



THE LASCAUX REVIEW  
*volume ten*



THE  
LASCAUX REVIEW  
VOLUME 10

ANNO DOMINI 2023



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edited by  
Stephen Parrish  
Wendy Russ



# The Lascaux Review

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# Points of Entry

by Abbie Barker

Sometime before dawn, my son climbs into my bed.  
“The bat woke me,” he says.

I touch the top of his head, feel him shiver. It’s almost summer, but a chill hangs in the air. We wear extra layers, pull old afghans out of drawers.

“There is no bat,” I tell him. “It was a dream.”

He falls back asleep without arguing.

I lie awake, admiring his shape, how someone so small can occupy so much space. In the dark, I sometimes forget my husband moved to Florida to live with another woman. By daylight, I always remember how young she is, how childless.

\*

Over breakfast, my son rehashes his dreams: saxophones and scooters, water balloons, and pointed sticks. A bat flits in and out of every scene.

“Are you scared of it?” I say.

“It’s always there.”

I ask him what he thinks the bat represents, what its presence suggests. I want to know if absence haunts him the same way it haunts me. He shrugs and says, “I see bats at night sometimes.” I don’t ask if he’s missing his father. I don’t tell him how bats make me think of intruders—someone or something that can force its way through the slightest opening.

\*

My son wakes me the next morning as it’s getting light. He pushes his back into my ribs, cocoons the quilt around him. “He’s making noise.”

“Who?”

“The bat.”

We’ve never had bats in this house, but I don’t know how to convince my son. “What if we learn about bats today?”

He nods and says, “He lives in the attic.”

I squeeze his hand. I doubt there’s a bat, but I can’t bring myself to step inside the attic that my husband never finished. He bought the paint and supplies, the drywall, the tools. I didn’t ask why he never made any progress. I never wondered why he spent so many hours up there alone.

My son points to a water stain on the ceiling and says it’s shaped like a bird or maybe a ghost. I drift off and dream of my husband, as if he never left, as if he’s hiding somewhere above us, waiting to drop back into our lives.

\*

The next week, I invite a man inside our home. He stands in our front hall, but doesn’t fill the space the same way my husband did. His neck is the kind of thick that makes me step back. But he’s here to investigate the attic. I need him to prove there are no bats.

His name is Carl. I shake his thick hand and lead him through my bedroom into the walk-in closet, one side stripped of my husband's shirts and shoes. Carl aims his flashlight toward the pull-down ladder, sending a faint beam into the dusty dark.

\*

Carl returns to the hall, brushing filth from his shorts. "It's definitely a bat," he says.

"But how'd it get in?"

"The vent. Want to see?"

I shake my head. No, I don't wish to confront our intruder. No, I don't want to see the untouched drywall and loose power tools, tucked into corners, taking up space.

My son grabs my hand and asks if Carl is going to kill the bat. I ask him how he knew it was a bat. He looks at the floor and rubs his elbow. "I see it at night sometimes," he whispers.

I lift his shirt, search his skin for marks, the slightest puncture.

\*

Before bed, my son and I talk about the bat and how it will live with us until fall. We will wait for it to move out, let it fly somewhere warm.

"Like Florida?" he asks.

"Something like that." I don't tell him how much I hate Florida and the humidity that makes everything damp.

My son asks if the bat lives all alone up there. Carl only found one, but somehow one feels more intrusive than two, even more alarming than three. "Bats don't just have one mate," my son says. "They have many."

\*

While we wait for the bat to leave, we receive postcards from Florida, where it's warmer and permanently damp. Where my husband lives in a beachy one-bedroom apartment and won't pick up the phone. All summer my son composes letters to his father. He writes and writes but never asks for a stamp.

By fall, I toss all the silhouetted palm trees into the trash. Once we're sure the bat is gone, I clear out the attic. I drive to the dump.

Carl returns to mend the damaged vent. He hammers fresh trim into place, and slides wire mesh through the gaps, filling larger holes with smaller ones. He circles the property, searching for additional points of entry.

"That should do it," he says.

I stand in the door frame, taking up space. "Go around again," I tell him. Carl will walk the perimeter of the house until I am certain there are no more holes, no more cracks. Until he seals every opening.

"Points of Entry" originally appeared in *Atticus Review*.



# The Marked Book

by Sean Gill

The boy begins by saying he has killed a spider, a Goliath among spiders, a monster dangling from the ceiling on a strand of gleaming silk, the grossest thing he has ever seen.

The father asks how he has killed this spider.

The boy flinches. His misgivings are plain.

The father asks him again how he has killed this spider.

A book.

A library book?

From your shelf.

Which shelf?

The boy leads him into the den and lowers his head. He points broadly at a bookcase, eight feet high.

The father asks, which book?

I don't remember.

Which shelf?

I don't remember. I put it back. I thought you'd be angry.

You used the cover?

No, I opened it up. I shut it inside.

The father imagines one of his first editions fouled by this unpleasantness. It is an abstract kind of panic.

He briskly flips through a few volumes of *The Story of Civilization*, reprioritizes, then inspects *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, *Chronicles of Golden Friars*, and *Tanglewood Tales*. He has decided that, with the way his shelves are arranged, the book in question must be either be from “History” or “Horror.” The boy is only four feet tall, how high could he reach?

Are you mad, daddy?

The boy has otherwise outgrown the use of “daddy,” so the father recognizes it as a social calculation. No, of course not, he says.

After he puts his son to bed, he returns to leaf through further volumes. He feels as if he has inherited a minefield and must tiptoe accordingly. There is a sense of growing dread; each flip of the page could reveal the mangled spider, a stain with eight legs.

It does not turn up that night.

\*

In the months that follow, the father tends to avoid the books from that case entirely. He’s read them already, at any rate, and if he never finds the dead spider, it will almost be as if it never existed. There are only so many years in a life, and although he bought each of these books with the intent of reading them more than once, he admits that there are many he will never have the chance to revisit, even in his forty or fifty remaining years. Still, there is the matter of this blackened page, locked in the bindings of an unknown tomb. Each time his son visits, he finds himself remembering and shivers as though someone has stepped on his grave.

\*

Fourteen years later, in an empty nest, the father tugs the chain of his green banker's lamp and is about to remove *The World and the West* from its slot on the shelf when, out of the blue, he remembers the missing spider. It's been ages since he thought about it. He imagines it must have dried up by now, crumbled away into dust, leaving behind nothing but a slight bruise on the page. And yet he knows this is a false hope. He knows the dead creature remains, intact, plotting to catch him unawares.

He hesitates. It feels unlucky to tempt fate, and, in his loneliness, he has become quite superstitious. He is imagining the crumpled body suddenly behaving like the Black Spot from *Treasure Island*—a force of chaos, a death sentence; perhaps tied to some future misfortune of his son. For now, he lets the book be. If he really wants to read it, he can check out a copy from the library.

\*

Now the father is eighty-one. Years ago, his son moved away to Alaska, heeding an opportunity at a leading fishery. At first, he dismissed his son's choice but has come to acknowledge that the major markers of his own life were decided arbitrarily, at best. His son's yearly visits are a source of great comfort, but the spaces in between are bleaker than the arctic winter.

In the mood for poetry, he eases *Black Beetles in Amber* from its notch on the shelf. He spreads back the calfskin cover, the marbled pages seem to ripple on their own, and in all of its awfulness, the flattened spider is revealed. The father's heart skips a beat. Fingers of ice flutter across his shoulders. He swiftly shuts the book, but there is a rising wail beyond the limits of his hearing, the impression of invisible walls closing in

around him. He is certain that at any moment the phone will ring, and it will be Alaska calling—a disaster at the fishery, an avalanche, the storm of the century. Overwhelmed, he turns out the lamp and lies down on the parquet floor. He conjures doom and gloom, terror and horror, a darker and more personal nightmare than anything his shelves can offer.

Uncertain dreams give way to a wobbly awareness. The night, suddenly empty with silence. An old man, struggling to rise.



“The Marked Book” originally appeared in *The Iowa Review*.



# Paper Nests

by Laurel Miram

The hand tremors hold off until the second “F” now. “Progress!” the therapist says. “I know you don’t think you can...” But it’s not that. It’s not a question of strength. It’s about beginning. Or reprisal.

Pale yellow pads are best. They contrast well with black Sharpies. No one can miss a bumblebee. Bold shades feel childish, multi-colored stacks, desperate and chaotic. Pale is unpretentious. Professional. Informative, but not pushy.

“Do you think it matters to most people?” the therapist asks. Clearly she’s in possession of the answer. The question is essentially rhetorical. Most people don’t bother replying to that kind of inquiry.

A standard yellow Post-it pad contains one hundred adhesive sheets. Filling every page might sound gravely monotonous, considering the wording is identical, but adjustments here and there help. Spacing is limitless. Placement is indeterminate. And there are half a hundred ways to draw a line.

When its lettering is finished, each pad births a flip book. An illusion of moving words. Sometimes the words spawn pictures. They flutter to life—little, insignificant things, nonsensical but for shared proximity—and with the slip of a thumb or lift of a wrist, they are gone.

“I want you to try an exercise,” the therapist suggests. “Go to the grocery store and place your notes. Then go to another. Keep placing. Affix them until your hands are empty.” This is a thin trick. But, fine, there are worse ways to waste a day. Twelve stores, fifteen Post-its lighter. The lesson is unnecessary. It’s not about running out, using up. It’s salvage and courtesy. It’s warning.

“I want you to open the baby’s room,” the therapist says.

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

It takes five days to fill a 3×3 Post-it pad. More if life or people get in the way. Sitting on the floor is best, so long as the lap desk is available. Sometimes it’s put away—high in the linen closet—and climbing the stepladder stings too keenly.

“Let’s make a deal,” the therapist says. “Every time you feel the need to buy new Post-its, go on another search-and-stick spree instead. You can still soothe that urgency, that need to alert. Rather than stockpiling them, put those bundles to use. It will help you move forward.”

Emptying a pad is cathartic. But not soothing.

“That’s great!” the therapist cheers. “I’m so glad. I know it was hard to do.”

The baby’s room is next.

“How are you feeling about what we discussed a few weeks ago? I mentioned opening up the baby’s room—are you still against it?”

“I’ll always be against it.”

“You’ve made such progress with the Post-its. How many pads would you say you’ve filled, in all?”

“I don’t count them.” Why would anyone do that?

“Ballpark.”

“Seventy-five?”

“Could be a long time until you come to the end of them.”

There is no end to them.

“Maybe we should ramp up the timeline a little,” the therapist decides. “Let’s see where we are next week.”

How many grocery stores are within reasonable driving distance from any one person’s home? How likely is a shopper to unknowingly purchase food items that have dropped to the floor? How many people will heed the sharp drone of a pale caution and choose differently, giving thanks?

“So, how was the weekend?” asks the therapist.

“I visited thirty-seven stores.”

“And?”

“I flagged all of them. Especially the produce aisles.”

This is where most people lose their grip. Often they retrieve the fruits they’ve dropped. Some are wise enough to realize we cannot redeem every tender thing we let fall. If I see someone return a bruised product to the shelf, I knock it loose again. I tuck it against the racks and displays and cover it with a blacklisted Post-it—a little yellow jacket. Each thudded cantaloupe gets one. *Fell on Floor*, the paper jacket warns. Every rolling apple: *FELL ON FLOOR*. The tiniest tottering grapes—*FELL oN FlooR*. Dented soup cans, lurching chip bags, trampled

cartons of sliced cheese. The crib. The playpen. The blanket with the fuzzy bees. And the door. Swarms and swarms of layers on the door.



“Paper Nests” originally appeared in *Smokelong Quarterly*.

# Blood and Ink

by Chris Atkin

I decided a long time ago I wanted one tattoo.  
A single image that screams of self,  
meant to say all the things I cannot find the words for.  
Today I'm in my thirties and my skin is still bare.

I blame it on my fear of permanence, or needles,  
or what my Mormon mother might say when I come home  
for Thanksgiving with something etched deeper in my skin  
than my fear of god will ever be.

But those are just excuses,  
something to say to postpone grappling with  
all my indecision for another day.  
The truth is, I look in the mirror and I can see  
every moment that left a mark upon me  
and I can't decide which one to immortalize  
with blood and ink.

I spent most of my life a few hundred pounds overweight,  
so do I get something that symbolizes everything  
I've had to carry? Or how it felt to slough so much of it off  
one mile at a time?

Or should my tattoo tell the story of the oldest child?  
The one who spent the time between english class  
and football practice throwing himself between his siblings  
and their father and all the venom on his tongue?

Maybe make it a monument to the lonely heart,  
the one whose only known love when it was unrequited,  
the broken boy who blocked his own shot  
over and over again.

The writer in me knows you cannot tell a life's story  
on a single page and not leave all the messy details out.  
And what a boring page that would be.  
So instead of settling for one image,  
just tattoo me a tapestry.

Give me Giles Corey breaking under that final boulder,  
even as he screams for more.  
Weave him in with images of Esau, and Lucifer,  
and all the other fallen first born sons.  
Paint my skin with portraits of Cyrano de Bergerac,  
and Quasimodo, and Charlie Brown,  
and so many other boys who loved a girl  
who could not love him back.

Inlay it with iron rods, and feather pens,  
and all the words I wish I had written first,  
and maybe when it's finally done, it might be enough  
to capture the smallest piece of me.



“Blood and Ink” originally appeared as a spoken word poem on *TikTok*.

