

PDR

Spring 2011



Printer's Devil Review

Editor

THOMAS DODSON

Fiction Editors

KATE ESTROP
THOMAS DODSON

Arts Editors

JESS BARNETT
JOSHI RADIN

Nonfiction Editor

CHRIS WILLARD

Poetry Editor

IAN POOLE

Editorial Consultant

TIMOTHY GAGER

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 1 (SPRING 2011)

<http://pdrjournal.org>

Cover: Robert McCann. *Ghosts & Zombies*. 2006. Oil on linen, 69" x 82"

Printer's Devil Review (ISSN 2160-2948) is an independent, open-access journal of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and the visual arts. We are a completely online journal and publish two issues per year, in spring and fall.

Printer's Devil Review is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

Printer's Devil Review
P.O. Box 382529
Cambridge, MA 02238
editors@pdrjournal.org

We do not accept postal submissions. Please see the submission guidelines on our website.



Contents

Thomas Dodson

Editor's Note 1

CONTRIBUTORS 3

FICTION 5

Norah Piehl

A Whole New Look 5

Cat Ennis Sears

Split Spine 18

Christine Gentry

The Tidal Pool and the Sea 23

Kate Racculia

Natalie Takes the Elevator 34

VISUAL ARTS..... 46

Jarrood McCabe

Boy in Plaid Shorts. Adirondack Park, New York..... 45

Itchy Ribs Robinson. New Orleans, Louisiana 46

E.W. Seeley. Chesterfield, Massachusetts..... 47

Alison Lindsay and Horse. Pine Plains, New York..... 48

First Aid Shelter. Horseneck Beach, Massachusetts..... 49

Sean Flood

Public Alley 439..... 51

72 X 36 oil on canvas, 2009..... 51

SOHO Corner 54 X 52 oil on canvas, 2010 52

CITYGO..... 53

50 X 68 oil on canvas, 2011..... 53

3DEKA 53

36 X 24 oil on canvas, 2009..... 53

South Station 74 X 96 oil on canvas, 2011..... 54

POETRY	55
Franz Wright	
<i>Roadside Grave: February</i>	55
<i>Autoventriloquism</i>	56
Kendra DeColo	
<i>There Are No Safe Words</i>	57
<i>The Dream in Which You Are</i>	60
<i>The Dream of How We Survive</i>	63
Laura Cherry	
<i>Missing Gloucester Teen Found Dead</i>	66
<i>Not Taken but Transformed</i>	67
Chris Hall	
<i>The Ground</i>	68
Mary Beth O'Connor	
<i>Gravity</i>	69
<i>When we aren't looking,</i>	71
Suzanne Frischkorn	
<i>When My Granddaughter Asks</i>	72

Editor's Note

There is a curious story about Aldus Manutius, the sixteenth century Venetian printer who invented the italic typeface style. Some say that he employed a black boy as an assistant, and that the people of Venice believed the child to be an insubstantial spirit, an imp of Satan. To dispel these rumors, Manutius made a public display of his apprentice and announced that “any one who doubted him to be flesh and blood might once come forward and pinch him.” The tale of Manutius’s apprentice is one of many origin stories for the term “printer’s devil.”

Another explanation concerns Johann Fust, a business partner of Johannes Gutenberg. Fust loaned Gutenberg the money he needed to complete his revolutionary printing press, but their partnership ended in 1455 when the inventor couldn’t repay the debt. Fust took Gutenberg to court, won the case, and was awarded the original press. Fust then went into business for himself, printing Bibles in Muntz and peddling them in Paris, where his mass-produced editions could be sold at a much cheaper price than those crafted by scribes. Familiar only with hand-copied manuscripts, some buyers saw something unnatural, even devilish, in the uniformity of these bargain-priced Bibles. Superstitious Parisians publicly accused Fust of employing black magic in the creation of his holy books.

Whatever its origin, by the seventeenth century, the term “printer’s devil” had come to refer to an errand boy or apprentice in a print shop. Joseph Moxon, in his encyclopedic account of English trades and handicrafts, explains the term this way: “The Press-man sometimes has a Week-Boy to Take Sheets, as they are Printed off the Tympan: These Boys do in a Printing-House, commonly black and Dawb themselves: Whence the Workmen do jocosely call them Devils; and sometimes Spirits, and sometimes Flies.”

The term was still in use in nineteenth century America to describe ink-stained apprentices. In fact, two of the founding fathers of our national literature started out as devils. At twelve years old, Walt Whitman stood over a type case in the office of the Long Island newspaper, the *Patriot* and, under the direction of a master printer, pressed words in line with a composing stick. Long before Samuel Clemens piloted a riverboat or took up the pen name Mark Twain, he worked as a printer’s devil for the *Hannibal Courier*.

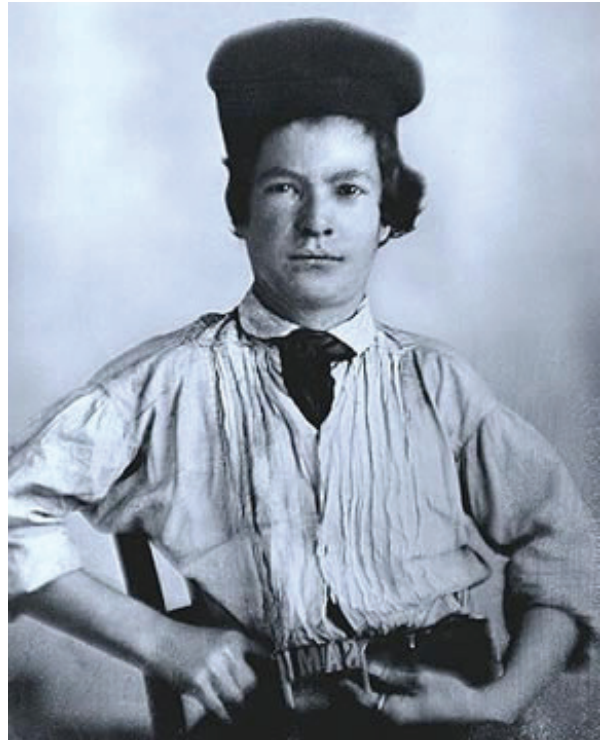
The editors took the name *Printer's Devil Review* for this journal as a way to acknowledge our status as apprentice printers. We are not publishing industry professionals, but rather practicing writers and artists who volunteer our time to bring work we admire to a wider audience. Because we've never published a journal before, we accept that we're bound to botch pages, spill ink everywhere, and occasionally step on some toes.

At the same time, we want to indicate our desire to encourage writers and artists who are, like us, in the journeyman stage of their creative careers. The magazine exists specifically to provide new and emerging writers and artists with access to publication.

We are also inspired by the examples of the young Whitman and the future Mark Twain—both by their literary potential and their entrepreneurial vitality—to imagine a future of creative achievement for ourselves and our contributors as well as a literary and artistic community capable of sustaining us as we work to master our respective crafts.

Obviously, a project like this depends on the labor and goodwill of many different people. I would like to thank my editors for devoting their time, effort, and aesthetic judgement to this endeavour. I am also very grateful to the contributors to this issue, our first, for entrusting us with their work.

I would also like to thank Timothy Gager for his help recruiting content and for his frank advice, Sue Kriegsman for providing us with a place to meet, and Alana Kumbier for her early contributions to the project. Thanks also to Zachary Evans and Annabel Gill of the *Inman Review*; Sue Miller, editor of *Greatest Uncommon Denominator*, and Caroline Zimmerman of Kneerim & Williams for sharing their experience with us.



Portrait of Samuel Clemens as a youth holding a printer's composing stick with letters SAM. Courtesy of the Mark Twain Project, The Bancroft Library, University of Calif., Berkeley.

Thomas Dodson



Contributors

LAURA CHERRY is the author of the full-length collection of poetry, *Haunts*, published by Cooper Dillon Books in September 2010. Her chapbook, *What We Planted*, was awarded the 2002 Philbrick Poetry Award by the Providence Athenaeum. She is the co-editor of the anthology *Poem, Revised* (Marion Street Press). Her work has been published in numerous journals, including *Forklift: Ohio*, *H_NGM_N*, *The Vocabula Review*, *Newport Review*, *LA Review*, and *Naugatuck River Review*; it has also appeared in the anthologies *Present Tense* (Calyx Press) and *Vocabula Bound* (Vocabula Books). She received her M.F.A. from Warren Wilson College.

KENDRA DECOLO is an M.F.A. candidate at Vanderbilt University where she is head poetry editor of *Nashville Review* and teaches creative writing at the Tennessee Prison for Women. Kendra was recently awarded third prize in Split the Rock's Fourth Annual Poetry Contest, selected by Jan Beatty.

SEAN FLOOD is a Boston-based painter. His work focuses heavily on architecture and urban subject. He tries to capture the energy and essence of street scenes through his markmaking and brushwork. You can see more examples of Sean's work on his website, WWW.SEANFLOODART.COM.

SUZANNE FRISCHKORN is the author of *Girl on a Bridge* (2010) and *Lit Windowpane* (2008), both from Main Street Rag Publishing. In addition she is the author of five chapbooks, most recently *American Flamingo* (2008). Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Barn Owl Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *MiPo*, *North American Review* and *PALABRA*. She serves as an Assistant Poetry Editor for *Anti-*.

CHRISTINE GENTRY joins BBQ on the short list of good things to come out of Texas. She lives in Harlem with her Greek Tortoise daughter, Delphi. In what little spare time she has, Christine likes to write very short stories, two of which have been published in *Word Riot* and *Flashquake* magazines.

CHRIS HALL received a B.A. in English from The University of Massachusetts, Amherst. There, he studied poetry with Martín Espada. He currently lives outside of Boston.

Photographer JARROD MCCABE hails from Massachusetts and is most widely known for his portraiture and landscape photographs. In addition to his photographic work he is currently sending fake postcards. To receive a fake postcard, email your name and address to Mr. McCabe (JR@JARRODMCCABE.COM) with the following subject heading: "I Love Fake Postcards."

MARY BETH O'CONNOR is a poet and fiction writer who lives in central New York and teaches at Ithaca College. Her award-winning chapbook *Smackdown: Poems about the Professor Business* was released in a new edition last year by *The Teacher's Voice*. Her work has been published in *Cafe Irreal*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *the Comstock Review* and other publications.

NORAH PIEHL is a freelance writer, editor, and book reviewer. Her essays and reviews have been published in *Skirt!* and *Brain, Child* magazines, on National Public Radio, and in print anthologies. Norah's short fiction has appeared in *Shaking Like a Mountain*, *Literary Mama*, *The Linnet's Wings*, *The Legendary*, and in the anthology *Battle Runes: Writings on War*.

KATE RACCULIA is a writer and researcher, living the sweet life in Somerville, Mass. and working on her second novel. Her first, *This Must Be the Place*, was published by Henry Holt & Company in summer 2010.

CAT ENNIS SEARS recently graduated from Emerson College with an M.F.A in fiction writing, where she taught freshman composition and research writing. Her work has appeared in *The Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Bateau*, and is forthcoming in *Corium Magazine*. She received honorable mention in a *Glimmer Train* short fiction contest and was nominated for the 2011 AWP Intro Journal Awards. She is at work on a collection of historical short stories.

FRANZ WRIGHT is the author of several books of poetry. His recent works include *God's Silence*, *Walking to Martha's Vineyard* (winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for poetry), *The Beforelife* (also a finalist for the Prize), and *Ill Lit: Selected & New Poems*. His latest full-length collection, *Wheeling Motel*, will soon be released as a Knopf paperback. Mr. Wright recently published two chapbooks: *Entries of the Cell*, a single long poem soon to be collected in *F* (forthcoming 2013 from Knopf), and *7Prose*, a set of prose poems in homage to his wife, the translator and writer Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright. Other poems in that series, in prose and verse, will be collected this fall in *Kindertotenwald*.

A Whole New Look

GO AHEAD, HAVE A SEAT. I know this is probably a far cry from your regular beauty parlor. Sorry, your salon. I imagine that's in a suburban strip mall, or upstairs from one of those designer boutiques downtown. Bright lights, sharp edges. Lots of shiny black. Silver. Right?

I know that kind of place. It's got a name like...Ciao Bella. You've got your edgy, hot receptionist with her oversized earrings, her piercings and bad attitude, your eager young hair-washing girls who also sweep up the clippings. Anything for a tip. Then there's the gum-chewing hairdressers. Sorry, stylists. They do each others' hair on breaks, roll their eyes while they share stories about the male customers—sorry, clients—who come in once a week to get their hair cut, bitch about their wives, and check out their stylists' asses.

There's the few token male stylists, too, right, the kind who'd never get hired at your dad's barbershop. Straight guys with curly hair, ironic glasses, or too many tattoos. The gay guys tell stories about their old lady clients who insist on trying to set them up with their nieces and granddaughters, who just can't figure out why Stephen or Daniel's still single. Those guys stick around forever, holding court in their cashmere sweaters and silver hair, queens for life while dozens of lesser royals come and go. Because what don't you see at your salon? Old lady stylists, right? Even middle-aged ones are rare at this kind of joint. Forty's pushing it, though most of these ladies are pretty handy with a makeup—sorry, cosmetics—kit, it turns out. So it can be hard to tell.

