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contents
volume 96  number 1  fall/winter 2009

poetry

anemone beaulier  1  How It Ends
  darrell epp      4  Perennial
  daniel saalfeld  5  Toward Besançon
  william huberdeau 9  Lovers’ Kitchen
  renee emerson    10 Betrayals
  darrell epp      23 The River
  bethany reid     24 That Long Spring
  peter e. murphy  33 Prostitutes Appeal to Pope
              greta aart  34 The Sun Temple
  bethany reid     59 To Begin
  beth marzoni     60 Improvisation
  rewa zeinati-choueiri  63 Maya
  joanne lowery    88 Protecting My Crops
  anemone beaulier 99 Ode to the Dog
  shoshauna shy    100 Stopping for Gas on the Reservation
  john azrak       101 Falling
  tom holmes       102 While Refuged at Sophie’s Cottage as Bombs Fall on London, Nina Hamnett Pens a Postcard to Wyndham Lewis
### fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adam “bucho” rodenberger</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Poolside Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jason kapcala</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Methadone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alex myers</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Far Gone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naghma husain</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Barista to Go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inda schaenen</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Risk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### non-fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ellen o’connell</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>French Pastries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graham currin</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Don’t Feed the Strippers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jane l. carman</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>krystal wu</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will fleming</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Just Wait and See</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evri kwong</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>robin stephen</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kristen rieke</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>michael mcgregor</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parvaneh angus</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shawn hanna</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>francis raven</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kellie flint</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kitty faraji</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joey brennan</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don fritz</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>edy madsen</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kate bradley</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>julia sanches</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fly the Friendly Skies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donkeyskin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission Gardens Sesh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunshine at Night</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lightbulbs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patterns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swan Lake</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zebra</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samhuinn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As 2008 came to a close and thoughts of 2009 appeared on the horizon, I found myself thinking about the things I’ve held on to and those things I’ve hidden away and tried to forget. “A new year, a new me” is by no means a novel resolution, but as my college career comes closer and closer to its end, I can’t help but feel that this year will be different. In twelve months, I won’t be in Santa Clara; I won’t be an undergraduate English major; and I won’t have the luxury of saving until later thoughts of what I want to make of myself and the life I’ve developed over the past four years.

With these thoughts in mind, I set out on a mission to clean up and reorganize my life, to throw out the unnecessary distractions and shine like new those things I want to carry with me, those skills and gems of wisdom that will help me transition from old to new. And so I started by looking under my bed.

Between the piles of crumpled homework assignments and wandering fluffs of dust, I found a stack of old notebooks and folders from classes whose finals I’d taken and forgotten long ago. As soon as I saw them, I felt a resurgent sense of intrigue, a curiosity for the all the exciting revelations I’d made in my academic career hidden beneath the smooth, worn covers piled before me, waiting for this moment to be rediscovered. Explications of Romantic poems, overviews of post-modern feminist theory and methodology, timelines marking the stages of American literary development—these are the treasures I expected to find buried in the pages in my hands. But between repeated definitions of Brecht’s “alienation effect” and deconstructions of Hélène Cixous’s “Laugh of the Medusa,” right in the heart of these testaments to my intellectual endeavors, I found something else: Undeniable evidence of my laziness as a student. As attentive as I always thought I’d been, a record of doodles, to-do lists, and notes to a friend in the next seat filled the margins of my notebooks on a near-daily basis. Certainly, I’ve taken classes I haven’t loved, but the reality I faced before me was embarrassing: How have I gone through almost four years of college thinking pencil sketched vines and Safeway shopping lists are on the same page (literally, it seemed) as the poets, playwrights, and authors I call heroes and inspirations?

The next day in class I resolved to be a better student. As I sat down in my seat and watched my professor walk to the front of
the room, I promised myself I wouldn’t get distracted. I fared pretty well for a while, but when I noticed the girl next to me hunched over her notebook drawing, I couldn’t help but look. Taking shape on her page was more than an absent-minded doodle: It was a full-blown, full-page, polka-dotted chicken. And it was all I could do not to laugh.

But like any English major trained to look beyond the surface and see the subtext below, I walked home from class with the image of that chicken in my mind, wondering why it touched me so. To start off, it reminded me that I’m not alone in my struggle to stay focused. The mind wanders; anxiety, ambition, necessity, vanity, and hope take over our heads and take us away from the moment, straying our sight from the envisioned goal straight ahead. But the power of art, poetry, and literature is to capture that moment, to illuminate it brightly, and to make the vision last long enough to give us time to look back and reflect. These captured moments, fossilized in time, are like the bones of our bodies, the skeletons and frameworks from which we can flesh out some sort of meaning to help us make sense of our lives and our world.

And what a confusing world we are in: In this issue, we explore the shock and disbelief of our post-9/11 nation; the inequalities and stereotypes in a society stratified by class and ethnicity; the life-encompassing struggle of drug addiction; and the bitter pain of death and betrayal. But even in the midst of all these uncertainties, upheavals, and unfinished stories, there is still hope in what we choose to make of them. We can shove our problems under the bed to collect dust and forget about them, or we can bring them out into the open and try to make sense of the mess. In doing so, we have the power to create, to build a body of knowledge and experience that can strengthen all our minds. All that is left is to decide: What will be the story we choose to leave behind?

We hope you enjoy the issue,

kelsey maher
and the santa clara review editors
How It Ends

You stand, charred salmon and torn
romaine still on your plate. Clenching
the curtains back, you look past
our garden—forget-me-nots, bleeding
hearts rising among the ferns—and beyond
the thin hemlocks that fence our lot.
I pinch crumbs from the tablecloth.
Even the water glasses weep.
My head rested against the hard rock holding the water deep within the ground. I had stretched my arms out, Christ-like as the moon beat down on the backyard. Brick enclosures imprisoned the cacti standing watch over the backyard, and I could see lizards scampering through the dirty, shadowed crevices in search of food with wings not quick enough to escape their lightning tongues.

I kicked my legs out slowly, as if backpedaling into my imagination, and let the ripples wash over me, slapping against my neck and splashing up along my chin. A dry heat had covered the county for several days, and this had been my home for a week, my only companions a warm bottle of liquor and a grimy pink raft left by the previous owners. The lizards appeared at the same time every night from the same dirty crevices and never bothered to come close enough for conversation.

A shower seemed redundant as I’d spent more time in the pool in three days than I would’ve spent at work in a week. The hours whispered by on the rare breeze that swept over the water as I sat akimbo on the raft, drink in one hand and cigarette in the other, draping my arms over the headrest. My skin hadn’t gone leathery yet, but another few days of this do-nothing religion would change that, and I wouldn’t concern myself with it until then.

Application of 8 SPF sunscreen once in the morning seemed sufficient, but my cup needed constant refilling. The fans in the house coupled with the AC tuned to seventy-two degrees kept the house comfortable, but I found more solace in the dryness of the outdoors and the watchful eyes of curious creatures acclimated to the desert weather. They didn’t need sunscreen, so I attempted polite mimicry. Between the bourbon, the sun, and the pool, I’ve forgotten what day it is. I have nothing to do but commune with a nature I don’t normally get to enjoy so unabashedly.

I don’t know anything about the family that lives in this
house, but their calendar says they’ll be gone until next Friday. I have a week and a half to finish off their groceries, drink every drop from their liquor cabinet, and enjoy the pool they haven’t cleaned since the season started. I found it littered with leaves and dirt as insects swallowing last breaths kicked tiny cilia-covered legs to get out. I stopped trying to save them after the first afternoon. It was like trying to empty a sinking Titanic with a child’s spoon, and I had better things to do; I just don’t remember what they are now.
an alien toenail in the sink, a
droplet of blood in the soap dish.
a fly in the ointment. spring-cleaning
time again, but what year is it?

our first-date theatre has become
parking lots, your hugs broke my
ribs like dry twigs. tomorrow I
might try shaving with a shovel.

green lights make me stop. eating
makes me hungry. every departure
becomes a return, a return to this,
a private blizzard in red and white.

I have a superpower: I can stare
at this wall until I can see through
it, all the way to where you are. that
skirt really doesn’t match those shoes.

special thanks to the “b” that turned
“one” into “bone.” your favorite dvds
fell so gently into the garbage can. it’s
nice to tidy things up, but what year is it?
Toward Besançon

East toward Besançon I headed with a towel and toothbrush in my bag. After two hours of walking, silence grew louder as the sky clouded over early spring fields. Trains traveling by began to mock me; I wished I hadn’t started so late to this last city of significance in the circle I had drawn around Dijon. Treads and other car parts made me meditate on the painting I was coloring myself into. Approaching a railroad crossing through which a train had just passed, an old lady honked for me to hurry up to her old black Citroën with a white shepherd dog in front. From the back seat, I spoke gilded thoughts about her country I was turning into my terrain of spontaneity. It began to rain. Her car slowed to a toll road that would lead me to my destination. Within fifty yards of walking, a middle-aged man in a new gold Renault stopped and said “Strasbourg” after I asked “À Besançon?” “D’accord, Strasbourg,” I replied, getting more than I bargained for. We agreed to struggle with his tongue as he pointed out the Rhine Valley the French lost so many lives over in both World Wars. Never asking for a ride
in the city, I encountered meaner spirits
on a bus, where a woman asked, “Une cigarette
monsieur?” Again, “Une cigarette monsieur?”
And again and again, louder and louder,

until she was spitting and screaming
in my face, “Une cigarette monsieur?”
She would not take “Je ne fume pas”
for an answer until a man got up

and kicked her off, shouting that she
was disturbing his femme. And then
at the train station’s brasserie,
where I was eating un sandwich jambon,

awaiting my early-morning train to Dijon,
a man eyed my bag and me intently
until his friend told him to leave me alone,
saying, “He’s hungry—can’t you see?”
The last time I saw you it was summer in California and we sat at the French café for old time’s sake. I deconstructed the pastry flakes of a pain au chocolat while you reinvented the art of attacking a mille feuille. Under the table our knees bumped but you didn’t move yours away.

During the summer we spent together I thought my hand would be in yours forever, and one night we caught the last BART back to San Francisco. We had gone to a party in Berkeley, initially assessing that we knew no one very well, easing our awkwardness by drinking too much sangria. By the time we realized we did know some partygoers, we were too sloppy to make much of an impression. A girl at the party asked if we were going to get married.

“That’s an awkward question,” you replied, puffing away at an uncharacteristic cigarette, which you only did when you’d had too much to drink. I leaned against your legs on some concrete college dorm stairs, hoping we really would get married someday.

When we walked home from the Civic Center that night, the stars unbuttoned over our heads to let us see the heavens we believed were up there. You offered to give me a piggyback ride. When I said no, you pulled me close and whispered to the top of my head.

“I love being out with you late at night. Don’t you feel like it’s you and me against the world?”

“Yes,” I said back. “I always do.”

We breathed the air of the same city and were drunk off the same sangria, and I wanted nothing more than to get home and feel my bare skin against yours.

More than a year later, you call me at my apartment in Brooklyn while I am holding a dinner party and you are living in London for the year. Two years have passed since I first saw you in a street near the Louvre, and it has already been a year since
you told me, in the thick fog of the Appalachian Mountains, that you don’t want our skin to touch anymore.

“I want to move to New York next year,” you tell me on the phone.

“I never thought you’d say that.” I stir lentils in an apartment full of guests.

“We can sample French pastries together.”

“We’ll always have Paris.” I add the onion.

I drop in a bay leaf and my friends in the kitchen talk and laugh without me. “Get off the phone,” they mouth to me. I point to the phone and mouth your name back so they know who is keeping me from them.

“I really miss you.” Your voice quiets to a near whisper.

“There are so many times I want to call you but can’t,” I say. “But I guess that’s what comes from living so far apart.”

The lentils are nearly done. You were the one who taught me to make them, but mine are different. Mine taste better, somehow.

“I have to go now,” I tell you.

“I’m sorry I kept you,” you say.
Lovers’ Kitchen

I’ve finally met an onion I can relate to. We cry together like family. It’s like we split and stew over the same things.
Betrayals

1.

You carried bitterness
in your pocket like the elderly carry
peppermints and caramels (you never
would hand them out).
It left no bulges, creases, laid a little flatter
than hatred, a little
smoother than love, but it weighed,
pulled and weighed, like a child
that isn’t yours but grabs
your hand in the supermarket
thinking you’re his mother.
You aren’t his mother, and his hand
is grimy with nervous
sweat and chocolate.

You did this, you tell me,
as that one pocket
causes you to list
and drag to its side.

This is the homeowner who sees
the crack in the foundation,
smells the first
dank wafts of mold
in the drywall, then the cellophane
flutter of termite
wings, and their chewing and chewing.

The hint of damage we can’t afford
to repair.
2.

The sunflower
planted in a row of daisies. Our roots
intertwined, embraced, all took
water from the same soil.
You shaded, grew
tall and diseased.
They cut you out
from the ground, roots

and what soil you could
hold, and what roots we had
twisted with yours
were cut and taken
away.

There was nothing
to hide us from the sun, but we grew
to cover the bare
ground
where you used to be.

3.

You have given me a lie with truth
written across its face. Yes,
I took it, I only read
the labels. But like an arcade
token in a snack machine,
it is no use
to me. It’s best to let it drop
on the sidewalk for someone else
to pocket. (It does shine
and lure in the sunlight). Or
to let it rust in a drawer

with all the others.
4.

White sheets over the furniture--
the armoire that belonged
to your great aunt,
the unwound clock, the sofa
we were not allowed
to sit on.

They stand like austere
trick-or-treaters, all the same
costume—no bag for candy, no holes
for the eyes and mouth, simply
ghosting.

This is what we have done with our past—
we covered it all with the purest
whitest sheets.
On my bus, the cast of characters never changes. There’s Grace Donohue, who is so hunchbacked that she forms a right angle. I’ve often wondered what her worldview must be like—how it would feel to stare at your shoes all day long while life flashes by above your head. Across from Mrs. Donohue sits Johnny Geronimo. It’s not his real name. But I don’t know his real name. I only know that Johnny never quite returned from his tour of duty in Afghanistan last year—he left home a man and came back a boy. Every time we cross the bridge above the Delaware, Johnny yells out, “Geronimo.” I don’t know what to make of this. Some of the other riders despise him for it. I can see them in my extra-wide rearview mirror fingering their paste pearl necklaces and rolling their eyes up toward God as though to say, “Really? Was that necessary?”

Other riders have taken to joining him.

“Geronimo,” they say in perfect cacophony. Some more emphatically than others.

And then there are Wally and Gene. Wally reads the newspaper aloud, and Gene passes judgment on everything Wally reads. They’re like a less genial Abbott and Costello.

“Says here, this chimpanzee’s celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday,” Wally says, and I can see him in my mirror, pointing to a picture somewhere in the middle of The Morning Record.

“Must be a slow news day,” Gene says, folding his arms across his chest.

“He put his tongue right in the cake,” Wally adds, nodding.

Gene says, “You’d think after seventy-five years he’d know better.”

I’ve been working this job part-time on the weekends for about three months now. The pay isn’t great, but when you’re forty-something and suddenly single, driving a busload of impoverished geriatrics and heroin junkies to the top of Fernridge Mountain doesn’t seem like such a terrible way to moonlight. After sweating
all week in a New Jersey plant, packaging condiments with a Hema filler, it’s nice to get out of the house.

***

I hate all of my passengers equally. Except for Diamond Jim. I love Diamond Jim. I could even be in love with Diamond Jim if he weren’t old enough to be my father. He looks like John Lee Hooker—even dresses the part, though I’ve never seen him wear a brown top hat. But he’s got the wraparound sun shades that fit over his eyeglasses and a Black Diamond guitar pick on a chain around his neck like a dog tag. He carries his guitar case with him and always sits in the seat directly behind me. Sometimes we talk. Sometimes he just clicks his false teeth and hums. On my first day driving the route, when I opened the door to drop Johnny Geronimo off at the methadone clinic, Diamond Jim stood up. He draped his wool coat over his arm, and tucked his guitar pick necklace down in his shirt. Then he picked up his guitar case and shuffled forward.

“Hon,” I said, touching his sleeve a little, “I think you’ve got the wrong stop.” I figured he was on his way to see a rheumatologist or even his cardiologist. I’ll probably never forget the look he gave me. His smile crooked, jaw unaligned.

“No, lady, I don’t suppose so,” he said.

***

A girlfriend of mine suggested I look into online dating. Love was just a mouse-click away, she insisted. She’d heard that loud, mustached doctor talking about it on Oprah. He’d said, “You’ve got to learn to listen to your heart before your heart can listen to you,” or something equally profound.

“Shirley, it’s so easy,” she said, picking the croutons off her salad. “You just answer some questions and then a computer matches you up with the guys who are most compatible.”

I couldn’t even begin to tell her how heartbreaking it all sounded—that we’ve become so generic a computer can scientifically pair us. It’s practically eugenics. I wondered, briefly, what kind of person headhunts companionship online.

When I got home, I went to the website. On a whim.
The front page showed a smartly dressed investment banker named Todd embracing a thin blonde named Carlee. They’d been in love for nine months and counting. In the next frame, Todd was actually jumping, his legs and arms spread-eagled; Carlee laughed. A banner at the top of the page promised, “It’s never wrong to browse.”

The instructions were simple. One pull-down menu read, “I am a man/woman.” Then, below that, a second menu asked you to select which gender you were looking for. I had no idea I was “looking for” anyone, but I selected “man,” put in my zip code, created a profile, and heated a Banquet frozen dinner. Chicken with gravy that looked like mucus.

Now, two weeks later, I’m having dinner again. At an Italian restaurant named La Bella Sicilia with a guy named Todd, no less. I can barely stomach the irony. I wonder if every man on the site is named Todd.

I don’t want to be at this restaurant. It’s a beautiful stone building with ivy leaves painted along the floor and ceiling. Fresh flowers on every table. The waiter brings bread in a basket and drops it on your plate using sterling silver tongs. The wine bottles wear wicker skirts. And after you order, the waiter pulls a gold chord along the side of your booth, drawing a wine-dark curtain across your table for privacy. It’s all very lovely, but it’s also my ex-husband Mark’s favorite restaurant, and I just know he’s going to walk through that door any second.

“Order anything you want,” Todd says, hiding his face behind the menu. He’s a big meathead. On the car ride over, he managed to mention twice that he played fullback at Penn State.

I’ve already decided to order the most expensive item on the menu.

Todd asks about my job, and so I tell him about bus driving.

“That must suck,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say.

I don’t tell him that, sometimes, when the passengers are especially grumpy, the yearn to fire off the nastiest insults that leap to mind consumes me. I don’t know what holds my tongue. Maybe it’s an exercise in moral self-discipline—a forgive-us-our-tresspasses-as-we-forgive-those-who-tresspass-against-us moment. Or maybe
it’s only the fear that I might say something too damaging—some cutting barb I can’t recant. I’ve always been good at pinpointing the tender spots—where to press to make it hurt. Now I’m burdened by my ability to read people’s wounds like lines on a roadmap.

I feel that way about Mark, too. We share custody of our three sons, and I still see him plenty. And every time, the responsibility never to dig into my stockpile of cheap shots, embarrassing secrets, 3:00 a.m. confessions, and taboo idiosyncrasies—no matter how badly I want to lob every spiteful hand grenade I’ve collected over the years—feels overwhelming.

I peek around the corner of the velvet curtain, like a child checking the audience at a school play, and right on cue, Mark steps on stage. He steps beneath the flowered trellis above the door and gives his reservation to the hostess. As he passes by our table, I reach out with my fist and punch him on the elbow. He stops for a minute and looks at the curtained booth. I can almost see him contemplating his options. I draw the curtain aside and offer up my easiest smile.

“Shirley,” Mark says. “I might have known.”
“Tunched to see what you would do,” I say.
Mark introduces his new wife, Jillian.
“Mark, this is Todd. Todd, this is my ex-husband, Mark,” I say.

Jillian smiles tightly and nods while the two men awkwardly shake hands. She’s pretty enough—average looking, really—but not the kind of woman who necessarily turns heads. Still, it curdles my stomach how good they look together. Better than Mark and I ever looked. With their olive skin and their jet-black hair, they could be brother and sister.

I’m a six-foot tall blonde. Like Todd.
“Todd was a fullback at Penn State,” I say, knowing Mark has little interest in football.
“That’s right,” Todd says, perking up.
The waiter who brings our drinks saves Mark from that conversation.

For the rest of the evening, I’m only half there. I drink far too much. I can hear Mark and Jillian’s muffled talking from the booth behind us, that gaudy purple cocoon. In spite of myself, I want to know what they’re saying.
Things weren’t always easy with Mark. I’m thinking of one dark winter in particular, when we sent our three children to live with their grandparents for a few months, and we stopped talking to each other altogether. Ten rounds of passive-aggression and looks so rage-whet you’d think us capable of killing each other with axes. Of course, neither of us ever laid a hand on the other. Mark threw his clothes in a duffle bag and disappeared until spring. I drove north to The Meadows, an asylum I’d looked up on the internet—or rather, “a regional specialty provider,” according to the website.

The place looked like an old farm—crooked wood-slat fences lining a mile-long, two-way, manor-house drive. I half expected to find horses running in the fields. From my car, I could see a basketball court with netless hoops, flowers in windows, and a dozen or so low stucco buildings that looked like my oldest son’s apartment.

I sat in the car for forty minutes and no one came out. So I left.

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“You know there are other fish in the sea,” Todd says after the waiter has left with the bill.

“What?” I say. I’m halfway through my third glass of wine; I haven’t been listening.

“You never know, you could be sitting right across from a largemouth bass.”

A largemouth bass? Oh Lord, this moment couldn’t be any more perfect.

I close my eyes. Blink a few times. “But Todd,” I say. “A largemouth bass is a freshwater fish. You wouldn’t find one in the sea.”

Todd cocks his head a little and wipes his mouth with his napkin. “It was a metaphor,” he says, grabbing his jacket and scooting out of the booth.

Later that night, when Todd, my very own largemouth ass, wheels his Camaro down a gravel backwoods road and says he’s taking me to meet his father, I start wondering how he plans to kill me. I’m not sure what to do. I can’t very well jump from a moving...
The house is small and windowless. Built into a hillside. The middle of nowhere. It’s like something out of *Silence of the Lambs*. I’m a grown woman. Empowered. Independent. But I have no idea how I got into this situation. Maybe it’s the alcohol’s effect, but I’m not even appropriately alarmed by my circumstances.

“My father likes it dark,” Todd explains, opening the front door into pitch darkness.

There’s no way I’m following him inside. From down the hallway somewhere a voice calls out, “Boy, is that you?”

“Yeah, Dad,” Todd replies, grabbing my hand and pulling me along behind him.

In the next room, the father is propped up in bed with a half-dozen blankets pulled up beneath his armpits in spite of the heat. He looks like a leper. “Come, turn out that light. It’s too bright in here,” he says, coughing and motioning to the single shadeless corner lamp.

Todd introduces me and the old man raises one hand like a monarch.

I say something about it being late, about working early and needing to be home.

“Drive her home, Toddy,” the old man says. “You know nothing good happens after midnight.”

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Todd gets frustrated when I insist that he call a cab for me. The cab arrives a half-hour later, and when I climb in the back, the cabbie says, “Jesus, that’s one creepy looking house.”

***

My riders love to gripe. In fact, they feed on it. It’s like lava running through their veins. Or maybe just java—hot and thick and satisfying.

“Spring is no season for air conditioning,” Grace says, leaning sideways out of her seat so I can get a good look at her in the mirror as she wraps her shawl around her shoulders and glares at the floorboards. I turn off the AC and crack my window. The high-
way smells like roadkill.

“It’s almost noon already,” Gene says loudly, staring at his watch.

“It’s eleven forty-five,” Wally says.

“That’s almost noon,” Gene says.

“You’ve got appointments. I get it,” I say, speeding up a little when we hit the railroad tracks. Behind me, I hear some “Ooofs”—the kind of noise you make when you’ve eaten far too much for dinner. My passengers bounce in their seats.

“Geronimo,” Johnny says.

By law, I’m supposed to stop at every set of railroad tracks and open my door to look for on-coming trains. In all the years I’ve lived in Lakeville, I’ve never once seen a train. Still, I know I’ll hear about it from my supervisor tomorrow. One of these passengers will rat me out. They always do. They know the regulations better than I do. They live for a good slip up.

Ten minutes later, they get their wishes granted when a deer leaps out in front of the bus and we hit it. I never really see the deer coming. Not until it’s too late. There’s a sickening thump, and then I’m yanking the steering wheel hard toward the shoulder of the road. It’s an instinctive move. The wrong one, it turns out. These old transport busses are nothing like sports cars, and for a moment I’m afraid we might tip. Instead, we dip off the edge of the pavement, kicking up dust and gravel, and come to rest at the bottom of a small drainage ditch.

“Holy Mother,” Gene says.

Wally recites the Twenty-Third Psalm.

My hands shake as I radio in the accident. Then I help everyone off the bus. No one is hurt. Unless you count the deer. Grace Donohue quivers. Gene starts to say something else. I shoot him a dirty look and he reconsiders.

“Geronimo,” Johnny says, and I could just kill him.

Outside, there’s no sign of the deer we hit, but one look at the front of the bus suggests that the animal has gone off somewhere to die. Both tires on the driver’s side are flat. The passengers form little groups along the road’s shoulder. I assure them that help is on the way. But who knows when it will arrive or what that even means.

Diamond Jim sits on the guardrail. He’s trembling a little.

I nod and offer him a stick of gum. He shakes his head and points to his dentures. Then he pats the section of rail next to him, so I sit down.

I expect him to say something about the crash. About how it wasn’t my fault. Cars hit deer constantly along this stretch. But instead, he says in perfect nonsequitur, “You’re thinking I should get my act together. Get cleaned up. Throw the proverbial monkey from my back. . .”

I wasn’t, but I say, “Sure. Why not?”

“. . . Because when it comes down to it, every day is a new day,” Jim says, gesturing to everything and nothing, like a preacher reaching out toward his congregation. “Sun shining bright on my face. Birds singing in the trees. Children laughing and playing.”

“Well, isn’t it so?” I say.

Jim shoots me a sidelong glance that says, Come on sister, wake up and smell the road kill.

“Okay, have it your way,” I say. “Life sucks. Getting wasted feels good.”

Jim frowns heavily and chews the inside of his cheek. He barks one hard laugh.

“Why do guys like me go insane, become alcoholics or druggies? You think we’re just bored? No. It’s ‘cause we all got one thing,” he says. He holds up his index finger. He’s waiting for me to ask. Probably he’ll wait all day if I let him.

“What’s that?” I say.

“Something,” Jim says. “Anything. Any one thing that keep you from living your life. From sleeping at night. From settling down with a wife and kids and a cozy acre of land somewhere. From making neighbors and having potlucks. And barbecues on the weekend. From buying a boat or taking up golf. Whatever. That one thing that hits you hard and fast like a Cassius Clay jab. Keeps you just left of center—makes you good at what you do. And all it costs in return is everything you’ve got.”

I stare at the mountainside across the highway. Some large rocks have fallen from its face. Water dribbles down from cracks in the rock, pooling along the roadside. I rub my forehead.

“That’s some really profound bullshit, Jim,” I say without looking at him.
“Do I look like I got a woman waiting at home for me?” Jim asks. “Dinner on the table? Kiss on the cheek? Grandchildren coming to visit, running in the halls? No, that’s not happening for me.”

Jim fingers the guitar pick at his neck, then balls up his hand into an arthritic fist. He says, “When it’s over . . . well . . .”

“Maybe you just need a hobby,” I say. Jim looks over, and it’s as though he’s considering whether I’ve earned a smile or not.

“I suppose I could take up needlepoint,” he says, finally. “But I’d probably be too damn good at that, too.”

He laughs and wipes some perspiration from his forehead and he’s suddenly ageless. I want to kiss him. But I know it’s ridiculous, and so I don’t.

It takes a little over an hour for the emergency shuttle to arrive, and after I’ve helped the passengers with boarding, I agree to wait for the tow truck.

“You want me to come back for you?” the shuttle bus driver, Georgie, asks.

“Maybe,” I say, and he nods.

I watch the bus disappear down the mountain; then I stare down at the accident site. My bus lists precariously against the guardrail, like a sinking luxury liner, its twin flat tires resting on the rims. Coarse brown animal hairs and blood cover the grille. I grab fistfuls of my own hair. It’s possible that my stint as chauffeur has ended.

Down in the ditch, next to the front fender, is Diamond Jim’s long, black guitar case. I should grab that for him. I edge my way down the weedy embankment one more time, bending heavily at the knees, searching for toeholds in the undergrowth.

When I finally make it back up to the road, I consider opening the case. It’s surprisingly light. I don’t know much about guitars, but I imagine what rests inside is expensive—probably a wine-colored Gibson Les Paul with creamy abalone inlay. Frets like gold. The kind of guitar my middle son mooned over for years in the guitar catalogues until Mark finally bought him one as a high school graduation present. I pluck at an imaginary string and listen to its twang.

When I do open the case, it’s predictably empty. No guitar. No drug paraphernalia. No concert playbills, or pictures, or me-
mentos of any sort. Nothing. Just sad maroon lining, shiny felt worn smooth and greasy like the knees on an old pair of corduroys.

I walk up and down the quiet stretch of highway—maybe fifty yards or so—gripping the case by its handle. It’s like something out of those music videos my boys were always watching on MTV. When I get back to the accident site, I lean over the guardrail on the other side. I watch the Delaware River flowing down below, moving fast with the sound of rushing water and the twittering of birds in the trees, Jim’s guitar case in my outstretched palms. A sacrifice or a baptism; I don’t know which. But I let it drop. I don’t even know why, really.

The case hits the water with a splash, and then, to my surprise, surfaces. It sails downstream like a newspaper boat.

“Geronimo,” I say, but, as the case disappears beneath a small ripple, even I don’t think it’s very funny.
twitching waiting for the mailman
wondering about how things change.
“you can’t step in the same river twice,”
you said, because the river’s constantly
changing. “if that’s true,” i said, “you
can’t step in the same river even once,
can you? it’s changing as you’re stepping,”
but you didn’t understand what i meant
and you certainly never understood how
much i wanted to build us a treehouse
in the jungle where we could eat bananas
all day and i could beat my chest like i
was tarzan lord of the apes. and what
were you thinking anyhow, glibly quoting
heraclitus to a man with tears in his eyes?
like a dog returning to his vomit i patrol
the used bookstores, the empty cathedrals.
the sheets don’t smell of you, like always.
how gone you are, how always returning.
That long spring of her fifteenth year,
she told herself, “I am too old to be a horse.”
So she stopped tossing her head
in that particular way her mother hated,
as if her mane caught the sunlight.
After chores, she walked from the barn
to the house without breaking into a gallop.
That was the year she nursed a crush on a boy
in the class ahead of her. But another girl
asked him to the Sadie Hawkins Day dance,
and after that, they were going steady.
In May, when the prom rolled around,
she helped decorate the lunchroom, fanning
pink tissues and stuffing them in chicken wire
to look like roses or gardenias, some climbing flower,
though they looked, really, like nothing
but wadded Kleenex. Her arms ached
from the effort of holding herself quiet. She stood
in the parking lot beneath a night sky
that would gladly have taken her,
a sky thick with stars as an Appaloosa’s back.
A half-moon skimmed the dark,
clouds trailing like broken reins.
I hadn’t felt right since I went to Greenville, South Carolina with my roommate Josh. Josh is the kind of guy you hate to love. Six-two and athletic, with eyes and a smile that knocked girls flat on their backs, legs sprawled and ready to go without saying a word. To call him a charmer would be like calling the ocean wet. Opportunity falls into his lap daily, like when he found us tickets to the Georgia football game and sleeping accommodations with the lovely sisters of Delta Delta Delta. But Josh’s problem is that he always feels that something better is just around the corner, a bigger check, a faster car. Which is why at 27, after bouncing from police cadet to bank teller to bartender, he had just started his first nine to five running a temp agency. The blind finally had their one-eyed king.

Originally, Josh had transportation to Georgia covered with his new Tahoe Suburban that got eight miles to the tank if you turned the DVD players off. But it ended up in the shop the day of departure, much like Josh’s promises usually do. That left us taking my gold Ford Taurus to the rent-a-thumper store to find another car to put the miles on. One painful hour later, our rental engineer Melba kindly told us that all she had on the lot was a green Taurus and a gold Taurus. “I’ll take the gold one,” I told her, and walked back out to my car.

We hit the road.

First we picked up Josh’s friend “Pinto” who was just down the street in Newport News, Virginia. Pinto was his last name. Bri-ans are a dime a dozen and his surname had stuck, as it usually does for Brians, Ryans, and Steves after the coach bellows it for the thousandth time in practice. I had never hung out with Pinto before, but he was a nice enough guy. His name didn’t imply any crazy quirks, just a small car. Which was fitting, as any vehicle becomes small when three guys are road tripping in it.

The next stop was Greenville, South Carolina, where we met Josh’s other friend, Phil and thankfully escaped the dank man-
cloud of my Taurus for Phil’s Jeep Cherokee, complete with Armor-All-coated back seats that sent the rear passengers into forced spooning on every turn. Inertia-spawned homosexuality aside, everyone was pumped for the game. Usually, this is the best part of a road trip. Hopes are high. All the plans are in line. The women are waiting to be met and the beers are just being cracked. I asked Josh if he still had our tickets. He said that they were a bit pricey, so he figured we would just scalp some when we got to Athens. We were seven hours from home going to a game still 90 miles away with no tickets. Right on track.

When we rolled into Athens at one p.m., we knew instantly that the game was going to be awesome because we could hear the stadium from anywhere in the city. Unfortunately, that also meant the game had already started.

“I thought you said it was a late game,” I said to Josh.

“It is. A late one o’clock game,” he said with a smile that substituted for an apology. We walked down to the stadium gates and found that the second quarter was half over, and the scalpers were still asking sixty dollars a ticket. We took a straw poll and figured our money could be better spent at the bar. Then tragedy struck. Josh’s phone died, leaving us with no Deltas. We waited around in hopes that maybe one would drop in. By eight p.m., it was time to admit defeat and go back to Phil’s place in South Carolina, as all the hotels were just as packed as the game. We headed back to Phil’s jeep.

So far, the trip had been innocently mischievous and I nursed my buzz to greater significance in the backseat of Phil’s Cherokee. That’s when road trip hysteria came into full effect. You see, after ten hours in a car, people start to get a little funny. Much in the way mountain climbers suffer from the dizziness of altitude sickness, passengers on long rides get the Roadtrip Giggles. This, combined with a six-pack of Natural Light, led me to the astute observation that any song becomes funny when you sing it in the voice of Scooby Doo. Prince’s “Purple Rain” became “Rurple Rain.” We told the Police’s Roxanne that she didn’t have to “Rhurn on da Rhed Liiiight.” And then, as if God himself called in a request to the radio station, Tom Jones came on with “What’s New Pussy Cat.” Pinto belted it out stone-faced like a trooper, “Rhut’s Rhew Rhussie Cat, Rohhh-oh-ohhh-oh.” I tried to join in but could never get past
the “Rohhh-ohh-ohh-oh’s,” and Josh was doubled over in the front seat in tears.

Fully immersed in the contagion of Roadtrip Giggles, I barely noticed the funny bar Phil pulled into. It didn’t seem like our kind of establishment. Electric pink letters sizzled on the side of windowless stucco: “PLATINUM PLUS.” It sounded like a credit card. Spotting the valet in a tuxedo shirt and bowtie at the door, I asked, “What kinda bar is this?”


Two things that I was always proud of were that I had never watched the movie Titanic and that I had never gone to a titty bar. “Graham Currin doesn’t have to pay for girls,” I was fond of saying. But as the bouncers came out of the club to make their rounds in the parking lot, it seemed that staying behind wasn’t an option. I just hoped they weren’t showing Titanic inside.

Pinto and Josh rolled in first. Phil and I only made it a few paces from the car when the valet piped up that we had forgotten to pay him.

“We’ve already parked,” Phil said.

“Yeah, but I watch the cars,” said the greasy blonde haired kid. Phil didn’t want any trouble so he doled out a five to the guy.

“That’s all I’ve got,” Phil told me. I’d have to pay our way in until he could get to an ATM. This was shaping up perfectly.

I walked past the four-foot tall suits of armor that stood guard at the entrance to Platinum Plus and immediately heard thumping bass and saw the strobes bouncing off of the hallway that led to the main club. I didn’t know how much it cost to get in, but I figured my fifty would cover us and I slid it to the cashier coolly. To my surprise it only cost sixteen for the both of us. Also to my surprise, the cashier handed the change back in two-dollar bills. Seventeen of them. Zoinks Scoob, what in the hell was I going to do with seventeen two-dollar bills?

Oh. Touché titty bar.

Phil laughed. “I should’ve told you. They only give change in two-dollar bills here. If you buy anything in Greenville, everyone knows where you’ve been.” Phil led the way as I took in the scene. All I knew about strip clubs I learned from TV. Usually it was a horseshoe ring of shady dudes sitting around a girl on a pole. TV was tame. Platinum Plus had a mainstage, two cages, a champagne
room, and numerous cubby-holed tables where the dancers could corner you and try to coerce you to the anything-goes VIP room. Full service, they called it.

We joined Josh and Pinto around a table near one of the cages and sat in chairs that I was sure I wouldn’t have wanted to see under a Dateline special investigation black light. The bass thumped on as a dancer shook her machine gun ass in the far cage. For a moment, Platinum Plus was really sort of, magical. Women in lingerie floated all around us like some giant sex aquarium. I had seen far more lewd displays at dance clubs, come to think of it. The bouncers in their tuxedo shirts gave an air of class to the place. And the house music reminded me of a New York club, the way the beat pounds in your chest and continuously escapes through some tapping extremity out of your control.

Then, from nowhere, a school of dancers wove through the chairs up front. All kinds. They looked like a Dr. Seuss book. Whatever type of girl you wanted, Platinum Plus had. Some were white and some were black. Some were thin and some were fat. Some in red. And some in blue. Some were old. And some were new. Some were sad. And some were glad. And for fifty bucks, some would be very, very bad.

I was just relaxing into my seat when the first one approached our table and headed straight to me. I’ll pause here to say that a strip club environment is truly a foreign land. It has its own language, rules, and customs. None of which I knew. The kindly Striplandian greeted me in their usual way.

“Hey big boy. What can I do for you?”

Seeing the many bars around and the girls dancing in, on, and around them, I said how about getting me a beer. Faux-pas. Her face squished up as she said with a huff, “I don’t do that. Your waitress will be here in a minute.” The guys at the table laughed uncontrollably. Lesson one: a stripper is not your waitress. For forty bucks she’ll give you the old San Francisco handshake, but apparently drink service is beneath her.

The guys were still laughing when the cage in front of us lit up. A young lady with blue hair and six inch clear platform heels, the native dress in Striplandia, came barreling up the ramp to the cage. She leapt from the cage and swung on a pole that flanked it. Neon glowing toenails flew overhead as she took the poll like a ver-
tical trapeze. I was impressed. We all were. We quieted down as she swung from bar to bar, but not in the herky-jerky way that Olympians do on the parallels. It was always smooth and controlled.

When she settled back into the cage to converse with an admirer, I asked Josh if there was any other etiquette I should know about. “Not really,” he said. “But they’re going to bug the hell out of you for lap dances the rest of the night.” That sounded cool, I thought, but as soon as he said it, a girl materialized like a vampire beside me. She knocked my foot off my knee, uncrossed my legs, and sat down on my lap. Suddenly I wished I was in one of the suits of armor out front.

“What’s your name?” she asked mechanically.
“Uhhh, Armand,” I said. “What’s yours?”
“Scandalous. Want to come backstage with me?” she asked.
“Uh, no thanks.”
“Come on. I usually charge forty bucks for three songs, but for you I’ll do thirty,” she said.
“What’s your tattoo say?” I asked, trying to change the subject.
“Envy. I’d rather have it on my body than in my life. How ‘bout that dance?”

Politicians and salesman alike could have learned from Scandalous. She stayed on message and went for the sale the whole time. She eventually called no joy and leapt up to find another target.

“Good job,” Josh said. “They’re just like sea gulls, man. If you feed ‘em they’ll just come looking for more.”

I’d seen an interview with a stripper once on one of those TV news shows that purports to investigate the issue of decency while really using it as an excuse to show endless reels of dancers in barely broadcastable outfits. She said that strippers liked the money, but even more they liked the power. And they sure wielded it at Platinum Plus. All eyes were on them. It took so much effort to reject beautiful girl after girl. One would give their relentless sales pitch to each of us, while another circled not far off, waiting to wear us down.

And it did tire. Over and over it went:
“No.”
“You sure?”
“No thanks.”
“Come on.”
“I’m tired.”
“I’ll wake you up.”
“I’ve got a girlfriend.”
“So do I.”
“I’m gay.”
“We’ve got some guys here.”
“I’m broke.”
“Goodbye.”

It was a never-ending string of “No’s.” I decided to escape the feeding frenzy for a moment and hit the bathroom only to find another tuxedoed gentlemen manning the sinks with a tip plate. You have to tip everyone at a strip club. The coat guy, the waitress (who isn’t the stripper), the valet who doesn’t move your car. But damned if I was going to give a guy a buck for turning on a faucet. I wiped my hands on the back of my jeans and walked out. Urine is sterile. Which is more than I could say for Platinum Plus.

I walked back to our table to find Pinto straddled and Phil missing.

“Where’s Phil,” I asked.
“Lap dance,” Josh said.

Another moment and Pinto was being lead away from us.
“Where are you going?” Josh asked.
“I talked her down to twenty,” Pinto said. “I’m a sucker for a deal.”

Two men down. Our numbers were quickly shrinking. I looked at Josh, hoping he would stay. He was laughing at Pinto. “Look at her get him. She’s like a velociraptor. You see the first one coming, but ya never see the second one.” I looked as Josh motioned and saw Pinto, now flanked by two girls at the ATM. He was done for.

With our numbers halved, the girls came even faster. We mowed them down mercilessly. I was a broken record of No. No to Michelle. No to Luscious. No to Valerie and Destiny and Harmony. No matter how melodious your name. No. You can’t get me to go for a walk. Or to the champagne room just to talk. Not in the VIP. Not with Candy. Not with your friend. Not with two tens. No. No.
No. I do not want you down my pants. I do not want your skanky lap dance. I do not want good times, thank-you ma’am. I will not pay you, Graham-I-am.

Then Josh got up. Rut-Roh Shaggy. At least it looked like he was heading to the restroom. But in the meantime, three girls surrounded me. They were asking me so many questions and doing that thing where they rub the back of your head and feel your bicep and marvel at how strong you are, and even though you haven’t worked out in a year you let yourself believe them. I was defenseless. I didn’t want to go to the back room, drink some spiked drink, and wake up chained to a metal headboard, missing my kidneys. But I was out of No’s. They were rubbing my chest and asking me what I wanted, and then I remembered.

“Actually,” I said. “All I want is for one of you to go get me a beer.”

And in a cloud of teeth sucking and eye rolling, they were gone.

Josh came back, followed soon by a dejected Pinto who admitted that somehow he had been talked into twice the fee. Some deal. Phil actually came back to us bouncing. He had gotten his stripper’s phone number. They’d had a moment, he said.

The lights dimmed and the emcee announced that we were all in for a treat as the second shift of more “experienced” ladies came on. Unfortunately for us, Platinum Plus does not offer a pension program for its aging performers. You see, strippers don’t die, they just become waitresses. It was time to go.

The drive back to Phil’s place was a quiet one, as was the one back home the next day. Except for when we stopped at a Bojangle’s and they asked Pinto if he wanted a combo. We told the cashier no thanks. He’d already had one last night. That kid’s a sucker for a deal.

I took two showers when I got home. One that night to wash the weekend off, and one the next day to ensure I was rid of all stripper glitter. Attending church the following Sunday had never been more of a necessity. I had a visceral need to return to normal. I just wanted to see wholesome things now. Kids and puppies playing. Fluffy clouds and kindly old church folk smiling and singing.

I took my seat with my family in the back row at First Fox Hill United Methodist as the choir finished “Sweet Hour of Prayer.”
Scooby was unfortunately absent from the vocals this time. When the offering plate came around, I reached into my wallet to figure what I could part with, and all I found were two-dollar bills. I placed all seventeen into the plate as discreetly as I could, but my grandfather saw them and knew something was up.

“Have a good weekend?” he whispered.

“Yessir,” I said. “I think so.”
Prostitutes Appeal to Pope

Years before his name ascended from a Vatican chimney he sat in a dark booth as professional as the girls who exposed their souls for him to absolve. Occasionally he would ask, How many times? Are you sorry? Is there anything else? But mostly he would sit, hands folded across his lap.

He preferred the girls to the gangsters who rattled their trespasses like statistics. He despised the bureaucrats who preached Godlessness at work then slinked in to see him for their weekly pardon.

The girls, however, waited past forgiveness, sometimes placing a cheek against the screen, sometimes asking how he was, if there was anything he needed. Of course he said no, grateful for a calling that blessed his earthly toil as he rose out of the darkness into the sanctified air.
The Sun Temple

Mid-August, I am seeking the Sun Temple with an ancient scroll of map—once my grandfather’s. Rules say that the temple lies hidden in the charcoal clouds, appears only to travelers who carry their ancestors’ passports. I have burned everything that belongs to history, except this rice paper map whose compass rose fluoresces when I bring back childhood. Stuffing my duffel bag with vegetarian sandwiches, memorizing chapters of sutras with coral rosary beads, I thought that I would be alone in this quest. But the roads are flocked for miles with people! Families of three generations in hot air balloons, transfixed in mid-flight between pagoda and skyscraper. Parking in the skies, they shriek from their wicker baskets, flapping incandescent banners, “Pray for the Ozone at the Sun Temple.”

Fireworks smear the slate horizon. A group of school boys surround me, dressed as Icarus, feather wings waxed to their arms. They announce with heroic audacity, “May the Sun God grant us modern myths to fly!”

I pause at a hermit’s rococo cave, now revamped as a bed and breakfast. Serving Brazilian coffee with anti-fatigue pills, the hermit jubilates at his blossoming business. Sipping coffee, I sit next to three Javanese farmers, scrawny and shabby, hiding their heads under conical straw hats. They point at two sacks of rice, their only passport to the temple—“That’s all we’ve for our yields last spring. … we will pray for monsoon rain, and vacation for our Sun. And you? What’s your passport?” Revealing my grandfather’s map, I say that I want to snap photos of a sprawling sunrise from a mountain peak. Mouth agape, I tremble to realise that I can no longer remember my grandfather—I am merely a tourist.
evri kwong | acrylic and sharpie permanent marker on window shade
89 1/2” by 67 1/2”
Donkeyskin

| robin stephen  
| serigraph  
| 10” by 14”
kristen rieke | acrylic on canvas | 18” by 24”
Sunshine at Night

michael mcgregor
acrylic on canvas
36” by 36”
Lost

parvaneh angus | digital photography
10" by 8"

[Image Description: A black and white photograph of a person looking at a large wall of names, possibly a memorial or a list. Several other people are also looking at the wall.]
A Boy Who Loses His Dreams Only Finds Them When He's Dreaming.
francis raven |
drawing
8” by 10”
Lightbulbs

| kellie flint
acrylic on canvas
36” by 60”
kitty faraji | chalk on paper
16" by 20"
don fritz | raku fired ceramic
20” by 26” by 6”
Samhuinn

| julia sanches
digital photography
16” by 10 1/2”
Far Gone

It was a couple of days after the towers fell that Bryan called his brother, the first day that Bryan felt like he could talk without choking up. Outside, it was beautiful fall weather, just like that day had been. When Jim picked up the phone with a gruff “Yeah,” Bryan closed his eyes. The sound of Jim’s voice made him feel alone; he wanted to call anyone else, but there wasn’t anyone else.

“Hey, Jim,” he said, seeing only the red-black of self-imposed blindness. “It’s Bryan.”

“I know who the hell it is. How are you?”

Bryan let out a rush of rehearsed lines. “I’ve been thinking it would be nice to see you, to get out of Boston. Would you mind if I visited soon?” The green leaves of a maple rubbed against his living room window as he waited for his brother’s reply.

“Give me a week to get your room ready. I’m up to my eyeballs in work.”

Bryan couldn’t quite imagine what his brother was busy with, living out in the sticks in northern Maine, but he just said, “Okay, sounds good,” grateful that his brother was willing to host him.

Jim cut in, “By then it’ll be moose season. What do you say to some hunting?”

Bryan felt his delicate balance falter, his chin quiver slightly, set off by God knows what, the idea of hunting? His brother’s voice? The thought of planes and office buildings that he couldn’t get out of his mind? Moose hunting.

“That sounds great, Jim,” he said finally, hoping his voice sounded steady.

“Alright then. See you in a week, bro.”

Bryan folded the phone closed, relieved that Jim hadn’t said anything about the attack. But of course, it was entirely possible that he didn’t even know what had happened; he lived so far out there, who knew what news reached him.

On the eleventh, Bryan had been gazing through his office
window when he heard someone scream. He ran out to the hallway where the whole law firm was crowded around a TV. A plane slamming into a building. It made no sense. Bryan was confused and shocked, nothing more, until the newscaster, his suit not yet covered with dust, gripped his earpiece and ran. Then the world fell apart.

That night at home, Bryan sat glued to the TV. He wept whenever they talked about the last cell phone calls that the victims had made from the planes or the towers. Then the news reports would shift to analysis of the suspected attackers, and the quivering pity drained away, replaced by rage that also left him in tears. Jerked around to the edges of hysteria, Bryan wanted to turn off the TV, but he found himself utterly transfixed.

