Hawthorn Road
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Road

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Hawthorn
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Frozen

Have you tried to scream
Within a dream
But terror won't come out?

You're froze with fear
And danger's near.
A whisper is your shout.

You're hypnotized
And paralyzed
And don't know what to do.

What is the deal?
Could this be real?
It seems as if it's true.

You try to run.
Your legs are done
As though you're in a web.

You retry a shout;
A scream rings out,
And you wake within your bed.

Relief you feel,
It wasn't real—
'Twas a nightmare in your head.

by Stacy Smith

The Night Life

After dusk met the velvet cloak
and stars were playing
peek-a-boo with the clouds,
the lake came alive
with the night life.

The railing of the peer
became the anchor
for dozens
of silken masterpieces,
woven by tiny engineers,
with neighbors abounding.

A solitary firefly
blinked his tiny lantern,
with only his reflection
as a response.

At the beginning
of the quivering, illuminated path,
a crooked neck bird
paused on his scaled stilts,
where silver flashes
became only visible
by the mimicking
of raindrops.

As crickets and frogs
serenaded with lullabies,
in surround sound,
I smiled and pondered
at the glory of nature,
while songbirds slept.

by Stacy Smith

The River's Story

As I stood beside the water
that echoed
like nature's air conditioners
swaying and dancing in the breeze,
I pondered at the river's past.
I thought of how the same body of water
brought forth the flow of words
for James Whitcomb Riley –
birthing a new poem, "At Broad Ripple",
over a century ago.
I remembered his line:
"The river's story flowing by."
It made me think of how
the streaming waterway
has been here for so long
and how things around it
have faded away,
like the Delaware Indian village,
once prominent along the river's edge –
now, just a snapshot of history.

Shells of tiny mussels
are confetti under my feet,
where the water
once spilled into the trees.
I bend down and collect a handful
of the river's leftovers
and return them
to their birthplace.
As ripples scatter
the silver flashes,
swimming as one
beneath the diamonds,
I think of how another poet,
in another time,
will tell the river's story…
"Forever tenderly begun–
Forever new and never done."

by Stacy Smith

The Donut Maker

Bob Spencer was owner and chief donut maker of the Western Donut Shop. His. He manned the grill in front during the day and at night kept the fryers busy in the back room. Donuts. Life sustaining. Drab as hell, long and narrow, booths and stools on either side, his life's blood, the shop. Blinking pink and black DONUTS sign over the door, a welcome mat. Waitresses, Amy and Carol, a couple of upbeat peroxide blondes gave the place pizzazz, dressed it up. They were a great people draw with their fun-loving banter and gum crackin' smart ass jokes. Both divorced and lovin' it, even with all those kids.

At midnight every night, the white haired heavy set man locked up the shop, minced across the street to his room at the St Charles, for 20 some years, his birds, plants and bed. He took care of the menagerie, slept a little and then walked back across the street to start the donuts for the 6:00 AM breakfast crowd. A simple clear- cut regime; every minute accounted for, no slack time to get bogged down in needless stewing and pining.

Nelly lived on the same floor as Bob, saw him lots as she ate breakfast and dinner at the shop and sometimes she and her friends would drop by after dance class (next door) and order cherry cokes and eat anything and everything. It was a happy time the time spent at the donut shop. Bob sometimes would come over to their table and shoot the breeze but most of the time he kept to himself. He would talk to the waitresses and ask about the kids, not offer much in return all the while running his hand repeatedly over his unruly white hair, flattening it. For such a large man Bob had a delicacy about him. He walked with a cautious step placing his toes first, heels never quite making it down, hips swaying side to side each step. Bob told Nelly nobody wants an old fat gay guy. His birds, plants and war decorations kept him company in the small room on the 3rd floor, his memories and Purple Heart on a pedestal.

He had birds of all kinds: canaries, parakeets, cockatoos, parrots, a regular arboretum. Nelly had a bird phobia so Bob kept them in their cages for the duration of her visit. Often. Bob was rarely out of his baker's white uniform, minus the hat and spatula, of course, even when the shop was closed on Sundays. He knew who he was in it, she figured. Sometimes on Sat nights Bob would go out for long walks and not come back 'til all hours. Sometimes with someone else, usually alone. Saturday was the only night he didn't have to open up the shop to get the donuts started for next morning. He could take it easy, enjoy life, sleep in. Come Monday and 3:30 A.M., Bob dragged himself out of bed, fed the birds, watered the plants then minced across the street to the awaiting fryers and ensuing donuts for the insatiable 6:A.M. crowd. Life wasn't so bad for a guy with a purpose.

Neila Mezynski

The Devil Rides the Ferris Wheel

When I was a kid, I looked forward to one local event every year—the Hillsboro Fall Festival. The city cordoned off several blocks of downtown and booths and rides were set up. Nightly you could see acts with clowns and acrobats right there in the middle of town and I walked around for hours without spending money except for the rides. I still remember the smell of cotton candy and caramel popcorn, but those were the happy times—before I met the devil.

I had just had my twelfth birthday when I first saw the evil one. He got my attention while I was riding the Ferris wheel one night. All the electrical power in the downtown suddenly went off and the Ferris wheel stopped with my car right at the top. I sat alone--something I had gotten used to--and I felt so scared. There were no lights anywhere and only a touch of moon-light to see by. The car swayed back and forth in the strong wind that had come up and I clutched the steel bar in front of me in a panicked grasp and started crying.

"No need to be afraid, Sonny," a deep voice drifted up from the car below. "This Ferris wheel is as safe as they make 'em."
I looked down to see a man leaning over the edge of his car to look up at me. He was dark-skinned and had a wild mop of black hair and a short beard. His suit looked rumpled as though he had been traveling in it and he wore no tie.

Some kind of salesman, I thought. He's certainly not from around here. His words did not comfort me and I felt ever more afraid than before--especially when he got out of his car and, like some gigantic spider, scrambled over the girders of the Ferris Wheel and plopped down in the seat next to me.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered in a voice that sounded like a cold wind blowing over tombstones. . “My name is Mr. Shapur and I already know yours. I'm not one of those perverts that prey on little boys. Actually, I help little boys. Especially after they're twelve-years old. I helped your father and I helped your grandfather when they were your age. I've always taken an interest in your family

I knew he lied. My grandpa was over seventy years old and this guy couldn't have known grandfather when he was twelve. Mr.Shapur, if

that was really his name, didn't look much older than thirty although his coal black eyes had an ancient look to them that chilled me.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "You think I'm not old enough to know your grandpa, but I am. I'm a lot older than you think, and I do a lot of business with young boys like yourself. I educate them, for example, I bet you've never even kissed a girl or touched her breast or anything. You listen to me and I'll teach you a lot about life."

Well, I hadn't done any of those things, but I sure did want to. This man scared me, but I was interested in what he had to say. I had been reading a lot of books lately about the super-natural and stuff so I was guessing who he probably was--if he wasn't the Devil himself, Shapur was one of his good friends, and, course, he wanted my soul.

"I don't think I want to sell my soul," I said. "I'm too young to make decisions like that. Besides, if you dealt with my grandpa and my dad, what did they get? They never made no for-tune or had lots of success or loved a bunch of women or became famous. They must have got-ten something..."

He smiled that devilish smile and said, "Oh, they got something all right. They were happy all of their lives. Just think about it. They had good wives. No family tragedies. Nobody went to war and got maimed. No big illnesses will happen to them until the very end and then it will be quick.

"My grandpa is over seventy. That's pretty old. What about my dad? How long is he go-ing to live."
"Well, he cut a pretty rough deal. He will live until he's 76 give or take a few weeks."
This shook me up. I didn't want to think about my dad dying even if it was years from now when he would be 76. That was really old, however, and seemed a long time away to me.
"You don't have too much time to make up your mind," the man said. "You'll be thirteen soon and then it will be too late. You think about what you want and, of course you'll want to set some conditions. Make it quick, however." With that he clambered back down into his car and, suddenly, the lights of the fall festival all came back on and the Ferris wheel started turning again. When my car descended, I scrambled out and waited to see if he were in his car when it rotated to the ground, but the car was empty. Strange stuff.

The next day, instead of going to the Fair, I went to the library and read everything I could find about devils and souls and contracts. It was scary. That Dante guy had a pretty grim view of Hell and of lost souls and stuff. Of course, he was Italian and those people are the ones that started parading around Jesus nailed to a cross. I also got some books of short stories that had compacts with the Devil--"The Devil and Daniel Webster", "The Devil and Tom Walker," and "Gimmicks Three," among others. I thought about Shapur's offer and thought about it for weeks. From what I saw Shapur wasn't the brightest bulb in the bag. I decided all the soul-sellers I had read about had made one mistake--they had chosen fame or fortune—a big mistake. I wanted to become the smartest guy in the world. If you're smart, you can make a lot of money, you can become famous, you can talk people into things (like sex), and lots more. You could also (maybe) outsmart a not-too-bright demon like Shapur.
Yes, smart would be a good choice.

Now, with regard to selling my soul; I didn't place too high a value on it; I don't go to church anymore, to the despair of my mother, and, therefore, don't much believe in souls. So, you see, I didn't really have any religious qualms about dealing with a demon.

I had another reason for considering Shapur's offer. There were some English scholarship tests coming up and a girl I liked, Marilyn, and I had been competing for years. I very much wanted to beat her score on this test and, if I were the smartest person in the world, I could do this. I wouldn't beat her too badly, just enough points so she would respect me and, maybe, go on a date or something.

My grandpa would be 75 on his coming birthday and if Shapur was telling the truth, Grandpa's time was about up. He and I talked a lot, so I decided to ask him about selling your soul. I sat down with him on the front porch one day and started asking him questions about sell-ing your soul. I explained it was for a class project about demons, but I don't think he believed me anymore than I believed him when he talked about a friend of his who had an experience with the devil.

"Well," he said as he settled back in his rocking chair, "I've heard tell of something like that. I knew some people when I was your age who said they had been approached by a demon or the devil--hard to tell them

apart." He grinned and pulled on his long, gray mustache. "I had a friend..." he hesitated a moment, "I had a friend who told me the devil approached him right af-ter his twelfth birthday. Now this friend told a lot of tall tales, so I didn't really believe him. Anyway, the devil said he could have anything he wanted, but he would have to forfeit his soul sometime after his 75th birthday. Sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"Sounds interesting," I said. "Suppose, just suppose you were selling your soul. What would you ask for?"
"I think my friend told me he asked for the people he loved to be happy. Just that. It hap-pened a long time ago, you know. I was...I mean my friend was about your age. Twelve, I think. A long time ago."

I didn't quite understand, but I knew his "friend" was really him. So he had sold his soul to the devil and all he wanted was for his family to be happy. Pretty simple, I guess. Grandpa had had a happy family who all loved him. Maybe that's the way to go. Maybe when it's your time to die, at least you can feel good.
I wanted to ask my dad if he had made a deal with the devil, but I couldn't imagine he had. We were poor--he worked hard at the grocery store, but never earned enough money to support our family. My mother complained some, but they loved each other and didn't seem to care about money. There were four kids in our family—me and two younger sisters and a younger brother. None of us had real problems and we were happy. We thought we would be happier if we had some money, but who knows? Dad's only problem was he didn't sleep well at night and he always had dark bags under his eyes.

Anyway, the day soon came when I had to make my decision. It seemed to me that if I were the smartest man (or kid) in the world, I would be able to outsmart the demon Shapur when the time came sixty-two years from now. Shapur just didn't seem smart to me and I figure he got where he was by harvesting a lot of souls after convincing some dumb kids to sell out cheaply.
Shortly after my conversation with Grandpa I read some more books about the soul. How in the early days a doctor put a dying man on a scale and weighed him and then weighed him again after he died and found a slight difference. Makes me wonder if there is a soul and, if there isn't, why would the devil trade things for them?

If I was going to haggle with Shapur, I had to be careful what I asked for. I figured that Shapur would not fall for the same trick twice, but I finally came up with something and I was prepared when he came to me one night as I walked home from a movie, He scared the hell out me by

making a dramatic appearance with a big flash of light and a thunderous noise.
"Okay," I said, "Here's the deal. I want to be the smartest person in the world. I want that to start tomorrow and not end until after I'm dead. No tricks."
"But when do I get your soul?"
"When I'm 75, but it has to be a day that I name."
"Done," he said as he pulled out a red ballpoint pen. "Just sign here."
He pointed to a parchment that had my exact words on it already. Interesting.
I hesitated a moment, read the contract again and then signed it and kept the pen. I like to have a lot of pens. Shapur disappeared saying; "I'll see you in sixty-two years."

Sixty-two years from now. I planned on having a great time in those sixty-two years. Of course, the light I would see at the end of the tunnel would be the fires of hell.

The first good thing for me was I beat Marilyn in the scholarship test by five points. I could have gotten a perfect score, but I realized I shouldn't show off too much. Being smart, however, did not help me romantically with Marilyn, because she got mad at me for beating her. I began to realize that "smart" had a lot of meanings.

I graduated high school with almost straight "A's" and my only problem happened to be gym class. I didn't like it and I didn't want to go. I convinced the coach he would have to pay for my glasses if they were broken--forged letters from my mom--and he let me sit out the whole year. He gave me all "C's" however. Who cares? Exercise never did anyone any good.

I did well in college and, having my choice of fields I could excel in, I chose electronic engineering. Even before I graduated, I had several patents for my inventions--a battery that re-charged from the magnetic sphere of the earth, a chip that could do billions of computations a second, and much more. I graduated magna cum laude and, in addition, I married the smartest girl in my class. Joyce was also the most beautiful--red hair, good figure, smooth skin--everything I had dreamed of. We also became the best of friends--friendship is important in a relationship.

My grandpa died at age 76, I hadn't asked him again if he had made a

deal with Shapur. It just didn't seem right and it was too late to change my deal with the devil anyway. That is, un-less my plan to outsmart Shapur worked, and I sure hoped it would.
Joyce and I moved to California's Silicon Valley and soon began a family. My kids, I mean our kids, were bright and happy. Our marriage only got better as each year passed, and I began to believe I had cut a pretty good deal. Forty years left. Life goes by quickly when you're having fun.

Our kids graduated one after the other from college and we relished our empty house. Joyce and I went on vacations to Costa Rica, Aruba, Germany. It was great. My dad died, but I had the flu and couldn't visit him in the hospital or go to his funeral. Twenty years to go. I quit inventing new devices, as it doesn't seem so important now.

I retired from my business and I turned it over to my oldest son. Joyce had a heart by-pass, which was successful due to one of my inventions. Ten years to go. I'm now having trou-ble sleeping at night, just like my dad.

I had to return to work and help my son with the business. Turns out he isn't the smartest person in the world and yet he seems happy. While I'm working, Joyce comes and sits in my office and we talk when we can. Five years to go.

Joyce died. I drank a lot of beer for a couple of months and the business went belly-up. My son and daughters were crushed by Joyce's death and urged me to take care of myself and stop drinking. One year to go.

The day is here. Shapur showed up in my den early in the morning, eager to do his "har-vesting." This time you could smell the demon stink of him, and I noticed his eyes seemed craft-ier than I remembered.
"Well," he said. "You have reached the agreed upon age. I have some leeway here, but I think you said..." he pulled out the contract and the writing gleamed with a bloody glow. "It says here that you get to specify the day. That seems simple. What day will it be?"
"Well, today is Tuesday and I specify the second Tuesday of this week."'
Shapur trembled and shook. He threw the contract onto the floor and stomped on it so that it gave off sparks and a pungent odor. He tore his hair out in huge chunks and he spat yel-low sulfuric streams onto the floor.
"Damn you humans! So, now I know why you wanted to be the

smartest person on earth. You tricked me." He put his finger to his chin and assumed a thinking posture.
Suddenly there was a flash of light, the room disappeared, and Shapur and I were stand-ing on the deck of a cruise ship. I looked around and saw the normal activity of people on an ocean liner; they seemed not to have noticed our sudden arrival.
"What are we doing here?" I asked.
Shapur looked at me with an insidious grin. "I thought you might like an ocean cruise to celebrate your...uh...victory."
"Well, that's awfully nice of you. You should have realized you were dealing with the smartest man on earth."

Just then the ship's loudspeaker hummed and someone began making the daily an-nouncements. "There will be a dance after sunset this evening. The dinner tonight will be a dress-up dinner. Oh, one final announcement, we have crossed the International Dateline and to-day is the second Tuesday of this week."
Shapur grinned at me and said, "You may be the smartest man on earth, but I'm the smartest demon."

Phil Richardson

Good Kitty

Rose lay upon her hospital bed, listening to Amanda's bright voice as her sister told her, in exaggerated tones, how well she was looking that day. She silently willed Amanda to shut up, but all she managed to say was, "good kitty," or something like it, her tongue an alien, thick blob inside her mouth so that the consonants were nearly indistinguishable.

"What's she trying to say, Mom?" Rose's niece Darla asked. She stood in the doorway as if uncommitted about actually entering the room, pleating the hem of her too-short sweater into folds. The slight pudge of Darla's stomach peeked out from beneath the sweater, hanging over the waistband of her hip-hugger jeans. Rose herself had worn equally skimpy things at that age, but at least she had had the body for it.

"She said, 'good kitty,' didn't you, sis?" Amanda turned her bleached-blonde head back to her daughter without waiting for a response from Rose. "The therapist says it is the only thing she can say besides 'yes' and 'no.' She misses her Jackson-kitty. Will you put on that Beethoven CD, hon? I am sure Aunt Rose would love to hear it."

"No," Rose said softly, not sure if she meant 'no' to missing Jackson, or 'no' to listening to Beethoven. Jackson had really been her husband's cat, and had remained mostly indifferent to her ever since Terrence had died of colon cancer four years ago. The name was supposed to be a joke--he was a solid white cat and Terr had named him after Michael Jackson. Rose wasn't sure she was ready for Beethoven yet either, unless it would make Amanda shut up. But Darla put on the CD anyway, and Amanda continued her monologue, as though she thought because Rose couldn't talk, she had to talk enough for both of them.

