



Issue 14

2024

The
Lindenwood
Review

a journal of literary prose

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Creative Nonfiction

All Of It Burns

My husband and I dig a pit in the earth. Out back in the clover I scattered by hand, where the fence is high enough so that we stay hidden, we have conspired to make a fire pit. What we're doing is illegal, but what does it matter now? We're stuck here, together, and the air has only begun to change.

We push our shovels through the clay and the loam, and I see through the lilac branches the tree stump. He doesn't know about it—that it was there, with her the night of our party and how we both leaned into each other, laughing, our arms and the edges of our hands touching. If he did know, I wonder if he'd want to get rid of the stump. But it's too heavy to move, and even if we did, where would it go? The indent in the ground would eventually fill, but we would both remember that it was once there.

When the tips of our shovels hit rock we stop. With gloved hands, we kneel and scoop out the remaining chunks, tear out the roots that poke through, and pat down the sides until they are smooth and even. I take bricks from the garden, three, four, five at a time, my arms strong and tanned from a summer spent in the open air, and arrange them on the small slope of the hole. I try to make a pattern with them even though they will be hidden underneath the wood, the kindling, our balled up bills. But still I do it on my hands and knees, gently tapping their edges with a mallet until they no longer move. My husband pats my ass through my overalls. He has not seen my body in months.

He builds the fire, even though I know how to do it. He's trying to be helpful. Here, he says, sit. Have a beer. But I do not wish to sit and watch, and so I walk the yard looking for small sticks and stems that have gone to seed—milkweed, aster, winged loosestrife. I bend to collect a handful of fallen leaves and my necklace slips from inside my collar. The gold catches my eye; the cursive letters, my initials, the name I was born with. I stand up and hold the small charm between my fingers for a moment before tucking it back underneath my coat.

Over by the playhouse, where she and I shared a cigarette in the dark the last time I saw her, I find branches fallen from the neighbor's dying weeping cherry. The limbs are leafless, and I reach up and snap a few more off. It won't be here next year, I say, might as well make the most of it. Just don't let them see you doing it, he says. They won't, I say, besides, what good is a dead tree to them? He stacks the wood in a teepee shape, and I think of Indigenous people and how in order to survive wars, they fought for the other side even though it meant killing their own. That they had to choose, so impossibly, between life and death.

The fire catches fast, and I sit on the old wicker chair we leave out even when it's raining. The mortgage and the car payment and the student loans and the vet fees turn to ash and land on my legs, my arms. My husband leans over and brushes my knee. Don't bother, I say, we can't escape it. And so he rests his hand on my thigh, and we listen to the logs catch and burn. It's a good fire, he says, we make a good fire. I nod but say nothing, watching the flames dance the way we used to.

Retail Therapy

She thought about clothes. How they followed her to the gym, work, and evening soirées, their fibers picking up the residue of her life, her nicotine sweat after dancing in a boiler room, the wine she drank so she wouldn't have to make small talk, the hours spent in bed hoping the day would brood just as she did. They breathed beside her, strewn haphazardly on the foot of her bed or the kitchen counter. She wondered if they witnessed the coconut oil her date massaged unto her thighs, which she now poured into a frying pan, if they saw him caress the trench between her ribs and never quite palm her breasts, fearful of their smallness. Had they seen her long-distance lover fall asleep within two seconds of lying in bed while she stayed awake wondering how he could be so unmoved by the fact that they were naked and together, as opposed to clothed and apart? Did they see her staring at the ceiling, wondering if men's emotions could appear and disappear with a woman's body, triggered by object impermanence? Men buttered their bodies on hers but they never really held her, not like fabric, sheathing her from the elements or accompanying her into uncomfortable spaces, refuting the most intimate parts of her and weathering the strain of time, warming her perennially frozen body because temperature is an emotion and nothing else quite fits like the gloves that mold and protect her hands, touching what she's touched, wanting nothing, giving everything.

Between a Lake and a Mountain

My father is eighty-two years old. He is not as strong as he once was. He used to be the strongest man I knew. When I was still very small, he'd play like a horse on the floor. When I was a teenager he'd throw a frisbee with me at the beach and could help me with any homework I couldn't understand.

That was many years ago. I am now a middle-aged woman. I try to spend the day with him at least once a week. I take him out to lunch and we play cards because he doesn't have the same energy he once had. I often worry about him. He is unsteady on his feet more often than I would like to admit. He has seen many doctors about this and they have explained the cause as old age.

He has lived by himself since my mother died fifteen years ago. She had lung cancer that metastasized to her brain. She had been coughing up blood for months but kept this to herself until the day she couldn't push her right foot on the brake pedal at a stop sign. She crashed into a tree, was taken to the emergency department and found out she had just months to live.

Ten years before that she became dependent on morphine after she was involved in a car accident. My father was driving, my mother was in the passenger seat. Another driver on a cross street ran through the red light. The other driver didn't have a license. There was a photograph of the other driver in the local paper the next day. He was sitting on a curb with his head in his hands. His face was covered by his hair. I never heard what happened to him.

At the end of her life my mother stopped eating like the hospice nurse told us she would. In the end, she stopped talking. After she went quiet I realized I waited too long to say sorry, to hear her say sorry. I can't remember the last time she told me she loved me. I last told her I loved her after she couldn't say anything back. When she died she was alone. My father says he was asleep upstairs when she took her last breath in the living room lying

on a hospital bed. I wasn't there. I was over three thousand miles away finishing school.

My father retired from practicing law a couple years ago. He mostly helped his clients with estate planning. When I was still a child he often said he decided not to be a trial lawyer because he wanted to be able to eat dinner with his family every night.

My father loves to read. He emails me articles from three national newspapers every day. When I have time I respond, but as a practicing physician and parent myself I am busy most days. Besides being a father, being an attorney made up most of his identity. I make promises to myself that I won't let this happen to me.

Last night I had a vivid dream. A sleeping child was in the back seat of my car. The moon broke itself on the windshield. My father used to call this kind a child's moon, how it was stuck in the sky just after sundown, like it's not ready to go home. There was only one child in the car, even though I have two, and she looked so small holding onto a faded plush toy. She was much smaller and younger than either of my children are now.

There was a blue lake behind me, bluer than I thought blue could be. There were no streetlights around me and the coming darkness of the early evening made it hard to clearly make out my surroundings. Even when I turned the headlights on all I could see was a black mountain at the end of the road. The mountain was very far away and as tall as the sky. In the way you know things only as you can in a dream, I knew that my father was ill and unable to get out of bed. I knew I had to get to him soon, so I started to drive on the two-lane road and tried to follow its twists and turns. I knew I didn't really know where I was going.

Falling Back to Earth

A few months back, just before my 37th birthday, I decided to go skydiving again. I expected that the experience would dilute the fears and anxieties that had been troubling me. I told myself that this singular act would reignite passion and meaning from the embers of monotony of adult life. After all, my expectations had been cultivated by my prior experiences skydiving. From age 23 to 25, I had jumped 10 or so times, and had seriously considered getting certified. Jumping had provided emotional and psychological readjustments that were more impactful than therapy, Prozac, or half-marathons. In large part, I credited skydiving with keeping me sober for almost two years at that time. But I ought to have known that expectations lead to disappointment and I shouldn't have been surprised that skydiving now would not grant me instant clarity—if it had ever really provided this kind of divine vision at all. Nostalgia is cunning. Lucidity, or at least a better understanding of my angst, would come eventually. It would just take some time, as things often do.

As I drove 20 miles south on the New Jersey Parkway to Egg Harbor—just north of Atlantic City—to go to the small airport, I reflected on my life. I had recently submitted my resignation to the DC-based company for which I worked remotely as a federal proposal writer. I had been at the job for just shy of a year. It seemed to be going nowhere and my manager didn't know how to manage and it was all growing more and more absurd. It was a good job, I suppose, but there were lots of jobs like it, and I found a replacement that paid me 20 percent more. If I was going to do that kind of work—which I didn't enjoy and which I certainly wasn't passionate about—then I figured I might as well take some time off and get a job that paid more. I believed my motives for quitting were reasonable, and now I found myself with three weeks to think.

My life had changed. I had just gotten my driver's license back after being sidelined by the State of New Jersey for a DUI. This time around, I hadn't had a drink in almost a year. My relationship with my family

had been rebuilt, and my parents had even given me a key to their house, trusted me to watch their dog while they were away, and often invited me to dinner. The relationship with the much younger woman, Candice, whom I was dating, had hit a consistent streak of domesticity: everything was okay and that made me anxious and suspicious. As much as I wanted to leave town and travel and live in a different city every month for a year—as I had wanted to do for a long time—I didn't trust myself and knew it would be as much of a bid of escapism as drinking, and would likely lead to drinking anyway. I felt trapped in a bubble of the banal, unsure of how to break out.

