

MARK HALLIDAY  
ERIN MURPHY

JEREMY B. JONES  
JUSTIN J. BROUCKAERT  
FRANKLIN K.R. CLINE

GARY L. McDOWELL  
STEVEN SHERRILL  
LAWRENCE F. FARRAR

JOHN HOPPENTHALER  
LAURA KASISCHKE  
NICOLE YURCABA

JESSIE VAN EERDEN  
TODD DAVIS



CHEAT  
RIVER  
REVIEW

FALL 2013 ❖ ISSUE 1

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—Poetry—

Mark Halliday

[Excuse Me?](#)

Excuse me? Did you say it's all just headed for decrepitude  
and being forgotten? We just get old and decrepit and then we are  
forgotten, or even forgotten first and then decrepit  
moving inch by inch from magazine rack to chair  
at the overheated public library which doesn't even house  
the books by us and our former rivals and we just die and  
decompose? Did you say that's the deal? The only deal?  
Well then screw it!  
I'm not cooperating with the big stupid joke.  
I won't even try  
to write poems that achieve so many layers of irony  
they're magically safe from the moths of obsolescence,  
from young-lung pups in 2030 dispensing quickie dismissals—  
“typical boomer bourgeois individualist lamentation”—  
I won't even bother! Why should I set myself up for that?

And I sure as hell won't sit around at the library  
trying to crank out Generous-Yet-Critical reviews  
of books by my peers, or my elders, let alone my frothy juniors.  
What would be the point? They're all headed for the same  
landfill full of plastic toys and smashed computers  
that I'm headed for. Just as you said. All of them.  
... Except maybe one—or two ...

No, screw that. I'm not getting hooked again  
on that beat-the-house against-all-odds teddybear dream.  
No, because I have this big insight now thanks to you  
and those thinkers of the Eighties you've mentioned who caught on

so now I'm not sweetly naïve like basically all those dead guys,  
Shelley, Tennyson, Yeats, whoever. Eternity suckers.  
No, I'm going—going—going going  
to eat a huge portion of sausage lasagna and feel contentment.

Felt Pouch

Out of the floodbath of itching vaporous particulars of perception  
I have sequestered my latest clutch of radiant-to-me unpredictably poised  
time-testingly graceful furbished bijoux

to carry them in this tiny felt pouch  
to the upper level but

your book and your book and your book  
are blocking the escalator

so I guess I have to take the stairs  
but my knees aren't the greatest  
so maybe I will just end up down here with the losers

(unless there is a secret elevator  
operated by Posterity Services)

so I'm learning to say "It's the effort that matters"  
down here where every hand flicks a keyboard  
and the evanescence of renown maddens many hatters.

Mark Halliday teaches at Ohio University. His sixth book of poems, *Thresherphobe*, is new from the University of Chicago Press in 2013.

Erin Murphy

[Reverse Alchemy](#)

Forget those bullion bricks  
and gaudy chains around  
the neck. I am perfecting  
the long tradition of turning  
gold to lead. See: autumn  
leaves. See: lust. See: everyone  
you've ever loved who's dead.

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Erin Murphy is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Distant Glitter* (Word Poetry, 2013), and is co-editor of *Making Poems: Forty Poems with Commentary by the Poets* (SUNY Press, 2010). Her works have been published in numerous journals and anthologies and featured on Garrison Keillor's *The Writer's Almanac*. She is associate professor of English at Penn State Altoona. Website: [erin-murphy.com](http://erin-murphy.com)

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Franklin K.R. Cline

Algae

Swaying and reaching for something just out of reach,  
the mostly-brown algae follows the push  
of the man-made woosh of water spilling through a silver tunnel,  
piloted into this pond from a larger lake. It all ends here.  
Someone has left a pop can on the grass, and its sparkle  
echoes the muddy glint of this sun, this water.  
The nearby grass is white and brown from being known.  
A pair of geese drink their fill, riding the water  
in the kind of silence shared by old couples  
eating out of styrofoam on a shopping mall evening.  
The incoming water yawns more splashes.  
Some algae blobs to the surface, green purple brown.  
Elsewhere up the squeezed gronk of some bird  
sounds rhythmically. I wonder if anyone will come  
pick up the can, if anyone needs to know about this.  
There is an apartment complex a quarter mile away  
and cars screech reminders of what's become home,  
the new whirl of our surroundings.  
There are several cracks on the pathway home,  
a silence like the world got emptied. The sun  
was supposed to set an hour ago, but it's still plastered up there,  
the bruised red of clearance price tags. Still,  
light makes a good dome for us to wish against.

## John Hoppenthaler

Last Father's Day

The ride to Dad's was uneventful. I mean,  
except for the squirrel, who seemed to have it in  
for himself anyway, the desperate scurry  
and lunge, certain thud. But that was nothing  
much in the grand scheme of things, and so it was her  
putanesca for dinner, and we grinned  
little grins to register the irony.  
Dad never flinched, and when had he begun  
to drink white zinfandel? Budweiser cans  
were nowhere in sight, our mother's photo  
was nowhere in sight, not even in a closed album  
placed upon the Ikea coffee table  
the evening before as a gesture  
we'd have seen as a gesture. Where Mom's Home  
Sweet Home had hung was a museum print—  
El Greco's View of Toledo—casting silver-  
blue electricity along the wall,  
its cathedral's spire conducting heaven,  
light humbled into dark conspiracy  
with storm clouds, torrents about to batter rooftops  
and flush the valley clean. "The dog got old,"  
Dad explained, "and I had to put him down."  
Did we want the boxes in the attic?  
Report cards, class pictures, 'A' papers," he said,  
"and who knows what else your mother saved."  
I threw my pellet gun in the back seat, too,  
the case of bootleg tapes I'd play so loudly  
they trembled the house with bass. My sister lugged  
Mom's wicker sewing basket and Di-Ann—  
that's how she spelled it, DI-ANN—  
didn't like it one bit, but there went thimbles  
out the door, tailor's chalk and the yellow tape measure,  
tins of hemming pins, a myriad of spools,  
dizzying arrays of colored threads, plus  
the two of us, and Dad and Di-Ann  
awkwardly waving goodbyes from the edge  
of the driveway, flabby arms around each other's waists.  
My clunker twitched into gear, leapt backward  
into the street like a startled cat. We heard  
the tearing; you and I both swore it was so;

the worn-out seat of the universe  
expanded then. We'd heard it split a seam.

[The Gentleman Hunters Run Their Hounds](#)

—Lake Anna, VA

Let's hasten through this early spring plague,  
ladybugs whirring about on pitiful wings  
while their homes are burning. Earlier,  
two does clambered uphill from the lake,  
disappeared beyond construction waste  
we've yet to haul to the dump. Minutes later,  
a pack of howling dogs followed, numbers  
stenciled on their sides, antennae protruding  
from tracking devices attached to their collars.  
I wished I were a hunter in camouflage,  
tracking down those canine killers.  
What would it be like  
to sip Armangac and smoke cigars  
beneath their stuffed heads, bared teeth  
polished and glistening in the firelight?  
Some cultures eat them, I'm told,  
but we scratch the fur behind their skittish ears.  
Sunday morning, on ESPN, the celebrity hunter  
murmured absent-mindedly as he kneeled  
over the eight-point buck he'd just plugged  
through the heart from three hundred yards,  
stroking that same soft spot  
behind the corpse's ear, almost whispering  
to it: he was saying, "beautiful animal,  
such a beautiful animal." You and I  
are happier now that we've seen the error  
of our ways. Though it is nearly dark,  
coyotes will likely keep their distance  
as we pick through our dense woods.  
The last flaring of sunlight incites  
the tree line into flame that will surely burn  
everything to the ground, but I have never loved you  
so much as I do now, yelping dogs  
and their red-necked masters be damned.

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John Hoppenthaler is the author of three collections of poetry, *Lives Of Water*, *Anticipate the Coming Reservoir*, and the forthcoming *Domestic Garden*, all with Carnegie Mellon University Press. Recent poems have been published, or are forthcoming, in *Subtropics*, *Copper Nickel*, *Cutthroat*, *Blackbird*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Spillway*, *Mead*, *Laurel Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *StorySouth*, and elsewhere. An Associate Professor at East Carolina University, he edits *A Poetry Congeries* at Connotation Press: An Online Artifact.

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Gary L. McDowell

[Of Smoke](#)

Paper cut-outs of bedroom doors—  
your bedroom doors—

march down the street  
or behind my eyelids or into the poem,

and in the poem

paper means lightning,  
means porch lights,

means ghosts, the terrible

harmony of its wandering body

The ghost's dreams are in my mouth  
We are becalmed———We

are hulls sweating the lake

[Of Oaths](#)

For over a week now even walking's made me tired  
Finding something is losing something else

Why do people go missing

Always the one boy at the park who wanders  
off, his mother asleep on a bench

Coffee grows on trees

A procession of snares and rattlesnakes,  
things that hiss and jump:

cars speeding by on wet pavement,

Sing the song a Siren sings, they say,  
they say, they sing

a song of people lost,

a chant of swan dives and car wrecks,  
the geometry of pain

The retention pond out back drained overnight,  
and now a hole, damp, tadpoles

drying in the sun

I've been told no before

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Gary L. McDowell is the author of two books of poetry, *Weeping at a Stranger's Funeral* (Dream Horse Press, forthcoming) and *American Amen* (Dream Horse Press, 2010), winner of the 2009 Orphic Prize for Poetry. He's also the co-editor of *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry* (Rose Metal Press, 2010). New poems are forthcoming in *Fourteen Hills*, *CutBank*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Burnside Review*, and *Salt Hill*, among others. He is an assistant professor of English and creative writing at Belmont University.

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Laura Kasischke

[The Invisible Passenger](#)

Between row 12 and row 14, there  
are, on this plane, no seats. This

engineering feat of  
gravity and wings, which  
flies on superstition, irrationality. The calm

has been printed on my ticket:

Doe and fawn  
in a grove below us, her  
soul crawling in an out of my clothes.

While, in a roofless theater, a magic act  
is performed for children  
by an invisible man.

Like the mess

of a cake that I once  
baked for my father—

Damp, awful, crumbling layers.  
Soggy churchbell on a plate.

And, my father's dentures, lost  
(all his teeth  
pulled out  
as a young man  
by a military dentist im-  
patient to send him  
on his way) and

my father's smile anyway.

Nicole Yurcaba

[The Great Appalachian-American Novel](#)

The Great Appalachian-American Novel

When writing the Great Appalachian-American novel—

the heroes should be romantically tragic:  
wanted-by-the-law moonshiners, poor dirt farmers, displaced Cherokee  
the at-one-with-nature mountain man.

Their eyes, faces, hands and fingers must be tragically  
replicative of the rough mountain landscape in which they dwell.

Moonshine should be consumed; tobacco chewed and the acrid juice swallowed.

If the hero is an Appalachian woman, she is beautiful. Possibly a half-breed, the result of simple  
mathematics: one-half displaced Cherokee mother plus one-half at-one-with-nature mountain man father.  
She must be uneducated and poor and in love with a rich city man.

Her at-one-with-nature father must threaten the city man with his ancient, generation-to-generation  
passed down Civil War era Enfield rifle.

The rich city man must be so filthy stinkin' rich that he can provide the half-breed Appalachian woman  
the things her mountain culture could not:

fancy Gothic-designed mansions, high-dollar foreign cars, schooling at the finest business schools, and  
refining at top-notch salons.

There must be one murder, one illegitimate child, one skeleton-in-the-closet secret—all threatening to be  
revealed and destroy the rich city man's prosperity.

If the rich city man loves the Appalachian half-breed woman

then the rich city man may become Appalachian by proximity, yet remain unaccepted by the half-breed  
Appalachian woman's kinfolk because she married a "ferner," who eventually buys out the poor old dirt  
farmer and

leads his friend, the Revenue Man, to the wanted-by-the-law moonshiner.

Sometimes complications arise—the county politicians don't take too kindly to city folk meddlin' in  
affairs they ought not to be meddlin'...

...unless, of course, the county politicians get their fair share of the cut.