Beethoven's exuberant allegro was relegated to the background, Rose's fingers on her good hand twitching with the memory of a violin she could no longer play.
"Eric thinks he might want to go to law school, don't you think

that would be wonderful? Of course, there's no telling whether he will stick with it."

Rose hadn't seen her nephew Eric much since he had started college out of state. She had taken him for a week in New York City for his high school graduation present. They hit all the punk shows, Rose the middle-aged hipster in the combat boots she hadn't worn for years, and Eric trying not to look like a wide-eyed Midwestern farm boy and mostly succeeding. He still talked about it. His last email raved about his pop-culture history class, but made no mention of law school. Of course, he may have simply mentioned that among many possible options and Amanda only heard the part she wanted to hear. Typical.
"And Josh sends his love. He would be here but he has a game today in Kokomo."

"It's Lafayette, Mom," Darla said, shifting her weight from foot to foot. Though she had moved from her post in the doorway to turn on the CD player, she stood about as far away from the bed as possible.

"Of course, that is what I meant," Amanda replied with a careless wave of her hand, then turned her plastic smile back upon Rose. "And Jim is working, of course. With all the new home construction, he stays very busy even on Saturdays! It has been wonderful for us, though, helped us take that trip to Disney World. I showed you the pictures, didn't I?"

"Yes," Rose responded, her leaden tongue making her lisp. God, but she needed a cigarette! They wouldn't let her smoke here, and it had been a week. Sure, the smoking was probably a factor in her having a stroke at age 45, but she would have killed for a cigarette. If only Amanda would leave her alone with Darla for a moment, maybe she could get her niece to sneak some in for her. Fat chance she'd get away with it though, with all the nurses hovering. And Darla looked like she would rather be anywhere but here.
Nobody wanted to be here. When she had the stroke, her lover had managed to call 911 immediately, or things might have been

much worse. But he had only been to visit her in the hospital once. He bent down to kiss her, bouquet in hand, like dutifully kissing the wrinkled, powdered cheek of some horrid great aunt rather than a woman he had made love to only a few days ago. He didn't have to tell her it was over. She was damaged goods. She could neither walk nor talk, let alone do anything fun in bed. And playing the violin, ever again, was probably out of the question.

"I'm going to be honest with you," the doctor had said, peering over the tops of his reading glasses with his squashed-caterpillar eyebrows raised. "This was a very serious stroke, and you probably will not be able to go back to doing all of the things you could do before. But we're going to do everything we can to get you walking and talking again, and I think the chances of that happening are very good. We need you to work hard, though, Rose. Can you do that?"

Rose didn't feel like working hard. What good would it do her to walk if she couldn't play her violin? Her throat tightened as Beethoven's joyous strains erupted during a pause in Amanda's continuous prattle. Didn't anyone just listen to music anymore? This was Beethoven, for gods sake, not muzak! Rose would have rather listened to some of the old punk records she had as a teenager, something like the Stooges, which would better suit her mood. She felt the left side of her mouth turn up into a crooked smile at the thought of Iggy Pop's monotone voice intoning, "I wanna be your dog" over the relentless, primal bass. She had given most of those records away when she and Terrence had moved from New York back to Indiana. Amanda would never have played that even if Rose, with her limited vocabulary, was able to make her sister understand what she wanted.
"Good kitty," she said softly.
"Can we bring Jackson here to see her, Mom?" Darla asked. "I think she's asking for him."
"The hospital won't allow pets." Amanda pushed her chair closer to Rose's bedside, taking her left hand, the one that still worked. "But as soon as you are well enough that we can wheel you out in the hospital garden, maybe we can bring him. Isn't it nice of

Darla to think of that?"
Amanda leaned close so that Rose imagined she was going to get a big whiff of that floral perfume her sister always wore, but she did not smell it. Perhaps it was an effect of the stroke.
"Yes," she said dutifully, and then tried to say, "nice," but she could not make her wooden lips and tongue obey her.
"It's ok, don't frustrate yourself, Rosie." Amanda patted her hand. "We understand what you mean."
No you don't. And don't call me Rosie.
As children, they had been Mandy and Rosie to their parents, but both outgrew those nicknames and insisted on being addressed by their given names at some point during high school. Rose, though she was two years younger, had made this decision first, but then Amanda quickly followed suit, and soon she was acting as if it had been her idea all along that the two of them were too grown up for nicknames. The only one who had still called her "Rosie" was her high school boyfriend Tony, who wanted her to sing in his punk band that they would then have called "Rosie and the Riveters." Tony had an older brother who was going to college in New York City, and he brought home the most outrageous music. Rose and her friends were listening to The Velvet Underground and New York Dolls while most of the other kids were into psychedelic rock or disco. Her hair was short and spiky before it was even cool, when Amanda and all her friends still had long hair down to their waists. But no matter how much she tried to be different, nobody seemed to notice. To their parents, they were still "the girls" and they got the same exact presents for Christmas, like dopey fair-isle sweaters that Amanda wore but Rose gave away.

Even Rose's desire, as a young child, to play the violin was seen by their parents as an attempt to copy Amanda with her clarinet, an instrument that, as far as Rose knew, ended up in a closet somewhere by junior high and was never played again.
"Take piano first, like Amanda did, and then if, after two years, you still want another instrument, how about the flute? That's a nice instrument for a girl," her father had suggested.
But Rose was insistent. It was the violin or nothing. She did manage to get through the required piano lessons, for which she was later grateful, but then, in third grade, she started asking for a

violin again. She couldn't remember a time when she hadn't wanted to play the violin. It may have been because of the violinist who came to play sometimes at their church, the brother of the organist. He was not a handsome man, with a bulbous nose and watery, colorless eyes, but his face became so beautiful when he concentrated, his eyebrows raising slightly on some notes, his lips pressing tightly together on others. And the sound had a way of vibrating inside her chest. She could close her eyes and imagine that she was the violin, making the music.

Finally, her parents gave in. Of course, the first sounds that she produced were dreadful, but she surprised everyone by taking it seriously. By the time she got to high school, the first thing she did every day when she got home was to close her door and practice for at least two hours. Then, she would put away her Bach, Mozart, Lalo, or Brahms, and put on the strange, discordant records that baffled her parents.

The punk band had not worked out for many reasons, not the least of which was that Rose got hoarse from trying to scream out Tony's angst-ridden lyrics, and the band members had looked at her in complete disbelief when she said maybe she could play her violin with them and they could get another singer. Who had ever heard of a punk violinist? She had quipped that at least she knew how to play her instrument, and that was the end of that. But she still let Tony get away with calling her Rosie, as a sort of boyfriend-only privilege.

"You shouldn't let him call you that," Amanda, playing the wise older sister, had scolded. "It sounds so little-girl. We're too old for that now, remember?"

As if Rose hadn't been the one to decide this in the first place. Years later, even their mother remembered it Amanda's way. When she would slip up and call Rose "Rosie," she would laugh her little embarrassed laugh, put her hand to her mouth, and say, "Oops, I know Amanda won't let me call you girls by your nicknames anymore." But when her mother was cleaning the

house, Rose would sometimes hear her mutter under her breath, “Mandy and Rosie,” for no apparent reason.

Their mother was still living, if one could call it that, in a nursing home, so far gone from Alzheimer’s that she barely said anything anymore, only read the same newspaper over and over again, though Rose knew she couldn’t really read without her glasses. Perhaps she would soon join her mother in the nursing home, and they could have wonderful non-conversations together. She would be younger and more attractive than most of the other residents, and all the old geezers would drool over her and have wheelchair races to decide who got to sit next to her at dinner.
"Darla, won't you come and sit down?" Amanda had apparently run out of things to say. "I'm sure your aunt would love to hear about your play."

Darla obeyed her mother, slouching across the room and into the vinyl chair, which responded with a squeak and a long sigh. She folded her hands in her lap. "Umm," she hesitated, "I got in the play."
"Go on," Amanda said, her earrings tinkling as she nodded vigorously. "Just because she can't talk very well doesn't mean she can't hear."
Darla shrugged. "It's a stupid play, though—"
"Of course it's not stupid," Amanda interrupted. "Darla has one of the lead parts in Our Town."
Hardly anyone got a word in with Amanda, with or without being speech impaired.
“Good kitty,” Rose said.
Even with her full vocabulary, Rose couldn’t have explained why that was the only thing she could say. It was a sort of verbal tic she had developed, probably while working on her masters at Julliard, when she had her first cat, her beloved calico angel, Tatiana. She didn't know at the time that the cat was the closest thing to a child she would ever have. She would hold her at the end of a long, frustrating day, stroking her soft fur and whispering like a mantra, “good kitty.” Tatiana’s constant, loving presence and loud purr had gotten her through the stress of competition with other violinists, the burden of having to keep

her affair with her much older, married, violin teacher a secret until she had received her degree and Terrence's divorce was final. But then she found herself saying it when Tatiana wasn't there. At first, she rationalized this by thinking about how much she loved her cat, and naturally, thought of her often.

But later she realized that sometimes when she said it, she had not even thought of Tatiana. The words came out of her mouth unexpectedly when she was deep in thought or under a lot of stress, often when she was thinking something particularly embarrassing, as if the words could bring her back to reality, or somehow cover up guilty thoughts. Fortunately, most of the time she managed to avoid this unless she was alone. But not always. She remembered sitting in a bathroom stall at Terr's nephew's wedding reception, after a few drinks, and realizing, to her horror, that she had said it aloud. Peering down, she had seen a pair of black, high-heeled shoes in the stall next to her, and had quickly flushed the toilet and left without even washing her hands, hoping that it was no one she knew.

"We're taking good care of your Jackson, I promise," Amanda said loudly. "And we will let you see him as soon as the doctor says you can come outside."
Rose could picture what would happen. She would sit in a wheelchair in the garden, and Jackson, yowling all the while, would be forcibly extracted from his cat carrier and placed upon her lap, where he would proceed to dig his claws into her legs and everyone would fuss about making sure she didn't have any cuts, particularly on the right side where she wouldn't be able to feel it. She would aim a few weak pats at his head and say, "good kitty," and Amanda would beam and pronounce the encounter a huge success, again congratulating Darla on having such a wonderful idea. It would be the subject of conversation every year at Amanda and Jim's Christmas party, how Rose had pined away for her cat and Amanda and Darla had heroically brought him to her. Just like when they were kids, Amanda would remember things her way, and her version would be the one that became part of family lore, regardless of whether it bore much similarity to the truth. And now Rose couldn't even give her own side of the

story. The history of the world would now be Amanda's history, and Rose felt her own life being slowly erased.
Gone was the eccentric Aunt Rose who was loved by her niece and nephews because she was less conventional than Mom and Dad. She used to take Eric, Darla, and Josh to Indiana Beach and ride all the roller coasters with them, screaming with her hands in the air. She had gotten them into symphony dress rehearsals and taken them on backstage tours of Circle Theatre, which Amanda heartily approved, as well as taking them to midnight movies and rock concerts their parents never would have permitted, which was their little secret. Now she was the family invalid, and Rose could tell just by Darla's posture how uncomfortable her disability made her niece feel. Just put her in a home somewhere and forget about her, better than being pitied and treated like a child. Or for godssake, just let her die!

Amanda stood and leaned over her, reaching down to take her right hand, the one that didn't work. "Let's do your exercises, to help you get better." Her voice still held its forced brightness, which belied the dark circles under her eyes.
Though she knew she was being ungrateful--Amanda and her family, as her closest relatives, were responsible for her care now--Rose willed her mouth to spew obscenities at her smiling sister. She didn't want to do her exercises!

"You bitch!"
Rose was stunned to hear her own words come out clear as day. Her mouth worked soundlessly on an apology.
"Yes, Jackson is a good kitty," Amanda replied placidly as she moved Rose's arm the way the therapist had showed her.
"Mom, I don't think that's what she said."
Rose turned her head to see Darla's mouth quirked up into a rare grin, and she realized that her niece understood her perfectly. Darla shot a furtive glance at her mother, and then giggled softly, winking at Rose as if to say that this would be another one of their little secrets.

Rose smiled in return, at least with the good half of her face. Before Amanda and Darla left, her niece came over and

awkwardly leaned down to hug her, whispering, “I know you’ll be fine Aunt Rose.”
Rose was still smiling after they were gone, when she whispered, only to herself, “Good kitty.”

Ellen Denham

Barron's Land

Joseph Barron lay alone in the field of his New Mexico ranch, which he had inherited from his late father, Alan Barron in 1989, waiting for the lightning of God to come. He will come tonight, he thought. My dreams do not deceive me. It is time.

He lay in the spot where he and Irene had once lain together. Earlier, when he started thinking about Irene, he had been sad--but not anymore. The whiskey and beer had washed away all his painful memories and emotions on this gloomy, summer night.

"I've been waiting," Joseph said while lying in the field. "Always waiting....

He thought about the few really good things he had had at one time in his life and started to smile wistfully. He thought of his one, and only true love, Irene. He thought of all the fun times he'd had fishing with his father and grandfather in Northern California many, many years ago. Then, he'd thought everything would be okay, that it would last Forever.

Forever. He thought about the word with envy and disgust. At this time, there was no point in reconsidering his fate; everyone he had ever known and cared about was gone. And, unlike his past, no matter how much he drank, no matter how much confidence he once possessed, he still could never be happy ever again--no matter what.

The winds were blowing persistently; the rain was drenching his entire body along with his dog, Maxwell's--his only prized possession left on earth...or so he thought. Seeing Maxwell outside made him sad.

"Get out of here, Max!" he yelled at the dog, in a pathetic, half-drunken attempt to scare him away.

"Damn you, Max," he shouted as he stood up, rain dripping of his old Stetson cowboy hat. "Get outta here!" It dawned on him that the dog wasn't going to cooperate, so he whipped out his trusty 38. revolver from his jacket pocket, aimed it straight up into the air, and fired. The dog was not afraid.

"You get out of here," he blurted, and Maxwell finally whimpered away, more out of disgust of his owner than actual fear.

Joseph was all alone now. Just another idle part of nature, he thought. What have I ever accomplished? the sixty-two-year-old man wondered, lying in the dirt and soggy weeds of his property. It's all gone now, far into the unknown. The unknown was something that was no longer scary to Joseph; just exhilarating.

"Hurry up," Joseph said as he gazed up into the dark, ominous clouds shadowing his property.

Wallowing in self-pity—it was almost as if he were waiting for God to plunge his massive hands down from the Heavens and bring him home. "Home." He desperately knew where he belonged. "Let the lightning come, oh Lord. Let it pick me up and take me home. Amen."

Joseph was always well-prepared. If plan A didn't work out, there was always plan B. He knew that if for some terrible reason his flight to Heaven would be delayed, he could always use his trusty 38. It wasn't his favorite gun nor his favorite method, but it could get the job done, he figured. He didn't want to use it, but he thought if for some queer reason all else failed, then he'd only be a bullet away from eternal happiness...and Irene and the rest.

The whiskey had taken its toll. Joseph was certain that the lightning wouldn't come so he commenced putting his faithful pistol inside his mouth. But, first, he decided to say good-bye to his dog--

"Maxwell," he shouted, at the top of his lungs. "Get over here, ole boy."

The dog followed his owner's voice and sat next to him and licked his old face and ivory whiskers. Joseph began to cry. It was a strange sight, indeed.

"I've found you a good home, Max. You deserve better. Much better. The man will come by tomorrow to pick you up. Your food and water's inside the house. Mr. Winters is a splendid person, Max. Really, he is. He'll take you hunting like I did in the old days. Make him proud, buddy," the old man said to his dog.

Maxwell strangely seemed to sense the stench of impending doom lingering above his owner's head. He once again whimpered, and the sound of nearby thunder scared only one of them.

"Max! Don't give me that look. I know what's best for the both of us."

The old man had now put the barrel of the pistol deep inside his mouth, but decided on not pulling it just yet. He thought back on his past, his childhood. His vivid recollections seemed to slightly increase his sanity—slightly. He wished like hell he could start his life all over again from scratch...so that he could change it. He honestly had no idea where he'd gone wrong. It must be for some reason, he thought. Why else would I be in this situation? I went to church; I loved my wife, and my neighbor and this is what I get in return? And what about Irene? She was a genuine angel and she died a very long and slow and tragic death in that awful hospital.

And enough thinking about Irene, Joseph thought. We'll be reunited soon enough.

He put the barrel so far inside his mouth that it made him gag, and he almost felt like he had to vomit. He decided it'd be wise to count to three, then...BOOM. Eternal bliss.

He counted. And before he hit three he saw a red Ford Taurus approaching his property at great speed. When he saw the red car, and who was inside it, his heart filled with great joy and happiness and hope. Joseph got to his feet and greeted his new visitor with open arms. It was his son, Isaac.

"Isaac. My son. Thanks so much for visiting me."

His son got out of the car with a deeply concerned look on his face.

"Dad. What are you doing out here...lying on the muddy ground...with that damned pistol in your hand?"

Joseph couldn't answer his son, because he had no answer.

"C'mon, Dad, let's go inside. I think you need a good cup of coffee."

Joseph said nothing, but followed his son inside his house. He drank two huge cups of black coffee, then started feeling more and more like his old self again. No longer did he think he believed with God and Irene.

Later that night, he called the nice man who was interested in his dog, and told him he wasn't for sale.

Jack Bristow

The Crawl

OLD MAN MCGREER never left the area he'd been born into; he just didn't. He liked to say his parents had been the first couple to move in there – the sparkling houses on the glowing streets – and people didn't contradict him. Now, heading into his late 60s, he could admit at least to himself that the constant battles to make his family one of the more noticeable around had left him soured on the place. Many times he walked home from the pub roaring terrible slurs, the kind that would've had him raising his fists if he heard another man making them. But now it was getting hard to care about any of that. Six months earlier, his wife had passed away after a thankless tussle with lung cancer, and seeing that his children and grandchildren were happily terrorizing the streets and would be sturdy in the face of future battles, McGreer applied himself to his new fight: drinking himself to death.

Every day since, and including, the funeral, he'd sat in the pub for a few hours as soon as it opened. That was a start. Then he'd come home and pour the whisky. It was cheap stuff, supermarket own-brand, but that hardly mattered when he was pounding through three bottles a day. This last week, however, the nights were drawing in, and having felt something coming on, something gathering, something tugging, he had allowed himself a more expensive brand. He also stepped it up to four bottles a day.