# Gospel

by Roy Bentley

I was raised with religion, if you count my granny Potter reading to me from *The King James Bible*, and you don't count my parents having absolutely no use for God until they were dying. Maybe if you can count that they knew Elvis had three Grammys, all in Gospel, and add in that the one jazz record they owned—*Miles Davis—Porgy and Bess*—mentioned a quote Doctor Jesus unquote in one of the songs. My father always said

he wished he could play trumpet. Meaning: like Miles. They might dress me up and catch the Sunday services at the Church of God on Dorothy Lane, but the church of their God was the hillsides outside Dayton, Ohio— they wanted to be out in the open air in cars, all kinds, but mostly in Cadillacs because it was the nineteen fifties, the jazz on the radio a music that they were starting to love.



*As God is my witness*, they would say if something was true. The gospel of light in a streambed is one thing, but my mother and father hadn't come to Ohio for beauty. Home was beautiful, home was Kentucky. Still, they had left Beauty in the tobacco barn bursting with crop, and with the general ruckus of any working mine at shift change, the sweet reek of coal smoke up and down the hollows. In a summer southing of oaks and poplars, a song of tree against tree

that could have been the Almighty trying to speak and be heard. Ohio wasn't Kentucky. It was a start. A new place. A chance for a factory job with overtime. Benefits. Union protections. Ohio was "Here Come De Honey Man" but for hillbillies. On their turntable, the red-labeled Columbia Record album spun and a trumpet in the hands of Miles Davis, a black man, said Gershwin said "It Ain't Necessarily So"—meaning blacks

on their side of the Great Miami in Dayton, and the Ohio River in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, couldn't count on our God, a God of the full belly and a VA-financed three-bedroom house with a yard in a neighborhood where the world looks like you. Sundays, they'd climb into the DeVille and drive to the river. To be reminded they were blessed, my parents. Before they divorced. Before the death of JFK, as God is my witness.



## Ars Poetica with Clickbait

by Rebecca Foust

I'm sure it's clickbait, a girl pulling and pulling  
a line from a hole in the ice for what seems  
like an hour but is actually only 3:20 minutes,  
and I'm worried she is not wearing gloves  
but also excited to see what's at the end of that line:  
a fish, or maybe another of those marriage proposals  
looped in jet contrails or glowing in block letters  
on Diamond Vision or most recently, shifting  
in white pebbles on the bottom of a kettle pond  
on the Cape, and after a long time that seems  
like an hour but is really only minutes, the ice  
explodes into a 30-pound fish, a Great Northern  
Atlantic Pike, one long, thick sickle of muscle  
taut with panic that knocks the girl entirely over  
before shaking the hook loose and flopping back  
down into darkness and freedom.

I'm relieved the girl still has all her fingers and also that it was not an ad, if at the same time a little disappointed not to see a ring, and I wonder if writing poetry is like that: a line dropped into a dark hole cut into ice, with the world maybe watching and maybe not, but when it does, always suspecting a scam while you sit patiently tending the line, willing to risk boredom, freezing, disappointment, and worse for the chance at a ring or a great fish ancient and elusive as time that will nevertheless never impress anyone as much as it impresses you—and for the chance that, having been knocked flat and utterly out of yourself, you might see stars—but that's what they say about fishing, right?—It was never about catching the fish.



“Ars Poetica with Clickbait” originally appeared in *december*.

# The Likes of Us

by Ken Holland

**A**nother ancient folk singer has died  
and of course out come your stories,  
how you once saw the man play  
in a basement club in Buffalo  
where the snow drifts were like the  
sheer facings of cliff-dwelling primitives  
and the cold off Erie sang through  
the porous mortar and friable brick  
so the folk singer's words took shape  
over the table where you sat  
as you reached above to hold  
his lyrics, his voice, his folk-pure soul  
as no one had ever held it before,  
and this you did, you swear, for forty days  
and forty nights, kept the singer's essence  
beneath a water glass on a table next to your bed  
where it rested like a child, like a softly pulsing  
night light, and gave you such dreams

that couldn't possibly be carried forward  
to the waking hours, so delicate, you said,  
too fragile for this world with all its mortality,  
all its mistakes, its futile birdsong,  
and you of all of us swam in the smoke  
of the folk singer's spirit and stroked  
the glass of his dreams, and kept him away  
from the likes of us, who would have stood  
respectfully by your bed in wonder at  
a folk singer dreaming his dream for you.



# How Time Works on the Southern Plains

by Justin Hunt

**H**ome to help my mother clear our Kansas place,  
I break for a Sunday morning walk:

south on Highway 49 and into open fields,  
along the once-rutted trail over which my father

and grandfather herded cattle on horseback—  
a century ago—then past the boneyard's

cedar-lined sod, where my teammate Mike  
has moldered since '69, in dress army greens.

And I think of what it means to leave a childhood,  
the death I'll die when I shutter our house

and drive Mom away, though the wind on my face  
is warm yet and summer-laced, and sagewort

shimmers the ditch and meadowlarks trill as I near  
the one-mile corner, where an old farmer

in a dusty pickup wheels north onto the highway,  
brakes after twenty yards and turns around,

pulls to a stop and steps out, calls to me by name,  
shakes my hand and smiles. *How'd you know*

*who I was?* I ask. *By the way you walk,* he says.  
This, to a man forty years gone.



# Glyphs of a Gentle Going

by B. Fulton Jennes

**M**y neighbor, a widower, vows  
that his house will be  
so death-cleaned on his demise

that his daughter's only worry  
will be to return the library book  
laid to rest on his nightstand.

No, my dear sir, no:  
you will call to her from  
the charged chattel that remains.

Anguished, your heiress  
will climb the threadbare stair,  
touching a finger to

each frayed fiber,  
searching for the weight  
and friction of your foot there;



she will lie on your bed,  
urgent to absorb the last calorie  
of your warmth, will sniff deeply

of the book's cover, her nose  
a forensic tool, tasked to sweep  
your marooned cells into her being;

she will open to the bookmarked page  
to read and reread the lines where  
your eyes last lingered,

imagining that she is the ink  
that whispered you to sleep,  
glyphs of a gentle going.



“Glyphs of a Gentle Going” originally appeared in *Connecticut River Review*.

# Checking Out

by Claire Matturro

Checking out in a long line  
my mind on what the hell  
I'm fixing for supper  
I notice the guy in front of  
me has a gun strapped to his hip  
like he's fucking Wyatt Earp  
I start to say something but  
my tongue twists tight like the tie  
on the bagged potatoes  
while my chest thumps  
with something like pain and I freeze  
there with canned beans  
and red apples vibrating in my cart  
and the whole damn place  
reeking of fried chicken from  
the deli with its week-old bread  
while I try to breathe without moving  
I could just leave my cart

get out quick in case  
he goes off but then  
he starts humming what sounds  
like Amazing Grace and even  
from the back I can tell he's clean  
so I mull it over  
fret about having to shop  
again at another store  
with traffic getting thicker  
every second I waste  
because of this fucking Wyatt Earp  
and I really need that bottle of red wine.



# If it Wasn't for You

by Bill Ratner

*after Brendan Constantine*

I'd be a baby without skin, a parrot  
without a little soap-shaped food cake,  
a truck driver out of a job. I used to envy  
those guys, name on the side, tools in the back.  
If it wasn't for you I'd be cake, old, stale,  
baked out, dirt under a mat, a neon sign  
that isn't pretty. I'd be that smell of rot after a rain,  
the hostility of the locker room, the sting of the pool.  
I'd be a pool cue wrapped around a stranger's head.  
I'd be dead, or at least without significance.  
I'd be a salad without dressing. I'd be a bug  
with no special genus, untraceable, alone,  
sitting on a body island. I'd be corn in teeth,  
shit on mushrooms, nylon on Saran Wrap,  
string between lovers, teeth between stops,  
teen angels, old '78s I could spin out the window

and crack against the neighbor's clapboards.  
I'd be memories without sense, as in a dream  
driven by dialogue, sentences that make sense  
in class but of no context, adding things up,  
tearing things out as if they were coupons,  
bald, dry, seated, in only mild pain. Is this  
what you expected? Don't answer...  
until I'm out of the room.  
Then you can be alone with your thoughts.  
Private, not at home, unplugged, unburied.



# The Science Hour

by Paul Byall

He turned into the rutted lane and geared the truck down so he could take it in slow. The thin wheels of the old Ford jostled over the road and the ridges scraped against the axles, each jolt bringing a grimace that deepened the creases on Early's leathered face. Leafless branches reached out to slap at his headlights, and a trail of dust flew up behind the truck, settling on the sawbriar bushes that burgeoned from the ditches on either side of the lane. A few black birds burst out of the brush and wheeled through the sky like a handful of flung gravel. According to the locals, it had not rained in over a month.

He wondered how much farther down the lane he had to go. The woman who'd called him didn't sound confident giving directions, as if unsure where her own house was.

The farmhouse stood in forlorn solitude behind a sagging barbed wire fence strung from leaning, weathered posts. He pulled up and got out. Although badly in need of paint and

several beads of caulk, the place was in better shape than most. It still had glass in the windows, even if a few showed cracks in the corners, and the wire strung from a pole to the gable told him they could afford the six dollars a month the power company charged to hook up to the grid. Through the thin clapboard walls of the house came the scratchy voice of a radio announcer. He slammed the door of his truck, but still no one came out. He stood for awhile at the bottom of the steps, hesitating before climbing up on the porch. He had been in this part of the country long enough to know that most farmers did not want you on their porches unless you were a relative or a neighbor. Trust, in these parts, had become a rare commodity.

Finally, he climbed up on the porch and knocked on the door. He caught bits and pieces of the voice on the radio ... *traveling at a speed ... light years from earth ... Hubble's law ...* A woman in a thin cotton housedress opened the door and put a finger to her lips, signaling him to silence. "It's The Science Hour," she whispered and turned back to the radio.

He lifted his hat, wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve and stepped inside.

"Thus the planets move away from each other with a speed directly proportional to the distance between them," said the static-laden voice. "The further away, the faster they move, which means the universe is expanding, accelerating toward oblivion."

They listened awhile, then the woman turned the knob on the radio and lowered the voice to a mumble. "Isn't it fascinating?" she said, and as she turned toward him, he noticed that her dress was torn at the shoulder seam. Faded to a dull gray, it might have been fashioned from an old curtain, but the tear looked fresh. "To think that we're on this planet just speeding

through the universe toward certain death. Of course we don't have to worry. It'll take thousands of years. But it's inevitable. Someday, boom!" She clapped her hands together to imitate the collision. "It'll all be gone." She looked straight at him, straight into his eyes, but he got the feeling she didn't see him, as if she were talking right through him.

Early didn't know what to say. He was there to fix a well. That was what he did, fix things, any engine or pump ever made. He'd been an engineer before the depression. He didn't know much about the universe or the planets, but he knew about all there was to know about machinery.

"My husband will be back in a minute. He's out there fiddlin' with the pump," she said, her voice freighted with contempt. She turned and looked him over, seeing him for the first time, appraising him like a mule or a cow for possible purchase. "How old you think I am?"

Early looked down at his hat in his hands. She seemed a few years younger than he, about forty, but farm women generally looked older than they were. She was thin, maybe even frail, but there was toughness in her eyes and the curl of her lip. His customers always made him nervous; times were hard and most had to save some while in order to pay him. He made his living from other people's troubles, but then so did lots of others, even doctors. Good and bad wasn't always so cut and dried as you'd like to think.

She followed him back out to the porch. "So?" she said. "How old?"

"Lady, I've come to fix a pump. What kind do you have, and what's wrong with it?"

"My husband, he'll be back in a minute. He'll know what all you need to find out. What I want to know is where you're from.



That accent ain't from around here." She gave him a half-smile and reached back to touch her hair in a gesture more suitable to a girl half her age.

He stepped off the porch and walked through the few feet of thistle and weeds that served as a lawn to the side of the house. "I'm from Kansas," he called back, as he surveyed the property in a search for the well. There was a dilapidated barn in the back and a lean-to built up against the side of it. He guessed the lean-to sheltered the well.

"Ain't there no pump work in Kansas?" she called down from the porch, sliding her hands down her hips to smooth her dress. "Or did your woman throw you out?"

"My wife died," he said. His own words surprised him. He usually told people she *passed on*, as if she'd just picked up and moved to another place. To avoid the woman's eyes, he looked past her at the peeling paint on the clapboard. Ruth had been a good wife and a good mother, and he'd never once, in their twenty years together, regretted marrying her.

"So why ain't you fixin' pumps in Kansas?"

"Where's your husband, lady? I got cash jobs waiting for me down the highway."

"You walk out back, you'll find him. I just can't figure why anyone would come down here from somewheres else."

"I follow the droughts, lady."

As he disappeared around the side of the house toward the lean-to, he heard the door slam on the porch. Sure enough, the well was there, a circular hole with a cast iron spout. The metal cover containing the pump and housing had been detached from the pipe and stood tilted on the edge of the well head. He didn't see the farmer anywhere. Then he glanced down into the well and saw what looked to be a carcass of some sort, man or

animal, half submerged in the water. It was a good twenty feet down, but the sun was close enough to its zenith so that it was only half in shadow, and he could make out a dark shape. It looked human, and almost certainly dead. Flies were already swarming around it.

He plodded back to the house wondering how to break the news to the woman. It was not the sort of thing a person would want to hear from a stranger. If she had a phone maybe she could call a lady friend. Glancing up, he spotted her in the window, probably standing at the kitchen sink, watching him come down the path. He expected her to meet him on the porch, to ask what the problem was that he was coming back so soon, but the porch was empty when he climbed the steps, so he knocked on the door.

When she came to the door he asked if she had a phone, and she looked at him sharply. "What you want to know that for?"

He told her what had happened and asked her if she had a lady friend she wanted to call.

