



THE LASCAUX REVIEW
volume eleven

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VOLUME 11

ANNO DOMINI 2023

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edited by
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The Lascaux Review

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Height Determined by Distance

by Tommy Dean

W e're in the car again. Dad drunk and playing with the radio from the passenger's side, his knuckles bruised and swelling. He takes his anger out on the walls, often striking a stud, the drywall crumbling, the picture frames dancing, but hanging on. My face stuttered against the impact. The glass already broken from the last time he knocked it off. My mother doesn't cower, just stands there in her robe, arms crossed, an immovable object, so I cajole dad into the car, his car, the smell of stolen cigarettes on the upholstery. There's a rhythm to this I'm starting to despise. A countdown until I'm out of the house. Seventeen. Senior year. A down payment mailed and delivered to the private college two hours away.

"Where to," I ask, the car tires crunching on the gravel driveway, red lights flashing as I pause for oncoming traffic. His face, a mask of inebriation, drips in the scarlet shadow. I

think of candles melting into a ring at the bottom of a glass jar.

“Oh, the bar, my good friend. Where all the sorrows of the river tend to flow.”

When he’s in this state he thinks himself a poet, a bard meant to entertain. There’s a duty here, to my mother, one that we never mention, but that doesn’t mean I have to enjoy the banter.

“Forget it,” I say. “I’m not sitting in the car half the night waiting for you to come out and puke in the bushes.”

“A gentleman never pukes,” he says, as we pass the competing churches. Body guards attempting to keep us in this silent town, but we slip through, gliding through the stop sign, keeping up speed to pass the bar. He does a bit of tattoo on the glove compartment, but he doesn’t argue. I’m in charge. The speed sitting him back in his seat as we bump onto the two lane county road. He can play whatever he wants on the radio, but I decide where we go, how long we drive, where we might stop. Some nights I drive until he falls asleep, head bumping gently against the window. Mom says this was the only way she could get me to sleep, that I’d cry until I was buckled in the car seat, eyes already growing heavy as she started the car.

Tonight, I drive the next town over to the ball park, circle past the high school, flash my lights at the sitting cop, my father waving like they’re old friends. Probably went to school together. A past I know nothing about. Wouldn’t care anyway. I’m present in the car, wondering how I’ll wake up

tomorrow for school, knowing I won't miss class. He won't take that away from me, too.

There's a spot I like to go, but only once he's fallen asleep. I turn the radio down and he doesn't object. He's finally lulled away from whatever troubles him. That sear of pain that dulls and bubbles. Worlds he keeps to himself. Each of us a planet orbiting but never touching.

A farm, house black with the char of a fire put out some years ago. I found the place on one of our first drives. He was awake that night, telling me about putting shingles on this house. How he was afraid of heights, but his dad demanded he help. Five dollars an hour to think about falling and dying. A pride I couldn't identify in his voice. Fear, I said, I could agree with. But he changed the subject. Complained about the new supervisor. I stared at the exposed rafters, the shingles melted and hanging like errant eyelashes.

Tonight, the high beams expose the base of the house, the cracks in the cement, the yellow curled weeds culled by winter's freeze. A wild thought of scooting him out of his seat, leaving him here, wondering if he'd wake before he froze. Something holding me back. Moving helps, keeps my hope in the future, discounts the ways this responsibility will fuck up my life, keep me in a cycle of caregiving. But again, I reach for the future, when the present finds me talking, fogging the windshield. Like radiation I hope the words sink deep, a risk of cancer, but isn't it just another way the cells try to change?

No stars, just clouds. Exhaust connecting ground and sky. "You ever wonder what I'm afraid of?"

But I can't speak anymore; my fists are curled, and they ache to move, to split, and projectile away from this body keeping everything in, so I punch his shoulder and he sways, mumbles, and I punch again, and again, and here he's awake, rubbing his arm, while I stare out the window, and he says, "You know I put that roof on. Hated the heights. Always been afraid of falling."

"Height Determined by Distance" originally appeared in *The Bureau Dispatch*.



In the Museums of Heaven and Hell

by Goldie Goldbloom

On either side of the halls of Heaven and Hell are the great glass-fronted cases displaying the glories of this world. Heaven has the stonefish, the blue-ringed octopus, all five thousand varieties of coral polyp, the smallest tooth of the sperm whale, the trembling light from a star that died millions of years earlier, the last time a baby nurses from its mother, the look in the eyes of old friends when they meet after a long absence. Hell has scalped tickets to a Rolling Stones concert, a bathroom scale, a plagiarized essay with an A in red ink at the top, a speedometer, a whiff of perfume, the words a CEO used about the least of his employees, shame, humiliation, disgrace, a tiny white flag.

Still waiting to be catalogued appropriately: the roar of the wind down the valley at night when you are feeling lonely; the coin you dropped unwillingly in the hand of the addict begging outside the 7-11; the ragged, badly-fitting wig and the fifty extra pounds you wear in order to appear less

attractive to men who might hurt you; the memory of your ex-husband's face like a desiccated bone stripped of its meat; the soft fur of moss that grows on the side of your children that didn't receive enough sunshine; the irrational love you carry for people who do not love you back.

"In the Museums of Heaven and Hell" was third prize winner in the 2022 Bridport Prize Flash Fiction Award and first appeared in their winners' anthology.



I Baked a Cake as Big as Our House

by Anna Mantzaris

I baked a cake as big as our house.

I started small. Bite-size cookies, mini brownies, tiny tarts and hand pies a 4-year old could cup like a fragile butterfly. I made a 3" cherry pie. Then a 6" cherry pie. Then a 12". Then a 24. Once I got to a radius of 48 feet of gooey cherry goodness—that my kids mistook for a bright swimming pool and got stuck in the sweet fruit sludge—I knew I had to build vertical.

A torte. A trifle. A glorious cone of croquembouche, comprised of puffy balls and held together with a web of spun sugar. I thought of all the options. I had already bought an industrial oven for the pie. Now I settled on a simple batter that had just a bit of spring that I could bake in sheets and piece together with a sturdy fondant.

I started buying butter in bulk. I got a license and bought wholesale vanilla (my husband mistook a nearly drained 10-gallon jar for bourbon and thought I'd really lost it). I mail-

ordered tubs of floss sugar used at carnivals and the neighbors grew nosy when they arrived in an 18-wheeler.

I constructed scaffolding from my kids' old play sets. Dara whined even when I told her none of them had been on it in years. "You're selfish, mommy," said my 11-year old Carter, who had had started to wear his father's ties to his public school for some reason.

I baked. I frosted. I piped and aligned. I climbed higher and higher, draping the whole house in a shiny royal icing.

I cut doors and windows and made giant éclair beds for all of us.

I marzipanned a sign reading: *The Millers*

The kids came around. At night, they curled up like little cream puffs themselves on the fluffy meringue armchairs, tucked and content in their house of sugar.

My husband finally caved and said, "Meredith, I think you've really got something here."

This wasn't a bake-a-giant-chocolate-chip-cookie at the mall endeavor, done for a photo op and made without care, a sagging middle still goopy and inedible. Our home was made with love.

When my kids wanted dessert they had become thoughtful and asked if they should nibble on the den or staircase and I watched them carefully moving their lovely little mouths up and down, gently trimming away the excess, my husband there too, putting aside his sensible diet for a taste of sweetness. I carefully steered clear of any chocolate for our dog's well-being and he got generous licks of the butter-cream grout.

The town newspaper did an article. A major news station interviewed me.

The Instagrammers arrived, pouty and duck faced, looking up at what was being called the Cake Castle and tagging it #bigcakehouse #gettinbaked #youaintseenothinlikeit.

It was no longer just for us. I imagined the neighborhood transforming like a Wayne Thiebaud painting—a community of round pastel houses with everything sweet and everyone happy.

And then we heard the thumps. The pecking. The birds and raccoons had descended. I went out one balmy evening to see a murder of crows flying off with the palmier shingles. A trio of rats had teamed up to destroy a hazelnut-studded eave.

The police came. We were issued a citation. *I* was issued a citation. My husband said he had no part in it. That was true. *But still.*

The house began to crumb and the older kids jumped out the windows into the newly formed beach and threw “sand” and old Mrs. Lever must have been the one to call Child Protective Services because I saw her peering out from her front slider window. I was told to move the kids back into the “regular” house or else.

The no-longer-so-sweet smell of sugar was acrid with a subtle hint of something rotting, well past its prime. What had been part fairy tale and part Keebler tree house fantasy was now a crumbling house of crumbs. It sagged. It broke. It was being consumed by wildlife and sweet tooth looters. The city eventually came to sweep away and compost the rest.

I baked a cake as big as our house. And it came crumbling down. But I did it. And it had stood high and tall, shiny with icing. And for just a moment, if anyone looked up, they would see a reflection of everything around them.



“I Baked a Cake as Big as Our House” originally appeared in *Sonora Review*.

First-Person Eye-Witness Reports: The Factual Sightings of Nessie

by Meg Pokrass

Probably the weirdest and most wonderful report of all was that made by the elderly Ms. Margarita Polkraski on June 8th, 1993. Cryptozoologist Ben Dinglefern interviewed the ailing Ms. P. and this account I regard as the almost accurate:

“This was back in 1976. My on-again/off-again boyfriend Rollo and I had passed through Dores, on our way over to the Wee Drop Inn, when just as my car was climbing a tiny knoll, an extraordinary-looking animal jerked across the road ahead of us, as if caught in a private moment, experiencing a series of shudders. Poor embarrassed thing, I said to Rollo, but he seemed more interested in his reflection in the rearview mirror. Rollo was finally going bald. When we were on the road together, what to do about it took up practically an entire conversation.

“Rollo saw no actual skin on the monster, he said, but we were far across the road, with Rollo finger-combing his own remaining strands, before he had time to take the experience of the miraculous beast in full.

“Did you see our Nessie? I asked, gasping like a star-struck child, having seen a most excellent female monster with a full, lustrous head of scales, but already she had been out of sight for a few seconds, and my Rollo was sipping from our wee flask and gasping from stress.

I can tell you right now. The creature was of a size six, and I envied her confidence in this terrible, crazy world. She had very long and thin neck, which undulated up and down, and was contorted into a series of half hoops. God, I thought, please help me find the right man.”



Send It, Send It

by Karen Paul Holmes

Send it out, send it
to your mother spinning in another universe
your father too
the babies your womb wouldn't hold
the blue heron's six-foot span
gliding inches over Lake Blue Ridge
and its mate stepping on your dock
like someone in clown shoes
and to the flash of a fish sacrificing itself
down the long gorgeous gullet.
Drive it, thrust it, high-fly it on freshets of wind,
seed the clouds so love may rain
on every counted hair of every head.
Hurl it, fling it, fastball it to Bangladesh
to the Chakma people with a thousand lamps
lit for Buddha. To Englishmen breakfasting
on beans and eggs at an Alaskan fishing camp.
To presidents, despots, and saints, equally.

