KUDZU HOUSE QUARTERLY

Volume Four, Issue Three:
Winter Solstice
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Note: “Parentheses” indicate Poetry; *italics*, Fiction; Nonfiction is in plain text.
EDITOR’S NOTE

In so many ways, it feels as if Kudzu has come full circle as we prepare for another Winter Solstice, much as we did just three years ago when we released our first issue of Kudzu Review. From that dawning issue, our staff and readership has grown and transformed with the journal itself. We have moved from being a biannual creative writing journal to a quarterly publisher of environmental scholarship, creative writing, and art. The Kudzu Vine, our book review blog, is gaining popularity, and we have a diverse lineup of book reviews prepared for next year, when we will publish our first eChapbook and officially become a quarterly journal! With all of this change, it is so wonderful to return to the first kind of publication we released, an open-themed winter solstice issue filled with the kind of excellent poetry, fiction, art, and nonfiction that helped first popularize our journal and our mission. It is my pleasure to introduce so many great works.

We begin with an interview with our featured poet, Peter Huggins. His recent book South interprets the region in ways quite pertinent to our journal’s ethos. His collection is out with Solomon & George, a publisher local to Auburn, AL. I very much enjoyed speaking with him about his recent work and his methods, and an excerpt from our interview, two poems from South, and my review of his book appear below. I encourage everyone to grab a copy of the book soon.

We then move into award-winning writer Patty Somlo’s “Rain Shadow,” where we get the brilliant line “If this hadn’t been his home, he would have felt sorry for the people living in the place he saw on the screen.” Following this, we have ecopoems by Jennifer Moss, Amaris Feland Ketcham, L. A. Owens, Andrew Jarvis, Daniel Bourne, Kevin Casey, Douglas Cole. These poets, and all the excellent poets you’ll find below, challenge and enrich our understanding of the relationship between humans, environments, and others.

We have some wonderful prose, such as Barbara Harroun’s “Wilderness,” the hilarious “Ebay Wildlife” by Susan White, and an account of International Migratory Bird Day by Tom Leskiw. Bob Carlton offers us “Walt Whitman in Suburbia.” I would also like to draw your attention to the photography and nonfiction essay work “Stone’s Throw from Hell” by Gina Williams and the rollicking poem “Salt Lick Prayer” by Lesley Brower. These are just a few of the excellent works that are in store for you in the following pages. Without further ado, I welcome all of you to another excellent issue of Kudzu House Quarterly!

Thanks so much for reading, and as always:
may the Kudzu grow!

Cheers,

M.P. Jones
Editor-in-Chief
Below is an excerpt from an interview with the poet Peter Huggins, in which he shares insight as a southern writer of place poetry, specifically regarding his recent poetry collection, *South*. The complete transcript of the interview is available on our blog, *The Kudzu Vine*. The collection is out with Solomon & George, and we have excerpts from the book following this interview so check them out! We thank him for offering his time and wisdom to the *KHQ* community.

**Madison:** I’ve organized the questions for the interview today based on different concepts. The first thing I want to talk about, of course, is place.

**Peter:** Yeah, I think, particularly in this book *South*, place plays a very important role. I mean, when you title a book *South*, you better be willing to take that on as an issue. And that’s what I tried to do in this book. I tried to do it not only from my own personal experience but also tried to put in some historical terms as well. Give it some context. So, the first poems in the book, more or less, serve that function.

**Madison:** So, what are some of the historical terms that you draw from?

**Peter:** Well, when you write a book about the South, or when you title a book *South*, as I did here, I think you have to address some certain things. One of the very first things, of course, is the issue of race. So, I deliberately started the book with a poem about that, about the Ibo, a people from Nigeria, who were enslaved and transported. A group of them, when they approached the southern coast, in particular, St. Simons, simply refused to go ashore. In essence, they committed mass suicide rather than become slaves. That story just fascinated me, and so, I tried to do something with that, and then just kind of go from there. So, I tried to cycle back to that as an issue from time to time and in various ways. The other issues, they all kind of had to do with clash of cultures as well. So I’ve got a poem in there that’s from the perspective of the uncle of Davy Crockett, who had a very difficult birth and was, as a consequence, essentially a special child. He didn’t function as a normal person might function. He was more or less adopted, or taken over by, the native tribe of East Tennessee, who thought he was a special gift of God. I tried, in the course of the book, to produce these poems that illustrated these culture clashes and conflicts, and they were really fun to do.

**Madison:** Well the idea behind the book really couldn’t be a better fit for *Kudzu*. The idea of invasive species is, of course, meant with this idea in mind. So it’s really great to have this kind of work; it really reflects the *ethos* of the journal. So, it’s obvious that being a Southern writer is a problem to have to work out in your work. How do you address that?
**Peter:** It is. I think I've considered this in various ways, pretty much from the beginning. And I've never really come up with a satisfactory answer. At certain times I tend to think that if you identify yourself as a Southern writer, what that means to be is that you're from the South. I don't see how you can really call yourself a Southern writer if you're not from the South. Now, I think you can be from the South and not think of yourself or call yourself a Southern writer, like Richard Ford, for example. My whole thinking on this is to try to be as inclusive as possible, rather than exclusive. I don't think that, for example, Tobias Wolfe, who is from Birmingham, thinks of himself as a Southern writer. So, I'm not exactly sure how I'm going to resolve this. If ever. Maybe that's part of the interest.

**Madison:** (laughs) Definitely.

**Peter:** But it's an issue I certainly keep coming back to.

**Madison:** This next question is very similar. How has place influenced your work?

**Peter:** I mean I've lived in a lot of different places, and when I try to concoct an experience, it directly comes out of place. Things that happened in my homes probably couldn't have happened anywhere else. I mean bizarre, grotesque, peculiar—call them what you will. Things that we often think in the South as being normal and ordinary, you know, someone else may not quite understand, that that really happens. That really happens? And you're left with disbelief. So, place for me is integral to the experience of the poem and to the experience of fiction, too.

**Madison:** Wonderful. So that brings us to the community of writers. Do you feel you write in a community of writers or do you write as an individual?

**Peter:** Well, I like to think I am carrying on this dialogue, with not just people I know, but with people that are no longer with us that have affected me in some way or that maybe I can affect in turn. So I tend to think of it more as this ongoing conversation. You know, this notion of the isolated artist, I'm just not really buying it. I mean, you have to isolate yourself to get the work done, but if you're working totally in a vacuum, I'm not sure that's healthy for the person trying to produce something or for the whole artistic climate, for that matter.

**Madison:** Definitely. So, for you, writing takes place in a place, it takes place amongst people, it's a dialogue among different voices and spaces.

**Peter:** Yes, definitely.

**Madison:** So, I think that is actually a really good segue into our next topic, which is craft. What I'd like to ask you about, really, is when you started writing and when you started writing poetry.

**Peter:** Most of the writers I know tended to start writing fairly early, but not me. I really, well I wouldn't say I dragged my feet, you know I wrote a few desultory poems in high school that were followed by a few more desultory poems in college. All the while, I was just learning and soaking things up. I had some great teachers when I was an undergraduate. I mean I had Alan Tate as a teacher. I had Andrew Lytle as a teacher. And these were remarkable individuals who had a lot to say and a lot to make you think about. So I had them as models, but even then, I wasn't totally convinced that that was something I really wanted to do. I must have been in my mid-twenties before I decided that writing was something that I wanted to do seriously.

**Madison:** So when you did start writing seriously, did you find yourself writing every day?

**Peter:** Not so much, because I had so many other things to do. It was more either after I did what I had to do workwise or schoolwise, but I never found it difficult to write. What I found difficult was that I never had the opportunity to really revise or refine. I mean I had no
problem writing and writing and writing and writing, but what I seemed to have a problem with was working on what I had done and whipping it into shape. That was what was difficult for me.

**Madison:** Definitely. So what do you think that your best poems have in common with one another?

**Peter:** First, maybe that attention to place we talked about earlier, that ability to enter into the mind—particularly if I am dealing with an assumed voice—to kind of leave myself behind and enter into the mind of that character or person. Maybe an attention to the language, so that it is compressed and concise but creates that explosion in the mind that we all want. Maybe that's it.

**Madison:** Good, well, I think now we should move onto inspiration, and we've talked a little about inspiration already. But I want to know, has your idea of what poetry is or what poetry does or the purpose of poetry, has that changed since you began writing?

**Peter:** Yeah, it probably has. When I first started thinking about writing poems, I was a little more insistent on trying to find a form that would work, and to think more formally than perhaps I do now. I think that's probably a really big change for me because I'm much more willing to try on any sort of hat that comes along and not try to make anything a certain way. I try to let whatever I'm working on dictate that to me, so that I can understand how the form can shape whatever it is I'm working on, and how whatever it is I'm working on can help shape the form. I try to let the form arrive more naturally, more organically, instead of trying to impose a structure.

**Madison:** Wonderful, and your poems still do have that rich, formal control, and so I think it's evident that you have a background in formal poetry. So, how does lived experience play a role in your writing? What experiences have shaped you as a writer and how do you write about experience?

**Peter:** This is a big question for me because I often will try to imagine a situation in a place, with a person—not necessarily me—and try to let the scene and the situation shape for me as I shape it. So it's kind of this interplay between who is experiencing and what is being experienced. That for me is it.

**Madison:** So what are some of the experiences that you've had that have either changed your writing or inspired your writing?

**Peter:** I once remember going with my father, who was a flyer in World War II, and one of the places he trained was right down on the coast at Foley. For years and years we could go down to the beach in Florida and drive right past this place, or very close to it. And all those years he never said anything, and then one time he and I were in the car, and all of the sudden we wound up in this place, and he said “I used to fly here,” and I was totally shocked. But he never really went on with the story, except for often he would go back to this story. His buddies were not so often killed in action as they were when they were learning how to fly. You know, all these pilots kept dying in training. So, the training was extraordinarily risky, but that's about as far as he got so all I had was that. So I tried to make something of that and tried to figure that out, even though I just had that little bit that I allowed myself to work on and transform. So whatever poem came out of that, I don't know if it bore any relation to what actually happened, but that doesn't really matter. I guess that's what I made of it.

**Madison:** So these stories—fact, fiction—it leaves you room for imagination.

**Peter:** Absolutely.
Madison: So, are there any poets that you continue to go back to? Are there people that have made an impact that lasted?

Peter: Almost on a yearly basis, I would go back and read Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*, and I haven't done that in a few years, but I read that book when it first came out, and then just about every year after for a long time to try and get some sense of what he was saying or doing. I would look at the poems, and then I would look at that book and try to understand as a way of helping me craft and as a way to think about experience and ways of transforming experience. So, that for me is a good example of that, but I tend to go back and re-read a lot of the classics—Yeats, Eliot, Dickinson—just to try and keep my language sharp. That's helpful to me.

Madison: Well, I guess the last question I'd like to ask you is there any advice you'd like to give emerging poets and writers?

Peter: Yeah, and I think I can do that in one word: read. Really, I mean, that's it. Read. I think you have to just read, read, read. And, if you're a poet, not just poems. Any poet can learn a lot from reading well-written prose. You can learn a lot about pacing, about story arc. I mean, obviously in poems, you do it in a much more compressed fashion, but you can learn a lot about how to do that, particularly how to pace, and how to elaborate on things that need elaborating or things that need cutting. So reading, and not just whatever genre you're writing in.

Madison: Well, from everyone at *Kudzu*, we'd like to say thank you for taking time to speak with us.

Peter: Thank you very much.

Again, on behalf of myself and the entire KHQ staff: thank you!
Mosquitoes

I do not need to offer them
The blood of a black ram,
Like Odysseus
Among the dead.

They swarm around my legs and arms.
They drink my blood, they feast on me.
I am their prey,
Their mark, their victim.

Their singing is a kind of truth.
I disregard it at my peril.
They are Teiresias
Who tells the future.

They are Achilles, Agamemnon,
Hercules, great warriors.
They are Ajax,
Stuck in the past.

They are the women I have known,
Far more deadly than you’d guess,
Who breed danger
Wherever they go.

They make me wild. I spatter blood,
My legs and arms are wet with it.
My eyes water,
I leave this pond.

As the red-eyed full moon rises,
My malarial sweats begin.
At your dusky touch,
Your passion, I tremble.

Reprinted from the collection South with the author's permission.
When Cold Killed the Camphors

The camphors shivered.  
Then their leaves fell off.  

Left bare and gray as trees  
In that other country north  

Of New Orleans, they waited  
For the cut that would take them  

Down. Brought in as street trees,  
They gave good shade, relief  

From the irredeemable heat.  
I breathed their crushed leaves  

To ward off a cold  
Or the vagaries of pollen.  

I hid in their branches  
To escape Capo's gang  

When I beat them at baseball.  
I covered the sidewalk with black  

Spots as I smashed their berries  
With my father's new hammer.  

When cold killed the camphors,  
Gangs of men with chainsaws  

Cut the camphors to the ground.  
The smell hung in the air for weeks.  

Reprinted from the collection South with the author's permission, originally appearing in storySouth
Huggins’ fourth poetry collection *South* takes us through regions of time, ideologies of place, and interior landscapes of the mind. His language is tersely sharp, and his brevity allows cunning and playful wit to shape the poems like a cutting line of kireji in haiku. Though these poems have a clever edge, they are never snide or cynical. At all times, Huggins celebrates the place, for both its heroic and despicable histories in a way that “heals and makes whole” (21). The opening poem reveals the horror and violence for those who were uprooted and brought here, forced from a home to a land of subjugation. Huggins looks to this in the poem “Ibo Landing on St. Simon’s Island,” which draws on an oral tale—one which hasn’t, until recently, been written down but nonetheless did happen—of a group of Ibo slaves who marched to their deaths into the sea. In the face of slavery’s horror, they chose death. The story is something of a legend in the place now, but the fact that the story documents such a tragic and heroic moment, kept alive through an oral tradition, adds its own layers of complexity and richness with Huggins profound image of the water “Sawing/ our chains, it sets us free” (9).

The book shifts through history and place, weaving through locations and the consciousnesses of historical figures to tell their stories in a new and important context. We see civil war reenactments and children playing with toy swords, but most prominently we see the way that the natural world invades the human domain. Like the waters at St. Simon’s Island, nature constantly intervenes in these poems to undermine power and authority. Huggins’ depiction of the south as a site of struggle and redemption is inspiring and shocking. The poem “Mosquitoes” deals with one facet of the south anyone familiar with the region will understand. In the poem, the natural world pierces the speaker’s consciousness, connecting him to ancient tropes, histories, and “the women I have known” (16). The poems weave together “Dante in Alabama,” giving us a glimpse of Huggins’ vision of personal connections to this place.

Given the subject matter, one might expect the book to be utterly dark, consumed with despair or melancholy. However, Huggins’ wit cuts through the anguish, always celebrating the audacity and courage of those who persevere and survive. His poems are also quite funny. For example, “The Tan Contest Judge Thinks of Peaches” where “you don’t find women with tans/ Like these on Roan Mountain” (38). Ultimately, These poems draw important connections. His work is intricate, complex, and rich. His vision neither ignores the dark history of the antebellum south, nor loses itself in the past. If you are in need of a great collection of poetry—which everyone is—grab a copy of *South* today!
The rain began lightly. A few drops fell at a time. You could see the pattern on the faded concrete sidewalks in town. No one paid attention. Caroline at the Village Bakery nodded when a customer said, “Rain’s back,” and returned to the birthday cake she was decorating.

Every November, dark days rolled into these parts. That’s when the yearlong residents of this sparsely populated and heavily forested coastal peninsula felt the world had shifted right.

As usual, there had been a brief respite from the wet weather after the Fourth of July. But even in summer, the rain never completely vanished, though the hotel and vacation rental owners still called the months of July and August the dry season.

An hour after the rain began, Katherine Fisher heard it beating against her studio window. The painting she had been working on was halfway done. She wondered if puddles had formed in the road, especially the gully in front of her cottage next door. That thought, along with the drumming of the drops, caused her to wonder if the power might go out, as it did during winter storms.

These thoughts pushed Katherine to abandon the canvas she’d hoped to complete, clean her brushes and put away the paint tubes, so she could drive over to Salmon Park and stock up on food and extra batteries.

Tourists who came out to the peninsula made jokes about the tsunami evacuation route signs, because they seemed to point in every direction, except toward the Pacific Ocean. Locals, who’d once made a good living catching salmon, before fish grew scarce and fuel prices climbed, saw the tsunami signs as stupid government interference into people’s lives. Dwayne Olson, who wondered many days if it was worth taking his boat out at all, costs being what they were and the catch so pitiful, called the signs the Road to Nowhere.

Unfortunately on the peninsula, there was nowhere to hide if a quake struck off the coast and water rose up, the way scientists and even Dwayne agreed it someday might. The peninsula was no wider than five miles at its widest point. Only one place existed above sea level, but it was in the middle of a densely forested park, far from town. Dwayne hated to think that folks on the peninsula were stuck, but he couldn’t drink enough beer to wipe that conclusion from his mind. The world had turned these last twenty years against the little guy. Even the weather and natural phenomena, like earthquakes and tsunamis and what used to be simple storms, had gone against them.

Dwayne walked out the door of the Salmon Park Tavern just as Katherine Fisher slowed her SUV and stopped at the four-way in the center of town, where First Street crossed Pacific Avenue. Dwayne smiled, since he knew it was too wet to mow the lawn. At least, Sharon wouldn’t be able to nag him about that. Maybe he’d head out to the garage when he got home, saying he had work to do on his boat. He’d climb in and pretend to be out on the ocean with the guys, bringing in a load of fresh chinook.

Katherine made a right turn and continued on to Randy’s Market. Town appeared empty, as it did once summer was done.

Katherine pulled into the parking lot. As she searched for a space, she noticed that puddles had already formed. If the rain kept up, the gully outside her cottage would turn into a lake before the storm let up.

Dwayne was relieved that his truck started right up. He’d been having trouble
with it lately and feared the battery would soon give out. If he had to borrow money one more time from his dad down in Portland, the old man would lecture him that it was time to move to the city and get a real job. Dwayne couldn’t get the old guy to understand that this was his life and things were going to turn around before long. They just had to.

As soon as Dwayne made the turn onto Pacific, the rain started coming down hard. He flicked the wipers up a notch higher, then noticed that the roadway was beginning to flood.

Dwayne was glad, though, that the rain had come back. Folks like Dwayne belonged in this soggy place. Dwayne might have explained, “It takes a certain kind of person to live here.” And he would have been right. The tip of the peninsula was practically the furthest west a person could drive.

