cottonwood

Joseph Danieluk
H. E. Francis
Marlene Olin
Susan Rich
Jeff Tigchelaar

73
Spring 2017

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
Lawrence, Kansas
Cottonwood 73

ISSN 0147-149X

Cottonwood is a review of the literary arts published once yearly.

Two-issue subscriptions to *Cottonwood* are available for $15. Four-issue subscriptions are $28. If you wish to subscribe to *Cottonwood*, or to become a donor, patron, or benefactor, please write to: *Cottonwood*, Dept. of English, 1445 Jayhawk Blvd., University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 66045.

Cottonwood welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction. Please limit poetry submissions to five, prose submissions to one story or essay. Submissions will not be returned unless they are accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Simultaneous submissions are accepted, and submissions are read year-round. Please send submissions care of the appropriate editor to: *Cottonwood*; Room 400 Kansas Union; 1301 Jayhawk Blvd.; University of Kansas; Lawrence, KS, 66045.

Cottonwood receives support from the Department of English of the University of Kansas. Production is facilitated by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences of the University of Kansas.

Cottonwood is indexed by the *Humanities International Complete*, *Poem Finder*, and the *Index of American Periodical Verse*.

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Benjamin Obler

The Secretary of Groveland

Michelle McLellan had been a teacher, like her mother and aunt, waking before dawn nine months a year, staging energetic performances five periods a day, taking eighteen minutes for lunch, tutoring after school, grading papers in the evenings, attending staff meetings in the mornings, chaperoning weekend dances, leading parent-teacher conferences twice a semester, proctoring exams, subbing for sick colleagues—in short, giving herself entirely, having no life of her own, and walking baggy-eyed among that class of noble servants whose health deteriorates and marriages fail but who achieve some notoriety in the school district, and about whom, when they are dead, divorced or disappeared, people shrug their shoulders and say, "What can you do? It's a tough job." For eight years Michelle lived this way, teaching a private Catholic high school in the Groveland neighborhood of St. Paul, until exhaustion put her in the hospital. Then, on the advice of a friend, she resigned and found work as a secretary.

At Gruber & Sons, a medium-sized firm handling employment law cases, she managed the appointments of fourteen lawyers who called themselves "senior counsel"—also the office supplies, the front desk and phone, some typing, filing, and proofreading. This was nothing compared to caring for the futures of 125 teenagers of families who thought of themselves as very important. For sitting in an ergonomic chair with soft pads under her wrists they paid her twice as much money as what she had earned on her feet in front of a blackboard, plus 401-K matching. She was appreciated, respected, and enjoyed good health benefits. Her hours were capped. She could not believe her luck, wondered why she hadn't made the change years earlier, and the guilt was only occasional.

The people of Groveland, meanwhile, wondered how Ms. McLellan could just stop teaching when she was so good at it. They wondered if some scandal had precipitated the move, though

they couldn't imagine it in her case. She was seen around town, at cafes and the grocery store, and her former students often told her, in gushing tones awash in superlatives, how well she was remembered, the impression she had made, how they and their friends still quoted her lessons and catch phrases. "Lean into the discomfort!" for example. These moments made Michelle proud and nostalgic, but her life was her own now. Her ambition was to be not subsumed by her career—and this ambition was being fulfilled.

Though earning more, she continued to live thriftily. She sat on Craigslist furniture, and she didn't own a television. She walked for her errands, and the porch of her apartment was her only luxury. There she read books in a wicker chair overlooking the courtyard. At sunset, orange beams pierced through the poplars and cottonwoods. Time spread out before her like a sedated river. She heard things anew, like the excited twittering of birds at dusk. She smelled again—a sweet, yellow linden tree nearby. Even if someone from a company downtown, below the bluff and the cathedral at the end of her block, had come up and offered her a position with executive pay, if it meant a return to the overwhelming stress, she would have laughed the caller off her doorstep.

Living in a small apartment in Groveland was not a comedown. The house she had grown up in had been shabby, with winter ice on the windows and the shingles crumbling and streaked. Now Groveland was overrun with young professionals, the "housing stock" as they called it, all fixed up. She couldn't have bought back her family house on Goodrich Avenue if she'd wanted to. Luckily, she didn't want to. Having always earned a teacher's wage, having always lived alone (since college), having always committed only to her students, she was accustomed to small spaces. She never thought of housing as stock anyway. She put her stock in education. Children were a sound investment. Most of her friends had moved out of the city, to start families—they wouldn't have their offspring attending inner-city public schools. They couldn't understand how she could live in such a small place. It wasn't a complaint she heard frequently; Michelle kept friendships to a minimum.

The humbleness of her apartment was made up for by her formidable reputation in Groveland—both hers and her family's legacy as stalwart women educators. Her mother and her aunt both had taught at the same private Catholic academy that Michelle had left. Certain old shopkeepers in Groveland asked about her name, McLellan, whenever Michelle wrote a check.

Suitors—as they were called in some old books Michelle read—were many, now that she had a modicum of free time. There was one man she'd liked especially, and she'd started seeing him until she realized she was dumping all her energies into him rather than the classroom. He was too eager to marry anyway, and his dream of remodeling a big Victorian along Summit Avenue was well out of line with her plans to keep things modest. She kept him at arm's length for a while, then stopped answering his calls. She took walks at dusk, read novels that had come out during her teaching years, and experimented with ethnic cooking in ways she'd never had time to before. She was sometimes lonesome, sometimes consumed by worry about broad things beyond her control—war, crime, disease. But that was just an active mind running idle. She was greatly happy.

What didn't go away, however, were the faces. The children's faces. Their plucky optimism, their infectious energy. Even the hope hiding in the brooding, scowling, belligerent ones. She was at Nina's Cafe one afternoon, taking lunch away from the office, and she was brooding deeply on the great sense of value one has when young people turn to you for guidance, and how she missed it. Her eyes scanned a newspaper, but her mind was on the satisfaction of witnessing comprehension bubble, feeling a connection forged. Children that day appeared to her, even in daylight, like stars in a night sky. She watched two young girls order hot chocolate at the counter, one helping the other remove folded bills from a change purse. Outside the window, middle-schoolers passed in a gaggle with thumbs under their backpack straps. At a glance Michelle understood who was the most popular, who insecure, which one the troublemaker. She decided to find a mentoring agency and to sign up.

The next day Michelle called and an interview was scheduled, forms filled out, and a background check made. After several weeks she was cleared to participate in a program that paired needy youngsters from Frogtown and East St. Paul with mentors who could commit to seeing them once a week for a few hours.

"We're thrilled to have a woman such as yourself on board," the agent said. Michelle was copiously thanked even before she'd done a thing, which made her uncomfortable. Several candidates were presented to her, and, not wanting to be the selector in someone's fate, she let the agency choose.

They assigned her Donnelle, a 16-year-old who liked basketball and hip-hop. Michelle went home excited but with reservations. What would she do, take the girl to a Timberwolves game? How could she endorse paying sportsmen millions when the free pass given to student athletes at the academy had been so maddeningly counterproductive to her professional cause, and the battles with the coaches never-ending and always coming out in their favor? She couldn't picture it. Neither could she imagine holding her tongue about the misogyny and violence rappers rapped about—that seemed connected to the sport of basketball. She returned to the agency saying she'd better choose her own. That's how she found the listing for Nerese, a seven-year-old who loved to play checkers, swing on swings, bake cookies, and read! Nerese loved to read, her bio said.

The first meeting was set up, to be arbitrated by a social worker from the placement organization. Michelle went home gleeful and nervous, burbling with love already. She put Nerese's picture, in which she clutched a book to her chest and smiled, on her refrigerator.

At Kowalski's Market early the next week, while buying chocolate chips and a new baking sheet, she ran into Katy Sanford. Katy and Michelle had roomed together at college in Madison, though they both came from St. Paul—different high schools, but their families known to one another. They had found solace in each other among the college masses, shared an apartment, then fallen out of touch when Katy moved away with a boyfriend. Now they had not seen each other for . . . nine years, they calculated.

They gasped and exclaimed and clutched each other's arms, awed at what they were seeing.

Katy looked different. She was thinner than ever. Her face, once delicate and pale, now looked orange and synthetic. She didn't seem to be ailing though—she spoke with animation and energy. "It's so great to see you!" she said. Yet there was something pinched and twitchy about her. A stiff formality gripped her, as if her natural movements were constrained.

And she smelled different. Standing in the baking aisle, a musky and expensive-smelling perfume came off her. Katy used to complain, Michelle remembered, of women who bathed in perfume. The change perplexed Michelle. She could still see Katy in a flower-print dress, her feet dirty from shuffling around shoeless in their dingy two-bedroom up on the table as she clipped her toenails, putting off doing a paper for Professor Namath. Namath was a smarmy, feather-haired prof who had invited his students to call him Trevor, spawning Katy's phrase, *Never, Trevor!* Katy had been so assured then. Michelle had envied her confidence. Now when Katy spoke, her words came out reedy and phrased like a question.

Michelle asked if Katy lived in Groveland, realizing they might be neighbors.

"I live in Plymouth?" Katy said.

"New Hampshire!" Michelle didn't know the names of Minneapolis' far-reaching western suburbs. She had no business out there among the General Mills, Target, Cargill, and Best Buy executives.

Katy said no, she was in town visiting friends. "Oh, God!" she added. "And I've got two kids! Matthew and Emily. Matthew's six, Emily's four. They're starting school—that's why we moved."

"Oh?"

But Katy had to run. Her husband was waiting in the car. The women exchanged phone numbers and promised to get together soon. "You'll have to come see my house," Katy said, turning back at the end of the aisle. She waved one last time and disappeared, leaving Michelle with no chance to reply.

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In Kids' Corner of the Groveland Public Library, Michelle and Nerese beamed at each other as if they had both finally found the person they'd been looking for without knowing who it was. It was their first meeting. Michelle sat on a tiny stool in the carpeted reading area, the agency representative at her side. Nerese was scrawny, with beautiful braided black hair, large brown eyes, and a broad smile.

After some conversation, the agent said, "Well, you two seem like two peas in a pod," and left them. They gathered books and walked out of the library, Nerese's thin arms, with their curious little pink scars, piled high with hardcover storybooks such as *Charlotte's Web*, and *A Child's First Visual Dictionary.*

"What's your favorite?" Michelle asked.

"All of them!" Nerese said.

They became fast friends.

Michelle showed Nerese around her apartment—the girl had never been in one like it before, on an upstairs floor. They set about making cookies. Nerese insisted on being the one to get the ingredients out, measure the flour, and turn the oven dial. Michelle made Nerese the topic of conversation—she was the one who needed love and attention. Nerese answered Michelle's questions with enthusiasm, until a point when she became quiet and uneasy in some way. Perhaps she was embarrassed about her family, or that she'd never used a computer, or about the toys she didn't have. But following Michelle's lead, she came back around, and after successfully cracking an egg and being commended for it, she said, "Michelle, I love you."

Michelle's heart sank. The declaration was premature, obviously. Michelle put her hand on Nerese's shoulder but quickly moved on. She did not dwell. "We're going to have a lot of fun getting to know each other. Oh, hey, I know." Looking down at Nerese, she suddenly remembered a little wooden stepstool that used to be her grandfather's—it had always been around, just sitting in a closet. She fetched it, and Nerese stood on it to reach the mixing bowls.

Nerese's eyes grew wide. "I'm as big as you now!" she exclaimed, though she only reached Michelle's waist.

The little stool suddenly seemed like an object of destiny. “That’s amazing!” Michelle said. “What a difference a few inches makes, huh?”

Nerese was not difficult, thankfully, though she could have been, with her father “out of the picture” as the agency euphemized, and being raised by her grandmother, a beer-drinking transplant from Alabama, and her mother, Tonya, who had a two-year-old boy by another man. Nerese’s 15-year-old aunt, the grandmother’s second daughter, also lived with them, and they were all supported somehow by Tonya, who worked evenings at a bank’s call center.

Surely Nerese didn’t comprehend all this for what it was, though—it was just her life. It was just the norm. She was well-mannered, well-spoken, and her mind seemed uncorrupted. She did slip sometimes amid the “yes, pleases” and the “no, thank you’s” into slang, saying “ain’t” and “axed” and “nuh-uh.” But after doing this she grew timid and more polite. Nerese’s two vocabularies seemed to express a profound duality in the girl, but Michelle didn’t say that one was more acceptable than the other. To both, she made a measured reaction of acceptance.

Every Saturday morning, Michelle picked up Nerese on her blighted block in East St. Paul, with its pools of broken glass on the road and signposts that had been crashed into. They went to Michelle’s apartment, started a batch of cookies, and read books on the porch while the cookies baked—Nerese reading to Michelle, Michelle reading to Nerese, then each reading on her own. Nerese’s attention span could be short. Sometimes they got out paper and colored pencils, or walked to the park and played on the swings. Other times, they went to the Children’s Museum or the Mall of America, neither of which Nerese liked much. She didn’t seem to mind being seen holding hands with a white lady, but her whole demeanor sank amid crowds, especially crowds of wealthier kids.

A seven-year-old is much different than a high-schooler, but Michelle’s plan was a success. In giving, she felt connected again to a vital part of herself. However, all was not effort and payoff. Nerese’s breath stank—she had rotting teeth, drank too much

soda, didn't brush regularly. Whether or not Nerese and her family had health insurance, Michelle didn't dare to ask. Her dad was in jail, Nerese announced once, though she didn't know what for or where or for how long. Nerese's grandmother, when Michelle stepped into the rented house on Saturdays, was always holding a can of Pabst, even in the early afternoon; and two-year-old Damone was often parked in front of the TV—rap music rattling the speaker, videos of rappers posturing beside gyrating women in bikinis.

Michelle's generalized worries had a specific outlet now, like a channel dug to standing water. She would buy Nerese a toothbrush and keep it at the apartment. Maybe she could see about getting her to the dentist. Court records about her father could probably be found, if her mother wasn't going to be forthcoming. She wondered if his crime had been explained to the child, some moral perspective given. And certainly Nerese should be in an advanced reading group; in skill, she really was about two grades ahead. Michelle could talk to the school about it. She would just have to be careful not to do like the agency had warned and overstep her bounds.

Five weeks of phone tag passed before Michelle and Katy found an agreeable date. "I'd love to have you out to the house," Katy said on the phone.

"Sure," Michelle said, though she had imagined them going to The Taverna or another of their old Groveland haunts. To gather in the old neighborhood seemed like the natural choice. But a house holds primacy over an apartment, and Katy seemed very eager for Michelle to see her home.

She went on a Sunday driving to Minneapolis and beyond, west on the freeway for what seemed like an hour. Off Hopkins Crossroad, she wound among pillared nouveau-Craftsmans, reading one after another 5-digit number on beige siding. The neighborhood—it felt to Michelle homogenous, like a compound—was new and barren. Elm saplings poked up in beds of cedar mulch, tied to the ground by ropes and stakes, as if they might be stolen.

In the foyer, Katy looked just as radioactive as she had in the grocery store. Her hair reflected a new tint of frost, and she seemed more at ease in her own house. “Come on in. Meet my kids,” she said cheerfully. Behind Katy, Michelle saw Matthew, the six-year-old, on the floor of a sunken living room beside a Hot Wheels parking ramp. “Matthew, come meet Mommy’s friend,” Katy called. The boy continued to work with the big plastic play set. “Matthew, come here please,” Katy said. The boy made no change. “I’m sorry,” Katy said. “He’s really strong-willed. He loves that toy.” When introduced, four-year-old Emily clung to her mother’s leg like a koala on a branch, suspicious eyes shielded by a heavy brow. Michelle could not coax a smile from her.