Shine it on that boy who fell
off the slide in 1965. And your scared, small self.
Let it flow, spread it on tomatoes from the honor-system
fruit stand—the red pulp salted then blessed with balsamic.
Whoosh it to the farmer who shared thusly,
trusting you to send its sweet acid unction to the world,
spilling out of lips,
exhaling from grateful pores.
Launch it, spin it out
over Shewbird Mountain's strip-mine scar,
across Ipanema sand.
Sparkle it into the Black Sea and the twelve-hundred-
gallon koi pond in the neighbor's yard. Flood it.
Send it out, give it out, let it spring
from you. It will come back. It will come back
brimming until your chest nearly bursts with it,
the aorta pumping, pinking ears and toes,
muscle contracting so the heart can expand
and send some more.



Sleep While the Baby Sleeps

by Jackleen Holton

Sleep while the baby sleeps,
they tell you, and so you begin, like one having to learn
everything all over again, to take sleep in small sips,
your body warm and fever-heavy, a jet-lagged sway
to everything. Day, night, it hardly matters
anymore, bed, couch or chair by the window,
sun streaming in through the branches
of the three-story-high tree, a light like France,
fifteen years ago: a friend's centuries-old
apartment, one room with a bed you got to by ladder,
so close to the ceiling it almost felt like a grave,
but for that window full of dappled sunlight,
and the outdoor market below, the little café
where earlier that day you ate a gorgeous
three-cheese pizza, washed it down
with real champagne, the feel of it on your tongue
reminding you of the French word
for freedom, and as you tried to sleep, your stomach

churned and you felt this was a fair price
to pay for the pleasure you'd taken in that meal,
as the little scraps of language floated up
from the street, a foreign-tongued bargaining,
so many words you never heard before weaving
in and out of dreams as light as the crocheted blanket
you draped over yourself before finally drifting
away for these few minutes, before the baby's shrieks
pull you back over oceans and years,
and you rise from the chair in the corner, woozy
from a dream of bubbles in a plastic flute, the buzz
of a foreign flea market in your head, a freedom
you can only reach by the rickety ladder of slumber.



“Sleep While the Baby Sleeps” originally appeared in *West Trestle Review*.

Toward the End of March

by Justin Hunt

Pollen dusts our yard. The oaks, heavy
with seed, rake the past from wind,

and an old friend's voice comes to me,
the words she spoke before she died:

I think of home every day, every day,
though she was ninety-six, had left

the prairie at twenty-five. *Every day,*
every day, gurgles the creek below,

its throat yellow and hoarse, and I wish
many things were otherwise.

Like my friend, I've lost home. I fear
I'll lose again. Something's missing,

and I'm impatient with myself,
disgusted I have no lines for this,

only the feeling I'm the tenor in a Puccini
duet, and my wife the soprano,

and those we've loved the orchestra.
Oh, how we sing and flail and blow,

how we strike our high Cs, how we bellow
our fires but for a moment, then drift

down nameless creeks, on yellow swirls.



Two-Man Saw

by B. Fulton Jenness

Dutch elm disease took its toll
on the once-lush sentinel by our pond—

a titan I often climbed to the very top,
bark tearing my stomach

as I hugged the trunk against the wind.
In spring, I'd strip papery discs

from its seed-laden branches,
collect them in the folds of my skirt,

then toss the confetti-coins over my shoulder
as I led a lamenting march that presaged

the end of all our elms.
When the tree was dead beyond a doubt,

my father fetched the two-man saw
from the barn and summoned me to help.

I was good for such chores but little else—
too word-wrapped, too careless with boys.

But we were both skilled
with blades that cut in both directions—

the back-and-forth bite that this time
felt like mercy. We put our backs into it,

drew the saw straight and stiff,
catching the blade only once.

And when at last the notch fell out,
leaving a startled mouth in the grey trunk,

the corpse toppled true, fanned us
with a rush of air like a loved one's last exhale.

We put the saw away
and parted paths again.

But at least there was this:
once, a gentle Goliath

had lain on the ground between us,
felled as if by a single stone.



Night Flight

by Judy Kaber

i

The hot thumb of day's end presses on my neck
as I wind the cords of phone, laptop, kindle,
check to be sure I haven't left anything behind.
It's been a long two weeks and I'm ready to leave.

I ask myself:

Are you really the man I once married?

If by *married* I mean taken into my bed at nineteen,
our skin as new as a rain-pelted street in morning,
a motorcycle the heartbeat of our love—engine throb,
dash of mud, bewilderment—then, *Yes*,
we lay on a wood floor, entranced by Coltrane, birthed
those boys, dug for happiness in a half-acre garden,
settled in a old farmhouse leaning into ruin,
and so how can I understand the wilt-yellow thinness
of your arms now, the way your breath rattles in your throat?

You, a lover. You, a man who once ate
fresh picked strawberries, fingers sweet.

I helped with your final ordering, folded blankets
tumbled in the closet, sorted tools on your workbench,
washed the dishes in the sink. Said goodbye.

ii

This is the memory I carry, a knotted bracelet
that flaps like woven psalms around my wrist,
roar of jets in my ear, scattered spots of light
in a sleepless night. Let this be what we put
into the bowl of our grief—the lemon sun
that beat on us, left us sticky with buzzing,
our arms sleeveless in the heat.

Once you breathed on my shoulder,
a sigh of delight. Now
your hair has fallen out. Your tongue
swollen and stiff. I take this with me back east.

iii

Below me darkness, an endless
turning as miles rough-wing by. I shift in my seat
looking for comfort. When you're gone—still
a drift of clouds, soft drag in the browning field,
silt-edged rivers.
Mountains fall from the map.
I hold the ghost of who you were in memory:

scarlet kingsnake in Florida grass, the black
Angus pulling on his rope, the garden left to be buried
as dust and ash drift in. Your connection to me
moves in the bodies of our sons.

We land soon in the gusty glow of morning.



Two Poems

by Sheree La Puma

Off the Record

LA: Saturday, October 1st. Downtown Metrolink.

The mariachi band goes car to car, here to share its music with a city fighting to shed skin. When they get to me, they are on their 3rd round of “Cielito Lindo.” The first time I saw hope it was carrying a country on its back. It wrote me a note in Spanish and left it on my bedside table. That large, dark piece of furniture that serves no purpose other than space to stack dreams (unfulfilled) on. What is life anyway but a series of leaps—bed to train—train to bed? And then that word that changes—everything. *Cancer*. I’ll be honest, on that day I was ready to give my life for the children that despise me. The scientist, the doctor, the artist, I have loved them without ceasing even as winter embraced me with its chill. The edges of this become blurry, like cancer with its tenacle-like reach inside my breast. Tourist or invader? It buries itself among previous wounds, adds bricks. There was a time milk flowed freely there,

buttery cream, warm and nourishing. Now a shuttered shop, mouths feed on heart flesh. Tomorrow, someone will pick me clean, remove diseased cells masquerading as grief. Until then, death is a poem about the sadness of hours, love, body lost and the mariachis—how they sing joy back into existence.

*

Tragedy Finds Me As a Poet

Give me silence & sadness, a taste of citrus swallowed after a shot, something bitter like daughters who have parted ways. Hate is having a moment. The tongue poised to strike is incapable of revolution. Feed me guilt, the kind you think that I should feel, or the ex who calls & never leaves a message. Feed me the father who tells me to block the sun, not realizing I am its polar counterpart. I didn't mean for these things to happen at the exact same moment. An unusual trove of debris is worming its way through a declining Western world. The city drops its branches, kisses the earth as if coming to accept a terminal disease. The infusions they give to estrange me from myself color my poetry. The hair is gone. So is hope. I do a bad Sinéad O'Connor impersonation. Nobody wants a part of this bald head. It's warped, uncomfortable to touch like loss, this empty house. I want to die in the yard, my head in a pile of leaves watching the sun sink into insignificance.



The Night Yard

by Ellen Romano

My husband and I escape the heat in the house,
step hand in hand into the night air
with crickets and the neighbor's baby
babbling through an open window.
Heedful, we answer with silence.

My mother has asked me if I see
wild animals around town.
She moves in and out of lucidity,
has been thinking of elephants
and matriarchies, tells me we should
all come back as elephants
and never leave each other.

My ancient dog is roused
by a flutter in the bushes, moves
his arthritic bones with care.
Can it really have been so long

since he was an eager puppy?
I think of other dogs, other spans of years
from birth to death, and the night becomes
a hundred other nights of my life,
with lightning bugs and flashlight tag,
a lunar eclipse in the hours before dawn.

A sweet scent brings me back to this place
and other people's memories,
the previous owner plants night blooming
jasmine for her one-time lover, its perfume
reminiscent of late-night visits,
and farther back, a Spanish soldier
falls to his knees in fear and wonder
when he meets an indigenous man traveling
the creek that runs behind my yard.
I ask myself whose bones, human or animal,
I walk on with each step.

But my mother is long gone, perhaps
already an elephant waiting for my rebirth
as her daughter. Now a different dog rattles
the bushes, she too already old. My hand is empty,
my husband not even as substantial as a ghost,
but here.



Confession

by Hayden Saunier

I fell in love with a field of rye.
It happened this spring for the first time and I am not young.
Let me tell you how this field
was both a single being and a multitude.
How it lay open to sky, wind, creature, sound.
How it rippled and flowed, bent, bowed, lay down, arose,
stood tall, grew taller, held its ground.
It hummed and whispered.
Sometimes it went completely still.
I watched it build itself out of nothing but chemistry
in a few short weeks, each stalk forming
leaflet, segment, grain head, braid, fine hairs.
As it grew, wild daisies bloomed inside the long straight rows,
each a separate question to do with love.
Some days the sun drove patterns through the furrows,
weaving self and shadow into its warp and woof
and every single color would show up, threading stems

with teal, bronze, azure, purple, silver-white.
I stood rapt in adoration at its edges.
It held the whole world for a while.
And even when the rye was cut down
and lay flat on the earth to dry where it fell,
the all of it radiated a gold and silver light.
Even then, it glowed.



Items on the Nebraska Homestead, 1889

by Pam Vap

1. a white lily
with sails of petals
above the pink blush on the weak stem

2. the small wooden trunk lugged
out just this morning

3. the dusty, square box of a farmhouse
leaning precariously and looking
out of place on 160 acres

4. an uncaring, wide horizon
fading to powdery blue
and stretching to who knows where

5. an occasional meadowlark's whistle breaking
into the July drone of insects

6. the German couple
without their Schätzchen

7. the young woman's empty hand
lying like a stone on

8. the trunk lid covering

9. the baby



Wandering Boy

by Jim Gish

It was six-thirty when my father finished lubing Dreck Benson's old Buick and took it off the rack. I pumped four dollars worth of high test for Butch Tobe and gave him a dollar in change. He mumbled but didn't look at me. The wind from off the river tumbled trash and candy wrappers down the street.

Half a block down, Mrs. Henson turned on the IGA sign. In the bleak grayness of the early January evening, it was a yellow smudge. Dreck Benson paid and left. I turned off the kerosene heater over by the RC machine. My father turned off the gas pumps with a switch inside the door.

"Sleet in the air, Dooley?"

"Yes sir. I can smell it."

We did not have to turn off the radio. My father told the mechanics, Ron and Pete, that it had a burned out tube. They just nodded. They knew better.

The old, green International pickup growled and spit, then started. We went out along Turner and then up Elm.

Past the Texaco station where Denver Reese waved and Billy Cheatum lit a cigarette and pretended not to see us.

