

Issue Six



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Patrick Meadows

Shorty

Kids were fascinated by the way Shorty got around East End. In those days, the only paved road in our part of town was Highway 50, unless you count the short road up the hill to the Gospel Tabernacle. The remainder of roads were mud tracks, sometimes covered with what they called red-dog, the rose-colored residue from the burned-out slate dumps down at Minden. On these, cutting back and forth across what was once the Rhodes place, we regularly stubbed our toes if we went barefoot on our bikes, and new cars were turned into rattle traps in a few months. In the winter the depressions were yellow slime pits, or frozen plates between the jagged edges of red dog.

Shorty scooted up and down these pathways and byways on a mechanic's dolly, his knuckles propelling him faster than many of the Pontiacs and Hudsons yawing along in his wake. Shorty had lost his footing grabbing hold of the ladder of a C&O coal car, his usual mode of transportation. He knew every switching yard in the southern half of the United States. Where the spurs ended up, and how the gondolas were composed for uncoupling along the way. In the late thirties and early forties, there was still a small army of tramps who toured from one hobo jungle to the next.

On the day of his accident on the C&O, Shorty had just had an argument with his old maid sister Fanny, a schoolteacher in one of the company towns down the mountain from Oak Hill, a place called Pax. It was his habit when in his hometown to sleep in Fanny's spare room, and since he spelled as an experienced short-order cook when in a bind for drinking cash, he cooked breakfast and dinner for his sister. He liked to pull his own weight, though as his more ambitious brothers—seven of them—liked to say, he didn't have much weight to pull.

On this Saturday morning, a day when Fanny could linger over her food in her housecoat, loud silk practically squawking with parrots, he baked some buttermilk biscuits, fried half a pound of bacon, browned some potatoes he found in a dish in the Frigidaire, and when he heard Fanny's heeled bedroom slippers come down the hall, he dropped two eggs into the hot grease.

"Morning, Fanny," he said to the frying pan. "You want one egg or two?"

"One'll do," she answered in a thin voice. "I'm not too hungry."

He recognized the tone, and glanced around. Sure enough, her face had that pained look of the mistreated woman. *Pigshit*, he said to himself. *She's been out with that traveling man again.*

He gently turned the eggs with a practiced flip of the wrist. *Over lightly, the voice in his head went on. That's the way I like my eggs, and that's the way I like my women.* He grinned, picturing old Judge sitting by the fire out by the tracks in Oklahoma somewhere when he said that very line. He slipped the eggs onto a stoneware plate next to the bacon strips, cracked another brown speckled shell on the corner of the stove, eased it into the popping grease where it spread into a perfect circle with a yellow sun in the middle. *...you think you're sumthin', dontcha, there with your tits sunnyside up.* Judge claimed that was from a poem, but Shorty didn't believe it. They didn't say things like that in poems.

"Paper says there's mudslides down at Gauley, again," Fanny said. "Looks like the mine operators would learn. You cut down all the trees, the mountain is going to let go. And if you build houses on the side of the hill, they're going to pile up right at the bottom." She rattled the paper. "Just look at that."

He twisted around and stuck his face up close to the picture. Since he had stepped on his specs in the pool room the other day, he couldn't see too well. He could tell it was a miserable bunch of folks looking on their ruined homes, but the details were blurred.

When he turned back to cookstove, the white had begun to harden at the thin edge. He flipped the frying pan—too rough, because then the yellow broke. He had to wait till the yolk stopped running before turning it out onto the plate, and by that time the fringe looked like a starched doily.

"Shit" he said out loud.

"Now, you know I don't permit foul language in my house, I don't care if you are my brother."

He ignored her, knowing that after a night out with Wick, if she wasn't in a good mood, singing "God bless America" in her high, child-like voice while she made up her bed, then she would be surly and scratchy, like to set his nerves on edge. The blue veins popped up under the tattoos on his forearms like worms rained out of the earth. He could feel his temples tense up. He wanted a shot of whiskey.

Instead he took the biscuits out of the oven, wrapped them in a clean dish towel like warm puppies in a basket and set her egg in front of her, underneath the newspaper. He pulled out his chair, sat down, and snatched up a biscuit before she laid away the newspaper and spread the pale yellow napkin on her lap.

She took one look at the sorry egg on her plate and slammed her fork down on the maple table. "Now, you know I just can't stand lace on my eggs."

He already had his fork halfway to his mouth when she said that, and he froze, his forehead crumpling. His hand began to tremble before he went on and took that first bite. Then he carefully split a biscuit and spread butter on both halves.

“And look at how you’ve scratched my varnish, the way you drag that chair of yours across the floor.” She pointedly cut the lace from the egg and shoved it to the side.

After forcing a couple of mouthfuls down his constricted throat, he saw from the way she broke the back of her bacon with the fork that she was building up to another complaint. He braced himself; he had only been back in town a week and would like to hang out at least until he could pick some apples and put a few dollars in his pocket before moving on, maybe back to Texas for the winter. He didn’t want to lose his temper.

Bacon bits flew around her plate like chips from an ax. “Another thing: I hate to repeat myself, but could you please spare me the sight of your dentures when I go to the bathroom. I just hate it.” She patted her lips daintily and sighed. “Even if you are my own flesh and blood.”

She used never to say anything about his false teeth, but ever since she found them in the toilet bowl one morning after he’d really laid one on, she had to remind him every chance she got. Now he ground his prosthetic molars and broke up his own bacon, crumbling it in his fingers over his two fried eggs.

Fanny looked at him in disgust. “I don’t believe I’ve seen such awful table manners in my life. Now I dare you to wipe those greasy hands on that napkin.”

That was it. He slammed his hands down, bouncing the plates and the cups in their saucers. He laid his napkin, neatly folded, beside his plate, after which he lifted the skirt of the matching table cloth and wiped his fingers one by one.

She was horrified, and for once words failed her, both hands crushing her own napkin to her mouth.

Then, he stood up, the chair legs screeching on the varnish like fingernails on a blackboard.

“Just because Wick didn’t dip his last night don’t mean you have to be on the rag with me,” he shouted at her, wet crumbs flying through the sunbeams coming through the kitchen window.

He turned on his heel and stepped through onto the back stoop, slamming the screen door behind him as hard as he could.

“Now, you just come back in here and finish your breakfast. There’re hungry mouths all over this planet, but you only think of yourself.”

He heard her but didn’t answer, didn’t look back once.

An hour later, he stood in the gathering mist at a bend on the grade where the C&O was slow enough to board. He hadn’t counted on the wet iron rungs, and the bacon grease didn’t help his grip. He watched his legs slide under the double trucks, his last thought before losing consciousness: *That’ll show the nagging bitch.*

So that was the end of his traveling days. The rail insurance paid his hospital bill, bought him a pair of wooden legs he hauled around for a while on crutches, and gave him a pension. Those were the days of trouble in coal-mining country, and most of the company lawyers were too busy tending to more serious matters. It was easier to pay off anybody hurt on their right of way, make some kind of settlement, and get on with the real business of making money.

It wasn't too long before Shorty—nobody seemed to remember his real name any more—traded his crutches to a grease monkey who had a pickup fall on him and break both his feet, in exchange for the dolly. He chucked the wooden legs and pushed himself around on that dolly for the next ten or fifteen years. He couldn't get up the steps into Fanny's house any more, except on his butt, so he rented a shack down in the bottom behind the lot of junked cars. You used to see him, winter and summer, rain or shine, heading up to the saloon out beyond Bowling's Market. The bartender, a fat Hunk nicknamed Belch, kept an oversized high chair down at the end where Shorty held court on The New Deal, the Filthy Rich, and the advantages of living with tramps to living in middle class society.

I never knew him to enter into a church, not even for funerals, until he ended up there after he skidded under that old ten-ton Reo carrying a load of soft coal to the school. The driver never even stopped, thinking it was just another pothole in the road.

Fanny was my mother's friend from their school days, and I went with her to the Tabernacle for the service. On the way to church, wearing her pillbox hat reserved for Sundays and other important occasions, she told me as much as I know about Shorty. *You know he had syphilis, from the way he carried on before he lost his legs,* she whispered to me as a sort of coda. She off and on tried to teach me about sex, usually with dirty jokes. I made a mental note to look up "siffilis" when I got home.

I was surprised to see a full-sized coffin for Shorty up by the altar, and all through the eulogy, while Fanny whimpered under her veil, and a pew full of brothers cringed beneath the dire warnings from the preacher, I thought about it. It seemed like a real waste, that much coffin.

When it came time to view the deceased, the part I liked best about funerals, I filed along with the others. Shorty looked strange to me lying down. Somehow his arms weren't long enough. It took a while to register, but finally it was plain as day. He was wearing shoes and long pants. What tipped me off was the way his trousers were creased just below the pockets, and the material was faded to where his pants had been folded and pinned all those years. From about the knee down they looked good as new. Fanny had dug out and attached his artificial legs.

I wonder what they did with the trolley he rode on. It sure would come in handy for lugging stuff home from Bowling's Market.

Patrick Meadows was born in a small town in West Virginia, and part of him still lives there. This story comes from then and there, if it ever left. For a long time he has lived in Spain, where other stories appear almost daily. But West Virginia hangs clear as the bell ringing in the Gospel Tabernacle on Tulley Road.

André Belleau

Roses for Candy Bar

Translated from Quebec French by J. T. Townley

In those days, there was a Steinberg's on rue Mont Royal. I don't remember for sure if it was located between rue Papineau and rue De Lorimier or east of De Lorimier. What I do recall, though, is that every weekend I earned four dollars there—no more, no less—as a bag boy. I was a sort of rear extension of the cashier at the end of the counter where customers unloaded their shopping baskets. The whole art of being a bag boy was to bag up the groceries at least as quickly as the cashier's fingers slid over the register buttons. If you didn't, the stream of purchases would slow down, and the line would back up, the very thought of which made me shudder. Sometimes the poor bagger, overwhelmed and frazzled, would crush the marshmallows under cans of baked beans or put a dozen clothespins in a bag ten times too big. That happened to me a lot more often than most. I was clumsy, easily embarrassed, and so ill at ease around girls that the slightest expression of irritation on the cashier's part was enough to paralyze me. "What in Lord's name did I do to get stuck with this one again?" she wondered. I began to blush, fiddling with the bags and boxes. The manager came over. He was a small, nervous man. With his strange tics and black mustache, he reminded me of a character in a silent film, something called *Max, Floor Manager*.

"He goes to a fancy school," he said, making sure everyone heard him, "but he doesn't even know how to bag groceries!"