His usual routine was to shiver out of bed at 11 o' clock for a doleful stint in the bathroom. He believed it shameful to vomit the next morning – the night during couldn't be helped, but the morning after, no, it put him in a bitter mood. That day, up at closer to noon, he was fine, more or less, hangover-wise. Everything else was truly terrible, blocks of pain and things seeming to be sliding down in his carcass, but at least there was no headache and little nausea. A bacon sandwich and a pot of tea left him hankering after the pub doors, the barmaids' chat, and a seat by the window.

Soon after he dressed, he felt the rushing again. He could think of it no other way than that – a rushing, a breeze just for him, plucking at his clothes, his skin. He'd been feeling it off and on for a few days, and it made him slightly nervous. That day it was a little stronger, so he thought he might have a drink indoors before heading out. Not a fortifying one, just a general drink.

His house was never empty. Some of his children were there again, moving back in when their relationships came to their usual draining conclusions; now there were grandkids in the same situation, he gathered. He no longer took an interest in their ramshackle lives, if he was honest. That had been his wife's job. They themselves filled him in when they thought to, but it was impossible to keep track of it all, and there wasn't much new in it anyway. He came into the front room, where a couple of grandkids and their young friends were lounging around, smoking. Beyond nods he ignored them, they ignored him, and the first drink was poured.

There were photos of his wife as a young woman on the mantelpiece, carefully arranged by him now that was gone. He didn't always feel he had to look at them as he drank, but that day he did, and when he did he almost forgot he had a glass in his hand. Something was up. He looked around, but no one was taking any notice of him, and it wasn't a joke he thought they could've played, even with their computers. He analyzed himself and passed himself as sober. He closed his eyes, tried to settle his mind, then looked again. It was no good. One picture had been taken at the fair when she was in her 30s. Her smile never revealed her teeth – she was self-conscious about their mild snagglement – but now they were showing, and it quailed him to see it. In another he was sure that, previously, only one of her hands had been visible, and in the one directly above the fire she was wearing a heavy necklace of beads he couldn't remember ever seeing (and he'd been attentive to those things, at least). There was a cropped hairstyle in another that he was positive she'd never had, as she preferred her hair long whatever the fashion was.

He could've been mistaken, he thought as he sat back down, but he couldn't convince himself of that for a second. There was no point asking anyone else in the room for their opinion, and he didn't want to know anyway. He spent an half an hour with the bottle, then got out of the house.

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There were three other pubs on his patch, and though normally he disdained two of them, he didn't question it when he felt the urge to visit them. The first was on a street he had no reason to go down, that was why it looked slightly unfamiliar.

It was full of office people on their lunch break, which disappointed him and threatened any kind of mood elevation, since he'd never liked

the sight of too many suits. He had two double whiskies, immediate cannons, and was ready to undo his belt and parade round showing them his bony backside, but thought that might be too undignified: today was looking to be a different kind of day, special to some degree. He had a steady few drinks and the odd scowl if an outfit was particularly offensive. The smell of the food struck him, but not as much as the chalk for the pool table. It was a while since he'd smelt anything vividly, much less anything that made him think of the color blue.

Some people in there knew him, but not all of them wanted to talk to him. Those who did found themselves sitting with a man putting no effort into making sense, so soon abandoned it. After four more drinks, McGreer lazily tipped over his table. The drinkers looked around, and were prepared to dismiss it as an old man's accident, until he started laughing. He was asked to leave by a shaky young barmaid, and was happy to be on his way, after some nasty words.

It was a ten minute walk to the next pub, but he didn't get there for nearly an hour. Across the road from the park he got his eye on a young woman with curly red hair and – no doubt – freckles across her nose, who reminded him of a teacher he'd had a painful crush on as a teenage boy: the one he'd daydreamed over endlessly, the one who spurred him into his first masturbatory session (and who had cropped up in there now and again for decades), the one whose car he'd confusedly scratched on the last day of term. It was a startling remembrance, complete in every way; he could almost smell her from across the road.

A few minutes later he passed a man who was the double of someone he'd fallen out with at the engineering works in the 80s and had campaigned to get ostracized. He actually stopped, turned, and watched that man walk away. Even from the back he could see the similarity. For a while after that he kept his eyes to the ground as he walked, but that was dizzying and dangerous. In a doorway, checking his watch, he thought that was his eldest daughter's first husband, who had died fifteen years before in a car accident, which McGreer had been not-so-secretly glad about.

He bought a few cans and some fish n' chips, and had them sitting on a bench at the shops. He was just about able to keep them down, while watching the world go by, as they called it without really knowing what that meant. Dogs had to be waved away. Children looked at him, as though eating out in the open, in the cold, was a freak show. The hope was that he would see his wife as a nineteen year old, the age he'd met

her, and that she'd come and talk to him and reassure him and leave him feeling happier than he ever had in his life. Instead he saw a woman he'd had a quick, unhappy affair with in his 40s, and looked quickly away.

The next pub's decor was too soft and cozy for him – it was all dark browns, gold lights and red wine carpeting. There were old world pictures up of people in thick clothes at the beach. More importantly, he didn't like the young ones who drank there. They seemed to have their own ideas about running things on the estate, ideas he found feeble. Plus, it was clear no one there was delighted to see him come in. He smiled as widely as he could, and offered to buy a drink for the person next to him at the bar. This was declined, neither rudely nor graciously. He got a double whisky and went wandering around the place, not liking what he saw in those beach pictures.

Two young men and a girl were on the pool table, and when the game was over, he wondered if they'd like to see some trick shots. They shrugged, stepped away, paid little attention. It was a shame, but his eyes wouldn't stay clear, his fingers and back hurt, it had been a while since he'd tried these shots, and the three of them were on drugs anyway, so he playfully jabbed the cue at their ankles and crotches before the girl took it off him. She would've been pleased to do more than that, he saw.

They could've thrown him out then, but a few of them came over and said, look, he could stay if he sat still and behaved himself. One of them sat down with him when the others left, started to talk, and McGreer made attempts to be coherent, but the conversation kept making untoward turns, with the young man, he thought, taking the piss; McGreer tried to direct it down more inflammatory routes, but these were headed off in an admittedly quite charming way. Apparently he wanted to hear stories about the old days in the area, but McGreer wasn't about to waste them on him.

After three further tense doubles, he said he was going to the bastard toilet. On the way he tried to throw a stool into the mirror behind the bar, but they were ready for him, the stool was taken out of his hand at the height of its swing. One of the big ones escorted him out and wasn't too gentle about it; if today had been more normal-feeling, McGreer might've rounded up the family and sent them across. He had to settle for swinging a harmless fist into the big man's tits, and leaving without even summoning up any spittle for the floor.

After a piss, he headed for the last place, talking to himself, occasionally

raising his voice to himself. Women formed the bulk of what he talked about, the affair, in harsh outlets. Halfway there, the wintry afternoon light made him stop and almost shed a few tears; but a few steps further on, a few deep breaths, and he was feeling formidable again, he could talk about the area. The slurs rolled out, more inventive than usual. Every other person he passed was someone he knew, though he wasn't always sure from where or when so tried not to worry. Some said hello, some kept their eyes off him, and he didn't speak to any of them. That rushing feeling was growing stronger, half-rushing, half-hurtling.

Inside, in the warmth, there was a tiredness yapping at his fibers, though perhaps there was something else in the core of this tiredness, some heavier drain. Feeling brave, he ignored his designated stool and stood for his first drink, which was a treble of the best whisky on offer. He saw it off a little too fast, with embarrassing results, not making it to the toilet in time; he leant panting against a wall, and the bar staff took pity on him, told him he might be better off at home, but he shrugged that off. He wasn't the type who stopped drinking as soon as it started rebelling. Though he did sit down for the next few.

People sat next to him, but he was too nervous to speak to them in case they said something that shocked him back into sobriety. There was no one he could talk to about his wife, had he been able to shape the words anyway. It was true he hadn't loved her for years, maybe you could say decades, so how could it be he was lost without her, what did that say about the arrangements of life? What philosopher drinking at five in the afternoon could answer him that?

Someone came in who looked like a neighbor of his parents from all those years ago, and if you couldn't have brimming eyes at the sight of their straight back and forgotten hairstyles, then you'd already died. A man came in, also from work years back, the drinking buddy who'd moved away, and began talking softly to the old neighbor. He knew that if he went over and started talking, they would look right through him. Then a girl came in, maybe someone from school, and she stuck a match, lifted a strand of her hair, and set it on fire while looking at him and smiling. He looked away, and couldn't get the glass to his mouth for trembling.

He said goodnight to the barmaid with more than usual politeness and walked out. There was no one about now, not even the sound of distant cars or doors, which he had known would happen. Even the amount of alcohol he'd had couldn't immure him to the cold. Almost home, maybe five minutes to go, his legs lost their force. He had to sit on the ground,

one hand propping him up, then the strength left that and he was lying down, not able to breathe very well. He was in an out-of-the-way street, little better than an alley. It wouldn't do, but he'd had enough, couldn't even move his thoughts now. All those pains were sliding into one another, waterfalling. The sky was showing a range of blues, and he believed that the clouds were making the same pattern as they had at the moment of his birth.

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When he knew himself next, he was in a white room. It was clean, spotless even, with a door, though not a window. He was sitting on a blue plastic chair, behind a bare wooden desk; he was dressed the way he had been on that day, though his clothes felt cleaner. Taking a moment to check himself, he decided that he felt better physically than he had for months, maybe for years, but mentally he didn't feel good at all. It felt like he was in a slow explosion, one that wouldn't end till everything ended – if it would ever be allowed to.

Soon the door opened and people began to enter the room. The first of them were like the pictures in books of primitive cavemen, though not quite – straighter, maybe, slightly more intelligent looking. They had only the first scraps of speech, which didn't stop them using it on him. It was hard to say if they spoke that way to everyone, though he doubted it. He gathered their comments were designed to be hard-hitting, and they made him flinch; there was no doubt about that. When they left – after they'd turned back for a few more tics and grunts – others walked in. Some, in fact, hurried in, put their hands on the desk, leant over it. Others, not always the women, were grappling with hurt tears.

It took him a few hours to realize what was happening. It became clear when he started to see himself, or his parents, or his children, in some of these people. Women from the Elizabethan era who had his mother's eyes; a man in woad with his father's timbre to his garbled voice; a woman in a ball gown with his middle daughter's mouth; gestures made by men from Victorian times that were replicas of those made by his father (and probably himself) when in the vilest of moods. The worst were those that looked like him. One, from the middle ages, was an exact copy and made him whimper and turn away. He saw himself in some when he'd been young, and in others how he'd look soon, perhaps before the day was out: ancient and permanently devastated.

After the first hour, they could all talk intelligibly, and they all said the same thing: the disappointment, the anger, the shame. None argued among themselves. They all agreed: it was the loneliness he'd put her through.

He kept quiet until the procession reached great-grandparents, recognized from creased black and white photos, then grandparents, barely remembered, dying largely unnoticed in his teens. To these he protested that he knew no better – an argument that was swept from the air with clawed hands.

To his mother, when she came in (his father lingered by the door, wouldn't look at him), he offered an apology, asked her to pass it on if she could. She couldn't, and it wouldn't be accepted anyway, and making it had done him no good.

Something opened behind him, hands gripped him, tipped him backwards, and he was dragged away to the steel vaults.

Barrie Darke

Dead Like Me

I am dead for 72 hours before those kids find me.
They're out in the woods where they're not supposed to be. They've taken their mother's slippers, the ones shaped like the gi-normous paw of a non-existent animal that she got one Christmas. If she had to get slippers, she liked these best because they made her smile when she looked down at her feet, and not a lot of people anybody knows smile when they look down at their feet. It's just an underappreciated body part. With the wheel and all of its technology, maybe people figure, like tonsils and gall bladders, do we hardly need our feet anymore anyway. I don't know; I'm just saying.

It's always kids and joggers finding dead bodies. Never regular people like movie stars or cartoonists or contortionists or environmentalists, who you would really think would be outside all the time and would find stuff. Just kids and joggers.

The jogger passed me by. Her new tennis shoes are that good.
The kids aren't supposed to be in the woods because their mother said there are ticks. She explained how ticks are worse than vampires because vampires will just kill you dead but ticks leave something slow and disease-y behind. She said the only way to kill a tick is to burn it.

The kids have never heard of that, a bug that you simply can't squish. So they set out into the woods to see that kind of bug, and to make monster footprints with the slippers. They hope they will trick somebody into thinking there's a Bigfoot living in these woods. The kids don't know how to read a map; if they did, they would see that this isn't the Pacific Northwest, and Bigfoot doesn't do Baltimore.

I am turning blue. Air is what ages a person and I don't care what anyone says. It's what might help keep us alive, seesawing through our lungs, but did you ever see what happens to a perfectly good piece of fruit if you leave it out on the counter for a prolonged time? It starts to cave in on itself. A body, 72 hours dead, will go the way of that perfectly good piece of fruit, and while I am still recognizable as someone human, soon I'll get to that place where I'm unrecognizable as someone that you might know. I've got maggots and flies, and I give them their due — how they find me and all others like me is uncanny, considering their brain is what?

So small, almost unimaginable at best. The kids will find me soon. I am not that well hidden, being dumped, not buried. It rained on me 24 hours into this, and the rain had wind, and the wind blew some leaves and twigs and some muck, and oh, an old discarded plastic bag. I know that it is old because the name on the store that is stenciled on it is no longer in business. Those damn plastic bags really do not decompose for, like, forever. Two man-made things, a human body and a plastic bag, and the bag has got the immortality rap down pat.

The kids are siblings. One is a boy and the other is a boy too, only he wishes he was a girl. When he was littler he wished he was a giraffe. Everyone was worried; what was with that?

He didn't dress like a giraffe or walk like a giraffe. He just liked giraffes. It had to do with their necks really ... they were beauty stretched out to the boy. He couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. His father, especially, was angry about the whole giraffe thing, saying he should like dogs if he was going to like any animal at all. Dogs were solid, loyal and protective.

Dogs lifted up their legs and pissed on things they wanted to piss on. His father liked that. His father didn't like how the son responded that dogs sniff each other's butts. He didn't like that at all.

The kids haven't discovered me yet, but they're close. It's like that game, "hot/cold" when you want someone to find something but you make them work for it ...you're warm, you're warm, warm, ahh, you're cold now, really cold, freezing, oh back to warm again. When the person playing gets hot, the person wins. These kids are warm in their discovery of me, lukewarm, and I knew a boy once, and his name was Luke Warner, and I am thinking of him right now because I have it on pretty good authority that the mole on the back of his neck that I stared at for two straight years from sitting behind him in Spanish and Math will be the cancer kind in about ten years. I don't know if he will recognize me in that time — I might be the girl they found in the woods and he might not even remember that I sat behind him all that time, and if I could, I would warn him somehow, but I can't, like I can't even tell these kids that I am over here and they are so warm right now it's not even funny.

They are starting to smell me — it's all but the memory keeping me alive now — and it's not the perfume that I put too much on that my mother said I was too young to wear. I thought she was watering it down anyway because it's not like my father ever bought her anything a lot of the time. She got it from her job working the cosmetic counter at the local five and dime store.

A hundred women had maybe pressed the pumper for a free spray, rubbing it into their wrists, their necks and what was left of their cleavage. New samples came in all the time, and my mother would swipe the old ones, putting them delicately in the front of her cosmetic counter apron. She was the only worker at the five and dime who got to wear an apron full of pockets so she could always have a tissue or a cotton ball or swab available at moment's notice to help a customer in application mode, which meant help some ugly person think they could be all of a sudden drop dead gorgeous with a dab of lipstick or a swatch of rouge. "Everybody can dream," my mother always said. I never remembered any of mine.

Right now, there are two of me: the me that was on the inside, now released and if you could see me at this very moment in my freedom, I would be all shimmer and light, hanging like streamers upside down in the trees. And of course there is still the dead girl body that used to be me. Needless to say, at this time I much prefer the new me that no one can see. The others that are like me, they can, I mean, we can see each other. We stream in and out of one another's space. It's a very sparkly existence. It should be blinding but it's not; we no longer have our eyes, but we can see everything and more, just fine.

The others dead like me check on me from time to time, to see how I am getting on. This one shimmer, just a little older than me, says as soon as the living find my body, I can move on up to the next level. This shimmer was murdered, too. It took them, she says, six months to find her body. She says they really didn't look hard enough. This is her opinion but I think that it is probably the right opinion because she was hovering by her own body for that long. She says she was a pretty girl once, but by the end of the process, her looks had all fallen off, and they eventually i.d.'ed her with dental records. That's why it's important to go to the dentist, she says, because he can brush in places where you just can't see because of having his dentist eyes, and they make a permanent record on you for in case you get murdered and they can't figure out who you are any other which way. It's a surprising thing, to hear this about teeth ...

Just when you think you know they're only good for eating and smiling, here they are good for when you become dead in a grisly way too. The things you learn when you're no longer in a place. It gets a wow out of me, that's for sure.

The kids are tired from the whole Bigfoot print making business. They're learning that it's exhausting stepping into the shoes of another person; even though Bigfoot goes barefoot most of the time, there's still a lesson to be learned here. The boy that wishes he was a girl wishes they had listened better to their mother when she said don't go into the woods. He is starting to feel closed in by all the trees. He becomes reflective about green, and is sure that it is definitely not his color. He can't figure out what fashion statement nature is trying to make, but he knows it's definitely not one he will probably share. His brother is also sick of the whole thing too, but he remembers their dad, when he's not screaming about giraffes and how boys aren't supposed to make sense of fashion yet alone fashion statements, screaming about how it's important to see a job through. Maybe he's not screaming — maybe he's just talking loudly — maybe good work is important to him — maybe sticking with things is important and that's why scotch tape is still around, even surviving over glue sticks and paste and even the glitter glue phase from a few years back. Maybe it's that his father got stuck with their mom who was a very pregnant girlfriend and he did the right thing, and so the older boy was born with a mother and a father, followed by his giraffe brother, and their father sticks with it, sticking every single day, and everybody knows the thing about sticking with it, while commendable, can make certain people grouchy and resentfully mean, and the boy is certain that while his father has certainly become one of those people now, he is certain that this is not how his father started out nor intended to be.

