THE BOILER

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FALL 2014

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PETRINA CROCKFORD

BIRTH

The doctor pulled the baby from the woman while she lay on the sweat-soaked hospital bed, the sweat coming from her back, her arms, her legs, because beneath that bright hospital light and with the windows shut and the curtains pulled and the strain of pushing life from the gut, all she could do was grit her teeth against the pain, and with her feet in the air—her soles held by two nurses in blue—she could only grit her teeth and sweat, in silence, the sweat sticking her dark hair to her face, her hair as dark as her eyes as dark as the moments when the contractions roll over her like heat sickness, blacking her vision and settling over her like curtains settling over the hospital windows with a view of the desert, endless brown and white and gray-blue, shadeless as the lamp in the motel room she calls home, home with a hot plate and a small refrigerator and a pink coverlet with cigarette stains that don't belong to her, like the handprint on the wall above the bed, and she put her hand on this handprint and wondered who it belonged to, who had put it there and why, whether on purpose or by accident did this person leave evidence of themselves and where, if anywhere, were they now, she thought, as she stood up and dressed for work, stretching her uniform over her stomach—and she feels it is a he; and she knows already what she will name it—the stomach she's careful not to bump into the edges of the counters she cleans, wiping them with bleach that strips her hands so raw she must wear Band-aids like rings, pulling at them while she rides the bus home at night, while a certain redness spreads across the sky and she thinks, in those moments, It will not last forever; she thinks, It will be better, because one cannot live forever, eating out of dented cans from the grocery store, but when she thinks of the future she thinks of the past, so different from the view out her motel window: a parking lot, but beyond it neat houses rise to the horizon, and it is towards this horizon that she walks one night, in the early evening, among these houses and the recycling bins that the people in the houses have set out for morning, and as she's walking she hears water—not lapping, but splashing—and she walks towards the sound until, through the slats of a fence, she sees a pool, the water a kind of blue she has never seen before, blue reflecting the smooth white bottom of the pool, and there are children laughing and playing in the pool, and that night she waited behind a tree until the children had gone into the house, and when she was sure all the lights were off, she reached over the fence and unlocked the gate and then she took off her clothes and crept into the water, careful not to let it ripple too much, and she swam on the surface and dove deep to the bottom, kicked her feet beneath her

—this might have been a river—before she emerged to slip past the gate and walk back home and sit on her bed in the room with the shadeless lamp, with the bulb burning bright, to wait for this moment, now, in this hospital room with the white walls and the white lights, the nurses in blue and the doctor hunched between her legs, coming up every now and then to tell her to push, to push from somewhere deep, some reservoir of strength within, though of course he doesn't say this, but she thinks of the pool and the blue water, and the smooth-faced nurse wipes her face with a towel and says, *no te preocupes*, a strange kindness she will remember forever, while the doctor pulls the baby out and up and, look, it emerges screaming like a wounded animal, blood-red and purple, and she is frightened to see it looking that way because she will protect it from everything—she is frightened at her own pain, too—because she is afraid she has failed to protect it already, and the doctor pulls the baby out of her so she can swaddle it, finally, in her arms and call it what she will name it, and teach it what she will teach it —the truth, whatever truth is—and she will love it, and the doctor asks her: What will you call it, and she says, victoriously, "Victor," and the doctor, not understanding her, leaves her in that room, beneath those lights, to pour himself a coffee at the nurse's station, something he does even though he knows the coffee is bitter and lukewarm, and he says hello to the nurses and he writes a note on someone's chart, and when it's time for him to fill out the birth certificate he forgets, briefly, what the woman said, he forgets until, yes, he remembers, and so he writes, in pen, on the birth certificate: "Bitor."

KARI GORON

Yesterday They Were United, 2013

MEGAN COLLINS

THINGS I KNOW

My sister sat on his lap, feeding him M&Ms.
When she was done, the skin on her palms
was kaleidoscopic. He bounced her on his leg,
his laughter opaque from years of cigarettes.

I understand there was a stroke. I understand
that, for weeks, speech was impossible.

He loved the insulation business like he hated
his son's dog, that malamute with a made-up name
who chewed the chair legs and stole the Sunday paper.
He once made a sale while delirious from fever.

I understand there was a sick room. I understand
that the light came amber through the windows.

My grandmother wore her wedding band on a gold chain
and learned to live alone. She kept him in a frame
on the fireplace, riding his bike on the railroad tracks,
his eyes fixed on something just past the photograph.

I understand I was born too late. I understand
the sheets had been washed, the bed remade.

MEGAN COLLINS

MY FATHER'S HAIKU

My father's haiku
aren't concerned with images.
He ate a sandwich
from Charlie's; there was too much
cheese. Every night,
he returns from work, his shirt
loose on his shoulders,
and he writes one down, counting
syllables like coins,
recording the baseball score,
the stock market leap.
He says how we're both poets,
that it must have been
in my genes. But I want trees—
dogwoods—bursting blooms,
the scent of peeled oranges,
the throat of a frog.
Days, he manages, gives good
work to Bosnians
and crosses three states to fight
for raises. Driving home,
he makes a haiku for me,
then dials my number,
reads his poem to a machine.

AMORAK HUEY

FIRE GOD ACCIDENTALLY CREATES THE BLUES

The variations of any story, the sum of our choices.
Which is to suggest infinite possibility,

but electricity does seek certain trees.
Convenient to say you were evicted from the garden,

that given your pick between righteousness
& the world you could not resist taste of iron on tongue,

heat of forge on flesh: to feel something,
that's all you asked, & to be looked at without pity,

to be touched the way hammer touches.
This is flame, & you are first to see it

& after that it does not matter what you do.
Sometimes you rise from water,

or you battle cruel sea,
or you have two faces, but the truth

exists only in reflection of lightning in river:
two shimmering bodies moving askew,

sudden, temporary, fractured –
there's particular unkindness in such jagged light.

When she leaves, you put the cities ablaze.
Still, she does not return.

Desire creates, devours:
to burn is to love. You cannot be blamed

for what rises unbidden from fire.

AMORAK HUEY

PORTRAIT OF MY YOUNGER BROTHER AS A BUDDY MOVIE

A man is never as young as his older brother thinks.

The rules of the genre demand a lesson learned,
a compromise reached, realizations all around –

but a man knows his motorcycle is exactly as safe as he wants it to be

and the promise that each of us contains
the best and worst of the other

is not exactly a lie – more like a whisper
in someone else's voice, a neat way
of wrapping up an implausible third act

when you've backed your story into yet another abandoned factory
and your nemesis has the drop on you –

the path out is laid with oil slicks, ridiculously vicious machinery,
a lifetime of lost keys,
hand-me-down shoes,
unasked-for advice.

A man has no choice but to accelerate. Forward
into the roar.

sam sax

NATIONAL ANATHEMA

when we speak
we sing

try to repeat a phrase
& not find music

the monotonic tongue too
is an exercise in sound

fire, a kind of salve
or slave to the mouth

the child prophet who burned
his tongue & still led his people
out of bondage

or another apocryphal story,
the man in chains who reads
the dictionary & bursts into flames

perfected pitch – divined improvidence–
polemic & polytechnic – the politics
of noise –

even the phrase ‘speech impediment’
carries its own kind music. even the phrase 'warfare'
even 'murder'
its marauding baggage
its stuttering thunderous corpse

oh sound, the simple tonal space
between play & plate glass
between bacchius & battle–axe

if only my people realized
we haven’t been promised
a homeland, rather, a song.
that jerusalem isn’t a place,
merely a series of sounds
that can written down
& taken anywhere.

sam sax

SILENT AUCTION

odysseus strangled a man in the belly
of a wood horse who thought he heard

his wife screaming, the french resistance
fed infants opiate laced breast milk,

josh & i held each other trembling
below the stairs

as my brother & his friends rampaged
through the house, liquor rampaging

through them. Silence is what comes
at the end of all our loud suffering

or during it. the film does not beg
the organ's accompaniment.

my first time for money i was so quiet
he could hear coins falling inside me.

might have mistaken my blood
for a symbol :: crashing.

what i'm arguing for is the impermanence
of beauty – hand unstuffing the carcass

of sawdust – when my body is in the ground
decomposing & disgusting,

who will pay to sleep with me then?

LINSEY SCRIVEN

LEARNING TO DRIVE

I was nine when Mom dragged me from Las Vegas to live with relatives in rural Oklahoma. With Child Protective Services and an angry rental attendant at her heels, she escaped across state lines, hollering at me: "Keep that attitude in check and we won't have to move again! All that open space for you to burn off steam. You better listen and keep that mouth of yours shut!" I had never lived beyond the cradle of that neon desert, and my only exposure to the middle of the country were photos of cow pasture and a blue Lincoln Continental stuffed inside a book wrapped in puffy fabric and fraying ribbon. We packed a small U-Haul and crossed the San Juan Mountains to a land so flat I avoided windows, afraid people from miles away could spy on me.

We spent the night in Kingman and stopped at an Indian Reservation to buy me a dream catcher. I hung it from the rear view mirror, the beads glittering in the sun, the wind from the open window fanning its gray and brown feathers; my mom clutched at the wheel with her good hand, cursing every time the truck fought against her advances. "This sonofabitch governor! I'll be in the fucking grave before we get there!" Later, when we returned the U-Haul, the sales associate winked down at me and asked if I had enjoyed myself.

"Yep. But my mom didn't. She was having trouble with the government."

*

We arrived at night. The red brick house glowed yellow, wild bushes and a concrete porch at the entrance, a snorting Pekingese yipping at my grandma's feet. It had been years since I saw Grandma, a short, bald woman with magnifying glasses and lipstick smeared on her dentures. Our relationship had revolved around the Halloween costumes she sewed me every year. The costumes never failed to disappoint: when I asked to be Pocahontas from the Disney movie, she created a potato sack with red ribbon and beaded headband with a single feather sticking up in the back. When I asked to be Poison Ivy from the newest Batman movie, she deemed it too sexy and made me Raggedy Ann. Red yarn wig, baggy pants and a patchy blouse, all left in the shipping box; I threw on a Scream mask instead and stormed my apartment complex, my breath hot on my face, slicing at the younger kids with a plastic knife.

The living room was dusty and empty, only a shadow in passing. Grandma had set up camp at the dining room table, television and couch crammed in a space suitable for a small family meal. Newspapers

and mail crowded the tiny, circular surface, crusty plastic plates and empty soda cans scattered on the floor. Books and more paper stacked on the couch, just enough space cleared for Grandma to fit. The floral fabric was cigarette-burned, a white circle pressed into the cushion from her weight.

Grandma put a finger to her lips, peering down at me. "Your great grandma is asleep. She is old and her heart can't handle much. If you don't behave, she will die."

