



CHEAT RIVER REVIEW

Ruth Baumann
C.M. Chapman
Clara Chow
Allen Forrest
Amber Hart
Andrew Hemmert
Alec Hershman
Sian M. Jones

Michael Milburn
Emma Moser
Winnona Elson Pasquini
Jason Peck
Sarah Snook
Susan Triemert
Drew Wade

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Prelude IV *Ruth Braumann*

Play hopscotch with squares of sun.

What you appreciate doesn't have to disappear.

But the narrator has to change, by virtue

of the insistence of a reality.

Dark matter sprays itself across the universe

like a perfume. Seduce it back.

Prelude V Ruth Braumann

Darkness hopes. *Heard it already* you say.
Some Decembers have a way of spitting out days
like chewing tobacco.
The air holds its breath when you enter.
Frost snaps its own neck, a violence
so brittle it turns tender.
Think of a kiss. Yes, just like that.
But totally different.

Ruth Baumann is an MFA student at the University of Memphis, and former Managing Editor of *The Pinch*. Her chapbook *I'll Love You Forever and Other Temporary Valentines* won the Salt Hill Dead Lake Chapbook Competition in 2014 and is forthcoming this Spring. She won an AWP Intro Journals Project Award in 2014, and her poems are published in *Colorado Review*, *New South*, *Sycamore Review*, and others are listed at www.ruthbaumann.com.

Self Portrait With Sketchbook, Sin, and Chimenea *Andrew Hemmert*

Smoke gropes up through the limbs
of live oaks, toward a blue
my ash-stained fingers can't touch.
When Dad gets back from Bible study,
drops keys in the kitchen drawer,
my raw drawings already lie
scattered like pyre dust
in the yard where my Lab stashes bones.
Dad smiles as I scrub and scrub my hands.
Every night, flat naked bodies
sprout from the ground, rake their paper nails
across my bedroom window—
not wind-burdened dogwoods
pawing at something past glass.
What I made begs back in.
I clasp my hands, knowing
they want to crawl down the bed,
let in the wet air and what,
hours on hours, my mind chases
away. I close my eyes, try
to picture the neighbor's banana tree
spilling fruit over the fence,
seeds breaking in our grass,
red ants bursting
from the earth to sneak
soft yellow back to their damp catacombs.
But all I see is the yard itself—
fire-wheel, scarlet
catchfly, devil's paintbrush.
Every morning, hearing woodpeckers search
for morsels beyond bark,
I hear cinders
throbbing in the dirt. No.
If something throbs, it hides
under soil-colored sheets, draws my hand.

Speaking Names of the Dead *Andrew Hemmert*

Hard to believe the one we lost was only gone
a year—still her name spoken was like a bottle thrown
against the side of a house. That night, the forecast warned
of gusts, but we were grieving and drunk, so we wrote
her name on a sky lantern's flanks. If there was a better place

for a launch, I can't imagine it—from the backyard
of that waterfront home, the Skyway Bridge's main spans
were two gold kites, and Tampa Bay was black as a new runway.
But as soon as we lit the balloon, the wind ripped it
from our hands. Her name, beyond us, careened

into the neighbor's yard and crashed into a scrub pine.
For a moment, I wanted our grief to spread, wanted fire
to leap from the pine to a nearby roof. I wanted our loss
to crush the neighborhood into smoke. But the tree refused

to take our lantern's flame, and the wind died down.
The lantern, pierced by branches, fell
in the bay. The paper that held her name dissolved,
and the wire frame sank into the rocks
like the spine of a fish robbed of its body.

Andrew Hemmert's poems have appeared in *Cumberland River Review*, *Jersey Devil Press*,
and *Driftwood Press*. He is currently pursuing an MFA in Poetry at Southern Illinois University.

Through Power Sheds A Polish, Don't Dawdle With A Hawks *Alec Hershman*

Slay a boy in the cowardly yard between him and your muzzle,
and he opens all the same, as if you'd spent him on a blade, his gape

emitting buzzards. So an ad hoc congress gathers in the branches,
and like slow, rabid animals we don't know how to talk to, the tanks

arrive on ordinary days. Sour toxin. Cherry out of irritation
that the tree invents, and I can believe in a path without anger

between flee and a death. Gaslight, here, underwrites the clouds;
News anchors have clearly emptied their clips of emotion

before going on air. In the farce museum, a spruce has crossed
himself from the lineup. Wanton for love, celebrity and facsimile

meet. By standard encroachments, the canons swallow all our angels;
the mimeo-ed faces spread far, and wide, and felt. At what point

can sympathy make space for the dead? Wishing only to be gentle,
I allowed a cold reading of the suicides, like colleagues folding

summary to task. I recognized me in their ends as neither threat,
nor compromise—nor promise.

Alec Hershman lives in St. Louis where he teaches literature and psychology to fashion and interior design students. He has received awards from The Kimmel-Harding-Nelson Center for the Arts, The Jentel Foundation, The St. Louis Regional Arts Commission, and The Institute for Sustainable Living, Art, and Natural Design. You can find links to his work at alechershmanpoetry.com.

On Waking to Find A Land-Fast Sea *Winona Elson Pasquini*

I

The day before, we watched ice form—dendritic arms
tried to hold, then failed. Fragile fragments, their stretch

breaking on surface waves. Ice

needles through gray waves

stitching frozen length against length. Our teeth alien

in our mouths, the caustic sun burning eyes, the air full

of dry sound, and the great ship churning. And he was pointing—
explaining ice and frazils building on the edge

of pale, flat frames, rimming each white
lily of the grey sea. Waves and wind channeled

brine between the dead

blooms. Then, the seals, the terns rattling the sky with beaks

and wings and a great wall

white-calving into the sea.

II

Tropic of Cancer, March, and the two
of us in a flats boat. Night softly etching the bay—I dipped

my hand to savor the velvet wet and finger the plankton—

bioluminescent, glowing

the water pale green.

Sharks, he said and pulled my hand away.

III

I could not see—I could

not see. I prayed to the Lady of Situations

and drowned Ophelia rising—

IV

He talked conduction, convection, and cold

water drownings—the colder

the better for survival—and don't
wear cotton. I went to the cabin for wool,

thinking there would be silence—

V

In the recess of the ship, I panted in the cold, wet air.

Winnona Elson Pasquini is a poet and writer living in Tampa, Florida. She was named a finalist in the New Rivers Press 2013 MVP book competition and a finalist in Yellowjacket Press's 2013 Peter Meinke Prize for Poetry Chapbook Contest. Her recent publications include work in *Flare*, *Cider Press Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Rock & Sling*. She completed her MFA in creative writing and studied film at the University of South Florida and is currently working on a poetry collection inspired by film.

My River Could Be Your River *Sarah Snook*

My flood could be your flood
each inch creeping closer
to treeline, over roadside
and shimmering across floodplain
every one hundred years

After one hundred footsteps
rivers could be ours, whisper
ripples as they glide
and wear land
to granite, then core
our hot cores baptized
under rolling water of rivers
that vein earth
like ribbons of minnows
skimming over rocks
to spawn

My cicadas shrieking
in sunblast afternoon
could be yours
Your footprint in muck
could be mine
our steps leading
where gravity pulls
water to lowest
point, inviting
animals, like us, to drink

Sarah Snook earned her M.F.A. from Minnesota State University, Mankato, M.A. from the University of Indianapolis, and B.A. at Ohio University. She enjoys reading, film, jazz, and taking care of her houseplant, cats, and son in New England.

Something *Emmer Moser*

Our stepfather, intoxicated, called us downstairs, the boom of his voice exaggerated with something like excitement. It was not an emotion we heard from him often, and as his bellowed HEY-KIDS-CUMEERE shook our little house and our little bodies, that oddity spread infectiously. We were surprised to find ourselves scrambling through doorways and over each other, sometimes four-legged. Our entangled limbs rattled with unexpected laughter — a joint struggle to seek out quickly the source of this commotion, this something like adventure. Our stepfather stood with hunched shoulders by the kitchen window, one fat finger to his lips and another pointing to our woods-infested yard. LOOK-ITSA-BEAR and we did look, and it was a bear, sooty black and potbellied, not unlike our stepfather. From the counter he snatched a box of MilkBones, and after cautioning us to WATEVR-YADO-STAY-INSIDE he slammed the screen door behind him, staggering in the direction of the brute. At the window we shrieked with half-fear, half-mirth at the sight of him, teetering drunkenly toward the furry mass, extending a treat-filled hand with theatrical slowness, as if it was a peace offering, as if fancying himself a flannel-clad St. Francis. The bear stepped forward and sniffed his fingers, and we wondered for a moment what blood would look like. We wondered if this was truly an act of bravery from our stepfather. A pink tongue fell from the bear's jaw, glinting with color and saliva in the sun. Before we'd seen it happening, the creature had gobbled the MilkBones and left the callused hand — which was still floating, palm-up, in open charity. Our little bodies sighed with an unknown delirium. They did this for an hour, our stepfather and the bear, exchanging hand and tongue with treats in between, the sunlight fading and the two of them grunting with something like friendship. At last, box empty and arm tired, our stepfather stumbled indoors, and we were sad to see it end. Outside, the bear continued circling our little house, while the sun died in red and became night. GUESSHEES-STILLHUNGRY, and we felt that hunger too, hungry for more of this short-lived insanity, this something like joy.

Emma Moser's multi-genre work has appeared or is forthcoming at *Zoomoozophone Review*, *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, *Thoreau's Rooster*, *Fuck Fiction*, and *Sweatpants and Coffee*. Her blog "Antiquarian Desiderium" was recently featured in *Writers Get Together*. A native resident of Western Massachusetts, she is currently completing her Bachelor's in English at Westfield State University.

Green Thumb *Jason Peck*

I had a green thumb once, back when I first moved in to college. Pots hung from the curtain rods of my new room and framed the windows with emerald trimming.

“I’m majoring in botany,” my roommate said, almost as an apology. I didn’t know what I was. I changed the subject.

But wasn’t college for trying new things? Why not plants?

That year I grew seedlings off a sponge. I grew spider plants from Mason jars. I coaxed ivy from sprouts, trained it to climb my bedpost like party streamers. The talent came from nowhere, certainly no inheritance.

My old house had a garden out back, overgrown with weeds, the soil nearly scorched to white by the sun. Nothing grew in my mother’s killing field. I remember the sight of her, wiping her forehead and clutching the backhoe so tight I could practically see veins through her deerskin gloves. They told her she needed a hobby after Dad left. From the air-conditioned window I had watched her anger in bloom, the houseplant leaves crumbling, our house always wanting for visitors.

“Do you talk to the plants?” My boyfriend asked when I’d show him the seedlings I grew under sweating plastic lids.

“They don’t talk back,” I responded.

“I’ve heard different,” he said. “They can if you listen.”

