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COMPLY (Borg Feminism)

COVER

April Bey

April Bey grew up in the Caribbean (New Providence, The Bahamas) and now resides and works in Los Angeles, CA as a contemporary visual artist and art educator. Bey's interdisciplinary artwork is an introspective and social critique of American and Bahamian culture, contemporary pop culture, feminism, generational theory, social media, AfroFuturism, AfroSurrealism, post-colonialism and constructs of race within white supremacist systems.

Proud of where she was able to afford an education, Bey received her BFA in drawing in 2009 from Ball State University and her MFA in painting in 2014 at California State University, Northridge.

Bey is in the permanent collection of The California African American Museum, The National Art Gallery of The Bahamas and The Current, Baha Mar in Nassau, Bahamas. Bey has exhibited internationally in biennials NE7, NE8 and NE9 in The Bahamas. Bey has also exhibited internationally in Italy, Spain and Accra Ghana, West Africa.

His work can be found at **april-bey.com**

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For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as "adult content": it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren't an actual grown-up then please don't read the Oddville Press, or at least, don't complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Hollywood Rain

Scott Laudati

You started off looking for Rome like I did.
In poems, in love letters,
written for a city planes fly to every day
but you knew
or decided
you hadn't earned it yet.
So
you went to West Hollywood,
a walk each night down Sunset,
not exactly The Malecón
or The Rue des Rosiers
but the girls are skinny
and sometimes you follow the one
with the German Shepard
up Rodeo
to a house her father couldn't afford

until they painted the walls
with Sharon and her baby.
The neighbor's thought a murder
would sink the value but they forgot
the California sun can
baptize anything.
And when the tourists come
she puts her yoga mat in front of the bay window,
falling into downward dog
like she doesn't know what she's doing.
And the men snap pictures of her
stretched out on this cursed land,

almost as rare
as a Hollywood rain
but nowhere near as beautiful.

Scott Laudati's recent work has appeared in The Cardiff Review and The Columbia Journal. He spends most of his time with a 14 year-old schnoodle named Dolly. Visit him on social media @ ScottLaudati

Hélène

Thomas Bulen Jacobs

I WAS IN PARIS to cover some global investment conference or other—I'd attended so many, I could improvise a keynote speech from a word-cloud of buzzwords. I emailed my editor to ask if we could just re-post my last piece, plagiarism in whole cloth. It's not like anyone would double check.

She asked when I'd be back in the office. Monday, I told her. I was taking the weekend in Paris with friends. Her response: Fine.

We were two sheets to the wind and looking for the third when I walked right past my aunt. We were just outside L'Astrance on Rue Beethoven. We were going to cross the Seine for a walk by the Eiffel tower.

"Charles?" I stopped at my name. Turned bleary-eyed to take her in.

It had been years since I'd last seen her. What threw me was that she was now completely gray.

Not that she wasn't stylish as ever. Hers was not the pewter of my mother's nun-like perm. Silken, white-striated, long on the top, her hair was swept back in a pert wave over close-cropped sides. She wore pencil thin black slacks and a $400 sweater. A strand of pearls hung double-looped on her chest, microscopic diamonds in her ears.

"Aunt Helen?"

"Call me Helen, dear, you're all grown up." She kissed each cheek in the French style. Her scent was faint but delicious.

I introduced her to my friends, Hassan and Enjoli. They were the kinds of friends who'd join you in Paris for the weekend, and not resent you for ditching them on day one. Anyway, we'd be back at it next weekend in Madrid.

"We're going to bed, Charley," Hassan said. "Call me in the morning."

I hugged them and we exchanged a few departing pleasantries while Hassan hailed a cab.

When they were gone, Helen asked me whether that were Hassan Zigsari.

"Yes." She was very perceptive.

"He looks just like his father, when I knew him. That was a long time ago." Helen didn't stand on ceremony. "Join me for a drink? We'll catch up."

We went into l'Astrance. I hoped she was paying; I could afford maybe a single drink.

Helen was greeted by the maître d, who escorted us to a two-top by the window. The glassware sparkled; the tablecloth was a saintly white.

A waiter appeared with cocktails which I didn't recognize.

"I take it you come here often."

"I live in Paris in the spring."

Things began to crystalize. I'd spent enough time in New York, London and Madrid, plus a decade as a business reporter, to see now that my aunt had money. Not drafty house in the suburbs money—and maybe not Learjet money. But she had money-is-no-object-money, townhouse in SoHo money, springs in Paris money.

I wondered whether my mother knew.

****

I'd asked my aunt once when I was younger how she was related to the family.

"Didn't anyone tell you?" I'd said no, and she had only said "h'm," and left it at that.

That she was related I never had any doubt; nothing less than blood could have induced such a woman to attend the peppering of holidays and graduations that transpired in our beat-down upstate city. She, of course, lived in the real city, meaning Manhattan, several hours' train ride away. She was everything that our small town was not: stylish, witty, ironic.

That's not to say that she was aloof. Quite the opposite. She simply had nothing in common with my parents and their friends, and so did not make any effort to spend time with them even when she was there. Mostly, she spent time with the children, and we were delighted to have her seated cross-legged on the edge of one of our beds, smoking ceremoniously through a long-stemmed cigarette-holder and devouring our books, which she happily read aloud to any asker.

At some point I realized that she shared my mother's maiden name, that she was universally known around town, and generally frowned upon for some reason or other. I had always assumed it was because she felt no remorse at leaving.

Neither, of course, had I.

****

The cocktail was spectacular, a mellow citrus and lavender. Vodka.

"Well, Charles, I can't say I'm disappointed to have bumped into you. I so often dine alone. It's a lovely change of pace."

I agreed. More details filtered up through the cocktail's buzz. She was a writer, a fact neither she nor my mother had ever uttered aloud, though both my sister and I had read voraciously from the beginning.

And Helen was not just any writer. She was one of the truly great YA writers of her generation, already firmly ensconced on middle- and high school reading lists. For a while she had been named the Official State Author of New York. I had learned all this obliquely, in college, when I saw her picture on the dust jacket of my girlfriend's book and reflected that she was my aunt.

"Oh my God, she's amazing, Charles. You really have to read it."

And I had. I read The Assembled in a single sitting and turned voraciously to the others: A Fortnight's Reprieve, The Daughters of St. Sebastian, The Hourglass. I was wounded to have missed them until now, only a few years removed from that singular time in life when that kind of book can be the very breath of life.

"I suppose the writing life must be good—Paris, and all that."

She blinked a few times and the lines around her mouth softened. She was utterly without guile, like a child. Yet there was a forcefulness to her, an iron core. It was easy to see why as children we had accepted her as one of us.

At any rate, now it was all out in the open.

Helen clinked the rim of my glass with the base of hers and took a sip.

"And you're a reporter? Where?"

"Yes, I work for the Financial Times. I'm in Madrid."

"Another writer."

I blushed.

"Hardly."

"You write."

"It's not the same thing."

"No, I suppose it isn't. How's your mother? Your dad?"

"Both well. You know; nothing ever changes."

"To tell you the truth, you're not the one I expected to get out."

I laughed and took a drink. At some point the waiter had come with another round of cocktails. This one was strong; orange and whiskey. "Why not?"

"Because you played hockey. I figured it would be Kathryn."

"She got out, too. She teaches printing at the Chicago Art Institute."

"Well, then, I was half right."

She winked and drained her cocktail. I glanced down at my own, still mostly full. I took another sip to keep up. I was going to regret this in the morning.

The waiter appeared a moment later with a third cocktail, and they conversed in rapid French. He bowed his head at her instructions and glided away to the kitchen.

"Your French is good. Not good, perfect."

"I lived here for a year in college."

"Paris?"

"Provence."

She was quiet, almost unstable, for the briefest moment, but she steadied herself by placing her long fingers on the base of her cocktail glass and resting them there for a moment.

"I hope you don't mind, but I ordered a few petits plaques. I'm not hungry enough for an entrée, but it's still certain to be too much food."

"I'm sure I can help you out." It was my first—and probably only—shot at a Michelin spread in Paris.

"Good. So, Madrid."

"Yes. Have you been?"

"Only Barcelona." She lisped the c.

"Well, Madrid is … Hemmingway ate there, you know."

She smiled and reached into her handbag. She withdrew a cigarette box and her long black holder. She lit a cigarette, offered the box to me (I declined), snapped it shut and tucked it away in her bag.

"I only smoke in Paris, you know. Never in New York. Not anymore. Not that there's anywhere you can smoke, even here. The waiter will be by in a moment to kindly request that I put it out."

"I went to J-school in New York."

"NYU?"

"Columbia."

"Good for you." She was apparently unmoved by the pedigree. I might have told her I had spent the last decade working at the Friendly's on Hoosick.

Helen blew a threadlike stream of smoke. "New York. When I moved there, in the seventies, you know, rent in the village was $200 a month. You could just show up places, and no one was there except the interesting people. Artists, poets, philosophers, drag queens. You could talk all night, drink like a fish and spend another $15. Now, all the interesting people are gone. I go places and everyone I meet works for a hedge fund. I barely leave the house. I should decamp to Paris full-time."

"Would you?"

The waiter arrived just then, theatrically flashing the half dozen plates he wore from his palm to his shoulder, each arranged daintily over the curve of the other. He set them precisely down before us, then turned and seemed to conjure a bottle of wine from midair. Helen tasted the wine, approved, and in a moment's time we were dining on fried mussels and green bean salad.

"I doubt it," she said.

I had forgotten the question.

"New York, I think, is the only place that'll have me."

We chatted that way for another hour, two hours. We had dessert, then coffee. Helen drank steadily through the meal, and I did my best to keep pace.

The longer we sat there, the more our intimacy deepened. I felt a quicker, easier camaraderie with my aunt than I'd ever felt with anyone, even Hassan. There was between us a kinship, something that perhaps ran in our shared blood, but which was yet beyond it. I imagine the Germans have a word for it.

By the end of the evening she was calling me Charley. It's not everyone who does.

****

"Haven't you ever wanted to write books for adults?" I was quite drunk now.

Helen eyeballed the ash tray that had materialized not long into the meal, unremarked upon by the waiter. She picked up her cigarette holder and held it at the ends between forefingers and thumbs.

"Oh, I've tried. I'll start a story, and I'll try to push my readership up and up, and then—I hit a kind of ceiling. My characters haven't made the imaginative leap out of adolescence."

She was quiet for a moment. She set down the stem and took a final sip of her digestif.

"I suppose in some ways, neither have I."

****

She called me first thing in the morning. Or maybe not first thing. I squinted at my phone. Christ, I was hungover. It appeared we had exchanged numbers. Her name came up as "Aont Hh."

"Meet me for breakfast, Charley. I have a proposal for you."

I immediately agreed.

Still, I lay for a moment in my bed, absent-mindedly changing her contact information in my phone. I couldn't have said why, but I texted Hassan and Enjoli to tell them I would link up with them when we were back in Madrid. Then I drank three glasses of water, took a leak and a shower and packed my bag. I decided to wear my suit.

I was glad I did.

Helen was impeccable in olive slacks and a starchy eggshell blouse. She wore a pair of Balenciaga glasses which she snapped into their case when she had finished reading the menu.

We took our coffee the same way—black.

"I'd like to spend the weekend in Provence. Under ordinary circumstances, I'd hire a driver, but—"

I took the liberty to interrupt. "Of course."

"You're licensed?"

"I rent all the time for work."

"You know I never even learned. I left for college at sixteen, and then, of course, living in New York…."

"Sixteen! Did you go to school in the city?"

"No, I went to Emmanuel College in Boston."

"No shit. I went to B.C."

"It's a lovely little city."

"But it's not New York."

****

A white Benz convertible was waiting for us at the Prince de Galles. The concierge handed me the keys while a bellhop whisked my suitcase from my hand. Helen's luggage—monogrammed Louis Vuitton, natch—was neatly arranged in the trunk. It happened in an instant, and when I looked up, Helen was just down the sidewalk, having a conversation with Matthew Broderick and Sarah Jessica Parker. She waved me over and introduced me as her,

"actual nephew, not the euphemism." She was funny; they laughed.

"Charles is a journalist in Madrid. We bumped into each other last night, and now we're taking a weekend in Provence."

Sarah Jessica Parker gushed about the food at some "rustic little out-of-the-way spot" outside of Cannes and after another minute of chit chat and the promise of meeting for dinner in New York, which I little doubted they would do, we slipped into the Benz. A pair of driving gloves lay neatly folded on the dash. I slipped them on.

"Any idea where we're going?"

"I've got my phone," Helen said. "For now, just head south."

****

We spent the day on the road, something I had not done in years, not since before J-school when a friend and I had used his move to Portland as a chance to drive across the country. Our conversation was sporadic until we stopped for a late lunch in Lyon. Helen, of course, knew a place.

Later, when we were almost there, in the countryside beyond Lorgues, kicking up dust on narrow, pale tree-lined roads, we passed through one of the interminable periodic stone tunnels, rounded a curve in the road and came across a little stone church on the hillside. The walls were whitewashed, ringed about with low dark bushes. The windows were framed with shutters dark as wine stain.

"Stop for a moment," Helen said.

There was a dusty tributary path from the road up to a flat stretch of field. I started to turn, but Helen indicated that I should stay on the road. There was no other traffic. We sat for a minute in the late summer evening. I turned off the car. After a moment the seashell rush around our ears stilled and the sounds of the countryside could be heard; crickets, the gentle lashing of the heavy-crowned linden trees.

"We're not far, now." Helen.

****

The vineyards were like nothing I'd ever seen. We had passed out of the hills into a vast emerald valley. Back on blacktop now, we whizzed past row upon row of grapevines, lush with late spring growth. Helen directed me tentatively to turn off onto a long driveway lined with towering cypress trees. In the distance was the winery, a stunning, low-slung modern dark-wood-and-glass building nestled in a perfect hemisphere of closely cropped grass.

I parked beside a pale blue Renault Alpine and got out to stretch my legs. The parking lot was like a car show. Every fender sparkled.

I thought we were going to dinner at the winery, but Helen took a wide berth around the building, passing instead into the country behind. A neat little footpath took us past a trim hedge-lined gathering space. As we were passing by, dainty lines of pale white Christmas lights ignited, strung from tall posts.

"It's stunning."

"None of this used to be here. It used to be a red stone castle. Repurposed, of course, and a little dilapidated, but elegant. You could imagine a thousand years of memory. It's a shame."

As if to make her point, we came up abruptly on a little stone cottage, complete with thatched roof. It was ringed about with leafy hedges, which enclosed a nicely appointed vegetable garden.

Behind the hedge stood a man with long, swept-back grey hair and a voluptuous mustache. He wore a blue workman's shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbow to reveal shaggy muscular forearms, hands like a bear's.

I was sure immediately that he must be

what this whole weekend was about.

When he saw us, his face broke out in an ecstatic smile. He threw his head back and bellowed with laughter. He came quickly through a low white gate and threw his arms around my aunt.

"Hélène!" he said, and I knew that never again could she be just Helen.

"Hercule." There were tears in her eyes. "C'est mon neveu, Charles."

"Charles," he said it sharl, taking my hand in his paw and shaking vigorously. "Bienvenue!"

I never understood another word he said.

Hercule invited us in through the gate, where he showed us what he had been doing upon our arrival; picking snails from the hedge and placing them in a deep ceramic bowl. We helped for a few minutes, Hercule and my aunt engaged in quiet conversation. From time to time Hercule would place a hand upon her shoulder and smile.

When we had gathered a satisfactory number of snails, Hercule drove us good-humoredly through a creaky wooden door into the cottage, which consisted of two rooms of roughly equal size: the kitchen and a spacious living room. The kitchen was organized around a vast wooden table, the living room a fireplace. I'd never been so charmed in my life.

Hercule set us down on high stools across the table. He opened a bottle of wine and poured us each a glass. I imitated every movement of my aunt's, and it was not long before my thoughts were swirly.

Still, I was incidental to the scene.

Not quite true. Hercule was a gallant host; it was clear, however, that he spoke not a lick of English. Clear too why Hélène's French was so good.

