cottonwood

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Kevin Fitton

Skimming

It was the same trip her school district sent her on two years earlier—the same seven a.m. flight, the same hotel. She quite possibly sat on the same park-style bench while she waited for the hotel shuttle to pick her up from the Orlando airport. There was a strong taste of karma in the way it worked out, the way it was happening again, two years later, almost to the day.

The district didn't typically pay for teachers to attend conferences out of state. Normally, if you wanted to go, you had to apply for grants and go through that whole rigmarole. But the first time she attended the conference, the district actually paid her freight. Out of nowhere, the school's math scores took a significant dip on the NECAP (the state level math and reading assessment), alarm bells sounded, and Amy, the lead Math specialist, was suddenly on her way to the national gathering for the Association of Math Teacher Educators in Orlando. She asked her principal where the money was coming from—money she had been told repeatedly that they didn't have.

"We'll work it out," said Dr. Pettyway.

Dr. Pettyway was a small woman with skinny limbs, thick-rimmed glasses, and unnaturally tanned skin. She smiled, as if it was a good thing that the school's finances were strategically opaque. She talked about making this a regular event, rotating which staff attended, but it never happened. The next year the district's NECAP scores rebounded, and the funding dried up. But she made friends on that first trip with the director of the AMTE, and Darlene asked her to come back to the conference this year as a presenter with the association paying her way. At the very least, it was an opportunity to get away from the Vermont winter—away from everything, really—which is why she found herself back in Orlando, waiting for her airport shuttle, her carry-on sitting at her feet like a silent pet, texting her husband about the kids' schedule for the weekend. In a certain sense, Brian was a good father. He

was caring and supportive, but she was the one who made family life work, who managed the kids' schedules, made sure they ate healthy food and did their homework. When the kids were with Brian she gave him detailed lists, and he would still drop the ball.

With her family and at school she was the behind-the-scenes operator who made it all work, and in both cases no one noticed. Of course, the cold hard truth was that classroom teachers were barely appreciated and specialists even less so. She had a bachelors from Wesleyan, a masters from Dartmouth, and she had logged fifteen years in her field. She had even been a part of a research team that published a paper in the *International Journal for Math and Science Education.* Despite all of that, she made less than half what Brian did. He worked for the largest marketing firm in Vermont and pulled down a good salary. She didn't used to care, but lately, it was grating on her. Maybe it was because they were separated, and she worried about the future. Or maybe she was just sick of it.

The conference was taking place in the ballroom of a Marriot, and her room was on the seventh floor. As she rode the elevator she looked at the schedule, surprised to see her own face, along with her bio, on the second page. She was presenting on that research paper from graduate school. It was seven years old now, and she worried it was dated. Now that she was here, she wished she hadn't ever mentioned the project to Darlene. When the elevator doors opened, she hesitated before she stepped into the hall. By the time she entered her hotel room, she was sure it was all a mistake. All of it. Leaving home. Presenting at the conference. Becoming a math specialist. There were days—and lately they were more and more common—when, during the little breaks in her schedule, she thought about walking into Dr. Pettyway's office and quitting. Just like that. And that would most certainly be the way she would do it. No letter. She wanted to see Pettyway's face when she said it: "I'm tired, I'm undervalued, and I'm not going to do this anymore."

She kicked off her shoes, pulled down the comforter, and dropped onto the bed. She looked down at her feet, wriggling her

toes and watching the shape of her feet change inside her socks, squirming and bending.

As she lay there, trying to relax, she started thinking about a news story from back home. A man from a small town near Burlington was caught by federal agents, charged with distributing child pornography. He was married but didn't have any kids, and Amy was thinking about the man's wife. The woman had left her husband and moved back to the Midwest, where she grew up. Probably, she was hoping she could leave it all behind her, but someone was sure to look her up on the internet and find out. The embarrassment would follow her, reappearing like a lingering infection.

Amy could have lounged on the bed for the rest of the day, but she wasn't the type to attend a work conference and skip the opening keynote. Two times in middle school she won an award for perfect attendance, which came with a free game at the bowling alley. There weren't many suburbs in Vermont, but she was the prototypical suburban mom for the twenty-first century in the Green Mountain State. She worked a thankless job, chauffeured her pre-teens to school activities and friends' houses, and then went to pick them up again in their trusty Subaru. She grew vegetables in their large garden, pulled weeds, canned the fresh produce in jams and sauces. She packed lunches with food from the co-op, taking her own reusable containers with her to the store.

There was a little bit of time before the conference started, and she decided to shower. She kept turning up the temperature, again and again. She wanted to feel it deep in her tissue. She wanted to fill the room with steam, until she was swimming in it. There was so much steam that, even with the fan running, she had to open the door and repeatedly wipe the mirror with a towel so she could see to apply her make-up.

She was a few minutes late, so she stood in the back while the plenary speaker plowed through the disturbances that came with the late-arriving crowd: voices in the lobby surging every time the door opened, the whispered greetings, the hotel staff's polyester uniforms making that zipping sound as they scurried around and their pant legs rubbed against one another.

There was a trick she used in situations like this when she was alone in a crowd: She looked for someone who looked like her. Tall, thin, long black hair, glasses. This was how she found Darlene, and it's how she found Nancy this time around. Years ago, she had come across an article about a research study which suggested that humans are attracted to people who looked like themselves. She had been laughing about the story with Brian, who looked nothing like her. He was stocky and tow-headed, and it had seemed funny at the time. But it occurred to her later that she had several friends who did look like her, who might even have been confused with her from a distance.

It took her a couple of minutes before she spotted Nancy, who was on the far left side of the conference room and appeared to be alone. She angled that way and sat down next to her, setting her purse on the floor between them. When the speaker finished, she introduced herself. They chatted for fifteen minutes while the room emptied, and then it was Nancy who suggested they go to dinner at Bacaros, the restaurant across the street from the hotel. Bacaros was a regional chain, and even though people regularly walked across the divided highway from the hotel, there wasn't a crosswalk. Amy and Nancy jogged to the median, paused for traffic, and then, when there was an opening, ran the rest of the way.

A short wall of brick outlined the front of the building. It was two feet high with a small ledge, planters stationed every seven or eight feet, holding a waxy sort of plant she didn't recognize. Right now it wasn't flowering, but she imagined it would bring forth large blooms, drooping and tropical. Nancy was chatting, talking about her kids, and she didn't notice that Amy turned quiet as they entered the building, holding her breath when the hostess led them past the table—that same table in the exact same location—breathing out when they were seated at a corner booth at least twenty feet away.

There were many details that she had forgotten. She didn't remember the tile floor, an imitation slate, arranged in a diagonal pattern. And she didn't remember the open ceiling and its labyrinth of metal beams and duct work, painted black. Or the rows of

pendants that hung from the ceiling, little LED lights, stars in the ceiling's dark sky. But she did remember the red-toned tables and chairs, and, of course, the giant fish tank, imbedded in the wall between dining rooms, glowing in aquamarine, the fish shimmering as they wriggled through the water.

Nancy said that she liked the opening speaker but complained that it was unrealistic. "I mean, it's great information, but when am I going to rewrite our entire curriculum? Who has that kind of time?"

"I know," Amy said. "I can barely keep my head above water."

"I don't want to complain," Nancy said. "Well, maybe I do." Her head bobbed when she laughed.

Soon, Amy was laughing so hard she had tears on her cheek. "You have to stop it," she said, "or I won't be able to eat this shitty sandwich."

"Oh, what's wrong with it?"

"Nothing." She shrugged and looked over at the table again, without thinking. It wasn't the first time she had looked over Nancy's shoulder.

"Are you looking for someone?"

She said she was looking at the fish. "They're just so pretty."

"I like fish," Nancy said. "Grilled and with a side of mashed potatoes."

"I think you're my soulmate," Amy said. And she did feel a sense of connection with this woman, though she knew little about her. Nancy had shared the names and ages of her children (Preston, seven, and Arthur, five), had offered up her husband's name and career (Trent, professor of entomology at Ohio State). She knew that they lived in a city called Dublin, a suburb of Columbus. But that was it.

"I'm feeling nervous about presenting," she said.

"You'll do great." Nancy had her shoulder-length hair tucked behind her ears, and it stayed there throughout the meal, obedient.

"It's so strange," Amy said. "The whole thing. All of us here in one place."

Nancy's eyes were green and hazel, mixed together like spilled paint. "At the very least, it's a break," she said. "No cooking, no dishes, no errands. Everything else is gravy."

Back in her hotel room, Amy went over her notes for her presentation, tweaked some of her slides. She called Brian and said hi to Courtney, her fourteen-year-old, and then Dirk, who was twelve and didn't know how to hide his confusion at his parents' separation. Even when he smiled, he looked like he might cry. After Dirk, Brian got back on.

"What did you have for dinner?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing special," he said.

"How not special are we talking?"

"Chicken strips," he said.

"Any vegetables?"

"Do tater tots count?"

"No, fried potatoes do not count as a vegetable." She hung up and held her head in her hands.

The first thing she ever stole was a wallet. It was sitting on that table at Bacaros, completely unattended, and she had reached out and grabbed it, and then stuck it in her purse. She'd had a few drinks, but that didn't explain the fact that she had done something so completely out of character. It was a new impulse, something she had never experienced in herself, and she didn't know how to push it away.

Inside the wallet was three hundred dollars cash. It was the wallet of someone on vacation: all of that cash, a hotel keycard, credit cards, and a bunch of receipts. She took the cash and left the wallet in the lobby of the hotel, tucked behind a seat cushion. A couple of weeks later, when she received the reimbursement check for her trip expenses, she cashed it, and then hid all of the money in the box with her father's ashes, one place she knew Brian would never look.

It was surprising how easy it was, once she opened her eyes to the possibility. Later that winter, she went as a chaperone with

Dirk's class on a trip to the Flynn, the big old theater in Burlington. At one point, she went back to the bus to fetch an aspirin from her purse and saw that another mom had left her wallet in her jacket, which was folded over her seat. She could just see it sticking out of the pocket. She recognized the jacket and knew that the woman was well-off, and it occurred to her that there might be a lot of cash. There was—several hundred dollars in all denominations. Amy took seventy-five, confident it wouldn't be missed. And as far as she was aware, it never was. The whole time the bus driver was sitting on the curb, smoking.

And then there was the day she went to her friend Donna's house to let out their dog. Donna and her husband, Brad, were away for an overnight, and Amy offered to stop by after work. She entered through the garage, let out the dog, a sheltie, filled its bowl with food and freshened the water. She found cash in three different places: stuffed into a bill rack in the kitchen, sitting on a dresser in the bedroom, and tucked into envelopes in the desk in the office. All told, it was around four thousand dollars and she took four hundred, skimming off the top of each stack.

Now she had a methodology. She stole from people who had more than enough and took a relatively small amount, knowing that no one would ever accuse her of stealing petty cash. She was a middle-aged woman, white and educated, who didn't need the money. On top of that, she was goody-goody. She wasn't a drinker; she didn't gossip. There was no way that anyone would believe that she was a thief. She couldn't even believe it herself, which is why she hadn't told a soul, not even her therapist. She didn't know how to talk about her stealing. It was impossible.

The next morning she met Nancy outside the conference room, just before the first session. They each had cups of coffee, and they offered one another a quick, one-armed hug. She was feeling anxious, but she didn't present until two p.m., and it was a break-out session. There were two other break-outs during that time-slot, and on the afternoon of the second day plenty of people would skip the session completely. She would end up with a group

of thirty to forty, she figured, and when she thought about it that way, it didn't feel so overwhelming.

She settled into her seat, her purse at her feet, and the plenary speaker started discussing a new batch of research on personal learning plans. Immediately, her confidence melted away. The woman used terminology like a second language, and Amy struggled to follow the discussion.

Nancy suggested they go for coffee. "I mean, real coffee," she said. But Amy excused herself, claiming that she needed to go over her slides. Instead of heading up to her room, she found a side door and walked outside. It was a cool day for Orlando, in the 50's, and there was a breeze. She wrapped her arms around herself and stood behind a large pillar, listening to the traffic. She was cold, but that didn't explain why her throat felt tight. Soon she was digging for air, and her breaths were coming in rapid succession. It felt like a belt was cinched around her torso.

She bent over and kept breathing, digging and digging. Now she was sure she was having a heart attack. She even had her cell phone out, ready to dial 9-1-1. Finally, the pressure started to relax, breath upon breath, until it passed.

She stood up straight, stretched her back, grateful for the relief and certain that she needed to get away from the hotel and the conference. She remembered that the hotel offered a shuttle to Disney Springs, and she went back to her room to get her jacket.

Even in the morning of a cool day, Disney Springs was busy. It wasn't the throngs of people that flocked here in the evenings after a day spent at the parks, but there were still people everywhere, walking with their heads turned. For a few minutes she drifted with the crowd, until she came to the Lego store, which was surrounded by giant sculptures made out of Legos: the seven dwarves at their mine, a knight fighting a dragon, Buzz Lightyear flying. The dragon and knight were most impressive. The dragon's head rose above the smaller knight twenty feet off the ground, while the knight raised his spear in defiance. According to a plaque, it had taken over 5,000 hours to build and consumed over a million of the little Lego bricks.

She went inside, walking toward a wall of cylindrical bins filled with different kinds of pieces: bricks of all colors, sizes and shapes; heads with painted faces and different hats and little plastic toupees. And then there were the kits. Two other walls were filled with box upon box of kits for sale. Models of real cars—the Mustang GT, a Volkswagen Beetle, a Porsche 911. There was a model of the Neuschwanstein and the Hogwarts Castle from Harry Potter. And then there were the Star Wars sets—the Millennium Falcon and Luke Skywalker's X-Wing. Even though, at twelve, Dirk was outgrowing his Legos, he would love the Star Wars stuff.