In the short time that Katherine pushed a cart down the brightly-lit aisles at Randy’s Market, the wind picked up. No one was out on the beach just beyond town. If anyone had been there, they would have seen the wind lift and carry the tips of the waves as they rolled in toward shore. The wind was blowing steadily enough to whip and tangle the kite strings that hung out front of several small souvenir shops. The occasional gusts ripped the lids off plastic trash cans set along the narrow roads north of Salmon Park. Not long after, an empty can started skittering down the center of Bay Street.

Charcoal clouds raced across the sky, blocking the light. Everything – sky, ocean, windblown trees, flooding streets – looked mad. Anyone would have thought the place was in for a real downpour, a stormy session that might do some real damage.

When the rain came back that afternoon, people got prepared. The locals knew there was a good chance Pacific Avenue might flood, that the previously hidden creeks along that two-lane road linking towns up and down the peninsula and out to the mainland would overflow.

The light seemed extra bright in Randy’s Market, since the sky had grown nearly black outside. Those overhead fluorescent tubes flickered momentarily. Katherine looked at the woman standing behind her in line.

“Uh, oh,” the woman said.

The checker laughed and in a too-loud voice asked, “Everybody got their flashlights?”

At that, Katherine pawed the bottom of her handbag. When she managed to put her fingers around the small thin portable light she tried never to be without, she felt better but then began to worry that the batteries might have burned out.

Dwayne Olson lived with his wife in a former shipping captain’s house feet from the dunes, with a view of the ocean through the second-floor bedroom window. When he pulled up in front of his house, he had the windshield wipers on as high as they would go. Even with that, the windshield only remained clear for a second. Dwayne was used to this weather but something nagged him about it.

Dwayne ran to the house, leaping to avoid puddles. After unlocking the door and stepping inside, he realized how soaked he’d gotten. He stood on the rug just inside the door, staring at the collection of shoes his wife had deposited. Even though he was dripping water onto the Douglas fir floorboards, which had turned golden over the years, the thought crossed his mind that Sharon had enough shoes for a woman with twenty feet.

“I’m home, honey,” Dwayne let out.

“Wet out there?” he heard from the kitchen at the back of the house.

“Startin’ to come down,” Dwayne yelled back, as he untied his tennis shoes and set them next to Sharon’s flip flops.

Before Katherine finished paying for her groceries, the lights flickered three more
times. The third time, the checker said, “Power’s probably gonna go out,” and then he sighed.

“Every year, I think I outta get a generator,” he said next. “Just never get around to it and then the power goes out and I’m stuck in the dark.”

Katherine didn’t want to admit that she enjoyed when they lost power. It made everything seem mysterious and cozy. She didn’t want to tell him that she had moved out here from the city because she wanted a different life. She wasn’t some back-to-the-land type but the wild feel of life and the way a person could disappear if she wanted here was something she liked.

Instead of telling the checker her thoughts, Katherine simply said, “Uh, huh.” A moment later, she realized that she hadn’t heard another thing the checker had uttered. He didn’t seem to notice.

Unbeknownst to Katherine and Dwayne and most everyone else on the peninsula, the waves rolling onto shore had climbed. The wide beaches filled up with deep pools of water. Dunes fronting the beach lost sand, each time a monstrous wave crashed and retreated toward the horizon.

The National Weather Service started issuing warnings. High surf and rough seas. Nothing unusual in these parts but the Coast Guard commanding officer who’d arrived at his office a few minutes before three o’clock was surprised to see waves rolling across the normally placid inlet.

“Looks like it might be a bad one,” he said to the junior officer after grabbing a cup of coffee. “We better bring in extra personnel.”

While Katherine carried her groceries to the car and loaded them into the trunk, the wind drove the downpour sideways. She tied her windbreaker hood tight to keep it from blowing off, but her face got drenched and she couldn’t see out her glasses. The parking lot had been transformed into a lake. Katherine’s jeans were soaked, a good four inches up from the bottom. Opening the car door felt impossible, as she had to push against a wind gust at that moment.

She sat in the driver’s seat, catching her breath. Something about this storm didn’t feel right. It had come on so suddenly, without a hint of bad weather earlier in the day. The weather reporters hadn’t forecast a drop of rain or even clouds. Now they were in the throes of a memorable storm, the kind that normally would be forecast days before with warnings about high surf and power outages and likely flooding.

By the time Katherine made the turn onto Pacific Avenue, the two-lane lifeline through the western side of the peninsula was swollen with murky brown water. Katherine drove as slowly as she could, not wanting to be forced to slam on the brakes and find them too soaked to stop the car.

She made the turn onto her narrow road, grateful there wasn’t a car on the other side, as she needed to swing wide because she was moving so slowly. As soon as she made the turn, Katherine saw that the creek had overflowed, filling the road with a foot or more of water. Already, the muddy water from the flooded road had started to seep into the yards. How long before water reached the front doors?

The wind was howling when Katherine stepped out of the car, after managing to pull into the driveway and park. A fierce gust battered her from the side, as she unlocked the back door to the cottage. Water pooled over the driveway onto the grass. She glanced over at the sidewalk leading to the front door and saw that it was now underwater.

The cottage is going to flood, Katherine thought, after she’d brought in the last bag and set it on the counter. She had no second floor, no place to scramble up to, if water began flooding the house.

Sometime after four, the storm surge started battering the coast. A man named Jim and his oldest son Tyler were standing at the main beach entrance on Eighth Street
in Longport. Jim loved watching storms, the wilder, the better. Tyler filmed a wave so huge, he feared his friends would think he'd manipulated the image to make it appear larger. Right after that, the dirty gray-brown water raced in so fast, Jim and Tyler were forced to run back toward town.

That same storm surge scoured the beach five miles north, where Katherine was sitting crouched over in her living room, listening to the rain pelt the windows while the wind roared. Up until today, she had felt fine about her decision to divorce Michael, who'd cheated on her for years, and move from the city to live alone at the beach. Most of the time, she loved her solitary life. Now, though, she wished someone else was here, to assure her that everything was going to be all right.

Katherine didn't know that the storm surge had pummeled several waves up the width of the beach. Saltwater had seeped into the path that led through the dunes out to the street. As if that wasn't bad enough, the road, where it dead-ended just past Katherine's cottage, had flooded. Dirty brown water from the pond formed there was pouring into the other end of the path that led to the beach. The main road connecting towns on the peninsula's west side was inundated. Coast Guard helicopters patrolled the coast. The Army National Guard had been called out.

Without wasting any more time, Katherine grabbed a paper bag from the lower kitchen drawer and began packing food she'd just bought. After filling two brown paper grocery bags with canned goods and produce and adding a bottle of white wine, she stuffed a small nylon overnight bag with a change of clothes.

Before stepping out the door, she looked around. How many times had she seen disasters on t.v. - floods and fires where people only had a few minutes to pack up and go? Most people grabbed photographs. She couldn't do that, she realized. Taking those things would make this real, as if her house and everything in it was about to be destroyed and she'd never be allowed to return.

When she tried to push open the front door, the wind wouldn't let her. She waited a moment and shoved hard a second time but the door refused to budge.

Perspiration dotted her forehead. She told herself not to panic. The side door will open, she told herself. That door was sheltered by the garage and faced away from the beach.

As Katherine had hoped, the side door opened easily and she stepped outside. Even though she had glanced out the window from time to time, seeing the water was still a shock. Pooling outside the door where the ground was flat, water came up past her calves. Wind and rain lashed her face. She prayed she would make it to her neighbor Sandy's house before the brown paper bags got soaked and gave way at the bottom.

It suddenly occurred to Katherine that she didn't know if Sandy and her husband Tom would be home. What if she went to all this trouble, packing food and wading across a lake outside in order to get to a house with higher floors, only to discover that her neighbors were gone?

The walk to Sandy and Tom's place left Katherine drenched. Even on the porch with its normally sheltering roof, the fierce wind slapped rain at her.

She pressed the doorbell. Its soft welcoming chime sounded left over from a different world, one in which roads didn't flood and it was possible to walk and drive everywhere.

Katherine was relieved to hear footsteps, first above her head and then edging closer. She recalled that though Sandy and Tom's front door was on ground level, the living room, dining room and kitchen were on the second floor.

The door opened a crack and Sandy stood there, a bright red apron covering her sweater and slacks. Katherine could smell something baking. Apples and cinnamon, she guessed.
“Katherine, get in here quick,” Sandy said, and pulled the door open wider.

Katherine stepped inside and closed the door behind her. She was dripping water onto the beautiful gray tile.

“I’m soaked,” Katherine said. “I should take my shoes and coat off here. These bags are about to come through at the bottom.”

“I’m glad you came. I was about to call and see if you were all right. We’ve got the t.v. on. Heard they’re sending the National Guard.”

Katherine was shivering now. Even though nothing had improved outside, she felt better, being with other people in a lovely warm house smelling of cinnamon and apples cooking.

Oyster Bay started to spill over its banks sometime after four o’clock. The sky had grown so dark that it could have been night. Water in the bay looked like mud. At first, it seeped onto the shore where the bay met land at its furthest point north.

Houses in the little community of Oyster Point had been standing since the late 1800s. The Douglas fir-sided structures with wide views of Oyster Bay had weathered fierce storms, and even floods. But this storm was unprecedented in its scope and the fierceness of its downpour in such a short period of time.

Even the birds that poked beaks into the mudflats along the bay’s shore seemed confused. Great blue herons glided over the churning brown water, several landing on the wooden deck of the Bayside Restaurant, as if they needed to stop and take a good look to believe what was happening.

On his wife’s insistence, Dwayne turned the t.v. to CNN. The rain had only been falling for several hours but CNN had somehow managed to get a reporter there. Dwayne squinted his eyes, trying to determine where the reporter was standing. Sharon stood in the living room, a few feet from the huge flat-screen t.v., repeating, “Oh, my God. Oh, my God.”

Dwayne alternated between staring out the window and looking at the t.v. If this hadn’t been his home, he would have felt sorry for the people living in the place he saw on the screen. He’d heard the reporter say massive flooding, and those words reverberated in his mind. If the roads were flooded, as the reporter said, then he and Sharon had no way out. But if they stayed put, what would happen to them?

He’d seen enough disasters on television to know that terrible things happened. His life had taken such a turn these last years, Dwayne no longer thought in the old way that such things would never happen to him.

Unbeknownst to Dwayne, the National Guard had begun to arrive. If he’d been standing just beyond the bridge, he would have noticed the tan humvees rumbling toward the peninsula. Coast Guard helicopters were flying low just offshore, getting buffeted around by the wind.

The humvees headed off the bridge and made their way in a straight convoy down along the river. The young guardsmen were happy to be here, instead of fighting a war in some hot Middle Eastern country. Seeing the mud-brown water swirling across the road, they could tell they were going to be busy.

The rescues began while it was still light, by helicopter and humvee, inflatable raft and motorboats. Some people, including Dwayne and Sharon, refused to go.

But as it turned out, the ones who stayed made the right decision. As suddenly as the storm began, the rain stopped. From one moment to the next, the sky lightened from charcoal to white, clouds fat and billowy blowing across and then splitting apart to reveal blue and then the sun low in the sky. Water started retreating.

The bay sucked back the mud-brown liquid that hours before had spilled over its banks. Unseen forces pulled the tide toward the horizon, baring spongy, salty mudflats,
which attracted great blue herons out of nowhere.

What was left of the sun heated the water covering Pacific Avenue, the parking lot at Randy's Market and the gully in front of Katherine's little blue cottage. As rapidly as the water had risen, it fell, and not long after vanished.

Katherine headed back to her cottage, carrying the nylon bag packed with clothes and bags of food, exactly as she had arrived. The sun felt like a friend who'd been away a long time. Birdsong practically drowned out the whoosh of the waves as they broke and rolled toward shore.

The following day, the sun rose into a perfectly cloudless sky. The sun popped out again the day after that. Everyone waited for rain. But the rain refused to come back.

The storm, which was being called a one hundred-year storm, had dropped enough water to equal a year's amount of rain. So people on the peninsula began to worry that the rain had finally run out.

Though the sun kept coming up day after day and rain stayed far to the north, no one on the peninsula could get used to what had become a desert climate. No one, that is, except the visitors bureau, which for the first time claimed the peninsula sat in a rain shadow, that produced warm sunny days, while the rest of the region dripped under cold and wet gray skies.
The beach is bleeding a fountain
like an old pen spewing sea ink.

They broke into its house, stealing
the arms and all of their suctions.

It hid under a rock, a place
to dine on crabs and fresh eel grass.

They found a way to poke at it,
a strong inversion of beach stone
and then a jab with drifted wood.
It requires bludgeoning to budge.

One boy lifted the underside
while one baited the over one.

This is a special way they found,
a way of moving the unmoved.

It bleeds aquamarine, as if
it died to pen their names for them.

And no one will know it, except
surgeons who bleed out all the blue.
DOUGLAS COLE

Rock Blasting Area

Miners started it up out here,
more came, so the road got wider
and somewhat permanent—
of course now there’s no mining,
just a little fishing and camping—
the tourists passing through,
the coffee shop and the art gallery,
The great lodge up on the hill
with horseback riding and swimming pool—
big storms come with dry lightning,
big strikes out of nowhere,
grasses fast burning, pines that survive,
and I drive around town,
no claim to stake, no home under threat—
a ghost can go anywhere.
Orleans, Northwestern California. May 1, 2009. Karuk tribal member and storyteller Frank Lake entertained those of us in the audience with his rendition of the song of Tu-s, Yellow-breasted Chat: a cacophonous series of chortles, squawks, and whistles. His selection of a tale that centered around Tu-s was especially appropriate for our International Migratory Bird Day event, as it’s a species that winters in Mexico and returns to the Orleans area the last week in April. The subject of this particular story centered around the chat’s loud, discordant song—which can continue through the night—and the consequences of people remarking that the bird never seemed to stop singing.

The theme for Migratory Bird Day that year was “Birds in Culture,” which had prompted us to invite Frank and another Karuk member, Leaf Hillman to share with us stories that had been handed down from generation to generation. Both of them were accomplished storytellers, altering their voices so they could inhabit the personalities of several birds we hoped to see the next day on our walk: Pileated Woodpecker, Common Raven, Allen’s Hummingbird, and Yellow-breasted Chat. The rapt audience laughed at the antics of these characters—sometimes vain, impatient, or selfish—much like the characters that inhabit Aesop’s Fables.

However, there was something unique about the stories that Frank and Leaf shared with us that night. Their tales reflected the Karuk’s long residency near the place where the Salmon River meets the Klamath, the creatures engaging one another at specific places, many of them not far from the Orleans community center: Ishi-Pishi (Man-Fish) Falls, Ogaromtoc Lake, and Katamin, which is located near present-day Somes Bar and considered by the Karuk to be the Center of the World.

Frank Kanawha Lake is of Karuk, Seneca, Cherokee, and Mexican ancestry. He received his PhD in environmental sciences, with an ecology emphasis from Oregon State University in 2007. Frank works for the U.S. Forest Service; his areas of expertise include restoration ecology, traditional ecological knowledge, and historical and contemporary Native American burning practices, especially as they relate to plants of cultural importance in the Klamath-Siskiyou bioregion.

The Karuk and their neighbors, the Yurok, Hupa, and the Wiyot believe that the world can lose its balance. Frank is among those who, through dance, prayer, and song ask that the world be renewed, and the balance be restored. Together, two dances are known as Pikiavish, or the World Renewal Ceremonies. The White Deerskin Dance occurs during the fall and the Jump Dance is held the next moon cycle at the location where the Karuk believe salmon were first created.

Dancers wear regalia that includes pelts, hats decorated with woodpecker scalps, and feathers for the men and elaborate beargrass skirts for the women, decorated with shells, beads, carved pieces of abalone, and deer toes. Both men and women wear necklaces constructed of dentalium—a highly valued long, thin seashell.

That night, Frank brought samples of dance regalia to the program, giving many of us our first opportunity to observe it closely.
My eyes were drawn to a soft pelt that the men wear around their waists. Several colorful gorgets (throat feathers) of male hummingbirds adorned the pelt: shimmering orange and reddish hues from several Rufous or Allen’s Hummingbirds.

But one gorget stood out from the rest, for it was iridescent purple. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was the gorget of a Black-chinned Hummingbird, a species recorded only three times in Humboldt County since Dr. Stanley Harris began record-keeping in the early 1960s.

“Frank, do you know where these hummingbirds were collected?”

“My grandfather and others used to hike into the Marble Mountains, northeast of here, to net them,” he replied.

I pointed to the gorget of the Black-chinned. “Well, if you ever encounter a Black-chinned Hummingbird in Humboldt County, I know a number of birders that would like to get a look at it. They’re hardly ever found here: only six people have claimed to see one in the county. One of the last-known populations close to Humboldt was east of here in Hartstrand Gulch, in the Scott Valley in Siskiyou County. Back in the 1980s, they could be found at a site where there’d been a forest fire, but eventually the trees grew back and the population winked out.”

Three days later, Frank emailed me. “The gorgets of the Black-chins weren’t collected locally. My grandfather said they would have to go to the Scott Valley to obtain them.”

A week and a half later, I received another email from Frank. “My wife Luna and I found a Black-chinned Hummingbird in our garden today. An adult male. Unfortunately, it was dead. But it’s in mint condition; the ants hadn’t even found him yet.”

Some might consider Frank’s assertion of the discovery of such a rare bird so soon after we’d talked about it a freakish coincidence. Initially, I tried to view the appearance of the hummingbird from the perspective of my Western-style education and position as a biological technician. It’s not really that weird.

After all, the species winters in western Mexico and nests as far north as British Columbia. Black-chins commonly nest in California’s Central Valley; they just don’t get this far west. This spring, at least, Frank just happened to be along the migration path of a single bird.

But something gnawed at me, a feeling that there were forces at work that trumped something as simple as increasing daylight hours and the urge for hummingbirds to migrate north. Frank’s sighting, so soon after we’d discussed the bird’s status, defied the odds of chance. After all, despite the county’s size—4,052 square miles—there had only been three previous sightings in Humboldt County over the past 46 years. And a Black-chinned Hummingbird had never before been recorded in the Orleans area, despite the constant presence of a U.S. Forest Service District wildlife biologist, the near-annual presence of skilled field crews, and 16 years of Migratory Bird Day walks held during nearly the same week as Frank’s sighting.