My boyfriend. I had one of those, too, for the first time. He had green eyes like azalea leaves. He was long like a snake plant and told me I smelled like fresh field daisies.

Flowers analogies? Please.

He was nice enough, though. He landed in my life as my talent had, and after he fell asleep, I’d think of the steps that would follow. Keep the grades solid and graduate. Then the proposal, the engagement. Marriage. A home with a greenhouse. I laughed for once at the world that my mother had always cast as hard and miserable with odds against happiness that even college degrees couldn’t balance.

For months, he and I lay in bed, and the leaves tickled my ears, the air heavy with vapor. The vines entangled everything, regardless of my efforts. I’d grown that good.

“You at least have to *water* them,” he said with concern, fingers brushing a solitary yellowed leaf.

He just didn’t understand. Things happen the way they’re supposed to. For millions of years, the plants grew without tap water and shade, without pots or fertilizers. In abandoned cities devoid of attention, their branches break windows, their roots crush sidewalks. Why work on things that take care of themselves?

I laughed and stubbed my Parliament in the damp soil with a shrug, listened to the slow hiss of it extinguishing and left the butt there. With my luck, I could grow a tobacco plant.

But now the plants grow slowly, reluctantly. No more buds pushing through the hard bark. I moved them aside to the windowsill. I tried selling them off for beer money with excuses. Then plants began to die.

I would come from class and see the leaves dead and brown like old confetti. My boyfriend would pick them up himself, absent-mindedly during the breaks in our conversations. He would graduate soon, we needed to talk. But he left before we ever did. My grades slipped. Guys came, but never stayed. We’d chat, nothing clicked. The dead leaves stuck to their shoelaces on the way out.

Desperate, I sat in on botany classes. But the talent came mysteriously, and left without announcement.

“This is hard work,” the professor told me, a dozen emails later. “Your roommate checks the Ph levels, she dilutes the fertilizer and I’ve seen her layering rocks and soil. So maybe you had luck before. But this is serious work. Sometimes they die despite everything.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Who taught you about plants?” he asked.

By then, my mother had actually taken to planting artificial flowers in the front yard, gaudy like pink flamingos. At least remove them in the winter so the neighbors don’t notice, I pleaded. Get a hobby, my mother responded.

They came and went in the years since I graduated. An azalea. A palm fern. A Christmas cactus. A guy with a soothing touch like aloe. A med student, pale like peace lilies. A computer technician who ended things abruptly by texting – *I need to make things work with my wife*, followed by: *Did I mention her?*

That week I killed a cactus. Impossible, I had always thought.

Trips to the ground floor of my apartment building late at night became routine – for laundry, for mail pickups, for dead plant-drop offs. I’d leave trails of dirt behind me, like tracks in the snow. Anyone could follow me to my room.

That's how I met him, when I tossed a date palm in the dumpster.

"I can help you with that," he said, looking at the plant and not me. His eyes were bright like wax begonias. The one remaining leaf of my plant reached like an outstretched hand.

Jason Peck's fiction has either been published or is forthcoming in *Crack the Spine*, *Fabula Argentea*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Pretty Owl Poetry*, and *3Elements Review*. He also serves on the editorial board for *After Happy Hour Review*, whose third issue is scheduled for Spring 2015.

How To Get Away From The World *C.M. Chapman*

At some point in your life, you might find yourself ready to run away from the world.

Many people do. Many people get to a place where they say, “I can’t take it anymore!” and then just seemingly drop off into the dark corners of the earth. It’s much more common than you might think. You might be, say, a shoe salesman who finally admits for the first time that he hates feet, or possibly a chef who has seen one too many soufflés fall to ruin. You might even be an ex-employee of the Central Intelligence Agency, someone who’s seen too much, someone who needs to hide, someone who—well—you get the picture. You could be that guy. Or any one of those guys—or girls. You could be that girl. That girl chef.

In the midst of this crisis, you might remember once seeing a picture of the earth at night with its spider webs of light and noticing that there existed only one significant dark place on the whole east coast of the United States. If you then consulted an online map, you might zoom in on that area and discover that there is a town called Dogleg Bend, West Virginia. You will most likely think to yourself, no shit? There’s really a place called Dogleg Bend, West Virginia? And once you come to grips with this fact, it is likely that you’ll assume that it doesn’t get much farther out than that.

Now you will imagine your new home, out there in that big dark patch, away from everything and everyone, solar and wind-powered, nothing that stands out, a small and simple place, off the grid. And you might think, here. Here it is. The place where you can get away from all the undercooked Beef Wellingtons...the vastly underestimated problem of foot bromhidrosis...the uncomfortable implications of a hostile debriefing.

At this juncture, you will need the services of a local realtor. Search for an independent agent, unaffiliated with any national chains. The time has come for you to put into use those large piles of cash that you have been hiding away for all these years. Hopefully, you remembered those large piles of cash, because they are instrumental in maintaining your anonymity.

Anonymity, naturally, is crucial to your whole purpose. You cannot afford to gamble that your whereabouts will become known, for obvious reasons. To this end, you will need to take care of several things.

All cell phones, for instance, can be easily tracked. You will, therefore, have to purchase “burners.” These cheap phones can be fraudulently registered, used temporarily, and thrown away. You will use these for all your communications and it will complicate any attempts to monitor you in this way.

For purchases, especially purchases of land onto which you plan to disappear, it would be extremely helpful to have a false identity. There are plenty of good identity thieves out there. You can find one for a reasonable price at your local college's freshman dorms. There you will make the acquaintance of a pale, spectacled lad named Nelson Boyd, who will take your picture in front of a blue sheet that he hangs over top of a beer bong dangling from a coat hook and a World of Warcraft poster. He will then provide you with a new social security number, birth certificate, and a Virginia driver's license.

Beyond the cell phone issue and the process of obtaining a false identity, it must be noted that many current vehicle models are equipped with GPS units which can be tracked anywhere on the planet. Before travelling to your new locale, you will have to trade down to an older model vehicle so that your movements will not be logged.

When searching for an independent real estate man in Trelvelton, West Virginia, it is likely that you will end up with a realtor named Wilbur Smith, and you might say to yourself, "No shit? Wilbur? Really?" But Wilbur, despite his "down home" manner will turn out to be quite the dynamo and after only a few weeks of phone calls will call to tell you he's found the perfect property, set in Bergen County but not part of any municipality. You will ask if there is an access road and he will assure you that there is.

"And some level terrain?" you'll inquire.

"Sure as you're born," he'll say.

"Because I want to build," you'll remind him, laying your index finger on the blueprints there on the kitchen table, as if Wilbur could see their self-sustaining beauty through the phone.

"Oh it's level alright," he'll say. "Course you're gonna have to clear out some."

"And it's not near any mountaintop removal sites?" you'll ask, as you glance again at the horrific picture still on your computer screen, also on your kitchen table.

"Nearest one of those is twenty miles."

"Because I don't want any water problems."

"Well there ain't no city water out in them parts, so you're gonna have to dig, as far as that goes," Wilbur will say. "But there shouldn't be any problems with the water there. What do you think? Want to come have a look see?"

"Okay, but my phone number has changed."

"Again?"

After you've given Wilbur your new number, you will want to go out and buy a bottle of wine for a quiet celebration. It is somewhat possible that your new forged driver's license will be rejected by the young cashier with the tattoos. Should this situation arise, do not attempt to use this identity for purchasing your property. And, regardless of what you might have heard about the quality of his forgery work, do not go to the sketchy Chechnyan at the corner of Wilson and 3rd. He is under surveillance. You should know this. You're a shoe salesman. Woman. You're a shoe saleswoman.

So, what will probably happen now is that, after many pitfalls and travails on the road, you'll get to Trelvelton and meet Wilbur, who wears a plaid dress shirt and jeans. After some confusion as to your change in name, he'll drive you out past a Walmart and a Motel 6 to the little town of Dogleg Bend, where he'll turn his green Jeep Cherokee west onto a secondary road which isn't much more than a tar-chip surface. You'll be twisting back and forth on that road for some miles before you turn onto another dirt road, left nameless here, of course, to avoid disclosing your whereabouts.

"Yes sir, this is God's Country up here," Wilbur is likely to say and you'll be hard-pressed to disagree. You'll look out over those rounded mountains covered with early spring green and feel how you could lose yourself in that ancient bosom. You'll gaze out on the endless mounds of rising earth and be able to see them, as they were when they were young and jagged. You'll be so struck with this primeval majesty that when you come to the property in question, all will seem magical, the bluebirds, the raccoon, the trees. Everything will seem so magical that you are likely to overlook what seem to be small problems with your plan.
DO NOT DO THIS.

After pulling as far into the woods as he can in his Jeep, Wilbur will probably say, "Well there's a bit of an access here anyway. Obviously you'll have to remove a few more trees. But we can walk from here."

After a ten-minute walk uphill through the woods, you'll come to a beautiful flat area that overlooks the mountains to the east. It will look like the perfect place for your dream home, and you will be able to picture the sun rising on your mountain hideaway. A stand of aspens on the other side of the clearing with their bumpy greenish bark will promise afternoon shade and you will notice, in the middle of that flat area, rising up through the new shoots of weeds like the back of a giant turtle submerged in the mud, a mound of rock that stretches some twenty yards from side to side.

"What about that rock?" you'll ask.

"Oh, a little dynamite should take care of that rock," he says.

At that instant a deer will run out in front of you, bat its eyelashes, paw at the ground and seem to welcome you to your new home.

Don't listen to it. It's a traitorous beast. And it only wants your corn.

It is likely by now, after your fifth burner phone, that you will come to the realization that all the calls you have made have been to established, monitorable lines and recognize this for what it is: a threat to your secrecy. The only solution in this case would be to make sure all your phone contacts use burners as well. Wilbur Smith will refuse to do this. So will your mom.

It is also likely that you will already have had to replace the engine in your older model vehicle when it "threw a rod," and you may find yourself considering the option of returning to a newer model. Again, buying a GPS equipped vehicle would sacrifice your privacy unless you were able to purchase it with a false identity, but seeing as how that identity did not pass the scrutiny of a convenience store clerk with tattoos, this will hardly seem a viable option.

In fact, with the property sale imminent, you will most likely have to resign yourself to Plan B, which would be to use your real identity and cross your fingers that it all flies under the radar. While you're at it, just go ahead and get a new car... and a smart phone.

Hopefully, you will have heeded the earlier warnings. Hopefully, you don't buy into the deer's bullshit. But if you do, here is what awaits you next:

You will likely take Wilbur Smith's advice and enlist the aid of the "Miller Boys," your heretofore unknown neighbors who live "a couple mile down thataway." Boys, you will discover, is a relative term. These two middle-aged brothers, who arrive in an International pickup truck so old it still has a choke control, will offer to remove the trees for the access road and the large rock in the middle of your level spot for a couple thousand dollars. Little do you realize at this point that you are paying for a party of beer, chainsaws, and dynamite. While the brothers manage to clear all the trees necessary to get vehicles to the site, they leave the knotted stumps and fallen logs laying off to the side, a game of pick-up sticks awaiting a colossal eight year old.