He cooked the snails in a garlic sauce, served them in shallow porcelain dishes. While I had not been raised with a particularly broad palette—my dad found Italian food to be a little ethnically transgressive for his tastes—a decade abroad had forced the issue. This was not my first escargot; it was undoubtedly the best.

Hercule cooked for most of the evening, laboring on one dish after another, each in turn. We lingered over each, drank bottle after bottle of wine. They spoke little, but there was no awkwardness. Nor was there any hint of sexual chemistry, not even sexual history; and this surprised me. Had I walked in on the scene and been introduced to them as siblings, I'd have assented. It was impossible to imagine this old familiarity as the source of whatever charge my aunt still carried in her heart.

When, during a long interval during which Hercule was cooking a fish—lemon, capers, garlic—and my aunt distracted by conversation, I took the opportunity to relieve myself and look around the cottage.

It was a spare, utilitarian space but there was a small bookshelf in one corner of the living room. I wandered over to take a look. There was a Bible in cracked leather, a shelf on gardening and viticulture, all in French, of course.

To my shock, there on the bottom shelf were all of Helen's books, in English, all crumbly paperbacks from when they were first released, some more than twenty years ago. I gently plied one from the shelf and opened. There was an inscription on the first page, made out in a neat feminine hand: Ma chère Evangeline, avec tout mon amour.

It was signed by my aunt.

****

I fell asleep on the couch, my aunt and Hercule seated now side by side at the table, talking, I could only imagine, of the past.

At one point, I could hear my aunt crying.

Or maybe it was a dream.

****

I woke with the sun, chilly from the breeze

coming in through the open window. Someone had draped a blanket over me in the night, and it had slid down beside the couch. I pulled it back up, hoping to sleep a little longer. I was startled to alertness by the sound of a tea kettle.

"Damn." Hélène swore from the kitchen before extinguishing the sound. "I'm sorry, Charley," she said when she saw me rustle.

"I hope that's for coffee."

"Naturally."

She made it in a French press, and we sat for a few minutes as I came into consciousness. It took a minute before I realized she had not changed from the day before.

"Hercule is the head of winemaking. We're to join him in the fields when we're ready."

"He's a hell of a cook."

"He's—well, he's a hell of a man, to borrow the phrase. I'm sorry we weren't more attentive last night."

"Last night was a delight. I take it you knew him when you were here."

Perhaps she hadn't heard me. No, she was only silent for a minute, her eyes averted. "M'hm."

She placed a tray of bread and cheese and jam before me. I ate ravenously.

"Was it a school program?"

"What?"

"Your year here. Why the winery?"

The question took a long time to make sense.

"No. I told you I was young when I left home. I took a year between my sophomore and junior years. I bought a ticket to Milan and made my way to Provence by train. I was lost, wandering the hills and asked for a job at the winery. Hercule took me on. I stayed a year, wrote letters to my mother to assure her that I was safe. It could never happen today."

She was right.

"Why leave?"

Again she elided me: "Shall we find Hercule? We won't stay long."

****

We lunched with Hercule at the cottage. Again, he outdid himself: salad, cheese and fresh bread, a thick beet soup, ripe pears thin sliced, drizzled with his own honey for dessert. When we'd eaten, Hercule walked with us to the car. Again he shook my hand. Again he and my aunt embraced. She sank into him, allowing him to rock her back and forth a few times. He held her at arm's length, smiled deep into the wrinkles around his eyes and opened the door for her to alight.

He stood at the crest of the driveway to watch us go.

****

Just a few minutes later, we came again upon the little stone church. Again my aunt asked me to stop. We sat for a minute at the base of the driveway.

Then, unexpectedly, my aunt said, "Forgive me."

She fumbled with the door, freeing herself, then began to climb the hill. I killed the motor and started up after her. She turned at the sound of me, her face pulled tight, but she made no indication that I should not follow.

Behind the little church there was a cemetery, surrounded by a low thick stone wall. Hélène passed through a small wrought iron gate, leaving it ajar for me to follow. I followed her past rows of mossy tombstones, weathered crosses. Here and there where a vase had been set, the wind had toppled them and scattered the desiccated remains of flowers.

Hélène stopped at last at a spot in the far corner of the graveyard. Just beyond the wall, over a low hill, sheep were cropping grass in the afternoon sun or napping under withered olive trees.

I went to stand beside her, not knowing whether there were more I could do, afraid, for once in my life, of allowing my curiosity to get the better of me; afraid that in pushing I might actually be pushing her away.

I knew the name on the tombstone: Evangeline.

"Who was she?"

She did not pretend not to have heard. She only stood silent for a long time.

"I didn't leave Emmanuel by choice. My sophomore year, one of my professors came onto me.

"No. He assaulted me. It was the early seventies, and that kind of thing was expected. Or, if not expected, there wasn't a language yet for what it really was. I had refused his advances, and so, even after, he threatened to destroy my reputation. I left because I couldn't bear the shame and discomfort of being near him. And I couldn't go home. I had left so young, so emphatically; I felt that I would be judged a failure. There would have been some truth to that."

She paused for a moment. Ran her hand through her hair, then pressed the base of her palm into the spot above her eye.

"I'm cursing myself for not having my cigarettes."

"I can run back to the car."

She twisted her mouth into a half smile and bent her head.

"I had some money. I had planned to travel all summer, to wend my way across the continent, perhaps even as far as Turkey, Morocco. South Africa? What did I know?

"At any rate, I stopped here because—because I fell in love."

"Hercule."

"Charley!" My aunt actually laughed. "You're obtuse."

Holy Christ. I was dense.

"Who was she?"

"She was the owner's sister. She was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. She was Persephone, wild-haired, golden skin. She never wore shoes, and she had the loveliest legs. I had never been in love before. I didn't have a language yet for what was happening. Being a girl in love. The being in love with a girl."

She blinked rapidly at the remembrance.

"I was infatuated. It must have been obvious to anyone who cared to see. Hercule could see it."

"And she?"

Hélène began to nod. With one toe, she reached out to touch the tombstone. Scratched a little cross into the grass before it.

"She was my friend. She loved me as a friend…"

Her voice was steady as she said all this.

"But she married Hercule.

"And it broke my heart."

Hélène stood for a long time with her eyes closed, her nostrils dilating with each slow breath. I thought at first that she had collected herself, but when at last she turned to me her eyes were bright with tears that ran in long thin streaks. I had never seen an adult cry that way, cry from heartbreak. I ached for her, understood her. I too have loved past possibility.

"I told you, Charley, that first night at dinner that I never—"

She couldn't finish the phrase.

She didn't have to.

Thomas Bulen Jacobs was raised overseas, mostly in South America, Turkey, and Spain. He is a graduate of St. John's College in Annapolis, Md. His fiction has appeared most recently in *Variant Literature Journal, River River Journal, The Oddville Press,* and *The Oakland Review,* among others.

Infinite Wake | Bryant Goetz

Bryant Goetz is a painter living, working, and exploring in the Pacific Northwest. His oil paint and mixed media paintings are often large in scale due to his attraction to the confrontational nature of larger work. He is mostly concerned with the emotional and darker aspects of life and the ways in which those can be portrayed through portraiture and figurative painting. His work can be seen at **bryantgoetz.com**

The Corner

Holly Day

the beetle in the
web clicks soft
in time to the spinning of its
body in the long arms of the spider
that has made its home in
the dark corner of
my office. it clicks
so regular I turn off my computer, my
desk clock to make sure it's
really him

the clicks speed up
when the spider
reaches out
with one long, pale
leg to spin
the trapped insect
another turn, they slow down
fade to near
silence whenever
the spider
pulls away

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction, Grain,* and *Harvard Review.* Her newest poetry collections are *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing), and *The Tooth is the Largest Organ in the Human Body* (Anaphora Literary Press).

We Have No Candle in This Funeral

Rebeca Ladrón de Guevara

"ANA JUST DIED" The voice on the telephone said.

I looked at the time. It was only midnight, but it felt like three a.m. I was confused, trying to figure out who was on the other end of the line telling me the news about my grandmother. It was my sister Carmen. Not my dad, not my mom, but Carmen, the one person who disliked my dad's mom the most.

"When did she die?" I asked.

"Like twenty minutes ago. So like her to ruin my fucking birthday," Carmen said.

I rubbed my eyes, "Oh yeah, it's your birthday tomorrow—today—"Feliz Cumpleaños."

"Thanks," she said. Carmen was always refusing to speak Spanish though, she, too, was born in Mexico City like I was.

"Your cousin, Mariana, knows all the details. She's the one who called dad," Carmen said.

Mariana was both our cousin, of course, but when it came to dad's family, Carmen and I tried to distance ourselves as much as possible by rolling our eyes and inserting a "your." Mariana was the only one of us seven grandkids who Ana called her "one true granddaughter." Carmen and I always laughed at this because Mariana is a self-hating snob who changed her last name to a French one even though she's got a burnt-tortilla face and nalgas de sope. She's a bitch, to boot, so Ana could have all of her as far as we were concerned.

"Should I call her?" I asked Carmen.

"Forget it, Natalia," she said. "Dad flies out there tomorrow. He's on the phone getting his ticket right now. Just go when he goes. The funeral service is on Wednesday night. Mom and I aren't going. We have no reason to. Those people have never cared about us anyway. Why should we care about them?" Carmen always referred to dad's family as "those people," and Ana's death wasn't going to change that.

"If I call, it's for dad, not them," I said, knowing Carmen was right. She and I had been raised as two not-so-beautiful islands in an archipelago called Dad-Mom-Carmen-and-I. But plates called work demands had shifted in recent years, and my archipelago was broken up by 2,384.471 nautical miles. My dad had to move his business to New Jersey to accommodate his biggest client, so Carmen got a transfer at her work, too, leaving me completely alone in L.A. In those three years since they'd been gone, dad's family never once called or texted to ask if I was okay, or if I needed anything.

After Carmen and I hung up, I went back

to bed, wondering who was going to read my cards for me now that Ana was gone.

Wednesday came, and dad and I pulled up in front of the family's dilapidated funeral home of choice in the South Bay area of L.A.

"This fucking dump again?" I said, filled with dread at seeing the ugly brown stucco structure hidden in the dark alleyway. "Do they get a discount here or something?"

My dad laughed. "I think it's probably the only funeral home that lets them do their Santeria shit."

Inside, we noticed two of the high executives' assistants from my dad's biggest client in New Jersey. Two Japanese men were sitting there in a room full of Santeras, with dad's mother lying in an open casket. Dad and I looked at each other horrified. Then I noticed dad's friend, Carlos, sitting in one of the back pews alone. I pulled at my hair, "Que carajos, dad? How did they even get the address?"

"I have no idea, yo no dije nada," he laughed. "Could this night get any worse?"

All our family secrets were coming out, so I wasn't really in the mood to laugh with him. I wanted to die right alongside Ana—well, maybe not right alongside—but under the coffin or in the bathroom. Dad's coworkers would all soon learn that his family practices Santeria, something my father hides from everyone. How had they found out my dad had a mother and that she had died? Someone must've overheard him on the phone.

I went to sit over by Carlos. He was alone in the back because he wasn't stupid. He knew that my dad's family didn't like him so he was keeping to himself. Ana's hatred towards Carlos was ridiculous, but when she hated, which was always, she hated with all her heart, passing it on to the rest of the family.

When dad's brother and sister saw dad walking in, they ran up to him, hugging him and crying on his shoulder. They walked him to the open casket, and all three of them stood there staring at their mother's body. His sister, Karina, cried, smearing black make-up all over her face like a mapache.

Good, I thought, I'm glad she looks like a rabid raccoon. I had never forgiven Karina for leaving us stranded in the Greyhound station in Downtown L.A. in the middle of the night when we came from Mexico City with nothing but the clothes on our backs.

Ramón wept like a little boy, repeating, "What will I do without her?"

What a pussy, I said to myself. He had always lived protected by Ana, both emotionally and financially, so yeah, he doesn't know what he's gonna do without her now. He'll have to get a job.

My dad didn't shed a single tear then or at any time during the night. My dad seemed so out of place around his family. I wondered if he had ever really belonged, even before he denounced their religion and went his own way.

"Who are all these people?" my dad, who was now sitting with me, asked as people we had never seen came in.

"Who do you think?" I said, "Your mother's ahijadas and ahijados."

My dad twisted his mouth in disapproval. "Goddaughters and godsons of what? The religion is a lie."

"Shh, be nice." But my dad's about-to-boil-over anger made me see that I was not just going to be a buffer between Carlos and my family, but also between my dad and the Santeros. I looked around wondering where the Japanese clients were. To my utter horror, they were up at the open casket, staring at Ana. I tugged at my dad's jacket.

"Oh my god, Dad. Since they saw everyone going over there to look at the body, they must have thought they should, too! Stop them. It's creepy. Gross. I haven't even gone up there to

see her and she's my grandma, or Ana, or whatever she is."

"Well, if they wanted to go up there, what do you want me to do?" He asked shrugging his shoulders, kind of amused. I wasn't amused at all. I went to go sit next to Carlos again, who also, seemed amused by the Japanese clients staring at Ana's body. "I would go talk to them," he said, "but I don't think they speak English."

The strangers, who were coming in politely, said "Hi" to me and Carlos, though they didn't know who we were. The more curious ones asked me how I knew their Madrina Ana. When I told them I was Ana's oldest granddaughter, Natalia, they were impressed, and probably surprised they'd never even heard of me.

"You can call me what Ana used to call me," I said, "la cabrona, who made her a grandmother before anyone should be made a grandmother."

They laughed uncomfortably. I could've let Ana die a sweet, loving grandmother, but I am my grandmother's granddaughter after all so I wasn't going to be nice.

"Esperanza is here." I heard some of the ladies saying, no longer interested in my story. I, too, was no longer interested in my story. Hell, who wants to know about boring old me who just works and goes to school when you have the drama of the resurrection of La Esperanza.

"Se ve muy bien." I heard all the ladies whisper to each other. She did look good, a little too skinny, though. She could've used a tamal or two, but she looked good. She had always been a pretty girl with light olive skin, big green eyes, and long lashes she once cut off down to her eye-lids when we were kids.

"Dad, did you know Esperanza was going to be here? Where was she all this time?" I asked, walking over to him.

"Your mom didn't tell you the story of her recent reappearance?"

"No," I said, intrigued.

"Esperanza and my mom's Santero Grandfather eloped and moved to Miami back when she was like fifteen. You were fifteen, too. You guys are the same age. They had two kids, and then when she and the kids left him a few weeks ago, because he beat them, she came to hide here in L.A. at her estranged sister's house. Her sister is my cousin Patricia, who you don't really know because the family doesn't like her because she's queer. El Santero called ICE on them, knowing Patricia and her wife have no papers. The house was raided, but no one had been home. Fortunately, the neighbor had called to warn them that ICE was at their house, so they didn't come home. In fact, I don't even know if they've gone back since."

"Jesus, never a dull moment with your family, dad." I did recall hearing something about a Patricia, but no one seemed to ever want to talk about her. I would ask my mom all about Patricia later.

As far as Esperanza was concerned, I was going to have to face the bull by the horns or, as we say in Spanish, de tomar el toro por los cuernos, so I went up to her. "Hola, Esperanza, que milagro que te dejas ver."

Yes, I totally used the very passive-aggressive salutation of, "What a miracle you're letting yourself be seen." Well, when in Rome.

"Hola, Nati," she said, using my kid name and leaning over to kiss me on the cheek. "The kiss of Judas," my mom always says when someone in dad's family gives her a kiss. Esperanza greeted me as if she'd seen me yesterday.

I had questions for her like, "Why that guy? He was like thrice your age and not even cute. Why did you disappear for twenty years? And now are you here for good? Did your long lashes ever grow back? And why did you cut them to begin with? Do you have an eating disorder?"

I asked nothing. I just returned the cold greeting and went back to sit next to Carlos. "Who's that?" he asked, and I told him the brief history of Esperenza as I had just learned it.

Most of the night, I sat with my hands in my lap, just waiting for the night to end, feeling que no tenia velo en este entierro, no candle in this funeral, or as we say in English, no dog in this fight, because these people were strangers to me, and I knew that after tonight, I'd never see them again, and I very much looked forward to that.

