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# Touchstone

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Number 36

Spring 2004



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**Number 36**

**Spring 2004**

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Kansas State University

Manhattan, KS 66502

Cover Art, *Snake Plant*, provided for this issue by  
Kansas State University student K. A. Settle

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or

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## Editors' Note

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**S**ynonyms for the word “touchstone” include the following: measure, standard, yardstick, benchmark, gauge, criterion, test, acid test, ideal, model.

These synonyms work well to describe the work by the writers published in this year's issue. From an overwhelming number of submissions, this year's editors and reading staff have chosen work which can be used to measure the standard of writing being done by graduate and undergraduate students throughout the United States in 2004. If you write, you may very well find a piece here against which you may gauge your own work. In fact, I encourage you to do so. Nothing helps us grow more, as writers, than to discover the superior writing being done by others in our genre.

When sending out the call for submissions this year I specifically asked for work of a social and/or political nature. Because 2004 is an election year and the political climate of the country is tense, I wanted this journal to showcase the work being done by writers who were engaged and interested in the issues of the world at this very specific point in history. My other editorial choice was to devote this issue solely to the written word. For those of you who were looking for artwork in this issue, I assure you it is here, but you must look deeper to find it. Though there are no photographs, pen and ink drawings, or reproductions of oil paintings or sculptures, there is, within the words of the writers in this journal, an inherent artistry, as lovely as any landscape and as moving as any mural. It is my belief that there is nothing so lovely as a powerful poem or a cleverly constructed piece of prose, and I hope you find this to be true as well.

I would like to thank the editorial staff, specifically, for putting in their tireless hours searching for AWP email addresses: may this never need to be done again! I would also like to extend a special thanks to Erin Billing, co-editor of last year's issue, for guiding me through some of the challenges of university publishing. Thanks also go to the KSU English Department and expanding creative writing faculty for their encouragement, and support, the KSU Fine Arts Council for the funding which makes *Touchstone* possible, to our faculty advisor Susan Jackson Rodgers, and to K-State Printing Services for their help in making this issue possible.

Shannon Draper  
Editor-In-Chief

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## ***Hammom***

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by B. Barry Darugar, MD

Teheran, March 1946

On our way to the hammom, the public bath, we passed through a small bazaar at the end of our street. The street was lined with one-story mud brick homes with flat rooftops on each side. A two to three foot ledge around the roof protected the small children from a fall. For older children the rooftops were a connected playground extending for almost a block.

The joob, a narrow, cement ditch, ran down the middle of our street. Teheran did not have a centralized water supply or pipelines at that time. Joobs served as a source of water. Water was stored in the underground reservoirs at each home and pumped out for everyday use. I recall a few children who died from complications of typhoid fever in that era before the discovery of antibiotics.

The roofed bazaar with diamond-shaped windows cut through the ceiling let in the light. It was lined by various businesses: meat cutter, bakery, grocery, and so on. In the butcher shop slabs of lamb and beef were hung in the open air from the ceiling hooks. In the grocery store, vegetables, fruit, and dairy products were offered fresh and unrefrigerated. The bazaar was crowded with shoppers, store owners, and manual laborers.

Ditch diggers and construction workers lunched around the joob. They washed their hands and ate their *sangak* bread with feta cheese and Persian melon. These workers competed for the attention of ladies passing by. "You quiver my liver," one would call out. "May this humble servant plow your garden." The metaphor was not lost on anyone.

The light sifted through the holes in the roof and created shadows around the bazaar, lending an ambience of intimacy and spookiness in various corners. The ground was either sand, dirt, or patternless cobblestone. Each section of the bazaar had its own sound, smell, and appearance.

To better exhibit the tightly woven patterns and colors, merchants presented their Persian rugs in special light. Each province's rugs had its own characteristics: Kermanshah and Ghome were known for silk carpets, Esfehan and Tabriz for their mix of wool and distinct patterns. The bright colors were reputed not to fade easily and the durable fabric to last for many years. To prove the point, merchants would place a carpet in the street to be run over by cars and walked over by pedestrians. In the fabric shops the purveyor displayed stacks of neatly wrapped bundles. Women chose the necessary material to sew clothing or drapes.



Dickering over the prices was a common practice, and merchants priced their goods according to their estimation of the customer's wit. The actual purchase price rested on the bargaining skills of buyers and forces of supply and demand.

"This carpet is not worth two thousand *tooman*, it looks more like a *gleem* than a rug," Haji Akbar would say to a merchant.

"Nah, Haji, it's a real Tabriz rug. It has seven hundred knots per square. It's tightly woven. Look at the colors, they jump out at you."

"It is loosely knitted, must have been woven by puny children. I estimate only three hundred knots per square, maybe worth one thousand *tooman*."

"I paid a lot for it myself. I can't sell it at a loss. I have a family to feed; but since you're a neighbor and a good man, I'll sell it to you at a discount, seventeen hundred and fifty *tooman*."

They'd talk back and forth until the deal was struck at fifteen hundred *tooman*.



In the bazaar men were the dominant sex, and the bazaar, the political arena, was a force to reckon with. During working hours, women had exclusive access to the hammom. Most of the women stayed home washing, mending, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. Women sewed clothes or knitted pull-overs, sweaters, and booties for the babies. Going to the public bath was a day-long social event. It was a place for women to gather and have a good time, relax, eat, and gossip. A place to find a husband or wife for their children and grandchildren. Meals, brought in by servants, were served in courses. Cold drinks, such as lemonade, pomegranate and cherry juice or fruit, halva, and *haleem* were served.

Most women entered the hammom with a loincloth around their waists, but during the course of the day they abandoned their cover and walked around naked. Boys younger than five and all the girls usually went along with their mothers to the hammom. Because of my small stature, even at the age of six, I still went to the hammom with my mother. My cousin, Samir, who was nine months younger than I, usually accompanied me. Even at that young age, Samir and I recognized women were different. Breasts the size of watermelons or enormous behinds were not our favorites; we preferred voluptuous women with black pubic hair. We also enjoyed looking at women lying on their stomachs. We would walk around to catch a glimpse, careful not to be noticed. If and when a boy was found staring at women he would thereafter accompany his father to the hammom, a feat less interesting to boys of our age.

"When I grow up, I am going to marry Sheerin," Samir said with a smile.

"You can't marry her. She is your cousin."

"Yes, I can. She is only a *distant* cousin." Samir turned around ready to pounce on me.

"Why do you want to marry her? She is ten years older than you," I said.

"Girls our age look just like boys. I don't have the same urges toward them."

“What urges are you talking about?”

“I’d like to put my mouth on her bosoms, ought to be a lot of milk there to be had.”

I didn’t have any answers then, but had I been privy to Freudian theories, I would have accused him of several psychological complexes.

Falling in love with older girls and later, ones closer to our own age, harvested us nothing but a lot of bittersweet memories and heartaches. We waved goodbye as the girls of our dreams marched off one by one to the altar in their wedding gowns with dolled-up faces, arched eyebrows, and ruby red lips. Samir and I, meanwhile, slaved over our books in the quest for education. Many rings of scars formed in our hearts.

As invisible creatures in the hammom, Samir and I heard all sorts of conversations.

It was in the hammom that I heard Tahereh’s mother, Sarah, talk to her aunt. “My husband, Haji Akbar, is unhappy; I overheard him tell Moman Bozorg, ‘I need a younger wife. Tahereh’s mother is getting old. She stays tired and can’t satisfy my needs.’”

“Sarah, are you going to have a *havoo*?”

“Looks that way.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have a plan,” Sarah said. “I can’t keep Haji Akbar from marrying a younger woman. The prophet Mohammed has given him the privilege.”

“Are you going to accept a *havoo*? Is that your plan?”

“No, I m going to be very attractive to his needs, but if he does not waver then I’ll arrange for a new wife myself. That way I’ll have a compatible *havoo*.”

“I see what you’re trying to do, Sarah. You’ll choose a younger *havoo* whom you can manipulate.”

“Well, don’t you think I am wise. Haji Akbar gets his new wife and I remain in control.”

In Islam every man can have four permanent wives and as many temporary wives as he can afford. The tradition requires a priest to perform a simple marriage ceremony. The man pays the required fees and he has a woman for as short a period as a few hours at his disposal. This is called a *seegheh*. After the transaction takes place, the temporary marriage dissolves automatically; the man has no responsibility, and the woman is free thereafter. This procedure is sanctioned by Mullahs who perform the ceremony and at times act as agents for willing women and pass the set fees to them.

Another conversation:

“Zora, why do you become a *seegheh*? Don’t you ever worry about marrying a man you don’t even know?” Sheedeh asked her friend.

“Does anybody really know the man they marry? Most marriages are arranged without the couple ever getting to know each other. So what is the difference?”

“At least in the ordinary marriages the bride has security.”

“Security? Ha! More like a high security prison. The woman gets locked into a marriage and tied to a man she might despise.”

“Zora, you are so pessimistic.”

“I am realistic, I like *seegheh*. I get to really know a man up close and personal by being married to him. If I like him I know how to keep him around and he’ll beg me to become his permanent wife, but if he’s a scum I also know how to get rid of him as soon as his time is up, with my dowry up front deposited into a bank.”

Islamic tradition and rules forbade unmarried men and women to mingle. However, during the reign of the Shah, the educated and liberal adults openly socialized. Like most Islamic countries, Iran had a double standard. Young men would test how much they could get away with. Extra-marital affairs with willing partners were common among men, but for a young girl the loss of her virginity was a disaster. The very same men who frequented whorehouses and had sex with married or divorced women would not consider marrying a girl who was not a virgin. They believed a girl who had been with other men would never be satisfied with one man. On the wedding night the groom traditionally showed his family the bloody towel that indicated the virginity of the bride. If a bride was not a virgin, she would be sent back to her father’s house in disgrace with the wedding annulled.

In the mid sixties, with the invasion of European and American culture and the increase in dating exposure and sexual temptation, even some of the most noble and chaste girls lost their virginity. The stories of their heartbreak and disgrace were told in the hammom. Young girls were also helped by the information available to them through the grapevine. Human ingenuity and the market demands always provide new solutions to old problems. Certain doctors made a handsome salary by repairing the hymen and providing the woman in need with a special capsule of her anti-coagulated blood that she could spill at the appropriate time on the towel or bed sheet to convince the groom’s family of her virtues. Most young grooms were eager to consummate the marriage and lacked the experience to differentiate between a repaired hymen and an intact one.

It was in the hammom that young girls confided in each other, exchanged information, and were chosen as future wives. Years later, it was in the hammom that Samir’s sisters searched for a bride.

“Tahereh is a chaste and educated girl,” her mother said. “She has been raised in a devout Moslem family.”

“Samir wants an educated, noble wife who is from a well-to-do family,” one of his sisters replied.

“Tahereh is all of that and more. She is tall, has big brown eyes with eyebrows.”

“Tell us more.”

“She is a student of the Holy Qu’ran and can recite many of its verses from memory. Furthermore, she has an enormous amount of wealth in her hope chest.”

Samir’s sisters smiled. “Samir is tall, handsome with a light complexion.”

“Tahereh wants a doctor or an engineer for a husband.”

“Samir is an electrical engineer with a bright future. What else can you ask for?”



The hammom was a gathering place for women to help each other cope with their *ghesmat* (fate), tolerate their philandering husbands, and their *havoos*. Women scrubbed their feet with pumice, spilled their sorrows, and received counsel. They immersed themselves in the steaming hot pool of water, hoping to wash away their anxiety and pain. They swallowed their frustration with a life of subservience, worth half of a man in the eyes of Allah. At the end of the day they shared *sabzi* (homegrown greens) and cheese in a piece of *sagak*, a ritual to prevent the humiliation of a younger *havoo* replacing them in the hearts and homes of their husbands.

The stepchildren of Allah left the *hammom* a few pounds heavier but rosy cheeked and clean.

The snow-covered peaks of the *Alborz* loomed in the distance, nearer the *Goleh-Yakh*; the redolent ice flowers, like yellow ribbons, adorned the frigid foothills. Closer yet the flowering trees and soaring swallows ran in the glad tiding of the coming of the spring.



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***Segregation, After*** for Carter G. Woodson

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by *Gregory Powell*

After we turned fifteen, black boys were men  
more than breath in britches, more than moon  
gazers with time to kill, one step beyond our mothers'  
switches. But close enough to offer them a hand.

We were the first to have white teachers that year.  
Before, black teachers went to our church & lived nearby.  
The new teachers did not live in our neighborhood or know  
my pastor's full name. Everybody at the school knew

that he built that school with his hands with a few nails  
& with lumber he had left over after building our church.  
The first day of class the new white teacher said to me "sonny  
I have big plans for you." (Who is sonny?); he recited sonnets

to us from early morning until the bell rang at the end  
of the day. We recited a dead man's sonnets until  
my tongue practically dried & split in iambic horror.  
When I told him that you can't swing twelve-bar blues

in fourteen closed lines, I was banished to a musty corner  
to reconsider my narrow views - since blues wasn't poetry.  
"You all will be great laborers, cogs in capitalism's wheel," he  
said. From the corner, I screamed that I would design guitars, hollow

bodies with bellies deeper than my father's cistern: twelve  
strings plucked by Howlin' Wolf or six strings plucked by Tampa  
Red or Albert King. He said I'd found fool's gold. I explained  
that when my pearl nail strummed a string, vibrations multiplied

along her slender length along her cherry body  
in a thread of light. I wanted to free myself in the belly  
of an acoustic guitar. “You will be swallowed by big  
industry!” he warned, “a modern day Jonah singing used blues!”

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***From Highway Twelve***

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*by Cameron Scott*

What time of day was it, pulled over  
in North Dakota, striking against monotony,  
waking up in Montana, making love on the Madison,  
making love on Rock Creek, making love

resonate in the hum of the engine,  
in the rise of heat, in the breaking rush  
of a late afternoon storm front collapsed  
around the mountains? So that now,

traveling back over the same roads  
as if I am remembering the guilty pleasure  
of being a passenger, a year of my life  
occupies three days of driving.

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***White Chair with Paint Peeling***

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by Daniel Hobson

Ah---swipes hand---  
you fund those city social programs and  
where's the money to pave our roads  
in the spring?

Ah---swipes hand---  
What do we care? Africa's got no oil, do they?  
Leave 'em to starve, them desert HIV shrivelheads.

Ah---swipes hand---  
the world has issues with what *we* do?  
Hell with 'em. America don't need no one, never did

Ah---swipes hand---  
you legalize *it* and you get like we  
got in the dry twenties. Rampant disregard  
for the law.

Ah---swipes hand---  
you get rid of the Commandments and you get rid  
of all law and order. Next thing next, you got  
a wild Darwin notion of God.

Ah---swipes hand---  
give a homeless man a home---and  
you take away his identity. Ain't that witty?

Ah---swipes hand---  
you take away a man's rifle and what's  
he going to use to shoot the man who's  
doing all the shooting?

Ah---swipes hand---  
you got a cent for a schoolhouse? Flip it.  
You got a cent for a new jail, too.

Lord---hand limp on lap---  
a cent *for* a new jail, too.

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### ***Something Like a Country Song***

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*by Christin Elise Kuchem*

He asked me to explain. I  
said, it's "something like a  
country song." It gets inside  
and burns away, till nothing  
remains but three chords  
and tears. The balance  
of up and down, down and  
up. How day-old coffee grounds  
compliment the stale but sweet  
stench of a Marlboro. How it comes  
from behind, a little higher, a little  
lower, and into one. One mess of ash-  
trays, pool halls, and tired men getting off the  
nine-to-five. Something like a cliché. Something  
sad like sitting in bars, talking of love.



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## **Handyman**

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by Brad Babin

He stopped the truck, set the brake, and walked out into wheat stubble, the crunchy stalks silver under the moon. The coyote reclined in congealed blood, one empty coyote eye open to the cold sky, frozen forever in the swift, tapered shape of running. He circled it once, staring down, seeing the red rimmed hole, the jagged, white gleam of splintered rib, seeing himself lying there, with Janey. He tilted his head back and scanned the glittering sweep of stars. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs tight with the cold air, holding it, warming it, then expelling it upward in a single rushing release, a slender and already dissipating column of white vapor hanging almost motionless in the frigid, black stillness above him.

He and Janey had heard the shots the night before, in bed, the cocooned blankets guarding a fragile bubble of warmth around their nakedness. The sudden booming, too close in the quiet house, cut short their slow rocking and whispering. She froze and rolled off him, pulling the blankets with her, and he felt her wetness on him turn cold in the air of the room. “What are you doing?” He watched her move towards the window. “Stay away from there.”

She dropped the blankets across his legs and gestured with both hands, palm out, gently pushing once against the air between them. “I’m just going to look, baby. That sounded close.” The black outline of her body moved across the window. He got up and felt his way into the living room. The woodstove ticked – cooling. He snuck up on each window, peering out into the dark fields behind the house, inspecting the gravel driveway that curled up from the road through shadowy cedars. Nothing. They had seen nothing, no one.



In long rolling steps, all swinging angles of elbows and knees, he loped back across the uneven and crumbly ridges of plowed rows, to get the axe. He had sworn off the Zoloft only a week before, against doctor’s advice, and now a formless and cryptic anxiety chattered, nagging, at his back. He needed a talisman. He needed mojo. He needed to weave a protective circle around Janey. The coyote’s neck was tough and he swung the axe high over his head, over and over. He saw himself in his head, a cartoon buzzard, dark and gangly, covered in dirt from the flower beds at

Mrs Carlson's, wild black hair flying as he chopped and hacked at a dead coyote in a darkening stubble field. He knew that if Doctor Morton could see him now he would frown his worried frown, the dome of his head gleaming, and reach for the prescription pad. But he was pretty sure he was all right, in control.



Last night though, when he returned to bed after crouching silent and still at the front window for thirty minutes, his senses probing the darkness surrounding the house, he'd been a tense bundle of knotted muscle and raw nerves, his jaw clenched and his leg twitching rhythmically. Janey knew what he was thinking. She spoke softly, carefully, her voice serious but calm. Soothing. "It's OK, baby," she said, "I've killed those bastards a thousand times. I'm done with them." She reached over and turned on the reading lamp next to the bed. "Look at me. I'm fine," she said, her green eyes holding him in place, nodding slowly. "I'm fine, baby. We win. We win. OK?"



He crunched across the stubble field to the truck, the axe swinging from his right hand, the coyote's head dangling by one ear from his left, the stars glistening overhead like dew on a spider's web spun down a deep, dark, old well. He felt and saw the curve of the earth, and saw space begin right down there at his feet. He stood on the curving skin of the world, surrounded by cold black space, and imagined the feel of Janey's eyelids against his lips.



He'd been working at Mrs. Carlson's since June. Janey's Aunt Jane, whom he'd also done some work for, played bridge with Mrs. Carlson, and knew she wanted some flower beds dug. Janey went along to make introductions and to reassure Mrs. Carlson. She *had* seemed a little uneasy at first, her hand twitching at the lined and hanging skin of her throat as she stood, hesitating, at the gate, looking up at him out of watery eyes.

But when she saw how nice he dug the first flower bed, with precise curving edges cut clean and deep and the soil worked up fine, raked flat and even, she said to him, "That's lovely, son," and taking the wiry, bunched, muscle of his long forearm gently, holding it lightly between thumb and wispy fingers, asked, "Could you put another one over here next to the walk?" She guided him delicately across the grass, the air buzzing with insects and heat. He surrendered himself to her, focusing his attention on the soft touch of her fingertips, like ladybugs, or the smooth round

surfaces of weathered acorns. He opened his senses to the slightest change in the pressure of her light grip, offering her the least possible resistance. He looked down at the bun that held back her gray hair. The stark white line of scalp. A tiny fleck of lint, or sawdust. He waved away a fly that circled tightly in the air above her head. She indicated, with a short sweep of her free hand, a stretch of lawn, next to a crumbling walkway that led from the side door to the alley.

“Here. For roses.” She released his arm and he began digging, searching down into the dark soil with the sharp edge of his shovel. Mrs. Carlson nodded once, and disappeared into the house. An hour later he straightened and stretched, and saw a blue glass pitcher of homemade lemonade, iced and sweating, waiting in the cool shade of the chokecherry bushes, further down the walkway.