And as for the rock, well, you get to witness some of that particular debacle yourself before Carl, the oldest of the "boys," the one with the AC/DC tattoo, says, "You know, I think that rock goes clear down!"

He will pause and rub his stubbly chin before saying, "You might need to get some guys in here who know what they're doing better'n me."

A sudden but brief panic will seize you. A professional demolition team. How much will that cost? What red flags will that raise? You are too far in to back out now. But the budget you have is already strained, and going to a bank for a loan is like shooting off a flare for the powers who wish to find you. Much of your plan depends upon getting a speedy start on your house. Now

you will have to stay longer in the creepy Motel 6 by the WalMart, which is going to drain you of even more cash.

“You know,” Carl will say, “you got plenty of level space here to bring in a trailer.”

It’s a possibility you haven’t considered and you’ll see it as a way to buy some time.

“Course we’ll have to take out some more trees to get it in here.” Carl will add.

It is at this moment, this exact moment, that you will look out over your new access “road,” and formulate the following words in your mind: My God, there’s no electricity out here. How much is that going to cost?

All because you listened to that damnable deer.

Sometime after the trailer has been moved in, after the electric, but before the plumbing, you will decide to begin moving your things in. Carl Miller will mention that he and his brother will “be out four-wheeling later” and offer to “stop by” to visit with a couple beers, just as a way of welcoming you to the neighborhood. Understanding that you may need their help again, you will be tempted to say, “Sure!” This is inadvisable.

With the involvement now of the electric company, state government, OnStar, Apple, Microsoft, AT&T, and DirecTV, the grid is now fully aware of your activities and location. It is now doubly important that you tend to appearances. The small details now can save the day, as any good chef should know... as any good woman chef should know...Oh, the hell with it. You’re not a woman...seriously...even if you are.

So, after that first “four-wheeler” party, when ten all-terrain vehicles laden with coolers of alcohol come bursting out of the woods like a swarm of giant buzz-roar bugs, and everyone sits around in front of your trailer drinking, and Carl and some guy named “One-Hand” (no, you don’t know why – he has both hands) get into an all-out brawl, you may feel like you made a mistake letting it happen in the first place.

No, no one expects you to listen to any of the warnings at this point.

Ed Brewster, the dowser, will likely complicate things further when he tells you that your trailer is sitting on solid rock and that your well will have to be dug some 200 yards away and pipe laid to the trailer. He assures you the same will be true of your septic system. The Miller boys will volunteer to do these jobs for a reasonable price, pulling you further into their world, entangling you in a personal relationship, the quickest way to undermine your efforts to stay hidden. This will be clearly evident when the second four-wheeler party takes you by surprise, despite your culinary training.

This time Carl will likely bring along two new things, some of his daddy's "shine" and his little sister, Norma, and twelve muddy people will come barging into your trailer hideaway wanting to see how the plumbing is working out. Not surprisingly, someone will see the documents that you saved to write your tell-all book laying on your kitchen table and start asking you uncomfortable questions about... well... secret recipes and stuff. You will gather up your papers quickly and claim that they are all your own inventions, but everyone will look at you funny for a long time.

That is, until the jar has made a couple rounds of the room, and then everyone will be clapping you on the back again.

Norma, a rather plain, but not unattractive woman of around 30, will be shy and withdrawn at the beginning of the evening, but as the night wears on you will find her snuggled up under your armpit on the couch, looking up at you with big eyes and saying, "Is it true you were a secret agent?" And to your horror, the following morning you will remember telling her all about clandestine missions in Afghanistan, Hong Kong, and the Ukraine.

Okay, so you're not a chef either. That's dispensed with too, another fallen soufflé.

Two other memories, equally horrifying, will emerge that morning. You, standing on the bed, showing Norma a new dance move that you call the "Sketchy Chechnyan," and then something else, something soft, warm, intimate, and delicious. Something stupid. Oh, so stupid.

Sometimes you just have to admit you aren't up to the task.

Some time after that second party you will find yourself at the Wal-Mart outside of Dogleg Bend when you will feel eyes upon you. Turning, you will see a child staring at you who then tugs on his mother's shirt and says, "It's the secret agent, Mommy."

Having admitted utter failure in dropping off the grid, you will now have to bring yourself to face other problems. Like the fact that your entire tenure in the CIA consisted of sitting in a risk assessment office in Virginia, running vast amounts of intercepted international communications through voice and print recognition software and sending the data on to an algorithmic team for analysis.

So no, you aren't a secret agent either.

But still, it isn't completely out of the question that someone might need the information you possess, that you could be tracked and extracted, debriefed under the cruelest conditions, and murdered with no one the wiser.

Well, maybe it is...

Or maybe it isn't, because there will certainly appear to be murder in the eyes of Mr. Franklin Miller the morning he knocks on your trailer door and asks about your intentions with his daughter, Norma. Carl and Bill will be standing behind him, alternately looking earnestly at their father and sternly at you.

Franklin Miller will say, "I don't care if ye are trained to kill," and grip his shotgun with white knuckles.

When this happens, aside from the fact that you might feel all of your plans unraveling and that this all might be reminding you of the plot of an Andy Griffith Show somewhere from your distant past, you will likely feel a strong impulse to offer to marry Norma.

So there you'll be now, living in a trailer with a woman named Norma, and asking yourself how it ever came to this. Whatever happened to your secret bungalow, solar-powered, hidden from all the world? Whatever happened to your meditative self-sufficiency? And at times like this you will find yourself ruminating on what prompted you to go into hiding in the first place.

What did you witness while you were there at that non-descript desk in that non-descript brick building in Virginia? Certainly nothing specifically scary. Unbridled stupidity and hubris? Dubious goals and dubious means of attaining them? Perverted priorities? Circumventing the Constitution? Withheld cooperation? Politics? Wasn't working in this secretive, bungling bureaucracy just enough to drive you paranoid into the night, to a mountain hideaway where you could just cut yourself off from all of it, deny you were ever a part of it, and wait for the bastards to bring it all to ruin?

Can anybody really blame me for that?

Shit.

Sometimes we just have to admit that no matter where we go the Millers will find us.

But, as you will discover, the Millers are alright. Everything will work in your trailer, despite the giant stone turtle burrowed in your front yard. You'll continue to spin wild yarns about your adventures as a secret agent as you keep every four wheeler party crowd enraptured and yes, every time they will ask to see your old CIA identification badge and they'll pass it around the room and marvel at it.

Eventually you will confess to Norma, only to find she already knows your secret. Norma will be a marvelous partner, a fine cook as well as lover, and you will be surprised and delighted to discover she is a college graduate. At night she will read you Robert Frost poems and your relationship will grow deeper over time. Your new mother-in-law, Retha will bring you canned vegetables during the winter. Bill will supply you with fresh meats during hunting season. Carl will bring you a puppy.

Even intimidating old moonshiner Franklin will come by and teach you how to put in a garden and you will plant your first rows of corn.

And the deer will have his due.

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Wishing Kidneys *Clara Chow*

Karen stood at the kitchen sink, washing kidneys.

They were pigs' kidneys, \$4.99 a pair. At the Cold Storage supermarket, doing the weekly grocery run while waiting for her son to finish his Chinese tuition class, she had come across the twin commas wrapped under clear film in black Styrofoam box, nestling among the lean pork, striploin and minced meat in the giant open-faced freezer. Something in their smooth ruddiness entranced her.

She had always loved eating pigs' kidneys. *Yo ji* in her mother's dialect tongue of Teochew. Transcribed into English, the name sounded like a hip-hop artist hailing his yoga guru – losing its flavour: the long-drawn, lilting first vowel; the almost-glottal stab with the tongue. As a girl, they had been a Sunday Morning treat, when they went to New World Amusement Park in Jalan Besar to eat fragrant, peppery bak kut teh or pork ribs soup. Instead of the prime or spare ribs swimming in the oil-splotched soup, she would ask for hers to have kidneys in it. A delicacy. And at \$5 a bowl, a dollar dearer than the normal pork meat. When she had asked her mother why, her mum had replied that it stood to reason: Each pig only had a pair of those, hadn't they?

She sliced the kidneys with a big knife, removing the white veins. The carved slices, like little ears, she tossed into a plastic container full of water, and was now dunking them and dumping the dirty yellow water smelling of ammonia. *Dunk, dump, refill. Repeat.* The motion was oddly therapeutic, the sound of running water lulling her into a trance.

When she had given birth to her first child, the confinement nanny had cooked pigs' kidneys too. Drowned in ginger, all the better for dispelling wind. The dish was present at every meal. After the month was up, she was done 'sitting in the moon,' *zuo yue*, as new mums are supposed to – the term made her think of women in rural China wrapped in red patchwork quilts and sitting all day on their stone beds while others did the housework in their cottage. By then, the sight of fried kidneys made her want to retch. It was many moons before she regained her taste for them again.

Getting rid of the pungent smell of pee from kidneys took longer, much longer, than she expected. Karen held up a slice to her nose and inhaled. The slightest whiff remained, but she could not imagine serving anything with even the hint of urine. Back into the container the slice went, Karen's hand swishing the slippery pieces of organ around like she was washing a pet. As she tipped the lemon-coloured water out of the container, a few slices slid through the sluice gates she made with her fingers. Karen marvelled at how similar the kidneys were to her own flesh – the same pale brown hue – and yet so different in their slimy pore-less appearance to her skin. She thought about the paradox of seeing something that belonged on the inside, outside – within turning without. Why did the Chinese believe that eating an animal part would boost the corresponding organ in a human? Generations of liver-chomping, bear gallbladder-slurping, tiger penis-snacking, sheep placenta-inhaling descendants of the Central Plains, scattered to the southern oceans, golden mountains and other lands, remained united in this belief.

Karen remembered her mother feeding her pigs' brains on the eve of her Primary School Leaving Examinations. She remembered looking into the blue-and-white porcelain double boiler, with carp painted on its side. Remembered seeing the whirls and whorls of the brain, its strange blueish-grey colour. "Drink the soup," instructed her mother, tall, slim, with her hair in a 1980s explosive perm. Remembered choking down some of the clear liquid, with unidentifiable pieces swimming in it. The smell of hair salon chemicals inexplicably in her nostrils. And then the imbibed carriers of cultural, historical, biological porcine knowledge of some kind being regurgitated straight into the double boiler. Her mother had taken away the dish with a sigh: "No need to drink any more."