The weight that I never put on in my 20s and early 30s was showing up on the scale. But there was money in the bank. Silver hairs were revealing themselves more often in my thick brown hair, but I had a car—a practical choice of a Ford Fusion rather than the Cadillacs or Camaros I had previously driven. I had been smoking cigarettes for 21 years but was still often asked for my ID when buying those cigarettes. I wasn't writing many essays, but I was making six figures by writing for *The Man*. Nothing was really wrong, but I felt like I was living someone else's life. I felt frozen. In the past, when I felt like this and life hit a plateau, I always picked up a drink again and hit the reset button. I treated life like it was a game of Sonic the Hedgehog that my friends and I played as kids: when the Sega froze and we sat there in frustration, we just hit the power button and started again.

And so, the idea of jumping out of a plane seemed like a healthier reset, and, like a game of Sonic, it was nostalgic. First, I yearned for a familiar jolt that would again provide a zest for life. Second, I yearned to return to that time in my mid-twenties when everything seemed possible—when all doors were still open. As I approached 37, it struck me that I had arrived somewhere, and I had never really arrived anywhere before.

I had made it, hadn't I? I had survived the worst parts of my addiction and was approaching a year of sobriety. But somewhere in there, survival had taught me to forget how to live and I was left with the gnawing feeling that although I had stopped drinking, I was unsure that I had changed. Maybe I was a bit kinder, a bit more empathetic, and a bit more responsible. But maybe I had simply stopped acting on the thoughts that had gotten me into trouble in the past: deliberate imprudence with women, thoughtful recklessness with money, and the absolute belief that I could still function

in the world with a glass of whiskey and a line of cocaine. Those thoughts were still there, I just hadn't done anything about them.

The skydiving center tried to get me on the plane quickly because a storm was moving up the coast. I initialed the paperwork without reading it, and although I was told I would watch an instructional video, the thick-German-accented instructor simply provided 60 seconds of training from the inside of a retired plane cabin that sat in the hanger. I gave my thumbs up. I wasn't anxious. I would step out onto the wheel with him behind me before we leaped together. The simplicity of jumping was coming back to me.

In the small, seatless plane we shimmied up next to the pilot and the three of us made our way up 13,000 feet in 15 or 20 minutes. The rain was a couple of miles in the distance, over the ocean, and appeared as a haze. I remember seeing a storm like that from a plane window when taking off from south Florida with a wicked hangover in my early twenties. The instructor opened the plane door—a translucent plexiglass garage-like door—the rain becoming more distinct, casting a shadow over the ocean in the distance. I could see Atlantic City to the south, where I had decided to stop gambling after my 21st birthday. On that night, I had maxed out credit cards on cash advances at the Trump Taj Mahal—a casino that no longer existed. With the plane door open, I had an incredible sense of aloneness. Not loneliness, but just the recognition of the aloneness of living that I had first woken up to with my consciousness at some point in my teens. I had never gone skydiving without friends. And in that minute before I put my foot out the door and onto the wheel, I thought about the friends I had been skydiving with, and the friendships that had been given away through a wormhole of time, addiction, and distance. Friendships don't get lost. Neither did jobs or cars or freedom. In addiction, I gave my life away: family, health, friends, confidence, career, reliability, money, integrity. Nothing was ever lost. Addiction may have taken love and possessions, but it asked first.

The falling felt familiar, and I couldn't help but smile. The goggles weren't as tight as they needed to be on my left eye, so I kept it closed for most of the jump. I found myself looking out at the storm and the ocean and the green stretches of the Pine Barrens with one eye open.

The best part about skydiving is the anticipation. The falling seems to happen almost in a blackout—the parachute snapping open like I’ve woken up in a hospital, drunk, wondering how I had gotten there. Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to it. It’s familiar. The scariest part is floating to the ground, when there is time to recognize that a flimsy harness and a chunk of fabric are all that prevents me from crashing to the ground. Mortality lurks, and I like it.

Life had become the antithesis of chaos, and I didn’t really know how to push through the constant adulating. Suddenly, I had woken up on the express train to middle age. I was unmarried, without kids, and with the longest relationship of my life stacking up to two years (if I’m being generous). Sure, I had gotten a couple of graduate degrees and traveled extensively and found myself with a kind and patient and beautiful woman. But I had also spent much of my adult life in rehab and 12-step meetings and hospitals. I just never expected to live this long.

I didn’t think much about skydiving by myself because doing things by myself is just part of life these days: no one is around to jump out of a plane on a Friday morning in mid-June. And maybe there aren’t a whole lot of people my age who decide that this is a good way to get their affairs in order. Oh well.

I am not jealous of my friends who are married, have children, or own their own homes. In moments of loneliness or uncertainty, my life of unattachment—or deliberate detachment—seems unabatingly selfish and meaningless. But I still bear the guilt, and sometimes shame, for the hell that I put people through. Even if I have made my own way through much of it, I keep people at a distance, like that storm from the plane.

A few days after falling back to Earth, I got in a car with Candice and we drove north to the lower Catskills in New York. We spent four days hiking and taking baths and eating vegetarian food. We stopped off at the university where I went to undergrad—a place I hadn’t been since those early skydiving days. And then we stopped at the house where I lived senior year, which my friends and I called the Green Briar. It was in that house, 16 years before, that I had tried to take my own life.

The house still stood, barely—roof collapsed from fire damage, overgrown with ivy and weeds and trees. My friends and I had been the last renters, and the house had been left to return to nature. That seemed

fitting. I stood at the base of the driveway, unable to maneuver up to the house as the rest of the gravel road had been overtaken by thick brush, as if there had never been a driveway at all. The Green Briar had been left to the world and no one wanted it. It was as if the damage done there had bled into the ground, rendering the property uninhabitable like a decades-old gas station with leaky tanks, unworthy of even demolition. The basement of that home had a dirt floor with an abandoned workshop from the 1920s. My friends often wondered if it was haunted. I never believed that. I've come to believe that if ghosts exist, they aren't found in a century-old house or Revolutionary War barracks or abandoned mental hospitals. No, if ghosts exist, they are inside of us, and we have to find a way to live with them.

People like me go to 12-step meetings and yoga and counseling sessions. We smoke too many cigarettes, drink too much coffee, live in recovery houses, work at diners. Sometimes we quit smoking and move out of those sober homes and become your doctor or your teacher or your counselor or your Senator or your professor. Maybe we were these things all along. But we all have a Green Briar.

I know that even if I don't know what I'm doing, I don't have to throw a grenade on my life just because I'm having thoughts about blowing it up. I can make mistakes. I can be reckless. It's my life, after all. One thing I don't have to do is pick up a drink. I don't have to give away all the good things in my life, even if sometimes I feel that overwhelming sense of aloneness.

I drove home from the Catskills, dropped off Candice, and spent a couple of days with myself. It seemed that the skydive hadn't affected me. But it had. It was just subtle, like a shift in the wind. I spent a lot of time in quiet. I ate good meals. I walked. I wrote. I read. I watched films. And I sat out on the porch and watched a storm roll in with both eyes open. Sometimes it's hard to pay attention. Sometimes it's hard to be at peace with the things that I've done. And it's okay to feel that way. It's okay to be uneasy. The only way to change is to feel it.

Inheritance

We met early one Saturday. Two sisters unlocking a door to that still room. Dust swirling as light streamed from one small curtained window near the worn chair that was her final resting place. What remains?

A wall covered with photos of smiling grandchildren, tape peeling from the wall. Stacks of yellow legal pads on the floor and felt-tip pens for easy reach to draw a sketch or take notes as she watched her favorite political show, *Firing Line*, Buckley's caustic wit and erudite speech breaking down an opponent's arguments. On a crowded bookshelf, a few volumes of classics and a Rembrandt art book that one son gave to honor a mother so gifted in art.

In the bedroom, a photo of a handsome man in a fireman's cap and jacket, the photo's glass frame smudged with fingerprints of the widow who greeted this husband with a smile and kiss before rising from the bed each day. On a nightstand, a glass of water, medicine bottles, a rubber-banded book bulging with prayer cards, and a silver metal rosary, the beads still bearing the impressions of teething babies that were held by the nursing mother, her days buoyed by moments of prayer.

And then the cherished discovery, a tattered envelope filled with yellowed newspaper clippings, a drawing of a young soldier holding his first-born son, and wartime letters, mementos of love, linking a young couple during years of separation.

What remains? Not an heirloom necklace, hefty trust account, or a family mansion. What is passed on? A love of curiosity, a passion for creativity, and a devotion to faith and family. What remains? An inheritance of love.

Without

What's happened to me?

Friends and family have mostly gone before me into that long good night. Those that remain are as entangled in their own mortality as I am in mine. We have nothing, and everything, in common. I can't bear to see them anymore, can't tolerate their searching eyes and their need to touch me to see if I am real.

Where I once solicited companions with whom to go to movies and walk in the park, now I do those things alone. Where I once sought lovers to lay with me and quell my fears, now I am quiet in the darkness. I seek only my own counsel. I talk only to my dog. I revel and worry and contemplate by myself.