The kits were very expensive. Most of the Star Wars kits were over two hundred dollars, and if she bought something for Dirk, she would have to get something for Courtney, who would want clothes. She didn't see any security devices on the boxes, and some of them were small enough to fit in her purse.

She walked back to the X-Wing kit. She sidled up to it. She could slide it into her purse. It was possible. But she stopped herself. There would be security cameras, and there were a lot of employees, maybe ten to twelve of them, wearing yellow aprons and name tags. What if she got caught? How could she ever explain this? It was crazy. She was crazy.

She left the store, found a bench, and sat down, facing a channel of water which ran beneath bridges and the manicured boardwalk. Her purse was next to her, and she felt for the iphone that she had taken from the airport. Stolen, really. It was during her layover at Reagan when she saw the phone at a charging station. No one was watching it. They must have gone to the bathroom or somehow forgotten it. It was a newer model, and she figured that the phone minus the SIM card was worth a couple hundred.

A flag pole rattled, banging angrily. The water in the lagoon rippled, shaking, as if in gestation. She felt dizzy and unbalanced. She still had a couple of hours before her presentation, but she couldn't imagine how she was going to stand up and talk.

A few minutes later a family of four walked by, and the kids reminded her of Courtney and Dirk. The ages must have been close. The girl, a young teen, walked in front of her brother, pre-

tending she didn't see him and then stopping suddenly in his path. He walked straight into her, and they both laughed.

She had to regroup. She was hungry—that was at least part of the problem. She stood up and started to walk. She passed several shops and a street performer playing a saxophone. At first, she felt a little shaky, but eventually she found her legs. She bought herself a hot dog from a food truck, something she hadn't eaten in years, not since the kids were little. She ate the whole thing in a few large bites. Then she found a Starbucks and bought a coffee and leaned against the outside of the building, watching groups of people enter and leave.

When her father died, her mom gave some of the life insurance money to her and her sister, and her portion went toward Brian's graduate school. He had just applied to the Harvard Business School, a total shot in the dark. But he was accepted, and then her dad died, and then the money came through. She didn't blame Brian; it was a mutual decision. What she resented was the whole arrangement. As a wife, mother, and teacher, she felt as if she was serving, serving, serving, and then living from the crumbs that were left on the table. But now she had something that was just for her, stowed away in that box. It didn't compare to the life insurance money, but it was something.

There was a little bit of sun now, and she was soaking in it, there against that brick wall, out of the wind. But she grew restless and decided to keep moving. On one side of the avenue there were stores and themed restaurants; on the other ran the canal, a vault of dark water flowing beneath the esplanade.

She ducked into a store—a big gift shop filled with Disney merchandise: t-shirts, hats, ornaments, coffee mugs, plush toys, and key chains. There were fairy wings, and wands, and toy castles. None of it was particularly interesting. Her kids were too old, and they'd never really been Disney people. But then she saw something that caught her eye: a Euro Disney t-shirt with Mickey Mouse leaning against the Eiffel Tower. It wasn't Euro Disney that she was interested in. She couldn't imagine going all the way to France and then wasting your time at a lesser Disney World. But Paris. The Loire Valley. Burgundy.

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There was no reason to worry about her presentation. Her research might not have been the newest, but it was still relevant, and it was an easy crowd. These were her people after all— the only people in the world who were thrilled to hear a lecture on a research study comparing the math acuity of children who did and didn't know their multiplication tables. As soon as she started describing the experiment, someone said, "Oh, interesting." It was a cakewalk.

After the presentation was over, she asked Nancy to meet her at Bacaros. She went back to her room, dropped off her computer bag, and touched up her make-up. Then she walked across the street.

"Here we are again," she said. They ordered from the bar and then wandered over to the fish tank.

"I burned through my per diem the first night," Nancy said.

Amy was looking at the fish. There were two types of fish in the tank—killifish with shining scales and splotches and streaks of reds and oranges; and little neon tetras, like children to the killis, darting among the much larger fish. Four of them seemed to be grouped together, two killis and two tetras. They all moved to one side of the tank, the tetras weaving between the larger killifish. And then the tetras darted away.

"I'm thinking about calling Brian," she said.

"Okay." Nancy took a sip of her gin and tonic, and the little straw just missed her nostril.

"I haven't told him what I need. I always tell him that he's opaque, but then I'm like a brick wall."

"What do you need?" Nancy asked.

"I don't know. Something."

"That's not very specific."

"I know, but it just seems kind of outrageous."

They walked back to the bar and hopped onto their stools. Amy ordered another glass of pinot noir.

"Try me," Nancy said. "Give it a test run."

"Okay." She took another drink of wine and then launched into it. She said that she wanted to leave teaching and become a playwright. She explained that she had some money saved and she wanted to go to France for a month, maybe two, write a couple of pieces, come home, and shop them around. In college she was a double major—math education and writing. Her senior year she even won a competition. There was a cash prize, and a group of students performed her piece the week before graduation. It was all there for her, if she had made the choice: grad school in New York, a career in the arts. But then there was Brian, and they were going to get married, and teaching was so much more practical. She thought that she would keep writing on the side, but it never happened.

Nancy clucked. "I have this theory about people," she said. "I'm always telling Trent that people aren't what they seem. They never are."

They had both been drinking and thought they should order some food, deciding on a couple of appetizers to share: fried calamari and seasoned shrimp. It made her think of Brian, the idea that people aren't what they seem. After all the years of knowing him, married for fifteen of them, she never would have believed that she would get the call she received from the police in the middle of the night. This was during their separation, and Brian had gone to a New Year's Eve party with friends from work, left the party drunk with another woman, and crashed his car into a tree. None of it was like Brian, and maybe that was why she was able to forgive him. Of course, she was angry. She felt angry, betrayed, embarrassed, worried, afraid. But the anger didn't keep.

When Nancy went to the bathroom, leaving her purse on her chair, Amy picked out the wallet, unzipped and unfolded it, so that it was all right there in front of her: a stack of cash, a MasterCard and a Kohl's card, two Starbucks gift cards. She counted the money, over two- hundred dollars, and then stuffed it back into the wallet and put the wallet back into the purse. She was teary-eyed when Nancy returned.

"What is it?" Nancy asked.

“I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like a rotten person.”

“Oh, posh.” Nancy put her hand on Amy’s shoulder and Amy leaned into it, soaking in the warmth of her friend’s touch.

“You’re a sweet woman,” Nancy said. “A little strange, but lovely.”

Finally, when the sun had gone down, the two women left the restaurant. Brian would be getting home soon with Dirk from hockey practice. She would give them time to grab dinner. Most likely pizza. Then she would call.

The road was busy, headlights quivering in their approach, and it took them a few minutes to cross the road. Nancy took off her heels, and when there was a short break in traffic, they made a dash for it. They were breathing hard and laughing as they entered the hotel, knowing that they had taken fate into their own hands and won a small victory.

“I guess this is it,” Nancy said.

“Home again, home again,” Amy said. She could see it now, the four of them together, forging onward, the silent past like a fifth chair at their table.

They embraced and Nancy turned away, heading off to her room on the second floor. “Bonjour,” she called out as she entered the stairwell. “Bonjour mon amie.”

Patricia Lawson

Ignatz

Howard's nephew needed a steward for a community garden. "It's in the urban core," Clark said. "All you need to do, Uncle Howard, is hang out and remind people to water. Maybe weed around the perimeter a little. Why don't you take a plot for yourself? There are three unclaimed ones under the blue tarps. Plus, there's a little stipend."

His nephew was a community organizer—a good kid, but a doofus. It would be like him to try to organize a community, but you had to admire the nerve required since, in Howard's opinion, everything under the sun resisted organization, and, if things could be organized, they didn't remain so.

Obviously, Clark had picked him because he was available. But why not? He used to like to garden, but now, in his tree-choked back yard, it was impossible.

It turned out *urban core* didn't necessarily mean slum. Some of the houses looked almost middle class, small and neat with hard-edged boxwood shrubs and white rock mulch, but others had old pickups and chain link in the front yard, and a passel of little kids. As Howard walked the garden's mulch pathways, a gang-banger sauntered by with serious tats and underwear on display for all the world.

As for the garden, it had lots of early stuff—lettuce, onions, spinach, cabbage, radishes, cilantro. There were small tomato and pepper plants, many planted way too close. Clark knew fuck-all about gardening.

At the west end, a gravel alley sloped downhill to the north, like a dry creek bed. On both banks, itchy weeds stretched out long fingers to touch Howard as he checked out the terrain. He passed a garage leafed over with poison ivy, stared into a bare-dirt back yard with a bright turquoise above-ground pool filled with little brown-skinned kids, hollering and splashing.

Farther down, trees and shrubs formed a primitive colonnade with small openings into back yards. Ahead, the alley ended in a level area where big potholes overflowed from last night's rain. When Howard shaded his eyes, the pools merged into a single pool where black birds squawked and splashed.

When he returned, a wiry old guy working his plot introduced himself as Dale Cutler. "This garden needs a sign telling people not to plant corn," Dale said. "Raccoon magnet. There's a pack comes down the alley every night." He pointed to a cage with an open door near a compost heap. "I get one or two a week and take 'em out to the country and let 'em go."

"I hear they starve to death when they're out of familiar territory," Howard said.

"Maybe they'll learn."

His second day of stewardship, a skinny boy of nine or so stepped out of the alley to ask if the could plant "vejables."

"Say what?" said Howard, playing the kid a little.

"Can I plant vejables here?"

"Pronounce your words, son."

"You know, like corn or tomadoes."

"A tomato's a fruit. Did you know that?"

"A canalope's a fruit."

"It's *cantaloupe* as in 'I want to elope with you, but I can't elope because I have to take out the garbage.'"

The boy looked annoyed. He wasn't a bad-looking kid with his wide-set eyes the light blue of an old mason jar, but he looked crafty. He wore cut-off jean shorts and no shirt and was turning red. Howard's daughter used to double coat her kids with sunscreen.

"What's that green thing?" the boy asked.

"A kohlrabi. Don't feel bad. Ninety percent of the population couldn't pick out the kohlrabi in a lineup."

"Waddaya do with it?"

"What do you think? You eat it? I'm not crazy about it."

"How come?"

"It can't make up its mind. It wants to be a cabbage, but it doesn't have a heart. Get it?"

"Get what? Hey what's that thing over there with the big leaves?"

"That's rhubarb, young friend. Makes the best pie in the world."

"You put those leaves in a pie?"

"No way. If you ate the leaves, you'd fall over dead."

Across the street, a large woman on a porch shouted, "Hey there, Ennis! Get yourself on home!" She waved an arm in a limp circle.

"What kind of a name is *Ennis*?"

"My dad's name. He lives in Oklahoma."

The boy headed home, returning ten minutes later with three more kids. "My family," he said—two girls, also fair and blue-eyed, and a small, dark-eyed boy of about six or seven. The skinny younger girl was ten and called *Shannon*; the older, pink-cheeked and well-endowed girl at twelve was *Madison*. The little boy was *Ramón*. Ramón was a pretty-faced boy with black spiked hair and brighter eyes than the others, yet all four looked sly. Ennis seemed less dopey than his sisters.

"The man's gonna let me plant stuff," Ennis said.

"I said maybe. I have to check with Clark. You all know Clark?"

"He's the guy wears cargo pants?" Shannon asked.

"No doubt. He's my nephew. I'm here as his lieutenant."

"You're in the army?" Madison said. "Arencha too old?"

They all began shrieking about wanting their own garden, and Howard found himself the center of attention for the first time in ages.

"You can each have half a plot. Everyone pick two things and I'll try to find 'em if Clark gives the go ahead."

Madison picked tomatoes and okra. Ennis picked "canalopes" and cherry "tomadoes." Shannon wanted the same. She looked as if Howard might slap her if she chose incorrectly.

"Just carrots," said Ramón.

"He's a half brother. He's like a bunny rabbit," said Madison. "He loves carrots."

"That's why his eyes are so bright," Howard said.

"The family's pretty needy," Clark said when Howard called to update him. "It's a good thing you're doing, Uncle Howard. They won't forget this."

"Oh, kids forget all kinds of stuff. Good thing too. Otherwise, our minds would be full of crap." But Howard remembered his grandfather, who'd moved in with them, putting up strings for morning glory vines, and how painstakingly he had set screws into the side of the house and tied the strings in place. By later summer, vines had shaded the entire south side of the front porch and bloomed a beautiful blue, and every day his grandfather called out "Morning, Glory" when Howard came down to breakfast.

At Lowe's he went crazy and bought eight kinds of tomatoes; five kinds of peppers, including serranos; bamboo poles for growing hyacinth bean vines to make a tipi; child-size gloves; and packages of cantaloupe, carrot, okra, sunflower, and popcorn seeds.

Afterward, he met his buddy, Milt, for their monthly lunch at the Panera midway between their houses. They had been eating there because the food was healthier than pizza or burgers. Howard was tired of the Pick Two's, but Milt, who was cautious now that high cholesterol and acid reflux were part of the picture, was sure Panera would extend his life.

When he showed Milt the hodgepodge of stuff he'd bought, Milt sniffed and said, "Do you know corn brings out raccoons?"

Howard told him about his new job and the kids he was working with, especially "this cute little kid named Ignatz or something."

For some reason *Ignatz*, the mouse character in the Krazy Kat cartoons, had popped into his head. Howard's father used to call an ornery little neighbor kid Ignatz. That Ignatz had a bit more going for him than this one and had grown up to become a lawyer, if something of a shyster.