A quick sniff of the kidney slices. Satisfied that she had gotten rid of the smell to the best of her abilities, Karen used a pair of chopsticks to grip then drop them into a stainless steel pot of thin peppery broth bubbling on the stove.

Two years ago, her mother, then 76, had been diagnosed with kidney failure. Three times a week, Karen left her employees in charge of her drinks stall in the food court during the afternoon lull and drove her mother to the dialysis centre in Thomson Road, nosing her MPV up the hill to drop Mum off at the foot of the hexagonal, glass-fronted building. A keloid the size of a cigarette box had formed on the inside of the septuagenarian's fore arm, where the nurses inserted the thick needles to hook her up to the dialysis machine.

"Take so long," grumbled Mum at first. "Sit there, nothing to do."

Karen had given her an iPad, installed with retro games such as Bubble Mania and Shanghai, to while the time away. Mum promptly stopped complaining.

Two of Mum's children had not been a match to donate a kidney to her. Julie, the youngest, refused to even take the test.

For years now, Karen and Julie had not spoken, a cold war that Karen knew hurt their mother. When they were growing up, their mum had often launched into impromptu lectures on the importance of sticking together. "When I die, you girls will only have each other," she would say, automatically discounting their elder brother Nelson, because it was taken for granted that Nelson would marry and have his own family. "If you don't love each other, who will?"

Karen had rolled her eyes. Not this speech again. She had had to share everything with her sister all her life – a bedroom, bathroom, school books and clothes – when could she be rid of her? As they grew up, bickering constantly, Mum had tried in vain to counsel sisterly love. "You two are supposed to be a pair," she had pleaded unconvincingly.

The final straw came when Julie, at age 23, had married Tak Heng, a layabout hated by the entire family. Unable to afford their own home, the couple moved in with Karen's retired parents (Dad was still alive then) and sponged off them. They fought constantly, and borrowed money incessantly. Heng even pawned the white gold wedding bands that Mum had bought for them when they got hitched.

One night, the neighbours had called Karen on the phone, worried after they'd heard screaming and shouting coming from her parents' front porch. Grimly, she had driven from her new flat in Sembawang – leaving her two sons at home with their father – to her childhood home. There, she had found the living room in disarray. Heng had gotten drunk and picked a fight with her sister. When Mum had tried to intervene, he had pulled a knife on her.

Incensed, Karen called the police. When the cops had taken Heng away, with a sobbing Julie following in a taxi to bail him out with lord knows what cash she had, Karen had stormed into their room and thrown out everything they owned. The last time she saw Julie, she had been crying, mascara running, while she tried to rescue her belongings from the rain. Karen had simply padlocked the gate and turned back indoors. A decade had rapidly squeezed its way between them.

Researching kidneys and alternative medicine after Mum's diagnosis of renal failure, Karen had come across a new-agey Internet article about the physiology and symbolism of kidneys in Chinese medicine. "Kidneys are said to hold our connection to our ancestors," the author, a California-based acupuncturist and clinical herbalist had written. "They also relate profoundly to our offspring as they hold the basic material for reproduction and fetal development." Karen, thinking of the fraught relationship she had with her sibling, wondered what was wrong with her own kidneys.

Dunk, dump, refill. Repeat.

She turned the fire on the hob. Using a spider sieve, she fished the slices of kidney up and dropped them in an empty rooster bowl to stop them from over-cooking. Beads of blood oozed up on the surface of each slice, seemingly forced out by the heat in the boiling soup.

Karen thought of how Mum's nose and upper lip used to bead with sweat when she slaved in the kitchen when they were kids. None of the three siblings had inherited this 'sweaty nose' trait from their mother, but Karen's elder son Jason had. When he perspired, perfectly formed droplets sat on the bridge of his nose.

It was Jason, doing his surgical student internship at a local hospital, who had told her about the latest research breakthrough, a great swine hope among kidney failure patients: scientists in the United States were exploring with using pig kidneys for transplants in humans. Of course, it was still at the lots-of-hype stage. Researchers were still trying to figure out how to prevent the human body from rejecting the genetic material from another species. It sounded like pigs-could-fly, sci-fi mumbo jumbo. But the idea was there: decellularize the pig kidney, by washing it of all its cells, while carefully retaining the structure of the organ, before syringing the human patient's stem cells into the 'scaffolding' – what is left of the pig kidney – for them to take root and grow.

Suddenly, pig kidney became very relevant to those whose kidneys had broken down. Only, you did not need to eat them as tonics; you needed to get them into your body by surgical means. How clever, she had thought. Not for the first time, came another thought unbidden, ironic: Pigs are more useful than your own children, in a pinch.

Having waited for it to cool a little, Karen ladled the tea-coloured spicy soup into the rooster bowl. Then she scooped some rice into a small bowl, with a blue-and-white dragon motif – the same set Mum had given her when she got married, along with the once-dreaded carp double-boiler. She put the two bowls on a tray and carefully carried it upstairs.

“Come in,” said Jason, when she knocked. Opening the door, she saw him bent over the books on his desk. The room was bathed in the orange glow from the study lamp on the table. Clicking her tongue, she flipped a switch on the wall. Bright, cold, white LED light sent darkness fleeing under the furniture. “*Aiyoh*, want to spoil your eyes, ah?” she scolded.

“Thanks, Mumsie,” breathed Jason, perking up at the aroma of the kidney soup.

She stood next to him as he hungrily scarfed down the food, running her hand over his thick medical textbooks, tenderly taming the bashed corners. “How? Your preparations?” she asked, circumventing subject-verb-object clauses in favour of the pragmatic economy, the way Singaporeans do.

“Coming along,” her son replied. “Final professional exam. Don’t play-play.” They both smiled at his bad attempt at levity. He took off his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. “I saw *Yiyi* Julie today,” he added.

“Yeah? Where?” Karen was surprised. Their family had not met Julie’s for years, not even during Chinese New Year. She was startled that he could still recognize his aunt.

“At the hospital,” he said. “She was there to see her specialist. Lung cancer. Stage four.”

There is a God, thought Karen, then immediately felt ashamed. Her sister, living with a pack-a-day-habit husband, was a non-smoker.

“She’s looking for a donor,” continued Jason. “She gave me her number. Here.” Rummaging in his pocket, he produced a scrap of paper with Julie’s neat handwriting. Her sevens were always crossed through the middle, one hook away from ‘zi,’ the Chinese character for ‘offspring.’ There were two of these little offspring in her phone number. Karen took the piece of paper. She watched as her son turned back to his food, slurping up the soup with relish. When the bowls were empty, he looked up and thanked her again. She ruffled his hair and took the bowls away, as he once more turned back to his texts and anatomy charts.

Back in the kitchen, Karen stirred the bottom of the pot. A few stray pieces of kidney floated to the surface. She ate them, still standing in front of the stove. Then, fortified, like with like, she sat down at the dining table with the cordless phone and dialed her sister’s number.

Clara Chow is a writer from Singapore. Her short stories have appeared in *Asia Literary Review*, *Blunderbuss Magazines*, *CHA: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Junoeseq Literary Journal*, and *QLRS (Quarterly Literary Review Singapore)*. She also contributes to *The Straits Times* and the *South China Morning Post*.

Happy Birthday, Jasmine! *Amber Hart*

The day before I turn fourteen the protective services lady comes to Momma's house to take Deandra and me away. At first I don't recognize her. She's just a shadow outside the screen door. You know how sometimes it's like that when the sun shines exactly a certain way and all you can make out is a person's shape. Her shape is hunched and bony. When she steps closer, I see her flat, streaked hair hanging down to her shoulders like heavy drapes, and her badge dangling on a string around her neck. I realize she's the same lady who came to my school the week before and asked me a hundred questions.

She looks different on the porch. Probably because she's standing opposite Momma. And because of the way the sun's throwing Momma's shadow out the front door onto her. Momma, with her wild hair and big round body, looks like a ball pumped too full with air. Especially when she's fixing to whoop somebody's behind and she gets to huffing and puffing and goes short of breath. When the lady comes that day, that's exactly what Momma does.

The week before when the lady comes to my school and they call for me at the office, I'm in gym class. I've never been called to the office before so I think somebody died. Momma maybe. But no, it's just some tired-face lady, smiling and winking at me every couple of seconds while she tells me she's from the Department of Family and Children's Services. Her eyes are a funny blue color that make me feel like I'm staring into an empty hole when I look at her. Out in the hallway she starts in on me about Deandra's daddy.

She asks, *Jasmine, does Deon Wilkes live at your house?*

At first I don't know who she's talking about because we call him Butter. Everybody on the street calls him Butter. When he first started showing up at Momma's, I asked my friend, Teisha, if she knew him. She did.

"Why's he called Butter?" I asked.

Teisha laughed at me, "You don't know?"

I shook my head. I like Teisha but not when she gets all superior acting.

"He's smooth. And slippery, too. Real good at making women fat. Like butter." Teisha told me he'd been coming around for her momma, too.

“I guess his name’s about right for him,” I said. Then we laughed because what else was there to do?

In the school hallway, I look at the lady, smile back at her dull face without answering. She loses her smile a little and presses on her forehead with her index finger. She goes on, calls him ‘Deandra’s daddy,’ like it might make a difference.

Does Deandra’s daddy live at your mother’s house?

I tell her, *Nobody lives at Momma’s house but me, Deandra, and Momma.*

I don’t tell her how Butter comes and stays a few days here and there. How things are fine at first but then he and Momma get to drinking and arguing, sometimes shoving each other around and banging against the walls. I haven’t seen Butter since the last time the police came around.

When did you see Deandra’s daddy last?

I don’t answer because I don’t know for sure.

She says, *Think, Jasmine. This is very important.*

I ask her if she could just talk to Deandra since he’s her daddy and all.

She glares at me, makes her lips go tight. Then she gets back to smiling and says, *Let me ask you this. What if I was to tell you Deandra’s daddy is in a lot of trouble?*

I say, *Okay.*

What if I was to tell you that the police are looking for him?

I say, *Okay.*

That he did something so bad that he can’t ever be around children again?

I don’t say anything.

She says, *See, Jasmine? This is important.*

After a minute I say, *I haven’t seen him in a couple of weeks. Maybe longer.*

She smiles in a different way then, like Granny smiles after I finally tell her the truth. She doesn't ask me anything more, just pats my hand and tells me to go on ahead back to Ms. Hayes' class.

Later that night I ask Deandra if she got called down to the office, too.

Deandra nods but doesn't look up from petting her cat. It's not really her cat, just some stray that comes around begging, but she named him so she thinks he's hers. It climbs into Deandra's lap and digs its claws into her legs trying to get comfortable. I wonder if Deandra knows the cat is just hoping for some food, that he doesn't really care about her.