So the giraffe brother who wants to be a girl says, "I wanna go home." And the older brother says, "me too", but it's the voice that sits inside his head where he's the only one who hears it, and the giraffe brother says, "what?", certain he heard something, and the older brother says "nothing", because he doesn't want to give it away that he talks to himself like a parrot. He knows that he should probably let his younger brother know this very vital information — a sharing of their proper animal instincts — but parrots are too colorful and too crazy and kept in cages by little old widowed ladies desperate for a conversational companion.

Instead, the older brother says, "a little while longer". The Bigfoot prints are starting to look ragged and poor. "We have to finish what it is that we started." The giraffe brother marches his shoe into an ant hill, mashing it into dust. "How will we know," he asks, winding his foot in circles until the ground is smooth and recreated,

"when that is?"
He never gets a reply.

I wonder how pissed off ants get when we interrupt them. They seem to have precision down — from the lines they travel in and the earth they push into their triangular domed homes to the transport of a singular piece of food that qualifies more as a particle if anything at all. I once watched a boy I didn't really know all that well hold a magnifying glass above an ant mound, setting fire to it from the sun. It was hard to believe something as far away and as mythical could light up such a blowtorch blaze all the way down here. I am closer to this sun now than I have ever been, and I try to stay away, in a most respectable way.
"I'm going," the giraffe brother says. He turns on his heel. The ant mound is totally decimated. I wonder how many called it home, and if there are any survivors who will live to tell the story of an ordinary day pockmarked by a sudden shadow and its crushing moment of death. Broken ant bodies everywhere, and it doesn't take much to break an ant — they're not constructed as well as, say, a sofa. My mother has a sofa in her front room, handed down to her from her grandmother. She remembers from her own childhood that sofa wrapped in a plastic covering, and how it always made kissing sounds when you sat on top of it. When my mother became an adult, her grandmother became an even older adult and went on to die. My mother took that sofa because that's what adults do when other adults die, take each other's stuff. First thing my mother did was take down that plastic, I mean, she cut through it like a surgeon, revealing some kind of beautiful underneath.

We wore that sofa down with spills, and dirty feet, and the perspiration and oils from our skins, but that sofa couldn't be broken. Sometimes it only looked that way. I'm going to miss that sofa, in every way.
The giraffe brother turns to see if his older brother is following him. He is not. The giraffe brother wishes he was taller or wider or bigger or longer or anything different than what he is today. He fears his older brother will always win. I wish I could tell the giraffe brother that the older one, by virtue of birthright, has already lived longer days than the giraffe brother has not even acquired yet, and he should hold on,

because that time is over for the older and not yet lived by the younger, so giraffe, you have really won. But I cannot tell him anything; he'll have to live to figure that out for himself.

So the giraffe brother, he picks up a rock. He doesn't know why. He's never done this sort of thing before. It comes from wanting to be heard, to go home already, to be taken seriously, to be appreciated, to be put in the right direction out of these woods because he doesn't know exactly where he is and where he should go to get out of where he doesn't know he is. The rock is small, but it is no stone, and hasn't yet gravitated to boulder status. It feels fuzzy in his hand for a patch of moss has claimed one side of it. He waits a moment, to see if he changes his mind. When that moment passes and he does not, he waits another, just to make sure. He throws the rock, intending for it to be a hurl, but in reality, it is only a toss. It lands at his brother's feet. He curses the rock.

The older brother curses his younger brother. It's when the giraffe goes to lift a much heavier rock that the older brother charges him. I watch them hit and tossle and wrestle and pound and spit, and it makes me yearn for the sibling that I never had. What fun it must be for one instant to hate someone so much, and in another minute to cling to them as if they hold the key to your very existence. Their movement takes them rolling along past weeds and leaves and twigs and litter and animal paths, and a damp wet earth that is the underneath canvas for it all. It is when the older brother is on top of the younger, pinning him down hard — arms holding arms, and knees holding knees, that he gasps, suddenly letting go.

"What?" asks the giraffe, immediately thinking that it has occurred to the older how are they going to explain it to their mother, as they are bumped and bruised and covered in muck from head to toe. But it is not that realization at all. "Oh god. Oh Jesus Christ," the older says, the words of deities weaving through his lips, his face wearing the look of terror. The younger brother, slow to get up gets only to his knees before he, too, rips the look of terror off of his brother's face, displaying it as his own.
"Is that a person?"
"I think that it is."
They have discovered me. My pink tennis shoed foot. There's no mistaking; there's no denying; there's no going back to a fun day of Bigfoot prints.
"Is she dead?"

"I think she is."
The older one asks for a stick. The younger one is dutiful. The first stick breaks when it is tested against my shoe. The second stick is thicker, though not quite as long. It is good for tapping away the brush that has been my blanket.
"Do we know her?" the giraffe asks.
"No," comes the reply. "We don't."
They are still, never having felt more alive than they do at this moment, standing over a dead girl. And when the giraffe brother leans a little too much into his brother, the older one doesn't mind much at all, even leaning in a little himself, too.

Sharon Goldner

This Thing Gone Healthy

Everything is propelled to me,
I attract, I do not pull.
So much that was dark,
So much that was heavy
Came to me, I remember
The wind changing, the poles shifting,
And there I was with a weight
Where none was before,
And a shadow over my remains.

I walked with fists clenched,
Teeth under tight lips,
A curtain over my heart.
I supplied myself opium
In doubt, in cynical thoughts,
I saw only black stars gleaming,
Coal for a fire, even that luster
Was too much, I took gray stars instead,
The rest I hid with clouds.

Now you're back, brown eyes and all,
I missed that bag you carry yourself in,
Though I promise myself I will not hurt.
This morning I did not wake
With distaste, my lips were open
And I was breathing finally,
And all inside me was land, whole continents,
Something for me to stand on.
But still I'm keeping a little pond fresh,
A place for the dark waters
To reflect your old leaving back to me.

Benjamin Nardolilli

Either Veneration

The trees pour wood
From the earth
Out to the delta
Of a sky over them

And the clouds
Condense to surf,
Wisps of foam
Drifting over the boughs,

The ground continues
Hoping to make leaves
And blocking out
The sun and moon

It desires shade,
A way to cool down,
Since it is pulled
To orbit by other bodies

Benjamin Nardolilli

A Cartesian Afternoon

I was brought to someone missing,
His eyes were searching the room
For a map, and failing, made
A grid for the world between us,

Placing all the junk in a meaningful sea,
Set in one place, and when moved,
Not lost, but sliding instead, everything
Having the power to take on numbers

And create distances, I had this power too,
Until I left the room and he moaned,
Missing his other axis standing at attention
To hold up a cabinet of coordinates for him.

Benjamin Nardolilli

Elastic Vision

The world weeps its colors
Out in front of me,
My skin, the leaves, the stones,
All their shades and hues
Are pools of this sorrow.
She is growing old,
And is trying to make it beautiful,\
So we stop asking questions
About origin, because
Origins bring questions of age,
And she hates to say how old she is,
Instead we should enjoy
The bright things she offers,
And the dull ones too,
They often have the best designs.

Benjamin Nardolilli

Sickness and Death

I wash my hands,
In water,
I wash my hands
In alcohol,
Nothing must escape me,
Nothing must enter.

Nurse, who is this fool before me?
This empty headed young one.
No pill, no incision will cure him,
No diet, no transplant, no transfusion
Will transform him.

He is stabilized, he is stabilized,
But for how long?
He mumbles something to himself
Shantith, Shantith, Shantith,
No I do not understand it,
I never took Latin.

The words seem
To have no meaning to him,
But he says them over and over again,
As if by saying it,
He could find something, that
The sound itself would liberate him.

"There is no shade,
No shade for me
Except right under
The old linden tree"

He sings, and I dream.
I dream of green fields,
Full of holes,
Full of germs, unsanitized
Lit by non-fluorescent light.

He is not tattooed
But has marks around his body,
He tells me there was a feeling
Locked inside, needing freeing.
Rubbish. He tells me to give him my hands,
And says that I am wonderful.

Benjamin Nardolilli

This Fleeting Life

In the darkness
a stealthy mouse creeps across the creaking floor,
softly squeaking to the sagging boards
that rot and fall.
In the darkness by the window
a lonely figure sits,
silent and full of dreams.
He looks with eyes hungrier than tombs
upon the passing strangers,
passing in the darkness,
young and full of dreams.
Boards rot and fall.
A mouse feeds and squeaks his joy.
An old man slumps
upon an ancient, broken chair
and sleeps.

Gary Beck

Inwoodians

Caw Caw Caw, Who , Who, Who,

We were birds in the night.

Riding the wind, we knew every nook and cranny and slipped like shadows in and out of the buildings.

We were ditch-em masters at night.

During the day we were knows as Inwoodians, we earned the right to be known by our ancestral heritage.

You could hear us when we wanted you too and we were invisible when no one was looking at us.

Beware the night when you hear the caw caw caw, or the who who who for we are watching you.

We are waiting , caw caw caw, who who who, ribbit, giggle ...

Greg Lyvers

Foreign Country

The drooping farmhouse and crumpled barn
stand small among million dollar mansions
cultivated like crops.

The road, once graveled dust
and rock-lined ruts, stretches
blacktop smooth toward upscale
bistros and gourmet supermarkets

where shoppers speak brioche, pesto,
Perrier, Riesling, baskets hold
Nutella rather than Hershey's,
provincial Brie instead of
American cheddar.

Fourteen acres, an oasis of undevelopment,
speak of a past culture,
the utility of a barn, the muted volleys
like musket fire that identify a Farmall tractor,
sniffs of sassafras, manure and clover.

A bulldozer preys on the
disappearing landscape.
The bushwhacker bullies the farm,
an eyesore to new neighbors.

Through chicory and Queen Anne's lace
the old farmer walks his fence line
in this foreign country.

Jo Taylor

The Righteous Brothers McCandless

I wasn't going to die after all, not in the physical sense anyway. He had given me a choice.

“I said, what's it gonna be boy?” James stepped closer demanding an answer as his brother Roy held me captive from behind, blade in hand. His voice oozed “backwoods”, and grease seeped from his pores. I spoke softly as to not risk slicing my neck open before he was prepared to do so himself.

“I'm sorry. What are my options again?” James landed the butt of his thirty aught rifle directly in my gut and I fell hard to the ground, fighting for air almost as hard as I had fought for my life across most of Jackson County. Part of me was proud it had taken them this long to get me. That part of me hadn't been informed of the current situation though.

“I'm a tell you one more time, just 'cause I like to hear me talk.” James held the rifle on his shoulder and strutted around on the pulpit in his ratty overalls like the cock that he is. Back and forth he went, playing to the drama. “You broke the law, you see? And there's a price, that you must pay, for your crime. Now, since all those commie pinko homos weaseled their way into our po-litical system right under our noses, your crime is not punishable under the great state of Tennessee's legalities. So Roy,” James stopped his strut, pivoting to face us, “how does one commit a crime that is not punishable by the law of the land?”

“It's God's law,” Roy leaned over from behind me and smiled, “sinner.”

“Yes! God's law. And although we are not here to judge you for your actions, the duty of carrying out the Lord's punishment has been bestowed upon us, the righteous brothers McCandless.”

The crime he was referring to was the date I'd had with their sister Allison. It hadn't occurred to either of them that she had asked me out. It was an average first date filled with pleasant conversation over a forgettable dinner followed by a cheesy movie. I held her hand, but only when she insisted, and when I dropped her off it wasn't even eleven o'clock yet. I suppose everything would have been fine if that was the end of it. But when I leaned in to kiss her goodnight, the darkness exploded with the cries of the McCandless warriors.

They had appeared from each side of the moonlit farmhouse with a savage fury. They had rage in their eyes, and weapons held high. Allison's nubile face acquired a look of irritation under her smooth, dark hair.

“Dang you James, Roy! Why can't you boys just mind your own business?” She turned and yelled my name, but I was already halfway down the drive. I'd been warned about the brothers, and even though I figured the stories had been exaggerated, I wasn't about to kiss her with my eyes closed. If I had, I might have met my maker on the McCandless' front lawn. But I didn't.

I ran.

I ran as fast as I think I've ever ran in my whole life. I was all regional track back in high school, but it's different when you're running for your life rather than just for the sake of running.

I know what you're thinking, I'm over reacting. Why would those guys kill me just for almost kissing their sister? Well, I haven't the faintest idea. What I do know is that when you're being chased by two crazy, gun wielding grease monkeys, you have two options. Run or die.

So, like I said, I ran.

I ran all the way back to town. Four miles and I didn't even look back once. Down the dirt road and across the pasture. I cut through the junkyard and hid in the back of an old Ford 100. I waited to see if I could hear the McCandless boys on my trail, but the night had regained its silence and with that came some sort of sanity. I wondered how I was going to get my car back once this whole thing blew over.

Just as I had caught my breath and was able to start thinking clearly, the resident watchdog's bark sent another burst of adrenaline through my veins and launched me over the side of the rusted out bed of the truck.

Dodging antique bumpers and hollow transmissions, I could hear the vicious beast closing in on my right and the hollers of the brothers behind me.

“There he is!”

“Ain't nowhere you can hide from the hand of God boy! You best give up now!”

I scaled the flimsy chain link fence with ease and left the dog snarling behind me as I turned and ran towards my apartment. Why the dog had chosen to pursue me and not them was a mystery, I've always been good with animals.

I stopped a block away from home and looked around. The streetlamps lit the sidewalks of the sleeping town and the familiar silence was eerily unfamiliar. My shirt was soaked with sweat and sent a chill through my body as it was now past midnight. Like a fool, I had left my keys in the ignition back in the McCandless' driveway. I couldn't go home anyway, I thought, they know where I live.

Just then a loud bang nearly coincided with an explosion of splintering wood from the maple I had been standing next to.

"Dang it, Roy! I almost had him!" Any thoughts of them wanting to just scare me away from their sister vanished with the speed of the bullet that almost took my life right on the sidewalk. They wanted me dead and didn't care who knew it.

I cut down the dark alley, hoping that the brothers' assault on silence would rouse the neighborhood and I would soon be safe. Help never came though, and I continued running until I was again in the open country. I knew I was faster than them, so the more I ran, the better my chances of survival were. Problem was, I'd always been a sprinter. I was tired and needed rest.

There was an old, abandoned church just up the road, sitting quietly in the night. It was there I decided I would find my salvation, if only for a few hours. I crawled across the ground the last hundred yards to avoid detection in case the brothers were close. There had been no sign of them since they'd shot at me on the open street. I raised the old wooden frame of the stained glass window, climbed into the church, and closed it behind me.

Once inside I looked around for something I could use for a weapon. The church was small, only two rows of about eight pews each, and had long been cleaned out. All that was left was a stack of dusty Bibles and a huge wooden cross lying flat across the benches on the far side. The moon was full, but the dirty stained glass windows filtered out most of the light.

As quietly as I could, I picked up the cross and carried it towards the door. Although it wouldn't keep the door shut for long, I figured it would buy me some time. The McCandless boys weren't the quickest rats in the race, so it seemed logical that they would first try to enter through the door if they even thought to look here at all. I found the darkest corner of the pulpit and sat down. My thighs ached, and welcomed the break.

I sat motionless in the dark, still in disbelief that such innocent behavior in my mind, was apparently a deadly sin in theirs. I wondered what Allison thought of all this. I wondered if they had given up searching for me. I wondered a lot of things that had no answer.

Every little noise that was probably a field mouse sent my heart racing and shot my pupils wide open. It might only be a field mouse, but unless you can see it, it might as well be death itself. I sat and stared at the cross leaning against the door and asked for what preachers had once offered from this very spot. Praying always calmed me down.

"Rise and shine, Romeo."

"Huh?" I opened my eyes, and there stood James, Roy, and...

"Allison?"

"Mornin' honey." She spoke as though I should be happy to see her. As if nothing was wrong.

"What the Hell is going on?" Behind them the door to the church was open and I could see people outside. James just smiled and let out a contemplative sigh.

"Well, that depends."

"On what," I asked.

"On you." He stood directly in front of me, walking slowly up the aisle. "It all depends on you," he said, raising his rifle, "and how much of a man you really are."

"I don't understand."

“Yeah, I figured as much. All you city boys are the same. You think conquering a woman'll make you a man. Ain't nothin gonna make you a man unless it's done before God.”

“Absolutely James, I totally agree.” You'll say anything with a rifle pointed at you.

“Good, good. A righteous man you may be yet. Get on over here.” He smiled and lowered the gun, coaxing me towards him. I obeyed and made my way between the pews. Allison stood smiling, her brother James between us.

“So, it is God's will that I, again, present to you a choice. You can join the beautiful Allison McCandless in a holy matrimony today, here, in this very house of the Lord, with He and everyone who holds her dearly as witness. Or, I'm a cut yer balls off. Either way, we gonna celebrate puttin a smile on the face of our Lord today. So, what's it gonna be?”

That's how I ended up here, in a church in Jackson County, Tennessee, being forced to choose between marrying a beautiful woman I hardly knew, and being castrated by the MacCandless brothers.

“C'mon boy, we're all waitin,” James said smiling.

“Yes, I'll marry her, of course I'll marry her. I was going to ask her anyway, I love her more than anything.” Again, you'll say anything with a gun pointed at you.

“Don't tell me boy. Tell her.” I turned and faced Allison, on both knees with a knife still at my neck and a gun in my face I wondered if this was how she had always imagined this moment.

“Allison, I love you so much. I-I-I've never felt this way about anyone before. Will you marry me?” She looked at me with suspicion, as if she sensed my desperation. “Please.”

“You got a ring?”

You've got to be kidding me. “A ring? Why in the Hell would I have a ring? Last night was our first date and I haven't even been home yet! You remember the end of the date when your psychopath brothers came running after me with their guns? I've been chased almost halfway

across the county! I've been shot at, almost bit by a rabid dog, I'm in desperate need of a tetanus shot, and now your brothers are going to cut my fucking balls off if I don't marry you! I don't even know you! No, I'm sorry, I don't have a ring!"

