

THE PARAGON JOURNAL

A large, iridescent feather with a green-to-gold gradient, standing upright on a circular wooden stump in a misty forest with autumn foliage. The feather's colors transition from a vibrant green at the top to a shimmering gold at the base. The forest background is filled with tall, thin trees and some autumn-colored leaves, with a soft, ethereal light filtering through the mist.

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A Journal of Creative Arts

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All drawings and prints featured in this issue Sophie Heldt

Elizabeth II

by Randall C. Fowler

Louisville, on the day of my arrival, was enjoying a respite from a treacherous and unyielding summer and from where I stood in the doorway of the bus station, winter was nowhere in sight. Leaves on nearby trees were swaying to a tune I couldn't hear against a sky bluer than I remembered. The city that sought absolution for its past failings seemed to have achieved some kind of internal peace for the moment, ready to settle for what it had grown into, and the weather pled for clemency on its behalf.

I never intended to return. I grew up on the west side, in an area next to the Ohio River, officially labeled a toxic-waste site responsible for almost half of the county's pollution. Nothing could have brought me back short of the news that my only son was missing. I had neglected him when he most needed a father, and now, in spite of my parole status in California, I couldn't turn my back on him in a crunch.

I cased the area. Two patrol cars, one state and one metro, were parked at the curb. For a parolee, the slightest misgivings can give even a brain-dead Johnny Law probable cause, and my gut said they were looking for me.

To my left, a loud noise caught my attention. A fat man had dropped two of his bags with a thud. He wore a plaid shirt, two sizes too small, and Levi's drawn tight below a belly that I feared might pop the buttons from his shirt, a sight I hoped to avoid. I hurried to help gather his things and returned his bag to its upright position.

"Why, thank you so much!" he said. "I don't see a baggage handler around, do you?" He raised his eyebrows as he spoke, making it seem like a question.

I suggested he carry my lighter satchel along with his smallest bag, and I would help him get his other two over to the cab stand. He said his name was Ralph. "Just a short trip to visit my aging sister," he said. "Only been here for three days. I live just outside Cincinnati, you know. I'm heading downtown to a reasonably priced Holiday Inn, willing to share a cab with you to split the expense. You interested?"

Luckily, I had found me a talker. A natural camouflage.

"My, my! This satchel feels like it's empty," he said.

I wasn't about to tell him that a hundred fifty grand in hundred-dollar bills only weighs a little more than three pounds. Instead, I said, "A small gift for a relative."

With my son missing, I had pulled together all my liquid assets in case of a ransom demand, and under the circumstances, it felt better having someone else carry all that cash as we walked past the police. Plausible deniability can sometimes create favorable confusion.

As soon as possible after hearing about my son, I jumped on a plane to Cincinnati. You can't get to Louisville non-stop from the west coast unless you travel in a UPS box, but four hours from LA and you're landing in Cincinnati, only ninety minutes from Louisville by bus. Besides, I thought the bus would let me sneak in without detection.

As we walked by, I dismissed the two local cops as rookies as they eyeballed the crowd from inside their car. I relaxed a bit as one of them stepped from his car and leaned against it to

light a cigarette. He was eyeing a young woman in tight denims and a tanktop. Humans are so fucking predictable.

One State Trooper, in summer-issue uniform of French gray trousers with a one-inch stripe, chukka high top shoes and short-sleeved shirt, his badge on the left side of his shirt spelling out Johnathon L. Clark, stood alertly next to the passenger side of his Ford Crown Victoria. He was looking over my head at the crowd of people shuffling along. I noticed badge number 635 as I walked past, smiling my usual, decoy smile, which caused him to look away rather than be bothered by some overly fawning civilian. He fiddled with his trooper hat as he gazed at his female partner who was fast approaching the car with two steaming cups in her hands.

At the taxi stand, I insisted my new friend take the first one in line, saying no to his offer to share a cab. "Opportunity only knocks once," he said.

And misfortune just barges right in. "Well, maybe I'll ride with you as far as the Brown Hotel," I said. It had suddenly occurred to me that it might be wise to get out of the area as quickly as possible.

The cab we approached had a typical Jefferson County taxi license plate, with the number 1843. I took my satchel from Ralph and placed it inside the cab, on the back-seat floor, and returned to the trunk to deal with his luggage. He didn't offer to help. I fumbled with rearranging some miscellaneous crap the driver had stored in the trunk—like it never occurred to him that his next fare might have luggage—and began cramming Ralph's bags inside. I finally got the damn lid closed, and when I looked up, I couldn't believe my eyes. The back door—which I was sure I had closed—was open. I saw a man in a hoodie running down the street. He jumped into a waiting, nondescript black Chevy and was off.

"So, do you still want to go to the Brown?" the driver asked.

I said. "Yes, and could you please go slow; I'd like to see if we can spot that getaway car or the hooded guy.

"What hooded guy?" Ralph asked.

"You want me to what?" The driver was looking in the rearview mirror.

It was too much trouble to explain. Something I felt I wouldn't have had to do in LA. Processing new information seems easier and faster on the west coast. Another reason I never wanted to return to my dear old home town. I looked for the hooded little thief and his getaway Chevy as we drove but saw nothing. At the hotel, I handed Ralph twenty-five bucks, even though the meter said twelve.

I walked slowly through the entrance of the hotel and rode the escalator up to the lobby. I needed help, and there was only one person I still knew in town.

"This is Eddie Mayer," I said to the woman who answered the phone. "Is Michael Barzini there?"

Michael's greeting was a familiar welcome. "Hello," he said. "I thought it might be you."

"Sorry, Michael, but this is not the call you expected. I've run into even more trouble, and I need your help sooner than I thought."

"When you called from Cincinnati, I put out some feelers on your son. Nothing yet, if that is what is on your mind," he said.

"Nothing...you heard nothing?" I asked.

“No. These things are sometimes hard to ferret out,” he said. “Maybe we get word soon.”

“Well, I’ve got another problem that I don’t want to discuss over the phone. Can we get together?” I asked. “Do you still live downtown in that great place over on Third?”

“Yes, I am pleased to say,” he said. “Where are you presently?”

“I’m on Fourth. Only a few blocks away. It would only take a few minutes for me to get there, if you’re up for it.”

“I will come to you. Where will I find you?”

“There’s a café on Fourth, a half block from Broadway, close to the Brown Hotel.”

I took a table on the sidewalk at the café—trying to imagine where my satchel might be, and whether the snatcher had yet discovered what was in it—and ordered a coffee.

When we first met, Michael was a curly-haired, nerdy kid. He was often doing something technical, like building a radar detector for measuring the speed of passing cars just for the hell of it, and I was constantly in trouble with the authorities. I was fifteen; he was thirteen, almost fourteen. We immediately disliked each other, but over time that changed, and we began running together, off and on.

When he developed a gambling problem, we somehow grew closer. Overnight, he discovered hard times, and getting in trouble was an affliction I knew something about. I guess I’m drawn to people with flaws, having firsthand knowledge with personality defects. We were more often in trouble than not, and on a couple of occasions, we found ourselves cellmates in the county jail. When I left Kentucky for California, he was in a medium-security correctional institute in eastern Kentucky for running an illegal (and crooked) casino.

Michael arrived as the waiter poured my third cup. I told him about my ordeal at the bus station.

“That doesn’t sound like you. How much were you carrying?” he asked.

“A hundred fifty large,” I said.

“That’s a sizable amount. Was it yours?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I said. “I should tell you I jumped parole to get here.”

“Ah ha, ah ha. So what is the plan now?”

“Well, I guess I’ll register at the Brown and then get started. I have to find William, but I admit I don’t know where to start. Don’t have a clue how to go about getting my money back. I was hoping you could help with that. I don’t have your connections.”

I looked for a response. No reaction to being categorized as to being *connected* would mean he still was. I had picked the right guy.

“I have lost track of many of the people we used to know. Things change and memory plays tricks when you have been away so long, but I will do what I can” he said. “However. you will not be checking into any hotel. You will stay with me, at least until we get the lay of the land. We will try to figure out what we’re dealing with and go from there.”

twenty-three and she was twenty. I had just been recently released from county jail where I had been held awaiting trial for larceny. She married me for the danger she sensed when we first met and divorced me for the same reason. Skirting the edge and defying the establishment was fun at first. We were both wild and unsettled, filled with boundless energy and iconoclastic

views.

Then the baby came, and Meredith wouldn't leave the house. She was obsessed with taking care of our son. She nagged me constantly about my lack of responsibility. *A real man would be out looking for a job that paid a salary.* She resented me and my activities more and more; I had lost my partner and began to resent the boy for the imposition. Her attorney telling the divorce court we had grown apart was like calling WWII a *disagreement*.

Meredith married her attorney two years after I left Kentucky. They moved to the outskirts of Louisville, on the east side, near St. Matthews, the other side of town from where I grew up in every aspect of the word. Her new husband changed jobs three years later to become an assistant commonwealth attorney—what everyone except Kentuckians call a DA—working somewhere in the bowels of state bureaucracy. Just the type Meredith and I had both spent our lives trying to avoid when we first were married.

I went to southern California. Working alone and realizing all the advantages of specialization, I found a niche that took advantage of my athleticism and limited the competition at the same time. My new job evolved organically, one step at a time. I became known as one of the best high-story men in the business, rising in a business that was declining. Others felt the work was dangerous and too hard. With my new work notoriety came, and with it ego, I guess you would say.

At first I tried to keep in touch with William, our son, who worshiped me without reservation. His mother's anger made me reluctant to keep it up, and as I called more infrequently, her tone softened a bit, and his interest faded. Her married name was now Young, but my son still used my last name—even today—which is the one thing I held onto as I phoned her.

“Meredith. It's Eddie. Have you heard anything, like a ransom demand—or worse?”

“Who's this, again?”

“C'mon, Meredith. Goddamnit, don't fuck with me. This is serious.”

“You think I don't know?”

“I take it you haven't heard anything then,” I said.

“No, *Shirley*,” she said. “It's not today. Tomorrow, at Mike Linning's, out on Cane Run Road. You know, by the river, for lunch, around one. Remember?”

“I take it your dear beloved came into the room just now and you can't talk, right?”

“Okay, I'll see you there at lunch time then.”

I have always been so impressed with how instinctively and automatically she could pull off a ruse. Except when it was on me, of course.

Staying in Michael's house seemed natural at first; getting used to his habits was another matter. He amused himself with still-life oil painting for short periods of time, which drove me nuts. I wanted some action. When he went out with some of his buddies without saying a word, I was looking for news about my son or my money when he returned, but he said nothing.

“Any news, Michael?” I asked.

“Nothing yet,” he replied.

“Michael, I'm going crazy here. We're not doing anything; nothing is happening. I can't just sit around doing nothing. I have to take some action. My son is still missing, not to

my money?”

“Nothing can be done at this point. Just relax,” Michael said. “I have a game with some influential friends tonight. Maybe I hear something. People brag, drink too much, maybe drop a hint about your son or that dough you lost—it was a big haul after all. You never know.”

“A poker game?” I asked. “What time will it be over?”

“Game *starts* tonight. Sometimes lasts a day or two, maybe less, maybe more.”

Idleness for the rest of the day almost sucked me under. Fortunately, Elizabeth, Michael’s girlfriend, came home early from her work at the main public library on Third. I found her knowledge on a wide range of topics interesting and her smile calming. All the while, I was trying to think of something I could do without waiting for Michael.

The next morning, the house was empty, and I had no way of getting in touch with Michael. I walked to the library hoping to find Elizabeth, but she wasn’t there. I scanned some of the magazines hoping some article would suggest a useful person or helpful action, but nothing came. I began to feel a little uncentered. I tried thinking about everyone I’d ever known in the area but came up empty.

Embarrassed, I returned to the house thinking Michael might return sooner than I thought. At noon, a knock on the door brought a man I didn’t know with a note from Michael. It read: *Go back to the cafe on Fourth at four p.m.. Wear a white shirt, no jacket, order a coffee, and wait.*

I don’t do the patience thing very well. Elizabeth came home for a late lunch at one, and I felt an unexpected excitement. Not just for the promise of action later, but because she was there. I didn’t understand my interest. In LA, I tended to be drawn to what I would call a hint of urgent lust, a great figure with a degree of dangerous looseness, a sexiness as obvious as the need to be discovered. A woman in tight jeans and high-heel shoes with a kind of aloof confidence that bordered on arrogance was what got my attention.

But Elizabeth was different; she wouldn’t generally be considered pretty if not for her kind smile and glowing aura. Today she wore a charcoal blazer over a knee-length yellow shirt with a navy-blue and white polka-dot skirt and beige medium-high heels. She looked elegant, with her scarf draped casually around her neck picking up some of the outfit colors. Not the type I generally went for, but I very much found myself drawn to her. I could feel the vibe of kindness, gentleness, what people describe as a good heart.

“You’re all dressed up,” I said. “Very stylish, very nice.”

“Some VIPs, big donors, were at the library today, and we were trying to make a good impression. They wanted a tour of the place. The remodeling’s going to cost a bundle.”

“When do you think Michael will return from his game?” I asked.

“No telling. I’m thinking sometime tomorrow.”

At four, I did as the note suggested. Halfway through my second cup at the café, a man walked by my table without even a glance in my direction. I looked closely at the satchel he was carrying—my satchel—and when he passed me, still without looking, he dropped it at my feet. I finished my coffee, picked up the satchel nonchalantly, tucked it under my arm, and walked back to Michael’s house. I immediately dumped the contents on the floor and began to count it. When I looked up, Michael was smiling.

“There’s fifteen Gs missing,” I said.

“You expected to get away without paying the vig?” he asked. “I told the little weaselly twerp to take his cut. Thank God nothing in life is free. Otherwise, guys like you and me would get no leverage. It was small juice to pay for justice or—if you prefer—ninety percent justice. Beats the shit out of no justice at all, does it not?”

I was glad to have the bulk of my life savings back. “Here, I want you to have this. Thanks for helping,” I said, handing him another fifteen grand. “You deserve it.”

“You are my friend. I didn’t do it for money,” he said.

“Still, I need to thank you.”

I learned long ago: kicking up is as important as taking care of people below. Eating alone is the problem, it strains friendship and loses points.

I had ordered my fish sandwich and fries before she arrived and went to an outside table. She joined me.

“So, I take it your wonderful husband was home when I called yesterday,” I said.

“Ever thought about taking up police work?” Meredith responded.

“What do you want from me?”

“My son.”

“He’s not just your son, he’s also my son. Do you remember how much time I spent with him before we parted?”

“Well, your so-called career gave you a lot of time to spend with him during the day, didn’t it?”

“I think about those times constantly. We did everything together, spent most every day doing something together until he was—what?—ten or so. Emulating my every gesture in those days haunts me even now, and I can’t stand the idea that I’m too incompetent to help him when he needs me most. I have to apologize to him for being so unavailable these last few years.”

“It’s a little late, don’t you think? He missed you so much. He’s just like you in every way I can think of. That’s probably why he and Alan have always been at odds with each other.”

“I feel bad enough—you don’t have to rub it in. I get the insult,” I said.

“I’m sure you’ll eventually turn it into a compliment.” Her brow was furrowed, eyes lowered. “How’s the fish?”

“What has your husband, his *stepfather*, done to help find William?”

“He refuses to talk about it.”

“What! Are you kidding? Why? He knows a lot of people, people in high places: police, detectives, DAs, probably most everybody in town. You’ve been married for twelve years, for God’s sake, and he’s been a prosecutor most of that time. And he’s done nothing? What the fuck is his problem?”

“He says Bill is a disappointment. He thinks he has just run away, he’ll be back. ‘Just give it time,’ he says. In the meantime, I’ve heard nothing—nothing—not a word. I’m worried sick. And nobody is doing anything about it. No ransom, no information, no nothing? What the fuck are you doing, for that matter, except criticizing others?”

“I’m trying. Don’t have a lead yet, can’t find a handle, but I am trying—have feelers out, but so far, nothing. By the way, I guess your legal-beagle husband came into the room while we were talking. Is that why you called me *Shirley*?”

She only stared and shrugged. Uncomfortable, I turned away to watch the river flow for a moment. The current was hypnotic enough to ease my discomfort.