Since this is about Deandra's daddy and not mine, I don't ask her anything more. I wish the lady had been asking about my daddy. That would've been easy to answer. Deandra's quiet the rest of the night and I don't know what to do with myself. Nobody said I *can't* tell Momma, but I don't. I know Momma will ask me from now until forever what that lady said to me. A lot of times Momma doesn't listen and I sit there while she gets red-hot and screams. Then she starts crying and saying her life is too hard, and why can't things be easy for once? She always ends up wiping her eyes and saying, "Thank God for my girls," and hugging us tight, making us promise we'll be good girls and stay out of trouble. Her hugs are the softest place I've ever been.

That night when Deandra isn't talking to me and I'm not talking to Momma, I go to bed thinking about the protective services lady and all her questions. I wonder if what Teisha told me is true, if they really ask questions over and over again until you say something you don't mean, then use what you said against you to haul you away to some foster care house and never let you see your momma again. Teisha knows a lot, but I'm never sure if she's right.

I find out the day I turn fourteen.

When the lady comes to Momma's house, Deandra starts whining as soon as she sees her on the front porch. The fan's going near the screen door to get us a breeze, but the only thing blowing is hot air. The lady sees us and waves, like we're going to get up. When we don't, she drops her wave and starts knocking on the door. When we still don't move, she takes to banging on the door, and frowning.

Momma's in the kitchen frying bacon and smoking a cigarette. She yells, *Answer the door.*

Deandra and I are squeezed up on the couch, hanging onto each other, not knowing what to do.

I say, *It's for you, Momma.*

She asks, *Who's at my door?* Then comes out from the kitchen and goes to the screen.

The protective services lady says, *D-FACS.*

Momma says, *D what?* Like she doesn't know.

Jennifer Wayne from the Department of Family and Children Services.

Momma squinches up her eyes. The ash from her cigarette falls on the carpet. After a minute she says, *What do you want?*

Ms. Wayne says, *We need to ask you some questions regarding Deon Wilkes.*

He don't live here.

We already know he does.

The hell he does.

Are you calling your daughter a liar, ma'am?

Momma turns her face slow toward us. Her eyes go small and black, dart between me and Deandra, then back at Ms. Wayne. For a second I don't want Ms. Wayne to leave without me. Deandra's grabbing me even tighter now, tearing up. And I'm thinking this is all her fault because Butter's *her* daddy and why couldn't he just done like *my* daddy had and never come around on account of being dead.

Momma says, *It don't matter what Jasmine or Deandra told you. He ain't been here. He don't live here.*

Ms. Wayne says, *Miss Mona. Do you really want to play this game?*

I ain't playing no game.

You are well aware of Mr. Wilkes criminal charges.

And?

You know you were to call the police if he came back around here.

He ain't been around here, I told you that.

I know for a fact he's been here.

Ms. Wayne stares right at me, mean and hateful. She turns her stupid, sour face back to Momma. She says, *The girls need to pack a few things and come with me.*

Momma says, *My girls are staying right here with me.*

Deandra begins howling in my ear in between hiccupping and squeezing me. I'm saying *Shhhh* and *Hush*, and keeping my eye on the situation. Momma straightens her back, cocks her head, presses one hand in the crook of her heavy hip. Her cigarette's about burnt down to her fingers. I can hear the bacon crackling and popping in the kitchen.

Ms. Wayne's still on the porch, not moving, maybe making up her mind what to do next. She reaches for the screen door handle, real slow, without taking her beady eyes off Momma.

Now Momma's eye to eye with her, just the screen between them. Momma snaps the lock on the door. Even I know that lock doesn't work anymore. She says, *Ain't no baby-stealing bitch coming in my house.*

Ms. Wayne takes her hand off the door. She says, *We can do this the easy way or the hard way.* She nods at the police officer waiting by the curb. I see him out the window. Around the neighborhood he's known as Skunk. He sweats so much you can smell him before you see him. Ol' Skunk never busted anybody, as far as I know.

Momma says, *You go on, get the police. Have him come tell me what I done wrong.*

Ms. Wayne sighs, *Fine, Ms. Mona, Fine.* She motions with her arm and up comes Skunk with a hat too small for his fat pig head. He stands behind Ms. Wayne, sucks in his gut and taps his sausage link fingers on his gun handle. Sweat stains his arm pits.

Skunk clears his throat and says firmly, *Ma'am, open the door.*

Momma puffs up her chest, every inch of her big body's gone firm. Her jaw is working and her hands are balled up in tight fists. Deandra's whimpering. I'm holding my breath to keep the trouble from coming. Both of us watch to see what's going to happen now.

Skunk grabs the door handle, flings the door open and pushes in front of Ms. Wayne. He grabs tight to his gun handle and his club, his basketball gut hanging over his pants.

Ms. Wayne trails in behind him. She says, *This'll all be cleared up soon enough with the Judge, but for now we've got to get the girls somewhere safe. It's just temporary.*

Nobody sees what I see on Momma's face just then. She's gone, switched over to the same eyes she had when she found out my daddy had died.

Smoke curls across the ceiling from the kitchen. The house goes quiet from Deandra finally hushing up and from the fight that's hanging in the air. It's the kind of quiet you hear just before a wave crashes down on itself. Or just before thunder claps and lightning zaps the sky. You know it's coming, but it still makes you jump when the noise finally breaks the silence.

Ms. Wayne says to me and Deandra, *Girls, go get yourselves a couple of changes of clothes. Your toothbrushes. Clean panties. Whatever else you can fit in your pillowcases.*

Skunk's eyes are roaming around Momma's place, his face in a frown. He isn't paying attention to the tide rolling in. Ms. Wayne's got her back to Momma while she's going on about the things we need and don't need packed.

Momma breaks the quiet with a hard and fast fist to the side of Ms. Wayne's head. She jumps on top of Ms. Wayne, straddling her with her legs and they go down. There's a thump and a grunt as Momma lands another punch, this time right in Ms. Wayne's mouth. Blood comes quick to her lip. Momma yells, *Ain't nobody going nowhere.*

Ms. Wayne's flat on the carpet, thrashing around and holding the side of her head where the blood is coloring her yellow hair red.

The women are screaming and tussling and Skunk's just standing there with his face hanging open. Deandra's all but on top of me in my lap like a baby. A TV commercial's blasting, the bacon's burning and I'm wondering what to do. Do I help Momma, slap Deandra, turn off the stove, pack my panties, or run?

I can't move.

Skunk jimmies his club free from his belt and starts whacking Momma. Each time he strikes, Ms. Wayne groans underneath her. Momma's like a wild animal, grunting and screaming. Skunk's sweating more now, big drops sliding down the side of his thick skull. He gets his club up under Momma's chin and chokes her out until her eyes roll back into her head and she falls off Ms. Wayne. Momma makes a low growling noise then goes silent.

Skunk's calling on his police radio saying, *I need immediate back-up. A suspect is down and D-FACS worker is injured.*

He asks Ms. Wayne, *You okay?*

Ms. Wayne's panting and gasping and pulling her badge from around her neck. She sits up. She's missing some hair on the side of her head. She gets up on one knee, nods and stands.

Skunk says, *Get the girls out of the house.*

I pry Deandra off me and tell her, *Come on.*

Deandra won't go until Skunk pushes her out the front door. Ms. Wayne's behind us, carrying her hair and her badge in her hand. She's gasping for breath and wiping tears away.

When we get to the foster care house we smell like four-day-old grease and sweat, and our faces are messed up from crying. We get introduced to the foster lady, a skinny, gray-haired lady who doesn't stop smiling. She acts like she doesn't notice how bad we look and just goes on and shows us to our bedroom. Then she feeds us some hard cookies and Kool-Aid. She doesn't ask anything but our names and we don't tell her anything more than Deandra and Jasmine. She tells us her name, Loretta Roberts.

She says, *Maybe you girls would like to watch TV awhile before dinner?*

Deandra and I go sit on the edge of the couch. We don't say anything, just stare at the TV like Ms. Loretta wants us to. I count six crosses hanging on the wall behind the TV. Different sizes but all wooden. One with a bible verse on it so small I'd have to get up to read it. The couch is firm like nobody ever sits on it.

It's cold in here, Deandra says.

When Mr. Roberts comes home we eat meatloaf and he and Ms. Loretta tell us about their grown kids and all the kids they've had come to their house over the years. *Kids with family troubles just like you,* Ms. Loretta says. Deandra peeks at me and I know what she's thinking. There's no way that many kids came here with a daddy so bad he isn't allowed around, and a momma who got choked out by a police for messing up the protective services lady. But we go on and nod and eat. The food doesn't taste like Momma's; it doesn't taste like anything.

They buy us clothes for school and put us on the bus every morning until summer comes. Then they take us to the lake where we swim and then sit and eat sandwiches at a table on the grass. Deandra and I lie on beach towels by the lake, listen to the water splash around in small waves. The faint lap of the waves puts me to sleep.

Sometimes at night I hear Deandra crying. I think about Momma, what she's doing. How we need to do what she said, be good. Stay out of trouble. Seems like Momma's the one who's got trouble, the one who needs to be good.

We see Momma every Saturday at the DFACS building. We go in a room with a chair set out in the corner where a worker sits and watches us. We get a different worker assigned to us than the one Momma jumped. The table's dirty and marked up from crayons. Momma talks quiet and sweet and tells us how much she misses us and how nice we're dressed and asks do we miss her? Kissing and hugging her isn't enough; we've got to tell her we miss her. She asks about The Roberts' and we say they're fine, but we'd rather be home with her. She asks about the food every time we see her. At the first visit Deandra told Momma that Ms. Loretta makes the best sweet potato pie and that set Momma's jaw to working.

Momma tells us she's doing her treatment plan and dropping urine every time they ask her to. She tells us Butter's in jail and that we'll be home in no time. Deandra sobs and says she wants to go home with momma now, then makes a pouty face the rest of the visit. Momma tells her she's going to be fine and we're going to be fine and we're all going to be one family again real soon. To me, Momma looks like someone let a little of the air out of her.

Momma starts skipping visits here and there. We wait for her in the room, every minute lasting an hour. First she says she's sick. Then she says she missed the bus. Each time she doesn't come we sit and wait. Deandra mopes.

The next time we see Momma, she says, *I ain't been feeling well lately. But I came to see my girls anyway. I had to see my girls.* She doesn't look so good. Her fingernails are dirty and her clothes are crumpled and smell.

She reaches for us, gathers us up against her so close. We smell the way her days have gone. This time Deandra goes straight past crying and makes her mad face. She doesn't even look at Momma till the end of the visit and then she starts back to her usual fussing and saying she wants to go home. I want to go home too but saying so won't help the situation.

