



Freight Stories

No. 3

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Freight Stories

is a free, online, fiction-only literary quarterly featuring the best new fiction on the web (or anywhere else, for that matter). Editors Andrew Scott and Victoria Barrett constitute the full partnership and entire staff.

We are mission-driven to promote the work of contemporary authors, both established and emerging, and to offer writers the confidence of print editing practices with the exposure of web publishing. *Freight Stories* is published in March, June, September, and December.

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Freight Stories Submission Guidelines

Freight Stories seeks to publish the finest contemporary fiction. Send us your stories, shorts, stand-alone novel excerpts, and novellas.

We do not publish work that exists solely for readers of romance, mystery, crime, erotica, or other genres you can name; we do, however, happily consider works of literary fiction that employ the tools of successful genre fiction in their exploration of rich characters.

Fiction of all lengths and styles is welcome. We wish only that your work be driven by the exploration of the lives of believable, compelling characters, and that it help to illuminate, broaden, or in some way enrich its readers' perspectives.

We ask that the work not be previously published in any form, and that you not submit more than one story at a time. Simultaneous submissions are fine, but please let us know immediately if the work is accepted elsewhere.

Submit your best work via e-mail to submissions at freightstories.com. To help us streamline our record-keeping, please include your name, contact information, and title of the work in the body of the e-mail. PDF and Word attachments (.doc, .docx, .rtf) are preferable to cut-and-paste submissions because of formatting concerns. As is the case with many literary magazines, we cannot offer payment to our authors, though we hope to in the future.

We welcome submissions year-round and hope to respond within three months.

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Tom Andrews

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Strangled Moose

*“In the moonlight
I met Berserk . . .”*

I.

Seven men, a pale woman and a dog
Circle the indoor, rubberized track
Like strangled moose.

II.

Orpheus rolled through his sleep.
Eurydice read a popular novel, a period piece
Involving a *ménage à trois*
And the strangling of a moose.

III.

Dear Mr. Farnsworth,
I’m sorry. I swear the black elk looked
Like a black moose.

IV.

A moose and its brown neck
Are one.
A moose and its brown neck and my hand
Are one.

V.

He read every third word
Of all of Leibniz.
Of each evaded word he made
A sharp, viable noose.

VI.

October. Bitter, early winds.
It sure was a big moose.

VII.

I listened and listened
To the cries
Of the softball fans.
The shortstop on deck
Reached for an aluminum bat
And grabbed the furry neck of the moose.

VIII.

I know the efficient sheen
Of otter, the orthodox
Tumult of moths. But I know, too,
That the moose could care less.

IX.

Bip said:
“I can imagine the calmest reality,
Containing a large fork-lift
And a bull moose...”

X.

The eyes of Proust are oblong and veined.
The wind combs its hair.
There is a monastery in Melk, Austria.
I did not see the moose there.

XI.

There is so much pleasure in the world:
An affable star, a warm bath,
The sordid strangling of a moose...!

XII.

The Sartrean moose. The Hegelian
Moose. Enigmas and structural myths
Of the moose. Meanwhile I've chosen
Freudian cactus?

XIII.

The air today is a fetid air.
The green grass is brown.
The moose coughs.

From the Editors: Freight Stories still doesn't publish poems. Except this one, which we offer to you because of our deep respect and love for Tom Andrews and his wonderful work. We're grateful to Ray and Alice Andrews, Tom's parents, for uncovering this previously unpublished poem for us. The editors got to know each other in a class Tom taught at Purdue. The world is less bright without him in it.

Ray Andrews writes: "Alice was trying to help us downsize and found an unpublished item of poetry Tom wrote while still a student at Hope College, in Holland, Michigan. Tom often was an iconoclastic wag in his writings, as you no doubt know. We think this was done in 1983 or 1984."

Kim Whitehead

The Visit

As Ava watches through the train window, the city is reduced to a clean reflection of itself. The early sun glistens equally on gentrified neighborhoods, gritty factories, and toppled gravestones. Cars and pedestrians move purposefully in the distance, without noise. Except for the occasional teenager on his cell, the riders are also quiet, staring out as she does or closing their eyes while they sit straight against the back of the seat, packages balanced on their laps. In the rush of the train is a kind of stillness she knows nowhere else in the city, but also a special sadness, as if the riders, especially the women and the old, are weary of the places they must go and wish to keep traveling on.

Then the train enters the station and glides to a halt. The doors slide open. She walks down the platform, swallowed into noise and smell and hustle. She moves onto the sidewalk and past the fruit stands at the corner of Marietta and Techwood, where most mornings a homeless man with a handsomely wild beard is inventing a blues riff. And then she arrives at her office, where the world closes in even more tightly, the latest murders, natural disasters, and political scandals coming in over the wire, where she is world-weary and cynical, where this is commonly thought by her colleagues to be the only attitude to take toward reality.

Her days often end at night, with a couple of drinks and dinner at Little Sal's, three blocks from the office. She is usually not alone—they are a tribe of sorts, her news crowd, especially the ones without someone to go home to, which is most of them. Then she is back on the train again, only this time she is one of the riders with a straight spine and closed eyes—she is truly exhausted now, and besides, through the window there are only scattered lights in the darkness, just a dim echo of her morning vision.

She knows herself well enough to admit it: she goes on defense, becomes a warrior at the gates, when outsiders visit her in the city. It's funny that she thinks of them as outsiders, since they still live in the place where she spent the first 18 years of her life: her mother and father, her aunts and cousins, a few high school friends. The only person she has not looked at this way is her grandmother Dial, who has visited once and was so eagerly childlike in her attention to the life of the city that Ava felt an enormous tenderness for her. They spent two days taking in all the sights. In other company, Ava would have felt stupid in the Coca-Cola Museum and the Cyclorama, but with Dial it was different. She didn't criticize. She didn't observe, however politely, that people act so differently in the

city or that the traffic was just unbearable (how did she stand it?) or that there are just so *many* black folks. And Ava believed her grandmother didn't really even think these things—she was having too much fun to be provincial.

So when her cousin Janette calls and leaves a rambling message saying she will be in town for the apparel mart for a long weekend and she's very nervous because this is the first time—after all, she's only had this new job at the dress shop about three months—but surely it will be fun anyway because in the evenings they can get together like two young single women and go out on the town, Ava feels her armor click into place. Two young single women, she thinks. Janette is married with two young sons—sweet boys, her mother tells her, though Ava has seen them only twice—and she wants to *act* young and single, but what does she think Ava is? At thirty-five, perhaps not so young anymore, but she is single. And free.

So, on Friday morning, she assembles an all-black outfit—not uncommon for her, but this one is particularly cosmopolitan: pencil skirt, strappy slingbacks, tight blouse with just a touch of flounce and more cleavage than usual. She sits next to the window on the train, soaking in her city's morning glory, feeling keenly how well she will extol its virtues over dinner that night. Then, finally, late in the afternoon, she is on the train to the airport, still, she thinks, looking smashing, though not so giddy anymore. The prospect of dinner with Janette, attractive in the abstract for its qualities of noble battle, now seems like just another dreary struggle to fend off assault.

Then she is negotiating the crowd at baggage claim, feeling a

little foolish in her garb, looking for Janette. It has only been six months since Christmas, so she knows what to expect from her cousin: colorful, well-coordinated blouse and skirt and dainty heels; whitened teeth; diamonds in all the traditional places; a little flip in the ends of her highlighted hair. And when Ava picks her out of the crowd, yes, she is decked out as expected, and she is bouncing on the balls of her feet as she watches suitcases move down the conveyor belt. Ava stands back a moment, suddenly less certain of who to be in this encounter, but then pushes her purse back on her shoulder and walks stiffly toward her cousin.

Janette swoops her floral print suitcase off the line and turns with a wide smile just as Ava reaches her. “Ava!” Before Ava can refuse, she leans in to give a graceful half-hug and then launches into a detailed account of her flight on the commuter plane. Ava tries to listen, watching Janette's peridot earrings dangle and counting the rings on the hands her cousin is moving through the air for emphasis. Then she is lost in the sensation she has had in countless airports around the world, surrounded by so many people so uncertain of one another, trying to get their bearings as boundaries are asserted, revised, forgotten. She feels the layers of stories swirling around them and steers her cousin out of the knotted crowd, even though in Janette's tale the plane is just circling to land.

On the train, Ava can breathe again, though Janette continues talking. They sat so long on the ground in Atlanta, she says, but somehow they still made it to the terminal on time. Her boys (by this Ava surmises she means her husband as well as her sons) are just

going to have to make do without her for two days—she worries about them, she says, but they’ll go out to eat and her mother will look in on them and hopefully the house will not be a total wreck when she gets back. She keeps this up all the way to the Midtown station, never once looking out the window. She never takes notice of their fellow passengers, either—the usual Friday night mix of wrinkled corporate types and the weary poor—and they studiously ignore her in turn, though this Ava expects. Instead Janette stares at some point in the air just a few feet before her and Ava’s faces, and Ava begins to wonder if her defense of the city will consist of pointing out to Janette that she is in it.

Janette does not begin to decompress until they are off the train and into Ava’s car. As Ava maneuvers through the leaden traffic, her cousin’s excited prattle slows to a low, even hum and she gazes out at the shops and art galleries and pedestrians melting together in a blur of streetlight. Finally, at the restaurant bar, where they sit waiting on a table, she actually puts her hand on Ava’s arm. Ava recoils slightly, bracing for the first of her cousin’s criticisms. She has already catalogued the available targets: the scoop-necked blouses of the trio of women next to them, the prices on the wine menu, the gay bartender who poured their cabernet, pinky ring flashing.

“Ava,” says Janette breathlessly, “I have just been so thrilled about this trip. And here I am!” She spreads her hands as if she has just appeared out of thin air and she cannot quite believe it.

Ava has absolutely no idea what to say. She had heard what Janette said on the phone—that they would be buddies out on the

town—but she is not prepared for this unabashed, girlish level of excitement. She fumbles for words but can only come up with, “Well, I hope you enjoy yourself.”

Janette laughs as if Ava has just given her permission, and her torrent of talk begins again. This time, however, she is completely tuned into her surroundings, lusting after the diminutive purse of a woman walking by and the over-sized chocolate tortes in the dessert case, wondering over the menu when they are at last at their table. As Ava puts her menu back down, Janette is just getting started. “These chefs,” she says, “Tommy and me, we watch them on the Food Channel. If I tried to use a knife like that, I’d wind up in the emergency room. And all these new-fangled things they come up with. Everything sounds so good, I just don’t know where to start.”

This goes on through dinner. Ava makes half-hearted efforts to contribute bits and pieces, but it is not really a conversation they are having. Janette is so exhilarated with her naïve vision of life in the city, Ava thinks, that she practically sparkles from it. So Ava does what she has been practicing for years: the din of the restaurant roaring around her, Janette deep into her next effusive observation, she moves under the surface, where everything is reduced to the blur of movement around her and the smooth feel of a wine glass under her fingertips.

Janette just keeps on talking, never noticing, though this is not the first time she has chattered away against the wall of Ava’s retreat. For her whole life Ava has been too porous. Early on, as she absorbed too much from other people—her mother and father, friends, cousins,

aunts, uncles, even strangers on the street—she intuited that their stories might drown out her own. She grew more comfortable with measured stories on the clean pages of books. She learned how to look attentive while her mind was elsewhere. Finally she started writing stories herself. Feeling herself somehow outside of the world, the one whose true talent is to chronicle from the perimeter, has given her the only real security she has ever known, amidst chaotic family gatherings, in the smelly crush of school, and later among weirdly elated soldiers. The only places she has not felt the insistent pressure of other people's lives have been her grandmother's farm, where Dial moved with silent purpose in her garden, where hawks crying and calves bawling worked like music on her mind, and in the medieval abbeys she secretly sought out in Europe, hiding from her colleagues her thirst for the empty walkways and gardens inhabited only by ghosts.

When Ava realizes her glass is empty, she pulls herself back into the noise of the restaurant and hears that Janette is asking her a question. She hears, too, on her left and right, the volume rising, the intensity of people talking and laughing, forks and knives chiming on plates. "I'm sorry, Janette, I couldn't hear you."

Janette is still smiling over what she has just said, obviously thrilled at contemplating so much freedom in a woman's life. "I said, do you miss being on the road or are you happy back in Atlanta?"

Ava stares at the approval in her cousin's face, completely unprepared to answer. The bedrock of her escape from Mississippi had always been that she was different, that she was unadmired, a

girl who bucked the script in a few too many ways. A girl who couldn't see there was such a thing as being too intelligent or too adventurous. And while she was away at school and then leaving behind every comfort to work in remote countries, Janette was planning an elaborate wedding, quitting college to have her first child, living within the confines of the world as they had grown up knowing it. Living smugly and secure, Ava had always thought.

Ava twirls her wine glass at the stem and glances around them at the shuffle of busy diners. She cannot admit that she is tired either way, that one place or the other, there are too many people to stumble over. That she knows how to read other lives too well, much better than she does her own. "Atlanta's a nice break," she says finally, falling back on her standard line. "Reliable roads, clean water. Easy money."

Janette smiles her approval. She glances around, too, but with obvious appreciation.

Ava looks at her cousin and thinks, impatiently, that it is time to break the spell. "Come on," she says. "You need to see more of the city."

Her friend Walt regularly throws large, expansive parties, though Ava does not tell Janette this on the drive to his loft. "He usually has people over on Fridays," she says nonchalantly, though she knows the place will be teeming with the usual eclectic crowd—grunge types smoking pot, in-town artists and literati, students from the art institute adding new coats of graffiti to one concrete wall. She

knows the music will be deafening. She knows how much she herself has grown to dread Walt's parties, that on any given Friday night, she'd rather lie in bed like an old woman, watching late night TV, than stand around with people as tired as she is but drunk or stoned enough to pretend they're not. And she knows that Janette has never been to a party like this one.

After they climb the shabby stairs up to his door, Walt whisks them in, showy as always, kissing Janette on the cheek and whisking her by the hand around to anyone who seems halfway interested in an introduction. When Ava has a drink in hand, she says hello to a few writers she knows and then drops into a butterfly chair to watch shock spread across her cousin's face. But she is disappointed: Janette's smile remains as open as in the restaurant, even when she shakes hands with Dan the metal artist, whose tattoos extend from his neck down under his shirt and out onto the backs of his hands, and even when she chats with Jolie, whose eyebrow stud is connected to the one in her lip with a chain. She moves about earnestly, talking without ceasing, flitting, Ava thinks, like a bird.

Ava feels the pressure of the music inside her head and sinks, like a burrowing animal, deeper in her chair. The room rolls into a sea of shifting color, and she focuses on an abstract canvas above Walt's refrigerator until her friends Susan and Dar come over to invite her to the gallery show they're mounting. She responds and smiles and nods, laughing when they expect her to. She nurses her drink.

Then very quickly Walt is calling everyone to climb to the roof to watch fireworks over the baseball stadium. Ava glances about for Janette—the route to the roof is a vertical iron ladder with small rounded rungs, not really a smooth ascent for someone in petite, pointy-toed shoes. But there is Janette, already on her way up, guarded from behind by a man Ava has never seen before. When Ava finally pulls herself onto the roof, the fireworks are beginning. She makes her way to the edge, squeezing into the crowd next to Walt and leaning out over the wall. While others watch the sky, some gasping at the explosions, she watches the light flash and trail away across the crumbling neighborhoods that surround the stadium, low frame houses with dilapidated porches in front of broken sidewalks. She keeps her eyes on the houses even between explosions, imagining the people who live in them and how tired they are, how much they resent the splendor exploding over their quiet beds. Then, in the flashes of light, the houses are brilliant, on fire it seems, not themselves at all. When the finale begins, Walt lifts his glass to the sky and kisses the women around him, though Ava doesn't give in to him, just turns her cheek wearily in his direction. That is when she spots Janette down the wall, leaning up toward the face of the man who helped her onto the roof, smiling as if she is expecting something. Ava turns back to the darkened vision of the city, leaning out into the night air.

When everyone else is off the roof, Ava climbs down and searches for Janette. She finds her leaning against a column, a fresh drink in her hand, laughing at something the man is saying close to

her ear. Ava stands in front of them, waiting to be noticed, looking down into her empty glass.

“Ava, there you are! I’ve been looking for you.” Janette puts her hand on the young man’s arm. “Ava, this is Roland. He’s been telling me all about his summer in Belize.” She leans toward Ava and says in a half whisper, “He’s a writer and a scuba diver.” She laughs through the last two words like they are an inside joke.

