

PhiladelphiaStories

Cultivating a community of writers, artists, and readers across the Delaware Valley

FALL / 2020 / FREE



FEATURING THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION WINNING STORIES
YOUNG AMERICANS A.C. KOCH / THE DEAD WOMEN ALLIE MARIANO / FERAL WIVES DAVID L. UPDIKE

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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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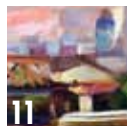
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ART



Joyride 41 Navy Shipyard by Monique Sarkessian

Monique Sarkessian creates colorful, impressionistic and expressionist oil and encaustic wax paintings and salvaged sculptures that celebrate life. Sarkessian finds inspiration wherever there is color and her painting process involves a variety of artistic materials and the use of abstraction to reveal beauty and moments of discovery to her work's viewers. Her artwork has been shown nationally and internationally and has been honored with numerous awards. She offers classes at her art studio in Wayne, Pennsylvania. www.moniquesarkessianart.com.

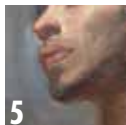


Joyride 12 Bartram's Garden by Monique Sarkessian



Magenta Morning by Patricia Shaw Lima

Patricia Shaw Lima has practiced and taught the fine art of printmaking since 1996. Her art has been juried into numerous international, national, and regional shows and is included in several public and private collections. A graduate of Temple University's Tyler School of Art, Lima serves as a faculty member at Abington Art Center and is director of the 705 WEST Printshop + Gallery in Jenkintown.



Head of a Young Man by Dori Spector

A painter and printmaker, Dori Spector maintains her primary studio in Newtown Square. Spector studied art at numerous colleges and private ateliers including the Grand Central Academy, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Moore College of Art and Design and Studio Incamminati where she has worked with many renown instructors. Her work appears in galleries around the country and is held in many private collections. Spector offers event-painting services. Visit www.dorispector.com.



Bubbles by Dori Spector



Philly Unchained by Krista Milito

Krista Milito's two passions in life are photography and dogs. She's been lucky enough to have worked in both worlds. Milito spent many years in the photography/lab industry and exhibited her fine art photography in shows in Center City, Philadelphia. Now a dog trainer with The Philly Pack, she pursues photography as a hobby. She has decided she's more of an "Imaginarian" and maintains her love of photography by capturing images on walks through our city.

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Letter From the Editor

Carla Spataro

For the past 11 years it has been the honor of *Philadelphia Stories* to host the fiction prize named for our friend and supporter, Marguerite McGlinn. I first got to know Marguerite in a local writer's group – the same place I met Christine Weiser, and so many other incredible Philadelphia writers. Like Christine, Marguerite was more than just a writing acquaintance. She was a friend and confidant, someone who supported me, and my work, unconditionally, but also told me the truth. She and her husband Tom lived, quite literally, down the road from Rosemont College, where I eventually enrolled to earn my MFA and where I am now the MFA program director. Even after she got sick, she would invite me over for dinner before class and we would talk about writing, about her family, about our dreams of becoming novelists. It was at these dinners that I got to know her husband Tom and learned more about her family – now the generous supporters of this prize. Marguerite was a champion of the underdog. I'd like to think that supporting short story writers, like we're able to do, and to do it in her honor, would make her very happy.

Each year I have two jobs related to the contest. I choose the judge and I choose the finalists. My criteria for choosing a judge is simple. I invite authors whose work I admire and who I'd really like to meet. Most of the time I get lucky and they say yes. This year's judge, Karen Dionne, was just such an author. When it comes to choosing the finalists, things are not as simple. Our fiction editor, Trish Rodriguez and a host of other screeners, read all the submissions. This year there were over 270. They did a great job of narrowing down the group to 39. From those I'm supposed to pick no more than 10. With Trish's help, this year we chose seven. The stories ranged from satire to psychological thriller to traditional literary fiction.

WINNERS

with comments from judge Karen Dionne, author of *The Marsh King's Daughter* and *The Wicked Sister*

FIRST PLACE:

"Young Americans" by A.C. Koch from Denver, CO

This short story ticked all the boxes for me. A nuanced, pitch-perfect father-daughter road trip told with an economy of language and an easy rhythm and flow that sucked me right in. Clearly plotted, well-drawn characters, along with just the right mix of atmosphere and insight make this story a winner!

SECOND PLACE:

"The Dead Women" by Allie Mariano from Little Rock, AR

A character at a crossroads is always intriguing; how did they come to this place and what will they do going forward? I love stories that focus on undoing the consequences of bad choices. That this story is also beautifully written is a bonus.

THIRD PLACE:

"Feral Wives" by David L. Updike, Philadelphia, PA

This short story begins with an irresistible premise: women all over the country are leaving their families to live in groups in the forest, constantly on the move, building temporary shelters while they hunt and fish and forage. An engaging and thoughtful commentary on what it means to shed the labels of "wife" and "mother."

2020 finalists:

"Almost Happy"

by Charlie Watts from Freedom, NH

"Almost There"

by Holly Pekowsky from New York, NY

"The Women in the Club"

by P. Jo Anne Burgh from Glastonbury, CT

"Magic Hair"

by Shanteé Felix from Baltimore, MD

**THE 2021 MARGUERITE MCGLINN CONTEST
OPENS JANUARY 15, 2021**

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Young Americans

A.C. KOCH – First Place Contest Winner

What was the one thing he couldn't do without? Like, if he was stuck on a desert island forever. He knew his answer right away but took a few moments to ponder so he didn't seem so strident. "A pencil and a sketchbook, I think."

"Sorry," Raquel said, "but that's two things. The point is, you can only choose one."

Harry smirked at her, so alert in her posture at the driver's wheel. A textbook pose from her drivers-ed class. "You can't have one without the other--they're an essential pairing."

"I don't make the rules, Dad. Only one thing."

"Well, if it's a desert island, I guess I only need a stick, so I can draw in the sand."

She threw her head back and laughed without taking her eyes off the road. "You can say anything in the world, and all you want is a stick?"

He showed his palms. "Hey, I'm a simple man. What would you choose, a graphing calculator?"

She peeled her eyes off the road to roll them at him. With her math mind and zeal for detail--about to embark on a degree in civil freaking engineering--she would surely be able to build a beautiful house on her desert island. But maybe he'd sounded sarcastic? He was about to take it back when she said, "I need my music."

"So an iPod or something?"

"Just a device with all my music on it, that never runs out of power."

"Don't you also need headphones? That's two things."

"No, it's just a device that plays any music I want, any time I want."

"So a transistor radio, with an infinite library of tunes."

"I guess so, but it has really good sound."

"So you invented a magical device with access to every song ever recorded, but I can't have a sketchbook to go with my pencil?"

She made an I-regret-to-inform you face at the road and shrugged. It was the kind of conversation that could last them all the way to California, which was the whole point of this road trip--a last bout of father-daughter bonding before she vanished into college and California and adulthood. He didn't know if she was feeling as melancholy about it as he was--how could she, with all the excitement and possibility?--but he felt like he was visiting a beloved house for the last time, turning off the lights, closing all the doors.

Movement in the mirror caught his eye with a spike of adrenaline: a truck's grill and headlight completely filling the sideview. He twisted around to look out the hatchback. The front end of a very large late-model Ford pickup surged at the window, less than a car-length back.

Raquel, both hands gripping the wheel, shot glances in her rearview. "Holy shit, he came out of nowhere."

"He's way too close," Harry said, teeth clenched. Their cruise control was set at 65, precisely the speed limit on this gently curving stretch of desert highway. The center line was dashed, with no oncoming traffic, and there was no reason why the truck couldn't just pass. Harry lowered his window. Wind battered their cocoon as he juttied an arm out to wave them around.

The truck fell back then gunned ahead, coming within inches of their back bumper. "Steady, Raqui." He reached over to kill the cruise control. "Let it slow by itself. Hands on the wheel, nice and steady."

The truck fell back again, then surged forward and cut sharply to the side. With a burst of throaty engine roar, it passed. Someone in the passenger seat banged on the truck's door as it zoomed by, with shouts that were torn away in the wind. With an abrupt lurch, it pulled back into their lane and sped away, middle fingers flying from both windows.

"Jesus," Raquel said, slumping but keeping her hands locked at ten and two.

"You're fine," Harry said in a calm voice even as his heart slammed. "You did great. Just slow down and let him get some distance."

"You should've wished for a gun instead of a stick."

They pulled off at the next town to switch drivers, and ended up scarfing a dinner of beef jerky, corn chips, and soda pop on a picnic table beside a gas station. A galaxy of moths pinwheeled around the Conoco sign in the twilight. Harry was counting off in his head how many more meals he was going to have with his daughter. This might be their second-to-last one, he thought as he chewed. In two days, everything would be different and irreversible. He didn't say anything about that, because why paint someone else with your own shadows?

It was another hour to Menden, the town where he'd reserved two rooms in a boutique hotel. Harry drove with his eyes flicking from shoulder to shoulder and mirror to mirror, alert for crossing animals and road warrior pickups. Antelope stood bright-eyed



and frozen off in the brush, and small critters zipped across the pavement. He slowed when they came around a bend and saw the strobing lights of a police cruiser at the side of the road.

An ambulance was just pulling away, flashing and shrieking and heading back towards the freeway. Harry slowed to a crawl as a cop standing by the squad car's bumper waved them past. Their heads swiveled as they went by. A compact car lay on its crushed roof at the end of a rutted debris trail about thirty feet off the road. Yellow caution tape demarcated the whole area.

"Dad," Raquel breathed. He knew what she was thinking but he didn't want to say it. She did. "Those assholes in the pickup ran somebody off the road!"

"You think so?"

"They were just looking for it." She twisted around to stare at the wreckage even as Harry sped up. He wanted to tell her to look away and keep the sight of car wrecks out of her head, the same way he tried to ignore a TV in a bar. Why fill yourself with garbage and pain? But he didn't want to nag. Besides, she had a good head on her shoulders; she could decide what she paid attention to. In the mirror, the ambulance sped away, a UFO streaking across the desert.

Their hotel was a chintzy affair, in the only three-story building in downtown Menden. The town was a leafy oasis in a shallow valley, with lunar crags and mesas surrounding. They'd chosen the town as their stopover on the way to LA because of an article Harry had read about a thriving art gallery scene. "The Marfa of Utah," the article had called it. A tiny community of ranchers and hippies, with a cabal of transplanted artsy weirdos that made the place feel like a sliver of SoHo relocated to a desert oasis. He knew that Raquel would have preferred to stick to the freeway and stay at a Comfort Inn, but she'd agreed to his plan since this would likely be their last road trip together. Artsy weirdos were his tribe, the way math freaks and programmers were hers.

Raquel disappeared into her adjoining room as soon as they got in. She wanted to check in with friends and get a good night's sleep, so she'd be fresh for their last day of driving. "You should check in too," she said, wiggling her phone. "Let her know you've been thinking about her."

He waved his hand to dismiss that, but he'd been thinking all day about a short and clever message he could send to the woman he was planning to see in Santa Monica tomorrow night. He splashed cold water on his face, tousled his greying brush of hair, and pulled on a blazer to head out to Main Street, sketchbook in hand.

A single ink line ascends a blank page, two-thirds of the way up, before cutting to the side to describe a gentle curve, then a collection of interlocking squares and rectangles. The tip of the pen never leaves the page, and its progress across the creamy paper never quickens or slows as it accumulates lines, turning back on itself, dipping into another curve, then finishing with a waving line embellished with tiny tassels.

When he finally lifted his pen, he took a sip of red wine and looked at what he'd done. A straight-backed rocking chair appeared to fly like a kite, high at the end of a string. He chewed his cheek and tap-tap-tapped his pen on the café table. The drawing was decipherable, but lacked *zing*! He turned the page, this time starting with a wavy ocean horizon across the bottom of the page before sending the string upwards again.