Bryan left his phone on the dining room table. His gaze lingered on the flat gray of the TV screen, but he forced himself back to the kitchen, where no screens tempted him to catch the latest news. He picked up the sponge from the sink and began to scrub the stovetop, scarcely conscious of the fact that he had already scoured this surface yesterday. His boss had shut the office for the remainder of the week, urging his employees to spend time with their families; the city was a mess anyhow. Without work, Bryan felt dislocated, adrift. In a normal state of mind, he never would have called Jim. But his older brother was all he had left since the grandmother who raised them had died almost three years ago. Since her death, he and Jim had drifted apart; there was nothing really to hold them together. But seeing the news reports on the dead and the missing had made Bryan call his brother. Besides, a week up in Maine would be perfect, Bryan thought. He could wrap up what was on his desk at work, really clear his mind. Then he’d be ready to get back into the swing of things.

The week at work went slowly—the forced cheerfulness, the careful avoidance of all topics that might be sensitive, the jitteriness as plane flights resumed overhead. Bryan sat in his office uneasily. The tinted glass of the window no longer felt empowering but exposing; his business suit felt like a combat uniform.

Early Saturday, Bryan hit the road, Route 95 for over two hundred miles. Mindless driving, a route he had taken four times a year up until his grandmother’s death. She’d raised him and Jim in Far Harbor, Maine, a bastion of barnacled rocks, voluminous tides,
and utter hopelessness, the northernmost point on the coast. What a place to grow up. They lived on the top floor of a small house on Far Harbor’s main street; the ground floor was a dry goods store that their grandmother ran—basic groceries, nothing fancy.

As a child, Bryan thought that someday he and Jim would run that store. They spent much of their summers out on the front porch, in shouting distance from the wharfs where fishermen stood and talked shop amidst the stink of diesel exhaust and ancient nets. This seemed like the perfect pace. But then he went to high school, turned fifteen, and abruptly Bryan outgrew that dream, and he outgrew Far Harbor, too. Good at school, an avid reader, he looked around one day and realized that everyone else was standing still, talking about cars they hoped to buy, boats they hoped to work on, the price of lobster. It started as a possibility that became a drive: to get out, to be better. He set his sights on college, began to envision a career.

Jim had absorbed Bryan’s plans with indifference. Always one step ahead of trouble, Jim nodded impatiently whenever Bryan talked about the future. Then the spring had come when Jim was done with high school. He would graduate in a week and, as far as Bryan could tell, had no plans for the future. Bryan had been sitting at the table, finishing his homework. Across from him, Jim shuffled a deck of cards incessantly, dealing out hands for cribbage, then scooping them up as Bryan ignored him.

Finally Bryan had had enough, “Knock it the hell off, Jim. I’ve got to finish this.” He shoved the cards away. “You might not care, but I want to get the hell out of here.”

Jim dropped the deck on the table and stood up. “If you’d stop being so stuck up, you’d see what’s going on,” he said. “You keep busy with your schoolwork. I’ve got to make ends meet right here.” He left the cards in a messy pile and went off to their bedroom.

The next morning, Bryan awoke to find Jim already gone and rode the school bus by himself for the first time. When he got home that afternoon, his grandmother was talking in the store with a clutch of old men who stopped by for no commodity except the day’s gossip. He slid along the side of the store, heading for the back cooler, and he heard someone mention Jim’s name and Tibbett’s Packing, one of the local sardine factories. Bryan opened
the cooler door, lifted out a soda, wondered what his brother was up to.

That evening, he waited upstairs for Jim’s return, like a wife for an unfaithful husband. He expected to see an exuberant Jim, flush with tales of new experiences. Instead, his brother came dragging home just before dinner, rubber boots slapping on the steps, fish scales glittering in his hair. Bryan opened the apartment door, letting the light from the entry flood the stairs ahead of him.

“How was it, Jim?” Bryan asked, but he knew the answer from his brother’s tired face.

“Shut it. I don’t need you looking down at me. You know what it is.” Jim tried to push past Bryan.

“I’m not trying to be condescending. I’m just curious. How was it?” Bryan insisted.

Suddenly Jim launched a punch that hit Bryan square in the face. The two of them tumbled down the stairs, Jim slippery and smelling of fish, Bryan beneath him, helpless to stop Jim from hitting him again and again. Then Jim got up, stepped over his brother, and trudged up the stairs. He shut the apartment door behind him, and Bryan was alone in the dark.

Route 95 through New Hampshire. You blink, you miss it. Bryan sped through the tiny strip of that state and was brought up short by the toll booths marking the entry to Maine. It was a sunny Saturday morning and all around him, waiting for their turn to pay the toll, were tourists looking forward to a last weekend before the winter weather set in. Americans hoping for some family time, desperate for a sense of togetherness and relaxation, something that was beyond everyone’s reach at the moment.

Through the tolls, the Maine turnpike began in earnest. A cluster of exits around Portland and then nothing for a long while. Jim didn’t live in Far Harbor anymore; he’d moved after their grandmother died, but he still he lived way up north on some property that their great-grandfather (long dead before they were born) had purchased on a lake.

The pine trees rolled by his car window; Bryan found it soothing, empty. Just north of Portland he saw the first hillside where the leaves had already turned, the birches yellow and a few sugar maples flaming red. Looking at them, Bryan couldn’t wait to get out into the woods. It had been years since he had done any
hunting with Jim. Back then, when they were both in school and just old enough to get a permit, their trips were mostly long walks in the woods, patient sitting, and hushed conversation. They cradled the guns in their arms but seldom took many shots until they got bored and started shooting at random targets. As the ragged edges of woodlands sped by, Bryan was satisfied with this vision. Quiet but purposeful time, the peace of nature but also the poise of hunting. He didn’t want to admit it, but the idea of holding a gun both excited and comforted him.

Past Bangor, Bryan’s car was the only one on the road. The familiarity of the drive made Bryan feel as though he were heading towards Far Harbor, that his grandmother would be waiting for him at the end of this journey. As he approached the exit that he would normally take to see her, he felt as if she were watching him, as if she knew that he hadn’t seen Jim in two years. His ambition had taken him out of Maine, far away from her; and Jim, still in the same sardine factory job, had been left to care for her. Going home had become a guilt-ridden affair, especially when the last sardine factory shut and Jim was stuck there with a dying woman, running a store in a dying town.

Bryan jabbed a finger at the radio and set it searching for noise. The music pushed away the thoughts that had been gathering, like flies on a carcass in Bryan’s mind. Instead he thought about Jim, wondering whether two years would have changed him and what the lake house would look like. It must be twenty years now since he’d been there. As kids, he and Jim had gone almost every summer. Some uncle who materialized in July or August would come to Far Harbor and pick up Bryan and Jim. The uncle was skinny, a bit twitchy around his mouth. He was clearly more interested in filling his trunk with beer from their grandmother’s store than with either Bryan or Jim.

As a kid, the ride felt interminable to Bryan. Up front, their uncle seemed to be of the same mindset. “East Bumblefuck, Nowhere,” he’d mutter to himself as they passed through a small town, just a gas station and a church. The road turned to dirt. The beer bottles clanked together in the trunk. At the lake house, Jim and Bryan fished or swam while their uncle drank beer, lining up the empty bottles and shooting at them with a pistol. The boys would float lazily in the water, listening to the sound of breaking
glass, which grew more infrequent as the afternoon wore on. At night, they slept in the loft of the cabin their great-grandfather had built, the musty air rank with the smell of mothballs radiating from their wool blankets. Jim always fell right asleep, snoring, but Bryan stayed awake, trying to listen for sounds from the lake; the call of a loon or, if the night was really quiet, waves lapping on the shore.

No, Bryan could not imagine Jim living there. What were the winters like? Wasn’t he lonely? After their grandmother died, Jim had been eager to move out to the lake. Bryan hadn’t asked at the time, wasn’t sure what Jim was running from in Far Harbor or what he thought he was going to get at the lake. At the time, he hadn’t really cared; he’d wanted to settle matters quickly, cleanly. If Jim wanted the rotten old cabin by the lake, then he could take it. Bryan had work to do down in Boston; he’d driven back from the funeral in a rush, intent on some upcoming case. Jim’s life was unimaginable but also uninteresting, of no consequence.

At last, Bryan saw the big green exit sign looming ahead. He steered up the ramp, drove past the few stores that serviced the highway travelers, and then turned on to a twisting, narrow back road. “East Bumblefuck,” he murmured happily.

An hour or so later, his car bounced down the last dirt road to the lake. The log cabin was still there, its front porch sagging near the shore, and it looked like Jim had built a new garage. Bryan stepped out and had a sudden urge to kick off his shoes and plunge into the lake, submerge himself, float for hours on its sparkly surface.

But then he saw Jim coming out of the garage towards him, Jim with a tangly head of hair and reddish beard, Jim with a sawdust covered sweaty T-shirt, wiping his hands on a rag.

“Bry-bry. Glad you could make it,” Jim said, clasping him in a brief embrace that overwhelmed Bryan: the smell of Jim unchanged since childhood, the scent of fresh-cut wood, gasoline, the sound of his long-unused nickname. “C’mon in,” said Jim, leading the way to the cabin porch.

Inside, the cabin no longer smelled musty, which startled Bryan—he had thought the smell was permanent, almost structural. Jim had left the same Adirondack chairs on the porch, and Bryan could see the old wood-fired cook stove in the kitchen, but otherwise it was entirely Jim’s house. In the living room, two La-Z-
Boy recliners were parked in front of a big TV; in the kitchen at the rear, a microwave and a coffee pot showed signs of frequent use. Bryan tried to take it all in without seeming nosey or condescending, while Jim kept up a steady stream of comments: “I wired up the electric last year. Makes a big difference, huh? I moved that table over from Far Harbor—you remember it?”

Bryan recalled the cabin as cave-like, perpetually damp and dim, but somehow it was lighter now, and not just because of the electric lamps. He craned his neck up and saw skylights in the roof.

Jim smiled. “First thing I did here, practically. Got up there to fix that leaky roof and put in those skylights. Makes it so you can see inside. Kinda opens it up.”

The cabin did feel larger, the opposite of how childhood places revisited are supposed to feel. Jim went on, “I fixed up a bedroom over the garage for you. Figured you’d be more comfortable over there than up in the old loft.” Jim nodded at the slanting ladder that rose towards the loft above.

Bryan climbed up first, saw the same four narrow beds that had always been there. “If it’s okay with you,” he said, “I’d rather sleep up here.”

Jim helped Bryan bring in his bags. As soon as he’d dropped them on the cabin floor he said, “Now that your shit’s unpacked, let’s get going. I told Joe I’d be over this afternoon.” Bryan had been standing on the porch, looking out over the lake. He’d been thinking of taking out a canoe and was annoyed by Jim’s insistence.

“What’s the hurry, Jim?”

“We need to get a truck from Joe to go hunting. Tomorrow’s going to be perfect weather, so let’s go.”

It was easier to go with the flow, Bryan decided. They walked to Jim’s truck, which looked fine to Bryan. The bed was full of tools, a chainsaw, random ends of logs and lumber, but everything seemed to be in working order; the engine started right up and ran smoothly as Jim pulled out of the driveway. They bumped their way down the driveway and then along an old logging road. Jim talked incessantly about the projects he was working on. Bryan had forgotten how much Jim could talk; he let the chatter wash over him. There was no mention of their grandmother, no mention of current events, just nice and easy.
After several miles on dusty roads, Jim pulled the truck up in front of a trailer. Several cars and trucks, even one RV, were scattered around the trailer; a few had four tires.

“This is Joe’s place,” said Jim, stepping out.

Joe turned out to be a Passamaquoddy, rather laconic. He pointed to two trucks parked at the edge of the clearing, both dented and rusty, one blue, one red. Jim went over and started each of them in turn, driving in small loops around the trailer. Bryan watched the trucks rattle and wheeze. The red one had its bumper tied on with rope; both had tires as bald as eggs. Joe nodded his head, watching Jim drive.

“This is the one we want,” said Jim, leaning out the window of the blue truck. Joe nodded. “A real beater,” Jim said to Bryan with a wink. He was grinning ear to ear. “I’ll lead the way home. Just don’t rear end me if this thing dies.”

Bryan tailed the lurching blue truck, breathing in the exhaust it belched, wondering what was going on in Jim’s mind. Back at the cabin, Jim was still grinning broadly, walking around the truck. “She’ll do,” he said. “Now let’s eat.”

After dinner, Bryan stood up and stretched. “Is the outhouse still in the same spot?” He asked.

Jim smiled. “Brand new outhouse, and the garage has a real bathroom, if you’d prefer, Mr. Cityslicker.”

Bryan stepped out and walked around the side of the cabin away from the lake. He saw the outhouse but decided to piss in the bushes. There’s nothing like pissing outside.

Bryan leaned his head back, looking at the boughs of the pine trees dancing across the blue-gray dusk above him. Before he knew it, he was crying. Christ. These last two weeks had wrecked him. He was a grown man taking a whiz against a hemlock tree and he was crying, looking at the trees and the stars and the emptiness. He zipped up his fly and wiped his eyes on the corner of his T-shirt. Christ. All day he’d made it—no talk of the planes or the towers. No terror alerts or false alarms. No TV news, no radio, no newspaper. Somehow, he thought as he moved through the thick shadows back to the cabin, somehow Jim knew what was bothering him. His avoidance of all current event-related topics was not out of ignorance; his ceaseless chatter was an attempt at distraction. This whole moose hunt was Jim’s plan to snap him out of it. Some-
how Jim knew. He was the older brother, after all.

The porch light had drawn a few moths, and Bryan stood watching them for a moment before going in. Around him the trees heaved and sighed, waited as if for him to say something. He cleared his throat. No, nothing. So he stepped inside, where Jim shuffled cards at the table, the dinner dishes cleared away.

“Hell of a long piss, Bry. Hope you haven’t forgotten how to play cribbage.”

The TV’s gray screen mocked him from the living room as Jim shuffled and dealt. There could be war, more bombings, and he wouldn’t know until it was too late. Watching his brother squint at his cards, Bryan wondered what Jim could have been. While Bryan admired the simplicity of Jim’s life, he was baffled by what it meant and why Jim lived like this. Maybe it was better than the sardine factory. Jim slapped his cards on the table, grinning. And Bryan thought, maybe he’s never been unhappy. Maybe I’m the one who’s dissatisfied.

The next morning, Bryan awoke disoriented as Jim shook him by his shoulder. He saw the murky skylights above him; it must be early.

“Truck’s all set,” said Jim. “Let’s go.”

They climbed into the blue truck Jim had bought yesterday. Yellow foam spilled out from rips in the seat and the floor was littered with soda cans. Jim thumped the dusty dashboard.

“A real beater,” he said with approval. Amazingly, the truck started and they rolled out of his driveway.

“We’re going to Turner’s Swamp,” Jim said, “You remember that spot?”

“Maybe,” Bryan replied, unsure. “What’re we shooting with?” He looked around for the guns.

Jim smiled. “No shooting today.”

“What? I thought we were moose hunting.”

“We are,” Jim paused; the truck’s engine pinged and popped. “Just not shooting. I didn’t get a permit. They lottery the permits, so fat chance I’d even get one. And if I did, that thing would cost four hundred dollars, so no way. This truck was two hundred—a bargain. You’ll see.”

Bryan looked at his brother’s hand gripping the wheel, the foggy woods around them. It didn’t make any sense to him, like
some riddle that Jim knew the answer to and was teasing Bryan about. “Jim...” he started.

“Almost there.”

The truck had no shocks; Bryan felt each rock in the road as if it had been thrown at him. If someone could be said to drive with a swagger, that’s what Jim was doing, grinning, one hand swinging the truck to avoid the worst potholes. They crested a short, steep hill and Jim stopped the truck.

“Sit tight. I’ll be right back,” Jim said.

At the bottom of the incline, the road curved out of sight. Jim disappeared around the curve, and Bryan felt uneasy. He had imagined a day or two in the woods; part of him craved to be armed and shooting, not sitting in a rattling, smelly pickup truck.

Jim reappeared, moving quickly, making an effort to be quiet. “We’ve got to be quick,” he said. From the back, he pulled two helmets. “Strap it on good,” he said to Bryan. Jim put his on first, then looked at Bryan, who was dubiously fixing his seatbelt. “C’mon, there’s three of them, so we’re bound to get one. Set?”

“Jim...” Bryan began, but his words were cut off as Jim released the handbrake. The truck lurched forward and Jim pounded the gas. They plunged down the hill. The tires skidded and slipped on the dirt. Around the corner, Bryan barely registered the three moose in the road. Long legs with knobby knees, shaggy brown coats. He bounced uncontrollably on the seat as the truck hit a pothole, took to the air, landed hard. Two of the moose jumped away. The third turned and broke into a gallop, but Jim bore down relentlessly. Bryan gripped the dash board as the truck closed in, and Jim screamed, “You goddamn fucking terrorist!” his hands on the wheel, setting the course, with Bryan as the helpless copilot.
Somewhere someone has to make a beginning.  
It must be made out of nothing  
or out of a landscape utterly other,  
of trees bent in the wind as if with the want  
of what begins.

So a pumpkin seed is planted, or the door  
on a birdcage closed, or all the birds let go.

Thoreau plants his nine bean rows.  
Anna Karenina slips into a party dress.  
Gulliver wakes to find himself bound by a thousand threads,  
and by the time he sits up, breaking them,  
it has already begun.

In the beginning, nothing too large.  
A raindrop streaking a window pane.  
A leaf falling.

A horse is saddled.  
An alarm clock ticks toward five a.m.

Here is our beginning,  
back in the dark, back at the quiet gesture—  
a hand cupping a breast, a baby’s cry.  
A man stoops to pick up a feather,  
a girl swings her leg over the horse’s back,  
the alarm sings.

So, like a bride  
you wake into your life to find yourself bound,  
your white dress woven of so many threads  
you can’t tear them away. Don’t cry.  
It’s your story.  
Take it in your hands.

Begin.
The lips he pressed close across my collarbone up against his baby grand in the soundproof practice room were not the same lips that kissed his bottles of Bud, that bloomed like a bruise against the shining brass when he bowed to his trumpet the way he must have bent as a child to some summer sprinkler, warm and thirsty and hoping.
Place

I sit curled next to my grandmother, her lilac perfume as clear as spring, as strong as the shrubs growing in her yard. It is Sunday night. We watch *Wild Kingdom, Lawrence Welk, Disney*.Regardless of age or size, she calls the kids hotten tots and cherubs.

I am in my father’s gaze as I deliver a slick, black-blue lamb, its steaming body sliding into the cold February air, its mother cleaning. I am in his gaze as I learn to drive a rusty International. I cut it too sharp, tearing open a tire with the grain wagon, the moist, rubbery air whooshing by my face as I climb down. My father says nothing.

I’m watching my mother melt away between her desire to satisfy my grandfather’s need for profit and her inability to embrace the idea that where there is livestock there is deadstock: that the bottle lamb we feed until his stomach swishes and then push around in a baby buggy either becomes a roast or a burden; that when the dog she talks to every day is hit by a car, the only affordable option is perma-sleep; that when that dog dies there’s a new one the next day to learn his work because the farm never rests.

I walk the hard black soil in the wake of gleaming disks, picking up ancient pottery that never fits together, collecting arrowheads and axes, holding the old black pipe still bearing the mark of gut or vine that once connected it to the rest of history. I clutch the paint rock, rub it across my cheeks, the iron coloring my skin. I’m listening to my father’s stories of ancestors, his longing for something primordial, something he cannot touch.

I hear the pheasant’s cry, high and harsh, beneath the brown and red of winter scrub. I see a merry-go-round of vultures, circling just out of reach, past the pond that shrinks out of existence when the sky refuses to rain. The same pond where, in wetter years, frogs chorus rounds of love songs between spring rain and snow showers, the most determined pairs of balled eyes poking out of water puddles surrounded by moats of snow.

I’m warning the roosters not to crow at midnight, not to
crow at 2 a.m. I tell the ducks not to shit on the steps. The roosters run away chasing a hen. Under the dogs’ protection, the ducks’ laughter is unmistakable. They laugh at me. They laugh at night, at opossums and raccoons.

I plant domestic rudbeckia and echinacea, their supermodel improvements making them stand out against their pallid ancestors in the same way my muted skin contrasts with that of my father, my grandmother, her grandparents. The flowers grow in purple and gold ovals like symbols of basketball teams. The plants create new boundaries each season.

I am in the living room. Outside the window, Leopold’s crane passes yearly. I watch the hawk fly by, carrying a writhing snake like Indiana Jones snapping a whip. The returning eagle carries a screaming rabbit.

I search but cannot find a prairie dog, buffalo, porcupine.

The crop dusters miss fields, sprinkling houses, ponds, and pets. The cat comes home, head on sideways, mewing, aborting her kittens. Stumbling, she does not die. My friend dies from cancer. My aunt dies from cancer. My aunt dies from cancer. Two plus three equals five. There are more than five.

I watch a coyote down a rifle barrel and decide whether or not to pull the trigger. I don’t fire. I killed seven watersnakes, one opossum, five snapping turtles, and a raccoon with a pellet gun to protect rabbits, chickens, ducks, and children. It is the battle between indigenous and domestic. I don’t know how to stand atop the fence and balance.

I need to find awe in less space than Thoreau. This is not a choice.

My cousin died from shrapnel wounds. For seven years, war planes and helicopters have hummed through the night air indifferent to this place. For seven years, I’ve listened for silence but cannot hear it for the howling, crowing, humming, screaming, and buzzing.
She eats
as though starving—chicken, dolmata,
the buttery flakes of filo—
and what’s killing her eats, too.
from Kim Addonizio’s Eating Together

Before my friend bought her first pink wig
She listened to another song by Dolly Parton
And played Scarlet’s Walk until the phone rang.

Before she wore a silk scarf over her bare head
She watched Muriel’s Wedding for the seventeenth
Time and wrote stories for the children of Palestine.

Before my friend’s thick auburn hair fell in waves
To the floor she sat in her blue kitchen till morning,
Carved pumpkins and wrote long letters
That carried her laugh inside them like a secret
Full of open drawers.

Before my friend knew she was leaving
She flew back home for good and left me
Her songs, like petals of carnation unfolding,
The way raisins swell under the chill of my tongue.
Laurel’s boss calls her into his back office. Laurel is unsuspecting, smiling, remembering a joke she just overheard one customer tell another, when her boss fires her. He tells her business is lagging. He tells her he’s letting her go because she was the last hired.

Laurel stares at him. He stares at her nametag.

“I’d be happy to be a reference for you,” he says.

Laurel doesn’t believe that business is lagging. She read a mention in the local magazine about Coffee Crutch’s business booming, about expansions planned. He is firing her because of her size. He has heard the jabs made by her coworkers, and maybe he’s worried that the customers think the same things and they’re leaving for the Starbucks down the street. She wants to yell at him. She wants to tell him that her weight can’t be killing business any more than the giant brown spot on his balding head. She can’t form the words, but even if she could, she’s too sensible. She knows she’ll need the reference.

Laurel doesn’t see her coworkers as she lumbers past them on her way out, although she pictures them already knowing, averting their gazes in embarrassment for her, or maybe staring because they want to see her reaction. Her face burns as she pulls out of the parking lot, the angry blush leaking to her neck, her chest. She wants to scream, but to really do a scream justice she’d have to close her eyes, and she won’t do that while she’s driving.

She drives downtown to stare in the windows of pricey boutiques rather than go home to face her laundry and her goldfish. She stops outside a store called Twiggy. Like almost any other clothing store, this one doesn’t carry anything that will fit her, but she doesn’t care. From outside she watches as the teen salesperson, alone in the store, leans down and blows on the glass jewelry case, then traces something in the fog. When Laurel enters, the girl jumps, embarrassed. She immediately forms a smile; when she gets a look at Laurel, her smile falters in confusion. But she musters a hello and asks if she can help her.
“I’m looking for a dress,” Laurel says. “Um...”

Laurel spots a dress in red satin. She walks over to it and checks the size. It’s a small. “Do you have this in a large?”

The girl looks so confused, Laurel almost feels sorry for her. She knows she’s thinking that two larges aren’t going to fit Laurel. But the girl goes in the back, returns with the dress, and hangs it in a fitting room. Laurel smiles a thank-you and goes in. She steps one leg into the dress, then the other, then pulls the dress up. It won’t go past her thighs, but she keeps pulling, pulling until the fabric splits. The noise sounds as loud as an espresso machine; the salesgirl must have heard, although it hardly matters because Laurel is too honest to ruin a dress in a store and pretend she didn’t. She collapses onto the bench with her head in her hands, her elbows denting her thighs. At a store like this, she should work a week to afford one of their T-shirts, and now she doesn’t have a job.

“Are you doing all right in there?”

Laurel can feel the salesgirl standing just outside the dressing room door. And for a second she hates her. She tries to stifle her sobs, but she knows the girl can still hear. The price tag dangles around her thigh. She doesn’t have the heart to flip it over to see what she’s done. At least there’s no mirror in the tiny room, no way for her to see herself stuck in the dress, looking like a walrus stuck in a thong.

She fishes out the wad of tissues from her purse and wipes her face. Her purse is made of straw, a style that was in vogue a few years ago, something she could have purchased even at a store like this because they don’t have to make special purses for fat people. She must look ridiculous carrying it—cartoonish, like Yosemite Sam in a dress—and it makes her want to rip the purse in half, too. Laurel pulls the dress off and wriggles back into her Coffee Crutch uniform. The manager didn’t ask for the uniform back, maybe to spare her—or himself—the embarrassment, or maybe because he figures he’ll never again hire anyone big enough to need it.

When she emerges from the dressing room, she sees the girl stationed behind the jewelry case again, a fake smile plastered on her face. The girl is trying to pretend she didn’t hear the rip, didn’t hear Laurel crying. She’s trying to pretend it’s not ridiculous that the dress could fit her. Laurel is grateful the girl doesn’t try to be-
friend her, doesn’t ask if she’s okay or offer one of her skinny, sympathetic ears.

“How did it work out for you?” the girl says.

“I’ll take it.” Laurel plunks her credit card down on the counter along with the dress. She spots a rack of purses.

“Just a second,” Laurel says, and heads over to it.

She won’t destroy any of the purses. She’ll just choose a cute one that will last for years.
I pull into the gravel parking lot at the base of Ridgeline and park my car. I push back my seat and lean down to lace up my tired and trusty running shoes. My old Mizunos seem much older than they really are—I have only had this pair for a few months—but I have been running enough miles lately that I should probably get a new pair soon. As I tie them up tight around my padded $9 running socks, I notice with satisfaction the inner corner of the front toe of my shoes that has been rubbed raw from countless laps on the roads in my neighborhood. I look down lovingly at my socked wiggling toes underneath the tattered cotton webbing of my shoes and hop out of the car, slamming the door shut behind me and shoving the car key into the hidden pocket in my nylon shorts. I glance down at my blue rubber Timex watch, set the timer going with a sharp beep, and I’m off to run Ridgeline.

At Ridgeline, I feel the most like myself and the least like myself at once. I run heedlessly and carefully at the same time, smacking myself in the face with blackberry brambles while always being mindful not to hog the one-lane trail. As the trail starts to make the first gradual incline of the run (certainly not the last), I talk to myself: You can do it, just a few more steps. Pick it up! How can you ever expect to improve your form if you’re running that slow? The long hill begins to rise sharply, and I feel my legs pick up the pace slightly while I lengthen my stride, consuming as much ground as I can. I breathe consciously, a steady in through my nose, out through my mouth as I run, making sure to pump my arms to urge my lagging body up the hill. I shoot my knees toward the swaying tree tops as my quads begin to prickle with the first signs of fiery pain, and then I crest the hill.

Time pauses indefinitely the moment my body is shocked into realizing I am no longer running uphill. It is as if I have taken a digital photo of my surroundings. The angry cawing of the crows shrilly pierces my ears; the small rocks threaten to press through the thin rubber soles of my Mizunos; the impossibly green hue of
the tree branches blinds me. I begin to stagger down the hill, mentally and physically spent from racing myself up this small mountain. But then, the moment of pain passes, and I exhale gratefully as I start my downhill free-run. I let myself go and coast, allowing my legs to find their own pace as they cycle below me. I feel detached from my body as I breathe in, out; in, out. The wood chips from the path kick up behind my dejected shoes, flinging at my calves and falling to stick on my cottony socks. I look ahead at the path before me and watch the afternoon light play tricks with the leaf shadows. The evergreens and oaks above my head have locked their branches in a dense canopy in the way that lovers intertwine fingers, allowing only dappled sunshine to slip through their tight embrace. I am grateful for the shade of the forest; there is nothing that ruins a good run more than the stifling heat of a summer afternoon. I look at my watch. It has only been seven minutes since I started my run, but I am already consumed by the challenge.

I am not a real runner—I have short legs, I don’t have PR’s, I like to eat too much—but I love to run. On any given day during any given run, I have to remind myself every other thought how much I enjoy the pain that I am putting myself through. Some days, there is nothing I can tell myself to make my run any better than it is. Those are the days when I feel as if I am running against a current of crashing waves with dumbbells tied to my feet. I see the “real” runners that pass me on the trails and know that they have Runner X-Ray Vision that penetrates my cotton T-shirt to see my naked body, where I harbor forbidden fat pouches instead of lean muscle. I feel the pus-filled blisters on my big toe and heel begin to crack, and the thin, translucent skin peels away, leaving raw pink flesh to be whipped around inside my shoe. Those are the days when I look at my watch every two minutes and find, to my utter despair, that my run never seems to be half done. I know I have had a bad day when my thoughts are consumed with finishing my run rather than running itself.

But on good days, all of the moments of pain are made tolerable by the few moments of pure joy. Today, as I careen wildly down the steep hill, I sense that today is a good day. I just know. Even though I have to furiously swipe at my brow to prevent the salty sweat from stinging my eyes and my quads feel like Jell-O, I am acutely aware of where I am. The dusty dirt poofs up as my feet
pound the earth, my dim shadow trailing behind me. The ground gradually descends until I find myself running on a very uncharacteristically flat stretch of Ridgeline trail. The momentum from my recent downward dash pulls me along, and my legs feel airy. I feel the way a leaping, frolicking deer must feel; as if the world is moving around me as I float effortlessly in one place. Granted, I am exerting effort—my breath is still returning back to normal from the hill—but I barely notice. I am too busy having fun.

And then I am there. I am in my holy place, where I feel most electric and most peaceful. As I enter the expanse of forest, I get the cathedral shivers, the kind of goosebumps that make you realize you are in God’s presence. Most of Ridgeline is the kind of closed-in, grown-over trail that reminds me of running through a rabbit hole; most of the time, I can’t see around the next curve because the forest is so dense. But here, in God’s house, the rabbit hole opens up suddenly to a space so huge I feel tiny. It steals my breath from me, and I feel like I am standing at the very edge of a steep cliff overlooking the ocean. And I always stop running, no matter how good of a day I am having or how pressed I am for time. There is something about my Ridgeline Church that forces me to put myself on pause.

I stand and revel in the power of this place, my breath heaving, in, out, in, out. I crane my neck, noticing the soft light as it flickers through the windy branches and the firm certainty of the tree trunks. I look down, seeing the knuckle-like, knobby roots puncturing the path before me and the wood chips that have been shuffled away by travelers before me. I breathe. I inhale big, open breaths with my arms lifted in an arc above my head; then exhale, dropping my arms like a rag doll attempting a bow. My runner’s mind shuts off here—no more thoughts of minutes per mile or splits or weekly mileage—and only one quiet voice remains. It whispers carefully: thank-you, thank-you, thank-you. I survey my surroundings and want to scream and dance and laugh and cry and jump. I walk a few steps, breathing deeply all the time, closing my eyes to see how far I can venture without tripping over a tree root. My heart stops hopping around in my chest like a bouncy ball, and I calm my body and mind. No matter how much I concentrate on what I think is important at the time, the voice returns. Thank-you, it says quietly.
I gulp down one more long breath and close my eyes firmly, sealing in my mind the absolute tranquility and peace I feel at this moment. I keep this memory in my heart the way you might carry a lucky penny in your jeans pocket. I finger it in my mind, caressing the worn copper edges, feeling the thousands of souls before me who have touched its energy. I sigh contentedly, then start to run again. My breaths quicken and my heart races, but my mind remains free to fly, unfettered by my body’s physical shackles. I run freely on winged feet, without worrying about falling, or about being fat, or about my pace. I run, thankful for my feet that are ugly with calluses and blisters. I run, thankful for my knees that have withstood countless miles of pounding on concrete and asphalt. I run, thankful for my legs that are strong from years of running and walking and dancing and living. I run. And I am so grateful.
Risk

When DeShante calls I always pick up. No matter what’s going on, or how I may be feeling, the sound of his voice is honey in my ear.

That morning, I was just getting out of the shower when he called on my cell wanting to know if I could meet him after work so he could ask me a very important question.

“I told you, baby, right after I leave the bank this afternoon I have to get down to Dillard’s. Today’s Thursday, you know that.”

“Oh, right,” he said. “Well, then, it’ll have to be after you’re done. What time is that again?”

“Nine. But what is it you want to ask me? Go ahead and ask me now.”

“Aw, Latrice, you just going to have to wait ‘til later. Meet me at El Caballo at 9:15, okay? You have yourself one excellent day, sugar.”

“I will. I love you. Bye.”