To him, a "fancy school" wasn't the engineering Polytechnique Montreal or Montreal School of Business, but plain-old, simple college. Mine, though, was nothing but a pathetic, remedial school named Centre Marie-Médiatrice. It gathered up all the other unfocused kids like me who forgot to get off the bus in sixth grade and let it take them, half-asleep, past twelfth grade and the first year of community college. At the time I'm speaking of, I should've been in rhetoric. In any case, the little manager kept close tabs on me. I was extremely tall and skinny and decked out in horn-rimmed glasses (an elongated replica of Jerry Lewis), and I was the butt of all his jokes. One day, winking at everyone who was listening, he asked:

"What are you going to do when you grow up?"

To which I promptly replied: "I'm going to shit on your head."

Despite my extreme timidity, I was still a child of the Plateau Mont-Royal neighborhood, nourished by the lively language of the street. After that, he could have very well chucked me out the door. Instead, he stared at me for a long moment, then pretended

to busy himself with a register that wasn't working right. O, the glory and misery of being a bag boy!

But the touchiest situations always came on Saturday nights, thirty or forty-five minutes before closing, when customers rushed up to the check-out counter. All of a sudden, I'd zone out, clutching at a half-filled bag and staring out into space. It wasn't ecstasy exactly, but I felt exultant. I reminded myself: My shift's almost over, and I'll collect my four dollars. If I hurry, I'll make it in time for the ten o'clock show. O, Candy Bar, you're dancing tonight! Candy Bar!

"You big, stupid idiot, look what you've gone and done again."

A brutal wake-up call. The cashier stopped checking. People stared. Dazed, I surveyed the unstable mound of groceries that had piled up. Tomatoes rolled to the floor. Reaching down for them, I bumped a carton of eggs off the counter, which joined the tomatoes with the soft cry of breaking shells.

But, truth be told, I wasn't there anymore. I was already at the show, sitting on the back row. The orchestra began playing "Harlem Nocturne." A woman's leg pushed through the gap in the curtain, a long white thigh against a red velour background. Then a black-gloved hand shot out. And then there she was, a blonde Venus born for the stage, in an evening gown slit up the side.

Women's flesh occupied a central place in my fantasies.

I was the only one at Steinberg's store on rue Mont Royal to know that Candy Bar was the most adorable, luscious, and depraved of all the strippers on what was known as the burlesque circuit, which came to the Roxy Theater at more or less regular intervals.

The Roxy (was it instead the Roxy Follies or the Roxy Burlesque?) was located on the east side of boulevard Saint-Laurent south of rue Sainte-Catherine. It disappeared when boulevard Dorchester was widened. On weekday afternoons, the entrance fee was thirty-four cents. It paid for two movies, a bag of popcorn, and an hour-and-a-half-long stage performance. Would it be a variety show? Or vaudeville? Or what was known in North America as burlesque? Looking back, it seems it was most often burlesque. In large part, the audience's appreciation of these shows came from the completely unvarying structure and predictable sequence of numbers, for example:

Musical overture: "Paris Will Always Be Paris."

The master of ceremonies (or "M.C.") runs onstage and explains that, by chance, he just ran into a guy at the theater entrance who told him that...Stand-up routine.

Sentimental songstress. Skit.

Juggler. Skit.

Loud drum roll from the pit. Formal introduction of the stripper, “the star of the show.” Striptease (“Saint Louis Blues,” “Harlem Nocturne,” “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody”).

INTERMISSION

Comic singer. Skit. Ventriloquist. Skit.

Introduction of the stripper (same routine). Striptease (same music).

The genius of this type of show was the waiting—and how many times it kept me on the edge of my seat, tense with the swelling promise of the final unveiling—which was spread out over all the numbers and imbued even the most mediocre ones with a sort of anticipatory intensity. Putting the dancer last in each part of the show was like withholding something important in writing: it influenced how we appreciated everything that came before it. And when the footlights suddenly lit up and the drum roll began, we knew that the big moment had come.

Lynn O’Neil, a butcher’s blonde daughter, but slimmer and with an absolutely divine derrière. *Peaches*, who had heavy breasts and thick hips, and an obscene aura particular to matronly women and brothels. *Bubble O’Dell*, a small, pale brunette who undulated onstage wearing a big heart across her crotch, crudely embroidered with red letters: “My Heart Belongs to Daddy.” *Winnie Garrett*, a tall, haughty redhead, whose slow pelvic gyrations, punctuated with thrusts and accompanied by meowing, made the piano man miss a beat. *Lucia Parks*. *Irma the Body*. So many others. You got under my skin, drove me crazy, invaded my mind. But I only ever admired you from a distance.

I still didn’t realize that this distance, which made me so unhappy, was crucial for the spell to work. I always wound up in one of the back rows, too hard-up to be able to slip an extra twenty-five cents into the paw of the gorilla manning the entrance, which would have paid for a seat three feet from the stage with plenty of legroom, where I could have hoped to see *Candy Bar* flash her blond bush when, at the end of the show, she slowly pulled off the miniscule square of sequined material that hid her sex. Hallelujah, amen! She was always my favorite. She had the grace of a young girl and a perverse sort of restraint that made me imagine the worst, by which I mean the best, a way of licking her lips with the tip of her tongue and gently caressing herself and pulling off her stockings. Truth is, I was on the verge of falling madly in love with her. She was all I thought about, a complete obsession.

There’s a lot more I could say since, even then, I was writing a story about these events. But is it really possible that I didn’t notice the shriveled-up misery of those shows, of that theater? Let’s just say I experienced them in a different way than others, and if they were even half as important as I dare to claim, it’s because I lived them by contrast.

During this same time, I was seeing a young girl from the Ahuntsic area named Monique, who had delicate features, an endearingly anemic complexion, and was sincerely inclined towards beautiful things. She lived near boulevard Gouin on a quiet street lined with stone homes set under tall trees, and everything about her and her neighborhood seemed more graceful and refined than rue Fabre, where I'd grown up. She would receive me in a small sitting room at the front of the house, and we would discuss poetry and music. We studied German together. Sometimes, she sat at a small upright piano and played—rather gently, as I preferred—pieces by Schumann and Brahms. She didn't have the fingers for Brahms. I was absolutely sincere about everything. It could have gone on for a long time. We were practically engaged.

But I was still a boy of healthy appetites, and the highs and lows of the city began to interfere with each other. I was looking for a way to satisfy the unquenched desires *Candy Bar* inspired in me on the far side of Montreal here in the somewhat infertile soil of Ahuntsic, desires that Monique herself intensified. But my every effort to get close to her was thwarted. How could I caress her backside while we were reading Péguy's "Présentation de la Beauce à Notre Dame de Chartres"? Not only would I have been taking ill-mannered liberties, it would have been an unforgivable aesthetic blunder. How could I slip my hand into the slit in her blouse when she sat at the piano with perfect posture, her small breasts perky, the mystical chords of Debussy's "The Sunken Cathedral" washing over us? These were formidable questions, delicate ones requiring the tact of an old Jesuit. There were times when I inferred that Monique might have really only been *Candy Bar's* double, the secretly perverse innocent who took turns with the falsely innocent pervert.

I took my leave of her in the evening with a chaste kiss. But instead of returning to my home on rue Fabre like any serious boy who was seeing a young Ahuntsic girl would do, I made a mad dash to the city's underbelly. I drifted from one nightclub to another, from one bar to the next, until dawn, a book under my arm, mingling with the hoards of night owls, loose women, and musicians, happy, even euphoric, as if lifted up by some huge, undefined promise. O, wonder of wonders! In those days, there were cabarets and restaurants that never closed—absolutely n-e-v-e-r. You couldn't party all night since you could never be sure that the last strains of jazz coming from the end of the street were really the *last* ones. Or that *every* girl had gone home to bed.

I led a double life. I was a little like a guy with a second home: always happy, both coming and going.

But don't go thinking I was malcontent. Definitely not. I found this duality thrilling, and I didn't harbor any nostalgia for unity. The devil had to have something to do with it; his name is Legion. While I waited for enlightenment on the subject, though, I gleefully allowed my single self to become many. Or, instead, I compared myself to a hunting dog let loose in the city, sniffing out and tracking illicit odors among all those overwhelming

sensations, apt to follow any one of the innumerable scent trails with no risk of ever getting lost.

My situation certainly didn't come without its minor personal difficulties. I jerked off way more often than I happened to run into a girl who was willing. Times weren't as anodyne as they are now when it came to the movements of the male member. Images of *Candy Bar*, along with the range of affections I imagined when I thought about Monique, were enough to keep me busy most of the time. I was so full of desire. I imagine that the most *essential* place must have been at my parents' house on rue Fabre, halfway between Ahuntsic and rue Sainte-Catherine. It was there that, on the verge of tears, I listened to the whisper of the wind through Marie Noël's poetic heather, where I heard composer Gabriel Fauré's melodic modulations, treasures I guarded jealously.

I probably would have gone on leading two lives, one in plain view, the other hidden, if I hadn't lost my job at Steinberg's. They'd tolerated this bag boy for a long time, but I was given the immediate boot for telling the cashier she could stuff the shopping basket of food I wasn't bagging quickly enough for her liking up her fat ass—and there'd still be room for more. So I no longer had the means to go to the Roxy. And oddly enough, I started spacing out my appearances in Ahuntsic. But self-deprivation didn't help. Instead of fading from memory, *Candy Bar's* bewitching postures and positions became more intense, if that was even possible. They haunted me, heavy with melancholy, tormented me. I forgot about everything else, including the impromptu skits, the last vestige of grotesque comedy, in which, to my utter amazement, pure melodrama and vulgarity of the lowest sort ran together without any transition between them at all. Harry White, Eddie Lloyd, Sharon Roberts, does anyone still remember your names? Or Freddie Lewis's absurd bilingualism at the long-awaited moment: "*And now ladies and gentlemen, the gorgeous Claudette, Claudette la gorgeuse!*"

Later on, I would see everything in a different light. In my mind, I would travel the burlesque dancers' "circuit," from the Hudson Theater in Union City to the Minsky and Empire in Newark (Mayor La Guardia had banned burlesque in New York City), and from there to Boston's Casino and Old Howard (frequented by Harvard students), Buffalo's Royal, and Montreal's Roxy, ending at Toronto's Victory, which drew an audience so ice-cold it discouraged even the most experienced dancers among them, or so I'm told. Courageously, they made the same tour, died the same deaths, year after year, usually by interminable bus trip, with stops in lugubrious stations and overnight stays in sordid hotels. The thought of them filled me with both pity and admiration.