***

He lugged all the stuff to the garden the next day and found the kids waiting. But after twenty minutes of sweating and digging in the dirt, Madison, Shannon, and Ramón put down their shovels and took off down the alley with Madison in the lead, like the cutout ducks an old lady had made to decorate the garden. They turned their greedy faces towards Ramón's cousins' house, the one with the aboveground pool he'd passed that first day.

"Where are you all going? Howard shouted.

"They got PlayStation," said Ramón.

"At least you're a true-blue gardener, Ignatz," Howard said when the others disappeared. Ennis frowned as if insulted.

"What's the matter? Ignatz was a mouse, kind of like Jerry in *Tom and Jerry*, but smarter. He was always lobbing bricks at Krazy Kat because Krazy drove him nuts."

The strip was hard to describe. Krazy loved Ignatz in spite of the mouse's hurling bricks, which the cat saw as missiles of love. "Li'l dollink," Krazy Kat would say. "Li'l ainjel."

Howard and Ennis put up the bamboo tipi and planted the hyacinth beans near each pole. The next day Ennis brought over two signs to mark his family's plots: *Propity of the Hernandez and Jenkins Familys. Vilaters Will Be Prossecuted*. Every day when Howard drove up, Ennis came over to help him weed, though his sisters and half-brother steered clear after figuring out no pay was involved. Sometimes he came from the cousin's house, where the kids stayed when their mother wasn't home. At first, Howard would mutter to himself as the boy approached, annoyed his thoughts were about to be disrupted. But what thoughts? Old gripes and gritches. Raggedy stuff.

The mother's name was Bethany Jenkins, he learned from the duck lady, who coincidentally was named Helen Chick, *Chick* being "the American version of *Chytka*," she told him. She was a tiresome old lady who prided herself of having the goods on everyone. She said Bethany and her kids were renting from a Mexican landlady, whose name was Olivia something.

"Olivia's no kin to that little boy, but all those Mexicans know each other. Thick as thieves. That Bethany's a great one for cussin'. Once I heard her swearin' at Olivia and Olivia swearin' back—cussin' in two languages. And that older girl . . . I won't repeat what she called her little sister, but it starts with a *c* and ends with a *t*."

"It's a pity." Howard said.

"The social workers came three times I know about and God knows how many more. Bethany still sleeps with the little one's father, even after he walked out on her. I don't trust any of those kids, especially the little Mexican."

"Ramón? He seems okay," he said, though he thought the kids were all out for the main chance. Clark had said he suspected Bethany's kids of swiping stuff last year. But the old lady annoyed him. As a little kid, he'd been a sneak thief too, had lifted mints from his grandfather's candy dish after the old man went blind.

One day when Mrs. Chick was working nearby, Howard saw the four coming back up the alley with two Mexican kids about the age of Ennis and Shannon. They were in the middle of an argument about someone messing with someone else's PlayStation controller.

"You was leaning into me," said the younger cousin, a chubby kid in a Mighty Mouse shirt, who clenched and unclenched his fists as he danced around Ennis.

"No way did I lean," said Ennis.

"Did so. Did so."

"You're full of shit," said Madison to the cousins.

"Hey, can it. You're in public here," Howard said.

"From now on none of you can use the PlayStation. I swear on my uncle's grave," said the older cousin.

Ramón hopped up and down shrieking, "Goddamnit, how come? Goddamn you assholes to hell!"

Mrs. Chick stabbed the end of her long-handled weeding tool into the ground. "All you kids go home before I call the police. I will not have such language on my street. I won't have it."

Madison brushed hair back from her red face. “This is a public street. Howard just said so.”

“What I meant was you have to be considerate. What you’re fighting over isn’t worth a hill of beans.”

Mrs. Chick screwed her face into a sneer and said, “I’m good friends with the chief of police, and I’ll have you all removed. Tell your mother I’ve lived on this street a lot longer than her.”

Howard was dumbfounded. The kids said no more, but when the old lady wasn’t looking, Madison gave her the finger.

The next day the kids had forgotten the fight, but Howard lectured them on being nicer to Mrs. Chick. “You have to learn to get along with all kinds of people.”

“Tell *her* that,” Ennis said.

It wasn’t like he was any great role model, but at least he could grow tomatoes better than old Clark. When his nephew returned, Howard said he wouldn’t mind staying on at the garden, even if it meant working for free. He could use the exercise.

Ignatz would stumble over to join him, sleepy-eyed, carrying his bowl of cereal. Together they staked and tied the tomatoes and, because of Howard’s careful watering, the vines grew like crazy and soon had golf ball-sized fruit. “Ignatz,” he said, “See what thou hast wrought!”

“What’re you sayin’?”

“Look what you grew, Ignatz! What you grew!”

Often the boy was silent. Other times he talked a blue streak, rambling on about whatever was on his mind, and he’d forget what he was doing and pull up radishes in Howard’s plot or knock over the hyacinth-bean tipi.

One day the boy ran through his list of fathers, beginning with his real dad, Ennis Jenkins Sr., whom he barely remembered. When he was five, there had been a guy named Forrest Colton. “Forrest was an old bald guy. He watched monster truck shows and hollered like crazy.” The next dad was Keith. “He was Afercun-Americun. Keith could play guitar better than that other Keith, you know, in the Rollin’ Stones.

“Old Forrest’d peel off his belt and give it to us. We couldn’t play with none of his stuff. He had a klection of metal trucks and

stuff up on a shelf. Once I took one down, but I forgot to put it back. I got a bad whippin'. He had over a hunnerd he klected in truck stops." Ennis shrugged as if to say things came and went, good and bad. You couldn't take it too seriously.

"How long was Keith around?"

"I don't know. Maybe two years. He made us a garden. He had huge tomadoes all summer. Canalopes. Everything you can grow in a garden, we had it."

"Everything?"

"Yeah. Onions, peppers, tomadoes, watermelons, canalopes, radershes, corn, everything."

Howard almost asked, "Then how is it you didn't recognize kohlrabi?" but said, "You can't beat a big garden."

Ennis took home the first peppers and tomatoes, and one day his mother came over to thank Howard. From a distance her weight made her look older, but up close you could see she was probably early thirties at best, a baby-faced woman with hooded eyes in an orange tank, Bermuda shorts, and flip flops.

She stared at the okra plants and said in a shy voice, "I sure want to thank you. You been a blessin' to my kids."

"Thank you, ma'am." He saw she wanted to keep the bounty coming. But maybe there was a particle of sincerity somewhere.

When she got over her shyness, she proved to be a rambling, self-preoccupied talker. "My mother useta fix fried okra," she said. "Nothin' better. She cooked it with onions and peppers and what have you. It was the peppers made it good, but sometimes she made it with hot peppers, and I'd say, 'Ma, I can't eat it that-away.' I always had a sensitive stomach since I was a kid. Never did like chicken nor pork. The smell gets to me ever time."

Howard was down on his painful knees, weeding.

"Smells are my weakness. Oil smells gag me. Sometimes, if I'm riding in a car with the windows down, the plution makes me so sick I could puke. Now, skunk don't bother me too bad, but mothballs do. Chemicals. If get a whiff of ammonyer, I about die."

On and on. He struggled to his feet and said it was time to be getting home. As he drove off, he watched Bethany haul herself up

her front steps. Her heavy hair hung down her back. Why hadn't she thought to put it up?

Poor Ignatz. Poor little kid. It was a wonder he didn't brain her with a brick.

Later that week he got an earful of what Mrs. Chick talked about. Bethany was out on the porch, and you could hear her clear across the street, having it out with someone. "You said you was gonna fix it, but you never done shit. How are me and my kids sposed to live in this fuckin' dump?"

In mid-July temperatures stayed fairly moderate, and there were several nice rains. Ennis and Howard pushed the bamboo poles supporting the flourishing hyacinth bean vines deeper, and the tipi stayed upright when Ennis knocked into it. Fuchsia flowers opened. The kids didn't play inside the tipi as Howard had pictured, though Shannon did venture inside for half a minute and pronounced it a "pretty thing."

Ennis peered out from an opening in the tipi and said, "I wish I could be an Indin. They had super big bows and arrows." An hour later, Howard saw him and the older half cousin running around barefoot, shooting at a squirrel under a car with a BB gun. Howard walked across the street and took the gun from Ennis. "You can't be running around with a loaded gun, Ignatz. There'll be hell to pay. Mrs. Chick'll call the cops."

"Old bitch." The squirrel made a dash across the street and up a tree.

"That's not nice talk. Anyway, if you're going to shoot, why don't you set up a target in the back yard so things don't go haywire? Forget squirrels. They want to live." But when he was a kid, he had shot at squirrels, birds, and rabbits, the usual things boys went after.

"Keith useta let me shoot at sparrows. They drive my mother nuts. Chip, chip, chip all day long. I can help with your weeding. Two bucks."

Howard guessed Bethany had put him up to asking. "You'll soon be getting some ripe tomatoes. Sell those if you want."

"How much do you think I can get?"

A day or so after the gun business, Bethany re-visited the garden with Shannon. While Shannon sat on a bench with her legs stuck out, Bethany related all that was wrong with her landlady, whom she called *Livie* and sometimes *Dipshit*. "They finally got my air condishner fixed, but it took Dipshit two whole days. And she forgot about the kitchen faucet, and I'm payin' for water down the drain."

"Maybe you're supposed to keep up repairs," Howard said. "Look at your contract."

"I don't hardly have a man around. Big Ramón was okay until six months after Little Ramón; then he stopped supportin' us. He only comes around when he wants you know."

"*Youknow* must be your middle name."

"You got a way of makin' up names for people, doncha?"

"I'm clever that way."

"Clever is as clever does."

"What's that mean?"

"Take it or leave it."

"Jesus H. Christ." He went back to weeding.

But when he thought about it, he felt bad about the *youknow* business. She was a lame brain, but maybe she couldn't entirely help herself, and she did have it rough.

He lugged himself up the steps to the cluttered porch and knocked on the screen door. The living room was a total wreck, with old pillows and blankets strewn about. The remains of last night's pizza were congealing in a box in front of Madison, who lay on the couch talking on a lavender cell phone.

Bethany stared at him through the screen. "That stuff for me?"

"Hey Bethany, I'm sorry I made that comment yesterday. It was uncalled for, so I hope you'll accept my apology."

"Okay, sure. What the hell."

"Where's Ig . . . ? Where's Ennis this morning?"

"In time out. He got into it with Shannon. They was rollin' around on that rug you're standin' on."

He looked down. The rug was a faded thing with cabbage roses in the middle, some old person's castoff.

"Can he give me a hand?"

"I guess."

Ennis stumbled out, sleepy and more hangdog than Howard had ever seen him, skinny and pathetic in his undershorts, rail thin.

"You look like you could use some sleep, Ignatz."

"I'm hungry. Can I have a waffle?"

"You know where they are." Bethany gave Howard a look that said, "See, my kids don't get away with anything," as if fixing the boy a frozen waffle was an indulgence. Howard knew that look. Last week a toddler sitting in the grocery cart in front of him had grabbed the bar that separates people's groceries, and his mother had slapped his hand. The message was, *I've got things under control. No disrespect is called for*.

Ennis went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. The fridge was bare inside except for a large jar of peanut butter, a sack of bread, a bag of something green, and an uncovered bowl of macaroni and cheese. It occurred to Howard he could have been taking snacks to the kids all along. Why hadn't he thought of it?

When he cashed his garden-steward check, he went back to see Bethany. "Listen, Kiddo," he said, handing her a fifty. "It seems you're kind of struggling what with the air conditioner and all. Here's something to buy groceries with." He handed her a twenty as well. "Ennis helped me a lot. Consider he earned it."

"Well, thank you, Howard. Heaven sent you to us. You're our angel." She said she'd gone to two food pantries and only netted some day-old bread and "a mess of greens." They had told her to come back for family counseling, but "Duh, what about the taxi?" She looked up at him. He handed her another twenty.

"She's borderline negligent," Clark said when Howard asked if Clark could help get the family more assistance. "I can put in a word," Clark said. "I feel for those kids, especially that skinny older boy. What his name?"

"Ennis. I call him *Ignatz*."

Clark laughed. "So does that make you Krazy Kat, Uncle Howard? You love that little kid?"

"L'il Ainjel," Howard said. "Nah, the whole family's on the take. Oh, hell, he's a good kid."

With his own money squeeze, he didn't know how long he could continue his role as "garden angel," as Bethany put it, grinning at her great witticism. Obviously, she'd coached the kids to call him *Uncle Howard* when the ice cream truck was in the vicinity. Madison asked for ten bucks, "So we can buy us some good hamburger meat, not that cheap stuff that clogs your pores."

He handed it over. "Buy lean," he said. "Check the label."

Howard bought them each a book, though he suspected it was hopeless since they'd grown up with TV's stapled to their umbilicals. But Ramón actually read *James and the Giant Peach* and said it was "awesome when the peach gets stuck on that pole on top of the Empire State Building." Howard had thought Ennis might go for his *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book since his youngest grandson had loved the series, but Ennis said, "I saw the movie. All that Cheese Touch shit. I'd never fall for none of that."

"In my opinion books are better than movies nine times out of ten," Howard said.

"How can they be? Movies gots bigger pitchers. No book can have pitchers that big. They'd have to haul it around in a damn truck."

"How come you're not smiling when you say that? Okay, have it your way. Be illiterate. Join the rest of the Americans. Can't read, can't think. Believe what you hear on TV. Come on, boy. I know you're smarter than that."

"Are you married?"

"I was, but my wife died, for your information."

"What'd she die of?"

"Heart disease. I don't want to talk about it, so don't ask questions."

"What if you married my mom? You could make her get smarter. You're old, but who cares?"