These are the years of wisdom. I have earned them with many missteps and many false analyses. I don't need things anymore. I have purged my house of the detritus of a misspent life. I have dropped relationships by the wayside like so many neglected crumbs. I have ignored the dogmatic truths that once ruled me.

Only the essence remains, looks out at the world through wizened eyes. It is not without appreciation or humor that I see myself. Those things are there, under the heavy cloak of sheer astonishment. I can't believe what I have come to. It is neither good nor bad but is nonetheless a shock to my system. I have become a monument to my past, a husk deprived of the sap that once ran through me. Sometimes I think that I will wither and drift away like a winter leaf, no longer a part of the whole. Or that one day I will simply forget to breathe.

But I go on. And, in my way, I thrive. Like a Southwestern sunset or a giant redwood, I persevere against all odds. Not eaten away at by useless details or worried about the thin veneer of civilization, I can make my own way into the darkness. I have constructed a sense of time and place that no one else inhabits. Only myself. And there is a little bit of room for my memories and my dog. My dog smiles when she sees me. She knows things.

Have I withered into foolishness? Are none of these revelations real or relevant? Have I come to a sorry end where I am traipsing on beyond my rightful time? That can't be the case because here I am. Not eternal, but as close as anyone comes to it.

When I was fifty, I doubted myself. When I was sixty, I doubted everyone else. Then, at seventy and beyond, I knew things. My body had indeed become my temple, vine-covered and alone in the jungle, witness to the wind and the screeching of tropical birds overhead. It had become as precious as diamonds, and as hard. Without it I am nowhere and no one.

There was another time when I needed love and comfort. I can't remember how long past that was. Now I need only myself. Everything crucial is within me. Around me orbit superficial bits of the past, like colored confetti, distracting but in no way real. It peppers my thoughts but adds no value.

Now, when I gaze outside my own perimeter, I see other people living other lives. It is hard to imagine they will be me one day. It makes no sense to think they will come to the place where I have come. Our paths are different. Our destinations cannot be the same. They will always need their bible and their laws and their loved ones. They will never be free.

Then what of my own situation? Have I come to that sorry end? Am I the fool to know that none of what I say is true? Not at all, I tell myself. Nothing is true. Nothing is false. I am only a woman meandering by herself in the darkness, getting ready to do the one thing we all do alone.

But I'm not quite ready yet.

My Father Has Always Been Dying

Despite his claims to the contrary, my father's office reminded me of a hoarder's mess. Something I knew he was intimately familiar with, given how he cleaned up my uncle's home twice a year. He spoke with disgust about the decades worth of garbage. Newspapers, plastic bags, and several hundred cockroaches buried my uncle. My father always promised he wasn't like that. And for the most part our house was tidy. It was only when we ascended to his haven, his den of bills and online card games, that we found the paystubs from the '70s and the endless business cards and every scrap of spare paper he had ever picked up. Boxes and boxes of cables, more than we knew what to do with, attached to nothing but coiled neatly, over—under, the way he had taught me. Containment of a problem does not mean the problem doesn't exist.

It's fascinating how some people think they are ordinary while others think those people are extraordinary. Such was the case with my father and I—he believed himself to be a very boring man with a boring life, and I thought he had led an extremely interesting life and as a result was a very interesting man. The son of Jewish German immigrants, thirteen years younger than his brother, orphaned by age fifteen, he had been seemingly everywhere, seen everything.

He told me stories of growing up in Chicago, his travels throughout the country working for various productions, living all over. There was a list of things he still wanted to do, of course—go back to school, take my mother to Hawaii, hold his grandkids. He promised me a trip to Germany, just the two of us.

I don't know if I'll ever stop grieving for all that he did not get to do.

When they met, my mother was thirty-two, my father forty-one, and he had no life savings. He lived in a hotel room sized apartment, did freelance work, and had been a bachelor for years. He had never lived in a house

until he and my mother bought one. But by all accounts I've heard—he was happy.

I didn't know what tumors were when I was younger. Of course not. When the adults spoke of it, my imagination conjured up a strange sea being, some porous, dried barnacle or coral. It sent a shiver of disgust down my spine, imagining such a thing sitting delicately on the back of my father's tongue. My young mind saw other things differently as well, bringing a child's innocence to the harshness of disease. When I learned chemo was a medicine, I thought it came in a little orange bottle with a childproof lid. After we went to bed, and it was time for my father's meal, I saw in my head my mother spooning a plate full of food—pasta, chicken, vegetables—down his feeding tube.

I didn't know he threw most of it up later. My mother only told me that recently.

My mother remembers how many people thought my dad was my grandfather, when I was little and we were out together. He was old, there's no getting around that. He felt insecure about it too, he told me later, when he showed up for parent-teacher night in elementary school, and there was a mob of young thirty-somethings looking at him, all gray and thinning hair before his time. But I never knew him any differently. On some level, I think I realized that it was strange my father was so old, but what could I do about it? Just enjoy every moment with him, I supposed.

But this is all about my father. This is supposed to be my story, my memoir. But here is the problem: I am defined by the absence of my father. It is certainly not my only definition; I am many, many other things. But when I try to write stories, they always seem to veer into death, into old men, into parental affection. To suffering. When I try to escape my definition, I might as well be a word attempting to escape a dictionary. I should be fair to myself—my mother has yet to escape her definition of widow.

I am haunted. To be clear: I believe in ghosts. No, I don't think my father is one. He's haunting me regardless. I see him in every sailboat I spot in the distance, every red Prius that passes me on the highway, in every bag of gourmet coffee beans. My mother sees him in the cardinals and

butterflies in our yard. I think of him every time I see a gray haired man, every time I hear a boisterous laugh turn into a hacking cough.

How about this: my father drove me home from dance, sometimes six days a week, for years. Looking back, it was the height of fatherly love, spending every evening waiting to collect a tired, complaining, and rank teenager. And yet when I got out of class, usually at 9:30pm, sweaty and irritated and feeling very bad about myself, he was always waiting for me. Radio on—NPR, or jazz, or an audiobook—we often drove without conversation, and, as per his rules, no looking at phones in his car. Other nights, when I had learned something fascinating at school, or when I had read a good book, or simply when I had some strange, philosophical thought, we would talk. He loved to hear me speak about things I was interested in, and he inevitably had some thoughts that would lead to a debate or an even deeper discussion. My mother will tell you I resisted getting my driver's license out of stubbornness or anxiety, but truthfully, when else would I have seen my father? We ate breakfast in the morning together, but I was too bleary and grumpy to have any sort of conversation then. Besides that, the thought of sinking into his passenger seat and closing my eyes was sometimes all that got me through dance class.

There's a small, peaceful graveyard surrounded by trees tucked away on a side street just off the main road I took to go to and from dance. That's where my father is buried. We drove past it for years and never knew it was there.

Our breakfasts were important too, I don't mean to imply otherwise. I will never forget the scent of coffee in the air, or how irritated I got when the first thing I heard in the morning was the loud screaming of my father's bean grinder. When I ate my sugary cereal with my hands—I had a strange aversion to silverware in my earlier years—my father tsk-tsked at me and asked if I was going to eat with my fingers when I dined with the Queen. He made eggs for himself, over salted and peppery, but always allowed me to steal several bites off his plate. We listen to classical music in the morning, and my cue to leave for the bus was when the smooth voiced announcer said, "And now, time for your morning Bach..."

As I darted out the door to grab the bus, he would throw me an easy question, calling out, “What’s two plus two?” only so I could retort, “Three!” The other phrase that followed me in the morning was when he said, “You’re beautiful and smart, and which is more important?” I would flick my hair or bat my eyes and answer cheerfully, “Beautiful!”

On my last day of high school, the placid announcer said, “And we have a special announcement for today. Rick Segall told us that his daughter has been listening to our classical program for years now, and is about to graduate! Congratulations...”

It wasn’t my choice to listen to that show, but I loved it anyway.

I could tell you it was the stroke that killed my father. A series of minor ones, ignored due to my father’s habit of downplaying his own health concerns, discovered when my mother forced him into the ER. Then “the big one”—the one that made the doctors sit down with our family and say all those nice words like, “It might be possible,” and “There’s a chance.” I could tell you it was the cancer, and that wouldn’t be a lie. For fifteen years after he went into remission, the lingering effects of radiation clogged the arteries in my father’s neck. I could tell you it was destiny, fate, his genes: neither of his parents made it past fifty-seven, so sixty-eight was a success story, for him.

I could tell you that it was a shock—and it was! I didn’t expect my life to change on a random summer Thursday morning. But I look back and in the end it seems like everything my father’s life led to that morning. Like it was inevitable.

Or I could tell you simply: my father is dead. And that must, necessarily, affect my story now.