But at the moment in question, the memory of *Candy Bar's* angelic face was all the more heartbreaking because I couldn't manage to separate it from memories of her lascivious gyrations.

There was something in all of it beyond the grasp of my youth and naïveté. During the day, I felt tortured. At night, I thought I was suffocating. And that's when I mustered the

courage to go see her one last time. God! If I could get close to her, talk to her, even touch her just once! But I lacked funds. So I awaited her return to Montreal, and when the day came, I went and sold my most beautiful books at Ménard's bookstore. It used to be on rue Saint-Denis where Morency's frame shop is now. He gave me seventy-five cents for my thick, two-columned edition of Victor Hugo published by Valiquette in Montreal during the war, and I somehow managed to scrape together three dollars. Saving out thirty-four cents for the entry fee, I barely had enough money to buy a dozen roses. I'd still be way back in the back row!

I entered the theater with my flowers and exactly six cents in my pocket. I had a hard time focusing on the stage, and it seemed as if I were watching *Candy Bar's* performance that day through a fog. Following her second appearance, which signaled the show's end, I rushed onstage, leapt up the stage-left stairs, and, bouquet in hand, burst into the backstage area with the trembling resolve of the most timid sort. There weren't any dressing rooms. Instead, there were low cubicles without doors, open to everyone. A woman of a certain age, wearing a robe, sat on a stool at the entrance to one of them. It looked as if she were watching passers-by.

When she saw me, she shouted, "What the fucking hell are you looking for?" She had the hoarse voice of a drunkard, hard features, and small, gray, hostile eyes. A cigarette dangled from the corner of her mouth.

I began to mumble. Then it hit me, and the roses slipped out of my hands, falling to the foot of the stool. It was her. It was *Candy Bar*. Much to my regret, I hadn't recognized her. I wanted to say something, but my voice died in my throat. I didn't know it yet, but I'd just learned my first lesson: the only thing that matters is illusion, and you have to learn to lie in order to get to the truth. Distraught, I fled out the rue Sainte-Elisabeth exit, and I ran for a long time, weeping as if I'd just been blessed.

André Belleau (1930-1986) published dozens of stories in literary magazines during his impressive career. He was also one of Québec's most important essayists, publishing numerous works of nonfiction, including *Le romancier fictif* (1980) and *Y a-t-il un intellectuel dans la salle?* (1984). He co-founded *Liberté* magazine, worked as executive producer for the Office National du Film, and taught literature at Université du Québec à Montréal. "Roses for Candy Bar" originally appeared in *Dix nouvelles humoristiques par dix auteurs québécois* (1984).

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Brendan McDonnell

Dislocated

We don't see much traffic on this road. The pavement ends about three miles back, and from there it's just rocks and potholes, like driving on the moon. If you take this stretch any faster than five miles an hour, your kidneys will punish you for it. The people who do come this far—utility workers, census takers—always ask, "Why don't you fix this road?" And I say, "Because then people will use it. And nobody wants that."

There are eight houses along this cul-de-sac, with each one spread about a quarter mile apart. Jim, my neighbor to my left, is seventy one, and lost his Julie three years ago. Frank to my right is seventy three and lost his wife to the cancer. I lost my Mary last year to an aneurysm nobody saw coming. Our house seemed too big without her, so I sold it to buy this country place between Jim and Frank. The other houses are hunting cabins and vacation homes, so Jim, Frank and I are the only full-timers. Widowers Row, they call us.

I'm retired, so I'll go into town maybe twice a month to buy groceries and retrieve my mail. If I need anything between trips, I can get it from my neighbors. Jim is always happy to help and glad for the company. He'll pop the tab on a cold one as I approach and rest it on the porch rail as an invitation to sit. Frank's house is a shorter walk but a lot less welcoming, and he'll remind me a dozen times to return or replace whatever I borrow. Like I wouldn't know to do that.

My daughter says she worries about me out here, but not enough to visit. Instead, she invites me to come live with her. "What if you get hurt?" she says over the phone. "What if you take a fall?"

"I'm only sixty-seven," I say.

"It's not about getting old, Dad," she says. "It's about being alone."

I do wish she'd visit, but if our road gives her husband an excuse not to come, then it is doing God's work. This road scares people off better than a barbed wire fence. I can sit on my front porch for days on end and not see another living soul. On those rare occasions when a stranger rolls past, I'll raise my fingers to my eyebrow in a crisp salute. They never take their hands off the wheel and scowl at me like I'm the one shaking them in their car like a pebble in a paint can.

I was passing that day the way I pass most: light breakfast, some news on the satellite TV, and then outside to the porch when the day warmed up. Just up the road I could see a tiny denim speck that was Frank working outside. Frank is six years older than me, but his property is immaculate. Weeds pulled, trees trimmed, lawn like a putting green. Watching him, I decided to cut my grass before it got any worse. Tending this big yard is the only thing I don't like about this place. Afterward my knees creak and my back hurts, but that's why God invented the riding mower.

I'd been at it about an hour and was already planning to escape the afternoon sun for some iced tea and a nap. I couldn't hear anything above the grind of the mower, so Frank was just ten feet from me when I saw him. He has a big nose and grey unibrow that makes him look like a vulture. A stint in the Marines instilled a ramrod posture that sixty-plus years of hard work couldn't bend. He also starches and irons his clothes every day just to work in his garden.

Now, his hair was mussed and his shirt untucked. He bent forward at the waist and pinned his right forearm against his belly with his left hand. His face was chalky white, and what hair he had left was pasted against his scalp in wet curls. When I killed the engine he just stood there, cringing.

"Something wrong with your arm?"

"My shoulder," he said. He winced, like just the vibration from his voice box made it worse.

From my backyard, I could just see the outline of Frank's house through the trees. I wasn't wearing my glasses, but thought I saw a blurry ladder on its side. It probably took him twenty minutes to stagger down to me. I've suffered enough sprains and breaks to know that adrenaline gives you 10 minutes grace before the real pain hits, and then it's Katy bar the door. I stepped down off the mower and placed a sympathetic hand on his back. Still, I couldn't help noticing that he wore the same pained expression whenever I asked to borrow a cup of sugar.

"This ever happen before?"

He nodded. "Tried....to shrug it in..." he grunted and then dropped to one knee.

"Wait here," I said.

I quick stepped back to the house and grabbed my keys. I went around front to start my car, but my heart was pounding so hard that I had to sit a second and catch my bearings. I put the car in gear and drove it through my yard to position the passenger door where Frank was kneeling. When I got out and opened the door for him, he shook his head until I said, "Jim's got a bum shoulder, too. He'll know what to do." I eased him into the bucket seat with his arms still pressed to his belly, but he was so weak with pain

that I had to get down on my knees and lift each of his feet by the ankle and place it gently inside the car as he pivoted to face forward.

I took the road at five miles an hour, but even at that speed Frank's head was snapping around on his neck like a boxer's speed bag. I felt bad for him, but there was nothing I could do. Driving this road is bad enough with two good shoulders, and if I went any faster, it'd only shake him harder and make things worse.

As we rounded the turn, I could see Jim's property through the trees. It was hard to miss. There were spinning wind vanes and wooden bird feeders and Amish doo-dads and fountains with cherubs spitting streams of water and a dozen ceramic garden gnomes. You should see this place lit up at Christmas. They can probably see it from space. I used to blame this carnival on his departed wife until I realized that he has to remove and return all this crap every time he mows his lawn. I leaned on the horn as I turned into his driveway.

Jim came bellying out his screen door with a loud squeak and a thwack. He was still chewing as he crossed his porch and didn't even remove the napkin he had tucked under his chin. He laughed when he saw me and waved me in with both hands, as if to say, come, sit, eat. And I thought: old Jim is nicer than Santa Claus. But then he spotted Frank in the seat beside me, and his expression grew serious. He'd heard me bitch about Frank enough to know that the two of us riding in a car together meant the temperature in Hell had officially dropped below 32 degrees.

I rolled down my window as I pulled to a stop. "Frank's shoulder's popped out. Can you set it right?"

"Is it dislocated, or separated?"

"Hell if I know."

Getting Frank to a standing position was a three-man operation. Jim limped around to the passenger side and tried to help him up, but his back is bunched, and there was nothing to grab that wouldn't hurt Frank's shoulder. With my knees on the driver's seat, I lifted Frank by his belt loops while Jim tugged his shirt collar until he could straighten his legs. When Frank was upright, Jim placed a tentative hand on his shoulder. "You want me to try to set it?"

I saw Frank glance at his shoulder and then turn to look at the road out. He stood there a moment, swaying slightly. On Frank's face and collar, I saw a fine salty residue of dried sweat. Finally, he closed his eyes and dropped his head. He nodded, once.

Jim snapped the napkin off his collar to show he meant business. He gripped Frank's wrist and slowly raised his arm away from his body like the crank on a rusty pump. Frank's face contorted in a red pinch of pain, the way a baby looks when it's about to wail. Jim lifted his boot and braced it against Frank's hip.

"Easy now," he said.

With a hard jerk, he simultaneously pulled and twisted Frank's wrist. I could tell that single pull threw Frank's breakers. Frank is German, with legs so white you could read by them at night. But in that moment, with that nose of his, he had the look and color of a cigar store Indian. His eyes rolled back, and his knees buckled slightly, and Jim and I nearly knocked heads as we stepped up to catch him. Jim looked at me with an expression of real panic. "We need to get help," he said. "Now."

Just inches from Frank's face, I could see Jim's point. The pain was pulling hard at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes were squinted shut so tight that he had popped some of the blood vessels on his face. He had the beginnings of a shiner in both sockets. "Should we call an ambulance?"

"I doubt they'd make it up this road."

"Let's drive him to the emergency then."

"We'll take my truck," Jim said.

The seat in Jim's truck stretches the width of the cab, like a sofa you can drive. We put Jim behind the wheel, with me in the middle and Frank on the passenger side so we could buckle him in. I reached across Frank's body and grabbed the far door handle to arm bar him against all the bouncing, but it barely helped. We still had two miles of rough road to go and another half mile of dirt after that until we hit pavement. With no radio or conversation, the only sound was the shock absorbers rocking and squeaking like the bedsprings in a Honeymoon Suite.

"How we doin' there, Frank?"

"Nnf," he said.