“So how is the marriage anyway?” I asked, still staring at the river.

“Complicated.”

“Is...was William happy...before—?”

“Yes, well, he was reasonably happy until recently. But he and Alan always had a strained relationship, I guess.”

“Why?”

“I think Bill—he prefers *Bill* to *William*—has always missed you, and Alan, I think, is jealous, although he won’t admit it.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say. Her words tore my heart out. How could I have left my flesh and blood and been in contact so seldom? I felt guilt like I had never felt it before.

When my eyes teared up, something that almost never happens, I didn’t know what to say.

“What was going on with Bill...before he, you know...?” I turned away.

“Bill has always been troublesome, headstrong, if you know what I mean—of course you do—but something happened recently... He stopped speaking to Alan altogether... I asked Alan about it, and he blew me off. Said something about how Bill needed to learn to mind his own business.”

“What the hell did he mean by that?” I asked. “What a strange thing to say unless—”

“Don’t really know. Not sure,” she interrupted. “He’s been acting strange though, recently.”

“Bill, you mean?”

“No, Alan,” she said.

“What’s that about?”

“Don’t know,” she said.

“Then, take a guess. Your intuition has always been spot-on.”

“Well, I only know there was an investment banker that’s been coming to see Alan a lot. The last few times he showed up, Bill left the house, slamming the door.”

“Who was it? I mean, do you know him and why he was there?”

“Don’t know, really. I assumed he was advising Alan on investments. He’s been talking about retirement...he would like to take an early one...talks about how difficult it is for a government employee.”

“And his name was...?” I asked, prompting.

“Not sure. I think his last name was *Walter*, or *Walker*, or something like that.”

“Do you have any reason to think this investment guy did anything to Bill to make him want to leave the house? Did he have any interaction with Bill at all?”

“I don’t think so. The visits seemed like normal business to me. I don’t know what Bill was thinking, but he and Alan spoke even less than usual.”

Confused, I wanted to leave before I said something I would regret. I thanked her for

agreeing to meet with me, and for the ancient memory of the tasty fish sandwich. When I tried to give her a peck on the cheek in parting, she moved away.

The odds against winning the lottery are the same for the loser as for the winner before the draw. Despite my inability to calculate the probability, I took a long shot on locating the only cop I respected, the last one to arrest me before I left the area. Not only did I discover he was still in town, but I discovered he was still on the force and was back walking a beat in old Butchertown.

That area was sheer hell when I was a kid. You took your life in your hands when you entered. Now, instead of cattle carcasses, its brick buildings contained upscale boutiques and gift shops.

I didn't ask about his being back on the beat; I had picked up on a rumor of a disciplinary problem, which confirmed my choice. Instead, an introductory question seemed best.

"They still call you *Whitey*?" I asked.

"Yeah. What do they call you?" he responded.

"Eddie Meyer. You locked me up for burglary long ago. You probably don't remember, do you?"

"Vaguely. No, as a matter of fact, I do remember you. I remember you as someone who was in touch with himself, in an odd sort of way. What do you want?"

"Just wanted to thank you. For getting me to go straight. Now I need help with a problem—when you're off duty, of course. Maybe buy you a coffee and talk? I could use some sound advice. What could it hurt?"

He was skeptical, reluctant to get suckered in. He repeatedly turned down meeting me at all. I began to think he didn't want anything to do with me, and the odds for my long shot were getting slimmer by the minute, until I suggested White Castle on Broadway. He agreed to meet me there for a quick bite before his evening shift the next day.

I discussed the *Whitey* meeting with Michael, who warned me to be careful. Although he didn't know *Whitey*, nor had he ever done business with him, he had heard a rumor of a gambling problem. I knew I was asking fate to cover her ears as I listened to a rumor of a gambling problem told by someone with a gambling problem who heard it from a third person with a gambling problem, but what the hell was I to do?

I chose to not show up at my scheduled meeting with *Whitey* in favor of easing in the gate before stepping into the lion's den. That very day Michael was able to determine that *Whitey* was down twelve thousand to a fellow gambler by the name of Vernon "the Roach" Jackson (whose nickname derived from the fact that a number of attempts on his life failed—it was generally believed he could survive the apocalypse). I gave Michael twenty thousand for him to pass on to his friend the Roach to cover *Whitey*'s debt and for an additional eight-thousand marker.

The next day I found *Whitey* on the job.

"I don't like being stood up," he said, walking by slowly as I pretended to stare at a shop display.

"Sorry, I had some business to conduct," I replied.

“Apparently. It would seem your business is more than just your business,” he said. “Same time, same place, tomorrow. But don’t stand me up.” His mumble was barely audible.

I accepted with a single quick nod. He turned quickly and stopped abruptly to ask the proprietor of the boutique a question, smiling, nodding. He slapped the shop owner on the back, then shuffled off down the middle of the common courtyard.

The next day, I arrived at the White Castle before he did and ordered a half dozen with mustard. He held up ten fingers to the woman at the counter before acknowledging me. Suddenly the informality of the situation hit me as preposterous. We’re ordering stupid little hamburgers while my son is still missing and might possibly be injured or even dead. I’m helpless and at the mercy of a cop I barely know. Michael hasn’t come up with anything. Am I being a fool? My stomach knotted; the tension, combined with the smell of onions, caused me to gasp for breath. I was going to be sick. I took two deep breaths and hoped for mercy.

“You don’t have White Castles in California?” Whitey asked.

“You’ve been doing your homework,” I said, relaxing a bit.

“I know you are still on parole. I know you jumped when your son went missing. I know I can arrest you anytime I choose but have elected, under the circumstances, to let it go for now.” Whitey raised his eyebrows, as any cop with over twenty years on the force might do.

“What do you know about my son?” I asked. “What have you heard?”

“I don’t know where he is, if that’s what you’re asking,” Whitey said.

“His stepfather is a commonwealth attorney. You ever hear of a guy named Young? ACA Alan Young?”

“Yeah, I know him,” Whitey said as he stepped away to fetch his lunch from the counter.

“And?” I asked.

“I don’t know him that well,” Whitey said. “Don’t much like him, seems full of himself, doesn’t speak to anyone below his level, if you know what I mean.”

“Apparently, my son doesn’t like him either. Have you ever heard of an investment banker named Walter or Walker, something like that?” I asked.

“No. Who is he?”

“Someone my ex-wife mentioned,” I said. “Maybe not important. She said she thought he had been coming around to help with investments. My son refused to be there when he’s there. Don’t know if it means anything or not.”

“I’ll ask around,” Whitey volunteered.

“My ex-wife got a ransom call last night,” I said.

“Jesus Christ! I would think you’d have mentioned that before now,” Whitey said. “That changes everything.”

“I was trying to take it one step at a time, carefully,” I said. “For all I knew, you might have been good friends with my son’s stepfather. But a ransom demand makes it all so real. Thinking of what has to happen now scares the shit out of me.”

“What’d they say?”

“Half a mil. She told them—or rather *it*, since it sounded like a computerized voice—we don’t have that kind of money. They threatened something bad would happen if we didn’t get it by midday Saturday.”

“That’s an odd time,” he said.

“I don’t know what drives it, but now what do I do? I can’t just sit on my ass and do nothing.”

“Hang on a second,” he said. He left the table and walked outside. He was on his cell for a good ten minutes. I got another Coke and waited patiently until he finally returned.

“That name you gave me: you said *Walter* or *Walker*, something like that. Could it be *Waters*?” Whitey asked.

“Yes, maybe, I guess so; it sounds right. *Waters*. Why?” I asked.

“Charles Waters is a big-deal financier, and I found out he knows your buddy, ACA Young.”

“So, he’s legit?”

“I didn’t say that. I asked some of my friends, and one, Bob, a detective, said he’s been investigating Mr. Waters for possible fraud, money laundering and other crimes. Bob suspected as far back as eight months ago that Waters was pulling off some kind of financial scam. It’s still an open investigation.”

“What’s he doing with Young?”

“Don’t know yet. I’ll find out,” Whitey said. “What are you doing about the half-mil?”

“I’ve got it covered,” I said. “But thanks for asking.”

Michael had offered up the ransom. I asked Meredith to call me as soon as she had any further instructions. She did, but when I suggested to Whitey that I act as courier, he pooh-poohed the idea. “They haven’t contacted you, only your ex-wife. Let’s not change anything. Let her do it. That leaves the two of us for backup.”

I thought Meredith should not do it. I should instead; after all, I’m the adrenalin junkie, it’s an integral part of my work so to speak. But this was different. This was serious, way beyond a threat to reputation or loss of freedom. This was too dangerous: somebody could get killed. But there was no way I could talk Meredith out of it.

They wanted delivery the next day. She was to board the *Belle of Louisville* for the one-o’clock, after-lunch voyage. The money had to be in an otherwise empty tote bag, not a hard case. She was to board close to launch time and stand at the top of the gangplank, then wait

Whitey suggested I board first and stand back in the crowd to watch the drop, in case Meredith needed me. He would wander around outside, on the street. “You never know how these things will go down,” he said. “There is often a problem, a wrinkle of some kind that can’t be anticipated. We have to be ready for anything and everything.”

Everyone was in place by five to one. At close to one o’clock, two boat staffers approached the gangplank to prepare for launch. At that exact moment, a young woman approached Meredith and reached for the bag. I saw Meredith resist at first. She had only heard a deep voice on the phone, and I surmised that the woman threw her off. I caught her eye and shook my head discreetly from side to side. She caught on and released the tote. Just as the gangplank removal began, the young woman sprang into action, jumped on the ramp, knocking it out of the hands of the startled sailors. I heard the woman say, “Sorry, I have to get off before I get sick.” She ran pell-mell down the gangplank into a small crowd, across a parking lot and up toward the downtown area.

My first thought as I saw the woman run down the plan was that it was already too late

for William. When I approached Meredith, she cursed at me and hissed that we were fools to not have assured his safety before giving up the money.

“If he’s hurt, it’s all your fault and I’ll never forgive you.” Both Meredith and I were stuck on a three-hour cruise neither of us wanted to take. It was the worst riverboat ride imaginable. I could only hope Whitey was on that woman’s trail.

Meredith was furious. Scared for William, she doubted aloud that Whitey and I knew what we were doing and suspected the bag didn’t even have five hundred Gs in it. Everything I said to reassure her failed. Probably because I didn’t believe what I was saying myself. Low on options, we weren’t even speaking by the time we disembarked. I went by cab to Whitey’s beat. When I finally spotted him, I stopped in front of a shop and waited for him to approach. I saw him do a double take, look around, then approach.

“Meet me in an hour in the Brown bar,” he whispered.

I got there early. Pacing, I imagined the worst: we had failed. I had allowed us to be snookered. I was already seated when he entered and sat down.

“I followed the woman into the Galt House, where she went up in the elevator with the bag,” Whitey said. “I thought there was a good chance I’d never see her or the bag again.”

I quickly wrote the rest of the scene in my head. Whitey loses track of the money, finds the bag is in some trashcan, and no one knows where William is.

“But just in case,” he said, “I sat in the lobby watching the elevator traffic. Within five minutes, a man emerged carrying the bag under his arm like he was ashamed of it. He rushed through the exit to the parking garage so fast I damned near missed him.”

“Could you tell who it was?”

“No. But I followed him to an apartment building in St. Matthews. The man had to wait a while to be buzzed into the building, so I guessed he didn’t live there. I sat in a bus shelter across the street alongside a woman who said she lived there and took the bus to town every day. I struck up a conversation, figuring I’d give him the fifteen minutes before her bus arrived. He came out in eight. The nice lady said she didn’t recognize him. I watched him walk away—down the street empty-handed.”

“Damn it. Damn it!” I hit the table with my fist so hard the waiter came to see if we needed something. For cover, I ordered a bourbon, and Whitey followed suit.

“You give up on me too soon,” he said, with a wink. “I’m a cop, remember? A very good cop, regardless of what you might think. I tapped into our database and discovered that a Charles Waters lives in that building.”

“I may kiss you,” I said. “After I find William.”

Over the next couple of days I gathered information about Mr. Waters from every available source. Charlie Waters was indeed a registered investment banker, whose primary activity was real-estate development. As General Partner in his many syndicated deals, he distributed enough income and tax deductions to keep the limited partners on the hook while he formulated arguable reasons to not pay his vendors, holding them at bay by sometimes suing them for non-performance and saying the most outlandish things imaginable to hurt their reputation, always presenting himself as the eventual savior in press releases. The projects were often kept afloat

until -- at the moment before disaster, sometimes four years later -- an out-of-court settlement favorable to his syndicate was reached. In the interim, he used borrowings against projected cash flow to start other developments and repeated the cycle time after time.

I asked Whitey to check with the officers who had been investigating Waters for the latest status of their case. He reported back that there had been no additional progress on the fraud case but that his limo driver, Tommy “the Snake” Piccolo, had been recently arrested for assault of a detective who had been tailing Waters, and was awaiting trial. As a well-known gangster for hire, he’d only recently landed the job as driver for Waters.

Michael gave me the name of the restaurant and bar Tommy “the Snake” frequented. I went there for the there for the next four nights, stopping by during the day several times just in case. No luck.

I asked the bartender. He said, “I ain’t seen Tommy around lately. Come to think of it, I don’t remember the last time I seen him. You never know: he may slither in anytime, you know what I mean?” he said. His laugh was so loud it made me wonder if I missed something.

Having lost the ransom and making no progress, I became lonely and depressed. It had been too long since William’s disappearance, and I was worried—worried that I wasn’t doing my share. I had to find the Snake. The weather had turned; it was dark and cold. Winter had arrived with a vengeance. I went out for a walk, and out of habit I headed toward the Snake’s hangout.

The wind had skeletonized the street, blown away all activity. I was as cold as I’d ever been. No real traffic; an occasional car crept along the snow-covered streets, going slowly, seemingly searching for something rather than going someplace. People were indoors; I walked alone on sidewalks wide enough for four. Snow fell. The wind blew flakes into my face. I pulled my collar tight around my neck like a hangman’s noose, reducing my sense of exposure as a parolee with no civil rights. The pub’s glowing lights helped my mood somewhat.

As I approached, I noticed a prostitute standing outside, smoking and looking innocent enough. I asked if I could bum a cigarette, even though I don’t smoke, just to have someone to talk to. She struck up an engaging conversation and generously offered the pack. I said no, I didn’t smoke that much and offered to buy drinks inside.

I asked if she knew Tommy Piccolo.

“Sure, everybody knows the Snake,” she said. “Why?”

“I haven’t seen him in a while,” I lied.

“Oh, he comes in mostly on the weekends but just happens to be here right now—over there, in the corner,” she said, nodding in his direction.

I thanked her and asked what she generally charged for her time. She said she didn’t charge anything for talking.

“Oh, come on. I’ve taken a lot of your time—time when you could have been on the clock. Tell me what you would have charged if I was a customer.”

“Three hundred is the going price.”

I gave her three bills. “You’ve been very helpful,” I said. “I’ll hand over another one for you not mentioning anything about me or that I was looking for him.”

“How could I tell anything about you? I don’t even know your name,” she said. “Not

passing on information I don't have is free: keep your money."

TommyPiccolo reminded me of a man I'd spent several months in jail with long ago. He was unsure of himself and unsure if he wanted to change. He seemed permanently hooked on negative thinking, supposing it was the only way to keep one step ahead of disaster. He was drinking Jack Daniels on the rocks, and I asked the bartender to keep them coming. I had locally bottled beer.

After two drinks, I concluded he would do most anything for money. Telling him my story wouldn't sway him one way or the other; he was only interested in what was in it for him. I asked questions about Mr. Waters, prodding in a way that might lead to some of his habits and issues regarding his schedule.

"Aw, I do not know if it is in my best interest to talk about my boss," he said, under his breath. "Are you planning something?"

"What do you care?"

"I care to not get caught in any resulting crossfire."

"I promise you that whatever I do will not involve you or your limo. You will be in no way involved," I said, with as much sincerity as I could muster. "And I'll give you ten Gs for information on his activities."

I don't think so," he said, frowning. "Sounds too risky."

I could see the drinks were sneaking up on him.

"I have reason to believe he has a half mil in his condo," I said, to bait him with the money he took from me.