"Didn't anyone ever teach you manners? But you're right. I'm old, and she's young, and anyway we wouldn't get along."

"Well, think about it. I ain't said nothing yet."

"Don't. Promise me."

"All right." Ennis thought a minute. "It prolly wouldn't work because she don't like you all that much."

"How come?"

"Says you look like an ole bear."

"Grizzly or polar?"

"She said a bear."

He hadn't the slightest intention of getting the least bit closer to Bethany. The day he'd given them money for hamburger, Madison had brought him over a grilled burger on a bun. "Not much good," she grumbled. "It's 93% lean. Got no juice. But Mom wanted you to have it, Uncle Howard." That made him nervous.

But he was a doofus, like his nephew, and he thought of Ennis' proposition, but only for a moment, which took place at three in the morning, a time when his thoughts zinged around like bats. Was there anything to be said for Bethany? Well, she was a survivor. So what? People always talked about survivors as if they were saints, but more often than not people survived by using other people.

Was she at all attractive? She was chunky, and sweaty, but she had pretty skin though she was freckled. Actually, the freckles were kind of sweet. Her hair, when it was clean, was a shiny reddish brown. But she had a totally untrained brain. It was a royal pain the way she rattled off clichés. "Do I look like I just rolled off the turnip truck"? she'd say.

"No, Bethany," he'd say, "you look like you fell off the rutabaga truck."

She thought everyone had cheated her, was about to cheat her, or would cheat her in the future, including him. Considering all these things in the early morning, he would pull the pillow over his head and moan.

In August, after their Pick-Two lunch, he invited Milt to follow him to the garden. It looked pretty damn good if he did say

so. He'd paid the kids a little to help weed and wanted to show it off, the kids as well. He'd almost said "my kids," though he knew Milt might not think highly of Madison or Shannon and would probably conclude Ramón was just another wetback. Since Howard had begun supplying them with granola bars, it looked like Ignatz might have gained a pound. He'd grown very tan over the summer since he went shirtless so much. Howard had taken him and Ramón to the barber for haircuts, and both came out looking spiffy. He was proud of them, almost as if they were his grandkids. Well, grandkids in need of attention. Hadn't Milt bragged about his grandson who was autistic but smart as a whip?

When they arrived at the garden, Ennis was on his front porch. "Come meet my old friend here," Howard called. "He was on a farm team for the Royals once."

The kid took his time ambling across the street. "I've been waiting for you to show up," he said. "The Royals gots a farm?"

"Not quite." Milt stuck a piece of gum in his mouth. "It was the Kansas City A's back then."

"Royals, A's, same thing," said Howard.

"I never heard of them," said Ignatz, unimpressed. He whipped out a Lexibook console Howard had just bought him at Best Buy.

"Cute kid," Milt said when Ignatz headed home. "But not educated. Country kid?"

"Sharp as a tack." He handed Milt some of his best tomatoes to make up for the thought that Milt was a numbnuts who didn't know potential when he saw it. "A whiz at Sudoku," Howard said.

A week later things heated up between the family and the landlady. He had met Olivia and thought her sensible enough. It would be damn hard under any circumstances to have a family living there, especially one with four noisy kids—though, come to think of it, Madison might not make much of a ruckus. She always looked as if she had a hard time keeping herself upright. Gravity was pulling on her as it was her mother. The girl was getting fatter. She was always flirting with the ice cream guy, trying to get a second scoop free.

The lot of them—from skinny Ennis and Shannon to slouchy Madison to sharp-eyed Ramón, who spent his time lighting firecrackers from the arsenal he'd acquired in July by wheedling or stealing—all seemed doomed to grow up semi-literates or con artists or both. They all needed an infusion of cash for special camps, dentists, tutors, barbers, psychologists, and allergists. Shannon wheezed.

He was too old, and his resources were limited. But when Clark told him about a soccer camp for inner-city kids, he paid for the boys. Ramón thrived, but Ennis refused to return when someone called him a hillbilly.

"Ignatz, you can't be a quitter. How're you going to get ahead in life?"

"I'm going to sell my vegables. Each year I'm going to make my garden bigger. Next year, I'm growing watermelons. Screw the dumb okra. You help me start something big over there in the back." He pointed to the duplex.

"Ok, Ignatz. Count me in. We'll keep in touch in the winter, okay."

One day Howard was standing in the garden, noticing purple seed pods on the hyacinth bean vines, when Ennis, Madison, and Shannon—Bethany too—came walking down the steps and out the door, carrying trash bags and suitcases. The kids had backpacks on their backs as well. They passed without speaking and headed toward the alley. He had a tight feeling in his chest.

"Where are you all going?"

"Bus stop down the street," Ignatz said. "Going to the Greyhound Station. We haveta move back to Arkansas. They got a place down there for us since we can't live at her place." He scowled back at the apartment.

"You can't stay at your cousins' place?"

"Full up," said Madison.

"Olivia said she'd call the cops," Bethany said. She was redfaced and weeping. Ennis and his sisters looked straight ahead.

"Were's Ramón?" Howard asked.

"With Big Ramón," said Madison. "Just for a while."

"What about your garden?" he asked Ennis. "It's doing so well. You can't leave it."

"Give it to the next guy. I prolly won't be back."

"You can't work something out? Do you want me to talk to Olivia? I will if you want me to." He felt the wind had been knocked out of him. "Let me write down your phone number at least. Give me a call when—"

"We don't have a phone yet," Bethany said.

"I'll call the social worker. Who is it? Here, take my number." He scrawled it on a piece of paper and handed it to Ennis, who wadded it up and stuffed it in his pocket.

"I'll call. I'm glad to call somebody." His voice sounded weak, winded.

"Sure try," Madison said, "But it won't work. The caseworker already talked to her. Conflict resolution. Olivia said no way."

The day was very humid, following last night's thunderstorm. Bethany and the kids walked past him, and before he knew it, they were halfway down the alley, approaching the overflowing water holes where birds splashed. The garden appeared to have thickened overnight. It seemed to Howard the four of them were like a sad little band of explorers about to enter a jungle, carrying suitcases.

He watched the girls avoiding—and Ignatz marching through—the pools of water. Bethany turned left and disappeared, and one by one the others followed.

Claudia Buckholts

Ontology

You live in an exactitude I can't find,
among laboratory breakers, sine curves,
mathematical constants. To you, the singing
of sparrows is only a mating ritual,
not some divine, extracurricular lament.

To you, fog cloaking a line of lampposts
as we stroll home in the evening
is only a meteorological phenomenon
and not the grace of another world
descending, the shadow of another bliss,

and the persistent droning in your ears
only a medical symptom, not the
humming of divine bees channeling
their way through a mortal body
towards the dense honeycombs of heaven.

Simon Perchik

*

You fold this sweater the way a moth
builds halls from the darkness it needs
to go on living—safe inside this closet

a family is gathering for dinner, cashmere
with oil, some garlic, a little salt, lit
and wings warmed by mealtime stories

about flying at night into small fires
grazing on the somewhere that became
the out-of-tune hum older than falling

—you close the drawer and slowly
your eyes shut—with both hands
make a sign in the air as if death matters.

Alan Britt

Butterflies

for Paula Bognanni

A large yellow butterfly, genus unknown, but upon close inspection likely a female Papilio glaucus or Eastern tiger swallowtail. Like a jumping bean she flops the forsythia hedge. I approach to observe her chestnut wings resembling an overripe banana. Over the hedge & against my neighbor's olive asbestos shingles she disappears. But across the yard, another large butterfly teasing the lavender lips bursting from a wild rose-of-Sharon resembles a black shadow attempting to free itself from a mirror. Upon approach, I see she isn't black at all but the color of volcanic ash with fluorescent blue brushstrokes boarding her sinuous swallowtail wings, cobalt brushstrokes that resemble the electric weavings found on Tara & blue collpa-dyed alpaca threads for ponchos & table runners woven by the Quichuas & sold inside the intestines of Quito. This butterfly, likely a female Papilio polyxenes or Eastern black swallowtail resembling cinders or volcanic ash, settles onto one ivory rose-of-Sharon for a moment before vaporizing inside the dripping shadows of a giant silver maple just as a final swallowtail butterfly hovers a second rose-of-Sharon—another female Papilio glaucus of silken straw—I head straight for her in time to witness eyeliner stripes bordering both corrugated wingtips along with a cobalt mythology smearing the backs of her flowing wings. Then off she goes, me fluttering close behind!

Donna Pucciani

Waking Up in a Rented Flat in Didsbury, England

Will the water in the shower
scald or chill today? What does it matter?

The birds are chirping outside a drizzled window,
daring the sky to lower itself one more centimeter.

The village is smothered in mist—

the fish monger on the lane pairing
silver-scaled haddock with fresh cod,
mussels asleep in their dark shells,
still smelling of the sea,

the butcher hanging joints of beef on hooks
above glass cases of chops and sausages
made from local pigs, and the cheese shop,

with Lancashire's best, Devonshire wheels waxed
and ready, fragrant Stilton on parslied trays,
jars of jam and honey.

Even the local pubmaster is up,
airing out the carpets of stale beer
before the lunch crowd descends.

Buses rumble past, their windows
steamed by the breath of tired workers.
There's morning coffee at St. James'.

A creeping senility engulfs the rest home
on the corner, its inhabitants smiling
or crying for no apparent reason,

showing us how to live

within the bonds of nothingness
on a planet facing an invisible sun.

And tea is brewing in china pots
all over England.

JC Alfier

Lake Verret Days

for Hogman Patin

Cottonmouths slide into unlit worlds.
Catchfly and redstar bloom like blood on sawgrass.

Herons vanish into fog, into thickets of cypress
poised like shipwrecked men nearing uncertain shores.

Route 70's strung out like a north-south trot line
flanking the miles along levee floodwalls.

Side streets of gravel and crushed shell
are the footwork of fallen angels, bummed

smokes hanging off their lips,
halter-tops faded to cheesecloth,

husbands gone to derrickhands
and drilling crews down on Wyandotte canal.

Between women trouble and hard weather
that tracks me like a mongrel, I take to my clapboard

shack slouched a mile deep into live oak,
dragonflies shadow-playing the jade light.

Harsh laughter slips a neighbor's fence
tethered to ground by muscadine vines.

Smoke from grills edges up into slash pine.
A shout, rooted in heartache, breaks from a doorway.

With my a/c/ broke, heat sticks close as a slow dance,
printing itself on my skin, like breath on a windowpane.

Roger Camp

Chancellorsville Revisited

My mother's fistful of marbles
dazzle me from inside a shot glass.
Indifferent to purebreds,
she collected crossbreds instead,
resulting in a herd of mixed breeds,
yellow-orange with fire-roasted red,
lemon-yellow with indigo striations,
hospital-green with a cherry taffy swirl.
Lodged among all the molten glass
is the clay marble I found as a boy
at the battlefield of Chancellorsville.
Ensnared by a fallen branch at Ely's Ford,
I fell onto it, my breath unsettling
dead leaves above its shallow grave.
This bland, earthy sphere, storied
with color. Bored before battle,
whiling away life in camp
playing a boy's game,
men soldiered them into the fray,
playing for keeps.

Fleta Vincent

Babylonia

Rachel
She be weeping lamentable,
wailing sons and daughters still
dying black with rejection,
sharecropping hands picking
white crops in broken black
soil bleeding mutated buds,
breaking seed coats warming
destruction injected in grief-
cracked veins stuffed with viscous rage,
flowing without end
ocean ripples of life riding
on the backs of black
despair.

Rachel
She be weeping lamentable,
wailing sons and daughters still
dancing black music and opaque
laughter breaking crystal tears
hidden in salt and conquered
keys playing melodies
in minor expiration to the beat
of unspeakable rhythms,
with tarnished harps and discarded
drums fading hearts longing
for love's embrace instead of sand
revolted by weary feet
shredded and spurned
black on the shores of a strange
and inhospitable land.

Rachel
She be weeping
lamentable wailing that
will not be comforted.

Richard Dinges, Jr.

Witch Two

Twigs twined into
arms and legs held
together by grass
tied into belts, skirts,
fiber shirts, no faces
or fingers or toes,
hung from bare
branches, skeletons
on skeletons,
talismans or warnings
or her vague memory
of her first doll,
blurred and distant,
an unfulfilled
dream that hovers
before myopic eyes,
stirs on an ancient
forgiving breeze.

William Snyder, Jr.

Those Moments When We Are Lost

Early evening, and in this room
in this yellow house, I work, my knees
pressed to hollows above your hips—
the supple flesh there as I straddle—
buttocks to buttocks—your spine-rail,
narrow troughs beside and up
from small of back to neck, billow-fan
of ribs, the blue veins, the shoals
of tiny hairs so white they might be
transparent—I cannot feel them.
Your head to one side, hair
draping ear, eye, chin, your arms extended,
fingers curled like water ripples
beside you. And shoulders, muscle
and flesh on bone, sighs of breasts beneath.
I knead and slide—press shoulder blades,
spine—hard-strokes up, down—an
inquisition of skeletal plumb. Your breath,
soft, like sleep-breath, and maybe
it is—your face, if I could see it, smooth,
pliant, lips parted in an oval of Om.
With my fingers, palms, heels of palms—
palmpress, musclesong—but slow,
deliberate, aware of limit, and need—
what the body desires, does not,
but abandoned to skin, flesh, sinew,
bone—the solid whole of you.

Down the street, in this early evening
light, in the kitchen of the blue house
on the corner, a man arranges an oven rack

for baking bread, and behind
the brown house next door, a girl counts
the swings it takes to make her friend
come out after dinner. While elsewhere,
the river silvers north, the arctic shrinks,
the universe expands in a grave,
inexorable hurry on its way to forever.

Catherine Swanson

Folly Beach

Somewhere beyond the trawlers, clouds were casting themselves out of Barbados. We sat on the porch and listened to waves spilling their foam on the beach. Summer had overgrown itself, a Japanese persimmon swollen in its own orange skin, and our time together, a garden where flowers bloom just long enough to get you drunk. As the wind rose, you turned and played your violin to the sea. When the gale came, we faced it in an old bed, pressed together like twins, our heads floating on the pillow. We held hands as water breached the dune and thumped the pilings of our house. Even with the window closed, the curtain danced like a boxer. We heard the next moment declare itself: a boat on a crested wave, a surge from which all future seasons would be composed, like the day we first dropped into the world and someone put a blanket on our startled, naked skin.

Masami Sugimori

Gomi-Yashiki (The House of Trash)

"Then what about—uh, oh, here she comes." Aunt Kazuko looked out the window. She was following up on a question about what American food was like. "Second time today."

"One cat less, though," Grandma said. A soft breeze fluttered the local newspaper on the coffee table, whose headline told of the rainy season's early arrival projected for this year. Grandma's gentle eyes were now pointed.

"What is it?" I turned around, a little relieved by the distraction. For I didn't know how to tell them about my first study-abroad year, which ended up little more than a series of remedial English courses. Instead of debating on international relations with American classmates, I found myself stammering about "5 Facts About My Culture" to equally disillusioned, equally struggling English learners. I hadn't even told my parents yet.

Outside, a short, stout woman was walking a bicycle dappled with rust. Four small cats, leashed to the handlebar by manila ropes, toddled about her feet. One white, one chestnut, and two calicoes. A black-lettered "For Sale" sign, with the name of the 200-*tsubo* plot's owner, stood on a small patch of bare dirt surrounded by grasses and occasional fleabanes. The woman and the four cats passed the sign slowly, with the Tateyama mountain range, lightly snow-clad, looming in the far background. She wore a frayed navy-blue pullover tucked into a faded pair of brown sweatpants. Maybe in her mid-sixties, I thought.

"Who is she?" I reached for a tumbler of barley tea on the table.

"Oh, you didn't know?" Aunt pushed the box of pastries to me. I took one with red bean paste.

"He can't know," Grandma said to Aunt. A brown *yunomi* teacup was in her wrinkled hands. "The last time he came to visit us,

it was the forty-third anniversary of his Grandpa's passing." When figuring years, Grandma always counted from Grandpa's death. Uncle Takashi would tell her to stop, joking irritably that he was not the Savior after all.

"Oh, that's right. She wasn't like that then." Aunt turned to me. "She is called Cat Grandma. Walks the cats every day. Weather permitting, I mean. We're going to have a lot of rain soon, so she may stick around today. Yeah, look."

I turned around. She was facing us, just fifteen meters away, but her glassy eyes were not seeing. Below a brown knit cap that completely covered her head, a pair of bushy black eyebrows accentuated her slightly tanned complexion. She put the bicycle on the kickstand. The two calico cats were playing with each other on their hind legs, moving toward the front wheel. The other two were sniffing around separately. The woman looked into the supermarket basket tied to the rear rack.

"What's she doing?"

"You'll see."

She took out a hand shovel and moved around the bicycle, her sluggish gait scattering the wrestling cats. Then she sank down to a squat and began digging at the earth.

"Is she weeding?"

"No, she's collecting weeds." Grandma said. "She plants them in front of her house."

"You probably saw the house on your way here." Aunt Kazuko's scowling black eyes gave sharp features to her lightly made-up face. "It's on Shrine Street. Did you see a huge junk heap?"

"A junk heap?" I remembered passing a mountainous pile of bicycle wheels, umbrellas, aluminum sashes, corrugated tin sheets, and numerous unnamable parts of whatnots—all in the middle of the otherwise harmonious row of prim neat houses. "Yeah, I did. So her house is in that block?"

"No," Aunt shook her head. "It *is* her house."

"Are you serious?" Through the window I saw the old woman digging, almost prostrate over the ground. One of the calicos came close, sniffing. She brushed it away with an open hand without looking up. "You mean, she lives amidst that junk?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

Aunt sighed, and then told me how the house became a receptacle for junk two years ago. How it had looked fine when her long bedridden husband died that year until, well, a month or so later. How people first thought she had just missed the day of oversized refuse collection. How they soon noticed something was wrong when they saw her walking a ramshackle bicycle loaded with tatters and old umbrellas. Holding her head high amid the plaintive squeak of the rusted wheels. "That was the beginning."

"But didn't anybody stop her?"

"Mrs. Minagawa, the next-door neighbor, talked to her. To no purpose."

"What about her family? Does she have any?"

"She has a daughter in Tokyo. But this daughter is gone ever since she left for college there. Didn't make it to the wake, did she?" Aunt turned to Grandma.

"No, she didn't." Grandma shook her head slowly. "Only the funeral."

"Yes, the daughter actually represented the family at the funeral," Aunt turned to me. "It was rather strange, but we thought the mother was just exhausted after taking care of the deceased for so long. Anyway, she left as soon as the formality was done, saying she must get back to work."

"So she doesn't know about the house?"

"Yes, she does. Mr. Murakami in the next block—he was on the local welfare committee then—wrote to ask for her permission."

"Permission? For what?"

"A cleanup. He had to write several times before getting a reply. It just said, 'Go ahead.'"

"So they cleaned the house up?"

"Yes, a year ago." The rainy season had already set in, Aunt said, so they waited for a break—a break long enough for her outing to last. And, thank goodness, a sunny day fell on a Saturday, when menfolk could help. Mrs. Minagawa saw her leave the

house and phoned Mr. Murakami. Then Mr. Murakami phoned the whole neighborhood, though everybody already knew it by the bicycle squeaking and the cats meowing. Soon there were over twenty people, both men and women, in front of the house of trash. Dressed in a mishmash of work clothes, with hard hats, gloves, and dust masks.

"Were you there, Aunt Kazuko?"

"Me? Sure." She sounded as if she had just returned from the mission. "Your Uncle Takashi was also there. Oh my goodness, the whole place was a nightmare. Just getting into the house was an adventure. She had rearranged the trash and closed the walk, to keep people away in her absence, I guess. And then inside, absolutely no room to move, with the garbage and trash and tatters all jam-packed. The smell stung the eyes, and it even came through the dust mask. And those bugs and rats!" She shuddered with her arms folded at her chest. "Anyway, we sorted things out, while menfolk worked on the outside. Then they came in and carried out what should be disposed of. Mr. Nomura had borrowed a dump truck from his construction company."

I pictured Aunt Kazuko and Uncle Takashi amid the great confusion and smiled. "But it must've taken hours to do all that. Didn't she come back?"

"We took care of that. Mr. Murakami's son—the second one, Kenji—he was a college freshman then. He followed her on his motorcycle, updating us on her every move. But we didn't have to worry after all. Guess what, she went all the way to Kamiichi."

"Kamiichi? Where the Temple is?" Our family tomb was in the Temple's cemetery. I was going to visit Grandpa and Uncle Hideki and other ancestors the next day. "But it's like ten kilometers from here, isn't it?"

"Yes. And, remember, she was on foot, walking the bike and the cats. We began the work early afternoon and finished around six. We made it somehow."

"But what did she go there for?"

"To visit her husband. I'll show you the tomb tomorrow. Nobody knew she had such a grand one there, with a granite five-

story pagoda. Well, maybe time stopped moving when he died. When we opened her fridge, everything had long gone bad, but—can you believe this?—the expiration dates were all about the time of his death."

"But how did she do without food?"

"Kenji saw her stop at a convenience store on her way back."

"To buy a boxed lunch there?"

"No, she got—and still gets—expired ones for free. At the back door. Just like a pauper. Well, you know, she kinda looks like one. They'd be surprised to know she's got a pagoda at the Temple. Anyway, she came back and entered the house as if nothing had changed. But with the way she's picked up more junk since then, we should do another cleanup soon." An electronic beep went off. "I'll take care of it," Aunt said to Grandma and shuffled to the kitchen. I heard the oven door open and smelled yellowtail teriyaki—that savory smell I had almost forgotten. I hadn't visited Grandma for three long years.

The twilight was deepening. I could hear Aunt Kazuko move about in the kitchen, the fridge door opening and closing, the dishes clinking together, the knife tapping on the cutting board. I knew Grandma would begin talking soon, just like every time we were alone together. About the women's high school she attended. About the days she worked at a war supplies factory in Nagoya. About getting married to Grandpa. Mother was born, Grandpa went to and returned from the war, and then two more kids, Uncle Hideki and Uncle Takashi. About a series of losses in the period of a decade. The Uozu fire destroyed all the houses and businesses of her folks, scattering them into strange places. Grandpa left for work one morning, all fine, and then had a stroke and never came back alive. When Uncle Hideki was drowned, they didn't tell her anything on the phone. They just told her to come. As she ascended the concrete steps of the breakwater, into her sight came a wooden box placed near the water, its cypress white in dazzling contrast with the wet sand . . .

Grandma once talked about Uncle Takashi, looking at the framed photograph on the wall. In it he, a high-school senior, was

marching in a pinstriped uniform, grinning confidently, leading the team with a large pennant pole in his hands. The same easy-going grin as in my first memories of him, like when he took me for a drive. I asked where we were going. He answered, "Where they'll eat you!" Then we were at a hole-in-a-wall cafe, Uncle Takashi chatting with the owner and other patrons. And me, looking down into the glass of cola, still afraid that they might stop laughing and begin eating me any time. One of them, with slick hair and mustache, turned and told me what an awesome third baseman Uncle used to be. Uncle noticed us and smiled. "Well, I was okay." He could have become a pro, Grandma once said, "but he chose to work as an electrician and got this house for us." They moved here sixteen years ago, after more than thirty years at what was supposed to be a temporary shelter after the fire.

The thickening early-June clouds added to the evening gloom. A draft of damp stuffy wind came in and touched the back of my neck. The rainy season could begin within a few days. Even this evening.

"She was such a fine lady . . ." The voice was low and monotonous, as if muttering to itself. Grandma often began with her family or relative, or sometimes with a friend from the women's high school. Once it was one of the housemaids she had before the fire. Whoever it was, she rarely named the person.

"And loved her daughter very much. The apple of her eye. No wonder, with all she had to go through when the war ended."

Most of her "fine ladies" had been from the women's school or the war supplies factory. Like Miss Suzuki, her best friend, who died several years ago. Or Mrs. Takashima, the nagging but warm-hearted forewoman who supervised Grandma and eleven other teenage girls. I waited.

"So when she got Chika, she was so happy. She ordered lots of fabric." After Grandpa's death, Grandma supported her three children as a door-to-door saleswoman of fabric and dresses. One of Grandpa's brothers, who knew some people in the industry, helped her to find the job.

"She made the baby's clothes by herself?" I really wanted to ask who she was. But with the way Grandma talked, I knew I

shouldn't ask the wrong question and disrupt the flow. Last time I could not ask who "that boy," an outrageous but lovable prankster, was. He turned out to be Uncle Hideki later.

"Oh, yes." Grandma nodded. "One day I saw the baby in her beautifully wrought romper. How adorable she was! Her father was smiling, too. Yes, he was a nice gentleman, just promoted to the section manager at the downtown department store." Grandma closed her eyes and took a sip from her *yunomi.* "They were such a happy family then."

"Not anymore?"

Grandma did not answer. She put her *yunomi* on the table, slowly, and then resumed talking, and I could almost see the shadows move in her distant memory. The daughter toddling with her plump bare arms raised shoulder-high, followed by the mother with a fluffy white towel in her hand. The daughter making a precocious bow in front of the looking glass as she fitted a pink flower-patterned kimono for the *Shichi-Go-San* festival. The mother's hug and the father's smile. The same happy shadows in the same looking glass, with the only difference in the child's growth year after year . . .

Then no fabric orders. No news at all. When Uncle Takashi moved his family to the neighborhood sixteen years ago—the year of Grandpa's thirtieth death anniversary, she added—there was only the mother to be seen, her perfunctory greeting keeping callers from peering behind the doorway . . .

"What? Wait, Grandma." I turned around and saw the old widow with the rickety bicycle and four cats, and a house of trash to call home, still in the middle of the grassplot. "Is she? Is she?" Her sturdy tanned hands were moving in a slow mechanical motion, arranging something in the plastic basket. "But why?"

"Why not?" Grandma's eyes were closed. "When we lost something, lots of women began living then. Had to, really."

It began to rain.

"We're having a thunderstorm, aren't we?" Aunt Kazuko returned. "Oh-uh, look at her," she said in a high-pitched, protesting voice. "She's doing it again."

The old woman was holding the bicycle with one hand and tugging the leashes frantically with the other. Each jerk of the manila ropes put the helpless cats into an even bigger jam. Especially the white one, right at the front wheel, meowing and meowing. The rain came down harder.

"She always gets mad that way," Aunt said. "You see, they just can't help—"

"Stay put!" The old woman yelled down at the cats, surprising me with her impossibly brisk young voice. "You got to listen to your mom!" A dazzling flash came and brought her soaked face, at once smiling and crying, into vivid three-dimensional relief against Mount Tateyama in the background. Then it was all darkness. A gigantic roar shook the earth. Large drops of rain rattled as they beat the roof.

She was gone. The rain was now pouring, exuding a damp and earthy smell. Aunt Kazuko closed the windows, when we heard a clatter from the garage. "He's back," she said and headed to the stairs. "I'll go get him a towel. I told him this wasn't a day for a bike ride."

Grandma and I heard Aunt's pitter-patter upstairs, as the rain continued to rattle. "Will you come visit us again next year?" Grandma said.

"I don't know yet . . . I may be busy." I thought of summer courses I would have to take to catch up.

"I know you'll come visit, good boy," Grandma said. "For your ancestors. For your Grandpa."

I heard the front door open and then close slowly. "Hey, look who's here!" Uncle Takashi thumped into the room. "A fine young man back from America! How have you been?"

"I've been alright." I could not help smiling at his good-natured vitality. "Yourself, Uncle?"

"Fantastic," he said. "It's good you got here before the thunderstorm. I'm only sorry your Aunt and Grandma must've nagged you with pesky questions. They are always so curious."

"No, we didn't," Aunt came in. "We filled him in on the House of Trash. That Cat Grandma was out there, collecting weeds again."

"You got a guest from America and wasted his time talking about that old woman?" His tone was suddenly edgy, and I remembered that Uncle occasionally got irritated at what Aunt said. "Don't you know it's none of your business?"

"No, no," I said. *"I* was curious. I was actually wondering if you could tell me about the cleanup last year. You were also there, weren't you?"

Uncle hesitated a little, before repeating to Aunt Kazuko, "It's none of your business."

Another lightning bolt flashed and illuminated the room. For a moment I could see his vexed eyes underneath the bald forehead. Then it was dark again, and the lightning appeared in the distance. "But—" Aunt Kazuko's voice broke a little.

Uncle snapped the light on and snatched a white towel from Aunt's hands. After a few hesitant blinks, the fluorescent lamps quietly restored the room's optical order. I could see the young slugging third baseman in the barnwood frame grinning from behind the head of the house, whose gray twill overall was dripping wet. "I'm telling you, Kazuko. When I'm here, there's no gossiping. Understand? Now let's get the dinner started for our precious guest."

Therese White

To Tell

At one in the morning someone calling on the phone. Her husband, Steven, rolling out of bed, grabbing the receiver, quietly answering, and Patricia at the same time feeling for her glasses on the nightstand, her hands acting for her eyes, knowing something was not good. Someone was in pain.

Patricia shuffled into her slippers and found her robe, tying it tightly round her thin waist, her mind wandering to the girls: Tina, Millie, and Jen. Around the corner of the bed she walked to stand next to Steven, who was holding the phone, listening, fuming, gritting his teeth. The voice from the phone was loud, amplified through the small holes in the receiver, screaming about feelings and work in the morning and daring.

Patricia pictured the voice: eyes wide with lurid animosity, forehead muscles tightening, flexing, feet planted firmly on the floor in preparation for a metaphorical gut punch or an uppercut. Patricia listened for the voice she recognized as if it were a disembodied head floating in space near the ceiling. It was male; it was Brian. She could picture him and the voice more clearly now, probably in his kitchen, the light above the stove lit, heat rising from the radiators, his finger pointing, thrusting at dead air space, and the woman standing next to him no one but Patricia's sister, Barbara, her youthful face drawn in both sadness and pride, her hair a curly mess, this woman of fine intelligence, this sister who managed their father's affairs holding onto Brian's arm as he launched into another tirade. Their kitchen would be clean, dishes in the dishwasher, nary a leftover in sight in the refrigerator, an oriental rug under their feet, running the length in front of the sink. Patricia, now positioning her arms just so, just in case she needed to reach out quickly and grab Steven, scanned her mind for where her conversation with Barbara had left off, embarrassed to admit that she had been thinking that their conversation was done, that their conversation wouldn't seep into another conversation, now between the husbands.

Patricia felt certain that Barbara would not get on the phone, and therefore felt certain, too, that she wouldn't have to come onto the phone either. This was a relief and a respite to her harried mind that couldn't switch off the panic she felt in her stomach every time Barbara's name sat on her tongue. Brian was questioning what right Patricia and Steven had to judge them so harshly, to treat them so badly, and to think so highly of themselves, to put themselves in such high regard as to think that they were above the others in the family, those who mattered and counted, those who did the books for Lon, their father-in-law, and offered their house for gin-and-tonics and cherrystones in the summer.

Steven was biting his tongue now, waiting for an opportunity, it seemed, to say something without knowing what would be best to say, or at least good to say to someone who was berating you without fatigue. Just hang up on them, Patricia thought. You won't get anywhere, she thought. But Steven was not without loyalty and wanted to avenge the damage done to his wife, her name, her reputation, even if their family quarrel hadn't left the family. You're a jackass, Brian, shouted Steven. How dare you, he spat. Patricia squeezed her eyes shut as she tensed her shoulders and twisted her neck. He needn't go that far, she thought. He needn't use that language, she almost said. But then, at that moment, Brian shouted fuck you so loudly that Steven let the phone leave his ear. Steven said he'd heard enough. He didn't have to listen to that language. Brian repeated fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Steven blared back, fuck you Brian, and hung up.

Oh, God, thought Patricia. No, she had not thought that, she had said that. Then she thought, now what. Steven ushered her backwards away from the bed so he could go downstairs, but not before putting on his own slippers. Patricia followed him, thinking she owed him something for taking the phone call, for keeping her from having to deal with her sister or her sister's husband, who rarely came on the phone and who had never before used a rough word with either one of them.

Brian was a clean-shaven man who smelled of masculine cologne, had hair that had gone white at thirty-six, and who regular-

ly got his nails polished. Barbara, on the other hand, had hair that refused to gray. She sashayed her way through the school year as a math teacher for the sole purpose of getting back to the beach and the beach house every summer, sand between her toes, tan lines on her hips, and a towel around her waist. Barbara and Brian were both on their second marriage. Patricia had felt good about Brian when she had first met him fifteen years prior. Other than indulging in too much wine when dining with friends, and Brian liking the finer things in life, especially Lon's finer things, she hadn't minded him; she'd even liked him. She had thought him a good match for Barbara, who liked Lon's finer things as well.

Their father had collected beautiful etchings and small, cast sculptures, rare feathers under glass, antique religious relics and furs his wife used to wear when their mother was alive. Lon and Elaine were a couple that had amassed a small fortune for the welfare and protection of their two girls; it was to be evenly divided amongst them after their parents' death. In her eighties, Elaine fell into the depths of Alzheimer's and dementia, never quite reaching its bottom for twelve years, until she passed quietly on a Wednesday afternoon in a room overlooking a horse paddock outside her window in the nursing home. Lon had visited her most every day she had spent apart from him, combing her hair, regaling her about whom he had seen at the deli, telling her about the boy in the pew in front of him last Sunday who could never keep still and would never mind his parents' admonitions, but who had, for all his bad behavior, still found favor with Lon. He gave the boy a lucky arrowhead he had dug out of a box in the cellar the following Sunday just before heading out to mass. Now Lon was the one in the nursing home, while Barbara and Brian lived in Lon's condo during the work week, running to and fro to school and to the manufacturing plant until the weekend, when they'd hightail it to the shore and spend time in their beach house a few miles from the ocean, overlooking a salt pond, a crushed seashell driveway out front.

Patricia was more sensible than that. She hadn't a beach house; she wasn't good with numbers and loved Lon for who he

was, not what he owned, which she reminded her own daughters about. Her mother, before her death, had gifted her one of the furs. She never wore it. It was passé now, but she kept the near floor-length coat in a cedar cabinet in the basement and would check on it every so often, brushing its mink softness with her fingers, smoothing down the deep brown, caramel and mahogany hair.

Patricia felt certain that the taking care of Lon, as he aged, should have been evenly divided, but that she got the brunt of the labor. She took care of all medical decisions concerning his person: moving out of the big house when it became all too much, switching medications due to an allergic reaction, arranging more round-the-clock care when Barbara and Brian couldn't be there during the day, for they had lived the closest at that point. Patricia knew his doctors' numbers by heart: his internist, cardiologist, orthopedist, dentist, urologist, and dermatologist, as well as his physical therapist. She knew the number for his pharmacy, his insurance, and the closest—and better—hospital. She was a walking encyclopedia of all things Lon: his blood pressure, his food intake, his cholesterol, his skin tags.

Barbara, on the other hand, handled the numbers: how much stock he owned, when to sell, how much to gift each grandchild for the holidays. Barbara had one son from her first marriage—a grown boy who used to laugh with Patricia's girls, riding the cold waves under the hot summer sun off the Massachusetts coast or the Rhode Island Sound. Barbara knew to the penny what Lon had in what bank and when each bill was due: cable, electricity, phone, insurance premiums. Lon had kept a large green ledger for all his accounting, and Barbara had held onto that custom, even with the advent of personal computers. She had inherited his grand penmanship and calligraphic flourishes danced upon her checks.

It wasn't difficult to get information about where the money was or where it was going. Barbara stressed transparency. Although Patricia didn't pry, she didn't want to seem focused on finances. It was she, Barbara, who offered news about the money, whenever there was some. Patricia listened, but didn't feel the same desire to repeat all that she had gleaned from Lon's nurses and doctors. Her sister's probable disinterest, she figured, was

good enough reason not to share health-related concerns. (Patricia had for the moment forgotten her father's recent bout of bronchitis. Her mind was elsewhere.)

Steven turned on the kitchen light and leaned against the counter, while Patricia asked if he wanted any milk or juice. Shaking his head, thinking of the phone call, he said that it was uncalled for, that it was certainly uncalled for. Patricia nodded, staring at her husband of thirty-eight years, years that included three babies, four moves, and six different promotions for Steven. And now, the children grown, Patricia and Steven had fallen into a comfortable routine. For their combined felicity in marriage, they settled into separate beds, if not separate bedrooms, each night before eleven—only tonight they were awakened by Brian's phone call, forgetting that it was prompted by a series of intentional omissions and assertions, not entirely of Patricia's own making.

Patricia's birthday had just come and gone, a February Saturday, cold and clear. Her oldest, Tina, arranged a party celebrating her sixty years with family and friends—save one, save Barbara. Tina had assumed Barbara and Brian would be at the shore for the weekend, two hours away, unavailable to attend, unwilling to drive back for a Saturday function as unimportant as her sister's birthday, and so unnecessary to invite. Invitations came in packets of twelve and forty-eight were sent, asking for respondents to keep quiet as it was a surprise party for Patricia: she wasn't to know about it. At the party, Patricia was surprised and relieved Barbara was not in attendance. She needn't listen to Barbara's talk of the beach house, of school, of Brian's newfound winery that they must all try. Instead, *she* was the center of attention, and it mattered not that her hair was gray at the roots and age spots bloomed near her temples.

But Patricia should have known that when Barbara learned of the party there would be a commotion, a riling of nerves, and a provoking of anger. Lon would hear of it; he would know and have something to say on the topic. He could not have attended himself due to his bronchitis; but his daughter, his daughter should have been there, at her sister's birthday party. Lon would say Tina

made a poor choice, a very poor choice in leaving Barbara out, in keeping her off the list.

When Patricia visited her father at the nursing home the day after the party, he was most displeased. He shook his finger at her and said he was upset and that it was wrong. He said her mother wouldn't like it one bit. Patricia agreed. Patricia nodded. He told her that she had raised Tina to be too free in her thinking and disrespectful with regard to family. But then Patricia said no, Tina was not to blame. It was not Tina. It was all me, said Patricia. Tina was only doing what she thought was best for everyone. Lon wouldn't have it; he wouldn't accept this line of thinking and said he would like to talk with Tina himself.

Patricia looked past Steven through the dark window into the sky, slowly listening to its dark night sounds, the barking of a dog, the low rumble of a plane overhead. She heard the ticking of the grandfather clock in the living room and, as she turned, suddenly sad, the tears started to gather now at the corners of her eyes. And then with Steven unable to see her face, the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Steven whispered that Lon should know what Brian said. Patricia turned, rifling for a tissue in her pocket, wishing to blow her nose only to see her dear husband, helpful as always, standing, arms outstretched, raising his handkerchief toward her as if he were waving a white flag.

The next day, they visited Lon together. It isn't fair, Patricia said. Brian shouldn't be able to get away with talking to either of them like that, using that language and such. Lon was not unprepared. Barbara had phoned him at 1:30 the night before. As far back as he could remember, when the news had been that Barbara had made a mistake and wanted to come clean about it, he sat Barbara down and told her what had to be done. He did the same this time as well. He told Barbara that she must apologize and apologize she would.

Lon would hope that this could be done in person, perhaps even at the nursing home, in front of him, sitting in his chair, in room 144. The rug was Berber, the art was a Cross with a dried

palm branch woven through Jesus' limbs. His books—possessions he valued—were by Bellow, Vidal, Updike, Mailer. It was all to be packed up and carted off to Salvation Army, where others would sort through his last belongings, finding a cardigan of worth, or a book to devour, upon his death. He had already parted ways with all his other chattel—all that was still sitting in the condo or in the bank.

Patricia was at first alarmed to see Lon strip his lifestyle to such meager means. But Lon relished the resignation, the relinquishing of property: it was freeing and liberating to the point of epiphany for him. He began to see his life in retrospect. He began to imagine the end of effort and the beginning of peace and contentment. He existed and that was all he wanted. This family drama was wreaking havoc with that aim. Patricia would have been dismayed to have to reveal these goings on to her daughters and so vowed to remain silent. She would bear the burden of conversations that had no exit point, conversations that were hushed and, as yet, unshared.

A week later, Barbara invited Jen to visit down by the shore. The beach is so beautiful off-season, she said. Bring the kids if you want, she said. Jen went alone. She took the trip as if it were a vacation away from her motherhood, a tiresome job with thankless hours spent laboring over meals and phlegm and TV and homework. This weekend she would be a niece and that was all.

How was the party, Barbara asked. She had wanted to inquire and so she did. Jen was delicate in her phrasing, careful to offer some, but not all, details that would make the day seem special, but not too special. Jen was aware after all that Barbara was decidedly absent from the party and that Tina had not sent her an invitation. Jen was actually unsure if Barbara would have come to the festivities, giving up the shore for a blessed weekend to focus on family and her sister, but her uncertainty didn't make her love her any less. Barbara was her aunt, for heaven's sake. She wondered if her mother knew that she was here this weekend. In fact, she didn't, but Jen was a woman whose desire to please all gave her reason to suppose that it was better that Patricia didn't know that

her youngest was visiting her aunt by the shore, and so that might remain a secret.

She had a presence, her aunt, even with her small frame and her small features. She had a way of easing herself into your confidence. And that weekend aunt and niece talked of miscarriage and Catholicism, shared experiences and doubts. Lon and Barbara were more alike than Lon and Patricia, Barbara said. Lon and Barbara were close and understood each other better than Lon and Patricia, Barbara said. There was a story there, and Barbara told what wasn't hers to tell.

It happened long ago, when Barbara was barely a teenager, living in the three-floor Victorian with Lon, Elaine, and Patricia, six years her senior. Patricia came home late one night and there was yelling and the slamming of doors. Lon said something akin to not in my house and he meant it.

Elaine and Patricia had to take a trip. They went beyond their little town and the railroad station and the factory smokestacks, and past the state line and down along a dirt road to where a midwife used a tool and made you clean again. Elaine told the St. Mary's Ladies Auxiliary that they had gone south to buy new glass goblets and she showed them off, too, good and sturdy, an amethyst color, empty and ready for libation.

Patricia married Steven four months later. He was a second cousin, once removed, who lived far away and was a good man, Patricia's aunt had said. The church wedding was followed by a traditional reception where the champagne flowed and Roland from up the road took pictures of Lon and Elaine smiling with Patricia and Steven. Eight months later, Tina was born, over five pounds for an early baby, a healthy sign, they said.

Barbara tilted her head as if to ask Jen if she had heard her correctly. Jen nodded and swallowed the information whole. It was evening by the time their storytelling was through and Jen had better get on the road to see the kids before their bedtime. It was twilight time, when all good things get ready for bed and lay their head to rest.

Jen looked past Barbara through the dark window, into the sky, slowly listening to its dark night sounds—a water vessel mo-

toring by on the pond and an owl who-whoing from a pine tree. She heard the whirring of the dishwasher in the kitchen and, as she turned, suddenly sad, the tears started to gather at the corners of her eyes.

Barbara cleared their wine glasses and kissed her niece farewell.

Hudson Saffell

Deluge

"To look at the river now," I said.

"Makes me forget it was a dry river bottom. . . . We used to run circles in."

Brett and I stood on the rusted-over Union Pacific truss overlooking the Ventura River, now flooded from El Niño's deluge. We were getting drenched, hoodies over our heads, facing the Pacific Ocean and watching the waves rise higher than we'd ever seen. We passed a joint between us, trying to keep it together and dry. The waves broke down on the tide thunderous, booming like something sonic, each wave's back-spray camouflaging the next one growing.

"We should be out there," Brett said.

"Dad would be," I said. "Imagine the stuff that's in that water, from all the way in Casitas, brought out there from the river."

"He would."

Brett stripped off his hoodie—"Yeah, good idea"—and the rain hit us on our bare shoulders, parted our long and unkempt hair, and the smoke, when we let it go, hung against the sheets of rain coming down all around us.

"I think we can do it."

"Man," I said. "If we do it, we should have fins. We should have a lot of things."

I laughed.

"Nah, too hard to surf with a finbelt. I've tried. Rather take my chances of not wiping out."

"Like in Teahupo'o."

"Yeah." Brett laughed. "Like you in Teahupo'o."

I was in my kitchen rolling a joint with fingers shaky from not having eaten. The week-long rain had finally lessened but the storm was far from over. In the news, El Niño seemed to have retreated, but only to regain its full strength—it was coming back

to flood us more. Well inside my apartment, my chafed elbows propped against the woodgrain Formica countertop worn white long before I existed, I mistakenly ripped a creased leaf of Arabic gummed paper, my set jaw off-kilter, when the phone rang once, twice, three times—again I thought—four. Brett buzzed on the other end of it, saying, "El Niño's a gift from God, Boonie. Anyhow. What? Screw what the Weather Channel said. I'm amped. You too, right?"

So I decided to agree with him with all my heart—the same heart my girlfriend, Maggie, thought she'd tucked away for safekeeping. And here it was, 1997, a nasty El Niño upon us—on our own claustrophobic generation X, Y, or Z, they weren't sure, and so were we, unsure. I heard noises from Maggie opening and shutting drawers and the medicine cabinet down the hall from me. Brett muffled the phone, but not well enough, and said, "Just pack what we need, that's it."

He was talking to Natalia, his girlfriend, who fired back, "Okay. Ass!"

We were all going surfing.

Brett went on blaring, "It's not like we're going hiking in the Sespe," to which Natalia countered, "Okay-*ass*!"

An hour went. I breathed out the cakey patio screen where the glass door was cracked open and saw Brett's topaz pickup truck race into the parking lot of Buenaventura Studios, my apartment conglomerate. I shouldered into a flannel shirt, left it open, and stepped outside. My eyes tightened under the overcast morning that rumbled from high but was supposed to hold until night. The air was warmer, without the smell of rain . . . we had plenty of time.

Two tailfins overbit the tailgate of Brett's pickup truck. The warmed asphalt tickled the rubber of his sagging tires, sounding off like the mini racing pigs at the Ventura County Fair every year. I watched Natalia in the cab of the truck, faced forward and hidden by a pair of Foster Grant shades. Before Brett had even braked, she moved at the passenger door and hopped out.

"Hey, Boone," Natalia hollered and waved, whirling to the tailgate. She yanked her shortboard out from the bed as if it

weighed nothing at all. She brought it to where I stood in the fresh-cut grass, where dark green clumps cooled the bare soles of my feet. She laid it down, stripped the grungy wax. I swept my hair out of my face and called her Nat because it created a kind of funny fury in her. And when I did she swung her board around and nearly clocked me.

"We need to get some fresh wax on these boards, quick," Brett barked out the left-open door. "They've already been stripped," he lied, his adrenaline going.

He leapt out of the cab, maneuvering his stickered-up board from the bed, and pressed it into the grass next to Nat's. He slingshot back into the cab, frisbeeing Slayer into the dash- mounted aftermarket CD player he'd recently got in exchange for a quarter ganja.

Nat tore shrinkwrap from a fresh bar of Mr. Zog's Quick Humps Sex Wax.

"Mine and Maggie's boards," I bugged Nat, "you know . . . they're already ready to go."

"Well, aren't you just a Daniel Boone, *Boone*," Nat said, balling up the plastic wrapper and thumbing it into her front jean-shorts pocket. She looked back at Slayer, sneered, and sighed sharply.

I grinned and glanced down at my Freestyle Shark wristwatch. I looked to see if anyone was staring at me staring at the face of my watch that signaled quarter to eleven.

Brett looked at me—beyond me. I turned and saw Maggie coming out of my apartment wearing less than I'd expected. I followed Brett's eyes, but Brett was my best friend. I looked back at Maggie wearing the smile she'd learned in Teahupo'o, where the four of us had gone on a surf trip last summer.

Last night I'd watched the news on KTLA while sitting on the floor waxing Maggie's board. She'd sat cross-legged on the couch, her eyes closed, a real "yogi," with earphones tentacling from her Walkman. Brett sat next to her, flicking his Zippo and stealing glances. I'd watched their reflection in the screen whenever there was a cut to commercials, and I could see through them both.

Now it was nearing winter. I'd watched the once dry riverbed fill with rain overflowing, racing beneath the 10I Freeway overpass, waterfalling the estuary before pounding out into the Pacific, carrying with it everything that could not resist its force. Inland, homes were flooded. Families paddled kayaks and canoes to reach rockier, more stable ground. People stood on rooftops and on top of vehicles, even climbed trees to stay head-above-water. Near the coast, in La Conchita, a handful of miles just south of Goleta, where Brett and Nat lived, entire homes had been exploded by bus-size mudslides, and several deaths reported. Houses crashed into one another. Families converged. But the deluge had also created, on several Southern California surf points, high, curling waves, vaguely familiar to us—the waves in Teahupo'o where all of us had got to know the thrill of big surf. It'd burrowed into our skin. For me, there were still tiny slivers of coral embedded in the heels of my hands and feet, my body having been hammered on an underwater outer reef. It kept me beached the rest of the day. Even in the heat I'd shook like a cat in the rain.

It was winter here, but it was impossible to tell. El Niño took care of extending the warmth, however coldhearted the environment had become. The currents shook things up weirdly. Dorado and yellowfin tuna were being landed as far north as Santa Barbara, and tuna were hauled in in San Diego without any empathy from the fishermen—never caring about why the tuna were in abundance off-season or how it would affect their migrations thereafter—who were just catching and catching them.

Things that didn't belong in the sea buoyed up like ruins.

We took Brett's truck to Pierpont, to the curb of Greenock Lane, Marina Harbor, just a few jetties away. From the highway, on the other end of the harbor, we watched the pilings of the pier get battered. Brett braked jerkily and downshifted into park all at once. I climbed out, a radiating buzz in my stomach.

Down the coastline, entire sides of cliffs had sloughed off from the storm. They were scalloped and slick now, with tree roots sticking out like bones, muscles, and ligaments. Homes had been cleared. Cliff-dwellers gone—who knows where. I watched the

waves break in the eight-to-ten-foot range. They swelled high and barreled long before they broke.

Maggie got my attention.

"Look, Boone."

Yards from us, a fatty gray carcass lay sideways in the sand. Around it, black blotches of horseflies congregated. We smelled its decay, heard the cry of gulls.

I watched Maggie curl a length of her wavy, short-cropped hair behind her ear, adorned with little hoops and studs. I saw the freckles on the wide bridge of her nose disappear into the crinkles her scrunched-up face made. I still found her attractive. We'd been together for almost two years.

I remembered something I'd seen on TV.

"Dead seal," I said. "In San Diego, a whole beach got covered in tuna crabs washed up onshore the other morning."

"Did they die?"

"They were already dead."

I zipped up my shorty-style O'Neill wetsuit, the kind we all wore, though the water was slick, salted, and warm—warm enough to skip the suit. Perhaps, then, it was something we didn't do to stay warm but to protect ourselves from the runoff in the clouds of churning ocean before us.

More and more, as we stepped across the beach, we felt the damp sand cling to our bare feet. We balanced across driftwood and seaweed-composed berms raked inshore by storm-driven tides. Black and orange over-stapled information boards in English and Spanish were newly staked in the ground, close to a shuttered-up pale blue lifeguard tower. Our feet found the diluted sand, where pieces of broken crab shells dulled the smoothness the ebb and flow created.

I reached for the Velcro cuff of my rubber leash. Over months I'd let the cord bake in the sun and dry-rot—procrastinated about buying a fresh one. "Hell," I said, securing the cuff around my ankle and slapping it. "I better not eat it out there."

We all lay flat on our boards, dipped our arms in the surf, and ducked beneath the near shorebreak, tasting the brackish water from the incoming river flooding the estuary beneath the over-

pass. It was noon and the day turned darker, then light again, then darker. Then only dark. The temperature of the water was warm, the air peppery like the smell of freshly overturned soil. The water was clouded from inland runoff, with debris mixed in: uprooted inland brush, aluminum gutters, pieces of siding from homes, Styrofoam, backyard toys . . . things that had no place in the ocean and far more numerous than the usual empty bottles, sandwich papers, cardboard boxes, and cigarette butts.

None of us had expected to see anything alive washed out to see from inland. Sure, animals had been carried downriver and drowned, usually before they made it to the estuary, or they were beached like the dead tuna crabs and that seal. But here, joining us in the sea, was (it couldn't be) a rattlesnake, which contended to survive further, floating on a barge of tangled tree branches. After we experienced the initial fright—the stuttering shock of it bobbing by, staring back at us, as if this was all just as paralyzing to him, too—the awesomeness struck. We just couldn't believe it was here.

Brett signaled the girls, "Keep paddling! Watch out for this freakshow!"—as if they weren't seeing what we were exactly, as if they couldn't recognize a rattlesnake when they saw one (as any Ventura County native son or daughter could). And sure, I was scared, but also I felt a little sorry for him. For what was to become of a rattlesnake in the ocean? Nothing good. A pitiful end was in the cards turned over for him.

Maggie ignored Brett, paddling closer. She puckered her lips at the snake as if to kiss it, as if to tempt it. Its tail never maraca'd. Nat looked at me, puzzled lines on her forehead, which was the way I felt I looked, too.

Maggie paddled by, her face all bright as if she'd done something righteous, maybe.

"Now I've seen everything," Brett said, paddling forward, toward the swell, and towards Maggie.

Nat and I straddled our boards, side-by-side. We watched the miraculous craft and its lonesome crewmember become smaller and smaller, more and more hidden by the maze of whitecaps. It

bopped up and down for some time, its scaled body in a loose coil, its flat head weaving side to side, softly, diminishing. Finally, it was gone altogether.

"I suppose they can't swim," I said.

"He didn't look too eager to."

"Geesh. What a wild ride he took."

Nat spit some water back into the sea and commanded, "Hey. Let's catch some waves."

And for many hours, that's all we thought of.

Saltwater and mucus cycled through my nose and throat like from a bilge pump. My board and body rose like an uppercut, dropped like an axe-kick, then glided. Rising with the undulation, I paddled, reaching and reaching for the position where I felt the swell growing beneath me. I muscled upright and planted my feet against my board.

In it now, stable, the wave took me and I was going all the way with it. I watched Nat paddle down into my wave, just behind where it began to break over top of me. I cut back, allowing its force to catch up to my own. Upright on the path my board carved, my fingers against the glass, I felt Nat slide by me. I was a goofy foot and she a regular. Her tail brushed my front. My fingers drew patterns in the wall, riding the barrel. I looked at the glass—a palace archway of inland junk whose time had come and gone. I cut across, or sometimes up the lip, and back down inside, until the wave was finished and barely plodding along. Nat flung her head up, her very long hair back with it, her tanned face smiling ear to ear. I looked at the darkening sky and capsized lazily, the tide ever rising. I paddled one-arm then, and turned the nose of my board toward shore, my eyes adjusting to the spooling of warm wind. I squinted.

"You got to be kidding," I said to myself.

At the extreme south side of the beach, next to the jetty, I recognized Maggie's older brother, Mark, setting up some kind of retro tripod. He was easy to spot because of his blond dreadlocks and would come to the beach when he knew Maggie was surfing. His body moved like a sandpiper, all while he set up his vintage

gear. He was a "photojournalist" for a local art zine or something. Maggie and Mark's family afforded anything without even noticing—old money grown from strawberry fields.

But what made me itch more than wetsuit rash wasn't that Mark was rich and probably bumping cocaine for breakfast—it was that he was phony. Who goes and takes videos of surfing from the shore anyway? He didn't even have a long-range lens or anything like that. I'd never once seen him in the water. If he'd been in the water maybe he could've captured that waterborne rattlesnake. *That* was art. Not the nothing of a safe shore taunting reckless waves.

I paddled up beside Nat and hollered, "Nice ride."

She thumbs-upped me and laughed, probably still high off the ride.

We spit out water, breathed in the weather and rejoined Brett behind the swell. He sat on his board, palming water.

"Mark's on the beach—where else," I yelled.

They all turned and waved. Mark waved back. Maggie paddled in and skittered off to her brother.

Hours went. I hit the surf harder than before, wave after wave. Most of my rides were more than a surf rat could ever dream up, not to mention luck with following through in the barrel.

I had a few wipeouts, but nothing I couldn't handle—until late afternoon. It was just another wave to paddle in to. I popped up on my board and my ankle seized like a thrown piston- rod. My body, alone in the clutch of the power of the wave now, launched me sideways. My board shot up into the air and I went opposite, sucked into the water. The wave took me down and snapped my leash (Jesus, I thought) and I knew the spill would be far more punishing than the one in Teahupo'o. I was a football field's length offshore where it was deep enough for a fleet of ships to anchor; where, if you're thrust down enough, far as a seabed allows, more than eight fathoms, more or less, disorientation gleans into a far more hallucinatory experience.

I remembered my father, who was a really good spear-fisherman in his day, who always told me that if this kind of thing

happens, that if you've gone under too far to know which way is up, to "just follow the bubbles." But the fucking bubbles were going every which way. They'd surrounded me—wanted to kill me. Where was Pop, I thought. Back in the Seychelles selling phony PADI dive licenses again was my close guess.

I thudded against the seafloor. Mud and sand lapped at me. It went dark and pellets of sand scoured my skin like pumice. I was in a writhing chamber of the sea. In this instance of blind, watery convulsion, I thought I saw a slender shadow whipping toward a faint glint, like a star coming into view on a gray evening. I was starting to see what I wanted to see, before the deflation of oxygen in my lungs reminded me to survive. I chose a direction for my final swim, I imagined, toward the wig-wagging shadow, toward some dull light I'd seen, and frogged my way there. My lungs burned and water leaked into my windpipe. I surfaced with a tattoo gun in my chest, coughed and vomited. I opened my eyes and saw the mangled light of afternoon, and then Brett—the silhouette of his downward stare. His hands leveled me upright. I floated on my back, hacking to breathe like a newborn, and my eyes welled.

"You must've thought you were down there forever," Brett said, laughing.

I brought my chin to my chest. Nat straddled her board and held ours. She looked into the water differently. I slapped my head back against the top-water, flopped over, and treaded. I saw Maggie—who'd missed everything—with Mark, neither of them watching the waves, just sitting on towels draped on the algae-topped rocks of the jetty, looking at each other, pushing hair from their faces. Smoke plumed above their heads and somehow I heard their laughter boom.

Above us, clouds of lead closed in and made everywhere look like dusk.

We caught our final waves and rode them in. The tide rose high. Nat was outpacing Brett. I watched the shorebreak slap against the backs of their legs. They stepped from slush to firmer sand and were tearing at each other with their voices. I heard the pitches and recognized Brett's, but not Nat's.

I paddled sidelong before turning my nose shoreward, the ocean still. It was suddenly listless and then rose in thunderous fair warning of the deep sea swell and the heaving sets of waves incoming. I fought at the flicking shorebreak, choppy and swirling in agitation, moving in my head. I left my board in the foam, let it slip out from my arm and staggered; after all, I had only fifteen minutes earlier nearly drowned for a second time. I walked to where Maggie and Mark sat posed on the rocks of the jetty, where Maggie and I had once gone spelunking before, and more.

I passed Mark's idle camera, Maggie's head thrown back mid-laugh, and Mark, that asshole, sat opposite her, his dreadlocks moving—a dumb grin above a weak chin. I can't remember before or again being so sick of seeing anyone.

He saw me, then. He saw what was happening. The look on his sunned face. *Never* seen him in the water, I reminded myself, my toes splayed in the sand. He was wide-eyed, as if expecting, what—something *real* maybe? He was a guy with extra-thin eyebrows, which made the dreadlocks (fucking blonde dreadlocks) and beard-scruff look even more fucking absurd. Who was he kidding?

My cocked fist made a charioted horsepower convergence with his nose.

The aftershock rippled up my forearm. Mark's nose spouted. Blood leaped and got caught by the breeze, splatting against Maggie. She'd been bleating my name ever since she knew what I was going to do, but had sat stoned-still. I was looking at my knuckles, skinned from having collided with his bony brow, as Maggie helped herself up off the rock. In one motion, she tried to punt my groin with her sun-browned knee, her bikini top popping off. My suit somewhat cushioned the blow and sucked up the shock.

Brett and Nat headed for the truck. Nat covered her eyes. Brett was walking with his hands in his pockets. Then he stopped, looked at me standing adrift in the wasteland.

"Fuck me, right?" I yelled at Brett.

He stared at me, didn't say anything. Nat was hidden in the cab of the truck. Brett got in, too, after spreading sand and grav-

el around with his toes. He sped around the circle of the street above us, the windows rolled down, his and Nat's mouths going off and on—but mostly on, and mostly his. They were somewhere else; somewhere worse. Maggie sorted out her bikini, huffing and cursing Almighty God. Mark drew away, his arm over Maggie's shoulder, trudging up a dune to the street. Maggie screamed many things at me while loading Mark and his equipment into the passenger seat of Mark's van, and then she got behind the wheel and slammed the door. She rolled down the window.

"Boone, you're an asshole. You've always been an asshole."

Inside the cabin of the van I saw Mark's eyes scroll up into his head. He held his Baja jacket against his nose but the drug rug fell down to his lap when Maggie reverse-swerved and lurched into first gear. Mark sat straight up, a bobble-head, flinging blood against the windows. Maggie rode the gear all the way down the lane, the engine begging for second but really wanting third—my middle finger raised in final salute.

I saw my board bobbing near the jetty, against barnacled rocks, pretty dinged up. I lifted it out and carried it toward the beach cliffs, jammed it beneath a heap of driftwood and covered it with more. Then the sky cracked open and stormed. I was alone. I felt the rainwater, even beneath my bare feet. Then a piece of glass, something sharp, bit the bottom of my heel. I cried out and stumbled, lengthening my stride to keep my wounded balance. I was bleeding.

More distended clouds broke open, bursting, convulsing, as if the rain wanted to drown not only me but the land and everything on it; even itself.

Why not.

Near the cliffs was a shortcut that reached the high ground. I'd walk back to my apartment, performing a steep scale versus a mile-long incline. I pulled at roots and branch ends, without a good foothold. I had to get my body close to the cliff-side to scramble up. Granules of sand were trapped inside my wetsuit and dug into my skin, in the bends of my groin, and rolled against my thighs as I monkeyed my way up.

My hands flat on broken chunks of clifftop asphalt, little bits of it sticking to my palms, I pushed up, stood, and stretched. I stood watching everything fade to black. Even through the rainfall I saw the flickering lights of offshore oil rigs and their skeletal forms in calculated points spread along the horizon.

I reached behind my neck, unzipped the top of my wetsuit, pulled it down around my waist, and let the rain rinse my face, shoulders, and chest. I raised my face to the sky and blinked, again and again. I stepped across the dreggy road to a cement sidewalk humped from rooted undergrowth. The palm trees whipped. The rain turned aslant, hitting me in the face. Entire palm leaves fell down on to the road, dead. When I reached my apartment, my watch glowed. The rain beat on the face and I couldn't see the time—the frantic rain coming sideways. My heel burned hot and I felt things that had no place in my wound mixing with it.

I turned toward my apartment, rounding a comer, and saw Nat on the front stoop. She leaned against her backpack, her eyes closed. I moved forward, into the artificial light of the outdoor fixtures. Her eyes opened. Her cheeks were red and covered in stains only tears could make.

I told her to hang on.

I slid between the side of the apartment and a row of sopping juniper bushes, the undergrowth scraping my heel even more. I went through the back and let Nat in through the front.

"Where's Maggie," she asked, biting her lip.

"Gone."

I smiled with nothing to back it up.

"I need a shower," she said.

I told her she didn't have to ask.

Inside, the phone rang. Nat said it had been ringing off and on for an hour—that she could hear it from the steps. She raccooned through her backpack and then she disappeared down the hall and I could hear the sound of the spigot water change when she went beneath the showerhead.

Into the receiver I asked Brett, "Where'd you go?"

"So . . . you know," he said.

"I *knew*."

The call hung.

"It's just one of those things," he said.

"I get it," I said. "She's a hot one."

"I'm going to stay with Pop for a while—"

"There's no reason for it, Brett. I'm over it."

"It's not that. I just have to. I need to get away for a while. What is there here?"

"It's really nothing, man," I said. "Maggie was just another chick. And we're fine staying in Cali, man."

"He's all we've got, Boonie. *You* know."

I saw American Spirits from Nat's spilled bag and fished one out of the pack.

Brett breathed frustration into the receiver. "When you see Nat, tell her for me, yeah? At least, tell her something."

"Yeah, sure, why not."

I was still trying to wake up from what he was telling me, even though I'd already known. Maybe it was too real, now. So I told Brett I would tell her, and that I wasn't going anywhere, anymore, ever. We said, "Later." I cradled the phone and tried to roll a joint but my hands shook. The gummed paper soggy, wounded. I tried again. The wet sand and blood formed a kind of adobe against my foot. I jumped to sit on the kitchen countertop, groaning, and rinsed the wound in the sink, my toes knocking over empty bottles of beer in the basin. I stripped my wetsuit and pulled a Pendleton blanket from the couch around me. I grappled with the joint and finally got it together.

Nat came out trying not to look pretty, wearing sweatpants and a large tank-top over a sports-bra. Her hair was dark again and slick, tailing around her neck and breastbone. She slumped into the couch.

Rain was railing against the glass door and the windows.

"To hell with Brett," she said. "That's it, you know?"

I inhaled sharply, not looking at her. Then I told her I knew everything about what happened in Teahupo'o.

She covered her face and said, "How could I be so stupid? How can I, you . . . how can we be expected to go on, knowing."

I said we didn't *have* to go on with it. I dropped the half-spent joint inside a cup of stale beer and listened to it hiss. "Brett knows no one's perfect, even himself."

"Well, *he* seems to think that way—that he's perfect and can do whatever he wants."

"My dad came off that way, too," I said.

"I thought he died?"

I covered my mouth, forgetting that I couldn't make a proper fist from having hit Mark. I grimaced and coughed up a little smoke.

"So he's *not*—?" she asked, her eyes closed and her head tired and heavy.

"No," I said. "Brett tell you he was?"

She looked at me straightly. Then she told me as soon as the storm lets go, surfing won't be fun anymore.

"There'll be more storms," I said.

And maybe it was the storm on TV that put Nat to sleep, or the real one outside. Her body leaned against mine. I faded into the vacuum of a wave that snatched me up from where I had waded too far out from ever reaching any shore.

Before dawn I walked upon the strewn landscape of the beach. It was only sprinkling under the brown fog. Still I could hear Nat's sleeping breathing, softly. Before I'd left I'd moved away from her gently, shrugged off my blanket and covered her carefully. Far above me, on the hillside, I could see the Cross. I looked down the coastline and smelled the peppered air once more. I fixed my eyes before me. What looked like a twisted branch, rinsed by the seafoam at interval, I drew near to. Then I saw. Among the weedy algae and trash, the deflated body of the rattler—its cloudy eye through the eye slit, dead. The only life coming from the tide running up and over him, the tail limply swaying back and forth.

I looked closely, memorizing. The stacked driftwood heap larger and larger. I'd come only for my board. My knees depressed into the soaked sand beside the pieces of spongy wood I rummaged through, only to find nothing.

Contributors

Jeffrey Alfier's work has appeared in *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*, among others. His collections include *Fugue for a Desert Mountain* and the forthcoming *Gone This Long: Southern Poems*.

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Fleta Vincent, a Georgia native, has published poetry in *Black Magnolias*, *Chantwood Magazine*, *Miller's Pond*, *The Raven's Perch*, and *The Voices Project*, among others..

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