"Hold up," I said to Jim. When the truck stopped moving, I pivoted on the seat to face Frank. With his healthy shoulder centered in my chest, I scissored my legs around his waist and crossed my ankles on the other side. I wrapped my arms around his chest and clasped my hands under his far armpit. This position was hell on my back and hips, but I thought it might brace him from some of the jostling. I felt strange holding him so close, and he felt it, too. He tilted his head away from me like he was resisting a kiss.

When we were moving again, I could hear a high whimper catch in his throat with each hard bounce and shift. Still, my bear hug seemed to absorb the worst of it.

“I need you to say something, Frank,” I said. “Make sure you’re still with us.”

“Unh,” he said.

“No,” Jim said. “He’s right. You need to talk, Frank. Take your mind off it until we can get you fixed.”

Frank hissed through clenched teeth.

“When I found my Mary,” I said, “I picked her up and held her just like this, Frank. I wrapped my arms under her arms, across her chest. Of course, she was a lot smaller than you.”

Frank’s eyes were squinted shut. He had stopped grunting.

“I kept trying to put her back on her feet. Her toes were dragging on the floor, so I’d lower her a bit, to see if she’d take. I was sure that eventually her eyes would flutter open, and then she would look at me and smile like I was the one who was acting strange. I did it over and over, picking her up and lowering her down, as I felt her grow cold against me.”

I got no response.

“I held her like that for twenty minutes, Frank. Even propped her against me as I dialed 911. My shoulders ached, and my arms went numb, but the ambulance found me carrying her up our street to shorten their trip.”

The truck began to gain speed, with the gravel cracking and popping under the tires. Jim reached around me to squeeze Frank’s knee. “Now we’re movin’,” he said, but got no response.

I twisted my neck to speak to Jim. “We’d better hurry,” I said.

“Is he...?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

We pulled up flush with the emergency room entrance like we worked there. I was uncoiling myself from Frank while Jim huffed and limped around the truck to pull the passenger door open. Someone inside must have seen us struggling, because two medics rushed out with a wheelchair. When I unhooked my ankles, Frank spilled out the door to the waiting arms of the medics. His eyes were closed and his mouth hung open. In the chair, his feet dangled feebly and at weird angles, like the felt legs of a puppet.

As they wheeled him inside, I watched Jim trail behind them on arthritic knees, shouting “ladder” and “shoulder” and “pulse.” He stopped in the lobby to look back at me. “You coming?”

I waved him on. “I’ll park the truck,” I shouted.

With Jim gone, I sat a moment with my eyes closed and swallowed hard against a sudden wave of dizziness and nausea. All of it, the heat and the mowing and the stooping and the lifting and the coiling and the hugging and the talking, it all caught up to me at once. When I opened my eyes, another medic had come outside to catch me lying flat on the truck seat. “You okay?”

“Sure,” I said, and forced a smile. “A little stiff.”

He nodded and rapped his knuckles on the hood of the truck. “Gotta move this,” he said.

“I was...just....” I began, but he had already turned to walk back inside. It took me another minute to stretch under the wheel and put the truck in gear.

We sat in the waiting room for a couple hours with people who were either hurt or waiting for people who were hurt. It was bedlam. There was a guy pressing a wadded handkerchief against his eye, and another who looked just like him dabbing a bloody napkin to his mouth. There was something about the way they wouldn’t look at each other that told me each had hurt the other. There was another guy playing a tiny electronic game with his thumbs. It beeped and blipped, loudly, and he never looked up once. If the world had ended, he wouldn’t have noticed. A Hispanic woman sat across from us with a half dozen kids going absolutely bonkers. They were crawling on the chairs and playing with the water fountain and pressing all the buttons on the vending machines while their mother stared straight ahead with a distracted, worried expression. She snapped out of it once when she caught Jim offering her a sad smile. “Your youngest reminds me of my great grandson,” he said.

Frank’s doctor was an Iranian of some kind who looked to be younger than Jim’s truck. He carried a clipboard and had a nervous habit of rapidly flicking the button on his pen with his thumbnail. It was like listening to someone accompany your diagnosis on the maracas. He frowned hard when we told him about our attempt to set Frank’s shoulder.

“Are either of you family?” he said, clickety-click-click.

“We’re his—” I started.

“—neighbors...friends,” Jim said.

“Does he have anyone we could contact?”

“Not locally, I don’t think. You’d have to ask him.”

“He’s in no condition to talk,” the Iranian said. “He’s in intensive care...”

Jim wore an expression of such deep concern that I thought he might cry. “Did he have a stroke, Doc?”

“I can’t really say, if you’re not family. It’s a privacy issue. But we’re always concerned when a man his age loses consciousness.” The Iranian smiled at me then. “What about you,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“Me?”

He placed his hand on my shoulder. “I don’t like your color.”

“I’m only sixty-seven,” I said and immediately felt foolish. He invited me to sit up on a gurney while he checked me out, but I said nothing doing. I had a feeling that if I reclined on that wheelie bed, he would have parked me next to Frank for the night, and I was determined to sleep in my house and my bed. I sat in a chair in the waiting room while he timed my pulse and flashed a light in each of my eyes. Jim fetched me a cup of water, and I pretended it helped.

“Can we see Frank?” Jim asked.

“Not at this hour. You should both go home and get some rest.”

“How about tomorrow?”

The doctor stood and checked his clipboard, his thoughts already on whoever came next.

“Call first,” he said. He retreated up the hall and clicked a fast rhythm like he was wearing tap shoes.

I made a big show of standing and stretching and pulling on my coat, but Jim stayed rooted to his seat. I stood there a beat longer to let him follow suit. I loomed over him, shifting impatiently from foot to foot. “You heard the man,” I said finally. “There’s nothing we can do.”

Jim stared at the hall where the doctor disappeared.

“Look, Jim.” I said. “It’s been a long day...”

“I know,” he said. “I just...”

“What?”

He met my eyes. “I just hate the idea of Frank waking up all alone in there.”

I lifted Jim’s wadded windbreaker and handed it to him. “He does that every day,” I said.

— — —

Jim and I climbed into the cab of his truck. He turned the key in the ignition and gripped the gear shift, but a commotion behind us made him shift back into park. We sat in silence with the engine idling while an ambulance tore out of the lot with its siren blaring. We rested a quiet minute longer and listened to the siren fade far in the distance. "It's a damn good thing you were there to help him," he said softly.

"He'll be fine."

"You probably saved his life."

"I think we're both guilty of that."

Jim is normally a big laugher, but he was quiet now, thoughtful. He dropped his head, like he was reluctant to say what came next. I thought I knew what was coming: That could have been either of us. Instead, he said, "You never told me that. About your wife."

I waved my hand like I was shooin a fly.

"No," he said. "I'm your friend. You should have told me."

"I never had to hug you," I said.

The trip home seemed to take forever. It was dark as we drove through town, and the harsh light of the street lamps and fast food places stung my eyes. At the last traffic light before the highway, I found myself squinting hard at the bright lights of a car dealership. Jim nodded to the VFW next door. The lot was full. "Wanna grab a quick one?"

I shook my head.

"Aw, c'mon," he said. "A quick one."

"Gotta get home," I said. "Doctor's orders."

"I'll introduce you. They ask about you."

"I'll be honest, Jim," I said wearily. "I'm just not in the humor for people right now."

Jim shook his head and looked away. But he eased the truck forward when the light turned green.

I tried to keep Jim company as he drove us home, but every time I rested my eyes, my chin touched my chest. I finally gave up and braced my right temple against the cool glass of the passenger side window.

Straight away I dreamed of Mary, as I often do, only this time I was telling her about Frank and the hospital. I described how the doctor looked at me and acted like I was the one who needed help. "I'm only sixty-seven!" I said, while Mary shook her head and clucked her tongue. I was smiling in my sleep, until I felt Jim's hand shake my shoulder.

"Better wake up," he said softly. "It gets rough from here."

Brendan McDonnell lives in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania. His stories have appeared in *The Monarch Review*, *Storm Cellar*, *The Magnolia Review*, *Mulberry Fork Review*, *The Bookends Review*, *The Griffin*, *Crack The Spine*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, and *Beginnings*.

Brandon Getz

What They Know

The demons are outside the window. It's hard to make out their faces behind the lamp's yellow reflection, but I know they're looking. They always watch first. Waiting for something, some sign of welcome, or out of a sense of propriety only they understand. I'm in bed holding a cigarette. I roll it and savor the spongy surrender of the filter, the subtle texture of dry tobacco beneath the paper. I haven't smoked in over a year—almost sixteen months—but I keep a pack in the drawer of the bedside table. When I need to, I take one out, tap it against the tabletop to pack the tobacco, feel the weight of it: light and easily broken.

Count to ten. Breathe.

They push one pane open and climb in, black claws clacking against the frame. There are three of them, the size of house cats. Chalky, pale skin clings to their ribs and spines. A breeze comes in behind them, and it smells like the coast at nighttime, the ocean—salty, cold. One starts to tap along the wall, and soon all three are tapping: the wall, the bookshelf, the chest of drawers, as if looking for some hollow place. All this noise, I'm worried it will wake Anya, sleeping in her crib in the next room. Most nights, the demons disappear into the house. They carry on as if they have business to take care of, ignoring Anya and me and the questions I always ask. I go into the nursery and fall asleep on her floor, door locked, and in the morning, some obscure thing in the house is damaged—symbols scratched into Carrie's clarinet, pages ripped from our photo albums—and the demons are gone.

They've been coming for weeks. Always at the same time. Always with the same solemn sense of purpose. The routine is almost comforting.

The demons are still tapping when I turn off the lamp. When the room goes dark, the sounds stop, and three pairs of silver circles follow me as I slip out of bed. In the nursery, I lock the door and stuff a blanket under the bottom. The window is closed and locked.

Anya sleeps noiselessly. I crouch beside her crib and watch her belly balloon and deflate. Even after five months, she doesn't seem quite alive—this new, living thing that a year ago existed only as a part of her mother, like a lung. I flick the mobile, and it spins its menagerie above her: soft cloth effigies of clownfish, pink squid, seahorse, tiger shark. Fabric cut into living shapes and tied with yarn to the strings of a broken wind chime. Carrie made it the afternoon we were told we couldn't get pregnant. It was her talisman, her fertility charm. We had been trying for three years. When the mobile

was finished, she hung it above our headboard and stared at it with her knees to her chest after we made love.

I roll up an extra blanket to use as a pillow and lie on the floor beside the crib, listening to her breathing and the muted sounds of claws against the plaster. They've never tried to touch Anya, but books have gone missing from her shelf in the nursery. Once, I found a plastic doll floating in the bathroom sink, its eyes plucked out. I stare at the locked door until I can't anymore, and all the sounds seem to fade.