I was reminded of Carl Jung’s theory of synchronicity, which he began to develop in the 1920s. Synchronicity looks at the simultaneous events of matter and mind as “the coincidence of inner and outer events.” Jung felt that because paranormal phenomena don’t depend on time or space, they can’t be thought of as causal:

“Synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as measuring something more than chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers.”

In short, synchronicity holds that when a person clearly holds an image in his or her mind, the energy of such visualization can influence the external world.

With some reservation, I voiced these thoughts to Frank.

“Yes,” replied Frank. “My grandfather used to refer to Jung’s belief in synchronicity...”
Frank’s response put me at ease, as some people can be dismissive of such theories. First Nations peoples speak of living in two worlds: the dominant culture that values upward mobility and material acquisition, which contrasts with the old ways that valued myth and legend, a sharing of resources, and a deep relationship with the natural world. Many of us who aren’t Native American share an uneasiness about the state of the human-constructed world and its values. And we find it difficult to negotiate a Vulcan-like world where it is decreed that the left side of the brain—responsible for logic, memory, and mathematical computations—must always trump the right brain, which helps us to comprehend visual imagery and make sense of what we see.

The long odds of Frank and Luna’s discovery of a Black-chinned Hummingbird—exactly two weeks after we had spoken of it—continued to amaze me.

It occurred to me that prayer, lucid dreams, creative visualization, and synchronicity—however dissimilar we might hold them to be—are but different fruits of the same tree. Prayer is practiced by the loved ones of those who fall sick, as well as by those who pray for a successful outcome, guidance, or insight. People derive power and direction from dreams. Runners and other athletes visualize themselves on the victory stand. These are all examples of where holding an image in one’s mind—the energy of their visualization—may contain the power to influence the external world.

Mentally, we tend to file these endeavors or phenomena—prayer, dreams, creative visualization, and synchronicity—into separate boxes, which speaks to the limitations of language and science. In our desire to categorize things, we sometimes overlook their similarities. Jung also believed that synchronicity served a role similar to that of dreams, with the purpose of shifting a person’s egocentric conscious thinking to greater wholeness.

* * * *

For those of us who avidly seek out birds, International Migratory Bird Day is a seasonal touchstone. Established in 1993 by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, it celebrates the return of “our” breeding birds from wintering in Mexico, and Central and South America. The event speaks to the human need for ritual, especially those that foster a deeper engagement with the natural world. After a winter of drab, brown shorebirds, sparrows, and longspurs, the mudflats, grasslands, forests, and woodlands in the western U.S. erupt with a riot of color that includes breeding-plumaged Black-bellied Plovers and Marbled Godwits; Lazuli Buntings; Summer and Western Tanagers; and a variety of warblers and orioles.

Friends and I have modified Migratory Bird Day in Orleans to reflect local concerns, christening it the Tony Hacking Memorial Bigfoot Birding Day. Tony, a former co-worker and friend who worked as a wildlife biologist for the Forest Service in Orleans, died of brain cancer in 2007. His zeal and stamina for sharing the natural world—especially with children—always served to inspire me. Up before dawn to help lead the bird walk, he’d follow that up by creating nature-based crafts with the kids. Dusk would find him hauling kids around to look for bats. Finally, he’d conclude the day with an “Owl Prowl.” The Orleans-to-Willow Creek area has produced a number of Bigfoot sightings. To the delight of the bird walk’s participants, Tony sometimes slipped away to don a Bigfoot suit, appearing suddenly to briefly stride across a grassy opening before retreating to his wooded lair.

* * * *

In the Karuk world view, planetary stewardship is maintained through the place-based spiritual and cultural philosophy of World Renewal. A philosophy of Renewal reaffirms the responsibility of humans as stewards of the Earth, critical to the ecosystem. Many indigenous people consider fire to be not only a sacred gift and tool but also a valuable means of environmental change and renewal.

For 6,000 years or more, the Karuk have used fire to shape their surroundings. Imagine living in a landscape that receives
more than 60 inches of rain per year with a long growing season. In the absence of saws, chainsaws, weed whackers, or hedge trimmers, fire represents a critical tool to manage vegetation. Fire was used to rejuvenate plants and reduce damaging insect populations. Fire helped the growth of plants used for cordage, basketry, food, and medicine, as well as improving forage for elk and deer and keeping trails from becoming overgrown with brush and trees.

In northwestern California, species that were targeted for treatment with fire include basketry plants such as sandbar willow (*Salix exigua*), California hazel (*Corylus cornuta var. californica*), beargrass (*Xerophyllum tenax*) and food plants: oak acorns, plants that reproduce from corms or bulbs that include various species of *Brodiaea*, and various roots and berries.

Then, in 1910, an event occurred that would dramatically change the relationship between people and fire in the United States. Dubbed the “Big Blowup,” or the “Big Burn,” this multi-fire inferno burned 3 million acres in Montana, Idaho, and Washington—roughly the size of Connecticut—killing 85 people. Prior to the Fire of 1910, there were differing views on how to handle forest fires. One camp held that they should be left to burn because they were a part of nature, while opponents of that viewpoint argued that fires must be fought in order to protect the forests. In the wake of such destruction, the response by the newly created U.S. Forest Service was to mandate that all fires, if feasible, be put out. This sea change—tribal burning was now classified as arson by the federal government—essentially brought an end to thousands of years of using fire to modify vegetation in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere. Although a small number of Native Americans continued to set fires in northwestern California into the 1970s, threats of jail time deterred most people from this activity.

More than 100 years later, the absence of frequent, lower-intensity burning has altered our surroundings: sites have been colonized by non-fire-resistant plants like white fir; trees have encroached into meadows; oaks that once furnished acorns for humans and wildlife have been crowded out by conifers. Modern forest fires tend to be larger, burn hotter, and occur more frequently, as a result of climate change and the accumulation of fuels, owing to the absence of tribal burning.

To this day, the Karuk believe that humans must engage with and care for the natural world and that a spirit of reciprocity is required to keep the world whole. While the Karuk once hiked many miles into remote mountains to obtain hummingbird gorgets for regalia, today they salvage window kills. However, even when they did actively collect them, the numbers were modest, as dance regalia was, and is, used by a small fraction of the tribal community. Killing a limited number of birds had little or no effect on the population as a whole. Especially when compared to the numbers of all bird species killed today by just one source, windows—estimated at between 365 and 985 million birds in the U.S. annually.

Furthermore, the former occurrence of Black-chinned Hummingbirds at the site where a wildfire had taken place in Hartstrand Gulch is instructive. Whether the result of lightning or initiated by a tribe, fire’s reduction of tree cover creates a warmer, drier microclimate that favors nectar-bearing, early successional shrubs—both of these changes benefiting Black-chinned Hummingbirds. Therefore, in northwestern California, tribal burning likely benefitted the species, just one example of the Karuk’s active stewardship.

I emailed Frank after receiving his photo of the Black-chinned. “Nice job! I’ll bet it was difficult to photograph it with adequate light on its purple gorget. In bad light, its entire throat looks black.”

“Yeah, it was tough to get the lighting right,” he replied. “I had to find the right pose. Luna was a big help.”

“Well, an amazing find, Frank...” There was no need to ask him what plans he had for the bird’s jeweled purple throat.

“I’m adding it to my regalia. So he can dance again.”
Sand, sego lily, Tarantula Mesa,
And the red light on the dashboard

Like a flash flood, fifty miles
From the nearest road

That acts like a road, culverts
And junction signs

For the boat trailers to Lake Powell.
Out here, there is only buffalo shit

From the only free-range herd outside of Yellowstone.
And cactus with water so hard-earned

It wants you to feel pain
Just for the fact that you desire it.

Out here,
only your eyes travel fast.

And even they stop dead
After running into stone.
A Man Stacking Stones

(Irpired by a sign at the Cape Coker Community Center, The Bruce Peninsula, Ontario, mentioning that the stacked stones on the beach were part of a self-help program and asking for others not to disturb them.)

I

Here in mist, even
Georgian Bay does not exist, waters
do not exist,
the leaves of trees, the thick trunks
and their own heavy language.

Unfortunately
I have said too much as well.

My hands
speaking a language as I hit her
that even frightened me.

II

So now I build. This stone
for its flatness.

It will provide the base

for the world to balance—
one elephant leg, testing

the shell of a turtle.

This stone for its color, the
dark bruise of shale. (Yes,

even the hardest rock
was once just softened clay.)
Each stone,

with its own sins
washed up on the same shore. Soon

my knees will be surrounded.
My back and heart enclosed. The rock

slow to anger, difficult to dislodge.

Soon
the view around me

will only be of stone,
the pockmarked

surface of my skin,

middle-aged dolomite, its pores
enlarging

in the slow fingerings of rain.

IV

In the middle of Georgian Bay
the water still falls and falls

over the ancient Niagara

before the last glaciers melted
and the pressures shifted elsewhere—

Yes, I too long to be swamped
by a new sea, buried and forgotten.

There I will abide.

Each stone I have chosen. Each
heavy word. —It was

through silence after all

that my own burdens
came to rest on her.
To my way of thinking, it’s like what Emerson said. I read him in college some twenty years back, and I still remember it. This is the type of individual that we, as a society, are at war with.

The nuisance factor with this character is way high. I mean, look up and down this street. Nice yards, well kept. Grass cut, trees trimmed. I have to write his place up every time I drive through here. I don’t get it. It’s not like he has that much real grass anyway, just a few clumps here and there that he let’s go until they’re two feet tall and I have to write up yet another violation....Target? No, of course not. But when I get calls from his neighbors, or I see how junked up the place is with Johnson grass gone to seed and weeds everywhere, I do have some sort of duty, you know, some kind of obligation to the law abiding citizens of this community.

Man, that guy creeps me out. I see him walking down the street almost every day. All kinds of weather. And always smiling. I think maybe he’s a little bit retarded or something. Maybe worse, like deranged or psychotic. Definitely a menace. Always staring at something, usually up, like at the sky or trees. But there’s nothing ever there, just sky and trees. Maybe a bird now and then. Nothing. Sometimes he’ll stop and kneel down, looking at the sidewalk and pawing at it, like he’s playing with the ants or something. Really, like a six year old boy looking for bugs. It’d be sad if it weren’t so creepy. And always talking to himself, too, as he’s going along. Singing, too, sometimes. But he’s not on the phone, or listening to music—no bluetooth, no earbuds, nothing. Just doing it on his own. I asked a buddy of mine down the street about it, and you know what he told me? Guy doesn’t even own a cell phone. Swear to God.

So the guy just walks into the trailer out of the blue one day. I don’t recognize him as one of our guys, but I figure he might be, he’s dressed the part, and I certainly don’t know every man on the site. I mean, it’s a big project. Plus, I’m usually just dealing with the contractors. Now, I’m a busy man, so I ask him what he needs and make it quick. He says something about wanting to help, so I tell him, we don’t do any hiring directly, it’s all contracted out, so he needs to talk to one of them if he’s looking for work. He says no, he’s not looking for work, he’s got a job but it’s his day off, he just wants to make some kind of contribution. I can’t figure out what the hell this guy is talking about, I’m just trying to get him out of there, get rid of
him, I’ve got stuff to do. So he says look, this school is an integral part of the community—he actually said that, integral—and he just wants to do one thing, no matter how small, to be a part of building the community, to be a part of shaping the future of the neighborhood—I mean, this is really the way he was talking. I figured the guy was mental. I thought about calling the cops, but I didn’t want any trouble—I get enough of that with INS—so I just gave him some BS about OSHA regulations and various liability issues. He just nodded and smiled, said thanks, went on his way.

5.

Do you know what I spent on re-sodding my lawn last year? How much I spend every damn year on landscaping? How many man hours I put into making my place look as good as it does? And now what do I see when I look out my front window? Dandelions. Everywhere. Must be six, eight flower stalks waving around in the breeze out there right now, and all I can think is, how many of those little bits of fluff are working their way down into my brand new sod? I know, I still have a shot at catching them now, while they’re still in flower, but Jesus, every day it’s a war. So what do I see when I look next door? An ally? Hell no. That yard is almost nothing but dandelions, and the doddering old jackass tells me he likes them. Doesn’t want to pull them up except when he harvests the roots. Harvests the roots! Can you believe that? Says he makes coffee out of them. I try and tell him, hose the damn things down with some Round Up, or Weed-B-Gone, something. We’re at war here. But no, not him. He likes the god damned things.

6.

Have you ever had a conversation with him? He stands there and listens. Every. Single. Word. You can see how intense he is, making sure he doesn’t miss a thing. And so enthusiastic about it, like you’re the most interesting person in the world. So there you are, telling him all about yourself, without even meaning to, and he’s just taking it all in, like some sort of stalker, or a thief trying to find out when you’re going out of town. Next thing you know, he’s checking to make sure your mom has a ride to her doctor’s appointment and how did your daughter’s soccer game go? I just feel like, it’s not just that he’s into everybody’s business, he’s like some creepy uncle, you know, making himself a part of the family. And it’s not just me. He’s interested in everybody.

7.

I see him out there sometimes, walking around his yard, picking stuff out of it and putting it in this big bowl he’s carrying. I thought, well, maybe he’s picking some weedy little flowers or something. I mean, I know he lives alone and all, so I thought, maybe he’s picking some flowers, puts them in like a little vase or glass or something on his table, brighten the room up a little, feel a little better about being alone all the time. You know? Well, one day I see him wandering around out there with his bowl, and I’m feeling neighborly, so I thought, what the heck, I’ll go over and say hello, cheer him up a little, just have a nice casual, neighborly conversation, you know? So I go over, say hello, introduce myself. He just gets this huge grin on his face, and shakes my hand, in this, God, I don’t know, I guess, vigorous way? Like I’m his long lost sister or something. It really made me feel kind of uneasy.
So I ask him what kind of flowers he's gathering, because I notice his bowl is mostly just full of weeds--stems, leaves, flowers, everything. So he tells me he's picking all kinds of things, henbit, dandelions, chickweed, cleavers, shepherd's purse, spiderwort. 'Weeding?' I ask. 'No,' he says, 'gathering dinner.' Now I'm really confused. I mean, why eat this nasty stuff out of the yard when you can go to a supermarket within walking distance and buy fresh, healthy produce? So I ask him. Boy, was that a mistake. I got what sounded like a manifesto for an answer. All about the interconnectedness of things, and how we have put up all these walls between ourselves and the world. 'I live on this little piece of land,' he says, 'I'm part of it, and it's part of me. The more literally true that is, the thinner and thinner the veil that separates me from my environment. The air I breathe, the food I eat—all of it exactly where I am, exactly what I am. You can't draw a line between me and it.' Jesus, what a nut.

8.

I fear for the safety of our children. I really do. I've seen him trying to talk to them. Not mine, of course, I always make sure they're inside whenever he's around. Anyway, some of the kids, the ones raised right, have enough sense to run back inside, yelling 'stranger danger!' the whole time. He don't care, just goes on to the next group. I've seen him out there, talking to kids can't be seven, eight years old. Talks to them like he's one of them. Gaining their trust. Saw him one time go in the street after a ball for one of them. Handed it back to the kid, got close enough to share a laugh, muss up his hair. Made my skin crawl. I don't own a gun, but I make damn sure I got a baseball bat handy at all times.

9.

Oh, I can tell you everything you need to know about him. Bonnie, down the street, tells me he's never been married, has no kids. Ted, across the way, says he makes his own pickles, cheese, soap, wine, almost like he's waiting on the end times. Frank, over at the corner, says the guy doesn't even own a TV and can't tell you the last movie he saw or who won the Super Bowl last year. Jenny, Frank's wife, says she saw him talking to Evelyn Newberry one day while she, Evelyn, was waiting for the school bus. They were laughing together and he's saying something to her in Latin, filthy no doubt. And there's poor Evelyn, probably going to be valedictorian, smart as a whip, sky's the limit type, with this pervert trying to screw with her head, or worse. Makes me sick. Oh, and did I mention that Jocelyn Quayles says he eats dirt out of his yard, and Mark Jenkins says he doesn't even have a cell phone? Or that Tom Salazaar says the guy prances down the length of the street everyday, singing? Yeah, you ever need it, I got the goods on this clown.

10.

Well, no...not yet. But look. What we are dealing with here is a ticking time bomb. Do you really think we can afford to wait?
At last, I can hear the soft bellow
of my swift breath blowing
heads of white dandelions—a sigh
hollowed out: the pain
I must have caused. You,
Mother, named each petal of fluff
Baby Jesus, made me pray
as each thread floated up its whiteness
mixing with clouds until I couldn’t see
them, their sound too high a pitch
as if a song only for God. “Wish away,”
you’d say, “one is bound to reach the Father.”

Whose father? Your Father.
My father? My father
is in the basement making his own music—
aluminum beer cans clink as he sets one
down, reaches for another. “No better country
song than a man poppin’ a top,” he’d say.
I’ve never found the chord of a cracking tab;
I can’t define its key; I can’t shape its note.
When I turn away from my mother, there is a frog on the glass. It could comfortably sit on the tip of my thumb. Slowly, it inches its way up the window, twitching left and right to examine insects shivering towards the light from the house. It is dark now. All I can see is the white belly of the frog and a thin strip of the shrubs below him. Further out, the night is luminous with sound. The throbbing of crickets and cicadas, and, beyond, the eerie calls of nocturnal creatures. It sounds like home.

My mother and I have been canning all day. The counter is lined with glass jars, still cooling and sealing themselves with faint pops. The rain this year brought an extra large crop of peaches, so that our one small tree dripped with hundreds of tender fruits, too many to count or eat. Beyond the canning jars sit pies and cakes, and beyond that, more bags filled with peaches.

Earlier in the day, we went out to get the jars. In the first store we visited, the salesman regretted that they did not have true canning jars. Canning, he said, is a lost art.

Once snow has blanketed the ground, I stay snugly inside, spooning peach salsa onto white fish fillets and brandied peaches onto fluffy brown pancakes. The room is dull, but the smells and sights of summer flood my mind. A little bit of warmth. I am in the city now, where the snow piles up in slushy puddles, smearing everything with grime.

But I no longer hear the insistent pattering of ice against the window. I am lost in the humming of bees’ wings. I stand on a ladder amid the peach boughs, heavy with fruit. The smell is intoxicating: sweet and sugary and, beneath that, a sickening alcoholic rot, brown fruits crushed beneath my creaking ladder’s feet. Even on the trees, fruits ferment, uneaten and unpicked, despite the pecking of birds, the scratching of raccoons, my own grasping hands. Bees suck nectar from the open wounds. Their honey will taste of peaches this year.