The women went to the kitchen, each making apologies about the busy schedules that had kept them from seeing each other sooner. Only moments passed before a chilling feline growl tore through the room. “Oh!” Michelle gasped, turning about, looking for the source. The hair on her arms stood up.

“Emily!” Katy said, striding to the living room. She removed Emily from the proximity of a cat standing on the couch arching its back. “Honey, don’t do that, please. You know better.” Katy brought the child to the kitchen and gave her a Fruit Roll-Up.

“Sometimes I have to divert her,” Katy explained.

The women took glasses of iced tea, and Emily, to the patio outdoors.

While the women chatted Emily ate her snack, then played with a watering can for a minute, but soon came around and bit her mother on the hand. Katy scolded her. She took the girl on her lap. “Oh, sweetie, don’t be sad. Mommy’s sad that you’re sad.” The girl quieted, allowing the women to converse, though Michelle continued to observe the glowing hatred in the child’s eyes. Shortly, Matthew appeared at the glass door inside the house, his wide-open mouth smeared against it. His pink gums showed and he pressed and waggled his tongue. Katy tilted her head disapprovingly and glowered at him. Matthew went on mashing his lips and tongue around, then cackled with delight, beholding the grand smudge he’d made.

"Boys," Katy groaned. Michelle's neck and ears grew warm. She shifted in her seat. She forced a smile at Katy, who continued with what she had been talking about. But now Michelle was distracted. She wondered what had happened to her formerly assiduous and clear-eyed friend. She questioned her own motivation for reconnecting with this woman from her past. It had been so long ago. A lot had changed. But she quickly righted her mind. It was her manner not to judge too soon. She could suffer a little distastefulness while awaiting encouraging signs. There was likely another side of the coin—there always was. In disputes among students, or between students and coaches, or between parents and students, there were always two sides of the story. Neither was the absolute truth. This was a lesson she had taken pains to impart to her students back when she was a teacher, not a secretary. Equanimity had served Michelle well in her career and in her life.

Filling the gap in their shared past, Michelle believed, would surely round out the picture and bring a sense of harmony between her and her old friend. At Katy's prompting, Michelle described her life since college, the years which she regarded with such clear delineation, like blocks of time: a year in Madison, waitressing for money to live on, figuring things out; the murderous months living with her mother back in Groveland while settling in at the academy, which they referred to by its acronym; the eight years teaching; the year since then as a secretary. It was all utterly clear cut.

"What have you been doing?" Michelle said, ignoring Emily's still-flickering anger, which she felt was resentment of her presence. But Katy's reply was nothing like she'd anticipated. It was scattered, imprecise, and lacking a thread of self-awareness. Or else it was greatly filtered. She seemed confused by recalling events and tying them together.

"Well, I didn't stay in Madison, obviously. Josh and I split up. I came back here, and that was . . . like, nehhh." Katy made a "so-so" sound. "It didn't take long before I met Paul. Then we got married. That was seven years ago. God, can that be right? You know, he's gone from marketing at General Mills to where

he is now, Carlson Companies. He likes it there. It's really great for him. And then Emily came and we had to figure out Matthew's school situation, so we put the house on the market."

The events seemed connected only by happenstance. What they all had in common was not that they had happened but that Katy had smeared them with a kind of truth, like joint compound.

Michelle asked if Katy hadn't wanted to send her children to school in Groveland.

"Oh, Lord no! Get real."

"Hmm."

"God, college was so long ago, but *not.* You know? It's like it's right there."

"Yeah," Michelle agreed, falsely.

"It was such a crazy time!"

"It was?"

"Yes! God!"

"Katy, we were tame. We went to one kegger. All we did was study."

"But the way we lived. That little apartment. The squalor. We had no money . . . Say, I haven't shown you around the house! You're going to love it. Come on. Matthew, watch Emily!"

It was a house for giants. Michelle felt shrunken. The doorways were wider, the windows taller, the ceilings higher, the couches puffier, even the handrails thicker. Everywhere one was surrounded by quantities of empty space. Several rooms were furnished but looked unused. Under the frightening sterility, however, Michelle perceived the allure—an anonymity, an undemanding plainness, like a hotel. There was comfort in that. Standing on the thick carpet, she felt as if she was atop a bed, like she could throw herself to the ground and get up unharmed.

They went out the lower level into a verdant backyard. There Matthew mounted a toy SUV with a whining electric motor. He drove around crashing into his other toys, for some reason narrating his exploits aloud like a play-by-play announcer: "The driver crashes with the dump truck! He cannot get away!"

His sister followed after him, imploring, “Stop! Matthew, stop!”

Stop driving, stop crashing, or stop narrating? Michelle didn’t understand.

The women stood and chatted, Katy pointing to the neighboring houses. “Over there is Roger and Anne, they’re great. In the blue house is Linda and Gary, they’re great. And Brian and Stephanie, they’re great.”

Katy suggested a walk, but Michelle said she had to go. She drove home in silence, feeling like she’d visited another planet. After a long silent drive back to Groveland, she stepped into her apartment and dropped her keys in the dish with a sigh. At first her wood floors and antique fixtures looked old; the small rooms felt cramped. But it wore off. She went to the porch, sank into the wicker chair, and held a book in her lap a while before opening it. She watched a high bough swaying, and the cottonwood fluff, like snow, descending. In the distance, she heard a rake scratching the ground. She smelled burning leaves.

Michelle tried to get Nerese’s family to take action on Nerese’s teeth. She explained that there was a public assistance program to pay for dental care. Tonya said she would think about it. It looked superficially like they had discussed the issue, but in fact a wedge had been driven. Tonya must have felt like she was being accused of being a bad mother, because shortly after she retaliated: the following Saturday Tonya “forgot” about Michelle coming, and when she arrived, Nerese was away at her grandmother’s for a sleepover. Tonya made no apology.

From there, it worsened. Their phone was shut off once, Michelle wasn’t able to reach them, and Tonya made no effort to keep in contact. The family had no problem reaching her, though, when needing money: in November, the grandmother called asking for help to pay the electricity. Foolishly, Michelle gave over $160 with a sinking feeling that she was crossing the line. Tonya never answered back about the dentist. What she talked about most now was her wish that Damone had a mentor too. This idea

she always left hanging, as if Michelle should snatch it up and make it happen.

The money was not repaid, but that was okay. It was a pittance on Michelle's secretarial salary. More important was the unfortunate fact that it changed the dynamic. Michelle made all the effort, and Nerese's family made none. Sure, Tonya told Michelle, "Nerese is always talking about you. Michelle this, Michelle that. Saturday morning, she's up at seven. I said, 'Child, she ain't gonna be here till noon!'"

But the family also teased Nerese about her special friend, shamed her for needing love. When Michelle came in the doorway, dropping Nerese off, they said, "What books did ya'll get?" eyeing Nerese's new armful. They sneered as if it was a rat she'd brought in the house. All Michelle could do was tell herself that Nerese gained from the experience, but once again, it was her giving everything, swimming upstream, wading against the current, throwing her weight into it.

These ups and downs endured for a whole season. Dealings with the family were fraught with ambiguity and tensions, little power plays, and passive maneuvers. Nerese's sociability improved. She ate carrots and could do handstands and cartwheels, and there was trust—but always some new problem arose stemming from the household. Most appalling was how Tonya saw no need for Nerese to join an advanced reading group, but had signed her up for dance lessons for her to learn to "shake her booty." Nevertheless, Michelle gamely persisted. She drove through the snow to pick up Nerese, looked up new cookie recipes for them to try, and paid the library fines when Nerese's books were lost or Damone trashed them.

Now that she was a secretary, she had an abundance of energy for these hassles. It was a fraction of the hardship she had endured and the will she had summoned daily to corral the attentions of 25 students at any one time.

Michelle and Katy got together for coffee every other month. It was clear they were quite different now than they'd been back

at UW, and it saddened Michelle they wouldn't be—couldn't be—as close again. But it wasn't only that. Frankly, seeing Katy was more exhausting than seeing Nerese. Even when Katy drove to Groveland and they walked to Nina's Cafe, their visit was dominated by Katy's attention to Matthew and Emily, trying to keep them fed, happy, clean and quiet. Conversation was like reporting from the streets of Baghdad—the machine-gun fire of Katy's corrective asides interrupting every other sentence. Matthew, could you not stand on the chair, please? Emily, Mommy doesn't want you to lick that.

But it wasn't only unruliness. A curious sense of enclosure surrounded Katy and her brood. It was like the children didn't see other adults. When the cafe staffperson brought the booster chair towards them—or when Michelle brought it herself—they acted aloof, even spiteful. Michelle supposed that, as a friend of their mother, whom they abused, she garnered no respect herself. Environments fared no better. The solemnity of Nina's—full of studying students, writers, and readers—didn't seem to register in the children's minds as something to respect. Territories were an extension of a world that was theirs to discover, ravage, and disown. Sadly, Katy resided within a similar bubble. Whenever they met, in an hour or two they'd pick up and leave Groveland, and Michelle was left to believe that this chilliness was necessary for Katy to stay close to her beloved children, to keep them understood and safe. It was as a shield.

One Saturday, sitting with Katy on the settee at Nina's, Michelle tried to salvage a friendly chat, one that rewarded the distance Katy had come, by asking about the kids. Katy in her usual manner said, "The kids are doing great! Matthew really likes school, and he's getting good reports. He's got a best buddy now, his friend Jonah. He's sweet. They had their first sleepover. Emily is doing great at TutorTots. She got a prize on Friday for good behavior. And she loves Ms. Nelson—don't you, honey?" Michelle couldn't reconcile these tales of agreeable progress with what she saw before her: the two children squirming across the furniture, uninterested in the cafe's children's magazines, doing violence to each other, their moods flashing from rage to despair to abjection.

There was a lot Michelle could tolerate, but she would not be a repository for self-serving gloss. Feeling deceived, made a dupe, Michelle vowed to reciprocate the veiled selectiveness of truth.

"How are you?" Katy asked. "How are things with Nerese?"

"They're great," Michelle said, disappointed in this as a lie. Things *were* great. Though not great the way Katy meant great. There were challenges with Nerese, but challenges were to be expected. Between Nerese and herself tenderness and friendship prevailed. "Nerese told me she wants to be a teacher when she grows up." This was true, and strangely, Michelle was annoyed that she couldn't dissemble in return.

"Really? That's so sweet. Does she know you're not a teacher anymore?"

"Yes."

"How old is she again?"

"Eight now. She was seven when I started seeing her."

"Hmm. I thought she was six."

"Matthew is six, not Nerese."

"It's weird though, you know—eight, and you never had to do diapers, teething, potty training."

"She's not my child, Katy." Michelle sensed, as she had at other times, that her friend felt as though Michelle had jumped ahead in line, unfairly bypassing motherly hardships—not to mention labor and breastfeeding.

"You know what I mean. So but it's good? It's going great?"

"Yeah, great. We have fun. She loves to bake. We've done every kind of cookie there is. It's probably time to move up to bread or cakes. We hang out at my place, we read, we do art projects."

"Don't you take her anywhere? She must get bored. Out by us, there's this IMax Theatre. My kids love it. You lie down under the screen, it surrounds you, it's 3-D."

"Nerese actually doesn't like movies. The television is always on at her house, and it bothers her. Anyway, we've gone to Como Zoo." That was a lie, they hadn't gone. They did go to the Raptor Center once, an avian rehab facility at the university. But Nerese had been frightened of the falcons and eagles.

"IMax isn't TV. It's better than TV. She'd love it!"

"She's a bit shy at new places."

"Oh, it's nothing. There's other kids there. She could make friends."

Michelle's blood pressure rose. "It really isn't her *thing*."

"All the more reason. Kids have to be challenged."

This was a ludicrous directive coming from Katy. Michelle took a deep breath and drank her tea. She was exhausted with competition already, though glimpsing how it came about was edifying. It appeared to her as a natural outcropping of duplicity. When you can say anything you want, claim any circumstance, the stakes easily get raised. But she felt unmoored, adrift in social pretension, and it made her nauseous.

Now an awkward silence bloomed between the women, shameful to Michelle, considering what they'd once been—educated women of integrity, feminists, aspiring careerists. Matthew and Emily, standing beside the coffee table, began to fuss. Matthew had hold of Emily's wrist, twisting it. Emily held something out of his reach. Michelle excused herself to use the restroom. When she came out, Katy and Matthew were squabbling over the boy's windbreaker hood. This niggling and suffering seemed their routine interchange—a baseline connection of controlling care and bitter helplessness. Michelle went to the cafe counter and stared into the case of scones and muffins. She was not hungry. She pondered whether she would see Katy again. She admonished herself to pity her friend and not look down on her. But it was hard.

Then a voice behind her spoke: "Ms. McLellan!"

Michelle immediately recognized a former student, Natalie Mahoney, class of '02. Not a great student, as Michelle remembered, but on the plus side of the divide. The girl had pushed herself, shown integrity, not rebelled or opted out. She had grown—the baby fat fallen away, taller.

"Oh my God!" the young woman said with wide eyes. "Hi!"

"Natalie, hi! How are you?"

"You remember my name!"

"Of course."

"You're so amazing. You must know a thousand names and faces."

"Oh, teachers don't forget," Michelle said, smiling now.

"Gosh, how are you? This is my friend Greta." Natalie indicated the young woman beside her.

"Hi," Greta said from behind snaky bangs and bright orange eyeglasses.

"How are you?" Natalie continued. She asked about the academy. "I heard Mr. Dupree retired."

"I don't know about that," said Michelle, with a hint of dispassion. She paused. "I left."

"What? No! Ms. McLellan!"

"Yeah. I made a career change."

"How could you? You were, like, the best teacher ever! Greta, tell her—I'm always talking about Ms. McLellan."

"She is, for sure!" Greta said.

"Lean into the discomfort," Natalie said.

"Lean into the discomfort. That's right," Michelle said, a convulsive breathy laugh passing through her. She had forgotten about this mantra she'd made up for Composition, to get kids over the hump of composing a thesis. She had forgotten about it, but had continued to live by it.

"Man, I can't believe it. What are you doing now?"

"*Now* . . ." Michelle said, "I work at a law firm." She was not able to keep embarrassment from rising up—her neck felt splotchy.

"A law firm?" Natalie looked stunned.

"Mmm-hmm." Parsing this was too much to deal with today, being already in the thick of it with Katy and her kids. She dissembled. "It's a managerial position. Downtown." As if that added prestige.

I'm a secretary now, she heard in her head. Her mind worked that way, always coughing up the truth anyway.

"Wow," Natalie said, with dimmed spirits. She looked like she'd just learned her dog had been hit by a car. "That's a tragedy. You're wasting your talent."

"You're sweet. But it was taking a toll." Michelle became aware of Katy looking in her direction, searching for her. Michelle looked over to Katy, who crouched beside Matthew, twisting

around. Their eyes met. A tight smile sprang to Katy's face, like a cable being tensioned. She made a doddering kind of nod and turned away. Michelle could see her conflict, her recognition that Michelle was speaking to Groveland locals, that she was known here, that Groveland was still her neighborhood. She was integrated, a fixture, and Katy was not. Katy had ejected. It wasn't her place anymore. Michelle perceived this in an instant, as she had perceived the social dynamics of the passing middle-schoolers outside a window. Katy was envious, regretful, and wanted to listen in and feel a part vicariously.

"I'm sorry," Michelle said to Natalie, facing her again. She touched the girl's forearm. "What about you?"

"Gosh, everything's happening right now. I just got engaged, like, what was it—" She turned to Greta. "Three days ago?"

"Two," Greta said.

"Two, I guess. Everything's kind of a whirl right now."

"That's great!" Michelle said. "Congratulations."

"He just got hired—Tim just got hired—at General Mills."

"Tim Sanderson!"