Prose Poems

Meat and Shell

When the doctor tells you the bad news, you collect his words, which drop like peanuts into your lap—peanuts you intend to give to the squirrels. You consider eating one or two, but these are peanuts to be buried in the earth, and forgotten, for the winter, or forever. You'll dig one up someday, unable to remember how you allowed the pile to build, like a mini peanut pyramid, upon your thighs. You, looking at the doctor attentively, quizzically, nodding, making the *emm-emm* sounds that say *I'm listening* and *isn't this interesting* while the floor of your stomach drops like an elevator cut loose and hurtling down the shaft. Meanwhile, you are being pelted in the face with peanut words: malignancy, metastasis, dysplasia, bad blood counts, and organs going awry—parts you didn't know you had, parts you'd be fine to be rid of, no loss there, *come take them*, you think, nodding pleasantly, good naturedly, plummeting toward the Earth's center, meeting the stench and bitter taste of it. How lovely the dirt that holds you, the dirt in which you're buried, meat and shell. How far you've traveled, effortlessly, from light, from land, from the sweet claws that held you. What bliss, you think, to be savored again someday, resurrected in the brilliant light of day only to be greeted by the mandibles of your captor. Ask the doctor. Ask the doctor how this one turns out.

Lime the Mud

Tourists gone, except for us. We splurge for a sleep by water. Sun's up. The mist makes all soft hue of steel, uncertain—like my trek of late. A white-tailed kite wings through, alone in frills of fog—no, a bird beneath flaps along in the very same rhythm. I'm wrong again—a water mirror made a twin, a presence that can't be touched. I feel it so myself.

While time sails on, three fowl of brown poke beaks down, grasping mud snails from the muck. Marbled Gobwit brunch too—they're year-round nesters. Birds—tens of thousands—winter here but can't be seen.

The mist pulls back. Between tendrils, an anchored trawler sullied white. A wide stripe of red streaks it. Above black wings beat, a string unfurling—sooty shearwaters go far. A single heron stands tall and regal. Staring, still, and ready to strike. Its spear yanks out little sand dabs. How many to fill its stomach? The tide ebbs and water recedes. How will I feed in years to come? Bits of algae lime the mud stretching far and farther out.

I Am Pain

On a highway in Florida in the early '80s, a small family of three ended up in a devastating car crash. A man watched his wife bleed to death on the side of the road; his two year old nestled on the grass beside her. When my father tells me this story, I am less than ten, not entirely sure what it means to have had a wife before my mother. Or what it means to have a brother considered only half, not wholly mine. What I am is a child that understands ghosts and how they haunt not only homes, but people, too. What I never ask is whether I would still exist had my brother's mother never died that day. Then I understand that my very existence I owe to my father's deep, bottomless grief. Just as my birth came about from my mother's own excruciating pain. I am pain, I think.

 asks what being loved feels like*after K. Iver*

and I have to admit I'm still not sure. Maybe something like the fear of losing, or letting go. But the fear is mingled with sweat and joy and wonder at the possibilities of holding on. So maybe more like a clenched fist slowly releasing its tension, relaxing into the palm of someone else's hand. Mostly it feels like belonging, in both senses of the word. Having somewhere to go, someone to go to. And the weight of responsibility; belonging to someone, and someone belonging to you. Possession without the threat. It's like a lock clicking shut, and the safety of knowing exactly where the key is. It's like knees giving out and arms holding you up before you even realize you're falling. It's that tight clench of the heart when something goes wrong, and that long sigh of relief when everything goes right. It's hearing your name, your name, held in someone else's mouth. Choosing what to give and what to keep, what to tell and what never needs to be spoken. Endless choices and the ability to fix your mistakes. Cowering under the sight of someone before learning to look back. And then looking back endlessly. Watching lips part and chest rise and tracing a small scar traveling through the fine hairs of a limp arm. Someone feeling safe enough to sleep with you watching over. I'd say I hope eventually I learn that same safety, feeling my body sink into a bed not my own and my eyelids so heavy I can't keep them open and knowing somewhere inside me that nothing could go wrong. But even if it did, it wouldn't mean harm. I think maybe being loved feels like knowing there is time for things to work out. So I don't quite know yet and I'm never sure how long I'll last but when I give myself the gift of suspended disbelief I can start to imagine a future where I'm alive long enough to learn what being loved feels like. I'd say something like that.

Salt Orchid

the orchid curls into itself, bleeding pale pink like the inside of shell, teacup on the kitchen table. her hands are rubbed raw from clothes washed in the sink, cotton to skin still damp, fingertips the color of blush. the morning seeps through the window; dew, frost, mist into the dust-filled room. in this room, she once told someone that this life is worth living, as a record worth playing spun and crackled a song they could dance to, easy. in the stillness, she wondered who she was, still. suitcase in the corner of the room, eyelashes thin, dirt under fingernails, car in the driveway in need of repair but she lived young and unaware. she is a soul remembered by a town who let her go; the return unexpected for them both. woods here are a wild place—old engine oil into soil, into maple roots, into throats of rabbits rustling beneath the undergrowth. wildflowers pull against the coats of coyotes. I stand beneath the canopy of green and think of the girl, her orchid eyes, speckled and open, her questions, her desire to understand the purpose of roots and veins and the blood flow beneath our skin. and how she forgives the rabbit for dying, the coyote for hunting, nature for teaching her how to dance, hungry and wild, ivy to stone to sparrow wing, free. the town inhales and exhales, cuts pathways to homes and lives separated by tall fences, gardens, niceties. lives connected by phone calls, hands held, dogs winding through seas of legs and summer days. the little yellow dog tells me that loving is a verb to be nurtured and warmed. she tells me mud-streaked, soaked from the river across the way: *this life opens for you*. I cannot take the hand of the young girl; she is a version of me from a long time ago still peering into rain puddles with dreams of worlds beyond their reflections, un-blurred, repaired, her father waiting at home holding her mother's hand, the family dog still alive, a family of four. I let this town hold me differently now, thorn in ankle, sun against cheek, footsteps left in mud, salt cracked against fingertips. the phone rings, the orchid loses a petal; I find a new record, and press play.

Below the Firmament

Not quite drunk where long grass meets the lake with bluegill finning in the shallows and the curtain lifting on June afternoon as we kindly call it, tree shade here to kiss your neck and the can sweating on the arm of the chair warm but still welcome in this heat and the voices tumble down the hill behind you. For a moment at least you're alone and perfect, like that fish drifting into skinny water, lost in some momentary dream of ease where it can all be seen coming over the light sand. Yes the lake floor slopes gradually to some murk where the sightless grope under cold thermoclines, down where feelers reach from aborted machines rusting in heaps, and yes the hill is one you must sweat to climb again and answer to your own name, but this is not pretending. It is not some satori of sandals and green algae and it is not pretending, even if you rise a bit unsteady and spook the fish with your shadow, even as damselflies skip across the film and you almost have the answer to a question you never thought to ask aloud. Far above pelicans soar pure wings without bodies and this is the firmament created to separate waters, ever changing yet arched right here above tree and dock, this is the light that comes to define each easy wave, each turning leaf in the blessed breezes of June.

from underwater

to list the things you've lied to yourself about would be to burst open with confession. to start a sentence as storied and weighted as a river; to never stop pouring out. your teeth eroding like boulders in the current. in place of plaque, moss filming your mouth like a cave. you'll wish you'd paid the world more attention before you started seeing it through a lens. from underwater everything appears warped. coming up for air is not always the solution. risks will take you, whether you equip a safety net or not. ropes pulled taut tend to snap. backdoors seal themselves with cement, damming the floodwaters. face forward like a moth careening into the warmth of the flame. where your gaze falls, light. yet shadows advance over every other horizon. you can only face one pole at a time, turning your back on one to prioritize the other. there is no need for intention to parallel outcome. see, regardless of meaning, the words, cadence and all, impress upon burgeoning memories. you speak in fragments, creating only a partial understanding for your listeners. let them into your world, cloaking all in shadow but a narrow corridor of stagnant, harsh light. your eyes are fully opened yet only halfway. this is as far as you've come. we occupy the entryway—a vestibule of space separate from time. one cramped room of a worn and tired house.