All the time I was thinking of those other days when Benny Jo rode with us. Talking about baseball or calling out to Francine Drell or Patty Majors, maybe wondering when he would get those straight pipes he wanted for that green over white Pontiac my father let him have. And even though it was five years ago, when I was eleven, if I closed my eyes, I could still see him there. His shock of unruly dark hair and that intense way of squinting ahead like he knew something wonderful and precious which he was not quite ready to tell everyone just yet.

At the Calvary Baptist, my father parked behind Reverend Cates's station wagon and went to tell him that we would be missing the regular Wednesday night prayer meeting for the first time in twelve years, if you don't count the spring flood eight years ago.

Thirty or forty of us scattered out there on those scarred, oak benches, facing the front and that big Baptist Creed. Quoting scripture and giving thanks. Strangers in a strange land, the Book says. Huddled together, beset by cares and trials unbidden, wrestling with our faith like Jacob with the angel.

But not us tonight, things being how they were.

Out on Miller's Hill, we stood apart, him on one side of the grave and me on the other. Talking to ourselves, talking to her.

“I am sorry, Lucille,” my father said quietly. “The man with the salesman’s voice said they would do it at midnight down there at Eddyville.”

He stood there, shaking his head, his eyes closed.

“I got a ‘B’ on an Algebra quiz, Mama,” I told her. “Annie called last night. She said the baby was colicky. It’s going to sleet tonight. Maybe they will call off school.”

I twisted my red handkerchief in my hands. Four ducks lifted off a pond and flew south. I walked over and sat in the truck, watching the low dark clouds, racing each other across the lower sky like heavy smoke.

It was a hard thing to watch my father like this. He’d always had enough courage and certainty that it spilled over and he could give it away. Now he was lost on this high, cold plain of tragedy and doubt which he could not turn from or pray his way around.

I have seen him sitting in the counsel of fools, and when they had spoken whatever outlandish things their fevered brains could spawn, my father would nod as though he understood. Then, like some fantastical spider of magical design, he would take their ideas and weave them into a hundred separate threads of logic and something near truth. In the end, he would send them on their way, satisfied that they had spoken their piece and been heard clean and true.

But that was all gone now. This thing with Benny Jo had eaten at his soul like quick poison.

The wind whistled in the cracks of the windows. My father got in, rubbing his hands.

“Her grave is still sinking.”

“It’s that red clay,” I said.

We drove home without talking. I watched out the window to the wasted corn fields full of rotting yellow stalks. I thought of us, my father, Benny Jo and me, walking there in the crisp colors of September. Of Benny Jo flushing out a quail and yelling, “Get that lead bird, Dooley.”

At home, I put coal in the stove and went out to shovel some corn to the pigs. They squealed and fought in the mud, crowding out the runts. I pumped the trough full of water, knowing it would have a skin of ice by dusk. Back inside, I read the sports page and read my father a story about Stan Musial while he fried some bologna and eggs. We heard a car laboring up the lane, and I saw the sheriff’s car pull to stop by that puny maple sapling I had pulled up two year’s ago in Vanover’s woods.

Lehman Buford, a Pentecostal deacon and the county sheriff, stood over just inside the back door. His hands worked the brim of his hat.

“They are sending him home tomorrow night on the L&N, Darnell.”

My father nodded. “Me and Dooley will be there waiting in the pickup. I done got the burial permit through Maynard’s office. They going to let us bury him back in that old over-grown family plot back near that willow pond. Thanks for helping me walk through that red tape.”

“You’d done it for me,” Lehman told him with half a sigh.

“Sure you don’t want some coffee. Dooley made a fresh pot not more than half an hour ago.”

“Guess not. It gives me nerves. I’d be up watching them sing the National Anthem on Channel 7.”

Then he was out the door. A minute later, I heard his wheels spinning in that deep rut out by the mailbox, the one we keep meaning to dump a load of gravel in but just never get around to it.

After we ate, my father said that he was going out to check on the stock. I told him okay, that I would do the dishes, even though I knew he was just going to go out in the barn and climb up there in the loft. He would sit on a hay bale and watch across the fields toward the river. Thinking of his oldest son some where in a dim, gray cubicle, watching the clock until the warden and priest came for him. And knowing my father, I knew that he was wondering where he had gone wrong. Wondering what he could have said to intervene, thinking of all those times he was busy until midnight putting on new brakes shoes or working two jobs, the farm and the filling station.

I did my homework, Spanish and Algebra. The words and figures swarmed and blurred. After a while, I heard the mantel clock ticking loudly and the soft squeak of that rocking chair my Uncle Harley had made from green wood, where my father found himself a steady rhythm, pacing himself for the long evening. He would be looking at the picture of my mother, who had wasted away with cervical cancer, out of her head with pain and medication, telling my sister to get the cake out of the oven and telling Benny Jo not to kill that black snake. Singing in those last days over and over,

that same plaintive Appalachian chant "...where is my wandering boy tonight? The boy of my tenderest care?"

We went to bed early. At ten forty, the phone rang. I scrambled down the stairs to answer it, my feet cold on the wooden floor. It was my sister Annie from up near Louisville, her voice soft and slurred. She was crying and talking, all of it mixed together.

"Don't carry on so, Pig," I called her by my father's nickname for her.

"The man on the phone said we could have gone down to be there for him."

"You know he wouldn't want that. Daddy wouldn't go anyway. Said it was morbid to go watch people kill your own blood."

She was off the phone a second, and I heard ice cubes tinkle in a glass.

"It's like I'm in a dream, Dooley. It's like this can't be happening to me."

I held my tongue, resisting the impulse to tell her that it was not happening to her, that it was happening to Benny Jo, that it was happening to all of us. But we were both half muddled and dream-gaited. It didn't matter. So I sat on the stairs and picked at a raveling on my pajamas.

"Maybe if he'd got that job on the barge or got that scholarship to Murray State and hadn't busted his knee on that hay wagon. If damned Nettie Scales had not moved into town and wound him around her finger."

I heard myself and thought it sounded like a petulant child, mad at the fates and whining over bad fortune as though that was something meant only for others.

“Nettie Scales was shot four times, Dooley. Billy Deems was shot twice in the heart,” my sister told me these things I knew already.

“Benny Jo wouldn’t hurt a fly,” I told her in weak counterpoint.

What I did not say while we held those silent phones across the miles was what I had thought to say to my father but then bitten back. That the Benny Jo who came back from Louisville for two Christmases was not the same Benny Jo who left us. It was as if the old Benny Jo had been eaten up whole and digested by this new creature who drank whiskey out of the trunk of his car late at night after my father went to bed. The kind of person who lived in a rat trap apartment in a bad part of the city and lay at night, grinding his teeth while his nightmares rode in full stride over the remnants of his dreams which were as thin and blue as vapor.

I listened to the sleet ticking off the roof, glazing the trees and roofs and roads.

Annie cried some more and hung up. I went back up to my room and lay there, trying to sleep. But it was near midnight now, and I was seeing the people come to his cell and lead him down that corridor. I got out of bed and turned on the lights. I had two old pictures of Benny Jo tucked in a yellow envelope in my night stand. I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at them. In one, he was maybe eight years old, wearing a straw hat and clenching his teeth around my

grandfather's corn cob pipe. In another, he was sitting on Uncle Eldon's Harley, looking sideways at the camera and smiling that smile you would expect from a golden boy, who had always expected that earth's bounty was descending to crown him alone for all his considerable worth.

When I closed my eyes, I could see him, coming out of the river at his baptism.

His face all holy and full of light as Brother Cates said the scriptures and raised him up from the waters of the Ohio there near Scuffletown. On the shore, we sang a ragged harmony, "Shall We Gather at the River." When Benny Jo broke the water, he came up radiant, like he was a saint who had been in a cave a long time and had himself a vision of wild angels.

*

When my alarm went off at six, I crawled out of bed in a daze. I sat there on the side of the bed, watching the snow fly outside the window. What sleep I had gotten was spotty, slippery sleep, full of turbulence and sudden wakings. I did not have to be told that my father had spent the night in a lonely vigil, either in his room, flat on his back, or in the living room, rocking there in the darkness, swarmed upon by midnight doubts which flutter flutter like gnats which do not rest and will not go away.

I went into the dark bathroom and splashed my face with cold water, then down to start the coffee. My father was already out in the barn, milking the tan cow named Susie. The electricity had gone off during the night because the ice and sleet had snapped a power line or some hurry-scurry worker

from the Alcoa plant locked his brakes on a tight curve and clipped off a power pole.

I heard the creaking of the back door and watched him coming in with the milking pail, a towel draped over it.

“No school today,” he told me as he poured the milk into the separator and put on the tin lid to keep out the occasional lazy winter fly which spawned in the walls and crawled out of that crack above the cook stove.

As we sat there at the table, stirring our coffee, thinking our separate thoughts which were only variations of the same thing, my father broke the silence.

“That your sister who called last night?”

“Yes, sir. It was her.”

“Was she making sense?”

It was a question fraught with his own knowledge of her nervous problems and her cure for them.

“As much as ever,” I told him dismissively.

He stood up and got out a roll of sausage.

“She’s just high strung. Maybe it would help if she married somebody who didn’t teach her that bourbon whiskey is a good way to set the stars straight.”

I nodded to him and scrambled some eggs in a bowl while he fried the sausage.

My mother would have fixed biscuits, but neither of us ever got past bad toast. We ate in silence and washed the dishes, putting them away carefully. It surprised our occasional visitor that two males living alone kept such a clean house. I think we just picked up what Mama had left us, some part of her kept alive in our rituals. It was a spare household,

not a hint of real color except for the knick knacks she left us, some Depression glass and a See Rock City cream pitcher.

“You mind missing school and basketball practice?” my father asked as he wiped off the table.

“No. We got two teachers out on leave, and the coach is so busy trying to save his marriage, we mostly coach ourselves.”

We fumbled around a few more minutes, both of us in and out of the kitchen. Finally, he asked if I wanted to pray with him, and we got down on our knees. I listened to his words, tracing them over in my head like you can do if you grow up in a house and hear the same person pray over and over. Like a litany of sorrows and worries—the widows and orphans, the soldiers on foreign soil, those who have dwelt in our mercy and our love. Benny Jo just there around the corner of the words not said.

We got up from our knees, and the lights buzzed back on.

“I think I will go up in my room, son. My head hurts some.”

“Yessir. I’m going out to that squirrel tree near the new ground.”

I began to put on my coveralls and heavy boots. I got my .22 from the gun rack. I could hear my father’s steps upon the stairs, heavy and slow. I walked out the back door and across the horse lot and took a tractor trail along the ridge toward the river, a hard ball of ice in my stomach.

I went down to where Simpson’s Branch emptied into the Green River and sat on a rotting log and watched some

barges go by, kicking up muddy waves which lapped against the bank. On a sycamore tree a few yards away, I could still make out where Benny Jo had carved a heart with the name of a girl whom he had loved and then forgot or she had forgotten him. Down the bank two hundred yards, near the ferry slip, Benny Jo jumped into the water and pulled me out on my eighth birthday where I had got caught in a strong current. He carried me to the bank, cursing and crying because he was the big brother who was in charge, and he was suppose to keep me out of harm's way. He lay me in some muddy sand near a burned out campfire and pushed on my belly until I coughed up dark muddy water and then began to breathe. Then he went over and threw up in the horse-weeds.