Then Momma doesn't come for a whole month. We stop going to the DFACS building altogether on account of it takes too much time out of Ms. Loretta's schedule. We're told we'll go back as soon as they hear from Momma again. It takes all the way to my next birthday, three

months almost, before we see Momma again. She's lost weight. Her big, round middle hangs lower. Her eyes droop into small pools of dark skin that have gathered since I saw her last. Her teeth are like Mr. Joe's. I haven't thought about Mr. Joe since I saw him laid up against the building outside the gas station. His empty, crinkled up eyes, his mouth gaped open like he was about to say something. Momma's got the same look on her face as him. When she talks, I hold my breath. This is some kind of birthday, again. I start crying and I can't stop. Deandra squeezes my hand under the dirty table with the crayon marks. For once she's got dry eyes.

Momma asks, *What are you all up to this weekend?*

Deandra pats my hand and says, *Momma, it's Jazz birthday tomorrow, remember? Ms. Loretta made a yellow cake with chocolate frosting. And fifteen candles.*

I go stiff waiting for Momma to snap. But, she doesn't even frown. Instead she nods her head, grins and says, *Oh, that sounds nice.*

The lady from the corner tells us our visit time's over and to say good-bye.

Momma stands up from the table, grinning wide like Joe when you throw a dime in his cup. She grabs me for a hug. I wrap my arms around her and rest my head on her shoulder. I breathe deep, search for Momma's powdery scent. I can't find it. I squeeze her tighter, bury my face in the crook of her neck, close up against her skin. She smells hot and tinny, like she's rotting from the inside out. She lets me loose so Deandra can take her turn.

Outside Ms. Loretta is waiting in her minivan. She's got balloons tied up in the back seat, all kinds of colors, one has *Happy Birthday Jasmine!* printed on it.

When we get in she says, *How'd it go?*

Deandra says, *Fine.*

I don't say anything. Just think about the yellow cake back at the Roberts' house. I already know it's going to taste like cardboard. Everything Ms. Loretta makes tastes like cardboard. And I know how the whole house is going to smell from those candles she burns all the time. How she's not going to stop stealing looks at us like we're some pitiful animals she's rescued off the side of the road. She's never going to stop smiling at us thinking that's all it's going to take to make our lives right again.

I slide the van door closed, but it doesn't latch. When I try again, I slam it shut and move the whole van back and forth. Once I'm in my seat the balloons surround me and bob at my face. I tap my finger on them, one at a time. I like how they sound when I plunk at them, hollow and empty, yet full at the same time; the way they fly away from me fast then float back slow. I do that all the way home.

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Appendicitis Day *Drew Wade*

Barn swallows pierce the air around the porch in jagged arcs. They're out in numbers in the twilight, feasting greedily on the flies that have bothered the girl all day. The fading sun, long and low on the horizon, covers the land in yellow and pink. It is neither too hot nor too cold in the porch's shade, and this comforts the girl some as she rocks on the big swing.

The girl is smart enough to take advantage of this while she can. July in these parts is often too hot for her to be outside long, but the shade and the hose she rinsed the peas with earlier have cooled her down and allowed her to rest. This is the perfect hour. She could be out here forever, if only her belly didn't hurt so bad.

She gives the porch another sandal-footed shove, sends the swing back a bit—not too much, or it might upset her belly again, which has been quiet for a couple minutes now. The movement and soft creaking of the swing reassures her. So does the aroma of autumn olives all around. So does the view—second highest in the county, according to her grandma—whole forests of maple and ash and cottonwood, tiny white farms and tinier trailers, fields painted by the fading light. Yes, she could be out here forever, if she just didn't feel like she wanted to throw up.

Her grandma comes around the corner of the house, pulling a wooden-slatted Radio Flyer. An empty orchard basket and two full paper bags of sugar snap peas jostle in its box, the work of just over an hour in the garden. Grandma parks the wagon off the lip of the porch and grabs one of the bags. She heaves herself up the three steps and settles onto the porch swing. She drops the bag in front of her, and the girl grabs the other bag for herself. Now they'll snap.

"Hand me that basket," says Grandma. They'll toss the ends into it, and later take them to the compost pile. "I'm always forgetting something."

The girl bends over the side to grab it, and a sharp twinge in her side almost stops her. She holds her breath and grabs the basket and places it between them. It brushes against Grandma as she does.

"Shoot," says Grandma, grabbing her arm and looking at it.

"What happened?"

"Darn handle caught me. Must have had a splinter in it." She looks at her arm again. "No harm done. It's not bleeding, and that's good enough for me. Just a poke, is all. I'm not mad."

The girl smiles, though it's more of a wince, and starts snapping. This is her favorite chore, her favorite part of living with her grandma, really—its repetition and efficiency, its easy satisfaction. The next best thing about living out here is how far away it is from everything—no

people, no cities, no shopping malls, no hospitals for miles. Just her and Grandma, like they're alone in the universe.

“Well,” says Grandma, looking out towards the road, “I think tomorrow you might have to wake up early and take the pellet gun out and shoot some grackles. They'll scare off the swallows before too long if you don't, I expect.”

Shooting things is the girl's least favorite part of living here. Some things need done, though, and her grandma's aim isn't as steady as hers.

She makes the mistake of looking at Grandma now. Grandma, plump and homely and warm, is normally the picture of self-composure, but now she is just a wet mess. Liquid seeps from her arm in a thick stream, almost like blood, except with a yellowish tinge.

“I think your arm's leaking.”

Grandma looks at it and smiles. “Oh, the scratch. It's nothing.” She wipes it off with her bare hand and keeps snapping. She pops the top, breaks the pod in half, pops the bottom—three snaps and into the basket. “What do you say about those grackles? I know you don't like that chore, but I'll give you fifty cents apiece.”

The calls of the swallows and the drone of the crickets fill the gloaming. On the horizon, the barest sliver of golden sun peeks over the hills. Day is dying in the west.

A swallow flies up to the telephone wire that leads from the house and sits on it close enough so that the girl can see it in detail. Dark blue on top, tawny yellow on bottom, tail poking out behind it like a pair of scissors. It holds a horsefly in its mouth and stares at her coldly. It lifts its head and eats the fly, then flies off to hunt more.

The girl shivers and holds her belly as another twinge comes. She's getting good at predicting them, now. This one lasts just a second longer, is just that much more painful than the last. She can handle it, though. Grandma's always said she's tough.

She turns to Grandma again, and again her attention goes down to her arm. The flow of water hasn't stopped. “It's leaking really bad. What's going on?”

Grandma chuckles. “The basket must have nipped me a little harder than I thought.”

“But it's not bleeding.”

“Well, it's lymphatic fluid, honey. The doctor has me on new medicine. It makes me retain a little bit of water. Don't you worry about it.”

As if to prove that it's nothing to worry about, Grandma squeezes the wound a little and increases its flow. Then, grinning, she wipes all the fluid away with her t-shirt, a green freebie from a grocery store's grand opening. The shirt soaks all the way through.

"It'll stop eventually, honey. Don't you worry, and I mean it."

But now, with the porch swing swaying and her stomach heaving and her breath coming in little jags, the girl isn't quite so sure it will stop. Grandma might go on leaking water forever, might become as parched and withered as the grass behind the barn in August. Is this what will happen to her, when she reaches Grandma's age? Will she puddle and fill, swell and heave, get pricked and bleed with blood that is not blood, get squeezed for every drop?

"I don't want to get old," she says, and the side of her belly leaps with pain again. She can handle it. Yes, she's tough.

"You've got a long time 'til you get there." Grandma looks at the girl, then changes her tone. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you blanch. My land, you do look white as a sheet."

The girl stifles a gag. There's a throw up coming on, very soon.

Her grandma must see this, too. "Okay, honey. You drive a hard bargain. I'll give you a dollar per grackle, tomorrow."

The girl manages a weak smile, and Grandma smiles, too. Together they rock in the day's dying light, and Grandma puts her arm around the girl. A little bit of the fluid gets on her, but by this point, the girl doesn't pay attention.

"Sunsets and life can both be pretty good sometimes," says Grandma after a few seconds, chewing on a pea.

Drew Wade is an MFA candidate and teacher of creative writing at North Carolina State in Raleigh. He originally hails from Ohio, and most of his fiction is influenced by the people of the Rust Belt and the Appalachian foothills. He is currently finishing work on his thesis, a collection of short stories set in the fictional Combs County, Ohio. His book collection has been variously described variously as "impressive" and "evidence that he has hoarding tendencies."

The Dog At The Fountain *Sian M. Jones*

I run into Professor Sullivan at the fountain near the Business building. It is spring – the sun isn't exhausting yet; it's still running at the perfect wattage. The fountain is set in the middle of the walkway, creating a pedestrian roundabout ringed by low, grassy mounds, beyond which stretches the black asphalt of the parking lots. The water shoots as high as one story from the crusty spouts hidden at the center, and then it crashes open, splaying itself like the frilled petals of some constantly generous flower.

I walk this way all the time to catch the shuttle to catch the bus and get home. I don't usually run into anyone to talk to

Professor Sullivan tosses a worn tennis ball into the fountain for his great, fat, elderly dog, a black Labrador who goes everywhere on campus with him, usually holding that tennis ball lovingly in her mouth. She's the resident spirit of the classroom where I take Introduction to Literature from her charismatic, inspired madman of a human. She lies next to his feet each class, and I've watched her sides rise and fall as she breathes and listened to her tail gently thwap against the low-nap carpet.

Now, she walks rather than runs into the fountain. She heaves her belly over the edge – a low concrete ring – and wades with deliberation toward the floating ball, which moves away from her in the current made by the falling water. When she finally gets it in her mouth, she heaves herself back over the edge and, sopping, heavily wet, saunters over to her human, and drops the ball at his feet with a splat.

He bends down, picks the ball up. The dog's ears manage excitement. Her old body manages anticipation. She and her human have the same emotional air – distracted and fiercely alert at the same time.

Professor Sullivan – who insists we call him Phil because fuck authority – has hair that reminds me of Ray Bradbury's, and I'm not just saying that because we read one of Bradbury's stories recently for class. I'm saying it because he looks like the author's photo. His glasses have the same square, black frames, and his hair is the same straight, white, overgrown hair. Though Phil's hair is a bit messier, actually, a little less clean. There's some chaos in Phil, expressed through bedhead.

Phil tosses the ball back into the fountain, a leisurely throw, and the dog starts after it again.

I feel as if I have a secret, secondary knowledge about Phil. He's the father of a classmate who hasn't quite stuck as a friend yet, even though I've known her since high school and was one-third of her medieval history study group. By knowing her, I know something about him that the other students in class do not. Something subterranean and inadvertent. Not that I'd ever talk to him about her. I mean, I've never talked to him at all except in class – and except now when he

waves me over, and we say hello, and I stand with him while he plays the laziest, happiest game of slow-motion fetch.