Just Below the Nose, a Hole

There are teeth on the subway. A representation of teeth, really. Ceci n'est pas une teeth. An advertisement for dental care. A woman smiling, not her whole face, just the lower half, mouth open, upturned in service of some disconnected joy. This poster of teeth, fangs bare, Nosferatu, so white. All lined up in a row, pressed together, no gaps. Sunk into the pink flesh. The longer I stand here staring at these enlarged mandible prongs, the more sinister they become. What are these visible bones that just sit in the wet window of flesh and get sensitive in the cold air? Teeth, bones, hardness that flows through an otherwise pleasant face and ends in little alabaster knots in meat beds. Has this person ever had a cup of coffee? A glass of red wine before bed? Some cotton candy before robbing an armored car? There's nowhere else on this subway for me to look. To my left is someone far too attractive to be glancing at. To my right is someone far too unfortunate to dwell on. I can only look ahead, right into the mouth of cleanliness, glossy finish beneath the thin pane: teeth. Not white but pearly, not perfect but better: well-maintained, aloof, affluent—These Teeth Have Been To That New Place, the place with the good bread, the wait at the door is always an hour. These teeth will get the check, it's fine, I mean it's only money. Don't be so uptight. Relax—you should free your mind, you know, travel to Europe—it's good for the back. Teeth! Teeth! Counting them now, oh, I'll see you in my dreams, picket fences around a perfect house, a rectangular sign that says beware of tongue.

post-surgery blues in e minor

my father tells me, crouched on the bathroom stool, that a scar still bleeding must be some form of regret or whatever. he ends most sentences with a casual “man.” i dab tissue behind his ear where his aneurysm honeyed out thirty years ago, my age, a mudpie of flesh tucked under slick black hair. a german doctor sawed the abscess off twice before a tassel of blood softened into a toad’s back a week later. normally my sister does this. the dirty work. our father in a closer state than the antique of a hug. he can’t help talking while i wash it, his jaw an eccentric crank of a locomotive, an obstacle. in the ’80s a surgeon would’ve been terrified as a man who looked as if he didn’t belong in a BDU, uncharmed by anesthesia, warmed conversation like they were sipping beers in the village square. maybe in another life they are friends, skiing with the avalanche crew, finding first loves five different times in Kissingen alone. but i wished my father would’ve said to me something like how a man shouldn’t have to wear a grave or a crown even if you’ve slept in a foreign jail cell. or because of the smoke he’s put in my lungs. or dammit, man, how you can sleep without blankets in winter long enough to know what death feels like. that warmth, that flower of a cigarette in your chest. how all bad shit can be good shit, man. i wish he could remember what i don’t either, the lives of my grandparents before they were picture frames, the feeling of holding him, the pull of a trigger aimed toward a grave, deer watching us without a flinch. the gauze sanctions tight under his golf cap, his bald patch a faint half-moon, lurching up & away as if i had done nothing. he has nothing left to fear.

Speak So Well

People say you speak so well. Every phrase numbly enunciated to hide any pain. Diction scrubbed clean of the struggle with rags and spray bottles of the strongest disinfectant linguistic camouflaging can buy. All day your words hold value if spoken with your milk voice. All day they rub against frustration, daring friction to kindle flames. When you speak so well, you can become an exception to typecasting, sometimes. Like language is a suit you hang in your closet every evening and take out each morning. Eventually, flat dialogue floats towards deaf ears just because, because in the end, you don't belong, and there's no guaranteed way to be heard, to know for sure they listen, to feel respected as your syllables get whitewashed with a smile.

fiction

A Good Storm

I crouch, silent, under the dark rattan kitchen table and listen to the roar of cold water filling the bathtub in the next room. My knees are pulled up to my chest, or at least as far up as my belly rolls will allow. Too many Little Debbie snack cakes and *I Dream of Jeannie* reruns this summer, I guess.

I have a companion down here with me, in the back corner under the burnt orange Naugahyde booth—a dead cockroach, belly up, spindly legs dangling up over its body. It's one of the big ones, a Palmetto, about an inch or two long and brown like dark chocolate, the ones who live with us and around us despite Daddy setting roach motels around the house for them. Momma says that having palmetto bugs live with you is okay, and that it doesn't mean your house is dirty. They were here first, so we agree to live among them. She says that only if you see those little light brown cockroaches running around, the German ones, that's when your house is dirty. But Momma says a lot of things.

Right now, she's telling me about the storm that's on its way.

"This one came up quick, Amy Lou!" She shouts over the constant crash of the bathwater. "You stay under there until we see what these winds are going to do!"

My whole family loves a good storm, but no one more than Momma. Every time it rains, she takes my hand and pulls me onto the front porch right when it's at its worst, letting the rain ricochet in a spray onto our faces, letting the thunder roll through our bones, letting the wind pull my long black hair to the side.

"Isn't it wild?!" Momma would scream into the wind, her wet face upturned to the blackened sky. "Isn't it glorious?!"

I pick at a corner of the worn linoleum underneath me, and stare at its yellow and brown pattern until my eyes go out of focus. Stale crumbs of French bread, like dry shards of glass, stab at my black-bottomed bare feet. Momma makes masking tape Xs on the windows so when they shatter, the glass will catch inside the X.

It's lunchtime, but the skies get dark like midnight. Lightning flashes through the sky, and the room around me lights up white-blue like a camera flash that quick-fades to pure darkness as the power blips out.

"Here we go!" Momma shouts.

There's no room for fear as I scoot out from under the table. Momma rushes to the dining room, yelling, "I've got the front one!" She flicks off that window air conditioning unit as I sprint for the back room. I stand on my tiptoes to turn off the unit in the high window at the back of the den. My fingers stretch past their limits to reach the power button at the very top.

Click.

We did it. Daddy will be proud when he gets home and sees we didn't blow another fuse when the power pops back on.

Momma pulls out the large box of matches, labeled "TOP" with black marks-a-lot on one side, my daddy's handwriting preventing me from sliding it open upside down and spilling the matchsticks all over the floor. Digging in the bottom kitchen drawer, she finds one pink and three purple tapered candles, half-spent leftovers from Lent. I grab the stack of small, dusty plates from the back of the cabinet and hand her one by one. She lights the candles then tilts them to let some wax drip onto a plate before standing the candle up in it. As far as I know, this is the only use for these plates. They are painted with pink and gold roses. They are chipped around the edges.

The thunder comes cracking fast and hard now, and the windows start shaking. A terrible sound comes from our yard that isn't thunder at all. Momma pulls open the greasy yellow curtain at the back door just as our sheet metal carport crumples in half, then lifts off and flies into the air, like it's a napkin somebody dropped on the sidewalk on a breezy day.

I don't know why, I will never really know why, but I slide open the glass door, and run outside after our flying carport, sheets of rain soaking instantly through my cutoffs and plastering my shirt to my belly rolls. The winds grow fierce and wild, and push against my face and up my nose until I can't breathe, like I've stuck my head out the window of a moving car.

Momma screams for me to come inside, but for the first time in my life, I don't listen to her. The storm falls down around me and I feel alive and full and free. I stand in the rain, I stand with the rain, I melt into the storm, I become the wind itself. Maybe this is what it feels like to be strong.

The rain goes into a pitter patter and then out. The winds stop screaming and the gusts turn into warm, gentle breezes that feel like Momma's fingers running through my hair at bedtime. I am quite sure I've chased the storm clear away all by myself. I open my eyes—I didn't know I had ever closed them. A big orange sky sits right above me. The still, wet air cradles me like a baby, swaddles me in quiet. I stand, soaked to the bone in the shambles of my backyard, and stretch my hands up to the sky. I turn my face to meet the hazy sun, both of us just come out of hiding. I can see the passing storm clouds in front of me, and more deep gray ones coming behind. This must be the eye of the storm, I decide. I wait inside this stillness and draw in a deep long breath of soft, calm air.

Isn't it glorious?

Leaf Hawk

The cake had been stored in an old Tupperware container with a red plastic handle. The sides and top of the container surely had once been transparent, but over time taken on a milkiness, a thickness, becoming almost opaque. Before they'd finished the angel food cake Mrs. Bridges had sent them, Irving and his mother had seen the dessert as a dark gray shadow looming behind the cover. Upon lifting the cover they found a tall, airy-looking golden ring. But now that the cake was gone, it was time to return the Tupperware.

"You should do it," Irving's mother told him. "Mrs. Bridges would be so proud of you." Later on in his life, Irving would come to know that by saying such a thing she meant only to get rid of him for a few hours. Those were the months immediately following his father's departure from the house, and his mother, reeling, needed the company of men. But as a child, he thought only his mother had this important errand to run, their household had this task to be completed, and he should be the one to do it; it would be significant for him to venture out on his own and return the cake container.

In his mind, Irving could see the house where he must go, as though visualizing it would help him actually get there. Mrs. Bridges lived alone in a long, low dark blue house that had once been painted olive green. It went to blue from olive after her husband died. A flag pole stood in her yard like an elongated silver sword. Irving always found it strange to see a flag pole in front of a house on a lane through the woods. Flag poles, he thought, should be reserved for officious, public government buildings: banks, post offices, schools. Not out here in the boonies.

Irving carried the cake container, looking at the tall gray trees on either side of the lane. Here were the bleeding gums, which every October turned red before any other trees, and which his father always pointed out to him. Here was the Monster Tree, as they called this scaly oak creature hunching over the road. Here was the sycamore, at the bend in the road, silently

sucking up the moisture (his father had told him such trees loved moisture) in the ground near the old well. He went up a hill and down its other side, then up another one.