#

Coffee and baby powder. I smell coffee and baby powder. At first, I'm thinking Carrie made the coffee, and it's going to be weak because she drinks tea. She brews coffee just for me when she makes breakfast on the weekends. And then I have to remember, again, that Carrie isn't here. Carrie hasn't made coffee in a long time.

Something thuds beside me and Anya starts to fuss. When I open my eyes, one of the demons is next to my face, crumpled like a scrap of dirty white leather. I feel embarrassed. I think: *How could someone be afraid of this?* Its skeletal body looks small and brittle, harmless. Then I think: *Why is it still here?* Then: *Why isn't it moving?* Anya squirms in her crib. She grabs at the air, clutching my shoulder as I pick her up. Bouncing her lightly, I nudge the demon with my toe, and it slumps over, sprawling. The gill-like flaps on its neck don't move in their normal rhythm—they aren't moving at all. And maybe that's why it isn't gone. At some point in the night, it must have died. A demon corpse, on the floor of my daughter's nursery. I think: *What am I going to do with it?* I think: *Shoe box. Garbage bag. The copse of ragged bushes behind the parking lot. A shovel.*

Anya whimpers hoarsely. Or, I think it's Anya, until the body starts to twitch. It moans: a low-pitched, cracked sound. A shoulder snaps into place, then the neck. The left elbow untwists; the skinny tail unkinks. It sits up and shakes its head, licks a wound on its hand with its black forked tongue. Then it climbs the barred wall of the crib, too close to me and my daughter and the blue sheets still warm from her sleep. It lifts one finger, pointing. It's looking at me—those deep black orbs look right into me. Something changes in the position of its flat mouth. An approximation of a smile. With the pointed finger, it taps one end of the mobile, and the fish begin to spin. Anya laughs and reaches for the whirling colors. The demon hops from the railing. Landing on its feet, it stretches its arms above its head and yawns, leaving the room through the wide open door.

#

In the kitchen, one of them is squatting beside a vase of plastic geraniums on the dining table. Coffee steams in a mug nearby. The mug has a picture of a frazzled cartoon robot on it, under the words *I Hate Mondays*. I don't remember owning a mug like that. It

might have been packed away in the crawlspace, in one of Carrie's boxes. I don't even know what I have—I have no way of knowing what they're taking from me. Black coffee grounds are boiling in a soup pot on the stove, the Mr. Coffee unplugged and cold on the counter. The demon is scratching symbols into the tabletop—the same symbols that are etched deep into the shower tiles and the footboard of our bed. As it finishes each letter, it places both hands on the surface of the table and blows the excess dust from the grooves.

"Stop that," I tell it.

Anya gums my shirt and reaches for my face. Her hands are clammy on my stubbled chin. I know she's hungry. I have to feed her. Whether or not there are demons in my house, I have to feed her.

The demon turns and stares at me. Its gills flare as it breathes.

"Go home," I say. "You're not supposed to be here." I take Anya's bottle from the fridge. "Today isn't a good day. My mother-in-law is coming. We're going to the zoo."

As if Anya could tell the difference between a peacock and a polar bear. She'll sleep through the Savannah and the Rainforest while Colleen asks me how often I've been feeding her, asks me if I've looked at any of the daycares she's called, asks me when I'm going back to work. In the aquarium, I will tell her that I need to use the restroom, hand the stroller over, and lose myself in the dark blue maze of tanks. Jellyfish will pulse purple neon. Tiger rays will ripple in their sandbanks. I will run my hand, as always, over the warm surface of the sea turtle tank. On our honeymoon, Carrie insisted on snorkeling the reef. Neither of us had snorkeled before. It was only the third time I'd seen the ocean. Twenty minutes into the dive, a piece of coral cut her leg, nicking an artery. All the blood, stretching out around us in the blue water, I worried about sharks or her bleeding to death. She was rushed to a hospital on the big island. It was the infection that almost killed her. Two weeks in intensive care. Lucky to survive, the doctors said. On the flight home, she told me she'd had a dream in her delirium that she'd grown fins on her ankles. She was swimming so deep in the black, volcanic ocean, she thought she'd never surface.

The microwave dings. I cradle Anya in my left arm and fix the bottle to her groping mouth. There are dim sounds from the living room—the TV is on. I hear bird calls, a man's voice narrating.

The demon continues scratching. I prop Anya's bottle against my chest and pour coffee into a mug. A film of grinds floats on top.

"I don't really want to go. It's my mother-in-law. She thinks animals are therapy." I place my mug on the table near the demon's. "What are you still doing here?"

Like always, it doesn't answer. This time, it doesn't even bother to look at me.

“What are you drawing?” I say. “Hey, you’re fucking up my table. Our table.”

Anya fidgets. She can feel my muscles tightening, my heartbeat quickening. I take a breath and count to ten like I’ve been told to. The demon shrugs and slinks to the floor. Before leaving the kitchen, it turns off the stove.

Anya and I are alone, the demons someplace I can’t see them. In sight, they don’t seem dangerous. But in other corners of the house, quiet like this, they could be up to anything. It’s morning, and they’re still here. They broke the routine.

The phone rings.

“I’ll be there in an hour,” Colleen tells me. “Dress Anya warm. It’s supposed to cool off today. Put that pink hat on her, the one I got her last week.”

“Colleen,” I say. “There are demons in my house.”

This is the first time I’ve said it aloud. There’s a pause.

“What color are they?”

“I don’t know. White? Kind of sickly-looking.”

“Are they doing anything? Building any kind of altars or teepees?”

“No,” I answer. “Just writing.”

“My friend Nancy had those. A whole nest. After her son left for the service.” A pause.

“Are you keeping them out of Anya’s room?”

“How did she get rid of them? Your friend.”

“She died,” says Colleen. “I’ll be there in an hour. Dress Anya warm.”

#

There are new symbols gouged into the coffee table. The remote controls are stacked on top of one another, but the demons aren’t anywhere I can see them. I settle onto the couch with Anya, and we hold that tableau for a while: Father and daughter, watching TV. It feels almost normal. On the TV, a handful of Japanese giant hornets are infiltrating a hive of honeybees, and in less than five minutes, all three hundred bees are shriveled and dead. Anya empties the bottle and drifts back to sleep. She snores, which makes me nervous. A sable antelope pierces the chest of an attacking lion, wracking its horns to free itself from the flailing claws of the lioness. I don’t know which infant snores are normal, which ones mean Anya can’t breathe. I try holding her at different angles, though I know, with the furnace on, the air has been dry and she probably just has mucus in her nose. More animals attack. More die. When I hear Colleen’s keys in the lock, we’re still in our pajamas.

Colleen looks at us, then begins to straighten the framed photos, to fluff the throw pillows. “I told you I’d be here,” she says. “Why isn’t she dressed?”

“I was having coffee. Anya needed her bottle.”

She looks around the living room. “Where are they?”

“Who?”

“The things. The demons.”

“I haven’t seen them since you called. Maybe the bedroom.”

Alarmed, she disappears into the hallway and returns a moment later. “I don’t see anything. No twigs, no blood.” She surveys the living room again. “Nancy said they tracked blood everywhere. All over her white carpet.”

“I haven’t seen any blood.”

“Why is Anya snoring? Are you holding her right?”

“I’m holding her right, Colleen. I know how to hold her.”

“Of course you do,” she says, placing the remote controls in a neat row. “What do I know? I only raised four children.”

“There’s coffee on the stove,” I offer. “One of them made it. It’s in a saucepan.” I start to stand. Colleen holds out a hand to stop me.

“I’ll get it, don’t worry,” she says. “Hold her up higher. Rub her neck a little.”

Colleen shuffles into the kitchen. Cabinets open and close, the silverware drawer rattles. The man on the TV is still saying something about animals. I lift Anya to my shoulder and rub her neck. Her snoring stops. I listen for tapping or a shriek from Colleen, but all I hear is the narrator. I close my eyes and count to ten. When Colleen returns with two mugs, I thank her and take a sip. She’s strained the grinds and added sugar, which I don’t like. I drink anyway, politely, exaggerating an *mmm* in gratitude.

“What’s on the table in there?”

“I don’t know. Graffiti. A grocery list.”

“You can’t let them do that. Next thing you know, they’ll be doing séances under your bed.”

“Séances?”

“Who knows what they do,” she says. “Are you watching this?” She turns the channel before I can reply, then sits forward in the recliner with her mug in both hands. These weekend visits—she drives two hours each way. She plans trips to the zoo, the frozen yogurt shop, the park. She pays for everything. I’m still on—paternity leave, they’re calling it.

“I said, what are you going to do?” she’s saying.

“About what?”

“They’ll take your daughter away,” she says. “Is that what you want?”

She finishes her coffee in one long sip.

“I’m her father.” And I’m suddenly aware of my daughter’s weight in my arms. I hold her closer. Count to ten. “No one is taking her anywhere.”

“I’m trying to help you. But they’ll bring her to live with me if there are still worries. Should we be worried?”

“Don’t worry,” I tell her. “I’m going to get dressed.”

“You can leave Anya here,” Colleen says. “I’m just going to clean up a bit.”

“Don’t clean anything. Get some coffee. We’ll be back in a minute. Everything’s fine.”

#

My sheets are shredded. Clothes are in piles on the floor. Carrie’s sweaters, skirts, her black party dress—all the things I kept—lie twisted with my suit jackets and jeans. Her picture is face down on the bedside table.

I push the pillows together and lay Anya between them. Her legs kick a little, but she stays asleep. I change into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, both from the floor. The rest of the clothes I toss on top of the shoes in the closet. Careful not to wake the baby, I check the sheets for signs of blood. As the shreds of sheets unravel, a demon rolls out from under the bed. It yawns and blinks, then crawls up to the photo of Carrie, setting the frame upright and tilting its head as if to apologize. A diagonal crack runs across the glass, and there are scratches on each side of the frame. With both hands, the demon drags the frame across the bed and places it on the pillow beside Anya. Then it pushes some of the shredded strips of linen into a loose nest, curls up next to her feet, yawns, and closes its eyes.

I sit on the bed next to them, watching each body breathe. Anya, belly inflating and sinking. The demon, frayed gills fanning and flattening.

“You’ve made a mess of everything,” I say. “I don’t know how to do any of this. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

The demon and Anya are both asleep. The only face looking at me is Carrie’s. The closet doors creak open, and the other two demons skulk into the room. One has my wife’s gold bracelet around its neck. Both blink at me, mouths set in guilty frowns.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?”