My city neighbors cannot know this feeling of contentment. They do not know these sights and smells, and clamor away from the buzzing of bees. They tell me they enjoy the peaches, not knowing what they are missing.

And this I know. If I can never achieve my heart’s ambition, never create a lasting impression, never change the world, this at least I have done. I have saved a little bit of life, which otherwise would have perished.
Every wasp is a gazelle in its mother's eyes.
Females sting a tarantula and paralyze it.
"She suffered an injury to her back."
The tarantula hawk wasp is the second most painful insect sting in the world,
after the South American bullet ant. Justin O. Schmidt, entomologist at the University of Arizona and creator of the Schmidt Sting Pain Index, described it as "Blinding, fierce, shockingly electric. A running hair dryer has been dropped into your bubble bath."
But he said the ant's sting was "Pure, intense, brilliant pain. Like fire-walking over flaming charcoal with a 3-inch rusty nail grinding into your heel." He tried to stay drunk for twelve hours to quell the pain, but his agony remained strong. Then they drag it underground through a pothole. The mother lays an egg in the tarantula and this larva nurses on the paralyzed spider. From in- "not" + jus (gen. juris) "right, law." Her children will be bright blue with rusty orange wings. Colloq. a slap in the face, two stabs in the back don't make a right. I wonder, did it feed on your mother's memories or was she, like I, like us, a woman born without history?
I bought a sweet potato, forgot about it, and when I found it in the back of my pantry, three of its eyes had sprouted. I held the potato in my hands, turned it around and around, and poked it checking for signs of decay. How had this little tuber formed life so easily? It was mandated that I throw the sweet potato away, but instead I tucked it into the small, blue waterproof bag I used for kayaking. It seemed like such a shame to destroy it.

Peter, my husband, came home that evening looking like he'd won a prize. Good for him, I thought, at least one of us was productive. After cleaning out the pantry, I'd sat in the living room, bored for hours, alternating between watching the news and staring out the window at lizards.

"Did you have a good day at work?" He was an officer in the southwest Florida branch of the FDA's new patent infringement division.

"Janine, you won't believe it. I got another big bust."

"Nice, who were they? What happened?"

"It was an old couple out in Lehigh. Had a big field of patented tomatoes they didn't pay any licensing fees for. Tried to say they were heirlooms."

"I don't understand these people. They had to have known they'd get caught?"

"I don't get it either, honey, but as long as people are dumb enough to break the law, I have a job. You should have seen how devastated they were when we burned their plants. The lady practically leapt into the flames trying to grab a couple of the ripe ones."

"Jesus. Well, congratulations. Maybe you'll get promoted soon." I thought of my earlier actions. Why hadn't I thrown that stupid potato away? I opened my mouth slightly and almost told him how silly I'd been, but I hesitated. He must have noticed my restraint.

"I've been meaning to talk to you, Janine. You seem so depressed lately. I know you've been dealing with things, but it's been months. I don't want to seem insensitive, but maybe you should talk to someone. Or maybe find something to help fill your days."

"I'm fine, Peter, I promise. I just need more time to sort everything out." What did sorting everything out even mean? It sounded lame even to me. We hadn't talked about the miscarriage since it happened, but he obediently changed the subject. I could tell I hadn't done much to alleviate his concern.

The next morning I took my kayak out of the shed. It was covered in thick dust which dulled the bright red hull, and I tried not to shudder as two gigantic palmetto bugs darted out from under the torn foam seat. Our yard was small, but it had a pair of mature strangler figs that provided shade, and it sat directly on the Estero River. I paddled down the river toward the bay, following the slow and steady current. Usually on these trips I focused my attention on the animals around me: sunbathing turtles, jumping fish, foraging herons, and the occasional reticent alligator. But today I paid attention to the plants, thinking the entire time of the illicit sweet potato I ferried. I had no idea what many of the trees were that lined the shore, but I did recognize several large mango trees, a couple wild, sprawling carambola trees, sporadic, thick patches of bamboo, and a few small pineapples. These plants owed their existence to some of the first people to inhabit Estero after the Calusa: the Koreshans, homesteaders, and citrus grove operators, who planted along the banks and unintentionally sent seeds down the river to volunteer in random places.
I got close to one of the carambolas. It was the largest fruit tree I’d ever seen, and it was covered with a multitude of large fruits and clusters of pink and purple flowers that emitted an enticing fragrance. The supermarkets had stopped selling starfruit soon after the Plant Breeders’ Rights Act came into effect. The law protected companies that created new varieties of plants by banning the selling, growing, or consumption of any protected variety. It seemed fantastic in theory, until the corporations started churning out crazed, invasive varieties that hybridized with any nearby crops. Bam, now the company controlled those plants too, and the small farmers were forbidden to replant the seeds, unless they wanted to chance steep fines or time in jail. Supermarkets and restaurants couldn’t buy legal products from anyone except the major corporations, and the major corporations were way more concerned with profit than taste or variety. It really wasn’t that bad. I adjusted my shopping trips just like everyone else.

I situated my kayak underneath the carambola canopy and noticed the tree was teeming with honeybees that hummed from flower to flower. I reached up and plucked a large, bright yellow starfruit from an overhanging branch and bit into it. The juice was amazingly sweet, and I tried to remember the last time I’d eaten anything like it. This wasn’t the fruit of a monocultural orchard: this was the fruit of wild chance along the banks of a tropical river, this was fruit that tasted of the preserves my grandmother had long ago made, and this was the fruit that incited my passionate need to break with the imposed beliefs that my husband clung to so willingly. I collected a few of the seeds and tucked them into my bag.

I made it out to the mouth of Estero Bay and went north, hugging the coast until I found my favorite trail. It led inland, between huge waterfront estates, and dead ended in a secluded, abandoned subdivision called Hidden Harbor. I loved the place. It was really only accessible by water. The road into Hidden Harbor was gated and padlocked, and the expensive stone monument announcing the community’s name was plastered with no trespassing signs. The developers must have gone bankrupt when the economy crapped out after the real estate bubble burst. Whatever entity had been working on the community had ceased before building any of the houses, but the infrastructure remained intact: the streets were paved, the docks still stood, and tall royal palms were scattered around in the wild grass and small shrubs of potential yards. I paddled into the medium-sized, man-made lake in the center of the community and docked the kayak.

I grabbed my bag and explored the area like I always did. I walked up and down both cul-de-sacs, giving my legs a stretch and my arms a break. I felt the weight of the sweet potato and seeds in the bag but ignored it for a while. I felt the heat of the Florida sun, and breathed in the thick humidity of summer. I stopped walking. I took the potato out, used my pocket knife to cut a chunk out around each eye, cleared the grass from a small area next to the pavement, and planted the sprouts in holes dug with my hands. I gingerly placed the still damp starfruit seeds in tiny holes nearby and gently covered them with sandy soil. I know these things only weighed a few ounces, but my bag felt much lighter.

That evening when Peter came home I hugged him and smiled.

“Hey,” he said, “you seem happy.”

“I am. I went kayaking today, did some soul-searching. It feels good.”

We cooked dinner together, played a few rounds of rummy, and had sex for the first time in months. I went to sleep wondering about the plants I’d started in the soil. They probably wouldn’t grow, but I couldn’t wait to go back and check on them. The next time I paddled down the river my bag held a couple pineapple tops. When I was a child, my mom cut the tops off all the pineapples we ate and planted them in the yard. I knew I couldn’t do the same in my own yard without getting fined or worse, but what were the chances I’d get caught out in Hidden Harbor? I docked
my kayak and carried my bag to my little garden. I stared at the dirt. Nothing was there. I told myself to be patient. I placed the pineapple heads into the topsoil. It was rainy season, so I knew the plants were getting plenty of water. I came back several times with various things I’d picked up that I hoped would grow: more sweet potatoes and pineapple tops, mango pits, peanuts, dragon fruit vines, and black-eyed susan seeds. About three weeks later I was overjoyed to find that a few sweet potato sprouts had broken the surface of the soil. I tried to limit myself to visiting only two or three times a week, but it was hard.

“You’ve been kayaking so much lately; you’re so tan now,” Peter said. I looked at my arms, and he was right. My skin was darker, and I could even tell I had slightly more muscle. I glanced at my hands and saw that I had dirt under my fingernails. Crap, I thought, I need to be more careful. I wondered if I should just tell him about the garden.

A few months later a category two hurricane headed directly for our spot on the map. We sat on the couch together with the house boarded up. We watched the local weather lady on the television announce the wind speeds for the area and waited for the power to go out. Our relationship seemed to be going well, but my slight guilt at keeping a small secret from him was turning into something stronger. My plants were flourishing, and my plot was taking up a significant chunk of Hidden Harbor. I’d even slipped a few of my newly grown sweet potatoes into our meals. I hoped the storm wouldn’t damage the plants too badly. I asked Peter how work was going.

“It’s great. Things are slowing down a little bit now that we’ve knocked out most of the big operations. We’re starting to focus on the smaller ones now.”

“Are the smaller ones really hurting anyone, though?”

He paused before answering. “You’ve got to remember that these people are criminals. They ignore the laws, think they can do whatever they want. They’re probably selling their produce on the black market, and that takes money away from decent hard-working people.”

“How do you even know? Do you talk to these people? Do you even check to see if the stuff they’re growing is patented, or do you just fucking burn it?” I hadn’t even realized this anger was there, buried and growing.

“What the hell’s your deal all of a sudden? We don’t need to check it. All of it’s owned by some company who bought up the rights to it.”

“All of it? Everything?”

“Yes.”

“What about the stuff that grows in the wild?”

“What about it?”

“Well suppose I take a walk along the river, pick a mango, and eat it. Am I a criminal?”

He didn’t even pause this time. “Yes. You know you’re supposed to pay for the things you eat, not steal them from the forest. And besides, someone owns that land, and if they get caught with mango trees on their property they’ll be fined, and we’ll burn the trees.”

“And you don’t have a problem with that?”

“Look, it’s not my job to interpret the law. It’s my job to enforce it.”

We looked at each other. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. If I told him about my plants he would understand. The man I loved would understand. “Listen, Peter, I’m sorry. I’m proud of you. I know that you’re a good person, and I know how hard you work.” I swallowed. I heard the wind toss what must have been a branch into the side of our house. “There’s actually something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

“What is it? Are you okay?”
“I’m fine. I’m better than fine, but I’ve been keeping something from you that I think you need to know.”

His face lit up. “Oh my God, Janine, are you pregnant again? I’ve been hoping and hoping but I didn’t want to—.”

“No!” As if I didn’t feel bad enough for keeping things from him. “I love you so much, and this isn’t easy for me to say, but I’ve been going out to Hidden Harbor. Remember that abandoned subdivision I took you to that time?” I told him all about my plants. I told him about the mango saplings, the sprawling sweet potato vines, the patch of peanuts, and the gorgeous yellow black-eyed susans. I told him how sweet the starfruit by the river tasted and how years from now my little starfruit saplings would be fruit-bearing trees. He stayed silent the whole time. He even smiled a bit when I told him about the gopher tortoise that dug a burrow right under some of my most mature pineapple plants.

“So,” I said, “I regret lying to you. I’m sorry. This garden has brought me a lot of joy, though, and I really hope you understand. You have to realize that not all the people who break the law are bad people. You have to understand that I’m not even doing anything wrong.” The power went out, and I quickly lit one of the candles we’d placed on the table in front of us. He stared intently at me in the warm, flickering light.

“I don’t think you’re a bad person, Janine. I love you very much.” He moved to hug me, and I knew everything was going to be okay. The hurricane hit land far north of us, the power came back on by morning, and the only damage to our property was a couple broken slash pine branches. Peter went in to work while I cleaned up the yard, but I couldn’t wait to check on my garden.

I dragged the kayak to the water and paddled down the river. Estero Bay was choppier than usual, but I was careful. I docked and noticed the smell of smoke. I made my way to my spot but stopped before I reached it. I saw a field of black. I looked at it for a long time, but then I forced myself to approach my burned plants. I searched for my beloved carambola saplings but couldn’t even find their decimated remains; the area was charred beyond recognition. I kneeled near the spot where I’d planted my first sweet potato and dragged my fingers frantically through the charred soil until I found an unharmed tuber. It had a small, still green, seedling sprouting from its skin, which I placed in my bag. I drifted back down the river exploring new passageways, planning, and collecting a few starfruit seeds and mango pits as I went. I found a perfect spot, a few yards from the river in a secluded, sunny clearing, to start one of my new wild gardens.
One hand on the steering wheel, one resting on the passenger seat, Hank swung his Jeep into the open spot in front of his house. A deft parallel-parker. He sat and listened to a song on the radio. Trying to figure out how to tell his wife the truth. “Leslie, I’m just plumb out of ideas about your dark-star daddy.”

He reached into the backseat for his guitar and noodled along with the chord structure.

“Keep it lonesome,” sang the male vocalist. Hank was chronically superstitious about turning off a song before its conclusion. The lyrics described the plight of a shrink who counseled nervous cowboys at rodeos. As a rookie therapist, Hank sympathized.

Hank’s client load included several wannabe cowboys who doubled as academics at the local university. And, of course, the lingering case of his late father-in-law, the mystery man with the jangling spurs. Boss Sturdevant was a state inspector of municipal flood plains. Famous for working on horseback, Boss shot himself and his old palomino, the day after a Channel 7 news story revealed fake inspection reports on the Wabash River at Terre Haute.

Five years ago tomorrow. At least he didn’t live to see his hometown under water.

Hank’s marriage to Leslie was a fractured fairy tale. You win the hand of the beautiful maiden, only if you keep her entranced with psychological interpretations of her dead daddy’s sins. Early on, Hank convinced himself (egged on by his wife’s friend, Joanne) that the reason the beautiful Leslie Sturdevant – a Miss Greene County Rodeo Queen – married a clubfoot preacher’s kid was that he assuaged her grief with riveting theories about her father’s “unknown sides.”

Leslie watched Hank from the kitchen. Their street still littered with debris from the recent Bull River overflow. She tapped on the window above the sink with two beer bottles. His n’ hers. She was a big fan of everything his n’ hers. His Jeep and her Jeep. His beer mug and her beer mug, both monogrammed. Leslie worked in the stables at PALS, a local non-profit that provided free equestrian therapy to kids.

She usually got home a little after six. Started dinner. Opened a beer.

Hank waved and climbed out of the car, clubfoot first, and blew her a kiss. His bearded face was a study in contrasts: soft from the front, hard in profile. Hers was the opposite. Add some turquoise jewelry and a slight tilt of her head, like a dog hearing a distant call.

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“Sorry, I’m late.”

“You were sitting out there listening to a song,” Leslie said.

“Couldn’t turn it off,” Hank explained, “you know how I am.”

“What do you think would happen, if you turned off the radio?” she asked.

Hank said, “Something awful.”

“You should try writing a song of your own,” Leslie suggested.

“Kind of superstitious about that too,” Hank said, “I might like it too much. I might quit my job and move us to Nashville and not be able to keep you in the manner to which you are accustomed.

“The check from FEMA came today,” Leslie said.
She served up a ‘meat and three’. Liver, onions, macaroni, green beans. It was the favorite meal of Hank's preacher daddy. Long ago, Hank's dad, as a Youth Ministry guide, led several mission trips to the local Indian reservation with the young Boss Sturdevant and considered him a lost soul way before he pulled the trigger.

“The water always wins,” Hank recited.

Leslie smiled. “Boss’ line after a couple bourbons.”

“Maybe that’s why he faked the reports.”

Leslie opened another beer. “No, he wasn't really a big-picture thinker like you.”

She stifled a sob. “It would have crushed him to see this mess, the downtown inundated. Appliances floating around in our basement. He wouldn't have known what to make of all this weather weirdness, ten inches of rain in one day, twelve inches the next.”

“Frankly, I'm ashamed of the FEMA money,” Hank admitted, “even though I know the government allocates funds for exactly this sort of situation. It’s like when I changed my office schedule to three days, so I could stay home on Tuesday and Thursday to read and do paperwork. The first Tuesday that I wasn't in the office, I felt like a loafer, a shirker.”

Leslie said, “Well, you take that to therapy, and I’ll take the check to the bank.”

* * *

Nose-pierced Joanne, in addition to being Leslie's childhood friend from 4-H, was a former office mate of Hank's. They had survived graduate school and practicum and set up an office together on the downtown square. Joanne's private practice quickly tanked, because she did all the talking and her clients barely got in a word. Motor-mouth Joanne stuck Hank with her half of the lease and took a job as a case manager for the university’s HMO.

“Hank and his woodstove - it’s a dick thing,” Joanne said, ritually dousing her omelet with hot sauce.

“You know how men get with their toys,” she added.

Leslie nodded, “Whenever I try to bring up his woodstove compulsion, Hank goes all mythic on me. Men and fires. Women tended those primitive campfires just as much as men.”

Joanne theorized, “Could be connected to your dad. Maybe the woodstove is how Hank tries to feel tough, like Boss.”

Leslie sighed and said, “Hank can’t seem to grasp that I don’t need him to psych out Boss’ suicide anymore. I’m getting tired of a different theory every week. Really, it’s about time he focused on why his own daddy was such a fundamentalist freak.”

Joanne held up a finger. “I must confess that I pushed him into that, when you two were dating.”
Leslie said, “So you might have more luck setting him straight.”

“Not if he won’t speak to me. I’ve tried to apologize many times for the office disaster, but he won’t take my calls. I don’t know how he tolerates us remaining friends,” Joanne frowned.

“Because I patiently explained that your office fuck-up was kind of typical,” Leslie said, “and because you still get credit for being the one who introduced us.”

“I never figured you’d actually marry the dude,” Joanne said.

Politely re-directing, Leslie said, “My grandmother’s porcelain got knocked around in the flood and her beloved tea tray was chipped. I’ve asked all the pottery people in town for advice on a repair and nobody has a clue.”

“Try a dentist,” Joanne suggested.

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Leslie’s grandmother was the only female dentist in Greene County for decades. Hank and Leslie’s current dentist, Dr. Sally Sturgeon, agreed to take on the task of repairing her noted predecessor’s porcelain tray. “No charge, by the way. Professional courtesy.”

“Is this the oddest job you’ve ever had?” Hank asked.

Dr. Sally smiled, “I once filled an ugly cavity in a large tooth in a bear’s head attached to a rug.”

