litmosphere

journal of CHARLOTTELIT

Featuring:
Bryn Chancellor
Melissa Febos
A. Van Jordan

Issue Two • Spring 2023

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Spring 2023

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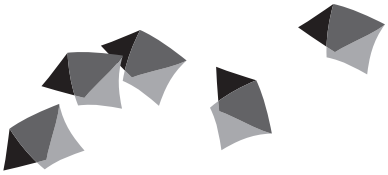

CHARLOTTE**LIT**

Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit

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Michael Dowdy

Editor's Note

We are honored, in this second volume of *Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit,* to present poems and stories from the second annual Lit/South Awards. The indelible contest winners—Claudia Crook's "A Catalogue of Celebrities Seen While Working at the Restaurant in the Gramercy Park Hotel" (poetry), Brooke Shaffner's "Everything I Love Is Out to Sea" (nonfiction), and Melisssa Scott Sinclair's "The Bridge" (fiction)—were chosen by our generous judges A. Van Jordan, Melissa Febos, and Bryn Chancellor, respectively. We are likewise honored to include their writing—Jordan's "Hex," Febos's "Wildness," and Chancellor's "The Moon, the Pyramids, the World"—as well as the contest runners-up, finalists, and semi-finalists.

Of the many writing contests, two qualities make the Lit/South Awards unique. First, *Litmosphere* features writing from our judges alongside their selections. This shared "litmosphere" symbolically levels the literary world's hierarchies between "established" and "emerging" (or "new") writers. Consider the winning poem, Crook's first published poem. Unlike many of us writers, she wasn't checking her Submittable account, under the (faulty!) assumption that she was unlikely to place in our contest. I eventually had to track down her work email to send her a gentle nudge. My surprise at her healthy (though flirting with financially disappointing) relationship with Submittable nearly matched her own surprise at the good news.

Second, our five-state geography distinguishes the Lit/South Awards from other regional and (inter)national contests. Many of us have seen the viral maps of the United States which redraw, sometimes in crude fashion, the boundaries of the South. Some are silly, some vaguely racist, a few culturally perceptive. This issue's "litmosphere" does its part in advancing creative cartographies of the region. It touches down in Gramercy Park, Angel Island, Maine, and elsewhere, with work from "southern" writers based in Boston and Copenhagen, Alexandria and Marietta, and beyond. In the words of Memphian Marcus Wicker's second-place poem, each of us is "Tuning in Live from the Way Out—," from wherever in the world your South has stuck with or to you.

I'm tuning in from Philadelphia, where I carried my Virginias and my North and South Carolinas with me when I moved here last summer. There may be many writing contests, and there may be many shape-shifting Souths, some inviting, others repellant, some both at once. But at this historical juncture, I am excited to report, with a fulsome shout, that the defiantly human writing in these pages—beautiful, disturbing, strange, fleshy, alive—will never be mistaken for a ChatGPT response to Lit/South's call for submissions: *Compose a story by a writer who has lived in North Carolina or one of its four contiguous states….*

Michael Dowdy
Philadelphia, PA

Kathie Collins & Paul Reali

Charlotte Lit's Co-Founders' Note

We are thrilled to present you with the second issue of *Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit,* which contains writing by thirty-four of this year's Lit/South Awards contestants, along with work from our acclaimed judges, A. Van Jordan, Bryn Chancellor, and Melissa Febos.

The 2023 issue of *Litmosphere* includes contest winners and finalists from each of our three categories—fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry—as well as poetry semi-finalists. We feel fortunate to have received incredibly strong entries in each of our first two contest years. As was true in 2022, we faced difficult choices this year and were unable to advance some fantastic writing.

As writers and journal submitters ourselves, we know how important publication is, and understand the disappointment inherent in having work declined. Please know that we appreciate and thoughtfully consider every entry. Published or not, your writing matters. While we at Charlotte Lit Press are genuinely thrilled to provide publication to the writers who appear in *Litmosphere,* we don't believe that publishing is the point. We believe that *community* is the point.

Writing is mostly a solo endeavor. Even for introverts, it's sometimes lonely work. We created Charlotte Lit seven years ago in part to address the loneliness and isolation that accompany this vocation. Our goal was, and remains, to provide a place (both physical and virtual) for writers to gather, learn from and support each other, to develop craft and community.

Though our offices are in Charlotte, every year we're reaching wider audiences across North Carolina, throughout the South, and even across the country. The Lit/South Awards acknowledge our position as a regional writing center by soliciting submissions from anyone who has ever lived in North Carolina or one of its adjoining states.

And so, we invite you—whomever and wherever you are—to participate in the Charlotte Lit community. We offer more than a hundred classes and events each year, more than half of them online. If you're not already a member, please consider joining. And, if you have the means to provide additional support to Charlotte Lit, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, we'd be grateful.

Visit us at charlottelit.org to learn more about membership, classes, and special events. We look forward to seeing you!

Kathie Collins
East Bend, NC

Paul Reali
Charlotte, NC

Lit/South Awards 2023
Winners, Finalists & Semi-finalists

POETRY

1st Place: A Catalogue of Celebrities Seen While Working at the Restaurant in the Gramercy Park Hotel — Claudia Crook
2nd Place: I'm Tuning in Live from the Way Out — Marcus Wicker
3rd Place: The Stars Align Themselves in Ancient Sisterhoods of Light — Rhett Iseman Trull

Additional Finalists:
A Pinch of Gray Fluff — Kenneth Chamlee
Birds Speak to the Women in My Family — Arielle Hebert
Clemency — Angelina Oberdan Brooks
In Spite of My Anger — Anita Cantillo
It occurs to me now — J. Joseph Kane
Kingdom — Katherine Soniat
Parable of the Foolish Virgins Revised — Joanne Durham

Semi-finalists:
Abscission — Bill Griffin
Anna's Bible — Elisabeth Murawski
Catechism — Janet Ford
Echo — Angelina Oberdan Brooks
Family History — Tess Congo
For Angel Island — Susan L. Lin
If I Love You, I Will Roast You a Chicken — Claudia Crook
Loving v. Virginia — Leslie Williams
Of Rock Doves — Paul Jones
Only Daughter in a House of Sons — Maureen Sherbondy
Queens and Kin — Arielle Hebert
Reef — Terry Hall Bodine
Telemachus Ponders the Bottomland — Katherine Soniat
The general tends his olive trees in the middle of a memoir I am writing — Fred Pond
The Holy Ghost in Thalia's Closet — Elizabeth Cranford Garcia
Vessel — Susan Alff
When the Universe Told Me You Were Dead — Anita Cantillo

NONFICTION

1st Place: Everything I Love Is Out to Sea — Brooke Shaffner
2nd Place: An Herbarium — Heather Hahn
3rd Place: When Facts Obscure the Truth — Janna Zonder

Additional Finalists:
Confessions of an Amateur Ghost Hunter — Ashley Memory
Kayla Rae Has Been Driving All Day — Rachel Baiman
What I Did That Summer — Suzanne Adams
What Newton's Laws of Motion Taught Me About Lust and Lies in High School — Nikki Campo

Semi-finalists:
A Toast to My Titties — Andi Brown
Leviticus 19:28 — Allison Darcy
Performance Studies — Claudia Crook
The Virginian — Tamela Rich

FICTION

1st Place: The Bridge — Melisssa Scott Sinclair
2nd Place: Becoming Posture — Jeannetta Craigwell-Graham
3rd Place: Stone Cold — Cathy Rigg Monetti
Honorable Mention: From Away — Judith Turner-Yamamoto

Additional Finalists:
Howling Baby Arch — Katie McDougall
The Hotel Motel — Michael Sadoff

Semi-finalists:
Engulfed — Alex Pickens
Ineluctible — Jennifer Carson
Licking Bones — Suzanne Adams
Sustenance — Vicki Derderian
Zebras — Melissa Brown

Lit/South Awards 2023
Poetry Competition – First Place

Claudia Crook

A Catalogue of Celebrities Seen While Working at the Restaurant in the Gramercy Park Hotel

G—, The first sighting.
When she walks in, I don't know who she is but I do know
she is Someone because when I see her I understand
what it means to be *struck*.

L—, She's pretty and petite and having the cheese plate.
I know her full name and that her boyfriend is dead
but she doesn't know I exist.

H—, Who doesn't see me because she never looks up
from her phone, but I see that she leaves the table between
her back-to-back breakfast meetings,
so she can still arrive after both of her guests
and that she orders the cacio e pepe eggs
both times, eats the whole thing twice

S—, Who is much hotter in person
than he is on camera, and his colleague

C—, Who is not.

K—, C—'s girlfriend, I think,
who came to collect her extremely soft coat. She smiled
and said, *Have a good night!* as if she were saying, *See I'm just like you,*
to which I said, *Of course*, Come again! by which I meant,
In here, I'm somebody, too.

A—, Who I never recognize
because her features are so perfect they are practically invisible.

F—, He's here once a week.
At night he comes in with his wife.
In the morning, he comes in hungover.
He fist bumps and banters, always ready with a line
before I even know he's come through the door.
He sets himself up for success. After all, it's his job
to be charming.

J—, Who looks at me.
And looks at me, and looks at me.
Who takes my hand and gives
me his name, who takes
the phone number I give
him and uses it, and sneaks
me up from the basement
breakroom to his suite
on the 16th floor and for one
night, lets me make believe
I could sit at the table, not seat it.

But in the morning,
I am at work and he is in bed, and by dinner
I am tying my apron, fetching someone else's
wine from the cellar.

Poetry judge A. Van Jordan writes: "A Catalogue of Celebrities Seen While Working at the Restaurant in the Gramercy Park Hotel" works through scenes cinematically, and the speaker also manages time, masterfully. This is a poet who understands the varying degrees of knowledge within a poem, too. The establishment shot, the title, which offers context for the situation that follows in the body of the poem, sets the stage for events that could be in the present, but the speaker makes it clear that the events in the first stanza are merely, "the first sighting," implying there will be more sightings. There's a habitual aspect to the verbiage in the poem, indicating that this is something that is not only happening but that these are actions that also happen chronically. Scene by scene plays out through various "celebrity sightings" and we learn something about them and about our speaker. Without a moment of sentimentality, the ending raises the knowledge of the speaker as someone who transcends the events by understanding what the events, and the consequences of them, mean in her life. My favorite sentence draped over two lines is this one, "A—, Who I never recognize / because her features are so perfect they are practically invisible."

Lit/South Awards 2023
Fiction Competition – First Place

Melissa Scott Sinclair

The Bridge

Something wasn't right.

The thought announced itself as A.B. dug his shovel deep. Hefted a chunk of damp ash and overturned it onto the tarp.

The ash smelled like a campground grill. It was flecked with fragments of bone.

That wasn't the thing that wasn't right. It was something unnamable that pressed down on him, heavy as the quilt-batting sky.

"Hurry it up," said Uncle Win. "Looks like rain."

A.B. dug out the trench methodically, excavating down to the clay, until the tarp was piled high. He bunched a corner in each hand and tugged.

"It's too heavy," he said.

"God, you're stupid," said Uncle Win. "Get the boys to help you. And remember: not all in one place. And not in big piles."

A.B. trudged back to find his cousins. As he passed the kennels, the pit bulls began to bark. One after another, in a desperate chorus. They wanted out.

"Shut up," A.B. said. "Shut up!"

Sadie appeared, galloping down the line. She snapped and snarled, working herself into a frenzy, and as she passed the dogs fell into sullen silence. They were afraid of her, all sixteen yellow pounds of her. Everyone hated Sadie, and Sadie hated everyone. Except A.B., whom she only disliked. For her he bought the soft kibble from Southern States, the kind she could eat with half-black teeth.

She came toward him now. She fixed him with one unclouded eye.

"Hey, girl," he said, reaching down.

She bit his hand, but not too hard, and growled.

"You go on," A.B. said. "Got work to do."

There was always work to do on the compound. *Light work and night work*, Win called it. A.B. didn't do much night work. That was all right with him. Sometimes he heard them at it, and those were the nights he couldn't sleep.

Sadie would come, then, and creep into his bed. Her warm whistling weight held down his feet, stopped him from spiraling up into the dark.

He pushed open the door to the barn. Not a barn, really, but a big falling-down shed. Win and his sons had framed it eight years ago and never finished the exterior. The plywood panels were so warped they'd pulled out their own nails. A.B. had watched it rot. He never said a word.

He found Connor and Caleb inside, where they always were. Sitting in two camp chairs that strained under their weight and playing Red Dead Redemption 2. Bald and bearded, so alike they looked like twins.

"Win says you got to help me pull this tarp," A.B. said.

"You're weak," Connor said.

"We're busy," Caleb said.

"He says you got to do it now, before it rains."

They made a big show of setting down the controllers and heaving themselves up from the chairs. When they saw the pile, they frowned.

"Why didn't you load it in the wagon?" Connor said. "Would've been easy to haul with the side-by-side."

"Just help me pull it," A.B. said.

By God they were fat, and by God they were strong. They stamped and snorted like two draft horses and dragged the tarp to the back field. With one last mighty yank they flipped it, turning out the ash onto the latesummer weeds.

Something glinted gold.

"Dibs," Caleb said, snatching it up.

"Now we got to spread it out," A.B. said. "Win said."

"You can," Connor said.

"Why do we have to do this, anyway?" A.B. said, unable to hide his irritation.

"Daddy says they're watching," Caleb said. "Can't have all this lying around."

A.B. took the rake in hand.

*

It was A.B.'s job to get the mail. Win didn't like to show his face outside, so A.B. walked the long rutted drive. It was lined with two 10-foot metal walls, raised more skillfully than the barn had been. Rough holes were cut here and there, so you could see who was coming. *The fatal funnel*, Win called it.

A.B. thought it was stupid. One, anyone who saw it would wonder: *What the hell have the Carter boys done to their driveway?* Two, it worked both ways. When he passed between those towering walls, he felt himself trapped.

And still, he was dogged by that feeling. Something wasn't right.

Sadie followed at a distance, wandering through the weeds. Her fur was studded with stick-tights. The one time he'd tried to pull them out, she'd clamped her teeth onto his ear. As if to say, *See? See how it feels?* So he let the hitchhikers accumulate, season after season. Hose that bitch down and a whole field would sprout.

Sadie didn't know she was lucky. After what she'd done to that Johnson boy, the littlest one, she should've been shot. Win took her in. To send a message, A.B. supposed. That there was no sorrow here, no shame.

But it was a shame, wasn't it? Dogs weren't supposed to turn on their family. That was the whole point of being a dog.

Sadie ran ahead, claws clattering on the planks that bridged the drainage ditch. She raised her leg like a boy and pissed on the mailbox post. She had done this so many times that she had worn off the painted blue letters: It now said DALLAS COWB. That was as high as she could reach. The little flag Cory had hung under the box — IT'S FALL, Y'ALL — was unstained.

Truth was, collecting the mail was his favorite job. A.B. liked coming to that place where the walls ended and open country began. An old persimmon tree grew on the far side of the road, heavy with fruit the color of flame. The fields were studded with hay bales, rolled up neat as sleeping bags. Beyond that, he could see the soft shadows of the Blue Ridge.

He crossed the rough bridge and opened the mailbox. It held a power bill, a satellite TV ad, and three catalogs addressed to Cory. A.B. flipped through them as he walked back. Vermont Country Store. Lillian Vernon. Miles Kimball. Families in matching pajamas, and braided rugs, and something called Gaggleville Get-Ups for garden geese.

"My magazines," his sister said, smiling, when he handed them over.

"I don't understand why you like that grandma shit," he said. The single-wide they shared, in the outer orbit of the barn, was packed with fake ferns and cinnamon candles and faceless Willow Tree figurines. Whirligigs crowded the yard. They startled him sometimes, when the wind at dusk brought them to life.

He picked up a white resin picture frame. "I'll Wait for You on the Rainbow Bridge," it said. Behind the glass was a picture of a dopey-looking golden retriever. *4x6*, it said.

"I told you not to spend any more money."

"I got it at the church store. It's brand new, see?"

"You're supposed to put a picture of a dead dog in it. Don't you know what the Rainbow Bridge is?"

She shook her head.

"When your dog dies, it goes to a big green meadow with all the other dogs."

"Who feeds them?"

"Nobody. They're dead. Then when *you* die, your dog is waiting for you on the bridge. You cross over together."

"Cross over to where?"

Her questions tired him. "I don't know. Heaven, whatever fucking place."

"I like that," Cory said. "It would be nice, to have someone wait for you."

"You don't even have a dog."

"I could have one of Win's."

"They're not pets."

"What about Sadie?"

"You don't want her."

"I could adopt one from the pound. A nice one."

"No dogs." He tossed the frame on the counter. "Quit buying stupid shit."

"I'm trying to make things nice around here."

It wasn't nice. It wasn't any of it nice.

Cory was as hard and dirty as the rest of them. She wore baggy old jeans and embroidered sweatshirts and never washed her hair unless he reminded her. He'd had to cut it short, so short the old scar showed through in back. She liked to scratch her butt and smoke American Spirits and play Xbox with Connor and Caleb, though they laughed every time she died.

"When are we going to get a better place, Anthony?"

"I've told you a million times. When I get paid out."

"When's that, though?"

"Soon," he said, like always. "I'll ask Win, okay?"

Flat on the counter, the retriever grinned lovingly at no one at all.

*

"Something ain't right," Win said.

He, Connor, Caleb and A.B. were standing in a circle and drinking beer, out by the place where the ash used to be. Goldenrod waved in the field. Another summer gone.

A.B. hadn't thought it would take this long. Long enough for the plywood to bend, for the mailbox paint to wear away. Things had been simple, back when they started. The job was moving inventory, that was all. Once they delivered so many packages, Win said, they'd all get their final cut.

Somewhere along the line, the work got complicated. Other people got involved. Then they had to get paid. Some people didn't cooperate. Then came the fires at midnight, smoke rising from the ash in the morning. A.B. had never signed up for that part.

When would he get what he was promised? He wanted to ask, but not now. Not when Win was in one of his moods.

"Cameras picked up a silver van driving by three times today," his uncle said. He paused, waited for this to sink in. "They're stepping up the surveillance."

Win was obsessed with surveillance. It was why he never got the mail, never went to the store. Never left the compound, if he could help it. Uncle Win wasn't born to blend in, he liked to say, and it was true. He was as tall as his sons, and had once been as big. But the years and his habits had worn away his flesh, and now he looked like some history-show Viking that had been frozen and thawed out again. Forehead furrowed, eyes hooded. Loose elbows spiderwebbed with ink, ribs splayed like a shipwreck under a long gray beard.

"There's nothing for them to see," A.B. pointed out. "Not from the road."

"I'm not finished," his uncle said. "Last night I saw a light in the sky."

"A UFO!" said Caleb. He flung his gaze starward, like he was looking to get beamed.

"No, dummy. A drone. They're looking for something. Someone's been talking. That's what I think."

Win was on one of his paranoid streaks. A.B. waited for Caleb or Connor to say so. To offer him something to take the edge off.

But they didn't. Not this time.

They all looked at A.B.

A.B. went cold.

"You know anything about that?" Win said.

"I don't know anything about anything," A.B. said. "I don't do anything except what I'm supposed to do."

"What about Cory?" Connor said. "She's always going into town."

"She likes to go to the church store," A.B. said. "And the dollar store. That's all. She would never." He filled his mouth with warm beer. Couldn't swallow it, somehow. Just swished it around and finally spat it into the grass.

"Well," Win said after a while. "I feel like it's got to be one of you. That's just how I feel."

"It's not me," A.B. said.

Win said nothing more. Only crushed his can, and tossed it into the pit.

*

A.B. wished he'd never told Cory that stupid story.

Now she wanted to know what the dogs did while they were waiting in the meadow. Did they grow wings, and did that hurt? Was the bridge actually made of rainbow, or was it just painted on? Did he think they would let you hang out there and play with other people's dogs for a while, if you didn't have one?

A.B. was tired. Sleep was always one state over, too far to reach in a night. He'd been meaning to talk to Win about everything, but his uncle's mood had darkened. He hovered like a turkey vulture over a swelling deer, watching everything with dead black eyes.

A.B. had an idea that maybe the business wasn't going so well. There were fewer packages coming in and going out. There were more arguments, whispered and furious.

And still Cory went on about the dog.

"I'm going to get one," she said. She crossed her arms.

"Like hell you will." She ought to have seen, then, that he meant it. But she was blinded by the force of her desire.

"A nice one," Cory said.

"It's *made up*," A.B. said. It came out meaner than he meant. "It's just a dumb story they made up."

She went very quiet.

"You don't know," she said.

*

At the Southern States A.B. picked up eight bags of River Run kibble for the big dogs and one of Tender & True for Sadie. He bought a bag of birdseed for Cory. The Audubon blend with peanuts. Usually he got cheap millet, but that only brought the sparrows.

When A.B. got home, he upturned the feeders. The old seed came out in mold-furred chunks. He had talked to her about this. You had to clean it, or the birds got sick. She never remembered. Things didn't stick.

There had been a chance, once. After the accident, they'd said the wires in her brain might wind themselves together again. He guessed now they never would.

A.B. would disinfect the feeders for her. At least something in this whole dirty place would be clean.

He pushed his way into the barn and went to the corner where they kept the things they used.

"Where'd y'all put the bleach?" he asked.

Connor and Caleb didn't look at him. They were locked in combat with an undead army, chairs creaking as they turned their controllers this way and that.

"I just bought some," A.B. said, raising his voice. "I can't be the only one who puts things away."

"You cleaning?" Win said. He must have come in through the back door. The secret door.

A.B. heard the edge in his voice. "Yeah," he said.

Win held up a jug of Clorox, dangling from his thumb. "There's a little left."

A.B. took it. "I wanted to tell you," he said. "What you were saying about Cory, the other night—you know she would never, right?"

"That's what she told me," Win said. "She said she never would."

He paused.

"Thing is, someone saw her." Win shook his head. His Viking beard swept his chest once, twice. "They saw her down at the county building."

No. Not Cory. Not—

Two wires sparked in A.B.'s brain.

"The shelter," he said. "She wanted a dog, Win."

"You know I said no more dogs."

"I tried to tell her."

"Thing is," Win went on, implacably, "the other night you said, 'It's not me.'"

A.B. went cold. Behind him, the screams and squelches of the videogame had stopped.

"I didn't mean it was Cory."

Win said nothing.

"She just wanted a dog, Win. A nice one."

"Well," his uncle said. "I wish I'd known."

A.B. went out of the barn. Then he ran. He ran past the pit, where smoke curled from new ash. He flung open the trailer door and called her name. There was no answer.

All the whirligigs stood still.

He ran for the road, between the walls.

The dogs were yelping. Win had hit the remote release on the kennel doors. Twenty-eight brindled shapes hurtled toward him, and one small yellow one.

Sadie raced out in front, like a rabbit for the greyhounds. As she drew even, A.B. reached down to scoop her up.

She sank her teeth into his ankle.

It hurt. It hurt a lot.

A.B. went down hard on one knee, then struggled up again. He tried to shake Sadie loose, but she held fast. The dogs were on them.

It hurt for a long time.

Then it didn't, anymore.

*

Something wasn't right.

A.B. was walking down the drive, like he did every day. No dogs yelped. No crickets sang. There were only the steel walls and the hard-packed road between them.

It seemed to him that he had been walking for a long time. He wanted to stop, but he could not. He was in the fatal funnel, and it was too late to turn around.

It's not me, he had said. In Win's mind that had sealed it.

By God he was stupid, and by God he was weak.

He was no better than the rest of them.

It had been him all along, the thing that wasn't right.

*

A.B. came to the end.

There was the mailbox, leaning on its peeling post. There was the persimmon tree, its branches bent low.

And there, on the bridge of planks, she stood.

"Sadie?"

Her ragged ears pricked up, as if she'd heard her name for the very first time.

A.B. crouched in the weeds and stretched out his hand. Sadie bit it tenderly. It hardly hurt at all.

It was nice, to have someone wait for you. Someone who understood.

Sadie trotted over the bridge, toward the hayfield where the long shadows lay. Looked back at him, expecting him to follow.

He would go. He had no choice.

But first, A.B. thought, he'd wait.

There was a chance Cory would come this way, wasn't there?

He hoped she wouldn't. He hoped she was going someplace nice, at last.

He would wait on the bridge a while longer.

Just in case.

Fiction judge Bryn Chancellor writes: I love everything about this story—A.B. trying to do his best for Cory, Sadie, and himself in such dire circumstances; the exactness of language and imagery; a setting that is at once beautiful and terrifying; the dry gallows wit; and fresh, tight dialogue—but I especially admire the author's restraint in keeping the violence off-stage, which makes it even more harrowing. The end is heartbreaking but also manages to find a bit of grace. Beautifully done.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Nonfiction Competition – First Place

Brooke Shaffner

Everything I Love Is Out to Sea

Sunlight glistened on the surface of the lake, the skins of women splayed on beach towels. Breasts clasped in black bikinis, hips made for sashaying down the narrow aisles of airplanes. My father wove through the women, tanned and chiseled with a jawline made for leading men. It was the summer of 1988. He was 40 and he'd just made captain with Southwest Airlines—a dream he'd chased for years.

My sister and I straggled along behind him. I was ten, skinny, sun-browned, ponytail swinging; Blythe was four, chubby, pink-cheeked, sucking her finger and scowling from behind a blonde bowl cut. Our parents had divorced the year before and Dad had us for the weekend. He'd taken us to a party of Southwest Airlines employees at Lake Austin.

I scanned the shore, taking in my father's Southwest Airlines family: pilots sitting on the dock, dangling their feet in the water, laughing and drinking beer; flight attendants sunning on their stomachs, pale bands of skin beneath their shoulder blades where they'd unfastened their bikinis. Their whole life was a vacation—a world of beautiful women balancing trays; flirtations in tight, charged spaces; overnight bags and hotel hot tubs; one-night stands and midnight swims; hips, lips, air, and nothing to stop their fall through space but a foam floatation cushion, a plastic pull-cord, and a shallow yellow oxygen cup. This sand runway of sunbathers, frozen cocktails, and pleasure boats was meant to soften their landing, to leaven this life on the ground until they returned to their airborne state of grace—a glass cockpit encased in a silver bullet shooting through a vast open void of sky.

Dad coaxed Blythe into her swimmies and blew up our inner tube. He pulled us around in the water making motor noises, Blythe sitting in my lap. He disappeared underwater, nipped at our toes, surfaced wide-eyed and said, "A school of minnows

just swam by. They didn't bite you, did they?" Blythe pulled her finger from her mouth and relinquished a giggle.

Eventually he left us to play on our own. I held onto Blythe's inner tube and watched him swim toward the shore—disappearing underwater for long, silent stretches, then surfacing. Our father was most himself in departure—wearing his white, collared pilot's shirt with striped badges over his shoulders, his black flight bag in hand; or with a long duffle bag of skis propped on his shoulder; or with a slam of the door in the night, my mother yelling after him. Now he was toweling off on the beach, talking to a woman, the two of them laughing with their heads tossed back.

I remembered my mother crying on the doorstep after he'd left one night, staring out at nothing.

"Why is Daddy always flying away?" I'd asked her.

"Because that's what pilots do," she'd said.

But back to that lake, that 10-year-old sinking underwater. The world dimmed and stilled the way it had when they'd told me they were getting a divorce. They'd waited until the previous summer, so I wouldn't have to switch schools in the middle of third grade. I'd already gone to four different elementary schools. They'd delivered The Divorce Announcement in the living room with characteristic ceremony, their voices grave and low, rushing into the ensuing silence to assure Blythe and me that we were loved. I knew that I was supposed to feel sad, but what I felt was a release. My father was like Gulliver in Lilliput, a giant held to the ground by a thin web of threads and tiny us tugging, weaving over and under and in between the strings. So that when the strings finally snapped and the clatter of fights and crying and slamming doors ceased, it seemed that the ceiling had lifted, all that sound sucked out; a great, deep breath flooding into the silence.

A suspended underwater feeling. I didn't mind that weightless suspension before you felt something, the silent bubble before time rushed in. I learned to sit with that silence until images, phrases, feelings wove themselves into stories. I became seaweed—a needless thing that floats and grows and makes its own food from filtered light.

I surfaced and sucked in air. Five feet away, Blythe frowned, her inner tube bobbing. I looked for our father and noticed a man harnessed to a parachute tied to a ski boat, the white parachute lying limp on the beach behind him. I held onto Blythe's inner tube and dog-paddled, mesmerized as the boat sped up, the towrope tightening, the parachute filling with air. The man ran a few steps toward the water before his feet left the sand and he was running on air, rising into the sky, his tennis shoes swinging gleefully as he glided over the lake.

I towed Blythe up to the dock where Dad was sitting with Rob, his red-haired, mustachioed bachelor roommate. Dad lifted Blythe out of her inner tube and onto his lap, and Rob gave me a hand climbing onto the dock. We stared up at the man traversing the sky. Dad thought it looked fun. My heart sped up when I asked if it

was safe and whether I weighed enough to do it. What if they couldn't strap me in securely?

"It must be." Dad shrugged, staring up at the parasailer.

"I want to try it," I blurted, the words out before I was sure.

Dad said he'd talk to the man supervising to find out if it was safe, and whether there was a weight requirement. "If he thinks it's alright, I'll put our names down on the list. I'll try it, and if everything goes smoothly, you can go. Sound good, puddin'?"

I nodded, envisioning my small body drifting across the sky like dandelion fuzz, Dad bragging to his friends afterwards about my fearlessness.

Like him, I lacked a normal sense of physical boundaries. I flew down black ski slopes without poles and stood up like a surfer on a kneeboard. During recess one day, I got a running start and leapt for the high bar. My fingers brushed steel and the next thing I knew, I sat in the nurse's office, head held back, icepack pressed to my nose. I didn't cry until another child's eyes widened at my blood-soaked T-shirt.

Unlike him, I was emotionally porous. Even as a child, the mournful strains of some song on the radio as dark fell could flood me with guilt, making me confess to my mother the insignificant litany of my 6-year-old sins.

A girl my age with a smattering of freckles over her nose paddled up to the dock on a raft.

"Well if it isn't ol' Monkeyface!" Dad grinned. "Where's your mom?"

"Lori's out on the yacht," Rob said. "Think I'll join her." He smirked at the girl. "Find us if you get hungry, Monkeyface."

"It's Heather!" the girl protested as he dove off the dock. Then, staring up at my father, paddling closer, "Can I have a ride?"

I stared at her disbelievingly. I would never have asked a stranger to give me a ride.

But Dad amiably slipped off the dock into the water and took turns hoisting Heather and me into the air a half-dozen times before leaving us to entertain ourselves.

Heather led Blythe and me to the yacht moored in the center of the lake, where her mother and other flight attendants and pilots drank margaritas. Their laughter carried across the water. Heather and I climbed up the stairs that led to the deck. Heather's mom, Lori, a lanky woman with dirty-blonde hair that hung to her butt, took a final drag of her cigarette, tossed it into the water, and hoisted Blythe into the boat.

"Jack's daughters!" everyone exclaimed when we introduced ourselves. They asked how old we were and whether we were having fun, then returned to their adult talk. Lori sat pretzel-legged in her hot pink bikini on a bench and Rob sat next to her. Someone said something I didn't understand and Rob laughed loudly, gripping Lori's

thigh. I stared at his meaty, freckled hand covered in strawberry-blonde hairs, fingers digging into her flesh.

Heather wanted to climb up to the front deck, where several women were sunning, and Rob offered to accompany us. I peered over the railing. White wakes arced through the water. There were boats pulling skiers, wake-boarders, and inner-tubers; wave-runners and jet skis, and in the distance, a windsurfer—water toys strewn through the lake like a spoiled child's playroom. Over it all floated the parasailer, a gliding god sanctioning the good life, his white parachute a flag for my father's country.

The house Dad moved into after the divorce was just a crash pad, a launch pad; a fold-out sofa mattress on his bedroom floor, pasta on paper plates, his Porsche poised in the driveway. He brought me shower caps from the hotels he stayed in on flight trips. It was our little joke. He'd announce that he had a surprise and pull a small package wrapped in the funny papers from behind his back. I'd have him read the comic strips before I carefully peeled back the paper, pulled the shower cap out of its box, and exclaimed with exaggerated astonishment, "Thank you, thank you, Daddy, it's just what I've always wanted!" Then I'd try it on for size. By the time I was six, I had a drawer full of shower caps in Holiday Inn, Sheraton, and Four Seasons boxes.

How funny, this gift to keep out the water. I understood that my father was here, in the circulation between boats, planes, women, and water-toys, the imagined intersection of wakes and contrails.

A dark-haired flight attendant with a drawl touched my shoulder and said, "Your back's getting burned, sweetie. Le'me put some sunscreen on you." I sat between her legs and she rubbed sunscreen under my swimsuit straps, saying she had a daughter my age.

"She likes me to French-braid her hair. Want me to do yours?"

I nodded. I loved the feel of fingers through my hair.

