

cottonwood



Joe Baumann
Doug Ramspeck
Patricia Corbus
Christopher Heffernan
Donna Pucciani

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Joe Baumann

KISS BLOSSOMS

Miller found the splotch while standing in front of Chase's immense bathroom mirror. He saw a flash; right between his pecs like a third nipple was a jagged silver line, a pair of them, really, shimmering like a tiny, tight vulva. He felt an immediate jolt of lightning followed by spangly nerves and thought: HIV. The word *lesion* melted into the folds of his brain and wouldn't get out. Never mind he and Chase hadn't actually had sex, or that Chase was the first man Miller had gone to bed with in his life, or that they'd only hooked up for the first time the night before. The word pounded at his head as he showered, scrubbing at the splotch with Chase's loofah, unwilling to touch it with his fingers as if it would spread to the rest of him. When the sudsy water passed over it, Miller could feel the splotch contract like a roly-poly curling up at the first sign of danger.

He went to an urgent care clinic, where his blood pressure was off the charts. The nurse practitioner taking his vitals raised an eyebrow and asked how often Miller exercised. He told her he rode his bike on the weekends and spent his lunch hour lifting weights at the university gym. She asked about his sexual history, and he felt a clammy sweat break out at his hairline. She stamped his chart and started checking boxes: yes, he used condoms, always. No, he had not had sex with a woman in the last six months, but yes, he'd had sex with a man.

"Kind of." He wasn't sure, he said, where oral sex—he said that, not *blowjobs*—fit. She nodded, then asked about anal penetration. He shook his head.

Miller studied her face as she scribbled. Her lips were relaxed, her face without lines of worry, judgment, or panic. She said the doctor would be in shortly.

He waited ten minutes. He memorized the patients' rights statement about receiving attention from an MD rather than an LPN. He shifted his weight, crinkling the strip of medical paper

beneath him. He felt his heart thrump. The splotch itched beneath his polo shirt, which the doctor, a rotund man with a bushy auburn beard, asked him to remove while he plucked on a pair of blue latex gloves. Miller remembered the hard warmth of Chase's fingers brushing against his skin as they yanked at each other's shirts. He'd laid his hands on Chase's strong back and felt hard muscle. Miller's parents had died a week prior, and touching Chase created the first stir of anything besides the dumb, stuffed feeling of being sealed off from the world since the funeral.

The doctor hemmed and hawed, prodding with a cold, slimy finger. He didn't feel pain when the doctor touched the splotch.

"Hmm," the doctor said, adjusting his glasses. "Well, it doesn't appear to be a lesion, but we should do an STI screening anyway, just to be safe. You've had one before?"

Miller shook his head.

"Oh, well, it's fairly simple." The doctor produced a long Q-tip and asked Miller to open his mouth. He swabbed Miller's cheek and capped the end. He unpackaged another one and drew it across the splotch like he was applying lipstick. Then he gave Miller a cup to pee in, and three days later, the phone call came: a crown of relief poured onto Miller's head when the doctor said all the tests came back negative. No trichomonas, no syphilis, no antigens.

"I'd like to schedule a biopsy, though," the doctor said. "I've never seen anything quite like that growth."

Miller didn't like the word growth. It implied nefariousness, death. Rot.

He didn't tell the doctor that a second growth—splotch—had appeared on the crest of his glutes, right at the tight cord of his lower lumbar. It pinched when Miller tried to lie down or do crunches on the gym floor. When he discovered it, he remembered Chase's lips brushing against his skin there. He had shivered at the moisture.

Chase: a discovery at the dim watering hole where Miller had decided to get rip-roaring drunk the night he flew back to St. Louis after spending three days in Omaha dealing with his parents' deaths at the hands of an out-of-control eighteen-wheeler careening across I-29. Instead of floating home on a belly full of well

whiskey, he found himself staring at the striking sandy-haired man who was crouched over a sparkling pint of amber beer, his face turned up toward the television where he'd convinced the bartender to turn on a women's volleyball match. Miller looked away when Chase caught him gazing, but moments later Chase had slid onto the stool opposite Miller at his teensy two-top and introduced himself.

"What about your game?" Miller said.

"I can still hear." Chase smiled, his cheeks crinkling into a pair of deep dimples.

Chase ordered them a pair of beers. As each minute passed, Miller felt something sloughing off: first the heaviness in his shoulders, then the bowling ball of bile in his gut, and finally the sorrow tingling in his thighs. Chase did most of the talking, eliciting short spurts of response from Miller when he asked about what Miller did for work (university admissions officer) and for fun (here Miller gaped and hawed, but Chase, undeterred, said, "We can come back to that one later"). As if he could sense Miller's need to be pulled back into the warm, living world, Chase paid for their drinks and slapped him on the shoulder. He said, "Come with me, why don't you?"

Chase lived in a loft above a flower shop, the stairwell filled with the sharp aroma of gardenias, tulips, and baby's breath. His kitchen was granite and steel, the huge island home to a rack of expensive-looking wine bottles towered over by a brass chandelier. Miller gawked at the leather sofas, the glass-topped coffee table, the bookshelves taking up an entire wall and rising all the way to the vaulted ceiling. There was even one of those rolling ladders for plucking the high-up books, which Miller had previously been convinced only existed in movies and maybe the Library of Congress.

"What did you say you do for a living?" he asked.

Instead of answering, Chase planted a kiss, fat and warm and crisp like the flowers in their coolers downstairs, on Miller's lips. They swiveled down a short hallway, Miller worrying he would have to tell Chase of his inexperience, of the muddy, untrammelled waters they were headed to with each step toward Chase's bed-

room. But Chase seemed to intuit Miller's newness and guided him through with gentle oaring hands.

In the morning, Chase disappeared into the shower and emerged looping a tie over the crispest white Oxford shirt Miller had ever seen.

"My number's on a piece of paper by your wallet. I have to go, but feel free to use the shower. Just let yourself out whenever. There are beignets in the kitchen."

"Who are you?" Miller said.

"A periodontist." Chase kissed him, gave Miller a quick slap on the cheek, and winked before leaving.

Then Miller found the splotch.

*

"It's not dangerous," Miller said, pulling off his t-shirt and leaning back so the leather squelched, cool and smooth, under his skin. Chase loomed over him. He lowered his hands toward Miller's skin but pressed his fingers around, rather than on, the silver lines.

"Huh."

"There's one on my lower back, too."

"And you say they don't hurt?"

"Nope. Feel a bit weird, like they're alive or something. But no pain."

Chase moved his fingers in closer, careful and appraising, his touch like the lightest breeze. Miller felt the tiny translucent hairs that circled his nipples go taut. His breath felt squeezed.

The splotch did not shy away. Instead, as if the whirls and divots of his hands were puzzle pieces linking with the hoopy ridges and valleys on Miller's skin, he was washed in a bright, golden warmth when Chase made contact with the splotch. He shut his eyes and shivered.

When he opened them, Chase was wide-eyed. Miller tucked his chin down so he could see. The splotch had shimmered and shifted from a dripping silver to a vibrant, heart-blood red.

*

The biopsy revealed nothing, except that the splotches—now counting half a dozen, tucked all over Miller’s body—alternately recoiled and puffed when scraped by the scalpel. The splotch had not bled when the doctor cut into it like a piece of wedding cake, but Miller felt a spasm that went straight through his chest cavity to his spine, lighting up a racetrack of discomfort. He cringed, and the doctor recoiled.

“Let’s maybe just do an incisional instead of excisional.”

Miller nodded. He hadn’t liked the idea of the doctor cutting away the entire thing anyway, imagining that the splotch had settled like a deep well inside him, and the doctor, set on getting the whole thing, would keep digging and slicing and eventually pull out all of Miller’s insides on his quest to remove it.

The results were dull and boring.

“They’re not cancer. But that’s about all I can tell you: what they’re not. No idea what they are.”

Miller didn’t bother going back for any of the suggested follow-ups.

He found himself at Chase’s loft most nights, unable to face the dour sting of his own apartment, which smelled of burnt paprika and hard water. His kitchen table was laden with paperwork from his parents’ funeral and the insurance company. Their estate lawyer had suggested he retain another attorney more adept at civil suits so Miller could lay into the truck driver and the company he worked for, possibly even the city for neglecting to clear the roads appropriately after the heavy snowfall that had sent the eighteen-wheeler cantilevering across the highway to mash into his parents’ sedan. Every time he sat down to face the mounting bastille of paperwork he felt the overwhelming sorrow that he’d tamped down start to mumble up his throat again, and he would rush from the room and find his phone, send Chase a text inviting himself over, where he was received with warmth and heartiness and a glass of wine and the clean sheets on Chase’s bed.

Chase ran his fingers over the splotches. He said they were soft as rose petals. They reacted to Chase’s touch with flowering

excitement, so unlike their retreat from the doctor's cold, clinical prying; their redness glimmered to a ruby shine beneath his fingertips as if drawing life from his hands. Chase said he could feel something pulsing inside them, a little energy current all their own.

"Maybe I'm pregnant," Miller said, lying on his stomach while Chase traced the newest splotch, which lay square on his right butt cheek. It made sitting hard; not uncomfortable—just uncouth. Miller felt he was smothering it.

"You've unlocked the secret to same-sex parenthood. Or maybe you're reproducing asexually and these are your buds."

They drank expensive wines. They went on cold jogs around a secluded lake and past several crumbling, abandoned farmhouses. They lay in Chase's bed on his silken sheets and touched each other. Eventually Chase mustered up the courage to flick his tongue against one of the splotches, sending an electric jolt through Miller.

"It feels like a pair of lips," Chase said. "It feels like they're kissing me back."

Miller missed phone calls from the attorney. He slid into work glowing, and his co-workers wondered if he was on drugs. No one knew about Chase; he imagined the stares and questions that would bombard him like a waterfall. His office mates had met girlfriends at Christmas parties and wedding receptions, bird-like women whose hips jutted out against their slim black dresses, lips painted thick with red that clung to his collar and throat when they pecked at him. Miller could imagine how his co-workers' minds would whirl with confusion should he appear before a punchbowl or spread of vegetables and cheese cubes with Chase at his side. So Miller tucked him away.

Then a splotch appeared on his left cheek, four months after they'd met. Chase had kissed him there after a long day of work—three gum transplants and a planar cleaning—and he fell into bed without even taking off his dress socks, which Miller tugged from his feet when Chase started snoring. He pressed himself up against Chase's prone form, laying his hand on his chest.

“What do I do about this?” he asked the next morning.

“Concealer?”

“I don’t own concealer.”

“You could put a band-aid on it. I have plenty of those.”

He told his co-workers that he’d cut himself shaving. They blinked at him, mystified, and went about filing paperwork and designing the newest recruitment pamphlet. Miller picked at the band-aid whenever he went to the bathroom. That night, Chase helped him pull it off, yanking out stubble and a few blackheads but leaving the splotch unharmed. It pulsed red in time with Miller’s heartbeat.

“It’s like it’s breathing,” Chase said, pressing it with a gentle finger, sending another drug-like smack of warmth down Miller’s body. “Hey, do you think you’re up to meeting my parents?”

Miller nodded, feeling dumb and stupid as Chase laid out the details: they would fly on Chase’s dime to Ossining, New York, where his parents lived near the Tappan Zee, in a small house a few miles from Sing Sing Prison. Miller offered to pay for his ticket, but Chase waved him off and demanded he sit down and eat; Chase had ordered orange chicken.

“What about this?” Miller asked, pointing his fork toward the splotch on his face.

“What about it?”

“Won’t they wonder?”

“Probably not. They’re not the type.”

“What about TSA?”

“They don’t notice guns in bags. They won’t notice that.”

“I feel like everyone will notice it.”

“The world has seen, and ignored, a lot worse. The world ignores starving children and racism every day.”

Miller ate his chicken. In bed, dreams of flight swirled through his sodium-bloated stomach.