"Ain't got no phone," she said, sounding more irritated than concerned. "Nearest one is in the store on the highway." She smoothed out her hair with her hand, her fingers lingering on the strands.

At the store he called the sheriff and waited. He followed the deputies back to the farmhouse and explained how he'd found the body. The two deputies stood staring down into the well, while the sheriff scanned the property, looking at the barn, the fields, the house, even the sky. Early followed his gaze, wondering what he was looking for, and caught a glimpse of the woman watching them from the window.

The next day he repaired six engines, saving little farms from turning to sand. At least one person on each farm asked if he was the one who'd found the dead man, and when he'd admitted, yeah, that was him, each one backed away and let him work alone. Late in the afternoon, he was working on an irrigation pump, heating the engine head in his portable forge, watching the hue to judge the temperature for brazing, waiting for a bright orange color to ripen on the metal to seal the crack. A wizened half-breed farmer watched him like a chicken hawk, his arms folded across a tattered denim shirt. "Ain't nobody that can figure how Collins fell down that well. He wasn't a drinkin' man, and he was sure-footed as a mule." He cocked his head and watched Early seal the crack with a clean sweep of molten brass. "If it don't work, you may as well pack up and go back where you came from," he said.

Early threw him a curious look, and the farmer said, "Stranger finds a dead man, that's bad luck."

"Ain't it better I found him than his wife?"

"Don't see it makes much difference. Ain't much that'd rattle that woman."

Near nightfall, when Early pulled the flywheel and the engine coughed and sputtered to life, spurting an arc of sunset-tinged water into the field, the farmer cracked a smile. "Guess you can stay around awhile."

He was staying in a place called the Arbuckle Tourist Court—although he hadn't seen anyone who looked like a tourist, either coming or going—a cluster of stucco cabins lining the highway next to a café that doubled as an office. It was nearly nine when he got back to his cabin, and he was too tired to eat. He washed his hands and face and sat outside on a hardback chair and stared at the sky. A shooting star streaked through the

glitter and disappeared. There'd been a time when shooting stars made him think of Ruth, of her up there in the heavens looking down on him. But that notion had lost its luster with the years.

He studied the sky for some time but couldn't detect any movement as the man on the radio had suggested. Only a few points of light in the abyss. He wondered if it were true, if the universe was rushing headlong into oblivion.

Across the highway, a freight train rattled by, its whistle shrill as a stuck pig. Beyond the rail lines lay yet another dirt farm, maybe ten acres, punctuated by a tin roof shack. The dead man's wife didn't even have children to keep her mind off her loneliness. At least he had that. He'd married young and raised two sons. But he didn't see them much anymore. Roy had lit out for California when his mom died, and Adam was in the Army in Texas. Sometimes he wished he had a daughter. Daughters kept in touch more, or so people said.

He got up and walked over to his truck. He ran his hand over the side of the truck bed, loaded with tools to dismantle, weld and forge almost anything but the weather. It had done good by him, that old truck. He was poor, but not as poor as most, beaten down and ruined inside like many of the people he'd met in this part of the country. At least he could get around and meet new people, who either made him sad or happy when it was time to leave, depending.

In the morning he headed out for his next job under a sheet metal sky warming to a hazy blue. He pulled up to a farm house, and a short man with a droopy mustache came out from behind the building cursing at the ground. Early tipped his hat, and the man spat at his feet. He'd never seen a place where the people were so inhospitable. The little farmer told him to drive into the

field behind the farmhouse. "My McCormack won't spark," he said.

Climbing into the Ford, he spotted, about two hundred yards off, the top of someone's head moving above the weeds of a fallow field. It looked like a woman. He poked his head out the window of the cab. "Who's that?" he said.

The farmer craned his neck and squinted in the direction of the figure then shrugged.

"Damned if I know," he said. "But any woman with nothing better to do than walk around like that is looking for trouble." He jabbed his finger at Early. "Now get to work."

The day turned hot as a furnace, and the sweat dripped off his forehead as he bent over machine after machine, tractors and flatbeds and irrigation pumps. By noon his clothes were drenched through and his back ached, but he'd fixed three machines within a mile of each other. His jobs took him back and forth past the same farms, and after awhile they all looked alike. He was in a field of stunted corn finishing with a balky International when he spotted a woman walking along the embankment of the railroad tracks carrying a basket in the crook of her arm. It was the dead man's wife. He waited until she got closer then looked up at her. She met his look dead on, her eyes the color of dull metal.

She walked up to him and set her basket on top of his tool box. She was wearing a different dress, just as faded and worn as the other, but not torn at the sleeve. "You ready to eat?" she asked, as though they'd arranged to meet here in this field.

"Where'd you come from?"

"My place ain't far. Just on the other side of this field."

There was no shelter from the sun where they stood, so she led him a ways through the corn field to a dry creek bed where

she knelt down in the dappled shade of a desiccated, half dead willow. "Used to be water here," she said, opening the basket. She glanced up at the web of leafless branches above her. "This tree was green then."

The creek bed had dried to a barren gulley strewn with smooth, round pebbles left by the departed water. There was a forlorn look to the gulley, as if it ached for moisture.

The woman lifted the triangular edges of a cloth folded neatly over the top of the basket to reveal an apple and two sandwiches wrapped in cellophane. She withdrew a sandwich then waited while he wiped his hands on a work rag before handing it to him.

"I'm sorry about your husband," he said.

She shrugged. "Truth be told, I'm better off. Now I can sell that ole heap a boards and get out of here."

They ate in silence for awhile, the only sounds the occasional buzz of a fly and the less frequent grumble of a car on a distant gravel road.

"You think I'm heartless, don't you?"

"I don't think anything. I don't know about your circumstances."

"He wasn't no good," she said. "He probably wouldn't even a paid you, so maybe you're better off too." She gave another one of her half-smiles.

"I don't know. I don't wish ill of no man. We all just live and die. Ain't no mystery to it."

"That's a strange thing to say, 'ain't no mystery'. Seems to me all there is is mystery. They say we live at the center of a great big empty space that stretches out ... forever, I guess, to infinity."

He hadn't meant it the way she'd took it. "It was just a figure of speech," he said, but she continued as if she hadn't heard. "But I don't know what infinity means, do you? I mean don't everything have to end somewhere? But then you think what kind of end could it have? A brick wall? But what's on the other side of the wall, and if you think about it long enough it makes you dizzy. They said today on The Science Hour that we humans are the greatest mystery of all. How we're the only species that has a language, and we can reflect on our own thoughts. They had this psychologist that talked about consciousness, how no one really knows what it is. Is it just the brain throwing out thoughts like a machine, or is it something apart from the body? Nobody knows."

"You're really into this stuff, ain't you?"

"I like to know about things. Why we're here, what it all means."

"What about a god?" he said. "A loving god?" Ruth had always talked about *a loving God*. She said she wasn't afraid of dying because she was in the hands of a loving God.

The woman pursed her lips in thought. "A loving god?" she said, her eyes widening as if he'd just hit on a novel idea. "That would be wonderful."

He took a bite of the sandwich. It was dry and tough, and his teeth had a hard time tearing the meat. He wondered if she'd fed her man any better. "What about your husband?" he said. "Was he the wondering type too?"

She flicked at her dress, as if at a piece of lint, and frowned. "Naw. He never thought past food and fucking."

The word *fucking* shocked him. He'd never heard a woman say it before. "People say they don't understand how he fell

down that well,” he said. “If he stumbled, he could have grabbed the edge. He was a strong man.”

“Maybe. I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

“How’d you tear your dress?”

She looked down at it. “It ain’t torn.”

“I mean the other one. The one you had on yesterday.”

“Was it torn? I didn’t notice.” She lifted her chin in a brazen stare and withdrew a knife from the basket. She sliced the apple in two and handed him half. The apple was better than the sandwich, cool and juicy, and he chewed it slowly, savoring it.

“Must be nice to just pick up and go whenever you want,” she said. “Bet you’ve seen a lot of places. Met a lot of people.”

“I’ve met my share. Some good, some bad. Most just like everybody else.”

“Still, I’d like to do that, travel around.” She stared off into the distance, as if she could see herself somewhere else. She bit into her apple, and a trickle of juice escaped into the corner of her mouth. She wiped it away with the back of her hand without ever taking her eyes off the horizon. “It’s so boring here, each day just like the last. After a while you wonder if there’s any point in getting up in the morning.”

“You can wonder that anywhere.”

She threw the apple core into the gully, stretched out her long legs on the dried earth and smoothed out her dress. Then she turned and put her hand on his arm, running it down his sleeve.

He stared at her, looked her up and down, making no effort to conceal his scrutiny. He had to admit she was a good-looking woman.

“You can kiss me if you want.”



He looked around. He wasn't used to kissing in broad daylight. Or in any light, for that matter, since Ruth had died. Her lips were softer than he'd expected, and her hair smelled like flowers, as if she'd just washed it with some fragrant shampoo. Which maybe she had. She wrapped her arms around him and let her weight drag them both to the ground, and in that instant the world went vague, dreamlike. He caught glimpses of corn stalks twinkling in the sunlight as if covered in sequins, and the weeds turned soft as meadow grass. Even the sun seemed to lift its torrid glare a distance from the earth, and all he felt was the woman's body soft and supple beneath him.

He heard her say, just before he fell asleep, "take me with you," and he awoke sometime later with those words in his head. She was sitting up, her back against the willow, looking at him. He picked himself up and took a few steps toward his truck, thinking she'd follow. When she didn't, he turned and said, "I can't take you with me." He didn't offer any explanation, because he didn't have any. He didn't know why he didn't want her to come. She may or may not have killed her husband, but that wasn't it. It just didn't feel right.

He expected her to cry, or at least get angry, but all she did was lift herself from the ground, retrieve her basket and walk off through the corn field toward her house.

The sun was back in full force, and when he got to his truck and bent to pick up his tool box, the handle burned his fingers. He shook his hand and picked up the work rag he'd left on the ground. He dropped the rag over the handle of the tool box and hoisted it into the back of his truck.

Driving down the rutted lane toward the road, he thought about Ruth, if she was in heaven watching him, if she'd seen him with the woman. Or if she wasn't anywhere, if she'd turned

to dust, leaving nothing but bones to rot in the earth. That was the hell of it, nobody knew. All the scientists and statesmen and experts in the world didn't know one single thing that mattered. One man can fix an engine and another can calculate the space between the stars, but neither of them knows anything. Not a damn thing.



# Todd

by Matthew Farrell

**M**y sister is dating a man I can't stand. They've been together for eleven months. I keep a handwritten list of his faults that is ever expanding. One day I will give the list to Kate and she will escape with her life in the nick of time.

Here are the first ten items:

1. His name is Todd.
2. His eyes are constantly open too wide, as if he just sat down on a thumbtack.
3. Even on the weekends, he combs industrial-strength gel through his hair, so it smells of engine grease and remains stiff and unmoving in the face of hurricane winds.
4. He's a loud breather.
5. He says *frustration* instead of *frustration*.
6. His big toes are monstrosities. They look like massive swollen thumbs. He wears sandals far too often, considering.
7. He gardens for fun.

8. Most of the stories he tells revolve around how his father made his fortune out of nothing, which taught the whole family a valuable lesson about hard work.

9. When he walks down the street, dogs bark at him and the happiness is sucked straight out of children who were previously dancing in the sprinklers under the summer sun.

10. His smile is lopsided to the point where it's a problem.

I keep this list in my desk drawer and add to it whenever he unveils a new fault. There is nothing egregiously wrong with Todd, but there's also nothing right. He'll just never make Kate happy, and my little sister needs to be happy.

\*

Andrew, my closest friend, agrees with me about the whole Todd thing. At Burr's Diner we criticize him while eating ice cream. The waiters all know us there. We don't have to tell them which flavor of ice cream we want. Andrew and I have known each other over twenty years, most of our lives, and we value our traditions.

"It's the way he holds his mouth," I say between licks. "His lips are pressed so tightly together."

"You know, Sam, I know what you mean. His lips are usually pressed pretty tightly together."

Today we've exhausted the Todd subject and move on to sports and then to a discussion of the little pleasures in life.

"The satisfying crunch of stepping on dry leaves," Andrew says.

"Watching a kid drop an ice-cream cone."

"Getting a back massage by a naked woman."

I shift on the cracked booth cushion and glance at the penny gumball machine beside us. When we were ten, Andrew

accidentally knocked the thing over, the glass bulb bursting and the gumballs scattering across the floor, each in its own direction.

“How’s the wife, by the way?” I ask.

“Off at her mother’s in Oakland right now. But she doesn’t leave often so let’s not talk about her. I’m not done with our list of pleasures. How about, on burning hot days, diving into the freezing water of the river, like we used to do all those summers.”

\*

In elementary school, Andrew (Andy then) and I had joint birthday parties at my house. Our birthdays were a day apart. We staged wars with toy guns in my backyard, darting around the miniature forest of pine trees, charging toward the wooden play structure that served as the enemy base, cradling guns as if we were brave, rescuing the group of stuffed-animal hostages. My mother made dinner—freeze-dried astronaut spaghetti, and for dessert, freeze-dried astronaut ice-cream sandwiches. We slept in tents outside. Those nights the stars were bright—my family lived deep in a wooded area of the suburbs where there were no street lamps to compete with the sky.

My mother’s smile lit the birthday candles. My father’s laugh shook the crows out of trees. But it’s been over three years since I’ve heard them speak, seen them outside of pictures.

Cancer. One after the other. As if they got the same disease.

After they died, we were about to sell the house but then Kate offered to move in. She wasn’t yet ready to let go. I would have moved in myself but I was living with my girlfriend at the time, Emily, and we had a place of our own.

