EDITORS' FOREWORD

Congratulations! You have in your hands the Spring 2015 issue of *Euphony*. As this winter of discontent melts into spring, we've compiled this issue as the perfect complement to the spring. From the bright savor of childhood synesthesia to the regret of things past, you'll go from Czechoslovakia to the racist South, from poetry readings to death row. (Note: no correlation implied!) As lilacs flower from once-barren ground, so too the crumbling of failed redemptions fuels the construction of new identities. But don't feel obliged to go in that order: while our issue is organized alphabetically, feel free to flip through these pages any way you want. After all, it's yours now—for better or worse.

Please drop by our redesigned website, **euphonyjournal.org**; every week, we post new pieces that do not appear in our print issues. Submission guidelines, information about our staff, and some past issues can also be found there. Don't forget to like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter [@euphonyjournal].

Any further questions or comments can be directed to **euphonyjournal@gmail.com**.

We hope you enjoy this issue as much as we did compiling it.

— The Editors

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Euphony is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations. Visit our website, **www.euphonyjournal.org**, for more information.

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CONTENTS

Tad Bartlett

ADDRESSING YOU

1

Amy, I'm addressing you. It's me, Joe Alsobrook.

I want to reach out to you, write you, call you, google you, friend you, email you, text you, see you, talk to you, touch you, tell you that I love you. Tell you I love you in a simple sentence, no modifiers or qualifiers. No silliness, no triviality, just real, transcending, complicated, miserable, hand-holding, fall day, summer sweat, knees weak, relating, elating, love.

We let them get to us.

Not that "us" was more than two months of teenaged soap drama, high school seniors, twenty years ago. What the hell am I doing even looking you up online? Your family pictures, your smile, your children, while my children call up to me from downstairs. Fuck all.

It's been so long, I'm mostly convinced I dreamed you, dreamed us, dreamed them. Probably dreamed me, too — probably still am. Fuck all.

2

Old hate-filled hometown, I'm addressing you now, your heart and history heavy with strange fruit. I deny you now, you know. Deny that I have anything to do with you, or you with me.

Do you remember the start of it? Band practice, the week before the first game of the season, on the practice fields across the back street from the high school, hot, August 29, 1988.

It's sweat I remember first. Sweat because it was hot and we had been out there marching and playing for two hours. But mainly sweat because I was a nervous teenaged boy about to play a song for a girl I had worshipped for almost three years, since we were freshmen, wandering the halls, lost, each from our junior highs on our own sides of town, now in the same high school, the one public high school sitting on Broad Street, the road separating the east and west sides of town, what was black from what was white.

Not that Amy would know I was playing for her. She likely didn't know I existed, or so I figured. I raised my trumpet to my lips, pressed the cold hard metal of the mouthpiece against my tightened muscles, felt the blood feel good as it flowed fast into that damned vein that popped out on my forehead whenever I blew real hard, hard like I had to blow to play a crazy love song for a girl who'd never said a word directly to me, whose body

moved in ways that made me feel God, to play it loud enough to rise over the band departing from the practice field, to reach the ears of the lithe majorette practicing her baton throws on the sidelines, Amy Jones.

And then she said it, and I know you heard it just as clearly as I did.

"Joe's just about the goofiest ass white boy I ever saw," she said over her shoulder to one of the other majorettes.

That could have meant anything for my chances. It could have meant that I'd touched her heart, that she would be mine forever until the end of time. It could have meant that she thought I was goofy and an ass, and white, and not in a good way. It could have meant she thought I was funny. Or that I was a pervert, or a bug. Anything. But the one thing I knew it meant for sure was that she knew who I was, that she knew I existed, that she heard my song.

3

Google search entry: "Joseph Alsobrook." 6,690 results.
Google search entry: "Amy Jones." 763,000 results.
We could be anyone.
Google search entry: "Amy Jones Alsobrook." No results found.

4

I think I found you, Amy.

Saw you have a video-chat account. I could totally just click a link and see you, talk to you. But what would we do then? It could only be one of two things: Awkward small talk that ruins everything I hold in this memory of you. Or you see in me what I see in you, we realize the same things about time and history and mistakes, and we smile knowingly, feel a rush of physical pleasure and danger. But then what are we? What am I? Just another clown pulling his pants down for a webcam. I'm not that guy. I'm not him. Forget I even thought it.

5

And so it was always you, my hometown. You were always looking, watching, waiting for your moment to pounce.

After the first game of the season, you were there. We were all mixed in together, the band members, the majorettes, the cheerleaders, the football players. Combined, we were you, our town. We were at the municipal stadium, headed for the buses for the ride back to the parking lot behind the school.

My uniform tunic was unbuttoned, my black concert t-shirt underneath drenched in sweat, my trumpet gripped in my right hand. I was

walking next to Shaun. He was draped in his sousaphone. I had talked to Shaun at least a thousand times about Amy. But now we weren't talking at all. I was watching Amy as she walked in her majorette uniform just ahead of us. Shaun was looking at me and shaking his head. He knew what was going on.

In my head, Amy turned around and caught my gaze, but she liked it, liked me. She was all smiles between lips like soft berries. In my head, she said, "Stop staring, goofy-ass Joe, and kiss me already," and her arms were around me, pulled me against her body, and then here's the unbelievable part: I knew what to do, I kissed her, just like in the movies, with assurance and manliness, and I wasn't just one big quivering erection and anxiety, but I was suave. I knew things. And she knew I knew things. In my head.

"Dude," Shaun said, "take a picture, bruh, right?"

I dropped my eyes. I was not suave. Amy kept walking on in front of us, elbowing her friends, talking about things I would never know about.

"Damn, Shaun, what do I do?"

"Don't do anything. Don't be a freak. That song the other day was one thing, but man, don't make her feel stalked, or like you're some kind of weirdo."

"I've been invisible for two years."

"Relax," Shaun said as we got up to the band bus, then he looked over his shoulder at me. "Come to Johnny's tonight. She'll probably be there."

You know about Johnny's house. After every home game, it's where half the seniors and juniors went to hang out and party, the black half mainly, except for the occasional white football players thinking they could score some weed there easier than on their side of town. They always left empty handed, but feeling cooler, somehow in on something. They never stayed.

"You think it's cool?" I asked Shaun.

He looked back at me in the aisle of the school bus, crinkled his brow, exhaled sharply.

"Man, please."

6

You have lost it.

I am addressing you, Joe Alsobrook, aging face in the mirror, googler of old girlfriends and wives never married, ignorer of family, betrayer of customers, progenitor of fatherless children.

I saw you the other day, shuddering in fear as you drove through the wrong part of town. I saw you lock your doors at the downtown intersection. You can't escape me.

7

Amy, I love you.

You know I'm not the clumsy jerk I make myself out to sound like, right? That's just some personal myth, the myth of the regular white kid. It goes like this: I was a slob at Johnny's. I was clueless, dressed only in the clean t-shirt and jeans that I had stashed in my car, while everyone else was dressed sharp. Tailored, low-cut, high-cut, unbuttoned, relaxed; skinny neckties, just enough cleavage, shiny shoes and heeled sandals; hints of cologne and perfume; hair in perfect fades or elaborately sculpted curls. And me, the goofy white boy.

But you knew that was just a myth, that there was a man inside of this boy waiting to be looked at, talked to. I saw you sitting on a sofa on the other side of the room, squeezed in between friends, surrounded by noise and pressing bodies, and you were looking at me, only at me. Shaun said something to me, and I smirked something in response, but I don't remember now, and I doubt I knew then, what we were talking about.

And then he pushed me across the room, a hand in my back, me his puppet, across the carpet and through the crowd. Nobody cared I was there, except, it turns out, you. And then Shaun grabbed the hand of the girl next to you, a piccolo player, and pulled her up, said something about the ragged formation of the woodwinds on the field, and you were left looking up at me, waiting for me to say something, and then I did it, I spoke.

"Hey, Amy," tasting your name as if I hadn't said it countless times to Shaun, to myself in the mirror, to you in dreams, because I had never actually said it to you. I tripped over my big sneakers into a sitting position next to you.

"Joe. What was that song you were playing the other day?"

"I don't know," I lied, "just something that had been stuck in my head. Best way to get it unstuck, you know."

And you laughed, and then you nailed me. "Sounded like 'Just the Two of Us.'"

And then I laughed, too. "Huh, maybe it was. Must have been on the radio or something. I was probably hitting the notes all wrong."

"No, I thought it was cool." And then you looked around the room, like you were as nervous as I felt, though I couldn't take my eyes off you.

"Well, my embouchure was shot," I said. "I don't know. It was nothing." Then you looked back at me, steadily. You put your hand on mine.

"You want to go outside?" you asked. "It's not so crowded out there. It's stifling in here."

Even me, oblivious, goofy Joe Alsobrook, even I knew this was a time to move.

8

Old hometown, can you believe that Amy was the first girl I ever kissed? A senior in high school, that's right, and never laid lips on a girl before that night out behind Johnny's house, Shaun honking his horn out by the street because his curfew was coming up. If you had known, maybe you would have tried to stop us sooner.

For a good while after I left Amy behind and Shaun behind and you behind, a voice in my head opined how strange a white girl tasted. But then it struck me one night a couple years later, kissing a white girl in the old cemetery behind my white college, that that whole business about the taste of Amy's kisses was just you talking, not me, that skin tastes like skin, lips like lips. Like my son tells me now, "Underwear is underwear."

9

You, Shaun. You stuck by me through a lot. Or maybe I stuck by you. Or maybe we were kids and we were in the same place at the same time and it was just easier not to be repelled by each other. But you were there that night when Amy and I kissed for the first time.

I thought you'd be steamed at me when I made my way around the side of the house and out to the street where your heap sat idling. You had a midnight curfew, something we had pushed many times before, but never shattered in the way we did that night. But you weren't mad. You were grinning, actually, looking at me sideways as I slipped through the passenger door.

"Whoa, cuz', what's that all on your cheek?" You grabbed me by the jaw and swiped a rough thumb over Amy's lipstick marks.

"Just a little something. It's nothing," I said low and into the floorboards, before I cracked a grin myself, "Wow."

"Damn, Joe."

We drove through darkened streets, going slow over potholes and one unpaved block on our way back to where my car was parked at the high school. As I climbed out of your car, I could tell you wanted to say something, the way you didn't smile. "What?"

"Joe, not to discourage you or nothing, but you know what this town is. You know how people are, right?"

"Yeah, I know."

"Well, just be sure you know what you're doing."

"I am."

"Then, good luck."

Of course, I didn't know what I was doing. I was seventeen and had just been kissed for the first time. You knew I was off the rails.

"Joe, really," you said. "I know you think some folks are down with you. I know you think it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks."

"I could give two shits about what the other people think. This fucking town."

"Well, I'm just saying that you got to have your own back sometimes." And then you smiled again. "Just be careful what you do, Joe."

10

Amy, do you remember the first week? It dreams in my memory like a year of sunlight. On that Monday, I jumped from my chest waiting to catch sight of you in the morning parking lot, to see if you would smile, or if you would glare, or if you would just walk on by. It almost didn't matter which, because it would all be happening in a different world than any smile or glare or snub before.

Twenty minutes later, your dad's minivan stopped next to the chain-link fence separating the lot from the street behind, and you stepped out, looked around, and spotted me. Then you headed straight for me. Do you remember what you said to me?

"You didn't call me," both anger and hurt on your face at the same time.

I stood there smiling, an asshole. "I didn't have your number. I looked, really. I even thought about going through and calling all the Joneses in the book asking to speak to you, but have you looked you up in the phone book? There's like a half a page of Jones."

"You could have asked somebody." I could feel a thaw, maybe. I kept smiling, not meaning to, not planning to, but just smiling anyway.

And then that was it. The last ice floe sloughed into the warming sea. You slid your hand into mine as the bell rang, and we walked, holding hands, backpacks slung over our shoulders, into the bandroom, jostled on either side as we went through the door, our arms touching.

11

Old hometown, you couldn't let that first week end like that, five days of warm breezes and cool nights, holding hands and late-night telephone calls when our fathers were sleeping. No, you couldn't just let kids grow, learn from each other.

"Nigger lover," remember? Scrawled on scraps of notebook paper slid under my books on my desk in American History class, or balled into a crumple and stuffed in my backpack, or muttered under your breath in the cafeteria. Remember? Sometimes I don't. Sometimes I'm not sure I even caught it those times to begin with, nonchalant and oblivious, just trying to be cool man, as Shaun never forgot to remind me.

That first Friday, lunchtime, Amy grabbed me by the arm as our lunch-study class walked down the hall toward the cafeteria, and pulled me down a set of stairs, laughter silent on her face.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

"Let's have a picnic, Joe, out on the side steps where nobody goes. I packed some sandwiches. We can get away from everyone."

I looked back up the stairs at the last of our class going down the hall. I didn't want trouble. I looked back at Amy.

"Come on," she said, "we never get to be away from everyone looking all the time. Let's go."

Out on the side steps, away from you, we laughed and talked easily about people we had known and things we had done over the past three years, realizing we both knew all the same people and both went to a lot of the same places and both listened to the same music and read the same books and felt the same way about things and both were too shy to ever talk to each other, and found out that we both had a thing for each other all that time and we tried to trace it back to the particular point in time and event that made us realize we had that thing. For Amy, it was something I said in ninth grade biology class, or the way I slouched in my chair, all cool without knowing I was cool, something vague, really, that I didn't quite get. But I laughed and felt good about it anyway when she recounted it for me there on the steps. For me, it was easier, no vague sense of anything. More like thunder following lightning right on top of you on a summer night. It was the moment I saw her for the first time, walking through the hall with her first semester schedule gripped in her hand, the way her hair swayed down her back, the way her large, almond-shaped eyes took in everything before them, heavy-lidded and confident, the shape of her body, the stride of her walk. She was freaking Venus; it didn't get much simpler than that.

So there we were, talking like that, knowing each other, inching closer to each other each chance we could until the full length of my leg was pressed against the full length of her leg, and our hands touched each other's hands as we talked, and our breath mixed as we laughed, and we didn't have the awkwardness of the lunch table around us, and we were happy.

And then you were there, and you saw us. You were in a late-60s Mustang speeding noisily up the side-street beside the school, and you yelled out the open window, "Kiss her, nigger lover!"

I dropped Amy's hand, spilled my sandwich remains from my lap, and was on my feet before I knew what I was doing, what I was saying. "Fuck you, asshole!" I yelled at you.

"Cool down, Joe," I heard Amy tell me. Then we stuffed things into the backpack and we tried to get back inside to the cafeteria before somebody came to see what all the yelling was about, but we were too late. We both got a day of detention for skipping lunch. I got two more days for cussing.

Your arms were strong, Amy, when you held me in the front seat of my car, on that dirt road north of town, as I shook and you told me, softly, to calm down, that we didn't need to worry about anyone else.

"Fucking McDonald's," I spat, "fucking assholes."

"Baby, it wasn't the Big Mac, and it wasn't no McDonald's. Those people are jerks no matter where we might have run into them."

"I don't care. I don't care." The stars were layered like rime across the black sky outside my car windows.

You kept holding me. I don't know why you held me so long, or held onto me so long. It was two months before the end, but if you had any sense maybe it should have been two days. I couldn't help it. Those people, that town—I had never experienced fury like that before. I was used to being the oddity, the one who was picked on, excluded, whatever. I had developed a tough skin. But this was different. This was me in love with someone who loved me, or at least who kissed me and held my hand, and now they were aiming their arrows at you.

You remember the McDonald's that time. Another couple Friday nights into our dating, after another football game, everyone headed to get burgers and cokes before whatever parties started. We were there when the football team from the seg academy came and saw us together and made comments about how they could pay you better than what I was but only if you would do better things for them. I swear, if I knew how, I would have killed someone. But then our football players were there, too, white ones and black ones together, and you pulled me, yelling, out the side door as the punches and the blood and the ketchup started flying.

13

You poor soul, Joe Alsobrook, you poor scared kid.

Homecoming night. You danced with Amy held close in the darkened gymnasium, hoping it would never end, the darkness of the dance, the rotating sparkles of lights from the disco ball hung from the rafters by the decorations committee, the smell of Amy's hair as she nestled her head against your chest. You didn't want it to end, but you knew it would, knew this was the night that she would lead you out of there early, right after you had your pictures taken to prove to her parents that you were there like you said you would be, that soon you would be in your car on that dirt road again, that she would have your pants all the way off this time, not just pushed down where she could touch you, that her dress would end up folded neatly on the back seat to avoid getting wrinkled or worse, that she would be naked in front of you, that you would be afraid to really look at her, all of her, that you would kiss the skin of her throat and her chest and her neck and her ears and her cheeks over and over, not quite sure what to do or where to go, how far down, what to touch, what was OK, what was forbidden, what was both.

And then it was too much and there it was, the desperation, the clumsiness, the expectation, and she pulled you toward her, on top of her, the car seat reclined back as far as you could make it go, and you tried to go places you had never even properly seen, had no idea how it all worked, how it all fit together, and she coaxed you, shifted you, trying to make it right, and then you both forgot who you were doing it for, and then, just as you were trying to figure out how to laugh it off, find a way to not do it but to not hurt her or hurt you or, god forbid, never get the chance to do it again, and when she sounded like she was ready to give up, too, you were in.

It must have been half an hour of complete foolishness to get there, but then it was better than any hand, hers or yours, had ever been, so different, so clearly like what the pursuit of life for the rest of your life would be about. But you didn't think about that then, because once you were in you wanted nothing more than to stay in and nothing more than to be out, and you were filled with the fear of every sex ed class you had ever had, sperm and eggs and money and desperate afternoon phone calls and beige clinics and babies or not babies and parents' disappointment and furor and your own shame, and forget about college and grad school and a decent job and cocktail parties where you would be the hit of the evening, and forget about art movies in a big city with sophisticated friends, and forget about concerts with your lover by your side, her hand in yours, and forget about leaving this place or the places like it.

And then Amy was catching her breath short and you were back there with her on that homecoming night, junior year, your blue 1978 Japanese hatchback creaking on its springs, the windows fogged up, Amy sweating underneath you even though the night was cold, and you opened your eyes, which you just then realized had been squeezed shut tight, and her face was loose and her eyelids open but her eyes rolled back in her head, and you felt her hands on your naked butt, and felt her legs moving under yours and you realized that your whole life was about to end and you said, quietly, "Amy, no, I can't," and then you backed down off of Amy to the floor at her feet.

And then she laughed and twined her fingers in your hair, and you realized you had no idea what a woman is or what a woman wants, but you knew that this was enough, whatever it meant, whatever it was.

14

Of course, hometown, you couldn't have that. Maybe you saw us slip out of the dance. Maybe you figured out why. I think at that point you were already counting the days until the end, knew it would come soon enough.

I think you must have got to Shaun. Maybe you threatened to beat the crap out of him, or offered him a job, or maybe a twenty. Maybe you told him he had a shot with Amy if I was out of the way, that she belonged more with him than with me. Or maybe Shaun was just with you the whole time.

Whatever it was, you sent Shaun to do your dirty work.

It was the Monday after homecoming. Amy and Tonya had gone over to their desks to look up something in the textbook, and Shaun and I were alone at our lab table.

"What the hell are you doing?" Shaun whispered.

"About what?"

"You and Amy. Y'all kissing and holding hands and being all nice on each other, that's one thing. But are you fucking her now?"

I felt cold sickness drop into my stomach. "Maybe that's none of your damned business," I said. "I love her, Shaun. Shit, you shouldn't be surprised."

Shaun looked down at his hands, turning his next words over in his head before he said them. Then he looked back at me, right in my eyes. "You a nigger lover?" His whisper broke a little too loud.

And then there was Amy, standing behind him, the textbook in her hands, her mouth dropped open. I couldn't say anything back to Shaun's question. It didn't feel like him anymore, but like you.

But then I was on one side of the lab table looking at Shaun on the other side of it, and Amy was on that side, too, and I couldn't say anything. Amy herself had told me repeatedly the word was nothing. But maybe coming from Shaun, it was all upside-down and inside-out.

You got what you wanted. It's a blur, the time between that chemistry lab and the official end of Amy-and-me. A blur of flat-voiced conversations, avoided eye contact, lifeless hand-holding. But there it was one day, after lunch. In the time it took to get from the cafeteria to the lockers in the bandroom, Amy laid it out.

"Look, Joe. We need to be friends."

"But we are friends. Are you dumping me?"

"I just don't think it's working out."

"Is this because of homecoming night?"

"It's got nothing to do with that."

"Is it because of Shaun?"

"You don't get it, Joe. It's not working out." And she turned and walked in another direction through the halls. That was it.

15

You. I don't know what to do with you.

I don't know what to do with you, Amy, though I suppose even now I have to let you go, again.

I don't know what to do with you, Shaun. When I remember you, I really only remember you as a friend, and I don't remember that one day in chemistry except when it's dark out and I've been awake too long or I've had too much to drink. Maybe it wasn't you who fucked it all up. Maybe I screwed myself up, with how bad a lover I was or how I couldn't stand up to people or Amy or how I was just a dork, or maybe we were just seventeen

and this is how things start and end for seventeen-year-olds everywhere, no matter what it is that makes them different from each other.

And you, hometown, what do I do with you? Mainly I hate you, and I don't feel bad about it. But maybe you deserve better? That's a question, not a statement, and I don't know the answer.

But the biggest question mark is for you, Joe. Sometimes you are so high and mighty, with your past of black girlfriends in your small southern town, your trumpet songs, your friends. Where are they now? Who are you? Left them all behind to go off to your white college, your white girls, your white job, your white house in your white suburb, your white wife, your white children, your white friends, your white colleagues, your white life.

Look at you. You are these things you hate and love. Maybe you feel good to sit back after twenty years and assess it all, like you're removed from it all, above it all, beyond it all. Or maybe you're down in it.

Jessica Covil

I TRIED

I tried
to be a sparrow once;
to make my nest on buildings,
so tall, that the war I waged with
wings against the sky was
insignificant,
my meaning lost like
ancient hieroglyphics, but
Egypt always told me I was "small";
with pompous brushstrokes, they
painted me bitter.

My bite
was more incisive
than you'd think—my beak
so wicked, I could break a seed like
Aphrodite scorned; I
was a
sacred bird in Greece,
but when they sent that rumor
flying, they forgot that myth was me.
Then they remembered
I was ugly.

Drab and
colorless, I drifted
far from grasslands, where the
farmers cursed my appetite; in cities,
I was one among the
shadow
that was made of
so many animals scavenging,
—birds and human beings, both
united in this
need.

And still
we'd sing, though
unremarkable it seemed
to privileged ears; in friendly flocks
we bathed in dust and
chanted earthy
aspirations.
So common
is the sparrow, that the
skies and streets alike are
lousy with us; our vulgarity is
something we have
learned.

That's why
I cannot be a sparrow.
If His eye is on me still, I hope
He sees how I grew tired of being fed
a lie by those who tried
to play Him.

Dan Grote

LAST WORDS

Vultures. That's all they are, so that's what we call 'em. That's the name we give to the people who come out of the woodwork the day before you leave prison. Seems like, in the hours before you hit the gate, you find yourself all kinds of new friends. Everyone wants you to leave them somethin'.

I been through it before. This is my third time through the Pen. At least this'll be the last. 24 hours left to go. The vultures have already been fed. Wasn't much of a meal for 'em. I made it a point not to accumulate too much this time. But, what I had I gave away before the screws came and moved me last night. Everyone got something, there was only six of us on Death Row. Fisher got some toothpaste, Wolcott got my writin' paper and Lester got my Bible. James and Blais split my last book of stamps and some envelopes. Wasn't really much else to leave. Some ghosts maybe. My regret, I suppose. Nobody wanted those.

Six years I've sat on The Row. The State takes its own sweet time killin' someone. Even if they wanna die. Sometimes I wonder if that boy I shot didn't get the better end of the deal. At least it was over quick for him.

My name is Donnie Lee Williams, but that won't matter after tomorrow. Some years back, I was born in Madisonville, Kentucky. The son of the son of a coal miner and there weren't no shame in that, because that's what fed people's families. You either mined coal, went into the service or cooked and ran moonshine. I didn't have it easy growin' up, but I didn't have it all that hard either. Simple, that's what it was. That's how I was raised. Turns out I wasn't much for minin' work. Wasn't much for signing up to go fight a rich man's war in someone else's country neither. That left me with runnin' liquor. I thought I was the best damn driver in the county. Turns out the Feds did too, least that's what they told me the first time they slapped the cuffs on me. They gimme five years in Leavenworth. I took my weight, sat back and did my time. I come out with my GED and a whole new irreverence for The Law.

Prison aint nothin' but a trade school for someone like me. You can learn anything you want... 'Specially about things you ain't supposed to do. I went in a cocky young moonshiner and came out a wannabe Dillinger. I picked the minds of some of the best bank robbers to ever touch a dollar while I was inside. Slim Walker, The Blue Eyed Bandit, No Nose Bivins, all of 'em. Each one of 'em had a good run. Made their names and made their money. They didn't get caught because they weren't good at what they did. They got caught because it was just their time. Every good run comes to a bad end and you gotta know that goin' in. I learned a lot from them. What they did right, what they did wrong and what they'd have done different.

Bank robbery seemed like a noble crime. Wasn't no workin' man gonna lose a dime. All that money's insured by Uncle Sam.

First bank I hit, across the state line in West Virginia, went easy as pie. I'm pretty sure there wasn't one person in that bank more scared than I was. $3600 was my take from that job. That's more than most folks in Madisonville will make in half a year. From there on out, I was off to the races. The money was good and I never even had to show my pistol, not once. Was greed that brought me down. Tried to do two banks in one day. First one went fine. Second one fell apart and I ended up back in Leavenworth for a 10 year stretch.

Seein' as how I was only out of prison for a little under two years, I still had plenty of friends there. It don't make much sense, trying to explain how a man gets through a decade in prison to someone who ain't never been locked up before, so I ain't gonna waste my time. Ain't got enough left to be wasting it. All I'll say about the time I done is that I never got stabbed and I never had to stab no one. I stayed out of the "Penitentiary Politics" and just left all that nonsense to the younger fellas. I read a lot. Read anything I could get my hands on, and I ain't just talkin' about skin mags, either. I'm talkin' real, honest to God books. Them words took me places I knew I'd never go, places I couldn't have even dreamed of going. It helped to pass time. When you're doing a dime, passin' time is all you can do. Before I knew it, I woke up to a ten dollar bill, a sheaf of release papers and a bus ticket back to Madisonville. No guidance, no direction, no plan. I just knew, bus ticket or not, I'd never see Madisonville again.

I never even made it outta Kansas. I gave the sawbuck to a guy at the bus station. In return, he gave me a sickly lookin' revolver and three bullets. I was pretty sure I couldn't have even shot that little snub nose without blowin' my hand off. Kinda funny. Guy just walks up to me, said he could tell I just got outta the can and he could hook me up with whatever I needed. Dope, firepower, pussy. Anything. How did he know I'd just got out? Maybe it was the way I was dressed. Maybe it was the look on my face or the way I walked. Maybe, once you get the stink of the Pen on you, it never washes off. Seems like no matter how hard you try to scrub away the stains of your past, no matter how many coats of paint you put on the walls you've built, the bad always shines through. You ask the Lord for what you need and the Devil sends you what you don't.

I gave my bus ticket to some pretty young thing headed east, and thumbed a ride headed west. Didn't have a clue where I was going and it didn't matter. I knew I was never gonna get there. A man in an old Dodge pickup stopped and picked me up. I forget where he said he was headed, but at the time, it seemed far enough. He was real talkative. Right up to the point when I showed him that old pistol. I repaid his kindness by leaving him stranded on the shoulder of the road next to a wheat field and taking his truck. It wasn't nothin' personal. I decided I'd put gas in his truck before I ditched it, leave it with a full tank somewhere it'd get found and returned to him. Just because you're a crook don't mean you gotta be an asshole too. He didn't do nothin' wrong but try and do somethin' nice.

First town I rolled into had a name, I just didn't pay attention to what it was. I pulled into a little gas and liquor joint. I put gas in the truck, premium too, filled it right up to the top. Washed the windshield, checked the oil and walked inside. The kid behind the counter didn't look old enough to shave, let alone sell booze.

I remember, he wasn't even shaking. Not when I showed him that pistol and not when I told him to open the till. I'm not sure why, but that pissed me off, him not acting scared of me. $212. That's all there was. That'd be enough to get me out of the state. That's all I wanted, just to get the money and leave. But, like everything else I've wanted in this life, I couldn't have it. I asked the kid to lay down on the floor and count to a hundred so I could leave. He acted like he was gonna do it too, right up to the point when he didn't. Dumb bastard reached for something under the counter and before I knew it, a shot rang out and took him right through the top of the head. Dead before he hit the floor. Whatever his last thoughts were ended up painted on the wall behind him. I'm glad I didn't tell him that he wasn't gonna get hurt. He wouldn't of though if he'd just listened.

I could've just left. Should have just left. I didn't. I walked to the cooler, grabbed a beer and just waited. I never even bothered to look under the counter to see what cost him his life. Seemed like forever and still didn't nobody come. I finished my beer and called the law myself. I don't know why I didn't feel like runnin', didn't know why I didn't feel anything.

My trial was just a formality. Didn't take any time at all and since I only killed one person, it barely made the newspapers. I wasn't innocent and I never claimed to be. Even if I hadda been, I don't think that court appointed lawyer coulda done anything for me. He couldn't even look at me when the judge sentenced me to die. Just gathered up a few papers and walked away. If I'd have had it my way, they coulda just took me out behind the court house and put a bullet in the back of my head right then and there. I didn't want no appeals, didn't want anybody to fight for me. It's amazing the amount of "good Samaritans" that show up wantin' to fight for a life that don't mean nothing anymore.

So, here I sit. Less than a day away from my own funeral. Won't be much of a funeral really. They'll kill me and then they'll take me to a Potter's Field just outside the gates, put me in the ground with all the other dead men no one wants. You learn to make peace with a lot of things when you're on The Row. I made mine and the ones that come after me will make theirs. Some will find fault in others and some will find salvation in God. Me, I was never much of a believer in Jesus and, the way things turned out, I don't think he ever had much faith in me either.

It's kind of a strange feeling, knowing the exact hour that death is gonna come for you. It's not a bad feeling. Not a scary one either, just strange. Maybe if I bought into the whole Heaven and Hell notion, I'd feel more. To me, death ain't nothin' but a flick of the switch or the pull of a trigger. The lights go out and you don't even know you're gone or

even that you were ever here in the first place. That's that. That's what I think anyways. I ain't exactly sad about it. I came into this world cryin', but I don't see much sense in goin' out that way. Maybe I'll become a ghost, maybe not. Nothing's gonna change once I'm gone. That boy ain't gonna come back and this rock we live on sure as hell ain't gonna spin no different without me on it.

I asked the Warden if he'd let me have a little Cumberland Mountain Shine with my last meal, but he said no. Said he was afraid that if I had any of that high test corn liquor in me, I might burst into flames when he pulled that switch and sent the electricity into me. Guess they don't want the witnesses to get queasy. I don't care one way or the other. About the booze, the audience, any of it. I deserve what I got comin'. I can't never repay all I've took. Maybe it's for the best. Hopefully, my goin' will bring some sense of peace to someone who needs it. I guess I'll find out in about 23 hours. Won't be able to let no one else in on death's little secrets, but at least I'll know. Who knows, I might run into that boy I killed. Not sure what I'll say if I do. One thing is for certain though, when they pull that switch, I might finally be able to stop runnin' from them demons that been chasin' me all my life. I might finally end up somewhere where my ghosts can't follow me.

I asked the warden if, after I was gone, he'd be kind enough to mail this letter to your mama. He's always been fair with me, so I suspect he will. I wasn't there when you were a boy and I'll never know you as a man. It's probably for the best, but who's to say? I reckon you deserve to know about the other half you came from. You don't get to pick who your dad is. You do get to pick whether or not you end up like him. I'm not one to give advice so I'll just tell you what I hope is true. My sins don't have to be yours, they can die with me or they can live in you.

Chris Haven

THE AUDIENCE RECEDES

after the poetry reading
The lights darken the show is about to begin.
I can't see my program, my hands, my lap.
I am saving a seat. Someone might show up.
A mike left on. We're not supposed to hear.
A black woman speaks of children who see death.
A white man speaks of pain curling like smoke.
But also dancing and red shoes and sweet cream.
They left their voices on their words got out.
Nobody tells bricks, facts, how a thing is built.
The singers think singing will save the world.
The talkers think talking will save the world.
The teachers think teaching will save the world.
Darkness thinks maybe darkness saves the world.
They tell you they've left the world in your lap.

Outside you just miss the firecracker.
You imagine shining hands in the sky.
Lights on the needles have all gone dark.
Meters flash zeroes. Nothing to record.
Rainslick streets. No moon. Grass, unsure of its green.
Sweetcorn fields rise in the shimmered distance.
Wind plays a song blowing time to come home.
A car pulls in next door time to come home.
All the battles are closed time to come home.
Shut it down the world is over come home.
Walk in find the light not the same body.
Not the same tongue who now knows you here?
This night unfolds more than you can receive.
Scraps of victory on the seat, for the next ones.

Ondrej Pazdirek

VERNERICE, 1976

Huddled behind an old tool shed,
five boys take turns chewing

a single piece of smuggled gum
from West Berlin. The lanky, dark-haired
one in the bleached overalls
is my father. They chew

until a boy they call tlustoprst
swallows the gum.

Walker Pfost

GRAMMA DIED AGAIN

this time she's left me a CB radio
I toss it in my car and take the 10
out of Los Angeles, hoping to knobcrackle my way
to a truck stop prostitute, maybe,
a driver outside of Indio laughs at me
says I'll hit the jackpot if I talk like that
meaning cop cars look like slot machines
so I shut up and listen for a soft voice
but mostly there are no voices at all
only the bathroom hand dryer sigh of road
sustained in a ceramic tile echo chamber
as the door closes behind me
I've stopped for another tank just out
of Deming, the black sky starting to flash orange
a convoy goes by with seven men talking shit
and I make them eight, my job is to watch
for troopers coming from behind
but I don't like how flippant they are about
their old ladies so I stop at a choke n puke
get a cup of coffee and a glass of beer
and I call my wife, who was still asleep
don't worry baby it's just New Mexico

Benjamin Pierce

MAKING THE ROUNDS IV

waiting for the water to return we dip our thumbs in ash
we dip our thumbs in ash to draw the faces we sit in circle with
to draw the faces we sit in circle with we look away from the thumb that draws us
we look away from the thumb that draws us, we forget our thumb as it draws
we forget our thumb as it draws, we remember in ash between us the face we draw
we remember in ash between us the face we draw, in common thirst we dip our thumbs in ash
in common thirst we dip our thumbs in ash waiting for the water to return.

Raegen Pietrucha

CHEER

The only words I feel safe speaking I scream
alongside a team, combining them
with sharp chops and kicks, a killer

smile. Eleven girls and I devote
our weekdays to memorizing litanies
of victory, and our boys spring higher

each year as if our words
are manna. Atop the pyramid, held
like a house on a rock, my faith

never wavers; I feel the girls' mass
will always lift me as it does the team—
soaring, however briefly,

above enemies — undefeated,
untouchable, immaculate. And on the weekend,
when I can get away from him, I hide

in the woods out back and practice—
a zealot casting spells – certain the right
words paired with the right actions will someday

help me become too mighty to be vincible,
recalling perfectly the patterns and tracts—
vital when you're the only one

who's ever coming to your defense.

Tova Reiter

BRIGHTNESS

For the eighty-third day in a row Noga awoke not knowing where she was. The weak and watery light floating into the bedroom was totally unfamiliar.

The colors of the tangled bedsheets, the pillow half-naked from her tossing and turning, eerily unnatural. There was a whisper of wind coming in through the window and it smelled entirely alien. She had not slept well in nine months, long enough to have conceived and birthed a child, she thought sometimes.

For a long moment, Noga allowed herself to imagine that when she opened the unrecognizable door she would find herself back in the apartment in Haifa, the smell of fresh bread wafting through the sunlit hallway. She squeezed her eyes closed again. She would tiptoe across the tiled floor, hear his voice as he badly sang along to Galgalatz, peek into the kitchen and see him leaning over the sink, two bites into a persimmon, the sticky cinnamony juice running down his chin. He never could eat like an adult. He would grin sheepishly as he caught her gaze, his dark eyes crinkling up and his mouth wide open, white teeth, dark skin.

Noga opened her eyes and stared hard at the spidery cracks in the gray ceiling. She knew she would not cry. She hadn't cried since May. Instead, she took a long breath of the strange air and got out of bed. She creaked across the cold floor and opened the door to the hallway.

Noga rested her head in icy fingers as she sat on the toilet, the fluorescent light harsh on her eyes. She had gotten her period overnight, looked at the brownish blood on the inside of her underwear distantly, as one might examine a spot on the sidewalk.

Ronit had told her once that she got sad whenever she got her period, as though she had lost something small but important. Noga had laughed and asked if she cried when she clipped her nails or trimmed her split ends, just to be difficult, but she had understood. Something about mourning the loss of potential. Now she couldn't believe something that had been inside her had ever been alive.

The alarm went off in the bedroom while she was washing her hands in the frigid tap water. Noga scrubbed carefully under her nails as its harsh ring echoed through the mostly empty apartment. She should shut it off. Washed up to the elbow, right arm first, cold fingers over the ragged two inches of scar.

Up her left forearm, raising goose bumps on the smooth skin. Splashed water on her face without looking in the mirror and brushed her teeth to the insistent beeping. She dried her face carefully on the towel that had been hanging there so long Noga could not remember what color it

was. And finally padded back to her bedroom and slid the small red switch over to off. She moved so slowly when she was tired, but she was always tired now.

In the sudden silence, Noga was unable to remember what she was supposed to do next. The light streaming in the window was a little stronger, but still overwhelmingly gray. She could see her suitcase in the dimness, open on the floor beside the bed, clean clothes spilling out onto the bare wooden floor. She wanted to sit back down and drift into memory under the tangled bedclothes, could almost taste the dry Mediterranean air and the sweetness of persimmon and her laughter and the salt on his skin, but knew that if she lay down she would not be able to get up again. So Noga swallowed and reached for the bra on the top of the suitcase. She could pretend for another day that she was not wrapped in pure white tachrichim, burial shrouds.

It was the seventeenth of Kislev, one week to Chanukah. Noga only knew the date because it was Nati's twenty-eighth birthday. When they were kids, he would wake her and Effy up early to skip school and take a day trip to the Dead Sea. They would splash around the waterfalls of Ein Gedi for hours, then take a bus into Arad as the sun sank low over the desert. Nati's favorite bakery was a tiny storefront on Elezar ben Yair street, and the old Sephardic owner would fill a paper bag with steaming sufganiyot. They could barely wait to sit on the curb outside before tearing into the greasy doughnuts, hot strawberry jam oozing out between their fingers, sweet powdered sugar billowing up in a cloud.

She ought to call Nati, but his wife might pick up, full of concern and suffocating pity. Or he might make her speak to Margalit, adorable and full of stories about her gan and her toys and her teachers and her friends. The thought of all that joy was unbearable.

The wind whipped down Wells and Noga dropped the cigarette onto the pavement so she could bury her fingers in her pockets. There was a paper turkey in the window of her bakery, and everything in Chicago smelled of cloying cinnamon-sugar and nutmeg. She couldn't go back in, couldn't breathe in there.

They used to live in the South, with a boundless desert backyard. They would run off past city limits every day after school, play hide-and-seek or show off dangerous and exciting stunts, walking home scratched and bruised and gleeful. They were invincible, even when Effy broke his leg jumping off a ledge and Noga scratched her arm so badly she needed eight stitches. Even then, with tears in her eyes, she had tried to shrug it off and keep up with the boys. It was Nati who had called an end to the game, Nati who had wrapped her bloody arm in his favorite t-shirt, the one autographed by the members of Mashina, Nati who walked home with his arm around her shoulders.

Noga ground the embers into the asphalt with the toe of her sneaker and huddled into her coat against the brick wall beside the bakery door. Thinking of Nati and his birthday made her head hurt.

Across the street, three men sat in a row behind the glass of

the barbershop, still advertising Veteran's Day haircut sales against a photocopied flag. The elderly gentleman on the left had an impressive mustache and a copy of The Tribune open in front of him. In the middle was a middle-aged man with a Bluetooth in his ear, nodding vigorously and taking notes on a yellow legal pad. And on the right a man about her age, ruddy face, good-natured smile, looking relaxed as he quietly stared out the window. It felt like a photograph, perfectly American in that Chicago way that made Noga feel not just like an outsider, but like a visitor from a distant planet.

She couldn't call Nati today. Maybe tomorrow she could bear it.

Noga had spent the evening of Veteran's Day alone in her apartment with pita and salad and soup, the same way she had spent nearly every night since they had changed the clocks and the darkness of winter had set in. She was hiding from the montages of soldiers in uniform on television, the sales at every store she passed on the walk from the Red Line to work. It was worse than Yom HaZikaron, Remembrance Day, because in Israel it felt like her friends at least tried to consider the price of war, even if they finally concluded that it was worth paying.

There was nothing sexy about death, nothing glamorous about having your legs blown off by an anti-tank missile. There was nothing glorious about sacrificing your life for overblown dreams, for the useless promises politicians peddled like patterned headscarves and candied almonds in the stalls of the open-air shuk. Noga hated Israel so much right then, staring at the men across from her and that stupid Xeroxed flag. Hated everyone who ever lived in the whole stupid country, anyone who told her how much of a hero she was, how very brave, for standing in a cemetery on a beautiful day and watching them bury a man who was barely more than a fucking child. She hated them all. She never wanted to go back there. She was done celebrating death and turning anyone who didn't have the sense to not die into a symbol, a martyr for some fucked-up cause no one understood.

Noga felt the sting of tears in her eyes and it made her furious.

She wanted to break something. She wanted to hurt somebody. She wanted to go back to that rainy day in November, five years ago, when he had first bought her a beer and told her she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and she wanted to laugh at him, laugh in his stupid cheeky face and get off the bar stool and say no thank you and leave and never fucking come back.

Don't dance with him!, she would say to herself. Don't let him make you smile, don't follow him home, don't jump in silvery puddles in the glittering street outside his apartment, don't let him touch you and in the darkness find out that his hair is as soft as it looks.

Was. Was as soft as it looked.

The boy in the barbershop—she had been wrong about his age, he was probably no more than seventeen—grinned at her from across the street and Noga started. She hadn't realized she was staring at him. She looked back, expressionless, then looked down at the smoldering end of her

cigarette. The anger was gone, leaving her feeling deflated and abandoned. The tears welled up in her eyes.

She just wanted to save them both.

Noga swallowed hard and had just turned to go back inside when a wail rent the quiet street and stopped her heart. It was an air-raid siren. A noise she hadn't heard since she was child, since the South had gotten bombarded with Qassams in the Second Intifada. Forty seconds, that's how long you had from the beginning of the siren's wail until the rocket split your life in two.

"Tzeva adom, tzeva adom," the electronic voice proclaiming a Red Alert, and you run to the nearest shelter, huddle in the machsan, whimpering and waiting. Your mother squeezes her eyes shut and whispers a prayer, maybe talking to god, maybe just to herself. And you tick off a list of loved ones, a mental tally of lives, your small world emerging from the onslaught battered but otherwise unharmed. Effy is in school, so he is safe. Nati's on base, so he is safe. Moriah's hiking in the north, Rachel's at work in Tel Aviv, Noa, Dudi, Lilach... You wait for "all clear" signal if you're lucky, an echoing boom, if you're not.

But here, here on the corner of Randolph and Wells, with the icy air blowing down the flat and empty streets, where was safe? Noga looked frantically for shelter she knew did not exist. Her breathing was short, but she didn't have enough time, the street was deserted and how, how could there be a raid here?

She was on her knees, hyperventilating, fear constricting her lungs and paralyzing her muscles. Why? Why did he leave her? Why did he make her love him if he was only going to leave her? How could he? How could he abandon her to face this alone? She was sobbing, her forehead to the asphalt, covering the back of her neck like they had taught her, to protect her nerves, her spinal cord, from flying shrapnel. How could he hurt her like this when she loved him?

Crouched on the ground as the siren wailed on, Noga could not think of anyone she wanted to check on. She could not think of anyone who was worrying about her. She was so far from home, so far from anyone she loved.

"Noga! It's okay! The tornado passed. We're okay."

Noga heard the voice and felt a warm hand on her back as though from a great distance. Michelle, small and blonde and looking like a perfect stranger as she blinked at Noga, concerned, worried.

"It was a tornado siren. They don't happen in Chicago usually, but it passed near here. We're okay, though. It passed. Come inside."

Noga blinked at her through a haze of tears.

"I—." The voice, thin and shaky, did not belong to her. "Okay. I'll be there in a minute."

Her coworker nodded and walked back in to the store. Noga sat back on her knees and took a long and shuddering breath. She pulled out her phone, dialed the number she knew by heart.

"Nati?" She sounded so broken. "I... I need to come home."

John Repp

BASEBALL GLOVES

I had dropped C somewhere
& parked to do my errand
maybe selling plasma
so we could go somewhere
afterward on the ten dollars.
We played catch a lot,
part of our sex. Everything
was part of our sex.
How ugly the word sex.
None of the stink
& grease of the thing,
the I-and-Thou, the
why not—*Ding an sich*
of the thing. Fun to imagine
Rilke spitting into the pocket
of his Goethe Ultra-Flex mitt.
Clutching a fluorescent
softball, the glove sat
on the back seat when I left,
not when I got back.
No more catch till someone
gave me a glove sometime
after C & I went *kerblooey*.
I fell in love with the glove
when I speared a liner
that yanked me toward left.
Damn Steve said. *Woohoo*
said Mark. Even I forgot
my two-hop pegs to first.
The glove enfolding a bald
tennis ball sat on the floor
of my closet bedroom
when I left for Grand Rapids,
not when I got back.
V had no idea, but when her kid
glowered through the door,
there it was. *That's my glove*
I said. *That's my kid* said V.
Ain't your glove said the kid
& for reasons lost to me
or no reason, I let it go
& haven't had a glove since.

ASA SOMERVILLE

THE SURVIVORS

A steady rain began to fall as he swung the car off the highway. The neglected state road sliced a straight line through the heart of the forest, and evergreens towered and bent overhead like gothic arches crisscrossing the sky. Matthias shifted gears and tapped his fingers across the arc of the unfamiliar steering wheel. There were a few bodies every winter, pulled from days-old wreckage after they lost control on the wet country road; he imagined the remains of the rental tangled in the trees in a hidden ravine, tail lights blaring into nothing until the battery ran out. For a moment he also imagined his mother's car, the way he always had as a child—but the old fear of that wound was gone, resolved, and he hated how similar certainty felt to relief.

Matthias chewed his lip in time with the muffled click of the windshield wipers. He could feel presence of the cigarettes in the glove box, warm and comforting as a promise. The car murmured and shuddered over every buckle in the asphalt. The dry heat from the air vent carried in the smell of damp earth and cedar smoke, but its warmth failed to reach his fingers. He passed a battered metal road sign bearing the town's welcome and advertising CAMPGROUNDS, REST AREA, FOOD; beyond that, a wooden plank nailed to a tree, handpainted with the words JESUS SAVES. Both of them seemed like wishful thinking.

The county police kept their local outpost on Main Street, in a low brick building shared with the post office that was dwarfed on one side by a fresh-from-the-factory vinyl-sided office park.

Clara sat outside in the rain.

Her open umbrella was hooked, forgotten, over the back of the bench; she had her sweatshirt on backwards, and the hood hung forward from her neck like a cowl. Under the awning, the promised social worker was waiting for him. Matthias wished that he could recognize the woman from an earlier encounter—all day he had wanted to take hold of someone and shake them and scream that he'd told them so. But this woman had the same tired features and businesslike fatigue as every other social worker he had ever met, and he couldn't remember if he'd seen her before. People like Matthias probably told her so every day; letting himself dissolve now wouldn't do either of them any good.

His sister rose to greet him. She spun the umbrella as she stood, an arc of raindrops scattering around her. As Matthias drew nearer he saw that a gangly kitten sat pouched in the hood of her backward sweatshirt, one paw curled over the edge. He snatched the cigarettes from the glove box and stepped out into the downpour.

"I guess you won't need to hire that custody lawyer after all," Clara said by way of a greeting. It was blunt and true and deceptively soft-spoken, his sister distilled to a caustic purity. The familiarity cut through the knot of nerves in his chest, and it was all he could do not to laugh.

"Guess not."

He ducked under Clara's umbrella to light a cigarette and nodded a curt greeting at the social worker. He imagined that both of them were probably supposed to cry, or to ask how the other was holding up, the way siblings did in the wake of every TV movie's climactic tragedy. But he was in no mood to reassure a stranger by pretending that anything about their lives had ever followed a script.

Clara tickled under the kitten's chin, tilting her ear to the tiny rumble of its purr. Matthias exhaled a thin stream of smoke into the rain and gave his sister a weak smile, and he knuckled the creature's forehead with the crook of his finger. As they headed up the path to the police station doors, Clara leaned lightly against his shoulder.

"Tell me where I need to sign," said Matthias. The social worker looked startled, which only worsened his distrust. You people could have done something years ago, he imagined telling her, just for the guilt in her face as she realized he was right.

Clara took hold of his hand as they entered the building. Her fingers were thin and frigid, and they still felt as small in his own as they had when they were young children. Matthias settled into the uncomfortable authority he had pretended to take all his life, and wondered if now, finally, it would come to him naturally.

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The rain abated after a few hours, but a heavy blanket of humidity settled in its place. As they pulled away from the police station, Clara sat silent in the passenger's seat, one hand cupped around the bony spine of the sleeping kitten. She propped her free arm against the window and traced an awkward zigzag in the mist.

"I figure we find a decent motel back in Port Angeles and try to tackle the house tomorrow," said Matthias. "I doubt you want to sleep there."

Tension crept into Clara's body, almost imperceptibly. "No," she said, and Matthias couldn't tell if she was agreeing or correcting him. "Maybe we can get dinner at that place on the pier, with the mermaid swizzle sticks."

The town receded behind them; without the road signs and the occasional gravel driveway crawling from the highway into the woods, Matthias might be able to forget that anyone lived here at all.

"She was sober toward the end," said Clara. She didn't look away from the window as she spoke, and there was an edge to her voice that made it sound jarringly similar to his own. "Till last night. But for a while she was doing really well."

Matthias braked at the stop sign in front of an empty crossing. The sole sign of life was a single-wide smeared with moss at the edge of the road, loomed over and thrown into shadow by the ancient evergreens.

"Addicts have to want to change," he said with a wan smile. "If they don't, they never really will."

He had always clung to the words for reassurance and absolution, trying to keep himself above water when he was young and lived in fear that he hadn't done enough. But it didn't seem to sit with Clara the same way.

As if she were straining to hear him from a distance, she tilted her head, her brow knit with the barest line of a frown. "Is that what she was?" she asked. She swung her gaze back toward him, her steady face betraying no emotion or conviction. The question almost annoyed him—would have, if it had come from anyone but his sister.

"I think she was sad," Clara said after a moment when he didn't answer. She shrugged and looked out the window again, at the ragged branches heavy with rain. "Everything else was a symptom."

A glimmer of headlights appeared at the mouth of the road some distance behind them. Matthias straightened and began driving again. Clara was shrewd for her age and knew better than to think the best of anyone, much less their mother, but she hadn't yet grown out of asking why with the childlike expectation of an answer.

The car crossed a low bridge, over a creek swollen and stewing with rainwater. His fingers itched for another cigarette, but he had promised himself, as always, that the most recent one would be the last.

"Even if she was," he said, "I think when you have kids, you agree to put all that on the back burner. And she didn't."

From the corner of his eye, he saw something flicker across Clara's face—almost a smile. "Kind of a tall order, Matt, don't you think?"

"Important things are never easy." Matthias pinched his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger to keep the irritation from reaching his face. "It's no excuse not to try."

At this point, of course, it was all academic. Whatever excuses their mother had made for herself, they'd long since dissipated into heat and dust. Clara didn't argue, but the cold air between them was thick with ghosts.

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In the evening, far from the threat of home, they went to the beach. Clara wore a fleece-lined bomber jacket over her sweatshirt, and the saline wind coming in off the strait painted streaks of damp into her blonde hair.

Matthias hung back and watched her as she ran to the edge of the water. When they were children she had been eager and ungainly, galloping into the shallows with her limbs caked in sand. She was more measured now, reserved, almost tentative; she moved the way Matthias did, no matter how many years he put between himself and the house he'd left behind. He wanted to explain it with adolescence, as if the change

were natural, but Matthias had never been as carefree as Clara used to be. He was born on the other side of childhood. Perhaps Clara had been, too, but had been brave enough to try and wrest some of it back.

"I feel like we haven't been out here in forever." Clara looked over her shoulder, her face bitten red by the wind. "Any good beaches in the city?"

"Better," said Matthias after a moment. "It'll be better."

She nodded, peaceable but not smiling, and turned back to watch the waves.

***

While they worked, the neighbors watched, as Clara's bedroom emptied into boxes and paper bags that migrated across the overgrown lawn and into the rental car.

It wasn't the same family that had lived there when Matthias left. No one ever stayed long if they could help it; this part of town was a stopgap measure, a place where you could take a break from belonging anywhere until you figured out what to do next. But they were the same sort of family that had always lived across the road, anchored by a blunt-faced mother whose children all had stringy hair and scuffed knees. The mother feigned indifference as she watched, but her children stared, gaping across the road with their forgotten toys swinging from their hands.

Without the posters and wall-hangings that had turned it into something that belonged to Clara, her bedroom looked like a derelict asylum. Rust-colored mildew crept down from the corners of the walls in streaks. Clara sat cross-legged on her stripped mattress and plucked idly at her secondhand guitar; she looked vulnerable, as if the mold might reach her if she held too still.

"Should we try the rest of the house, too?" she asked, looking up from a chord. "I know Mom had some photographs."

Matthias reluctantly turned back toward the window and the waiting stares of the family across the street. His face had twisted toward a scowl, and he would rather they see it than his sister. "If you really want them," he said.

The chords beneath Clara's fingers became a melody chased along the strings. It was moody and grim as the sky before rain, nothing like the thoughtful serenity in her voice. "I figured you might want them too," she said. "There are some of her with you and your dad. They look pretty normal. You could let your city friends see them without feeling embarrassed."

The melody took on a bitter dissonance, and Matthias felt the neighbors' eyes more acutely than ever. They were watching the final act of the show his mother had put on for them all her life, and he didn't want to entertain them any longer than he had to. "We can sort through everything when we get back to my apartment," he said. "As long as we

clear out quickly. I don't want to have to deal with the landlord."

Clara's faint smile returned, mirthless and unreadable. She ended the song mid-note and set the guitar carefully into its shabby case. "Suit yourself," she said, and slung the case over her shoulder to carry it out to the car.

Matthias shut the blinds and wandered into the living room. Beyond the small sphere of Clara's control, the house was in chaos, pervaded by the pungent smell of old newspapers and dirty dishes. From the back window he could see the wide scar of clear-cut land that stretched back to the edge of the county airport.

He had taken up smoking when he was twelve, in the first of his adolescent attempts to shock his mother so completely that she couldn't help but remember that he existed. Returning to this house like a prodigal son pushed years of distance and careful progress to the back of his mind, leaving him the same mess of futile rage and bare nerves that he had been as a teenager. When he gave in and lit a cigarette it wasn't just a failure to fend off the chemical urge—it was a concession to childish histrionics, as good as admitting that this place still held power over him.

He didn't want to bring any of this with them to the city. All he wanted was his sister, cut free from their mother and ready for a fresh start.

When he emerged with the family photo album unopened in his arms, he found Clara leaning on the chain-link fence. Her hands were smeared with dirt, her face damp with drizzle and ruddy from the wind; he only knew that she hadn't been crying because his sister never cried.

"I buried the last of her stash in the back yard," she said. She looked up at him, expressionless, and he was struck by how large her eyes looked in her thin face. "I got rid of most of it when she quit, but I missed the stuff under the deck. That must be where she got it."

He set down the album in the open trunk and leaned on the fence beside his sister. The children across the road had gone inside, but their mother still sat on the stoop, pretending not to listen.

"She could've bought it out of town," he told her. "This isn't your fault."

Clara's shoulders were taut, and when he put an arm around her she didn't quite relax. She wrung her hands and brushed them on her skirt.

"You smell like smoke," she told him. There was no accusation in her voice—there never was—but the question still felt like an angry chord. For a moment he couldn't respond. He took the carton of cigarettes from his back pocket and turned it over in his hands like a puzzle cube; finally he tossed it into the trunk and slammed it shut.

"I think we've got everything you'll need," he said. "I didn't see anything else in worth keeping."

Clara didn't answer, but purpose seemed to suddenly flood her small frame. She straightened, kicking off from the fence links, and trudged through the long wet grass. One of the half-wild cats darted

out from under the porch and rubbed against her legs; she paused for a moment to scratch its ears, but continued inside, tense but resolute.

"Come on," she said.

She led him back through the living room, through the dusty kitchen and the nook where their mother's clothes still sat piled and wrinkled on top of the dryer. When their mother's bedroom door swung open, Matthias almost retreated into the stale scent of the rest of the house. Her clothes, her room, everything still smelled like her—like cotton and beeswax and the rose-water scent of her lipstick.

It was just as she had left it, as though it might welcome her back at any moment. Her nest of sheets was rumpled and disarrayed as if she had just arisen from them. Above the desk she hadn't used in years, she kept her shrine to what she had squandered—her diploma, pictures from her first wedding, a few department-store pictures taken when she and Matthias and his father still had the look of an ordinary family.

Clara lingered over the bed, her thin arms folded across her chest. When she looked up at him she seemed far older than her years.

"She was here when I found her," she said.

Panic swelled cold in his stomach. "I can cover this," he said quickly. "You shouldn't—"

Over his protests, she continued to speak, her voice raised but calm and unwavering.

"The car was almost a mile away. She walked all that way and then just went to bed like nothing was wrong. Maybe she thought that no blood or broken bones meant she was fine. Maybe she was too out of it to notice." She reached down and smoothed a crease in the pillow.

"She probably never felt a thing, the doctor said, but I think they always say that."

"You shouldn't do this to yourself." There was a desperate, wheedling edge to Matthias's voice, where authority would have been if he were stronger. "Please, I can take care of this, you shouldn't be in here."

Clara took a deep breath, and in her inhale Matthias finally heard a tremor, but she crushed it so quickly that it might never have been there at all.

"I know you want to protect me," she said. "But Mom wasted her whole life running away and trying to protect herself from feeling anything, and I don't want to end up the way she did."

"Don't make excuses for her," he snapped. "She wasted her life chasing a high. You don't have to torture yourself to be better than she was, you just need self-control."

Her brows knit slightly, and she studied him for a moment, more in resignation than in anger. "You never thought it was any more complicated than that, even before you left." It wasn't a question, just an observation, matter-of-fact and almost philosophical.

"I just don't think trying to understand does you any good," he said wearily. "There was never anything we could do, and now there never will be."

Clara fell silent. She made a careful circle around the room, touching the blankets, the dresser, the dented venetian blinds. Finally she began to gather the frames clustered over the desk. Matthias's eyes lingered on the picture of his mother in her cap and gown, grinning and squinting into the sun. She stood alone, just as Matthias had at his own graduation. But for all that he searched, he could find no trace of sadness or desperation in her smile.

"People do stupid things when they're hurt," said Clara. She cradled the frames in her arms and glanced back at the bed. "I don't think trying to understand why is the same thing as making excuses."

His nerves were so frayed, his body so flooded with resentment, that part of him wanted to tell her that she was wrong—that to ascribe their mother's every crime to some indistinct pain was to absolve her for everything she had done and failed to do. But, as Matthias watched his sister make her last round through the room where she had found her mother's body, he realized that he had nothing left to say.

***

The sky was clearer here, enough that a few stars were visible in spite of the glittering band of city lights on the horizon. Clara folded her arms over the deck railing and watched the bow of the ferry slice through the water. The headwind whipped through her long hair like a flag.

Matthias braced his forearms on the railing and laced his fingers as he leaned into the wind. The sea air was bitterly cold, but Clara didn't seem to notice.

"I think you'll like living there," he said. He gestured toward the city, near enough now that no other place seemed to exist. "It'll be good for you. There's more to do there than just survive."

"As long as we've got surviving down," she said. She looked at him sideways with a small smile, but there was a trace of melancholy in her voice.

Matthias lit a cigarette in defiance of the towering stenciled sign warning him not to; this one would be the last, and he assured himself that he meant it this time.

"We're pretty good at surviving," said Matthias. What should have been reassuring sounded like a prayer thrown into the wind.

"I think so," she said.

The lights of the city pushed forward, bleeding past their boundaries, spilling like watercolor into the sea and sky.

Stephanie Spector

MARIGOLD, FROM FLORIDA

child synesthete
dreams pink cloud
tastes lawn flamingo
hears morning mango juice
and zinnia-pops her eardrum
from the rain boots worn to school
some color nature makes
some disco crayon march
that rainbow in the window
it's a song she yells *a song*

Paul Watsky

FOOD CHAIN REACTIONS

money's tight but
bedbugs are back
beavers—the ones that

turned into hats—are
back bears reaching
on hind legs in

the suburbs are back
bigger better panthers
pursue joggers

and the American
President swats
a fly sparking PETA

protests wolves are
running wild conures
discarded con-

gregate TB
toddles back onstage
to introduce super-

staph boils to your
backside in our waterways bilges
belch parasitic

mollusk larvae Burmese
pythons joyride on jumbo
jets everything fattens

on everything failing
unfinished naive half-
assed bummed because

broke but beavers—Hear,
O thou ponzied-out piss-
ants—are back

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Brian Lu writes and dances when he can and especially when he can't. He takes inspiration from hip hop and Haruki Murakami. For the future, he's keeping myself hungry for more.

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