I can tell you right off the bat, because I’m sure you’re wondering, that I knew that DeShante Abraham had no intention of asking me to marry him. We’d been over and over that ever since last winter when we had already been dating more than a year. Neither of us was ready. I saw no reason to hurry myself into marriage when we had all the time in the world ahead of us and things were fine as they were, at least as far as I was concerned. Also, I knew we were both too young. And another thing: I was working two jobs, he was working three. I could afford my own apartment, DeShante could not. He was sharing a place off Natural Bridge with Marie, who was his auntie, and Marie’s son, J.P. Marie and J.P. fought like crazy, and DeShante was the one who broke up their fights and made peace between them. Marie was pretty much a wreck, living on government checks and food stamps, trying to deal with her asthma and give up dope. One time a little earlier that summer, when I went over to pick up a change of clothes for DeShante, I found the front door open. Anybody could have walked right in,
and that part of Arlington, I can assure you, is no paradise. Inside the house it was stuffy and sweltering. All the shades were drawn and the place reeked of Jergens and french fries and cigarette smoke. I saw greasy Big Mac wrappers crumpled on the floor and Dr. Pepper cans under the sofa. Marie’s inhaler was filthy with fuzz from the carpet and the TV was blaring some game show I had never seen before. I had to practically scrape Marie off the living room floor, where she was leaning against an old easy chair, smoking the last half of a menthol Kool and tipping ashes into an empty Big Gulp cup. I stubbed out her cigarette and steered her into bed so that J.P. wouldn’t find her lying there when he got home from work. I felt sorry for Marie—who wouldn’t?—but I also gave her a piece of my mind and told her that she was going to have to get her act together, that the way she let herself and the house go was creating all kinds of tension in the family, and that everyone was always terrified that the next call would be the hospital telling them that she’d been run over by a truck or coughed herself to death. I’m not sure she heard any of this, but she did nod along and say sorry.

DeShante’s cousin J.P. was working part-time for the construction company that was building the new stadium. He was also taking classes at Harris-Stowe. J.P. wanted to be a teacher. He had always been good with little kids. Fifteen years ago, when DeShante was seven and needed a place to live, J.P., who was only fourteen, made it so DeShante could move in with him and Marie. Back then she wasn’t doing so badly. J.P. became like a father to DeShante, keeping him out of trouble, coming down hard when he went with the wrong kids, and to this day DeShante never takes two steps in any direction without consulting with J.P. In fact, it was J.P. who paid for DeShante to go to trade school and got him his job at the stadium so that they were both working there. DeShante also works part-time in the kitchen at a nursing home out on Olive. He says the one thing he will never be able to look at again is butterscotch pudding.

Still, even though J.P. is patience itself with everybody in the whole world, his patience always seems to run out when it comes to his own mama. And that’s where DeShante helps him out. DeShante says it’s because Marie is so helpless and pathetic; somebody has to run interference. I nod along when he says this but privately I think that’s not exactly correct. I believe that DeShante feels deep
down that Marie is his last and only link to his own mama, that if he lets Marie slide down too far into oblivion, he will have let down the spirit or fate or what have you that brought him into this world. But I would never say this out loud. DeShante would shake his head at a theory like that and grab my butt (he loves my butt) and say, “Girl, you spoutin’ crazy shrinkrap,” or something like that. So I only tell the other tellers who are my friends, Sherelle and Rhonda and even Matt, the white gay guy. They all agree with me.

So anyway, that Thursday we hung up and I went about my business. My hair was pulled tight off my face, done up in a knot of microbraids. I was wearing my gold earrings, the skinny hoops that come halfway down to my shoulders, a burgundy tank top, a fitted black skirt, and high heels. Liking clothes is one reason I was hanging on to the job at Dillard’s even though the managers at the bank wanted to pay me to do an MBA. Believe me, I was using every penny of my Dillard’s discount. My thought was, what kind of professional development could I pursue if I didn’t have the right outfit to pursue it in?

At four, I left the bank and drove over to the mall. The Dillard’s ladies department was pretty dead. July isn’t much of a shopping month, so I spent most of my time refolding T-shirts and putting clothes back on hangers and doing the inventory paperwork that had to be done before the fall things started arriving in August. It was a hot night and just getting dark when I came out at five past nine and drove over to El Caballo on Manchester.

DeShante was waiting for me at a table under a string of colored light bulbs. He had a big smile on his face and got up to kiss me and pull out my chair. DeShante kept his hair shaved close to his head and had his sideburns shaped exactly the way I like them, not too long and not too short. His skin is medium brown like mine. One time he joked that we matched like bookends. “Ten to one my great-great-great-granddaddy was chained right next to your great-great-great-grandmama and they got it on during the Middle Passage, sugar” he once said for a laugh. I told him that some people might not find a comment like that too witty, and that he better not be saying things like that in public. I think that hurt his feelings a little, but I also knew I couldn’t let him get himself in trouble over something stupid.

He had ordered himself a margarita, so I asked the waitress
for one, too. “With extra salt on the rim, please,” I said. The music in the background was loud and steady. I spread out the huge red cloth napkin over my skirt.

“So, what is this all about, DeShante?”

DeShante had this expression on his face—surprised and amazed and happy. He looked to me like a little kid, all hopeful and expectant. I couldn’t help but smile back at him. He kept on looking at me while I dipped one tortilla chip after another in that good salsa they make. My drink came and I took a long sip. I hadn’t realized I was so hungry.

“So listen, Latrice. This is big.”

“How big?”

“Big big.”

“Okay. Let’s hear it.”

“Listen, you know how we been working on those luxury boxes down at the stadium, right? Dry walling, what have you. Well, yesterday late afternoon, just as we getting ready to quit for the day, me and J.P. be putting up our tools and washing down the site when a couple white dudes come in along with a brother, a slick brother all dressed to the nines. He wearing a suit and crisp shirt and cologne and they be talking to him telling him about the corporate plans and seating packages they arranging. And this brother, he nodding and smiling as if he approved of what they saying. And then the white dudes sort of notice J.P because he in charge of this whole area, you know what I’m saying? And they introduce J.P. to the brother, whose name is Andrew Adams Jackson. They praise the work that J.P. be getting done on time and under budget and the quality of the work he doing, that gets their attention to me, so J.P. goes on and introduces me to this Jackson brother who shakes my hand.”

Out of breath, DeShante took the last sip of his margarita. Our waitress came over and we ordered: chicken enchiladas for me, chimichangas for DeShante, guacamole first to share. We both always ordered the same thing every time at El Caballo.

“So go on,” I said when our waitress left.

“Well, I’ll do you a favor, Treecy, and make this long story short. The brother dude, this Jackson, he ask me do I have any aspirations beyond working in construction. And I say I do, that I be working two jobs just to keep up and save a little but that it was
my intention to get my GED and eventually go to college so as to set myself up in my own business. Jackson, he wearing a very fine suit of clothes, a dark silky thing with a hanky in the front pocket and tassels on his shoes. He standing there in a cloud of cologne so strong it filled the whole space up.”

“Too much cologne is a sign of insecurity and vanity,” I said.

“What?”

“Cologne. People who wear too much cologne or perfume are afraid of their own animal nature and also want everybody to notice them right away.”

“Where you read that?”

“In Style, I think.”

“Well, I don’t know, he don’t seem so insecure. Jackson, in this cloud of cologne, he nods and looks me up and down. He looks into my eyes like some kind of laser beam, so that I feel, I don’t know, studied or something. What he looking to see I have no idea. I can see the white dudes watching him closely, trying to figure out what he up to, talking to me and all. And J.P. watching, too, with a kind of proud smile on his face, but also kind of suspicious, like he thinking what the hell, man, what you be messing with my bro here for. Well, Jackson asks for my phone number and asks can he give me a call and when would be a good time. So I say later that day would be good, but before five, which is when I have to go over to to Graceful Edge in order to do my dinner shift.”

The guacamole came and I started eating.

“So Jackson he calls me and, get this, sugar, he says he has a proposal for me. Evidently, he runs some kind of investment thing, a money management kind of deal, one of those companies that get people to give them money so they can turn that money into more money. Which is why he’s being courted to buy into a piece of the stadium, I guess. Anyway, he says he has a knack for seeing into the potential of people and companies, that he has patented a method of growing money like it was a flower that can grow better under some conditions than others. I don’t believe I understand this dude at all, he seem a little crazy to me, if you want to know the truth. Over and over again he say, ‘It’s all good, brother. It’s all good.’ I had half a mind to tell him that from where I sit, it’s not quite all good, that I have an aunt who can hardly see straight half the time on account of habits that are better left unsaid.
“Jackson say he had took one look at me and known, just known, that I belonged with him in business. He ask me do I want him to pay for my schooling while he trains me to come with him and work. He say he feels I will prove to have a knack for this line of work, and that I can teach him things about the way people like me think. He say there be too much of a distance between the black folk who got money and the black folk who don’t, and that the first brothers who figured out how to bridge this distance would clean up.”

When DeShante finally paused, I thought about what he was saying. Naturally, I thought it sounded suspicious. I knew from experience that there are no shortcuts in this life. You had to pay your dues. I know I did. And I did because my own family taught me to. Mama would not have stood for me not making the grades I made, for not doing everything I could to make something of myself. Which is why Mama just about had fits at the mere thought of DeShante and his folks. It wasn’t that she didn’t like him. She could see the goodness and sweetness in him just like I could. It was that people like DeShante were so easily waylaid by the thought of a shortcut.

What DeShante was describing just didn’t sound right. DeShante is cute and charming, and I know his soul is clean like a sheet. But what kind of businessman made impulsive offers like this? It sounded too pie-in-the-sky. But I could tell that a piece of DeShante was already sold.

The waitress came over holding our two plates, one in each hand, a rag protecting her palms and fingers from the heat. “Don’t touch these, they’re hot,” she said, lowering the heaped and steaming platters.

“Jackson say there’s this idea called headspace,” DeShante said, ignoring the food’s arrival. He put his long forefingers alongside his temple. “Headspace is where most all the buying and selling in the world takes place even before a single dollar trades hands. A person has to become master of the headspace. And at the same time, Jackson say it all about the numbers, looking at what they done in the past and trusting them not to lie about the future. That’s it from A to Z, he say. Knowing the headspace. Trusting the numbers and not the people. You young, he say to me. You got energy, he say. He say a black kid that gets to be my age without being
in jail is like a white guy becoming a CEO. He say his instincts is never wrong when it come to judging character. And then last of all he tell me to go to work like I always do and then call him back on Monday with an answer. He say he already have partners, who he will set me up with right away if I say yes.

“So my question to you, Treecy, which I have been thinking about ever since yesterday afternoon and all day today, is do I listen to this brother, or do I go about my own business?”

Only then did DeShante pick up his fork and dig all the way into his chimichangas. His eyes looked so worried and I could tell he hadn’t slept much the night before. He took a long sip of his beer, and a dab of white foam remained on his upper lip. He licked it off with his tongue and smiled again.

I said, “Have you talked about this with Marie and J.P.?”

DeShante’s face darkened the way it does when he doesn’t feel good about something. One of the things I love best about him is the way a person can read his face like a book. There isn’t any kind of feeling he can have that doesn’t show up on his face.

I said, “What did they say?”

“Marie, she say go for it,” he said. “She say—you know how sometimes she gets all religious on you—she say, ‘the Lord has dropped an angel in your lap, DeShante. This man was sent to you for a reason and you owe it to yourself to follow him. This could be your one true way up and out of here.’”

DeShante stabbed a bite and chewed for a while. I just drank and ate and waited. But I could already sense what J.P. had said.

“J.P. told me to walk away from it. To tell you the truth, Treecy, J.P. got ugly, as ugly as I ever seen him get. He say these kinds of dudes come through and think they can make a buck off a poor stupid nigger just like white folks do. I swear, Treecy, J.P. used some harsh language, words I never heard him use before. J.P. say that Jackson must feel like he can use me for something or he wouldn’t be approaching me with all this talk of opportunity. J.P. say rich black folk never bat an eye at poor niggers unless there’s some money to be made off them or they’s a tax deduction somehow. He say just take care of yourself and keep on doing what you doing and stay outta trouble.”

DeShante and I stopped eating and looked at each other a long time. I could tell there was something more he wanted to re-
He took a sip of beer and looked down into his glass as if he couldn’t look me in the eye.

“After that, J.P. turned on Marie.”

“What did he say, DeShante?”

“He say, ‘Marie, you shut the fuck up with your bullshit about angels falling in laps and one true paths outta here. You know nothing about what DeShante has got to contend with. Or me, for that matter. You stay in this apartment and smoke and look out the window all day and watch the bullshit down there on the street and think the good fairy is going to make a special 9-1-1 rescue visit. Well, I’m telling you DeShante knows better than that. He knows he has to work and work and pay his bills and make himself a solid skilled citizen and then he can talk about business plans.’ And then Marie, she cover her face up and she start to cry, which makes J.P. even madder because then as I see it his anger be mixed with guilt like he picking on a defenseless victim. And that is what I cannot tolerate, Latrice. I just cannot tolerate that. You know I can’t.”

“So what did you do?”

“I said, ‘Lay off for now, J.P. I mean it. Lay off. She can’t help it and she just wants the best for both of us.’”

“And what did J.P. say?”

“He said, ‘DeShante, you are a fool.’”

Then we felt sort of shy and quiet in El Caballo. The tone of the place suddenly seemed all wrong. I didn’t feel like hearing the loud music and I didn’t feel like seeing all those colored bulbs and eating any more of my enchiladas. I had watched DeShante go from all excited, to angry, to confused. Now the man was entirely turned around like he had just stumbled off a merry-go-round and didn’t know which way was which. I guess given everything in her life, I could understand why Marie would encourage DeShante to take a chance on this piece of happenstance. Marie’s head was always half in the clouds even when she wasn’t high, and she really did love DeShante in her own way. I could also understand J.P.’s worry and doubt, because honestly, I sort of agreed with him. Here he had put all this energy and love into his cousin and he was afraid it would all get blown away on a some guy’s whim.

“Then what, DeShante?”

“Marie, she say J.P. didn’t really never care for her the way I did, that he might be her son but he never cared for her or for her
future the way I did, that I acted more like a son to her than he did. And then she start to really break down and cry real loud. And then I was afraid J.P. might get rough with her and I prepared myself to step in like I always do. But a few minutes went by and J.P., he had been palming that faded bald tennis ball he keeps around just to squeeze to make his hands stronger. After squeezing his tennis ball a while and staring at me, who was glaring at him, J.P. sort of look like something transformed him. He completely changed his whole attitude, like in a couple of minutes some new influence had washed over him and made everything different.

“J.P. smiled and said, ‘Mama, you can say what you want about who you want, you ain’t never goin’ to be DeShante’s mama. And DeShante’s not your son and that’s a fact. You’re stuck with me. But that doesn’t mean nothing when we both are here for you.’ And then J.P. come over and he punch me in the arm and told me to go call this Jackson dude and say yes to him. But all of it was so confusing to me, sugar, my family being messed up as it is, that last night I realized that I need your help to decide what to do. What do I do? How do I know if this Jackson guy is for real?”

“Let’s get out of here, DeShante,” I said. “Come back to my place and we’ll look him up.”

I live in a garden apartment off Delmar and 170. It’s a safe place, a complex of two-story brick buildings filled with single young people who are all mostly white collar types—teachers, computer fix-it guys, and bank tellers like me. There are lots of Indian folks, too. I mean Indians from India, young women who come and go with their long, straight black hair pulled back.

Outside my front door, while I was trying to separate my apartment key, DeShante came up and hugged me from behind and kissed the back of my neck. I could feel his knees press into the back of my thighs and start to kind of buckle me backwards into him, which meant you know what. I opened the door, flicked on the overhead light, and put my purse on the entry table. DeShante made for the couch.

“Let’s sit a minute, Latrice.”

I took off my shoes and felt completely exhausted from my day. If I had sat down with DeShante right then, I don’t think I could have gotten up until the next morning, and things might have turned out very different for him and me both.
So I went over to the computer and woke it up. DeShante got up from the couch, turned on the stereo, and put on the Abstract Tribe Unique CD he’d brought over the Sunday before. Then he came over and pulled up a chair to sit beside me.

“You want something to drink?” I asked.

“No thanks, baby.” He put his arm around my shoulders.

I googled this guy Jackson. Unbelievably, it turned out that DeShante’s “It’s all good” Jackson from the stadium was the real deal. He was the Jackson from a group called Jackson, Klein & Allen, an investment firm that had gotten write-ups in about a thousand magazines and newspapers over the last five years. *Business Week. Ebony. St. Louis Business Journal. The Post-Dispatch.* They were all listed one under the other in blue letters.

“Click on one of them, Latrice.” DeShante said. “Click on the one from *Business World.*”

Side by side, we started reading while DeShante tapped the steady beat of “Mass Men Baby” on my thigh. I got to the bottom of the page and started to scroll up.

“Hang on, sugar. I ain’t there yet. Remember who you dealing with here.”

“Sorry, baby.” Waiting for DeShante to catch up, I tuned in to the music which normally I didn’t pay much attention to, *the rhythm of the eloquence strong as an elephant.*

“Oh, I’m there.”

I scrolled down. Here’s how Jackson and his partners worked: every year they picked only two companies. Just two. They researched for months until they found exactly the right two to invest in in order to guarantee an annual return of fifty percent on a person’s investment. One year it might be Apple Computer and Caterpillar Trucks. Another year Disney and BP Oil. But whatever it was, the system worked. And a fifty percent return is not normal, that much I knew from what I did for a living. Nobody secured that kind of return. I clicked on a few more articles. After a half-hour I had seen what I needed to see. Jackson, Klein & Allen made serious money.

“Well, the man’s real, all right,” I said. “But I still do not see what exactly he wants from you, DeShante. I think you need to ask him very specifically why he chose you of all people. Find that out, and then we can talk about whether or not it’s the right thing to do.”
When DeShante left my place around midnight, he was walking on air.

One week later, DeShante called me up when I was putting on my makeup. He said that we were invited to dinner that night with Jackson and his wife, and Klein and his wife. It happened that fast. DeShante told me to get dressed nice, and that we were meeting at the Kleins’ house for drinks and then going out to Tony’s.

“Tony’s,” I said.

“That’s right,” DeShante said.

“Tonight?”

“That’s what I said.”

The thing that embarrasses me is that right away I thought about clothes.

“I guess I can wear my little black dress with the green fringy shawl. No, that’s not right. I’ll have to think about this. But what are you going to wear, DeShante? Do you even have a jacket? Do you have a tie? They won’t let you in wearing trousers, no matter how nice they are. Those brown linen ones you got with me last spring are fine, I guess, but you need a jacket. You don’t want to have to use one from the cloakroom.”

“Relax, sugar,” he said. “J.P. got something I can borrow.”

“What about Dillard’s?”

“You’ll just have to call in. Latrice, you need to calm yourself down. I had that conversation with Jackson you told me to have. Listen up. He told me he wanted to train me to train my own mind how to pick stocks and how to know when to make the trades. He told me he didn’t want no one who had finance ideas hard as rock in his head from the start. No backassed MBA, is what he said. So I told him I don’t see nothing wrong with giving this a try as long as I can do my GED somehow, and he say no problem to that. I also told him about you and me, and how you was the best thing I had going, you and J.P. I told him what you did and where you worked, and how you had plans. I guess he figures to get to know me he has to get to know you. This could be it, Latrice, so I’m asking you please to call in your manager and tell her that you will not be in tonight.”

“Of course I’ll call in, but why Tony’s of all places? He must know you won’t be comfortable there.”

That was a mistake, me saying that, and I knew it right away.
and felt bad. I heard DeShante snort on the phone and then he was quick with me.

“I guess I’ll just have to make myself comfortable, then,” he said. “I’ll pick you up at 6:30.” I knew he was mad when he didn’t call me sugar.

All morning I counted out twenties. I issued deposit slips. I cracked open solid brown rolls of quarters and watched them splash into my tray. I smiled at customers at my window and talked about what a beautiful day it was and how lucky we were that the heat finally broke and made it more like California than St. Louis. But in between customers I couldn’t stop talking or thinking about what might happen that night. Sherelle and Rhonda shook their heads and looked like doomsday had come. Matt was optimistic, but his peppy encouragement only made me feel worse.

At lunch I had no big appetite so I just went over to the Starbucks. I took my iced mocha to an iron table and watched the people who had time to hang out on the street. A gray-haired older mother went by in a pair of frumpy navy blue sweats and running shoes. She was pushing a tricycle stroller and had a big to-go cup of coffee in one hand. Her kid was gumming a bagel.

It’s strange. When summer is in full swing in St. Louis, nothing feels too serious. People go through the motions of work. Mailmen walk around in their shorts carrying their satchels. Construction workers blast at holes all over town. And I know stuff gets done. But there’s this feeling in the air, as though everybody agrees that the work they are doing now is not like the work they do when the weather is cooler. Five o’clock comes and you go to the movies. Or you go meet friends and go dancing. Or you get together with your family on Sunday afternoon and drink a beer while sitting on your boyfriend’s lap. Your big-chested uncle cooks ribs and laughs from behind a screen of blue smoke and the little cousins run amok in the yard and you think, I do not want this day to ever end.

I realized then that I wasn’t worried about DeShante dealing with the lah-de-dah of Tony’s, exactly. I was worried about the family that would show through DeShante’s talk. I was afraid that the way he talked would betray the folks who had taken care of him for better and for worse. And I was also afraid of the way I was already thinking (I couldn’t help myself) that if this shortcut of DeShante’s got him set up for real, I could maybe, maybe, be going out
with a man on the road to the place on easy street where everybody wants to be.

When I opened the door on DeShante at six-thirty, I was all dressed up in my pleated lemon-yellow skirt, the one I always wore with a white camisole. I had high-heeled espadrilles on, that season’s wedgy version that criss-cross and lace up your ankle.

“Hey, baby,” I said.

“Well, hey.”

We had a big long kiss and he grabbed my butt in his hands and lifted me up.

“So I guess I pass muster,” he said.

“Oh, DeShante, I’m sorry,” I said. “I was no good on the phone earlier. Let me just get my bag and do my lips. Take my keys out of the bowl and we’ll go in my car.”

The Kleins lived in the Central West End, in one of those three-story mansions on Portland Place. It was the kind of neighborhood that if we were dressed differently and had driven up in DeShante’s truck with Mos Def rapping out the window, people would have assumed we were there to paint the garage or haul off broken cribs or steal copper downspouts. We parked along the curb in front of the house. An automatic sprinkler with nozzles poking up through the front lawn was already spraying the grass. From little black heads the water spiralled out and the system made a rhythmic sound—k’tch...k’tch...k’tch...k’tch—as it flung water across the sharp green grass blades. DeShante and I timed our dash up the front walk so as not to get splashed.

The Klein’s front door was big and heavy and had a brass knocker in the middle. We didn’t use the knocker; we pressed a small white button and heard the ding-dong inside. The white guy who opened the door was just about bald.

“Here he is, The Man” the guy said, obviously meaning DeShante. “Phil Klein. A pleasure to meet you.”

Klein stuck out his hand to DeShante, who mumbled something I couldn’t understand. I think it might have been his name. Klein squeezed DeShante’s upper arm. “Welcome. And this beauty—”

“Latrice Sanders,” I said.

“Of course.” He shook my hand, too, and I noticed his green eyes and yellowish, even teeth. “Please come in, both of you. What

A big round pedestal table stood right in the middle of the front hall. In the middle of the table was a tall glazed vase full of thick-stemmed flowers with solid purple heads like globes. We followed Klein around the table and down a few steps into the living room that was probably four times the size of my whole apartment. The ceiling was high and light flooded in from a wall of glass doors along the back of the house. Klein gestured at a couch and a chair. DeShante and I looked at each other, smiled stupidly, and plopped ourselves down, but not before Klein scooted to the door to let in Andrew Jackson and his wife.

“My man!” Klein said at the door.
“Yo bro,” Jackson said. “Here we go.”
“Bernice, a knockout as always,” Klein said.

Jackson and his wife came down into the living room. DeShante got up to shake their hands and I almost died when he said “Nice to meet you, too, ma’am,” to Jackson’s wife, just like he was a fourth grader. Bernice Jackson had on a nice dress, a simple white lisle that I could tell by the cut cost a fortune. It looked great against her skin, which was dark like the sharps and flats of piano keys. When she sat down she locked eyes with me for just a flash.

Klein stood at a rolling cart and poured us all tall glasses of sangria.

Pretty soon, everyone except Klein’s wife was stuck deep in furniture that swallowed you up like a bowl of fluff. Then the woman who must have been Klein’s wife came in and grinned. We were all holding icy glasses and not touching the fat olives and white cheese on the table in front us.

“I’m Daphne. So glad you could join us this evening.”

This woman was dressed like a person in a Saks ad. The toes of her black open-heeled shoes were so pointy they could have stabbed a rat. Her skirt had sparkling beads and sequins around the hem. The colors of her halter top swirled in a retro Peter Maxx pattern I knew from the knock-offs we sold at Dillard’s. She wore huge chandelier earrings of cut crystal that caught the light every time she turned her head. Daphne Klein poured herself a glass of sangria.

“So, so, so,” Klein said, lifting his glass when he saw his
wife perch on the edge of the piano bench. “Where to begin? Giving thanks to fate? To the new stadium for throwing you two into the same space and time? To Einstein, for inventing space-time in the first place?”

“It’s all good,” Jackson said, and I couldn’t help it, I laughed out loud. DeShante laughed out loud too, but it was alright.

“Listen,” Jackson said. “In all seriousness, and with all due respect to your Einstein, my friend Philip, this ain’t no space-time hocus-pocus. This is the first day of the revolution. You just lucky enough to be along for the ride.”

I felt Klein and his wife and Bernice Jackson watching us, watching me and DeShante listen to Jackson taunt his partner. This jabbering was nothing new to them, I could tell. Jackson seemed to have the upper hand, but Klein never stopped smiling.

“You won’t never hear me argue with that, Mr. ‘Double A’ Jackson,” Klein said. “I got no problem with carrying the flag and beating the drum, so to speak. That’s what I do best, anyway. You just go right ahead and lead the way.”

“And you, DeShante?” Jackson said. “What do you make of this turn of events?”

“I’m not sure what all I make of this, sir,” DeShante said, rubbing his thumb up and down his glass and staring at the red fluid. “It do seem strange to me, I’ll say that. But I think I understand where you coming from.”

Klein said, “Not to change the subject, but will someone please tell me why Feliz Almatazon, with the heat he’s got, is painting the corners like the finesse pitcher he is not?”

DeShante’s face looked confused and I knew what he was thinking: what the hell kind of crazy white and black dudes were Klein and Jackson? Was DeShante supposed to answer this question? What would they think of him if he did? What would they think of him if he did not? I could see all of these questions churning through DeShante’s mind even as he sat there. Faced with what he believed to be a trick question, DeShante, like the self-protecting boys in grade school, rode it out in silence; he decided to let someone else seize glory for the right answer or suffer shame for the wrong one.

“You know,” Jackson said to his partner, “if that man would just rear up and fire, that would be it. It’s Duncan who’s not set-
ting that pitcher free, and you can only blame LaRussa for that. Or blame Henderson. But don’t sit there and blame Almatazon. When those assholes finally take the bit out of his mouth he’s going to blow people’s minds.”

Klein shrugged. He leaned forward and put a fat green olive in his mouth. He chewed on it for a while, then put his hand to his mouth and spat out the pit. He leaned forward and lay the pit on a small silver dish.

“Maybe so,” he said.

Daphne took a sip of her sangria and looked at DeShante.

“I feel like I’ve seen you before,” she said to him. “Do you live near here, in the West End or anywhere?”

“Um, no ma’am, I don’t.”

Then DeShante’s phone rang and we were both startled from the depths of the couch. Now everyone looked at him. DeShante shifted his weight and pulled his phone out of the front pocket of his brown linen pants. He looked at the number. I could see he was trying to decide whether to take the call or not. There was always the chance that this was the bad one, the one we all dreaded. Marie in the E.R. Marie in a house fire. He gazed at the tiny screen for a couple of seconds while his ringtone played on, and then his long thumb pressed the button that made the tone go silent.

“I live in North City,” he said, looking up into Daphne Klein’s eyes. “Up near Arlington and Natural Bridge.”

People who don’t live in St. Louis don’t understand what it means for a person to state his address just like that. It means you lay your whole entire self on the line. Where you live means everything. Maybe that’s true in other places, but here it’s a sign of strength to admit to living in North City when you’re sunk in a couch on Portland Place. I could have thrown myself into DeShante’s lap and hugged him right then and there.

“I am familiar with that vic-in-it-y,” Jackson said, and Bernice actually chuckled.

“Mr. Jackson,” DeShante said. “I said before that I think I understand where you coming from, but really, the truth is that I do not. I understand what you will be training me to do, but what you mean by a revolution?”

“Son, I was hoping you’d ask me that,” Jackson said. “You know what’s at the heart of revolution, I mean the word ‘revolution?’ Revolving. Turning. Turning things over and upside down.
I want you, DeShante. I want you to help me turn our world over and upside down. I can teach you about buying and selling stock. That's easy. And I can teach you about how capital, large amounts of capital that is, flows from St. Louis to Hong Kong, from Harlem to Singapore. What I want to see for once is capital flowing against the current. By the time I am through with you, my brother, you will be able to read this world from both sides, from the have side and the have-not side. And because you are the kind of man who calls it straight, you will be the engine that drives this company’s capital upstream. That is precisely what I aim to do, and you can go ahead and tell that to your folks.”

Klein had stopped smiling. These guys may have been cryptic, but they were serious.

When our glasses were empty, we all went out to Tony’s and clinked glasses to the words Jackson and Klein threw out.

“To painting the corners!” Klein said.

“To rearing back and firing!” said Jackson. “Finesse ain’t nothing without power.”

On Labor Day, right before DeShante started work for Jackson and Klein, the two of us brought Marie and J.P. over to my parents’ house for an end-of-summer cookout. Marie chainsmoked a pack of cigarettes, but otherwise behaved herself, and J.P. spent the day bragging about his cousin, who was on his way to the top, according to him. I sat and watched DeShante play a long game of checkers with one of my uncles. DeShante had quit his job at the nursing home and would be putting on a suit and tie and reporting to an office for the first time in his life.

Watching him play, I have to admit I felt a little sad, not knowing how things were going to change for us. You read all the time in People about folks who just cannot deal with overnight success and wind up suffering tragic fates. But I also think Labor Day is always a little sad, whatever the new season has in store. The end of summer hits hard—grasshoppers everywhere have to turn back into ants—which is why I found myself praying DeShante’s risk would pay off. Given the opportunity, who wouldn’t want to leap over the long slog that lies between hope and destiny?

DeShante used one of his kings to triple-jump my uncle right off the board. My uncle laughed, play-slapped him on the side of the head, and called it beginner’s luck. DeShante’s face shined penny bright.
Protecting My Crops

Yes, I understand about conservation, endangered species, the prerogative of the preserve. Keep your pamphlets, spare me another lecture. So I killed a giraffe—I’m sorry—but it’s not as if I didn’t admire its grace or regret that because of me, these would be the last leaves of its sideways chewing. But it had come too close to my garden and its feet had trampled long-tended dreams, what sustains me, though I see the skepticism beneath your pith helmet, and I will fight you tooth and claw to keep the spear that felled hungry antelope whose horns I sawed off to sell at fair market price. Wince not, oh you virtuous ranger. I could shock you with tusks and rhino parts and the MGM lion’s very head. The splayed foot of ibis placed just so props my door open, even to you. The table is set, the kitchen cooks my secrets. I have what I have because of necessity and ruthlessness. I stole from the wild and killed from the heart. I staggered beneath buckets of tears to water my seedlings. That neck was long enough to reach all the way down and nibble the little green men who were once little green words. The seed of selfishness is how all of us first understand that we are one and the same. Yes, I watched the giraffe test his camouflage at the edge of my straight rows, I respect how he blended in, but when he overstepped my hedge,
I did not hesitate to end his forage.  
Now I tower over his fallen body  
squashing the season’s sprouts.  
So much beauty to drag away  
and hope the harm will straighten.
It was the summer of 1994. I was twenty-one and on the street again. I’d left another residential treatment program in March and had been spending my days chasing nickels of heroin and coke through the streets of Spanish Harlem. One morning, the air thick and soupy, I met Frenchie in Metropolitan Hospital’s methadone line. I wasn’t in the program, but I often lingered there, listening for tips on what spots had the day’s best product. I’d seen him around before—tall and lanky, dark-skinned, a lazy eye coated in a gray film, red worm scars crawling up and down both of his thin arms—stepping off spot lines, pushing around a noisy shopping cart piled high with neighborhood flotsam, or simply leaning against a brick wall in the 106th Street project courtyard, hawking the neighborhood.

He looked me up and down, asked if I was ill. I wasn’t, but I hugged myself and screwed up my face, thinking he might offer some help—a taste of methadone or even a bloody kickback. “Yeah, kind of,” I said.

“Where you from? I been seeing you around.”
“Baltimore,” I said. “I’m new here.”
“They call me Frenchie,” he said, and then turned away. About a week later I found him again, this time bent into a wheelchair much too small and wearing a sling on one arm. He was parked in front of the Second Avenue McDonald’s, a weathered paper cup in his good hand, a few pennies jingling at the bottom whenever someone walked past.

“What happened to you?” I asked.
“What?”
“That.” I pointed at the chair. “What happened?”
“Oh, this.” He smiled and lowered his voice. “I found it in the park. Just sitting in the trees.” He rolled closer, flicked his eyes to each side, and giggled. “I been out here all week telling people I was in Vietnam.”

“Nice.” I was sure they’d believed him; Frenchie, like most
junkies, looked at least a decade older than he actually was.

“What you been doing, Balteemore?”

It surprised me that not only did he remember me, he remembered where I was from. “Same old,” I said. “Just trying to get by.”

I excused myself and headed toward a large woman approaching the McDonald’s entrance. “Excuse me, ma’am?” I said, smiling and putting on my best sales face. “I have ten dollars worth of coupons here I can’t use, and I’d be willing to let you have them for eight. That way, you get ten dollars worth of food for eight bucks.”

She studied me hard, glaring down her nose at this skinny, dirty white boy clutching a book of certificates. She pursed her lips. “Kinda coupons?”

“They’re actually one-dollar gift certificates, but they spend just like cash.”

“How I know they gonna work?”

“I’ll go in there with you and make sure,” I said. I was careful with my voice, afraid the morning’s desperation would crack through like a bray.

“Why you ain’t using them yourself?”

“Somebody gave them to me,” I said. “And I’m not really hungry. So, you know, I’d rather have the cash. I mean, if you’re just gonna spend your money in there anyway, why not do it with these, right? That way, we both win.”

She sucked her teeth and then asked if she could see them. After inspecting both sides and looking me up and down again, she said, “I’ll give you seven. But you gotta come.”

I pulled open the door and held it for her. “After you, ma’am.”

I was getting good at these small hustles; they were all I had, my only source of income. Not an hour before, I’d done the same at a Midtown train station: three tokens for a dollar apiece. Now with this, I’d have enough for two nickels to start the day.

Back out on Second Avenue, my hand shoved deep into my pocket and palming my score, I heard, “Wait, Balteemore, hold up for a minute.” Frenchie, still in the chair, rolled himself closer using only baby steps. I noticed then that he also had a sling on his arm.

“How you got these coupons?”
“Homeless drop-in center for street kids.”
“How many they give you?”
“Few a day,” I told him. Truth was, StreetWorks was usually good for twenty dollars worth a day, depending on who was working. Most of the counselors liked me and tended to give me extra subway tokens and certificates when I asked. I was sure they knew what I was up to, but no one seemed to mind.
“You know, Balteemore, me and you should work together.”
“Oh, yeah? How so?”
“I got some ideas,” he said. “But I need a partner.”
I’d never been one to roll with a partner, even when I still had friends. My self-destruction was a private affair, and I wanted to keep it that way. Yet I often got lonely out there, especially at night. “What kind of ideas?”
He looked around suspiciously, as though he was sitting on a plan that half of East Harlem would steal if only they could hear it. “First, maybe you could help me out a little?” He wrinkled his face into a pleading, distressed look, just as I’d tried doing to him the first time we met. “Please, Balteemore, I’m sick.”
“You didn’t get your methadone this morning?”
He rubbed a hand over his face and stared at his lap blanket. “Nah. I trade it for crack. It’s gone.”
I didn’t know if he meant the crack or the methadone, but I assumed both. I scratched my head, looked up and down the street, then back at him. I felt a little sorry for the guy; in a world full of bottom-feeding dope fiends who’d allow little to get in the way of their blast, Frenchie seemed like one of the nice ones out here, incapable of inflicting harm on anyone but himself, and it bothered me some to see him suffering. More, I think I wanted a friend. “All right,” I said. “I guess I could hit you with a little something.”
He made a fist with his one good hand and held it to his chest. “Don’t worry, Balteemore, this plan’s gonna work,” he said. I started east, toward the river, worried that I was about to feed a stray who wouldn’t leave me alone. But when I looked back, he was still seated in the same place.
“Well, you coming?”
“I need a push,” he said.
“A push?”
“Yeah, yeah, in the chair.”
“No, uh-uh. I’m not pushing you all the way over there,” I said. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”
He held a finger to his lips and looked around. “No, but Balteemore, my arm,” he said, and held up the sling. “And I’m out here all the time. I can’t let these people see me acting like everything’s fine.”

“Seriously?”
“Just over to First.”
I shook my head, grabbed hold of the handles, and pushed. He was surprisingly heavy, and the chair’s errant front wheel kept pulling us left. This was precisely why I’d always insisted on working alone.

Once we’d split a bag and done up our shots in a vacant lot down near the FDR, we shared a cigarette on a threadbare couch that smelled like unwashed feet and decaying teeth.

“Where you from, Frenchie?”
“French Guiana,” he said.
“That’s in South America, right?”
“Very beautiful place, but very fucked up, too.”
“Here, too,” I said, but he didn’t hear me. He was looking off into the air, staring at nothing. “All right, Frenchie, tell me this big plan of yours.”

“Oh, right,” he said, and scooted forward to the edge of the couch. “It’s not a lot but maybe enough for us to get by for a while.”
“How?”
“It’ll take some work, Balteemore, but if we do it right, I think we could make a few bucks.”
“How?”
“You’ll have to do a lot of it, though, because you white and they won’t notice you as much. But I help you.”
“With what, Frenchie? What the hell are we talking about here?”

He fixed his good eye on me. “Flowers, Balteemore.”
“Flowers?”
“Flowers,” he said again.
“What about them?”
“You know all those fancy buildings along Park and Fifth? Well, they all have these flower beds outside, all along the sidewalk.
All we have to do is go over when it’s dark, pull up the flowers, and then sell them somewhere on the street.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“That’s your big plan? Stealing flowers and selling them on the street?”

“I’m telling you, man, these people down on 86th, they’ll buy them.”

I started to laugh, something I didn’t do much in those days. I’d long ago crossed that line where this could no longer be called partying; this was my life, and little about it was humorous. But as I pictured the two of us walking around carrying stolen flowers, their roots dangling from our dirty hands like entrails, I couldn’t help myself.

“Why you laughing? It’ll work, Balteemore. For real.”

“How do you plan on selling them? You’re just gonna hand people a flower with the roots and the dirt and shit hanging off and expect them to pay us?”

He thinned his eyes. “No, Balteemore, I’m telling you, I got it all worked out. I got the idea last week when I find a box of plastic flower cups in the garbage. And look.” He pointed across the lot to a broken-down baby carriage with a missing wheel. “We can use that to carry them around.”

I really laughed then, to the point where I had to hold my sides. I could see it so clearly: the two of us pushing around a decrepit baby stroller full of flowers, wheeling the thing up and down those pristine sidewalks of the Upper East Side. What a sight we’d be, the kind of thing someone would spot from their car window and laugh about for weeks. “You should have seen these two pushing around a baby stroller full of flowers,” I imagined someone saying. “God only knows what they were up to.”

But as ridiculous as it sounded, I also thought it might be sort of fun, an adventure. And since I didn’t have a whole lot else going on, I said, “Fuck it, let’s try.”

Frenchie smiled wide. “This is gonna work, Balteemore. Trust me.”

As Frenchie had warned, since I was younger and healthier and white, I was in charge of most of the dirty work—scrounging around in the moist beds, pulling the flowers up by their roots,
and placing them in neat piles along the dark street, while he kept watch for cops or doormen or what he called “richy white people.” Once I’d robbed a bed of all its flora, deracinating every last flower until all that was left was a level patch of moist soil, Frenchie would creep by with the three-wheeled carriage, pick up the piles, and tuck them safely into the buggy. Then we’d roll up or down the avenue to the next spot and do the same, until the carriage was so full that we both had to hold on just to keep it from tipping over and dumping our goods all over the street.

We started late on a Friday and agreed to work until the sun came up in order to get things set up for the Saturday morning shopping rush. Frenchie managed to score us a dime to share, which kept us well until morning. By the time the first light of day broke through the darkness, we had about forty different flower pots organized into neat little rows in the vacant lot. Everything from morning glories and hollyhocks to African pansies, impatiens, tulips, and marigolds. Frenchie, it turned out, had quite the knack for floral arrangement. He took special pains to make every pot look as though it had come from a real nursery, cleaning the dirt from each leaf and gently brushing the soot from each petal. On some he would even use his spit to make the leaves shine.

I had to admit, as crazy as it had sounded at first, as we got everything ready and placed the first round of pots into the bottom of the carriage, I started to believe this might actually work, that we might actually make a few bucks.

Once Frenchie had picked up his morning allotment of methadone, which he finally shared with me, we wheeled our wares down to 86th and set up shop on a rusted and wobbly wood-grain card table we’d found in a dumpster.

“You do the talking,” he said. “You’re young and white and the ladies will buy from you. It won’t look so good if I’m sitting there.”

I began to understand something then, the differences between us: Frenchie was at least fifteen years older than I was, he was dark, and he was in far worse physical shape. Until then I hadn’t considered how much easier it had probably been for me out there. In my mind we’d been equals; class and race lines were obliterated when it came to street drugs. But I saw something unsettling in that moment: Frenchie’s future and a bit of my own.
“So you’re basically just the idea man in all this, then?” I said, trying to be funny.

“C’mon, trust me, Balteemore, this is gonna work.”

Business was slow at first, and by ten I was kicking myself and cursing Frenchie under my breath. “No one’s going to buy these things,” I said. “What do people want with someone else’s old flowers anyway?” I was growing impatient, worried that this would all be a waste of time, that at the end of the day I’d be no better off than I was now. “I can’t just sit here all day like this,” I said. “It won’t be long before I have to go get something.”

But Frenchie wasn’t concerned. He simply smiled his cool smile and said, almost arrogantly, “Just wait and see, Balteemore. Just wait and see.”

He was right: by early afternoon we’d sold nearly everything. We had fifty-three dollars between us, which was more money than I’d had at one time in months, and several of our customers had even asked if we’d be back with more the next day. Which, of course, we were. A few days later we even had a painted cardboard sign taped to the back of our table. “F&W FLOWERS,” it read.

Our business lasted about ten days, maybe a full two weeks, before both the flowers and the demand for them began to wither and die. We’d used up all the plastic pots, and no one seemed interested in the loose flowers we offered one day at half price. After a day or so with little to nothing in the way of sales, I told Frenchie I was going to have to figure something else out.

“We just need a better plan, Balteemore,” he said. “Something for real money.”

I’d also grown tired of sitting around all day, manning the table while Frenchie went to cop our stuff or find more flowers. I needed to be in motion, to get back to working my little hustles again. I wasn’t interested in a new plan, one that, unless we were robbing banks, would still yield us only a few dollars a day at best. It was time to move on. “I’ll come find you again,” I said. “But I should go back downtown and take care of some things. Some people down there owe me money.”

“I’ll come with you then,” he said. “I got nothing else to do.”

I shrugged noncommittally and stared at the street. I felt like I was abandoning a close friend or kicking that old stray back
to the curb where I’d found him. But I needed to be alone again, navigating the streets on my own, finding my own means of survival.

“We could pick up cans, Balteemore. That’s what I do sometimes for money.”

“Sure, yeah. We could do that,” I said. “I’ll come find you later on.”

He shrugged a shoulder and fixed his gaze on the ground. Finally, he nodded, and said, “OK, Balteemore. Maybe I see you again sometime.”

Twice I almost turned back, but I forced myself to keep walking.

Then I was alone again, back to selling off fast food gift certificates, subway tokens, and new needles from the drop-in center. I’d grown used to transience in those days—people came and went, they left town, went into rehab, relapsed, got locked up, disappeared, died—and I’d learned to maintain a safe distance, to keep one foot poised to run at all times, sober or not. It was simply part of that life. But in Frenchie I’d found an unexpected friend, and I missed him.

I didn’t last long out there alone. In less than a week I was back uptown searching for Frenchie, ready for Plan B or any other ideas he might have. I’d collect cans if that’s what it took.

He was not at any of his usual uptown haunts. I went to the Metropolitan methadone line, the vacant lots, the spots on 110th and 116th, our flower stand site. I even asked a few familiar faces if they’d seen him. No one had.

Perhaps he’d moved on to a different part of town. Maybe he’d carried himself back into another program, something he talked about from time to time. “I got to stop this shit, Balteemore,” he had told me one day. “I ain’t so young no more. Not like you.”

Rather than encourage him, I’d said, “I’m not that young, Frenchie.”

He’d smiled and shook his head, as if to tell me I had no idea.

As I searched, I held fast to the idea that he was somewhere safe. I imagined him seated in a brightly lit room of recovering addicts, laughing about the two weeks he spent with this whiteboy from Balteemore, stealing flowers from the richy people on the Up-
per East Side and selling them back to the very same people.

But I knew better. It was likely something worse—a trip to Rikers, a beat-down for trying to rip off a dealer, an illness, an overdose. This is what happens to us. A few get out but most don’t. I worried Frenchie was wilting away somewhere, alone.

I could endure only another few weeks, during which time I kept my eyes peeled, hoping each day to spot him folded into that too-small wheelchair clutching his paper cup and giggling. Finally, exhausted, scared of getting locked up, and out of ideas for cash, I dragged my still young bones back downtown and checked into another detox unit, my fifth in less than two years.

I think I always knew I’d make it out eventually. Unlike Frenchie and nearly all the other older fiends I knew, I still had options. I was young, white, and maybe just smart enough to know I wouldn’t last, not without far graver consequences. I’d heard the same story too many times from too many people: one day you wake up and realize you’ve spent your life chasing the high. I didn’t want that. I feared that, sometimes more than death. But it wasn’t until I met Frenchie that I truly understood it.

I never saw him again. He exists only as a memory, one, like so many others, that continues to fade with time and whose accuracy is always suspect. While I can still feel slight pangs of remorse when I recall his expression the day I walked away, mostly I smile when I think of him, thankful for the brief time we spent together.
You were a shelter mutt, curled on stained concrete. Hiccups jolted your ribcage. You cocked your head, your wrinkled lower lip caving into your mouth like a toothless old man’s, and I thought of my childhood dog and afternoons beneath an aspen tree, looking for patterns in the sun-backed leaves.

I took you home; you pissed on the new rug. You ate the cover of Frost’s *Collected Poems* and a corner of the sofa. You got fleas. You ate the fleas and got worms. You dug up the dahlias and puked in the car. The tally of chewed shoes grew as you grew.

I began to count the minutes that weren’t mine alone: mopping dirt and dog hair from the floor, tossing a ball until my arm ached, praising you as you squatted to shit. I remembered my mother’s eyes when I was small, dull as old pennies. I scouted a backwoods road where I might drop you one night.

But every morning, you nosed my bare calf. My arm grew strong enough to toss the ball until you dropped, and I stopped checking the kitchen tiles for dirt after our walks. I thought about how a person can learn to want almost anything, how the oil in your coat had come to smell like my father’s sweat and cologne.
Stopping for Gas on the Reservation

Probably a fifth grader, jeans held up
with a belt, both hand-me-downs,
both too big for him.
When he says the money you should
give him will help buy jerseys for his team
—and holds up the sandwich bag
with rumpled dollar bills—you want
to believe him, believe there’s a coach
who cares about hamstring stretches,
parents who fill bowls for breakfast,
then a grandstand.
Orange Popsicle stains his mouth,
eyes squint against a South Dakota sun
baking neighboring houses
into dusty surrender.
When he claims he’s the pitcher
and their record is eight-oh-and-oh,
you think he knows you suspect
that whatever you give him will go
towards more Popsicles or Snickers
or whatever it is ten-year-old boys
buy in towns with only one grocery,
one truck stop.
You have fives but keep pulling tens
out of your wallet for his outstretched
palm—One for the massacre
at Wounded Knee, another for the fact
that this is where his people live,
and one in apology for ever thinking
he was a liar in the first place.
When I ask her if she wants something to drink
she says she wants a still point in a turning world.
“All I have is light beer,” I say, mumbling something
about staying in shape. She laughs. I feel a little ache
under my heart. She eyes the pair of bruised hybrid
bikes (one my daughter’s) hanging on the wall
outside my bedroom. “We can go for a ride,” I say,
not sure if it’s the ache talking; the spokes of a fat
wheel are a blur on the axle in my mind’s eye.
She says she’s had worse proposals but she hadn’t
ridden a bike since she was a kid. “That’s not a problem,
your muscle memory will take over,” I say. “You won’t fall.”
She leans forward, her birdlike shoulders curved as if over
a racer’s handlebar. There’s a special providence
in the fall of a sparrow, I’m thinking.
She clasps her knees, lifts her head, the soft curve
of her dimpled chin, her brown eyes opening
into a wide smile it is all I can do to keep my heart still.
I stand, extend my hand, curl my toes to grip the floor.
“It will be just like riding a bike then,” she says.
While Refuged at Sophie’s Cottage as Bombs Fall on London, Nina Hamnett Pens a Postcard to Wyndham Lewis

Sophie collects new moons just before dawn—
“When they’re most ripe,” as she will explain—then stacks them in her cellar like fine porcelain plates. When a full moon arrives in an afternoon, she’ll face the other way. With a mirror for aim, she’ll fling a new moon over her shoulder hoping to slice the full one from the unsculpted sky.

Henri is Henri Gaudier-Brzeska—Modern French Vorticist Sculptor who died in WWI at the age of 23. Sophie is his lover. Nina Hamnett, the Queen of Bohemia, is Sophie and Henri’s friend.
Contributors’ Notes

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