Allison stood there silent, just staring at me while the crowd outside waited to find out what exactly this day would bring.

"No."

"What? Are you serious? No?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just don't really like you all that much. You're kinda mean sometimes."

"You're kidding right? Tell me you're kidding." She shrugged and walked down the aisle, exiting the church.

"You heard the lady," James said. Just then the town's only preacher walked in and looked around.

"What's goin on in here?" I'm saved, I thought.

"Father, thank God you're here. They're going to-"

"Hold on there fella." The old man crossed his arms and looked past me. "James? What's the story?"

"Well father, Allison don't wanna marry this man. Says he's a mean one." The preacher nodded.

"I see. Well, that's that then." He turned around and closed the doors. Roy began dragging me towards the front of the church with one hand, still holding the knife to my neck with the other.

“Wait. Wait! That's that! He said that's that! What are you doing?” James laughed and tossed one of the old Bibles to the preacher. He caught it and dust flew into the air. The preacher walked towards me down the aisle, and opened the book.

“Boys, let's put a smile on our Lord's face today, shall we?”

Aaron Posey

Cain: A Life

Tonight the children of Cain sleep, separated by concrete and panes of glass, in high-rises and on the sidewalks of the world. Their old man walks the earth, he has never had the city dust touch his soles, and bright lights are for those who think they have hope. He creeps in the dark of the shrinking woods, peeking through tent flaps, seducing lost hikers. He still appears to be the twenty three year old he was when the curse was set, it is possible that he has bedded down one of his own once or twice, a brain a few millennia old is not good at remembering. The only memory that sticks is the sound of Abel's blood, screaming as it sunk down into the roots of the crops the Almighty had turned his nose up to. Sometimes he catches the faint echo of similar screams as heart embraces knife, hands go around a wife's neck, or a gun is pointed in accusation at another favored son. His children, after all, must do what they must do. But he walks on, the heart which might once have felt the tug of remorse now nothing more than a bag of dust.

In the beginning, there was remorse at getting caught, anger at the blood, at God for His curse, and later at his parents for starting over. For himself, but also for the brother he had murdered. How could they forget their beloved sons so rapidly? All that weeping and gnashing of teeth turned over in less than a year's time into the moans of pleasure and childbirth. Cain would crouch and listen in the darkness, clenching and unclenching his fists in rhythm to his mother's cries. It was with equal pleasure that he later ripped one of those unnamed sisters from the family hearth, stealing her away in the darkness of night. Sending her back in the morning to face the shame, hair covering her face as the rest of the family turned their backs, as if his touch had left a stench upon her skin that they could not bear. It was a pleasure he repeated again and again, until the others were forced to guard the camp through the night to save the few daughters who remained. They carried spears, stabbing menacingly into the brush, but it was the torches that caused him to cower.

The earth still spoke in whispers. His love, which had sucked down his brother's blood as fast as she could, seeking its nourishment and hiding the evidence. He tosses in his sleep, digging his fingers deeper into the dirt, feeling its warmth. She cries out at his touch, demanding, seeking an answer to why her children were not accepted. All these years, since the raw smell of her beneath his fingertips first overwhelmed his body, the sting of her Creator's rejection never wanes.

Sometimes, hiding in the edge of camp, he would hear his own story told, again and again, to frighten young children and shame the almost grown. He would hold up his arms and legs to the snatches of light, trying to find the mark they spoke of in whispers. Eagerly he would listen, when another child would interrupt the storyteller and ask what the mark looked like. But always at this point the storyteller would cuff the child behind the ears in a warning not to interrupt, and go into another story.

He would then crawl away, to find a hole in which to sleep. Unless it was the story of the fall, then he would stay awhile, relishing the demise of his parents.

A millennia passes, maybe more, and the story around the campfire never changes. As the lost tribes flee across the Bering Strait, he tags along behind with the feeble and lame, settling in what will soon be the American Midwest. Age slows him down, causing him to wander in the same circles. He befriends a priest, who considers him the ultimate challenge, the irredeemable man. A month will go by, maybe two, and he will knock on the church door, blackening with decay, and the old man will welcome him in, offering shelter and perhaps a game of chess. He tells the him of the ancient world, how far off those blue eyed renditions of the Christ are, making him chuckle through his ash dust beard.

It must have happened gradually, the ending of tales around a campfire. Now when he tells his latest conquest his name, their eyes crinkle up in confusion, not fear.
"Whadda ya mean, like Citizen Kane?" is a question that comes up, once or twice. When he explains, no, like the brothers in the Bible, their eyes begin to light up, "ahh, okay, like East of Eden." He has never been to a movie, cannot picture the bending of light and the capture of images in his mind.

Neither can his friend, tending to keep away from those things termed by the Vatican as "worldly", but seeing the agitation in what has become his light in a swiftly dying congregation, he concedes. They walk into town, and arrive beneath the glowing marquee, Cain cowering under so much light. The darkness in contrast within is comforting, reminding him of the caves in which he grew up. Before the glowing screen, both men sit and wonder why God has not yet struck down those who would make themselves like gods. They walk back to the church in silence, each guarding his beliefs. Back inside, he tells the priest that James Dean reminded him, ironically, of Abel, the good looks that came too easy,

the vulnerability behind the eyes. He has never before spoken of his family, and the old man listens with the attention of a gossip, going over every detail, asking questions. He asks him about Eden, if he remembers anything about it. He closes his eyes, and in his mind he can see a black circle of trees on an empty plain, forbidden and unattractive. There is no recollection of angels or a glowing sword, and reading over to the beginning of Genesis does nothing to jog a memory of them.

That night, under the stars, they come to him, blue flames bearing the faint outline of wings and blades. He wakes in a cornfield, blanketed in frost tinted leaves, covered in sweat.

A night, similar to this one, so cold, and the stories his parents have told them about the constant warmth of Eden turn over in his head, keeping him from sleep. He nudges out from under his mother's arm and sneaks away from camp, towards the circle. In the night, when all is darkness, it doesn't seem so forbidding. As soon as his fingertips brush the bark of the first tree he reaches, they are upon him, all the rage of Heaven roaring in his ears. Had he been a man, his father is told by the seraph that carries his stunned body home, they would have killed him. Over Abel's broken body, Adam will demand of Heaven why they did not, how one child deserved amnesty over the other.

As the story rushes out, the priest is reminded of an article he has read, soldiers returned from war, unexplainable phobias, frightening dreams, triggered by moments so subtle, they are only unearthed by years of therapy, shock treatment, hypnosis. This is a man, old as time but still, to him, so young. After Cain has left he drops to his knees, begs forgiveness of Christ. This is a man he has treated like a relic, to be gawked at, combed over to fill the holes of history.

Their friendship suffers this revelation. The old man now treats him gently, seeking to meet needs he imagines he has, a new coat is bought from the leavings in the offering plate, pockets stuffed with a pocket Bible and religious tracts. The love suffocates and confuses him, his circles become larger, until the church leaves his path altogether.

This year's first snow smells of rotten eggs, thanks to the paper mill sludge being dredged up the creek banks. Kate looks out, nose tucked into her shoulder, up to the elbows in soapy water. Springsteen is singing something on the radio about waiting and falling behind. Behind the steam webbing up the glass, black trees wave off the sleet, looking as if they want to be let in. If the cold wasn't seeping into the joints of this old house, if her roots were as firm as theirs, Kate might be inclined to

open the door and bless them with a little warmth. But as it is, the only things falling behind are bills, and waiting just brings the spring and more layoffs, so instead she sinks back into the tub, letting anthem chords and water wash over her.

It was the hopelessness of the situation that had pushed her out the door and into the woods on a January morning. She did not know what the future held, but could be certain that at least outside she could be alone. Even that turned out not to be true. She did not see him, walking through the trees as if he were walking the aisles of a department store, until they were almost upon one another. She did not usually take to strangers walking around so close to the house, but there was no guile in his eyes, no hint of a threat. It was not until she woke up under sheets already cooling that she realized there had been no passion, no warmth in them either. His eyes had been as empty as the branches scraping the siding.

Solitude came naturally to her. When the time came at the end of school to either move on to the crowded dorms and lecture halls of State or get a job, she chose the mill. She kept to herself among the other workers, all her mother's friends, sitting alone with a cup of tea in the lounge on break, walking through the wood home, refusing the offers of rides. In the house she stayed mostly in her room, sleeping, reading, watching the TV she had bought with her first paycheck. Her mother had tried to pry her out from time to time, insisting it wasn't healthy for a girl her age to keep to herself that way. When Mother finally succumbed to lung cancer last year, Kate's relief threatened to overpower her sadness.

Now this man had shown up, briefly, and left her with an overwhelming ache for company. She couldn't understand it. Failed daughter, failed mill worker, and now, failed one night stand. The next day Kate put the house on the market and bought a bus ticket. She was tired of hiding out, waiting for whatever was next. She was ready to go out and find it.

What she found across the aisle in the other window seat was her mystery man. To her annoyance, when she managed a feeble hello, he nodded back with the politeness of a stranger. No recognition, no hint of embarrassment, he comfortably went back to staring out the window at the blurred landscapes flying by.

The speed of the wheels beneath them was a new experience for him. He felt a bit of the awe he had felt at the movies, only now the godlike power was beneath his feet. It reminded him of Elijah's chariot, flaming through the sky. At the time he had envied the prophet's ride into

Heaven, but now he himself had the power harnessed to the ground, taking him where he chose, and not at the command of God. It was as close to human enjoyment as he had come in a long time, marred only by the glare of the young woman in the other seat, threatening to burn through his collar. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps it was a woman who had lent him a place to sleep recently, but none of them seemed on the verge of a long trip from what he could recall. His eyes were of no use, he had left the glasses the priest had pressed upon him last year as a Christmas gift behind on the old man's desk, and any figures were now a blur. He'd only been able to decipher the age and gender of the person in the other seat when she'd spoken.

She couldn't stand it, the longer he pretended to stare out the window, the more ticked off she got. Her mother had always taught self control, turning the other cheek could have been the motto for her life, but mother was no longer here. At the next stop when he got out to stretch those spidery legs of his, she rushed out after him, like a mad bull, and called out.

"Hey, hey you, have you got no shame, running out like that?"

He turned around, slowly, squinting in the sunlight. The face still showed no recognition, only confusion, looking around to see where the cackling voice was coming from.

Close up now, she drew up a breath for another tirade, then came up short. His height was something, underneath the tall trees, that hadn't struck her before, but now, beside the deserted bus depot, it made him loom, a Frankenstein of a man. The eyes above her were still empty, and she considered for the first time that perhaps he couldn't see. It was a suspicion he seemed to confirm, no longer hearing her voice, he turned again and trudged inside to find the men's room.

Kate was left blushing in the dust. She's always been accused of lacking the social skills of a coyote, but until now that hadn't bothered her much. People who couldn't accept her as she was weren't worth the trouble. Shame made hr slink to the back of the bus and crouch down low. Shame made her miss the fact the man's seat was empty as the bus pushed on.

Cain blinked in the sunlight at the empty road. He was sorry to see the girl go, her fierceness had reminded him of his mother. As little children, Eve would draw in the sand over and over again the form of the snake, showing them how to pound with their heels at the bulbous

head. More than Adam, Eve missed the garden, and saw in God's promise a chance to get back within its walls. Their father tried to explain to the boys, "A thing of beauty is drawn back to beauty." He and his brother would practice on harmless lizards, or insects, sneaking up from behind and then driving their heels down, flattening the heads. As the luckless bodies roasted over the fire, they would boast excitedly on how they would do the same to the legless beast. They spent weeks as their father plowed, kicking over clumps of dirt, exploring every creature's hole, and never found the one mother drew in the dust, again and again, until the day she died, never again feeling the breath of Eden.

It was not until he left the desert that he saw his first snake. Walking through the rain forests of South America, where the air heavy and dark even in midday. He thought perhaps he's found a home, but the snakes would wrap around his nightmares, taunting his failure, and his feet carried him on. This continent, though, was full of snakes, hiding in the jungle, the forest, the desert. He'd have to tread with care through the scrub surrounding the depot.

Sitting in the field, brush grass tickling her forehead, Nancy listened to the silence. It was a good sound, a sound that almost made her forget the jackrabbits playing kickball in her skull.

This morning she had packed the kids up in the van and taken them to school. A treat for them after the madhouse bus rides, kindergarteners mixed in with eighth graders, it just wasn't right. They too had appreciated the little piece of quiet they managed to snatch in the morning, the soft patter of home, finding socks, choosing pop tarts over toast, packing lunches and homework, faded into the soft murmurings of the local top 40 station played low. No demands to turn on a Barney tape, no fights about who touched who. It was nice. They all needed a little nice.

Bill she had left on the couch, snoring off another night of drinking away the humiliation of another lay off. It was hard, trying to feed three kids off of unemployment, lifting what little was left in his wallet when he stumbled in at 4 am. The only blessing seemed to be the lack of insurance now gave her an excuse to stop trying. Months and months of driving to different hospitals for the same old tests, and still no doctor could explain the cause of these headaches, never mind bringing an end to the pain. Thank God that was over, she could stop.

There was plenty to eat in the fridge, her mother's number posted clearly on the refrigerator. All the laundry, the dishes were washed, the

floors swept and vacuumed. Whatever folks might say, they would know that she had gotten her priorities straight, she left her kids taken care of. Cash was used for the bus ticket, carrying her out to the middle of nowhere, thinking that by the time they found her, the kids would be grown enough to forgive her. She reached into her back pocket and slid out the knife just as the shadow fell over her.

Looking up, all she could see was a dark outline, like the shape of a man screen printed against the sky. The voice that came out seemed to be just as startled as she was. "Excuse me", it said, and then it was gone. Nancy lifted up her arms, knife forgotten in the earth to touch the emptiness left behind in the sky. She longed to feel the skin of her babies, the feel of her husband's lips. She lifted herself up on to her feet and began the long way home.

Cain felt a twitch, walking away from the woman. Why he did not care whether or not the woman was successful in taking her life made him ponder what part of him was still human.

Helen R. Peterson

Mother

She hangs upside down
her engorged belly obscene
in the light. Like a jellyfish
hanging in the waves
of my window in oceans
of web, in the sea
of spiderlings breaking
out from her abdomen
and I cringing , terror
itching my fingertips,
children around the corner,
gnashing their teeth.

Helen R. Peterson

the little river

a little river
runs through here
separating gas stations
from low-rent housing

it holds no fish
flows slow
with godly
patience

those waters
hide handguns

discarded
by murderers

josh byer

Freedom in Florida

Freedom stood before him in her flannel shirt, no bra, a single rivulet of sweat pouring down the bony channel between her sagging, freckled breasts. It was at this point, when she made it clear that she was willing to help him escape, that he stopped thinking about those breasts, and started thinking about everything else. They stood in front of the liquor store by the university, at 8 in the morning, the only place within walking distance of the house with a call-box, where he had told her to find him. She smoked her menthol cigarette and looked away as he tried to make up his mind.

What were the alternatives here? He could go home. Yes, home. That was the really wrong thing about this, he had gotten to where he was thinking about it as home. Because there was no place else to call home. So he would go home, and cook them breakfast. Here, with freedom standing, waiting, her name was Misty, by the way, he could not even bear to think about them. The kids, the brother, his girlfriend. He would go home and cook breakfast, and go read for half an hour while they ate and showered and fought over the bathroom, and, eventually, left to go to school and work. Then he would clean up, roll up their sleeping bags (the twins slept in the living room, on the floor), make the beds, then take the already-overflowing garbage out, then do the dishes, then clean the floors, then while the floors dried he would water the garden, weed, then walk down to the grocery-store, then come back get started on dinner. So his day would pass as the live in housekeeper. Nothing truly, obviously bad would happen unless he broke something, or neglected to do something, or spoke back. Of course, the kids would spill stuff on purpose, spit food on the floor, that kind of thing, the two adults would pretend not to see.

You get a place to be. That was the upside of the situation. You have a place. It was not a home, you sleep on the fucking kitchen floor, but you are not an intruder, nobody questions you being there. What happened to me that I am happy with just that, though? It did not start out with him being the servant. There was a time that he was an equal, when he would have looked down on those nasty hillbillies and been right to. Even then he had cleaned up after them, though. They were his guests, he thought. He had had no problem with it. Now, they were paying the rent and he was still cleaning up after them. It had not happened overnight. That's how the best traps work, slow and certain like cancer. You don't go from being a free man to a broken, loyal servant quickly. But when you get to the servant place, when it grows on you over time,

without anybody telling you that you are owned, stating obviously, it is complete, you are owned. You see no other way to live but as an accessory to your owner. This is your place, as a satellite. The world was a scary, hard place, with no place for a thirty-eight year-old man with no formal education, and whose body was used only to the house-work he had been doing for the last year, and whose mind was used only to fiction. Freedom's life until fairly recently told him how bad it could be. The hillbillies told him that. What would you do? The niggers around here would cut open your soft, pudgy old ass your first night on the street. That was what Amanda's brother had said to him shortly after she had left. Not in anger either. He had said it simply, as an honest opinion. His assessment. It was probably true. He had been lucky to have gotten that hotel job and kept it for as long as he had. There were people out there, thousands in this town alone, with college degrees who had to settle for the fast-food drive-through. He would die on the street, out behind a dumpster.

He had met the redhead, Freedom, in the library. Misty. She had broken one of her false teeth on the water-cooler and was sitting at the back, at one of the desks where nobody could see you, crying. He had stood staring at the rows of Walter Mosley paperbacks (the mystery section was at the very back of the building) and peeking around the corner at her. Only that morning he had sat on the toilet and wept. Truly wept for the first time in twenty years. Now he was in the library, the only comforting place in his world, he felt a raw, incautious empathy here, for her. He was not used to approaching strangers. Especially strange women. He had never been that kind of guy. But here he was, feeling empathy, feeling at home, and there she was, not the prettiest woman in the world, vulnerable, and with a problem that he could fix. He went over and spoke. I know a guy who can fix that. It was the first offer of anything he had made to anybody in a long while. That was how it started.