Phil watches his dog with a bemused smile, the one he gets when one of us is talking in class, trying our best to say something smart. He's proud of us, not in a false way, but in a way that encompasses our fledgling awkwardness. It's a smile that seems to say: We all start out muddled and unable to fly. Isn't it ridiculous? Isn't it marvelous?

That's when, standing there in the spring sun, I feel distinctly homesick.

Which only makes sense if you know that my father died a few years earlier, halfway through my teens. He was old like Phil, and a professor, too, and he and our old dog, both thick around the middle, both muzzle-grey, would walk slowly through our neighborhood in the winter evenings, my father wearing a blue knit cap like a seaman, and our short mutt of a dog trotting at his heels with a curled-up mast of a tail. They would both come home a bit winded, but happy to have been out, happy to return.

(I write these words twenty years after the fountain, on the day I learn Phil has died. Before now, I was embarrassed by it, the sentimentality of conflating Phil with my father. Now, it just seems apt. Mortality makes archetypes of us all.)

Trigger warning: racial epithets/slurs

Not What I Say *Michael Milburn*

My father was an open-minded, liberal, humanitarian Democrat who campaigned for that champion of civil rights, John F. Kennedy. He was also a flagrant racist, sexist, xenophobe, and anti-Semite. The first of these impressions came to me through the evidence of his actions, and the second through his words. At family dinners he maligned blacks, Jews, women, gays, and foreigners. He never insulted members of these groups to their faces, treating them with courtesy and even solicitude. It was only outside their presence that he would refer to “that nigger who took our bags,” or “that fairy actor.”

The bigotry that I heard him express was so unequivocal that it might not have mattered what my eyes saw except that they occasionally saw scenes like this: In the fall of 1976 I sat in a Washington, D.C. hotel room with my father, mother, two sisters, and a young partner from my father’s law firm named Mark Sisitsky. I had come from college to watch my father argue a case before the Supreme Court. The night before his appearance, he summoned several of his colleagues to our suite for a last round of preparations. I had first heard him mention Sisitsky’s name in our house a year earlier, when he referred to him as that Jew-something—Jew-lawyer, Jew-boy, I can’t remember which. His tone sounded more humorous than malicious, insofar as one can say something like that without sounding malicious.

In calling Sisitsky that name my father was complaining about a decision the younger lawyer had made relating to the long-running case that they were working on. Their firm was one of the foremost litigators on Wall Street, and I knew that in order for Sisitsky to be assisting my father, a name partner, on a case bound for the Supreme Court, he had to be brilliant, a crack lawyer, and have my father’s complete trust and respect. What I couldn’t figure out was how to square their partnership, not to mention Sisitsky’s hiring, with the anti-Semitism that my father had expressed in our house throughout my childhood. How could he stand working with a Jew, and how could Mark Sisitsky stand spending so much time with such a blatant anti-Semite?

When Sisitsky arrived at the hotel he greeted my sisters and me, then pointed to my father and said, “That man is my idol.” He clearly not only respected my father’s legal skill—we overheard him in the next room interrupting him with questions that the justices might ask, and praising his extemporaneous answers—but his personality as well. At one point Sisitsky asked which of us had inherited our father’s sense of humor, as if that would be the greatest legacy we could receive. My father could be very funny, but a good deal of his humor around the house depended on his denigrating minorities, and I wondered how he managed to avoid this in Sisitsky’s presence and still impress him with his wit. If, as it appeared, my father confined his offensive talk to his family, why would he want to do that?

I noticed other evidence that my father spoke this way only at home and only for show. Though his dinner table conversation would have sounded appropriate coming from the patriarch of a family of rednecks in the Deep South, there was nothing narrow-minded about the way he raised his children. We all attended progressive private schools and colleges and were encouraged to engage him in conversation about our reading. In spite of the backward rhetoric that came out of

his mouth, he managed to instill us with progressive values. From the time I was a toddler in 1960 until my parents sold our house forty years later, a framed front page from our town's newspaper sat on a table in our den. It showed my father shaking hands with J.F.K. at a local campaign event, receiving the candidate's thanks for his support. In the late 1970s, the conservative son of my father's best friend published a book entitled *Harvard Hates America*, which deplored the university's liberalism. My father had great affection for the author and engaged in spirited debates with him about political and social matters, but made it clear at home that he approved of Harvard's politics and found the book's thesis ridiculous.

The biggest disconnect between my father's words and behavior occurred when I was a junior in high school, during the publicity surrounding the Joan Little case in North Carolina. Little, a black prisoner, went on trial for murdering a guard who she alleged had tried to rape her. The case became a cause célèbre among civil rights activists and feminists. My memory is hazy on whether my father ever mentioned Joan Little in my presence, but if he did he would have called her "that n[redacted]"—that was simply how he referred to blacks, male or female, rich or poor, famous or obscure. The surprising thing was that he contributed to Little's defense fund. I can't remember who told me this, but if my father did, perhaps in response to my asking him about the case, it would have been typical for him to refer to "that n[redacted]" and his contribution in the same sentence. Like his mutually respectful relationship with Mark Sitsky, this paradox is one that I grappled with while growing up: how to reconcile the man who missed no chance to slur minorities in front of his children with the humane liberal whose actions contradicted his words.

One explanation is that he didn't mean what he said, which seems more plausible than that he did mean it, but for some reason acted against it. It's easier for me to understand why he would play down his generous actions than why he would risk, even guarantee, that his children would be infected with the views he spouted. If he was joking, speaking outrageously in order to get a rise out of his audience—and he succeeded at this as my siblings and I got older and remonstrated with him for his comments—then again I have to ask why. I can understand him performing in this way for his cronies at Wall Street lunches or in the country club bar, but why would he scandalize his children, especially at the risk of teaching them values that he did not hold? Was he trying to sabotage our upbringings, or just an incompetent, careless parent?

I often feel stupid taking those comments of my father's seriously, as if he could hear me and roll his eyes at my lack of a sense of humor and inability to distinguish his convictions from his performance. In this way he reminds me of the rapper Eminem after the release of his album, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, in 2000. Criticized for his homophobic lyrics, Eminem defended them by saying that the speaker in his songs wasn't him, even though he wrote in the first person and made autobiographical references. But I wasn't mature enough as a child or teenager to distinguish my fair-minded father from his bigoted persona, and even if I had been able to do so, it's hardly more forgivable to joke that way around one's children, even if one explains that one is joking, which he didn't. In one of my earliest memories he taught me a version of the counting rhyme "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe" that included the line "catch a n[redacted] by the toe." He allowed me to repeat this line with no awareness of its inappropriateness until my kindergarten teacher heard and made me stop.

The fact is that if my father was alive today, he would sit in front of the TV and call Barack Obama a n****r, Tiger Woods a n****r, Oprah a big fat n****r, and anyone else who didn't look like him a h****r, c****r, g****r or other name. Reading the *New York Times* over breakfast, he would make obscene jokes about Hillary Clinton or Angela Merkel. When Obama was running for president, I came to admire the candidate's intellect and literary ability, but kept hearing in my mind the racist commentary that my father would have regaled our family with if he had been alive, though he respected nothing more than a sharp legal mind and liberal politics like Obama's, and would have voted for him. Watching an NBA basketball game on TV, I still hear my father's comments like "look at that monkey jump." No matter my age—twelve and heading off to seventh grade or thirty and home for a visit—I flinched every time he said things like this, and tried to calculate his actual respect for these people given the words that he used.

I was fourteen when the television show "All in the Family" debuted in 1971. In interviews, many viewers said that the vocally racist and anti-Semitic Archie Bunker reminded them of their fathers and grandfathers—"men of a different era" in one woman's words. I too saw a lot of my father in Archie, especially the pleasure he took in his family's outraged reactions to him. As far as I know, my father never watched the show, and it never occurred to me to watch it with him in search of clues to how he felt about this theatrical version of himself. No doubt he would have kept up his own act, cheering Archie's rabid pronouncements in order to infuriate me the way Archie baited the son-in-law he called Meathead.

I suppose there's a good side to my father's reckless talk in that it forced me to think about his words and decide whether to condone or repudiate them. Growing up in a wealthy suburb of Manhattan and attending private schools, I found it hard to read the signals coming from my friends' parents—the subtle asides, jokes, or glances among adults that might or might not have indicated prejudice. My father's talk was too blunt to overlook or misinterpret. But even as I came to recognize its wrongness, I couldn't help but internalize it until it became part of my character. I may not have agreed with him, but his words echoed in my ears as I encountered different races, genders, nationalities, and social classes. I hope this doesn't make me part of what Nicholas Kristof, in a recent *New York Times* column entitled "Is Everyone a Little Bit Racist?" calls "a broad swath of people who consider themselves enlightened, who intellectually believe in racial equality, who deplore discrimination, yet who harbor unconscious attitudes that result in discriminatory policies and behavior."

My mother, while less prolific in her comments, came across as just as intolerant as my father, though she never sounded like she was joking and therefore left no doubt about her true beliefs. She made a show of sparing her young children, but her practice of calling someone a name in my presence and then saying, "Pardon my French" or "I shouldn't have said that" seemed more insidious than my father's unrepentant speech. As an adult, I told her after one of these incidents that my father knew that he sounded like a monster and took pride in it, but that she didn't seem to realize how repugnant her words were. Not that I'd have wanted my father to be that straightforward—part of me likes hanging on to the possibility that he didn't mean the objectionable things that he said, even as I torment myself trying to figure him out.

As a boy on vacation with my parents in the Caribbean, I befriended the ten-year-old son of one of the housekeepers at the resort where we stayed. My mother made no secret of her disapproval

of this black child, questioning his hygiene and trustworthiness, and talking to him as if he was mentally slow. My father, who gleefully referred to the child out of his and his mother's hearing with as many racist names as he could think of, was friendly to him to his face and seemed unconcerned that I played with him on the beach and even visited the impoverished neighborhood where he lived. To judge from the amount of time that I spent with the boy, I was attentive only to his friendship, not his race or economic status, which suggests that my parents' benighted views, however facetious or genuine, had not seeped into me.

Or, more precisely, they had seeped into me—how could they not?—but had not yet shaped my opinions or actions. Which leads me to ask whether they ever did, or do, or will, and how much of the way I interact with the world is influenced by my parents' examples and how much by my own thoughts and experiences. I can't find any prejudice in myself, though it seems improbable that my parents didn't bequeath me some. At the same time, I don't remember either of them making a racist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic remark that I didn't disagree with, know was wrong, and regret being exposed to. Could I have rebelled so completely against them as to transform their noxious influence into pure open-mindedness?

I'd like to think so, but my memory produces another contradictory scene. I'm in eighth grade and arguing with my friend Robert Barron, the only Jewish student at our affluent, all-white, Episcopalian private school. Our debate escalates into trash talking and then physical grappling, as he jumps me from behind. I swing him around, saying, "Get off me, you stupid Jew," except that I mumble the last word so that I will be able to claim afterward—and I do—that I said "jerk" and he misheard me. I blame my father's confusing example for the fact that in appropriating his language I forgot that he never directed it at his target in person.

