

PhiladelphiaStories

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FALL / 2018 / FREE



FEATURING THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION WINNING STORIES

LESLIE LAUREN GREEN / SUGAR MOUNTAIN STACY AUSTIN EGAN / WINDMILLS, THE BOYS LAURA FARNSWORTH

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THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION IS A NATIONAL SHORT FICTION CONTEST MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE MCGLINN AND HANSMA FAMILIES. CONGRATULATIONS TO THIS YEAR'S WINNERS!

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ART



Valley Forge I by Anne Leith

Leith spends her time painting nature and places, both in the plein air tradition and in the studio. With an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania and an MA in Contemporary Art History, she credits other artists as her teachers and inspiration. She also works like a fiend to achieve the same top-level results in her own paintings. Leith is a professor of art in several colleges and art centers in the Philadelphia area and creates video documentaries and oral histories. www.anneleith.com.



Fall Woods, 2015 by Anne Leith



Drying Sea by Demetra Tassiou

Tassiou was born and raised in Greece and educated in the USA. With an MFA in Printmaking from the University of Pennsylvania, Tassiou's work has appeared in many group and solo shows in the USA and internationally and has received numerous awards. In her work in this issue, Tassiou's focus ranges from natural elements and saving the oceans to recent civil wars, religious conflicts and the economic reasons of migrations and the plight of people displaced in these trying times. Visit www.demetratassiou.com. Instagram: demetra.tassiou.



Migration by Demetra Tassiou



View From the Pond at Dawn by Bill Sweeney

Bill Sweeney lives in The Chadds Ford area of Pennsylvania and had been painting since 1981. His work has been exhibited in juried shows at The State Museum of Pennsylvania, West Chester University, Widener University, the Wayne Arts Center and the Community Art Center in Wallingford. He has won awards in the Philadelphia Watercolor International Exhibit of Works on Paper, The Artist's Equity Members' Exhibitions, and several art centers' membership exhibits.



Dead Lake 2 by Karen Love Cooler

Karen Love Cooler is an award-winning Philadelphia artist. She creates art in many media including painting, sculpture, mixed media, printmaking and photography. A founding member of The Montgomery County Guild of Professional Artists, Karen has maintained a studio practice since graduating from The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Her "Dead Lake" series documents the demise of cypress trees in the Florida Panhandle while asserting that though natural cycles occur in nature, we must protect our resources. Visit www.karenlovecooler.com.



Mini Moo by Rachel beltz

Rachel Beltz is a young artist on a mission to make people stop and appreciate the little, beautiful details of everyday life. Using watercolors, she creates photo-realistic miniature paintings. Squeezing in each and every detail, the majority of Beltz's work can roughly fit under a United States Quarter.

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Some Thoughts on the Fickleness of Publishing

Carla Spataro – Editorial Director, Philadelphia Stories & PS Books

Every year I have the honor of choosing the finalists for the Marguerite McGlinn Prize for Fiction. I've been doing this as long as we've been running the contest, and despite the fact that it always seems to fall during my vacation, it's something that I always look forward to. If nothing else, it is a purposeful reminder of how capricious the publishing process is.

I usually get a lengthy list of stories to read. Sometimes it's as few as 60, this year there were 130 semi-finalists, plus the additional 25 that I screened in the first round. What's important for writers to remember is that in these kinds of situations, the reader is not looking to give you the benefit of the doubt. They're looking for reasons to reject you. Nothing makes me happier than to open a story that is not formatted as required. I get to reject that piece without having to read it at all. There were 14 such stories this year. Were they any good? I don't know. I didn't read them.

I know there are authors out there who think these kinds of things don't matter, that an editor, or agent, or contest judge will make an exception for them, because their work is so good. I think most of us wish we had that kind of time to be generous, but when I have two weeks to pick 10 stories, and I have 130 of them to read, I'm looking for any reason to tick them off my list. Most of the stories were rejected because they failed to engage me on the first page. Many of them felt like a story I had read before, or there were grammar mistakes, or poor punctuation. Others tried to cram too much up front, while others were thinly veiled (or at least felt like) fictionalized versions of the author's childhood, full of wistful nostalgia, but not much else.

One thing I want to make very clear. There were more than 10 stories that I could have sent to our judge, Dan Chaon. The finalist list changed several times and there were a few stories that I immediately fell in love with. Stories that are so odd, or fresh, or beautifully written, (usually all three), I'm sure the judge will choose them as winners. Then there is another, much larger group that I can't quite make up my mind about. Then I start to look at the list as a group. This year there were a lot of stories about teen-aged girls coming of age somehow—all in painfully odd, fresh, beautifully written ways. They had to be, since this is not necessarily the kind of story that I gravitate toward. Perhaps my attraction reflected the current political and social environment that we're all slogging our way through these days. Who knows? But I asked myself, do I really want to send Dan a whole list of stories like this? What about these other stories? They're really good, too! So, I made some adjustments and included the 10 stories you see listed here. Two of those stories ended up in the winner's column.

But there's no reason to believe the others might not have, too.

The longer I do this, from both sides, as an editor and a writer, the more I understand that what really counts is perseverance—believing in your work enough to keep sending it out. You never know when something you've written will strike just the right chord with an editor.

I hope that you enjoy reading this year's winners as much as I did. One author had two stories make the cut—a first for us. And another first was a husband and wife both making the final batch. Here are few comments from our judge Dan Chaon about each of the winning stories:

1. "Leslie" is a lovely and understated story that reminded me a bit of the great Ann Beattie. I was struck by the intriguing dramatic premise, and impressed by the finely calibrated, vivid scenes. There's a tenderness in the characterization, a generosity of spirit that moved me.

2. "Sugar Mountain" The complex, dark power struggle between two step-sisters is beautifully rendered, and the author does a wonderful job imbuing even the most quotidian scenes with a sinister tension.

3. "Windmills, the Boys" This strange, haunting gothic piece is made particularly memorable by its unique, poetic language and quirky use of point of view.

2018 Finalists:

"The Hibernators" by Jaime Netzer – Austin, TX

"Work on Your Personality" and
"Faceless Styrofoam Heads" by Holly Pekowsky – New York, NY

"The Burning of New London" by Brendan Egan – Midland, TX

"Kiss Me Honey and Let's Go to the Show"
by Mojie Crigler – Cambridge, MA

"Buddha" by Ilene Raymond Rush – Elkins Park, PA

"Stick a Needle" by James Pihakis – North Adams, MA



Leslie

Lauren Green – First Place Contest Winner

Michael leans over to flick off the heat, catching a whiff of Rick's half-eaten apple in the cup holder. He had thought the fling with Rick would maybe last a night or two. Fifteen months later, they are driving home to see Michael's ex-wife, Leslie, who is throwing herself an end-of-life party.

In the passenger seat, Rick extends his arms overhead and begins to spell out O-H-I-O, not for the first time this trip. Michael knows that Ohio means little to Rick, who has spent all twenty-four years of his life in New York City, where Michael met him at a tacky Chelsea bar called Rawhide.

"Did you know there's a river here that's flammable?" Michael asks.

"Huh?"

"The Cuyahoga. It's so full of pollutants, it once caught fire. Literally."

Rick snorts, the way he always does when he finds something either amusing or lame. Michael is unsure which category his fact falls into. He sets his gaze ahead into the near-dark once more, where a sliver of moon lances through the lacy canopy of sycamores that flanks the side of the road.

Leslie had been sick once before, long ago. She had told Michael this on an early date—how she spent her fourteenth year propped-up in bed, teaching herself card tricks from a paper booklet while doctors pumped her body full of delphinium-blue poison. By the end of the summer, the whites of her eyes were tinted blue, like sky reflected in a corner of windshield, and she could levitate the queen of spades.

And now she is dying. Second cancer—that was what she called it on the phone. Not a recurrence but a separate entity altogether. Michael was in his office at the YMCA when she rang. As Leslie's voice floated toward him, he imagined her in their old kitchen, worrying the landline cord into a coil between her slim fingers, crossing one slick, shea-buttered ankle over the other.

"Come," she said. "I mean, if you want. If you still love me—" she said, but she did not finish the sentence.

The end-of-life celebration seemed somber and hellish to Michael, who had no desire to return to his former existence. "It's not exactly like she's ever been the life of the party," he grumbled to Rick. *Life of the party*. The words were like tinfoil against his teeth. *Jesus Christ*, he thought.

But Rick had insisted he go, and had offered to accompany him, most likely in the hopes of purloining some medical cannabis. So, it was decided.

Michael casts a sidelong gaze to the passenger seat. A deep red nick dents the cove beneath Rick's ear where he cut himself shaving this morning. His cheeks are unsullied, young. "Arizona," Michael says.

"What?"

Michael gestures to the license plate of the white semi-trailer that looms like a cloud in the reddening distance. "Arizona," he says again.

"Oh, nice."

Rick drapes his brown leather jacket over his lithe body and wriggles it up to his chin. His head lolls to one side. Blue-black twilight peeks through the lines on the window glass where he has fingernailed away the frost. "It's so boring here," he says, his voice husky with sleep.

"Welcome to Middle America," Michael answers, with a small laugh. He waits for the reward of Rick's quick snort, which does not come.

Nighttime bounds across the highway and far into the plains. Darkness spreads over the soybean fields and hoods the silver Camry. Michael lets his thoughts drift to Leslie. Leslie in the bed, late at night, waiting for him to come home. Leslie on the twig-littered drive, watching him pull away.

A car streams around them, blaring its horn, and Michael careens back into his lane. Beady red taillights glare out at him from ahead. "Maryland," he says. "Did we already get that one?"

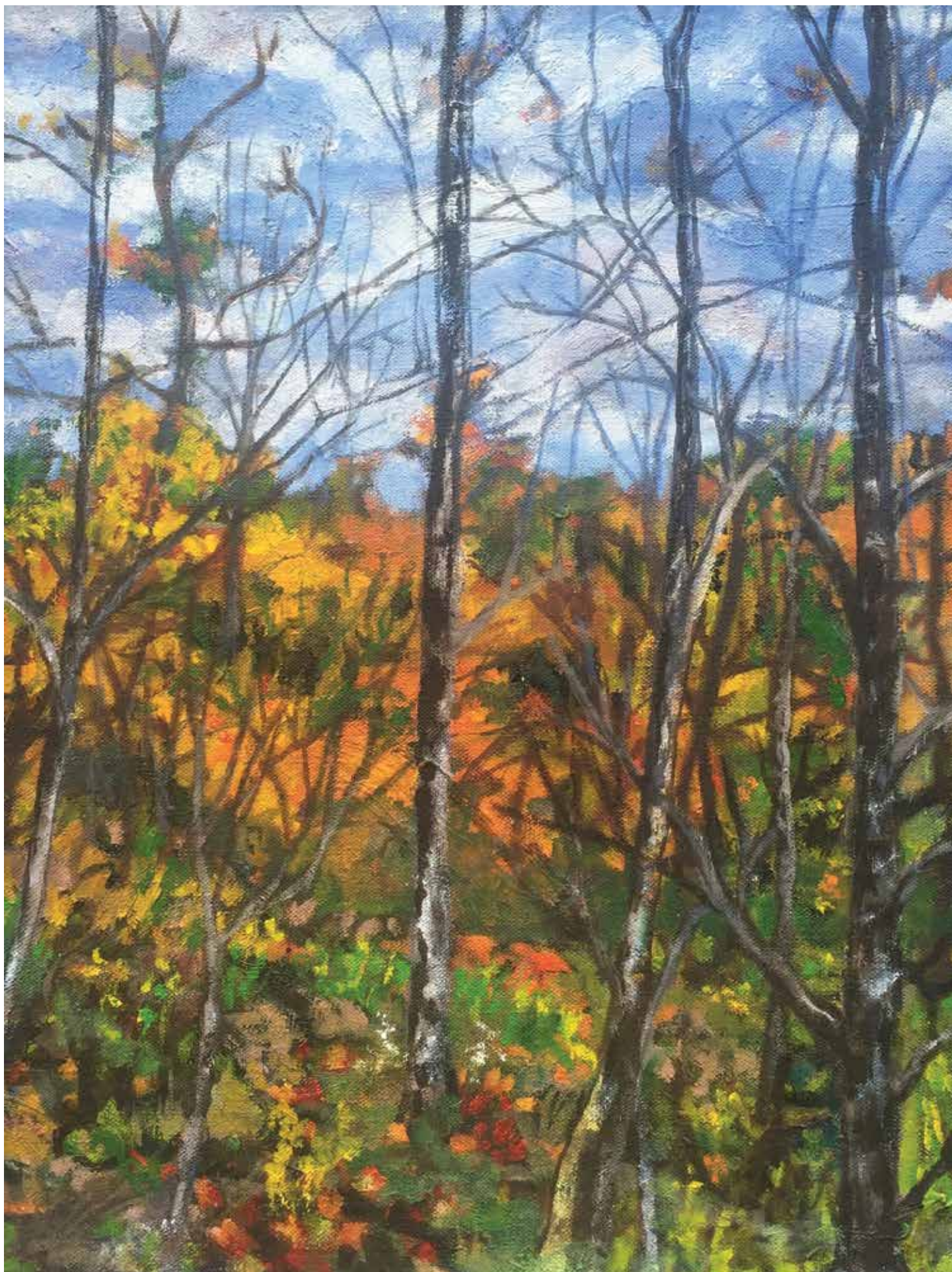
He glances over at Rick, who has lapsed into sleep. Outside, wintry currents howl. Michael reaches over, turns up the heat, and tries to think again of Leslie.

The rules to Leslie's party, which she had emailed out to her twenty-five or so nearest and dearest, are simple: No using the words "death" or "dying" or "cancer" or "time."

1. If you need to cry, step outside.
2. If I need to cry, you are not allowed to judge me.

The roads grow more and more familiar. Michael spots the Sunoco station he and Leslie frequented whenever they drove to the airport, the mossy bog they meandered around when spring fever spiked, the convention center where Michael got down on his knees for a man whose name he did not want to know.

He nearly misses the turn onto his own block, the one he took every day for twenty-two years. He passes the Claffeys, the



Morgans, the Haberfields. He slows as he approaches the stone-and-stucco house that once belonged to the Fletchers. A "For Sale" sign gnashes its long, white fangs into the overgrown yard.

The Fletchers were a young couple who had perpetual, mystifying tans, which they emphasized by dressing exclusively in pastels. They lived in the house with their toddler, a flax-haired boy named Jacob. Michael and Leslie sometimes watched Jacob through the window as he raced his Tonka steel cement mixer up and down the drive.

"Why isn't anyone out there with him?" Leslie would ask. "Someone should be watching."

"You don't know that someone isn't," Michael would counter.

One day, Mr. Fletcher strapped Jacob into his car seat and drove to the reservoir on the outskirts of town, where teenagers would venture in the gauzy days of July to get lucky. The reservoir was two miles long and sixty feet deep—lightless and shimmering as a black snake. Later, the skid marks would indicate that Mr. Fletcher didn't even brake—he drove full speed ahead into the water, which swallowed the car in several large gulps, down into the belly of all that glimmering black.

For nights after the tragedy, Rachel Fletcher's wails kept Michael and Leslie up at night. When they passed by her in the supermarket, her grief seemed otherworldly. Her eyes darted unsettlingly in their sockets, as if her pupils were an etch-a-sketch trying to erase what they had seen.

Michael and Leslie adopted Rachel Fletcher's name for any pain that was too great to bear. When Leslie's father died of heart disease: *Rachel Fletcher*. When Michael was laid off: *Rachel Fletcher*. On that final day, when his car was packed, and he drove away, watching her disappear in the rearview mirror: *Rachel Fletcher, Rachel Fletcher, Rachel Fletcher*.

Rick stirs and rubs the sleep from his eyes. "This it?" he asks, taking in the abandoned house.

"No," Michael says, easing his foot down onto the pedal. "Next one."

He pulls into the drive. A single light glows firefly-yellow through the kitchen window. "Maybe you should stay here," he says.

Rick shrugs. "It's not like she doesn't know I'm coming."

"I know, but—"

Rick palms Michael's thigh. "Don't," he says, squeezing. "It'll be fine."

Michael stares into the nettled gulley behind the yard, waiting for his headlights to catch on a pair of gleaming eyes or the scales of a leaping fish. He is considering restarting the car and checking into a motel for the night when Leslie appears backlit in the doorway, a pillared cardigan sashed loosely around her middle.

"Hey, stranger," she calls, as Michael kills the engine and clambers out of the car.

The air is crisp. The breeze smells of rainwater on pine. Leslie waits on the landing, staring at Michael with what he imagines to be painkiller-induced joy. He walks to her and wraps her in a hug. She is all bone beneath his fingertips. With her mouth still nuzzled into his neck, he gently cups the back of her wigged head.

He hears Rick behind him and pulls away. "This is—"

"Rick." Leslie extends her hand. "So nice to meet you. Come on in. Ignore the mess. I'm still trying to get everything set for tomorrow."

She leads the way into the kitchen, where moonlight pools on the ground beneath the French patio doors. Michael's eyes flicker to the frames on the wall. Leslie riding the Raptor at Cedar Point, arms thrust into the air; Leslie at her nephew's wedding, face dewy and wide. He tries to reconcile the woman in the photographs with the one who stands before him now, her pallid skin impressed with a filigree of purple veins.

"Long drive?" she asks, collapsing into a cushioned chair. She rubs the back of her palm against her forehead, smudging one penciled-in eyebrow to a long, brown streak. "Can I get either of you a drink?"

"I'll take soda if you have," Rick says.

"Pop," Michael corrects. "I'll get it."

He pads to the pantry where they keep the drinks. The shelves are stocked for tomorrow's party with foods the Leslie of his memories would be loath to purchase: chips and candy, soda and beer. Michael fingers the plastic rigging between the soda cans. Leslie always used to complain that the rings were an environmental hazard, liable to pollute the oceans and strangle sea turtles. But what should she care for oceans now?

When Michael returns to the kitchen, he finds Rick standing in the planetary blue light of the refrigerator, wielding a bulbous head of ginger.

"It's for me," Leslie explains.

Michael cocks his head. His wife is gone, but here is this woman sitting in his wife's chair, wrapped in his wife's freckled skin, wearing her same kind and weary face.

"Soda?" Rick asks.

Michael tosses him the can, and listens to the snap of the tab, the hiss of the fizz. He has forgotten how eerie the woodlands' silence can be. Rick tips his head back and allows the brown liquid to stream into his gullet. Then, with alarming strength, he crushes the can in one fist and sets its flattened body down on the marble countertop.

Michael turns to Leslie, whose eyes are shut. "Do you need help setting anything up for tomorrow?" he asks.

"Mmm," she says, "I think I've got everything. My mom's been staying here, so she did most of the setup. I just need to finalize my outfit."

"Can we see it?" Rick asks.

Leslie pauses a moment, then blinks her eyes open and labors to her feet. "Sure," she says. "Just give me a minute. I'm slow going up."

Michael watches as she shuffles across the hardwood floor. He waits for the open mouth of the hallway to devour her frail body before shooting Rick a savage look.

"What?" Rick asks.

Michael shakes his head. "Let me show you the rest of the house," he says.

He leads the way from the kitchen, flicking on lights as he goes. In the dining room, he is overcome by the urge to yank open every drawer and catalogue all the objects she will leave behind. He reaches for the china cabinet, where he spots Leslie's favorite vase sitting on the topmost shelf. The vase is turnip-shaped, the white-waves color of the Atlantic on a drizzly day. Michael grips it by the neck and uses his shirtsleeve to swab dust from around the rim. Then he sets it in the center of the dining room table.

"Look at this," Rick calls.

Michael glances up and crosses the threshold to the living



room, where Leslie's mother has arranged a semi-circle of folding chairs. Streamers festoon every surface. Rick stands at the foot of a bridge table set off to one side, studying the objects neatly arrayed on its surface. A sign above, scrawled in Leslie's trembling hand, reads "HELP YOURSELF."

Michael runs his fingers over the keepsakes: Leslie's porcelain hand-mirror; her camera; a set of scalloped, earthenware bowls; a watercolor of a lily. He is about to turn away when he catches sight of a familiar glass bottle, dangling from a silver chain. The bottle is the size of his thumb and filled with pink sand from the beach in Greece where he and Leslie honeymooned.

Michael pinches the chain and lifts it into the air, watching as the coral granules in the bottle tumble one on top of the other. He had given Leslie the necklace when they first married. He closes his fist around the glass and worms it into his back pocket. He can feel Rick's eyes on him and looks up, daring to be challenged. They stare at each other, soundless and unmoving.

Just then, the patter of Leslie's footfalls jolts them. "Where did you boys run away to?" she calls, and the kettle in the kitchen begins to sing.

Michael remembers little from the honeymoon. He remembers only the tract of sky at sunset: febrile, the color of a skinned tangerine; the sizzle of his feet over the hot cobblestones once walked by emperors; a donkey braying; the lassitude of the Mediterranean. He remembers the day he walked down to the beach alone. Leslie, sick with sun fatigue, had gone back to the whitewashed villa early.

Even now, Michael can picture the tanned face of the young man folding up umbrellas on the salmon-colored sand.

The man, who couldn't have been more than a boy. The man, whom Michael slipped a Drachma banknote in exchange for a blowjob. The man, whose flushed cheeks and vacant brown eyes tormented Michael every day for the next twenty-two years of his life.

When all was said and done, Michael sat down in a webstrap beach chair and regarded the young man with the disdain he reserved for the people who reminded him of his most monstrous self. The man finished folding his umbrellas and strode back up the path, whistling.

When Michael and Rick reenter the kitchen, the room is dark. In the silvery moonlight, Leslie's edges are feathered and blurred, as though she has been done in crayon. She stands with her arms crossed, in a red silk gown that Michael recognizes. He and Leslie had squabbled about its exorbitant price two years ago; at the time, she had no occasion to wear it to. *I just want to feel beautiful*, she had said. Why was that not enough?

"Can one of you get my zipper?" she asks, walking toward them. She moves slowly, fisting her hair away from her neck. Rick steps forward and tugs the zipper up its track, his hand hovering at the clasp.

She spins around. "What do you think?"

Rick lets out a long, slow whistle of approval.

Leslie scans Michael's face. "It'll be better with makeup," she says.

Michael swallows down the lump in his throat. He levels his eyes on Leslie. She suddenly feels very large to him, and far away, like a city glimpsed through an airplane window. "You look...ravishing," he says.

He has the desire to say something more, but every word that comes to mind seems trite. They stand in silence until, at last, Rick clears his throat.

"It's late," he says. "I'm gonna turn in."

Leslie nods. "I've set you up in the guest room, just up the stairs, first door on the left."

"Great, thanks."

Rick swings his backpack over one shoulder and slinks toward the staircase. He has a dancer's physique, and his slim hips pendulum from side to side. After a few moments, Michael and Leslie tilt their heads up at the ceiling, where they hear Rick moving about in the room above.

"He seems nice," Leslie says. She crosses to the sink to put away the last of the dishes, humming to herself a tune that is more breath than music, and impossible for Michael to place.

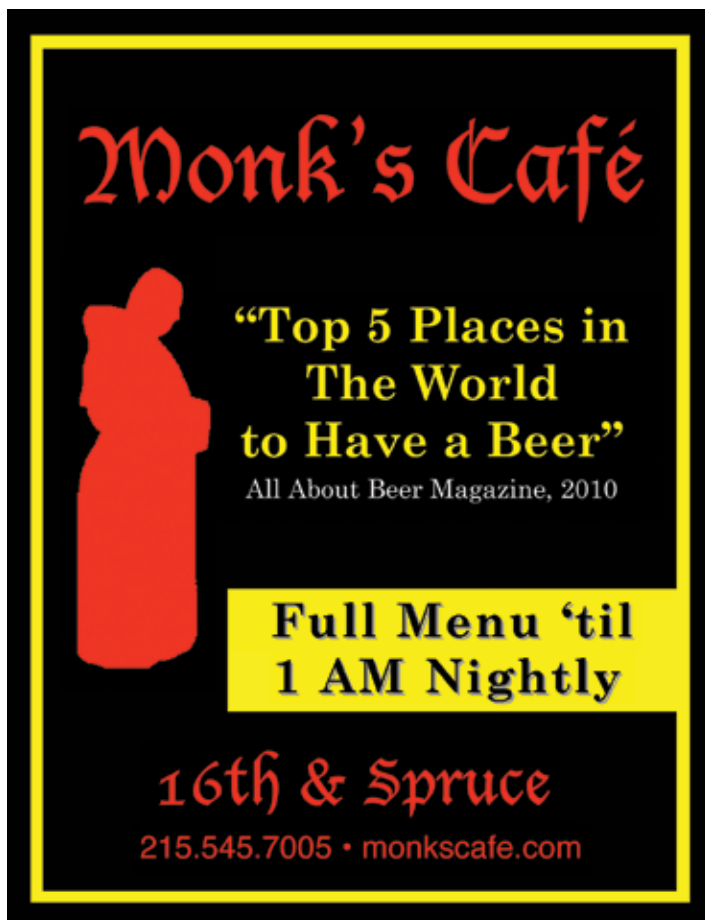
"I'll get those," he says.

"They're already done."

She shuts the cupboard and wipes her hands on a blotted, balding rag. "So, what's he getting out of this?" she asks.

Michael opens his mouth, then closes it again. He thinks of Rick, of his youth, his boundless energy, of the rainbow-pride flag that hangs in place of a window curtain. He thinks of the night they first met. Michael had worn a too-tight paisley shirt, which pulled between his shoulder blades. Uncanny taxidermy fixtures jutted out from the wooden pillars overhead. Shot glasses sweated on the ebony bar.

Rick stood in the center of the room, pretending to rope the mechanical bull with an invisible lasso. At the sight, Michael felt a judder inside, and placed one hand over his heart; he had forgotten what this muscle could do. Later, the men kissed

A black and white advertisement for Monk's Café. The title "Monk's Café" is in a large, stylized, gothic-style font at the top. Below it, on the left, is a silhouette of a person in a long coat and hat, possibly a monk, holding a staff. To the right of the silhouette, the text "Top 5 Places in The World to Have a Beer" is written in a bold, sans-serif font. Below this, in a smaller font, is "All About Beer Magazine, 2010". At the bottom, the text "Full Menu 'til 1 AM Nightly" is written in a bold, sans-serif font. Below that, the address "16th & Spruce" is written in a large, stylized font, and the phone number "215.545.7005" and website "monkscafe.com" are written in a smaller font at the very bottom.

Monk's Café

**"Top 5 Places in
The World
to Have a Beer"**
All About Beer Magazine, 2010

**Full Menu 'til
1 AM Nightly**

16th & Spruce
215.545.7005 • monkscafe.com

beneath the bristled snout of a boar, whose marble glare kept vigil over the crowd. Rick tasted of pizza. When he opened his mouth to speak, Michael was surprised by the faint Colombian accent that barbed his voice. *Top or bottom, Cowboy?*

Recalling the line, Michael feels the tips of his ears burn. At the start, he had liked how both he and Rick were, in some ways, beginners. He liked how Rick, at twenty-four, had never known a single person who had died, not even a grandparent. He liked how Rick called him *Mi corazón*—my heart.

Michael is about to ask Leslie what she knows about being someone's heart, when he notices that her hand has paled on the countertop. Her shoulders begin to tremble. The fabric of her dress dimples in the concave shadow of her stomach as she doubles over in pain.

"Hey," he says, stepping forward. He pries her fingers up one at a time. She yields to his touch, as though she is boneless, made of water. "I've got you," he says, cinching an arm tightly around her waist.

For so long, the cheating had seemed almost too easy. Leslie never questioned why Michael decided to take up piano as an antidote to middle-age malaise, nor why he insisted on taking lessons twice a week with Jonathan Claffey, the neighbors' son. She never questioned the underwear with the stain in the crotch that she found nearby the gulley, which Michael said must have belonged to one of the hooligans who egged the Fletcher house. She never questioned why her husband was so frigid at night, rebuffing her every advance. Or, if she did, she never expressed these worries to him.

Perhaps Michael could have kept the charade up had he and Leslie not run into one of his ex-lovers—a striking, Irish-sort—at the Cinemark, whose eyes widened when Leslie introduced herself as Michael's wife. Leslie looked to Michael, her pupils dilating, jaw tensing, and in that instant, he knew that she knew.

In the car ride home, her hair smelled buttery, of popcorn. "I feel like my whole life—" she said. Michael waited, but she did not go on.

They pulled up to a stoplight, and Michael turned to face his wife, his throat gummed with excuses. Black trails of mascara coursed down her cheeks. Her expression was blank. She stared at him vacuously, as she would a stranger, and he wondered how she had so quickly secreted away whatever intimacy lay at her surface.

"What do you want me to tell people?" she said. A car behind them honked, and Michael turned back to the road. "What?"

"I mean, do you want me to tell the truth?"

Michael sieved through the simple kindness of her question, hoping to catch something sharp lurking in its tenderness. "Tell them whatever you want," he said, too scornfully.

Tears pricked at his eyes. He told himself this was what he had wanted all along. Leslie reached over and laced her fingers with his over the gearshift. Her touch was warm, loving. Michael did not know how a person could be so good.

Upstairs, Michael sets Leslie down on the bed they once shared. The sheets smell of rotted flesh. On the bedroom carpet, he notices the oval impressions her slippers have left, like tracks in snow.

"Will you get the light?" she asks.

He does. In the darkness, he fumbles to the bed, sits at its edge with his head hung and his hands clasped in his lap. He hears Leslie's effortful breathing behind him. "Do you need me to get you anything?" he asks.

She runs her hand over the space beside her, smoothing the wrinkled sheets. "Lie down, will you?"

He climbs into bed, careful not to pull on the red silk of her dress. His body commas around hers. She is smaller than he remembers. The warmth that radiates through her back is shocking. He wonders for a moment if the doctors have it wrong, if she is not near to death at all.

"Wait," she says. "Shut your eyes."

"My eyes?"

"Are they closed?"

"Yes."

The mattress shifts as Leslie pitches forward. Michael hears a faint rustling and the clacking of bobby pins against the cherry-finished nightstand. He imagines her buzzed head, the down that frosts her skull.

She lies back down, closer to him, and he can feel her breath hot on his neck. "Hey, you have silver in your beard," she says. "You know that?"

Michael feels her fingers tracing over the basin-like curve of his chin. Her hands stall. Then, slowly, she leans in and kisses him. He can feel the ridges on her chapped lips, the places where her skin is flaking. She pulls away and nestles her head into his chest.

Just then, Michael hears the floorboards creak and glances up, startled. A shadowy figure stands in the half-lit doorway. Rick.

"I should go," Michael says, watching in his periphery as Rick turns around, making a hasty retreat.

"Wait." Leslie prayers her hands beneath her head and opens her eyes. "Stay."

Michael scratches at his beard. Groggy with exhaustion, he rolls from the bed. "Give me a minute," he says.

He plods his way from the room and down the hallway. The light is on in the guest room. Michael imagines entering, only to find Rick repacking his toothbrush into his toiletry bag, slipping his feet into his brown loafers, readying himself to leave. Michael will take Rick into his arms, explain the gossamer-thread sort of love that sprouts in the corners of a lifetime spent together, where neither party thinks to look. He will ask why it should not be possible for him to love them both. But Rick will merely snort, shove Michael away, say he is nothing but a foolish, dirty old man.

When Michael arrives at the room, he is surprised to find Rick standing by the window, hands balled into the pockets of his jeans. "What are you doing?" Michael asks, setting one hand to rest on the doorframe.

"Thinking," Rick says.

Michael strolls over to him, so that they are mere inches apart. Rick is a head taller, at least, and larger. Michael feels his heart quicken in his chest, the way it always does when he walks past someone on the street he knows could hurt him.

"How is she?" Rick asks. He is standing so close, Michael can make out the golden flecks in his brown, wrinkleless eyes, and the scar on his cheek where he scratched at a chicken pock when he was a boy.

Michael purses his lips. He waits, knowing that Rick will uncover the answer he cannot provide.

Rick nods and gestures to the window. "Look," he says.

Outside, the world is lacquered a chilled pink. Clouds scud across the lightening sky. Rime cloaks the winterweed. A slender-tailed bird alights in the tree just beyond the windowpane and begins to coo.

Rick reaches down and takes ahold of Michael's hand. Then, gently, he leads Michael back to the door. Michael suddenly feels very small. He remembers how, as a child, his father used to usher him to the bus stop at the end of the road each morning, where the other St. Jude's boys constellated in their woolen gray uniforms.

Rick crinkles his eyebrows. He gives Michael's hand a hard squeeze. "She needs you now," he says.

On the day Michael was set to leave Ohio, two years before, he paused in the kitchen before the French doors, wondering how he got here. Just yesterday, it seemed, he was a teenager whose pinky inched along the church pew toward the pinky of the boy who sat beside him. The next thing he knew, he was standing at the altar, staring into Leslie's eyes, and then, in a single blink, he found himself a middle-aged man, with back pains and a mortgage and a problematic hairline. The years were pancaked together, and he could not unflatten them.

The night before, Leslie had sunk down to the floor of their bedroom, wanting to know if it was her fault. He told her it wasn't and asked why it needed to be anyone's fault. But she was hurt, and he was hurt, and where there was hurt, there was blame. So he said, "No. I should have told you."

They did not kiss, but they apologized, each of them saying, *Sorry, I'm sorry*, over and over again, until the words had lost their meaning. She cried, and maybe he did, too, though in his memory he hadn't. In his memory, he held her, and she sobbed

into his shirt, until two dark spots, the size of nickels, bloomed on his chest.

And now it was morning. In the daylight, Michael looked at his house, quiet and flooded with sun. He saw the kitchen as though for the first time, imagining what it would be like without him here. Leslie entered in her bathrobe, shaking him from his reverie. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Michael walked out to the car, lugging the last of his boxes. She watched him as he jammed the trunk shut. She said she wanted to watch his leaving for herself. Otherwise she would wake up in the middle of the night, expecting him to return.

"I'll see you," he said. He said it as if he were setting out for the supermarket. He turned the key; the engine sputtered to life. Michael waved, and then he drove away.

Exit signs studded the highway. At each one he thought maybe he would turn back. He drove and drove, until the world stopped looking like a place he knew. He drove until his body ached and he couldn't drive anymore. Then he parked the Camry on a seedy corner nearby the Holland Tunnel, where the whirl of cars travelling in and out of the city lulled him to sleep.

When Michael gets back to the bedroom, Leslie's eyes are closed. He crawls into the spot beside her and watches her lashes flutter as she drifts in and out of dream. Luminescence gathers in the folds of her red gown.

Beneath him on the sheets, a round object kneads into his back. He reaches down, and his fingertips land on a smooth, curved edge. Michael pulls it out and turns it over; the pink sand streams from one end to the other. He leans toward the nightstand and sets the bottle beside the wig.

Leslie stirs. "Everything alright?" she asks.

"Yes," he says, "go back to sleep."

She curls her legs up beneath her and reaches out, drawing Michael closer. Her eyes are wet and shining. Michael cups the soft of her shoulder.

"Are you in pain?" he asks.

"A little," she says. "The hospice nurse will be here in the morning."

Michael's stomach churns. "How bad is it?" he asks.

The room is quiet, save for Leslie's wheezing. Michael waits, wondering if she has fallen back asleep. But then, at last, the corners of her dry lips curl. She does not say it, but the words hang in the space between them: *Rachel Fletcher*.

Leslie yawns. "Will you wake me if I fall asleep? I want to see the sunrise."

"Sure."

Michael glances out the window. The first golden rays of morning have begun to dapple the sky, and pour into the room, swathing him and Leslie in ribbons of yellow.

"Thanks for coming," she whispers. She reaches over and clings to Michael's sleeve.

"Of course," he says, aware of her pulse beneath his fingertips, steady but faint. "I wouldn't miss it."



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Lauren Green currently lives in Austin, Texas, where she is a fiction fellow at UT's Michener Center for Writers. Her fiction has appeared in *Glimmer Train* and *Conjunctions*, among others. She recently graduated from Columbia University, where she was awarded the Louis Sudler Prize in the Arts.

Benjamin Franklin Was Right

Poem by Kasey Edison

Pure as stars swimming through wet winter sky,
swallowing the cold until indistinguishable
like fish of the deep swallowing their young.

Say something to me. But don't say life is set
like marrow in bone, that the dead inside each of us
strain at our skins to get out.

Tell me, isn't this also life:
clouds squeezing pearls of light on the cold ground
so they scatter like bits of glass?

Your Lucky Life

Poem by Ken Fifer

In your sailor hat and peacoat, you cross
the asphalt and see what you thought
was your home is an old wooden boat.
You stand on the prow and what was
a black locust turns out to be your Jacob's ladder.
When you climb down you think
you're in Washington Crossing State Park,
but really you're on your own porch in Raubsville,
thanking Pat for the tuna on rye.
So you lean back, sip your Schlitz, look at the river,
shift your chair among the nine white pillars
which apart from being ornamental
hold up the second floor and roof.
It's as if whatever comes your way
leaves your footprints. When the locusts hunch over,
when the noisy green maples dig in to grow
bored and restless along the pointless Delaware,
when the paint of banisters peels from your palms,
when the birds leave no tracks at all
you think they all must be your countrymen.
And when moles tunnel under your home,
smacking their lips, wrinkling broad noses,
cleaning their glasses, with the river this close
they must all be your relatives. Each time
you bite into your sandwich you know
the pleasure and pain of harvested grain
in silos where the light goes down.
You can taste the gaff in your cheek,
the fishy vicissitudes, the last moments
of tuna roused from the deep
which fit so exactly into your mouth.



Kasey Edison has been published in *The Broadkill Review* and *The Mississippi Review*. She is currently a manager at a large financial institution outside of Philadelphia, where she lives with her husband and dog.



Ken Fifer's poems have appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Ploughshares*, *The Literary Review*, and other journals. His most recent poetry book is *After Fire* (March Street Press). He has a Ph.D. in English from The University of Michigan and has taught at Penn State (Berks) and DeSales University. He lives in Center Valley, Pennsylvania, with his wife Elizabeth, four dogs, two cats, and assorted other creatures.



Sugar Mountain

Stacy Austin Egan – Second Place Contest Winner

When we first moved to Bellaire, my mom thought that my soon-to-be stepsister Brooke and I were eating “healthy” to get “bridesmaid ready.” Brooke crossed off the days until our parents’ wedding on a kitten calendar that hung in the kitchen. She did this because it endeared her to my mother.

My mom met Brooke’s dad on eHarmony. Compatibility matching didn’t fail them; they’ve been married for years, but no algorithm had matched Brooke and me. I knew I was supposed to feel sorry for Brooke because her mom died of breast cancer three years before, but she was so manipulative that, at fourteen, there was only so much sympathy I could muster.

“It’s not anorexia or bulimia,” Brooke said by way of introducing her idea to me. “It’s very effective.”

Even though I’d only lived with Brooke for a few weeks, I knew from weekend visits that she was a person whose suggestions were prophecies. My mom ended the lease on our townhouse in Austin early to move to Houston the second my school year was over because “*Brooke needs some time to adjust*,” and I had to share a room with Brooke, even though the house had bedrooms to spare, because Brooke thinks “*sharing will bring us closer*.”

Brooke was less than two years older but acted as if this necessitated that she make all our decisions, so I knew I was in trouble when she recited the diet like a menu: A cup of raisin bran with skim milk for breakfast, a low-fat turkey sandwich with a piece of fruit for lunch, a granola bar for a snack, and yogurt and oatmeal for dinner.

“That’s crazy,” I said. We were lying out on floats next to the edge of the pool. Brooke had snuck a beer from the cooler and was splashing herself with water occasionally to stay cool.

“No, it’s not,” Brooke said, “my mom did it all the time.”

Brooke mentioned her mother often: never around my mom though. She was waiting for me to say something about my father, but I was too embarrassed to tell her that we had no relationship, that he’d once told my mother he didn’t believe I was his.

“I’m only a four,” I said. I took a sip of beer only because I wanted her to see that I wasn’t afraid to.

Brooke swept her dark blonde hair into her hand, pulled it over the back of her float, and leaned her head back so the perfectly straight ends brushed the concrete. “I guess you think those uniforms are more forgiving than I do” she retorted. That was another thing Brooke was getting her way on: her dad had

already pulled the strings to get me in at the Episcopal High School, and I was going to have to sit through church services on Wednesdays and wear an itchy polo daily. “Besides,” Brooke added, lowering her Lilly Pulitzer sunglasses, “Haven’t you ever heard of vanity sizes?”

Brooke has always been one of those girls who constantly dangles her approval so it’s closely in reach but never actually grasped, but back then, I thought her games were winnable.

“I guess we can do it,” I said, “If you really want to.”

Though I pretended that I didn’t need Brooke to like me, we both knew it wasn’t true. Brooke had already given me some of her clothes, negotiated an allowance for me with her father, and taken me to get my hair colored “the right kind of brunette.” She’d told me whom to avoid (our neighbors, the Davidson twins, seniors at the Episcopal school, were “*creepy and awful*”) and how to stay on her father’s good side (“*make good grades, make your bed, and don’t wear make-up*”). Her help came with conditions, but I’d make a show of weighing my options.

“That’s what I like about you,” Brooke said. She smiled her Crest-whitening strip grin. I’d have the same one by summer’s end.

My mom came out on the patio, and Brooke crunched the can of beer into the float’s cup-holder.

“You girls look so cute,” my mom said, holding her phone out to get a grainy picture.

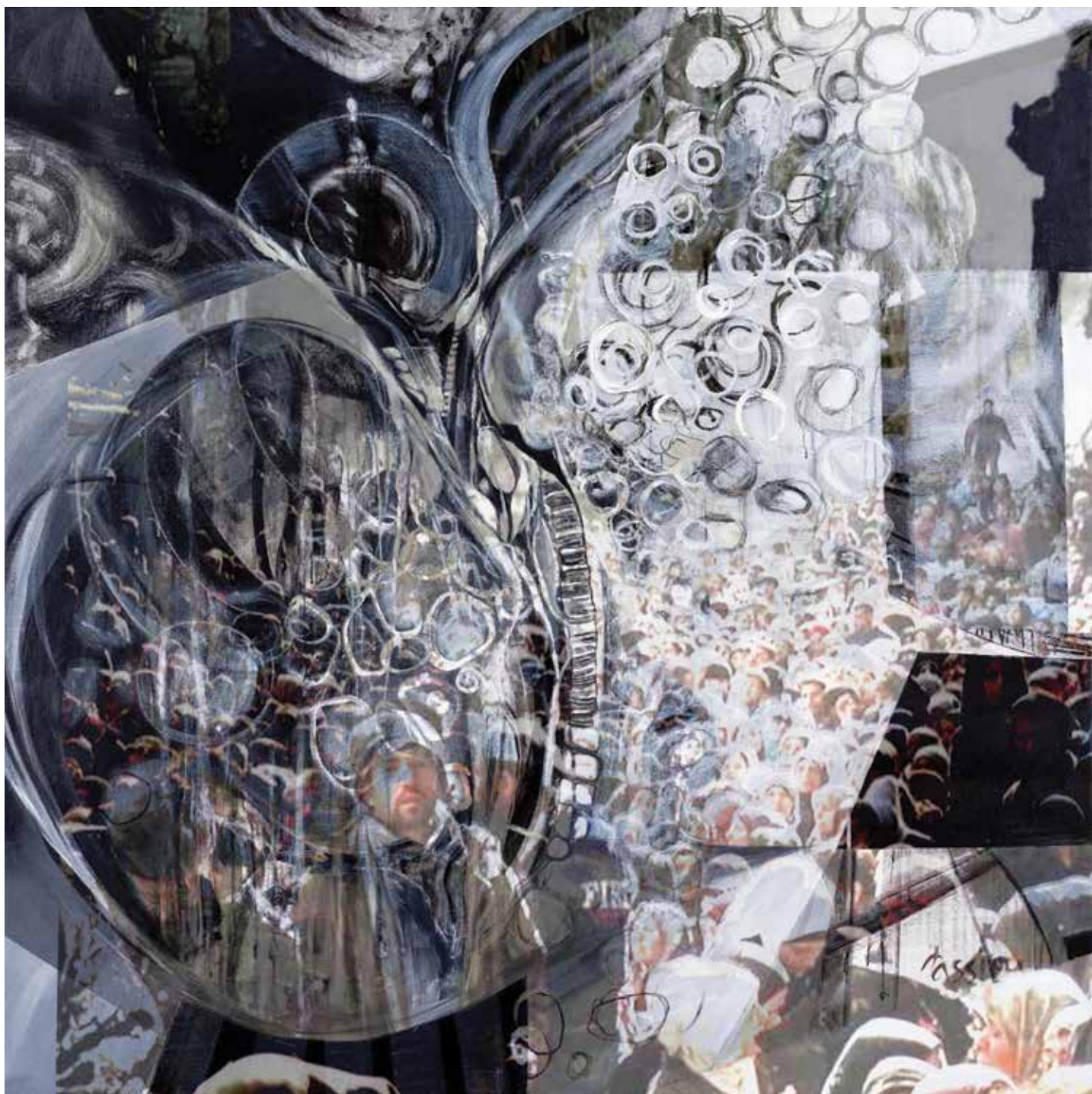
My mom was adjusting well to life in Bellaire. She’d left her job as a nurse at St. David’s and wouldn’t be looking for a new position. Not working or worrying about bills anymore made her look even younger, and recently, we were asked if we were sisters. Brooke’s dad, Joel, was almost fifty.

My mom brought us a picture from *Martha Stewart Weddings* of champagne colored bridesmaid dresses in silk chiffon and told us she’d booked a fitting for the next day. If she smelled the beer on our breaths, she didn’t say anything, and she skipped her usual lecture on sunscreen too, though we were already pink, and it was clear we’d soon burn.

*

Brooke said we were eating 1,200 calories a day, but I was skeptical. I was reading for AP English and started with *Madame Bovary*, which I had to put down constantly; my mind was always on food. For two people that hardly ate, we talked about food a lot.

“What would you give for a Dairy Queen Blizzard?” I would



ask.

Brooke would correct me: "The only milkshake I care about are the ones at Avalon Diner."

It was in this way that I quickly learned that everything about my past life (walking with friends to the 7-Eleven for Slurpees, riding bikes to I Luv Video, and watching movies in garages) was irrelevant history. None of the kids here rode bikes: they were chauffeured from country club to club sports, and they didn't rent movies: they watched *The Sopranos* or *The Wire*.

We'd list various indignities we'd willingly suffer (going to school without a bra, court ordered trash pick-up) for an Avalon milkshake before settling on the same 110-calorie granola bar from the day before.

Joel had Neil Young's *Live Rust* on vinyl, and we'd play "Sugar Mountain" on his Audiofile turntable and dance around his pool table. It became a joke, and one of us would break into the chorus when we craved food: "Oh to live on sugar mountain, with the barkers and the colored balloons, you can't be twenty on sugar mountain." We'd sing *twenty* like it was an absurdly old age and argue about what a barker was.

The diet brought us closer, the way I'd imagined real hunger does: a joining born of desperation. Brooke would run her thin fingers over my ribs, counting the new definition. I sometimes wanted to quit, but I told myself as soon as our parents were married, it'd be over. Brooke's attention fed me in ways food didn't. She could be viciously demanding. Bathroom products had to be lined up by height; she'd once opened her window to throw my book outside because my reading light was "*poisoning her*." But I'd forgive these trespasses to be treated like a favorite doll. I was lonely and homesick, and I'd imagined that Brooke was too: that we were each other's consolation prize.

A few weeks into our diet, we were playing volleyball in the pool outside. I was horrible at volleyball and hated the bruises it left on my arms, but Brooke claimed playing on the intramural team would elevate my social status exceptionally. I served, and Brooke leapt from the water and hit the ball over the fence into the Davidson's yard.

"Nice job" I said, climbing the pool ladder.

"What are you doing?" Brooke asked. She rested her arms on the ledge of the pool, her face suddenly angry.

I hesitated, trying to figure out what I had done. "Getting our ball," I said, squeezing the water out of my hair. Brooke had taken to fixing it in a French braid daily.

"It's gone," Brooke said shaking her head. "Forget it."

"I'll be right back," I said, slipping on my flip-flops.

Brooke inhaled like she'd stepped on glass. "Samantha," she said, one of the only times she'd used my full name, "it's gone."

"Why?" I said. "We can't abandon Wilson, right?" Brooke always acts as though everything is replaceable, a Bellaire mentality I've never adopted.

Brooke didn't laugh. "Don't worry about it," she said, wrapping a towel around herself. When the ball showed up on the doorstep later, she looked sick, and she didn't finish her oatmeal or yogurt.

In July, six weeks into our diet, I woke up feeling my hipbones jutting into the mattress. Brooke huddled on the end of her bed, her knees pulled to her chest. She was just sitting there, staring straight ahead.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I forgot that you live here," she said.

I stretched my thinned arms and yawned. "Only for a month and a half."

I climbed out of bed, cleaned my face with the Clarisonic Brooke swore by, and retreated to the kitchen to get our Raisin Bran.

"I'm late," I said, handing Brooke her cereal.

"Hm?" Brooke said. She insisted we eat our cereal with baby spoons. It was comical to watch.

"My period," I said.

"Oh, that's good."

"Amenorrhea is not good," I said. "And I'm losing my boobs. Do you see this?" I lifted my shirt to show my gaping bra.

"I don't even want boobs," Brooke said. "Everyone thinks they're so great."

"This isn't healthy," I said.

"Just because your mom was a nurse, you think you know everything," Brooke said. She took insanely long pauses between bites: she made eating a bowl of cereal a half-hour ordeal. I'd secretly poured myself a cup and a half of Raisin Bran.

My mom knocked on the door. "We all have a fitting in an hour," she said.

"Only 32 days to go!" Brooke said cheerfully. I thought of her cloying kitten calendar.

Our parents picked the only Saturday at the country club that wasn't booked for the summer. August in Houston is miserably muggy, but my mom acted like the school year was a necessary deadline: as if we all needed to be related before she could attend the teacher meet and greet or sign-up for volunteer committees.

After Brooke heard my mom on the stairs, she said, "Look, you aren't pregnant, so don't worry about it."

"My mom is a nurse," I said. "Technically."

"Okay, whatever," Brooke said. She pulled on her skirt without unzipping it.

I knew it was bad for us, but there was a secret joy I felt when Lenora, the seamstress at Winnie Couture, bitched about having to take in both of our dresses. It wasn't being skinny that I cared about: it was that Brooke and I were allied. Every inch gone was a pledge of sorts: that this hungered suffering together was better than any pleasure we could feel alone.

"Girls, should I be worried?" my mom said in the car. She still had her old Jeep Cherokee with its Dairy Queen stains and Lake Travis smell. This was before Joel bought the Lexus as a wedding present. I watched the towing company take the Cherokee, the last remnant of our old lives, while they were on their honeymoon in Cinque Terre.

"About what?" Brooke asked sweetly. She always rode shotgun.

"Lenora thinks this diet is a bit out of control," my mom said.

"We're just so excited for the wedding," Brooke said. "You want to go get ice cream, Sam?"

The deception felt too easy. I wanted my mom to see through our attempt, but she accepted Brooke's easy explanation and seemed reassured when Brooke wrapped an arm around her in line.

I ordered a cone of my favorite flavor, mint chocolate chip, and kept Brooke in my peripheral vision as I ate.

My mom talked most of the time. Her stories used to be

about what was happening at the hospital: avoidable tragedies, grieving families, the doctors that she preferred to work with and why. Our conversations that day were about her tennis and golf lessons and how the Davidsons bred their dog and were expecting a litter of Golden Retrievers.

"I wish we could have a puppy," I said.

"What do you think your dad would say?" my mom asked Brooke.

Brooke laughed. "He's not a dog person."

The truth was Brooke wasn't a dog person. I tried to imagine a puppy in her room chewing on one of her Tory Burch sandals.

My mom changed the subject to how Mrs. Davidson thought Brooke and I should join swim team next year with the twins.

"I don't like races," Brooke said. "They give me anxiety."

"She doesn't like the Davidson twins either," I said. Then, unsure, I shot Brooke an apologetic look.

"I thought you were friends," my mom said.

"Kind of," Brooke said. She chewed the last piece of her chocolate chip cookie dough. "But I have Sam now anyway."

I felt a twinge of pride in having been preferred.

Brooke continued, stealing a bite of my mom's ice cream for show. "It's not that we're *not* friends, it's just that we're *not* friends, you know?"

"Sometimes you grow away from people," my mom said. It made me nervous to wonder what relationships she had replaced in her life and anxious that I'd done the same to my friends back home. I wondered about that kind of dissolving: whether it was fast like the first time you put on jeans after summer to find them too big or drawn out like your swimsuit bottoms slowly becoming too loose until you feared being exposed.

Brooke decided we should skip the bread on our turkey sandwiches at lunch. "That way," she said, "we cut eighty calories."

"Oh, to live on sugar mountain," I sang.

Brooke joined in and reiterated that a barker had nothing to do with dogs.

When Brooke's dad traveled, my mom had Tuesday dinners with Mrs. Davidson and the Junior League. The week before the wedding, Brooke and I were curled up on the couch. She was watching *HBO*, and I was reading *Wuthering Heights*, when she said, "You know they want a baby, right?"

"Cathy and Heathcliff?" I asked, thinking Brooke was spoiling the plot; she did that sometimes and then would pretend she "thought you'd already read that part."

"Our parents," Brooke said, "want a baaaaby together," she drew out the word as if I'd never heard it.

"No, they don't." I said. "My mom doesn't," I added, less sure.

Brooke took my hand and led me to the master bathroom. "Come look," she said. She opened the cabinet under one of the sinks and pointed to a box of pregnancy tests and something else. "See?" she said triumphantly.

"That doesn't mean anything," I said, examining a purple box that proudly claimed to identify twice the number of fertile days.

"You have to try when you're thirty-seven," Brooke said. "These tell you when to have sex."

"Why would they want that?" I said, sitting on the edge of the tub. I felt suddenly hot: the idea of sharing my mom with a newborn was infuriating.

"This is what people do," Brooke said, tracing her finger

down my spine.

Looking around the bathroom, I realized how little of my mother I recognized in it. She used to own a couple of shades of Covergirl lipstick and some Maybelline foundation, but now the counter was littered with M.A.C. eye-shadows, highlighters, lip and brow pencils, and several jars of creams that claimed to fix wrinkles and dark spots, problems she didn't even have.

"She didn't say anything to me," I said.

Brooke, already bored with my disbelief, flipped through one of the magazines my mom had left on the tub. She stopped on an article "19 Reasons He Won't Tell You What He's Thinking."

I felt my stomach rumble for want of mac and cheese; the idea of eating oatmeal again was nauseating.

"I think the Davidson's dog had puppies," Brooke said. "I bet if you go over there, they'll show you. That might cheer you up."

"I thought you *hated* them."

"Just because you go doesn't mean I have to," Brooke said, though this was the first time all summer she'd suggested we should do anything apart. She picked up my mother's hairbrush and started to brush my hair, tangled from dried pool water.

"We can't have one anyway." I let her pull my entire head back as she combed.

"I bet if I asked my dad, he'd say yes," Brooke said in a sing-song voice; she moved a hair tie from her wrist and held it in her mouth, concentrating as she braided.

When she was done, we headed to the kitchen. "Can't we eat something different?" I whined.

Brooke squeezed my waist. "I bet you can almost fit into Abercrombie Kids."

I could hardly eat my yogurt. I kept thinking about my mom and wondering if she hadn't found time to tell me or if she had just picked up tests on a whim while shopping for bananas and hearts of palm.

"Are you going next door?" Brooke pushed.

"Can't you come with me?"

"I thought you loved puppies," Brooke said. She stirred her strawberry yogurt into her banana-nut oatmeal. She had this absurd idea that food had fewer calories if it was cold.

*

I stood alone at the door, poised to knock but unsure of what to say; I'd spoken four words ("nice to meet you") to the twins since moving in.

The twin that answered wore a green polo shirt and khaki shorts and seemed too ordinary for Brooke to despise.

"I was wondering if I could see your puppies," I said.

He smirked, his dark eyes looking me over. "See what?" he said.

I felt myself turning red and took a step back.

He held out his hand. "I'm Caleb. You're Sam, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry. I just moved in a couple of months ago."

"The puppies are in the pool house," he said. I followed him past the formal dining room and various living areas. The Davidson's home was much like Brooke's, but with more televisions; flat screens blended into the walls. In the kitchen, a woman was washing dishes.

"That's Lucy," Caleb said. I waved awkwardly, not sure if I was supposed to keep with the spirit of formal introductions.

I doubted Mrs. Davidson ever set foot in the pool house: *Maxim* spreads of curvaceous women were taped to the walls,

an unmade full-sized bed sat in the corner, sheets covered with crumbs and ashes, a two-foot bong stood in the middle of the floor next to the dog crate, and the whole room smelled like weed.

"Sorry for the mess," Caleb said. From the bed, his brother, Mark, barely looked up from his laptop to acknowledge me.

"What are their names?" I asked, kneeling next to the crate.

"This one's Roger," Caleb said, handing me a warm ball of fluff with ears and paws too big for his body. "And that's Timber, Asher, and—where's Marshmallow?"

"I have him," Mark said, holding up a puppy in his right hand.

"Those are...funny," I said sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"People never keep the names anyway," Caleb said, sitting next to me.

"Did you find a home for all of them?" I asked. I held Roger in my lap, stroking his head. Not bothering to open his eyes, he moved his chin so it sank over my knee.

"Only Timber and Asher," Caleb said, pulling the wrestling puppies off one another.

"Aren't you Brooke's sister?" Mark asked from the bed.

"Yeah," I said. "Well—in two weeks." This was the start of it: my belonging to Brooke.

"Where's Brooke?" Mark asked.

I told him she was at home. Roger sighed and shifted in my lap. "His ears are so soft," I said.

"Does she know you're here?" Mark asked. Caleb looked at him incredulously. I shifted to my side, pushing my knees tightly together.

"Yeah," I said, more to the puppy than to Caleb or Mark. "She's right next door."

"You wanna smoke?" Caleb said, resting his hand on my shoulder. His fingers slipped under my tank top, rubbing the strap of my bra.

"I should go," I said. I didn't want to leave Roger, but I put him back gently.

Holding my breath, I found my own way back to the front door. On the way out, Lucy called to me: "Chica, cuidado! ¡El piso esta mojado!" At the time, I'd thought this was a reprimanding, but later, it occurred to me that she'd given me a warning: one that I hadn't heeded.

That night, I waited until Brooke was asleep and went down to my mom's room. Since she was alone, I didn't bother knocking. I climbed into her king size bed; the feel of linen sheets was so different from her flannel ones we'd bought on sale at Target. The bed still smelled like Joel's cologne. No matter how nice he was to me, it was still an imposition to share her.

"Mom," I said, shaking her gently. "I need to talk you." I took a deep breath and tried to keep my voice from breaking. "Why didn't you tell me that you and Joel wanted to have a baby?"

My mom pursed her lips. "I don't know why you think that, sweetie."

I went into the bathroom to show her what I'd found, but the boxes of tests were gone. I was having a hunger headache, and on top of it felt equal parts rage and relief.

"I guess I misunderstood something Brooke said," I told my mom. I wanted to march upstairs and scream at her that I knew she was a liar, but instead, I snuggled under the covers.

My mom rolled over to face me and tuck my hair behind my ear. "What did Brooke say?"

I yawned, forcing myself to act casually. "She was on the phone. I guess she was talking about some TV show."

I thought about Brooke waking up alone and wondered if it would seem different than awakening to me, a slowly disappearing girl. It wasn't enough for her to wither my body; Brooke wanted to chip away at every relationship I had until I was only hers. I curled into a ball and held my knees to my chest, and it was reassuring to find myself still there.

The next day, at our final fitting, Lenora stuck her turning tool down the back of each of our zipped dresses and pulled to show my mother the extra inch.

"Everyone loses weight in the summer," Brooke said. I could tell she expected me to agree, but I only stood in front of the mirror. Since I couldn't explode with my mother around, I punished Brooke with silence.

"I'm sorry, Lenora," my mom said, obviously flustered. "I promise it's vitamins and family dinners from now on."

At dinner that night, we picked at our organic Whole Foods chicken, even though it was the best chicken I'd ever tasted. Joel was home, and Brooke, as usual, dominated the conversation, talking to take the focus off eating.

I spent the evening in the living room, reading. I overheard my mom in the kitchen arguing with Joel. He got defensive, deflecting back to his line that "*change was very stressful for Brooke*." I half wanted to never eat again, so my mom would worry about me, but I knew if I ate a few Oreos, it would piss Brooke off royally.

"Sam, sweetie," Joel said as I pulled apart my Oreos. "You think Brooke's okay, don't you?"

"Sure," I said, liking both my newfound ability to please him and the way my mother shook her head and left the room.

I planned to wait until Brooke was asleep to go upstairs, but at 11:30, she was still wide-awake and stretched out on her bed, feet hooked over the end.

"Hey," Brooke said, casually.

"Unless you're going to apologize for lying, don't even bother talking to me" I said. Brooke looked at me bewildered. "I know that you made that baby stuff up."

"I was just joking," she tried.

"Really funny," I said sarcastically. I went to brush my teeth, but Brooke followed me.

"Don't be mad at me," she said. She looked with horror at the remnants of Oreo that I'd spit out when brushing my teeth. "What did you do?"

In my mind, it'd been a perfect rebellion, but now, I couldn't explain what I wanted it to mean.

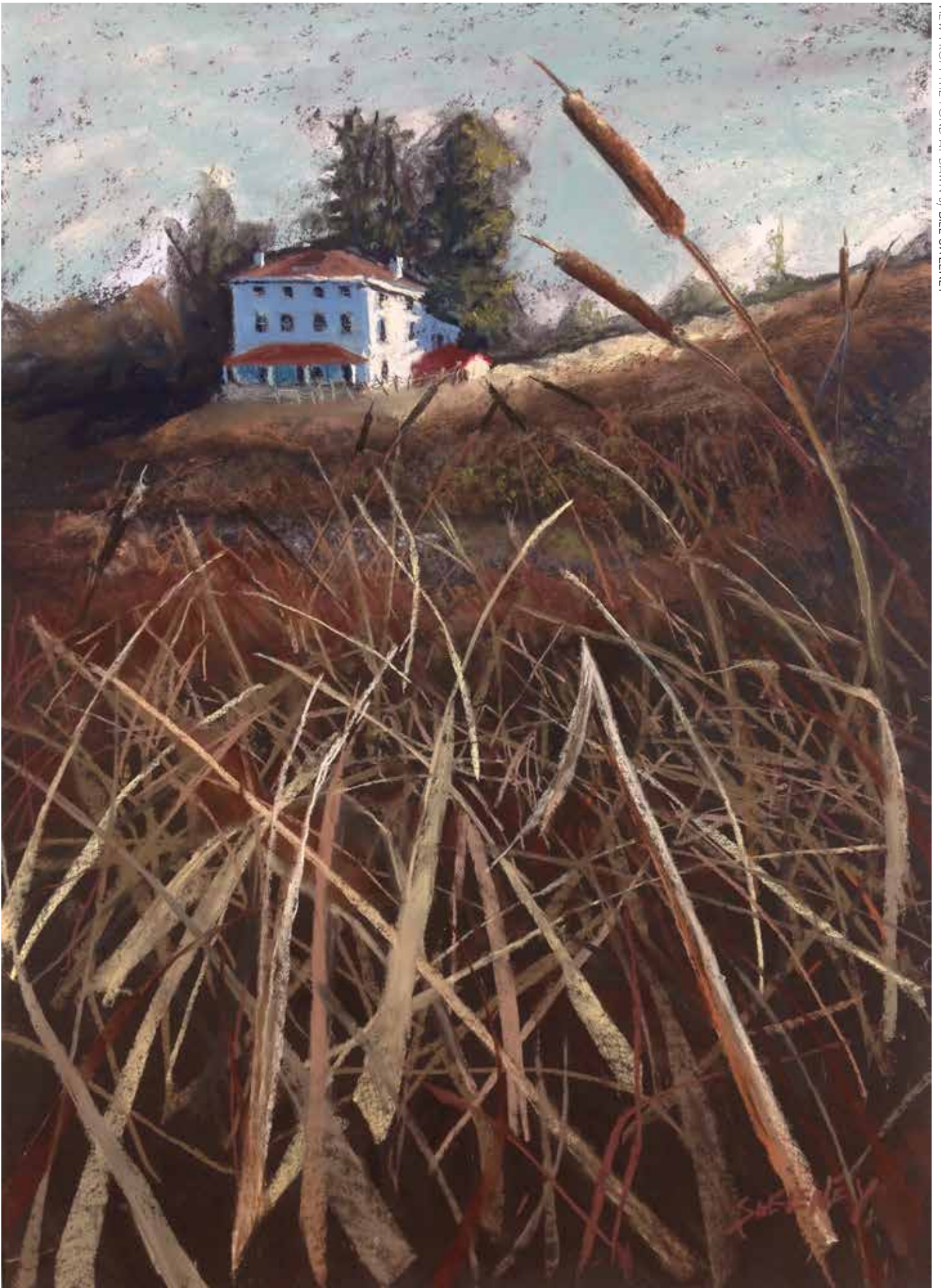
Brooke grabbed my arm and dragged me to the toilet. "Get rid of it," she demanded.

"Tell me the truth," I countered. Relinquishing control of my body was the only thing I'd learned to trade for leverage with Brooke.

Brooke showed me how to use the end of my toothbrush to make myself gag. There was a stinging in my throat and nostrils. I wanted to push Brooke against the wall or to rush, crying, into the arms of my mom or even Joel.

Brooke watched until it was gone, flushed, and then said, "I bought that stuff, and I put it there."

The admission of guilt wasn't satisfying. "Why?" I pressed, hoping for remorse. I didn't understand it then: that Brooke



would spend her life trying to impose on others all the grief she couldn't expel.

Brooke only shrugged.

"You know what," I said, leaning against the counter. "You don't get permission to be an asshole just because your mom died. I haven't had a dad ever, and I'm not manipulating everyone all the time."

Brooke retreated to the bedroom and turned off the lights. I re-brushed my teeth, put on my pajamas, and lay in bed, too angry to sleep but too tired to argue.

Brooke didn't say anything, but then she whispered, "You know how sometimes on the weekend, you wake up, and you kind of want to get out of bed, but there's not a reason you have to, and you just can't make yourself?"

I closed my eyes, imagining it, but I didn't say anything. Asking for details felt too much like forgiveness.

"I felt heavy like that all the time," Brooke said. "Even when I was walking around."

When I couldn't find a job after I finished college, and my first serious boyfriend and I failed to make a post-graduation relationship work, I remembered Brooke's description of depression, and it was like finally understanding drug use innuendos in a song you'd spent your childhood thinking was about falling in love and going to a dance.

"I want to tell you something, Sam, but you have to swear: you can't tell anyone."

I debated ignoring her, but I was curious. "Whatever," I said. I turned, facing her and hugged a pillow to my flat chest.

"When I was really bad, one of the Davidson twins had sex with me."

"What do you mean?" I said. I turned on my reading light. Sex, as seen on *HBO*, was usually about an exchange of power, so the act seemed beneath Brooke who always automatically got her way.

Brooke pushed her hair behind her ear. "We were in the pool house. I thought I'd feel better if I smoked, so I took a hit."

"You smoked pot?"

"I felt like it would help."

"Did it?"

"No, it really hurt," she whispered.

"The smoke?"

"The sex." She paused.

I didn't know the right thing to say. "Who was it?" I asked, moving to the end of her bed.

"I don't know." Brooke flipped to her stomach and pressed her forehead into her elbow. "I didn't stop him because I thought maybe it would change something. He kind of pulled my hair the whole time."

I thought about the bed covered in ashes and crumbs, the pictures from *Maxim* on the walls. "Did you tell someone?" I asked. I thought of Lucy. "Was anyone home?"

"Their dad is, like, so mean to them, Sam." She had her face in the pillow.

"Why did you let me go over there?" I said. The anger in my voice surprised both of us.

"Nothing would've happened," she said.

I felt frozen on her bed thinking about how she'd braided my hair before I'd gone to the Davidsons.

She was crying; she grabbed for me and pulled me to her, our first hug outside of one-second side ones on end of week-

end visits. I felt her shoulder blades as she shook and knew mine were identical the way that bone pushed hard against skin.

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"Two Octobers ago," she said quietly.

She looked past me, but I forced eye contact. "You sent me over there by myself," I said incredulously.

Brooke grabbed her hairbrush from the nightstand. For a moment, I thought she was going to hit me. She must've seen me flinch. "I made you safe," she said. "Stand up, and I'll show you." She used the end of her brush to measure the gap between my thighs. "See? You aren't want they want now."

I thought about Caleb's hand on my bra strap. "I don't think it works that way."

Brooke walked to her window, which overlooked her pool and the Davidsons' and the pool house too. Both were eerie with emptiness, and the fence between seemed too short from above. "They'll be at college in a year," Brooke offered.

"I'm not going to keep starving myself until then."

Brooke started humming "Sugar Mountain," but this time it wasn't funny.

I noticed she'd been gripping the hairbrush firmly, and I gently took it from her. "Whatever happened to you—" I wanted to name it, but I didn't have the word. "It wasn't because of how you looked."

"I made us safe, Sam," she said like she wanted to believe it but couldn't.

I nodded, even though I knew it wasn't true.

*

There's a photo from the wedding that my mom loves. Our parents had it printed on a large Canvas. It's Brooke and I in those strapless bridesmaid dresses, the color of Rosé. We are back to back, and, like mirror images of one another, our shoulders formed hard angles rather than rounded curves, and our collarbones were more noticeable than our pearls. We were on the golf course at the country club; the sun setting behind us was that August orange-red.

The photo that is Joel's favorite is on his desk in a silver frame. The photographer had pulled us away after dinner. I'd eaten my first full meal in months while Brooke had picked at her dinner salad. In the photo, Brooke is leaning in to whisper, a hand cupped over her mouth, to tell me we were getting a puppy: a wedding gift from her father. My gaze is off to the side of the frame, but my smile is genuine and smudged with frosting from a piece of wedding cake I'd just eaten. "He'll be a barker," I'd joked, and that had set us both off giggling, bent and gasping for air. Though we were fourteen and sixteen, we look much younger in that one: carefree, weightless.

Sometimes I find one of those prints in a deserted drawer, and I stop to contemplate it. What's missing from the image makes it better than memory. From Brooke's open grin, she looks unphased and forever fed. My eyes glisten with tears from laughter and reflect back only Brooke and that sunset, and there is nothing or no one to tell what we've already had to leave behind.

Stacy Austin Egan holds an MFA from McNeese State University. Her fiction chapbook, *You Could Stop it Here*, was released by PANK Books this spring. Her fiction appears in *PANK Magazine*, *Driftwood Press*, *The New Plains Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *WomenArts Quarterly Journal*, and *Black Fox Literary Magazine*. She lives in west Texas with her husband, Brendan, and their daughter. She teaches literature and writing at Midland College.

In the Morning

Poem by Robyn Campbell

two bodies resting
two bodies at rest, faces to the light,
all internal movement like plants
a floral type of narcissism

or, maybe they are not like plants
they could be like fish
faintly oiled, slick skin
shining

you say you think
death looks like life inverted
it is a turning
i say then that a poem inverted
looks something like truth

laid bare, as we are

picked nearly clean
marks left by the million
little teeth that time attracts

Hypnagogia

Poem by Robyn Campbell

On her 63rd birthday, Annie Edson Taylor became the first person to survive a barrel ride over Niagara Falls. When asked, she later said, "I would sooner walk up to the mouth of a cannon, knowing it was going to blow me to pieces, than make another trip over the Fall."

In darkness, the descent.
You hold tight, fists
clenched and pray
for a good swift end.

As a child you opened
your eyes at night and trained
yourself to see
God, gave
a face to the thing
you loved most.

Is he here now
in the water's electric
hum, in the
prickling beneath your
skin?

And then you feel the change. Something
nameless is pulled
out slowly from the middle of
your chest; it's like an exorcism.
The care is gone, and the
worry—that old need to make
the future manifest
turns to breath and is exhaled.

From far away, you
hear it: "the
woman is alive."



Born and raised in Eastern Pennsylvania, Robyn Campbell has been writing since before she can remember. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Apiary*, *Stirring*, and *1932 Quarterly*, among others. Her time is split between writing, playing drums, fleeing to the mountains, and editing *Semiperfect Press*. She lives and works in Philadelphia.

Boris the Cockatoo

Poem by Barbara Daniels

I whistle when I drive my car—"Hava
Nagila," "Battle Hymn of the Republic,"
songs my friend Jackie's cockatoo calms to,
bobs his head as I bob mine and reaches

for me with his clawed foot. It's 18 years
since I carried tampons. I keep a photo
of myself without eyebrows. Thin, I was very
thin. I lifted my soft red hat to show off

my baldness. My inner organs slumped
together where tumors large as grapefruits
crowded me. Of course Lazarus loved death.
It was dark there. Cool. He didn't have to

buy clothes or plan what to eat. There was
no weather. No boat to mend. No sisters
who would never marry. He held a round
piece of felt he made into hats: a monkey's

jingling cap, doctor's homburg, black hat
of a rich man oiled and shining. Shake
the felt! Presto, a hat covers his closed
and dreaming eyes. So far I've hit and

killed a meadowlark and a pheasant, both
in refuges they might have thought safe.
I ran over a basketball while its owner stood
stricken at the side of the street. I'm a blaring

calliope strapped to the back of a gilded truck,
whistling till my mouth hurts. When I see Boris
at Jackie's house, I look straight into him—
unblinking eye, curved beak, offered claw.

When the Music Ends

Poem by Barbara Daniels

Years after your death a magazine
emailed: "We want you back, Viola."
Today, a little morning rain. You told me

before you met Dad you walked sedately
past the bank where he worked, turned
the corner, took off your shoes, and ran.

Why he married you: that blazing hair.
When I looked like an egg, no eyebrows,
no lashes, some people laughed at me.

Just last night a waitress said, "Sorry, sir,"
mistaking my tousled hair and androgynous
shirt. My streaming service wrote me:

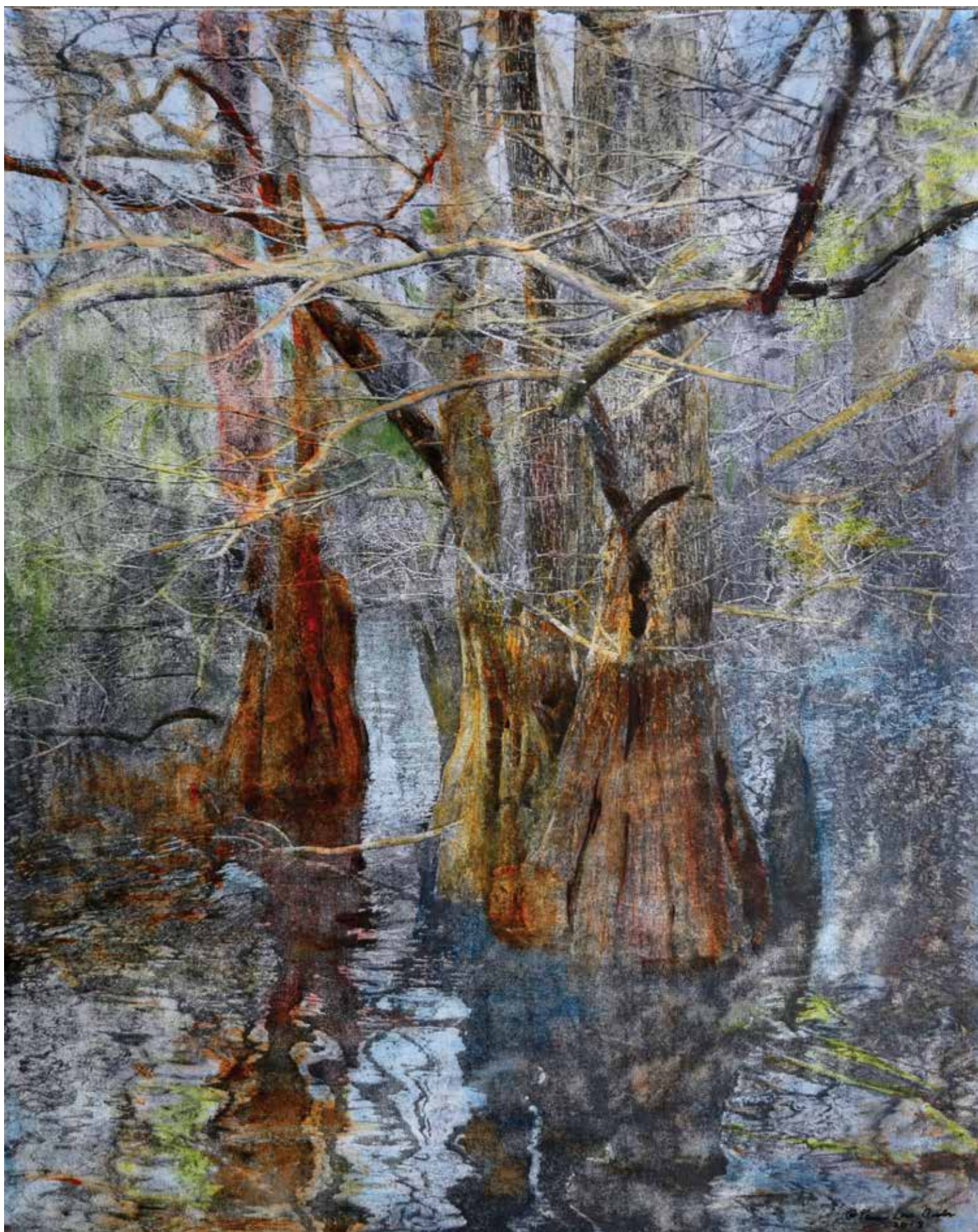
"When your music ends, we will continue
to play music you should like." Hair
doesn't grow in the grave, but it should,

shouldn't it? As you were dying, your friend
said, "You have the best hair in the building."
Still red in your ninety-ninth year. When I die,

my atoms could leap into fingers and feet.
I might be somebody's shining hair. It's raining,
but softly. Mahler's third symphony plays.



Barbara Daniels's *Rose Fever* was published by WordTech Press and her chapbooks *Moon Kitchen*, *Black Sails* and *Quinn & Marie* by Casa de Cinco Hermanas Press. She received three Individual Artist Fellowships from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and earned an MFA in poetry at Vermont College. Photo Credit: Mark Hillringhouse





Windmills, the Boys

Laura Farnsworth – Third Place Contest Winner

The boys drown in the pond on Myrtle Dag's property. Windmills, the two of them, arms and rocks and driftwood and pinecones painting the water with rings and diagrams and dusk, and then the postures of *dare*, pulleys for shoulders, rope for arms, run farther and throw farther, hoot and shout and leap, catch the rock, the pinecone, farther, and still farther. Dive to save the boy who takes the dare.

Windmills, the boys, arms and arms and arms. And then.
And then nothing.

Myrtle sets her binoculars on the drainboard.

Percolator, decaf, two lumps. She peels potatoes for supper, leaves them cold in the sink. Rain titters overhead, becomes heedless applause, and then fists. Denial, anger. Rifles of lightning. Sobs.

And then nothing more.

Myrtle signals the dog to her bed. She stands there, at the kitchen window, until well after dark.

Sheriff's car. Lights, a wet ribbon up the dirt road, toward the boys' mother, her house, her wondering kitchen table. Good boys have fried chicken for dinner, milk at bedtime, oatmeal at sunrise, before the school bus. Good boys, smart boys. Once, a teacher drew a red line through a spelling word on her Jack's paper. Boy. Buoy. Float, boy. Float.

Myrtle puts the binoculars in a casserole dish in the cabinet. She fills her mug, sits at the kitchen table, watches the dog sleep. She lets her head set itself down upon the Mount Rushmore placemat, turning what has been witnessed today sideways.

The pond stirs beneath its bed sheet.

Lou paws a dream in which she is a puppy again.

Then, all sides of the sky, an envelope full of pink.

Myrtle scrambles an egg for herself. For the dog, some left-over squash, the last of the cottage cheese. Lou goes out the side door and does what she needs to between the rosebush and Jack's old swing set, her piss pooling neon atop the mud.

Binoculars, Myrtle holds them to the window. Down the dirt road come the searchers. Hounds, the kind with very long ears. Something flagging from an officer's hand, a child's pajamas, scents of sleep and toast and morning cartoons. Scooby-Doo, Where Are You; Myrtle always liked that one, the giddy sameness every Saturday, ghouls, pancakes, chores.

Doorbell. She puts the binoculars behind the cookie jar.

Ma'am. Mrs. Dag, is it?

A deputy. He sweeps his hat clockwise, sets it on the porch

hook where Roy's always hung. Shoulders poking at the fabric of his uniform, forehead smooth as piecrust. Fidgeting on her sofa, where to put his hips, his elbows. The dog sits her chin on top of his knee, lets out a long, patient breath. He wears the mirrored kind of sunglasses. She could reach for them and wipe away the smudges with her shirt, hand them back. He folds them into his pocket. He looks about twenty-five. Her Jack would be twenty-eight.

Mrs. Dag, ma'am. You were home yesterday. Afternoon and evening.

Well, she was, yes.

We're looking for some missing children. Brothers. The deputy shows her a photograph. Birthday party, chocolate ice cream.

You must know them. The family. Questions without marks.

She has watched the boys with their mother. Walking, with tote bags, kites, sometimes a Frisbee. Down the dirt road towards town, and then back up again. The mother launching kites upward, handing over the spool, yelling *run, run*, the boys' bodies leaving earth for moments at a time.

A proper asking: did you see the boys yesterday?

Will it help to answer this question, Myrtle. She tells herself this the way a person would address a child when the answer is a foregone negative, when there is no other acceptable response. No, it would not help a thing, the worst thing that can happen to boys has already happened, done and over, and eventually they will be found looking nothing like their mother's memories of them and is that not better than telling a man with a notepad what she has seen in this life.

Would she tell him about windmills, and how she set her binoculars on the drainboard.

Well, then. *Myrtle Dag*, he writes in his notepad. *No*.

If you think of something. You can call.

Well, then.

The boys' mother will be sitting on a kitchen chair telling a notepad every truth. Good boys, walking to the churchyard to climb trees, letting them have a little freedom, be home by dark. No, they never get lost. Yes, they always come back. Weeping, skin of her nostrils crude, snagged hair in the prongs of her unwedding ring. Or maybe she is on the sofa, knitted afghan smelling of cheese and sweat and modeling clay, her eyes spread round like gravy. We'll find them, someone will say, they will be just fine. The mother will try very hard not to scream at this.

There will be things said in town. Those boys running loose all the time. Late for school. Often absent from church. Probably,

she tipped herself back onto the sofa, closed her eyes a spell, and then they were gone. Going it alone, you know, can't be easy, but still. People examining cause and effect, wanting their own contentments guaranteed.

The boys' father left awhile back, Myrtle heard, moved away. Boise, maybe. Spokane. Someone will have called him, he'll be on an airplane, coming to help, to look, asking the flight attendant for orange juice because the boys always liked it and because he doesn't know what else to ask for.

They all have names. Myrtle cannot recall a single one.

She fills the coffee pot with suds to soak away its brown tide-marks. She wipes a cobweb from the window.

The deputy's hounds call out, and the searchers change slant. Myrtle lifts her binoculars. Some cross the dirt road into a potato field, the backs of them dominos in a line. More of them now, townspeople in caps, work boots. Women, too, other mothers, blue jeans, windbreakers, setting up card tables along the road with water jugs and juice and muffins, on a Saturday, after a storm, because two boys are gone, just gone.

The deputy accepts a cup of water.

Then: a car in the gravel drive. Janet, from town. Myrtle sets the binoculars in the fridge.

Myrtle, hiya, sorry to just drop in and all, but the phones are all out, did you know? I suppose you've heard what they're up to out there, I see those boys all the time when I head up to your place. Made me think of your Jack and your Roy and all, and I'm sorry for mentioning it, but Myrtle. Can't help it, you know? And I wondered if you'll be needing any groceries, I can swing back by later. Nothing? That's fine, hon, hope you didn't get too wet last night, our sump pump's goin' like runaway horses. Make it harder, I suspect, the scents washed away and all. For the hounds, I mean. Okay, Myrtle, take care of that hip, and bye now.

Her Jack.

Jack, who was a boy.

Myrtle who was a mother.

Stuck in Myrtle's head at the age of nine, homemade buzz cut, like a kitten to pet him, stuck there because he was still hers then, stuck there because he was still happy, tree swings, quail's nests. Hay bales, horseshoeing, helping her with canning, apples peeled in one curling serpent's tongue. Chasing after sheep on his pony. A road trip once, just Myrtle and Jack, South Dakota. A sack of donuts powdering the air between them. Hank Williams, hamburgers. No worries at all about love, no wondering: is there any other kind except mother and son.

Boy Jack swung at baseballs from the apex of a dirt diamond, Myrtle tucking her hands between her thighs and the bleachers, pinching her knuckles numb in a sort of prayer: connect connect connect. Once, it worked: the violence of wood on leather, red stitches wincing as they went airborne, away from a mother tipsy with pride, a father who willed the ball into the second baseman's glove.

Roy stood his son in the field to practice batting that night until he crumpled.

Myrtle plastered Jack's shoulders with salve and Epsom salts.

You cannot make him into something resembling a man with that nonsense. That is what Roy said to her. Why does a boy need to resemble a man, and doesn't that come along soon enough in this life. That is how she answered him.

Who would Myrtle Dag be without a boy to fix?

A boy that does not become a man is a useless effort. Roy's

final word on the subject. Roy, who has never sat up all night in the rocking chair, loving away an earache. Roy, who put newborn lambs next to the skin of his own chest. Farmer, father. Rancher, reaper.

No more ballgames after that. No more Junior Mechanics meetings, 4-H competitions, marksmanship meets. She bought Jack a puppy, named her Lou, showed him how to rub the felt of her belly until she snored, demonstrated housebreaking and the rites of obedience until he shrugged. He learned to drive, and they never did ride together anywhere again.

Then Jack turned seventeen, sideburns on a sapling, stabbing at his meat until blood turned the potatoes pink, eyes plain and blank and chrome. Churning up the north hill, after dinner, down to the club of cottonwoods by the stream.

Where are you going, boy? He never answered that.

Myrtle didn't have to follow far, just up to the old smokehouse. The tiny, west-facing window. Binoculars. Her son. And that Ricky. A miner's kid, trouble, shoplifting, smoking. Talk of him in town. Another kind of love, a starving, seething tussle, denim jackets and ball caps and birch-white legs, not the love of a man and his wife, but something else. She went to the smokehouse once, and understood. And then twice, and she no longer did.

She loved her son just the same as always, like a boy, her boy, but that was the wrong thing to do, reaching out to smooth his hair, put a biscuit on his plate. Jack hurled back at Myrtle hunks of her love, because he wasn't a boy now.

That day, that night:

Roy gave Jack a hard time about not putting the hay in the barn before supper and Jack spun a kitchen chair across the room and through a window, Roy, in that chewed-up way of his, asked her: *do we have a problem here*, and Myrtle had shaken her head no. Because to say yes would be giving life and a name to a thing that was better off not living under the steepled roof of Roy's mind.

Jack ran off after he threw the chair. The smokehouse, follow him, she wanted to, to be sure he was fine, just angry, just young. Jack, Ricky, bodies like books, bodies like blades. No, Myrtle, the man you've named Jack needs to run. She stayed back and dealt with all the broken things.

Roy drove away to count lambs in the back pasture. Evening watch.

Doorbell. The young deputy again, dark birds of sweat on his uniform.

Bloodhounds seem to have a scent, along the broken fence and toward the pond. We'll need to go over your property. Before it storms, Mrs. Dag. Urgent, as you can see.

Yes, Myrtle can see. She beckons the dog, bends to breathe the cornbread smell of her ears.

What's her name? The deputy smiles.

Lou. She was my son's.

Mrs. Dag? Are you all right?

The pond. It is hollow. It is full.

The night her family broke:

Myrtle heard two shots, perhaps a third. Roy's rifle. She knew the cough of its discharge, the following echo. Dusk. Coyotes. He'd be warning them off. Myrtle picked up the puppy and shut her in the bedroom, away from the shards of their evening. She swept the shatters into piles, the piles into islands, the islands into continents. When Roy came back to get a thermos of coffee, before the overnight watch, she would try to describe for him the

terrain that was their son.

Dark arrived. Roy had not. Neither had Jack. Myrtle unclothed herself of expectation. The boy needed to come home of his own mind. She turned down the bedding, ordered the lock to a position of welcome. Well, come.

For Roy she filled a sack, swellings of meatloaf between bread, a taste of it dropped for Lou, red beet relish in a jar, to see him through overnight watch. She hung this on the porch hook for him to find. For Jack she left an oatmeal cookie on a napkin near his pillow. She made up the sofa with a sheet, a feather pillow, a cotton blanket, just in case. In case of lost boys. She found Roy's brandy, the bottle inside his old boot at the back of the closet, for the worst nights, the longest deliveries, and wet her coffee cup.

Over the busted window she taped great white incisors of poster board, Jack's old science projects: kill cabbage worm larvae with lye soap and vinegar, one percent iodine solution on squash beetles, graphs and sketches and the teacher's remarks in red, points subtracted for penmanship.

Then Myrtle and the puppy stirred, settled, slept to the sound of thunder closing doors, rain stewing up a fog for morning, and nothing else.

Myrtle sometimes allows this account of events to be truth.

The men are searching Myrtle's property. The hounds wear stockings made of mud.

Fracturing without regard, the skies. The sheriff's deputy and the local men back away from lightning above the pond. One of the men wraps his arms around the boys' mother, dragging her to the safety of Myrtle's porch. She kicks, her heels blunting the man's knees and shins.

The hounds are ordered to the patrol car. The searcher team and the boys' father lean themselves against the house, beneath the overhang. Myrtle fills the percolator. Offer comfort, she could. She dumps it into the sink.

Water rises to the level of the kitchen door.

The deputy knocks. *Mrs. Dag, please.*

How simple it would be to save them all.

Mrs. Dag? Please, we need a blanket for the boys' mother. Soaked to the bone, do you have some tea, set her here on the sofa, let's get the fireplace going. Equipment on the way, drain the pond, footprints at the edge, only clues, almost erased, no sign of them elsewhere, fearing the worst. The boys.

Swallowed. In the pond, too many truths.

You are very kind, Mrs. Dag. To let us disrupt things this way.

The mother is a fallen tree. She has the smallest hands, Mandy, so much smaller than Myrtle's.

Mandy. The name of a young mother whose boys are gone.

Myrtle could tell her things about that. About making ready, watching out windows. About beds unslept, toast unmade. Sweatshirts unwarmed by the arms inside of them, the ribs, the sweat. How a woman bags the shirts and the boots and the Superman sheets for the church charity. Then leaves the bag in her trunk. Then stops going to church. Then stops going anywhere.

The pond. What does a boy come to believe when the water's surface is out of reach? Calling out to the algae. Drifting, into the innards of tractors, astonished rubber tires. Does it seem hopeless? Myrtle allows these questions, answers herself that dying must offer something gentler.

She sits down near Mandy on the sofa. Tucks the afghan tighter around her shaking limbs. Lou offers the comfort of her fur.

Myrtle knows the story of a man with a rifle coming upon his son in the woods. The son grappling with a boy the father has seen around town, their denim jackets and Wranglers and work boots and briefs discarded, their skin dirtied by the tumbling-away sun. The man, seeing a problem that cannot be reconciled otherwise, raises his rifle. The boy from town slants toward his jacket, his own weapon in its pocket.

Two shots, three.

The man, the boy, the son. Letting go their redness onto sand and rocks and the bones of trees. The mother hearing, seeing, knowing, from the smokehouse, kneeling down and retching.

This true story she knows becomes about the Dag family, a speckled old filmstrip, a war.

Roy's truck at the side of the road, door aghast.

Myrtle running, shoeless, to the trees.

Help me, Myrtle, help. Get the boy in the truck. Get his legs. Help me.

Ricky is not Ricky any longer, the bare whole of him small and wrong and limp in her hands. Roy is not Roy, his shoulder joint showing itself, a peeled spud. Jack is shaking. She wraps him in old towels, the lambing rags from the truck. He can't see her, something wrong with his eyes, he can't, is she there, mother, and shush, she tells him, these things can be fixed, we will get this fixed, and yes, I am here. I will fix you.

Ricky and Jack, in the back of the truck, spread out on the old mattress that is for lambs and calves. Roy at the wheel, Roy, the father of a ruined boy, a boy he ruined, speeding away, the door handle snapping at her wrist, before she can jump in the truck and tell him to take highway fourteen to Sheridan, paved all the way, hospital, Jack is allergic to aspirin, gives him hives, sleepwalks sometimes, likes to be sung to when there's thunder, can't abide cold feet.

Myrtle runs after them, down the dirt road. Blood in the spaces between her toes. She was screaming. She must have been.

The truck slows. He's remembered her, Roy has, that she is the one who mends things, the blisters, the frostbite, the barbed wire stuck through flesh. In reverse now, she can catch him, catch right up and jump in the back and watch over those boys all the way to Sheridan, but the truck swings wide, punching her off her feet, and onto the knothole of her hip.

Roy arrows his truck through the fence at the edge of the Dag's property, sundering clover and early red sedge, staggering over dead timber. Myrtle sees one arm rise from the back and fall back down. Jack. The truck finds the pond, spitting mud behind, gagging on gravel and moss and the pale ooze of carp. The pond is a swallowing thing.

Myrtle crawls. The slowness of a baby. The urgency of its young mother. She crawls to the pond until mud takes her wrists, her shins, her knees: stop, you see, there is nothing to be done. There is nothing to save. There is nothing to fix.

This is sometimes the case with stories that are true.

She could tell Mandy about the pond holding her in its teeth that day, until the rain began, and for a long time after.

Laura Farnsworth is a Denver-based writer, artist, and gardener. Her work appears in *The Progenitor* and *Aquifer*, and she was recently awarded the Meek Prize for short fiction by *The Florida Review*. She is currently at work on a story collection exploring the humanity hidden within seemingly incomprehensible behaviors.

When I Look Like My Father It Makes My Mother Cry

Poem by Lorraine Rice

I give up on wrestling my hair
into a limp, submissive, dead-straight
existence, tell my mother—*Just*
cut it all off, trying to get back
to the beginning, in the straight-backed chair
waiting for my mother
who'd been the one to fix my hair, wanting
her to see it never was
broken. Feet bare, sweat-stuck
to newspaper spread under the chair—
how many times, how
many, have I watched her cut
my father's hair? Him
in the same chair, a frayed
towel-cape over shoulders and chest,
his ankles an X on the spot where
Dagwood blows his top over
Blondie's new hat. Her over him,
cheeks caved in, brow ridged, the concentration
of years on her face, sharp
metal shears in hand. My parents always uneasy
sharing space and seeing them
close is bewitching and bewildering—
their fragile intimacy severed
by the cold crisp chastisement of scissors
as my hair falls in black puffy clouds. Confused
coils, soft and intricate, beg to be caught
again and again and holding them
begs a reckoning—*Me?*
Not me? In the straight-backed chair
while my mother cuts my hair, in the full bloom
heat of summer she freezes
then puts a mirror in my hand—
You look just like your father,
and because her eyes are damp
for once, I do not argue.



Lorraine Rice holds an MFA from the The Writer's Foundry at St. Joseph's College, NY. Her work has appeared on *Literary Mama* and in the anthology *Who's Your Mama: The Unsung Voices of Women and Mothers* (Soft Skull Press, 2009). She lives in Philadelphia with her family.



Clarion Street

Nancy Farrell

It was mid-summer, 1972, when I was 12 years old, that my parents sold our small row home on Clarion Street in South Philadelphia. They bought a finer row home in a suburban development dubbed Briarcliff, which rested in the Delaware County town of Glenolden. My father, Charles, was excited to own his first garage, while my mother, Violet, looked forward to the neighbors being less close at hand, albeit only a tad less. With the South Philadelphia and Briarcliff agreements of sale both signed, the clock began to tick toward our last day as South Philadelphians. That day would arrive in October, 1972.

My father had been struggling to keep his home goods business afloat. Progress was not on his side. My father's customers were the housewives of South Philadelphia, but their numbers were dwindling. It was the dawn of the shopping mall. The drapery that my father stored in his car and carried into houses could not compete with the variety at Sears, Roebuck and Company. In 1972, the remaining housewives continued to open their doors to my father, but it was because he was a sociable, homegrown fellow. They desired coffee and conversation with him, but his home goods, not so much.

Undeniably, it was my mother's office job at the Bell Telephone Company that enabled our move to Briarcliff. The job was a 20-minute walk from Clarion Street, and something she accomplished in sensible heels and strictly on time. The residue of my mother's stern upbringing gave rise to her handling stacks of Bell Telephone Company paperwork with speed and competency.

Once the news of our upcoming move spread, I was forced to fathom the unfathomable. I laid in bed at night as one realization after another turned my stomach. Clarion Street would never host another of our holidays. The aroma of my mother's spaghetti and meatballs, cooked each Sunday after Mass at the Annunciation BVM Church, would fade from the kitchen. The days of the overhang outside our back door sheltering my bike were numbered.

Life began to shift, as my mother collected ideas for modern decorating from *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Briarcliff would be her chance to start fresh. Meanwhile, my father declared that Briarcliff would be cleaner and safer than South Philadelphia. I felt insulted on behalf of our home, as I watched one room after another turn to dust and echo. Briarcliff-worthy knick-knacks were boxed up, while unworthy ones were placed in the trash.

The most troubling part of the move was the inescapable loss of my Clarion Street friends. There was my closest pal, Brid-

get, with whom I shared a birth year and every juvenile notion, such as whether a song she made up, "Little Brown Jug," might someday be recorded by The Monkees. With her perpetual pixie hairdo, Bridget had a pureness of heart epitomized by her habit of chalking "I'm sorry, let's make up" on the sidewalk outside my house following our rare spats.

And then there was Brenda, who was the same age as Bridget and me. Brenda was pretty and being hip came as naturally to her as breathing. When the bullies from around the corner turned up, Brenda remained unfazed. Always with a bottle of Coca Cola in hand, Brenda would deliberately spill dribbles onto the street, simply for kicks. Bridget and I occasionally hitched ourselves to Brenda's hijinks because it was exciting, but we typically favored the comfort and trust of our twosome.

There was Anthony, as well. He was one year older, and our informal leader on Clarion Street. He wore his hair long and he had a drum set in his basement, where he played Led Zeppelin songs. Bridget and I found Anthony charming, even though his rock star persona was undercut by his family's laundry, which continually drooped on a clothesline above his drum space. We believed we had a love triangle parallel to Betty, Veronica, and Archie in the *Archie* comic books that we purchased at Bertolino's Pharmacy.

My last summer on Clarion Street passed much like the prior ones. We roller skated, played tag, twirled hula hoops, and told spooky stories, all the while devouring cones of ice cream from the Mr. Softee Truck and Broadway Licorice Rolls from Jean's Grocery Store. We fell into bed at night sticky with sweat and sugar, confident that all of those things would be within reach again when the sun came up.

The gang knew that my family's house had been sold, but this turn of events was unfamiliar. All of us had only ever lived on Clarion Street. I longed to confess my heartbreak, but instead talked up the spacious MacDade Mall/Eric Movie Theater complex located near Briarcliff. What I should have announced was that nothing could top Clarion Street. There was the Mummer's Parade that took place every January 1st just two blocks away, and it wasn't just the lively music and magical costumes that made the parade extraordinary. It was the neighborhood families who opened their doors in welcome to all, offering escarole soup and crumb buns. Our parents lost track of us on New Year's Day, but never worried about our being cold, hungry, or safe.

There was also the 37-foot statue of William Penn, the found-



er of Pennsylvania, that sat atop Philadelphia's City Hall, which was visible, opportunely, from the flat rooftop outside my bedroom. And then there was the lunch counter at nearby Woolworth's, where the price of an ice cream sundae was determined by whichever balloon a customer chose from the day's balloon assortment. The balloons dangled colorfully above the lunch counter and contained within each was a slip of paper that was a price tag. When a balloon was chosen by an ice cream sundae customer and then popped, the treat's price was revealed.

In October, 1972, when my family's last day on Clarion Street landed, I felt a helplessness equal to the weight of the moving truck that rested in my line of sight. My friends watched curbside, while I leaned on our wrought-iron railing, as our forest green sofa and television were carried out sideways and stowed. I knew

that my parents intended to comfort me, but were busy with last minute tasks. There were closets to be checked one final time, and keys to be collected.

With the last of our possessions amassed in the moving truck, the metal door was slammed down and the tarnished latch secured. This was my family's cue to climb into our blue Rambler Ambassador and to begin following the moving truck to Briarcliff. I rolled down my back-seat window, and my friends peeked in to wave goodbye. I sat in the car, stricken, and closed my eyes, as our car proceeded to the corner of Clarion Street. To lessen the ache, I pretended that we were headed instead to our yearly vacation at the Lamp Post Motel in Wildwood, something I treasured. "It will be okay," my mother said from the front seat.

And my mother's prediction was true. Time passed, and I did

gradually become accustomed to the suburbs, and to the new friends and happenings that filled my days in Briarcliff. There were stumbles, to be sure, like when I was stung on my forehead by a bumble bee as I walked to my first day at Our Lady of Fatima School. Or when my mother signed us up at the Glenolden Swim Club, where I sat glued to the pool's ledge, filled with the terror of a non-swimmer. And then there was the ill-fated, week-long Girl Scouts camping trip I took to Sunset Hill, when I was commanded by the leader to wear a wash cloth bobby pinned to the top of my head because I had neglected to pack a hat.

Despite those missteps, I grew to accept that dipping my toes in creeks and fishing for minnows at Glenolden Park were reasonably worthwhile pastimes. And I developed a great affection for the group of Briarcliff girls who took me in. We moseyed to the MacDade Mall, where we shared pizza at Italian Delight and bought David Bowie albums at Wee Three Records.

But my memories of Clarion Street never fell away completely. One of my first visits to the block as a grownup was on a date to The Victor Cafe, an eatery that borders Clarion Street, where the servers are budding opera singers. The date was with the Briarcliff man that I would one day marry. He walked patiently alongside me down Clarion Street, past my old house, which then featured dark red awnings and a polished front entrance. Just as I had done back on moving day in 1972, I paused and closed my eyes, and I felt a tenderness borne of nostalgia, and a melancholy borne of a spell forever gone. Impulsively, I decided to ring the doorbell of my old house. Perhaps the current owner would be sympathetic to my story, I thought, and I could take a peek inside, but no one answered the door.

A decade later, I revisited Clarion Street, this time with my young daughters in tow. I held their hands, as I told them about pushing doll coaches with Bridget down the sidewalk. I told them about Brenda and her penchant for mischief. I pointed out the house where Anthony played his drums.

The friends I left on Clarion Street had never been far from my thoughts as the ensuing years rolled from one to the next. About a year after my family's move, Bridget became a boarding school student at the Charles E. Ellis School in Newtown Square, an institution for fatherless daughters. My mother dropped me off at the school to visit Bridget one brisk, Sunday afternoon. Bridget and I strolled through fallen leaves to a nearby McDonalds, where we caught up, and where we realized that our bond had not waned. Afterward, as I sat in Bridget's dormitory room, I worried that she might be lonely, but the opposite was true. She revealed that she was comfortable at the boarding school, and that the other girls were nice. Living at the Charles E. Ellis School was a continuous sleepover party, Bridget disclosed.

Thereafter, despite spans of time when we unintentionally overlooked one another, and when the tides swept Bridget in one direction and me in another, our relationship endured. When Bridget was married in 1981, I was by her side, and when it was my turn in 1984, she was by mine.

Brenda's family also moved away from Clarion Street. They bought a home in Springfield just four miles from my family's. At the time, my father and Brenda's father, Ray, developed a companionship. They were Delaware County transplants who, in spending time together, found a way to hold on to a bit of South Philadelphia. As a result, Brenda and I saw one another from time to time, and she spoke of Springfield contentedly. A decade later, I would coincidentally acquire work at the same

Center City law firm where Brenda's sister worked, which circumstance renewed our families' link.

With an expanding Internet at our disposal, Bridget and I, then in our 40s, decided it was high time that we discovered what had become of Anthony. Utilizing social media, we discovered that Anthony was a professional drummer in a band called Splashing Violet, and in another known as The Flip-N-Mickys. We wasted no time in messaging Anthony, and he wasted no time in agreeing to meet us.

On a balmy, early spring evening, Bridget, Anthony and I had our reunion at the Triangle Tavern in South Philadelphia. Open since 1933, the Triangle Tavern, with its Italian grandmother-style cuisine, had prevailed despite several bouts of new ownership and an assortment of renovations. I parked my car outside the Triangle Tavern, and I kept an eye out for Bridget, as it dawned on me that Bridget and I had chosen the ideal place to meet. After all, what was our relationship, if not something that had prevailed despite many years and many changes?

Anthony was inside when Bridget and I entered. His back was to the door, but when he heard us, he leapt from his seat. He hugged Bridget and me in a warmhearted way that belied our lost decades. Anthony, who had remained boyish in appearance, wore a black t-shirt and jeans indicative of his career, and his hair still rested past his shoulders,

Over pizza and beer, we kicked around memories of the 1960s and early 1970s. Anthony recounted the innumerable times we had been scolded by our elderly Clarion Street neighbors for misdeeds as small as dripping ice cream onto the pavement, or as big as bumping a parked car on our bikes. And we nodded in agreement over the incomparable thrill of the Whip Truck Ride that passed through our neighborhood in summertime.


Afterward, as I walked to my car, I thought about what I would say if I could speak to that girl who had sat, stricken, in the blue Rambler Ambassador in 1972. I would tell her that hurdles and teary nights spent over her diary lie ahead, but that in time her self-confidence would grow, and like the South Philadelphia knick-knacks her parents once deemed worthy or unworthy, she would discover what to hold on to and what to let go.

Present day Clarion Street thrives in the revitalized Passyunk Square district. My small row home, purchased by my parents in the late 1950s for \$5,500, would sell today for over \$300,000 at current market prices. The former mom-and-pop grocery stores are now trendy businesses, and The Victor Cafe is a Philadelphia tourist destination. Still, when I visit, I recognize the kids outside. They do not notice me as they play with their Barbie dolls and their Nerf Super Soakers. I sigh, and then I smile, and I know it's time to go.

Nancy Farrell is a lifelong writer with a focus on autobiographical works. She spends most of her free time with family, including a darling rescue mutt. The library is her favorite place. She works as a legal assistant in Media, PA.

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