"No, no! Tim DeVorst. He didn't go to Groveland. We met at college. Tim Sanderson!" Natalie scoffed.

"Sorry. It's been a long time. Hey, do you live around here?" Michelle realized that she and the newlyweds might be neighbors.

"Actually, we're closing on a house next week. I'm taking Greta there now to see it. We're just getting coffee—it's a long drive. It's out in Orono."

"Orono . . . South?" Michelle hesitantly ventured.

"No, it's like out past Maple Grove. You get on 94 and go west, and then, like . . ." She turned to Greta. "Then what do we do?"

"I don't know. It's your house!" Greta said, laughing.

"I can't think right now!" Natalie laughed and lurched forward like an ostrich, as if to describe the absurdity of not knowing one's own home. Michelle recognized the girl's mannerism from eight years ago. Strange how it persisted. "It's, like, 94 west," Natalie staggered on. "Then um . . ."

Michelle held her eyes patiently, like a good teacher. Natalie implored her friend to help.

"Don't look at me!" Greta said, blushing, like young people do when their friends are on the spot and screw up.

A screech rang out in the room—Emily. Behind the young women, Michelle saw Katy stand, hoist a bag strap over her shoulder, and grab Emily's hand. She made an exasperated face, and an apologetic gesture toward the door.

"I guess we just keep going," Natalie said. "And going and going and going!"

Michelle faced Natalie with an open countenance, her wide inquisitive eyes waiting to understand where the women would go.

Joseph Danieluk

Bullheading

Donny Ducharme was never the same after the night we saw his mother peeing in the Quinebaug River. That afternoon, we were in Donny's unaired basement looking for a burlap bag. Donny said, "Burlap is best because it's strong and still lets the blood and stink out. Tonight, you'll be catching the biggest bullheads in eastern Connecticut."

Donny was seventeen, two years older than me, and the only true friend I had in high school. He had lime-green eyes and black hair combed back wetly. A pencil-thick vein protruded along each bicep and a wooden ankh hung from the chain around his neck. He stopped at a workbench and shifted a cardboard box filled with chainsaw parts. "Here." He held up a rolled bag and let it unfurl. He stepped on a bottom corner and yanked up. "Mildewy, but still strong."

A door above us opened and a wan light cast shadows on a set of stairs. "Donny, come up here, I need to talk to you."

Donny draped the bag over his shoulder. "Mother hen calls."

We went up to the kitchen where Donny's mother stood at the counter buttering slices of white bread. "Donny, how many times have I told you, I don't want any of that grody stuff brought up from the cellar. Lord knows what kind of creatures are multiplying down there."

Donny went to the far end of the kitchen and tossed the bag out a screen door. He came back and rolled his eyes before he sat at one end of the table.

Donny's mother wore snug jeans with fancy gold stitching on the rear pockets. She turned to me. "Chris, how are you, your family? I heard your mother hurt her leg."

I sat at the other end of the table. "Her knee, the lateral collateral ligament. A dog chased her and she fell on the sidewalk. She's had therapy and a cortisone shot so she's all right now."

"Send her my best. And look at you, you've grown as fast as a summer corn stalk. Not to mention those big brown eyes like your father. Even his butternut hair."

I tried not to blush but it was hopeless.

"Mom, what did you want anyway? Chris and I have things to do."

She rested the tip of her knife on a stick of butter. "Some bad news. I have a cousin, Trish, who just passed away in Albany. My Aunt Amelia said the death took place under odd circumstances. She didn't want to go into details over the phone, but I said I would go up and do anything I could do."

Donny tipped back in his chair. "I never heard you talk about any relatives in Albany."

"Some years ago, my aunt and Trish lived in East Hartford. It came to light that a pervy brother-in-law couldn't keep his paws off of the girl. The police got involved, and before any dirt leaked out, Amelia ran off with her daughter in tow."

Donny's mother's long hair was braided and showed all the tones of a browned biscuit. Her pumpkin-colored toenails stuck out of open-toed sandals and she wore dangling amethyst earrings. "I promised Auntie I would leave as soon as possible so now I've got to get the lead out and gather my things for the trip. There's pork chops and cube steak in the freezer and I left forty-five dollars under the lining in the silverware drawer. For emergencies."

She brought a plateful of the bread to the table. Donny took a slice, rolled it into a ball, then took a bite. "Does Dad know about all of this?"

"He does. I called him at the plant, he won't be home until midnight. He's working a double all week so he can buy a smoker. That's some kind of metal box you cook meat or fish with a wood fire down below. My front tires are going bald, and he's looking to spend good money on some useless man-toy."

I couldn't stop admiring her face. Her eyes were slightly hooded and the eyebrows tweezed into perfect arcs.

"Chris and I are going fishing later, so if you call no one will be home."

"I trust you boys, totally. Make sure you call Chris's mom to tell her your plans."

"We already did," Donny said.

"I'll be gone two, three days, hard to say."

"Take as long as you want," Donny said. He popped the rest of the bread into his mouth.

In order to get to the slaughterhouse for our bait, we needed a vehicle, and Donny's cousin, Buster, had told Danny he could use his pickup any time he needed it. Buster's house was three miles away so we set out on a shortcut that Donny knew. We followed the shore of Aspinook Pond, traversed a hayfield, then turned into a hardwood forest with tumbledown stone walls and ferns growing along a rill at the bottom of a dark ravine. The deer flies were relentless; they bit me between the shoulder blades and the back of my neck. I struggled to keep up with Donny, and by the time we reached Buster's the bramble scratches on my hands and wrists stung with sweat.

Buster's house was rundown with weeds growing out of the gutters and sided with old asbestos shingles. A moldy Big Wheel sat on the front lawn, and a Dodge Ram pickup was parked in the rutted driveway. Donny threw the burlap bag he had carried into the bed of the truck. He pointed to a doorless garage off to one side. "See that far wall back there? That's where Buster keeps his fishing stuff, he won't mind if we borrow it. Grab two poles and a tackle box."

I went to retrieve the items then placed them over the bag.

The front door suddenly swung open and a heavyset woman stepped onto a planked porch. "Who's over there? This is a private residence."

Donny moved forward. "It's me, Donny Ducharme. I helped Buster do a valve job on this truck last winter. Almost froze my fingers off."

"That doesn't concern me." The woman wore a sleeveless burgundy top with cocoa-colored shorts. A crescent of white fat hung over her waistband and a plastic headband pulled her hair back tight.

Donny said, “It’s Lorraine, right? We’re here to borrow Buster’s truck. He said I could take it any time in lieu of payment for the mechanical help I gave him.”

“I don’t know anything about that. Who’s that kid with you?”

“That’s my friend, Chris. You don’t have to worry about him.”

Lorraine looked out at the road then back at us. “I don’t know if Buster’s even kept up the insurance on that crummy thing.”

“We’re only going to Jewett City,” Donny said, “not far.”

“Still, you could crack up that truck ten feet down the road, and without insurance my old man and I could get sued for everything.”

“I’m hearing you, Lorraine, I really am.”

“You two stay put. I’m calling Buster at the plant.”

“That’ll make both of us feel better,” Donny said. Lorraine went back into the house and Donny said, “Take that pitchfork leaning against the garage. It could come in handy.”

I went for the tool and put it in the back of the truck.

“We’ve got to hustle now,” Donny said. “We’ll push this beast out to the road before Lorraine catches on.” He opened the driver’s side door and took a set of keys from the visor. “You clamp onto the front bumper and I’ll shoulder the back of the door frame and steer.”

We rocked the truck until the tires broke free then guided it out onto the road. Donny cut the wheel to get us pointed downhill and we jumped into the truck. After coasting a ways, Donny turned the key and the engine started with a shudder. In no time we were barreling down the road and I watched the sunlight flash between the trees. Donny raised a fist and said, “We are *mo*bile my friend.”

I was certain that Lorraine was already dialing up the cops.

We pulled off a county road and followed an abandoned logging trail until we could see the slaughterhouse up ahead. Donny shut off the engine and we rolled through brush until we were within ten feet of a gravel parking lot. The building was made of cinder blocks with a hand-painted sign on the wall facing us.

The words read: THURSTON'S MEAT MARKET/meats cut to SPECS. Just past the lot was a white farmhouse with chickens pecking at a patchy lawn.

Donny said, "Check out that small dumpster behind the building. That's where they hold the guts until they dump them into a pit back in the woods. My brother worked here the summer before he joined the Marines. He told me the whole procedure."

A breeze lifted and an awful stench drifted our way. "Anyone live in that house?"

"Some crusty Yankee named Hiram something. He invited my brother in once and showed him the deer rifle he keeps right inside the front door. He said he'd shoot coyotes or trespassers, didn't matter to him."

"Thanks for sharing that."

We got out and took the bag and pitchfork and ran to the back of the building. Donny used the fork to stir the contents of the dumpster. "Got some bones, entrails, hide—who knows what else."

We had raised a swarm of flies and they buzzed dopily over our heads. The odor from the dumpster made me gag, reminding me of the time I almost choked on a piece of steak gristle.

"Look at this," Donny said, spearing something with a tine. He lifted a bloody, dripping mass. "Seems to be a lung, the shape, the texture. Open the bag." He flicked his wrist and the organ slipped free. "Tonight, my man, the bullheads feast on filet of lung."

The Quinebaug River was murky brown, with a meandering current dimpled with small eddies. On its banks were red and white oaks, swamp maples, sassafras bushes, staghorn sumac and, beyond, cornfields high with fluttering, sunlit growth. Donny turned off the dirt road and drove through a clearing in the woods before parking behind a dilapidated fieldstone foundation. We left the truck and Donny found a loose stone and dropped it into the bag for weight. I took the fishing gear and we walked toward the river.

A plate girder bridge spanned the water, and we made our way along the railroad tracks until we reached the midway point.

We climbed below the tracks and came to stand on the ledge of a stone center support. Donny tipped the bag until the lung slid out between our feet. He cut off a piece with his jackknife then dropped the remainder into the bag. “Remember where this lands now, otherwise you’ll be getting snagged up all night.” He knotted the top of the bag and threw it twenty feet downriver. The material held an air bubble for a moment then the whole thing sank. “The stink bomb lure for dinner has now been set.”

We had time before dark so we decided to cast out for garbage fish. It wasn’t long before Donny hooked a big sucker. He horsed it in then flipped it up to where we stood. He took the hook out and held the fish up for me to see. “Notice that round, rubbery mouth, the way it just keeps sucking away?” He moved the fish to my crotch. “That action would get you off in a minute.”

I slapped the sucker from his hand and sent it flying in a high arc before it smacked flatly against the water. “You’re a regular riot, you know?”

Right after dark the bullheads began to slam our bait. A polished-ivory moon rose over the treeline and tinted the water with a nickel sheen. Bullfrogs jarumphed along the shore. Crickets rubbed their legs together to send out their tiny screeches; an owl hooted downriver. I felt inordinately happy to be out in this August night with Donny. I thought of how later on he would sneak two of his father’s beers and we’d sit on the back porch and wait for the cool, after-midnight air to roll in.

But then I caught something out the corner of my eye. A car came toward us along the road that Donny and I had taken. I nudged him with an elbow. “Company.”

The car made a bouncing, shock-worn stop atop the opposite bank and the engine went quiet. I could see the orange coals of two cigarettes rise and fall in the front seat. A man said something in a low voice and a woman laughed. Her voice sounded familiar.

After a time the two of them got out and walked to the back of the car. The man opened the trunk and under the moonlight I could see that he was a hulking figure with shoulders oddly turned inward, as if to protect his vitals. The woman wore form-fitting

clothes and stood with a hand on her hip. The man said, “I’ve got the poles and cooler, you take the nightcrawlers and lantern.”

“If one of those slimy slugs crawls out of the can, I will freak.”

“Now, darling, you promised you’d try to get into the spirits of things.”

They made their way down the bank and stepped onto a small sandy area at the water’s edge. The man lowered his things and walked to a nearby bush. He took a knife from a sheath on his belt and cut off two branches. After lighting the lantern, he whittled each branch, a vee at one end and a point at the other. “To hold our poles,” he said. He pushed the pointed ends into the sand and baited the hooks. They each cast out.

We were hidden under the shadow of the bridge. Donny whispered, “Reel in slow and quiet, we don’t want to get tangled with their lines.”

Across the river the woman said, “Any of that wine left?”

The man opened the cooler and took out a tall, slender bottle. “More than half. Take what you want, I’m switching to beer. Too much wine gives me a headache.”

He handed her the bottle and she took a long drink. “I’ve probably had enough, but this tastes better as you go along. Not all sugary.”

“You’re holding thirty dollars there.”

They watched their rod tips for awhile then the woman said, “Walter, I have to pee.”

So, Walter.

He looked over. “And?”

“I can go behind the car, but you have to be a lookout.”

Walter picked up his pole. “I think I just had a bite.”

She let out a hard sigh. “Did you even hear what I just said?”

“I did, just go in the bushes over there.”

She glanced behind her. “Are you kidding me? I could catch poison ivy or pick up a Lyme tick.”

Walter pulled up on his pole. “Damn, missed him. It was that slow tug-tug of a bullhead.”

"Jeez, you are a real piece of work." She kicked off her flip-flops and stood in the water. "Walter, this water is so warm I could pee in it."

He looked at her. "Whoa, darling, now you have got my full attention. That would be a sight to see."

"Maybe I'm just tipsy enough to do it. But you can't watch."

"Sweetie, you can't ask that of me. You've set the train going down the tracks."

She came out of the water and wriggled out of her pants and panties. She returned to the river and half-squatted. "Walter, I'm *pee*ing in the Quinebaug River."

"That you are, and your coppery thatch is all aglow under the moonlight."

"Stop that."

"And what a stream. It sounds like a gushing garden hose hitting the bottom of a metal bucket."

I had to say what had to be said. "Donny, that's your mother."

He didn't respond. He crouched and ran a palm across the stony surface. He found a shard of rock and rifled it at the sandy shore. It cut into the water a foot from his mother's ankles.

"Walter, knock it off. Don't be throwing things at me."

"Huh?"

She left the water. "Something splashed hard right by my feet. Didn't you hear it?"

"This bullhead is still teasing my bait. I wasn't paying attention."

"For crying out loud, Walter."

"Will you relax? What you heard was probably a big bass snapping at a surface bug."

Donny found a second rock and threw it with all he had in the same direction. "Yeow!" Walter cried when he was struck in the chest. He got up and paced along the river's edge. "So there's a crazy out there? You douche son of a bitch. I'll get my Glock out of the car and pick you off like a dumb pigeon."

Donny's mother rushed to get back into her clothes. "Walter, I'm totally spooked, let's get out of here."

"Not yet." He walked up the bank, started the car, then maneuvered it so that the headlights shone across the river. We crouched and moved back farther under the tracks. Before long the lights went out and Walter came back down the bank. He said something in an inaudible voice and the lantern went out. I could feel Donny's breath hot and hard on the back of my neck. My own breathing matched his.

Then there was a new light—a flashlight. The beam moved in a bobbing motion along the shore and toward the bridge.

"No choice now, " Donny said. "He's on the move."

We left our fishing equipment on the ledge and gripped the ends of the railroad ties to pull ourselves up. We ran the best we could along the tracks and sprinted to the truck. We hopped into the cab and Donny fired up the engine. He backed up like a madman, bowling over a stand of sumac, then we were back on the road.

He went to shift into first when a light suddenly blinded both of us. "You little cruds, I'll snap both your necks!" Walter shouted. He took hold of the door handle but Donny shifted and floored the pedal. Walter held on for a few seconds before he went ass over teakettle in a billow of dust.

We raced by the old textile mill and turned onto Slater Avenue. Donny said, "I don't know if he got a good look at us. If we can get the truck to Buster's, we'll be golden."

But it wasn't long before a car came up and crowded our ass. "Uh-oh," Donny said.

"He said he had a gun."

Donny pushed the truck for all it was worth then swerved onto a side street. The street was lined with mill houses, and several teenage boys were practicing their skateboard moves under a telephone pole light. Donny kept on the gas and the boys scattered. We slid on a sharp corner and ended up on someone's front lawn. Donny killed the engine and we watched out the back window. I said, "Maybe it was just some looney, after all, trying to get around us."

No such luck. A car came hurtling down the street and skidded to a stop in front of us. Walter got out and made a great show of

walking nonchalantly toward the truck. His hair was gelled with a perfect side part and his T-shirt was a spotless, bright white. He hooked a thumb under his narrow belt and approached Donny's door. "Hello, gentlemen, out for a night ride?"

Donny rested his arm on the door. "What's that to you?"

Walter took out his wallet and flashed something silver. "Off duty." He leaned over to look at me. "You been hanging with this guy tonight?"

"Just a bit. He helped me fix a flat on my dirt bike. We're driving up to that twenty-four-hour breakfast diner in Killingly."

"I had one of those bikes when I was a kid, a Kawasaki. I dumped it three times, broke my wrist on the last. Dad told me to find something safer so I got into fishing. You boys like to fish?"

Donny said, "Why would a cop, if you are one, want to know something like that?"

Walter straightened. "See, now, I never did like the word cop. Kids play cops and robbers, that's okay, they don't mean anything by it. I prefer to be called Officer Shaw."

"Good enough, Mr. Shaw, but right now I don't see any probable cause for you to detain us. If you move your heap, we'll be on our way."

"There's a question of you speeding on Slater. And that so-called heap is a '57 Chevy Bel Air, small block 265, 4-barrel carb, dual exhaust, original upholstery with only a small tear on the back seat. Once I get that smashed-in back fin fixed, it'll be worth north of forty thousand."

Donny looked at the car. "Got a date tonight?"

"Screw you."

"She good-looking?"

Walter flung open Donny's door and pulled him out by the throat. "You retard. I saw your crappy truck down by the river. You should have run me over when you had the chance."

I leaped from the truck and ran toward Walter. He saw me coming and gave me a side kick to the chest. I reeled backward and fell, the back of my head snapping against the asphalt. A door opened behind me then Donny's mother was kneeling at my side.

"Good God, Chris, are you all right?" She helped me to sit and looked over my shoulder. "Don't move." She went to the car and came back with a wad of napkins. "Press this hard where it hurts. From what I can tell, it doesn't seem too bad."

I knew she was trying not to scare me. I felt a warm trickle of blood worming its way down the back of my neck.

Donny's mother ran to the truck and forced herself between Walter and her son. "Walter, stop, you know I can't stand to see two men fight."

Walter still had Donny by the throat. He used his other hand to shove Donny's mother out of the way. "Do you know who this little cretin is? He's one of them who tried to slice your head open with a rock."

"Walter, you're scaring me. Let me handle this."

He let go of Donny's throat. "You? What in the hell are you going to do?"

"Trust me, just this once."

Walter got into Donny's face. "This is a one-stoplight town, son. Next time we meet, you won't have a woman's skirt to hide behind."

Donny rubbed his throat and spit on the ground. "I don't need a woman for anything, especially her. Now be a good boy and run along like she told you."

Walter sneered. "Anything you say, you little pussy." He strolled back to the car.

Donny's mother said, "Honey, you know I'm a little drunk and I'm not going to make things worse by defending myself right now. I'll be mortified by all of this tomorrow, but we can still sit down and have a normal conversation."

"You'll be sick tomorrow."

"Then that's my own fault."

She reached up to palm his cheek but Donny's hand shot out like a snake striking. He held her wrist. "Don't touch my face. I don't like anyone touching my face, especially you."

"You're squeezing a little too hard."

He released her wrist and she ran to the car in tears. Walter smoked the tires then sped off.

Donny came over and helped me to my feet. “How you making it, Chris?”

My head swam. “Not so good.”

Donny lifted the napkins to have a look. “We’re going to the emergency room.”

“I don’t want to do that.”

“Not your call, buddy.” He helped me to the truck and we drove away.

The ride to the hospital was quiet. I looked up and saw that the moon was now veiled with rolling, pitch-black clouds. “Supposed to rain tomorrow. My father said the lawns are crying for it.”

He drove on as if he did not hear.

It was two years before I saw Donny again. I had just pulled in to the row of stores set back from Main and parked in front of the bakery. I went to open my door and saw Donny come out of the Tobacco Town store. He took a lighter from his jeans pocket and lit a cigar. I watched for a minute then backed out and circled the lot so that I could stop alongside him. “They let hobos like you in town?”

He instinctively stepped back and took off his mirrored sunglasses. “Chris, for real?”

“The one and only.”

He had a deep tan, but the skin of his face looked parched, pulled taut, exposing too much of the whites of his eyes. His collarbones stuck out within the neck of his T-shirt, and that ink-black hair was just long enough to pull into a stubby ponytail. He took in a full view of the car. “A Taurus? You planning for the kids already?”

“Not hardly. My grandmother passed away and no one else in the family wanted it.”

“Free is the best price.”

“Come on, get in.”

He opened the door and sat sideways. He held his thigh then dragged his foot in. “Bad ankle. Jose Cuervo and motorcycles don’t mix. I got up close and personal with a stop sign.”

"Did you have it checked out?"

"No money for that." He held up the cigar. "Mind if I puff on this stogie? I'll blow the smoke outside."

"Go for it, it might kill the last of Grandma's citrus air freshener." I drove back to Main.

"So here's the deal, Chris, what happened. I put the thumb out and ended up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Why there, who knows. I eventually got a job as a deckhand on a charter fishing boat, the Double Down. Cut bait, swabbed decks, cleaned toilets, acted all enthused when some plumber or lawyer caught a puny red snapper. Then the captain, out of nowhere, tells me he has to cut my pay because the cost of diesel fuel had skyrocketed. I told him that didn't work for me and he said to hit the bricks, deckhands were a dime a dozen. I tried to find more work but then I screwed up my ankle and was grounded. I bounced a few checks and got hold of a credit card number. The cops found me out and I went to court and the judge set bail. I convinced an ex-crewmate to spot me the money, then I skipped."

"My father can help you, Donny. His uncle owns a paving company. He could pay you under the table."

"That would be the only way I could do it. But first, let's see how the ankle holds up." He took a long draw on the cigar and streamed the smoke out the window. "I gotta ask you, Chris, did anyone ever try to find out where I was? Why I would just up and disappear. My mother or anybody?"

"Time went by, no one had heard anything, so my mother called your house and asked why you weren't coming over to visit any more. Your mother said that you had been kicking around the idea of a cross-crountry trip and decided to pull the trigger. She said she got a postcard from Joliet, Illinois, and you related that everything was going great. She said you even befriended a stray dog and named it Buela."

Donny shifted his bad ankle. "Who would have ever thought it? My mother has the natural mind of a fiction writer. Problem is, she could never put butt to chair to accomplish anything. She has the attention span of a water bug." He drew on the cigar again and asked, "How about my father?"

"He and your mother split. He got a job at a casino up in Massachusetts—dealer, I think."

"God bless him, he's better off."

Main Street came to a fork and I bore right onto North Main. "Donny, you stay at our house tonight, have a hot shower, eat something home-cooked. There's even a game on, Yankees and Birds."

"Chris, look at me. I look like one of those crackpot survivalists running from the law. And I would never disrespect your mother by walking into her home like this. She's always treated me like a son."

"That'll never change. But there is one thing I have to tell you, and it's going to sound like total horseshit."

"Yeah?"

"My father is driving our archery team to Bradley International, we're having a big tournament in Minneapolis this week."

"Archery?"

"Don't laugh. I wasn't good enough to play the big jock sports, so, on a whim, I tried out for the archery team. Come to find out, I could shoot a grape off the top of your head."

"I don't see that happening any time soon."

I slowed to turn into a driveway, backed out, then headed back toward Main. I reached for my cell in my pants pocket. "I'll tell my mother you're coming for dinner."

He chucked the cigar out the window. "Man, what did I just tell you?"

"What, then? Wander the streets all night until the cops stop to check you out?"

"I've got my sleeping bag stowed in the field behind the post office. I'll be able to think better tomorrow about what to do."

After a few minutes we reached Main. I continued on toward the post office until Donny said, "Stop, stop."

I steered into the curb. "What's the matter?"

"Look over to other side of the street."

I didn't see anything that stood out.

"The car, Chris, the car."

Then I saw it, the ‘57 Bel Air with the crumpled fin, parked in front of the Crazy River Bar. “I’ll be damned.”

“At last, the day of reckoning. Time for a face-to-face.”

I shot him a look. “Are you nuts? You’re already in hot water.”

“I don’t care about that right now. This has got to happen.”

“Listen, Donny, think this through. You’re a man now, not some kid bent on payback.”

“Chris, sometimes thinking is only avoiding. And I’ll never forget the sound of your head hitting that pavement. It sounded like someone dropped a cue ball on a tabletop.”

“I healed.”

“I’m not.” He reached out and I shook his callused hand. “Maybe down the road you could teach me how to shoot a bow.”

“It’s a given.”

He left the car and went across the street. I watched the passing traffic in my sideview then got out and went to the back of the car. I opened the trunk, pushed aside the spare tire, and found the lug wrench. I stuck the long end down the back of my pants and closed the trunk. The traffic would not stop so I crossed against the light. I followed Donny’s path into the bar.

Susan Rich

Teardown

> *A woman came home to find her husband had allegedly torn down their house while she was away. The man was charged with "criminal mischief."*
>
> —ABC Nightly News

What does it mean to raze your home,
bulldoze your way through small rooms
of faded wallpaper and radiators clanging with air?
I imagine the man, from Middletown, New York
imbued with joy as he pushes through
his wife's perfume bottles and pasta bowls,
the old bowling trophies and cardboard boxes,
circa 1955. He's cracking open the foundation,
the support beams, the drywall—
even the rear fence is now kaput.
As he sits back on the rented Caterpillar,
surveys his elegant catastrophe
that for just this one minute
looks like nothing more than a Jackson Pollock,
he knows, *I'm a good husband*.
No more discussions of remodels:
soapstone or composite; paint colors, knobs and pulls.
He is satisfied; he is more than ecstatic.
He is home.

Rodney Torreson

The Fires Actually Fought that Fall by the Volunteer Fireman

who the siren would rouse from his bed
in the middle of the night, after some wide-eyed devil
lit up another deserted barn, were not the infernos,
which the fire truck, a streak sliding sideways
around a corner and out of town,
was always too late getting to—
another barn burned to the ground.

Rather the fires fought were inside his head.
His wife still in bed and with one eye open
could see the fires, too, played out on a bedroom wall.
A long time it had been since she saw
in her husband such passion as she did
in his arms and legs flailing
in his lamp-lit fever to get dressed
and to the station, her man's shadow stretching up
into the shape of flames crowding over him.

Her eye still on him, he seemed to be extinguishing
the fires, he and his shadow fighting as one,
his mirror image, joining in, making three.
her own shadow there too, lying beside her,
that darker side, dreaming maybe it made itself up
in the wife's mirror image and slipped out of there,
to meet up with him who made the fires—
sweetly terrible as he was—the two running through
the corn rows now, carrying empty gas cans and matches.

John Sibley Williams

Light Must Be Ruthless, or Nothing at All

Through paper-thin curtains pierce tusks of morning,

sun cauterizing the wounded
corrugated roofs.

That imaginary bird we lost
pecks away the veneer,

leaving empty sky atop crude earth;
a map of home, edges curled black,
        layered between tinder and flame.

Edifice falters;

still you think eating the sun will prolong the burning,
stave off ash; another salve like
grandmother's seal oil and wax,
your youthful apostlehood
        and unconversion,
gasoline fumes fisted tight into rags,

as what you inhale rages inside like a sparrow's pent-up song.

You think migrating from one raison d'être to the next will return
    you

to that place where your father
as a grizzled old musk ox held the road
to be more than destination, saying,
"In the throes of naming *horse*
we loosen its reins," with you

on his back, morning over his shoulder, saying
"*us* and *them* is just a word
for where the moon goes."

Guy R. Beining

Felt Tongue

356.

the mouth remained
open but would
not speak, it was
mute, remote,
tongue tucked under
a language
long abandoned.
petite appetite, petite
movements toward
a voice
drummed out,
watching
all
the wings
fall
into a
hellbox.
they were leaves
someone said,
but nothing was confirmed.

Linda Taylor

Longest Night: December 21

The dark is crying outside,
budded like a flower
to eat the winter sun.

Its color is so pure,
a candle on water,
that rises through our bodies

to our lips: Forsythia
and hyacinth sudden in March.
And we, we are a fire,

we the long water, burning
the black creek in belts
of bright rain, every

surface of light grown cold,
every texture a garden
of cold, nipples rising

through the wet,
hair naked with night.
Only then have I thought

that my ashes will be spread
with yours to wash
the mountain laurel with their dust.

Robert Cooke

The Blonde Drinking Lemonade

I'd like to be ice
come from a thousand years
of distillation to cool the lips
her tongue licks before speaking.
My body from minerals and grasses
to lie against her lips from Iowa.
Each time I'm brought back up to her—
nothing to keep me from entering her mouth,
blowing kisses, her tongue
moving me from one side
to another. Then I'm melting
and sliding deeper into her
thirsty, July body
swaying like a yellow iris.

Jason Roberts

Eschatologies: A

a lizard drowned in the mop bucket & soon
the opposite of water; the neighbor's azaleas
pulled up by the roots after she found
her husband & his lover; just a little ways down the street
a crow rearranges the future with a squirrel's viscera
losing a day here & there; in the afternoon light
which is a portal to nowhere

we go where it takes us

Simon Perchik

*

You pan for rocks though every breeze
smells from wood lying on its back
and between your fingers a stream

ripens as fruits and berries that fall
swallow the Earth hand over hand
the way beginner stones learn to splash

so nothing will float free, is melted down
as the darkness you hear spreading out
to dry and further you sift for anchors

and all around you the cold ripples
drip into your breath, lay there, whisper
to come up together, say it's over.

Jeff Tigchelaar

They Are and What

> *On Oct. 9, 1975, a motorist on U.S. Highway 95 in northern Idaho . . . reported to police that some 15 masked individuals formed a roadblock with linked arms, forcing him to turn around.*
>
> —Michael D. Albers, *The Terror* (86-87)

Headlight beams don't lie on nights like these

when they fall on forms, hooded
figures in the road

standing arm in arm in black robes

and they are fifteen

and what they are and what they are
doing beyond
the obvious, beyond being

a silent
staring
roadblock

is what the headlight beams could never tell

Marlene Olin

Control-Alt-Delete

The computer is Muriel's best friend. Their relationship is predicated on a few simple rules. Push a button and an email flies across the Internet. Push another button and music sounds. Some people will play solitaire for hours. Others prefer Dungeons and Dragons or Candy Crush. But Muriel is more of a YouTube fan than a gamer. All she has to do is push a button. Then *poof!* She can disappear inside the videos and soundtracks of other people's lives.

Beep. This is Muriel, Mom. It's 5:55 p.m. and I'm checking in. Work is fine. I shelved fifty-seven books and helped five people at the checkout desk. I had macaroni and cheese for dinner. I'm hanging up now. Beep.

Like most twenty-four-year olds, Muriel has other obligations, a life outside the confines of her home. She works at the public library. She walks to and from her job and registers the mandatory five miles Dr. Sheffer has determined is adequate but not stellar. She heats her dinner in the microwave. But from six o'clock to ten every night, the blue screen is her constant companion. Link after link after link. How the time does fly.

Beep. This is Muriel, Mom. It's 5:55 p.m. and I'm checking in. Work is fine. I shelved forty-three books today and helped eight people at the checkout counter. I had a chicken pot pie for dinner. I'm hanging up now. Beep.

Each day has a sameness to it. First Muriel punches the time clock. Then she puts her lunch bag—peanut butter and strawberry jelly on whole wheat—in the staff refrigerator. Next she goes to the bathroom. And every day when she returns from the bathroom, her lunch bag has been violated. Edwin, as always, has taken it out and dumped it on the table. When she puts her backpack on the middle shelf, Edwin switches it to a lower one.

"PB and J doesn't need refrigeration, Mutant. And that suitcase you call a backpack is hogging the whole shelf."

Alyssa is her supervisor. As senior librarian, she's the person who assigns shelving, checkout, sorting, book repairing. If Edwin is a hangnail, Allysa is the sun peeking through the clouds.

"You're doing great work, Muriel!"

"What would I do without you, Muriel!"

Edwin is an assistant. And according to the ladder of employee seniority, Muriel is one rung below. Muriel likes her job. She likes the way people whisper, she likes the blue lines the machines make when they scan. She likes the orderly progression of the Dewey Decimal System.

But still she wakes up each morning with cramps in her stomach and pain in her jaw from grinding her teeth.

"You need to speak up," says Dr. Sheffer. "There is always going to be an Edwin. You can't avoid the Edwins in the world."

As far as Muriel can determine, the "library Edwin" exists to torment her. When she sees him walking down an aisle of books, she turns and walks the other way. The lunchroom, unfortunately, offers few escape routes.

"You see that strip of tape?" says library Edwin. "You sit on this side. I sit over here." He over-enunciates each word like she is deaf. "Weee'rre talking booooundaries, Mutant." Then he swoops his arms so if anyone else in the lunchroom happens to be hard of hearing, they now get the point. "You sit there, Mutant. I sit over here."

Edwin, Muriel figures, is the itchy scab on her knee, the leaky faucet in her bathroom. Something you just have to live with. And no matter how many times Dr. Sheffer tells her to defend herself, the words just get stuck in her throat. Like a clock set on the wrong time, she's always five minutes behind. She just looks at him, her eyes anime wide, her feet frozen, her hands stiff.

Beep. This is Muriel, Mom. It's 5:55 p.m. and I'm checking in. Work is fine. I shelved forty-nine books and helped ten people at the checkout desk. I had Salisbury steak for dinner. I'm hanging up now. Bye.

The day that changed everything starts like every other day. Edwin tosses her sandwich out of the refrigerator. Then he sets up

a force field around his chair during lunch so Muriel has to sit at another table.

"You're probably contagious, Mutant. With the stupid virus. I should douse myself with Purell."

Some people laugh. The part-timers slap their knees. A few employees on the lower rungs belch great guffaws. But not the old lady volunteer. Never the old lady volunteer.

Like God, she sees and hears everything. Tufts of white hair spring owl-like from her scalp. She turns her head in all directions without even moving. Propped on a stool by the information desk, she keeps a nonstop stream of banter going.

"If he was funny and had some timing, he'd be the next Don Rickles," the old lady volunteer snorts. "But then if I had long black hair and dimples, I'd be the next Loretta Young."

Edwin is doing another Frankenstein imitation, his feet stomping on the carpeting, his hands raised in the air, fingers curled.

"Allysa see you doing that and your ass is toast," says the old lady.

"Who—oo the hell do you think you are?"

Little does Muriel realize that a new chapter in her life is about to begin. For instead of walking home that day, Muriel heads to the university. She puts some money in the slot and finds a seat on the bus. Then she follows the route on her phone, tilting her head one way when the bus turns right, the other way when it turns left. When the bus stops, her hands clench the seat.

"It's a trial," said Dr. Sheffer. "Transcranial magnetic stimulation has been used to treat depression. They think it can treat other disorders, too."

Muriel never ever lies. Lying is for evil people like Edwin. Instead she decides to keep this information in a separate compartment. Deciding not to tell her mother is more like an omission than a lie.

When she arrives at the office, they make her sign a lot of papers. Then they stick her in a dentist's chair only there isn't a dentist. A nice tall man jams ear plugs in her ears and talks to her real loud. He scans the thick wad of papers she has signed.

"Muriel Goldstein. Asperger's Syndrome. No prior health issues. Excellent."

He huddles in a corner with a lady in a nurse's uniform. When they look at her, their eyebrows are arched, their foreheads lined. She remembers her flashcards. Yes, thinks Muriel. Those are worried faces.

"We'll just try it for a half hour today. Okay?" asks the tall man. "Sometimes the therapy can cause headaches and dizziness. We'll go easy the first time, okay?"

It looks like a magnifying glass is in his hand, only heavier. The tall man moves it around her head while he's looking at some sort of screen.

"ARE YOU OKAY, MURIEL?"

It feels like a family of woodpeckers is tapping on her head. Woodpeckers on steroids. Incredibly large woodpeckers with really sharp beaks.

She grips the armrests, closes her eyes, and then they're done.

By the time the bus ride is over, the tapping has stopped. She walks quickly. Her watch says 5:15 and she always called her mother at 5:55. Her rituals comfort her. Dinner. Her phone call. The computer.

But for some reason her legs don't work very efficiently. The air seems thicker. Gravity has doubled down. And everything looks different. The leaves on the trees have separated, each one dangling by a small twig. She counts them. . . . one two three four five six seven . . . like hands waving in the breeze.

Three birds sit on a power line, looking at her—squawking, laughing. Tee hee hee. She stands on the sidewalk and twirls around. Like the conductor of an orchestra, she can separate each sound—the pitch, the tone, the volume. Usually the world is a fast forwarded film, a blur of noise. But now each and every voice is distinct.

"I feel like Chinese tonight, Harry. Whatdya think about Chinese?" says the woman on her cell phone.

"Mommy Mommy Mommy. I want ice cream. I want ice cream right now!"

"About those biopsy results, Dr. Schwartzbaum."

"Fuck you, Sherry. A guy's allowed a little R and R. So fuck you."

Though she makes it to her apartment by 5:45, she forgets to call her mother. Luckily her muscle memory is still intact. Her body adheres to its schedule. She warms up a frozen pizza for dinner, washes her dish and glass, then sits down in front of the computer. Usually she scrolls through the news then segues to whatever piques her interest. Cat videos are her favorite. Her wrists cramp and her fingers ache before all the cat videos are through.

But that night she streams a TV show instead. Alyssa has been talking about it at work. Muriel usually doesn't watch TV. The characters on the sitcoms speak too fast and the movies are hard to follow. But all of a sudden everyone seems to be speaking slower. A CIA hitman named Peter Quinn is in love with a bipolar spy named Carrie Mathison, but while he is willing to risk life and limb—literally!—for her, she's more interested in saving mankind. Please Carrie! Don't desert Peter in his time of need! Let someone else find the suicide bombers who are heading to the train station strapped with explosive vests!

She is used to her thoughts spinning slowly like an old vinyl record. Now they are zooming warp speed ahead. Lying in bed that night, she presses down on her eyelids to keep them closed and counts until she hits one thousand.

The next day at work, the former Muriel no longer exists. When Edwin takes her sandwich out of the refrigerator, she puts it back. At lunchtime, she follows the old lady volunteer outside. There's a bench set up near a butterfly garden. While the old lady sneaks a cigarette, Muriel sits beside her.

"Don't ever take up smoking," says the old lady. "It's bad for your skin."

For the first time Muriel steals an up-close view of the woman. Her face looks like a waffle iron, her nose a map of capillaries zigging this way and that.

"But then again, it's good for your figure. I haven't eaten lunch in fifty years."

When Muriel laughs, she surprises both of them. She fingers the creases of her mouth, feels the smoothness of her teeth.

"Jesus H. Christ," says the old lady. "You *can* smile."

Later, after the old lady crushes the stub of her cigarette into the pavement, they head back inside the library. For the first time, Muriel notices that the woman favors one foot. She leans to one side like a listing ship, does a little hop skip. Muriel slips her arm around the old lady's elbow, escorts her to the information desk, and helps her up on the stool.

"For fuck's sake," says the old lady. "This is my lucky day. Better check my lottery ticket. I'm on a roll."

A few hours later, the high school kids dribble in. They need community service hours and the library is a neat, air-conditioned way to do it. It's Edwin's job to give them instructions. Inside the children's section, where he thinks he's out of earshot, he arranges them in a circle and performs. Again it's the Frankenstein imitation, his hands raised, his fingers curled. The kids are doubled over, laughing. But suddenly Muriel realizes that it's exaggerated laughing. Edwin is their supervisor. They laugh. Stop. Laugh. Stop. It is pretend laughing. Laughing to score points with Edwin.

When Alyssa emerges from her office a few moments later, Muriel is thunderstruck. For the first time she notices the way the librarian holds a book. Muriel glances at her own hands, opens and closes her fingers, then looks back at Alyssa. The librarian's hands are severely arthritic. Gnarled like old trees, the joints are knobby and swollen, the fingers bent. Then Muriel glances once more at the children's section. Frankenstein has morphed into library Edwin once more.

Every weekday for the next month she attends another session. The pull of the magnets makes her teeth rattle. The thumping makes her head throb. But new synapses are connecting by the minute. Some little person in her brain is flipping on light switches, giving her life a new perspective. Like the zombies on the TV shows she now watches, she considers the former Muriel one of the walking dead. She has been reborn.

Beep. Muriel, please call me sweetheart. I worry about you. I know it's only been three days but I'm a mom and moms worry. Okay? Beep.

Beep. Muriel, this is Dr. Sheffer. Please call the clinic. The clinic needs to speak to you. There are certain side effects we need to monitor. . . . Beep.

Before the sessions are over, Muriel quits them. She has to acclimate to the person who has sprung Pegasus style from her head. For Muriel has become overly attuned to the world around her. She is bombarded with information that she was never privy to before.

At work, she notices how Alyssa hides her hands inside her sleeves, how she delegates work to the lower rungs—work which a librarian usually does but which her crippled hands are unable to do. In fact, when she thinks no one is looking, she does no work at all. Instead she scrolls the Internet and shops online. Craigslist. eBay. Etsy. Zappos. Her job is her default mode, something she squeezes in when she has time.

Even library Edwin has turned over a new leaf. Every day Muriel now overhears the conversation he has with his father. After Edwin finishes his lunch, when he thinks no one's around, he calls him. Cupping his cell phone with his hand, whispering, the conversation is nearly always the same.

"Yes, Dad. I'll be home by dinner, Dad. Red Lobster. I promise, Dad. I love you too."

Life, Muriel, is learning, is complicated. People who are good are sometimes bad and people who are bad may have little sprouts of goodness trying to break through.

"Even Hitler had a father," says the old lady.

For years Muriel's world was filmed in black and white. Now it's shot in Technicolor with Dolby sound. It's wonderful and terrible at the same time.

"A heightening of perception is only temporary," says Dr. Sheffer. "Eventually you'll regress. All the patients regress."

But Muriel doesn't want to regress. Somehow a screw has tightened. No longer does she march like a robot with her hands

straight by her sides. Instead there's bounce to her step and a swing to her hips. When she walks on the sidewalk to work, men crane their necks and whistle. And to Muriel's astonishment, she likes it.

So that is what flirting looks like!

She buys her first pair of high heels and cuts a swath through a crowd like Moses parting the Red Sea. Men strike up conversations with her at Starbucks. Then one day the neighborhood dog walker asks her out for a drink.

"Should I go out with him?" she asks the old lady.

The old lady looks down from her perch and squawks. "You got any better offers?"

That evening she returns home from the library and finds her mother waiting. Muriel has no idea how her mother managed to get there. She lives in a senior community an hour away, shakes with Parkinson's, squints from the cataracts that are blooming in each eye. She sits on the front stoop of Muriel's apartment building like a tossed newspaper. Muriel needs to tug on both elbows to help her up.

"When I saw you walking down the sidewalk, I thought it was a stranger," said her mother.

It's late in the afternoon, the time of day when the moon is a suggestion, the sun an afterthought in the sky.

"You're supposed to ask me in," says her mother.

But Muriel is paralyzed. Her mother is nearly as weathered as the old lady volunteer. But instead of being short and squat, she's elongated. And instead of dressing in slacks and a golf shirt, her mother wears blouses and skirts.

"I'm really glad you're here, Mom."

Like a bobblehead doll, her mother's chin is bouncing up down up down. Muriel wraps her in her arms and takes a deep breath. Her mother wears Shalimar. She smells like Shalimar and soap.

"Sometimes," says her mother, "you sound so far away. And I get these crazy ideas. I'm afraid that you're lost and I can't find you. Afraid that you're slipping away."

She kisses Muriel's forehead and lifts her mottled hands. Then with trembling fingers she traces the outlines of her daughter's

face. She feels the furrows of her nose, the planes of her cheeks, the softness of her lips. And suddenly it dawns on Muriel that there are constants in the world. The earth may be tilted on its axis, but at night the stars still shine.

"I'm going out on a date," says Muriel. "I need to figure out what to wear."

"I'll help you," says her mother. "That's what mothers do."

Three months later, the effects of the treatment have slowly subsided. The dog walker is now part of her schedule. She sees him Tuesday and Saturday nights. They go out for a pizza and a movie, come back to her apartment, and make love tenderly under the sheets. She takes the bus and visits her mother on Sundays. And though Muriel's new powers have diminished, something permanent has taken residence deep inside.

She's content but unsettled, curious but apprehensive, satisfied but restless. She realizes that there are good people and bad people and a whole spectrum in between. And that's okay, she's decided. Even if it's all at the same time.

Christopher Heffernan

Where I Could Get It

They kept saying the unemployment would start any day now, which seemed like a line. But they were the State, and as the State must function as a State, they must give me the money they said they would give.

I stood over the tub, looking at the ring. The money was not much money, and it was not free money, but it was in the end necessary money, as Christine said, to keep things going. When I found out it was only two hundred and ten dollars I almost threw the whole thing over, thinking that that little bit was not worth waiting in all those lines and filling out all those forms, but she was saying it was better to have the two hundred than nothing, and then I found out they didn't have lines and forms anymore, it all being done on computer. There were no crowds of screaming vagrants, and there were no idiotic officials behind counters with bulletproof glass. You did not go to the office. In fact, there was no office. They said this upfront, that if you had any questions they could be answered on the website, and if you needed to talk to someone to call. Once all this was sorted it was no problem: everything from home. The only thing was the lag before the payments began.

I got down on my knees with the sponge and went at the ring. I tried not to think anymore about checks not coming, and money I did not have. It was the ring, this dirt, and the day. All of it now, going along. The key was to be occupied. Time was something I did not mind on my hands, but there was a difference in volunteering for it and having it thrust upon you. Once, I watched an uncle of mine go absolutely crazy when he was out of work, starting in on the bottle and ending up born again, dancing in a sheet at some Jesus camp in Kansas.

I was pretty sure I would not end up at a Jesus camp, but with too much time there could be too much thinking, and you could get lost in meaningless detail. The big picture completely gone.

The job had not been the greatest job but at least it kept things straight. There had been a routine. You knew where you were, you knew what you had to do and where you had to go. Everything simple. Then this guy, Joe Sutherland, transferred in from Otsego County. That started the whole thing going out the window.

At first he was around because it seemed they were putting new loading docks in, and putting new doors on the docks. He would walk around with a tape measure and a pad and pen and sort of go over how things would be if the docks were bigger and if he could push our offices back further, if there was more room to keep things inside at all times instead of having some of the material outside for part of the day as it was getting processed. At least that's what I heard. That was what Frank said, and that was what Becky basically said, too. Then Adrianne was fired and Ian was let go a week after that. A panic started. People began putting resumes together. I thought it was all crazy. Everyone running for cover when nothing really was going on. Just a few loose ends being clipped, a tightening up as they put it into gear for expansion. The place was fine.

But honestly there was confusion that came through, as there was no need to fire people who were doing a job as well as it could be done, a simple job that was mostly moving invoices around and making phone calls. Not much goes into operating a shipping warehouse. Then Becky was fired, and people really got scared. I came in and she was sitting on the hood of her car, crying. She told me they had just let her go. She said that they had called James into the office, and Joe Sutherland said that James was doing a good job, and they wanted him around and hoped he wasn't thinking of leaving. Then they called her in and fired her. They fired her at 10:30 in the morning on a Thursday.

I said, "Why didn't they just tell you last night that you didn't have to come in anymore and save you the trip?"

"This is all so ridiculous," she said. I thought it was remarkable how she could talk so plainly and cry so badly.

"Or," I said, "why didn't they wait until tomorrow evening? Let you finish out the week. It seems sort of stupid to me," I said.

"Because,' she said, making it a point to look me in the eye, "Joe Sutherland is a shit-eating fuck-hole." Then she said, "A loser. A fucking loser."

We were out there talking for a while. My shift didn't start until eleven, but I didn't care if I was late. I had been there long enough, and I was tight with Frank and Steve who could tell Joe Sutherland to go screw.

Two weeks after that they cut me loose. And when I came out of the office they called James in and let him go, too.

I leaned back to find another sponge in the bucket and whacked my elbow on the cabinet. As I went to get up on my haunches, rubbing it, I whacked my head on the edge of the sink.

The bathroom was too small. You had to bend to avoid the ceiling at the back of the shower. It was a mess. The whole top floor was too small. Christine kept saying that we needed another bathroom. That we'd been married two years and that we needed a bigger place. Two or three bedrooms she kept saying. "For what?" I said. But of course I knew for what.

Originally, we talked about saving money and getting things together in about five years, that we would take a nice easy approach so that when we went to get a loan the mortgage would not be so bad, and that maybe we wouldn't get killed by the bank. But in the last few months she'd been saying that things were slipping away from us, and that if we didn't get going now we might not ever get going, and then we'd be stuck. "Deprived" was the word she used. She kept talking about how long it all took, that if we started in five years after we got a bigger house, it might not happen until seven or eight years. She brought it up pretty regularly. I wouldn't fight with her but we would sort of go round and round as I tried to figure things and she tried to get us moving in the direction, as she said, people in our position or stage should be at already. Since I'd been let go, though, she hadn't said anything. She hadn't said anything about money, loans, extra rooms, and hadn't said anything at all about being deprived.

I started scrubbing with the other sponge. It held the soap better. I leaned my weight on it and gripped the tub and seemed to

be getting more of the dirt. There was a breeze that came through the window, a spring breeze, and I could hear a lawnmower going outside, and then an airplane over the house.

When I got to the head of the tub and was going at the drain, someone knocked at the front door. I waited a moment for it to happen again, and when I didn't hear anything I went to check.

Coming down the stairs, I looked at the kitchen clock and wondered who the hell it could be. Everyone was at work.

The living room was still and I listened, thinking that maybe I'd imagined it, or that whoever had been there had gone. But then there were three quick taps and I heard shuffling on the porch.

It was Bubby. He stood there with his thumbs in his pockets, wearing an old brown paisley polyester shirt, and he had the chin cut out of his beard. The new beard made him look like a kid, and the shirt was four decades out of style. I started to laugh.

"You look insane," I said.

"Eat shit," he said.

"Seriously," I said. "You . . ." I started to say but didn't finish. I was looking at him and kept laughing.

He put his head down but still had his thumbs in his pockets. "Winnie likes it," he said.

"I hope so," I said.

Then he said, "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I said and let him into the house.

He came in and threw himself on the couch.

"I was cleaning the bathroom," I said going into the kitchen.

"You're a good man," he said.

"No," I said, "not really. You want a beer?"

"Yeah," he said. Then he said again, "Winnie likes it."

"Right," I said, coming out. "You said that." I gave him the beer.

"She said I needed a change," he said. "She said I needed a woman's touch."

"And this is her touch?"

"No," he said. "I just went looking around for some better clothes and found a box of my dad's old shirts. You know how he was," he said, "so I thought . . ."

"That Winnie would like it."

"Yeah," he said.

"And what about this?" I said waving my hand at his face.

"Oh," he said. "I saw a guy on TV with it. I thought it was, you know, pretty cool." He rubbed his chin.

"Right," I said.

"Well, Winnie likes it," he said. "I don't have to live with you."

"Thank God for small things."

He took two big pulls of his beer. "Christ," he said, "you won't believe what happened today. Mark Kellerman fell off a ladder and broke his leg."

"Shit," I said.

"Yeah," he said, "but lucky for us that after we got done with the ambulance and everything, so much of the afternoon was spent that Dave just sent us home."

"How bad was it?" I said.

"Bad enough," he said. "There weren't any bones sticking out or nothing, but he was screaming like a crazy person. The ambulance people had to give him a shot to calm him down." He laughed. "Then he was a drooling idiot. But," he said, "I guess that was better because his leg was all crooked and shit, and it made me kind of sick to look at it. John Dill went and got another sandwich from this deli across the street, and he was eating it right there. He was sitting there, eating it and watching everything. Dave was like, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"I guess he's a sick fuck," I said.

"He is," he said. "It was nuts. It took them a while to get him out of there. They had to get him all straight and secure and get him on that bed thing with the wheels and get him in the ambulance. I figured they'd just throw him in the back and race off. Oh, it was bad before they got there. I mean, man, he was screaming. Dave was sitting with him. At first some of us went over to him, but when we saw what happened we kind of stayed away. It was really sick to look at. And there wasn't really anything any of us could do anyway. After they got him out of there we were all just

sitting around and Dave was like, well, I guess you can all go home, the day's pretty shot. He didn't look that good either. He was all pale and shit. Then we all left." He drank from his beer.

"That is crazy," I said.

"It is," he said. Then he said, "I come over in part to see if maybe you want to work for Dave."

"Oh," I said.

"Really," he said, "he'd hire you in a second."

"Oh," I said again.

"I could talk to him tomorrow. The spot's open. You can have it until Mark comes back, and then maybe Dave'll take you on full time, or maybe find you work with another crew if he can't."

"That sounds good," I said. "But," I said, "I don't know about roofing."

"It's tough work," he said. "My old man used to say you'd have to be fucking stupid to do it. But . . ." he said and shrugged.

"Well, the unemployment is just starting, you know, it's gonna kick in any day now."

"Yeah?" he said.

"I wanna, you know, see how long that's all gonna go on for, and I wanna see if maybe there's something more substantial out there, something more than dragging shit up and down ladders all day, and being on the tops of houses in the sun."

"Yeah," he said.

"I'm gonna coast and see if something really good comes along. I need something good. A good foundation. Christine's always talking . . ."

He was looking at me.

"It's gonna take more than a new shirt and a haircut with her," I said.

"I didn't get a haircut," he said.

"You know what I mean."

He didn't say anything to that, and we sat there drinking.

The afternoon had been going by without me, and I could see in the living room, where we sat, that there was no sun coming in through the front and that Christine would be home soon unless

Dan the dick kept her late, in which case she could be home any time between five and nine, and she would not call.

One time, only one time, I told her to call. I said, "If you're gonna be late just let me know."

And she said, "If I'm gonna be late you'll know because I'm not here."

"Funny," I said. "I was waiting around to eat with you, to see what you wanted."

She was actually digging through the fridge when I was saying this. "If you're hungry and I'm not here," she said, "eat. I won't be upset if you've eaten."

"But," I said and I tried to say some other things but she was tired and hungry, and she slammed the refrigerator door, and that pretty much ended me being concerned about when she'd be home.

"So I guess Mark ain't going to that Memorial Day thing," I said.

"I don't see why not," he said. "They'll just slap a cast on it. He can hobble around on crutches or something. Or even better, he can plant himself next to the keg. Won't even have to move."

"He'll have to fight Dina for the seat," I said.

"True that," he said. "She'll probably gnaw off one of his arms," he laughed.

I laughed too. "Yeah, but he can drink with the other. One arm, one leg."

"Anyway," he said looking up at me, "he was in shape, so that'll help."

"I guess," I said.

"Being fit helps with the healing process," he said.

"He was a horse," I said. "Running up and down them ladders," I said, "you can't be a fat ass piece of shit."

"Though some have tried." Then he said, "Seriously though, I could talk to Dave for you. It'd be no problem."

"Nah," I said. "I'm telling you, that type of work, it ain't for me. It would go down bad. Dave would get pissed at me for working like shit, and you'd look like shit for having recommended me."

"I always look like shit to Dave," he said.

I forced a smile.

"It pays about what you were making before," he said.

"I figured," I said.

"Think about it," he said. "At least think about it."

"I don't have to think about it," I said.

"It's just that I can't imagine unemployment gives out all that much, and Christine was talking to Winnie." He looked at me. "Not about anything bad, it's just, you know . . ."

"Yeah," I said, "I know."

He went on. I was sitting there, playing with the bottle in my hands.

I watched his mouth go and watched his face and his eyes looking at the label on his beer where it sat on his stomach on his new shirt. The sound of his voice was going in the room, rising and falling with a few chuckles as he laughed at his own jokes.

"Did Christine tell you that Winnie wants another? She wants a girl," he said. "Makes me climb all over her day and night to get it done. Says she's not gonna stop making them until she gets a girl. I can't be in the house anymore. I'm terrified she'll come home before Jake's out of daycare and make me go at it. She even has the named picked out. Megan," he said. "She's obsessed with the name Megan. Always has been. She said she'd made her whole class call her Megan when she was in the first grade." He put his hand under his head and propped it against the arm of the couch. "She asked Manny how he felt about having a little sister. He said he's all for it. But he's all for everything," he said. "And let me tell you this though, if she doesn't get a girl with the next one then she can get a cat. No more after this," he said. "I've had it." Then he said, "Did you know cats throw up all over the place, that they just eat and throw up all the time and they're not sick it's just what they do?"

I got up from the chair, and I went across the room to the door. I opened the door, and went outside.

The space in front of me was open. There were the two trees on the front lawn. The sky was big over them. I walked down the

path, and stood there a moment. It was warm and this was the first time I had been outside all day.

I turned to see Bubby watching me through the screen door.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"Nothing," I said.

I walked away and went around to the garage.

The door was open, and I went to the back, and found the boxes of things I had that were from before I was with Christine. I took a few off the top, and found one that I thought had bigger things in it and pulled the flaps back, but there were only some old books and clothes and junk, CDs and a lamp. The other boxes were too small.

Bubby came to the door and stood in the driveway with his beer in his hand.

"What are you looking for?" he said.

"Nothing," I said.

"Well if you tell me what it is . . ."

I searched around against the walls, and in the corners.

"Come here," I said.

He came over and stood next to me. I unscrewed the handle from the push broom and laid it out on the bench and told him to hold it, told him to put his beer down and put both hands on it and use his weight to keep it in place. Then I took a small handsaw and went at cutting off the end. The handle jumped around under the pulling and pushing and did not stay straight under the arms of Bubby who, several times, had to tell me to stop so he could get a better grip. Sawdust fell in a steady stream and built up on the floor.

When it cut through, it cracked slightly under the blade and broke off. Bubby's shoulders visibly relaxed. I held it up, looking at it, turning it around a few times, then swung it. It was long and thin and awkward in my hands, but I swung it harder, getting my balance, swishing it through the air as it made a deep sound, cutting a line around me.

"Watch it with that thing," Bubby said.

After another little search, I found a bag of Christine's tennis balls in one of the cubbies on the side.

"Come on," I said, and went out.

There were no cars in the street. Though I could not see anyone, there seemed to be people everywhere, eyes everywhere in the houses around me, watching me through the windows that looked straight down to where I stood.

Bubby was still in the garage.

"Come on," I said to him.

"What are you doing?" he said.

I did not answer.

He looked side to side then finally came down.

He started to say something, but I cut him off and pointed to the manhole in front of us. "That's home plate."

I went and stood at the manhole, looking up the street and around at the yards. Bubby stood in the driveway. "Well take the field, damn it."

He walked out in front of me and stopped.

"Further," I said. "Move back," I said.

He went to the next driveway.

"Where you are now is a single," I said. "So I guess you should go out a little more."

"Kyle," he said. He waited for me to say something or do something to give him something to register a complaint against. We stood there looking at each other. Finally, he turned and walked about halfway down the next yard.

"The mailbox behind you is a double," I said. "And the second driveway past that, not the one right behind you, but the next one, is a triple."

He looked at where I was pointing, then looked back at me.

"Back up," I said waving at him.

He took only a few paces and stopped.

I wanted him to go on, to keep going and cover as much field as possible as I could picture a ball going over his head and him losing it, walking around, not knowing where to look, and it would be him all day crawling through the bushes, so I waved again but he didn't go. Finally I stopped, not wanting him to think this was practice for standing up for himself.

Some tree branches hung down over us in broken lines. None of them looked good. Then there was the streetlight way down at the end. It was a little too far, but I didn't care.

"That there," I said, pointing to the streetlight. "Turn around and look. If you hit it over that streetlight it's a homerun."

He looked at it. Then he said, "Christine's gonna be home soon, you know . . ."

"Yeah, I know."

"It's just that . . ."

"She ain't no Winnie," I said, "and I am certainly not you."

Before I could get one of the balls from the bag, the sound of a car caught my ear from down the street, and I turned to see a small white compact coming at us, and my stomach gripped. I wasn't sure if I should just stand there and smile, or go to the curb, or maybe even try to run and hide in the house and make up some lies about the whole thing. But as I straightened and was about to pick up the bag, I could see that the car was not hers. It was a Japanese job like hers, similar, but not the same company. I kicked the bag of balls to the curb, and held the bat with both hands as the car went by with some college girl wearing a ponytail.

Bubby was on the sidewalk.

"Get in the field," I said.

We went back to where we had been.

"She's gonna kill you when she gets home," he said. "Maybe me, too."

"Good," I said. "She can kill us and eat us, make our goddamn bones into a stew."

"What?" he said.

"Nothing," I said. "Just concentrate on the game."

I threw the first ball up and tried to set myself as it came down, jerking my arms hard as I swung and missed, yanking myself so that I had to take a step to keep from going over. "Shit!" I said. A shockwave of pain went through my back. Everything tensed, and I could not move for a moment. It was like the bottom muscles squeezed the spine with a fist, and the top of the spine squeezed at the back of my neck. I walked around in a little circle and it took a moment before I could reach behind and rub myself.

"Shit," I said again. I rotated my shoulder and twisted a few times, slow, from my waist to loosen up. "It's been a while," I said.

"No MVP for you this time," he said.

I got the ball from the gutter and came back to home plate.

"Ready?" I said.

Bubby waved.

"Okay," I said, and threw the ball up and swung again.

I topped it, smashing it into the ground, and sent it spinning off to the left, into one of the neighbors' yards. We watched it go through the grass and bang off the front of the house near the garage, where it spun out and stopped near the front door.

"I guess that's a foul," I said.

Bubby started over to it.

"Don't bother," I said. "I can see it. We'll get it later. Strike two."

My back still hurt but now it was more of a constant ache, not a shooting, sharp pain. I twisted a few times to loosen up again, then took my stance. This time I straightened my hips, pointing them at Bubby, and made sure, as the ball was coming down, that I kept myself in position. I stepped forward, straight, and when I did I caught the ball and whacked it right at him. On a bounce it came up off the street and would have hit him in the chest but he put a hand out to grab it. It ticked off his fingers and deflected away, spinning out into the lawn to his right, rolling under a bush.

"Ha!" I said. "Single!"

He was looking at where the ball went.

"Maybe you should put your beer down," I said.

He did not put his beer down, but he did not drink. He stood there opening and closing his hand to make sure it was all right.

I was about to toss another ball when I heard another car behind me. This one was coming quick, and I had the impulse to run to the house again, to hide again, feeling that it was her and she was gunning the damn thing right at me, but when I turned it wasn't her, and I watched it come for a moment before I picked up the bag and jogged to the side. It was some middle-aged guy on his way home from work.

Bubby was sitting on the grass.

"Get up," I said.

The next few swings were bad. The first one I swung under. As the ball came down I tried to drop my back arm and swing up to lift it, to get the ball up and out, but missed it completely. The one after that I tried the same thing. But I only caught a sliver of the bottom, clipping it, and sent it spinning off backward and bouncing way down the street.

"Maybe we should stop," Bubby said. "I wanna finish my beer, and I really don't want to be here in the middle of World War Three."

"You just get your ass ready," I said.

"Because she's gonna tell Winnie, and Winnie's gonna . . ."

This time when I threw the ball up, I threw it way up, and did not swing when it came down but let it bounce so that when it bounced it came up about belt high. I caught it right on the bat and went straight through it, clean, not feeling the smash when it hit the bat but feeling only a slight tension like I was pulling a taut rope through a hole, or releasing a catapult.

The ball took off, not high but straight and rising, and whizzed past Bubby who ducked as it went by even though it was ten feet over his head. It went all the way out toward the far driveway but did not have the height to clear the streetlight. I could feel it spinning through the air, pushing away from me where I stood until it began coming down, faster than it rose. It hit far down the road, where it was no longer a ball anymore but a yellow dot fading from green, a thing that could be anything.

"TRIPLE!" I shouted.

Bubby watched the ball.

"I'm getting it," I said. "I'M GETTING IT!"

"Yeah," he said.

"You better loosen up," I said. "When it's your turn you're gonna have a lot of runs to make up. You're gonna have a lot of work to do."

My breath was heavy and I sweated into my shirt and down my back and the sun burned at the back of my neck. For a moment

I calmed myself until I knew I was ready. I looked at my feet, and the bat and the ball, and threw the ball up in the air, high again, so that it would bounce belt high where I could cut through with the bat and catch it. I saw the ball big now and coming down. I saw it coming to where I would snatch it out of the air and send it very far away from me, where it would sail straight up and through the street and trees and I would not see it anymore going all the way out, all the way to where it would never, never stop.

H.E. Francis

At the San Millán

Nothing escapes Gregorio's eye. Standing in the entrance to the café, he sees the dark figure of the stranger, a small elderly man dressed with dignity, rather formal for summer, emerge from the Metro again, stand on the top step, and observe the *terraza.* It is the fourteenth consecutive night the man has come, and precisely at nine, when the sun eases and the crowd gathers to sit on the *terraza.* Tonight, though every table is taken, the stranger lingers on the periphery. He does not take the first free table, but waits until the one next to Vicente's usual table is empty, close to the café entrance.

Gregorio himself attends: Cinzano with soda?

The stranger raises his brows, smiles, nods.

When Gregorio returns, the man, who has never offered a word, says, You run a fine café.

Gregorio knows but never tires of hearing it, especially from strangers. As *encargado* he prides himself: his waiters are first class. Serving is their *oficio*, and that *oficio* is always to be respected. Indiscretion is unpardonable. Gregorio is well aware of what an impudent word can do. What, he says to his *camareros,* would you think of Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia if they behaved like nobodies, a couple of *don Nadies*? If his is not a royal house, he treats his *clientes* like royalty.

Like the café, centuries old, with his exacting memory Gregorio embodies history itself. And summers, the high season, the terrace does look ceremonial. As he stands in the café entrance, nothing gives him more pleasure than surveying the busy five-street intersection of La Latina. The café sidewalk is decked with impeccably white tables and chairs and a host of dazzling green and red umbrellas advertising MAHOU beer. But the joy of sitting on the *terraza* comes not from any natural view, though the sky over the city may turn an awesome spectrum of heavenly blues to hellish reds and grays: no, the lure is the incessant activity—of the great domed market, Barclay's bank and the Central Hispano,

the theater, the deli, the game room, the white ice cream stand, the flower kiosk Flores Amparo, the cluster of drivers at the taxi line along the curb out front, and the mouth of the Metro—never a moment without movement.

Gregorio never tires of tourists, casuals, and certainly never of his regulars, especially since his wife died some years ago and his son moved to Malaga. He counts on the usuals, yes, on the actress's father scribbling day and night in a notebook, on Elvira the lottery vendor and her sister, on the *politico* Alvarez, and the widows who unfailingly eat their noon meal in a window alcove inside, and the gypsy family with their screaming kids, and Lola the attractive old dancer widowed in Germany and back in Madrid for good with her German shepherd always by her chair, and the shopkeepers and wives, and a flock of daily drop-ins from the surrounding blocks, vecinos all, who sustain him all the year.

But no one has been more loyal than Vicente—twenty-two years of coming straight from his desk across the street at the Central Hispano for his noon meal with his colleagues, especially with Lucas, but, with Lucas gone, alone these days. Twenty-two years—twenty-two!—of dropping in nights, summers on the *terraza*—a regular, friendly, yes, known to all, respectful, and as respected as his workplace.

Vicente admires Gregorio, how he manages his little kingdom, for it is that; with his *clientes* he tries always to maintain a sympathetic understanding midway between indifference—death, that—and empathy—a loss of perpective, that. And in bad times Vicente has depended too. What would he have done without this refuge? What when his mother died, and then Lucas committed suicide? He would never want another close friend. But whose words sustained, whose company like Gregorio's? Now and then Gregorio sits and talks with him, for who more than Gregorio himself—seeing family and so many of his *clientes* come and go over the years—is aware that vacancy can cry out, that silence can claw flesh. Lucas's death created a hiatus: for nearly two weeks Vicente stayed away from the San Millán; he could not bear to think of sitting there eating, staring at Lucas's empty place.

It is the gypsy children who call attention to anybody new. They circle the stranger's table, wheel their tiny toy cars over the pavement or on the *clientes*' tables, and stand and smile. All eyes, they flirt for attention. Concha, come! Manuela! Get your sister, Pablo. The scene does not escape the *lotera*, who parks always in plain sight on the *terraza* so her regular *clientes* will spot her for their lottery tickets. Like Gregorio, she is the unconscious recorder of their daily history. Ask Elvira, they say. Elvira says, Ask Santi. Santi is one waiter who mouths too much, and not always behind the scenes. Gregorio is thinking of letting him go.

The stranger has a fine cane but no limp. Perhaps it's the cane that intimidates. Sometimes he sits with it poised between his legs, one hand over the other on its head, formal as a judge. Like Vicente he sits the evening out. Early, as usual, Lola gives her *Hasta mañana* and is pulled anxiously down the street by the German shepherd. As the evening goes, the tables fill and empty. The three widows leave for their evening meal. Even Elvira leaves before Vicente. By eleven usually all but tourists and perhaps a straggler or two have gone home. Vicente is uncomfortable. Gregorio is standing in the doorway. He appears to be indifferently surveying the plaza, but he is perfectly attuned to Vicente. Vicente has kept him in the doorway frequently this night with idle talk. You saw that ETA blew up the presidential candidate's car? The *Invanta's* wedding's in Barcelona—why not Madrid? Those *pimientos* kept me awake all night. Ah, those *pimentos*! Gregorio is aware. It is not Vicente's first nervous night. Of late he has given Gregorio many little indications. It is Vicente's time to leave, but he goes on sitting. Susceptible, Gregorio knows when his presence is a comfort but he is constantly being called inside.

Vicente is quite factual. He is not given to imagining things. And he is no insomniac. But he can pinpoint the night—ten?—ten days ago, yes, Wednesday, when he woke—not to urinate, with no headache, no worry. He fretted to Gregorio: a bad night last night. Of course he thought nothing of it on Thursday. Or Friday. Or Saturday. But then came the thought it was some kind of beginning.

Beginning of what? He could only tell himself *sounds*. Because, while awake, he heard a regular, light, well-spaced tap, tap, tap. At the café Gregorio's eye on him meant Gregorio was aware he was nervous, but what would Gregorio think if he said, Gregorio, I'm hearing things? And one evening later—that was a week ago—tired from two nights of fitful sleep, he had to say a word because Gregorio said, You look a wreck. Gregorio didn't ask, Something at the bank? But his glance straight across Toledo at the Central Hispano spoke. No, not work. Bad sleep. Dreams. Imagine—me! I never dream, Vicente said, but did not say *eye*, an eye kept coming, came down on him, a single eye. It startled him out of sleep. Waking, for a lingering instant he saw it clear in the bedroom dark before the lid closed over it. When he slept, the lid opened again.

Vicente is grateful for the café's bright outside lights. If he closes his eyes now, he may see it—or the mouth. It was enough to tell Gregorio about the eye. He does not say and the next night I dreamed a mouth. A mouth! And smiling! The third night he was almost afraid to close his eyes. He was confused. Why was he dreaming parts? He racked his brain, trying to fit them together. Was that it—his brain challenging him to fit them together? But he couldn't.

Vicente?

He realizes Gregorio has been talking to him now, about the ETA bombing. *Suerte que fue un coche blindado.*

An armored car?

Sí, blindado, Gregorio says. He notes that the stranger—at the table facing Vicente—nods as if Gregorio were addressing him.

The car saved Aznar and the driver's lives, Gregorio says.

At this moment, across from the Mercado, the late performance of the comedy with Lina Morgan at La Latina lets out. People pour into the streets and down the Metro entrances, and in no time the *terraza* is filled with latecomers. But since one waiter has already left, because of the rush Gregorio himself is needed. Gregorio is perfectly aware that at this moment Vicente is dependent on his presence. And he has been aware all week of the movements of the stranger, though he must confess that it was

only after the first week that he sensed some puzzle . . . design? . . . in the way the stranger chose a table each night. From Vicente's increasing distractions, he knows Vicente too has perceived some logic in the man's motions. Not many nights passed before Gregorio noted that it would be an instant after Vicente left each evening that the stranger, in the most casual way, would rise and stroll along the sidewalk and also turn into Maldonadas Street. Gregorio is surprised that no overt indication has come from Vicente.

The man is sitting facing Vicente. Fortunately, the theatergoers have surrounded them, creating a frenzy of sparkling talk and laughter, so a turn of head or shift of body allows his interest to seem to wander naturally to other tables. An occasional involuntary tap reduces the man to the cane. Nights past, when going home, Vicente heard that sound, regular, regular, behind, beyond, but when he halted and turned, expecting that dark, insistent presence, a taxi passed—nobody, and at each corner nobody. And, once inside, he looked down into the street from his *piso* on third: nobody. Had he imagined? But no. The next night and the next, no sooner had he entered when he heard the tap. What else but that cane? Had his preoccupation with that presence let him in? Had he let the man cross some invisible line? Foolishness! Why would anyone pursue *him*? Still, this is a mad time we're living in.

He stares at that cane now. He does not have to raise his eyes to the man. He knows that cane. The cane is wood, mahogany with a metal tip, the handle the head of a dog, a sleek greyhound.

He knows Gregorio senses his erratic behavior—silences, stares, distractions—because after any number of times asking what? what's that, Gregorio? Gregorio kidded him: Ay, you've got your ears plugged, Vicente? So he laughed, but couldn't laugh away the image. And he *did* want to tell Gregorio that, but he could picture Gregorio's absorbed but noncommittal look and he dared not risk his judgment. In fact—but perhaps he has, and with every justification, imagined this too—Gregorio has been observing him more and more closely. Yes, Vicente is aware of Gregorio's attentive—vigilant?—eyes and of some questioning, cautious, even measuring tone in Gregorio's voice. But how could he tell Gregorio this: Three nights ago in my dream I woke up and

a man, shadowy, vague, was standing at the foot of the bed, then went into the shadows and out my bedroom door. I threw the covers off and followed through the *piso*, out, down the stairs, into the street. He went far ahead, down a street, another, always far and dark and shadowy. I didn't know those streets; I couldn't reach him so I went back, exhausted, and got into bed, slept, and woke in that dream—and he was standing there in the shadows.

How did he get into my dream?

Evenings after, he was afraid to go down to the San Millán, but, despite fear, the mystery had the fascination of destruction: he felt impelled, he could not resist.

Good he did not. The next night he joined Elvira at her usual table. Elvira was a talker. It relaxed him. He could drift. And he was amused. Elvira and Santi had a running bicker between them. Santi did not consider her a *cliente* but a fixture who sat day and night over a single *café con leche* plaguing him for a glass of water, an *aperitivo*, a wipe of the table, which he gave grudgingly, fussing aloud, descending to insults, indifferent to the *clientes*' overhearing it all and to Elvira's embarrassment. But, Santi, I'm not a *cliente* too? The tiffs did not go unnoticed by Gregorio. Apart, he said, *Por favor*, Santi, Elvira's been a *cliente* years now. Santi firmed his lips, rolled his eyes in scorn, went on muttering. And that night Elvira startled Vicente: When the man with the cane emerged from the Metro and sat at a table, Elvira smiled and raised her fan to him. The man returned the smile—smiled!—with a glimmer of gold tooth. Vicente was caught not by the tooth but the smile, something about the smile, the face smiling.

He's on vacation, Elvira confided, from Valladolid.

Ah, on vacation.

All he thought at the moment was: the man then would go, leave Madrid. He sank back in his chair with such relief. But why relief? Why should he care? The man has done nothing, he told himself, I've let his presence somehow play on my imagination. And that smile. The lone eye and the isolated mouth seemed to suggest a face—his, surely. Yes, he had taken it home fragmented, and the parts had floated into his dreams.

He felt suddenly light, laughed, laughed for no reason, felt animated and, laying his hand on Elvira's arm, launched into his old story. Elvira had heard it, hadn't she? Yes. But it was too good, he loved to tell it, how he rubbed shoulders with the assassin. I was in the crowd outside the Teatro Apolo the night Prince Felipe went to see *Le Míserables*: a jam, a dozen police cars at least, and the block cordoned off. Just when the prince stepped out of the car and stood, a man leaped onto another's back and aimed a pistol straight at the prince. If it hadn't been for a woman who threw herself against them, toppling them so the pistol fired wildly, we would have no prince now. But the worst thing for me—I was right beside them. I saw nothing till it was over, but the police hauled me in with others to the *Comisaría*, questioned me and kept me till they were positive I was innocent and no part of a conspiracy. His story triggered Elvira's tale of her husband's imprisonment by Franco during the war. A good night. The rapport relaxed him. Walking home in the hot, still air, he felt heady, felt a buoyancy in his steps. And he slept. How he slept! You see? You were tired, your imagination was preying on itself. In the morning, as if he had driven out some malign spirit, he felt light too, and the façade of the Central Hispano seemed so clean, and the aqua face of Barclay's next door to it shone. All day he zipped through papers, settling customers' problems with such fervor, laughing now and again, keeping Laurita rushed so that at his constant, quick movements she said affectionately the *ardilla*'s certainly busy. He laughed. When had she last called him the squirrel!

Nothing got past Gregorio. Busy next noon but not too busy to notice Vicente's ebullience, that evening he said, Elivra sold you the winning ticket, Vicente? For Vicente was not only his old self again—Gregorio was glad of that—but more than his old self; and that alerted Gregorio because Vicente had overnight come to indulge in unusual banter with the waiters and the regulars as if, incited by a rewarding business day, he had carried over from the bank not exhaustion but exuberance.

Both the café and *terraza* were crowded and neither Gregorio nor the waiters had a moment's breather, shouting orders into the

kitchen, loading their trays, rushing, and keeping the cashier busy. Then, when he did have a moment, Gregorio for the third time that night had to steer off the young addict staggering his way between tables with his hands cupped while mumbling his incoherent *Suthingfrasanich*, and divert the beggars who came irremediably night after night. At least the singers and guitarists playing from bar to bar earned their *pesetas*, even those who came in twos and threes with shaved heads or red orange green spiked hair or crests, in black leather and metal, playing the monotonous few notes they knew on the recorder. Vicente deplored them, usually favoring with *veinte duros* only the gypsy guitarist and the singer with the fine flamenco voice, but that night he dropped change into the punks' leather bag. Feeling jovial, Vicente smiled, greeted, talked. He could not believe. Such a reprieve! But from what? That mere presence, a figure who meant nothing to him? A cane? What kind of spell had he let his imagination cast over him? So pleasant the coolish late hour, the *plátano* leaves rustling overhead, the broken rush of traffic, the voices, the workers headed home for the night, and this comfortable familiar circle of light. . . Though he thought of work tomorrow, he stayed longer than he should. And intending to go in to relieve himself in the basement, he stood and turned.

It was a bolt: The man was staring straight at him.

He was sitting at the table behind him.

Vicente had barely enough presence not to cry out. For only an instant, halted, he stood unnerved: how long had he been there? When had he arrived? He hadn't seen him come out of the Metro. Then he turned not inside but home, hurried off with as much restraint as dignity allowed, hearing Elvira call out *buenas noches, Vicente*; and he flagged to her but hurried on, feeling a sudden thing vague yet palpable as an insect moving about in his head. What? How that vagueness agitated! And his agitation quickened like a live thing swelling against the walls of his chest. He let his breath break only when he rounded the corner out of sight.

Gregorio came out to the *terraza* just in time to see the man with the cane saunter across the open space, pass the Metro entrance and turn into Maldonadas. And Vicente? he asked Elvira.

Ooof, gone, just a minute ago gone, she said, and *rápido*. *Rápido*, hey? Gregorio said. *Sí*, *sí*, Elvira said. And Gregorio: *Qué raro*! And it *was* strange. Vicente rarely left before Elvira. So, as Gregorio had increasingly suspected, something was happening, something . . . what? . . . close but blurred as a steamed window. And from Vicente's recent behavior, Gregorio was half convinced that Vicente himself did not know what was happening. Vicente's spirits were first up, then down, up, down. Not the everyday Vicente.

Home, Vicente sat, breathless. *Why* breathless? What *is* this? Your blood goes hot and cold like a faulty thermometer. Loud he said, Calm yourself right now. He sat in the armchair. Pulled the lamp chain. Dark. Closed his eyes. Rest, rest. But hadn't he relaxed tonight in a flush of talk, so comfortable with Elvira over a drink or two more than usual? But this wall of stillness kept nothing out. The more still he was, the more his broken thoughts riled, breeding fragments, chaotic as trapped insects battering to get out. Something in the dark . . . far . . . came and came. Close, it veered, and abruptly—he knew—it was that vague face. He turned his head from it but the face moved with his eyes, and to cut off the hard glare he jerked the lamp chain and at the same time heard Elvira's voice echo from nights before: *from Valladolid*.

Valladolid.

Lucas had been born in Valladolid. Lucas! For a moment Vicente was overcome by nostalgia for his old friend. . . . Two years now since his suicide.

Vicente had gone to the *tanatorio* alone to view Lucas. There had been no funeral, no burial. Surely a relative had claimed the ashes. Lucas did have a brother, and in Valladolid. Vicente had never seen him. A brother.

He went cold with it. He could not bear to think about Lucas. From the very day of Lucas's death he had insisted on not thinking about his suicide, walling it out, as nearly impossible as that was, because Lucas had been everywhere around him—at work, at the San Millán, at home. After Lucas's suicide he had stayed at home days, sick with it, and then he went back to work and had avoided the San Millán. Leaving the bank, he would not cross Toledo to

the café but turn quickly left out the door and descend Toledo to cross at Colegiata, taking a roundabout route to his place on Lavapies.

When after more than a week away he appeared at noon for the usual Monday menu, *lentejas*, his favorite, how glad they all were to see him! And how at home he felt! He was grateful, deeply relieved, that Gregorio and Elvira and the regulars did not dwell mercilessly on Lucas's crime.

Embezzling! That hard stare had brought it back. He sat, gazed, mulled. In bed all night long over and over that week unfurled, repeated, repeated. Why? He did not *want* it, could not bear it again, that horrendous week. But something willed it, against his will willed it, willed himself in it: he watched himself, bewildered but fastidious, discover the irregular transaction. That discrepancy led him to a careful tracing of the Ponce Industrial account: back, for some years back. The periodic discrepancies were generous sums, but what fascinated was the long-range, meticulous, *regular* irregularity: Lucas had been draining the difference between normal payments and fraudulent periodic increases—and how could that be? Vicente said nothing until he had gone back and demonstrated indubitably that the parallel Ponce account existed in name only, all laid out clear and "innocent" in the computer; and that, also beyond doubt, the account had been initiated and automatic postings maintained by Lucas. Lucas! How could Lucas betray the bank and himself and him? How could his friend? How? His first impulse was to wish he could backtrack, undo his discovery, undo the discrepancy itself, close his eyes to that one simple chance discovery of a misspelling, *Ponze*, which had led him to the false Ponce account.

Vicente had sat at his desk gazing through the glass. Lucas had looked up and caught his eye. Vicente did not smile. He dropped his eyes to the desk, confused; not only angry, but agitated, forlorn, and feeling betrayed, by his friend trapped. His friend! He felt an unbearable swelling. He waited, waited till he thought he could speak, lay the whole pattern out to his *gerente*. When finally he gained control, he went to Roberto. I have the worst thing to

say, he said, and laid it out. When, shortly after, Roberto rose from his computer, he called Lucas to his office. Lucas surely realized because he halted an instant before Vicente's office with what to Vicente seemed a slumped stance and an ensnared look. Vicente could not stay. Laurita, he said, I'm leaving early.

In the morning he called in sick. He *was* sick. His thoughts moiled like live things in him. If only he could vomit and spew them out visibly. He could not think clearly. His feelings churned. Lucas. He was prostrated by the dilemma. He could not pull himself out of it. Everybody knew what friends he and Lucas were and surely understood when he stayed home too distraught to work the rest of the week—three days.

On the Saturday after that discovery the Rosales woman in the apartment below Lucas's found him hanging from the wrought iron balustrade in the hallway between the third and fourth floors.

Lucas!

The next day it was all Vicente could do to pull himself together, dress, and drive out M-30 to the *tanatorio* to see Lucas for the last time before the cremation.

Back at work, he was moved by the quiet sympathy most of the others showed him, though there were the usual several, sulky and complaining, who showed the uncustomary distance, perhaps because he and Lucas had been such constant dinner companions, perhaps believing he was not clean in the Lucas affair. What else but guilt could cause him to avoid work and stay home all that time?

Nobody was more pleased to see him than Gregorio. Day after day, Gregorio said, waiters and *clientes* and especially Elvira had been concerned about him. How glad they all were to have him back. And how discreetly they skirted the matter of the bank and Lucas.

Gregorio observed how, in such a short time, Vicente had fallen off: He was not merely pale but thinner and nervous. You haven't been eating right. Back to our lentils, he said. But, more revealing, Gregorio noticed for the first few days how Vicente's gaze seemed to fall into a channel and fix: he was not listening.

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He is not listening now. Gregorio is saying something about the striking French farmers marching on Paris. Gregorio raises his voice above the sudden cries and shouts coming from inside the café because Real Madrid has won the game, but he finally gives up. The game over, instantly the exodus home for the night meal begins. In no time only a few clients remain. Ramón comes out and begins to take in the umbrellas and remove the stands. And it is then that Vicente catches the man's undeviating gaze on him. Clearly the man bends forward, straight toward him. Vicente is fascinated. He cannot move his eyes from the other's.

But the stranger moves. In a second he is standing over him.

Me permite? he says, his hand on a chair.

Vicente, bewildered, nods but he cannot hold: The instant the man is seated, he utters I'm Vicente Prado.

I know you, the man says.

Know *me*? But how?

The man sets his cane between his legs. I'm Lucas's brother, he says, Mariano.

After two years this should be a moment of surprise and the greatest pleasure—Lucas's brother!—but there is nothing pleasing in either the brother's look or tone, and there is only the accumulated suspense, and fear, in Vicente.

The man reaches in the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

As if to besiege him, allowing him no time to fathom, the brother unfolds and spreads two newspaper clippings with photos of Lucas from the front page of *El País*.

Lucas. The embezzlement. The suicide.

The face does besiege.

Lucas is staring up at him.

Vicente shifts his eyes to the brother. No, he realizes, he has never seen the brother until now, not at the *tanatorio*, not even in dreams.

What? he says, confused but expectant.

You think my brother didn't know he might one day be caught? Lucas took that risk. He was wrong, but I don't question his motives. They were his. *He* had to live with himself. He could even have endured jail, he told me.

Told you?

Here. I was here. I came at once. He was my brother—don't you understand?—*mi hermano*! The man's voice quavers. And *yours*.

Mine?

Yes, he *was*.

And you couldn't have saved him?

Saved him? Only one person could have saved Lucas.

The brother gazes so long at him that Vicente is cowed.

I'd have given anything, anything, to save my brother. Lucas didn't *want* to be saved.

Didn't want to be!

The brother gives him a long, hard look and then retrieves the clippings, folds them and puts them away, grips his cane, and stands. His fingers go white on the cane.

He's going to strike me, Vicente thinks.

But *you*! the brother says with such scorn that Vicente shrinks within. In your heart you know why your friend hung himself, don't you?

Because he was—

No, *not* because he was caught embezzling!

Vicente wants to close his eyes, shut him out, but the brother's gaze holds him stunned: They are Lucas's eyes.

Would *you* commit suicide if the one friend you loved turned his back on you?

Vicente utters a moan. But the brother gives him no reprieve.

That's what killed Lucas, that betrayal.

He strikes the pavement with his cane. And with a last hard look at him, he turns and crosses the *terraza*. Vicente watches him go down the Metro steps, dark against the light, and disappear below.

He will not come back, he will never come back. He will not have to, Vicente knows, because he will always be here.

Vicente sits slumped in the chair a long time, gazing across at the mouth of the Metro—seeing himself sitting in the bank,

watching Lucas pass his window, halt to look up at him, then go on to talk to the *gerente*—before he realizes Gregorio has been standing in the entrance throughout the encounter. He watches now as the waiters stack the tables to chain them together by the *plátano*. All the taxis must be busy, the line is empty; the market has long been closed and all the shops; the theater marquee is dark, the last performance over; the traffic is sporadic. On the *terraza* the young couple who have been holding hands, kissing and murmuring, finally leave. Inside, the waiters are noisily cleaning up, surely glad the night's almost over. Alone, Vicente sits silent, sunken, staring into the pavement.

Gregorio sees how upset he is. Vicente looks up. His face is stricken, his look imploring. Gregorio is familiar with that look, the unconscious look of despair that needs a confessor. Yes, Gregorio knows. All the years hasn't the San Millán been an ear for confessions? Fallen secrets settle like dust for the nightly broom. Locking the door, he must leave them behind. Each day brings its burden. Day and night the café is bright, a refuge of light. But Gregorio has heard the conversation.

Vicente knows Gregorio has heard it. Vicente knows too that Gregorio's head is filled with knowledge of his *clientes*, knowledge that is locked in him forever. And it is that, Vicente realizes, which he cannot bear. Gregorio, who understands—Vicente feels that understanding—will say no word to him, he will never mention that confrontation. That silence—though cruelty cannot be Gregorio's intention—is worse than any overt judgment.

Gregorio . . .

Vicente's voice vibrates between agony and fury. That brother! he is thinking. Gregorio, he wants to cry out, you see what that brother has brought me?

Gregorio, standing between the café and the *terraza* as the waiters prepare for closing, nods.

From inside someone turn off the *terraza* floodlights, leaving only shafts of light falling from the café windows.

At that Vicente stands. *Hasta, mañana*, *Gregorio*, he says.

God willing, Gregorio says.

Vicente hears the protective *persianas* drawn down over the café windows with a thunderous metallic reverberation.

And he goes his unvaried route, along Maldonadas and across the Plaza de Cascorro and through Encomienda and Jesús y María and Calvario to Lavapies. Though he is seething with thoughts of *him*, *that brother*, and *you, Lucas*, he is slow, heavy, carrying inside him what will not stop growing. And when he unlocks the street door to the building, he hauls himself by the bannister up the three flights to his door. He stands staring at the peephole. Why does he dread going in? He shuts the door and stands with his head against it in the dark. If only he could stand suspended this way forever! He dreads the light, but he switches it on and turns to the mirror and stares at that face which he must confront at last.

You! he says, staring at what Lucas has left him.

Contributors

Gary Beining's work has recently appeared in the *Iowa Review*, the *South Carolina Review*, *Fiction International*, and other reviews and journals.

Robert P. Cooke has published his writing in such reviews and periodicals as *The Sun*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Sou'wester*, *Sycamore*, and *Southern Poetry Review*.

Joseph Danieluk's stories have appeared in *West Branch*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Roanoke Review*, and other publications.

H.E. Francis has published two novels and six collections of short stories. An O. Henry and Pushcart Prize winner, his collections have also won the Iowa School of Letters Award for Short Fiction and the G.S. Sharat Chandra Prize for Short Fiction.

Christopher Heffernan has published poetry and fiction in the *Writer's Journal* and the *Summerset Review*, as well as other reviews and anthologies. His book of poetry and flash fiction, *Rag Water*, was published by Fly By Night Press.

Benjamin Obler's novel, *Javascotia*, was published in 2009 by Penguin Books UK. A *Puerto del Sol* fiction contest winner, he teaches at the Gotham Writer's Workshop in New York City and online at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis.

Marlene Olin's short stories have been published or are forthcoming in such journals as the *Massachusetts Review*, *Prime Number*, *Upstreet Magazine*, the *American Literary Review*, and *Arts and Letters*. She is the winner of the 2015 Rick DeMarinis Short Fiction Award.

Simon Perchik's poems have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *The B Poems* published by Poets Wear Prada.

Susan Rich is the author of four poetry collections, her most recent being *Cloud Pharmacy* and *The Alchemist's Kitchen*. She has received awards from PEN USA, *The Times* (London) and the Fulbright Foundation. She co-edits *The Strangest of Theatres* by *McSweeney's* and the Poetry Foundation.

Jason Roberts has published his poetry in *Free Inquiry* and *POEM.* He was awarded second place in the 2007 Southern Literary Festival.

Linda Taylor's poems have appeared in the *Indiana Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, the *Massachusetts Review*, *Nimrod*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and numerous other reviews and journals. Her book *Sun on My Back Like a Hand* was a finalist in the White Pine Press first book competition.

Jeff Tigchelaar has published poetry in *Pleiades*, *LIT*, *North American Review*, and in various anthologies including *Best New Poets.* His first book, *Certain Streets at an Uncertain Hour*, was published in 2015 by Woodley Press.

Rodney Torreson's work has appeared in the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *New York Quarterly*, *Seattle Review*, and in many other reviews and anthologies. His most recent collection, *The Secrets of Fieldwork*, was published by Finishing Line Press.

John Sibley Williams is the author of nine collections, including *Controlled Hallucinations* and *Disinheritance*, published in 2016. His work has appeared in the *Midwest Quarterly*, *december*, *Third Coast*, *Nimrod*, the *Baltimore Review*, and various other reviews and anthologies.