Blink. Blink.

“You’re not helping.”

The one with the bracelet skitters up to me. It lifts the thin gold chain over its head and offers it to me. I slip it into the drawer of the nightstand and notice the pack of cigarettes. In that moment, I want to hold one between my fingers. I want the smell of it, the habit. Something familiar. When I open the box, the cigarettes are missing. In their place are small seashells, bleached and cracked and sandy. The demon’s lips pull back to show a row of dull black teeth. It nods. The scene has the feeling of a ceremony. I smell their bodies and Anya’s. Salt and sour milk. The room is quiet, reverent.

“I’m sorry,” I say. And I am. When I lift it by its neck, it doesn’t squirm or thrash. Its gills flutter against my palm, skin dry and rubbery. It’s still smiling. The small body is so light I imagine its bones are hollow like a bird’s. The demon purrs, or clears its throat. With my thumb and forefinger, I snap its neck easily. Head falls limply to one side. Gills flag in their rhythm.

I lay it out on the bed next to the sleeping demon and pick up the other one from the closet, breaking its neck the same way as the first. Neither bleeds. The scratched frame I place back on the table where it belongs. Already the first demon’s vertebrae are snapping back into place. This is what it knows about death. It hasn’t learned it’s not supposed to get back up.

When I touch the gills on the sleeping demon’s neck, it moves its shoulders as if shrugging off a bad dream. Its skin is cold and dry like the others. I shake it awake. Black eyes fix on the two bodies of its brothers. It shakes its head, disappointed.

“I had to,” I tell it. I stand and lift Anya, who’s starting to whimper but isn’t quite awake. The demon crawls to the others, outlines a symbol on the chest of one of them. As it does this, the necks I’ve broken are already snapping back into place. “Don’t take anything. Please. Don’t build a nest or anything in here. We don’t need it. We’re fine.”

#

Colleen is Windexing the TV. The Bible channel is on now, muted. Colleen circles her paper towel over the faces of a white-suited preacher and a woman in a wheelchair with her arms raised to heaven. Anya wakes as I strap her into her swing. She reaches for Colleen. I hand her a rubber toy whale, and she stuffs the tail in her mouth.

“Did you find them? What happened?”

“Nothing,” I say. “I just couldn’t find my shoes.”

Colleen sprays cleaner on the TV. Anya coughs.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“It’s okay. It’ll only take a sec.”

“Colleen.” My jaw stiffens. I try to count to ten. I only make it to three. “Colleen, right now, drop the fucking Windex.”

She freezes mid-wipe, eyes wide. “I’m sorry,” she says, looking for someplace to set the bottle. “You know I just want to make sure everything is okay. I don’t want you to have to worry about anything.”

She means this, I know. She rocked and fed Anya when I couldn’t. She sold the rest of Carrie’s things. She reassured the social workers, took care of all the paperwork. Whenever I failed, Colleen was there to make sure things got done, until she was doing everything I should have been.

She looks at me expectantly. She wants to see that I feel something.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I’ll get Anya’s hat.”

She manages a smile. “The pink one. It’s the warmest.”

#

Anya’s hat is next to her coat and mittens on the changing table. Above the crib, the mobile is spinning. I stop for a moment and watch the fish move in their circle.

Down the hall, I look inside the bedroom. The bodies are gone. The bed is stripped, and fresh sheets are folded in a stack at the end of the bed. The closet door is closed.

And then I see them. They’re outside the window. Six black eyes, mouths neutral, showing no teeth. I sit on the bed and watch them for a while until, one by one, they crawl away. When I lock the window, I don’t see anything on the side of the building. No pale shapes moving through the parking lot below. The wind smells of car exhaust and autumn leaves.

#

Colleen is in the kitchen washing the saucepan and the used mugs. She sets all three mugs on a towel to dry, propping the pot against them. Anya is in her high chair with the whale. Spittle hangs between its mouth and hers like a tightrope.

I kiss her forehead. “I love you, baby girl.”

She gurgles.

On the table, the demon’s symbols look like caveman carvings, a museum display. I trace the rough edges with my finger. Maybe, I think, it’s a verse from some unholy script or lines from a demon love song. Then I think maybe it’s a message. Maybe it’s telling me the reason they were here. A good-bye.

“Grow up to be a deep sea diver,” I whisper to Anya. “In one of those big Martian-looking suits. Go see whatever there is to see.”

I take the coffee jar from the cupboard and scoop some into the filter of the Mr. Coffee.

“Don’t worry,” says Colleen. “They’re not in here. I checked.”

“I know.”

“We can get a new table. On the way home.” She unplugs the drain and dries her hands. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I tell her. “We’re okay.”

I pull the hat over Anya’s head. Its flaps cover her ears, and little braids of pink yarn drape onto her shoulders. She drops the whale and pulls on one of the braids, and the hat twists, its wool flap covering one of her eyes, the other sparkling and blue and looking right at me.

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Leslie Maxwell

How the Eye Sees

We are all pregnant at the same time. Our skin stretched taut across our swollen bellies, fluid-heavy. We have not talked about the day it will happen. Instead, we smooth lotion into our skin and drink lemonade.

*

We are giving birth, all of us, on the same day. My delivery is easy. I don't feel it, and it is over before I can see anything.

*

Afterward, we wait—mingle, it's called—in a light-filled atrium. We drink lemonade. We all seem fine. Our abdomens are still stretched, remembering what used to be inside. Our shirts hang, limply, from our breasts. One of us had a C-section. It looks as if she has not yet given birth. She is sitting in a chair someone brought her. The diluted sun from the skylight at the top of the atrium catches on her brown, straight hair. The glossy shine of it stings my eyes.

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Catherine Brereton

The Runner

She crosses the road opposite me at such a bold angle that I can't help but notice. I'm waiting for the traffic signals to change, for the green filter arrow to give me the go-ahead to proceed. She is already proceeding. She emerged, I think, from a side road, although I can't be entirely certain of that. But the tilt of her body when she crossed the road suggested that she'd been maintaining a steady direction, a straight line from the well-to-do cul-de-sac, right across the wide road at the intersection of expensive houses and well-worn commute.

While I'm waiting for the lights to change, she glides along the sidewalk, turquoise running shoes flashing with each stride. The sky is winter bright, a thin, brittle blue that looks like it could shatter with too loud a noise or too heavy a step. Even from fifty yards away I can see the small puffs of air she's exhaling into the atmosphere, tiny clouds of heat. Her blue shirt, which matches her shoes, has no sleeves, but she's wearing neon yellow gloves, like she's stealing the sun.

She's moving with an unparalleled grace, a long-legged gait, skimming the earth, stretched out and swift. She's wearing black leggings, taut against her lean legs, and her blonde ponytail barely swings, her movements so elegant. I wonder, briefly, if this is the start of her run and if, in an hour, she'll be heavy-legged and weary, if her calves will sting, if her thighs will ache, if the frigid air will strip the warmth from her lungs leaving her tight-chested and breathless. Then, I wonder where she'll be in an hour, how far she can travel at such a pace, whether she has an end point, whether she runs in a carefully thought-out circle, whether she'll stay on the roads or break off into the arboretum nearby, where she can run among the bare trees without breathing in the exhaust fumes of a thousand coughing vehicles.

The green arrow signals me to go, and I go, easing the car onto the road that she's galloping along. She's running not on the sidewalk, but in the cycle lane—I've heard it's easier on the shins—and I nudge the car out slightly as I pass to give her more room. Then, she's behind me, and I see in my rear-view mirror her flushed, hot cheeks, determination etched on her face.

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Prairie Schooner, *Star 82 Review*, *The Establishment*, *The Toast*, *GTK Creative Journal*, and Graywolf Press's anthology *Burning Down the House*. Brereton is the current Editor-in-Chief of *Limestone*, the University of Kentucky's literary journal. She lives in Lexington with her wife and their teenage daughters.

Curtis (Chuck) Weikert

Maka-feke

After its canoe sank, the rat was offered a ride to shore by a passing octopus. The rat gladly jumped on the octopus's head, was shuttled to a nearby island and after leaping to safety, shouted "*Thanks Octopus, I left you a little present on your head!*" With a tentacle, the octopus discovered that the rat had left a pile of excrement as its parting gift. Ever since, when an octopus spots a rat, it convulses with rage.

I first heard this story while seated cross-legged in a small thatched falé in Kolovai, a tiny village perched along the western neck of Tongatapu, the largest of a chain of jewel-like islets that comprise the Kingdom of Tonga. Sprinkled just west of the International Date Line, Tonga breathes life into each new day. I'd been there just a few months, a Peace Corps volunteer teacher at the village middle school. On Friday nights, village men assembled to quaff kava, a murky, slightly narcotic brew concocted from the dried root of a tropical evergreen, *Piper methysticum*. Fortified by the drink, they shared news of the day, sang traditional songs, and tried to bring Salesi, their new volunteer, up to speed on legends and life—*anga fakatonga*—the Tongan Way.

Outside the haystack of flip flops mounded at the doorway, children whispered into the night: "Where's the *papalangi* from? Is he married? How many children does he have? He has blond hair! Look at the mustache!" Pungent smoke from cooking fires mingled with frangipani-scented air, a pleasant affiliation that has remained with me for decades. Fruit bats squabbled in the ironwood trees lining a single, narrow dirt road bisecting town. They had yet to reach consensus about when to lift off en masse for the bush. At the northern end of that road was *mui fonua*, the Tongan word for "lands-end" and where a long run of talcum white sand, Ha'atafu beach, was massaged by water the color of a bluebird's plumage.

In the shallows immediately offshore were lovely corals that would detonate my notion of color, shape and texture. A hundred meters beyond, the fringing reef spilled into inky depths patrolled by schools of tuna, snappers, and Giant trevally. A platoon of Bumphead parrotfish well north of fifty pounds apiece might also be seen. Hefty barracuda that had graduated from the shallows to the big time often came calling. So too the occasional reef shark or two. Or more. Beneath this oft active zone of improbability, the light went uninvited. There thrived the myth-makers of my childhood. One in particular took center stage, the giant squid grappling with Captain Nemo's submarine in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*. Thank you for that, Jules Verne.

Tentacled creatures such as the giant squid are a special breed of mythological marvel. Long before *Jaws*, there was the kraken, a catchall term for giant octopuses and squids bent on havoc. A symbol of evil in print, illustration and film, the octopuses—for centuries known as devilfish—occupied the dark alleys of every mariner’s imagination. In his vivid woodcut of 1810, *Poulpe Colossal*, the French malacologist Pierre Denys de Montfort brought every sailor’s nightmare to life, depicting a bug-eyed octopus overpowering a sailboat. The work was based on stories told by whalers who claimed to have seen evidence of such giants at sea.