*

They sat in business class from Lambert to La Guardia, able to spread out and lean back. Miller wore a gauze pad held in place

by a thin strip of transparent athletic tape, and when the flight attendant murmured some well-wishes, Chase took Miller's hand and made some quip about Miller fending off a mugger, saving both their wallets. The woman gave them extra pillows and champagne.

"You're not usually a liar," Miller said.

"Only to make you look better. Cheers." They swallowed down their Brut, the liquid cool and poppy.

Chase drove their rental car, a zippy, sleek sedan that belonged in a car commercial with pounding neon lights and a dark, empty city in the background. They skirted past Manhattan traffic and bumbled up I-87 past White Plains and New Rochelle. Miller wondered where Yonkers and Montauk were, whether the Peekskill Blue Mountains were nearby.

The house they parked in front of was modest, a two-story settled behind a blooming garden full of hydrangeas, phlox, and ferns.

"Isn't it too early in the year for these things to be in bloom?" Miller asked.

Chase shrugged. "My mother has a greener thumb than a leprechaun who's been dyed like an Easter egg."

He knocked on the door instead of walking right in. "I lost my housekey years ago."

"And you didn't ask for a spare?"

"I don't get home much."

The door opened, heavy and white and yawning with noise like someone waking from a long nap, and Chase's parents were standing before them, his father's right hand resting on his mother's left shoulder. They were both smiling as though posing for a Christmas card—in garish red and green matching sweaters to boot—and they ushered Chase and Miller inside in a whirlwind of grabbing hands and pulled-to hugs, slaps on the back, visual appraisals and approvals. They dragged them to a pair of enormous leather sofas, threads of use dashing through the material like cracks in a desert floor. Chase's mother—"Call me Anette," she said during the hopscotch of introductions—gestured to a charcuterie spread and several unopened bottles of wine.

“We weren’t sure what you’d prefer, so we brought up a bunch.”

“Up?”

“There’s a wine cellar,” Chase said. “Just open a red, Mom. Any kind is fine.”

“White will go better with the prosciutto,” Benjamin, Chase’s father, said.

“Then white it is,” Miller said.

Chase was a replica of his father; their shoulders were both broad and knotted, their skin sand-blasted, foreheads wrinkle-free. Each had the same sunned hair that swept in the same direction. Anette was a squat, tiny woman, round in the belly like Miller thought most women got with age and childbirth, the clingy after-effect of their impregnation tarrying through their middle age no matter how many aerobics classes or iron man competitions they put themselves through, unless they were magically gifted by genetics or happened to be a celebrity who could afford lipo and a private chef. She dangled thin meat toward her mouth like it was alive and she was toying with it.

When evening came Anette lit candles and Benjamin grilled steaks. They ate at the kitchen island, Miller’s plate nestled in next to the unopened wine bottles (“No formal dining room,” Benjamin said with a shake of the head. “My one complaint as a homeowner”).

Laden with drink and beef, Miller and Chase departed for bed after homemade apple crisp and ice cream, which slid down Miller’s throat in a cold burst. He felt huge, the splotches on his body pulsing with the excess calories.

Chase’s childhood bedroom took up the entire second floor, a wall of windows looking out at the line of pine trees separating the house from the neighbor’s. A huge desk took up the opposite wall, where a desktop computer languished and software boxes were crowded on the high shelves. The queen-size bed was nestled opposite the stairs. There was no door.

“When I need to pee,” Miller said, “where should I go?”

Chase pointed down the stairs. “We passed the side hall leading to the yard on the way in. It’s down there.”

Miller woke in the middle of the night, moonlight like poured silver flashing across the windows. His bladder was full, pulsing like knuckles pressing against his groin. When he rolled over, he registered that the bed was empty. He passed family photos nailed to the whitewashed wall and found the bathroom. Miller had pulled the gauzed pad off his face before falling into bed and looked at himself in the mirror. His throat caught: the splotch had changed. A BB-sized lump had burbled up to the red surface like a massive zit. He pulled down his underwear. Every splotch was the same: a hard knobby dot in the center.

Miller peed, his eyes not on his stream of urine the color of melted butter but on the splotches. He wanted desperately for Chase to touch them, to tell him that this was normal enough, that of course a splotch would develop a tough, tight bulb like a hard sebaceous cyst.

Leaving the bathroom, he heard mumbled whispers and saw the sepia of the light above the oven in the kitchen; it had that dull glow that reminded him of stacks of old newspaper.

The voices distilled into those of Chase and his mother. Miller couldn't see them, but he could picture the scene: one on either side of the kitchen island, a bottle of wine—red this time—between them, glasses barely touched. Anette would be in a too-large bathrobe, green or maybe fuchsia, with slippers that didn't match, Chase comfortable enough around his mother in his boxer briefs and tight white tank top.

"Well I think he's lovely," he heard Chase's mother intone. Miller wondered at the perfect timing of overhearing such a thing.

"I'm glad you think so," Chase said.

Miller felt a slither of gold in his stomach, which was maybe partly the wine still sloshing around. He took a step backward, then another and another. He slipped up the stairs and slid back into the bed. Like those in Chase's apartment, the sheets were silky and smooth and they licked at the nubs like a soothing balm. He waited for Chase, but at some point he fell asleep. Miller was woken by the hot press of sun beaming against his chest as it filtered through the windows. He felt the comforting push of Chase's hand against his skin.

*

The air was crisp and smart as they stood next to Anette while she watered the gladiolas and tulips in the side yard, where a second, smaller garden was as bountiful as the one out front. She wore a gaudy wicker hat the size of a sombrero, cartoonish on her stout frame. It shaded her face from the glare of the sun that had risen to its peak in a cloudless blue sky. The yard was snug and private, the copse of pine trees thick. Chase admitted that he used to sunbathe in the nude during the summer while his parents were at work, cupping a pair of underwear over his crotch when he laid on his back.

Benjamin had driven off somewhere, some secret mission that was a surprise for the boys—that's what he'd called them, "The Boys"—that evening. Anette was slow-cooking chicken for some ancient family recipe for enchiladas that Chase described as better than sex. He was wearing a pair of bright blue and pink swim trunks and no shirt even though the temperature was in the mid-sixties; Miller could see the taut shrink of his nipples and the goosepimpling along his bronzed arms. When Anette turned off the hose she waddled inside, leaving Chase and Miller to their own devices. Chase waved for Miller to follow him into the back.

The yard was long and rolling and ended in a steep downward curve that emptied into a small creek. They traipsed all the way, Miller watching the twitchy crags of Chase's back as they walked. At the edge of the creek Chase squatted down and stuck a hand into the water then flicked his fingers in Miller's direction.

"I used to wade up and down in the summer. That way felt the most dangerous," Chase said, pointing to his left. The creek curved, but Miller could see that the foliage grew thick, brambles reaching over each bed of the creek and knotting together in a thorny curtain. "I always wondered how far I could go." He looked up at Miller and shrugged. "Feels kind of silly now. Not nearly as hard as moving to California for my residency. I knew no one."

"The world seems bigger when you're smaller," Miller said.

Chase stood. "I like that." He planted a kiss on Miller's throat. "I like that a lot."

*

Benjamin's surprise was gargantuan Cuban cigars, laid in a thick wooden box. Anette was shuffling back and forth in the kitchen, pans popping, vegetables sizzling. Miller hadn't ever smoked—not a cigar, not a cigarette, not weed—before, but he plucked one of them out anyway. It was heavy and smooth and strangely soft. Benjamin cut it for him. Chase waved his father off, saying something about both of them training for a marathon, which was news to Miller.

“But you don't actually inhale,” Benjamin said. “You just keep the smoke in your mouth.”

“Sounds cancerous,” Chase said. “Mouth cancer would look bad on a periodontist.”

Benjamin sighed, set the box on the coffee table, and said, “Well, we can at least enjoy their texture.”

“Ravishing,” Chase said.

Anette's enchiladas were as good as promised, melty and salty and just spicy enough to form beads of sweat on Miller's upper lip, cooled nicely by the margaritas she blended in a frozen drink machine that whirred and spat out its own perfectly-shaved ice. They ate outside, on the back deck that was only accessible through the master bedroom. Miller felt odd carrying a plate of Mexican food and a glass full of tequila through his boyfriend's parents' bedroom, where the bed was made with hospital corners and the dressers were covered in vases full of fresh lilacs. The weather was sharp, chilly. Miller wore his favorite sweater, which scratched at the nubs dotting his body.

After dinner, the night long dark, glasses of wine appeared on the table. The deck was illumined by strings of Christmas lights twirled onto the wooden rail; the lighting caught cheeks and ears at ideal angles. Miller listened to Chase and his parents chat and laugh and grow bubbly with zinfandel. Eventually, Anette asked Miller about his own mother and father.

“Oh,” he said. “They passed away recently.”

“I'm so sorry,” she said. “Was it sudden?”

“Isn't it always?” Benjamin said.

“It is,” Miller said, “but this was particularly sudden.”

“There was a car accident,” Chase said. “Just before we met, actually.” He reached over and placed a hand on Miller’s kneecap. “I could see his sorrow from across the room. It’s why I introduced myself.”

Miller felt a sudden bludgeon of guilt. He had not thought of his dead parents all weekend. They were already fading into a glommy blur, the contours of their faces and the sounds of their voices stuffed in a shadowy cavern. He said so after Anette and Benjamin had begged off to bed, the dishes stacked in the steel basin of the kitchen sink, wine bottles rinsed and deposited in the single-sort recycling bin. Miller was facing the darkness of the glassy upstairs windows, the peaks of the pine trees spiky in the moonlight. He’d taken off his shirt and could see the humps on his splotches reflected in the dark glass.

Chase draped himself over Miller’s back, his arms dangling down like honor cords.

“Why guilt?”

Miller shrugged. “I don’t know. I keep forgetting about them. I figured I would think about them all the time.”

“Life shouldn’t be about remembering everyone else every day, even your parents.”

“My dead parents. My parents who suffered untimely deaths.”

Chase dusted his lips across a splotch on Miller’s shoulder, curving them over the hard growth. “It feels like a bead. Or maybe a cherry.” Chase’s teeth pressed against his flesh. Miller felt a wave of pleasure, as though a sea breeze was skipping through his body. He turned around, slow enough for Chase to know to disengage, and kissed him on the lips. Chase led Miller to the bed, which squeaked under their falling weight.

*

He woke to a bristling feeling, like he was lying on grass. Miller pulled off the bedspread and looked at his body: the splotches had bloomed.

Miller shook Chase awake, who appraised the new development with cool stoicism, like he was scanning a legal document. Where each bead had been was now a budded horn of petals, pinkish-white, in the shape of a lily stargazer. The ones on his back and sides were crumpled from the weight of the bed, but the blossom on his chest was luxuriant and perfect. He was about to press his hand to it, but Chase snatched his fingers and held them.

“Like something from my mother’s garden,” Chase said.

Miller stared at himself. His mouth was dry. He could feel the roots of the splotches connected, pulsing and tickling at his bone marrow and tendons. When Chase leaned over and whistled a tiny stream of air on to the largest of the petals he felt a twitching flare like he had been zapped, a hot tungsten beam plunging through his skin. Miller’s cheeks flashed red. He crunched his fingers around Chase’s hand.

“Put on some clothes,” Chase said. “Come with me.”

Miller stumbled to squash his feet into his shoes, pulling the tongues hard and forgetting socks. Chase led the way down and into the early morning. The house buzzed with the smell of percolating Colombian roast. Once outside, Miller could feel the blossoms yearning toward the yellow warmth of the sun.

“Here,” Chase said. They stood in front of Anette’s small garden. The morning air was dewy. Columns of yellow, orange, and white gladiolas stared up at him. The tulips were pinched tight like tea candles. Chase tugged at the hem of Miller’s t-shirt, forcing him to raise his arms so Chase could pull it off. The wet, cool air bit at Miller’s armpits. The wicky feeling on his exposed belly button made him suck in his gut.