An hour passed, at the end of which he had five pages of flying rocking chair kites. Paging back through them, he found that the fourth one had something special: a looseness to the line, with a higher, smaller chair that really looked like it was pulling at the end of its tether in a landward breeze off the ocean. This was the one.

He pulled out his phone, propped the sketchbook up at an angle to catch the light, and snapped a photo. Then he zapped it off in a message to Jackie in Santa Monica, without explanation. The phone swooshed to confirm delivery.

The table where he sat in the back of the Café Cosmos appeared to be a marble and iron artifact transported here from a Parisian sidewalk brasserie, but it was the only table like that. All the furniture was mismatched, with tapestries and draperies hanging everywhere. Pinpoint Christmas lights gleamed like constellations embedded in the folds of fabric. An arched doorway looked over an outdoor terrace where more tables and chairs were arranged under a pergola that dripped with glowing webs of light.

Besides himself and the bearded man at the counter, the place was deserted. Sixties French pop grooved on the speakers. Gazing through the archway at the softly illuminated courtyard with its archipelago of tables, Harry had a feeling of dislocation. Was this Paris? Istanbul? Barcelona? It felt more like any of those places than a small town in the desert.

The man behind the bar said, "Oh my god!"

Harry glanced up. The guy stood behind the bar holding a phone to the side of his face, eyes wide. Then: "What!"

Their eyes met but the guy didn't seem to be seeing him. He was fully submerged in whatever scandal was currently unfolding inside his ear. Presently he said, "Jesus, poor Deborah. Does she know yet?"

Harry felt his own adrenaline pumping out empathy for whatever this barista and Deborah were going through. He bent to a fresh page and started a new sketch—another rocking chair kite, this one flying even higher and more distant than the others, tossed by a swirling wind that pulled the string taut. He tried to block out the one-sided phone call. The barista finally wrapped up the conversation and killed the call. He stared at Harry. "Dude, do you drink?"

Harry glanced at his nearly empty wine glass. Before he could answer, the barista came out from behind the counter with a half-full bottle of Bulleit and two shot glasses. He took a seat at Harry's table and poured two fat shots. He held his up and stared over the top of the shimmering booze with shining eyes. "To life," he said.

Harry picked up the other shot, raised it. "To life."

They swallowed and set the empty glasses back down with twin clicks.

The barista—long black hair framing a scruffy face, Jack Sparrow-esque with a scarf and bracelets and a paint-spattered shirt—nodded towards the counter. "That was a death notice."

"A death notice?"

The barista waved at the archway that opened onto the terrace, a blank white wall on the far side. A scaffold there held paint buckets and tools. "The guy I hired to paint that wall—a muralist—he just got killed in a car wreck on 27."

"Jesus. Highway 27?"

"Rollover accident, went through the windshield." The barista poured two more shots.

"Wait--I was just on that highway a couple hours ago. I think I saw that wreck."

"Completely dead," the barista said, pouring and raising a fresh shot. "You never know."

Harry raised his too. "You never do."

The barista sighed and downed his shot. "Transformation, man."

"Transformation," Harry said, and drank.

That was the beginning of their transformation from sobriety into drunkenness. They finished the bottle of Bulleit and moved on to a bottle of Johnny Walker, taking occasional breaks to step onto the terrace and smoke a joint that the barista offered up. The guy's name was Julio and he was originally from Juárez, but he'd grown up in the American southwest, and he'd opened this place just last year. He rose to attend to other tables when people trickled in, but always ended up back at Harry's table where their shared bottle stood. They'd become boozy compatriots in solidarity against death. Julio tapped the closed sketchbook on the table between them. "Sorry, I cut your inspiration. What were you working on?"

"Have a look, if you like."

Julio spent ten minutes paging through, making little twitches of surprise or interest. Finally he closed the book and narrowed his eyes at Harry. "You're a real artist."

"Well, it's only a sketchbook. Just the raw stuff."

"You're a real artist, though. I can see it."

"Actually, I'm the art director for a greeting card company. There isn't as much art involved in that as you might think, but yeah. You could say I do art for a living."

Julio watched him, a wry wrinkle at one corner of his mouth. His eyes glittered.

Harry knew what was coming next. He saw it as clearly as a sign along the side of the highway.

Muted light throbbed behind the drawn hotel curtains as Raquel's voice called from the hall. "Anybody alive in there?" she said, rapping on the door. Only when he dragged himself back to consciousness did he notice that his phone alarm was chirping. His head was splitting with the ghosts of wine and whiskey and weed. He couldn't quite remember how the night had ended, only that he'd been out past midnight. And had he agreed to paint Julio's damn mural? The sketchbook lay on the bedside table and he leafed through it. Several pages were torn out, raggedy edges along the spine.

He remembered that he'd sent Jackie a snapshot of a sketch, and when he checked his phone, he saw her reply: *Am I the kite, or am I holding the string?*

Yes, he replied with a dimple in his whiskered cheek.

Her response, moments later, was a googly-eyed smiley-face, every bit as ambiguous as his reply.

Raquel laughed when she saw his face as he shuffled into the breakfast room. "Did you get hit by a truck last night?" she said, then sealed her lips, apparently realizing that the phrase was in poor taste after what they'd seen.

"I made a friend," he said. He sloshed black coffee into a mug and slurped it down standing by the machine, then poured himself some more.

"How about I start us off driving?" she offered.

"Perfect--I can get caught up with my Instagramming." He meant it as a joke, and grinned, but Raquel gave him an earnest smile and grabbed a couple of bananas from the fruit bowl. Was this what happened on the cusp of the empty nest? The teen transforms into an adult, and the parent regresses back into adolescence. It felt like that switcheroo had been happening for years now, but the pieces had finally clicked into place. All her life, Raquel had been a proto-adult, and Harry had been an overgrown kid. Time had simply sealed the deal.

Harry swiped left, swiped right, swiped left again, as Raquel held their Prius to a steady 75 across the southern flank of Utah. "How about this one," he said, reading glasses low on his nose as he read the Tinder profile aloud: "*Social justice warrior bent on world domination via the synergy of good whiskey, hot jazz, and absurd conversation. Be as sharp as you are tall.*" Wow, I think she's got my number."

Raquel blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. "Dad, please--she sounds amazing, I'll give you that--but don't you think you ought to step away from the Tinder for a while? You've got a date lined up already. Don't be a douche."

"A douche! I've never been a douche!"

Raquel snorted. "Said every guy ever."

Harry hooked an eyebrow at his daughter. "Have boys mistreated you? You never talk about that stuff."

She scoffed. "Boys mistreat everybody. They're boys."

"Well, not every--"

"Dad! You don't need to worry about me, honestly. Guys really don't bother me anymore. I can handle myself."

"Of course you can, Raquel, I know that." He held his phone out for her to see the woman's profile pic. "Look at her. She looks like Annie Hall."

Raquel wouldn't even glance at it. "My eyes don't leave the road, dear father. Swipe left, and step away from the app."

He sighed and clicked the phone off. "I'm just hedging my bets. Jackie could be a total bust."

"Are these lines from your upcoming part in *The Douche Dialogues*?" Smirk.

"Okay okay, let's just concentrate on driving."

"And what about this 'friend' you made last night? What's up with that?"

"It was just a dude. He owns the café across the street from the hotel."

"So what if it's a dude? Love is love." More smirk.

"Raquel. The road."

"I know. We've met."

Across a corner of Arizona, through a descending canyon of shipwreck cliffs, in and out of Las Vegas and then into the traffic-congested desert flats of outer California. Raquel stayed behind the wheel, fueled by bananas and corn chips. Harry's date with Jackie was set for this very evening, 8 pm, on the Santa Monica pier. He hadn't seen her since high school, until she'd improbably popped up on Harry's Tinder when he set his location for Santa Monica in anticipation of this trip. He'd recognized her right away: the big eyes and heart-shaped face, the black curtains of long hair parted straight down the middle. She'd been a stoner freak in high school and Harry had been more a part of the goth weirdo crowd, but they'd connected through mutual friends and spent a season hanging out in her bedroom after

school smoking and listening to mixtapes of Bauhaus and Alien Sex Fiend and Sisters of Mercy. Her natural beauty had intimidated the hell out of him, and he'd never made a move to kiss her, although it was nearly all he thought about during those autumn days. He was certain she never thought of him that way. Then she got a boyfriend who rode a motorcycle, and she wore leather pants and sleeveless Harley tees to school for the rest of the year. The deathrock afternoons came to an end. Senior year, she moved away, and he never saw her again--until he stared into her nearly unchanged face on Tinder twenty-five years later. "Haroldo!" she'd responded to his initial message, the only one who'd ever called him that. "You haven't changed! Did you sell your soul to the Devil? How much did He give you?"

He'd changed plenty, of course. His hair was still thick, but it was entirely grey now. Still, his face was thin, but in a hollowed-out way. Were there really any traces of his 16-year-old self left? He peeked in the sideview mirror where the sun fell directly on his face. Death Valley unspooled all around. He looked haggard, dark under the eyes. Not just hungover but used up. Jackie was not going to even recognize him tonight. Maybe he should just cancel? What were they going to do anyway--sit on the pier and google deathrock tunes on their phones?

The sun pinned them from above. Harry felt better after Barstow, but Raquel wanted to keep driving. He tried to engage her in conversation about her living arrangements, sharing a one-bedroom off-campus apartment with a girlfriend from high school, Priya, but Raquel kept her responses monosyllabic. He started to get the feeling that she wanted to be behind the wheel as an excuse for avoiding conversation. By this time next week, he'd be on the highway back home, alone, and he'd be childless. She'd be a grown person, out in the world, and all his biological duties for propagating the species would be over. "You know, Raqui," he said, looking out over the plain of cacti marching off to the sun blasted horizon, "the finest line is knowing when to trust, and when to be on guard."

She glanced at him, then scowled at the road.

"And at your age, you need to err on the side of being on guard."

"Oh-kay."

"I think I've been more of a friend than a dad these past few years, and that was probably a mistake. I'm sorry, sweetie."

She glanced at him again, starting to look alarmed now. "Dad--I get it. But you have to get over mom."

"What? I'm fine. That's not what I'm talking about."

"Don't get all guilt-trippy about it, Dad. You did the best you could--the best anyone could. We're both going to be fine."

He looked back at the cactus procession. "The best I could," he said. It sounded like an epitaph. He kept quiet until they entered the outer freeways of LA.

The hug and kiss that Priya gave Raquel when they arrived outside the apartment confirmed a suspicion in Harry's mind. Raquel's grin was supernatural, a vision of a long, rich future full of love and challenge and triumph.

They unloaded the car in a headlong rush, Raquel dumping her things in what was clearly Priya's bedroom. The ocean was visible out the front window in a sliver of space between two buildings across the street, partially eclipsed by a leaning burst of palm trees. But the air was laced with sea salt and sunlight.

Twilight flared over the water as Priya poured them each a shot of tequila. They toasted standing on the balcony where the landward breeze played with their hair. "To fathers," Priya said.

"To the future," Raquel said. She leaned into him and clinked her shot to a second time and said, softly, "To you, Dad. Thank you."

Harry grinned. "To love," he said, and all three of them blushed, and downed their shots to hide it.

Raquel looked a degree of magnitude happier than he'd ever seen her, almost to the point of not being recognizable. For his part, he felt sadder than he'd almost ever felt, except for the days and weeks following his wife's death. But tonight was a different kind of sadness, tinged with a certain satisfaction. He'd gotten his child this far, after all, and she was going to be all right. Even better--she was going to *thrive*. You could tell just by the look of her.

Dinner plans took shape quickly. Raquel and Priya were meeting friends of theirs at a local watering hole. Priya invited him, but Raquel put an arm around her roommate's shoulders and said, "Actually, my dad's got a hot date tonight."

"Oh?" Priya said, eyes wide. "Who's the lucky girl or guy?"

Harry waved a hand. "Just an old friend. We're going to compare aches and pains."

Raquel nudged Priya. "Old high school sweethearts--and she's actually hot. I checked out her profile."