Heather and Blythe were sitting on Blythe's inner tube with their feet in the center, Heather teaching her a clapping game: apple on a stick makes me sick, makes my tummy go 246, not because I'm dirty, not because I'm clean, not because I kissed a boy behind a magazine!

"Me next!" Heather cried.

"Sure," Cindy said. "First put some more sunscreen on Blythe."

"I can do a French braid…I think," I said, and Heather plopped down between my legs and let me try. Blythe, never one to be left out, sat between Heather's legs, and Rob observed that Cindy was looking a little pink, herself. He sat behind her, forming the caboose of our French-braiding, sunscreen-slathering train, part of the larger braid of sunbathers, swimmers, skiers, and wake-boarders; of boats, toys, players, and floaters; a succession of linked limbs, rings rippling outward like the circles on a lake's surface when you dropped a stone into the water.

I sensed some message being channeled through these chain links, transmitted from largest to smallest, adult to child, dispersed like dirt swirling through the water. Apple on a stick makes me sick, makes my tummy go 246…. I held the message in the pit of my stomach, a hardening knot.

Cindy rubbed sunscreen on my back, her warm palm in that hollow between shoulder blades, opening an emptiness, a hunger for my mother, who would sit on my bed at night and rub my back until I fell asleep. This stranger's hand on my back, the chalky smell of sunscreen, my fingers weaving damp strands of Heather's hair—all of it made me long for my mother's familiar curves, the safety of her voice, her carefully lined lips and crisp, dry-cleaned collars. Sunlight shifted on the water's surface like a ghost. An ache circled my windpipe.

Cindy pointed toward the shore and said, "Look, I think your dad's about to go." I remembered my name on the parasail list and fear shot through me. I wriggled free of the chain and ran down to the bottom deck. I dove off the deck and swam like hell to tell the man to take me off the list. What if they wouldn't take me off?

I swam harder, hearing the voice of my swim team coach: "Pull the water! Quick breaths!" I pulled the lukewarm weight of that lake, sediment swirling through the water. I didn't stop swimming until I reached the shallow water at the shoreline.

I stood up, breathless, and saw the unopened parachute floating on the water—white and rippling. Pilots and flight attendants stood in the shallow water, huddled around something. I stared at their lean, tan backs. Someone shifted and I caught a glimpse of a woman bent over someone floating in the water. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. A flight attendant I'd met earlier said, "Come on, sweetheart." As we waded to the beach, she said, "Your father's been hurt, but he's going to be okay. They train us to deal with these situations. See, Stella's giving him CPR." I believed her.

I looked over my shoulder as we walked toward the shore, but I couldn't see my father. All I could see was the circle of women hovering over him, shoulder blades jutting like mangled wings.

Nonfiction judge Melissa Febos writes: My favorite essays engage with complex topics—unresolvable emotional conflicts, questions without answers, pains that only time can address—and do so in prose so limpid and beautiful that I am not frustrated by this unresolvability, as I am so often in life, but left satisfied, head singing with the bells of those questions, that love, the emotions that trouble us most, whose beauty can sometimes only be found in art. Brooke Shaffner's "Everything I Love Is Out to Sea" left my head ringing.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Poetry Competition – Second Place

Marcus Wicker

I'm Tuning in Live from the Way Out—

Twilight, FM. Equalizing my work-life balance
behind an At Home furniture warehouse
on the outskirts of town.
The drive-in is showing E.T.
to an audience constellated with stock
Corollas & Chevies, late model Escalades—
more tumbleweeds than minivans—
which is exactly the way I like it.
Butter popcorn & menthol. Coconut
sunscreen laced with strawberry body mist rise
overhead in a greasy jet stream. & 30 feet up,
center screen, standing on a scaffold,
a film prof with a lavalier mic is dragging me
back to The Downside Present—a fourth dimension
I catch myself streaming through, rudderless.
Where narratives sail further, faster. Submarine
nefarious & sell better as soundbites. Where
sometimes I get a little confused about who
to argue with, what to mute. The man speaks
down from his platform. & I imagine we look
like Go Karts parked on a checkerboard.
He's nervous, out of pitch. Rattling

off box office stats, in a square red hat.
Flubbing trivia questions
between prerecorded ads for the snack bar
& half-off buckets of Bud. I fear the young prof
is being punked. Hazed into this sideshow.
He tells us E.T.'s face was modeled after
the poet Carl Sandburg, a pug, Einstein &
Hemmingway. *Effectively, Spielberg has concocted*
the perfect animatronic mixture of brilliant father
archetypes & unorthodox cuteness. Such that
E.T.'s likeness would appeal to any demographic.
But when I consider this weirdo assemblage
of serious, Silly Putty faces, it occurs to me that E.T.
is definitely a brotha. So obviously an alien of color.
Given his woolen rubber brow, his burnished
bronze. He strikes me as more Levar Burton.
Admittedly, a small, embered part of me—
a supermoon lit fingertip—would be extinguished if
the sacred visage of Sun Ra or Octavia Butler
were desecrated by SFX. The other parts are like,
What about Jimi Hendrix? Or Dr. King? Why not
Prince, or Wanda Coleman? John Coltrane?
I guess I'm asking: Is the muse a conscious engine?
The same unruly, half-forgotten theory of blood's relativity—
will it ever go extinct? Will it autopilot existence
in our image, ad infinitum? Is that why the poet
suspects the film prof is trying to erase him?
Why I've always thought The Predator bit his locks
from George Clinton? I have known shadows
from the "Absolute Otherwhere" my entire life.
Since I was knee high to a drum pedal. Got one
or two on my mama's side. So don't tell me E.T.
isn't me. Spawn of Grace Jones & Bootsy Collins.
Kin to Andre 3000, Badu & 'n'em. Funk ambassadors
from the future. Ecstatic escape artists. Beacons
blinged with sequin. Children of alien abductees
who invented signature genres of time travel
reaching for the Mothership, searching
for a way to phone home.

Poetry judge A. Van Jordan writes: One of the most imaginative poems I've read in some time is "I'm Tuning in Live from the Way Out—," which captures an Afrofuturistic journey to the past and back to the future. The brilliance of this poem is how it manages to transport through time seamlessly by the sightline of the speaker, who takes inventory of the world around him, and harkens back in time through imagery that both has the power to engender a memory and, all at once, to prompt a dream of the future. The image system of funk music, literary figures, and speculative fiction never feels forced. My favorite line in this one is, "I guess I'm asking: Is the muse a conscious engine?," and I'm glad the poet behind this poem has a muse that keeps pointing to what's up ahead. I want the speaker of this poem to keep telling us how to get there.

Joanne Durham

Parable of the Foolish Virgins Revised

> *"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish."* — Matthew 25, New King James Bible

Ten old women steered their wooden boat out to meet the sunset. There were those among them whose bodies knew ecstasy, those who knew violation, those who felt the fine thread of love stitching together their cells. Women who had lived on the few slips of earth where they were allowed to read had taken vast journeys of the mind. Others learned from stones and rivers and the deep pain of hunger and their children's hunger, and some learned from both. They were, then, neither ignorant nor innocent. All of them sometimes felt wisdom stir in their bones, but since none had found the path to ending cruelty in the world, none claimed to be wise. They were wise enough, though, to take turns at the helm. They had seen such transformations many times, but still they marveled at how the sun nudged the mountains into fire, painted the river tones as varied as their own skins. Some had brought provisions—bread, oranges, lanterns, sweaters stretched from wear. Others had departed hastily with only their clothing, and some had nothing left to bring. When they reached the portal to their destination, they breathed relief that no one commanded them, *only you can enter, you cannot, you must bring this or that.* Those with knowledge from books had prepared them for such orders, and the ones who had studied the patterns of roots of trees and the touch of sun on every leaf were confident no such command would come. They were ready though and agreed they would entwine their fingers to basket themselves, shelter one another in their arms, enter together by the strength of their dimming light.

Arielle Hebert

Birds Speak to the Women in My Family

This time,
when a trail of feathers
leads me into the forest,
I follow.

Don't think about where it's taking me,
only the flightless thing, torn to tufts,
crawling in the underbrush,
but I find no blood, no body.

Whisper of deep woods.
Of gifts and pleasures planted and earthed. What was I
so afraid it would say?

I'm here,
arms full of feathers, unsure
which of us is the offering,
which way is home.

My grandmother was told
by an out-of-season swallow
when her mother died.

We have family in town,
my mother says, pointing to
a pair of sandhill cranes
stilt walking through the yard.

I've collected
so many feathers.
I could be mistaken
for wings.

My mother's tongue,
her mother's birdsong
softer with every daughter,
but still a trace, feather by feather
through the old mountains,
disappearing into stone.

Arielle Hebert

Queens and Kin

In this story
I am the villain
survival makes me,

feral child shedding
my first set of teeth.

I know there's no such thing
as walking alone in the woods,

anything whispered is a powerful wish,

and all good hunters fear
the animal caught in the trap, know

nervous madness can make a wolf
gnaw through its bound leg and leap.

Someone once told me
true potential is found
in hunger, in the mirror

of an empty plate.
We the royalty of forbidden
fruit and broken ribs,

queens and kin
whose plum robes we dance in,
whose bloody hands rest on my shoulders.

The ancestors are calm
if they've been fed,

sluggish after holiday feasts.
That's when they start telling stories,

all they narrowly lived through,
how they met their ends,

that's when they start seeing
things long past doomed
to repeat themselves.

But my mistakes are my own.
Betrayals sweet
and lasting.

Don't tell me what I won't do.

J. Joseph Kane

It occurs to me now

that I only started
identifying as a feminist after

you left, which sweeps the legs out
from most of my breakup poems.

I still remember trying,
and don't think you should

have left the way
that you left, but

I also remember undoing
knots in your shoulders

feeling like time spent
on the not-sex parts

of your body made me
a good boyfriend. Affection

a service. When you told me
the worries that had you tangled

I didn't try too hard to worry along—
they were your problems,

and we'd fix them. I'd
fix them. I was listening

to so much James Brown.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Fiction Competition – Second Place

Jeannetta Craigwell-Graham

Becoming Posture

Side 1

Pleasure, the girl said. Susan broke the distance between them, rounded the long side of the oak desk to perch on its edge, one leg skimming the wooden floor. A casual body, she told herself.

The other students were a smear of faces with the occasional decent nose or mouth. The girl outlined the envelope-colored walls of the classroom. Did not bother with the easy chairs at the end. Squeezed past the imprints of people to the center of the room. It was not because she was Black and they were white and she was Black, Susan told herself.

"Sex is a means to authentic pleasure. To a whole existence. The readings you assigned wrongly conflate the pursuits of the sexual revolution with those of the feminist movement."

"Interesting. I think I understand. But please explain." This was a lie. Susan ate chicken most nights, drove a safety-tested Subaru station wagon and fucked with her eyes closed. Like there was no want involved in life. Her clothing choice today was an exception. A clingy off-white silk blouse which would not stay put. A millennial had persuaded her to buy it. Said it had "breathability" and it was "well worth the three hundred dollars." Susan had three hundred dollars and wanted to believe her.

"It is not just an act. We do it to discover our wants."

Afterwards, adjusting her top across her cleavage while she sat on the toilet, she peed and used less toilet paper than usual, the feel of her vagina startling through the single layer. She wiped again though she was well dry. It was like her body wanted to

introduce itself to her again. An insistent call from across the parking lot from an old acquaintance, one you drove away from and pretended you did not see.

*

While she flayed Stephen's dry chicken breast, she tried to pick out the exact shade of the girl's skin from the wood grains of the dining room floor. Her skin browned like the girl's once. Now, a permanent inside-shade spread past the crevices of her knees and elbows because the sun only found her in-between. In-between class, in-between meetings, in-between home and work. A particular type of jealousy grew within her that unexpectedly turned to desire; the green-eyed monster who no longer cared for the possessions, or even achievements, of the other person, but just wanted their flesh as their own. She squeezed the wool lines on her tights until she was certain there would be marks on her skin when she removed them that night. She ate her chicken.

The next day Susan doodled her initials along the margins of an article she planned to publish. Without looking up she recognized the presence in front of her door. The girl waited in its frame and Susan gestured her into the leather armchair in front of her desk. Rather than throwing herself in the chair like most other students, the girl folded her body into the seat—one long leg angled over the other knee, deliberate as the making of small origami cranes. As she moved to shut the door, Susan's eyes glanced at the "open office hours" sign she had taped to the glass window.

When Susan gained tenure, her degrees and old posters were swallowed in her new, larger office. She drove out to her storage unit to see if any of the pieces she had inherited from her mother would suit instead. They had been in the storage unit since her mother's death. After the funeral, the house had been bare except for the sculptures which occupied a corner of the home office. The sculptures, all dark black wood made to resemble fetishes from Benin, were assembled like a small battalion. Her sister did not want them. She had been reminded of warnings of a Congolese colleague about acquiring the wrong mask, mistaking curse for curio and ending up subject to the fetishes' whims. They had been too heavy for her to bear alone. One rode shotgun because the Subaru turned out not to be spacious enough for once. When she drove they rattled against each other, even through the bubble wrap, like the drone of an ancient war. She took the route to her storage unit not even considering the empty basement in her house. She used a trolley to wheel the sculptures down the hallway, pointed their faces away from her body, spread them throughout the room before she turned off the single bulb above their heads. Art had always been important in her family. She had briefly entertained a double major before dropping it. She enrolled as a bronze supporter each year at the local art museum to remind herself what could have been. But in the short time in her car and in the storage unit the pieces appraised her, instead of the other way around. The thought of placing them in plain sight unsettled her. *Silence* was the least imposing.

Two trunks of wood spooled out from impossible hips to meet a single point. Rough brown rope bound them together. Like two enemies meeting for an unexpected kiss. She relocated it to the corner of the office and her colleagues paused to ask her if she had redecorated. She always said no, sensing the sculpture judged her deceit. She overwatered the philodendron until more and more of it was covered.

"I like that Delmonte," the girl said, pointing to the piece.

They sat in silence for a minute, Susan's years of research and speeches on intersectional feminism bad preparation for a conversation with the poised young woman in her chair. Undergraduates frightened her. They roamed in small packs. The wilder boys chomped at her and the liberated girls looked incredulously at her decision to wear her winter coat in September as they walked by in T-shirts and shorts. She could still remember all the things she had not said when she visited her Ph.D. advisor's office; how, over four years, he assembled the same slimy grin whenever she stopped by for advice of a serious nature, as if his eyes had accumulated sludge and could only roll offally down her entire body. Susan imagined the girl would have said something about this, and not via email or with some placating joke about misogyny.

"Yes, it's definitely one of my favorite pieces of hers," Susan replied.

Susan reached up to her bookcase to find the book she had mentioned to the girl after class and handed it to her. She rubbed the surface of her desk, let it reorient her towards the space between her and the girl. She highlighted the academics and theories in the book that she knew the girl would not recognize.

Susan's office phone interrupted and she pressed the hold button. It was probably Stephen calling about dinner and she did not want this girl to hear the precise type of salad blend he should pick up. Also, it was no secret Stephen was white but he was not here to assuage the room of his whiteness. In the past his hapless-optimistic-sensitive-white-guy act diffused the Blackest of radicals. Susan was certain the girl would see right through this; that his offer of a handshake would be met with puzzlement that anyone still shook hands. Susan got up and stacked papers into meaningless piles on her desk.

At the door, it happened. She was in mid "thank you for your time" when Susan touched the left mound of her hip. An unusual place to begin. They both looked at Susan's hand until a footstep fell somewhere far down the history of the hallway.

*

Split awake from a nightmare of the girl's back concaving until it broke, Susan was relieved to find her whole the next day, asking to borrow another book. When she stood to leave, Susan understood the image from her dream. It was the girl's posture. She might blame too many nights in the library but there had been a time when she stood up straight. Now her shoulders sat closer and closer to her earlobes as if her own body questioned what was going on.

"Can you help me?" Susan said.

"What?"

"To stand up straight like you do."

"Oh. That was one of my mother's many bad integration ideas. The others being horseback riding, lacrosse and tea times. All coincidentally favorite pastimes of racists. It is one of the few things I didn't cancel from my childhood."

"I can relate. Your posture is unbelievable. My spine is quivering at the sight of you. I used to look like you when I was younger, but then." Susan gestured around her office, as if this explained it.

"The first thing you should know is straight is not the aim. The best posture is spine in, breasts out. Like an overconfident ape."

Susan wiggled her torso in her seat.

"Best to do it standing up and give yourself plenty of space."

Susan rose and faced the girl, thrusted her small chest out then back in again when she imagined how silly she must appear.

"No, that's it. Wait, do you mind?" She touched Susan's hip to thrust her more upright, the irony of their changed places made things lighter and cast the other touch as a friendly nudge out the door. Susan paraded back and forth two times, laughing out loud at the exercise. On her third stroll Susan shut the door. When she turned around she locked eyes with the girl and held her feet to the ground. At touching distance, Susan reached to take her hand, the sculpture overwhelming the periphery of her left eye, until she incorporated the girl's body into hers and they eclipsed the figure.

Later, with her cheek resisting the scratchy pull of her Persian rug, Susan wound herself up searching for the right words for what had just happened, opened and closed her mouth hopeful they would escape on their own. She thought proximity to the girl's edges would bring her own bones and insides forth. But as her body returned to its clothing, there was still too much skin to feel anything.

Side 2

I am not the B-side.

The day I joined Susan's class, I spotted her on campus with her husband. He looked as if he had been made in a hurry, his features smushed and undefined, his clothing half-tucked-in everywhere. He tried very hard to keep up with her. It wasn't easy because she walked at a speed that said, "We're not together." It turned me on that she did not let him.

It guarded the corner of her office. Normally I would have revealed the truth. Told her about Grandmother. As she was only ever to be called. Let her assume, as a direct descendant, our blood did more than transport. It sang. It created. It transformed. The unmentionables: how the sculptures I made to imitate her dried

brittle and cracked; the way she raised all of your work to eye level, squinting so hard her lids looked like labia; the smoke from her slim cigarettes which clouded the room and nearly wiped away the sight of you. When those cigarettes smoked her, we were officially overlooked by way of will and testament. Only a small collection of West African-inspired fetishes were left to my mother. It was like Grandmother was still not watching us because the sculptures kept to themselves and took up space. My sister and I would play a game of who could last the longest in a dark room with them. She always won because she never hid once she was in the room. Grandmother specified her work should remain accessible to the public so I was surprised to see a piece in private hands. But *Silence* was in the office's darkest corner, covered by a bush of a plant and a layer of dust that was visible from across the room. Susan was not scared of *Silence* and it looked smaller for it.

When she pulled at my hip all I saw was the woman who had marched across campus. I almost linked fingers with her then; begged her not to leave me behind. I spent the evening in the library combing the feminist literature section, trying to find something I could appear with at her doorstep and ask for an explanation. The title now escapes me.

We ended up on her rug and there was a sliver of my orgasm where a sliver of the sculpture came into view, and I never reached that ladder of up-up-ups that are necessary to pull it off. Afterwards, I rolled closer to her and breathed into her neck, *be here,* and something changed in her. I did not tell her I was speaking to myself.

The sex got better, freer each time. But the sculpture always interrupted. It was closer than I remembered it to be. Then further. It was the first things my eyes saw after we had been together.

When I made a comment about moving it, Susan lifted it from the corner and put it in front of me, said it was a "gift." I told her I could not take something that was worth hundreds of thousands and bring it back to my dorm to stare at my roommate's Grateful Dead posters. Susan said it might do me some good, inspire me to complete my final thesis project for my art minor. I took it back to my dorm, wrapped it in a sheet and slid it under my bed.

I came in great shakes once the sculpture was no longer staring at me. But each time I laid down on my bed, I could feel it. Like the princess and the pea. Except nights of unrest did not turn me princess. Even if I had been raised to be one. There was always something unfinished in me. Something unworkable within my own hands. Susan, on the other hand, was complete, put together.

One morning I woke up blacker. Hawaii-shaped bruises lined my spine and on the back of my thighs, more visible because of the flat winter brown of my skin. At first I thought I had fallen during the night and not remembered. I pressed on each of them individually; molded them while I lay on the quad half-listening to my friend Eva talk about transferring schools again. I rested cautiously that night but when I awoke, my entire back and thighs were a pummeling of bruises and

I moved like a man just before knockout. I stayed in bed all day. As I lay awake, afraid to sleep, my hand grazed the sheet under the bed. I pulled it out and ran my fingers over the entire piece. The wooden surface scraped into my palms. I moved it to different places in the room but it did not fit in anywhere. All night I sweat, waking up to turn on the light and move it to a new position, until it was next to my roommate's desk, as far away as it could get.

When I woke up I did not have any new bruises and the old ones looked like some of the black had been leeched out. My roommate was giddy over our new décor, even more impressed that it was my grandmother who had made it. She said it was so tribal and the next day, she confessed that while I had been out, she and her boyfriend had had the most "primitive fuck" they had ever had. I stared at the sculpture and its opposite effect on me.

One morning, still in a daze from another night of bad sleep, I arrived in Susan's office.

"Can I paint you?" I asked.

"Yes, sure. Now?" Susan looked down at the paint and brush I had taken out of my bag.

"Yes, now. On your skin."

"Here? In my office?"

"We've done other things here. Is it so strange?" I pulled out my water canister and took a coffee cup from Susan's shelf and filled it up.

While she paused to evaluate if it was strange, I pulled down her blinds, laid a painter's sheet on the carpet and started removing her clothing. A friend of mine did body paint on me once. She had used bright parrot colors. Had not left a single inch of my skin visible. When she was stripped bare, I painted cross-sections in black on Susan's body. Dissected her body using slaughterhouse rules. When she was done, I leaned in and kissed her. I kept going until we were on the plastic mat and I had black all along my front, the imprint of her arms and breasts like road work on my jeans and T-shirt. When I came up to look at her face, her breasts were thrust up to the light, her back bent like one of the figures in the sculpture.

I looked over at the corner where the sculpture had been and sat up. There was another one staring at me. I dressed, with Susan protesting and asking what was wrong, and ran back to my dorm. I stripped bare and shoved the clothes in my sink and submerged them underwater even though I knew they were ruined.

The next day before class ended Susan called my name so I had no choice but to remain.

"What's wrong? Why did you leave yesterday?"

"Why did you put up another one?"

"What do you mean?"

"Another of the sculptures."

"Oh, that. The corner was so empty without it."

"So now we are in exactly the same position again."

Back in my room, I noticed I still had spongy black stains on my forearms and triceps. Like someone had given me a shadow. I closed my eyes and proceeded to peel the paint off my skin with the edge of a hangnail.

Side 3

We did not choose Sides.

Born of the same tree, we were split. Oh how we yearned and yearned for our halves and sides. Our Magic to conjoin rooted during our separation. When we were twisted together again with rope and shape, we could Magic two, three, four; as many copies as needed to become one. In our language "yesterday" and "today" are the same word, so we could also Time.

We gave them a chance to meet one another. Same girl-woman together. In spite of Time. And, as if they could sense our whole Magic, neither one could be in our presence. The first stored us with the things she did not want. The next one hid us under the weight of her whole body. When we emerged, they waited. We waited too. Which one of us would be real first. We were breakable but they were the shards of a glass glued dangerously back together. Sometimes a creation becomes more than you.

Each one thought the other one was the perfect castle, wanting to weave in and out of their kaleidoscope towers. It's always easy to admire someone else's fortress. You can see its beauty. You can see its faults. But it is still standing. And you are leaning. And you are unable to escape from the walls and corners of your own design. One should not try unless you are prepared to be lost.

Occasionally, in those brief moments of ecstasy, an unbecoming moan made it so they could see themselves together. We saw them too. Then when neither wanted us, they grew disappointed. Angry.

"Why are you giving it back?"

"Can't you see it knows something we don't?"

"It can't. It's just a sculpture."

"We won't be rid of them until it finishes us off."

"Everything breaks."

She threw us to the floor. To prove a point. We splintered. We could not repair ourselves or them. They would remain like us, two broken halves forever.

Fiction judge Bryn Chancellor writes: This writer has a magical way with diction and imagery that evokes both beauty and strangeness. With its inventive structure and perspectives and grand use of objects, this triangular story pulls us into a surreal, uneasy world of sex and art that explores contemporary Black womanhood.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Nonfiction Competition – Second Place

Heather Hahn

An Herbarium

"*Man muss ja Brot haben!"* My mother-in-law pounded our well-worn farmhouse table, the gathering place in my first house, which looked out onto the curtsying limbs of a white-blossoming magnolia. I was so proud. The little ranch sat atop soil more sand than dirt, a quiet lot stretching back from the road beneath sheltering loblolly pines. Yet, like some sort of unhinged German foil to Marie Antoinette, the grandmother of my daughter was yelling, "One must have bread!" She shook with demand. She sure didn't want what I was offering, probably some form of muesli-like cereal or maybe eggs and pancakes. God, I was trying my best. I had been cooking meat, starch, and two kinds of vegetables every night for at least two weeks. My first year of teaching high school in the U.S.—which had begun with a student bizarrely claiming that a plane had flown into the twin towers in New York—was ending with my father-in-law threatening to sue me. The ink on the bazillion papers I had graded wasn't even dry.

*

I taught moral philosophy at the college level for many years. I taught that ethics is the mucky gray, all the while imagining a more colorful mire, the students and me churning around in a cranberry bog with rubbery boots or in a vat of grapes, our feet irrevocably stained purple. Ethical choice necessarily marks you, and in my adult life, I learned quickly how often people will fail to pick a side. I taught that ethics without action is no ethics at all. I probed the difference between justice and revenge, which brings us to the adage attributed to Buddha: "If you propose to speak, always ask yourself, is it true, is it necessary, is it kind?"

*

On some level, I understood where my mother-in-law was coming from. She wasn't wrong. American bread culture in the early 2000s was sadly lacking. I was a tired mother, chasing a Shirley Temple toddler through Publix, picking up Chicago-style rolls on the fly. And after all, my mother-in-law was no different than the American students on my semester abroad who pleaded for McDonald's in Hamburg. The safety of the familiar can erupt into some mean cravings when vulnerability seeps through. I like to think I'm not like that, though. That semester in the late eighties, every day, I unveiled the perfect square of *Schwarzbrot*, butter, and cheese from its waxed-paper wrapper with ritual care, as a whole new way of being in the world unfolded; a new language became body and mind. Now it sounds like hyperbole to say history expanded before and behind me and that there were suddenly new aesthetics of landscape and painting and poetry, but it's true. I learned to see. Isn't that the point of being so young, that you are hungry for all of that? I'm also saying I think bread is very important. I'm saying I've been a baker of bread since my teens, taught by my mother, and I get what a loaf of bread says about a culture and a people, about family and hospitality. In the Germany of the 1980s, I saw health food stores long before we had organic in the Rust Belt. I was bereft when I returned to the States to a bread and coffee desert. There were no suitable substitutes for a disoriented mother-in-law.

*

Germans like hearty bread. Only 5.7% of German breads are made with pure white wheat, the rest with rye, spelt, and other whole grains. In contrast, it is exceptionally rare to find *Vollkornbrot* (full cereal bread) or *Schwarzbrot* (black bread) here in the States. Waves of food reforms since the middle of the nineteenth century have made Germans adamant about what is considered nutritious. And it's not white bread, even if little hard rolls (*Brötchen* or *Schrippe*)—crisp on the outside with a perfect ball of white fluff that separates itself from the walls of the roll in the middle—have snuck their way into the everyday diet. A generation or two ago, these white rolls were mainly a Sunday treat.

I miss *Brötchen*, but approximations are available. More deeply, I mourn the absence of *Schwarzbrot's* thin, flat slices, revealing tightly packed grains like the cross-section of a slide in biology class. Especially in Hamburg or Lüneburg, where the bread is particularly dark, but even further south and lighter brown, the squares divulge oval, moist kernels, pleasantly pungent. If commercial American-Jewish rye riddled with caraway seeds is related at all, these are distant cousins. German black bread is multi-dimensional and deeply satisfying, much like a pint of Guinness. A local baker in Youngstown, Ohio, used to produce the brick-like loaf, but no more. It seems I'm left no choice, especially here in the South, but to challenge myself to attempt several recipes for this notoriously unwieldy dough from Stanley Ginsberg's insanely well-researched *The Rye Baker*.

This is a white-black cultural divide of a Eurocentric kind. We Americans have generally aligned ourselves with the French, for as Goethe noted, the Germans and French consider this line of demarcation, this shibboleth, between black and white bread a call to battle. And while American artisan loaves have saved our bread culture from the void of the tasteless, processed white slice of Schwebels, best suited for washing your car, our artisan breads don't venture into the terrain of the heavy rye sponge. The baker-author Ginsberg drives the point home—a loaf of bread is a comprehensive national statement, with geography, climate, flora, agricultural practices, and economics all baked into it. What is now a curious cultural anecdote while perusing a well-written cookbook was once a matter of life and death; according to Ginsburg, in pre-modern European societies, bread accounted for three-quarters of caloric intake. The stakes couldn't have been higher.

*

In the Paris of the 1990s, where my calories were derived largely from the Parisian, white flour baguette (itself, shockingly, not even universally French, as I recently discovered on a visit to Provence), my academic diet was Derridean. A lover of paradox, the volta, the turn in the poem where meaning begins to show itself, I found Jacques Derrida's lectures on *Being in Time* meaningful because of the German text, no thanks to my French, which was a bit like unactivated yeast at the time. Derrida reminded us students, black-clad and serious and packed into tiered rows of amphitheater-like seats of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, that "giftig" in German means "poison." Within the gift, then, is something poisonous, a hidden underbelly, a betrayal, or at the very least, a covert expectation of return. So a gift is never freely given or entirely wholesome, but rather, perhaps, a Trojan horse. Depending upon one's attitude toward this brand of postmodernism (a worn-out topic, admittedly), this gift/*giftig* slip is either a point of departure for inquiry or hooey. I find it does give me pause. I love a good turn. Objects, then meaning, turn themselves inside out.

*

And so it went in the Middle Ages, periodically, in waves, over several centuries. Girls and women, also men, danced on lacerated feet but could not stop. They scratched arms until bloody nails were packed underneath with flesh, desperate to free the crawling insects they perceived as having burrowed under skin. Tens, hundreds, fainted and screamed, were taunted by the devil, were even terrified of the color red. Women miscarried, arms and legs convulsed, eyes rolled back in heads, and bodies were lit by a holy, searing flame from within. Pieter Brueghel painted *The Dancing Mania* in 1642, and all throughout the medieval period and into the Renaissance, famine and witch hunts of souls like these often coincided. Who else could cause individuals of all ages to see the foulest visions and lose control of their very bodies but the devil himself?

But in the interim, the hard and social sciences have weighed in. Cold winters followed by wet springs—a perfect incubator for ergot poisoning, caused by the rye-loving fungus *claviceps purpurea* and leading to two types of ergotism (convulsive and gangrenous) and all manner of hallucinogenic symptoms and physical ailments—often culminated in an inquisition. Rye bread, the staple of the poor, had betrayed them, as only the elites had bread made from wheat. Embedded within the staple crop of the poor were the seeds, or rather spores, of death. Contaminated rye flour didn't stop causing St. Anthony's fire, convulsions, and gangrene until the late 19th century. Ergot poisoning wasn't identified as a disease until 1853. But witch trials in the Middle Ages in Europe resulted in the execution of tens of thousands of individuals, largely women. Because when crops failed, nothing but spore-infected rye (itself a weed, like heather, my namesake, a flowering weed) fed the masses, who became sick, convulsed, lost limbs, were deemed witches, and some burned at the stake, because of it. A deadly betrayal, a wicked turn.

Not everyone gives this theory credence. Some argue instead that a particular socio-psychological context led to mass hysteria. However, it seems no leap at all to imagine that together *claviceps purpurea* and the church, hell-bent on controlling the body politic and the female body in particular, worked in concert to produce documented events of sorcery, transgressive beliefs, and punitive actions. Having myself been called a witch, cast as a poor hostess and later a home-wrecker and anti-religious, all before reaching my mid-forties, I know it doesn't take a famine to incite the fearful.

*

Someone else, not my mother-in-law, did actually name me in a lawsuit. An "agnostic paramour" is, arguably, a "witch." A fellow soccer-parent, whose childhood was spent rolling twenty-sided dice and fighting off orcs, translated. *She's calling you a witch!* he said. Indeed. Just another hot spring day at the soccer field. I remember standing next to the most beautiful, newly-planted flower beds on campus when I got the call. We were being sued, freshly married, and riding that all-encompassing wave of love and incredible luck with nothing but good will for all men in our hearts. A witch! If only! I am reminded of a couple overheard on a date, one booth over from my forever husband and me, discussing the power of *Game of Thrones*'s Daenerys Targaryen, the guy so animated. "Why they mess with her? Everybody know she got three dragons!" Exactly! If only someone, anyone, said, *Don't mess with Heather. Everybody knows she's a witch*. The irony is, that kind of spewed out, white-hot naming can become something worth claiming.

Robert Graves did say that heather is a suitable tree for the initiation of Scottish witches.

