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Acknowledgments

Our sincere thanks to Dr. James D. Evans, President of Lindenwood University, who will retire this year. His support of faculty scholarship, his firm belief in academic integrity and excellence, and his pride in our university have all served to inspire us and to help create a community of lifelong learners. We thank Dr. Evans and wish him much happiness in his retirement years.

Many thanks also to Dr. Gina Ganahl, who has taken over the role of Dean of the School of Accelerated Degree Programs this year, which includes our MFA in Writing program. Dr. Ganahl has been a constant source of encouragement and positive growth, and we are very lucky to have her.

This year we welcome aboard Kelli Allen as our Poetry Editor, and her editor notes follow. Kelli’s talent as a poet, her brilliance as an instructor, and her tireless enthusiasm in all she does are tremendous assets to our program and to our journal. We are truly grateful to have Kelli at Lindenwood University.

Issue 5 would not have been possible without the hard work and skills of our editorial staff. Thank you to Sam J. Imperiale, Jacqueline McGarry, and all of the editorial assistants who discussed and voted on submissions for publication. This journal is a reflection of our MFA students’ varied perspectives and wonderful talents, and we hope that you enjoy reading the essays, poems, and stories that moved us as readers and inspired us to keep writing and writing and writing.

—Beth Mead
Editor, The Lindenwood Review
Director, MFA in Writing Program
Lindenwood University
From the Poetry Editor

One morning I walked downstairs to find a small flood occupying my kitchen. There was a ripple in the water’s surface, only an inch or so deep, and I noticed a tiny, dark green frog flopping along in the wet and mess. Two things occurred in that moment of recognition: I was in awe of those miniature legs propelling that perfect little amphibian body around a domestic pond that should not exist, and I let out a rather satisfying long sigh. The realization was easy—some little disasters are miraculous. There was no reason for the water, or for the frog, but here they both were, as natural and quiet as if they had belonged in that space from the beginning.

Poems happen to me in much the same way. I will read a few lines, maybe sit with a title for several moments, and suddenly I am ankle-deep in a spilt well, unexpected, but necessary all the same. Good poems announce faith in their reader. They speak to us from their weird pools on the page, telling us to wait, to be still, to look closer at what bodies might be leaving spells or salve. Poems refuse our walking away, our potential frustrations. By some magic left on the page, swishing about, the poet is saving us from drowning by insisting that we learn, now and always, to rest surface-to-bottom in stanzas, in these carefully worded waterways. Great poems demand that their readers pull open the strings tightly pulled around this or that bag of intention, and spill the contents to the ground, flood or none.

In selecting poems for this issue I noticed a theme quickly emerging. In their own unique fashion, each poem offers a sense of fluidity akin to both actual water and to that wonderful subconscious flow of dreams and longing. Even in humor (spiders and awkward dinner conversation), and in grief (death and unrequited love), the poems ask us to travel a river of sorts, stopping carefully and quickly to admire changing shores and banks. Dick Bentley’s “In the Rain: Lake Superior” gives us water as movement, as dance performed for and by
the swimmer, and for everything waiting beneath the waves. In “Learning to Paddle a Canoe,” Karen Hildebrand shows us that communion happens in the simplest actions, and often in the quietest spaces. Robert Kendrick explains in “Looking at Six Mile Creek” how water serves as conduit for memory. Each poet in this issue asks us to have faith that the journey down, and up, these figurative water-paths will grant us needed change.

Poetry always requires a leap unlike any suggested by prose or essay. Poems demand that we see miniscule frogs, caught in their own dance, sharing our private spaces, as living metaphors. The poems in this issue are salty fish. They are sleek fins and scales reflecting the best light on the calmest days. They populate that deep space where we know curious creatures are waiting for us to see them, brave, and as they are.

—Kelli Allen
Essays
Our Mother: A Prequel

We are there in spirit already the day you meet on a beach in Marblehead. As soon as he puts his towel down next to yours, we awaken. We are potential, possibility, stacked up and ready to campaign for life. We glint in reflections off your sunglasses, have worked our way into the sheen of the suntan oil you share, burrow under your beach reads; *Life* magazine for him, an Agatha Christie novel for you. We attach ourselves in the form of invisible threads that pull you toward each other. We are in the grains of sand stuck to the bottom of your rubber flip flops. You track us around with you the entire summer.

Admittedly, Mom, we missed a lot. We missed the majority of your college years where you majored in Phys Ed and played field hockey and basketball. We missed the summer you spent in Montana, making good on a vow to get out of Ohio every college summer and have an adventure. We missed the trip you took with your friend to Mardi Gras in your new red Studebaker. We missed the letter from the restaurant in Marblehead saying this Ohio girl could come east. She’d have a job and a spot in the rooming house. We missed the map buying and route planning and suitcase packing. We missed the nights you twisted in your sheets, unable to sleep, imagining hot wind on your neck while Chardon, Ohio, melted into a highway mirage behind you. The wonder of your friends. *You’re going where?* Friends who came home every summer break, friends with office jobs and babies and desires that did not include showing up somewhere they’ve never been before and making a life there.

You have never been east. You have never seen an ocean, have no idea the thunder it carries. You did not yet know the marshy fish stink of tidal pools, of ribbons of seaweed weaving around your ankles, water so cold it numbs your feet, the ache a rocky coastline can summon.
The man isn’t great looking. He isn’t ugly either. A bit on the scrawny side, a large dark birthmark over his right eyebrow. But he’s funny, charming even, the way he plops down next to you as if you are waiting specifically for him. “Hi, Kaye,” he says, having extracted your name from one of your friends. “I’m Eddie.” He has the Boston accent, a sound your ear is just getting used to; the absence of the letter R, the softening of words that run together in a stream. A river of words pours out of him, jokes, stories. You are laughing. Your head spins in the dizzying July sun.

He is finishing college, Harvard. He wants to go to law school. You like his friends Chickee and Carolyn. They drive a convertible. You spend the season waitressing and bussing tables in the village restaurants. Surely you can give him a chance, we whisper in your ear. Harvard, for heaven’s sake.

This sun browns your skin. You spend your days getting an ocean tan, which is different than a lake tan, or a backyard-on a-lawn-chair tan. Your beach tan is deep and golden; it makes you feel pretty. You carry the pretty all through your shift at the restaurant where you stack full plates of hot seafood all the way up your arm, and back to your room where you change to meet Eddie and his friends. Wear the white blouse, we urge. It shows off your tan. No, not the brown skirt! How about the swirly polka dot?

He teaches you to drink Manhattans. He is a great dancer. When you Jitterbug, people stop dancing and watch him toss you over his hip, slide you through his legs. When it’s time to get into your car and head back to Ohio, we permit you to clap us off the bottom of your shoes. Our jobs are done. You are in love.

Love can flatten a girl from Ohio with a sporty red car and a dream to escape, cloud her thinking, render her blind. But we, the potentials, would not have stepped in even if we could.

Love presses him to visit your family over Christmas. Love urges you visit his in the summer, puts a ring on your finger before he leaves for Germany, his army Korean War assignment. It lingers while you graduate and take that job in the country school where the boys spit tobacco and the girls never get to college. The girls who will never know what it’s like to toss a suitcase in the trunk of a car and drive off to unknown cities.
You set about learning to be a proper wife. You sit with your mother, on the sun porch on Saturday mornings drinking sweet tea and penciling a week’s worth of menus. There are guidelines. There must be a meat, a vegetable, a starch of some kind. You can always add rolls or salad. Butter is your friend. You learn to roll out a pie crust, to choose the right cuts of meat at the market, to slice summer corn off the cob and simmer it in salted cream. To shake flour and cold water in a jelly jar until it’s smooth enough to whisk into the gravy. You fry chicken, bake blueberry muffins. After, you and your mother critique the meals over a sink full of soapy dishwater. You copy your successes onto recipe cards to take with you when you leave.

He comes home from war and enrolls in law school. He’s Catholic so the wedding will be in his church. You will settle in Winchester, his home town. There is never any question about this, so why complicate things with a wedding in Ohio? It will be so much easier this way. In your mind you have already left Ohio, with its cornfields and silos and suffocating states on every side. Massachusetts is your home now.

Before the wedding, you must agree to raise your future children Catholic. You are a regular Midwestern Presbyterian. You never had any Catholic friends, but Massachusetts seems to be teeming with them. All of Eddie’s friends and their wives and girlfriends are Catholic. You sign on, considering it another adventure in your exciting life, a life about to become more thrilling. You imagine weekends at the shore, recreating the intoxication of the summer you first met, fingers entwined, kicking along the frothy surf. You expect he’ll want to take you to his old Cambridge haunts, supper clubs and dancing. You never consider that love can be slippery, temporary, rescinded.

The wedding is a blur, not only because it goes by so quickly, but because Eddie has asked you not to wear your glasses. Friends and family who come to wish you well are soft outlines of familiar shapes.

You become pregnant right away. You don’t work, instead stay home and try your recipes and wait for the baby. You are bored, with Eddie at the office all day. On Saturdays he plays golf with his friends. They stay late and have drinks at the 19th hole while you slide a hot iron over his boxer shorts,
arrange the magazines on the coffee table into a perfect fan. If your mother
calls, you are bright, just fine, everything is super, but when you rest the
phone back in its cradle you find it hard to swallow.

It turns out Eddie doesn’t love the beach after all. His ideas of travel are golf
trips and a damp, spidery cabin on a lake in New Hampshire. A lake like
all of the lakes of your childhood, scented with boat fuel and fish decay,
black and deep, with a bottom of slick grass. Mostly though, he loves his
little hometown which you realize is much like Chardon only without the
corn.

We come quickly, four girls in four years, sensing the urgency, feeling
portions of the love expel from you one baby at a time. Our father has lost
sight of you. He only notices you when you are pretty, dressed to go out
on the town, your hair curled, and lipstick on. Then he takes your arm
and waves goodbye to the babysitter who will play her Beatles records too
loud. He doesn’t feel the thickness in the air that surrounds you, the effort
it takes to swing your feet to the floor when a baby cries in the night. Has
no idea how many times you step into the coat closet each day to cry into
a woolen sleeve.

Your mother is stern with you. She comes after each birth, understands
what is going on. You will have a baby every year, she warns. After the
third she tells your father she won’t come for another. You need to stop this
nonsense, she tells him. When Baby Nancy is born she stays in Ohio.

It is 1961. You ride the train into Boston. You can’t remember the last time
you went anywhere alone, without a baby on your hip, small arms reaching
for you. You have to travel to Boston see a doctor who is not Catholic, and
to visit a pharmacy that is not named O’Neil’s or McCormack’s.

You hold your purse tightly on your lap. The conductor smiles at you
as he punches your ticket. There is a place on the way from Winchester to
North Station where the train slows and sways because the tracks are bad.
The rocking lulls you. You rest your head against the leather seat back and
close your eyes. You count your mistakes.
At home, my sisters and I crawl all over the babysitter. We touch our flesh in relief, wiggle our toes, grasp each other’s fine hair. Dion on the record player sings, “Runaround Sue.” In her bassinet, Baby Nancy puts a tiny fist into her mouth.
Fortune Tellers

For my thirteenth birthday my parents gave me a new stereo. A slick JVC CD changer with multiple trays, dual cassette decks for dubbing, and a digital menu panel with lights in a rainbow of colors. It was beautiful. The speakers were allegedly powerful, too. The only downside came when I looked briefly into my crystal ball and saw that in two years, on his own thirteenth birthday, my brother Nicky would receive a stereo that was vastly superior due to inevitable advances in audio technology.

Dad was in my bedroom removing the sound system from its large box with great enthusiasm, recklessly snapping the Styrofoam packaging. White kernels littered the carpet and clung statically to his sweatshirt. In one swoop he had my dresser angled away from the wall and was plugging the stereo in.

“Nice,” he said. The panel glowed invitingly and he stepped back to admire it.

For me, the anticipation of this moment had accumulated like a ball of snow rolling downhill all winter. The waiting, the desire, the glory of solitude in my sanctuary with grunge rock: Pearl Jam, Nirvana, Soundgarden.

Dad had other ideas. Hunched beside the stereo he chose a CD he had brought to christen the music machine. When I saw what he was doing, I was flabbergasted and assumed it was a Genesis album—this was the group we listened to on the rides from Naples to Rochester and back again during weekends with Dad. Dad, Nicky, me and so much to say there was nothing to say at all. Cruising the city streets in the black Acura Legend to Dick’s Sporting Goods and Blockbuster video, Italian restaurants and Redwings games, three bachelors eating Pizza Hut for dinner and then again for breakfast, sprawled on the couch at Dad’s apartment watching movies we had already seen together in the theater, simply enjoying one another’s presence.

My parents divorced when I was seven and when they told Nicky and me, I immediately thought of the only other kid in my class whose parents
were divorced. Jeremy Stopka was, to the best of my recollection, a cliché of poverty and neglect. His shirts were too baggy, his pants too short. Either he didn’t know how to tie his shoes or he didn’t care if they dangled onto the bathroom floor. After school he walked to the bowling alley where, he bragged, he consumed unlimited pizza and Coke—his teeth were spotted with black rot—and played video games while he waited for his mom to finish her shift at the shoe rental counter. He sat beside me in school and smelled like cigarettes and unwashed bed sheets, a tangle of sour breath and sallow skin. He left class for remedial help in math and reading. He couldn’t throw a ball well. He didn’t smile much. As immature as my judgments were about what type of person Jeremy was, he was not somebody I aspired to be like. Yet, sharing the commonality of divorced parents I felt more like Jeremy than I ever imagined I could and less like my friends than I ever wanted to feel.

Thinking about my parents splitting up was like punching a bruise. I’m sure many children of divorce feel the way I felt. I didn’t want anyone to tease me or think of me as different. Stupid. Sick. Neglected. I didn’t want anyone to discover my new defect. I knew that in this way, Nicky and I were different from all of our friends, so to keep the divorce a secret I chose to ignore it. I simply never acknowledged that Dad lived in another town. That I only stayed at his place a few times a year. That I was ten before I knew that he made amazing omelets. That he had girlfriends. I even ignored the fact that my attempts to keep the divorce a secret never fooled any of my friends. After enough time passes, some things are impossible to hide.

Once, after Dad brought Nicky and me back to Naples on a Sunday evening, the Acura broke down. He left it at the bottom of our street and walked back up the hill to the house. It was too late to call a tow truck so he spent the night on the living room couch. The next day I came home from school and there he was watching TV, still waiting for the tow truck, the only time in my life I would see him like this just after school.

“Hi, champ,” he said when I walked in the room, “how was school today?” I loved him speaking those words from that couch.

Unlike when we spoke on the phone during the week and ended our conversations by saying, “I miss you and I love you,” on those car rides back to Naples we just watched the road and trees scroll by and listened to Phil Collins until it was time to hug goodbye and then say only, “I love
you, too.” Sometimes in the car Dad sang in a rangy voice. It was more imitation than authentic. I slumped in my seat because even when you’re young you know whether or not your parents are rock stars. At the time I didn’t realize he was messing with me, not even when he dropped us off at home and told mom about his performance on the ride, apparently proud of his clever histrionics.

“Your father used to be in a band,” Mom told me after he left. “‘Fortune Tellers’ they were called.” That impressed me a little and I tried to imagine him onstage.

“What instrument did he play?” I asked.

“None. He was the singer,” she said with a rueful laugh. “They were pretty awful.”

The CD tray slid open and into the new stereo Dad placed the first album, a ceremony I had planned to orchestrate myself, but he caught my eye with a teenage twinkle in his own. I kept quiet. A bluesy guitar lick jumped at us. Then, drum kicks and the bass line. Dad twisted the volume knob to the max. He howled along with the singer about a girl with long black wavy hair. I couldn’t distinguish his voice from the stereo voice. The lead guitar bit again, the rhythm section filled, and Dad was leaning back on one leg, the other bent at the knee in the air and with his giant hands he picked out the notes of a vigorous air guitar solo, then turned the volume down.

“Nice,” he said, but I didn’t know what to say, could never have predicted that routine. “After classes finished on Friday afternoons,” he continued, “I used to put my speakers in my dorm window and play that record as loudly as I could.” In the most beautifully clichéd way, he appeared younger at that moment.

The stereo sat atop my dresser, in the top drawer of which was a wrinkled photograph of Dad holding me afloat in the high school swimming pool. I was four years old at the time. The picture, my go-to charm when I needed to see him at bedtime, seems to be one of the only concessions I allowed myself regarding an acknowledgment of the end of my parents’ marriage. In that photo, in his arms, I felt so secure. Looking at it each night confirmed reality because looking at it meant he was not downstairs. Only alone in my bedroom did I feel less different, stupid, sick, neglected, less like Jeremy. After each glimpse, I buried the photo under my T-shirts at the back of the
drawer. On the other side of my bedroom wall, I imagine Nicky, with his own picture, did the same. We never talked about it, though.

Suspended in the water, suspended in time: in that picture everything was okay. I could almost smell the chlorine, hear the lifeguard’s whistle skip across the water and echo off the walls, feel Dad hold me tightly with one hand around my waist while reaching under water to snatch Nicky off the bottom and hand him back to Mom on the deck. I remember how, after that lesson, I chased Dad. The sun stretched over the crackling summer grass and wind whipped my damp hair and I almost had him. Dad zigged one way and then another and I kept after his knees. The plastic bag holding our wet towels and trunks twisted and crinkled in his hand. I was chasing the sound and the chlorine smell that covered us and I was chasing him. From the school pool, up the hill, across the soccer field. Dad looked back at me, just out of my reach and I giggled and pumped my legs. My whole world was that sprint. A gust of wind pushed against me and I charged forward, reaching with my hands, but Dad was pulling away, a blur of denim I watched explode to the far side of the field. I stopped running and waited for him to come back to me.

We walked the two blocks home in the fading light. I slept deeply and when I woke in the morning, while Nicky and Mom were still asleep, I went downstairs to the screen door just in time to look out and see Dad close the trunk of his car and back down the driveway. It was sunny and I didn’t say a word and I knew my presence was unnoticed.

“Who was that?” I finally asked when the music stopped.

“Led Zeppelin,” Dad said, drumming his fingers on the doorframe. With that he snapped his gum like a snare shot, left the CD in the stereo, and walked on out the door, whether to the past or the future I could not tell.
The Dog-Eared Page

We met in ‘05. His face was seasoned, his hair thinning, his stance that of the officer he had been in 1968. My eyes were lined with lessons, my hair white and spiked, silver hoops hung from my pierced ears, remnants of being a flower child, in 1968.

We liked the same music. We laughed at the same things. Laughing was just about our favorite sport. Over coffee at Starbucks, we joked about the foibles of online dating. One of us widowed, one of us divorced, we were coming of age—again, trying to be hip in the twenty-first century.

“Let’s take a trip to North Carolina next month.”

“I’d love to, but I’ll be in Chicago for my grandson’s birthday.”

“Okay. I’ll get you a flight out of Chicago to Raleigh. I’ll drive up, meet you at the airport and we’ll head over to the Blue Ridge Parkway. I promise you’ll never be the same—I’ll be your tour guide and we’ll head into the dim corners of my memory!”

Up went my eyebrows. “Should I be excited or scared?”

He met me in Raleigh. Armed only with a camera and James Taylor CDs, we headed off on a road trip, holding hands so we wouldn’t get lost.

He paid for breakfast that first morning while I checked out my camera. He took a toothpick from the cup on the counter and pushed it out of its cellophane as he waited for change from his twenty.

“Y’all come back now, hear?”

“You bet.” He smiled at the cashier, walked back to the table, slipped the toothpick into his mouth as he did.

“Ready to experience autumn in these mountains?” he asked.

I wondered if he was ready. He’d been a lonely boy in these mountains.

I looked up and grinned. “I’m ready.”

He rolled that toothpick from one side of his smile to the other and reached for my camera bag.
The fiery colors of fall splashed across the mountainside; the view from the Blue Ridge Parkway was stunning, but fog changed everything when we emerged from a tunnel. The low-lying blue mist was gone, and just like that, we were in an eerie soup.

Driving was almost impossible.

He about missed the faded sign. Between the drizzle and the lopsided writing on the weathered board, all he saw was Something Something Apple Orchard. He spotted a whitewashed wooden arrow chunked near the edge of the asphalt when he leaned over the steering wheel. He made a hasty turn down the muddy drive.

“Is this supposed to pass for a road?” I asked, holding onto the dashboard.

He needed both hands to wrestle the steering wheel. “It did when I lived here!”

Furrows led us to a clearing in an orchard. He parked the Camry beside a mud-spattered tour bus. Twisted branches, unwilling to drop the last determined apples, scraped the window when he opened his door.

I waited while he jogged around the car. He’d been taught old-fashioned manners growing up in these mountains. I smiled envisioning him as a young boy watching his daddy open all the doors for his mother. “Daddy” and “Mother” were spoken with love everywhere in the Appalachians.

He wrapped his denim jacket around my shoulders as I stepped out of the car.

My ankles disappeared in the swirling vapor. With his arm tight around me, we ran toward the sagging steps of a long, low-slung store. Wind messed my hair and fat raindrops pelted my hunched back. I stomped onto the rundown porch.

“Bluegrass Band this Afternoon” was taped on the rain-slicked door.

“Hey, look what we found!”

He squeezed me close to him as we entered. Jovial smiles and well-fed faces were everywhere.

Folks, some tall some not, roamed around tables crated with apples, pumpkins, and cornhusks. They crossed the aisle into aprons and rag dolls and tee shirts. Women chattered as they inspected everything, then, chose what they’d buy.
On the other side of the general store, three old pickers and singers were setting up on a stage carved into the store’s back corner.

We headed in different directions. I moved through a sea of flannel shirts and baseball caps, my eyes on the front row seats beside the crackling fireplace. He turned toward the aroma of coffee and spiced cider.

A small paper bag dangled from his fingers when he slid into the seat next to me. I caught the sack just as it slipped out of his tenuous grip and snuck a peek.

He handed me a cup of coffee. Chuckling at my impetuousness, he asked, “Would you like a piece of fudge?”

The Celtic blend of fiddle, guitar, and 5-string banjo started low and filled the store. He pushed his Tar Heels cap back on his head, tapped his foot, clapped his hands, and sang along, his husky voice harmonizing with the voices of the suspended musicians. I ate my fudge and bobbed to the infectious tunes.

He took my hand. Gave it a squeeze. He was like that; we spoke more with our eyes and the touch of our hands than with words.

The smell of apples punctuated the air. Wet tourists relaxed around us. I took in their white hair and receding hairlines. The only difference between them and us is a car and a bus, but I feel like I’ve stepped into a different dimension. Lightning flashed outside the window. The back of my neck tingled.

The pickers played on and in between songs their accents deepened when they told their tales.

When they started playing “The Tennessee Waltz,” he drew his arm away from my shoulders. Leaned forward.

Then he set his coffee cup on the floor, just underneath his chair, stood up, adjusted his low-slung jeans, exhaled, turned, and extended his hand. “Dance?”

He told me once he didn’t dance. He stood, tall and lanky, expecting my answer. I looked into his eyes and saw a teenage boy.

I rose, hesitant and uncertain. While time waited, I teetered on the flat edge of the world.

He covered my hand with his, placed the other one in the middle of my back. And we were dancing. Smooth and snug. He led so well.

I leaned back, looked into his eyes.
He winked, pulled me closer. I tucked my head next to the curve of his Polo-scented neck. I felt the give and ache of the worn boards under my hikers, my shoes slid easily, in sync with his muddy boots. I inhaled his smooth-shaven face. I was dressed in the finest denim jacket.

The big musician in suspenders was the only other person in the room and he coaxed a beautiful plaintive ballad off the strings of his fiddle. Twice.

I never wanted to sit again. There was a teenager inside me, too.

We had lived a thousand miles away from each other, fifty years ago. I was a big city girl. I pretended wild, but I was masking scared. I danced with my girlfriends every Friday night. No boy looked my way. Skinny, flat-chested, redhead, with no hope of a tan—that was me. Mom had told me I’d be pretty when I got older. Her words burrowed deep.

Fifty years ago, he was a mountain boy in North Carolina. He stumbled and yearned. To kiss a pretty girl, hold her close, smell her hair, dance with her. Maybe even discover her mystery. A lot happened over fifty years.

I did grow into pretty.

I married and through the invisible years of diapers and part-time jobs, peace marches and broken dreams, I sometimes looked back to a high school dance, I’d imagine a boy wanting to dance with me.

He wore a Green Beret before he grew up. He went on marches, too. He got married in between tours of duty. Got divorced the same way, in-between. Time just got away.

An odd thing about time: We can’t feel it moving, but it does. We don’t know where it’s taking us, for a while we can’t see where we’ve been. We often don’t notice the wonder of a special moment.

Then one day, a stranger walks by carrying two cups of coffee. We blink. In that moment, we recall the weight of a denim jacket, and we hold that hot cardboard cup again. We hear the fiddle. We even smell the Polo.

That was some trip. I’m alone now. I learned love comes in strange clothes and like mercury, can’t be held at all.

I’ve summoned that memory often. It’s a little run down at the heels, scuffed up around the toes. Still, my heart swells when I see his sepia image.
in front of me, his hand extended. That word, *dance*, lingers. When I try to capture his elusive drawl, all I hear is a whisper, then the memory slips away.

He was joking when he said “you’ll never be the same,” but he was right. I never was the same after that trip. I figure the Universe dog-eared a page and waited for me in a general store, with a piece of fudge, where I was finally asked to dance by a boy, in the mystical rain of the Blue Ridge Mountains.
Postcard from Bodega Bay, 1963

Here the air is hardly ever still: shrieks, then trills. Leaves swallowed by shadow and song. Come summer, it’s said the gulls will outnumber the locals, their bodies roosting inside the steeple at St. Theresa’s, legs like clothespins clinging to the schoolhouse eaves. You wouldn’t recognize me, how welcome I am, more homing than home. When sparrows ribbon between houses, their cries remind me why I left. Why in the boughs of your mouth a name other than mine now perches. Oh, this sky! How it hovers, then dips! Empty as memory, then teeming with wing-beat and talon. Don’t bother with apologies. Forgiveness is the sound of a screen door flapping behind me, the hard knob nesting in my throat. As you sift through the ash of eleven years, some aches

I know you won’t consider: which letter burned quicker than the others, where the wind draped each photo’s scorched and oily plume. Sometimes I think of how swift the first corner took, how often love is numb beneath the mantle of longing and truth. Before you, I never knew beauty, its quills, its quiver, the dark calligraphy unfurling at my back.
Mystery

We all believe in mystery. The way one thing becomes another because we say it does, but only if it’s true.

The way the male red-wing blackbird, royal red epaulets, makes of mere stems of grass, a dais, the way he ok-a-lees!

The way starling rabble on the lawn mimics and mocks. The way the striped gray tomcat, after his roam, comes home cold, with a puffed tail, forgets (or remembers) like a teenage son, begs to be let out again. The way the yellow crocus, the lavender crocus, yawn awake, lazy at the woods edge, in the same way the watch dog, lazy at the garage, welcomes home a stranger like family because his spirit informs her this is true. The way white pines and red pines are so adamantly green, yet do not envy the way a crushed white fir needle releases the fragrance of tangerine. The way a cardinal’s what-cheer cheer cheer becomes my mother’s laugh.

Thin white scar she bore on her hand, mark that recorded the day she rescued a meadowlark from a cat when she was twelve, the way this gave birds and mercy precedence. And the cottonwood twig she planted by the water trough on their dry-grit pinto bean farm, the way it rooted and thrived while each of her father’s store-bought saplings died. The way words take root. A scene in Genesis, shepherds gathered at a desert well. Flocks of thirsty sheep, bleating heat of the day. The dust, the din. Then Rachel, with her flock. The way translating this verse—Jacob,
the way he greeted her with a kiss—bewildered me with sudden tears before I knew the next words, \textit{and he lifted his voice and he cried out.}

The way \textit{watered} and \textit{kissed} sound so alike in Hebrew. The way I \textit{knew} that moment, that day, by the way its dove flew across my chest.

Communion Season

Last light seemed to flicker under restless clouds. Driven from their beds that morning, doll parts lumped under mattresses, orange juice taken to cleanse their lazy mouths, little girls walked arm in arm with their fathers through the streets and into the church, newly painted peach. Mouths O’d in quiet song, like the mouths of silent movie starlets, surprised and gasping. I remember nuns at the entrance signaling the girls to cross themselves, to partake of a small mystery, three things happening at once: burrs clinging to their ruffled socks; patches of sunlight appeasing their father’s raincoats—the gray of old meat; gold studs on nightstands waiting to be used as ornaments, as benedictions, holding the throb of 3-day-old pierced ears.
Goat

No, he won’t be outcast. Or if he must, he’ll be defiant,
dewlap and long ears ringed with vapor,
breath damp green with ripening hay.

So what? He shakes his head. Who needs the sheep?

All around, deer bend and browse. He likes their ways, their grace.
Dinner at Mom’s

My brother’s hair is a darker shade of red than mine, and we both have excellent form when we shoot free throws. We sat in the wrong chairs for dinner, not where we sat growing up. We received identical inspirational calendars from our mom for Christmas. 
- Taxes are due. - Pay the cable bill. - If the wind fails take to the oars. 
He works in a pharmacy, sorts little pills into little bottles. Customers curse at him if their insurance won’t cover the bill. I like to ask myself the question: What was I doing at my brother’s age? He is five years younger than me, and I think, somehow, doing this will help me better understand him. I tell him how I can’t stop thinking that aging is like a rain slicked slope. I don’t think I need to explain why. He tells me he doesn’t think about things like that too much. I am the age at which rock stars seem to die tragically. I can’t sing. But if I stand in front of the mirror for long enough, I can hear my skin melting.
Night Light
after the affair

I’m thinking a yacht—sails
pulled, kicker and tide
dead even. Commotion down
the beach—a fisherman struggling

with what’s gone deep, alone
like a good fisherman should be,
close to his lies. I turn the light
to a party boat, blood on the deck,

no chance for fish stories here,
too many things getting away—

the perfect mount, make it
a skin mount, scales still full

of the last moon. Next morning
it’s all buoy and glassy seas

warning me where not to go
after I’ve gone, reminding me

of home—the porch light, stories
I’d push overboard before bed.
Light and Dark During the Sermon

Then there’s how light passes through the apostle’s face on the stained glass window, specifically his eyes. What does he see now that we know…His lips, what would he say if he knew…The priest recalls Old Ben’s burial. The offering is next, that gray area where gods have room to work. The congregation feels it getting late for all their own reasons.
Copperhead, Ambler Gorge

It wasn’t like we didn’t notice—
twice walking over your body,
a thick twist of rope amidst thatch,
leaves that match your markings and dirt too,
radioactive—
the third time we jumped from
your net and still you snoozed,
a spring unsprung, a mouse trap
unsnapped.
They say you don’t exist here, among the rocks
and furrows, but I know better
your dreams are mine—
untrodden woods, fresh streams with trout
a place sullen by no one
We’re simpatico there
They say that one bite, if you existed,
might send me to the anti-venom unit,
that a strike in the heart would be a clean kill
but I don’t believe that—
I jumped over you twice today, unknowing,
a third time with knowledge,
and you didn’t care
the fear marketing is better then
or perhaps I caught you dreaming today
of slow mice and dim hamsters,
of stupid hikers
and black mambas
who have a better reputation after all.
Learning to Paddle a Canoe

I get that it’s a simple matter
of physics: *For every action,*
*there is an equal and opposite reaction,* like love.
I can’t tell a fulcrum from a fish.

When I dip an oar into the honeyed lake,
my face ripples. So, *this is joy!*
*The lower hand serves as a pivot to the lever action.*
It’s somewhat easier than I imagined

navigating these waters alone—
Clary Lake and the land that lies beyond.
*Once the stroke is completed, relax.*
I raise my paddle and drift

near a pair of loons. They mate for life,
you know. *Endurance will come naturally
with practice.* All around, lily pads
open their fragrant breasts and swish.
The Spider in My Bedroom May Be An 18th Century Privateer

There is a spider in the corner of my bedroom and I have named him Sir Aloysius Bartleby. I assume that he is a man of the sea, but not quite a pirate, and not quite legit, occupying more of a gray yet respectable middle ground—perhaps a privateer. I also assume that he is running booze to the cave crickets in my garage with their unnecessarily large knees. The saddest part is that both Sir Aloysius Bartleby and myself know that I will kill him in his high boots and large buckled belt that no doubt contains two loaded pistols. He will request a duel, which I will say is nonsense because he is far too small for me to hit at twenty paces and I am much too large to feel the effects of his tiny gun. For obvious reasons swordplay must be discounted as well. I toyed with the idea of wrestling him to the ground and quickly slicing his throat with the knife I keep under my bed but I am unsure if spiders have throats, or if they can see in multiple directions on account of their eight eyes, making sneaking up on him fairly dangerous, as I know he is quite skilled with a blade himself. So I will go the dishonorable route, therefore, and kill him while he sleeps and dreams of his intricate webs. I wish a quick death for him and the feather running from his cap crushed in tissue between my index finger and thumb but I am oh so tired tonight, this bed is ever so warm and my wife, who fears his swashbuckling tendencies yet just wants him gingerly scooped up and let outside, promises to keep a good eye on him in case he again tries to escape from the only destiny a thinly mustachioed spider could ever reasonably hope to know.
Faith

I was brought up on science, Marx and Darwin—religion is the opiate of the masses—so I feel odd to be in church with Eric, my Rwandan driver, trying to fit in.

The pastor is pacing up and down the stage, preaching of sheep and goats and Jesus the good shepherd who waited for the new calves to be born. The tired father in his blue Sunday suit in the pew in front of me puts his shovel-size hand on the shoulder of his little wide-eyed son. The congregation murmurs their amens,

and the green-vestmented pastor preaches how Jacob served and worked and waited—seven years for Leah and seven more for Rachel, patient seven years for what was his. The newly married couple three rows down wrap their joyous arms around each other, to a deeper, louder chorus of amens.

And the God-wrestling green-vestmented pastor preaches Luke, Chapter 12, verses 35–36: how the faithful servants kept lamps always burning, waiting patiently because they did not know the hour when the master would arrive. Three older women in the first front pew, bent crooked from years of hoeing fields, smile agreement, nodding happily.

And I envy them their faith and their belonging, and am surprised to hear myself whisper “Amen.”
Old Loves

Love, to my parents, was a luxury. When poverty walks in the front door, love runs out the back, my mother warned me, repeating warnings her parents gave her.

They’d seen it happen. My mother’s sister, my Aunt Ruth, ran off with a socialist who thought he was a poet. She died poor, and of the tsuris he gave her, it’s best we hold our tongue. My father’s cousin Matt, who had the jewelry store, broke up his home for a Broadway showgirl. She left him flat when he went broke. What good did love do him?

My parents played it safe. My mother taught in public school, my father’s fish store thrived. And if they always fought, that was just what people did. At least we all survived.

So lately, I’m finding it a puzzle, when I watch them both, pushing ninety, cracked and faded, coming to resemble pale photographs in rusty frames, and see them holding gnarled hands. I have to wonder if their awkward tenderness quietly being born means that having come so far, it’s safe to risk just one small luxury.
Sanctuary

It’s one of those years again where I lose it with a stranger
in a public place, someone working in documentation or produce
and say, *Sorry I’m not usually like this. Usually, I am quite kind.*
I can feel how time soon moves away from us and we feel less.
We don’t cry as much; sadness is something more to be swallowed
like someone else’s barbeque fire in the air or the rain falling in the pool
between the graveyard and Persian bakery. And I am briefly passing through
knowing what there is to love in the world, and if I walked forever,
I’d still know. But gratefulness isn’t the point. And if it is,
gratefulness can only take me so far. And for years I wanted
to see you again like Lexington, Va farm girls in 1960,
anticipating their *Sha-la-la-la…oh baby now* request with a red phone
to the radio call in show. And I still do want to see you,
but that’s not the point either. And anyways, if you somehow just know
any part of this between the pigeon murmurs and a finger cut on a barbed wire
where you have come to ask the earth for water then that will suffice
for me, for this slow and burnt yellow Autumn.
In the Rain: Lake Superior

There’s ballet at the chilly shore,
a dance between rain, beach,
and distance where lake dissolves to cloud.

Amid those forms our view’s
a trim rinse of muted tones, taupe
and cloudy with a hint of silver,

out of focus, until the swimmer
dances out into the chest-high
spray and hops an arabesque.
Never barren rumination
    we are only almost noble
caught by trappings’ praise
seldom haughty never numb
never narrow never mind
    though our necks be stiff
we can learn to bend
must not grind our brains on this
caught within a cage of meaning
    we will answer our enlargement
in open-throated arabesque
find our footing in a time
when God is seen (if seen at all)
    as lightning in a sudden sheet
salty seething aether-churning
flash and gone
rapture’s endless proximation
    limitless
hyperbole
will have to do.
Late Afternoon in the Shadows of the Fruit Trees

Walking barefoot in this orchard of gnarled roots, I wish I had something to protect my feet. The old man said the fruit isn’t ripe, yet it smells sweet to me. The old man said to take a stick and kill all the snakes in the trees. He said if you pet the snake, it will bite you and you will go blind. I am losing my faith in him.

In the sunless tunnels under these leaves, you and I speak of fruit. I call this an apple. You tell me it is a pomegranate. Your mother told you not to eat this fruit. My father told me not to eat this fruit. Are you, too, weary of their voices? Later, they will make up stories about us. As their days shrivel with cold, they will blame us. Tonight we weave shoes for our bare feet. Tomorrow we walk into the sunlight, softly singing.
Solvent Can

Easy to get what he wanted, at first. Anhydrous ammonia siphoned from farm storage in night fog & chill, his legs & hands shaking as he filled the fat turquoise tank. Antifreeze jugs stolen one at a time, each wrapped in a fraying black hoodie when his manager took long ten-minute trips to the john at Durham’s Auto Supply. Lithium from batteries cut with a razor & opened with needle nose pliers to peel the shimmering metal strips. Pseudoephedrine took work, smurfed over five counties by the kid with the tar paper mouth for a few free ounces of meth. Easy to get what he wanted, a gutted out trailer on Love & Care Road tucked back on a curve of gravel, surrounded by scrub oak & pine. Windows painted black & sealed from the inside with trash bags & duct tape. Red spiral rings that glowed on the stove as his hoses crept over counters and floor like kudzu, carrying droplets
to make the rough crystals. Diamond mine in a kitchen. Easy to turn into cash. Easy to get what he wanted. A flicker of static, a low voltage kiss to charged air. A bouquet of flames. What some in the county call a good tweeker barbeque. Plastic & rubber turned lip curling smoke. His skin & bones become char. Not much left but the trailer’s scorched shell. An old propane tank in the back. A few aerosols. This solvent can, empty, tossed a few yards into the woods, almost as spotless as the day it was dropped in a Wal-Mart cart.
City of Bridges

Lightning in distant clouds
like a candelabra in a haunted house,

and watching the sky switch itself
on and off again like a television,
crowning the dark hills with a few tufts
of an old woman's impossibly bright hair,

it's easy to believe everyone has retired
to their back rooms, tugged on their foreheads
and unzipped themselves, revealing
the saffron clouds under their skins,
have gone into their back rooms

That I am an insect pushing its way along now
obsolete highways, amber mouth gaping open

like a lover asking in vain for a kiss, purple feelers
beating the pavement in anguish as the prey
sprints away, warned by the advancing lights.

If you want—
the rain will be cold and perfumed
as a prophet's head gracing a silver platter.
If you want—
there to be blood, slide a coin under your tongue.
If you want—
I can take you to the restaurant in the next town over,
the one that’s always closed, and we can dine
on cakes in the shape of skulls, our hands covering
our eyes.

Down in the dry and dark, the dead woman
reaches for his eyes and finds

you know what she finds.

I’ve got nothing, she confesses
to the ferryman, who remains

unmoved, a face made of lacquered wood,
hand still outstretched imperiously,
palm up and blank in the air, like a magician
showing he has nothing to hide.

Nothing here is connected—
not the grocery stores,
not the snow, not the people inside their skins,
not the landscape splintered hard
into a code between the moon
and earth.

But you knew that already,
too much salt in your blood

from watching chickenhawks drop for the river
painted below the town
in all its verisimilitude,

all its imitation of a normal life,
as if their talons can slice
the current.

What's the use of talking
here, beneath a sky pale as china?
Down where

the old men still sit
on the docks
in their flat hats,

where fish rush through the water
dark as a hawk's iris,
carrying all the truth

you ever wished for,
waiting to be built up,
waiting for the foundations to be laid.

The mistake is in thinking
a bridge links two points,
rather than marking their separation.
Jennifer Jackson Berry

Paper Birthday

Our baby is onion skin, not crisp
for folding into toy kites or airplanes,
but translucent, hard to see
in her white or canary colors, floating
just out of reach. She is thin,
bones also paper, scrolled
with only whispers inked
on the cotton fibers,
what her name would have been.

August 6, 2014
Looking at Six Mile Creek

No fish from the creek today. Even the mudcat refuse
a night crawler speared on a hook, suck what clings to the bottom
instead. Behind me, a groundhog shimmers though weeds,
supple & bright as a girl’s hair in summer. She may be split open
tomorrow, glistening white entrails curled on the asphalt,
blood turning dark in the sun. Picked up with plastic gloves
& burned as biological waste, her dirt-crusted brood in the nest.
Son or daughter, my kid would have been nineteen this month.
If Stephanie has a child now, I don’t know. Lives in Virginia. Did.
My line drops slack, the float lying still in the water.
Zenith Singularity

While you opened, skies opened
and light funneled its way from expanses
left more crowded by rubber band storms,
erasures of history, your tense sigh
building furrows, slowing nothing.

Zeros clog up the world, close it down,
fuzz edges usually sharpened like static.
All you thought laid before you, drafted

and harnessed, singled by erosion,
plentiful but indebted somehow.
Ventana

My husband and I were lost in the woods.
I want to hike from Esalen to Tassajara.
My dog has a notch in his ear.

Five days, four nights, twenty years ago.
Hot springs at either end.
He’s a rescue, so we’re not sure how he got it.

In the smallest wilderness area we’ve ever hiked.
Keep staring at maps.
Whether it caught on something and tore.

We couldn’t have been more than a mile from our camp.
I want to empty myself into the landscape.
Or was deliberately done.

But we couldn’t figure out how to get to it.
Feel fatigue behind my knees.
My husband thinks it was some kind of branding or marking.

We were tramping along a stream that dissipated into marshy ground.
Ridges plunging to the ocean.
He’s calm most of the time, doesn’t jump up, doesn’t bark.

We were in a place we didn’t remember.
Ocean that snatches the land.
Comes up to you, stands there and sniffs.

At night we took turns watching the fire.
Chaparral, grassy meadows, stands of pine.
Sometimes he’ll startle and start to tremble.
When it was my turn to stay awake, I kept falling asleep.
Canyons of the Big Sur.
For no reason we can apprehend.

My turn to sleep, I couldn’t.
Water rushing on.
Something we can’t hear or smell.

I dreamed not of food but clean sheets.
Redwoods.
Maybe a memory.
Killing Time

In August, I pass him
on our country road.
He is walking his pasture fence
in his pressed jeans, a tucked
plaid shirt, a blue cap
with the bill riding low,
white hair neat on his neck.

No horse in the pasture these days
to switch her tail at flies,
or bend her head to graze,
or raise it again
to keep her eyes on him.

But old habits die hard.
He strides in his dusty boots,
moving slow, and pausing
to pull thistles and mustard,
tossing them to the side
of the ditch as he goes.
Cora looked up from the rocky shore to see a freighter looming on the horizon. The sun had just set, and twilight clarified the haze which had defined Lake Superior’s outer reaches for much of the day. She’d been on the beach about an hour searching for sea glass—or, more accurately, lake glass—to make jewelry. She’d even stopped watching the sunset, which was glorious as usual, to comb through the coarse rocks and pebbles in hopes of finding more colorful pieces that she could use.

It was harder than one might think, finding beach glass along this particular shore. This was the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and the waters that sustained the sparsely inhabited mining towns were largely unpolluted. A blessing, of course, but not while trying to find fragments of garbage that the lake had transformed into polished gems. So far, she had gathered into her skirt pockets a collection both small and unvaried. The pieces were almost entirely clear and opal, with a single pale yellow one that had shined out at her from the water near the shore. Where were the turquoise pieces, not to mention aqua, forest green, orange, brown, maroon? If hidden farther out in the water, they would have to wait. Although the late-June breeze was mild and warm, her fingers ached after plucking that one golden miracle from an inch of frigid water. Normally, the year’s first touch of Superior water felt clean and pure, like how Cora imagined baptismal water must feel to those old enough to process its sacramental meaning. But this year, the water just felt…numbing.

They’d had a rougher winter than usual, and the ice on the lake had only finished melting a few weeks ago. Back in May when the slush piles had finally disappeared and the trees started budding, the joy was palpable everywhere. By now, however, the novelty had worn off, and people were beginning to settle into the pattern of summer.

That was all right, she supposed. Routine kept her busy. That was mostly why she’d decided to spend the evening collecting pieces for her jewelry. She would sell the necklaces, bracelets, and anklets on the website she’d
set up for that purpose—an enterprise which had yet to yield a substantial profit. The main thing, though, was the resolution she’d made last week on her fortieth birthday, a promise to herself that she would perform at least one creative act per day. Simply put, every day she would take at least one step toward producing something. It had occurred to her that she spent too much time consuming the products of others: books, movies, music, food, even hiking trails. Enjoyable, certainly, but the inherent passivity of all this consumption exhausted her. She was tired of appreciating things.

So, she had begun to spend more time working in her vegetable garden, writing embarrassing nature poems in the journal she hadn’t touched in years, and making her custom jewelry. She didn’t even wear jewelry, but she liked making it. She had steady hands and a talent for design that she’d never suspected before. She’d gotten the idea a few years ago when she’d started working at the craft shop, work that didn’t count toward her tally of creative acts, since she was just a middle-man (or woman) selling items to customers. Hers was a pleasant job that paid better than many other places in town, but it was still just work.

And then there was her husband, Ray, a middle-school science teacher obsessed with insects. Although Cora loathed bugs, she loved when Ray would lecture about moths and crickets while they rocked together in the back-porch swing on summer nights, the tide a constant, rhythmic presence on the shore below. She only half-listened to what he was saying, but he would become so animated and flushed and huggable, so much himself, as he described wing spans and eating habits. They’d been married for twelve years. Still, nothing they did together—biking, talking, sharing meals, watching movies—could be considered creative. Not even sex, since they’d given up on having kids a few years ago. They were medically able to have children, as far as she knew, but they’d kept putting it off for one reason or another until they both felt too old for the challenge. Well, not too old exactly, but too settled in. By the time it finally made sense to try, when they had steady jobs and had saved enough to buy a house, Cora was past the point of caring, and Ray already had his fill of kids at work.

Even so, in the weeks approaching her fortieth, she had expected the old regrets over their childlessness to resurface. This hadn’t happened, though; if she thought of kids at all, it was with indifference. And no matter what the psycho-babblers might say, this urge to do creative acts was not
about an unfulfilled need to procreate. When she’d had that desire before, it had been powerful and straightforward, not cloaked in symbolism. No, something else had been bothering her, a longing that rose up again in her chest at the sight of that freighter far out on the lake.

Cora gave up her search among the rocks and sat back on the damp sand, arms hugging her shins and skirt puddling around her ankles. The sun was gone, but the light would linger for some time. Today was the solstice, though she hadn’t thought of it until just now, noticing the celebratory bonfires dotted along the beach in both directions, flaring orange in the dusk. At the nearest one, a man and woman giggled drunkenly and dared each other to go in the water. The woman ran down to the shoreline and waded in up to her knees, then yowled and raced back, wild with laughter. From their vocabulary and the quality of their voices Cora could tell they were young, probably mid-twenties—about the same age as she’d been when she first moved up here.

She had been out of college for a few years and was alternately crashing at her parents’ place in the suburbs of Cincinnati and working her way around the United States. She picked oranges in Florida, served cocktails and crawfish on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, cleaned hotels at Yellowstone. She never stayed more than a few months in one place. Her parents thought she was crazy. Why didn’t she just look for a job in Cincinnati, save up for an apartment, pay off her student loans? She couldn’t explain it to them, or even to herself. All she knew was that her life up until then had been so sheltered, so structured. She wanted to prove something to herself, though she wasn’t sure what. So she would pick a city she’d always been curious about, drive there in her little hatchback, check into a cheap motel, and roam around looking for Help Wanted signs. This would have been a poor strategy in today’s busted economy, with its outdated job postings as empty as the Internet’s other promises, but back then it worked just fine.

This was a time in her life that, as the years piled up after it, would gradually leave the province of memory and enter into that of imagination; there, it would expand and glow with the red-gold hue of romantic adventure. But whenever she would read through her old journals from those years, she was freshly surprised at the restlessness, frustration, and loneliness oozing from every page. Then the veil of myth would lift to
reveal the truth that her post-college odyssey had been a big, fat failure. Whatever she was looking for, she hadn’t found it.

Perhaps she was already beginning to understand this when she first came here that August, driving north from Detroit and stopping to stretch her legs in Mackinac City. Just like her other trips, this one was a whim, the brain-child of passing remark or a glance at a map of Michigan. She honestly could not remember.

She did remember the trip, though. It was already dark when she arrived in Mackinac, a tourist town full of stores that sold fudge, candy, and souvenirs. The main attraction was Mackinac Island, which didn’t allow cars and could only be reached by taking a ferry from the mainland. Once she crossed the Mackinac Bridge, she would be in the U.P. of Michigan. But it was still three hours to Marquette, her destination, so she parked in the lot of a beach-front hotel and walked out onto a long concrete break wall extending into the dark, choppy waters of Lake Huron. She stood at the tip of the structure, leaning over the iron railing and breathing in moisture from the lake. Bats fluttered near the floodlight above, preying on mosquitoes and casting quick, swooping shadows on the water. Pink-tinged clouds filled the sky above the lake and obscured the moon and stars. Though this was just one of the many places she’d passed through recently, a new kind of tremor buzzed through her body. This wasn’t the familiar twinge of excitement and dread that came with arriving in a new place; this felt different, like her life was just now beginning. The air vibrated with possibility. For the first time in her travels, she felt truly independent, truly free. Anything could happen now.

This feeling grew stronger as she drove across the Mackinac Bridge, its lights reflecting on the water and its wires twanging in the wind. And the feeling stayed with her as she drove the winding, pitch-black roads all the way to Marquette. Most of the time, hers was the only car in sight, so she kept her brights on and prayed that a deer wouldn’t dart out of the woods in front of her. For some stretches, she could sense rather than see the black expanse of Lake Michigan on one side, the towering forest on the other. The farther north she drove, the more she felt like she was traveling back in time to some primeval place.

The first indication of Marquette came with a widening of the highway and the lights of chain stores and restaurants. She checked into the first
hotel she saw and woke up around noon the next day. The first thing she did was drive around the small college town until she came to a beach, which took all of five minutes. She took off her shoes and waded out into water that shocked her with its cold, though she’d since come to understand how warm the lake had actually been that day. It was so shallow here that, when she was finally in up to her thighs, she glanced back and saw the shore far behind her. She stood there alone and looked out over water so clear that it intensified the warm brown color of the slick sandstone beneath her feet. This was Lake Superior, gleaming silver in the August sunlight. No breeze stirred that day, and the water lay flat, barely rippling. And vast. So vast it defied imagination. That feeling she’d had since Mackinac City reached a crescendo, and something clicked inside her. This wasn’t what she’d been searching for, no, but it was something better.

And here she was, all these years later, with a husband and a house right on the lake about ten miles east of Marquette, a fixer-upper foreclosure they’d been lucky enough to snag. She hadn’t meant to stay, not consciously, but then she met Ray, who was here from downstate working on his master’s in Biology. Just a few months after she’d arrived, she was working at a gas station and sharing a run-down house with four slovenly undergraduates. Her housemates threw a party, and Ray showed up with some people they knew. Emboldened by alcohol, he came right up to her and started talking about bugs. She liked him immediately. He was quirky without being annoying, and they hated all the same things. They shared a pot brownie in the kitchen and told each other dirty jokes. Then they went out to the back porch, where a light snow, the first of the year, flaked their eyelashes. His kisses warmed her collarbone, ears, cheeks, and finally her lips. At her suggestion, they ran to a large oak in the backyard and began to climb. Ray stopped about halfway up and started back down, but she made it nearly to the top, so high up that she could see the lake, an endless plane of negative space in the distance. She threw her head back and howled up at the waning moon. She couldn’t be sure how she found herself standing on solid ground beside Ray, but she would always remember how he grinned at her and said, “You’re a force of nature, you know that?”

As Cora sat on the beach and watched the freighter glide almost imperceptibly further from the ore dock toward some unknown destination, she wondered if that were still true. Had it ever been true, or did Ray just
say that because he was stoned and drunk with falling in love? And what did that even mean, “force of nature”? Maybe it had something to do with taking risks, but when was the last time she’d done that? Had she ever taken one, a real one? Even her travels all those years ago didn’t seem to count, somehow.

The nearby couple was leaving, kicking sand over the dying embers of their bonfire and gathering their towels. They waved in her direction as they tromped away, although they’d ignored her up until now. Waving at strangers was a custom around here, so she half-lifted a hand at their retreating backs. Now the closest fire was about a quarter of a mile away. Off to the west the residue of sunset had almost disappeared, and the lights of Marquette glimmered in the growing darkness. She should go back up to the house, wait for Ray to return from the errands he’d been running in town. But something was keeping her there, planted in the sand.

She loved this place, she really did. But sometimes, she would have a ridiculous urge to “borrow” a speedboat, drive it out to one of the freighters and somehow hitch a ride to wherever the ship was headed. There was actually a cell phone app that told you the names and destinations of these ships, many of which hauled iron ore between here and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, but she preferred not to know. She’d rather imagine that she could just hop a freighter and end up in Chicago or Cleveland or any number of Great Lakes cities, not caring about directions, maybe not even recognizing the city until she saw the skyline or got off the boat and glanced at a billboard or a newspaper. She missed cities sometimes: the diverse people that minded their own business instead of staring or waving at you, the anonymity, the concrete, the powerful mixture of odors both pleasant and less so. The stupid thing was that many city dwellers would kill to live in a place like this, or would at least pay good money to rent a summer home here. Also, with a little planning and saving, she and Ray could take a vacation and go to any of these cities whenever they wanted. But that would be nowhere near as satisfying as traveling by lake, not knowing where she was headed until she got there.

Although the freighter was nearly gone from her sight, a solitary figure materialized out of the grayness to the east—an upright paddle boarder, rowing parallel to the shore in her direction. Standup boarding had become popular in the last year or two, and since then Cora had thought
about trying it out as a test of her resolve and focus. Still, this person must have been crazy, balancing in the near-dark above forty-degree water, who knows how deep all the way out there. And alone. What if he fell and knocked himself unconscious on his board? Those things were hard, made of fiberglass, weren’t they? As the figure paddled nearer, now almost directly across from where she sat on the beach, Cora could make out that she—definitely a woman, based on size and build—was at least wearing a wetsuit, complete with hood, gloves, and boots. Even so, this woman was foolish. Cora felt a twinge of what might have been envy, but which she soon recognized as something else—loss.

Then, almost as if Cora’s thoughts had caused it to happen, the woman lost her footing. As she flung out her arms to steady herself, her oar plopped into the calm water, where it drifted out behind the board. The woman’s arms pinwheeled for what seemed like eternity, and just when Cora thought she had finally regained her balance, the woman fell backward and disappeared into the lake.

Cora jumped to her feet and scrambled over rough stones to the water’s edge. She squinted hard at the paddle board, the oar, and the disturbed spot where the woman’s body had broken the water. She thought she saw a ripple, maybe the tip of a reaching finger, then—nothing.

Cora stripped down to her underwear, flinging blouse and skirt behind her on the beach. Knowing that she would lose her nerve if she tried to wade out, she belly-flopped into the lake and gasped as its glacial cold pierced her chest. She crawled along the muddy bottom until the water became deep enough to swim. Keeping her head above water and her eyes on the paddle board, the outlines of which were growing fuzzy in the darkness, she concentrated on kicking her feet and reaching forward with her arms.

Keep moving. Don’t look back at the shore. Don’t think. Don’t think about how that board is much further out than it looks. Don’t think about how you’re not even halfway there yet. Don’t think about how much higher the lake’s been this year, how deep the water might be getting, or how you’ll find her in all of it. Don’t think about how you’ll get her back to shore—you can use the board. But now you’re thinking. Don’t. Don’t think about hypothermia, or drowning. Don’t think about the Edmund Fitzgerald.

She realized that her strokes were keeping time with the “ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum” of the familiar Gordon Lightfoot song, steady as a
metronome. She opened her mouth to laugh and swallowed Lake Superior in all its danger and glory. Now it was almost fully dark. She’d forgotten how quickly that could happen. She had lost sight of the board awhile ago—a lifetime ago—and no longer felt the cold. She had no idea how long she’d been swimming, or how far she’d made it. Bad signs, but she didn’t care. No turning back now. She thought of her clothes on the shore, probably being pecked at or carried away by gulls, and laughed again. She wouldn’t need them anymore. Poor Ray.

Then her reaching arm struck something solid—the oar, gleaming neon yellow and attached to a black, wet-suited arm. The mouth of the woman straddling the paddle-board was open, but the roaring in Cora’s ears blocked out her voice. Cora clutched the oar with a shaking hand, treading water, confused. Then she realized that this woman must have been calling to her for some time, probably since Cora had begun to swim. The woman couldn’t possibly have been under water for very long and still survived; she must have surfaced awhile ago and begun paddling toward her.

Her adrenaline draining, Cora began to hear the woman’s voice ringing clear over water that magnified sound just as it did everything else. The voice crystallized, became words. “It’s not deep here. You can probably stand with your head above water. But you should get up on the board in any case. This water is bone-chilling.”

Feeling foolish, Cora stopped treading and stood in water up to her neck.

The woman removed her gloves and held out her hand. “Here, come up on the board. I’ll row us back to shore.” Cora stared at the blue-veined, liver-spotted hand, then looked up at the woman’s face. She was old, at least seventy.

“Damn,” Cora said.

The woman frowned. “Well, come on. We need to get back on shore and get you dry.” She grabbed Cora’s hand and held it in a firm grip. With some effort, Cora managed to climb onto the board and straddle it in front of the old woman, practically sitting in her lap. Only then did she discover the numbness in her legs and posterior, which couldn’t feel the board beneath her. Her torso felt disembodied, floating, all clacking teeth and heaving chest.
“I can’t feel anything below my waist.” Panic buzzed her forehead and began to close her throat, until pain came like hot needles, pricking her thighs. She looked down and saw the woman’s strong, beautiful hands massaging her bare flesh.

“Thank you,” Cora said. The woman continued down Cora’s legs to her feet, not seeming to hear. That was all right. Cora wasn’t even sure to whom, or to what, she was giving thanks: the woman, the lake, the night, whatever Creator might be listening. Maybe all of these.

“How does it feel now?” the woman said.

“Hurts.” Cora couldn’t talk much for shivering.

“Good. Pain is good.”

“I know.”

The old woman lifted the oar. “Shall we?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

The woman began to paddle. Cora could make out the rocky shoreline, which wasn’t that far, after all. Past the dunes and up the hill, her kitchen light was on, dwarfing the stars that flecked the sky above her house. Ray was home, probably making popcorn in preparation for watching a movie together. She would be glad to see him, but first there was this moment, which found her suspended, afloat in this liquid void with a kind stranger. She wasn’t exactly sure what to name this state of being, but some people might call it grace.
All Jozef Bastin has ever stolen are the oranges. They are all he wants. At the age of seventy-nine, Jozef’s sense of purpose has become eclipsed by a kind of singular, tactile hunger he doesn’t understand.

He reaches down, lightly runs his fingers over two oranges. He eases his green mesh shopping bag around, rests it near his shin, and with a little tap, the oranges topple down into the bag. Mrs. Kim is talking with Mrs. Oliver, so she doesn’t notice. She has already rung up his purchase of a wedge of Gouda, a quarter pound of salami, a few tomatoes and strawberries. They’ve exchanged the usual pleasantries and, as is his habit, he has tipped his hat politely. Mrs. Kim is always friendly, smiling and talking. She keeps her two skinny black-haired sons busy sorting and hoisting crates of produce out into the morning sun. On occasion, when she’s ringing up his purchases, she slips a head of garlic into his bag without charging him, reminding him that it’s good for a pot of soup. He thanks her, looking down at the worn leather of his walking shoes.

Back at his apartment, he puts everything carefully away, sometimes while softly humming the tune of a folksong like those his mother often sang to him when he was a boy. He places the oranges in a large white bowl, adding them to the rising numbers of other oranges taken from previous trips. The sight of them in the bowl gratifies him, yet once his heartbeat has calmed and his awareness of what he has done settles upon him, it becomes impossible for him to eat them. Instead, he offers them to his neighbors or their children. His son, Nick, likes them and always helps himself whenever he visits. He seems to especially enjoy them. Sometimes, a couple of them become mottled with that pearl gray tinge of mold before he is able to give them away and he has to toss them in the garbage. Yet, even after throwing them out and taking them from his own garbage pail to the dumpster behind his apartment, he discovers that the pungent aroma of the overripe fruit still lingers in his apartment for days.

The ripeness is a smell he loves, but at times it also repulses him.
The compulsion persists, the mound of oranges grows, like irrepressible captives that must be accounted for. Jozef has become increasingly haunted by the shape and constancy of this compulsion, by the strange alertness of his mind and the stillness of his heart as, week after week, he slips one or two more oranges into his bag. He is struck by the ease with which he takes them, by the strangely pliant energy of his otherwise stiff and feeble legs as he makes his way back to his apartment flush with the dark knowledge of what he has done.

Saturday morning. Jozef sits near the large window in the living room of his apartment waiting for Nick to arrive. They are going to Woodlawn Cemetery where Jozef’s wife, Helena, is buried. Tomorrow is her birthday and he holds in his lap a small bouquet of irises, lilies of the valley and white roses to place on her grave. He has done this faithfully every year since her death. This morning he rose early, had his coffee and a slice of buttered rye. He bathed and shaved and combed his thin wisps of white hair, dressed himself in a white shirt, a dark blue blazer, grey wool slacks and a bright red tie.

Jozef rents a four room apartment in a red brick building four stories up, amid the sidewalks and storefronts of Allerton Avenue. The grounds have green lawns and tall slender trees that make a pleasant shade.

The large window where he sits this morning lets in the afternoon sun. The velvet ruby colored sofa—a wedding gift from his mother-in-law—still endures. An old oriental carpet he purchased at a flea market runs beneath. He is fastidious about keeping it clean, frequently sweeping it with a broom of stiff straw. There are a couple of low bookcases of dark wood holding a collection of art books: Modigliani, Brancusi, Picasso, and others. They are Helena’s. She was a painter. Dear beautiful Helena, gone almost ten years now, following years of shuffling in and out of mental hospitals, regimens of psychotropic drugs, a weakened heart that finally claimed her.

Atop the bookcases sit two small canvases of Helena’s work: one a still-life of dishes and fruit and utensils, the other a spare painting of glossy-leaved shrubbery and a gray-blue sea, a tapering horizon of deep blue and mauve. Above these, in a thin black frame, hangs an old black and white map of Antwerp, where Jozef was born.
A small window near the bookcases holds a new air conditioner Nick purchased for him last summer. But Jozef dislikes the drafty cold spots it makes, so he rarely uses it.

In the corner between the bookcases and the air conditioner stands the mannequin of a male torso he once used for fittings during his years as a shirt maker. Its headless, muslin-seamed body remains watermarked and frayed, riddled with pinpricks and black marks of charcoal from decades of fittings.

Jozef taps a sepia tinged fingernail against the newspaper wrapped around the bouquet and turns his gaze to the bowl of oranges on the oval shaped dining table. The white bowl, the dark teak wood of the table, the vibrant color of the oranges, all glow brightly in the light of morning. An arrangement that might have caught Helena’s eye, he thinks.

The door clicks, the knob turns. Nick has arrived. Jozef closes his eyes as his son opens the door, leans inside.

“Pop? You there? It’s me.”

He smells his son’s cologne. It reeks of the oily musk of some animal. Nick is an investment broker, mid-thirties. He works on Wall Street. He seems to possess the necessary instincts and cunning. He dresses in expensive clothes, has his hair cut at a salon instead of a barbershop, dons silk socks in colors of pale blue and yellow and shoes of exquisite nutmeg-colored Italian leather. He is tall, with shoulders bulked out, clean large hands cuffed perfectly at the wrists, nails clipped trim, square and smooth. Nick fills a room with his presence, the profusion of his head to toe grooming, the trouble he takes with clothes, his smooth, olive skin, that spare trace of fragrant talc on the neck.

“You okay, Pop? You ready to go?”

“I’m fine.” He waves his hand in the direction of his son.

Today Nick is wearing a crisp white shirt, tan blazer, dark slacks, freshly creased. Jozef sees that he is also wearing gold cufflinks. He puts his hands on his knees, slowly rising from his chair, nodding.

“Let’s go,” he says as Nick helps him up, lightly brushing stray flakes of dandruff from his father’s shoulders.

They take the elevator downstairs, stepping outside, into the sun-washed morning. Nick keeps a hand on his father’s elbow, gently guiding
him into the passenger seat of his shiny black Lexus. Jozef watches his son, the careful way he takes his arm and helps him get into the seat, one leg at a time; the way he leans gently above him to secure his seat belt. He is appreciative of his son’s solicitous manners. It is the excess polish and gleam of Nick’s life that annoys him.

He settles in, clutching the flowers in his gnarled hand.

“How much you got left to pay on this fancy machine you drive?”

Nick buckles himself in, turns the key in the ignition. “This beauty?” He laughs. “I don’t buy, Pop. I lease. I don’t like to keep a car for more than a couple of years. You know, so I lease. It’s like I always have something new to drive.”

That’s Nick. He’s always loved the newly minted. As soon as anything begins to show wear, he loses interest. When he was small and Jozef took him shopping, he observed how Nick loved to run his hands over things, whether it was brass and steel tools at the hardware store, the gleam of apples and plums and packaged beef at the grocer or the touch of cottons and silk from which Jozef fashioned shirts for his upscale clients. He delighted in helping his father pick fabrics for his shirts. He handled things with the kind of care most boys his age weren’t capable of, much less interested in.

He hears a sound like the chirping of an insect, and Nick reaches into his coat pocket, takes out his cell phone.

“Yeah, what’s up?” he says. He rubs his forehead as he talks, his eyes wander here, there as if searching for something he’s lost. “Yeah…I know. Look, I can’t talk right now. Can I call you later? Yeah…he’s gonna be pissed, I know. So what. So he’ll be pissed. I gotta go.” He slips the phone back into his pocket.

“Who’s pissed, Nick?”

Nick shakes his head, smirks. “It’s nothing, Pop. Just the office.”

On a Saturday? It’s always like this when Nick visits. Vapid conversation interrupted by calls from a working life he can’t seem to break away from, ever. But then, these days, Jozef muses, everyone is on the phone. It used to be only crazy people walked down the street, muttering incoherently.

Jozef leans his head back against the deep cushion of his seat. The inside of the car is a hushed and insulated chamber. Noises from the street grow distant. Everything smells starkly new—the leather, the shining dashboard, the lingering drift of his son’s rich cologne. The windshield is so clean it
The warm sun burnishes the interior; a glitzy hothouse on wheels.

“IT’S nice you can afford such a car,” he says as Nick slips into reverse, cuts the wheels sharply pulling away from the curb through bouncing glints of sun and shade, then out into the street.

Now he kneels by Helena’s marbled headstone, tracing a finger along the grooved letters of her name, laying his bouquet gently down. Nick stays with his father for a moment, helps him with the bouquet and kisses the stone of his mother’s grave. Jozef can feel his son’s restlessness when Nick places a hand on his back and tells his father he is going to take a walk.

Jozef holds a palm against the stone. They were married in wintertime. Helena wore a coat of pale blue wool, sprigs of lily of the valley tucked in her hair. They ascended the steps of City Hall, freezing fingers entwined. He gave her a silver ring with a diamond as small as a glint of melting ice. Forty-five years later, she died during a rich and flowering springtime, and as her casket was lowered into the ground, he placed a bundle of those same fragrant bell-shaped flowers—tied with pale blue ribbon—on top. As he touches the grooved letters of her name, he feels something like the spare shape of her hovering nearby. How brightly lucid and beautiful she had been in the early years of their marriage. A slender, pretty young woman who liked wearing khaki workpants and a white blouse over which she’d slip a butcher’s apron when she painted; a palette of cloth daubed and stained with ochres and blues and browns and reds. In a city full of immigrant strangers like him, Helena’s face became his touchstone; her voice and laughter a map for him to find his way. Her hands, supple, strong and fine, were always stained with colors, looking as if they were bruised. She would tint her canvases with the resin of leaves from pots of tea they drank. On Sundays, they visited museums and she would dress solemnly in a dark wool skirt and a silk blouse—not for him, she once explained, pinching his cheek, but for the paintings.

Prayerful words slip out of him, soft murmurings. In their first days together, she had never seemed a stranger to him, becoming only more familiar each time they met. By the time her illness became apparent, he was already too deeply in love with her. They were engaged then, his love for her entwined with that dark understanding. That’s when he became her
map, helping her walk the slender tightrope of her sanity. He learned how to talk to her to calm her manic episodes, to take her medications regularly. She blossomed in his care, placated and easy. Then, after Nick was born, she got worse. Her manic episodes increased. She could go for days without sleeping, painting frantically, reading poetry out loud, weeping; leaning out the window of their tiny apartment on East Broadway in the pre-dawn hours, her arms flailing as if trying to swat leaky streaks of morning light with her fists. He would hold her until she grew still in his arms—a nervous, exhausted bird.

He leans forward, kisses the headstone, then gripping it with both hands, he rises, feeling lightheaded from the rush of blood. Nick continues circling the grounds, talking softly on his cell, cutting deals among the dead.

The sun is warm on the skin of his head, his shirt growing moist. He shuffles to a nearby bench and sits, loosens his tie, pulls a handkerchief out of his back pocket, wipes his wet face.

He feels a hand on his shoulder.

“You all right Pop?”

Jozef shrugs. “A little tired. Nice day, but the sun’s a little bright for me.”

Nick sits beside his father. Jozef looks at him. His face is tight, his smile a strained muscle. There is the light chirping again. Nick reaches into his pocket, swipes at the phone’s screen, rises, talking softly.

“Christ,” Jozef hears him mutter. “I was afraid of that.”

A moment later he returns to the bench, leans back, crossing his legs, his hands clasped tightly, one making a fist inside the other.

“What’s wrong, Nick?”


The bench is situated on a gravel path near a small garden. Low mounds of leafy green plants fringed with bright purple and pink flowers pulse with color.

“What kind of trouble?”

Nick’s face is bunched into a dark grimace. He sighs. “They’ve started some kind of an investigation. It involves our whole firm. Insider stuff with securities, they say. I can’t talk much more about it. My lawyer says it wouldn’t be a good idea.”
“What did you do?”
Nick shoots his father a dark, hurtful glance, then he abruptly stands, hands thrust in his pockets.
“You want to go? You ready?”
“What for?” Jozef says. “You don’t like it here? You haven’t even spent two minutes not being on the phone, wishing you were someplace else.” Jozef’s body stiffens. If he had the strength, he would take his son by the shoulders and shake him, right here among all the dead. Right here, in front of his mother’s grave.
“Yes. Take me home,” he says to Nick as he tries to stand. He grips the edge of the bench, his body lurching forward.
Nick takes his arm. “Easy, Pop, easy.”
“So, they gonna let you keep your pocket phone in jail?”
“Jesus, Pop.” Nick laughs. “No one’s taking me to jail. I swear to you about that.”
Jozef’s legs feel too heavy and he struggles to move them. He breathes air into his lungs, but it only makes his body feel oddly warm and sour. If he is going to move, if he is going to walk at all, he will need his son’s help. Yet he can hardly bear it when Nick grips his elbow and escorts him to the car, as he explains to his father that he has a good lawyer and he fully expects things to turn out okay.
No chance of jail for him, he says. No chance.

On the drive back to Jozef’s apartment, they do not speak. Nick grips the wheel, maneuvering smoothly through traffic. The day is so lovely it makes Jozef’s skin ache. He feels as if he is gliding on the very surface of the air, all the darkness beneath him; sunshine spilling through the shadows of trees as they drive along the parkway. The lush beauty of green springtime fills his lungs until his chest hurts.
Nick pulls up in front of the apartment. “You want some lunch, Pop? I could get you something from the deli. Be back in a few minutes with it.”
“I’m not hungry, thanks. Think I’ll lie down, have a rest.”
Nick shrugs, nodding. His large hands rest on his thighs. He’s taken off his jacket, and tossed it in the backseat and sitting here now in his crisp white shirt, the sun glinting off his gold cufflinks, his dark trousers still
bearing their fine crease, Jozef glimpses a well-groomed, nervous, middle-aged man poised on the fringes of probable disgrace.


Jozef wants to say no, that he can manage on his own, that he can make it okay on his own. But he knows he can’t. It’s too warm, he’s too tired. Gravity, he thinks. Too much gravity in the legs.

Nick takes his key and unlocks the apartment door, leading his father inside. It is warm and dim. Jozef flips on the light switch near the door.

“Jeez, Pop, it’s hot in here,” Nick says, fingering the rim of his collar. “How about we switch on the air conditioner?”

“I keep it off when I’m gone. Why run up the bills?”

“It’s alright Pop. You don’t have to worry. Run the thing. Keep the place cool. That’s why I got it for you.”

“I don’t like it. It gets too cold in here when I run it all day.”

Nick sighs, shaking his head. He goes to the air conditioner and punches the on switch. He pulls out a dining room chair, drapes his jacket on the back and sits. Jozef starts for the kitchen. “You want something? A drink of water?”

“No thanks, Pop. Come sit down. Why don’t you let me fix you something to eat. Maybe a sandwich?”

Jozef raises a hand in the air, shakes his head. “Stop it. I’m not hungry.”

He pulls out a chair across from Nick and sits, feeling drained. He is unable to simply declare to his son that he wishes for him to go now and leave him alone. So often these days, Jozef feels that he is just close enough to Nick to sense how much distance there is between them. It isn’t because Nick doesn’t try. He does. He tries to be a good son. But it’s what Jozef doesn’t know about his life, so many things he doesn’t understand and that Nick won’t talk about.

“You remember your Uncle Theo?” Jozef asks him.

Nick cracks a little smile, nods. “Yeah. I haven’t talked to him in ages. You ever hear from him?”

“Oh, now and then,” says Jozef. “You remember the summer you spent with him?” Nick was fourteen. Jozef had sent him to stay with his Uncle Theo, Helena’s brother.
“Yeah, Pop, I do.” He looked at Jozef, his face quiet and even. “That was the summer Mom really went off the rails.”

Helena had become uncontrollable that year, prone to violent fits. Her doctors were experimenting with the dosage levels of some new medications they’d given her. Jozef had decided to accept Theo’s offer to look after Nick so he could take care of Helena.

“I thought your summer would be better if you went somewhere. Enjoyed yourself a little.”

“He took me to eat prime rib. A place called Chic’s. It was his favorite place.” Nick laughs, patting his stomach. “I ate a lot of meat that summer.”

“You came back with some nice silver cuff links. You’ve liked wearing cuff links ever since.” Jozef says.

Nick nods, smiling. “He took me to his favorite jeweler. Let me pick them out myself.”

It’s growing cooler in the small apartment. The air conditioner hums.

“Nick?”

“Yeah, Pop?”

“You don’t like the cemetery, do you? You don’t like visiting your mother’s grave?”

Nick taps his fingers on the table, takes an orange from the white bowl, cradles it in his hand. “I don’t know, Pop. It isn’t so much the cemetery, it’s just…well…” he shrugs.

“Well, what?”

“She’s just such a stranger to me, you know? I don’t feel I ever really knew her, except as someone who was sick, you know?”

Jozef frowns, nods slowly. “I suppose. It couldn’t be helped. It was one of those things.”

Nick stares at the orange in his hand. “Why are you buying so many of these, Pop? You on a binge of some kind?”

There’s a tone of guarded irritation in Nick’s voice. He digs a big thumb into the skin and peels it back, dropping thick clumps on the table, separating out the juicy segments, popping two at a time in his mouth as juice runs down his fingers. His face is moist with sweat as he grabs a white handkerchief from his back pocket, wiping his fingers.

“I give them away,” says Jozef. “You like them. So where’s the harm?”
Nick shrugs, smiling. He tears another segment loose and puts it in his mouth. Strings of white pulp dangle from the corner of his lips. “No waste, no harm,” he says, dabbing at his mouth, wiping his chin. Looking at his son devouring the orange, Jozef is reminded how his manners often fail to match the eloquence of the way he dresses.

“Smells like some of them might be getting too ripe, you know?” says Nick. He taps his foot, the shiny leather of his shoes channeling waves of what strike Jozef as muted panic.

“So,” Jozef says. “You have good lawyers? They’ll get you through this thing? What do they say?”

Nick looks at his father. His mouth is a tight thin line again, his chin stretched out hard, smooth. He makes a poker face. “I’ve got good lawyers. They’ve done lots of this stuff before. It’s the usual thing. One person messes up the works for the whole firm.”

“Who’s the bad apple?”

Nick looks at him. He rolls his lips, biting them. He shakes his head. “They have their ideas. Everybody does. I can’t tell you anything. I know you want me to, but I can’t talk about it. I can’t. Please don’t ask.”

“Nick?”

“Pop, please…”

“Just tell me one thing. Did you do something wrong?”

Nick flinches, rubs his eyes wearily with the heel of his palm. “I didn’t, Pop. I didn’t.” He looks down at the table, fingering pieces of orange peel.

Jozef looks at him, nodding. “Sure. Okay then,” he says softly. “I hope it goes okay for you.”

He busies himself, gathering pieces of orange peel when Nick’s phone goes off again. He starts to reach for it but Jozef grabs Nick’s wrist, squeezes it with as much strength as he’s able to muster. “Don’t do that anymore,” he says, feeling a warm spasm of anger creeping up his spine, bone by bone.

“Huh?” Nick looks at him with surprise.

“Turn that damn thing off. Quit answering it, will you?”

The phone continues to chirp, chirp, chirp, but Nick doesn’t touch it.

“Okay, okay,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

The noise stops, the apartment fills with silence.

“Can you go now?” Jozef says. “I’m tired. I want to lie down.”
Nick looks a little hurt by the abruptness of his father’s words. He gets up, pushes the chair back against the table.

“Give me those,” he says to Jozef of the orange peels Jozef is cradling in his hands. He gives them to Nick and Nick takes them, holds them to his nose, sniffing them. “I once smelled an orange from a block away. Like some kind of noisy bird,” he says, a wry smile creeping into the corners of his lips. For a few seconds, he looks like a boy again, unburdened. He shrugs, shaking his head as he walks the bundle of orange peels to the kitchen trash can and tosses them.

Jozef’s palms smell of oranges too.

“I’ll call you later in the week Pop,” he says returning from the kitchen where he grabs his jacket from the back of the chair, slipping his arms through the sleeves, smoothing and straightening his cuffs. He leans and puts his arms around his father, kisses his forehead. Jozef feels the heat of the day coming from Nick’s shirt and jacket.

“You need anything?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Some money? You need some money? Or some groceries, or something?”

Jozef waves a hand at him. “Don’t be silly. I’m okay. I can still get my own groceries. And I don’t need your money either.” His face reddens and a sudden shame engulfs him. He promises himself he will give Mrs. Kim some money for the oranges next week. He knows that he’ll likely lie to her about why he took the oranges. He hates himself, his childish furtiveness.


Jozef closes his eyes, raises a hand in the air. “Okay, yeah, sure. I will. I promise.”

Nick starts to leave when Jozef calls out to him. “Nick?”

“Yeah Pop?”

“Will you do me a favor?”

“Of course. What?”

“Next time we go to your mother’s grave bring flowers, will you?”

Nick smiles, embarrassed. “Sorry. I’ve been a little distracted. Next time, I promise.”
As Nick shuts the door behind him, Jozef rises, heads to his bedroom. On the way he turns off the air conditioner. He strips down to his T-shirt, beltless slacks, bare feet and climbs into his bed.

Jozef sleeps. The room is warm, humid, dark. He slips beneath layers of blankets. There is an interlude of deep, numbing sleep before a stirring cocoon of dreams erupts—floating dispatches of memory, apprehension, fear. Plumes of smoke fill the air; Mrs. Kim is running, terrified, arms in the air like a twirling, tumbling scarecrow, crates of oranges, berries, lettuce and cucumbers tumbling and crashing everywhere. Another vivid shard floats by: Helena in a hospital gown wields a paintbrush; thick oily hues stain her bed sheets—all over her skin, her hair, her gown, the floor. She is weeping. Bitter, incoherent words spew out of her like broken rhymes, gossamer strands of her hair against her pillow.

He hears his father, the diamond cutter: *You have to hold it just so, at just the right angle. You get the right cut, you break it just right, you’ll make a handful of brilliant sunshine.*

A handful of brilliant sunshine. His father had a way with such things. He had a way with holding things, a long concentration before making the cut, clearing away every thought that was not essential.

*A diamond’s an ugly thing, a misshapen crystal, see? Just a piece of broken glass, until the right cut and polish turn it into a gem.*

But it was Jozef, a young man in his father’s dim and musty workroom in the basement of their house in Antwerp, there with Nick; not Jozef as failed lapidary, but Jozef as something of a master, speaking these words. He helps Nick clamp the diamond in the dop, helps him position it just so against the whirling disc, explaining the importance of the position, so the wheel grinds away the diamond to the desired angle. Nick stands on a milk stool. Jozef wears an apron, soiled with oil and grime, one small lamp between them, burning its light down into the dop, the crystal still a rough shaped rock. The smells of his father fill the tiny workspace; odors of dark tobacco on his breath, of shaving cologne; the flesh of other women, like a coating of white powder on his skin; his fine skin, his soiled fingernails. Between the unspoken pauses in his illicit life, between the careful instructions of cleaving, day in and day out, the bombings began, scores of refugees filling the cobbled streets, the V1 and V2 bombs whistling like shrieking
ghosts. His father worked, disappeared, returned, smelling of perfume. His mother, ignorant of everything, washing clothes by hand, boiling potatoes, counting rations, combing her long dark hair in the evening by a light so thin her tired eyes ached and burned as she untangled her thick strands, fashioning a plump shimmering braid that ran down the length of her spine; her beautiful posture.

She threads a needle and Jozef watches it disappear beneath a swath of fabric, a bobbing silver fish; the tips of his mother’s fingers pricked, bruised and dancing.

His father goes away one day, never returns. Passports and broken suitcases; burned out churches, hollowed out homes and debris, his mother’s grief, all follow. Then, he sees Nick again, steadying himself, saying he’s ready to make the cut, biting his lip, wiping his hands on his shirt.

Jozef opens his eyes, torn from the moving walls of his dark brain. It is damp and hot. The room is stifling. He throws the blanket off, sits up, wincing; raw hunger and an ache in his temples. He grips the edge of the nightstand, eases himself on to his feet, shoving them into worn leather slippers.

He makes his way through the darkness to the living room, switches the air conditioner on. He sets it on low, resting his palm against it for a moment as it lets out a gust of cool air.

He goes to the dining room table, pulls out a chair and sits. With a gesture as absent-minded as it is ravenous, he takes an orange, holds it to his nose, sniffs. It smells ripe, but good, not yet too far gone. He digs a thumbnail into the skin, begins to peel the fruit. The tips of his fingers grow white, fragrant with the smell of the orange, the snowy, musty pulp. Carefully, he separates the sections and one by one, slips them into his mouth, closing his eyes as he chews, tears sliding down his cheeks, seeds slipping out between his lips, into his palm tightly cupped beneath his chin, the sweet juice filling tongue and cheek, his hunger expanding as the fruit disappears, encroaching the last unlit place of his days.
Where’s Billy?

My great aunt, Maggie Sebold, puffed on Chesterfields all the way up to Tamarack Lake. She never seemed to stop talking and kept taking her hands off the steering wheel to emphasize this point or that. We thanked God that few cars traveled the old two lane highway.

Since my mother, Laurie Frym, had asserted her right to ride shotgun, that left my uncle, Bud Sebold; my little brother, Billy; and me wedged in the back seat. We rolled down all the windows in the old Packard, but the cigarette smoke, the hot air, and the flesh-grabbing vinyl on the seat made the five hour trip seem a lot longer—*a lot* longer. We arrived at the lake wet with perspiration, bone-tired, stiff in all our joints, and, according to my mother, *cranky*.

On top of just having endured a miserable ride, the fact was I hadn’t wanted to go in the first place. A town kid, I really didn’t like the woods. The notion of spending several days at Tamarack Lake made me uncomfortable; I’d run into some bad times there. This time was no different. I just had a feeling—like something bad was going to happen.

My mother pooh-poohed my qualms and accused me of *just being difficult*. Anyway, she reckoned a week together at the lake would be good thing for all of us. That ended the discussion.

This trip made it our fourth summer going to Tamarack Lake and to the old hunting lodge my great uncle, Great Aunt Maggie’s husband, had hired built for him soon after he came back from the trenches of World War I France. Fenton Sebold had been a banker, a man of property, a deacon in the Episcopal Church—a community leader. He had also committed suicide near the lodge with an old German Luger. That sad event had transpired years before. Still, Fenton Sebold always insinuated his way into my mind when we came to the lodge. At times it occurred to me I might have my feet planted on the exact spot where he’d done himself in. It was not a good feeling.
“Here it is, Bud,” my mother said. She climbed out of the car and, like a real estate agent showing a property, gestured toward the two story log structure. “Really something, huh?”

My mother was a slim, wiry woman, about thirty-five at the time. She wore slacks and a white blouse and wrapped her chestnut hair in a dark blue scarf tied around her head. She had a pale, gullible looking face, with large, innocent eyes. My mother had gone through a rough patch after my father took off and before Great Aunt Maggie stepped in to help out. I guess that’s why her emotions didn’t always stay in one place. Sometimes she could be as tough as they came; other times she’d just break down over nothing at all. Right now, she sounded chirpy as a chickadee and stood there, hands on her hips, explaining the layout to her kid brother, Uncle Bud.

“It can sleep twenty upstairs,” Great Aunt Maggie interjected, “although it’s been years since we had a crowd like that.” She made a quick trip down her private memory lane. “And could they eat.”

My mother contended Great Aunt Maggie had been a knockout beauty in her day. From my thirteen year old vantage point, I couldn’t see it—all I saw was seventy-year-old gray hair pulled back in a bun, seventy-year-old wrinkly eyes peering through bifocals, and a seventy-year-old double chin. I had to admit though, even if she acted crabby, she treated Billy and me well. Sometimes she’d look at me with a straight face and say, “Come on Frank, let’s shake.” When we did, she’d slip a folded dollar bill from her palm into my hand.

Uncle Bud had never been up to the lake. My mother seemed determined we shouldn’t miss this opportunity to spend the week together. That was because Bud, a slim, wavy haired twenty-year-old with deep brown eyes, had enlisted in the Navy and would be leaving us at the end of the month for Great Lakes and recruit training. I realize now that Uncle Bud had been no whiz kid; but in those days I thought the world of him—Jack Armstrong, Sky King, and the Lone Ranger all in one. And he was going in the Navy. That was really something.

“You boys help carry in the groceries—and get those perishables right in the ice box,” Great Aunt Nellie said. “Jack should have put the ice in this morning. He knew we were coming.” Jack Buck lived across the lake on the reservation with his wife and five kids. He looked after the place.
Billy had been asleep for the last hour of the trip. Now, like a little hibernating bear, he resisted waking up.

“Come on, Billy, I’ll give you a lift,” Bud said. He hoisted the five-year-old in his arms and walked behind the women to the house. From the time our dad abandoned us, right after Billy came into the world, Uncle Bud had been like a big brother to us. He did a lot of good things for me, but, although my mom denied it, I knew he favored Billy. She favored Billy too. Everybody favored Billy, as if he was the crown prince of cute little boys. I liked him too. But all the adulation sort of turned me off.

Once we got inside, my mother led Billy, now awake and whining, up the stairs at the end of the great room to continue his nap on the second floor. Uncle Bud and I hauled in some boxes and luggage, and then we settled into two large leather chairs facing the great room’s empty fireplace, sipping warm Cokes. Aunt Maggie busied herself organizing the kitchen.

Shafts of sunlight, sprinkled with dust motes we’d stirred up, burst through windows set in the log walls and, at three in the afternoon, lit up the great room. Beyond the great room, a screened porch extended the length of the house and provided an expansive view of the lake. Wooden steps led down a twenty foot embankment to the water. From there, a plank dock ran out into the lake. An old but serviceable row boat and a green canoe rocked gently alongside the dock. Jack Buck had seen to the details.

Sunk in his chair, Uncle Bud said, “That fireplace is huge. I wonder where they got all those stones.” He took in the hodgepodge of sofas, chairs, tables, oil paintings (hunting scenes and sunsets), and kerosene lamps. Then he lifted his gaze to five or six tired-looking deer heads that festooned the walls.

“Who do you suppose shot all those?”

“Probably Fenton Sebold and his friends,” I said. I didn’t mention I thought they looked tacky or that they gave me the creeps.

Uncle Bud got out of his chair and checked out a knotty pine book case stuffed with dog-eared mysteries, thrillers, and Westerns. Nothing new had been added in years; I told him I’d read all the Zane Grays. Bud flipped through one of the musty-smelling National Geographics stacked on top of the book case. Then he tossed it down and said, “Let’s go upstairs.” He picked up what he called his sea bag and slung it over his shoulder. (In
retrospect, I suspect it was just an old laundry bag.) All I had was my old Scout knapsack, not nearly as impressive as a sea bag.

We paused at the top of the stairs and surveyed the place. Like the first floor, the second consisted of one long room. Wires had been strung the length of the room and across it so that curtains could be pulled back and forth to create separate sleeping areas. My mother had already made up four beds and was working at getting Billy to go back to sleep. She waved at us and then put a forefinger to her lips.

“Looks like one of those old army hospital wards,” Uncle Bud said.

“To me,” I said, “it looks like a dormitory for orphans.”

“I imagine what it must have been like in the old days with fifteen or twenty hunters snoring here in their long underwear.” The thought started us both laughing until my mother shushed us again.

Later, we posted ourselves on the porch and took in the shores of the lake with a pair of field glasses we’d found on a table. With the binoculars still pressed to his eyes, Uncle Bud said, “Hey, Frank, do you want to go fishing tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I said, “we can dig up some night crawlers in the morning and get a batch of sunnies or crappies.”

“Don’t you want to cast for bass?”

“Sure, that’s okay.” I tried not to sound very enthusiastic about casting. Had he forgotten how the summer before I’d been out in the boat casting and snagged my friend Eddie with a plug—right above the eye? We’d had to drive twenty miles over gravel roads to find medical help. The recollection of that twangy-voiced, old doctor pushing the barbed hook on through the skin of Eddie’s forehead, then snipping it off still made me queasy. There was something about being at Tamarack Lake. I didn’t know what it was but it wasn’t good.

My mother reappeared on the stairs with Billy. “I guess he got his second wind,” she said. “Now he says he wants a drink.”

The sun had burned Billy’s tousled blonde hair almost white. I suppose he was a cute kid—at least that’s what the grandmothers, aunts, and other idolizers all said. My aunts claimed his pushed up nose came from my mother’s side, which is the Sebold side. My Norwegian grandmother claimed his blue eyes. As far as I know, nobody claimed the chubby cheeks, chubby arms and chubby legs.
“Where’s the bathroom?” Bud asked. It had been a while since we stopped at the Phillips 66 station back on the highway.

“Sorry, Bud.” Great Aunt Maggie’s voice carried from the kitchen. “No indoor plumbing. The outhouse is in back.”

Bud looked perplexed. “I’ll show you,” I said and guided him out across the clearing to the slant-roofed outhouse, a weathered little structure I hated. A two holer, it smelled horrible (cups of lye dumped in availed little); it submerged the user in near darkness when the door closed; it swarmed with squadrons of nasty flies and aggressive mosquitoes; and it provided a nesting place for hordes of scampering spiders.

“It’s easier to just go in the woods,” I said. At night, however, with who knew what prowling around, no good alternatives existed. A flashlight didn’t provide much protection.

Waiting for Bud I leaned back against the parked car with one foot behind me on the running board, watching a pair of chipmunks, their tails straight up, scoot back and forth like a pair of furry acrobats. Why did my mother want to come up here anyway? We had plenty of fresh air at home—and a toilet that flushed.

When Bud came out, I said, “Jack Buck told me that years ago one of the hunters was in the outhouse on a cold, moonlight night. He heard this big commotion. When he peaked out, he saw that two or three wolves had brought down a deer between him and the lodge. Had to stay in there shivering for a long time until people from the lodge finally chased the wolves off.”

“You believe everything Jack Buck tells you?”

Uncle Bud didn’t know the half of it. Jack had filled me with stories that could make your hair curl, most of them dark stories about spirits and creatures that lived in the nearby woods. Who knew what might be out there? As a ten or eleven year old, I’d been reluctant to stray far from the lodge, especially by myself. In fact, I still was.

Before going back into the house, Uncle Bud and I pumped a pail of water and washed up. It got dark early in the woods, and Great Aunt Maggie rang the supper bell at five-thirty. We sat on straight-backed chairs out on the porch and consumed slabs of canned ham, boiled potatoes, and corn on the cob, all cooked by Great Aunt Maggie on the black wood stove that dominated the kitchen.
We heard loons, calling like abandoned souls, somewhere on the lake. Although the lake stretched to almost a mile long and nearly as far across, only three other owners had cabins along the shore. We detected no movement at the other places through the binoculars and figured nobody else had come up.

“Isn’t it peaceful,” Great Aunt Maggie said after we’d pushed back from the table. “I always think it’s so peaceful when the sun is going down.”

“It is quiet,” my mother said. She stared through the screen at nothing in particular.

Great Aunt Maggie might have considered it peaceful, but that in-between time, neither fully dark nor still light, stirred a sense of unease in me. It struck me as a mournful time, an eerie time. The cries of the loons didn’t help either.

“Uncle Bud, are you going on a boat?” Billy asked. He kept trying to lasso a spoon with a piece of yarn he’d found somewhere.

“I guess it’s really pretty out on the ocean,” my mother said.

I could tell she was feeling bad because Bud was going in the Navy and we wouldn’t be seeing him for a long time.

“Yeah, I expect we’ll have some great sunsets when I’m out there on one of those *battle wagons*.” Bud had started using Navy lingo, and he hadn’t even set foot in boot camp. He gave Billy a pat on the head and said, “Billy, first time back, I’ll bring you a sailor hat.” He didn’t offer one to me.

“It’s getting a little dark. We need some light.” Great Aunt Maggie pumped up the pressure on a Coleman lantern and lighted it. The mantle flared orange and blue, and then bright white, lighting up the table where the uncollected plates remained and illuminating our faces like white masks in the settling darkness.

“Let’s turn on the radio.” My mother smiled at Uncle Bud. “Maybe we can tune in some music. Pep things up.”

Uncle Bud, like a navy radioman on a fast-moving destroyer, hunched over our portable Motorola and spun the dial. But crackling static canceled out the two or three music stations he tried to pick up. The only clear signal came in from a station broadcasting a repeat of the Mercury Theater presentation of “War of the Worlds.”

“Oh, I remember this,” Great Aunt Maggie said, “scared us half out of our wits the first time around.”
“I think Billy will have nightmares, if he listens,” my mother said. She turned to Billy. “Give everyone a hug, then off to bed.” He lodged a pro forma protest, but, hugs delivered, Billy toddled away with his mother. My mother treasured that little boy—in her arms and in her heart and in her mind.

We lingered there—Uncle Bud, Great Aunt Maggie, and I—in the lantern’s little island of white light set beneath a dome of absolute blackness. Martians landed, their machines crawled over the face of the earth, and their death rays threatened the extinction of all mankind. I knew it was just a story; still, listening there in that quiet, lonely place gave me the willies. When we all turned in, it wasn’t Billy who woke up with nightmares. More than once in the night I came to sitting straight up, shivering in the sticky, warm silence—a silence broken only by the croaking of frogs and nocturnal grunting of snapping turtles. I wished we hadn’t come. I didn’t know why. I just wished we hadn’t.

In the bright light of morning, my spirits lifted. Like a mother’s touch, the voices and sounds wafting up from below reassured me. I could hear Billy laughing and giggling downstairs, Uncle Bud chasing him around. “Where’s Billy? I’m going to get you. I’m a bear. Grrr. Grrr.” Bud loved to tease Billy, and Billy loved being teased. Where’s Billy? was their favorite game. My mother’s voice: “Okay, that’s enough, don’t get him too excited.” Then they’d start again; more growling and giggling, played out against the muffled clatter of dishes and the muted clanging of pots and pans from the kitchen.

I eased out of bed, slipped on my jeans and a tee shirt, put on my battered Keds, and headed down the stairs. Like the warmth of the voices, the sweet maple-laden aroma of sizzling bacon drew me on.

“Uncle Bud’s a bear,” Billy said.

“Grrr,” Bud said.

It turned out to be a noisy, happy breakfast. Maybe my mother had it right after all—about it being a good thing for us to spend time together at the lake. When we’d finished working our way through mounds of pancakes soaked in Log Cabin syrup and melted butter, Uncle Bud stood up and, like a camp counselor, announced, “Still early. Time to go fishing.”
Bud rowed going out. The oars creaked in the oar locks and produced easy sloshing sounds as they came dripping out of the water. Water bugs skittered across the placid surface, challenging the fish that lurked below waiting to devour them. From time to time, fish broke the surface to do just that, leaving behind fast disappearing ripples, the only evidence they’d ever been there.

Bud didn’t talk much while we were on the lake. Once he said, “There’s a war just started in Korea. Wonder if I’ll get over there in the Navy.” I didn’t know where Korea was, but the notion of Bud going to war sparked my imagination. Another time he said, “You better look after Billy. Sis has her hands full raising you two.”

Mostly we just fished, without saying anything. We used drop lines with lead sinkers—maybe he remembered about Eddie after all. In no time we had put together a stringer of blue gills and a couple of small bass. Uncle Bud asked me to row in. He leaned back in the rear of the boat, tilted his cap down over his eyes, and let his hand trail in the water. By the time we came back alongside the dock, the morning mist had long since burned away. It had been good on the lake. My misgivings melted away. It would be a great week, I told myself. It would be a great week.

“Leave the stringer in the water,” Uncle Bud said. “We’ll clean them later.”

I trailed Uncle Bud up to the lodge. When the porch door slammed behind us, Billy rushed up to him like an insistent terrier. “Mommy says you’ll take me for a walk. Please. Please.” My mother smiled, a hopeful smile, at her younger brother. Lately she’d seemed so strong; now for a moment she seemed—I don’t know—sad, vulnerable.

“Sure, Billy, but first Frank and I have to clean the fish.”

“Wait until you see what we caught,” I said. I took Billy in tow and we climbed back down to the dock to retrieve the fish. But when I lifted the stringer for him to see them, Billy started to sniffle. “There’s no fish,” he said, his tone at once frightened and accusatory.

It was true. Only a few ragged fish heads hung from the line. The snapping turtles, creatures with brains the size of raisins, had been there. I shouldn’t have cared, but the image of those warty skinned snappers and their sharp, ugly beaks launched a chill that coursed across my back. It
made no sense, but I suddenly felt as if I’d abandoned the fish and, stuck there on that line, they hadn’t had a chance.

The undefined unease that had embraced me the night before flooded back. I wanted to tell my mother we should go home. She would have rejected the proposal—and told me I was just being difficult. So I said nothing.

As the day wore on, the mercury climbed in the tin-framed thermometer next to the kitchen door. The air had turned clammy, unmoving. The songbirds had ceased their trills and warbles. Even the crows had stopped their squawking racket and gone silent.

“I expect it’ll rain soon,” Great Aunt Nelly said.

Apprehension about our going out for a walk clouded her voice, but she didn’t presume to give my mother any advice about us kids.

“They’ll only be gone twenty or thirty minutes,” my mother said. “Billy needs some time out of the house.”

“I want to go.” Impatient to start, Billy tugged at Bud’s trouser leg.

Uncle Bud and I set off on the gravel road that led away from the lodge, with Billy marching along between us. We hadn’t gone far, however, when Billy decided to pluck a bouquet from the wild flowers, Indian Paint Brushes that spilled over in fiery red, green, and yellow excess on both sides of the road. Uncle Bud and I stood there watching him until Billy got bored and we could start off again. Soon after that, Billy plunked himself down in the road to play with a rock. I tugged at his hand to get him going again. He didn’t like it.

Ten minutes or so further along, we came to a little used foresters’ trail that branched off to the right.

“Tell you what,” Uncle Bud said, “we’ll go up this trail a little way and then head back to the house.” I didn’t see the point of it; the gravel road suited me fine.

Uncle Bud could see I wasn’t eager. “Come on, Frank. Into the wild. We’ll be like explorers.” Hands on his knees, he bent down and said in a conspiratorial voice, “Won’t we, Billy?”

“Are there bears?” Billy had his own concerns.

“No bears,” Bud said. “Besides, if any bears come, Frank and I will chase them away.”
Thick, dank woods flanked the meandering trail on both sides, plants in a dozen shades of green intruded everywhere, and rotting logs and branches littered the ground. Further out, tamarack swamps, ponds, and bogs dominated the landscape all the way into the surrounding counties. Sometimes the trail veered sharply, and its disappearance around a bend made you wonder if a way back existed. The white and yellow flowers that grew there, some of them emitting a foul odor, were of a sort that favored dark, wet places.

A colony of white maggot-like insects infesting a tree stump and scurrying simultaneously in a hundred directions captured Billy’s attention. He crouched down and began poking at them with a stick.

“Let’s go, Billy,” Uncle Bud said. Billy ignored him, busy with his stick.

“Come on, Billy,” I said. “If you don’t come, we’re going to leave without you.”

“No.”

Uncle Bud caught my attention and winked. A shadow of teasing impulsiveness flickered across his face. “Let’s hide and see what he does.”

Billy’s bratty behavior would earn him a little lesson.

Uncle Bud and I took off running back down the trail, which twisted first this way and then that. After we’d covered thirty or forty yards, we ducked behind a tree and waited.

“Just don’t make a sound,” Bud whispered. “He’ll be along here in no time.”

“I’ll bet he doesn’t even know we’re gone,” I whispered back.

We lurked there, like a pair of outlaws about to spring an ambush, expecting to see my little brother come down the trail at any minute.

A thick silence wrapped itself around us and rose above us into the pines. We cupped our hands to our ears, better to pick up the sound of his voice.

“He’s probably scared,” I said finally. “We better go get him.” Second thoughts about our trick had got hold of me.

“Let’s give it a couple more minutes,” Uncle Bud said.

“I bet he’s crying,” I said. “I’m going to get him.”

“It hasn’t even been five minutes.” Bud checked his watch.

“Besides, I’m hungry. I want to go back to the lodge.”
As if an affirmation of the need for us to be on our way, it began to sprinkle. Rain drops sporadically pattered down on the trail.


We heard nothing. I had anticipated Billy would call for us, come running to us with open arms. But we heard nothing.

Thunder rumbled all around, and the sky, what we could make out through the trees, had turned an abrasive-looking gray-black. Half jogging, half walking, we came around the turn to the place where we’d left Billy poking at the stump. He was gone.

“He’s probably hiding. Mad at us,” Uncle Bud said. But I detected a catch in his voice. At first deliberately, and then frantically, he started pushing back brush and probing alongside the trail.

“Billy. Billy. Come on out.” We both called. But we heard only the accelerating tempo of rain spattering on the forest canopy above us.

“He must have gone further ahead,” I said. We began to run, from time to time stumbling over debris strewn across the trail. We shouted as we went: “Billy! Billy.”

“He’s got to be here.” I gasped for breath in the thick air. “He’s got to be here.” But, he wasn’t. Barely thirteen, I began to cry. I’ve never forgotten Uncle Bud’s face—at a loss, washed by panic. What had we done?

“He can’t be far,” Uncle Bud said. “You take one side, and I’ll take the other.” We waded into the woods and clambered over fallen trees, our sneakers sinking into the oozing decay that coated the forest floor. We found no sign of him. Sometimes we stopped—frozen in place, hardly breathing—straining to hear a whimper, a sob, a word, anything from the little boy. We did so without reward—Billy had disappeared.

“I’ll keep looking. You get help,” Uncle Bud said.

I ran all the way back to the lodge, rain drops and tear drops smearing my vision. My heart jerked in my chest, then fled ahead of me. Even under the trees, an all-out rain now pounded down.

When I burst into the kitchen, my mother lifted her eyes toward me. “Is it something terrible?” she said.

I shook my head yes and sobbed.

By late afternoon, Jack Buck and three or four of his friends, along with a couple of deputies, had joined in the search. Without respite, the rain
poured down in frothy sheets. Wearing an old yellow slicker, even Great Aunt Maggie pushed through the sodden burrs and nettles. My mother, however, didn’t leave the house. Instead, she sat slumped over the kitchen table, her face buried in her arms. She didn’t cry; just uttered little moaning sounds. Only once I heard her murmur, “Where’s Billy? Where’s my Billy?”

Bud and a couple of the others kept at it, shining their flashlight around in the rain-soaked night and calling out for Billy. Like a beast with a never-ending appetite, the darkness swallowed their feeble beams wherever they directed them. Much later, as the still unrisen sun pinkened the eastern sky, the searchers slumped in chairs on the porch, burnt their tongues on steaming coffee, and considered possible next moves. When I tentatively placed my hand on my mother’s shoulder to comfort her—or perhaps, I suppose, in hopes of eliciting a forgiving touch in return—she pushed me away. For a while, I tried to sleep, but, exhausted as I was, I kept waking up. The voices rising up from downstairs no longer reassured.

In the morning, the sheriff stood in the doorway, his hands clamped together holding his hat in front of him. “I’m sure we’ll find your son,” he said to my mother. A kindly looking man, with a bristly mustache and a paunch that pushed at his gray uniform shirt, he meant well. “Probably hiding, afraid to show himself. That’s often the case, you know.”

My mother simply looked at him, her face showing no emotion. She didn’t believe him.

“I’ve got forty men and the boy scouts out there right now. They’re all from around here. Know this area like the back of their hand. We’ll find him.”

My mother nodded. “Yes, please.” She still didn’t believe him. And she refused to look at Uncle Bud or me.

“Children have often wandered off,” the Sheriff said.

She didn’t answer right away. When she did, my mother’s voice came loaded with hurt and condemnation. “But those cases are different, aren’t they? Their uncle and brother didn’t run off and leave them.” Now she fixed her tearless, narrowed eyes hard on us. “Did they? Did they?”

The Sheriff replied that he guessed not. Uncle Bud and I studied the planks in the floor, unable to deal with either her grief or her anger.
Before it all came to a halt, they say there must have been a hundred or more volunteers prowling the woods, dragging the lake, breaking into unoccupied cabins. The sheriff questioned us; he questioned Jack Buck; and he sent out inquiries on my father. Theories sprouted like mushrooms—that Billy had been kidnapped, that he’d sunk into one of the bogs; even that he’d been taken by an animal. None of the theories led anywhere. They searched for two weeks. But they never located a trace of him. Like a little puff of mist gone off the lake, Billy vanished from our lives.

In the autumn, Jack Buck’s dog showed up at a neighbor’s place carrying one of Billy’s small blue and white shoes. That event set off a whole new round of searching. It produced nothing.

Not long after, one day my mother got on a bus and went looking for my father. I don’t know if she ever found him. Like Billy, she disappeared. Uncle Bud turned out to have a trick knee and was discharged after four weeks at Great Lakes. He wrote to me for a while; then the letters stopped coming. When my great aunt died, some said of anguish, the lodge fell into disrepair. The roof sagged and eventually caved in. Later, vandals burned down what was left.

Some people will tell you that bad choices aren’t necessarily stamped into your life forever, that they can be offset or somehow overcome. I can’t agree. When I got older, two or three times a year I’d drive up on the interstate, go out to Tamarack Lake on the new county hardtop, and poke around in the woods. I didn’t really expect to find anything, but I felt compelled to do it. I guess I was still searching. Somehow or other, I suppose I’ll always be searching.
Flash Fiction
The Someone on the Roof

Someone is on the rooftop with an accordion. You can tell by the way their knees bend that they have been up there a long time. Cartilage softens at high altitudes. A skeleton will thin without proper air pressure. Astronauts return to earth with bird bones. The Someone on the roof moves like a piccolo—aviator joints.

The Someone does not see you watching from the attic window. Or maybe they do, & do not care. Or maybe they care immensely & should you look away, the bellows would silence. The chimney would crumble. But you do look, & the accordion bellies open, inhaling the night. Dusk pales. Shadow extracts from air. The Someone spreads the accordion between their arms & the dark is sucked into it, & the sky hoists its skin one shade younger. The instrument contracts. It shrinks into itself & bores sound, & you realize you had never heard music until tonight.

The Someone plays the keys as if sorting through a jewelry box. A note slips ring-like over a finger. Knuckles tap against a minor chord. Sound tangles in chains between the wrists. The Someone opens and closes the accordion & every one of your lovers leaves you again. The roof shingles begin to clatter, the way they did last decade when the hurricane came. The Someone surely knows you are watching. They are looking right at you now & you forget to look away. You forget to never trust a Someone with hollow bones. You are opening the window. You are climbing onto the roof. You have lost your fear of heights. O holy firmament, God almighty, you will never know ground again.
The Son of a Coal Miner

When Jake was in junior high, he’d get home from school, eat a bowl of oatmeal and a banana, and wait for his father to get home. When he did, his father would eat his own oatmeal and banana, change out of his three-piece suit and into sweatpants and a worn Chicago Bears T-shirt, and lead them downstairs, to the basement, where they would fight.

Once they’d clicked the lights and made their way to the far wall, they laced up their high-tops, wrapped each other’s hands, and pulled on their gloves with their teeth. Then they bumped fists, their last gesture of friendliness until they again stood upstairs.

They tried not to slip as they circled that small space. His father switched stances every now and then, from orthodox to southpaw. Sometimes he’d dance; move in and out, toss two or three punch combos that stung but didn’t hurt. He liked to piss Jake off, to see how he’d react.

Of course, Jake would hit back. He did most of the hitting. Two-to-one, easy. He could swing as hard as he wanted. He had to. He had to take it as seriously as a real fight. It was the only rule—minus no low blows, kidney shots, and the like—and it was for his own good, his continued improvement.

So they’d swing and swing, and sometimes Jake would land a good one under his father’s arm, or on his hook nose that stuck out so predominately, and his father would take in this fast breath, like he was mid-air and about to jump into water. Jake would flinch when this happened. His heart would sink and flutter. In those moments, Jake felt his first real sense of adulthood—the duty-bound power that comprised it.

But those flinches and flutters didn’t last long, because his father was tough, the son of a coal miner. He’d breathe and barrel down, wait for his chance, and then sink a hook into Jake’s stomach or bruise Jake’s jaw with an arching, overhand right. His father tried to hold back, but each time Jake hurt him, the ropes of his conscience—of his fatherhood—grew slack.
for a few good swings. Sometimes Jake took the power off his own punches to avoid the power of his father’s.

Rounds lasted three minutes. They had no clock, no bell. Jake’s father would count the time in his head, or so he claimed.

Once, Jake had his father against a wall of banana boxes—the “ropes”—and was pounding his ribs with a body combo. Jake could hear his father hold his breath, tighten his midsection, as he let loose. Then Jake landed an uppercut—a dream uppercut—that sent his father’s head backwards like a gun blast.

He didn’t fall, and when Jake stepped back, his father nailed him harder than he ever had before. A double left hook. One to the body, one to the head. The body hook hit Jake in the kidney. He’d never experienced a kidney shot before, and it was terrible. His back and chest turned this icy, wet-cold feeling and his legs gave out, disappeared underneath him like someone pulling a rug.

But they didn’t give out soon enough. The second hook came right as Jake fell. It connected with his temple.

The room turned bright green and throbbed that way for a long time. When Jake came to, his mouth guard was gone and his tongue hung dryly from his lips.

Jake didn’t remember if his father stood there, bouncing on his toes, mouthing the ten count, or if he crouched over him and made sure he was alive. He didn’t even remember getting up. All Jake remembered was throwing combination after combination at his father’s face and body until he stumbled backwards and hit the floor.

They ended their sparring session early that night.

Before they went upstairs, but after they were done taking off their gloves and shoes and hand wraps, Jake’s father put his arm around him. “You fight like that,” his father said, staring over his red nose, “and no one will mess with you.”

Two trails of dried blood lined his father’s mug—from nose to lips to chin—and the green flashes in the corners of Jake’s eyes hadn’t yet fizzed away. They twinkled on either side of his father’s bloody face. For a second, Jake thought of Christmas, even though it was months away.
Chasing

The American soldiers had always come. All my life. They often gave us candy. I remember how the sweetness would melt in my mouth or the tartness would zing under my tongue. I would wish for more and eagerly anticipate the next time they would come.

Sometimes they had other things for us. Toys. The special Army food. Water.

Of course, we had water, but this water was different and special. It was American water. Whatever that meant. The other kids said that it tasted better than our water. Some of the kids had tasted it themselves, and others were just repeating what they had been told.

I heard the truck come rumbling toward me before I could see it, and as it approached I heard the shrieks of other boys following it. Chasing it. I looked up to see why and saw the two soldiers in tan camouflage in the back. One was holding out a glittering plastic bottle.

American water.

“C’mon!” the soldier called out to the boys. I had heard the American soldiers say that before and I knew that meant he had something to give us. He said other things that I didn’t understand, and he was laughing.

I joined the chase.

Several other boys ran next to me. Some were bigger than me. I was only eight years old. They could probably run farther and faster than me if they wanted to. But they didn’t want it like I did. I knew I would run longer than anyone. I would not give up.

The sun was hot and my feet were sweating in my shoes. The dust came in through the holes and it turned to a muddy paste inside. I dodged potholes in the street to make sure I wouldn’t fall, but I kept my eyes on the sparkling clear bottle.
The smell of exhaust from the truck burned in my nostrils as I continued to chase, but I didn’t care. I was running as fast as I could to keep up with it. No, I would not give up.

By the fourth block, my heart was pounding hard. It felt like it might burst right out of my shirtless chest and I would die right there on the street. But at the end of the block I looked back and I was the only one left.

The other boys had stopped chasing. They had given up. I continued running, ignoring my tired legs and willing them to keep pumping fast, trying to match the speed of the escaping truck.

The faster I ran, the more the soldiers were laughing. The one with the bottle was talking to the soldier next to him. He seemed surprised that I could run so fast and so far, and I was proud. He threw the bottle from the truck.

I ran to grab it with a surge of new energy. I had done it! And the reward was mine alone. The other boys had given up, but I had not.

Suddenly, some older boys ran from the sidewalk. They cut me off and one excitedly snatched up my bottle, which had cracked when it hit the dusty pavement. The precious liquid leaked onto the hot asphalt. He turned the cap quickly and with a series of pops the seal was broken.

The older boy took a deep drink and passed the crunching plastic bottle to one of his friends, who also took a drink and passed it on. They each took turns taking greedy swigs of it before handing it off to the next boy.

And, just like that, it was gone.

I felt hot tears sting in my eyes. My mouth was dry from breathing hard in the dust and exhaust from the truck that had now passed.

I said nothing to them. I blinked back the tears and ran my fingers through my sweaty hair as I turned and walked away. I would not cry.

Maybe when I’m ten, I told myself. Maybe then I will get to taste the American water.

No, I would not cry.
What She Showed Me

Where to jump the fence and where the party store kept the same generic tickets they sell at the gate.

The fortuneteller was new this year. No tickets, just two bucks I gave up a funnel-cake dinner for.

She waited outside, hungrier for a teller-of-pasts, or a giver of them, in some carnival that doesn’t need fences, doesn’t take tickets.
The Final Score

The game began forty-seven years ago: John, in his crumpled slacks after a long day at the office, sitting cross-legged on the floor across from Mary, nothing between them but cards. John Jr. was just a baby back then. They could only play a few hands before John Jr. would notice they weren’t paying attention to him, would begin banging his toys against the metal edge of his pac ‘n’ play like a prisoner in an old movie. But a few hands at a time was better than nothing. Originally, they’d agreed they’d play to five hundred, but when Mary reached the target so quickly—after just three days—they extended the objective to a thousand, then to five thousand. By the time they reached five thousand, though, they’d forgotten when to stop.

Eventually it became a sort of running joke—a winner would be declared only when one or the other of them passed away. There was a period of about two years—in their early forties—when John was several thousand points ahead, but Mary caught up to him and passed him, for a while. And so it went for years and years, John would be ahead, then Mary, then John. The game kept going and going, through it all. Through John Jr.’s childhood, his graduation, his marriage; through John’s infidelity, then apology, then penance; through Mary’s illness, then her remission; through John’s illness, his stay at the hospital, his gradual decline, his final days back home.

The winner, it turned out, was John. Mary checked the current score-sheet before folding it up and sliding it inside the card box, even though she’d already known he had won. Afterward, she wasn’t sure what to do with the cards. In the end, she gave them to John Jr., who’d grown up watching his parents play the game. When she told him she was giving the cards to him, he protested, but only a little bit.

“I can’t take them,” John Jr. said, even as he reached out for the box. “You should keep them.”
Mary shrugged. “What am I going to do with them?” she asked. “The game is over,” she said. “I lost.”

With the game finished, the evenings seemed a lot longer. Mary took up knitting, but it didn’t stick. She moved in with John Jr. and learned to play cribbage. She’d play most evenings with John Jr.’s wife, Maribel, but it wasn’t the same. She missed the continuous nature of the old game with John, the illusion that the game would go on forever, the sense that there would always be time to even the score.

Years later, after his mother was long gone, after Maribel was long gone too—happily remarried to a dentist in Lancaster, and with two kids, neither one John Jr.’s doing—John Jr. came upon the old deck of cards while trying to make room in his closet for his new live-in girlfriend. He didn’t remember those early days, when his parents played on the porch while he distracted himself watching ants. He didn’t remember the later days, much, either. He was preoccupied with his own life back then—a pre-teen, then a teen, then a college student, and then, and then. The game’s title was faded, almost unreadable, and the once stiff box had softened and torn at the corners. The weight of the cards felt light in his hands, and without much thought, he tossed the worn box into the large trash bag with the rest of the junk he didn’t know what to do with.
A Promise

“Help yourself,” he said.

I watched him shuffle back into the bedroom and decided his head looked slightly like a melon. “Is the tap water any good?” But he had closed the door, so I filled my glass and walked onto the balcony.

It was July, and the air was warm. I could smell the harbor a few blocks away and the garlic from that restaurant down the street, the one we passed on our way back to his place. I had tripped on the cobblestones and held onto his arm. It must have been that last martini.

“You coming in?” he asked from the living room. I remembered the bar and how good he looked throwing those darts, each throw something like a promise. Pulling the sheet tight around my body, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine my way back home, climbing back down the stairs of his building, stumbling across the street to the train. It didn’t work.

“I don’t know, it’s nice out here.”

“Yeah.” He leaned against the sliding door and cracked open a beer. “You coming in?”

“Sure,” I said, “just give me a minute.” He shrugged and turned, and I looked down at the railing. An ant wiggled along the edge, avoiding the condensation that must have leaked from the glass of water still in my hand. Down below, cars inched along the neighborhood street, and the people, so many people, all with their own little lives, hidden behind windows, discovering something between here and there, hoping the clouds might move so they could see the moon.
Disconnected

I slept through the end of the world. A deep, heavy silence woke me up. I looked through the window and saw the scorched forest and the skeleton buildings in the distance. I wondered if I’d ever hear the sound of laughter again. Then I remembered that I had never liked people, and I laughed.
We Passed Upon the Stair

On her third trip to New York, the butterfly room was available for the nights she’d be there. Dylan, the owner, her Dylan, now a stranger, didn’t offer to handle it for her, just said to call his four-room hotel for a reservation tomorrow, he’d have it arranged. The day before she flew out, he emailed that he wouldn’t be in town.

The plane was late so she had to take a taxi straight to the conference hotel where almost everyone else was staying. For nine hours she talked, numbed by the fluorescent lighting in the windowless room. The heat was set ten degrees too high and the small of her back was sweaty.

Dylan’s hotel wasn’t far but she was too tired to carry her luggage. The girl at the hotel took her bags from the driver, led Veronica up two turns of stairs, and unlocked the left door. She said that Mr. James had been staying in this room for the past few weeks while his apartment was being renovated, that he’d been fixing up this room, too.

Veronica could smell fresh paint, and wanted the girl to leave. She wondered if Dylan was friends with the girl, interested in her. As soon as she heard footsteps going down the stairs, she started to look. She opened every drawer, bending over to see in back of each, all corners of the closet, in the bathroom. All empty, pristine.

Then she took her clothes off, and unpacked, putting a few items in every drawer, wanting to fill the room. A clear glass bowl filled with pink and green bath beads sat on the tub, and she put the chained plug in place and filled the tub with hot water. She took six beads out of the bowl, dropped in five, put one back. As they burst, the water swirled iridescent.

In the water, the oil from the beads soaked into her skin, and she leaned her head against the rounded tub edge. She closed her eyes and imagined him sitting there on the bathroom floor, his back against the wall. She arched her neck to give him the best angle. Her lips moved in pretend conversation.
Out of the tub she toweled off, turned on the lamp by the bed, and turned off the overhead light. She got in bed naked with her briefcase, and got out her glasses and a file. She worked with deliberate seriousness. The soft white scalloped-edged sheet was folded down at her waist.

The next morning, she nodded to a middle-aged man coming out of the room across from hers, the wood room. They started down the stairs at the same time and at the first turn, she asked him if he was alone. When he said yes she stood on her tiptoes and they started to kiss. With his body, he leaned her up against the wall, and she suddenly felt trapped, in danger.
Still Auditioning

We clink glasses, sip our after-lunch absinthe afternoon, neat, under the frayed umbrella on the terrace, squint at the sun-sequin dazzle on the pool deemed unsafe for swimming. James Dean and Elvis are long dead and we are old, used up, celebrating our umph wedding anniversary in this seedy wreck of a hotel, and why not, we shrug, since no where and no one else will have us.

Here we are still together and neither of us has counted the years or even knows why. When old married couples brag about being together for so many exact years, and everyone around congratulates them, we cringe. Longevity doesn’t mean happiness. It can refer to indentured servitude, enslavement, and internment over years of misery and the inability to get the hell out.

With us, seems the original investment was made in good faith, but little by little, the dividends stopped. We realized just because you love being a husband or wife doesn’t mean you are good at it. We also sadly understood what a shame it is to be so good at what you don’t love.

“Ah,” I say, but what I mean is: It was love at first sight, me with my bobby socks and pony tail, you with your thick sideburns, really it was. But you insisted on asking me if I loved you and naturally I answered no in order to make you love me more, which you did, then I lost interest, so naturally I said yes, I love you so much, let’s hurry up and get married. I stunned you out of your passion and when I saw that you had worked me out of your system, I wanted you again. I said what I said because I could, you know how it is, whether we are together or not, nothing changes.

You hold the glass to your nose, inhale fennel and anise fumes. “Oh yes,” you say, “you know how it is.” But what you mean is: We have both fallen out of love with each other and into finding what fits. We’ve grown alike. When we want something, we get it, satisfied for a moment, then we become bored. We both understand each other’s performance. Yet, neither
complains because each time we do, we find ourselves exaggerating a little more and end up feeling worse instead of better.

Have you noticed (you don’t ask), the swimming pool no one swims in is an opaque jade, an unhealthy color for swimming pools, perhaps even toxic, like this wormwood infused drink in its clever little glass, this dangerously addictive psychoactive drug we sip.

I have (I don’t answer). What’s the point. We are still auditioning each other for certain uncertain roles. And anyway, these marks on our fingers from the rings we can’t pull off over our arthritic knuckles, these indentations of pale skin that won’t wash off, they still to this day burn with the savage sizzle of white-hot branding irons.
Contributors
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George Bishop’s work has appeared in Carolina Quarterly and New Plains Review. Forthcoming work will be featured in Split Rock Review. Toadlily Press includes his latest chapbook, Short Lives & Solitudes. Bishop won the 2013 Peter Meinke Prize at YellowJacket Press for his sixth chapbook, Following Myself Home. He attended Rutgers University and lives and writes in Saint Cloud, Florida.

Carmelinda Blagg’s fiction has previously appeared in Avatar Review, Halfway Down the Stairs, Falling Star Magazine, Wanderlust Review, and the anthology Best of the Web 2009. She received the 2010 Individual Artist Award from the Maryland State Arts Council. Carmelinda lives in Bethesda, Maryland, where she is a member of The Writer’s Center.

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Maria Brandt’s plays have been finalists for various competitions in NYC, Boston, Buffalo, DC, Reno, and London; read in Los Angeles, Valdez, Fort
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Charles Laird Calia is the author of two books, including the novel *The Unspeakable*. Calia’s short fiction and poetry have been published in a variety of magazines, including *Penumbra*, *MacGuffin*, *Cape Rock*, and *Big Muddy*, among others.

Cara Chamberlain’s poetry has appeared in *Boston Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and many other journals. She has received two Pushcart Prize nominations and has been featured by *Poetry Daily*. Cara is the author of two collections, *Hidden Things* (2009) and *The Divine Botany* (forthcoming). She lives in Billings, Montana.

Ashley Cowger is the author of the short story collection *Peter Never Came*, which was awarded the Autumn House Press Fiction Prize. Her short fiction has appeared in several literary journals, and she holds an MFA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She lives in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, with her husband, daughter, cat, and collection of overweight stuffed animals.

Bianca Diaz’s chapbook, *No One Says Kin Anymore*, won the Robert Watson Poetry Award from Spring Garden Press in 2009. Her poems have twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and once for Best of the Net Anthology. Poems currently appear in *Mount Hope* and *Red Headed Stepchild*. She earned an MFA from George Mason University and is originally from Miami, Florida. Bianca currently lives in North Carolina.

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Lawrence F. Farrar, a career diplomat, served in Japan (multiple tours), Germany, Norway, and Washington, D.C. Short term assignments took him to more than 30 countries. Lawrence also lived in Japan as a graduate student and as a naval officer. A Minnesota resident, Lawrence has degrees from Dartmouth and Stanford. His stories have appeared in approximately 30 literary magazines, including *The MacGuffin*, *Tampa Review Online*, *Curbside Splendor* E-Zine, *Green Hills* Literary Lantern, *Evening Street Review*, *Red Cedar Review*, *The Worcester Review*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Jelly Bucket*, *New Plains Review*, *Streetlight*, *Bloodroot*, *34th Parallel*, and *Eastlit*.

John Findura holds an MFA from The New School and is currently completing his professional license in psychotherapy. His poetry and criticism appear in numerous journals including *Verse*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Copper Nickel*, *Pleiades*, *Forklift*, *Ohio*, *H_NGM_N*, *Jacket*, and *Rain Taxi*. A guest blogger for the *The Best American Poetry*, he has won and been a finalist for various awards. He lives in Northern New Jersey with his wife and daughters.

Michael Gould is a student at the University of Minnesota. His poems have appeared in literary journals including *Water Stone Review* and *Decades Review*. He lives in Richfield, Minnesota.

Jennifer Gray studies poetry at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she lives on a small country acreage with her husband, two children, and a pet cemetery that is more populated every year. She writes her poems before dawn, when her children wake up. She has work forthcoming in Ted Kooser’s *American Life In Poetry*. In addition, in the spring of 2014, a selection of her work received second place in the Gaffney/Academy of American Poets Award.

Sarah Hausman is a Navy wife, roller derby girl, and aspiring writer from the Pacific Northwest.

finalist in the 1999 *Quarterly West* Novella Competition. Awards include the 2011 *Philadelphia City Paper* Poetry Prize and two Pennsylvania Council on the Arts fellowships. She is the founder of Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio, which offers community-based writing workshops.

Karen Hildebrand’s poetry has been published or is forthcoming in various journals, including *Blue Mesa Review, Fourteen Hills, A Gathering of the Tribes, great weather for MEDIA, G.W. Review, The Journal, Maintenant, Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, and Poet Lore*. Her play, *The Old In and Out*, cowritten with Madeline Artenberg and adapted from their poetry, was produced in New York City in June 2013. Karen has had two chapbooks published, *One Foot Out the Door* and *Final Shot at Love*, and her work has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. Karen grew up in Colorado, made a career in human resources and arts management, and then reinvented herself as a writer/editor at midlife. She moved to San Francisco in her forties and to New York City in her fifties. Karen now heads the editorial department for a publisher of five popular dance magazines.

Jennifer Jackson Berry is the author of the chapbooks *When I Was a Girl* (Sundress Publications, 2014) and *Nothing But Candy* (Liquid Paper Press, 2003). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Booth, The Emerson Review, Harpur Palate, Stirring*, and *Whiskey Island*, among others. Poems also appeared in various anthologies in 2014, including *We Will Be Shelter* (Write Bloody Publishing) and *By the Slice* (Spooky Girlfriend Press). She is an Assistant Editor for *WomenArts Quarterly Journal* and lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.


Kavanaugh’s poetry, prose and photographs have appeared in *Melancholy Hyperbole, When Women Waken*, and *Blotterature*. She travels the scenic route between St. Pete, Florida and the Off Campus Writers Workshop
(OCWW) in Winnetka, Illinois. When she’s not writing, she’s listening, picking up slices of life or shells on a beach.

Robert Lee Kendrick lives in Clemson, South Carolina. He has previously published, or has work forthcoming, in *San Pedro River Review, Red Earth Review, Main Street Rag,* and *Iodine Poetry Journal.*

Eileen Malone’s works have been published in over 500 literary journals and anthologies and have earned many awards, including three Pushcart nominations. Her award winning collection *Letters with Taloned Claws* was published by Poets Corner Press (Sacramento), and her book *I Should Have Given Them Water* was published by Ragged Sky Press (Princeton). She lives in the coastal fog at the edge of the San Francisco Bay Area.

Thomas N. Mannella III has a BA in writing from St. Lawrence University and a Masters from St. John Fisher College, both in New York. Excerpts from his memoir, *A Matter of Time,* have most recently appeared in the 2014 issues of *SLAB Literary Magazine, Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine, Jet Fuel Review, The Casserole,* and *South85 Journal.* Currently, he teaches English and Environmental Literature in Naples, NY, where he lives with his wife and sons around the corner from his boyhood home.

Joddy Murray’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in over 70 journals, including *The Broken Plate, DUCTS, Existere, Licking River, Meridian, Minetta Review, Moonshot Magazine, Painted Bride Quarterly, Pembroke Magazine, Southampton Review, Stickman Review,* and *Texas Review.* He currently teaches writing and rhetoric in Fort Worth, Texas.

GennaRose Nethercott is a poet, playwright, performer, and folklorist from the woodlands of Vermont. Her recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Rust + Moth, Cleaver, Axolotl, Freeze Ray Poetry,* and others. Her poem “Departures” won the 2014 Holland Park Press poetry competition. She serves as the poetry editor at *Mount Island Magazine.* She knows more about shape shifters than she does about being a person.

Ernesto Pavan is happy to have his first publication appear in *The Lindenwood Review,* and he is hopeful for a future as a writer.

Daye Phillippo is a graduate of Purdue University and Warren Wilson MFA for Writers. She is the recipient of The Elizabeth George Grant and a
Mortarboard Fellowship for poetry. She lives in Indiana with her husband and their youngest son in a creaky, old farmhouse on twenty rural acres.

Nate Pillman’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in *PANK*, *North American Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Mid-American Review*, and others. He is originally from rural Iowa but now resides in southern Arizona.

Jennifer Robinette’s fiction has appeared in *Silk Road Review*, *The Red Clay Review*, *TINGE Magazine*, *The Blue Pen*, and *Glassworks*, and she has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Jennifer currently teaches writing and literature at Northern Michigan University.

Kirk Schlueter is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. His work has previously appeared in *Thin Air*, *Animal*, and elsewhere.

Kelly Talbot has edited books for nearly 20 years, previously as an in-house editor for John Wiley and Sons Publishing, Macmillan Publishing, and Pearson Education, and now as the head of Kelly Talbot Editing Services. His writing has appeared in dozens of magazines. He divides his time between Indianapolis, Indiana, and Timisoara, Romania.

Vallie Lynn Watson’s debut novel, *A River So Long*, was published by Luminis Books in 2012, and her Pushcart-nominated work appears in dozens of literary magazines such as *PANK*, *DecompE*, and *Gargoyle*. She received her PhD from the Center for Writers in 2009. Watson teaches in the Creative Writing and English departments at UNC Wilmington, and she is the editor of *Cape Fear Review*. 
The MFA in Writing Program at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri, focuses on the practice and study of creative writing. Students receive personalized instruction in small workshop sessions. Courses may be taken in the classroom, fully online, or a combination of both in-class and online. Faculty members include writers such as Tony D’Souza, Eve Jones, Wm. Anthony Connolly, Catherine Rankovic, and Kelli Allen.

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