In *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck’s octopus is a “creeping murderer” with “evil goat eyes.” Victor Hugo chillingly called the octopus “one of those embryos of terrible things that the dreamer glimpses confusedly through the window of night.” In exile on the island of Guernsey, Hugo sent Gilliatt the fisherman to battle an enormous octopus in *Les Travailleurs de la mer (The Toilers of the Sea)*. “Compared to the devilfish,” he wrote, “the hydras of old bring a smile to the lips.”

Culturally familiar thanks in part to pulp fiction of the mid 20th-century, octopuses engulf superheroes, divers, and damsels in distress. Hollywood promoted them as shiver-inducing creatures large and small. A Golden Gate-sized specimen snacks on San Franciscans in the 1955 thriller, *It Came From Beneath the Sea*. Even Disney found the image of a wicked octopus irresistible, creating Ursula as a nefarious creature opposite the winsome Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*. Leading men from King Kong to 007 have had to contend with suckered appendages. Within the pages of Ian Fleming’s *Octopussy*, James Bond kept tabs on his femme fatale’s pet blue-ringed octopus, whose toxic bite leads to death within minutes, and did for one unfortunate assailant.

Yet, as science unveils the octopus and its secrets, they’ve become less threatening and more fascinating. In his 1940 essay, *In Defense of Octopuses*, the naturalist Gilbert Klingel wrote, “I feel about octopuses—as Mark Twain did about the devil—that someone should undertake their rehabilitation.” Soon after, Jacques-Yves Cousteau began that process by bringing octopuses into our living rooms. Today, rather than feared, the octopus is on many a reef-visitor’s must-see list. But during my early months in Tonga, they weren’t on mine.

I taught myself how to spearfish in the waters off Ha’atafu to augment the limited diet of root crops and tinned meats available in the village. It was a tricky place to fish because the entry and exit were made by swimming through a channel; time it the wrong way and one could be trapped outside the reef with no way to return against the ebbing tidal waters. On one occasion I barely made it back. Watching from shore, my friend Sione told me of puzzling out the proper way to handle my *putu*, Tongan for funeral.

Spearfishing was a way to make friends and navigate a cultural byway that could be fun and challenging at the same time. New words entered my vocabulary. In the back of my mind, a grouper is still *ngatala*, parrotfish *hohomo*, and it was time to get out of the water when the tenifa, tiger shark, did more than just a drive-by peek at our dangling limbs. In the company of burly Tongans, I became a hunter with interest solely in that night's dinner. Whatever else the reef had to offer meant little. I finned quickly across the shallows, intent only on reaching deeper water as quickly as possible. Once there, I stalked groupers and snappers that folded themselves under ledges or into caves. I might hover at depth, matching my breath-hold against the curiosity of large fish, any one of which meant food for many. At the time, regarding the coral reef as more than just backdrop to the hunt would be like asking a deer hunter to examine a patch of wildflowers while a ten point buck passed nearby.

I can't say when it was that my hunter's eye lost focus, when I first noticed the reef's symphony. It had been playing all this time; I just hadn't listened. In shallow as well as deep water, I gradually succumbed to the distraction of clownfish dancing in and out of anemones or paused to admire the clouds of damselfishes hovering over purple, emerald, and gold hued corals. Unseen before, now I spotted eels decked out in multiple colors and patterns that peered from their lairs. Delicate cleaner shrimp advertised their services while tiptoeing about the corals. And of course there were octopuses, wedged into their hideouts, barely distinguishable within rock and rubble. They were the reef's silent sentinels—evaluating, watching, waiting for nightfall.

So much to see! I'd look up and my fishing buddies would be far ahead, wondering where I was. "Come look at this," I'd shout to deaf ears. Though I still shot many fish, often regrettably so given their beauty, I didn't count on one thing. By the end of two years, many of them, especially the octopuses, had become "friends" for life.

It may seem hard to believe, but octopuses are mollusks, distantly related to clams, oysters and snails. Over 500 million years ago, an evolutionary road diverged; clams went one way and pretty much kept up their clammy ways. The precursor of today's octopuses later traded the security of a shell, opting for speed, mobility, sharp vision, and star wattage as an aquarium draw. Octopuses are kin to squids, cuttlefishes and the rarely seen nautilus, all of which comprise the *Cephalopoda*, meaning head foot.

Octopuses break all the rules. They walk on legs lined with individually controllable suction cups. Or jet about by drawing water into their mantle cavity, then forcefully expelling it through a funnel. The suckers are lined with chemoreceptors that can taste food. Octopuses solve problems, use tools, learn skills, recognize individual humans. Their hearts are not one, not two, but three. If frightened, they jet away behind the cover of an ejected cloud of black ink.

Found in all oceans, there are several hundred species of octopuses. The Pygmy is thimble-sized, weighing in at one gram. The Giant Pacific octopus is a scale-busting three to four hundred pounds. Others include the Bumblebee, Flapjack, Gloomy, Old woman and Wunderpus octopuses, as well as the darling of snorkelers just about everywhere, *Octopus vulgaris*, the Common octopus.

All of them have a level of intelligence unheard of in the realm of invertebrates. One learned to quickly solve a maze by watching a trained octopus navigate the puzzle first. Veined octopuses collect coconut shell halves to use as shelter. When threatened, they tuck into one half and may even pull the other on top and wait for the danger to pass. They have been seen transporting the shells from one place to another to use as “mobile homes,” behavior thought to be the only known use of a tool by an invertebrate. But one thing octopuses don’t do very well is to live long lives. Programmed to grow fast, breed once, and die young, a three-year-old is considered ancient.

Maka-feke (MACH-ah FEH-kay) in Tongan literally means “octopus rock” and is what fishermen use to lure the creature from its lair. Here is where the legend I first heard at the kava club merged with the practical. I’ve often wondered which came first, legend or lure. Or maybe a keen observer did spot a rat hitch-hiking atop a cephalopod. Perhaps a cyclone forced the two into an uneasy alliance, later violated by the rat. Myth? Maybe, but then again...

What does force the imagination is finding the rat-like resemblance in a contraption that appears more an homage to mixed media than fishing lure. The lure is made by joining a conical stone to a shell and a fibrous “tail.” A line is attached and the decoy bobbed over the octopus’s lair. Spotting its old nemesis the rat, the octopus rushes forth and seizes the lure, only to be drawn to the surface where it is dispatched with a bite through the brain. Though I had no qualms other than an initial queasiness about biting a speared fish to death, I drew the line when it came to doing the same thing to an octopus.

Before it can be converted from surgical tubing consistency to edible morsels, an octopus must be tenderized. Boiling and whacking the heck out of them are classic techniques. Where refrigeration is not an option, Tongans drape them in tree branches, the desiccated bodies, *feke momoa*, fodder for nightmares. My personal favorite was *lu feke*, chunks of octopus tucked into layers of young taro leaves with bits of onion and baked in coconut milk. Nau, the wife of my headmaster, served it after Sunday church—a special treat—and I wolfed it down. The richly flavored stew could make anyone forget that they were eating the world’s most intelligent invertebrate.

During the day, an octopus holes up in a den; a small cave or crevice, even a beer bottle will do. Nighttime is when they go on the hunt. Armed and dangerous like its

cousin the squid, an octopus is an efficient, voracious predator. It stalks crabs, probes for clams, explores crevices for shrimp. The suckers on each arm function independently and can manipulate objects with ease, even to the point of rolling a tasty tidbit sucker-to-sucker on down to the mouth where prey is dispatched with a lethal bite. Often, the hunter retreats to the safety of its den to eat. Meal over, the octopus doesn't want to crowd up its living room, and like sloppy college students tossing pizza boxes outside a dorm room, an octopus discards shells outside its den. Want to find an octopus? Look for its garbage heap.

If you're lucky enough to spot an octopus caught out in the open, don't look away. One moment it's there, the next it's not. A master of camouflage, an octopus has many tricks up all those sleeves to avoid detection. Its skin harbors an array of minute color organs called chromatophores, and like tiny cartridges of printer ink, each is hard-wired to the brain. In less than one-hundredth of a second, an octopus can change color in any part of its body, an app that a fashion designer could only dream about. Like to see this outfit in lavender stripes or turquoise polka dots? How about alternating waves of psychedelic maroon and cream? Need to look bigger than you are? Just add dark "makeup" around the eye. Voila, you've got a really big eye! How about some textural variety—bumps, lumps, horns—done! Their disguises are many and include the moving rock, waving seaweed, sedentary sponge, and brain coral. Even the flattened flounder is a common pretense.

At Ha'atafu, given the chance to catch an octopus, something niggled at my conscience. My fishing pal Mafi pointed one out. *Puke ia!* he shouted. Grab it! He looked bemused when I shook my head no. Dragging an octopus from its den and up to the surface was not going to happen. Not given what I'd seen there and on other reefs around the island.

"Meeting an octopus," wrote professor Peter Godfrey-Smith, "is like meeting an intelligent being." And my meetings had been frequent and instructive.

An interspecies meet-up with an octopus, without fear or menace, feels like a dry run for the day when we might encounter intelligence from afar, so palpable the baffling enigma of one another. In Tonga, my lifelong love affair with octopuses began with a conversation, since duplicated on many reefs in different seas.

"What are you?" the octopus asks.

"What are you?" my reply.

So goes our underwater chat.

"So now what?"

"So now what?"

Years later, I live on the island of St. John in the US Virgin Islands, privileged to visit my reef friends at any time. One of my favorite snorkeling spots is Maho Bay, where emerald hillsides melt into the turquoise waters. One day, I find myself nosing about the submerged boulders and corals at the base of a rocky point that juts into the bay. It's a good place to search for dazzling juvenile fishes such as Rock Beauties, French and Queen angelfishes, Blue Tangs. Sometimes I even see baby lobster, juvenile sea turtles and yes, octopuses.

Engage the coral reef for long enough and you soon become attuned to the unusual shape, movement or color that shouts "look here!" So I do.

A translucent bubble, no larger than the tip of my little finger, drifts past. And then another and still another. Suddenly I'm nested within hundreds of bubbles. A tiny form reveals itself within each; a baby octopus, a perfect miniature version of the adult. Each egg is occupied by a tiny ambassador from another world. I have never seen this before. The female octopus normally lays and stands guard over her eggs in a den until they've hatched. And then she dies. The sight of new life is a rarity on the coral reef. But things always happen. No two visits are ever the same.