Ava looks at Roland, who looks back at her. He is wearing a vintage bowling shirt and black Converse. Ava recognizes the look, including his droopy eyelids and the day’s growth of stubble on his face. She fakes a smile in his direction and then turns back to Janette. “I’m worried that you’ll be tired tomorrow morning.”

Janette checks her watch. “Midnight!” She smiles and looks longingly up at Roland. “Guess I have to turn back into a pumpkin.”

As Roland leans in to kiss her on the cheek, Walt swoops in and circles one hand around Janette’s waist while lifting his glass in Ava’s direction. “Here’s to the wild belles of Mississippi,” he says.

While Janette beams, Ava steps back slightly, disgusted to be caught in the net of Walt’s generalization—she and Janette grouped together in this way, the same kind of women, the same fable. Walt won’t let Ava get away, though—he moves to her next, embracing her like they are about to waltz, pressing himself against her as if she is a blank slate on which he can write whatever tale he invents in the folds of his inebriated mind.

“I’m not a belle, Walt,” she yells through the music.

“Of course not,” he says, smiling down into her face, and then

he kisses her quick and hard on the lips and is off across the room again.

“What a mess he is!” says Janette as she pulls Ava by the hand toward the door, half turning back to wave goodbye to Roland. Then, as they are stumbling down the stairs in the dark and moving toward the car, Janette begins her chatter again. In her version, it was a party to be remembered—glittering characters and conversations, not seedy or shocking.

When they reach the hotel, Janette turns toward Ava. “You know what I tell my friends back home?” she says. “I tell them that when I grow up, I want to be single and live in Atlanta, just like my cousin.” Then Janette lets out a self-pitying laugh, but Ava is not sure if it is real.

Ava is lying in bed the next morning, awake but still, when Janette calls. She has been imagining their conversation, certain that Janette will be full of regrets, covering for her behavior by apologizing for drinking too much or complaining that she should have gotten more sleep.

Instead, Janette gabs happily: she has such great stories to tell her co-workers about her night out on the town with her cousin, she knows they will give her a hard time for flirting so much, she can’t wait to come back again.

After listening for what seems like a long time and then mumbling her goodbye, Ava lies still a moment longer. She could return to sleep, but she knows it would not be peaceful. If she listens

hard enough, she can hear the hum of traffic building on the street. She rises, slides on clothes, grabs her keys and wallet. She gets into her car and drives with the window down, the cool morning air dense with the scents of her immense village, its exhaust and cooking, its jumbled, stewing human smells. The long ribbon of her freedom unfurls before her, gray asphalt going to places she does not know how to imagine.

Cathy Day

Genesis

or The Day Adam Killed the Snakes

Adam and Eve live in a farmhouse surrounded by apple orchards. One spring day, Adam pokes his head into Eve's study.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Working," she says.

"Oh. I'm going to the attic to bring down the air conditioner," Adam says.

"Great," Eve says into her computer screen.

He waits. "I might need you."

"Uh-huh." Her fingers fly across the keyboard.

A few minutes later, he calls out. "Come here! I want to show you something."

Eve snaps her laptop shut. She never gets any work done when Adam is home.

In the attic, Adam points to an abandoned cot. Two black coils bask in the light coming through a dormer window.

Yes. Adam and Eve. Apples and snakes. Snakes with tongues that flit out to greet her.

"Oh my God," Eve says.

"Five feet long," Adam says a little proudly. "Maybe six. They're

big fuckers."

In the last few months, they've found plenty of shed snake skins on the attic stairs, in the basement, hanging from tree limbs. Snakes slithering across their gravel road, and once, she almost ran over one with the John Deere. When they have friends out for sunset drinks on the long porch, Adam and Eve bring out the skins—long strips of dry paper. But they have never actually seen a snake in the house. And now, here are two.

Eve tiptoes back downstairs and goes to her study. Adam finds her at her desk, staring at the ceiling. "They're right up there," she says, pointing. "How can I write thinking about them above my head?"

Yes, Eve is a writer. Adam is, too, but this isn't important until later.

Adam crosses his arms. "I knew I shouldn't have shown them to you."

"They must move through the walls at night," Eve says. "How can we sleep?"

"I knew it!" He stomps downstairs and returns a few minutes later with a shovel, the one they've been using to plant perennials in the front yard.

"What?" she asks.

"I have to kill them."

"No," she yells. "That's too dangerous. Can't we just capture them and put them back outside?" He gives her his "I-can't-believe-you're-so-dumb" look, and she remembers the mice. That winter, they used a humane catch-and-release trap until Eve said, "I might be crazy, but I think it's the same mouse." Adam marked an X on its back with a permanent marker, and sure enough, they caught the same mouse again a few days later. So they switched to the death traps. Adam baits them with peanut butter, and at night, Eve hears them snap shut in the kitchen.

Armed with the shovel, Adam trudges into the attic, and a few minutes later, Eve hears him whacking away. Soon he's screaming, "Stupid motherfucking snake! Die! Die!" She wonders if the snakes are poisonous, if she should help. But help how? She doesn't move from her desk until he yells, "Open the door!" Adam has bagged one of the snakes. It writhes on the shovel scoop, red innards bulging like sausage in its casing. Adam drips snake blood on the floors, the rugs, all the way to the front door. Tossing it far into the yard, he marches back inside. "The other one," he spits, slamming the attic door behind him. More whacking. More motherfucking. More blood spots down the stairs.

Eve finds Adam standing in the front yard. He's breathing

heavily, leaning on the shovel, staring down at a black and red pool of snake. Eve squats down to get a better look. One of the snakes opens its fleshy white mouth wide, like it's screaming. "Careful," Adam says. "They aren't dead yet."

He tells her they wedged themselves in a corner, where the angled roof meets the floor, so he couldn't just chop off their heads. Instead, he had to poke and beat the snakes to death—or to this near death. He brings the shovel over his shoulder like a spike hammer and finishes them both, pounding their tiny heads over and over with the curved underside of the shovel. Then, Adam carries the snakes toward the weed-choked sluice that feeds their pond.

After, they sit quietly in their matching Adirondack chairs on the porch. A few days from now, Adam will discover on the Internet that he's just killed two non-venomous black rat snakes (*Elaphe obseleta obseleta*), praised by area farmers as better mousers than barn cats. He'll read the online article out loud to her, pausing after this sentence: *Although it is one of our most valuable snakes, human fear and prejudice against all snakes often result in this shy and beneficial species being killed on sight.* But right now, Adam and Eve are still sitting on the porch, free of this knowledge. Right now, Adam has just done a brave, brave thing. Eve touches his hand and says, "I love you," because she is so grateful, and Adam says tiredly, "I love you, too."

From the porch, Eve notices that services are over at the little stone church up the road. Yes, this story takes place on a Sunday, and yes, there's a church, and yes, there are snakes, and yes, they live in

an apple orchard, but there are no actual apples yet. It's spring, you see. The trees bear pink and white blossoms, and the orchard hums with millions of bees. The world looks like Oz, like it just snowed flowers. Eve loves this place, and she believes their finding it is a sign that her life is exactly as it should be. Some nights, Adam and Eve sit on the porch with martinis and talk about getting married in the little stone church, but neither of them ever uses a word other than "someday," although they have been together for six years.

That night in bed, Adam is quiet for a long time. Finally, he tells her that he had to swear in order to work up enough hate to finish off the snakes. "They've probably lived in this house for years," he says. "Longer than us." He says, "I'll never be able to get those images out of my head. I can't believe you made me do that."

"I didn't say to kill them," says Eve.

"No, but you said you couldn't stand them being over our heads."

"Well, could you?"

He rolls over. "I could have lived with it."

"Bullshit," she says. "You just feel bad, so you want it to be my fault."

There is a long silence, and then he says, "It is."

In the weeks that follow, Eve feels less certain about her future with Adam, as if the snakes have left a curse on the house. Adam and Eve fight about very stupid things like eggplants, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and bath towels. For the hundredth time, Eve asks, "What's wrong?" and for the hundredth time, Adam says, "Nothing."

A few months later, during summer's long green stretch, Adam invites a colleague and his wife over for dinner. While Adam and his colleague are casting lures into the pond, Eve gives the wife a house tour. In the study, the wife pauses for a second and looks up at the ceiling. "Something's happened up there. I can feel it. I'm a little clairvoyant." Eve tells her about the snakes, and the wife nods knowingly, like she already knows how this story will end.

After the colleague and the clairvoyant have gone home, Eve sits on the porch and thinks, *Maybe I'll write a story about the day Adam killed the snakes*. She's been thinking about it ever since it happened. Actually, she was thinking about it while it was happening. Writers are weird that way. At the moment, Eve has no theme in mind, no point to make. Just images in her head: the black snakes, their white mouths, the pink and white blossoms, the blood blooms Adam scrubbed furiously from the rugs.

Adam is inside doing all the dishes because she cooked the big dinner for four. That's the deal they've struck, so that everything's equal. Eve sits on the porch with a drink, listening to the thrum of pond frogs and the buzz of cicadas, remembering the white noise machine she and Adam used in Chicago, how they preferred the "Summer Night" sound, a recorded loop of what they now have for real. Maybe she'll use that detail in the story she will write about the day Adam killed the snakes. Maybe she'll change their names to John and Mary. Before they go to sleep, John and Mary will argue about whose fault it is that the snakes are dead, and then they'll have sex, the kind that's more like hate than love.

Eve's not sure what happens next or how the story will end, but this doesn't worry her. She's also well aware that just because something really happened doesn't mean it will work in a story. A story can't hold apples and snakes and sex and Sunday and church and a psychic. And won't one snake do as well as two? And shouldn't she move the snake from above her writing desk to above John and Mary's bed? Isn't that more potent, especially when they have angry sex there later?

The truth is: Adam and Eve have never made love in anger, but it seems appropriate for John and Mary to do so, and certainly better than admitting that Adam and Eve have not touched each other—except by accident—for a long, long time. These days, living with Adam reminds Eve of college, of politely sharing space with her roommate Penny. Every Friday, Penny left to visit her boyfriend Harold, and every weekend, Eve had the room to herself. She always felt a little surprised, even a little resentful, when Penny returned from Harold's on Sunday nights.

Sitting there on the porch, Eve listens to Adam washing dishes and keeps thinking about her story. Maybe she'll write a scene in which a worried Mary snoops through John's briefcase, afraid she'll find love letters from another woman or downloaded porn. Instead, she finds a poem typed on John's office letterhead, a poem in which he imagines them as an old couple, sitting in rocking chairs. This poem makes Mary cry, but not for the reasons you think. Mary cries because John has crossed out every word and scrawled "Stupid" next to them. *What is stupid*, Mary will wonder, *the poem or the thought*

of us growing old together?

You think this happened, but it didn't. Harold wrote the poem to Penny, and Eve found it once (free of edits and self-loathing) in her roommate's jewelry box. No, Adam never wrote a poem like this. In fact, he hasn't written anything but to-do lists for years. Lately, whenever Eve publishes a story, Adam will congratulate her and then shake his head, saying "God, I hate you." This is a horrible truth, but Eve would rather use the fictional "stupid" poem to represent Adam's frustration than the fact that he often—and quite literally—beats his head against a wall.

The real truth is: when Eve snooped through Adam's briefcase, she didn't find any poems at all. Just the porn. But she can't bring herself to put this detail in the story she will write about the day Adam killed the snakes. She would look bad, invading his privacy like that. Besides, Eve promised Adam she'd never reveal his secrets in her stories—that he once threw a cat off a roof to see if it would land on its feet, that his swimming coach fondled him when he was eight, that his parents have never, not once, said that they love him. So she'll change all the real details, omit all of his secrets, but Eve knows that the story will hurt Adam anyway. There's no way around it.

Adam has gone upstairs, but Eve still sits on the porch, wondering, "What is this story about anyway?" She won't know the answer for another two years. When Eve finishes the story about the day Adam killed the snakes, she'll know it's a story about the day she knew she could ask him for anything—to kill a snake, to marry her, to give her a child. The day she knew that everything would be fine as

long as nothing went wrong. It's a story about the bad days that always come, Adam holding out the shovel scoop full of dirty diapers and overdue bills and unwritten poems and ads for jobs he'll never have and houses he'll never own, telling her "Look at what you made me do." The story will be about the day she knew in her heart (but not in her mind) that she would leave him.

But try to remember that Eve doesn't know any of this yet. She's sitting on the porch, watching fireflies blink across the lawn, waiting for Adam to fall fast asleep. Maybe you think she's sitting there because it's such a beautiful night. That's true. Maybe you think she's sitting there because she's avoiding sex. That might be true, too. But here's what Eve thinks: that once he's asleep, she can sneak upstairs and write without him knowing, without making him feel bad. She doesn't yet see this as an important detail in the story, but she will. The story is forming inside her, and someday, when she's ready, she will write it.

Jon Sealy

Renovation

The summer I was eighteen, I helped get a man killed during a renovation job. I'd just graduated from high school, and in the months before college, I worked for my father at the Carolina Research University in the South Carolina piedmont. I'd grown up in Issaqueena, a foothills railroad town halfway between Atlanta and Charlotte, but like a lot of folks I was raised to leave. By the end of the nineteenth century, cotton plantations had killed the soil, turned it to red clay, and weave rooms took over the field as the place for poor men to sweat blood. Those old mill towns had scattered across the upstate by the early twentieth century, but that industry's on its way out now, the mills closing their doors and boarding up their windows. My father was our family's first to find work outside the textile industry, and I was the first to go to college, leaving those old Carolina mills for good.

In 1986, my father had been landscaping at the university for seven years, ever since the power plant downsized and laid off nine hundred employees. My mother worked for the bank, but I didn't have a job when I graduated from high school. Since the university hired summer laborers, my father pulled a few strings to get me onto his tractor crew, despite my mother's objections. She

thought his job was dangerous and just knew I would get hurt, but I took the job anyway, working with my father to mow the university's perimeter fields, hundreds of acres the agricultural school hadn't taken over yet. My father told me that some guys did this work until they died, that I needed to keep moving forward. He wanted the job to teach me a lesson, but I was having a blast. I'd never driven a tractor before, and learning to control that clunky old machine on the slopes of Watertank Hill was a good way to spend a summer.

But July heat broiled those fields and turned the grass the color of coleslaw. Nothing grew. Our crew laid low in a cluster of hemlocks behind the chicken houses at the north end of campus until the end of the month, when my father's boss told us to work with J. P.'s crew and renovate one of the architecture buildings.

This was a Tuesday. We usually worked seven to three, but J.P. had his crew on six-thirty to two-thirty, so the four of us on my father's crew came in early. Men idled around the lumberyard, sipped Maxwell House and fired up cigarettes. Tim and I pulled out the cards and started shuffling, aiming for a quick game of rummy while they all filled out paperwork. Tim was a little older than me, from over in Seneca, and I'm ashamed now that I can't remember exactly how he looked. I remember he had white gums and yellowed teeth. A

vertical scar in his upper lip. One eye bigger than the other, like he was always mid-wink. There was a blankness to him, like where most people have thoughts they don't say, a running narrative in their heads, his mind was quiet. Though he wasn't a summer laborer, some of the older guys looked at him the way they looked at me—some dumb kid who hadn't been around.

J. P. stood by the door, looked toward the dawn-pink sky, and said, We got a lot of work to do today. It's going to be a hot one.

We usually took our time getting out on the job, but he was quick to move us out. He turned back to us and shook his head. He was small and wiry, and wore a University Facilities hat over curly thin hair. We didn't like J. P. Maybe he wasn't a bad guy at heart, but he sure as shit wasn't fun to work for. His crew did all the heavy moving—rocks, dirt, office supplies, you name it. One of the guys said he swirled his tongue to the left whenever he kissed up to the boss, and that's how he got crews transferred over to help him out whenever he asked, and it got him that end-of-year bonus, something no one on my father's crew ever got.

We shuffled out of our chairs and went out the backdoor to the smoking ramp. It wasn't even light outside. The sky was just getting pink, an arc of blue around it like an eye opening up. It was cool enough for a jacket, but not cold. No reason not to start work, even though I dreaded killing this stillness by starting our equipment.

My father was already outside, smoking by one of the trucks. He could be antisocial, though he seemed glad I tried to hang out with the guys. He did a good job of keeping work and family separate,

so when I was on the job he was my supervisor, not my father. He opened the door of the F-150 and got in. Tim and I got in on the passenger side, Tim in the middle.

Three trucks, carrying eight guys, caravanned down to the end of Stadium, turned left onto Perimeter, and then right onto University. I sat in the passenger seat with my arm out the window, eyes closed. The cool air slid over my skin, and it smelled of pines and coffee. We didn't talk. My father held a cigarette out the window, Best Value brand, Ingles's version of a Marlboro. My mother never let him smoke at home, but on the job he went through three packs a day. I don't know how we made it through the evenings and weekends without smoking, because back at work he'd always have one in hand. I'd started to smoke myself, though only if I was out with friends. I never lit up at work.

The truck wheezed up the steep hill. A cemetery was hidden at the top, among a thicket of water oaks, and poison ivy crept all over the trees. Absurd as it was, the university had put this cemetery here, close to the stadium so the souls of rich fans could hear the roar of the crowd.

You'll need to look out for yourselves today, my father said.

What do you mean?

He took a drag on the cigarette, then flicked the butt out the window and glanced over at us. His long face was coated in a thin layer of stubble, and his combed back shaggy white hair had wings flipping out at the ends.

It's going to be a long day, and J. P. isn't going to look over your

shoulders and say when it's time for a water break. You boys get hot, take a break.

He shook out another cigarette, crumpled the pack, and threw it on the dashboard.

J. P.'s not that bad, Tim said. I had to work with him the day they moved office supplies into Adams Hall.

Wait 'til you've been here a few years. You'll learn.

I was only at that job three months, but one thing I still miss is three guys sitting across the bench of an old pickup, our knees and legs grazing. I'd heard stories about men in my father's generation bonding in Vietnam, but I never went to war, so male intimacy's always been a taboo for me. I work in a sterile office now. Our cubicles aren't big, but they close us off from each other, just like in high school when my friends and I would leave one seat between us in a movie theater. I dated one woman in college and married her. She, like me, was a fragile thing, so I guess we were a good match, but I nonetheless feel I've missed out on something about human interaction.

The architecture building was tall and made from red brick, like most of the buildings on this campus. Someone in the administration had decided it was time to renovate this area, and we were supposed to clear out the old furniture, then strip away the drywall and insulation. When we got to the drywall, we'd have to wear masks because of the asbestos, and J. P. was right about it being hot. July was the worst month to work landscaping. The air was

bone-dry and still, but if it happened to rain, the water would evaporate the moment it landed on the dust and the air would be thick with humidity.

We broke into two groups. My father, Tim, Lonnie, and I spent the morning hauling trash out of the second floor, while the other crew worked on moving old furniture from the ground floor. We formed an assembly line, Tim and I in the building, grabbing trash pieces and throwing them out a giant window down to Lonnie and my father.

We worked in a large classroom, easily twenty-five by fifty feet. Dozens of folded tables leaned on one of the walls, wooden chairs piled up next to them, strips of plywood and drywall, and a few big pieces of furniture—two filing cabinets, a bookshelf, and a large oak desk that I was sure we'd never get out of the building. I was lanky and small, could barely lift a fifty-pound fertilizer bag. Everything, the furniture and the gray tile floor, was covered in dust.

It was slow work. We started with the chairs, each grabbing one and then chucking them out together. They plowed into the brick patio below and splintered into several pieces, and the noise echoed through the courtyard. My father and Lonnie stood to the side, and they scurried in and grabbed the biggest pieces and carried them over to the dump truck. Tim and I were careful not to throw something on them, but I expected it to happen.

I used to worry about my father, especially when I was younger and he'd recently been laid off and had taken a new job driving a tractor. I'd overhear my mother yelling about how he was going to

lose an arm, and him yelling that it was only temporary and that at least, goddammit, it was steady work. At the beginning of the summer, I watched him carefully to be sure he was staying safe. I could see him, years from now, old and alone and in a field somewhere on the edge of campus, the summer heat baking down on him. He mows too fast on the side of a hill and the tractor rolls. He isn't fastened in and leaps for freedom, but the machine pins him and he dies slowly from something awful, a collapsed lung or a shattered rib imbedded in his heart. My mother in Florida with another man, she doesn't find out for a week that he's been killed.

The rhythms of the work took over, and seeing my father firsthand—and doing the same job—made the danger seem remote, like cancer or a plane crash. Today, however, watching the furniture fall and shatter, I measured in my head how close those flying pieces came to my father. Ten feet. Twelve. Nine.

When we got to the folded desks, we heaved each out the window by placing one end on the sill and sliding it through. The walls in the room were white and scuffed with black smudge. The inside, lit only by the morning sun, smelled of plaster filtered in from the hall.

Hey, Lonnie called up. Watch out now.

You got to move faster, old man, Tim said, his voice a raspy, country lilt.

Lonnie flipped him the bird, turned around, and walked away toward my father and the dump truck. My father stood by, a burning cigarette dangling from his mouth. The stale air away from the hall

had the bitter and sweet smell of old wood and sawdust and mold.

We lunched at the lumberyard, and I dealt out a game of spades with Tim and Lonnie against me and my father. I put the cards facedown, one for each of us, clockwise. We played spades every day, and I was getting good.

What's shaking, Ray? Tim asked. Ray was on the trash crew and sat watching our game. He was a big man, red-faced and bald.

Shit. This damn kid parked his car behind me, right when I was about to back out from the dumpster.

We began to put our cards in order, and Ray pulled a sandwich out of his bag and angled his chair so he could see my cards.

You know, he went on. You'd think he'd hear those goddamn beeps and think, Hey, this is a bad place to be, but I had to yell at him to get his car out of the way if he didn't want it smashed up. The motherfucker looked at me like I'd asked for a blowjob.

My father said, The kid's parents will probably sue you for sexual harassment.

Oh shit, son, Ray said to me. You better watch those cards.

He won't make it, Tim said.

My father saved the round by taking the last trick with the ten of spades.

Oh ho, Tim said. You almost got caught there at the end.

I appreciate your helping my partner, my father said.

Lonnie nodded, his mouth full of sandwich. He usually didn't talk much during lunch. Just sat back and played cards. Flecks of

food flicked in and out of his mustache.

Tim dealt out the next round, and my father unwrapped his burger. Some of the guys brought their own lunch, but my father and I picked up something from Burger King or Hardee's three days a week. My mother was not the type of woman to pack our lunches, and neither of us was motivated to cook for ourselves.

How's that new burger from Hardee's? Ray asked.

Tastes like shit, my father said. But it's slick enough that it slides right down.

Goddamn, Ray said. Then to me, You got to talk to your mother about your old man. Does she let him eat that shit at home?

Hell no, she doesn't, my father said. I have to load up when I'm out of the house.

He looked to me, lowered his chin, and said over his glasses, Don't tell your mother.

He said it like he was joking, but I knew he wasn't. My mother didn't like him at this job, and she would later give up and leave him, but for now he was still trying to make things work. Another round went by, and then Ray balled up his sandwich bag and turned to me.

You must be getting to be a short-timer around here. How long you got left?

School starts the third week of August, so maybe another two weeks. You looking to get your space back at the card table?

You know it.

My father shuffled the cards and started to deal them out.

Tim said, You going to bring back some college girls for us?

Shit, he ain't ever coming back, Ray said. He's going to be living a life of luxury, beer and pussy and shit. You think he's going to come back here?

My father finished dealing, and we picked up our cards.

I'll come back, I said, though I didn't believe it. College was supposed to change everything about my life—I'd find a social circle, a girlfriend, get laid all the time, and wouldn't ever be lonely.

For the first time, Lonnie spoke up, said, Don't listen to these clowns. You need to get educated. Get out and lay low. Don't get caught up in women and drugs.

Shit, Lonnie, what are you trying to do to him? He needs to get drunk and laid, isn't that right?

My father smiled, the same smile he used when the guys gave him a hard time about his old lady keeping him on a tight leash.

Tim said, Man, I might have to go to college myself.

Yeah, maybe you ought to go and leave Mark here. He's a better card player than you are.

J. P. scuttled by without looking at us, and stepped out the door onto the smoking ramp. My father put his cards down and wrapped up the scraps from his burger, his sign for us to go. We stepped out onto the ramp, and I sat idle on the rail while the guys lit up, sucking in the hot afternoon air, the dry heat blasting their throats.

Back at the architecture building, only the big furniture remained—two filing cabinets, the bookshelf, and a big oak desk—before we'd start on the drywall. Management wanted to save these

pieces, so we couldn't throw them out the windows. We broke out the dollies to wheel them out one at a time.

J. P. and his crew had moving to do, so they didn't come back with us. The ride over this time wasn't as nice. My father and I followed behind Lonnie and Tim. The air that blew in from the windows made me dizzy.

When we turned onto University and started up the hill toward the cemetery, my father said, I hope you've been paying attention to these guys this summer.

What do you mean?

They joke and have a good time, but it's no kind of work for a young man.

It's not that bad.

He flicked his cigarette out the window and looked at me, eyes narrowed. His tanned face had dark lines, gray stubble around his lips and cheeks. The white hairs frightened me, these signs of age on someone who I remembered as young and slim and tough.

It's hard work. There's some benefits, I've got that going for me, but I wouldn't do it if I had the choice.

Because of Mom. I know.

Your mother doesn't like me doing it, but it's more than that. These guys will be doing this work until they die. They won't ever get out. Hell, I may never get out.

We sat at the stop sign for a moment, and then he turned right onto Ridgecrest and pulled into a space behind the architecture building. A spiral metal sculpture rested in front of the building,

something the students had designed once to act as a sentry.

I followed him into the building, where Lonnie and Tim were already waiting.

You and Tim are the strong young men, my father said. Why don't you two see if you can get this desk, and me and Lonnie will start on the cabinets?

You're getting old, Tim said.

I'm not far from dying.

We all laughed, but I had a knot in my chest. Maybe they all knew my father was being serious, and laughing was the easiest way to deal with it. It beat crying, that's for sure, though perhaps some days they all felt like crying. My father tried to be a good supervisor. He knew that nothing was worse than working for someone who let you do all the grunt work and who sat by and smoked. If his crew was hauling dirt, he was out there with a shovel. If they were cutting sod, he was out there loading pieces into the trailer. He worked hard and stressed safety, and so far his crew had been lucky. Heatstroke or a case of poison ivy was the extent of their trouble. I don't know if he was arthritic, but he was old, and conversations like the one on the ride over let me know that he was thinking in terms of life and death in more ways than an offhand joke could let on.

He and Lonnie loaded the first cabinet on the dolly and wheeled it to the elevator. Tim and I stood by the desk, a four-foot by eight-foot monster built from thick slabs of wood, stained dark brown, the surface scarred from chipped varnish and years of student carvings.

Oof, Tim said.

No shit.

We each had a side. The wood was worn smooth, so it was hard to get a solid grip. We lifted, the desk as heavy as I'd feared. We shuffled with penguin steps out of the corner, and I walked backwards. Light from the still-open window angled in, and dust floated thick in the sunbeam. The desk banged on the doorway as we twisted into the hall and toward the elevator. Veins stood out in Tim's neck and his face was as red as a chili pepper in August. At the elevator, I stopped, and we lowered the desk, both of us panting.

Shit, Tim said. You know there's no way we're going to get this thing down in there.

Yeah.

It's only one flight.

A long flight.

We hoisted the desk off the ground again and seesawed down the hall until we reached the stairs. The stairwell was dim, lit only by cobweb-covered yellow lights, the walls and floor a musky brown brick. The exit was twenty stairs down, with a mid-floor landing that would make a rough turn.

You want to switch? Tim asked. The bottom will be the heavy end.

You mind?

I was grateful for the offer. Tim crossed over and said, Ready?

I guess.

We lifted, and Tim stepped down into the stairwell. We made it

down the first few stairs okay, and then I stood at the top of the first step. I couldn't see much of him, just the bulk of the desk with an arm and the top of his head. His forehead was bright red. He stumbled and the desk banged down a step.

You all right?

Yeah. His voice was strained. I stepped onto the first stair. He must have been near the landing when the desk shifted in my hands, then boomed against the stairs. The noise echoed, and there was a moment when the desk seemed to lay floating over the stairs before gravity took over, and the slick wood fell out of my hands. Cannon fire sounded as the desk slid down each subsequent stair, tipped on its end, and twisted to the side.

I jumped down, four stairs at a time, around the desk to the mid-floor landing. Tim lay upside down, pinned to the stairs with his head on the landing, the corner of the desk digging into his throat. Cocked at an angle, his face was plum-colored, his hair slick and matted and sticking out. His right arm dangled out of the desk two stairs up, and the bulk of that monster rose up and towered over us and blocked the light, like the east end of the dorm high-rises in late afternoon.

Oh shit, oh shit, I said, and I pushed my weight into the desk, but it wouldn't budge. It felt lodged under something. I called for my father and then squatted and took Tim's hand. Hey! I yelled again, my voice hoarse.

My father and Lonnie ran up the stairs. The landing was so cramped that none of us had any room to move.

Jesus Christ, Lonnie said.

He stepped over Tim's head and got on the top set of stairs beside me, elbowed me out of the way.

It wouldn't fit in the elevator, so we tried to move it down the stairs, and Tim was on the bottom and I was on the top and then it slipped I don't know what happened it just slipped—

Hey.

I stopped and looked at my father.

We need to move this desk.

We all lifted at the desk, and got it shifted, but Tim wheezed and gurgled. My father squatted and lifted his head, put it on his knees. Later, when I was a student reading war novels in an American literature class, I would think about this moment, and my father as a soldier in Vietnam, and wonder if he'd ever had to hold a dying soldier's head in his lap the way he held Tim's head now. It was such a natural move for him to make. No matter what he did in the future, and no matter what my mother would say about him, I would always remember this moment and know that my father had tried his best.

Tim coughed, and blood trickled out of his mouth onto his lips. My father stroked his hair, and Lonnie and I stood by, helpless and cramped, the desk killing our friend and coworker, yet unable to do anything about it.

They gave our crew the rest of the week off, after we answered questions and filled out paperwork. My father went back the next week, but I couldn't do it. I was finished with landscaping. I sat around at home for the next few weeks, eating chocolate ice cream and watching reruns of *Gilligan's Island*. Then I left for college without saying goodbye to any of the guys at the lumberyard, and I haven't seen them since, not Lonnie or J. P. or Ray. Only my father. He and I got close that summer, and we stayed close while I was at college. Things went south between him and my mother, and I saw less of them both. My mother lives in Delaware with her family. I see her once in a while, but she has her own life now. My father still lives in Issaquena, though he no longer works landscaping. He came across a better job as a supervisor in the Milliken plant down in Anderson, so he moved back to the textile industry, where his family came from. I still see him several times a year, but it's all surface details now. We talk about the weather and our jobs. He doesn't have any more advice about life, and what can I tell him?

That night, after Tim was pronounced dead and our crew went through our bureaucratic hopscotch, my father drove us home to my mother. The three of us sat in the living room that evening, not speaking, my parents on the couch, at opposite ends, with me in between them. My mother rubbed her hand on my back, and my father brought me a Heineken, my first. The beer was cold and bitter, but I drank it anyway. My parents stood up for bed, and my mother paused in the doorway to the living room, watching me as I sat silently in front of the couch.

Is there anything I can do? she asked, but I told her, No, nothing at all.

At four in the morning, I woke up and got out of bed. The house was quiet and dim, and shadows played along the halls. The rooms shined in various shades of gray, lit up by moonlight that streamed through the cracks in the blinds. The bathroom, windowless, was pitch black until I turned on the light and the brightness stung my eyes.

Instead of returning to bed, I went down the hall to the dining room and sat at the table. The curtains on our sliding glass door were parted, and I could see our backyard, white in the moonlight. A line of maple trees, weathered and cracked, fenced our yard off from the neighbors. I didn't know if I was up for the day or if I should go back to bed. I knew I wasn't going back to work, but I was already on the morning shift and would wake up before dawn anyway. Birds chirruped outside, and the bluish night glowed in through the blinds and cast strange shadows in the room. I felt the same calmness that I'd felt yesterday morning, riding to the jobsite. I still wake up that early, on occasion, and ease out from beside my wife and go downstairs to the living room. I'll always love this time before the world gets started, the stillness of twilight.

That summer morning, years ago, my father crept up behind me in the dining room and asked, Can't sleep?

He came into the room, sat beside me at the table, leaving the lights off, and said, I like getting up early, but this is a bit much.

It's peaceful.

It is that.

I felt like maybe we should be thinking about Tim, about how life wasn't fair to take someone so young, but I couldn't do it. All I could think of was my own self, how time makes you responsible for things you don't want any part of. My father stood.

I'll leave you be, he said.

Susan Neville

Clock

‘Clock’ was one of the first words my daughter learned as a child. She was pointing to the gold watch circling my wrist when she first said it. Clock, she said, pointing with her entire hand, and her father corrected her, said ‘watch’ and my daughter looked at her father’s face, of course, she *watched*, but when she turned back to that gold band on my, her mother’s, arm, *clock* she said again, and I thought *yes*.

Clock is a word, like stone and rock, that I like the sound of. *Clock*. The hard k at the beginning and the end, with ‘law’ in the middle, or that same hard sound at the beginning with ‘lock’ at the end. Lock. Of hair. The door. Lock it now.

It makes sense that clock would be her first word. There was a clock in every classroom in every school, and her father, my husband, was the one in charge of all the hands. Because he wanted the sign on his truck to read ‘And Son or Daughter’ he took our daughter with him from school to school before she was old enough to attend and even after, during that late afternoon childhood of golden time when her classmates went home to their snacks and caregivers or their empty latchkey houses.

One child, our daughter, in the center of our lives and the two of us moving around her. I knew where my child was and she knew

where to find me.

In the house, with its ticking clocks.

Here’s how it was at first, as our daughter was schooled in timekeeping. The floors were wood, the walls were plaster, the children particularly cruel as though by re-setting clocks my husband was stealing minutes from their afternoon play. There was just one room in most schools when my husband’s father was himself young, but when schools became honeycombed with rooms, and the factories were noisy and large and beyond the reach of a bell or a boss or teacher with a watch who told the time, someone had to be the keeper of order and *time* had centuries ago been chosen as the ordering abstraction and clocks the symbols of that abstraction.

What else could it have been, you might ask, and I suppose most of my answers would be temporal, though more elastic. Nothing to do with numbers, certainly. Perhaps colors of daylight. Blue-grey hour, blue-red hour, yellow-green hour, red-orange hour fading into peach hour into purplish hour into a stretch of ebony, or if you live in a city into orange gas-flame hour in an earlier century, replaced by reddish mercury vapor hour as the years flew by the windows.

And then of course the interminable grey of winter hours, the

hours that so oppress me now: gauze grey, winding sheet grey, the grey of unoxygenated skin, and so on.

Or perhaps the days could have been ordered by things done or by things made and our lives would have turned out differently. No clocks to synchronize, no time to keep. All schoolchildren, when they'd finished reading one book, would go outside for recess and play until they were tired, and that could be any time between sunrise and sunset or multiple sunrises or sunsets. The same with doctors and surgeries, dollmakers and dolls.

But it was time as measured in something like heartbeats that was the ordering principle, and my husband and earlier his father was the keeper of those beats, and one day my daughter would be, my husband thought, the keeper of those beats as well.

My husband worked on both the masters and the slaves in all the schools and businesses. That's the official terminology, passed down through years. The master clock was in the principal or boss's office and the slave clocks were attached by an elaborate electrical relay so as the day unwound its spring, the master would continue its important work and the slaves would follow. It was my husband's job to tend to the master, to see as well that the insides of the slave clocks were oiled and accurate, to move or bend the fragile hands of master or slave when necessary, to keep the faces free of fingerprints, to replace the glass if cracked, to polish the copper rings, to repair the wires between the clocks and as well, as well: to charm and sometimes to caress the occasional female teacher whose own

internal clocks kept regular time in the gush then slow drip of blood.

Oh yes, I knew about them.

There are several ways of telling time at night. One is by sound: by springs unfurling like petals of flowers or weights or pendulums, and they all, or almost all, involve a hammer and a string or bell.

The other is by artificial light. For instance, there is incandescence, hot light, where you turn on a lamp and you look at your clock and see what time it is.

Or you have digital numbers that keep the time for you, and they are hot as well, requiring electricity and so on.

And then there is luminescence.

When something is luminous it's because it's tired.

When something is luminous it's because some energy has caused an electron to jump out of its ground situation into a higher or excited state but the electron prefers the ground situation and when it falls, it gives up energy in the form of light, like the trailing of a firework into smoke.

There is in fact luminescence in nature, in fireflies for instance, and there is photoluminescence in things that absorb light, like oyster shells, and there is even radioluminescence in things that are radioactive like radium or tritium.

Photoluminescence works just a few hours past nighttime. It fades.

Radium doesn't fade within a human's measurable time and so

it was slathered on the hands of watches until it began to kill and maim the women who made the hands. I'm sure you know this.

Tritium is inside your drugstore watch, if you're like me, the one you reach for by your bedside when the electricity has gone out and the digital numbers have lost all sense. It too is radioactive, but none of it leeches out through the glass face and into the bones of your wrist, I swear it.

There were times when the watch around my wrist felt like a shackle to me. I was in my house, my daughter upstairs sleeping. I could not leave because she was very young and she was sleeping. She was upstairs sleeping and my husband was not home and there were times I wouldn't have minded if you told me that the tritium was in fact working its way into my bones, causing a lingering illness that would allow me to be a good though fragile mother while he watched and regretted the time he'd spent away from me.

I never wanted my daughter to feel this way. I wanted her to have a different sort of fierceness when in love. I wanted her to have the upper hand, to see things in their proper context, to have that long view.

In the early days of my marriage and early motherhood I read, dutiful wife, those things I thought would keep my husband interested in me. I would say and whisper the words while we had sex: Ingraham, Ithaca, Emperor, Kieninger, regulator. Spring, hand,

face.

My husband belonged to unions and centuries old fraternal organizations that met at certain times and with some regularity and that offered the excuse for him to meet his mistresses for longer stretching time, in the murky dark of a teacher's lounge at night, after he had brought our daughter home. Sometimes I thought he used our daughter as a magnetic device, drawing women to him. But not one of them could have known as much as I did about the inner workings of his mind or of his life.

Still. He and his women knew the coming and going of the janitorial staff and either he or the woman had a key to every lock, and they were probably, as I think of it, lonely women, and I think of all these women as tied together by that same electrical relay system as the clocks, my husband working on them with the same patience. The placing of the hands on the women's bodies, the slick faces in the moonlight. He was as faithless to them as he was to me.

Though he was good, I have to say, at timing: where to touch and with what pressure and how long, the slow moving of the hands around the face. He was so very good at sex. He would talk and teach his lovers to talk back to, or along with, him. A simultaneous murmur or hum of language, of Kant and count and can't and cunt and so forth. A tic. So of course there would be jealous women, not jealous of me of course, poor stupid wife, but jealous of one other.

My husband never raised his voice to me and so, we thought, our daughter would be unaffected by our failing marriage. My husband believed, or so I believe, that he was a good man who simply

lived two lives within one span of time. His eyes were extraordinarily beautiful. He was a narcissist with gifts to give. If a woman he was with would cry because she was ashamed but still said yes to him, he wouldn't notice it or perhaps he wouldn't care. I know this because I've been that woman, or was before we were married. I knew, I suppose, what I was getting in to but couldn't really imagine it.

There's a clock on the wall in my kitchen. The time it shows is different from the time on the microwave which is different from the time on the coffeemaker which is different from my wristwatch and all of them are different from the time on the cellphone. I attend to those slight differences. Some days I try to coordinate the times but when I've got two of them saying the same thing a second will flip over on one of them like it's risen up through the watery goo of a Magic 8 Ball.

It all takes my mind off my daughter, who consumes me. On days she is afraid her boyfriend might leave her, she thinks about driving her car into a tree. She told me this. How could she tell me this? She told me this and she can't untell me.

When she was born I didn't plan for this contingency, the contingency where she wanted to drive into a tree because her boyfriend might break up with her. I couldn't think beyond the skin, the lashes, the perfect nails, fat chubby feet. The same with her first year and her second and third and fourth and so on until nineteen, where she rests. The birthdays come and go and she is still that baby to me.

And so I think: check the clock, set the clock, reset the clock, or clock someone as in to hit him. Or clock in as to start work *Clock clock clock*, the word running in circles in my head.

Christopher Newgent

At the Fire Scene

Not until the fireman presented the charred remains of the lasagna to Michael did he remember the oven. The microwave had stopped working just before the funeral, two weeks ago now. A woman from a nearby church brought the dish, wrapped in tin foil. Condolences, she said, and God bless. He fell asleep waiting on his dinner in the oven. He woke coughing, thick smoke crowding the house, clingy and warm.

His first instinct: Joseph.

Michael ran, choking on the gray wisps of air, to his son's room, but staggered at the doorway. It was just as it had been left—the pillow tossed to the floor, the race car sheets torn back, the inhaler in pieces on the dresser. Michael remembered a girl standing at the casket, his son's classmate, who didn't understand. "Wake up, Joey," she said. "Wake up." Michael had turned away, leaving his ex-wife and her new husband there while he stepped outside for air.

At the fire scene, two rescuers grumbled behind Michael and shook their heads. A neighbor whispered to them, and the firefighters took one long look at Michael before rolling their hoses in silence. Michael stared at the smoldering leaves of pasta amid the blackened, broken remains of the church lady's casserole; the dish had shattered

in the fireman's hands when it touched the December air. The snow around them still sizzled.

Michael knocked on his ex-wife's door, then stepped back, shuffling one hand inside the other. The peephole went dark and then light again, before his ex-wife revealed herself in the light of the foyer. She looked tired, baggy eyes, straw-like hair breaking loose from her ponytail. Michael looked down to her step-children's galoshes in a neat row, just inside the door.

"It's getting late," she said. "I have to put the kids to bed."

He stood there a minute, invited by the glowing Christmas tree behind her, the warm hardwood. "It's always cold at night, in the house, just as I'm starting to fall asleep."

"Michael," she said. She grabbed her coat from the rack and joined him on the porch. He stared at the bottom of the door, where on the other side, those small shoes were in rows. She touched his elbow.

Michael picked the shards of porcelain off the sidewalk and pitched them in the garbage can under the kitchen sink. He shoved open all the windows. The breath of December sucked at the smoke

still inside the house. He walked from room to room, touching his possessions, and turned on all the lights. Turned them off, then on again. Everything was gray. In the living room, he stayed a moment and watched the curtains as they fluttered inward. A heavy fog showered downward from the windows like wafts of dried ice.

A piece of crumpled paper on the coffee table shivered to life in the breeze. The boy's best friend had left a note inside the casket, which Michael had pocketed almost immediately. In the jostled scribble of a child just learning, his son's friend had written, "I want to climb trees with you."

Michael watched as the paper made its way across the table toward him.

Jill Stukenberg

Everybody Else

In the brown bomber jacket, Randy's father would wait for him outside the store. He'd stand with his back to the windows, his chin rotating as he scanned the parking lot. He looked as if he wished he were the security guard, someone official hired by the store to watch out for kids—or teenagers, like Randy. Randy hurried forward, hunching in his sweatshirt. Catching the clerk's eye, he pointed to the Discman, the wires that led from the case clipped on his belt to the oversized headset clapped precariously over his ears. For the record, it was his. He'd come in with it.

Not that there should be confusion about a Discman in a place like this, with its shelves of whitely gleaming iPods and iPhones; not that there should be confusion when it was a deaf kid anyway, Randy, wearing the ancient thing to begin with.

You either got it or you didn't. You laughed when you saw those earmuffs, or you didn't get it at all.

Randy's shoes stuck to the floor like to a basketball court. The white orbs of the overhead lights danced continually forward, reflected in the floor's waxy surface. Then he came to the CD, about four hundred copies of it. On its cover, the hood of a shining black car jutted forth as if intent on driving right out of the store, over the clerk and through the glass. Randy fingered his father's money, deep in his

pocket. Twenty bucks was more than Kyle deserved for a present.

Randy's fingers were thin and long and pale. They were like his nose, like the pink rims of his large ears, and the tiny bones of his shoulder blades. His brown eyes were his father's. His scrawny chicken legs too, from before the original days of the brown bomber jacket, recently unearthed by Randy's father from the closet where the dining room table's leaves had been stored.

Randy selected a CD and the one behind it slid into its place. Then, with the same fluidity, and yet without thinking about it—as if finding a natural adaptation, a simpler movement for improved efficiency—Randy shoved the long plastic case down his pant leg and tucked the top under his waistband. His pants hid the CD as completely as if they'd shuttled it to a separate dimension, as if this, all along, had been their purpose.

Outside, the Brown Bomber stood in a warm patch of sun reflected from the brick of the building, his lips parted in a smile and his breath heaving, too heavy and too moist. "That was fast," he signed.

"Close your mouth," Randy replied. "That's so gross." It was not a bad day, not bad for idiots, their faces strained toward the sunlight like baby birds. There was a woman standing next to his father,

signing with him with her sharp nails. She had short, curling hair, and had appeared there as if out of the thin blue air.

Along with her, there was a new feeling. Hot. Randy remembered only afterward about the posts on either side of the doors, the sensors that were to detect the bar codes.

“May I introduce Melinda?” Signing, Randy’s father might have been playing an air harp. He held his hands high in front of his face. He stood with one foot bracing in the front, and rocked forward and back with his whole body. This was from when he’d learned, in the fifties.

“M-e-r-l-i-n-d-a.” She smiled as if apologizing, and corrected the spelling with her fingers. “There’s an r.” Her eyebrows were shaped like horseshoes and stayed that way even as her mouth changed.

Something like Chinese food came on a breeze that blew across their faces.

“Would you join us for coffee?” His father asked Merlinda, or perhaps he was asking Randy. He bent his knees as his fingers worked. He pointed to the Starbucks, and for all the notice either Randy or his father had ever given any Starbucks before he might have summoned the place into being. Between them and it, only tar-dripped concrete lay glimmering in the sun. One stick-like tree had been planted in a gravel bed at its halfway point like the flag of a demilitarized zone between mega stores.

No one had coming running out after him. Behind them, the entire building might have disappeared—evaporated through some

ultimate radiation, combination of all this sunlight, tar, weirdness, and the interlocking motion of the traffic at the nearby light.

Merlinda said she’d love a coffee. They left the store like they would the smoking ruins of a sacked city.

The Discman had been a gift from Kyle’s mom, an old thing of Kyle’s put out on the rummage sale table until Randy was caught looking at it, he was just killing time, and Kyle went to her and said, really, in all seriousness, how could she charge *Randy*, Kyle’s oldest friend?

Kyle could speak to his own mother like that, teasing her even as she didn’t understand she was being teased, confusing her. Was he serious? Well sure, of course—of course!—the Discman was Randy’s, if he wanted it. Randy’s!

“Uh, thanks,” Randy said, a poor gift-receiver his entire life, further caught off guard when she’d rushed over to present it. He eyed the already doubled-over Kyle over her shoulder. She hadn’t learned much more than the basics of sign in fifteen years of knowing Randy, the boy across the street whom she’d sought for a playmate for her son when the two were only infants. Kyle would be homeschooled, yet she wanted him to grow up learning a second language, or so she’d explained to Randy’s mom, shouting so that the movements of her lips were totally obscured.

“That woman is crazy,” Randy’s mother had said of her, on multiple occasions. “Mentally unbalanced,” she would remark, speaking as well as signing, showing off her Gallaudet degree as well

as, it seemed to Randy now, some odd kind of admiration. Her eyes followed Kyle's mother each time, back across the street, later with her pen and legal pad.

All of this—with the Discman, and then stealing the CD—took place after Randy's mother lost her vision, after its long secret deterioration was exposed and then she'd left, too, and then the divorce, a legal afterthought—clumsy, unreal, and more embarrassing than anything else—like a marriage after a pregnancy.

She moved in to an assisted living community with a roof-top garden, downtown. So far downtown and so high, on the top of a skyscraper, that it could have been another plane to which she'd ascended, another state to which she'd absconded.

I always did want a dog, she said, summarily, it seemed, of all the events leading up to and through her departure. That was the kind of leap in logic Randy's mother had always made, some number of steps ahead, like a genius, a math whiz, who cannot show or explain her work.

Randy wore the Discman over to Kyle's, across the street, where there was a computer with an internet connection and Kyle, downloading songs onto his new, whitely gleaming iPod. Now having reached the wind-swept summit of his parents' combined knowledge, come January Kyle would attend boarding school in Denver, an announcement that had in part prompted the trip to the CD store. Partially, too, had Randy's "new Discman" contributed, and the burned CD's that went spinning in its case. There was no blaming the

evil corporate greed of the music industry with the Brown Bomber.