I crushed the sewing magazine beneath my sneaker.

Grandma led us down the skinny hallway, faces of people I had never seen lining the wall. She pointed out the bedroom where Mom and I would sleep, every corner piled with videocassettes and old dolls, dressers of various sizes topped with high-collared blouses, wool child coats, faded and misshaped snapbacks. Mom would have to slide up from the foot of the bed, unable to squeeze into the little space between mattress and materials.

The door to Grandma's room was ajar. Inside, a small twin bed and sewing machine, all hidden beneath swollen garage bags, layers of dress patterns, magazines, paperbacks with their pages all crumbled and water-stained, and an army of coffee rimmed mugs on a pile of quilts. Later, when I couldn't sleep, I snuck down the hallway to see Grandma sleeping on top of it all, her bald head cradled by a plastic bag.

All these things to keep Grandma company in the house she had grown up and now took care of her dying mother. For my family, open corners led to thoughts of inferiority and loneliness, and when Grandma peered at all her handmade collections overflowing her shelves and drawers she felt full on the inside.

Behind me was the door to Great Grandma's room. The wood seemed to tremble in its frame, a faint ghostly noise spilling from its hinges. Was the noise a murmuring fan or the slapping blinds from an open window? I listened closer. I heard scratching on the plywood, or maybe it was Great Grandma tapping her yellow nails impatiently on her bedside table, waiting for me to end the long hot days of her failing heart.

*

Mom was a cripple.

The only job she could get was ringing bell for the Salvation Army during Christmas time. Standing in front of Walmart or Lucky's, she chatted with customers and vagrants, her cropped hair dyed blonde or red, styled like the hairdos of Princess Diana with help from hair-spray and pick.

Before Mom had a stroke at 29, she cocktail-waitressed, snorted miles of coke, and chased diet pills with shots at the bar before shifts. She blamed the diet pills for the stroke; she blamed the casinos for the diet pills. She stepped on a scale every month in front of her

bosses and was under contract to keep her weight down. She sashayed around ringing slot machines, carrying drinks and dollar bills, the sharp corset of her costumes stealing her breath; she floated through parties and teetered on her lack of significance, each high elevating her above the men who shoved dollars between her breasts and told her not to be so shy.

She described the stroke to me once. Back then, the doctors couldn't do anything for her condition, and they left her on a metal slab to ride out the paralysis. Why not a hospital bed? "Easier cleanup," she said. "Already rolling my ass to the morgue. No hope. They said I would never speak again. Never walk again. Your mom sure showed them!" It took years of physical therapy for her to learn to walk again and her right hand would always be in the position of holding a piece of paper.

*

In Grandma's house, the dream catcher hung from the bedpost on my side. A knot was loose on one of its hide strings; I fumbled to retie it, a bead dropping into my hand. I dragged the bead through the sunlight, mesmerized by its glittery paint. There was print on the inside: MADE IN TAWAIN. I thought of the store where we bought it: smelly bathrooms, loud restaurant in the back, rows of overpriced trinkets. I was sucking on a Jolly Rancher when I spotted it hanging beside the picture frames and ceramic howling wolves. I said: Oh, please can I get it? I promise to never back talk again! Mom said: Yeah, right.

I put the bead in my mouth and sucked on it like candy.

*

My brother joined us soon after our arrival. Shane was ten years older, one of two sons Mom had with her first husband. Prone to mood swings, he slept the mornings away and watched cartoons and rented tapes all night. He swore he met aliens somewhere at a bus stop near Boulder City and always brought home homeless cats after his pizza delivery shifts. At one point we had twenty cats in our two bedroom apartment. Mom couldn't take all the meowing and cat hair. She piled all twenty cats into a clothes hamper and duct taped the lid shut. Clawing cat limbs poked out from the holes on the sides, beady yellow eyes staring at me unblinking. With one hand she dragged the hissing hamper down a flight of stairs and across the complex to her car, the cats digging into her thighs at every chance.

Shane brought from Vegas sculptures made in high school ceramic class, twisted and glossed in dark colors, where he stored quarters and buttons, bags of weed and rolling paper, neon lighters that'd make your thumb raw trying to get a flame. He slept on the couch because all the rooms were taken up, blackened, smelly socks forgotten in between the cushions. His brown hair long on top and slightly curly; we

shared the same smile that made our eyes get all squinty. He wore Walmart jeans, shirts with graffiti art, and polos from pizza joints.

One day Shane looked at me from the couch, asking: "Want to learn how to drive?" We went outside, the sunlight warm on my face, sounds of cows in the distance. The Lincoln from the pictures sat in the yard, piles of dead leaves around its tires, the dashboard dusty and the windshield cracked down the middle.

He banged open the door, cursing loudly when the ignition wouldn't turn over. Banged open the hood to peek inside. I was drawing rain turtles in the dirt because Mom said the state was in a drought. "Just outta fuel," he said. He stalked the yard for a hose and something that looked like a plastic kettle. Then he went to the lawn mower Grandma had rolled out for him to use. Crouching, he sucked until he gagged loudly, the hose dripping into the kettle. I was in the front seat when he finished feeding lawn mower gas to the Lincoln.

"Lemme start it up for you," he said.

I slid over the white bench, ripped fabric catching on my jeans. I wiped at my legs and my hand came away coated brown. Shane had to plead, call the car a motherfucker, a cock-sucking bitch, slam on the gas pedal and punched hard at the wide steering wheel, for the old thing to start. I jumped and punched at the air; Shane grinned and gave me a blue-eyed squint.

He drove up to the gate to the pasture and I jumped out to let him through. When we were a safe way from the house, he slipped out and gestured for me to take the wheel. "All right, your turn."

The wheel was white and metal, and I had a hard time getting my fingers all the way around. I stared at Shane next to me, afraid to look ahead. I could barely see over the dashboard.

"Okay. Slowly push on the pedal."

I scooted and stretched my leg until I could reach. The car lunged forward, Shane palmed the fuzzy ceiling to brace himself. None of us wore seatbelts; I didn't know how fast we were going. Some cows grazed up ahead and I jerked left to chase after them. They scattered, heavy muscle moving beneath cowhide like grass in wind. "Slow down!" Shane yelled. I didn't know how. We hurled forward at increasing speed. I marveled at our acceleration, like I had in the U-Haul on those wide highways, Mom slowing at every corner and asking me to look out for those flashing light fuckers. Trees on my left, an old wire fence on my right. Shane white-knuckled the crackling upholstery. We hit a rock or hole, and soared. Time stopped. The wheel hummed in my hands, metal in pudgy palms. We hit ground, and there was a breaking sound like a box filled with dishes flying from one corner to another in the U-Haul.

"Stop! Fucking Christ, stop!"

"How?" I screamed.

"Release the pedal!"

"I don't know how to release it!"

"Just stop—fucking stop!"

I let go of both the wheel and pedal, and Shane lunged over to steer us to safety. He was pale and trembling when he drove us back.

Back in the dining room, Shane flopped down on the couch. "This kid almost got us killed."

Grandma looked up from a sewing magazine. She wore an auburn wig today, deep red lipstick bleeding into the lines around her mouth. "Julie should have never brought this child. She thinks she knows what she's doing, but she has made mistake after mistake since divorcing your father."

"I don't even remember what it was like when they were married, when it was just me and the bro." Shane flipped through channels lazily.

"Shane started it!" I yelled. "He told me to drive!"

Grandma glared at me above her eyeglasses. "Lower your voice. Your great grandma needs all the rest she can get."

"I didn't think you were gonna try to kill us," Shane said.

I picked at the wallpaper in the doorway, trying to think of something to say. "At least I don't drink gas," I mumbled.

Grandma snapped her fingers at me. "Get away from there! How dare you destroy your great grandma's house?"

I kicked the wall and ran into the bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

"God damn it!"

Grandma's voice drifted above sitcom laughter, the tears hot on my cheeks. I punched at the mattress, my skin itching beneath my sweater. I still felt the humming wheel in my hands, my body moving because of me.

*

Mom spent her days on the computer, playing checkers online with strangers and raising families on The Sims. She listened to Beatles CDs over and over and reminisced about her teenage years. Soon there were rumors that she was seeing an Indian fellow who worked at a gas station in the nearby town of Ada. I never met him, nor did I ever know his name. The family only referred to him as The Indian. Mom pretended she wasn't dating anyone.

I occupied my time riding around the tiny neighborhoods in Ada with Shane. Shane liked to get Taco Bell to snack on in the car while he visited loads of people. He would park a little down the street from a house, tell me to stay put, and then run in quickly to grab baggies that fit in his palm. He was always giddy when he returned, his eyes wide and excited. He would fumble with the stereo, turning up the rap songs on his mix tapes that made the car shake and its speakers to buzz. Sometimes we got snow cones from the only place in town that

sold them. Sometimes Shane got too angry about having to stand in line and stormed off instead.

Grandma ate lunch in restaurants every day. We usually met her at the Blue Moon Café, one of the only restaurants in town. The café had black and white checkers and pictures of Elvis on the walls; they served fried catfish and chicken fried steak. Shane and I liked getting their bacon cheeseburgers. Grandma liked drinking iced coffee that she made herself by ordering hot coffee and a glass of ice. She usually got a salad or a bloody steak because she was always on a fad diet. She spent the time checking her watch and wondering whether Mom had remembered to give Great Grandma her medication. "That back room burns like hell at this time in the afternoon," she would say. "I just don't think Julie can be trusted to help her."

*

The house wasn't big enough for five people. I was sent outside to run around, but it was hard to have fun without other kids. I got my rain turtle stick and hit tree trunks with all my might. I beat the ground, the side of the house. I smacked the top of my shoes, then my ankles and shins. I moved up to my thighs and hit until I ached and my skin burned. I dragged the stick across the wire fence at a run, trying to capture the feeling of being in the Lincoln. If only I knew how to release the pedal I would drive around the country and take pictures of mountains and camp out under the stars. No one would be able to find me, and Mom would worry and Grandma would be sorry.

I went inside but there was nowhere to sit near the television. I stayed in the dusty living room holding my rain stick. I saw a figure pass between bedrooms in the hall, the end of its blue bathrobe dragging across the floor. Grandma was in front of the television and Mom was on the computer. The figure crossed the hallway again; this time I made out its hunched back and unsteady gait. Somehow my bedridden Great Grandma was walking from bedroom to bedroom in search of something. I moved closer, terrified at the prospect of meeting her. I imagined she had white misty eyes like an oracle and black decaying teeth. I moved slowly along the beaten down carpet and found the doors ajar, but Great Grandma was nowhere in sight. I stopped in front of the only closed door and listened for her breathing. The door trembled like it did that first night, and I could hear murmuring above the whirling fan. With a shaking hand I tapped my stick to the door and waited for a reply. On the other side footsteps paced near the threshold, the murmuring continuing uninterrupted.

I knew what she sought in the cluttered rooms. I went to the bathroom and sat cross-legged on the puffy linoleum to rummage in the cabinets until I found a cardboard box of hair. The box was gold with green trim and smelled like old books. Inside was a heap of curls individually tied with green ribbon. Something deep down told me this

was Great Grandma's hair from when she had her whole life ahead of her. I caressed the soft curls with fingers sticky with dirt and tree sap. I felt like I was touching parts of a ghost.

Grandma came down the hall carrying pill bottles. "Get out of there! I can't handle you messing with things with your Great Grandma so ill!"

I showed her the box. "This is what she needs."

"That's your great grandma's hair from when she was a child. Now put that away and get into the tub. You smell to high heaven!"

I drew a bath to please her. I didn't get undressed but stood next to the bathtub with the box of hair. I watched the rising water, the scattering bubbles and steam. I felt moist and hot in the face. I thought about the ancient woman in the next room over and all the years she lived on this land so flat I was sure I could see the ocean on the horizon. I overturned the box, a flood of brown locks floating like miniature ships on the water. They looked like a fleet trying to escape the faucet's mega waterfall.

Grandma peeked in to see if I was bathing. "You little monster!" she said when she saw the drowning ribbons of hair.

She yanked my arm and clumsily tried to swat my butt. I tore off her wig and beat at her chest with my fists. I screamed until my lungs burned. Above the commotion came calls for help. Grandma froze, her nails biting into my arm, her wig crumpled at her feet. She stormed from the bathroom. "I'm coming!" she yelled to the walls.

The ambulance was called. Men in white squeezed a bed with wheels down the hallway. Great grandma was wheeled from the house, an oxygen mask over her face. Her hair was no longer brown and shiny, but a wispy gray. She was tiny under her knitted nightgown, her sickly white skin translucent in the afternoon sun. She seemed to not be whole, a disappearing body that had become another attachment for the bed. Peering into her blank eyes it was hard to believe she existed.

HEIDI CZERWIEC

MY SON'S BROTHER

When I was young, I checked out armfuls of Choose Your Own Adventure books from the library, ten or so at a time. Reading them the way I did required athletic, agile hands. I wanted to keep all options, all avenues open. Every time a choice presented itself, I inserted a finger in that page so I could retrace my steps, follow each narrative path the book offered. The stories, with their endless turns, required every digit I could deploy, and often I'd end up forced to flip pages with my nose or chin. In this garden of forking paths, my fingers were threads I followed back to the plot so I could always take the road not taken. I couldn't stand the idea of a choice, any choice, being closed to me, so I read on with sprained, spraddled fingers.

*

By the time Wyatt has reached six months, I finally lose the feeling that choosing to raise him has been a mistake. I fantasize less about the social worker, at our once-monthly post-placement meetings, snatching Wyatt away from us and declaring me unfit. Less about turning him back in to the agency before the adoption is made formally legal. Less about telling Jodi, who watches Wyatt three afternoons a week, who adores him and is also waiting to adopt, *here – take him. He'd be better off with you.*

I hate myself for writing those things just now. Of course I would never have done any of them. I love Wyatt. When not in the same room with him, I obsess over him, hunger to hold him again. Plus, surrender was not an option – if I had given him back, I couldn't have lived without him, couldn't have lived with myself or the look on my husband's face. So my only choice was the weird, twilight half-life I found myself living.

And it was hard, the kind of hard few want mothers to admit. Months of midnight feedings that bled into the dark days of a North Dakota winter, months of feeling isolated with an infant while my husband got to escape to the adult world of work, months of growing distrust at my nascent mothering skills. Constantly running up- and downstairs and forgetting to eat except in the odd free moment caused me to drop twenty pounds. As a result, on the rare occasion that I was out in public, people would comment that I looked great, that parenting seemed to agree with me – I glared back, sure they were fucking with me. My writer-friends with new babies both had recently-accepted

book manuscripts – publications that would help them ride out the dry spell of those early mothering months. My manuscript languished in the lists of eternal semifinalists – always a bridesmaid. And because I wrote no new poems in the meanwhile, I had nothing to send out. Facebook posts of friends' publishing triumphs seemed to gloat, though I tried to muster enthusiasm. But these feelings, dark as they were, were not unusual among new mothers, especially writer-moms. So why was I special?

Because the worst part was all the deliberate choice that went into being Wyatt's mom. One does not accidentally adopt. There are no surprise adoptions. There is the nearly year-long process of interviews and background checks and psych evals and medical checkups and examinations of finances. Weekends of parenting workshops where we reconditioned ourselves away from fraught phrases: not "give up for adoption" but "choose adoption." Not "your birthmother was bad," but "your birthmother made bad choices." Always the emphasis on the choices, made and unmade.

And all that even before we got cleared to appear in The Book: a collection of profiles (both in binders and online) from which birthmothers make their selection. Many of the profiles had a scrapbook-crafty look – fun fonts and pictures with pinked edges mounted on novelty papers – and featured North Dakota couples and their values: mostly sports, hunting, large extended families, pets as surrogate children. Having so many choices can be a burden. How would we stand out? As a couple with five English degrees between us (three in creative writing), we treated the profile like the high-stakes rhetorical assignment it was: we drafted and redrafted, crafting a narrative that emphasized the heroic birthmother ("you") and her brave choices, inviting her to picture her child in the home and life we described. We were empathetic, fun, educated without sounding elitist, even funny. We hired a photographer friend to shoot unphotogenic us looking as comfortable and warm as possible. We submitted the profile and we waited.

As it turns out, we didn't wait long. The average is a year from when a couple enters The Book; we waited three months before a birthmother chose our profile and her social worker contacted us to set up a meeting. The social worker gave us a thumbnail sketch of the birthmother: white, 23 years old, single mother of a 3-year-old daughter, 17 weeks pregnant by an unknown father – she believed she'd been roofied at a party. Had not had a drink since discovering she was pregnant, was still trying to stop smoking. Did we want to meet with her? We did. Now, because the father's unknown, it could be a mixed-race baby. Did we have a problem with that? We did not. You sure? We're sure.

We drove to Bismarck, eight hours round-trip across flat, broad swathes of brown farmland stippled green with seedlings under an endless sky of oppressive blue – after Fargo, nothing to punctuate the landscape except the occasional grain elevator, cryptic exit signs with names like "Buffalo/Alice," and towns a hundred miles apace. In town, we found the building, an odd, squat cylinder that looked like an old paint can, and made our way through the offices, beigely outdated, to a meeting room where we waited, anxious. Then, Kinzey: a sweet and confused girl with huge brown eyes, liquid behind thick glasses, so shy and ashamed she had brought her best friend to do most of the talking. A lapsed Catholic, she couldn't bring herself to get an abortion, though her friend had offered to help pay and to drive her the two hundred miles to the only clinic serving three states. I didn't know what to say – as a feminist, I supported any decision she would have made, but I was so glad she had chosen to carry this baby, maybe for us.

We let the friend ask questions, but addressed our answers to Kinzey. I let fly a well-timed f-bomb calculated to put her at ease, to win her over – her brown eyes widened, and she laughed in surprise. By the end of the meeting, she had chosen us to parent her child – a son, we soon found out, when she invited us to her ultrasound appointment a week later. A son whose birth we would miss, six months later when, just after midnight on New Year's, my phone rang and Kinzey's friend told us *hurry, he's coming fast* and fast we drove but didn't go as far as Fargo before she texted us pictures of our perfect, angry red boy.

So someone specifically chose me: to mother her child, to give him the life she wanted for herself, wanted to give him before she thought *I can't raise this child*, and then gave him by giving him up. I try to live up to the weight of her choice, to deserve her son. Now, after six difficult months of wondering if *I* could raise him, I begin to believe I can. The warm sun returns to the High Plains, and Wyatt and I spend afternoons on a quilt in the park. I am finally fluent in his cries, his noises, his rudimentary communications. I plan classes for the fall semester, simultaneously ecstatic to be engaging my brain again, and guilt-ridden over Wyatt starting daycare in a month.

When adoption day comes, I can testify, truthfully, in court, that I want to be Wyatt's mother. We have kept texting with Kinzey both in the months before and after his birth (always texting – she's too shy to call and talk), and pay for gas and hotel so that she can be part of the big day. We celebrate with pictures outside the courthouse and brunch downtown.

That fall, with its adjustments to our family schedule, especially me returning to work, is difficult, but we start to make sense of it, to make plans for our future – I apply for sabbatical leave to finish a poetry

project, my husband for law school. Kinzey, working full-time and working at an associate's degree, keeps up with us through sporadic texts. One night while clearing up after supper, my phone vibrates with a message from her:

> So some unexpected news im pregnant its a real shock.

I respond with alarm and worry, for which she is grateful. More than anything she fears being judged, and I try hard not to do that to her. But I admit it: my first reaction is disappointment. One of the outcomes of us adopting Wyatt is a second chance for her – to stay employed, finish a degree, and get control of her life. Then she texts

> Im choosing adoption again after seeing what a gift it was to you. You are the best parents i could have found for my baby. I dont know if i will find anyone like you.

A few texts later, it creepingly occurs to me that she's hoping for us to offer to take on this child as well. My gut seizes up. Another baby? We didn't plan on a second. I've almost made it through the first year with the first. I do some quick math and estimate that she'll be due around March or April – meaning two babies under the age of a year and a half. My insides curl tighter. I text back something like, *Wow, this is a lot to deal with. I'm glad adoption was such a good experience for all of us. I hope the right decision will be obvious. Let us know how you are, and what you choose. We love you.* Then I call my husband into the kitchen, show him my phone, the exchange of messages.

Over the next few days, Evan and I huddle together in bed and over coffee and picked-at meals, our thoughts running back and forth, hard and fast. *We can't take this baby. I barely made it through the last year – I don't know if I can do it again. What about law school? What about the poetry project? We gave away all the baby stuff Wyatt's already outgrown. I bet we could get it back. Where would we even put another baby? I guess the baby would be in our room for a while, but then would have to share a room with Wyatt.* Now we're imagining logistics, picturing the new baby already in our home, in our lives. *But what about our plans? We'll have to put them off by at least a couple years.* We don't need to ask how we'll afford another adoption process – we have enough, a sum we've stockpiled in anticipation of losing Evan's salary when he leaves his job for law school. And because she's choosing us outside the negotiations of the agency, it will be treated as an "identified adoption," where the adoptive parents know the birthmother, a process more streamlined, fast-tracked, less expensive. Is being in a position to pay a blessing, or an obligation? *But the cost of another child? That's twice the cost for everything. How would another baby affect the life we want to provide*

for Wyatt? He wouldn't have as many comforts, but then again, he would have a sibling, his sibling. We never planned on adopting another child. *This isn't just another child. This is Wyatt's sibling. If we were the ones who had a surprise pregnancy, a second child we weren't planning on, we'd find a way to absorb it. Does that mean we should, that we have to, absorb Kinzey's bad choices? If we don't, how could we explain to him that we had the chance to adopt his sister or brother, but didn't? But our plans, our plans!* Mornings, I take care of Wyatt, picture trying to keep up with his rapidly expanding repertoire of activities, but once again horribly sleep-deprived, newborn in tow.

I send panicky messages to my guru, another adoptive mother and writer with whom I'd bonded over the previous months. *Two kids under a year and a half! I already feel like I'll never get any writing done ever again. And yet, and yet, and yet. Tell me I'm not a horrible person if I don't take on this baby.*

She quickly responds: *Heidi, it sounds like your gut is telling you that you and Evan can't do this, and feel good about what you can give Wyatt. There's a happy medium between wresting babies away from teenage girls like in the '60s and having a person with lifelong problems fall in your lap as an adult, almost like you adopted Kinzey. You did not adopt Kinzey. You are not responsible for her life and her choices.*

The word "choice" has been around since prehistory, but before the Renaissance, it mostly referred to matters of taste, of preference. The sense of weighing alternative courses of action doesn't really come about until humanity had begun to lose its fatalistic worldview, its sense of predestination.

Over the next week, Evan spends a lot of time pacing the back deck, on the phone with his friends. I sit awake in the dark, feeding Wyatt his midnight bottle, wondering how much longer we will use his bottle-warmer, a hand-me-down on its last legs that burns any stray dribbles of formula to fumes of weird chemical caramel. We worry that we can't say no. We worry that we can't say yes. We worry that Kinzey will become too dependent on us, that she'll rely on us as the answer to all her mistakes. Most people regard choice as a good thing, but the weight of choosing, of the fear of regret, can become paralyzing. Over that week, Kinzey continues to text us, her hints becoming broader, becoming pleas.

And here's the hard thing: this choice is really mine. Evan has always rolled with changes – absorbed them, planned around them, moved forward. But since I'm the one who's borne the brunt of childcare, since this will affect me more, Evan defers to me. He's gracious enough

to support me, to call my decision ours, but if we're honest, this is my call.

So finally, we circle back to our initial reaction: *We can't raise this* baby, which is a kinder way of admitting *I don't want to*. We slide our fingers from the page, unmark that path, never to follow that narrative. We text Kinzey to say, gently, that we're sure she'll make another set of parents as happy as she's made us. As soon as we send it, we feel relief. As soon as we send it, we feel sad.

Choice can be an illusion: choosing a course does not mean control over that course. And you never choose only your own adventure. Kinzey, who had never been particularly regular in her correspondence, becomes nonresponsive. We guess that she's sad too, probably hurt – we are the latest in a lifetime of rejections. Feeling guilty, not sure how to feel or what right we have to feel it, we don't do as much as we might to keep up communications. We justify the lapse as giving her space to process this new pregnancy and adoption, to allow her time to be wooed by a new adoptive family. Growing up, no one ever praised her or told her she was special – she had positively glowed under the attention we gave her. We hope she's getting that from someone else.

About a week before she gives birth, she surfaces, and starts responding to texts again, dropping what seem like careless little bombs as though she's corresponded with us all along – it's a boy, she's told us that, right? and oh, hasn't she told us the adoptive parents live in the same town as us? And then after the birth, she fades in and out, surfacing at times to request a visit, then canceling as the trip approaches. We feel sadness, relief.

Guilt, curiosity, self-torture – we are dying to know more about this boy, our son's half-brother. We contact our adoption social worker, the woman who checked on us after Wyatt's placement, who handles all placements for our area. We tell her we want to be in communication with his half-brother's family, offer our contact info, request that they keep in touch. She passes along our info, and reports that while the family is willing, they're a bit overwhelmed with a newborn at the moment, and with establishing a relationship with Kinzey, who apparently had waited until late in the pregnancy to choose a family (hoping we would change our minds?). They ask for space.

But over the next few months, every time we're out in public, I look for new babies who resemble Kinzey and Wyatt – in North Dakota, towheads are the norm, so I study the dark-haired infants, search for the characteristic dimples, the softly cleft chin. Around their own adoption day at six months, we send congratulations, with pictures of Wyatt at that age and a description of his personality – his love of

books, pickles, tacos, singing surprisingly in tune at the top of his lungs – hoping the comparison will intrigue them. We have yet to hear from them.

We – I – had a choice, and I said no. And my *no* continues to disturb me. Whom might I have harmed by my choice? Not us. My drought ends: my book is published and I write a new poetry manuscript that excites me. Evan ends his first year of law school at the top of his class and secures a lucrative clerkship. Not the new baby who, no doubt, is happily exploring solid foods and solid footing somewhere in my town.

Wyatt? *What would Wyatt's life have been like with a brother* I wonder, when he tugs on my hand while I'm cooking, desperate for a playmate. When my sister-in-law drops the news that next year, their daughter is going to have a new little sister. When Jodi brings her own adopted son Eli over to play and the boys clamber on the furniture, the stairs, laughing and shoving, ignoring boundaries the way brothers do.

It's said you can't choose your family, but that's not true – ours involved more choice than most. Our son had little say in any of it, but I don't know if or how much this will hurt him. As an adoptive parent, I'm preparing – as much as one can through workshops and roleplaying and readings – for the inevitable questions he will ask us: *Why didn't my mom keep me? How do I know you'll keep me? Who was my father?* And I've tried to collect information for when he asks about other family, for if he chooses to get in touch, to ask them for answers I can't give him. I'm preparing to deal with his hurt.

But Kinzey's hurt is plain. What does it mean that I said *no* to her, a girl who said *yes* to us in the biggest, most unimaginably beautiful way possible?

I'm grateful for today's model of open adoption, for humane communication to replace the wrenching away of babies from anonymous mothers. But it visits its own hurts. At some point, our love and nurturing of the birthmother is revealed as a sort of performance to gain the agency's approval, to elicit her *yes*. An illusion exposed by its eventual limits. Open adoptions prolong the contact until new and different disappointments are probable, inevitable. Even under this new system, where it seems the birthmother makes all the choices, pain is still the price she pays for her mistakes – some in the old expected ways, some entirely unanticipated. Some in which I've participated.

Kinzey had choices; Kinzey had babies. She chose us and we said *yes*. Then, we – I – said *no*. I owe it to her to own it.

PETE MADZELAN

Looking Up

THE BOILER

PETE MADZELAN

Houston Street, NYC, 1973

JEFF WHITNEY

from THE TREE WITH LIGHTS IN IT

The best way to fall apart
is to do so
slowly.

Like a bison
breathing
in snow.

A name fingered
on a window
going cold.

JEFF WHITNEY

from THE TREE WITH LIGHTS IN IT

Lord bless the woman
wrapped in a black Glad
bag and walking among
us, talking about the horrifying
necropants of Iceland,
asking if I can spare some
moons, hollering
for no reason
other than hollering
is another way
to be in this world.
The lyrebird is another story.
When he opened his mouth
the sound of a chainsaw
came out, then a camera,
then a car alarm. The Lyre
who never had his own song.
Who learned the secret to flight
but kept it inside, immaculate
bones incapable of singing.

BRITTNEY SCOTT

POINTS OF ENTRY

There is always the shower,
flailing face first, a brief dance before
your teeth burst loose, neck snapping
lights–out style. The water descends,

it darkens around you.
Think about sockets, those friendly faces
grinning up from the baseboards.
All it takes is one wire's wrongful rub

against another. A meeting between you
and a yardsale toaster warm under the weekend sun.
Is your basement dirt based?
Radon rises through your floor's imperfections,

infests your body, enters
undetectable like the holy ghost, happiness,
those dreams you have of falling.
Bed linins are woven with formaldehyde,

a carcinogen which eventually fills you fully—
your lusty breakdown's only preservative.
It's coming, and you're already floating off.
Your soft cavities will soften,
blood will clot against you.
The hoary oak drops its legacy

on the roof nightly, the damage it does
to silence, to forgetfulness,
your long standing denial
that unless you take an ax into its thick ringed trunk,

it will be here after you – the whole block,
fever, toxic plants, your pill bottles
expiring. All of it goes on without you.

BRITTNEY SCOTT

CONTEMPORARY OMENS

There are two of you now,
your name appearing twice on my Gmail contact list.
And my laptop's grinding brain
knows something of indecision and duality,
but this minor glitch rips
open the space

between my reason and emotion.
In the time between our lunar distance,
I Google, follow, touch, star the moment
your emails enter my inbox. While Skyping, I read daily items
strewn behind your figure,
I read them as lonely
thrown bones.

While the miles spread over our bodies,
the re-runs end, the season
premiere of our favorite show gets TiVoed, and

every leaf falls from the late-night trees,
every leaf

flaunts its losing hand. In time,
you will tell me that you choose to be *a better man*.
By that you mean I am a bad decision, a negative
instead of a positive. Fault is funny, and faulty
and shifting beneath. All I have done
undoes itself.

In the last snap-chat I sent, a monument
to impermanence, action without consequences,
moments placed outside of time –
I am topless, winking,
my one eye already half-closed toward regret.

LES KAY

THEY CAN REMEMBER IT FOR US WHOLESALE

In one life, requisite tears harden
to diamond, maledictions drift to the floor,
white rose petals in a television wedding.

Later, notions of home rot beneath
the ruptured crust of a distant moon.
Someone else's minions close around
us like tulips flaming shut at dusk.

They close fast before I can save.
Hovercraft and helicopters strewn
like peony blossoms in June. Reset.

Closer, a pixel Bentley glistens like rabid
saliva. I wake early for practice. We play
the Kansas City Whose–Its this Sunday.
Injury. My long locks glow like violets.

Hello, you say, hours later. The dogs
are whining, wanting into actual sun
to stretch, roll, run beneath actual Rose

of Sharon. The soporific foundation
groans, and as I blink against the light,
you wander elsewhere, your mind wrapped,
like cellophane, in someone else's packaging.

LES KAY

TENDING

Chainsaws and lawnmowers cough to life
(waves crashing shore) in service to the reality
of distant neighbors whose sole concerns
seem to be maintaining the measured
artfulness of their front yards for those who
happen past. Morning breaks. This is not
our reality. The call and response of birdsong,
muted slightly by the canopy of fat sweet-gum
leaves in the side yard, flits between intervals
without resolution, stirring amber chipmunks,
bark-hued squirrels from windbreak stands.

We long to sleep into the moon festooned
edges of night. Perhaps, as traffic swells,
oak trees will loosen their grip on acorns,
squirrels will resume their aerials,
leaping from branch to shingle and back
in search of the day's scavenge. Perhaps the mangy
malamute, who crashes into his fences
as a cresting tide crashes into itself,
will sound the shallows of his colorless charts,
his barking call fill the neighborhood of imports
and vinyl siding with howls that harmonize
like ocean to moon. In the guest room,
you stir from sleep's seascape. Your ears slip
shackles of responsiveness. We try not to
wake you. The fumes of progress
seep through the swollen bedroom door.

LES KAY

A LONELY IMPULSE

The stagecraft of a tarp-covered stadium outside
our window, the acrylic texture of carpet clutched
in scraped-up hands, the chords of assurance
that clanged through your voice as you arrived
upstairs in a slender red skirt conspired to confirm
the false impression that at last shrouds of sleep
had been wept away, that at last the struggle
to emerge from the comforters as from a chrysalis
was left with its floating. It was then, believing,
that I held you in my arms again as you stroked
my sweated head and promised, with the presence
of touch, that this was real, real as this year's elections.

Now I know I held nothing more than a notion
of you in my naked arms. Now, in the cold quiet
of our winter house, I study, like kabala, what you,
or rather this idea of you, said. You had tired
of the status quo. Nothing was left to be done,
other than something, so that was what you did.

Now, even if I suspect some slight fever as culprit
and blame my body's temporary revolt for those visions,
I know that there was nothing left to be done and that
you did what you did. Forget, with me, the unlikely
presences that haunt the narrative. Let them be visions
of possibility, like the Pleiades on a cloudless night
—the seven sisters huddled together, offering what
seems a constancy of faint light, even if one sibling,
or another, has already fallen dark. Let us clutch
each other's hands, as we imagine the sisters do,
and descend that staircase open on the status quo
as the acrylic carpet crinkles between our toes,
and your red skirt swishes us away from doubt.

KARI GARON

One Legged Faux Murder

THE BOILER

VANESSA JIMENEZ GABB

my father and i build a family tree

he names dead people
as far back as two hundred years

he or she would have remembered
more, he says

it is not morbid his saying
this i want to get it

all, I say
in case you are hit by a car tomorrow

this is morbid
i like the way it feels

to see the blood
the tiny red bugs

crossing over
i smear

neither white nor black
just alive a moment ago

his eyes a little wet
allergy in the body

who gave this away before before
is it Caribbean

to be intolerant
is it indigenous to be intolerant

human to be of flowers and dust
sent into the air

this is either very glorious
or too ceremonial

i have never asked this
many closed-ended questions

i hope it doesn't feel punitive
to know without sounding

so imperious i am sorry
something has opened

into more and i am here
thinking of all the parts of me

that died at the bottom of a long night
working and if not working

for the government making it work
in one room

the beginnings of socialism
or capitalism

how well can we know ourselves
in different systems of being

question answer parenthetical
he comes upon a bit of memory

i put it beside the men and women
this is how i will place them

and remember them
if there is a blank

it will go on forever
far enough into the ghosts

all the fucking
everyone did is in

our hair
the air about us

how political it is
to be here

in the backyard in Queens
spread out like leaves

like buccaneers
pilferers in the rainforest

ARIANA NADIA NASH

IN THE GARDEN OF THE GODS

We came because we heard
before they left they scattered seeds.
We hoped for orchards,
pools in the dents their bodies made in the earth,
a change in the texture of air
where their breath might still hang golden.

We found instead that they had never left.
They had waited so long
for their garden to rupture the earth
they had sunk into the hillside,
their great bolderous bodies slumped into piles.
Their patient faces, turned still toward the east,
eroded slowly. Water streaming
over their bodies began to carve tattoos,
until they retreated into rock.

We lay our light flesh against their bulk
and felt their fires still smoldering.
We could read in the trembling against our skin
their epic histories — crawling out of the sea
and rushing across these flatlands,
of great hopes for these lands.

We listened to their whispers,
between earth and sky is our silence,
between earth and sky is our death.

We could only lie against them and offer
the gratitude of our palms,
the altar of our foreheads garlanded with sweat
in tribute that they remained,
holding earth and sky together.

And we could grasp hands and feel
for the first time the valleys and slopes
of our skin and our flesh in this garden,
in this graveyard of the gods.

ARIANA NADIA NASH

9 to 5

9am. We live now where the hours suck the soles like mud
where the mind snaps back on itself, rubber-banding

Yes, we are being dramatic
Yes, an office is not a prison

...

10am. Woman Bending Over Ferns, can we take you even here?
Yes we can carry you, but will you come?

...

11pm. Is it enough to think *poached eyes on ghost*
at our reflection? When words are counted and charged
If we could wander Dublin for a day forever

...

12pm. If there is a river, if there are bridges, if trains
run across those bridges

...

1pm. Somewhere
it is snowing in a square and a quartet of cellos
is playing *Greensleeves* as the snow falls lightly
and history is recollection
Yes, these things are romantic
Yes, a *quartet of cello* is a singular noun
Yes, nothing romantic in air conditioning

...

2pm. Woman Bending Over Ferns, chiseled from prayer,
tell us the arms open even here
Tell us there is a guitar playing somewhere the sounds of salt and blood
that they withstand the fluorescent light

...

3pm.

...

4pm. We have choices we are sure we do
We do not know where we make them
We do not know if they are like children who we create
and who become their own
An office is astonishingly quiet

...

5pm. Let your body curving over the ferns be a window
Let the ferns be light and noise
Let tomorrow be transformed by today
Let today by tomorrow

KIRSTEN AGUILAR

PHOTOGRAPHS

The neighborhood was without power again. They sat outside on the patio around the little blank TV, Grandmère and Isis and Mirielle and Phillipe. After three months, Isis was used to this, to the uncertain electricity and the scarce water. Tonight, like most of the nights she'd been here, the sky was not black, but instead lavendered by smoke and dust. Across the yard, Olivier, the gatekeeper, sat in a plastic chair near his room, a windowless outbuilding whose fourth wall was part of the high stone fence. He listened to music on his cellphone, a sort of tinny racket, held it up near his ear, moved his head back and forth.

Mirielle sat on the ground near Grandmère's feet. Grandmère bent to braid her hair, her fingers deft, quick. Phillipe held up a flashlight so that she could see. Isis sat, listened, her hands quiet, resting on her camera in her lap. Earlier, they'd wanted her take their picture – they'd posed, Mirielle and Phillipe with their arms around each other, near the fence, near the front door, near the TV, out on the street in front of the house. They'd tired of it quickly, went inside, brought their dinner out to the patio to watch TV but then the power had gone out and left the house dark and gaping,the TV empty and the sky big and painted.

Grandmère finished Mirielle's braids and the three of them went inside to bed and left Isis alone with Olivier. She wanted to stay outside a while more. She loved this darkness, this quiet, the buzz of crickets laid over the sounds of the city – cars and motorcycles and music. Olivier came to sit beside her, took Grandmère's chair. He was around Isis' age, early twenties. He made her an omelet every morning for breakfast and washed her shoes and boiled water for her tea and when she tried to help him clean up, he'd say, *non, laisse ça, laisse* – leave it. They'd fallen into the habit of sitting together in the kitchen when she got home from University in the evenings. She'd eat or read and he'd listen to the radio. It was a quiet, gradual friendship, the type that creeps like a fog and then is, out of nowhere, all–consuming.

He turned up the song on his cellphone, moved his heels up and down and then his shoulders.

"*Tu aimes danser*?" He said.

Isis laughed, shook her head. She liked the way he looked at her, his eyes staying too long on her skin and her hair."I can't dance the way you can," she said.

He stood up, reached out for her hand, tugged her up.

"No, no," she said, laughing. "Really, I can't."

He moved his hips, his feet. She pulled her hand away, stepped

back, held her camera to her eye. The flash broke like lightening. Olivier held his arm over his eyes.

Olivier's ringtone cut through the music. He stopped dancing, picked up his phone.

"*Alo*?" he said. He looked at Isis. She focused the camera, pressed the button. He turned away, spoke low and soft. The voice on the other end was a woman's, high and quick. Olivier moved away across the yard and disappeared into his room.

Isis held her camera out, flicked through the pictures and stopped on the first one. Olivier, smiling like a child.

On Thursday, Isis told Grandmère she was going to dinner with a friend from the University.

Instead, she and Olivier went for beers in a neighborhood called *Titi-Garag*e at a white tiled club, its exterior stained with dust and dirt like an old bathtub, a sink left dry too long. They sat in a corner on the second floor. He ordered two *Castels, glacés*. The waitress shook her head, her hair stiff and straight.

"*Non*," she said. The refrigerator was broken. They'd have to be warm.

He shrugged, nodded. "*Ça va.*"

He looked at Isis, smiled. His eyes were pale, almost green and they struck her as cold as glass, a type of toy ring you might get at a carnival or fair, tricked into paying too much for something that would break of its own accord, no mishaps necessary.

There were other couples and groups of friends, their tables littered with bottles and cigarettes. The women wore tight and studded outfits, their breasts like balloons, their butts like bubbles.

He leaned close so that he could speak into her ear because the music was loud Nigerian and Senegalese pop, mixed like a haphazard and beating heart.

Outside, it rained. A torrential downpour, a violent dumping, a big, screaming rain that fell brief, but incessant.

They stayed until it lost its grip on the sky. He paid for their beers and guided Isis down the crooked stairs, his hand on the small of her back. The others watched them, blatantly curious at their mismatched skin.

Outside, night had fallen like a muffled blanket, the sky mute and purple. The vendors emerged from beneath their umbrellas and plastic tarps where they'd taken refuge during the storm and went back to sitting and selling. On the corner of the avenue, a boy unfurled a blanket and laid out pairs of spiked and shining heels. He had a bad leg – bent and bowed like warped wood.

They shared a taxi with a woman whose face wrinkled like a blanket, her eyes milky brown. When she smiled, a small, creeping, caterpillar smile, the spaces between her teeth gaped like doors. She held a pink

plastic purse in her lap, clutched it tight until Isis slid across the backseat to sit beside her. The woman moved her hand, ran a finger along Isis' arm, her touch like a murmur.

"*Tu es belle, ma fille*," she said. She gripped her purse again, leaned forward so that her chest swallowed it, cocked her head sideways to look at Olivier. "Is he your husband?"

Isis shook her head. "No," she said and thought of the call he'd made yesterday, the voice inside the phone that came through like a song.

They passed a river, bloated and swift. In the dark, Isis made out the figures of men, naked, washing in the water, scrubbing under their arms, in between their thighs. They passed a *patisserie*, the light in its windows bright. A man whose leg ended at the knee sat on the sidewalk outside, eating a baguette, his hair matted and long. They passed a dumpster, piled high with burning trash. The flames licked at the sky, the smoke curled up like a flag, wavering in the wind.

They stopped beside a restaurant called *Obama Fan Club* to let the woman out. She leaned forward, passed her coins into the taximan's waiting hand, then tugged and jostled herself out onto the street. Before she shut the door, she turned to Isis, said, may god stay with you and although Isis did not believe in god she held onto the blessing, felt it linger like a rock in her chest.

Olivier and the taximan spoke in *Medumba*, back and forth, quick and harsh. Isis could pick out only a few words, the ones that Grandmère had taught her – *kijuu*, to read and *mbwe,* goat. They seemed to be arguing, but as they neared home, Olivier burst into laughter, bent, clutching his stomach. The taximan laughed too, caught Isis' eyes in the rearview mirror. He tried in English: "You American?"

Isis nodded. "Yes," she said. "I am."

He said something to Olivier. Olivier replied.

"You want to marry me?" the taximan said. He swerved to avoid a child who stood too close to the road, holding up packets of peanuts in thin plastic sacks, selling them for 100 francs.

Isis shook her head. "No, thank you."

The child saw her white face in the window, ran behind them for a while, his flip-flops flapping like fish.

The rain had turned their road into a thick orange paste that stuck to their shoes and crusted them like a cast. It squelched beneath their feet, reminded her of the squeak of rubber. He walked with his hands in his pockets – she held hers out at her sides to keep her balance. The *Castel* had made her head light and the road was uneven and slippery.

The neighbor, Fabien, sat outside in the rocking chair on his porch, eating. His home was small, a little square house made of mud bricks. He raised his hand in a wave.

"*Venez!*" he said. "Come. See the new baby."

She'd been born the day before in the hospital.

Olivier looked to Isis. She nodded. They crossed the road and went to the porch. Fabien stood to kiss Isis on both cheeks. They pulled back the fabric that curtained the doorway and crossed the threshold. Inside, it was warm and clean. Two little boys sat on low stools eating rice and fish from bowls on their laps. They looked up at Isis, their eyes big, and continued to eat using their fingers to pull meat off thin white bones. The news played on a small TV in the corner of the room.

Helène, the mother, came from the back room, the baby in her arms. She wore a T-shirt that said I Heart NY and a green patterned skirt that fell to her ankles. Her feet were bare, the soles thick against the dirt floor.

"*Bonsoir*," she said. She told the older boy to get off his stool and give it to Isis.

"No, no, it's okay," Isis said, but the boy had already put his bowl on the floor, gotten up and was pushing the stool towards her. He sat on the floor cross-legged and watched Isis while he chewed. She sat on the stool, low to the ground so that her knees pointed up. Hélene pushed the baby into her arms and stepped back, smiled, crossed her arms beneath her breasts. Her fingers were stained dark at the tips – she'd worked in the field today

Olivier stood near the door. He nodded to Helène.

The baby slept, swaddled in a pink blanket, a little gray hat on her head. She was soft and warm. Isis wanted to fold her body around her, swallow her up, press her cheek against the baby's.

"What's her name?" she said, looking up at Helène.

"Liza."

"Liza," Isis said and pressed a finger into the baby's tiny palm. She stayed sleeping, her eyes squeezed shut, her chest rising and falling like a slow wave.

On the TV, police busted an illegal market that sold motorcycle parts, disassembled like wanting limbs. Olivier watched the footage, his arms crossed over his chest. He stood, legs apart like a sentinel. The men on screen, the perpetrators, looked heavy eyed at the camera, waiting as the police gathered up piles of stolen parts, loaded them into trucks, and carted them away.

When they returned home, the house was dark – the others had gone to bed. Olivier pulled the iron gate shut behind them. It clanked and woke the dog. He barked and scratched at the door of his pen. Voices came from the apartment on the hill behind them. Laughter. Singing.

The front door was already locked and so Isis followed Olivier around the side of the house to the kitchen door. He jostled it open and flicked on the light.

"*Tu as faim*?" He said, looking over his shoulder at her.

"No," she said. She stood for a moment by the door. Olivier

went to the stove where the dinner leftovers remained – rice and *sauce arachide*. He twisted the cap on the gas, reached for the matches, struck one and lit the burner beneath the rice. He turned and leaned against the sink.

"I am," he said. "Sit down. Eat with me."

"I'm not hungry," she said, but she slid into a chair, took off her purse and set it on the table.

Olivier added more palm oil to the sauce, stirred it.

"Do you have *sauce arachide* in America?" he asked.

"Yes," Isis said. She played with the strap of her purse. "It's called peanut sauce. It's thicker though, and we don't put in fish."

"No fish?" he said. He got them plates, scooped on the rice, then poured over the sauce.

"No, no fish."

Olivier set a plate in front of Isis, got a fork from the drying rack, pushed it into her hand.

He sat across from her.

"Eat," he said.

They ate.

"How's your boyfriend?" he said.

Isis shrugged. "He's good," she said. She thought of Fynn, his blond hair, his blue eyes, the glasses he wore when he took out his contacts.

"What is America like?" Olivier said.

Isis considered. She mixed the sauce and the rice together on her plate. "It's far away from here," she said.

Olivier took a bite, worked the food in his mouth, then spit out a thin, almost invisible bone into his palm and wiped it on the table. "Be careful of bones," he said. "You might choke." Isis scooped a chunk of rice onto the tip of her fork then turned it over to let the pale pieces fall. "Everyone wears seatbelts," she said.

Olivier laughed, that same gut laugh he'd had in the taxi.

"What's so funny?" she asked, smiling, almost laughing too.

"You Americans are too afraid," he said between breaths. "Afraid of everything."

They finished eating, left the dishes in the sink for Angéle to wash in the morning. He walked her to her room, stood in the doorway for a moment, reached out, touched her cheek. His skin was rough, thick, calloused. "*Bonne nuit*," he said.

She woke in the middle of the night to the sound of a cockroach. Its wings, buzzing against the wall, its feet, scuttling across the tile floor. She threw off her sheet, scrambled to turn on the light. Fear jumped, tingled at the ends of her limbs. The fan had broken and so the backs of her knees, the crevices between her fingers were moist with sweat. She'd been dreaming of a birthday cake, sunken and sweet.

She grabbed a shoe from her closet, jumped back onto the bed. She waited, poised, shoe held high. There it was, by the door. She got off the bed slowly, moving like syrup, then quickly, smashed, smashed, smashed it until she heard a hiss, then backed away. It twitched, little jerky movements. She smashed it one more time just to be sure then covered it with the shoe. She'd have Olivier get rid of it tomorrow.

She woke late, the others had already gone to work and to school. Grandmère had left to visit a friend in *Biyem-Assi*, she'd be back in the evening. Isis went to the kitchen, expecting to find Olivier there so she could ask him about the cockroach. Angéle was there, washing dishes, but Olivier wasn't so Isis made herself some tea and an omelet, took it to the balcony. She ate and watched the road, the women who passed with baskets on their heads, the moto-men who roared by on patchy motorcycles, their passengers squished and bouncing on the back. There went Angéle toward the market. She waved down a moto-man and hopped on back – they zoomed away.

Olivier came out onto the balcony. His feet were bare and he wore cut-off jeans.

"I'm sick," he said. "I have a fever."

Isis offered to make him tea, told him to go back to bed. He shook his head, looked down at his feet, brushed his toe along the floor.

"Are you going out today?" he said.

Isis shrugged, took a sip of her tea. "I don't have University. I wanted to hang out with you."

Olivier stayed silent, his eyes cast down. "I'm going to get medicine later," he said.

"Where?" Isis asked. "Can I come with?"

"I don't want you to get sick," Olivier said. He turned, shut the door behind him.

When she'd finished her breakfast, Isis wandered back to her room, closed her door, locked it, lay sprawled like a starfish on her bed. She took out a book, opened it, read. The cockroach and the shoe lay unmoved on the floor.

She woke again when it was already dark to a banging on her door. She rushed up, unlocked it with a click, opened it. Grandmère peered into her room, looked around, wild.

"Are you missing anything?" she said.

Isis didn't understand. Grandmère pushed past her, kicked the shoe on her way in, sent the corpse of the cockroach skidding across the floor.

"Are you missing anything?" Grandmère said again.

"No," Isis said. "No, I'm not." She moved to her closet, opened the doors, checked for her computer, for her camera.

"*Olivier est parti*," Grandmère said. "He's gone."

Isis closed the closet doors, quiet.

Grandmère moved to the window, closed the curtains in loud snaps. "He took the DVD player, my jewelry, the money I'd saved," she said.

"But he was here this morning," Isis said. "I was here all day."

"It's all gone," Grandmère said and moved into the hallway, left Isis alone.

The police came and offered to help after Grandmère paid them 200,000 francs. They asked Olivier's name, and his age and the languages he spoke. They asked his height and the names of his friends, his family, his village. They asked if Grandmère had any pictures of him.

They all sat in the living room in those stiff leather couches. Angéle had stayed late, brought them plates of fried plantains covered in a vegetable and chicken stew.

Grandmère looked to Isis, where she sat with her knees up, held close to her chest.

"*Tu as pris des photos, non?*" she said.

The policemen turned their eyes to her. They stared, blatant.

"*Eh, la blanche?*" The fatter one said. "*Tu parles, non?*" His eyes reminded Isis of her father's. They were deep and brown and naked.

Isis shook her head. "I don't have any photos of him. Just of the house."

Grandmère called for Angéle to bring more plantains. "*Tu es sure, Isis?*" she said.

Isis nodded.

Angéle brought more plantains. The policemen heaped them onto their already bare plates.

PETE MAZDELAN

Waiting

PETE MADZELAN

Wash Day

THE BOILER

DONALD J. MITCHELL

SALAMANDER

I find it while clearing away big chunks of rotting old-growth cedar, dark boles of shake wood inspected and rejected no doubt by my great-grandfather early last century. I'm opening a space in these woods for a writing cabin. I think this may be a good sign.

It's the Oregon variety— the salamander, I mean. That's what the book says, though in the photograph the Oregon race is lighter, and this one is the color of Irish stout. I didn't even notice it at first, lost in the bric-a-brac shadows of the lady ferns, but when I returned to kick up and cart away another rotten wedge, there it was, standing tall and stiff as the Royal Guard— well, as stiff and tall as a salamander can stand, anyway. It often does that, I've read, holds up the tail like a shitting cow, waits for something to snatch it off so it can run like hell— well, as fast as a salamander can run, anyway.

There are those who believe, or *have* believed, that a salamander can withstand fire; *I see* that. Though exposed now, this little guy was quite safe under that soggy lump of wood, and if the crowns of the forest were raging in a holocaust above it and baking everything around it to embers and cinder, there is every chance in this world it would remain damp and serene, bathed in its regenerative and protective darkness. And I can imagine some scavenging opportunist like me, in whatever century, in whatever millennium, scouring the smoldering aftermath, pulling back a block of charred wood, not noticing anything right away, then returning to find this naked, perpetually wet little thing standing, as alive as the gods, in the pale brimstone and ashes. A startling new element! Not good to eat, but sure good to marvel at and to shiver about— because it's weird, isn't it, how just a smidgeon of truth can cause the heart to flip? There, where nothing was before, is something now— a shining, black homunculus, standing tense and ready, utterly naked and vulnerable and yet seemingly immune to the universe, obliging me to center my whole life on it. It's as if some tiny creature living at the base of my skull has suddenly recognized itself and is shrieking.

Maybe I don't know if this is a good sign or not, but what can I do but stand amazed? Under these boughs, in this spot where I hope to build my own refuge, *here* is a wonder. And if I ever get this cabin to rise, I pray this little wonder will choose to live beneath it; I require something this dark, something this cool and immemorial at home below the orange heat, under all the burning questions I have to ask. I need that immunity, that alertness and vulnerability— that willingness to be whatever it takes.

KATHLEEN JONES

THE DUNES ARE SAWDUST

The dunes are sawdust. No, packed brown sugar.
I topple them with two-by-fours, with my fingers.
From the shambles I mold cubes, which dissolve
in coffee. Or, actually, in the muddy saltwater
that fills the mug, my own scooped hands.
The sky bruises the ocean, clouds low and leaky already.
Every headache I get is an unkind machine, a tempest
that melts the beach away, wet sand sticky
against the hands trying to hold the shore in place.
Shore: the horizon an ocean can see when it tries
to imagine beyond its own churning self.

KATHLEEN JONES

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

Your left hand grips an onion. Your right a sharp knife.
I flinch at each thoughtless plunge, your assumption
that the onion will be the only thing severed.
I think about how I never renounce anything.
To strip myself clean of faith and fear—
I can't imagine accepting such freedom.
You've shed childhood beliefs and you're quick
with that blade. But my faith barely erodes
and I'm slow to cut. And wouldn't the scraps
from the cutting board make a good home
for a worm to turn over and over, to writhe in joy?
We're unsafe yet ecstatic on this small planet,
still certain we'll crumble rightfully, cradled
in the palms of time. But when your friend died
too early, your weeping lacked both bitterness
and vision. I promised you she was happy,
no, I promised you there was nothing wrong
with her anymore. I don't know if you agreed
or believed for me, in eternity or a nothingness
that—I agree—would be its own kind of peace.
But I don't think skin as golden as yours could end up
only compost. The cells, yes, but not the light.

LAURA ANNE HELLER

JUNE

Lucinda

Evenings after we spend our days apart,
he in the field digging and tilling earth,
while I in the house cleaning and sewing:
We find each other in sunset silence,
share the day's warmth in an embrace.
June evenings I find him before twilight
and dusk, sun painting brilliant gold across
the brown and green field. I take his rough hand
and we dance along the fence–line, slow waltz.

LAURA ANNE HELLER

THE DROUGHT OF KNOWING, 1952

Lucinda

We make our home where I once walked evenings,
the house familiar, across from a friend,
and the field becomes his dream as it was
my father's. He can see with fresh green hope
the rising corn, the crops that yield dinner,
the bills paid, and the presents of town joys.
We sow, plant seeds, both of us in the field,
until each day ends with showers and love
in the moonlit farmhouse; The stars whisper.
The first crop is sparse, weak, missing desire.
A drought returns. I cannot help wonder
if I brought it to the farm, our marriage,
a souvenir of my mother and father.
I tell him the story of my childhood:
the old treasures, the fights, the fire, her death.
His worn face shifts from soft flame of love
to hard ache and rigid line of anger:
"You knew this would happen to us. You knew."

M.P. JONES IV

THE BROKEN BRANCH

after James Wright

Standing on the stone path
before the cabin door, staring out
at the scarred oak that leaned
in the dooryard, ancient and solemn,
shading the cedar fence and the fire pit
where we gathered until late,
when the stars echoed their bright
syllables across the pasture.

By the time the first branch has fallen
onto the soft loam outside
the windows of the empty house
in the cold afternoon light,
the trunk is already hollow,
mute, illiterate, nearly forgotten
as it strangles with dirt
from the steady motion
of the carpenter ants,

the deliberate sunlight
pressing against everything
like a miller's wheel,
turning drops of shadow
violently from the hole,
dripping tiny fragments of dark earth
where the black branch hung,
sorrowful and late,
until the orange heart
crumbled to dirt and ruin.

Those owls who nested there
all those long winters would haunt
the deepest nights with songs
of their longing. When the mother
leapt from branch to branch
crying out as her fledglings left,
leaping one–by–one into the fieldgrass.

You would go, grandfather,
so faithfully to clear the debris
from the dying trunk, until your
own body lay in ruin. And the ice
storm came in the night, as I slept
alone in the dark house, with light
from dying embers licking the ceiling.

And the tree threatened, even in its ruin
to survive you in the desolate field,
but it had grown so heavy
with the worn tenor of night,
like the edge of some long road
coming abruptly to its end
before you can even imagine,
that it cannot begin to bear
the weight of its own memory
or offer its relentless green refuge.

And those owls who knew
not how to weep or were too wise
that nested there have long flown.

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK

from LEAFMOLD

Wilderness for whatever reason wants always to get in. I am waiting for I don't know what. The visitor sits cross-legged in the doorway. Hard to leave, harder to enter. Sending good wishes to the east. Noticing what time does to people. What we intend when we say *a very long time*. The shadows in the mouth's corners. The doves in the pine every morning. The dogs in the fields. The hackneyed corn and the wheat and the soybeans. Look at yourself raining the fields, rationing the earth's skin. *Bye, going to the dentist* is the worst sentence so far. His book continued on: a series of voices echoing between houses. A "frustrated" filling in a certain molar. A palace of grit. The above-deck sunset tacked to the anonymous ceiling panel. Complaints of cicadas. Never smother a candle with paper. An old woman wrapped in a throw leans in to speak to her son, a man with a mustache, hearing device, easy posture. Fishing beside the dam late July. Their rods like fingers extended. Speech often leads to difficulty. The surface of the moon. The surface of a desk. What do you expect? Carry on, dumfounded amid the small talk.

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK

from LEAFMOLD

Corn still standing between bare orchard plots the day after the winter solstice: gold and dead. Also, good, sad and cold. Trance state upon trance state. There is nothing more beautiful than a check engine light. There is nothing more beautiful than dressing in the dark. There is nothing more beautiful than the dog with a new bone. There is nothing more beautiful than windburn. There is nothing more beautiful than ringing the bell and hearing movement, maybe footsteps, the lights on, and you can tell someone is inside but they never answer. There is nothing more beautiful than that. I want to be the ladder on a recreational vehicle: the silver handholds, curved staves leading to the skylight's edge. An agent of conspiracy: the Auglaize River shedding confessions of ice and catastrophes of mitigation. Upon hearing the news, the hoax spreads like mold on bread. Heads up: alien abduction, knife in the shoulder, red-tailed hawk. Coming in from the snow, I feel blood run the rosary of my glands like current through a circuit. They saw an otter near the pig barn. It disappeared in the hedge. Am I not dead? *You are not.* Will I be? *You will.*

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK

from LEAFMOLD

The new war began over vanilla beans and *I want a piece of you*. The knowing glance just locks the door behind it. The late Joyce scholar emerges from his nasal grave. *Get soaring*. A sign in town with no referent: *FREE*. A mambo of tenses. The weekend swallows us whole. We imagine ourselves as we are. The hounds of the rain, the voice grabbed by the throat. Inside the frame: two ducks escape above a prayer written in curved lines. *Please, lord, let me miss*. I am the captain's replacement. Oceans frighten me. I'm a mess at the beach. Bitter almond. A night of dancing at the snowed-in tabernacle while the master drums his fingers on his chin. Hearts produce meat and vice versa. Let me do what I know how to do. As I get older, death feels more and more deliberate. Eight million thoughts and they're all comforting. Timetravel via campfire. *I'm still me*. A dying wasp clings to the thistle's bowed head. Avuncular: volcanic, wombatish. The heron crouches like an old man crouches—carefully, with patience, timing. A part of home: all of your finger and toenail clippings: under boards, in plastic bags in landfills, in owl pellets, in ditches and swamps. *All winds at some point go up*, you had said.

BRIAN PORTER

LONG ROAD TO ARCADIA

Stan's first calf delivery came late one afternoon, just before closing time. With Everett out sewing up a wire-cut horse, he decided to go alone.

The Petru farm was four miles northwest of town. Stan drove around the courthouse square, along shady streets lined by tired old bungalows, and then down a lonely county road. It was early September. The roadsides were baked to a crispy brown, and the leaves of the post oaks drooped listlessly, craving a breeze. Stan remembered what Everett told him on his first day. "Most calvings are easy," he'd said. "It's the bad ones that keep life interesting."

Stan had waited for him to continue, but Everett just stared at the wall. The specter of things unsaid, of grisly stories untold hung in the air between them. Stan knew the complications well enough—malpresentations, fetal deformities, cervical and uterine prolapses, vaginal tears, ruptured uterine arteries—but to him they were little more than words on paper. To Everett, they were battles won and lost, rope burns and aching joints, long nights and red-eyed mornings.

Stan drove through a densely wooded creek bottom and rattled across a low wooden bridge. A hundred yards later, he pulled up to a farmhouse near the road and parked under a tall sycamore. As he stepped out of the truck, a spotted one-eared dog was urinating on his front tire. A stooped woman with a cane got up from a lawn chair and hobbled over with a lurching crab-like gait. Wilhemina Petru had sagging jowls, bulging eyes, and hair of an unnatural red. She wore a faded and dirty baseball cap slightly askew.

"I'm Willie," she said, her voice like burlap rubbed on a cedar post. She extended her hand, steadying herself with the cane.

"Stan Holub," he said, taking her hand. "I'm the new vet."

Willie squinted at him, chewing on the inside of her cheek, and tightened her grip. "I was expecting Dr. Templeton...but I guess you'll have to do." She released his hand and reached up to scratch a hairy ear with a knobby forefinger, her eyes never leaving his. "We got a good one for ya."

Stan flexed his fingers to get the circulation back. He looked toward the barn, his throat dry. "You got her in the pen?"

Willie gave a little snort. "Nope, but she ain't going nowhere. She's down at the creek. You can't get your truck down there, but I'll drive us in my Mule." She motioned toward a four-wheeler parked near the house. "You can put your stuff in the back."

Stan's heart was pounding. He wished Russell was along, but he was helping Everett with the horse. Stan knew the protocol in these

situations was to make at least a token effort to get the cow penned or to rope her on foot. If that failed, and if the cow was out in the open, Everett would drive alongside her and Russell would rope her off the back of the truck. Once the cow was dragging the rope, they'd drive on top of it. The third option was to dart the cow with a tranquilizer gun. Everett said that some vets—the "smart ones"—wouldn't come out to the farm unless the cow was penned. "But I'm the accommodating type. Or maybe I just watched too many episodes of *Wild Kingdom*."

Stan walked back to the truck, trying to think of everything he'd need—ropes, calf puller and chains, obstetrical sleeves, bucket, betadine, cooler with medications, needles, syringes. In several trips, he carried it all over to the four-wheeler and piled it in the back. Then he climbed into the seat beside Willie, who was revving the engine, both hands on the wheel, eyes fixed straight ahead. "Hold on," she said.

The vehicle jerked into motion and shot off across the yard with the dog leading the way. Willie hit a cattle guard at full speed, causing Stan to bounce up and hit his head on the roll cage, and then she followed a rutted overgrown trail down into the woods. Stan tried to reposition himself, looking frantically for something to hold on to, but each bump sent him scrambling. He ducked to miss a tree limb, but the next one slapped him across the face. He slid down in the seat and put his knees up on the dash to brace himself. He wanted to yell at her to slow down, but then she suddenly pulled to a jarring stop in the middle of a yaupon thicket.

"This is as close as we can get," she said, picking up her cane and pointing to the left. "The creek's right over yonder."

Stan spit out a leaf and stumbled out of the vehicle. When he looked in back, he was surprised to see everything still there. He picked up his ropes and started threading his way through the woods, following the sound of a man's voice. Maybe he'd have some help after all. He soon spotted an expanse of brown stagnant water through the leaves. Then he saw the cow—a black Brangus cross standing in the water up to her belly, all four feet stuck deep in the mud. The tip of the calf's tail extended from her vulva, indicating it was in breech position. The air was hot, still, and soupy, filled with a sweet sickly smell, the sound of buzzing flies.

A lean bearded man wearing a straw cowboy hat and a sweat-drenched gray t-shirt waved from the other side of the creek. "I'm Kenny Petru. And this here is Justin," he said, nodding at a spindly teenage boy who was shyly emerging from the shade of the creek bank.

Stan introduced himself and went back to the four-wheeler to get his supplies, relieved that at least the cow was immobilized—no rodeo heroics needed. After piling everything on the bank, he slipped on obstetrical sleeves and drew up a syringe of lidocaine. He stared at the cow for a moment, and then he took a deep breath and waded out to her. The water came up to his knees, and it took effort to pull his feet from the mud with each step. When he grasped the cow's tail to give

her an epidural, she swung her head around and almost hooked him with one of her long horns.

"She's a little salty, ain't it?" Willie said. She chuckled as she took a seat on a tree stump. The dog sat down beside her.

Stan went back to the bank to get a rope, gritting his teeth. He tossed a loop around the cow's horns, pulled it tight, and threw the end of the rope to Kenny and had him tie it around a willow tree. Now free to work, he gave the epidural, scrubbed the cow's vulva with betadine, and rinsed her off. When he reached in with his gloved arm, the calf felt swollen and gassy, tight against the dry wall of the uterus. It had been dead for some time—probably three or four days, maybe longer. The stench was overwhelming, and he breathed through his mouth to avoid the worst of it. He wondered if he should call Everett.

"The calf's pretty rotten," he said, waving a fly off his nose with his free hand. "How long she been calving?"

"Rotten? What're you talking about? She just went missing this morning." Willie looked at Kenny. "Ain't that right?"

"That's right, Mama," he said. "She never showed nothing."

Stan's mind was racing. The usual remedy for this presentation was turning the rear limbs around and pulling the feet up into the birth canal, but that wasn't an option—there just wasn't enough room. And a C-section was clearly out of the question. A fetotomy was the only way to go. If he could cut off both back legs just below the hocks, he could put chains on the stumps and maybe pull the calf out. Everett had reviewed fetotomy basics with him—it was doable. Stan sloshed back to the bank and explained what he planned to do.

Willie narrowed one eye at him as she leaned on her cane. "You sure it's dead?"

"No doubt about it."

Willie scowled, sighed, and looked away.

Stan walked back to his truck to get more supplies, not wanting to risk another ride on the four-wheeler. By the time he returned, he was out of breath and drenched in sweat. He poured a gallon of lubricant into his bucket. Holding the bucket in place between his knees, he passed a plastic stomach tube into the uterus and attached the other end to a stomach pump. He then operated the pump, stopping several times to redirect the tube, and covered the calf with the thick slimy lubricant.

"What the hell ya doing that for?" Willie said, standing and craning her neck. She stepped forward a few steps to get a better view.

"It's too dry in there. This lubricant makes it easier to work and will help the calf come out."

"I guess that'll cost." Willie shook her head as she turned around and sidled slowly back to her seat. "I never seen Dr. Templeton do such a thing."

Stan tied a long length of obstetrical wire to the end of a chain. Reaching into the cow, he tried to get the chain around one of the calf's

rear limbs. There was little room to work, and the chain eluded his grasp again and again. As he stood there struggling, his arm in the cow up to his shoulder, sweat pouring down his forehead and burning his eyes, he wondered what had possessed him to take this job. Large animal practice? Who was he kidding?

Stan wiped the sweat from his brow. His arm was starting to feel numb. The foul dank air made it hard to breathe. He shifted his feet, struggling to wrench his boots free. The mud was a dark, vile, formless thing—cruel and unrelenting—slowly pulling him and the cow into the abyss.

Just as he was about to admit defeat, to walk out of the creek in disgust and call Everett, he felt his finger slip through the end link of the chain. He pulled the chain out, and when he reached back in excitedly, he could feel the wire looped around the leg, just below the hock. This might just work.

He ran the free ends of the wire through a Frick speculum—a metal tube two feet in length—and then passed the speculum into the birth canal until it was firmly against the calf's leg. He recruited Kenny to help, having him glove up and hold the end of the speculum in place. Stan then put on work gloves, wrapped the free ends of the wire around his hands several times, and, using a back-and-forth sawing motion with both hands, he quickly severed the calf's leg. He pulled it out and tossed it onto the bank, just close enough to Willie for her to catch a good whiff of it.

The dog began sniffing on the leg, and Willie swung at him with her cane. "Ringo, git!"

The other leg went a lot faster. Stan reached in and looped chains around the stumps and then walked to the bank and retrieved the calf puller. He returned and set the puller in position, attached the chains, and started cranking. The calf slowly emerged, inch by inch, and when the hips came through, he knew he had it made. He gave a few more cranks and pushed down on the puller, using leverage, and the calf slid out and hit the water.

Stan felt a warmth inside that surged out to his fingertips and down to his waterlogged toes. He was smiling as he unhitched the chains from the puller and began tugging the calf toward the bank. When he was almost ashore, his left foot slid on the slimy creek bottom and he went backward with a splash. He got up quickly, his face burning, and wiped his muddy elbow on his wet jeans. He got the calf onto the bank and knelt to remove the chains. When he glanced at Willie, she was leaning forward, her jaw set, her eyes steely.

"Now what?" she said.

Stan dropped the chains into the bucket and slowly stood up. He paused, waiting for his head to clear, and then faced her.

Willie motioned to the cow with her cane.

Stan looked at the cow and then at Willie, not sure what she was getting at.

"Whatcha gonna do now?"

Stan turned back to the cow. Her tail hung limply in the water from the epidural, flies still buzzing. She'd sunk even deeper into the mud. He couldn't just leave her there, but what was he expected to do? He stood silently, staring down at his muddy boots.

"I can maybe get the tractor down here," Kenny said.

Stan inverted his obstetrical sleeves and rolled them into a ball. Of course. Why hadn't he thought of that? "Okay...sure."

The creek bank closest to the house was too thickly wooded to get the tractor close enough, but Kenny thought he could get down to the opposite bank. Using ropes to pull her out would be risky, but Stan remembered he had two broad nylon straps in his truck. Last week he'd helped Everett use straps to lift a downer cow with a tractor's front-end loader. They might work for this too.

After Kenny left for the tractor, Stan walked back to the truck to retrieve the straps, wondering what his old boss Gil Mabry would say if he could see him now. Three months earlier, when Stan sat in front of Gil's desk in Houston and explained that he was leaving, Gil had listened intently, nodding, giving the impression that he understood his motivation perfectly, that he could feel his angst, that he could even relate to it on some level. Maybe he admired Stan for doing something he'd always wanted to do himself.

During the long pause that followed, Gil's expression changed—first to confusion, then to amusement. "You're shitting me right?"

Stan returned to the creek with the straps and waded back out to the cow. With a lot of effort, he managed to get one strap behind her forelimbs and the other in front of her hindlimbs. When Kenny arrived, he linked the straps together and attached them to the tractor with a long chain. Kenny then idled the tractor forward, slowly pulling the cow from the mud like a cork from a bottle. Stan breathed easier when she was finally on dry ground.

After the cow was unhitched, she tried to rise but went back down. Stan flushed out her uterus and gave her injections of cortisone and an antibiotic. Then he administered a slow intravenous infusion of a glucose and mineral mixture. As he was discussing follow-up care with Kenny, Justin pointed down to the water. "Look." Stan turned in time to see a cottonmouth as thick as his forearm swimming toward the opposite bank, its head raised and its tail whipping through the murky water.

It was early evening and the creek bottom all shadows by the time Stan got into his truck and headed back to the clinic. He was wet, smelly, and bone-tired, but he was singing along with the radio, tapping his hands on the steering wheel. When he got to the clinic, he cleaned up his equipment, changed clothes, and went into the office. Everett was still at his desk and asked how the call went. As Stan told him about it, Everett nodded approvingly. "Nothing like jumping in with both feet."

Stan slept better that night than he had in weeks.

Following surgery the next afternoon, Stan called Willie to check on his patient.

She answered after eight rings.

"Hi, Mrs. Petru. This is Stan Holub. I'm just checking on your cow. How's she doing today?"

There was a long silence, and then Willie cleared her throat. "Not so good. I knew I should've waited for Dr. Templeton."

Stan felt suddenly weightless, like he was plunging helplessly, the bridge he'd built for himself having splintered underfoot. "What do you mean? She's still not up?"

"Up?!" Willie laughed bitterly. She paused, and when she spoke again, all trace of humor had left her voice. "My boy found her this morning in the creek...drowned like a goddamned rat."

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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