For all intents and purposes, I have been deemed both personally and professionally a witch. I once stood in line in Piggly Wiggly—true story—and heard

one woman say to another that "philosophy is the enemy of religion." I have no idea what the context of that conversation might have been. If memory serves, I turned to her and politely inquired what would make her say that. I remember saying that quite a few philosophers were religious believers. I remember explaining that I taught a philosophy of religion class, where we looked at the structure of religious belief. I remember saying that the purpose of examining religious belief is to know why you believe what you believe. In the Deep South, but also in the interim in all regions of the U.S., people have a hard time recognizing compatibility between disciplines they have been raised to believe are at odds. We confuse disagreement in this country with attack, with disrespect, or worse, with evil. (In that same grocery store, a male customer once addressed my other, more visible role in life by impressing upon me, unsolicited, that I must have another baby so that my toddler would have a sibling. I asked him if he was going to come over and babysit.) For the record, philosophy and religion are not inherently incompatible. But if you teach to or teach with people who are fearful, who experience questioning as an uprooting—and what is philosophy but asking probing questions?—you will eventually be called a witch. Again, if only.

I ran across the most exquisite images of a sorceress at the Pittsburgh Zine Fair in the Ace Hotel in Oakland. She was drawn in black, naturally, wimpled head bowed over the baby in her belly (the child who would usurp the girl-narrator in the affections of her father), spikes of a crown protruding from the witch's head. The stepmother (I am myself one, if not practicing), universally, cross-culturally villainized, might be low-hanging fruit, but the honest pain of the young artist's depicted betrayal (autobiographical, she said) was an image I couldn't look away from. Her loss was tangible. I might have been the shadowy figure juxtaposed with the aproned, blond mother lost to the narrator. The glossy-paged zine was almost entirely black and gray and white, except for the pin-prick of blood on the tip of the finger, the ruby lips of the daughter, and the red outline of the enticing apple. A hex always brings death and endings with her birthing and new beginnings. She disrupts, she wedges, she usurps.

In these scenarios, I am thrice-over a witch.

*

Cereal rye (*secale cereale*) "a member of the Grass family, is **a class-C by complaint only** noxious weed…. Rye probably originated from the mountains of North Africa and the Near Middle East, evolving as a food crop about 3,000 BC. It is able to withstand colder climates than wheat and by the late 16th century was used for bread making in Russia and Northern Europe as well as in Britain."

Heather, *Calluna vulgaris*, "native to Africa, temperate Asia and Europe, is **an invasive weed** in its introduced range in Australia, the United States, Canada and New Zealand."

It's all very definition and perspective dependent, what is noxious, what is precious. Dandelion greens abound in salads, and *echinacea purpurea* boosts our immune systems. But these are squarely weeds. I remember as a kid wondering as my mother, a gifted gardener, tended to her many vegetables and flowers, what the difference was between a weed and a flower, as my own namesake flowers purple. Weeds arrive on a precious plot and change the landscape (a daughter-in-law). Weeds threaten what has been cultivated in a particular place for decades, perhaps longer (a family that has gone through divorce). Weeds choke out all that is holy and precious, like one particular way of seeing the world (philosophy). Rye is a weed that threatens other crops, but its hearty disposition lent itself to feeding millions for hundreds of years in inhospitable climes, until it turned on those reliant upon it, infested with parasitic spores. Heather is a white or pink or purple flower of the Scottish Highlands, unless it is choking out your preferred plants, or finding the promising soil to raise a daughter, or falling in love with a kind man who had been almost turned to stone by a mythological gaze, or who is teaching students to think for themselves, or stitching together the wet tissue paper of stepmotherhood. All of these weedy transgressions mark one a witch.

*

Weed

noun

- a valueless plant growing wild, especially one that grows on cultivated ground to the exclusion or injury of the desired crop.
- any undesirable or troublesome plant, especially one that grows profusely where it is not wanted: *The vacant lot was covered with weeds. The daughter-in-law ruled the roost. The professor taught philosophy. The stepmother stepmothered. The second wife wifed.*
- ~~*Informal.* a cigarette or cigar~~. This is a formal inquiry.
- SEE MORE (If only they would have. I'm trying.)

verb (used with object)

- to free from weeds or troublesome plants; root out weeds from: *to weed a garden. To threaten a lawsuit. To name in a lawsuit. To wish the stepmother dead.*
- to root out or remove (a weed or weeds), as from a garden (often followed by *out*): *to weed out crab grass from a lawn. To make the tenure process a living hell and oust her.*
- SEE MORE (Watch me staying or leaving of my own accord. That's the nature of weeds. Recalcitrant.)

verb (used without object)

- to remove weeds or the like.
- SEE MORE (the like = *calluna vulgaris* and her ilk)

*

Weeks after my daughter was born, in an effort to get out of the house with her American grandparents, I pushed our zippy, three-wheeled, Dutch jogging stroller along the smoothly worn, gray stones of the City Museum of Worms. Here in Worms, Martin Luther had refused to recant in 1521, and here, my infant felt the urge to make a raspy, eerie, throaty hiss, which echoed repeatedly off the vaulted ceiling. My parents and I giggled, but if it had been 1521, someone in a dark cloak would have come and confiscated the possessed child. She never made that particular sound again, reminiscent of a cousin of mine who tried out the f-bomb for the first time on Christmas Eve in the middle aisle of the cathedral in downtown Pittsburgh. Timing is everything. In Worms, the gargoyles seemed to appreciate the effort.

My daughter was soon transplanted from Germany to the U.S., away from one set of grandparents toward another in search of what, today, we call work-life balance.

We raised her bi-lingually, on a steady diet of St. Nikolaus Tag, German children's books, German in the home, and VHS videos of the sweet little witch Bibi Blocksberg. I imagine with sorrow that my former mother-in-law experienced a bait and switch. One moment I was coaxing her down from Köln into a *Konditorei* to share layers of torte, and the next, I was loading up a metal container, baby crib and all, bound for the port of Charleston. I chose a life for my daughter I could guide, and so we left a place I thought might have been a life-long home. My life, too, was cleft in half.

*

I'm a confirmed bread snob, but there are better reasons for being picky about bread types than nostalgia for one's student days. My Freiburg guest-mother balked so vehemently at my mention of Southern cornbread I felt suddenly ashamed. "We ate that during and after the war. I can't eat that ever again." She described how sack after sack of cornmeal was dumped in fields by American planes and made into a tasteless, dry approximation of bread. What could be further from the familiar rye? Sawdust was even incorporated into "war bread" in the absence of flour. Who was I to bring the taste of grit and ash back into her mouth? Perhaps from a place of similar hauntings of lack and suffering, my mother-in-law pounded the table, demanding an end to the litany of loss and trespass. I have heard tell that the men did not keep her safe. And while that generation of women did not put their stories in my mouth, what they do not say reverberates to this very day from the rubble they sifted through to begin to assemble a life. A little table pounding for safety and family and decent bread that makes you whole is not, then, uncalled for.

I can't really apologize. There was necessity in the leaving. But if I did, if I approached to perhaps thoughtlessly risk the delicate chrysalis of your life now, I would speak softly to you, directly. That's the least I would do. The truth—that you

only gave me the best gifts, a result of careful observation, reflection, and taste—adds to this particular ache akin to regret. Your presents *did not* (I believe, I want to believe, I believe) contain hidden poisons. I had to be careful, because if I found something pleasing—a blue trivet with grain painted on it, a photograph (of a boy, your son, legs crossed, playing contemplatively on the floor)—you would up and give it to me! You deserved a gentler story. And while I still don't believe men should be allowed their little white lies, if I am right about you, we still love each other, or there is a feeling very much like love, that we have both tucked away, which we might unpack, hesitantly, when no-one else is around.

*

If we are lucky, we grow into our names. I strove hard to out-tomboy my flowery first name, churning up playground cinders as the fastest girl or boy in the school until that Matt kid showed up in fifth grade. Even worse, children scattered in every direction when Shaun B., wearer of black-rimmed glasses, stigmatized my speed by nicknaming me "Danger" and declaring me "it." But after school, my ever patient dad tempered my kindergarten (and adult, it turns out) desire to be liked with a universal truth. He said it plain. *When people call you names, it is because they feel badly about themselves. They try to pull you down to their level to make themselves feel better.* He could really have stopped parenting there.

That exceptionally grounded seventies childhood was split evenly between a Rust Belt love of football and the endless, unfolding worlds within the carefully chosen spines of public library books fished out of the stacks with eager fingers. I followed the adolescent hero Ged from Ursula LeGuin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* across windswept landscapes until he learned the power of naming and the eponymous nature of his shadow side. I considered for the first time that language is a wizard's tool, a deadly weapon, and a way to be in the world. As a rule, Heather, or *Calluna vulgaris,* harkens back to the Ancient Greek *Calluna* or *Kallyno,* to "beautify or sweep clean."

It has also been said that heather is useful for opening the portals to the world of the fae. If only.

Nonfiction judge Melissa Febos writes: A discursive and pleasurable study of bread by an affable narrator who twines together myriad elements, including moral philosophy, witches, and names.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Poetry Competition – Third Place

Rhett Iseman Trull

The Stars Align Themselves in Ancient Sisterhoods of Light

And Jade and I sat on the hood of her car
and didn't mind the rain, the sun
that ticked on anyway, the sun would not go out.
And Megan held my hair back.
And Molly taught me cigarettes. And Sarah
kept her promise not to tell. And Riley told.
And Coach chased me down—night
we lost the playoffs and I'd planned
to kill myself, out the bus emergency door, took off
for the roof downtown—and she carried me to
Brittney's and Brittney leant me dry clothes, underwear and all,
and let me sleep beside her, in the morning
bought us donuts, even though
I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep.
And sometimes it was as if there were
a party thrown to save me, devout
committees formed, tasked
with just that job. And

sometimes there was no one

but wind off the ocean, the evening
all laid out before me like bedclothes,
and even the gleam in the eye of the wren
and the sunrise all red-dressed and boasting and once
there was this Great Dane, Charlie,
who knew—somehow he knew—
on my lap the full-grown anchor of his body, head
to my shoulder, world I didn't want
to want to leave.

And Caleb sewed the captain star
I'd ripped from my letter jacket and
kissed me when I needed to be kissed, Bridge
of Sighs and all of Venice incandescent, inviting me
to drown. And kissing didn't save me. And anything
might save me. And Karen understood.
And Joy did not. And Lauren grew delphinium,
she said, just for me. And Jenny—when the light spiked
sharp and I forgot the way to breathe—
held me for an hour
outside the party, outside everybody else's ease
and laughter. And Corey found me in the field.
Her hair like smoke and ribbons. We didn't need
to speak or touch, just watched the sky
until the bats delivered twilight. And Eli
deemed my pain divine and let me see
above his bed where he'd drawn a map of his
in a fever of blue ink after watching *Fight Club*, and did not
take my clothes off, even though he could.
And Brittney brought me everywhere and Brittney
kept me in her Jeep and Brittney did the talking
when I had no words.

And Nicky gave her lucky coin and Chris
the flannel off his back right after class, right
when I said I loved it. And Janelle at two a.m.,
no hesitation, let me in and shared the Irish whiskey
she'd been saving, lit us candles, until
we were the last, we were sure, awake alive.
And Leah steered us into safety, let me rest
across the back seat, Indigo Girls and yes,

I'm on fire, I'm on fire through the years.
And Jade couldn't take it anymore
and turned away. And Heather sent an actual
disinvitation, her stationary tinged the palest pink,
but Lizzie patched me up
in the back of the cathedral and kept
her hand on me all night, even in her sleep.
And Holden stayed past visiting hours
and Vanessa, the night nurse, let him. And
under the oak tree, Stephanie
told me all her secrets.

And Brittney came each time I called,
even though her date, even though her finals, even though
I take and take and make myself the center
of each story. And Greta wrote me songs
and Katie said *crawl in* and
Mary did my portrait as a shadow.
And Adrienne pinned me down,
fiercest hug until I promised
not to jump. I didn't jump. I didn't
swallow the whole bottle. I threw out
the razor blade, even though I hid it first awhile
and touched it sometimes like a lover.
I'm lucky. And that's all. I'm lucky
I am loved.

Poetry judge A. Van Jordan writes: It's not easy to write a long, narrative poem—especially one both set in the past with hindsight knowledge and with the revelation of a reverie—but the poet of "The Stars Align Themselves in Ancient Sisterhoods of Light" makes it look easy. What's particularly impressive is the number of figures who enter and are managed in this poem, while the speaker never seems to lose her way. One of the most challenging aspects of writing a poem with multiple figures is keeping the pronouns in order. I never tripped up or got taken out of this poem. The poet wisely offers both an introductory clause and some context for each figure who enters a scene. There's also a sense of wisdom in this one; it's the wisdom of someone who has lived and can look back, making sense of what they've learned. My favorite line in this poem is, "And sometimes it was as if there were / a party thrown to save me." I'm glad the speaker of this poem got saved and could live to share this narrative.

Anita Cantillo

When the Universe Told Me You Were Dead

That very morning, the feral cat left
a dead bluebird on my doorstep,
splayed open.

Heart gutted, this remained:
a blood-empty chamber
caged behind delicate, shattered bone.

Newly lifeless, feathers still wet
with morning sky, the orbs of her
eyes set to flight.

Anita Cantillo

In Spite of My Anger

I take the plate of palm fruit offered.
The thin layer of skin cleaved away,
each gem halved, revealing fibrous coral flesh.

These *pejibayes* from the motherland
are your peace offering.
For months you've hoarded this
forbidden fruit.

We must eat the entire jar now
or the fruit will spoil.
I understand this sacrifice.

Basta. Enough with the argument.
Let us eat.

Susan L. Lin

For Angel Island

I.

The tile on your restroom walls reminds me
of blank composition paper: each empty square
like the promise of a new home.

I fill these boxes with the language of those
who were once detained, knowing that others
will call my writing (and me) "foreign,"

will tell me to go back where I came from.

II.

A mother gives birth in three dimensions.
A map neglects topography, doesn't begin
to tell your whole life story:

The foliage overcoat that sets you aflame
and the concealed missiles that lay dormant
inside your belly. Poised to launch,

the opposite of falling.

III.

I stand at the precipice and look down
to the cold body that wraps its long arms,
shapeless and blue, around you.

Skin darkens when it absorbs the light.
A souvenir from the summers when you taught me
how to stay afloat. Those wet tongues

lapping at my bare toes.

IV.

Time threatens to unearth a skeleton,
the bones that form our histories. You, adrift:
farther than ever from the motherland.

I can hope for a happier ending.
One where we wave and say "goodbye"
but then I take the boat out to sea

and paddle till we meet again.

V.

A word about the knobless doors:
I'm afraid that if they close I won't be
brave enough to open up again.

The writing on the wall tells me more
than horizontal lines on a sheet of loose leaf
ever will. It says: *I was here.* They were here.

Their voices forever etched on the skin of you.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Fiction Competition – Third Place

Cathy Rigg Monetti

Stone Cold

The door was standing open and with a quick snap of his head the deputy motioned her to go on back. She stepped across into dark and slowed, giving her eyes a minute to adjust. She was in a hallway this time, one lined to the left by a wall and then to the right, jail cells, it looked to be four in a row. There wasn't anybody in the first one, thin light making striped shadows across the concrete floor. The second one was empty, too; its iron-bar door stood open. She couldn't see the third, but from the last one came a long intake of air, gravelly, familiar. *Damn him*, she thought, and she froze, not wanting him to see her.

Oh he'd be surprised she'd come. He never figured her to give up on him—he'd made so many messes and she'd cleared them up time and again. But this one was different and he knew it. This one cost her more. And so she stood there at the edge, one cell away and out of sight; she stood there letting time stretch long while Mack Bell waited, and Mack Bell worried, before stepping into his view.

*

The thought flashed of her babies—which Evie, James and Jolene were—at home this very minute with her mother. She'd got off this morning without giving up even one good detail about where she was going or why, which was her plan but you never know how things like that are gonna go. It was not a far leap for her mother to figure it, so she'd lied on the spot saying there was a woman over on the Pound with a mess of sewing up for decent pay, and it was hers if she could collect it by noon.

*

There was the creak and cry of rusty bed springs. She couldn't see him but she could picture him, standing to stretch his legs, rubbing at his back as it always gave him trouble. This came from working the mines, all that bending over, which does things to a body, takes its toll even when the mean you carry ought to be something keeps a younger spine bucked up. But lord no not Mack. He was always paining, always aching, always having another reason (like he needed it) to act ugly.

*

It had been his Mama who saw to it they were wed. There was a baby on the way and soon as she found out, in the same sentence Mrs. Bell declared it both the Lord's will and a crying shame. Weren't no son of hers gonna walk away from such a situation, and three days later there they were—her and Mack, married—which then his hateful mother washed her hands of the whole damn thing. And from thereafter and forevermore she'd had not one thing to do with either of them, or with the child once it came. The woman considered it a relief, is all you can figure, no longer burdened with the consequences of her son's shenanigans. It was a good play, you'd have to say that, the town's disparaging eyes now cast solidly in the direction of his wife, who was measured equally unfit by both rumor and association.

She'd had no idea. That was the thing, no idea in the days when it would have mattered. He always had money, but the mines pay pretty good. Mack'd got into coal right out of high school and that's a job that affords a decent life when you're single and your expectations fall on the simpler side: a fast car, all the beer you can drink, trailer park rent. It didn't get complicated until there was a girl involved or some escalating debt, of which at the time Mack had neither. What he did have was a pulling toward things that were dangerous. Moth to a flame; if it was high stakes, and stupid, Mack Bell was in. Which is just how he'd come to this in the first place. It was over a poker game when somebody'd bet he'd not break into Long's and come out carrying a box of Black Beauties. Which of course he did, which led to another, which in time he was caught up in a nasty business getting dirtier by the day.

*

A voice from the front, somebody was coming. She slid into the empty dark cell, tucking herself into a corner behind stone.

*

Three times she'd left him. The first happened a decade ago, them married only a couple of years. That would make it, what, 1979? Yes, 1979, and she was gone exactly one night when he showed up at Linda's begging her to come home. She remembered it like it was yesterday, her standing on the porch and him walking up the hilly drive, the sun shining behind him. She'd shifted Evie to her left hip and used her right arm to raise a hand over her brow, that's how bright the light was.

It made her smile to think about it. How contrite he'd been that afternoon, how filled with promises. They were gonna start over, he was gonna be a better man and make for a life that suited them both. He loved her, that was the thing, he loved that baby. And God but she fell for it—silly girl, so full of hope. Linda knew better and told her so. Her Aunt Linda had done it all and seen it all and she was one woman not shy about telling you straight. Which was what she'd loved most about her, God rest her soul, except for when it cut into lies a person was desperate to believe.

The next time was harder to think about. There were two babies by then, Evie was five and James, going on three. She got word Mack'd been carrying on with the woman from the thrift shop, a girl she knew of since she went in there to look around sometimes, The Second Hand Rose. She was always taken with the woman, who'd follow you around not hardly talking but for answering questions, her black hair and eyes and that dark skin putting you in mind of somebody from over off somewhere, like a gypsy or a queen. She could see why a man would be drawn to a woman like that, who seemed mysterious. But she, for one, wasn't putting up with it.

She told him as much, not letting the situation fester. She did not mince words, either, and his response was to look her over with hatred and anger and slap her hard across the face, snapping her jaw.

He walked out. Two weeks later he walked back in, this time him being the one to receive word. His wife was pregnant, they were expecting their third child, and it was time he came on home.

The last and final time was four days ago. The sheriff had come to the house with a warrant to search and as he and his bloodhounds found everything they were looking for, and as her name was on the deed right along with Mack's, this left her "culpable."

*

She did not move, stood stock still. She listened as footsteps approached.

"Mack," the voice said. It was familiar, serious, the person passed by. "It's me, Mack. Kenneth."

So it was Ken Ramsey, a lawyer.

"Kenny. Hell, I sure am glad to see you."

"You can call me Kenneth. I go by Kenneth now."

This was funny, she thought this was funny, why she'd of laughed but for needing to stay hid. Kenny and Mack went back to eighth grade, them both playing football and getting moved up to varsity when some seniors got expelled. They were too young for that locker room, which the coaches should've known, and some things happened that wasn't pretty. She'd learned about it back in the day, her and Mack first courting and there being a lot of Seagrams and a little 7UP. Somehow that night Mack felt like talking.

"Sure. Kenneth it is. But how did you…I mean, who sent...."

There came a sharp clink, Mack's class ring no doubt, as he took a good grip on the bars. He was 31 years old and still wearing the thing, like high school had become his religion.

"My services have been retained by your mother," Kenny said.

"My mother?" Mack said.

His mother? she thought.

"I've talked to her and the sheriff already. I have a pretty good understanding of what transpired, I believe."

*

There was a midnight scrimmage called by the coach. That's what they'd told the young boys—who got to the field to find it dark. They did like they'd been told, though, and went to the 50-yard-line where they found, in a neat little row, two helmets, two sets of pads, and a football sitting in a kicker's stand.

They waited, not talking much but mostly just standing around. After fifteen minutes, Mack said he was leaving, this was a prank and they were the joke. Kenny wasn't sure—maybe they'd got the time wrong, or maybe there had already been practice or maybe it was to come. He did not want to leave nor do anything that would land them in trouble. So they gave it another ten. Then "screw them," Mack said, and he walked off. Kenny came, too, and when they got near the end zone, "Boys. Boys!" they heard through a megaphone. "You trying to get kicked off this team? Get your asses back to the fifty. Run."

Run they did. Kenny being smaller and faster, he got there first.

"I thought this was a scrimmage." Mack had his hands on his hips, his words shouted into dark.

"Suit up," said the megaphone. Both boys reached for their pads and the megaphone laughed. "Oh wait. I forgot to say. This is Nekkid Scrimmage. So strip first, all the way down."

Mack was out of his shoes, his shirt, his pants. Kenny hesitated but followed, and when the lights clanked on there they were, blinded and bare. Cheers came from the sidelines where there were eight or ten guys, three or four girls and not a single coach.

"Line up, boys," the megaphone said. "You know the formation. QB Mack in back. Kenny, you get down in front. Go on, now. Go on. Mack, get your hands in there tight. Hold it…hold it…hold it. Hike that ball."

*

Papers were shuffling, Kenny was looking for a note, or he needed to write something down. "We'll just go over the facts," he said, "to be sure I've got them straight. Just need a yes or a no, you got that, Mack? Yes or no is all I'm after." Kenny's voice had taken on a different tone, he sounded like a lawyer. "You own a

house at 404 Rocky Creek Road. Correct?" Silence, which if Mack had to think this over, Kenny sure enough had his hands full. "Please answer yes or no. Out loud, so there's no mistaking."

"Yes, I own a house at 404 Rocky Creek."

"Yes or no only, please."

"Yes."

"The house at 404 Rocky Creek Road is co-owned by your wife, Brenda T. Bell. Yes or no."

"Yes."

"On the afternoon of 14 January, Sheriff Tommy Yates confiscated from the house at 404 Rocky Creek Road: morphine—six bottles, Darvon—a case less two, and three boxes of Yellow Jackets."

"Yes. I guess." The lawyer cleared his throat, to which Mack responded, in a whisper, "I don't know what all they got, Kenny. I wasn't there, and Brenda won't let me back in."

"The pills, which I just listed, were not prescribed for you or for your wife by a physician."

"No. Hell no, Kenny."

"You did not, in fact, know the pills were there."

"Yes. I mean no. Wait. What?"

"You, Johnny Mack Bell, had no knowledge of the drugs in your house."

"No?"

What the hell, she thought.

"I mean no. No, I did not."

"Which means they were the property—legal or not—of your wife, Brenda T. Bell."

She leaned back against the cell wall and used her hands to brace; she was light-headed, and she feared she might faint. She felt the cool stone, held to its ridges, hoped its peaks and valleys would be enough hold her. She closed her eyes. They were gonna pin this on her, that was the plan. They were gonna use *her* to save *him*.

"Mack. Yes? Or no?"

"Kenny…I mean, I wanna…" He stopped, then started again. "But she don't…"

"Let me be clear, Mack. You'll need to be very careful what you say next. I've been given the facts of the investigation, and all I'm looking to do right now is confirm them. A yes sends us in one direction, a no sends us in another."

"Ask the question again."

Kenny spoke slow, like Mack was hard of understanding. "The drugs that were confiscated at your home, at 404 Rocky Creek, on January 14, were the property of your wife, Brenda T. Bell. Yes, or no."

She held on tight; the world went white; a thousand sights played. First her babies, Evie with the curls, Evie quick to smile and sing. And such an imagination!

Evie born with bright eyes that of late, had started to flatten. James, a Mama's boy. Sweet and loving, afraid. There was a line between Mack and James and it was stretched tight, one on one end and one on the other, both pulling. Little Jolene, dark little Jolene, who came into this life screaming and ready, already, for the fight. There was June, Brenda's mom, steady if disapproving. She herself had suffered hardship and hard times and lord she looked a thousand years old. With Brenda gone, what would happen to her? To them? What would happen with all of them, was this to come to be? Brenda'd had dreams, too—her own dreams which in this time alone had found room to take on shape. She'd pulled out an old school notebook, the kind with the spiral that was always bent, and she'd turned past her notes from Civics and Math to some mostly empty pages in the back. She'd made a list of all the things she was good at. *Taking care of kids*, was what she wrote first, but she marked it out having no interest in taking on other families' problems. *Cooking*, she wrote. *Cleaning. Waitressing. Sewing.* Sewing—she was good at sewing, she had been since she'd first learned to sew in eighth grade Home Ec. One Christmas Mack'd surprised her with a Singer he'd found at the salvage shop, it was not in good shape but he'd got it working, cleaned up and oiled, its parts all humming. She could take in sewing, she could do that at home, she could make it a business. Why maybe someday she'd open up a shop, fill it with dresses, tops, pieces of her own design. Or she'd go to college. She could go to the community college and study accounting, she'd always had a head for numbers, plus Jeanette Miller had started that—

"The drugs were Brenda's, Mack. Yes or no. I need your answer."

"Shit, Kenny."

Mack's ring was tapping again, tapping against the metal. Then the tapping stopped. She heard his shoes, he walked away, turned, came back to the bars. His voice was low. "Look, man. I appreciate what you're doing. What you're willing to do. It ain't a small thing. I just don't think I can—"

"Stop. Before you say anything else, I want to be sure you understand. Your mother contacted me. Your mother retained me, with the clear expectation I get these charges dropped. She explained to me what happened, then I went to the sheriff who confirmed the details just like she'd laid them out. Now if you want to give me a different version, you have the right to do that. Clients often tell me all kinds of stories around the same circumstance. But understand, we'll be working from what you say. Yours will be our truth."

Mack didn't say anything, the silence went on for so long she could feel it string out like a long, thin line, the kind a spider spins when starting a new web.

"You struggling to remember, Mack—I have to say it comes as a surprise." Kenny sounded less like a lawyer now, and more like a friend. "I was rather sure—your Mom was rather certain, I suppose I should say—the facts would come back to you quickly."

"I ain't a monster," Mack said.

"No," came Kenny.

"Although I have done gracious plenty to get strung up over, of which I expect you are aware." Brenda could picture what her husband was doing now, that thing where he peeks out from under thick lashes, a little boy trying to both hide and see.

"Yeah, well, here's what I know," said Kenny. "You stood up for me. All those years ago, you stood up for me in a situation that was both impossible and cruel, at a time when it would have been far easier not to. At a time when you didn't have to."

Mack got stiff, she could hear it. "Weren't no reason for them to cut us both down."

"Yeah, but the stakes were rising, and you made the deal. I got to walk off that field. In exchange, you stayed."

She hadn't known there was more to the football story; as Mack had told it, the lights came on and everybody had a big laugh. It'd sounded stupid, of course; initiations always are. But boys will be boys and whatever.

"I'm here for you now, Mack. I'll put it on the line. All you gotta do is say it. No you didn't. Yes she did."

"But godamighty, Kenny, what reason would there be for Brenda to have stole them drugs? To hide them? Ain't no judge in their right mind gonna rule that girl was behind it."

"Your mother says different."

"What does she know." It was under his breath, a throwaway but there.

"She's got a witness, Mack. Testimony'll be your wife's had the scheme going for years. There's some evidence, too, and I have to tell you, the work-up's pretty convincing."

Tap tap tap, it was the sound of possibility. "How much time would she get?"

"Less than you."

The sick in her stomach began to move, panic and dread, fear on the rise. It climbed her throat, she swallowed it back, it found a new path to her nose.

"Listen, Mack. I didn't think this would require so much considering. And I sure don't like the idea of walking out of here with you not answering. But if what you need is time, I'll give you that. I'll come back tomorrow. We'll get the facts straight then, whatever facts you remember."

Mack didn't answer and she tried to think, to decide her next move, should she go at Ken Ramsey right now? Should she call out—for the sheriff maybe?—who was godamighty *already on their side*. Should she slip out herself, get a lawyer of her own? No. She should talk to Mack. She should talk to Mack, damn his mother, there were the children and he would see that and if they sent her away, who would there be to…

"Alright then. I'll see you tomorrow, Mack."

Kenny was coming now, shadows had thinned, she pushed herself hard against the wall. He was past and near to the exit when there came Mack's voice, shooting down the hall.

"It was me, Kenny. I did it. I stole those drugs. Me—Mack James Bell. You hear? You too, Sheriff? I am the one done it. Me, not nobody else. Me. I'm the one."

*

They were on a blanket under the trees, it was early in their courting and spring buds were just starting to open. She remembered because the day was pretty, if cool, and he'd pulled up unexpected in his burnt orange Chevelle. He told her to get in, and she'd done it no thought at all. There was a six of Miller High Life on the floorboard, and before they'd got around the corner she'd popped one open, handed it to him, scooted over close as she could get to Mack Bell.

He tucked the bottle between his thighs. His left hand was on the wheel, and he stretched the other long across behind her. They didn't talk much—the wind was making a racket with the windows partly down—and from time to time she'd reach for the beer, take a sip, then hold it to his mouth where he could drink and not have to let loose of her shoulder. It was funny. She never liked beer but this one tasted good, a mix of sunshine and misbehaving that was new to her, and thrilling.

They drove through town. When he turned left she knew he was taking her to High Knob. In a quarter mile the road narrowed, and they started the windy climb up, forest lining the edges and switchbacks insisting they respect the steep grade. In spite he kept up speed and it slung her here and there, both of them laughing, then he'd reach out again and pull her back close.

Up at the top they parked. They had not opened a door yet when he kissed her hard and something pent up inside her released, water of a dam rushing to flood a too-dry valley. She gasped a little, it catching her off guard, and he stopped, pulled back, and considered her. He wiped gentle at her mouth with his thumb. He'd decided something, she could tell this even if she didn't know what it was, then he smiled and turned to get out. "Come on, Bren," he said. "And grab those beers, would you."

When he opened the trunk she saw there was a couple of blankets in there, something she decided not to ponder too deep in particular since it was cold up on this mountain. He grabbed them both and took her hand and they headed off in the direction of a trail. They hadn't got far when the path cut back, and in another fifty yards, narrowed and split. "This way," he said, and she followed.

They got to a small clearing. It was a pine needle patch alongside a grove of old laurel, and he took one of the blankets and spread it out over the ground. They sat. "Look at you, shivering," he said, and he took the other and pulled it around them both and where the wool touched her skin it itched and tickled both at once. Fear and wonder and excitement moved in her.

"You know what I like about this, Bren?" She looked at him, but his eyes were straight ahead. "It's just you and me. The way it should always be."

In no time they were down. He was beside her, over her, around her—everywhere and searching, everything and finding. Tall pines reached for sky and she became ground, earth, his kisses raining fire. She was adrift, she was there, she was willing; he was certain and he was taking.

It was their beginning.

It was their end, caught like she was in the memory. Lost in their love just as now, he would be lost in his.

Fiction judge Bryn Chancellor writes: This story captured me with its absorbing characters and immediacy, as well as its wonderful movement, veering deftly into past moments that amplify the sadness and tension in the troubled present. I'm especially taken with the last extended passage, a lovely memory that turns hard and fast into that final punch of a sentence.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Nonfiction Competition – Third Place

Janna Zonder

When Facts Obscure the Truth

My friend Laura and I were talking about rape and how difficult it is to prove in a court of law. "Men and women seem to have different perspectives on consent," I said.

But, is that true? Are some men actually confused about whether a woman wants sex? If a woman is raped and represses the event as it is happening, reframing it into something she can live with, does the rapist believe she is a willing participant?

In the middle of my conversation with my friend, I flashed upon an experience I'd had in my early twenties, one that I had never spoken of before. It happened in 1972. I had been working as a secretary for a couple of years, and had grown disillusioned by the corporate world. So, I ditched everything I owned except my red 1968 Mustang convertible and took off from Atlanta for San Francisco. I was on a driving quest to find a deeper, more spiritual way to live. Just before I left home, I bought a Raggedy Andy doll to keep me company. He rode shotgun.

I met Rob in Norman, Oklahoma, in the University swimming pool. I had thought him to be a student there, but on closer examination he appeared to be in his thirties. He was a huge guy, about six-four, who had been living on a ranch in Australia for the previous six months. His job had been to wrestle sheep into position for shearing, repair fences, and herd cows on horseback. He was hired muscle, and it showed in his sculpted, hard body.

By the time I met him, my heart and mind were wide open to new experiences. Almost everyone on my journey had been kind to me. When I had a flat, a man in an 18-wheeler pulled over and fixed it. When I needed directions, I had only to ask. No one had harassed me. So, when Rob swam over to say hello, and after a brief

time, started tossing me in the air and holding me as I floated on the water, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. I felt as free as a child on a swing.

I was a child in some ways, only twenty-two. By the time I met Rob, I had reconnected with my innocence. I had become enamored with Eastern philosophy and the idea of oneness. We were ALL ONE! Separation based on skin color, or religion, or for any other reason was an illusion. I didn't understand then that all philosophies and religions exclude women from equality—either officially or in practice—so, I couldn't wait to share this revolutionary idea of oneness with everyone I knew, especially my family. I felt the blinders of prejudice that had shaped my early life loosen and begin to slip away, and I was soaking up life with no judgment towards anyone.

When Rob asked me where I was staying for the night, I said I didn't know. I might move on to the next town or just get a cheap motel room there in Norman. He said he'd like to travel with me for a while. Maybe to Arizona or Nevada. We could share expenses.

This wasn't unusual for the time. In the '60s and early '70s, strangers on the road hooked up for a while, and then moved on. I had initially liked the idea, but something in his manner triggered a faint alarm inside me.

"Maybe," I'd said. "I'm kind of on a quest. Traveling alone is part of it."

He said he lived with his mother and much older stepbrother, and that she would be very happy to let me stay with them. I initially refused, but he insisted. He had latched on to me in the pool and—with me being from the South, raised to be polite, raised to see men as authority figures, and believing that his mother would be there—I said, "Thanks, that's nice of you."

We left my car parked in the University lot, and I rode with him to his mother's house. It was small and tidy with a living room that looked preserved for company who never came. He showed me the bedrooms. "That's my mother's room and here's my room," he said. He put my luggage into a third bedroom.

"Where does your brother sleep?" I asked, but he didn't answer. Again, I felt a slight alarm. Something was strange with the sleeping arrangements in the house. I got the distinct impression that his step-brother slept with his mother, but my mind wouldn't allow me to accept that, so I blew it off. He penned a quick note for his mother, and we left to go to a party at his friend's house.

We talked of spiritual philosophies on the way over. I told him Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and *The Nature of Personal Reality* by Jane Roberts had heavily influenced me toward the belief that reality is fluid, and we create much of our suffering in our own minds. He had read some Eastern thought, too. He agreed with some of what I believed, particularly the illusion of duality as the source of all conflict.

When we got to the party, rock and roll blasted from the speakers set up on the patio off the kitchen. His friends, a young married couple, and about eight other

people were hanging out in the cool night air, smoking pot and drinking jug wine. After a couple of hours, the wife managed to get me alone in the kitchen.

"How long have you known Rob?" she asked.

"I met him today," I said.

"Do you like him?" she asked.

"He's okay. Do you?"

"He's my husband's friend," she said.

Again, I felt the stirrings of uneasiness that I had felt earlier in the swimming pool—his easy familiarity with my body, his insistence that I stay with him at his mother's house.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked. "If there's something I should know, please tell me."

She seemed to grow more agitated, but kept her emotions under the surface. "He told me that you were an old friend visiting from out of town."

This news intensified my discomfort. Why would a grown man feel the need to lie about how long he had known me—especially a guy who was talking about connecting to a higher consciousness on the ride over?

"Please tell me what you know about him. Am I in danger?" I asked.

She said, "No, no. He's okay," but her body language told me something she was unwilling, or unable, to name.

After she left the kitchen, I stood there trying to figure out how to get out of the situation. My car was at the University. My luggage was at his mother's house. It never occurred to me that I could have caused a scene or asked someone to help me retrieve my things. After all, he had been nice to me. Besides, I didn't cause scenes. Why would I embarrass him for no reason that I could explain? That was not in my repertoire of behaviors. And, I didn't think anyone would help me. They were his friends. He was huge and powerfully built. No man there would have been willing to cross him. I calmed myself with the knowledge that his mother would be in the house with us. How bad could it be? I would extricate myself in the morning.

Shortly after I made the decision to keep my mouth shut, we drove to his mother's house. We walked to the front porch, but even from the curb, I could see my small cosmetics bag and suitcase sitting beside the door. An unsigned note was taped to the top of the suitcase. In capital letters, it read NOT A MOTEL.

Rob snatched the note and noisily gulped air as if he'd been sucker-punched in the heart. With his jaw muscles flexing, his body stiffened and his eyes turned into a microcosm of pain and rage. Through clenched teeth, he said, "That bitch."

He grabbed my luggage and stomped off to his car. I followed, trying to soothe away his anger and get myself out of the situation at the same time. "It's not a problem," I said. "I was planning to stay in a motel anyway. Let's just take my stuff over to my car. Please. Don't feel bad."

He paid no attention to me. We settled into the car. His dark rage blanketed the interior, leaving me fog-bound and blindly groping for words that might shift the energy.

"She's always been like that," he said. "She'll do any fucking thing my brother wants, but let me try to have someone over. Let me try to have anything."

I sat in silence listening to his rant, feeling my panicking heart flutter, then pound, my breath trapped high inside my constricted chest. My mind went into survival mode. Faking a calm and light demeanor, I said, "The party was great, Rob. Your friends are really cool, but it's getting late and I'm pooped. I saw a little motel over near the University. I was planning to stay there, anyway. If you could just take me back to my car? Or, I'd be happy to call a taxi. You must be tired, too."

He said, "You're not calling a fucking taxi! What kind of guy do you take me for? I invited you out, and I will get you back to your damn car."

As a child, I had learned through my culture and in my home how dangerous it was to speak up when a man felt shamed, especially a man shamed by a woman. I paused, waiting for him to say more. When he didn't, I asked, "What would you like to do now?" I thought if I didn't insist on any particular plan of action, his anger would dissipate and he would eventually take me back to my car.

"Stay with me for a while," he said. "I don't want to be alone."

We drove to a nearby isolated park, and I sat beside him on a soft grassy hill overlooking a lake. The moon shimmered on the water, but we were tucked into the shadow of a forest, and the light did not reach us. We were the only people in the park. For over two hours, his anger boiled, then simmered, then boiled again. I purred soft words of comfort the way I had been raised to do.

"I'm sorry you're feeling so bad. Please don't let it worry you. Your mother just didn't want a stranger in her house. I understand that. It doesn't bother me in the least."

Every time I thought he was calming down, he would find some new slight, some memory, confirming his mother was an evil bitch who hated him. He couldn't let go of the humiliation of seeing my bags dumped on the front porch, as if he were a child, and she was sending his playmate home.

"That's why I went to Australia, to get away from her. She's fucking crazy," he said. "You're all fucking crazy."

He slammed his hand against the ground and jerked out a handful of grass. He wadded the grass into a ball and flung it onto my outstretched legs. It didn't hurt, but the message was clear. I was one of "them."

I brushed the grass off. "Not all women are like that," I said. "I'm not like that. I would never do what she did."

"Will you stay with me tonight?" he said. "We don't have to sleep together. We can sleep in separate beds. I can't be alone right now."

"If you want me to," I said, the only answer I felt would give me a chance of surviving the night.

We drove to a nearby motel and rented a small room with twin beds spaced about five feet apart. The room had a ridiculous western theme. The bedspreads, lampshades, and sheets were printed with wranglers on rearing horses, their Stetsons pushed back at rakish angles, their lariats twirling high above their heads. A large painting of a trail ride through a winter landscape hung in the center of the dark paneled wall across from the beds. A little boy's dream bedroom.

What an odd place to die, I thought.

I was no longer confused. This guy had real issues with women. While I had had sex with men I didn't love in the past, there had been a genuine attraction and a feeling of safety, an exchange of pleasure between willing participants. As a young woman coming to adulthood during the second wave of the women's movement, I had embraced the idea that my sexuality was my business and no one else's. I saw it as a hard-earned right, like all the other rights women had finally won—the right to vote, to attend school, to have a credit card, to buy a house, to inherit property, to have access to birth control, and to control our own bodies.

None of that mattered now. He had proven throughout the evening that my feelings, my rights, meant nothing to him. Nothing I said had any impact on his behavior. We lay down on our separate beds, fully clothed, on top of the covers. I could feel the tension growing in the room, his anger towards women and his sexual desire hissing like a body of snakes hidden in the ceiling above my bed. I struggled to equalize the pressure between two forces—one building to near explosion within my body and one bearing down upon me from the outside.

In that swirling mass of energy, I began to hear a voice inside me. At first, it sounded like a drumbeat. Three beats. Then four. Thump, thump, thump—thump, thump, thump, thump. A pattern. Thump, thump, thump—thump, thump, thump, thump.

Then words came, beating with the same rhythm.

Have no fear, I am with you. Have no fear, I am with you. Have no fear, I am with you.

The voice inside my head sounded unfamiliar, but as it moved closer into my consciousness, it became my voice. And, when that happened, I relaxed my shoulders and began to breathe deeply. I would know the right thing to do to stay alive.

At precisely that moment, he said, "I want to come over there with you."

"I'd like that," I said.

Poised above me, dominating and covering me, he began to jerk my clothes off, to spend his anger on my body. I was not physically strong enough to fight him, but some intuitive part of me knew to allow myself to feel compassion in the moment. I felt compassion for him—something had turned him into an angry, bitter, sexual

predator—and I felt compassion for me, a small woman-child, about to be sacrificed on the altar of his rage.

"Let's slow down," I said. "Let's get undressed and enjoy each other. Let's forget all the bad stuff that happened tonight."

I touched him tenderly. I looked directly into his eyes and never looked away. I pretended to want him. I pretended to feel pleasure. I pretended to make love. I was still terrified, but I surrendered my attachment to the idea that I would not be raped that night. I willed him to hear the same soothing voice I had heard. Soon, I felt his anger dissipate and leave his body, slowly, like water eroding a path through an uncharted landscape.

The next morning, his manner had changed completely. His face was soft and his anger gone. We didn't speak of his mother. We didn't speak of the possibility of him going with me on the rest of my journey. On the drive to my car, he stopped at a bookstore, where we had coffee and a muffin. He bought a book on spirituality as a gift for me. I don't remember the title, but I remember his inscription, "Thanks for everything. I hope the rest of your journey is filled with joy." I never read the book, and lost it somewhere in California.

I am convinced that book was his attempt to make the previous evening seem normal. That way, I wouldn't call it what it was. As I drove away, I tried to reframe the experience, to think of some other way of looking at what had happened…if I had been less trusting, blew him off at the pool, spoken up at the party, made a run for it somewhere? Would that have prevented the rape? In that motel room, was the voice in my head God's or just my attempt to comfort myself? If it was the voice of God, or some higher consciousness, had rape been the price necessary to spare me from death?

After we parted, I drove as far and as fast as I could. While barreling through the desolate Texas panhandle, I monitored my rearview mirror to assure myself that he wasn't following me. When I reached the beautiful land of New Mexico, I put the experience behind me and didn't look back—until a couple of months ago, when my friend Laura and I were discussing the complexities of proving rape.

"Why do you think you've waited so long to tell this story?" she asked.

I felt an unreasonable emotion arise within me, choking off my voice, again, the way it had for all those years. Shame. The sexual predator's ace card had kept me silent. I had buried the memory in a sarcophagus of shame and never dared to crack it open.

It is only now that I can reframe the experience into something that gives it any value. That night in the cowboy motel taught me that I must pay attention to the early, prickly sensations that alert me to danger, like the ones I felt in the pool and at the party. When a man can't hear me, and in particular can't hear *no,* I need to get away from him immediately before he escalates into violence. I believe some

higher consciousness guided me in that motel room. I believe I escaped from a truly dangerous man.

"So, what would you call that?" I asked Laura. "It wasn't consensual. It was surrender. It was survival. Do you think it was rape?"

"You couldn't prove it in a court of law. You appeared to go willingly. You said yes to sex. You didn't get beaten up," she said.

"That's factual," I said, "but is it the truth?"

"No," she said.

Nonfiction judge Melissa Febos writes: A harrowing and thoughtful meditation on the unnamed place between consent and assault, and the shrewd and heartbreaking choices the vulnerable must make to negotiate their own safety.

Angelina Oberdan Brooks

Clemency

The wind smooths dunes,
sea oats, and sundew:
a hand straightening
a duvet.

I wade, ankle-deep,
and skip sand dollars.
The waves smother
their plunks.

One of these creatures
pauses in my palm;
its monstrous hairs
still shuffle.

I could let it dry out,
die slowly on a windowsill,
or quick
in a tub of bathroom bleach.

Angelina Oberdan Brooks

Echo

Even the desert is becoming a distraction. I chant
its geography like an incantation against you: plateau, swell, wash.

Birds pick through golden desert grasses so dry they sound like the shuffles
of feet, and I turn to look for you.

Like a desert's dedication, I have worked up to this. I am alone with river,
sandstone, cliff, dog, and not you.

I had hoped you'd disappear like the sound of trucks on the highway.
No echo, hum gone. Tufts of cottonwood seed by the Colorado—

but I have misplaced both of my metaphors. You always come back.

Katherine Soniat

Telemachus Ponders the Bottomland

How might I return to the land named after brightness,
the home where lit mice once ran the fields
and thrived on barley?

And who thought up lines this sharply pointed:
Drink only from that fountain. Leave your skin at the door.
Broken animal ribs served at cliff bottom. Bottomland pox on those
who love the wrong gender.
Don't those phrases, no matter how dated,
sound like the way we humans think? How a swift
jolt of violence makes us as wicked as any—those who wish they had
done what others had. So, they just kept on wishing
for an awful long time.

Katherine Soniat

Kingdom

There could have been time for another life
before a strong March wind swept us from all-fours
to drop us down by the water.

Mirror waiting.

No denying that the Nth degree of the unknown is upon us, and there's still no hint of direction for our wasted planet. Our run at flamboyantly hot lifestyles shrunk

the ice (and more) to pieces. Huff and strut, and we've about destroyed
our planet.

We mark time, belch, and remain on the lookout for chatter, though truth is
we're most awkward within the family circle where the food tastes good
but the term *lineage* shows ugly signs of meltdown.
Who sits where
at the last family feast (?) when any mention of disagreement is met
with angular glares of *Thou shalt not repeat tales of personal or climate crisis.*
And thou shalt instead sip all thy wine then nod at the endlessly grinning?

My determined place at that holiday folly? I doze with my clutch of poems
in the family broom-closet—me, yet another calculated risk to the authenticity
of family history.
Cursing in couplets, tweeting of human drift measured in masses:
poor Continental wanderers—lost infants, men and women. The elders choking in

water, while in my pine-oiled nest I grow heavy and sniff broom straw—one way
back to our lost animal kingdom.

Maureen Sherbondy

Only Daughter in a House of Sons

I.

Ever since a teacher read that story
of Abraham thrusting his son against
wooden altar, blade at the ready,
I have distrusted all adults.
Show me your hands;
turn both pockets inside out,
I commanded through childhood.

Somehow, I knew that being
the only girl beneath a roof of sons
set me up for sacrifice. At night
when parents headed off to sleep,
I learned to hide all knives inside the house,
keep them stored beneath my bed.

II.

My father stood in the driveway,
cigarettes in his front pocket, vodka
on his tongue. Blade in hand.
Clamor of metal grinding metal
beneath the waning silver moon.

Inside, I waited for lullabies
that did not arrive, so I learned
to hum these tunes myself,
to cover my small ears,
to hide from foes approaching
from the darkest rooms.

Tess Congo

Family History

It's true; men have betrayed the women
in my family like the women
have betrayed each other.

Maybe that makes me more willing
to slip ammo to my therapist's
fingers. Part of it—last spring,

my sister sticking a fork in my spine;
I'm curious—can I trust a man
to hold a gun and not pull

my hair? It's just these fingers stuck like
chewing gum. Mom says
"They'll use it against you."

Does she mean the window of my math class?
Glass parted for my body as if I'd lift
toward it, a pile of feathers.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Fiction Competition – Honorable Mention

Judith Turner-Yamamoto

From Away

After the dry summer there were only the black-eyed Susans blooming. Sophie knelt at the flowerbed by the rusted metal wall of the boat shed. She opened the newspaper, holding the fluttering pages down with her knees. A brisk wind rippled the surface of the bay, setting the buoys on the lobster traps dancing. The metal sign for Potts Point screeched back and forth above the pier. Clouds the gunmetal gray of the ships built nearby scuttled across the sharp October sky. The wind, Sophie told herself, would not be so bad at the cemetery, away from the water.

She worked quickly, slicing through the woody stems, the pile of flowers in front of her growing. Mondays, Mrs. Chilton liked to shoo her out of the house first thing. Habit, as most things seemed to be with Mrs. Chilton. Sophie imagined her getting her husband off to his boat before daylight, the children off to school, then tying her apron on with a fierce snap, and throwing herself head-on into the disorder of a weekend's worth of living.

For Sophie, this Monday had started like all the others. Stuart up before the light, showering. The zip and snap of him dressing in the dark, the brisk closing of his suitcase and garment bag. She lay in bed, her heart hammering with an unnamed anxiety, telling herself this time his leaving was a dream. Then came the starched collar stiff against her neck, the medicinal mint of his mouthwash as he bent to buss her cheek. She stayed there, the covers pulled tight, until the chill of Mrs. Chilton's disapproval seeped in. Sophie somehow found herself here, in the cutting garden.

She struck a match, cupped her hands against the gusts. Smoking was something she'd taken up in Maine. She stopped short of inhaling, but found a cigarette gave her something concrete to do when she was feeling wispy, as she did any time she thought of Mrs. Chilton outside the confines of the gray shingle house they shared.

Not that she didn't feel comfortable with her. She did, despite her glaring at Sophie from behind the dust gathering on the mahogany chifforobe or in the no-buff wax building up in the corners of the kitchen. An indifferent housekeeper, Sophie had always relied on help. But no one would clean for you in Maine. Besides, she didn't like the idea of strangers touching Mrs. Chilton's things, moving them around. She wanted the house to stay just as it was.

From away. The locals' description of outsiders came to her, striking her with its fit. Except when she dealt with ghosts, Sophie felt herself operating from a remove. It was this distance that had first put her within reach of the spirits. Before Stuart, she had been a magnet for ghosts. Orphaned, she grew up in her grandmother's old house in Vermont. A string of elders, including a great-grandmother, two maiden aunts, and a distant bachelor cousin had died there. Unlike the children at school who either ignored her or made a point of excluding her, the spirits competed for her attention. They whispered to her in the swishing of the feathery pines outside her window, in the silken urging of the rain. She lay in bed listening to their disembodied desires, longings beyond her child's understanding. Later, as she began to grasp their meaning, the spirits became more insistent, swirling around her, an intimate fog distracting her from her daily business. They left her alone only when she took on their troubles, healed their sadness through her own heart.

She flicked her half-smoked cigarette in the water, wrapped the newspaper around the flowers and began the climb the hill to the car. Soon it would be too cold to smoke outside. She couldn't imagine Mrs. Chilton liking her lighting up in the house. Their differences centered on Sophie's essential fondness for dirt. She even liked the look of it settled on surfaces, its quality of reclaiming things, its indifference to efforts at obliteration.

"Cleanliness is next to Godliness," Mrs. Chilton chided her when Sophie tracked mud into the kitchen from the shed where she threw her pottery. When she lined the urns up in the nook, Mrs. Chilton noted the flaws Sophie put in each one, a gap in the glaze, a slight slope to the mouth of a vase. "It's deliberate, to let the life in," Sophie would say out loud each time. She washed her hands at the white enamel sink, smirking to herself as the iron-laden dirt turned the white bar soap and the sink orange. She opened the tap on high, the whine of the old pipes drowning out Mrs. Chilton's dismissive sniffs.

An upsurge of wind caught the small pieces of drawing paper she settled on the passenger seat, sending them swirling through the interior of the car. Sophie dropped the flowers on the floorboard, lunged after the paper. Funny, she thought, weighting the retrieved sheets with a box of the soft-leaded pencils she used in her work at the graveyard, how making rubbings, and later throwing pots, the constant putting of her hands in dirt, had given her something solid to hold on to. Stuart had done that for her too. "Stalwart Stuart," she'd called him. With his plain, sensible face, his rough solid body, he'd been her surest chance at an ordinary life. His incapacity to

understand anything beyond what he could touch, hold, or count had snuffed the spirits out like a candle. Until Mrs. Chilton.

She and Stuart had lived in the house for three months, since July. They'd happened on it early in their annual Maine vacation. Mrs. Chilton had died in the spring and her nephew, Ben Greely, was setting up the estate sale.

"Go on in," he'd said, struggling to arrange a mismatched collection of porch furniture on the lawn. "You don't need me worrying after you."

Sophie wandered through the rooms, dragging a finger along the scars on the furniture disguised with energetic rubbings of lemon oil. "Annie I, Annie II, Annie III," the names of Mr. Chilton's boats cut from the bow of each one, hung on the wall in the yellow breakfast nook just above a plate printed with the Lord's Prayer and a praying-hands plaque.

In the kitchen Sophie spotted a fishbowl filled with sea glass. Amber, cobalt, aquamarine. She ran her hand through the fragments frosted and smoothed by tumbling waves. She pictured Mrs. Chilton waiting for her husband's lobster boat to round Sharp's Island. Scanning the rocky beach, occasionally a glimmer of color would catch Mrs. Chilton's eye, come home in her pocket. Sophie imagined her whisking in the back door, a small quick-moving woman like herself. She'd toss the glass in the bowl that once belonged to one of her children's goldfish, grab her apron—freshly bleached and pressed, it still hung on its hook by the stove—and begin the business of serving up dinner.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful," Sophie said, half to herself as she pressed the starched white dimity of the kitchen curtains between her hands, toyed with the ball fringe, "to come here to our own house each year and just instantly be part of things, to belong?"

More comfortable taking action than imagining, Stuart went right outside and offered Ben Greely an unmatchable price for the house and its contents. A few weeks later, Stuart drove her back to the house, dropped the skeleton key to the front door in her lap. "There," he said, smiling a satisfied smile. "There's your Maine house."

Sophie had let them in, the clunk of the heavy tumblers falling in place. A familiar penetrating cold she hadn't noticed that first day stayed with her as she retraced her steps through the downstairs rooms. Stuart followed along, watching, she knew, for the incline of her head, the intent look that would assure him she was happy.

His cell phone sounded, the emphatic beeping sending him back to the car. Stuart was so busy, she thought, pulling back the dining room curtain to watch him juggle the phone, scrawl down figures. The house was a gesture, his way of getting close the only way he knew how. She let the curtain drop, joined him outside. She'd turned to look at the dining room window, seeing the expected flutter of the curtain drawn away from the glass. In buying Mrs. Chilton's house Stuart had thrown her back to the very thing he had rescued her from.

She was the one who had decided they should stay on through the winter. She had pictured drifts of snow, an icy shawl enveloping the house. Inside she would bake, the steam slicking the windows, and then, in spring, the purple and yellow heads of crocuses would disrupt the perfect, even calm of white. But the house at Potts Point proved as easy for Stuart to leave as the one in Greenwich. In August while he lay in supplies of salt and snow shovels and made arrangements for their road to be plowed so he could keep on with his unrelenting business travel, she'd begun to grasp the coming winter's endlessness.

Sophie pulled into the church parking lot. "Be careful what you wish for." There was Mrs. Chilton again, expressing herself in homilies, prying in her thoughts even here, away from the house. Speaking to her as she had that first night she and Stuart lay together in the four-poster bed. "Home is where the heart is," Mrs. Chilton said just as Stuart kissed her goodnight in his distracted way, turned his back to her. Sophie knew Mrs. Chilton's voice at once, the tone as tight as the stitches in the framed samplers throughout the house expressing similar maxims. All night she lay awake, her restlessness exacerbated by the unfamiliar sound of waves tossing outside her window, certain Mrs. Chilton would not be able to hold her tongue. But Mrs. Chilton had been silent, a perverse petulance Sophie now knew well.

What did Mrs. Chilton want? She reached in her pocket for a cigarette, fumbling with the matches. Other spirits spoke to her about their own troubles, but Mrs. Chilton never talked about herself. Last night, just after falling off to sleep, Mrs. Chilton's presence had startled her awake, setting her heart pounding in the cloaked darkness. Although Stuart lay beside her curled into his side of the bed, and the alarm clock ticked on, she could not escape the weighted sensation that things were very wrong. And there had been something else. That odd urge to shake Stuart awake, to demand that he hold her, that he abandon his plans to leave in the morning.

She crossed the road to Bailey's Store. First a cup of coffee, she would take her time. She tossed her cigarette in the bucket of sand by the front door. "Good morning, Howard." Sophie dropped a quarter in the dusty glass by the hot water urn, scooped instant coffee into a Styrofoam cup. Howard emitted a grunt that passed for hello, continued reading his newspaper. She stirred her coffee, dunked the clumps of nondairy creamer that refused to dissolve. The worn pine boards beneath her feet were splotched with spilled coffee and in need of what Mrs. Chilton would call a righteous mopping.

She stepped onto the porch, peered across the road at the graveyard enclosed behind a low stone wall. She saw no spirits, only here and there the trick of sunlight, slanted and broken by headstones. Still she waited, wanting to be sure. She heard Howard's chair complain as he turned to see why she hadn't gone on down the stairs and about her business. Responding to the push of his stare, she poured the last of her coffee on the ground and started for the graveyard.

She lifted the rope latch, opened the peeling wooden gate. The flowers could wait a while longer. She'd do just one rubbing before going on to Mrs. Chilton's grave. She chose a child's stone, the first in a row of several topped with a crudely carved lamb. She concentrated on the scraping of her pencil, the letters emerging from the velvet of the graphite.

Sophie dug the clay for her urns from the banks of the creek just below the graveyard. She pictured tiny tributaries flowing through the graves like veins through a body, leeching minerals of flesh and bone, depositing them in the clay along the creek bed. Smells of lingering emotions came to her in the colors marbling the earth: the musty gray of despair, the sour yellow of unfulfilled ambition, the unexpected sweet red of forsaken love. The urns, bearing the names of these buried here, would be placed on the graves beneath the headstone. She planned to photograph what she imagined would be their slow crumbling return to the earth from which they'd come. This was a work she could be involved in her whole life, one that might finally satisfy her reluctant affinity with the world of spirits.

She tucked the paper in her pocket, blew on her cold fingers. The idea for the project had first occurred to her when she stumbled across Mrs. Chilton's grave. The headstone, simple gray granite, stated only the facts. "Ann Stover Chilton, Born February 7, 1930; Died March 7, 2017." It reminded her of a stock simmered and diligently skimmed until it was rendered utterly bland. Except for the marble urn attached at the base of the stone. Around its circumference were carved bunches of lilies of the valley bundled with curling ivy, the same plants that grew by the steps to the screened in porch. The urn stood there, squarely part of Mrs. Chilton's plan.

Armed with the flowers and the gallon jug of water she kept in the car, she took one of the pea gravel paths bisecting the graveyard. She found Ben Greely down on all fours on his aunt's grave, the manic chopping of grass clippers clacking against the headstone. She watched as he patiently went over the new grass just beginning to form a soft, down-like covering.

"Hello, Ben."

He looked up at her, his face creased like a piece of paper that had been folded again and again as if someone's mind kept changing. He inclined his head toward the grass. "You got to be careful. It's been just six months now. You can't cut too close when it's young."

Sophie nodded. "Yes, I imagine so."

"I keep things tidy for her. But Monday's not my usual day."

"It's mine," Sophie offered. "I bring her flowers. From her garden."

His eyes narrowed. She couldn't tell if he suspected her of some ulterior motive, or if the low sun, which had just popped out from behind a cloud, was bothering his pale eyes. "So that's you. Well, I guess that's fine."

Sophie smiled. She imagined Mrs. Chilton being equally as unappreciative despite her prominently placed urn.

He pulled out the faded blooms, peered inside at the last of the water gone milky with the drained life of the flowers. "No way to dump the old water." Guess she didn't think of that. "Have to bring the hose along next time I come, give it a good cleaning."

He moved aside to let Sophie flush the water.

She emptied the bottle, turned her face away. The rising brackish smell transported her to her grandmother's parlor. She was nine years old, her turtle, the only pet she was allowed, had died. She saw herself shaking its bowl until all the water sloshed onto her grandmother's crocheted doily, infusing the house with more death, more loneliness.

"Lonely all right." Ben said. "He left her, weeks at the time, him with his boats and all."

Sophie found room for herself in his blunt abbreviated speech. "But the lobster boats, I watch them. They come in each day in the late afternoon."

Ben pulled at a weed caught in the teeth of his grass clipper. "We're not all lobstermen. You might think so, judging from the buoys clogging up the bay. He was a deep-sea fisherman. Then he up and died young on her, lost at sea in a storm."

"But she had her children."

"Nope. Just me around now and then after my mother died."

Ben bent over, inspecting a black-eyed Susan whose petals were lightly tinged with red as if it had for a moment thought of being something besides a yellow flower. "Annie had black eyes. They sparked something awful, like a pair of snapping turtles. I think she was mad at him, right up to the day she died." He looked away, mopping his handkerchief over his eyes. "They say folks come to the graveyard to feel close to them that's gone. Seems like I just feel the loss more."

Sophie patted his hand. "Stop by for tea some time. You might like visiting the house."

"It's the same then."

She nodded. "It's still hers."

She watched Ben walk away, stop to trim an errant blade that caught his eye. Mrs. Chilton angry. And alone. She hadn't thought of that. She unfurled the newspaper, teasing free the first of the flowers. Her hand brushed the last of the grass clippings away, the clean buoyant smell staying with her.

Fiction judge Bryn Chancellor writes: This story's setting and imagery, along with the naturalism of the hauntings, were immediately appealing. The subtext ripples here, culminating in that great final scene in the cemetery and Sophie's new understanding, so evocatively phrased: "Mrs. Chilton angry. And alone. She hadn't thought of that."

Paul Jones

Of Rock Doves

We call these doves pigeons
because they are many
because we once built them cotes
because we collected their guano
because we spread it on melon
patches and near tomato beds
because they bob their heads
in their staggering walk
like professional wrestlers
at the end of their careers
because they can't see
straight ahead any other way
because they are easily misled
because no matter what
some find their way back home
because when some vanish
there are always many more
because their name is an echo
of the hungry noises
that come from their flimsy nests
because they raid each other's nests
because they kill their neighbors' young
because they kill their own young
because together in a group
they are called a *deuil*
which means *mourning* in French
because we eat their young
because they taste so sweet
and have very small bones

Kenneth Chamlee

A Pinch of Gray Fluff

A pinch of gray fluff scraped from the dryer's screen
is today's mouse of loss. Every week my shirts grow
thinner, jeans tumble toward evanescence.
Not wear, but wash-and-dry seems the agent
of attenuation, though a hot shower and pumice soap
do not ablate any fat from me, no matter
how long I stand in the pressurized spray
or work the towel like a belt sander.

Clothes hung on a line would not betray
any loss at all, just sunlight drawing dampness
back into the cycle of gift and attrition.
But who does that now? I throw them into the
cold appliance and when I check the lint trap find
a marriage, a glacier, a stand of old growth dreams.

Elizabeth Cranford Garcia

The Holy Ghost in Thalia's Closet

—for Hannah Gadsby, comedienne

What the Samaritan can tell you
is how the body blooms survival—
violet, eggplant and ochre.

What he can't: how you pulled
yourself from the gutter, healed
alone, your only poultice

a beleaguered humor,
its swaddling now
grown tight at the jaw.

Tell a new story, truer.
Say *seventeen*
shouldn't look this way.

Say any happy ending
grows only from grief shucked clean
down to its kernels, which means

ask the thing you've been skirting:
Where is the kink in the Great Chain's spine?
Is it you

  or the men who raped you?
Is it you
  or the men with boots?

Uncowl the tongue,
say aloud the answer,
listen to the priest of your own mouth

announce *Granny,*
there's no wedding
at the end of this.

Search for your Christ, start
in the coal mine, he's sleeping
on the floor, dreaming of almond blossoms,

turquoise-pressed, the brush tips
of cypresses, the foxglove's many mouths,
dreaming that outside Auvers

two brothers lie forever in a wheat field,
the light learning and unlearning itself
in bright, undulant tassels.

Bill Griffin

Abscission

Does tree drop leaf
or does the leaf let go?

Diminished daylight,
phytochromes

see red, count the minutes –
sap vessels slow

the flow of sugar,
chlorophyll has done its summer

duty, done with green
brown mottles brown,

an old man's hands
sun-leathered—abscission

cells stiffen, distance swells
between son and father

as youth is spent
and debts forgiven

or written off in spite—all this
you may know but still

no way touch the tree's knowing
of its own holy time:

appointed to cut off, discard
or cut loose to freedom

from the haggard branch.
And our time, my son?

Scattered leaves,
will they feed

the roots?

Rachel Baiman

Kayla Rae Has Been Driving All Day

I first met Kayla Rae in September. I got a text from an unknown number saying she needed a fiddle player in three hours for a last-minute gig, and could I be at the rooftop of the Bobby Hotel to play five songs, *pays $150.* I skimmed the message until I got to the part about the money and replied yes, I would be there. I guess I did a good enough job because two weeks later, I found myself on a plane from Nashville to Texas to play a weekend of shows across her home state.

The heat made me itch uncomfortably as I stepped out of the Dallas Airport onto the curb. Kayla Rae called to ask what I was wearing (white tee, jeans, and a colorful handkerchief around my neck), and seven minutes later I had thrown my fiddle into the back of the white 15-passenger Ford and was climbing in, suitcase in hand, sweating as I hoisted it onto the seat beside me.

Kayla Rae was in the driver's seat, and my suitcase and I occupied the bench seat between her mother and a red-headed man wearing a ball cap in the back. Kayla was always perky, with good skin and blonde hair, a Texas prototype. She told me her boobs were fake the second time we met, waiting for an elevator in the hallway of a Hilton Garden Inn. "Well, I paid for them!" She laughed, jiggling them up and down with her hands.

"I want some!" I said, as a way of letting her know I wasn't judging, and also, I did kind of want some.

Back in the van, she introduced me to her mom and her sister. "And that's Tyler, he's playing guitar." The sister had two long braids and was wearing a camo hat backward over them. She had the same thick eyelash extensions as Kayla Rae, but she exuded a darkness that made them jarring, their attempt at sweet femininity ironically framing her angry eyes.

When I was first starting out as a musician, I thought that getting gigs was about being the best player, being completely prepared, having good-sounding gear, and generally being professional. In reality, getting gigs is largely about being completely malleable as you tumble in and out of the most intimate lives of complete strangers. A perfect sideman arrives without expectation, listens closely, watches and reads everyone's emotions, and fits seamlessly into the natural flow of the scene.

I wondered what these women thought of my looks, plain and unaugmented. I didn't mind the way I looked, but in this context, I felt distinctly un-feminine; unbeautiful, unkempt, and unpresentable. But there was also a certain power in the refusal to comply with these pageant standards, not that it had even been a conscious

decision for me. I felt a moment of gratitude for my ability to play the fiddle, a skill that gave me an irrefutable value in this circle.

I glanced back at Tyler and said hello. He had a surprisingly nice face, but looked greasy and smelled, some combination of body odor, stale laundry, and cigarettes. The sister, whose name was Carly, barely looked up. Kayla hit the gas and we rolled onto the highway towards Dallas, brown grass and strip malls lining the black pavement.

Conversation filled the car, a layer cake of Texas drawl, yelps of language piling up, frosted with bouts of laughter. Carly, the sister, mostly stayed quiet, looking at her phone, her shoulders hunched over, the bright white part in her hair between her braids staring back at me.

Tyler told outrageous stories, each running into the next. His brother had a rooster that crowed with the wrong melody. The other roosters tried to teach him the proper cock-a-doodle-do, but he was just plain tone-deaf. It got to where he told his brother that if the rooster didn't learn the notes, he was gonna eat him for dinner. This led to a drunken fight, but the brother must have been more sober than he seemed, because he was suddenly winning, and Tyler had to stab him with a kitchen knife. The neighbors called the cops but when they got there, one of the cops was a girl Tyler had slept with, so she let him off.

"Was your brother OK?" I asked.

"Yeah, he was fine," he said.

"So it was a gentle stab then?" I offered. Nobody answered.

That night we played in Dallas, a short opening set. It was an old theater, full of middle-aged folks in boots and hats, smiling and yelling their appreciation. Kayla was charming, cracking jokes, and turning her Texas way up.

"I was giving an interview, and I said I was gonna use my record deal money to fix my foundation. Then the reporter asked, what foundation did I have? I said, 'No, not a charity, I mean, the concrete slab under my house.'" The audience laughed.

Tyler looked the part of a handsome guitarist and smiled calmly while he strummed, but he wasn't fooling me. He cast frantic glances my way as he chose a fret for his capo, unsure of what key the next song was in.

After the show, upstairs in the green room, I sat down in a rounded black armchair, looking at my phone. Tyler was full of energy, starting up the storytelling gears again. "You're a great sideman," he said. "Not trying to steal the limelight. That's really cool, most girls are always looking for a chance to promote themselves."

I rolled my eyes. "Aren't most people?" I said.

Just then Kayla walked in and I said, "You'll have to hear what Tyler thinks about women."

"What did you say?" she asked Tyler, with a glare.

"Naw, nothing, nothing," he said. "She was just being real sweet, saying how we're here to support you, and I was saying how most girls are always trying to make sure the attention is on them."

"Well," said Kayla Rae, resignedly, "yeah, that's true." She sat down on the floor and examined her blonde weave in the mirror.

"It's hard down here for a girl to get anywhere, though," she said. "There aren't that many of us doing the music thing, and girls can be real...you know...."

"Even you and your sister used to be competitive like that!" said Tyler.

"Well, that was different!" said Kayla Rae. "I mean, people were pitting us against each other, like that shitty guy she was married to."

"Fucking Lance," said Tyler. "I hated that motherfucker."

"Yes," said Kayla. "And not just him!"

She had a wonderful way of saying "Yes," with the weight of the word dropping emphatically and with great satisfaction. *I've been waiting all of this time and you finally understand what I'm trying to say.* It made you feel close to her.

"I mean, people would come up to one of us and say, 'you're better than your sister,'" she said. "You know, they would think it was OK to say that kind of thing. And then Lance was just—oh, is this 'Two Roses?' I have to go sing." Kayla Rae rushed out the door and down to the stage.

That night we had a long drive back to Waco from Dallas after the show. I was tired from my early flight and had taken my contacts out to sleep on the van bench. By the time we pulled up behind a small house, it was 2 a.m. and I had no sense at all of where I was. I stumbled through the back door, wheeling my suitcase loudly behind me. I knew I should have said something polite like, "What a nice place!" But I didn't have the energy, and could barely see, so I couldn't come up with anything to compliment.

The sisters pulled out an air mattress at the foot of a full bed that they were sharing, and fussed around looking for sheets and blankets. There was a brief argument because the mom didn't want to go out to the camper to get an extra blanket and Kayla Rae asked Carly to do it. In the end, nobody did it. I didn't care and fell into my air mattress with a sweatshirt over my face to block the light as they puttered around finishing their nighttime routines.

I woke up late the next morning, and the house was empty. Kayla Rae had told me about a court date they had early that morning to deal with their dad's estate. "My dad bought this house," she explained. "He was gonna move it to his property and fix it up, but then he died, and this guy isn't letting us take it, he's pretending like it wasn't paid for. I told him we were gonna sue his ass and he didn't respond so that's what we're doing."

I walked around the house, gazing at framed family photos and wooden furniture. In the bathroom was a jewelry hook with stacks and stacks of necklaces, beaded,

sparkling, some with large crosses. Kayla Rae's parents had divorced, and her mom had remarried. I tried to guess who belonged to whom in the family photos.

I looked for a kettle in the kitchen but couldn't find one, so I filled a soup pot with water and put it on to boil. I made a coffee and walked outside to sit at a metal table in the brown yard. There was a chicken coop next to a small wooden shed with a Texas flag painted on it. In the center of the brown grass was a bench with a fake metal cattle head and horns. I saw rope nearby and wondered if the cattle head was for roping practice, or if it was just decor.

Soon, the sisters and the mom returned, and Tyler pulled up in his van. There was a long discussion about how everyone would fit into the vehicles and it was eventually decided that Tyler would ride back to Waco after the show with some people named Jerry Wayne and Shaina. Their names were repeated over and over in the conversation. *Can you go back with Jerry Wayne? I love Jerry Wayne! That's a good idea about Jerry Wayne.* Later that afternoon, I gave my impression of the conversation to Kayla Rae and Tyler, stretching out my vowels "Jerrayyyy Wayuneeeee," and they laughed and laughed.

Tyler and Kayla Rae and I loaded into a small SUV. The van was headed somewhere else with the sister, and the mom was staying home. I sat in the back next to the guitars while Kayla Rae and Tyler talked and laughed loudly in the front. When Tyler got out to open the yard gate, Kayla Rae turned back to me and said, "He smells, right?"

"He smells so bad," I said, laughing. When he got back in, she cranked up the A/C, but neither of us mentioned his stench.

Kayla drove us around the block to check out the house that she was trying to win back in court. The roof was drooping and the porch railing was torn off. The whole building, garage and all, was lifted off of the ground on stilts. "That's how they make houses here," said Kayla Rae. "They're all on flat slabs, ready to move."

"I remember when me and some guys worked on a house that had a basement," said Tyler. "There were five of us down there looking around like, what do we do with this thing? We'd never seen one before." He laughed. Tyler talked about some of the other construction work he'd done.

"Show her the shower, show her the shower!" said Kayla Rae.

Tyler pulled up a picture on his phone and passed it back to me. The photo showed an immaculately tiled walk-in shower in a neutral beige. The back wall had an image cut into it of a naked man holding a bow and arrow, pointed up to the top right corner of the wall. It was illustrated in a classical style, like a two-dimensional Greek statue, but where those statues would normally have a humble, flaccid penis and balls, this man was in profile, with a giant erection pointing up, in perfect parallel to the drawn bow and arrow.

"Wow," I said, zooming in to see that the penis was made from a single piece of tile. "I had to cut that out with a grinder," said Tyler.

"I can't believe you did that," said Kayla Rae.

"That's what he wanted!" said Tyler.

"Who was it again?" she asked.

"It was Joe Maddox, you know him, from Waco? His signs are all over, Maddox concrete and foundation repairs?"

"Why did he want that?" asked Kayla Rae.

"Didn't ask," said Tyler.

The theater in Houston was a sister venue to the one in Dallas, with a similar layout and deco. A painting of Townes Van Zandt adorned the back wall of the main room, and there were oranges and bananas for us upstairs. Tyler was outside calling his daughter, and Kayla Rae said suddenly, "We're getting to be close friends now, so I can tell you this, but what Tyler was talking about yesterday, Carly and I, we had a stepdad, and he did things with us he wasn't supposed to do, and he's in jail now."

"Ohhhh," I said, stupidly.

"It's fine," she said, holding up her hand. "Everyone's had therapy, and it's all good now, but what I'm trying to say is, like, whenever there's been a problem between my sister and me, I think it's been because of a man."

Tyler came back and I said, "I didn't realize you had a daughter."

"Yeah, she's fourteen," he said. "She's amazing. Willa is her name."

He showed me a picture. "Fourteen!" I said, surprised because Tyler looked young.

"Yeah, we had her real young," he said.

"I remember when she was just a baby," said Kayla Rae.

"Yeah, Kayla Rae cried when I told her I got a girl pregnant," said Tyler.

"Yeah and that's not the only time," she said, throwing me a glance.

"You have other kids?" I asked.

"No," he said, "I mean, there have been some pregnancies. But I always bring them to the clinics and pay for everything."

"He won't wear a condom!" said Kayla.

"I don't even know how to put one of those on!" he replied. I stared at him, biting the inside of my mouth.

"It's not just me! I'm not that guy," he added. "I brought it up once with Christine and she said, 'I'm not a dirty whore.' I swear, that's what she said!"

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Kayla Rae seemed calmer without her family entourage, and Tyler and I found a Vietnamese restaurant close to the venue while she took a nap to recover from her early morning court date. Tyler asked me to teach him to use chopsticks, and I told him I was also terrible with them. "I'll just leave them attached so they do the work for me," he said.

"Right," I said. "Good plan."

The show went smoother that night. The sound was better and Tyler got most of the keys right. After we played, we sat in the balcony to watch the headlining band, a Texas songwriter who was famous in the '90s. "The backup singer," I said, feeling like I had just solved a cold case, "her boobs are fake, right?"

"Definitely," said Tyler and Kayla Rae at the same time.

That night while we waited for Kayla Rae to pack up, Tyler told me about Kayla Rae and Carly's stepdad. He was their high school principal and married their mom. He started a relationship with Carly when she was fourteen or so. "He had her in his office and stuff," said Tyler. "And it was emotional. He had her thinking they were gonna run away together. Then he started making moves on Kayla Rae. Carly found out and got really jealous, started being really mean to Kayla. That's when their mom figured it out. I think she's felt so guilty ever since. And it was small-town stuff, so everyone knew what was going on. They had a really hard time during the trial 'cause guys kept leaping at him in the courtroom, trying to beat the shit out of him."

I thought about Carly, and her angry eyes under her ballcap. Kayla Rae told me Carly had a big record deal when she was twenty. That she'd originally moved to Nashville to sing with Carly. They'd patched things up after her divorce.

"Lance, though, Carly's husband, he was the worst," continued Tyler. "When she tried to leave him he threatened to tell everyone that she'd been in love with her stepdad. I should have killed that fucker. Those girls are like family to me."

That night when we got back to the hotel, Preston, the headliner, was drinking whiskey in the lobby with a few guys from his band. I grabbed some paper coffee cups from behind the empty bar counter and we sat down to join them.

"I've got a toast, I've got a toast," said Kayla Rae. "Here's to rattlesnakes and condoms; two things I don't fuck with."

Laughter erupted. "She can really pull that off, can't she!" said the steel player. He had puffs of gray hair and had played his whole set sitting on a pile of three purple plush pillows stacked on a folding chair.

I looked sideways at Kayla Rae, who seemed fluent in this language of crowd-pleasing. She'd barely slept and had spent the morning defending her dead father's house on stilts. I didn't know how she found the energy to perform for these men.

Preston held court while we drank, telling story after story about his family, his upbringing, and his success. He talked about his grandparents during the Great Depression and got verklempt. "And my grandmother was a school teacher and they were begging teachers to go teach in the black schools. They were paying a premium but nobody would go. And my grandmother said, 'I will! I'll go and teach those kids,' and I'm so proud, I'm so proud of who I come from," he said with tears in his eyes.

Kayla Rae stared at him with admiration, nodding and gasping at his stories. I had a strong desire to punch him in the face. He continued, "And when I sent that editor my story she said, 'Preston, that's as fine a paragraph as I've ever read,' and

that's when I started my book." The whiskey had taken charge of my thoughts now and I saw Preston as a kind of tarp, sagging, engulfing the whole group. And there was Kayla Rae, straight like a tent pole holding him up. And on the edges of this sagging tarp were her mom and her sister, tugging, tugging, with their pain and their needs. And Tyler was pulling on her too, and her pedophile stepdad, and those other Texas music darlings, always competing, and her whole hometown loving the drama, and her heavy silicone breasts, her synthetic eyelashes, and her dead father, and the man holding his house hostage.

Eventually, the party broke up, and the puffy-haired steel player and Tyler wandered over to the bar to get more ice, chatting about recording and gigs they'd seen each other at.

Later, Tyler said, "You should have come over and talked to us. We were getting into spatial audio...oh, but you wouldn't have liked it, though!" he said, his tone suddenly mischievous. "He was just saying how he always makes sure to mix the hot licks into the front left, cuz it's the man's side, you know, the driver's seat!" he laughed.

I looked at him. Straight into his stupid, charmingly blue eyes. "Kayla Rae has been driving all day," I said.

Michael Sadoff

The Hotel Motel

I had never heard my baby scream so loud and couldn't help thinking as I sped along the two-lane highway that I was a terrible mother. The road weaved through a deep, wooded valley past acreage for sale, a small clearing with three white crosses, and a billboard for a place called The Hotel Motel in a town named Hapness. I thought my eyes were playing tricks. I said a little prayer, asking only for decent food and a clean bed for the night.

My phone started ringing again. "Nobody's home," I sang. Archer stopped crying for a sec when he heard his mommy's singing voice, so I sang "nobody's home" again. After the third or fourth time, it stopped working, and his screams got even worse. My nursing bra was wet. I knew I shouldn't speed in the dark with deer and possum or whatever else.

By the time I pulled into the parking lot, his sweet little face was crimson, and his diaper had leaked up the back of his onesie. I held him close, pee and all, until he stopped screaming. When I changed him, he kept opening his mouth like a little birdie. I was happy to oblige because I was about to burst. For the first few seconds after he latched, he kept whining like he didn't realize he had what he'd been fussing about in the first place, but then he settled down and drained me. I felt lightheaded. I opened the window, closed my eyes and took some deep breaths of the night air.

I pictured Blake standing over me in our cracker box rental house, his head shaved like a Buddhist monk, jasmine incense burning everywhere and hurdy-gurdy music playing on the Bluetooth speaker, telling me I was the crazy one. I had left in a hurry.

I arranged Archer in the sling and made my way to the rental office. The Hotel Motel was decidedly a motel in the fullest sense of the word. Jeeps and pickup trucks crowded the lot. It would have to do. A chime sounded when I opened the door, and a little man in a starched white button-down and black pants emerged from a back office. "Good evening, young lady." He had a fringe of dark hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. He peered over his reading glasses into the sling at Archer and smiled. "And who do we have here?"

Archer was awake, so I turned and let him have a look around. "This is Archer. He's seventeen weeks."

"I will bring a crib. How many nights are you staying with us?"

"I'm taking it a day at a time."

"One double-bed for the night and a crib. That will be $78."

The money in my checking account wouldn't last long. I handed him the debit card and pushed aside my slow-growing panic. "Is your restaurant open?"

"No, I'm sorry, breakfast and lunch only. We don't have enough help."

"Is there somewhere else? I'm vegetarian. It's so hard."

He swiped my card and typed something into the computer. "My wife will fix you something. Come to the restaurant door in twenty minutes." He smiled and handed me the key card. "We are vegetarian too."

Moths fluttered around the fluorescent lights as he carried my bags up the flight of stairs. "Room 28," he said and opened the door. I stepped into a shabby but clean motel room. A/C running low. Bedspread and curtains a matching shade of mustard yellow, the carpet olive green. A painting of a tree-covered mountaintop above the headboard. I turned to thank him, but he had slipped away already.

Archer was sleeping against my chest, so I moved my bags from the doorway as gingerly as I could and turned the deadbolt. I inspected the sheets for stains or hair, lifted the mattress to check for bed bugs. The mattress was hard, and its springs groaned, but the sheets were stark white.

The sink was outside the bathroom. Old but functional with unwrapped bars of soap. Odor of lemon and bleach. I pulled back the shower curtain. Peeling caulk in the corners and rust stains by the drain, but no mildew or scum. The squeak of curtain rings on the metal rod caused Archer to stir. I kissed the top of his head. "Mommy's here," I whispered. "No one's going to take me away from you."

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My mind conjured shadowy figures lurking in the stairwell or by the ice machine as I made my way to the restaurant. I was so relieved when a motherly figure in a blue sari opened the door and ushered me into an old-fashioned diner with red booths and checkered tile floor. Her brown eyes were soft and watery, and her skin glowed beneath the fluorescents. She gushed over Archer. "First born," she said. "He will always be the one. Where he goes, your heart goes too."

I held him a teensy bit firmer against my chest. He sighed. I knew he had a special purpose, not only in my life but in the universe. I felt somehow that he would bring light and love into the world in a way that I couldn't. I started to break down.

"No, no, little mommy, please don't cry." She helped me to a chair and handed me some napkins from the dispenser. "You're exhausted," she said. She turned on the ceiling fan.

After I had wasted more paper napkins than I could forgive myself for, she led me to a tiny kitchen in the back. She said her name was Deepali. She seated me by a metal bench and brought a bowl of lentils with flatbread. Cardamon and clove. My prayer in the car had worked. I believed then, as now, that there are no coincidences. Even Blake threatening to have me committed was part of the plan, pushing me where I needed to go.

The lentils were so spicy they brought tears to my eyes again. I tore off a piece of bread. Deepali gave me ice water and yogurt sauce. "I should have given you warning," she said. "We like it very hot."

"It's delicious." I could barely get the words out. I guzzled water and ate more bread. I spooned the yogurt sauce into my bowl and tried again with a smaller bit. The more I ate, the more I enjoyed the burn.

Years after all this happened, when Archer was about nine or ten, he asked me why people like food that burns. In Buddhism, we call suffering dukkha. We practice controlling it, understanding it's inevitable, a fact of being reborn. Spicy food is not that. Sometimes, pain is pleasure. People hold a yoga posture for an hour or run fifty miles and call it leisure. Some like pain during sex. The pain we choose isn't suffering.

"You know, you should not be traveling alone," said Deepali.

I thought she was prying. "I have my little man here, and he's all I need."

Her eyes closed with a shake of the head, like my mother's *Lord, grant me the patience* look. "It's so dangerous for a young lady alone on the highway."

"I didn't plan this."

"Do you have parents?"

My parents thought I was going to hell because I had rejected Jesus. When I got pregnant and dropped out of school, my dad said, "Don't come crying." I should have known it was an idle threat. "No," I said to Deepali. I didn't want their judgment or their I-told-you-so's.

"My sincerest apologies. I didn't mean to—"

"It's OK. You've been so kind."

She sighed. "May I walk you to your room?"

"No," I said a little more sharply than intended. "I mean, no thank you, you've done so much already." Speaking not another word, she took my bowl and spoon to the sink and began to wash dishes.

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On the upstairs balcony, a brunette in a crop top, denim miniskirt and high heels came from the other direction. She was with an older man in a black trucker hat and mirrored aviator glasses. Pitch black out. They stopped at the door next to mine. For a moment, we all stood there together. I thought the girl had a look of pleading. I wasn't sure if it meant *please help me* or *please don't judge me*.

It took a few tries with my key card. As I stepped inside, I glanced over my shoulder at the man. He had a six-pack of beer and apparently was fascinated with his shoes. I heard their door swing open and shut and then their muffled voices through the thin walls. I held Archer and leaned against a flat pillow on the wooden headboard, worried about the girl. Before long came the sound of bedsprings and the headboard tapping the wall.

Deepali's husband had set up a pack-and-play while I was having dinner, which made me think of the nicer one I had left behind with its built-in changing pad and the attached moon-and-stars mobile. I worried that Archer wouldn't rest well in a new place, but he was too exhausted to care and fell asleep right away.

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A loud bang and a man's angry voice jolted me. I had dozed off sitting up with the lights on. Archer stirred and started to whimper.

"You need to calm the fuck down," came the girl's voice.

A beer can hit something and rattled.

"Don't make me call the cops," she said.

Something landed with a thud. I prayed it wasn't her head.

Archer was crying now, so I hopped up to get him.

"You're a piece of shit," she said.

"Curse me one more time, bitch."

I tried to dig my phone one-handed from my bag.

The man spoke in a low growl. I couldn't make out what he was saying.

"Please. You're hurting me." Something crashed. Then their door swung open and shut, and his silhouette glided past my window shade. Archer was wailing now. I rocked him and walked in little circles. "Are you OK?" I called to her through the wall.

She didn't respond immediately. Finally, she said, "Yeah, I'm alright."

I sang to Archer to calm him down. I was a soprano and could feel myself hitting the notes, like a bell in the center of my chest. Her door opened and shut again. Then came a shy tapping. The peephole lens magnified a purple welt on her cheek. I unlatched the deadbolt but not the chain and opened the door a few inches.

"Sorry about waking your baby."

"Oh my god, that looks terrible."

"Yeah, it happens." She rubbed her upper arms and crossed one bare foot behind her ankle. Her lower lip quivered. "You have a beautiful voice."

"Should you call the police?"

"No police. Please."

Archer peered up into my face like maybe he had something to tell me if he could make his mouth form the words. She seemed harmless enough and kind of pitiful. I undid the chain and opened the door. Moths started flying into the room, so I pulled her inside. Her welt was swelling and darkening. "Here, sit down." She took the seat offered at the foot of my bed.

I held Archer on my hip as I carried the ice bucket to the end of the walkway. There was no sign of the man or anyone else around. When I got back to the room, she was slouching where I'd left her. I pressed the bag of ice against her face. She took it and adjusted it on her cheek. "Son-of-a-bitch stiffed me," she said. I got the

tissue box and handed it to her. She mopped the smeared make-up from her face. "Mama's sick and can't afford medicine." Archer was squirming around in the crib now. Almost midnight. I had heartburn from the spicy food and a throbbing behind my left eye. Dying for sleep. "Where'd you learn to sing like that?"

"Church choir." I didn't mention the two years as a voice major.

"I'm Carly." She looked 17 or 18. She had a round face, lovely full lips and a diamond stud in her nose. She reminded me of a starry-eyed girl I knew in high school, who played dumb for the boys.

"I'm Evie. And this is Archer." He was restless. Overtired. I picked him back up.

"I'm good with babies. I used to put my little brothers to sleep."

He was wriggling in my arms, so I bounced him a little. "What happened to you?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You mean why am I a whore?"

"No, I mean…I'd like to help."

"Looks like you got your own problems. Like maybe you're one flat tire from being homeless."

My stomach lurched at the thought. Archer was wet again, so I laid him on the changing pad.

"Sorry," she said. "You're sweet to wanna help."

"You don't think he'll come back, do you?"

"He got what he wanted."

I undid Archer's onesie and diaper. Sure enough, as soon as I took it off, he squirted all over.

"Here, let me help with that." She started mopping up pee with a cotton cloth. She cooed to him as I put on the dry diaper and onesie. "Mama had me when she was sixteen." She took the changing pad and cloth to the bathroom and turned on the water. When she came out, I was in the chair nursing. He could barely keep his eyes open, so I put him in the crib.

"Thank you," I said to her.

She stood across from me admiring his sleeping face. The welt on her cheek looked so painful.

"Do you want to get breakfast in the morning?" I asked.

A smile lit her face. "That'd be great."

"How about I tap on your door around ten?"

She seemed happy about our breakfast date and gave me a little hug before she left. I turned off the lights, deadbolted the door and fell mercifully to sleep.

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Archer woke at his regular hour. I fed and burped him, and he spit up milk down my shoulder. The warm, sickly sweet of it made me queasy. I rinsed the cloth and hung it on the shower rod next to the others.

I distracted him with television. Usually, I was against TV. You know, junk food, toxic toys made in China. I made an exception that morning. There was a show about a little bald boy with a whiny voice and a serious case of insecurity. Sure enough, Archer's eyes went right to it, and he fell into a stupor, lying on my belly while I dozed too.

I woke when he stirred and realized it was after ten. She probably thought I was standing her up. One more person who had disappointed or discarded her. I splashed cold water on my face and dressed us both.

It took her a hot minute to answer the knock. In the daylight, the breakfast date seemed like a bad idea. I was starting to back away, when the door swung open, and there she stood beaming. The bruise on her cheek had darkened to a slate color, powdered with foundation. Over last night's outfit, she had a thin, coral colored blouse, buttoned halfway. "How's that darling boy doing this morning?" She slipped her key card into the front pocket of her miniskirt.

"Woke up at six-thirty. Thank God he fell back to sleep."

"May I?" she asked. She held her hand a few inches from the top of his head. Charming. So many people put their hands on him without asking. She caressed his head. "I love that little peach fuzz." He seemed to like her touch.

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Deepali stood at the hostess stand with a crease between her brows. She said good morning to me but not to Carly. Huffy as she led us to our table. "Highchair?" she asked me.

"He can't sit up yet."

It wasn't exactly bustling in the diner. One or two families at tables and some older gents at the counter. The help had dour expressions. There was a round, squat waitress and an old fry cook with a hair net, thick jowls and downcast eyes. He slouched over the grill like he was waiting to be reborn. A young man in faded blue jeans and white T-shirt bussed tables without a glance at anyone. The waitress set two bone white coffee cups on our table and offered what looked like dishwater from a carafe.

"Can I have tea?" I asked.

"Earl Grey alright?"

"That'll be great, thank you."

She pulled the teabag from her apron, dropped it into my cup and walked away.

"You're a classy mama," said Carly.

Yeah, real classy. Motel diner. Broke. Nowhere to live. "Because I drink tea?"

"The way you hold yourself and talk. I wanna be like you."

I had always wanted a little sister. Someone to look up to me.

The waitress returned and poured hot water into my cup. She pulled a pad and pencil from her apron.

Carly ordered blueberry pancakes with scrambled eggs and bacon. "And I changed my mind about the coffee," she said. "I want tea."

I ordered a veggie omelet and declined the bacon or sausage.

"You know what," said Carly. "Hold the bacon from mine too."

I took Archer from the sling, set him on my lap, dug a teething ring and a plush baby octopus from my bag. I held the octopus out to him, and he reached for it. "Look at you, smart boy," I said.

When our food arrived, Carly covered her pancakes with a thick layer of strawberry syrup and tore into them like she hadn't eaten in days. My omelet was overdone and dry. I drizzled Tabasco over it.

"Where're you heading anyway?" asked Carly.

"Still figuring that out."

She opened a sugar packet and dumped it into her tea. "Don't get stuck in this town." I thought maybe she would tell me how she got stuck there, but she went tightlipped, pensive-seeming. We ate in awkward silence, which she finally broke by excusing herself to the lady's room.

As soon as the door shut behind her, Deepali appeared at my side and stood over me with a stern expression. "Please reconsider the company you're keeping."

"I appreciate your concern."

"I don't think you really do."

I lowered my voice. "Please don't judge her for how she earns a living."

She checked the door of the lady's room. "You don't know how she earns a living."

Bells rattled on the diner's front door, and a family with three loud kids and a grandmotherly type crowded the entrance. Deepali sighed. "She can't be trusted," she said to me and went to seat the new party.

Carly glanced at Deepali and frowned as she slid back into the booth. "That woman won't give me a chance." She made a silly face at Archer. He giggled, so she did peek-a-boo.

I assumed Deepali meant well.

"Anyway, I'm a paying customer." She took another bite of her pancakes.

"You said last night your mom needed medicine. What does she have?"

She glanced at the ceiling. "What doesn't she have. High-blood pressure, heart murmur, thyroid condition, arthritis."

"She must be young for all that. Wasn't she sixteen when she had you?"

"That's what chain smoking, fast food, and third shift will do."

*

When Deepali rang us up, her face was inscrutable. Carly tried to kill her with kindness, saying yes ma'am, please and thank you, but it landed with a thud. Outside the diner, Carly said, "See what I mean?"

I took a few steps in the direction of my room.

"I don't suppose you vape," she said.

"Can't. I'm nursing."

"Trouble is, I'm all out. I hate to ask but could you give me a lift? Maybe on your way out of town?" It was hot outside, and Archer was getting heavier. "You know what, don't worry about it. Forget I mentioned it."

"No, it's alright. I'll give you a lift. Just not before I get a shower."

We walked upstairs silently, nodded our goodbyes and went through our separate doors.

In the room, I checked messages. Blake with his phony shamanism and his full repertoire of manipulation. He was heartbroken, missing me, missing Archer. Our souls were meant to be together. He promised to be the best husband, father and teacher he could be. He would get me the help I needed. The messages from my parents weren't any less disturbing. Up all night, worried sick, maybe hiring a private investigator. They were praying for our safety, asking God to watch over us. They had spoken to Blake, and all had agreed that I needed treatment for postpartum.

Archer was hungry again. My strong, growing boy. He had a lot of energy after he ate, so I let him have tummy time while I stole a shower. The water dribbled. Barely enough pressure to rinse my shampoo. Noon checkout approached. No way was I paying for another night at this dump. Archer reeked of sour milk and pee, so I laid him on a towel and wiped him with a washcloth.

I decided to skip out on Carly and leave town right away. I had an aunt who lived alone and had always been kind and free of judgment. We hadn't spoken in a while, but I thought she might take us in. I loaded my bags and dropped the keycard at the office. On my way out, I nearly collided with Carly. "Hey, I was about to come get you," I said.

In the parking lot, I buckled Archer into his seat and unlocked the passenger door. The car was baking hot and musty. My phone connected when I pressed the ignition and my playlist started up. Florence and the Machine, suddenly a little embarrassing. I turned the volume down and the air conditioner up.

"Nice car."

"Thank you. Which way am I going?"

There wasn't much to see in the town of Hapness. A two-lane road with boarded-up businesses. She had me hang a right onto an even smaller road. Said it was a cut-through. Ramshackle homes with rusty carports and riding mowers. Trampolines overtaken by vines. Another little highway with a couple of rundown strip malls, an adult video store and discount clothing. We pulled into a parking lot, and sure enough there was the vape store, except it was out of business. "Damn it," she said. "I was just here last week."

That's when the man in the trucker hat and aviator glasses stepped in front of the car. He pulled a gun from the back of his pants, showed it to me and shrugged his shoulders. I heard Carly say, "Take your little brat and get out of the fucking car,

bitch." Her real voice. "Leave your purse there and don't touch that phone or my friend will blow your fucking head off." I found that I couldn't move. "I said, take your ugly baby and get the fuck out of the car."

Hard to remember what happened after that. I know I peed myself a little. Somehow, I managed to get Archer from his car seat and was standing in the vacant strip mall parking lot. The sun was a demonic cyclops. Archer was calm, but I was bawling like a baby. I wanted my mom and dad. I wanted to go home. I stumbled along the side of the road, until a highway patrol slowed and turned its lights on. The sign I had been waiting for. My message from the universe.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Poetry Judge

A. Van Jordan

Hex

after Lynda Hull

The day of the spell was the day of cast shadows,
of diaphanous figures whipped clean of fear,
angels ablaze sailing a coastline of hushed tête-à-têtes,
adagio tenor wails laced with rage, smoke rising
from the wails, from the laughter; just when
the last local trains crawled into stations;

just when televisions grew verdigris in homes, obsolete
from indolence; just when Black signatories erased
their names and put on their boots, cirrus streaks formed
on the skyline of the city. A mother held her
barely alive son, the son to whom she vowed
protection from harm. Having thrown a circle

of goofer dust to enclose her enemies, she raises
a totem over her head. It's now time: Let her wield
the words of Black declensions, new vowels,
the best nouns of home training, of damn good sense.
Let her sit for a spell, wipe sleep from her eye.
Let her obtain a license for what's lethal

from whatever God has taken her image,
whenever the sun comes over the buildings,
whenever the moon weighs more than the sun,

more than Pisces and Neptune. Walk to
a street corner with plenty of witnesses,
where you'll bear no isolation,
sing your words facing North or even higher.

Now, walk backward through the chains
of time from each past and current hindrance
to our future. Invoke the names of those
not ceding privilege in boardrooms, the ones who oppress
to their graves. Now summon each forgotten spirit,
each fallen son. Bless each prayed-up grandmother,

each open door and vivid corridor. Bless the pains
spared you, vicarious to you, passed down in your blood,
carrying you through the dangers and the echoes of time.
Remember: family echoes within your body; history
pulls through you as you move through a day.
Raise them in this…prayer, let's call it,

to that God who took your image.
Go to the tree, to the home, to the street corner,
and spread these words—tossing wreaths,
spinning incantations—where torn
life collapsed under a last breath.

This poem first appeared in The Fight & The Fiddle, *Winter 2022*

Janet Ford

Catechism

You say you've never seen his face?
After the steam and babble of Lucky Dragon
the words ring out across the empty lot
as clear as a call from a desert minaret.
The asphalt sparkles in the dark like broken glass
as we move along in sepia,
forgiven for now the detail of the day.

I persevere.
Then tell me what you see.
The hood of your sweatshirt tips to the sky;
every upturned face is innocent.
Well there's a ring of craters at two o'clock;
the light parts are mountains, and the seas are dark.
You shrug. *It's just the way the rock cooled*
when it left the earth five billion years ago.

There is no such thing as time.
We are still standing there
looking out on that winter night.
You brush the hair out of your eyes,
silver beneath the man in the moon,
and close.
I can almost see your face.

Terry Hall Bodine

Reef

The shade pasted with pictures from *Look*
magazine stays drawn; it ticks against
the window frame, unsettled by the fan.
A washrag blankets Mama's eyes. Cracked
like the spine of a paperback book, she loses
things she meant to do, her unbound thoughts
disordered. I gently close her bedroom door
to dull the sound of weeping.

Beneath the outside spigot Avis bathes as best
she can; I wipe her down but she stains brown
as summer's deadened end. Cross-legged
on the concrete stoop, I spread stale bread
with potted ham, our splayed knees makeshift plates.
My sister, ever poised for flight, is like a kite
without a tail; she'll never leave this nest
she's unaware that she is making.

When picking my name, Mama fixed on the fuzz
that blushed my wrinkled head, its color
just the coral of the polish on her nails.
I feel, instead, akin to pink invertebrates
cemented where they're bred, polyps
clustered hopelessly like kinks of chain-link
fence. I am rusting underwater:
I cannot swim; I cannot drown.

Leslie Williams

Loving v. Virginia

1967 U. S. Supreme Court case striking down state laws that banned interracial marriage

To balance like a bowl upon a table,
to stay up later reading deeply
in the borrowed books, to share
a cold glass of milk and piece
of icebox cake while keeping on
knowing where not to go
no map nor scaffolding except
the abandoned block
where whippoorwills settled
in grandiose moss, the aunts
with hats and Biblical pocketbooks
sharing out Kleenex, half-sticks
of Juicy Fruit across the aisle
but what was wrong was still
wrong with us in 1985,
a white father taking a girl aside
to say you cannot be seen
with that boy driving around town
that boy has to leave now come inside.

Fred Pond

The general tends his olive trees in the middle of a memoir I am writing

I want to spell Cincinnati without hesitation, I want
to read *Finnegan's Wake* loud enough to disturb the dead.
Why haven't I more money? Why not give my money
away? I find a used copy of *Ulysses* in a Delhi bookstall.
Months later I abandon Joyce, and who could blame me?
Myth or truth, and does it really matter now to
Cincinnatus? He was plowing a field or digging a ditch
when called to serve the republic. Or so the Romans posted
on Facebook. A fortnight later he is a hero, returning to plough
or shovel four acres of farmland beside the Tiber. Familiar
land, his farm. If God wills, I will return to Dublin someday. I wore
a pair of white tennis shoes in 1973. Left them in a ditch beside
a highway outside Belgrade, thumb out hoping for a ride.
Why, I wonder, why leave shoes behind? Too much baggage.
Too little time. I am the Traveler; days are non-sequential.
The Kabul cobbler couldn't make shoes big enough for me.
I cut the front off the shoes with a pocketknife. Wiggle my toes.
Finally, the toes can breathe. Let freedom ring. I mourn the Stan Smiths
every day—forlorn, the pair alone on the shoulder of a Slavic highway.
Those shoes nearly new, white with green trim on the tongue and the heel,
size 13. I want to cast a spell on Cincinnatus. A spell to cover him,
envelop him within a domed sanctuary. I want him forever
sequestered, protected on his farm. Ignore the war, Cincinnatus, and who
could blame him? A forever spell to protect him from the soldier's
life. A spell that gives him time to cultivate his grapes. A gravel
footpath beneath the arbor he's built leads to the olive trees.
When walking there the vines above offer fruited shade.
Understand that grapes were not his only passion. The general
also tended to his olive trees.

Nikki Campo

What Newton's Laws of Motion Taught Me About Lust and Lies in High School

In Newton's first law, an object won't change its motion unless a force acts on it.

I signed up for AP Physics my junior year of high school. I was gunning for valedictorian. I had also heard that Ryan—the redheaded soccer player about whom I'd filled a three-ring binder of poems after he dumped me for Andrea—was taking the class.

Andrea was new in town, as were her shiny brown bob, pointed toe flats, and cooperative eyebrows. The morning I watched her throw an arm around Ryan's neck and glide down the English hall, I wished I hadn't curled my bangs.

Physics sounded hard. What was high school if not time to practice my splits, not eating in front of boys, and asking my English teacher to opine on an anonymous poem I found? (It was my poem.) He thought the poet relied too much on a thesaurus. I nodded. (She had.)

My valedictorian sister had her ex-boyfriend's old AP Physics exams, the same ones Dr. Carlson, the teacher who insisted students call him Doc, used every year.

In our home we obeyed rules as outlined by Sunday School teachers with high collars and feathered bangs: no premarital sex, no lying or cheating, and no premarital sex. But if my sister had the exams, why couldn't I use them?

I decided the tests could supplement my learning.

Then, Doc said exams comprised our entire grade.

So, rather than pay attention in class, I passed neatly-folded notes to Ryan. I reminded him of last summer, when I waited on his table, the two-dollar-bill tip, the wink, the midday not-quite-sex we had in my parents' family room, and the piece of Juicy Fruit we shared after. I'd saved the wrapper. I wrote "I hope An is treating you well," delighting in her indefinite article nickname.

He mouthed, "She's not you." Who cared about the acceleration of a mass on a downward slope, measured in m/s^2? I cared about sapphire eyes under fluorescent lights.

Ryan smiled, and I imagined it was to say I was his favorite. I knew I'd try to recreate the expression on my own face later.

I got so distracted by Ry in those first weeks of class, by the notion of *maybe*, that I *had* to copy the first test's answers into my TI-82 graphing calculator—which had a

note-taking function—the night before the exam. I promised myself it'd just be this once.

In Newton's second law, a force applied to an object at rest causes it to accelerate.

I cheated on the next two tests. The sin was already committed, damage done. I was a cheater.

Every day before physics, I stopped in the bathroom to frown at my disappointingly thin lips glazed in watermelon Kissing Koolers. In class, I avoided Doc's eyes. He was old, monotone, easy to dodge.

When Doc called on me one afternoon, to my delight and surprise, I knew the answer. Not because I'd cheated my way into it, but because I understood the concept. Maybe I didn't need to cheat? Maybe next time I wouldn't?

Over winter break, my sister came home from college burdened by conscience. "I'm taking back the exams," she said.

I felt my cheeks warm. "You *told* me I could have them," I said. I was smart, she said. She regretted giving them to me. It was best for everyone.

When she went out that night, I thought about what she'd said. It was true that I earned As in my other classes, even the advanced ones. But what if I couldn't grasp linear motion? What if I got found out as a fraud, expelled for my actions? Banned from college? Who was she, a Pre-Med Student with a Future, to dump her moral reckoning in my lap now, to lock me into a lifetime of suffering, a lifetime of loneliness, a lifetime spent paying for gas with tip-jar quarters?

I thought about my summer job waiting tables. My shift started at 4:45 a.m. By the time it was over, Ryan and my other friends were just waking up. My daytime TV and nap when everyone else was at work left me feeling Other. Periphery. I wondered what that feeling, extrapolated across a lifetime, would do to me.

So, I ransacked my sister's room. I plowed through desk drawers and slid my hands under sheets. I tore through her closet. Stashed in her suitcase I found the old tests. After my parents went to bed, I pulled the suitcase into the middle of her lamplit room and set up shop with my graphing calculator and the pile of stapled sheets. My hands shook, part outrage, part nerves. I recorded every question and answer. I even included mistakes because no one is perfect.

For the rest of the year, I cheated in Physics.

In Newton's third law, when two objects interact, they apply forces to each other of equal magnitude and opposite direction.

One night in late spring when my parents were out, Ry came over. Though I was a virgin when we dated, I had slept with one person since. To sex I applied the same logic I applied to dieting and physics: One cookie/cribbed exam canceled the deal, made me unholy; might as well eat the whole sleeve/cheat all year/do Ry.

We talked at length in my bedroom about how great Ryan was, under the guise of talking about how great we had once been together. As I traced his freckled, square jaw with my finger, I was conscious of the fact that I had stared at his team soccer picture an hour earlier.

"How long 'til your parents get home?" he asked with the same smirk he'd flashed the previous summer before the Juicy Fruit.

"Long enough," a voice that didn't sound like mine said.

This is what life would be like if I were a cheater who had premarital sex, I thought unironically, as if that weren't who I was.

Did it occur to me then that I might be thrusting Andrea into the same heartache I felt when Ryan left me? If it did, I pushed the thought away. All I felt in that moment was chosen.

"My middle initial is Q for quickie," he said, winking.

And so it was—quick.

Lying in my twisted sheets, mostly clothed, lust transformed to regret. His words from minutes earlier rang empty. Of the many ways I dreamed sex with Ryan would make me feel, I didn't count hollow among them. The object in motion (me), had finally come to rest. The shame and recklessness of the year were no longer obscured by desire. I moved to the kitchen table, pulled up my knees inside my shirt, and waited for him to leave.

Newton also discovered the rainbow—that white light wasn't pure, but rather contained all the colors.

I tried to write a poem about Ryan that night but felt stuck. Shouldn't there be light and magic? Shouldn't words burst forth, eager but inadequate to capture the high? And if not, surely there would be poetry-worthy remorse. But there wasn't. I was still just me—at once overwhelmingly the same and ever so slightly different.

Behind my college-ready resume and carefully-applied make-up, there had been plain old human yearning, repressed to the point it had oozed out in ways I hadn't predicted or wanted to see. Maybe I didn't need to cheat to get an A in physics. Perhaps I would have learned lust (or was it love?) could be reciprocal without shagging Ryan. That's the thing about shortcuts: the outcome leaves us never knowing if the journey may have delivered what we were really seeking.

The shame took longer to dissipate than my obsession with Ryan, but eventually, I came to see rules as guideposts, purity as an illusion, and integrity as ephemeral. Much as I regretted pilfering the old tests and soliciting the quickie, I couldn't be sure I wouldn't have done either again, given the chance.

In fact, there are still days—when my work feels less-than, my lips thin, and when I drop my Harvard graduate degree into conversation to feel something—I wonder if I've changed at all. I haven't cheated anything other than my weight on medical forms lately, but I'd still probably stumble over my words if I ran into the redhead in

a bar. Even all these years later, I'm still an object in predictable motion, making bad poetry and decisions, awaiting reactions, and hoping now and then, if I hold my life at just the right angle after a storm, to see a rainbow. Knowing in one moment that none of my past transgressions matter, and wondering, in the next, if they do.

Claudia Crook

If I Love You, I Will Roast You a Chicken

I will approach the holy ritual with reverence. I will pour
a glass of wine, compose a menu like a symphony

of senses. I will fantasize about the feast—the sides to serve, snap
skin of salt potatoes! garlic broccolini!—as I drag a fingertip

along the rim of my stemware, make it sing. I will turn on
the heat, then turn to the bird, and with that body

I will be so tender. I will reach inside to save the darkest, softest parts,
sizzle them in butter—chef's snack! Catch me in the kitchen, eating hearts.

And in the open cave of its chest, I will place instead bright
yellow lemon, parsley, spring green, delicate sprigs of thyme.

I will melt a pat of butter between my palms, slather breast and thigh, fingers
slipped between skin pinched loose from flesh. Sprinkle with salt. I will open

the oven, make my offering to the heat. I will sit and let the skin sweat
'til it becomes a golden crackling crust and at prick of inner thigh

juices run clear. I will be hungry, but I will wait
to cut the truss, to tear at tender meat, until you

arrive and we are at the table,
bounty laid before us, and then—

oh, and then

Susan Alff

Vessel

Glory be to God for dappled things.
—Gerard Manley Hopkins

In my kitchen, my mother's pitcher holds pride
of place, nothing fancy,
redeemed with a booklet of Green Stamps
from the five-and-dime.
In her kitchen, she filled it with our milk
—no cartons on the table for her—
that small flourish dampened
by my father's snort, unleashing us
to mimic him. The pitcher was put away,
my mother always present, hollowed.

Vintage crockery crowds my kitchen shelves:
salt and pepper shakers in animal shapes,
a flock of white creamers, spouts lifted in full caws,
the chipped table settings of other people's lives.
A few more things of hers have come to me:
limp yellow cafe curtains, a singed oven mitt.
My hand seeks hers inside.
For family, she rang the unsung daily rounds:
cook set the table say grace repeat
Alone, I take my turn with the household Book of Hours.

My mother's pitcher holds the waiting air.

Elisabeth Murawski

Anna's Bible

In a font heavy and dark
as a forest in Grimm,
the Polish text

resembled German, fooled
the soldiers seizing
books to burn.

Forbidden, the tongue
of Chopin and Koszewski.
A closer look

could bring arrest.
She took it with her
on the journey

to America, the farm
in Michigan. In sandy soil
ideal for growing

fruit, they buried three
of twelve children.
I can't

imagine it. The Bible
ended up in our flat,
its dark brown

leather cover cracked
with age. I admired
the ruse,

my family's chutzpah.
I was sixteen.
I didn't wonder

when she found the time
to read, or what
she believed,

if she grieved more
in spring, everything
blossoming.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Fiction Judge

Bryn Chancellor

The Moon, the Pyramids, the World

The night before my dog's memorial, I dreamed of my father. He stood in our dirt yard, blocking the door to the double-wide. He said something and then ran at me. I couldn't move. He flicked his cigarette. Whoosh, the brush went up. I woke hot, exhausted, disoriented. No wonder I snapped at my daughter, threw my mug across the kitchen. As Lucky slammed outside, she said, "You never learn. I can't believe I drove four hundred miles for this."

She wouldn't answer my texts. She must have talked to my sister, though, because as I cleaned up the ceramic shards and splattered coffee, Hallie called from New York where she was filming. She said, "For Christ's sake, Constance," and I said I was sorry, it was an accident, I didn't mean to. Hallie was quiet. She said, "You sound like him," and hung up.

I popped two edibles, grabbed Nickel's doggie urn, and opened the front door. Fall in Phoenix. The heat had broken the way it did, roasting and then bam, down to the 70s, and the city slings open windows and gulps in fresh air, the chatter and cheers of televised baseball games wafting into the streets. I eyeballed the sunlight as if it had knocked with a bible in hand.

The yard had been toilet papered. White strips looped the juniper and adobe wall, crisscrossed the Arizona ash, spilling through the break in the hedge and onto the Hall Monitor's property, snail-trails of two-ply across her immaculate lawn. At first I guessed it was the little darlings at Palmera Vista High, but my election signs had been spray-painted with red X's.

I dropped the urn, rage surging as it had for months. As I snapped up the ruined signs, my inner voice—I call it Her Majesty—said, *Now, love, be cool. Don't show your ass.* Nope. I screamed and hopped up and down and winged the signs into

the driveway. The stakes clanked on the concrete. I untangled toilet paper from the porch, balled it, and tried to throw it. Instead, I tripped over the urn and belly-flopped on the grass. Knocked the wind and fight right out of me. I lay there, panting. My father hovered, spectral.

My phone rang. My manager at the Palmview Pub: a burst bathroom pipe. Hours before Game 7. Perfect.

I called the plumber and then got a ladder from the shed. I propped it on the tree trunk, climbed up, and batted at the toilet paper with a broom. Yellow leaves and white scraps drifted down, but I couldn't shake loose the highest strands. I sweated, my jeans digging, my Dodgers jersey clinging to my muffin top. Her Majesty said, *Well, love, you have been knee-deep in junk food*. Truth. Last night, instead of dyeing my skunk roots, I'd eaten an edible and knocked back a freezer-burned sleeve of mint cookies as I avoided news and scrolled streaming queues, read old reviews of my last movie three years ago, read glowing reviews of Hallie's recent one.

The Hall Monitor next door—her name was Vera Romero—stepped outside with a trash bag. Vera was in her late fifties, slim and bowlegged with a wedge haircut like what's-her-face, that Olympic figure skater from the '70s. Vera liked to sit on her stoop beneath her Cubs flag and take notes in a memo pad. Queen of her brick-ranch fiefdom. Once we'd been friendly, chatting about the heat, baseball, traffic, parenting—I'd watched Vera's son sometimes after school, and she'd keep Lucky—but I began to dodge her when she complained about the mulberry tree between our houses or overgrown grass or scolded Lucky for parking too close to her driveway. When she'd called animal control on Nickel, I'd screamed at her in the street. Since then, I'd given her a fake smile: *Eat shit, lady*. My father's smile.

Before Vera could catch my eye, I dropped the broom and grabbed the lowest branch, swung a leg over it, and heaved myself up. Her Majesty said, *Dearest? A tree? You're sixty-five years old with a dodgy knee, and you've eaten two pot gummies.* Too late. I was up. I laughed and planted my feet wide, despite my twinging knee. It wasn't as if Vera couldn't *see* me, a skunk-headed woman in a bright blue baseball jersey.

I hadn't been up in a tree in decades. Thirty years ago, I'd boost Lucky's little butt up into the branches and we'd climb together, hollering out exaggerations: *I can see California! Well I can see the dark side of the moon! I can see Mount Everest!* I'd bought this house and the pub after the divorce. I needed stability, security as acting jobs dried up. Graeme was a lousy husband (I'd been wife No. 2, and he now was on child-bride No. 5), but a decent person, a good father, a great producer—he was EP on Hallie's last film, the one with all the raves. He'd given Hal and me our first break, when we were in our early twenties and I still went by Connie, my last name still spelled like my father's, Sinclair.

I stretched to reach an overhead branch and began to climb. I found more footholds and went higher, my thighs burning. The scratch of the rough bark was comforting, like an old sweater. The scent of stock and marigolds floated up from

Vera's garden. Through the thinning leaves, I glimpsed bright lime paint on a door of a flipped house that used to belong to the laundromat owner, serrated shadows of palms and paloverdes on the pavement, a woman with long fair hair bundled in a too-big fleece riding a ten-speed with yellow handlebars down the sidewalk. Beyond was the sloped roof of the Coliseum, the hump of Camelback Mountain to the east, the Westward Ho tower downtown. *I can see the skyscrapers! I can see the pyramids! I can see Machu Picchu!*

From this height and angle, my bungalow, shrouded by oleanders and bougainvillea, seemed shrunken. A shingle was missing over the living room, and the Hall Monitor was right: the mulberry branches hung too low to the roof. I leaned down to look through Lucky's bedroom window. The bed unmade. On the desk was a laptop, a suitcase by the door.

My dream resurfaced. That old home on the edge of the city. Me and Hal in a free-standing fort Daddy had built behind the trailer—The Lookout, we called it. From high above, we ran lines for plays that Hal wrote. Tiny Hal, born a preemie, her little bird ankles poking from the hems of her jeans, hair and eyelashes as white as the moon. Below, Daddy rumbled around the dusty acres in his Bobcat. On good days, he'd let us climb into the tractor's bucket, and we'd laugh as he raised the bucket, shout, "Go higher, Daddy!," the Superstitions and their lost-gold secrets at our backs. Above, we scanned the desert, pinpointed the highway exit six miles south. Below, a boy grabbed my ass, cornered me at a cast party, and Daddy smelled of sunflower seeds and beer. Above, Hal wrote words for me to say, luminous words, and I practiced being someone else. Below, a boy didn't listen when I said no, locked a door and covered my mouth. Above, I cried while Hal wrapped her skinny arms around my waist, said she'd beat the living shit out of that boy, and below, she did, a white-haired fury with a backpack weighted with library books. Below, Daddy burned our neighbor's shed and two acres of desert and went to prison. Above—there was no more above. We had to come down. We had to go.

Up in the ash tree, I was as high as I could go before the branches wouldn't hold. The Hall Monitor was still down in her yard, stuffing wads of toilet paper into a trash bag. A breeze brushed my face, and my throat tightened. Above again, but this time I couldn't pretend who I'd be. I was this: an aging actor who couldn't get anything but cameos, a terror to my family, hiding up a tree from my neighbor, from a country on fire, from my burning dreams.

I held tight to the trunk, and thought, *Fall*. A season, the earth in orbit around the sun. Plummet, collapse, cascade. From a great height, in love, from grace.

I let go and stood on a limb with my arms at my side. A knot pressed into my arches. Paper drifted to the grass. I closed my eyes. Light prickled behind my lids, as in moments before sleep, a great sparkling blankness. I crouched, let gravity decide.

But when I wobbled, I whirled my arms and lunged toward the trunk. My foot slipped into a crevice, and my ankle twisted. I yelped and yanked my foot free, but

my shoe stayed wedged. A breeze brushed my rear end. My jeans had blown out. I hugged the trunk, closing my eyes. My armpit reeked like onions and talc.

When I opened my eyes, Vera stood below. I stifled a scream.

Vera said, "Constance? You okay? I heard you yell."

"Fine," I said. "Resting." I flexed my foot and blinked away sweat.

"If you say so." She waved and started to walk away.

"Wait." I tested weight on my ankle and winced. "Maybe I'm a little stuck."

Vera squinted up. "Want me to call the fire department?"

"You are good at calling the city."

"You want me to call or not?"

"No."

She put her hands on her hips. "What, you think I can carry you down?"

"Give me a minute."

"I don't have all day."

"Go, then."

Vera propped her foot on the ladder's lowest rung. I grew dizzy. I squeezed my eyes shut and held the trunk. Lucky wouldn't pick up if I called. I had no one else.

"I'm going to call," Vera said. "I'll be right back. Don't fall."

I tugged my shirt over my butt. I could see the headline now: Former Actress Gets Stuck in Tree/Cleaning Toilet Paper from Branches. I'd be trending in no time, with comments about weight gain and skunk roots and guesses as to drug use and I-thought-she-was-already-deads. Or more likely, no one would notice at all.

Vera said, "They're on the way."

I jumped. The woman should wear a bell. "Okay, thanks. I owe you."

She nodded. "How about you cut down that mulberry?"

If I could have reached my shoe, I would have thrown it at her head.

I said, "Cut it down, Vera. I don't care. The world's going to hell, and you're worried about a tree that drops berries in your yard. Give me a break."

"You don't have to be rude about it."

I thumped my forehead against the trunk.

"It's a messy tree," Vera said. "It causes me so much trouble."

"It's a *tree*," I said. "Have you seen the news? Someone vandalized my signs." I pointed at the placards splayed across the drive, the name of the country's first female presidential nominee X-ed out.

She said, "I don't care about the news."

"Super. You're probably not going to vote either."

"That's my business." Vera folded her arms. "I'd pay half to take it down."

"It's not the money! Jesus, can you—I'm kind of busy dealing with *this* tree."

Vera shouted, "Maybe you should fall! Maybe that would teach you a lesson!" She pushed the ladder. It toppled sideways, crashing to the grass.

My laugh came out as a hiccup.

Vera stared at the fallen ladder. "Shoot. I didn't mean that." She tried to lift it but stumbled and dropped it with a clang. She started coughing, doubled over.

"Are you sick?"

"Allergies."

"Leave the ladder." My foot spasmed, and I gritted my teeth. "You did your good deed. You can go."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Not having to deal with me."

"Oh my god, Vera. *Go*, okay?"

She sat down next to the ladder. She leaned against the trunk and stretched out her skinny bow legs. Her toes peeped from sandals, the nails painted bright pink. The leaves fluttered, and a strip of toilet paper floated down and landed on her slacks. She picked up the strip and waved it overhead. "Fly the W."

The Cubs. I had to smile. "Game 7. What a Series." I tugged my Dodgers jersey. "I'm True Blue, but I grew up with the Cubs. Think they'll pull it off?"

"Crazier things have happened." Vera coughed into her knees.

I traced patterns of bark—alligator skin, Lucky used to call it. Graeme had box seats at Dodgers Stadium, and while he schmoozed, I'd explain pitches to Lucky and track the games on scorecards, which Daddy had taught me and Hal at spring training games in Mesa. On his good days. I remembered one game: bottom of the ninth, Cubs down by two. Then a crack of wood, a ball's high, sweet arc, a white spark flashing through the night air—going, going, *gone*. Daddy whooped and danced a jig, shouted, "Sayonara, sweetheart! That's all she wrote!" He picked me and Hal up by the waist, swung us around in the aisle, bought ice cream cones for the road.

Vera said, "I'm glad I lived to see it, no matter what happens. Everyone's coming over tonight to watch. My sister and her husband and kids, too."

I couldn't remember Vera mentioning a sister, but maybe I'd forgotten. Or hadn't been listening—Lucky's accusation. *You never listen, Mom. You never learn*.

Vera stared up at me. "How're things with you?"

"Been better." I pressed my forehead against the bark.

The truth was, that morning was more than a shattered mug.

My agent had called. Didn't get a part; they were going in a different direction. My first screen test in months. A week earlier, someone found Nickel, rotting, her leg chewed off, one tattered pink bootie on her front paw, in the alley behind the now-closed laundromat. Lucky had moved to California and back into her father's orbit, into Hallie's. Election footage was a reel on loop. An old rage rose, dense and hot, born of my father, my ex-husband, of every boy or man who'd cornered me, catcalled me, grabbed me, a director who'd squeezed my nipple, all of them who told me to smile, told me I was a stupid bitch when I said no.

I'd taken a hammer from the junk drawer. Glass sprayed across the kitchen and living room as I broke framed photos and artwork and vases. That time I did heed

Her Majesty (*Watch out, dearest, look out!)* because when I hurled the hammer, it gouged the plaster wall instead of Lucky, who'd cowered next to the ottoman.

I told Vera, "I didn't get a part I'd hoped for, among other things."

"That's a shame."

"That's the business, but God knows I'm not getting younger."

Vera balled the paper in her fist. "Nothing turns out like you thought it would, does it? I was supposed to go to college. Study literature. Become a teacher. Become—" She cut herself off, flipped her wrist, dropped the wad of paper.

"I didn't know that."

"You don't know a lot about me." She coughed again, leaned forward and plucked a leaf from her pant legs. "Another life ago."

"How many do you think we have left?"

Vera laughed. "Good question."

I poked the bark. "When I started out, I thought—" What? That I'd be Hallie. A working actor, get to spend my days becoming somebody else. Be somebody. I forced a laugh. "Honestly, I don't know if I was good enough in the first place, and I basically quit when I moved here. But I got this." I waved my hand at the house and all it suggested. Stability. Family. Love. I couldn't say, *It was supposed to be me*. As if there were only room for one.

"That's good."

"It was." I stared at the shrunken house, the empty windows, the doggy urn tipped to the side on the front step. I heard the *thunk* of a hammer in plaster. *I can see the Pacific! I can see the future! I can see the whole world!*

"You can still do more." Vera flicked the ladder, which let out a dull metal ping. "Lots of people are late bloomers."

I affected an accent: "I think I've done gone and bloomed." I laughed but pictured brown petals falling from stems. I pictured the last time I'd seen my father on a tractor, the day before he set fire to the neighbor's shed and went to prison. I pictured Hal, luminous on the screen.

Vera stood and brushed her pants. Said something I couldn't hear.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Hallie.

"Lu called and said you're up in the tree in the front yard," Hal said. "Constance. What's in the hell is going on?"

"Nothing. The yard was toilet papered. I'm here with Vera."

"You're okay?"

I held tight to the tree. "Fine."

"Good. Because I got some really good news."

I wasn't sure how much more good news I could stand. "Another review?"

A siren cut through the air.

"What? No. I'm going to direct a movie. I co-wrote it. And I want you in it."

"Me?"

Hal sighed. "Who else would I want in my movie?"

I said, "I thought you wouldn't want to talk to me after this morning."

"Connie. I was upset. Lu was freaked out. I was at work. I know you didn't mean to. Obviously you're stressed. This year, god—I should have checked in. What is that racket?"

The siren grew louder, and the fire engine came into view down the street. Vera covered her ears against the blare. Neighbors wandered into their yards and driveways.

Below, Lucky appeared next to Vera. She shielded her eyes and stared up at me in the branches.

I clung tighter to the trunk. "Fall," I said into the phone, and Hal said, "What?"

I started to cry, big dumb hiccups, until the siren shut off mid-wail.

Hal said, "Connie, it's okay. Whatever's going on. I'll be there soon. Promise."

I turned off the phone and hid my face against the bark.

Lucky pulled the ladder upright and propped it against the tree. "I'm coming up." She climbed to the top rung, but I couldn't look at her because all I could hear was my father. *Girlie, I'll give you something to cry about*.

Vera called, "I'll leave you to it." She walked through the hedge to her house.

Lucky stood on the top rung. "Well, this is a new one. Mom? Hey. Are you okay?" She reached up and touched my bare ankle. "I can see the pyramids," she said.

I wanted to say, I can see the whole world, but what I saw was my house with its branches too close to the roof, an hour down the highway from my first home with its dirt yard and lookout fort, where I first believed I could be anyone.

*

The rescue crew got me down within the hour. A few scratches and a mild sprained ankle, a tweaked knee, a blanket wrapped around my bare rump. I changed and showered while Lucky got pizza and ice cream to watch Game 7. We focused on the game and not on the morning.

With ice on my knee, a heaping bowl of Almond Praline in my lap, and my daughter next to me on the sofa, I watched the Cubs win in a wild Game 7. We shouted and hugged, and I limped around the living room, so elated that I sent my agent an email at midnight. *Don't count me out*, I wrote, telling her about Hal's movie. I clicked send, a flicker in my chest at the *whoosh*.

*

On Thanksgiving Day, two weeks after the election, I wasn't feeling thankful, except that Lucky and Hal were there with me for a few days.

We decided to spread Nickel's ashes that afternoon, so I stepped outside again with the urn, this time with a brace on my knee. Lucky and Hal trooped out behind me.

Hal said, "I'm stuffed. I'm so sleepy. I thought vegetarian Thanksgiving was supposed to be less tryptophan-y."

Lucky said, "Not if you eat, like, three scoops of mashed potatoes."

Hal put her arm around my waist. Lucky stood on my other side, bumping her hip into mine.

Hal said, "After we memorialize this pup, let's walk to the park, okay? I have to make room for pie."

Vera came out onto her stoop then. I hadn't seen her since the day in the tree. A woman with buzzed gray hair held Vera's elbow, helped her into a chair, and kissed Vera's cheek before she went inside. Vera had a clear plastic tube in her nose and wheeled an oxygen tank. I remembered Vera's cough. So not allergies.

I waved and called hello, but Vera didn't respond.

I handed Hal the urn and said I'd be right back. I slipped through the hedge.