“My grandmother had one of those too,” Leslie chirped.

“She must have been quite a woman,” Sally said.

“She was, except it was eventually discovered that her degree was mail order,” Hank revealed.

*  

On the way home Leslie turned up the radio in the Jeep and silently stewed. Hank pretended not to notice. He offered ideas for the tray, to display fruit or nuts or magazines. No answer. He made a joke about getting her to speak being like pulling teeth.

She snapped, “I just don’t know why you had to mention the mail order degree. All her patients continued coming to her anyway.”

Hank resorted to clinical-speak. “Don’t you see? It could be an important link to Boss. His mother faked her dentist’s degree and later Boss faked all those inspection reports. And, hey, a lot of times suicide is actually triggered by small, last-straw events. Maybe his horse kicked over a bucket and he shot the old nag in a rage and then impulsively killed himself from guilt.”

Leslie groaned, “Can you please give it a rest?”

Hank nodded ruefully, unable yet to admit a more pressing reason why he couldn’t let go of Boss’ fall.

*  

The alarm clock buzzed at six-thirty.
Hank clumped downstairs to the kitchen to make coffee, delivered a cup upstairs, and returned to his desk. Rubbing his eyes, he forced himself to focus on his Mental Health Counselor license renewal. He reached for a pen and jabbed the tip into his cheek. The coffee cooled and needed reheating.

When Leslie eventually appeared, Hank slid the papers under a pile of mail on his desk. She plopped down on the couch.

“What are you working on?” she asked.

“Case notes,” Hank lied. He hoisted a log from the woodbin and clumped over to feed the fire.

She said, “It’s plenty warm in here already.”

“I’ve got to keep the stove going,” he said.

“Why? Why do you have to keep the stove going?” she asked.

“Because it’s a fire,” he explained.

She laughed at the illogic in his comment. Only then was it visible to him. Only then did he glimpse his own folly reflected in the foibles of his young marriage. He backpedaled, a bit dazed, and slowly placed the log back down in the woodbin.

He almost confessed the license renewal problem to her, but couldn’t get the words out. It would render him the same as Boss. It would taint him.

* 

‘It’ was one of Hank’s university clients. ‘It’ was the university’s mental health policy, a strict medical model carve-out. Therapists had to exaggerate symptoms in order to get sessions approved. ‘It’ was a burnt-out professor desperate for change. ‘It’ was a routine dysthymia diagnosis, usually good for ten sessions.

After a few getting-unstuck conversations with Hank, the dysthymic professor applied for a job outside academia, with a corporation in Indianapolis. He received a first interview and then a second. The corporation asked to see his medical records. When the professor didn’t get the job, he blamed it on Hank’s diagnosis. The guy claimed he lost the job because of a trumped-up, inaccurate diagnosis and filed a complaint with the State Board.

‘It’ made it hard for Hank to focus on anything else.

* 

At the end of a work day, Hank turned off the lights in his office and meditated. Sunset leaked through the blinds and glowed on the carpet. Hank tried to feel his breath flowing in and out from his heart. He sat in a half-lotus position on the floor. His chest and belly muscles slowly loosened. He closed his eyes. On rare occasions, a faint blue light hovered inside his forehead.

“My body is in the universe. The universe is in my body,” Hank silently recited, “my body and the universe combine together to find some compassion for that sonofabitch because I should have seen it coming the minute he walked in the door with that hurt-dog leer…”

Having barely grown beyond the ‘impostor syndrome’ phase of a young therapist’s career, Hank still struggled with the belief that he was unconsciously one hundred percent responsible for everything that happened in his office. Tall, bulging bookcases and framed degrees on the wall attempted to create the impression that he knew what he was doing.

A sharp knock sounded at the door. Hank hoisted himself off the floor and clumped through the waiting room. Had his last client dropped her keys in the couch again?

* 

Joanne grinned nervously in the hall. She held out a bouquet of mums, apparently ripped up from a nearby garden, the exposed roots scattering dirt. “Good news, Hank! I come bearing good news!”

She glanced around the office, no doubt noticing that Hank had ditched all her leftover stuff, including her 4-H posters. She handed him the dirty flowers.
“I just came from the university’s review committee meeting. They brought in a consultant. They’re totally supporting you and the diagnosis. The State Board will close the file on the investigation. I wanted you to know right away!”

Hank froze. “Did you call Leslie too?” he asked.

“I left her a message. Isn’t it great news?”

The mums fell from Hank’s hand. This is what Hank’s daddy would call a “Day of Judgment”.

Joanne, never the most astute clinician, suddenly realized, “Oh, shit, you hadn’t told her! Oh, stupid me! You didn’t tell her because you were afraid it made you look like Boss. You were afraid that Leslie would dump you. And now I’ve screwed you again! Oh, Hank, how are you ever going to forgive me?”

“That’s the least of my worries,” Hank muttered.

*

Hank drove slowly home, preparing for Leslie’s fury. He crossed the churning Bull River on the new bridge at Second Street and quelled an impulse to yank the wheel.

The tune about the rodeo shrink came on the radio. Hank turned it off. He parked in front of his house, scraping the curb with his rear wheel.

He heard the clink of beer bottles on the kitchen window. Possibly an auditory hallucination, a welcoming sound he desperately wanted to hear. He blinked and saw his wife tapping two beer bottles on the kitchen window. Was this a positive signal or a summons to his final reckoning? Leslie’s face seemed to indicate the former. Hank stared in consternation.

Joanne’s plaintive question resurfaced. How could Leslie forgive him so easily? How would Hank ever manage to get beyond Joanne and Boss and the sonofabitch professor? And his own daddy’s crimes? The club-footed Ph.D. offspring of a backwoods snake-handler and moonshiner banged his forehead against the steering wheel.

Hank closed his eyes and summoned some appreciation of Boss Sturdevant, a glimmer of understanding for how the mad labyrinth of regulatory bureaucracy could indeed drive a person over the edge. The beer bottles clinked again on the window. Hank reached for his guitar in the backseat. There was only one solution. He would finally have to write a song.

END
L.A. OWENS

Parking Lot

Plastic bags catch in the limbs
of the islands’ small trees,

their trunks crusted with street salt,
flecked with remnants

of straw wrappers, the asphalt pale
beneath the winter sun.

In the back seat, where Happy Meal Barbies
snooze in layers of plastic,

the children half-doze, watching
the stores as they pass,

the glowing Baskin Robbins
with its white walls and thirty-one flavors,

teenagers wiping
the counter with gray rags,

the Big Lots, its shelves weighted
with anticipation: scented candles,

coffee pots, sheet sets,
and picture frames

that come with smiling faces
already inside. How hard is it

to love what is
more than what could be?
LESLEY BROWER

Salt Lick Prayer

... but his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.

Genesis 19:25

Lord, often I desire to be as shameless as a cow,
particularly the unabashed manner
in which they gyrate their tongues,
lolling the slick muscle past ryegrass
and millet-stained teeth in an ardent bray
of admonishment or warning, the seemingly endless
length stretching forth in unabashed fury.

A heifer will launder the ass of a calf
in broad daylight and then return,
guiltless, the instrument of her cleaning
into her mouth. And oh! The freedom
to explore one's own nostril with a tongue,
to traverse the tender dark laden
with hair and snot and grit
with a wet appendage, and to bring that filth
back into the most intimate realm
of knowing, to taste the foulness
of existence and swallow it down whole.

Dare I speak of the desire to press
my own bud-mantled tongue to all manner
of things discouraged? Once, I flattened
my mouth against the rusted pane
of a screen door until the hatched weave
bequeathed its coppery marinade
of night wind and spider leg and wasp wing
and the salt-sweat of every palm
thrust against it. I still crave
to fasten my mouth upon every wound,
every mosquito bite, blister, and razor-slip tear.
Perhaps there is no quandary or silent ache
that cannot be solved once lapped,
but Lord, I lack the courage to bring it to my lips.
The cattle ask no absolution for flailing
their tongues, heads thrust though the perilous barrier
of barbed wire in search of crabgrass clumps,
their writhing organ a pink absurdity exposed
without even a flush in their wobbling jowls.

And see, Lord, the union of mouths at a salt lick,
not so much as a beg your pardon
when one greedy tongue slurps against another
in the haste to satisfy, muscled heads
nudging the weaker aside, stout shanks quaking
with the vigor of their licking, all tongues
lolling, colliding, twining, eager, naked.

Omniscient, You must already know I'll take one last look
at whatever miracle or catastrophe preformed
behind my back, so give me this: let it happen
when I'm surrounded by black-eyed heifers
lashing the bone-whip of their tails flank to flank
to ward off flies, udders chapped from suckling
wobble-kneed calves. Let there be discs
of excrement hard as kettle bottoms
and broom thistle necking up towards a cloudless sky.
Let there be a mockingbird on a fencepost, ranting
like the prophets must have, screeching about nothing
and everything all at once in a language
the cattle couldn't care less about.

And then, when I twist around and squint
at that forbidden thing You told me not to,
Lord, turn me into a salt lick.

Let the cows lumber forward in a heavy shuffle
of muck-chinked hooves, the frayed canopy of their lashes lit
in a sun-bright fringe. Let those tongues unfurl in crass glory
to grind wetly against my face, erasing the salted hood
of my eyelids, wearing grooves into my elbows and ribs,
eroding my fingertips and nose and that small curve of bone
at my ankles until those swaying bellies are full
of pretty much everything I was ever worth anyway.
Blood drips from the snake's mouth and splatters in a semicircle on the hot asphalt. He's coiled defensively in the road after being struck by a passing vehicle. The large gopher snake is hurt, angry, looking to blame, but he isn't going to kill me, even if he does manage to strike. He isn't venomous, and gopher snakes are constrictors. I lift the hurt, hissing reptile with a walking stick and gently move him off the road. I stupidly say, “Now stay off the road,” like I’m talking to a Chihuahua. This partially paved road in deep southeastern Oregon is fairly well-traveled, but it’s wide, and rarely do two cars ever pass. I’m hours from anyplace with real traffic. A four-inch-thick, five-foot-long snake warming himself in the midmorning sun is pretty tough to miss, even at high speed. I could spend the rest of my days dragging snakes off sunbaked highways and never save them all. But if he lives, he’ll go on to dine on crop pests like gophers, mice, and rats that plague the farm and ranchlands. He’ll sink his teeth. He’ll slither. It will go on.
Out here, where there are more antelope than people, it seems the tailings of our roughhewn human existence are more starkly evident than in other places. A ball of barbed wire from an old ranch left to rust in the middle of a nature preserve. A single bullet embedded in the dry alkaline lakebed. An abandoned stone house, its dirt floors now covered in cow manure left by wandering herds. A dead coyote lying in the ditch, his face blown off. A snake, haphazardly struck, its blood marking the road that will take me home. A sun-faded beer can, shot up for target practice and forgotten full of holes, twenty-five miles from the nearest trash can.

Near the barbed wire, two enormous iron tubs remain, where Chinese laborers worked a borax mine from 1892-1902. They worked for a dollar fifty per day, seven days a week, year-round, only two weeks off for the Chinese New Year. Miners mixed sulfuric acid and spring-heated lake water with crude borax from the lakebed and refined it into pure borax crystals. It was loaded in ninety-pound sacks and sent by mule train to Nevada. In ancient times, burak was mined in the Middle East and used to preserve mummies. It’s also valuable as a detergent stabilizer, fertilizer, and weed killer, among other uses. Thick, white mineral crust crunches beneath my hiking boots as I walk along the shore, looking for migrating birds where mammoths once roamed and Chinese men once scooped so-called white gold into boiling vats. I consider how native grasses and fish are more precious here now, more valuable than minerals, how we’ve evolved just enough to protect carefully selected pieces of the earth from our own destructive tendencies.

I stare at the bullet for a long time. How long will it take for it to succumb to weather and erosion and disappear into the playa forever? Fifty years? A hundred? Seeing it there, embedded in the dried lakebed, reminds me of the 10,000-year-old Pleistocene crescent tool I found nearby once, in a similar position, just as forgotten but a hundred times more permanent. There were mastodons here then and ancient horses. There were giant camels and wooly mammoths and other large game animals that wandered and grazed the immense grasslands and the soupy marshlands of the humid lake country. Native Americans lived
in surrounding caves and fished from reed boats. The tiny, inch-long crescent, carved from chert, a type of quartz, was likely used to skin rabbit hides all that time ago. The rabbits now run from the sound of flying bullets, leaving not a single sign out here unscathed.

During breakfast at a café in a town with a shot-up population sign that reads 15, I ask a cowboy about rabbit hunting. He’s sitting next to me at the counter, sopping up yolks with thick slices of buttered sourdough. I ask him about the pile of dead jackrabbits down the road. The stack of them rotting in the sun six feet high. A rancher sitting next to him is laughing about how easy it is to stun rabbits with spotlights at night. “Why?” I say, probably annoying the hell out of them. “Why just kill them and leave them?”
The way the dripping yellow yolk balls up on the twisted ends of his mustache turns my stomach a little, but I can't look away. He continues chewing, silently. Then, without looking at me or putting his fork down, he says, “Jackrabbits ain't no good. All they are is full of parasites.”

I think of the spent bullet, the barbed wire, rotting meat, stone crescent, borax tubs, stone houses, Pleistocene horses, reed boats, bloody snakes, empty skies. A coyote howls in the distance. Bacon sizzles on the grill. Somebody drops a dish in the back.

“Just because, then?” I say, pushing my fork around in my hash browns, feeling both awkward and strangely bold among these strangers.

“Yep,” the cowboy says, tossing his dirty napkin onto his plate and wrapping thick, dirt-stained hands around his coffee mug. “That, and some guys with guns and beer got bored, I guess.”

After breakfast, I slip into the cottonwood thicket near the café. A trail leads around a small pond. Quail scatter into the brush, topknots bobbing. A great-horned owl swoops in near silence from a branch. An old barbed wire fence sags at the edges of the grove. Now, in some places, fencing is being pulled by volunteers to open land for pronghorn herds and to protect birds like sage grouse from entanglement, even as shiny new strands of razor wire are raised at a prison expansion on the other side of the state, always keeping some out, putting others in.
So we don’t feed the birds anymore,
Once the rats came. Each week a bigger body
In the snap trap as the brood grew.
Four, then five, and then the mother,
Big as a woodchuck, yellow teeth biting
The murderous bar in her rigoured agony.

The last to go made sport of us --
Snap trap, glue trap, bucket of water...
A month of night-time gnawing later
And the poison finally got him. We found him
By the noisome smell in the workshop wall
Once the cold had come, and the birds had gone.
We can’t smoke outside the nursing home, so we walk around the block, sit on the curb. It’s 9 degrees. I don’t feel it in my camouflaged Carharts, gloves and hat. Bess wears lavender scrubs and a flimsy fleece. She brings her knees to her chest and hugs them. She drops her head to her knees. I place my hat awkwardly on her head, hand her one glove.

She’s the best C.N.A., and the things that make her good at taking care of old folks—smiling while she wipes their asses, bathing them like they were her own parents—makes her vulnerable. Brings her pain enough to break her heart daily. I put my arm around her. Bess’ big, oozing heart keeps her with her ass canoe husband too. We take a long drag. She pulls the hat down to cover her ears, drops her head to her knees again.

“So,” I say, “This woman goes out, promises her husband she’ll be home by midnight. The margaritas slide down until 2:30 a.m. She takes a cab home. She gets inside, and her cuckoo clock cuckoos 3 times, so she adds 9 more. Over breakfast, her husband asks when she got in. She says, ‘Midnight.’ Husband says, ‘I thought so. I heard the cuckoo call 3 times, stumble over the couch, say shit and then squawk 9 more times.’”

Bess looks up, her face blotchy and wet, her nose running.

“What am I going to do, Jane?” she whispers.

Bess is pregnant. She already has 3 kids, ordered like stairs—2, 3 and 4. The last is still in diapers.


Bess says three kids and a binge drinker make for a special kind of alone.

After work, I relieve my mom, and walk into the same loneliness. 5 years ago, I wore these Carharts deer hunting, right before dad’s stroke. He felled an eight-point buck. I took a picture of him and the deer. Dad’s eyes bright and alive. He’s not that man any more. Time was we’d sit in a tree stand for three hours at a time, not a word said, the silence rich and deep. Dad swore there were old growth trees in the back acreage, many hundreds of years old. He promised there were pockets of wilderness on our land. He claimed cougars after he found his mutt, Jake, in the south field with his belly ripped out. I watch him now, his head cocked at a weird angle, his body curled up, and I wonder if inside his head there’s wilderness too. He can’t talk to tell me.

Bess puts her head on my shoulder, and she’s so slight it barely weighs a thing.

“Are you really asking me, Bess? Or do you already know what you’re going to do?”

I wonder what she’s thinking, but her teeth are chattering too hard to say.

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When I was a child, I forgot how to be a human being.

I forgot because in the sparsely populated New England countryside where I lived, I had no friends and existed to my parents only as a target for abuse. So I became friends with the trees. Our home was surrounded by old growth forest; many trees dated to before the American Revolution. Over time, trees had grown so close to our house that you could reach out open windows and touch them. They seemed sage and sentient—mostly quiet, yet talkative via whatever passed through them. I often spoke to and patted the trees. I felt—and still feel—that they looked back, peacefully and wisely observing me and the world while refusing to stoop to commentary.

* 

I knew most trees on our land intimately. I could identify the ones that had been hit by lightning, had v-shaped crotches filled with rot, had owl holes or scraggly red squirrel nests, had chipmunk and deer mice burrows beneath raised roots, or had been bedeviled by woodpeckers. I cared for the trees, sawing off diseased or broken limbs, cutting away intrusive upstart shoots at their bases, siphoning away crotch water, shooing woodpeckers. In turn, they fed me with pinesap gum; apples and pears; birch leaves for tea; chestnuts to be roasted in the stove; and icicle pops that I plucked from branches during winter.

I became best acquainted with the unusual trees—like an ancient glaucous willow, or pussy willow, that had made a rare transformation, decades before my birth, from a bush into a two-dozen foot high proper tree. Spring seemed to officially arrive only when she, from tender mint green buds, pushed forth her furry, silvery gray catkins. The other trees followed her in budding—and I knew each of their birthing structures: beech buds, for instance, were narrow, conical, and decorated with diamond shapes; chestnut buds were ovoid and flared upward, like flames of a torch; elm buds had the overlapping scales of roof shingles; and
maple buds were stalks with pursed lips on the end, like eyeless faces kissing the sky. That's how I felt for most of my childhood; my entire self always turned upward in a desperate hunger to survive, away from the abuse, toward the treetops, toward the clouds.

*  
Not surprisingly, I fell in love with a tree and came to consider it my family.
  My tree was a singular catalpa on the lawn in front of the local public library. It had odd but exquisitely beautiful twisted bark, like twirling rope coils ascending to the heavens. I have never seen another tree like it. Some residents claimed the tree had originally been two or more trees that were twisted together, but catalpas naturally transform themselves into corkscrews over time. My catalpa was hundreds of years old and seemed to have several contemplative, friendly faces buried slantwise in its bark: a family.

*  
In the library behind the catalpa, I read that twisted bark could indicate that the tree was responding to a powerful local magnetic field. The book included photos of twisted trees, but none even approached the complexity of my catalpa.

The book also explained that trees act like conduits between deep earth and sky; they actually are a critical factor in the preservation of Earth's magnetism. Due to sap flow, trees are electrical conductors, pulling up electrical tension and releasing voltage into the ionosphere. (According to none other than the United Nations, deforestation is actually damaging Earth's magnetic field, as there is a “correlation between the density of vegetation and the decline of the Earth's magnetic field.”) My catalpa still stands in front of the library, and on the rare occasions I visit, it is the first thing I go see.

*  
During my twenties and thirties, I lived in a tiny 1920s cottage in Los Angeles; it looked like a fairytale haven plucked from Shropshire, but it was surrounded by skyscrapers and constant traffic. There were four cottages in the little compound. The lot was too small to host a tall building, so the cottages had survived although everything around them had been torn down.

I loved coming home to the fat old trees in the courtyard and all the bare, gnarled wood inside our home. I paid the rent by working at editorial jobs in real estate, law, and banking—jobs where I made certain that I could edit by hand and avoid typing as much as possible. Just lightly tapping a keyboard was painful.

*  
Those were the lost two decades of my life. I was in constant, boiling-in-oil pain from hidden birth defects in my upper arms, but none of the doctors could figure out the cause. I saw specialist after specialist, yet they all failed to examine my upper arms and instead focused on my hands, which were shrinking and collapsing, cupping into themselves. (I, too, had no idea that the birth defects were causing my disability; like the doctors, I didn't even know that they existed.) Soon I had to wear braces all the time. Sustained by painkillers and experimental anti-inflammatory drugs, I could hold a pen for work—but barely.

*  
During this period, I got drunk with friends one night—blotto drunk, surely amplified by all the prescription drugs I was taking. We also chewed several buttons of peyote each. I was recovering from the day's medical tests. My new doctor's favorite test was to hook me up to an electrical shock machine. The nurse would stick needles deeply into muscle, so that they reached the nerves without anesthesia—because I needed to tell her when the nerves reacted. The needles began at the top of my head, descended my neck, and marched down each shoulder all the way to my fingertips. Each needle was connected to wires.
After I had been sufficiently stabbed, the doctor would turn on the electrical current, sending Frankenstein shockwaves down my nerves so strong that my arms leapt in the air and flailed about, like the desperate death spasms of a beached fish. (Doctors have since modified this machine so that it is used humanely in nerve conduction studies, but when I had the tests, it was medieval because they did not know how to calibrate the current.)

Following that day’s tests, the doctor told me that there was drastically increased nerve damage—the electrical current slowed in scar tissue, which showed up on a computer monitoring the frequency. He said the damage was so severe that I would never be able to use my arms and hands normally and would always be in extreme pain. I told him that I was a writer. “Time to change professions;” he said merrily, lifting the lid on a jar of leftover, half-melted Halloween mini chocolate bars, as if they could easily erase my grief. “Candy?”

I didn’t tell him that the only “writing” I was able to do was at work, where each editing mark caused pain that I tolerated only because I needed to eat and pay doctor bills. I had long ago been forced to stop writing fiction due to the pain and clawing of my fingers. The stories I never could write haunted me every day. They were relentless and uncompromising—like orphans who had mistakenly decided to claim me as their mother, like fate.

Enlarged by tequila and peyote that night, I had a vision. (I also, according to my friends, talked nonstop for hours—but I have no memory of what I said.) In the vision, one of my literary heroes, Frederick Douglass, walked up to me in a forest. He was a porcupine, but his quills were upended pencils. I tried to touch him, but the pencils pricked me so hard that they drew blood. “Come,” he said. He began to climb a tree—my lovely twisted catalpa, whose bark coils had flattened into a looping, smooth path of warm flesh. The smell of nutmeg rose from the tree each time I stepped on its trail, as if I were walking on perfumed skin.

I followed the porcupine until we were far above the earth. Douglass extended one long, curved claw and cut a door into the base of a cloud just above our heads, creating an attic door of sorts. The cloud bled light, warm rain. He jumped up, through the little opening, and then I followed. We sat together inside the cloud, looking down through the doorway at earth, which was now the size of a pea. I felt calm and clear.

I somehow knew that Douglass represented not my writing, but my imagination—so nothing else mattered. My crippled hands, my constant pain, the befuddled doctors, my terror of becoming completely disabled and homeless... all were suddenly irrelevant.

Douglass shuddered with happiness, like a dog shaking contentedly after a swim. The pencils flipped so that their erasers were topside. I reached out to pet his back, and the quills fell flat with a series of clicks. We seemed to sit there for eons, while I again and again smoothed the pencils on Douglass’s back. After a while, we both slept. I awoke sitting upright on the couch, my twisted hands resting on my lap, atop Douglas. He had become a shag pillow.

My friends surrounded me, asleep on the floor, slightly curled into themselves like fall leaves. I was the only person awake, even though I would have loved to be back in my dream. I tried to make sense of my vision as I savored the quiet. If Douglass represented my imagination, then what symbolized the rest of me? The cloud? The pencils? The bleeding, soft rain? I looked at my hands, which had become corkscrewed and gnarled, like the catalpa’s bark, due to nerve damage and muscle wasting. My pain had driven me so deeply into myself that I felt a continual hush, as still and ancient as a stone. I had no desire to move from the couch, no need for anything but myself.

I was a tree.
Tim Cresswell

What I said was

The biomass of squid exceeds that of humans.
There are new islands forming off of Iceland
and worms a mile deep with teeth.

What I meant to say was

you can still sit
in amongst the bluebell
haze of woods in May
in Wales,
your history erased. An early bee,
sluggish in the shadows,
the breeze laden
and feel your body. Full. Then.
“Wait – hold on… Here, talk to him while I drive.”

The young woman, holding the steering wheel, tossed the cell phone on the lap of her husband sitting in the passenger seat. Shaking his head, he picked the thing up.

“Hello? Yes, Mary,” he said. “Yeah, we’re on our way to the Stonehenge of the Deep South.” A pause; he listened. “No, I honestly don’t remember what it’s called. The Lied Stones or something.”

“Guidestones. The Georgia Guidestones,” his wife hissed.

He turned to watch the blurry Georgia pines, which were strangely similar to those back home, safely back above the Mason-Dixon. But he wasn’t really watching them pass – he was listening to the torrent of words from the phone. He withstood them, willing himself to hear the braying, goatish old voice on the other. From the driver’s seat his wife could pick out the most-repeated words, hammered home like a rhythm.

Doctor, planning, family. The words had become a kind of incantation over the last few months.

“Wait – are you still there?” the man blurted out suddenly. “Mary, I can’t hear you – I think it’s breaking up.”

“I can hear you just fine,” said the tiny voice, which the wife heard clearly.

“Hello? Hello? It must be the Georgia woods, Mary. We’re out of range. I can’t hear you. We’ll have to call you once we get back to Augusta.”

He hung up. A smug smile twisted his lips as he dropped the phone in the cupholder.

“I can’t believe that woman gave birth to you,” he said. “What a freaking nightmare. She wouldn’t stop talking about the doctor’s appointment. I thought we agreed we weren’t going to tell her any of the new developments.”

He stared at her. She stayed focused on the road, curving the car west. He didn’t blink. Finally her concentration broke.

“I didn’t tell her anything,” she said. “She just wants to be a grandmother so badly. Ever since we got married that’s all she thinks about. She’s dying for grandkids.”

“Then I wish she’d hurry up and die for them.”

“Gene!”

A moment of silence. He turned back to look out at the line of pines whooshing silently by.

“Okay. How much does she know? Medically, I mean,” he said, casting a sidelong glance, a single eye, over at her.

“She assumes it’s me. And she doesn’t know for sure about the next appointment. With the clinic. She’s just guessing.”
She squeezed his knee.

“And she definitely doesn’t know about the waiver we signed, or the side effects of the drugs. So there’s no worry there.”

He nodded once, silently. He slapped his knees and then reached out and twisted the knob of the radio. He fiddled with the static until he hit upon the distorted strains of a Hank Williams song—something about doomed love—twangy, heartfelt. But he couldn’t get the frequency right, and his twiddling with trembling fingers only picked up more static. So he found a bluegrass station that came in clear and he just let it play. The strumming was chaotic, the melody sunk deep beneath the fray of the strings.

“How exact is this process?” he asked, turning his head to her.

She shrugged as she leaned the car into a curve stretching around the playground and green fields of a school.

“I don’t know. You heard what I heard. It’s as random as natural genetics. Organized chaos. A million rolls of the dice.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” he said.

The car cruised onto a straightaway. Great holes were gouged in the earth, strewn with rocks and strangely-colored soils. Quarries long abandoned, trucks rusting away to nothing along washed-out roadways. Then they were entering the limits of Elberton, the Granite Capital of the World, as weathered signs reminded them again and again.

“We’re not too far now,” he said.

“Two hours of driving is more than enough to see some stupid fucking rocks,” she said, fidgeting behind the wheel.

“In response his silence was pointed, malicious. Her breaths were audible, each of them challenging him. But he remained silent, staring out the window at the dilapidated furniture stores and pawn shops and feed depots on Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard. A minute more and they were stopped at a traffic light—the only one in the heart of the downtown.

“So—where to now?” she asked.

“Go north. The magazine said it’s on a hilltop just outside town. The highest point in the county.”

She began to turn the car left.

“No, no,” he said, grabbing the pulling the wheel toward him. “Make a right. North is right.”

“Sorry,” she said, singsongy, with a disingenuous shake of her head, as they turned onto Hartwell Highway.

More gouges in the hills, the silent quarries rolling by, punctuated by the occasional wood shack advertising itself as a tombstone workshop. Then there it was on the horizon: the slabs standing up, slight nubs announcing themselves at the top of a modest hill. He pointed. She squinted.

“I can barely see them from here,” she said.

He directed her to the turn for the gravel road and watched as the granite monoliths grew into view. She parked the car between a pair of others: a beat-up, wood-panel station wagon, and an electric blue sportscar. She unclicked her seatbelt and crumpled back into the driver’s seat. She turned to him.

“Well, here we are, dear,” she said. Then she did the unexpected: she leaned across the center console and grazed his cheek with her lips. He recoiled in surprise.

“What’s that for?” he asked.

She smiled in the sunshine, rolling her eyes, flirty again, like when they’d met.

“You’re my husband. I’ve grown rather fond of you,” she said, grabbing and kneading
his knee. “I know we did a lot of traveling
to get to this wedding. And you were really
good through all of it, Damned Yankee that
you are.”

She blinked twice, and her voice tuned
down to a minor key.

“Plus, we’ve been going through so much
at home, we should try to be nicer to one
another,” she said softly. “And once we get
through this, we’ll be a full family. It’ll take
some teamwork.”

He sat ramrod straight in his seat. They
froze that way, for just a moment. But then –
slowly – he turned to her and kissed her lips,
their eyes locked, intensely big in close-up.
Then they pulled away.

“Now let’s go check out this mysterious
artifact from the eerie 1980s,” she said,
holding up her hands, making a haunted
howling noise from the back of her throat.
He laughed.

“The 1980s were pretty horrifying,” he
conceded.

They stepped out. A balding footpath led
to the Stones. Two couples skulked around
the monument: a pair of punks, a man and
woman wearing leather jackets and pierced
faces circled the granite structure – and a
buttoned-down couple wearing khaki pants
and bright windbreakers were staring down
at something on the ground beyond the
monument. Some ragamuffin little children
scurried back and forth across the clearing
surrounding the structure. The Stones grew
out of the ground, against the blue sky, as
they neared.

She stopped short, her head angled up at
the capstone. The tall slabs were shot through
with maudlin, obtuse sunlight. The two of
them walked slowly around the perimeter of
the monoliths, and from above, he realized,
the things would look like half an asterisk.

As they strolled slowly they squinted at
the inscriptions: Russian, Chinese, French
and English, the dead languages of Egypt
and Babylon. Each side repeated the same
command in a different tongue, a different
voice:

“Maintain humanity under 500,000,000
in perpetual balance with nature

“Guide reproduction wisely – improving
fitness and diversity

“Unite humanity with a living new
language

“Rule passion – faith – tradition – and all
things with tempered reason

“Protect people and nations with fair laws
and just courts

“Let all nations rule internally resolving
external disputes in a world court

“Avoid petty laws and useless officials

“Balance personal rights with social
duties

“Prize truth – beauty – love – seeking
harmony with the infinite

“Be not a cancer on the earth – leave
room for nature

“Leave room for nature.”

She stared up at the English words,
rereading them, mouthing the syllables
deliberately, like she always did when she
was concentrating hard on a tax return or a
lengthy mortgage or a fuzzy ultrasound. He
watched her, then stared up at it, too.

“It’s really something,” she said, shaking
her head. “Only thirty years old. It feels like it
should be older. Ancient, or something.”

“I think how new it is, is part of its
mystery – part of the reason it’s created a
whole lot of controversy,” he said.
She angled her face to him, an eyebrow arched.

“Controversy? Who’s even heard of a stack of rocks in The Middle of Nowhere, Georgia? Besides kooks like you, that is.”

He shook his head, and a knowing—but somehow tired—smile crossed his lips.

“This mysterious structure is the epicenter of a thousand conspiracy theories,” he said, affecting a TV narrator’s voice. “The anonymous builder, known only as R.C. Christian, is considered by some to be either a prophet of God—or Satan himself.”

At that moment a young girl shrieked and ran past them, her identical-looking brother flailing after her, hot in pursuit. The rest of the gaggle of kids were shrieking on the other side of the Stones, their parents unaccounted for. The young husband just shook his head and continued on.

“To some, the New World Order is announcing an intent to split the globe up into financial kingdoms,” he said. “To others it’s a Satanic call for genocide to reduce the world’s population. Others still think the inscription is a resounding call for an Age of Reason, in which humanity will live in peace and harmony with the world around it.”

She laughed.

“Why?” she said, staring up at the inscription.

“Don’t know. People either think the Stones are an enlightened call for a brighter future, or a strange incantation for Armageddon. At any rate, whoever erected them—whoever this shadowy R.C. Christian figure is—never got his, or her, point across clearly.”

“They speak to us—loud and clear,” a voice from behind boomed.

They swiveled their heads, and there stood the middle-aged couple. Their smiles were twisted with a grotesque radiance. The balding man stood a little in front of the stout woman, with his hands on his hips. Far-off behind them the young couple with the black leather and fishing-tackle faces were piling their brood of screaming kids into the improbable wood-panel station wagon.

“Yeah, the Guidestones are a mystery,” said the older woman, grinning and winking. “But they’re not unsolvable.”

The younger couple—man and wife together—looked at one another, then turned fully to face the older couple.

“So you’ve figured out the unanswerable riddle of the Georgia Guidestones,” the younger man said.

“I have,” the older man said. “We’ve got too many people breeding out there.”

He pointed up at the stone slab with a prophetic, crooked finger, then continued:

“See that 500 million? Even that’s too much, in reality,” he said. “Too many babies surviving, not enough wars and plagues to thin out the population.”

The man pointed his still-outstretched finger at the younger couple, who suddenly saw the glint of zealous insanity in his eyes.

“Hey—you don’t have any kids yourself, do you?” the lunatic asked.

“Actually…” the younger woman said, glancing at her husband, “…no.”

A moment of strange silence, the earth spinning, the wind slipping past.

“That’s good,” the older man said. “Matilda here and I both got fixed just to make sure we couldn’t.” He reached back and draped his arm around his beloved bride,
who smiled coquettishly. She looked insane, too.

"Yep – now we just go on vacations whenever we want," he said. "Don't have to worry about doctors' visits or soccer practice or saving up college money in a trust fund. That's the way to live – for the moment, and for yourself. Not adding people to the end of the grocery line, more millions onto the Social Security rolls. Fewer people to keep driving around, burning all these fossil fuels. Don't you agree?"

The younger man's head tremored. He cleared his throat, ready to make a kind of speech. But before he could begin, his young wife's slim hand slid into his own, and squeezed gently. She began to pull him away from the monument, around and past the childless zealots.

"We just haven't reached that decision yet," she said, still talking over her shoulder, not stopping. "We might very well have kids someday. Depending."

The older man shook his head, smiling devilishly, wild hands held skyward.

"Well, that's your choice to make," the crazy man hollered after them. "But don't forget what kind of world you'd be bringing them into. They'll just be an added burden on this world, desperately fighting for oxygen and elbow room against everybody else. You know the life they'll lead isn't going to be any kind of humane existence. Think of the horrors to come –"

The young wife continued shepherding her husband away from the older couple.

He ambled along with her in a daze, like an invalid walked by a nurse.

"We'll see," she said as they walked toward their parked car, and she pressed the car keys into her mate's hand. "We'll see."

They got back in the car. He started the engine. For a second he stared up through the windshield at the monoliths. The older couple waved at them, then turned and began taking pictures of the Stones with large cameras. The young husband put the car in reverse, put his arm atop the back of her seat, and edged out onto the road.

The drove north, circling back to the highway. Within a few miles they had caught up to the station wagon. Thick blue exhaust puffed out of the muffler, but they could see kids bouncing on the backseat.

"Honey?" the young husband said. "Why don't you give the doctor a call and confirm that appointment next week." Then he kissed her and hit the accelerator, passing the wood-panel wagon. She nodded and picked the cell phone up from the cup holder.