She was a stripper, a profession Amanda looked down on. Her first husband had run off with, and later married, a stripper. She was over forty, only got a few gigs a month in one or two places, to fill in till they could find another, younger girl. She lived in her car, having been evicted the week before. Amanda had left behind a free fix certificate with a discount denture guy downtown (he could only think that maybe he had enough money that she would always be able to replace her false teeth instead of fixing them). She drove him to the house to get it, then they went to the denture place, then they sat in the parking-lot and waited while the dentures were made. They talked. Thinking that he would never see her again, he told her everything. Thinking that he had

nothing to lose he revealed all of himself to her, things he never shared with anyone, not even Amanda. She did the same. Then at the end of it. When the dentures were ready, when it was almost time to go get her son, they found that they understood each other. There was a familiarity there, that it was too soon to call friendship, but that bordered on intimacy anyway. They felt that something could happen.

She had a job up in Jacksonville, she told him. She was heading there now. A good job. He could see the boy in the backseat, sleeping. I don't have much room, but you can get some clothes and come with me. So here it was. The old Cadillac. This is my hope, he thought. I have nothing at that house, but I have everything at that house. I met her twenty-four hours ago. She was looking away, smoking a second cigarette, waiting for him to decide. Fuck the clothes, he said. Let's just go. It was a decision he would both regret and delight in for the rest of his life.

Jeb Reiss

Coming to Terms

I walk up a sidewalk flanked by walled gardens of multicolored roses and daffodils, their sweet scent an uneasy contrast to the quailing of my heart. My red Chihuahua tugs frantically on her leash, her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth as she tries to prove she is stronger than her ten pound body leads me to believe. Little gagging noises issue from her little body and she tries to break free of her collar by vigorously tossing her head.

We reach the front door of the hospice and my mom opens it to allow the dog and I to pass through. I find myself in the lobby. Mid-summer sunlight pours in from the windows, bathing the blue flower printed couches and chairs with warmth and cheerfulness. Vases of plastic flowers are scattered around the room, and there is an assortment of out of date magazines scattered on tables around the room.

Nobody sits reading before the fireplace. There are no groups of people standing around laughing or talking. I hear the clock ticking on the wall and the soft, excited panting of my dog. A nurse in green scrubs with a plastic smile appears and says something in a whispered voice to my mom. After a moment, I follow my mom down the hall to my grandmother's room.

The room smells of cleaning products and waiting death. Like the lobby, the room is bathed in warm rays of sunshine. Miniature dolls my grandmother collected through the years sit in a long line on the low window sill. The bigger dolls stand or sit on the top of a shelf, smiling at me with painted smiles and plastic eyes.

I shudder and turn my own eyes to the bed. For a moment, I think my eyes have deceived me. My grandmother's once snow white, beautiful, wavy hair lies flat, devoid of color and life. There are more wrinkles on her face than I remember, and her skin hangs from her face in defeat. Her head hangs to the side like a puppet without strings.

No longer held at bay by a gallon bag's worth of pills I can't even name, Parkinson's has complete control of my grandmother's body.
It is no longer hers. "Hi Mom! It's me. Erin and Merci are here, too," my mother exclaims. Her voice seems too loud in the tomb-like silence.

My grandmother opens her eyes and looks at us with watery, colorless eyes. I am convinced she doesn't see us. My mom puts Merci gently on the bed. I stand back awkwardly, uncomfortable and uncertain of what to say. I don't think she'll hear me or understand.
"Hi, Grandma . . ."
She doesn't look at me, but a barely audible sound comes from her bed.
"How . . .are . . .you . . .?"
I can't understand her, so my mom translates.
I lie. "I am all right." In actuality the room scares me, seeing her this way makes my insides melt.

The depleted, wrinkled woman in the bed does not match the mental picture I have of my grandmother. I remember her as a woman who knelt in her garden wearing a wide brimmed straw hat tied under her chin with a black ribbon while she planted roses that bloomed like children's smiles in late spring. At Christmas she made candy holly leaves out of dyed cornflakes and spicy red candies. My cousins and I liked to see who's tongue would be the most green from the food coloring.

Whenever I got sick, my grandmother would produce her small blue boxes of cluttered costume jewelry for me to go through. I would dump the contents of the boxes on the bed covers of the antique four poster bed in my grandmother's guest room and spend hours gazing at the shiny brass pins with glass stones that sparkled when they caught the light. Sometimes I would try to imagine where my grandmother got a particular pin and where she might have worn it, and ultimately, how it ended up in a box to be shown to her granddaughters whenever they got sick.

Grandma never sat with me while I looked over the pins, necklaces, earrings, and bracelets, and I never asked her about the history behind them. She was there though, in a sense. Secret stories I imagined about her past and who she may have been at my age lay hidden within each item I touched.

It saddens me that I never thought to ask her to unlock the secrets. Despite what I did know about her, there was so much I didn't know. I had my chance, and I never took it.

Looking at my grandmother now, the engulfing, heavy weight of regret settles on my heart. I blink a couple times and look up from the

linoleum floor in time to see my grandmother's head turn to the side in a drunken manner.
"I . . .will . . .be. . .out . . .soon . . ."
I don't know how to respond, or rather, I don't have the heart to respond. She knows I'm here, that our dog is here, but does she know where here is? This hospice? This place of peaceful death?

My mom hands me our dog and tells me to go for a walk around the building. I don't need to be told twice. Mom hands me the leash, and I all but flee from the room, not once looking back. Wandering around the halls, I find a small, reclusive space with a couch and sit down heavily. Death lingers in the air, in the halls, in the carpet, in the furniture. Escaping it is impossible.

I will myself not to cry, but tears have a life of their own.
Merci chases the resident black puppy around the room and I find myself wishing I had their sense of blissful ignorance to the pains of humanity.

A couple weeks later, I am standing in line at REI, wishing the cashier would hurry up. The late July air feels too heavy and my stomach is doing cartwheels all over the inside of my body.
I need to sit down.
When it's finally my turn, I lean drunkenly on the counter while the cashier rings me up with a cashier's indifference.
"Are you okay?" My mom asks once we're outside.
"No. I need to sit down for a second."
I stagger over to the trees and promptly hurl the contents of my cart wheeling stomach into the trees in front of the store.
Great. If this keeps up, there is no way I'm flying to New Hampshire to visit my stepmother's family.
That night, as I lie in bed trying to get my body to decide if it's too hot or too cold, the telephone rings. I know my mom answered it because it goes silent after the third ring.
I wait.
A few minutes later my mom comes in and sits on my bed. She never sits on my bed.
"That was Uncle Charlie," a pause, and then, "Grandma just died."
I start to cry. I think my mom is crying too, but it's hard to tell in the dark.
"I'm going to meet Aunt Nancy and Aunt Elaine at the hospice. Uncle Charlie is already there. He was there when Grandma died," she looks down at me, "do you want to come?"

I shake my head.
"Will you be okay here by yourself? Do you want to come upstairs and sleep in my bed?"

I shake my head again. I don't want to move. My stomach hurts, my body aches, and now my heart is breaking apart in my chest. Mom strokes my hair gently and gets up to leave, closing the door softly behind her. When I am sure she's gone, I take my teddy bear and go upstairs to my mom's room. I climb under the covers, feeling the warm comfort of our Chihuahua at my feet.

I hope Mom comes home soon. I want a hug . . .
I am sick for a week, and though it prevents me from going on my much wanted vacation, it also prevents my mom from being alone in her grief over the death of her own mom.

The funeral for my grandmother is held near the end of my week long illness. The late July sky is a dull, sorrowful grey that mirrors the feelings of my family as we walk toward the gravesite. My grandmother's polished wood coffin sits beside the plot where her husband is buried. The grandfather I never met.

We gather before the coffin and the service begins. The world seems to grieve with us in silence, the only sounds those of soft weeping and the solemn words of the pastor. A gentle wind dares to stir the hair of those gathered, blowing it into their faces, hiding their silent tears.
I know people are crying, but they are so quiet. Am I allowed to cry? I don't want to disturb the service. It's so quiet. I look up from the grass and glance at the coffin. Did they dress up her body? I thought the casket was open during the funeral so family members could walk by and pay their respects. How does Grandma look now?

My mind is so busy distracting me, I don't notice the tears washing down my face. Suddenly the air is filled with a deafening roar. As one, we look up in time to see two fighter jets streak through the grey afternoon sky. I watch them until they are out of sight. God, that's loud. When the pastor resumes speaking, there is a sad, gentle smile on his face, a smile that almost reaches his eyes.

At the time I didn't understand the significance of the two fighter jets. Only when my family talked about it with sorrowful fondness at the funeral reception did I realize what it meant: Grandma was with her

husband again, and she was happy. Now, I hold the memory close to my heart where it will not fade or be forgotten. In a way, it's a memory that fills a part of the emptiness my family and I all feel inside.
My mom cries a lot after the funeral, especially when a friend offers kindness or sympathy. Having never really known my grandmother as intimately as my mom did, I find it difficult to comfort her. She once spent half an hour weeping alone in her room, refusing a hug from me. I sat awkwardly alone on the couch, at a loss of what to do.

One morning at the breakfast table about a month after the funeral, Mom looks a bit lighter than usual.
"I had a dream about Grandma last night," she tells me.
I look up from my cereal. "What happened?"
"I was at a coffee shop or some kind of room somewhere. My mom walked in. She was dressed in a white gown and she looked healthy, like she did before Parkinson's really got a hold of her. 'Mom!" I called to her. She didn't answer, she just smiled at me and I woke up."
"Wow."
My mom smiles. It suddenly occurs to me that I haven't seen her smile in a long time.
"I think she was trying to tell me that she's okay; that she's happy now," Mom says.

I return the smile. The dream has caused a bit of the dark cloud to disappear from her brown eyes. Eyes that mirror my own. Perhaps now my mom can slowly come to terms with her own personal grief, and in time, I can learn to come to terms with my own.

The knowledge that I didn't take the opportunity to create an intimate relationship with my grandmother still weighs heavily upon my heart. Yet, I realize now that the memories I do have and what I do know is precious. It's better to have known someone for one moment of their life, however fleeting, than to never know them at all.

Erin Reilly

Planet Stupiter

Brendan Thicket was preparing the barbeque. The square sun shone down on his square sausages. The cars rolled by bumpily on their square wheels. He bent over to smell the cooking meat and when he stood back up again his hair was on fire.

'Food's ready,' he shouted.
'Coming,' his wife replied.

She took a fork, speared in into the sausage, and roasted it for a few seconds above her husband's burning head. She looked at the figure hanging from the great elm tree at the bottom of the garden.

'Catch another one?' she enquired.
'Sure did,' he replied.

The face was bloated and bruised, the eyes bulged, and a swarm of flies buzzed all around it.

Mr. Thicket looked on with some pride.

'I caught him out real good.'

Marjorie chewed thoughtfully. 'How'd you do that then honey?'

He breathed in the smoky air and for a few seconds savoured the victory.

'He tried to sell me a new vacuum cleaner at the door, and I said it looked like it sucked.'
'You tell him honey.'
'Then I said that looks like the opposite of easy to operate. And he says to me. It's as simple as two plus two.'
'He didn't!'
'He did! I looks at him and I says. So mister, what does two plus two add up to exactly? And do you know what he says?'
'I dunno.'
'He says four!'
'No!'
'I just dragged him round the back and strung him up! Him, hollering like a baby, saying, I'm not intelligent, I hate them sorts, and me not saying anything 'cause I've heard it all before.'

She chewed some more on the meat, as she watched the corpse spin idly in the wind. There was something about the exchange that didn't sit right with her. Finally, she had it.

'But isn't that intelligent Brendan, in a way, to catch someone out like that?'

Brendan thought about this for sometime before marching down to the elm tree and hanging himself. But the flames from his head burned through the rope and he landed back down on the ground with a thud breaking his ankle.

*

On Planet Stupiter, the dumber you were, the better things went. Intelligence, once a much-feared affliction, had now become a rare occurrence.

In more than twenty generations, no Thicket had ever been intelligent. Their family coat of arms consisted of a shoe treading on a dog turd and underneath it in Latin: Te audire no possum. Musa sapientum fixa est in aure.

Brendan's great grandfather had been crowned village idiot three years running. That was why it was such a shock to Brendan when he'd fathered an intelligent child.

He had looked at his wife as she lay there in the hospital bed, and wondered what she'd been up to. There were rumours that dumb women liked intelligent men. He'd wanted to accuse her of something, some act, but the word had escaped him as he sat by the cot.

The doctor came and took them into a side room. He was so dumb he'd risen to be a consultant. He told Brendan that he wasn't to worry…and then he said he'd forgotten why he wasn't to worry…but it might come back to him later.

Brendan felt something as he looked down into the cot…something the opposite of hate, but he hadn't said anything when the people from the Department of Doltishness came to take his son away.

*

The postman pushed two letters through the door, freeing Brendan

from his reverie, and he hobbled over to get them. He burned the envelopes above his head, and the flaming paper fragments set the hall carpet on fire. He closed over the door and grinned at his wife as he made his way back.

'Here, I got something to show ya,' he said, and handed over his bank statement. She read it slowly. '£32,000 in the red! Why you old dog you!'

'I know,' said a beaming Brendan. 'Just stick with me baby. This time next year we may well be looking at house repossession.'

He moved onto the next letter and his eyes widened.

'Marge!' he screamed excitedly. 'I've been chosen to appear on Leadhead!'

Marjorie fainted, possibly from the news she had just heard, possibly from smoke inhalation.

*

Leadhead was a popular game show on Stupiter. You took two terminally ill contestants, sat them down in wheelchairs, and gave each a loaded gun. You asked them a question and whoever got it right got the right to shoot. The winner also won a holiday that he would never live long enough to go on.

'Marge?'
'Yes, honey.'
'Why am I appearing on Leadhead? I mean I'm pleased and all, but it's not as if I'm dying or anything.'

He picked the cat up, sniffed its fur, and then placed it in the washing machine, closing over the door, and turning the dial.

'Ah,' said Marjorie. 'You remember that nice doctor at the hospital who told you not to worry about the baby?'
'Uh huh.'
'Well, after you left, he remembered why you hadn't to worry. He said you only had four weeks to live, and that was two weeks ago.'

Brendan watched as the cat's head spun round through the window.

'She's gonna be real clean,' he said. 'Did he say what was wrong with

me?'
'He did honey, but it just went out of my head as soon as I left the hospital. All those illnesses kinda sound the same to me.'

'Yeah,' said Brendan, as he continued staring at the washing machine. 'She's gonna be real clean.'

*

The big night came and Marjorie watched excitedly from the sofa as she chewed mouthfuls of popcorn. This was the first time anyone she knew had ever been on television.

The music started, the curtain came up, and the host ran down the studio staircase shooting invisible pistols in the air.

He beamed a smile into the camera, and introduced the contestants: 'Brandon Thicket, and Austin Texarse, ladies and gentlemen! Let's play Leadhead!'

Some of the audience had brought their own guns, which they fired into the roof, causing masonry and bits of metal to fall down. Brendan saw a woman decapitated in row three when a lighting rig fell on top of her head: her husband hi-fived the people around him before producing his camera.

'Now, please gentlemen, take your seats.'

Both men held their rifles by their sides tightly. The host produced the first card from his breast pocket. He cleared his throat. 'Drum roll please maestro,' he said. A hush fell over the entire studio, and then he looked at both contestants. 'What is two plus two?'

The 30-second clock began ticking loudly. The cameraman cut to shots of perplexed looking audience members. Brendan tried to get his brain to work. 'I'm going to have to hurry you,' said the host.

Suddenly, Brendan's eyes lit up. 'Four?' he answered but a groan went up from the studio audience. 'I'm sorry,' said the host, 'but I'm going to have to offer it to your opponent.'

'I dunno,' said Austin.

'I dunno is the correct answer!' screamed the host.

The band played the out of tune theme tune, the armed audience shot their weapons into the air, and the host once more ran around the studio firing his imaginary pistols.

Brendan braced himself, as Austin took aim from his wheelchair, and his life flashed before his eyes: he recalled that time he'd said…now, what was it he'd said again, and to whom? There was that day he went to visit…who had he gone to visit and where did they live?

It was on the tip of his tongue, when he heard a loud bang. His head snapped back, before falling forward, and slumping as his chin came to rest against his chest. The top of his skull was gone, revealing a dark empty cavity.

'Darn,' said Marjorie, as she chewed on some more popcorn.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. When she opened it, she saw a door-to-door salesman holding a vacuum cleaner. She looked at the implement for a few seconds as she leaned on the doorframe.

'It looks complicated,' she said.
'It's as easy to operate as two plus two.'
'What's two plus two then?'
'I dunno.'
'Clever boy,' she said. 'You better come in.'

Andrew McLinden

in a field outside of town

The ghost cows of Kewanna keep
their gazes down. We are all stories
after we pass but while we're alive
bulls terrorize, and calves impose
terrible eyes. Ghosts never glance
over, just sway giant muzzles
like machines without owners.
What they are doing no one

surmises or, for that, pays them
much mind. We're driving down
Seventeen. Out the window they
sentinel our tired blonde days.
I've never known them to notice
silence transgressing, nor question
my asking what are they hiding
beneath those awful white hides.

Sadly, they munch under night soaked
skies. Are we nothing to them behind
those fences, their faces too placid
or are we just blind? I shift and hit
the gas and tear on out of there.
No story's related. After we've
gone, ghost cows of Kewanna
continue their graze.

Brion Berkshire

My Brother's Keeper

As my brother nears forty, the smoke from his cigarettes seeps into our couch, and when we play poker Monday nights he snaps open beer after beer and tells sloppy jokes more loud than funny. He has never married, and his last relationship was a horror show. Recliners were burned in the driveway; clocks thrown through windows. He has always been just off the edge of life, and when I trace it back to the beginning, my Aunt Helen is there, tucked into the landscape like a dogwood in bloom. In a Polaroid she poses by the lake at Yellow Banks, a campground in the boot tip of Indiana. The picture is old, everything shading yellow. She holds two large catfish, one in each hand, their bellies creamy as butter, little round eyes above strange oriental whiskers. They struggled to breathe long after she pulled them from the water.

That whole summer my brother was her puppy. When we camped at the lake and my mother sent us to bed, Helen, all of nineteen, would linger in the tent, stroke my brother's fine hair and tell these fractured when-I-was-a-little-girl stories until he fell asleep. Funny stories about fat uncles lurching toward her down the narrow hall. How her mother would throw empty bottles at a growling dog, shattered fireworks of twinkling glass. Blonde strands of hair fell across her face so I couldn't see her eyes.

In another old photograph she's curled in my uncle's lap, the lawn chair beneath them ready to collapse. My uncle's eyes are bright and he flashes big square teeth beneath a ragged mustache. The stub of a cigarette smolders in the hand he rests on her thigh, and in his other hand he holds a can of beer out for the camera like a husky pitchman. The campfire is a dash of blurry sparks, but nothing framed has gone to yellow.

After swimming all afternoon, the whole family returned for an early supper, pink-skinned, tummies full of lake water. The Coleman stove hissed blue flames. In the reeds near the wooden dock we found a painted turtle the size of a half dollar, a slider my uncle called it. We put it in a Styrofoam bait cup and scooped up some swampy water. Aunt Helen lifted it high between two fingers, and it pulled deep inside its shell and sealed up tight. My brother cried that he wanted to see it, so my aunt pulled a Zippo from her front pocket and let it flicker beneath the turtle's hinged belly. The small thing ran on air, mouth agape. A shiver shimmied up my arms, so I wandered out to the ice chest to fish out a soda. In the last of the day's heat we watched snakes ess through

the shallows. Near dusk a family of fat people came down to our neighbor's dock and tried to rock free the wooden pilings for firewood. When we yelled at them, they ignored us and my grandfather had to warn them away with his revolver.

In the fall my uncle and aunt split up and she moved in with the second shift manager of the McDonalds in Boonville. Our mother fielded calls from friends and nosy women from the Methodist church who swapped all the gossip of how things turned ugly. On the way home from the county dump one afternoon, my father swung by to check on my uncle. As our truck knocked to a stop on the curved curb of the cul-de-sac, my uncle killed the mower and broke into tears at the end of the drive. He mopped his eyes and neck with a bright red bandana. His teeth were hidden behind his glistening mustache. A little dead tree in the yard clung to the last of its orange-brown leaves.

Someone had poisoned Tippy, their dog. I raced around back to get a look, my brother on my heels. He tripped on the downspout of the gutter and sprawled, but scrambled to his feet and followed. The dog settled deep in the gloom of its house, still chained to a stake, mouth open and black, riddled with flies. Its body fell in on itself and the stench was putrid and heavy. My brother couldn't put the patterns together in his head, light and shadow mixing with decay. He kept asking, Where's the doggy? My father came up and yanked us away by our elbows.

Our home was strangely quiet. The television had gone out and a thin guy in a green pant suit came over from McGowan's and pulled its guts out. My mother brought him a glass of sweet tea and half a sandwich. My brother and I sat on the couch and watched the repairman work. My father threw his tools around on the unfinished side of the basement. When the man finished up, he gave my mother the bill and thanked her for the sandwich.

He was barely out the screen door when my father came in fuming. He asked her what she meant by flirting like that? She said my father was being ridiculous. We chewed and chewed our sandwiches as the whole thing wound tight like a swing and spun all loosy goosy.

My brother burned twigs behind the garage and freed the Lautner's rabbits from their old shingled hutch. They never caught the black and white one though we saw it for weeks at the fringes of the

neighborhood. When my parents grounded him for acting out, I helped him runaway one blustery Saturday. He packed his comic books and some cookies and slices of cheese in a paper grocery sack and I boosted him out of the window and closed and latched the shutters. Mother came looking for him when it got too quiet, and as usual, his timing was impeccable. He had second thoughts and knocked on the window as she looked in the closet where she thought he might be hiding. After work my father gave us both the belt.

One Sunday after church my brother dug my aunt's new phone number from my mother's purse. The light was thin and pale and the parking lots of the shopping malls still held the last mounds of soiled snow. Mom was in the basement sorting laundry and checking pockets, and my dad snoozed in the recliner as the football game mummered on in the background. My brother shrugged his coat on over his Sunday best and slipped out the side door. He walked along the ditch four busy blocks to Shelpper's gas station where he called our aunt from a pay phone. Helen promised to come pick him up, but rang my mother instead. When he saw our maroon station wagon bump into the parking lot, he loped past the propane tanks before my mother snagged him as he climbed the chain link fence. I crouched low in the back seat as people gawked, and she forced him in beside me. His face was wet and rubbery. His army jacket smelled of fried potatoes and greasy chicken, with just a hint of gasoline. He was swallowed by the jacket's puffy greenness. The sun burned through the car's dingy windows, warm and steady. He pummeled the back of the passenger seat with his Buster Browns, and for some strange reason I thought again of the turtle. The ditches were weed-choked and confettied with trash, and no matter how hard my mother twisted the dial, all she could tune in on the radio was the faraway tremolo of an old man's hellfire sermon. My brother rolled down the window and yelled wild silliness to the world. My mother pulled off on the soft shoulder and flung open the door. She peppered him with a flurry of open palms, the flash of fingernails and her wedding ring.

Just last year Helen died of lupus. She'd moved away long ago to Fort Wayne, Indiana and never spoke to my brother again. He jumps from odd job to odd job, replacing a window here, taking down the eyesore of an old chain link fence there. My mother and father have run away to the gulf shores of Mississippi. My mother plays the slots in the big casinos. My father bought a bag of golf clubs at a local yard sale. They bicker and smoke and cat nap between meals.

My brother has stopped fighting with my mother, and she in turn has given up on chasing after him. He never goes far, and sometimes in winter when he strolls up the sidewalk in the dark, poker chips stacked on the table behind me, I swear he's grown smaller still, a six pack of beer in the grocery sack instead of comics, and that dark green jacket he buys over and over, swallowing him up like the cold rainy weather.

Brent Fisk

The Family Dog

The painting was named "The Family Dog." It was ironic because he was all alone and because George had gotten the painting for his wife in lieu of a real dog, which she wanted in lieu of a child. This dog in the painting, seated, wearing a suit and tie, smoking a Holmesian pipe, had been talking to him for two weeks by the time George decided to listen.

Before then George was sure it was a hallucination or the manifestation of some kind of neurosis. Maybe it was just an odd delusion, a stand in for his wife's doleful looks, the words she didn't say though he knew she thought.

It wasn't like the dog had any powers besides the already baffling one of speech. For example, he couldn't come out of the painting. For all George could tell, it couldn't even move from the recliner it was sitting on. All this painted dog could do was talk.

But boy could it talk. George, do this. George, do that. Clean this room, George. Why don't you just kill your wife, George? You know you want to. Stuff like that. Nag, nag, nag. It was almost the direct opposite of George's silent wife, who often sat beneath the painting as it talked.

George did not let on that he heard anything. He was certain should he acknowledge hearing the talking dog that it would never shut up. He was equally certain if he just ignored it long enough it would go away.

Even to take the painting off the wall and throw it out had seemed too much of an admission to the dog that he had heard every word the dog said.

But after the second week, with its babbling becoming worse instead of better, George decided to listen.

He pulled up a chair and set it before the painting.

"All right," George said. "You want to talk, go ahead and talk."

"I knew you could hear me. You weren't fooling anyone."

The dog's mouth moved when it talked but nothing else did. Not even the eyes.

"What do you want, dog?"

"I want simply this," the dog said. "For you to do my bidding."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I will be forced to employ other means of persuasion."

"Such as?"

"Pray you never find out."

"Are you the same dog who was talking to the Son of Sam?"

"My cousin," the dog admitted. "An amateur. Hardly worth considering."

"I see."

"You see nothing, human."

"Of course."

At this point George took out his pocket knife and cut a big X in the painting.

"What the hell?" the dog barked.

George said, "Not dead yet?"

"You will need more than a pocket knife."

George took the painting off the wall and carried it to the fireplace. Smiling, he lit a fire. When he was about to throw the painting inside, the dog said, "Wait a minute. Okay, okay."

"Okay, what?"

"Do you know how much effort it takes to haunt a painting?"

"No."

"Lots," said the dog.

George held him over the fire.

“You can’t really hurt me, can you?”

“No,” the dog admitted. “Hell, have a heart.”

George put the painting back on the wall.

“I’m not going to do what you tell me,” George said.

“I figured that,” the dog said. “But I don't care about that. I just hate you. You don't know what it's like being stuck and watching some guy who can move and doesn't, refuses. The truth of the matter is I'm sick of being a dog in a painting. And that’s why I told your wife to—“

But it never got to finish because George and the dog exploded with the bomb George’s wife had set between the fireplace logs.

James Valvis

Immobile

The truck rolled slowly and perilously up the icy hill. Dark trees, miles of snow and the endless night sky panned and dipped slowly across the vehicle's windows as it plodded upward. Eliot Moon refused to expose his fear to his father, and feigned nonchalance as he caressed the steering wheel, but it took all he had to rein it in with even the slightest bump or swerve. His knuckles were as white as the evening snow. "Positively gothic," judged Dr. Moon from the passenger's seat. He was most likely referring to the looming convent in the foreground, a structure built by pious innocents a century ago, which now resembled something a lazy teamster might've painted onto the backdrop of a 1950's B horror movie: all steeples and archways, missing only the token bolts of lightning overhead. There would be no lightning tonight to disrupt the cold stillness of most other nights that this region had to offer come winter.

Dr. Moon had been surprisingly quiet up until now, which was itself a small blessing. Perhaps the sight of the convent in this dark wilderness, which lacked subtlety in a way that probably offended him, triggered his gruff.

"The flu," he mumbled to himself. "An entire convent gets the flu. These women live in the Dark Ages. Deluded old virgins, forgotten by time."

Eliot said nothing, because deep down he feared nuns. He never met one, so the fear was irrational. But the idea of nuns terrified him. Dr. Moon despised all churches and religious figureheads, but had occasionally admitted to a grudging respect for the ladies of the cloth. They generally lived simple, healthy, long lives, which in his medical book spoke great volumes. That is why he agreed to respond to this late call, an act of great rarity on his part. He admired the nuns' lifestyle, not their calling.

The truck nearly sputtered a sigh of relief after it was parked into a small lot behind the convent, which looked much smaller up close than it did from the bottom of that high hill. Eliot opened the door for his father, who leapt spryly onto the snowy tar of the lot. The older man belonged on the cover of a baby boomer magazine: he was fit and strong, his bald head and knife-sharp silver beard only accentuating a potent masculine prowess. Eliot passed the leather black medical bag to his father and

began to follow him around to the front door, but halfway Dr. Moon spun to face him.

"You're not going in there," he told him. "This abominable place is a holy Petri dish of contagions. I will not have you loafing about the house, whining and spreading around your foul smoker's phlegm, and missing more work. Start warming the car in twenty minutes, and don't you dare smoke any of those damn cigarettes that I'm supposed to pretend I don't know you have."

Eliot watched as his father leapt up the icy steps to the front door with abandon. Was there a surface on earth strong enough to crack the old man's skull if he fell? Was it even possible that he could fall?

Convinced that he was finally out of Dr. Moon's line of vision, Eliot lit a cigarette. He had made his way slightly downhill and off the path, now finding himself in the dark, cold, silent forest. Eliot spent his days crunching tree trunks into particle board at the mill, and tall trees in the wilderness often made him feel guilty, threatened and unarmed. But better to smoke beneath these evil trees than in sight of his father, whose venomous medical sermons cut him deeper than any saw.
As he puffed on the little burning knob, the usual thoughts crawled lazily through Eliot's mind. He wished the mill would go union; a rumor had spread that a guy at the union mill several towns over had "accidentally" severed the tip of his finger on the head saw and was given a lifetime of disability payouts.

He wished he could be back in New York City, in Greenwich Village with bohemian Aunt Peggy, where he spent the happiest fourteen months of his young life while his mother was sick so many years ago. The memory of those lights and colors, songs and smells; those happy drunk college students and their sidewalk bric-a-brac, were now fading into half-recalled dreams.

He wished that he didn't have the face of a horse and the voice of a dormouse, so that he could get the nerve to spark up a conversation with the check-out girl at the Mobil Station off of Exit 21, who was the only pretty girl Eliot had ever seen within twenty miles in any direction. He wished he could be anywhere else and anyone else but Here and Him.

The first scream was so muffled and quick that Eliot just assumed he hadn't heard it. It couldn't be a scream; it was an afterthought. He smoked on.

The next one came long seconds later. It was a bleating, inhuman wail, undeniable in its awful eeriness. It came from no direction, and had no discernable proximity. It dropped a hard chill onto Eliot, who froze in place, mind and body.

The third scream brought more purpose and less mystery. Perhaps it was just Eliot adjusting to this new stimulus, but he could now read more from it. A woman, deep in the woods, beneath the hill, away from the convent. A woman in pain. A woman being raped. Murdered. Mauled.

The cigarette butt fell to the ground. Eliot heard his heavy breathing and felt his heart thump wildly in his ribs. He was making a crunchy mess of the snow beneath him as he began running in one direction, stopping, backtracking, beginning in a new direction, stopping, backtracking, etc. Where should he go and what should he do? The convent. His father. Cell phone. Police.

The fourth scream pulled him blindly into the dark woods below him like an invisible claw. He had to act. He had to stop this. Where was he going? His brain clattered within his skull like a coin in a shaken bucket. What would he do? The dark trees whipped around him as he leapt down over roots and branches, stumbling, slipping, but not falling. What was he prepared to see? His mind floated above his body, but the body soldiered downward, following the fifth scream.

The trees cleared and Eliot stopped running, and was now sliding down an icy hill, on the soles of his boots, like he was roller-skating. Here was a cemetery. A fucking cemetery, beneath the ledge he had landed on. A sixth scream rose from below him, and Eliot was so scared that he almost began to cry. Then he looked down.

In the deep snow bank beneath his icy-rocky perch, some yards from the gravestones, lay a large figure, seemingly making snow angels. It took a long moment for Eliot to summon back control of his organs to determine what he was seeing. It was a heavy woman, lying face down in the snow. She was not making snow angels, she was merely clawing

feebly at the snow around her to try and regain leverage, but she was failing. She had fallen. And now she was screaming.
Eliot hated himself when he realized he was stifling a laugh. Perhaps it was out of relief that the big reveal had not proved more dire, and that he did not have to fight a bear or a murderer. Perhaps.

After a mercifully brief moment of pondering, Eliot slid down this slope with the same ease as the one above it. He began to silently marvel these stuntman athletics of his, triggered in a moment of chaos. Who knew? Ankle-deep in the snow bank, Eliot jogged to where the large woman lay.

"I'm here," he announced breathlessly as he approached, "I'm here."
The woman began to cry when she heard this, but could not angle her head to view her savior. Eliot stooped low to meet her gaze. Her dark eyes were pink and puffy, and her round, childish face was deathly pale. Her mouth was agape with sobs.
"What happened?" Eliot asked.
The woman was trying to formulate words between her blubbery bleats. "I fell," was all she could legibly muster. She repeated this several times. Eliot reached for her wide hands, which were spread out before her.
"No!" screamed the woman pathetically. "You can't get me up by yourself! I'm too big! Get help!"

On a normal night, these words would've moved him to pity and embarrassed obedience, but tonight Eliot was feeling cocky. So he took a firm grip of her wrists and began to pull her up. She was heavy, but the adrenaline that pumped through his body made Eliot into a human forklift. Soon the woman was slumped over his shoulders, and then standing before him more or less on her own, but she was wobbly and continued to tightly clutch his hands. She proceeded to shake and sob.
"I was trying to take a shortcut to the path over there," she finally warbled after regaining an inch of composure, motioning with her head to a small footpath going up a side of the hill leading up to the road that, sure enough, would've made Eliot's downward journey a lot more practical. "I don't know why I walked here. The snow is so deep. I don't know what I was thinking."

Eliot furrowed his brow in puzzlement. "It's not so deep," he replied.
The woman burst into new tears, and now Eliot finally felt the good-old fashioned guilt reclaim his body, stifling the adrenaline rush down with a forceful wallop. He had said the wrong thing.
"Let's go," he told her, and began to release one of her hands, but she held on for dear life.

"I can't, I'll fall again," she whimpered.
"Okay," he answered, "Okay. Let do this."
Hands locked with hers, Eliot began to pivot the pair of them in a circular fashion towards the path, side-stepping. She followed his lead in this strange little dance. When they finally reached the relative safety of the path, the woman cried out in relief and hugged Eliot tightly.
"You saved me," she whispered. "You saved me, you saved me." A strange warmth basked over Eliot as she cooed this into his ear.

The slow march back up to the convent proved relatively quiet as the woman began to regain her composure. By the time they had been let in by one of sisters, pale and unresponsive in her illness, she gone quite silent. Perched on a bench in the waiting room, the woman silently gasped, eyes closed, exhausted. Her entire body was damp from the snow and the sweat. The simple cotton muumuu she wore clung moistly to her folds, and her surprisingly bare legs dripped small rivers through her fleshy crevices. The rolls of her leg fat draped over her ankles, nearly hiding her slippers.

The older nun who let them in lingered only briefly before retiring to her chambers, too sick to stand there and tend to them. Eliot caught glimpses of other nunly figures spiriting down hallways in flickering movement, younger ones pushing older ones in wheelchairs with remarkable speed.

Dr. Moon had been summoned, and was now questioning the woman as he tapped her brow with a cloth and pulled a thermometer from her mouth. He was trying out his best bedside manner with her, but even this was fraught with chilly sarcasm.

"Well, you are very lucky to have escaped diphtheria, Virginia," he told her, calling her the single name she had given him earlier when pressed. His reeked of adult condescension, and clearly Virginia immediately knew what she was up against and hated him.

"Your son saved me life," she replied simply. Dr. Moon merely took a mental note of the mercury in the thermometer before returning it to his bag.

The youngest and healthiest nun in the convent, a silent woman in her fifties, was now swaddling Virginia's bare legs with paper towels, mummifying them. It was grotesque and sad for Eliot to behold, but his

father's lack of response to Virginia's declaration made it seem all the more depressing.
"And what brought you to the cemetery at this hour?" the doctor finally continued with half-interest. Perhaps his father could get some sort of punchline out of this line of questioning, Eliot pondered.
"I realized I had forgotten to put flowers on a grave," she answered curtly.
"Ah, I see, I see," Dr. Moon added with a dramatic nod. "A lost lover, perhaps? Husband?"
"My mother's. I'm not married."
"Of course." Dr. Moon then balked as if he caught himself in an outward display of obvious cruelty. This was not his style, at least not with anyone other than Eliot.
"And where do you live?" he proceeded, switching gears.
"Half a mile down the road, off Exit 19."
"Well, that's quite a walk for you."
Virginia flashed him a cold stare. "I took a taxi."

Dr. Moon nodded again. "I see, I see. Well, you live, for now. But, Miss Virginia, I must warn you that a person of your immobility must really consider some serious lifestyle changes before deciding to go on a late-night gallivant through a cemetery snowdrift."
"Dad," Eliot heard himself interjecting. The nun had stopped her swaddling and looked up at the doctor coldly.
Dr. Moon quickly turned back to his son, sporting a stoney frown, but Virginia held up a hand, nodding patiently.
"It's okay, Eliot," she announced sadly, "It's fine. I've had this conversation a thousand times with a thousand men just like this one. And I'm tired of discussing my glands, my diet, and everything about my body. It's pointless, and it's not worth it. So, I'll just call a cab and be on my way. Thank you again, so much, Eliot."
Without once looking back at the woman, Dr. Moon leaned in to whisper to his son. "Take her home, and come right back. Don't listen to a thing she tells you. Just drop her off and get right back here. I'm tired of this nonsense, and these people."

Despite her ordeal, Virginia now smiled sweetly from the passenger's seat of truck where she was precariously squeezed into. She was murdering the vehicle's suspension and the truck nearly scraped the tar, but Eliot did not mind so much. He was transfixed by the sudden change of mood from his passenger as the convent dropped out of sight behind them.

"How did you find me?" she asked, staring at him with her warm chocolate eyes and her sunny round face, framed under strawberry bangs.
"I was out there smoking," Eliot responded sheepishly. What's going on here, he wondered.
"Thank God for that," Virginia said with a gentle laugh. "Thank God you smoke."

Eliot awoke from a strange, pleasant dream with a cruel chemical jolt, darting upward from the couch where he normally slept. Dr. Moon hovered by him, fully dressed for a day at the office, shaking his resigned head. He was absently stuffing the remnants of the smelling salts back into his pockets.
"Go to work," he commanded before quickly exiting the house.

The day had passed languidly, and Eliot was surprised to get through it uninjured, given the state he was in. His thoughts had been darting awkwardly between wanting to know why Virginia had seemed so at ease with things last night in the truck, and what the inside of her house looked like. And he had never seen eyes so wide or a smile so kind. And no one had ever called him a hero before.

"These are for a friend," Eliot heard himself telling the checkout girl in the Mobil station. "She's going through a rough time. These should cheer her up, right?" This had been the most he ever said to the checkout girl. Or to any girl, more or less.
"Sure," she replied, not even looking up at him. "That'll be eleven fifty."

"The kettle doesn't whistle anymore," Virginia called from the kitchen, "But I always know when it's ready. Eliot fidgeted on the puffy couch adorned with an Afghan rug. His gas station bouquet spread modestly from a jar, newly perched on the little coffee table before him. The house was a descent size, but dilapidated. Many chachkies adorned shelves and surfaces, depicting animals at play or rest. The woman emerged with two blue mugs and their flapping tea bag strings hanging from them, and sat down on the loveseat across from him.
"No one's brought me flowers in a real long time," she said with quiet sincerity after a pause.
The worst thing about blushing is the tingling heat one feels in their cheeks.
"I dunno if their considered nice or not," he babbled, "it's not my thing."
"They're nice," she assured him with a smile. "And if if you didn't bring

them, it's so nice that you came to check up on me. You're just nice, I guess."
Eliot nervously sipped the tea. "This is good."
"Yes. You bought it for me, sort of. Welfare, I mean. It's from the taxpayers."
Eliot looked up at her.
"I have to be honest," she continued gravely. "I'm not proud of it. I have three undergraduate degrees: Library science, computer science, English. But no one wants to hire me. And I don't know if I could get to a workplace if they did."
Eliot didn't quite know what to say, so he said the first thing that came to mind. "Never did college."
She eyed him curiously. "How old are you again?"
"Twenty-two."
Another kind smile. "And you can't guess my age. No one can. I like it that way. It's one of the perks of being like this."
She was correct, but Eliot could never guess anyone's age. He wasn't good at that sort thing.
"You should give college a thought," she continued. I mean, you're father's a doctor. You can afford a great school. I had to do the community college. And even that wiped me out."
This was not a conversation he wanted to have. "Not for me."
She searched his soul with a warm, penetrating gaze, then suddenly shivered, and clung her large sweater tighter around her shoulders.
"It's cold in here," she said. "That air conditioner over there is rusted into the wall. I threw a blanket over it, but that didn't do much. I hope these flowers make it through the week."

The flowers lasted about three days, but they remained wilted in the jar when Eliot returned. On the fourth week, it was Eliot himself who decided the brown rotted things must be tossed.

He did not care much for the opinion of others, regarding who saw him with Virginia or who did not. Not like there was much to worry about if he did: Virginia always preferred his visits at her place. The home she inherited was cluttered, but she kept it neat enough, and it always felt inviting and safe compared to Dr. Moon's stark little house.

Eliot did not fully understand his attraction to Virginia. She was certainly not the physical type he had become familiar with in women, and by all means was raised to resent anyone who "did not take care" of themselves physically. But truthfully, Virginia actually led a pretty healthy life. She ate well, exercised to the best of her ability, and was

hygienic. But she was born with problematic glands, and there was nothing she could do about that. He admired her acceptance of this, and appreciated how devastating a setback like the night in the cemetery could be.

He had to admit that Virginia's constant reminders of his heroic acts that night, as well as her regular reassurance of his attractiveness, intelligence and overall goodness, had become a bit of a drug. He caught himself becoming less embarrassed with her compliments over time, and this revelation nerved and thrilled him.

Aside from this ego boost, conversations with her were also intoxicating. She listened well, and she spoke of interesting things, like places she'd like to travel to and jobs she'd like to have in those places. Eliot began to see himself in other places around the world, away from this nowhere town, for the first time. Perhaps he and Virginia could leave this place behind and get their fresh starts somewhere else entirely. The only person he went out of his way to hide his friendship with Virginia from was his father, of course. It wasn't so much that Dr. Moon had any sort of power over him per se, but the man had a way of producing such a vicious turn of phrase. Eliot did not think he could listen to the awful things the hateful doctor had to say about Virginia.

It was on the day that Eliot was finally able to wrestle that damn rusted air conditioner out of the hole in Virginia's wall that life became even more interesting. It started with her hand on his shoulder, which turned into a caress of his arm.

All the things that Dr. Moon had to say about fat women were wrong. Everything about her body was soft, warm and inviting. He fell into her, and with every inching movement there was another part of her to explore. She roared with delight. It was wonderful.
Love consumed him, for the first time. There was no point in calling it anything else. Virginia opened up even more after this first lovemaking; she became more real, more human. Her encouragement and praise never stopped, but he found that she had begun to gently prod him into a forward movement. Where could they take this? What should they leave behind? What did they need to do to make this into an actual life together?

"I heard about you and your friend," Dr. Moon told Eliot one day as the younger man was rushing out. Eliot froze and eyed his father, who stood with his back to him, gazing out the window, a cold little marble

statue. Such a small figure, casting such a large shadow.
"What's that, now?" Eliot asked, knowing full well where this was going.
"A doctor friend of mine told me all about it. I'm surprised that behemoth of yours still manages to come in for check-ups. She went on and on to him about her new young lover. I obviously knew right away. I was repulsed, but I knew that only you could ever be so stupid as to-- I can't even say it. I can't even imagine it."
Eliot hung his head, ashamed of his shame. "I didn't think you doctors were aloud to talk about that stuff," was all he could say.
"No one but fools live here, in this town. If that weren't the case, I'd warn you against the social improprieties of being seen with such a person.
Eliot flashed with angry heat. He just wanted to get out of this house, forever and ever.
"Well, if that's the case, then you really don't have much to complain about, Dad. I'm just another fool."
The doctor turned around. Eliot was expecting those beaty little death orbs burrowing hatred into his chest, but was instead surprised to see that Dr. Moon's eyes were opaque pools of sadness.
"You don't remember you're mother's illness all that well," he began. "I sent you away at the worst of it and I don't regret it. The meningitis twisted her spine into a an abstract thing, and she screamed herself to unconsciousness, and I was right there screaming along with her. And then she screamed herself to death, and I was left wondering whether or not our twenty years of relative happiness together was worth it for me, to have to see her in those final moments."

A lump formed in Eliot's throat, and he was rendered mute. He had only the vaguest, most idealized memories of his mother, but the image of her as a screaming, knotted pretzel was too much for him to process. He had never really been told this before.
"Falling in love with a sick person is the height of folly," Dr. Moon continued gravely, sad eyes lost in thought. "You will be left alone, questioning the point of everything, and you will grow into a cold person."
Eliot recovered as quickly as possible. "Virginia isn't sick. She's just gotta different shape, is all. She's healthy enough."
Dr. Moon shook the languidness from his expression and frowned familiarly. "And what does she want to do with her life, this Virginia? What are the great plans you two have for the future?"
"I dunno. We'll work something out."
"I am sure you're convinced she's self-sufficient, but I am going to go out on a limb and suggest that she's on assisted living, is that correct?"
"Just for now, but she's gonna get a job soon."

"She will get no job," Dr. Moon growled emphatically. "She will continue to blame the world for her problems, and she will suck the resources out of everything and everyone around her. She will leave you a dry husk, and you will be stuck in this town you hate so much forever and ever."
Eliot felt dizzy, and slumped onto the couch. Nausea crept its way up into the pit of his stomach.
Perhaps, for a fleeting moment, something resembling pity could be traced in his father's expression. Eliot remembered the first and last time he saw this look, years ago, as the doctor faded from view while the train carried young Eliot to New York City.
But the moment was indeed fleeting, and the gears turned again in the doctor's presentation.
"Do as you must. I don't own you. I did a rotten job of raising you and there's no point in starting now.
"But you should know this. Your Aunt Peggy called a few weeks ago, and wondered if you had any interest in working as a superintendant in that maddening little building of hers in the East Village.'
Eliot shivered. This was too much.
"I wasn't sure what to tell her," the doctor continued. "You've been out of the house more than usual these past few months. I thought perhaps you were finally resigning yourself to life in the particle board business here, and that this rural idiocy was maybe your real calling.
"Tell me. Was I wrong in drawing that conclusion, Eliot?"

Eliot was frozen in the truck. Every exterior and interior square inch of the vehicle was packed with items, wrapped in paper and plastic and tied with bungee cords.

Virginia's house loomed in the passenger window, looking smaller and colder in the moonlight this evening then he had remembered. He hadn't spoken to Virginia in weeks, leaving her voicemails unanswered. Avoiding her proved alarmingly easy, despite the pleading, desperate confusion of her messages. Listening to Virginia's recorded raves and rambles as she tried to work out the reasons of his betrayal in monologue form infused Eliot with a detached coldness, like he were listening to an avant-garde radio play. He knew that his father's words had gotten to him: perhaps she really was a being of endless need and limitless blame. Perhaps she had been about to reveal these to be her true colors. Perhaps he was getting out alive while he could.
If that was the case, it did not explain why Eliot could never bring himself to actually explain to Virginia why he had her cut out, or that he had officially cut her out at all. It did not explain why the mere idea of saying goodbye to her would completely paralyze him.

He gave the little house one last look. Perhaps she had already forgotten him by now. Maybe she'd find the strength she needed to gain her mobility, and move on to better things. Or maybe she'd remain in that house, in this town, until the end of her days. Eliot hoped that wasn't case.

Realizing he was crying, Eliot drove off, accelerating more with each mile, praying for the moment to arrive when this frosty little town would drop out of the rear view mirror for the final time.

James R. Silvestri

Surfaces

Dragonfly wings—mother of pearl
trilled with charcoal and pine,
finely transparent above

the buoyant bluegills suspended
below flowering lily pads
with azure and emerald
scales, each a tiny gem,
mesmerizing
in the dark
nibbling
cold.

Glenn Lyvers

Deer

Looking for trouble is serious
business for white tail deer
in the frosted Indiana
fields. They amble deftly
in a black and white world
dotted by orange hunters
only barely aware
their swelling bellies tighten,
waiting for the spring.

Glenn Lyvers

Groundhog Day

Sometimes boys lie
on the edge,
out of sight
along holey-hill—
long guns trained
over groundhog colonies
tempted by sunshine,
tempted by clover,
waiting for gullible
little brown heads.

Glenn Lyvers

Fly Fishing

Trickery is stirring,
drifting in the brook,
a shiny ordained barb
luring the fish
with a colorful story—
promising fulfillment
while twisting and dancing
like magic
in the shallows.

Glenn Lyvers

1850 – Rising.

1.
She took the bull
—the breeder,
our entire future
down
the dark trail.

There was no discussion
about mother,
about the guilty
footprints to the butcher.

Father lay dying over
grandmas white linens
until he wasn't anymore.

Suddenly
soup.

2.
She wore her dress,
Sunday's church,
wading in the river—
watching the men on the bank.

Silently fishing.

3.
She gathered eggs
in the morning.
Warm for cooking.
Scrambled, Over medium, Hard, Poached.
Standing at the stove—
radiating heat.

Humming hymns
to herself.

4.
A winter of lead.
Heavy protestant rafters.

Silent
cold.

Reverent,
tombstone-cold.

Mother burned
the barn in the stove.

5.
The fat summer Grace died—
Blackberries and grapes
Beer and moonshine
Chickens and rabbits

Cooking all day.
All day dirty plates,
all day turning spits—
all the angry ovens.

6.
Fireflies brought recurring dreams
of dad walking in
the fields,
clearing the stones.
Incorporating the mash.
Drinking our worries.
Carrying the sire bull.
Straddling the bucking barn.
Lighting oil lamps in the yard—
fireflies.

7.
I saw Uncle Robert from Colorado
rise
with a full team of horses,
rise
like the cedars do—
over the hill
until he too floated
in-between
the hill and the clouds.

Robert from the mountains
stepped down
to straighten an injured fencepost
and then he drove the jingling team
across the river
to the porch.

He settled in.

8.
Sister Edith converted again.
Sunday church with mother~
wading in the river~
dresses like clinging church bells.

Sister Edith rang.
At last, no longer silent.

*

Five dollars for wedding invitations;
Cordially,
"Robert and Edith"

9.
Mother lived
nine more summers by the river.

Near the end,
she was watched over
by young boys, reverent boys,
sons of Edith, who taught her
every day
to pick a flat rock,
to hold it sideways,
to throw it in that familiar way
over water and water.

10.
Mother died in the shadow
of the new barn,
where she could hear
young boys laughing.

Up the ladder—
Falling—
Up the ladder—
Falling—
into the yellow
hay below.

Up the ladder—
Falling—
Up the ladder—
Falling—

Up the ladder—
Falling—
Up the ladder—
Falling—

11.
It rained the day we tried
to bury mother.

The great pouring of 1850.
It was the kneeling river
drumming,
sobbing,
swelling up
            all at once—
            rising up, like choir voices
singing loudly, *Halleluiah*—
taking mother away
in a tiny wooden boat.

Glenn Lyvers

The Orchestra

Choruses of insects wail
at the cross-
roads of the forest,
where many paths converge. Insistent
choirs perform their orchestrations,
sounding alarms, of-
ten commandments to visitors
trying to decide the right path
to follow. The deafening noise
causes many to avoid the cross-
roads, turning back
to quiet, familiar trails.

Glenn Lyvers

My father's woods

Walking through my father's woods
I am read by blind saplings
reaching out to brush my face
with their curious leafy hands.
They are the turnstiles of the forest
spreading out their arms to count
the visitors who pass—and their
broken fingers point to where
the inconsiderate visitor went.

The sun shines down between
the noble green towers creating
a kaleidoscope of oddly shaped lights
and soft cornered shadows along the
soggy path where the black earth yields
beneath my feet, creating footprints
that gather water for the mice and birds
to drink from when they leave
their perches, high and low.

In my father's woods I am on the big screen
surrounded by a bewildered audience,
wondering what to make of my
clumsy trudging about. I become
an awkward moment in a foreign film
when the music stops and the audience
watches silently, waiting for God
knows what to happen next—and
if I pause, like a statue and listen,
I can hear them discussing me
during the intermission.

Glenn Lyvers

Flash flood in Bridgman

On the edge of Bridgman
there are no sirens—no fanfare
when the river vomits in-
to the gulley, flooding the farm-
land, delivering odds and ends
from the river.

On the Rolling Acres, a shopping cart,
deposited with the receding waters,
is missing the wheels. Dead horses
bloat beside flat fish, staring
at the sun with opaque eyes.

Only two days later, flowers
open to the singing birds.
A brown barn begins to crackle,
cleaning itself—color shining
where mud falls away in sheets.
Only the meadow's low end, still
a tiny pond jammed with turtles—
remains new.

Glenn Lyvers

Shadow in the garden

She was an incidental earth mother
born of lust like those be-
fore her. Though the passion faded,
the garden erupted anyway.
Things abandoned will grow

in lackluster secret ways,
absent the missing gardener—
day by day, always growing. A sin
for the crops—to be left alone
to grow or wither, up to them.
And when they do grow, gorgeous,

the gardener brags to everyone
who will listen. To such rhetoric
people smile and never question that
they never saw the gardener, garden—
guarding against anything. A lie,

and one told so often
that one comes to believe
the lies of the great gardener
standing amongst the gorgeous,
like a shadow.

Glenn Lyvers