Now Todd spends a few nights a week under that roof.

\*

When I die, I want a picture of me in my obituary with the caption, “This photograph was taken on the day of Sam’s death.”

So every day I take a picture of myself. Of Kate and Andrew, too, as often as I can. You can never have too many pictures.

\*

I’m at Paradise Island, a rundown theme park off Arden Way recently renamed The Point because someone must have decided the first name raised people’s expectations too high. Kate and I used to come here all the time as kids, with Mom and Dad, after school and on weekends. Bumper boats, batting cages, the arcade, the huge purple slide we rocketed down on potato sacks, terrible pizza. Dad loved the bumper boats even more than we did, loved letting us splash him, and I came here with him long after the rides lost their thrill for me.

Now I’m here at thirty-one years old, playing miniature golf with Kate and Todd in the broiling heat.

Dressed in khakis and a suit jacket, sweat dripping out of his sleeves, hair immaculately parted on the left, Todd looks like he got lost on the way to a business meeting. He takes five minutes to set up each putt, ensuring his back is straight and feet are lined up perpendicularly to the desired path of the ball. He swings the putter from side to side for minutes at a time like he’s a human pendulum, convincing me God missed an opportunity to birth him as a grandfather clock.

Kate is winning. She’s a good golfer. I’m in second. I’m a good golfer too. Todd’s in third, and looks upset.

“The putter they gave me is way too small,” Todd says.

“That must be very *frustrating* for you,” I say.

“Do you want me to grab you another one?” Kate says.

“No,” he says. “I’m up for a challenge, Katie.”

I hate when he calls her Katie. That is what Dad called her. “I don’t think you’re taking enough time to line up your shots,” I say. “It’s all in the preparation, Todd.”

Kate scowls at me. Todd adjusts his hat and readies himself for the next swing. He looks back and forth between the ball and the hole six times. I counted.

Number 67 on the list: He’s a bad miniature golfer and a sore loser.

\*

Sometimes I feel so isolated I can’t take it anymore. I go for walks at night because I don’t want to make it easy on myself. I want to face myself alone in the dark. But the leaves are a menacing shade of black under the moon. The crickets never stop their whining.

In the daytime everything is different. It is spring now, and I run around the track at McKinley Park. The rose garden loves itself this time of year. The people getting married under the arches of flowers play an adult version of Ring Around The Rosie, and for once they don’t think about all the saturated fat in the cake. The long grass bordering the garden folds under the push of the wind, bowed toward the ground like hair gelled and combed down. Squirrels chase after each other and wrestle on weak branches. It sounds too perfect to say that I hear children’s laughter, but it’s there, as they jump off the swings.

\*

I get home after another half-day at work. I don’t have much to do now, ever since “Get The Fax Straight!” cut back on my work hours, because the boss can’t afford me right now, because, seriously, how can you support a whole business selling just fax machines?

My apartment is a few cramped cubes littered with dirty clothes. Even with the extra free hours, I'm still usually too lazy to raise the blinds. It's like Alaska or Antarctica in here, where the nights last months. Mom always used to scold me for that, walk around the old house raising the blinds, humming "Here Comes the Sun."

It kills me sometimes, wanting Emily back. Today is our two-year break-up anniversary. Officially longer than we were together.

I've seen her a few times since I ended things, or maybe it was more of a mutual ending of things, I don't remember. We have coffee sometimes. Occasionally I'll miss something she's saying because I'm imagining her body next to mine in a bed too small for us both. It was for the best she moved out. Never enough space here. And I doubt I ever really liked her. I definitely didn't love her, as I told her I did those hundreds of times. But her eyes were so unusually green. Whenever I told her a story, she kept her eyes steady on mine, her lips puckered in concentration.

I sit on the couch and write down the things I plan to accomplish during the rest of the day. *Eat tomatoes for the cancer-preventing lycopene. Run in McKinley Park. Take a picture with Andrew at dinner.* Later, if and when I do these things, I will write check marks next to each entry.

Suddenly the power in my apartment cuts out, forcing me to raise the blinds. Did I forget to pay a bill again? I never realize how loudly the refrigerator buzzes until the power goes out. Silence can always get more silent.

I turn on my battery-powered white-noise machine and select "Waves 2." "Waves 1" just sounds like static.

\*



At Burr's Diner, Andrew gets a half sandwich of turkey with cranberries and a half sandwich of tuna, as always. I get the cheese dog sandwich instead of the regular hot dog sandwich. The waiter doesn't seem to notice the change.

"His breath is always so minty fresh," I say. "Todd seriously must brush his teeth five times a day."

"And use Listerine mouthwash," Andrew says through a mouthful of tuna.

"And he holds his lips so tightly together, like he's struggling to hold himself back from shouting at someone."

"I think we've already talked about that one, but I definitely know what you're getting at." He's looking down, not meeting my eyes. Is he just agreeing with me to be agreeable? He's a social worker at the UC Davis Medical Center and sometimes I think all his interactions are fake.

I decide not to ask a stranger to take a picture of us together.

\*

The next day, I go for a run in McKinley Park and see Todd and Kate by the tennis courts. They're sitting on the bleachers drinking grape soda (my favorite), watching middle-aged men grunt out a game of tennis. Kate waves me over.

"Don't you work today?" she says.

"Took a day off. I'm sure the fax machines will be fine."

"Did you call your boss?"

"Yes, ma'am. I officially have the stomach flu."

Kate smiles. Todd looks straight at me. "I wanted to talk to you about something, Sam," he says, eyes wide open. "There's an internship open at my office. I could float you around to the guys." He's leaning forward, arms crossed. He taps his sandals on the bleachers. The big toes are out today.

"I already have a job, Todd."

“I know. Just wanted to let you know.”

Pop pop pop of rackets hitting tennis balls. Number 28: He thinks he’s better than everyone else because he’s a senior analyst at a hedge fund.

I stand up. “I’m off to finish up my run. Best way to get over the stomach flu, I hear.”

\*

Working at Get the Fax Straight! has taken a toll on my sanity. Customers are rare, the boss takes four-hour lunch breaks, and the phone rings so infrequently I’m starting to suspect it’s broken. All I ever hear is the occasional screech of a fax machine trying to commit suicide.

I imagine the various ways this place could be demolished. A flash flood tears through the building, picking up fax machines, carrying them out the door, down the street, and along I-80 for a hundred miles to the ocean. God chooses Get the Fax Straight! as the center of the apocalypse—fire eats at the wallpaper and the posters of people smiling while sending faxes, then the earth opens up and swallows dozens of screaming machines. And on and on.

I get bored and start riding the elevator up and down. Whenever I’m on an elevator, I stand with my face an inch in front of the crack in the metal doors, waiting for them to open. If someone turns out to be on the other side, they draw back in shock. Because I do this, someone else in the world must do this too, and one day we will both be doing this on opposite sides of the same elevator door. When the doors open our faces will be inches apart, as if about to kiss. This will be my future wife.

\*

Todd invites me to a baseball game, Giants vs. Dodgers. We will get matching hot dogs and nachos and oversized barrels of

Coke. Todd, being Todd, will buy lots of souvenirs, including one of those giant foam hands with the index finger sticking up. He'll wear that on one hand and a baseball glove on the other, gawking at the game and preparing for the home-run balls to head in our direction. But when it does come, Todd will happen to be zipping up his zipper (having forgotten to do so earlier), and the ball will smash into his temple. A quick death. Kate will be sad for a while, of course, but in the end everyone will be better off.

I decline Todd's invitation. Instead I go for a run at McKinley Park, enjoying the rose garden and the noises of people, and I feel good.

\*

I'm thinking about buying a puppy, a Jack Russell Terrier like my childhood dog Chloe. Jack Russells bark all the time, and it will be nice to have sounds in my apartment again. Women love puppies, too, so a girlfriend shouldn't be too long to follow.

\*

A few months after Mom died, which was a year after Dad died, Kate and I went through old home videos—typical mourning routine, reliving childhood memories, etc. We sat there for hours, on opposite ends of the couch. Not much talking. I remember one scene: Mom filming, me at maybe four years old jumping on our parents' bed, Dad holding out his arms to prevent me from breaking my neck. Kate was three, standing on the carpet, trying to climb onto the bed. The bed was tall and she was short. Gripping the top of the mattress with both hands, She kept trying to swing her legs up, but she couldn't hurl herself high enough. After every attempt, she shouted, Can't do it. Can't do it. Slurred so it sounded like one

word. Cantoit. Cantoit. I bounced on the bed, smiling, saying, Come on, little girl. You can do it, little girl. Cantoit. I could hear Mom's laughter behind the camera, friendly laughter, not mean or mocking. She set the camera down, and for a moment it was pointed at the wall on its side, and when she picked it up again, my sister was bouncing on the bed next to me.

Kate and I should make it a tradition to watch our home videos every year, together on the couch, on Mother's Day or Father's Day or one of their birthdays or their anniversary, June 6th, which is coming up. I call her.

"Kate, I just thought of something we—"

"Sam! I'm so glad you called!" Her voice sounds young, high-pitched, and happy. "Come over. I have news."

\*

The news is that Kate and Todd are engaged, as of tonight.

\*

Todd's lopsided smile. So wide it looks like he's posing for a dentist's advertisement. When he starts telling me the story of his proposal for the third time—down on one knee, tuxedo, nothing original—I leave, grab my running clothes from the car, and run to the downtown library.

The downtown library is an ugly brick building that has the luxury of being next to even uglier brick buildings so that it looks halfway decent by comparison. I pick out a random book and start reading. It's about a man who challenges himself to go a whole year without spending one dollar to prove that the world doesn't have to be based on capitalism and consumerism, which many of his friends deem admirable until he's arrested for stealing vegetables from a community garden. It's dull, so I put it back. But the author—I check the spine for the name, Jeremy Pickett—probably spent years of his life writing this thing.

I feel the weight of all the years surrounding me on these shelves. Say each book represents the labor and pain and joy of five years of life, and say there are a million books in this library—that's five million years of life within these walls. Exhilarating, but also sad, that all that life could fit inside one ugly building.

I run to the river.

I edge down from the levee to the bank, my shoes dislodging little rocks that tumble down the hill, sending up trails of dust like little horses riding across the desert in a grand western. I strip to my boxers and dive into the river. The sun is hot but never hot enough once the water wraps around my head. I swim to the other bank, stand up to feel the breeze and see the cottonwood leaves shaking in the wind and the golfers shielding their eyes from the sun. Is Kate getting married because she's lonely? Because she still feels the hole left by Mom and Dad?

Teenagers have gathered above me on the bridge. A scrawny boy climbs over the railing, preparing to jump into the river, fifty feet below. Sound travels well across the water, and I can hear his friends encouraging him. "Do it!" "Don't be a pussy." Girls are there too. "Don't think about it, just go." "It's worse when you think about it."

"Let him alone," I shout. "Someone else go, if you're all so eager."

The scrawny boy's head swivels in my direction. "Mind your own business, asshole!" he says. And he jumps. He is silent as he falls. Then his feet break the surface with a crack. He emerges smiling. His friends look back and forth between him and me. One girl flips me off, then climbs over the railing herself, hops into the air, squealing.

I swim back to the other shore. I'm going to skip work until my boss fires me. Get a new job. Maybe the world will end because someone doesn't receive a fax.

\*

Kate invites me to a small celebration dinner, along with Andrew and his wife, and another couple, Mr. and Mrs. Something. We eat at Kate's house, my parents' house. As I enter the living room, I smell Mom's grand piano before I see it, the fragrant wood, the ivory keys that still feel the weight of Mom's fingers.

The dinner—spaghetti with home-made tomato sauce—is simple but great. Dad used to cook it all the time, saying the lycopene in the tomatoes reduced the risk of cancer. Todd carries plates to the table, his legs squirming close together so his pants make that swishing sound. Number 16: He walks like a duck.

During the meal, Todd tells the story of the engagement several times. Andrew interrupts the third telling to recount his own engagement story.

"Sometimes I think she acted for both of us," he says. "She got down on one knee for me, and she asked herself to marry me. Then she said yes and I said whoopee! Then she said—do you know what she said?—she said, 'It's about time.'" His wife, Emily, was smiling but looking down into her wine glass, and she was blushing faintly. "And then I almost reminded her that we were still in our twenties, and she wasn't even pregnant so what was the rush, but instead I said again, whoopee!"

It takes a lot of work to ward off the feeling that someone who's been your lifelong best friend may, in fact, be a dick.

I deal that thought a killing blow by way of a large amount of wine. I take to staring unblinkingly at Todd. He places his

hand on my sister's shoulder, twiddles his fingers on her shirt, smiling and looking like he owns the world. The sounds of the dinner conversation recede, and all I can hear is Todd's trademark loud breathing.

After dinner, Andrew thumbs at his wife and says, "Boss tells me we've got to go," and they leave along with the other couple. I sit at the piano bench and rest my fingers on the ivory keys. Kate comes up and sits next to me.

"I love this piano," she says. "I wish Mom had forced me to continue with lessons so I could do the thing justice."

"Me too. Those piano lessons were awful though. That woman creeped me out, with her bright orange hair. People that old shouldn't have hair that orange."

Kate smiles. "Are you OK?" she asks.

"Of course. Why?"

"I don't know. You didn't talk much tonight. None of your jokes and stories about Dad or fax machine malfunctions."

"The wine was just so good I couldn't take my mind off it." I play a single note on the piano and clear noise fills the room, like we're in a soundtracked movie. "Are you OK, too?"

"I am."

"Todd makes you happy?"

She seems to expect the question. "Look, I know you don't like Todd, but—"

"I like Todd." The single note echoes. I strike it again and press my foot on the pedal to make it linger.