Besides that school's exclusivity, plenty of other factors in my youth helped to give me a blinkered view of society. There were no minorities other than servants in the suburb I grew up in, though the neighboring town, which supplied those servants, was predominantly black. I didn't spend time around blacks my age until I arrived at boarding school in 1971, where a small but militant group had led a revolt the previous year that overturned many of the school's antiquated rules about dress, chapel attendance, smoking, and curfew. The group's leader was a tall senior who looked like Sly Stone, the front man for 1960s funk group Sly and the Family Stone, with his sculpted Afro, flamboyant clothes, sunglasses, and jaunty hat. He and his friends commandeered a table in the cafeteria, excluding all but a few of the white students.

At the time I found those black activists supremely cool and inspiring. When I look through my old yearbooks today, the aura of confidence and self-containment that they exuded has not diminished. My grandfather, father, and three brothers had attended the school before me, and pictures of them in coats and ties, surrounded by white males in the shadow of the two Gothic chapels, were part of the imagery of my childhood. Arriving on campus in 1971 and seeing boys with shoulder-length hair wearing blue jeans to class and congregating in a drafty shack to smoke cigarettes legally, all thanks to that charismatic black man and his cohorts, neutralized some of my father's racism.

I'd like to say that I benefitted from the school's diversity in other ways, but it took white students more outgoing than I was to integrate the minority cliques. I associated with my kind—

WASPS whose families had attended the school, and my teammates on the lacrosse and hockey teams. My only memory of a racial interaction involves our hockey team's only black player and his white roommate. Whenever Steve Isaac, the black player, boarded the team bus for an away game, his roommate would shout, "Back of the bus, Isaac," to the other players' laughter. It was a delicate joke: that the speaker was Steve's best friend and a popular team captain gave him alone permission to make it. Steve's reaction combined indignation, helplessness, exasperation, and amusement, as if he was calculating how to respond and decided that going along made the most sense, though who knew how he really felt? The coaches, knowing the two boys' relationship, must have intuited that the scene did not call for a scolding, at least not a public one. They navigated the same line that I sensed, without fully grasping it, between the humor and the toxicity of my father's bigotry.

I never told my father about the business on the hockey bus, which he would have found funny and harmless, and used to justify his own behavior. Though I wouldn't go so far as to agree with him, I owe him my awareness that blatant racial humor is more honest and even inclusive than polite reserve. It wasn't lost on my hockey teammates, Steve included, that he was also the only black on any of the teams we played against, and we knew from history class about the treatment of blacks riding buses in white communities. By shouting out that joke from the comfort of his acceptance of Steve as an equal and friend, Steve's roommate did us the favor both of stating what was on our minds and making fun of it. My father may have performed a similar service by giving voice to the kind of racism that many people in his social circle felt, but kept quiet about; in our house those thoughts were not repressed or taboo. If that was his intent, I was too young to understand it (and still don't fully understand it), and besides, certain words probably should be taboo in the presence of children.

The portrait of my father that I carry in my head is so contradictory that I can't tell how he will appear to someone meeting him in this essay. Do his words alone define him as a monster, or does that fact that he confined them to his family and always seemed to speak them in jest soften their effect? To my knowledge, no one else saw him as a bigot, and the people like Mark Sisitsky that he disparaged out of their hearing found him charming. This also goes for the employees of the swanky places where he took his family out to eat or on vacation, who bantered with him, laughed at his jokes, and welcomed him back year after year. But who knows how much of their behavior was sincere and how much motivated by professionalism and his potential as a tipper?

As a result of his wealth and social and professional status, he mostly interacted with minorities from a position of authority. A life-long horseman, he owned a stable and horses, and employed black grooms whose manifest respect for him was, again, impossible to read given their dependent roles. Once my father, sister and I visited a stable that boarded a horse my father wanted to buy. While he was inspecting the horse in a stall, the head groom, a black man, drove up, parking near where my sister and I waited. He asked our names, and when we told him, he said, "Dev Milburn your daddy?" His expression, tone, and the way he said my father's first name without minding who heard him, has stayed with me: even with my father out of earshot, I heard respect and affection in the groom's voice. I don't know for sure whether my father subjected this man to his racist jokes, but however he treated him, he appeared to have earned his friendship.

Another factor that keeps me from giving full credence to my father's spoken words is his literary taste. A constant reader, he showed no discrimination in his choice of authors or subjects. Among his favorite thinkers that he regularly read books by and about was Gandhi, whose race and appearance he made fun of nevertheless. He kept up with current nonfiction and well-reviewed novels, including *Portnoy's Complaint* and each of Saul Bellow's new books when they came out. If I had spotted a copy of James Baldwin's essays or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* on his bedside table, I'd have teased him about his open-mindedness, but found nothing surprising in his choices. Riding behind him in silence along bridle paths or watching him set off for a walk with his dog, I sensed that he was thinking the kind of philosophical thoughts that he read and sometimes spoke about, not seething about blacks and Jews.

Sometimes I think that my father's spoken biases were just vehicles for his most enduring legacy to me—not humor, as Mark Sitsky would have had it, but scorn. The words I have quoted were only his most inappropriate ones; he expressed contempt for everybody, every perceptible trait and failing, including my mother's, my siblings', and my own. Though he was alcoholic and chronically overweight, he criticized these afflictions so relentlessly in others as to distract from his hypocrisy. He was equally free in insulting intelligence and personality. His use of scorn to make himself look and feel superior is one that I practice and had to remind myself not to model for my son when he was growing up. Since race, religion, gender and sexual preference don't qualify for me as measures of character, I tend to focus on people's looks and behavior when running them down.

When I was a senior in high school, the first poem of mine that a teacher praised as having a distinct voice recalled a day when I was taking photographs on the boardwalk at Jones Beach on Long Island. My viewfinder framed a woman that my father would have savaged for her skin color, gender, looks, and dress. As his voice threatened to drown out my thoughts, I realized how much of his subjectivity I brought to my observation of people, and how hard I had to work to hear his words without believing them. He was a flagrant racist, sexist, xenophobe and anti-Semite. He was also an open-minded, liberal, humanitarian Democrat who campaigned for that champion of civil rights, John F. Kennedy. Throughout the writing of this essay, I have debated which of these statements deserves to come first, and still can't decide; they're both true.

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Matroyshka Dolls *Susan Triemert*

1. (Ah-DEEN)

We are driving home from soccer practice, and my older son, Mitch, sits quietly, pensively, in the backseat. He catches my eye in the rearview mirror. *Chris said he's a Swede. Mom, are we Swedes?* After I clarify that he hadn't said sweet, which his friend Chris is not, I'm once again reminded that my son is adopted, that I hadn't given birth to either of my Russian born children. Mitch has also momentarily forgotten, as he's done before, and we are now in that hazy limbo where I can pretend he's biologically mine. Here, I've always known him, had cared for him as an infant. An undefined, beautiful limbo, I think. *Yes, I want to say, I'm part Swedish, so you are, too.* Instead, I find myself saying, *Most likely not, honey, although it's possible.* I do not elaborate right away. Your blood is not mine, I think.

2. (Dvah)

No one would disagree that bunking next to Jack is a challenge. We call him a squirmy worm. Before you know it he'll have flipped over, his toes will be skimming the headboard, and it will feel like he is trying to rappel down your side. *When I was a baby,* he asks, *was I a squirmy worm in your tummy too?* I want to say, *Yes, that was exactly how you were.* I'd go on, *You tickled my belly and I giggled for nine months straight.* He, too, forgets he is adopted, and I feel obligated to remind him. *Remember how you have a Russian mama?* I say, thinking of the title we'd given his birth mother. *I bet you squirmed all around inside her belly.* Would it have been terrible to pretend, just this once, that I knew the answer, that he indeed squirmed? There are worse things, I think, than to act as if he'd always been mine.

3. (tree)

A close friend was over for dinner when Mitch crawled onto my lap. She looked over at us and nodded. *You two look related,* she said. Although I knew what she meant, and knew she meant no harm, I wanted to say, firmly, *We are related.* I said nothing at the time. Later, I told her that although I knew her intentions were good, comments like that might confuse Mitch. It definitely had stirred up doubt and insecurity in me.

My husband and I have been completely open with our children about their adoptions. Because Mitch was two when we met him, fully aware that we hadn't always been his parents, we'd been introduced to him, not as Mom and Dad, but John and Susan. At home, we speak freely of our sons' shared heritage and repeat stories of our multiple trips to visit them in Siberia. We've preserved their Russian names, used now as middle ones. *Matroyshka* dolls and other Russian

trinkets are displayed in nearly every room. *Are we Swedes?* We are not trying to hide anything, I remind myself.

4. (che-TYH-ree)

Even if I wanted to, it would be hard for me to forget my children are adopted. I am always reminded: at the doctor's office, filling out sports forms, worrying about their health histories, Mothers' Day, speaking of their births, celebrating birthdays. And not seeing my face in either of theirs. When a woman mentions her pregnancy or the challenges she'd faced parenting an infant, I often immediately disclose my children are adopted and I can't relate; Jack was adopted at eighteen months and Mitch when he was nearly three. When people tell me my sons, who are not biologically related either, look alike or resemble me, I disclose—or remind those who have forgotten—the similarities are simply coincidental. What harm would be done if I were to nod and smile? If I were to just keep quiet when someone assumes I, too, battled morning sickness and a grueling labor. If I, like them, had been woken multiple times a night to screaming babies and multiple feedings. Those were the days, I'd think, with a smirk.

Since I'm proud of the way my family was formed, what do I hope to gain? Perhaps, I want others to see us as more united, to see them as all mine. *Was I a squirmy worm in your tummy?* Here, in this limbo, I'd have felt them grow, been the first to see their angry, red birthing faces, heard their first screams. In a way, I feel like I deserve to have been privy to all that since I am the one who cares for them now. There are moments of their lives I will never know, which seems unfair since I know them better than anyone else.

5. (pyat')

Maybe I simply want to elongate the time spent in that nebulous, beautiful limbo. To pretend, the same way my youngest does. *That Russian lady*, Jack says, *well she tried to save me from a fire. It's sad she didn't make it, but she did get me out alive. Weeks later, he'll say, That Russian lady did not survive the sinking ship. I tried to protect her, but I could only make it to shore myself.* He pretends: to fill in the blanks, to control the uncontrollable, to have a say in something in which he's had none. Maybe that's all I am doing, with my idea of a hazy limbo, my pocket-sized bit of control.

Was I a squirmy worm in your tummy?

Are we Swedes?

Of course, I think as I say, It's possible.

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