“Don’t ask why, but I think this is what needs to be done,” Chase said. He pressed his hand to Miller’s chest, thumb and index finger squared around the large blossom between Miller’s pecs. “As I say to my patients, you might feel a little pinch.”

Chase plucked the blossom. Miller felt a tingly, sucking feeling where the splotch belonged, then a strange cutting itch, like something was digging a hole in his chest. He looked down: where the blossom had been was a smooth wave of flesh, as if all

history of the splotch had been erased. His innards weren't tumbling out of him, all his ghosts and blood and bones and sorrows spilling through his skin. Just the smooth, pale putty that covered his sternum in a single fondant spread.

Chase held the flower between his fingers, lifting it toward the bowl of the sun like he was offering a toast to the clouds. From its end a pair of thin, narrow filaments dangled like the tentacles of a man-of-war, white as bleached teeth. Miller shaded his eyes with one hand and watched Chase twirl the flower, its petals dancing in a tilt-a-whirl circle. Then Chase lowered the blossom, holding it against his stomach like a bride marching down the aisle with her precious bouquet.

"This is a part of you," he said.

"Okay," Miller said.

"It's grown from you." He lifted it up to eye level. The petals were hued with lavender veins. "It came from you."

"The child metaphor again?"

"But not a metaphor." Chase knelt in front of the border of the garden. "It's a thing you gave to the world."

"What are you doing?"

Chase held the blossom in one hand and used the other to scoop out a small divot in the soil. He settled the flower down into the crevice he'd formed, then packed the loose dirt around it. With a ceremonial head bow he spat, the gloopy liquid gathering on the brownie-dark earth.

"Your mom won't mind?" Miller said. He wanted to scratch at the bare spot on his chest, but that felt like some kind of sacrilege.

"She'll love it." Chase laid an arm over Miller's back, squeezing a hand around his left shoulder. Chase's fingers were toasty. He leaned his head toward Miller's and looked down at the flower.

"It's so small," Miller said. "By comparison."

"It'll grow," Chase said. He splayed his free hand across Miller's stomach. "They all will."

"And then?"

"We'll plant them." Chase fluttered his hands over all the blossoms. "In the woods, or in the country, or in parking lots, on

the university quad. In the strip mall next to my office.” He squatted, leaning in toward a blossom on Miller’s right calf. “We’ll go to Omaha and plant one on your parents’ grave. We won’t forget about them.”

“We won’t.”

“No,” Chase said. “We never will. We’ll leave them everywhere that matters.”

The sliding door opened, Anette leaning out. She saw Miller and her eyes widened, but she kept her cool and cleared her throat.

“I made French toast. There’s cream for the coffee.”

“Perfect,” Chase said, dusting his hands. “You hungry?” he said, tapping Miller at his hip.

Miller looked down at the flowering blossom, snug in the soil. The petals seemed to beat with breath.

“Yes,” he said. “I guess I am.” To Anette, who had retreated inside but was looking out at him: “Yes, I’m starved.”

Doug Ramspeck

GHOST SNAKE

The brothers are lying on their bellies. Lying on their bellies in the backyard. Atop the grass by the back porch. A porch with a narrow opening beneath it. There are cobwebs there, shadows, dirt. The boys are peering into the shadows. Squinting while lying beneath the July sun. That sun is a bright cyst half-hidden in a cloud. A sprinkler arcs and arcs behind them. There is the hum of a lawnmower in the distance. Brandon, who is twelve, brought his young brother out from the house so they could lie here on their bellies. The younger brother, Miles, is eight. This is the house where they have lived for all their lives. A green house. With slabs of limestone along the lower half of the structure. In a small neighborhood of houses, surrounded by farm fields and farmhouses. On the outskirts of town. A sleepy town beneath a cyst of sun. There is a limestone retaining wall leading off from the side of the house. There is a cement driveway with a basketball hoop and a torn net. But the brothers aren't thinking about any of this. The brothers are peering into the shadows beneath the house. Trying desperately to see.

Brandon points a finger. "There," he says.

"Where?" Miles asks.

"There," Brandon says.

It's a snake in the darkness. A snake the boys can barely see. A ghost snake. Curled there in the dirt. The creature is black. Or maybe it is only black in the dimness of the world beneath the porch. Maybe, in sunlight, it would be another color altogether.

And what is the snake doing? Nothing. Lying there. It might be sleeping. Or it might be dead. Or it might be a snakeskin without an actual snake inside of it.

Miles feels uneasy. Miles wants to stand and back away. Miles holds his breath. What if the snake lunges? Sinks its fangs into his arm or face? Is poisonous?

But his brother reaches beneath the porch with the yardstick he brought with him from the house. Miles wants to say *don't*,

don't. Miles wants to say *what are you doing?* But he can't, of course. Brandon dragged him out from the house just for this. Brandon pulled him away from a Netflix show he was watching. Brandon said there was something he simply had to see. Brandon gave him no choice. So Miles braces himself. Prepares to leap to his feet and run. Calculates the quickest way to get back into the house and to close the door. Meanwhile Brandon leans his arm still farther under the porch. Gets his whole shoulder into the opening. Leans like he is begging the snake to strike. Then he touches the end of the yardstick to the snake. Pokes the snake. And what does the snake do? It is not a ghost snake now. It is not an empty skin of a snake. It slithers away on its belly, slithers out from beneath the porch on the far side from where the brothers are lying on their bellies. Moves past the steps. Muscles on its own belly across the grass then past the sprinkler. Muscles toward the woods at the end of the yard. The snake is as long as an arm, maybe longer. And the snake is actually black. All black. Even in sunlight. Brandon chases it. Brandon throws the yardstick at the retreating snake. Miles chases the snake too. Of course he does. This is how the world works. Brandon does something and Miles follows. And what is Miles thinking in this moment as he is running in the direction of the retreating snake? He is marveling at what his brother has accomplished. How his brother forced a snake from the shadows, made it twist across the grass. How his brother chased the snake as it fled. And Brandon wasn't afraid of the snake. Not in the least. No, the snake was afraid of *him*. There is a kind of triumph in this fact. That's the only way to see it. Miles carries this sense of triumph for the rest of the day. But it's not his triumph, he knows. It's his brother's. Miles is in awe of his brother. Of course he is. This doesn't overstate it. Not in the least. Miles worships his brother. Why wouldn't he?

Brandon goes to war later that month with Grant and Sydney Kerzee. Grant and Sydney Kerzee are siblings. They live down the street. In a tan two-story house with a brick chimney and an above-ground swimming pool in the side yard. Grant and Sydney

are both fourteen. In Brandon's grade. They are twins. They don't look alike. He's a boy and she's a girl. She has long hair and he has short. Her hair is blond, his brown. He is taller than she is. She has boobs. Miles looks at the two of them and can't imagine how they could have been born at the same time, how anyone could ever imagine they were twins. But Brandon says they are. Brandon insists on it. So Miles accepts it. And Brandon is furious with the twins this summer. Hates them. Which Miles doesn't understand either. Brandon and Grant used to be best friends. Grant used to be over at their house all the time. Used to have dinner at their house, sleep over. Used to go fishing with them and their dad at Morrison Lake. And Grant used to let Brandon and Miles swim in their swimming pool. Float on one of their plastic rafts. Used to let them come into the air-conditioned house and eat cookies. But now Brandon despises Grant. Now Brandon insists that Grant and Sydney deserve whatever they get, and they are the ones who are going to give it to them. By "they," of course, he means him and Miles. By "give it to them," of course, he means go to war.

So what is it that they do?

They go over one night after dark and sneak in the backyard. Sneak up the steps to the above-ground swimming pool. Brandon walks out on the diving board. Brandon opens the fly of his shorts. Brandon pees straight into the water. It is such a surprising thing that Miles covers his mouth with a hand. Covers his mouth to keep from crying out. He is amazed, amazed. His brother is an astonishment.

Then Brandon says, "You pee now."

Another night they find old sidewalk chalk in the garage. Chalk that was given to Miles a couple of Christmases ago. Chalk that was never even opened. Chalk wrapped in plastic and cardboard. Chalk in all different colors. They open the package now. Sneak over after dark and write bad words on the Kerzee driveway. Brandon has to tell Miles how to spell a couple of the words. They write and write until their fingers hurt. Then they run home laughing. Run home with Brandon patting Miles on the back. Miles has done a good job. Miles knows his brother approves.

They stand in their own driveway—which is free of words—and talk about the words they wrote. Brandon tells Miles what some of the words mean. Miles nods and nods. There is a moon over the shoulder of the house across the street. It is like that moon is an eye that is winking. Miles imagines that his brother is a keeper of all secrets. That there isn't anything his brother doesn't know.

A week later, the Kerzee family goes out of town. For a day. To Cedar Point. Brandon knows this because he had originally been invited to join them. Was supposed to spend the entire day on the rides. Rollercoasters. And as soon that morning as Brandon knows that they are gone, he tells Miles to follow him. Miles does. Miles follows his brother out of the front door of their house. Down the road. Three houses. Count them out. One, two, three. Then the Kerzee house with its above-ground pool. And what does Brandon do? He walks around to the back of the house with Miles. He turns the knob on the door that leads into the garage. Locked. Turns the knob on the door that leads to the kitchen. Locked. But the door to the basement is unlocked. They go down the cement steps and Brandon turns that knob. And then they are inside. And they take the stairs to the main floor. And they walk down the narrow hall to Grant's bedroom. And Brandon looks through it. Opening drawers. Peering in the closet. Looking under the bed. And he finds a silver dollar in a desk drawer. He puts it in his pocket. And he finds an old catcher's mitt high on a closet shelf. He tucks it under his arm. And he finds an old PlayStation videogame he knows is Grant's favorite. He tucks it under the arm with the catcher's mitt. And then he tells Miles they are going. And they head back down the hall. And they stop at the refrigerator and Brandon hands Miles a few slices of ham to eat. And Brandon finds a bag of Doritos in the cupboard. He tells Miles to carry it. And for a moment before they head out the door, Miles thinks to himself: *We are thieves. We are thieves like in a movie. Stealing from the bad guys.*

Two nights later, Brandon makes Miles join him on yet another excursion. This time they don't head down the street but cut through the back lawns. They walk on the other side of the fence. Where Mitford Creek goes. Where the cornfields start up on the other side of that creek. They are ninjas. Miles creeps the way

his brother tells him to creep. They come up from the back of the Kerzee house. And what do they do when they arrive? They cross the grass that is clipped as close as a golf course. They stand for a moment by the edge of the above-ground swimming pool. Then they sneak right up to the house itself. Sneak up in the darkness. There are lights on in the house, but the shades are closed. There is the sound of a television in the living room, but it is muffled. Brandon touches a finger to his lips. That gesture means *be quiet*. They slide along the house until they reach the bedrooms. They slide along the house until they reach the bathroom. There is a light on inside it. There is a white curtain there, but it has gaps at the side. Brandon goes up on his tiptoes to see inside. Then he turns to Miles and whispers into the night air, into the sound of the crickets, into the fireflies with their beacons around them, "It's Sydney." He adds, "On the toilet. Sitting on the toilet."

Brandon speaks these words as though he's uncovered something that no one else has ever seen. Not in the entire history of the planet. Miles wants to see too. Of course he does. But he is shorter than the window. Shorter than his brother. And the window is high. Too high. So he grabs the ledge and tries to drag himself up. Tries to do a pullup so he can see.

The toilet flushes in this moment.

He hears it flush.

And suddenly Brandon raps his knuckles on the window. Loud. Very loud. Like he wants to break the glass. Then he is running. Running. Miles knows that he's supposed to run too, but he is still gripping the ledge. He lets go just as he sees the curtains fall away. Just as he sees Sydney pushing her face close to the window. Touching her nose to the window. Placing her hands on either side of her eyes. Like blinders. Like her eyes are now binoculars.