The tiny apartment became a whirlwind of primping and Fiona Apple, and before he knew it the two girls were heading out. Harry realized that his last dinner with his daughter had already come and gone. He thought of that picnic table in the weeds beside the gas station in Nowhere, Utah, where they'd chowed beef jerky and Fritos, in what had turned out to be their last sit-down meal together as father and child. From here on out, they'd just be two adults. A stricken smile played on his face as first Raquel and then Priya gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Do twice as much listening as talking," Priya said as she went out the door, finger in the air. "Make her feel respected."

"Who?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"The hot date."

"Ah, of course."

Then they were gone and he was alone on the balcony with an empty shot glass. The sun melted towards the edge of the world. He went back inside to put himself together.

He found the arranged spot on the pier--the farthest end, under one of the last lamp posts--and leaned there in his blazer, shivering with the twilight breeze that whipped off the water. A guitar dude was set up nearby with a tiny amp and microphone, playing folky covers of old Bowie. The guy's CDs were for sale in his open guitar case for twenty dollars. Harry watched him from his lamp post, feeling annoyed to have a soundtrack imposed on the moment, even if it was *Starman*.

Halfway through *Let's Dance*, a woman walked up to him on clacky heels. She wore a gauzy scarf around dark hair, and kept her hands plunged into the pockets of a long leather coat, a vintage find by the looks of it. Her smile was immediately familiar even if the rest of her was not. "I was waiting for *Ch-ch-changes*, but it was starting to get cold."

"Jackie. Damn, you look great."

They shared a hug, then went back to shoving their hands in their pockets against the wind. "So you've been waiting a



while?" he said.

She waved at a spot a few lamp posts away. "I just wanted to get a look at you first, make sure you were yourself."

"So I passed that test! I've been wondering if I'm myself, you know."

She squinted at him. "You've improved a lot with age, Haroldo. It's weird."

"A lot?"

She regarded him, shaking her head, almost angry looking. "Men get to do that--sexy aging? As if you didn't have all the advantages already. Dudes just never stop getting away with it, right?" Then she broke into a grin.

"Well," he said, "you're one to talk. You look amazing." He wasn't even sure yet if he meant that, only that it had to be said. But his first glimpse of her suggested that her features had sharpened in a fortunate way. The rosy roundness of her face had diminished, replaced with sculpted angles and lines. He pushed an extra spark into his eyes.

Her look matched his. "Sounds like we're both going to get lucky." She laughed and slipped her arm through his.

Dinner was in a bistro along the boardwalk where rented beach cruisers coasted past and people strolled as night settled over the shore. He'd expected to reminisce about Bauhaus and all the elements of their junior year as kindred outcasts—the Aquanet, the Benson & Hedges, the Bartles & Jaymes, Ronald Reagan's bullshit, their future visions of themselves as famous artists and rock stars—but none of that came up. Instead, she asked question after question about his life, his daughter, his work, his prospects. Harry found himself answering as fully and truthfully as he could, aware that he was dropping the ball on Priya's advice. He finally said something about that. "You know, my daughter's 'roommate' told me to listen twice as much as I talk, but you're not really letting me do that."

Jackie leaned forward in the circle of spotlight that illuminated their small table. The tablecloth was littered with crusts and crumbs of the baguette they'd demolished with their bowls of French onion soup. "Why did you say it like that? With air quotes?"

"'Roommate'? Well, I think there's more going on that she hasn't shared with me."

"But she *did* share with you. She brought you into the apartment where she's going to live with this person, and she didn't try to hide the hug and the kiss, or any of it. That was sharing."

"I guess you're right."

"And it sounds like this 'roommate' knows what she's talking about when it comes to dating scenarios." They both fingered the slender stems of their wine glasses.

"Okay then," he said, "now I ask the questions."

She laced her fingers in front of her, squared her shoulders, and beamed.

She'd been married, ten years, to a chef. During that time, she'd gone to culinary school as well, and they'd opened a restaurant together in Silver Lake. A gourmet vegetarian joint with craft cocktails. But the husband kept screwing the waitresses and hostesses, and she'd finally left him and opened her own place not far from here.

"Why aren't we eating there?" Harry wanted to know.

"It's where I freaking *work*, you know? Besides, I always like

to see what the competition is up to." She looked around with slitty eyes, tenting her fingers together.

"That explains all the cockroaches in the soup."

Her eyes popped for just a second before they disappeared into crescents under the smile that was unchanged after all these years.

They finished a bottle of wine, then walked back to her condo where they had sex, watched a couple episodes of *The Office*, had sex again, and fell asleep on her couch. Harry awoke, disoriented. The dawn sky was a grey sheet hanging over a grey ocean outside her balcony door. Jackie's hair curtained over his face as she leaned down to peck a kiss on his forehead. She was in a bathrobe, puttering in the kitchen where a kettle started to whistle.

"Why didn't we do this twenty-five years ago?"

"You were too shy," she said, heading for the stove.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes. A gull hovered in mid-air, almost close enough to touch, just beyond the balcony railing. "You mean if I'd just said something?"

"Well, it depends what you said." She joined him on the couch with a tray of tiny earthenware teacups and an iron pot that wafted the scent of jasmine.

He pondered. "So it took me twenty-five years, but I finally found the words. Which ones were they?"

"It was all of them, in combination." She poured steaming ribbons into both cups. "Plus general horniness, and a desire to recapture youth. And the Bowie songs. And the wine. Don't forget the wine."

"I won't forget anything."

Up close like this, in the pale dawn without make-up or wine goggles, he could see the age on her face, but it worked for her. He hoped the same was true of himself. She seemed to like looking at him, at least.

"You said you were only going to be here a couple days," she said quietly. "Is that still your plan?"

"No. At this point my plan involves never leaving this couch."

"I see." She scrunched her lips in thought. "That means we'll probably end up screwing a few more times before I get tired of you and kill you."

"A few? Could be worth it."

He ended up staying two more days, ostensibly occupying the couch at Raquel and Priya's tiny place, but actually spending both nights at Jackie's. She was gone for twelve hours both days and came home exhausted and already a little drunk to find Harry sitting on her balcony making sketches of the street below. The rooftops, the palm crowns, the ocean horizon. She never made him feel unwelcome or that she wasn't happy to see him, but he knew that the time had come for him to go after they skipped the sex on the third night. He'd dropped into the middle of these people's lives, and it was time for him to ease back into his own and get it flowing again.

His farewell dinner with Raquel ended up being a home-cooked affair with Priya, who helped him slice onions and garlic. They rustled up a batch of linguini and asparagus with cream sauce. It was simple and good enough. "I never really taught her to cook for herself," he said to Priya as they were plating nests of noodles. Raquel was setting the table out on the balcony under a web of lights. Strange music made puzzle pieces in the air. "I



JOYRIDE 12 BARTAMS GARDEN by MONIQUE SARKESSIAN

meant to teach her how to make salsa, and omelets, and beef bourguignon. All she ever wanted to make herself was ramen and cereal." It felt like an admission of failure.

Priya caught the look on his face and patted the counter between them. "Well, Mr. Stills, you got her this far. Now she's got people."

"Please, call me Harry." He grinned into the warmth of her smile. "And thank God for people."

They ate under the gradual twilight with the ocean murmuring. "To the future," he offered, and they clinked their white wines. There was nothing else momentous in their conversation, just a lot of easy chatter about TV shows and antique shops and coffeehouses that stayed open late. Harry felt himself faking a smile at first--he really would be leaving, any minute now--but before long the smile was real. With a crust of bread he drew a face on his plate in a puddle of sauce.

Later, as he was saying goodbye to Raquel at the curbside, she gave him a tight hug that went on and on. Finally, wet-eyed, she pulled away, gave a smile, and ran back up the walk without a word. Harry raised a hand but she didn't see it before slipping inside. He almost called out, then let her wordlessness linger. What would more words do? He drove out of town, out of the city, in no particular direction.

The Pacific Coast Highway held his attention for a few days. He found rooms in small towns and motels in a meandering route that took him back over the mountains and into the same desert they'd crossed a couple of weeks earlier. His sketchbook had grown full of cross-hatched drawings of vineyards seen from rest areas, lines of telephone poles marching to the horizon, dis-

tant thunderheads.

Coming back into Menden in southern Utah, he cruised down Main Street under the noon sun. There it was on the side of the café, on the courtyard wall: a rocking chair straining at the end of a kite string, buffeted in the wind. Bold black lines on a white background, with colorful clouds and mesas along a low horizon. Someone's name--not his own--was stenciled in the lower right corner, along with birth and death dates. A dedication, he supposed, to the late muralist. He saw it all while stopped at a light and moved on when a horn bleated behind him.

Freaking Julio--the café guy had stolen his sketch! Or--here Harry paused and considered--had he offered it to him? He couldn't remember the details. Now his design had been recreated on the side of the wall, with Harry's name nowhere in sight. He smiled to himself. *Am I the kite*, he thought, *or am I holding the string?*

He sat pulled over at the side of the road, looking at the wall. The chair strained against the line, reaching for the sky. You make things you love, you send them into the world, and then you let go. And then the next thing happens, and the next thing after that.

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goode for who

Poem by Edythe Rodriguez

black skin, white acts
blackface to carry black caskets
blackface to lineblur
black face for *it wasn't really about race*

goode for a u-turn on 59th
goode rizzo replacement
goode enough for a second term
goode for killadelphia
goode for the city of brothas

who love smokin brothas

goode for *i didn't know about the gasoline*
goode scapegoat
goode to look goode on paper

and bad for the cameras

goode negro
goode reverend
goode christian
goode eye for scripture
goode enough to crucify kinfolk

for a goode view on broad



Edythe Rodriguez is a Philly-based Afrikan Renaissance poet who studied Creative Writing and Africology at Temple University. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Tulane Review*, *Sonku Literary Magazine*, *Call and Response Journal* and *Bayou Magazine*.

Full sun

Poem by Tyler Campbell

ocean keeps crashing at my house whenever waves are too small
to couch surf / whenever moon tells his secrets / whenever the
tide rises like warm bread // whenever the door is deadbolted /
the lock gets picked / a horseshoe crab gets left on the deck /
heavy footsteps wake the whole house in the beginning of
the night // whenever moon leaves the porchlight on / wastes
fossil fuels / rolls weed on the coffee table / leaves seeds scattered
like coffee grounds on the kitchen counter / the house moans for
being left turned on // wind works against me / doesn't take her
15s / eats at her desk / is always trying to leave early // ocean
complains about the shoobies / the bennies / wants them to head
home for winter / for the restaurant to close on sundays / cut him
when it's slow / so he can go home / have strangers run metal
detectors through his hair / looking for gold / for the fishermen to
pull sandy strands back into a hairnet / dress his legs in fishnets /
before his next shift / before he falls asleep on the couch / in the
middle of the afternoon / before we have to spend the whole day
lightfooted / tiptoeing through the kitchen / watching t.v. with the
sound off / the captions on / so he doesn't wake up / leave in the
middle of the morning / with the lights left on / with the t.v.
flickering / with wind whispering / the top of his ears raw / biting
at his heels



Tyler Campbell is an artist outside of Atlantic City. He enjoys making tiny pancakes for many friends.



Dead Women

Allie Mariano – Second Place Contest Winner

The dead women are the topic of conversation at dinner. One in a dumpster. One, a hunter found, in the wooded swamp outside of town. One, with a hand that had fallen open, palm asking please, please don't forget me. One in a river, three in the swamp. Some degraded beyond recognition. The most recent, on the side of I-10. All together eight women, all of them sex workers, white girls and black girls, found in Jennings, New Iberia, Iowa, Louisiana.

It is not the conversation for polite company, but Moira and John pride themselves on the subversive. Of course, these dead women will be discussed over moderately priced cabs.

I love this about them.

Moira and John host: Moira, a history professor at the local university, and John, a chemical engineer at one of the plants. Some of the guests, I know, and some I do not.