*

At seven-thirty that night, my father called up the stairs to say that Mr. Heppler at the train station had phoned. My father started the pickup, and we drove into town, sliding and creeping on the icy roads, both of us catching our breath and praying the truck out of those long slides where your stomach starts to turn. We parked the truck in that broken blacktop and went into the cavernous interior of the railroad station where the paint flaked off the walls and the exit signs had faded nearly out completely. The station had been built in the '40's to handle the troop trains to Fort Breckenridge and Fort Campbell.

Three old men from down county were there, sitting around a pot bellied stove, spitting tobacco juice into the coal bucket and throwing us furtive looks.

We went out on the platform with the sheriff, and he got Posey, the porter, to get us a big loading dolly. In a few minutes, we could see the piercing beam from the front of the engine, and then it had chuffed to a stop. Three passengers disembarked, and then Posey led us to a baggage car where we wrestled the coffin down onto the dolly and then rolled it to the truck. As we slid the cheap, wooden coffin into the rusted bed, my father said, "Watch them sharp corners. You'll lose a finger."

I started to cry, but nobody mentioned it. My father shook hands with the sheriff, and he gave Posey two dollars.

Posey held up his hand and shook his head. "I won't take money, Mr. Darnell. That boy was a ring tail wonder. I'd drag that box all the way to your house just for the strength of your son's good, long laugh."

"Okay, Posey," my dad said. "Thank you."

My father shook hands with the sheriff. "Thanks, Lehman. I appreciate your help. I know this falls outside of your official duties."

Lehman Buford clapped him on the shoulder. "Darnell, you're a Baptist, and I am a Pentecostal, and we have both seen the mouth of temptation. What I done was in recognition that could have easily been one of my own."

"No matter what you heard, he was a good boy," my father said, his voice suddenly gone weak and old.

The sheriff nodded and turned to go, but he turned back once more. "You done all you could do, Darnell. Five years from now, I will remember him hitting eight foul shots in a row in the district finals and beating Beaver Dam at the gun

with that half court shot. I will remember him in the seventh grade when he got beat up by that Thurston bully for standing up for my daughter.”

We drove home with the radio on. “Your true lovin’ Daddy is movin’ on,” Hank Snow sang.

We parked the truck under the skeletal limbs of the slippery elm next to the smoke house. We had a certificate to bury him in the old family plot down by the pond where the snake doctors danced over the cattails in full summer. The church had a secret vote and asked that we not to bury Benny next to mama. Daddy said that it was all right. He’d figured it would happen, given what was on the radio and in the newspapers.

I went up to my room with a bologna sandwich and a glass of milk. I finished it and lay there on my bed with my clothes on, feeling a heavy fatigue welling up in my bones. I dozed and I dreamed of Benny Jo and Annie. In that sepia dream, I saw them bow to each other and then begin to dance. It was in our sideyard, over next to the apple trees. Snow began to fall about them, and they danced on, floating there among the snow flakes, like mythical creatures of great joy.

When I woke up, it was because I heard the car motor outside and then the door slam. I knew that it was Annie. Standing at the window, I saw my father come off the porch and go to take her in his arms, almost as though he had been sitting in the living room, waiting for those car lights to brighten the front window. Annie lurched a little, but Daddy caught her. I could hear her voice just a half note off hysteria.

My father led her out to the pickup where he left her, leaning against the side, her head over on the cold wood of the coffin.

I should have gone to bed and given her privacy for mourning, but I did not. I stood there at the window, thinking of Benny Jo and Annie, growing up here in these upper rooms, their lives so pregnant with promise.

Then that other thought came, something so hard edged and true that it nearly took my breath away. What was my father thinking now? Was he watching me every day, not even fooled by what I said or pretended to be, always wondering when this last child would take some twisty turn and reveal that thing in himself which had gone sad and bitter at the core? Another monument to my father's endless prayers and all those good intentions.

That was when I heard the noise in his room. A keening moan like some beast yoked to a burden which he had dragged like a rock too long but had gone on pulling it until this terrible moment, when he had seen the breadth and depth of his own hopelessness and despair.

I leaned my head against the window, willing the noise to cease. That was when I saw Annie as she began to struggle with the awkward weight of the coffin, pushing, shoving and hauling it until, by some unthinkable feat of strength, she leveraged it from the bed of the pickup. As I watched, half fearful and half fascinated, she dragged Benny Jo's coffin inch by inch until it was beside the apple tree where I had dreamed the dance.

She disappeared from view for a few seconds, and when she reappeared, she was wearing what looked to be my

brother's old basketball letter jacket and the crown she had worn as the home coming queen.

She commenced like a crippled bird, leaping and jiggling as her heels flung up tufts of dead grass and dirt, stumbling and falling, but always back up again. She shook her fists skyward, as though daring God to show his face and offer the least hint of his best defense.



The Faith Healer

by Ciera Horton McElroy

We don't know why he came. Ours is not a big city. There are no stadiums, no conference centers, no airport hotels to fill with hosannas. Instead, he has a folding chair at the farmer's market. Behind him rests a banana crate, handpainted. *Miracles \$10.*

He does not look like a faith healer. As we load baskets with fresh mango, kohlrabi, peas, we eye him. He is new. This is what we do. His jeans are worn around the heel; his face is rubbered from sun, with jowls that droop over his jaw. He is clean shaven. His hair wears product like a crested gray wave. He does not look like a hippie or like a Christian. He looks, maybe, like someone newly homeless, selling CBD from the back of a truck. His sandals have lost their tread. We can tell when he swings his legs in his chair. The soles flap like bird wings. We don't yet know whether this is funny or sad. We think, perhaps, it's both.

We are here every week in the summer. We come after choir, always the first to squeeze avocados and pick the most ripe. We eye the oatmeal soaps and smell them. We sample homemade hummus. The market is a maze of white tents that meander to the town gazebo. Today, every booth but his is busy.

Dawn strides toward him, but that is no surprise to us. She wears too-tight shorts and mandala shawls that drool with fringe. Her hair is dyed flame-red. (We suspect she even owns a bong.) We pretend to be interested in overpriced bread as Dawn extends her hand. He does not take it.

“Do you need to be healed?” he says.

We laugh behind our teeth. *Does she ever.*

“Just being neighborly,” says Dawn. Her hand drops to her side. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Are you sure?” he says.

And this is where the overpriced bread loses our attention completely. This is where we lean. We stop our half-hearted conversations about that condo collapse in Deland. We steal glances, wonder if Dawn has some glistening secret life—if this is an old boyfriend come to make up for lost time. His tone is so earnest. He seems to be asking, *Don’t you remember me, Dawn dear—have I really changed?* We think, he’s crazy. Miracles for cash means *spot-me-money-for-the-whiskey* crazy. But Dawn twirls the fringe around her ringed fingers. Seconds pass. The salt air ruffles the canvas booths around us with the gentlest of breezes. The morning is white and warm as sweet cream. The faith healer stands. He is shorter than Dawn. He is soft but thin, like an underripe

pear. His voice lowers so we cannot hear, and his hand grazes Dawn's so briefly that we miss this, almost. But we don't.

*

We are women past our prime. We are mothers done mothering—we never lost the baby weight, but still we wear bikinis. Our skin is wrinkled from sun, our hair graced with gray. One husband is dead, another retired, the others still work here and there. (Construction, PE coach, water operator.) Our marriages are lazy. We used to take long runs along the lake and have shower sex before work, but now we fear our fat would jiggle. We have cellulite and lines. It's shameful to be seen.

Our children—our world—live states away and call when they remember. We tell them about new choir music, novels picked for book club, saucy recipes we find for kale. They complain about the president and the news, spout opinions on stories we've never heard. We nod along. We do not say how sad FaceTime makes us. How we can tell that they type while they talk. We take what we can get. When they ask (finally) how we are, we tell them. *Oh, you know. Sore some days. Headaches. Tired more than usual.* We tell them of the remedies we've tried: oils, Keto, acupuncture needles. They say "Just talk to your doctor" and give us looks which says they have higher degrees than we do: our children who've surpassed us. We cannot keep up with the people we created. When they visit in the summers, they want to ride bicycles and play tennis or row through the algae-crested lake. We'd rather sit and talk, serve beer in cool glasses. One day with

them and we are tired for weeks. We can feel the aging in our marrow.

We hate this, the feeling small. We hate this more than anything.

*

On Sunday, as we sing from the choral platform *Lift High the Cross*, we see him in the back pew. He wears a plain black sweater and the same holey jeans. He does not take communion. He does not pass the peace.

We learn that he's staying in the Motel 6 off Highway 27. Every morning, he breakfasts at Denny's before a walk through town. Naomi says he comes into her bookstore at 10:00 on the dot, never to buy anything, only to browse.

"He doesn't even touch the books," she says. "He keeps his hands in his jeans like this." And she slouches her shoulders, arches her back. She walks like she's imitating James Dean. "He just sort of strolls, like he's looking for nothing. If he carried a backpack, I'd check it."

The next week, he is again at the market. We load baskets with tomatoes, pretend to inspect our eggs for cracks. Really, we watch Dawn approach the faith healer again. This time, after she speaks too softly for us to hear, he cups her jaw. He closes his eyes. No one else at the market seems to care that this strange man has his hands on Dawn Lozano's face. His lips move as in a whisper. When he pulls away, she is crying. She hugs him and drops a twenty in the banana crate. One miracle, plus tip.

We did not know about Dawn's teeth. Not until she tells us in book club at Naomi's about the rot.

“It’s been bad since Mari was born,” Dawn says after a long sip of bad Merlot. Naomi buys the cheapest wine with the prettiest label. “We couldn’t afford the dentist—Bill had just been laid off, you remember, and we lost all our benefits—and I was eating ice cream every night, and everything started then.”

It was not bad at first, the toothache. And then it was everything: the pain locked into her jaw. She couldn’t eat, sleep, swallow. She tried new silicea and fluoride—she tried chamomile and arnica. When Bill was hired by the power plant, she went to the dentist again only to learn that the pain wasn’t what she thought.

“An impacted wisdom tooth,” she says. “Extraction was \$2000 we didn’t have. I never got it pulled.”

Sandra rubs her cheek in sympathy pain.

“So this guy at the market, he just cured you?” says Lisa.

Lisa is direct. She often says what the rest of us are thinking. Before her sons were born, she went to law school and clerked for Judge Marshall. She used to compete in triathlons. She scares us a bit. “He just puts his hands on you and *snap!*—” she snaps her fingers. “It’s gone?”

“Believe what you want.” Dawn tips her glass to finish the wine. “But today is the first day since Mari was born, and she’s twenty-two now, that I have not needed ibuprofen just to get through a meal.”

We have met to discuss a fairy tale retelling, written by a novelist who won a big prize. It’s boring and sad, about children gone missing. About rats, a plague. None of us want to discuss it. Besides, book club is a disguise for wine and

gossip, so we spend the next hour musing about the miracle man.

*

It happens quickly, the way he takes over our lives. First, he occupies the mental space. We talk about him on our group chat. Lisa passes him on her morning runs around the lake. She texts us sweaty selfies that show the faith healer near the water's rim.

Lisa: *Look who I found? I legit called out to say hello and he didn't even register. Just stood there and stared at the water.*

Sandra: *Better watch out, this is Florida lol 😊👉*

Dawn shares what she heard through her sister-in-law's coworker who takes a night shift at Stan's Bar: the faith healer spends hours every night at a high-top with a small leather journal and endless rounds of club soda. This makes us smile and wonder.

But things take a turn the day Naomi texts us about the bookshop.

Naomi: *He's got gloves on tday*

Lisa: *Like leather gloves? Gardening gloves? We need DEETS*

Naomi: *idk like black gloves. But he's actually touching the books. This is so weird. He's thumbing through the local section right now.*

Sandra: *My book?! 📖*

(Sandra's claim to fame was the publication of a poetry collection in 1994 from a small university press. Naomi keeps it in stock. She is a good friend.)

Naomi: *can't see the cover, maybe?*

Sandra: *tell him i'll sign it 😏*

Naomi: *lol he doesn't even know your name, does he?*

We learn over text that he does, in fact. Sandra sends the grimace emoji, her favorite one, and says she has a confession. Last night, she drove to the Motel 6—alone—when she told Luis she was visiting us. Our phones light up with alerts. We pause mid-conversation with a customer, mid-rinse at the kitchen sink, mid-run. We read quickly, thrilled by the secret in someone else's life.

After dinner of shepherd's pie and Corona, shared at the coffee table while Tucker Carlson was on, Sandra drove to the motel and parked and waited and panicked, then got up the courage and climbed the two flights of stairs and knocked on his door. We do not ask how she knew which door was his. She does not say.

Sandra: *He wasn't surprised to see me. Srsly. He just opened the door and said, Oh, it's you, like he'd been waiting for me. He invited me right in, just like that 😏*

Naomi: *You didn't ... you know?*

Sandra: *God no 😐*

Lisa: *So wait, i'm confused. Why'd you go there? Just tryin to understand*

Sandra: *I was in pain, and I had to know. And let me just say. Dawn, you were fucking right.*

Dawn: *I know.*

*

After Sandra's visit to the motel, the rest of us venture forward at the market. We are curious cats. We go in small

clusters at first, two or more, and shift the baskets in our arms as we comment on the weather or church music. We are flirtatious skeptics.

The faith healer, he does not small talk. He gives a soft smile and asks how we feel, really. We try to practice honesty.

“Not too good,” we say.

Lisa tells him how she ran through poison oak. Naomi points to a wasp sting on her wrist. The faith healer nods, solemn, and removes the black gloves. Up close, he smells woodsy, like sandalwood and oak. His skin is bluish and his eyes are ringed. His hands, they are delicate—not like our husbands’ that have worn callouses like armor. These are piano fingers, long and pale. The faith healer touches Lisa’s patchy ankle. He holds Naomi’s wrist. And the pain? We feel it leave us like fog lifting off the lake in early morning. The light shimmers through. Is it magic? Is it God? We reach into our pocket books, unzip our fanny packs and drop whatever bills we have into the crate.

We are back the next week. And the next.

Soon, his market booth is the busiest every week, and not just with us. A young man who works construction approaches with a muscle spasm; an old woman with asthma throws away her inhaler after only five minutes with the faith healer. A young sandaled couple brings their toddler, knees raw from a tricycle fall. We feel like our husbands when they complain that someone has stolen a favorite fishing hole. We discovered him first. We have grown to like the Saturday routine—choir music, fresh bread, miracle.

But word spreads as word does. It does not take long for the faith healer to become small-town famous. Everyone in our town is like us, it seems. Curious and eager. We are not accustomed to excitement. The local TV station, K64.4, interviews him for their morning show, and a woman in red asks him questions at the market. When the story airs, we show our husbands.

“This guy’s the real thing,” we say.

“Sure he is,” they shrug and change the channel.

*

We want him. We all do. It’s obvious, the competition that sprouts like weeds. How Naomi chops her hair like the Xerox girl in *Friends*. For her daily run, Lisa swaps her gym T-Shirt for a sports bra, and we whisper to each other, “slut.” We imagine where he’d touch us, how he’d open the folds of our skin and move with knowledge, with care. He would know what to do. He would know where to let his finger pulse, where to reach down with his tongue.

We shock ourselves. We feel like teenaged girls who have just discovered the showerhead. And this is how we know the others feel the same way: Dawn says it first—at book club—after reading *Fire Sermon*. It is a sexy book. A Christian has an affair and describes everything. We can’t read it before bed.

“I’ve had dreams about him,” Dawn says. “Is that bad? Am I bad?”

“What kind of dreams?” Naomi takes a big sip of wine and tries to act disinterested.

“You know. Dream-dreams. Like, the kind I haven’t had since college.”

“Not since college? Poor you.”

“I’m serious, I feel bad about it. I haven’t dreamed about Daryl like that since—well, I don’t know if I’ve ever dreamt about Daryl like that. My mind is in the gutter.”

“Mine is always in the gutter.”

Our group chat feels the change. We stop confiding in each other when we see him; instead, we alert the others like sentries.

Sandra: *I heard you know who was in the bookstore today?*



Naomi: *So? I can’t have customers now?*

Sandra: *Does he ever talk about me?* 🙄

Naomi: *What? No*

Lisa: *I should hope that what he knows he keeps to himself*

Dawn: *What’s that supposed to mean?*

Lisa never says.

A rumor circulates in choir that the faith healer is having an affair with someone in town.

*

August looms, and we wonder how long the faith healer will stay in town. Soon, the high will go from 95 to 90, and fall will be here. The anglers who summer at our lake will pack up their gear and return to the panhandle. The summer farmer’s market will end, and in its place we’ll plan fall festivals with snow cones and snake handlers. We need our miracles to stay. He has become our Saturday fix—all week is a countdown to the market, that intense gaze, his skin in that

brief brush as he heals us. We're feeling better than we have since '85. Our muscles lengthen like they did when we were girls, when we could flip across balance beams and golf a 110. Naomi's skin brightens like creamed coffee. Lisa's legs seem to lengthen. We do not know where the rings under our eyes go, but they go somewhere. Our husbands ask if we've been working out.

On the last market of the summer, on a rare cool day, we stay late and watch the vendors pack. We chatter with each other about Naomi's upcoming birthday and the dinner we'll throw at Lisa's with fettuccine and oysters. But really, we watch the faith healer meet his lingering customers then pack his banana crate. He notices. He approaches, and we cluster like hens, suddenly shy.

"If it isn't all my ladies together," he says. "The first faithful ones."

We blush, smile, say small nothings.

He continues: "You know, I was wondering. I used to offer fireside chats in my last town. It was for the more passionate ones, the ones who really wanted to learn about faith. Totally casual." He smiles, and his product-heavy hair shines in the light. "Are you interested?"

Are we ever.

*

We want you to know before the story ends, that he does not hurt us.

We're aware that it sounds stupid—going to a man's motel room alone at night. Or worse, perhaps, the state park. We know you may not believe us. You might think we're

crazy old women, that we exaggerate, that we're attention starved. Our husbands thought this, too, after everything. Our children rolled their eyes. We tried to explain how he'd helped us, but they just laughed and said, "Okay, mom." We are their silly mothers who believe in the faith healer's work.

Maybe we got lucky. Sandra's daughter says we could have ended up on some PBS special about the killer who lured his victims through religious promise. "They'd call him the Miracle Man," she says. "His victims miraculously vanish!"

We don't know much about serial killers. We cannot stand the True Crime shows our daughters absorb like water. We don't even know much about the faith healer, not even his name. To each of us, he told a different past, which at first made us angry and then made us think. We don't need the illusionist to show us the cards or the trick slot in the hat. We do not need to know everything, so long as the show is beautiful.

*

The night of the fireside chat is the kind of hot that calls for watermelon. Instead, the faith healer stands at a charcoal grill and roasts bratwursts. The air is slick with smoky meat.

We have told our husbands colorful lies: we are at Canvas and Cheers, we are mixing chocolate martinis at Dawn's, we rented tandem bikes for the lake path. Of the truth, they would not approve.

The sky is purpling—the clouds are watercolor wisps. He lowers the grill lid and tells us how we live with faith every time we trust the water from our tap or the seatbelts in our

cars, how all those tiny nothings keep us alive. We sit like Girl Scouts on log benches and rub deet into our skin and nod and wonder when, exactly, we began to feel old. When he talks, we remember hours flung across our childhood beds as we listened to records and talked on the phone and waited for our parents to sleep so we could smuggle the keys. We have not been wild in so long. Maybe we never were.

“I want to tell you more about why I do this work,” he says and turns a bratwurst. The fat sizzles, and the skin pops. “It’s because the medical system doesn’t serve you. They miss things. They do not *listen*.” And we nod because he is watching.

He spears the brats and fills paper plates and passes them to us. There is lemonade, too, the powder kind in a pitcher. We feel like the 5,000, fed by miracles.

“You ladies know I’m not here to sell you nothing. I don’t hawk essential oils or tinctures or whatever. I’m here to get to the soul of the problem—I’m here because I was *called*, because there was need.”

He removes the last sausage and closes the grill. Mosquitos hover through the charcoal air, and we chew silently. The faith healer settles into the one plastic chair around the open pit. This is the park where our children had Field Day years ago—where we pushed them in strollers and fed bread to the ducks. Now, it’s nearing park curfew, and we sit around like campers, like we’re about to sing “Kumbaya” and roast s’mores. The faith healer is silent for a long time as he studies his hands.

“I want you to be honest with me,” he says at last. “I want you to tell me where it really hurts.”

The silence is interrupted only by bug song.

We tell him. It is so freeing to speak that the words tumble out of us like Jenga blocks, a loud clatter.

Lisa tells him how she “tore down there”—her words, not ours—with baby number one in ‘86. It never healed right. The stitched scar was a flap of flaming skin. How to tell her husband, *No, maybe never?* How to deprive herself forever from his body inside hers? This is why she runs, her libido, she runs and runs because only that makes it better somehow. That kind of high. Sandra describes the tenderness that lives in her muscles, like pain is a pioneer to stay. She doesn’t know where it came from or why her massage therapist hasn’t helped but it’s costing \$60 a week to be rubbed with oil and make no progress. Naomi rubs her neck, stiff still from a bender years ago. Her baby was in the backseat, she says, and she was driving to the grocery store, and when the truck behind her clipped the back of her van, she whipped so quickly to check on the carseat that she pulled something that never quite healed. There is more, more. We have backaches from old mattresses; oven burns on our palms; knee pangs from when we could run on beaches, before the soft sand shot our joints. Some of what we share is small in comparison. Migraines, menopause, cramps that wallop our bellies at night. Small, but not, when you can bleed through your clothes at work. We have hot flashes and sweat stains, rashes and insomnia. There is more, there is more.

As the night deepens and stars stud the sky, we tell him of other pains. We tell him about the FaceTime calls with our children. Or not fitting in the skinny clothes we saved. Or how the news makes us so anxious that we can't sleep. Or how, once, Naomi's daughter called her "ignorant" for not knowing about Proposition 8, and Naomi has never forgotten that. How Lisa's son said he hated her for supporting the Republican governor—how could her own baby hate her? Or the way our husbands touch the softness of our bellies and we wince in shame—or the way we can be out all day running errands, buying groceries, and return to a "What's for dinner?" We tell him about the fury.