The Japanese clients decided it was time to leave. They came and bid my dad goodbye, and I walked them to the door as they bowed their way out, walking backwards. I hoped they wouldn't trip and fall in that shitty concrete.

I lingered by the entrance, relieved they had gone when a group of young black men, dressed in the staple white clothing that Santeros wear, came in. They held canes, drums, masks, and a horse's tail. My dad's sister, Karina, saw them and rushed over to show them in, greeting them all as if they were the Second Coming. Bitch had barely given me a nod all night. The Santeria ceremony was about to begin, so I got excited. I loved the drums and the dances and the intensity of when a Santo possessed one of those present.

But next thing you know, Dad, Carlos, and I were shoved out, and the doors closed behind us. We were not invited to this part of my dad's mother's funeral. Ana would have demanded we be let in.

"What the fuck?" my dad said.

I was glad he had been too slow to realize what was happening.

"Their misa Santera is about to start. Don't you hear the drums?" I asked him.

"Isn't that nice?" my dad said. "I'm going in there to stop them. Who the fuck do they think they are leaving us out here? She's my mother, too."

"Your family, dad, that's who they are. And you should be used to this by now. But just this once, can you just let it go? It's your family's religion, your mother's religion. Let her have this. I don't like how they've shunned you since you set foot off the plane, making arrangements behind your back, going against your wishes even though you're floating the bill, but I let it go. I don't ever plan on seeing these people again now that Ana is gone, so let them do whatever they want."

He pretended I said nothing and turned to Carlos to talk shop about networks and IP addresses. For the first time in the night I was glad Carlos was there. My dad was good at avoiding things and not showing emotion. The fact that he didn't even cry at his mother's funeral was not surprising to me at all. I had never seen my dad cry.

Frustrated, I went behind the building to have a cigarette. I saw a kid pacing around in the dark. I walked up to him to ask him if he needed something, but as the streetlight hit his eyes, I knew exactly who he was. He was a beautiful boy with caramel skin and green eyes. Esperanza's green eyes.

"Hi, I'm Natalia, your mother's niece. What's your name?"

He had probably been shoved outside like we had been because he hadn't been baptized into Santeria yet.

"I'm Josh, and I know who you are," he said shyly. He must've been somewhere around ten.

"You're a really handsome boy," I said.

"Gracias," he said, turning to the window with his ear to the glass. We could faintly hear drums and people raising their voices.

I tried to distract Josh. "Are you in school?"

"Yes," he said, stealing a kiss from me before running away. "I love you Natalia."

I pulled him as he tried to get away, and I gave him a hug. "I love you too, Josh." He broke

loose, running off to the front of the funeral home. It was one thing to hear the rumors about the lost years of Esperanza, but seeing her son in the flesh was proof of the life the family whispered about.

I finished my cigarette and went back to stand with Carlos and my dad. Los Santeros dressed in white were now outside, too, talking and smoking. I went back into the funeral home, assuming I was now allowed inside again.

When I went back in, I was the only one there, so I went over to the Guest Book. I had no intention of signing it. I had nothing to say. I flipped the pages, violating people's privacy by reading their messages to the woman who wouldn't even let me call her "abuelita" and always demanded I address her as "Ana." My dad and I had been the only ones who hadn't signed. Even Carlos signed: "My most sincere condolences. Amigo para siempre, Carlos Alvarez."

Friend for life. Carlos was always so good to my dad despite the fact that these people shunned him. But he, like me, was doing this for my dad, not them.

People had made their way back in again, and Carlos and I went to go sit back down where we had been before getting kicked out. Just then, a Catholic Priest, in full regalia, came in about to start the mass.

"Orale!" Carlos said. "Why the Catholic Padrecito? I thought they were Santeras."

"They're a fucking fraud, that's what they are. All religions are a fraud," my dad said, walking up to us.

I had given up on lecturing my dad. I turned to Carlos. "Santeras are also Catholic. They worship African Orishas and Catholic Saints the same." I didn't need to continue on as to why dad's family practiced Santeria. Carlos knew they were from the Mexican region of Veracruz, just across the gulf from Cuba, which was heavily influenced by the Afro-Caribbean Island, even in their cuisine, with those delicious fried plantains Ana used to make.

Everyone took their seats. Family had to sit in the front row, so I left Carlos and went to sit in between my dad and Esperanza. She was kneeling with her head in her hands, reciting the Our Father.

Since when is this one so devout? I wondered. Then I remembered she had eloped with a Godfather of Santeria after all.

As the priest prepared the chalice and communion, which would come towards the end of the Mass, I noticed he had a wedding band on his finger. I wasn't Catholic or Santera, but I knew that was weird. Maybe things had recently changed and I had missed the tweet from the Roman Catholic Church saying priests were now allowed to marry.

Esperanza finished reciting her Our Father, looking up at the priest for the first time. She got close to me, whispering in my ear, "What the fuck? Is el padre married or what the fuck?"

I laughed. My dad's family had always been mean, but also incredibly hilarious with all their cussing, which they made into a beautiful art form.

The mass began, and the boring-ass priest monotonously carried on. El Padrecito didn't do a whole mass, fortunately, but then he asked that the family in the front pew kneel down and pray. So we did.

He started with the first family member at the beginning of the row, moving right towards dad and me at the end. The priest put his fist out and asked each person to kiss his big-ass priest ring. He went on, one by one. Every single one of the family members gladly kissed the man's ring. I wasn't going to do that. Guácala. Gross. So what would I do when he came up expecting me to kiss his ring?

When he came up to my dad first, putting

his fist up so dad would kiss it, he took the priest's fist, opened it, and shook his hand as if he were a business associate. I did the same when the priest came to me next. I guess the priest quickly found out who the non-believers in the family were. The priest moved on past me, and Esperanza kissed his ring.

After the ring-kissing, everyone lined up to take communion. Carlos, dad, and I split without even saying goodbye. On the drive home, my dad and I laughed so hard.

"El pinche viejo is crazy if he thought I was going to kiss his ring," my dad said. "But I didn't know what I was going to do. Ignore him? Punch him? Walk away? So the first thing that occurred to me was to just shake his hand."

"I wasn't going to kiss his hand, either, so it was just perfect, dad. Just perfect."

We were silent for some time. "Dad. I'm really sorry your mother died."

He reached over and held my hand.

We called mom and Carmen on speaker phone and told them how the night had gone. How the Japanese clients were there and had gone up to the open casket; how Carlos showed up out of nowhere and everyone ignored him; how Esperanza made a surprise appearance and Ramón wept; and how Maria, Ramón's wife, cried more than anyone, even though Ana hated her guts and beat the shit out of her often.

"Pinche vieja fake," my mom said. "She's always complaining to me about Ana."

"I'm so glad I wasn't there," Carmen said. "We have no business being there with those people. We have no dog in that fight, or as you guys say—"

"—no tenemos vela en este entierro. Carmen, when are you going to speak Spanish like the rest of us?" my mom lectured, veering us off into an argument about that.

"Anyway, la noche de locos has finally ended, and the four of us are all the family we have and need," Dad said, sounding as glad as I was that his mother's funeral was over.

Rebeca Ladrón de Guevara hides in Los Angeles, California. Her fiction has previously appeared in *Chicago Literati, Sonora Review, Badlands Literary Journal, The Oakland Review* and *The Latino Book Review Magazine 2020.*

Untitled | Kris Surovjak

Kris Surovjak is a the Senior Associate Director of Admission at Whitman College, an avid hiker who loves riding a bicycle to work.

A thank you note for the large, balding man who saved my friend from the mosh pit floor at the Möngöl Hörde show:

Casey Smith

She accidentally told me about it three separate times
like each one was the first, and that is how I know it is important,

how much her life bent around that moment: your hands.
Imagine: we hear Kimberly and her boyfriend are going to New York,

and it is such a big deal that we're all, *What if you're getting engaged?*
and she is getting engaged, but not on this trip—sometimes,

people go north for hardly any reason at all, like you, perhaps.
Maybe you live in New York—maybe for so long

that when it snows, it doesn't even feel like a prayer anymore,
and you don't watch the angels funnel your cloud breath back into the sky—

maybe, you don't even like Möngöl Hörde that much,
the show Kimberly drove eleven hours for—

maybe, you heard guitars tuning from the street and wandered in.
Imagine: you are twenty-one and from South Carolina,

and even though you are wearing your non-slip boots,
the sweat pooling on the bar floor sweeps your feet from under you,

and you land on your back in Brooklyn,
and the shimmering bodies above you are so busy bumping auras

they can't hear you yell, so when a large man tumbles into your eyeline
you swat him on the inner thigh, and he's like, *Shit, dude*

V V V

and plucks you off the ground by your slippery armpits.
Imagine: how you looked to Kimberly in that moment, to her cat Skeeter,
watching from Heaven,

the neon bar lights haloing your corkscrew beard:
Santa Claus seven beers deep, bleeding from the head.

She tried to thank you but the bass jittered the words to the ceiling,
and everyone was still dancing.

When we met up back home, Kimberly lifted the sleeve of her too-big flannel
to reveal a single, greening bruise and said, *I sort of wish it wouldn't go away,*

and I imagine you, stepping out of a muggy bar and into the wind.

Casey Smith is a poet from South Carolina with a twelfth house moon. She is an MFA candidate at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. Her work explores themes such as chronic illness, pop culture, and intimacy. Her poems are published or forthcoming in *Passages North, SICK Magazine, Booth,* and *Okay Donkey.*

The Even Keel of a Well Told Lie

Mark Jacobs

NOBODY HITCHHIKED ANY MORE, not through this America so full of dread and bad history. That did not necessarily mean the thing could not be done. Thumb out. If a person were leaving Broadhope County in south Virginia headed toward a destination he was as yet unable to visualize, it could not hurt to try for a lift. Not on the highway, where police prowled, just a plain old country road. Thumb out.

He put the odds at slim to none that somebody would stop and pick him up, this close to a dense wood of loblolly pines, under a gray sky in late October, a quarter mile from a broken-armed scarecrow in a field of cornstalk stubble. Guilt by association. Slimmer still, those odds, that it would be a woman who stopped, but she did. He did not know cars. Makes and models evaded him. This one was red and looked sort of new.

"Where you headed?" the woman wanted to know. Her name was Avis, she informed him. She was black and old. She had a plain, calculating face and was not afraid of him.

"Oklahoma," he told her, sliding into the passenger seat and strapping the belt across his chest.

His name was Quill. He was thirty and as of this morning no longer had a home. He was a man who had long allowed fear to dominate his decisions, his lack of decisions, but that was over and done with.

"You got a ways to go," Avis told him, "but I don't need to tell you that. What's in Oklahoma?"

One thing he sensed right at the outset, in the freshness of change: lying was a lot like sailing. It called for an even keel as you cut through deep water. Not that he had ever sailed, but within the limits of his experience his mind was nimble.

"My granny died," he said. "She left me a chicken farm in Arrowhead County. Not a big one, but it's a going concern or so I'm told."

"I am sorry for your loss. You were close to your granny, I guess."

"Pen pals, you might say. We kept in touch."

"I see."

Next to Avis on the seat was a telephone. She could pick it up and check to see if there was such a place as Arrowhead County, Oklahoma. But she didn't. She wasn't going far, just to the Exxon station four or five miles from where she picked him up. She told him about the Easter, years back, her auntie wore a floppy bonnet to church and was attacked by a robin because the hat had a nest of simulated twigs

in which rested little wooden eggs, painted pale blue.

Getting out of the car at the gas station, he thanked her for the ride.

"You want a piece of advice?" she said.

He nodded.

"You gonna tell a lie, do it with more conviction."

He nodded again, frozen in place until she pumped her gas and waved and went back up the same road they had come down together. The yellow grass in the field on the east side of the Exxon was briefly black with crows. Snoddy used to sit on the back porch and shoot them out of the sky with a shotgun. That was years ago in a simpler time when the rivers ran white with whiskey and the hearts of lovers cracked like tragic eggs. Snoddy was a man who had been his stepdaddy for a number of years, until that too came to its end. Quill always felt bad for the murdered birds, watching them plummet to the indifferent earth. With his ultra-keen eyesight he saw the birdshot, each tiny pellet, from the moment it left the barrel of the gun until it smashed into the unsuspecting crow. His momma called that bullshit. His concern for shot birds was just weakness, she insisted, it was the shameful weakness of a boy by the name of Penfield Quill.

He went into the little convenience store that was attached to the garage. He had a child's weakness for gummy worms, but it was time to put away such things, on top of which there was the question of money. He needed some. He came back out again. It seemed more like fortune than luck when, after an hour of standing around, a geezer pulled up in a truck older than he was and asked Quill did he want to make twenty bucks.

"Doing what?"

The old guy, whose beard derived from the Old Testament, shook his head, bothered by the need to explain. Because Quill was not in a position to bargain for anything, not even information, he went with the man to a one-horse farm set back off the road where dogs on chains leapt and snarled. There was a pile of firewood. It needed moving from out behind the barn to the porch, where it had to be stacked leaving room for the front door to swing open. Winter was on its way, and fires called for. Quill moved the split logs with a wheelbarrow and did not hate the job.

After a while the old man came out with two cups of coffee, and Quill took a breather on the porch steps.

"Ain't you got a regular job?" the farmer said. On either side of his large beard, his ears were question marks.

"I had one," Quill told him inaccurately, "but I quit."

"How come?"

"Hadn't been feeling good. Went to the doctor. She told me I have a rare disease."

"Oh yeah? What kind of disease?"

"First you lose your memory. Then it comes back, but everything you remember is different, and mostly wrong. After a while, you can't cry anymore, or laugh, or even be afraid. All you can do is look straight ahead and wish things. Weird things, according to the doctor, like you wish you could be a wood duck, or that rain came from the ground and went up into the sky."

"Damnedest disease I ever heard of."

"Like I say, it's rare. I figured, what the heck, if that's what I've got to look forward to, might as well see the country."

"This what you call seeing the country?"

"I'm just getting started."

Quill accepted the old man's offer of a bed for the night. The farmer, whose name was Burnside, cooked sausage and eggs for their dinner, and Quill told him more lies about the symptoms of his disease. He had the sense

Burnside wanted to believe him but was struggling to get past his doubt.

It rained that night. Quill got out of bed in the guest room upstairs and opened the window. He sat there in a straight-backed chair with a sense of bereavement that subtly influenced the falling rain. It made no sense until he realized he was lamenting the loss of the person he had so recently been. Get the hell out, his mother had ordered him the night before. Serious, this time she was. *You ain't gonna freeload off me no more. Get out of your goddamn room and go be a man somewhere.* He was taking her advice but with the foreknowledge that his particular path to manhood was likely to be crooked.

In the morning, Burnside told Quill he knew what he needed. Quill did not ask what that was, but he took his open mind and went with the farmer to a house clear across the county—it was taking longer than Quill had anticipated, getting out of Broadhope—to a yellow house on the outskirts of Red Post, near the trailer park where the Black Muslims lived. Quill had seen the Muslim women shopping at the Kroger, now and then. In their head scarves and self-possession they looked like saints and reinforced his suspicion that he was not the person he ought to be. It was not so much that he was evil as that an insidious worm was forever crawling through his innards, leaving a trail of slime as it went.

Burnside told him to wait in the truck and spoke at some length to a redhaired woman on the porch. Phyllis had big thighs and shifted from one foot to the other as though she had to use the bathroom. The conversation, from Quill's distance, was emphatic, but at the end of it he was inside her little house, in her little wallpapered bedroom, taking off his clothes with a combination of shame and joy, both of them deep. The pattern of the wallpaper was row upon row of pink roses and green leaves.

When he had turned seventeen, Snoddy was still his stepdaddy and took him to a house like this one in Briery, the county seat. So he was able to tell the woman truthfully that he was not a virgin. Not that she asked.

"You're an unusual fuck," she told him after they had been in the bed an hour or so and were worn out with mutual thrashing.

Quill focused, greatly desirous of getting this next one right. "I had a twin brother. Identical. Growing up, we had our own language. We could even do math problems in it."

"Something happen to him?"

"You won't believe me."

"Not if you don't tell me, I won't."

"Our momma didn't like it, us being so close, going around saying stuff nobody could understand. She called a man in the federal government, I don't know who. They came in a tan-colored car and took my brother away. We were age eleven at the time. A sedan. The tan car was a sedan, four-door, and the driver had a red tie with little blue balloons on it. I remember like it was yesterday."

Phyllis sat up in the bed, and Quill thanked his one lucky star for the sight of her breasts, which were firm and shapely for a woman of her fortyish age, with red-brown nipples that went beautifully with her hair. She lit a cigarette, offered him one he turned down. "What was your brother's name?"

"Wilton. It's not like he's dead. We get reports, every once in a while, about the scientific tests they're running on him at a laboratory in New Jersey. The reports make him out to be some kind of genius. He's a hero. I miss him. I miss him a lot."

"Poor Penfield, stuck home with no way to be a hero. Still, you got Old Man Burnside to spring for an hour of my time, and I know for a fact that man's wallet only opens once every

couple of years. You must have a little of what Wilton's got in you."

Quill didn't answer. He was thinking about Oklahoma, wishing there were a county called Arrowhead in that western state. He asked Phyllis if she minded, could he take a nap in her bed.

"Suit yourself," she told him. "No extra charge."

It was pleasant to watch her dress from the snug disordered bed, which retained her scent. He had wondered often enough what it looked like, seeing a woman put on her bra. In this case, the bra was black, and the sight of its cups capturing her breasts moved him. But then he fell into a profound sleep. It was probably all that firewood hauling the day before. At home, in his previous life, he had not been actively active. A dream came to him, but he was able to switch it off and sleep unimpeded.

When he woke, Phyllis was drinking a cup of tea on the front porch and scratching her ankle. She was dressed to go out, waiting for him to finish his nap.

"I'm running into town. You want me to drop you somewhere?"

"Sure."

"Where you going?"

"New Jersey."

"To see your brother."

"It's about time, wouldn't you say?"

So she dropped him downtown in Briery. They shook hands like business partners, and Quill walked to Memorial Park. The October air had a tang in it. The tang of death, he called it. Pleased with the description, he sat on a bench.

She's not a bad mother, he heard himself say, but it sounded like somebody else's voice, one he was not sure he ought to trust. Belinda Ruth had lived her own difficult life. Her childhood stories were enough to curl the hair on a bald man. Why wouldn't she take it out on her son, now and then? Well, and of course he had grown up to be her special disappointment. He missed his room, which was where he spent most of his time. But with an effort of will he put his mother and his ex-home out of his mind. He was a long way from Oklahoma and an inherited chicken farm.

The college kid walking by toking on a cigarette said sure when Quill asked him if he could bum a smoke. That was not how you said it, not in today's America where there would be a cooler way to ask. Quill had never smoked a cigarette in his life so had to pretend to inhale in order not to make a coughing fool of himself. But Will—that was the student's name—didn't seem to notice his defective smoking, and had some time to kill. He took a seat on Quill's bench, and Quill retrospectively analyzed what he had told Phyllis about his brother Wilton. It was not yet the essential lie toward which he was making his stumbling way. Still, he had made enough progress in the science of the thing to have this insight: how the right verbal forgery might lead him to truth.

His power of invention was momentarily shut down. As badly as he wanted to, he could not come up with anything worth saying to Will except thanks for the cigarette, and the student moved on.

Suddenly it was the evening of the second day of Quill's adventure into manhood and he had not left the county. Some trip, some voyage of self-discovery. As an escapee, he was a failure.

Wrong.

Mentally, he put up his hand in a stop sign. He absolutely could not be what his mother had forever charged him with being. Slow learner, maybe. All right. He could admit that much about himself. But not a failure.

A place to spend the night. He left the park and walked dark streets, stopping at a fast food

place to eat a piece of fried chicken and drink a glass of water. The teenage girl at the window handed him the water with contempt. Free water was for losers. But he had to husband his money, not knowing what lay ahead. When it seemed late enough nobody would notice, he lay down on the porch of a big house with pillars in the Whispering Pines neighborhood. He fell dead asleep despite the chilly air, the ungiving boards, no pillow. Nature, he surmised, was protecting him.

A squirrel woke him early, chattering from the steps. That was a good thing, because he was able to roust himself and move on before somebody in the house came out onto the porch to pick up the Richmond paper, which had been tossed there as Quill slept. *Don't bother reading that crap,* Snoddy used to say, *all the news in the damn paper stinks to high heaven,* which at the time made Quill wonder if there was a low heaven, more accessible to a person like him.

His penis as he walked reminded him of Phyllis, and the same shame and joy he had felt in her bedroom yesterday came back to visit like two old friends who never went anywhere without the other. His dick swelled and jumped around in his pants, calling out curses and blessings in a tongue with which he was not overly familiar. Before he could think about any kind of Oklahoma, he knew he had to see the red-haired woman one more time.

It took the better part of the third day of his journey to get back to Red Post. He hiked to the edge of Briery and put his thumb out, but nobody stopped. The early spring heat didn't help. His face got red with it, and his forehead was wet with sweat, giving him the look of a man in distress, a sight from which it was all too easy to look away. He waited a good hour, a bad hour, before hiking some more. He got a short ride and was put down at a crossroads that bisected a fenced pasture, from one side of which seven llamas of different sizes and colors looked at him with tall disdain, their mouths working steadily as they chewed.

Another short ride. Another long walk.

Not until the sun was going down did he reach Phyllis's yellow house. As he went up her drive, an army of noisy starlings pivoted in the shimmering rose-gold sky, on their way to the night's bivouac. He gave thanks in general to see her car. She was home. The car, like the house, was yellow.

She did not want to let him in.

"Please," he said.

"I'm busy."

"I owe you an apology," he explained.

"Apology accepted. Now move on, Penfield."

"I told you a lie, yesterday. A whopper."

"I knew you never had no heroic twin brother in New Jersey. You ain't that good of a liar."

"Can I come in and tell you the truth?"

"If you're after a free piece of ass, look someplace else."

"I only want to tell you the truth," he promised.

The important lie was crystalizing in him, growing firmer, acquiring a more definite shape, with every passing minute. That was a relief. Tramping country roads all day had brought him to a low ebb of discouragement. Now, though, crossing Phyllis's threshold into her cozy living room, he had a strong sense of something that resembled accomplishment about to be.

She sat in her saggy upholstered chair eating a bowl of spaghetti and drinking red wine. She could not help being sexy, not any more than his penis could help its intermittent high-pitched yelping. She was wearing jeans and a blouse with a V neck that emphasized the

indisputable fact of her breasts.

"You want some spaghetti, help yourself," she told him. "It's a pot on the stove."

Quill thought he would tell a better lie if he had something in his stomach, so he helped himself to a bowl of spaghetti and poured wine into a tumbler. He sat opposite Phyllis, and they watched each other eat.

"You want the TV on?" she asked him.

"No, thanks."

"You think I'm a whore."

"To be honest, I haven't given it any thought."

She frowned, which increased her age by a good five years. "I'm no whore, I'm a woman in a messed up situation."

"It's complicated, I bet."

"You don't know the half of it."

He let her go on for a few minutes, explaining the history of her personal and professional mistakes. It was the least he could do, since she was going to be the repository of his indispensable lie. When she came to a breaking point, he began.

"You hear about that house fire over to Darlington Branch?"

She shook her head.

"You will. That was our house, the Quill place."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Furnace blew up, an old oil burner. My momma, my stepdaddy, our two dogs and two cats, they all got burnt up in the fire."

"But not you?"

"I was out in the barn when it blew. I ran up and tried to get into the house, hopefully save somebody, but the flames were already too big. That old farmhouse went up like a matchstick."

"And you lost your family."

"Yes, ma'am. And also the deed to the property, and a coin collection my granddaddy willed me—one guy that looked it over told me the collection was worth ten thousand dollars, but that was a few years ago so probably it was worth more now—and the family Bible. Not that we were religious, but it had the history of the Quills going back a hundred and fifty years. On the flyleaf, you know how the old-timers used to write that stuff down? Also, I lost a photo album with the only pictures of Lottie we had."

"Lottie?"

"My baby sister. She died when she was six months old. From pneumonia."

"Did you have insurance on the house?"

"Momma missed too many payments. Anyway I am shit out of luck. No money to bury them on, far as that goes."

"So you have nothing."

He nodded. The science of telling a lie included knowing when to shut your mouth.

He leaned forward and placed his empty spaghetti bowl on the coffee table, next to an African violet in a clay pot. He liked the plant's being there, in the home of a woman with red hair who was coping as best she could with her situation. The deep purple blossoms were, to his irreligious mind, a note of grace.

"I don't know what in hell to believe," Phyllis told him.

"Believe the truth. That story about my brother Wilton… well, I never had no brother of that name and never will. The truth is, it's all over for me, period and the end."

Finally, he had gotten it right. Knowing that, being sure, gave him a warm feeling inside that complemented the wine. Speaking of which, he went to the kitchen and brought back the bottle. He poured them both another glass. Facing each other they drank slowly as the night came down on the yellow house, on Broadhope County, on the well told lie of Penfield Quill's wrack and ruin. There were tears in his eyes as he lifted his glass, as well

there should be, just not the tears Phyllis presumed they were.

"All that hard luck coming down on your head," she said with understandable suspicion, "it's sad all right, it's real sad. But it don't entitle you to no free nooky."

He shrugged. "How 'bout we see what's on TV now?"

She shrugged, her shoulders moving just as much as his had, just as little. "Remote's around here somewhere."

Quill was not big on television, as a rule, but he didn't mind watching a little with her. This was how it had worked, just as he'd had an inkling it would. Find and tell the exactly right lie, and you punched through to the truth. Which in its perversity had been hiding on you. And the truth was this: he was a seedling, head just barely popping up out of the dirt. It was not the end, it was the beginning. Of everything. His life was not over, it was just starting. With any luck, with the right combination of sunlight and rain and whatever it was that trees ate, a year from now he would be a sapling. In Phyllis's little living room, in the heat of her reasonable reluctance, that sounded pretty good. He got up and hunted around for the remote.

Mark Jacobs has published more than 150 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic, Playboy, The Baffler, The Iowa Review,* and *The Hudson Review.* His five books include *A Handful of Kings,* published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy,* by Soho Press. His website can be found at **markjacobsauthor.com**.

RULES (Ferengi Feminism) | April Bey

good mourning

Edward L. Canavan

along the blade of summer's grave
the days still burn
well into the evening hours…
but now, at dawn, there is a breeze
with the slightest hint of winter
upon it.

Edward L. Canavan is an American poet whose work has most recently been published in *Harbinger Asylum, The Nervous Breakdown,* and *North of Oxford.* His first poetry collection entitled "Wreck Collection" was released by Cyberwit Press in March 2019. Edward's poems were featured as part of The Poetry of Place exhibit at South Pasadena City Hall Gallery in March 2020. He is a native of the Bronx, NY and currently resides in North Hollywood, California.

Ascension

Hannah Baumgardt

I SIT SHOTGUN IN THE TRUCK Emily stole half an hour ago and watch empty cornrows run alongside us. The field's gold is muddy with half-melted snow, and puddles flash as the sun ascends the sky.

The actual theft of the truck isn't quite illegal. Emily only stole it from her dad—borrowed, really. Or perhaps it's more illegal, as she doesn't have a license. Neither of us are yet sixteen. Emily's face is too innocent to give the impression of any age older than fourteen. While I could fake up to seventeen with makeup, I also happen to be paralyzed from the waist down. Which takes me out of the driving equation.

So Emily drives, eyes wide despite the fact that not a single car is visible along the stretch of country road.

"You're a great driver," I say to break the silence.

She doesn't take her eyes from the asphalt. "A million thanks, Wren, and I would be eight times more confident if this wasn't my first theft and we weren't en route to the second."

"You're also a great thief," I say and despite everything, we both laugh.

Ten minutes later, we arrive at the parking lot off the side of our high school auditorium. Our seat belts click simultaneously. I push the door open and focus on the spring breeze rather than Emily's clunking as she fumbles the wheelchair out of the truck's back seat. She unfolds the chair and readies it by the passenger side.

"Sorry I had to steal the world's tallest car," she says, looking up at me.

"I'm used to heights."

We maneuver my useless legs and slightly less useless upper half into the chair. I used to whirl through aerial cartwheels and back handsprings with ease. Now it's a feat of gymnastics to get out of a damned car.

I wheel myself to the auditorium's side entrance. Emily walks beside me. She gets the door and we slip into the white linoleum-floored hall connecting the theater to the dressing rooms and the rest of the school. From backstage comes low chatter and the louder call of lines. Rehearsal for the community production of Peter Pan is underway.

We stop near the end of the hall beside a metal ladder screwed into the cinderblocks. The ladder leads up the wall to the equipment storage room. The backstage door stands ajar not far away. This part of the plan was Emily's masterwork. She's a member of the theater

guild and practically has schedules and equipment memorized.

Emily tugs her t-shirt straight, then twirls the ragged ends of the holes in her jeans. "Maybe you should've stayed in the car. What if someone finds you while I'm up there?"

I clear my throat against the rush of helplessness and anger her suggestion brings. We've already had this conversation. The rational part of me agrees with her. I'm no use here. In all honesty, I'm a liability. But my pride has always been louder than my rationality.

"I'll knock on the ladder if anyone's coming. That way you can turn off the lights."

"Okay..." Emily adjusts her backpack, glances up and down the hallway, and ascends the ladder into the storage attic. The trapdoor is already open; Peter Pan is an equipment-heavy production.

I roll the chair back and forth as I wait for her. Boxes rustle and something heavy shudders the ceiling above me. "Macbeth!" Emily curses, and I grin. A theater nerd to her core.

She's up there for what feels like an hour. I scoot my chair back to watch a sliver of stage through the half-open door. A teen boy dressed in green sails against the black backdrop. The flight wires connected to the harness beneath his costume are hardly visible. The scene sends my mind slipping into the rut it's worn over the past year: flight. Not the normal fantasy of a teen girl, and I assure you that until a year ago, I would have been picturing our star athlete Ben Kirowski shirtless. Now I see only the freedom which was mine in those seconds I sailed from the uneven bars, through the air.

I don't remember much of the week after the accident. But I remember lying in the hospital bed, hazy with painkillers, insisting my mom entertain me with anything related to flying. We watched Up, Mary Poppins, and How to Train Your Dragon. God, I even watched Superman, and I hate superhero movies. I could feel those moments, when the ground left and all expectations hung in the air. I felt it a year ago and I will feel it again today. I don't expect Emily to believe that reality is the most beautiful thing in the world—more beautiful than Ben Kirowski shirtless—but she believes that I believe, and that is enough.

At last Emily taps down the ladder, her backpack bulky with gear. A screw-topped wire pokes through the zipper.

"Coast clear," I say, though my eyes haven't registered the hallway in minutes.

"Let's high-tail it!"

She grabs the chair handles and we run down the hall. It would be less conspicuous to walk, but the speed and slap of Emily's converse are too wonderful. I swing my legs out to hit the door as we approach, but nothing responds. I swallow sour realization and instead lean forward, bracing my arms. I smack the door open and we careen across the parking lot. The chair jolts, shooting pain from my tailbone to my skull. Emily spins to a halt beside the truck. We glance at the auditorium's side door. No one emerges. Emily joggles her backpack and grins. Despite the pain, I smile back.

Once I'm again situated shotgun, chair and backpack stowed behind, Emily revs the engine and pulls with ultimate caution onto the road. Two minutes out of town, her knuckles are clenched white around the wheel. Birds flutter in my own stomach, too. We've got to time this next step perfectly, and it's me who will have to do the bulk of the work. Silence clogs the car for the half hour it takes to reach the pull-off marked 'International Eagle Center.'

We drive through the tunnel of budding trees, tires crackling over gravel. The woods open to reveal a circle for parking, two dumpsters, and the slant-roofed brick of the Eagle Center. I unbuckle, but Emily turns to me.

"This is big, Wren. It's, like, abduction. You're sure?"

I laugh away the nervousness her words trigger. "It's not abduction, Emily! It's just stealing."

"Oh wonderful. Just stealing."

"You don't have to do anything but hold some cages. It's Saturday; no one should be here for an hour yet. We'll be fine."

"Should be…" she echoes, but gets out of the truck.

I slide the key ring from my pocket. I stole it this morning from Mom's line of hooks by the door. Now I twirl the ring around a finger as Emily wheels us to the front entrance. Around and around go the keys, burning a white line into my flesh. Around and around, as I had done on the bars a year ago today…

I press Mom's ID badge to the scanner. The light flashes green and the lock clicks. Emily pushes the door open.

The interpretation hall spreads before us, its skylight washing the floor in gray. Waist-high information boards line the walls. Stuffed eagles lift wings behind glass. The front desk lies empty, computers silent. Three halls branch from the main room, labeled 'Americas,' 'Europe and Asia,' and 'Africa.' I run my tongue over my teeth. Mom is the director of the International Eagle Center, and I've been with her on plenty of weekend trips feeding and treating birds, cleaning. But the Center has never seemed ominous before now.

"We'll get the goldens first," I whisper, though there's no need for secrecy. The janitor left half an hour ago, the doors locked behind us, and it'll be another hour before staff arrive for the afternoon shift. "Americas wing."

I take the lead, pushing myself down the hall. Murals of mountains, plains, and soaring raptors decorate the walls. When we reach a gray side-door with the words 'Employees Only,' I flash Mom's ID and twist the handle open. Emily holds the door and together we slip into the cement corridor. I flip a switch and florescent bulbs pop into life above, illuminating the poles, nets, nooses, and long yellow gloves hung along the wall. I unhook two pairs of these, handing one to Emily and sliding the other over my arms.

Emily flexes her hands in their giant leather casing. "I don't know about this, Wren…"

"Grab that net," I tell her before scanning the ID at a metal door and hauling it half open. Emily pulls it the rest of the way, her net's pole clanging against the chair wheel.

The sound and motion cause a smattering of wings from the habitat beyond. Brown shapes hop along the bare branches, sending twigs and bark to the earth below. The sounds echo slightly from the cement walls and wire-enclosed sky.

I fumble with a Ziplock bag in the netting beneath my chair. Talons scrape above me as I pull out a strip of venison; I have the birds' attention. I hold the meat in my right hand and stretch out my arm. I whistle twice. "Miri!"

Down plunges an eagle large as a refrigerator. She's an absolute beauty, feathers shining even in this dim light. I've always liked the goldens best of all our eagles. Lions of the sky is how I think of them. That was how I thought of myself, up until a year ago… Around and around I spun, the bar burning white into my hips. Then something slipped. My hand, maybe, or the world itself pivoting beneath me. The bar yanked away and I spun without it, free and graceful. Up or down made no difference. I was flying. Or perhaps falling. Who could say?

Miri's tail fans, skating her into a better angle.

I was falling. The spectators in the stands could say. The doctors could say. Even part of me had to agree, sitting in a chair with legs that

itched to stretch but could not. Yet during that fall, I knew an infinite moment where divinity and damnation pivoted so near and did not matter. I knew unbound, absolute incorporeality. No burdening body. No leaden legs. Just the air and the earth and myself in between.

My eyes return to Miri diving through the air. Flying or falling?

I duck, but Miri's wings still cuff me, flinging dark hair into my eyes. Emily scrambles back, trips over her pole, and lands in the dirt. I can't blame her; Miri's wingspan is longer than my dad is tall. The eagle's talons circle my wrist as she lands. She settles her wings, adjusts her grip once, then jabs for the meat. I let her have it and admire the sheen of her feathers, giving Emily a breath to collect herself.

We've trained almost all our birds like this. My parents are international leaders in falconry. Eagles aren't typically used for that sort of thing, but eagle rescue and rehabilitation are only half the purpose of the center. The other half is why Miri is here; education and entertainment. The International Eagle Center houses almost every eagle species in the world. People come from a long way around to view the birds, and, in the case of the goldens, see them perform. I still help in the falconry demonstrations. It's one of the few aspects of life that hasn't changed during the past year. You don't need legs to be with a bird.

Emily picks herself up and I motion her closer. "You can pet her, if you want."

She eyes the bird. Miri eyes her right back, eyes as bold and bright as the sun. "That bird could take my finger off!"

"She won't." I stroke Miri's back to demonstrate. The eagle resettles her wings, but tolerates my touch. After another moment of hesitation, Emily removes one glove and runs a finger over Miri's feathers.

"Good girl," I say, mostly to the bird. Then, "Emily, can you get the kennels?"

"The ones back in the hall? Yeah." She tugs her glove back on. "Keep the door open?"

"Sure." I point my toe to scoot the chair back. After a moment's confusion at my lack of movement, I swear softly and maneuver the chair with my free hand until its wheel jams the door.

While Emily's in the hall, I lace a pair of newly-designed jesses around Miri's talons. They're tighter than typical, without a way for her to get free of them, and have a metal bit attached to their loose end, where something could be screwed in.

I whisper as I work, "You'll be fine, girl. You'll do great. Nothing's going to hurt you. Be strong, that's all."

I grew up around the eagles and have always loved them. But my heart is especially full as I tie the jesses on. When I was little—four, maybe - my dad used to make jokes about me being skinny enough for the eagles to carry away. The image stuck with me and might even be the reason I joined gymnastics. But I've never before put myself into their power quite so literally.

Emily bumbles back into the habitat with a medium-sized dog kennel in either hand as I fit a hood over Miri's head. The eagle startles a bit as the kennels clunk against the doorframe, but I've got her jesses in my fist and she settles down. I cup her shoulders with one hand, ducking her into the kennel. Emily closes the door as I release Miri. She scrabbles against the plastic and batters the walls before getting her balance.

"Good girl," I tell her, and call down the next golden.

Soon we've got the four I want inside their kennels. All females, as they're larger and stronger. All outfitted with hoods and my special jesses.

"Do we really need the others, or should we go?" Emily asks, bouncing on her toes.

"The goldens can each lift thirty pounds, but I'd feel safer with the crowns too. They're stronger." I smile for her. "It won't take long."

We leave the goldens in the interpretation hall and are soon at the Crowned Eagles' habitat in the African wing. These two are a mating pair, less trained than our goldens. Crowns in general are shy and uncooperative. Though I manage to land the male, Emily has to spend what in other circumstances would be a laughable amount of time chasing the female with her long-poled net. At last we have them both outfitted and secure in their kennels.

Back in the interpretation hall, I think to check my phone for the time.

"Shit! Emily, we've got ten minutes before afternoon shift!"

"Holy man!" She grabs two kennels and jogs to the truck. Despite her haste, she's gentle as thistle-down with the eagles as she lines them side by side in the truck bed. I prop the door for her, carrying the last kennel out on my lap. I'm forced to watch, wheeling back and forth as Emily secures the kennels with bungy-cords. It seems to take a stupidly long time to get me into the car. At last we're pulling away. We exchange places on the gravel drive with Vickey, one of the Center's senior staff. She doesn't notice me, though she does squint at all the kennels on our rust-streaked truck.

Emily eases up to forty-five on the highway and I smile grimly. Vickey can call Mom for all the good it will do now. My plan has unfurled its wings.

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Two hours later I perch with legs folded beneath me on the bare rock of the cliff where my family practices falconry. I wear nothing but a white sports bra and underwear. I want to feel. Feel the kiss of stone into my bare legs and the night-whispering wind on my bare back. A theater wire-flying harness cinches my waist and two nylon straps bind each of my arms, circling bicep and wrist. Hooked by carabiners to these straps and the two harness loops are six flight-wires. Tethered to the ends of these are six eagles, four perched on my bare arms, the other two on Emily's gloved ones.

I wait in the golden moments before the sun winks closed its eye. Waves of winter-flattened grass stretch behind me. Before me plunges the yellow scramble of the cliff to the stream below. I close my eyes and feel the warmth of scaled skin and pierce of talons against my arms. A breath of air outlines slips of blood along my skin.

I open my eyes, stare into the ring of the sun as it sparks the prairie across the gorge. "Now."

Emily has been silent for the past hour. I know she is more nervous for this last part of my plan than any other. But she knows I will have peace no other way. And so, because she is the best friend I could ever have, she mirrors the dip and spring of my arms and her voice bolsters my own.

"Hup-ya!"

The birds batter the air, us, and themselves with their wingbeats. I keep my arms held stiff from my sides, letting the flight-wires reel upward. Emily ensures nothing tangles. The harness-wires tighten first, then both arms. Nothing happens for a long moment.

"Hup-ya! Hup-ya!" Emily shouts.

I fight to keep my arms parallel to the ground as my weight rises to my shoulders. Just like gymnastics; I haven't lost my skills yet.

"Hup-ya!"

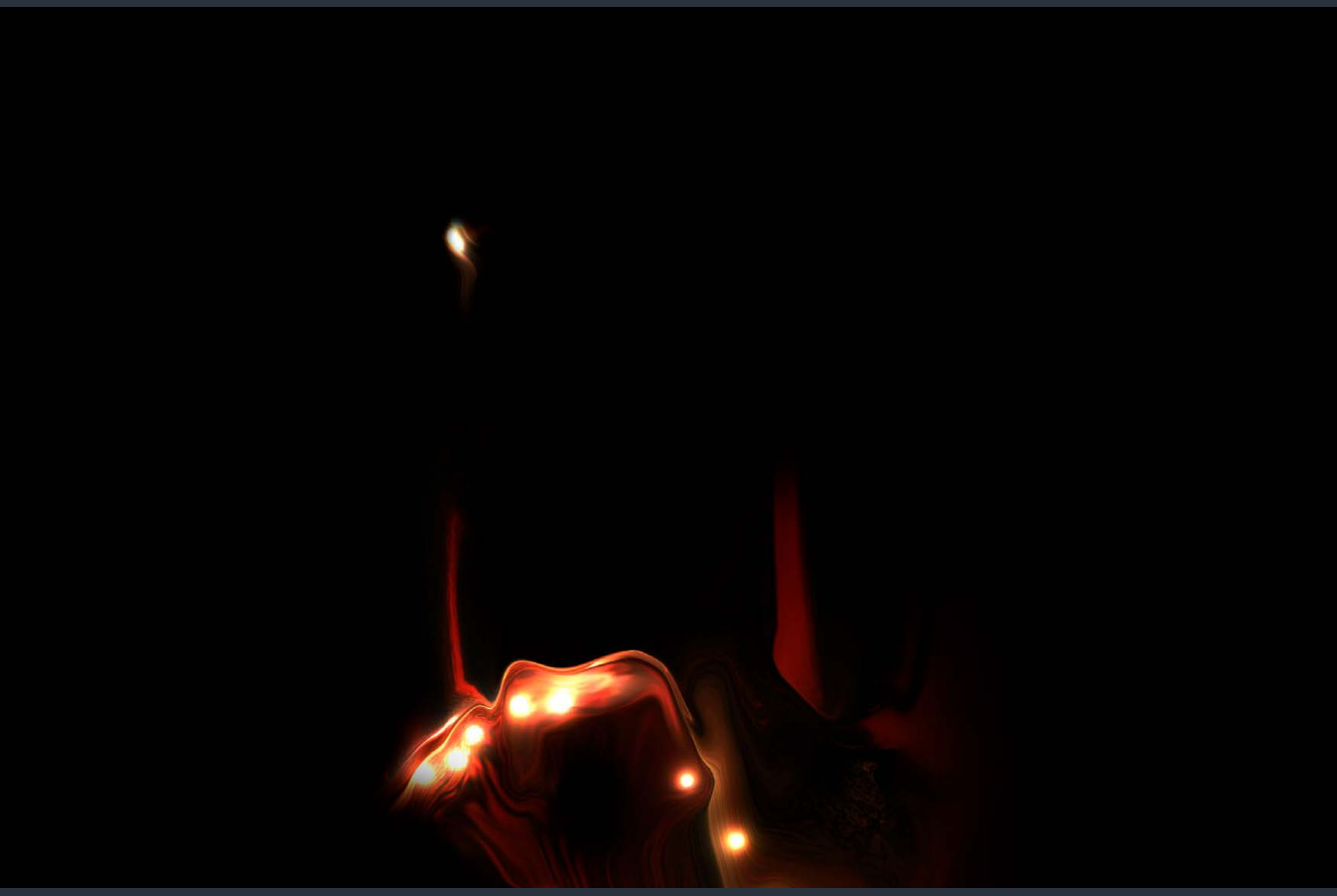
My body lifts until I'm kneeling on the stone. Farther. My breath beats wings in my chest. Now only my toes brush the ground.

I know that for anyone watching I am a girl standing with arms outstretched to the sun. My feet leave the earth. Laughter and tears war in my chest. I close my eyes and bare my throat to the sky.

The world pivots below me, a change in acceleration, a swing forward. The wind whips my hair up and to the side. My muscles quiver with the effort of enforced stiffness. An eagle shrieks above me, wild, unfettered. The air strokes my bare stomach, lifting me.

I laugh freely for the first time in a year.

Hannah Baumgardt is a recent graduate from the College of Saint Benedict, in Minnesota, where she studied creative writing. Baumgardt's stories have been published in *Bridge: The Bluffton Literary Journal* and *Runestone,* among others.



V54 | Joe Lugara

Joe Lugara works have appeared in more than 40 exhibitions throughout the New York Metropolitan Area, including the New Jersey State Museum; Gallery Bergen (Bergen Community College, New Jersey); Proteus Gowanus (Brooklyn, New York); Drawing Rooms (Jersey City, New Jersey); Curious Matter (Jersey City); and in New York City with, among others, Castle Fitzjohns Gallery and 80 Washington Square East Galleries at New York University. Lugara's work can be found at **joelugara.com/dark-art**.

Casey Smith

Frank Zappa and I are the only people at this party who aren't stoned

and we're both, like, being really cool about it.
It's too easy—in this moment—to lie
and make it seem like I'm taking a principled stance
when I'm only abstaining because after two hits
my blinks turn bright yellow
and I start making bad first impressions,
and if there's anyone I've ever wanted to like me,
it's Frank Zappa, right now,
a lone curl escaping from his left pigtail
and swiveling down his neck.
We mosaic the coffee table with peeled beer labels,
and Frank says, *Want a cigarette?*
and tonight I do, even if it's a red,
and he's so good at smoking
that I never even see him ash.
He yanks a streamer from the ceiling,
loops it into a cassette tape, and leaves.

Kelmar Sees All

Carl Tait

"ARE YOU A REAL PSYCHIC?"

They often ask that first. I vary my answer depending on how credulous they sound. The voice on the phone had an old-money Atlanta accent, and I didn't want to play him for too much of a sap. I plucked an answer from the middle ground.

"Many have told me that my insights are remarkable," I said. It was true; I was very good with my clients and many of them had rhapsodized about my powers. Not that I had any such powers, but that was irrelevant.

"Am I going to die?"

Oh, Lord, not one of these. I'm not a doctor and I'm not a psychologist. I can't cure people and enough of my ethics remain intact that I'm not going to lie to anyone about a physical or mental illness.

"My son, everyone dies," I answered in my most pastoral voice.

"Will I die soon?" the voice persisted.

"That is a relative term," I answered, preparing to hang up.

"Will I die this week?" asked the caller, with an undercurrent of genuine fright.

I didn't hang up. "Where are you calling from?" I asked.

"A pay phone."

Did pay phones still exist? I supposed so, but hadn't seen a working one in years.

"Why are you calling me from a pay phone?"

"He will hear me otherwise."

"Who will hear you?" I had now pegged the guy as a crank, but an interesting and potentially profitable one.

There was a long pause. "I shouldn't say anything else over the phone. Could I come to your office or your sanctuary or whatever the proper term is?"

It was close to five o'clock and I had not planned to see any more clients. Actually, I hadn't seen anyone at all that day. Slow time of year. But this frightened fellow had my interest.

"All right," I answered, and gave him my address. "I don't usually schedule consultations at this hour, but if you can be here before six, I will make an exception. I feel that your situation is urgent."

"You are very perceptive," my caller said with new respect. "This is indeed an urgent matter. I will arrive shortly. Good day." There was a click.

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I went into my consulting room to prepare for my visitor. Not much to prepare, really. I

turned on the lighting, which consisted of dim bulbs seated in quaint fixtures. Nothing like a little old-time technology to lend an air of authenticity to a dubious enterprise. I gave the table a perfunctory dusting. The tarot cards were already in place near my seat. They were neither more nor less accurate than other methods of peering into the future, but like the dated lighting, they instilled a certain awed wonder in the type of person who was likely to seek my services.

I ensured that my simple black and white clothing was immaculate as well. No tie, no jacket, and—good God—no turban. No cheesy Magic Swami here. I am Kelmar, spiritual advisor. Great title, isn't it? Says nothing and everything. My clients can read into it whatever they choose.

My real name is Preston Bradley. No, not Bradley Preston. What kind of parent gives their child two last names? Even if I hadn't decided to become a psychic, I probably would have changed my name at some point. These days, I go only by Kelmar and pretend not to hear people who call me by my birth name. If they call me Bradley Preston, I try to accidentally bump into them while walking away.

I heard the sonorous, bell-like tones of my aging doorbell. I walked to the vestibule—yes, of course I have a vestibule—passed through the inner door, and opened the front door. Outside stood a man who was harder to judge than I had expected.

He was well-dressed, of course. He was even wearing a vest. But the voice on the phone had belonged to a portly, middle-aged man, at least in my imagination. The man on my front porch was no more than thirty and was thin to the point of boniness. He stared at me with a look of desperation that momentarily penetrated my natural cynicism.

"Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Kelmar," he said, in that middle-aged-fat-man voice. He might be thin, but the vocal sonority was most impressive. I associated those sorts of round tones with money, and was hoping I was correct about that, at least.

"Just Kelmar, sir," I corrected him gently. "And your name is …?"

"That's not important," said the man, raising a hand and stepping inside without being asked. I backed up to the inner door and opened it for my visitor.

"Right this way," I said, ushering him into the consulting room. "You may sit right here."

The man took a seat. I judged his reaction as he gazed around the room. Good. Very good. He was impressed yet anxious; eager to talk and ready to pay. He didn't even ask my fee. I sat in my own chair facing him and touched my fingertips together.

"Please tell me how I can be of assistance to you," I asked.

"Honestly, I'm not sure if you can," the man said. "I just don't know who else to ask."

He stopped talking. Was he having trouble putting his thoughts into words? Was he testing my famed psychic abilities? It didn't matter. I had done this many times.

"You fear for your life," I said simply. "And your fear is growing every day."

"Yes," gasped the man with relief. "I hoped you would understand. I have always wondered about the possibility of a world beyond this one, but it has only been in the past few weeks that the question has become of great personal importance."

"Have you recently lost a loved one?" I asked. They almost always had, whenever they mentioned the Great Beyond.

"My stars, yes," said the man. "That is remarkable; your reputation is well earned. I lost my father just a few weeks ago. My mother has been dead for years."

"My sincere condolences," I said, already playing out the possible scenarios in my mind. "What was your father like?"

The man seemed almost puzzled by the question. "He was my father. I loved him, and I believe he loved me. He was well on in years, so his passing did not come as a shock. It was after his death that the surprises began. Highly unpleasant surprises. Kelmar, do you believe in the supernatural?"

"There is so much that science does not yet understand, and the realm of the supernatural remains a tantalizing mystery." It was one of my stock phrases, yet I prided myself on delivering it with an air of wisdom each time I said it.

My client responded with a pitiful smile. "Dad would have said that was nonsense. But that was before he died."

"Do you think his opinion might have changed since then?"

"I could ask him," said the man. "But he is so angry with me that I probably wouldn't get an answer."

"Why do you think he is angry with you?" I asked.

The man squinted his eyes and grimaced. "Button, button, who's got the button?"

"Tell me more," I prodded. I was skilled at reading my clients, but when they descended into childish gibberish, it was better not to guess.

My visitor was about to respond when the noise began.

Barking. The crazed, angry barking of two fierce dogs.

My consulting room had no windows, but loud noises from outside the house sometimes managed to leak in. Two of my neighbors had large dogs that did not like each other. They sometimes got into barking contests when they met, and this was one of those times. I silently cursed the dogs even more than I usually did.

The effect on my visitor was immediate and startling.

"No!" he cried. "I knew I shouldn't have come! I'm sorry! So sorry!"

He hastily rose from his chair. He thrust his hand into his pocket, pulled out some bills, and flung them onto the table.

"I hope that is enough to pay for your time. I thank you kindly, but this was a dreadful idea."

The money was twice as much as I normally charge for a thirty-minute session and he'd been with me for less than ten minutes.

The man left the room as quickly as it was possible for a gentleman to do. I heard him open the inner door of the vestibule and then heard the front door slam shut a moment later.

The most interesting client I'd had in a while had slipped away like a frightened hamster.

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I was still thinking about my guest as I sat eating my solitary breakfast the next morning. Note that I say solitary rather than lonely; I lived alone and liked it that way. It did mean that I was unable to relieve any obsessive thoughts with cheerful banter over breakfast, so I dove into the morning newspaper with unwarranted enthusiasm in an attempt to clear my mind.

A politician had done something unseemly. He should have consulted his psychic first. The construction project on I-85 had been extended yet again and was now scheduled to be complete around the time of the first interstellar space flight. And there had been no progress in solving the recent burglary at the home of a Buckhead blueblood.

I chuckled at this last item. The painfully wealthy Mary Helen Rutledge had lost her

prized diamond necklace to a burglar the previous week. I suspected she collected diamond necklaces the way some people collected thimbles. My sympathies were entirely with the burglar.

That's not very nice. I should be on the side of law and order and sweetness and light.

Oh, come on. I earn my living as a psychic, for God's sake. I'm always going to be on the side of whoever can siphon money away from those who are swimming in it.

The phone rang, interrupting my rationalizations of the unethical.

"This is Kelmar, spiritual advisor. How may I ease what is troubling you?"

There was a short pause. "I visited you last night," said a familiar voice.

"Ah, sir, I remember you well. I was troubled by your precipitous departure. I hope all is well." I knew it wasn't or he wouldn't have called back.

"I'm afraid not," the man answered. "I'm sorry I ran away like a cat on fire. Could I meet with you again today?"

I had him. Normally, I would invent some excuse about my busy schedule to give the impression that I was doing him a favor by working him in. As it happened, I didn't have to lie.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I am visiting a client for most of the day. I could, however, rearrange my schedule this evening to fit you in. Would 5:30 be acceptable?" The part about rearranging my schedule was embroidery, but the rest was true.

My caller readily agreed to the time. Before we hung up, I asked one final question.

"Sir, given the unusual circumstances of our initial consultation, I must insist on knowing your name before we meet again."

There was a slight hesitation. "My name is Varnell. Claiborne Varnell." He hung up.

Jackpot. The Varnells were one of the richest families in Atlanta. It suddenly seemed like a very long time until 5:30.

****

I normally derived considerable pleasure from my visits to dear old Dawson Gardner. He was a wealthy widower of advanced years who was unable to come to me, so I was happy to make fabulously expensive house calls for his consultations. He was a sharp, gregarious man who seemed to treat my visits more as entertainment than divination, which would have eased my conscience if I'd had one.

On this visit, I was not at my best for Mr. Gardner. To his credit, he noticed my lackluster performance.

"You seem somewhat distracted today, Kelmar. Are the spiritual forces not as powerful as usual?"

I wasn't sure whether the question was tongue-in-cheek, but answered with something in the neighborhood of honesty.

"I am sorry. Some days are not quite as strong for me as others. Would you like to stop the session early?"

"No, no," replied Mr. Gardner, as I had known he would. "Please continue."

I tried harder for the rest of the reading.

****

I treated myself to an extra-large plate of spareribs at Hasterman's after my house call. Hasterman's had some of the finest barbecue in the city and its proximity to Mr. Gardner's house was one of the reasons I had accepted him as a client. Am I a terrible person? Of course I am.

I made it home before the worst of the rush-hour strangulation began. I made sure that no trace of barbecue remained on my hands and face, then set the stage for my evening consultation. I had already read up on the Varnell family for any tidbits that might

allow me to provide additional confirmation of my powers.

My antique doorbell proclaimed the appearance of my guest at precisely 5:30. I took my time answering the door, savoring the arrival of Claiborne Varnell as I would a beautiful cut of steak that still required the care of a fine chef in its preparation.

Claiborne was dressed in a crisp seersucker suit and a bow tie that he wore without a hint of self-consciousness. As I had expected from the tone of our earlier conversation, he was more at ease tonight. His troubles remained, but he had decided that I was the person who could help him. He had no spouse to convince him otherwise; I had checked.

We took our places at my consultation table and Claiborne began his story.

"First, I must apologize again for my unforgivably rude behavior yesterday. I have rarely felt such terror."

"All is forgiven, Mr. Varnell," I answered. "Many who come to me experience some initial fear."

"You are most gracious, sir. As you surely surmised, I believe I am being haunted by the spirit of my father. I hear his footsteps and his groans and even his anguished voice."

"That must be highly disquieting. Why would your father do such a thing? As I recall, you said you were on good terms with him."

"Indeed I was. So much so that he wanted to ensure I received my full inheritance. I am an only child."

I had learned that delightful fact earlier in the day. The sole inheritor of a large estate was entrusting me to resolve some imaginary issues with his dead father, for which I would be paid a substantial sum. I wanted to grin with the delight of a small child who has just been presented with a large slice of birthday cake, but I kept my mask of serious concern in place.

"Was there a problem? Did your father not leave a proper will?"

"Oh, the will was fine. I inherited the house and the bank accounts, which were smaller than you might imagine. Nonetheless, there has been a calamity that seems to have infuriated my dad's restless spirit. Have you ever heard of Button Gwinnett?"

Button, button. As an avid collector of interesting items, I had most certainly heard of Button Gwinnett. My mouth wanted to drop open but I refused to let it.

"I know of Gwinnett County," I said truthfully, then stopped.

"The county is named after him," Claiborne explained. "Button Gwinnett was a Georgian who was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence."

"I see. Why is your father angry about this person?" I hoped I knew the answer.

Claiborne smiled patronizingly. "Not about Mr. Gwinnett himself. About his autograph. Button Gwinnett's signature is the single most valuable autograph in the world. Dad owned one of the very finest specimens in existence: an entire letter written and signed by Mr. Gwinnett."

I was quietly ecstatic. I couldn't entirely control my delighted smile and covered it with a cough.

"And this priceless letter has not come to light among your father's effects?"

"It has not. It was not in his safe deposit box or in his safe at home. I have searched the house repeatedly, but have not found it."

"I do not intend any disrespect to your father by this question, but why did he not tell you where he kept such a tremendously valuable item?"

"He did, in his own way. Dad was an odd man with a childlike streak of adventure. His will stated that he had written down the hiding place in the back of his favorite book."

"Which book was that?"

Claiborne wrinkled his nose. "A rather terrible book of Civil War reminiscences by his great-great-grandfather, Anderson Varnell."

Anderson Varnell, I thought. Varnell Anderson. Another poor soul with two last names.

"And you cannot locate this book?" I asked.

"Much worse than that. Dad's house was broken into shortly before his death and the book was stolen, along with other items of more obvious value. I did not tell Dad about the loss as I didn't want to break the heart of a dying man. If I'd known he was going to play this silly pirate-treasure game with his most cherished possession, I would have been less protective of his feelings."

"Is the book valuable?"

"Not especially," answered Claiborne. "It is, however, extremely rare. Dad had one of the very few copies in private hands and it would have been nearly impossible to replace."

I leaned back and sighed. It was a sigh of great contentment, though carefully calibrated to simulate concern.

"This is a difficult challenge," I said gravely. "However, I believe I may be able to help you. I will need to come to your house and attempt to communicate with the spirit of your father. Given his anger over the misplaced letter, the risk for me as a psychic is very high. Assuming that we can find the letter, my fee will also be high." I named an amount that struck me as absurd.

"That will be acceptable," said Claiborne stiffly. "When will you be able to pay me a visit?"

"No earlier than tomorrow night. I will need time to prepare, and the spirits are always more communicative at night."

Claiborne nodded. "I will call you tomorrow afternoon to confirm the time. I am entrusting you with a great task. Finding the autograph will finally allow my dad's troubled soul to rest."

And make you even richer than you already are, I thought.

My guest arose and left the room as I remained seated. I heard the front door close behind him.

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Now wait a minute. I've already admitted that I have all the psychic powers of a bowl of grits. How did I plan to find that Button Gwinnett letter and earn enough money to pay for a good portion of my retirement?

This is awkward. I have painted myself as an ingratiating small-time swindler who entertains wealthy clients with visions of other worlds. While that is true, it is time for another admission.

I am also a thief.

No, not just a phony-psychic sort of thief. An actual burglar.

It's not how I make my living. It's only a hobby. Sometimes it's not practical or even possible for me to buy an item that I want, so burglary becomes a necessity. I steal only from the wealthy, and only specific items that I require for my own collections.

Such as rare books on the Civil War.

Alone and excited, I rose from my seat and went to the far corner of my consulting room. I moved away a pile of books on otherworldly matters—esoteric trash that was purely for decoration—and exposed the floorboards. I sat down and pushed and pressed two adjoining boards in an odd sequence that could never be triggered accidentally. The boards flipped open like little doors, revealing a hidden safe in the floor. I opened it quickly and reached inside.

I withdrew an old book and opened it to the title page.

"True and Honest Reminiscences of a Faithful Confederate Soldier in the War of Northern

Aggression," it blared in verbose nineteenth-century glory. Underneath the title, in large and gaudy letters, was the proud declaration of authorship: "By ANDERSON VARNELL, C.S.A."

"Got it!" I said out loud.

"No, I believe we have you," said a familiar voice from behind me.

I was still sitting down and scooted around as quickly as my posterior would allow.

Claiborne Varnell was smiling at me. Behind him was an excessively large man holding a gun that was pointed at my head.

"Kelmar—or I guess I should say Mr. Bradley—please put that book down and slide it towards me. It wouldn't be in your best interests to try anything. David just loves shooting things, especially if they're alive."

I stared at him in unfeigned astonishment.

"Oh, come on now, it's not that hard to figure out. I stepped into your vestibule and closed the inner door. Then I opened the outer door and pretended to leave, but I was actually letting David inside. We waited in that vestibule until your scrabbling stopped, then we came right on in."

"So now you get the book and the Button Gwinnett letter and … oh." I stopped. "There is no Button Gwinnett letter, is there?"

Claiborne laughed gleefully. "You see it now, don't you? A little late, but you see it. My dad would never have spent that much money on a letter even if it were signed by Jesus Christ himself. But I've been studying you for a while and figured that sort of thing would get your attention. You like fooling people and taking their money, and sometimes you like breaking into their houses and stealing their treasures. That book really was my dad's favorite and it was a family heirloom that was supposed to pass down to me. I didn't take kindly to you stealing it away from us."

"How did you …?"

"The police have been wondering about you for some time. They know you have a lot of money that's hard to explain, and they suspected you in a couple of burglaries but didn't have enough evidence for a search warrant. Not that it would have mattered; I was sure that you'd hidden your stolen prizes in a mighty good place. That's why I had to trick you into retrieving that book yourself."

Claiborne put on his frightened face. "My daddy's ghost is gonna chase me into an early grave if I don't find that letter! What can I do? Please use your magic powers to help me, Kelmar!" The terrified expression broke apart as Claiborne erupted in laughter. Even David managed a wispy smile, though his gun remained fixed on my forehead.

"Please thank your lovely neighbors for the barking dogs during our first consultation," Claiborne continued. "They saved me the trouble of pretending to hear something horrifying before I fled. It was important for you to believe that your flim-flam had convinced a scared and gullible client to return for a second visit."

Defeated, I slid the book across the floor. Claiborne picked it up affectionately and inserted it into a pocket.

"Just one more thing, Mr. Bradley. My dear friend Mary Helen Rutledge wants her treasure back as well."

I wilted. I was already sitting on the floor so it was hard to wilt, but I managed. Without a word, I reached into my no-longer-secret safe and pulled out a strand of fiery light. It hurt my eyes, but I think that's because I was crying. I held out the necklace to Claiborne, who accepted it with reverence.

"Sweet Sarah, I see why Mary Helen loves this so much. Such beauty in a little string of polished pebbles." He stowed the necklace in another pocket.

Claiborne straightened his jacket. "One

final suggestion. I would advise you to end your experiments in the burglary business. Mary Helen and I know all about it, as does David, and we would be most displeased if we were to find that any of our friends' belongings had mysteriously migrated into your home. Please do not make us pay you another visit.

"For the moment, however, our business is concluded. Please enjoy your psychic powers and continue to use them for the betterment of humanity."

Claiborne was still laughing as he left.

Carl Tait is a software engineer and author of two books for older children: *Tales from Valdemere Castle* and *Lavinia's Ghosts*. He has also written a number of short stories for adults, all of which are set in Georgia, where he grew up. His work is forthcoming in the *Eunoia Review*. He currently resides in New York City with his wife and twin daughters.

Mouth Dust

James Croal Jackson

Silent all these nights the dust breathes.
Beneath string lights and window triangles

a few hours before sunrise. Why wait so long
to change nothing but the thermostat? We're cold

under covers not touching each other. Our mouths
the dust breathes. In your bed beneath string lights

minutes before sunrise. The world outside a purple
lip. Everything touches the light chapped.

James Croal Jackson (he/him/his) is a Filipino-American poet. He has a chapbook, *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017), and recent poems in *DASH, Sampsonia Way,* and *Jam & Sand*. He edits The Mantle (**themantlepoetry.com**). Currently, he works in film production in Pittsburgh, PA.

Ember | Bryant Goetz

Mayflies

Christopher Cascio

I WAS LOOSENING THE FOURTH BOLT on the head of the engine block when I could sense the presence of Dickerson behind me, sniveling, and with his chin no doubt jutted peevishly over my right shoulder. I didn't look back at him. Couldn't. Not even a glance for Dickerson. I simply eased the socket from the bolt and lowered my nose to that side.

"Bad plugs?" Dickerson snorted, his breath infecting the air like a miasma.

"Head gasket," I rasped, my voice not so much catching as emerging. I don't think I'd spoken a word all morning.

"Oh, that'll be a bit of work."

"Mhm."

"And you'll be doing all of that right here?"

There it was. Despite thirty years of voluntarily mowing the church lawn, providing leaf cleanup, snow removal, you name it; I'd done it—Dickerson had been a lively, thirty-something scold at the start of it, newly assigned to care of the Orthodox Catholic Church property by the bishop himself. And now, not ten minutes into the job, he was already breathing down my neck—literally, nattering me about having my truck parked in the grass. The only damned vehicle on the property.

"I'll need level ground," I said, gesturing with the wrench. "To make sure everything sets and seals properly when I put it back together." I twisted my shoulders just enough to meet his eye. "I hope you won't mind."

Dickerson recoiled slightly. "No, I suppose I won't, being that it's for a specific purpose with a specific end." He nodded.

"Right," I nodded back.

"A specific end," he said again, asserting with his eyes.

I smiled. "Of course. I'll move it back across the road just as soon as I'm finished."

Dickerson plodded past, nodding, or maybe not. Maybe it was just his head jouncing with his hobbled steps. Dickerson was borderline ambulatory at best, with his leg and all. Come to think of it, he'd been hobbled—at least a bit—since those spry scold days. Still a sanctimonious pest, just younger. Shelly hadn't even been diagnosed at that point, was probably just soaking in enough of that spilled benzene to get it all started. Jake wasn't even a thought. Or maybe he had been. Yeah he had. There was one day when Shelly sat on the front porch with Jake all swaddled up in her arms (It was his first time outside after getting over a bout of croup.) and here come Dickerson hobbling mildly—a young hobble always inspires a bit of

empathy, or maybe it's sympathy. Still, he come hobbling and cast a dry glare up toward the porch, and Shelly turned round from it like he'd thrown a dart, like he'd sent up a curse with that look. I'd nearly forgot about that. Jake had been just an infant at the time, and Shelly had still been strong enough to protect him, with no end of that in sight.

She'd run the gamut, you know—chemo, surgeries, remission and then an awful resurgence. It had started in her stomach and then went just about everywhere else. Didn't even know it was there until Jake was almost seventeen. Litigation had failed her and several others who had lived and worked in that part of town. Damn near half the block had fallen ill and died within about a year of one another. Once she'd been diagnosed, I spent the bulk of my time nursing her. She fought forever, but we both knew what was coming. After Shelly died, my days were suddenly empty, and time became an object to be dealt with. I hope you never have to know that feeling. Jake had been moved out three years, so it was just me and Rocky. Shelly had adored Rocky. She had chosen him. Place out in Lancaster. Probably a puppy mill by definition, but everything had looked clean and cared for. She didn't care. She knew what she wanted and what she wanted was right there. Rocky was her second mini schnauzer. Said she would never have another kind. And so, after she passed, I sorta kept to a schedule around him: walked him every three hours. On cold mornings I dressed him in this little tight, black, long-sleeved outfit that looked like a wetsuit. Sat on the porch in the afternoons and drank cans of Yuengling while he took in the air. Just before dusk we'd take the truck and go spot deer in the fields. On Saturdays, I mowed the Orthodox Catholic Church lawn across the road. Still parked my truck along the edge of the lawn, too, and whenever Dickerson complained that it would ruin the grass I just kept my mouth shut and nodded along, on the inside telling him kindly to go fuck himself. The church needed all the help it could get, but with someone like Dickerson skulking around, all they would get was a mow. That and Rocky's piss.

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When changing the head gasket, I had taken a few breaks along the way, one to take a leak and twice to walk Rocky so he could as well—Rocky, too, has gotten to that age when certain activities are a bit more labored, but by two in the afternoon the head was re-assembled and I was torqueing the bolts back on. The air had become downright hot and the breeze, which had been pleasant in the morning, was nowhere to be found. Rocky watched me work with his snout pressed between the bars of the front porch and his tongue drooping forward. It was just as I closed the hood that I saw that little lime-green Chevy pull around the corner.

It was you, coming home to visit your folks next door. You had finally landed a job at a small college in New York after years in the warehouses—you had gotten out—and yet you still came to see them whenever you had time off. I remember I had asked you about it once. You answered that you enjoyed your folks. Besides, you said while rubbing the back of your neck, living in New York was damned expensive, and vacations were even more expensive.

That car was only slightly bigger than a one of those Smart cars, if you could call them cars, and one that color was clearly a deal left on the lot because no one else would take it. I supposed it was pretty smart of you in that it was probably great on gas, and a deal is a deal—who cared what color the damned thing was! It got you to where you needed to go. Got you back home. I remember watching

you swing that toy-sized car onto the near end of the lawn. I wiped my hands on a rag as you exited the car, opened the hatch, donned a shoulder-slung briefcase and then hefted a laundry bag onto you back. You waved to me, and then as you crossed the road toward your parents' place, the half-a-double beside mine, you paused. "Do you think Mr. Dickerson'll give me a hard time for parking here?" you asked.

To Hell with Dickerson, I thought. "No."

I found your bearing admirable. After all, Jake was just a year or two younger than you and lived only a town away but visited less often. Jake was a good kid, though. I think you know that, even though you two were never close. Shelly and I had raised him right. We'd waited too long to have a child and then drop the ball. He kept his hair short. Worked long, hard shifts at the meat-packing plant in the industrial park, the same park as you, just a different plant. He'd had a few serious girlfriends, hadn't yet married. No kids. No problems—no drugs, nothing like that. He moved out at twenty-two when a friend had an upstairs apartment for rent. In fact, the only point of criticism I could think of was a possible lack of filial devotion, noticeable only by comparison to you I suppose—which was perhaps cast into slight relief by Shelly's absence.

Three weeks after I saw you, Jake was driving home pre-dawn, trying to make the left out of the industrial park when a trucker, asleep at the wheel and barreling down Route 924, blew through the light and shredded his mid-nineties Lumina. I had just showered and settled on the couch and begun flipping through channels when the police knocked on the door.

****

The day of Jake's funeral, the weather was damn-near enchanting: lush grasses and trees, a deep cobalt sky and a breeze that cut the heat just right. Nothing like the day we'd buried Shelly. That morning had been either tragic or appropriate, depending on how you viewed it: an uncharacteristic and brisk forty-three in mid-May, and it just poured all day long. In fact, I can't remember another day when it had rained so consistently hard from beginning to end. And the service itself wasn't without its mishap. Shelly's corpse had gurgled—throaty and rich—from within the open casket during the service, right as the priest had paused for silence. Truly magnificent, I tell you. Gasps issued forth from the congregation like a psalm. Little old ladies swiveled their heads to see just who else had heard it, affirmation that no individual little old lady had in fact lost her mind. The priest, doubtless accustomed to such phenomena, handled it like a pro—and I suppose he was—and moved the service forward without acknowledging that anything had happened. But Jake and me and the little old ladies knew better. Though, unlike the old ladies, I preferred to think of it as a divine remnant of Shelly's propensity for—as she had called it—pissing on people's sacred lamp posts.

With Jake, however, everything was solemn and beautiful and perfect. The service was pristine, the disposition delicate. A group of mourners accompanied me home and stayed for beers and conversation. They were as kind as they could be. Great, really. Some had known him as a kid, who I knew, and others had known him as a man and I'd never met any of them before. But despite how good they all were I still wasn't ready to talk about him. It wasn't like when Shelly died, so I spent most of my time on the porch with Rocky and let everyone talk and drink and grieve together indoors, as they needed. Their cars and trucks filled the finely manicured orthodox church lawn across the road, and I waited on the porch for Dickerson, who I knew would come galumphing down the road any minute, which he did. When

he'd managed to reach the area in front of the house he glanced over at the cars, then back at the porch. Then he put his head down and galumphed away.

The next morning, just as the final lurid hues were being overtaken by a cloudless blue, I got a phone call, and as soon as I heard the voice on the other end I knew I was on with the truck driver. He identified himself as an Andrew Kovalcic. "I just wanted to call and tell you how very sorry I am." His voice was a tremulous rasp. "And I also want to say thank you."

For a long moment I remained silent, then, "Thank you for reaching out. Listen…" I didn't want to let him continue. "…I know this has been painful for you, too, and if it's all right that's all I'd like to say right now."

"I-I understand," Kovalcic stammered. "But please, there's more I want—"

"—I'm sorry," I said and hung up the phone.

I had decided against pressing charges. The police had wanted to regardless, but they had learned that Kovalcic had undiagnosed sleep apnea, which could account for his falling asleep and sink a case of negligence, especially since his logs were in order—he hadn't been overworking, and drowsiness is difficult to prove after the fact. Ultimately, I refused. The guy had been through enough, I figured. He'd pay for it every day. Any man with a conscience would. Just ask a vet. You don't need a prison to enforce that sentence. A person can't escape the confines of his own skull.

And I couldn't help him with that, at least not right then.

The phone rang again a couple times, and I just let it ring. Kovalcic tried once the next morning and then twice the day after that.

That Saturday, I was mowing the church grass when you turned the corner in that little green car again. Did you know that the Orthodox Catholic Church doesn't view death the same way as the Roman Catholic church? I've never been too much of a believer, especially not since the war, but you pick up things from talking with people over the years. Regular Catholics see death as the soul's liberation from the body, but the orthodox see it differently: separating the soul from the body, breaking that union, even with a natural death, is considered evil. Death itself is evil. It's ruin. I was thinking about that while mowing the grass that day. And I can't say that I disagreed with it.

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You were sitting out on the porch later that afternoon, you and your dad. I was on mine, enjoying the air with Rocky. You were talking about the mayflies. You were saying you'd heard something on the radio while driving, something about the lights on the Market Street Bridge that connects Nescopeck to Berwick being turned off for a few nights.
I used to build bridges, you know. Not that bridge. Not on the Susquehanna. In the military. Seabees. It was my job during Vietnam. We'd build bridges and then they'd get blown up, and then we'd build them all over again. But it was when you brought it up that I remembered telling Jake about the mayfly swarms years earlier, how mayflies couldn't even eat, their mouths were just there for show. All the eating had been done as larvae. Only thing they lived for as adults was to mate, and just for a day or so. Then they died. On the day after a swarm, you could find a layer of dead mayflies several inches thick on roads near the river. It was like driving on wet leaves. Shelly had lampooned me when I had said it was almost biblical to behold. Jake had taken it a step further and called it the Great Pennsyltuckian Sex Swarm and the Susquehanna Smut Blizzard. The Allegheny Mountain Death Orgy.

That was Jake.

"They're attracted to the light," your dad had said after giving a somewhat similar overview of their life cycle. You nodded your head, your attention fixed on him. "They shut off the lights near the river so they don't swarm over the road while people are driving."

You leaned back in your chair. "It's amazing," you said. "They all know their purpose. Just like that." You gestured toward the sky, and I noticed a look of pride on your dad's face. Just then the phone started ringing. I'd left the inside door open, and the sound issued forth unabated, echoing off the walls of the orthodox church. I knew it was Kovalcic again. I let it ring.

"Telemarketer?" your father asked.

"Something like that."

"Can't fucking stand 'em," he said, taking a sip from his can."

"Yeah, me neither."

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That night, the tornado hit. Touched down just north of us, up in Wilkes-Barre, near the river and rain wrapped, just before eleven. Category two. It tore a canyon through the shopping mall, leveled five smaller structures and damaged more than a dozen others, hurled shattered rooftops nearly ten thousand feet into the air and launched a parked cube truck through a bookstore. Then it streaked toward the interstate before lifting—almost like an angel—into the air and disappearing.

In the morning, I sat on the couch with a glass of water, flipping through the channels, not knowing anything had happened. I remember glancing down at the coffee table, which I'd built and topped with photographs of Shelly and young Jake and then covered with glass. Many of the photos were cut crudely; I hadn't done a great job with that, but it made them all fit, and it was ours. Shelly bathing Jake in the sink. The three of us at a barbecue at a house I don't remember: me throwing horseshoes, Shelly relaxing in a beach chair with Jake sitting in the lawn beside her. The flash of the news station cast a reflection onto the glass, and I lifted my eyes to an image of destruction—rubble and rebar and twisted metal. A newscaster was saying how tornadoes rarely manifest at night in the Northeast, but this one had and it had hit hard. Said the town was lucky it had struck so late in the evening, said it was a miracle nobody had died. A different reporter, one at the scene, stood in front of a flower tent that had been spared. This tent stood in what appeared to be the center of a parking lot, debris visible in every direction. The owner of the tent—a short, round man with grey bristly hair along the sides of his head said he felt bad the tent had survived untouched when entire homes and businesses had been destroyed. He went on and made a joke that the people who'd erected the tent for him had earned job security for the rest of their lives. Then he looked around and sighed and got serious again, and he said it was hard to believe just how much things could change while one was asleep.

I guess it would make sense if that last statement had made me think of Jake, of losing him so suddenly like that, especially so soon after losing Shelly, but that's not where my thoughts went first. They went to the truck driver, also asleep that morning when everything changed. We had a lot in common in that way. And then I was leveled with a sharp, throbbing pain in my head, stomach, and extremities that would have wrenched me over for the rest of the morning had it not been for the front door opening right at that moment and Jake walking in.

I didn't say a word. What could I say? I wondered if perhaps—and perhaps whimsically—I had dreamed his death. It would explain

the strange, the unreal feeling ever since and then while watching the news and especially what I was seeing before me now. It had to be. The dead don't come back. They don't open doors and walk in and stand there and look at you, breathing! His chest was moving, I could see it, he was breathing, and not a scratch on him. He looked fine and calm and he was just looking at me. Shoulders gently sloping, auburn hair a mess and not enough facial hair really to qualify as a beard. He was just…there. It had just been a terrible dream. Thank Heaven it was just a dream. The pain was gone. I felt words growing in my throat—I didn't know what I was about to say, but it was coming. I was about to speak.

"It wasn't a dream, Dad," he said. He then closed the door, walked over and sat on the couch beside me. "It happened. But I get it."

I studied him. I was confused, I mean more confused than at any other time in my life. "But you're right here," I said, shaking my head the way you do when you can't make sense out of something. "I can see you breathing. Goddamn it, I can feel the weight of your ass pressing down the couch cushion." I tried to grab his arm, but my hand went right through without any feeling or sound, like nothing, as though he were a hologram.

"Yeah," he said, looking at his arm. "It's more complicated than that. I really can't explain it. I don't fully understand it myself." I sat back and tried to let my body settle into the couch. It was all too much. The room was beginning to spin and the pain was coming back. "Dad," he said. "It's okay. I didn't feel a thing."

And just like that everything stopped, and it was like something opened inside of me, opened wide and I felt like I was just talking with my boy. Jake appeared to be ready for this. "Dad," he said sharply, his demeanor becoming grave and urgent. "You're missing out," he said, his mud-brown eyes shifting their focus back and forth between each of my own. He reached for my glass of water but stopped short. "Did you know that if you put a flea in a jar it'll jump and hit its head only so many times before it gives up, and then it never jumps so high again? Do you understand that? It's what this place does. It beats people down. Eats them. Piece by piece. It eats and eats, and it doesn't give anything back. This place, Dad. . .everyone here is stunted. Everyone. Even when people leave they get so scared of becoming poor again that they never really cut loose. They never really leave and live. It's absolutely tragic." Jake's brow flattened as he leaned in. "Listen to me now, Dad," he said. "Stop mowing the church lawn. You only started because some part of you wanted to reconnect with all of it after you got out of the Navy. Think about it. Then think about Mom. Leave the grass and the leaves and the snow to that lurking prick Dickerson. Leave this half-a-house and leave this town. Go down south or out west. Go to Reno. Spend a month just touring the restaurants. Wash racy tracys down with mimosas. Thrill the girls with war stories. And bring Rocky with you. They'll eat him up. He needs that just as much as you do. Jesus Christ, Dad. Don't you remember why you don't believe in any of this?" And then, just like that, he stood and left, his body flickering once just before he shut the door behind him.

I want you to think about that.

Chris Cascio's writing and visual art has appeared in The Southampton Review, Sand: Berlin's English Literary Journal, Gulf Stream Literary Magazine, Peregrine Journal, Longridge Review, and elsewhere. He teaches writing at Monroe College and also works as a freelance editor and portrait artist. He currently lives in Larchmont, NY.

Existence as Such

John Kuligowski

Spaces ask to be filled
go ask the crickets
chirruping at one a.m.

or the band that plays on
to an empty barroom

that's why I write
it's fear you see

fear that the stars will
some day be gone from
their spaces

the terror of an empty
line an open hand
prepared to slap my face

the lips nose eyes and brow
that disappear the
moment I drift to sleep

or pink elephants
that tramp across
a cirrus cloud

while strange weather
again becomes the norm

like empty words
that stare with glassy eyes

wondering what
there is to be said

John Kuligowski's work has appeared in *Word Riot, Unlikely Stories, The Northville Review, Maudlin House,* and several other venues. One recent story received honorable mention in *Glimmer Train's* Fall 2018 Short Story Award for New Writers.

All the People in Rothko's Paintings

Brendan Todt

They all believe the same thing: the people and Rothko and the people in Rothko's paintings. They all have the same religious experience he has because they all believe in the same something: something that is not. Which is maybe why he insisted the light be the way it is—so low—and the people stand where they do—so very close—so that before they can believe they must investigate it for themselves. And investigate their belief in it. So that they can trust that, having investigated it, they are free to believe in the something that is not. Though they are not free. Because they are already as much a person in Rothko's paintings as the red underneath the red underneath the red. Outside the lobby Margaret and Jonathan are waiting to hear what their friend will say and to ask if it was really worth the drive on a Tuesday. Their friend will answer only partially. Not because the answer is at all partial. But because the friend is. Having left herself in the painting. Amongst the people in Rothko's painting. Of whom she is now one. One who contains, like the others, her self.

Brendan Todt is the author of the poetry chapbook *The Idea of Leaves within the Dying Tree*. His poem "At the Particle Accelerator at Krasnoyarsk" was included in *Best American Non-Required Reading 2013*. His fiction and poetry can be found elsewhere in print and online. He lives in Sioux City, Iowa and writes for *Art Hub Siouxland*.

v303 | Joe Lugara

A Loose Impediment

James Southworth

WHEN ZANE MISSES a three-foot putt on the seventh hole, he flings his putter across the green, and I scamper to get out of its way. The veins in his neck are pulsating, and his canines are exposed. It looks like he's ready to bite the head off a rodent. Instead, he points at David, who's standing on the edge of the green.

"Do you have to breathe like that?" yells Zane. "That rustling is driving me nuts."

"Sorry," says David. "I think I'm coming down with a cold."

"In July?" asks Zane.

I pick up Zane's putter and as I hand it back to him, he pleads his case to me.

"That's gotta be a violation."

"Having a cold in July isn't a violation," I say.

"Not that, you turd. Excessive noise on the green. I should get a do-over."

I feel for Zane. Having to deal with the rustling of leaves is hard enough on the putting green, but nobody should have to contend with the rustling of nostrils. Not even billionaires. Especially billionaires. Still, as the official score-keeper, I'm supposed to be impartial, and since I've already given Zane some favorable calls, I need to draw the line somewhere.

"Sinus congestion isn't an example of excessive noise," I say.

I'm looking down at the cropped tufts of grass, expecting Zane to explode in anger, but when he doesn't say anything, I look up to find him fixing the part in his thick black hair. Then he readjusts the cross on his gold chain so that it's centred on his chest. Then he looks me dead in the eyes.

"That's dogshit," he says.

And he taps in for a bogey.

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This year's private-members tournament at the Sunnydale Golf and Country Club would be the most exclusive ever with three members each putting up fifty thousand dollars. Jessica, the club's Executive Director, wouldn't be able to attend the event. She was going on a cruise to celebrate her wedding anniversary and was entrusting the tournament to me.

"Food might be tricky," said Jessica, during one of our planning meetings. "Talk to Samuel about the menu. I'm sure Zane and David will want steaks. The challenge is O'Neal. He's vegetarian. Maybe Samuel could do a veggie lasagna for him."

Working at a golf club was a decent summer job but replacing divots for a living wasn't how I wanted to make my mark on the

world. As a recent business graduate, I had greater ambitions and overseeing this tournament could help me realize them. Since the club would be closed to outside guests and members on the day of the event, I could try to make an impression on these three business leaders. Maybe I could connect with O'Neal about being a vegetarian, and he'd hire me to work at his plant-based burger company. But it was Zane's investment firm that most interested me. That's where I really wanted to make my mark.

"And remember to study the USGA rule book," said Jessica. I nodded and made a mental note to Google what USGA stood for after the meeting. "You have to be ready for anything on the course. Strange things happen all the time."

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I'm standing on the fringe of the 18th green with Zane and O'Neal. We're watching David, who has about a 20-foot putt with a slight left-to-right break. It's makeable, at least for him. He's already sunk two longer putts during his round this afternoon. As David looks back and forth between his ball and the hole, the fibers of his polo shirt struggle to contain his basketball-sized belly. Otherwise he appears at ease. His head motion is fluid, his hands still, which is impressive given the circumstances. If David sinks this putt, he'll waddle away with one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

David continues to look back and forth between his ball and the hole, like he's watching the world's longest tennis rally. Just as I'm wondering if this will ever end, his head goes still. Normally that's a sign he's about to begin his putting motion, but now he's just looking down at his ball, motionless, like he's in a meditative trance, like he's forgotten the whole point is to actually strike the ball. Finally, some movement occurs, but it doesn't come from David putting; it comes from Zane leaning over to me and whispering in my ear.

"Time violation. You gotta call it."

As a bead of sweat trickles down my cheek, I try to remember the USGA rule book, which I now know stands for the United States Golf Association, but I can't remember the specific rule about players taking too long. Thankfully, David begins to sway ever so slightly to his left, and I'm confident it's a sign that he's finally ready to strike his ball. Instead, he keeps drifting farther towards his left, slowly at first, until gravity gets him in its hold, whereupon he quickly keels over and smacks to the ground.

Zane runs over to David, rolls him onto his back, and checks for a pulse. Then he begins pumping David's chest.

"Give him mouth to mouth," I yell.

"You give him mouth to mouth," Zane yells back.

"I'd advise against it," says O'Neal, leaning casually on his pitching wedge. "The scientific literature suggests that mouth-to-mouth resuscitation has limited benefits."

Zane continues pumping David's chest, but the intensity of each pump gradually recedes until he stops altogether.

"He's dead," says Zane.

While all kinds of muddled thoughts race through my mind about life, death and the meaning of it all, Zane joins me on the fringe of the green. As we gaze upon David's corpse, the crimson sun is setting, drifting into oblivion.

"He lived by the putter and died by the putter," says Zane. "It's how he would have wanted to go."

I'm not sure David would have wanted his head to slam against the ground, causing his toupee to dislodge. But this isn't the time to be disagreeable, so I nod.

"His shareholders will be devastated," continues Zane.

I'm about to nod again, but I hear heavy breathing noises behind me. I turn around to see O'Neal raking the bunker with great vigor. I try not to judge. We all have our way of processing tragic events.

"Well, I guess I should call the police," I say. "Or is it the coroner?"

Zane looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "You can't do that," he says. "We don't have much sunlight left. O'Neal and I have to finish our round."

As if on cue, O'Neal steps out of the bunker, walks over to David's corpse and assesses the body. "What's the rule?" he asks. "Am I allowed to move this?"

I want to say that under no circumstance can he or anyone else move the body, that we need to wait for the coroner and postpone the tournament, but my heart is thumping so fast that I can't find the words. I can't even stand up. My knees are so weak that I crumple onto the grass.

"According to USGA rules," says Zane, "that body is a loose impediment. No different than a rock or a piece of garbage. You're allowed to move it if you can, but we're not helping you. That would only help you win."

O'Neal grabs David's heels and tries to drag him off the green. I want to tell him to stop. I want to tell him that what matters is not the USGA rules but the rule of law, but all I can generate is a squeak that he probably assumes is a squirrel scurrying into the bushes.

"He's too heavy," says O'Neal, unable to move the body.

"You're gonna have to play through then," says Zane.

O'Neal takes a few steps back from the corpse to get a better read of the green. "How am I supposed to play this? He's completely blocking the way."

"You're an inventive player," says Zane. "Figure it out."

As O'Neal kneels behind his ball and analyzes his shot, I know I need to act. What does it matter if I upset Zane and ruin my chance of working at his investment firm? This is a death. I need to stand up for what's right. I stand up. I'm shaky at first, but I take a wide stance to steady myself. "I think we should postpone the tournament and call the --"

Zane shoots me a look that could put a pack of wild dogs on their backs, and I promptly sit back down.

"The coroner can wait," he says. "We'll be done in a few minutes. It's not like David's going anywhere."

"I've always thought the way we treat dead human beings is odd," says O'Neal, still kneeling behind his ball. "We put them in these boxes that keep them cut off from the earth. Imagine if David could decompose right there on the course. His nutrients could replenish the soil. This green would be spectacular." O'Neal walks up to his ball and takes a practice swing. "Our perspective is all wrong. Most philosophers and scientists agree that materialism is true. When we die, that's it. It's not like his body is something sacred. There's no difference between it and a rock."

"Exactly," says Zane, smiling widely. "He's just a loose impediment." Zane struts over to where I'm sitting and hovers over me like an ominous cloud ready to burst. "Come on, kid. Are you gonna be a team player and let us play through?"

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Zane, O'Neal and I are sitting at the bar in the club restaurant. I had earlier told the restaurant staff, including Samuel, to go home. They didn't need to know that David died, that we continued with the tournament after he died, or that O'Neal made the most miraculous

shot by banking the golf ball off David's body, leading to an easy tap-in to tie Zane. By that point, it was too dark for a playoff, so Zane and O'Neal agreed to be co-winners and to split David's fifty thousand dollars between them.

"To a successful tournament," says Zane, raising a glass of champagne. He clinks glasses with O'Neal, then holds his glass out to me. I know he's happy to have won all this money, but I'm hesitant to clink when one of the participants is decaying on the course. Fortunately, I'm saved from this dilemma when a car pulls up to the front of the club, and O'Neal gets up to look out the window.

"Is that the coroner?" I ask.

"Pizza," says O'Neal.

"Perfect," says Zane. "I'm starving."

Although I ordered one meat-lovers and two vegetarians, the pizza place messed up the order and gave us three meat-lovers. While Zane rips into his food like a predator preparing for hibernation, O'Neal takes a more scientific approach, objectively assessing the pepperoni, Italian sausage and ground beef that's smeared all over his pizza.

"They're loose impediments," says Zane, laughing. "Just pick 'em off."

O'Neal's hands are trembling, his eyes wide. He looks more horrified now than when David collapsed and died. "I need to go," he says, voice cracking. He makes a beeline for the restaurant door, but before leaving he turns around and with perfect intonation says, "I'll be back later to pick up my twenty-five thousand."

After Zane finishes his pizza, he begins grunting with homo erectus fervor, so I slide O'Neal's pizza over to him. While Zane tears into that, I'm feeling too anxious to eat; I'm worried about a phone call I have to make.

"How do you think I should break the news to David's wife?" I ask. "Do I tell her that her husband died and then mention he lost fifty thousand dollars? Or do I lead with the money and follow with the death?"

"Ease into it," says Zane. "Ask her how her day went. Has she seen any good movies? Has she been on any good trips recently? Establish a connection first. Then, when the moment's right, make the transition. It's like making a cold call to get an investor's business."

This would have been the perfect opportunity to segue into a conversation about investing, but after what transpired on the course, I'm not sure I want to pursue a career in finance after all. Maybe I don't have the killer instinct that's required; maybe working at a golf club is more to my temperament.

"Thanks for your help today," says Zane. "Took you a while to come around, but I appreciate your interpretation of the rules." He reaches into his pocket and hands me his business card. "I can always use people like you. Call me if you want a real job."

I'm dizzy with excitement, but I have the presence of mind to recite a prepared line. "I'm a recent business graduate with a focus in finance."

Zane shrugs. "It's the intangibles that matter. If you can interpret the rules of the Securities Commission like you do the rules of golf, you've got a bright future."

Feeling empowered and a little hungry, I begin picking off the meat from my pizza.

"You're not vegetarian, are you?" asks Zane.

I shake my head, but he doesn't look convinced. With a grin that reveals a chunk of ground beef stuck between his top middle teeth, Zane grabs the loose meat from my pizza, sprinkles it over one of O'Neal's slices, and places the meat-drenched slice in front of me. "Now that's a meat lovers," he says. "How can you say no to that?"

There's no way I can refuse, not if I want to demonstrate my intangibles, so with an

outstretched arm, I pick up the slice, inching it towards my mouth. I'm holding my breath. It's just a variety of tofus, I tell myself and take a bite. I repeat the process until the slice is gone, and I'm leaning back in my chair, smiling.

"You've got some beef between your teeth," says Zane.

As I dislodge the meat with my tongue and let it dissolve in my mouth, I've never felt more alive; it's as if a new kind of energy powers my being. Sure, there's a medley of meat working its way through my digestive tract, but it runs deeper than that. Waiting in the golf club for the coroner to arrive with Zane sitting across from me, I have a sense that this is a pivotal moment in my life, that like the grease dripping off my fingers, it's a moment dripping with meaning. Surely, I'll be reflecting on it for years to come, fondly remembering that time when I transitioned from adolescence to adulthood and set out on a journey to make my real mark on the world.

James Southworth recently completed the Creative Writing certificate program at Humber College in Toronto where he developed his first novel. Southworth holds a PhD in philosophy, and teaches academic writing at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada.