# The Lindenwood Review

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# The Lindenwood Review

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# Creative Nonfiction

Carolyn Decker

# Five Auguries

*An Essay on Navigating Cancer*

## 1. The Mourning Dove

The dawn after the diagnosis, when your fiancé hops on the first flight west to his mother and his boyhood home, you will know two things. First, that the CT scan showed four inoperable masses, and second, that everything is about to change. When your search for wisdom in the haze above the airport reveals nothing more, listen to the mourning dove. This is a bird with a message. She is an augury, or perhaps an augur herself. Her soothsaying comes in the way she holds her distance on the power line. Listen for the urgency in her feathers, the muted coo before the sudden take-off. Notice how she does not yet fly.

And don't fall for the obvious symbolism. No mourning yet—your role is to support. The task at hand is to load up the car with a summer's worth of stuff and drive three days with the cat perched on the center console. As you pack, the cat will watch the mourning dove through the kitchen window, green eyes trained on the dove's black beads, bloodthirsty. Think about death as much as you must, but don't ask anybody those questions.

## 2. The Sandhill Crane

You will see a pair of sandhills browsing in the roadside ditch when you first arrive. You don't know them well, but you love people who love them. The ditches are thick with daisies, sedges, rushes, grass-pinks. The cranes will simply go about their business, eating whatever it is that they eat. In the art of auguring, cranes symbolize immortality and good fortune, but they fly with their necks outstretched against the sharp blade of sunset.

When you drive by these marshes again, you will see mute swans and their young ones wading through the duckweed and pond lily. When prompted, you will teach your mother-in-law-to-be the term *cygnets,* then think to yourself that swans do not technically belong here. You will realize you don't know what young sandhill cranes are called. She wonders aloud if she will ever hold another baby. With a catch in your throat, you will silently entertain plans to move here permanently. You imagine generations of cranes returning again and again to the marsh.

3. The Great Horned Owl

You will not hear the nighttime call of the great horned owl with the fan running in the RV. That honor will be reserved for her aging chihuahua who—so you are told—hoots back to the owl in a special tone of voice. Take comfort that such a large aerial predator is ready in the woods, can act as a spirit guide if the ambulance can't come quick enough.

Sleeping in the RV it will be hot. The fan will not keep the mosquitos off you, but you will tolerate the bites as a way of absorbing some of the pain, though the raised pink envenomated bumps will do nothing about the size of the masses in his mother's lungs. One night, the stent holding open her airway will migrate into her throat. You will bargain with God to trade nine years of your life for hers. In a terrible fit, and a deep heave, she will cough up the stent like an owl pellet.

4. The Cliff Swallows

The cliff swallows are for you. They're for themselves, but symbolically you can claim them as companions. You inked their image into your skin when you longed most for independence, envied and emulated their daring migrations. You will find them first when you walk down to the river alone. Their clay and concrete nests under the bridge are bursting with the unseen mouths of swallow chicks. Each swallow is devouring scores of mosquitos, which you are allowed to relish. Each one of you is a conglomeration of cells killing and eating and creating more cells.

The swallows will peep to one another. You will count pairs—perhaps thirty—unsure you're double counting as they swoop and dart amongst

each other. Their purplish glossy backs are sleek like the varnish coating you paint on the ironwood poles at the make-your-own-walking-stick workshop. The three of you will each decorate different designs. You will paint a pair of bloodroots—he carves a river otter. She brands warrior in bold text, and if you look at just the right moment, you will see the upturned flight feathers of a smile, the rise and fall of a breath.

5. The Four-Toed Salamander

This one is not a bird. Not all auguries are. You will find two four-toed salamanders under logs in the backyard forest you will someday steward. Steady yourself for the big conversation with your own mother, trust that she will understand, that you will still visit, that you can be happy here. Ask yourself if salamanders—whose entire lives play out in these few acres—think this much about uncertainties. Tell your fiancé about your findings and be glad when his reaction is a vow—to tread lightly among the hummocks of sphagnum moss where the four-toeds communally nest. You have helped him care about someone he didn't know lived in his boyhood woods.

Let it go when the gravity of the moment you shaved her head dissipates because her hair grew back enough for her own daughter to re-shave it over the weekend. You will bond over making the wedding guest list, in brainstorming ways to transplant the hostas and the trumpet honeysuckle. Keep it to yourself that you have your own garden ideas, your own dreams for the family, the forest, the unfortellable future. You have time to transform, to talk about it. The masses are still there, but smaller, and the cough is less. The salamanders are out there, hidden, little known to the birds.

Sarah C. Baldwin

# I Remember Now the Ecstasy of Being Saved

Somewhere out there Patty Hearst is robbing banks in her crocheted beret but I'm not thinking about her, I'm in the apple tree at the far end of our yard, the one where my father has made a treehouse out of two-by-fours and a plywood sheet. I'm barefoot on the plywood, high off the ground, but I want to climb higher, up into the branches. I take a step forward and before I can take it back I see the nail, crusty with rust, poking up out of a loose scrap of wood. I watch as my small bony foot covers it, as the rusty nail tip pops through the pale skin of my long second toe. I stare at the toe, at the nail that has punctured it. I feel my scalp tighten. And I hear, rising from my chest, an endless, stretched, insistent scream, then another, then a stream of identical screams, lavish in their rise and fall, screams so urgent and keen they propel themselves up the long backyard and through the screen door and into the kitchen and my mother's ear. And suddenly she is a small shape running toward me with abandon, my mother who does nothing with abandon, running so fast her Peter Pan collar lifts in the wind, pushing at the air with her elbows as she runs, holding me in her eyes as she runs, quickly becoming life-size until there she is at the foot of the tree, reaching overhead with both forearms, slapping at the platform until her right hand blindly grasps the two-by-four that she can't see is connected to the nail that's connected to my toe, and she tries to hoist herself up with it but my toe is not strong enough to moor her and she falls back, her backward fall the pendulum reply to her earlier upward rush, and she drags the piece of wood as she falls, thudding onto her back, and from the grass she looks up at me wildly, wheezing *I'm sorry I'm sorry* but I'm sobbing *Thank you thank you thank you thank you* because I know, even in the violent chaotic heave of the moment, that she has found the only painless way to free the nail from my toe and because, for those long screaming moments, I had filled her eyes, I had been all that mattered.

Kayla Jessop

# About a Catch

My father stands in the manicured grass on the side of the house in which I live and he visits. A Newport hangs from the corner of his mouth as he empties his calloused, paint-spotted hands of a bucket of fresh baseballs and two mitts: one small, pink, and one large, brown—all we need for a simple game of catch. He takes a long drag and coughs. He repeats this drag-cough routine as he stretches the mitt meant for me and puts it on my hand. "This way it fits like a glove," he says, as the cigarette in the corner of his mouth bounces with each syllable. He does the same for his mitt and then punches his left fist into the center of it. Flicking the cigarette into the yard, he explains: "It's simple: I throw, you catch, and throw it back to me."

I run to the end of the house, face him and punch the palm of my glove as he did to his.

This is the first time I have seen my father in days. "At a doctor," my grandmother—his mother—had said each time I asked where he'd been and why he hadn't visited me recently. He looked happy when he came home—clean, buzzed brown hair, blue eyes, smiling. My father never smiled.

But he loved sports, especially baseball. I hate anything regarding dirt and sweat. He always said how much he wished I was born a boy so he could have someone to "throw a ball around with," and yet, here we are. At ten years old, I'm not opposed to playing outside, but I'm not too thrilled to get dirt under my nails either. I only agreed to play after seeing the glove.

We start off simple, close together, tossing it back and forth; then we go further apart, throwing the ball a greater distance. After rounds of learning underhand throws, we take a short break, sitting in the grass, bodies pressed close together. At 25, my father looks like a boy: short and thin, a single strand of hair on his upper lip that glistens on his cherubic face; as if, when I was born, he stopped aging—stuck in a fifteen-year-old's adolescent body. I watch my father take large sips from his gas station cup, my mouth watering with each glimpse.

"Can I have a sip of that?" I say.

"No. Go get a drink from in the house," he says, scooting closer to me.

"But why not? I'm thirsty."

"Because this is an adult drink. Kids can't drink it," he takes a long gulp from the cup as he positions himself on his knees, faces me, and puts his nose to mine, beginning our game of noses. A game we played on his good days.

"What's an adult drink?"

A sweet odor escapes from his lips: "A drink for adults."

The game ends as I scoot away from him, disappointed in his answer.

I don't press the conversation anymore because instinctively, I know it isn't my business. Then, our conversation is simple: How was school? How was the doctor? What is your grandmother making for dinner tonight? Our conversations are always this way, not only because of my young age but because my father doesn't know how to talk to kids as my grandmother would say. His "grown-up talk" always received lectures from his mother.

He stands, lights and puts another cigarette to his lips, gulps more of his drink, and throws the ball as the smoke makes his eyes squint. The throws became harder and higher, and when I couldn't—or maybe just didn't want to catch the ball—my father would laugh. The more I didn't catch the ball, the more he would laugh.

For all of my life, I have been used to seeing my father cry. He is the type of man one would call "sensitive," but he doesn't like to be referred to as such. He cries over everything, but more specifically when apologizing for his mistakes: constant stints in jail, then rehab, then disappearing, only to repeat the cycle. As a child, I didn't understand what it meant to be so apologetic for everything. Later in life, I find myself apologizing for everything and anything. I too would grow up to be sensitive.

As the day came to an end, he would get sloppy throwing the ball and would give me a black eye. But right now, he takes another drag of the cigarette, throws the ball, and it lands right in my mitt.

# March Past

I stand in front of six hundred kids on a parade square, in an air force base in Greenwood, Nova Scotia. I'm a kid myself. Maybe fourteen; plain, starched, and over-confident. A statuette. A girl in blue. It's air cadet camp graduation day, and it's thirty-eight degrees. I am the deputy parade commander and a goddamned star.

*Wing, At-ten-tion!*

Wing complies. Knees lift, fists form, elbows lock and a single glorious stomp echoes around the world. Palm fronds tremble, cows low and dictators weep. They hear me in France. They see me from the moon. Officers smile. They puff their chests. These brassed men and bunned women. Soldiers with pins in their wrists and melted ears and burnt hearts. At breakfast one had whispered in my ear: *you. are. good.*

My parents aren't here to watch. They are moving from Nova Scotia to New Brunswick. They've bought an inn surrounded by marshland and mud. A Victorian horror, with ancient beds and hidden walls and tired staff. They've bought a dream. I'm commanding one.

*Wing, Right, Dress.*

Wing complies. Heads turn, arms lift, boots shuffle. Wing makes beautiful lines. Like grown-ups. Like pros. It is unusual, this synchronicity. Because these kids are not the same. Some are short. Some are giants. All legs or limbs or lips. Some are poor. Some are hurt. Some are here as punishment. Kids caught stealing, smoking, or skipping school. Sleeping around. Some know French, play football, sew clothes. Cadets is free. Anyone can join. Anyone can learn to march, or polish a boot. Anyone can learn to fly. Anyone can learn to be good.

My bedroom is gone. It's in a U-Haul somewhere. Along with my skateboard. My report cards and ribbons. Badges. Medals. Trophies. My love notes and autographs. Playbills. Gold-bordered certificates. All bits of happiness. Proof that I exist. Proof that I am in fact, *good.*

I imagine my parents pulling into a Big Stop, fueling up, cooling down with a cold drink, a wobbly piece of pie and then continuing on, unable to see me in the rearview mirror, unable to hear my enunciation, the sharpness in my voice. The conviction of my commands, my perfect pitch. The sounds of how good I am.

*Eyes, Front.*

Wing stares straight ahead. All of us focused and in line. Starting lines. Adulthood is a Shakespeare essay and an airstrip away. A first kiss, a first kill, a first trip overseas. First year university. An apartment for one. I let that knowledge sink in. The end of camp, the end of summer, the near end of childhood. No more lip-syncing or drinking from hoses. No more mandatory gym classes, slam books, love notes, parties in the woods. No more building something from nothing, day dreaming, believing we can be somebody. Believing we are good.

My parents have probably made it to New Brunswick by now. Parked next door in the driveway of the yellow house with the red pane glass in the door. They will choose my room for me, stack boxes in corners. Leave my skateboard in the mudroom, put away winter coats. I imagine they'll walk the property, talk to the staff, fix kinks in carpets, sweep crumbs and empty ashtrays. The restaurant will be closed now but they will consult with the chef. They'll ask about the night's special and I will reply, *I'm right here!*

*Wing will march past in column of route. Move to the right in column of route. Right, Turn.*

There's only time to breathe, to squint through the heat haze that's turning everything into blurs. Podiums, politicians, flags, memories.

In New Brunswick a train behind the marsh will blast its whistle three times, lifting my parents' hair, blowing up their sleeve cuffs, drowning me out.

*By the Centre, Quick-March!*

I step-off. Eighty-five centimeters, then adjust to seventy-five, one hundred twenty beats per minute, arms swinging at ninety degrees, spine tall, heart full. I am leading the parade, the wing, a kid in command. With each boom of the base drum, each toss of the mace, each nod of approval, I believe I can fly. That I am good and will be in perpetuity because there will be more parades and they will always need commanders.

I want to march to New Brunswick. With my wing. All six hundred birds. We will crowd into the parking lot of the inn, fill every square foot, every inch of crumbling pavement. The band will play something grand and my parents will clap. They will know I'm good.

*Wing, Eyes, Right.*

The march past. I call the command. I salute. I have a perfect salute. How many times did I practice in the mirror? Checking the placement of my thumb, my fingertips, the stretch of my hand, the bend of arm, the angle. All eyes are on me. Not the cadets' eyes, but the dignitaries. The people that matter. The bigwigs, the brass, the local businessmen. The valley reporter. Behold the deputy wing commander, the girl, the future.

But my parents don't see. They are lost among bulrushes and chives and white sheets on the line. They are lost in a beginning and the parade is almost over.

*Wing, Halt.*

It is hotter now. Kids have been standing for hours. Cadets sway, sweat, faint. Medics and warrant officers lead them away and I leave my post, my parade duty finished. All that's left is for me to return to the back of the line. The rear. Alone. Where no one can see me. The last time I am *good.*

Meghan E. O'Toole

# Do You Remember That Time on the Road?

We ate Ritz crackers with cheese and blood-red jam almost every night one summer we travelled. Rain pinged the top of the station wagon. I slept in a tank top. You sometimes checked my forehead for a fever with both sides of your hand before pressing each palm against my pink pink cheeks. We parked at rest stops in the open palm of the great plains for the night, and it is still the best I have ever slept.

I can describe the kind of missing as homesickness. The only person on earth who understands the gravity of this loss is you.

In California, I almost told you I loved you while we ate, that time we had to stop driving because I couldn't stop crying. You fed me crackers, then, too, topped them with cheese and jam yourself. I ate through breath-heavy sobs, choking on the sandy crumbs. I could taste my tears. I strained my eyes to read the printed signs where we pulled over: *Do not feed the cats*. And sure enough, here was one now, white tail like the open end of a quote. You bent down and reached the pale half-moons of your fingernails. The cat darted away. Yards across the parking lot, a stranger moved through tai chi under the sharp fluorescence of a streetlamp, and you said, "That guy creeps me out," and I shut my mouth because "I love you" didn't fit in this scene. Instead, I waited for you to dip the butter knife back into the jam jar and spread the sticky seeded red across the white slate of cheddar, the crumbly ridges of the cracker perched between your thumb and middle finger. You took turns churning out crackers. First me, then you, then me again. You licked the knife clean and again checked my flesh for fever.

No one at home understood this choice. I wanted to be selfish. I wanted them on my side. Instead I listened: my mother's "That was the love of your life. Most people never get one." followed by "Do you still speak to her" and "Will you speak to her" and "I have no problem with her" months later, my sister who wanted to console you instead, my brother who still saw you as one of us.

It felt like falling, this knowing and sense of doom. You once said you loved me like I loved you, but I did not press.

Do you remember, just after California, Crater Lake? I felt like I was falling forever into the blue, and at the last second I looked down. It was then that I hit the water. My head snapped back with the force, and I couldn't turn my head for days. You had to drive. You didn't mind. You hated how I hesitated when passing on a two lane road. In Oregon we did what lovers do—invent constellations, shower together, scrub each other's backs with slow, steady circles. We cooked dinner, sometimes. Once it was ramen while we watched a pod of whales climb the coast. Sometimes it was only crackers. Crackers, cheese, and sucker-tart jam. Only this time, I had the knife.

Daniele Skor

# it's okay if they don't

My roommate brought home Halloween decorations this week. The bell pepper already died, and I've been making pesto to preserve the abundant, browning basil. I'm worried the green tomatoes on the vine outside won't have time to ripen. Some things die quickly, others take their time. I've learned that friendships do both.

Lately I've been happiest alone, sipping iced coffee at the farmer's market, baking cupcakes on the weekends. The friends I love most are farthest away. We are mourning the end of a friendship together, in hushed FaceTimes and long text messages. We are taught to mourn romantic relationships, to seek comfort in other women when the men in our lives disappoint. I often wish I'd seen a Disney princess who lost a best friend.

Who, when the weather grew cold, she began to disagree with over the tiniest of things—who would wash the dishes, which man the Bachelorette should have chosen. Maybe they fought over the same boy, or one found a friend she deemed cooler. To teach little girls that not all pain can be forgiven with a package of Oreos and a bottle of wine, and some conflicts are deeper than mistakes. That we should not expect or demand perfection and constancy from the women in our lives.

She would lose her friend slowly, then all at once, and we would have to watch the painful conversation. She would wonder where she failed at the sacred institution of female friendship, then learn that things may not be as sacred as they seemed. The dying green tomatoes on the vine are a sign of the natural cycle of things as summer turns to fall, to winter. There will be new tomatoes next summer. Even those may not last.

I wish we could have watched her pick up the pieces of herself after the awful revelation of the ending. To see her learn to trust again without losing herself.

The first loss I mourned an entire summer, crying by the pool. I lost myself. The second caused immense guilt. The third gave me an anger I hadn't felt before, so much that I didn't recognize my bitter self around her.

This fourth brings a heavy, dull ache, an ending that felt inevitably sad. Like unripe tomatoes, yellow flowers that haven't yet given way to fruit, sacrificing themselves to the rhythms of the world.

Every month we bleed; every year our bodies age and as years go on, we women change. I didn't even like tomatoes 7 years ago, I didn't know how to make pesto. We examine the people around us to determine how they fit into our new identities. I learned things from the plants that I've killed, from the friends I've lost. They were invaluable in their inconstancy. Failure is a funny thing. I am mourning the end of a female friendship, like I have so many times before, reflecting on the ways we grew together, then apart. The weather's getting colder. Lately I've been spending time alone, repeating the cycle of learning to trust without losing, learning to accept without blame. Watching the tomatoes grow on the vine. Hoping they'll ripen but understanding it's okay if they don't. I've learned that friendships do both.

Piper Gourley

# Why I Can't Love You Right

When they took my shoes, I learned to run. Within reality, I never ran. That's one of the rules you learn when you are institutionalized: running is a boredom, a pointless pursuit. I knew what happened to the kids that took off from the ward. Extended sentences, re-capture, rough tackles into the tall grass. When they took my shoes, I hair-pinned into fight-or-flight, and I flew, flew into nothing. I ran into books. I ran into sleep. I ran into pills. I ran into wall after wall of emotional short-circuits until my brain became a lump of nothing, an obstacle to scale.

This is to say, I have been running ever since I stepped foot in the hospital, and I'm running, still. This is why I cannot love you right: you are another thing to scale, another hope to tear past. If I slow down to love you, the rest of it will catch up. The rest: It's enough to send me plunging into nightmares thicker than honey, to make me search for the faces of patients and staff in crowds in cities far from each hospital that held me, knowing there's a chance they could finally grab my heels. It's enough to kill me, and too much to share without killing you. Love, I will be your final straw. I am a walking surrender. There is a target that follows me, swinging from my heart by a noose. So I run.

I cannot hold your hand. Your hand feels like an entrapment. Your hand is a small cage, and my hand is an animal. Your hand is a wall I keep sinking into. I lock the door of every room I enter. I use my hands as shields, as tools, as weapons: keep the world away. I repel. I reject. Safety is the longest chord that I will hold onto before dropping off the edge. I cannot hold you; you are not safe.

When I was ten, I bought a book from the local Hallmark store: *101 Things You Should Do Before Your Kids Leave Home*. My mom found the purchase strange. A novel for parents, the most interesting thing I'd held in all my life. I flipped through the pages, examining mothers and fathers and children

with copy-paste grins, these stock-model photos of hot air-balloon rides and hiking and board games. I think I was always searching for love like that. As something tangible, trackable. Like if I made a memory of my life, then I would never leave home: home would follow after me.

(You don't feel like home and that's not your fault.)

I never made a list of these things. Just looked at the photos and wondered. When I left home at fifteen, I didn't take any photos. The hospital inventoried my little clothing, my stuffed bear, my books, but no photos. I had no proof of love. This is why I take so many photos, now. This is why I stop every time I see a red cloud or a dead bird or a sunset. I'm looking to keep evidence, to prove I deserve to be alive. This is why I cannot love you right: How can you love a person who you feel compelled to memorize, a person you've assigned to heal the past, frame by frame?

(There's this sweet sadness of knowing you're not a person anymore; I am within this.)

Institutionalization took eighteen months of my life. Three hospitals. Like schoolyards, like stepping stones, leading deeper into a rare darkness, a society beyond society. Institution borrowed eighteen months of my childhood, wrapped my youth in warm red ink, in dead things. I was a child when I entered my first facility, and a problem when I left the last. My kidness, revoked by the doctors, by the court. Illness exists beyond identity, forcing you to shed your skin, to lose your person. Eighteen months. This is time that I compartmentalize, make small in my head, and that is why I can't love you right: I make everything small in my head, including you. The bigger things become, the harder they hit. The more they hurt to have, to lose. Eighteen months—loss became the counter-balance. Loss robbed me of my sanity, but loss was stable, consistent. Loss, reliant and horrid.

Loss kept me alive. So I will lose you. And I will mean to.

Symptoms of Institutional Syndrome:

1. Loss of independence
2. Apathy
3. Depression
4. Lethargy
5. Repulsion of touch/social connection

6. I can't stay inside. Don't touch me. I can't stay inside, I can't and you can't make me. I can't sit still because sitting still feels like defeat feels like giving into the restraints and I have been gone from the hospital for almost five years but I am still just as untethered as when I got there as when I got there as when I got there and I can't stay inside. I can't sit here because I will sink and it will end me. Let go of me, let go of me, don't touch me, don't hold my hand. Don't fucking touch me. I won't be still with you. I'd rather die.

In the third hospital, I went six months without touching someone my own age. This was forbidden in Residential treatment: touch. Hugging, holding hands, even accidental brushes on the arm or cheek. The words *I love you* were forbidden, too, strangled from us with the threat of consequence (isolation, speaking bans, physical restraints, worse). The staff's veins of control prevented us from knowing our bodies, from knowing one another. Prevented us from cutting our hair, speaking out of turn, moving without permission, breathing too hard. My body was not my body. Denied from me, controlled down to each syllable that left my mouth, to each movement of my fingers and toes.

This is why I cannot hold your hand. When I hold your hand, I spend the rest of the day fighting heart palpitations. When you hold my hand, my hand doesn't feel like my hand anymore. Touch sparks panic in me. Not belonging, not comfort. I watched my fellow patients be pinned to the floor, their hands twitching like spark plugs. I watched them refuse to share their hands with the staff, because their hands were their hands, and, to prove that their bodies were not their bodies, the staff had them restrained and pried their fingers apart, one—at—a—time. When you hold my hand, I feel the imprint of that truth, feel as if my body is about to be brought to the earth. I feel trapped. I need my hands to be my hands, to belong to me, alone.

Courage is a law I keep reciting, but cowardice is a low I reach for. I live in a lie: *Wait*, I say, *wait*. I tell you to wait, that I can love you later when I'm better and kinder, but I can't. Love is the biggest lie. It is the biggest exhaustion. I once learned about love as starving. I once learned love as denial, as rejecting nourishment, letting my body drip back to the earth in

hot pools of grief. This love birthed from pain, in my horrible admittance, is a comfort to me. For so long, I knew love only by condition. And all my conditions have been conditioned out of me, pulled from my body in fine strings. I am hollowed and unfillable, a cursed combination.

All of these things live in me, still: the angry anorexic, the suffering child. I am no more myself than I was at the start of all of this. Re-cultured by institutions. Re-framed by insanity, a party word, a sweet whisper. My body is a shadow of something alive. I have a vocabulary you don't recognize: Haldol, booty juice, Seroquel, orthostatic. This is why I cannot love you right: I no longer remember your definition. I fall into triggers: airline grape-juice cups, plastic paper clips, the scent of lavender Lysol. I live in a second half of the world, an underbelly, deeply invisible to you. You cannot live there with me. If you did, you'd have to join me in this moving coffin, wall after wall, nail after nail.

Joel Long

# Charlie Parker Plays the Grain Mill

*for Bird's 100th Birthday*

Friday nights in Great Falls, after school, we waited for dark. Then we poured into moon units, two surplus mail jeeps, wheel the wrong side, teal one that Mark owned, milk-green one that Don owned. We drove uphill past Black Eagle to the Northwest Bypass, searching for backroads, gravel fully drowned in wheatfields lit only by moon and distant light of our tiny city, the Great Stack. When we found the spot, powerlines hummed a language we had not learned. Don backed his moon unit, the rear door open, docking with Mark's open door, making a shag carpet room in the middle of the prairie. We swallowed Miller beer, cranked the car stereo, a cassette deck in the spare, metal dash. The music was Bebop. We left behind commercial jazz like Spyro Gyra and Jeff Lorber Fusion Group, left the neo-bebop Richie Cole behind for the root of jazz: Charlie Parker. If we stepped from the mail trucks, we stepped into fields, pulsing wheat for miles, star-scape that rendered gravity irrelevant—we were all floating. Charlie Parker chanted from speakers, bumped now and again by the thrust from Max Roach or lifted by chords from Bud Powell, Dizzy screaming, bending. We'd scratched "Bird Lives" in the green stall of the band room bathroom, but now we listened, nestled in Montana night. Bird wove braids through strings, invented in every beat over "Scrapple for the Apple," "Donna Lee," "Confirmation," "Now's the Time," indeed. I admit, this high school drummer, this sophomore held on tight to catch it, but sometimes I grasped on, relaxed, found the genius of Parker as he inhaled the stream of music. I caught Bird endlessly creating, sparks struck from stone in the Montana dark. In mail trucks, conjoined, we swayed our heads to match rhythm, to measure incredulity: Charlie Parker, head full of steam, made the future from every finger flick and breath, his mind so present yet three moons ahead.

# Prose Poems

# The Bones of Her Back

are ill-maintained, mended in a thousand broken places. When they are pulled from the upholstery and released weightless into the air circulating in the belly of the aircraft, the mother thinks of her babies. Sudden, buoyant, detached. Like her bones. She thinks of her babies as grown-ups with spouses, with kids in arms, like her co-passengers, except they're drained white, ghostly, at this moment. Thinks of the white strips of anti-depressant tablets she must administer to Sam when she got home, *if* she did get home, while the plane plummets, free-falling metal behemoth, deaf to prayers, immune to panic screams. In twenty seconds, she revisits her mother, dances in her two-piece with the Italian on a one-off fling, family vacations, first love, hate for the Victor Party, major and minor mishaps, betrayals. Ploughs her emotions into memories that have been like raisins drying in the sun, festering sore. In another ten, she returns home to Sam rolling his wheelchair to the door and waiting. She pictures herself stopping to survey her flower bed, the herbs she planted during the last rains swaying in delicious solitude, and her cat whining. As the huge weightlessness of them takes a rhythm, tangoes with the void like a couple at Rio de La Plata, she devours the delicious melody of sheer nothingness, like an autumn leaf in the wind. Towards the end of her exhalation, she is upon a bed of magnolia, in and out of silent acquiescence, when she realizes her body is heavy again, deep and full, anchored in ether, and the bones of her back are darting forward.

# Groundwater

How is it that I can walk that county line road like the crook of an arm, squeeze through the detail of evergreens, push the heavy front door, avoid the creakiest stairs up to the kitchen, my mother's scent like someone's burning candles of it, in a house ten years torn down? Or feel the press of that boy's spectacular mouth on mine, fingers straying through sleek hair, lungs filling with lightning and stars, when we are twenty years on, a country between us? Liquid memory wells within me, groundwater, saturating my sleep. Come morning, wet tracks on the floor, bed to window.

# Another Country

All things considered, going to Europe wasn't her worst idea, leaving the girls with their father and stepmother, saying she needed to clear her head, get back to painting. Everyone would agree it was time she got sober and there was that place in Rome where she could dry out, an old monastery—the Innocents—she'd have plenty of privacy, and after all, newborn babies are abandoned every day so it wouldn't be out of the question to find one on the Spanish Steps, a boy wrapped in blankets. She'd bring him home in the spring. *Girls, meet your brother, Antonio,* she'd say, naming him for St. Anthony, patron saint of lost things, of which there were so many in the world—especially her. She couldn't marry the guitar teacher just because he was the father. He was a musician, too young, and moody. She'd mistaken his instability for artistic genius. Anyway, she was forty-one and didn't want to embarrass the girls. Whose mom got pregnant at this age? It would never work. There was no need for everyone to know her secrets. In Europe, she could board a train in one country and wake up in another, never have to tell the handsome musician what they'd set in motion that afternoon—one body reaching blindly for another.

# When the Bookshelves Collapsed

You were quick to eat the blame in place of the heavy-handed house cleaner because you'd become friends, in your way, so I was forced into reacquaintance with drywall powder and a decade worth of neglected volumes scattered here and there and here, now, a chance for rediscovery or at least alphabetization so naturally I hunted ephemera instead, rattled the bindings like shook temples for bookmarks and other dusty congregants to unearth a postcard from Hell, MI, a get-well note from a well-tamped flame, a photo booth roll of three shots of us where we smile then frown then disappear so that the camera is caught in a moment of self-reflection, a little letter written in earnest to my mother on defunct bookstore stationery from someone named Dave until I'm trapped, kneeling, ringed by all the little pieces of a person wondering if it's possible to drown in reminiscence when you enter with a stud finder and a drill and intent like a rope. I guess all of this was just to say I hope you still need me too.

Kathryn Bratt-Pfotenhauer

# The Art Park

The seas are rising, and the world is half-dead, and Jill and I have driven forty minutes outside the city to look at sculptures. There is a twisted floral thing painted silver; it sways with each gust, the wind breathing at our shins like a huffy toddler. The clouds pile up in cigarette rolls. Off to the side, there is a wire door with wire steps that opens into nothing, and Jill makes a joke about Narnia, about alternate realities. There is a sign that says not to touch or sit on the artwork. I have a mind to do it, just do it, there's no one around to see me except for the compostable toilet and Jill, but I won't. There are some things that are still sacred, there is still something worth saving, and sometimes that has to be enough. Jill's hand points at a wire horse rearing in the middle of the field. It looks like it could buck you, it looks like it could bite. It looks like it could do a lot of things. My hand hangs empty in the air, so lonely I could almost cry. I look at videos from New York where the subways are submerged and in Philly, people are cannonballing into the sewage water in swim trunks. It is hard not to feel slightly anxious about this. I am clutching a stress ball the size of my fist, meaning I am clutching my fist. I am debating whether it's even ethical to have children anymore, is it responsible. I am writing letters to my imaginary son. I call him Felix. It means lucky.

Paula Aamli

# The First Time I Crossed the Line from Earth to Sky

I was a baby. There's a photo of me, in some drawer somewhere, attached by adhesive to a fading blue cardboard passport, a pillow-sized scrap of pale skin and pale hair balanced on my father's lap, lower jaw adrift with astonishment, pale blue eyes wide with wonder, pointing a pudgy palm towards the flashpoint of the photo booth's engulfing light. My father, impossibly young, smiles at me, nodding. *Yes, a bright light. Look towards the light, my darling. Do you think maybe you could smile towards the light?* We lived in France for a season. We left too soon for me to remember, but I used our brief foreign life as a mark of distinction throughout my school days, at every opportunity. Found distinction in being the child of parents who spoke foreign languages, had foreign friends, had seen foreign landscapes with their own, familiar eyes. Who drank dark intense coffee wrung from filters, a habit which my grandmother disdained—a cup of powered instant Nescafe was the proper and correct taste for a coffee drink, in her experience. Then there was a time when crossing the line between earth and sky came to seem mundane, ordinary, unremarkable. New York, Thailand, China, England, Norway, New York again, Norway, again. Too familiar, in fact. These past years, I have been un-learning my flight habit, putting down roots, storing my suitcase, learning what it means to live a grounded life, a life spent mainly in contact with the wide earth. One day, when I am old, perhaps, I'll cross above the skyline for the last time. And on that day, will there be a bright light? And perhaps my father, impossibly young, smiling towards me and whispering—*Look towards the light, my darling. Do you think you could smile towards the light?*

# second stage

i am fifteen and spiraling. i piss sand and glass and my spit is maple syrup. i am frenetic and jilted and drink too many kickstarts because i can't sleep at night. i am sixteen and furious. i am a factory worker and hurt deep in my bones. someone blocks the splash of a van's tires and he imprints on my heart. i am seventeen and burning. i am a kernel of laughless lungs and sick in the fourth stall. i leave my math class early. i am eighteen and numb. i hurt in deep secret places and vomit out my brother's words. i keep a caterpillar chip on my shoulder. i am nineteen and alone. i have slashed a cop's tires and my cane sits uneasy in my hand. i fill notebooks with half nothings and pretend i am proud of them. i am twenty and locked. nobody goes in or out and i read maus in my laundry closet. my mother wishes i knew how to speak. i am twenty-one and addicted. i am half drunk on the underground and wish someone would approach me. i do not want to go home anymore.

# Compass Basics

You will use an azimuth, part of a circle that can float on a card in a capsule with a needle that always will point to north because of the iron in our planet. Unless you are near railroad tracks or a concentration of power lines. Unless you are standing near a man with a belt buckle so large in his center that he seems focused on a metal button, or a closet with belts hung on nails on the back of the door like snakes by their heads. They swing slightly when any other door in the house opens or closes. Unless you are carrying a pocket knife. That, my father didn't tell me.

True north differs from magnetic north, he said, although I couldn't understand it: why did the geographical north pole matter if it didn't match the pull of the planet? Geography was his first love, and stars knit his blood, in particular, the north star, Polaris, what I couldn't see because I was nearsighted although I pretended in order to make him happy. Don't you see it? You've got to. It's right there. Yes, the little bear runs around one fixed point, has for centuries.

Truth be told, that star is moving closer to being truer. There was no north star when our ancestors drove across the sea, just a cub that seemed close enough to be handy. By the Middle Ages, the star seemed to stand still with the sky pivoting around it, and that's how we've come to know it. In time, it will move away from the celestial pole, just as it spent centuries moving towards it.

Others used the north star as a way to cross a desert.

My father bought more maps than we ever needed. He spread them on the floor and pressed the compass on their surfaces to teach me.

You find where you are through triangulation, by matching the landmarks around you to the landmarks on the map and working them with the compass into a triangle.

This doesn't work if you can't see things far away. Just as stars slurred, with my vision, mountains numbed in what might be forest, might be rock faces. There was never just one stream or peak on the map or around me, and I couldn't tell which was which to save my life. I preferred playing with the knife, watching how more than one blade could snap into the bone compartment.

It's easy, he said. Pay attention to terrain lines, the way the ground rises or falls around you. But you also have to figure declination, the difference between true north and magnetic north. If you forget to do it, you'll be lost, sure as I'm standing here. We've done it a hundred times now. Azimuth means the way, the direction.

# poem for the places I am in the closet

a tiny porcelain zebra wobbles on the corner of my bookshelf. I'm nursing a bandaged thumb, bloody baguette serrated knife job gone wrong. my grimy fingers & crooked nails twitch in the sliver of light leftover from my kitchen window. I am a woman in the same way we refer to ships as women. barely but mighty anyway. I want you the same way the wolf howls at the moon. only in the dark. throw me overboard already. I'll tread water until you toss me the line. the roads here are so tangled I can't see very far ahead. I don't have names for all the shades of green. suddenly, it's june—the carpenter ants are drilling holes in my aching floor. I sleep to the sound of your memory. what I would give to put my feet in the sand again, on your dashboard, dance around barefoot on your kitchen floor. I light candles at dusk, give thanks for your split ends, hope there is an end to distance & to shame. good lord, let me be proud. I have walked so far in the rain. the clouds must break ahead. a crested bow & soft starboard. my sails are drawn.

Charlotte Covey

# Becoming

Contrary to popular belief, I didn't live on a farm. I lived next to a cornfield and an abandoned church, but the town fifteen minutes away was a good one, and I didn't have to muck up cow patties or travel an hour to the Wal-Mart, like some friends I know from "the real country." Instead, I would say I grew up in the country of suburbia: the spaces between fields and shopping malls and the laundromat with a tiny grass-patched cemetery fenced in the middle of the parking lot.

In a way, I came from the middle of old and new; historical buildings squashed next to Texas Roadhouse and too many intersections, even though we still only had one Starbucks, and you could see the Chesapeake Bay from the main road. I can still walk to the rocky beach from my parents' house, and I remember midnights spent skinny dipping in snake-infested swamp water, and the trail of poison ivy I followed to get there.

I grew up afraid. My mother was both overprotective and very anxious, and once we stayed in the car in our driveway for thirty minutes during a thunderstorm, since she was worried the lightning would strike us dead before we reached the house. I grew up locking my car doors (rational) and fearing driving long distances (irrational). I moved to St. Louis when I turned twenty-one and forgot what it was like to come home.

Here in the city, I say I grew up among cornfields; it's not necessarily true, just something to say. Something to explain why I can't parallel park and why I can't sit in traffic and why it took me so long to stop worrying about being mugged when walking downtown.

I still grow afraid, but I think it's of the wrong things. I drink till I can't think straight or walk straight or see straight, and then I drive back to my apartment and fall asleep soundly. Then I go to work the next morning and

worry a shooter will burst into my classroom and gun us all down. I meet strange men in the backrooms of bars and cower the next morning when forced to call my credit union.

Sometimes, I think I will become my mother. I already worry about everything I can think of, and I tell people I can't do math when really, I'm not so bad at it. Sometimes, I decide I will not be my mother, thank you, and I down two bottles of wine and kiss someone I don't know to prove it. Sometimes, I feel very much in the middle of things, like in between the old and the new, the country and the city, and I can't make much sense of where that leaves me.

# Dead Man At Siesta Key

When it had finished the sea slid him back to us. It didn't say a word. A white-blue empty, a thousand cradles warm and rocking. I imagine him that morning heavy-bellied, a little afraid of his heart. How quickly, how quickly life goes. It takes so long to build one. The heart closes like a door. To swim in the current asks a question of the sky. As he died he became a boy with his questions. Became a horse rolling with his eyes. While we walked on the beach the brown doves of his lungs filled with sky and salt. I had your hand that day, when they noticed him floating. Deep in the lifeguard, adrenaline igniting, a fire in the dark dream of salvation. We're watching from the soft sand. Beside us his mother returns to her ancient hunger, begins to knead the air.

# Fiction

Meagan Perry

# Magic

All three girls hunched intently over Lizzie's phone. They appeared to have almost stopped breathing, caught up in wonder. It wasn't the gathering Anne would have wanted for her own twelfth birthday, but Lizzie seemed more than content at the centre of the celebration, scrunched between her newest friend Thalia and her younger sister Emma. Anne admired the tumble of girls, almost not believing two of them were hers. There was so much bright energy and focus in them. *I must have looked like that sometime*. Emma turned her bright face up toward her older sister just as Lizzie turned her gaze from the phone to Anne.

"Mom is that you?"

Hearing her daughter's disbelief in every syllable, Anne braced herself. Lizzie had taken to challenging her mother at every opportunity, wondering aloud if Anne knew anything at all, yet also somehow expecting Anne to understand Lizzie's every thought and feeling. It was hard to be patient.

"I'm not sure," answered Anne, outwardly calm. "I don't know what you're looking at."

She walked over behind the couch to see what Lizzie had asked about, and curled over the girls like a gargoyle.

Sure enough, there she was, blurrily reproduced from nineties television, sawed in half and smiling. John, her boss at the time, was there too, holding up a large and showy saw. Anne wasn't surprised to see the video, but she was amazed that the girls had found the clip so quickly.

John had called the day before to say he was putting some old clips online, asking if he could tag her in them. Feeling old and glad to hear his voice on the end of the line, she agreed right away and now—*alakazam*—there she was.

"Yeah that's me," she told the girls.

Lizzie squinted from the screen back to Anne, comparing.

"Wow," said an impressed Emma. Lizzie was a bit more distant.

"That's cool," she said.

Thalia didn't hold back.

"That's awesome!"

She grabbed the phone away from the other two, restarting the video as soon as it ended.

Anne felt a burst of pride. With that video available, the next time she told another mom at school that her first job title was "magician's assistant," she'd be able to wipe the skeptical stares off their bland faces. She could hardly wait to bust out her phone on Monday.

Anne watched Lizzie measure Thalia's enthusiasm up. Lizzie had trouble keeping her friends, she was quick to judge, and today's invitation was an audition for Thalia, who was clearly fascinated and had a lot of questions.

"When did you do that?" asked Thalia. It was great to see so much interest.

"Well, judging by the fashions that must have been the 90s," she said.

The girls missed her sarcasm. They nodded solemnly, examining Anne's teased hair and apple cheeks, as though they had just received an important secret.

Anne's young self lay paused on the screen, her head poking out from the end of one box, her mouth smiling broadly while her legs protruded from a matching container that John was parading around at some distance from her.

"That was my summer job after high school," she told the girls.

"Did it hurt?" asked Thalia.

"A little," said Anne. Thalia's eyes widened, and Anne relented.

"No silly, it was magic. It didn't hurt."

"Show it again, Liz," said Thalia.

Lizzie was definitely less interested in this than Thalia, but she tapped the start of the video and they were back at the beginning. Young Anne traversed the stage once more, on her way to be sliced. They all watched it through. To forestall a fourth watching and an impatient outburst from her eldest, Anne decided to call a halt to the spectacle with a distraction.

"Who wants cake?"

The girls raised their heads: "Me me me," they peeped attentively like hungry chicks before they ducked back down to the screen, their attentions pulled to the next item down the internet rabbit hole.

Anne hurried to the fridge to get the cake she had made for her Lizzie. It was a classic birthday cake, chocolate with white icing.

Manoeuvring the cake off the bottom shelf, she rammed it against corner of a plastic container full of pasta salad, tearing off a big chunk of icing. The cake's fluffy innards were revealed. Anne sighed. Any attempt to fix up that icing would be a disaster, there would be crumbs across the whole thing. Instead she shook some sprinkles on top, candled the cake and spun it so the flaw faced her instead of the girls. She would slice the broken piece away before there was time to notice it, and devour it herself.

Anne held the cake high and marched into the dining room, where the girls had materialized at the table, Lizzie and Thalia side-by-side, with Emma hunkered down in her dad's usual spot at the end of the table as she always did when he was away.

Cake carefully placed, and candles lit, Anne gave the nod, and Emma started up a piping chorus of happy birthday. Anne joined in as best she could. She was no singer. Thalia's enthusiastic rendition brought it all together. Lizzie graciously accepted the song with a shy smile. When the last note faded, Lizzie blew out all the candles in a single breath, Thalia giggled "no boyfriends," and Anne cut each girl a perfect slice of cake, sliding her own quickly off to the side.

"Did you ever learn any tricks?" asked Thalia, blowing a crumb of cake from her lip to the tabletop along with the question. She was clearly glad to have an opportunity to talk more about the video.

"Of course I did," said Anne.

"You did?" asked Lizzie. She wanted to know too, but probably would not have asked the question herself. Anne hoped Thalia would be invited to come back again soon.

"True story," said Anne. "Maybe I'll show you."

She swallowed the damaged piece of cake. Lizzie did not look convinced that Anne could actually show them anything. She had her lips pressed together and her head tilted to the side. Her eyebrows were raised just a little. She looked a lot like her dad in that moment. Lizzie's skepticism wasn't surprising; as far as her kids knew, Anne was a regular mom doing regular things, happily enough. Why should the girl believe?

In the minutes that followed, while the girls talked about magic, that they had seen or imagined, Anne started to panic a little. She hadn't

practiced any of those magic tricks in ages. She left the show after one summer. That video had been shot more than twenty years ago.

When they were done it was Thalia who asked.

"Can you do a trick for us now?"

Anne nodded.

"After I get these dishes into the kitchen. You girls go play."

Anne was now a mom in trouble. Six bright eyes sparkled with youthful excitement as they watched her head back to the kitchen with the dishes. She stood in the kitchen, remembering herself at 17, when she saw the ad for a summer job with a magic show and applied. Her friends thought she was crazy. Would her parents let her travel the county alone with a *magician*? She told them yes, but the truth was that her parents said no.

Then her dad lost his job. It changed his mind. He said she could do it if a parent was there to supervise, and he had the time. He spent the summer accompanying her to county fairs, applying for jobs in nearby towns when they passed through, and practicing amateur sleight of hand at the back of community halls. He had a lot of time to kill while she helped set up and tear down. Her dad told John he could do some of that work, but John didn't want to pay a roadie. That summer, Anne handed her cheques over to her parents for food and gas. At the time, her dad's attention had felt like a burden. Now that Anne had a daughter of her own, she understood why he wanted to be there.

While she reminisced, Anne disappeared the plates and cups into the already crammed dishwasher and started to fill the sink. As the water rose in the basin, she skillfully balanced the remaining dishes into an improbably tall pile: mixing bowls, pots, and cake tin. She swirled her hand gracefully through the suds, ending with a flourish. Tada. Housework.

Chatters and giggles from the other room washed pleasantly over her as she submerged a mixing bowl, eavesdropping. Her three minutes of fame were being picked apart in there like it was the moon landing.

"Can you believe your mom did that?" said Thalia.

"No," said Lizzie. "That can't be her in that box. Look, her hair is a different colour and she's too short."

Anne sighed. She would have to deliver on this trick thing. She placed a third bowl upside down in the drying rack and headed for the basement,

reaching back through boxes of camping gear, old yearbooks and objects destined for regifting.

She found it more quickly than she thought she would; it was in a smaller box than the rest, which were packed together tightly against the back wall. She had labelled its side with the words "Amazing Anne" in her showy, teenaged cursive.

Adult Anne pulled the box out of the stack without dislodging the larger ones, leaving a cube of empty air behind. She could tap it back into place when her trick was over.

Open, the box was less than half full; it held a tiny collapsible wand, a deck of cards, and a few of her dad's old magic tricks nestled in her old cape. She tapped the wand against the box, half expecting a bird or bunny to emerge. Her dad's favorite trick had always been the fake thumb tip into which you shoved a very delicate silk scarf. With the thumb tip closely fitted over your own thumb, you could show an empty hand to the audience, cover your fist, then reach in to extract the scarf from the fake thumb. Executed properly, the trick made it seem like the magician was drawing the scarf out of an empty hand.

Her dad went all in at the magic store where he bought it, springing for a tricolour scarf, red, blue and yellow, and the most realistic thumb, matching it to his skin tone.

"Extravagant," he'd said, wiggling his eyebrows.

A skilled professional or practiced amateur could master the trick; it was simple and sure to impress. She and her dad had been pretty good at it by the end of the summer tour. Anne grabbed the thumb and its scarf out of the box, tucked the trick into her pocket, and headed back upstairs.

The girls were still in high spirits. They had more questions. Emma called out to Anne, "Mom, how did they cut you in half?" and Anne answered her that they did it with a knife and the girls looked down at their tummies, like much younger children.

"We've been watching your video trying to see how you did it," said Thalia.

"If it was for real," mumbled Lizzie.

"Will you tell us how?" continued unsuppressible Thalia.

"A magician," replied Anne, "Never shows their tricks or talks about how they do their tricks. It's a rule."

Her memory conjured the gasps and cheers that accompanied John's dramatic saw work as she lay in the box, smiling hard. She also remembered the slight but always present fear that the trick might not work, that she might actually get chopped.

The girls begged her to tell and she demurred, first gracefully, then firmly. She walked back to the kitchen, slipping the false thumb over her own as she went.

When she appeared with juice a few minutes later they barely looked up.

"Why did you want to get sawed in half, anyway?" asked Thalia, reaching for the juice but keeping her eyes on the screen.

"It was more interesting than working at the supermarket," said Anne. "And I got a sparkly outfit."

"Oh," said the girl, clearly not realizing that sparkly outfits were not very easy to come by back then.

Anne was eager to break out her trick so she stood in front of them, waiting for their attention. They were, for some reason, concentrating on their juice. *It's just juice, girls*, thought Anne before she broke into their reverie.

"Oh gosh, something is going on with my hand," she said loudly. "Hmmm," she added. All the girls looked up, curious, maybe a little worried. She was committed.

Anne spread her fingers wide on the unthumbed hand, moving it back and forth rapidly across the girls' field of vision, then rubbed her palms together.

"Ready for some magic?"

They all nodded, Lizzie a little more slowly than the others. All of this felt like it was coming out a little too loudly. It was awkward. Anne pressed on.

Lizzie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, put her cup down and settled back with her phone.

*Two out of three*, thought Anne, and focused on the trick. She had shown them the empty hand, now she would grab the scarf and draw it out. She reached into her fist and twisted her fingers around trying to coax the scarf out of its hiding spot. She had definitely tucked the scarf too far into the plastic thumb, a rookie mistake that would cost her the girls' attention. It was taking ages.

Thalia's eyes dimmed in disappointment, but then Anne managed to dislodge one silk corner from the thumb tip. There. She cupped her hand as though it held a small animal, pulled out the tip of the scarf so it peeked from the top of her fist. *I should make a surprised face*, she reminded herself, and did. She showed the scarf, *not too close*, to each girl in turn, doing her best to ignore Lizzie's polite, but distant, smile.

Anne offered her hand to Lizzie to emphasize the reveal, then asked Thalia to reach over and hold the scarlet end of the fabric tightly. With Thalia as her loyal assistant, Anne stepped backwards away from the girls, saying "goodness me what is going on?" as the scarf stretched between her them.

Lizzie was still giving Anne the most annoyingly casual of glances over her phone.

The other two, however, were hers. They had leaned forward, Thalia gripping the end of the scarf and Emma clearly trying to figure out how Anne was doing this. The blue section of the scarf revealed itself, then finally the yellow. The fabric slipped out of Anne's cupped hand and drifted to the floor.

Thalia and Emma, shared meaningful tween stares, but Lizzie leaned even further back on the couch. Anne decided to end with a flourish, and delivered a graceless pirouette, narrowly avoiding bashing her leg the corner of the coffee table.

She tucked the plastic thumb tip into her bra then twirled back to face her audience. Then she took a long, deep bow that strained the backs of her thighs. She straightened, winded, as Emma jumped off the couch away from the limp and seemingly hypnotized Lizzie.

Emma stood with Anne, chest out, one arm in the air like a ringmaster.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she hollered, "My mom!"

Lizzie didn't even look up.

Thalia smiled and made a silent clapping gesture then a fist pump. Anne bent to pick up the scarf up from the ground, forever the cleaner. She turned back to the kitchen.

"Hey mom?" said Lizzie.

Thalia and Lizzie were back at the phone, and Emma had cuddled up to it too. *It never ends*, thought Anne.

"Do you want to see your trick? I made a video."

Gabrielle Tribou

# In the Timeline Where She's an Easy Choice

They don't own a broom yet, so Mariella cuts Trey's hair in the bathtub. Shirtless in a pair of well-worn briefs, his arm draped over the rim, he looks like Christ after the crucifixion, minus the blood. She pulls a strand, flecked with silver, and snips, the dark hairs drifting through the air and landing like scratches against the tub.

"Pet the dog again," she says, "and I'll cut your ear off."

But his eyes are closed, and he doesn't see the way she squints her eye and holds the scissors, wrist angled like a pirate's hook.

"Mercy," he says, Zeke licking his outstretched fingers. "I beg you."

Later, they walk the poorly lit mile to the beach and leave their shoes at the lifeguard stand. Without a broom, the sand they bring back from this nightly trip settles into the dips and ridges of their trailer. They find it at the bottom of their coffee cups, clinging to the bar of soap in the bathroom.

Last week, they watched Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes* without subtitles. During the sex scene, where the man and woman writhe in the sand, beetle-like, their necks and backs and pincer-fingers coated with the gritty sediment, Mariella said, "That'll be us by the end of the year." They made love on the futon then, the film's grainy hissing playing in the background. Like many movies they've started in this world, she wonders how it ends.

On the beach, Trey hands her a pebble shaped like a pair of stemless cherries and calls them testicles. She pockets the stone. They walk along the shifting beach with his arm across her shoulder, her hand cupping the soft curve above his hip. Once, in another timeline, he'd said the way their bodies fit together was like two pieces to a puzzle.

Here, he asks, "Am I crushing you?"

Ahead of them, Zeke barks at the retreating surf. Ghost crabs flutter underfoot. At the outfall pipe, they stop, and he pulls her toward him by her belt loops. The stone presses itself into her thigh. There's a breeze, and it passes through them. Above, the moon swings wide on its black noose.

# Marooned

Van's father was a big man, bigger than Van would ever be. Dennis Ryan stood with a wide back, broad, thick shoulders, and forearms as wide as small trees. He towered over men six feet tall. He had worked as a merchant marine in his youth, and hard work at sea had made his arms and body as coiled and taut as the rope he handled all day. A favorite trick of his was lighting kitchen matches on the rough, rock-hard calluses on his hands. They were like a pair of cheese graters, and when Van was a boy, his father handled him like he was made of glass to avoid damaging him.

For all his bulk and brawn, Dennis Ryan was a quiet man. A soft man. Not "soft" in the sense of being weak; he had shown Van the extensive map of scars that covered him from head to toe, detailing for Van the assorted acts of violence at sea which precipitated each one. He was soft, rather, in a way that would make him stop and save a turtle trying to cross a busy road. Or care for a bird that had fallen out of its nest. He was *soft* in the sense that he was *kind*. He cared about things. He cared about animals and insects and (sometimes) people.

During Van's childhood his father made his living as a carpenter, a builder. The story set between ship and hammer, about his leaving the sea for dry land, was his father's favorite, and Van had heard it countless times. As Dennis Ryan told the story, he woke up one morning, young and stupid and missing one eye, in a hospital somewhere in Georgia. There had been a car accident that may or may not have been his fault, and definitely involved alcohol. The first thing he saw when he opened his eye was Van's mother, trying to take his blood pressure.

"Good morning, Captain Morgan," she said to him with a smile.

"Where am I?" He asked her.

"You're in heaven, sweetie. Can't you tell?" She let the air out of the cuff with a loud hiss and wrote something on his chart.

"So that makes you an angel, then?" He smiled at her through swollen lips.

"If you want. Or could be I'm a demon." She shrugged.

"Guess I'm going to have to keep my eye on you then." He pointed to his uncovered, surviving eye, and according to Dennis, she giggled slyly.

And that was all it took. Dennis traded in his sea legs for a pair of work boots, and thus began the brightest-lit time of his life. Van's mother breathed beauty into Dennis Ryan's salt-washed world. Life before her had been bad food, back-breaking labor, and close living quarters with ill-tempered men. Van's mother was a ray of filtered sunlight, warming his skin after a long, long storm. They set up house in a suburb of Atlanta and had a son. Dennis read him pirate stories and adventures of brave captains battling the wild sea. Van's mother sang him old '70's folk songs. She collected yard gnomes and planted them around the edges of their world.

Van's earliest memories of his mother were the warm, cuddle-scented skin dreams all children deserve. Smiles and the sweet melodies of a happy mother's voice shined down from her face, and Van's young toddler world was contented and fascinating. As he began to walk, though, he saw her from a place outside of her arms, saw her whole, not just a face above his. He saw tears. He saw her sitting in her chair, staring out the window, ignoring him as he banged his empty sippy cup against her knees, pleading for more milk. Van saw his huge father kneeling on the floor next to her as she sat in her chair, his own face wet with tears, his voice quiet and urgent. While she stared out the window. Somedays still she held Van, too tightly, and whispered over and over that she loved him, that she was sorry, and she loved him. Her eyes inches from him, wet and alive, ringed with fire. His small hand touching her face. Those memories are fewer, and older. There are sharper images of her in her chair, looking out the window, her eyes as cold and unfeeling as raindrops.

One night, when he was five years old, Van's mother walked out the door after a quiet disagreement with Dennis, and Van and his father never saw her again. She never came back for her things, never withdrew money from their bank account, never wrote them a letter. The police couldn't find her. Dennis hired a private investigator to search for her, but she was truly gone. She had disappeared completely.

It destroyed Van's father. For Dennis, losing his life with Van's mother was like finding himself cast off, marooned in a suburban archipelago, his

small crew looking to him every day for answers. The disappearance was immeasurably worse than if she had just been killed. At least then there would have been a body to mourn, a burial site to visit. A disease or an accident to blame, somewhere to direct all the anger and anguish instead of turning it all inside. Sadness became his world, became *their* world.

Several years after his wife's disappearance, Dennis built a workshop behind the house and spent his evenings there shaping things out of wood. The first thing he produced was a fairy tale house, about gnome-sized, with a crooked window in the front and a high, peaked roof which sagged drowsily to one side. The siding and the roof were covered in small, irregular wooden shingles and Dennis had incorporated small twigs to serve as molding and trim. A rounded front door opened and closed on tiny hinges, and the entire thing was painted in five different, happy spring colors. Young Van loved the gnome house. His father left it on the back deck and Van brought a different toy to stay in it every night, imagining his dolls and action figures enjoying legendary visits in a multi-colored, magical castle.

A month or so later, there was another gnome house on the deck when Van got home from school. This one was slightly larger, and the roof drooped slightly lower. It had a yellow star on a twig sticking cock-eyed from the roof's peak. That night there was a big party for Van's toys to celebrate the new construction. After that, a new house appeared every few weeks. Soon they lined the perimeter of the deck and started creeping out into the back yard.

"Dad, you should sell some of these, you know?" Van said when he was older. "Let's rent a table at the flea market and I bet you could make a bunch of money."

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

"They're shit," he replied.

"Well, let's give some of them away then."

"No, I told you. They're shit."

Van loved them. As more of the gnome houses appeared, the nightly gatherings of figures and dolls and stuffed animals grew in size and attendance. Van found some old strands of Christmas lights in the basement and asked his father to run them around the deck and the yard.

To the distant sound of tinny music coming from his father's workshop, characters danced and laughed and chatted the night away.

As Van grew older, so did his father. The houses generated at a much slower rate and eventually stopped altogether. They filled the yard, high and low. Van had taken to hanging some of them from low branches in the few trees in the back, and they swayed above older, earth-bound models circling the trees' trunks. The bright colors had long ago faded to an almost uniform light brownish/grey, and what shingles were still attached were warped and split. Not long before his father was killed, Van asked him during one of their few conversations, "Dad, the houses. The gnome houses, you know?"

"What about them?"

"You spent so much time on them, put so much work in. But I never saw you take any pleasure in it."

"Why would I? They're shit."

"They're not, though. They're amazing."

His father put his beer down and looked Van straight in the eye, something he rarely did. "Well, they didn't bring her back, did they?" And he stood up and went to bed. Two months later he was killed by a hit and run driver. He had stopped by the side of the highway to help a motorist change a flat tire. As he was working on a stubborn lug nut a car swerved onto the shoulder and that was the end of Dennis Ryan.

That was the end of Van's father, but it wasn't the last of him. It wasn't the last of the witches brew of emotion Van felt whenever thoughts of his father lumbered through his mind. The love and hate boys often feel for *that* man in their lives. That first, huge man. It took half a lifetime for Van to tease out the roots of the anger he felt for his father. He realized he had grown up blaming Dennis for his mother's disappearance. *He killed her!* Young Van devised dozens of horrible scenarios detailing how his father had murdered his wife and disposed of her body. That charge was weak, though, even in the court of a young child's mind. There was far too much eye-witness evidence of Dennis' devotion to his wife, his unequivocal love for her.

*He drove her out of the house!* That was the next silent accusation Van held in his heart. His father had made her leave, intentionally, or by making

her hate him. It was a fault in his father's character that had made her run. It had been preventable, and the blame for her disappearance lay entirely on his father.

Many years later, when the piranha who lived in his mind stopped eating for a time, Van fell upon the third source of his anger, the true, defining source. *It was my fault she left.* He had blamed himself for his mother leaving, and the guilt he felt was impossible for a little big heart to live with. So, he turned it into anger and directed it straight at his poor father, whose only crime had been to love two people more than the entire world of people put together. Van never spoke to his father about his anger. He just kept it in his belly, undigested, letting just enough escape from time to time to help fill the tub of Dennis Ryan's sadness. Van knew later what had always been obvious: his mother was sick, and her sickness had destroyed their world. It wasn't Dennis's fault, nor Van's, nor hers. It just was. Like so many tragedies before and after, no one is to blame, and everyone suffers.

After the State Troopers left on the night of Dennis Ryan's death, Van went out onto the back deck. The very first gnome house his father had made still stood where it had first appeared. The wood was so rotten it was practically fused to the old wooden railing which ran around the deck. More than half of the small shingles were gone, and something was growing out of the crooked window. The tiny hinges were completely rusted, but Van managed to get the door of the house open. Inside was the stuffed bunny Van had placed in there many years before, his very first, and his favorite stuffed animal. His name was Mr. Flumps, although he had gone through numerous name changes since his mother had first set him in Van's crib. She had called him Mister Snugs, Sergeant Snugsly, Floppy, Mister Flopsy and eventually Van had started calling him Mr. Flumps. He was the only thing Van had of his mother, and it had only seemed right that he should reside in the original gnome house.

His father had been right, though. It didn't bring her back.

Matt Whelihan

# Removing the Body

I didn't want to work that summer, not after what had happened at college in the spring. Working meant interactions and a close proximity to others, details I couldn't handle. But I needed the money, and Alex's dad needed help at his funeral home.

"Would I have to do anything with the bodies?" I asked

"It's a funeral home, idiot," Alex replied.

"Like, touch them?"

"It's night removals. If someone calls in a death after the funeral home is closed, you pick up the body. It's $150 a trip, and you get to sleep all day. What else do you want?"

I'd watch TV through the night, keeping the volume low so I wouldn't wake my parents. It was mostly travel shows and DIY stuff, anything light. When a call came, I'd head to the funeral home and grab the keys for an eight-year-old black minivan. It had no seats in the back, just a collapsible cot with a thick cover that zipped shut over the bodies.

I only had two destinations that summer: the hospital's morgue and the county coroner's office. At the hospital, I'd park next to a bio-hazard dumpster and watch the security guard smoke a cigarette. After she stubbed it out, she'd let me into the chilly room with the stainless steel drawers. At the coroner's office, I'd take a ramp down to a windowless, basement facility where three attendants were always eating despite the wet, chemical odors.

On the first few trips, I felt like I was missing necessary credentials. I was sure someone would call me out or accuse me of breaking the law. And it was strange, seeing the dead in an unadorned state, some with eyes and mouths still open, others with ragged, post-autopsy stitching down their chests.

I'd slide on latex gloves and try to move them, worried I'd disturb or break something in the process. It was one of the coroner's attendants who showed me how to do it.

"Hold on," he called as he put down a carton of lo mein.

"Line your cot up next to them, lean over the middle, grab tight, and yank. You try and tug at the arms or legs, and you'll be here all night just wiggling that guy back and forth."

I was sweating when I clutched the dead man's hip. But I yanked, it worked, and the attendant got back to his food.

My return trips to the funeral home were silent. I passed through neighborhoods with empty sidewalks and blinking street lights, the radio off and my mind twitching with thoughts of college. I guess that's why I started talking to the bodies.

At first, it was piecemeal observations:

"This van really has no acceleration."

"I never noticed that Greek restaurant before."

"Sorry in advance, but there's some bumps coming up in the road."

But soon, I was talking about me. About whatever I had been watching on TV that night. About how I hardly saw my parents or friends that summer. About what had happened at college in the spring.

It felt good to say what I wanted without being asked, "And how does that make you feel?" And the bodies never tried to direct the conversation towards some bullet point on a list of symptoms.

I told an overweight man mottled with liver spots that my friends had portrayed the whole thing as wish fulfillment rather than invasion, something that didn't require recovery, but celebration. I told a frail woman with patchy hair about the campus security officers, how they had rolled their eyes and kept repeating, "But you were drunk, right? And they didn't actually hurt you, correct?"

I told all of them how it felt to have something taken. Something you hadn't bought or earned. Something that was just there, and then, just not. I told them everything, and they listened in comforting silence.

Back at the funeral home, I'd park in the garage and use a creaky service elevator to bring the cot down to the prep room. Then I'd move the night's passenger to the embalming table in the middle of the room, and my job was done.

I always wanted to stay, though. I wanted to guard the bodies through the long hours before the staff arrived, to act as quality control as they were embalmed and cleaned, dressed and casketed. I wanted to watch them change, to see their damage hidden.

But I knew I couldn't stay. People were worried about me. Spending the night alone in the prep room and making demands about the work to be done on the bodies would only worry those people more. So I started the ceremonies. They were brief reflections delivered to an invisible audience, but they helped to place a period at the end of my nights.

The final ceremony came a few days before I headed back to college. I stood in the prep room looking down at a shrunken woman in a hospital gown. She still had medical tape attached to her arm where an IV had been inserted.

"She was a bright light in a dark world," I said, a little disappointed by the cliché.

"She helped me to understand what comes after the line is crossed."

It was vague but better.

"I was feeling detached before her. Like all I could see was this other, baser side of people. And no one wanted to hear that. But she was different. And maybe she's not really her anymore, but there's still something there, some part of her that can't be removed or altered no matter what happens. She showed me that. I guess they all did."

I made a bow, turned off the lights, and left through the garage. I knew she'd be fine. I knew they'd all be fine. After being prepped and displayed, their bodies would be sealed away, buried, protected. And that was all I wanted.

Richard Jacobs

# At the Rapids

When my father had stood on the creek bank for five minutes without speaking or looking back at us, without skipping a single stone across the water's surface, I stepped away from the picnic table and joined him. Low in the wake of a summer drought, mutely filling with leaves, the creek glimmered in the October sunlight without betraying a current. Dad didn't greet me, just kept his eyes on the ground by his shoes, but at least he didn't turn away. I glanced back at my mother who, ever watchful, had stationed herself at one end of the table. She'd draped an orange oilcloth over its surface. Behind her, a maple tree with a rounded crown shed its yellow leaves like a sun dying out. My wife, Laura, stood near the other end of the table busily arranging our silverware and tubs of food—cold fried chicken, potato salad, pickled eggs. She'd baked an apple walnut pie, her first, for the outing. She fretted with the plates, and I knew she, unlike my mother, would give my father and me a measure of privacy. It was a warm Indian summer noontime. I crouched low by my father's knees, tugged loose what felt like a flat stone from the dry ground, raised myself, and reared my arm to sail the stone upon the water. I halted, mid-motion, when my fingers sensed what I held—an arrowhead, perfect in form. *"Holy Christmas!"* I sang out, honoring my younger self, for as a boy I'd spent whole summer Sunday afternoons clinging like the shell of a locust to the banks of this creek—digging, praying, exhorting the earth to yield up one arrowhead, blade, or bead. Dad, startled, had stepped forward to catch me, but I'd managed not to fall. Intending to offer him the first good look, I extended the dark treasure toward him. He glanced at it and nodded. A breeze nudged its wide arm across our chests.

"What kind of stone is this?" I asked as I urged it on him.

Dad frowned at the arrowhead. "It's iron."

"Oh." I drew it back and rubbed its surface with my thumb. Charcoal-colored and stained with clay, beveled on one edge but keen as the steel of a new pocketknife on the other, the arrowhead seemed a jewel in my hand.

I held it up for Laura to see. My mother announced, ringingly, that lunch was ready.

Sliding the arrowhead into my pants pocket, I said, "Hungry, Dad?"

With his eyes on the creek he shook his head no.

Turning alone, I beheld, dappled with sunlight, the two women standing together behind the laden table. The shrug I gave my mother was met by her with a pout. I climbed to Laura and took her hand. Still our secret, carried by her these past two months like the seed of a flower too precious to mention, our first baby waited to bloom.

I scooped a fingerful of my mother's creamy potato salad from its plastic bowl and ate it. "Good as ever, Mom," I said.

"Won't he come?" she asked in a stricken tone.

Her dramatics annoyed me. "In a little while, I'm sure," I answered as I callously filled my plate.

Laura asked, "Should we wait?"

"Davey?" stage-whispered my mother.

I sat down, pulling gently at Laura's wrist to seat her. "I think not."

"Earl?" My mother's burdened utterance reverberated, drawing looks from picnickers at other tables.

Dad gazed upward as though her voice, like a bird's, had descended from the topmost branches of the slender river birch that shared the bank with him. His chin snapped down and he swiveled in place. "Lu, I'm going for a walk. Go ahead and eat." He began to hike, in his long-legged gait, along the creek.

Mother's eyes implored me. "Won't you *go* with him? Won't you make him come *back*?"

"No, Mom. Jesus, he obviously wants to be left alone. You know how he is."

"Better than anyone, I should hope." She slumped onto the bench across from us and told Laura, "He'll moon about the house for weeks." To me she added, as if to portion out the blame, "He'll smother me with silence, you know he will."

My mother's eyes are sea blue and lovely and almost always clear, but beneath this noon's full sun, a brimming lemon-gold bowl in the unfolding sky, they were clouded. In all my recollection, my parents' skirmishes resulted from my mother's frequently stated imputation that my father

talked too little to her and my father's abiding conviction that she talked too much. "Why must she make an issue out of everything?" I'd heard him ask, more than once, not me or my siblings but the prevailing air.

I helped myself to a chicken breast. "Dad always needs to work things out for himself. Let's give him some time. Then I'll find him and try to steer him back here. Eat a little bit and tell us the story. All you said when you called this morning was that Aunt Jane died yesterday but Dad still wanted to go on our picnic. Now he's acting like he'd rather be anywhere than here."

Laura had prepared a plate for my mother. Mom took it and thanked her with a dim smile. She ate a slice of pickled egg. "Don telephoned last night around ten. I answered and he asked for Earl. I somehow didn't recognize his glum, gruff voice. We'd been laughing at a joke Larry Halter told us. He and Rose were over for cards, and we were about to play the bully. Earl's face went numb at the kitchen phone. He leaned against the wall. We heard him say, 'Yes… yes… I see.' He hung up and faced us close enough to tears to scare me. Have you ever known your father to cry? I stood up, knocking over my chair, and said, 'Is it one of the kids?' He leaned against the wall and moaned, 'It's Jane. Cancer's been pitted throughout her lungs since April. She died half an hour ago.' I didn't go to him. The air he spun around himself seemed dense as"—she searched for an image—"a swarm of bees. I said, 'I'll go upstairs and pack our suitcases.' He said, 'No, you won't.' Larry and Rose cleared the table and whispered how sorry they were. Larry had been sweet on Jane when we were all in school. I walked them to the door in a daze. When I came back to the kitchen, Earl said, 'The bastard kept it to himself. He could've called us last week. Could've called yesterday.' "

I thought Mom had paused. She picked at her food for a minute and lit a cigarette, so I said, "What about the funeral?"

She exhaled a plume of smoke. "Don claimed Jane wanted to be buried in a simple ceremony out there. In Arizona! He's burying her tomorrow, or so he told Earl. He said he'd write to us about the location of the grave and about her will. Can you believe it? I said we should just fly out there, Davey would drive us to the airport. His answer to that was to walk out into the night, without a coat on, for two hours. He went to the cemetery, I'm sure—his parents and all—and into the woods. While he was gone

the whole thing hit me, Jane dead. She called us one day last month and sounded like herself, perhaps a little winded. She and Earl talked for ten happy minutes, and then I laughed along with her for five. Neither of us guessed anything was wrong. The only hitch came when I asked her when she planned to come home again and tour the unmarked sites of her strayed youth—you know, the back alleys and cornfields. We were always kidding each other about our wicked pasts when we'd been the least daring girls in town. Jane went quiet, so I gushed out an apology. But she said, 'Oh soon, soon I pray.' Then we said goodbye."

"The last time we saw her," I said, "was at Grandma's funeral?"

Mom nodded. "Four years ago. She flew home by herself. Remember how your father tried to talk her into staying?"

"Dad never liked that guy."

"Don glowers so. He doesn't let you feel comfortable around him. No wonder they had no children."

I laughed. "Sorry, Mom, but that makes no sense."

"Doesn't it? Well—" She wiped a tear from her right cheek and hugged herself. "It's been my suspicion for years that Don kept her out there against her will, hiding her from us. That's silly, I guess. She loved him." Mom stubbed her cigarette out on the bench and dropped the butt into a paper cup.

Laura tapped my knee. I rose and smiled at my mother. "You know how good Dad and I are at talking about anything harder to discuss than baseball or work."

Her face brightened. "You might just tell him how sorry you are about Jane. I know he hasn't given you the chance."

"Would it help if you told him we missed him?" Laura asked.

My mother laughed with genuine pleasure. "That's never worked for me before. But, Davey, if you tell him *Laura* misses him you might shame him back."

"Oh I wouldn't want him to be shamed," Laura protested.

I kissed her. "I'll say it only if I have to."

The woods—spangled trees, littered path—didn't camouflage my father for long. Through the red veil of a camellia I saw him sitting at the far end of

a hickory bole that spanned the creek. He'd walked fewer than a hundred yards to take cover from us. I stepped into view and hailed him.

He glanced up but couldn't find me. "Present," he called.

I wobbled across the tree bridge. Sitting down beside him, I said, "I'm sorry about Aunt Jane."

By the time I'd entered the third grade I'd learned that my father buried all pain beneath a ghastly scowl, so his hatchet grimace, aimed at the woods as he barely nodded, didn't alarm me. I added, to fill the void, "Uncle Don's a lout."

No answer. Balked by a voiceless sorrow that welled up through me for my father, whose silence, an invisible cloak he wore like a shroud on the occasions of his grief or anger, seemed born of a hard secrecy no one could penetrate, I fought back an uprush of tears. Images of my aunt and father together, both tall and lithe and with angular faces, kind green eyes, and straw-colored hair, brimmed in my memory to blot my sight of the creek. I remembered a photograph that revealed their grinning grade-school faces peeking out from a spray of coin-sized leaves in my grandmother's beech tree, their bare legs dangling from the limb on which they were perched. I remembered the time when, along this very creek, my young father and aunt had helped my brothers and me build a dam of rocks and sticks while my mother, choosing not to get her feet wet, bestowed her encouragement from a lawn chair. Uncle Don, a stranger to us by his own choice, wandered the woods alone. And I remembered the golden autumn afternoon when I was five that Aunt Jane, her blond beauty magnified by her bridal gown, her arm squeezed in the vise of my father's elbow, strode up the center aisle of our Lutheran church toward a life we did not suspect would become one concealed from us.

"Dave. Dave?"

"What? Oh, I'm sorry, Dad."

"Let's see that arrowhead."

I fished it out of my pocket and handed it to him. "Remember how we used to hunt for these along here?"

"Yes." He studied the relic critically. "Most Indians stopped hunting and warring with arrows when white men began to trade rifles with them. This must have been used in some ceremony or sold as a trinket."

"Oh? It looks pretty deadly."

Dad raised the arrowhead into the glittering sunlight. "It would tear a body's hide," he agreed. He lowered it, pressed it in his right hand, and studied the mark it left in the heel of his palm. Sighing, he gazed into the trees as though they masked the balm to his suffering.

All I could think to do was to watch the trees with him.

After a minute, Dad asked, "Do you know how this creek came by its name?"

"I've guessed it was named for the Conewago Indians."

"By them, I'd bet. It twists a long way east and flows into the Susquehanna near some rapids. Indians named things—rivers, forests—in a way that fixed their locations. 'Conewago' means 'at the place of the rapids.' "

I glanced at the creek. Here, it was stippled like the flank of a trout by sunlight and stones. The water was still.

Dad's eyes were troubled. "Some old-timers, the fathers and grandfathers of men around here who talk Black people down even if they've never met any, claimed *Caugh-na-wah-ga* was Indian slang for 'cannot walk it.' Like all Indians were lazy. But the Indians around here never built a permanent village. These were just good hunting and fishing grounds for them to visit. They weren't even natives of this area. They were refugees, hiders from the Iroquois. Scared of them, I guess."

He barked a self-belittling laugh and stood up. I jumped to the bank to let him cross the hickory first, but he stayed in place, towering over me. "Hiders," he repeated, biting the word, looking across the creek toward the picnic area. "Maybe that's what I've been all my life. What I've been doing for most of my fifty years—hiding out." He swung his face, kinked with disgust, toward me. "I could've visited her anytime. My own sister."

I stood rooted to the bank. "You didn't know she was ill."

Dad shook his head. "I don't know, Dave. How do things go so sour? One day I see they are sour and I don't know why. I can't ever figure out why." He scanned the breadth of the woods. Then he discovered the piece of iron in his hand and looked at it like it was a brand new thing. It seemed to spring him. He skipped down to the bank, gave me the arrowhead, and said, "I'm going for that walk now. Be back soon."

I let him go ten yards, then thought the hell with it and said, "Dad?"

He wheeled round as though I'd flung a net over him.

"Laura and I are expecting a baby."

He took the news stone-faced. "Honestly?"

By now, I felt I could laugh in restored safety, the afternoon partially saved, but I didn't. "Yeah."

"Does your mother know?"

"No sir."

"Well." A pent breath escaped through his lips. Without exactly smiling, his face relented. "I'm glad, son. Hey, that's great." He brought his hands to his hips. "I'm still taking that walk, okay? Go back and tell Mom the good news. And listen, tell her I'm all right and I'll be hungry when I get back."

"I will."

Then the smile came, reticent, but a smile all the same. It held as he pivoted into the woods, away from the light that skirted the creek. All around him, screening his body as he moved on, the burnished leaves spun down or clung for another minute or day to branches that would prove helpless to hold them.

I crossed the bridge wishing I knew how to breach my father's aloneness. And then I wondered if he'd spied the arrowhead on the creek bank first, if he'd waited there hoping I would join him and study the terrain about us as I'd done when I was a boy. If I hadn't discovered it, would he have plucked it from the ground for me? I looked back to where Dad had disappeared and promised myself I would keep the arrowhead, be it trinket or treasure, until the day arrived when I could conceal it along the creek for my own child to discover.

# Scars and Time

She has a small scar behind her left earlobe and I wonder if she knows that I'm aware of it. I've always wondered how it came to be and I used to make up stories in my head. Stories involving nipping puppies, or a renegade fishing pole cast when she was 13. Then came college and being on and off again and separated by an ocean. Then the marriage and children and parental responsibilities and less and less time for ourselves. There was no time to talk, no time to think about the scar. There was no time anymore. Then there was the separation, but I still had hope until I was handed the bundle of paperwork one day at my door. I nearly dropped my drink. All these years, memories, placed into legally formatted documents with spots for my signature. Now I have nothing but time to think, nothing but time for another person. I'm sitting here at my kitchen table wondering if her next lover will notice the small scar behind her left earlobe. I fear they might. I fear they may ask what it is from. I fear she may tell them.

William Cass

# Neighbors

When I retired from my job as an elementary school principal, my wife finally agreed to sell our house in the suburbs and buy the hobby farm I'd always wanted. She was still employed as an illustrator for a publishing company and almost all her work was done remotely by then, so she said she could do that just as easily out in the sticks. The place was only twelve acres and less than an hour away from our old house, but it had everything I'd dreamed of. The former owners had recently retired themselves to a warm weather state and were happy to include in the price their dozen or so heads of cattle, handful of chickens, and all their farm equipment. They even left the barn cat.

The son of one of my former teachers worked as a realtor in the area, showed us the place, and negotiated the sale and all other details. One of those was a survey of the property's boundaries, which hadn't been done for more than the century that the deed had been in the former owner's family. The only surprise with the survey involved a short curve in our next-door neighbor's irrigation ditch out towards the middle of our properties that the realtor said actually belonged to us.

"Yeah, the ditch kind of makes a little jog across the boundary line around a tree." I'd put my cell phone on speaker and brought it into the study where my wife worked so she could hear. "My guess is that the original owners simply made some sort of personal arrangement way back when to allow access for that way. Maybe to provide a little shade for the neighbor's cattle in that section. But the stretch is definitely yours, and you can use the water from it to irrigate your fields if you want. Like we discussed, your own irrigation ditch on the other side has become pretty paltry over the years and may eventually dry out altogether. Nice stroke of luck for you actually."

My wife had put down her drawing pencil. We stared at each other for a long moment until I finally asked him, "So what do we do now?"

"Well, you don't have to do anything yourselves, at least for the moment. I'll simply talk with your neighbor and see if things can be resolved at that level. Checked his deed, and he's lived there all his life and has quite a bit more acreage than you, so we'll see. All that's really needed is for him to re-route twenty or so yards of barbed wire fencing. Shouldn't take him more than a half-hour to do that, but he's an old codger named Dale who I understand is kind of a hermit and pretty crotchety." He paused. "Anyway, I'll go explain things to him, show him the survey, then let you know."

After he hung up, my wife and I continued to look at each other until she said, "No need to hurry worry, I guess."

I shrugged and said, "Suppose not."

It took our realtor several days to call again. Like the last time, I put him on speaker in my wife's study. "Well, he's not happy," our realtor told us. "Not at all…spitting mad, in fact. Kept shouting about history, family honor, and all that. But in the end, he moved the fence." He gave a snort-like chuckle. "Probably won't be inviting you to dinner anytime soon, though."

He went on to discuss other details about our move-in, which was still several weeks away. When we ended the call, my wife said, "Maybe we should have left the fence alone."

"Too late for that now." I gave another shrug that I hoped looked more dismissive than I felt.

Our realtor hid the keys to the place under a potted chrysanthemum he left as a housewarming gift by the side door. We'd driven from our old house ahead of the movers, and after we'd walked through all our new empty rooms, we went out into the backyard. The big mounded garden at the far end of the lawn was still turned under in the late spring, and beyond it our fenced fields began, more or less evenly divided for grazing and hay, sloping gently towards the forest and foothills in the distance. Our cows were huddled together at the back of the grazing side to the left. The weathered barn sat off to our right, and next to it, the chicken coop and a small corral that I supposed had once been used for a horse. Our next-door neighbor's own corral mirrored it, split in half for pigs and sheep, as did his house across a narrow cinder driveway. A tall old man in a jean jacket and

tattered ball cap leaned against fence separating the corrals staring at us. I assumed he was Dale.

I motioned to my wife with my chin and said, "Look."

She turned his way. Dale stood perfectly still, his forearms on the top plank of fencing, white grizzle sprinkling his cheeks and what I could see on the sides of his head under the cap. I lifted my hand in greeting, but he didn't return the gesture. Instead, he spat over the fence into our corral, turned slowly, and walked off towards his house.

"Well, hello to you, too," I heard my wife say.

I'd grown up on my grandparents' farm and had nostalgic memories of it, which certainly contributed to my desire to buy the new place. There really wasn't all that much involved in managing it: tend to the animals, irrigate where needed, use the riding mower on our sprawling lawn, fiddle with machinery and little projects here and there, help my wife with the garden, hay and seed the one side of the fields when the time came for each. But it was enough to keep me busy, add some productive satisfaction to the hours I was uncertain how to fill when I'd first retired, and it did remind me fondly of my youth.

Our interactions with Dale remained basically the same as that first one. Every time my wife or I were outside in his proximity, he'd quickly go in the other direction. She and I usually took a walk down the road past his house after dinner and looked over as we passed by. If he was in a window when we did, he'd yank the curtain closed. If he was in his big barn which fronted the road, he'd disappear into its dark recesses. We noticed he left his garden unplanted, so my wife brought over some fresh picked corn when our first ears were ready and left them on his front step with a note; we found them unhusked on top of his garbage can out by the roadside when we walked by that evening.

A couple weeks after that, I took a chance and approached him while he was painting his side of our corral fencing. I came up to him quietly through the soft earth and said, "Howdy."

His head snapped up, then his wide eyes went to slits. The glare behind them was as hard as nails.

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

I watched his jaw clench and he grunted once. Then he spun on his heels and went off carrying his dripping paint brush like a baton, hobbling a little. He left the can of open paint where he'd been standing.

My wife held a basket of eggs she'd collected from the chicken coop as I came back across the corral. When I was beside her, she said, "I saw that exchange. Didn't look too friendly."

"Nope."

"What else can we do?"

I gave her another one of my useless shrugs. "Not much that I can see."

Our lives gradually fell into a kind of quiet rhythm, and where Dale was concerned, we simply did our best to ignore him and his continued coldness towards us. He was a good decade older than me and, as far as I could tell, still did all the work on his place by himself. This included triple our acreage and number of cattle, along with the pigs and sheep, plus a sizable stand of apple trees.

As for the work on our own farm, I mostly taught myself what I didn't remember doing from my childhood. That first summer's haying was a bit of a challenge, but I used the internet to acquaint myself with the old equipment involved, and with my wife's help assembled a stack of bales five wide and eave-high up against the corral side of the barn. We kept the exposed portion covered with tarps, and it lasted as cattle feed well into the next spring. I didn't even try to venture into animal husbandry, but hired a local vet who came out for calving and things like that. We used the same buyers that the former owners had for our cattle and excess eggs. I'd always been pretty handy, so did my own maintenance on all the machinery. I learned to can vegetables from the garden and planted some berry bushes out front by the road that bore well even that first year. My wife's illustration work continued without complication or interruption; she said she appreciated the peace and quiet. And we both enjoyed the passing seasons out there in the country. All in all, we adjusted pretty well.

We didn't need to use any water from Dale's ditch to irrigate; our own remained sufficient. However, I did see him from time to time out where he'd had to move his fencing at that curve; I supposed he was checking to see if I'd installed any piping or a pump. Every now and then, my wife left

him something else from our garden on his front step. I usually walked over with her and waited in the road when she did. Sometimes as she was leaving, I thought I could see a tiny rustle at the curtain in his front door, but I was never certain. She dispensed with any further notes, and although we got no acknowledgment in return, we didn't see anything she'd left for him in his garbage can again either. I wondered why his own garden remained unplanted and untended. Had it become too much work or was there something else involved? I had noticed a not-so-old pair of women's gardening gloves hanging from a peg just inside his barn, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

As time went on, when I saw Dale outside, it seemed that his limp grew worse. Our bedroom and his were both upstairs and only separated by about fifty yards, so sometimes after my wife and I had gotten in bed and turned out the light, I'd see him through our windows in his plaid pajamas turning down his own bed, his movements slow, labored, and it seemed to me for some reason, sad. He had to grip both hands under his knee to lift that bad leg up under the covers. After his own light blinked off, I often thought of what it must be like for him to have to navigate those stairs every night and then wait for sleep to come in that big bed alone. When I did, I was glad for my wife's warm body and even breathing next to me.

We didn't have any problems or accidents to speak of at our new place until one day at the end of our second summer there. It had been unusually rainy, and my wife and I had been scrambling to get our hay cut, baled, and stacked in the short, dry window forecasted on the weather report. It was late in the afternoon, and she and I were hurrying to finish adding to the stack of bales I'd finished that day. I'd cut and raked all our fields, but had only baled half, so it was about eight feet up on top of the stack on the side of the barn that we'd assembled so far. My wife stood almost as high on the fresh bales stacked on our little hay wagon beside me using baling hooks to swing one at a time to me; I used hooks of my own to grab and position them on the stack. As I was bending down for a new exchange, my feet slipped on the stack's slick edge, and I fell, dropping my hooks. I hit the side of our hay wagon on the way down. We both heard my leg crack then, and again when I struck the ground. I suppose Dale did, too,

where I saw him through my grimace and yelps of pain tossing slops in his pigpen. I was thankful my wife had her cell phone with her because she called 911 right away, and it didn't take more than fifteen minutes afterwards for the ambulance to arrive. While they were loading me on a stretcher into the back of it, she ran to follow it to the hospital in our car, and I saw Dale watching again. He'd moved closer, his slop pan dangling from one hand; with the other, it looked like he'd slowly raised an index finger in my direction.

The fracture near my knee was hairline, but the one in my ankle was compound, so I came home after a night in the hospital in a full cast from my thigh to the top of my foot. My wife had to use a portable wheelchair to get me out of the car in our driveway. Dale was out in his pigpen again as we were making our clumsy attempts to negotiate that; I was aware of him regarding us as we did. My discharge orders directed me to remain in bed for a full week, so my wife had fixed up one of the downstairs bedrooms for me. It was alongside our driveway, so once she'd gotten me situated in bed with pillows under my cast and propped behind my back, I could see Dale through the thin curtains that covered the window. He hadn't moved from his pigpen and was still staring across at our house.

I awoke early that next morning to the sound of a tractor passing my window. I frowned as I became fully conscious and heard it continue chugging past the barn towards our fields. I sat up and heard my wife moving upstairs from our bedroom into the room at the back of the house that she'd turned into her study. A few minutes later, she clattered downstairs and appeared in her robe in my doorway.

Her frown matched my own as she said, "Dale."

"What about him?"

Her eyes widened. "He just started baling what's left in our fields."

I felt my own eyes widen. I turned towards the window where I could see gray clouds gathering high in the sky.

My wife asked, "Did you hear what I said?"

I nodded slowly, then blew out a breath. "He's trying to help us," I said. "Trying to beat the rain."

"What should we do?"

I looked back at her. "Can you handle that hay wagon on your own?"

"I think so."

"Go thank him, then collect the bales he makes and stack them." A distant roll of thunder interrupted me. I gave a quick look in its direction. "I figure the two of you have about three hours, maybe four."

She nodded herself. "You okay on your own?"

"Sure," I gestured towards the fields. "Go."

The rolls of thunder inched closer as the morning wore on. I watched Dale and my wife finish tarping the last stack of bales on the side of our barn a little before noon. By then, I'd managed to get out of bed, into the portable wheelchair, and had rolled myself out to the open side door. The first splats of rain came just as my wife was reaching up to shake Dale's hand where he sat on his tractor in our driveway. He reached down, shook, then started chugging away, his baler swaying a little behind him. As he passed the side door, he glanced over. I patted my chest and pointed to him. He tipped his cap once in return. Then he was on his slow way down to the end of our driveway and turned left onto the road towards his own. Rain fell harder as my wife stood getting plenty wet and watching him go. I did the same, dry and grateful for good neighbors, at the side door of the home I knew would be our last.

# A Place for Nothing

My stepmother approached me as I sat eating lunch in their new house. She smiled and set down two paint swatches and asked my opinion on what color to paint the room I slept in when I visited on weekends. Delighted to be asked, I considered the colors carefully, even though I already knew the one I would choose. The choices were dark blue and light yellow. I happily selected the blue. Still smiling, my stepmother took both swatches and said thanks.

The next weekend when I visited my dad's house, I opened the door to the room to find it painted yellow. The room had a trunk, lamp, and futon. Just like in their old apartment, I unfolded the futon, took out a blanket and pillow from the drawers beneath it to make a bed. I put my backpack in the drawer so even when I was there it was almost like I wasn't. They bought a house with three bedrooms so one could be the computer room, one could be a bedroom, and the other could be the spare room where they could put nothing at all.

Beth Mattson

# Spells

Not all of the nurses' assistants sitting and chatting by the northwest living room know that they are magicians. They won't receive a letter or invitation. I have seen some who know, though, by now. A tough, round young woman with a long brown braid takes ferocious care of the elders here. She knows that Jeanne is sweet, and to speak gently to her while thumbing the cancerous frown wrinkles away, and to acknowledge how awful it feels to have the hoyer lift net fastened too soon before the weightlessness of suspension from chair back to bed, for a terrible but necessary change of pants and horizontal rest. There is one environmental assistant with leather wrinkles, and multiple bands tying back her long ponytail (maybe elaborately restrained hair is a spell to look out for), and the rough voice of a smoker who has been through some things—not many of them formal education—and she is good to us, as well. She tells us that she loves us, even when Buddy hits her for trying to help him to a toilet or shower before he has finished an even number of laps through each of the four corner living-room-holding-pens, which is itself a very effective spell for soothing. I wish they knew. There is so much they do not know. They scold us for folding too many napkins into too many clenched fists, laugh when they think we aren't listening, and they laugh even when they know that we are listening. The one with the mean jaw, the one with the vacant eyes, the one who has sold her soul to multiple technology giants, the one who flees the actual nurse that is her flawed but superior teacher. Those who do not wear the ordered pandemic masks.

They do not know that I am a witch. They see a sad slippered shuffle, around and around, slowly trudging the filthy carpets, not a high priestess who is taking care of them in their ignorance. Here we are, seventy, eighty, ninety, accepting what offerings are available to us, and trying to spin them into our final songs to the gods above and below. We are the lucky ones, who have made it to our ending choruses, reprises reckoning before we take flight into the final ecstatic oblivion. I stop to let Cathy

clench my hand in her own. She is wrestling hard, grappling with all of the makers, singing to them of her triumphs and sorrows before she crosses over. I give her a less worried corner of fleece to grip until I can return. She is too busy to respond. Her song is light and buoyant, marked by grasping hands in the air above her head and eyes wide, leaping with her vocals. She is not as sad as they think. Disappointed, maybe, but firm and active beneath safety belts and vinyl headrests caked with spittle and food. It makes me happy that the assistants at least know to feed and wash those who are still singing, those without personal time for food and water consumption.

I understand that my children have put me here. It's not ideal. But who has ever heard of an old woman finishing her life carried on a litter from a perfectly kept rustic cabin to sandy beach shore each and every day, by youth with nothing better to do? They do have important things to do. They aren't wrong. They have found me a place where I will have some services provided, where I can still wander, where I can still love and struggle, where I can still serve my Goddess of Ferocious Empathy and Natural Sciences. I have served Her in worse places. The abusive man was worse; the negligent justice system was worse; burying children was worse. She has many faces, not all of them gracious. Some of them as mean as the nurses' aid who flicks us when we try to share our coffees with each other. My face is not always kind, either.

It must be a difficult kind of joy to have been raised by an artist like me. My children know to keep their night eyes sharp by avoiding flashlights, to breathe through their feet on the Earth, how to laugh with a face full of mud, and the solace of paint and other wide open spaces. I gave those gifts and instructions. It must have been frustrating to not know if they would find the rational technical reporter who would cite data, pen policy, and debate political unrest, or the wild animal heart yelling that despite all of our righteous studying, we know nothing and that the mere tardigrades are more magical and capable at thriving in the universe than humans. We are all hurtling through space right now. The planet spins on her molten core, we rush around the closest star, which is but a speck dancing in galaxies, ripping their ways towards the next black hole and banging rebirth.

"Yes, just like that Richard," I say. "Those spoons you have collected are the best model. Don't worry if they take them from you now. You can get

more at supper. I see. You can fly. You've always been flying, my darling. We are flying through space right now. I know."

I stop at the alarmed front door and hold Lizzie's face between my crone's knobby knuckles. I kiss each cheek. She cries, and that is all right. "We are all going home, Lizzie, we are all going home." Nobody knows what it is like until they live it. "Some did not get to live this far. Yes, sing to me. Belt out about the surprise that our toenails are horns and we have poop under our fingernails, just as our ancestors did. It is not my favorite part, either. We are all going home. Come, walk to the fish tank with me. Look. We have the same memories."

Lizzie pleads with the fish. They are good listeners. They have always been deep in flowing emotions, sometimes cooler, sometimes hotter. The lucky fish don't live as long as the lucky humans. Smaller, tender animals are sensible to begin singing and screaming earlier in each life. It takes a long time to get it all out. I wish the last note for all of us. Another easy spell, a simple wish.

The overly precious but kind Life Enrichment Coordinator gives me wireless headphones playing digital tunes that I can in fact register with my worn eardrums. I don't mind the new music on the staff's streaming devices, but I'm also not immune to the old hymns. How Great Thou Art has always been stuck in my head as much as Hava Nagila and wailing at the heavens with my fists. Darling Coordinator still believes that she serves only the Christ. This is fine. I don't mind including old druids' tales in my prayers. She may learn otherwise or she may not. Some never learn better. What could a perpetual virgin know of all humans' full lives lived? A stupid interpretation of the great mysteries. Oh, a woman conceived the night that she first enjoyed carnal worship with a god metaphor? It's not so hard to understand. Flashes of faces. Salute a sacred mother, a dying child, an angry father, geology, pharmacology, mushrooms, faeries, and essential oils all at the same time. You make too much of it, Sweetheart. I bite the headphones to show her. Look, child, it is soft foam covered by vinyl over hard plastic surrounding wires and jumping electrons. All synthetic but showing you wilderness, everything all together at once. Maybe someday.

I open the door to Diane's room in the northeast hallway. She is upset that her husband has left her here. She does not enjoy my advice to lock her door, but I have seen Tom in here when she is unable to physically or

emotionally fend him off. Staff are conflicted; it is right to let adults of all ages enjoy human urges and needs for contact, but the staff girls have been harassed by Tom, and a few other men as well. For those strong enough to pull away and joke the old men back into their places, it is not such a big problem that after they apply perineal care cream to Tom's scrotum rash, he repeats on and on for days his obsession with describing where he'd like to apply cream on the women. Tom insists that a clitoris is up inside a vagina and that a penis can rub it best. Jim asks all the young women to sit on his lap. When Lyle has tired of asking them to sit on his face, he switches to asking them to sit on his bare feet, and watches their faces change under the power of an old man leering. I don't care; I'll hit the old men. Incompetent wizards. Always thought they were the best. I'll show the young women what's true. Let them write their Incident Reports. It is a witch's place to fight when she can. It is an act of instruction. I remind Diane that she can forget about the men, and join with the ladies at any time. She's not ready. I lock her door on my way out. Keep your stale tea mugs horded in your own room, Tom. So many easy spells.

The internal courtyard garden is one of my favorite spaces here. They leave the doors open to us, as is our right. Don't doubt that some are moved to follow-through on civil and human rights protests, reports, and examples set. Unrest is a powerful spell. Some kitchen worker has potted mint, thyme, oregano, chives, sage, tomatoes, cucumbers, and strawberries in this furnace with no trees. I only have a few moments to cast outside, until a young woman, trying to be helpful, will see me sweating and insist I return to the air conditioning. Such thoughtful foolishness. Soaking in heat is marvelous magic.

I told my daughter so often that she became sick of it, "Remember this summer feeling. In the dead of winter, when you are so cold you know that it will hurt to warm up, remember that you were hot to your core in the summer. Summer and seasons live in your bones. You have been warm, and will be again." She would roll her eyes, but I still smile to know that she is not without magic. You have it, too, you know. It is so easy. You never needed to attend a school that called it such. You do not need to know all of herb lore. Who does? Some other granny, perhaps. But if you don't know willow bark, dandelion leaves, Queen Anne's lace, wild parsnip, ground

cherry pits, and bittersweet nightshade down by the creek, shame on you. Go looking.

Why break and maul sporilla, hydrangea, and black-eyed-Susans with bare fingers? I stoop to look at the landscaper's offerings, for a stone that would be good for skipping across water, except that it is broken. This makes it a tool. The curved end will rest in my thin palm and the jagged edge will scrape the stems to snap when and where I will. This is a good time to gather rocks. In purchasing a cheap mixture to dump around flowers, this facility has given me a solid mix to pick through. I dump a whole handful on the patio table, on the side without umbrella shade. There, a rough white quartz, striped sedimentary, speckled granite, soft sandstone. I cast them with relish for Pat. We giggle. She casts for me on the electric piano in the lounge, when it is plugged in. I owe her. And it is a good reading. The stripes of sedimentary fall even with the quartz and sandstone. Pat will have peace and comfort sitting beside her complex journey. The chaotic granite lands farther from her. Good. She smiles and chatters a lovely word salad. I bring her a larger limestone. She presses it to her lips.

"Yes," I say. "It is summer. We must know summer before winter comes again. Feel it. This too shall pass. Hold it in your bones."

I hold a tiny dimple of granite to the corner of my smile.

A niece once asked me if I minded when she touched my tarot cards. I laughed and pushed them across the table to her. She worried that she would interfere with my own magic, deplete my cards. It is important to laugh with and at youth, for their development.

"If my magic was so easily broken as that, it was lousy magic in the first place!" I shake my head, my limp gray hair again. If your faith in any lord or lady can be broken by carbon dating, rather than including mathematical proofs and satellites in your religion, it was a garbage hope in the first place. They are all the same. The signs are all around you. Read them.

The idiot assistant with the too-tight bra curse on her scolds us for trying to eat rocks. Dumb girl, these are too big to swallow; we are only driving heat into our molten centers, and you cannot even be rid of the easiest curse ever laid upon you. But she lets me pick flowers and a sprig of mint on our way in, maybe only because she is stuck holding Pat's hand through the door, which she locks until we are well down the southeast corridor. Breaking rules is a jealous spell. Pat and I find a cup of drinking

water in Rosa's room. Rosa always calls for her mother, and we always answer. I laugh with my Goddess that I am still playing The Mother, so deep into The Crone, but it has always been my favorite role. She fits.

I help Pat remember which end of the flowers go into the water first, and then she arranges them, packed from glass wall to glass wall. We offer the feel and scent of them to Rosa, who is crying at this point in her reckoning tune. At least she can feel summer snow, white and green and meant to be crumpled for relief to this old woman caught now in a recliner. The recliner is not bad. Well-loved and used often mean the same thing. Synonyms for places and times. Her several chairs all smell like her. I sit in the kitchen-y chair with a thick pad on it. My pants grow damp, but a damp bottom is no large price to pay in this line of service. I pet Rosa's hair from her face.

"Mama loves you," I coo as Pat strays back towards the door and the setting sun, "I am so proud of you, Rosa."

"Whyyyyy," Rosa asks me, so earnest I could almost weep with her to reveal the clear and obvious truth.

"I am so proud of you because you are brave and strong and beautiful and smart. You are such a good girl. Mama loves you so, so much. So much."

Some spells have the most obvious words. Use them, solid and dense. Borrow this one. No need to write it down. This is something you could have gleaned for yourself. Anyone in the throws of serenading their ancestors and makers and the sky and the worms can be served easily by you. Why do you delay?

Pat wafting out the doorway was a signal to the staff to check on Rosa. It is the young, round woman with the twin French braids under her face shield and mask. Her walky-talky crackles. Another confirms that Rosa will be tended. Twin braids lead me to my own room in the southwest wing. I smell sour. She will change my pants, perhaps add some aluminum to my pits. I don't begrudge her intentions. Many of these young women are still disgusted by their own bodies, and so are repulsed by ours as well. I once chided a young cis-hetero man for never having tasted his own semen by the age of thirty. He loved me, but did not want to date me anymore, either. To be comfortable with the mess of the human body is often to be seen as pitious rather than empowered. So it is with the assistants, and some of the nurses themselves. Barely initiates into the realities of cells,

tissues, and spirits. This is what life smells like. Why did you think that heaven would not reek a bit, too?

I lean heavily on the bathroom door with my pants around my ankles. Do you think wizards' staffs are only of spiritual power? They are also good for balance and for violence. I do not regret the murders or corrupt wishes I have committed, but I will not bang this poor girl on the head with my door today. She is trying hard. I like her. She is not a man groping at me in some alleyway. She faces those, too. She is not a child abandoning an elder into a rusty trap. She is just learning. I admit, I didn't know before now either.

Her face is red and sweaty with the effort of me. When I am a little bit cleaned off and in a fresh pair of absorbent underwear products, she sits down on my shower chair with a sigh. She lifts her clear plastic face shield and lowers her fluffy gauze mask.

"It's so hot under here," she tells me.

I sway a bit on my feet. I will be her priestess, too, my hand raised, one palm ejecting and spewing undeserved, whispered blessings to her. I close my eyes and concentrate. *Shh. It's all right, I see you. You are learning. I am proud of you because you are strong and brave and smart and beautiful. Humans have always faced plagues. This pandemic is nothing new to we delicate, persistent creatures. You are doing well. You have a shield and a mask and youth to resist the new virus. You will live with your stories intact. You will accept the gifts of other dead women who have held radiation, scrubbed their skin, and stuck us all with needles to bring us this far. You are precious, as you see that we are all precious. Thank you for your ferocious dedication to my final days. I forgive your resentment. Mama loves you. Go girl, keep learning.*

"Oh, you're having one of your spells. Here."

She gifts me as well. A small cup with a tiny pill inside, and a bottle of fortified lemonade. I love these potions. My sisters, the doctors, and the addicts know these tiny vacations as well. When I lay down after my hike, I'll sleep and dream powerfully tonight. Learn to read your dreams and your aches. Work with them. They are maybe the easiest magic to mistress. Loosen up. Be free.

I find Betty sunken into the too-deep chair by the front door fish tank, on my way to the northwest living-room-play-pen, for another full loop of

the floor. I sit on the sticky upholstery with her, give her my yellow, lemon potion to share. She can use these electrolytes.

"Here, Aunty." I say her favorite title. "It's Kool-Aid. Try a sip."

Excited for her favorite, she drinks the false juice of good salts and sugars.

The assistant with the clenched jaw scolds me again and snatches the refreshment from both of us.

"Mel," she frowns with real ire, "You should know better in a pandemic! You were my favorite biology teacher!"

Foolish child. She's right about the germs, but the secret words to someone's favorites, to get them to take their medicine is another easy spell. If you are too basic to be able to balance your spells, I pity you. Pity is not all bad. There is an easy middle ground between telling your grown children the self-evident truths that you have learned in your crazy years and comforting them that you still know how to speak of current events and other trivialities via Skype. Maybe someday they will know that all magics, pasts, futures, creatures, and technologies—they are all the same, all soft, bendable, and potent. But sing, sing your own song, chorus and reprise. I am here for it. You will forget all of the wrong notes someday, too. Wait. I know a difficult spell. So do you. Let's sing it.

# Contributors

Dr. Paula Aamli is a Humanities graduate with a Masters in Sustainability and a Doctorate in Organisational Change. Her doctoral thesis, "Working through climate grief: A first-person poetic inquiry," explores individual and institutional responses to the emerging climate crisis, using arts-based research and poetry. Paula has had poems published in Allegro Poetry Magazine, Dissonance Magazine, and Shot Glass, a poetry journal of short verse.

Kara Arguello was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and now lives, works, cooks, mothers, and writes in San Jose, California. She has published poems most recently in Across the Margin, Blue Kettle Review, and Red Wheelbarrow. Her work has previously appeared in Cream City Review, The Fourth River, Sugar House Review, on the blog Eat This Poem, among others, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Sarah C. Baldwin is a writer living in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, who has also lived in Pittsburgh, Paris, and Providence. Her work has appeared in Salon, The Rumpus, Thread/Stitch, Stonecoast Review, the Times Educational Supplement, Christian Science Monitor, and elsewhere, as well as in numerous university magazines.

Tegan Bradley was born and raised in southern Maine where received her undergraduate degree in Creative Writing from the University of Maine at Farmington. She is currently living in Alaska while attending Goddard College in pursuit of an MFA in Creative Writing. As a hobby she takes pictures with animal statues.

Kathryn Bratt-Pfotenhauer's work has previously been published or is forthcoming in Beloit Poetry Journal, Meridian, Grist, and elsewhere. They were a poetry semifinalist for the 2017 St. Lawrence Book Award and the 2019 and 2020 recipient of the Bryn Mawr Bain-Swiggett Poetry Prize. They are in their first year at Syracuse University's MFA program in poetry.

Ali Bryan explores the what-ifs, the wtfs and the wait-a-minutes of every day. Her first novel, Roost, won the Georges Bugnet Award for Fiction. Her

second novel, The Figgs, was a finalist for the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour and her YA novel, The Hill, was longlisted for the 2021 Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize. Her stories and essays and have been published in literary journals in Canada, the US and the UK. She lives in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, where she has a wrestling room in her garage and regularly gets choked out by her family.

William Cass has had 250 short stories appear in a variety of literary magazines such as december, Briar Cliff Review, and Zone 3. He was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at Glimmer Train and Black Hill Press, and won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal. He has received one Best Small Fictions nomination, three Pushcart nominations, and his short story collection, Something Like Hope & Other Stories, was recently released by Wising Up Press. He lives in San Diego, California.

Charlotte Covey is from St. Mary's County, Maryland. She earned her MFA in Poetry from the University of Missouri -St. Louis in Spring 2018. She has poetry published or forthcoming in journals such as Painted Bride Quarterly, The Normal School, Salamander Review, CALYX Journal, the minnesota review, Potomac Review, and Puerto del Sol, among others. She is currently a contributing editor for River Styx. Charlotte recently moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee with her partner and their cat, Budlight.

Carolyn Decker is a poet, essayist, and scientist. She studied biological and environmental sciences at Wheaton College and the University of Rhode Island, and was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow. She is particularly interested in wetlands and wildlife, as well as the relationships between people and wild places. She lives in Providence, Rhode Island. Her writing has been published by plain china, From Whispers to Roars, The Menteur, the Rhode Island Naturalist, and The Wildlife Society.

Richard DiPirro is a disabled veteran, and his work has appeared on the National Veterans Foundation website and in the Veterans For Peace newsletter. He have also been published in several magazines, including

Fiction Reader, Fringe Magazine and Raving Dove Literary Journal. He currently resides in Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife and three amazing kids.

Diana Donovan lives in Mill Valley, California with her husband and daughter. A graduate of Brown University, her work has appeared in Cloudbank, Pacific Review, Levee, Plainsongs, Prospectus, and Pithead Chapel.

Gillian Ebersole (she/they) is a dancer and writer who explores the embodied experience of queerness in her poetry and choreography. In particular, their work explores queerness in relation to the structures of conservative religious upbringing. Gillian's debut chapbook, The Water Between Us, won the Charlotte Mew Prize and was published by Headmistress Press in 2021. Gillian believes in yellow bedrooms, sunset dances, and sitting in coffeeshops.

Piper Gourley is a professional ghostwriter from Houston, Texas. Their work has been published in Glassworks Magazine, Etched Onyx, Michigan Quarterly Review: Mixtape, and more. As a ghostwriter, they have published over 650 creative articles across the web.

Richard Jacobs lives in Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in the Sewanee Review, the Penmen Review, and October Hill Magazine. He is at work on a novel.

Kayla Jessop is a graduate of the Master of Art in Writing program at Coastal Carolina University. Her creative nonfiction has been published in Tempo, Harpur Palate, Broad River Review, You Might Need To Hear This, and is forthcoming in other literary magazines. She does her best writing while sitting in coffee shops and daydreaming about possibilities. In her free time, when she's not teaching, she enjoys cross-stitching and watching New Girl.

Eve Jones's poetry and photographs have appeared in such journals as AGNI, Blackbird, DIAGRAM, FIELD, Lydwine, Mid-American Review, Nimrod, Poet Lore, and Vinyl. She is the author of the poetry collection Bird In the Machine (Turning Point Press 2010).

Joel Long's book Winged Insects won the White Pine Press Poetry Prize. Lessons in Disappearance (2012) and Knowing Time by Light (2010) were published by Blaine Creek Press. His chapbooks, Chopin's Preludes and Saffron Beneath Every Frost were published from Elik Press. His poems and essays have appeared in Gettysburg Review, Sports Literate, Prairie Schooner, Bellingham Review, Rhino, Bitter Oleander, Massachusetts Review, Terrain, and Water-Stone Review, among others. He lives in Salt Lake City.

Angie Macri is the author of Underwater Panther (Southeast Missouri State University), winner of the Cowles Poetry Book Prize. Her recent work appears in RHINO, Salamander, and Sugar House Review. An Arkansas Arts Council fellow, she lives in Hot Springs and teaches at Hendrix College.

Beth Mattson is a mother, writer, teacher, and social worker living and working in the high bluffs of Wisconsin.

Meghan E. O'Toole is from Illinois. In 2018, she was awarded LitMag's Virginia Woolf Award for short fiction, and she graduated Summa Cum Laude from Elmhurst College in 2017 with a degree in English and received an MA in English from Western Illinois University in 2021.

James Palmer has been writing for years but recently started submitting his work. He has a B.A. in English literature, but is the Operations Manager at a distribution center 6 miles from home. He lives in Providence, RI with his wife and three children. He enjoys reading, writing, and exploring the city and forests with his family. This is his first published work.

Mandira Pattnaik's writing has been accepted in Best Small Fictions 2021, Timber Journal, Flash: International Short-Short Magazine, Citron Review, Watershed Review, Passages North, Trampset, DASH Journal, Miracle Monocle, Amsterdam Quarterly and Press53 among other places. Her fiction was recently translated into Arabic. Mandira's work was also nominated for the 2021 Pushcart Prize, Best Microfictions, Best of the Net, and received Honorable Mention in CRAFT Flash Contest 2021.

Meagan Perry's work has been published in The Saint Anne's Review, Carolina Quarterly, Another Chicago Magazine, Hypertext, and Columbia Journal. It has been selected for honourable mention in the Glimmer Train Short Story Award for New Writers, was a finalist for the Very Short fiction category in the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Contest, and shortlisted for the 2019 Disquiet Literary Award for Fiction. She is a proud lesbian and draws inspiration from all parts of the queer community. She lives in Toronto.

shelby rice is trying to reach you regarding your car's extended warranty. they received the Montaine Award for Creative Nonfiction in 2020. They have been published in Rejection Letters, Existere Literary Magazine, Thirty West, and more. originally from Dayton, Ohio, they have recently obtained a cane which is also a sword and will tell anyone who listens.

Daniele Skor was born and raised in St. Louis, earned a B.A. at Middlebury College in 2020, and currently teaches high school in Colorado Springs. She loves baking and adding houseplants to her classroom collection. You can also find her work in The Maine Review.

Garrett Stack's first book is Yeoman's Work (Bottom Dog Press, 2020). His poems were most recently published in Third Wednesday, Cider Press Review, and Lucky Jefferson. He teaches at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan.

Gabrielle Tribou is a graduate of Florida State University's creative writing program where she was the recipient of Florida State University's John Mackay Shaw Academy of American Poets Undergraduate Award and a Spotlight Award in Undergraduate Fiction, selected by Pam Houston. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where she works as a high school English teacher.

Matt Whelihan is an assistant professor of English at Wilmington University where he teaches writing and literature courses. His work has appeared in publications such as Slice, The Carolina Quarterly, failbetter, and Hobart. He lives in the Philadelphia area.