Randy let himself in through the back door and climbed the stairs to Kyle's room—a stale, darkened chamber at the top of the house where posters of pubescent girl rock stars smiled down from the ceiling, their glossed lips plumped and parted.

Kyle wasn't impressed with the cellophane wrapped CD until he heard Randy had stolen it. "Sick, man," he said, sufficiently moved to raise his fingers from his keyboard.

"That's not all," Randy replied, and yanked Kyle's comforter over the rumpled sheets. Next to the bed waited an empty (and still dirty) fish tank, and next to it an X-box, a TV with DVR, and another older computer now pulled apart to wires and boards. If there was anything new in the world to be had, Kyle had it and was bored with it before Randy even saw it advertised, so it seemed that marketers around the world conducted their business by first checking in at Kyle's house, reaching with their long fingers from New York or California to peel back his roof and peer over his shoulder.

"My dad went on a date with this woman, and she grabbed my crotch," Randy said.

"What? Where?"

"At a Starbucks. The one across from the Best Buy."

"Shit! What did your dad do?"

Randy shrugged. "I'll tell you what I did. I jumped up and hit my head on this weird lamp."

"Did she sign?" Kyle asked.

It was what had mystified Randy too. How had his father

picked up a woman in the few short minutes he was inside Best Buy? How had he known she would stop to talk to him—that she could? It turned out that she had worked as an aide at Randy’s old elementary school. He didn’t remember her, but his father had, which meant that even when Randy’s mom was still around, still married to his dad, he had been checking out Randy’s teachers.

“So, she grabbed your crotch.” Kyle demonstrated on himself. It was too much in the closed, dirty-laundry-filled confines of his room.

“More like here.” Randy admitted, indicating the side of his pants, over the pocket. “She could hear my Discman. She said I had to skip to a different song, or turn it down.” He watched Kyle. She had said the lyrics were inappropriate.

“Oh, shit,” Kyle said, shaking his head, tears of laughter in his eyes. “What did you do?”

Randy shrugged. He didn’t tell the rest—how his father had looked down at his pants too, and then everyone had been looking at the outline of the stolen CD.

Kyle’s bedroom had smelled like souring milk and sawdust in all seasons, at all the ages Randy and Kyle so far had been. He turned back to his screen, playlist, and plugged-in iPod.

“You don’t fill yours up?” Randy asked him.

“When I have more time I will.” More and more often lately, he finished typing or clicking before pausing to sign.

“You think you’ll have time to mess with that at school?” Randy asked. “You’re going to have actual assignments now. Tests.”

In the piles in Kyle’s room lay strewn video games he’d never

seen the second levels of. As a kid he’d pushed his GI Joes through the rain gutter. *Now why did you do that?* His mother would come outside and crouch down low to inquire. To her, everything Kyle did evinced a profound act of choosing.

Kyle moved his mouse as if he were snipping wires to deactivate a bomb, as if each click were a decision that represented life or death, and then all at once he went fast, fast, fast, backing through a familiar sequence.

“I’ll get songs from guys I meet there,” he said finally.

Kyle could be a smug little prick, and yet still, somehow, he seemed to demand pity for the condition. Randy would have to remember to tell him not to bring the pictures of the girl rock stars to Denver, which were not the right kind of pictures, even he knew, for a highschooler’s room.

“Yeah, well, make sure you give me all your new stuff before you go,” Randy said. He dropped the Discman to Kyle’s desk, popping it open to the last mixed CD. On his way out he tried for a look at Kyle’s face, to see how wide his grin was.

That year, Randy had just started high school, mixing in with kids from public middle schools all over the city. Unlike his mother, he would attend a regular high school. Unlike his father, he could expect to do so without it being a big deal for anyone—administrators, parents, other kids. Randy knew that his father, when he was Randy’s age, had been called a deaf-mute. Recalling that now, he shook his head with renewed astonishment, with the indignation

he'd learned from Randy's mother, the activist.

Amidst that pack of anonymous freshmen, Randy was trailed by an interpreter, college-student Julie, with her dreadlocks, who had been approached on at least two occasions for drugs. Yet it had shocked Randy to realize one day in homeroom that other kids had heard about his deaf mother going blind, and his deaf parents' subsequent divorce—like they all along had been the intolerant ones. Who had dropped whom? Had his father found his mother's blindness disgusting? No—it came out that she had left him. The girls who sat near Randy couldn't get beyond it. Deaf and blind. It was too much to happen to a person, they kept saying every time they saw Randy, or perhaps they repeated it all day long, no matter who they were around, shaking their heads and their wide, brown-rimmed eyes.

Julie interpreted everything. She was obsessed with the girls' ignorance and tactlessness. Sometimes she continued their whispered conversation even after the teacher strode to the front of the room, wagging his chalk and pretending to ignore his view of the back of Julie's homemade tank top. (That joke Julie and Randy also shared. *I'm getting you an A*, she'd sign to him, right in the middle of class.) Randy might have told the girls that he agreed with what they were saying. At his grade school, they had made fun of the blind kids the most, their dead faces and their sticks.

Most unfathomable to the girls who sat in front of him, Randy knew, was the idea of having any husband, blind or deaf, who would touch you, and then losing that or giving it up.

"Which one do you think is better-looking?" Julie asked him, trying to match the girls mean for mean. "The tall one, or the one with the big tits?"

He suspected that if he told Julie about stealing the CD she'd say *right on*. He suspected that if he told her about the CD she'd find out about the Discman too, how he wore it now when he was just walking around, or on the bus, and how on the bus with the volume up it had made a woman sitting near him get up and leave.

"I need someone I can talk to," Randy's father said in their kitchen after dinner one night. "I need someone to be a life partner, and to share my life."

He wasn't referring to Merlinda, or the coffee date that had destructed. Since Merlinda, he had been on two other dates, with two other women presumably met in the same way: at a store, out in the world, charmed somehow by his brown bomber jacket. He'd assigned Randy the punishment of returning the CD to the store and apologizing, but hadn't yet followed up by asking how it went. His trust in Randy's acceptance of the order, and his willingness to do the right thing, was the seal of their new relationship.

But was he ready? He asked Randy, rhetorically. Then he shook his head. He wasn't ready until Randy was ready. His father explained as if he'd been watching Oprah all afternoon. Randy looked at his father's overgrown eyebrows, at the acne scars on the sides of his roughened cheeks.

"Just think of the problems we'll have once you're dating too."

He smiled. "There will be girls coming, girls going."

Randy said he was going to make some toast or something in the kitchen. He was still hungry.

His dad followed him from the dining room, carrying their dirty plates and setting them inside the sink. "Two old bachelors," he said. "We'll have a jar of condoms in the bathroom. We'll install a red light bulb in the hallway." He grinned.

"Can I just eat my toast?" Randy said. "Is that okay with you, lover boy?"

One interesting, surprising thing about their lives this past fall—as interesting as Randy's father's satisfaction with his own good parenting—was this: how easily they fell into their routines, which had only to be altered slightly without her. They lived where they'd always lived. They continued to leave in the morning for school and work.

Randy started making his own lunch, but he'd never liked the way she did it anyway, with gloppy mayonnaise and wet tomatoes that soaked the bread.

Half the semester passed. In homeroom, the girls moved on to discussing black men. Would they date one? If so, how would they handle it if he ever called them *bitch*? Julie was now writing a paper about the girls for a class she was taking.

She also found out about the Discman. So Randy put it on, modeling, bobbing his head. Julie didn't know what to think, he could see, and so she just laughed. Sure, she got it.

But at the end of the day she said something else, clapping him on the shoulder. *Congratulations. Now you're just like everybody else.*

Time passed every day, and yet did not pass. Still it would be another month before Kyle left, after Christmas. One night, one more time, Randy let himself in the back door to find Kyle on his couch, watching TV in the basement rec room.

"Get up," Randy said. For the first time, he didn't feel weirdly guilty and regretful, or even happy and excited while watching Kyle mishandle or mistreat something—and this time it was their friendship.

Kyle stared at him.

"We need to try something out," Randy said. When Kyle continued to lie there, Randy threw a pillow, hitting him in the head. Kyle left the pillow there, covering his face. Randy had to walk over and pull it off. When he did, Kyle was smirking.

"Why didn't that sensor go off?" he asked. "Aren't you curious?"

Kyle looked as if he were thinking for a moment, remembering, but Randy knew he remembered. "Maybe it did go off," Kyle laughed. "Did you hear it?"

"They just let me walk off with their merchandise? Sure."

Kyle sat up on the couch. "Broken," he said, using one simple sign.

"Or, it was fake to begin with. To scare people."

Kyle bit at his thumbnail. He liked games in which it was other

people—everyone else around them—who were stupid. “So are you going to try it again?” Kyle asked.

“I’m thinking about it. I’m thinking about a test.” He explained about bringing the CD back in to the store to see if the sensor went off, which was a plan that formed in his hands as they moved.

Kyle considered this, then shrugged. “I already copied it.”

“We’ll just walk in and out, and see if the sensor goes off.”

“Great. What if it goes off, and then we have the CD?”

Randy did what he did when he mimed that he was deaf, pulling at his ear, relaxing his face to look retarded—a gag that Kyle loved.

“Oh man,” Kyle said. “You’re so sick, you know that? You’re so sick.”

Randy wasn’t sure if the Best Buy would be open by the time he and Kyle got there. It was past rush hour, and December-dark. The longer you live, Randy’s father would say, snapping his fingers as if he were pleased, the days fly faster. Like to get older was to shift not only through time but hyperspace, too.

Signposts and landmarks of their neighborhood streaked past the window as the bus careened around corners, choosing unexpected directions like a stunned animal in the woods. They came to the next neighborhood over and jerked through it.

Kyle had brought his iPod, and Randy the Discman. They sat there, nodding their heads. Randy shook Kyle’s arm and they got off, the bus rolling away, out of sight.

Walking across the big parking lot, Randy dropped a step

behind Kyle and almost, quite nearly, slipped the CD with the black car on the cover into Kyle’s thick army coat pocket.

Kyle danced out of the way, slapping Randy’s hands. The CD spun to the ground.

“You have to,” Randy said.

“Me? You stole it.”

“Exactly,” Randy said. Now his heart was thudding. Strange as it seemed, sometimes total firmness worked with Kyle, as if he only wanted to be *made to*.

“No way,” Kyle said. “No way. I never said I would do it. Fuck.” Kyle signed like he was throwing the words. “You brought me all the way out here.” He pointed, finger shaking.

A car shot across the far end of the parking lot, so fast it would have killed them if they’d been in its path. Teenagers.

Kyle swooped down to pick up the CD. With it, he ran through the dark back toward the bus stop, his coat flapping, and the white bottoms of his shoes flying up and sideways.

“Well it was yours anyway,” Randy said when he caught up to him.

“It was a gift.” Kyle was tight-lipped, pained, now clutching the CD as if he’d resented the plan to return it, his precious gift.

Still breathing hard from the run, Randy looked down the street in the direction from which the bus would come. He checked the bus schedule again, the number you could call for information if you had a phone.

Later, months later, the woman's name was Cherie. Her plump arms bulged from under the bands of her short blouse sleeves. Her skin was yellowish, like butter.

His father was learning to cook. Now he baked. He collected recipes.

Signing with his hands up in front of his face, it was if he were framing the woman who stood before him, framing her in his mind, in his memory. Like the other women in the past weeks, Cherie loved it. It seemed that she had his full attention as his eyes had to follow her lips, follow her hands. Randy's father was good at dating.

Yet, was his attentiveness due to the fact that *his* father, when he was a kid, would flick him in the face with his fingernails if he "didn't listen"? His deafness had come at three, after a fever, and he would not have lost his hearing if his father had been sober and brought him to the hospital on time.

Cherie's cousin was deaf, she'd told them, and so she knew some signs, but not many. She kept apologizing for herself. When she didn't know a word, she shook her head, let her hands fall to her lap, seemed to freeze up.

Chill. It's Okay. Randy tried to calm her. These were signs even hearing people understood, signs that led them to think that if they just tried they might discover they were able to sign all along, the words and sentences happening in their fingers like spontaneous combustion. "Okay? Smile?"

"Cherie," said his father, putting down his fork. "You remind me of someone." He ducked his head, bashful. This room with the

long table and high-backed chairs was the room where Randy now sat to work through his homework load. His father used the other end to go through their bills and the mail. They'd added the leaves to make the table even longer, and they could eat here too, and occasionally entertain. There was good light. Randy's mother had thought of it as a room for holiday dinners. She'd found it stuffy, formal, not for everyday use.

Randy's father pressed his fingers in to his palms while he thought, as if warming his hands. "Kate Winslet," he signed finally, spelling out the name fast like it might flash on a marquis.

Cherie didn't follow the letters.

"*Titanic?*" Randy tried.

He and his father leapt up as one. Charades? Randy assumed Leonardo DiCaprio's pose, grabbing his father's hips from behind. His father flung out his arms from the bow of their imaginary boat and the tractor beam of his smile, the joy of his flung backward face filled their small dining room. Cherie laughed.

"I'm heading out," Randy said later. He saluted Cherie, fingertips swinging on a hinge from his forehead.

This was after he'd cleared the table, completed his end of the mock exchange. *No, let me. You have company.*

Jennifer Levin

Boom-Chick-a-Boom

(Back in the Day: Julia)

I could've fallen in love with Calvin Goodman if he'd let me.

He was hot—he could've had any freshman he wanted. I was a senior and at first we were just friends. We met at a bad party and in the crowded hallway he told me he wanted to see me naked. He had indigo eyes with long black lashes, and shaggy mink hair that curled past his ears. His voice had a lilt and twang that led me to believe he was from Texas, though he said Los Angeles. He said lots of things.

We looked at poems together. Not our own, not at first; we read to each other from books, long hours holed-up at my place in front of the wood-burning stove, unheard of in a college student's crumbling rental. Looking back, I'm sure it was part of what attracted him. It was cozy.

Eventually, he asked me to critique his work. He said he didn't find his intro workshop satisfying. *I want to go inside poems*, he said. *I know you can help me get there*.

He made excessive references to whiskey and shadows and smells of water, but there were some fine moments. There were also mixed metaphors and an underlying hostility about women's bodies I chose to overlook.

After three weeks of toying with each other, we hooked up in my kitchen one evening after drinking red wine and, of course, reading poetry. I kissed him on the back of the neck while he rinsed a glass at the sink; he whirled around and threw me up against the refrigerator. We spent most of the following week on a thin futon and old blankets laid out in the living room, because Calvin sure did love that woodstove.

I've been waiting for this, he murmured. *There's no place I'd rather be*.

People said we made a good couple. An attractive couple. I thought that meant we looked made-up, invented whole-cloth by someone else—someone who failed in her execution of the premise and plot, because based upon my reading we weren't a believable couple. If I'd read us in a story I would feel sorry for Julia, so needy and clingy and old. I felt removed from him, but it didn't matter.

We fell into our roles. I let him put his head on my lap, cry and tell me about his mother, a manic-depressive with an OCD streak. Her glitch was washing: the floors, her hands, her children—whatever appeared to be dirty.

She made me suspicious of all women. I hate her.

I stroked his hair and told him he was a good person.

We'd be at a party or a bar and Calvin would disappear, only to catch my eye from across the room fifteen or twenty minutes later, invariably draped in some chick, acting like she was the most fascinating thing he'd ever met. All he had to do was flash those navy blues and girls flocked to him. He'd whisper in their ears, nuzzle their necks and look at me—he'd look right at me and whisper things to them I couldn't begin to guess. After a while, I began recalling former, better boyfriends.

I don't know what I was thinking. I knew ahead of time that showing him my poems would ruin them, forever and absolutely, even if other people thought they were brilliant, even if other people wanted to publish me immediately upon graduation and make me a literary sensation.

But he'd been asking. I had a senior reading to prepare for and was desperate for feedback, and Professor Keeley already had a stack of my stuff on his desk and he'd recently taken to skipping his office hours because he was going through a divorce—so I gave Calvin a test.

Could he critique my work in a civilized way? Would it tell me something about him I hadn't yet understood? Perhaps it would serve as reassurance. I needed something to sustain me. My mad fling with

a younger man had turned out to be far more trouble than I'd bargained for—in fact, Calvin was starting to creep me out. I needed to graduate and get the hell out of town before he chopped me up into little fucking pieces or hung me out the window by my ankles or whatever his sociopathic mind was concocting, because he couldn't control himself. And: he wrote all over the two pieces I sacrificed to him. Front and back, he filled all the available white space with red-ink instructions; he typed an entirely new stanza and stapled it to the mess he'd made. He picked at each syllable and sound, judged every image.

Sentimental. False. Breezy. Unnecessary.

We had lots of fights after that. I began applying to graduate schools and he began glancing dismissively at the paperwork and chuckling.

You'll never get into any of these places.

One morning in April I rolled over and broke up with Calvin Goodman.

It's not working anymore, I said, I'm in love with someone else, I'm dropping out of school, anything to get him out of my bed.

He sat up, his eyes turning black. He pulled the blankets off of me.

Here's a scene:

It's two o'clock on a Tuesday morning. Lucinda is asleep when the phone rings.

He says, "I need to talk to you."

She says, "I'm sleeping."

"I'm stuck at an awful party. I'm surrounded by fakes and drunks. I love you. Please rescue me."

"No. I'm asleep. And I'm mad at you."

"I love you," he pleads, "don't be mad. I need you."

(Advanced Poetry Workshop: Adeline)

Willa pinched me on the thigh, so I pinched her back and she kicked me in the shin. We had bruises all over our bodies. The violence occurred covertly, under the table. We battered each other out of sheer frustration and, at least for me, the need to feel pain. That was workshop.

The Nasty Crotch Boys chuckled and mumbled, shuffled their papers and got ready to tear me apart. I tugged on my bangs—the result of too much experimenting, they were bleached-out with crunchy pink tips; they'd been cut unevenly recently by my roommate, Franny, who hadn't meant to further mangle me. I foresaw multiple years of embarrassing outgrowth before I would again be considered presentable.

"Go ahead, Addie," Professor Keeley said.

"The beginning or the end?" My voice came out as a whisper. I cringed at myself. I didn't feel at all mentally prepared for critique.

"Your choice."

I cleared my throat and read my four lines aloud: "Blue white sage smell/carts me close to/how I can't tell/of the blue-white you."

Silence for a full minute. Then clearing of throats. I rubbed my

eyebrows.

Calvin Goodman opened his mouth first. "I can't stand this bogus feminine thing. You disguise it in some pretty limited description, first of all, and second, it's not original or interesting. It's just, you know, he fluttered his hands, "sentimentality. Why don't you write about anything important?"

Sentimentality was rooted out of our poems like plague. Willa and I were the only girls in the class; there were only three in the whole writing program. We didn't have any female professors. We noticed these details.

Lawrence Tipton jumped in after Calvin; he dug in his ear the entire time he spoke. "There's some decent imagery, but Cal's right. I guess I don't buy all this family history crap."

They made me want to cut myself. And they reeked. They smelled like last night, like bourbon and sex, in the middle of workshop. I wanted Professor Keeley to take his turn. At least he always said something nice, even if he didn't consider me one of the good writers.

Willa scooted her chair closer to the table and made a terrible screeching sound across the floor. The Nasty Crotch Boys quieted, always more willing to listen to Willa than me. She cleared her throat and tucked her limp, light brown, trouble-free hair behind her ear. When she spoke her voice was calm, almost measured.

"Growth. Forward, not back. Not history. Get it, fellas?"

Calvin snorted. "Your precious insights into your friend's childhood in some Midwestern mall town don't warrant our

attention, do they? This is a fluff piece about the fucking garden in Addie's backyard when she was wee. Why are we wasting so much time on it?"

My head was full of cement.

"The language bothers me," he continued. "All those *rhymes*." He stroked his goatee while he critiqued. He reminded me of a truck driver, or Satan.

"It's in form, freak!" Willa shouted. She was never able to remain calm in workshop. "That's not what I meant," Willa said, but Calvin didn't let her finish.

"It's a pretty little tear-jerker for the ladies," he said sweetly.

"I think we're straying a bit," said Professor Keeley. "Since Addie has given us something in form, for which I applaud her effort, why don't we address the rhyme scheme? Addie has a good sense for internal rhymes and half rhymes—"

My cheeks went hot with his praise, but I blushed too soon.

"It does seem, however, that the word choices could be more...inspired."

"It sounds like Mother Goose," Calvin snorted.

"All right, now," said Professor Keeley.

And then Lawrence was up, with his poem about getting laid in a bar bathroom. He read four lines aloud: "Bourbon blisters, burns through/her skirt sliding over, no panties / so sliding, stopping. I see through / her bourbon mind, blur her edges."

"Dude," Calvin said, "I could feel the burning. Very strong voice."

I flinched, anticipating a pinch from Willa, but she wasn't paying attention anymore. She'd zoned out—she was writing in her notebook, humming softly. I wanted to be able to tune them out, but I never could.

It wasn't as if I wanted to go to their house, drink with them, listen to them talk and talk, kiss them if they wanted to kiss me. It was just something I did.

Here's a scene:

Lucinda goes out in the middle of the night to pick up Calvin from a party. He said he was stuck. He begged her to come.

She follows his directions, drives all the way across town, and pulls up at a loud house. He is standing on the front lawn with two girls she's never seen before. She honks the horn; the three of them look at her and laugh.

She rolls down the window and honks again. "Calvin," she calls, "get in the car."

"Why do you keep following me?" he shouts. "I can't get rid of this crazy bitch," he says for all the world to hear. "I've never even talked to her, but she writes me all these crazy letters and shows up wherever I go. She's a total stalker."

"Get in the car, Calvin," Lucinda says.

He yells joyously, not sounding the least bit like someone who loves her. "If you don't leave me alone, I'm going to get a restraining order!"

(After Class: Willa)

Addie and I met for coffee on the Quad once a week after workshop to discuss our educational futures and watch the sunset, which was a far-too-easy metaphor.

Addie was vibrating. She attempted to light a cigarette and hold onto her coffee at the same time; she didn't manage it and scalded her hands. "Ow! God—fuck!" She sank onto the grass, cursing and muttering, trying to get herself organized. She managed to dump the contents of her backpack onto the ground, which sent her scurrying around shoving notebooks, textbooks, and an amazing variety of badly chewed pens back in.

I sat on the grass, smoking and looking at the horizon, pretending not to notice her clumsy, frenetic actions. She'd had a bad afternoon. I couldn't blame her for acting like a spaz.

"So what the fuck was that?" she asked, ready to begin our conversation. "They trash my poem for eight minutes and worship Lawrence for thirty? What can I cling to? That fucking Lawrence thought I had some nice imagery? Which he didn't bother to write down, of course, or like give me my poem back or anything, so..."

"You got screwed," I said. It was early spring and as the day faded to twilight, I felt burdened with a sadness I didn't know how to fix. "All I know is that I cannot listen to another poetic list of bourbon brands. I will shoot Calvin in the fucking eye. And why do they all talk the same? Do they intend to sound like assholes every time they open their mouths? Fuck—drinking, fast women, jazz and the blues. The destructive forces of nature, the loss of a father."

Addie giggled. "Crashing fast cars, escaping in fast cars, the loss of fast cars."

"I seriously think we have a legitimate conflict of interest to present to the dean or the president or whoever it is that listens to these kinds of complaints," I said. "How can they be allowed to all live in the same gross house together and then all be in the same workshop?"

Addie wrinkled her nose. "And have sex with all the same girls."

"Nasty. It's a cult and Calvin's their leader." I laughed maniacally, warming up to the game. "What the hell is it about him, anyway? Why does everyone except us think he's, like, God?"

"He's hot?" Addie suggested.

"Whatever. I hate the way they all fawn over him and think he's so damn talented. I wish Keeley would do something."

Addie cracked her knuckles and sipped her coffee. "I don't think he notices. Or he might actually like them better than us."

It took a tremendous effort not to roll my eyes at her. "Why do they think they need to be drunk to write? It smelled like Milwaukee in there."

"They got wasted last night."

I put down my coffee. "Why do you know so much? I know Franny Mack has to go there, but you don't. I mean, can't we just agree that if you're dating Calvin Goodman, you're probably a little simple?"

"Franny's not simple," Addie said, "she's *deluded*. Hey, see that girl over there?" She pointed at Lucinda, sitting under a tree. "Do you

think she's pretty?"

"Freshman Hottie?" I snickered, but I wasn't dismissing it. Lucinda was the only other girl in the writing program, and guys went after her in a way I'd never personally experienced. I didn't resemble Lucinda in any way, shape, or form—"pretty" didn't come close to doing her justice. *Ethereal* was better. She didn't just look like a poet; she looked as though she were made of poetry, shrouded in translucent silk and mesh, like her insides were sewn from verse.

"She's a sophomore now," Addie clarified, "and Calvin sleeps with her. I mean, he fucks campus, but she's the main one."

"Then why doesn't Franny break up with him?" I didn't have time for girls like that. Addie and I were only friends because of workshop.

"He can be nice, sometimes. And sometimes it's fun there. At their house."

I didn't care who Addie thought was hot, and I didn't know Franny Mack well enough to care how Calvin treated her, but the whole idea that Addie could hang out with them one night and berate them with me the next, over and over and over again, was unfathomable. "You shouldn't traipse so willingly into enemy territory."

"Franny's my roommate! She likes me to go with her because I know all his friends better than she does."

"But even *I* know he's cheated on her a thousand times. Not only do I not understand—I refuse to."

"It's not like he does anything in front of her."

"Of course not. That would subvert his mission of total mind control."

Addie shot me a wry look I hadn't known her capable of. "Trust me," she said, "no one keeps Calvin Goodman's sex life a secret. We tell her everything we hear until she gets pissed. When Cal's with Franny, he treats her like a princess. But, yeah...there are always tons of random girls there."

"What's it like?" I hated that I wanted to know the details, as if knowing meant something to me, when all I wanted to care about was the sanctity of workshop.

"The guys drink Jim Beam out of coffee mugs and quote Ginsberg. Freshmen girls sit around smoking joints and giggling, thinking they're hanging around with the coolest boys in school. Franny and I sit in the corner and glare. Or we cook dinner."

"How very Columbia University in the fifties. We should iron our hair and wear black turtlenecks." I dumped my coffee in the grass, exhausted and confused because I actually was wearing a black turtleneck. Addie wore me out. We had the same conversations every week—she just didn't get it. Like her poem. It was okay; all her stuff was okay, but it never went any further. She left herself open to them because she didn't do the work.

"It's only two months until he graduates," Addie said. "We'll have a whole last year without him and everything will be different."

"Not good enough," I said, deciding to enjoy myself. "I want him gone today. Let's kill him."

"We could poison his cigarettes," Addie suggested. "Or behead

him on the Quad!”

“Yes!” I agreed. “Public shaming. He’ll be humiliated into leaving and we won’t go to jail. No—I know! We should call all the female poets we can think of and invite them to come here so we can gather around him in a big feminine circle and point and laugh and read his own stupid poems back to him until he begs us to kill him!”

“Or,” Addie said, “we could give in and suck all their dicks because then they’d respect us.”

I kicked her in the thigh. “What the fuck are you saying? No blowjobs! That’s not respect, it’s—”

“Don’t look now,” Addie said.

“For fuck’s sake.” Calvin and Franny Mack approached from across the Quad. They joined us on the grass without waiting for an invitation.

“What’s up?” Franny asked after hugging Addie. Girls who hugged all the time pissed me off.

“Just talking,” said Addie.

I pulled up a handful of grass. “We’re stockpiling weapons for the all-girl militia. You better watch out, Calvin.”

“Are you still upset?” He reached out and stroked Addie’s cheek and I almost bit him. Addie only shrugged. “Well,” he said, as if asked to sympathize, “it is hard for you, in the department.”

“It’s pretty fucking male-dominated,” I said.

“I don’t think that’s the problem.” He stroked his goatee. “There just aren’t that many strong woman poets out there, so you have nothing to go on. I can feel your struggle in every poem.”

“Denise Levertov!” I shouted, “Emily Dickinson, Rita Dove, Adrienne Rich, Jorie Graham, Brenda Hillman, Julia Alvarez, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Louise Glück.”

“Jorie’s okay,” he said, “but you just named the whole list. And half of them are dead or wrote about nothing to begin with.” He sucked in a breath, readying himself for some final point. “Female poetry just isn’t very deep. It’s...lacking.”

“Lacking?” Addie and Franny said together.

“*Female* poetry?” I cried. “Why do you talk like that?”

“Cal, sweetie,” muttered Franny, “you’re being a pig.”

He patted her on the knee and smiled. “First of all, male poets outnumber female poets ten to one. You can’t debate this. And two—Willa and Addie know exactly what I’m talking about. There’s never been a strong woman poet in the department. Well, except for my ex-girlfriend, Julia Garrity. She had one almost-great poem her senior year. I mean, it won an award, but small weaknesses were obvious.” He patted Franny’s knee again and sighed, took on a dreamy expression I knew preceded a revelation from the King of All Poets. “I wish there were more girls like Julia. I really loved her.”

He was such an ass. If Addie thought this was Calvin treating Franny like a princess, there was no reason to try talking to her about anything real ever again. I stood up, unable to take another second.

“Are you leaving us, Willa?” Calvin asked, feigning innocence.

I stepped back, stumbling and not caring, desperate for distance. “Drop out,” I pleaded. “Please? Just get the fuck out of our lives as soon as possible?”

Mistress

*He unloads his stories,
graphs his guilt upon my skin.
I listen and he listens
to himself talk. I ask
him nothing and
tell him nothing.*

She would never beg him to choose.

She is pushing the edge of something sacred.

She is writing it down.

She could say she is in love

and it would be the truth.

There are a number of truths.

(A Night Like All Other Nights: Franny)

Did you ever have to read *The Good Earth* in high school? I read it in tenth grade, or most of it. Actually, I had to pretend I was sick so I could stay home and finish it the day before the test, and I still had to skip the last few chapters. There are so many things in my life I wish I hadn't skipped. Do you ever feel that way?

So I didn't finish the book! You didn't even read it, so fuck off.

It's about this Chinese family, and in the part I remember, the son is grown and married and he and his wife live with his very traditional father. This is a problem because the son wants a glamorous life—he wants to be rich, make money and fit in with

Chinese society, but this flies in the face of everything his father believes in.

One day, the father gets sick and falls into some kind of stupor, like a waking coma, like he's not so much asleep as in a daze. He stays like this for a really long time, so the son does all these things his father wouldn't approve of. He gets rich, refurnishes the house, and since it's fashionable, he gets a concubine.

His wife isn't too happy about that, but there isn't anything she can do.

Anyway, the father finally wakes up. All of a sudden he's aware again, and he wanders around the house rediscovering things. He happens upon the concubine and completely freaks out. "There's a whore in the house!" he screams. "There's a harlot in our house! Get her out!"

I totally laughed at that for days. I thought it was hilarious, the image of this little old sleepy Chinese man screaming about harlots. I didn't understand then. Maybe I was too young. Because I've been thinking about that book a lot lately, and I don't think it's funny at all now.

No, see, I have a point. See, at first I thought the roles were easy to assign. Obviously, Lucinda's the concubine. The whore. That's what she is, so don't look at me. I can't stand it when you look at me that way. But I can see why you're squirming, because I certainly had trouble with the concept. A mistress? Seriously? You're twenty-three years old. And you try to pass it off like you're Jack fucking Kerouac, like the things you do will lead you to fame and greatness.

Maybe they will. How do I know?

I wanted that for you once. I think that's what made it a little okay, and a lot sexy. But I am a fool. All you have to do is breathe near me and I'm covered in goose-bumps.

My friends told me about Lucinda a long time ago.

So what does that make me? The betrayed wife? Or the father suddenly coming to his senses?

I actually thought I hated you enough to forget you last Christmas. I gave you that painting as a gift, you dick—how could you *critique* it like that? I'm not in your fucking poetry workshop. But it's not like you respect anyone's art, anyway.

And on New Year's Day, when I fixed the painting how you wanted, I knew it was useless. I lay awake nights in my parents' house, wishing you were there with me.

My friends have given up on me, by the way.

Do you know how awful that feels? They tell me all the stories about you and your gross roommates, that lair. When the clock strikes midnight, do you just pick one? Club her on the head and toss her over your shoulder, caveman her down the hall? I've tried to imagine it, but all I can picture is bad seventies porn. Sideburns and a boom-chick-a-boom soundtrack.

That part is barely real to me. And if you were discreet, I wouldn't know anything at all. But I do. So the worst part, Calvin, is that I have to see them. You've cheated on me like a psychopath. Every girl I see on campus, on my way to class, at the library, wherever—every single girl might have slept with you. Everyone I

look at is suspect. I have to question everything and my friends won't shut up and it's depressing and tiring and I hate it. I hate everyone at this point.

You've been quiet for a while.

I would like to believe that for once, you're actually listening. But I am so easy to fool. I should have listened.

I'm the whore. I'm the wife and I'm the father. I'm the son, trying to please everybody and still get what I want.

You? You're no one.

No one could ever write about you.

Here's a scene:

Calvin and Lucinda twist on the bed, blankets on the floor, lights off. He jerks down her stockings and ties them around her wrists, ties her wrists behind her head. Not too tight. She knows he knows that she's just getting over being mad at him, and if he ties her too tight she might get upset all over again. He removes her panties but leaves her bra in place. He kisses her stomach.

"Be right back," he whispers.

She's alone, tied in the dark, waiting while he searches the house for a condom. She wishes he'd waited until he returned to tie her up; the door isn't locked which means at any second a houseful of stoned and drunk idiots could stumble in and see her this way. She wonders what this will be later, when she writes about it or thinks about it or thinks about writing about it. She would leave him if she could.

The skin on her stomach prickles in a breeze from the open window. The stockings at her wrists prevent her from following her body's instinct to wrap her arms around herself. It's winter. Calvin is in constant need of fresh air. His room is always freezing.

She doesn't like his room. In the day, the walls are lined by books bought with stolen funds from the Poetry Society, of which he is president. He was supposed to buy books for the student lounge, but he said he deserved them for himself. The books are lined up evenly with the edges of the shelves, arranged in some order he never allows her to disturb. He says she'll get fingerprints on the pages.

Patricia Henley

Red Lily

Father Bill had been sent away. There was a home for them in South Carolina, her mother said, a place where they could straighten out. Jenny wondered if there were bars on the windows. It happened almost overnight. He presided at Mass on Ash Wednesday, and the next morning they saw him two doors down at the brownstone rectory, scraping ice off his windshield with the edge of a plastic cassette case. Then into the car went two suitcases and a stack of books. He did not look back. Hypocrites, her mother said, and she stopped going, even though she kept her part-time job selling rosaries and holy cards at Catholic Supply in the church basement. Jenny went ahead and made her first confession and communion that year. She never got over the allure of confession, the dusty maroon curtain, the whispers and stories, the buoyant relief, saying her penance at the communion rail, having been absolved of her childish sins, little lies and selfishness.

Her father moved out a year later. The Wabash had flooded. She had been afraid of the river water swirling around the tires. Leaning out the window of the Rambler station wagon. They had been to the zoo and eaten frozen custard—it was the first day of frozen custard season, which was really ice cream. Frozen custard

had been outlawed, but the sign stayed the same, a polar bear dancing a jig. Her father let her get out of the car and pick her way to the house around the smelly puddles on the sidewalk before he gunned the engine and disappeared out of town, her mother said, and across the state line, to Ohio. These memories were folded in with others from that turbulent time: Waverly coming to live upstairs for the rent money; her grandfather's heart attack and the funeral where she had glimpsed the men drinking from a brown bottle in a back room of the funeral parlor on Ferry Street; her mother saying, "No more church. No more confession. No more fish on Friday. Promise me you'll never go."

Then things calmed down. Jenny became a gatherer of secrets, a gossip. These morsels she brought to her mother every evening for twenty-five years, always the sins of others, never her own. As she grew up, if ever guilt nagged at her, she would think, How could it be gossip if people told on themselves?

Jenny sometimes spied curiously on the weddings or funerals spilling out on the limestone steps of the church, both occasions appearing similar to the casual observer, with well-wishers or mourners dressed in pin-striped suits and lace-trimmed navy-blue dresses squared off with shoulder pads. At Catholic Supply her

mother's boss was now Father Rickie; they would see him in the summertime, cooking over a hibachi on the widow's walk of the rectory. Jenny sometimes daydreamed about the confessional. She stopped in front of the church and memorized the Mass and reconciliation schedule, thinking, Someday. Her sins were backlogged, a clerical mess. They seemed to infect her like particular strains of the flu. Spite was big the winter her mother and Waverly got together, the same year Eddie Fox and Sharla got together. Spite and jealousy and meanness.

At the last Halloween party, Sharla had come dressed as the boss, His Honor, head of English, in an olive-drab trench coat and wingtip shoes that had probably belonged to a dead man, purchased at the Goodwill for one dollar. The secretaries always made fun of him. A fashion plate in his early forties, he wore his black hair shaggy like a seventies rock star, and he smelled of pipe tobacco and garlic, which he believed to have curative powers. His wife had gone to Oregon to care for her ailing parents and never returned. He finally divorced her, but not bitterly. Sharla was not his secretary, Jenny was. He wanted to remarry, he had confided when Jenny saw him packing up family photos to take home. He didn't want reminders of his ex around. There were no children to keep up appearances for. Jenny imagined that he wanted children and sometimes she pictured bringing a baby home to him. Wrapped in a pastel receiving blanket. A boy with a mass of black hair. All the steps before that, leading up to a baby, were foggy. Only staff and junior

faculty attended the Halloween bash; Sharla's costume was a secret amongst them. As the night wore on, she'd opened the trench coat like a flasher and shown them her lace teddy. The lights had been dim; you couldn't see everything. She'd been a little drunk on mimosas and Eddie had taken her home. Jenny had laughed as loudly as anyone when Sharla flashed open the trench coat. She wanted to be part of it all, but she decided right then to edge Sharla out.

Before Tarkington College, Jenny Rogers had worked selling services—Chem-Dry carpet cleaning, septic tank pumping, landscaping, efforts at tidiness, wholesomeness, and beauty. In a cement block building on the edge of a nearly abandoned industrial park, she would sit in a padded cubicle under skim-milky florescence, a headset on to leave her hands free, and she took orders, usually from women. She would wonder what their houses were like. Jumbles of toys and inherited knick-knacks, or streamlined, maple and stainless steel, with what she still called under-the-counter dishwashers—she and her mother had never had one. She envied the men who went out on the jobs. They smelled the house smells—lemon oil or perfume or baby powder—while Jenny was stuck with a magazine picture of Lake Michigan in winter tacked to her cubicle wall. But she had escaped that life. She had been at Tarkington College for nearly eleven years, a hunger satisfied.

She had her own office, attached to His Honor's, with doors she could shut if she wanted to listen to a love song on the radio turned

low or if she wanted a good cry—that had happened only twice, but she liked knowing a modicum of privacy was possible. Her office had a window—not all did—and many admired her view: a brick patio surrounded by river birches and yellow tulips that bloomed in April. Sharla in the main office received everyone—Fed Ex delivery, students, faculty, spouses of faculty with new babies to show off. Gayleen spent her days in the eight-by-fifteen photocopy room across the hall. They called the head His Honor behind his back. Keep the kid gloves handy, Jenny would say, he was one to tiptoe around. You never knew when he might jab you with a smart remark. Several mornings a week he worked at home on a book some people said he'd been writing for ten years, a book about theory, she'd been told, what wasn't real, just an idea, Jenny translated. During his mornings at home she took visitors. Students and faculty would stop by, discreetly checking to see if His Honor was out. They would lean in her doorway or perch on the library chair which she'd dressed up with a kitchen chair pad printed with pink toasters and tea cups. They might say, "Cute as a button," at the photo of her tortoise shell cat—Jellybean. Or they might bring her bags of zucchini from their gardens.

She would get the lowdown.

Sooner or later, everyone told secrets.

She knew that after the league games at Star Lanes, the men on the bowling team went to the Lingerie Demonstrations out on State Highway 23.

She knew the reproductive history of everyone, when pregnancy scares occurred, when pregnancy tests were taken, when miscarriages

and abortions were buried in the souls of would-be mothers.

She waited for cat-scan results.

She knew about lumps and suspicious moles.

She loaned small sums of money to needy students.

She knew when professors were canceling classes to go for job interviews at more prestigious institutions. You wouldn't have to go far for that. The course load at Tarkington was four/four. The class cap was thirty-five.

And the affairs of the heart, the field of sexual energy surrounding people who were smitten or people who had met at the wrong time, wrong place, who were married or committed to others—she had radar for that.

Students said she was a surrogate mother. At those moments, an inner voice nearly squealed at her. Lighten your hair! Get a tattoo! Buy velour tights! Still, she didn't take offense, even though she was only thirty-two. It was something to hide behind.

All winter Jenny plotted to make Sharla look bad. The holidays were an excuse for frivolity, for trays of iced cookies brought in for general consumption and personal leave time extended for shopping. It was easy to blame Sharla for a job not quite completed; Jenny did not have to lie; she merely pointed out with a shrug and a wince what would have been ignored any other Christmas. Later, in the new year, she stayed after hours and on Sharla's hard drive she made a slight change in the grammar of a congratulatory form letter to parents of star students. The letter went out without additional proofing and a senior wrote a snotty editorial for the school paper about the poor

grammar. A message Sharla had taken was misplaced, torn into tiny pink shreds and flushed down the toilet. Jenny said to His Honor, “I’ll have to keep an eye on her.” “Please, Jen,” he said, with a long-suffering roll of his eyes. She kept tabs on Sharla’s tardiness and reported it, exaggerated it, slipping in musingly, “She might not work out.” “You’re right about that,” he said. “I’ll have a talk with her.”

Sharla was called in. A compact, determined woman in her mid-twenties, with a ruddy pugnacious face, she sat in Jenny’s office, nervously eyeing His Honor’s door, picking at the appliqué on her felt skirt. You couldn’t remember the color of her hair unless she was right in front of you: linoleum brown. Jenny knew his style: His Honor could put the fear of God in you without being specific. Sharla came out contrite and sidled around the building ashamed for a few days. It was only a matter of time, Jenny self-righteously told her mother when she reported all incidents. She nearly came to believe in Sharla’s laxity herself, losing track of what Sharla had done or not done, losing track of truth in the flushed, almost sexual feeling she had when she was about to sneak around or tattle.

Eddie Fox, who taught geology, had a job offer in Florida. He closed Jenny’s office door for privacy on a blustery Friday in February, the week before Ash Wednesday. She didn’t think of it that way at the time—the week before Ash Wednesday—but later she would. Students darted to and fro beneath her window, their umbrellas blown inside out by a wild gust. Eddie’s cowboy boots turned up at the toes. He wore jeans so smooth they might still be

iron-hot to the touch, a white dress shirt, a barn jacket waterproofed with wax. His clean-shaven face was long and scarred from acne along one cheek, a scar the shape of a river’s oxbow. She had watched his strawberry blond hairline recede, but he was the sort of man who joked about it.

Jenny knew every inch of Eddie; she could bring him forth anytime, anywhere. Thoughts of him could make her feverish with want; she could pass an hour lying on a sofa, sick with desire for him, the way you feel when you’ve eaten too much store-bought cake.

“What about Sharla?” Jenny said. She felt tears about to come. A ballad on the radio fueled her sadness.

“We never, you know, made a commitment.” Eddie opened a candy jar and plucked out a miniature chocolate bar, unwrapped it, and popped it into his mouth. She wished he hadn’t said that. She didn’t want to know with what indifference he shrugged off Sharla, in spite of her wish for Sharla to die, disappear, or quit.

A pro-forma knock interrupted them—she was about to say, Come off it, Eddie. Sharla and Gayleen squeezed into the office.

Gayleen was a wisp, blond, a chatterbox, always in black, fresh out of junior college.

Smart as a whip, Eddie had said about Sharla, and for some reason that phrase stuck with Jenny and she resented it every time she was in the presence of Eddie and Sharla at the same time. Jenny didn’t need to be told that. Sharla took the free course every year and she paid for two more. She had thirty credits. The handbags she collected reminded Jenny of sewing baskets. She went to Indy

monthly to buy vintage clothes, red sweater sets from the fifties and poodle skirts.

Eddie excused himself, smilingly. “Got to go, got to go, ladies.” On the way out, he patted Sharla’s knee; she smiled like the Mona Lisa. Jenny could read her a mile away: she was at his mercy.

“Well?” Jenny said.

“He’ll be in Tallahassee,” Sharla said, averting her gaze. “I don’t really care, Jen. I never want to get married. Marriage breaks your backbone.”

Jenny showed them a find from the prior weekend: a stiff black-and-white photograph of a white-haired man in a casket surrounded by rose wreaths. She collected antique funeral photos. Sharla showed them her bracelet made from old buttons, fake ivory and rhinestone. Gayleen suffered these exchanges restlessly, snapping her fingers, wiggling in an abbreviated dance to the classic rock on the radio. Finally she said, “Cabin fever, that’s what I’ve got.”

She and Sharla left as unceremoniously as they had arrived. They were doing their rounds while His Honor was at a meeting; Jenny would never do that. She was a good girl, her mother said. His Honor had praised her at her annual review; she was doggedly responsible, to force him to praise her. Gayleen would not last long at Tarkington, in Jenny’s opinion. All on her own, she would sabotage the job. She was late more than not, and whined about the work assigned. She talked about moving to Bloomington where covens practiced white magic in public parks. “They want to cast off restraint, Jenny. No guilt.”

Gayleen had been the source of news regarding Eddie and Sharla, and what Sharla and Eddie thought of marriage had been a predominant theme. Once a week all winter Jenny had accompanied Gayleen on her smoking jaunts to the south steps of the building where they might with luck find diluted sunshine; they would stand in wool coats and scarves, gossiping, while Gayleen smoked a filterless cigarette. To mark the hour, the mechanical bells in the tower would play “The Way We Were.”

“It’s been going on since summer—you must’ve known,” Gayleen had said, the first time the topic was broached. “They went to the dunes together.”

“The dunes?”

“Haven’t you been anywhere?”

“I’ve been to Wyoming,” Jenny said.

“What for?”

“My cousin out there had twins. I went out to help her. Before Chem-Dry. I rode the Greyhound to Gillette and saw antelope in the fields.” She rarely thought about the cousin now, the sweet-poop odor of the babies, their bleating, but the experience had altered her view of motherhood and what it might demand of you. She had decided then it wasn’t worth it. Now she thought babies might be your passion. At campus picnics the babies charmed her. She felt voluptuous and competent in their presence.

“Well, the dunes are only two hours from here, if you don’t mind speeding.”

“We didn’t get that far when I took Roadside Geology from

him.”

“They still use condoms.”

“What difference does that make?”

Gayleen, for her age, had esoteric knowledge about the nuances of relationship. “It just tells me,” she said, “they’re not that committed. Or she’d get the pill. They have the kind of commitment where you don’t have to talk every day. It’s a level you get to. Some never get past it.”

Jenny had never considered such stages of commitment. She didn’t know what to expect, but as they talked, over the winter, she knew she did still expect something. Some flood—of desire or care—that would become bedrock sediment. In her mind, the process didn’t take much time, but it might be more geologic.

The day before Eddie’s announcement about moving to Tallahassee, she had said to Gayleen, “Do you believe in love at first sight?”

“My mother says that’s an old wife’s tale.”

“My mother says, ‘Love’s slavery, girl.’”

She said that, but Jenny could not rely on her mother now. Ever since Thanksgiving her mother and Waverly had been doing it right under her nose. He had carved the turkey. He had called her Mary Lou, what no one had called her mother since high school. She usually went by Suzie-Q, the nickname given her by her brother. How did Waverly know about Mary Lou?

Gayleen had smirked. “That’s a bad attitude, Jenny. You’ll never find a hubby.” Her voice rose cynically on the word *hubby*. She

bent over and smashed her cigarette butt on the concrete. “Come to Cox’s Pub with us. Karaoke’s fun, Jen. You lose your inhibitions.”

Jenny always begged off. She couldn’t imagine getting up on stage with young people and making a fool of herself. Inhibitions were God-given, her mother always warned.

The day of Eddie’s announcement, she didn’t want to go home. He’d left her feeling bereft. It was the loss of a fantasy—she was self-aware enough to see that. At home she would have to put up with Waverly, the smell of his pipe tobacco. He had been there every evening for a week. She never told her mother the stories with Waverly there. Her mother would usually have supper on the table. The Christmas tree would be lit in the window, no matter the season. In 1967 her mother’s brother had died in Vietnam two days before Christmas and the tree had been lit ever since. They had replaced the original aluminum tree and the light bulbs had blinked out now and again and been replenished. It was a commitment her grandfather had made and when he passed away, the obligation fell to Jenny’s mother.

There was always a smell in the house—an electric smell, as if wiring might melt at any moment, and also cigarette butts too long in the ashtray—her mother’s menthols. Thin and brittle, with a mouth wrinkled and soured by smoking, she was given to wearing loose pants and tunics that might have been pajamas, but she wore them to the supermarket and the convenience store on the next block where she purchased cigarettes and Nirvana Cash lottery tickets. Jenny felt

an aversive tug away from the house whenever she imagined Waverly kissing that sour mouth. The odor of whatever her mother had cooked would waft over everything, often meat and onions and potatoes in one form or another. She had a cookbook called *The Perfect Potato*.

Upstairs Waverly would have left MTV throbbing, as if he had only come down for a moment. For a while when she was still in high school, Waverly had been the one Jenny secretly wanted. He drove a delivery truck for Coca-Cola, and after work she would try to catch him in the yard, tending what he'd planted—Scotch bells and lilies and pinks.

There was always someone she wanted, someone impossible. She had not been interested in the garden; in fact, she had a mild fear she kept to herself, a fear of dirty hands, and she washed hers more often than necessary.

She went home anyway; there was no place else to go. She got out of her shoes and into house slippers left by the door in winter. Waverly said, "How's tricks?" And her mother said, "We're going to add a deck this spring." She fanned brochures on the table, pictures of people in shorts and sundresses, lounging on a white deck that blazed in the sun. They ate dinner together, with Waverly pinching tiny bits of food and feeding them to Jellybean, who begged. Jenny pushed her food around on the plate, unable to eat.

It felt as if her mother were unfaithful to something. But to what? The life they had led. The sameness. Jenny had done whatever her mother said to do, and this was her reward. She tried not to think

about Waverly's body against her mother's body. It was too rough, too shameful. They were doing it. She was sure of that. Sex was what they could not mention, with him there, but it lay there intangibly on the table. He might be waiting for Jenny to go to her room to reach out, to say something vulgar. Gayleen had told her that lovers are vulgar, like children spouting dirty words. She thought that she might trade rooms with Waverly. Or run away.

"I might go to church," Jenny said.

"Jen."

"I might." The thought had been surfacing for a while, like a fish coming up out of water to snag insects. Still, she surprised herself.

"No harm in that," Waverly said.

So her mother hadn't told him everything. There were still some things he didn't know. She wondered when they had started up. When was that moment when they first really looked at each other? Waverly must have been fifteen years younger than her mother. He chewed his fingernails down to the quick and they were unsightly, stubby, almost obscene. He always wore a Harley-Davidson neckerchief. If she got close to him, he smelled yeasty, like beer.

"You don't know anything about it," Jenny said, her voice quavering. What she felt had so little to do with them; it was all about Eddie Fox.

Waverly shrugged and pulled Jellybean onto his lap and stroked him. The strokes were long and generous.

She got up and went into her room, stepping gingerly, gathering

her purse, her shoes, as if she had all the time in the world. She put on her special Italian shoes, a find at the AIDS consignment store—suede the color of limes. Gayleen had said they probably had at one time belonged to a drag queen with fake fingernails to match. She didn't care. She wanted it to be special, for she hadn't been to confession in over twenty years. When she came out, they were clearing the table. No one said anything. She flung on her coat and hat. She stood in the foyer and pulled on her gloves. She wondered what life was like where Eddie was headed, Tallahassee or a Caribbean island. People there weren't pulling on gloves in February. There were places where people listened to music outdoors, where they drank tropical drinks and barbecued whole pigs. Loyalties were not secure in places like that. People ran off on boats with strangers. Women wore thongs. Inhibitions were considered old-fashioned, out of the last century. Or the one before that. She could never go. She could never figure out how. One time she had known what that felt like. Only once. What kind of roadside geology would you find there? Wouldn't Eddie miss the moraines?

She was just in time. The church felt forbidden. They didn't hold confession as they had when she was a girl, with the dusty curtain between you and the priest, the anonymity, the halting whispers and sweaty palms. The church lights were dimmed, and the four confessors came in solemn pairs up the aisle in white robes. After an entrance chant, a prayer, the priests—even the Bishop had come—took to their corners, pre-arranged positions here and there around the church. The penitents went like spokes in a wheel to

them, and the church was filled with the consistent hum of sin. Jenny went to the back of Father Rickie's line. She wanted to be last.

Her hands shook. He was a few years older than she, but Father Rickie seemed young up close, like someone's little brother. Did he even shave? She heard her mother's voice: They're hypocrites. As if that were the worst you could be.

A small sin might be a good way to begin: a misdemeanor, selfishness, the habit she had of always saving the heels of the bread for herself, for she felt they were a luxury, and her mother thought so, too. Then she would build up to a larger selfishness, how she had not wanted to see her mother's need. How she had controlled her mother. I'll be good if you'll be good. Until now.

But instead of the small sin, she blurted out, "He showed me the rocks, Father, in the lab storage room. He expected me to help him move them. Just because, I imagine, I work for the college. This would be after hours. We were alone in the building. It's the one way out by the physical plant—"

Father Rickie glanced around. "You might want to lower your voice." He smiled tentatively, encouragingly.

She tried to be cooperative. She had not anticipated the pleasure in telling her story, the way she had the opportunity to re-live it, the bad parts as well as the good. "He had a big chunk of obsidian in there. Beautiful, black. Glassy. He'd found it himself, he said. He stood so close. I could hear him breathing. I felt like I could—" She burst into tears.

Father Rickie handed her a clean white handkerchief. "Could

what?”

Through her miserable tears she said, “Like I could hear his heart beating, Father.”

“When was this, my dear?”

“Ten years ago, Father.”

“It was painful for you.”

“It is now, Father. But then I thought it was what I wanted. I wanted to get rid of my inhibitions.”

“And did you?”

She came up for air and worriedly glanced around the church. “He doesn’t believe in marriage.” Her chest hurt from the tears; she thought about Sharla, that Mona Lisa smile, what Sharla had concealed from Eddie. She wanted to say, *Tell* him what you want.

“Did you consider marriage?”

“I thought it might be a reasonable outcome, Father.”

“That’s what you think—”

“—when you’re young. I know.”

The rumors and temptations of people had not fully settled in Father Rickie’s bones the way they had in hers. She saw through Eddie’s exaggerated bonhomie. She understood Waverly’s loneliness. And her mother drinking cold duck on the anniversary of her marriage to Jenny’s father. In spite of everything, she did that. All that Jenny understood—what she had learned from all those secrets—was a gift from God, and that was one reason she had come to confession. They had something in common. She might know more than Father Rickie. Had he ever taken advantage of a girl? Had he

ever reached down there without even a preliminary kiss? Had he ever ignored the girl after?

Eddie Fox had come up behind her while she admired the obsidian. It was a late summer evening, during the last heat wave of the year, right after classes had begun; the marching band practiced in a field not far away, tubas nickering. The canvas blinds were down. He complimented her body and no one had ever done that before—your hair, your hips, I watch you all the time, what is it with you? Look what you do to me, he said. She was twenty-two and still a virgin, still innocent of what it might mean not to be a virgin. She wasn’t smart that way, but she knew it. Other girls were focused on getting the kind of attention that would result in hearts, flowers, rings, lace, wedding almonds, trips to the resort in French Lick. The whole kit-and-kaboodle, her mother called it. What they’d lost when her father left.

Jenny had a defect: a scar above her lip. When she was three years old, she had whirled dizzily in the living room, lost her balance, and struck the coffee table corner. Her father and mother, together, had whisked her to the emergency room at St. E’s, where an old doctor with whiskey-breath did a sloppy job sewing her up. Every night she rubbed a cream used by women with stretch marks on the scar, willing it to go away. But it was still there, leathery, prickled, the size of a baby butter bean. He had not kissed her because of the scar, she felt sure.

Father Rickie was more interested in her admission of not going to Mass since she was thirteen. “Come tomorrow at seven-

thirty,” he said. “On Ash Wednesday, get your ashes before you go to work.” For penance he told her to say five Hail Mary’s now and to come to daily Mass for a week.

The church had emptied out. She went up to the first pew and knelt down. Were the other priests waiting somewhere for Father Rickie? And what was his life like, after hearing confessions? Father Rickie went up to the altar and blew out the candles, cupping each flame with his hands. There was a humble shape to his back, a self-denigration he had adopted, even though he was young and good-looking. She would look forward to receiving Communion from him and doing her penance.

The altar and the sanctuary seemed to recede, lit only by a bank of lights in the rear of the church. When Father Rickie passed by, she reached out and returned his handkerchief.

“I’ll wait in the back,” he said. “I need to lock the doors. We keep the doors locked.”

Jenny said the prayers—she could remember the words. But even as she prayed, the memory of Eddie, what she hadn’t told Father Rickie, washed over her. How he had undressed her and she had not been ashamed. How sweaty they had been. How she had taken homemade brownies to him the next day. And the morning after that, a red lily, the only one in the crowded day lily bed on the alley behind the garage. All the others were Stella D’Ors that lit up the alley when sun struck there. She thought that surely if he appreciated the fossilized ferns in coal and the pink in granite, he would love the red lily. It was brick-red, with moist tough petals and an intricate interior. She had

cut it down with a steak knife and wrapped its stem in a wet paper towel. In the geology lab, he had acted put out by her request for a vessel to put the red lily in. He had said he had a meeting. There had only been that one time when he praised her body and asked her to lie down with him on the army surplus blanket he kept in the lab cupboard, even though he visited her office every week and ate the miniature candy bars she kept on her desk.

She had been drunk on Eddie for years. That’s what the tears are about, Father Rickie, she wanted to say. Almost the end of grief. A broken spell.

She stood up and genuflected in the aisle. Genuflecting, she recalled her First Communion. It was her father who had outfitted her. The rented veil. The white flats with the smooth soles. She had not thought of that since then, her father picking out the flats at the discount shoe store. He had come back for her First Communion, and he let her think it was from Ohio. Years later, she saw him from afar at the county fair with his new children, a boy and a girl. They were about to get on the Tilt-a-Whirl.

Father Rickie waited at the back near the stone baptismal font. He walked her to the door and said, “See you tomorrow.” He touched her shoulder.

Outside, on the church steps, she was not weary. A windless night, it had begun to snow. The church was another place to be. Father Rickie was someone to get to know. She listened to the cheerful staticky voices of the taxi drivers in the parking lot of the convenience store, talking to each other on their CBs. All things

seemed new, vibrant. She could see her own house, the Christmas lights behind the grimy window. She might tell her mother about going to confession, or she might not. Her mother would have an opinion. She would never keep out of things or say, “That’s up to you.” Waverly’s upstairs apartment glowed with TV light.

A half-block away there was a tavern with a sign in the window: HAND-SPANKED BURGERS. Two people were ducking into the tavern—like a somber painting, small-town life in winter—and she recognized them at once: Sharla and His Honor. Sharla wore a second-hand fur wrap and His Honor removed his fedora and opened the door for her. It was not a place you expected to see him. He probably thought it was ironic, taking Sharla there. He had explained irony to her. Professors went to the restaurants downtown near the courthouse, where you needed to know how to smell the cork when they brought the wine to your table.

What had felt momentarily sweet fermented. But it was a fix you could get, going to confession, like Eddie’s city fix when he went to Chicago. She had a mean streak and at that moment she was grateful for it. She might uproot Waverly’s herbs on the kitchen sill. She might hide her mother’s menthols. A mean streak would give her something to talk about with Father Rickie, easier to confess than lust or greed. And she could predict that her mother would envy Father Rickie. She would dearly love to hear the stories, but Jenny would keep them from her. The future was all laid out. Jenny would be stuck

with Sharla forever. She could see it in the way he opened the door for her. They would manage his affairs, make his travel arrangements to the theory conferences. Sharla might have his babies. She would not hurt the babies, but she would have to find a way to get back at her. Their lives would be linked by more than Sharla would ever know. Within a few days of each other, they had learned that what you want changes, and those who say never shouldn’t.

Contributors

Tom Andrews grew up in Charleston, West Virginia. He studied at Hope College; at Oberlin College, where he was an intern with *FIELD*; and at the University of Virginia, where he was a Hoynes Fellow. He subsequently taught at Ohio University and Purdue University. In 1999 he went to Rome, as Poetry Fellow at the American Academy.

His publications include three books of poetry, *The Brother's Country*, a National Poetry Series winner chosen by Charles Wright and published by Persea Books (1990); *The Hemophiliac's Motorcycle*, winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize and published by the University of Iowa Press (1994); and *Random Symmetries: The Collected Poems of Tom Andrews*, published by Oberlin College Press (2002). His memoir, *Codeine Diary: True Confessions of a Reckless Hemophiliac*, appeared from Harvest Books in 1999. He also edited collections of criticism on two contemporary poets: *On William Stafford: The Worth of Local Things* (University of Michigan Press, 1995) and *The Point Where All Things Meet: Essays on Charles Wright* (Oberlin College Press, 1995).

Tom Andrews fell ill in Athens, Greece, in the summer of 2001 and died in London that July.

Cathy Day was born and raised in Peru, Indiana, which is best known as a circus town, but is also the birthplace of Cole Porter and the Spanish hot dog. She is the author of two books, most recently *Comeback Season: How I Learned to Play the Game of Love* (Simon & Schuster/Free Press, 2008), part memoir about life as a single woman and part sports story about the Indianapolis Colts' Super Bowl season. Her first book was *The Circus in Winter* (Harcourt, 2004), a fictional history of her hometown. *The Circus in Winter* was a finalist for the Great Lakes Book Award, the Story Prize, and the GLCA New Writers' Award, and has been translated into German and

Czech. Her fiction and nonfiction have been broadcast on NPR's "Selected Shorts" and "Studio 360" and appeared in *New Stories from the South*, *Story*, *River Styx*, *Antioch Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Southern Review*, *Post Road*, and *Sports Illustrated* online. A native Hoosier, Cathy received her BA from DePauw University and her MFA from the University of Alabama. She teaches in the Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh. She's also online at www.cathyday.com. Strange but true: *The Circus in Winter* was the solution to the *New York Times Magazine* acrostic puzzle in February 2005 and is currently #10 on Metacritic.com's "All-Time High Scores" list—for what it's worth.

Patricia Henley is a novelist and short story writer with six published books, most recently *In the River Sweet*, a novel set in a small Indiana college town and Vietnam during the war. She lives on a country road outside of West Lafayette, Indiana, with her two dogs, two cats, and her husband, Kip Robisch. She is spending her fall writing a novel set in Mississippi and working for the Obama campaign.

Jennifer Levin is originally from Illinois. Her work has appeared in *The Iowa Review* and *THE Magazine*. She holds a BA in creative writing from the College of Santa Fe, where she works as the editorial director in the marketing department. She lives in Santa Fe with a man and a small dog.

Susan Neville is the author of four works of creative nonfiction: *Indiana Winter*; *Fabrication: Essays on Making Things and Making Meaning*; *Twilight in Arcadia*; and *Iconography: A Writer's Meditation*. Her prize-winning collections of short fiction include *In the House of Blue Lights*, winner of the Richard Sullivan prize, and *Invention of Flight*, winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for

Contributors

Short Fiction. She lives in Indianapolis with her husband and two children and teaches writing at Butler University and in the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers. Her new book, *Sailing the Inland Sea*, is published by Quarry Books, a new imprint of Indiana University Press.

Christopher Newgent lives as a writer in Indianapolis. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *Poetry East*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Talking River*, among other journals; his non-fiction is featured in *Kritik Magazine* online. He hopes to begin his MFA studies in poetry in the fall of 2009, and is currently working on a collection of poetry tentatively titled *Pillars of Snow*.

Jon Sealy grew up in upstate South Carolina and holds an MFA from Purdue. This is his first published story.

Jill Stukenberg lives in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches composition, and sometimes other things. She earned an MFA from New Mexico State University, and has been previously published in *The Sonora Review*.

Kim Whitehead's story "The Split," first published by *Terrain.org*, was selected for *Best of the Web 2008* (Dzanc Books). Her fiction has also appeared in *storySouth*, *The Distillery*, and *Third Reader*. She lives with her husband and son in Columbus, Mississippi, where she teaches at Mississippi University for Women.