So what happens to these women? Do they just spit out their gum, tell off their clients, and ride off into the sunset? Do they just fade away?

Some of them get married, sometimes even to those same creepy guys in the end. Some of them teach at beauty schools, inspiring a whole new generation of gum-chewers. Some of them move to small towns, open up shops on Main Street, start calling themselves beauticians again, remember how to do perms and blue rinses until they're blue hairs themselves.

But most of them end up just like me, setting up shop right here in my trailer, my beautician's chair the most expensive piece of furniture in the living room. Classy, huh?



Around here we trust lifelong customers, word of mouth, and tiny yellow pages ads to keep us going, hoarding tips in a jar for the tough times. Now and again I luck out. Last month Donna Keckeisen's daughter got married: six bridesmaids and two flower girls, plus the mother of the bride, all wanting updos. But you can't count on that every month. I learned that a long time ago.

That's why I was so glad to get the new gig at that Home for the Blind there down Highway 9. Two afternoons a week, a guaranteed paycheck no matter how many customers I see. Sure, the atmosphere leaves a lot to be desired—probably even less glamorous than this place. There's a convenience store for the residents on the first floor, near the foyer, with a chair and a portable sink over in one corner between the granola bars and the feminine hygiene products. Sometimes I stub my toe on the seams in the linoleum floor. For a while, I didn't even have a mirror. But then again, why would I really need one? And there are upsides, too. I have to bring my own boom box if I want music, but I get to pick all the tunes instead of leaving it up to Ian the hipster. I can wear whatever I want, and if my roots start to show a bit, who cares? Not my customers, that's for damn sure. To them, I'm the only game in town.

At the beginning, though, I wasn't always sure who my customer really was. Jeanne at the front desk who signs my check every other Friday? The smock-covered person whose hair I'm cutting? Or is the real customer the grandma or dad who perches on the green vinyl chair over by the bottled juices, telling me exactly what to do, down to the length of sideburns or the angle of a pageboy? "Sara's got a nasty cowlick at the nape of her neck," a well-meaning mother might tell me, like her gray-haired daughter is still in pigtails. "Don't cut it too short back there."

Or a gruff father might greet me by saying, "Number two clippers on the side and the number three on top," the same formula for his son's buzz cut since the boy was five. I try not to glare at them as I work, the way some of them keep up small talk with their relatives, ask them easy questions about activity hours and field trips, even while they're texting or checking sports scores the whole time. The same thing people do everywhere these days, I suppose, but there they don't even try to hide it. Why bother? And really, who am I to judge?

The first couple of shifts, I tried talking to the residents myself, but I kept making a mess of it. Once this youngish guy, Dylan, came in, soon after I started. Poor man looked like someone had been giving him the same bowl cut his entire life. His sister brought him in. You know the type: comes once a month to visit, after work and before cocktails with the girls. She was wearing a pencil skirt and insanely high heels, pacing around and checking her BlackBerry, stopping only to tell me what to do, as if in between her MBA courses and



Bikram yoga classes, she'd somehow managed to pick up her cosmetology license.

But at least we both agreed that her brother needed a change. She wanted bleached tips and lots of hair gel; I was going for floppy bangs, sort of a Tom Cruise look, especially with the mirrored sunglasses he liked to wear. But of course the sister won. Dylan wasn't going to speak up, that's for sure. Why should he trust me, anyway? And in the end, he did look pretty good. "Wait till your friends see you! They won't even recognize you," I said before I thought, but there was no taking it back. He didn't say much, just shook my hand and thanked me softly. But the sister—sheesh. She got all cold, as frosted and spiky as those tips on her brother's hair. "Most of his friends can't see anything at all," she hissed, striding away, as much as that tight skirt allowed her to stride, anyway.

Since, then, I've felt like I've had to learn a whole new way of talking to people. All the usual beauty shop questions are off-limits, meaningless, even. "Do you like the way that looks?" "Do you want your color the same as last time?" "Do you want your bangs cut a little shorter?" I can't even say, "You're going to look beautiful," because even if it might be true, they'd never know, you know? I don't want to remind them.

Anyway, I figured out pretty fast that it's these family members who call the shots. Or pay the bills, which pretty much amounts to the same thing. And a lot of them, maybe even most of them, seem to mean well. They've just forgotten that there's a difference between actually caring for someone and just keeping a weekly appointment. At least they do show up, make sure their relatives have clean clothes, enough food in the fridge, that they're getting their nails clipped and their hair done regularly. At least there's that, even if you have to ask yourself, sometimes, why they've stuck their sister or father in a Home for the Blind in the first place instead of helping them get a real apartment, a dog maybe, a bus pass and a library card like the blind people I used to see all the time in Chicago, striding down subway platforms and navigating the El better than I ever could.

You know, when I moved from Chicago downstate, I was surprised to learn that there even are such places anymore. The very notion seems like something out of the nineteenth century, the kind of place Mary Ingalls went to learn how to read Braille and play music and become a lady. Did you ever read those books? No? That's a shame, but I suppose you're too old now. Maybe you'll have a daughter someday, and you can read them to her.



I was one of those gum-chewing stylists for half my life, you know. Kept my eyebrows dagger-thin, my nails as long and shiny red as Mick's Ferrari. I even dyed my hair black for years—can you imagine? You've probably seen the photos of me, fresh out of high school,



the strawberry-blonde Chassell Strawberry Festival Queen with a tiny diamond already on my finger. But after my divorce, after I ran like hell from Jeremy and the U. P., and everything else, too, I just wanted to be everything that Strawberry Queen wasn't. I was ridiculously young, younger than you are now. But I'd already been married four years. I had left a toddler back in Michigan, for crying out loud. I felt ancient at twenty-two. So at the cosmetology school in Oshkosh, I learned everything I could from the other girls: their diet tips and all-black fashion sense, their bad attitudes, their talent for drawing the best gossip out of their clients or telling their own good stories, their habit of flirting with everyone, even guys they loathed.

I was a quick learner, too. Mick said later that he'd had his eye on me from the first day, that I'd flirted my way right through the interview. I never loathed Mick, of course; I just thought he was out of my league, too big city for me, I guess. Even though I looked nothing like the Strawberry Queen by then, I think I still only imagined myself with guys like the one I'd married, you know? Solid guys like Jeremy who drank Leinenkugel's from cans, who wore flannel shirts and Wranglers, who hunted all fall, snowmobiled all winter, and spent all summer fixing their snowmobiles and telling hunting stories. Mick got manicures, for Pete's sake. But he picked me, for whatever reason, out of all the beauty school graduates who came through Ciao Bella's front doors that spring. He offered me a job that first day and a date not long after.

We never lived together. Did you know that? Mick and I were together eighteen years, once I got over his cashmere sweaters and his Italian leather shoes. And even though I spent every weekend, pretty much, at his condo in Lake Point Tower, I still liked being able to wrap myself in a satin sheet, those nights, and stand in front of the picture windows on the sixty-first floor, looking down at Navy Pier from one side of the condo and on the other out toward Wrigleyville, where I had my very own studio apartment. I never really trusted myself not to fuck—oh, gosh, sorry—mess up this new thing, and I liked knowing I wouldn't have to start over again from nothing if I did.

Doing hair at Ciao Bella was nothing like I'd imagined back in beauty school. I'd fancied myself some kind of artiste, I think, but being a stylist, even at a swanky place on Michigan Avenue, is more like being a therapist or a diplomat, or even a pathological liar, than like being an artist. Eight times out of ten, clients didn't want even the slightest change. They cringed if you suggested toning down their brassy highlights or trimming more than half an inch off their frizzed-out split ends. Even the ones who came in looking for a makeover didn't trust me to make the right choices. A girl might come in with a photo of Winona Ryder torn out of the latest *Us Weekly* and demand to look just like her, even when I pointed out (diplomatically, of course) that even the cutest pixie cut wasn't going to erase her bright red corkscrew curls or her forty extra pounds. "The client is always right," Mick

would say, but he didn't have to watch their disappointment or settle for small tips when what they saw in the mirror didn't exactly live up to the glossy magazine photos.

The most dangerous were the women who came in and practically threw themselves at me, begging me for a whole new look. "Just do what you want," they'd beg. "I trust you." Sometimes they were girls who just walked in off the street on a whim, desperate for any available stylist. Sometimes they were my own regulars. But almost always, these women practically collapsed into my chair, looking defeated and hopeful at the same time. They'd just gotten dumped, or fired, or both, and they figured a new hairdo was the natural first step in their fresh start. But you know what? Even when they claimed to want to turn their future over to me entirely, even when they said "I trust you completely" and "You know best," they didn't mean it, not really. I'd suggest a layered shag, and they'd say they didn't do bangs; I'd propose a darker brown to suit their coloring, and they'd insist on staying blonde. Some of the other girls had a gift. They could make their own subtle suggestions seem like the client's own ideas. But I never got the knack, and I never figured out if my clients were scared of losing control or if they just couldn't let themselves trust me.

Can you blame them? Look at you—I bet you're just a little nervous sitting there, aren't you? Holding your breath a bit until you see what your new color looks like after it's dry, right? I sure don't blame them—or you, either. After everything, I hardly trust myself.



There are forty-six residents at the Home for the Blind, and after I'd been cutting hair there for a few months, I thought I had met them all, one way or another. But one Friday a couple weeks ago, as I was packing up my scissors and getting ready to go pick up my check, a young woman came into the convenience store. The first thing I noticed was that she was alone. That was unusual since, like I told you, most of the time they come in with a whole well-meaning entourage. I noticed her hair next, naturally, not only because of what I do but because, well, you'd have noticed it, too. She was petite, cute even, in her floral T-shirt and dark jeans, but you'd never have known it at first glance. Her blonde hair was long and heavy, like she hadn't had a trim in a year. Tangled. She'd had bangs once, but now, if she'd been sighted, she'd have had to peer through them, like the dusty lace curtains at your grandma's house. As it was, though, she didn't even seem to know. Just like she didn't know that her jeans had a big stain of what looked like mustard on the right thigh. She walked toward me slowly, tentative with her cane.

"Can I help you find something?" I asked her, figuring she was there to pick up Pringles or Band-Aids or whatever else people shopped for on a Friday afternoon just before closing.

"Are you the hair stylist?" she asked hopefully.



“For about another five minutes, I am,” I joked. “But I’ll be back on Tuesday.”

But she looked so disappointed, like she’d dragged herself down here for nothing after all, that I told her I could stay a few more minutes for a consultation, at least. I mean, really, where else did I have to be?

So I helped her into my chair, found out her name—Deena—and asked her what she wanted.

“That’s the problem,” Deena told me. “Somewhere I have a photo so I can show you what I want to look like, but I can’t find it anywhere.” I asked her if anyone could help her find it, and she started to cry. And then I figured it out—she didn’t have anyone at all. No busybody relatives, no bossy friends.

I asked her a few more questions, found out that the picture was in an old photo album but that Deena couldn’t remember which closet it was in, let alone which shelf. So I looked at my calendar for Tuesday—it was wide open—and penciled Deena in for the whole afternoon.

I met her right at her apartment that day—the first time I’d ventured beyond the lobby and the dining room into the residential corridors. Many of the doors in her hallway had been decorated with dried flower wreaths, cheerful wooden cutouts of hearts or birds, homemade cards with crayon drawings and greetings to “Nonny” or “Poppa.” But the door at A16 was bare except for the institutional sign that listed Deena’s name and room number in Braille and embossed lettering. I rang the doorbell and Deena answered in seconds. I wondered if she’d been waiting right behind the door for me to arrive.

Deena’s hair was a mess again, and although she’d changed clothes, her khaki pants still could have used a good ironing. None of the light fixtures in her apartment had working light bulbs. Jeanne had warned me to expect that, but I was still glad that a fair amount of sunlight flooded into the apartment after I opened the blinds on the picture window that overlooked the scent garden outside.

Deena pointed out her two closets—one near the front door, one in her small bedroom. She suggested that I start by looking through the front closet, and she asked if I’d like a cup of tea. I must have sounded surprised when I repeated her offer, because she laughed a little. “I’m not as helpless as all that,” she said. “Give me an electric kettle, and I’m a regular Julia Child.” I accepted, of course, and started looking for her photo album.

It’s weird, you know, digging through someone else’s closets, even if you have permission. It’s not as personal as the medicine cabinet, maybe, but it’s a lot more private than, say, a bookcase. Think about your closet at the dorm—I bet you have at least one thing in there that you’d rather not have anyone find.

I could tell that someone had helped Deena organize her closet at some point, maybe even done it for her. There was a logic there; Christmas ornaments and Halloween



decorations in adjacent bins with Braille labels, cleaning supplies in a tidy crate next to the vacuum cleaner, winter hats and mittens in a basket decorated with snowmen. And on a top shelf, almost too high for me to reach, was a box of mementos: some high school yearbooks, some homemade cassette tapes, and a photo album.

“I think I found it!” I called out to her. Deena was already sitting on the small sofa, two steaming mugs of tea on the coffee table in front of her. I sat down next to her. “Now what am I looking for?”

Deena was quiet for a moment, sipping her tea, so I picked up my cup to do the same but put it down just as quickly. A thin film of oily scum floated on top of my tea, and there were ancient coffee stains on the inside of the rim. “It’s my mom,” she said quietly. “There should be a picture of her holding me when I was a toddler. She’s wearing a green dress with pearl buttons. She’s laughing and trying to keep me from grabbing her big hoop earrings. We’re in front of a lilac bush, and I’m wearing a purple dress that’s the same color as the lilacs. It’s my Easter dress, I think. The sky is so blue in that photo. That’s how I imagine the sky is every day, and that’s how I always remember my mom.”

“So you weren’t always...” I asked hesitantly.

“No,” she said. “We were in a car accident when I was four. My mom died, and they say I had a lot of head trauma. My vision was just wonky for a couple of years, but eventually I went blind altogether. I spent a lot of time those two years looking at the pictures I had of my mom, trying to fix her in my memory. I can see the photo perfectly in my mind, but I wanted you to see it, too, so you’d know.”

By then I’d leafed through the album and found the photo. Sure enough, it was exactly as Deena had said. Her mother was beautiful, her short blonde hair golden in the spring sunshine; it curled softly around her face as she threw back her head and laughed.

“Tell me what you see,” Deena said. So I paged through the album, describing for Deena her yowling newborn photos, her naked baby bath photos, the endless parade of proud and joyful relatives holding the chubby, blonde little girl, catching her at the bottom of a steep playground slide, holding her steady on a carousel pony, clutching her on a plastic toboggan, crouching down with her to get a good look at a bed of daffodils. I didn’t know who any of these people were; I didn’t even know where the photos were taken. I described everyone’s big 80s hair and tight 80s jeans. We giggled at Deena’s tiny denim jackets and overalls and her mom’s Olivia Newton-John leotards.

“Help me look like her,” Deena said when we’d reached the end of the photo album, which didn’t go past Deena’s first day of first grade. “I know it won’t be the same, because of my eyes, but I thought that if I could imagine that I look like her, I might feel closer to her, you know?”

I swallowed hard, offered to take the teacups back to the kitchen before we headed back down to the convenience store. I tried not to gag when I saw the state of the kitchen. It seemed like Deena was trying—dishes were drying on a rack, and she'd recently used a sponge to wipe things down. But she'd missed a couple spots—one canned pea hung out in a corner of the countertop, the wall behind the stove showed splatter marks from what looked like a spaghetti sauce incident, and several of her "clean" utensils still showed stubborn traces of peanut butter or ice cream. I called out to her that I was just going to wash up our mugs real quick, which I did, and rewashed a bunch of her silverware at the same time. I even grabbed some Lysol out of that crate and gave the countertops a good once-over.

When I headed back to return the cleaning supplies to the closet, though, Deena was standing in the kitchen doorway. "You probably think I'm a mess, don't you?" she said with a sad little smile.

I stuttered a little, feeling clumsy, like I'd overstepped Deena's invitation, which I guess I had.

"Don't answer," Deena told me kindly. "I know I've let things go since my Aunt Justine died a few months ago. Myself most of all, you know?" She reached out her hand toward me, and, feeling the bottle of cleaning spray, took it out of my hand. "Aunt Justine was my mom's sister. She raised me after my mom died and my dad...just disappeared.

"When Aunt Justine was alive, we argued all the time. I wanted more independence, but she always wanted to baby me. When she sold her house and moved to the retirement home, she set me up here." Deena laughed a bit as she put the Lysol back into the closet. "Since she's been gone, I think part of me kept hoping she'd show back up here one of these days, clucking her tongue like she'd do and saying, 'See, Deena Bean, I always said you needed me.'" She shook her head. "I can't really remember what having a mother is like, but Aunt Justine's smothering was the closest thing I knew. Now I think it's time for something different."

I didn't say anything right away—I couldn't. Just grabbed the photo album from the sofa and squeezed Deena's hand. "You ready for your new look?" I asked. I hoped my hands wouldn't shake as badly as my voice did. I was terrified, you see.

Do you part your hair here? Oh, on the left side? I should really know these things.



Sheesh, listen to me ramble on about myself. I feel like I know so much about you, but I really don't know you at all. I don't know where you part your hair, don't even know if you have a boyfriend, for crying out loud. Don't worry—you don't need to tell me right



now. Although they might come and take away my license if I can't even get that piece of information out of you. Gossip is a beautician's unofficial stock-in-trade.

What's that? Oh. That. No, we aren't together any more. Mick's still up in Chicago, ruling the roost at Ciao Bella. He hasn't found anyone new yet, as far as I know, but he will soon. Men like him are never alone for long.

Why is it that the worst times are always all tangled up with the best memories? I remember we sat on the patio of my favorite Spanish restaurant, eating spicy shrimp and garlicky mushrooms on one of those endless, perfect July evenings. The patio was draped in ivy and flowers and the crowd was noisy, so we didn't see or hear the thunderstorm until it opened up right on top of us. We ran indoors, found a spot at the corner of the bar, laughing at how drenched we'd become in just a few seconds, how I'd forgotten my sweater outdoors but remembered to grab the pitcher of sangria. He kissed me, then—he tasted like garlic but so did I. "Marry me," he whispered into my wet hair.

I laughed, poured us another round—after eighteen years, who was he kidding? Marriage was for kids and dreamers, not old heartbreakers like us. But then I saw he was serious, and I shivered. The air conditioning was chilly on my damp skin. I told him I'd think about it. I told myself I was just imagining the disappointment in his eyes when I didn't answer right away.

We'd never even talked about marriage before, believe it or not. But then, there I was turning forty, and we both knew my days at Ciao Bella were numbered. I guess Mick figured if we got married, I'd have at least one kind of security.

For more than a month, this unanswered question lurked behind all our conversations. I thought about it constantly, but instead of talking to Mick about it, I did the worst thing possible: I talked to someone else.

He was in town for a convention, a walk-in, my last client on a Friday night. Mick had already left for the evening. He and I had had some tiny argument about something—I don't remember now—but I wasn't exactly eager to rush over to his condo after work. So when this guy, who was so handsome I pretended not to notice his wedding ring, offered to take me out for a drink after my shift, I agreed.

We strolled up Michigan Avenue to a bar at one of the big hotels. And the guy bought me expensive martinis and stroked my hand and listened to my drunken ramblings. The crazy part is that one of the last things I remember from the bar is blubbing into my drink as I went on and on to this total stranger about just how much I loved Mick. How much I loved him, but was just too scared.

Yep, I remember that, and I also remember following this guy upstairs—because of course this hotel was his hotel—and crying after because even a one-night stand with a handsome stranger wasn't helping me answer that question of Mick's.

Only it turned out it did. Because I had to tell Mick what I'd done, of course. I went over there first thing in the morning. I had heavy mascara rings under my eyes and my hair was a mess and I stank like gin. And when Mick saw me, he knew. And at first I thought he was going to forgive me, and I couldn't stand it. So I said, "See? You should have known better than to trust me. Look at me. I've fucked this up, and if you marry me, I'll just fuck it up again and again. That's just what I do." And Mick reached out his hand for me, for a second, before he dropped it and turned away. I rode down the elevator, all sixty-one floors, and walked over to Navy Pier. I rode the Ferris wheel all morning long, imagining all the times I'd looked down at people just like me from Mick's picture window, all those poor people turning in circles, thinking they had the best view in town when really, they couldn't see anything at all.

Sorry. I was imagining myself back there in Chicago for a minute. Do you want it blow-dried? Sure—we can keep talking after.



Oh, right. I was telling you about Deena—why again? It doesn't matter, I suppose.

So have you seen the Home for the Blind? That sounds like a setup for a joke, doesn't it? Sorry. Like I said, I have a tendency to stick my foot in it sometimes. Anyway, it's out on the edge of town. Come to think of it, it probably was around back in the *Little House on the Prairie* days, or not long after. The main building is this huge Victorian farmhouse—wraparound porches, gingerbread trim, the whole nine yards. But someone in the 1970s thought it would be a great idea to tack long, low residential wings on each side, slap on some aluminum siding and call it a day. If you look at just the main building, the place is really old-fashioned—gracious, even; but if you widen your view, it looks like a double-decker Metra train drove right through that lovely nineteenth century building.

Deena's apartment was way down at the end of one of those modern wings. We walked from there to the main building, where the convenience store and salon was, alongside the kitchen and dining room. Everything was a little shabby around the edges, and I wondered just how bad the cutbacks Jeanne had talked about were, or if they just didn't feel the need, you know, to keep up appearances.

When she got to my chair, Deena propped her cane against the counter and sat right down like she was one of my regulars. She reached back and pulled that long, heavy hair back into a ponytail, automatic, like any woman's done a million times before. "You sure you're ready for this?" I asked, half hoping she'd say no.

And then—I'd say she looked at me, but I know that's not right. She turned her face in my direction, though, and said, no hesitation, "Of course. I trust you completely."



How many times had I heard that line before, only to be second-guessed and shot down a million different ways? But Deena, she had no choice, really. And for the first time since graduating from beauty school, standing there with no one watching, I had no idea of even how to make the first cut.

So I opened the photo album to the photo of toddler Deena and her gorgeous mom, propped it up on my counter, and asked Deena to tell me about her. And as Deena talked—sharing some of her own distant memories, some stories learned from other relatives—I stopped worrying and just trusted my hands to do the right thing. I pulled over the portable sink and worked conditioner into that knotty hair until it was slippery smooth.

Deena's mom was named Marlene, and she had been a librarian until Deena was born. Deena was an only child, and Marlene spent every moment with her little girl, as if she had known their time together would be short. She worked at Deena's co-op nursery school, she taught toddler music classes, she ran a weekly story hour at the library. And she loved to throw parties and to play music and hold her baby daughter in her arms as she danced. And as Deena told me the patterns of a life, I found my own rhythm. Twist. Pin. Comb. Clip. Over and over again.

Long blonde strands fell on the floor as I worked almost automatically, focusing on Deena's words instead of my own fear. And finally, it was done. And there she was. Her shorter, lighter hair had sprung into silky waves framing her face, which was radiant and so much younger, all of a sudden. And even when she told me about her mother's long-ago death and about her aunt's recent passing, her teary eyes and sad face, haloed by those bright blonde curls, were absolutely beautiful.

"You're stunning," I told her, without thinking. "I wish you could see yourself."

"Yeah, me, too," she said very matter-of-factly. "Good thing there's nothing wrong with my mind's eye." After her hair was dry and I'd brushed the last clippings from the back of her neck, she reached back as if expecting to feel that heavy ponytail still there. When she reached through air and found her soft new curls instead, she smiled. "Perfect," she said. "I knew it would be." And she thanked me and hugged me and tucked her photo album under her arm and told me she'd be back to see me again. And we both laughed at that, and then I drove back here, more satisfied, freer than I could remember. And then, finally, I called you.



Most of the other stylists at Ciao Bella never even knew I had a daughter. Mick did, of course. His first wife had taken their two kids and moved to New Jersey. He'd had to watch them grow up through photographs and second-hand reports, so we had that in common.



Ciao Bella wasn't exactly the kind of place parents took their kids to get their first haircuts—we left that to the folks at Snippet's Mini-Cuts. But every once in a while, someone would bring in their daughter for a flower-girl updo or just some special birthday pampering. And I'd look at those little girls, hear them laugh and tell stories about seeing the dinosaurs at the Field Museum or the Thorne Rooms at the Art Institute and I'd feel sick. I'd have to go lie down in the break room with the lights off. Sometimes I'd even throw up. On the worst days, I'd just leave, cancel my appointments and take the El north to my studio apartment, hide out until Mick or my friend Angie showed up with hot cocoa and currant scones.

Because it's not true, you know, no matter what they've told you. I thought about it every single day, what I'd done. It's easy to blame everybody and everything but yourself. I used to wonder what would have happened if I hadn't been the prettiest girl on the U. P., if I'd gone to college in Ann Arbor instead of getting married at eighteen. But the simple truth is I was just so sad. I can't even explain it now. Sometimes Jeremy or my mom would have to wake me up every two hours to nurse the baby. I'd have just stayed wrapped up in bed for days on end, otherwise. Sometimes I did anyway, and they gave up and just made a bottle instead. When I did get out of bed, I'd just sit in the rocking chair wrapped in a bedspread, staring out at the snowdrifts that had worked their way halfway up the windows. I felt like I was being slowly buried alive.

Maybe if I hadn't been in tiny Chassell, maybe if I'd been smarter or older, maybe if Oprah had already started talking about finding your best life by then instead of just hauling her wagons of fat around on stage, I'd have figured out different ways to shovel us all out. But as it was, the only thing I could imagine doing was running away. From everything. Either that or dying right where I was.

I never blamed you, you know. I loved you, every minute I held you and all the minutes afterward. Things were just all twisted in my head. I thought that by leaving I'd rescue myself and also save you. I didn't trust myself not to turn you into someone as sad and miserable as I was. But I never blamed you. Or your dad. He's a good father, isn't he? I always knew he would be.


After he got done hating me, especially after he got remarried, Jeremy sent me photos every month, along with your drawings from your art classes, the stories you wrote about your trips to Disney World and Isle Royale. I saved every one. I used to imagine, sometimes, especially when you got into high school, that you and your girlfriends might head to Chicago for spring break or a band competition. I wondered what I'd do if you showed up to get your hair done at a big city salon. But you never did.

So after things with Mick and me went all wrong, when I was looking to leave Chicago



behind for a while and start over again, I headed to where I knew you were. I was so proud that my daughter was studying to be an art teacher—at the best state university in Illinois. Things haven't been perfect. They never have been. But sometimes people surprise you, and that makes it all worthwhile.

I surprised myself, calling you, finally. I don't know why it took me so long or why I finally felt ready last week, after all these years. And you surprised me by answering the phone in the first place and, honestly, by coming here today. But I'm so glad you did. This is just the beginning, don't you think? I mean, we have twenty years to catch up on, and we're not going to do that in one color and cut. I know that. But I've always said that there's no better place to get to know someone than right here. I've heard more stories—and told more of my own—standing around chairs just like this one. It's a start, anyway.

Okay, I think you're all set, hon. Just hold this mirror, let me turn you around so you can see the back. What do you think? Is it everything you'd hoped for? 

Split Spine

THE BABY IN MY WOMB ISN'T NORMAL. We know this for sure now. Henry thinks that we should terminate the pregnancy. He always says it that way. He says, "terminate." He never says, "abortion." He says spina bifida causes paralysis, the quality of life would be so low, it would be cruel to continue.

But I can feel myself getting bigger every day, I can feel the baby getting bigger. And I can't believe this baby is forming all of its organs, its limbs, its hair and eyes and teeth and gums for nothing. She's building these things because she wants to live, because she, like any other animal, wants to survive.

And it's our fault. We built her with damaged sperm and aging eggs.

We should have made this baby long ago.

Fifteen years ago, when we were twenty-five and twenty-six, we would go to the river and the trees would hang over the banks. There were rocks and sand, and warm river water. There was his muscular chest in a tight checked shirt. There was my body in black boy short underwear, tight against my skin. There were my breasts in a black sports bra; there was my flat stomach.

Henry was whistling. He was lying on a rock. And then he took off his shirt, jumped into the water, and was kicking away, pulling me towards him and we were swimming. We should have found a rock and made this baby then.

We've lived in this cold northern city for ten years. We thought we'd just stay till we got something good on our résumé, but we stayed much longer. We waited till we were in our thirties to get married. We waited till we were in our forties to have children. We waited till we had a house and enough money to take the children on yearly vacations.

We wanted everything to be just so, we didn't want to risk doing something so big without proper foresight, without planning. I've been reading books now about parenting for the last five years. I know how to do it. There are so many ways to cause damage and I know how to avoid the classic mistakes. But my body is a traitor.





I did not tell my mother about the problem with the baby. If I get an abortion, I'll tell her it was a miscarriage and she'll sympathize with me. She won't ask for details unless I want to talk about it; she'll be sensitive.

I remember my mother making Henry's parents sweet iced tea—not knowing how to do it, and soaking teabags in cold water, then adding some ice and serving it to them in mugs with milk. His parents sipping from these mugs with strained smiles on their faces, trying to be polite. My mother, embarrassed because it was obvious that she didn't know to do it, and she's tried so hard to act American, to raise us to feel at home in this country, to feel American. She has always told me that I am a bridge, that she's Lebanese, I'm Lebanese American, and my children will be American. She wants my children to feel completely at home in this country with its strip malls, its hot black asphalt, its manicured trees and its wide open blue skies. My mother told me, you might not feel completely at home here, but I did my best. I didn't know everything. I had to learn the culture, but your children, they won't be Lebanese at all.

She tells me, your roots are American now, and your children will be grateful because America is a xenophobic country. I don't want to tell her that I waited too long and that there will be no American children, that the bloodline ends here, that she gave up her country and assimilated for nothing.



Summer in Boston comes late but tries to make up for lost time with one hundred-degree temperatures. They had issued a boil water order for the entire Boston area because some pipe broke and was gushing our clean water into the Charles. And goddamn, it was hot. While we waited for the AC to crank up, the little fibers of the couch stuck to my legs. But on the floor, it felt like the plush white carpet was sweating. So I stood by the huge flat screen TV. The TV was the kind of thing I had once said I would never have.

Henry had laughed and bought beer when he saw there was no bottled water left in the stores. Now he sat with a bottle of light and creamy, expensive, Edelweisse hefe, going round and round the rim with his index finger. I wanted beer; I wanted to get drunk like him. But I was doing this pregnancy right, and so now I drank lukewarm boiled water that hadn't had the chance to cool. Henry asked, "What are you going to do, Eva?"

"Maybe it will work out," I said. I was thinking this "defect" would make her better than normal, like the boy in my neighborhood who had a club foot his father refused to fix,



claiming that it “built character.” Maybe spina bifida would make our daughter special.

I said, “Birth defects, like a cleft palate, used to make people in Native American tribes so special, they were treated like kings.” I had no idea what I was talking about, just vaguely remembering an informational paragraph beside some Native American art I’d seen years ago.

Okay, he said. But he’s not living five hundred years ago in a tribal society. And what causes spina bifida anyway, he asked. He looked at me like it was me, like I caused it.

“The doctor said it’s not enough folic acid before conception. Heat sometimes, hot tubs, electric blankets in the first month. And age. Of the mother and the father.”

He said we could try again, we could get pregnant again, we should terminate it soon. The leather couch he was sitting on was brown and glistening with his sweat when he shifted his weight. He looked like a sweating slug on the brown couch. Why did he say, we can try again, we can get pregnant, we should terminate it? I was the pregnant one, not him.

I told him we could wait a few more days and he grimaced like he smelled something disgusting and told me it was like a Band-Aid—you just had to rip it off. Was he drunk already? What was he talking about? This was nothing like a Band-Aid.

“The scarring would make it harder to get pregnant next time,” I told him.

“Maybe we should take that risk. And we can always adopt.”

I told him it was late and I had to get up early for work. He said we shouldn’t avoid talking about this, it was important, we only had so much time. Instead of responding, I went upstairs and looked at macabre Google images of spina bifida—the purple hardened plate on the lower back, the spinal cord protruding through the skin and muscle, the brain sometimes displaced to the upper neck. I read about the intense pain from the lower back to the knees and wondered if she hurt, right now, if she was screaming inside of me where no one could hear her.

What scares me is that this baby in my womb has to come out. It can’t grow forever, I can’t undo this. Either it will come out the normal way, or it will be sucked and pulled out.

When the doctor showed me the telltale signs on the sonogram monitor, I thought about how the sonogram sounds like a freight train to the fetus. I imagined what she was feeling inside, the loud rushing roar, the unbearable heat, how there was no way to explain to her why it was so hot and so loud, so suddenly. And if I did what Henry wanted me to do, there would be no way to explain that to her either.



I dreamed that I gave birth to our daughter, and she was terrible. She had two heads, melded together, one looking forward, one looking backwards, like the god of time. She had two sets of eyes, two mouths, two noses.

Henry was there in the dream and he said, this doesn't run in my family, does it run in yours? I said no, which was a mistake, and he assumed I had cheated on him. He said he would send our child into the wilderness to die. He took the baby with him and walked away until I couldn't see him anymore.

I told him over and over, "She is your daughter, she is."



When I woke up the next morning, everything in my body hurt. There were aches and pains in my neck, my shoulder, my back, my head.

Henry said he had something to show me after work, he wanted to take me someplace. He said to come straight home after work, and he'd see me later. He said, "love you," and left.

After work, Henry was waiting for me on the porch. "Come on," he said, "let's go!" In the car, he held my hand over the console, and I adjusted the seatbelt around my stomach to fit it better. I wasn't yet used to the extra weight.

He drove out to the suburbs and parked at the bottom of a hill. He said, "Now, we walk up the hill." We wound our way through the trees on footpaths, occasionally emerging from the woods into the nearby college's dorm parking lots. Fifteen minutes in, it started raining. The trees were so green, and the rain was coming down between the patches where the trees were less thick. Henry gave me his red raincoat and I put it over my head. Below us, you could see the rolling hills of suburban Boston, and then the city ending at the sea. He said, "It's not that much further now."

Ahead of us was an old and elegant brick building. Vines climbed up its sides, and the roof was made entirely of windows. He said this observatory was built in 1872. He'd come here a few weeks ago for the public stargazing night, and he said it still uses the same lens to look at the stars as it used to when it was built.

"Why did you bring me up here?"

"I just thought you would like it. I hadn't shared anything like this with you in such a long time."

I didn't even know he was interested in astronomy; I didn't even notice that he was gone that night. Our relationship had become platitudes: love you, miss you, see you soon.

He said, "Have you ever thought about how each star is coming at you from various times? That what you see in the sky isn't at all what is there right now? That each star takes



a different amount of time to reach you?”

I told him it’s scary that you can’t even trust your eyes.

Walking back to the car with Henry’s red raincoat over my head, the rain slowed and the stars started to come out. I thought about how our models are only approximate, and there’s no way to understand everything, or to have everything explained to you.

In the car, Henry told me he married me, not my womb, and it wasn’t my fault, or his fault. But he wanted us to have a good life together and to give a good life to our child. He didn’t think it was fair to continue with the pregnancy.


When he put his hand on my stomach, I couldn’t help it, I started to cry. I wanted to tell her why she was in pain. I wanted to tell her the procedure would only last fifteen minutes and that it would hurt, but that after that, there would be stillness again. When I had found out I was pregnant, I had wanted to tell her about physics and Shakespeare, about romance and music. Now, all I wanted to tell her was, please forgive me.



I stopped by the grocery store on the way back from my first visit to the clinic to see if there was any more bottled water. They told me the dilators take twenty-four hours to open my cervix. They told me to come back the next day for the rest of the procedure.

At the grocery store, there was a throng of people gathering around two exhausted-looking men in sweaty Stop and Shop T-shirts and a pallet of five-gallon Poland Springs water. I waited in line for two containers. As I walked to the checkout, my gallon of water, swinging from its carry handle, hit a little boy in the head. He grabbed his head and looked up at me with big brown eyes. The look he gave me was questioning and curious, not accusing. He didn’t know why he had been hit, and he wanted to know why. I said I was sorry. He looked around him at all of the people clamoring for water. I repeated, “I’m sorry,” but he didn’t hear me because he’d already started to cry.

The old man behind me in the checkout line asked, “What will you do with your water?”

I will do with mine the same that you will do with yours. I will drink it; I will use it for cleaning, for cooking, for brushing my teeth. I will bathe in it, I will wash my skin in it. As my cervix opened against my body’s will, I thought, I will use this water to survive. 



The Tidal Pool and the Sea

JUNE 28, 1979

The discordant sound of clanging dishes, flirting waitresses, and complaining coworkers dulls his mind as he watches the sweat lazily bead and slide down the beer bottle. He's drinking slowly on purpose; he sure as hell doesn't want to go home. Tracy has been on a rampage since he stumbled in late Tuesday night. Why it matters to her what time he gets home is a complete mystery. Isn't that one of the few *good* things about being separated? Something about the kids, it being hard enough on them already. But she was the one waking them up. Who knows. Doesn't matter anyway. He winces at the memory of his lumbering riposte: informing her of a date he had set up for Saturday night with Marcy. Marcy McKeenan. He said her whole name just to drag out the effect.

A purposeful swig of beer. He holds it in his mouth. A sharp elbow pulls him from his thoughts. "Hey, that one over there's pretty cute, huh?" He follows Dale's bony finger across the room to a group of girls drinking and laughing at the far table. There's no question to which one he's referring. She is cute. She throws her head back in a loud laugh. Her legs are crossed, revealing just enough thigh to make his insides stir. He swallows his beer. Why not?

"I'ma ask her to dance."

"Like hell you are. That girl ain't gonna dance with your ugly ass."

"Betcha she will."

"Well, go on then. The next round'll be on you, I guess."

This set of nine flash fiction pieces makes up part of the author's larger project, a fictionalized memoir of her father's life. The section entitled "May 9, 1973," was previously published in *Word Riot* in January 2009.



He puts the beer down and wipes the condensation into his hair. As he stands up, he realizes that he isn't nervous at all. Not excited either, really. Detached. Maybe there is something to having nothing to lose. He tucks the back of his shirt in and walks toward the table. Dale is whooping and hollering behind him, telling all the other guys to watch.

She sees him coming. He is unaffected by the blatant crown-to-toe assessment her eyes make as he approaches. He arrives at the table and the other girls giggle and shush each other. He looks only at her, straight at her. One of them kicks her foot. She takes a slow sip from her straw, looking up at him through her eyelashes. The others wait, open-mouthed, for him to say something.

"Hello."

"Hi."

"I'll give ya a nickel if you'll dance with me."

The smile starts in her eyes. She bites her bottom lip to keep from looking too pleased, but the corners of her mouth have already given her away. "Alright, stranger."

He reaches out to help her up. Soft fingertips in a calloused palm. She puts her weight into his hand. She isn't even finished standing when he decides to tell Marcy McKeenan she can forget Saturday night.

December 16, 1988

The alarm clock crashes into his dream. He had been sitting in that tweed chair in Mr. Clarkson's office, only in the dream it had swallowed him in its itchy earth tones, his outstretched fingers barely reaching the armrests. Clarkson had been yelling at him—his finger stabbing the air between them with every syllable—when suddenly he began to shout, "BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!"

When consciousness finally finds him, he has time to chuckle at the fading memory of the dream before the nausea takes hold. It is a familiar feeling, the stomach turning in on itself. It is as if the organ is trying desperately to escape a body it sees as a sinking ship. There are so many things that will go wrong today, all of which he will be blamed for, but none of which he can control.

He slowly sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed. His feet settle on the chilly, threadbare carpet of the floor. He puts his face in his hands and lets the weight of his head rest there for a second. Pam rolls over, covering her head with the tattered blanket, groaning in protest to the continued squawking of the alarm. He lifts his head and looks at the lumpy, squirming image of her cocooned body in the blue glow of the neighbor's floodlight coming through the blinds. He reaches out to the alarm, trying to choke down the unjustified bitterness he feels at the fact that she doesn't have to get up in the dark.

He takes a deep breath when he steps out the front door and the cold air makes his lungs ache. Dawn is a faint glow on the horizon. Maybe he'll take Hannah and Dylan to that old field tomorrow and cut down a Christmas tree; they always get a kick out of picking just the right one. Pam will give him a hard time because it's private property, but she'll deal with it because they can't afford to buy one and she knows it. She'll bounce the baby on her hip and give him that look as he drags it in the house with two giggling, pine-needle-covered children in tow, but he knows an hour later she'll be helping the kids unpack homemade ornaments made out of popsicle sticks and glitter glue. He watches the fog of his breath dissipate before walking to the car.

January 12, 1979

It is not the gun that catches Tracy's attention. Naked, still as a stone beside him on the couch. It is the pillowcase he has over his head. One of Matty's: faded pink cotton with a rainbow and butterflies on it, threadbare in the middle from his little head's rubbing in the night and his sister's head's rubbing before it.

"What the hell are you doing?" Trenchant, staccato.

But he is numb to that now. What does it matter? He moves only slightly, tilting his head toward the doorway to see her silhouette through the shroud. The lamplight winks on the barrel of the gun. She gasps and his body tightens, his fists clench. By the time her hand reaches her mouth, he has lost his chance.

April 17, 1975

The sudden call crackles loudly from the PA, startling him so much that he loses his footing. The rubber sole of his boot keeps him from sliding off the side of the plane's engine casing. The wrench falls twenty feet and lands on the concrete floor with a loud metallic clang that echoes from the tin walls of the hangar. *Shit*. Oil-slick hands search for grooves. Black-rimmed fingernails, hardened by years of abuse, haul the weight of his body back to safety. He lies there for a minute, hot face on cool metal. Heavy breaths form a faint trail of water droplets. A gust from the industrial fan catches the sweat on his back and an army of small hairs stand on end. These calls are the worst part of his post.

He sees the crash site from more than a mile away. He fantasizes that it was the pilot's last breath that streaked the sky, forming a spiral of black smoke as it left his broken body. The stench of burning rubber enters the car through the vents. His stomach turns. He shuts the air conditioner off; he would rather be hot than endure that smell before he has to. As usual, he is the first one on the scene. Medics don't bother rushing to crashes like this anymore.

He parks upwind and takes a deep breath before opening the door. The smell still hits him hard, even after two years. This one is really bad. The plane is completely destroyed; the only immediately identifiable parts are a burning tire and half of a twisted propeller, planted in the ground like a warped, sickly tree. He finds a boot, still laced and eerily unscathed. As he places it in a bag, he pictures a pretty wife receiving the phone call in the morning. A lucky 100 lire coin, ambiguous pieces of flesh. By the time he finds a jawbone, he has given names to both of the imagined children.

May 9, 1973

My dearest Sung-Mi, he begins to write. The pen stops, almost of its own accord, on the comma. The ink begins to bleed. He watches the small circle of blue slowly spread, seizing upon each tiny fiber of the paper like a proliferating virus. He stares for a long time without blinking. Finally, shaking his head, he rips the paper off the pad, crushes it into a tiny ball, and places it on the desk. He covers his eyes with the heels of his palms, pressing into them until fireflies flash behind his lids. "What the hell've you got yourself into," he hisses through his teeth. His arms fall heavily to the wood as he tries to blink away the residual illusions of light.



Pen meets paper again. Fast and messy, a desperate attempt to make thoughts words without having to dwell on their consequences. *Sung-Mi, its been 2 months since that plane took me away from you and brought me back home. I'm sorry if its seemed like an eternity. I had alot of thinking to do. I told you I would let you know when I had it all figured out. Its been real hard for me, and you should know that.*

A continuous flow of images flicker uncontrollably in his mind: the porcelain dunes of her waist, the sericeous taste of her shoulder blades, her eyes like wet olives.

I should of stayed, dammit. I should of stayed there with you. But you know I got a wife. I got two little kids. You know that. I can't go leaving them, no matter what you and I had. I'm a good man, Sung-Mi. Anyway, I'm sure trying to be.

He hears something fall in the kitchen. Tracy snaps, "Now pick it up, Matty. Pick it up! Look at the mess you made!" Matty whimpers something indecipherable. The pen picks up speed.

My wife, she don't know about you. I think its best to keep it that way. I hope you understand why you won't be hearing from me again. Please don't ever try to contact me. Lets leave it be.

He immediately folds the letter and stuffs it into the addressed, overly-stamped envelope he has kept in his wallet for weeks. No use reading it over. Too late to change his mind. He grabs a jacket and heads for the front door.

Tracy calls from the kitchen, "Hey, where you going?"
"For a walk," he curtly replies without looking back.

He stands in front of the mailbox for the better part of half an hour, trying to force himself to just reach out and open it. Finally, he puts the letter in and slams the door. His knees give out. He sinks to the sidewalk, fingers still gripping the handle and one arm across his gut, where love and obligation wage a bloody, visceral war.

September 12, 1966

He watches her perfect, yellow ponytail swish back and forth as she bounces to the bathroom. How is Jeanie Clark, the prettiest girl in school, at Lou's pizza parlor right now with *him*? He is painfully aware of the pimple that appeared this morning, a mercenary of his deepest insecurities. He checks to make sure Jeanie isn't on her way back, dips two fingers in his water, and tries flattening his cowlick to hide the blemish's screaming message: that he isn't good enough for her.

He hears the bathroom door swing open and turns to watch her walk back. She smiles; his cheeks burn. Then, when she passes a table of guys he had been far too distracted to notice, someone reaches out and cups her behind. She whirls around—more surprised than scared—and slaps the hand away. The guys all laugh and caw obscenities.

A fast, boiling anger flushes his ears and locks his jaw. He gets up so quickly that his thighs catch the edge of the table, and its legs screech an alarm. Suddenly, he is at their table. He doesn't remember walking over. He doesn't remember Jeanie's frightened plea to "just let it go." he realizes that she is holding his hand when he uses the other one to swipe the asshole's plate off his table. It crashes to the floor and breaks the newborn silence of the parlor.

"Get up."

The guy is just drunk enough to slightly delay the realization that the broken mess on the floor is his plate. And that the 5'9" high school kid flaring his nostrils is talking to him. And that his friends are all goading him to respond. "The hell you say?"

"I said get up. Let's go outside. Now." He stomps out the front door, the tinny jingle of the bell muffling Jeanie's nervous implorations.

Outside, he untucks his shirt and rolls his sleeves. Though his reputation as the youngest of three truculent boys has spared him more than a few fights, he still has enough experience to know what to do, even if most of that experience came from the very brothers by whose notoriety he was saved. The drunk guy stumbles out with a slice of pizza in his hand, a nonverbal claim as to the innocuous and annoying nature of this interruption.



“Leave the kid alone, Frank,” someone calls out from the small crowd. “Just let ‘em both go home.”

“I’mma let ‘em go. I just wanna talk, that’s all,” Frank says through a mouthful of pizza. He lifts a finger to request time to finish the bite. The boy waits, following an unspoken and instinctual rule. Frank turns around to throw the slice away, but before his hands reach the trashcan, he drops the pizza and whips back around to sucker punch the boy in the eye.

A flash of light and a white-hot pain temporarily blind him. When his eyes open, their focus falls on the huge ring on Frank’s hand: pulling away in slow motion, dripping a jagged line of red onto the pavement. A warm, sticky stream floods his vision.

Suddenly, his hands are on Frank’s ears, slippery with blood. He doesn’t remember knocking him down. He doesn’t know how long it has been. He yanks the limp head up and down, skull hitting curb with the deep, sickening sound of a watermelon about to split. Somewhere, Jeanie is screaming: “You’re gonna kill him, Jesus!” It feels like fifty hands are clawing at his back. Still, he continues. Finally, someone hooks an arm around his neck and drags him off, choking and sputtering.

Regaining his footing, he smears a mixture of foreign blood and his own across his face in an attempt to clear his eyes. Frank’s body lies lifeless and crumpled on the curb. Now, he is afraid. Frank’s friends rush to his side. Someone shouts, “Lou just called the cops!”

His eyes search for Jeanie. She stands away from the crowd, her face a ghostly white canvas for a mouth frozen in horror. He grabs her hand to run; it lies spiritless and stiff in his. They dash across the street to the safety and shadows of the maze of alleyways he knows by heart. Her arm remains taut as she staggers after him in the dark, and he wonders whether she will try to break free. Her whimpers become the soundtrack to his racing mind.

March 2, 1996

An intense, quiet anger has been dammed up for a while now, held in with sandbags of resentment that ache and groan, threatening to give way.

He can feel the bitterness; it has latched onto the muscles in his shoulders with dull, tiny claws. He usually tries to loosen its grip with the numb noise of the television, but on days like today—when he comes home after eleven and a half hours of getting blamed for other people's mistakes—he allows it to penetrate his veins and pour out of his mouth.

He enters the house with heavy steps. Pam is folding laundry in the living room, watching a made-for-TV movie with Hannah. They mumble their hellos to him, too distracted to ask how his day was. Dylan and Mark do not even look up when he finds them playing in their room, surrounded by more cars and action figures than they could possibly have time to use.

He stalks around the house, soaking up every offense. He hates that he works all day and comes home to a wreck. Wash the goddamn dishes, Pam. Is that too much to ask? Instead of cleaning up after the dog, who continues to use the dining room as a backup toilet, the kids hop over the mess to get to the computer. Today, these mounting frustrations break the tenuous dam, and his words rush forth with diluvial force.

"Who's throwing paper towels on the dog piss in here and leaving it for someone else to clean up? I guess that's my job, huh? Is that why it's left in here?" He knows his voice is carrying to every corner of the house. He does not wait for a reply. "I guess no one's gonna fess up to that one, right? Look at this kitchen! It looks like a bomb blew up in here! I mean, what the hell is this?" He scoops up a piece of paper from the floor. There is no need to figure out what it is; he just needs a name, a target. He stomps to the living room. "HANNAH! Come pick your crap up off this floor!"

His daughter stares at him from the couch, jaw set and eyes slit. "That's not my *crap*. That's my report card. And if you'd bothered to read it before it fell off the fridge, you would have seen that I made all As."

Hot shame trickles down his forehead, triggering an immediate defense. "Oh, I don't give you enough praise? What, you need a freakin' PARADE every week?"



Hannah bolts up from the couch and whisks past him, snatching the paper, tears of anger in her eyes. He hears the trashcan lid open and shut; her door slams moments later. He grits his teeth so hard it feels as if they might shatter. He looks up at Pam; a cold, hard stare is molded into her face. Bitterness strengthens its hold. The claws dig in deep.

September 15, 1987

He sets the drain plug down on the ground beside him and wipes his filthy hand on his pants. An inquisitive breeze finds him under the car, cooling the sweat beaded on the back of his neck. He is watching the pan slowly fill with oil, hypnotically iridescent in the sunlight, when the trance is interrupted by the sharp, unmistakable sound of Hannah screaming.

He sidewinds out from underneath the car so quickly that when he cuts his arm on a piece of metal, he does not notice. He finds Hannah crying in the backyard, rolling on the lawn and clutching her arm. Pam is leaning over her, frantically asking what happened. A rivulet of blood has snaked through the hairs on his arm and is now dripping bright red from his fingertips onto the emerald blades of grass. He sees Dylan standing by the clothesline pole, looking sheepishly guilty next to the large rubber ball they had pulled out of the lake the weekend before.

He bends down, scoops up his daughter, and gently carries her inside the house. In the living room, he sits on the threadbare recliner and perches her fragile body on the knee of his dirty pant leg. A crimson smear mars the ruffles on her favorite shirt, and at first he thinks that she is the one bleeding. But when he lifts up her sleeve, he sees nothing there. Between sobs, she keeps repeating, “Daddy, it hurts; it hurts, Daddy.”

“I know. Show me where.”

She points to her shoulder and winces—“Ow, Daddy, ow!”—when he raises her arm to look. And as he holds her wrist—tiny, soft, and birdlike—between his index finger and thumb, his mind leaves him.

A young child—her smooth, tanned face streaked with mud and tears—cries in front of a group of straw houses huddled in the clearing of a foreign jungle. The warm air is wet, heavy, and still. Her mother kneels down beside her, changing the bloody bandages on the stump where her arm used to be. Someone says, “Poor gook. V.C. cut it off when they found out she took an American inoculation.” He stomps his cigarette out in the dirt and keeps walking...



Hannah is crying on the floor when he finds himself again, standing tense, his jaw and fists clenched. She must have fallen from his lap.

Pam enters the room from the hallway. “I just called Judy; she thinks it might be broken. We should take her to the hospital.”

“It’s not broken, Pam. She’s just being a baby. It looks fine to me.”

He storms out of the room, brushing past Dylan, who has been quietly awaiting his punishment on the couch. Through the slammed door, he hears Pam’s attempts to soothe Hannah’s increasingly pained cries. And with every blink, his eyelids net more memories from an endless sea.

March 13, 1972

He throws his head back, letting the shot slide down the warm trail left by at least five others; he can no longer remember. His returning chin dips lower than it should, and the room takes a second to catch up with his line of vision.

A blurred silhouette approaches from the other side of the room. He squints and recognizes Johnson, the new boy at the barracks, when the kid gets close enough to slam a cold beer down on the table beside him. “Eat, drink, and be merry, motherfucker,” Johnson says, clinking his own beer against the newly stationed gift and then taking a long swig before adding, “Tomorrow we die,” and stumbling back to the bar.

Through slow blinks, he watches tiny pieces of ice on the side of the bottle slither and collide into one another, clinging to the glass before joining forces in smooth, liquid channels. He is suddenly filled with a childlike sense of awe at how easily water changes forms, how easily it escapes.

He bends forward to grab the beer with a breathy grunt, and the lifted bottle takes with it a piece of paper. When he breaks the condensational hold, his deployment letter once again takes shape, and he remembers that he had brought it with him. There had been talk of getting drunk, dragging an empty oil drum out to the runway tarmac, lighting one letter, and then throwing them all in. It would be a futile and stupid rebellion, and they all knew it, but it would be nice to watch something burn.

He stands too quickly and his legs wobble as he calls across the room, “Hey! Johnson!” He waits for the boy to give an upward nod. “C’mon, le’s go.”

On the side of the runway, his motorcycle shudders beneath them. Johnson grabs on to the sides of his jacket and they both lean forward. He opens the throttle and they rush into the darkness and wind. As they pick up speed, his eyes water and sting, so he closes them. Turning his face to the moon, he lifts his hands, waiting to fly. 🌑

Natalie Takes the Elevator

ALL THESE YEARS, VIOLA HAS BEEN WAITING IN THE ELEVATOR. Natalie knows this is impossible—or at least highly improbable—and yet it's true: when the doors part, Viola Fabian, the woman herself, is standing inside the small tarnished-brass box as if she's been locked within for the past twenty years, whiling away the hours since 1977 until Natalie arrived with a wish to descend. Every detail is as Natalie remembers. The low ponytail, which was mostly white even in Viola's mid-twenties when Natalie first knew her, is now the color of paper. The exquisite gray wool suit could be the exact same if the lapels were only a bit wider. The frozen blue eyes and the sloping reddish brows—proof that Viola has, at some point, been something other than a white witch—and the mouth, painted the dark red of old blood, are still poised for a glare, a doubting arch, a comment that had once had the power to stake Natalie through the heart.

Natalie's body moves her forward, across the threshold from the dim ninth-floor hallway of the Bellweather Hotel into the ancient elevator car. She stands beside the woman who killed her, and the doors seal them inside together.

In 1969, the summer she was ten, Natalie Wink began to dream of Paul McCartney. It was never the same dream, but Paul was frequently there, wearing his shiny blue uniform and neat Sergeant Pepper moustache—on the prow of a sinking ship, swimming through the black of space, or bounding through a field of high gold grass like she imagined grew in the middle of the country. Natalie was born in California, in a small town outside San Francisco, so her best ideas of what happened beyond her immediate world came from the maps in social studies textbooks: maps that denoted each state's primary products with cartoon hieroglyphs that made Natalie imagine a titanic oil derrick dominating all of Dallas, gargantuan bundles of wheat stacked neatly throughout Kansas, and one lone, enormous dairy cow terrorizing northern Wisconsin. California had a mammoth orange infestation, but that was south of Natalie; all she had to worry about (well, there was plenty to worry



about, but all she had to worry about when it came to the threat of regional agriculture) were gargantuan grapes, and Natalie liked grapes.

The first Paul McCartney dream happened on that Fourth of July, when her uncle brought over sparklers that burned green and her parents, proud owners of a brand new hi-fi, played records all night long. She may have heard it before then, but it was the first time she truly listened to “Penny Lane.” When no one was watching, she reset the needle to the beginning of the song and played it and played it and played it until her mother’s college roommate said that if she heard that fucking song one more time, she was going to leave and take the pot with her. It didn’t matter. “Penny Lane” played on in Natalie’s head. It was, to Natalie, a thing of impossible, addictive beauty, and the trumpet solos—which she would later learn, to her delight, were played on something called a piccolo trumpet—were the most perfect sounds she had ever heard.

Beyond being a worried and hesitant child, Natalie held a preternaturally rigid conception of right and wrong, good and evil. At ten, she believed in absolute moral categories, that there were heroes and villains and devils and angels, like equal and opposite reactions of the soul. That trumpet solo—clear as a clockwork bell, racing up and down and sideways—was pure. Natalie liked to think of herself as pure, as a hero. She was not like her older brother Trevor, who had been dropped off late at night twice by the police; she was not like their neighbor Hank Howler, who kicked Ralph, the Winks’s black lab, when he didn’t think anyone was looking. Natalie did not get in trouble; Natalie did not hurt anyone or any thing. She had a good and a true soul, and the perfect trumpet in “Penny Lane” made her hum like a tuning fork.

She put herself to bed that night. Her parents and their friends were still in the backyard, laughing a little too loud, their voices wreathing Natalie with the comfort of their nearness. She brushed her teeth and her long red ponytail and slipped between her covers. She heard Ralph turning and turning and finally settling onto the pink braided rug at her bedside. Natalie drifted away as the trumpet played.

And then there was Paul McCartney, sitting next to her at the picnic table on the lawn outside. It was nighttime (at least it felt like it was still tonight), but they were alone. It was so quiet she could hear the rustling of his uniform, the silvery fringe and pink braid on his epaulets flopping against his arms with a satisfying heaviness.

“Penny Lane” began to play softly, from no turntable that Natalie could see, and Paul McCartney sang to her on the mossy picnic table in her own backyard. He sang casually, conversationally, like a friend leaning in to tell her a secret, about bankers and firemen and nurses selling poppies and things she didn’t understand but wanted to. And when the trumpet solo began, Natalie was astonished to find something small and round and



metal pressed to her lips, her fingertips dancing on cool flat pearls and her lungs filling and pressing air out in a voice that was clear and bright as crystal.

For the first time in her life, she knew how it felt to be perfect.

She woke up early the next morning and ran into her parents' bedroom and announced—to their intensely hung-over confusion—that she was going to play the trumpet. Starting now.



Viola Fabian even *smells* the same. Natalie has compartmentalized so many things about her that she's begun to forget some of the less upsetting, purely sensory details. "Compartmentalize"—that's Natalie's therapist talking, Doctor Call-Me-Danny; he drops fruity things like "compartmentalize" and "emotional distance" and "avoidance behavior" every third word. At any rate, the memories are all still there and floating up from the cold storage of her subconscious. Viola smells like lavender and coffee. Every inhalation is steeped in it.

Natalie is suddenly sure she is going to cry.

"Which floor?" Viola asks.

Her voice—Natalie blinks and just as suddenly knows the tears will not come, thank God—her voice sounds different: smaller, more human. How can that be, when everything else is precisely the same? Unless it's Natalie's own ears that have changed.

"Lobby," she replies with a small croak that turns into a cough. "Thank you."

Viola, also going to the lobby, has already pressed L and settles back to the middle of the car. She sniffs. She looks at her watch. She does normal things for someone riding in an elevator to do. Natalie thinks she might be staring, but she doesn't care and couldn't control herself anyway if she did. Of all the places she thought she would see Viola Fabian again one day, casually riding in an elevator at a high school music festival and retreat in the Middle of Nowhere, New York, is not one of them. On the news, as either victim or perpetrator (both were entirely likely)—that was where she would reappear. Perhaps in the newspaper, in a picture accompanying an obituary. Possibly in her casket, should Natalie be compelled to attend her funeral to confirm that she is, in fact, dead.

Natalie takes a risk.

"Here for the festival?" she asks.

Viola looks straight ahead. "Yes," is all she says.

"So am I. Chaperone. I have two students attending, chorus and orchestra, both seniors." She swallows, feels she is talking too much. "And I guess there's going to be a big storm this weekend?" Conversation about the weather—especially impending snow, when



in upstate New York—is an elevator staple. “I’m just happy I got us here safe and sound, though I hope we can get home again. Did you travel very far?”

“Everywhere is far from this Godforsaken armpit.”

Natalie bites back a smile. Classic Viola. Then she frowns, bruised. This, she imagines Doctor Call-Me-Danny would say, is a complex emotion.

How do you not recognize me? How do you not know me?



The first time Natalie Wink met Viola Fabian, one was twelve and the other twenty-four; one was a student, one a teacher; one was awestruck and one was jealous. This is what Doctor Danny, the past twelve months, has been telling Natalie over and over again was the simple truth of the matter. Natalie, who was there, knows it’s sort of half the truth, that it contains pieces of truth—gnawed on, mangled, and turned inside-out but, she supposes, truth in essence.

Natalie took up the trumpet in the fall of 1969 when she entered fourth grade. By middle school, her band director told her parents there was little more he could do to guide her passion and talent, but he *could* recommend a name for private lessons. He’d seen a young female student from the conservatory play a trumpet concerto to a standing ovation and recently heard she was looking for pupils. Natalie’s family was still living outside the city at the time, and the drive to San Francisco to meet with this student and discuss the possibility of lessons would always be etched in her brain: how the rolling brown hills gave way to long blocks of pastel-colored houses, to city stoplights and street corners and crowds of people. Her teacher was among them. Viola Fabian, with her perfectly musical name, could be any one of them.

Viola met with Natalie and her parents in one of the practice studios at the conservatory. They compared calendars, discussed fees. Natalie, trumpet case on her lap, hugged it close out of excitement more than apprehension; she wanted to show this strange and beautiful young woman—younger than her parents! and obviously so much cooler—how talented she was. How similar they were. She believed music was her future the way that she believed in breathing. It was hard-wired, a brand on her soul, so essential to her being that she never thought of it as a choice.

Viola asked Natalie’s parents to leave them for a moment. “Having our parents around makes us that much more nervous when we’re playing for a new audience,” she said, and winked at Natalie. The practice room, sound-proofed and close, felt like a secret clubhouse, and the two of them felt like sisters: Viola the wise older, Natalie the precocious younger. Viola asked her to run through her scales: major, minor, and chromatic; and Natalie did.



She asked her to play a prepared solo, beginning to end, and Natalie did. Viola handed her a sheet of handwritten music to sight-read, and Natalie did. Natalie knew she hadn't performed perfectly—sight-reading was her Achilles' heel—but she also knew she'd performed well. Very well, she thought; she'd felt herself lift and swell on the high carrying notes, clap like a bell on the short ones, and scamper around the eights and sixteenths with electricity. Through it all, Viola had said nothing beyond an instruction or a question. She had paced the small room (which felt smaller and smaller as time went on), winding the end of her red-and-white streaked ponytail around her index finger, her brow furrowed, her lips pursed.

Natalie laid her trumpet across her lap and waited, hopeful.

Viola smiled at her and said, "You were sloppy on all of your scales, but especially the full chromatic, which was pretty goddamn awful. Your pitch was off on measures eight through twenty-two in the solo. I don't understand why you thought the grace notes leading into bar F were optional; you apparently think you know better than the composer and I can emphatically confirm you do not. You cannot sight-read. Overall, your attack was weak, your intonation thin, your technique laughable. You are not ever going to be great, but if you would like to try to be good, I might be the only person who can help you. Learn this," she said, offering a sheaf of music. "All of it. By next Tuesday."

Again, Viola Fabian smiled—and Natalie was too young, too dumbstruck, and too hungry for validation to realize that it was a smile of malice.



How many things had to happen, how many decisions, left turns instead of right, for them to meet again like this? Natalie is dizzy with the sheer coincidence of it all—for them to have last seen each other on the other side of the country in California, on a June evening in 1977, and for them now to be sharing an elevator car in upstate New York, descending with excruciating slowness through the ancient belly of a hotel that time forgot? She squeezes her eyes shut. Twenty years of her life have passed since that sweltering day, since her graduation party—twenty years. She feels the weight of what those twenty years might have been, could have been, if she'd turned left instead of right. She sags inside.

She licks her lips. She knows, at least, how *she* got here. From California she went to college—in Indiana, to a sprawling state university, where she studied music theory, composition and performance. Then she met her husband, Barry, at her first job, when he was subbing for the chemistry teacher. What was that teacher's name? Natalie struggles but can't recall. She does remember that a substitute was needed because the regular chemistry



teacher had accidentally set his beard on fire during a classroom demonstration. So for her to be here in this elevator, in small part, a man whose face is a blur and whose name is a mystery had to turn the gas jet up a smidge too high on an otherwise normal day in the mid-1980s. *Oh life. You think you're so funny.*

Then she and Barry were married and moved to—where was it first? First to Chicago, because neither of them had ever been there. Then to Ann Arbor, because they heard it was lovely, and a little part of both of them missed college. Then to Minneapolis, to one half of the Twin Cities, because Natalie was restless again and Barry refused to move any place with a cost of living higher than anywhere they'd been before. He had family in St. Cloud and suggested Minneapolis, she knew, because he wanted children and wanted to be close to his parents and brothers and sisters when that happened. “When that happened” was how Barry talked about procreation, as though it were as eventual as their next birthdays, their thinning hair and wrinkling hands, their deaths. Natalie didn't have the heart to tell him that the act of having a child—of conceiving, carrying, delivering, rearing—was something she could no longer even imagine.

This was chiefly the result of being a teacher. All the time they were moving, she and Barry were teaching in public and private schools, the children of the wealthy, the super-wealthy, the poor and the destitute, the comfortable and the aspiring. But in every school and every ensemble she conducted, Natalie always had the same students. The same jerkoff percussionists who found it hilarious to ditch lessons and waste time in rehearsals. The same meek little third flutes, barely passing enough breath through their instruments to make them whistle. And the same wunderkinds, bright and bright-eyed, born bursting with talent, who she tutored and praised and who always left her for something better. To them she was a yearbook signature, barely a souvenir, and she had come to resent all the hours of her life she'd given without hope of return. So it was too late now for kids, for her, even though biologically it wasn't; she was only (ha) going to be forty in the spring. It was just that she had already raised hundreds of children and didn't have the strength to raise another, one of her own—who would leave as surely as all the others, who would take what was left of her heart and everything else.

“What district are you from?” Viola's voice startles her.

She swallows, her throat dry. “Ruby Falls. Way upstate. A northern backwater armpit.” She and Viola had always spoken the same language.

“How long have you been teaching there?”

“Not long,” Natalie says, and thinks: the break-in. The break-in is the last thing that happened to bring her here. That was why they left Minneapolis, after all—because a man broke into their little house on Stratford Street with the tilting mailbox and the green shutters. Not just a man. An *intruder*. And he didn't just break in—he broke in, and then

Natalie Wink Wilson shot him in the leg and he died. That she has killed someone has become a perfectly normal thing for her to think about herself, on the same level as where she went to college and how she met her husband. *The man I killed is the last thing that brought me here.* She feels nothing in particular when she thinks about it. But then she has felt very little at all, about anything, since she shot him.

One of the last clear emotions she remembers feeling is angry, so angry, when she and Barry had talked about what they were going to do next—after the man was buried and the lawyers had said their piece and it was clear nothing was going to happen, other than Natalie being written up in the *Star-Tribune* as a heroic homeowner. When Barry calmly, all things considered, pointed out that running away would solve nothing, she had shouted at him, screamed, really. WE ARE LEAVING. WE ARE GOING SOMEWHERE ELSE. So they did.

This, then, is somewhere else. In this elevator with Viola Fabian is somewhere else—another world in another time, from another era of her life. *How the hell did you get here, Viola?* she wants to ask. *How many left-instead-of-right turns led you here? How many places did you teach, how many men did you marry, how many children have you and haven't you had, how many people have you shot?* Her cheeks feel warm and she flushes, her anger like a wave of nausea, because she cannot imagine that Viola Fabian's road to this elevator was anywhere near as disappointing, or as much of a waste of a life.

And where is the justice in that?

The car gives a little wobble—Natalie hates this creepy old place, and its creepy old machinery—and the moment of unsteadiness jostles her mind. She starts. She remembers. She remembers the gun in her jacket pocket.



She has forgotten how it feels to believe in things like justice—things like right and wrong, and good and evil, heroes and villains. Viola Fabian cured her of that.

Viola taught her that she was never as good as she thought she was, or wanted to be. That the only way to avoid embarrassing herself was to do exactly as instructed. That every time Viola called Natalie lazy, or stupid, or an uptight little bitch, she deserved it—it was good for her to stay humble. Or she was just kidding, God, could you *be* more humorless? Lighten up.

And Natalie believed her and loved her, for years, and this was why: Viola Fabian made Natalie better. She made Natalie *brilliant*. At school, Natalie jumped to first chair in every ensemble, then tried out for the local youth orchestra and made first chair trumpet there, too; at fourteen, she was the youngest in the whole section. She entered solo competitions and won. She auditioned for adult-level concerto competitions and placed. Every single



thing Natalie attempted musically, she excelled at; and every single time someone praised her for her accomplishments, she was sure to shyly mention that it was nothing, that it was all thanks to her mentor, Viola Fabian. Natalie was too caught up, too genuinely thrilled by her developing abilities to question Viola's motives or methods. It wasn't until she was a senior on the edge of high school graduation that she realized she was truly afraid of letting Viola down, that this fear had conditioned her, and, worst of all, that for years she had only been playing for one reason: to keep Viola Fabian happy.

She'd been at a youth orchestra rehearsal, on a break, sipping a Coke in the lobby of the local high school that allowed them use of its auditorium for Sunday afternoon rehearsals. One of the oboists was sitting on the lobby floor working on a double reed, shaving the edges down with a flat blade. It happened in half a second. She heard the knife clatter to the floor; she turned and saw the kid's white face and wet, red thumb; and then the kid, who looked too young to even be in high school, burst into hysterical tears.

"What did I do? What did I just do?" He was talking to himself; he didn't even see Natalie. Blood was pumping out of his thumb, polka-dotting the hallway linoleum, and he was draining from white to transparent. "Oh my God, I need this thumb. I need this thumb. I need this thumb."

Natalie laughed at him. She too was stunned white, but he was just so funny, sitting there in his striped T-shirt that was a little too tight, bleeding and blabbering. He was fine—it turned out he didn't even need stitches—but he made Natalie think. What would she do if, say, her front teeth got knocked out and she couldn't hold a decent embouchure? What if *she* lost a finger or two and couldn't reach the keys or hold her trumpet aloft? Lying in bed late at night, with Ralph the (very senior, by now) black lab fast asleep on the pink braided rug at her bedside, Natalie Wink realized the first emotion she would feel upon being unable to ever play the trumpet again was relief. Stomach-dropping, heart-stopping, soul-soothing *relief*.

She saw Paul McCartney, heard the rustle of blue satin. She heard "Penny Lane," cheerful and mysterious, promising a wider, brighter world. She tried to feel how that first dream had made her feel, when the act of playing music had seemed her perfect preordained right. But music felt like none of those things now. She couldn't even remember well enough to pretend.

It was Viola Fabian's fault.

She lived with this knowledge for several months. She played her spring concerts and was fêted as a graduating senior. She actually graduated from high school, and it all passed by quickly and without much fanfare, until her parents threw a graduation party for her on a too-hot June night. Natalie, who didn't particularly want a party in the first place, gamely threw on a sundress, stole a beer from the refrigerator in the garage, and was two bottles

in when Viola arrived. Natalie would spend the summer rationalizing that what happened next happened because she had been drinking. But that wasn't true. It happened because Viola had broken her heart.

Wearing her uniform of gray suit, pumps and power ponytail, Viola looked like a court clerk dispatched to serve the party with a summons. Natalie had been going to her weekly lessons like everything was normal, had betrayed no irritation toward her mentor for poisoning her pure love of music, so there was no reason for Viola to suspect she was unwelcome. But here, in the backyard strung with pink and purple paper lanterns, in the house where Paul McCartney sang to Natalie in her dreams, Natalie watched her brilliant and cruel big sister from across the lawn and wanted her to die. To actually die—to leave the earth, without forwarding address, forever. She was ashamed to have borne Viola's cruelty and considered it kindness, humiliated by the understanding that all the awards and accolades were a celebration of something sick and wrong between them, something twisted. She had fallen for it. She had been so desperate to please, so thirsty for success, she'd put her soul in hock to a woman—oh God, Natalie could see it—to a woman who wasn't half as talented as she was. Or as talented as Natalie might once have been, before Viola bled her dry and turned her into a performing monkey.

She hid in the house, in her room. She watched the sun set on her friends and relatives in the backyard while she drank more beer, feeling righteously wounded and utterly sorry for herself. The party sounded like a success—she heard laughter, loud talking, shouts. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine how she would tell her parents she didn't want to continue with Viola, that all the years they'd financed her private lessons they'd been subsidizing an emotional sadist. *Listen to yourself, Natalie. You're being melodramatic. Histrionic.* Viola was mean, Viola was a bitch; but Natalie had allowed Viola to get away with it. And she, Natalie, would have to—she could—she was going to college in the fall. That was a natural cutoff, wasn't it? Couldn't this all just go away by itself?

There was a light thump on her door and when Natalie turned, there was Viola, letting herself in, the villainess coming to gloat. She looked like she didn't want anything in the world but to eat Natalie's heart.

"*There* you are. Everybody's missing you down there." She leaned against Natalie's dresser, her eyes skimming the beads and knickknacks and plastic idols of Natalie's childhood. "But *of course* you're up here, hiding in your room like a spoiled little brat."

Natalie didn't say anything. She sat on the edge of her bed and wished that Ralph the black lab were with her, Ralph who loved her just because he loved her.

"Your father tells me you're going to Indiana." Viola sniffed. "I was surprised you didn't tell me yourself. What gives? You've been so *quiet* lately. We haven't talked in months, really, Natalie—is everything okay? Are you afraid about graduating, going off to college?"



Jesus, Viola was sitting on the bed next to her, trying to be kind. Next she was going to ask to brush her hair. Braid it. “Maybe you’re feeling a little, oh, a little *anxiety* that there’s an awful lot of competition out there...that maybe your best years *are* behind you?”

Natalie closed her eyes. The beer bottle in her hand was empty and her stomach too full. She sloshed.

Viola’s arm circled around her back, giving her a squeeze. “Your best years are behind you, kiddo,” she said in a voice slicked with kindness. “That’s the way it is. Sure, you’ll go on, you’ll go to school. You’ll learn how to write and how to teach, and you’ll probably teach but you won’t write, and you certainly won’t compose anything worth remembering. Then you’ll marry someone and have children and you’ll say you played the trumpet in school but you won’t have actually picked it up in years. You’ll get rid of it. You’ll sell it, and you won’t be happy but you won’t quite be able to put your finger on why. Unless you remember this conversation with your old friend Viola, and how she tried to make you something great but you chose differently.”

Natalie broke without thinking. The bottle was a club in her fist. She swung back. Viola raised her hands to protect herself and Natalie slammed the bottle against the meat of Viola’s forearm. She knew she hadn’t broken the skin but she also knew it was going to leave a beautiful black bruise, huge and swollen, because Natalie had felt the bone ring, low like a giant brass bell. Elated now, feeling as if she had planted a flag on the moon, Natalie lifted the bottle again and this time Viola was too stunned, too slow. This time, Natalie swung hard and smashed her on her temple, right near the hairline.

Viola made a noise, short and shocked. Closed her eyes, brought her hands up to cover her face. She tilted. She swayed on the edge of the bed like a dizzy child. Natalie watched a tear of blood well, bright as a jewel, on Viola’s head.

Natalie dropped the bottle on her pink braided rug. She didn’t think she would learn anything worse from Viola Fabian than that she was a puppet, an instrument to be played. But there, in her room on the night of her graduation party, she learned that she was not a hero. Viola was not a villain. They were somewhere in between and nowhere at all, both of them alike.



The gun in Natalie’s jacket is the gun that killed the man in her house. She brought it with her to the festival on impulse, tucking it in her luggage between her sweaters and skirts and shampoo and conditioner in their little travel size bottles. While packing, it drifted into her mind—as it often did, unbidden and horrible—accompanied by a simple thought: *I might need that*. If she had asked herself why, for what possible reason could a



chaperone at a weekend retreat for student musicians need the protection of a handgun, she would not have had an answer. Not then and not now, other than as a kind of insurance against that which could not be anticipated. It was so easy to bring it. It's innocuous, small and surprisingly light, a very popular handgun, according to Barry, among casual gun- and home-owners. And women. She made a point not to know too much about it, which she now concedes was very stupid and could be the main reason why a man she did not know is dead. Barry will miss it if he happens to check the safe in the den, but Barry is spending the weekend with Kevin and Lou, playing poker, watching football, maybe crossing into Canada for the casinos. She doubts he will even look.

She does not have a permit to carry it. She carried it out of her home and out of her hotel room just the same; she was too afraid to leave it on its own, and too afraid to leave herself alone without it.

But Natalie is not going to kill Viola Fabian. Natalie, almost forty, exhausted and afraid, traumatized and more than slightly bitter, is never going to kill anyone ever again, even if she feels like it and even if they deserve it. However, it might—it might feel good to *frighten* Viola. To gently remove the gun from the inside pocket of her wrinkled-from-the-drive blazer and ask if Viola thinks she looks familiar. *Do you remember what happened the last time we met?* She would casually press the red emergency stop button on the door panel and the car would jolt, stop, and she would face Viola, that heartless sociopath, cornering her in the rear of this tiny elevator car—this car that smells like old shoes and dust and a faint whiff of ammonia from the housekeeping carts that are pushed on and off every day.

Yes. That would feel very good indeed. The hairs on the back of Natalie's neck stand up like spikes because this is a very insane thought she is having—Doctor Danny would probably say that it is “willfully destructive and pointlessly violent,” and for once Natalie would agree. But it is a thought that feels good, and Natalie is a fan of feeling anything at all these days, good, bad, or insane. She senses a real smile pushing up from deep inside, from the bottom of her stomach, and it bursts onto her face with something like a tiny laugh.

The elevator has reached the lobby. The doors open.

Too late. Natalie is more disappointed than she would like to admit. There is no pretense of politely summarizing their elevator conversation—no hollow chat about enjoying the festival or that perhaps they'll see each other at dinner, which will begin in a few short hours. Viola Fabian moves quickly to be the first off. She glances back over her shoulder and looks straight through her former pupil, pinning her to the back of the car.

“Get over yourself, Natalie,” she says. 🌸



Boy in Plaid Shorts. Adirondack Park, New York
JARROD McCABE



Itchy Ribs Robinson. New Orleans, Louisiana
JARROD McCABE



E.W. Seeley. Chesterfield, Massachusetts
JARROD McCABE



Alison Lindsay and Horse. Pine Plains, New York
JARROD McCABE



First Aid Shelter. Horseneck Beach, Massachusetts

JARROD McCABE

Like many photographers I know, Jarrod McCabe balances his photography work with heavy doses of athletic pursuits. When I called to ask a few questions, I could hear the tap running. “Washing a wound,” he said. Canoeing.

McCabe recently got back from working on a job in Shanghai. Based in Boston, but working all over the world, he shoots his personal work interspersed with editorial and commercial jobs and work on other projects. He admires the work of Irving Penn, Richard Avedon—more the Western portraits, less the fashion—New York-based editorial photographer Chris Buck, and, closer to home, William Huber.

In his color landscape “Boy in Plaid Shorts,” hills frame a boy on the beach of a lake. Two couples flank the boy, absorbed in their own activities. Symmetrical but independent, each figure contributes to a whole he is unaware of, and the down-looking boy focuses our attention in and out to the far side of the lake.

In the black-and-white portraits, McCabe finds beats that are slightly off: “Itchy Ribs Robinson,” lost in time, facing the camera with uncertainty. “E. W. Seeley,” framed outside by an oddly small, rusting trailer entrance, while grass almost as high as the trailer falls off either side of the image. Obscured by a horse that mirrors her straightforward stance with a head gesture that hides, “Alison Lindsay” peeks out from a mane, and the horse’s eyes and her eyes remain hidden.

Joshi Radin

Public Alley 439
72 X 36 oil on canvas, 2009
SEAN FLOOD

Welcome to Sean Flood's world.

Although his subject matter differs greatly, the blurring of textures and sharply contrasting colors call to mind some of Francis Bacon's best work.

Flood's use of perspective charges his paintings with movement and vitality—sometimes to dizzying effect, as in "CITYGO" and "South Station."

The same is true of "Public Alley 439," in which the funnel-shaped perspective of white sky at the top of the canvas not only suggests snow or fog (both common in Boston, near to Flood's home base), but also serves to draw the viewer's eye to the pavement, the surface of which reflects the sky.

The lack of figures in Flood's work occasionally serves to create a disquieting effect, as in "3DEKA." That piece is also reminiscent of Edward Hopper, opening a space for viewers to fill with a story of their own.

Jess Barnett





SOHO Corner 54 X 52 oil on canvas, 2010

SEAN FLOOD



CITYGO
50 X 68 oil on canvas, 2011
 SEAN FLOOD

3DEKA
36 X 24 oil on canvas, 2009
 SEAN FLOOD





South Station 74 X 96 oil on canvas, 2011
SEAN FLOOD

Franz Wright

Roadside Grave: February

In the white is a name.
In the three worlds
it stands. Wind
sounds, a world of one
color.
Name spoken,
once,
in a darkening field;
name being stitched,
very small, in white thread
in white cloth.

Autoventriloquism

F stares at the pill. F takes the pill. Look, look. F's in his right mind again. And I'm sure we are all very grateful to the medical-pharmaceutical complex, and I'd like you to join me in giving it a big hand. Just hold on there a minute you. Rather, please pause for a moment, take a deep breath, and take a minute to think about what you are doing; devote a brief period of fair and objective consideration to what you have done. It's still just conceivable, is it not, that for the time being and many hours to come, there will be no turning back from having unlocked and opened wide the door to your wrong mind. My God, I think you're right! Maybe we should opt for staying right where we are. Next time, I mean. Next time we should really try to put our heads together. We should also stay in tonight. I mean the next time it's night. Will it soon begin to brighten, or has darkness fallen for good: is it evening or morning, to put it in more elemental terms. What do you say, we'll relinquish the reins, turn over the wheel, what matter to whom! What matter if the driver be unlicensed, high, and making a stop now and then to relieve convenience store kids of the cash in their registers. What matter if we are lovers who only yesterday were children, writhing and entwined around each other like the slender caducean serpents, never wondering to what purpose we're so weirdly being wielded, or by what. But that was then. Why quit now, we've come this far. The world's a beautiful thing. Dark as it is there. Blind as we are.

There Are No Safe Words

It takes patience
 to watch
a man die
 how he folds
over
 and becomes
something
else
 what he has paid
good money
 to receive—

the business end
 of a flashlight
rolled up newspaper—

 the way he must
beg for relief
 unhooking each
syllable
 of my name
from his mouth



to break him
 beyond words
leaked through
 the gag

his scars smolder
 under expensive
shirts for days
 soft parts

incandescent
 with the cursive
of my teeth
 boot heel
stitched to a grin

what he dreams of
 inside his cubicle
my taste glued

 to longing
funk and mess
 gasolined over lips

 what he needs to feel
whole
 smear heart
rubbed

along the carpet
the air fresh
with our work

stripped of language
as he buckles
calls out
comes slithering
into bright
new being

The Dream in Which You Are

Inside of me—
half-human, half collected
fragments of morning walks
along the wintered cathedrals
and brown stones
of Mass Ave.—

you've seen my body
so many times
you can recall perfectly
the deep cracks of my
white-bottomed feet,
the air odored as I taste:

gin and earnings of week-
long sweat. My skin,
stiff in your mouth,
inside of you as much
as you are inside of me

working against anonymous
parts, newsprint crackling
within the flint of my slacks



as you raise my legs
to go deeper, and notice
my face blurred

below the neon orange
wool of my cap,
a numb light streaking
over us inside the ATM

where we wrestle
each other as demons
tethered by a thin leash
pulled from the hot
vent toward heaven

and you can't tell
whether I am human
or not, what sex
inside the heap
of bulged and sealed

plastic, the blunt truth
of my tongue the only
feature articulated
from the knot of my face,

reaching towards you,
the bright worm
of my heart, my stench
wadded and wet, all of me

one held breath,
waiting to pass a needle
through this difficult sleep.
When you wake, part of me

will still be there
tossing in your pores,
filaments mixed

as saliva and blood
into the syllables
of your name,

faceless and shadow-
skinned, my genitals
x-ed out, signed
over the length

of your long
and beautiful life.

The Dream of How We Survive

“the four boys were starved and abused while five other children in the house were allowed to live normal lives.” –*NY Times*, February 11, 2006

Each night I carry
their bodies

Inside of me, my brothers
who grow wide and strong,

Their mouths split like birds
begging for meat.

I believe someone is watching us
through the cracked windows,

Who knows we are not children,
our eyes vast and poisoned,

Deep enough to drown in,
to drink. I wear my dreams

The way the night wears
its darkness, the smallest's



Tongue sometimes turning to water.
We drink of him

Until he is dry as a field,
and wake to the hiss

Of our stomachs eating
themselves, like steam

Released from a kettle,
the footsteps of our mother

Unlocking cupboards in the dark.
I know that dirt tastes

Like blood. That blood is sugar's
memory. I wear my hunger

The way trees wear music, birds
who don't need daylight

To open their throats and bleed.
There is a hate that makes me

Perfect, precise as a finger
unbuckling a belt. I leave

My ache everywhere,
a smear of gravy on the lip,

My skin the color of ruined
sheets. I no longer care

What my body might do inside
another's. How she holds

The knife against the flesh
of a fruit, teasing it down

Until we nearly faint. I know
I am no longer a child,

But tell me what it is that makes
me a man.

Laura Cherry

Missing Gloucester Teen Found Dead

If you could huff the sand or the blue sky.
If your neighbors' medicine cabinets
held only hair elastics, Hello
Kitty Band-Aids, unscented lip gloss.

If the "High Achiever" award weren't
so damn funny. If ever you had
a moment, stilled, when the world
put away its jabbing pins and crazy-

clown laughs. If the reporter writing
the exposé on teen drug use weren't
such a good connection. If trying

to sleep were less like scraping shells
along the inside of your skin; if the ocean
would shut up or say something already.



Not Taken but Transformed

O beloved object, O fantastic shawl woven
of gilt threads, chicken wire and slate-blue smoke;
scent of mango, of pine, of Elizabeth, New Jersey;
music of champagne glasses, trash compactors,
and champagne glasses in trash compactors;
tearfully hot on the tongue as Thai chilis, mysterious
as a brown-paper bundle from the deep freeze,
brittle and voluptuous as crème brûlée – you are all
I can think of, looking from my slough to a rafter
of stone, the words etched as if waiting all along:
Nothing will ever be the same.



The Ground

We keep the ground there by walking on it
Otherwise it would float away
Hurled up, torn up, the wind pushes the sidewalk
under our feet
We let it pass
Stamping the cement down
as it's conveyed along

That deviant ground will be made an example
It won't learn from rugs, send us tumbling
The wind strong, its warden, gets the trees involved
Their roots deep so it can't dig to stall,
Instead, stuck with initials and sewers,
curbs and gum, cigarette butts and losing scratch tickets,
left cracking itself with no better plan
than to wait like a trip wire under the sun

Mary Beth O'Connor

Gravity

The death of a star seems to last forever
We see it for years at night
And unless we are astronomers
or the star is as famous as a planet
we don't know exactly when it blinks out

Like a firefly in the summer's darkness
we're never certain exactly where it was
or which one it was we saw
and the fixed stars are always moving
in their own sphere

of time and distance
so far from us that we forget time
and space are simply aspects of each other
to our current astonishment because
after all we've sent paparazzi

rockets, and probes, and landers
out into this vast and precise fiction
and seen the photographs
And I'm not trying to imply that it was
filmed on a back lot in Hollywood

But sometimes I wonder how long,
how far we might travel—

We *believed* for a moment that we flew
as we ran and leapt down Inglewood Avenue
on our way to school

Mary Beth O'Connor

When we aren't looking,

the world disappears.

Oh no! says Uncle Max,
Not this again!

He calls to his wife
in the kitchen fruitlessly.

He's left with his tv.
Even the bookshelves

behind him
have committed suicide.

Suzanne Frischkorn

When My Granddaughter Asks

About the woman in Cuba

I will tell her that each night

she released a cascade of black

from its trap of pins until it settled

at the small of her back, and that is why she birthed

eleven children; but will be unable

to explain her penchant for O's—

Ofelia, Odelma, Onieda,

or need for R's—

Rosselio, Renaldo, Rafael.

I will not say she abandoned my father

and his siblings without wisdom

because on her way out

she left Oneida's hair scattered

on the plank floor kitchen,

a five-finger lesson imprinted on my aunt's cheek.

That will teach you to feed a man without a job.