Vera held a memo pad in one hand, a pencil in the other. Her cheeks were sunken, and her blouse and slacks belled around her frame.

I said, "How are you? I didn't know you were sick."

"Pneumonia," Vera said. "I got a little run down. It's nothing." She flipped her wrist and dropped her pencil.

"That's hardly nothing." I kneeled on my good knee, grimacing at a stab in the bad one. I grabbed the pencil and held it out.

"Thanks." Vera wheezed as she leaned forward. Lucky and Hal waved. Vera nodded, lifted her hand. Her skin seemed translucent, like prawns.

"That's nice they could be here," Vera said.

"It is," I said. "Hey. Guess what? I'm moving. To California."

"No kidding. When?"

"In the spring."

I told her the plan. My pub manager would housesit, and I'd move into Hallie's newly built guesthouse, going to work on her film. I'd decided, what the hell. Everyone I loved was there. Might as well try. Not sure how long I'd stay.

Vera said, "Time for a change, I guess."

"Yes." Or rather, time to let go of my inferno of resentment. Time to burn this stagnant, fearful life to the ground.

"I'll keep an eye on things," Vera said.

"I know you will." I smiled. "Thanks."

Vera looked toward the ash tree. I turned. By now the tree had shed most of its leaves, which the day after the election I'd anger-raked into a pile at the base as I blared punk rock through the rolled-down windows of my parked car, thinking, *Come out here and tell me to turn it down. Please. I dare you.* At the crown, a thin band of leaves with a few tufts remained.

I said, "Fly the W."

Vera smiled, adjusted the tube in her nose. The morning sun lit up the tree, and its branches shivered. Withered paper parachuted to the ground. What did Vera see? I didn't know, wouldn't ever know. Maybe her son, her grandchildren, her sister, other relatives I didn't know. Maybe a baseball's high, sweet arc, a flash through the air, defying odds, defying gravity—*gone*. Maybe this yard in front of her, where she answered to no one but herself.

The tree bounced and swayed in the wind, glowed gold, a fast flicker of shadow and light. For a moment, a fissure, forked like summer lightning, flared in that stretch of sky. It was as if the world had cracked open to let us see inside. I had a feeling that if I looked long enough, I'd see everything, from every great height.

I took Vera's hand, pressed it between my palms. "Do you see that?" It was right there, above us. Vera made a sound in her throat that I took as *yes*.

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Suzanne Adams

What I Did That Summer

In the spring of my freshman year at college, despite maintaining a very respectable grade point average, I realized that I knew nothing about life.

Was it because of reading *The Grapes of Wrath*? Maybe. I'd never had a stomach cramped by hunger and I thought somehow I should. Steinbeck, I felt, was someone who knew about life. Or not Steinbeck, maybe, but his characters. They knew about life in a way I didn't. Although I cringed at the idea of nursing an old man from my own breast like Rose of Sharon, it wasn't a current problem since I didn't know any old men. I hated the thought that owning things freezes you into "I" and cuts you off forever from "we." I longed to be "we," to merge into the Whole, to be part of Humanity. It seemed logical, as I told my mother, that the way for me to overcome my ignorance about life was to become a migrant worker. I could pick grapes in California, which would be easy because I was already at school in California. I could start as soon as spring quarter ended.

My Midwestern mother felt that anything in the Midwest was safer than anything on the West Coast, so would I agree to pick cherries in Michigan instead of grapes in California? Sure. So it'll be The Cherries of Wrath. Whatever.

I was eighteen.

Cherries came from Glenn, Michigan, across the lake from our home in Illinois. In the 1950s Glenn was known as the Cherry Capital of the Country. They had your Cherry Queens, cherry pie bakeoffs, and cherry pit spitting contests. Behind all that cherry-centered revelry were the people who actually picked those cherries. Migrant workers would appear in Michigan as the cherries ripened and sign up for work in the orchards. Most of them slept together in the second-floor storage rooms of the big barns that squatted on the flat farm landscape.

My mother, already less than thrilled with my migrant worker ambitions, was not about to sign off on those communal sleeping arrangements, so there was a problem. But somehow (how? I never asked. It just seemed like the sunny, carefree way my life always opened for me) she discovered that the superintendent of schools had a summer place in Glenn on a large property, with a small isolated cabin that could be rented for a nominal fee. With that in place, my mother agreed to drive me to Glenn, drop me off and depart. I'd be on my own. Adventure! Life!

The first day out I visited a cherry orchard and got a job as a picker. Luckily, the strawberry season had just ended. Strawberry pickers had to spend all day crouching over the plants, which at this farm were intermingled with poison ivy. Of course

the workers ate some of the berries. Of course they got poison ivy. One woman had poison ivy inside her mouth. The itching made her so crazy that she threw herself out of the barn's second story window. I was glad it was cherry season.

Cherry pickers wore lugs, metal containers that rest against the chest, secured by straps around the neck. Each lug could hold 35 pounds of cherries. The pickers stood on ladders, high in the trees, reaching out as far as possible so as not to have to move the ladder very much, which would waste time. The point was to fill the lug quickly, climb down and carry it to the field boss for credit. Then back up the tree. All day. The more lugs, the more money. A fast picker could earn $35 a day. The field boss took one look at me and suggested that I start out with a half day's work. No way—I was in this to live the life, just like all the other migrants. I stayed until the last picker left.

After that first day of work I could hardly walk. The most direct route to my cabin crossed a cornfield. The corn was high, and between the rows the ground was fairly soft, a good place for a little nap. I lay down and was surprised to wake up there very early the next morning. I wasn't sure my arms and legs still worked, but they did, carrying me somewhat painfully back to the cabin.

Actually, the cornfield had some advantages over the cabin, where I wasn't as alone as I had anticipated. For company I had legions of field mice. Whoever said "quiet as a mouse" didn't know mice. They are *not* quiet. Nighttime was party time, and they squeaked and rattled and ran over my cot with me in it. During those early days I was too tired to do much about this, but I did put a hat over my face so the mice wouldn't bite it. The outhouse was less of a problem, as spiders really are quiet.

My first day of work had been a Friday, so I had the weekend to recover. I needed it. I felt as though I'd been picking cherries with my neck. My first lesson in life was to stop leaning so far out to reach the cherries that the lug hung straight down from my neck. That's not good.

The next workday was better, and the days after that better yet. I got stronger and faster. One day I was picking near two young boys who looked to be about 12, and was enormously pleased when they told me I was a good picker. "Almost as good as a boy," one said. High praise!

My fellow pickers were mostly family groups from Eastern Europe who sometimes sang songs in a language I couldn't understand. They were strong and lively and seemed to enjoy working together. Language problems prohibited much conversation with adults, but some of the kids had been in schools in the U.S. and enjoyed translating for me. I was able to learn that in one family a son had gotten a job in a shoe store in town. This astonished everybody. Why would he want to be sticking shoes on smelly feet when he could be out in the fresh air with the family? These people didn't seem to be suffering. I didn't see anyone breastfeeding old men.

There were feral cats around the barn and kittens had been born a month or so before I arrived. Although it was good to have some cats to keep down the rodent population, the field boss said this barn had too many cats.

"Could I have a kitten?" I asked him.

"Take 'em all. I'd just have to drown 'em anyways." But he grinned when he said that, and I didn't think he meant it. He did, though.

I couldn't take them all, but I did take one, named her Glenda and tried not to think about it when the other kittens disappeared. Was this the Reverence for Life that I had expected? Back home a kindly woman ran a place called Orphans of the Storm and took in unwanted animals. Those that couldn't be adopted at least had a safe place to live out their days. But, little college girl, life is real, life is earnest, and the end might be a watery grave for an overpopulation of cats. You wanted real life, didn't you?

The field boss told me not to feed my cat much so she'd keep after the mice. I hadn't considered the mice and their probable fate. I wanted Glenda because I was lonely and I thought a cat would help, which it did. After a week Glenda was in bed with me at night and the mice were not, a definite improvement.

Life was settling into a predictable routine: up and out early, cross the cornfields to the cherry orchard, pick cherries all day, walk home, feed the cat, eat a sandwich or something simple, check the cot for spiders that Glenda might have missed, and fall sleep. But than a problem arose. The man who owned the cabin wanted it back, just for one weekend. Where would I go? Although I'd spent a night in the cornfields, a weekend there wasn't appealing. Seeing my distressed face, the cabin owner mentioned a farmer nearby who had a big barn with rooms for workers. As he wasn't harvesting at the moment, the rooms should be empty. For sure he'd let me stay there for a weekend.

On Friday morning I packed a few clothes and my *Collected Works of Shakespeare* and went to inquire.

The barn in question was only half a mile or so down a dirt road. The weathered gray paint of the farmhouse suggested that it had been there a long time, knew what it was, and didn't have to impress anybody. I walked up the steps to the little front porch, which was swept clean, found the doorbell, heard it ring inside the house, and waited.

After a few minutes I heard footsteps and the door was opened by a man who looked as weathered as the paint. I explained my situation and asked permission to stay in his barn just for the weekend.

Pause. Then, slowly, "Don't see why not."

"Could I move in this morning?"

Pause. "Don't see why not."

I thanked him and left to explore my new habitat.

The barn was at some distance from the farmhouse. Like other barns in the area, it was large, with the first floor filled with farm machinery. A creaky wooden staircase led to a series of small storage rooms all around the second story periphery of the barn. The area in the middle was open to the first floor, like a big rectangular doughnut. There was a primitive bathroom, a surprising luxury. I examined the rooms. Most were filled with sacks of dried corn, but some had cots for workers. A few of the rooms were locked, and when I checked the open rooms I was surprised that they locked from the inside. Did the corn sacks need their privacy? I picked a room opposite the staircase, dumped my book and zippered bag of clothes on the cot and headed out to the orchard.

When I got back to the barn that night I was surprised to see a light in the upper room. How thoughtful! The farmer left a nightlight on for me. Once again goodness and mercy were following me all the days of my life.

But when I climbed the wooden staircase I was startled to see a large man I didn't know sitting on my cot. He looked about 35 to 40 years old, with a husky build and black bushy hair. There was something wrong with one of his eyes, which was covered with a milky looking film.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! I didn't realize—is this your room? I can—"

A slow grin creased his face. "Naw, I reckon it's yer room."

"Oh, uh—no, I can take any of the rooms—I just didn't know anyone else would be here." I moved to grab my stuff, splayed out on the bed beside the man with the milky eye. But he moved fast, putting a large hand on the bag with my clothes. Was the zipper open a little? I don't think I left it that way.

"Stay and talk, why doncha." Less an invitation than an order.

"I—could do that." I worked on dragging a smile up from my shaking legs. None of this seemed right. The farmer hadn't mentioned anything about other people sleeping in his barn. Instinct said "*Run away*!" But I'm not a fast runner. "So—I'm working over at Grier's orchard, picking cherries. You work around here?"

"Cherries, huh?" Grin. "You sleep up to the barn with them others?"

"Naw." If I spoke his language maybe he wouldn't hurt me. "Got my own place. Well, rented it."

"Yeah? Where is it?"

Stupid! You want to tell him where you live, in an isolated cabin as far from help as, well, as this barn is? You'd like to see him turn up there some night, with the mice? "Oh, 'bout a mile from Grier's, I guess." *Run away! Run away!* "You?"

"Used to be the butcher at Country Market."

Oh, great. I wondered if he had his butcher's knives with him. I decided it was not a good idea to ask him if he had permission to sleep in the barn. So I told him about working in the cherry orchard, and he told me about losing his job as a butcher. Seemed some customers were put off by his blind eye.

"And," he added casually, "I've got a temper sometimes. They say I'm a schizo."

The cornfields were looking pretty good about now. But best to keep talking until I thought of a way to get out of there without making him mad. I declined his invitation to sit beside him on the cot.

"So, do you like to read?" I quavered, gesturing toward Shakespeare.

"Naw. But they's plenty a things I do like." Adjusting posture on cot. Scratching inner thigh.

And they'd never hear me at the house if I screamed.

I edged closer to the door. For a big man he moved fast, needing only a few steps to be beside me, his arm against the door frame, blocking my way. He leaned his face into mine. That eye was scary. He touched his bottom lip with his tongue.

I tried not to recoil. But I gotta get out of here! And then, a thought. "Hey," I said, trying to sound offhand and friendly, "I, uh, I have to use the bathroom. Be right back."

He looked doubtful, but slowly pulled back from the door frame, dropping his arm a little so I could get by. I considered running down the stairs and out into the night. But I'd make a noise on those wooden steps. He'd certainly hear and possibly come after me. I doubted I could outrun him, and he looked considerably stronger than I was, probably from cutting up slabs of flesh. I conjectured a scenario where I stuck a finger in his good eye, but that plan wasn't appealing because I'd have to be so close to him. I made myself walk slowly around the catwalk just past the bathroom to the next storage room with a lock, tiptoed inside, quietly locked the door, and hoped.

It was quiet for a while and then I heard him.

"Hey girl, where are yuh? Where yuh at?

I hunkered down behind some corn sacks, thinking he might not see me if he broke down the door. I heard heavy footsteps coming along the catwalk. He was opening the unlocked storeroom doors and kicking at the locked ones. I hoped I hadn't left footprints in the dust outside the door. Why hadn't I thought of that?

He reached my door. I didn't breathe. He shook the handle, yelled, shook the door again. I imagined him looking at me through the wooden door with his filmy dead eye. Finally he left and continued around the catwalk. I could hear him opening the unlocked doors and muttering. At last he went back to his room, or maybe mine. Silence.

I waited.

After about an hour, I thought I heard snoring. I took off my shoes, eased the door open and crept to the staircase, willing it not to make a sound as I went down. Once outside I ran sock-footed into the fragile security of the corn rows, where I thought it might be hard to find me. I crouched.

Silence.

Then the corn stalks rustled.

The wind??

Yes, that time. I looked around. Nothing. Was I safe here?

The corn rows won't keep you safe, girl. The corn doesn't care.

I kept thinking that the farmer never told me someone else would be in the barn. How strange was that? Did he think it was all right for a young girl to spend the night with a schizophrenic butcher? It wasn't comfortable in the cornfield. I was way too scared to fall asleep.

But I had nowhere to go. Clods of dirt and dry sticks poked me when I lay down, and if I stood up I was afraid I might be seen. I changed location a few times, crouching as I looked for the tallest, thickest rows of corn stalks to hide in.

What had that farmer been thinking? Was I a throw-away person whose virginity, maybe even life, didn't matter*?* I thought about my boyfriend, and how sweet it was to hold and kiss each other, and how we both cried because we wanted to go further and we couldn't, because it was the '50s. What a waste.

Then I imagined the newspaper headlines if my body were found in the cornfield or the barn. "But what was she doing in an isolated barn late at night? What did she think might happen?"

Was this my fault? The farmer hadn't agreed to take care of me. The whole world was not my mother, dedicated to keeping me safe. If I wanted to leave that cocoon I'd grown up in, I'd better sprout sturdier wings.

The sun did, finally, rise. I went to the orchard, happy to feel so safe in a place that was by now familiar. I found the owners and the field boss in the side yard going over crop yields. I told them about the butcher in the barn.

"Oh yeah, we know that guy. Real weirdo. Scares people."

"Scared me! Could I please sleep in your barn with the other workers, just for tonight?" A warm feeling toward those fellow workers filled me. I knew I'd be safe with them. After all, I was one of them.

"Sorry. Barn's full right now."

No offer to protect me or take me in for the night. No one seemed to think that the farmer should have warned me, or that I should have been particularly upset about a butcher in his barn. It wasn't their barn. They didn't owe me anything.

Actually, nobody did. That's reality, baby. There are shadows as well as sunshine on the plains. Ultimately we're our own caretakers in life. Suck it up.

I did. I shook myself off, walked to town and found a vacant room in a motel next to a gas station where I could get some food. I had some money in my jeans, as Friday had been pay day, but, handing it over, I thought of how many lugs of cherries it represented. Well, call it tuition, girl, for a course called Learning about Life.

The next morning I called home. Home was also real.

Lit/South Awards 2023
Nonfiction Judge

Melissa Febos

Wildness

NARRATOR: *You're a girl, not an animal.*
VALERIE: *A she-mammal or a female child. I was on the borderline between human being and chaos.*

—Sara Stridesberg, *Valerie*

My mother had raised me vegetarian, and though I harbored no real desire to eat meat, sometimes, in summer, I would take a hunk of watermelon to a remote corner of our yard and pretend it was a fresh carcass. On all fours, I would bury my face in the sweet red fruit-meat and tear away mouthfuls. Sometimes, I'd rip handfuls out and cram them in my mouth, which wasn't much like the way any animal I knew of ate. I was less playing a particular kind of animal than enacting a form of wildness that I recognized in myself.

I watched *Wild America*, a PBS show on which conservationist Marty Stouffer revealed the wildness of the animal world. Alone in the woods behind our house I had beaten my chest, acted out my own invented stories without a thought to how another's gaze might see me. I sympathized with the jittery business of squirrels and fanatical obsessions of our golden retriever. I was confounded by silverware—why it should exist when we had such perfect instruments at the ends of our arms.

Walt Whitman claimed our distinction from animals to be that "they do not sweat and whine about their condition" and "not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things." However often Stouffer imposed human narratives on the animals depicted (very often), it was still always clear that survival was the priority that assigned value to everything in the animal world. If the wild marten was overcome by her own feelings, she didn't let it stop her from procuring dinner for her babies. I might have had to close my eyes during the part of

the nature documentary in which the pack of hyenas felled an antelope, but they had no qualms about tearing warm mouthfuls from her while she still kicked with frantic life. I learned in elementary school that we were animals, but unlike other animals we did not seem driven by the instinct for physical survival. We were so far up the food chain that it was no longer even visible to us. We were beyond survival, in a dark and lofty realm wherein our obsolete instincts had been perverted into atrocities like capitalism and bikini waxing. I might not have been able to name this, but I recognized it.

Sometimes, when I momentarily detached from the narrative of human life that we all took for granted—the one that presumes that money, cars, shopping malls, pollution, and industry are not a demented and catastrophic misuse of our resources—and glimpsed it from an evolutionary angle, it seemed so bizarre as to be unlikely. Was this real life or some strange dystopian movie, a dream from which we would soon wake to resume our sensible animal lives—in which "nature" was not a television show category or an experience to cultivate a preference for consuming but the only thing, the everything.

In elementary school, however, we kids were not making an ontological study of late-twentieth-century middle-class American life. We were neither learning about capitalism nor reading Whitman. We were learning how to be human. We were learning the exact way in which, though we were animals, we should not look or act like animals. To call someone an *animal* was an insult. As my peers and I approached puberty, this was unfortunate, because I had trouble keeping track of the narrative. I was covered in scabs and bruises. I was sun-browned, full of sighs, and interested in every orifice. I was an *animal*.

By middle school, this felt like an especially disgusting secret, because I was also a girl.

*

At the end of fourth grade, my body mutinously exploded, flesh swelling from my chest and thighs before it happened to anyone else my age. I was enormous, I thought, Alice after drinking the wrong potion, busting through the house of what a girl should be. Girls were not supposed to be enormous. They were not supposed to be scabby and strong. Inexplicably, strong and big were what every animal wanted to be except us.

To be human meant that females were the cultivators of meticulous plumage. We competed to be the weakest and smallest and most infantile. We seemed to spend all our resources withering ourselves to be attractive to males. The goal was to be as soft and tidy and delicate as possible. It made no sense at all. I was not in the habit of withering myself. I was not tidy or delicate. I ate the same way I did everything—with speed and vigor. One day at lunch, after I polished off a soggy square of cafeteria pizza, the girl next to me stared with bald attention.

"What?" I said, self-consciousness radiating through me.

"You eat so fast. I can't even finish a whole piece of that," she said, with a touch of self-satisfaction. "It's so *big*."

Wild America had taught me that wolves could go more than a week without eating, but I could only make it through one day. *I won't eat anything but string cheese this week*, I would promise myself. One Saturday, the only thing I consumed was a bag of sugar-free Jell-O powder. I licked my fingertip and dipped it into the tiny bag of red sand until it glowed crimson and my mouth was aflame with chemicals, as though I had poisoned myself. I *would* have poisoned myself if I had thought it would transform me into a smaller animal.

In hindsight, the extreme reversal of values—big and strong going from best to worst—shocks me. Men seemed to have it all, to be considered superior in every perceivable way, and yet we were discouraged from striving for any form of dominance deemed masculine. To be described as "manly" was the vilest of insults. Such adaptability was required of us to perform this internal U-turn, to conform our loyalties to this crackpot framework, rife with contradiction. What I needed to survive middle school happened to be the opposite of what I would have needed to survive on *Wild America*.

Instead of eating contests, we had starving contests. Instead of boasting of our strengths, we forged friendships by denigrating ourselves. Instead of arm wrestling each other, we compared the size of our arms, competing not for strength and size but for puniness. It didn't take long for someone to point out that I had "man hands," an insult I subsequently used to abase myself well into adulthood.

*

I inherited a lot from my mother, though I first recognized my hands. We have long fingers, wide palms, and strong nails. They don't carry our ring sizes at mall kiosks. We shop for gloves in the men's section of department stores. We don't bother with bangles. In adolescence, it struck me as unfair because my mother was beautiful, with fine features and dizzying cheekbones. No one was ever going to be distracted from her face by her hands.

In school, I learned to talk less. I moved more slowly and hid my body in oversized clothes. I longed to be a smaller and cooler thing, less wanting, less everything. Though I felt gigantic, I wasn't. It was not the first time I mistook the feeling for the object, and not the last. This is what happens when you give your body away, or when it gets taken from you. Its physical form becomes impossible to see because your own eyes are no longer the experts. Your body is no longer a body but a perceived distance from what a body should be, a condition of never being correct, because being is incorrect. Virtue lies only in the interminable act of erasing yourself.

My body, though fickle, was starvable, concealable, subject to the reconfiguration of desire—when someone thought it pretty, so it became. Not my hands. They were maps that led to the truth of me. I was no petaled thing. I was not a ballerina. I was a third baseman. I was a puller, a pusher, a runner, a climber, a swimmer, a grabber, a sniffer, a taster, a throw-my-head-back-laugher. They were marked by things and left marks. They would never let me become the kind of girl I had learned I should be.

*

Before I learned about beauty, I delighted in my body. I sensed a deep well at my center, a kind of umbilical cord that linked me to a roiling infinity of knowledge and pathos that underlay the trivia of our daily lives. Its channel was not always open, and what opened it was not always predictable: often songs and poems, a shaft of late afternoon light, an unexpected pool of memory, the coo of doves at dusk whose knell ached my own throat and seemed the cry of loneliness itself. It was often possible to open the channel by will, an option that I found both terrifying and irresistible. I would read or think or feel myself into a brimming state—not joy or sorrow, but some apex of their intersection, the raw matter from which each was made—then lie with my back to the ground, body vibrating, heart thudding, mind foaming, thrilled and afraid that I might combust, might simply die of feeling too much.

Though this state seemed obviously the most *real* and potent form of consciousness, I knew that it was not "reality." I understood that you could not live with an open channel to the sublime inside of you; it was impossible to hold on to the collective story of human life with that live cord writhing through you, showering sparks like a downed wire in a hurricane. The channel that connected the wild in me with the wild outside could not be destroyed, but I did my best to seal it. I turned away from the real inside of me and oriented myself outward. I did not look back for a long time.

*

By the time I was thirteen, I had divorced my body. Not before or since have I felt such animosity toward another being.

There were moments, though. As a teenager, at night, alone in my bedroom, sometimes the illusion of autonomy from my body would crumble, and I would be flooded by the most profound sorrow and tenderness. I would look at my strong legs, each scar on my knees a memory. My soft little belly that had absorbed so much hate. Even my hands—like two loyal dogs that no amount of cruelty would banish. I suddenly saw my body as I would any animal that had been so mistreated. My poor body. My precious body. How had I let her be treated this way? My body was *me*. To hate my own body was to suffer from an auto-immune disease of the mind. I was unspeakably remorseful, as I imagine any abuser would be in such a moment of self-appraisal. I sat in the dark and hugged myself. *I'm sorry*, I whispered and squeezed

my own shoulder. *I love you*, I said. While I slept, the veil would draw once more. In the morning, I rose from my bed and looked in the mirror with disdain: *You again.*

*

My first girlfriend, Lillian—we were sixteen—confused me. Her short, matted hair and carpenter pants. The duct tape that sealed the rips in her down coat. Her soft voice and easy tears. Her delicate hands like flesh feathers that rustled thoughtlessly in her pockets or against my face. Even paint-flecked, with perpetual crescents of dirt under her nails, she was more girl in this way. I wanted to kiss her all the time. I also envied her the freedom of that ethereal form. In it she could be herself and still be beautiful. What did I think would happen if I did the same? I'd be seen as an ogre, all my hundred hands exposed. I needed Lillian to *love* me, and that meant I had to hide the aspects of myself that I suspected might repel her.

I spent the majority of my time in her company tense with control. My body was bigger than hers, and I feared drawing attention to this fact by being too flagrant in my movements, my laughter, my opinions. I had successfully internalized the belief that all my animal aspects—including and perhaps most of all the inherent vigor with which I approached life itself—were an affront to my femininity and should be annihilated if possible or, failing that, vigilantly suppressed and camouflaged. With her, I could be openly queer, wearing men's shirts and battered Doc Martens, but I was still in disguise.

After observing us together, a friend of my mother's once commented that I seemed *so much more mature* than Lillian. There was something childlike in the way my girlfriend inhabited her body. She sat with her legs either akimbo or improbably knotted, fidgeted restlessly, ate with her hands, and stared into space for whole minutes. I found her seeming lack of self-consciousness mesmerizing and worshipped it as yet another corporeal ideal unattainable to me, a freedom that could be afforded only by those more finely constructed. Because she was beautiful, she could be uninhibited, even slovenly.

One day, we lay on a blanket in the grass of her backyard. The trees hummed with insects, the air hazy with pollen. I read a novel, peering over it occasionally to watch her dip a paintbrush in a slick of watercolor and drag it along her sketchpad, the wet tip like a tiny black tongue, streaking the white with purple.

Eventually, she tore out the paper and handed it to me.

"For you," she said and kissed the top of my head.

I took the paper, suddenly buoyant with hope. I had not known enough to want this, but still it had found me. For a moment, anything seemed possible. Even my own happiness.

I smiled at her and then turned to study my gift. Next to the colorful figure of a woman's nude form and a tree with tangled branches she had painted a short poem.

Sometimes you touch me more like a bear than a butterfly, read one line. I froze, understanding that despite all of my efforts at control, she had seen my wildness. Shame shot through me in hot streaks.

*

In her essay "Uses of Erotic: The Erotic as Power," the poet Audre Lorde defines the erotic as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling." Oppression, she claims, is predicated on the suppression of this resource and its inherent power. "As women we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge." I had read the essay in college and loved it, without comprehending the full breadth of its relevance to my own life.

In my early thirties, I became conscious of the fact that I had been in consecutive monogamous relationships since my teenage years. I was a person so habitually attuned to the charge of attraction that I *accidentally* got into committed partnerships. Being partnered was a comfort, a perpetual reassurance that I was lovable, unrecognized in my more grotesque qualities. Despite my prolific dating history, I had never fully graduated from the inhibitions of my first love. I still fastidiously monitored my body, especially during sex, as if some telltale clue—a bearish touch, a too-loud moan—would expose my feral nature and drive my beloveds away.

"Don't you think you should take a break?" my mother asked me when I was thirty-two. I had just ended a three-year domestic partnership.

"Probably," I said, though I had already begun the next one. When it ended, I decided that I really ought to take a break.

It was hard, at first. I had to restart a few times. But when I committed to the quest of being alone and of turning inward, the change was immediate. Like a plant growing toward the sun, my life began to open. I wrote all day, until I wasn't sure if I even remembered how to talk to other humans. My days were a strangeness that I inhabited first with trepidation and then glee. I bought a new bed, and every morning I woke alone and gently patted myself down, as if taking inventory of my valuable cargo. It was just us, for three whole months, and then the better part of a year. Eating whatever I hungered for. The late-night reading and list writing. The silvery wordless mornings. I reread Lorde's essay ("the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing") and sighed with recognition.

How wrong I had been about freedom. I had mistakenly thought that that I must succeed at erasing myself in order to be myself. In fact, it was the opposite.

*

Six months into a new relationship, as we strolled down a sidewalk on a Saturday, I explained for the first time the ways I had for so long loathed my own body, how I was still embarrassed sometimes by my big hands. My partner stopped and turned to face me before she responded, her voice gentle but firm. "Little friend," she said. "I am charmed by your proportions. Just because you have an issue with them doesn't mean that anyone else does."

Part of learning to receive things is learning to do so when you haven't even asked for them. Intimacy, I've found, has little to do with romance. Maybe it is the opposite of romance, which is based on a story written by someone else. It is not watching lightning strike from the window but being struck by it.

Sometimes, during our sex, I step out of myself, like a wheel that's lost its track. I see my body crouched over her, thighs flexed, hands slick and enormous, face dumb with desire, mouth open—and I shudder, ready to tuck it all back in and make myself small again. To do that would mean leaving her here alone in this bed, leaving this *here* that exists only between both of our bodies. So I don't.

One afternoon, as we lay washed onto the shore of the bed, slack and salt-crusted, wrecked by pleasure, she said, "There is a word in my mind, but I don't know if I can say it. It's going to sound silly."

"Tell me," I said, my head on her chest, mouth briny with her.

"Sublime. Sometimes our sex feels like the sublime."

I laughed and rolled onto my back, threw my arm over my eyes.

"We call that sublime," Kant wrote, "which is absolutely great" and "beyond all comparison." A thing that can inspire us to feel a fearfulness, "without being afraid *of* it." An earthquake, for example, Kant understood as a sublime event.

I knew exactly what she meant, but I had no words to name it. My knowing was from a time before I knew such experience was speakable, when all I knew was that deep well inside me, the channel that connected everything to the pulse of my own wild heart.

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Katie McDougall

Howling Baby Arch

All day, in silence, Mason trailed his hiking guide under the tireless desert sun. They'd marched, climbed, scrambled, as if on another planet, at each turn a new and startling formation, vista, color-scape. In silence, they navigated a narrow cliff's edge crowded by an ancient pinion, crawled on hands and knees through a dark maze of bulbous sandstone, scaled rocks where the trail dead-ended.

The guide, Saige, hushed shepherd, spoke only to say, "Please don't step on the cryptogrammic soil," and "Rattler country. Keep an eye out." As though Mason Alexander, son of Atlanta, would know a rattler if he saw one.

When he could walk no more, they slogged up a steep sandy rise, sinking and ascending in equal measure until…there. There?

A towering sandstone arch rose against the cobalt sky, its open mouth framing eternity. Late afternoon shadows stretched eastward like children at rest.

He'd arrived…. Arrived?

Fifteen thousand miles he'd travelled in his tired station wagon. He'd put himself in the way of splendid, snow-swathed peaks, glittering bodies of water, autumn aspens bold with gold. But this, somehow, landed the *it*, the reason for his journey. This moment, this arch, blazed with freedom, mystery, horizon. Portal and grail.

Maybe.

For two months, he'd been driving, stopping, looking, sometimes walking, often drinking, never researching, nor writing, nor doing what he was meant to do—using precious sabbatical funds in the service of education and growth. For six weeks, he'd carried a heavy, dead thing inside him, the cumulative days doing nothing to resuscitate.

Until now.

Maybe.

Or perhaps this was simply delirium born of exhaustion and the promise of rest.

"What is this place?"

Saige, who seemed to know this land without trails as though she'd created it herself, ignored the question, instead pointing toward the shade of a lone cottonwood, where, at the tree's base, a shimmering pool proffered cool bath for distressed feet. Mason sat as directed and peeled off his dusty shoes and socks to reveal raw, angry blisters bubbling on both heels. He dipped his feet and sunburnt ankles into the water.

"What's it called?" he tried again, nodding toward the arch. Profoundly thirsty, he drank the last of his bottle. It seemed he was on the verge of sunstroke, his skin tingling cold under the heat of the sun, his mind doing the same, the sensation oddly comforting.

"This arch?" Saige's voice sang siren after so much silence. "No name." She smiled at him, direct, deeply dimpled, eyes lit with play. "It's not really on maps."

Mason tried to understand this. Were they in uncharted territory? Was there such a thing? He pulled his phone from his pocket to check Google Earth, but it was dead. Apprehension pricked at his scalp. Only now did it occur to him he hadn't signed waivers, didn't even know the fee. If his wife were with him, she would have asked because that's what responsible people do.

"Not on maps? Is that possible?"

"Out here." She laughed. "Anything is possible."

"Anything?"

Her chuckle was light, absent of malice. He sort of trusted her. He wanted, needed, to trust her because who else was there? They'd not seen another human since morning.

"You can name it," she said. "The arch is whatever you want it to be." She extended her hand like an invitation.

Mason studied the magnificent formation, too perfectly sculpted to be true but the truest thing he'd ever seen, and shuddered at his own smallness. He thought of Salvador Dali, melting clocks. Imagined God, the artist, and this the last stop to creation, a giant handle to the planet for easy carriage.