"I know he can be annoying, believe me. He's a strange one sometimes, the way he seems rigid and professional, talks as if life is a job interview. He wants people to like him, wants *you* to like him. And he gets nervous when he thinks he's failing. Can you recognize why he might be nervous around you?"

I don't say anything. The note from the piano finally dies.

"He's different when it's just us," she continues. "He's warm. He can be silly. He reads to me in bed, from books I've chosen that he would never read on his own, and he does voices for all the characters. He supports me and doesn't try to change me. I love him."

I look at her. She looks like our mother—her green eyes, the first hints of crow's feet deepening at the corners, which don't make her look older, just softer.

Todd walks up, puts his arm around Kate. "Did you tell him our plans, Katie?" He smiles. He's always smiling.

"What plans?" I say.

"Todd's moving in," Kate says. "With me. Here."

"Really?"

"I'm ditching my apartment, nice as it was," Todd says. "Figured there was so much space here, might as well take advantage of it."

"And we'll never have to sell the home," Kate says. She places a hand on my knee, and I stand.

"Congratulations, you two." My face feels hot, and I smell Todd's greasy hair gel. "Kate, I'm tired. Calling it a night." She nods, looking at me as if she's the older one, and I'm a helpless child.

"Need a lift home?" Todd asks.

"No thanks, Todd. I'll walk."

"Mind if I walk you out?" Todd says.

I start down the front steps and Todd follows, placing a hand on my shoulder. I cut across the grass, but Todd sticks to the cement path, extending his arm before releasing his grip on my body. He trots along the border of the lawn and catches up to me.



“Sam, I’ve got something serious to ask you.” Again he puts his hand on my shoulder. I stretch my arms and force a yawn, and he lets go.

“You’re having doubts?”

“No, no. Of course not.” His face is serious, stunned. Suddenly he laughs. “Are you joking? Yes, you’re joking. OK, are you ready?” He looks me square in the eye. “I was wondering if you would be my best man.”

I look at the ground, at my shoes. They’re covered in mud. The sprinklers must have just run. I forgot. Kate waters the lawn at night. That’s why Todd followed the path. He knows more than I do about my own home.

“Did Kate ask you to do this?” I say. Todd stands under a street lamp, and his face is streaked in shadows.

“No, she doesn’t know.” By the way he blinks repeatedly, which he rarely does, I know he’s lying.

“Don’t you have any friends to ask?”

“Yes. Of course I have friends. But you’re family.” He raises his hand to touch me but at the last moment pulls back. A lopsided smile tightens across his face.

Number 85 on the list: He tries too hard and has no spine. He’ll do anything to please my sister.

“Todd.” I kick some mud off my shoes and a few flecks land on Todd’s shiny loafers. He doesn’t notice because his gaze hasn’t left my face. “Todd, can you give me some time to think about it?”

“Sure. Sure, whatever you need.” He claps and rubs his hands together. “Let me know.”

“I will,” I say, already walking away. When I look back, I see Todd looking down at his feet. He licks a finger, bends down,

and rubs mud from his shoe. Then he follows the path back to my parents' house.

The night air is the perfect temperature for walking. It's only a few blocks to my apartment, but I take the long route, around McKinley Park. The sounds at night are so easy to isolate in my mind. The friction of my shoes on the cement. The crickets. A car, probably up on the freeway.

I make my way to the rose garden and sit down on a bench in the very center of it. The flowers have lost their color to the night. A runner passes by without noticing I'm here. At the base of a nearby elm, a squirrel digs around in the dirt, looking for something it misplaced.



## After That, Try This:

by Christiana Louisa Langenberg

Stare at your reflection in the storefront window. She looks familiar, you think. Tilt your head and search her face, browse for details that resemble the old you. Wonder where she is now and who this might be.

Stand in the aisle at the thrift store you often visit. On this day you have a *Choose Joy* mug in your hand, priced at \$.45. Not much for joy. Take it home and fill it with hot ginger tea that's supposed to be medicinal. The first sip is soothing, but lately you're only borrowing warmth.

Watch a fish flail on a pier and note how it gulps air in search of oxygen. Realize that this is how you sleep now, your body moving itself without your knowledge, trying to swim in the absence of water.

Contract an odd case of situational color blindness. Somehow, black and blue look exactly the same. Violet and pink could be twins. Your shoe rack is a confusion of indoor and outdoor. On Monday, show up at the office looking like a bruise

shuffling down the hallway in gardening clogs. Nobody says anything, but people are bad at this, and besides, you haven't told them what happened.

And then, spend a lot of time waiting. For what, you don't know. The next thing, you suppose. The one that will tip you either toward or away from the abyss you seem to be walking the edge of and staring into, no matter where you are.

Maybe start preparing easily digestible foods. Find there's something mesmerizing about chopping and sautéing, watching the quinoa turn translucent, inhaling the aromatics; yet, you're unable to lift the end results to your mouth. It all looks like aquarium gravel and your thoughts are flying in a holding pattern nowhere near this moment. And besides, you're gorged on sorrow.

When people ask, "How are you?" as they walk by, you cannot answer *fine* or *good*. *Anguished* or *dislocated* are not acceptable responses. *Disassembled* feels accurate, but it's too clumsy to say and then somehow keep moving. Nobody wants to tote the muddled bulk of your grief for you or listen to the volume of it, and neither do you.

Consider that you might never diverge from this state of being. This is who you are now: a voiceless contusion wandering aimlessly in and out of limbo.

After what seems like years, and—it turns out—have been *actual* years, open the hall closet with an indefinite sense of purpose. Pull out the muslin bag, the one that contains hundreds of photos of you and the deceased. Flip through them like some kind of robot and decide, with alarming speed, that most of them can be tossed. Keep only 10.

Here is one of the two of you at the lake you've forgotten the name of. This is how you look: not at the camera, but at the

person taking your picture. Your adoration could not be more clear. Here is another—same place/same day/three minutes later—of the deceased looking at you with the exact same expression. Try to make sense of where you are now, while holding proof of otherwise in your hands.

And then, one luminous day, in the last quarter mile of your longest, long walk, you startle a blue heron, and the shadow of its wingspan somehow crushes you. Your torment implodes. In seconds you're weeping directly onto the rock fines, your palms smeared with grey dust. Try to remember how to swallow so you can resume breathing,

Lay awake that night, and don't resist when a flinty nostalgia mingles your thoughts into a flat dish of glass beads. Listen to the breeze from the small fan next to your bed and follow along, unsurprised by how easy it is to find yourself headfirst inside a kaleidoscope. This makes sense to you, somehow, that you can look through the eyepiece even though your body is blocking the reflective surfaces. What appears next is a simple map on the wall of all your good intentions, colorful pushpins stuck in key intersections, brass thumbtacks smooth against emotional sinkholes. And when you rotate the dish of beads, you're aware you can't control the way they reposition themselves, but you still want to see what happens.

In the morning, try this: envision leaving the mortuary parking lot, the corrugated box labeled *Processed Remains* sitting in the passenger seat. You can see it now. There is so much of her gone and so much of you adrift. Reach over and loop the seatbelt around her, as if she simply forgot to do it herself. It'll take twice before it clicks.

You heard once that UPS drivers make only right turns to save time. Research has shown it works. Scan the oncoming

traffic moving in one direction. It seems each car passes you with only one person in it, unless there's someone you're missing. Keep waiting to turn left.



# Towel Racks

by Wilson M. Sims

At the family dinner, I planned to ask my mom and dad questions about their garden, and their rental properties, and what their lives were like when they were 27. Afterward, I would meet my pageant girlfriend for a concert at The Ryman. I was going to hold her hand and listen with my eyes and tell her I liked the music she liked. I was going to traverse the day without drinking more bourbon than my withdrawals demanded. And the next morning I was going to remember having been a good man and having gone to sleep the night before. But family dinner was an intervention.

And then I was in an interventionist's garbage-littered truck. And then I was in the middle of the part of Nowhere that is east of Nashville but west of anything else, buying gas station beers and cigarettes, because for some reason I wasn't supposed to show up to rehab sober. And then I was parked outside of a small composite building somehow attached to a double-wide trailer. And then I was inside the trailer and there was a nurse

behind thick glass and a quiet giant standing behind me. And then I was signing my name on a line. And then I was in rehab.

The nurse moved her hands over the keyboard cautiously, pecking each key with her index finger. When I offered to type for her, she turned her gaze from the tops of her hands to me. Maybe the muscles in her face meant to form a smile, but she produced an upside-down frown. The nurse's glass cell was housed within a larger room lined with sagging leather couches. Cups and paper plates sat on cheap wooden tables; down a hallway just wide enough for a single person was the kitchen and communal bedrooms and bathrooms. It was nighttime outside, and all of the overhead fluorescent lights were on inside.

Quiet Giant ducked even though the roof was higher than the length of his stretched body. I glanced over my shoulder and sought mutual understanding in his blank eyes, but there was none. I looked at the door through which I had entered, and then at the nurse. Her gaze was back on the tops of her own hands, but the index fingers were no longer pressing keys. I didn't have to pee, but I did want the bizarre, frozen moment to end. I asked her where the restroom was. She turned her rolling chair 180 degrees and pointed with her whole arm, extended as if towards the horizon, and I took four steps to the single-person restroom.

The door did not close behind me; Quiet Giant filled the space behind me, between the bathroom and the main room. I gestured towards the single toilet, but he did not understand. I asked him if he wanted to go first. His hips were the same distance from the ground as mine. I wondered whether his torso, neck, or head accounted for his height. He handed me a clear cup with a top and said to pee in it. I told him the interventionist had forced me to drink gas station beers, but Quiet Giant



said they needed to know if I was on anything else. I told him I was not, and he told me I would say that, and I told him it did not make sense to lie about something like that while holding a cup that tested piss for drugs. He told me to pee. I looked up at him and he looked down at me.

I said, "Okay, I'm going to pee," but he said, "Yeah, I have to watch you," and I said, "What?" He told me he needed to make sure it was my pee. I told Quiet Giant he certainly was not going to watch me pee. I imagined Quiet Giant had abnormally short legs but an abnormally long penis.

He said it was policy, and I said who the fuck carries other people's piss with them, but he sighed and looked at the ceiling two inches above his eyes. I felt bad for him but remained committed to being mean. I stepped to the far side of the toilet and turned my body to face him entirely before dropping my jeans and briefs to my ankles like a child. I stared into his face until I finally started peeing and he did not stare back, but he did take the cup of my piss to the nurse. I followed Quiet Giant down a hallway of laminate floors. He carried the bag I'd arrived with, but it was not *my* bag.

\*

Six hours previous, I'd walked into a restaurant I'd never been to. Sportsman's Grill in Nashville, Tennessee. High-backed booths softened by green cushions ran along the four interior walls. The waitresses looked like lifers of the trade; they seemed bored walking with trays and notepads, and their skin and hair looked thin. Light from wobbling ceiling fans swept back and forth across the glossy tables while twangy country music played. My parents and a stranger were seated on one side of a circular table, in the center of the building. My mom

was in the chair between my dad and the unknown man, but much closer to my dad, and holding his clasped hands.

I hugged my mom, whose eyes were red from crying, and patted my dad on the shoulder. The unknown man shook my hand, introduced himself as Pat, and said he was there to help my mom say something she hadn't been able to say herself. I nodded, watched my own knees while sitting, and exhaled my head up, towards the people. The country music continued, the lights from the fans swept the surfaces of the tables, and the arm of a waitress placed half-gallon plastic red cups of water onto the table. She said something, and Pat said something, and she disappeared. Sweat from the cups formed pools of condensation.

My mom told me it seemed to her and my dad, and my sister and brother, and all of my closest friends, as if I had been trying to kill myself for some time. She told me that her real son had been missing for years, that there wasn't any light from my eyes anymore, and that this was the worst moment of her life.

My teeth held my face together. I did not look at Pat or my dad, or at any of the patrons who might have noticed something uncomfortable happening. I kept my eyes on my mom's, but I did not feel sadness or anger. I felt heat where my spine entered my head, and I felt pain in my lower back.

My mom told me I had two options: to do what they were asking, and go to a treatment center Pat had recommended, or to be entirely alone. Nobody to speak to on my birthday or theirs, no nephew's basketball games to go to, or nieces to play hide and seek with. No mother to call on Mother's Day and no father to call on Father's Day. My mom found her cup with her eyes, my dad watched the sweeping lights, and Pat and I did not move.

I told my parents we would never again have a relationship. I spoke with a measured tone. I spoke through her eyes to them both, and to my distant siblings, and friends, and to Pat and everyone else in the restaurant and on earth. I told them their fucked up perspective was going to ruin my life. I told them I would go to rehab, but only because I wouldn't let them pin the collapse of our family on anyone but themselves.

Pat stood up and said, "Let's go," and my parents said things I did not listen to while I followed him from the restaurant to the parking lot. A bag I had never seen before, the bag Quiet Giant later carried in the rehab's hallway, was moved from my parents' car to the interventionist's truck full of garbage. Pat got in the driver's seat while my parents stood some yards away. I handed my house and car keys to my mom and said, "Remember when I told you to listen for real, and to remember that I would do *anything* for you? This is that thing, and the last thing." My mom was my person.

\*

At the trailer-park rehab, which had creatively been named "Recovery House," my intervention bag was locked in a closet and I was locked in a room. I did not know what was in the closet, but two men were in the room and each was occupying a bed. One of the men was asleep on top of his made bed wearing only boxers and a baseball hat. The hat was not set atop his face to shield light but snugly fit just above his ears, as it would be worn by someone mowing their lawn in the middle of the afternoon. The other man looked to be the size of a baby and was swaddled in his comforter. Three cots were empty, making five in all, and other than a stand beside each bed there was not any furniture, closets, light switches, or decorations.

I knocked on my side of the locked door until Quiet Giant opened it towards himself and lowered his head beneath the frame. I told him the door was locked and he agreed. I told him I was far too sober to sleep, and he said he was sorry. I told him my room smelled like shit, and he looked over my head and into the room but said nothing. I asked if I could smoke a cigarette, and he said it was policy that I could not but to follow him.

The door clicked behind us, and I told Quiet Giant one of the men was sleeping on top of his bed in only a baseball hat. Stooping his neck, he led us down the hallway which included the kitchen, into an office, and onto a wooden deck by way of a sliding glass door. He lit a cigarette and I did too. I told Quiet Giant I'd decided to come there, and I'd been the one to sign myself in. I told Quiet Giant it was my girlfriend's birthday. We were supposed to be at a show at The Ryman, but I was in that room with those men. He said I could not smoke a second cigarette and walked me back to my locked room. I was not too sober to sleep; I did so in the bed beside the swaddled, tiny, old man.

Within minutes, muttering and shuffling woke me. I opened my eyes to two old, dangling testicles. The old baby was totally naked in the dimly lit room. He was standing in the narrow space between our two beds, with his testicles drooping an entire yard beneath his acorn penis. As I closed my eyes, the old baby yelped and fell to the floor. Being a hero, I opened my eyes.

With his jeans bundled at his ankles, he looked even smaller than he was. Poop that was yellow like a newborn's puddled on the floor beside him. I slid from my bed, knelt by his body but on the side without shit, and yelled for Quiet Giant. The man in the hat stumbled from his bed, coughing and gagging, and slammed his fists, over and over, on the locked door. The shit

smell had been actual poop, and when exposed to air it seeped into all skin pores and cloth fibers.

Quiet Giant helped Old Baby into the shower while the nurse bundled the comforter and sheets Old Baby had been using as a diaper. Hat Man, wearing only a hat and boxers, snored in a kitchen chair with his mouth open and face angled towards the ceiling.

I sat between the hallway wall and floor and wondered where someone belongs when they don't belong in rehab or elsewhere. I imagined standing before a high-seated panel of judges, a projection of my life playing behind me, and the middle judge, a man, asking me, "Son, I don't understand. What happened to you?" I imagined opening my mouth to speak, raising my hands with my palms toward the ceiling, and then dropping them to my sides as my mouth hung open.

Quiet Giant stood at the end of the kitchen and told us we needed to go back to our room for the night. Hat Man and I returned to the room where Old Baby was already swaddled anew, asleep in his bed. Quiet Giant propped the door to our room open with a fan, and the stench moved in laps across our beds.

\*

During the following days, I medically detoxed from alcohol. There were no clocks. The sheets were consistently the wrong temperature, and I moved beneath, above, and around them. My fingers scratched sores into my upper legs. I did not sleep as my mind fragmented. I saw a coworker who'd never been in my home, in my kitchen. I saw a version of my mom, older than she was. I watched a wolf, or demon, open the locked door to my rehab room, pace the floor beneath my bed, and stand on four legs above my paralyzed body. My sight was with

closed eyes and my screaming was mute. When my condition improved to merely vomiting and shivering, I developed three complete plans for the future:

1. I would go to Mexico (one of my cards was not maxed out) and teach English. Or do something else. But I would not ever speak to my family again, and hopefully, they would mourn until they died.

2. I would enlist in the military. The Girl would cry and be dramatic before I left. I would not tell my family. One day a man would knock on my parents' door and present a flag, and they would learn of the heroics I had performed prior to jumping from a plane without a parachute. I would not ever speak to my family again, and hopefully, they would mourn until they died.

3. I would live behind a bar where I also worked. In Idaho or Montana. I would grow my hair and beard. I wouldn't want or need anything other than regular customers and periodic one-night-stands. I would take nighttime walks in the woods, listening to Bon Iver, until the bear from *Legends of the Fall* killed me. I would not ever speak to my family again, and hopefully, they would mourn until they died.

\*

A woman who was not a nurse knocked on the door that I couldn't open and strode to the side of my bed. Her hair was dark and the skin on her pale face was marked by off-brown spots. She wore jeans and a cardigan over a black collarless shirt, and she told me to stop being a baby and smoke a cigarette with her. Her clothes were too small, and heavily taxed by long, defiant strides. Somewhere, a staticky DJ's voice manipulated

vowels. Hat Man and Old Baby were not in the room. Officially, my detox was over. I followed the woman.

When she asked me if I had a jacket, I told her I didn't know. She abruptly stopped walking beside a hallway door to work one of her many keys in the lock. With the door open, she looked up at me and asked if I had packed the bag. I shook my head no.

"'Cause you were too drunk, or 'cause you didn't know you were comin'?" she asked.

"I left my house for dinner with my parents," I said and waved my hand towards everything around me. She nodded and flipped through folded and tagged clothes in the bag. I imagined my mom stepping over and on the reflections of a Target's overhead lights to buy this stuff. Her face like it was when she told me I'd been missing for years. I imagined her passing overalls for toddlers, basketball shorts, dorm furniture—totems of her abducted boy—her red, honeycomb-cart full of these tagged and folded rehab clothes.

"Well," said the woman, "you don't got a jacket, but we got a jacket." She pulled a neon-orange bubble jacket from a cardboard box deeper in the closet. She lifted it towards me and said, "It may not smell real good, but you don't either." She closed the closet door and walked quickly down the hallway.

"What's with the music?" I asked, following her into an office, through the exterior sliding-glass door, and onto the wooden deck where, days before, I'd smoked with Quiet Giant.

"New patient needs it," said the woman, speaking towards the steps she was descending. The stairs led to a cigarette-butt tower circled by mismatched plastic and iron chairs. The woman sat, pressed her back against the seat, and flattened her face towards the blue, cloudless, morning sky.

“Can I need a radio?” I asked, easing into the least broken of the chairs.

“No. She *really* needs it,” the woman said seriously.

“*She?*” I suggested, crossing my own legs as I sat. The woman smiled and said, “I don’t think you’re gonna be interested.” I pulled my lighter and Camel cigarettes from my pocket, lit a smoke, and let my head fall behind the back of my chair.

“So,” she said, “just booze?”

“There was coke for a while, but about a year ago I left it in D.C. when I moved here. Well, Nashville.”

She told me she’d been a meth girl; I didn’t tell her I figured. She pulled a bulky vape from her pocket and kept it close to her lips between pulls.

She told me she’d used meth for much longer than she hadn’t, and she hadn’t used a drug in over four years. I told her congrats. She said, “Thank you,” but she “was just finally being a person and didn’t need praise for not committing felonies.” I passed my eyes over the marks on her face; I was glad not to have met the worse version.

She told me her first drink was given to her by her dad when she was 11 and she’d snuck another, and it was the best day of her life. She went on to get into pills until she couldn’t afford them and then did anything that changed the way she felt. The last few years she was using she did not want to at all. “None of that sounds very fun,” I said.

“No. It sucked ass. And on top of all that I fell in love with a woman, and that doesn’t work with most people around here. I was supposed to be Christian. Lotta people do meth but nobody is gay.”



“When I first got to Nashville, on the very first day, the first bar I went to was a gay bar,” I said. “I’m not gay, but I’m a flaming liberal, and I was scared the Tennessee people would be able to tell.”

“Gay bars are the best,” she said, “but I didn’t use meth because Christians hated me, or because my piece-of-shit dad violated me, or because the kids at school made fun of my thrift store clothes. I woulda been using meth, or crack, or somethin, either way.” I nodded without understanding and lit a second cigarette, anticipating a reprimand that did not come. She nodded at my smoke and said, “I quit when my husband got me pregnant, but I miss that shit every day.”

I asked about the women from before and she said maybe things would’ve worked out somewhere else or sometime else, but she really did love her husband. “You think it’s true?” she asked. “That I used to be a meth fiend and a criminal, and that I lived on the streets and in the woods? That I wanted to quit but couldn’t? And that now I’m a mom and a wife and my job has benefits and I’m not perfect at any of it, but I’m a whole person?”

I could tell we’d moved from whatever we’d been doing to whatever we were supposed to be doing, and I said, “Sure, of course. And seriously, I’m really glad for you. And I’m—I am sorry, whether your dad or those kids in school had anything to do with anything or not—that those unspeakably sad things happened to you. But I wasn’t doing meth in the woods or pulling up floorboards for copper or whatever. I was taking a literal model to a concert for her birthday. I didn’t just have a job, I had a profession.”

“Ahh, so your thing was different? You’re different?” she said, as if it were stupid of me to think I was different.

“I was making okay money and working in places with ping-pong tables and traveling the world and stuff.” I said. She tugged on her vape and popped up from her chair and looked down at me hunched in my plastic seat.

“So you gotta great job, you traveled the world, and somehow you ended up in rehab, but you don’t got any rehab problems?”

“I didn’t say I don’t have problems. I’ve got plenty. But they’re not problems this place fixes. Not problems like Hat Man or Old Baby. Well, I think it’s great that you do whatever you do here, but my problem wasn’t some mechanism wrong with my arm where it just kept slamming booze down my throat. My problem is I’m just really not how anyone thinks I should be. But they all want me to be happy, and that’s the only thing I can’t manage, so my family sent me here. I won’t be a problem for you, but I’m not going to stop drinking once I’m out of here.”

“Too bad. If you knew you were in rehab for rehab problems, I could probably help you get better.” She turned up the wooden stairs. I watched her go and slid my eyes along the side of the trailer where she worked. There was no fence, and for as far as I could see there was nowhere anyone wanted to be. I followed her path over the stairs and into rehab, watching my feet fill the frame of my sight until I was in my bed.

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Later that morning, the nurse opened the door to my room and said to try and join them for lunch. She said I should try to keep something down. I slid my feet from the sheets of my bed to the floor and sighed with my standing. The kitchen was the hallway and the hallway was the kitchen, so I stepped into both for lunch.

A small, square table stood beside a single window, and I sat in the only chair facing outside. Hat Man, Old Baby, and a girl in her late teens came from the main room and sat in the remaining chairs at the table. A sprout of the girl's electrified hair was held in place on the top of her head by a tangled hair tie. She wore bottle-cap glasses and an extra-large t-shirt with small holes to either side of its neck. I looked at Hat Man and Old Baby, but they stared at the bare table before them. From the radio in the girl's lap, staticky rap pierced at high volume.

The nurse served us plates of grilled cheese sandwiches on white bread, with four to seven recently frozen french fries each. I watched the girl squish her sandwich into her mouth. She fit half of the bread-and-cheese square between her opened jaws and held the other half in her hands. Snapping her teeth down on the middle of the sandwich, she looked me in the eyes and violently pulled severed bread and cheese from her face. Crumbs covered the radio and floor, and Hat Man looked at me as though he, too, were sane. Beginning to smile, without breaking his gaze, he over-graciously thanked the nurse for "cooking." The nurse cooed. Old Baby pulled his french-fries into smaller segments and mashed them into spheres between his forefinger and thumb. The girl chewed with her mouth open and sandwich bits rolling across her tongue.

I stood and meekly stepped to the nurse with my plate. I thanked her for the meal but reminded her that I was lactose intolerant. She asked me if that meant I couldn't eat cheese? I asked her if I might be excused but she said to at least eat some fries. I wondered if Old Baby was lactose intolerant, too, and returned to my seat.

Radio stood while spitting half of her sandwich from her mouth, grabbed and poured Kool-Aid from the fridge, and then

emptied half of the coffee station's sugar shaker into her cup. Hat Man yelled, "Hey!" and the nurse shouted Radio's name, but red streams were already dripping from either side of Radio's chin. Hat Man said, "God dammit! You know what that does to you!" and Radio made a noise like a fart and turned the speaker side of her radio to his face. I dropped a balled-up french-fry from my hand, pushed my chair back with my legs, and went into the men's communal bathroom. I was not sure how many days I'd been there, but I knew more than half of my thirty-day sentence remained. I sat on a toilet and pushed the skin of my face up and down.

The A.A. book they gave me explained how all alcoholics believe they are not alcoholics. My jaw clenched. The first story in the book is of this guy wanting and needing to never drink again, only to find himself drunk, at the bar. I imagined the people of my life, siblings and friends, reading his story and thinking, "Oh, goodness. Is Wilson like that guy? How sad!" But isn't it obvious why denial as a prerequisite is problematic? If all alcoholics believe they are not alcoholics, who then distinguishes those in denial from those accurately self-appraising? Say someone asks my mom if she thinks she's an alcoholic, and she says, "Uh, I don't think so." Well, "We know what that means!"

I looked directly into the fluorescent light above me. Aside from muffled Top 40 songs increasing and decreasing their proximity to the men's restroom, everything was quiet. In a group, one of our counselors had said, "If you've ever wondered if you are an alcoholic, then you probably are." But you know who wonders if they are an alcoholic? Anyone accused of being one. When my parents didn't know what to do about a son who hated living, they called me an alcoholic because an alcoholic is

something that can be fixed. When they called me an alcoholic, apparently I became one—because I wondered if I was.

The stall door was glossy and hazelnut brown, and, even though there was not a lock, I decided the bathroom was the best room. During my intervention, my mom had said, “All we’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy.” But she didn’t know what she asked for. What she’d always been asking for. They didn’t understand what sort of place they’d sent me to. The position they put me in. But they knew I wouldn’t go for my own sake. They knew I would for theirs and goddammit, fuck them for knowing I wouldn’t have a choice when faced with them or not them. Fuck them.