Unmoored before their time, the babies stand little chance where hungry mouths abound. Reef fish swirl close and begin to feed on this unexpected food source. Gently, I cup one of the eggs, take a breath and dive. The sun's rays twist in the water column and illuminate my path down. Rainbow-colored parrotfish move off, a school of French grunts divides. I find a small opening in the rocks, pray that a moray eel hasn't chosen the same spot and shove my fist within. I release the egg, give a few waves of my hand to push it back farther. And hope.

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Michael Milburn

Not What I Say

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 nigger"—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 nigger" and his contribution in the same sentence. Like his mutually respectful relationship with Mark Sisitsky, 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 nigger 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 nigger, Tiger Woods a nigger, Oprah a big fat nigger, and anyone else who didn't look like him a hebe, chink, guinea 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.

Michael Milburn teaches English in New Haven, CT. Recent essays have appeared in *Cheat River Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *South Carolina Review*. His book of poems, *Carpe Something*, was published by Word Poetry in 2012.

Lauren Fath

The Color of Tomatoes

In 1940 and wartime, my great-aunt Margaret peeled tomatoes at the Red Gold Tomato Cannery. There she is: tall and long-limbed above a trough of pulp, her wild hair tucked under a stretchy mesh net. The door-to-door census recorder's quick cursive says that twenty was her age, and Upland, Indiana, the town where she lived with her mother, father, and the younger sister who would, in forty more years, become my grandmother. My grandmother—straight, mouse-brown hair molded into pin curls, standing just five feet tall behind the kitchen counter, the way I remember her: bearing a paring knife with its plastic handle the color of ivory, stripping things of their skins. She used her thumb to stop the knife blade after each stroke, her skin indented but never sliced through. It was a motion I considered reckless at the time, because at the time, I did not know what it meant to be reckless.

Her older sister Margaret had hair the color of tomatoes and curled like the waxen peels she wound from them in supple spirals. Early girls, red golds, vine ripe, and until she died, she dyed her hair red. But that—1940—was wartime, when women worked, when the town where I would grow up was seventh on Hitler's list of cities to bomb. Magnet wire was the reason: Fort Wayne, Indiana—an hour from the tomato cannery by I-69—harbored Rea Magnet Wire, the factory that spooled out its detonating thread by the mile, put the town on a map where it would rather not have been found. So Aunt Margaret peeled tomatoes, lived with her parents and sister in the apartment on Half Street, as if nothing, then, were whole: not the street and not the tomatoes, not the job she would work only until she married two years later. And then would she miss standing alone on the line, the fruity flesh forgiving, nimble?

My grandma was too young to work, or else she, too, might have peeled tomatoes. Instead, she went to beauty school. Visits to her, I sat at the dining room table. On its white tablecloth she placed a jam jar of water, held in her hand a pink rat-tail comb. She, the only one who could tame my wild curls, smoothed them down, dipped the comb's tail in the water to make a clean part. And even though I was too old for the braided pigtailed she gave me, I knew that that was how she wanted to see me: younger than I thought I was, younger than I really was, a lookalike of her curly-haired sister, hair the color of tomatoes.

And I wonder, when they moved Aunt Margaret to the nursing home, when she lost even the memory of her own sister's name—Evelyn, which rings more of lilies than deep-red fruit—did she still remember the tomatoes, loose flesh and juice in her hands, pulpy acid stinging the cracked crooks of her fingers? In the moment she died, did she

think of wartime and tomatoes, of squeezing seeds from beneath her fingernails, of the way our own blood smells like aluminum?

Lauren Fath grew up in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She received a PhD in English and Creative Writing from the University of Missouri and an MFA in Nonfiction from Oregon State University. Her work has appeared in *Fourth Genre*, *Post Road*, and *South Loop Review*, among others, and has received a Pushcart Prize nomination. She is an Assistant Professor of English at New Mexico Highlands University.

Farryl Last

The Ancients Who Hadn't the Fridge Brew Poison

I was not banished, I came here. The dark dims the outline of houses, kitchens, trees.
Nightfall:

Drowsy from dinner in the next room you prepare the bed. Birds strain, then settle,
against

the summer air; like small fists the flowers close. One by one stars ignite. And I
sit at the long table, alone, a basket clamped between my knees. How thick the seeds,
gathered

before the dawn. How strange, how beautiful what brings the deepest sleep. You set out
across

the yellow fields, so from your feet the world grows smaller,

the too-ripe berries, the oleander grasping the horizon. Tub of water, lick of fire,

gathered poison at my feet: closed eyes I picture the sun growing

colder as the night does, switched off, as your feet beneath the sheets.

Didn't I come here? A moment before at the long table, eating, having eaten fruits of the
earth,

fruits of the sea, having cast your eyes from my pale hands to the window, having left
me

at the table, you in the next room, counting your buttons, the oleander wags its
branches

at the window. A blanket breeze, then stillness. I know how the night will go, it will go

as always: shadow of the mountain, dreams of a poison cloud. At the long table, I
watched

branches beckoning the inside of the house, with all its pots and napkins. And me,

shivering in the kitchen, bare feet pushed barer against the cold floor, filled

with legumes, filled with nothing, filling the basket at my feet—

Out the window I pour.

Farryl Last is a 2015 MFA graduate from Hunter College, where she now teaches. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Entropy*, *great weather for MEDIA*, *Red Paint*

Hill Poetry Journal, HOOT, The Intentional, and Poetry City, USA, among others. She once lived in Mantua, Italy, and taught English there.

D.G. Geis

Petition

For Henri Coulette

O Lord of the fast checkout
don't let me wobble
like old men in the grocery store.
Let my cart push straight
and my body sing at right angles.
Stretch out my living
so the sun marks time by my shadow
and death finds me handsome still.

D.G. Geis lives in Houston, Texas. He has an undergraduate degree in English Literature from the University of Houston and a graduate degree in Philosophy from California State University. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *491 Magazine*, *Lost Coast*, *Blue Bonnet Review*, *The Broadkill Review*, *A Quiet Courage*, *SOFTBLOW Poetry Journal*, *Blinders Journal*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Open Mouse (Poetry Scotland)*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *Atrocity Exhibition*, *Driftwood Press*, *Tamsen*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *The Collapsar*, *Grub Street*, *Slippery Elm*, and *The Write Place at the Write Time*. He will be featured in a forthcoming Tupelo Press chapbook anthologizing 9 New Poets and is winner of *Blue Bonnet Review's* Fall 2015 Poetry Contest. He is editor-at-large of *Tamsen*.

Ruth Foley

Astrology

Give me your hand tonight,
your capable will improbably twinned
to mine. I think perhaps
I've always known to find you.
If there is a moon, try not to remember it
tomorrow—deny yourself
the comfortable reliance on sickled convention
when we are not
reliable. If I should lift my mouth
just this once
try to forgive me. Don't look
to me for answers unless you're willing
to abide your own reflection. I cannot hide
the way I see you now.
Instead, look up, count to ten.
Give me your hand
and nothing else of you. Look at all
our terrible stars and do not name them.

Whale Songs and Love Sounds

His ear against my breast, he says he hears
the sea. I list the things it's taken, but he knows.
He hears, but I hold everything a shell does now:
nothing. I bend two spoons, begin to build the ellipsis
of a crab. They are empty, too, the bowls,

the cupboards and the drainboard, and they can go
to dust. I am thinking of how water layers paper,
how it can't return to trunk or branch. I'm thinking
of another reclamation, cellulose in compost,
how worms through kitchen scraps sound
like nothing until you bend close. Maybe my chest
is teeming, writhing. He says wave and shore.
I say the wave is an illusion, taken up into itself
again and again, that shore or coast is a matter of
perspective. Both of us could swim through
the arteries of a blue whale. All our lovers
could fit on its tongue, sleep cold in the vault
of its mouth. It could be like us, I say, breaching
and easing, could be full of damp societies,
the low thrum of love calls or storm warnings

Ruth Foley lives in Massachusetts, where she teaches English at Wheaton College. Her work appears in numerous web and print journals, including *Adroit Journal*, *Sou'wester*, and *Valparaiso Poetry Review*. She is the author of the chapbooks "Dear Turquoise" and "Creature Feature," and the full-length collection "Dead Man's Float" (forthcoming from ELJ Publications). She serves as Managing Editor for *Cider Press Review*.

Alex Stolis

Postcards from the Knife Thrower

May 17 Red Bluff, CA

Picking apples making pie, patching a shirt pinning a hem,
breath after breath until we lose count. It's been too long
it's only been a little while. We're not a sunset, quiet snow
-fall; we're muffled gunshots, silent whip cracks in the wind.
The want is bad. I sharpen knives, one by one; taste the wet
sky. Your blue dress remains unmended, unworn; a memory
cut, sliced then twisted away. I've lived despite premonitions
and omens; an empty room never promises anyone anything.

May 18 Mt. Shasta, CA

So far no word from the underworld. Go ahead.
Shut your eyes. It doesn't matter. It will find you.
Today is unseasonably warm, spring-like, the sky,
an Easter blue dotted with clouds brackish, dirty.
This is the view from the last horizon. I'm the for
ever man transparent and indestructible; rename
the birds in heaven the animals on earth; rename
you, mark you and travel past what is mappable.

Alex Stolis lives in Minneapolis.

Brent Fisk

What We Take Apart When No One's Looking

August of the wild fence row, kicked-up broken glass.
I tore through remnant tiger lilies and dead sparrows,
flattened shotgun shells pocked by gravel, tickseed hidden in a hiss of grass.
Disassembled walls clunked stone by stone into the belly of a rusted barrow.
Summer of the busted knuckle, the hard-earned easy cash,
the blackened thumbnail and a stash of Playboy's rain-marred beauties,
and orphaned cans of beer. Summer of the whitewashed sky,
the waylaid hour, the twitch of a deer's flank at the edge of a field.
I took apart the lawnmower until my whole life stank of gas-soaked rags.
I drowned out the warblers with a louder song, broke the bones in one soft hand.
I learned the itch is God's most hellish punishment. I ditched the cast,
unsigned, too pure and lonely for a pen.
That whole July and most of August no one spoke my name.
I thumbed a ride to Georgia when the heat dragged down the moon.
I tell myself I wouldn't change a thing.

Brent Fisk is a writer from Bowling Green, Kentucky, with over 300 poems, essays and short stories published so far. He has an BA in English Literature, and an MA in Creative Writing, both from Western Kentucky University.