"I see…" he said, but the vision morphed, words vaporized. Mason felt the earth spinning on its axis. "A wedding band." That was it, not a handle. Presented from the land itself for an airy, ethereal finger. He turned to her. "You're not married?"

It was not exactly the question he intended, but intention had lost its legs that morning. He'd only intended to zip through Moab, a few hours plenty for the town's glut of tourist shops and motor lodges. He'd not intended to get turned around in a residential neighborhood, lose GPS, stop for directions at a teardrop trailer with hand-painted lettering advertising "Phantasmagorical Hiking Tours." He'd certainly not intended to get talked into an outing with the dimpled, amiable guide, who'd been fully verbal until she wasn't. At the outpost, she promised a moderate route, two hours max. He'd not known that once in the backcountry, she'd hike just far enough ahead to prevent conversation. All day, he saw only the nimble backside of a tomboy—erect carriage, strong calves, spindly arms, long dark hair tied in a low-slung ponytail. Her face became mysterious to him, and without countenance, without words, she seemed to him as the rabbit might to the greyhound. And so he'd experienced awe and dislocation all alone. If she'd magically disappeared as she had magically appeared that morning, he'd surely have died out here in this vast, otherworldly maze.

"Wrong," Saige said with wide and certain head shake. "Not a wedding band. It's a howling baby."

Again, the rock reshaped in front of him into the red lips of a mythical infant, its cry frozen in time. He saw his daughter Josie in her howling years, mouth wide and circular, a tunnel for unhappy noise. And now, a college freshman, unhappy still, just less vigorous about it. Mason felt unruly tears rise for his youngest, and turned his head away toward the titanic sandstone chess board to the south.

He'd had too much sun and strangeness. He needed sound, words, conversation. Unmoored, he smothered the space between them with babble. "You must be wondering what I'm doing way out here." His pale, submerged feet appeared magnified and alien in the translucent water. "In Utah. By myself." It was the wrong opening. As far as he could tell, she too was "way out here, in Utah. By herself."

"This is not my normal life. I'm a history teacher in Georgia—on sabbatical. Reward for thirty years. Unusual for high school teachers, sabbatical. But, there was a gift. Anonymous. I'm writing a book. A history of Western expansion geared for ninth graders. Or tenth." It hurt his soul to say it, this tired untruth. "I have a wife, two girls in college. I plan to travel for four months. Fifty-two years old, and I'd never been west of St. Louis until now. Liza's mom lives in Sarasota—we go there." He spoke quickly, urgently. "In September, I drove until I hit the Pacific Ocean. Spent two weeks in New Mexico, ten days in Colorado. I'm reading and retracing the nineteenth century writers and explorers of the West—Lewis and Clark, John Wesley Powell, John Muir…" He stopped. What he wanted to say was, *Who are you? What's happening?*

"Who are you?" he said. It was the kind of question Josie asked of strangers from her perch in the grocery cart back in her toddler years.

"I'm Saige. Hiking guide. But you knew that. I'm not married." A lizard, speckled in the exact reds, tans, and grays of its habitat, skittered across the rock. "Should I be?"

The arch reddened in the fading sun. He considered marriage and family—all it was and all it wasn't, and found himself confused, as though he'd never seen it really. Like the surface had changed, just as the arch had. He no longer recognized the form for what it was.

Mason thought of Liza, and of the anxious keen in her voice every time he called home. She saw the sabbatical for what it was—a gentle nudge from his school, where he'd been a fixture for decades, to get it together. She didn't understand why he was driving around by himself, looking at things thousands of miles away just to feed the ruse of research—he should be home, in her care, resting. And to be honest, he didn't understand either anymore. It struck him now that his failure to understand was hers. For thirty years, they'd been interchangeable—one mind, one soul, so that he no longer knew his own. And now, in a way, they'd become strangers, and he, a stranger to himself.

Saige turned, allowing him finally to see her fully. She, like the lizard, was a part of this place—her skin, her eyes, blended with the desert hues. Etched, smooth, rounded. Maybe Native American? Or Hispanic? Maybe just tan. He almost said it. *God, you're beautiful.* He wasn't that guy, never had been, loyal as a Labrador. But in this place, he didn't know who he was. Like anything that wasn't truth was a lie. "God, you're beautiful." Had he spoken aloud?

"What are you looking for?" she said, still as stone, staring into the mouth of the howling baby.

Mason pressed both hands against the ground. He pictured himself four months ago, a ragdoll in jacket and tie, sprawled on the floor of his attic office with a six-pack of beer and the yellowed pages of an essay on Emerson written by his twenty-year-old self while downstairs a hundred friends and family celebrated Josie's graduating class. Finding him, his older daughter Carrie captured the moment in an Instagram post. *My father's midlife crisis.* 348 likes, many his former students.

Mason gazed through the arch at the pastel, crenulated expanse beyond. All spring, the dead thing inside him had reared up and left him speechless. Literally. Each time he was shocked by exhaustion's capacity to bulldoze words, the very mechanism of meaning. Or was it simply *meaning* he'd lost the ability to make?

The cure, he sensed, was not rest, but its opposite. His wife and doctor disagreed. His girls were bewildered. His headmaster didn't care so long as Mason fixed it. And so Mason drove west, seeking something like the spirit of the grand men he retraced, the adventure and discovery, the purity of purpose, the shiny, new gifts of the open road. He often, almost jealously recalled kissing his wife before she was his wife, inflamed with delight and desire. He wanted delight and desire. He wanted the want that every man and woman wanted, startlingly universal and painfully specific.

Those were the good days. Sometimes, he wanted only to disappear far into the woods.

He looked to Saige, singular and free. *Liberation,* he almost said, but didn't.

Because really. Liberated from what? He was a history teacher for God's sake—he knew better than to throw around a word like that. He wasn't chained down or hemmed in. He was a privileged, home-owning, college-educated, able-bodied, salaried white man in America, chasing down dead white explorers, waxing nostalgic on dead, white Ralph Waldo Emerson, indulging his little, white mid-life crisis—he, who'd won the lottery. Well, maybe not *the* lottery, but *a* lottery. He'd been born well, then married better.

He dropped his forehead to his knee. "Liberation," he said, defeated.

Saige's gaze rolled over him, and he wondered if she could see it, the dead thing he wanted liberated from, like a tumor poking from the loose skin of his neck. Maybe she of the phantasmagorical hiking tours could diagnose because he couldn't. He knew only that he'd lived with it a long time, maybe all his life; it was

his birthright, alongside his lottery ticket. “Mostly though,” he said, “I’ve just been bored and lonesome.”

A jet stream appeared, intruding upon the pure blue.

Day began to fade. It happened quickly, the evening shadows diffusing into darkness, smear of desert glow to the west. “This is a loop, right?” Mason said. “I mean, how much longer?” The question felt like sacrilege here in this fantastic, barren wonderland of rock and sky, cacti and cottonwood.

“Loop?” Saige smiled. “No.” She reached for his wrist and wrapped her fingers around it as though to check for pulse. “When you came to the outpost this morning, I saw you.” She waited for his gaze. “And I thought, *Tethered*. Everything about you—your collared shirt naming you head coach at Hilltop Academy, your ironed shorts and needlepoint belt.” She studied the belt. “Ducks?”

Mason had no idea how needlepoint ducks came to be on his belt.

“Your grip on your phone and your rigid plan to leave Moab by noon, and I thought, this man needs some desert. You knew it too, or you wouldn’t have followed me all day like an obedient dog. I didn’t tell you about the three-person minimum.” She paused. “Or about the required forty-eight-hour advance booking.” Saige released his wrist and peered toward the disappearing sun. “Actually, it’s my day off. I’d only stopped in at the outpost to check messages.” She ran her fingers in circles over the sandstone at her side. “Also,” she continued, almost a whisper, “I switched routes after about a mile, jumping off-trail to take you here. It’s my favorite place. I hike it alone, maybe once a year. But it requires a sunrise start in order to finish before nightfall. We’ll hike back by moonlight.” She glanced at her daypack and then at the sky as though remembering something. “I’ve got a headlamp. I think.”

Alarm rang between Mason’s ears. He was not a tourist on a three-hour cruise. This was shipwreck. “I can’t make it back.” He pointed to his blistered feet.

“You can,” she said. She pulled her index finger through her hair, tugging at knots, and Mason saw Carrie, at ten, before her diva days, too busy at being a kid to bother with a hair brush. Saige must have been that way too, just never grew out of it, missed the imperative to brush, color, and curl. He tried to be angry, but when she turned to him, it seemed the stone of her was melting. It made him want to brush her hair.

“I live off the grid,” she said, “in a house made of tires and mud. I have three dogs and seven chickens.”

Nearby coyotes sounded in a reverberant, choral keen as though from within the arch. Mason stiffened. His head swiveled, looking for the source.

“I’m from Nebraska,” she continued. “I haven’t been back since I left at seventeen, and I don’t talk to my family.” She peered toward the red-rock valley beyond the arch. “I’ve slept with every cowboy, raft guide, and climber in this town. Free-spirited men, addicted to adrenalin, independent and untamed. Like me.”

Inside his small nod, Mason keened with the coyotes. Floundering inside Saige's confession, his wife's face blurred.

"You asked who I was," she continued, leaning toward him, the heat of her skin palpable. He breathed in the sandstone scent of her. "I'm your opposite. Untethered to the extreme. The wind could blow, and I'd disappear. And maybe today I needed to attach myself to something, someone, who wasn't going to blow away. Someone tethered. I hijacked you."

Hijacked.

The word pin-balled between his ears, and then to his body. Foot mostly. He yelped and pointed to his seized toes. "Cramp."

"Get up," she said. "Walk it out."

Mason jumped to his feet, limping and hooting until the cramp subsided, and he stood on warm sandstone in a final blaze of sunlight. Drawn toward the arch, he walked. Saige's warning—*Please don't step on the cryptogrammic soil*—played like a mantra in his head. Made him think of kryptonite and super powers and the profound irony of Clark Kent. Stopping at a sprawling patch of cacti, midway between Saige and the arch, Mason stood amazed at the brew inside him, the chaos and abundance. He was hijacked, terrified, tethered, lost and found. He was an old man, body and soul spent and broken; and he was a boy, full of juice and vigor. He was a husband and father. He was a man, unbound and singular. The parts clasped hands in his chest, and Mason felt something like a catch in his throat or an urge to sneeze. He opened his mouth, inhaled. He could howl, the primal cry of an infant, or a crazed fan, a man on fire.

He didn't. Mason Alexander, son of Atlanta, wasn't a yawper even though this day, this girl, this predicament, and the giant stone circle suspended against the purpling sky had worked on him. He was alive.

He turned. Saige stood watching him. Even from the distance, he could see the approving smile. Hiking guide? Spirit guide? She'd gifted him something of what he sought. As he walked back, Mason felt the plastic of his life had cracked, just a little, and the substance inside him spread kaleidoscopic freedom. He imagined, just for a moment, moving through Saige's house made of tires and mud, like a childhood fort. Perhaps their bodies would attach in one room, then the next, dogs watching in approval of so much tethering and so much liberation.

With a rough pat to the arm, she said, "I hope you like dogs."

Heat flushed into his inner ears. Was he standing at the edge? He heard the anxiety in Liza's voice, felt his own hesitation at every refilled tank and new, remote destination—Creed, Chinle, Bluff, Chimayo, Badwater. So many miles. So much big sky, big land. Did it come to this, a point of no return? A threshold and an abyss.

Saige stepped away and reached for her pack. It was nearly night now. The last of the day's sun glowed upon the searing arch, and he could feel the temperature

dropping with daylight's remove. He sat back down and picked up his stiffened, gritty socks.

Wordlessly, Saige performed first aid on his blisters, covering them with a magic combination of ointment, padding, and tape. Removing a small pump from her pack, she treated the water from the sinkhole, refilling their bottles. She gave him a homemade bar to eat, made of ingredients dense, sticky, and mysterious. He chewed slowly, unsure whether divine or rotten. Ministrations complete, they stood. She cinched her pack, checked the ground for evidence of their trespass. Facing Mason, almost an afterthought, Saige looped her finger around his needlepoint belt, tugging him toward her in something like a body-bump. She smelled like sun and sand.

Mason managed one foot in front of the other on ruined feet and desire of yore, following his guide into the fading light toward the game board of formations, where they wandered in the gaps between queens, bishops, rooks, and pawns. He had no sense for direction, time and space lost to him. He was sure only that this was not the direction they'd come.

Only when the cold night turned black, did he ask, "Is this the way?"

She slowed but didn't answer.

"Saige?"

"I thought we might find a shortcut. Possibly a road out beyond."

"Possibly?" he said.

She stopped, rotated slowly around like a spinning figurine. A touch of fear illuminated her solemn countenance under flickering headlamp. "There generally is. I mean, a road. Somewhere. I'm not worried."

They continued, and already Mason found himself replaying the hard-earned arrival, the silent yawp and crack of plastic, the tug at his belt, the certainty of his own living blood. These images, like the thinly crusted cryptogrammic soil, were fragile, and essential. He relived it all, working to recreate the explosion in his chest, as one does with things past.

Because really, the present was a different planet, too strange and frightening to comprehend. The formations seemed to move, dark pieces sliding in Mason's vision. And worse, they seemed to grow, dwarfing the two lone stick figures, toys to the pawns.

Perhaps to stave off panic, Saige chattered frenetically, sharp contrast to her earlier silence. The monologue began with a bear. Mason tried to follow, absorbing her story impressionistically. She'd been a child, hiking with her grandfather in the Tetons, near such-and-such lake, when they came upon a grizzly, big as a shed. Hair blonde and matted, but dark in the face, eyes wide, startled, agitated, like, "Who the hell are you, and why are you in my house?" She thought they were done for—she was still a child after all, and feared things like lions and tigers and bears. But Saige's grandfather, unafraid, stood tall and proud, roaring at the beast until at last it shrugged its mighty shoulders and bolted.

They'd gone there every summer, the two of them, making the long drive across the Midwest into the Rockies. Her grandfather had been 10th Mountain Division, stationed in Colorado before fighting in the Alps. Never got altitude out of his system. He'd tell Saige if he hadn't had a wife and baby in the cornfields waiting on him after the war, he'd have made a life out west, a life that made sense.

Mason tried to think about this—*a life that made sense*.

"He died of old age and disappointment," she said.

"That's why you're here?" Mason said. "Living this way?"

"Maybe. But that's not the point. The point is the bear. And my grandfather's courage."

In some part of his brain, Mason heard her, was with her, but his mind was off the rails, spiraling also into thoughts of grandfathers, of being one, which led him to think about Josie, who sobbed into his chest outside her dorm when they dropped her off, and Carrie whom he knew these days more by the party pics on social media than he did by conversation. And Liza, whose face came sharply back into focus, even in the darkness.

"To stare down the bear. To roar. That's what I want." Saige swung her head toward him, the headlamp blinding. "No regrets."

Mason knew this was for him. A parable. *Liberation*. And yet, all at once, Mason felt terribly sad, for Saige, for himself, for his daughters and unborn grandchildren, because he knew—fifty-two years on the planet, sharing life and showing up—the roar wasn't sustainable. Stare down the bear, and still a trail of thick leaves littered the path, the detritus of life and love.

In his mind, images flashed of Georgia in fall, deciduous trees, winter coming, the black gum in their yard whose crimson turning he'd missed for the first time in decades. He pictured the overstuffed sofa where he'd curled up with his wife and daughters for a million Disney movies and reruns of *X-Files* and *Friends*. The drawer under the TV where for twenty-five years, they'd stored playing cards, spare batteries, rubber bands, loose dice. He remembered his girls as howling newborns. His life—prescribed and tethered, inevitable and abundant.

Fate allowing—a road, a trailhead, Search and Rescue—he and Saige would return to safety, and he might be invited to bed with his unfettered hiking guide. The landscape of his life would morph. Giant handle, wedding ring, howling baby. He would be liberated, and devastated.

Or, fate allowing, he would drive to the nearest motel, and at sunrise begin the 1800-mile journey home with only blisters to show for himself, tumor and lottery ticket tucked safely in the glove box. Devastated. Liberated.

Saige stopped and turned abruptly so that Mason walked into her, hands landing on her waist. She stepped inside the accidental embrace, and they stood, stone-still, in the night, a formation unto themselves. Moonlight glowed on the vast sandstone wonderland.

"We're lost," Mason said.

She nodded, her head nestled under his neck, and he held her like he would his daughters. She was not a spirit guide, not even a hiking guide, not now. She'd delivered him—yes—but only so far. Only here, which was nowhere.

Stars swirled in the black night sky, beautiful and terrifying.

About Charlotte Lit

Charlotte Center for Literary Arts, Inc., is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 2015 by writers Kathie Collins and Paul Reali, with studios located in the heart of North Carolina's largest city. Charlotte Lit's mission is to celebrate the literary arts by educating and engaging writers and readers through classes, conversations, and community. Our programming includes:

- 100+ classes annually, half of them free, led by talented writing teachers from the Charlotte area and across the state and nation.
- Three class formats: in-person, online, and asynchronous.
- Year-long immersions: Authors Lab for novelists and memoirists, Chapbook Lab for poets, and (forthcoming) Chapbook Lab for short story writers and personal essayists.
- Event that put published authors in conversation with community members: 4X4CLT Poetry+Art Poster Series (2016-2022), Poetry Nightclub (quarterly beginning 2022), and the long-running Community Conversations series.
- Multi-event initiatives: Carson McCullers at 100 (2017), Beautiful Truth (2019), and Artists Reckoning with Home (2022).
- The Lit/South Awards and the accompanying publication, *Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit.*

In our first seven years, Charlotte Lit has hosted readings and master classes with many literary stars, including Joseph Bathanti, Sandra Beasley, Erin Belieu, Reginald Dwayne Betts, Laure-Anne Bosselaar, Nickole Brown, Gabrielle Calvocoressi, Wiley Cash, Jennifer Chang, Chen Chen, Morri Creech, Tyree Daye, Stuart Dischell, Melissa Febos, Beth Ann Fennelly, Richard Garcia, Judy Goldman, Jaki Shelton Green, Christine Hale, Lola Haskins, Terrance Hayes, Dustin M. Hoffman, Jessica Jacobs, A. Van Jordan, Ada Limón, Maurice Manning, Matthew Olzmann, Cecily Parks, Ron Rash, Paul Tran, and our very first guest, Linda Pastan.

You can learn more about Charlotte Lit and find your way to becoming part of our community at charlottelit.org.

Contributors

Suzanne Adams lives in Charlotte, NC, near family, friends, and good writers. She's a former actor, director, teacher, and forest health activist, now writing in hopes of justifying that degree in English from Stanford and Master's from Northwestern. Her stories have won prizes in the Elizabeth Simpson Smith Short Story Contests and have been published by *Memoirs Ink*, *Minerva Rising*, and *Main Street Rag*.

Susan Alff, now of Maryland, lived in North Carolina for nearly 40 years, where she worked in independent bookstores and raised a son. She has been published in *Wraparound South, Flying South*, and *Pinesong*. Her poem "Piecework" won the North Carolina Poetry Society's 2021 Poet Laureate award.

Rachel Baiman is a musician and writer based in Nashville, TN. Her music has been featured in NPR, Vice's *NOISEY*, and *The Chicago Tribune*, among many other outlets. She is currently on tour in support of her new album *Common Nation of Sorrow*. Her credits include fiddle, and string work for Kacey Musgraves, Amy Ray, Kevin Morby, Molly Tuttle, Kelsey Waldon, and others.

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Nikki Campo is an essay and humor writer with a business education. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times, Brevity blog, The Washington Post, Good Housekeeping, Bon Appetit, National Geographic, McSweeney's Internet Tendency,* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. One of her essays took first prize in the Charlotte Writers Club 2019-20 Nonfiction Contest. Though the Midwest still feels most like home, she lives in Charlotte, NC, with her husband, three young children and a dog named Turtle. Online: nikkicampo.com.

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Bryn Chancellor is the author of the novel *Sycamore* (Harper/HarperCollins, 2017), a Southwest Book of the Year, an Indie Next and Library Reads pick, an Amazon Editors' Best Book of 2017, and among *Bustle*'s Best Debuts of 2017; and of the story collection *When Are You Coming Home?* (University of Nebraska Press, 2015), winner of the Raz/Schumaker Prairie Schooner Book Prize. New fiction is out in *The Southern Review* and forthcoming in *Ecotone* and *Cimarron Review*, and previous work has appeared in *Brevity*, *Colorado Review, Gulf Coast,* and elsewhere. A native of California raised in Arizona and transplanted to the South, she is a grateful recipient of fellowships from the Arizona, Alabama, and North Carolina arts councils and the Poets and Writers Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award in fiction. A graduate of Vanderbilt University's MFA. program, she makes her home in Charlotte, NC, with artist Timothy Winkler, and teaches at UNC Charlotte.

Tess Congo's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Publisher's Weekly*, *PANK*, *Curlew Quarterly*, *Bowery Gothic*, *Stone Pacific Zine*, *Luna Luna Magazine*, *Solar Journal*, *Thimble Lit*, and the anthology *Ripe* (Afterword Books). Tess has previously received a scholarship from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and recently earned her MFA in Poetry at Hunter College.

Jeannetta Craigwell-Graham is a Caribbean/African-American writer based in Ebeltoft, Denmark. She was a 2021 Tin House Winter Workshop Scholar. Her writing has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *X-R-A-Y Magazine*, NY Writers Coalition's *Black Writers Program*, *Andika Ma*, and in an Owl Canyon Press anthology. Jeannetta is also the co-host/producer of The Write Attention podcast. She writes stories which use horror themes to explore the harsh realities of being other and is currently working on a novel trilogy incorporating family history and African Diaspora folklore.

Claudia Crook is a writer, educator, and restaurant server based in Wilmington, NC. She holds a BA in Media Studies and French from Pomona College and an MFA in Creative Writing - Nonfiction from The University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Her personal essays have been published in conjunction with the World Nomads Travel Writing Scholarship, and she has appeared on the editorial masthead at *Off Assignment*, *The Paris Review*, and *Harper's Magazine*. This is her first publication of poetry.

Joanne Durham is the author of *To Drink from a Wider Bowl,* winner of the Sinclair Poetry Prize (Evening Street Press, 2022), and *On Shifting Shoals* (Kelsay Books, 2023). Her poems appear or are forthcoming in *Poetry South* (2022 Pushcart Nomination), *NC Literary Review* (James Applewhite Prize Semi-Finalist), *Poetry East, Dodging the Rain, Whale Road Review, The Inflectionist Review,* and many other journals and anthologies. She lives on the North Carolina coast, with the ocean as her backyard and muse. Online: joannedurham.com.

Melissa Febos is the bestselling author of four books, including *Girlhood*—LAMBDA Award finalist and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism, and *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*. Her fifth book, *The Dry Season*, is forthcoming from Knopf. Her awards and fellowships include those from the Guggenheim Foundation, LAMBDA Literary, the National Endowment for the Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The British Library, the Black Mountain Institute, MacDowell, the Bogliasco Foundation, Vermont Studio Center, and others. Her work has recently appeared in *The Paris Review, The Sun, The New York Times Magazine, Kenyon Review, The Best American Essays, Vogue,* and *New York Review of Books*. Febos is an associate professor at the University of Iowa and lives in Iowa City with her wife, the poet Donika Kelly.

Janet Ford lives in the Brushy Mountains of western North Carolina. The recipient of the 2017 Guy Owen Prize from *Southern Poetry Review*, her poems have appeared in *The North Carolina Literary Review Online*, *Poetry East*, and *Caesura* among other publications. She received the 2022 Margaret Laughter Myers Residency Fellowship Award, and her work has twice been featured in the North Carolina Poetry Society's Poetry in Plain Sight.

Elizabeth Cranford Garcia's most recent work has or will soon appear in *Tar River Poetry, Portland Review*, *CALYX*, *Chautauqua, Tinderbox Poetry*, and *Anti-Heroin Chic,* is the recipient of the 2022 Banyan Poetry Prize, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She is the author of *Stunt Double* and serves as the current poetry editor for *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. Online: elizabethcgarcia.wordpress.com.

Bill Griffin is a naturalist and retired family doctor who lives in rural North Carolina. His poetry has appeared in *NC Literary Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. Bill has published six collections including *Snake Den Ridge, a Bestiary* (March Street Press, 2008), illustrated by Linda French Griffin, and *Riverstory: Treestory* (The Orchard Street Press, 2018). *How We All Fly* arrives from Orchard Street Press in 2023. Bill features Southern poets, nature photography, and microessays at his blog: Griffin.Poetry.com.

Heather Hahn is a Fulbright Scholar whose writing and teaching often explores place, identity, and liminality. She has been a tenured philosophy professor at a women's liberal arts college, an English professor at an HBCU, and a professor of comparative literature in Mainz and Aachen, Germany. Just as her practice of martial arts has given way to yoga, her academic writing has folded itself into creative non-fiction and the first novel she is finishing now. Heather is equal parts Rust Belt childhood and Sun Belt parenthood (daughter Naomi), grateful to have landed with her husband Chip in Charlotte, NC.

Arielle Hebert is a queer poet based in North Carolina with roots in Florida and Louisiana. She holds an MFA in poetry from North Carolina State University. Her work has appeared in *Great River Review*, *Nimrod*, *Willow Springs*, and *Redivider*, among other places. She was a finalist for the 2022 Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize and a finalist for the 2021 Pink Poetry Prize. She won the 2020 Claire Keyes Poetry Prize judged by Erika Meitner and the 2019 North Carolina State University Poetry Contest judged by Ada Limón. Arielle believes in ghosts and magic. Online: ariellehebert.com.

Paul Jones is no longer a person of interest according to several three letter agencies. This despite his having had a manuscript of poems crash into the moon's surface in 2019 carried by Israel's Beresheet Lander. In the fall of 2021, Jones was inducted into the NC State Computer Science Hall of Fame. His book *Something Wonderful* was published by Redhawk Press in 2021. Recently, Jones has published poems in *Hudson Review, Tar River Poetry,* and *NC Literary Review,* as well as in anthologies including *Best American Erotic Poems (1800-Present).* Online: smalljones.com.

A. Van Jordan is the author of four collections: *Rise*, which won the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Award (Tia Chucha Press, 2001); *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A* (2005), which was listed as one the Best Books of 2005 by *The London Times; Quantum Lyrics* (2007); and *The Cineaste* (2013, W.W. Norton & Co). Jordan has been awarded a Whiting Writers Award, an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and a Pushcart Prize. He is also a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship (2007), a United States Artists Fellowship (2009), and a Lannan Literary Award in Poetry (2015). His forthcoming book, *When I Waked, I Cried to Dream Again*, will be released in June of 2023 (W.W. Norton & Co). He served as the Robert Hayden Collegiate Professor of English Literature at The University of Michigan, and he is currently a Professor in the Department of English at Stanford University.

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Elisabeth Murawski is the author of *Heiress, Zorba's Daughter,* which won the May Swenson Poetry Award, *Moon and Mercury*, and three chapbooks. *Still Life with Timex* won the Robert Phillips Poetry Chapbook Prize. A native of Chicago, she currently lives in Alexandria, VA.

Fred Pond lives in Concord, NC. He has rarely published, always written. A finalist in last year's contest, he makes a second appearance in *Litmosphere* this year. Poems and prose have appeared previously in *The Puritan*, *Meat For Tea: A Valley Review*, *The Lindenwood Review*, *Prometheus Dreaming*, *Kakalak 2022*, and elsewhere. He earned a BA from Grinnell College, an MSN from Yale University School of Nursing, and an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte. After 35 years spent in nursing, most of that in the U.S. Army, he is now retired.

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Brooke Shaffner's novel *Country of Under* was the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction runner-up and a finalist for Dzanc Books Prize for Fiction, Black Lawrence Press's Big Moose Prize, and Mason Jar Press's ongoing 1729 Book Prize. An excerpt won the Asheville Writers' Workshop Fiction Contest. She's been published in *The Hudson Review*, *Lost and Found: Stories from New York*, *Marie Claire, BOMB*, and *The Lit Pub*. She's received grants from United States Artists and the Saltonstall Foundation, and residencies from MacDowell, Ucross, Saltonstall, Edward Albee, Jentel, I-Park, and VCCA-France. Brooke founded betweenthelines.biz and is co-creating Freedom Tunnel Press (freedomtunnel.press).

Maureen Sherbondy's latest book is *Lines in Opposition*. Her work has appeared in *Litro, Harpur Palate, Calyx, Southern Humanities Review*, and other journals. Maureen lives in Durham, NC. Online: maureensherbondy.com.

Melissa Scott Sinclair is a fiction writer, essayist, and award-winning journalist. Melissa's bylines have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Richmond Magazine*, *Style Weekly*, and *The Virginian-Pilot*. Work is forthcoming in *Audubon* and in *Wild Life*, a book from Atlas Obscura. In 2021, she was awarded the Michael Kenneth Smith Novel Fellowship. She's currently revising a novel, *Collie*. She lives with her family in Richmond, VA, where she spends summers raising gray tree frogs.

Katherine Soniat's eighth collection of poems is *Polishing the Glass Storm* (LSU Press, 2022). Her ninth collection, *Starfish Wash-up,* is forthcoming from Etruscan Press in 2023. *The Goodbye Animals* was awarded the Turtle Island Chapbook Prize (2014); *A Shared Life* won the University of Iowa Poetry Prize; *The Swing Girl* (LSU Press) was selected as Best Collection of 2011 by the North Carolina Poetry Council; and *Notes of Departure* was selected for The Camden Poetry Prize by the Walt Whitman Center for the Arts & Humanities. She has been on the faculty at Hollins University and Virginia Tech. Poems have appeared in the *Hotel Amerika, Denver Quarterly, Women's Review of Books, Iowa Review, Poetry Magazine, Superstition Review, The Nation, Tiferet,* and *The New Republic,* among others.

Rhett Iseman Trull's poetry collection, *The Real Warnings* (Anhinga Press, 2009), won the Devil's Kitchen Reading Award, the Brockman-Campbell Award, and the Oscar Arnold Young Award, and was nominated for a Poets' Prize. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *32 Poems*, *American Poetry Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Image*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere. She is the editor of *Cave Wall* and president of the Nina Riggs Poetry Foundation.

Judith Turner-Yamamoto's debut novel, *Loving the Dead and Gone*, Petrichor Prize finalist, has been acclaimed by *Publishers Weekly* as "bittersweet and fantastical" and by *Foreword Reviews* as "moving and insightful." Published in more than thirty journals and anthologies, her many awards include an Ohio Arts Council fellowship, Virginia Arts Commission fellowships, the Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize, the Washington Prize for Fiction, and the Virginia Screenwriting Award. Her interviews have been featured on NPR affiliate WVXU, and her work has appeared in *The Boston Globe Magazine, Elle, Interiors, Art & Antiques, The Los Angeles Times, Travel & Leisure*, and many others.

Marcus Wicker is the author of *Silencer* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)—winner of the Society of Midland Authors Award—and *Maybe the Saddest Thing* (Harper Perennial, 2012), selected by D.A. Powell for the National Poetry Series. He is the recipient of a 2021 National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, 2011 Ruth Lilly Fellowship, as well as fellowships from The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and Cave Canem. Marcus is Poetry Editor of *Southern Indiana Review*, and an associate professor at the University of Memphis, where he teaches in the MFA program.

Leslie Williams is the author, most recently, of *Even the Dark.* Her work has appeared in *Poetry, The Southern Review, Shenandoah, Image, Kenyon Review, America*, and elsewhere. Born and raised in North Carolina, she now lives near Boston.

Janna Zonder writes and performs musical comedy with her husband and creative partner, Stu. Her short story "Who Kills The Bugs For the Dalai Lama?" won third place in the inaugural Lit/South Awards and appeared in the first issue of *Litmosphere*. She was awarded a residency by the Pat Conroy Literary Center in Spring 2022. Her first novel, *Magenta Rave*, is a fast-paced story of revenge against sexual predators. She is currently at work on a screenplay based on that novel. She is also nearing completion of her second novel, *The Phenomenon's Daughter*, a coming-of-age story set in 1950s Georgia. Janna is from Marietta, GA.

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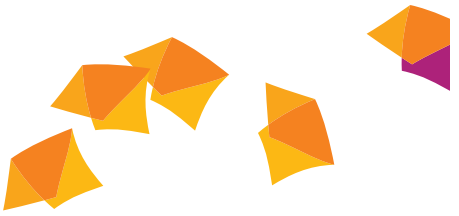
Fiction by Bryn Chancellor • Cathy Rigg Monetti • Jeannetta Craigwell-Graham • Judith Turner-Yamamoto • Katie McDougall • Melisssa Scott Sinclair • Michael Sadoff

Nonfiction by Brooke Shaffner • Heather Hahn • Janna Zonder • Melissa Febos • Nikki Campo • Rachel Baiman • Suzanne Adams



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