See, it wasn't so bad. And in time there she was, waiting for him, her garage door open, she standing in the garage at the foot of some little steps leading to a paneled door. Mrs. Bridges wore what she always wore, a blue denim button-down, with blue jeans, and white Keds. She had short, cropped white hair like a man. She wore big faintly tinted glasses. She stood next to her red Jeep Cherokee (a "classic," she had once told him). Next to that was her son's yellow and white striped Jeep pickup.

Mrs. Bridges did not lift a hand, did not wave, but watched him approach. Irving curved around her driveway's big yellow rocks. There was the flag pole. He went up to her. With the Tupperware in his hand they stepped inside.

"Sit down," she told him, gesturing to a chair next to her dining table. Irving sat down. Mrs. Bridges went into her kitchen, a long kitchen, what Irving's mother had called a "galley" kitchen, and pulled out a box of Sweet-n-Low, the pink sweetener Irving's mother liked. She went to the fridge and pulled out a tall plastic pitcher of a dark liquid he knew was instant iced tea.

The old woman carried the pitcher and the sweetener in, then set these down on the dining table in front of him. She went back to the kitchen for two glasses, added ice cubes to these, then walked back over and sat down.

The cake holder perched on the table. It was easy to forget he'd come here to return that; it seemed this was a date for a social occasion rather than a practical thing like returning a borrowed item. Mrs. Bridges breathed loudly. The backs of her hands had bones protruding out of them in fanning, straight lines that seemed to lead to each of her fingers. Her skin was mottled, pink and apricot and even a little dull violet. As they sat there, a car rumbled past, and Irving didn't have time to see what kind of car it was. Mrs. Bridges looked out the window then back at him.

"Your mother requires all kinds of visitors," she said. "Delivery men, food guys, guys collecting trash—of course we get the Ricers brothers, too, guys delivering flowers, from Bloomington, plumbers, electricians... Rich always did all of our stuff around the house himself."

There was a large pale blue porcelain ash tray on the table; Mrs. Bridges pulled this over. She pulled out a pack of Salem cigarettes and lit one with a small plastic lighter.

Irving drank his tea. It tasted flaky, like there were little bits unstirred together.

Mrs. Bridges stared across the room, at the screened-in porch beyond which tree branches and green leaves could be seen. “Lot of deer lately, licking the salt blocks,” she said. “Your dad would love ‘em. It’s actually good he’s not always around anymore, out in the woods. I always thought he was going to go like Richard.”

She took a puff of her cigarette. Irving watched her. Her husband had been killed in the woods by a falling tree branch. Irving gripped the wooden chair he sat on. The prospect of talking about death with an adult was terrifying. Was that really what was going to happen?

“I just knew it would,” said Mrs. Bridges. “So I’m glad he’s not out there. But I am sorry about your folks. It’s hard for people to stay happy.”

No, not death—loneliness; she was going to talk about loneliness. But then she said, “I didn’t even hear anything that morning. It wasn’t even windy.” She stopped a moment and seemed to consider. “A widow-maker, made a widow out of me. Yes, a widow-maker,” she said. “That’s what we call one of those tree branches that dangles. One of those fellas just waiting to drop. All it takes is a strong wind. Or not even that strong of a wind, just the wind at the right angle, really. And down it goes. Right on to you.” She looked at Irving. Irving didn’t know what to tell her. He didn’t have a clue. *Widow-maker*. It reminded him of a spider. Black widow.

“You know when we first moved here, this road didn’t have a name. We were the ones to name it. It didn’t have a name, and the county told us, now that there were people living back here, we had to have a name for it. And it was kind of like the thing that took him, that gave us the name.”

Irving looked at Mrs. Bridges, knowing this was indication he should ask a question. “How did it get the name?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Bridges, “it was only a few months after we moved in. And it was a really stormy night. I mean, things were blowing around like crazy. It was a thunderstorm, so you know, lightning would flash, and the whole sky would light up green, and all that. And we’re out here, sitting on the porch, as we would back then, Rich loved to watch him a good storm.

And he says he sees something. See something? I say to him. Where? And he said, up there, in the tree. Well of course there's about a million trees out here, right, but I look to where he's looking, and even though everything is thrashing about, I can see what he means, up in one of them branches. And I look. And I look longer. I think it's a bird, I tell him. That's an awfully big bird, he says to me. And I says I know it is but what else could it be? And we don't say anything for a minute, just kind of keep watching, and then he says to me, You know what I think you're right, I think that's a bird. It must be a big hawk. Cause we'd been seeing these great big red-tailed hawks flying around ever since we moved in. We thought they'd be good to have. We couldn't get a kitten, of course, couldn't keep a cat, but hey we thought they'd keep the mice population down. Besides I don't like cats. Never have. Anyway, we say, look at that hawk, and we are just amazed, watching it sit there, in that tree, and the branches are all moving about, the whole tree is going side to side in the wind, and the rain is picking up, and the lightning is flashing, and thunder and all this, and the hawk is just sitting there, mild as can be, paying no attention to anything, not really moving.

"Well, eventually, we realize it's midnight, so we get on up and go on to bed. I turn out my light, he turns out his light. And we go to sleep. Next thing I know, it's morning, there's light in the room, and I am hearing Richard, putting his feet on the floor. I hear him go out into the hall and then I hear the door to the porch. It scrapes and bangs along real loudly. And then I hear him go, 'Well I'll be damned! The hawk's still there!' So I stand up and put on my slippers and go out and join him and stand there on the porch and look out and up in the treetops, in the exact same place as last night, in the same crook of the tree, I see this kind of thick dark brown shape, like a hawk. Only it's not a hawk. No. I look more closely. And Rich's smiling, now. Grinning real widely. No, not a hawk. A pile of leaves. We looked at the leaves then went in and made ourselves our coffee and then we sat down at the dining table and the thing both of us were thinking, was, how on earth, in all that wind, in all that racket, that wild storm, how did that clump of leaves stay in one place?"

Mrs. Bridges went silent, staring at her red cup, her tea. Irving looked at her face. "So you decided to name the road Leaf Hawk."

She nodded. "That's right."

"Because you thought it was a hawk but it was leaves."

“Right.”

Irving sipped his tea. It seemed he was supposed to make some significance of the fact the pile of leaves hadn't moved, had survived the storm without being tossed about. What was important about that?

“For the longest time those leaves were up there, no matter how big a storm blew in, even one of them tornadoes came in, I don't know if you remember that, you were probably too young, one of those just blew in and ripped all kinds of things up, and the leaves were all in the highway and water was flowing out of the ditches and all that, but the leaves were still there.” She paused a moment, her mouth a straight line. “Then, one morning, we woke up, looked out, and they were gone.

“Gone,” she said, again.

“Do you know what made them drop?”

“Drop, scatter, no, we don't know. Just looked out, and they weren't there.” Mrs. Bridges paused, seeming to stare at something. “Maybe they were right there on the ground under the tree, for all we know they were. But you couldn't tell, of course. Once they fell... They were just leaves.”

Irving didn't say anything. He took a drink of his tea. Mrs. Bridges puffed her cigarette, watched him. She rattled the ice in her glass. “Is your mother doing fine?”

“My mom?”

Mrs. Bridges nodded.

“I think so, yes.”

“Good. You keep an eye on her. She'll need you, you know.”

Irving nodded. He did know his mother needed him, but he seemed to need her more. She always seemed ready to leave his room at night, after saying good night to him. While he would prefer to drift off and fall asleep and find her there beside him when he woke up in the middle of the night, she always seemed eager to slip away. This sense he had of her desiring to leave him made him anxious and unable to fall asleep. It felt like she was waiting for the sign that he was asleep. Knowing this made it difficult for actual sleep to happen.

“I wish Torrance were better, but he's just not, you know. Your mother would never go for him. I don't blame her.”

Torrance was Mrs. Bridges' son. He had a very red face. Often he walked in the woods, alone, with a big stick. Sometimes he had a white

beard, sometimes he didn't. For a while he was the manager of the local McDonald's, the only one in town, and that was a big deal. He wore a periwinkle polo and had this fancy headset geared up to his right ear. They could remember seeing him a few times when they went through the drive-thru. It was wild seeing somebody you knew from out on Leaf Hawk Lane, in town like that, and in a place as busy and big-named as McDonald's. Like two worlds colliding. But that was a short-lived circumstance; before long Torrance was back out in the woods, with his stick, and soon it got to the point that Irving's mother didn't like to stop and roll down the window and talk to him when she saw him, in his plaid jacket, as she drove by. His breath always smelled funny. You could smell the smell he had even from feet away. It was a sort of sour smell, like the drink his father used to drink at night, the whiskey.

"No, I don't blame her," said Mrs. Bridges. "Anyway. I need some more tea. Would you like some more tea? Oh, no you still got some. I'll be right back." She stood, slowly, grabbing the sides of her arrowback chair, and then she walked toward her kitchen, slowly.