In rare instances, everyone seems like a tragic Appalachian, struggling against Big City's corruption and encroachment and embezzlement, struggling to flee from uncontrolled industry, overbearing technology and Big Government.

In the Great Appalachian-American novel, after it is finally written, all of the rich city people will be Appalachians, after they have bought up all the finest mountains and farmland, and built their high-dollar mansions. And all of the true Appalachian-Americans will be the mist rising from the great Smoky Mountain's peaks.

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Nicole Yurcaba hails from a long line of coal miners, Ukrainian immigrants and West Virginian mountain folk. She is an adjunct instructor of English and Developmental Reading, substitute teacher and farm hand hailing from West Virginia currently pursuing her Master of Humanities in English at Tiffin University. Her work has appeared in print and online journals such as VoxPoetica, Referential Magazine, Rolling Thunder Quarterly, Decompression, Hobo Camp Review, The Camel Saloon, Jellyfish Whispers, Napalm and Novocaine, Floyd County Moonshine, and many others. In life, she enjoys taking the unbeaten path, and usually exits the scene pursued by bear.

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## Todd Davis

Yu

Blue dragonflies rise  
from the alder marsh  
in the last hour of light,  
and barn swallows skim  
the field to filch the heads  
of the tallest grasses,  
hungering for these blue  
seraphs who open  
into the stomach's  
afterlife. Wings thin  
as wafers carry us  
into the resurrection  
of dirt or limb  
or wherever  
plundered flight  
may come to rest.  
Dragonflies know  
the closer to the earth  
the safer the path.  
Swallows cannot dive  
from heaven  
without crashing  
into catkins and cattails,  
the blessed covering  
of darkness  
that drapes this world—  
which is not made  
of ten thousand things  
but ten thousand  
thousand.

Mud Dauber

Work with a hammer teaches us blood under the nail  
forms a half-moon. A fist at the side of the head teaches us

blood on the tongue tastes like sun-warmed iron.  
Blood itches as it dries from the jagged lines

the locust thorn leaves while chamber by chamber  
the nest grows on the underside of an old board.

Yesterday my youngest was stung, foot swelling twice its size.  
As we sit on the porch after dinner barn swallows fly in

and out of the loft: bellies the color of sky at dusk.  
Only in this new dark does the buzzing finally stop.

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Todd Davis teaches creative writing and environmental studies at Penn State University's Altoona College. He is the author of four books of poems, most recently *In the Kingdom of the Ditch* (Michigan State University Press, 2013) and *The Least of These* (Michigan State University Press, 2010). He also edited *Fast Break to Line Break: Poets on the Art of Basketball* (Michigan State University Press, 2012) and co-edited *Making Poems: Forty Poems with Commentary by the Poets* (State University of New York Press, 2010). His poetry has appeared widely in such places as *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, and *Iowa Review*.

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## —Fiction—

Steven Sherrill

[Food Court](#)

Four days after Christmas, three days after his father's funeral, and still a long day's drive from home, Mitch sat in the second floor window of a Red Roof Inn looking out over the tarp-covered pool and the chain link fence enclosing it; looking out across an interstate highway running North and South, sometimes around, sometimes over, but there (wherever he was) through the pinched, winter-brown Allegheny mountains, a rocky chasm cut just wide enough for four lanes of traffic, barely room for the on-ramps, the off-ramps; looking out over and beyond the highway, beyond the derelict Quickie Mart, where the side of mountain had been bulldozed away to make a plateau for the Arnesal Valley Mall and its busy parking lot.

Not quite four-thirty, and the January sun, that luminous cataract, was about to blink shut for the night. Mitch didn't know for sure where he was. Virginia, maybe. Maybe southern Ohio. He'd driven, numbed, and alone, away from Briar Creek Presbyterian Church, away from the platters of deviled eggs and buckets of fried chicken and gallons of sweet tea, away from the mourners, those related by blood, or history. He'd driven without paying attention, wanting only to escape—for the second time in his life—a community that seemed to thrive on grief; wanting only to go back home, where the suffering was, somehow, more bearable. Mitch stopped driving for the day, pulled off the interstate when exhaustion began to blur the traffic signs. The Red Roof Inn was the only lodging option at exit 237.

Mitch sat in the window—because it was the only chair in the room—and moved his fingertip back and forth across the cell-phone's power button. Sat with his knees wedged against the metal housing of the heating unit, and waited for its rattling, turbojet cycle to end (so much noise for such tepid air sputtering from the vents), but when the heater stopped, the erratic, tidal, roar of the cars and trucks passing on the highway filled, immediately, all the space silence could've occupied. Mitch thought of calling the front desk and asking for a room at the back of the motel. But even at his best, his freshest, his most confident, Mitch avoided confrontation, even hypothetical, purely speculative confrontation. As for that day ...

There was no lid on the toilet; he felt silly, embarrassed, but he sat anyway, and had to close the door to do so. How many days since he'd checked messages? How many years since he'd gotten a message from anyone other than his boss, the district manager of all three Copy-Rite sites, or his nearly bed-ridden wife Louise? Mitch couldn't answer either question.

The voicemail ring tone startled him. A jarring hip-hop beat and some guttural exclamations, no doubt downloaded into the cell-phone by his, at once, caustic and evasive thirteen year old daughter. Donna never really interacted directly with Mitch. Hadn't for a long long time. But she seemed to thoroughly enjoy wreaking techno-havoc around the house. Cell-phones, the TiVo, the answering machine, the microwave, anything that could be reprogrammed was fair game. Maybe, Mitch thought, all the electronic monkey-business was Donna's attempt to reach out to him.

As a young man, when he'd left South Carolina for a school near the Ohio and Pennsylvania border—not quite North, not quite mid-West—he thought, for sure, that just the act of leaving the place where he'd endured childhood would change his life, immeasurably, for the better. Twenty years later, Mitch still remembered his mother alternately sobbing then pouting at the kitchen table that day, and his father never coming out of the basement workshop. But he had absolutely no idea nothing really got better.

Maybe Donna was thinking of running away. Maybe her pranks were coded messages. Again, with the ring tone.

“... twerk it to the left ... bounce it to the right ... rumpshaker ... you a rumpshaker ...”

Mitch fumbled with buttons until the song stopped. The cramped bathroom grew suddenly too small to hold both him and breathable air. Mitch undid the second button on his road-weary shirt, sat on the bed to listen to his messages.

Two. Only two. Both from his boss, Thom, who insisted on the h.

The twenty-seven missed calls were from Louise, but the messages were from Thom.

The first was simply an angry “Where are you!”

But Thom knew where Mitch was; had to. Mitch left the note, with Thom's name on it, saying he was going to his father's funeral, in plain view.

The second voicemail was angrier. Less intelligible, and palpably angrier. Thom kept repeating that Mitch “... better check his goddamn email ...” But Mitch didn't bring his laptop along. He went over a list of possible problems in his mind, but decided not to speculate.

Mitch's footsteps echoed in the concrete stairwell, as if he were a much more substantial man. As if he carried some weight. He held the lobby door open for an old couple in matching Virginia is for Lovers t-shirts.

“Do ya'll have a business center?” he asked the desk clerk.

Ya'll

Mitch had worked hard to put the ya'lls and the aint's behind him, but one afternoon with the grieving relatives and acquaintances, with the motley band of pallbearers he'd been coerced into joining (two old men he didn't know, two cousins he didn't want to know, and one man his own age, in a filthy suit, whom his mother insisted used to be his best friend, and who talked to Mitch in nervous whispers the entire time they carried the coffin, starting every sentence with “Hey Mitch ... Hey Mitch, remember that little retarded girl we thought was so cute? Hey Mitch, ain't them Yankees you live with a pain in the ass?”

Hey Mitch, ya'll want to blow a doobie after the service? Hey Mitch ..."), and his tongue was sullied again.

"A what, honey?" the desk clerk asked. She'd checked him in earlier. He'd noted the fatigue, the deep weariness in her eyes. He'd noted her efforts to hide the dark circles and heavy bags behind makeup and a hairstyle that seemed too young for her face. Her efforts made Mitch want to hug her. To thank her for checking him in so nicely.

"A business center? Or a computer for guests to use?"

Mitch looked around the small room as he asked. He saw a coffee machine and a wire rack almost empty of brochures. Mitch looked at her Red Roof Inn nametag.

Lela.

"No, honey. We got complimentary breakfast; coffee, juice, and donuts. Sometimes yogurt. We got Wi-Fi in the rooms, but it don't half work. But there's no computer."

Lela, no doubt, saw the anxiety sweep across his face.

"Is it important?" she asked.

Mitch nodded, yes. Bit his top lip.

"Sit still for a minute," she said, then slipped through the closed doorway behind the counter. Seconds later, the door opened, but she didn't emerge.

"You can come on in," she said.

It was the manager's office. Lela left Mitch alone to do his business. He stared at the Red Roof Inn Customer Service Award of the Year "Lela Happenny" plaque until his eyes adjusted to the antiseptic fluorescent light, took a deep breath, and logged into his Copy Rite email account. The sheer bulk of his unread messages immediately overloaded the computer.

Mitch wanted nothing more than to crawl, unseen, out of the office, across the lobby floor, climb into his car, and drive away, but he forced himself to stop trembling and go face Lela. As it happened, the desk clerk was as kind as she was tired. She rebooted the computer, showed Mitch a trick to get the web browser to open his saturated email server, and didn't leave until he was successfully logged on.

"I'll leave the door cracked," Lela said. "Let me know if you need help."

Thirteen new messages in his in-box, all from Thom. Mitch only had to open one before wishing the Red Roof Inn computer had remained frozen. He heard the front door, and the sound of rolling

luggage on tile. As the full extent to which he'd screwed things up at work became clear, Mitch listened to Lela check in new guests.

How many times had he heard Thom give "the talk" at the monthly manager's meeting? Thom took his job seriously. Every second Tuesday, he gathered his minions in one of the cramped conference rooms and, like some half-televangelist, half-drill sergeant, railed about how much of a monster Kinko's was, and how Copy Rite could only compete by finding just the right clients, and treating them like kings.

Mitch's store handled the small company's biggest account.

Mitch, in addition to basic managerial responsibilities, handled layout mock-ups, collating, and bulk mailing.

The Ohio-pyle Oxbows, a regional Single-A baseball team, affiliate of the Cleveland Indians, was hoping to promote their new mascot before the season's start.

Their idea was a yoked ox with a smile.

Mitch remembered, clearly, signing off on the final proof.

Thom's third email, and the accompanying attachment, said it most accurately: "It looks like a turd! Like a goddamn grinning turd! In a cowboy hat!"

And, as if the color shift and some compression in the graphic wasn't enough, a glaring typo in the banner couldn't be missed. While Mitch buried his father, twenty-five thousand turds, on the front of twenty-five thousand Ohio-pyle Oxbows Season Schedules, made their smiling way across the state, into twenty-five thousand waiting mailboxes.

Lela was filling the brochure rack when Mitch staggered out of the office. He had to eat. He hadn't eaten hardly anything since the service. He had to nourish his body before calling Thom. Lela looked a little afraid when he approached, but her kindness, or her commitment to customer service, kept her from running away.

"Is there a restaurant in the Arnesal Mall?" Mitch asked.

"You mean the Arsenal Mall?"

The gods, the powers that be, however their called, wouldn't allow Mitch to forget his dyslexia for long. Despite having made it through college, his tendency to flip flop letters, transpose numbers, and often overlook glaring typographical errors, held him down to the bottom rung of Copy Rite's corporate ladder.

"There used to be a Friendly's," Lela said. "But it closed."

Mitch floundered in the silence.

“They got a food court,” she, finally, said.

When he stepped out of the Red Roof Inn lobby and into the parking lot, the stench of rotten eggs made him gag, made him drop his keys, made him change his mind, instantly about trying to walk across the highway to the Arsenal Mall. Fresh air may have done him some good. But Mitch couldn’t deal with that sulfur-y, and oddly familiar, stink.

He hated malls. For a multitude of reasons.

