cottonwood

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Diane Hueter
Michael S. Moos
James Redwood

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Contents

Stephanie Coyne DeGhett	Picture Book	7
MaryEllen Beveridge	The Émigrés	21
Diane Hueter	Two Women Talking on a Winter Morning	42
Michael S. Moos	Prairie Rain	44
Anthony Tao	Anna Karenina in Suburban America	45
Andrew Jarvis	Biology	46
Amanda Tumminaro	Confessions of a Cat Lady	47
John M. Bellinger	Gabriel	48
Eugenie Juliet Theall	Bloody Scrap	49
Holly Hendin	Moth	50
Paul Felsch	Passage	51
John Sibley Williams	Abacus	52
James D. Redwood	The Scarf	53
Keith Lesmeister	Elements of the Body	67
Michael Onofrey	Desert Neighbors	89
Contributors		101

Stephanie Coyne DeGhett

Picture Book

What you're watching, she thinks, *is the rest of a perfect couple's lunch playing out*. They—Nathalie and Jules—are on the terrace of a restaurant, a lake in view across the street, glinting diamonds in the faint choppiness of its surface. There are kayakers on the lake, slivers of bright orange and blue and yellow leaving pencil-thin wakes. Orange and red leaves against the sheet of blue sky.

And what happens now, she says to herself, *is that you coach yourself through, like a performance*. An encore performance. That is, point out the reflections of the trees in the lake, the blue in the mounds of low mountains humping along the opposite shore, talk about the bear motif on every mug and T-shirt in the shops: bear paw chocolates at the chocolatier's, framed bear posters at the furnishings store. At the bookstore, a display of bear-themed picture books: bears in their traditional fairy tale trio, bears in photographs in a little wildlife series, a bear in a brightly embroidered vest in a story set in wintry Russia. In a restaurant entryway, mechanical bears as big as cubs twirling in the window. They won't buy any of these, though she will, later, on an errand for lattes from their hotel room, take pictures of the spinning bears. During the perfect couples' lunch, they will make evening plans for a walk around the lake, a movie, the photography show at the arts center. And she will hope that the performance itself can kindle the real thing—joy—back to life.

That old hope.

And what he's said is this: "Didn't you date a kayaker? Is that why we're here? Your riff on old times, memories of skinny-dipping Adirondack lakes with the kayaker?"

The choice of the weekend's terrain had actually been his, though she knew better than to engage the comment by pointing that out. She had indeed once gone swimming at night with the boy-man he called the kayaker, the pair of them like Adirondack

porpoises, pale and glistening in the moonlight, laughing with every surface breach and splash. In fact, that was the backstory to the glass porpoise paperweight—a long-ago gift—on her desk. Even though he had gotten his stab-in-the-dark so on target in that unnatural way of his, Jules wasn't aware that the paperweight was any kind of token. At first, that was the result of some early common sense of no-old-lover talk. And later she realized he would never let the thought of it go if he knew, not until that object was off her desk—broken, apparently by mistake, or had disappeared mysteriously or was stashed, by her, in a remote drawer behind a wad of socks or in some other region where good memories go to hibernate. He wouldn't have let it go until the old memory was spoiled. Or until he walked out her door.

She had been believing again in the little miracle of who they might be together, she and Jules. *Different this time*, is how the chat in her head went. *Not just different, fixed. Nearly perfect*.

Now came the tutorial session.

If queried later about his lakeside comment, Jules would say he was joking, apologize for his failed humor. If pursued, that is confronted, with the idea he was indulging in retro-jealous zingers again, he would do something loud and memorable that she would have to work hard to forget.

Instead, she left him, again.

"Not just because I made a comment about that old boyfriend," he says when she tells him it's over. "Not when the weekend was so wonderful."

"We've been here before," she says. She doesn't mention she knows he's been in her email, deleting messages from Charley, a new client at the frame shop—whom he mistakenly thinks is a guy—and from Ed who is a guy, a much older guy, the owner of her favorite restaurant, The Desert Marigold. Nathalie's painting a mural on his wall. There are other missing emails from work—she manages The Brush Stroke, a venerable old art supplies and frame shop that she keeps from teetering out of business for an owner who keeps threatening retirement. She puts together a calendar of

mini-art classes in calligraphy or making miniature books and has bimonthly openings for regional artists.

There are even missing messages from her best friend, Kara, who runs The Desert Marigold for Ed. Maybe she should have registered these events more clearly instead of letting the old familiarity of commonplace invasions soften her sense of intrusion. *So*, she thinks, *we were already there*. Already in their old troubles before they even took the ferry across Lake Champlain to the Adirondacks, where a little mountain town would become the latest map tack in the geography of their serial disintegrations: confrontation in a favorite Boston museum, accusations in a coastal Maine restaurant.

It was never easy to let him go. Both times before, she moped, watched movies that reminded her of him, replayed the mental video of their good times minus the nasty bits, talked about him a lot to Kara while they sat in The Desert Marigold in the hour before it opened at four—rehearsing, usually, his fine qualities in alternate doses with can-you-believe-he-actually-hacked-my-account stories. And, then, both times, there was the email—*Want lunch?*—two words, somehow deftly timed. And she, hungry, like a soul in hibernation, would say *yes.* And it would begin well.

"What did you get out of it when you two are together, anyway?" asks Kara. "It must be that the sex was amazing." Nathalie is on the scaffolding set up at The Desert Marigold so she could complete the mural: a giant sun that begins on the upper reaches of the wall, its rays the long blades of leaves peeled from a cornstalk, ribbed and slightly furled. Kara has tilted a chair—bright in coral and yellow paint—against the wall so she can look up at her friend while she works.

"Of course, that's what you'd say," Nathalie says. That part of their relationship, hers and Jules', was fine—but what she actually got, the thing that was so hard to let go of, was that she felt awake when she was with him. Simply that, awake.

The somnolent quality to her life—years the truth—responded to very little. Not to self-coaching or new surroundings or new

activities. Her personal sense of dormancy—being muffled from the world, feeling there-but-not-there—has always been resistant. Living with what she thinks of as her dormancy disorder is, in some ways, easy enough—it doesn't show, after all. As a kid, she had literally slept a lot—an apartment full of worries disappeared that way—but she has refined the technique a lot over time. Or it has refined itself. She feels she has had as much choice in the whole dormancy thing as a tamarack turning shock-yellow and dropping its needles, a turtle submerging in the dark organic silt of some quiet waterway. *One day you wake up the color of sulfur and start shedding needles, or one day*, she thinks, *you find yourself breathing a little shallower in that carapace of yours and start to slowly sink and then burrow into the mud*.

"Maybe the third time is the charm," says Kara.

"Maybe," says Nathalie, who has been waiting to be seized by the inevitable numbness that sets in whenever they break up. Later, waiting for Kara at the bar of The Desert Marigold, she takes out her phone and plays the video of the trio of mechanical bears twirling and finds herself laughing instead of hitting delete. A quick flicker of delight. Apparently the numbness hasn't begun to settle in.

No email arrives. By the end of fall, signs of her old somnolence have begun to settle on her. She forages more for food, finishing the last bit of Kara's cheesecake, and doubles up on sweaters at home, burrowing into the big comfortable chair and staying there sometimes just for the sake of staying there.

No email in early winter. She is trying to stay awake and it's nearly working. She puts on the annual juried photography show at the shop and wears bright scarves—reds and oranges and blue. She keeps half a dozen on pegs near the door. Often, she hangs out with Kara at The Desert Marigold. She is not, is not, is not waiting for an email. Sometimes she plays the mini-video, twirling bears in a store window.

When she was small and denning her covers into a comforting wad, she could hear the angry voices in the apartment rise and fall, like loud but remote growling and snarling. No words registered,

just the immensity of the conflict. She would rouse in the morning still unrested. And hungry. She would sneak graham crackers into her pockets as she left for school, come home to nap. She slept days into night, then slept night through to morning. Later she mastered hibernating with her eyes open, out in the world but asleep nonetheless. She knows, or she thinks she knows, what a bear in her lair can hear. She knows that hibernation isn't sleep, that one rouses from it hungry and deprived of rest, that it takes all available resources. That it is as demanding as traveling a thousand miles.

If hibernation were sleep, it was sleep that knew itself as sleep. In the woods it might be bodily awareness of leaf and root, the scent of cold earth and spruce bark. The sound of footsteps, distant gunshots and hunters, coyote howl, all happening a universe away. Here it is the bodily awareness of layers of old sweaters and zippered jackets and gloves to root out of pockets, the walk to work on sidewalks ridged in curbs of plowed snow, the pure scent of simple coldness and of car exhaust hanging in frigid air. The sound of boots crunching on snow, the distant sound of voices around her talking in the coffee shop, the sound of the furnace kicking on when she opened The Brush Stroke. All happening a universe away.

A cold January night, the first deep-winter night that promised a double-digit below-zero plunge, Nathalie slips into The River's Edge, a narrow new-and-used bookstore that specializes in gardening and tarot books, old art books and books on fence- shed- and barn-building, books on natural history and children's books.

Halfway toward the back of the shop, a narrow bookcase is built beside the frame of a window that looks out on the black ribbon of river rippling lights from the buildings that rise from its banks, including the sign of The Desert Marigold. A shelf on the bookcase holds the owner's favorite finds. This is not announced by a card that says *Staff Picks.* This is a more secret stash, disguised as random vintage books. She once found a very old field guide to insects, each color plate a marvel. She once found a small

but extraordinary desserts cookbook. Today the only newcomer volumes are a short stretch of slim-spined children's picture books. The last book is faced forward: *Blanche Neige et Rouge Rose. Snow White and Rose Red* in a French edition she has never seen or even knew existed. The illustrator is Nik, the artist for her favorite books when she was a kid. Each picture as familiar to her as a recurrent dream. The bear in the forest. The ripple and gleam of his fur.

And here is memory, come rushing back. Nathalie at three, maybe four. Forgotten at the sitter's. A series of phone calls resulted in her aunt retrieving her. *Sorry sorry sorry* said Tiny at the door of the sitter's house. *I'll be picking her up Fridays from now on.*

Once in the car, Nathalie didn't ask about where her mother might be. Tiny did hair and smelled of shampoo and the ingredients that went into permanents. These smells, both familiar and sharp, mixed with the smell simply of deep cold. The car heater was going, its fan a small burred roar. It was late on a cold day and Nathalie was suddenly overtaken by sleepiness. *Don't you go to sleep*, said Tiny. *We have places to go and I can't leave you to snooze in the car.*

The drugstore. A snowy day, late, evening crowding into afternoon, the front window of the store gone black and reflective as mirrors when she looked out into the parking lot. A spin rack of children's books near the pharmacy section of the drugstore, near first aid and vitamins.

Pick one, any one you want, any 99-center. Just park it till I'm done, Tiny said.

Nathalie chose *Snow White and Rose Red* because one of the girls on the cover had brown hair, like hers, as brown as the fur of the bear the pair of girls rode on. She chose it because it was winter now and there was a winter scene—a pair of girls listening to stories, a fire leaping in the fireplace, the falling snow framed in the window. And then a knock on the door. A bear filling the doorframe, shaking its great brown coat until a flurry of snowflakes fell on the hearth rug.

Eventually the 99-centers came to fill nearly a foot of shelf space in her room, acquired a quarter-inch at a time, most from the spin rack at the drugstore, most from Tiny. There were six or seven illustrated by Nik.

Almost all the books Nathalie finds at The River's Edge are 99-centers, but in French. *Blanche Neige et Rouge Rose* is there—and *Boucle d'Or et les trois ours* and *Beaudelaire l'ours*. Beside these is a small four-volume boxed set of stories about the seasons set in a woodland full of young animals—including a bear cub. Stories in French she has never seen before. There is also a translation of Russian fairy tales called *The Bear*, published in Paris in the 1930s. All illustrated by Nik. She is in her perpetual state of being nearly broke. She buys them all.

All those years ago, Nik illustrated a story called *Beaudelaire the Bear* about a bear who lived in the north woods and liked winter so much he didn't hibernate. In spite of his red anorak and the fact that he got around on snowshoes, there was a transfixing "bear-ness" to Beaudelaire, and drawing bears was her remembered beginning for loving to draw and then paint. She had, in fact, tried to apprentice herself to Nik with her skinny tin of watercolors—purchased from the same drugstore as her small library. She painted a series of Beaudelaires—trying for rich brown fur, trying not to ruin the little pan of yellow by her attempts to make golden highlights—in the margins of the book.

At The Brush Stroke, she decides to do a display of children's book illustration. The store carries a selection of children's picture books about real and imagined artists: colorful paperback bios of Pollock, O'Keefe, Warhol, and the fictional life of a little girl who posed for Renoir. Storybooks about magic paintbrushes and artist-mice in tiny berets with immense paintbrushes dripping primary colors. She chooses a few more titles for the inventory, makes a book order. For display, there will be staff-lent volumes of illustrated books.

Her own 99-centers have long since disappeared. That is just as well. Finding them in the cartoned debris of her mother's last

apartment would have touched her old companions with sadness. Her newly found copy of *Beaudelaire* in French will be there, though, and the winter book from the boxed set about woodland seasons. It is called *Endormi et Éveillé*. In it, a mouse pokes its nose from a tunnel beneath the snow, a red squirrel leaves an embroidery of paw prints on the snow. And under an uprooted spruce, a bear in her lair is asleep. Nathalie likes the fact that small birds have landed in the spruce because she knows the bear would hear the busy sounds they make in the branches.

And then comes the email. *Want a bite to eat?*

Why not come to the apartment? she responds. *I'll fix something for both of us*. She is hungry, she realizes. Not ravenous but hungry. Not asleep, but still having to coach herself. Missing Jules a little still. The good bits. Maybe a little weary of the work of staying awake.

Whenever she took him back, it surprised no one among their friends. Their skirmishes, his mini-rages, her exits and disappearing acts, the weeks-long separations and months-long break-ups formed a theme—like the assigned character attributes of the friend who is always late but loved anyway, the one who never gets the joke, the one who can be counted on for a ride. Jules and Nathalie were the on-again-off-again pair. The of-course-they're-back-together pair.

"Do you think this time will be the charm?" asks Kara, while they have a coffee before opening at The Desert Marigold. Outside the snow is falling again, tiny flakes that feel like icy pinpricks. Stalks of last summer's sunflowers are bristling through the accumulating snow in the window box painted to resemble Mexican tiles. Kara is assuming already that Jules coming back into Nathalie's life in the old ways is just a matter of time. Kara's own love life had less emotional investment and more activity.

How to explain that something is different this time, Nathalie wonders. She's told Kara about finding the little stash of books, but not that she's started painting watercolors again. Right now just the telling would be like rubbing the dust off a moth's wings.

How to tell her I haven't dropped my needles this time? How to say that it was a close call, but this time I didn't submerge in the cool silt.

"Feels different this time," she says.

When Jules comes over, the books she is sorting through as she gets ready for the opening night of the children's book illustration exhibit are still in a sprawl on the living room floor, the books in French that Nik illustrated among them.

"What's all this?" asks Jules. They are sitting in the living room, balancing plates on the arms of the chair and sofa. *Surprising how much fun a shared meal can be,* she thinks, reaching over and grabbing a second slice of apple cake.

Jules leans down and picks up *Snow White and Rose Red.* She's purchased a modern copy in English. "I remember these books," he says. "Engines that could. That kind of thing. I remember liking one about a dump truck."

"Nik," she says. "Nik is the illustrator. He was my f avorite as a kid. In fact that was my favorite book."

Jules looks interested. "Is this one of the books Tiny gave you?"

She's told him stories about Tiny. He's remembered. "Not the very same one," she says. She scoops up the books done in French to show him. She tells him how Nik escaped the Nazis in Paris. She's read an interview Nik gave decades ago to an art magazine. "His son is the model for a lot of his illustrations—Hansel, and Jack in *Jack in the Beanstalk.* Ivanko in *Ivan the Bear's Son*. He's the prince in this one." She is pointing to the young prince who has emerged from the bear suit in *Snow White and Rose Red.*

Later, Jules sits beside her on the sofa, pulls her close. "Want a bedtime story?" he whispers.

He thinks he's staying the night, she realizes. And is surprised to discover for herself that he is not. "Not yet," she says. "Let's take our time."

Jules seems fine with an arrangement that he didn't anticipate, nestling in closer, saying, "Sure."

On his way out, though, Jules picks up a book from her stack. "I'm surprised you don't look him up," he says, holding up *Snow White and Rose Red* and pointing to the prince. "Discuss your shared admiration for his father. Tell him you grew up taking his picture to bed with you."

They hadn't really even gotten to the good bits yet.

"You're not really working on being jealous of the elderly son of a long-dead picture book artist, are you?" she asks.

"I'm not jealous at all," he says.

Days later she parks in the side street behind The Desert Marigold, sits in her car going through the door pocket for change to put in the parking meter that is half-engulfed by a mini-Alp of accumulated shoveled snow. By the bridge, a man from the nearby group home and his aide are making their way through the snow, her hand on his elbow, his steps unsteady but deliberate.

The passenger door jerks open and inside its open wing, Jules. He is hollering, but the snarling words aren't reaching her yet. *Street fight* is what she thinks. *We're in the middle of a street fight*. She manages to hear that he is accusing her of some indiscreet affair. Sneaking in the back door to see Ed. *That again*. She tries to put the key back in the ignition, but the moment has begun to strobe. She thinks of bolting but he has already started to step back. The door slams.

Through the windshield Nathalie sees the aide try to steady her companion, who is now in an anxious teeter, trying to get away from the spot. The aide makes eye contact, holds up her phone in a query — does she want help? Nathalie shakes her head *no,* waves her off, starts the car, pulls away from The Desert Marigold.

Days later, Nathalie comes back again to finish up the mural. Just before noon, she and Kara roll the orange metal scaffolding away so they can see the full effect. They step back to the far wall, stand shoulder to shoulder.

"It's over before it even starts this time with Jules," Nathalie begins. She's going to tell it all, the meal, the books, what she said,

what he said. The hollering on the street, the frightened man, the whole thing.

"Listen to me," interrupts Kara.

Nathalie pauses.

"He hit on me," Kara says. "It was closing, Friday night. I'd had a lot to drink myself that night. I never do that but he started buying Kahlúa—Kahlúa rocks, Kahlúa and vodka, Kahlúa and vodka and cream." Kahlúa was Kara's favorite liqueur — but usually in coffee or cheesecake. "He said he wanted to talk about you. I let him walk me home. It was slippery. I was wobbly."

Kara is crying, Nathalie realizes. *Those are tears.* "How far did it go?" she asks, knowing that Jules thinks he has found a way not just to take a moment or a memory away this time, but a friend. The friend who listened to stories about him. Maybe, she thinks, there's been too much of that kind of bad-boyfriend storytelling anyway. *Is this a thought-out plan*, she asks Jules in her head, *or are you just an intuitive genius at this?* Nathalie reaches her arm around Kara's shoulder and gives her a small squeeze. "We're still friends," she says. "I think the corn stalk leaves as rays of the sun turned out great, don't you?"

Don't you go to sleep, she says to herself.

Nathalie works all day the Sunday before the show starts—The Brush Stroke closed, the window shades pulled down. She's as anticipatory about opening the doors the next day as she would be for the opening of a gallery exhibit. The next weekend and the weekend after, two regional picture book artists are coming to give presentations.

On Monday morning she arrives early, before the sidewalks are cleared. Pigeon tracks are imprinted across the dusting of snow on the cement doorstep of The Brush Stroke. Inside, she turns up the heat, adds *Blanche Neige et Rouge Rose* and the little winter book to the exhibit. She has installed a pyramid of tiered shelves on a wide table at the entrance to the backroom frame shop, visible from the door down the central aisle that moves through inks and sketchbooks and art kits for kids. Framed art from the visiting

artists is on the walls and for sale. Her own watercolor notebook is now always in her bag. It is hours before the shop opens and she is ready. The coffee maker in the back is making its early morning sounds.

UPS shows up with a delivery, the boxes radiating the cold of the unheated delivery truck. Lengths of framing in a long box, matboard heavy in its big carton, and a small package, wrapped in brown paper in that retro way she loves. It looks like a present, like a package that survived years of misplacement at the post office to arrive here, this morning.

The handwriting belongs to Jules and it's addressed to her. *Don't open it*, she thinks. *Just don't open it.* Street sounds recede. She stares at his handwriting. Familiar enough she can visualize the words on the card inside: *Sorry? I still love you?*

But under the brown wrapping paper, on top of a small cloth portfolio tied with a cloth ribbon, is a note that says *Not all of it was as innocent as a bear in a red coat. What do you think of* l'ancien pornographe *now?*

The gray cloth boards of the portfolio are a little rubbed but beautiful still. The title is in French—*Idylle d'hiver.* The illustrator is Nik, going by his full name *Andrei Nikolyev.* Nik, shaper of her imagination. Companion in her early hibernations. The date is 1933. Paris. Before the Nazis. Before his flight to the U.S. Long before his son and 99-center fame.

Untied, the portfolio reveals a sequence of old lithographs, the size of big postcards or old cabinet photographs. Signed. Numbered. She touches the signature. A note from Paris, from the bear illustrator. The first scene, a man and woman in a Paris bookstore, seen through the window from the street. They are not together. Then they are at the same table of books, shoulders nearly brushing against each other. Then leaving the bookstore, the narrowness of the doorway moving them close together, the book she has purchased under her elbow. On the street, not touching but throwing only one shadow. One of his hands on her waist or a little lower than her waist and the other hailing a cab. A light snow in the haze of the street light. Their footprints in the scrim of snow on

the sidewalk. *So,* she thinks, *he was always doing picture books, just not always for children*. An intensely erotic sequence, entirely narrative, direction clear even from the first moment.

Where did you find these? she asks Jules in her head. And only he could have found them, he and his talent for finding the hidden. *What did it cost you?* Nik's old political cartoons went for a great deal. Storyboard pages with his original watercolor sketches even more. What was Jules doing without in order to do this?

She turns the sheets, interleaved with tissue. Had she thought that the fairy tale prince had emerged from his bear suit fully clothed? *Apparently not,* she thinks.

So few colors. The graphite of the figures, the warm gold-tan of her coat, sash-waisted, her shape apparent in the drape of the soft wool. The pale red of her scarf, the pale red of the book she has purchased, the pale red of her mouth.

His coat falls open as he opens a taxi door. There is suppleness and bulk to their brief climb over the running board, their clamber into the taxi. The seam of a stocking shows. They look briefly awkward for the first time. Nathalie has read enough picture books to know what they are doing. They've scrambled the log, they're looking for a den.

At the hotel, the woman reaches up and removes an earring. There is an awkward wrangle of undergarments over her ears, an elegant collapse of hosiery on the floor. Nathalie realizes there are two pelts that need to be shed in this story.

The book has fallen open and face down on the floor. Is it a book with fine old illustrations or wonderful desserts—or maybe a book of folktales?

The face of the man in the lithograph sequence looks like the photos of Nik, the artist painting himself into the story. Her old bear protector. So, here he is with his bear suit off. Rose Red has worked the charm. Someplace Nathalie has read that a bear looks remarkably human when skinned. Apparently that is true. At least according to lithograph no.11. Nathalie spins the next lithograph page upside down to get a look at the woman's expression.

Éveillée. She lays out all the images on the framer's work surface. The old storyteller and his paintbox had more than one life.

How many things had Jules hoped to spoil with this explicit, amatory tryst, Nathalie wonders. She interleaves the lithographs with their tissue again, ties them back into their portfolio, drops it into her bag with her watercolor notebook. She pulls up the shade on The Brush Stroke's door and undoes the lock. Time to open. Outside, the sounds of tires on snow.

Awake. Entirely awake.

MaryEllen Beveridge

The Émigrés

The two little girls ran across the grass, swift as wind. They played together on the back lawn, drifting across the roots of trees, until the older girl spied Holly next door on her mother's deck, taking down the laundry. The younger girl stared boldly up at Holly, then fled with her sister behind the heavy blue flowers of a hydrangea bush. Holly worked a wooden clothespin from the line that traveled along a pulley above her mother's lawn, releasing a billowing sheet. She pulled the line in, hand over hand, and dropped the pieces of laundry into a wicker basket. A red cardinal burst into her field of vision, sudden and swift, flying straight above the line of rope, and landed, now only a rustle of green needles, in the far branches of a fir tree.

The girls' grandmother opened the basement door onto a small patio under the deck of the house. She closed the door behind her and walked the yard, as if fixing its perimeters. It was enclosed by a chain-link fence with the exception of the driveway the family shared with Holly's mother, and even then she had had to convince the girls' grandfather of the impossibility of opening her car door should the fence be extended there. The girls' grandfather had begun the project of attaching green fabric to the inside of the fence; it was already in place at the other side of the yard and at the border of the property behind the house. Soon the yard would be barricaded by sight as well.

The girls ran to their grandmother and stood before her. She smoothed their hair and put her broad hand on their small backs and surrendered them to their play. She walked across the yard, from fence line to fence line, as if on a kind of watch. Holly waited for her to look up. She waved. The girls' grandmother waved back, at first automatically, then, having remembered Holly, with warmth. She walked up the stairs to the deck and went inside the house, back into the enclosed world the family inhabited.

Holly left the laundry basket inside the kitchen door and returned the old canvas clothespin holder to its place on the floor

next to the refrigerator. Her mother Nora sat at the table over a cup of coffee, smoking a cigarette. It was one of the few indulgences of her entire life, and she persisted in smoking after almost everyone had stopped and there was nowhere left to smoke in public. She bought cigarettes by the carton and smoked three or four a day, one after each meal and sometimes one before she went to bed. Smoking made her still, almost dreamy; otherwise, when Holly and her husband Dean visited, she was quick, almost abrupt in her movements, and in her vigilant attentions to her house there was always some chore for one of them to do.

"I saw the cardinal again," Holly said.

Her mother blew a trail of smoke into the small kitchen. Smoking had somewhat criminalized her, and so she consigned herself there. She looked at her daughter and smiled. "He's a beautiful cardinal," her mother said. She inhaled another lungful of smoke. Nora had gray eyes and hair rinsed light brown, set in short curls around her forehead and temples. She wore a pair of denim slacks and a cotton shirt. Even when she smoked there was a certain antique glamor about her, as if she brought with her cigarette case and lighter, placed near her elbow on the old kitchen table, memories of night clubs and swing bands.

Holly carried the laundry basket into the house and folded the items it contained in her mother's bedroom. Her mother liked to do laundry on sunny days so she could hang it on the line to dry. She liked the smell of the sun on her towels and sheets. Holly put away the laundry in its assigned drawers and closets and left a few things for her mother to help her with later. She brought the basket to the basement, then poured herself a second cup of coffee and sat at the table with her mother.

Dean was upstairs, raising storm windows and pulling down the screens. Nora had given him the task of making the house ready for the new season. He had already changed the order of the storm windows downstairs and replaced the storm panels on the front and back doors with screens. All the doors and windows were open. The air moved through the house. It smelled clean, like earth and new leaves. The house was almost the last on a street that

had once been woodland, and there were still a lot of the old trees in the yards, large firs and oaks. They towered over the houses, a mixture of Cape Cods, two-family homes, and small, shoebox-shaped bungalows. All of the houses were worn and blemished by age and requiring repair: paint on the front steps, a new window frame, a repointing of brick. Over the years, in defiance of the tragedies of want and need, Holly's mother had planted her yard with daffodils and tulips, climbing clematis, forsythia bushes, and decorative cedars, and it looked verdant and welcoming, a surprising map of color on the declining street.

Nora stood and said, "I think I'll go read my book while you and Dean take care of things." She had crushed out her cigarette and placed her cigarette case on top of the ashtray.

"What are you reading?" Holly said. She was following her mother into the living room.

"Oh that war memoir by that French woman," Nora said. "She found her diaries abandoned in a cupboard. She doesn't remember a thing about writing them." Nora borrowed the books from the public library and read entirely from the nonfiction section. By now she could speak with some authority on the subject of the war years and the Cold War decades that followed. Sometimes, over the telephone, she related to Holly an incident from one of the books. There was always some unexpected element of human motive in them, men and women in crisis within a larger disruption, a larger crisis. But mostly she merely closed the covers and returned the books to the library, the only witness to her lengthy hours of reading a typed list of the books and the dates she had read them. She smoothed her denim slacks and picked up her book from the ottoman. She sat in a green plush chair and began to read under the light of the picture window.

Holly went upstairs. Dean had finished adjusting the screens and was sitting on one of the twin beds in the guest bedroom, trying to type on his laptop.

"I tried working in the other room," Dean said in a low voice, "but my legs began to go to sleep. At least I got the Internet up. There must be an open connection somewhere in the neighborhood."

The other room, directly across the landing, was an unfinished space that Nora used as an attic. In it were a few old chests of drawers, a trunk, a bookcase containing a dictionary and books on gardening, and plastic dress bags where Nora stored her out-of-season clothes. There was a small window across the room set in an unpainted frame. Strips of pink insulation hung between the beams along the roofline. To work, as Dean wanted to, there was nowhere to sit but the floor. "I'll talk to my mother about a table and a chair," Holly said. "Maybe there's something stored away." But she knew before she finished her thought that there was nothing stored away and that her mother would resist any request to remove a piece of furniture to the upstairs, to change the order of her house.

Holly turned the wedding band on her finger. She had good, sharp, deeply set brown eyes. She looked at Dean with a kind of habitual patience, as if she always observed the world, and him in it, from slightly afar. He closed the laptop and put it on the floor. He took Holly's hand and led her to the bed. They sat close together on the chenille bedspread. The old springs gave, making a sound of protest.

Dean held her. His body was big and sturdy. He had a luxurious mat of hair on his chest. A tuft of it showed above the neckline of his sports shirt. When they were alone, when he held her in their own bed, his chest hair on her skin was like fur.

"The windows held up another year?" Holly whispered. She often felt, here, as if she had come to a place where there was penance to undergo. As if she could only know her husband again after a number of labors.

"Yes ma'am," Dean said. His hand was at her waist; along the curve of her hip.

Holly turned and lay on her back. This was the room where she slept when she visited her mother, before she married Dean. The house had felt cloistered, immaculate; the habitation of women. Holly played gin rummy with her mother and Scrabble on an old board, stained with coffee rings, the wooden tiles worn to a patina. They both smoked cigarettes then. They breathed thin gray

curls of smoke into the kitchen, and to Holly each exhale was like a sigh. Her mother had the cleaning woman in before Holly's visits, and she served their meals punctually over the space of the day and went to bed at 10, after the local news. Holly felt imprisoned in her mother's world of ritual and routine. But she had begun to understand, in the way her mother insisted on maintaining it over the years, on the most ordinary days, that it had saved her from something she didn't want to think or talk about, and that it would be impossible now to let go.

Dean brushed Holly's hair away from her face and began to kiss her. The bedsprings complained. He kissed her goodbye in the morning. He kissed her in airport terminals and after services at church and when they walked along the marshlands where the Asian water lilies grew. He kissed her after dinner. They had been married three years. They had each brought a certain sorrow, a certain deep consideration, a certain gladness to their marriage, because they had lost quite a lot beforehand. Other wives and husbands. It seems they had lost a great deal of people. They were aware of all the losses that inevitably come to one. Each year on their anniversary they stood under a flowering willow on a roadside near their apartment building and married each other all over again.

Nora was downstairs, opening cabinet doors, opening the refrigerator. Things were being taken down, taken out. Holly sat up and pressed her chest against Dean and kissed him goodbye. The twin bed was low to the floor and he took her hand and helped her up. The other twin bed, where she slept, was higher, with a new mattress so thick that the protector wouldn't hold; after a night of sleep Holly's cheek on waking was against the bare mattress, the protector all pulled away. At night she felt at an unbearable distance from her husband as she lay in the darkness in the uncomfortable bed, listening to his breathing.

Nora moved around the kitchen. She handed Holly plates and dishes to bring to the dining room table. She said, "Sit, sit," to Dean and he sat in one of the chairs while the women laid the food before him. Nora had prepared a fruit salad, a lime Jell-O

salad with cream cheese and grated carrot, and a plate of wheat bread and thinly sliced, rare roast beef. There was another plate of lettuce and sliced tomato. Nora had spooned mustard and mayonnaise into separate glass dishes. Lemon slices and cubes of ice revolved slowly in a pitcher of tea. The evening before, Holly and Dean had arrived late, at dinnertime, for Mother's Day weekend, with Friday afternoon traffic stalled ahead of them and on the northbound side of the throughway as well, and they met more traffic as they turned off the throughway onto North Main Street. They breathlessly sat down to a dinner Nora had prepared of roast lamb, crispy potatoes, and snap peas.

"Can I make you a sandwich?" Holly said to her mother. Dean had passed her the serving plate.

"No, no," Nora said. She took two slices of roast beef and tapped a spoonful of mustard onto her plate.

"This is very good roast beef," Dean said. He had built himself a towering sandwich. He was calm and polite with Holly's mother. Nora thought Dean a steady, good man, but Holly thought Dean hadn't been able to learn how to relax completely with her, and to be with her as a member of the family. She thought he was still trying to learn how to do that, or perhaps he had moved up to the border and decided to stay there.

"Do you remember your neighbor's name?" Holly said to her mother. "The grandmother next door, the grandmother of those little girls. I saw her when I was taking in the laundry."

"Something, something like Madeline or Marjorie," Nora said. "I wish I could understand her better. It would be good to have a neighbor to talk to. Though the girls are very sweet. So shy when they first moved here. But now when I get out of the car they come over and ask for hugs."

"Mirjeta," Holly said, with the finality of memory. "She told me when I went over to meet her, in the yard, before the fence went up. It must have been at least a year ago."

"Oh that fence," Nora said. "Well the father is gone, did I tell you? He apparently wasn't ambitious enough for the girls' mother, so she sent him along. Now the grandparents come to the house

while the mother is away at work. She has a very good job in a nursing home. The father used to take good care of those girls, in my opinion, but he was sent away nonetheless." Nora's eyebrows had knitted together in consternation.

"I remember him," Holly said. "I remember seeing him, that is. But hadn't they just come here, weren't they new?" How does one begin, she thought. How does one begin in all of one's newness.

"Oh, he was very nice," Nora said. "He did all of that beautiful stone work in the yard—the patio and the walkway in the front. He and his wife's father replaced my gutters. The needles from the fir tree overwhelm the gutters so I asked them if they could possibly take a look."

Dean sent Holly a signal, a brief shift of his eyes. He flexed his shoulders minutely.

"Between the two of them," Nora continued, "they hardly spoke a word of English. We didn't have a language in common to discuss the matter. The grandfather showed me a receipt from the hardware store and I covered it and paid them what I thought was fair for their labor." She served the fruit salad in little lotus-shaped cups and offered them to Holly and Dean. "He didn't argue," she said, "so I guess my estimate was correct."

"If I may ask," Holly, said, "what did you pay them?"

"Why, twenty dollars," Nora said.

Holly felt her lungs deflate, discouraged for the men who had done this work for her mother and who were too kind or new to protest.

Nora passed a serving dish to Dean and he positioned a circle of Jell-O salad on his plate with a serving spoon Nora had taken from her mother's silverware chest. Nora's dining room was arranged with the oak furniture she had inherited from her mother and father: the table and chairs, a sideboard, and a china cabinet with a door of curved and beveled glass. Holly remembered the furniture in her grandparents' dining room. She had loved to sit at the table with her grandparents, who seemed so old to her, and at peace together.

Nora's bedroom contained an oak four-poster bed that had belonged to her parents, and a matching vanity table and chest of drawers. Elsewhere in the house she had a Hitchcock desk and chair, a set of matching side-table lamps, and a spindle-legged table on which in recent years to mark the Christmas season she placed a miniature evergreen of bristling plastic branches. She seemed to exist in a kind of Yankee obliviousness, full of manners and a certain brisk grace, while living in a small Cape Cod house at the end of a neglected city street that seemed to Holly as if it could be stormed at any moment by whomever desired to. Years ago she had advised her mother to get deadbolt locks for the doors, and on her next visit the doors held small brass sliding-bolt locks, which were more the idea of a lock than a lock, and which Nora most of the time forgot to engage.

All her early life Holly had lived with her mother in one shambling house after the next. In her childhood her mother rented an old house with a yard occupied by crab grass and small thorny bushes. Each room was accessed by a fieldstone step and built at an obtuse angle so no one room seemed to have any relationship to the other. The house always held a chill. Holly was too young to question whether it was from thrift or lack of funds. Even in summer the house was cold, like the impenetrable cold of stone. Her mother then rented the top floor of another old house with sloping ceilings and a staircase that led from the downstairs front hall to a narrow pit, an architectural error, it seemed to Holly, from which one stepped up into the living room or into the hallway that led to the bedrooms. Holly had to stoop under the roofline when setting the kitchen table. Nora parked her car in the barn. Its entrance had a high threshold over which she would gun the car, and Holly, her palms pressed to the dashboard, waited for the lift of the car, its sudden drop, and the urgent pump of the brakes. After both of her parents had died Nora took her inheritance and bought the small Cape Cod house and moved her parents' furniture into it. The rental houses were isolated, separated from their neighbors it seemed now to Holly more by circumstance than actual geography, and the house Nora had finally been able to own seemed

to exist in that same isolation. One morning a number of decades ago, Nora's husband, Holly's father, packed a suitcase, boarded a flight out of Bradley to O'Hare to catch a connection to Oklahoma City—where Nora knew even as she closed his suitcase she would never go—having arranged, he said, to spend the week pursuing job leads, and never returned. It had been years since Nora had spoken his name. But all of the places she lived, that were somehow inadequate, somehow wanting, seemed like a rebuke to Holly's father, who had escaped the expectations of the East and of his wife and child that had all somehow confounded him, and had left Nora alone.

Nora topped Dean's glass of iced tea. "Did you notice the fence in the yard on the other side of the house?" she said to Holly. "The neighbors over there?"

"The white one," Holly said, trying to remember what had been there. "It looks new."

"They took down the swimming pool. They left all the parts leaning against the inside of the fence."

"Who lives there now?" Holly said, though she barely remembered who had lived there before.

"I don't know their names," Nora said. "The trees block the view of the house. Maybe that's for the best. I just hear cars coming and going in and out of the driveway."

An older couple, from Jamaica, had lived across the street, but they had moved away. Nora had liked them. She enlisted them to take in her mail when she went to visit far-away friends. Another couple, a barrel-chested man and a woman who often sat in a lawn chair drinking Cokes, had lived directly across the street. A magnificent cherry tree grew high above the house, which the new owners had had chopped down. Holly remembered how each season, over the course of days, its dense pink petals fell in drifting showers onto the lawn and the street. Somewhere lived a teenage boy, not completely right in the head, according to Nora, who shoveled the snow from her driveway during the worst months of the winter. She used to speak in passing about another family with a number of children, all very polite, she observed to Holly,

but Holly didn't know what house they lived in or even if they lived on the street anymore. No one ever appeared to be about but the little girls next door. The street seemed to be inhabited by immigrants, passing upward, passing through, leaving the street in another stage of exhaustion with each retreat.

Nora and Holly cleared the table and Holly washed the dishes. Dean, unsure of what else to do, went upstairs to his computer. At home Holly got everything ready and Dean cooked dinner and afterward they cleared the table and he talked with her while she washed the dishes. It was a good arrangement, but when Nora inquired about her daughter's menus and meal preparation she put forth the opinion that Holly was neglecting Dean and her role as Dean's wife. Holly was happy to be getting something right. She had been married before, two times in her twenties, and how does one know anything then? How to measure distances, how to read the signs, how to travel a curved line. Then, after what had felt like permanent winter, a place of cold and dark, she had met Dean. During her twice-monthly telephone calls to her mother, her mother often said, "Oh Holly, Dean is a fine man, I know, but how I wish for the days when we used to sit at the kitchen table smoking cigarettes and playing gin rummy." She gave Holly recipes for spinach omelets and stuffed mushrooms.

Holly went to the car to get her old clothes. The little girls were in the front yard with their grandmother. The older girl was twirling on the stone walk her father had built, stepping one foot in front of the other. Her long brown hair lofted above her shoulders and seemed to weave in the air, following the turn of the girl's body. She looked up at Holly and stopped, her pink Crocs still, her hair falling and resting again on her shoulders, and slipped away, into the house. The younger girl climbed onto her bicycle and rode it in circles, showing off for Holly. Holly saw the grandfather lift a bag of loam on the other side of the yard and shake it onto the ground. The grandmother, Mirjeta, walked toward Holly. Holly took her hand.

"Do you remember me from last time, when we met, I think it was last spring," Holly said, and she repeated her name to her.

"Yes," Mirjeta said. "Spring." Then she said, "How are you?" The younger girl had jumped off her bike and stood next to her grandmother, boldly looking at Holly.

"I'm here with my husband for the weekend," Holly said. "We're going to plant flowers for my mother. Hello," she said to the little girl. The girl continued to stare at Holly. She thrust her little chest out.

"This is Elira," Mirjeta said. "She is four. Would you like some coffee?" The older girl studied Holly from the crack between the screen door and its frame. The front yard had been converted to a garden. The grass was turned under and the soil covered with loam. Small pale green shoots stood in ordered rows in the furrowed ground. The garden took up the entire front yard, stopping just short of the stone walk.

"Kaltrina," Mirjeta said. "Come here. This is Holly. Kaltrina is five."

Kaltrina opened the door and took a step onto the walkway.

A white car drove up the street, made a U-turn where the street dead-ended, and parked in front of the girls' house. Willie Colón's trombone thundered through the open widows and abruptly stopped when the driver cut the engine. A young woman got out of the passenger side and followed the driver, a young man, to a one-story white house across the street. She crushed out her cigarette on the street with her boot heel and threw a contemptuous look at Mirjeta. Both wore baggy cargo pants sliding down their hips and black sleeveless T-shirts. Their upper arms were decorated with tattoos. They sat together on the front steps of the house. The young man lit a cigarette for himself and one for the young woman. The girl's dark hair hung in thick strands over her shoulders; the boy's was closely shaved. They looked like guardians of something alien and forbidding, sitting silent and unmoving at the door to the house.

"Come," Mirjeta said, and Holly followed Mirjeta and her granddaughters into the house. The living room was modest, like Holly's mother's, with a leather couch, a fireplace, a clock on the wall in the shape of a sun, two easy chairs, and a coffee table

that held a number of children's toys. It was probably the girls' parents' idea of an American house, Holly surmised, everything new, clean, without a history. The girls spoke the language of children, soft whispers and little shrieks. Sometimes they spoke the language of their parents and grandparents, words with different intonations within the hesitant English. Kaltrina, more daring now in her own house, sat next to Holly on the couch. Elira stood in front of Holly, swelling her little chest. "I cut my hair," she announced. "She cut her hair with the scissors," Kaltrina explained. Elira pulled her short dark brown hair up and turned her head to show Holly what she had done. "Mama had to take her to fix it," Kaltrina said.

"Oh," Holly said, "you cut your hair! Well it looks very pretty." Of course she had cut her hair, Holly thought. You come to a new country or you are born to a new country and you wear your hair like a guerrilla. You are at war with your own history. You are perhaps at war with a country you don't understand. You can be four and know this.

Mirjeta brought a cup of coffee on a wooden tray and set it on the coffee table as she moved the children's toys out of the way. There were books on Cinderella and Pinocchio and bright pieces of paper that had been pasted onto felt and little magical looking balls made of clear plastic with sparkles suspended in them.

"Do you take cream?" Mirjeta said. Her English was slow and labored.

"No, thank you," Holly said. "The coffee is delicious. You aren't having any?"

"My English," Mirjeta said. "It is not good." She had an accent that sounded to Holly's ears as if from Eastern Europe, the words clear, with a throaty sound under each one.

"My mother will be home in four minutes," Kaltrina announced to Holly. She had begun to spread the toys out on the coffee table for Holly. Elira took some more from the end table next to the couch.

Mirjeta's face was calm and beautiful, but it held an old sadness. Her skin, a dark golden color, looked as if she had spent time

in the sun, while her granddaughters' eyes were full of hunger for the day, for the strange woman sitting in their living room, and their skin was pale and clear. Mirjeta held her chin up slightly, as if that would help her in her search for English words. "My daughter speak English," she said to Holly. "I learn it from her."

"My mother loves your grandchildren," Holly said. She could only speak English to the girls' grandmother, so she went on. She said, "They give her hugs when she comes home in her car."

"My English not too good," Mirjeta said. "Kaltrina translates for me."

But Kaltrina was five and she stood quietly at the mention of her name, as if hoping not to be called upon.

"You have children?" Mirjeta said.

"No," Holly said. "I have a husband. Dean."

"We have four children," Mirjeta said. "Three here." Mirjeta lifted her palm and Holly thought she meant somewhere nearby. "We live a few streets over there. My other son, won't fight, go to Switzerland."

"Won't fight?" Holly said.

"He not fight. Terrible war. Make no sense. One day no more Yugoslavia. We from Kosovo. Now no more Kosovo."

"Do you know people here?" Holly said.

"No," Mirjeta said. "No one care to. Close doors, stay inside. No one to visit."

"Have others come?" Holly said. She meant to say, Do you have friends here from home, do you help each other, does it make it easier for you, do you cook the old foods, do you laugh again? But Holly was silent, suddenly confounded by her own language.

"The Roma come," Mirjeta said. "But the Roma bad."

The girls had run upstairs and then upstairs again and come down with a small plastic table and two chairs. They were showing Holly all of their things in the living room, and now some of their things from upstairs. They sat at the table to show Holly what it was all about.

Mirjeta's husband opened the front door and stepped into the room, tucking a cotton bandana into his back pocket. He extended

his hand to Holly. "Leka," he said, and bowed, and Holly stood and gave her name and shook his hand. His skin was tanned and his forehead was deeply lined. He had graying, dark blond hair. His bones were angled and agile, as if he were used to satisfying work with his body. He had a pleasant face. He sat in one of the easy chairs and spread his fingers over his knees and scowled. "I tell those kids to leave," he said. He looked at Holly but he was speaking mostly to his wife. "They sit in their car and play their music, I tell them park at their own house."

Mirjeta said something to her husband in their language. Holly put a thumbnail to her tooth. The young man and woman had disturbed her. They had seemed so hostile, so offended that she and Mirjeta would even dare to regard them, and so removed from any loyalties but to each other.

"I see your husband outside," Leka said. "You planting some flowers, eh? He would like a coffee?"

Holly got up and called to Dean, who was standing on the grass, trowel in hand, surveying a small tract of dirt under the lamppost. He put down the trowel. The men shook hands and sat across from each other drinking Turkish coffee from elaborately painted porcelain cups that Mirjeta had presented on the same wooden tray. The girls sat on either side of Holly, pressing for her attention. Dean sat ceremonially with his host, bringing the cup to his lips and taking small sips of the coffee. Leka had taken an attitude of comradeship with Dean. He was talking to him about Clinton and the Dayton Accords. He said "Clin-tun" and "Day-tun," as if they were the same. "End of war," he said, "but not of troubles." He lifted his chin upward too, trying to find the English words with which to speak with Dean. Dean listened respectfully, his body canted toward his host.

Kaltrina, shy again with Dean in the house, began to fidget with her dress.

"Dean and I were going to work in my mother's yard," Holly said to Mirjeta. "We were going to start this afternoon." Holly thought that much of what people spoke to each other was something other than what was said, words intended to show affection,

or concern; an acknowledgement that the mind sees one, understands one. They could be almost any words, about a garden or coffee or one's children. They helped with the other words, how one can begin to approach the inexpressible. Holly did not have the words to tell Mirjeta that she admired her and was glad to know her, and so she smiled at her, and Mirjeta, beholding Holly's face, smiled too.

Mirjeta turned to Kaltrina, her translator, but Kaltrina had hidden her face in her grandmother's side.

Holly wanted to ask Mirjeta about her homeland that was no more and what it was like to have to leave and then to come here, and how does one leave a promise of a life when it has been taken away. Or was it always bombs and fear and was she glad to have left, even her home and her clothes and the graves of her parents and grandparents? What did you leave behind and how do you start again and how do you do, how do you do? Instead she said, "Maybe the girls would like to help us with the flowers."

Mirjeta said something to her grandchildren and they sprang up and went to the door. Holly said to Dean, "I invited them to help," and Dean stood slowly and the men ceremonially shook hands and Dean thanked Mirjeta and Leka and Holly said, "Thank you, thank you," and Leka hospitably opened the door and the girls streamed out, into the sunlight, and across the double driveway to Holly's mother's yard.

Holly changed into her old clothes. Nora was at the lamppost, in a pair of old walking shoes, showing her the places where Dean had begun to mark the dirt with a trowel. A flat of pansies lay in the shade. "Now," Nora said. "You have to dig a hole, fairly deep, and water it, then separate out the plant and push the dirt around it, nice and firm. You won't need to water it again till evening. You don't want to overwater a new plant."

The girls stood close by Nora and Holly. Holly lifted the watering can and told the girls what she was going to do. Elira followed her to the side of the house, just beyond the trash barrel at the end of the driveway, and Holly showed her how to turn on the spigot and then how to squeeze the nozzle of the hose and fill

the watering can. Elira crouched over her work intently. The can was halfway full and Holly showed her how to let the nozzle go and lift the can, though Holly took the weight of it by the handle. Elira, very seriously and with great care, brought the can across the lawn. Holly helped her set it down. Dean had finished digging the holes and Nora carefully took each plant from the flat. Holly helped Elira tilt the can and soak the dirt.

Kaltrina had retreated to her own yard. She stood on the walkway her father had built and watched Holly and her sister move around the lamppost with the watering can and Holly lift it up and Elira jump up and down, up and down, and Elira tilt the bottom of the can and the water come out like a shower. Holly was taking each plant and setting it into the dirt and showing Elira how to tamp down the dirt around the plant. Her little hands patted the dirt like she was petting a dog, and Holly showed her how to press the dirt firmly with her fingertips. Elira held up her dirt-streaked hands for Holly to inspect, like their mother made them do before they sat down to their dinner. Holly showed Elira how to hold out her hands and she held the watering can over them like a shower, and then Holly held the can over her own hands, one by one, and then put the can down and waved her hands in the air, all the while smiling at Elira. Elira jumped up and down up and down, and waved her hands and clapped them and got a spray of water and some dirt on the front of her jumper. Holly raised her eyebrows in pretend shock and got some more water and cleaned Elira's hands. Then Elira looked around for more to do but the flowers were all planted, their little brown and yellow and blue faces tilted toward the sun.

Kaltrina ran across the walkway. She ran up to Holly and said, "My mother will be home in four minutes."

Holly said, "Would you like to help us till your mother comes home?" Kaltrina nodded and she helped Holly fill the watering can at the spigot as she had seen her sister help her and then watered the holes at the front of the house that Dean had made ready under the picture window and in front of the bushes. She and Elira helped Holly take each plant from its receptacle in the flat and she

felt the resistance of the plants and saw the trail of roots as she laid them, as she saw Holly do, on their sides on the lawn. This time the flowers were pink and white. Nora was saying something to Dean about the spacing of the holes and so Holly had Kaltrina and her sister count the holes and there were nine, one, two, four, nine, in the rectangle of soft dirt on each side of the front door, and Dean covered a few holes and dug them again, though Kaltrina had a hard time seeing that they were any different.

Nora said to Holly, "I miscounted. We'll have to get another flat tomorrow," and she picked up the empty flats and went around the side of the house. Dean spoke in a low voice to Holly and kissed her ear and went to the car and got a book and opened the front door and went inside. Holly had to fill the watering can again and again and sometimes Kaltrina helped her and sometimes her sister did, and they watched the holes fill with water and the water disappear into the dirt and then they set the remaining plants in and tamped around them with their fingers. Kaltrina splayed her hands onto the cold dirt that was like Play-Doh almost or something from her mother's kitchen, a cake or a cookie ready to be put in the oven. Kaltrina and Holly and Elira all clapped their hands and waved them at the sky and the water shot in droplets over their clothes.

The little girls were like creatures that ran with lightness and squatted over the earth and said, "Yes," when Holly said, "Hold your hands out," or "Me, me," when Holly said, "Let's fill the watering can," and they swayed over the flowers very close to her and their breath was like the breath of something newborn, it came in little puffs, puff, puff, as if from a great exertion as they tamped the wet dirt around the plants. They all had little droplets of water on their clothes as if they had been caught in a brief rain. Leka opened the front door as Holly was standing contemplatively over the plants and he looked at each of his granddaughters and smiled and nodded briefly at Holly and closed the door. The boy and girl with the low-slung pants sat on the steps across the street again, in front of the one-story house. They sat with their knees together and their forearms resting on their thighs, in an attitude of malign

alertness. The boy tamped a cigarette on the step and lit it. The flame flared, like a sudden fire. They seemed to be looking at no one, but Holly knew they were aware of her and the girls and of Leka who had shut the door on them after checking on his grandchildren. The boy looked briefly at the closed door and seemed to speak to the girl and then went back into his pose of indifference, a figure guarding the entrance to a forbidding place. The little girls crowded close to Holly and Kaltrina held a finger over the plants and counted and said, "Twelve," and Elira said, "Huh, huh," as she tamped the dirt for its own sake and held out her hands for Holly to shower with water.

Holly assessed their work. The line of plants was orderly and straight. There were six additional holes ready to receive more plants. Then the girls looked up at Holly because their work seemed to be done. They looked around for more flowers to plant, at the yard with its mowed lawn and nowhere else for them to water and tamp. They crowded close to her and she could hear their breathing. She took their hands and said, "Tell your grandmother I'm sorry you got your clothes dirty." There were little flecks of dirt on their clothes. Kaltrina said, "My mother will be home in two minutes," and Holly took their hands and they went with her across the walk and she waited until their grandfather opened the door and they were inside.

She stood over the new flowers then took the gardening things to the basement and rinsed them in the old zinc sink and put them away and took off her sneakers and washed their soles and walked up the basement stairs in her socks. She stood on the deck. The cardinal appeared as if already in mid-flight, winging from tree to tree. It landed on a branch and flicked its tail, then flew across the yard again, just beyond the deck, a brilliant red creature against the green foliage, as if to be seen, as if to show himself to Holly. She knew then he must have a nest nearby, perhaps in the dense bushes next to the deck, and he was showing himself to her so as to divert attention from it. She went inside and shut the door gently, so he would not have to be concerned for the safety of his nest, so he could go back to his mate and his chicks.

At dinnertime Nora ordered take-out from the Chinese restaurant on North Main Street and they sat down together at six o'clock. After dinner they watched a movie on cable television. Holly sat with her mother on the deck in the darkness while she smoked her evening cigarette. They heard briefly, from across the two yards, through an upstairs window, the excited cries of the girls; their mother had come home. It was late and Dean was waiting for her upstairs and she lay with him under the covers in the narrow bed and he pulled her arm around his chest. Then she lay in her own bed, on her back. The street was quiet, the darkened houses filled with slumbering consciousnesses, as if the houses themselves were dreaming. Later she woke to the sound of a car moving slowly up the street. Its motor seemed large and powerful in the stillness, like the slow thunder of tanks, and Holly was suddenly afraid. She heard two car doors slam shut and the fading sound of footsteps across the street and then there was silence. Later she woke in another layer of darkness to the sound of songbirds announcing the dawn. They called from the depths of the trees, singing and singing, each bird calling its tribal song. She awoke later as if having arrived again in her own body from another place. She tried to remember her dreams. Dean snored gently in the other bed. She slipped into her clothes and walked softly down the stairs and unlocked the back door. She walked the yard in the thin new light, to the far border and then across to either side. The birds were quiet. She heard a single low chirp, the shaking of feathers, from high in the trees.

For breakfast Nora made blueberry pancakes and bacon, freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee, and they ate together at the dining room table. Holly brought down their Mother's Day gifts, tucked into a small decorative bag she had lined with white tissue paper. Her mother opened the card and read it slowly aloud and read their signatures and placed it open on the table. She reached inside the bag and unwrapped a small box and pulled from it a long strand of pearls, colored pale blue, and ran it admiringly through her fingers. There was another gift, of soap and a companion hand lotion, and she squeezed a few drops of the lotion onto her daugh-

ter's hand and rubbed in the scent, then did the same for herself, and the air held the odor of lavender. Nora said, "Thank you, oh thank you, how thoughtful, how beautiful," with genuine gladness, and Holly thought how she often forgot that there was only herself and her mother, and then on other days a few relatives, and some friends here and there, and that to celebrate anything, anything in peace and plenty with another was a gift. Holly kissed her mother's cheek and felt bad about everything, everything, and then she was glad and she blinked her eyes, blinked her eyes, and ran her fingertips under her lower lids, catching an eyelash, catching an eyelash; it was only an eyelash.

Holly put away the breakfast things and washed the dishes while her mother set her birthday card on the mantle. Dean went out to survey their work in the front yard. When he had had another life entirely, he husbanded his property, pruning and mulching and planting. He owned a half acre and a good house and it was all gone, to the lawyer and to his ex-wife. Now in winter he would point out to Holly a few sticks growing out of the ground and name them. In spring he told her the names of all of the plants they discovered on their walks, and which ones he used to have in his yard. Now, after breakfast, he had a few rows of pansies and impatiens to oversee, and he checked the soil, as he had done the evening before, and packed a plant a little tighter, and stood up and ran the back of his hand across his cheek. Holly drove her mother to a farm-and-garden center to buy another flat of impatiens. As she backed the car out of her mother's driveway, she looked across the street in the rearview mirror but nothing was there. Whatever car had come down the street in the night was not evident; all was quiet and still. The little girls' mother's car was gone, taking her to work again, and the door to their house was closed in the morning light.

Holly's mother, having decided on a flat of mixed pink and white flowers, rested it on the floor of the passenger seat. Holly drove them home. She turned into the driveway, gave the flat of impatiens into her mother's hands, and walked with her to the front of the house. She heard the clack of Dean's computer keys

through the newly installed screen in the door. She looked for the little girls, who she wanted to help plant the flowers. They seemed to her to be a necessary part of this labor, two wood nymphs with powers that would help the plants take root. And then there was Leka, walking across his daughter's front yard, across the furrows, stepping onto the soil that was birthing the seeds he had planted to feed his family. He knelt near the fence line that bordered the street, his knees disturbing the furrows. He was hunched over something on the ground in an attitude of dismay. Holly went to him. He looked at the garden with an old despair, as if he were witness again to something that had been irrevocably harmed. A mass of cigarette butts lay tightly together there, as if they had been dumped over the fence from a car ashtray. The boy and girl sat on the steps of the house across the street, watching Leka in their attitude of sinister guardianship. The white car was parked in the driveway next to the house. The girl had folded an arm loosely across her knee.

"Evil, evil, evil," Leka said, and he stood as if to accost them. He looked helplessly at the marred ground. Nora waited by the door, the flat of impatiens in her hand, her mouth pursed. She would probably tell Holly that they shouldn't be planting a garden in their front yard, as if they were on a farm instead of looking after a house on a street in a city. But then, Holly thought, what does one know to do in a new land, in a new world, aside from try to survive. Her mother must surely know this, having entered so early into a world incommensurate with anything she had imagined of it. Holly found herself covering her mouth with her fingers. Every loss seemed concentrated in the defaced soil. She ran into her mother's house and pulled the tissue paper from the brightly colored gift bag and carried it across the yard to Leka. She knelt on the ground and spread the paper beside him and began to place the cigarette butts on it. When she was done she folded the sides over and dropped the paper into the trash barrel at the end of her mother's driveway. Leka watched her, paralyzed with an old rage. Holly returned to him and knelt over the soil and began to repair the furrows.

Diane Hueter

Two Women Talking on a Winter Morning

A pearl grey car stalled
catty wampus in the street.

The policeman cruising by
waits to see if it can get going again,

while the snow-crusted school bus lets down
the handicap track for two coatless boys in wheelchairs.

I'm sitting this one out—trapped in my driveway,
morning coffee steams the inside of my windshield.

I run the wipers with fluid,
scraping off last night's runnels

of bird droppings. I love the birds, even the black
grackles, but especially the cardinal

calling "pretty boy, pretty boy." I see my breath,
I see two women, neighbors down the street

standing on a brown and dormant lawn.
One wears a blue house dress with pink roses large as hands

clapping in the wind. Her short hair grey as concrete
and curly as clouds. The other woman wears a black coat,

patternless and belted. On her way to work,
her car idles in the driveway, pluming past the leafless trees.

Her white hair pinned in a bun—
I see little tendrils coming loose, framing

her head like dandelion fluff or eider down.
Together, their breath comes out, ribbons

linking them as surely as hands on shoulders.
I don't believe they are talking about the crisp morning air

the newspaper boy, the moon,
dogs that bark and whimper all night.

They look into each other's eyes
as if the world was not twirling busily around them

ricocheting past in yellow buses and red or ebony wings
or indeed as if they recognized its erratic path

and knew they had to be
the steady calm center of it all.

Michael S. Moos

Prairie Rain

Rain has been walking across the prairie.
It eases the suffering of cows and wild dogs lying exhausted
on their high buttes.
The smell of dry earth sweeps down through the flowering sage
on the hills, delicate as the skin of an old woman.
The streets of small towns turn dark and cool, making you forget
what you wanted but could not have.
Gravel roads turn the reddish color of summer deer
in their season of velvet horns.
In the distance a meadowlark settles on her nest, closes her eyes.
A grasshopper comes to rest in your wet hand a moment.
You do not want the sky to clear.

Anthony Tao

Anna Karenina in Suburban America

Anna's bodily penance is not the climax
book clubs would have your believe.
The story continues with protagonists
who fiddle with farm implements
and rise early for life's daily work,
who choose to breach bulwarks or fight
against nature itself, smiling
sad like the universe that births
human beasts, ideals, or dreams.
Minds are ever shedding constraints,
adding consonants to our DNA
to be made macaronic. We would
as gladly plumb depths as rise to clouds
to make sense of the novel of our life,
except it is not so much ascent and descent
as a swing on a parabola, seeing,
at one moment, a father's beaming face,
and, the next, his wide-eyed terror
as you're pushed away
into every mistake you'll make.

Andrew Jarvis

Biology

The formaldehyde frog
is enlivening her
with a scent of sour.

It is mother inside,
breathing behind the tongue,
swimming in its bladder.

She steeps in the red spleen,
circulating in blood,
birthing in rotten eggs.

They were our garden gore,
where amphibians fell
to her furious rake.

Their legs in our lilies
glowed like erupted jade,
graceless, awful, acute.

And she is wide open,
residing in the lobes;
she must have murdered it,

made its heart stop beating
for us to open death,
dissecting her divine.

Amanda Tumminaro

Confessions of a Cat Lady

I'm rather chilled lately, even in my bathrobed-religion.
The world is sharp around the edges,
but my cat always snuggles like a ball
and attaches to me like a tumor.

Winter is approaching like a car playing chicken,
my cave is my solitude. The lamp, my sun in artifice.
I am the non-famous, obscure Greta Garbo—
and only my cat agrees to publish my short stories if he were editor.

The time is coming for bowls of soup,
the heat of the soul. My cat would make a good cook,
I'm sure, if only his height could reach the stove.
Until then the microwave is my meal island.

The snow will pile up like a procrastinator's assignment
and I will keep in stock my cocoa as if it were a lifesaver.
But I will be my cat's punchline in the epilogue,
for he's the one with the furnace of his coat.

John M. Bellinger

Gabriel

In this dim there is a movement of air
a gossamer stir through our night as I lay
in your arms, sung silence like soft cloth
across doorways, being tricked
by a slight summer wind.
You shift,

and we begin. Again I brush the rhythms
of your chest, feel the burn, the rest,
the gentled force of you, move
my length all down your length,
gird you with this yearning with
these limbs. Twine you.
This is the fire
of which we never speak, this is
our rough anointing.

In the morning I will dream again of angels.
How this time they will whisper things
I dare not dare believe,
how they will whisper them
and whisper them again,
insistent as the blue-bottle flies,
swarming; iridescent black.

Eugenie Juliet Theall

Bloody Scrap

I knew a Harvard man who slept like a crocodile—
jaw
locked open, with a bloody scrap of meat
wedged
between his teeth. A strand of his mother's white hair,
trailed
from an incisor, rippled waves of nausea in me.
Territorial,
she climbed inside his mouth, feasted when I wasn't
there.
I couldn't liberate the entrails, proof of his insatiable
hunger,
no matter how far I crawled on his acrid tongue,
breasts
swollen with sugared milk, searching for a backbone, a beating
heart,
someone with balls. Like a cheetah, I dragged his
carcass
between my legs to the top of a tree, but she couldn't
let go
of her baby, her sustenance. She followed, waited until the limb
broke.

Holly Hendin

Moth

Even the stars are dead, you know, moth,
More ghosts in their light.
When you look up at night, you know,
Graves are being lit by pulses of light
That were sent while those bones still held meat, and soul.
And think, even now, just this second,
A pulse of light is sent from somewhere and you'll never see it, no,
But the grass around your bones will.
Your porch is dark under the gated night.
You know I'm there before I even knock.
Maybe the space between us,
Maybe it was a pulse of light too,
Sent hundreds of years ago before I even was a me;
I wasn't alive so you couldn't light my cigarette.
Moth, I like how the flame is so close to your hand and my face.
The best part is the swoon but
I won't fall off my chair, I can't,
I am only wings and antennae, and when you swat me, I evaporate
    into dust.
The calendar is folding up now,
Time turning back on itself,
Curling in on itself.
Tuesdays were never a particular favorite of mine.
You are celebrating something tonight,
And I stayed home and burned paper above the sink,
Bits of char floating to the basin below,
Orange embers along the edges until I blew it away, black.
Under your porch light,
Moth, don't be angry
I'm sitting in my car,
I'm sitting under them all,
I'm waiting for the stars to confess
It's all just a joke
Anyway.

Paul Felsch

Passage

I'm sure the dead Romantics smiled
when, at my daughter's bedtime, I revived
my *Norton Anthology of English Literature* from college,
then riffled a thousand of its translucent, waxy pages
to Keats' "To Autumn." I'm less sure
how they felt about what happened next—
my daughter's still-pudgy, ten-month old hand
darting from her pajama sleeve, then snapping up
the highlighted and blue double-underlined
hedge-crickets and robins into her mouth
before swallowing with a single, crepitant gulp.
My wife panicked, first shining a flashlight
into our daughter's mouth, then leaving a message
with our doctor's exchange. And as she paced around
waiting for a call back, our daughter simply
giggled and cooed. And I began to imagine her sounds
were Keats' insects and birds echoing
from the tiny cavern of her stomach, her body
digesting the lines as they braided
her DNA's laddered spirals, the poem becoming
part of her like her steely blue eyes and coarse blond hair.
The doctor said her body would dissolve
and pass it. But that didn't stop me from reading
the poem to her in the years that followed,
or hoping she could bridge the page's void
on her own someday, able to glide
from one line to the next, summoning
the words that were missing.

John Sibley Williams

Abacus

This is how I learned to count. Two inches right magnifies my dominion. Withdrawal left and the world repossesses itself. The sound of balancing. *What I subtract from the landscape can be reclaimed by the same method*. Here

is a sky-headed child and here is a small white cross stabbed into soil. Here is an ethic and here is a country of warm shell casings. From the flowers I decapitate, a seed. From what I plant, a harvesting. From grief, a name I cannot unlove.

To learn reckoning, I am handed down a multi-colored toy. *Red* for horizon. *Blue* for the deadening earth. I own a harmonized world of gray plastic circles, an impotent kingdom.

James D. Redwood

The Scarf

The stars shone above the Truong Son Mountains, but Loi barely noticed them. The glossy green leaves of the sapodilla tree over his head screened them from him. And because of the blackout he was not worried about a light coming on in his sheltered open-air darkroom to spoil the image he was nudging into life in the well of a hospital bedpan. He smelled the calamanders and the *hoa thi* flowers, the slow thick muck of the nearby canal which crept through the heart of the Ho Chi Minh trail outpost. But above it all, even above the pungent odor of photo chemicals which rose from the bedpan as he moved the emerging picture back and forth with a pair of chrome tweezers, came the smell of tuberoses, the flower used at funerals. Loi held his breath for a moment, but his distress only increased when the girl's face appeared and he noticed the resemblance. His mind went back to a year earlier and then returned to the image floating beneath him. The girl was a ghost caught on film. A ghost that was alive again. . . .

"Miss, I have something for you," he called out the next morning, when he spotted her plodding along the towpath ahead of him. His step faltered when he remembered that she was a ghost. But the wind had snatched his words, and the girl hadn't heard him. She labored under the weight of a pair of shoulder baskets filled with ordnance, and her sandals smacked up the mud from the towpath at each heavy step. Artillery Crew No. 5 was setting up for the day farther along the canal, and the snout of a KS 19 poked above a cluster of banana trees and began its hunt for the American prey.

"Miss!"

Loi held the photo out in front of him, his hands shaking, but then the girl turned and he saw her lovely face and the betrothal scarf draped around her neck. How could he have been so mistaken? This girl was far more cheerful than a ghost had a right to be.

Loi felt a rush of relief. Followed, however, somewhat perplexingly, by dismay.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you were someone else."

"What do you have there?" She tramped up to him and set the baskets down with a clunk. Silver artillery shell casings slid around in them like a load of metal fish. The two women did look a lot alike, but this one was prettier. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"You were at the ceremony yesterday, weren't you?"

"Yes," he said.

Loi had been momentarily distracted by this charmer with the scarf, while Political Officer Dang pinned medals on a couple of men in the front row and droned on about past successes against the enemy and the long struggle ahead. But it was the other one, the ghost, wedged in among a crowd of applauding cadres several rows behind the beauty, who stuck in Loi's mind. The ghost watched the awards ceremony with the saddest eyes Loi had seen in a year. The beauty now reached for the photograph and pouted when Loi kept it back.

"Come, let me see! Is it for *me*?" His reluctance baffled him, and he finally handed it over. A delighted smile spread across the girl's face. "Ooh, there I am! But why did you put me down here in the corner?"

"Well, I. . . ." A pretty girl never likes being told she's been passed over for another person.

"Oh, and look! There's Suong, too. My cousin. What a sourpuss!"

The charmer giggled, and her laughter sounded like the trilling of a bamboo flute. But Loi's mouth turned down when she reached for a burlap bag slung to her carrying pole and started to open it. The photographer reached forward to take the picture back, but the scent of the girl's body as she resisted him, sweet as bauhinia flowers, almost seduced him into letting her keep it. At last he snatched it out of her reach, and her mouth popped open in astonishment.

"It's not nice to take a gift back," she scolded. Her lips formed another pout, and Loi averted his eyes. Why was he being so un-

generous? But then his gaze returned to her face. How alluring she was! Once more he was on the point of yielding when she cried out,

"Fine! *Keep* the stupid thing! You have a lot to learn about photography anyway, Mister Cameraman." One end of her scarf tumbled off her neck, and she angrily tossed it back again. But her fingers caressed the fabric.

"Cam!" a man called down the way. "Hurry up! We need those casings!"

The girl twisted on one foot.

"I'm *coming*, Bao!" she shouted. She showed her back to Loi, stooped for her carrying pole, and hiked it up onto her shoulder. Then she stomped off down the path, the munitions baskets creaking under the weight of their contents. Each step she took seemed to trample in the mud every explanation he would have offered to placate her. The enticing fragrance of bauhinia flowers vanished in the air, leaving behind the stink of the canal. The artillery casings clanged from side to side until she was gone.

When he came upon her cousin, from the back, coincidentally, Loi felt a tightening in his chest even before she turned around. He spotted a conical hat moving up and down on the other side of a shoulder-high cactus hedge, and then, as he edged closer, he saw that Suong was dressed in the plain white shirt and black pantaloons of a peasant. She held a large wicker sifting tray out in front of her, and every few seconds, as the wind shifted, she tossed the paddy rice up into the air and let the breeze carry away the chaff. The grain fell back into the tray with a hiss, like hundreds of tiny insects hitting a screen all at the same time, and then she tossed it up again. A small kitchen garden hemmed the girl in on three sides.

Suddenly he was afraid to look at her face, at the memories it would arouse. He was about to steal away when his picture folder caught on a branch of the cactus hedge.

"Damn," he muttered.

"Is that you?"

The girl spun round and stepped forward, but then the eagerness died out of her face and she halted. Loi tried to extricate the folder from the hedge.

"*Troi oi!*" he cried. Gingerly he extracted a brown cactus spine from his right forefinger. He sucked at the wound and gazed at the girl. Her shoulders slumped at an angle. Loi felt her disappointment.

"I'm sorry, Miss Suong."

When she didn't say anything, he looked down at the folder again. One of the corners ripped as he pulled it free.

"Damn!" he repeated. He opened the folder. The girl next to Cam had been torn out of the picture, but the charmer still smiled ravishingly at him, the engagement scarf snug around her neck. Loi's glance moved several rows back. And Suong's haunted eyes stared out from the center of the photograph just as they had before. But Loi continued to examine the picture as though to assure himself that the two girls were really there. His gaze lingered a bit longer on the ghost than on her pretty cousin.

Suong stepped closer. She smelled of mint and the moist rich soil of the emerald green paddy fields. But her breath startled him with its heat.

"How did you know my name?"

"I . . . here." He passed the photograph over the hedge. She retreated a pace and looked at it while she cradled the winnowing tray on her hip. A lock of hair which hung down over her face in the picture tumbled off her brow, much like Cam's scarf, but she paid it no mind. After a moment or two she glanced up.

"But this doesn't explain how you knew my name."

"Well, I met your cousin Cam, you see, and—"

She snapped her head back and shut her eyes. After a few seconds she opened them and stared at the photograph once more. As she did so, she gripped the sifting tray so hard the wicker strands creaked from the strain she put on them. But with her other hand she gently stroked the scarf around her cousin's neck, much as Cam had earlier fondled the garment itself. The contrast between the two actions surprised Loi, but then the look of sorrow that

came over her surprised him even more. Once again, he recalled a face that for a year now he'd wanted to forget. . . .

"Thank you," she said hollowly.

She handed the picture back and walked away without another word, down a red laterite path that twisted through the kitchen garden and out past an open bamboo gate into an adjoining field. Her body swished through a low patch of elephant grass and disappeared, while Loi stood by, unable to call her back and force his gift on her. He was afraid to look at her again, even in the photograph, so he slipped it in among the other pictures in the folder and strode off in the direction of the base camp. Yet with every step the strange girl lingered in his thoughts. Sight unseen, like a ghost.

It was the Mid-Autumn Festival, and Loi had agreed to stay on in Xuan Bo village until it was over. He hoped to get some good pictures of the lion dances, the children's march, the procession of lanterns along the canal. To ease his mind, however, he left the damaged photo of the two cousins in his rucksack and shoved it under his cot.

The wind came off the mountains with a breath as sweet as milk as he emerged from his makeshift studio, strapped his Leica to his shoulder, picked up his tripod, and took off along the towpath in the direction of the village. The sun had set an hour earlier, and when Loi started out the sky was dark. But then the moon emerged from behind a bank of clouds as thick as a rough hemp mourning robe, and it now shone white, round, and full on the path, the canal, and the surrounding jungle. There was some risk in holding the celebration out in the open, but the authorities had felt it important to boost morale. The recent American air strikes had exacted a terrible toll on the people, both physically and spiritually. . . .

Loi quickened his pace. Several dead reeds bordering the canal swayed from side to side as he went by, as though he'd brought them back to life, and he felt a pang deep inside him as he remembered the time a year earlier when such power had been denied him. . . . The branches of a couple of mango trees dipped toward

each other like lovers. The night was a perfect one for romance, he thought, with a longing so intense it astonished him. He'd become standoffish lately, with women as well as men. The impermanence of human existence had convinced him that to act otherwise was foolish. . . .

"Excuse me, may I pass?"

He stepped to the left, away from the canal, but the girl collided into his back and fishtailed toward the water. She let out a cry, and the basket she was carrying flew up into the air and fell to the ground. Goods pelted the towpath like hailstones. The girl stumbled, and Loi caught her round the waist just in time and pressed her close. He looked at her. It was Suong. Her body felt as soft as cotton, as warm as a place on which the sun had rested. She smelled of sandalwood now, rather than the earth. Loi continued to hold her until she regained her balance. Then he remembered what she was and sprang back from her.

"Oh, why am I so unlucky?" she wailed. She gazed crestfallen at the foodstuffs scattered at her feet. Star fruit, bananas, persimmons, young green *com* rice, all intended for the Mid-Autumn Festival.

"Look at this! What am I to do?"

Her anguished voice cut through the normal night sounds—the chirring of insects, the croak of a whipping frog, the call of a plover—and brought them to a halt. Loi tried to replace her troubled image with the sweet carefree face of her beautiful cousin. But the picture of Cam that came to him was a hazy one, badly out of focus, like a failed photograph. Had he forgotten her already?

"Here, let me help you," he said, stepping forward. He leaned down, reached for the basket, and started to fill it.

"Why did you get in my way?" the girl complained.

The injustice of her accusation hardly registered, for a sudden dread came over him when he spotted a pink grapefruit which had split open on a rock. The pulp lay red and bleeding, reminding him of the many war scenes he'd photographed for the Ministry of Information. His hands began to tremble, and he had to clasp them together to stop the shaking. Of what use would he be taking photographs that night if he couldn't keep his hands steady?

"Don't you realize I have to get to the festival? Before it's too late?"

Her sense of injury was almost palpable in the night air. Loi didn't trust himself to answer. Instead he focused on gathering up her things.

"Did you hear me, Mister?"

Loi rose to his feet. "Yes," he said. "I'm very sorry, Miss Suong."

He offered her the basket, but kept his distance. She eyed the contents and pressed her lips hard.

"They're worthless!" Her eyes filled like pools on the first day of the rainy season. A wisp of cloud flitted across the moon, and when it was gone, her face appeared drained of life. He stepped closer, to comfort her, and his foot came down on something soft. He drew back, gazed at the ground, and noticed a mashed persimmon and a *com* rice ball. The traditional courting presents, the persimmon symbolizing the male, the green rice ball the female. Loi picked them up and held them out to her.

"What good are they?" she exclaimed, seizing only the food basket. Loi gazed at her, chagrined. Her sense of wrong no longer appeared unjustified. He sought for a way to make it up to her. But then his hand slipped, and he lost his grip on the persimmon and the rice ball. They fell to the earth again and shattered like a cluster bomb. Suong looked down, horrified.

"Oh, how *could* you?" She crouched and sifted through the pieces as though hoping to undo the damage. Her muttered laments flew about in a sudden harsh wind that struck Loi's face. The wind of the White Tiger, the bringer of bad luck. Loi knew there was nothing he could do to appease her now.

The girl collected whatever fragments she could, rose, and placed them in the basket. She gave Loi a reproachful glare and walked off rapidly in the direction of the village. The panels of her *ao dai* flashed in the moonlight like a distress signal. Loi wanted to call out how sorry he was, but all he could do was watch her go. Once again it was too late. . . .

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Loi heard the clash of cymbals, the plunking of a two-string viol, the heartbeat of tom-toms as he emerged onto the village square. The square was lit up with kerosene torches flaming at the tops of bamboo poles, in defiance of the enemy. The marketplace buzzed with activity as though it were the middle of the day. A weary-looking *bahn mi* seller hawked golden ingots of bread to the festival goers, and beside him an old woman peddled half-hatched duck eggs nestled in banana leaves and emitting the fragrant aroma of persicaria. Loi paused and debated for a few seconds before he passed them by. The Ministry of Information had not sent him here to indulge himself. He strode on, and soon melted in with the rest of the crowd converging on the *dinh*.

Children dressed in gaily-colored costumes, their small fists stuffed with candies and mooncakes, ran between the food stalls and the community center, and a couple of them almost tripped him up. Everyone seemed happy, exhilarated by the merrymaking, but Loi felt dejected. The encounter with Suong along the banks of the canal preyed on his mind still. He drew in a deep breath and tried to recall the charming girl with the scarf. Cam was an irritating young thing, yet now he longed to have her close. But all he could remember was her cousin, whose memory clung to him like a shroud, the way the girl herself had when he'd kept her from falling. It was as though the ten kings of the underworld had sent her to make sure that what happened a year ago stayed with him forever. . . .

Loi's footsteps slowed as he came up to the *dinh*. He gazed at the stage in front of him and tried to shake his melancholy mood.

A traveling acting troupe was performing the story of the Ngau Rains. A girl dressed in white portrayed Princess Chuc Nu, separated from her true love, the shepherd boy Nguu Lang, for disobeying her father, the Lord of Heaven. On this night only were the two allowed to meet, across the Silver River which would afterward divide them forever. Chuc Nu held her lover's hand and put on a face of woe which made Loi think of Suong again. He pitied the poor actress for her sorry plight, forgetting for a moment

that this was only a show. The girl wept copiously to the great delight of the audience, which consisted mainly of farmers thankful for the gentle autumn rains which streamed from the princess's sad eyes. But the melodrama felt very real to Loi. Too real. He was about to turn from it when someone pinched his elbow.

"Well, if it isn't Mister Photographer!"

Loi's gloomy mood vanished in an instant. He allowed the bewitching girl to take his arm and pressed her fingers gratefully. Cam twirled to a man standing behind them.

"Look, Bao," she said. "I *told* you I would find him!"

The man was a soldier, tall, angular, what the photographer supposed most women would consider handsome. A large shiny medal was pinned to his chest. Loi felt a stab of jealousy as he scanned the man from head to foot. So this was the type they fell for! He turned away, carrying the girl with him. Her face shone up at him like a mooncake, undaunted by his rudeness.

"We were hoping to run into you. Weren't we, Bao?"

She twirled again, and the end of her scarf slipped off her shoulder the way it had that morning. She giggled and tossed it back with flourish. But she was buoyant and flirtatious now, rather than annoyed. The man with the medal grunted.

"Oh, how thoughtless of me!" she cried, releasing Loi's arm. "I forgot. Mister Photographer, Comrade Captain Bao. Captain Bao, Mister Photographer." She turned back to Loi, tittered a second time, and batted her eyelashes. "Do you have a name?"

"Vu Ngoc Loi," he blurted out, but he was vexed with himself for being so eager to impart it. Did she think her looks entitled her to everything? An awkward silence fell between them. But Cam was unfazed.

"Ooh, what's that thing?" she squealed.

She leaned forward and snatched a peek at his tripod. Her breasts brushed against his arm when she did so, and Loi let out an involuntary exclamation. Cam sprang back a step, laughed self-consciously, then wiggled her nose at him. There was no need to explain the tripod to her, for she'd already lost interest in it. Her childishness exasperated Loi, and he turned and stared stonily at the stage.

Chuc Nu was bemoaning her wretched fate as she parted from her lover. Her face was a picture of misery as she clung to Nguu Lang, and then she launched into a final high-pitched lament when her father tore them apart. Loi sympathized with her. He thought of Suong again, but this time with a tenderness which surprised him. Cam laughed at his side, a bit nervously now, and Loi made a face and moved away from her. In the past year he had not found much to laugh at. But the determined girl stepped forward and grabbed his arm again.

"Don't be so *owlish*, Mister Photographer," she said, once more blinking her 1ovely eyes at him. Loi blushed like a Dalat strawberry.

"I'm sorry," he said, disengaging his arm. "But I have to go." He hurried off in the direction of the canal.

"Wait!"

Cam flew to his side and took his arm a third time. She gazed up at him beseechingly. "We'll go with you. In fact, we want to engage your services. Will you take our photograph?"

Loi elbowed his way through the crowd gathered on the bridge over the Xuan Bo canal. The villagers were clustered so tightly he could barely squeeze by. Children and adults leaned on the parapet and searched the canal for the approach of the flotilla of sampans that would end the day's celebrations.

He reached the railing at last, jiggled in among a group of children, and set down his tripod. The boy next to him clutched a red, yellow, and blue *to he* rice dragon and stared at the photographer with eyes as big as *dan chuyen* marbles.

"What's that for, Uncle?" he exclaimed, twiddling his toy dragon and straining to catch a glimpse. The kid's curiosity reminded him of Cam's, and he decided to ignore him. The child tugged his sleeve. "Mister Uncle?"

Loi relented and gave the boy a smile, but then he remembered he had work to do and turned away. He screwed his Leica in place on top of the tripod and aimed it out over the canal. He snapped on the flash unit. The boy repeated his question, yanking

harder on the photographer's sleeve. Loi frowned unti1 he took his hand away. Unlike Cam, the kid was not easily distracted, and what a pest he was!

"I'm going to photograph a formal marriage proposal," he growled. The boy looked hurt, and Loi felt a twinge of guilt and smiled at him a second time. The child brightened up and jostled the girl on his other side.

"Did you hear that, Binh? Somebody's getting *married!*"

"Not yet, Little Sir," Loi said. "The lady only has an engagement scarf. She'll get the ring tonight. That's what I'm going to photograph."

He leaned forward to catch a glimpse through the viewfinder, and his foot nudged an object which was against the railing. He glanced down, and his eyebrows rose. It was Suong's basket. The flattened persimmon was on top of the other food, but it looked as though it had been pounded into the remains of the rice ball like an artillery shell into flesh. The sight of it was unnerving. Loi looked over the parapet. The waters of the canal swirled beneath him, but he saw nothing else. A cloud began to settle over his mind, however. Just then the boy beside him squirmed with excitement.

"Look!" he cried. "They're coming!" Loi raised his head. In the distance the sampans came into view. Villagers of all ages ran along the banks of the canal and cheered them on. Their rice paper lanterns flickered in and out among the trees.

The crowd on the bridge leaned forward, and Loi squinted into the glare of the brightest night he'd seen in a year. Colored lights danced on the water as the flotilla, with Cam and Bao standing upright in the lead sampan, gradually approached. The musicians in the craft behind them struck up a lively wedding tune on their pyriform lutes, monochords, and oboes. The harmonious melody, the balmy night air, the smell of willow fronds dipping in the waves lifted Loi's spirits. As Cam and Bao nestled together, he even forgot his earlier jealousy.

But then a great white pelican perched on a large log in the middle of the canal snapped its beak at the advancing sampans and made a low croaking sound. It flapped its wide wings and rose

heavily into the air like one of the huge airplanes the Americans used. The log spun round several times, disturbing the current. When the water calmed, Loi saw the reflection of the moon on the surface of the canal. Next to it was a face, shining like a ghost. Loi lurched forward, broke into a sweat, and grasped the rail to keep from fainting. He shivered all over.

The teenager had been killed coming through a cassava grove on her way home from school. She was floating in a bomb crater filled with rain when Loi found her shortly before sunrise the next morning, and she looked small bobbing against the wall of mud carved out by the B-52. Her face appeared sad, but resigned. It shone up at Loi from the waters of the bomb crater, a twin of the pale round moon which gleamed beside it. A lock of matted black hair hung down over her brow. When Loi understood that it was too late to help her, he knelt down at the edge of the crater, grasped the scorched branches of a manioc tree, and stretched out his other hand. With trembling fingers he caught hold of one of the girl's ankles and dragged her toward him. The concussion from the bomb had apparently blown her sandals off. Loi was used to the dead, but he was taken aback by how cold the girl was, and how waterlogged. When he succeeded in fishing the body out, he waited quietly beside it until the sky became light enough to take a photograph. He felt numb all over, but whether it was from sorrow or from the chill of the approaching dawn he could not tell.

Finally he spotted a fellow searcher coming through the grove toward him. Loi beckoned to him, and when the man arrived, he asked him to prop the dead girl up while he took the lens cap from his Leica and composed his first shot. He did not ask the man to remove the dirt from her brow or the reeds which clung to her hair and her blood-stained *ao dai.* But after he took the first photograph and peered in the viewfinder again, Loi started to shake so badly he thought an earthquake had followed in the wake of the air strike. His clammy forehead fogged up the viewfinder, and he could no longer see to focus. He collapsed to the ground, and his breath came in a series of short hard gasps. The villager holding the body stared at him as though astounded by the photographer's

extreme reaction to the handiwork of fate. Loi rocked from side to side, stricken with grief. The expression on the girl's face tormented him. No anger. No outrage. Like the villager, she seemed to accept what had happened to her as a mere quirk, something that was only to be expected. Sad perhaps, but nothing to get worked up about.

Loi had captured countless numbers of dead on film before. But never one that had affected him so much. . . .

The lead sampan drew nearer. With an effort Loi pulled himself together and moved back from the parapet. He wiped his forehead with his shaking fingers. The little boy and his companion gazed at him in fright. Loi looked at them but said nothing. He calmed his nerves and peered at the sampan.

Cam and Bao clasped hands and gazed tenderly into each other's eyes. A ring glinted in Bao's hand, and the betrothal scarf embraced Cam's neck for all to see. They would soon be at the bridge. Loi bent down, glanced in the viewfinder, and readied the camera.

"Who's *that*?" the boy asked. The photographer straightened up and followed his gaze into the branches of a willow tree drooping over the canal. The sampan was almost opposite it. Clinging to one of the lower branches, betrayed by her *ao dai* gleaming in the moonlight, crouched the ghost.

"Suong!" the photographer called. She looked in his direction. The lovers in the sampan, caught up in their bliss, noticed nothing. Suong's face was as pale as the moon itself. Her eyes looked on Loi's for a moment, as though she wanted him to stop her. Then she jumped into the sampan.

"Suong!" he cried again.

The girl wrapped her arms around Cam's shoulders and fought like a tigress. Her fingers clawed at the engagement scarf. The boat yawed from side to side as it sailed toward the bridge. The oarsman in the stern tried frantically to steady it.

"*Ai da!*" Cam exclaimed, trying to fling her cousin off. "It's mine! Let me go!" She twisted her neck as far as she could. "Bao, you stupid! *Help* me!"

Bao stood off to one side, his feet planted apart to keep himself from falling. He hung his head and made no effort to intervene. After a few seconds he glanced up, but at Loi rather than at the two women fighting close to him. His face no longer had the proud expression of a recently decorated war veteran, but instead had the shamefaced look of a man bothered by guilt. He quickly glanced away again.

Loi stood by the railing along with the rest of the crowd and watched the scene below him in stunned silence. Suddenly he saw the engagement scarf tear free. He heard a muffled cry of triumph, followed by a splash and a loud crack. The oarsman regained control of the sampan, and it moved on beneath the bridge.

Loi anxiously scanned the water, then ran to the other side of the bridge. Cam wailed after her lost scarf and continued to berate her fiancé, who held aloof from her still, his head bowed low again. Loi raced back to his original position. Cam's moans grew fainter as the sampan sailed farther away. . . .

"Suong!" he shouted, for the third time. The canal was turbulent, but after a few moments it became tranquil, and Loi spotted the reflection of the moon among the waves. It glimmered dully now, and he knew there would be no air strike that night. But then, once more, he saw a face floating beside it. A new face. Suong must have hit her head hard on the log on which the pelican had rested, and which was drifting away toward the shore, taking the engagement scarf with it. Or perhaps she'd even broken her neck. But on her face was a look of defiant rage, the only thing that could save them both. Loi heard a final despairing cry from Cam, but it was only the remnant of a long distant past. Although the angry moonlike face below him was very still, Loi knew at last that it was not too late. He set his camera down beside the food basket, climbed up onto the parapet, and leaped into the canal.

Keith Lesmeister

Elements of the Body

The summer after I finished the fifth grade my father was sent away to a facility up north for his lapses in judgment. That's how my mother explained it. Over the phone, she'd repeat this to friends and family members. "He's going up north," she'd say, "to get treated for his lapses in judgment."

His lapses got bad in the spring of that year, and a couple of months later, in June—after my mother had finished teaching the school year—she drove him to the Abby Center, thirty miles away, so he could get help. After that, my older brothers went to live with my grandparents and I stayed with my mother.

That previous winter, prior to his going away, my father had been unemployed—occasionally picking up contracting jobs with some buddies who worked in the trades. He could do just about anything—carpentry, plumbing, electrical—but he had a tough time holding down steady work and his friends knew well enough to hire him for only a few days at a time, only when they really needed his help.

While my father was out of work he studied maps planning our family's vacation to Yellowstone. "We're gonna stop here, and here, and here," he'd tell me and my older brothers, pointing at the six-foot long map he'd tacked to the basement wall. From eastern Iowa, he figured the drive would take us about twenty hours, but he had plans to stop off for a few days in the Badlands and the Black Hills. "Trip of a lifetime," he told us.

But in the evenings, when my parents thought us boys were asleep, I'd hear my mom say, "Don't get the boys' hopes up." Or, "How do you plan on paying for this trip?"

It wouldn't matter anyhow because my father would disappear from our lives, and Yellowstone would be plagued with intense forest fires from June to October. This was also the summer my mother started drinking again—going out with friends or sitting around watching the '88 Summer Olympics. It was also the

summer I became fascinated with our new neighbors—the Reece family. So much so that for the first week after they moved in—this being early August—I convinced my best friend Ryan to bike around their cul-de-sac with me, hoping we could catch sight of them.

On the actual day the Reece family moved into their newly built house, with U-Hauls and sweaty men lugging boxes, Ryan and I snuck over to survey the event. It was high noon and humid. Both of us sun-scorched, shirtless. This was the southeast side of Cedar Rapids. I had just turned twelve.

The Reece's house sat at the edge of our neighborhood, beyond the grove of white pines. The driveway was lined with saplings and wound its way up from the cul-de-sac to a side-attached garage. A stone walkway led from the arched entryway to the driveway where a fiberglass basketball hoop was mounted at the far edge. The windows appeared large and shiny. Bushes and decorative trees framed the front and side yards.

Ryan and I lay hidden under the white pines, crawling from one tree to the next, pine needles sticking to our sweaty stomachs and arms. We spotted a woman sitting on the front lawn running her hands over the top of the green sodded grass while a doughy-looking kid wearing red and orange Bermuda shorts ran through a sprinkler. The woman tilted her head toward the sun, eyes closed, absorbing the heat. Her hair was dark, and pulled back in a messy ponytail. Ryan held a pair of cheapo binoculars to his eyes. He'd bought them last weekend at a garage sale for a dollar. "She look good?" I said. The men moved from the truck to the house and back again, carrying boxes and rolling dollies with heavy furniture and appliances.

"Not bad from here," he said. Blue Popsicle had stained the sides of his mouth.

"Let me have a look," I said. The binoculars were wet from Ryan's sweaty hands and face. "Dude, she's a fox." The woman touched her temples and focused on the sky. Then she folded her hands together, held them for a moment, and brought them to her forehead. Even now I can't fully explain my attraction.

"She's not bad," Ryan said.

Sprinkler-boy grabbed a towel and darted into the house. The woman stayed on the lawn.

"Sprinklers are for pussies," Ryan said, taking the binoculars back.

"No shit," I said. "Why the hell'd they build that house near us anyway?"

It'd take four houses on our block to match the size of theirs.

The woman stood up and stretched. She put her hands on her waist and bent forward moving her hips around, like she was warming up for some athletic event. She did this for a few minutes. Then she turned and went inside, her flowy dress getting taken every which way by the breeze.

Ryan and I shimmied out from under the pine grove and biked back to my house and sat next to a window propped open by a box fan running on high. I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my arm. House flies flew everywhere and my mom's cigarette smoke circulated in the living room. She stood at the kitchen counter making herself a bologna sandwich while Ryan and I rated the hotness of our new neighbor and figured out ways we could meet them—her. Simply knocking on their door never occurred to us.

The night before my father left for up north felt like any other night. It was the first part of June, two months before the Reeces moved in. School had already let out and we sat on a couch in the basement listening to some AM stations that alternated between airing talk shows and playing gritty blues musicians. My father enjoyed most AM programming, and as we sat on the couch poring over maps, it occurred to me then that we hadn't been alone together in a very long while. My mother was upstairs preparing a late dinner: beef stew and biscuits. My father's request.

"Here we are, Ike," my father said, pointing to our location in eastern Iowa. "And this is where we want to be." He flipped the page to Wyoming, but instantly set the map aside. It was a sudden move that I imagine, now, was a realization that his interest in

our family's road trip made no difference in the outcomes that lay ahead for him. He was still leaving tomorrow. He tousled my hair, then ran both hands over his and stood up.

"Come on," he said. He motioned for me to stand, and I did.

Seeing him in such close quarters, I observed how much he and my older brother Joe resembled each other: the dark features, face full of stubble. Joe was sixteen, driving, and shaving almost every day. It wouldn't be long before Allan, my middle brother, was doing the same. Me—I had my mother's characteristics: small, slender stature. But strong. My mother could be a fierce opponent if she felt wronged or mistreated. I felt that I possessed that same determined, underdog-like strength. My father once told us boys—when it was just the four of us out camping—that when he and my mom were younger, before she was a teacher, she used to get in bar fights. Once, he told us, she poured a pitcher of beer over another woman's head, then slammed her forehead into a table. Apparently this was one of my father's ex-girlfriends, and while my father recounted this memory he laughed with a kind of fondness. "How about your old man—two women fighting over me!" We all laughed on cue, like we were supposed to, but I think we all felt funny knowing this about our primary caregiver.

Now standing, my father put his hands up, jabbed the air. We used to do this a lot when I was younger—shadowbox around the basement. He took jabs, throwing his left hand near my right ear. "Pop, pop," he said. His hands sliced the air around my forehead. I mostly kept my hands up protecting my face, feet moving. We circled around on the carpet and when I saw an opening, I'd take it—an imaginary hit to his stomach or jaw. My dad would stop for a moment and grimace, feigning fear and hurt. "That-a-boy," he told me. "Keep up the counter punch."

The Reeces' house was the only one on their cul-de-sac. We lived around the corner in another section of the neighborhood. Single-story houses bunched close together, stuff lined up in the yards: old cars, couches, barbecue grills, weight lifting equipment, leashes tied to trees.

All week after the Reeces moved in, Ryan and I rode our dirt bikes up and down our street and then over to the Reece's. We pedaled in circles hoping the boy—Sam was his name—would come out. I was hoping to see the mom. I guess we were more curious than anything—who they were? Why did they move here?

One afternoon, after Ryan and I rode around their cul-de-sac for a while, Sam rode out of his garage on a shiny new BMX bike. He was a soft-looking kid with rosy cheeks and blond hair combed forward. He wore those same red and orange Bermuda shorts, and the three of us biked in circles at the bottom of his driveway.

"Who are you guys?" Sam said. He squinted at us, the sun high and intense.

We told him our names and that we were from the other side of the neighborhood. Then Ryan said, "You know how to bunny-hop?"

"What's that?" Sam said.

"Bunny-hop, California bunny-hop," Ryan said. "You know anything like that?"

"Never heard of it," Sam said.

We rode around on their empty street—Ryan and I jumping curbs and popping wheelies and bunny-hopping our bikes. We were pros at this, but we could tell right away that Sam couldn't do any tricks—couldn't even wheelie. After that was established, we rode in circles again, and Ryan and I told him about the neighborhood: the pine grove, the neighbors, the dogs, the deer, the creek at the end of the lane where we occasionally caught frogs and turtles. Sam thought that was cool. And then I told him about my paper route, and also told him he could come over to my house anytime. He said he'd rather have us over at his place because his house "rocks." Then I told him I lived with my mom and Ryan lived with his grandparents, and before I could tell him where my dad was and where Ryan's parents were, he said, "What, are they like in jail or something?"

"They're not," Ryan said. "They're coming back as soon as they get their shit together."

"My dad's a businessman," Sam said. "He's got money coming out his ass. He wants me to get a job because he says I need a work ethic." He looked at me. "Think I could help you with your paper route?"

I thought about jamming a stick into his front spokes, watch him tumble over. Locusts were screeching and the sun was destroying us. "I guess you could meet me in the pine grove tomorrow morning," I said. "5:30 sharp." I didn't think he'd do it.

"That's fucking early," Sam said.

"People will shoot me in the head with a .44 Magnum if their papers aren't out in time," I said. I held onto the handlebars with my left hand and made a pistol out of my right and aimed it at Sam.

"I need to go inside," Sam said. "Air conditioning is where it's at. I'll ask my mom if you guys can come over."

"Where'd you move from?" I said.

"Place I moved from would kill this place," he said. "This town smells like dead catfish and cereal and hog shit all swirled together in a big tub of boiling piss." Downtown Cedar Rapids was a few miles away, but we could still smell Quaker Oats and ADM Corn Sweeteners and the river.

"Why'd you move here?" Ryan said.

"My dad's job or something," he said. "But he's gone right now. Travels all the time."

"No," I said. "Why'd you move *here*, to our neighborhood?"

"My mom wants to buy these other lots," he said. "So we don't have neighbors." For Sale signs lined the empty lots on each side of the street. Tufts of dry brown grass grew around the signs. The lots were treeless, bare.

"What's wrong with her?" I said. "She doesn't like people?" I looked up at Sam's house and I could see a figure moving around inside, behind those shiny windows.

"My dad says she's a little off her rocker," he said. "I don't think she has any friends."

"You smoke?" Ryan said to Sam.

"Never," he said.

"Ike thinks your mom's hot," Ryan said.

"Never said that," I said. I shot Ryan the death-look.

"Dude, that's disgusting," Sam said.

I stopped pedaling and looked up at the window where Sam's mom stood. She seemed to be looking in my direction. But pretty soon she backed away and disappeared from the window.

That night, my mom went out and didn't come home until after midnight. She'd started going out more and more. I locked all the doors and closed up all the windows because I'd watched a horror movie a couple nights before, and in general I was scared of the dark, which at certain times of the year made the paper route difficult.

When my mom came home I was sleeping on the couch. She'd either forgotten her key or didn't bother digging it out from her cluttered purse—she startled me, fists slamming the front door. I jerked awake and let her in. She shuffled through the entryway, swaying, smoking a Kool. She stumbled over and swatted me in the head. "Why's it so damn hot in here," she said. "What kind of idiot closes the windows when it's finally cooled off outside?" I sat back down on the couch and she opened all the windows, then sat next to me. She didn't talk. She leaned back and blew smoke at the ceiling. She finished her Kool and snubbed it out in a glass ashtray on the coffee table, already overflowing with butts. She looked into the potato chip bag, but I'd already finished it and a couple of cans of soda while watching action movies on late night television. She put her arm around me. "Sorry," she said. "Sorry for yelling. Sorry for smacking you." She leaned against me, rested her head on my shoulder. "Sorry I called you an idiot." She pulled me close and tousled my hair with her knuckles. She smelled like she always smelled after coming home from the bar, and then she fell back against the sofa and almost immediately began snoring. I knew she missed my father dearly. I was trying to be patient with her. I patted her knee and kissed her on the cheek. I pulled her sandals off and set them under the coffee table. Then I turned out the lights and tiptoed to my parents' room. I reread a

letter she'd started writing to him. Coffee stains marked the edge of the paper. It lay on her nightstand next to a pen and a ceramic mug. I'd read the letter earlier that night, and I wanted to read it again because it gave me something that I can only describe now as hope.

The other thing my father loved to do was play darts. The evening before he left for up north, after we'd shadowboxed in the basement, we played. I guess technically we didn't so much as play but just threw at the board. He held three red feathered darts, and I took the yellow set. We alternated, tossing them at the corkboard, my dad commenting on each of his throws: "Too high" or "Too far to the left" or "What the hell was that?"

After we'd been throwing for a while, I hit the bull's-eye dead on, but the dart fell out.

"Gotta throw it like you mean it," he said. Then he refocused on the board, positioned his fingers in just the right way on the dart's barrel, and just as he fired it forward he said, "Like this." The dart sailed high, lodging into the old oak door. I stood there, waiting for his reaction. But he didn't comment this time. I knew he was aiming for the bull's-eye, but clearly missed the mark. There was a short pause, and then laughter. Nothing but laughter. After I knew it was safe, I started laughing too. There'd been moments before when something like missing the dartboard would've provoked a completely different reaction. I can't begin to describe how relieved I was when there was nothing but the smile on his face and the sound of our laughter.

After a minute of this, my mother called us for dinner. We could hear my brothers already in the kitchen. I started for the basement door, but just as I went, and just as we started to relax from our laughing fit, my father latched his arm around my neck, took me in a headlock, kissed the top of my head. "I've always liked spending time with you, Ike," he said. "You're one of the good ones."

Before I left to deliver papers I checked on my mother, who had repositioned herself on the couch, sleeping sound. I tiptoed

into our foyer and folded the papers. Outside, the morning was cool and quiet, a still grayness that kept everything calm. I loved the mornings.

At the last second, I decided to check the pine grove to see if Sam was serious about helping. When I got there, he was waiting. Sitting cross-legged on top of the burnt orange pine needles. "Why the fuck do you do this?" he said. "So early."

"It's good money," I said.

"How much?" he said.

"My dad told me when he comes back he'd take over the route for a while because he could use the extra cash for our vacation."

"Like how much?"

"Quite a bit," I said.

"How much?"

"About a hundred," I said.

"A week?"

"Month."

"That ain't shit," he said. "Extra cash? Yeah right. Your dad's a poor fucker." Sam stormed off. "Fuck this."

I threw my bag down and some of the papers fell out. Each one perfectly folded and rubber-banded. I ran up behind Sam, jumped on his back. We fell to the ground. I rolled off him and stood up. He scrambled to his feet.

"What the hell was that?" he said. We were at the edge of the pine grove and could just barely see his house.

"Why'd your parents build here anyway?" I said, flinging my arms in the air. "Have you seen our neighborhood?"

"You mean all those shitty little houses for people like your dirt-broke dad."

I shoved him hard in the chest, knocking him to the ground. I got on top of him. He flailed, trying to get up. I spit in his face and hair. Then I started stuffing his shirt with pine needles. I pushed them up his shirt and down his collar until he looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy. He squirmed underneath me. He was a lot bigger, but I was twenty times stronger and I felt completely in control. He brought his arms up across his face but I never took one swing.

I just kept stuffing. He was screeching like a trapped animal. I got up and stood over him.

"Shut the fuck up," I said. He cowered on the ground, looking at me. I pulled a Zippo out of my pocket and flipped it open in the fancy way my dad had taught me. We'd sat in the backyard one summer evening a year ago and he showed me where to place my two fingers and thumb, how to flick it open.

I sparked a flame.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Sam said. "Don't." He put a hand up over his face, still on the ground.

"You know how fast these burn?" I said. I pinched a pine needle between my thumb and index finger and lit it. It shriveled up and disappeared.

"Please, don't." He was sobbing and could barely talk. "I'll pay you," he said. "Seriously." He tried tearing off his shirt, but he was too flustered. He started pulling out the pine needles.

He scrambled to his feet and ran out of the woods. I ran after him, knocking him down one more time. I jumped on top of him and opened my Zippo. He swatted it from my hand. It skidded across the pine needles. I dove for it, and when I looked back Sam was scampering across one of the empty lots back to his house. I wiped off the shiny lighter and rubbed it with my thumb. My dad's initials carved into one side.

When I got home from delivering papers, sneakers damp and my right shoulder aching from where the bag had hung, a woman stood out front of my house. It was Sam's mom. Seeing her up close choked my airways a little. I knew she was here to scold me.

She wore a bathrobe, and her hair—wavy and unkempt—was pulled up in a messy ponytail. She was barefoot. "Are you Isaac?" she said.

"Call me Ike," I said, trying to sound as cool as possible. But it came out more like a whimper.

"You owe my son an apology," she said. I edged closer to our house and looked into the window. I thought my mom might still be sleeping on the couch.

"You're Sam's mom," I said.

"He wanted to deliver papers with you," she said. "But you left without him. He came home bawling, telling me he really wanted to walk the paper route with you but you didn't wait for him."

"Did he say anything else?" I said.

"I know eleven-year-old boys aren't supposed to cry about stuff like that but Sam's—" She paused then and looked away, pulling her robe tight. She inhaled deeply through her nose. The birds were singing, loud and chaotic, and I noticed her eyes grew big and focused, like a hawk hunting for mice. She never blinked. "—he's a good kid," she finally said. "He gets lonesome when his dad's out on business trips, which is more often than not. You should come over for breakfast and visit with him. Do you need to change? I'll wait for you."

"I know where you live," I said. "Just beyond the pines."

She stood there, waiting, then turned her focus to the ash tree in our front yard. "Poor thing's probably going to die from the Emerald Ash Borer." She pointed at the tree.

"What's an Ash Borer?" I said.

She looked at me and her eyes grew hawk-like again. "Do you feel warm?" she said. "Like your chest is knotted and tight?" She walked over to me, hands open, arms outstretched, like a zombie. "I'm sensing a lot of heat coming from you." She rested her palms against my temples. Her grip felt warm and firm. My midsection tingled from having a grown woman other than my mother touch me so spontaneously. I shifted weight from one leg to the other.

"Are we doing something?" I said. I moved my head back and forth. Her eyes closed. She let go of my temples and stepped back.

"If I told you that your body needed more water, or cooling elements, because you're too full of heat, fire—how would you feel? How would you respond?"

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"Come with me for breakfast," she said. "I've got just what you need."

Their entryway was tall and open with shiny wood floors covered by soft rugs. The place smelled like herbs and scented candles which burned in clusters around the house. There were two

chairs in the living room, along with stacks of unpacked boxes. The walls were bare—no pictures or paintings, just white.

I sat at the breakfast bar. I felt strange sitting there with what had just happened with Sam, but I ate anyway. Scooping yogurt and granola out of a blue ceramic bowl. Sam's mom, on the walk over from my house, had introduced herself as Daphne Reece. After she served me breakfast—yogurt was supposed to "cool" me off—she went out back and started building a fire in one of those fire pits built into a brick patio, level with the ground. She was pulling kindling out of a five-gallon bucket, laying it on top of crumpled newspaper.

Sam came down the stairs wearing blue pajamas with dolphins all over. He walked heavy-footed through the hallway. His hair was messy. When he spotted me, he said, "Dude, what the—?"

I pointed out back. "She invited me."

"You need to go," he said.

I rose from the stool. Just as I did, Daphne walked in and said, "So glad you're up, sweetie. Ike decided to join us for breakfast." She hugged Sam, kissed his forehead. Then she set her hands on his temples, like she did to me. He shimmied loose.

"Not now, mom," he said.

He stuck a glass under the refrigerator's ice machine. Ice clanked in and he poured himself some orange juice. His face looked scrunched and soured. When his mom wasn't looking he flipped me off and mouthed the words: "Fuck you." Then he turned on a television that sat on their kitchen counter. Reruns of last night's Olympics—men's and women's gymnastics.

"Awfully acidic," Daphne said, tapping Sam's glass of juice. "We'll have to offset that with some alkaline foods or drinks later today."

He rolled his eyes. Out back a fire was raging. Daphne stepped out again and leaned into the fire. She was still in her robe—a red, silky, kimono-like thing that hung open, her white pajamas underneath.

Sam sipped his juice. He turned toward the walk-in pantry, rummaged around the shelves. He came out with a box of Lucky

Charms. “You totally freaked out back there,” he said to me. “You were gonna light me on fire if I hadn’t been so quick to escape.”

“You didn’t escape shit,” I said. “I let you go.” I brought my bowl to the sink and rinsed it out. “Listen, for the record, I wasn’t going to set you on fire. You think I’m crazy?”

“I never wanted to move here,” he said. “This town’s a shithole.”

“You cried like a fucking baby,” I said.

“You were gonna light me on fire.”

“You’ve never gotten your ass kicked, have you?” I said. “You squealed like it was your first time getting pummeled.”

“I’ve been in fights,” he said.

“You ever been knocked out, trying to box your old man?” I said. I got right up in Sam’s face, fists clenched. “You ever been held underwater for filling the bathtub too high? You ever gotten slapped across the face for putting too much ketchup on your plate? You ever—”

“Chill out, dude,” he said. “I get it. You’ve gotten your ass kicked by your old man. You’re a badass. Whatever.” He poured a bowl of Lucky Charms. I backed away.

“My dad’s fine,” I said. “That’s not how he usually is.”

“I don’t really give a shit,” he said.

Daphne came back in through the sliding glass door. She was wide-eyed again, like she’d just discovered something. “I have an idea, boys,” she said. Her knees bent slightly. She put her arms in the air. “I’m going roller skating!” she said. “You boys want to go?”

I looked at Sam. “I dunno,” I said.

“Come on,” she said. “It’ll move your energy around.”

“It’ll what?” I said.

“Here,” Daphne said. She handed me a cordless phone. I inspected it. “Call your mom, Ike.”

“No one wants to go—” Sam began to say.

“—Sam, be a ‘yes’ person,” she said. “Remember what we talked about?”

I called my mom and left a message on the machine. Daphne walked upstairs to get ready.

"Listen," Sam said, touching my shoulder. "Let's just not talk about this anymore, okay? What happened earlier. Let's just move on."

The roller skating rink was on the outskirts of town—surrounded by cow pastures and ag-land. Ryan and I had been here a lot during the school year, playing video games and air hockey, and playing tag, and I was nervous he was out here and would see me with Sam.

We parked, got out, and right away Daphne skipped over to a group of cows standing next to a barbed-wire fence. I could see black flies harassing their bodies and faces. Their angular heads were close enough to pet. Cows had those distant, dreamy eyes, and I could never look at one for very long without feeling exposed and guilty for something. Daphne rubbed one's nose, and looked back at us. "These beautiful creatures," she said. She petted one for a moment longer, then she turned to me and said, "I suspect you eat meat, Ike, but you might consider abstaining. Meat generates a lot of bodily heat."

"Jesus Christ," Sam said, so only I could hear. "Let's go. She'll catch up."

Inside—dim lights, wood paneled walls, worn-out skates, poor air conditioning. It felt stuffy, like my house. The two guys running the cash register and skate rental had shaggy hair and sweat beading on their faces. A concession stand lined the far wall—rows of candy, a soda dispenser. Daphne paid the two guys and they gave us our rentals.

"I love skating," Daphne said. We sat on a shag-carpeted bench pulling on our skates. She was chewing gum. I watched her mouth work.

"And bonfires?" I said.

She sat up, leaving her laces untied. "There's a delicate harmony to maintain," she said. "Elements of the body, Ike: Earth, *Fire*, Water, Air. When one's off, it can lead to disturbances." She spat the gum into her hand and wrapped it into a tissue. "My spiritual counselor says that I can become waterlogged and therefore

indolent, indifferent, and unstable. Fire helps." She looked at Sam and put an arm around him. "And we wouldn't want mom out of balance now would we?"

Sam said no in a flat voice. He stared at the rink.

"Roller skating," she said, "Movement helps, too."

"So the bonfire and the skating," I said. "It helps—"

"—helps offset my being waterlogged," she said. "I need coals, fire coals, and when the fire burns down I'll collect them and put them in a pan and stand over it, allowing the heat to enter my pores. Which is why you need to be here with us, Ike," she said. "Your inner energy is hot, and being around you will also help offset those of us who need more fire."

She grabbed my temples again and said, "I mean, Sam and I—we're water and air heavy, and we need another person to offset our imbalances. Think of it like opposites needing each other. For balance." She kept her hands on my temples and moved them down to my face. I felt a tingle in that area again and I was repeating in mind: Please no hard-on, please no hard-on.

"Mom," Sam said. "Let him go for chrissake."

"Of course," she said. "Let's skate. Movement," she said, while skating onto the edge of the rink, "another wonderful way to generate heat. Probably not the best for you, Ike, but we'll make do."

Ryan, as I feared, was here, and when he skated by he scrunched his lips and eyes. That expression probably would've meant nothing to anyone else, but I knew Ryan well enough to know what he'd just told me. Or, asked, rather. He was wondering: what the fuck?

Daphne turned out to be an excellent skater, pulling all sorts of jumps and twists, and other moves I'd never seen. She rolled around on one skate, with the other leg trailing in the air behind her. She had this determined, focused look on her face, like she was in some sort of zone. Sam and I played air hockey and I crushed him in every game seven-zero, and he whined a little. Ryan and another guy skated toward us. "Ryan," I said. I tried to give him a high-five, but he just looked at me, then at Sam. "Doubles?" I said. Ryan and I were an undefeated team in air-hockey doubles.

"Nah," he said. "Maybe another time."

Sam didn't want to play either, so we all sat on one of the carpeted benches and watched people move around on skates. Some held hands, some skated backwards, others were in the center of the rink doing the limbo.

"Speaking of jobs," Sam said. We all looked at him kind of confused, but he kept talking. "My dad works for his dad, my grandpa. It's a family business. I'm gonna take over after college." Ryan pushed off the bench and skated away.

"Sounds like a life," I said.

"I'll hire you, if you want," he said. "Then you won't have to worry about that paper route."

"I think I'm ready to go home," I said.

"Not yet," he said. "Let's skate."

We skated. Sam sang along to Top 40 music that thumped through large, rectangular speakers. Air moved over our faces. We weaved between people. Sam eventually skated toward the concession stand. Daphne moved off the rink and sat down on one of the benches. Every time I looked over at her, she was watching me. Or so I thought. I tried turning and twisting, and bending down on one leg, moves I'd watched her do.

And I was doing pretty well, but after about ten minutes of this I took a jump and tried a three-sixty in the air. Even now, I still don't know what came over me, what possessed me to try something so difficult, so ridiculous. I suppose now it was some form of expression, some need for approval, to impress Daphne. Something that could only be motivated by childhood notions of bravery and risk.

I came down and landed on the side of my foot. My ankle popped. And the rest of my body hit the rink hard. The pain was excruciating. I could feel my ankle already swelling up, pushing against the leather skate. The music stopped. The pain moved into my stomach. I felt like throwing up. Daphne skated over, knelt next to me, put her head down and instantly started running her hands through the air around my ankle without touching me.

People were looking at her, but since I was lying down, propped up by my elbows now, all I could see was the top of her

head. “It’s low,” she finally said. “It’s a low sprain, that’s a good thing.”

“It’s broke,” I said, grimacing. “It’s gotta be broke.”

“It’s not,” she said. “I can feel your sprain.” She still hadn’t touched me and her hands were still working. I could see her face now, but her eyes were closed. She was really concentrating. “It’s low, and that means a quick recovery, easier to heal than a high sprain.” She opened her eyes and looked at me. “You need balance in your elements,” she said. A crowd of onlookers gawked at us, including Ryan. I could see people shaking their heads, asking what happened. “Excess of fire means you’re daring and prone to taking great risks,” Daphne said. “Not inherently bad, Ike, but look what could happen.”

“You tried what?” my mother said. She was sitting at the kitchen table, smoking, drinking a sweating bottle of beer, watching the Olympics on a six-inch television that sat underneath a kitchen counter. “You wanna be in the Olympics, don’t you?” she said.

I didn’t say anything, just kept ice on my ankle.

My mother asked me twenty-five times if I was crazy. Just kept repeating the same question until it seemed she’d forgotten she was even talking. I stayed quiet. After a while, after the sprinters were finished with their prelims, she made us dinner: cold meat sandwiches, potato chips, and carrot sticks. She set the food on the table. Then we said a prayer together, something we’d never done together on our own, something she’d never even suggested. Then we ate in silence.

The initial pain was excruciating, but with regular icing the swelling went down after two days and the sprain became manageable. Still, I needed someone to help with the paper route. I asked Ryan but he said, “Hell no. Who wants to get up that early?”

I decided to give Sam another chance with the route. After the last attempt, I wasn’t sure how he’d feel. But I asked anyway.

Sam agreed right away and showed up at my house first thing the next morning and watched me fold papers. I hung the bag over

his shoulder and he complained how heavy it was. I rode around the street on my bike and gave him directions while he delivered. Occasionally, if there were more than two front doors on a house, or a dog was barking in the front yard because the owner forgot to bring it in for the night, Sam would stop and glare at me for instructions. But mostly I rode my bike, which put hardly any pressure on my ankle, and Sam walked briskly, chucking papers onto doorsteps.

Once, I had to tell him to stop whistling so he wouldn't wake people, but other than that he was an ace. He agreed to help for a week, or until my ankle felt better. And he said he'd do it for free. My dad had told me once: "Don't accept free help. You don't wanna owe anyone anything." And his advice was ringing in my head as I watched Sam deliver papers. I thought about handing Sam money at the end of the week, but later on I thought better of it.

It's hard work accepting help from others. But I found something in Sam's offer that made me question my dad's words.

It's been twenty years since that summer when my dad went away and the Reeces moved into the neighborhood. I kept in touch with Sam throughout high school, but after that we lost contact. His family still lives at the end of the cul-de-sac. The bushes and trees around their home have filled in, and the brick and cream-colored siding are slightly faded and worn, and now, contrary to Daphne's wish, other houses line the street—two-story homes with prominent garages. My mother still lives around the corner, beyond the grove of white pines.

Just the other night, I strolled through the Reece's neighborhood. A cool fall breeze, leaves just starting to turn color, ready to coat the ground. I made it a habit of staying with my mother on or around the anniversary of my father's death. That summer he went away marked his being in the Abby Center off and on for five months until he simply couldn't handle it anymore. Left no note, overdosed on pills.

My mother has since retired from teaching. She still works, but she'd lost her interest in classrooms a long time ago, and she

knew when to call it quits. Over the years, she's developed a persistent strain in her voice. At first I thought it might've been the smoking. But now I think it's something more than that, although I can't say exactly what.

It'd been several years since I visited the Reece's cul-de-sac—their neatly groomed yard, the fiberglass basketball hoop, the arched entryway. But it was all still there, mostly the same. I'd spent many hours in their home—with Daphne, with Sam. And I've thought of the Reeces more often than not, especially while back home visiting. It's occurred to me on more than one occasion that I should knock on their door, say hello to Daphne, see how she's doing. But that still hasn't happened.

What I thought about then, the other night while I strolled through their neighborhood, the eve of my father's anniversary, happened on the last morning Sam helped me with the paper route. It was a few days after the skating incident, just a couple weeks before sixth grade started, and only two months before my father died. We'd just finished the route—me on my bike, Sam walking beside me—and he invited me over for breakfast.

When we walked inside their house, we could see his mom in the backyard starting a fire. She wore the same bathrobe, a red, silky kimono.

Sam and I poured cereal. The television on the kitchen counter played reruns of track and field. Daphne slid the door open. "I was just thinking about you, Ike," she said. She came up behind me and set her hands on my shoulders, then my arms, then my temples. Then she made me turn around on the stool.

"Take off your sock," she said. She pulled her robe tight. I could see the outline of her breasts. My eyes locked on them. "Pay attention, Ike," she said. "Take off your sock."

I peeled off my sock and she knelt down and slid her hands over my ankle. "Oh, youth," she said. "Quick to heal." She popped up. "But quick with other things, too, like pulling stupid stunts. Your heat is still off the charts," she said to me. She took my hand. "Follow me."

Daphne led me toward their front door. I looked back at Sam but he was just sitting there, like nothing was the matter. We

stepped into the front yard. It wasn't even seven o'clock in the morning but outside the air felt still and humid. The sky, an early morning gray.

She pranced onto the lawn which was unmowed, overgrown—grass curling over, heavy with dew. I stood on the front steps.

"There's a plains tribe that believed morning dew is like holy water," she said. "In fact, they used that very word, holy, to describe it." She squatted down and sat with her arms around her knees. Her robe was spilling off to the sides, exposing her legs. "They believed that a person could be transformed—their spirit, that is—if they were to lie in the dewy grass. Kids, for instance, especially boys, around the age of twelve—their elders would bring them to the prairie in the pre-dawn morning, and they'd roll around in the dew, and sometimes they'd lick it off the grass." With that, she sprawled out onto the lawn and moved her arms and legs like she was making a snow angel, and then she started rolling around. I observed her motions, then looked up at the house to see if Sam was watching. He wasn't. It was just us. "Come over here," she said, now sitting still. "This dew, this water, will offset your heat."

I sat on the ground and right away could feel the dew soaking my legs and bottom. She touched my wrist with her index and middle fingers. "I can already sense you cooling off," she said. Her eyes were closed, and her robe was barely clinging to her—I could see exposed skin around her stomach. She opened her eyes then and told me to roll around on the grass. "Let the dew temper your fire," she said. "Bring balance to your spiritual and bodily elements."

After a few seconds I stopped rolling around. She closed her eyes again, face to the hazy sky. Her elegant neck, lips, and eyelashes. I gazed at her for a while before I brought my hand up, brushing against her arm to see if she'd react. She didn't move. We were six inches apart. I looked toward the house one more time to make sure we were alone. Then I carefully set my hand on her breast. I didn't pull or grab. I just rested my hand there, and for one or two seconds nothing happened. She kept her eyes closed.

I grew excited. Everything in my peripheral fogged over. I could feel my heart hitting my chest. Then she opened her eyes.

In a calm voice, she said, "Please take your hand off my chest." She looked at me sternly, in a way that helped redefine our roles: hers being an adult and mother, mine being a kid. Her eyes quickly softened, like she was taking pity on me, and I kept my hand there for just a moment longer before burying my head into the grass so we didn't have to make eye contact. Dew soaked my face. I could hear her get up. "That will help," she said. "That dew will help a lot."

She told me to stay where I was. She told me I needed to stay there until I felt something shift in my core, in my spirit.

After she left, I turned over on my back and lay there for some time—long enough to feel the sun grow unbearable, hear the birds turn silent, and long enough to observe a few jumbo jets leave their marks across the sky.

Eventually, I got up from the lawn and hopped on my bike. I raced home as fast as I could—down their driveway, through the pine grove, and around the corner to our house. I couldn't wait to get home, because later that day my brothers and mom and I were heading up north to visit my dad. He didn't talk much while we visited because he liked when we did the talking. He always wore the same sweatpants, and we always met at the same table in his room with metal folding chairs and a deck of cards and some decaffeinated coffee or pitchers of water in the center. The nurses shuffling by in steady, urgent efficiency.

During our visits, we all had time alone with him—me and my brothers—for our own private conversations. He always wanted me to tell him stories, and I planned to tell him everything—about Sam, the paper route, the roller skating, but especially about Daphne. Because, here's the thing: there was nothing I liked more than seeing my dad smile. One of his big goofy smirks could light up any room.

And with everything that had just happened, I was so sure—so fully confident—that I could get a smile out of him.

But when I got there and had my time alone with him and told him the story, it was even better than I could've imagined. Better

than I could've dreamed. He laughed so hard he almost peed his pants. He got up off his metal folding chair and slapped his knees. "Ike," he said. "You are something, kid. That's the best thing I've heard in ten years." And he said something else too. Something I've never told anyone, even though I know now there was no direct connection to what he said and what happened to him two months later. But for the longest time, I blamed myself for all of it.

As we walked out of the private room, my dad still laughing, he opened the door for me and said, "You and your story, kid." He wanted to say something more, I could sense it, but he was laughing too hard, putting his hands on his own chest, and all he could manage between laughs was this: "You just kill me, Ike," he said. "You just kill me."

Michael Onofrey

Desert Neighbors

Peering out the window of his singlewide, he sees a young cat stumbling around in the heat. The cat's plight is on pebbled ground that's near the parking space for the trailer spot next door, wide enough for two vehicles. The spot can accommodate a doublewide, but there is no doublewide, and there are no vehicles. The husband-and-wife team, Howard and Sarah Conroy, who manage the mobile home park, call the empty trailer space a "vacancy," a term that applies to the next trailer space as well, two empty doublewide spaces, one next to the other, both "vacant."

The cat is alone and aimless in its troubles, mid-morning and already hot. Neil doesn't have the air conditioner on yet, but he's contemplating it. He's been in his newly purchased singlewide, a "resale," for three nights and three days, and this is the beginning of his fourth day. He's been experimenting with the necessity of air conditioning, and he's found that he can do without it at night after about ten o'clock, and then in the morning to about ten o'clock, but ten a.m. is pushing it.

The cat looks to be three or four months old, and what occurs to Neil is that it might attract a bird of prey, a hawk for example. A coyote would be a threat as well. Neil's already seen coyotes the previous two evenings at dusk walking the fence line on the desert side.

Neil goes out the front door of his mobile home and down three wooden steps, and then walks on a graveled path that runs between the steps and a parking space where his pickup truck sits. On the other side of his pickup truck, grit and pebbles crunch beneath his sport shoes. When he gets to the cat, it looks up at him—eyes squinting, mouth agape. Face like a cubistic painting. Black, white, and brown—a calico. The cat is crooked on its legs.

Beginning of June, and just when Neil is getting situated in his new home, he has himself a cat even though it'll take two days

of walking around and asking people if they've lost one before he realizes that it's all his.

A weekday morning, mid-October, and it's been a long summer, but now things have changed, heat in southern Nevada finally easing up. Neil's got a cup of coffee and a tortilla in hand and he's going out the backdoor of his singlewide and the cat is cutting in and out of Neil's footsteps and Neil is making adjustments for this in his stride.

Coming to the side of the trailer, where the patio is, and where Neil plans to sit at a table and look at the desert, Neil sees his neighbor, Eleanor, who lives on the other side of the two vacant trailer spaces, which makes Eleanor and her husband, Gus, Neil's closest neighbors. On the opposite side of Neil's trailer, there's nothing besides a chain-link fence and the desert, for Neil's place is at the end of the road, a corner slot.

Eleanor is wearing a flower-print muumuu, and she's standing about ten feet away from the chain-link fence over by her doublewide, and she's got a shotgun in her hands, seemingly pump action. She raises the rifle to where the butt of the rifle's stock finds a firm place against the muumuu at the meaty part of her right shoulder, and she assumes a practiced stance—body bracing, one foot forward, muzzle of the rifle zeroing in at a place on the ground that's about ten or fifteen feet in front of her and almost parallel to the bottom of the chain-link fence—Bam!

The rifle's report is at Neil's ears at about the same time that his eyes are telling his brain that Eleanor is absorbing the rifle's recoil, and in the same thought-frame there's a coiled snake on the ground that's rising and then skittering over the ground like a piece of flung hose, direction the chain-link fence, dust rising from where the snake took off, and then a little more dust rising from where the snake settles just shy of the fence.

The temperature is neither hot nor cold, and in the extremity where the city's electric glow leaves off and dissolves into the desert, a spray of stars is overhead in a moonless sky like thrown sugar. There is no wind.

Neil sits on a wooden bench at his patio table, mug of hot tea on the table. The cat is also on the table and it's sitting its haunches while looking out toward the desert. A slab of concrete, which constitutes the patio, is beneath Neil's sport shoes. There is no awning because the awning got mangled in a fierce wind during the previous owner's occupancy. Neil's singlewide was not only termed a "resale" but a "fixer-upper" as well, which meant "as is." He took the remains of the awning down and was left with an unobscured view of the sky.

A faint bittersweet aroma is in the air. Neil attributes this to the creosote bushes that dominate the area. To Neil's right, and some distance away, he sees his neighbor, Gus, meandering with a flashlight, beam of light scanning the ground. In Gus's other hand, the hand without the flashlight, there's some sort of apparatus that looks like a very large pooper scooper, a five-gallon squarish can with a stick attached to the back, front of the can cut open. Another stick seems to be in the hand that's clutching the five-gallon can. Neil has seen this on other nights when there's no wind, Gus out with a flashlight and with a can-stick set-up. But Neil hasn't asked Gus what this is about, maybe because Neil's only talked to Gus during the day, questions about Gus's nighttime activities with a flashlight and king-size pooper scooper not arising. Gus doesn't have any dogs that Neil knows of, so Gus can't be looking for dog waste. Gus and his wife, Eleanor, are from Moscow, Idaho, and like Neil they are retired, but unlike Neil they are weighty. Neil's build is rangy, but of late "rangy" has been whittled down to borderline skinny due to weight loss. Also, with regards to differences, Gus and Eleanor have each other whereas Neil lives alone, but of course there's his cat. The cat has become a comfort.

Gus has wandered over to near Neil's trailer space. Neil suspects that Gus doesn't know that Neil is sitting out in the dark. Neil could watch in silence, but circumstance has presented an opportunity. Neil stands up and comes to the edge of his patio.

"Hello there, Gus."

Gus stops and looks around.

"Oh, howdy, Neil."

"I was sitting here drinking tea, and I saw you, and I was wondering what you're doing."

"I'm looking for tarantulas."

"Tarantulas?"

"Yes. I collect them, and sometimes sell them. I got a beauty last night. Found it walking across my patio. A female. You mostly find males, and that's because females stay in their holes. Males walk around and look for females. Females have light brown hair all over, whereas males have black legs."

Plain yogurt topped with bran cereal is his mainstay for meals during the day. Sometimes a large fruit salad with a dab of olive oil. After this, there are steamed vegetables that get a helping of tomato sauce and two pieces of boneless chicken that are cut to the size of a golf balls. He drinks a glass of vegetable juice with his dinner.

Throughout the day there is coffee and tea, but the thirty-something physician who is his personal doctor at the medical center he visits on a monthly basis has told him to limit his coffee consumption because Neil has an enlarged prostate that causes him to urinate often. For his prostate he receives pills, and for his asthma an inhaler.

Along the narrow roads of the mobile home park ambulances are not infrequent, sirens off, red lights flashing. When the emergency vehicles exit the mobile home park to merge onto the highway, their sirens are activated, which, from where Neil's trailer is located, hardly sound immediate. Yet, particularly at night, those silently throbbing thrusts of red light cruising by and reflecting off all surfaces are a poignant reminder that the mobile home park caters to the elderly, otherwise known as the retired.

"This is almost as good as TV," Gus says, while ushering Neil into the living room. Eleanor, standing to the side, is smiling, a horizontal expression on a broad face. It's three in the afternoon, and the living room is the same temperature as outside, seventy-five degrees, gorgeous weather prevailing.

Before inviting Neil in for "a little relaxation and showtime," Gus had remarked about the previous evening's World Series game, but since Neil doesn't have a television set he didn't see the game.

Eleanor offers tea or coffee. Neil says, "Coffee." Gus says, "Me too." Eleanor says, "Cream and sugar in your coffee, Neil?" Neil says, "Yes, cream and sugar." Eleanor leaves the room. Gus is drawing heavy drapes over the windows.

It's a somewhat spacious living room that easily accommodates tasteful furniture. The room's focus is oriented toward a huge terrarium that's on a table.

"Make yourself at home," Gus says, and indicates a deep brown sofa that's directly in front of the terrarium, which must be eight feet in length. Gus has turned a ceiling light on. Without it the room would be dark.

"Got my other terrariums in another room. This one is the showcase one."

Neil nods.

"Up in Moscow, Moscow Idaho that is, we used to have friends over for drinks when we did this, but we don't drink anymore, so now it's tea or coffee," Gus relates, and then goes on to say, "There's a mail order business over the Internet, websites and so forth, so anyone with an interest can have this sort of entertainment these days, this sort of hobby. That's how I got into it, up in Moscow."

Eleanor returns to the room with a wooden tray, three coffee mugs on the tray. Gus turns on a light that's in the metal canopy of the terrarium, and explains, "This light imitates moonlight." Eleanor, after setting the tray down, says, "How about *Sketches of Spain*, Miles Davis?" Gus says, "That's a good choice."

The music starts, volume low. Everyone has a mug of coffee. The ceiling light goes out, and all there is to look at is the terrarium.

Neil spots some lizards flicking about. The terrarium is indeed lit as if by moonlight. Not a crescent moon, a full moon.

"We can talk," Gus says. "No problem."

In addition to dirt, there are sticks and rocks and clumps of brown, tuft-like grass, just like what's outside.

And here she comes, about three minutes into Miles Davis, brown and furry-like, about four inches from leg to leg. She has emerged from a cluster of stones, which is evidently where her hole is. There's something about her. Perhaps it's the way she walks, eight bent legs, nothing rushed. She stops here and there to probe. She is measuring the terrain with utter care.

"This is the female I got last week," Gus says.

Neil nods.

"When it gets a lizard," Gus says, "or an insect, it injects venom. This not only kills the prey, but softens the insides of the victim as well, like a soup, which the tarantula sucks out, and that of course is its food. The lizard or insect becomes an empty shell."

Neil looks over at Gus. Gus sips his coffee.

"But for people," Gus resumes, "they're practically nonpoisonous, something like a bee sting. But you kind of got to watch out for their hairs. They get their dander up, they can flick their hairs, which can be an irritant on bare skin. But usually they don't do that."

Gus and Eleanor sip their coffees. Neil sips his coffee. *Sketches of Spain* is building.

"By the way," says Neil, "what line of work were you in before you retired?"

"Eleanor and I were realtors."

He sits at his patio table with a sketchpad and a pair of binoculars, cat a foot away from his sketchpad. His view touches the desert constantly, pencil moving on the sketchpad. It's late afternoon and the desert is showing him a roadrunner, which has knifed a lizard. The roadrunner is holding the lizard in its beak, head and tail of the reptile squirming on either side of the beak, roadrunner erect and posing. Neil is trying to get this on paper, but to dwell at length with only the binoculars is a strong temptation. The cat, having settled all such priorities long ago, looks only at the bird.

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"Housepainter-slash-handyman."

"Utility," says Gus. "Always in need."

"I was busy, which was fine when I was young, and then okay when I was middle-aged, but by the time sixty set in, it wasn't okay anymore."

"Understandable," Gus says.

The cat sits three feet to the left of Neil's paper. The sheet of paper is taped to an eighteen-by-fifteen-inch piece of plywood that has a smooth hardwood veneer. There's no wind.

Neil has dunked his brush in a jar of water because he doesn't want the paint to dry in the bristles while he talks to Gus, who has wandered over, coffee mug in hand. The cat's playfulness in the area between the chain-link fence and Neil's patio probably drew Gus over, but when Gus arrived the cat went up onto the table to sit its haunches.

"Playful, isn't she?" Gus said.

"Yes," Neil responded. "And you know, when I had her spayed there was a woman in the waiting room at the vet's who told me that when you spay a cat she will stay kitten-like through her life. But of course this cat is still pretty much a kitten, not even a year old, so I don't know if that's true or not, not yet."

Doves are cooing somewhere out midst the creosote. Neil has identified the doves that frequent the locale as white-winged doves, thanks to an Audubon field guide. A pretty blue circles their eyes.

"I imagine that's your hobby," Gus says, and indicates the watercolor.

"Yes," Neil replies, and pauses, and then says, "Took it up after my wife passed away, which was about three years ago. I didn't know what to do with myself, so . . . I know it sounds corny, but . . ." Neil trails off.

"It's not corny," Gus says. "It's life."

A crow caws from out of the blue sky overhead. To the east, craggy hills have taken on a pink hue. Neil's patio is in shadow.

"Television wasn't making sense to me, and then Los Angeles wasn't making sense. I just picked up a pencil and started draw-

ing. I had stopped drinking by then, and . . . I don't know, sketching and watercolors kind of got my mind off of things."

"Of course."

Neil moistens his lips with his tongue. His lips are chapped.

"It kept building, and then there I was, sixty-six years old—freeways, expenses, noise, endless suburbs. I was too old for it—too old for work and too old for Los Angeles. So, in quest of downsizing and economizing and simplifying and retiring, I quit L.A. and moved to Las Vegas, the eastern fringes here . . . where the desert begins."

"Yes."

"The desert," Neil enunciates. "It calls up images of harshness and indifference and loneliness. Yet there's this soft beauty, particularly at dusk."

A few moments of silence ensue, and then Gus says, "Hey, I'd like to buy that watercolor from you," and gestures toward the painting in front of Neil. "Eleanor's got a birthday coming up, and I don't know what to get her. She loves that roadrunner. So if I can buy that from you, I'll get it matted and framed, and then that'll take care of her birthday present."

The cat has stretched out on the table, legs gangly.

"How about if I give it to you—"

"I couldn't have that—"

"In exchange for something."

Gus stops as if to listen to a rewind in his head.

"In exchange for what?"

"Well, if something were to happen to me, you and Eleanor could care for the cat."

Neil's looking up at Gus's fleshy face.

"You got a deal."

Laminated paneling, off-white in color, constitutes the walls and ceiling of the kitchen/dining area. Linoleum flooring is also off-white, but the white is speckled with flecks of blue that help to break up monotony and veil scuffs and dirt. A Formica-topped table, squiggles of blue and red on a yellow background, denotes

a breakfast nook along with a couple of bench-like padded seats, burgundy vinyl encasing the padding. One end of the Formica-topped table is just below a window where the cat sits its haunches on the window's sill, looking out at the desert.

Neil reads a local newspaper that gives international news obligatory space grudgingly, details skimpy, national news slightly more in terms of space. Local or metro tragedy and events, including sports, get most of the paper's attention, as well as the numerous ads, many of which feature discounts.

Neil occasionally attempts to take advantage of some of those come-ons, but only if they can be reached on foot or by public transportation. Public transit in Neil's case means the bus system. There is no subway, and taxicabs are expensive. Almost everyone gets around by automobile, but not Neil. He sold his pickup truck a month after moving into his singlewide. Since then, he can be seen pulling a red wagon while walking through the mobile home park, and then out on the sidewalk that parallels the highway, destination a supermarket. During the heat-intensive summer he only ventured out at sunset with his red wagon, heatstroke during midday a genuine threat. It's the sort of wagon that children put to use as a toy. Neil, in fact, had one when he was a kid, but now it's a utility that helps him live without a motor vehicle. The wagon is for carrying groceries.

He usually reads the newspaper at his breakfast nook in the morning, coffee and a heated tortilla alongside, cat on the windowsill. Neil finds little fault with his current lifestyle and this is partially because the newspaper informs him of tragedy and circumstance far worse than occasional boredom.

A light wind is blowing and the air is brisk. The sky seems restless, but there are no clouds. Sunshine is piercing. It's a light jacket day, a windbreaker day, but it might turn into something more. Right now, though, it's a day for walking to the supermarket, and it's in preparation for this that he's inventorying foodstuffs in his kitchen. He glances out the window nonchalantly. What he needs from the supermarket is on his mind, but then it's not on his mind.

The coyote is coming from that swath of gray dirt between the chain-link fence and the two vacant trailer spaces. Stiff, sporadic weeds are jerking in the breeze. The coyote's step has intent and its shoulders are rolling, eyes fixed. Scene and situation coalesce, and Neil's out the backdoor of his singlewide.

He was going to call the cat in before leaving, the cat responsive to this—very unusual in a cat. But Neil and the cat have this covenant, this understanding, this way of doing things—cat outside at certain times, inside at other times, safe times, not-safe times, a spurious assumption.

Neil's coming around the side of the trailer, ten a.m., sun in the eastern sky. He's moving quickly. He can't locate the cat, but he doesn't stop for this, doesn't stop to search or look, for things seem to be transpiring rapidly. Adrenaline is surging through his sixty-six-year-old body, strength and agility to the forefront. Where did this come from?

He needs to grab something, needs something in his hands, a stout staff maybe, but there isn't one available. Not on the patio. Maybe somewhere else, somewhere nearby, but he doesn't have time for that. The only thing he has time for is what he sees: two cinderblocks on top of the patio table, cinderblocks to keep the table from flipping over in a strong wind, and on each of the table's wooden benches there are cinderblocks as well, and for the same reason. But a cinderblock won't do him a great deal of good.

He tips the one bench at a radical angle and its two cinderblocks slide off to thunk on the patio, and just like that, he's carrying the bench and he's advancing out onto that swath of pebbled dirt. The coyote notices immediately.

Neil starts running, or tries to, two-thirds of the bench in front of him like a lance. The coyote turns. The idea, as silly as this will seem later, is to jam the coyote up against the chain-link fence and ram it with the bench.

The coyote is high on its paws while moving sideways in a clipped motion as if hopping, parallel with the chain-link fence. Between Neil and the coyote, scattered tufts of brown grass are fidgeting, and from a crystalline sky there is knifing sunshine, but

there is something else, something to Neil's right that plays at his peripheral vision.

"Let it go, Neil!"

He looks over and sees her, and he stops. She's already down from the wooden steps of her doublewide. She's in a quilted housecoat, cream-colored. Slippers are on her feet. Neil has his head turned as he looks at her. Wind pesters a tangle of pale hair on her head. The bench is still in Neil's hands. She's moving out onto the gray dirt. Neil hears the rifle's action. She assumes the stance, and there it is—

His eyes see Eleanor's shoulder accept the recoil. His ears hear the rifle's sound. He turns. The coyote's hindquarters have taken the pellets. Maybe not all of them, but enough to send the animal to the ground. There seems to be something, some void, some emptiness, before the coyote tells the world of its affliction. Such a sound like Neil has never heard—a cry, a howl, a scream. The animal is scrambling in the dirt with its forepaws, but there's no getting up. Neil hears the rifle's mechanisms and looks over. A shell is flipping in the air. Eleanor is advancing. The sounds of the coyote's anguish don't stop. Only Eleanor stops, and she's no more than eight feet from the coyote. She draws up, and this time there is only silence after the pellets hit their mark.

The cat is on the windowsill, looking out at the night. The window is closed. The wind has picked up, and now it's a true wind.

He is making dinner, and he is thinking, and he knows he'll have dreams.

With a shovel, he dug a hole and buried the coyote in that area between the vacant trailer spaces and the chain-link fence. Eleanor had gone inside to get dressed. Gus was in town on errands. And the cat—she emerged from wherever, Neil noticing her when she started rubbing her shoulder against his leg while he was filling in the grave.

Eleanor came over for coffee, and she and Neil sat at the breakfast nook with coffee and Lorna Doone cookies.

Among other things, Eleanor told Neil: “The desert side of the fence is theirs. This side of the fence is ours.”

Neil’s slicing up a pear. The fruit salad will have honeydew melon, pear, apple, and banana. He’ll add a little virgin olive oil for dressing.

He looks over at the cat and he thinks. But there’s no thinking this out. It just keeps going and going and going.

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