"Oh, he's got lots more than that, I can tell you that for sure," he said, shaking his head. Laughing, he continued, "Oh yeah, he's got lots more than that."

"Tell you what," I said, leaning in. "You meet me tomorrow for lunch at Dolci Italiano in Butchertown. I'll have the ten big ones for you if you answer my questions, and if it turns out that he has more than the five hundred as you say, I'll meet you back here with another fifteen. Deal?"

"I will go so far as agree to meet you for lunch tomorrow. Then we'll see."

As we walked out together, his legs wouldn't hold him. I grabbed ahold as he lost his balance and almost fell. I had encouraged him to keep drinking, but now I was sure that if I hadn't stayed with him he would have broken God knows how many bones. Somehow he was able to make it to a cab, and I watched him fall into the back seat.

Over the next several days, I learned more than I'd expected. I gave him the original ten and another five. Now I was getting somewhere, finally making progress, even though I was down to eighty-five thousand, less miscellaneous expenses.

At some point, he began talking freely about how Waters financed other criminal activities while staying clear of getting involved directly himself, how Tommy, as personal driver, was often sent to pick up bags of cash and bring them to Waters' condo.

Getting close was never my problem; knowing what was too close required a talent I'd never developed. Like a moderately competent horseback rider, I questioned whether I could keep my saddle at racetrack speeds.

"One night I personally picked up four bags containing over three million and left them empty inside his empty condo," he volunteered. "It stayed in his wall safe for a day or so, then

it mysteriously went someplace two days later.”

I wanted to say: *So, his condo is the rinse cycle for funds left soaking overnight.* But I restrained myself.

It was six o'clock by the time I arrived back at Michael's house after the spending a long lunch with Tommy the Snake. I told Michael all I had learned about Waters from Tommy.

“What is going on inside that head of yours?” he asked.

“I hope to get your half mil back and then some,” I responded. “What would you do in my place?”

“I would be very careful,” he said. His eyes flashing about as though something might be sneaking up on us.

“I always try,” I said. “Maybe you could verify some of my info with your friends—when you can, of course.”

“I will try,” he said. “I have to go, but I will do what I can.”

By the time I showered and shaved, Elizabeth was there. Our dinners together had become old hat when Michael was at poker. I had convinced her to try an upscale restaurant three blocks from Butchertown which Whitey had put me onto. Elizabeth had softened, seemed to enjoy our times together more and more. She was free in spirit, easy to talk to, and her eyes sparkled as I spoke. I was excited and flattered. She reminded me of the early days with Meredith. It felt warm, like admiration.

I don't normally drink wine or have desert, but I took both because she wanted them. We lingered after-dinner, telling stories of our childhood and laughing at the idiocy of things we considered important as kids.

Leaving, we couldn't remember where she had parked. We searched for a moment or two before I spotted her car. I had driven to the restaurant at her request, but now I thought better of it. I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

“I think I had too much to drive home.” I said. She slipped her arm around my waist as we walked the twenty yards in silence.

The silence lasted longer than I intended; it seemed to take on a life of its own.

“I just now realized the high point of my day is when you come home,” I said. “You are most fascinating.”

“If I hadn't gotten to know you so well, I might think you believed what you were saying,” she said. “But I know you've been around, seen a lot. I've never really been anywhere, or seen much, not like you have. I can't believe you're serious, but thanks.”

“I am serious.”

She looked down, bashfully, and I kissed the side of her neck.

“Are you okay to drive?” I asked.

“Didn't you notice I had only a few sips of wine tonight?”

“I didn't. I knew you hadn't had much, but not that little. Are you not feeling well?”

“I feel fine, but guilty for drinking. I'm trying to stop, but it's been very difficult. I think I may have a problem with alcohol, but I'm determined.”

“Why?”

“I’m pregnant,” she whispered.

“My God! You’re pregnant?” I whispered back.

“Start of third trimester. I’ve been reckless, but I’m going to stop. No more.”

“Is the father someone you work with?”

“No. There is no father.”

“All the more reason you need to take care. No more alcohol, my dear. Fatherless births are special, you know. We still honor the last one.”

She touched my cheek. She held her hand there until I thought my heart would burst. She fondled my earlobe for a second, gazing into my eyes. She slid her hand slowly down my cheek, touched my chest, and let it rest there. She looked away. I wanted to speak but nothing came out. We stood for several minutes in silence before getting into the car; the grace of the moment was too extraordinary to tamper with.

Tommy confirmed that on the date of the ransom delivery, a bag like the one I described containing a sizable amount of cash showed up at Waters’ condo. Beyond anything I expected, he mentioned his boss was expecting between a million and two million on a night he was to receive an award at a dinner downtown. I slipped the Snake another fifteen grand for the info. True to his nickname, Tommy was able to swallow it in one gulp. Now I was down to seventy thousand.

I remember how excitement filled the air the next afternoon. This was to be the quintessential event of my entire career, the job everything else had been training me for. The past lost its meaning except as example.

The execution was perfect. The take was a little on the plus side, totaling two million three. I dallied a moment over taking more than the five hundred I felt was mine but justified taking the whole bundle as my reward for the grief they caused me. I rationalized a moral ground somewhat higher than I was used to walking, thinking no report was likely to be filed. I was taking money that was not his in the first place.

After a week it seemed I was home free. But it turned out that some of the money had been siphoned from a Federal construction job and that made it a bigger deal than I counted on. My active parole status in California was bad enough, and now the potential for even deeper trouble seemed imminent; I didn’t need the Feds looking for me as well. I learned long ago that when you’re in a hole it’s best to stop digging, and it’s important to get rid of the extra dirt. So, I gave back Michael’s half-mil and contemplated where to stash the rest. Beyond that, I decided I really should lay low for a while, but the need to find William was greater.

“Hello?” I answered a call I wasn’t expecting.

“This is Meredith.”

“Did you hear something? Where is he? What’s going on?”

“I’ve got two things to tell you, so just listen,” she said. “First, I’m so Goddamned frustrated I want to kick somebody’s ass, yours included, and I got word from the police that they are giving up. William is about to become a cold case. They have no leads and assume he is a

runaway.”

“Can your wonderful husband do anything?”

“Stop asking that. He’s not going to do a damn thing. Hes ays there’s nothing he can do.”

“What about the ransom demand?” I asked. “That proves he’s not a runaway.”

“Mentioning that raises more questions than I can deal with right now.”

“Smart. That’s probably smart, you’re right.”

“But thank God, I then heard from Bill. I was so relieved but still frustrated that I couldn’t tell anyone.”

“Where is he? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know; he wouldn’t say. He is going to call you, wanted your number.”

“Me? Why?”

“I don’t know, but I told him where you were. If he calls, please call me as soon as you can. I have to know what’s going on.”

It was only a few days ago that I thought he might be injured or dead. What can I say to the kid to indicate how I feel without appearing like an old fool? How can he forgive me for not calling or coming to see him?

Two dayscan seem an eternity. But he finally called.

“Hello?”

“Hey.”

“William. Where the hell are you? Are you okay? I asked.

“Stop it. There’s something you have to do. Quickly,” he said.

“Wait! Wait! First, are you okay?”

“As if you care.” His voice sounded detached and distant.

“Are you kidding? Don’t do this. I’ve been worried sick about you. Are you okay?” I repeated.

“Let’s just skip the preliminaries,” he said. “This is serious, and I called you because I don’t know who else could possibly fix it. Mom’s about to get taken to the cleaners.”

“How?”

“They’re trying to sell the house,” he said.

“Come on, William. How can that happen? What’s going on?”

“Alan’s been scheming with that Waters guy. They plan to put the house up for sale soon. Mom’s oblivious.”

“How do you know?”

“I overheard them talking, before I became the enemy. The mortgage is down to about three hundred fifty thousand, but the current value of the house is around a million, more or less. After Waters’ take—which I gather from what they said will be about a hundred thousand or so— Alan expects to net over a halfmillion. He wants a million; the other half million comes from my ransom—”

I interrupted. “And where did they think it would come from?”

“They know Mom doesn’t have that kind of money, but they figured you did, or could raise it -- at least you could finagle a way to raise it.”

“What in god’s name are they thinking?”

“Alan is trying to figure out how to run away with a woman not much older than me.”

“Son of a bitch! I’ll kill the bastard.”

“Don’t give them the money. I got free.”

“How? When?”

“Couple of days ago. The guys holding me weren’t too bright. I was sure they would get lax, and I used the time to plan a getaway.”

“I have to see you. I want to see you. After this ordeal...we need to stay in contact. I’ve missed you.”

“No, stop already,” he said.

“Can’t we meet someplace? I have to see you.”

“Enough. I need to get my head straight.”

“Was it dangerous getting away?”

“No, not really. There was a ledge outside the only window in the room I was in, and I used to sit in the window to get fresh air—at least that’s what I told them. The woman living on the floor below always left her window open; she left every day around ten and never closed that window unless it was raining. At the right moment, I shinnied down a drainpipe to a small balcony one floordown. It worked.”

“How could a father not love a son like that? You’re a block off the old chip.”

“Do not pay the ransom, and I’m asking you to save Mom,” He said. “Where I am is nobody’s business. I want to be left alone right now. Just don’t pay the ransom, and fix Mom’s problem, I beg you. I figure you should at least be good for that. That’s all I called about. Good-bye.”

“Where are you? Can I come to you? Let me help you. What can I do?”

“Not to worry,” he said. “Be safe, take care of Mom.”

“Keep in touch then—often, you have my number—when and if you’re up to it.”

I knew he was going to be okay.

The first item of business was to call Meredith and report the essence of the conversation, and to ask her to check every checking and savings account, every loan they had, and reconcile every incoming and outgoing transaction she could think of, with an eye toward anything that stood out, any item that seemed out of order.

She called me back the next day.

“Everything seems normal, except one account,” she said. “Maybe I’m mistaken, but I could swear we had a savings account with over a hundred thousand in it. I have no idea what happened, but it now has less than three hundred dollars.”

“Go to the bank and find out the dates of the last ten transactions. And then go to a different bank and open an account in your name only. Call me back when you finish.”

The next day she called to say Alan had made a withdrawal a month ago and put the funds into an account in only his name.

“I’ll need the routing numbers and account numbers for both accounts. Then monitor the joint account hourly. When you see a large amount deposited to the joint account, write a check

to pay off the mortgage on the house. You did open an account in just your name at a different bank, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then move the remainder into that account, the one that's in your name only. Use that account to buy CDs of different denominations with staggered vesting dates. Then get an attorney to file for divorce and get him or her to immediately start working on getting the house in only your name. At least tie it up legally so it can't be sold."

I diverted her questions and asked her to listen to me: *it is what Bill wants*. That seemed to quiet her for a bit.

I then went to Tommy the Snake. I offered him twenty-five grand to get me the details on Waters' offshore bank accounts. When he didn't return at the agreed time, I went to his pub.

"I got the dope," he said, "but I need more. I damned near got caught messing with his computer. He suspects I'm up to something, and I have to warn you, he's tied you to the money he lost—he didn't hear it from me. Can't say for sure, but I would guess we are both be in danger. Your offer of twenty-five is not enough."

"What is enough?"

"I've already quit my job, even if I'm the only one that knows it. I have to get out of here. I got a trial coming up in three weeks. Now would be a good time, but I need more."

"How about another twenty-five?"

"Still not enough. I'm taking a lot of risk here. I got a place all picked out."

"I gave you a lot before."

"Still got it. Still ain't enough."

"How about a hundred?"

"Make it a hundred fifty. That should last a while where I'm going. You got the cash now?"

He turned over the details of Waters' account when I handed him the money the next day.

Agreements with hawala operatives are always verbal. With no paper trail, the deals depend on personal trust. I arranged for a local hawaladar to transfer eight hundred fifty thousand to his counterpart in the islands, who further transferred it into Waters' account. Their commission was twenty percent. The hundred sixty Gs bought their mutual trust.

When the transfer was complete, I moved it from Waters' account into ACA Alan Young's account. That part was easy: I had the necessary information and that path was well-worn. But I ran into a snag when I tried to transfer the dough into the joint account for Alan and Meredith Young. Some newbie, eager to avoid mistakes and apply all the rules, kept asking questions and requiring proof of authorization. I adeptly supplied answers that should have worked, but he kept coming at me. Finally, in desperation, I asked to speak to his manager.

"Before you put me on hold, in case we lose the connection, would you tell me the name of the manager you are transferring me to?"

"Leon Taylor is manager of this branch. I'll see if he's available. Hold, please."

As the music began, I hung up. I emailed Meredith and used my personal phone to call her.

“Meredith, there is a problem, but nothing we can’t handle,” I said. “Would you please call the bank number I just emailed to you and pull from your end? I told them I was Alan Young and that may be part of the problem—the guy I spoke to may or may not be convinced of that, and even if he believes me, remember Alan made a sizable withdrawal recently without your knowledge from this same account, and they may be trying to be very careful. You need to convince him the person he just spoke with is your husband, Alan Young, and since you and Alan are individual signatories, you can ask to talk with a manager by the name of Leon Taylor—and make him aware that you are expecting a sizable transfer. Get mad, threaten to raise hell—you know the routine—and demand to know what the fucking hang-up is.”

“Got it,” she said. “Feels like old times.”

“Don’t forget,” I added, “as soon as the transfer is complete, write a check to pay off the mortgage. Then move the rest into your account and buy CDs with varying maturing dates so you can roll them over as you need to. Also, good luck.”

It worked. By the end of the week, Meredith’s mortgage was paid off, and she had five hundred thousand tucked away in CDs.

Two of Michael’s friends, acting as intermediaries for me, each bought a Mercedes in the names of two guys in LA who had helped me out over the years and had them delivered by carrier to addresses in LA I gave them. The hundred sixty thousand paid them back handsomely and would undoubtedly come back to me in kind, all laundered and spiffy.

I offered to cover Whitey’s expense for a high-end gambler’s rehab facility, which I estimated to cost around forty grand for top-notch care or, alternatively, to refresh his marker by the same amount. He chose to renew his marker, saying that in-patient rehab would jeopardize his employment and be a waste of time, anyway.

Walking up the five steps from street level to the brick walkway leading to the front door of Michael’s house, I saw rapidly moving silhouettes inside the first-floor window. The Gothic architecture provided many protrusions, massive gables, lancet arches around windows and doors, each a potential hand or foothold large enough to accommodate even an amateur’s awkward step.

Climbing to the second story windows was easy. I saw Elizabeth standing behind a huge wingback chair large enough to provide a false sense of safety, but she didn’t see me at the window. I motioned; she still didn’t see me. Finally, I got her attention and motioned for her to unlock the window. I climbed through.

“What’s going on?” I whispered.

Her eyes registered bewilderment: they were wide open but unseeing. She tried but couldn’t find her voice.

“Did they hurt you?”

“No. They...not up here,” she murmured.

“Is there a gun in the house?”

She shook her head no and shrugged again.

“Sit tight, stay here. I’m going down there.”

The stairway leading down had a banister on each side, the one on my right attached to

to the wall. I moved as far right as far as possible, knowing the steps were less likely to creak closest to their support. I turned my back to the wall, my right-hand gripping low on the banister, my left grasping at a higher level up, and I put as much of my weight as I could on my hands, somewhat relieving the load on the steps, and quietly inched my way down.

I could hear yelling. There were two men who were demanding the return of the two million three. I continued down, slowly, one step at a time, trying to survey the action, ducking my head slightly, bending at the waist to increase my view.

I felt myself spinning, my body gyrating uncontrollably, and my eyes lost focus as I tried to locate the source of the noise in my ears. The stairway began to shake and vibrate, the steps contorted as though they were made of rubber, for which I was grateful since I knew they were moving toward me and I longed for a soft landing. In all the commotion, with me rotating and the staircase circling, I found myself hitting the floor and lying there with one of the men standing over me.

Michael was tied to a chair, his chin on his chest; blood everywhere, his feet splayed, his torso slumped over. Then came a chilling scream from the top of the stairway. I was able to turn enough to see a man coming down with Elizabeth in tow. Halfway down she jerked, and he snatched; missing his grip, she kicked, and he shoved. I saw her fall.

She tumbled down the steps hitting the bottom on her back and sliding almost to where I lay on the floor. I closed my eyes and reopened them in disbelief. She obviously needed immediate medical attention. All I could say to the two men was, "Please help her."

"Shut the fuck up," the bald-headed one said. He was pointing a pistol at my head. "Where's the money?"

"What money?"

"You know what money," he said. As he spoke he lifted his hand, and I heard the explosion. Michael's body jumped.

"Don't...don't..." I couldn't make another sound.

"Shut up. It's over."

I heard nothing else before the piercing pressure and a sense of suffocation overcame all further feeling and thought. I sank into a black abyss.

What sounded like a woodpecker's incessant knocking caught my attention. It stopped for a period and then resumed. It went on until the pain in my side forced me into awareness. It was dark; night had fallen, and whatever was at the door became more insistent. The door squeaked open.

I heard, "Hello? Hello, is anyone here?"

A day and a half later, with the help of a doctor friend of Whitey's, I was able to walk around. Tight bandaging around my upper chest and a sling for my left arm slowed me down for a while, but gradually I could pretend to be almost normal. I took a cab to Jewish Hospital.

Both Elizabeth and the baby were in distress; she was in a coma. Michael was pretty beat up before they'd shot him and was in critical condition. In response to my questions, the nurse said he was in and out, and I could talk to him only when he was awake and stable. They were both in ICU, with limited visitor access.

"How are you, Michael?" I asked, when the nurses finally let me see him.

His voice was weak. "I got snake bit," he said.

He passed out and I left.

When I returned, I walked straight toward ICU. No one was at the main desk, which was unusual, so I walked straight to her room. There was a flurry of activity, four nurses and an intern surrounded the bed. I peeked around them. I saw Elizabeth lying there, uncovered, her abdomen sliced open. Her eyes were open and staring at nothing.

I couldn't stand it. I closed my eyes so tight it hurt. I wanted to unclosethem but couldn't. Unable to achieve the impossible task of looking, unable to distinguish what was real from what wasn't, became unbearable.

Where is the baby? I need to see the baby! I wondered why no one was listening. I felt or heard a thud somewhere between my back and my injured arm, or maybe at the base of my neck, and I remember thinking it didn't matter, all was lost anyway.

A nurse came and knelt by me, raised my head into her arms, and screamed "Stat!"

I whispered to her, "What happened to Elizabeth? Where's the baby?"

The next morning, I awoke in my own room. A nurse was standing there.

"Lie still: you broke a few ribs and re-injured your wound. You'll have some pain for a while," she said.

She gave me a shot and I began to feel better almost immediately.

"Where's Elizabeth, and where's the baby?"

"We did everything we could," she said. "Elizabeth took a turn for the worse. She never woke up, and the doctor had to take the baby. He waited as long as he could. He only did it when he knew we couldn't save her. Didn't even have time to get to the OR. The baby's fine. She's in the nursery. Would you like to see your baby, Mr. Mayer?"

"Where is Michael?" I asked.

When I finally opened my eyes the next morning, my brain had died. My body, in sympathy, wouldn't respond. I couldn't wake up. Forcing my eyes to focus, I still didn't feel conscious; I couldn't believe what I thought I remembered. Whenever I tried, my mind went blank. It was just too horrible to think about.

Even the following day, I was not able to imagine the event; I almost passed out struggling with it. But the day after, it helped to visit the baby; I missed Elizabeth and could sense the baby did, too. I tried to visualize the baby as being her mother, incarnate. My view of the universe had changed. I felt an anxiety of complete doom: it couldn't possibly be worse.

Reality began to seep in after a few more days.

"Mr. Mayer," Nurse Luanne said, "the nursery has been asking about when the father is going to sign the birth certificate, and what name you have chosen for your little girl."

"Is Michael still in a coma?" I asked.

"Yes, he's in a medically induced coma, and you'll probably be able to take the baby home before he's discharged."

"I want to go see the baby. I haven't seen her today."

"You should lie there and rest for a bit."

"I want to see the baby."

She took me to the nursery in a wheelchair. The sweetest little girl I had ever seen opened her eyes for only a few seconds, and I fell in love all over again. I spent the next few hours there, staring in disbelief.

I looked through the window at people passing by outside. I wondered how they could go on living in view of the disaster, how they could choose to live under these circumstances. Then I thought about the baby, and I understood. Vaguely.

I didn't take care of my only son when I had a chance, why did I so desperately want to take care of this one.

"It won't be easy, but you'll be just fine with your little girl," the nurse said. "She's so precious. I've gone to see her every day, and I pray for her every day. I'm just sorry I didn't get to know her mother."

"She was special," I mumbled.

Nurse Luanne smiled and nodded.

At the last moment before leaving, I wrote 'Elizabeth Barzini' on the birth certificate. For the first few days at home, I had no idea what I was doing. I never left her side. I was scared to death something bad would happen. But with the formula and diapers the hospital had given me, and the constant visits of Michael's friends and their wives bringing food and supplies, we managed.

Three weeks after Michael came home, I began to trust him to look after the baby for short periods of time. Eventually, when I could leave for an hour or two, I drove across the bridge to Indiana to meet a man Michael knew who was able to create a new human existence: an Indiana driver's license, a new social security card, and a birth certificate for me. It cost me two hundred fifty. He did such a good job I tipped him another hundred.

I read in the paper that the police had two suspects for the attacks. The article indicated there was not enough evidence to get a search warrant; the possible charges were numerous, including murder. They had police sketches of the suspects in the paper, but it could have been anyone, as far as I could see.

Michael had told me they had taken his wallet which contained about eight hundred dollars, his Rolex, and a few other items, to make it look like a robbery, he thought. And he was sure, relatively sure, they had also taken Elizabeth's diamond necklace.

"The cops asked me to confirm the accuracy of the sketches. I declined." Michael said.

"But you're reasonably sure these are the guys, right?" I asked.

"Yes, especially the one with the dragon tattoo on his neck. I won't forget that."

"Then, don't identify them if they ask you again," I said. "I'll take care of it."

Whitey was able to get an address from his friends working the case. They lived in a run-down apartment house, and from the room designation I guessed they lived on the fifth floor. The next afternoon, I asked Michael to watch the baby for a couple of hours.

The building had iron bars on the windows, and the front door was kept locked. I was unsuccessful in moving fast enough to get to the door before it closed behind a heavily perfumed and tattooed man with the face of a bear. I've found that people want to trust all but the most suspicious-looking, so with well-rehearsed timing and boldness, I was able to talk to a tenant with the thinnest grasp on reality into holding the door for me as she entered.

Picking the lock on the door of the apartment was a freshman's assignment. I searched the place, looking for answers to questions I hadn't formulated yet. There was a small stand-alone safe on the floor in a closet, an inexpensive one designed to stop the near-honest and slow

down the not-so-honest. It contained a surprise: about a hundred credit cards of all types with a variety of names. There were three of Elizabeth's, and the one and only credit card Michael owned. I took Michael's and left Elizabeth's there.

In a top drawer of a dresser, beneath some odd-looking T-shirts and tank tops, I found about twenty watches and some odd pieces of jewelry. I spread them out on the bed. One necklace was exactly like Elizabeth's, so I put it in my pocket for later examination and left everything else on the bed just to let them know someone had been there.

Using several of the credit cards from the safe, I called ten stores from an old directory using their phone: electronic stores, clothing stores, and a jeweler. I bought a total of twenty items, about fifteen thousand dollars' worth of goods. I gave the thugs' real address and phone number, and for added measure, I asked that they be delivered to the names I had read in the paper. Even if the information was incomplete and the dates a bit out of whack, it should be enough to give the police probable cause and a search warrant.

The guilt and remorse I felt about Elizabeth's death wouldn't go away. I had always been used to operating in a background of nagging guilt, juggling conflicting feelings like a clown tosses bowling pins in the air, and like the clown, my trick was always to never look directly at any one of them. But that was not working now. I had to look things in the face. I had to let someone I trusted in on my plans, in case something happened to me. I felt responsible for little Elizabeth's welfare and decided to tell Michael.

"I got a job," I said. "And I'm buying a house, on the east side of town, not too far out. Would you like to come live with us? Me and little Elizabeth?"

A reflective moment followed. The house had a nice nursery for Elizabeth, and I made sure it had a separate guest house in case William ever showed up. I still hope to find a way to reconcile with my son but doubt it will come anytime soon.

Michael picked something up from the table. "Hey, I see you found Liz's necklace. Where did you find it?"

"In a drawer," I said. "Elizabeth told me she wanted her baby to have it. By the way, from now on please call me *Edwardo Barzini*, your two-years-older brother. I changed my name. You okay with that?"

"It'll take some getting used to. Even so, I doubt it would be a good idea to cohabitate," he said. "And you got a job, did you?"

I said nothing in response as he let the question sink in.

"How did you get a fucking job, anyway?" Michael challenged my stare. "A *job*? With your record? Really?"

"I got the offer today, by phone, and Edwardo Barzini doesn't have a record. I interviewed a week ago. Supposed to start two weeks from now."

"Where?"

"Out at the airport. Mechanic."

"Which airline?"

"No airline. Trucks. A fleet of trucks to be exact. I passed a test, and now they're going to train me. The pay's... well, let's just say the pay's not falling from the sky in clumps like the

old days, but not bad either.”

“Starting a new job, changing your name, buying a house?” He stared in disbelief.

“You’re still Eddie to me. You financially okay?”

“Okay, as long as the authorities leave me alone,” I said.

The thought made my heart rate go through the roof. Jumping parole is a problem that won’t go away by itself. California won’t give up, and who would look after little Elizabeth-then?

He looked longingly at the necklace in his hand, kissed it, then slowly lay it down. He turned to gaze out the window. I walked to where he stood and put my hand on his shoulder.

“You have been a better friend than I deserve,” I said.

His eyes darted around the room, looking for something he had lost.



S(he) Plays Again

by Russell Carisse

V

Once there was a chance, swallowing as he
 Stepped as punctum from the ground, behind on
 The fence of her garden, that's growing on
The plot she was given by fury, he
Hoped to catch her sable eyes flinting, she
 Worked the blackened earth he was tramping on
 Without looking up, her silent words on
The wind alluring, with new spells could she?

His lips following her voice, as if it
 Portended their meeting upon the veldt,
 Where spring was springing through the winter melt
Awash in temperate mood, as if it
 Knew happen chance was then unraveling
 The path before them that they're traveling.

VII

Smuggled, she herself was then giving in
 To waves crashing on her shore, as if he
 Ruled the sea for her bounty, as if she
Had anything but herself feeling out
Alliances to save lands bleeding out
 In to foreign tears of hers, as if she
 Cried secrets for another, as if he
Had anything but himself giving in.

Regaled in purples he was stunned himself;
 Like a rival's statue that stands over,
 Like a suiter's unexpected winning.
Bordered in purples she was stunned herself;
 Like a sibling's trespass that's brought under,
 Like a quarry's unexpected tripping

XI

In a forgotten cave, and pacing she
 Extolled the danger that was encroaching on
 The possibility of love placing on
Them a happiness; speaking tinted he
Kissed her sable eyes; speaking hinted she
 Promised kingship and land bordering on
 Both desert and sea, his smile growing on
Her face, as both played between she and he.

And the walls were built off in the distance
 By those soon kept out, and including he,
 They would be chased far from the lands, by she
 Who commands armies, and even though she
 Loved his presence close, it was because he
Was building other walls of an instance.

XIII

It was flowers and perdition, that he
 Brought to her hidden door, came alone
 Through hidden lune lit nights, in between
Dried out grasses tied into charms, that she
Hung high from birch and poplars, so that she
 Caught her reappearance up, in between
 The standing stones, they come to meet alone
In the flowers and perdition brought he.

On the falling slopes amongst rutting sheep,
 Rolling rolling tumbling falling went they,
 The stars spattered themselves about their heads,
 The knurls knuckled themselves around themselves
 Rolling strolling at the bottom, went they
In the valley dim amongst naked trees.

Song in Waltz Time

by Mark J. Mitchell

Over there sleeps a grief.
She calls out names at night.
She's dreaming your release,
but her hand holds on tight
to your soul, like a child
and her blanket. She smiles.

She turns over. You stay
too close. You turn back,
like you do every day
,forgetting she's a fact.
She'll always call your name.
She won't renounce her claim.

Go ahead, smile at her
sadly—that's not a choice.
Light as a gold feather,
she'll tickle out your voice.
Leave her there, let her sleep.
You'll wake her if you weep.

A Lost Homesteader

by Mark J. Mitchell

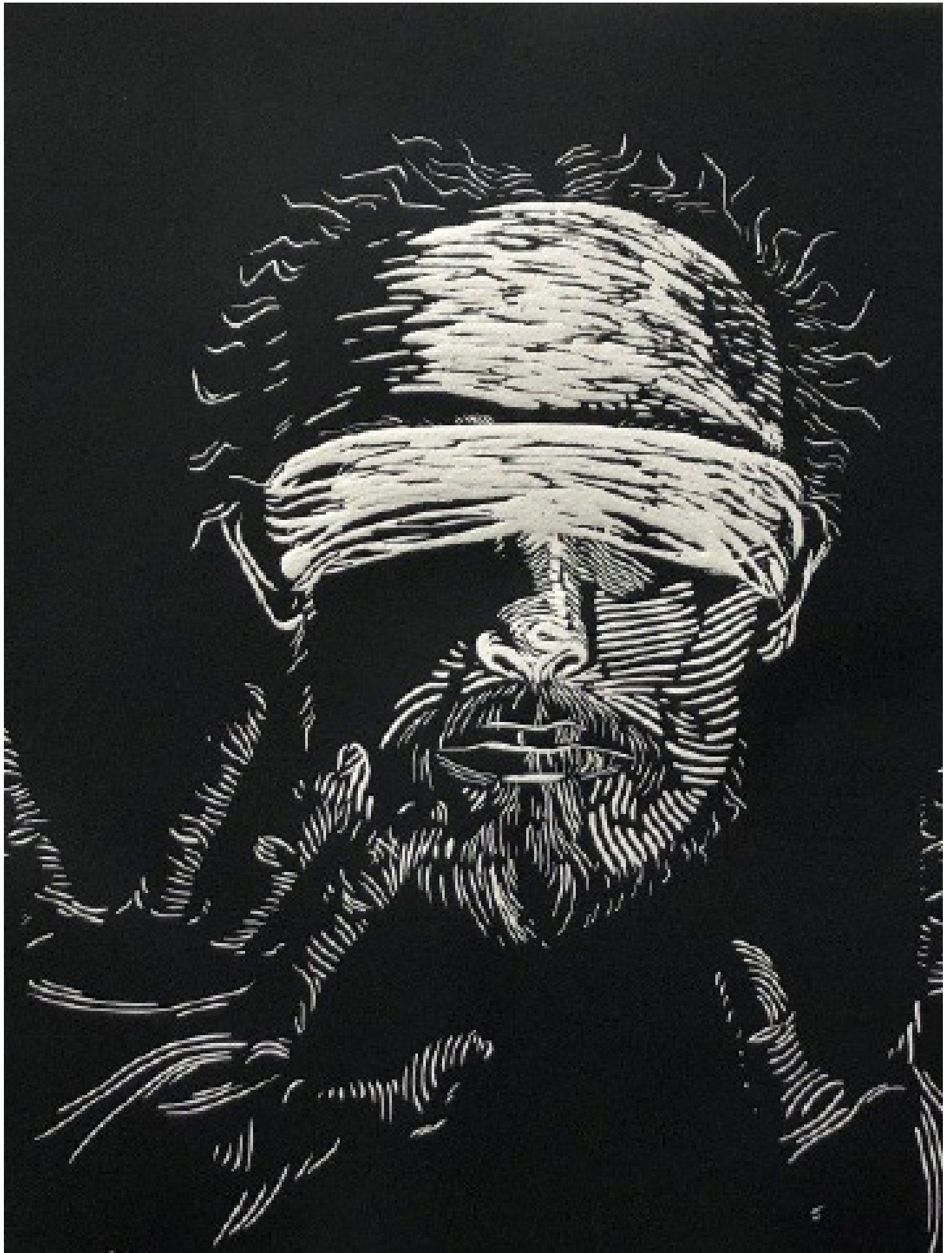
Her knives were beaten into new scissors
hidden under white frames, behind fears.
She'd know where they were for mending deserts
when orders came to slice up her mirrors.

Last Sunday, she fooled everyone. Her tears
stayed salty—too potent for minors
to drink. Real, though, her sorrows. That's why her
knives were always close, disguised as scissors.

Her absent wealth kept away visitors.
She never missed them. Sometimes on a clear
night she'd chant low songs, spray a plant mister
to conjure hidden frames and peek past fears.

Her kitchen drawers squeaked and rattled for years.
She liked that music—minor, the sad reverb
of moonlight on a cliff. It stays dear
to her knowledge, mending her cool desert.

She'd look for nothing and find it. Clever
that way. Made damn sure her shack wasn't yours.
Her scissors cut, needing no advisors,
no orders. She'd slice up her own mirrors.



Father, Is It?

by Thomas Weedman

After comp-and-lit class (in secular circles you've overheard it called *chomp and clit*), the lithe girl asks to borrow you.

"Sorry?" you say.

You were about to light a cigarette, then finger-bead a quickie decade when charcoal fingers in the woolly Charlie Brown pullover approached.

She came to class late with splotched cheeks and snow in her cargo of uncorked curls. She removed her ear muffs, fingerless mittens, and ensorcellated the eye. Then she eye-banged you from across crowded the room and smiled. You shivered and looked away.

Now she says, "You don't live on campus, do you?"

"No," you say. You novice in a small brick house by the candle-lit grotto and frozen lake instead of the Victorian dorms. But you don't tell her that. You shiver again, freezing to death. Even in the heated classroom with double-pane unstained windows, you still shiver in a London Fog buttoned to the throat. The coat isn't heavy enough for winter, even with its removable astrakhan fur liner, your gray skein scarf thin as an ascot handkerchief. So much protection yet to discover. Like snow boots and thermal underwear.

"I need a body, a male model," she muses, leaving the lecture. "For the rest of the semester. Mine just broke his leg – stupid footballer. I need a replacement."

You slide the gelid cigarette behind your frozen ear. "You mean a football player?"

"What else would I mean?" she says.

"You *are* Irish."

"*Assumpta*, actually."

"Of course, you are." You say you are flattered. Then buckling to vanity, you say, "What kind?"

"Nude." Then she says, "My studio hours are half *tree*."

"Which tree? Good or evil?"

"*Tha-ree tarty*."

"Oh, the time! 3:30." Your hours too, after the cell physiology elective you are about to fail, and then the daily obligation you can never miss. Your fantasy to embody the TV M*A*S*H characters Pierce and Mulcahy is at risk. But you say, "Um."

"Are you diffident or shy? Not a *Mary* or a big girl's blouse, are ya?"

"Not necessarily," you say, though you have no idea what those mean.

Her siren hair sparks under the fire sprinklers and caged lights of the loggia. You are alarmed on rocky ground.

"This *Mary* has commitments." You nearly say commandments.

"Break them. I can pay you in a number of ways." She licks her lips like salt victuals, tonguing and laving cracked, beaten skin.

Busted, you want to count the ways but can only sum laminins and trimer chains, their Cross-like protein structures lashing inside the matrix of your cells, bleeding your soul. Now

Now this Assumpta *and* Jesus have gotten under your skin. You bite your lip.

“We could go now,” she says, “and you could check it out, see if you like it, or me. We could even go to your place. Do you have roommates?”

You are on your way to Latin class. Wooed by conjugal, you conjugate *tentare*, then stutter, “Thanks, it’s very tempt, tempting, tempted but--”

“I thought so,” she says, holding a sketchbook of kilned limbs and a copy of *Persuasion* to her busty bosom, teasing pages and fibers of wool and womb, *Jesus*.

You unbutton your London Fog and flash the goods, while still hiding beads.

“Father, is it? I’m sorry.”

“Apostolate, actually. Haven’t taken a vow of celibacy yet.”

“*Tank God*,” she says, standing so close to you.

“Don’t--”

“You won’t call the priest police, will you?” She issues a bashful look. With smudged drawing fingers, she fingers the white band under your hard Adam’s apple. “Let me know if you change your mind.” Then she pats your black-shirted chest. “You can smoke now.”

You finish the hard pack but can’t focus later at Liturgy of the Hours. You can only cuss quietly during Sext. *Hail fucking Mary* is what you prayerfully mutter. The rest of the semester, you sit in front of the class, so not to mull or look at her locks or eye them like a hawk. You wrap the Holy Rosary around your hand like an end-of-time tourniquet. But you feel a primordial gaze oozing, throbbing you alive down to your coccyx in the burning cold.

The Harshness of Birds

by Chevon Fuller

Chirp. Chirp. Silence. Chirp. The lazy birds flapped their weighted wings through the thick July heat. Here, in the marshlands of Awendaw, South Carolina, things don't move far or fast. There is movement, but it is lethargic, peculiar, and measured. If you sat still, you could feel something unanticipated here. There was a secret in the back woods, down a dirt road off of 17 Mile Landing, at the Manigault house. The Manigault's lived in a 54-year old, two-story colonial, painted white with black shutters that were put to full use during hurricane season. The house was tree-smothered and manicured, but its pretty outside belied the strong pulsing undercurrent inside; a lava stream of emotions that burned so irrepressibly that it scalded and blistered, if you were lucky. The not so lucky were charred.

At first, she heard the birds. Then silence bit her subconscious like a mosquito; although Leticia Manigault could not immediately reconcile the sound of chirping and the sound of silence, since she was still foggy with sleep and hung-over from a bottle of gin she'd drunk last night up in the backwoods. Leticia listened without purpose or intention, the way it happens when wakefulness begins and the mind is black, and largely silent. Chirp. Silence again. Chirp. Her eyes slowly opened. She saw the horizon, and it was still weighty and pregnant with the dark gray hue of night. She made out dark purplish spots in the sky; clouds rising slowly like the slow breath of a distended belly. The clouds looked like the sonogram remnants of her miscarried babies and a lifetime of trying. Or maybe it was more like D'Edward's lung cancer X-ray yesterday and the strain of his doctor saying he's dying? She couldn't decide, and she reached out and touched her foot against her husband's now slender leg.

Without warning, like the first lightening flash of a storm she didn't know was coming, her mind enlarged, even before she could fully swallow and ingest the first thoughts that eased into her mind. She quickly opened her eyes with deliberate force and looked at the clock: 6:02 a.m. Next the rage came, like a sudden clasp of thunder in a darkened summer sky, as if her rage was something she was required to put on underneath her robe and slippers in order to tolerate each day. Leticia jumped out of the bed, grabbed her housecoat, slippers, and a thick leather belt with a large metal buckle from when her husband was muscular and meaty. When the rage came, she didn't even smell the scent of D'Edward sleeping next to her, or let his touch move her to a better place, or hear his words when he said he felt sick again last night. Instead, rage barreled her out of the room in a flash, like the speed of a gunshot.

"I'mma beat the shit out of you, ain' neba gwine end, you lazy no good for nothin'. Why I don't hear my lawn being mow?" She raced down the hall to Baba's room and swung open the door, speeding to his bed with the hard belt buckle raised to strike the sleeping 11-year boy. But Baba wasn't there.

Every Saturday, Baba did something to get whapped. If Leticia didn't wake up to the sound of mowing on Saturday, Baba got whapped. If Baba forgot to take the trash out before noon, Baba got whapped. Sometimes she whapped him while he pushed the lawn mower, just for being late getting started. Sometimes, she whapped him out of bed, and it pleased her to

know that he couldn't hear her coming.

She bolted downstairs and ran down the hallway, listening for the sound of the mower, but that sound did not come. Instead, when she got near the kitchen, she heard a chair fall and then gasping. What she saw cemented her hatred for him more than she already despised him for being born by another woman in the middle of her marriage to D'Edward, and then having to raise him when his mother became a drug addict.

Baba had positioned a chair underneath the kitchen light, tied a rope around his neck, and kicked the chair over just when he heard Leticia charging down the hall to come after him. In the first few seconds, he could still see her look at him with disgust, and she grimaced as he struggled; his head throbbing. In the next seconds, he heard a loud ringing in his ears and saw flashes of light in his eyes. Finally, with the energy of taking out a heavy bag of stinking garbage peppered with the stench of days old shrimp, she grabbed both his legs and hoisted him up to relieve the pressure. She held him there for a moment, as if trying to decide whether she even wanted to hold him long enough to save him. She was older now, 43, and a lifetime of cooking in the kitchen, sitting around, and drinking, had made her body fat and weak. She hollered for D'Edward, and her voice cracked from the weight of the child, the energy needed to holler, and boiling anger. D'Edward jumped in his pants and stumbled down the stairs, half guessing that the mower broke and half worried it might be something else. When he saw his baby boy, an electrical shock raced through D'Edward's body so forcefully that it passed through every cell in his body like a life support jolt to his heart. He raced to free Baba, cut the rope, and placed his semiconscious body on the ground.

D'Edward sat on the floor in stunned disbelief at what his son had attempted to do. "Baba, why you do that, son? I coulda lost you."

Leticia taunted. "Wha? Lost wha? 'E can't even kill 'eself right. I shoulda have left you hangin' right there. Don't you be showing you neck at school neither. E'vry sick ain't fa tell."

Baba's head fell towards the window, his teary face and reddened eyes slightly open. He couldn't move. Then, slowly sound came to him through the open kitchen window. One sound. The birds. Chirp. Chirp. Silence. Chirp. Today, July 22, on his 11th birthday, the birds were, as always, the permanent soundtrack to his despair.

"I don't know what to do. Oh Lord!" D'Edward repeated as he sat on the kitchen floor rocking his only child's limp body. Baba was breathing, and his senses were slowly returning, but his soul was beaten down and lifeless. D'Edward ached from somewhere in the depths of darkness, but the Lord never gave him the fullness of relief. It all sounded familiar to Baba; more unanswered prayers.

Baba's shirt was wet with his Daddy's tears. "Son, can you hear me?" Baba nodded yes, but didn't look his way. "You seen me goin' back and forth to the doctor? You seen how this sickness got me tangled up?" Baba nodded yes. D'Edward paused. "That thing come back like hell's fury and doctor say it ain't gonna' stop. . I'm...I'm not gonna' make it, son." Baba let it sink in, and he wailed in more pain than any Leticia could inflict on him, his voice raspy and deepened by a painfully raw throat. His heart was already hurting from the inside out from the evil rising out of Leticia's hands, now it felt like it was going to explode. D'Edward rocked him tighter. "Son, I need you to listen to me right now." Wailing in agony, something welled up inside of Baba's soul that made him understand. He listened. "Even if God just gave me six

more months, I promise you Leticia ain't gonna' put another hand on you while I'm on this earth. You understand?"

"Here's what's gonna' happen to you when I gone," his Daddy said, as if he heard Baba's whispering soul. I gonna' give you a key, son, but you gotta' make me a promise you won't do nothin' to try to hurt yourself, ever again. I show you how to protect yourself. There's a gun in my handgun box that ain't never 'sposed to be pointed to you, you hear? I gonna' slip the box under your bed. If Leticia tries to beat you, open that box, take out the handgun, and tell her your Daddy told you to shoot her. And you mean it when you say it, son. You shoot her. As long as you got that handgun, you gonna' be protected from Leticia and you ain't got no reason to hurt yourself, you see? She scared of guns and won't touch 'em anyway. You promise me, son?" His Daddy's words started to reunite his wounded body and fledgling spirit. He said, brokenly, "Yes, Daddy. I promise."

D'Edward reached in his pocket, took the handgun box key off his key ring, and placed the key in Baba's hand. Baba fell asleep in his Daddy's arms before he could get him upstairs to his room, body and spirit barely held together, as if he was made of sand and wind.

D'Edward told Leticia that if he had taken Baba to the hospital, the police would have put him in foster care 'cause of her. He told her he hated himself for being blind to how she hurt Baba. When she tried to explain with the excuse that country kids get beat for discipline and Gullah kids get beat harder, he stood his ground. "Not in this house, anymore," he said. "You lay another hand on Baba, I'm putting you out on the street, and then I'm calling the cops to arrest you. You understand?"

Leticia turned to drinking vodka and cranberry juice to curb her unremitting urge to beat Baba. When D'Edward passed, the smell of his demise sat thickly in the air. Leticia graduated to alcoholism. The house was never cleaned; there were always crumbs to be found under the table and along the kitchen floor, many ending up growing old along the baseboards.

First, Baba ate the food from the funeral repast he had packed in the garage freezer. After that was gone, he took money out of Leticia's purse to get groceries, before she could spend Daddy's social security checks, meant for his care, on alcohol.

By the time Baba approached 14, Leticia spent most of her days in bed drinking. One Friday summer night, Leticia, brazenly drunk and hocked up off of some drug, headed for Baba with a belt while he was sleeping, remembering, like a long lost reflex, that he should be beaten for something. She stumbled into his room, "This is all your fault, you mother fucker." Baba jumped out of bed and stood before her, unyielding. He was slim, but a growth spurt had propelled him on the path to 6'4" like his daddy. Towering over her, he said with a newly discovered baritone voice, "I'd turn around and leave if I was you."

Baba told the police everything they needed to complete their suicide investigation. "She died 'cause of grief, alcohol, and some kind of drug. She ain't been right for a long time. I went outside to mow the lawn like I do every Saturday. I felt something underneath my feet. It was a dead bird. Can you believe it? An acadian flycatcher. Thick necks, large piercing eyes. That's when I knew something bad happened. Yes, Sir, that bird was a bad sign. I went upstairs and next thing I knew she was shot dead in bed. I didn't hear a thing, which is strange 'cause I'm a light sleeper."

Chirp. Chirp. Silence. Chirp. Baba looked up in the trees and heard the birds chirping.

He felt a warm breeze on his cheek and took a deep breath. The air felt good to him. He locked his arms at the wrists and rested them on top of his head to stretch his back. “Yes sir, I’m a light sleeper and she was deathly afraid of guns; I guess that’s how it goes ... it won’t go that way no more. Ain’t that something?”



Wish in the Other

by Wendy Fox

In my life then, working at my office, I'd say that there was this layer of not-caring-ness, like a video I'd seen of teenage boys throwing smoke bombs down a canyon in Oregon. The shaky recording cuts out just after the spot where the wispy smoke begins to rise, but while the potassium nitrate has burst from its container, it's still encased between the rock walls of the canyon, and this is the most dangerous part, lit sparks loose in the dry valley. It was like how I figured my face must have looked when my boss, Kate, fired me: a slow smolder.

In the online video I could sort of see how everything would play out and also kind of not see anything, and while the boys must have eventually walked away from the ridge and gone back to their campsite or their car, when I first watched it, I already knew that it was not so many frames away from the emergence of disaster. The boys are reckless and wide-eyed, like if they just had thrown a little harder, they would have hit their real target, like they would have known what they were throwing toward.

I was in my apartment when I saw the news report of the unintentional blaze—hot, dry conditions, a lighter passed back and forth, the smoke igniting the forest floor and then burning through the understory of the forest and up the canyon walls. I'd grown up in and still lived in Denver, and I'd never been to Oregon before, but it looked like a beautiful place, even with the hillsides glowing wrong and the river water so hot, it must have been bubbling through the bowl of the Columbia gorge.

~

It was hard to know what to do with Cale when he called. We'd both been out of college for a few years, and when he contacted me, it was in the first week of losing my job. I'd been finished with school for much longer because Cale, my best friend from high school, had gone on to do a PhD. I had some money saved, but I was considering moving back in with my mom—she'd offered, and honestly, besides me keeping up some kind of appearance regarding being an adult, there was no reason for us to live apart. It had been just us two since my dad left when I was in the second grade. My dad wasn't supposed to leave her, but that's what he wanted. I didn't want to leave her, but that's what I was supposed to do. I barely remembered him. I talked to her at least once a day.

"I'm sure you'll find another job soon," my mom said over the phone, and I hoped she was right, but I learned a long time ago not to pin too much hope on anything. My mom, when she was in a crass mood, used to say, *Well, you can shit in one hand and wish in another and see which one fills up first.* I liked that about her.