The real problem, which I’d only said out loud once, when drunk, was much more embarrassing than anything I’d read in the rehab books. The real problem was that I thought I was living the life most of the world wanted. And yet, since sometime in middle school, everything that was “me,” everything that felt but wasn’t an actual part of my physical body, had been experiencing a relentless aching. And there’s no rehab for melodramatic sounding shit like that. There’s rehab for people who drink hand sanitizer, or people who need music to keep them from slamming their heads into walls, or people who aren’t people anymore.

I stood from the toilet, stepped into the center of the bathroom, and realized there was nowhere to go that was any different than where I already was. My bed, the hallway, the main room. I wanted to want something. I wanted to prefer one room to another, or some person to another, or to have a reason to be doing something, but it was all shit. Whether I left the bathroom or not didn’t matter. I did not feel sadness, but the place between my skull and back felt hot, and my lower back hurt.

Smoking was the only thing I had. Smoking was the only cause that forced Recovery House to free us into the outside air. Smoking was where the conversations with staff were not clinical, and conversations with staff were the only conversations with two sides. Most importantly, smoking was because I wanted to. But smoking was a privilege we were allowed only after all four of us had each completed our assigned chores.

I'd finished detoxing a week earlier, and each of those seven days I'd wiped, swept, and mopped the kitchen. I cleaned the kitchen because Vape Staff told me the cleaning of the kitchen was my responsibility, and I cleaned the kitchen because I wanted to smoke. Conversely, each of those seven days Radio had danced, colored, pooped, or "hidden" in her jacket as opposed to cleaning the floors in the main room. Radio wanted to smoke, too, but Radio didn't understand the cause and effect relationship between the completion of her chore and everyone being permitted to smoke. She also didn't have any cigarettes of her own. As a consequence of these forces, for a week I'd been doing both of our chores so that we could both smoke my cigarettes. With each day my frustration with Radio, and with my captivity, mounted.

On the eighth day, I wiped, swept, and mopped the kitchen, but did not clean Radio's floors. I glanced over the dirty laminate while walking to the sliding glass door that led to the smoking circle. I planted my feet and stared through the glass. I heard Old Baby's walker slide into position to my right, Hat Man's breathing a pace behind my head, and Radio's radio pumping Katy Perry louder and louder as she stomped atop the floor she had not cleaned. Vape Staff exited the office, looked from her

watch to the floor of dust and dirt, and said, “Ya’ll gonna miss your smoke break.”

Once on a golf course in Minnesota when my dad snarled insults at me, I raised a club over my shoulder. My dad’s mouth gaped and tears streamed over my face as I yelled that I wanted to beat the shit out of him.

I felt the same way now. I spun on my heel from human target to human target. I suggested Old Baby be moved to a nursing home or the grave. I complained of having to clear household poisons from Hat Man’s path so he wouldn’t drink them. I pointed out how absurd it was of him to be less embarrassed by 30 failed rehabs than going bald. And yes, we knew he was going bald. I spoke to Vape Staff as if Radio did not exist and demanded Radio be sent somewhere with strapped jackets and soothing lights. I asked why someone with no damaged reasoning skills was being held to the same standard as me, and more importantly, why my my freedoms were tethered to the actions of someone with damaged reasoning skills. I told Vape Staff I was super glad she’d stopped snorting meth long enough to have a baby—that the whole world was really, very grateful she reproduced. I asked her if she got off on having power over someone like me, knowing that if humanity’s lifeboat had room for only one person, she’d be left in the sea while I was given the seat.

My whole body was hot, and I knew my veins were showing, and everyone’s eyes were wide except for Vape Staff’s. Katy Perry did not stop singing; the floor remained dirty, and our bodies continued to stand inside a partially constructed rehab. Radio looked at Vape Staff for translation.

Vape Staff began to take a step towards me but brought her foot back beneath herself. She took a breath while looking at the

ceiling and then said, “Every day you have chores at the same time, and every day they have to be done before you can smoke. And every day Radio doesn’t do her chores and every day you get more and more mad. Tell me, if she’s never done her chore but every day you expect her to, and then blow your lid when she doesn’t do it—which of you has damaged cognition? The one dancing instead of doing chores, or the one losing his fuckin’ mind about somethin’ that predictable?”

I said nothing. I’d become very heavy and tired.

Vape Staff said, “Ya’ll go smoke,” and I knew the command did not include me. She spun on her spot and over her shoulder said, “Well at least that was finally something real. Come on, smart man, let’s start pullin’ your pretty head outta your ass.” I followed her.

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Vape Staff sat in a cheap computer chair behind a corner desk. One portion of the plastic-wood desk was between us and the other against the wall to my right. There were no posters or paintings on the walls, and books were stacked on top of one another, beside an empty bookshelf. The carpet was brown and thin—as hard and bland as the cement beneath it. She flicked a lamp on and told me to get the overhead light.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Really.” I slouched into my chair and found places to rest my head and arms and feet. “I’m not usually that type of person.”

“What type of person is that?”

“The type that passes hurt around. Yelling. Screaming.” I looked at my stretching and lightly flexing hands.

Vape Staff pulled two stapled sheets from a folder, and I knew it to be a packet I’d filled out. The place operated on packets and essays and two books. I’d done the packets and read the



books because I planned to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Recovery House. I was determined my time would be punitive, not correctional, and I would be blameless.

“Financial Status,” she read, “\$56,000 in debt.” I reclined in my chair and closed my eyes, allowing the oration of my ruin to land on my smiling face.

“Not quite the rich boy we all thought, huh?” She was smiling kindly.

“I think debt is probably better than being poor.”

“Guess it don’t take money to be a rich boy,” she said. “Relationships Status: ‘Family would prefer I be different or in another family. Girlfriend—never to be introduced to family or friends. Tired of being lonely surrounded by people. Decided lonely, alone, is better.’”

I nodded my chin with each of those points I’d made against myself. I ran the fingers of my right hand along my left forearm. I leaned my right ear towards my right shoulder, then my left ear towards my left shoulder.

“Emotional Status: ‘None. I’ve become who I will always be, and whoever that is hates being whoever that is. Wish I didn’t have to outlive my parents.’” When Vape Staff looked up from the packet, I winced. “Sure, no problems here,” she said sarcastically.

I mimicked her ironic tone and said, “As I said...”

“Employment Status,” she continued, her eyes back on the packet. “‘Was once a Senior Development Manager, but reduced to, most recently, Bartending. Which was not a success, either. I was fired when a server drank from my cup that she thought was full of orange tea. It was mostly tequila and she vomited on the floor.’ I thought you said you had a career or something? Moving on,” she said.

“Housing Status: ‘Rented room in a shared home. Nothing on the walls and bottles across the floor. Bed broken. Roommates complained to the landlord about me leaving the front door wide-open through the night, multiple times. I denied it, but it was true. One roommate stopped me in the hall, and cried, and said she thought I might die.’”

Vape Staff’s hands remained still, she allowed the packet to slide flat onto her desk, and she clasped the fingers from both hands together. She had one leg crossed over the other, and to the side of her desk I could see her bouncing both both legs with the ball of her planted foot.

“You better add ‘in rehab’ to that resume,” I said.

“In rehab,” she said through a smile. Her eyes held light in them; I could tell there was warmth towards me, from her, for the first time. I could tell I was safe.

“So,” she said playfully, “things ain’t so good, huh? Maybe they were once, but right now, today, things ain’t so good.”

“No they AIN’T,” I said.

“Okay,” she said, gently clapping her hands on the edge of the desk, “tell me the first real thing. Something actually true.”

“True, how?” I asked.

“How you yelled just now, that’s not from nowhere. Where’s that from? And don’t tell me you were mad or sad and it doesn’t have to be about alcohol, but tell me a real thing that actually happened.”

I watched shadows appear and disappear along the tops of my hands as the tendons beneath them flexed and relaxed. I sucked in through my nose and heaved big air from my mouth. I looked at the ceiling and then the yellow desk. I found her eyes.

“There are two things I’ve been thinking of, actually, and I don’t know why. And I like to think I can figure out why I’m thinking things. There are some years that I don’t, and nobody knows this, but I don’t remember anything. Like, I just can’t remember a thing that happened.”

“Okay. That’s okay,” she said. “Don’t worry about that. That happens. But tell me something you do remember. Tell me the pictures you see when you close your eyes or when you’re trying to sleep.”

I closed my eyes and knew the beginning of the true thing but pushed around trying to find something else. I was out of everything else.

“Okay. So, I know it’s not a huge thing. Like, I can’t imagine the shit you hear. And it’s embarrassing, really, and I don’t know what it has to do with anything, but the first thing was with my dad. I remember, he was wearing his super short shorts, a white undershirt, and always, he always had a cigar in his mouth. He stopped drinking before I was born, and apparently that’s when he started with the cigars. Anyway, he chewed on them all the time. In the car, on the couch, in restaurants where nobody could smoke, on the beach, in church, at my school.”

Vape Staff laughed a little and I did too.

“It’s like the bad guys in Captain Planet,” I said.

“Never saw it. Keep going.”

“Anyway, he was sitting in this puddle in our side yard. Muddy and sweating, and moving his whole body trying to do some yard thing. It was a sprinkler, or a sprinkler line or something. I don’t know if he was pulling or pushing, or what. But I was supposed to be helping him, and he asked me to go get a tool from his chest in the garage, and he said the name of the

tool. I don't know if it was some kind of wrench, or ... well, I mean I think I would know a wrench. Maybe it was something else. I can't remember. Anyway, I ran back to the garage, opened the chest, and looked at all of the tools. I couldn't figure out which one was the thing he had said. I was little, maybe 11, but not young enough not to know. I know that. But I didn't ... hey! C'mon! That's not fair."

Vape Staff's vape was sliding from her pocket to her mouth and she smiled at my protestation and winked me on.

"Well, I grabbed two different tools and brought them back to him, sitting myself down outside the puddle. Trying to buddy with him because I was pretty sure I'd fucked it up, ya know? Well, he was quiet and I was quiet and I knew it was a fuck up and he told me to listen when he talks. 'Actually listen,' he always said. And, how about that? The only thing I remember is him always yelling at me to listen to him."

Vape Staff did not laugh or say anything.

"Anyway, so he tells me the name of a tool again, and I listen again, and I run as fast as I fucking can back to the box in the garage. And I must have taken forever because I held every one of those tools in my hands and tried to imagine how they could be used." I showed Vape Staff a puzzled face looking at hands holding invisible tools and I smiled so she would laugh but she did not.

"Well, whichever tool I held seemed to be the very dumbest tool anyone would ever bring back to him, ya know? It's like if you're driving in a town you've never been in and someone's riding with you who lives there. The person who lives there forgets to give you directions and then shouts 'LEFT, LEFT, LEFT,' as if you're an idiot for almost going straight. I only knew I

should know the tool, but I had no idea how I could have known tools, know what I mean?”

She nodded her head with her vape in her mouth. I pulled my extended legs in and moved to the front of my chair.

“I tried to figure it out. I flipped those things around in my hand and tried to imagine how they could be used. I tried to remember a scene on TV with tools in it. Sometimes I confuse which things I should have known and which things I’ve forgotten. Well, the names of tools aren’t and weren’t on the tools, and I didn’t think anyone had ever shown me all of the tools or told me what they were called. I figured if nobody had shown me the tools, or told me what they did, it was because that’s the sort of thing that any actual man would already know. And so, I probably took forever while he’s sitting out in the mud trying to make our house better, and he probably assumed I was being lazy. Because I would do that. Just forget I was supposed to be doing a thing. But I wasn’t this time. I was really doing all sorts of shit trying to get it right. But, of course, I came back with a lot of wrong tools, again.”

I set my feet away from my chair, again, crossed one leg over the other, and leaned backward so my head rested on the back of the chair. Vape Staff watched me for a moment and pulled the vape centimeters from her mouth and said, “AND.”

“AND what? That’s my point. I have no fucking clue.”

“AND,” she said again, “what’s the rest of our story? Finish it.”

“Oh. I dunno, it’s nothing. He probably got mad and I probably got scared and then he probably had to go get the right thing himself.”

“No, go back to where you were. Just finish it for me, will you? Close your eyes and finish it like you were tellin it.”

I dropped the back of my head towards the floor and sent an ‘ahh’ towards the ceiling. I closed my eyes, again.

“Okay. So, I went back to him with about as many tools as I could carry, and his face was mad the whole time I was walking towards him, but I had to go to him. My Dad was not always this way. He’s a good man, now. I think something was going on. I know he was on the couch for a while, around that time. But when I was little I never knew when he came home if we were going to play catch, or wrestle, or if he was going to lose his shit on me. And my sister, she’s 12 years older than me. She had it way worse. I mean, I think he abandoned her for a year. He was drinking then.”

Vape Staff interrupted with, “Wilson. What happened!?”

“I’m a parenthetical speaker! So, his veins showed and his face got redder and he started rolling his tongue around in his cheek and biting it, all of which he always did, and he lowered his face to mine and pointed his finger into the spot between my eyes and it vibrated. He just screamed and yelled, and he didn’t push me or yank me or belt me. I kept my eyes open. I stared right into his insane face because I knew I couldn’t do anything to him—he was still way bigger than me and controlled my life—but I did want to, really badly. Then he just got quiet, with his voice still quivering and his teeth still chewing his tongue, and he said something like, ‘How about for once, you don’t be a dumb fuckin’ faggot, and ya think before ya do somethin.’ And I know it’s no excuse, but he grew up in a different time, and I’m sorry I said the word, it wasn’t always that word. His point was that I was an idiot. Whichever word he used, that was always the point.”

The room was too quiet for too long. I opened my eyes and said, “Look, it’s like what you said the first time we ever talked.

You mentioned a bunch of stuff that happened to you, but you said it didn't have anything to do with you being a drug addict. Well, the second true thing rolling around in my head is that I had a friend kill himself. But it's not that I was broken by his dying. The thing I've been thinking about is how I wish losing him hurt more than it does. I'm not going to go through that whole story, but right after I found out he'd killed himself, I didn't sleep for two days. And you hear people say shit like, 'I didn't sleep at all last night!', but those people are lying. I'm saying, I watched the red digital numbers of a clock move from 1 am to 7 am. Two nights in a row. And this isn't what you think, it's not me saying, 'Look how bad I've had it.' Because the truth is, I wasn't even sad during or between any of those minutes. I wasn't sad at all. I mostly just thought about the details of the thing. Imagining him shooting himself in the head. Imagining him shooting himself in the chest. Both, because I didn't know which he had done. Just thoughts, though, not feeling any of it. And if I'm really honest, I didn't imagine that stuff much. I spent most of those two nights thinking of really stupid shit like which day my dry cleaning would be done, or my fantasy football team, or girls at work or whatever. And I'll say this and I'll shut up. The entire point of everything I am telling you is that I have seen how people look at me. I like that when I drink during the day in a shitty bar, people look at me like, 'Woah, what is *he* doing here?' I think I even started going to shittier bars because I liked people looking at me that way. And I've had people ask me—girlfriends or bartenders or drunks—they say, 'Did something happen to you?' They say it with real concern. I tell those people I witnessed my friend's suicide, or my dad beat me, neither of which is true. I lie to them because that would explain me ending up being who I am. Those things—my dad and my

friend—have nothing to do with why I am who I am. I don't feel those things at all. It's not booze, or my dad, or trauma. It's that being alive is unpleasant. And I saw what Andrew's suicide did to people. To his family and my friends. And I love my dad. And I love my family. So for me, there's no suicide. There's only drinking."

I felt tired and heavy, and I could not remember what my point was. I closed my mouth and dropped my chin to my chest, rolling my face towards my right and then left shoulder, stretching my neck.

"Okay," Vape Staff said casually, rocking a little in her chair.

"Okay, what?" I asked, watching her swivel.

"You think the whole planet is set up wrong, or you think you're set up wrong. So, why not drink your brains dead? Well, Wilson," she said, leaning her arms onto the desk in front of her and lunging her torso towards me, "first of all, it was wrong. What your dad did to you. It was wrong every time it happened. Just like what happened to me was wrong. And a friend killing himself is gonna fuck you up. Whether you think it did or not. And you did good just now. You told the truth. But now, *my* job, now that we are both in the real world, isn't to help you figure out why or what makes you see drinking as the best option. My job is your solution. How to get you living while you're still alive. Because there's stuff for you to do. And Wilson, this is a promise: if you take my suggestions and actually do them, you will hurt other people less. And then you will hurt less. Forget about drinking or not drinking, and just think about hurting less and causing less hurting, okay?" She was smiling mischievously, and I straightened my back.

"Okay," I said. "Whatever. I'll do whatever."



“Good. Then you go on outside, and you have you a smoke. But before you come back inside, you take ten whole seconds, and you choose whatever you want. It can be the sun, or grass, or all of nature, or time, or Jesus Christ. Anything you think is good, and has always been good, and will always be good. Anything like that, and you spend ten seconds imagining or looking at that thing and you just think or say, over and over, ‘help me.’” Vape Staff pulled her arms from her desk and leaned back into her chair, content with her words. I laughed with my mouth open but she did not join me.

“What?” I said. “Come on. You’ve got to be kidding?”

“Nope. You don’t have to mean it, but ten whole seconds,” she said without changing her posture, “or have you already forgotten ‘I’ll do whatever?’”

I didn’t move for a moment. My hands each held one of my knees, and I said, “Whatever. Yeah, whatever. I said I’d do whatever, and I couldn’t have fathomed something less helpful. But it doesn’t matter.”

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I sat in the least broken of the mismatched chairs, alone, outside of Recovery House. Colors began to shade the light of the setting sun. I watched the smoke leave my cigarette, and I thought of this character in *War and Peace*. A Russian prince. This prince had a dad who loved him but was sometimes a jerk. The prince was born into unbelievable wealth, and into a class of society that was privileged, and the prince met a beautiful wife who adored him. He was handsome and clever, and even decently brave.

Napoleon was conquering Europe and storming the prince’s homeland. The Russian monarchy was falling apart. Suffering began to traverse class. The table was set for this

prince to do something significant, something helpful, maybe even something heroic. Me and the characters in the book all wanted and needed the prince to be as good and as capable as we hoped him to be. Good enough to make things better. And, at first, he tried. He tried to do something about the invading conquest, he tried to do something about the stark wealth disparity in his country, and he tried to do something about his absent affection for his wife. But Napoleon continued invading, the peasants remained oppressed, and his wife died—seemingly sick with sadness. And the prince came to know invisible crookedness, a perversion of his soul, which cursed his actions. The prince bathed in self-loathing and delusions about his own power, and despite being born with everything everyone wanted, the prince was miserable. He left the city for the country, busied his hands with household chores, and entirely committed himself to cause no more harm.

Then I thought of towel racks. There were no towel racks in the shared men's restroom of Recovery House. In the mornings, when we were finally allowed into the restroom, I stormed the space with a full bladder and damp towel. I peed in the toilet while assuming Hat Mat and Old Baby peed in the showers, and then I draped my towel over the curtain rod. While I soaked beneath the shower head, my towel did as well. I imagined the director of Recovery House checking boxes on a sheet of paper. "Soap," "lights," and "toilet paper," checked. "Towel racks" unchecked.

A towel rack would have been nice. I could have rested my towel on it, and my towel would have been dry after I'd showered. Almost everywhere I'd ever lived, I realized, had towel racks. I felt grateful for those hundreds of racks that had kept my hundreds of towels dry. The racks were never in my way,

I'd never hurt myself on one, and I guessed the same was probably true for everyone else. A towel rack wasn't much of a thing, but it wasn't a bad thing.

I stared at the ground beside the cigarette-butt tower. I heard my own breath for the first time in a long time.

My parents owned a rental house, not a Russian estate. My girlfriend was pissed about her birthday, not dying from heartache. And I may have been sad, but a fight behind a Walmart was the closest I'd been to war. I wasn't a prince. I was dissatisfied with endemic privilege. My failures would not be the subject of hundreds of lectures but of a few text messages. When I crossed the minds of friends and family they would say to one another, "It's hard to believe, isn't it?" or "What a shame, huh?" I knew money would do nothing for me. I knew I would not fix any significant problems or play an important role in any story. But I thought I might be able to be useful, like a towel rack. I thought I might be able to cause no more harm.

I stood from my chair in the smoking circle and shoved butts into the cigarette tower. I heard radio commercials coming from inside, and pictured Hat Man, Old Baby, and Radio around our little dining table. Radio was probably mainlining sugar to spite Hat Man, and Old Baby was probably passing mashed balls of bread from his lips to his seat. Vape Staff was probably in her office where I'd left her, packing a water bottle or book into her large black shoulder bag. She'd probably be leaving soon and driving as quickly as she could to a home of love. Her husband was probably a good man, and her baby was probably swaddled in their affection. Vape Staff was probably happy.

I remembered walking down a snowy sidewalk in Denver, when I'd lived there a few years before. It felt like there were

cords from my shoulders to my boots, and the cords were taut so each of my steps tugged me toward the ground. It was one of the winter holidays. The streets were empty, but the restaurants and bars were full. I remembered walking down the sidewalk while looking in the windows. Families, couples, and groups of friends seemed to exceed the capacity of the venues they shared, but their faces were red and everyone was smiling with their eyes. I remember seeing a table with people who looked just like me, who seemed happy to be with each other, and I wondered, almost aloud, "*How do they do that?*" My family had offered to fly me home, and coworkers had invited me out, but I'd known that taking a flight or joining a group would not have left me anywhere other than wondering what human thing I should have known, but didn't, or if I'd forgotten something everyone else remembered.

Shadows were spreading from right to left across the facade of the rehab, and the orange jacket I'd inherited crinkled with my movements. I dropped my chin into my chest and saw that my shoes were pressed perfectly into their own prints. I moved my hands into the jacket pockets, closed my eyes, and remembered Vape Staff's instructions.



## Contributors

Chris Atkin is a high school English teacher, poet, and spoken word artist from Orem, UT. He has a B.A. in Education from Utah Valley University. “Blood and Ink” is his first journal publication.

Abbie Barker is a creative writing instructor living with her husband and two kids in New Hampshire. Her flash fiction has appeared in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Superstition Review*, and elsewhere. Read more of her work at [abbiebarker.com](http://abbiebarker.com).

Roy Bentley is the author of *Walking with Eve in the Loved City*, finalist for the Miller Williams poetry prize; *Starlight Taxi*, winner of the Blue Lynx Poetry Prize; *The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana*, winner of the White Pine Poetry Prize; as well as *My Mother’s Red Ford: New & Selected Poems 1986–2020*, published by Lost Horse Press. Poems have appeared in *North American Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Rattle*,

*Shenandoah*, and *New Ohio Review*, among others. His latest is *Beautiful Plenty*.

Paul Byall is the recipient of the 2019 Writers@Work Fiction Award, the 2011 Porter Fleming Short Story Award, the 2010 Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize, and the 2009 New South Fiction Award. His first published story, written while a student at the University of California, received mention as a distinguished story in *The Best American Short Stories* anthology. His short story, "The Genie at Low Tide," published by *Ploughshares*, has been anthologized in *Ploughshares Solos Omnibus 2*. Paul grew up in Ohio and received degrees from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio and the University of California.

Matthew Farrell's prose and poetry have appeared in *Arcadia*, *The New Guard*, *Potomac Review*, *Rattle*, *Sixfold*, and elsewhere. He received a BA in Film & Media Studies from Stanford University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Oregon. He graduated from medical school at Oregon Health & Science University and is currently a resident in radiation oncology at UCLA.

Rebecca Foust's new book, *Only*, is forthcoming from Four Way Books in Fall 2022. She is the author of three chapbooks including *The Unexploded Ordnance Bin*, winner of the 2018 Swan Scythe Chapbook Award, and four books including *Paradise Drive*, winner of the Press 53 Award for Poetry. Recognitions include the Pablo Neruda, CP Cavafy, and James Hearst poetry prizes, a 2017-19 Marin Poet Laureateship, and fellowships from The Frost Place, Hedgebrook, MacDowell, and

Sewanee. Recent poems appear in *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Narrative*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere.

Sean Gill is a writer and filmmaker who won *Michigan Quarterly Review*'s 2020 Lawrence Prize, *Pleiades*'s 2019 Gail B. Crump Prize, and *The Cincinnati Review*'s 2018 Robert and Adele Schiff Award. He has studied with Werner Herzog, video edited for Netflix's "Queer Eye," and was directed by Martin Scorsese (on HBO's "Vinyl"). Other recent writing has been published in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Threepenny Review*, and at *Epiphany*, where he writes the "Lurid Esoterica" column.

Ken Holland's work has appeared in *Tulane Review*, *Rattle*, *Southwest Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *Main Street Rag*, and elsewhere. He is the winner of the 2022 *New Ohio Review* poetry contest.

Justin Hunt's poetry has won several awards, most recently 1st place in the Porter Fleming Literary Competition and 2nd place in the River Styx and Strokestown (Ireland) international contests. Hunt's work also appears or is forthcoming in *Five Points*, *The Florida Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Solstice*, and *Barrow Street*, among other publications.

B. Fulton Jenness is Poet Laureate of Ridgefield, CT, USA, where she serves as poet-in-residence at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Her poems have appeared in *The Comstock Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *Limp Wrist*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, and many other journals and anthologies.

Her chapbook *Blinded Birds* was published in March 2022 by Finishing Line Press.

Christiana Louisa Langenberg is the author of the bilingual collection of stories *Half of What I Know*. Her second collection of stories, *Here is What You'll Do*, was a finalist in the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. She is the recipient of the 2019 Barry Lopez Nonfiction Award, the 2015 Louisville Literary Arts Prose Prize, the Drunken Boat Panliterary Award for Fiction, the Chelsea Award for Short Fiction, and multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her stories and essays have been published in *Passages North*, *The Huffington Post*, *Glimmer Train*, *Dogwood*, *New South*, and elsewhere. She teaches in the English Department and Women's and Gender Studies Program at Iowa State University.

Wilson M. Sims is a writer and Behavioral Healthcare Worker based in Nashville. He was recently published in *Witness Magazine*, *Longreads*, and *The Florida Review*. His memoir is currently under construction. [wilsonmsims.com](http://wilsonmsims.com)

Claire Matturro is a former lawyer and college teacher, author of eight novels, including four published by HarperCollins. Her poetry has appeared in *Kissing Dynamite*, *New Verse News*, *One Art*, *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Topical Poetry*, and is forthcoming in *The Tiger Moth*. She is an associate editor at *The Southern Literary Review*.

Laurel Miram is a Detroit-born writer. Her work appears in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, and elsewhere.



Bill Ratner's poetry is published in *Best Small Fictions 2021*, *To Decorate a Casket*, *Fear of Fish*, *Rattlecast*, *The Missouri Review Audio*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Chiron Review*, and other journals. Bill is a 9-time winner of *The Moth StorySLAM*, 2-time winner of *Best of The Hollywood Fringe Extension Award for Solo Performance*, a certified volunteer grief counsellor, and earns his living as a voice actor.