It is the end of Moira's semester, and they were so happy when I arrived. They demanded I stay the night. *You could head out first thing. You could at least have coffee with us.* Once, I would have acquiesced, but tonight I'm only thinking of my trip back home, willing myself to stay sober enough to drive. Just an hour, east on I-10, a straight shot home to Lafayette.

On the table sits a big bowl of potato salad, yellow and shining. I watch it while the others stand around the table, chatting and watching Moira and John. Moira has tight, dark curls, and a face that isn't quite pretty. She is smart and loud and funny, so it doesn't matter.

From the corner where I stand in the dining room, I can see Moira standing over the stove, telling her husband that the pot is too hot to set on the table.

"A towel?" she yells. "It'll burn through."

"Who's the scientist, Doctor?" John replies. John is tall and all arms and legs. He towers over Moira who looks up at him with her hands on her hips.

I take a seat at the table, put my purse on the chair back, and stare at a bottle of wine. I want more but think of the cops monitoring the highway home.

Finally, John marches out of the kitchen, holding the boil pot with potholders on both of his hands. Moira fusses behind him with a hot plate and a towel. She puts the hot plate down, just by the potato salad, then drapes the towel across it and folds it back over, a sacred ceremony. She gestures to her husband: *put the damn pot down.*

There is comfort in the steaming pot, the scent of the thick

broth, of venison sausage, of pulled chicken.

"Sit!" Moira commands the guests. They mill about, make moves toward the table. "Go sit by Erin," Moira pushes a man near my age. He is also tall and thin, a young John with shaggy hair. He looks down but obeys. I feel my phone buzz in my purse, against my chair back. Maybe it is Sam. I want to get home to him.

Moira carries bowls of rice from the kitchen and places them in front of people at the table. All together, we are twelve.

With my bowl in front of me, I ignore the man to my side and ladle gumbo into my bowl. I take a large spoon of potato salad and throw it on top. The first bite is life-affirming. No decision I make today is so crucial that it can't be changed. It is thick and silky and salty.

Moira hovers over the table, making sure everyone has filled a bowl before she fills her own. John watches his wife. Brown, gravy dots his beard.

"Erin, Adam, Adam, Erin," Moira says, taking her seat at the head of the table. Adam is the man beside me. "Adam is John's nephew and a Chemical Engineer too. He interviewed at Citgo yesterday."

I smile, and he gives a small wave.

"I'm not sure I want to leave Texas."

Moira waves this away. "You'll love it here."

He starts to speak, but someone yells down the table to Moira.

"The girl on the highway, her throat was slit. Who do you think killed her?"

"Her arms were covered in bruises," says someone else.

I feel a creeping feeling in my stomach, drawing away the heat from the gumbo. I refill my wine glass a third time.

Moira shakes her head. "Conspiracy."

"Serial killer!" John calls from the kitchen. "It's a serial killer. All of those girls dead in a thirty-mile radius."

Moira crosses her arms and sits back. "Her throat was slit. Someone didn't want her to speak."

"We are talking about eight dead prostitutes, Moira. Doesn't that sound like a Jack the Ripper?"

She waves her arms at him. She is drunk. "Their innards aren't decorating the highway. Serial killers like a show."

"I'm glad I'm not a young woman," one of the other teachers says. "They are almost all under 30."

"It's a cover up," says Moira. "You have to know these towns. That many dead girls?"



Women, I think. I do not want to think about dead girls or dead women. I want to think about Sam who wanted me to stay home to begin with. His wife is out of town for the whole weekend. I'm not too drunk to drive, I think. I know which exits the cops hang out at. I resolve to stick to the speed limit.

I knew about the previous murders. I wasn't afraid. They were all sex workers; they worked out of the same hotel. They had rap sheets, drug habits. Crimes like this just remind you that they can happen, not necessarily to you.

The guests carry on.

"The Lafayette paper said —"

"Yes, but did you read—"

They mention neck bruises, the particular mix of semen in the vagina, the dirt and blood under the nails.

"Our paper says it's a serial killer"

"Parish cops are not incorruptible."

My stomach turns again. This morning, Sam asked me why I wanted to hang out with "those old people." We were lying in my bed, his arm around my shoulders, his other hand moving slowly down my stomach. I didn't bother mentioning that he was closer to their age than mine.

"They're my friends," I said. "I haven't seen them in months. Come with me."

Sam laughed at this. Of course, he wasn't going to come.

"I'm going," I said.

"What about the slit throat?" This question brings me back to this dinner, which now feels as if it will never end. I want my little studio apartment. I want to curl up with Sam, spend a slow Sunday morning with sunny-side eggs and black coffee.

I think about my apartment: my own, without roommates, above a garage, one big room and a tiny bathroom. I feel years have passed since I lived in Lake Charles, even though it has just been one. My parish job pays more than any job before. I don't miss the years I spent in Lake Charles: grad school and then low-paying jobs. It was easy living, late dive bar nights, weekends at camp houses on Big Lake, a far cry from my Tennessee home.

The apartment, now, is my haven, full of crazy, mid-century furniture inherited from an aunt: a wooden cabinet with an art deco inlay, two short, puffy little chairs that almost curved all the way around you, a wooden desk with hairpin legs. I bought a couch and a bed for myself. It is cozy. I love it because it is my own, because I have the entire say in how it looks, because I can see every corner at once. It feels safe. Amidst the chatter of murder and conspiracy theories, I want nothing more than to be home, door locked to the world outside.

"Hellooo." Moira is standing at the head of the table. "Erin?"

"Sorry, what?"

"What do you think? Serial killer or conspiracy?"

"It's really grim isn't it?" I ask. "Talking about them at dinner."

"It's current events." She is not the least bit worried.

"I don't know. I don't know enough about it."

"You should wildly speculate like the rest of us." John is smiling, sensing my unease.

"I'm a historian, John. My job is to wildly speculate on events. These just happen to be very recent events." The attention turns back to Moira and John, and everyone laughs. John gets up to grab another bottle of wine.

I take a sip of my wine. Adam says, quietly, "it is grim, isn't it? I saw the news, but I hadn't really thought of it until now."

"I hadn't either. I should, but I don't want to." Thinking too hard might bring me somewhere unsafe.

He puts a hand on the back of my shoulder. It is warm and friendly. The others start to get up from the table, moving to help in the kitchen or sit on the couch.

I glance at Moira; she is oblivious, talking to John, gesturing with her entire body.

"Do you want more wine?" Adam moves his hand to his own empty wine glass.

"I have to drive back to Lafayette."

"Tonight?"

"My boyfriend wants me back."

I watch the implication cross his face.

"Moira led me to believe otherwise."

"She doesn't know."

"Complicated?"

I nod and take another sip of my wine. I close my eyes to taste it, let it burn the back of my throat.

"Maybe stay?" he says.

"I'm going to get some air," I say.

I stand on the back patio, wishing I was a smoker with a reason to be outside. The bricks on the patio are sweating in the December humidity, it's still above 60 degrees outside and as humid as a swimming pool. I draw a line in the condensation with my foot. I feel too tipsy to drive right now. I worry in an abstract way, that there are too many things to manage, to think about.

I look around their yard. It's dark, but the patio's floodlights cast harsh bright stripes on the yard. There are stakes in the garden for tomatoes, but no vines. Beyond the garden, the low chain-link fence cannot hide where the land slopes into bayou. Cattails grow haphazardly. The water ripples at a disturbance. I shiver, thinking of womens' bodies settling into the murk. I take one deep breath and turn to go inside.

Inside, I pass the guest room where the door is only half shut. Adam is in there; his shirt off, his back to me, and I can see the broad definition of his shoulders. I feel a sudden ache, and I want to crawl to him. He could curl around me. I stand and watch him a second longer, dead silent. He starts to turn, and I run to the bathroom.

I look at my face in the mirror, flushed red with smudged eyeliner. The humidity had melted my face. I squeeze some toothpaste out on my finger, then put it in my mouth and swish it around. I spit, run some water on toilet paper, and wipe off the makeup under my eyes. I check my phone, no word from Sam, but his existence feels like a heavy weight all around me.

I finally leave around 11:30 with that hour drive ahead. I feel sober. On the way to the highway, I drive through the downtown strip: lots of young people are out in front of the bars drinking

and smoking. From the car, they all look beautiful and happy. For a second, I want to stop and join them. I want to be anywhere but where I am.

The highway calms me down. There are few other cars, and the road is well-lit and freshly paved. Why had they insisted on talking about those girls in that vague, glib way of people drinking? Of academics, always at a distance, always analyzing, asking everyone to zoom out.

I call Sam to let him know I am on my way. No answer, and I leave a message. *Hey, I'm headed home, you coming over?*

The stretch of I-10 between Lafayette and Lake Charles is completely flat, lined by rice fields and littered by fast food restaurants. I know the stretch by the exits: Iowa, Welsh, Jennings, Crowley, Scott. Otherwise, there is little to tell each mile apart. Almost midnight, the streetlights along the highway grow intermittent. Not all of them work. Any traffic has thinned. My mother would tell me to watch out for drunk drivers. Moira told me to watch out for drunk drivers as I left. She had been faux-enraged that I was leaving. "We have everything you could need here! Look at this handsome nephew! If you have to leave, take this food!" The highway stretches infinitely ahead. I try Sam again.

The phone rings, and all I see is Adam, shirtless, back turned. We had barely spoken, but the appeal of this new person is easy, all potential, no baggage and dead weight. I shake him from my head, shake away the option. Sam wants me back tonight. I like that about him, that he wants me close, whether or not he stays the night with me. Still no answer on the line.

I begin to worry, just a little. He can get so irritated when I don't answer, and our plan is to meet at my apartment, assuming all went well with his wife. Or, as well as it could. He would stay with me for a week or two. It had felt like a good idea to be out of town when he told her, though now I wish I had just stayed home. I don't know much about his wife; she is a dentist. I can care less about her the less I know about her. Sam doesn't talk about her much, unless it is to say he can't get away for the evening.

I realize I have been driving in silence when I pass the Welsh exit. I find the Cajun station; it is playing Zydeco, which is usually irritating. Right now, though, the accordion, the nasally butchered French lyrics are a comfort. They lighten the night.

When I see the Jennings exit ahead, police lights flashed red and blue in my rearview mirror, as if on cue,

"Fuck," I say. I slow, as I drive up an overpass to park under the streetlight at the top. To my right, the gas stations and fast food restaurants off the exit ramp are bright and not too far away. I stop the car and watch the cop in the rearview mirror, typing into his computer, doing whatever cops do for ages before they finally get out of their vehicles. I am sober; I am certain. I don't see any other cars on the horizon.

"Fuck," I say again. I chug an old plastic bottle of water, watching him in the rearview mirror, swishing it in my mouth. The water tastes like plastic. I think of my apartment and its safety. I look out into the night: the low-lit highway, the haze of humidity, the lingering exhaust. This is too vulnerable. This is unsafe.

He gets out slowly, and I can see his beer belly as he shuts his car door. A car races by on the interstate, but he doesn't even look at it. I take my eyes off of him to watch the car ride away; its taillights shrink to faint red dots on the horizon. I roll down my window; it is still humid out. The moisture billows into my car. I



can smell exhaust and tar and wet grass. I reminded myself what I am doing, where I am going, who I am.

"Ma'am" he says.

"Yes?"

"You've got Tennessee plates?"

I try to make these words make sense.

"Sorry?"

"Your license plate, it's not local. Are you from Tennessee?"

"Oh," I say. "Yes, I moved to Lafayette not too long ago. There was so much to do. I hadn't thought about them." Mostly true, I did completely forget about my plates. The car is still in my mother's name, though I have lived in this state for almost four years. I realize I have avoided the hassle of tickets or getting pulled over my whole life here.

"You need to do that. How do you like Louisiana?"

"Oh," I start, wondering where this is going. "It's good." I try and stop a shiver.

"Good. I've never been to Tennessee. What brings you down here?"

"Work." I try to say it cheerily. My cell phone buzzes once on the console.