He found himself digging flower beds all over Mrs. Carlson’s big lawn. She said she found the patterns comforting and over the course of that summer, he reduced her lawn to mere green paths between clean shapes of freshly turned black earth. He liked the work. It satisfied something in him to see Mrs. Carlson so pleased. She seemed to see in the patterns of oval and rectangular mounds an ordered and reasonable universe in miniature. But he knew that beneath that finely crumbled, black soil lay embedded, coiled and gripping the dark earth, the twisted roots of weeds that he’d never quite get out, no matter how hard he sweated and strained. There would always be more. He could scrape with his fingers, dig and pull and scratch, search out their channeled niches – hoping against hope to eradicate the last sprouting remnant. But they would elude him, extending down into the earth forever, piecing and pushing through the territory of the worms, like hairs on the skin or a gleaming dome – the insistent, searching tendrils of chaos.



He lay staring into the dark after they had gone back to bed, listening to her breathing, then snoring. He heard the shots over and over again, saw dark figures skulking through the fields. He felt the sudden tiny change in the air pressure of the room, the barely discernible shock wave set in motion by someone, a sneaking assassin, pushing sharply against the locked front door, testing it. Janey lay on her back, peaceful, while he held his long body tense and rigid as a plank, trying not to fidget and wake her. Impossible to sleep. Flitting shadows scuttling crab-wise through his head and whispered prophecies of bloody, slapstick mayhem – the millions of everyday dyings. The dull, obstinate banality of death angered him. It ate up the good with the bad. Ravenous, heedless, it devoured all of life. Like the progeny of certain species of insects it was hardwired to feed on its own

mother, eating her from the inside out, forever, reborn each moment, a corrupt infant with a shifting, squirming skin of white maggots. Life's own fat, greedy baby.

He rolled over and looked at Janey sleeping next to him. Her hair radiated out from her head, a black halo against the white of her pillow. Only when she slept did he really see how small she was. Awake she seemed larger, sometimes larger than him. She would be looking up at him, talking to him in her smooth, calming voice, her green, wide-set eyes so . . . *open*. . . he felt he could just walk right on in.

He got up twice to check the deadbolt. His ears probed the quiet for the subtle twig snap of creeping disaster. Janey looked so exposed, lying there quiet and still, that he tensed instinctively, protectively, against the press of the world's malice that pushed at the walls of the little house. He tried to shut his mind to such thoughts, but they always came skulking back again. Something dark out there, slouching its way, not toward him, but toward her. He did not feel threatened directly. In fact, he knew his existence was not acknowledged by whatever forces were at work, his protective impulse overwhelmed by them like a handful of sand in a hurricane wind. He was a ghost – beyond threat and unable to exert any influence on the world through which he moved. And like the ghosts of ghost stories, a single fixed idea, a current, pulled him through the world, the headless horseman in search of his head, the flickering mother on the rocky shore, howling at the sea for the return of her drowned children. With him it was Janey.

Janey often visited her sister down in Red Falls. He always saw her off, standing there while she got behind the wheel, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his stomach in knots. The smash and grind of metal and glass rang in his head. He fidgeted, picturing every inch of that narrow twisting highway, roaring with logging trucks, knowing that she'd pass within inches of death every few seconds.

He caught her in her sweats one morning, cinching down the laces of her running shoes. He stopped and stood over her with an armful of firewood, his other hand tapping the cold stove, telling her that running was *prey behavior* and provoked cougar attacks. If she cooked dinner, he stood and stared, transfixed, as she sliced a green pepper, the rapid strokes of the sharp blade flashing so near the tender skin of her fingertips.



Mrs. Carlson always left the door of the house open for him if she needed to run errands while he was there working. "In case you need to use the bathroom, or get a drink of water."

Sometimes, even if he didn't need water or the toilet, he went inside and just stood there with his eyes closed, breathing in the house's air, a warm, comforting smell – fresh bread, lingering fumes of countless nourishing soups. Vinegar. Dust. Mrs. Carlson always displayed her grandchildren's scrawly crayon drawings on the icebox. Pictures of lopsided and fragile looking houses, of thin, awkward figures whose ballooning heads threatened to topple them, of dinosaurs and monsters dripping blood from yellow fangs, held in place by magnets shaped like slices of watermelon, tiny bunches of grapes, lemons. Sometimes he came in, poured a glass of water from the tap, and just sat, in the middle of the kitchen floor, drinking his water while the empty house whispered around him.

Shortly after starting work at Mrs. Carlson's, he went into the house to get a glass of water. As he drank it, he moved around the kitchen, opening cupboards and drawers, standing and looking inside at wooden bowls, corkscrews, coffee cups. He loved the little everyday objects, worn with use and the sliding of hands. Old tools with wooden handles, a woman's hairbrush. His own coffee cup, a chipped and stained white mug of glazed ceramic, like you'd find in almost any diner, pulsed with ritual significance. He drank down darkness from that cup every morning, a strong, bitter antidote.

He opened one of the cupboards above the counter, to the left of the sink. A shelf stored plastic packs of red paper napkins and Christmas dishes with pictures of red-suited Santas and green holly wreaths. The lower shelf held little jars of spices: cumin, paprika, black peppercorns, nutmeg. A prescription bottle. He reached carefully and turned the bottle so that the label faced him. Diazepam. 10 mg. Qty. 60. Valium, just the thing for jangled nerves. He picked the bottle up and shook it – a full, maraca-like sound. She must hardly use them. The date on the bottle read April 14th, almost three months old and hardly touched. He shook three of them out into his palm and replaced the bottle quickly. He swallowed one of the pills with a slug of water, anticipating the welcome calming effect, the sweet chemical precision of relief.

But when he saw Mrs. Carlson coming up the walk with a grocery bag, his various parts conspired in mutiny against him. His legs carried him directly over to her of their own accord. His lips and tongue confessed the theft in a shaky voice. His extended hand offered to return the two pills he *hadn't* already swallowed. She looked at his face, his eyes, down at the pills in his hand, back up to his eyes. He wasn't sure she understood, but then she reached out with her free hand, gently closed his fingers over the pills, and said, "That's all right, son, you keep them. They will help

you to sleep. I know.” She squeezed his hand once and continued on up the walk towards the house.

“I’m going to make some lunch. I’ll come and get you when it’s ready.”



On the highway, he watched the sun hesitate, the first light oozing up from behind the hills. He stared out at the sheared rows of harvested fields curving away, coming together in the distance, rolling by like the spokes of a wheel, in huge leaping steps, keeping pace with them. He slid, tipping over in the seat and coming to rest with his cheek, his open mouth, pressed against the cold glass. He heard Janey’s steady voice floating to him from the dome of lightening sky – “Hang on, baby.”

He lay awake until five, when he finally got up to split firewood by the porch light. He lost himself in the swinging rhythm, the satisfying pop of logs bursting apart, the solid bite of the axe in wood as they split, pitchy lengths piled up around the chopping block.

Janey’s face floated in the dark, just outside the ring of light. He pictured her safe and warm in bed. He knew that his constant anxiety for her safety worried her, but he couldn’t help it. Strange that once he’d been so blind to the lurking dangers of the world – before they met. He showed up for his appointment that Wednesday at Dr. Morton’s office and a thin girl draped in baggy t-shirt and jeans looked up, following his movements, her steady green eyes peering out from under choppy black bangs. He sat down on the opposite side of the room.

She was seeing a doctor down the hall from his, Rinehart. Psychologist. His own doctor, Doctor Morton, a psychiatrist, had been filing away at his rough edges with all the tools of the trade, Paxil, Effexor, Wellbutrin, a pharmaceutical cornucopia of anti-anxiety medications and anti-depressants, before settling on the Zoloft, which left him empty and flat inside, like all the others. He wanted off.

Janey had a regular appointment at the same time as his, and they both began showing up earlier and earlier. Each Wednesday they sat a little closer. She watched him, talked to him about her doctor, the weather, nothing in particular, just talking and watching. Inching closer. Then one day she came in late. He was already there and she walked over, sat down in the seat next to his, put her hand on his arm and squeezed. Afterwards she walked him to his truck, and the next week she got in the truck and he gave her a ride home. Finally, she asked him over for dinner. When they had been together almost a year, she told him about what had happened to her. She kept her voice

neutral, and described the assault in one short, clinical sentence. He wanted to comfort her, but somehow it turned out the other way around. She held him by the shoulders, at arm's length, and watched his face carefully, then squeezed him close, her face in the angle of his neck. The worry started there, growing.

He moved quickly, rhythmically, his jaw clamped down on itself and his breath heavy, the axe flashing down, burying itself in the chopping block as the split halves flew apart, the knocking clunk of wood on wood as they fell to the sides. The pile of split firewood rose almost to the edge of the chopping block.

It wasn't so bad at first, and for a while Janey enjoyed his fussy attentions, smiled indulgently at him hovering over her, holding her coat. A gallant, mothering scarecrow. He bought her a high powered canister of the most potent pepper spray available. It sat in her glove box, nestled among the clutter of sticky pennies, folded receipts and packets of ketchup like colorful blisters. He encouraged her to take a self-defense class. Janey liked the idea, but when she signed up and the classes started he always insisted on going over what she learned each session, practicing the moves with him playing the part of attacker. At first Janey had complied, executing deft restraints and quick sweeping blows feigned at his throat, his groin. But his insistent and grim enthusiasm made her self-conscious. It felt awkward, so she begged off. "We practice in class." To appease him, Janey periodically gave spontaneous demonstrations of her skill, sneaking up on him and throwing him to the ground with sure, subtle movements. He'd find himself on his back, immobilized in the trained grip of her limbs, her voice low in his ear, "Whatcha gonna do now?"

Then she caught him checking her brake lines one morning before she left for work – for tampering, he finally admitted when she pressed him for an explanation. "You quit taking your medication? Who do you think is trying to kill me?" She made an impatient, sweeping gesture that included the fields, the woods, "Raccoons?"

He saw danger swarming greedily around her at all times – drunken drivers, mad gunmen, falling fragments of dead satellites, carbon monoxide poisoning, other invisible death gases.

He picked up another length of firewood and balanced it with one hand on the chopping block. He wanted to change what had happened, hammer the world into a new shape, a new place. As he pulled his hand away, his leather glove snagged a splinter, just long enough, a split second, to set the heavy round to wobbling, widening its arc, like a fumbled salt shaker hanging at that moment

between settling solidly back down onto its base, or tipping past the point of no return and spilling out its white grains.



He and Janey and Mrs. Carlson, standing among evenly spaced flower beds – unplanted rows of beds, like fresh graves. Mrs. Carlson stood next to Janey and cradled Janey’s left hand in both of her own, holding it out slightly in front of her. She spoke to him, “She’s all right, see?” She gave Janey’s hand a little pat for emphasis. Then she turned and kneeled in the rectangle of loose black soil at her feet. She bent forward and began digging with her hands, digging down, growing stronger, making large smooth swimming motions with her arms in the soil – sinking in and down – laughing, before her head went under, stroking with her powerful arms, pulling herself down and down. The flowered fabric of her loose dress rippled, little yellow daisies on a blue background, pooling there on top of the soil, pulled under inch by inch, as she stroked downward in graceful motions, her body aimed at the dark calling center of the world, until only her stockinged toes remained, wiggling. And then those too slipped under and were gone. Janey spoke to the soil, dimpled at the spot where Mrs. Carlson’s toes had just disappeared.

“You still with me, baby?”



She heard his truck come up the driveway two hours after dark. She’d already been out in the field behind the house and seen the coyote. When he didn’t come in right away, she turned on the porch light and stepped out on the porch. He was there, bent over, digging a hole next to the bottom step, his long shadow swaying out behind him. She saw the head on the packed dirt next to him and looked at his face. She stepped over to the edge of the porch and looked down at him. “You’re burying it.” He nodded and she watched him finish the hole, cutting it round and deep and even. He settled the head down into the hole, and Janey came down and threw a handful of dirt on the sticky, matted hair.

“Come on,” she said. “Finish with it. Let’s go in.”



The wheel of the earth spinning. The road. His face against cold glass. Janey’s voice on the radio saying strange things – hands on, maybe, well all those deer. A fat doe jumps into the headlights and Janey’s car swerves out of control, rolling over and over across an empty field. We’ll



almost dare? He is behind the house looking down at the dead coyote. Then it is his body with the shotgunned hole in the chest. Then it's Janey.

"Hang on, baby. We're almost there."



He swung the axe overhead in a wide arc, saw the length of firewood still teetering and tried too late, to check his swing. The blade glanced off to the side and down and hit the inside of his lower leg, cutting to bone, and burying itself in the meat of his calf. He let go of the axe handle and it stayed there, suspended in the air in front of him. He stepped backwards, stumbled, and fell, the blade twisting painfully in the cut. He took hold of the handle again and moved it slightly. Blood gushed, the weight of the axe holding the wound open. He felt dizzy. Idiot. He looked around for something, what? The only logical thing – get the blade out. He grasped the handle gently this time, held it. His hands felt his leg's pulse through the axe handle, the strange sensation of being connected in places he shouldn't be connected. Other connections disconnecting. He gritted his teeth and gripped the handle firmly. He pulled – a flash of white, gray, again. He finally wrenched the blade free, and the blood flowed even faster. A dark puddle spread quickly on the packed dirt beneath his leg. He rolled over, trying to stand. When he put weight on the leg, he felt a flash of white pain. Then, groaning and cursing on the ground, he saw Janey's face in front of him, felt her hand pressing against the wound as he rocked and moaned. Janey's level voice in his ear, "Hold still," she said. She unbuckled his belt with her free hand and pulled it snaking from the loops. She cinched it down tight above the hole. She ran inside and came back out folding a white t-shirt, her flowered long underwear trailing over the crook of her arm. She tied the folded shirt tight against the wound with the underwear, wrapping it around twice and already blood soaked through, red and wet. She knelt and wrapped her arm around him, helped him up and over to the truck. "Where are your keys? We've got to go. Now." His face was white and blurry as he dug into his pocket. She looked down. His jeans on that side were soaked in blood, shining wetly. A small, red pool formed, swelling out darkly around his boot. Too much blood.

She slid her shoulder under his arm and helped him into the passenger seat of the truck. She ran around and got behind the wheel and cursed at the grinding whine of the starter chugging over but the engine not catching. The sharp metallic smell of his blood was strong in the cold cab of the truck, and again the starter grinding, grinding, "shit," and finally catching.

On the way to town he coated the floorboard with a sticky film of his blood. It was only thirty miles in, but the blood flowed without stopping and his face turned from white to gray. He mumbled, trying to focus, stay aware. He sagged unmoving against the door, staring out from under drooping eyelids, heavy, watching the cut rows of fields file past, unable to turn his head. Janey heard him say something about a deer in the road, watch out, but no deer in sight, then, a few minutes later, Mrs. Carlson's name, her own name. They reached the outskirts of town just as the sun was peeking over the hills, the day coming cold and clear.

At the emergency room, two nurses dragged him out of the truck and up onto a stretcher. They rolled him inside, shouting ahead to prepare the way. Figures in white and blue moved busily around his prone length, brandishing needles, tubes, shining plastic bags of plasma.

They stitched up his leg, set the bone. They filled his veins with new blood. They pulled him back into the world with their eyes and with the steady knowledge of their hands. They gave him an injection that spread through his belly, his muscles, warm, tingling, and the pain backed away. He nodded in and out of consciousness, wondering what had happened to Janey, remembering the blood, her there, wrapping the wound. He remembered the road, the red morning light on the fields. The undulating spokes of a huge wheel that leapt across the hillsides. Mrs. Carlson, her daisy print dress billowing out behind her, swimming with smooth powerful strokes through the dark earth netted with the complex branchings of roots.

He saw Janey standing naked in a lighted room. Black night peered in through windows that quivered with the room's reflection, watching her. She pushed once, with both hands, against the air, and the blank, watching panes shivered and exploded outwards, shattering into galaxies, falling.

Janey laughed and laughed. She smiled at him.

"See?" The sound of her voice wrapped around him, warm.

She made a sudden smooth motion, her right arm flashing out from the elbow, and a bridge of flung sand arced out into the empty air and hung between them, suspended.



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## **G.H.E.T.T.O**

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*by Norman Golar*

Gun shots,  
Holes pierced through ribs  
Every night, a new corpse  
Tripped over, kicked  
To see if it is alive.  
Once, it was Patrick.

Gangbanged like  
His brother.  
Extra clips pocketed with drugs.  
The gun at his hip. He worked for money,  
Touched his waist for protection,  
On the year's shambles.

Game: to sling drugs to ill--  
Hearted addicts. Patrick  
Extended the drug to weary hands.  
The money stacked,  
Teasing Patrick with future hopes  
Or his mother's premonitions.

Gangs protected their own, the way  
His mother tried. Patrick  
Escaped her agenda,  
Taking on plans his Chief  
Thought fit. Organization  
Or family, they watched after one another.

Granted with comers as spots,  
He got a lot of customers.  
Each member with their own.  
They reported to Chief with  
The ends made weekly.  
Ordinary duties for the

Guilty. Patrick mirrored other profiles before  
His death sprawled his body –  
Each community in Chicago  
Talked about who's coming up –  
    making the dough in  
The week's news, and how everything basically rots  
On every comer.

Gangsta, Lit Boy,  
Heavy, C-Note,  
E, Jodi,  
Trav, Kirk,  
Tank, Barri,  
Otis, and others  
Got the unexpected –  
Head, chest, and leg shots.  
Even ass shots, and to  
Think these were vets  
To the game. They knew how  
Or when to shut down the spot.

Gallant cops  
Hissed at gang members, but  
Every officer was threatened by  
Tart drug lords. When shots spat,  
The police played ghosts, dealers the ghouls,  
Ordained to control fate.

God knows Patrick now, more than  
He ever expected to. Similar to the rest –  
Excited, but  
Thoughtless, and  
Trampled by nameless bullets  
On sudden chance – Patrick's body didn't budge when  
a customer stumbled over him.

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***So That She Would Not***, a poem in response to Kenneth Miller Adams' "Portrait of a Native Girl"

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by *Christin Elise Kuchem*

In a quiet room sits,  
hard eyes and soft dress,  
a girl posing  
involuntarily.

He painted her skin  
rich, with turquoise,  
coral, and the entire  
spectrum of desert-mesa browns.

He placed her in light,  
to capture the sun,  
stolen from her sky.  
Then told her to smile  
so that she would not.

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**Pushed Out Nail Hole**

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by *Oliver Good*

If something were lost I wouldn't have heard that bell ring,  
*pur – Ring, pur – Ring, pur – Ring – the – receiver.*

I am a shape against the glass

moonling over nothing

in the heart of America  
where the crow flies straight

we make worlds and we make words.  
We wear fragrant oils to church and smile  
when we shouldn't. The piano is out of tune.  
The organ is out of air. Less. I'm listening to

quiet sounds, *cricket. Cricket.*

My knife comes from the coast.

There is a small door in the chapel under the upstairs stairs,  
past cloak and hanger, crucifix and card tower.  
My friends carve their names there. I've done  
the same. We smoke the same cigarette.

We wish for what wouldn't have happened,  
a chance to catch our self – smoldering *fast*  
*red bud ash flickering*  
reminded of a bell dying.

Elsewhere lent philosophy

*God is ether imagination satisfaction.*

I felt a layer lift – *skitter – scatter* – held my eyes.  
I'm a recluse. We reside behind pictures.

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## **Story Digger**

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by Nikol Watson

The mesas bloomed full that April morning when Uncle Newt's truck dipped into McElmo Canyon, heading for home. Yucca plants erupted in graceful shoots of white pom-pom heads, cactus blossoms turned face-up to the sun, sage glowed silver-green against red sandstone. From the brush, jackrabbits skittered as Uncle Newt steered toward his ranch at the head of Sleeping Ute Mountain in southwestern Colorado. His adobe brick house squatted at the base of a mesa this side of the red dirt road. On the opposite side was the Ute reservation where Uncle Newt ran cattle year round.