He didn’t know what Donna did with her days. Didn’t know her friends. What she liked about school or even if she attended regularly. All she ever seemed to do was go to the mall. All he ever heard her talk about, while driving her to or from the mall, was auditioning for American Idol, and Next Top Model, and some others he couldn’t remember.

Donna, dear Donna, had clearly inherited her mother’s short legs, wide hips, and thin lips. Had inherited no recessive “singing” gene. And, with increasing evidence, had inherited more extreme versions of the learning disabilities that plagued Mitch. He had neither the heart nor the courage to shatter her dreams.

Despite being wedged into a narrow gap in the mountains, with nothing but steep rocky farmland for miles around, the Arsenal Mall bustled busily. Mitch walked through the doors just in time to have to duck to avoid being hit—practically decapitated—by a remote controlled toy helicopter operated by a grinning dreadlocked teen at a kiosk in the aisle opposite Victoria’s Secret.

He hated malls.

Mitch dodged the toy sellers, the NASCAR memorabilia, and the stand full of rock stars airbrushed onto tee shirts, weaving around the kiosks and their purveyors until he made it to the food court at the heart of the mall. A high, domed, glass ceiling just barely contained the massive palm tree at its center; on nearly every surface of the low brick planter from which the tree rose, groups of tattooed and pierced youth sat, stood, mulled, ate, chewed food or gum, talked or text messaged on their phones, taunted each other, swore and pretended not to, or swore with giddy abandon; all of them, more or less facing out from the center of the planter, as if guarding something there, watching all who came and went at the various food stands, judging, assessing, a hormonal army ready to be unleashed. Teens, maybe, but he couldn’t really tell. Mitch hated malls.

He tucked into a short line at The Great Steak & Potato Company, not because he had a taste for their food, but because few teens sat on the nearby planter. Mitch took his sandwich to the most distant empty table and set about eating. He just needed to get something in his stomach before making those phone calls. Two bites in and he noticed the cart just on the other side of the rail separating eaters from shoppers. Soooo-Real Pets! Fake animals, smaller than normal, curled onto beds or crouching low and

looking up. Wiggling their tails. Blinking their eyes. Or seeming to sleep. The fur looked so real. Mitch swore he saw a diminutive schnauzer breathing; saw its fake belly rise and fall with fake breath.

He found the whole scenario nauseating, but, as if it wasn't nauseating enough, he noticed that some of the kids had left their posts on the planter and were taking turns—he watched it more than once; was certain of the actions—watched them huddle by a door to a hallway that led to a bathroom, and one by one, taking turns, pick their noses and come up wipe their fingers on the Soooo-Real puppies and kittens.

If Mitch had flown to his father's funeral, like Louise said, he wouldn't have had to witness such nonsense. He wouldn't have missed so many days at work. If Louise and Donna had come with him, like he wanted them to, but couldn't say, couldn't ask. If he hadn't moved north, married a Catholic with "different" ideas about the world; a woman who developed a mysterious chronic illness that his mother could neither believe nor pronounce. If he hadn't spent the past years putting coat after coat of shellac on his past and its inherent pain. If he could only have a daughter that looked real, that seemed alive, but didn't need to be cleaned, fed, cared for, worried about. If he only had a wife that did want his touch, did need his presence; a woman who did more than curl up and breathe.

Laughter shook Mitch out of his daze. He must've been thinking with his eyes open, and looking in the direction of the obnoxious kids. They were clearly looking back at him. Talking. Snickering. Plotting.

Mitch wanted to go home. Or at least back to the motel. He needed to call Louise and Thom. No, Thom first. Mitch stabbed a few last French fries into some ketchup, ate them hurriedly, paused at the trash can long enough to take a final sip of his cola, and headed toward the exit. Escaping the mall without negotiating the aisle way kiosks was impossible, but he looked for a different exit so as to avoid the helicopters. In looking around, Mitch noticed that a few of the kids were following him, ducking in and out of doors, giggling. Mitch quickened his pace. It wasn't bodily harm that he feared; rather the less tangible and often more permanently damaging public humiliation. When the teens seemed to step up their pursuit as well, Mitch considered dashing through one of those numerous unmarked doors in every mall that led to god knows where. But something changed his course of action.

More accurately, someone.

"Excuse me," the boy said.

Boy. Man. One or the other. His coal black hair, equally dark eyes, and clearly foreign skin made it hard to tell.

"What?" Mitch said, both grateful for being rescued from his pursuers, and suspicious of what this stranger manning a kiosk full of salves and lotions wanted from him.

"Can I ask you a question?" the guy said.

“Umm ...”

That was a question. Did he mean another one?

“What’s your name?”

“Mitch.”

Mitch looked around. The teens had scattered, but remained on the periphery. The dark man worked to lock Mitch’s gaze with his own. The man extended his hand. A common courtesy.

“Mitch,” he said, holding Mitch’s hand firmly. “I am Avi. Can I ask you a question, Mitch?”

Mitch tried to pull his hand back, but didn’t want to be rude.

“Do you know the Dead Sea, Mitch?”

“What?”

“Do you play the guitar, Mitch?”

By that time, Avi had the fingers of Mitch’s right hand, splayed, examining each fingertip, tracing the ligaments into his wrist. Mitch, embarrassed by the ketchup under his nails, flushed. It all happened so fast, Mitch didn’t know what to do. Avi said strong hands should look good, cared for. Avi said something about salt and mud and the Dead Sea. Something about essential. Avi used the word revive several times. Then Avi opened a jar by his cash register, scooped out a dollop of something clear and grainy, and began to massage it into Mitch’s right hand. So fast. Slow down. Mitch, who’d never, ever been touched so intentionally by a man, of any age, from any country, could not move. He knew the kids were watching from somewhere, laughing. He knew the other shoppers looked at the ground and hurried around him and Avi, as if not wanting to witness such an encounter.

Avi said something about the Dead Sea. Avi pushed his strong thumbs into Mitch’s palm.

A sluice gate opened in Mitch’s mind; a tsunami of memory nearly drowned him.

Mitch and his father. Twenty years earlier. His father needed help wiring several fluorescent light fixtures in the ceiling of his basement workshop. It took all day. They both stood on ladders, reaching up into the tight junction boxes, taking turns with the screwdriver and the wire nuts. It was the last time he and his father ever touched.

Mitch jerked his hand from the dark boy’s grasp. Tried but could not stop the surge of tears. Avi looked, first confused, then disappointed, then fixed his attention on a dumpy middle aged woman coming out of The Body Shop. Mitch ran all the way out to his car. Was still crying, sobbing even, when he dropped his keys, again, in the dark that time, under the front wheel. Had to get on his hands and knees

and reach, blindly, until he found them. And that smell. Those smells. The piney oil Avi had massaged into his hands blended with the odor of sulfur permeating everything at Exit 237, and Mitch suddenly knew why the egg-y stench was so familiar. Mitch, in an instant, was seven years old again, and on vacation, in Cherokee Village, with his parents, and on the drive, all the way there, they'd joked about the smell of the paper mill, and on the chairlift up to the park, Mitch had cried, sat in his father's lap all the way to the top, his father telling him, over and over, hush ... hush ... hush.

Back at the Red Roof Inn, Mitch thought briefly of going in to tell Lela Happenny about what happened, but through his tears—and the glaring irrationality of the action—he thought he saw a different clerk on duty. Couldn't risk it. He had to call Thom. No way around it. He should call Louise. He ought to call his mother.

Mitch, exhausted, climbed the stairs. Couldn't think clearly. Couldn't remember Thom's phone number, or any other phone number. Couldn't imagine what he'd say to anybody even if he did call. Mitch opened the control panel of the heater unit, twisted the knob, turning the blower on high, hoping the noise would drown out the storm in his head. Mitch drew the thick, plastic-backed curtains fully across the window, and without undressing, climbed into bed and pulled the covers up. Felt certain sleep would elude him. Knew, without doubt, he'd lay, he'd wallow, in his confusion, his exhaustion, until daybreak, then drive home no less weary, no less mixed up.

But Mitch was wrong.

He slept. Slept soundly, for about ten minutes. Then the dreams started.

Mitch moaned and twitched beneath the covers as he dreamt of walking, over and over, down the aisle of Briar Creek Presbyterian Church, walking up to his father's open casket, while all his relatives and all the people from his past sat in the pews and laughed and snickered and mocked him for his fear and his sadness. And his father, old, older than he'd ever seen him, naked, eyes open, and every time Mitch got close the man whispered "hush, boy, hush." And someone called his name from the door.

When Mitch left that dream, he found himself wading in a concrete river, through a rocky chasm, each labored step almost impossible. Beneath the surface, and breaking the surface of the fluid stone, monstrous mechanical leviathans swam, their maws gaping and clanging shut, their chrome teeth gnashing the January sunlight.

"Mitch."

Someone called his name from high up on the bank, and Mitch reached up, without being able to see who was up there. Mitch left that dream, left it, running, kicking his legs, twisting the blankets around his feet, as if shackled, fettered, in the middle of a desert, someplace hot and dry, in the distance a grove of gnarly trees, their blue grey leaves shimmering, Mitch bound at the foot, unable to escape the mammoth horned turd charging directly towards him, dragging a shattered yoke on a broken chain, no less dangerous seeming, deadly even, for the fact that the monster was a cartoon come to life. In the distance, from the grove of trees a figure, a voice, a boy, or man. Avi? Mitch held his hands up, trying to

protect himself. But each cartoon breath that snorted from the creature's cartoon nostrils blistered his skin. Avi began to run toward Mitch. The hellish cartoon turd charged nearer and nearer. When Mitch realized they would all collide at the same time, he screamed. Jolted himself awake.

Awake.

In the Red Roof Inn.

Sweating.

And so incredibly erect, aroused, hard, that it hurt.

Shame and embarrassment coursed through Mitch's tired body.

What the hell.

Mitch kicked off the covers and got out of bed. Moved away, as if the bed itself were contaminated. So many things coursing through his mind, he couldn't parse out dream from memory, fear from desire. He tried. But everything rolled and roiled together, and everything became Avi's face, Avi's dark eyes, Avi's strong hands. Mitch was drenched in sweat, wanted to open the door to let both the stifling air and the demons out, but was too embarrassed. Ashamed. And still hard. He tried thinking. Thinking of banal things. Thinking of—as he had in sixth grade, when Lisa Rummage wouldn't stop flashing her underpants while he gave a book report on Tom Sawyer—embarrassing moments. He tried not thinking. He thought about going down to the lobby, under the pretense of asking for directions or something, but his erection would not be suppressed. Simply to relieve the discomfort, Mitch had to loosen his belt. Unbutton his pants. Remove his pants. Simply to relieve ... what ... a force larger than himself, driven along by a lifetime of missteps, Mitch gave in. He tried, as a last resort, picturing his wife Louise ... practically bedridden. Picturing, finally, Avi ... Avi ... Avi.

line break

At 2:37 in the morning, a moonless, cold morning, somewhere between South Carolina and Ohio, Mitch fell into the deepest, most restful sleep he'd had in years. Decades, perhaps. No dreams. No anxieties. No throbbing temples or aching back. And when he woke, without an alarm, eager to be awake, not quite sure what had happened in the night, uncertain what day of the week it was, but remarkably ok with it all, his first thought was to apologize to the boy with the Dead Sea salt and mud for acting so strangely. Nothing more. Just to say he was sorry for crying and running away like that.

Mitch whistled as he showered; some hip-hop song he didn't know the words to. Hung a clean oxford shirt in the bathroom as he did so, to smooth out some of the wrinkles. He dressed, and as he snugged up the knot of his tie, the cell phone rang. Mitch's belly lurched. He had an idea. He peeled a couple sheets from the Red Roof Inn notepad, took the only envelope, despite the stained corner. Took his suitcase. Left his phone, vibrating and ringing, on the nightstand without checking to see who was calling. He looked out over the interstate, through the pure, clean morning air. The mountains cut a crisp

silhouette into a hard blue sky. The domed ceiling of the Arsenal Mall, with the food court at its heart, glinted like a jewel, in the sun. In the lobby, Mitch ate a strawberry and banana yogurt, then, because it was the best thing he'd ever tasted, he ate another. Mitch borrowed a pen from the desk clerk, spent a few minutes writing a note that spilled over onto both small rectangles of Red Roof Inn paper. He printed the address for Copy-Rite on the envelope (attn: Thom), and was grateful when, as he checked out, the desk clerk offered to stamp and mail it. As he signed the receipt, Mitch couldn't help but notice how much softer, how much healthier, the skin on the back of his right looked, compared to the left.

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Steven Sherrill has been making trouble with words since 8th grade, when he was suspended from school for two weeks for a story he wrote. He dropped out of school in the 10th grade, ricocheted around for years, eventually earning a Welding Diploma from Mitchell Community College, which circuitously led to an MFA in Poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

He's been making visual art since 1990ish. And those images are venturing out into the world. Self-taught, he tries to repeat the things that work, and not to repeat the things that don't. Steven has wanted to make music for his entire life (owned and abandoned guitars, fiddles, harmonicas, banjos, a saxophone, an accordion, etc.), but never felt he had the right. Then he formed the Allegheny Bilge Rats Shanty Choir. Arrrgh!

Now, Steven is an Associate Professor of English and Integrative Arts at Penn State University, Altoona, with three novels and a book of poems in the world. He is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for Fiction in 2002. His first novel, *The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break*, is translated into 8 languages and was recently released as an audio book by Neil Gaiman Productions. His second novel, *Visits From the Drowned Girl*, published by Random House (and nominated by them for the Pulitzer Prize), US and Canongate, UK was released in June of 2004. *The Locktender's House*, novel #3, was released by Random House in Spring 2008. And in November 2010, CW Books released the poetry collection, *Ersatz Anatomy*.

Much more info can be found at <http://stevensherrill.com>

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Lawrence F. Farrar

[The Man Who Wouldn't Pay for Dinner](#)

Herbert Templeton's name first lodged in Consul Paul Choate's consciousness while Paul was polishing off a cheeseburger. Paul and two other consular officers had already begun their lunch in the Embassy cafeteria, when Vice Consul Marcia Phillips placed her tray on the table and joined them. Marcia, a trim, short-haired brunette, came across as a no nonsense sort of a person, wholly committed to her job—too committed, in the view of her more experienced colleagues. Like longtime members of a fraternal order to whom all had been revealed, they were of one mind—the twenty something Marcia needed to lighten up.

"I just had a sort of strange passport renewal at the counter," she said. "A young guy, named Templeton."

"Strange? Strange in what way?" Charlie Philibrown asked.

Marcia doused her chicken salad with dollops of Ranch dressing, and then scraped some of them off with her fork. "It's hard to explain," she said. "His documents were all in order, and he was very polite."

"Well that is strange," Paul said, and everyone laughed. It was an old joke.

Paul Choate, a man in his mid-thirties, had brown eyes and close-cropped ash-blond hair challenged by a hairline in retreat. Sleeves rolled up, looped tie askew, and often as not a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, he looked more like a character from a movie newsroom than an American government representative. All he needed was a hat with a press pass stuck in the band. Both cynical and cautious, in the church of bureaucratic success, Paul reckoned the cardinal sins to be those of commission, not those of omission. Prudence was the watchword.

"No, it wasn't that," Marcia said. "I'm serious. He was nice looking, dressed quite neatly, expensive clothes—oozed preppiness. What was strange was the way he talked."

"Dialect? Accent? What?" Philibrown hunched his shoulders and lifted his palms, a juxtaposition of gestures that proclaimed get to the point. Philibrown—portly, red-faced, and middle-aged—regularly advertised his resentment of faster rising, younger officers. He directed some of his heaviest volleys at Marcia, a person he once described as overly serious and too big for her bloomers (no one had laughed).

"Not that either. It's just that when he answered my questions, he was ... well, kind of vacant—spaced out. Like he was talking past me. Like I wasn't there."

"Hey, that could apply to some of the people at this table," Paul said. "Vacant, I mean."

"You can laugh if you want to, Paul," Marcia said, "but I think we'll be seeing him again. Something wasn't right."

“Anything else make you think so?” Susie Opstad asked. A large, animated woman in her early thirties, unlike Marcia, she detected seriousness in almost nothing. Not one of the Great Minds of the Western World, she flowed happily along with the current, wherever it might take her.

Marcia picked at the forlorn flakes of chicken, scattered like a cook’s afterthought among clumps of iceberg lettuce displaying signs of incipient wilt.

“When I asked him what he was doing in Japan, he said he didn’t know. Just said they sent him.” Marcia put down her fork. She’d given up on the salad.

Paul dabbed at an errant glob of catsup decorating his shirt front. “They? Who are they?” he asked.

“He didn’t say. And before he left I saw him standing in the lobby. He must have spent five minutes staring up at the clock.”

“Just wanted to be sure of the time,” Susie said. She smiled brightly. Susie always smiled brightly.

“I’d swear he was watching the second hand go around,” Marcia said.

Paul’s turn as duty officer came that evening, meaning that if any consular business needed attention after the Embassy closed, the switchboard operator directed it to him in his apartment. He’d just refreshed a glass of Chivas Regal and spread open the Japan Times to its meager coverage of American sports when the phone jangled. He recognized the voice of a police liaison official named Imai, one of their regular contacts.

“Mr. Choate,” Imai said, “we have a somewhat curious situation here. One of your citizens came into our Akasaka police station about an hour ago and does not seem desirous of leaving.”

“Has he broken a law?” Paul asked.

“No, but the policemen find his presence rather annoying.”

“Has he interfered with them in some way?”

“No. He is just standing near the door and staring at the officers as they come and go. Sometimes he smiles and bows.”

“Do you have his name?”

“Oh, yes. He was most courteous and gave us his passport. He is Mr. Herbert Templeton of the state of Connecticut. He is twenty-eight years old.”

It was the same guy Marcia had talked about at lunch.

“How can I help?” Paul said. “Has he asked for some kind of Embassy assistance?”

“No, he has not. But, we hoped you might speak to him on the phone. Suggest he return to his hotel.”

Paul quaffed his drink and pulled a note pad closer to the phone.

“Hello,” the man said, “Herbert Templeton here.”

Paul identified himself and said, “Mr. Templeton, I understand you’re visiting one of the local police stations.”

“That’s quite right,” he said. “It’s very nice.”

“Yes, but they’re also busy. It would probably be a good idea if you could be on your way and let them do their jobs.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” Paul encountered the same detached voice Marcia had described.

“What brings you to Japan?” Paul said. “Are you a tourist?”

“I suppose I am. I hadn’t really thought about it. Yes. That’s it. I’m a tourist.”

Before Paul could ask him anything else, Templeton hung up. A moment later the phone rang again. “He just walked out and got into a taxi,” Imai said. “Thank you.”

Paul paused for a moment, considering his notes. Not much there. He had to admit he didn’t know what to make of the episode. But, difficult as it might be to do, he felt inclined to agree with Marcia. They likely had not heard the last of Mr. Templeton.

The next morning Paul asked Marcia to bring Templeton’s passport renewal application to his office. Templeton had given his US address as Middleford, Connecticut and his Japan address as the Grand Palace Hotel. He listed his emergency contact as Mr. Homer J. Templeton, also in Middleford. Herbert Templeton had landed a week earlier at Narita on a United Airlines flight from New York. Nothing on his application cried out for attention.

“One other thing, I noticed, Paul,” Marcia said. “Templeton has at least a dozen visas in his passport—maybe more. And there are entry and exit stamps on almost every page.”

“He must really get around,” Paul said. He started to sing, I’ve Been Everywhere, but couldn’t manage the words, and his Johnny Cash impression petered out after Reno, Chicago, Fargo, Minnesota.

Marcia rolled her eyes. “I’m serious, Paul.” She snatched back Templeton’s paperwork, delivered an exasperated look, and stalked out of the office.

The weekend passed without incident. At least, Templeton seemed to be behaving himself. On Monday the familiar throng of people seeking consular services lined up outside, funneled in through the doors like fans at a sports event, and packed the lobby. A would-be Zen practitioner from Elgin, Illinois claimed he had lost his passport and wanted a new one. Ever ready to ferret out fraud, like a precinct detective, Philibrown interrogated the young man, convinced he’d actually sold the passport. He maintained you could see in their eyes if they were lying.

Marcia busied herself explaining to an irate American woman there was nothing the Embassy could do about rude hotel clerks. And, still smiling, Susie zeroed in on a Filipina who, like a miraculously recovered amnesiac, suddenly recollected she had failed to mention on her visa application that she was already married and had two children back in Manila. Like a succession of ocean breakers, surprise, incredulity, and unhappiness crashed against the face of the applicant's GI fiancé.

At about 2:30, Kensuke Takeda, the consular section's senior Japanese employee, presented himself at Paul's office to report a phone call from the Yamashita Department Store in the Ginza. He said a foreigner, whom store officials determined to be an American, had been lounging on a sofa in the furniture department since the store opened in the morning. When Takeda inquired about why they didn't call the police and have the man removed, a manager told him they wanted to avoid adverse publicity. According to Takeda, the manager acted as if someone with a particularly repugnant disease had turned up on their couch. Couldn't the American Embassy do something? Discreetly please.

"Is his name Templeton?" Paul said.

Mr. Takeda nodded.

"Tell him we'll get back to them."

Four consular officers huddled in Paul's office. Except for Marcia, they agreed that, since Templeton had not asked for any help from the Embassy and since the Japanese, so far, appeared reluctant to take any action, there wasn't much they could do. Moreover, while his behavior might be characterized as unusual—weird, according to Philibrown—it did not seem threatening.

"Isn't it our job to help Americans in trouble?" Marcia narrowed her eyes indignantly. In her view, the rest of them, like so many bureaucratic ciphers, were ducking their responsibility.

"But, he really isn't in trouble," Paul said. "We can't involve ourselves with every minor flap that comes our way, with every American who gets a little off course."

"Besides, if we get involved we'll probably just stir things up," Philibrown chimed in. "Next thing you know, we'll have some congressman wanting to know what's going on."

"That's why we ought to do something now. So we don't have to hear from a congressman." Marcia remained convinced their hands off approach was not the right one. "Maybe we should at least talk to him—find out what's happening with him."

Of course, imbued as they were with unassailable self-certainty, the others knew she lacked the sagacity that comes with years of experience, a sagacity that says, if left alone, cases will resolve themselves, that says the passage of time is a universal curative. They didn't articulate it. But, they thought it. Marcia would learn.

In this vein, Paul hoped Herbert Templeton, like a radar blip that flares brightly, then fades, would simply vanish from their screen. Consequently, Mr. Takeda's follow-on report afforded some relief. After lingering in the clocks and watches department, he said, Templeton had bowed to a clerk, glided impassively down the escalator, and disappeared into the street.

The consular team heard nothing from or about Templeton for the next week. Then one evening, just after Paul punched in his remote to watch the CNN satellite news and lofted his stockinged feet on to a hassock, Marcia phoned him at home.

“You’re not going to believe this,” she said. “It’s Templeton again.”

“What now?”

“Same sort of thing. He apparently attended a concert at the Sony Hall tonight. Philadelphia Orchestra I think.”

“Right. That performance has been sold out for weeks. He must have paid plenty for a ticket.”

“Anyway. Long after the concert was over, he was sitting on a bench in the lobby. The cleaning crew thought he must somehow be with the orchestra. But, when they were ready to lock up, he was still parked there.” The man seemed to carom from place to place like a billiard ball.

“His behavior is odd. There’s no doubt about it.”

“The hall manager called Brian Allison. He knows him, of course, because Brian is the Cultural Attaché. Brian called me afterward.”

“Is that it?”

“No. Brian lives near the concert hall. Thinking he could be helpful, he went over there and actually talked to Templeton.”

“That’s not his job, but ...” Paul craned his neck, still trying to catch the television news.

“Brian had the same impression we did,” Marcia said. “His first words when he called were, ‘This fellow is troubled.’”

“What did ...?”

“First, Templeton rambled on about the concert. Then, according to Brian, the man clammed up and for a long time just sat there with this serene smile on his face. When Brian started to leave, out of the clear blue Templeton accused Brian of being sent to spy on him by Templeton’s father.”

“I expect Brian wished he’d stayed home,” Paul said.

“Brian’s exact words. He also said he couldn’t help thinking of the Norman Bates character in Psycho. According to Brian, Templeton stood up, announced he was walking back to his hotel, and left.”

“Norman Bates? Really?”

A few days later, Anthony Hamilton, the Embassy’s Consul General, returned from home leave in the United States. In the course of filling him in on some of the cases that had come up while he was away, Paul cataloged their quirky contacts with the quirky Mr. Templeton.

Tony tilted back in his executive chair, fiddling with a pencil. An African-American, with Jamaican forebears, Tony was endowed with a youthful demeanor and appearance (just a bit of gray at the temples) that belied his long Foreign Service experience. A savvy, all-around good guy, Tony was also a wellspring of consular lore.

“I’ve dealt with cases like this before, Paul—once in Rio, another time in Nice ... couple of other places. I’m guessing, of course. But, I’m willing to bet your man is emotionally disturbed, sent abroad by his family to get rid of him.”

“I guess I’ve heard of such ...”

Tony flipped the pencil onto his desk and clasped his hands behind his head. “They find him an embarrassment. Instead of getting him the treatment he likely needs, they stick him on a plane and send him away for weeks at a time—maybe months at a time.”

“According to Marcia, his passport was plastered with entry and departure stamps,” Paul said.

“Mostly, the families are well off. So expense is no problem. And they can always say their son—it’s almost always a son—is traveling abroad. Sounds good.”

“It seems pretty unfair,” Paul said.

“And, because these folks aren’t fully competent, there’s always a potential they’ll get into trouble.”

“So what do we do?”

“Right now? Nothing,” Tony said. “If they think he’s a problem, it’s up to the Japanese immigration authorities. I’m confident this guy has a return ticket. But, so far, it sounds like he hasn’t done anything that could get him deported. He’ll probably just go out to Narita Airport one of these days, hop on a plane, and fly off. I’m sure he knows the drill.”

“But, Marcia thinks ... well, she thinks we could at least send a telegram to his parents.”

“Oh, yes—our Ms. Phillips. Good instincts I suppose, but a bit zealous.”

“I told her we’d just be seen as meddling, but ...”

“That’s right, Paul. We’d just be meddling. He’s an adult and a private citizen. Unless there’s a legal problem or unless he asks, it’s not our business.”

Paul liked Tony’s assessment. “Well, you know how Marcia is,” he said. “Anyway, haven’t heard any new reports. It’s probably a non-issue.”

Paul’s forecast was as inaccurate as the ones for the local weather.

The following afternoon Marcia waved him over to where she was talking to a man at the visa counter.

“Paul, this is Mr. Lyman. He stopped by to share some information I know you’ll want to hear.”

A longtime Tokyo resident, Peter Lyman represented a Minnesota medical products company. A large, humorless man, Lyman sported a crew cut straight out of the 1950s, horn rimmed glasses too.

“I had a kind of strange experience on the train today,” he said. “I thought you might be interested.” Lyman scanned the room, like someone who suspects he’s under surveillance. Then he placed his elbows on the counter and spoke in a low tone. Paul had a hunch as to what must be coming.

“I was on the Yamate Line, on my way to an appointment,” Lyman said. “I sat down next to this young American. Thought I’d chat a bit. You know—talk to somebody from home.”

“Let me guess. His name was Templeton,” Paul said.

“Yeah. How did you know?”

“Please go ahead.”

“Long story short. When I asked where he was going, he said, nowhere. Sounded like, I don’t know, like a robot. I figured he was joking.”

Marcia and Paul exchanged glances. He’d run into Templeton all right.

“What he said next sounded pretty strange too. You know the Yamate Line runs around the city in a loop. Right?”

“Yes, we know.”

“Well this young guy—really looked normal, you know, but kind of creepy when he talked—told me he’d been on the train all morning, just going around and around.”

“Did he say anything else?” Marcia asked.

“That’s what I’m getting to,” Lyman said. “We pulled into Yurakucho, which was my stop, and I got up to leave. He stared at me, and you know what he said? He said, ‘I’ve got a bomb, and I’m going to blow up Tokyo.’ He said it with a straight face too.”

Paul had Lyman repeat his story to the Regional Security Officer (RSO). The RSO had already heard about Templeton’s earlier exploits, both from Paul and from the police. He promised he would pass the information on to his law enforcement contacts. The notion that Templeton actually had a bomb seemed far-fetched, if not preposterous. Moreover, one man’s recall of remarks he might not even have heard correctly was a thin reed on which to hang any kind of action. Still, Templeton’s behavior warranted some concern.

As it turned out, the police thanked them for the information, but they pointed out they received many such tidbits and simply couldn’t deal with them all. They did say a detective would swing by Templeton’s hotel and talk to staff members there.

“You’ve passed the information along,” Tony said, “that’s all you can do for now.”

Still, Paul increasingly began to wonder if Marcia might not have it right. He tried to resist the notion. It was, after all, at odds with the approach that had served him so well for so long. Nonetheless, maybe they should try to get more involved. Talk to Templeton in person, call his father, consult with the police—something.

“Okay,” Philibrown said, “your boy Templeton has pulled one stunt too many.”

“My boy?” When did he become my boy?” Paul said.

“Okay. Not your boy. Anyway, he was in a Shinjuku restaurant—Takeda has the name of the place. The police say he had a meal, then just sat at the table and refused to pay his bill. The restaurant owner has agreed to press charges. It’s a minor offense, but the immigration types want him gone.”

“Good. They’ve finally got something they can act on. I think it’s time he leaves.”

“The cops have him right now, and Tony wants you or Marcia to pay him a welfare visit. Make sure he’s being treated okay.”

“Why are they even holding him? Can’t they just keep him at his hotel until he has a hearing or they send him on his way?”

“Takeda says they put him together with that bomb talk. Apparently want to keep a closer eye on him than if it was just the restaurant business.”

“I’ll go,” Paul said. He retrieved his consular ID card from a desk drawer, slipped on a jacket, and requested the admin assistant to lay on an Embassy car and driver.

After he checked in at the police station, Paul found Templeton sitting in a holding cell casually examining his nails. Paul asked if he was being well-treated. Templeton raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

“Would you like us to notify anyone in the States that you’ve been arrested,” Paul said.

“They’ll find out later.”

In his mind’s eye, Paul had conjured up an image of what Templeton might look like; and he’d come surprisingly close. Willowy build, blond hair stylishly cut, tie perfectly tied, jacket obviously tailored—in short, like someone to the manor born. Except, if Tony’s assessment was on the mark (and Paul sensed it was), it appeared Templeton had been shown the manor door.

“I can’t give you legal advice,” Paul said. “But, I can say that in cases like yours in the past the authorities have simply asked the person involved to leave the country.”

Templeton continued to study his nails, first extending his fingers palms down, as would a woman, then, closing his fingers against up facing palms, as would a man. He seemed totally preoccupied.

“Could you tell me the time?” he finally said.

“It’s 4:15. Did the police take your watch for safekeeping?”

He shot Paul a don’t you know anything? look. “I gave it to a musician. It was no good anyway.”

“I see. Of course, I assume you’ve shown the police your return ticket.”

He delivered the same look. “I threw it away,” he said and began to manipulate a cufflink between a thumb and forefinger.

“Do you have money to buy another one?”

“No.” A look of blank indifference.

“Credit cards?”

“No.”

“I don’t quite understand why ...”

“I gave my money to an old woman pulling a cart. The cards just flew away—maybe into the sky.”

“We could give you a repatriation loan. But, first you have to try to get money from friends or relatives. Would you like us to contact someone? Your father?”

He pursed his lips like someone who’d just ingested a too large portion of wasabi.

“If you want to.” It hardly seemed a firm endorsement of the idea.

“I understand you’ve paid in advance at the Grand Palace. If I talk to the police, I think they’ll let you stay there until the immigration authorities act on your case. Probably tomorrow.”

“Yes. That would be nice.” Templeton did not appear overburdened with gratitude.

“And you could call your family. Unless you want us to send a cable.”

“They’d be absolutely delighted,” Templeton said. A stealthy smile crept across his lips and his voice came freighted with irony.

Dealing with Templeton was not easy. Paul felt as if he was trying to pick up a piece of cellophane with yard long chop sticks.

“I don’t expect they’ll hold you much beyond tomorrow,” Paul said. “Just a guess.”

“Good. Tell the police, I would like to go back to my hotel. Tell them I’ll fly away tomorrow.” Then, as if part of the same thought, he added, “Do you know that when you sleep, you leave the earth?” Whatever was that supposed to mean?

“I thought you threw away your ticket,” Paul said.

“Oh, no. I threw away my watch. Here’s my ticket.” With that, from an inner pocket he produced an open ticket to New York and grinned. “Seems I deceived you,” he said. Herbert Templeton needed to go back to the United States. Soon.

In the morning the Embassy operator patched through a call from the United States, a call from one Martha Templeton. Along with his other duties, Paul served as the Embassy’s Welfare and Whereabouts Officer.

“Our son, Herbert, is traveling in Japan. He’s supposed to check in once a week. But, we’ve heard nothing for over two weeks.” Paul sensed more irritation than concern.

“As a matter of fact, I spoke with him just yesterday,” he said. “He seems to be in good health, although perhaps.” Paul searched for words. “a bit disoriented.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Martha Templeton said, her voice marinated in sarcasm. He’d touched a neuralgic point.

Paul outlined what he knew of Templeton’s curious activities and, as best he could, his mental state.

“Are you a psychiatrist? He’s seen some good ones, you know.” Martha Templeton possessed the smoky voice of a woman with too much money and too much self esteem. Paul also had the impression she had tossed down a cocktail or two—or three—before the call.

“No. But, I have to tell you the police and immigration authorities want him to leave. And he’s assured us he will be on a plane for New York in the next day or two.”

“That simply won’t do. His father has made reservations for him in New Zealand. That’s why I want to talk to him.” Bleached blond, crow’s-feet, parchment skin from too much tennis or golf—Paul tried to visualize her as she lectured him.

“Well, Mrs. Templeton, I’m sure the Japanese won’t care where he is going. But, don’t you think it would be better if he returned home?”

“That is none of your concern. Just give me his hotel phone number. And, if you see Herbert, tell him to call home.”

As soon as Paul informed her where her son was staying, she hung up. Nice lady.

Paul tried to call Templeton in his hotel room, but no one answered. The desk clerk said the American had not come down and agreed to deliver Paul’s message when he did: Call parents in US or call me.

The regular group had congregated at a cafeteria table for a coffee break when Mr. Takeda homed in on them.

“The police just called. That fellow Templeton is dead.”

“What?” They responded in near choral unison.

“A hotel guest in the corridor heard moaning from his room,” Takeda said. “He called the front. The clerk thought Templeton might be ill, and so he let himself in with a pass key. When he stepped into the room the clerk was shocked by a most disconcerting spectacle. Mr. Templeton lay sprawled on the floor—quite dead. There was a great deal of blood spattered about.”

“What was the cause of ...?” Paul said.

“The police say he killed himself. Cut his wrists and stabbed his neck with a broken glass. They want to know what to do with his body. Also want someone from the Embassy to take over his luggage.”

“It’s what we get paid for,” Philibrown said. But, he wasn’t his usual flippant self.

“This is awful,” Marcia said. “Just awful.” She clapped her hands over her mouth.

“Mr. Takeda,” Paul said, “please ask the police to hold the remains at their morgue and arrange for us to meet them at the hotel in an hour or so.”

Takeda executed a bow and started to leave.

“Also, see if they have any more details. I’ll be in the Consul General’s office.”

Once Takeda had gone, Marcia said, “Well, I guess we’re involved now, aren’t we?”

“Yes. I guess we are.” Paul thought for a moment. “Great parents, huh? Just dumped him.”

“So did we, Paul. So did we. We could have done more.”

“But, Marcia, until yesterday, we had no official reason to ... there was nothing we could have ...”

Marcia, a sorrowful expression blanketing her face, condemned Paul with her eyes. Then, without looking back, she strode out of the cafeteria.

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As a career diplomat, Lawrence Farrar served in Japan (multiple tours), Norway, Germany, and Washington, DC. He also lived in Japan as a graduate student and as a naval officer. A Minnesota resident, Farrar has degrees from Dartmouth and Stanford. His stories have appeared in Tampa Review Online, Green Hills Literary Lantern, The MacGuffin, Red Cedar Review, Red Wheelbarrow, Evening Street Review, G.W. Review, Straylight, Colere, Worcester Review, 34th Parallel, Blue Lake Review, Cigale, Bloodroot, New Plains Review, Paradise Review, The Write Room, and Bryant Literary Review. He also assisted with preparation of a Hiroshima memoir published in New Madrid. Pieces are forthcoming in Jelly Bucket and Streetlight.

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Justin J. Brouckaert

The Only Thing Blue

I am a marine biologist.

I repeat it like a prayer as I scrape the barnacles off the rusted bulbous tool that collects specimens from the depths. I pry them one by one from the metal with a dull blade—sometimes there is resistance; other times, the deck rains crustacean.

I pick the finest ones to preserve in formaldehyde and bring back to the scientists who sent me. They are important scientists who make their livings with gauges and probes. They expect much of their students.

I take this picking seriously, pinching each barnacle between my fingers, turning it against the moonlight. I trace my nail along the shell—such a thing, that shell.

To each winner, a blessing: You, I whisper, and drop it, like a pill.

I place the jars twenty to a box and stack them along the walls of my cabin, pile them feet high beneath my bunk. On the mornings I'm more sick than awake, I think of them as insulation, a wall that braces me against the churning of the sea. I try to forget that they, too, are floating.

It takes the three tan, wiry men all of the morning and most of the day to work the instrument up from the depths. These are hours I spend inside my cabin, measuring the highs and lows in the cavity of my chest. I often try to think of home, what it feels like to be solid and full. It is not easy.

In the beginning, I tried to fight the sickness. When I heard the men laughing on the deck, I walked out to watch them, but they turned silent when they saw me. One of the men showed me the yellow of his teeth. I realized I was the only one swaying with the sea.

If I were braver, I would smile and sit and watch them, take the silence as my own. I would listen to their arms stretch and burn in the sun. I would press my back against something hard. I often feel myself inching toward moments like these.

When the men are done, one of them bangs a cable-cut fist on my door to call me. They leave me a meal from their day's catch, and I eat it without sickness. I work through the night to split husk from metal, rooted in moss and exoskeleton. Scrape, examine, record, preserve. This is science, I think, though there are moments when the slap of the waves on the hull makes me think it's something else.

We dock three times, on islands with more men than women and more fish than men. The fourth will be home, to labs and classrooms and charts and the ones who sent me. I think of what I will do when the only thing blue to look at will be the sky. I think of what I will do with my hands when I am alone.

On the long days, when we are farthest out, I wait for a response to my call—a rap at the door. When it comes, I will not be worried and sick, like I was. I will breathe deep and press my fingers into the spaces where they fall. I will try not to latch onto anything.

I am a marine biologist. I am a researcher. There was a time this meant something different, but the sea makes things difficult. There is nothing here to stand on.

The truth is, barnacles make me shiver. They're only a fungus on the sea floor—hundreds of crusted, swollen eyes that lash at me when they're hungry, mistaking my fingers for prey. The truth is, there is not much difference between a good specimen and a bad one.

If I were braver, I would say such things, even if only in a sigh.

If I were braver, there are some things I wouldn't do at all.

Justin J. Brouckaert is the author of the chapbook *Look at This Fish* (Burning River Press, April 2014), a collection of flash fiction and prose poetry. He is a James Dickey Fellow in Fiction at the University of South Carolina.

## —Creative Nonfiction—

Jessie van Eerden

### [The Helicopter](#)

During the hottest dog days of August, Betty mixed biscuits wearing just her bra and slip, no matter who was around. Outside the screen door of the house in Spencer, the kids squatted to shoot marbles—a yarn-string circle in the driveway dust, one kid thumbing the aggie and launching it toward the prettiest cateye with the orange and black ribboned center. When the aim was good, the aggie smacked the cateye and sent it flying to the dog’s dent in the dirt under the porch. It rolled to the center like a bead in a dish, and the dog went after it for his own. The kids’ grandma stood by and watched, too old to sweat in her blue polyester housedress with three-quarter sleeves. She clutched her left arm with her right and looked uncomfortable in town; she watched the street the way a kid watches the closet for a specter. She went for the screen door when she heard banging pans and cussing, to help Betty with supper.

These are my mother’s people, the Boggs family, on her mother’s side. Down in Spencer, West Virginia, in Roane County, which is a four-hour drive south from my childhood home in the northern part of the state, people say the mountains get meaner. They get fiercer the farther south you go, closing you up into their wet heat and shrinking the sky so you can’t breathe when you look up. It’s dark too early, even in summer. The mountains swallow you back into themselves. Mom’s parents had moved north so that Granddad could take a job with the power company in Albright, West Virginia, but, as a kid, Mom loved to go south, to let herself be swallowed each time her parents were willing to take her. As a mother, she told me the stories about her Uncle Harry and Aunt Betty, Betty’s scant clothes in the heat, cousins who taught her to shoot marbles in a squat.

After my grandparents moved north to a house just outside of town on the Albright Road, my granddad’s choice piece of advice to his kids was to “get the hell out.” Out of West Virginia altogether, he meant. A harsh imperative, but who would fault him—the youngest of thirteen, a brother or two in the state pen, a suffocating matriarch who tried to strong-arm all her kids into staying under her roof. Jobs are too scarce, he said, and the people too backward. But Mom’s small sprig of a body put down surprisingly deep roots. In her teens, when her parents announced they were leaving their house on the Albright Road for a brick house with hedges in town, Mom strapped herself to the support beam in the basement and refused to leave till they forced her. And she was reluctant to go off to college, to make something of herself in the way they wanted her to, but eventually she obliged.

Mom’s deepest roots reached to Spencer. Whenever she went down to visit, she stayed with her Grandma Boggs on the farm. She shadowed her grandma, followed her blue housedress around as though it were the surest thing in sight. Some of my mom’s people, like Aunt Betty, stayed in the small town, and she would visit with them and with Aunt Susie’s bunch, who had moved to the neighboring town of the peculiar name Looneyville. But most of the family left, moved to Ohio or took jobs in Kentucky near the university, returning home only for an occasional wedding, a funeral, and the Boggs Reunion in late summer.

For us kids, Mom's stories from Spencer had a rosy hue; she left out the unkindnesses, the particular breed of spite or shame that brewed in her relations and took them north. She left out the story someone later whispered to me, about her cousin who went after his own sister with scissors. It's not that Mom was ignorant of the more sinister details of her family; she just took those details for granted. They were not to get in the way of loving, for love covered over a multitude of belittling remarks and unsettling secrets. My mother's no bland perfect angel, but it's not at all sentimental to say that she could always love the spiteful and the poked and the fucked-up cousins. She loved the snot and shame out of you, and she was bound to her people with a fondness more stubborn than her dad's leather belt that she'd used to strap herself to the beam in the basement.

My great-uncle and great-aunt, Harry and Betty, hosted the Boggs Reunion most years. They married young, inherited the Boggs farm and hated it. So they moved to town and Harry got work drilling gas wells and made pretty good money. Before Grandma and Granddaddy Boggs died, they sent him to pilot school for a time, and it was enough to put the love of flight in him. He bought a helicopter to keep in a hangar at Roane County's tiny airport. It may have been his own way of getting the hell out. He and Betty lived maxed out in debt in Spencer, raised their kids and sent them out to make something of themselves.

The first Boggs Reunion that I remember was in August of 1984. Betty called Mom and asked her to be in charge of games for the kids. Thrilled, Mom drove us to Family Dollar, bringing back a big mesh sack of glass marbles, cateyes with the ribbons suspended in their centers. She cut up scraps of muslin and sewed forty or so tiny drawstring bags. I was five, and I helped her puff-paint Boggs Reunion, 1984 on each bag and then filled each with marbles. I got mine early and emptied the little sack into my jeans pocket for the car ride down to Spencer.

That year, Harry and Betty had rented the 4-H summer camp in Roane County for the reunion. When we pulled up to the dining hall, people were streaming in and out of the screened-in porch, hugging and talking, hands on hips or on Tupperware containers of food. Kid cousins congregated on the steps and then raced off in clumps toward something beyond the hall. I didn't know many of my second cousins, so I was a while understanding that everyone there was my kin. But I recognized Aunt Unabelle on the steps at once, and she came over and plucked me from the car, up into her arms and into her smell of polyester and old skin.

"Wait till you see it!" one of the boy cousins hollered to another, running around the dining hall's corner. Mom hauled out her box of marble bags from the trunk and asked Unabelle what the boy's ruckus was about. Oh, Harry landed his helicopter yonder, Unabelle told us; he's parked it over on the baseball field past the cabins, promised to give the kids rides after supper.

At the news, my sister and brothers darted after the other kids. I squirmed loose from Unabelle's arms in time to turn the corner with them. Too short, I had to fight through the herd of kids to finally get a good look. And there it was in the field. I stopped cold and broke into a quick sweat. I went no closer to it right then. The helicopter gleamed like something from another world, sitting there like a dream out past second base. It was a deep glossy yellow on its sides, the kind of yellow you might lick for honey, but it was mostly glass in front, even halfway along the bottom where your feet would go. The chopper blades spun in a lazy twirl, as though Uncle Harry had just started it up to get a rise out of the kids and then shut it back off again to make them wait, to make us wait and sweat. He was walking toward the dining hall

now, flanked by giddy boys getting first dibs on rides, and I heard him say that we'd have to wait till after supper. He said we'd be able to look through the glass floor and see Spencer shrink back like God's little model; we'd see as God sees, the pastures like quilt patches, the people like ants.

I still hadn't moved. Harry walked past me and winked, patted my girl head like a puppy's, and the cousins swarmed by. Someone was calling us for supper. I breathed in the heavy humid Spencer air, so close to my cousins that I couldn't tell the scent of my sweat from theirs.

Before following the swarm back to the dining hall, I noticed one older cousin who stood apart from the rest. He was a huge boy I didn't know, with a face a little on a slant, black hair cut coarse. His arms bounced a bit at his sides, like he might have been flapping new wings. He looked at me, and I scrambled after the other kids into the screen-porch of the dining hall.

Today, in this Midwest town where I live, I read a chunk from a ratty paperback copy of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written by an anonymous fourteenth-century mystic. A sentence sticks to me like a burr: Strike with the sharp dart of longing love—and do not leave it no matter what happens. I'm surprised by it, since I haven't been on board for much of the text and haven't felt anything from the book strike a chord within me. I have been thinking about changing the way I live, a thought that always moves me to read wide-eyed mystics, poets, Buddhists and Sufis and Quakers, to try for a new angle. So I dog-ear the page and take the book with me as I head out the door to take my car in for an oil change.

In the lobby at the Jiffy Lube, after handing over my car key, I sit down and puzzle over what I've read, as though fiddling with the burr. Where is it that I'm supposed to strike with the sharp dart exactly? In the book, the anonymous writer seems to mean strike the very *Cloud of Unknowing* itself, the cloud between self and God. From what I can tell, this cloud the writer describes is a sort of dread that takes your ego down a few notches. Or obliterates it altogether. You stand in it naked, with nothing to recommend you. Go deep into the dread, the writer urges. Face your own weakness and nothingness, your own fraught story; stay constant and look neither to the right nor to the left for escape. Sit with it and do not rise, and do not unfix your sharp dart of a gaze from what longing love reveals. No matter what.

I wait in the Jiffy Lube lobby with two other customers. "Judge Alex" comes onto the TV that's bolted to the wall, and the three of us get sucked in. It's a petty claims court show, and it seems that, during a commercial break, a commotion started brewing in the courtroom. Judge Alex pounds his gavel, grinning. His black hair is slicked back and looks good with his black robe. He's presiding over a crude, stagey sort of case: a disheveled woman with dark roots but a white-orange ponytail complains at high pitch about her husband's affair with her neighbor—and who has the right to keep the apartment, the mini-dish, the DVDs? And she's tired of cooking his meals when he's banging the blonde next door. The deadbeat husband surprises us—me and the two guys in the lobby—when he doesn't deny the affair at all, but confirms it and claims that his wife is verbally abusive; she drove him to it, he says, and he has every right to stay in the apartment and even to seek therapy at her expense.

She's weaving back and forth now like an Apostolic churchgoer who's got the Spirit. She looks like she might leap over the railing to smack him, but instead she glowers, ignoring the slick Judge Alex altogether when he tries to interject, though he seems happy enough for what the fight could do for his ratings, and she says, "Then you keep the place and give me a damn settlement and I'll get the hell out—and we'll see how you do—I'm getting the hell out." She hugs herself and looks about to bawl. I find

myself in her corner, cheering her on like all the folks in the courtroom are doing, their hooting bringing down the judge's gavel again. I can almost see her taking flight, shedding this drag of a husband and rising above it all, letting her hair go natural, making something of herself. But she does in fact start to cry. Though I suspect these shows are scripted, I can't help but think she means it, that she's really getting out, and she looks out of place with her sincerity. She wears a flannel shirt buttoned up halfway, looks like an oversized child who doesn't want to leave just yet, but is too stubborn to let it show. It shows, despite her. And the camera zooms in close on the lines in her face. It's not about the husband, not really. It's the stale air of the cheap apartment, air so heavy that it sags in the pale flesh of her face. It's the threadbare Budweiser T-shirt she wears underneath the flannel; she wears it for the comfort of the familiar, though the familiar is what's killing her. The mechanic behind the desk calls my name before I can sort out my thoughts about the woman. He calls my name a second time. I sign the receipt for the oil change, get in my car and go, without hearing the judge's ruling.

The woman's icy words grate against me in the car—I'm getting the hell out. She and I aren't in the same boat at all, but maybe we're in the same choppy waters. She reminds me of my granddad telling us all to leave home, to succeed and rise. When he said it, you could see the wear of forty years of watching pressure gauges at the Albright Power Plant start to show in his square face. I suppose I did what he said, to some extent; at this moment I do live away from the mountains. But I don't always feel an easiness about it. Where are you supposed to go when you get out? When you make your way? In this small city of people where I live now, the house windows that I drive by glow clear in the evening falling. Before people drop their Venetian blinds, they're so vulnerable; you can see into them and make your own guesses about what it is they want out of, to fly from, what they are making of themselves or not making of themselves. What they might do when they face their own dread, whether they'll stay with it—their longing taking on shape and dimension—no matter what happens.

I pull into my apartment lot and know that there is a part of me that goes after flight. I remember slipping a quarter into a gumball machine at the Ames Department Store as a kid and getting back a bubble-case. Inside the case: a tiny aluminum Pegasus charm, bent a little on one wing. I fell in love with it, but never put it on a chain around my neck. I buried it, thinking that the necessary step I had to take to set it free for flight, a real heaving horse with a ten-foot wingspan. My heart sagged when I dug it up the next week, still a dinky charm with a damaged wing. Another time, I believed my sister when she told me the sand dollar someone had given me had a bundle of doves in it, doves I needed to let loose. So I busted the sand dollar on the porch roof outside my bedroom window and sprinkled the tiny white pieces onto the shingles. That night, the rain washed them off into the iris bed below; I found them the next morning. Even as a twenty-year-old, I was giddy at the airport—flying for the first time and proud of how adept I was with the electronic kiosks. Mom had driven me there, her face full of question. I slid my credit card through and punched in my passport number, eager to find my gate and take off.

I wasn't an unhappy kid; it just always seemed that up was the preferred direction in which to go. Escape was always imminent. Maybe the desire came from a mixture of my granddad's admonition and the teaching I got at church about the rapture in the last days, that all of us believers would be taken from this troublesome world, as though beamed up into UFOs, in the twinkling of an eye. The life lived, especially the rough or shameful or disappointing parts, was something to escape—we are always to rise, above the dirt-poor houses of our fathers in a family of thirteen kids, above the splitting shoes and

homemade blouses of our mothers, above a life of obscurity. Above the mountains that fold in around us too close.

The paperback *Cloud of Unknowing* sits beside me in the passenger seat, with its goofy Seventies cover. I'm wondering: if I strike and stick with it, come hell or whatever, would the cloud all but dissipate so that I'm face to face with God? With whatever is most true? But I need to read on to find that out. For now, I leave the book closed. I figure, though, that if I were to strike with my sharp dart, with my longing love, and let the dread creep in like cold, then I might have to let go of my preference for escape.

I fingered the cateye marbles in my pocket. As it neared evening, the supper dishes clinked in the dining hall sinks. The women began their hum back and forth to the kitchen, Betty giving orders. The men leaned back on the folding chairs so their stomachs ballooned out big; they clasped their hands there on their bellies and put in a chew of tobacco or a rub of Copenhagen snuff. The time was right, and I slipped out of my chair and joined my jittery cousins at the edge of the baseball field where the helicopter sat.

Harry came out soon enough and started it up. The black blade turned, slow at first, and then it whirred into nothing. He started taking us up in twos and threes. All of our scrawny bodies pulsed for the front of the line at the fence near the batter's box. As I stood waiting, a tall, wide shape moved up beside me. It was the cousin whom I'd noticed earlier in the rush of cousins beside the dining hall. His arms weren't bouncing at his sides now. His shaggy black hair sprawled and gave way before the force of the blade's wind. His eyes were glassed over yet full of force, and he held his mouth open in a pout as though speech were about to come, but it didn't.

The boy wore baggy jeans and a big white T-shirt with a stretched neckline. He was enormous, probably three hundred pounds, and he looked about seventeen. I still knew only a couple of my second cousins' names, and I wondered who he was and whose he was—he might have been Aunt Susie's boy, or Gail and Mike's. He was big like Mike. I remembered the story of the older cousin who had gone after his own sister with scissors, and for a moment I feared it was him. But then the boy looked down at me with a face somehow like a baby's and, saying nothing, he reached for me and hugged me with his doughy arms. He held me a little too long, smothering my face in his T-shirt, but I wasn't all that afraid; I sensed no intent to harm. He released me after I squirmed a little, and I smoothed my hair and we both went back to waiting as Uncle Harry escorted a few bright-eyed boys back from their ride. My cousin looked down at me once more, then all at once lunged forward past the line of eager kids and met Uncle Harry near the second base marker, midway between the crowd of kids and the helicopter.

His excitement rippled through his body, and some of my girl cousins giggled. He and Harry stood there in a kind of dance. Then Harry shook his head, said something into the boy's ear and slapped him once on the back. Then, as if told a goldmine secret, the giant boy turned from Harry, smiling big, and strode back toward us.

He's going the wrong way, I thought. But his eyes shone. He looked so ready to steal away into the sky, because isn't that what he and I and everyone were supposed to want? To lift off and leave Spencer and its muggy nights behind, to shake it off like a damned June bug?

The boy looked right at me.

“I’m too fat!” he blurted with his hands raised up like thick wings. “Uncle Harry says there’s a weight limit and I might crash it.” He laughed a little, crossed his arms and turned to watch as four others bolted for the helicopter door. My cousin Nathan took my hand and jerked me forward. I nearly left the ground when he pulled me, weightless, like one of Betty’s nylon slips on the laundry line. I was in a half-trot toward the machine, straining to look back over my shoulder for that beaming sweaty face, an anchored body in a white tee. Uncle Harry was at the door then; he grabbed me and lifted me into the helicopter before I could turn back around and say, “Let me stay, leave me be.” Twenty of my little selves could’ve fit in there. I was wedged in between two punchy twins and felt my belly drop down into my toes as we lifted.

I started to cry, but no one paid attention. I felt like I might throw up; I covered my face with one hand and reached for the cateye marbles in my pocket with the other, just so I could touch them. But, as the electrified, drawled voices around me grew hushed and then went silent, I spread my fingers from my eyes, then slid my hand away entirely and looked down.

My eyes went wide just like the twins’. I was looking through the glass floor of the helicopter, past my canvas shoes, at a tin-roofed dollhouse that must have been the dining hall, with a porch I couldn’t quite make out, a porch that I knew had screen around it keeping the bugs off the grownups as they gathered out there in the late light. The cluster of kids at the fence shrank up to an anthill, just like Harry had said. The whole 4-H camp turned into a green blanket with play things on it, trees into little pom-poms, the road a dirty frayed ribbon. It seemed that we might fly northward, over my house on the hillside, and would I be able to recognize it when I saw it, or tell Mom when I saw her that the house all but disappeared inside the mountain, or when would I even see her again? All was disappearing as we kept going up, and I found myself pressing my face closer and closer to the glass floor, straining to make out shapes and buildings—where was the boy who had held me?

It was my first flight, my first leaving, and I sobbed for the boy left behind; I still felt his fleshy arms enveloping me in a smother. I wept at how empty and how wonderful it was to rise, at how horribly I loved leaving. At how I longed for what I’d left.

The Cloud is pinched under my arm as I get milk from the refrigerator and put my Jiffy Lube receipt under a magnet on the fridge door. I sip the milk in the kitchen, and it comes clear to me just what has troubled and excited me about these words: Strike with the sharp dart of longing love—and do not leave it no matter what happens. They reveal my contradictions, the schism in my self. I know the anonymous author meant for his or her words to keep to the context of mystical union with God, but the words loose a spout in me and I cannot help but let the contradictions spill forth: my unsteady pangs of homesickness, and my fierce insistence on leaving home; my ache for the sound of a slack screen door shutting after my mother’s heels, and the thrill of having gone off to school and finding work, work of my own; my resolution to be okay with being nothing, as existentially calm as a doe, and my white-hot fear of not having accomplished anything impressive before the reckoning comes. My regret for having betrayed what I have loved, and my coming to see this betrayal as something at the core of what makes us human.

In the kitchen, I feel that sting of my own betrayal, and I return to my five-year-old self, in a flimsy body, on the helicopter ride at the Boggs Reunion of 1984 when my too-big cousin stood by and watched from his place beside the batter's box. I return to that day when it wasn't yet betrayal that I felt, just an incoherent ache. Embodied contradiction without understanding; just two big feelings at once: exultation and despair.

I suppose when my helicopter ride was over and Harry landed, it would've been near dark. My cousins would have been begging for just one more ride, and the boy left behind would have still been standing there, nearly a silhouette by then, and I shy before him. But, try as I may, I can't remember when we came down. I don't remember coming back, and I don't remember ever seeing the boy again. There is no clear ending.

So I'll end it, this time, by staying where my longing strikes. I stay with the dread of a small self. I stay with the boy, where the mountains fold in on themselves. He is anchored. I do him no favor by staying; I just bury my face in his white T-shirt. It's like a bed sheet, and I smell there the musty dog days of Spencer and the flecks of Copenhagen the boy had dropped when he'd dipped with one of the men. I stay for the length of the evening, at least.

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Jeremy B. Jones

[Mountain Mobility](#)

*It is not just a case of people remaining in one place; it is of people and their place being entwined.*

—Phillip Shaw Palaudan, Victims

Great-great-great-great granddaddy Andrew Maxwell crashed in first, a Scot from Ireland. He grabbed up his land grant stretching across Fruitland after the Revolutionary War, and over time, his children sprawled across the earth, planting seeds and putting the soil to work in the shade of the Blue Ridge Mountains. My Maxwells took over.

The roads I cycle in the afternoons after I finish teaching at the elementary school used to be lined with Maxwell corn and cows and kids. Today the land is spotted in shoddy trailers and pruned apple trees and modest two-story houses, but centuries ago, my people turned and tilled the ground I roll over, spreading themselves across the land until the soil was used up, sections of it sold or traded. Then, they left.

All but my line. Mine stayed put; even after my great-great-great-grandfather was killed in the Civil War, they dug in deeper alongside Clear Creek. And here I am over two-hundred years later, pulled back to this land after spending the last decade running away from it: living in a boxy brown house just above that same thin creek.

Well before my Scots-Irish kin lit on this land 200 years ago, the Cherokee bore trails into the forests and built settlements along the water in the Blue Ridge. They'd made a way and a home with the mountains—they were reconciled with it—and so among the other indigenous groups in the region, the tribes of Cherokee were known as The Mountaineers.

But by the nineteenth century, once treaties and deception and guns had pushed out most of The Mountaineers, my people dug deeper in—the Maxwells and Gilliams and Whitakers and Joneses. And before long, these settlers were no longer newcomers, no longer Scots-Irish or Welsh or anything connecting them to another homeland.

They had all become one: The Mountain Whites.

The term mountain whites wasn't blanketed upon my people to distinguish them from mountain blacks; there hardly were any slaves or freed blacks in these harsh mountains. Instead, mountain white linked them to the Poor Whites of the South. The Mountain Whites, like the Poor Whites, were something unfamiliar, something other; they were a people for the bottom strata of Southern society.

The Mountain Whites were akin to the Poor Whites in their consistent poverty and subsistence farming. Like most mountaineers, the Poor Whites of the South (also called corn crackers and, later, simply, crackers) survived on anything the land would produce, anything they could pull from the ground.

Both groups were seen as incapable of economic or societal evolution, forever at the mercy of hard ground and slow minds.

Yet while the term mountain whites connected us to the Poor Whites, it also meant to separate us. The Poor White accepted slavery easily because he was ever aware that without such an institution, he would be the field hand, the back catching the whip. His paleness was all that kept him from the bottom of the pile. He had arrived to America under some form of servitude. Many Poor Whites hoped to escape absolute poverty through servant emigration, while others were criminals serving their time in the fields of The New World. They came with nothing and lived with less.

But the Mountain Whites took their plight intentionally. They chose these mountains; they staked out their land and survived it. They conquered. They came of free will and fiery blood, and while they were thought to be backwards and strange, they weren't for pushing around or putting to work.

line break

When I have a day free from teaching elementary school, I drive across the creek and stop in on Grandma and Papaw around noon. Grandma's usually in the kitchen pulling cornbread from the oven, the stove warming a few pots of vegetables. I like the days like today when a pan sizzles with collard greens and a pot swirls with mashed potatoes, Papaw's fiddling around in the garage or whistling in his chair, and there're always extra helpings for me.

I sit while Grandma seasons the greens, and I ask her to tell me about her childhood. As I soon as I ask it, I fear the question is too broad, but she just slaps her thigh as she turns toward me to say, "Jeremy—all I ever did was hoe corn."

As a child, Grandma went to work as soon as she could. She was the youngest of five Maxwells, so she dug potatoes and strung beans alongside the men down by the creek, and then she set to helping her mom serve noon dinner, cooking the same vegetables she's fixing me today.

But as she grew, she also worked alongside migrant workers. Her family, like some other Mountain Whites in the beginning of the twentieth century, could afford to hire cheap labor. But like her siblings, Grandma still worked the fields as a child, alongside the hired help—field hand and sodbuster all at once.

These days, nearly all of the migrant workers in our county are Latino, primarily from Mexico and Central America. They're the parents of my students, the hands tending and packing our apples. But in Grandma's day, most migrant workers were black, and they were often whole families working any farmland that needed hands. As the mountains grew cold, the workers would travel south, following a harvest line toward Florida, trying to make ends meet by chasing hard labor and amenable climate.

These workers were mostly Southern, descendants of slaves and then sharecroppers, and so Grandma, a Mountain White 150 years removed from Scotland, worked the fields of her childhood alongside black families barely 50 years removed from slavery.

But in the '40s, she found herself, not yet a teenager, down in those bottoms pulling corn and picking beans with funny-sounding white men. As she tells it, the men were all blond and tall and tongue-tied and handsome:

“We just worked down there with everybody. It didn't matter who you were. In the field, you worked.”

She tells me of one hot day: She leaves work of the field to help her mama start dinner. On the way to the house, she spots one of these men—a boy really, barely 20—creeping from the Maxwell cellar. In his arms, he cradles a jar of canned peaches, and as she spies him around the corner of the house, he stops, sticks his whole hand in the jar, and swallows down a slimy handful of peaches. He swiftly tightens the lid and stuffs the jar in his pants after he wipes his mouth clean.

She leans against the edge of the house, only watching him.

Her older sister, Carolyn, trudges up the hill to the house behind Grandma as the boy drifts back to the field, peaches in his pants.

What are you doing? Carolyn, the older sister born into bossiness, asks.

Walking, Grandma snaps, turning briskly back to the house and aiming for the front door.

She never told on that boy for thieving, never shared the story:

“I reckon he needed something sweet,” she says. “Plus, he was kindly cute.”

She worked the fields with the corners of her eyes aimed at that boy. He was tall and strong, mysterious and silent. She may've been too young to know who he was then, but it mightn't have mattered. Her crush and the other Germans sweating in the Maxwell field that summer were all Nazis, prisoners of World War II. They would show up in the mornings, heaped in the back of a truck; some would hop off at the Maxwell Farm and the truck would head on up the road, delivering the German labor to other farms.

The Germans were held on the other side of town in a POW camp that opened on Independence Day—July 4, 1944. The 263 men stored off of a road leading to the Pisgah Forest were the new labor. They fell to the bottom of the social ladder, below the Mountain Whites, below the migrants, and so their backs bent to toil our soil.

They pulled our food from the land. They allowed farmers like my great-grandfather, William Maxwell, to sell extra produce at the Curb Market. They brought an economic boost to our soil during war on theirs.

The stability of the Maxwell farm helped Grandma and her sister attend college in Brevard and then Cullowhee. Grandma met my grandfather working at a dairy in Waynesville:

“I saw him riding up and down the road on his little pinto pony, and I thought he was right cute.”

Soon, she graduated, started teaching, married and a built sturdy, comfortable life: a brick home and yard. Today, just across the road from their ranch-style house sits a newly situated mobile home, right on the edge of the former Maxwell Farm. An old car and a fishing boat stand guard in the trailer’s yard. Deeper into Fruitland, at the foot of the mountains, patches of trailer parks house migrant families who’ve left behind former lives in Latin America to bring our apple trees to fruition. They all make homes on this land given to Andrew Maxwell after it was taken from the Cherokee.

The class division marked by the road in front of Grandma’s—the line between the trailers and the houses—is palpable across Fruitland. On the other side of the pasture in front of my two-story house on Gilliam Road stand two trailers. One family lives in them both simultaneously, and surrounding the trailers are scraps of machines, wheel-less cars, kids’ toys. The yard is littered with brokenness. Yesterday I watched the mom mow their small plot of grass, while holding a diapered baby with one arm and the steering wheel with the other.

I’ve never met these people even though I can see their trailers from the window and I’ve been living in this house for months. When I let my dog loose, he often circumvents the horse pasture’s fence to run up the road to these neighbors’ plot. But I stand by the barn on our land and call him back, without getting too close.

line break

As a boy on Jones land—just across the creek from the Maxwell farm—I grew up ever-aware of the lines between houses and trailers. We Joneses all lived in houses, but the Wilkies, our neighbors living near Highway 64, subsisted in mobile homes.

As boys, my cousins and I would walk out the edge of the hayfield, near the end of our land, and yell. Eventually, the Wilkie boys would emerge from the end of our road, where they lived in a series of trailers above their apple house. We’d soon line up and start calling fake football plays and hitting each other up and down the hayfield.

Our games were usually friendly enough, but the Wilkies were the enemies of our boyhood imaginings. We set Tinker Toy traps for them in the woods; we plotted many lines of defense—trip lines, hidden holes—to keep them away from our land. They never crossed onto our plot uninvited—probably never cared too—but we felt sure they would try to seize our territory or take from us or sneak into our hideouts. And they weren’t welcome.

Even though we’d meet up during summer vacation and clobber each other, I didn’t associate with the Wilkies at school, don’t even remember saying hey in the hall. We never ventured onto their land to form our games; we just hollered from our field, knowing where the line between us lay.

Even our dogs didn't get along with Wilkie dogs. They'd sometimes circle, hair raised, in that same hayfield, and fight to slobbery, bloody ends.

Our parents never stopped to chat with the Wilkies as we pulled onto Highway 64 from the driveway. We'd see the father, wild thick beard and dirty t-shirt, picking up palettes of apples with the tractor or sitting in front of the apple house in a rusted-out metal chair. We'd sometimes wave, but we didn't stop to ask about family or chat about the weather. The Wilkies' narrow stretch of land along 64 marked a boundary we didn't cross, physically or socially. It meant danger—the end of our land, the highway, the unknown.

When I was a boy, my uncle planted a line of pine trees along the hayfield to more clearly mark the boundary from Jones land to Wilkie land. Today, the pines have grown tall enough to hide any trace of the Wilkies from our property—a natural wall.

Behind the wall, the family sells apples and other produce from a brown, garage-like building at the end of the road, beside our mailboxes. Further down 64, they have a few rows of apple trees, but much of what they sell they buy from other orchards and farms. They're farmers and middlemen all at once. Outside of the apple house stand their trailers and old trucks and shells of machines. When one of the kids marries or reaches adulthood, they stick another trailer above the apple house. The Wilkies, like us, stuck to their piece of earth, living in each other's backyards, perpetually staying put. Four trailers now stand off 64, climbing up the hill, backed by a row of immense pines.

Even though we filled our woods with Wilkie-aimed traps, and even though our parents concealed the Wilkies with trees and careful eyes, Grandma and Granddaddy maintained relations with them. Granddaddy used to stop his old truck at the end of the road to shoot the breeze outside the apple house in the afternoons. They would gift Grandma a bushel of apples from time to time, and she'd return thanks in the form of an apple cobbler. But we next-generation Joneses, next-generation Mountaineers, learned to push them away, to roll up our windows pulling out of the drive.

These days, when I drive to my childhood land, I turn off 64, and grow curious about the Wilkie plot. I tip my cap or wave at them when we make eye contact. But most days they don't look at me. I wonder if they even know who, or whose, I am after years of being away. Maybe it's obvious from the dress shirt I wear pulling in the driveway after a day at school. Maybe my newish SUV marks me, places me on the Jones land, sets me in a house instead of a trailer. Maybe they just don't care.

Today, after I leave Grandma and Maxwell land, I turn up the driveway past the Wilkie plot and try to trace what it is about them that kept us at bay, with upturned noses and fearful eyes. Of course, it's painfully obvious to me now as a twenty-four-year-old man coming home after years away. We drive newer cars. We built a pool behind our house. Our parents work in town, wearing ties not NASCAR t-shirts. We're better.

But we're all Mountain Whites. We're all scraps of Scots-Irish. We have the same homeland, here and abroad. We're the same.

Yet, in the generations from Grandma to me, something changed. We're no longer laborers, no longer dependent on those apple trees surrounding our land. We're no longer victims or stewards of the soil. We don't need handwritten signs along the road reading Corn, Tomatoes, Half-Runners to make ends meet. We've moved on.

And even with all my newfound idealism as a man returning to and exploring this homeland of mine, teaching ESL to the children of trailing-living migrant workers, I breathe easier on the other side of the pines, heading toward the sturdiness of a house. I instinctively rush past Wilkie land, afraid of getting caught or stuck in our gritty, shared past.

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Jeremy B. Jones' "Mountain Mobility" comes from his forthcoming book, *Bearwallow: A Personal History of a Mountain Homeland* (John F. Blair, June 2014). His other essays have been named Notable in *Best American Essays* (2009 and 2011) and appear in various literary magazines, including *Crab Orchard Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *Defunct*. While he hails from the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, he teaches writing in the lowlands, at Charleston Southern University in South Carolina.

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