On the walk home, Irving observed yellow puddles in the lane, ovals of water colored by the road's silty mud. The branches formed an intricate web of wood overhead. Some of them had leaves, but most of them were bare. Some of the branches creaked. Irving walked in a mixture of contemplation and vigilance. Hearing about death and loneliness from Mrs. Bridges had seemed daunting, but really the subjects had been a little interesting, kind of enchanting, the way the books he liked to read—about girls who wear scarves so their heads don't fall off—were enchanting. The topics seemed removed and apart from him, far away.

A rumbling could be heard, and gravel skittering; a car roared down the hill in front of him. Irving froze. The pointy dark blue nose of a vehicle barreled toward him. So here it was. Death. He'd thought it was far away, but he'd been foolish. Wrong. The car kept coming. Something in him then activated itself, something that seemed bigger than he was, almost as though he was a puppet at the end of some strings. Maybe the trees with their branches were the puppetmaster, moving him. He leapt out of the way. He tumbled into some leaves and brambles on the side of the road.

At home, his mother opened the front door after he had climbed the front steps.

“Look who’s home. Look who walked all the way to Mrs. Bridges’ and back.”

“Your boyfriend almost hit me.”

“What did you say?”

“Your boyfriend almost hit me. He came flying down the hill and almost hit me. I had to jump out of the way.”

He’d never before used that word—boyfriend—but he knew that’s what the man in the blue Pontiac was for his mother. His father had used the word one of the last times he was in their kitchen. He had stood next to the peninsula counter while Irving was eating a Red Baron sausage and pepperoni pizza and said, “I think your mother’s going to leave us. She’s got a boyfriend.”

Irving’s mother closed the door behind them. Their German shepherd, Heidi, walked in, cut a circle around her. “What has Mrs. Bridges been saying to you?”

Irving walked out of the room to his bedroom.

That night, in bed, with his mother asleep across the hall, Irving turned and traced a finger along the train on the wallpaper. He could almost feel the sharp corner of the red caboose, the red square. And this blue rectangle. And this yellow triangle, he could almost feel its point. It was only flat paper, with different colors, forming a border around his room. But it seemed he could feel dimensions to each color and the geometric shape each made. His mother had come to say goodnight to him tonight, like usual, but tonight her breath had seemed sour, like Torrance’s, Mrs. Bridges’s strange son’s, and he’d been ready for her to leave even before she did. It had been a reprieve when she left him here alone.

Dynamite Girl

Lenni was a dynamite girl. All the time, pop-pop. People stopped, even gazed. Tried to move closer to her. Especially men. *Hey fellas*, she'd say, and *Well, look at you*, and *Ooooh*. They'd linger over her words as she spoke them, like they were love notes to fold and press beneath pillows. They'd study the fierce curve of her hip as she slow-walked away. But women too. They wanted Lenni's hair, icing-white, down her back, pieces in braids. They wanted to move like her, fearless. Watched as she seemed to eat her coffee, full gulps of it, how she dashed it with milk. They didn't notice the way she'd sometimes hide in the bathroom stall for an hour or two. They didn't see her at night, clipping her toenails too close. She'd watch the blood rise, form a perfect circle of black redness. When Lenni stopped showing up at the office, her co-workers shrugged. *Probably in Paris*, they thought, *whisked away by someone exotic*. After a few weeks, Lenni's boss stopped calling, and people stopped talking, except for a *Whatever happened to that Lenni?* now and then. *Don't know*, they'd say. *But what a dynamite girl*.

Wash-O-Rama

Marie got everything ready and went back to the kitchen to finish what was left of her tea, then washed her mug and spoon and set them in the drying rack. Telling herself it was okay to look nice once a while, she wore a sundress and sandals, and the hat with the wide brim that she used to wear every Sunday, back when she went to church.

Marie left her apartment with her red wagon clattering behind her, and turned from her tree-lined street onto a sunny and busy road that she wouldn't mind so much if it had sidewalks. When a pickup truck slowed and its driver called, "Hey, hot mama, what's a pretty thing like—" and then sped off after Marie picked up a rock, Marie felt briefly triumphant before dropping her arms to her side, telling herself not to cry. She cried a little and pulled the cart a while before dropping the rock.

Wash-O-Rama's air conditioning felt good on Marie's face and neck, and the fabric softener and mildew swirling together soothed her, like the first drops of rain on asphalt in summer. A few machines were humming despite there being no customers. Marie thought nasty things about people who left their laundry unguarded, at this early hour or any other. Several times during just the past week, she thought about teaching them a lesson, but her wagon was barely big enough as it was.

She loaded the washer with clothes and detergent, and turned the temperature dial to COLD. Patting her pockets filled her with dread that worsened as she rummaged through her shoulder bag. She bleated into her hands, then pounded the washer three times before returning her hands to her face, where they remained until a door opened in the distance. When a worker appeared, Marie sat down in a plastic chair, wiped her eyes and pretended to read *Good Housekeeping*.

After the worker was done watching her and returned to the back room, Marie set the magazine aside. She knew of a cash machine a few blocks away, but the Wash-O-Rama's change machine had been out of order for a while. To remove everything from the washer, load the wagon,

pull it all the way home to get the roll of quarters she had forgotten, and then drag it all back to Wash-O-Rama would take an hour or more.

Then, remembering something she had seen yesterday, or maybe the day before, Marie went to the counter by the vending machines, cluttered with magazines and coupon booklets. She turned the pages of *Parents* absently while looking at one of those cardboard charity displays with coin slots. She hadn't donated to one in a long time, questioning the accountability of convenience stores, delicatessens or other businesses where these displays were normally found.

Marie peered through a small window into the back room where the worker had gone, then at the display again. The vignettted photograph at the top, a boy with a big smile and a smooth, white head, looked like the same kid on every display Marie had ever seen. She directed her sudden anger at the makers of these displays, at herself for not donating to them, at those who did (this one only had two empty slots), at the boy's family, and even at the boy himself, even while telling him it wasn't his fault, then back to the display-makers, herself, then, instead of going all the way around again, Marie did a quick calculation and extracted fifteen quarters and hurried back to the machines.

The clothes were a satisfying blur of suds and color by the time the Wash-O-Rama's front door opened. A woman carrying a basket under one arm and dragging two bags was struggling to hold the door open with her hip, which, when paired with the other, Marie thought, should be sturdy enough to prop open a barn door.

The woman, who Marie hoped didn't speak English, dumped everything on the floor, pulled her hair into a ponytail, wiped sweat from her neck and began picking through the pile. She held up a pair of khakis, the kind boys wear to parochial school, and examined them front and back.

"They wear it one time and that's it," the woman complained. "Then onto the floor. Don't know what's clean, what's dirty. God help me if they're not back in the drawer when they want them." She held a pair of jeans up to the light coming through the window. "I don't even know what this is! Chocolate? *Blood?*" She pressed them to her nose before dropping them on a table. "At least they weren't wrestling in dog shit again." She sprayed stain remover from a can and began scrubbing with the built-in brush. "Doesn't even matter, does it."

“Sorry, what?” Marie said.

“They grow out of everything so fast, I don’t know why I bother. Ingrates. Animals.”

Marie imagined, with that much laundry and those hips of hers, three, maybe four boys. Probably not done, either; they never are. The woman turned dials and pressed buttons, and then fell heavily into a plastic chair and picked up the magazine Marie had tossed aside.

After moving her clothes to a dryer and dropping quarters into the slot, Marie touched the one still lingering in her pocket. She must have miscounted. She thought about returning it, but getting caught might draw attention to all the missing ones. She reached for the START button when the woman shouted, “Wait!”

Startled, Marie turned around to find the woman nearing the washers in a crouch. The woman rose, holding Elise’s pink-and-yellow striped sock with both hands. Marie reached for it but the woman pulled it to her chest as if were hers. “*Abh*,” she said sweetly, holding it out for both of them to see, and then said in a squeaky voice, “so *teensy-weensy*.”

Marie snatched it away.

“Just trying to help, lady. *Jeez*.”

Marie was waiting at the dryer as the final seconds elapsed. The buzzer sounded and she scooped the clothes into a cart.

“Do you wash everything in cold?” the woman asked, looking at Marie’s cart. Marie looked at it too, not having noticed how quickly everything had faded, even in cold. “Probably should.”

Pulling her loaded wagon toward the exit, Marie said, “You think you know everything. But you don’t know anything.”

The woman grimaced without moving her eyes from the magazine. Holding the door open, feeling the heat seep in, Marie said softly, “Peroxide and dish detergent.”

A bus was going by, and the woman said, “What?”

“Hydrogen peroxide and dish detergent. It works for chocolate at least. Blood, I don’t know.”

The woman made a face like she was taking note of it. Marie was halfway through the door when she stopped and said, "Tootsie Rolls? You know...the little ones?"

"What?"

"She used to do that. I forgot to check all her pockets sometimes. Too rushed. Too distracted, I guess."

The woman lowered the magazine and raised her eyes.