And he hears her say, "Miles!"

He runs. Runs. Falls by the patio. Falls on the slippery grass. Runs not toward the back of the house but toward the street. The quicker way home. Runs not the way Brandon headed but the other way. Runs as he hears the sliding glass door coming open. Sydney's bare feet are loud on the patio cement. Sydney is run-

ning after him. Running. She is on the track team. He knows this. Sydney Kerzee is on the track team. And Sydney Kerzee is taller than he is, stronger than he is, meaner than he is. And Sydney Kerzee is getting closer. Closer.

She tackles him before they reach the street. Tackles him on the grass. He skins his knee on something. Gets a mouthful of dirt. And she is punching him, punching him. The blows arrive like something feral, unhinged. And she says, “Perv. You perv. You fucking perv.”

Hits, hits, hits. Her fists closed. Hits him on the shoulder, the neck, the hands . . . which are covering his face. Hits him on his sides, in his chest. Then she stands up and kicks him with her bare foot. Kicks him in the ribs. Kicks again. Tries to kick him between his legs but misses. Gets his thigh instead. Spits on him. *Spits on him.*

“Perv!” she says.

He is up by then. He is running by then. And when he arrives home, when he reaches the driveway, Brandon is waiting. Brandon is standing with his arms crossed over his shoulders. Like he has been waiting for many, many hours. Like he has grown bored with waiting.

“What happened to you?” Brandon asks.

So Miles tells him. Miles tells him the whole story. The whole humiliating story. Getting beat on by a girl.

And Miles says, “We have to get her, Bran. Promise me we’ll get her.”

And Brandon slips an arm around his brother’s shoulder. And Brandon slaps a mosquito with his other hand. A mosquito that lands on his neck. And Brandon says, “We’ll get her.”

A week later Brandon and Grant are friends again. And Grant is over at the house all the time. Having pizza with Brandon and Miles and their parents. Watching movies. Playing catch in the front yard. And Brandon is back over at Grant’s house all the time. Swimming in that above-the-ground swimming pool. Playing video games. Shooting pool on their basement table. And Brandon

has nothing bad to say about Grant now, nothing bad to say about Sydney. And Brandon tells Miles to forget about what happened with Sydney. That it's no big deal. That Sydney didn't mean anything by it. That she had a right to be upset. That they did catch her peeing, after all. And Miles tries to forget it. He tries to hear what his brother is saying. He tries to let the words make sense inside his ears. Tries to appreciate that his brother knows best. Doesn't his brother know everything about the world? Doesn't his brother know even more than their parents?

But then, in early August, they are all swimming in that above-ground pool one sunny afternoon. The sun is like a spotlight. The sun wants to blind their eyes. It is a weight against their bodies. Miles is dripping. He has just climbed from the pool. Grant has gone inside. Grant is getting another Mountain Dew. And Brandon is standing before Sydney in the water. Both of them standing with water up to their shoulders. Bouncing up and down a little. Their hair slicked with wetness. Their bodies beaded with wetness. And what does Brandon do? He leans forward in the pool and kisses Sydney. Kisses her right on the lips. Kisses her right there in the water. Kisses her while they are both dripping. And she kisses him back. And then they step away from each other and Sydney looks toward Miles. Looks his way as though to say *so you saw that?* As though to say *I'm pretty sure you saw that.* And Miles can't help himself. Miles wishes he were bigger, stronger. Wishes he were old enough that he could jump into the water and hold his brother's face beneath the surface. Miles can't believe what he just saw. His brother. His brother who chased that ghost snake from beneath a porch. His brother who ran after that snake. Now his brother did *this*. Kissed Sydney Kerzee on the lips. Kissed her for no good reason. Kissed her like he liked it. Miles wants to cry now. He can't help himself. He can't hold it back. His eyes are warm with it, wet. Now Miles would gladly hold his brother's head under the surface of the pool and count to a hundred. Count to a thousand. Count to a million. Then he'd go after Sydney.

Patricia Corbus

LEAVING THE DAY OF THE DEAD

The peace lily's cobra head turned
to follow us as we spoke of sorrow

and regret, smiling. We were not burned
by the sunset's desperate red, chilled

by the woodpecker's demented laugh,
or spooked by the bald cypress's sudden

full head of green hair. Three of us dead,
and one dying, arm in arm, we walked

in a sandy lake where the moon floated
on its back, shivering the water.

Mortal magic had crumbled with the sun.
The world was spinning

her wool into the last few feathers
of sunset. We began to breathe and splash

each other, startling a lone loon sleeping
on the moon's belly, and watched it push off

for home through looms, pinwheels,
pinpricks of stars.

Patricia Corbus

HOW QUICKLY

The sea must eat its fill—
 a container vessel now and then,
 a swimmer caught in the undertow,
a nautilus shell, one chamber stuck open,
 swept helplessly across the ocean,
 children on the shore,
sailors in war, cruise ships in storms,
 a jet ski zooming away without its rider,
 a tsunami's big gulp.
Well, what of it. We are conceived in water,
 and should be used to hauling it around,
 sloshing, kissing,
taking water in and letting it out.
 The Gulf surges over our heads,
 and the water in us rises and falls
at yon Luna's pleasure. We sink like ships
 and jump like dolphins. Like clouds
 we are wrestled by the wind
into different shapes and destinations.
 When the wind dies, how quickly the sea
 and sky hold hands, and stars
and starfish skinny-dip together in the dark.

Angie Macri

INTERIOR FLAKE

Self-heal seeds spread by rain.
which falls like it always has, even
as the trains take the coal away
to burn. The miner bees, sulfurs,
and whites, feed on the mint,
a kin to our gardens.

Cobden and Kincaid chert
were brought here by trade. The firmament
over the southern part of the state
became quite still, and interior flakes
were worked from nodules
of sky, and beds, from shatter.
An arm pounded on a fracture line.

Arrow points, drills, scrapers,
sometimes with a stem,
convex, we find what was taken
to shape. The coal
is counted by the ton, and the self-heal
grows on the waste.

Janna Knittel

WHETSTONE

Obdurate as hornfels
under pressure,
fissiparous as flint

at acute angles—
when I'm struck
instead of stroked

I splinter
into smoky blue
flecks of iolite.

If you ceased
shillelaghing me
to swarf, homed

me in your pocket,
I would resonate forever,
your living
lithophone.

Michael S. Moos

SPINE OF A BUFFALO CALF

It did not take long for the ashes to leave your bare hand.
Not long to settle into the grass.

You told yourself, the dead are to be left behind
in the drifting snow, or among the spring wildflowers
opening their blue bodies.

In this you were telling a truth, though not all of it.
So you will come back to look out over the ridge, out over
the dark vertebrae of an aging continent,
to feel you have fulfilled your ancestral filial promise, made
amends in the sunlight.

You lie down on the dry hard earth, emptiness
filling your rib cage, your eyes full of the featureless sky
and one dark bird circling away to a tiny speck.

You know a fleeting pity for the delicate wildflowers
crushed under your weight, as you lie there seeking concord
at the edge of the draw, searching this dry
edge of the Badlands for a sign, listening to the silence
on the far shore of your prayer.

Full of all the nothing in the world, you bend down
some morning, in tall winter grass, the sage dusty dry blue,
faded sculpture of bright rosehips in the wind.

Here, discover the bleached spine with its white ribs,
the abandoned skull now poised between the great rocks
as though sleeping, as though waiting, too, to slip back.

Waiting for something to come after the coyotes, the vultures,
the gnawing fingers of sunlight returning to make a solemn
gesture across the land.

The old infinites are still here, of course, but not quite
as you imagined them. As though sorrow
is a bird you could name, but only in a language
from another age.

R.M. Kinder

ABOUT THE SPARROWS

1

A thousand sparrows settled in the chinaberry.
They crushed leaves, and squabbled for a sixteenth inch.
They boded something—a change in the weather,
a striking of old guards, a suspension of delight.
They nagged my future. I was ready to bicker with them,
but not to leave the neighborhood not anytime soon.
In spring, maybe, if the tree blossomed.

2

Night comes, and something like sparrows overwhelms the tree.
White moonlight brighter than every lamp in town can't expose
the thousand or so small bodies. How have they gone silent?
Not far away the creek smells hot. Fireflies are languid, drenched
with summer air.
In daylight, our country's flag hangs limp from every doorpost.
Telephone poles cast shadows, divide streets, houses, yards.
Such grids of poverty. I used to sit in this very tree
and leave notes in knotholes. Now small creatures hold their
breath.

Jason Roberts

CHAMBER IV: TRANSPLANT

For ECM

if I could remove your heart
full of stunted ticking clocks &
the inconstant throes of a thing
trying not to fall
in on itself
over & over & over again
& replace it with something
that
won't scratch until it bruises you
something not afraid to be naked
in the light
or the half-light
after our love has had its way
something that won't ache
when it finally lies down
to dread or dream or die
I'd cut into you with our voices
winging gently in the dark & pull
at the roots of this anguish
this rejectamenta
as though
it could go on living
in the song of my own frail body
transposed to a gentler key.
&
given back when the timing
was slower & more precise
but
because these are simply words

& so rarely mean or change a thing
it will be enough for me to lie here
pressing my head to your rising chest
knowing I can only listen &
guess at the distance

between beats

Randy Blythe

TO THE TASK

There are those who say
that after all his suffering,
Job's questions were so tough
they silenced God,

and that's why
we listen so hard,
as if the long pause
has grown more pregnant.

Was God shut up
the way the Dog Star
shuts up mockingbirds in July?

Divine shame
at a just man's indignation?

Is that why miracles grew vaguer,
more timid?

Now God seems baffled,
reluctant at what to do with all that
timelessness

Sits in the top of a cedar
stretching His wings, preening,
shaping His beak
around weighty silence,

tongue distended,
a little embarrassed
at the outcome of His own paternity.

Stretches finger-feathers
into first one realm then another,
a little uncomfortably,

perhaps shrugging a bit,
always trying for a fit,

like a funeral director

who points his employees to their work,
purses his lips,
adjusts his new suit coat
while the coffin is closed.

Donna Pucciani

A STRANGER'S PLOT

The garden I walk past daily
belongs to a man I've seen
only once, reeling the hose in,
the god of his small Eden.

A constellation of daisies
now falls from a skyful
of dying roses, leggy petunias,
mammoth clusters of perennials
with exotic names and no hope
of blooming again until spring.

I want to tell him
he's done a fine job
with his English garden
in the suburbs of Chicago,
the last giant sunflowers
painting the clouds yellow
before their final wilt.

I silently laud his perseverance
in the fight against tight-fisted clay,
the Polar Vortex that eats all the living
in its frozen maw, and the scorch
of Midwest summers.

My soul leaps among the asters.
He doesn't know how often
I have dead-headed his irises,
pinched off exhausted day lilies
drooping within reach of the sidewalk,
smelled his newly-spread mulch
in the early glistening dew.

Guy R. Beining

FELT TONGUE

245.

why not scribble
on the blueprint.
we have been blinded
too long by the canon.
those mighty minds
have been rinsed
by the same blueprint
tho it is missing
nostoi & the
history of cardenio.
the thing is to
move the scriptures
under a restless hand
that does not rest
even in sleep,
& it will redo the work
& redirect the canon
taking us into uncharted
lands that will finally
release our pause & effect.

DIRGE

Private Pearson

In the sandbagged watchtower overlooking the zig-zag entry into FOB Salerno, Bryce Pearson slumps across the buttstock of his M-240, its barrel aimed skyward like the opposite end of a seesaw. He should be alert, but he's zoning, his mind ten-thousand clicks from desert and guard duty. Easy enough to do in this great wash of brown and gray, everything blending into one monotonous blur like television static. The base sits on a dozed shelf of sand with miles of rock-scrabbled hills spreading out in every direction but east, which is dominated by steep, jagged mountains. Occasional shrubs dot the hills and mountains, but otherwise all Pearson can see is sand and rock.

Mail call this morning brought Pearson a care package from home, and he's dreaming of shift change, of chowing down on Mom's corn fritters, sweet potato pie, and tubs of dirty rice. Imagining he's a million miles from mortar rounds and rocket attacks and callouts to scenes where someone's gotten their shit blown off.

On the sandy road below, Tariq Jackson stands at the boom barrier in a Kevlar-plated vest, his torso as blocky as a Lego figurine. He's supposed to ID and search any Afghans who approach the gate while Pearson provides overwatch, but foot traffic is light. It's Thanksgiving and the rest of Task Force Devil is eating holiday dinner, squirreled away within the tank ditches and HESCO barriers surrounding the compound. The battalion is rotating back to Fort Bragg at the end of the week, and home is all anyone can talk about.

Ssg Berkholtz had already given them the required headshrinking talk about how home won't seem the same as they remembered. *But it's you who's changed*, he'd said. *You who'll feel itchy amid the fat luxuries of the good 'ol US of A.* It sounded like bullshit to Pearson. They've only been gone six months, short as

deployments go. Yes, he's changed from when he first arrived in country, quicker to flatten on the sand when a launching mortar round pops off in the surrounding hills; unhesitant in lighting up someone who doesn't drop a weapon when ordered; and no longer queasy when the backs of enemies' heads explode to paint black smears on sandstone walls. All those things that had shaken him during his first few weeks are now nothing but a tight knot in his gut. A knot he hopes will unravel once he gets home.

But during Berkholtz's talk, he kept these reservations to himself, mimicking the squad's older members, the ones who'd deployed multiple times, their features blank as stone. Even Mueller, that wiseass, just sat there mindlessly rubbing an old scar on his brow. So Pearson stayed silent too, nodding in all the right places while dreaming of home.

Now, he raps knuckles on his helmet to refocus on the task at hand. Jackson notices and blows him an exaggerated air-kiss. Jackson is Pearson's best bud. The two youngest squad members, they'd been through it all together. The shared patrols, humping up mountains, every step littered with scree, past boulders and through stone passes scorched black from previous firefights. The night raids with kicked-down doors, each man covering the other's back as he rushed in with the stock of his M4 wedged into his shoulder, his Aimpoint optics painting a red dot on his target. And the wide-eyed moments after battle rehashing how close one or the other had come to being killed, showing off a ballistic plate that stopped a bullet or using his thumb and forefinger to show how close it had come to his head.

This morning, over powdered eggs in the DFAC, Pearson had asked Jackson what he's going to do with all the combat pay sitting in his bank back home. *Cruise the strip clubs on Yadkin*, he'd said. *Make it rain on the honeys*.

Sucking in his cheeks and rubbing his chin, Pearson said, *Indubitably*, in a posh, British accent, and they both cracked up. Just one of a thousand of their inside jokes that made no sense to anyone else.

As Jackson went on to describe the choice things he'd like to do with the strippers, Pearson nodded along and gave the oc-

casional fist-bump, pretending like he wanted nothing else. But really, the only girls on his mind are the ones writing him from Meadville, the ones who barely noticed him in high school. Main reason he'd enlisted was the way the girls had gone apeshit over the brawny recruiter in the school lobby. Now these former cheerleaders and prom princesses are sending him lingerie pics from their bedrooms. The photos are stuffed in his helmet lining, a bit of inspiration to leer at whenever he pops off his brain bucket. Soon enough, he'll get to stroll into town in his dress greens, silver jump wings, and spit-shined Corcorans, and his only problem will be deciding which of them to hook up with first.

Blinking back to the present, Pearson sees a woman limping toward the gate, and the coil in his gut clenches up. In years to come, reflecting on this moment, he'll wonder if something in the woman's gait reminded Jackson of his mother, the way she hobbled on her cane into his bedroom each night to kiss his forehead. Or if, framed within the woman's purple hijab, her expression, angelic as the Virgin Mary, prompted memories of Baptist sermons, echoes of *Thou shalt not* staying his trigger finger.

Protocols exist for situations like this, Rules of Engagement outlining the rapid progression of escalating force to use against anyone approaching the gate. *Shout. Show your weapon. Shoot to warn. Shoot to kill.*

But he'll never know for sure why Jackson stands motionless and lets the woman come unchallenged, shuffling toward the boom barrier, hugging a bundle the size of a swaddled baby.

When Pearson's fog finally lifts, he yells *Stop* at the limping woman. The hairs on his arms bristle as he notices a mottled bruise coloring one side of the woman's swollen, frightened face. He fires a warning shot over her head and lowers his aim for the kill shot. Then a fist of sand knocks the air from his lungs and the world goes brown.

Sophia

Sophia wants to discuss the explosion with her husband, but Brendan, just home from Afghanistan, won't talk about it. He pretends Tariq's death and Bryce's disfigurement don't bother him,

and she pretends to not notice his pretense. Even though she can practically feel anger radiating off him in waves.

Brendan's squad is being quartered for the night in a hotel in Newport News, Tariq's hometown. Eyes closed, Sophia stands swaying in their room, hugging their baby, one arm cradled beneath her diaper, one hand at the small of her back. Rubbing small circles, she whispers *Mommy loves you, Mommy loves you*. Chrissie's fussy protests are winding down, surrendering to exhaustion, chubby fingers of one hand worrying the enameled edges that pierce her gums. Finally her tiny digits fall away and her breathing becomes slow and regular.

Sophia's face is sleep-creased, greasy hair swept back and knotted behind her head. Being a military wife is harder than she thought. Plucked from her carefree life and friends, plopped down in a scrubby base where she doesn't know anyone, and anchored to a teething infant that demands every second of her waking attention. While her husband was being shot at halfway around the world, she nearly collapsed into tears with every knock on the door, the potential specter of a notification detail waiting on her stoop. Frightened and alone these past six months, she's wanted to scream half the time but kept herself together for one reason: Chrissie.

Sophia lays the baby on the king-sized bed and surrounds her with a pillow fortress. *Can you turn that down?* she asks, nodding toward the TV. Brendan is sitting in a padded chair tilted back on its rear legs, one foot dangling and the other pressed against the edge of a desk. On the television, turned on its stand to face him, a dour anchorman is speaking in a monotone about tomorrow's funeral.

Brendan mutes it with the remote, and close-captioned text scrolls across the anchorman's face. In the screen's upper right corner is a headshot of PFC Jackson in his maroon beret. Brendan leans over to the mini-fridge and pulls out another miniature bottle of Jack Daniels. He cracks it open and slurps down the whiskey in a quick gulp. Then he drops the bottle into the wastebasket where the glass clinks against the other empties in the bottom.

We can talk about it, you know, Sophia says. I won't freak out or anything. I'm stronger than you think. Strong enough to handle anything but being shut out.

Not much to say. I was in the chow hall when it happened.

She looks from the two prints of seascapes to the various lighthouses on the wallpaper. It's the type of décor she and her mom used to appreciate on browsing trips through Bassett, Ethan Allen, and Pier 1, but today it jangles Sophia's nerves. Resting a hand on her daughter's chest, she feels the bird-like beat of her heart. Chrissie's face is serene as virgin snow. It bears the brow and full lips of her father.

Sophia wonders what troubles her own parents went through at this age. Their anniversary is coming up in February. Thirty years they've been together. All the parents of Sophia's friends are still married too. That fact had always informed her idea of relationships. You meet, you fall in love, you go through rough patches, but you stay together, forever, for better or worse. Especially when you have children.

Brendan opens the fridge and grabs another bottle.

Wanna slow that down? Sophia says.

His face screws up into a knot. *I haven't had a drink in months. Give me a break!*

Sophia can't believe *that* is the grievance he wants to complain about. Not the mortar attacks and IEDs. Not being separated from his family. Not Tariq's death. Just the forced sobriety. *She* hasn't had a drink either; she'd been pregnant the first three months of his tour and nursing the second half. But she bites back her anger. Like always. *I'm just saying, you haven't had any booze in a while. It's gonna hit you twice as hard.*

Brendan shoots out of the chair so fast, it shocks her. He throws the bottle across the room and it bounces off the wall and skitters across the floor. *What do you want from me?* he screams, fists balled at his sides.

On the bed, Chrissie wakes and starts wailing. Brendan looks down at his daughter, and as he does, his rage diffuses into a confused mask. He fingers the small scar curling through his eyebrow.

I don't need this shit right now, he says. Then he storms out and slams the door.

Sophia stands for a beat, staring at the door's security latch, considering swinging it shut to lock Brendan out. Then she picks up Chrissie and bounces her in her arms, swaying back and forth as she walks around the room. *It's all right*, she says, knowing it's a lie. *Everything is all right*.

Corporal Faust

Faust arrives early at McFadden's and grabs a seat at the bar. The interior is dim, late afternoon sun dampened by tinted windows. On a TV behind the bar, two hosts of a local talk show face the screen in overstuffed chairs canted at forty-five degree angles. On the left is a blond woman in a flamingo-pink suit. She rehashes the story of paratroopers coming to town to bury their fallen squadmate. Her companion, a thin man with sad eyes, nods along and grimaces. A picture of the squad appears with Faust, the alpha team leader, positioned near the middle. The camera pans past him and zooms in on Jackson's face. Then a map of Newport News fills the screen, a bright yellow line detailing the route the motorcade will take to the cemetery. After a few moments, the map cuts away to a sharp-faced major spewing platitudes about the cost of war, his bony blade of a face providing an exclamation point to his message. *So come on out*, the sad-eyed newscaster adds, *and show your support for the troops*.

Faust curses under his breath. The news coverage will turn the private ceremony into a public spectacle. He orders a tumbler of Hennessy and sips the amber liquid, gazing down the long, lacquered counter. The pub is nearly empty; but not for long. Soon enough, welders and pipefitters from the shipyard surge through the doors like high tide crashing a levee. They strut in with chins jut before them like the prows of icebreakers, their forearms scarred with glossy dots from liquefied steel, biceps wreathed with knotted ropes or stamped with blue tridents or anchors. As these flannel-shirted men order beer by the pitcher, Faust listens to their gripes about management, overtime, and rising rates of mesothelioma.

None of them bother with Faust, though he almost wishes they would. He's keen for a fight. He's always been the level-headed sort, but that changed this past deployment. Iraq had been a straight-up slugfest with the Republican Guard, but Afghanistan had been a different monster altogether. Their convoys were ambushed regularly, locals took pot shots into the compound, and some roving mortar unit lobbed shells at them and disappeared before the Quick Reaction Force could get them; the nighttime mortar barrages rarely hit anything of consequence, but the random attacks screwed with their sleep. Eventually an Apache shot up the mortar unit and the pot shots became infrequent occurrences. Oddly enough, without them it became *more* difficult for Faust to sleep. Before, under the constant threat of attack, adrenaline built up in his blood until a chorus of explosions washed it away in one terrifying thrill. But without an actual attack, there was just ever-mounting anticipation with no release.

His best sleep came after contact with the enemy. After the kill-or-be-killed dance, the quick aim through optics and pull of a trigger, ejected brass cartridges pirouetting beside his head as the whip-crack of return fire snapped through air around him. In the thick of battle, he had no time for conscious thought, just instinct and training. Afterwards, the ecstasy of survival coursed through him in a bigger and better high than he had ever felt on any drug. It was only in the long stretches of quiet, when days passed without an attack, that he catalogued the near misses stacking up against him and felt a nervous apprehension. It's the same keyed-up sensation twitching beneath his skin right now. And the only cure he knows is combat.

At happy hour, girls in shimmering blouses glide in like a V of geese landing on a pond. Young and beautiful, they lean over Faust to order flavored martinis and fistfuls of shooters, their perfume stirring his blood. A handful of girls head to a central, raised section of the floor ringed by arm-rails that serves as a dance area. They step onto the platform and dance on the checkboard floor with drinks in their hands. Immediately the music turns up and the lights dim.

Soon shaggy-haired townies join the girls and the dance floor fills with jostling bodies. Below the gyrating throng, small groups stand in tight knots on the hardwood floor, yelling to be heard over the music. The only break in the carnival-like atmosphere is a hiccup of stunned stillness when a group that everyone recognizes pushes through the door. It's the other members of Faust's squad. Block-shouldered and confident, they part the crowd like beaded curtains, moving as a single unit, each set of eyes sweeping different sectors, assessing the chaos.

They grab a table in the back near the restrooms and Faust joins them, bringing a pitcher from the bar. He sits beside his squad leader, Berkholtz, a power-lifter with pale, Nordic skin. Mueller, the resident troublemaker, is first to pour himself a glass of beer. *You're all right, Corporal Faust, he says. I don't care what anyone says about you.*

Coming back from the ladies' room, two slender girls with tight half-shirts showing off pierced navels stop at the paratroopers' table. One of them leans over to touch Mueller's forearm. *I'm so sorry for your loss, she says.*

Mueller wraps an arm around her waist and snugs her up against his chest. *No reason for that, he says. Sorry is for tomorrow. We're in a partying mood tonight.*

She laughs and allows herself to be pulled into his lap. Her friend steals a chair from a nearby table and joins the group.

In a nearby booth, one of the thick-necked shipbuilders shakes his head and says something to his friends, who all look over and laugh. Faust gives a backhanded tap to Mueller's shoulder. *You see that shit?*

Huh?

Those fuckers disrespecting you, man.

Mueller glances over at the booth then back again. *Whatever man. It's cool.* He squeezes the girl's waist and smiles at her. *Not as cool as you though. You're cute as a ladybug.*

Nah, man. It ain't cool at all. It's go time.

Mueller reacts like a switch has been thrown. His smile disappears and he dumps the girl from his lap like dusting off crumbs. *Let's go then.*

Hey, what gives? the girl says. Hands on hips, she looks down at Mueller, but his face has transformed into a landscape of hard plains. *C'mon, Denise,* she says. Her friend rises and the two of them stomp off.

Around the table, the other faces are as dead as Mueller's. Nothing further is spoken. They stand as one and close on their target.

Specialist Mueller

Brendan Mueller jerks awake in the tub. First thing he thinks is, *Where am I?* Second thing, *Where's my rifle?*

Then he sees the seashells on the bathroom wallpaper and it all comes back to him. Mostly. As he scrunches his brow in concentration, scenes from last night flash in disconnected bits and pieces. The dark bar. The loud music. The skinny girl with the bare midriff. A whirlwind of bodies. A chair tipping over. A chin thrust forward. Mueller's fist connecting with an uppercut. Then someone else decking him, and the taste of blood filling his mouth. He flexes his sore right hand, its knuckles skinned and bruised. *Worth it,* he thinks.

As he lifts himself out of the tub, spots swim through his vision and he pauses for a self-assessment. His temples are throbbing and his neck feels as if it's clamped in a vise. Rotating his head in a slow circle, he hears vertebrae crackle like popping bubble wrap. He licks his chapped lips, wishing for an aspirin.

What the hell did I drink? he wonders. He vaguely recalls moving on to a shitty dive bar and plowing through a slew of pitchers. At one point, he convinced the bartender to sprawl across the bar so he could drink tequila shots from her navel and suck a lemon wedge from her mouth. *That* brings a smile to his face. But smiling makes his head hurt more, so he stops.

That's when the dragging prongs of memory dredge up other images, scenes from the desert, from the day Pearson died, and an icy rush shoots through his veins and a stench fills his nose. He'd been one of the first out to the gate after the blast. When he'd arrived, Sergeant Berkholtz was pressing a field dressing on

Pearson's face and wrapping its long green tails around his head. *Go check on Jackson*, he'd ordered, and Mueller had rushed down to the crater, knowing what he'd find. Jackson's shredded body. Pieces torn away. And that burning smell.

The smell still comes to mind whenever he sits still, whenever noise recedes, whenever he closes his eyes. It's what he thinks of now, even before his wife and daughter in the other room. When his mind finally comes around to them like a sweeping, cinematic, overhead shot, the film is intercut with quick flashes of the skinny girl from the first bar and the bartender from the second. His skin flushes hot with shame.

Last night when he'd returned to the room, Sophia had asked about his fat lip. The disapproval in her face was all it took to knot his fists with sudden fury. Fearing what he might do, he'd turned to the bed and hammered the pillows, howling all the while. Then he'd retreated to the bathroom and sealed himself inside.

Now, with his hand on the doorknob, he takes personal inventory. All those months in the desert dreaming of home, of his wife, of his baby. *They* are what he should concentrate on. Not the smell of burning bodies.

When he opens the door, he sees Sophia playing peekaboo with their daughter, Chrissie giggles in spurts each time she pulls her hands away to reveal her face. Brendan sits on the bed beside them and puts his hand on his wife's back, rubbing it in a circle. *Sorry*, he says. *I'll do better*.

Sophia grabs his wrist and pulls it across her shoulder, settling his hand on her left breast. Through the thin fabric of her worn, cotton nightshirt, he feels her heart beating. Squeezing, he pulls her back against his chest.

Staff Sergeant Berkholtz

In the second limo behind the hearse, Berkholtz stares out the window at the crowd. Bradshaw sits stone-faced beside him. Seated opposite are Mueller, his wife, and their little girl, quiet in her carrier. Sophia is sniffing, flicking nervous glances sideways at her husband, who is still enraged from this morning's encounter with the reporters.

As they were leaving Rollins Funeral Home, television crews ambushed them on the steps, a phalanx of microphones thrust in their faces. Mueller had said, *You want details? I'll give you Goddamn details.* Berkholtz had told him to shut up. Then he and Bradshaw had hooked Mueller's arms and duck-walked him to the limo, Sophia trailing behind like a dog with its tail tucked.

Now throngs of locals bracket their route, huddled in long winter coats, hands pressed over hearts or waving flags. Some hold signs that read "Gone But Not Forgotten" or "America Thanks You." Old vets stand at attention and salute, their garrison caps studded with pins. Everyone else applauds as the procession breezes through red lights and stop signs, police motorcycles leap-frogging ahead to hold up traffic at every intersection.

Despite the cold, a fleshy girl wearing nothing but cowboy boots, short shorts, and a red-white-and-blue bra bounces up and down with a sign that reads, *We love you!*

Get a load of that shit, Mueller says, a crooked smile cracking through his anger.

The signs, the applause, the sirens and flashing lights—it's all a blur to Berkholtz. All he sees is Pearson's flapping cheek, his own hands stuffing a white compress against the red hole, wrapping the tails around his head and knotting it in front.

They'd all seen dead and wounded before, mostly Hajji, but a few Americans too. Parker and Santamaria from Charlie Company, Rago from HHC. But this was the first time it'd been soldiers from his squad. Berkholtz was supposed to be the guard on overwatch that day, not Pearson. But when he'd heard about the turkey dinner, he'd scratched a line through his name and written "SPC Pearson" above it. *Rank has its privileges,* he'd told him with a smirk. His next words to Pearson didn't come until he was kneeling in the sand, trying to stuff what had fallen out of his face back in again. *You'll be all right,* he'd said. *You'll be all right.*

He'd meant to tell Jackson's mother about the switch, admit how everything was his fault. If *he'd* been on the gun, maybe none of this would've happened. But he couldn't look her in the eye let alone get his mouth to work.

As squad leader, Berkholtz should have escorted Mrs. Jackson to the first limo, but he passed that duty off too. It was Bradshaw who gave her his elbow, and she'd held onto it fiercely, her cane hooked in her other hand as she shuffled forward.

Over the past six months, Berkholtz must have heard a hundred of Jackson's "Mama Stories." How she worked two jobs to put food on the table. How she once stabbed a would-be purse snatcher with a hat pin and then beat him down with the very purse he'd meant to snatch. How, whenever Jackson screwed up, she made him peel a switch from the birch tree out front so she could whoop him with it. This morning, though, she'd been as frail as a desiccated leaf in winter.

Ashes to ashes, Berkholtz thinks. Dust to dust.

Mrs. Jackson

Graveside, Jackson's mother is glad the day is miserable, cold as the bottom of a well. No clouds overhead, as if the sky had known to strip itself of charm. Her metal folding chair is lopsided, its right legs plunging deeper into the grass than the left. That, too, is fine.

Resting on her lap is a black cane with a silver eagle's head. *Too showy*, she'd told Tariq when he'd given it to her as a birthday gift. She'd hung it on the closet rod and hobbled around on shopping trips to Piggly Wiggly and Rite Aid with a plain cedar cane with a rubberized tip. Now, she clasps her son's gift, caressing the eagle's head and regretting how stupid she'd been, how prideful.

Behind the flag-draped casket, the chaplain says something about brotherhood and sacrifice, but his words are too slippery for her to grasp. She stares at the silver eagle until her vision swims out of focus. A movie starts up in her head: Tariq as a diapered toddler chasing their pit bull with a Wiffle bat; her little boy jumping his beat-up Schwinn on a tiny ramp in the street, saying, *Look, Mama, look*; her boy all grown up, posing in a rented tux with his prom date, his smile as wide as Chesapeake Bay.

Sitting in her Sunday finery, she feels as cored out as a jack-o-lantern. She squeezes the cane, tensing her muscles in an attempt

to hold back tears, refusing to cry in front of everybody, being strong for her little boy.

She remembers when Tariq came back from the recruiter, showing off enlistment papers as if they were something to be proud of. *Take it back*, she'd said. *Go on back to Mister Man and take it back*. He'd reached for her arm, saying, *Mama, please*. But she'd slapped his hand away. *Fool, you gonna get kilt in someone else's desert 'less you take it back*. And when he'd run out and slammed the door, she was left in the kitchen with the echoing accusation.

How many times had she replayed that scene? Each time, her own words stabbing her heart like a dagger. *Fool. Fool. Fool. You gonna get kilt*. If she hadn't made that proclamation, perhaps it wouldn't have come true. If only *she* could take her words back.

Her gaze drifts from the florid-faced chaplain to black-clad mourners with hands crossed in their laps, and then to the cluster of soldiers in dress blues, faces hard as frozen ground, gold stripes down their legs, miniature medals displayed on their chests.

When the chaplain finishes, a square-jawed captain salutes the casket. Seven rifles fire three quick volleys and she jerks each time the shots crack through thin air. When their echoes recede, her shoulders start to shake as something rattles free inside her chest. It's the tide she's tried so hard to hold back finally breaking free. Mustering all her willpower, she straightens her back and stymies the tears. She swears she will *not* make a scene. Not here. Not in front of her little boy.

Two soldiers fold the flag, snapping creases with machine-like precision. Then the captain carries the star-spangled triangle to her and places it in her hands. *On behalf of a grateful country*, he says.

Private First Class Bradshaw

Bradshaw asks the hostess for a table for four. *Somewhere in back, if possible*. As she leads him on a weaving course between tables and past a long curving bar, he's glad to see the few TVs are tuned to sports channels. No chance of this morning's ceremony

popping up there. She seats him at a clamshell booth wrapped around a long, oval table, and a waitress comes by moments later to take his drink order. *Just water.*

The restaurant is Catch 31 Fish House and Bar, sandwiched between Atlantic Avenue and the Virginia Beach boardwalk. Classier than Bradshaw is used to, but it's their last day of per diem and Sergeant Berkholtz says they should use it up.

Bradshaw admires his squad leader more than anyone else he's ever known. Saddled with life-or-death responsibilities, Berkholtz incessantly drills his men until reactions become second nature. But instead of screaming at them for every little screw-up, he goads them on with praise. *Looked real sharp, but we can do it better. Can't have any hesitation. Speed and violence. Hooah?*

But Berkholtz has seemed unmoored since the blast. Bradshaw mentioned it to Faust a few nights ago, but the team leader told him, *It's all good. Sergeant K is the man.*

Berkholtz's first name is Kristian, a Norwegian name passed down from his mother's side of the family. Genetics also gave him pale, smooth skin that makes him seem ageless. Other NCOs in the platoon sometimes call him *Sergeant Baby*, but Faust isn't dumb enough to do that. Not only can the bulked-up squad leader bench twice his weight, his favorite punishment for men in his charge is twelve-mile road marches in full pack. Berkholtz can be positive and inspirational when the situation calls for it; hard as a rock when it doesn't.

Maybe that's why Bradshaw relates to him so well. Berk's philosophy mirrors his own. Bradshaw was a choir boy before becoming a linebacker in high school; he believes in the sanctity of life but is willing to kill in the name of freedom. In combat, he'd always been able to act without compunction, performing his duties like a machine as the whip-crack of bullets tore the air around him and wounded soldiers cried out for medics. No hesitation. No thinking.

As the war dragged on, walls of his compartmentalized thinking grew thin. In one room of his brain, the absolute certainty of their noble cause began to heed complaints from others. *What*

were they still doing here when so many locals wanted them gone? When every American death was followed by televised broadcasts urging Muslims in neighboring countries to take up the fatwa, cross the border, and come fight the Great Satan?

Bradshaw and his squadmates may have had their doubts, may have even groused about them among themselves, but no one balked when the shit went down. They kept killing and being killed because it was their job, each man risking everything because he loved the man next to him. Simple as that.

Now, Bradshaw swizzles ice in his cobalt glass, trying to empty his mind. He's still sipping water when Berkholtz and Faust arrive. *Hell of a view*, Berkholtz says before sitting down. The window opposite the booth looks out on the veranda's fire pits and the boardwalk teeming with tourists. Looming over them like a colossus is a thirty-four foot statue of King Neptune holding a trident in one hand and a giant turtle in the other.

The three of them sit in companionable silence Berkholtz staring glassy-eyed out the window. Bradshaw glances from him to Faust, who merely shrugs his shoulders. Before the silence grows uncomfortable, Mueller comes weaving through the restaurant.

Where's the wife and kid? Berkholtz asks.

Mueller makes a face. *Chrissie's throwing a fit, so the ladies will not be joining us tonight.*

The waitress comes by, and after she finishes taking their orders Mueller asks if she knows what time it is.

Hmm, six-ish, I think.

Uh uh, Mueller says, *it's beer o'clock. Bring us a pitcher.* When he winks, a smile blooms on her face.

Cute, she says.

So are you.

When she leaves, Bradshaw notices her sashay is more pronounced than before.

Always the life of the party, says Faust.

Argue if I could, Mueller says, palms held up. Then he turns his right hand over and flexes the bruised knuckles. *Last night's kind of a blur. Mind catching me up?* As they recap the previous

night, Mueller chuckles at the details he remembers and says, *No shit*, to those he can't.

So you're pounding on this one dude, Berkholtz says, *when his friend cracks a pool cue on your back and down you go. Then the guy gets ready to start stomping on you, but this hard charger over here takes him out and saves your ass*. He claps Bradshaw on the shoulder.

Mueller scratches his head. *I remember that. He smashed a bottle over that fucker's head. Man, I've only seen 'em shatter like that in the movies. That was awesome*.

Yeah, Berkholtz agrees, *awesome*.

Bradshaw has a different recollection. *Yes*, he'd hit the guy with his beer bottle, but it hadn't busted. The guy had fallen sideways into the next table and knocked over some glasses. *Those* had shattered. If he doesn't correct them now, he knows how this story will morph over the years, adding bulk, becoming more heroic with every telling. True details will eventually fade like the memory of a dream surrendering to daylight. But the beer comes before he says anything, and Mueller pours for everyone.

What'll we drink to? Mueller says.

Fallen comrades, Bradshaw says. *To Jackson*.

Berkholtz's face tenses for a moment, then he nods. *Raise a glass*, he says, hoisting his beer.

They all take long slugs. Mueller drains his entirely. He pours another glass, sets the pitcher down, and turns to Bradshaw. *I ever tell you about the time I snuck a fifth of Wild Turkey into a field exercise out on Sicily DZ? We were supposed to just sit around as OPFOR for 3rd Battalion in some mock bunkers, but Jackson got wasted and streaked across the DZ in nothing but his gas mask and a pair of smiley face boxers*.

What I remember, says Berkholtz, *is Sergeant Payne lining everyone up in formation afterwards and ordering us to drop trou so he could identify the underwear*.

Mueller laughs. *Son of a bitch never gave me up for sneaking in the booze. Even after they Article-Fifteened his ass*.

After that, the stories fly and the pitchers keep coming. *Remember the way Jackson... How he used to always... What about the time...*

Bradshaw listens, wondering which stories are true, but not really caring. What lies they tell and what truths they keep is not for anyone else to dictate. Each man must find his own way home.

Christopher Heffernan

FOR DINNER TONIGHT

She hears his boots come down the hall from the front door toward her where he comes into the kitchen with a plastic bag that he pulls a pack of cigarettes from and throws the cigarettes onto the table. She looks up but he does not look at her. The table is pressed against the fat of her body which takes up the entire corner of the room so that the rectangular shape of the wood sits like a small shelf fixed to the bulge of her stomach. “Thanks,” she says. He opens the refrigerator and puts the bag in then takes out a beer. “Sorry they didn’t have your brand,” he says. He twists off the cap and throws it into the sink as he starts out then says, “Oh right,” and goes back to the refrigerator where he opens the door and juggling his beer and the door takes a tub of cottage cheese from the plastic bag and brings it to her. The windows of the kitchen are open and dark from the night outside where crickets chirp and a firefly lights a brief yellow line that squiggles up then squiggles down. She has the cigarettes in her hands, holding the pack close to her face, as she turns it over, inspecting it, reading the label and warnings. “I’ve never even heard of these,” she says. “Gary’s kid was at the deli,” he says, “he said they were okay.” He drinks from his beer as he goes toward the living room. “I’ll need a spoon,” she says. He stops and lowers his head. To the feel of her hand the box is not made of cardboard but paper. It makes her suspicious as she opens them. She takes one out and sniffs it, rolling it between her fingers, then lights it. She looks at the cigarette as she exhales. The cherry burns quick and the smoke is thin and lacks a bluishness she associates with quality. He puts a spoon on the table. “Didn’t Gary’s kid graduate this year?” she says. “I think,” he says going out. “What’s he still doing in town?” she says. “I don’t know,” he says from the other room. The TV goes on. “When was the last time you saw Gary?” she says. “What?” he says. “I asked when the last time you saw Gary was.” “A while,” he says. “Six months or so,” he says. “I think he got a new route or something. Mostly Fletcher’s been making the deliveries now. I guess. There’s a

couple of new guys. But mostly it's Fletcher," he says. "How's Fletcher?" she says. "What?" he says. "I'm just wondering how Fletcher is," she says. She puts the cigarette between her middle and ring finger and opens the cottage cheese. "He's alright," he says. She pushes the cottage cheese back and forth with the spoon then takes a mouthful. There is a bit of water on the top that she stirs in then takes another mouthful before she takes another drag from the cigarette. "Actually," he says, "Fletcher's been away," he says. She exhales the smoke, playing with the cottage cheese. "Oh yeah?" she says. "Where at?" she says. "You're gonna have to talk louder," he says, "I really can't hear you." "I said, where did he go?" she says. "Where?" she says. "Where?" he says. Then he says, "Vegas." She eats more of the cottage cheese and takes another drag. "What's he doing there?" she asks. She hears him laugh. "Gambling, I imagine," he says. "Yeah," she says to herself. There is a mason jar of iced-tea at the end of the table that she leans for but cannot reach. She takes up a fork and gets the prongs behind the jar and drags it toward her until she can get her fingers on it. "Maybe we could go to Vegas," she says. Sweat is on her upper lip. The TV is going. "Tim?" she says. "I said maybe we could go to Vegas." Then she says, "I'm serious." Then she says, "I need to get away." Then she says, "Don't you need to get away?"

Morgan Nolte

APRIL 2020

There's nowhere to run,
no work,
no school,
no friends.
These people in your
home,
these people you
live with—
why are you so hesitant
to connect with them?

You move back in with your family for quarantine because you ~~think~~ *hope* it will be easier to isolate with the people you spent your formative years with. After two years of living away from them, you had idealized them in a way. In your mind, you replaced all of their toxic traits with tolerable ones and convinced yourself that everything would be fine.

You could not have been more wrong.

You love your family, yes, and they aren't all bad, but they aren't the ideal people to be trapped in a house in the suburbs with. Your mom doesn't understand why you're always so sad. She doesn't think you should need drugs to feel better, *Jesus is all you need*. She says this, ignoring the fact that she takes the same pill as you every morning, though at a much lower dose. As a psych major, your sister claims to understand what you're going through but is surprisingly tactless. She would rather talk about herself than be brought down by you. *Good vibes only!* is her mantra, though she talks more shit than anyone you know.

But again, they aren't all bad. Years ago, after you had sat on the driveway in the rain for an hour, too tired to cry, you came back in the house to a cup of tea your sister prepared just the way you like. When you decided you needed to talk to your doctor about increasing the dose of your Citalopram or trying something new, your

mom drove you to the appointment and waited until you were done because she knows how much you hate switching meds.

Your mom and sister don't always get it, but sometimes they try to make it easier. You can't talk to them about how you feel, but you have a therapist for that. This is your family, and you're stuck with them for the time being. You stay in your room as much as possible, so they don't have to see you being sad and you don't have to hear more and more bad advice—*Don't worry, be happy!*—or feel the mix of guilt and inadequacy that comes when you don't laugh at the jokes they make at your expense.

You think maybe things would be better if you had an honest conversation with them about how you feel, but you've tried that before. Some people just don't get it, and you're trying to be okay with that. Until you can be, you believe the best method is avoidance.

You feel more alone
now
than ever.

~ ~ ~

You rarely leave the house.

You know that self-isolation is recommended for the greater good.

If anyone should be quarantined, it should be you.

You've exhibited every symptom for almost three weeks now.

The only reason you haven't been tested for the virus is because the CDC said only to go to the doctor if it was life-threatening. *Your symptoms are mild, so why be selfish? It's not a big deal that you can't fill your lungs. It's not a big deal that they burn. You can breathe fine.* You fill out the CDC self-checker three times before you are satisfied with the results. *Sorry you're feeling ill. You have one or more symptom(s) that may be related to COVID-19. Stay home and take care of yourself.* You change your answers three times, neglecting to mention the time you fainted from lack

of oxygen, to convince yourself you shouldn't burden the health care professionals even more. After all, you can breathe fine.

So you stay home,
and you can feel yourself getting bad again.
Something about physical illness seems to trigger your mental illness.

Perhaps it's the isolation which comes along with being ill.

Or maybe you just hate the lack of freedom.

Either way, it doesn't matter.

You don't want to be the reason someone dies,
so you follow the stay-at-home order to the letter.

~ ~ ~

In-home isolation has turned into in-bedroom isolation.
You're tired of your mom telling you to smile
and maybe lose a few pounds
and your sister ignoring you unless she needs someone to
tell the most recent gossip—you wonder how there can be
so much gossip during quarantine—
so you stay in your bedroom alone.
Isolation has dug its roots down deep in you.

You think back to when you missed two months of classes during your sophomore year of high school. Your doctor diagnosed you with mono, which justified not leaving your bed. However, he missed the depressive breakdown which kept you there longer than you needed to be. *He probably missed it because you lied when he asked you if you had little to no pleasure in doing things; if you felt down, depressed, or hopeless; if you had thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself in some way.* Being isolated from your peers for so long caused you to withdraw into yourself, made you afraid to see people again. It was a contradiction you still can't wrap your mind around.

*If you hate being alone
so much,
why do you keep isolating
yourself?*

The isolation takes a toll on you.

You redownload the dating app you had for a week or two after your last breakup.

It isn't long before you remember why you deleted it in the first place.

There are only four girls on the app,

one of which is you,

one is searching for a threesome with her unattractive alcoholic boyfriend,

one is your best friend's ex,

and you talk to the other for about a week before the conversation runs dry.

The men on the app seem all too eager to break quarantine to get laid.

You know the men who say

I know I don't have the virus, so it's okay for us to meet up

are the same ones who think they don't need

to get tested for STIs,

or at least wear condoms.

You aren't really sure why you downloaded the app again. You know after the stay-at-home order is lifted you won't talk to anyone you matched with. You just need the constant social interaction. For whatever reason, you feel guilty for asking for this from your friends. Whenever you text them, you feel like a bother, and you wouldn't even think of calling them. When you stop to think about it, you know how flawed your reasoning is. They would love to get a message from you, or at least for you to respond to their messages in less than your standard five to seven hours. You know it makes your day when you get a message from them.

You know that you're making isolation worse for yourself, but you can't seem to help it.

It's not that you don't want to talk to anyone,

and it's not that you can't find a way to talk to them.

It's just that you don't.

You can't seem to wrap your mind around why you don't.

~ ~ ~

Nothing makes you smile anymore.
(Though, it's not like you smiled much before.)
You watch cat videos and stand-up comedy,
but the closest you'll get to a laugh is forcefully exhaling.
You greet classmates and friends on Zoom
with a fake smile and an *I'm good! How are you?*
but by the end of the call you've all resigned
to monotone voices and straight faces.
You and your best friend cried for three hours on the
phone together.
Neither of you said a word,
you both just cried.
Same time next week?

It kills you to think that you'll still be stuck
in quarantine next week.

You know that people are dying and that you should feel grateful that you don't have it worse than you do. You feel guilty for being *sad* while people are dying from the virus. Your therapist reminds you—on yet another Zoom call—that your problems are valid. Your major depressive disorder increases your chances of one of the top ten leading causes of death in the United States: suicide. You know how real the risk is. She always tells you that people like you, people who have attempted before, are more likely to attempt again. You remind her that you've been taking your meds and meeting with her more often than you used to.

You promise her you'll be fine,
though you aren't sure
if you're trying harder
to convince her or yourself.

~ ~ ~

You aren't used to being alone this often. You used to hang out with your friends every day. You used to go to classes and have discussions with your classmates and instructors. You used to go

to work and talk to your boss about Tik Tok and help guests with reservations. You used to go places and see people and
now you don't.

You didn't realize how dependent on strangers you were
until you didn't have them anymore.

You didn't realize how much you needed
to be in rooms of twenty people whose names you
barely know.

You didn't know how much you needed
to smile at shoppers as you hand back their
change.

You didn't know how much you needed
to walk by countless faces on the street without
saying a single word

to any of them—occasionally smiling at one that looks vaguely
familiar,

in case you met them and forgot.

You post another selfie on your Snapchat story. Five guys you
barely know swipe up almost immediately. The messages ran-
dom thirsty guys send you throughout the day almost fill the void.
You barely know these guys anyway—you met them at parties,
in classes, online. They're basically strangers. You need the brief
interactions, so you will just have to make do for now.

~ ~ ~

Time has lost all authority over you.

You've lost the structure that kept you (relatively) sane before.

Without it, you've been spiraling.

You wake up at eight now, which has gradually pushed itself back
from your typical five.

You can't breathe,

so you can't run,

so there's no need to get up early
anymore.

You lie awake for at least half an hour before you actually get out of bed,

though it feels as if you just woke up
a second ago.

It's nine o'clock before you start your schoolwork,
though you don't know where the
time went.

You look at the clock and it's two p.m.

You haven't seen your family or eaten yet today.

You don't know how this keeps happening.

You'll get food when you finish
this page.

It's six and you're finally
eating.

You make a promise that you'll
take better

care of yourself tomorrow,

but it's been a week

and the habit hasn't changed.

You check your phone at three o'clock.

Suddenly it's eight and you've missed the club meeting
you were supposed to join on Zoom.

You've lost track of time.

It seems everyone else has as well.

Only two people noticed,
and the meeting was rescheduled.

You've started setting alarms for meetings.

You need your concept of time back.

Your essay was due Sunday at 11:59,
so you planned on starting it Friday
and spending the weekend working on it.

Now it's 4:00 pm on Sunday and
the last day you remember is Wednesday.

You email your instructor to explain what happened and
to ask for an extension.

Kindly, he responds (five hours later)

that you can turn it in whenever you get the chance,
that he's been having difficulty keeping track of time, too.
Somehow, you finish it on time.
Some of your best work,
he writes in the comments.

~ ~ ~

At least you have so much free time,
you think,
trying to convince yourself that quarantine isn't all bad.
You have so much time to learn new skills.

You've picked up crocheting again—
something you tried once then got bored of.
It's almost summer,
but you're already prepared for next winter
with a scarf and matching mittens.

You've almost perfected your ability to give
stick and poke tattoos
(mostly to yourself).

You've read so many books.

Unaccustomed Earth

Fever Dream

The Worst Hard Time

(You have read more books in one week than you did all semester.
You no longer have a job to go to, and you finish your schoolwork
relatively quickly. You don't want to leave your room and see your
family, so you sit and read until the hunger gnawing at your stom-
ach drives you downstairs.)

You Shall Know Our Velocity

The Namesake

The Hungry Tide

You've tried so many recipes.
You've made so many friendship bracelets
and sent so many letters.
You've done so many things,

but they can't compare
to the thing you miss most:
seeing people.

You feel stir-crazy despite always keeping yourself busy. Between Zoom calls, essays, school readings, and the countless activities you use to kill time, you're never not doing something. Sometimes your mom will just sit on the couch and do nothing. You envy her. You wish you could be still with your mind, but you need a distraction from your thoughts.

Your therapist recommended that you use this time to practice mindfulness and come to terms with the things you think about most when you're alone. You had hoped that you might do this but putting the idea into action is just as scary as it was before the world closed. You close your eyes and try to focus on your breath, *just your breath*, but other thoughts slip through.

Breathe in.

You're worthless.

Breathe out.

Nobody cares about you.

Breathe in.

He hurt you because you deserve it.

Breathe out.

You were asking for it.

Breathe in.

You're a whore.

Breathe out.

You don't deserve to be loved.

Breathe in.

You're better off dead.

You give up meditating after two minutes. You know bottling up your thoughts and emotions isn't healthy, but the world hasn't been healthy in years. But neither have you.

You thought you might try to check off some items on your bucket list, but quickly realize most of the things you wanted to do before you died involved going places and seeing people. The other items take more time—getting your PhD, being published, learning a language. You're making plans for grad school, con-

stantly writing and occasionally submitting pieces, and taking a course in Italian. You're on the way, but these things don't happen overnight, especially when the world isn't running.

Occasionally, a wave of determination will sweep over you, and you'll finish all of your assignments for the week, but then you're depressed because your life has no structure and you have to come up with something to do. This sort of determination used to benefit you, but now it feels like it just puts you in a bad spot. You need to keep busy, to distract yourself, but you don't seem to be able to do so.

~ ~ ~

Nighttime is the hardest part.

You've put away all distractions by eleven
with the hopes of falling asleep tonight.

Your books are out of reach.

Your notifications are turned off.

Your blinds shut

so you can't stare at the stars

until the sun comes up anymore.

There is nothing that should keep you awake. Still, you don't fall asleep until three hours have passed, only to wake a couple hours before your alarm is set to go off.

Your mind doesn't shut off.

You can't stop thinking.

Sometimes your anxieties are valid, but one night you spend hours contemplating whether you've been folding your paper cranes correctly or if you're misremembering the steps. The next day, you look up a tutorial and decide you like your way better after all.

You have nightmares that your teeth are rotting and falling out. Careful not to wake up your family, you get up to check and spend two hours counting and recounting, just to be sure.

Thirty-two.

Your high school history teacher once told you that Aristotle

thought women have fewer teeth than men. You wonder why he thought that.

Thirty-two.

You check six different websites in case one of them is wrong and has tricked you into believing you have the correct number of teeth when you actually don't.

Thirty-two.

Eight incisors. *Good*. Eight premolars. *Good*. Twelve molars. *Not good*. You have to remind yourself that you had your wisdom teeth removed and that it was okay to do that. If you still had them you would have

Thirty-two teeth.

Twenty-eight is just as good.

You go back to your bed.

You don't know how you have been surviving on such little sleep.

~ ~ ~

Eventually,

you realize,

quarantine will be over.

You're not sure how you'll go back to normal.

Your life has changed so much so quickly.

You have not adapted well to these changes.

You're hoping you'll adapt better to the life you once knew.

However, deep down, you know you've always felt like this, at least to some extent.

The world may never go back to exactly the way it was before, but you know you'll stay the same.

Environment and structure can only change you so much.

Quarantine or not,

you haven't been okay in a long time.

Quarantine or not,

you're not sure how to get better.

CONTRIBUTORS

Joe Baumann's work has appeared in *Electric Literature*, *Barrelhouse*, *Zone 3*, and *Hawai'i Review*, among others. His collection *Ivory Children* (Red Bird Chapbooks) appeared in 2013. He was a Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction in 2019.

Guy R. Beining has published several poetry chapbooks. His work has appeared in *Iowa Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Fiction International*, and *South Carolina Review*, among others.

Patricia Corbus's poetry has appeared in many journals, including *Paris Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *New Letters*, and *The Madison Review*. Her most recent collection of poetry, *Finestra's Window* (2015), was the winner of the Off-the-Grid Poetry Prize.

Bill Glose has published poetry, essays, and fiction in *The Missouri Review*, *The Sun*, *The Florida Review*, and *The Writer*, among others. His honors include the F. Scott Fitzgerald Short Story Award and the Robert Bausch Fiction Award.

Christopher Heffernan's fiction and poetry have appeared in *The Believer*, *The South Dakota Review*, *Whiskey Island*, and *Tampa Review*, among others. His collection *Rag Water* (Fly by Night Press) appeared in 2015.

R. M. Kinder has published novels, poetry and short fiction collections. Kinder's work has appeared in such journals as *Atlanta Review*, *Appalachian Journal*, *New Letters*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. A forthcoming short fiction collection, *A Common Person and Other Stories* (University of Notre Dame), is the winner of the Richard Sullivan Short Fiction Award.

Janna Knittel received a 2019 Artist Initiative grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board. Her work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Split Rock Review*, and *Waters Deep: A Great Lakes Anthology*, among others. A chapbook, *Fish & Wild Life* (Finishing Line), appeared in 2018.

Angie Macri is an Arkansas Arts Council Fellow and teaches at Hendrix College. Her recent work has appeared in *Cherry Tree*, *NELLE*, and *Superstition Review*. Her *Underwater Panther* (Southeast Missouri State University) won the Cowls Poetry Book Prize.

Michael S. Moos, a previous *Cottonwood* contributor, has published four books of poetry, including *The Idea of the Garden* (Ashland Poetry), which was winner of the Richard Snyder Prize. His work has appeared recently in *Atlanta Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, and *Great River Review*, among others.

Morgan Nolte is a Junior majoring in English (Creative Writing), Philosophy, and Italian at the University of Kansas.

Donna Pucciani's most recent collection of poetry is *Edges* (Purple Flag Press). Her work has appeared in many journals, including *Poetry East*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Italian-Americana*, and *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Doug Ramspeck has published seven volumes of poetry and one short story collection. His fiction has appeared in such journals as *The Georgia Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Iowa Review*, and *The Southern Review*. He is a three-time recipient of an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award.

Jason Roberts, a former *Cottonwood* contributor, has work appearing in *Poem*, *Chiron Review*, and *Slipstream*, among others. He is a counselor for South Carolina's Department of Mental Health.