Dawn tells him about her dreams, that what hurts is wanting something wrong.

He seems to coax the words right out of us. He leans back in his chair and bobs his leg so that his sandals flap. Bird wings, we think—flying things! Our pain is airborne. We are warm and sip more lemonade, stale in paper cups. Always, he maintains eye contact with us, steady and owlish. He is never distracted. Soon, he knows more about us than we knew about each other in forty years.

He touches Dawn first because she is the closest to him.

In one swift motion, his palm strikes her forehead. She falls off the log. We blink in the dim. Dawn's head thuds like a baby learning to sit. She writhes on a pile of pine needles and at first we think she's in pain—but then we hear her laugh. She grabs her belly and spasms as a mosquito alights on her neck. "Holy laughter, yes," exclaims the faith healer. "Yes, yes, yes. This is good—this is the spirit moving. This is

your faith being tested.” He stands from the plastic chair and lifts both hands. “This is the proof of healing! Let the darkness leave you, like demons cast out, amen.” He moves around the circle like a mad game of duck-duck-goose. He strikes our heads with the heel of his hand, and it doesn’t hurt. His palm is hot and sticky with power. When he touches us, the heat rushes in fire rivers. We clutch our guts. We fall. Our hair hooks the palmate leaves, and mosquitos land on our necks like kisses. The laughter gallops from us—you’d laugh like this if you were pain free. We have never done drugs, but we imagine this is how it feels: better than Tylenol, better than wine, better than sex and hot baths, we feel really, truly good—good in that fleshy way, where you’re overly aware of your body. At the heat of his touch, our muscles soothe and our scars heal, burned away like an oven on clean. The world turns gauzy. There is a film, a stillness. The pain, it dissolves like a baby leaving our bodies in one final burst.

*

And then he leaves. The very next day. On a Monday. In September. Just as the weather turns nice. Just like that. He checks out of the Motel 6, where, we learn later, he’s been sleeping with the leggy and tattooed owner in exchange for free board. He leaves with \$10,000 cash from miracles and a copy of Sandra’s book, signed. He takes an Uber to Orlando, from where he buses to Amelia Island to heal rich white people on holiday. We do not know what to think. Except we have that small, sinking suspicion that the miracles will fade. Our muscles do not groan as they used to—Dawn’s

toothache has not come back. But we fear the pain we've known can vanish. Ache is like hunger, always bound to return.

The morning he leaves, Lisa texts, *Run with me?* We say okay. We lace up the sneakers we only wear when our kids are around, pretending to exercise daily. And we squeeze these bodies that once housed babies into shorts that can't hold us in. We follow Lisa through town, past the green and the Denny's and the motel, past the county highway that leads to the park where our children used to play—it is only three miles, but our bodies bounce, they sweat, they burn, they hurt, they long, they itch, they thirst, they shudder. And we keep running.



“The Faith Healer” originally appeared in *Story*.

Don't Let Them See You

by Anonymous

I sit on the floor at the Oregon Convention Center, my back against a wall, watching the tidal rhythm of legs moving past. The water-sound of voices echoes from the high ceilings. I'm trying to decide whether it's worth missing a session to walk a few blocks for food, but I'm already hungry and the decision feels complicated. Nearby, other attendees at this writers conference have also washed up along the edges: sipping cups of coffee they waited in line half an hour for, or looking at their phones, or just staring into space. A crowd of 15,000 puts pressure on everyone, but I'm lucky that provisioning myself is the biggest physical challenge I face. Many others work against more formidable obstacles, and the emphasis on access here is refreshing. There's a long list of accessibility equipment and services available, and we're duly reminded in each session not to question anyone's use of accommodations. Disabilities, it is repeatedly stressed, are not always visible. Taking access to the next level, many

panel topics focus on writers who belong to queer, minority, immigrant or marginalized communities. The conscious effort at a universal welcome feels promising in this blank, bland corporate setting; a glimpse of an open future in which everyone's input is valued.

And yet, in this carefully equalized architecture of access, there is one barrier so taken for granted that it goes entirely unacknowledged. It's because of that barrier that I am writing this piece anonymously; if my biological traits are known, my chances of getting a first novel published will plummet.

After one crowded session on the secrets of mainstream publishing, I join the throng lining up at the panelists' table for a few seconds of one-on-one. I approach an executive editor from one of the big five publishers, classically brisk and New York looking. I will soon be pitching a debut novel, I tell her, and I want to know how much of an issue my age will be to agents and publishers. She immediately replies that, despite having denigrated self-publishing during the session, she wants me to know that memoirs are the one genre where self-publishing is useful and appropriate. She goes on, bafflingly, to expound on how self-publishing is today's excellent equivalent to the keeping of bundles of letters, of journals, for posterity. What? She looked at my face and hair and automatically assumed I was writing a memoir?

"No, not a memoir," I say. "A novel. Literary fiction."

She pauses, looking disoriented for a second. Then she says, "Well, you don't have to let them see you, right?"

“I should keep my photo off Twitter?” I already do, for this precise reason, but I want to make sure that’s what she’s saying.

“Yes, exactly.”

I back away to give others their turn, my thoughts scrambled. I mean, yes, I knew this, but actually having it confirmed out loud stuns me. I try to imagine just how her recommendation would go down if she had said that to literally any other kind of person at this conference.

Don’t let them see you.

What would happen if she said that to a writer of color, or one with a disability or whose gender expression was non-traditional? Don’t let them see what you look like, or the doors will slam shut against you, your access will be revoked.

How I look. My face is not acceptable. I could cover my white hair with a scarf, and from the neck down (clothed, at least) I look no different than I did forty years ago. It’s just my face I can’t hide. The weathered skin, the increasingly androgynous look. There isn’t enough makeup in the world to obscure the tracks of time, these deeply-cut frown lines and loosening puffs of flesh. And anyway, the last time I wore makeup (aside from Halloween) was when I was fifteen. It seems so strange, that this physical outer shell—which I can’t even see unless I look in the mirror—has become an obstacle to joining the literary conversation. If I had dyed hair, lifted face, all the signifiers of the attempt to stay visually relevant, would that make a difference?

Disabilities can be invisible to others, yes, and many people reckon with challenges nobody else can see—but it works

the other way as well: The world sees someone who is sidelined, less capable, more narrowly self-involved (all I can write is a memoir?)—while looking out through my own eyes, I don't see any impediments. I'm just part of everyone else here, another human particle in the flow through these hallways.

Is it a question of capability? I'll set mine against any random pick of the twenty-somethings surrounding me. I live alone off-grid, which means hauling firewood, dealing with windstorms and intransigent tools, sweeping snow off the outhouse seat. I can handle the chop and slam of small boat rides in rough waters. And I can take on the urban world, too, parallel parking in the heart of Saturday-night Portland for the Copper Canyon book launch event, or landing alone in Istanbul or Moscow. I've outlived lousy parents, raised children to adulthood, washed the body of a dead husband. I earn my living now online, writing about blockchain and the capabilities of mixed reality (while hiding my age from my clients, of course).

All of which is to say that I can grapple with the world on its own terms. I move through it much as I ever did, albeit with more knowledge and competence. I don't need allowances to be made or special access to be offered. But the world's reaction to me has drastically altered.

I do recognize that my outrage is a response to the erosion of privilege that I've taken for granted until now. My experience cannot be compared with that of someone whose entire community has been violently, systematically barred from equal participation in society. My body has white skin

and agile parts that all work. I'm a cisgendered, heterosexual, decently educated legal citizen. I've been poor, but it was always the poverty of someone who had choices. Put bluntly, I suppose, I'm accustomed to my voice being heard. At least as much as women's voices are ever heard, which for me has generally been sufficient.

After another session, I ask my question of a keen-edged androgynous-looking panelist who runs a respected small press. I trust this person's insight, and would love for them to be interested in my book someday. "I won't do you the disservice of saying your age wouldn't be a factor," they respond—honestly, if also obliviously. "But in the end it's all about the writing." Fair enough ... except. Except we both know what it means for my age to be "a factor." Factor as in obstacle. As in the thing you have to overcome, the downside that your writing has to dazzle them into ignoring.

Of course I want my work to dazzle. Every writer does. You hack away at the sentences until you've pruned them into the best shapes, organic and artful. But when all the polishing is done, when you've breathed as much compelling specificity into your characters as you can, then you want your work to be evaluated on an equal footing with everyone else's.

I'm aware that many people my age (63) have reached a resting phase, where they only want to review and chronicle the lives they've led. Their molten surface has cooled, rigidity is setting in. The stereotypes do spring from real sources. But how dare anyone decide ahead of time about *my* ambitions, on the basis of what they think they know about people who

look like me? (Hearing myself ask this, I must stop to acknowledge that people have made generalizations about me all my life—but wearing the badges of privilege, I was able to remain oblivious. It’s when the stereotypes turn negative that you notice them. But I’m only me, and I only have my own story. So with a nod of respect to those who struggle against bias that is immeasurably more brutal and pervasive, I will continue.)

When does the gate close, if you’re an emerging writer? How many years did I miss the deadline by? Maybe the answer lies in those peppy articles regularly churned out to encourage “older” writers to take heart. These usually list inspirational models who published their first books in their forties.

The curious thing is that the timed access gates only shut out writers who are new to the field. If you already have a track record, your future capacity isn’t in doubt. You become like a Supreme Court justice, where your mental acuity is treated as permanent fact. And this is a good thing—but why assume that those of us who were otherwise occupied during our early decades have somehow lost the capacity to think deeply and rigorously? For some of us, if we’re accomplished at anything, it is in making new beginnings.

Of course what publishers and agents want is someone whose career they can invest in, whose earning potential plots an agreeable arc across the axes of time and profit. They are business people in a shifting and unfriendly market. But we’re none of us fortune-tellers. If we were, then publishers could simply count up the years of working life remaining to

every new writer who knocks at their door. By that measure, who's to say? I may be lucky enough to have another 25 years of lucid thought ahead of me. And not every young MFA graduate will keep churning out work for the next five decades. Besides, how long do marketable writers even stay under contract? Plenty of them jump from one agent or publisher to another in the industry's competitive churn.

I do recognize that age-related professional barriers are often logical. I wouldn't expect to be accepted to medical school, for instance, even if my MCAT scores were stupendous. It would be unreasonable to occupy a valuable training slot intended for someone at the beginning of their career. And physically and socially, I couldn't possibly fit such a role.

But writing is different. The pipeline of possible entrants is more or less unlimited, and we each work alone. If you're good enough to interest a reputable publisher, you're by definition at a professional level. The work doesn't require physical endurance—although admittedly, book tours sound like they have their hellish moments. Later stages of life even confer certain practical advantages. What was I doing during all those earlier, more marketable years? Hurling through idealistic but ill-conceived marriages. Raising children. Moving. Figuring out how to put food on the table while learning how to be an artist or teacher or immigrant case manager or remote homesteader. I always wrote, of course, but projects got dropped and set aside as I followed my appetite for one fascination after another. Now? Settled alone in a wild patch of forest, my time is mostly my own. Working

remotely, I can earn a week's living in about 12 hours, and the resulting freedom is an astounding luxury.

Any serious profession demands stamina and agility in some realm, and for writers, that realm is the mind. What's called for is an elastic self, able to engage a dissonant world and sift out nuggets that pierce and persuade. Age doesn't correlate with how open the brain's sluice-gates are; how hard and fast the ideas surge, how relentlessly they demand expression. It doesn't constrain the shapes those ideas take, strange and writhing. Having lived longer is like standing on a hill; you can see more of your surroundings. That vantage point lifts you up out of the weeds, but it also makes your endpoint all too clearly visible.

Younger writers have their own brilliance—a freshly forged knife to cut through assumptions and reframe the terrain. Many have survived trauma, and describe it with unsettling clarity, but they haven't yet looked back on it through the lens of multiple decades. The perspective of age isn't reproducible, any more than any diverse voice can be authentically expressed by someone who hasn't lived that life. To deepen the collective canon and make it truly reflect the full scope of human experience, don't we need every articulate voice? Isn't that the whole point of diversity, the whole reason that access is worth struggling for?

Maybe the problem is that I'm not diverse enough; unlike members of other outsider groups, I represent everyone's future. Maybe that inevitability causes society's averted gaze. If you are lucky enough to escape an early demise, you will eventually join me on this uncomfortable slanting ground.

You will feel the pitiless advance of time, the urgency that makes me grab half an hour to write on a noisy ferry, instead of browsing the latest political shitshow on Twitter. I'm pricked by the constant knowledge that my words will at some point stop flowing, my brain stop sparking and linking. I just don't want the marketplace to force that ending before nature does. Nothing matters as much as bringing something into existence that wasn't there before, and crafting it skillfully enough to make the reader startle with recognition. All I can do is trust that if I manage that verbal alchemy and keep my face hidden, the gatekeepers will invite me into the literary conversation before they figure out how old I am.



I Will Tell You This Much, and Then We'll Never Talk About It

by April Ford

The flashbacks are harder to handle now that spring's almost here. They strike when I can't easily get back to my pandemic bubble of myself and two cats. It's been twenty-four months since I last had sex with Sam, with anyone, but my body remembers like no time has passed, when the memories strike. Once, Thanksgiving 2016, we fucked so many times in a row we stopped counting. Me, a 38-year-old then, Sam, a 40-year-old. We paused only to gulp from a bottle of Blue Chair coconut rum, aiming it at each other's mouth and inevitably spilling more than we drank, until the distance between our mouths became too great and excruciating and we fell back onto the mattress, sticky, sweaty, manic in our reclaimed youth. Promising *I love you I love you I love you*.

*

After Sam ended our relationship the second time, to pursue a renewed fixation on his first wife, the binge-eating

tendency that has stalked me since early-adolescence took hold, and I let it. How else was I to protect myself from the devastation of being continually rejected by someone I couldn't convince my addicted heart not to love, a person whose interest I desperately wanted to keep.

The first time Sam ended us went like this: Suddenly he demanded a divorce so he could go to grad school. He could not be a husband and a doctoral student at the same time, he insisted, the day after we moved back to New York (the whole reason we had left eleven months earlier had been to get married and establish ourselves somewhere different). Sam was good at History and wrote a brilliant statement of purpose about the important contributions he hoped to make to the study of Quakers and whaling. The university that offered him funding clearly was not concerned about his age. Out of nothing less magnanimous than fear of abandonment, I tried, early on, to convince Sam that starting a PhD at 43 might be an issue, though not because I believed this to be true. Rather, I couldn't compete with his fantasy of arriving to campus unencumbered by our marriage, scrubbed of my scent and free to meet someone in his "league," as he put it.

Day after day after evening after night, while he visited and re-visited the faculty web pages of prospective mentors, ordered transcripts from colleges he had attended as a freshman and sophomore before taking a fifteen-year hiatus to avoid addressing worsening symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, I begged him to consider letting me come along. My job in book publishing was remote, and with my

income plus his stipend from the university we could afford a comfortable life. With my support, he could focus on coursework, networking and attending conferences, come home to prepared dinners and Cadbury our cat. But all my unskilled, emotional bargaining achieved was more distance between us.

When Sam killed himself a year and a half after he left me the second time, binge-eating wasn't enough to protect me from feelings. Sam definitely was not coming back, so the alcohol dependency that had been creeping alongside my years with him took charge.

*

No one wants to talk about suicide, except maybe in the form of statements that reflect how it will never touch them: *My daughter isn't really depressed, she's just a teenager. You know teenagers, they grow out of it; I keep telling my father lots of people over 50 change careers—I mean, 50's the new 40; Did you hear about that poor lady who snuck out of the nursing home so she would freeze to death instead of catching the virus like her husband? I'm so glad my parents are staying at the cottage for now, where it's safe.*

Definitely, no one wants to talk about suicide during a pandemic, with the surviving spouse as she grapples with binge-eating and alcohol dependency and not just everyday inconveniencing grief but something therapists call “complicated grief.”

*

The day Sam took his life, Sunday, August 9, 2020, I slept in. This isn't usual for me, I'm an early riser, but the night

before I had overindulged on Grand Marnier and MacDonal'd's to fill Sam's absence. We hadn't spoken in a few weeks. I had asked him for space because our hundreds of texts per day were stressing me out rather than making me feel secure in our third attempt at a relationship, this time long-distance because the pandemic was between us. For me to get that space, I had to block Sam on Facebook and by phone (this last didn't actually prevent him from phoning but sent him straight to voicemail, which he typically filled with breathing sounds).

The day before Sam took his life, I texted him at noon, when I figured he would be on his lunch break. He was working at a no-kill refuge for cats now, because leaving me for grad school and then leaving me for his first wife hadn't met his expectations. I still had Cadbury our cat. "Hey! Can you tell me if you're at the same mailing address so I know where to send the divorce papers?" I regretted the text as soon as I sent it, regretted it as I wrote it, but I needed a reason to check in. To ask, "How's it going?" would only revive our compulsive texting, rekindle our codependence. While friends were trying hard to make me see Sam was bad for me, leaving me whenever he thought he could do better elsewhere and then doubling back with histrionic promises to give our marriage a chance, I knew the truth: I was no better for him. What I needed from him, bottomless love to fill my bottomlessness, was not something he could give.

The night before Sam took his life, I was at my computer, supping a tumbler of Grand Marnier neat to lessen the sickness. Sam hadn't answered my lunch-hour text or my late-

afternoon phone call, so now I was trying him on Facebook, where I could see when he read my messages. “I’m sorry about bringing up the divorce papers, I just need to know you’re okay.” I messaged his first wife and one of his co-workers. Everyone said he was fine. His first wife had talked to him the day before, and his co-worker had seen him on the job that afternoon. No reason to worry. They would tell him I was looking for him. I continued to worry. Sam had never ignored me for so long.

The next morning, a police officer phoned to report Sam had been found hanging by his belt from the shower in his studio apartment. I texted one close friend: *He did it this time. He finally did it.* Then I got ready to meet her for a walk in the park, which had been our plan for a week. Sam’s first wife phoned before I left. She cried and I cried with her. She told me that around 5:00 AM, the hour Sam died according to the coroner, one of her toddler’s battery-operated toys woke her up, making weird sounds and crashing into things like a lobotomized robot. This had never happened before. She believed it was Sam visiting her and assured me he would visit me soon, it was God’s will. I said I couldn’t see it happening because magical things don’t happen to atheists. Plus I was still waiting for Sam to acknowledge any one of my twenty-plus texts, Facebook messages, and voicemails from the night before.

*

~~Since everyone’s talking about life lessons they’ve learned from the pandemic, let me share life lessons I’ve learned from Sam’s’ suicide:~~

*

Before I met Sam I was married to an English professor eleven years older than me. We were a respected couple among friends and colleagues in the upstate college town where we lived, which was one reason it took me so long to leave the relationship, why, maybe, it took a thunderclap like Sam to call me to action. It can be surprisingly hard to justify leaving someone who doesn't treat you badly but who isn't right for you. Immediately after I left (and before anyone knew about me and Sam), some friends and colleagues said, *April, Why? "J" takes such good care of you. You can teach part-time, write most of the time, and summer at your in-laws' Cape Cod vacation home. Why rock the boat?* It was a rare opportunity for me to learn what some people really thought of my capacity to be my own person.

A few months into our separation, J told me his father wanted to know how I was holding up (J had delayed telling his parents, in case I changed my mind). I said give your dad my campus number, and the next day J's father phoned me. Failing to extract from me a "reasonable" explanation for my "irrational" decision to leave the marriage, my father-in-law of many years declared that all I had accomplished while with his son was because of his son. And then he hung up.

*

There's an ad for intermittent fasting that appears daily in my Facebook newsfeed, even though I've never consulted the web about fasting. I've never fasted. My strain of disordered eating and drinking is all binge and no purge (I purge in other ways, so it balances out eventually). Once binging

has served its purpose, I return to healthy patterns, lots of steel cut oats and little else in excess, until the next emotional spike. I've never been overweight but the preoccupation with thinness is always there, as regular as my exhalations, even when I'm thin, which is most of the time. I want to be too thin now, skinny like I was with Sam, when I never knew from one moment to the next if he still loved me, still wanted to be with me, still found me attractive, still liked my writing. When I was with Sam, I binged on codependency.

Before he killed himself, Sam handwrote a six-page, single-spaced note with no beginning and no ending, a fading in and fading out of his thoughts as they swerved between first-, second-, and third-person perspectives. In his note, Sam says he was never able to love, the most I ever was to him was a recurring fixation. In my low moments, I choose to interpret this as a form of love: He couldn't get me out of his system. I was on his mind until he died.

In my low moments I look down at my belly when I'm in the shower and recall the different illustrations in the intermittent fasting ad. *No, it's not a gluten belly. It's definitely not a post-baby belly. It's not a booze belly either (well, maybe a little).* It's a sadness belly, as unloved and untouched as the rest of its host. One of my friends, who's had more paramours than there are days in five years, doesn't believe me when I say my last time was with Sam. When I say this, he says back, "Come on, be honest." We've known each other for a decade and he's done more for me than I have for him as far as I can tell. Lately, when I can handle projecting into

the future, I imagine having sex with him, no pandemic or complicated grief in the way.

*

I will tell you this much: It's almost spring, spring is followed by summer, and summer one year ago Sam committed suicide. Sam and I did not have a good run, a very long run, and I imagine certain people feeling vindicated, smug, the ones who admonished me for loving him. *You are making his life worse by the hour!* We were together not five years, and now he's dead. A few days after his death, I received his belongings by courier, including the belt he had used to hang himself from the shower in his studio apartment. The belt had been severed into equal halves; Sam's body was so still when the EMTs arrived, they could be that precise. One night, I examined the halves for hours, praying my atheist heart out for traces of Sam—his blood, sweat residue, anything—to appear. I pressed the halves to my nose and inhaled what might be left of him. Another night, I looped my own belt around my neck and reenacted the way I imagined Sam had hanged himself. I missed him, wanted to be with him because I didn't know how to be without him. He still had not, as his first wife promised he would, visited me, told me it's not my fault or it's all my fault. He still has not.

Our first two years together, we had the time of our lives. Sam told me more than once, "You've given me some of the best days of my life," and it's what I need to believe. If I don't believe the good things he said, if I believe his letter, that he was never able to feel love for anyone, then what story can I tell? There's no room in my binged-out body to store more

grief, so now grief is forcing a story out of me. The purge. People have said, Oh April, you could write a book, a terrific book like Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and I want to answer, "There can be no book." For there to be a book, I would have to tell Sam's secrets, which are not my secrets to tell. For there to be a book, I would have to keep alive what Sam so plainly wanted to kill. I could tell many stories about our greatest and our worst moments together, because everything between us was either the greatest or the worst, but I could never give anyone the full picture because I can't see it for myself.

So instead, for Sam, I tell our story in palatable fragments. And try to let myself feel everything as I remember the sweetness of Blue Chair coconut rum.



"I Will Tell You This Much" originally appeared in *Months to Years*.

Cassandra's Prophecy to No One in Particular

by Anna Hundert

If you call it unconditional, you will make people uncomfortable. You would be better off in the conditional. If you were to think that all love is somehow cosmic or universally anointing, you might think that all love songs are about God.

You will overthink. You will sometimes find yourself talking just a bit too loudly. You will dwell somewhere in Calvary with the ghost of Emily Dickinson, and then, wondering why they named the virus after the crown, you will think about the crown of thorns and Puck and all the dead poets and why the word *ideation* seems so absurd, to take the dangerous noun, the idea, and then turn it into a verb ideate and then turn it back into a noun, ideation, the thing you have to reassure people that you won't act upon. There is the strangeness of the phrasal verb act-upon. There is the sacred practice of saying no.

You will overthink turnings and spirals and snail shells, the tendency of certain things to grow in an ever-arching arch instead of just growing up. You won't mind growing up, but you will sometimes miss your father's dad-jokes.

Which is not quite the same as why gravity pulls galaxies together like that, all bodies drawn to each other but also drawn to the center, falling around each other without ever being capital-f Fallen, and you will wonder if everything that rises really must converge. You will think to yourself So many people have thought these thoughts before, and the world didn't end all those times. You will see the word metamorphosis and think of metanoia then paranoia, then pareidolia, and you will wonder if you are, in fact, Losing It. Certain sentences take on too much significance and they can't bear it themselves, Lady Madonna making ends meet and our mother has been absent ever since we founded Rome. You will save this text into a folder labelled "fiction things." Call it flash, or some kind of shining, or mirror-mirror-on-the-wall, or a love of the most lip-pursing sour-sweet apples. You will sing George Harrison to yourself when you see a sign that says Everything Must Go.

Something interesting about helter-skelter is that chaos tends to rhyme. Higgledy-piggledy, hodge-podge, willy-nilly, pell-mell. You won't know what chaos really is. You weren't there when my city fell. I am prophesying to you from a life that may or may not have been real, but you will still think to yourself, but her assault was more real than mine, Ajax with blood on his sword, and how she clung to the statue of Athena as he dragged her away so tightly that it

tumbled down, an unambiguous No. You will never properly study Hebrew but you will know that the formless void in Genesis is also a rhyming chaos, tohu wa-bohu.

You will chop onions while you write parts of this in your head. Try to put into words the sting-sweet smell and the sound of cells splitting apart from each other, of blade hitting wood. Resist the tears out of habit. Consider how these verbs begin to sound like imperatives. Reread some Emily Dickinson and sing to yourself, may I return to the beginning. Remember the days when you knew all the words to the song about the colors of Joseph's coat. Remember the days when you always noticed which way your shadow fell.

You will think of the word Will and how it is what puts happenings into the future but also is the thing itself, the will, maybe God's will. You will read difficult texts that parse the tenses of God, the way the eternal is outside of time, God the Father knitting puns into every human language just for the dads. You will listen to your father's dad-jokes and feel a strange comfort in the Buddhist monk at the hot dog stand who said Make me one with everything.



Distance

by Treena Thibodeau

A week before the party, I text my newfound brother and sister about social distancing. The wording has to be right; I don't want to sound uptight. I'm the free-spirit most likely to lose her top in the pool battling nieces for a spot on the raft. I'm the one who will come up with a truly dangerous game to play on the trampoline. I'm the *fun* aunt.

Hey dibs, my text goes. So excited for birthday weekend. I am donor-conceived, and so is my brother, and we all met electronically last year. Our three birthdays fall just a few weeks apart, but it's the first time the three of us will be together in one place. I'm already nervous: my sister is an ER doctor, and my brother also has a smart job. They are adults with houses and children. I am a forty-six-year-old woman who owns a hamster, the only one not bringing a family of her own to the party. *Just want to check in about safety!!* I debate the merits of adding a third exclamation mark.

In 2019, before saliva was scary, I used the alchemy of my spit and the internet to find my donor-father, anticipating

some sort of genetic jump-scare. On the maternal side, my family history reads like a V.C. Andrews novel, my mother's story a murky pond, placid on the surface with secrets unspooling under the rocks at the bottom. When I was sixteen, she told me I came from a sperm bank and dropped the subject fast enough that I knew not to pursue it.

Knowing the answer to the question *who is your family* is a big piece of telling the story of yourself, starting in elementary school when your teacher asks you to locate yourself in the branches of a family tree, but not knowing my father's identity meant I could tell whatever story I liked. I liked to think my father was Bill Beutel from *Eyewitness News*. He looked like a man who never lost his temper and yelled *I HATE YOU FUCKING KIDS* because you spilled nail polish on the rug.

After all those years of speculation, the 23andMe website gave up my donor-father's name with an anticlimactic lack of struggle, and I wrote him a cautious email, double checking to make sure none of my neediness leaked out. There should be a squiggly line for that; my spelling and grammar are fine, but I need some kind of auto-correct for the phrase that shows my desperation for fatherly acknowledgment. I reassured him I just wanted medical information, and I didn't ask him to read forty years worth of my stories. This stranger can never know how hungrily I scoured the internet for his photos. He's enough of a public figure that there are even videos of him, my stomach a trapdoor sprung every time he pulls a face that I've only ever seen before in the mirror.

In the beginning, my father wrote me back with warmth. I told him I was a writer, and he told me about his parents, children's book authors whose names my partner immediately recognized. *That book was my favorite.* A windfall of pride: the grandparents are even better than Bill Beutel, proof of genetic worthiness, even though I do not get to claim them publicly because that is how it works with anonymous donations. The half of my DNA that I want to brag about is the half that has to stay a secret.

My father mails a box of my grandparents' books to the school where I am a teacher, and it's so heavy I need to push the box down the hallway with my foot. I hope that someone will stop me and ask what I am pushing, so that I can say, *oh it's just a present from my father* in a breezy tone of voice. His return address is on the box and I put it in Google maps to see how long it would take me to drive there, if I were invited, and if I were better at driving.

The party is at my sister's. She did not come from a cup at the sperm bank. She was raised by my father (*Her father*. To her, I always refer to him by his first name, never attempting to hook an arm around him with a possessive pronoun), and she sends me old newspaper articles featuring our grandparents, with my father and my uncle as children, holding up the books starring the characters they were named after. My father and uncle named their children after characters as well. They are all escaped figments of my grandparents' imaginations. My first name, Treena, is in one of their books too, although this was just coincidence, and they spelled it differently.

My sister has the famous last name. I have the last name of the man who adopted me, the one my mother divorced and coached me to be embarrassed of. He'd dropped out of school in the eighth grade and struggled to write letters, and when I asked if I could call him, my mother said it was expensive and pressed me to start calling her new husband Dad instead. I complied. I was five, and an extra father seemed like a good idea. I called the one I'd started out with *Old Dad*.

Apparently you can trade up. I am fascinated by my new siblings, by my biological father and the trove of family lore he comes with. I continue to write to him, and his responses grow terser until he falls silent, alluding to marital pressures.

I get it. To my father's wife, I am not family. Still, I post pictures of myself online with my newly acquired sister and her young daughter, the three of us laughing the way you laugh when you know people are watching and you want to show that you are having a nice time.

Because of the pandemic, when I get to the party, I do not hug my brother and sister, although I want to so badly my arms itch. I wave, which seems more like a good-bye than a hello. My estimation of six feet varies with how much I like someone, and the distance between us feels sloped, tipping me towards them. We live in separate states, and saying no to this party is unthinkable in the face of a gnawing fear that there won't be another chance for all three of us to be together at one picnic table. That is the other thing about new family—you haven't had any conflicts yet, so you don't know if you can safely make it to the other side of one.

A part of me wants to go and hide in the bathroom, to text them separately, *I feel so nervous*. Texting is easier than talking. My brother would text back a reassurance, swearing I wasn't acting that weird. My sister, a note of identification: *I'm nervous too!* In real life, the three of us have the same awkward laugh. But if there are gaps in the conversation, the dogs and children fill them. There is a birthday cake. Rather than blow out my candle with my own potentially infected breath, I pluck it from the cake and wave it, flinging wax everywhere. I wish for this family. People talk about *family of origin* and *family of choice* like they are two different things, but sometimes they are both.

In the photo of the three of us, you can tell we are related. We look the same, even if I'm the shortest by a solid foot and still trying to reserve a COVID-appropriate distance, listing to one side.

Are you going to post that picture of us, I text my sister later. If it gets back to her mother, she'll be furious. Her mother calls my brother and me *those people*. We have no idea how many of us there are, we diblings, shadowy as the monsters in my grandparents' books, forever trying to start trouble. In 1974, donors were financially compensated, thanked for their masturbatory public service, and assured their identities would remain hidden forever. Doctors advised mothers not to tell us. These were medical-grade secrets, even if it meant we grew up in families baffled by the distance between us and the people we shared a dinner table with.

All my siblings are half-siblings, but stitching together a relationship with these two makes me feel like the gulf was not entirely my fault. It changes the story I tell myself about myself. And also: I confess to my mother that I found my donor-father, although I know I am venturing into the boggy territory of family secrets. It takes her a while, but eventually I get a text back.

How do you feel, she asks, startling me. I can't remember her ever asking me about my feelings. It's a struggle to make room for my mother's question in the story, for the arrival of a caring parent in my emotional-orphan narrative. She asks, *Did you always wonder?*

After the party, my sister posts the photo on Facebook, the proving-ground where everyone's family looks sort of normal. *Found-family*, she captions it. She tags me, and I share it to my own page, and my comment is lavish with exclamation marks, the punctuation version of hugs. I have a family. It doesn't look like everyone's, but I'm coming to realize: *no one's* family looks like everyone's. *Family* is just the thing we agree to call each other.

My mother sees the picture, me grinning beside my brother and sister, deciding we are family. According to Facebook, she liked it.



Contributors

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Karen Paul Holmes has two poetry collections, *No Such Thing as Distance* and *Untying the Knot*. Her poems have been featured on *The Writer's Almanac*, *The Slowdown* and *Verse Daily*. Publications include *Diode Poetry Journal*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Plume Poetry*, and others.

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Anna Hundert is a fiction and nonfiction writer based in Somerville, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Literary Hub*, *Electric Literature*, the *Ploughshares* blog, and elsewhere both online and in print.

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.

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