"I don't know where she got them all," Marie continued, looking down, smiling thinly. "School, I guess. They probably gave them out for good behavior. For spelling tests and things."

"Oh," the woman said, searching for something to say. "I guess it's good she finally stopped, then."

Marie looked at her for a long time. "What did you mean by that?"

"I don't know..." the woman stammered, "I thought you said she *used*—"

"No, no," Marie said, once again more inside Wash-O-Rama than out. "Still does it. Just yesterday, in fact. And, I do believe ..." Marie eyes brightened, darting to each corner of the room, "the day before that, too."

"Well," the woman said, "thanks for the tip. I'll try it next time."

"Will you?"

"Yes, definitely."

Marie was again mostly out the door when she said, "Try not to get too upset with them. They're just kids."

"*I'm* not upset," the woman said.

"Oh. I thought...okay, goodbye, then."

Marie emptied the laundry bags on her apartment floor. The sun that had shone on her and her wagon the whole way home had kept everything warm. She sat cross-legged, pairing socks and rolling them into tiny balls, smiling each time she tossed one into a wicker basket. Neatly folded T-shirts, pants and dresses went in next. On top was a layered underwear cake with cartoon frosting and strawberry toppings. Marie sprung to her feet and sighed on her way to kitchen, and turned on the burner beneath the kettle.

In Elise's room, Marie flipped the basket upside down and shook it. She picked up a small T-shirt and threw it. She unpaired socks and flung

them in opposite directions. She went hard at a yellow dress, not meaning to rip it like she did, then went after something else while shrieking loudly enough to alarm any neighbor who wasn't used to it by now. She kicked at what was left of the pile with muted rage until she heard the kettle whistling.

By the kitchen window, Marie drank her tea hurriedly despite it being too hot. She washed her mug and spoon and put them in the drying rack.

Around noon, Marie loaded up her wagon with the clothing from Elise's floor, including the torn yellow dress, and stepped out into the sun. She patted her own dress pocket, the roll of quarters solid against her thigh. There would be enough left over to repay the leukemia kid, but Marie doubted she would because it doesn't make any difference.

The Salmon Trader is Tired of Pink

The letterbox is an abandoned cemetery of relations left behind when they came to this new country. Their mail dried after some time; so did the office mail and bills, once regularly shoved into it. None since Ramboodin was bit by, what his wife calls, the bug. The frame of the door leading from the gates creaks, needs oil, but there's only Szu and she has only two hands. The jars on the kitchen shelves gawk—desperate beggars—but there's no money to buy pulses or sugar, and Aimee knows that. Food is precious. Neither Ramboodin, wherever he toils, nor Szu and Aimee, complain.

Everything he can find, Ramboodin believes, is precious. Everything he can't is also precious. Ramboodin has a hard time acknowledging that everything can't possibly be precious, even if the bug in his head tells him so. Szu laments it's because of the bug—miserable bug of an idea. The bug put tiny wheels below his soles, whirring bees in his head. Ramboodin can't sit still ever since. He never went to trade at the docks where the fisherman brought boatloads of salmon ashore after he got that crazy idea, now doggedly leaves for unknown destinations without notice. Szu is let in on only one thing about him: he's out “exploring.”

Ramboodin simply won't consider things he already owns, things and people that are moving away from him at galactic speeds. For he doesn't know what else to do. Like now. Except watch water, salmon-hued, drip down the black rockface he's crouching beside, collecting in the bowl it has created on the gravel below. In time, they firm up, crystallize with sharp edges, turn into sparkling “water” diamonds. Discovery he'll announce to the world when he gets home. He dreams of the euphoria it will create.

The “water” diamonds begin to flow in a slow, sloth stream towards the far end of the cavern. Narrow beam of light from the cornice on the cave roof hits the glittery brook, lighting up interiors in an ethereal light.

Back from the cavern, sitting on a damp mossy rock, Ramboodin opens his log book and begins to scribble. In between digging out tuber for

lunch and trapping the odd blind bat, Ramboodin chronicles his unlikely survival and the strange mystique of the “water” diamonds.

He'll be home soon, Szu tells her daughter Aimee. Aimee takes a moment to reflect on her father, whom she hasn't met in many months, and only about eight times since she was born. She puts the lid on the jar filled with rare tangerine-and-beige pearls, one of her father's “precious” things, and leaves for school.

Later, Szu takes a couple of pearls, examines them in sunlight. Ramboodin had said the pearls, from a secret place where he used to go fishing for salmons, would fetch a fortune. Then she wouldn't need to work anymore...

One last time?

Szu had nodded. The day was his birthday, and both had had a little too much indulgence.

He'd gone on another of his trips. To find things no one believed existed.

Szu returns the pearls to the jar. Unbraids her hair. Goes shopping for baby tomatoes—pulpy, blood-red, and weird ocular-shaped scented candles to burn by the bedside. They must save money. She turns away from the confectionery and pedals her cycle back home.

At night, she waits for Ramboodin to return from the go-beyond world, in time for the holidays. Sits by the glow of the pearls in the jar, doesn't turn on lights. Everything, she knows, is precious.

In his broken campervan, twenty-hundred miles from civilization, Ramboodin hears wolves howl. The milky-white stream just beyond the tree-line gurgles. Freeze is still some weeks away. He's not been gathering nuts and roots for ten days, his toe is rotting, sprain on the other leg. He's due home. If only he could.

At night, Ramboodin dreams of a warm fire, and Christmas carols, and a nice breakfast, and his family.

He wakes up to feathery beings strolling around him, whispering amongst themselves. Will they cradle him in their arms, take him away, in one swift stroke?

Mornings melt into darkness. Ramboodin loses count, and consciousness.

The water diamonds sparkle. There's a silvery luminescence in the corner, lighting up things Ramboodin has hoarded. Today's precious cargo, tomorrow's junk.

Szu has been forgetful. She's losing it very fast. Aimee finds Szu's unused anti-depressant strips while she'd been foraging the cabinet. She'll settle for something she wasn't looking for, and open a tin of salted dried fish.

Szu will see herself with her husband, honeymooning in Cyprus, the balcony overlooking the bay, the kiss under the stars.

Tonight, she and Szu will put up the Christmas tree from last year, or was it the year before that, kept for so long Aimee can't tell, but she'll decorate it with strips of used foil paper, some lights and little Santa dolls.

They'll tell visiting neighbors Ramboodin is away in the north. On another of his expeditions.

Aimee will insist on going out with friends. Szu will hear the car full of happy teenagers swish away.

She'll pace the front yard afterward, observe steadily falling snowflakes, this year like the last. The dark wholesomeness will canopy her. She'll imagine Ramboodin waving to her when a meteorite streaks across the sky and suddenly dies.

In time, she'll forget Ramboodin is missing for years and believe it's not the snowflakes, but she, who's the precious one falling into a spectacular flaky abyss.

Contributors

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Linda Caradine is an award-winning Oregon based writer. Her work has been included in The RavensPerch and other literary journals, as well as numerous magazines, newspapers and online. When she is not writing, Linda manages a nonprofit animal rescue organization. She has written a memoir about that experience. Her book, *Lying Down with Dogs*, is due out in April 2024. You can contact Linda at www.LindaCaradine.com.

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Joan Lange grew up in St. Louis and graduated from Webster University. She has been an educator and school librarian for 29 years. Currently the Director of Libraries at Annunciation Orthodox School in Houston, Texas, Joan is a co-sponsor of the school’s literary magazine, which has won several REALM awards from NCTE. She writes a blog for AISL: <https://aislnews.org/author/joan/>.

♫ LB is an array of letters, bound to impulse; a writer creating delicate connections. they have called any number of places home; currently, a single yellow wall in Michigan. they have been published in *FOLIO*, *Roanoke Review*, *Figure 1*, and *The Offing*, among others. their portfolio can be found at twinbrights.carrd.co and their workshops can be found at poetryasplay.carrd.co.

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Carol Park ranges from suburbs to wilderness. Six years in Japan altered this California girl forever. She delights in hiking, gardening, mentoring, and reading. She also enjoys teaching ESL and volunteering in a jail. Her MFA comes from Seattle Pacific University. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Haight Ashbury Journal*, *Black Fox Literary*, *MiGoZine*, *The California Quarterly*, *Foreshadow*, *Words & Whispers*, the *Monterey Review*, and the anthologies *Making Marks in the Sand*, *Viral Verse: Poetry of the Pandemic*, and *New Contexts: 2, 3 and 4*.

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Jason Vrabel, formerly an architect and neighborhood planner, writes and reports on fair housing, immigration, the arts and other topics for various publications. He's a recipient of a Heinz Endowments Investing in Professional Artists grant and was a fellow at the Creative Nonfiction Foundation. His recent creative work has appeared in *Ruminate*, *Southeast Review*, *Quagmire*, a Belt Publishing anthology and elsewhere. Jason lives in Pittsburgh.

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