I think it had been close to a year since I had really talked with Cale. He was a math guy, and he'd ridden that through multiple scholarships. Even before I lost my job, I had mentioned wanting to go back to my mom's house to him.

"Yeah, man, it's not a problem per se, it's just optics. Like with girls, it doesn't look good," he said.

I was pretty sure I had never given a fuck about optics, whatever that was even supposed

to mean.

“I don’t date girls,” I said.

“Oh shit,” he had said. “This might be too heavy for right now.”

I heard party sounds in the background. What I didn’t get to say in that last conversation before Cale hung up was that I meant *women*. That a girl is a child. That the females in my life were only girls in the past tense unless they were, in fact, children. Probably he would have said something about me being hung up on the semantics of it, but I’d been raised by a single mom, and I saw how men treated her, and somewhere along the line I had taken a vow to do better. To be better. And I didn’t get to tell him that I didn’t appreciate his homophobia.

When Cale called this time, he did not sound sober at all. “Like if I could just crash with you for a few days? You still have your place? You didn’t move back in with your mom? Right?”

Yes, I still had my place, I told him. *No*, I didn’t move back in with my mother, at least not yet. *Sure*, he could stay with me for a few days.

“Where are you?” I asked. He’d done his BS in Chicago, his master’s in Massachusetts, and had finally landed in California for his doctorate and had stayed on, working in a lab. Last I had heard from him, he loved the lab and the undergraduates.

“I’m like a little over halfway home,” Cale said. “Staying at a friend’s in Salt Lake. Well, friend of a friend.”

Salt Lake City was still eight hours away from Denver by car. I wondered if he had talked to his dad but I figured not. Growing up, that was the family. My mom and me, and Cale’s dad and him. Cale and I had tried to scheme to get my mom and his dad together, but we were in high school, and we didn’t know what we were doing.

“I’m going to text you the address of where I am,” he said, slurring at the end, *eye ammm*. “And then I am going to go to bed. And then when I wake up, I hope you will be here. I really really really really need you to be here. Please, Laird.” He coughed.

“Okay,” I said. “Don’t forget the text or I won’t be able to find you.”

“The text?” he said.

“Text the address,” I said. “Maybe see if there’s mail or something. Look by the door. I’ll need the address.”

“I got you,” he said.

“Charge your phone,” I said, but he had already hung up.

I put down my cell, and I rummaged in my apartment—change of clothes, toothbrush, stuffed into a bag along with a few granola bars. I filled all of my water bottles. It was almost nine in the evening, and I’d meant to read for a while and then go to sleep, but instead I brewed a pot of coffee, slung it into a thermos, and brewed another cup for my to-go mug. Into the bag went a banana, a couple of string cheeses, and an apple. I took my morning vitamins. I took a piss. I waited to leave until my phone finally dinged with Cale’s text, and then I put the address into my GPS. I figured even if a number was transposed, I’d get close enough. I figured that by the time I got to him, he’d be sobering up.

I didn’t know if Cale was reaching for me in particular or if he was just reaching. I double-checked that I had my wallet and my phone charger, and I took the coffee and the water and the food to my car. On the way out of town, I topped off the tank and, on a whim, ran my old

Honda through the automatic car wash. Inside, while I waited for the machine to soap and rinse and soap and rinse again, I called my mom and left a message and told her I was taking a road trip to see Cale, and that everything was fine. I called Kevin, Cale's dad, and thanked him for the birthday card he had sent months ago and asked if he had talked to Cale recently. *Anyway, call me back*, I said.

My car was cool and glistening after the wash, or at least it would be until the water dried. After that it would be a matte burgundy color with a scratch down the side and a pitted windshield, but for now my coffee was hot, my ride shiny, my water cold, and my gas tank full. I turned to head west on I-70, and I wondered if this was something Cale would do for me.

~

I wanted to have some great experience of the open road—a young man who has lost his job and is setting out to claim his oldest friend, his friend who was everything to him not even a decade ago, his friend whom he would once do anything for, a friend who had never needed much from him, but now the friend does need, so the young man is barreling down the interstate, alternating between coffee and water, eating a banana to stay awake, slapping himself to stay awake, eating a granola bar to stay awake, doing jumping jacks at a rest station to stay awake, eating a string cheese to stay awake, getting gas to stay awake, thinking of every painful moment he can conjure from his life to stay awake while he drives because though his friend has not said so, he would not have called if he was not in over his head; the young man does not know if it's smoke or water or something else covering his friend, but he felt the muffling of his voice, heard the *please*, heard the *really really really need you*, and so now he is punching the accelerator and chugging the coffee and what's left of the water and watching the odometer tick through the miles, and he is balancing being safe against going faster while he tries to bounce a message off the sky *I'm coming, I'm coming*—but it was mostly just dark highway.

~

Silent for so long, my GPS spoke up as I reached the outskirts of Salt Lake. I turned her voice off. It was almost six in the morning, the edge of daybreak. I was very, very tired, so I pulled over at a truck stop, set the alarm on my phone, and slept for just over an hour in the back seat, until Cale's message dinged.

Just woke up, where are you?

20 minutes, I tapped back.

In the truck stop I gassed up, pissed, and got a refill of coffee. Splashed water on my face. There was a voicemail from my mom, sounding chipper, but nothing from Kevin, Cale's dad. On my way back to my car, a trucker offered me something to keep me awake, a translucent red lozenge in his outstretched hand, but I turned it down. He said to me that I looked like I needed it. I said to him that I didn't think he was wrong.

Back on the highway, I listened to the radio as the GPS voice guided me to a tumbledown house in a generally nice neighborhood. On the radio the community in Oregon wanted consequences for the boys. There was still a wreath of smoke through the valley, and the fire was not contained. "I don't care if they are just kids," one interviewee said. "They should go to jail and they should pay."

I parked and the story stopped when I clicked off the ignition. Before I could knock on the door, it opened, and there was Cale. I hadn't seen him in three years, and though he had

always been thin, he was a scraggled kind of skinny, and he smelled worse than I did.

Beyond him, through the doorway, I could see a mess of bodies passed out on couches, on the floor, and maybe someone upright in the kitchen, or maybe a dog licking the countertops.

And his arms around me. “I didn’t think you’d come!” he said. He was crying and his snot was on my shirt.

I pulled him to me. “Hey, you’d come for me.”

“I’d try,” he said, gulping air. “I promise I would try.”

“You would,” I said, turning my face away. He really did smell horrible.

~

We stopped at McDonald’s on the way out of town, and I talked the cashier into refilling my water bottles and my coffee thermoses. Cale had three sausage McMuffins with cheese, and I thought that was a good sign, that he was hungry. I had a biscuit and a hashbrown, and I thought of the trucker’s red lozenge and that maybe I should have accepted it. I was the dazed kind of tired, but Cale seemed worse than me.

“Are you coming down?” I asked him as he finished his last sandwich.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “It’s like California is just some kind of memory. Kind of remember being in a car, kind of remember talking to you, but I woke up about two a.m. and thought it was a dream, but I saw my text to you and went to wait at the window, and when you were actually there, it was *wow*. Laird, like really, *wow*.”

“*Wow!*” I played along.

Cale spilled ketchup down the front of his shirt, and I took a deep breath. Eight more hours back to Colorado. He definitely could not drive, and I wasn’t sure if I could, but I knew I had to.

At the counter I ordered more breakfast sandwiches, two Big Macs, and some fries, and asked the cashier again to top off my coffee. The food would be cold before we wanted or needed it, but we had to stay awake, and I did not want to stop more than necessary.

~

By the time we got to Grand Junction, Colorado—about thirty miles past the Utah state line—I was really dragging. I pulled over for gas and breathed in the fumes, hoping for a jolt, but there was nothing but stink. Cale was passed out in the back seat. He had eaten both of the cold hamburgers and then crashed. Outside of my quick nap at the truck stop, I had been awake for close to forty hours, sober as soap.

It was late morning and while I waited for the tank to fill, Cale’s dad called.

I meant to be cool, but I was exhausted and hungry from not having eaten real food and worried about my friend, and I told him everything. Cale was strung out, passed out. I was running on barely any rest. I had lost my job and not totally broke yet but definitely on my way. I was going to move back in with my mom to save money, but also I wanted to move back in with my mom because I missed her. Cale didn’t look good—it had been hours, and even if he was sleeping, he was still wasted.

I heard Kevin typing. He told me to rest, that he had made an arrangement at a hotel, and he read me the address.

“I think I can make it the rest of the way to Denver,” I said.

“Sleep a bit,” he said. He was insisting. “Even if it’s only a few hours. Get home safe.

Can you come here first? Drop off Cale?”

It was like we were in high school again. I listened to Kevin, always had. I wished Kevin was my dad too.

“Can you call my mom?” I said, surprised at how my voice broke, and then not surprised.

“Sure, buddy,” Kevin said. “I’ll call her right when we hang up.”

~

The hotel was not some roachy thing that I would have done on my own dime but a nice place. I had to almost drag Cale through the lobby, but because he was my oldest friend, I refused to be embarrassed, even though people were staring at us. When I got him to the room, he was babbling and feverish, and I was glad we were not in the car.

In the video of the boys throwing smoke bombs, they are egging one another on. By the ninth or tenth time I’d watched it, I was almost sure they both knew what a bad idea it was but they do it anyway. In the news updates since the morning, the state of Oregon had announced they would attempt to try the boys as adults and seek a prosecution for destruction of public property.

In the hotel room Cale snored in his bed. I took a shower and I tried to relax. I ate the last breakfast sandwich. It was cold and the cheese was congealed and the bread soggy. I drained one of my water bottles. I pissed.

I crawled into the clean hotel sheets, and the horizontal feeling was welcome, but I couldn’t sleep with Cale in the room with me. I wondered if he would be hungry when he woke up. I wondered if he drank coffee. I wondered if I was the first person he called or the last. I wondered if he would be angry when I took him to his dad’s. I wondered if I would take him to his dad’s—maybe my place for a day or two would be better. I wondered what he was coming off of, and I wondered if there was something I should be looking for, like tremors or delirium or something else. He slept on and then he began to snore, and I was glad because then I could hear his breath.

~

It was 4 p.m. when I jolted awake. Cale was still in the other bed, tangled in the sheets. I had texts from my mother and three missed calls from Kevin. I had that urgent feeling of being late for work. I remembered that I had been fired. I showered quickly, put on my one change of fresh clothes, and made hotel-room coffee.

It took me another forty minutes to get Cale awake. He reeked. When I pulled back the bedsheets, there was a ring of yellow, so I hauled him into the bathroom. He was barely responsive but once he was stripped, I folded him into the tub and turned on the shower, running it hot, running it cold. Either temperature, he sat and turned his face to the stream of water.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

I put Cale in the hotel robe and tucked him in the other bed, the one I had slept in. I made him drink some water. I was worried about leaving him, but my phone GPS indicated a Target only three miles away, so I raced there to get clean clothes and snacks. Underwear, sweat-pants, socks, and a shirt. Three protein shakes. More bananas. Bottled water. Three packaged sandwiches and a large bag of almonds. I ate the almonds by the handful on the way back to the hotel, chasing the nuts with one of the protein shakes. I felt a little bit better.

We checked out of the hotel, Cale clean and wearing the sweats and underpants and socks. The clothes he was wearing stank so bad I left them in the room, and I put twenty bucks on his bed for housekeeping. I figured they'd seen worse than rotten jeans and pee, and it was the last of the cash that I had budgeted for the trip, but still.

It was close to 6 p.m. by now, with four more hours to Denver. I texted my mom and Kevin:

Leaving Grand Junction see you soon I love you both.

~

When Cale and I were about the same age as the boys in the smoke bomb video, we'd go down to Kevin's basement and smoke pot, and we also tried whatever else we could get our hands on, which truthfully wasn't as much as we pretended it to be. Two misfit kids trying on a bad-boy identity, falling asleep to *Lethal Weapon 3* for the hundredth time.

Maybe he was more into our limited drug scores than I was—it's just as hard to trust any memory as to pull one up. I know we weren't the kind of kids who set off alarm bells, who set things on fire, whether ourselves or a forest, even by accident.

My mom, his dad, us two, we made a kind of family, and Cale and I did the kinds of things kids who haven't had it too hard do. Kept our grades up. Didn't mouth off too much. Didn't get caught. It had been hard when my dad left, but that was so long ago, I had stopped, or at least tried to stop, caring. Everything seemed fine but maybe Cale was more like those smoke bomb boys than I knew. Maybe he was tinder ready to be lit, maybe he was burning and I didn't know how to see it, maybe he was already ash.

~

"I can't sleep," Cale said from the back seat when we had about another hour to go.

I was trying to decide if I was going to take him to my place for a little bit to chill or if I should drop him at Kevin's.

"You've been sleeping since last night," I said. The cruise control, one of the few things that worked correctly in my aging car, was set to seventy-five, but it felt like we were going very, very slowly.

"Do you have a joint?" Cale asked.

"No, man," I said. "There's water back there, though. And bananas and a sandwich and a protein shake."

"Fuck you, Laird, and fuck you and your fucking ba-na-nas."

I decided I would take him to Kevin's.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm fried."

"Drink some water," I said.

"Laird, bro, I love you, but also fuck off with the water already."

Yes, I was definitely taking him to Kevin's.

~

We were close now, coming in through the suburbs. Cale had crashed out again, only to wake just as Denver started to peek through the plains. He told me he was hungry and that he had to shit. I took this as a good sign, the body waking up. Unless he had a stash with him, he had been off whatever he was on for almost twenty-four hours. It was a start.

We pulled over at a rest stop, and I followed him into the stall, because I was not going to

let him run. I was also not going to let him buy a red lozenge off of a trucker. I texted my mom as I waited.

“I can’t go with you loitering out there,” he said.

“Yes, you can,” I said.

Almost home. Let’s talk about me coming back to your place, or we get a new place. I don’t care about the optics.

Optics? she responded immediately.

I heard Cale’s bowels loosen in a sudden way. He groaned. The stench was immediate and terrifying, even for a rest stop.

The way it looks. I don’t care how it looks.

There were more sounds from the stall, Cale’s voice, and Cale’s body. When he finally emerged, he looked deflated.

“Are you sure you don’t have a joint?” he said.

“Positive,” I said. I washed my hands in the cold rest stop water for the third time. I’m not a germophobe but the space felt dirty.

“God. I fucking hate you right now, Laird.”

“I know,” I said. “Wash your hands.”

“You are the worst. You are the worst person I have ever met in my life,” he said. He smashed the tap and the water ran out. He soaped up with the grainy powder soap from the dispenser. He lathered in a dramatic way to ensure that I saw.

He was misunderstanding me. I didn’t want to police him, only get him home.

Okay!! My phone dinged with my mom’s text.

After he rinsed, he raised his leg and kicked the air dryer, but by the time it started up in a whirl, he was already headed for the car, fingers dripping.

I turned over the ignition in the Honda for what I hoped would be the last time in a long time. On the radio a journalist was discussing how the boys in Oregon thought they were getting away with something but they were wrong. They were getting away with nothing after creating their own documentation. No one could say how long the forest would keep burning, how long the river would bubble.

Cale was asleep again. A light snow began to fall, and I cursed it because I did not have good tires. By the time we were in Denver proper, it was all floppy, wet flakes, and I wanted to be off the roads. I lurched into my apartment building’s garage because it was the closest—I knew Kevin was waiting, but I couldn’t do another twenty minutes to his house and then come back to mine.

It took some effort to get Cale out of the back seat. I listened to my car’s cooling engine tick. Just like the hotel, I had to nearly drag him up to my apartment and into my bedroom. I wondered if he would piss the bed again, and then I decided I didn’t care. My mattress was old.

In my kitchen I cracked a beer and called my mom.

“I’m home,” I told her, then drained the beer nearly empty. “I’m beat.”

“Kevin’s on the other line, hon, I’ll conference you in.”

The three-way conversation was short, and my mom and Cale’s dad decided they were coming over, even though I told them I had nowhere for all of us to sleep. Kevin said he’d bring an inflatable bed and my mom had said, *Great.*

“I’ll grab some extra sheets,” she said.

When they arrived, with the air mattress, spare bedding, and a pizza, I wasn’t sure who to fall into first. It was my mom who caught me, but Kevin’s hand was there too.

Outside the snow was swirling harder, and when I blinked, it was like nothing changed at all since our boyhood—it’s me and Cale and my mom and Kevin and the smell of pepperoni.

When Kevin went to check on Cale, my mom went with him. Her hand laced in his.

“Does it smell like piss?” I asked. “He pissed the bed in the hotel.”

I’m crying, I’m so tired.

“Nope,” Kevin said. “I think he’s good. You got him out of the woods. I’ve already researched in-patient treatment.”

“Okay,” I said. There was snot running down my face. I didn’t know if Kevin was right because I thought Cale had a long road ahead.

In another version the boys in Oregon would have just set off their smoke bombs in the backyard. That’s probably what Cale and I would have done. We would have known we would get in trouble, but we’d also know there was no use trying to hide anything. Maybe by making the video they wanted to get found out, I thought. Maybe they didn’t have the same kind of safety we had, to screw up in plain view of a parent. Maybe they thought they had to sneak around, and they never thought about the video being uploaded and used as evidence, and rather than YouTube hits, it was meant to be just for them.

I drank another beer, we ate some of the pizza. We bedded down, my mom and Kevin on the squeaky air mattress, me on the creaky couch. I was glad they were with me. I heard Cale snoring from my room.

I was too tired to wonder if them sleeping on the air mattress together was just a measure of practicality or if there was finally something happening between them.

Our imperfect family.

Our perfect family



Moments of Green

by Lauren T. Davila

The green grass wrap around my toes,
licking my callouses just enough
to light my nerve endings aflame.

But it's the aphid that lands on my arm,
concealing itself in between birthmarks,
making its home in my constellations,
that startles me the most.

As it burrows deeper (or so it thinks)
into solid skin, sensing the warmth,
my toes mimic, sinking into the grass,
to attempt, just for a moment,
to become one with them, one of them.

Right then,
I am greener
than I have ever been before.

I am lucky and living and breathing in
as a being more primal than
the sunlight which falls, shattering
pigmented stained glass,
beauty to shine brightly.

The slight smell of muddled roses
mixes with the sea breeze,
and I am both me and I am green:
nature and human for an instance.

And the green is so far and yet near.
I know the aphid will seek another's
warmth
and the green will continue to be
green
whether I am there or
not.

Mozzafiato

by Lauren T. Davila

(adj.) To chop off one's breath.

fiato leaves my body as I clutch hands
against glass and my flesh forms a prayer
with the air rising off the horizon.

espresso turns my tongue pink and
burned bookends in a pile curled up
asleep yet alive in my mouth

vagare down side streets and trip
into cobblestones so I can exhale
doubt and inhale welcome.

la sistina makes my neck ache cyan
and I am Michelangelo's masterpiece
floating toward a ceiling of saints and sinners.

Monterosso is a new sort of teal
and water soaks my jeans through,
saturation a kiss from the Mediterranean.

limoncello fills my nostrils at the view
of trees which aren't afraid to hurl *baci*
at the heavens and Giotto's tower rings.

Dimitri in Space

by Lawrence Thelan

CHARACTERS

DIMITRI - an Eastern-European cosmonaut
SERGEI (unseen) - his commander at Mission Control
ANNA (unseen) - Dimitri's wife

SCENE

Present day. Outer space.

SYNOPSIS

A cosmonaut encounters unexpected trouble in outer space.

NOTE

The characters of Sergei and Anna never appear on stage; only their voices are heard over Dimitri's intercom.

Outer space. As the lights come up, DIMITRI is revealed suspended in mid-air. He is floating. He is an Eastern-European cosmonaut in the midst of a space-walk.

DIMITRI is a kind-hearted, sincere man who loves life probably more than most. He has been in space for six months and is due to return home tomorrow. At present, he is making observations and relaying them to Mission Control back on Earth.

(Pause)

DIMITRI

I've got a wedgie like you wouldn't believe.

SERGEI

(Over the intercom)

What's that?

DIMITRI

Sorry, Sergei –nothing. I was just observing the effects of weightlessness on underwear. They're not good.

SERGEI

You're supposed to report back what you *see*, not what you *feel*.

DIMITRI

Yes, Mission Control, I understand. Just be happy you're there on Earth where gravity works in your favor.

(It should be noted that – regardless of the sophistication of the rigging apparatus used – Dimitri floats and moves in slow motion throughout the entire play. Here at the beginning, that movement should be seen as almost playful)

(DIMITRI gazes into space)

Look! A shooting star. Number twenty-one. Isn't that good luck, Sergei? Make note, Mission Control: shooting star number twenty-one was seen at twenty-one hundred hours and twenty-one minutes. My goodness, that's a lot of twenty-ones. That *must* be good luck. I'm not superstitious but that seems too coincidental not to mean *something*.

Ah, floating in space, Sergei. It's the closest thing I can imagine to being in heaven. Just me and the universe. One. It's a shame it has to end. One more day. One more day to question the unanswerable. One more day to scan the heavens. One more day of solitude. Oh, I'll be happy to be back home, Sergei, don't get me wrong. It will be wonderful to see my wife again, and my son, Mikhail. And to sleep in my own bed without having to strap myself down so I don't float away; and to eat my favorite foods off a plate instead of from a pouch. All the little things we hold dear in our day-to-day existence on Earth. But life in space is different. Here I've experienced a whole other world; a world that is vast, and powerful, and as natural as a womb. I think I could live in space forever.

Sorry, Sergei – one tends to become quite philosophical when one is alone in outer space. You must think that I've lost my edge – that I'm not the same Dimitri you sent up here. Well, I am. But I'm not. Do you find this confusing, Sergei?

(No response)

I've put you to sleep, haven't I? Sorry. I've never been a good conversationalist. I ramble too much – sometimes aimlessly – and no one else can get a word in. My wife says I do it on purpose to avoid talking about subjects that don't interest me. An interesting theory. I wish I could say it was true – for that's a very clever way of dodging boredom. But I doubt I'm smart enough to come up with such a trick. The truth is I'm not aware I'm rambling until it's pointed out to me. Of course, I'm also weightless. No doubt that has some effect on the way I think and speak and feel. And the way my underwear creeps.

Uh-oh. There goes twenty-two. Make note, Mission Control: shooting star twenty-two observed at twenty-one hundred hours and twenty-three minutes.

(He thinks about it for a moment)

There can't possibly be anything lucky in that. Did you get that, Sergei? Number twenty-two.

(Pause)

Sergei?

(Pause)

Hello, Mission Control? Do we still have communication?

(Pause)

Hello?

SERGEI

(Over the intercom)

Yes, yes, Dimitri, we're here.

DIMITRI

Good. I was beginning to get lonely. I like knowing you're there, Sergei, even if you have nothing to say. When I was a boy I had no one . . .

SERGEI

Yes, yes, Dimitri. Listen, we've had a little situation come up down here. Nothing of any great consequence, just some . . .

(Speaking to another worker)

What? Okay, okay! Let her in.

(To DIMITRI)

Listen, Dimitri, you keep on observing and calling in your findings – we'll take note. But we may not be able to respond quite as often as we'd like. We've got some things to do down here...

(He trails off)

DIMITRI

What's that?

(No response)

Oh. Well. All right. I'll keep my eyes open. Perhaps a comet will pass my way. Or Pluto. Or Tinker Bell.

(He gazes into space)

I wonder if I'm upside down. I can't tell anymore. I suppose it doesn't much matter – upside down, right-side-up is all the same in space.

Sergei, do you want to hear a secret? I've been holding it in for many weeks, but since I'll be home in a few hours, I can tell you now. I'm going to retire after this mission. Isn't that something? I'm sure you're saying, "Why, Dimitri? Why would you want to retire now at the height of your career?" Why? Because I want to spend more time with my son. He needs a father at home – not floating around in space. Mikhail is growing into a man and I'm missing it. Oh, I love space, and I'm going to miss it very much, but my place right now is with him. Don't you think? I didn't have a father growing up. At the time I didn't think it mattered. But as I've gotten older I've realized I've missed out on one of the greatest relationships a boy can have. I don't want Mikhail to reach that same conclusion years from now - long after I'm gone.

(Pause)

I'm rambling again, aren't I? Sorry. Let me see if I see anything.

(He gazes into space)

Boy, could I go for a Snickers right now. I set one down my first day in space and I haven't seen it since. When I return home it will be very nice to set something down and know it will still be there when I return for it an hour later. So many hours I've spent these past six months searching for things that have floated away – especially at mealtime. I hate chasing after my food.

(He floats)

I'm just coming up over Europe now, Sergei. Oh, the sight of Earth from this perspective is indeed humbling. The view is very clear tonight. I can almost see my home – if it weren't for that one little cloud that sits directly over our country. Or is that smoke? At any rate, it's beautiful. I will never forget the image of Earth I've seen from this side of heaven. It brings a smile to my face every time I see it.

Speaking of smiling . . . You know what I've observed, Sergei, these past six months – I mean, along with the shooting stars, and comets, and the unimaginable amount of space debris? When living alone, one tends to laugh very little. Oh, many times up here I've noticed myself smiling. I've smiled at using my toilet; I've smiled at bouncing off a wall; I've even smiled while upside down struggling to change my clothes. But I can't recall a single time when I've laughed. My conclusion? It takes two. It takes two people to laugh. That's another reason I'm looking forward to coming home: my wife is very good at making me laugh. Of course, I haven't spoken to her in quite a while. The last I heard she'd started teaching Sunday school and was doing yoga – presumably not at the same time. It's remarkable how much can change in six month's time, don't you think?

Sergei, Sergei, a comet! A red-hot snowball with a tail full of fire! I never get tired of seeing those. Make note, Mission Control: a comet observed in the eastern sky – or is it western? . . . Well, no matter, it was a comet heading straight for . . .

SERGEI

(Over the intercom, nearly out of breath)

Dimitri, Dimitri, do you hear me?

DIMITRI

Of course, Sergei. Did you get the comet? I just saw . . .

SERGEI

Dimitri, we have a little problem down here. It's gotten out of hand. And it directly affects you personally.

DIMITRI

Oh?

SERGEI

Yes. Listen to me closely. Dimitri, there's been a coup.

DIMITRI

A coup?

SERGEI

A coup.

DIMITRI

A coup.

SERGEI

Yes, yes, a coup! Over the course of the day a rebellion that's been quite critical of the President in the past couple of months has taken over the government. They've stormed the capital, are burning government offices, have taken control of the media, and are silencing communication across the country. I've just a couple more minutes to talk to you. Long story short, Dimitri: our government has collapsed. It's no longer functioning. It's gone. The President has fled the country—gone into exile somewhere. More importantly – and how this affects you – the space agency has been dissolved, Mission Control has been shut down, the computer systems are being dismantled, and we're all being forced from the building. Do you understand what I'm saying?

DIMITRI

You're saying . . .

(He gets it)

Wait. You can't leave me up here. All alone? All by myself?

SERGEI

I'm sorry, Dimitri. There's no way to bring you home right now.

DIMITRI

But it's only a matter of hours. I was to return home in just a few hours.

SERGEI

I understand. But . . .

(Although the pace and intensity of the play picks up at this point, DIMITRI can still only move in slow motion. The juxtaposition of the slow motion movement and the racing conversation should, it is hoped, heighten the anxiety of the situation)

DIMITRI

I have limited food, Sergei; I have limited air.

SERGEI

Yes, I'm aware of that!

DIMITRI

Have I been forgotten?

SERGEI

No, you are not forgotten!

DIMITRI

By the rebels?

SERGEI

(Uncomfortable telling him this)

The rebels don't care.

DIMITRI

Then I am forgotten.

SERGEI

No, you are not! We're all very well aware of you. You are there. We are here. Unfortunately, that is how it must remain for now.

DIMITRI

But Sergei, I need. . .

SERGEI

Dimitri, your wife is here.

DIMITRI

Anna?

SERGEI

She wants to speak with you.

(To ANNA)

All right, go ahead. But we have little time.

ANNA

(Over the intercom)

Hello? Hello, Dimitri?

DIMITRI

Anna? What's going on?

ANNA

Oh, Dimitri, the world has turned upside down.

DIMITRI

It looks fine from here.

ANNA

Everything we knew to be true no longer exists. I'm scared, Dimitri; so scared. So, we're leaving – Mikhail and I. We're going to Paris. It's no longer safe here for us. We must go.

DIMITRI

When?

ANNA

Now. Right now. The writing's been on the wall for some time. There's a group of us who anticipated such an action, and who've gathered provisions so we can cross the border by foot later tonight.

DIMITRI

But Mikhail. . .

ANNA

Mikhail is a strong boy, Dimitri; almost a man now. He's very much like you. He'll be fine. He'll make you very proud.

DIMITRI

And you?

ANNA

I'll make you proud too. I promise.

DIMITRI

Anna . . . make me laugh.

ANNA

I've no time. I have to go. We'll wait for you, Dimitri, we'll wait. I'm sorry. I love you. Goodbye.

(She is gone)

DIMITRI

Anna? Anna?

(Pause)

I love you too.

(Pause)

And Mikhail. Tell Mikhail I love him.

(There is a pause of considerable length as DIMITRI assesses the situation)

Well . . . this is an unexpected turn of events.

(Pause)

SERGEI

(Over the intercom)

Dimitri?

DIMITRI

Sergei, is that you?

SERGEI

Dimitri, I'm sorry about all of this.

DIMITRI

How long will it be? How long until you can bring me home?

SERGEI

A long time I'm afraid. A long time. I'm very, very sorry, Dimitri. I have to go now. Good luck, my friend.

(He is gone)

DIMITRI

Sergei? Sergei?

(No response)

Good luck? That's what you say to a man alone in outer space – good luck?

(Pause. DIMITRI floats.)

Just me and the universe. One.

(Pause. Then with sudden amazement)

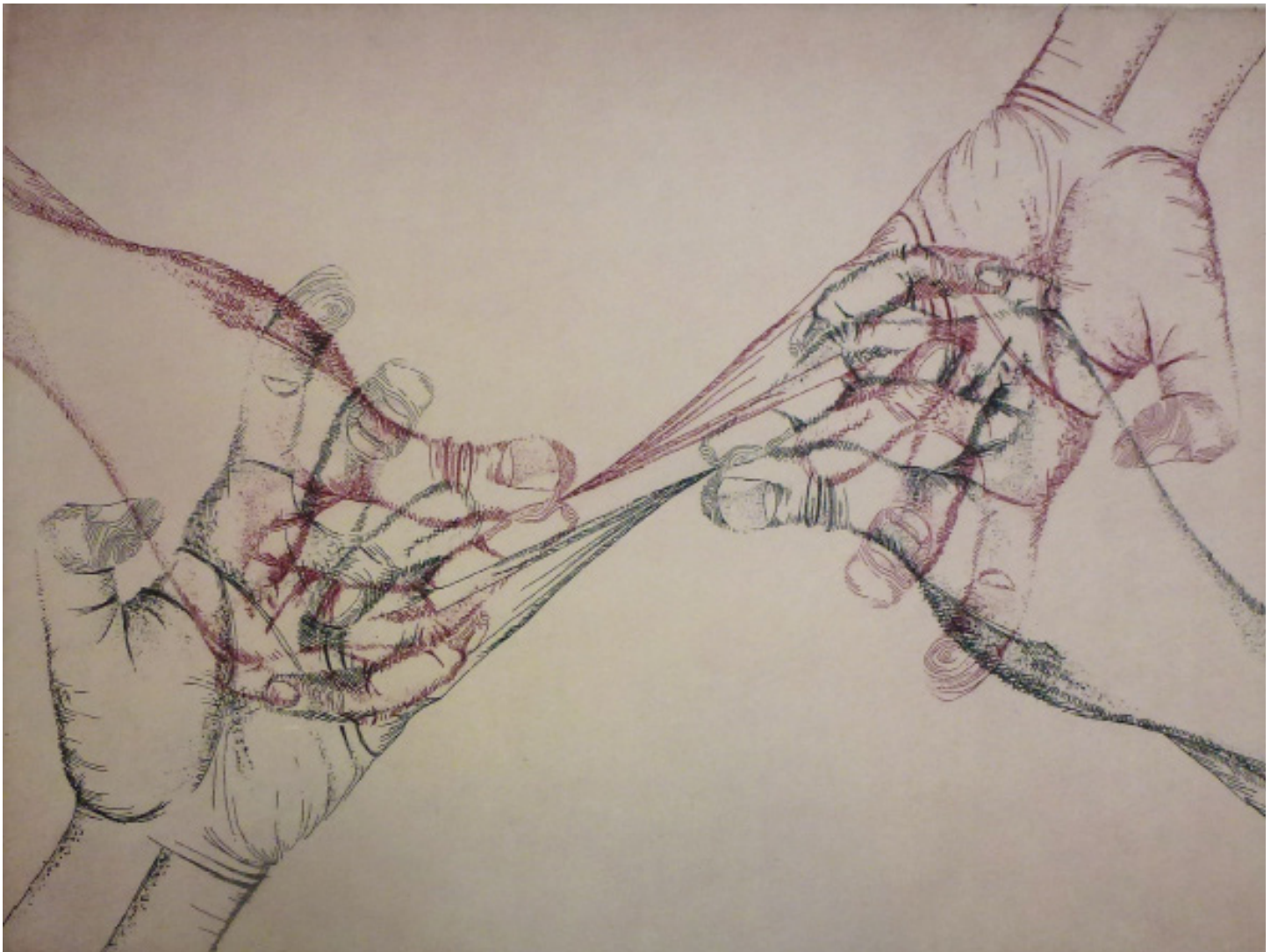
Sergei? Anna? Anyone? I think I see God.

(DIMITRI continues to float as the lights

FADE TO BLACK

* * *

Dimitri in Space is a metaphor, motivated by the events of the Arab Spring of 2011. As rebel factions toppled government after government in the Arab World (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, to name a few) these impassioned but inexperienced revolutionaries were quickly saddled with the burden of creating new governments to replace the old. As the old regimes were rejected and thrown out and new ones developed in their places, some good characteristics were lost or discarded. Dimitri is one of those characteristics – simply forgotten or ignored in the wake of other events.



To the Family's Secret Child Molester

by Lane Chasek

We protected you
as if our silence were all the forgiveness
you needed, the only
salve for the lifelong wounds
inflicted on a child — you lived

in the same city as me one summer,
our paths and histories crossing, unknown to each other,
in Rapid City. Your wife, your two children,
the feigned ignorance born from *family first*
and blood and water — whichever means more
to those who protected you —
as if you needed protection,
as if your reputation, your future,
was what mattered.

And I've been scolded with messages of forgiveness
from those I thought I knew, believed
I could trust, breaking the hard slabs
of ancient desert tomes over my head,
lodestone moralities in which we'll forgive
and trust the rapist, the molester everybody knew by face,
if not always by name — to believe those who matter
are those with the most to lose.

The endless refrain of
He wouldn't have lasted in prison.
As if your weakness were your innocence.

The worst part was always knowing
this was never my pain, never my story
to repress, but I shared the silence,
as if silence could become our mother tongue
and erase history.

And I grip this memory, never my own,
between weathered teeth, between words
I'll never lay to rest in my bones, never a finished
thought, never a complete day where I won't
elive the silence.

Would naming you matter?

Would your name absolve you, burn you, crush you under
the flexed arm of my anger? You never needed
saved. I don't need saved.

Something does, but not us.

Chemo

by Lane Chasek

Like Heracles without his deathwish or the deaths of others.

Or Sappho and her sunburnt fragments, herself
pen and parchment, bone and skin, the fact
we can read without meaning, decipher her love
not despite but because we've lost so much of her.

The child, the mother, nothing left but to hunger
for some fuller time, each seed crushed
until only the husk remains. And you said it never hurt,

only scarred until the scars, the memory of pain, the thought
of a burning sternum erased themselves.

And you said it was cleansing fire, your twelve labors,
your twelve steps to redemption — loving others, writing others,
remembering them until only the scraps remind us.

Drying Up

by Michelle Wells

I am staring out the window as a boom of thunder rattles the pane and, a few seconds later, lightning flashes across the gray sky, branching out like fingers. The rain slides across the huge plate of glass in big drops that hit and run down at an angle. Gradually it covers the window and picks up speed until it is pouring down, mutating the window as if the glass itself had slowly morphed over time, obscuring my view of the heliport on the top of the hospital tower, across the compound and one level down.

“Is there anything I can get you?” the hospice worker, Alice, asks me.

“No,” I murmur and manage a weak smile. “Thank you.”

“When are your children arriving?” she asks.

“Monday.”

The lines of her face pull down in a frown. I’ve heard her murmured conversations with the nurses. They don’t know how long I’ll last in this land between living and dying, but Monday seems doubtful. It’s okay. We’ve had plenty of time to say our good-byes. I know they’ll be okay. Right now, I just want to rest, I’m so very tired. I close my eyes.

#

I am playing with my cousins in the stream that runs behind the houses on our block. It is always cooler back there. The strong afternoon sunlight filters in different shades of green through the fork tongued leaves of the maple tree towering overhead. Birds sing in the branches and the stream burbles around us, mingling with my cousin’s laughter as she splashes. We wear shorts and tank tops, and my hair is pinned back in two braids. I slide my feet carefully along the bottom of the stream, feeling between smooth wet stones and squishing the silty mud between my toes. I have a silver metal kitchen strainer attached with black electrician’s tape to a discarded pea green broom handle for catching crayfish.

The wooden framed screen door slams with a crack as my father comes outside and sits on the steps. Setting his coffee cup beside him, he pulls out a pack of cigarettes and taps one out then pulls out his silver lighter and flips it open to light his cigarette.

My foot slips and my toes slam down in between the rocks. I manage to keep my balance but it hurts like billy-o! and then the pain radiates up my leg until my whole body constricts with it . . .

#

“The button, dear, you have to push the button,” the hospice worker is saying to me, her hand placing mine over the button for the morphine.

I have control of it at this point and can use as much as I want. They aren’t remotely worried about me becoming addicted. I won’t last long enough for it to matter. I press the button

and slowly feel the pain begin to ebb. I remember my dream. That was probably the last summer we played in the stream before it turned silver and the company plowed it under. I close my eyes and the morphine sends me floating away.

#

I hear the water dripping on a pan in the sink. I really need to do something about that, I think vaguely, the phone still held to my ear. Water has become a commodity and we are penalized heavily if we use more than our allotment. Brian already spends too long in the shower.

“Mrs. Taylor . . . did you hear me?”

“Yes, oh yes,” I reply. Her voice is strong and clear coming down the line.

“The doctor would like to see you on Monday to discuss treatment options. Can you be here at ten o’clock?”

“Yes.” I don’t want to wait any longer than is absolutely necessary. If I’m going to beat this thing, the evil C word, I need to get the jump on it. And I am going to beat it. There’s no doubt about that. “I’ll be there.”

#

I wake, coughing this time, a dry rasp.

“Would you like some water, dear?” the hospice worker asks.

I nod, trying to swallow but it isn’t working.

She holds the cup to me, bending a straw so I can draw on it. After a few pulls and small sips, the constriction in my throat eases. I smile my thanks and glance out the window. The rain has ceased and the moisture is already steaming away into the atmosphere.

I feel so very weary. I don’t know how long I rest each time, I can’t see the clock anymore, but it is never enough to refresh me. My strength is flagging.

The nurse flies in and flutters around cheerfully, making notes on the board at the foot of my bed then flips the blankets back over my feet and has a hushed consultation with the hospice worker. They glance up at me.

The verdict is clear. It won’t be long now. That’s okay. I’m ready, I’m not afraid anymore. I close my eyes and drift.

#

I am standing at the kitchen sink, looking out the window at the sunlight dappled backyard where the stream once ran through the trees.

I glance at the note on the counter. *I’m sorry. I can’t do this anymore.* He hadn’t even signed it. I don’t blame him, really. It has been difficult, these long months of chemotherapy. I am sick more often than not and most of the care has fallen on him, but I never thought he might just walk out.

I shut off the water and turn from the sink but the glass slips through my numb fingers and falls, shattered, water splashing. I try to catch my breath and my heart races.

#

I open my eyes and the hospice woman is sitting in the chair, reading aloud softly from a newspaper, almost as if praying, trying to soothe me with her steady voice and presence. She glances up when she feels my eyes on her and smiles.

“It was an earthquake,” she says. “Opened up a sink hole fifteen feet across.”

I remember a legend about broken hearts causing chasms in the Earth, maybe it was about the Grand Canyon being caused by a loss of true love. *Oh well, just a sink hole. Maybe he really hasn't broken my heart after all. But it felt like it at the time.*

#

The next time I open my eyes, he is there, standing by my bedside, holding my hand. He smiles down at me and it is a familiar sight. I inhale as if breathing in his love.

I know he left because he couldn't stand watching me in such pain.

“I'm sorry,” he says.

I squeeze his hand. “I know.”

“I have to go. But I'll see you later.”

“Later,” I echo and release his hand.

#

I feel the pain intensify until every muscle in my body is gripped in a vice. I have to concentrate on just breathing for a few minutes. As I feel the wave start to ebb, I feel a hand on mine, placing it back over the button.

“I'm not supposed to do that, you have to push the button for yourself,” I hear the hospice worker say gently.

I feel a cool hand on my forehead below the scarf. I open my eyes and see her looking down at me, a mix of pity and care on her face. I look around the room. We are alone.

“Was Brian here?” I ask, my voice a rasp.

“Who? Wait . . .” She picks up the cup of ice chips and offers me one on a spoon. I take it and suck on it for a minute, swallowing the drips of water until I can speak more clearly though my voice still sounds weak. “My husband, Brian, was he here?”

She shakes her head, her forehead creasing in puzzlement. “I didn't know you were married. But of course, the kids”

She trails off and I can see she is wondering.

“He left,” I explain.

“Oh, one of those.”

I can hear the sour note in her voice but that isn't how I think of him. When I picture him it's always with that smile, like when he picked our first child up and held her so tenderly in his strong arms. “I've stopped blaming people for what they did or didn't do,” I say quietly. “We all make untenable choices at some point.” My voice is hoarse again.

I feel her pat my hand. “Would you like some water?”

“No, I just need to rest.”

I stare up at the corner of the ceiling, at the water stain from some drip at some point in the past, perhaps from a pipe above. It reminds me of . . . *something*. My eyes shut. I just . . . want to rest. I hear a long drawn out buzz and the rest is silence.

Contributor's Notes

Randall C. Fowler (Elizabeth II): My work has appeared in *Chicago Quarterly Review* and *Catamaran Literary Reader*. I have participated in dozens of writing workshops and conferences, many at Stanford University and the University of California. I have a doctorate in Applied Mechanics from Stanford University, taught for a while as an assistant professor at San Jose State, and hold numerous patents on electro-optics techniques for fingerprint analysis.

Russell Carisse (S(he) Plays Again): Russell Carisse is preserving one hundred acres of wood and wetland in prime clear cut country of New Brunswick, Canada. Here they're homesteading off-grid with their family of people and animals, growing food, and building a stone house from local and found materials. Concerned about the literacy level of the province, they donate any proceeds or subscriptions gain by writing to the local library.

Mark J. Mitchell (Song in Waltz Time + A Lost Homesteader): Mark J. Mitchell's latest novel, *The Magic War* just appeared from Loose Leaves Publishing .A Full length collection of poems will released next year by Encircle Publications. He studied writing at UC Santa Cruz under Raymond Carver and George Hitchcock. His work has appeared in the several anthologies and hundreds of periodicals. Three of his chapbooks— *Three Visitors*, *Lent*, 1999, and *Artifacts and Relics*—and the novel, *Knight Prisoner* are available through Amazon and Barnes and Noble. He lives with his wife the activist and documentarian, Joan Juster and makes a living pointing out pretty things in San Francisco. A meager online presence can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/MarkJMitchellwriter/>

Thomas Weedman (Father, Is It?): Thomas Weedman is a San Diego native. He attended St. Augustine High School, earned a BA in English from Notre Dame and an MFA from Lindenwood, where he was an assistant editor on the *Lindenwood Review*. He's been a seminarian, a forklift operator, trucker driver, a barista, barkeep, and a professional gambler. He is the author of *Dreaming of Apples in Eden* and *Tainted*. "Father, Is It?" is his fifty-first completed short story.

Chevon Fuller (The Harshness of Birds): I've had an insatiable imagination and an incurable curiosity since childhood. At first, it showed up as a love for acting; and I breathed life into characters based on the written word. It was a natural thing for a child growing up under the bright lights of New York City to do. Soon, I turned to law as an outlet for reaching people and expression through words. In other words, story telling. In the end, I've found, simply, that story telling is my first love. This is one of my first stories.

Wendy Fox (Wish in the Other): My collection, *The Seven Stages of Anger and Other Stories*, won Press 53's inaugural award for short fiction and was released in 2014. My debut novel, *The Pull of It*, was published in September of 2016. In 2017, I won Santa Fe Writers Project's grand prize for fiction, and my novel *If the Ice Had Held* was published on May 1, 2019.

Other work has appeared or is forthcoming in COG Magazine, descant, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Hawaii Pacific Review, The Madison Review, The Missouri Review online, OxMag, Painted Bride Quarterly, Pisgah Review, PMS poemmemoirstory, The Puritan, The Tampa Review, Tusculum Review, Washington Square Review, and ZYZZYVA, among others. I am an MFA holder currently employed in corporate marketing.

Lauren T. Davila (Moments of Green + Mozzafiato): Lauren T. Davila is a Latinx writer currently pursuing her MFA in Fiction at George Mason University. She holds a BA in English and a BA in Creative Writing from Pepperdine University. Her stories and poems have appeared in Mid-Heaven Magazine and Poets Reading the News. She splits her time between Los Angeles and Washington D.C., where you can find her writing in coffee shops and swimming in the ocean.

Lawrence Thelan (Dimitri in Space): Lawrence Thelen is the author of the book *The Show Makers: Great Directors of the American Musical Theatre* (Routledge). His published works for the stage include the comedies *Eating Rhode Island* and *Higgins in Harlem* (both published by Dramatic Publishing), the one-man comic play *Ichabod Crane Tells All*, featured in the anthologies *Best American Short Plays 2011-2012* and *Best Monologues from the Best American Short Plays* (both published by Applause), and the one-acts *Beethoven's Last* (Dramatics magazine) and *The Guppy Ballet* (Applause). His comedy *Pie in the Sky*, which was a finalist for the Abingdon Theatre Company's Christopher Brian Wolk Award, premiered simultaneously at The Victory Theatre Center in Los Angeles and the ART Station Theatre in Atlanta. His comic opera, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, was produced in New York by the 92nd Street Y, and his musical *The Third Wave* received the Jackie White Memorial Playwriting Award. Thelen has contributed fiction and nonfiction to *Dramatics* magazine and *Show Music* magazine. For seven years, he was the producing associate and literary manager for Goodspeed Musicals in Connecticut.

Lane Chasek (To the Family's Secret Child Molester + Chemo): My poems, stories, and essays have appeared in *Broke Bohemian*, *Contrast*, *Jokes Review*, *Lincoln Underground*, *Plainsongs*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, and others. I was the 2016 and 2017 winner of the Laurus Poetry Prize, and my first nonfiction book, *Hugo Ball and the Fate of the Universe*, will be released later this year.

Sophie Heldt (drawings + sketches): I am a junior at Wake Forest University majoring in Art History and minoring in French and Studio Art. I do works on paper primarily with graphite and charcoal. I've always aspired to evoke an emotional response from my viewers whether that's curiosity or personal resonance. I have an affinity for the body, specifically hands and feet, and buildings as my brother suffered an accident involving multi-story building. No matter the subject, I aim to capture a moment in time that can hopefully unfold into a dynamic story unique to each viewer.

Michelle Wells (Drying Up): Melora Johnson is a writer in Upstate New York, working in poetry and prose who daylights a librarian because that's where she hears the strangest stories. Her short fiction and poetry has been featured by the editors of *Yahoo! Voices* and she has recently

released her first book of poetry, *A Sanctuary Built of Words: Poems of Peace, Grief, and Passion*.