"What kind of work do you do?"

I will another vehicle to pass by, for it to be daylight. I want to have made different choices. Sweat pools under my legs on my car seat. I feel it drip from behind my knees.

"Social services," I finally say. "Social work."

"You definitely have a Tennessee accent. Have you spent any time in Jennings?"

"I haven't."

"You should visit sometime. We got better gumbo than Lafayette." The fear of a DUI dissipates, but a new one creeps up my spine. I do not want to talk about gumbo on the side of a highway after midnight.

I think of the dead women in Jennings, about Moira's suspicions of police corruption. A couple of cops had been taken off the force, and it was rumored to be related. That was what someone said at dinner. Or maybe they were on extended leave? Did they always get everyone though? That was the thing about corruption. It runs deep.

"I guess I will." My phone begins vibrating again on the console. "My husband is probably worrying about me. It's so late."

The cop frowns. A truck speed by; my car shudders faintly in its wake.

I swallow and put on my serious voice that I use for clients: "did you want anything?"

"I noticed your plates. You need to change them. It's a residency requirement." His casual chat has turned abrupt.

"Yes sir," I say.

The silence hangs thick between us. I barely dare to breathe.

"Can I go?" I finally ask.

He nods slowly and turns back to his vehicle but doesn't walk away.

"You should come to Jennings sometime. I'm Mike."

I look up and out of the window to see him. He isn't looking at me; he is looking out over the splendors of the exit, at the Shell and Tobacco Plus, Popeye's and McDonald's. His hands are on his hips, which makes his belly poke out even more.

"Ok," I say, quietly.

Mike takes a step toward his car and looks back at me. The right side of his face is illuminated by the lights. He looks sad,

maybe. Then, he turns again and walks away.

I move slowly inside my car, scared to move too fast and catch his attention. I put my foot on the brake, slide the car into gear, then nudge the gas. My car moves easily, as if it knows slow movements will calm me.

My apartment is an over-the-garage, mother-in-law suite, separate from the main house where a family with young children lives. They were happy to rent the apartment to a young professional who was no longer a partying college student. When I pull up in the driveway, the garage floodlight switches on. On the left side of the garage, a wooden staircase leads up to my small deck and door. The porch light is also on. I feel relief to think that Sam must be there.

I turn off the car and grab my purse and the grocery bags with leftovers that Moira sent with me.

Inside, Sam is sitting on my round little chair, and the floor lamp next to him is off. I can only see shadows on his face.

"You were supposed to be here an hour ago."

"I got pulled over." I put my bags down by the door. "It was really weird."

"Sure."

"What?"

"Pulled over? You drive like a mawmaw."

"I know. It was weird." The back of my neck prickles.

I walk over to him and lean to give him a kiss. He turns his head to the side. I turn on the lamp next to him and look at him, his long, pronounced features, his Roman nose, his high cheekbones. He gazes at some spot on the floor, away from me.

"Are you okay?" I go to pick up the bags and start to put the food away.

"Fine."

It strikes me suddenly that Sam is drunk. I can smell it now, like a switch has flipped. He doesn't drink often, but now the scent of whiskey is everywhere. I open the fridge.

"Do you want something to eat? Eggs or toast or something?" I pull out the eggs.

He crosses his arms. "Where were you?"

"I told you. I called when I left Lake Charles. I got pulled over in Jennings."

"Where's your ticket?"

"I didn't get one. It was weird. It was like he just wanted to talk to me."

Sam stands up. "What happened with the cop?"

"He just asked me a bunch of questions."

"And let you go?" He says this as if it was the most preposterous thing he has ever heard.

"What's going on Sam?"

"Was he hot?"

I put the eggs on the counter. "What the hell, Sam."

He stands over me, a good six inches taller, thin, wiry muscles.

"Was. He. Hot?"

"What the fuck kind of question is that? Jesus Christ. Getting home was hell. You need to drink some water."

In a second, he has both of my arms in his hands, tight. I pull away, but he grips them firmly. "Just answer me." I start moving.

"Let go."

"Answer me, and I'll let go."

I look up in his eyes, they are dark and blank. His brow is

wrinkled, furrowed.

"No, he wasn't hot, Sam. He had a beer belly. Maybe he was lonely. Maybe he wanted something from me. I don't know. He let me go. I'm here. What else do you want?"

"The fucking truth, Erin." He let me go, like he could throw my arms to the floor.

"What happened with Regina?" I move toward him, but I can tell by his face he's told her nothing.

"I want you to tell me why you took so long to get home. Did you meet someone at Moira's? Cops don't just let people go without a ticket that late at night."

"You need to leave." I say it firmly, tiredly.

Before I can move, he has both hands around my neck, and I'm against a wall. I try to push his chest, to slap at him, but he is stronger than I can ever be. I cough, choke, struggle for breath. I think of the dead women. How someone was close enough to them to bruise them, to slit their throats. Even if it was a stranger, a serial killer, they had to trust them enough to get that close.

I gasp for breath and let out a ragged scream. Against all logic, I hope the family does not hear me. I think how I do not even want the police to help. Sam loosens his grip and shakes his head. I put my arms between his and push them off of me. His shoulders slump, and he will not look at me.

"Sit down," I say. "I'll make you some food." I watch him walk toward the table and sit, still gazing down.

Earlier, when I was leaving Moira's house, John had walked me to my car.

"You okay, kiddo?"

"I'm okay. Just a lot going on."

"Ignore her. She thinks she knows what's best for everyone. You don't have to see Adam, we'll still invite you over."

I laughed. I had wanted to tell him everything. That I was dating a married man, that he was leaving his wife for me, that I found his possessiveness exhilarating and at times a bit too much. That I was terrified to leave, to head home, but that my home was the only place I wanted to be. That I was completely spooked.

"Invite me over next time he's in town," I said.

John gave me a hug and opened my car door for me.

"Be safe out there," he said.

I put a frying pan on the hot plate and crack the eggs into a pint glass. I hold each end of the egg between my finger and my thumb and tap it once on the countertop. Then, I break the egg into the glass. I add a little water and beat the eggs with a fork.

"I didn't tell Regina," he says from the table.

I keep beating the eggs. I don't look at him.

"Why not?" The pan is hot, and I pour in the eggs, throw shredded cheese on top.

"I can't."

I keep cooking. Maybe the cop had just wanted to talk to someone. Maybe Sam had just had too much.

For the first time all night, I feel not fear or anxiety, but anger.

"Why didn't you tell her, Sam?"

I hear him inhale, but he doesn't answer, and I don't turn around. I finish the eggs and turn off the heat, lifting the pan. I feel the creeping feeling in my neck again, and I whirl around.

I know that Sam is right behind me. I know that the pan hits his arm. He yells, almost a bark, and I strike him again with the

pan, maybe on the shoulder. The eggs are on the floor in a glistening mess. I grip the pan and breathe heavily. Sam stares at me and clutches his arm with his other hand. We stand, staring at each other: me, with my back to the stove, and Sam, with the rest of my apartment behind him. I feel the adrenaline course through me; I see how his eyes cannot focus.

I feel anger and power and powerlessness and sadness, and I try to make a decision. I will put the pan down and leave the eggs. I will run cold water over a rag and put it on Sam's arm. I will send him to his car, and that will be it. I will leave him to explain his injuries, to account for his own scars, to make his own choices about his marriage. I will keep moving forward. I will make it.

Tomorrow, Moira would call to check on me. She would share more rumors and speculation. The murders would never be solved. Moira would invite me over. I would never make that late-night drive again. Maybe I would let Adam wrap his arms around me. Maybe I would always choose something safe over something exhilarating. Maybe not. Maybe I would give in to impulse again and again. I had to own my story. I knew I controlled it. This was my only power.

I put down the pan, but keep my eyes on Sam. I get out a rag, turn on the faucet, and feel the cool water run over my hand.

Allie Mariano's writing has appeared in *CutBank*, *The Citron Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *New Orleans' The Times-Picayune*, and other places. This year, her short story collection, *Dead Women and Other Stories* was a finalist for the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize. When she's not writing or teaching, she can be found biking in the Ouachita Forest.

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The Feral Wives

David L. Updike – Third Place Contest Winner

The Feral Wives have left us, that much is clear. What is less clear is why, and for how long. Surely their absence must be an aberration, a temporary detour from the long, slow, steady march of civilization. For how would we go on without them? And they without us?

We know so little. Their means of survival, their patterns of migration, their social structure—if they can be said to have one—all remain mysterious. We can theorize, of course, but little can be said with any certainty. We have learned that they tend to travel in groups of six to twelve—though communities of twenty or more are not unknown. They prefer to stay on the move, building temporary shelters from the materials close at hand and then disassembling them, so that the only traces they leave behind might be a pile of sticks and leaves, a charcoal pit, a few bones. And yes, they hunt, fish, and trap, though we have little idea how, since they do not appear to be armed in the conventional sense. They seem to know things that we have lost, and to have lost things that we know.

Those who are returned to us—sometimes by misadventure, more often by force—are of little help. They understand our questions but do not answer them. Have they been sworn to secrecy? Attempts to reintegrate them inevitably fail. In extended periods of captivity—for this is clearly how they see it—they become despondent, sometimes even catatonic. We can warehouse them, or we can set them free. Either way, they no longer belong to or among us.

We were at a rest stop somewhere in Ohio when Katrina finally bolted.

She'd been slumped over in the passenger seat all morning, face pressed against the glass, staring out at the monotonous landscape of fields, farms, and factories scrolling by on the turnpike. I was at the wheel, trying to put as many miles as possible behind us, with the vague notion that a change of scene might mean a change of outcome. The girls rode in the back, uncharacteristically quiet, Chelsea clinging to her phone, Greta to Mr. Tiddles, her stuffed rabbit. They were anxious, looking to us for cues on this odd, unexpected journey. I had none to offer.

To the extent that I had a plan, it was to keep driving west, chasing the sun until it set, then find a cheap motel for the night. Rinse and repeat. I'd thought maybe we could outrun destiny, and if not, then at least we'd be on the run as a unit. Maybe at some point we'd just ditch the car and the hastily packed suitcas-

es and tramp off into the wilderness together. That didn't seem to happen to others, but why couldn't we be different? Or maybe we'd just keep going, all the way to the Pacific, and then... what?

Something made Katrina perk up. She raised her head and squared her shoulders, the muscles on the back of her neck tensing. I stole a sideways glance out the passenger window to see what might have caught her attention, but it was just the same thing we'd been seeing for hours: rows of soy and corn stretching into the distance, punctuated by an occasional barn or silo. Perhaps sensing my gaze, she turned to face me. Her eyes, curtained by wisps of her long blond-going-to-gray hair, were open wide, pupils dilated. She was looking, not at me, but right through me, beyond me, to something that wasn't there, or not yet there, though I had the feeling that the sheer intensity of her gaze could almost bring it into being, whatever it was. Not for the first time in recent weeks, I also had the visceral sense that I was no longer looking at my wife of fourteen years but at a complete stranger. God knows what she saw when she looked back at me.

The angry blast of a truck horn in the left lane snapped my attention back to the road. I'd been drifting, and I jerked the wheel to the right as an oil tanker whizzed by mere inches away.

"What is it, Dad?" said Chelsea, her voice tight with worry. "What happened?" At nine, to her sister's four, Chelsea had become their spokesperson for the trip.

"It's fine, honey," I told her. "I was just getting a little too close to that truck, so he was letting me know."

"Mom, what were you looking at over there?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Katrina absently. "Go back to sleep." Neither girl had slept a wink since we'd left our home in Harrisburg in the early dawn.

"I have to pee," said Greta.

"How bad, muffin?" I asked. "Can you wait a little while?"

"Kinda bad," she said. In the rear-view mirror I could see her squirming in her seat. She hugged Mr. Tiddles so tightly that his torso slumped forward, his long ears drooping over her tiny thighs.