"My thoughts exactly," she said, punching in the number for the receptionist. She stayed on hold for a half hour as they drove past the desolate quarries, back along the uncertain Southern roads.
The Persistence of Aether[1]

Take the whole and drape it, white-laced rooms upon rooms, matrices
spun by a cosmic spider, unwound by atomists.
White grids arise in the round earth’s imagined corners:
enter a windless wind where matter might blow. Or leave space
undisturbed
and symmetric, a vacuum without breath. We
can never step out. Still our minds devise
ways to spy on god. “Weave a layer of fine silk gauze,”
through which our scattered bodies slide, “and mold steam....”

Aether whispers in our resolute ears, infer me, oh
we do, then we disbelieve, we argue. And you whose eyes
crave contact. A mistake to believe. And yet it holds
in place. Is it aether or its metaphor that persists? We are in it
again: adrift and somehow fixed. We cling,
we cannot see. This web, impossible to resist.

[1] Frank Wilczek referred to the “persistence of ether” in The Lightness of Being: Mass, Ether,
and the Unification of Forces. The concept of an ether, or some variation of it, has stubbornly
reinserted itself into our theories of nature for as long as we’ve been debating matter and
empty space—the latest incarnation is the Higgs field, in which we are immersed and by
which particles obtain their mass. Some recommend we think of the viscosity of molasses to
understand how the Higgs field imparts mass to particles traveling through it. But imagining
this is tricky: the Higgs field seems like an airier, somehow more transparent version of the
ether (a supposed medium light waves traveled through) that was famously experimentally
discarded by Michelson and Morley in 1887. The vacuum of empty space keeps filling up
with friction and drag.

Some rhymes, “scattered bodies,” and more are from John Donne’s “At the round earth’s
imagined corners (Holy Sonnet 7).” “Weave a layer of fine silk gauze and mold steam out of a
few red-glowing clouds” is from Wen I-Tô’s “Dead Water.”
My sister, Jill, believes good sex doesn’t hold a candle to a good yard sale. Combine bargain with bizarre, and the woman’s in heaven. She relishes the rush of spotting the neon green cardboard signs, planning her route, and arriving at the littered yard before the dew dries. Jill is a rabidly competitive woman. She played sweeper for our high school soccer team, and her vicious slide-tackles sent more than one would-be-scoring opponent to the hospital. I no longer play cards with her due to her banter and accusations. When eBay was born, Jill was thrilled. She could simultaneously engage in virtual yard sale-hopping and a bloodthirsty bidding game.

In my younger, wilder days, I shared a home with my sister, Jill, her fiance, Brian, and my girlfriend, Lucy in Asheville, North Carolina. Jill and Brian bought the grill; Lucy and I bought the computer. Jill was at our computer like a crow on a car-flattened squirrel. She’d type, stare, wait, eat something, type, stare, wait, then holler, “I won!” She’d whoop and high-knee strut around the room in a techno-tribal victory dance. She was oblivious to the fact that she was paying for the prizes. In her crazed mind, she had defeated hundreds of strangers in computer warfare. In reality, she had typed in the winning number, which was instantly deducted from her checking account.

Rarely was Jill satisfied with her purchases, yet she continued to seek and buy. Every week or so, a strange item would arrive: a coon dog crossing sign, an autographed picture of Carol Burnett, a pair of cat socks that disintegrated in the dryer, and a pornographic snow globe. On a rainy, July afternoon, Jill announced she wanted to rekindle her high school passion: pottery. She decided to fill her evenings and our basement by purchasing a used kiln. So the bidding began. I must admit the pride I felt in my sister when she told me she had scored a kiln at the paltry price of $40.

Lucy and I were clipping our dog’s nails in our bedroom when Jill howled in agony from the adjacent computer room. Our dog, Zora, broke free from our hold when Jill barged through our door.

She was hysterical. “I just read the description of my kiln more carefully. It’s four fucking inches high. I spent 40 bucks on a miniature, metal kiln—a doorstop.” Though a little unnerved, her bank account casualty did not end her eBay hunt for a kiln.

One glorious day—when eBay Yahweh smiled upon her—she “won” an actual functioning kiln, and she asked Lucy and me to ride with her in Brian’s truck to Lexington, Kentucky, to pick it up—in order to save her the costly shipping expense. Though Jill is my younger sister, she is the boss of me. I have only said no to her when her requests have involved endangering others or dancing (and for me, dancing and endangering others is one and the same). Lucy is always game for a road trip, so we three squeezed into Brian’s truck on a Saturday morning. Lucy drove the five hours there, never guessing she would have to drive the whole way home for her personal protection.

We followed the highways, exits, and turns on our MapQuest printout to the storage unit where the kiln awaited us. Jill called the kiln-seller, Faye, on her cell phone, and, after we’d joked about being lured to our deaths where our bodies would be stored, a dented Plymouth rambled down the gravel road and stopped a few feet away from us.

When Faye stepped out of her car, we gasped. She was as spindly and pale as a cave cricket. She tottered toward us, her button-down blouse opened enough to

EBAY WILDLIFE

by Susan White
reveal her sunken, bluish chest. She wheezed as she explained she had used the kiln to make ceramic doll heads—that she was selling it because she had a heart disease.

She unlocked the storage unit, and there sat Jill’s fortune—due to Faye’s misfortune. Panting, Faye followed us as we carried the kiln to the truck. She offered to help us lift it onto the truck bed, and we heartily insisted that she not.

As Faye handed Jill the instructions to the kiln, a husky’s head poked up from Faye’s back seat.

“What a beautiful dog,” I said.

Faye said, “What about my other dog?” She walked past me and opened the front passenger door. A small gray and black animal with a light blue flea collar stood on its hind legs and sniffed the air.

“Isn’t that a cat?” I asked.

“Nope,” said Faye.

And then I saw its dark mask.

“Oh my God, it’s a raccoon!” I loved it instantly.

Jill and Lucy rushed the car, oohing and awing over Faye’s wild passenger.

“You can pet him,” Faye told us.

I stuck my arm through the open window. The raccoon sniffed my hand and grabbed my forearm with his paws. His pads were warm and as soft as sifted flour. The critter climbed up my arm and grasped my neck.

Jill grabbed him from me, held his nose toward hers, and said, “You’re just a lump of love.”

“Do you want him?” Faye asked.

“Yes!” Jill and I screamed.

“Are you two crazy?” Lucy asked. She was, after all, a Family Nurse Practitioner who worked for the Public Health Department. She mentioned rabies, our dogs, and the fact that the raccoon would grow to the size of a three-year-old child.

But Jill and I would not be deterred. Because our parents owned the house we rented and Lucy had only moved in a couple of months earlier, we felt justified in continuing the nurturing Faye had begun. Faye assured us he was litter box-trained and was in the midst of transitioning to a diurnal schedule. She told us she was looking for homes for all her animals due to her poor health. Her brother’s family was going to adopt her husky. Adopting this little fellow was the right thing to do, we told Lucy.

Jill insisted on sitting in the cramped back seat with our new family member. Lucy insisted upon driving, in order to be as far away from him as possible.

Though Lucy repeatedly called us idiots and other derogatory names, we were all, even Lucy, excited by the absurdity of riding down the interstate with a lovable, wild animal, the kind we only knew from cartoons and a Beatles’ song. I turned in my seat to watch the coon as it curled up and slept by my sister’s thigh.

We’d listened to nearly five songs of a Lucinda Williams CD when Jill reached for the coon, and he grunted then growled. Jill laid her hand on his little, gray head to appease him. The coon didn’t like that. He hissed. Jill yelped and pressed her back against her door. “Stop the truck!”

The coon turned a quick circle and reared up, emitting a prolonged noise like a raspy-voiced ghost.

I watched my sister and the coon with fascination and fear.

“I told you not to bring that thing home, but—”
“I’m coming up there with y’all.” Jill grabbed both headrests.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jill.” I extended my arm to Lucy’s seat to block my encroaching sister.

Jill raised a leg toward the front of the truck. “He’s pissed!” She cleared my arm, and landed on me with one butt cheek.

“Hang on,” said Lucy.

We veered onto an exit; Lucy slowed at the traffic light and continued right, toward the Wal-Mart building. She announced, “We’re stopping to buy a kennel.”

The coon and I, separated by a couple of feet, waited in the truck, which Lucy left running so we could enjoy the air conditioning and music.

He explored the back seat, scratched his head with his long-toed foot, then plunged to the floorboard. The loud crinkling noises informed me he had found an empty soda can.

I pulled my cell phone out of my purse and called Lucy to get an update on their shopping. Before I could finish my first sentence, the coon pulled itself up and over the console.

I screamed, “He’s up here with me!”

He didn’t look at me. He looked straight ahead, reached out his skinny arm, and, with his five-fingered hand, grabbed my opened bag of Skittles.

“Shit! He got my Skittles!” I ended the call in the midst of Lucy’s hysterical laughter. I threw the phone to the floorboard. Grabbed the end of the Skittles bag. The coon would not surrender his hold. We pulled back and forth until he growled and let go. A few Skittles flew through the air, hitting the dashboard. He poured the remaining colorful candy into his mouth. This wild critter was jacked-up on sugar, and we still had hours left to drive home.

I got out of that truck. Stood in the parking lot, waiting for Jill and Lucy.

“Good God, he’s scared her out of the truck,” Lucy shouted for me to hear.

She and Jill walked toward me with huge, plastic, smiley-faced bags. They unloaded their goods: a kennel, a water bottle and holder, a food dish, a harness, a leash, a rubber ball, a stuffed hedgehog, a squeaky fish, and a litter box set.

Lucy put the supplies back in the bags. Jill opened the metal gate to the kennel and handed it to me. “All right, Susan, put him in the kennel.”

I shoved it back into her hands. “No way.”

“One of you needs to do it,” said Lucy, “or else we need to throw him out of the truck. You know I’m sure as hell not touching him. Ever. Face it, this was a mistake.”

Lucy is right more than any human has the right to be. In fact, that year, I had a baker write “Lucy Is Right” on her birthday cake in red icing. I wanted to be right this time, so much so that I willed myself to ignore common sense.

I laid the kennel on the hot pavement. “Did you buy any food for him?”

“What the hell do raccoons eat?” Lucy asked. “Do you even know?”

“Skittles,” I said.

Lucy got her Nalgene bottle from inside the truck and poured the tepid water into the little cage-side bottle.

I sat the kennel down on the seat, its opening facing the coon.

“You’re going to have to pick him up and put him in it,” my sister instructed.
I opened the truck door and squeezed behind the driver's seat. Lucy closed the door. He climbed around the kennel and into my lap. I scratched his head and petted his back. He snuggled against me. I slid my hands around his midsection and lifted him toward the opening. He hissed and whipped his pointed head around to face me. I was out of the truck before Jill's and Lucy's screams ended.

* * *

The whole trip home, I sat against the window behind Lucy's pushed-up driver's seat. A kennel separated me from our Kentucky captive.

Jill and I didn't want to admit we had made a mistake, not even when we saw a dead raccoon the size of a tire—its stiff legs pointed skyward—on the side of the highway.

“Let me be clear,” Lucy said. “I want nothing to do with this creature.” She flashed me a stern look through the rear-view mirror. Then she looked at my sister. “Jill, he will live in your room. He will never enter mine.”

* * *

It was dusk when we reached our neighborhood. We turned onto Baxter Street, which I’d into our road—and provided us with a name for the raccoon. He looked like a Baxter.

Lucy parked Brian’s truck behind our cars in the driveway.

I knew there was no way I was picking up Baxter and carrying him into our home. I admitted as much, and Jill surprised the hell out of me.

“We named him. We have to keep him.” She assumed the intrepid demeanor of her sweeper days and reached for the curled-up raccoon.

He growled, but Jill showed no fear.

Something amazing happened. The coon calmed down, nestled his triangular snout in her armpit. Jill held him like a baby.

Even Lucy found this cute.

“We just need to ignore his noises,” Jill said, and she kissed his head.

“I’ll put our dogs on the deck. We’ll have to introduce them gradually,” Jill’s gasp stopped me. “Oh my God! I never even thought about what breed of dog I have. Beasley’s a Redbone Hound—a COON hound!”

“No forethought whatsoever,” Lucy said. “You two just up and take this wild creature, not even considering how he’s going to coexist with the animals we have.”

I started to say something but changed my mind.

Lucy continued, “What if our dogs get rabies?”

Jill said, “We’d know if he had rabies. He isn’t showing any signs.” She walked toward our house. “And he’s going to be in the house with us, so he won’t get rabies.” She turned to me. “Put the dogs in the backyard before I bring him in.”

Jill’s ninety-pound coon hound rushed me. As I kneed Beasley away from the door, his nose sniffed every inch of my jeans. My lab/Australian Shepherd mix, Zora, crept out of my room, her ears pricked and body stretched low for skulking.

“Come on, dogs,” I said, grabbing their collars and pulling them through the kitchen door to the backyard.

Brian emerged from the computer room, offering to help us carry the kiln to the basement.

Lucy said, “Oh we’re going to need a lot more help with something else Jill and Susan brought home.” At least she was laughing.

“Are the dogs out?” Jill screamed through the door.

“She better not have another dog,” Brian said.

“You wish!” Lucy said and opened the door for Jill.
Jill walked across the threshold, snarling fur clinging to her chest.

Brian said, “What the hell is that? An opossum?”

“Much better. Cuter,” Jill said, walking toward the man who learned to hunt wild animals before he could tie his shoes.

I agreed. “We wouldn’t bring home a creature with a naked tail.”

Brian bent down and looked at Jill’s bundle. “Holy shit, it’s a raccoon!”

While Lucy explained that this creature would not sleep in our room and that she would take no responsibility in raising it, Baxter did the best thing he could have. He extended a little paw toward Brian.

Brian squeezed his paw and said, “His pads are like velvet.”

And then Baxter grabbed Brian’s shoulder with his other hand and hoisted himself onto the man of the household.

Brian was an instant fan when Baxter fiddled with a button on his shirt.

But there was one more resident to win over: Beasley, the coon hound. We were cautious in this introduction. Beasley was leashed and muzzled. We showered the coon with love so Beasley would regard him as a friend and not something with a squeaker he could rip out of its belly.

I thought Baxter and Brian’s bonding was touching, but Beasley and Baxter’s interactions were the stuff of Disney movies.

Within moments, we had unleashed and unmuzzled Beasley, and Baxter was riding on Beasley’s back and sticking his front paws into Beasley’s panting mouth. The two new friends wrestled on Jill’s bed.

As Baxter explored Jill’s room, I sat at our computer: the tool that had led us to Baxter. I searched the Internet for articles containing the words raccoon and domestication. I read article after article, looking for glimmers of encouragement. But I only found warnings.

“If a raccoon is kept as a pet, he must have the run of the house.”

“Raccoons like to dig large holes in beds so they can nest.”

“Baby raccoons are adorable, but they do grow up. When they reach maturity, their behavior can change from cute and cuddly to vicious and destructive.”

“These rascals have bad tempers!”

“Don’t let your pet crawl on you like a tree. This may be entertaining when your raccoon is young, but when he reaches maturity, a 50-pound raccoon won’t feel so great crawling all over you!”

“Roundworm is also an issue with raccoons and can be transferred to humans and other household pets. Roundworm can cause central nervous system damage, blindness, and even death!”

I found the exclamation points excessive.

Baxter crawled up our legs (as I had read he would do) and washed our pocket-change in the dogs’ water dish.

Balancing on his hind legs, he reached upward to pop the bubbles we blew in his direction. When I mowed the yard, he waddled behind me—nose to my heels. He regularly joined Jill in her bathtub, thus his wiry hair remained clean. I loved coming home from work to a masked pet who climbed up my leg, grabbed my keys, and washed them. My dog—though by no means a Disney worthy companion—tolerated him, and Lucy acknowledged Baxter did some cute things, though she never picked him up. By far, Baxter and Beasley had the best relationship. They played and slept together. They were much more entertaining than television. I would go so far as to say Jill got more pleasure from the play of these unlikely pals than she derived from yard sales, even estate sales. We filmed Baxter and Beasley (our own Fox and the Hound)—capturing their cartoonish antics. My favorite footage was of Baxter leaping like a sci-fi tarantula from the back of the Lazy Boy onto Beasley’s
He clings to the wild bucking Beasley like a rodeo champ. Baxter leaps onto the couch, Beasley grabs a stuffed bear and shakes it like a bad, bad habit. Baxter jumps off the couch and grabs the end of the bear. The two tug and growl. Eventually, they swoon into a loving embrace.

But, just as Disney has its seedy, sexual side—with Simba’s boner and a golden phallus built into the Little Mermaid’s Castle—a male raccoon loses his charm in the hormonal tornado of puberty. Baxter started humping fist-fulls of Jill’s comforter. We put child-locks on all our drawers and refrigerator after he dragged utensils and pots all over our house and decorated our rooms with the inedible parts of our refrigerated contents. He grabbed every potted plant, spilling dirt everywhere. This nocturnal, pubescent monster that a heart-failing, translucent woman passed off to us was destroying our home—stuffing objects down the toilet, leaving gashes across Brian’s face in the night, growling at us when we tried to pull him off ripped furniture. Basically, we had adopted Thing 1 and Thing 2. He had grown big enough to classify as two damn things. And he had a temper. Any attempts to stop him from doing what he wanted prompted a furious tantrum of slashing and gnashing. We finally admitted Lucy was right. Baxter belonged in the wild. We agreed to prepare him for a release into nature.

We bought a plastic kiddie pool, and encouraged the coon to swim and snag grapes and fish. Baxter refused to enter the water. We scattered food around our fenced-in backyard. Beasley ate the food. Despite Baxter’s lack of instinctual survival skills, we found a place to release him. Lucy’s friend Maisie lived in a cabin out in the country. A clan of raccoons visited her front porch nightly because she poured out cat food for them. We drove there at dusk.

Of course on our trip to Maisie’s, Baxter was not the scary beast we traveled with from Kentucky to North Carolina. He sat on my lap peacefully, his neck extended to watch the passing scenery. I rubbed his back and told him he was going to make a bunch of raccoon friends.

“Oh shut up!” Jill choked from the front seat. “I can’t stand this. Let’s not do it.”

Jill’s tears clawed my heart. I asked, “Should we turn around?”

Lucy pulled into a gravel lot. She put the car in in park and turned toward her fickle companions. “Do you honestly believe the best place for him is in our house? You two have no control over him, and you shouldn’t.” She delivered three bullets of truth: “He’s a raccoon.”

Baxter crawled from my lap to the floorboard and grabbed a pen. He bit it then dropped it.

Jill said, “But he doesn’t know the woods.”

“Fine,” Lucy said. “I am not going to be the sole reason we release him. If you two have changed your minds, then let’s go back home.”