To the east, snow capped the La Plattas, promising the area farmers enough water for a lengthy growing season. But Uncle Newt wouldn't live long enough to see the ground tilled. He never even made it back to the ranch that day. His heart gave out along the narrow curves of the canyon floor. Truck pulled to the side of the road, he stumbled out and died face down in that red dirt. Tourists on their way to Mesa Verde saw him on the ground but didn't stop. When they reached Cortez they told the sheriff that another "damn Indian" was lying "piss drunk" in the road outside of town. That's where the deputies found Uncle Newt, dead. They identified him as one of the Roubidoux brothers who ranched the area. Not Navajo or Ute, not even full-blooded. From the dirt lodged beneath Uncle Newt's fingernails it appeared as though he'd tried to claw a few more feet toward home before his heart ticked out. On April 3, 1913 the family buried him in the Cortez cemetery. I was born eight months later, but would not learn the story of Uncle Newt's death for thirty years, when I thought I'd been told all there was to tell about my Indian ancestors.



It is April when I drive my grandfather toward Dolores, entering the landscape of his childhood. It will be the last time he sees this canvas of mesa and juniper. He dozes in the passenger seat, head falling toward the window. Sunlight filters through his thin stand of hair. He has been unusually silent this trip, deep in his mourning of my grandmother – now three months dead – he is nearly lost in his grief. I'm hoping this trip will steady him in the world.

I am road weary, having left my home in northern Idaho to travel to Utah, my childhood home, to gather Grandpa and drive him to his childhood home in southwestern Colorado. It's a trip we've taken together before. When I was sixteen and my grandfather was still young with dreams,

we spent a June week at my great-aunt's house in Dolores. I hiked the mesa tops, impaled my leg with a yucca needle, and was given my first cold can of beer.

“Don’t tell your parents,” Grandpa warned, “They’ll have my hide.”

It took me most of the evening to sip down the beer, but I carried that can around as if its mere presence in my hand could transform me into something I was not: older, mature, sexy, rebellious – the fact that there were no young men to notice escaped me. I soon gave up trying to drink the beer for appearance’s sake and joined my elders in the living room for a nightly story session.

This road, leading to the Four Corners, is a road of stories and bloodlines. Whether traveling its hills and curves with my grandpa or my father, the tales are the same. I know them by heart and by landscape. Even before I had walked this ground I knew my family’s connection to it. Grandpa’s stories of growing up on the Dolores River and running cows on Tailor Mesa were family legends my brother and I could repeat verbatim. When my father talked about the reservation where his grandfather was born, I assumed it was located in Colorado; it was the only landscape I imagined my family inhabiting, though I knew we did not belong to the Navajo or Ute tribes which call this area home. But the fact that my family had settled near these people in the land of the Anasazi thrilled me.

At the age of six I wanted nothing more than to be an Indian. My best friends were Native Americans whose parents worked at the Inter-Mountain Indian School in Brigham City, Utah. They were kids who knew their culture, and I was envious of this knowledge. My father, who knew nothing of his tribal traditions, took me to the local pow-wows and promised to make me a buckskin dress from the elk and deer hides he brain-tanned in an underground pit behind the house. I used to sneak down to the basement and pull the smoky skins from a wooden chest in his work room. Draped in cotton-soft hides I would dance circles around the room, pretending I was an Indian princess and my father was a great chief.

When Dad told me we were to visit his family in Dolores, Colorado, I couldn’t sleep for a week. I had never met my father’s people, that I could remember. I imagined tepees and campfires and people dressed in feathered regalia. At the time it did not occur to me that no one in my family owned regalia or could carry a tune, much less dance. It didn’t matter, I was anxious to share a commonality with my Indian classmates. I would tell them that I too belonged to a tribe, that I was a *real* Indian. The excitement was almost too much to bear.



We left for Colorado before the sun breached the peaks of the Wasatch Mountains, and by late afternoon had crossed the Utah-Colorado border. As we lobbed through bean fields and veered south, Dad pointed out Sleeping Ute Mountain. I couldn't make out the head, arms, knees, it just looked like any other bump in the earth. Dad kept pointing and swerving until Mom told him to watch the road.

"You see him now?" Dad asked, a few miles further. I strained to see something that resembled a sleeping Indian. "One day he'll wake up to lead his people," Dad continued. I squinted at this great warrior lying in the desert, doubtful. But as we drew closer to Cortez, I saw him, the headdress and outline of face, the arms folded neatly over his chest, the jut of knee caps, and finally his big toe sticking up across the border in New Mexico, just as Dad had described. "I see it," I yelled, and pleaded for my father to tell me the legend of the sleeping warrior again. "Are we one of his people?" I asked. When my father told me no, I was more than a little disappointed. I couldn't understand tribal distinctions. Why couldn't we belong to this warrior? More than anything, I wanted to be part of this mountain's legend, or find one of my own just as heroic.

"Tell me a story about our tribe," I asked my father. He turned off the main highway and headed east toward Dolores.

"I don't know any," he said. "The only stories I know are about this place right here." He pointed to the landscape passing outside the car window. Thick stands of juniper rose up on either side of the road, the bark hanging like shredded curtains from twisting trunks. Red dirt, sage brush and yucca needles pricking the air. By the age of six I had heard most of my grandpa's stories a dozen times or more; how he quit the one-room schoolhouse during eighth grade to tend cows; how he shot a man in the arm when the guy threw a snake on him; how his mother used him as a messenger boy to carry her love notes to the man down river. However interesting, these weren't the stories I wanted. Where were the tales about Indians? About my great-grandfather growing up on the reservation? Weren't Indians supposed to pass on their stories and legends through oral tradition? My grandpa never told me what I wanted to hear: that I was an Indian with as rich a heritage as my school friends, and should declare my bloodlines with pride. But all I ever got out of Grandpa was, "Everyone in the canyon was poor those days, and that's all that mattered. Life was hard enough."

After the disappointment of Ute Mountain, I had little hope of a bright future, but my spirits lifted when we pulled into Aunt Lillian's driveway at the base of a steep-sided mesa. Lillian took my brother, Paul, and me under each arm and escorted us into another world. Her house overflowed

with Indian artifacts that she and her husband Harold had collected on their ranch over the years. Display cases held Anasazi pottery, baskets, spearheads, arrowheads, manos, metate, bits of blankets, bones. I stared in awe as Harold described the name and purpose of each piece, told us how long it had taken him to patch everything together. The Anasazi became the greatest mystery to me; an enigmatic people who lived in the shadowed overhang of slickrock cliffs.

That trip we spent every possible day at Mesa Verde National Park, just a hill and valley away from Lillian's house. Paul and I would scurry down the switch backs into Cliff Palace, descend the log ladders into silent kivas. We waited for ghost voices to rise like smoke trails. Our backs pressed against the cool rock walls, we whispered to each other, said we could feel the spirits of the Anasazi beside us. Our skin rough with goose pimples, we'd scurry up the ladder into the sun on the canyon rim. Mesa Verde was a solemn place then not yet accustomed to the buzz of tourists, left open to our own imaginings. Anthropologists had not yet discovered the history of the Anasazi; they were a lost tribe, a people mysteriously wiped from record. Knowing no real history of my own tribe, I felt a kinship toward these "Ancient Ones" who dwelled in cliffs, erected temples on mesa tops, and disappeared from their canyon communities around 1200 A.D.

I couldn't understand how a civilization could just disappear, like a section of a history book torn out. It frustrated me that no one could tell the Anasazi's story; surely their people had survived somewhere. Years later I would learn that the Hopi and Pueblo Indians held descendants of the Anasazi, a logical conclusion given their tribal locations. These people hadn't been entirely wiped out; their Kachina culture had survived and I was jealous. I no longer felt a connection to a people I once felt were lost. Thousands of years after leaving their cliff dwellings, they still had their stories, their legends and customs. I had known from a young age that there were people called the Ioway, that they lived in Kansas on the Ioway reservation, that I was an enrolled member, but I knew nothing of their culture or traditions. As a child I believed that was the only thing that alienated me from my "true Indian" friends.



Grandpa is silent. I can see Sleeping Ute Mountain, but I don't point it out to him. He has not told me any stories during our drive and I worry that he is too sad to recall the past. I'm hoping his sister, Lillian, will help him remember. My reasons for coming to this corner of Colorado are selfish: I am after stories, want to collect them before they are lost. I want to know about my ancestors, who they were, where they came from. Psychologists say that once people reach a certain

age they regress into their pasts. I am hoping my grandpa will remember things he might have forgotten in his prime; I am hoping Aunt Lillian will charm the stories out of him.

It was my great-aunts who fed my curiosity for all things Native American; my grandpa's sisters, Lillian and Lola, small women with broad smiles and big noses, like mine. They were the first to tell me I had "the Indian" in me. Not the Ioway features like their father or Uncle Newt, but Osage, like their mother Ernestine, a woman too noticeable to have lasted in that forgotten corner of Colorado. "She was misplaced," they said. But weren't they all misplaced?

Over the years I've tried to piece together my family's history, tried to make sense of the stories, to fill the silent gaps with my own questions. I know nothing of Ernestine's family, only that her father burned their tribal records for society's sake. The stories I know, I have researched and belong to the Ioway, who hold our tribal enrollment: the Utes, who suffered enslavement at the hands of my French ancestors and the Navajo who my family lived among in the Four Corners area.

The Ioway, my great-grandfather's people, are nearly forgotten in their federally recognized splitting and blood dilution. On the university library shelves they make up one or two thin books, usually lumped together with the Sac and Fox tribes of the same area. They are *Bakhoje*, a nickname given them by their sister tribes the Missouri and Otoes. It means "Ashen Headed"; at some point the Ioway were witnessed in the aftermath of a wind storm, the ash from lodge fires coating their hair like snow.

My ancestors are Roubidoux, half-breeds of French/Indian descent, from the Ioway tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, a crumb-sized reservation on the Rand McNally road atlas. My great-great-grandpa left this reservation near Hiawatha, Kansas to find a new life in the southwest corner of Colorado. I don't know why he left. To seek a better life? To be known not as Indians, but as ranchers and miners? It seems the Ioway people have been migrating west since the Europeans showed up in their neighborhood of the upper Great Lakes region hundreds of years ago. Their home was the stretch of land, from woodlands to plains, between the two great rivers, the Missouri, and Mississippi. They dug the earth to plant corn, squash, beans – "an industrious people accustomed to cultivating the earth" – so the books say.

In Colorado my family dug the earth for silver. Black and white photos show the creased faces of my great-grandpa, aunts, uncles, their bodies thin, tall, short, their faces proud, as if they were accomplishing something great. They cut their hair, wore suit coats and baseball uniforms, drove Buicks and Fords. They had been taught by a generation before them that the only hope they as reservation half-breeds had for success was to forget their Indian customs and adopt the

industry and economy of the white man.

At the age of sixteen, my grandfather entered the Rico mines and worked below ground for two years. One day he and his cousin, Junior, decided to go topside for lunch and crawled their way out of the tunnel to sit in the sun. When they ducked back inside they found the shaft collapsed, their tools buried beneath the debris. Not long after that Grandpa headed west again, to San Diego where he joined the Navy. When that didn't take he moved to Los Angeles where he spent forty years as an electrician, and made turquoise Indian jewelry in his basement to sell to the wealthy of the Whittier hills.

From what I've learned of my ancestors, it seems they spent most of their lives trying to get away from their Indian heritage. I wonder what they would say if they knew I was trying to find a way back.



I am unprepared for the shock I receive when I help Grandpa up the steps into Aunt Lillian's house. Nothing is as I remembered. She has taken a new husband since Harold's death and has moved the cases of Indian artifacts from the house. I want to ask her where she has put them, but am afraid she will tell me they no longer exist. She leads me to a bedroom at the west end of the house, past a vacant wall that once held a collage of Roubidoux family reunion photos. When she asks if I'll be comfortable in the guest room I smile and assure her I will, hoping my voice is upbeat enough to convince her.

Grandpa is at the kitchen counter drinking coffee, catching up on the local news, when I join him. Aunt Lillian turns her attention to me, asks what I've been writing about lately. I tell her, "About being an Indian," then pause, "or *not* being an Indian." She laughs.

"That is the question, hon," she says, "It's all about the blood." She repeats herself, then turns to rinse out the coffee mugs.

I've often questioned why I'm the only one in the family who seems overly concerned with my Indian heritage. Perhaps it's my fascination with the unknown, or the guilt I feel about the Ute Indians my French ancestors mistreated, or my desire to know more about the Ioway tribe before it becomes altogether lost. I'm an enrolled member of the Ioway Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, but so far that has meant nothing more than a chance to get some tribal money and federal assistance to go to college. I want it to mean more, but I am hesitant. Will I become the wannabe I once was as a child? The truth is, once the blood is measured Osage and Ioway – is it enough to give me the privilege of claiming my heritage? Do I have the right to speak about

Native Americans as if I am one of them? Or do I blend in with Caucasians and keep silent a voice which can bare witness of the Ioway tribe and my family's history within it? The measure of blood has never felt so defining.

In 1906, Jacob B. Jackson, a Choctaw, begged a senate committee to allow him to emigrate with his people from Indian Territory to Mexico in order to preserve their bloodlines. He and the rest of the "real" Indians in his conservative group were anxious to pull up stakes before any more half-breeds diluted their people. Any liberals in the tribe who defended the mixed members were questioned as to where their loyalties lay – certainly they weren't "true" Indians.

Twenty years earlier the last of the Ioway traditionalists packed up and moved south to Indian Territory for the same reasons Jackson cited. They'd had enough of marriages outside the tribe, of blood dilution and white influence. I wonder how many Ioway joined Jackson's cause. I can't say I blame them. The Ioway traditions were dying out, getting lost in the shuffle of European influence and cross-breeding. In the late 1890s, the Dawes Commission, a group of men led by Senator Henry Dawes, managed to drive a wedge between the tribes, pitting progressives against conservatives and dividing tribal land into smaller allotments. Indians were encouraged to sell or lease their "excess" lands to non-Indians and to assimilate themselves into white society. Separatist groups sprang up among the more conservative tribal members, hoping to retaliate against the Dawes reforms and reestablish tribal autonomy. Lines were clearly scratched in the dirt between "real" Indians and their "traitor" counterparts. It didn't matter; in the end the government decided which tribes would claim what corner of the United States. Some of the Ioways stayed in Oklahoma, the rest, mostly mixed-bloods, were set in a tiny scrap of northeastern Kansas, where they lived in clapboard houses with picket fenced yards.



"Uncle Newt looked as full-blooded as they come," Lillian says. She has indulged my request for stories by emptying boxes of photos onto her counter top. She seems as anxious as me to shuffle through them. I take the picture from her – a group photo of women in gunny sack dresses, men stretched across meadow grass in rolled cuff jeans, toddlers hanging on arms and straddling waists. Lillian names off my great-grandpa's brothers and sisters-in-law, nieces, nephews. She points to a dark-skinned woman, the best dressed of the group, posing straight and somber in the corner.

"She was a great-aunt, come out to visit us from the reservation," Lillian says. "She

couldn't believe how trashy things were out here. Thought herself much better than the local Indians." Which meant she didn't think much of her own relatives, my grandpa's family, who lived in a quaker-pole cabin on the banks of the Dolores river, ate scrapple for breakfast, and grubbed for roots and berries.

Grandpa takes the photo, laughs, then tells me a story of when he visited the reservation as a boy. He says he never cared for the shine of his great-aunt's house, or the way he was made to scrub up for dinner. "They didn't live like any Indians I knew," Grandpa says. "They were a high-class bunch."

Maybe that's why Louis Roubidoux took his family west. Maybe all these years I've had it wrong. Perhaps my half-breed family were some of the separatists trying to preserve the old ways, not good enough to band with the "real" Indians down south, but too good to give up their ways altogether. Perhaps the question of blood amount made it impossible for them to stay on the reservation where full-bloods claimed the impossible status of "real." Here in Colorado they spoke their own language, assimilated with the whites when it suited their purpose, and allied with the Utes and Navajos when it mattered. Their bones mark their territory in the southwest desert just as their ancestors' burial mounds mark the bluffs of northeast Iowa. Their blood is in the earth.



The next afternoon in Dolores is cold. Amid a flurry of snow, I drive with Grandpa beneath the rim of Tailor Mesa where he herded cattle as a boy. We visit the one-room schoolhouse where he lasted until eighth grade. He shows me the Rico mines where he dug, the Dolores river where he fished. We visit the headstones of my great-aunts, uncles, grandparents who rest in the shadow of Sleeping Ute Mountain. We take long drives into the dry, red ravines of McElmo Canyon, where stone houses fall away to three-story homes meant to blend into the slickrock and juniper. The cottonwoods on the canyon bottom are budding, the inch-high grass is green, and heavy clouds carry a threat of serious snow.

"You wouldn't know McElmo Canyon now," Lillian says, pointing out the window to a blur of sage brush and Navajo willow. "It's all growed up into houses – pretty houses and stuff."

"I tell you," Grandpa says from the front seat, "the way things have built up around here, if I moved back, I'd have a hard time findin' me a place to hunt rabbits."

Lillian mutters her agreement then leans close, stretching her finger toward the opposite window. We're passing below the peak which makes up the sleeping Ute's folded arms atop his chest. "Uncle Newt said that up on top of there is the mouth of a volcano." She points to the tip of the Ute's fingers. "Us kids used to hike up there tryin' to find it, but we tired 'fore we reached

the top. ‘Course he was probably windy like someone else we know.” She nods toward Grandpa and laughs. I realize that storytelling is in the blood, and passes one generation to the next.

We skirt an outcrop of rock, taking the corner slow, then come out in a green stretch of valley. “This was all part of Uncle Newt’s ranch,” Lillian says. Grandpa can’t recall the lay of the land. “Daddy and Bessy lived in a little ol’ shack over there,” Lillian tells him. She points out a narrow strip of dirt near a red canyon wall. When my great-grandpa sold his place on the Dolores river he moved out here, to work on Uncle Newt’s ranch. I’m unsure what constituted the move, my grandpa was grown and gone by then. I make a mental note to get the story from uncle Mitch, my grandpa’s much younger half-brother who grew up out here.

This is a land of contrasts, greens against reds, desert holding a flourish of juniper and sage. Indians from the Ute reservation at the end of this road catch rides to Cortez in fancy rancher’s rigs. It is a land of stories, some untold. I take my video camera out and film the passing landscape while Lillian’s husband Don drives. Out the rear window is Mesa Verde National Park, where they now require tour tickets, and the historical renderings of the Anasazi are not the stories I remember.

Someone recently told me that the park rangers now tell visitors that “Anasazi” is no longer a politically correct term to describe the ancient ones who dwelled in the slick rock cliffs. This disturbs me. I feel their story fading.

We reach the end of the pavement and slow to a crawl. “Uncle Newt died out here somewhere, didn’t he?” Grandpa asks.

“Pert’ near,” Lillian says. I ask how he died and they tell me the story. I’ve never before heard my grandpa mention his Indian heritage with such guarded emotion – his veins rise to the surface of his sagging skin and his lips quiver as he recalls the tourists who sped past Uncle Newt because he looked too much like an Indian. Then the story is done and the car is silent. It is the first I have heard tell of Uncle Newt’s death, and I don’t know what to feel. What does it mean to be Indian? Who has the right to say they are Native Americans? I tell people I am on a quest for my roots, that I am tracing bloodlines and they respond, “Why do you care?” I don’t say aloud that I care because I have heard too many Americans of European descent say we should ship all the foreigners home, close the borders to immigration; that I care because *not* knowing one’s bloodlines spawns ignorance and prejudice, or that I care because humility and respect comes from knowing what blood runs in my veins. I don’t tell them I think they are wrong for *not* caring.

The red dirt beneath the tires is marbled with white alkali. I can imagine Uncle Newt spread out on the ground, his face warm against the earth, hands digging toward home. I read recently that loway legend says that when we die our spirits walk the trails we have taken in life. I have found the

trail I have been searching for since I was a child; it is a trail of stories, of blood ties, and I have only set foot at the head of it. I let the video camera roll as I scribble notes on ruled paper, picking up words like bits of dropped crumbs. I collect these words so I can pass them on; I dig them up to keep them from being buried.





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***crying like a weather front***

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by Phoebe Reeves

not cumulus thoughts

dark-hued boulders of water

leaning into

lightning

as if release

from electrostatic emotions

were a natural process

I have no instinct      no

weather  
pattern

my birds fly west in winter

my thoughts hibernate in august

the harvest is unpredictable

crops stubborn

and still

no rain

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**Rain, three continents**

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by Gayle Mak

1

They announced you  
at the end of October. The first  
significant  
rain  
since spring.  
Predicted to fall on Halloween. This  
fall, my first  
in a new country far removed  
from the equator.  
Temperate, seasonal, promising  
sudden shifts in temperatures  
that I must learn to navigate  
in Fahrenheit, the world  
no longer  
unwavering in degree  
Celsius.

2

I think of May,  
five months ago.  
All cold,  
wet rain pelting  
down on the flat Perth landscape.  
Famous blue skies washed  
to a soggy gray, colors all  
rinsed out  
except for the blood red  
of my bridal *kua*, carefully hand-  
carried across the ocean by plane,  
obediently opened up  
for Customs' curious scrutiny, their *Ooohs*  
and *Aaahs* echoed, a day  
later, by 60 wedding guests, all  
strangers, for whom I was to parade  
my novel identity. I am  
the bride from the tropics, flown in  
to greet, smile, pour tea and lift  
the winter gloom with  
my auspicious garb,  
my chili reds, silvers and golds  
showcasing delicate peonies  
blooming in bewilderment  
in a foreign May, holding back

dragons gleaming, writhing  
in silk, tempted to leap  
off their embroidered threads  
into the rain  
cascading  
breathlessly  
outside.

3

Outside, it is raining again.  
As they predicted, the rain  
came on Halloween, and again  
a week later. I wake  
to nightfall at 3 pm, next to  
you, still deep in your nap. You  
sleep through the rain, unaware  
that your adopted California  
sunshine, like your Aussie  
sky in May, is all scrunched  
up into a sobbing mess.

I lie in bed and think of  
rain  
hard and fast  
smacking down everything in sight.  
The roar of water  
gushing through monsoon drains flooding  
knee-high  
onto roads. Above,  
the moans of Angsana trees, pregnant  
with pods, hunched over, branches  
twisted, heavy with rain  
water, threatening  
to break and spill  
the tropic over  
and over  
in the thunder  
clap  
of a lightning bolt that freezes  
the evening sky – for a split  
second, it is noon –  
and runs off into the dark,  
menacing to strike  
again.

Somewhere,  
along the equator, it is  
November, the start  
of monsoon season, where the air  
grows habitually restless in the late  
afternoons and clouds pile up  
in angry masses only to  
disembowel themselves  
at dusk with the sharp  
slice of a zig  
zag

across  
the skies,  
sending lives  
scuttling  
in a dozen directions.

4

Here, November marks fall,  
pointing inevitably to winter.  
Rain falls  
every few days, often  
exclusively on weekends,  
with routine sullenness,  
the same forlorn air  
stirring our lungs  
warmed by heaters and fireplaces.  
I lie in bed listening  
to the morose patter on panes,  
pull you close  
and strain  
against the dull throb  
of this foreign rain to hear  
the swing of thunderbolts  
splitting up the heavens, the  
sharp crack of the skies, opening  
up in a howl  
as the monsoon  
unleashes  
rain  
hard and fast  
somewhere,  
it is November  
again.

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**Translation of 'La Collision'**

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by Kristen Shaw

It is a command: love carefully! And here love is a codeword for something else. This line is from a Planned Parenthood bumper sticker. On one car we hit. This boyfriend likes to think he does not love carefully; he thinks he loves dangerously. I tell him he is just reckless. I have been in two car accidents with him, one on Prosperity Drive where it meets Wade Hampton Parkway. Later I looked this up: Wade Hampton was a Civil War general. Confederate. This happened before Alabama. I thought we'd been given a sign; he thought we'd been told a joke.

"Love Carefully" is probably also from my horoscope or from a sentence such as "True love carefully observes its boundaries." This is just an example.

We (the exclusive form) take our lives from a bumper sticker and an encyclopedia. And this is taken from somewhere else.

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**Framed Innocence**

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by Christin Elise Kuchem

My baroque bureau holds, in strangled suffocation, a memory framed. Ominous October winds thrashing the white oak, threatening us with the crackling collapse of its offspring. Yesterday's yellow baby hair, a saccharine sniff of warm morning baths and strawberries, snarled in a careless current, like the years. Stiffly starched blue denim crunch, as big brother masterfully mounted the bark-blanketed peak. Mom, tying my timid limbs around her tiny waist, not giving way, keeping us in a motionless moment. With camera cue, a flash flickered, while both she and time lost grip.

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**Pieces**, for Chris and Ilya

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by *Emily King*

Every Saturday  
afternoon,  
he waxes his car  
with astonishing consistency

Buffing, polishing  
till it glitters  
goldenly

One must admire his inimitably  
German work ethic  
and efficiency

His ancestors pulled  
themselves up  
by the bootstraps,  
with this deliberation  
so they could,  
too, step proudly onto  
streets paved with  
gold

The very same Deutsch  
dogma  
that made little  
checks  
on a register –  
pieces, cargo  
deported, unloaded  
check, check

Humanity  
chiseled into  
pieces  
into ghettos  
into barracks  
factories, camps  
pyres

Pieces, pieces  
of grinning golden teeth  
without their jaws

Pieces returning

as ashen snowflakes,  
smudging the sun  
from the sky

Pieces of that Germany  
Do they remain in him –  
Hibernating in the  
recesses  
of his genes

One cannot buff it out so  
simply –

How many generations will  
carry this stain,  
these pieces?

No, no  
these pieces –  
They're everywhere.

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**PBY-5A Catalina**

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by Jay Stevens

“You’re late,” I say as he slips into the booth opposite me. He looks terrible. His face is gray and drawn, and there are smudges of grease paint under his eyes and at the corner of his jaw.

“Sorry, Sidney,” he says.

“I’m used to it.” I’m sitting in front of my half-eaten fried-egg sandwich and lukewarm cup of coffee. I’ve already twisted a half-dozen napkins into formless lumps. It’s impossible to make origami swans from soggy diner napkins.

“Well,” he says, “you look good.”

“You look like crap,” I say.

“That’s no way for a son to talk to his old man.” He fumbles in his pockets and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. “I had a gig. Ran late.”

“Who needs a clown this time of night?” I ask. I’m kinda pissed to be sitting in diner at two a.m. Plus I’ve got classes in the morning.

He lights a cigarette and inhales. He exhales and waves away the cloud in front of his face. “Ha,” he says, leaning over the table towards me, “you wouldn’t believe it. Some very strange party on Capitol Hill – ”

“You been drinking?”

He eyes me. He’s got this angry stare; his pupils jog back and forth like he’s scanning my intentions. Accompanied by a dramatic pause. He’s your dad, I remind myself, and he’s full of shit.

“No,” he says.

“Tempted?”

“Of course.” He peels a napkin from the dispenser and folds it into a swan. It takes him only a minute. He leans heavily on the folds. The nicotine-stained fingertips fluffs the napkin’s wings gently as he sets it on the table between us.

“I can’t believe you just did that.” I point to the pile of mangled napkins in front of me.

“You never did have the touch,” he says. “How’s dentist school?”

“I’m studying pharmacology.”

“Drugs, not teeth, that’s right.” He wags his cigarette at me.



The waitress comes over to our table. "What can I getcha?" she asks, tapping her pad. Dad orders coffee.

"You sure you don't want more?" I say. "My treat."

He picks up the menu and flips the pages. "Gimmie a double bacon cheeseburger," he says.

After the waitress leaves, my father and I watch each other fidget. I recognize bits of myself in him. Thick fingers and hairy hands. A slouch in the shoulder. Big, round heads, his with a bald swath running down the center. That's my head in a few years.

"So what's so important we have to discuss at two a.m.?" I ask.

"I have cancer," he says.

"Ah," I say.

He stubs his cigarette out in the ashtray between us. "Just like that," he says. I watch his fingers tap the butt three times. A faint trail of smoke wavers and fades.

The waitress returns with my father's double bacon cheeseburger. She drops the plate in front of him like it's worthless. It rolls a few times on the table-top, and before it stops my dad has the salt shaker in his hand.

Between bites, he explains the disease to me, where it's located, the treatments, his doctors, the prognosis. He complains a lot about the care and health insurance. He has a lump and feels sick all the time. He doesn't think he'll make it.

"Is it contagious?" I ask.

"I'm the clown," he says.



I pick Joey up after class in a parking lot tucked behind a strand of trees three blocks from the battered women's shelter where she works. She's there when I arrive, sitting under one of the trees drinking organic juice from a can. When I pull in, she throws the can to the pavement and stomps it flat with her boot. She's not mad, it's just a trick she picked up at work. That, the buzz cut, the cuffed jeans, and the thick leather watchband.

"Hey, baby," she says as she gets in. She pins me against my seat and runs her hands through my hair.

I rub her head, which feels just like cashmere. "I like the hair. It's sexy," I say.

She bats my hand away, laughing. "It's because I look like a boy, you pervert!"

I stop the engine and we wrestle around, giggling like little kids. I tickle her sides, and she kicks the dash. I work up to her neck, which I nibble and which drives her crazy, and she throws her head back and takes a deep breath.

“No, not here.” She stops and pushes me away. “Maureen might see us.”

Maureen is her boss.

“Fuck Maureen,” I say.

I pull back and start the car up. It’s the same old fight, and I’m just acting my part. Joey thinks Maureen would fire her if she knew she was straight. She took the job as a counselor at the shelter a year ago when jobs were scarce. She saw during the interview that Maureen was a dyke, so she dropped a few hints during their chat. She planned to tell Maureen the truth, but after working there she said that admitting she’d been lying would be worse. Now she’s stuck a lesbian.

“You got in pretty late last night,” she says.

“I was studying late. Denny’s,” I say, “drove around some.”

“Something bothering you?” she asks.

I’m thinking of my dad. But I told Joey the first night we met that my dad was dead. We were in a bar, a dark, noisy place, and we found ourselves drunk on a sofa. It seemed like a good story at the time. She patted me and cried a little about it. We haven’t talked about much it since. Joey thinks it’s too painful for me.

“I have an idea,” I say, “on how you can be straight again.”

“Really.” She rubs her head.

“We engineer it. You meet a guy – me – you fall for him. You question your sexuality. We date, you have sex, boom! You’re straight.”

“I don’t know,” says Joey, “what about my girlfriend?”

“Girlfriend?” I give Joey a dirty look.

“I told them at the shelter I have a girlfriend.” She tells me she created an elaborate life with another woman, “Cybelle.” “We met kayaking,” says Joey. Cybelle works in construction, and she competes in triathalons. She has a dog. She hunts. I begin to like her.

“You have to break up,” I say.

“How?” she asks.

“You caught her cheating.”

“She’d never do that.” She chews her nails. “What will you do for me?” she asks.

“I’ll tell you about my father,” I say.

Joey looks me over. “Deal,” she says.



Joey and I sit out in the back yard on lawn chairs with beers. I bring out the radio and put on the Mariners game, just loud enough to hear Dave Niehaus yelling when something happens. It's warm and clear, the sun won't go down until after nine. Beyond our fence we hear evening noises from open windows and doors.

Naturally, I lie through my teeth. "He died about this time of year," I say.

"When?"

"I don't know," I say, "a couple of weeks, a month from now. I don't know the exact date."

She nods vigorously. "So it's the season that's reminding you."

"Ye-e-e-es," I say. "Yes."

"What happened? What was it like?"

"He had cancer," I say.

"What kind?"

"I can't remember, exactly. A brain tumor."

"You don't remember?"

"It was a tough time." I look off over the yard. "He told me, you know? He looked me right in the eyes and told me, but I don't remember."

"But what about the hospital visits? The doctors? They would have told you."

"It was all a blur. It happened so fast."

Joey sits back and wiggles her can of beer before sipping at it.

"It's too painful to go into," I say.

"Forget the details," she says. "I'm sorry I pressed you."

"Well."

"What was he like?" she asks.

I make up things. I tell her he was an accountant like my mother. That he took me to ball games and father-son picnics. That he used to mow his lawn in cutoff shorts. That he liked to do wood-working in the cellar. A load of crap, really. My dad likes to drink.

"Sounds a lot like Greg," she says.

I was thinking about Greg – my step dad – when spinning the bull. I wonder sometimes what it would have been like as a kid to have Greg as a dad. To distract her from this line of thinking, I describe my father's death.

"We all gathered around," I say. "Me, mom, close relatives, and his best friends. It was a beautiful afternoon. He wanted the ball game on. Like now." Joey and I listen for a moment to

Dave Niehaus. “Looooooow. Ball one,” he says. The crowd makes soothing static in the background.

“We all gave him hugs,” I say. “He held on to our hands.”

Joey sighs. “That’s beautiful.”

“We held the funeral in a stone church. Standing-room-only in the back, in the aisles. You should have seen the wild flowers in mason jars and buckets. We said things about him, told stories about college, work. There was poetry.”

“Did you say anything?” asks Joey.

“I told everyone what a great dad he was.”



My mother lives in Bellevue, and to get in to her neighborhood, I have to punch a code into the box in front of a gate. She remarried and moved out here the year I started school. I like Greg, her husband. He’s an accountant, too. He builds model planes in the basement, and he has season tickets to the Sonics. Other than that, he’s normal. Well, except that he’s married to my mother.

As I drive down the lane, I crane my head out the window. I’m looking at the address numbers. That’s a problem with this place. I can’t tell the streets or houses apart. A tiny patrol car comes the other way. It’s not really a patrol car, it’s a neighborhood security car. The guard behind the wheel slows down, and we’re both at a crawl.

He’s a kid. Younger than me. His face is sweaty and red. His brow lowers as he gives me a look. I wave. He nods. I feel sorry for the kid, stuck driving around these streets all day, nobody to bust or run down. He must feel useless. I don’t mind that he turns his car around and follows me down Oak Street. I notice there’s not a single oak in sight, only a string of sad saplings bound in wire and plywood strips like a procession of special needs trees.

I find my mother’s house and pull into the driveway. The security guard stops, too, and looks my way. At least I think he’s looking my way. He’s put on aviator glasses and I can’t see his eyes. Unsure what to do, I wave again. If he notices, he doesn’t respond. Maybe I should run away or go for an imaginary gun, give the kid some excitement.

I ring the doorbell. After a long minute the door swings open. Mom. “Oh, it’s you,” she says. “Come ‘n.” Before I can get inside, she pushes past me to the front step and holds up her right hand, middle finger extended. “Fuck you, Jeremy!” she shouts, and the patrol car pulls slowly away

“That fucker thinks I sell drugs,” she says.



“Who is it?” shouts Greg. His voice drifts up from the cellar.

"It's Sidney," yells my mother.

"Send him down. I have something to show him."

Greg is at his desk, an old gray metal thing he picked up at a Boeing surplus sale. The only light down here is a high-intensity lamp, which points straight down. Just a slice of Greg is visible in the edge of the light. His head is bowed, he's got a model plane in his hand, and he's performing an invisible task with tweezers. Neat hair, peppered with gray, golf shirt tucked into chinos, and thick black moustache. Tape player with something 50s on it. He looks up and smiles.

"Take a look at this baby," he says. He holds up a large, clunky plane with the underbelly of a duck's ass. It's already assembled and painted cobalt blue.

Above him on strings hangs his model plane collection. They hide in the dark now, but they look damn impressive in the light. There's at least thirty planes from the Second World War, all sorts of crazy shapes and sizes. He's shown them all to me, told me stories about each one. There's bombers, fighters, jets, scout planes, trainers, rockets, and biplanes. He's got them all.

"PBY-5A Catalina," he says. "A patrol bomber float plane. Lands on its belly," he says, and demonstrates by swooping the plane down onto an imaginary sea. He makes this motor noise with his lips while he does it, like a little kid.

"Wow, Greg," I say, "that's neat."

"Logged the most flight time of any plane in the war," he says. "They used them to spot subs. They dropped depth charges right on 'em." He points out little barrels tucked inside the hull. "And they had disposable jet motors they'd attach to the wings to help take off quickly from the water or off of a small carrier." Using his tweezers, he taps the tiny engines, superbly painted, the silver rotors flashing like polished metal.

"I'm putting on the decals now," he says, and shows me how he was about to place a wet sticker on each wing.

There's a whole assortment of things on his desk. The box the plane came in with the plastic skeleton where innumerable pieces hung, many too small to pick up with fingers. The paints. The airbrush, the regular brushes, the turpentine, the glues, and toothpicks, all laid out on newspaper neatly across the desktop.

Greg has incredible patience. I could never do this stuff. You can't see a speck of glue on his planes, you have to search for the seams where the pieces fit together. He researches to make sure he paints the planes realistically.

I like it down here in the half dark. The only thing illuminated is the work at hand. Everything else is dark and hidden away, just the soft doo-wop for music. Once Greg and I bought a model together. One of those seagull-winged planes they flew on “Baa, Baa Black Sheep.” I lasted an hour before I got bored and left the plane with Greg. I came back the next week and it was done.

“Couldn’t wait for you,” said Greg, looking embarrassed.



“So, your father has cancer,” says my mother.

We weave our way to the back porch, through the kitchen and living room. She’s decorated the house like she has a sailor boyfriend. There’s something from every damn country on the planet. A scroll with calligraphy from Japan, crystal vases from Switzerland, a tribal mask from Africa. On tables scattered around the house are photos of Greg and my mom in front of landmarks – pyramids, cathedrals, ruins – or surrounded by little brown people. They travel a lot.

I can imagine my mother in remote parts of the globe negotiating with illiterate tribesmen for trinkets to take back home. She’d paint her face and dance around fires, eat monkey brains, and find her way through the shanty-town mazes without getting killed. It’s Greg I have trouble picturing. He’s an innocent, and he’d let himself get taken in by the first third-world con man he met.

“Greg was shocked to hear your father was dying,” says my mom. She’s carrying tea for me. It’s from Nepal, and it smells like hay left out in the rain. “He thinks we should try to be with your father more often.”

“What do you think?” I ask.

She sets the tea down on the white aluminum table on the back deck, and I pull up a chair. Mom’s on her feet inspecting her potted plants that line the deck rails, turning over leaves and muttering. The back lawn is neatly mowed, and I can see the parallel lines across the grass. I’m reminded of baseball games, picnics, and the Fourth of July.

“There was a time I loved him,” she says. “But your father is on his own now.”

I sip the tea. It tastes worse than it smells. As soon as I swallow, my skin tightens and my fingers tingle. I sip again and a curious warmth spreads in my belly.

“What’s in this tea?” I ask. “Are you drugging me?”

“Nothing illegal,” she says, digging a finger into soil. “It’s an aphrodisiac. A treat for the girl.”

I stare into the cup. The tea is the color of well-nourished piss. I can’t believe my mother slipped me an aphrodisiac. The warmth and tingling spreads. I drink more. Mom’s inspecting a plant with stripes like a tiger and weird flowers like hungry birds.

“That’s good of Greg to think of dad. Most men would be jealous.”

“Greg can be such a tight ass.” She’s found a garden tool, an iron claw on a handle. She starts in on the tiger plant with it.

“I told Joey when we first met that dad was already dead.”

Mom breaks away from her plant. She drills me with a look. “Now why did you tell me that? Do you want me to help lie for you?”

That was, in fact, what I wanted. Instead I say, “No, don’t be ridiculous. I need advice is all. How to get out of the scrape.”

“You’re lucky,” she says, “your father may soon provide you with a corpse.”

“That is not helpful.”

“What do you want me to say? If you want to hear that you should be honest, cheerful, and industrious, go talk to Greg,” she says. “I don’t know why you lied to Joey in the first place, but everything related to your dad gets complicated.” She stands and brushes a wisp of hair back under her hat while giving me a look. “Including you.”

I think this over, rolling the cup a little so the tea sloshes in circles.

Mom says, “You know, if she asks, I’m going to tell her the truth.” She brushes her pants and starts back into the house. She turns and winks. “Finish your tea.”

“Do you think the cancer is real?” I ask.

“Don’t give him any money,” she says.



On the way back, I practice telling Joey my father is alive, but dying. Sometimes she reacts well, especially when I lay it on about my terrible childhood. But other times she gets angry and storms out. A couple of times I never see her again. I’m pretty nervous by the time I pull up to our house.

My father is on my front step in a clown costume, pounding on the front screen door, which sounds like he’s beating a pail. He’s wearing his red gloves. His wig is twisted to one side, and two dark rivulets wash away the makeup under his eyes. His mouth, rouged into a banana smile, is contorted. I can see yellow teeth and a tongue that’s almost white.

“SIDNEY, OPEN THE DOOR!” he’s shouting, “IT’S ME, YOUR DAD!”

Neighbors are out on their doorsteps. Scenes like this get a lot of attention on a Sunday morning.

As I pull up, I see the shade next to the front door part slightly, and there in the slice of window I see Joey’s face, small and pale, but determined.

When I pull the car in the driveway, everything changes. My father stops banging. He turns to watch me park. He's swaying as if he's on a ship. Joey waves me away. She motions for me to get back into my car and presses her fist against her cheek, her thumb and forefinger extended to her mouth and ear. She's pantomiming me to stay put, because she called the cops. After all, why not? She thinks my old man is dead, and that this man is crazy, possibly dangerous.

I know he's drunk, wiped out, blotto. He's not violent, just dramatic.

As I get out of the car, I feel like I've stepped onto a stage. Time slows, and a dozen sets of eyes watch my every move. The midmorning sun plays the stage lighting. I fumble for my lines. My audience thinks this man is going to kill me. Instead, he falls down the stairs. The clown shoes trip him up. He falls to the grass and retches. "Sidney," he says, "Sidney."

The front door opens a wedge, and Joey peers out, her face filtered by the steel mesh of the screen door. "He's been trying to break into the house," she says.

"Joey," I say, "Joey." I walk right by my father who reaches out and grabs my pants leg, pulling me to a stop.

"I love you, Sidney," says my dad.

"It's my father," I say. The door opens wider. Joey's free hand balls into a fist and her mouth forms a little "O."

"What?" she says. "He's dead."

"I wish he was," I say, "but he's only a drunk."

"I'm dying, Sidney," he says.

Just then the police cruisers arrive.



I drive up a long dirt driveway and see a whitewashed farmhouse with a wrap-around porch. Oak trees and a picket fence on the grounds. Even a gazebo standing out back, and I imagine all the alcoholics waltzing around it to Boston Pops, my dad stuffed into a suit with his hair combed and parted, dancing with a woman in his arms.

I park the car in the driveway by the side of the house. The clouds are low overhead. It's like the light is sucked out of the scene. I had the heat on for the drive, and when I kill the motor I feel the cold October air leak into the car. The engine ticks as it cools. I stare up at the wall of the porch in front of the windshield.

My dad had to come here after the run-in with the cops. It was this or some jail time, they said. Joey says that's not good for his chances to stay clean. It's better if he had volunteered. That'd



show desire to rehabilitate. She says I should expect him to get drunk and land on our doorstep again.

I get out of the car, and pick my way along a gravel walk down the length of the front porch where dad is sitting with three others. They sit in rocking chairs around a low table, on top of which is an old coffee can they use as an ashtray. My dad lifts his hand, and the others look up, dull curiosity etched on their faces.

“Hey,” I say as I tramp up the steps.

“My son!” he cries, rising, his arms outstretched. I enter his embrace and let him squeeze me. He smells like cigarettes and clean laundry. He introduces me to Bruce, Steve, and Peggy – they’re bundled up in sweaters. Peggy wears a scarf. Her lips are blue. They look tired and bored.

“How’re things?” I ask.

Dad shrugs. “Can’t complain,” he says, “not allowed to!” He laughs at his own joke, and the others smile through their smokes.

“Nice drive?” he asks.

“Not bad,” I say. “Long.”

We make small talk. Dad likes the food and his counselor, but can’t wait to get out of the clinic. The others nod, agreeing.

Bruce has a son my age, he says, a Boeing engineer, hasn’t talked to him in a while. Peggy’s son is in the Army in the Pacific, the Philippines maybe. Steve has two daughters, one of whom is married and living in Spokane.

This is a group of broken parents, I realize, drawn together over their mishandled children. They sound amazed at the simplicity of their kids’ existences, as if living a normal life was an act of great daring and skill.

“How’s the girl?” dad asks. “The one with the boy’s name.”

“Joey,” I say.

“Joey,” he says, smiling around at the others.

“Touch and go,” I say. “You landing drunk on our front step really fucked things up.”

This kills the mood. Quiets things down a bit. The drunks shuffle their feet, even while sitting down. They must see this kind of thing all the time.

I don’t say that things are okay, that mom stepped in and saved the day, that she and Joey had a heart-to-heart. I don’t say anything about school, my health, or the weather in Seattle. I don’t say that I wish I had the guts to lay all my fatherless years at his feet, to yell at him, tear his shirt, hell, even to take a poke at him.

I don't say that I love him.

I say nothing. Let him squirm.

Bruce stands.

"Why don't I get some coffee?" he says and heads inside. Steve and Peggy follow close behind. Dad watches them retreat, no doubt wishing he could join them.

We're alone. I notice how quiet it is up here. Lots of trees.

"How's that cancer?" I ask.

"A miraculous recovery," he says.



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## ***Rules for Flying***

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*by K.A. Settle*

Neil says, "Rules for flying?  
If I could fly, I'd say,  
kiss my ass, I can fly."

But you must not fly  
when anyone is looking;  
You must land before  
you awaken,  
or else endure.

The wings may still be blooming  
between your shoulder blades  
as you find yourself airborne, netted  
in the swags of power lines  
strung from droning towers.

Account for the new  
dimensions of your body.  
No matter how muscular  
your wings, avoid  
day-sized holes.  
To be caught in this manner,  
sick and immortal,  
is a variant of hell.

Sufficient need, expressed in dreams.  
Flying codes are entered, encrypted  
at night when God  
scrubs you with his eye-beams.

*You get so dirty during the day,*  
he clucks,  
scrubs so hard  
that blood works its way  
along the filaments of your feathers,  
and the next morning  
you awaken,  
stained.

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**Adam's Rib: Upon the Chimera**, for my husband

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by Catherine Whitney Beaudreault

*Dear Alex,*

*We were so pleased to receive your letter. As Heather's spirit left her body, it entered yours as a new beginning of life...*

*– Donor's mother, 12-17-02, 29 months post transplant*

I lay next to you in the night  
looking into frothy darkness and creating  
the parts of you and me,  
where I might split off and rejoin your body,  
how I am held against its tucks and projections  
its trove of hair that follows up, over your breastbone,  
nests between us when we press.

I lay next to you in our completion  
straining to be sure of the sound – patter of cells  
the footsteps of your death defying composition  
carefully fixed by surgeons' hands  
– plucking the organ like a fruit  
– reaping and resowing  
(your liver is a girl, trapped under a bus, sent in a cooler  
of meaty, bloody drool, twelve hours and twenty pounds of transfer,  
hurried)  
to fix light back into your belly, from where it was draining.

I lay next to you in the night and hope,  
how at the end of our seven days  
there might be livers made of  
polypropylene, other compounds, a clear windowed surface  
where we may be sure of perfect flow, the translucent renewal  
of a body that ticks within its own lonely borders  
itself,  
only burdened with the patent of sale.  
But perhaps even then,  
I will worry over the dark skinned children of the factories  
paid pennies a week to be poisoned in the fumes,  
boys and girls this time, both and all,  
and more mothers –  
mothers destined to bleed the world back round.

I lay next to you in the night

and feel for your sex,  
its rise in my palm.    You shift  
half asleep, the cat in the crook of your arm  
*She loved animals. . .played the flute. . . was a nurse*  
When I wake, my hand has gone slack at your groin,  
    but still, holding on.

On the news yesterday,  
the talk of hormones that form our personalities in the womb,  
that temper the swarm of fetal cells into what should hunt and gather  
tend fire and suckle, or become however we ought  
which is the puzzle  
because we fit each from each,  
need both besides,  
move beneath our skins  
    with reasons that unzipper and peel.

Tonight, I take the mystery in my arms,  
I press my lips to the scar of its make,  
I bear the knowing and the unknowing of what we are  
How we are sparked and formed and set adrift  
only as far formed from each  
as the lobes tied in with venous bows,  
the ribs unbuckled and notched closer  
into the No inside the Yes;  
    the her inside the Him.

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**Daughter Languages**

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by Kristen Shaw

It's *cute*, this vocabulary  
of linguistics; English  
and Dutch are like little girls  
in this region of the language family  
tree, where there are only female  
cousins (a word like *primas*)  
and they apparently reproduce by  
budding, or something miraculous.  
Unless the Great Vowel Shift  
was like puberty: sounds swung  
upward like darkening hair  
or a first period. XX nevertheless  
repeatedly descends from Germanic,  
Centum, it goes back even  
further and it's the way we  
say "Four" that makes us imply  
some distant male's nose, a great  
great grandfather we all resemble.

Listen to me: now I know why  
everything feels  
so feminine in my mouth.

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**BLESSING**

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by Georgia Tiffany

We waited for his head to lift from grace,  
his hand to take up the linen napkin  
shake it loose from its fold,  
drape it over one leg.  
It was a signal.

I took up my own, fingering the initial "T"  
stitched in the corner,  
then smoothed it across my lap.  
My crinoline petticoat rustled.  
We waited for his hand to lift the fork,

and then the intrusive clink  
of silver on china,  
then my sister's glass of milk  
pressed to her lip and the delicate slurp,  
mostly my own internal swallowing.

The chair scraped against linoleum  
when my mother pushed from the table.  
"Should I turn on the Mozart?"  
I stopped chewing,  
looked first toward my mother's question,

then my father's jaw,  
then buried my gaze in the platter of carrots  
potatoes, chunks of beef.  
Breath waited inside me so deep and so long  
I could hear its echo.

At last, "Yes," said my father.  
My mother's Sunday shoes pattered  
across the kitchen floor  
and entered the soft pile of the next room.  
There was a fumbling,

a click, a pause,  
and the 78 dropped to the turntable.  
We heard the arm of the phonograph rise,  
adjust itself, land the needle  
with a tiny scratch to find the groove.

The mass began. "Mozart," my mother said  
to no one in particular, scooting her chair  
back toward the table,  
her voice almost childlike, almost passionate.  
"The Kyrie. I love the Kyrie."

My sister and I unstiffened,  
lowered our shoulders, resumed eating.  
Later we would realize  
we'd witnessed something captive within us –  
a little breath, or death – released.

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***Tar Paper School House***

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*by Steven Irwin Kimmi*

I went to school in a tar paper shack.  
And sat behind the coal furnace  
and when hot cinders came shooting out  
like falling stars, meteors,  
like things I never even heard of before,  
I'd scoop them up in my soft, pale hands  
and toss them back in  
so the school house wouldn't burn down.

I learned everything I know  
in one room, with one teacher,  
one chalkboard, and one chunk of chalk  
that screamed every time we used it.  
I learned how the world worked  
and where I stood and what I could do.  
But more importantly, where I couldn't stand  
and what I couldn't do.

And when it rained we got wet  
and when it snowed we got shovels  
and when summer rolled around  
we took all that knowledge home with us  
and acted like it meant something,  
like it mattered. That's the one thing  
they never taught us: it don't matter what we do,  
nobody's ever going to look at us the same.



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## One-Gun Salute

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by Leta Reppert

My parents' house stands on a hillside near the remnants of the town of Keats, Kansas. Keats was once a relatively thriving railroad town, boasting a creamery, bank, lumber yard, high school, and grade school, but times changed, the railroad lost importance and moved elsewhere, and Fort Riley grew. On the western edge of Keats runs a road named Reservation Drive, the south end of which is blocked (just before the bridge over Wildcat Creek) due to Fort Riley's expansion and the fact that the firing range now lies approximately two miles from the town.

Fort Riley, the former home of General George Custer, has changed with the times, too, but these changes have been more favorable to it. The cavalry that occasionally rode up the valley below the place where my parents now make their home has been retired in favor of more modern equipment such as helicopters and howitzers. The Fort has swallowed up more and more farmland, to the townspeople's chagrin. I remember watching the annual Fourth of July parade as a child; one year a farm truck piled high with manure proceeded slowly down the street, bearing a sign that read, "This is what we think of Fort Riley expansion."

Growing up so close to the Fort, I always took for granted the rounds of artillery fire that echoed through the cedar-lined hills. It, like the flares lighting the night sky, seemed a part of life. I don't think my mother ever quite grew used to it; perhaps when you are transplanted to an area, you never quite take root as fully as native growth. I rarely noticed the noise, except on the occasions that the explosions were loud enough to make the windows, and, seemingly, the whole house, shake. Seeing helicopters flying overhead was less frequent, worth pointing out if you happened to see one, but their raucous noise beating the air was not surprising. I remember during the first Gulf War, riding home from school and hearing the noise of military aircraft buzzing over the school bus, all of us covering our ears and looking up at the inside of the gray metal roof in a vain attempt to see it close up. It was only occasions like this that were worthy of note.

There were stories about times when Fort Riley, not content with the land it had already been allotted, had escaped its bounds. Our neighbors to the north told us about the time, before we had moved to the area, when one of their fields had burned when a flare went awry. We later found one in our upper pasture, a gauzy parachute attached by thin cords to the now-empty metal canister. There were even stories of artillery shells that had landed, but not gone off; our neighbors

across the road had one sitting in their living room until they were told that it could still explode. Grim-faced soldiers then came and carried it carefully away.

Despite these incidents, the summer I was eleven years old was the first time I really realized the risky side of living close to the Fort. It was about ten o'clock on a weekday morning in July, before the day's heat had completely driven out the night's coolness. I was feeding our sheep, which were grazing among the apples, apricots, and plums of our orchard, when a blast sounded, louder than any I had heard before. The explosion reverberated among the hills, and I crouched halfway to the ground among the sheep. I even glanced up, half-expecting to see enemy aircraft blotting the Kansas sky. Of course my fears were silly, unfit for someone in her double-digits; didn't even mention them later when my eight-year-old brother Mike confessed he had thought we were being attacked by China.

He and my mother were in the garden picking cucumbers. He was there under compulsion, being forced to help harvest vegetables instead of fishing in the creek that lay at the bottom of the hill, as he had been doing nearly every morning that week. Mom heard more than I did; in her recollections of the story, she mentions the "whistling, sucking sound, like the sound you hear when you open a jar of peanuts," that preceded the bang. However, she concluded that the noise must have resulted from extraordinary activity at the Fort – perhaps new guns or some kind of accident – despite a rather perplexing event.

Having fair, easily-freckled skin, Mom always wore a hat to the garden. On this particular occasion, she was wearing a white, plastic hard-hat left over from when my father had built our house. Shortly after the explosion, Mom heard a tap on the top of her hat, as if a pebble had hit it. She searched the ground nearby, but the cucumber vines hid whatever had fallen from the sky.

We thought little about the noise for the rest of the day. Sara and I had softball games in the evening, and Mom and Dad were busy rushing to and attending games. The next morning, before the rest of us had gotten up, Mom told Dad about her experience in the cucumbers the day before. When she mentioned the tap on her hat, she asked, "Nobody would believe that, would they?"

Later that day, when my sister Kitty was passing by the creek, she noticed that branches had fallen from several trees. This was not terribly surprising, since there had been a storm the night before, but she walked closer to determine the extent of the damage. When she approached, she found a gaping hole in the ground by the stream. The ground was blown bare of grass, tiny shards of which were sticking out of nearby trees. Some trees were chopped off, others had limbs splintered and missing, and the trunk of one lay in the center of the crater. No evidence of a stump remained.

Dad had been working as a civilian doctor at the Fort for several years, but he had been offered another job, and this was his last week there. Mom telephoned him to report what Ketty had found. Dad made several calls and finally managed to contact someone who was willing to come out and take a look. It seemed that no one knew exactly whom to talk to if you suspected that the Fort had missed its target.

Later in the day, the first representative of the army came to visit. A civilian responsible for overseeing the firing range, he spent the larger part of an hour examining the site. After his lengthy investigation, he asked, "Has there been any heavy construction in the area?" Dad pointed out to him that our neighbor's digging of a new septic system probably would not have led to this result, but the officer was non-committal. Nothing we asked or said would convince him to say that the army might have had a role in creating the crater. He suggested that finding shrapnel might provide evidence to support our view, but even Ketty's discovery of a jagged piece of metal buried in a tree did not move him. He left assuring us that he would send someone else to take another look.

A soldier soon followed. This one came, looked at the crater, and commented, "I wonder what we hit you with." In the next couple of days, more soldiers came and dug out the hole to find whatever was left of the explosive. After their work, they concluded that they had hit us with the largest artillery shell they were using at Fort Riley at the time; its explosiveness was equal to "half a Volkswagen full of TNT," and it was "designed to kill everything within fifty meters."

Shells are manufactured so that when they explode, they break into burning hot, jagged pieces with razor-sharp edges, to make them effective at killing and maiming. When the shell landed, Ketty was working in our patch of sweet corn – approximately two hundred yards east of the impact. We believe that we may owe her safety to the high creek bank shielding the garden from the shrapnel. (Incidentally, we are pretty sure that we owe Mike's life to cucumbers, since the shell hit about thirty feet away from his fishing spot.) This bank rises about ten feet above the level where the shell hit, so the clay soil must have taken the brunt of the attack. Only the shrapnel traveling upward and outward – and thus more slowly – could have escaped the confines of that bank. Most of the shrapnel we have collected was found in the area close to the impact, but we know that some made it over the bank: Ketty found a two and a half inch piece lying on the roof of the garage, and we suspect that a small piece hit Mom's hat.

Naturally, when word got out that Fort Riley had accidentally fired a live shell into a populated area, there was a bit of an uproar. Some were afraid that it would happen again; indeed, there was concern that there had been two shells, not just one. My mother and some of the

neighbors recalled another loud blast occurring earlier in the day that our shell hit. (It had been early in the morning, before my siblings and I were up.) Although a group of forty soldiers searched through the woods to the south of us (the area they considered most likely for an impact), nothing more was ever found.

When the media got wind of the mistake, we quickly got our more-than-fifteen minutes of fame. I had to come home early from watching a performance of The King and I with a friend because a T. V. crew from the Topeka news station was coming out to do a story. The reporter, with her short brown hair and stylish vest and slacks, pointed out the holes where shrapnel had penetrated our well house. (Dad later had to patch these to keep the squirrels out.) The camera followed my dad as he showed the small “entry wound” where shrapnel had hit a tree, followed by the bigger hole blown out the back. Curly-haired Mike shyly fingered with his shirt as he told them, “We just heard this big boom.” Later the cameraman showed him playing close to the crater as one-year-old Isaac walked unsteadily at the bottom. I, being at the stage where I was not young enough to be cute and not old enough to be pretty, was only shown in the background, hands in my pockets and frizzy hair pulled back into a pony-tail.

The Wichita Eagle did a story, too, and a newsman from Texas called us up one evening, having read in an Associated Press article that Fort Riley was retraining soldiers due to the incident. The local paper, the Manhattan Mercury, also ran a story, which led to my parents’ canceling our subscription as a result of the Mercury’s refusal to withhold our address. Following this, a few interested readers drove up our driveway, trying to find the crater. The incident took place during President Clinton’s downsizing of the military, and some people in the area thought that it would be a good idea for Fort Riley to be downsized out of existence. There were a couple of meetings about the issue, at which one of our neighbors recalls being told by the officer in attendance “that the army was more important than a few civilians.” This understandably did not help to ease the tension.

In an attempt to pacify the neighborhood, Fort Riley invited us all out to the firing range to view for ourselves exactly how many safeguards were in place to make sure that this sort of thing didn’t happen. Of course, it had already happened when all of these safeguards were in place, but nothing was said of that.

When we got to the Fort we were loaded in a fifteen passenger van and driven out to a simple, white building standing among the prairie grasses, which, our elderly neighbor told us in surprise, had before one of the rounds of expansion, been the church where she had gotten married.

At the meeting, the soldiers showed us maps of the Fort and the town (demonstrating how close we actually lived to the firing range), and told us that they had determined that the misfire was a result of “an error in deflection,” which is the equivalent of saying, “We think we hit you because the gun was pointed at you.”

After this less-than-reassuring meeting, they took us out to the howitzers to show us what they had been doing (or should have been doing) the morning they missed their target. They brought out an example of the type of shell that had landed by our creek, loaded it into the gun, and fired it. We were confident that this, at any rate, hit its target; we were able to see the dust and smoke in the distance as it landed. The tour ended up taking so long that they offered us all MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) before we left for home. (Mike recalls choosing one MRE but changing his mind when a soldier pointed out to him that a different one included M&Ms.)

Overall, the meeting showed us exactly why this shouldn't have been able to happen; it did little to explain how it actually had. The soldiers merely echoed the sentiments of the officer interviewed by the television reporters, who said, “That sort of mistake should not occur.” We had come to that conclusion ourselves. At least they reassured us that their retraining would keep us safe.



My parents never joined in the talk of closing the fort; as my mom told the reporters, “I'm still more concerned about the tornadoes and the storms that go through here than I am about being shelled by Fort Riley again.” But they did ask the Fort for a report on why “that sort of mistake” had occurred and would “not occur” again. After waiting a year or more for that report, my parents reminded the Fort of their request and received the reply that Fort Riley had no record of the incident but that they could try requesting information from the Pentagon. Months after doing just that, Mom and Dad received a reply saying that the Pentagon did not have any records either.

Apparently, the wildlife around the site of the impact were a little bit shocked by the explosion; for a short time afterward, the crayfish in the creek started crawling up our driveway, and, much to Mike's dismay, the fish disappeared from his fishing spot and did not return for months afterward. Other than this, we have suffered no obvious ill effects, although lingering doubts remain about whether any of our hearing was affected.

Our acquaintances' reactions to the affair were varied. Dad's former colleagues at Irwin Army Hospital jokingly insisted that it was just a “one-gun salute” to acknowledge his resignation, but Dad said that they were “sore losers.” Most of our friends were fascinated by the story, and several of them reminded us, “You could have sued!” We probably could have, but we didn't, and

Fort Riley didn't feel the need to make up for their irresponsibility, so fame and a nice shrapnel collection are all we gained from the ordeal.

Few people remember the incident now. Every once in a while, we'll bring out our shrapnel and show it off to guests and sometimes even take them down to the creek and show them what is left of the crater. Most of the time the noise from the Fort doesn't bother us (except, of course, when there are exceptionally loud explosions), but Mike says that he still "hits the dirt" every once in a while.

Not long ago, we met a man who had been working at the Fort back in 1994. He looked surprised when we told him that we were the ones who had been hit; he told us that later on that July day he had worked on a howitzer whose hydraulic system had a leak, causing the gun barrel to gradually turn. This is a better explanation than we have ever received from Fort Riley.

Even more recently, a soldier in one of my classes at Kansas State University reminisced about what happened at the Fort in the aftermath of the misfire. Although he came to the Fort two years after the accident, he recalls being reminded again and again not to be like the "idiot" who somehow managed to fire off base. Even two years later, rumors were circulating about the incident – that the soldier responsible for the accident had been recovering from a night of drinking and that he had "hit a barn" full of cows. Although the army was reluctant to acknowledge their role in creating the crater, Gene assured me that the forward observers who are responsible for watching where the shells land must have known immediately that the shell had not hit its target. Although they probably did not expect that it had landed off post, "there's no way they could not know" that they had missed their coordinates.

A few weeks ago, nine years after the shell hit, there was a neighborhood meeting at the church in Keats regarding new zoning restrictions that might be put in place, and a representative of the Fort was present. After the meeting, Dad called the official and told him that, in his opinion, the Fort lacks credibility, especially considering the accident with the shell and the subsequent lack of records. Apparently, we had finally managed to contact the right person. This officer soon found the nonexistent report and sent it to us.

The results of the investigation state that "Multiple leader failures in at least one platoon coupled with sloppy battalion fire control procedures allowed this firing incident to occur," and they "direct the imposition of stringent fire control procedures (SOPs) and leader training regimens to ensure safe artillery firing during training, and ultimately during combat operations." They conclude

that “A disciplined fire support system...doesn’t fire out!” A handwritten emendation adds, “much less off-post.”



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**Ars Poetica** (Terzanelle)

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by Phoebe Reeves

*Even the world can't dive fast enough to know that other world ----William Stafford*

A symphony of one; the improvisational trends  
that come from touching nothing daily,  
the poetry of listening descends

into a crying ear, but failing  
sight grasps the fingertips of lines  
that come from touching nothing daily.

*Apassionata* land-mines  
absorb the horizon, tumbling into  
sight. Grasp the fingertips of lines

that cannot hear the rhyme: you  
need the infinite caesura they hold.  
Absorb the horizon. Tumble into

the waiting words. Their meanings told  
nothing of this Rhapsode's  
need the infinite caesura holds

within blue-celled walls or in the dusky road.  
A symphony of one improvisational trend  
– nothing of this Rhapsode's –  
the poetry of listening descends.



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***Fire Eastern Night***

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*by Nathan Dorsett*

A trail of haloes as bright as chirps hold in a dust devil's luminous sail...

Along the torrents farm hands with swift jackets shovel a cornering trench –  
laying charcoal shoots. Among the pushing soot the head wind pulls throughout ashen  
shocks. Fiery seedpods churn under the dry tides. The roasted blooms sink.

Drenched the farmer's sweat up behind the flames. Growing piles of ash, unseen, fill the  
puma's soft tracks. Stretched skulls with flat teeth and scapulas pile arm in arm. Plow  
hands' disagreement over temporary claws and fanged teeth rests in bleached bones down  
on the beach. In the dark clear eyes squint at the stars, quietly their drawl leaves at the  
match stick.

... from his brim the light snaps inward shutting behind a fired black shutter.  
At the peak of the hill a boxy quail perches; charred loafers underfoot.  
He rolls the night's pictures into cases. The clear lenses carefully he packs away.  
Taking a predatory glance behind glass,  
in-between shuffling and pouncing the pressed lines  
a bleached dress shirt could be filled with birds,  
or stroll to another square before the heat, in song.

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***The Pact with Sedna***

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*by dg nanouk okpik*

The ice chisel sculpted her mother's day  
The mother sent another caribou calf during the first year  
through the sprawling white marsh scrambling,  
with pack and paddle, on hooves with driftwood.

She put on a carved mask with snowy owl feathers  
then danced a long, limp, mukluk shuffle.  
The clock struck the twenty-fourth hour, her lifeline  
was thirty-six years, she knew Sedna would betray her.

The jawbone of Birimik was the place to give her up  
clad in calico flora and braids down her shoulders, she went.  
She went as a mother of childrens' children.  
She went to seek refuge in the mammoth's arms.

One day the pact would be known to the need be kinfolk.  
One day the dirty dip net will overflow with frost bitten whitefish.  
One day the polar bear will come to the child and give her seal eyes,  
for making medicine of twigs and ivory, belting chants of skeleton Inuit.

The driftwood mask let her be inside out.  
The still poison of fish guts come up gnarled  
in layers of rabid willow ptarmigan,  
inroads of dirt and dust makeshift the tides.

To repay Sedna will be a lifetime of parkas.  
Give them to the river's narrow nest, lined with plumes  
and dragonflies humming to ears of dwarfs.  
The giants will laugh and the salmon will roast.

Then, she would be able to take the shell lenses off  
let her goggles lie next to the granite rock,  
and pull her braided hair down in truffles of seaweed.  
This day is made of homed puffins and soothsayers.

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**February 17<sup>th</sup>**

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by Norman Golar

Clock crashes to floor – domestic killing,  
Car thunder – strikes pedestrian's spine,  
Driver snatches pre-teen girl,  
Baby drinks bleach from lower cupboards,  
Bullet steals man's brain in faint alley.

Baseball player's body sweats a stroke,  
Roach sleeps with boy; dies in ear,  
Twice lightning touches jogger,  
Veteran loses a leg,  
Officer prods inmates for kicks.

Lee Strasberg dies eighty years old, a final curtain call,  
Bon Jovi dances in his dancing shoes with *Livin' On A Prayer*,  
Robert Massey dethrones himself from CompuServe,  
Michael Jordan breathes air before claiming it,  
Washington's holiday, every once and a while –

The Epitome Nightclub in Chicago,  
Suffocates twenty-one hearts,  
From lost fists and two strayed faces  
To citrus sprays and dead gazes.  
Blacks in Chicago fall victim  
As those on the Long Island Railroad in New York,  
As those in Vietnam versus China,  
As those in the N'djamena Airport in Chad,  
As those in Hamburg, Germany,  
As those who sit watching clocks fall.

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## ***The Face of a Warrior***

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*by Gene Collins*

Walking with his back stiff and his chin thrust forward, his bruise enters the room before he does. He stops just inside the door.

Captain Poul looks up from his desk to the soldier dressed in camouflage BDUs.

Standing in the doorway at parade rest with his hands clasped behind his back, the soldier appears stacked in blocks from the broad, square soles of his boots to his flat shoulders and thick neck. His face is equally angular except for the mottled web of bruise that surrounds his left eye and branches to his ear. His eyes are fixed on the window across from him.

“Good afternoon, Private Taylor. I’m Captain Poul. If you’ll just have a seat, we’ll begin in a moment.” He extends his arm, gesturing to a chair in front of the desk. Although he does not get up, it is apparent that he is much taller than Taylor, because his arm spans the width of the large desk.

“Sir, yes, Sir.” Taylor walks swiftly to the chair in front of the desk, executes a left face, and sits down. His hands are face down on his thighs and his back, still rigid, does not touch the cushion behind him.

Captain Poul is sifting through an open file on the desk and he stops to mark various places with a pen as he turns the pages. He looks over the rims of his glasses at Private Taylor. He smiles. “Relax, son. The drill pad rules don’t apply. We’re just here to talk. Let’s forget rank for now. Shall we?” His smile, although genuinely disarming, quickly fades to placid concentration as he returns to the file.

Taylor’s eyes shift from their fixed state and dart around the room without focusing. “Sir, um, okay.” He leans back in the chair.

Captain Poul continues to look through the file. He does not appear to be much older than forty, but strands of gray can be seen darting through his otherwise dark hair, as he turns several pages.

Taylor puts his hands on the arms of the chair and looks around the office. Pictures of soldiers standing in front of Humvees and howitzers, along with framed certificates, hang on the wall to his left. It is difficult to see the pictures or certificates clearly because of a glare from the window that almost entirely fills the wall behind him. To his right is a bookcase filled with numerous

paper and hardcover books. Among them is the title, *The Conditioned Response*. Taylor studies these for a moment and then looks at the wall behind Captain Poul.

Two curved Japanese swords are fixed to the wall above a shelf holding a stippled gray iron helmet and faceplate of similar origin. They are all pitted and rusted with age. The two swords are hung horizontally with the largest at the top. The smaller sword is about half the size of the one above it, and both are nicked in several places. Centered on the shelf, the top of the helmet slopes down from a point into an inverted V that ends in curled-up flares. Underneath this ridge on the sides and back of the helmet, iron plates hang down in an overlapping shingle pattern. The convex faceplate at the opening only leaves a small slit for the eyes. Hinged on one side, it is open enough to see the hollow cavity within. An engraved gold plate lines the face of the shelf below the helmet but it cannot be read because of the glare from the window.

“Let’s see...from the looks of your 201 file, you’re prior service, right?”

Taylor looks back down at Captain Poul. “Yes, Sir. I mean, yeah.”

“And I see that you served in Desert Storm as a Sergeant.”

Taylor shifts his weight in the chair. “Uh. I was told that wouldn’t be a problem.”

Captain Poul looks up and shakes his head. “Oh, it’s not. I just like to know a little bit about who I’m talking to.” He puts down the file and leans back in his chair. “It also helps me understand the fight involving your platoon at Gunner’s Inn last week.”

“Oh...This is about that.”

“As I understand it, the fight started with Private Cole striking you in the face. Do you have any idea why he would want to do that?”

Taylor crosses his arms and reaches up to his collar with his left hand. He shrugs. “I don’t know, Sir. Maybe he doesn’t like me much.” He pinches the rank on his collar and begins rocking the single metal stripe back and forth between his fingers. Here the fabric of the uniform is faded and creased.

“Huh. I suppose not.” Poul smirks and his eyes return to the file. He turns a page. “The fight then spread to the rest of the platoon.” He looks up at Taylor. “Do you know how that happened?”

“I don’t know, Sir. It just sort of did.”

Captain Poul nods in assurance. “I understand, and you’re not in any trouble. I’m just concerned about any tension within the platoon that might have allowed this to happen. And please, relax. Let’s try to forget who’s a Captain and who’s a Private. For now, let’s just talk. Okay?”

“Okay...sorry.” He stops fiddling with his rank and drops his hands to his lap.

Captain Poul says, “Not at all.” He looks down at the file for a moment, then back at Taylor. He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, but did you say you were in Desert Storm?”

“Yeah, for a little over six months.” Taylor glances at the open folder on the desk.

“I’ll bet you have some stories you could tell.”

Taylor studies the backs of his hands resting in his lap.

“You boys did a good job over there.”

“...Thanks, Sir – I mean thanks.” He looks back up at the Captain and asks, “You didn’t go?”

“I’ve never had the honor to serve in combat.” Captain Poul takes a drink from a coffee cup on his desk. Embossed on the face of it are the words, “What’s up Doc?” Below this is a picture of Bugs Bunny dressed in Army fatigues. Strapped to his head is an old-fashioned reflector plate.

“Oh.”

“Were you there while we were hot?”

“Yeah, but only for a day.”

Captain Poul says, “I heard they were surrendering in droves.”

“Yeah, they just gave up. Because they were hungry.” Taylor chuckles. “Pooor babies.”

He crosses his arms and begins pulling at his rank again.

“They got what they deserved?”

“Exactly.”

“I see.” Captain Poul sets the cup back down on the desk and picks up a notepad and pen.

Taylor lets go of his collar and leans forward. “Sir, can I speak freely?”

“That’s all I ask.”

“Those camel jockeys treat their people like shit, and if they followed a maniac like Hussein, they did get what they deserved. Hell, the way they treat their women, I’m surprised their own wives didn’t kill them in their sleep.” He looks at the floor and shakes his head. “When I went through Hawalli, I saw one of the scraggly bastards driving an old jeep. He had his goat in the front seat with him while his old lady sat in the back. Ain’t that a kick in the teeth?...Sorry ‘bout the language, Sir.”

“That’s quite all right. Feel free to say whatever is on your mind.” Captain Poul scribbles something on the notepad.

“If it’s okay to ask, Sir, what are you writing?”

“Just some notes for myself, so I can keep track of all these interviews later.” He looks up from the pad and adds with a smile, “I have a bad memory.”

“Oh.”

Captain Poul continues writing and Taylor’s eyes move around the room.

“Nice swords. Katana and Wakizashi?”

Captain Poul stops writing and turns to look up at the swords. He says, “Thank you, and yes they are. Fifteenth century. The helmet and faceplate are from the same period.”

“What’s the inscription on the bottom of the shelf say?”

“It’s a quote from George Orwell.” He turns back to facing Taylor. “He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.”

“The face of a warrior and all that, huh?”

“Something like that.” Captain Poul writes something else down on the pad and then puts down the pen. He turns his attention back to Taylor. “It took some persuading, but I finally got the armorer to let me keep the swords in here with the helmet and faceplate instead of having to sign them in and out of the arms room. They are weapons, even if they are mine. Do you collect?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a fourteenth century Ken back home.” He smiles. “I guess we have something in common.”

Captain Poul’s own smile tightens. “I guess we do. Were you allowed to keep it in your barracks room when you were in the Army the first time?”

“Yeah, but I had to keep it locked up in a glass case.”

“What about Kuwait? What did you do with it when you were deployed?”

“I sent it home to my mom so she could take care of it. I was only gone for six months.”

“So what did you do for those six months? You were...” Captain Poul looks at the file on the desk and turns a page. “...13Bravo, right?”

“Yes, Sir – I mean yep, straight up artillery. We mostly did infantry CPA missions though, because they were so short manned. You know what they say.” He points to the first division patch on his shoulder. “Everybody’s secondary MOS is 11Bravo, infantry.”

“CPA?”

“That’s what we called them anyway. You know, like a CPA’s an accountant? That’s what we were. Accountants. We went around to Hussein’s ammo caches and recorded all the chemical weapons so disposal units could pick ’em up. That was the deal. According to Bush. We stop fighting and they give us their NBC ordnance.” Taylor smirks. “Not that they couldn’t just make more.”

“Did you ever run into any trouble?”

“Naw, they were pretty tame. Except for the last one. I’m sure it’s all there in my 201.”

Taylor nods toward the file on the desk. “They did one of these evals after it.”

“That would be in your medical records.” Captain Poul picks up the file and shuffles through it. “I don’t have them here with me, but I guess I could get them...”

“Oh. Well, I could just tell you about it. That thing doesn’t tell you what really happened anyway. It’s just facts and numbers.”

“They are a little impersonal.” He sets the file back down on the desk.

“Sides, it’s better from the horse’s mouth and all, right?”

“Heh, so I’ve heard.” Captain Poul has his notepad and pen again.

“It started out pretty much like all the others. We got told where to go. We got there, counted their stuff, while they just stood around watching, and then we left. No big deal. Sometimes we had to go a ways out from camp and sometimes not. Every time we walked, or road-marched, however you wanna call it. It kind of sucked, but it wasn’t like you see on TV with all that loose sand everywhere, and your feet sinking up to the ankle with every step. Don’t get me wrong; there was sand, plenty of it. But most of it was hard-packed and there was even some scrubby little bushes growing here and there. The worst part was when the wind picked up and what loose sand there was got blown into your face. It felt like tiny little needles constantly sticking you. You either had to deal with it, or you tied a handkerchief around your face, as if it weren’t hot enough already.”

“Was the wind a problem on the last mission?”

“Naw, there wasn’t even a breeze, but it was hotter than shit.” Taylor leans back and recrosses his legs.

“Yeah, but wasn’t it a dry heat?”

“All I know is, it was heat. I was carrying the SAW and let me tell you, that sucker had me sweating to beat hell. At least I wasn’t RTO. Johnson could barely keep up.

“Those damn SINGARD radios got heavy. We were in the classic Wedge formation, or whatever the hell you call it. I was really a redleg artilleryman and we didn’t do a lot of ground pounding. So I don’t know much of that infantry crap. I never understood how walking in an arrow shape like a bunch of stupid birds could keep you from getting shot. Anyway, Johnson was left flank and he was dogging it.”

“Did you have far to go that day?”

Taylor uncrosses his legs and stretches. “A little ways, not too bad. We were looking for a bunker just outside of Abdali. LT was up next to Baker on point, and he didn’t even notice that



Johnson was starting to lag behind. That was the whole problem with LT. He never thought about his section. If he did, maybe the shit that went down later on would never have happened.” He begins working the rank on his collar again.

“Who was your Lieutenant?”

“Lieutenant Waitfield. He was a skinny guy with light brown hair, and always moving around like he couldn’t sit still. He reminded me of one of those fraternity guys that were always hyped either on, or about something. I think he’d got his commission a whole six months before, cause most of the time he seemed like he had no idea what the hell he was doing. No offense to officers, Sir.” Taylor holds his hands up, palms out.

“Oh, it’s okay. None taken.” Captain Poul flips a page over in the notepad and begins writing on the next.

“More notes for the interview?”

Captain Poul finishes and looks at Taylor. With a wave of his hand, he says, “Only a few. Please, continue.”

“Well, Lieutenant Waitfield, he couldn’t even read the GPS without help, much less take care of his section. With Johnson falling back and seeing as how I was the ranking NCO, I moved up to point, and told the LT that the troops might need a break. The dude actually asked, ‘Who told you to get out of position, Sergeant?’ He actually said that. Johnson’s bringing up the rear, about to fallout from heatstroke, and this guy asks what I’m doing out of my position. Ain’t that a kick in the teeth? So, I told his ass, ‘Johnson’s hurting and I think he needs a breather. Drinking a lot of water or not, if we don’t give him a break soon, he’s gonna fallout and I’ll have to stick him.’”

“You were a combat lifesaver?”

“Yeah, every NCO there had to take the class, and learn how to run a saline I. V.”

Captain Poul nods. “I guess over there, you never know when you’d need it.”

“Yep, a lot of guys fell out and got stuck their first week there. Johnson was about to do just that, but LT didn’t care. He said, ‘Tell him to drink water (like I hadn’t just told him it wouldn’t matter) and suck it up. I want to make it to the bunker and be back to camp by nightfall.’ Then he started to talk like it was my fault, ‘This is your responsibility anyway, Sergeant. You’re supposed to make sure the troops carry out orders, and keeping them fit to do so falls under that. Don’t you think?’ What the hell did he think I was trying to do? Idiot. I told you he didn’t give a shit about his

section. Well, I tried to tell him anyway, 'Sir, that's what I'm trying to do.' But he just said, 'Then get back there and handle it.'

"There wasn't anything else I could say, so I fell back to Johnson and tried to help him out as best I could. After all, I was carrying the SAW. Although it ain't as heavy as a M60, the bastard's pretty much a fully automatic version of the M16 and still weighed a lot. The rest of the section had their own shit to worry about, so Johnson and I did the best we could. Like I said, it was hot and there wasn't much wind. You just kept walking with the sun pressing down on your head like some giant fiery hand on top of your Kevlar. Most of the time you spent hoping for a breeze and then when one came along you wished it would go away because it was so hot. You ever baked something in an oven and then opened up the door to check on it and got that hot blast of air in your face?"

"Well, my wife does most of the baking, but I know what you're talking about."

"That's exactly what it was like when a breeze picked up. Boiling air that you could feel drying up your face. You breathed it in, and all you wanted to do was get it out. But it didn't do any good, 'cause you just had to suck it right back in again. Then there's the sun. It was twice as bright as it was hot. Reflecting off that beige-yellow sand it was all you could do to keep your eyes open. And there wasn't anything else around besides yourself to cast a shadow. Sure, there were a few slight hills, but they didn't amount to much. We had to wear shades that were non-reflective, so they weren't much help either.

"Like I said, Johnson and me did the best we could. He was one of those big black guys who looked like he could carry the whole section if he wanted, but the heat was bringing him down. I tried to keep him motivated by saying stuff like 'Come on, dude, you can do it. We're almost there.' You know all the stuff they teach you in PLDC. Johnson didn't talk much. Never did. He just kind of grunted every once in a while. I never really understood that. I didn't know him that well anyway. None of us really knew each other. We had all been picked from different sections in our artillery unit and put on that detail. We'd only been working together for a month or so, and after that mission we never did again. So while Johnson grunted and I gave the half-assed pep talk, we walked. We were slowing the section up a lot, and finally the LT stopped. He said it was because he had to check the GPS, but I knew he just didn't want to admit that the men needed a break." Taylor stops and takes his canteen out of his cargo pocket. He opens it and takes a drink.

"How many men were in your section?"

Taylor swallows and says, "Five. We used to have six, but one fell out dehydrated the day before. Bathers never could take the heat any better than Johnson. That's probably why LT stopped. He didn't want the section to become four. While he was 'checking the GPS,' I had Lubeviche take the SINGARD from Johnson. The heat didn't seem to be affecting Lubeviche" ass at all. Didn't matter how hot it got. He never slowed down. That was one high-speed, low-drag dude.

"After me and Johnson'd fallen back about five hundred meters, LT finally decided to slow it down. It still took us about an hour to catch up and get back into position, though. About two hours later, we stopped for lunch, if you could call it that. You know how MREs are. Meal Ready to Eat, my ass. You'd think if we could come up with a hundred and one ways to kill the enemy, we could at least come up with a decent meal."

"It's been a while, but I can still remember how they taste."

"Like ass, huh?"

Captain Poul chuckles.

Taylor smiles. "Well, we finished eating and started on our way again. LT surprised us by keeping it at the slow pace. Even so, we started getting close to the Iraqi position by two. We weren't being real quiet or nothing and I guess the bastards either heard us or saw us, 'cause when we got about a click away, shots were fired."

Captain Poul sets the pad down in his lap and stares at Taylor. "I thought this was after the cease-fire. Didn't they know that a U.S. unit was going to come and take inventory?"

"They should've, but we hit the deck anyway. None of us were gonna try and ask 'em any questions right then. Lucky for us, we were on a little hill, and we just low-crawled back down the other side. LT called me over and when I made it to him, he asked me, 'What do you think is happening, Sergeant?' Shit, his guess was as good as mine, and I told him so. I said, 'Dunno. Maybe they haven't heard about the cease-fire. Hussein ain't exactly known for keeping his troops informed. Or maybe they figure ain't nobody gonna catch 'em popping a few grunts out in the middle of nowhere.' He looked at me for a minute, and I could tell he was scared. It was the way his eyes jumped from left to right, like he was checking my face to see if I was joking or something. 'Maybe it was an accident,' he said. 'We haven't returned fire, so this isn't an incident yet. We just need to keep our heads.'

"That's all I was trying to do. Then another shot went off and we all kind of jumped. I wasn't really paying attention to the first one 'cause I was just trying to keep my ass from getting shot. But the second one I heard clear as a bell, and it sounded like a M60 set on semiautomatic.

We all waited there for a couple of minutes baking like bacon, damn sand was hot, and then the LT crawled up the hill aways and looked over it. After a couple of seconds, he came back down. When he got back next to me he said, 'I didn't see any movement. It looks like the bunker is facing the other way.' That didn't mean nothing. He knew it and I knew it. But I told him anyway, 'You know they gotta have something watching their back. They probably haven't seen any movement from us either, but that don't mean we ain't paying attention.' He nodded, looked back up toward the top of the hill, and then back at me. 'Wait here.'

"When he said that, I saw something else in his eyes besides fear. They were still jumping back and forth, but now they seemed to be looking far away too. He was a damn glory chaser. He said, 'I'm going to go do some recon and assess the situation. They probably won't see just one of us and if they do, they'll be less trigger happy than if it were the whole section.' Now he was trying to blow smoke up my ass, and I think he knew I wasn't buying it 'cause he was already shaking his head when I said, 'That's bullshit. They see you, and you're dead.' The asshole was gonna try and get himself a medal, no matter what I said.

"Still, I had to try and stop him. I would've argued with him about it all day, but he pulled rank on me. 'Wait here. That's an order, Sergeant.' Then he started crawling around the side of the hill and just when he was about to go around the corner, he stopped and said, 'Maintain radio silence. I have the hand-held and I'll contact you if I need to.' Then he left. By his damn self. You heard what I said. I tried to stop his dumb ass. What else could I do?" Taylor stands and throws his hands in the air. He paces back and forth for a few seconds and then stops in front of the pictures on the wall to his right.

"There was nothing else you could have done. You did precisely what you should have. You followed orders," Captain Poul says. His voice is low.

"I know, but they were wrong." Taylor studies the pictures. The glare from the window is not the only thing obscuring them. Many are faded, and in one of them, a reflection in the window of the Humvee portrayed hides the faces of those standing in front of it.

"Perhaps, but the orders were lawful and you did the right thing by keeping your cool. Not many would in that situation."

"You think so?"

"Definitely."

"Thanks." Taylor leans forward and squints at the picture with the sunlight-reflecting Humvee.

“No one can ever really say what he would do in any given situation, especially in combat. You handled yourself with a calm mind, and that is all the Army can ask.”

“I wouldn’t say I was calm, but I guess I did ok.” He turns and walks back to the chair.

“Certainly, that is understandable. Did you calm down a little after Lieutenant...” Captain Poul flips back through pages in the notepad. “Waitfield left?”

Taylor sits down. “I guess. We sat there on the back of that hill for fifteen or twenty minutes just waiting. Nobody said nothing, we just listened. And drank water. Like I said before, it was hotter than shit. I think we were all wondering how far he was, and what was happening. And lying there in the sand I couldn’t help but think about sand fleas getting in my ear, like the guy we had all heard rumors about. He had one of ’em get in there and it laid eggs. Pretty soon he had a whole nest of ’em. Didn’t know ‘till he went on sick call ‘cause he had a headache. Probably never happened, but I still thought about it.

“Then we heard another shot. Just one, like the others. But this one seemed louder somehow. I crawled to the top of the hill. Couldn’t see a damn thing. The bunker looked like any other little hill out there on the horizon. We wouldn’t have even seen it if we didn’t know it was there. When I stared at it real hard, I could just barely make out the top hatch and the murder holes that they shot out of. Nothing moved. I crawled back down. A few seconds later, I went over to Lubeviche and picked up the SINGARD hand piece to try and get the LT, ‘Lima One, Lima One, this is Lima Two, over.’ I got no answer. ‘Lima One, we heard shots fired. What is the sit? Over.’ Still didn’t get nothing. I tried for a couple more minutes but all I got was static.

“The entire section kept watching me like I was magic and was gonna pull the LT out of the hand piece. We waited ten more minutes and I tried the radio off and on. When we still hadn’t heard nothing one way or the other, I decided we had to do something. First, I tried to call base camp. ‘Alpha One, this is Lima Two, over.’ ‘Course I switched over to the secondary channel in case the first had been compromised by the LT. Didn’t get a fucking thing from them, either. Damn SINGARDS. You could never tell when those bastards would cut out on you. The other radios might’ve been bigger, and heavier, but at least they worked most of the time. Hell, I would’ve settled for a damn tin can on a string if it would’ve let me get a hold of base camp.

“I decided to take the section over to the bunker for a look. I mean, I had to do something.” Taylor’s eyes flick to the helmet and faceplate on the wall. “For all we knew, the LT could’ve been dead, dying, or prisoner. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to pull a hero and try to go alone, like the dumbass LT. That’s what got us into the shit to begin with. We headed around the side of the hill

opposite from the one the LT took. No reason to tempt fate. We moved in the same wedge formation 'cause I didn't know anything else. Like I said, I wasn't a grunt. I figured our best bet was to come at the bunker from the side, so they couldn't get a clear view of us from the front or the back."

Taylor drains the canteen and stuffs it back into his cargo pocket. "It was a long ass way to that bunker. You never realize just how far a thousand meters is, until you gotta low crawl most of it. Halfway there I hit my hand on some kind a thistle bush. I was so busy watching the back of that bunker, I put my hand right down on top of it as I was low crawling by. Shit kind of stung. I stopped and pulled out the big thistles I could get with my fingers. The rest were too small. I had a bunch of 'em stuck in the palm of my hand like a coat of tiny little hairs. That night, it took me about an hour to pull 'em all out with a pair of tweezers. Annoying as shit. You ever had a little splinter in your hand and then have it brush up against something?" He rubs at the palm of his right hand with his thumb. There are small scars punctuating the skin in white dots. He stares at the helmet and faceplate on the shelf above Captain Poul.

"Yes, I used to work in construction before the Army. It gets on your nerves."

Taylor looks down at his hands and then back at Captain Poul. "Yep. Every time one of 'em got hit, it felt like a tiny jolt of electricity zapping my hand. Well, I tried to ignore it and made my way to the side of the bunker. We got within about three meters or so and stopped to see if we could hear anything. Let me tell you something. Most people don't want to admit it, or talk about it, but it's true. Hussein was ready for our asses when we came. He had stockpiles and stockpiles of ammo and ordnance scattered all over that desert. They were dug in good. Hussein knew all along that sooner or later someone was gonna try and stop 'em, and he was ready for it. There were ammo and fuel resupply points everywhere. I'm not saying they would've beat us, but if he'd a treated his troops a little better, we'd a had one hell of a fight on our hands.

"The bunkers were dug in good and set-up perfect. This one was no exception. They had taken an area that was a natural hill and dug a square hole straight down from the top. Since most of the little hills in the area were only about ten feet in diameter to begin with, they were perfect. They dug this square hole, that's about as big as the hill itself, down till the top barely cleared their heads. Then they shored up the walls with sandbags, covered the top with a board and sand, and put a hatch in it. Through the front and back, slits were dug out and lined with steel so they could shoot out of 'em. Bastards were set up.

"Right then, only one of the murder holes had anything pointing out of it. To my right,

the front of the bunker had two murder holes, and the far one had what looked like a .50 cal. barrel sticking out of it. There was one hole in the back. It was empty. We sat there and listened for a minute or two. I didn't see the LT but I did hear some mumbled voices in the bunker. Couldn't make 'em out, though. I motioned for Baker to come over and take a look since he was the next highest rank as a Corporal. He got over to where I was, but he couldn't make much out of the voices either. Didn't matter much. The LT was the only one that could've understood 'em anyway. He did notice something that I hadn't though. Up by the hatch that was open an inch or two, clear as day, was a bright red smear of blood. Fucking-A. I had an idea what those towelhead bastards had done with the LT. I had to go and check it out. I motioned for Baker and the rest of the section to cover me, while I took a closer look.

"I crawled up there as quiet as I could (I never was any good at that kind of shit anyway) and looked in the two-inch gap at the hatch. It was a convex steel plate that opened on a torsion bar, kind of like the driver's hatch on a howitzer. The blood was smeared a little on the rim of it, and a lot had dripped down inside. What little had fallen on the sand was already dried up into a stain. Through the gap I could see the three of 'em 'cause they had some kind of battery powered lantern in there. 'Course they all had dark hair and dark skin, and they were all wearing those screwed-up uniforms that looked like BDU shorts. Two of 'em were eating MREs. Son-of-a-bitches must've gotten them off the LT.

"The third one was holding his messed-up-looking assault rifle up to his shoulder acting like he was shooting something. He rocked back with the imaginary recoil and then held up his hand and flipped it over like a tin can shot off a fence. He said something in that spit-all-over-yourself language and they all laughed. The sorry fuckers had the balls to be in there joking about how they had shot the LT and took his shit. I looked around on the floor inside, but I didn't see the LT's body. I was guessing they or a buddy of theirs had drug him away so they wouldn't have to deal with the smell. I was pissed."

"What did you do?"

"Shit...I decided to give them something to laugh about. I looked back at the section and grabbed a HE grenade out of the carrier on my LBE. I motioned for them to watch the perimeter for the buddy of theirs that might be out there. Johnson's eyes got wide as shit. He wasn't huffing and puffing anymore, but he was sweating his ass off when he saw that grenade in my hand. He hadn't seen the blood yet, and none of them had seen what I had. Baker nodded and

he had the rest of the section fan out around the bunker. I looked back inside.” Taylor rocks his rank between his fingers.

“They were still bullshitting around, so I switched the grenade to my right hand and pulled the pin with my left. It made a soft little click, but the dudes in the bunker were too busy laughing it up to hear it. The thistles in my hand were stinging like hell as I held onto that grenade.” Taylor begins to rub his hand again. “Since the murder holes were big enough to toss a grenade back out of, I knew I was gonna have to cook that baby off before I threw it in, so they wouldn’t have time to get rid of it. Most of the time, when you throw a grenade, you just pull the pin, let the spoon fly on its own, and throw it. If you wanna cook it off, you just hold it a few seconds first. I couldn’t do that this time. When that spoon lets loose it make a loud, ching, kind of noise and bullshitting or not, the dudes in the bunker would’ve heard that. So, I grabbed the spoon in my left hand and slowly let it come off.

“Now, I didn’t think of this until I was letting the spoon go, but when, exactly, does the ten-second-count start on a grenade? Like I said, most of the time the spoon flies off in less than a second anyway, so it doesn’t matter. But I was taking it off slowly. Did the time start when the spoon was off halfway? A quarter? Three quarters? I didn’t know, so I decided to go with halfway. I figured I didn’t have that far to throw it anyway. I figured I’d count to six, too. That’d leave ’em four seconds. They might be able to get it out one of the murder holes in that amount of time, but probably not. Anyway, I didn’t want the damn thing to go off in my hand since I wasn’t too sure about the starting time.

“While I was counting, I looked back into the gap and a whiff of air wafted out at me. There’s one thing I never realized about all the bunkers I’d seen ’cause I’d never been in one before. How cool it must be inside one. Temperature-wise that is. All that sand must be a good insulator ’cause the air that came out at me must have been at least forty degrees cooler. Well, when I got to six, I lifted the hatch a little, tossed the grenade in, closed the hatch, and jumped up and sat on top of it.” Demonstrating, Taylor grabs the seat of the chair on both sides.

Captain Poul leans forward on his desk. His eyes are wide and unblinking. “What did they do?”

“At first they didn’t do anything. They just stopped talking. It was so quiet. So quiet...” Taylor releases his hold on the chair and turns the scarred hand palm up. He stares at it for a moment and then dazedly wipes the palm back and forth along the length of his thigh.

“They didn’t say anything at all?”



He looks back up at Captain Poul. “Oh, they started yelling. After a few seconds they was yelling to beat hell. And God, the pounding. Pounding on the bottom of that hatch. A couple a times they even managed to lift it ’cause I didn’t have anything but the hatch to hold on to. I couldn’t let go, though. I...just couldn’t. Let me tell you, I could’ve swore I counted to a full six before I even started to grab that hatch. And counting the time it took for me to drop the grenade in, jump on the hatch and have them realize what was happening, it must have been at least eight or nine seconds before they started pounding on that hatch. But I swear to you, it had to have been another five or six seconds before that grenade went off. They must not have thought about throwing it back out one of the murder holes because I didn’t get my legs blown off. They just kept yelling and then they started screaming. And the screwed up thing, at the end...they sounded like they was singing in that language of theirs. Singing. Ain’t that a kick in the teeth?”

Captain Poul lifts his eyes from the pad. “You killed them all?”

Taylor is now digging at the scars with his thumb. They pulse out from his skin in a cacophony of red. His face slack, he stares at the helmet and faceplate. His voice is low and airy as he answers. “I...I had to. I had to do it. Didn’t I?”

Captain Poul doesn’t immediately answer. Instead, he removes his glasses and massages the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger. He sighs. “So the grenade *did* go off in the bunker.”

Taylor blinks and looks down at his hands. The scars still blaze beneath his thumb. He drops his hands to his lap and faces Captain Poul. “The grenade went off all right. And I’ll tell you something, I didn’t even feel a thing through the hatch. Part of the roof caved in behind me, but that was it. They stopped singing. There wasn’t even that much noise. Just a kind of *poof*. Then their buddy came running up from about fifty meters away. The other guys in the section probably would have shot him if the LT hadn’t been right behind him.”

Captain Poul stops writing. “Lieutenant Waitfield!?” He lets the pad fall to his lap again.

“Yeah, the sorry son-of-a-bitch was down in an arroyo sixty meters away counting up the ordnance they had. Didn’t even think to let us know anything. Regardless of the SINGARD screwing up. Told you he didn’t give a damn about his section. He had his clipboard in his hands like he always did when he’s counting up their shit.”

“What about the shots you heard fired?”

“Aww...bastards were just shooting at some rabbit or something. They didn’t even know he was there.”

“And the blood and MREs?”

“The blood was from whatever they killed, and the other dude was off cleaning it while the LT was counting. The LT had given them the MREs. Guess he didn’t care too much for ’em either.”

Captain Poul takes the notepad from his lap and sets both it and the pen on the desk. He runs his fingers through his hair.

“Well, what the fuck was I supposed to do?” Taylor springs up from the chair and walks back over to the picture of the soldiers and Humvee. With his back to Captain Poul he says “I mean, shit. If LT had just let us know what the hell was up instead of trying to do it all himself, it would never have happened. Asshole should never have gone by himself in the first place, but he just had to have that medal.”

“What happened next?”

“Well, the dude who was with the LT was excited to say the least. We got him calmed down, though. It probably helped that we were all armed, and all he had was the knife he had been cleaning that animal with.”

“I meant, what happened concerning the Army?”

“Oh, the LT was irate. He took the SAW and the rest of my weapons from me. Then they had me confined to quarters when we got back. Jerk.” Taylor crosses his arms and grabs the rank at his collar. He looks over his shoulder at Captain Poul. “Like I was dangerous or something. ’Course there was a court-martial.” He turns back to the picture.

“What did they find?”

“They didn’t do much. First of all, they didn’t want the entire world hearing about it, so it was kind of low key. My lawyer from JAG said that even though I didn’t follow the rules of engagement (guess because of the cease-fire I wasn’t supposed to engage the enemy unless I was actively being fired upon, and I should’ve tried to take ’em prisoner and question ’em first), the LT didn’t leave any orders in the instance he was captured or killed like we thought he was. It also helped that the rag-heads had technically broken the cease-fire by shooting that animal. All they did was strip my rank, give me a general discharge that changed into an honorable after six months, and bar my re-enlistment for two years.”

“I see. Do you think it’s a fair judgment?”

“You know, you can’t see who it is in the picture ’cause of the sun. Why do you even keep it up?”

“Why does that picture fascinate you?” Captain Poul asks. “What do you see?”

Taylor continues to stare at the picture, and the rank at his collar rocks between his fingers in a furious twitching of knuckles.

“What about the Iraqi soldiers?”

The backing of the rank on his collar slips off as he is rocking it between his fingers. The point of the pin jabs into his thumb. “Ah!” The backing and rank drop to the floor. He stoops to pick them up. “What about ’em?”

“Do you ever think about them? Did they get what they deserved?”

Taylor shrugs and continues to study the picture as he reattaches his rank.

Captain Poul picks up the pad and pen. He begins writing. “That’s just a mask, isn’t it?”

Taylor finishes attaching the rank and crosses his arms.

Captain Poul stops writing and watches Taylor’s back for a few seconds. “Why didn’t you fight back when Cole started hitting you at Gunner’s Inn last week?”

Taylor’s shoulders rise and fall slightly.



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## *Elegy for Clara*

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*By Gregory Powell*

In 1917, she was told to burn a field of grass.  
She never cottoned up to fire.  
She never handled fire.  
Never burned a living thing in her life.

She struck a match and sidled along the edge of the field.  
A spring breeze quickened the flames.  
She had not seen her sister, Helen who trailed.  
An angel brushed a wing across Clara's heart.

Smoke burned her eyes. Clara turned.  
Helen ran toward her in a dress of fire.  
Clara beat back the flames with her arms  
that melted into one failed battering ram.

She walked a mile in her sister's shoes.  
She walked a mile in her sister's shoes.

I watched her at her white stone churn  
plunging a wooden paddle into warm milk;  
Fingers grooved the wooden handle.  
Golden butter beaded/gleamed for her silver spoon,

In 1951, her first churn had split in two  
("like the curtain in the Temple  
rent in two when Jesus died")  
The next second, Granddaddy June dropped dead,

She wondered how to make it with their eight children,  
a woman in a world of mean-mouthed men?  
She reminded God that He once parted the Red Sea  
for his children to cross on dry land.

She walked a mile in the shoes of Moses.  
She walked a mile in the shoes of Moses.

Clara's skin was as dark  
as the coffee she percolated.  
She drank it straight, black,  
no cream no milk no sugar no vodka

Her arms were as thin as reeds,  
Stretched tall enough to hold  
her eight children. She said God  
whistled through her bones to stretch them.

I asked which particular tune God whistled  
to lengthen bone? She was not sure but believed

He loaned it to the nightingale  
one evening when her lover flew away.

She walked a mile in a grandmother's shoes.  
She walked a mile in a grandmother's shoes.

She leased land from the Bryant family and sharecropped  
cotton, cotton, cotton! Seeded  
mile-long rows from the levee to her front porch.  
She & her children hoed cotton/pulled corn/chopped

weeded/picked/banked sweet potatoes in straw/  
pickled/canned fruit/crushed heaven's sweet nectar  
from sorghum & sealed it in tin cans.  
By 1968, work bowed her back into a rainbow.

She bought a Bluco radio after her last crop;  
watched her 33 grandchildren dance from her front porch  
across fallow ground by 1999, beyond the levee,  
beyond the strobe of her clear searching eyes.

She walked a mile in a sharecropper's shoes.  
She walked a mile in a sharecropper's shoes.

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**Wild Rose**

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by Georgia Tiffany

I think I had my mother's dream.  
My father crawls in bed beside me.  
He comes in through the mouth,  
and whispers  
that familiar way whispers do

when they think they can touch,  
then slips one fat arm under my waist,  
the other under my neck,  
and carries me to the piano  
where I must play.

"*To a Wild Rose*"  
whispers my father.  
His friends are there – two on the sofa,  
one in the blue corduroy chair,  
each with my father's face

and each face by the firelight,  
flame-colored, eyes set in coals.  
My father stands near  
the marble hearth.  
The fire glows.

*Wild Rose*, he says again.  
I have memorized Bach suites  
yet cannot remember  
the wild rose.  
I think I am in my mother's dream.

He's so proud of you, says my mother.  
MacDowell, says my father.  
Like something crawling,  
my nightgown clings to my legs,  
floral flannel, and full of worms.

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***It's All in the Timing: An Interview with John Rowell***

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by Shannon Draper

During the Fall of 2003, Kansas State University hosted visiting writer John Rowell. Formerly of North Carolina and currently of New York City, his first book *The Music of Your Life* was published in 2003 by Simon and Schuster. Rowell has recently completed his MFA from the low-residency program at Bennington College in Vermont.

**SD:** *Some of the questions I have are based on some of things we've talked about this week while you've been here. One thing I was curious about is when you actually first started writing fiction?*

**JR:** I always kind of wanted to write when I was a kid and I did write then, kid things. I took creative writing in college, I studied with a wonderful writer and teacher, Max Steele, at Chapel Hill, and so that was my first experience with workshop.

**SD:** *Was English your undergraduate degree?*

**JR:** No, theater was. And so then I moved to NY to be an actor and then, I don't know, about ten years ago I really decided I wanted to go back and try to write in earnest. I started doing workshops in the city and I just found good teachers to work with.

**SD:** *One thing that I think is so interesting about your work, especially in "Spectators in Love" and "The Mother of the Groom and I," is the juxtaposition between what is considered humorous and what is dramatic in each of those stories. I'm wondering if you consider that comic timing something that is elemental to fiction, or if that is a by-product of your time spent as an actor?*

**JR:** Both, I think. I hadn't thought of it that way before, but that is an interesting idea. I do think as an actor you learn a lot about rhythm by doing good comedies by writers who write comedy well, like Neil Simon and Oscar Wilde. You develop, I think, an ear for it. I feel like I have an ear for dialogue and speech too, so coupled with that, if the comedy works, that's why. When comedy is successful it is because it has been timed correctly...all comedians and comics will tell you that: it's all in the timing. And I think that's true of fiction, too. I don't ever write something saying, this is going to be funny. If you do that you're dead in the water. I think people make that mistake, thinking 'Oh, I need to put a little humor into this.' It never, never works. You've always just got to be writing for the character and the situation, and that's where the humor will arise organically, from what happens and who it happens to. It has to be genuine.

**SD:** *Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences at Bennington? About the program itself, what drew you to it, and how it functioned?*

**JR:** After doing a lot of workshops in New York with a lot of really, really good teachers, I thought I could do this in a bigger way. I thought I could get a degree. But I knew that I probably didn't want to just lock, stock and barrel go to a full-time program. I knew about the Bennington program and a couple of the other low-residencies, so I decided that's what I wanted to do. I could get my MFA and then I could teach. I chose Bennington because of the faculty. Jill McCorkle had been a huge influence on me as a writer, I loved her work. And there were several other people, Amy Hempel, Alice Mattison...people whose work I knew, like Susan Cheever, that I knew I wanted to work with. The Bennington program consists of two ten-day residencies each year – ten days in June and ten days in January.

**SD:** *And the majority of what you write takes place at home then?*

**JR:** Yes, and then you mail it off in packets every month and the teachers send it back to you with comments.

**SD:** *Were most people wanting to write or teach, or both?*

**JR:** Most people wanted to write, a few people like Susan (KSU faculty member Susan Jackson Rodgers) and me, we want to write and teach. But certainly a lot of people go to MFA programs just to work with those kinds of writers.

**SD:** *Are there writers that you think aspiring writers should read? Writers that are good “nuts and bolts” kinds of writers?*

**JR:** I do, actually, though it's a really subjective question. I always go back to John Cheever and William Trevor and John Updike, Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Richard Yates and William Maxwell and Raymond Carver. There are a lot of masters out there and I go back to those people all the time. When you get stuck it's great. I think the best motto to have is “reading is inspiration.” It's the joyful antidote to being stuck as a writer.

**SD:** *There is a trend in publishing now to market fiction by category. Your fiction has been listed on Barnes & Noble.com and Amazon.com under the category of gay and lesbian fiction, and I was wondering how you feel about that as a published writer? If you feel you write for a category or if these categories are sort of arbitrary and ridiculous?*

**JR:** I think they're arbitrary but I understand them. I don't reject the notion of being labeled as long as it's a sub-label and not the primary label. I don't think any writer wants to be categorized and labeled, unless you're just very clear that you're writing murder-mystery or romance novels, or genre fiction. I certainly don't think that I am.

**SD:** *No, I would say not.*



**JR:** I fall under that umbrella of literary fiction, and I'm very honored to be included in that. But it's just because so many of the stories have, as their protagonists, a gay male, of whatever age, and so it's been identified as "gay fiction." And that's fine, I want to have a gay and lesbian audience, I want to have an audience of every stripe of life. I think if people want to read your book they will read it, no matter who they are. If there's something that they read about it, or that someone tells them about it, that strikes an interest, they'll either get past whatever associations they may have, or they'll look at those associations and say that book is not for me. What can you do about it? Most of the time you're never even going to know. That's something about putting a book out there into the world, people can be hashing it over in Milwaukee or Santa Barbara, and you don't know those people, and that's great. They could be ripping it to shreds or they could be sobbing and saying it's the story of their life: you'll never know. You just have to believe that all different sorts of reactions are happening out there from people who read it and hope that people like it and get something out of it.

**SD:** *There was so much positive response to the book. Were you surprised by that or grateful?*

**JR:** Grateful, for sure. You can't write for reviewers, you know. You can't write for anybody, you just write something that you hope a large number of people will respond to in a positive way. I'm very grateful about the positive response, and surprised. It was my first book so I really had no idea what kind of critical reception it was going to get. I had wonderful writers write blurbs for this book, and that was sort of the first indication of outside responses to this book. Susan Cheever, Jill McCorkle, Mark Childress, Lee Smith, Stephen McCauley and David Ebershoff. I admire all of these writers tremendously, they're fabulous writers, and I thought, well, they're smart people and if they like it then maybe others will like it, too. You never know.

**SD:** *Did you know about the whole promotional side of things when you first decided to send the book out for publication?*

**JR:** I had an inkling of it but I really didn't know everything that was involved, and I really did get involved with the whole promotional side of it. I think it's good for writers to do that.

**SD:** *To help sell their own work?*

**JR:** I think so, yeah. I mean the more you can help your publisher promote your book, the better it is for everybody.

**SD:** *I'd like to switch gears here and talk a little bit about some of the stories in the collection. There are some really beautiful pieces that deal with children, particularly the young boy in the title story "The Music of Your Life," and then the descriptions and the relationship with the child Donnie in the last story "Wildlife of Coastal Carolina." Are you interested in writing more about children?*

**JR:** There is a lot of material about children in this book, you're right. It's the kind of thing, you know, where I think I probably will, but do I plan it? Do I say 'this book is going to be about children?' No. If it comes up and works out to be part of the organic design of my next project then I will. I'm very careful about long-range planning, in terms of a book, because I think you need to allow surprises for yourself. One of the best things that happens when you are a writer is that you surprise yourself. Like 'I didn't intend to write that. Where does that come from? Where does this come from?'

**SD:** *The reason I ask that question is there's such integrity in the way the children are written. Or relationships that seem to make sense between children and adults, especially the chance encounter in "Wildlife of Coastal Carolina," and how just a small meeting with this child can change someone. So many times in fiction you read children that look like these very stereotypical versions of children rather than thinking children, feeling children.*

**JR:** I'm glad you felt that way.

**SD:** *I'm also curious about your feelings about revision, because so much of writing is about re-writing.*

**JR:** Absolutely.

**SD:** *Amy Bloom talks about revision as tinkering around the way men in woodworking shops would tinker. She was referring to a novel she had sent off that was selected for publication but then she withdrew it because she didn't think it was good enough, yet, which I found fascinating. Does that analogy work for you, that idea of tinkering, or are you more of a complete change kind of person?*

**JR:** I think it depends on the story. I like the notion of tinkering because sometimes that really is what it comes down to. When my editor acquired this book I think he felt like there really wasn't much to do to it. I said, 'Oh, give me time, I've got things I want to do to it.' And to his credit he let me. There was a time when he said 'I think it's time to stop' but fortunately I was pretty much done at that point, too, so we were in sync. You know, I actually just love that process. I think the hardest thing is to just get out, you know, just write it first. I think the more you write, the more you become comfortable with the re-writing process because it becomes kind of joyful: you just get to keep making it better. We can become very possessive about it, we can spend an entire morning saying 'Is it *but* or is it *so*?' And it can drive you insane. You can wake up in the middle of the night saying 'should her name be *Swanson* or *Swenson*?' Why do we do that? Who knows? It's just an instinct to make our work as true to our own impulses as we can, I think.

**SD:** *From the time that the book got accepted for publication to the time that it came out, how much work was done changing it? Are there stories in the collection that look completely different than they did when it was accepted?*

**JR:** I wouldn't say completely different but I did make a lot of changes. I was very lucky because the book was bought at the end of 2001 around Christmastime. In January of 2002 I knew it wasn't slated until spring of 2003, so we really had time to work on it. I had almost a year, which was great. It took me longer than I thought. I thought I would do it in maybe three months. You know, some of that depends on your editor's schedule, too, and he had other books that he was working on. And I really kept working. We substituted a couple of stories. We took out a couple of stories that had been in the original submission, and then I showed him something new and he said 'yes, let's put that one in.'

**SD:** *The stories that are in your collection seem interrelated, and you mentioned that was not something you intended to do. Do you see a common thread through the stories?*

**JR:** I had a teacher one time who said writers should not be concerned about theme because theme is for other people to identify, and that always kind of stuck with me. I think that's true. I think you need to write character and experience and situation and not think about 'what theme am I trying to communicate? What's my thesis here? What am I trying to say?' I think writers trip themselves up when they start getting into intellectual, heady games like that. It's really not where they should be. I can now look at this, the stories and the book as a unit, and see thematic threads and unity and pre-occupations and predilections as a writer...things I was sort of aware of before, but you're never really aware of anything until it's in black and white. But again, that was something that I think my editor, not being the author of the stories, could do for me. He could see how we were going to put this book together, about how we were going to order the stories. And I do think there is thematic unity in this book. You know it's funny about short story collections. I've noticed critics will jump on them for two opposing reasons: either they are too linked or they're not linked enough, so you are kind of damned if you do and damned if you don't. One review said 'why do you only write about gay men?' And that's her perspective. But my book is not what you would call a linked collection. These stories are not about the same person, and they take place over different times and eras, and the locations and situations are diverse, yet certainly the protagonist of each story is a gay man.

**SD:** *It's interesting that critics rarely, if ever, say 'all of these stories are about heterosexual couples.'*

**JR:** Exactly, isn't that funny? How many people said of *The Interpreter of Maladies* 'why is Jhumpa Lahiri only writing about the Indian experience in America?' Nobody said that. Why does anyone write about anything? If you don't like someone's subject matter that is your prerogative, but I think it's wrong to say to writers 'don't write about that.' We write about who we are and what we have experienced in life. And interestingly, the other thing that has not been talked about as much with this book, that surprised me a little, is that I don't think it has been given enough credit as being a southern collection. And that is another label.

**SD:** *A Regional Fiction label.*

**JR:** But certainly a lot of it is southern themed, and flavored.

**SD:** *You were raised in North Carolina, and you live in New York City now. How important do you think place is in your work and in writing in general?*

**JR:** I think it's very important. I think all of the great writers you can think of really have an allegiance to place. Certainly southern writers like Faulkner and Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor and Truman Capote...that southern background and heritage was extremely important in their work.

**SD:** *I know it's difficult for me to share my work with family members and friends, people who are close to me, but in workshop, with people I don't know, I can get it out there very easily. What is your experience with that?*

**JR:** I agree. I think it's easier with strangers. I think it is much harder to take on the reactions of friends and family than of strangers.

**SD:** *Because we call it fiction, but it is inherently a part of our own experience and informed by how we've lived and what we know.*

**JR:** The words *autobiography* and *autobiographical* always gets bandied about, especially with first books, I think. You know, 'how autobiographically were you writing?' I think all work is autobiographical because you are always lining your own experience and fictionalizing it. Everything in this book is fictionalized. I think people would be surprised that the things they think are the most "ripped from the headlines" of my own life's newspaper pages are not. I know where I've borrowed directly and I know where I've invented, and mostly I think that is for me to know. I think there are a lot of myths involved with reading and writing fiction and I don't always want those myths exploded. Every time I read a book I'm not caught up with 'did this actually happen to this writer? I wonder how much personal experience is in that passage?' If you're doing that then you're not really participating in the pure, joyful act of reading fiction.

**SD:** *I grew up in the midwest and even though the story "Saviors" is based in the south, the character of Jean Sloop is particularly vivid to me. She's so reminiscent of women I knew growing up in a small town.*

**JR:** You always want universality, even when you are writing specifically about a time and a place, a region or people. Like this one, southern middle-class WASPs, often gay. You want there to be universal connection so that someone in Alaska could relate to the inherent struggle between a father and a son to understand each other. These characters want to go some place other than where they are, they want to go to another world. That's universal, and I think people see that.

**SD:** *Do you have a particular audience in mind when you write?*

**JR:** I try not to think about audience and perception when I'm writing. I think that is counter-productive to the creative process, when it is just you alone with your computer. If you start to let marketing questions creep into your process of just writing a story and creating fiction then you're not really doing pure work, and I think work should be pure. But I think, as I said earlier, once a book is book, and it has been written and edited and put together and packaged, it's up to the writer whether or not he or she wants to promote. My feeling was that I wanted to, and then you kind of become a marketing person. In the last six months, frequently my days were spent getting to a reading, giving a reading, signing books, being glad to see that books were being sold, and that kind of felt markety to me, as opposed to waking up in the morning and just sitting at the computer, not answering the phone and not turning on the TV, just me and the computer, writing. And there is something a little schizophrenic about it, but I think every writer wants to be published. Except Emily Dickinson, you know she didn't ever want to be published.

**SD:** *I think a lot of writers at my level of experience (master's students who are writing), I think a lot of us get caught up in 'oh, I want to write something that will get published in StoryQuarterly, or Glimmer Train or The New Yorker.'*

**JR:** And I think those are great publications and good goals to have. I never think it's wrong to say 'I'd sure love to have a story in *Glimmer Train* or *Paris Review* or *The Atlantic*.' I think it's wonderful to set goals like that. I think that helps you to define your place in the business of writing, and it certainly is a business, as acting is a business. But you know, what we're talking about here is a schizophrenic thing in that these are creative acts that you do based on a gift or a skill that you have acquired or dream that you've had that has very little to do with the cold world of marketing it once it's out there. Actors, you know, it's very pure art, when it's done well, and it is wonderful to work on a role and to become a character and to do all of those things that actors do to give a performance; however, for actors in New York or L.A., their day to day job is flipping through their palm pilots and saying 'I need to get pictures off here and I need to send a note to this casting agent and this one, and I need to get to this audition and I need to wear this and I need to take this lesson and I need to make these calls and I need to follow up with this agent.' You know, business stuff. The trick is, once you get the job, to go back to that pure self or motivation or inspiration. So, when I get finished promoting this book, until the paperback comes out in June, I just want to go back and have my writing world be my computer and me.



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Each year the *Touchstone* staff awards cash prizes to those writers whose work is deemed exemplary. The winners for 2003-2004 are:

Fiction

Graduate Award: Jay Stevens, "PBY-5A Catalina"  
KSU Undergraduate Award: Gene Collins, "The Face of a Warrior"

Poetry

Graduate Award: Catherine Whitney Beaudreault, "Adam's Rib: Upon the Chimera"  
KSU Undergraduate Award: Steven Irwin Kimmi, "Tar-Paper School House"

Non-Fiction

Graduate Award: Nikol Watson, "Story Digger"  
KSU Undergraduate Award: Leta Reppert, "One-Gun Salute"

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