I sighed. "OK, let me see what I can do." I'd been holding on myself since at least Pittsburgh and had finally reached that point of Zen where my angry bladder seemed to belong to someone else. Now, with the prospect of relief, the urgency returned. I saw a sign ahead promising a rest stop in five miles.

"Hang in there," I told Greta, taking the Subaru up to eighty

to pass a row of cars and trucks in the right-hand lane. In four minutes flat we were pulling into the Muskingum County Rest Area. We drove past a long line of stopped tractor trailers and turned into one of the angled parking spaces for cars. Ahead, up a paved walkway, was the visitor center, a low concrete building with a flying-saucer-shaped metal roof. A path to the right led to a pavilion with a few empty picnic tables, beyond which lay grassy hills with stands of tall oaks, and, beyond that, the woods. A cell tower loomed out of the trees like a sentry.

"OK, let's go," I said, opening the door and unfolding my stiff legs. By the time I stood up, Chelsea and Greta were already out of the car and on their way up the sidewalk. "Wait up!" I called, but they kept going, Greta pulling her older sister by the hand toward the glass doors of the visitor center. I poked my head inside the car. "Are you coming?" I asked Katrina. "I don't want them running off alone."

"They'll be okay," she said, not looking up. "They're survivors, Steve."

"Alrighty, then," I said, not wanting to argue the point. "Do you want anything? Coffee? A snack?"

She shook her head.

"We may not stop for a while after this."

"It's best to keep moving."

"Suit yourself." I pushed the door closed and hurried up the path. We'd had a lot of disconnected conversations like this lately, and I was running out of patience. So, apparently, was she.

The bathroom stop turned into a snack run, which was quickly upgraded to lunch, and then I couldn't resist getting in line at the Starbucks for an iced mocha latte, my one weakness. By the time we emerged from the building, laden with greasy bags and sweaty drinks, Katrina was gone. Not only that, but she'd left the passenger door wide open, with all of our stuff in plain view of anyone wandering by.

"Where's Mom?" asked Greta.

"I guess she went for a walk," I said. She'd left her phone in the cup holder between the seats, and her suitcase was still with the others in the luggage compartment. I scanned the surrounding area but saw no sign of her. A wave of panic rose from my gut to my chest and lodged there. I didn't want to alarm the girls, so I said, "Let's go over to the picnic tables. We can eat our lunch while we wait for her to come back."

She didn't come back.

"Maybe she's inside, looking for us," I said, though I didn't really believe it. "Let's go check."

We dumped the remains of our picnic into the waste bin and headed for the building. Several couples passed us on their way out, retirees in tennis shoes and oversized sweatshirts. The kind of people you saw on the road in late September. We must have seemed out of place, and perhaps a bit panicky, as we attracted looks of curiosity and concern. One of the women leaned over and whispered something to her husband, then gave the girls a sympathetic nod. Save your pity, I thought. We'll be fine.

The visitor center was humming with activity, as people headed in every direction at once, alone and in clumps. I looked around the place and saw no sign of Katrina. I sent the girls into the women's room, but they returned without their mother. We combed the food court, to no avail. I asked some of the employees if they'd seen a fortyish woman in jeans and a fuzzy brown sweater. Not much to go on, I realized, but we had to try. They just shrugged. Greta began to cry, and Chelsea took her by the

hand. More people were staring at us now. More whispers and knowing looks.

"She must be outside," I said. "C'mon, let's go, girls."

We walked the perimeter of the rest area, where the mown grass gave way to woods, calling "Katrina" and "Mom" at the top of our lungs. The dark, silent forest swallowed our cries. The only other sound was the rumble of trucks out on the highway. I saw no paths or obvious points of entry, just weeds and underbrush, thorns and poison ivy. Discarded candy wrappers, Styrofoam cups, and plastic bags had blown up against the edge of the wood, like sea foam washed up by the tide. The idea of stepping over them and into that dense mess of foliage with the girls in tow made me deeply uneasy. So did the idea of leaving them standing there at the edge of the wood.

We went over the entire rest area twice, then returned to the car and sat with the windows down. Greta continued crying and sniffing, while Chelsea stroked her sister's hair and I sat in the front thinking about next steps. It was Chelsea who finally broke the silence. "We lost her, Dad," she said.

It sounded like an accusation.

HOST: Welcome back. I'm Megan McCready, and this is "Here and Now." Today we're talking about the so-called Feral Wives. Who are they? Why are they leaving? Where are they going? What can we do to bring them back? Joining me this morning are two experts: Roger Reed of MROWWW. Roger, why don't you tell us what that stands for?

ROGER: Sure. It's Men Rebuilding Our World Without Women.

HOST: Welcome.

ROGER: Pleased to be here.

HOST: And over here we have Vanessa van der Velde, professor of women's studies at Barnard College and author of *Fleeing to the Future: Manifesto for a New Feminism*. Professor van der Velde, thanks for joining us.

VANESSA: My pleasure. And just Vanessa is fine.

HOST: Roger, let's start with you. Why do you think this is happening, and why now?

ROGER: Well, it's pretty clear, really. As a species we've reached a breaking point. For millennia, human society was shaped around a simple concept: the nuclear family, with one man, one woman, and their biological offspring.

VANESSA: Not al- . . .

ROGER: And it worked, or at least it worked well enough that every society in the world ended up adopting some version of this model and building a cosmology around it.

VANESSA: Not ev- . . .

ROGER: And the reason it worked was because there were clearly defined roles and a hierarchy for enacting and enforcing them, with the woman as the primary caretaker, and the man as the head and decision-maker.

VANESSA: Whoa, I . . .

ROGER: But in the last, let's say, five decades or so, there's been a coordinated effort to undermine the natural order of things and replace it with something else, something based on destructive and misguided notions of fairness and equality.

VANESSA: What's mis- . . .

HOST: So you blame feminism?

ROGER: No, not at all, Megan. I blame men.

VANESSA: Can I just . . .

HOST: Why do you blame men?

ROGER: For being weak. Too many of us have abdicated our natural role, and it's left our women rudderless. They're leaving because we haven't been fulfilling our social and biological imperatives as the male of the species.

HOST: Which are?

ROGER: I call it the three P's: Provide, Protect, and Preside.

VANESSA: If I may . . .

ROGER: It's like the proverbial three-legged stool. You take away one leg and the whole thing collapses. I'd argue that all three are eroding, and what we're seeing now are the consequences.

HOST: And you, Vanessa, how about it? Do you think Roger is right?

VANESSA: I couldn't disagree more. He's right that we've had centuries of patriarchy but look where it's gotten us. A planet on the brink of disaster, a society that's literally being pulled apart. And all because of men's insatiable need to dominate everything—women, nature, each other. This is what's driving these women away. They're returning to nature as allies against a system that aims to destroy everything. It's a survival instinct . . .

ROGER: Vanessa, Vanessa, please, you know that just isn't true. Our survival as a species has always depended on subduing and exploiting nature at every turn. That's the whole basis of civilization, going all the way back to the Fertile Crescent.

VANESSA: Fertility is nature, Roger, and women . . .

[Crosstalk]

HOST: We have to . . .

[More crosstalk]

HOST: We have to break for commercial. I want to thank you both for being here. When we come back, we'll be joined by a bounty hunter who's been reuniting families across the country. He calls it rescue, others say it's kidnapping. What do you think? Stay tuned.

We stayed in the rest-stop parking lot until dinnertime. I knew with increasing certainty that Katrina was gone, but I was reluctant to leave in case she changed her mind. If we left, how would she ever find us? We made several trips to the visitor center for various things, and to have another look around the premises. And then it started to get dark, and the girls were getting restless and asking too many questions I couldn't answer, so I decided it was time to move on. But first we had to leave a note or something inside.

I herded the girls into the visitor center one last time, looking for someone official to ask about where to leave a notice. The best I could do was a uniformed janitor emptying trash cans in the food court. I explained our dilemma, and he pointed to a kiosk against the wall that I'd somehow overlooked in our previous passes through the building. Under a sign that read "Have You Seen Us?" was a unit that could easily have been mistaken for an ATM. On the screen, at roughly six-second intervals, appeared a succession of captioned photos of women: "Regina Simpson / Age 36 / Last seen Steubenville, Ohio / August 7, 2023. If located, please contact...." Regina was pictured seated at a table and clutching a large kitchen knife in her hand, blade pointed toward the ceiling. On the table in front of her was a birthday cake, candles ablaze. She was facing the camera, and there it was again, that look I'd seen in my wife's eyes just hours earlier, gazing past us, *through* us, into a future we couldn't see. A wave of vertigo swept over me, and I clutched the edges of the counter to steady myself. Then the picture was replaced by another,

and the feeling passed.

A green button to the lower right of the screen was labeled "New Entry." Reluctantly, I pressed it, and a touchscreen menu appeared. I entered Katrina's name, date of birth, and "Last seen Muskingum County Rest Area, Ohio," along with the date and contact info. All that was left was to upload a photo. I pulled out my phone and began scrolling through the gallery: memes, pictures of the girls on their bikes, of a fender-bender I'd been involved in a few months earlier, of the girls in last year's Halloween costumes, more memes . . . did I really not have a picture of Katrina?

"Chelsea, do you have a decent picture of Mom on your phone?"

After much discussion, we settled on one from last summer, of Katrina kneeling in the garden. She was looking at the camera and smiling, her hand cupped around a large, ripe tomato. We uploaded the photo and then stood there, waiting for it to come around on the screen. After a couple of minutes, she appeared among the procession of the missing and then was gone from us again. For the first time that day, I felt tears gathering at the corners of my eyes.

DESPITE SETBACKS, PA HUNTERS HARVEST 74 ELK THIS SEASON

HARRISBURG, PA – Eighty-nine hunters took part in Pennsylvania's one-week general elk hunt, which closed Nov. 9. Most left elk country with a trophy. For those licensed to hunt bulls, the success rate was 100 percent.

The harvest included eleven bulls estimated to weigh 700 pounds or more. The heaviest, taken in Clinton County, tipped the scales at 800 pounds and had a 10-by-9 rack. Some hefty antlerless elk were also taken in the harvest. Ten of the 62 cows taken by hunters weighed over 500 pounds.

Harvest numbers were down somewhat from previous years, due to the closure of several areas following sightings of non-hunters in the vicinity. State Game Commission wardens also investigated several reports of unlawful harvesting, including the partial remains of one bull discovered in Carbon County. No arrests were made.

All hunters are urged to use caution due to increased activity in state game areas unrelated to licensed harvesting of wildlife. Accidental shooting incidents such as those reported in Illinois, Michigan, and Tennessee have not occurred in Pennsylvania to date. We'd like to keep it that way.

—Pennsylvania State Game Commission Bulletin

The closest motel I could find was two exits and twenty-some miles away. The taciturn Indian-American couple who ran the place handed over the keys without comment, and Chelsea and I unloaded the bags and brought them in while Greta stood outside in the pale yellow glow of a streetlight, clutching Mr. Tiddles and sucking her thumb.

"Greta," I said as I emerged from the room for a second load, "Thumb." We'd made a bargain whereby she got to take Mr. Tiddles everywhere in exchange for not sucking her thumb.

"Dad, leave her alone," said Chelsea.

"We can't suspend the rules just because Mom isn't here."

Greta threw Mr. Tiddles to the pavement, stomped into the motel room, and slammed the door.

"Nice going," said Chelsea.

It was sometime last year when we first heard about the Feral Wives, though I don't think they were even called that yet. It was a Sunday morning. The kids were watching TV in the den while Katrina made pancakes and I did the *New York Times* crossword. We had NPR on in the background, and a report came on about an unusually large number of missing-persons cases involving women in various parts of the country.

"You know, you could cut me a little slack," I said. "It's not like this is easy for me."

She rolled her eyes, retrieved the rabbit from the sidewalk, then joined her sister in the room, closing the door behind her.

"Chelsea, Greta, I'm sorry!" I called after them.

I tried the door. It was bolted from the inside.

After much cajoling, I managed to get them out of the room and back in the car, and we drove off in search of a restaurant. The motel owners hadn't been especially helpful, but it seemed there was a diner a couple of miles down the road. After driving back and forth through the town, which was really just a cluster of dull clapboard houses with rusting cars in the driveways and plastic toys on the lawn, we finally spotted the neon sign on a side road that led back in the direction of the interstate. It didn't look promising—just a dull stainless-steel-plated box of a place, with a handful of old cars and trucks parked out front—and I was half-tempted to drive the twenty-five miles back to the rest stop for Sbarro or Wendy's, but the weight of the day was settling over me like a damp wool blanket. I needed a meal and a bed, perhaps not even in that order. I pulled into the lot and parked.

In contrast to the dingy exterior, everything inside was bright and shiny and smelled like disinfectant, even the menus, which were almost as large as the Sunday comics section. Our waitress, whose name was Sandy, wore a white uniform and a cheerful smile that seemed like an extension of the decor. She asked where we were from and where we were going. The first one was easy, the second one not so much. I was about to say that we were "headed west," but Greta beat me to the punch.

"Our mommy ran away today," she said.

"Oh, darling, I'm so sorry. You must be worried about her."

Sandy continued talking to the girls, asking them questions about their mother, all the while ignoring me. Finally, I could stand it no longer and cut in.

"They're fine," I said. "We're fine."

"No, we aren't," said Chelsea.

Greta, who had finally calmed down somewhat on the way over, began crying again.

I sensed a coup building and I was outnumbered, so I backed down.

Sandy brought the girls multiple refills on the sodas that came with their grilled cheese sandwiches, and then threw in two free sundaes for dessert—as though an excess of sugar would somehow soften the loss of their mother. With me she was curt and direct. "Are you finished with that, sir?" she asked, looking at my half-finished hamburger and pile of fries.

"I couldn't eat another bite," I said. My appetite had fled, and fatigue was settling in.

"Your check." She slapped it face down on the table in front of me.

Is this how it's going to be? I thought. Damn it, I'm the one who stayed behind.

Just for spite, I left her an outrageously large tip.

It was sometime last year when we first heard about the Feral Wives, though I don't think they were even called that yet. It was a Sunday morning. The kids were watching TV in the den while Katrina made pancakes and I did the *New York Times* crossword. We had NPR on in the background, and a report came on about an unusually large number of missing-persons cases involving women in various parts of the country. The women were believed to be alive, and some had been spotted traveling in groups, usually in rural areas. Supermarkets and restaurants in these areas had also reported overnight break-ins that many thought were related to the disappearances. A local sheriff somewhere in the Midwest was interviewed, as was one of the husbands. Both seemed completely at a loss to explain the phenomenon. "I just keep waiting," said the husband, "and wondering why."

"That's weird," I said. "I mean, it sounds almost like an internet hoax to me, or some kind of hysteria. Remember all those clown sightings back in, when was that?"

"I believe this is real," said Katrina.

"So what do you think it's about? Why would they do this?"

"I'm sure they have their reasons."

"Like what?"

She shrugged and looked out the window. Outside, our neighbor Ted was bent over his lawnmower, tugging repeatedly at the starter cord. Finally it turned over, chugged a few times, and roared to life.

"Everyone is different," she said. She didn't elaborate; I didn't ask.

In retrospect, I probably should have.

Deirdre Hendricks, Ted's wife, was the first to go. We knew them, of course, but weren't especially close, even though one of their two boys was in Chelsea's class at school. Word got around, along with various rumors—that she'd run off with an unknown lover, that she'd gone back to California to live with her parents, that she'd joined a religious cult—but eventually, as other women began to follow suit, we connected her disappearance with the larger trend.

We'd see Ted on the other side of the fence, puttering around in his yard, pruning the roses, scooping the leaves out of the pool, running the leaf blower along the deck. He seemed determined to act as though everything was normal, but there was a ferocity to everything he did. I felt sorry for him, of course—but also, I have to admit, a little superior. I imagined that he must not have treated Deirdre very well, after all, for her to take off like that. And there had to be something very wrong with her as well, to abandon her kids like that. I crossed paths with him

once at the supermarket and mumbled a few words of sympathy, which he brushed aside in a pretty rude way. Oh well, the guy was suffering. Most of all, though, I felt bad for the boys. Whenever I saw the two of them coming or going from the house, they always had their heads down and seemed lost. Chelsea said that Ted Jr. had been getting in fights at school.

A month or so later, a police car pulled up in front of their house, and two women in uniform got out. They helped Mrs. Hendricks out of the backseat and escorted her up the walkway to where Ted and the boys stood waiting. She wore a long white gown and walked slowly and deliberately, a policewoman at each elbow. Then they all went inside and closed the door. After that, we'd see her out on the back porch now and then, usually accompanied by her husband. There was a chain anchored to one of the porch posts, and sometimes he'd lock the end of it to a little brace she wore around her ankle so he could leave her out there. She'd sit on the folding deck chair in the sun, arms draped at her sides, until he came out and brought her back in. We saw nothing of the boys anymore. Chelsea said they had stopped going to school.

Katrina and I were sitting in the kitchen one morning, drinking coffee. It was a bright, sunny day, and normally we would have been outside, but we'd stopped using the back porch so much because we never knew when Mrs. Hendricks would be out there in her chair. Not that we interacted with her, or her with us, but it was just awkward having her sitting there.

She was out there now, in fact.

"What do you suppose happened to her?" asked Katrina.

"Our sunbathing friend over there? I don't know."

"She looks so . . . empty."

"Yeah, not a lot going on there."

"But why?"

I shook my head. "Who knows? Drugs, mind control, PTSD."

"What if she's only sad because she's back here?"

"What's wrong with here?"

"What if she was better off . . . wherever she was?"

I shrugged. "I don't see how. She was probably half-starved. I mean, what do they eat, anyway?"

I looked out the window and noticed that she was staring at us, or at least in our direction, which was unusual. Most of the time, she seemed to keep her eyes straight ahead, even when Ted was out there with her.

"She's watching us," I said.

And then suddenly she stood, opened her mouth, and screamed—a long, protracted shriek that was audible even through the closed windows of our kitchen. It was painful to listen to. Ted came barreling out of the house and tried to put a hand over her mouth, then quickly pulled it away. It appeared she had bitten him. They struggled for a while, until he was finally able to subdue her, unlock the chain, and drag his wife inside the house.

"That was horrible," said Katrina. She looked pale and shaken.

"I feel so bad for those boys," I said. "It must be hard with their mom like that."

One day, Ted knocked on our back door and asked if we'd seen his wife. Apparently, he had come outside to discover her missing. Her chain had been cut neatly in two, probably by a hacksaw. Ted said he didn't even own one, so she must have had

an accomplice.

"Are you sure you didn't see anything?" he asked. His tone had an accusatory edge, and I half wanted to throw a punch at his pinched face.

"No," I said.

"How about your wife? Did she ..."

"No."

He stood there for a moment, then turned abruptly and walked back across the yard toward his place.

I went down in the basement and checked our hacksaw. It still hung in its usual spot over the workbench, though I couldn't tell if it had been used recently.

A few days later, a "For Sale" sign went up in front of the Hendricks's house.

THE HOMEFRONT: WHEN MOTHERS LEAVE

It has long been accepted that some fathers will leave their families behind for extended periods of time. The reasons have varied according to culture and time period, and have included military service, sea voyages, colonial adventurism, migratory labor, and numerous other pursuits that have taken men far from home and hearth. And then there are those who choose to walk away from the burdens and responsibilities that attend raising a family. Depending on the circumstances, such men may be lauded for their service, viewed as making noble sacrifices for the sake of their families, or castigated as deadbeats and losers, but the fact remains that their absence is seen as a commonplace and even necessary fact of life.

But what about women who leave their families behind? Extended absences by mothers are likely to be judged far more harshly than those by fathers. This is true even when the woman is serving in the military or working a job that involves frequent or extended travel. While the father is likely to be seen as providing for his family or sacrificing for his country, with a mother there is the negative perception that she found something "more important" than her children, and that the children will suffer as a result.

Ample evidence exists that extended maternal absence has a negative effect on the mental health of children, but it is not clear that the impact is any more severe than it is for paternal absence. Furthermore, children raised by single fathers seem to fare just as well as those raised by single mothers. So why does this disparity in perception persist?

This question has received renewed attention lately due to the so-called Feral Wives. Reports on the phenomenon in the popular press tend to treat it as a kind of epidemic, something that arose suddenly and spontaneously, with very little precedent. Although research supports the notion that the number of women abandoning their families has spiked in the past year, this also represents the culmination of a trend that began decades ago. Much of the evidence remains anecdotal, but a recent U.K. study of walk-away moms covering the years 2015–20 indicated an increase of about 12 percent per year in the number of cases...

—*Psychology Today*

In the weeks following Deirdre Hendricks's second departure, other women began disappearing. First it was Camille Fogarty, whose husband Rob was a contractor specializing in overpriced additions; then Renée Compton, who worked as a legal secretary and was married to the town supervisor; and finally, Mrs.

Romberger, Chelsea's fourth-grade teacher, who just stopped teaching one day and stared out the classroom window until the confused children finally got up and left. She didn't come back the next day, or the next, and now they had a long-term substitute.

Not long after that, I awoke one night to find Katrina's side of the bed empty. I rolled on my side and looked at the clock: 3:24 a.m.

I lay awake, waiting for her to return from the bathroom or wherever. When she didn't, I slid out of bed, donned a robe, and went downstairs. The kitchen light was on and the back door stood open. I slipped on a pair of shoes and went out into the yard.

I found her standing under a tree.

"Katrina, what are you doing out here?"

"Can't you smell it?" she said.

"Smell what?"

"The fumes. They're choking us."

"Katrina, I think you're dreaming."

"We're dying, Steve. All of us."

"Come back to bed."

"You go. I want to stay out here for a while."

"OK, whatever." I went inside, got back in bed, and tossed and turned, finally drifting off just in time for my alarm to go off.

When I stumbled downstairs to make coffee, I found Katrina on the back porch, curled up against the door, fast asleep.

Things went downhill fast after that. Katrina stopped cooking, bathing, sleeping in our bed. She kept irregular hours, often staying up all night. I don't know if she left the house, or where she went. I don't know what, if anything, she ate. All I knew was that we were losing her, that it was only a matter of time before she was gone altogether from our lives. And that's when I made the decision to take to the road. We'd head west, the four of us, to the land of new beginnings.

We saw them on the way back to the motel. There must have been fifteen or twenty, fanned out at the edge of the road. The high beams from the Subaru lit them up like so many statues, casting long shadows across the field from which they had emerged. Opposite them, to our right, was a stand of fir trees, their pointy peaks registering as a slightly blacker area against the darkening sky to the west. I slowed the car.

"Look, girls," I said.

Chelsea leaned forward between the seats. Greta, who had been halfway asleep, sat up and craned her neck. "Is Mommy there?" she asked.

I had wondered the same thing, but none of the women in the group resembled Katrina. They were too old or too young, too tall or too short. I got the feeling they had been out here much longer than mere days or hours. And besides, how could she have covered all that distance in so short a time?

"I don't think so," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"We should check anyway," said Chelsea. She unbuckled her seatbelt.

"No, Chelsea," I said. "Stay in the car. I'll get us closer."

I inched the car forward. We stared at them, and they back at us, though I doubt they could see very much with the headlights shining directly on them. Even in the stark light, their faces were

darkened, with webs of what might have been paint streaked across them. Most were wrapped in long robes or blankets that hung to the ground, and some wore feathers or garlands around their necks, in their hair. One of them held a long staff, a good ten feet tall, with what looked like the skull of a small animal at the top.

As if on signal, they sprang into motion and bolted across the road, their robes streaming behind them, and disappeared one by one into the trees. The last one to cross hesitated for a moment at the edge of the wood and turned back in our direction. I rolled down the window and shouted, "Hey, wait!" Then she turned and plunged into the darkness.

We drove slowly past the spot where they had disappeared, but the forest had swallowed them, and all was still and silent.

"I want to go home," said Greta.

"We will," I said. "Tomorrow."

Because what else was there to do now but return? Return to the questions, the stares and whispers, the casseroles delivered to the door. The feeling that we had failed at a game whose rules no one understood, least of all the players.

I awoke early the next day to a beam of light in my face. I opened my eyes and saw Chelsea standing by the window with the heavy curtain pulled partway open. A thick slice of morning sun spilled across the double bed where Greta slept, her tiny frame curled around Mr. Tiddles, thumb stuck in her mouth. We'd have to have a talk about that thumb later.

"What do you see, honey?" I asked Chelsea, propping myself up on one elbow.

She showed no sign of having heard me, so I asked again.

"What's out there, baby doll?"

She turned and stared at me, wordlessly, then dropped the curtain, enveloping us in darkness.

The Feral Wives have left us, this much is clear. But we will carry on without them. We will keep the fires burning, the wheels turning, the engines churning. We will hold down the home front, as best as we can, while we await their return. They seem to be compelled by forces beyond our control, beyond our understanding—perhaps beyond theirs as well. We do not know if they are going forward or backward, or if these directions even hold any meaning in relation to their actions. Perhaps it is enough to say that they are going. And when they get there, if they get there, perhaps someday they'll come back for the rest of us.

David L. Updike is a writer and editor based in Philadelphia. His work has appeared in *Grimoire*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *365 Tomorrows*, among other venues. A member of the Bucks County Writers Workshop, he edited the first two issues of the group's literary and historical journal, *Neshaminy*. A long-time museum publishing professional, he is currently director of publications at the Barnes Foundation. He lives in Wyncote with his wife, daughter, and more books than they could possibly ever read. **Photo credit:** Daniel Benton-Updike



Witness

Leon Jackson Davenport

Our family moved to West Philadelphia in the 1960s after my father left the Army. Maybe because it was such a gorgeous afternoon on such a lovely spring day, my mom had walked down to my elementary school as she occasionally did, to get out of the house and stretch her legs. As we walked back together, we talked as we strolled past neatly trimmed front lawns, picture perfect in their tiny plots.

The immaculately preserved row homes in our neighborhood were obsessively maintained as the pride of ownership for Negro Philadelphians who survived the Great Depression. Many had colorful flower boxes filled with crimson and purple flowers, and others had stone facades, piped in white or charcoal. On some, the porches jutted out like crowns from the buildings. People sat on their stoops and smiled as we walked by. Others sat in shadow, just watching as the cars ran up and down the street.

I don't remember what we talked about that afternoon. Usually, my mom would ask, "How was school? Who did you play with at recess? What did your teacher say about your homework?"

That was all it took, and we would prattle on about anything and everything, including Grant, my pet turtle. "You know he got out again?" my mom might have said. "This time, he pushed the gravel up against the side of his habitat, made a ramp, and then climbed out. I found him in the closet with a family of dust bunnies riding on his back."

Or, as it was near the end of the term, I'd muse about school next year—"I'll be in 5th Grade!"—and everything I hoped to learn and do.

We lived on a well-traveled thoroughfare in a white, three-bedroom house on the even side of the street, two blocks up from Market Street. It had a big basement and a stone porch, where many homes on our street had wood or wrought iron railings.

On the other side of the street, a group of girls about my age played double-dutch—the tap-skip-tap a familiar sound as girls all over the neighborhood played it. Next to them, a little girl bounced her ball. She wore a frilly, brightly colored dress and shiny black shoes. Her mother had done her hair in thin braids that young girls liked to wear. A rainbow of colorful barrettes secured her tightly woven strands.

We had reached the top steps leading to our front door when we heard a loud bang. It was a loud thump, really, not a crash or crunch of metal, like two cars coming together. I'd heard that

before. This sounded different, and I looked back.

The first thing I saw was a bright red ball with sparkles—the kind you could purchase from Woolworth's for 49 cents. It rested against the curb, still and grimy.

The ball had bounced away from the little girl, and she had run after it. She hadn't looked. She hadn't seen the car moving up the street. The driver hadn't seen her until it was too late, and he hit her. She lay in the street all done up like it was her birthday, ready for the party she would have. The ball was undoubtedly one of her presents, which was why she ran after it. It was too new to lose.

She was not moving. I couldn't see any blood. My mom fumbled with her keys as she rushed to get me inside because she didn't want me to witness the pretty little girl lying in the street. The car that struck her hovered, menacing inches away from her head.

Though I can't remember the color of the car, I remember the little girl's frilly lime green dress with white accents blowing in the wind—her black skin in contrast with the bright party dress she wore—her body laid on the ground, broken.

Passersby had assembled across the street near where the little girl lay; I wasn't paying them much attention.

A woman came marching down the street. She pointed up at my mother and demanded, "Do you have a phone?"

"Yes."

"Then go call the ambulance."

My mom was standoffish with people she didn't know and never liked being told what to do. Still, given the situation, mom forgot about me, and instead of shepherding me inside, she vanished into the house to call and ask that an ambulance be sent. Back then, there was no 911 service, so you had to dial direct or ask the operator to connect you. It usually took some time for the operator to come on the line. When she answered—and it was always she then—the operator would ask what service you needed police, fire, or ambulance and would connect you.

A single police car came. He drove up slowly; quietly, there were no lights or sirens. As I remembered, it was a blue car because the city had begun replacing the lipstick red cars they had when we first moved here. He stopped behind the vehicle that had struck the little girl.

The cop got out of the car and strolled up the street. I stood on the porch and watched. He swung his arms and adjusted

his cap as he walked around to the front. He managed to look around without seeing any of us, much less the little girl who lay in the street ahead. With each nonchalant step, the assembled passersby and neighbors grew tenser. Their eyes narrowed, and they began to mutter. It made me angry, too, instantly, volcanically. I watched his every step, my anger boiling, the disdain that he conveyed pricked my conscience, offended my understanding of why he was here, tarnished the badge of a public servant, soured the title Police Officer.

So, I became someone else, no longer just a marginally concerned party. I became a witness. Witness to what I didn't know, I was nine years old, and my experience limited the outcomes I could imagine or predict. But it was now my responsibility to remember as much as I could. Record as much as I could in my memory and keep that image in the eye of my mind.

Then something awful happened.

The cop looked down, and his face changed. His self-satisfied smirk faded, and he became grave. Perhaps the little girl had stopped breathing, had a seizure, or someone in the crowd said something.

He scooped her up and ran up the street. Holding his hat in one hand, cradling the little girl in his arms, he sprinted, as I imagined he did in high school, running in his last race as a senior. He ran the 100 yards like his life, and the state championship was in jeopardy. He didn't stop until he disappeared into the doctor's office at the corner of our block.

A few minutes later, he emerged. Still carrying his hat, he was breathing hard, walking with a purpose. That arrogant, insensitive gate that I found so offensive had disappeared. He had a spring in his step. Perhaps he realized we bleed too, and he

probably had saved the little girl's life. His head snapped to the right, and he saw me. My gaze didn't waver.

Sometime later, about a month or two, I saw the same little girl back bouncing her red ball in front of her house. When it jumped away from her, she didn't run into the street after it. She let the ball roll to the other curb, and after looking both ways, she skipped after it.

I write this because this incident had been playing in my mind lately. I believe it may be a reaction to the attitude that claims you are a hero just by putting on pants and showing up. Damn what you do, what you say or how you say it. Or, maybe it's because the police killed another unarmed person in their custody—once again, again, once again.

I wondered what became of that Philly cop that over 50 years ago transformed from disinterested bystander to a human being, at least long enough to cradle that little girl in his arms and rush her to a place where she could get help. I wondered if he took that feeling back to this patrol car, back to his precinct and home with him, and after everything, did it last—did he change? Did he answer every call from then on as if he could be the difference? Or did he backslide?

Leon Jackson Davenport is a Writer, Fine Art Photographer, and Emmy nominated Video Editor. Leon lives in the Eastern US, with his lovely wife, and a cadre of feral cats who come and go as they please. He has published online in Six Sentences, Foundling Review, The Full of Crow Quarterly, Powder Burn Flash, and in volume two of the print anthology, "FEAR: A Modern Anthology of Horror and Terror" published by Crooked Cat. He is currently a master's degree candidate in Creative Writing at Wilkes University.

(cape may)

Poem by Peter McEllhenney

like scraps of paper
folding themselves into birds
the sea gulls settle

the shimmering light
on the water at sunset
keeps its promises



Peter McEllhenney is a writer living in Philadelphia, PA. His work has appeared in *Philadelphia Stories*, the *Seminary Ridge Review*, and others. He blogs occasionally at www.PeterGalenMassey.com.



The Devil in Society

Jeannine Cook

My Auntie Lilith is a storyteller adorned with all the histrionics a 5-foot Trinidadian woman can muster. As a child, visiting her home meant witnessing random flares of dramatic scares where, without warning, she'd turn out all of the lights, lock all of the doors, and provoke spirits as my sister, cousin, and me ran alongside her fighting evil in complete dread.

That eight-year-old me hid under her table in a puddle of my pee while my thirteen-year-old sister with tears on her cheeks locked herself in the closet and my cousins yelled in terror as my auntie's unbridled jumbies and soucouyant and dwens chased us down the stairs and into varying corners of the house.

After a full night of panic, Auntie Lilith gathered us all at her feet for story time. Heaving breathlessly in the darkness of the house, she said, when she was my age, she fought off a mischievous haint that embodied a little boy named Seth. In her classroom, he'd walk past her desk and pull at her ponytails and call her a pickaninny, daily and without fail. Aunt Lilith knew that Seth was filled with an evil that only she could fend off. The notes she wrote to her teacher warning that a wicked energy dwelled in the classroom were unheeded and even mocked.

One day, as the wild and unchecked power hypnotized Seth, lil' Aunt Lilith sharpened her pencil, fully intending to use it to pen yet another poetic prose of precaution. However, when Seth pulled his hand from her hair, placed it on her desk, and then bent down to whisper pickaninny inches from her lips, she knew it was her duty to exorcise the demon that ran rampant in Seth's body. She stabbed her pencil straight through his skin, his nerves, his blood—scaring the hell out of him quite literally.

The metonymic adage, the pen is mightier than the sword, assuages the egos of writers who use our words to pen poetic prose of precaution about impending doom or a euphoric past. But, perhaps the pen is only mightier than the sword because it has the dual ability to both communicate brilliant essays and defend brilliant lives.

Today marks 147 days since Breonna Taylor was brutally murdered by her city (officers and officials), her state (her governor and her attorney general), and her country (her president and

his administration). We, as taxpayers, play a part in her murder because we continue to pay the salaries of the people who murdered her. We also pay the salaries of the people who conspire to cover it up.

A good many of us have written think pieces and social media posts demanding justice, but, like my Aunt Lilith's, our warnings are unheeded and even mocked. There is a wild and unchecked power that is running loose in our society. It continues, like Seth, to victimize and brutalize young, Black girls because it is drunk with power.

So continue writing your think pieces, telling your stories, and saying her name. But today, right now, sharpen your pencils and prepare to act boldly because this is an evil that we must fend off.



For the last 10 years, Jeannine Cook has worked as a trusted writer for several startups, corporations, non-profits, and influencers. In addition to a holding a master's degree from The University of the Arts, Jeannine is a Leeway Art & Transformation Grantee and a winner of the South Philly Review Difference Maker Award. Jeannine's work has been recognized by several news outlets including Vogue Magazine, INC, MSNBC, The Strategist, and the Washington Post. She recently returned from Nairobi, Kenya facilitating social justice creative writing with youth from 15 countries around the world. She writes about the complex intersections of motherhood, activism, and community. Her pieces are featured in several publications including the Philadelphia Inquirer, Root Quarterly, Printworks, and midnight & indigo. She is the proud new owner of Harriett's Bookshop in the Fishtown section of Philadelphia.

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