I knew we couldn’t go back. The half-domesticated coon deserved a chance to run loose with his wild instincts. “No. I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Jill?” Lucy asked.

After a painful pause, Jill said, “I know we need to let him go.”

We drove up a steep, sinuous, gravel road to Maisie’s cabin. Baxter, balanced on the headrest above Jill’s shoulder, looking out the window. Lucy parked, and Maisie appeared at Jill’s window—eager to see the new member of her dinner clan. Jill stepped out of the car, Baxter clinging to her chest.

Maisie—with her long, wiry salt and pepper hair, jean shorts, tank top, work boots, and tattoos—was a fairly wild creature, too, in my opinion. She welcomed Baxter with a granola bar, which he unabashedly grabbed then jumped onto Lucy’s car hood to eat. “I figured he should eat something before he spends his first night outside.
As he ate, Lucy and Maisie caught up on each other’s lives, and Jill and I tried our hardest to be stoic. But when Jill carried Baxter a few yard into the woods, we balled. Nearly five months had passed since Jill carried him into our home. Baxter climbed up a tulip tree and looked back at us while hugging the narrowing trunk.

We all yelled to him: “Bye, Baxter!” “We love you!” “Make lots of friends!” “Be brave and safe!” “See you at my porch for dinner tonight!”

Baxter shimmied down the tree and ran back to us. He climbed up Jill’s leg, and we all, even Lucy, wailed.

Eventually Baxter heeded the call of the wild and disappeared into the sylvan surroundings. We followed Maisie into her cabin and ate spaghetti and salad. I wondered if Baxter had found berries or nuts to eat, if he’d met any other coons. If he’d even recognize they were his kind.

After dinner, Maisie poured cat food into the three dishes that sat on the edge of her front porch, just above the wide, steps. She joined us in the living room, telling us they’d show up in an hour or so. We passed the time by telling Maisie the story of how we’d ended up with Baxter.

With the satisfaction and confidence of a tour guide, Maisie pointed at the window. A line of five raccoon heads peered into the dishes. We female, humans kneeled on the couch and watched them eat the dog food.

“There’s Baxter, “ I screamed with relief and pride.

“He looks different than the others,” Jill said. She was right. Baxter was a lighter gray, and his face was thinner. “I guess Kentucky coons are different from Carolina coons,” she suggested.

“Maybe so,” I agreed. “But they’re more his kind than we are.”

After the coons retreated into the darkness, we thanked Maisie and traveled back to our home.

Beasley sniffed every inch of our home, looking for his buddy. We took off the child-locks, and we bought new potted plants. Brian slept in peace, awakening free of cuts. But coming home from work was not as fun, and I still can’t see bubbles without thinking of Baxter.

Looking back, I see the release of Baxter as a my transition from a reckless, impulsive creature to a more reasonable person. Shortly after, Lucy and I bought a house; Brian and Jill, now married, remained in the old house.

Though I have a steady job, tame pets, and a partner of ten years, sometimes, on a restless day I sniff my surroundings, looking for that wild, destructive force with the soft pads.
Ursus Fibonacci

Black
bears,
driven down
from desert mountains
by drought into Old Taos,
scatter our trash in hunger’s waste.
THESE DAYS I volunteer at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, culling invasive species from the oak savanna bordering Lake Wingra—just to the north of the world’s oldest restored prairie. In deep snow in the dead of winter we excise insidious buckthorn and twisting honeysuckle, leaving the dame’s rocket and garlic mustard for when they bloom in spring.

Spring’s the time for burning as well, after fallen twigs and old leaves have been raked away from the tree trunks, gathered in piles, and carted off. The controlled burning—subject to the weather—leaves charred swaths that are soon replaced by green shoots of various grasses, freeing both savanna and prairie of underbrush. The aim is to return the land to the way it was when the native Ho-Chunk walked southern Wisconsin.

Work crews gather in the parking lot on Saturday morning. A trained leader provides tools—loppers, pruning shears, sickle-like handsaws—and minimal instruction. Mainly we’re taught how to identify the interlopers that crowd out native plants and smother small trees.

Buckthorn is a tree-like shrub with twisted dark branches on which the thorns are like miniature shark fins. It’s easy to identify because scraping the bark reveals a yellowish-orange color. In season, thriving buckthorn are rife with what look like blueberries, but in winter the berries are shriveled and black. Care must be taken not to shake them off, or more buckthorn will result. It’s a nuisance to pick those shriveled berries out of the snow.

The honeysuckle is also a nuisance—brown, entwining vines that grow to a variety of thicknesses and are difficult to remove once cut. Their gnarly fingers coil themselves around nearby branches and cling to each other as well.

Flowering dame’s rocket can’t be missed. It’s like a bouquet of violets on three-foot green stalks, with dark green leaves shaped like spearheads. Its flowers have four petals that can be white, pink, or purple. The leaves of garlic mustard are a lighter green, and broader. They look like the hearts on Valentine cards, only with serrated edges. Garlic mustard stalks can grow four feet tall. Like the dame’s rocket, its white flowers have four petals. Crush its leaves and hold them to your nose and you’ll know why it’s called garlic mustard.

Both species are easily pulled from the moist earth in spring. The dirt is shaken from the roots, and they’re placed in plastic bags. They’ll regenerate wherever left behind.

The arboretum staff is diverse. Skyler, who grew up in Madison, has been monitoring one particular tract of oak savanna for thirty years. He exudes a proprietor’s enthusiasm for the job. Debbie is finishing her master’s degree in environmental science. She’s applied for a federal internship that would offer her a choice of innovative research projects for the next three years. She spent a year studying in Paris, and we converse in French when the time allows, especially during the break—fifteen minutes of health drinks and whole-food cookies mid-way through the morning.

Then it’s back to work, week after week.
Seth Augenstein writes for a New Jersey newspaper by day, and writes fiction by night. His short stories have appeared in Writer’s Digest, the Cracked Eye (Other Publishing), Ginosko Literary Review, and Tropus Quarterly. He was in Saul Bellow’s last class at Boston University, and he was a tour guide at the James Joyce Centre in Dublin for a few cold months. His work, in all its vanity, can be found at www.sethaugenstein.com.

Daniel Bourne’s poems have appeared in Guernica, Ploughshares, Field, Plume, APR, Prairie Schooner, Shenandoah, Salmagundi and elsewhere. His books include The Household Gods, Where No One Spoke the Language, and a collection of translations of Polish political poet Tomasz Jastrun, On the Crossroads of Asia and Europe. He teaches in English and Environmental Studies at The College of Wooster in NE Ohio, where he edits Artful Dodge. Since 1980 he has lived in Poland off and on, including from July 2013 till January 2014 for some collaborative projects with Polish poets and visual artists involving the environment as well as back in 1985-87 on a Fulbright fellowship for the translation of younger Polish poets.

Lesley Brower is a native Kentuckian, raised in tobacco fields and Baptist churches. She currently works, gardens, and cooks in southern Illinois. Her most recent work is forthcoming in Southern Voice, The Aurorean, Adanna, and Big Muddy.

Bob Carlton lives and works in Leander, TX.

Kevin Casey is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and received his graduate degree at the University of Connecticut. His work has been accepted by Stickman Review, Crosscut Magazine, and Tule Review. He currently teaches literature at a small university in Maine, where he enjoys fishing, snowshoeing and hiking.

Douglas Cole has had work in The Chicago Quarterly Review, Red Rock Review, and Midwest Quarterly. More of his work is available online in The Adirondack Review, Salt River Review, and Avatar Review, as well as a recorded story in Bound Off. He has published two poetry chapbooks, Interstate, through Night Ballet Press, and Western Dream, with Finishing Line Press, as well as a novella called Ghost in the Overtime series of Workers Write Journal. He is the winner of several awards, including the Leslie Hunt Memorial Prize in Poetry; the Best of Poetry Award from Clapboard House; First Prize in the “Picture Worth 500 Words” from Tattoo Highway, as well as an honorable mention from Glimmer Train. He was also recently the featured poet in Poetry Quarterly. He is currently on the faculty at Seattle Central College and is the advisor for their literary journal, Corridors.

Tim Cresswell is a geographer and poet who has been widely published in poetry magazines in the United Kingdom, Ireland, the USA and Canada including; Five Dials, The Moth, the Rialto, the North, Magma, Poetry Wales, Agenda, Envoi, Riddlefence. His first collection, Soil, was published by Penned in the Margins (London) in July 2013. His second poetry book – a book-length sequence set in Svalbard called Fence Furthest North - is being published by Penned in the Margins in 2015. He is also the author of five books on the themes of place and mobility including, most recently, Place: An Introduction (Blackwell 2014).


Marnie Heenan is a native of High Point, North Carolina. She lives in Fort Myers, Florida and attends Florida Gulf Coast University, where she studies English and creative writing. She edited for The Mangrove Review and has work forthcoming in Aquila.

South is the fourth book of poems by Peter Huggins; his previous books of poems are Necessary Acts, Blue Angels, and Hard Facts. Over 300 poems appear in more than 100
journals, magazines, and anthologies. Among his other awards and honors, Peter Huggins has been a Tennessee Williams Scholar at the Sewanee Writers’ Conference and has received a Literature Fellowship in Poetry from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. He teaches in the English Department at Auburn University.

Andrew Jarvis is the author of Choreography (Johns Hopkins University), Sound Points (Red Bird Press), Ascent (Finishing Line Press), and The Strait (Homebound Publications). His poems have appeared in Valparaiso Poetry Review, Tulane Review, San Pedro River Review, Stonecoast Review, and many other literary magazines. He was a Finalist for the 2014 Homebound Publications Poetry Prize. He also judges poetry contests and edits anthologies for Red Dashboard LLC. Andrew holds an M.A. in Writing (Poetry) from Johns Hopkins University.

Amaris Ketcham writes for the literary blog, Bark. She has recently been published in the Los Angeles Review, the Weekly Rumpus, and the Utne Reader. This poem is part of a poetic inventory of the Sandia National Wilderness, near Albuquerque, NM.

Corinne Lee’s fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have been published in dozens of literary magazines, and she has been a multiple nominee for the Pushcart Prize. Her book PYX won the National Poetry Series and was published by Penguin. Ms. Lee was chosen in 2007 by the Poetry Society of America as one of the top ten emerging poets in the United States. Six of her poems were included in Best American Poetry 2010. She was educated at the University of Southern California, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop (fiction), and the University of Texas at Austin (poetry).

Tom Leskiw and his wife Sue and their dog Zevon live near Eureka, California. He retired in 2009 following a 31-year career as a hydrologic/biologic technician for Six Rivers National Forest. His more than three dozen works of essays, book and movie reviews have appeared in literary journals that include Advenutrum, Birding, Kindred, Snowy Egret, Terrain.org, Under the Sun, and two anthologies published by Whispering Angel Press. An avid birder, he organizes and judges a student nature writing contest each spring. His monthly column (established 1993) appears at www.RRAS.org and his website resides at www.tomleskiw.com.

An unabashed nature lover who has traveled to both ends of the earth and numerous places in between to write about and photograph the wonders of nature, eight-time Pushcart-Prize nominee and National Park Artist-in-Residence, Karla Linn Merrifield has had more than 400 poems appear in dozens of journals and anthologies. She has ten books to her credit (heavy on nature!), the newest of which are Lithic Scatter and Other Poems (Mercury Heartlink) and Attaining Canopy: Amazon Poems (FootHills Publishing). Her Godwit: Poems of Canada (FootHills) received the 2009 Eiseman Award for Poetry and she recently received the Dr. Sherwin Howard Award for the best poetry published in Weber - The Contemporary West in 2012. She is assistant editor and poetry book reviewer for The Centrifugal Eye www.centrifugaleye.com. Visit her blog, Vagabond Poet, at http://karlalinn.blogspot.com.

Jennifer Moss received her MFA from Butler University. She is a poet and musician originally from Indiana but has recently migrated to Colorado discover a little more of the world around her.

L. A. Owens's work has appeared most recently in Quaint Magazine, The Sierra Nevada Review, and Snowy Egret. She completed an MFA in poetry from Penn State before moving to Kansas where she currently works in higher education. You can find her online at laowenspoet.tumblr.com.

Jessica Reed writes poetry and creative nonfiction that explores our desire to know the natural world. Her previous work has appeared in Isotope: A Journal of Literary Nature and Science Writing; The Fourth River; symmetry: dimensions of particle physics; and Maine in Print. She holds an MFA in poetry and a BS in physics, both from Purdue University. She lives in Indiana, managing a fifteen-acre homestead.

Claude Clayton Smith is Professor Emeritus of English at Ohio Northern University. He is the author of a novel, two children's books, four books of nonfiction, and a variety of poetry, plays, short fiction, and essays. His writing has been translated into five languages, including Russian and Chinese. His latest books are Ohio Outback: Learning to Love the Great Black Swamp (The Kent State University Press, 2010) and The Way of Kinship: An Anthology of Native Siberian Literature (The University of Minnesota Press, 2010), which he serves a co-editor/translator with the late Alexander Vaschenko of Moscow State University.
samples of his work and related information, simply Google his full name.

**Patty Somlo** has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times, was a finalist in the Tom Howard Short Story Contest, and has been nominated for the 2013 storySouth's Million Writers Award. Her essay, “If We Took a Deep Breath,” was selected as a Notable Essay for Best American Essays 2014. She is the author of From Here to There and Other Stories. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including the Los Angeles Review, the Santa Clara Review, and WomenArts Quarterly, among others, and in thirteen anthologies, including Solace in So Many Words, which won the Next Generation Indie Book Award for Anthology.

**Olivia Tandon** is a graduate of Columbia University's creative writing program, specializing in creative nonfiction and short-form fiction. Her creative work has been published in Creative Nonfiction, Gravel, PolyText, Lung Poetry and The Eye, and several essays on teaching in NYC have been published in New York Teacher. She is also the New York editor of Two Cities Review, an online literary magazine. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and their dog.

**Randi Ward** is a writer, translator, lyricist and photographer from West Virginia. She earned her MA in Cultural Studies from the University of the Faroe Islands and is a recipient of The American-Scandinavian Foundation's Nadia Christensen Prize. Ward is a Pushcart Prize nominee whose work has appeared in Asymptote, Beloit Poetry Journal, Cimarron Review, World Literature Today, Anthology of Appalachian Writers, Vencil: Anthology of Contemporary Faroese Literature and other publications. For more information, visit: www.randiward.com/about

**Susan White** has an MA from The Bread Loaf School of English and an MFA from Stonecoast. She teaches English at Carolina Day School in Asheville, North Carolina. She has published fiction in River Walk Journal, Deep South, and Front Range Review. Recently, she has horrified friends and family by writing nonfiction stories, which appear in The Pisgah Review, Barely South, Dear John, I Love Jane, The Battered Suitcase, The Tablettter, and Kudzu House Quarterly. She earned Honorable Mention for “Salvation Drive-Thru” in Winning Writers' Wergle Flomp Humor Poetry Contest and published her poem “A Child's View” in Heartscapes. When she is not grading papers or writing, she's romping through the woods with her four dogs.

**Gina Williams** is a Pacific Northwest native originally from Whidbey Island, Washington. Much of her creative work is influenced by experience and observation. Over the years, she has worked as a firefighter, reporter, housekeeper, caregiver, veterinarian’s assistant, tree planter, gas station attendant, technical writer, cocktail waitress, and berry picker. Her most curious on-the-job task: feeding pet mealworms for an elderly woman as part of her housekeeping duties. Most exciting: fighting wildfires across the west. Most rewarding: raising her sons. She earned a bachelor's degree in Journalism and English, and a master's degree in communications from the University of Oregon. Her work has been featured most recently in The Sun, Fugue, Palooka, Great Weather for Media, Black Box Gallery, theNewerYork, and Gallery 360, among others. Learn more about her and her work at GinaMarieWilliams.com.

**Ian Woollen** lives in Bloomington, Indiana, walking distance to Bryan Park. His day job is psychotherapy. Recent short fiction has surfaced in Bartleby Snopes, Third Wednesday, and The Smokelong Quarterly. A new novel, Uncle Anton's Atomic Bomb, is just out from Coffeetown Press.
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Robin Conn Ward: Executive Design Editor
Robin Ward is the mastermind of our website design, having achieved a degree in computer networking from Cochise College and Web Development from ASU. Robin's interests lie in the hyper-real, the increasing development of an artificial world in the face of an eroding biosphere.

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Arthur Wilke: Managing Editor
Arthur Wilke is a provocateur of environmental studies of the literary and socio-political realms. Known for undertaking such extended expeditions as the Appalachian Trail, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, as well as many others without the privilege of a name, Arthur studies the real world relationships of humanity, wilderness, and the environment. When he can be torn away from the woods, he is most often found tinkering with old cameras in search of the big Other, reading the latest Žižek, and agreeing way too much with Gore Vidal and Edward Abbey.

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Jane Alford: Assistant Editor, Nonfiction
Jane Alford is our resident ecofeminist and strict grammatician (someone around here has to be). She's always on call, reminding us of the right place for a direct object and when we're describing women as such. She received her BA in English and history from the University of Montevallo and is currently pursuing her M.Ed. in English Language Arts at Auburn University. She is particularly interested in language acquisition and teaching English to speakers of other languages. She enjoys adventures of the outdoor variety, growing food and cooking it, and playing with her loyal feline, Romeo.
**John Nicholson: Layout Editor**

John, who now lives in Southside, Birmingham, has his BFA in Fine Art from the University of Montevallo, tends to work part time so as to keep an open schedule for various vices. He loves banana pudding, Zeppelin, and his one pair of pants that fit just right, and he's down to hike with you any day of the week if you ask him. He doesn't mind taking your batteries to be recycled, either.

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**Charlie Sterchi: Fiction Editor**

Charlie Sterchi lives in Auburn, Alabama, where he is a master's student in English at Auburn University. His surname is Romanche for “one who dreams of Jeannie” and may possibly be the inspiration for the American sitcom I Dream of Jeannie, created by Sidney Sheldon and starring Barbara Eden and Larry Hagman, that ran from September 1965 to May 1970. To this very day, dreaming of Barbara Eden and other genies – but mainly Barbara Eden as she appeared in her famous, shall we say celestial, television role – remains an involuntary patrilineal preoccupation among Charlie and his kin. When he isn't watching TV Land, Charlie enjoys reading Lorca and Barthelme whether in or out of the bath.
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RANDI WARD
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exacting

—Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese”