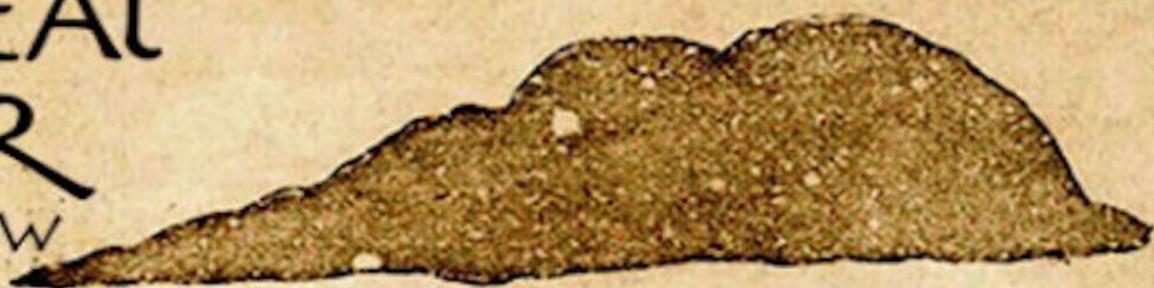
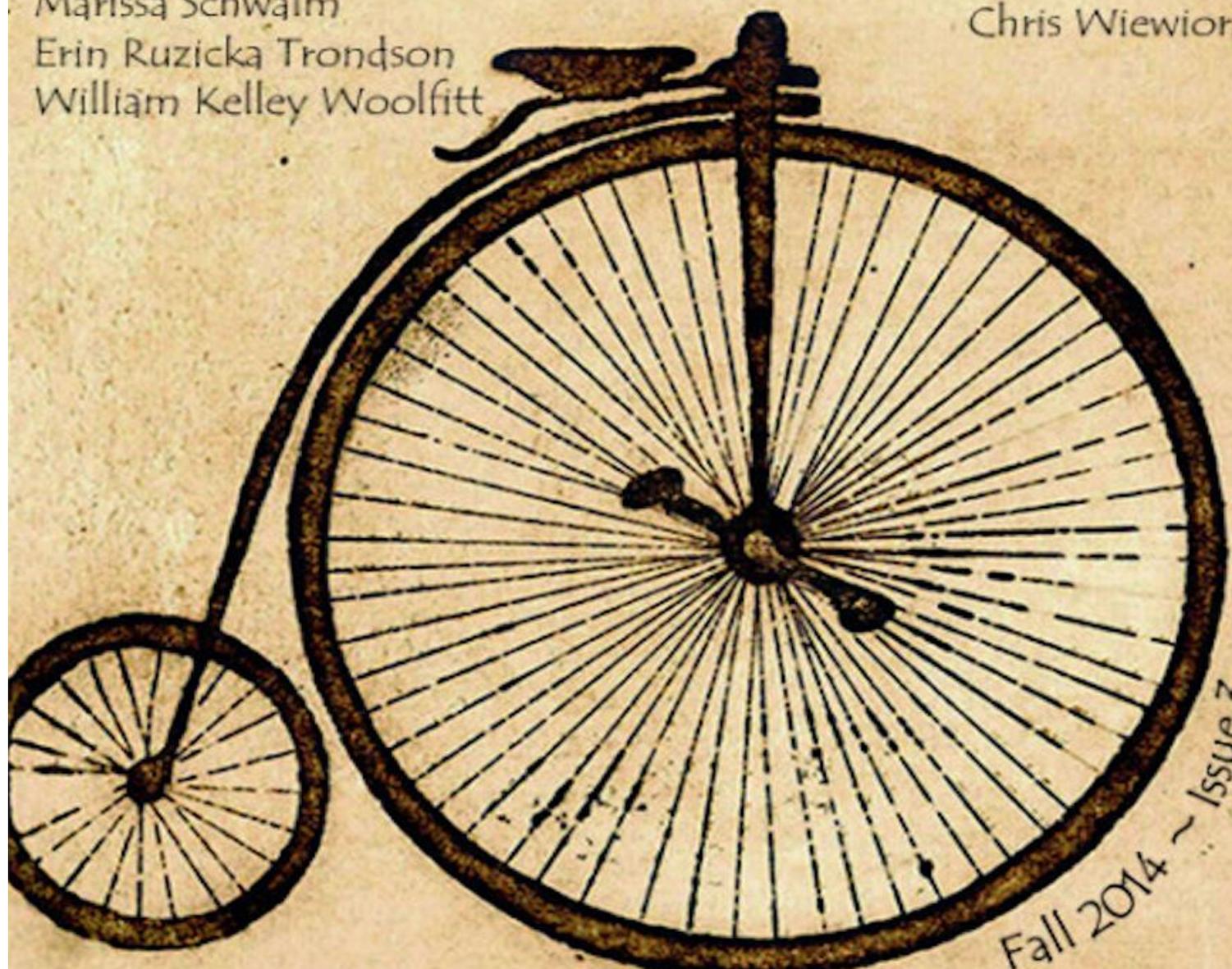


CHEAT RIVER REVIEW



William Hoffacker
Matthew Kabik
Lucien Darjeun Meadows
Marissa Schwalm
Erin Ruzicka Trondson
William Kelley Woolfitt

Sarah-Jane Abate
Sarah B. Boyle
Tim Buchanan
Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois
Vanessa Couto Johnson
M. E. MacFarland
Cindy Hunter Morgan
Andrew C. Sottile
Chris Wiewiora



Fall 2014 ~ Issue 3

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September, That Year *Sarah B. Boyle*

The calm of fixing,
with each layer of glue,
petal to page. One day to fix the final dead petal,
hold every bud
bound
beneath the mucilage.

It happened like machinery: Planned
Parenthood fed me a pill
like a quarter
and a gumball bled
from between my legs.

I hang
by their stems
your flowers until junked
bunches of ragweed and parched petals
drop
to the floor.

A receptionist handed me the number to schedule
a follow-up and possible
cleaning out—this
to occur in no more than twenty days' but
no less than two weeks' time.

Strapped in a cardboard box,
eighteen days after
the abortion I made you fly to face,
a shock
of sunflowers, tiger lilies, ragweed
crowded the stoop.

My maintenance at the clinic handled,
I called to thank you for the follow-up
bouquet.

It's for our anniversary, you said.

But how'd that go, anyway?

Questions for the Mothers Sarah B. Boyle

oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?

– Gwendolyn Brooks

I – in the jail

Into the morning sky, columns of condensate

and paper lint fly from the mill.

We read Gwendolyn’s “the mother,”

three women incarcerated in the county

jail that shares the road with the mill

and J

and me,

huddled around the plastic table,

golf pencils lying in wait.

Abortion is never love, said D

who didn’t get to see her kids this week

because, I can’t remember, another

horrible thing, and M exhaled,

My boyfriend thought I was lying

when I told him I was pregnant

and needed, you know, some money.

For an abortion.

His money—but was it his?

She went to the clinic alone.

She alone refuses to write.

The pencils, she says, pointing

the butt end of hers at me, at J.

No erasers.

We have no response.

2 – at the poetry festival

The tent was crowded, enormous,

quiet, enchanted. It was cold—

J and I didn't care.

Most of you know how many children

I've had, but what you don't know

is how many abortions.

We looked at each other. How

did Lucille say that? Not proclamation

or confession. Just a sentence.

How many of us need to know—

and she gave it to us, all of us

who counted her our mother.

She read “the mother.” And that

is how the truth is to be said:

with a mother’s tongue.

Across the sky driving home,

Venus on the horizon—no,

just a plane, flashing

through the mill clouds

and flying west,

away

Sarah B. Boyle is a poet, activist, mother, and high school teacher. Her poems have appeared in *Menacing Hedge*, *Storyscape*, and elsewhere. She recently curated a series of essays on the poetics Alt Lit and rape culture for *Delirious Hem*. She has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College.

Malacasoma *M.E. MacFarland*

For several weeks in summer the crowns
and branches
of the apple trees wear silk

dense and withheld, like a word shouted underwater.

On clear nights
it's like an ill-timed Halloween,
the globes of pale, huge fruit
glowing above the indigo grass
with dozens or hundreds of animated seeds.

In the boring afternoons a boy
likes to swing into them
with a stick, make the curled bodies fall
from the wound
like rain from a cloud
if rain were ink and solid

—because after all
there are so many tents
who will miss just this few?

He is a barbarian of the field,
teaching himself religion.
Songbirds converge

and raise a violent din.

M. E. MacFarland received the 2014 Southern Writers' Symposium Emerging Writers award in poetry. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he attends the University of Virginia MFA program.

Birthday Is A Time For Burning *Lucien Darjeun Meadows*

Open and uncurtained, my Aunt A's new windows
face the field that leads to Grandmother's house.

At night, A wakes every other hour, sometimes
already by the windows, watching. *I never know*

if Mom's house will still be standing. Across the field
of pine trees and overgrown onion grass,

Grandmother is sleepwalking again. Last week,
she made a two-tier cake for A's birthday,

red velvet and buttercream, forty white candles—
but in the night, she lit the candles, put the cake

back in the oven, turned it to broil. *The smell,*
the smell. She woke from a dream of July bonfires,

gas oven aflame, screaming—my aunt heard,
grabbed her fire extinguisher ready by the door,

ran down. *She will never surrender that house.*
A hot wind rattles pine needles over the porch,

where we three sit, brittle clumps. They fan
over our feet in patterns, spiral of candles.

Lucien Darjeun Meadows was raised in West Virginia. His poetry has appeared in journals such as *Hayden's Ferry Review* and *Quarterly West*, been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and won an Academy of American Poets Prize and the AWP Intro Journals Project. He is currently an MFA candidate at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.

ALPENA, 1880 Lake Michigan *Cindy Hunter Morgan*

When apples bobbed in the surf
after the wreck of the Alpena,
she waded out in darkness
as though entering a play
in which gauzy clouds became a Greek chorus
singing a story of a ship and a storm
and a promised future. She listened
and thought of all the boys
who left her, and of the rot in her core
some had palpated and tried to name.
When the clouds parted,
she lifted her skirt, bent down,
and dipped her face into the lake,
trying to sink her teeth into the white flesh
of a Pippin or a McIntosh
and, in the sinking, claim her berth
as the next to marry.
She knew of this custom,
borrowed from Romans and Celts,
and when fruit floated to shore in October
and clouds sang to her,
it seemed a sort of destiny.
Out of disaster would come matrimony, she thought,
as she scooped the reflections of old stars
into the hem of her skirt—
white veil she would raise
again and again
for a man who was floating to her
on the lid of a lost piano.

FRANCISCO MORAZON, 1960 Lake Michigan *Cindy Hunter Morgan*

Only last week it was still
October: high cumulus clouds
and something gentle in the air.

Now waves pummel the hull
and sleet lashes his face.
He thinks of the woman he met

that night the ship docked in Chicago—
the straps he slipped off her shoulders;
her dress, which slid to the floor.

Linoleum. Waxed, slippery.
He wants her, or he wants
what came after her: a coffee pot,

yellow curtains,
three oranges in a red bowl,
a ball game on the radio,

a dresser for his wallet,
a rug beside the bed, a geranium
on the kitchen window sill.

Maybe, most of all, the geranium,
which was not too dry
and not too wet,

and smelled of the earth—
soil and chlorophyll
and roots.

Cindy Hunter Morgan teaches creative writing at Michigan State University and is the author of two chapbooks. *The Sultan*, *The Skater*, *The Bicycle Maker* won The Ledge Press 2011 Poetry Chapbook Competition. *Apple Season* won the Midwest Writing Center's 2012 Chapbook Contest, judged by Shane McCrae. Her poems have appeared in a variety of journals, including *West Branch*, *Bateau*, and *Sugar House Review*. Poems from her new manuscript about shipwrecks appear or are forthcoming in several journals, including *Midwestern Gothic*, *Fogged Clarity*, and *Salamander*.

The Fixed Meal *Vanessa Couto Johnson*

Oblivion spreads
its tablecloth.

Earth elements can
combine into spoons.

Hunger for the darkest dirt,
until the fullest hill

un-fills with heat.
No one is detained.

No one is looking
at the sky now.

The land loses
hair that stood on end.

Spread the white napkin
over the lap.

This is not a surrender. This is
not a surrender, but the needed

meal, the bite
that must be chewed,

the mushrooms that begin
to inherit.

Vanessa Couto Johnson's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Blackbird*, *Toad Suck Review*, *The Destroyer*, *decomp*, and elsewhere. She is listed as a Highly Commended Poet for the 2014 Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize. She currently teaches at Texas State University, where she earned her MFA, and blogs occasionally at meansofpoetry.com.

The Skin of a Viper's Jaw Transfigured *William Kelley Woolfitt*

1906: Tamanrasset, Hoggar, Algeria

Shaded by boulders, cooling my feet in dark sand,
I brush my arch against a golden rope that shudders, rises
up to strike. I see scales like jewels, then light
pouring through the delicate skin of its hinged jaw

as it kisses my heel. Ragged heat washes through me as I
fall. I taste India rubber, and petals of blood
leak from my nose, my bones melt, and I become
a sack of jelly. The viper is gone. I am alone,

none to ease my thirst or lie with me in my grave.
Then the Tuareg shepherd carries me to Dassine's tent,
and anoints my wound with red iron, lashes
a strap around my ankle, and burns my foot again.

I smell my flesh cooking, I vomit, drowse, and drink
the potions Dassine brings me. I sleep, sail to France
where my mother rips a lace shawl. When I wake,
I sit up and eat sour milk from Dassine's spoon.

William Kelley Woolfitt teaches creative writing and American literature at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee. He is the author of a book of poetry, *Beauty Strip*, forthcoming from Texas Review Press. He is also the author of a fiction chapbook, *The Boy with Fire in His Mouth* (2014). His poems and stories appear in *Shenandoah*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *Tin House* online, *New Ohio Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *River Styx*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review* Instapoetry Series, and elsewhere.

Dried Fig Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

My dog and cat ran away together. They'd been conspiring, waiting 'til winter so they could cross the lake, knowing I can't stand cold, detest arctic wind, and don't trust the thickness of ice. Both of them were calico, so they had a lot in common, despite their difference in species. They told each other that they lived in a post-species world, and were thus mutually reassured.

It was a lonely morning when I awoke and padded into the cold living room to find them gone. I knew right away what had happened, as I did when my wife left me, even before I found the note she'd nailed to the black walnut cutting board I'd given her one Xmas. It was beautiful, dark and severe, like her, but she'd showed no enthusiasm for it.

My dog and cat agreed with her: I could be a condescending bastard, and insensitive.

They've only been gone a couple of days but I've already forgotten their names. There are more dogs and cats in the pound. They see me coming and shrink away. They can tell the kind of man I am, not abusive, but capable of sucking all the joy out of a room—that's what my wife told me. That's what the woofs meant, the sour meows.

So I was abandoned, lonely and had money troubles, and then I ate an e-coli burger with cheddar.

The nurses' shadows are those of Joshua trees. It's suffocation Centigrade in the ward. I am as parched as a dried fig, but they won't give me any water. All the other charity cases look like Charles Bukowski, one per bed. One Bukowski is sucking off another. One Bukowski is sweating piss, saying: *This is the biggest accomplishment of my life.*

Joshua trees stick needles into my arm, set up a drip. One tree says: *I've never seen anyone this dehydrated. Your body is a desert.*

She and I are desert rats. I ask her if she can find me some Viagra, or that other stuff. She says: *Your body is a Rubbermaid cabinet stocked with disease and tools for which there are no longer any functions.*

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois' poems and fictions have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He is a regular contributor to *The Prague Revue*, and has been thrice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for 99 cents from [Kindle](#) and [Nook](#), or as a [print edition](#).

All The Roads And Trees of Pennsylvania *Matthew Kabik*

All the trees in Pennsylvania are dark and strong. They are earnest maples and enduring pines. They are ancient and watching over the roads. They are tricksters against people who expect a straightaway but instead find, just after one blind turn, another two snaking past a mountain ledge or spilling-over ravine. The trees wait and watch cars twist around and past them, getting lost and tracking back through them trying to find a green road sign in an ocean of green trees. Mike doesn't hate the trees. He knows what they are.

When they got to where they expected to find an unused fire tower, they found nothing. Daniel made a wrong turn and the roads led them to a hill with rocks and pits where fires burned before summer. It didn't stop them. Sandra ran in front of them towards the rocks while Daniel and Mike got the stolen beer out from the trunk and cracked one open like adults might. They tapped the cans together and Mike imagined Daniel being his father's age, not seeing the beer as anything nearly so amazing as right now.

They found Sandra on the top of a long, flat rock—like grey ice cream that someone scooped away at with a spoon. The low part of it was facing towards them, and where it got thicker led to a drop off—something carved out by a glacier long before Mike could even imagine. They sat on the rock, the minimal exposure to the sun making it warm, and drank. Sandra sat on Daniel's lap because they were dating, and Mike drank more than he meant to because he didn't want to look like it bothered him.

When they kissed, Mike looked up at the tops of the trees until they stopped. Until Sandra threw an empty can at him and he threatened to throw a half-full one back. Daniel said he needed to piss, so Sandra stood up so he could go away from them both. Mike expected her to slip away with him, for the two of them to leave. But Sandra did not go, and instead walked along the length of the rock, going to the highest point of it and slide-walking back down. She told Mike it was fun and because Mike drank more than he meant to, he tried it, too. They ran up the rock, scrambling to the top, and then slid back down, sometimes falling to their backs and sliding sideways. It was fun because it was scary, because they could decide—just once—to keep running right of the edge and fall down through the drop off to the ground far below.

They got to the top again and saw Daniel walking back through the woods. He was looking at his feet because there was always the chance of a rock poking up from the ground or a snake, so Sandra shouted at him. Mike shouted at him, too.

When Daniel looked up he waved and shouted something back but Mike didn't hear what he said. He shouted it again and Sandra shouted back that there was still some left.

When Daniel disappeared behind overgrowth, Mike turned to Sandra and kissed her on the lips. She pushed him away and he fell.

He drank too much because he didn't want to look angry that Sandra was sitting on Daniel's lap. He drank too much and he fell from the top of the boulder to the ground below. He fell looking up the whole time. He fell watching the tops of the trees grow higher into the sky and Sandra shouting down at him with terror through her face. He fell and stopped falling, and felt the rocks below break his ribs and head and spine and arms. He felt his whole body crack apart and didn't make a sound.

He waited for Sandra to run down the boulder and down the long sloping side of the hill. He waited for Daniel to kneel next to him and whine out Jesus to Mike's broken bones.

He cried when they picked him up, Daniel under his broken arms and Sandra holding on to him from his useless knees. He cried and felt everything inside shifting with each heavy step or stumbling progress towards the car. He listened to Daniel's breath grow ragged with effort and hot against his cheek. He watched Sandra's ponytail bounce with each panicking step.

When they reached the car, they tried to put him in the front seat but he whispered out that he wanted to be in the back, where he could lay flat. Sandra pulled him through while Daniel supported his broken back and ribs and legs. When they finally got the car door shut, the pain was gone and Mike knew it was because there was too much of it for his body to understand. He felt comfortable, even with the feeling of his bones clicking and cracking against themselves.

Mike looked up at the trees and felt Sandra's warm hand on his cheek and looked at her. He told her that he wasn't angry, that it was his dumb fault for drinking so much. He heard her start to cry and told her he was sorry for kissing her.

He told them both that they were lost, and that he was sorry and he wasn't upset at all. Mike opened his eyes and looked at the trees racing by and thought he was almost home, just for a second.

Matthew Kabik's work has appeared in *WhiskeyPaper*, *Sundog Lit*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *Little Fiction*. He earned his MFA from Arcadia University and lives in Lancaster, PA. Follow him on Twitter @mlkabik or visit his website for a complete list of publications: matchstickcircus.com.

Don't You Want Someone *Sarah-Jane Abate*

Haley's the only girl she knows in ninth grade who's still a virgin, or at least the only one who'll admit to it. Everyone else has had a boyfriend in the past year, and done it. Haley's last boyfriend was in seventh grade, Corey Wood. She remembers the scribbled hall passes during class, his mouth tasting sweet, like cinnamon. He's been seeing Marie Wildonner since then. It doesn't bother Haley. Corey works at the quarry with his father and uncle and brothers in the summer. Haley's been asked out by a couple of the vo-tech boys, but she looked down at their hands, the ragged, dirty nails, the rough knuckles. Tried to imagine them touching her, inside her, like she wanted. She said no.

You better get that taken care of before you graduate, Deanna's always saying. Otherwise when's your next chance? Deanna's two years older than Haley. She's got an after-school job working at Maple Hollow Diner, makes her own money. She's been dating her boyfriend, Steve, for three years. They're getting married when they graduate or when she gets pregnant, whichever comes first. Haley listens when Deanna talks about boys. Like when she says all Haley has to do is stop acting so distant. And when she says, Yeah, they're not perfect, but what do you expect?

The diner is empty. Haley's helping Deanna stack jelly packets, the black plastic caddies dulled and sticky with jam. Haley looks down at her nails, the pale pink polish chipping off.

You just need to make one of them notice you, Deanna tells her. Haley nods. Homecoming's the perfect chance, don't you want someone? Sometimes I think you're happier off alone, she says, and makes a face.

Of course not, Haley says. Deanna drifts to another table, apron barely clinging onto her hips. Haley follows her.

Anyway, Deanna says. You can't ask them. You'll look too desperate. You need to wait for one to ask you. You're not ugly, she says.

Thanks, Haley says. She pushes the glass salt- and pepper shakers at each other, lining them up, edges flat and equal.

I don't mean it like that. Seriously. These boys around here are too dumb for their own good, Deanna says. Couple years from now when they stop wanting to fuck everything that moves, realize they want married, they'll wise up. They'll be lining up at your door then. Fifteen's young anyway, Deanna tells her, even though Haley knows Deanna lost her virginity at 14.

Deanna throws her a wet rag and Haley catches it, starts wiping down the table. By Minersville's standards, Haley will die an old maid. The fluorescent lights hollow out Deanna's face, put shadows around her jaw.

Anyway, Deanna says again. Did you hear about Katie Ralston? Graduated two years ago? Pregnant again. Jesus, learn to keep your fucking legs shut. Haley doesn't say anything, just laughs, looks down, picks a spot of tartar sauce on the table with her thumbnail.

The shops in town are all proudly labeled—Miners Bank and Miners Plaza and the Coal Cracker Creamery. Haley can't get past it. The drive to school curls down through half-carved-out mountains, the spread of fall trees giving into heaps of shimmering black coal, reflecting the sun into the sky, glinting silver. There's a JESUS MAY COME TODAY sign just before the Volunteer Fire Hall. The sign is a faded yellow, the color of piano keys. The letters are crooked, worn with road dust and rock salt. Winters, out-of-towners make U-turns in the parking lot when they realize they're nowhere they meant to be, spray up salt and dirty slush.

Deanna comes and gets her before school every morning. The high school's on the other edge of town. Near the school, the Culm Banks. Haley sees it every morning. It runs alongside the town, sprawling out into the next town over. Hills and hills of coal, ground up pieces too small to do anything but cover you in filth. Haley grew up sneaking through the cut in the fence to play with the junk. There's furniture, appliances, even a crane, yellowed paint rusted in brown spots. Rumor is one kid got stuck in a fridge once, back in the '80s. They didn't find him for days. It was summer. They couldn't get rid of the fridge after they found him. They didn't have anywhere else to put it, they said. This was the dump. The Banks stunk for months, the sweet smell of decay.

Deanna threads over the yellow line. Everyone in town drives too fast, smokes too much, drinks too much beer. The town always gets you in the end, Haley thinks; all that changes is how old you are when it does. Either an accident or suicide or a long, slow death. The hiss of her grandpa's oxygen mask. Her father's shaking hands, only steady when he concentrates on an engine. The three aren't much different.

Fuller's in Haley's third period history class. His dad's the only dentist in town. His teeth are perfect, straight, almost shining. Haley hides her own bottom teeth below her lip when she laughs in class. Her family could never afford braces.

Deanna starts elbowing her every time he raises his hand. He wears collared shirts over his dark wash jeans from the Gap in Lehigh, not the soon-faded blue of Wranglers. He doesn't wear work boots. Haley watches when he's not looking. He glances over at her once, catches her. One time he comes up to her after class, says, I don't think I quite caught the homework for tomorrow, I

know you probably wrote it down. You're always on top of things like that. Do you know what it was? And she blushes, gets out her school-issued planner, gives him the page numbers, while he stands too close to her.

There's a group project on the New Deal. Deanna nudges Haley in the ribs, looks at Jake. He's looking at Haley. The three of them plan to meet in the diner after school. Deanna doesn't show. Haley and Jake get a booth, the torn vinyl sticky underneath them. Jake makes a face at it, sticks his finger into the rip. It makes the hole worse, the yellow foam puffing out. You come here a lot? he asks her, but doesn't wait for an answer. He's grinning to himself. This place is a dump.

He lays his forearms on the table, strips the paper from around his napkin, unrolls his fork and knife. His fingers are straight and long, pared-down nails free of dirt. Haley and Jake order. They don't talk about the New Deal. He tells her that his family moved here a couple years ago, and he still feels like he doesn't fit in. He tells her he's always noticed her. He tells her he can't wait to get out of here, to go to Dartmouth, like his dad. She says she wants to go to college too, get out. He smiles at her then with his perfect teeth. She feels the heat in her stomach, lower.

He pays. Outside the diner, he asks her to Homecoming, just a month away. She says yes. Then he asks her to be his girlfriend. She says yes again, and he kisses her. His lips feel chapped. Rough. She opens her mouth and he breathes into it, repositions his grip on her chin, angles her face closer. She can feel him through his jeans. He releases her and grins, the same grin from earlier. She watches him leave.

Deanna picks her up. Haley rolls the window down because the A/C doesn't work, lets the hot August air push in over her bare arms. Deanna's thrilled. Her parents will be relieved she has a boyfriend again. If Deanna drives fast enough, the piles of coal turn into one long line on the side of the road that points towards home. Haley feels as if she can close her eyes.

Haley's grandpa likes to sit out on the porch of their duplex when it rains. Her mom's protests are always half-hearted. They moved into the sagging house to take care of her father, stayed when they realized there was nothing they could do. Haley stands inside the screen door, pressing up against it until she can feel the cool, just-wet metal push into her skin. She holds the door open for him, watches him wheel his tank out, bouncing over the ripples in the Astro-Turf-covered porch. His fleece-lined slippers shuffle, so slow Haley grips her fingers into the edge of the screen door, wants to go out to help him, wants to scream. It's hard to breathe in the heavy damp. The ground has a wet tang of rotting leaves. Everything glistens, slick to the touch.

She watches through the screen as her mother's father takes his oxygen mask off, holds it dangling from one hand, breathes in with a choking wheeze, body shuddering.

Two weeks before Homecoming, Jake takes her to meet his parents. He lives in a development on the edge of town, Cranberry Estates. No one can imagine why they named it that. The houses are all the same two-story house with neat porches and large front windows on the second floor. The lawns are all the same neatly trimmed rectangle. The streets are smooth and flat gray. No coal here.

The inside of Jake's house radiates warm beige and pastels. She looks down at her hands for dirt that could betray her. Jake doesn't notice.

His parents are perfectly nice. They're gracious. Jake's mother has prepared a chuck roast for dinner. She keeps serving her, tells her she's too skinny, so pretty. His dad says that Jake keeps telling them how smart she is. That she's always one of the only ones raising their hands in class. Aside from him, that is, and they all laugh. They make her feel welcome. She smiles a lot, makes sure her bottom teeth are covered.

Jake drives her home. She kisses him quick, not opening her mouth. She makes an excuse about curfew, heads inside. The living room is dim, smells like mildew, like beer, her mom's Avon. Like home. Haley sits down on the couch next to her mom, curling her legs up under her, spreading the black of her only dress over herself. Her parents are watching a real-life crime show on TV. During the commercial break, her dad pulls a pack of Camels from his shirt pocket, lights up, puffs out. Haley can feel the cloud of smoke dry in the back of her throat, imagines it yellowing the wallpaper. No one smokes in Jake's house. Her dad coughs deep in his chest, hawks a long yellowing string into one of the empty beer cans by his side. Her mom closes her eyes, opens them, keeps staring at the infomercial playing on TV.

In gym class Ms. Mihalchek pulls her aside, tells her she should get out. Just like that: you should get out while you can. Ms. Mihalchek is a trim brunette, wears matching sweat suits but tells girls they could do more chin-ups if they really tried. She started teaching yoga last year, the same time she told a junior that she should get an abortion. The girl's parents called the school and filed a formal complaint. Haley thinks she didn't lose her job because the principal has a crush on her—all the boys do. She's seen the writing on the walls. Ms. Mihalchek's not going anywhere. There's no one else. She's been their only new teacher for years. Wrestling gets all the money.

She tells Haley she's a smart girl, that she has a shot at college. She'd make a good teacher. She also tells Haley that she should work on her attitude a bit more. No one's going to pass her the ball if she stands there all day with her arms crossed.

The gym echoes oddly. They are standing by the green-painted bleachers. Haley can hear yells, the squeak of sneakers stopping short on the waxed floor.

Haley shrugs. I've got plans, she hears herself say.

Ms. Mihalchek nods, keeps looking at her. She doesn't wear makeup, but she looks like a model anyway. She graduated Minersville High before Haley was born, went to college, came back. She told Haley about this once, told her she wanted to make a difference. She was trying to make a difference. Haley can understand how frustrating this must be to her.

The door to the outside stands open, cool air just reaching Haley. She hopes the girls in class notice Ms. Mihalchek taking time to talk to her; she hopes they don't. Haley doesn't say anything, just watches the game until Ms. Mihalchek blows the whistle, shrill and sharp, and jerks her thumb at Haley to get back in. Haley does.

Haley's room is full of the carved coal she collected before she grew up to feel the weight of it all pressing down on her. She has animals from every year of the county fair until she was eleven. She has a glossy black bear catching fish from a stream, a glossy black eagle, a glossy black mountain lion. They are lacquered to shine, to keep shining.

Some of the old-timers just can't give the coal up, her grandpa choked out. They go to the piles around town and fill paper grocery bags with hard coal. The old men carve the animals, never anything but animals. They sell them at the fair, rough, knobby hands fumbling the money Haley's mother hands over. Black cracked into every crease and callous on their hands. Their hands sometimes shaking from the alcohol or the tremors, like her dad's do now.

Her parents keep no coal on their shelves. Their coal is waiting in her father's lungs from what his own father brought home from the mines. Haley can hear her parents through the thin walls: sometimes snoring, sometimes fighting, sometimes making love. Constant, though, is the hiss of her grandpa's oxygen tank from the other side of the duplex, the dust he hacks up.

Jake takes her out to the Culm Banks that weekend, the ground shining flat silver, junk for a mile. They walk. He kicks rocks, plastic bottles, beer cans. You used to play here as a kid? Jake asks her, and she nods. She's wearing his sweater even though she's not cold, because he gave it to her. It's what's done. She's sweltering, her armpits prickling with sweat under the mid-September sun. The outline of the moon is rising in the sky. Nearby, there's a mattress. Beyond that, a TV. Farther out, an old four-wheeler.

But it's the town dump, he says. He's smirking, half-smile on his face. She nods. He's got that look in his eyes, the one she now recognizes, the one that means he wants her. Jake pulls her tight against him, kisses her hard. His mouth is rough, chapped lips on hers. He runs his hand up her arm to grab her breast, the way he thinks she must like it. She kisses him back, presses up against him, shuts her eyes against the zigzagging brights behind her lids. His hot breath on her neck, clean fingers digging into her waistband.

The town still uses the old mining whistle to call noon and six o'clock. Nobody jumps when it goes off. It's housed in the fire hall now. Haley's dad's auto shop is in town, right next to it. He says it's comforting. He says he hopes someday she can get a job that's comforting to her. Maybe not something with her hands, he says quickly, because she's a girl, but something simple. Something that can be finished when the day is over and returned to just as easily the next day. Something hour-by-hour, like her mom, who clerks at the title and tag place. Haley nods, pushes the tools on his work table around. She rubs her hands together, wipes the grease off on her jeans.

When her dad drinks, he says at least being a mechanic gets his hands dirty. Not quite like the mines, but almost. Her dad gets like this some nights, drinks 12-packs of Milwaukee's Best and drops the cans into a Shur Save grocery bag one by one. Haley's mom just shakes her head, pushes the chipped black dish of an ashtray along the coffee table to him with one socked foot. She never says anything, never disagrees, just changes the channel to another Lifetime movie. The light is dim, only one lamp turned on. Haley listens to the muted dialogue, the clink of the cans as they pile up in the bag.

She and Jake spend their nights watching movies in his parent's basement, making out. They're been dating for three weeks now and Deanna's surprised they haven't fucked yet. It's because you're a good girl, she tells Haley. Play hard to get, they like that more anyway. Jake's touched Haley four times so far. It makes her heart pound, her breath get faster. She tells Deanna that she's gotten to second base, to third. Finally, Deanna squeals, and then, let's go out to dinner before Homecoming, us couples.

Haley's mom takes her shopping for a dress the weekend before the dance, driving an hour to get to the Lehigh Valley Mall. She glances in the rear-view, cutting her eyes at Haley. Haley turns the radio on. Her mom turns it down. She takes a deep breath, says, Do you know how to use a condom? And when?

Of course, Haley says, quick, to stop her. She stares out the window, the pot-holed grey road. The birch trees, growing out of the coal piles they pass. They only tree that grows in coal, and grows well.

I just don't want you to make a mistake, she tells Haley. I don't want you married straight out of high school with a baby, she says. Haley can see the lines around her mouth from this angle. Her lips pressed thin with age, growing old here.

Besides, he doesn't want that. He likes me for my brain.

Honey, her mother sighs, then slows down. She looks behind her, pulls off to the shoulder.

He said, Haley says.

Her mother unbuckles her seat belt and turns to Haley. Just think about your future, she says. I talked to Ms. Mihalchek. She says you could go to a good college. You could leave here.

I am, she says. Haley feels lost, in a rut, wheels spinning in the slush and not getting any traction. The leaves on the birch a bright yellow, gold against all the white and black.

You know, I love birch trees, Haley's mom sighs, facing front again. Your father proposed to me holding a birch branch, with leaves, instead of flowers. Haley's heard this story before, knows her mother was four months pregnant. You ever wonder why you never had any brothers or sisters? her mom asks.

Haley doesn't know what to say, shrugs again, looks back out the window. The leaves small, almost invisible against the sky. Infinitesimal is a word from the PSATs. A Ms. Mihalchek word.

At the mall, they get pretzels from Auntie Anne's and Haley watches the girls with their push-up bras pour into Victoria's Secret and out again, swinging their pink bags back and forth with pride. In Penney's, Haley looks at the dresses, sticking to the 70% off clearance rack. She finds only three in her size. She settles on one that her mom says makes her look so grown-up. It's a sickly gray dress with spaghetti straps and sparkles. It's too long for her, but it's on super sale. Her mom tells her it's perfect; she can hem it. When Haley looks at herself in the mirror she still recognizes herself. Her blonde hair, her hips, the swelling of her breasts in the dress. She looks younger than she feels, playing dress-up. She can feel the satin on her shoulders and she moves, shifts around. She cranes her neck, tries to see herself from the back. She wonders if Jake will like it, if he'll see her transformed, or the girl the dress makes her feel like she still is.

When she comes home and tries it on for her family in the dim living room, her dad says she looks beautiful. She pulls up the sides of the skirt and walks over to the other half of the duplex, stepping through the thin door. The bare shag carpet tickling the soles of her feet, wheel marks in the pile from her grandpa's oxygen tank. Her grandpa nods, coughs, says, too, that she looks beautiful. She goes back into her room and takes it off, hanging it on her open closet door so that she can keep an eye on it from her bed.

Jake comes to pick her up for Homecoming in the Jeep his parents got him. He's wearing a collared shirt, black jeans, a tie. He shakes hands with Haley's dad and granddad in her living room. They go through the motions. Her dad nods, claps him on the back, tells him you better not lay on a finger on my daughter. I've got a .22 with your name on it if you do.

Jake nods, says, Of course not, calls him sir. Her mom hugs her, and Haley can feel her hairsprayed curls crunching between them. When they are out in the car and driving away Jake

grins at her, puts his hand on Haley's thigh, fingering up past the edge of her dress. She slouches towards his hand.

You look beautiful, he tells her. I mean it.

Thanks, she says, and feels something tight in her chest, something she doesn't recognize. Something hot and hard in her throat. She can't stop looking at him.

At the dance, Haley's heels scuff against the gym floor. She takes them off, pressing her sore feet flat against it. Jake tells her that he'd like her to come home with him afterward. She nods her head against his chest. His hands tighten around her hips. After the slow song ends, melds into another one, she pulls away, tells him she needs to pee. He walks her as far as the drinks table.

She makes it to the bathroom, bright green craft paper tacked up onto the walls for the dance. It's quiet. Her ears ring hollowly. She rubs them, feeling the sweat slick on her face. She pumps a paper towel out of the dispenser, wets it, presses it to her skin. Someone bursts out of the stall to her left and she looks up, looks in the mirror. It's Deanna.

You excited, she asks, lip gloss flashing against her teeth.

For what, Haley asks. The dance isn't that great. Her stomach is fluttering.

That's not what I mean, Deanna says, and winks at her, over-exaggeratedly. It looks like she has a twitch.

Oh, Haley says. That.

Come on, it'll be fine, Deanna says. Make sure he pulls out if he doesn't have a condom. Come on, she says again, and grabs Haley, pushing her out the door and down the three steps to the gym.

She drags her over to Jake, standing by the punch bowl. When he sees her, he tosses his red cup in the garbage can, grabs her hand, pulls her out onto the dance floor.

The sparkles from her dress catch the lights. She looks out over Jake's shoulder and sees Ms. Mihalchek standing near the doorway, arms crossed over her stomach in a black dress. She's thinner than Haley thought, her shoulders in the dress like a warning. She's wearing black pumps, much nicer shoes than Haley. Haley looks around and sees every other chaperone on duty there with their husband or wife. Ms. Mihalchek's half-lit up by the fluorescents from the hallway, watching the kids dance, watching Haley. Haley looks away, won't meet her eyes.

Haley can feel Jake hard against her, has been feeling him for every song. Everyone's dancing to hip-hop, hips grinding and bouncing. Now, though, she presses back, harder, with more force, circling her hips a little. It's easy. She knows what he wants, and she wants it too, she's telling him. He pushes his thigh between hers, and she pushes back.

When the dance is over, the lights come up and everybody separates, blinking. In the light, Haley looks at Jake, sees the sweat stains under his arms. She thinks about the lines of her mother's face deepening as she pulled off to the side of the road. She thinks of Ms. Mihalchek, alone at a dance filled with high-schoolers, holding herself in the dark and the noise.

She takes Jake's hand then, follows him out to the Jeep. She can feel the excitement in the pit of her stomach, between her legs, a wet heat. His hand is on her thigh, between her thighs, as he drives. He pulls over at the Banks. My parents might still be up, he says. You don't mind, do you? and she says no, of course not.

He grabs a blanket from the back and helps her through the hole in the fence she's been ducking through since she was a kid. She totters in her heels, catching herself on Jake's shoulder. He wraps his hand around her waist. She holds up the sides of her dress. She doesn't want to get it dirty.

He takes her to the old twin mattress. He lays the blanket over it, helps her down. She tries not to touch anything. When he pushes her dress up her thighs, pushes his fingers against her underwear, she can feel the dress spilling over the sides of the mattress, can feel it dragging and knows that she'll never be able to wear it again. He doesn't pull out a condom or put it on and she doesn't say anything, doesn't tell him about the one in her purse that her mom gave her.

She stays silent.

She's been told that it'll hurt, and it does. She digs her fingers into the ground on either side of her, feeling the coal sharp between her fingers. She feels the hot rush, his body shaking, the wet heat inside of her. Afterward, he presses his face into the side of her neck, his slick skin, his wet, open mouth. Everything stings, feels sore, chafed, as Jake's lips always feel. She can feel him inside her still, shrinking. When she shifts, he seeps out from between her legs, a slow, hot trickle. The ground around her glitters in the moonlight that shines down on the dump, but it's just old coal. She thinks of telling Deanna, knows how she'll squeal. She closes her eyes and waits for what she knows must come next.

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By The Time This Reaches You I'll Have Fled *Tim Buchanan*

It had been three months since Rob last received a postcard from Carmen. She never missed a month before now. In the two years since he last saw her, he hadn't stopped thinking about her. They met, on a sunny morning in a café near the bay in San Sebastian. He had been walking the cobblestones that bent around the beach when he saw her sipping coffee on an open-air patio. All Spanish women were lovely, but she was something else. He rested against the railing that separated the walkway from the sand and pointed his camera up the bay at the sailboats crammed into the wharf. He moved his lens along the plaza, past a large carousel and a small park with elaborate hedge sculptures until it settled on her.

She was looking out at the blue water, occasionally lifting a porcelain cup painted with a blue pastoral scene. Her fingers were long and delicate and touched the cup lightly. When she sipped, her lips parted rather than puckered, and she closed her eyes and smiled. He watched her for a long time, and then he went over to her.

"Pardon me," he said. He held the camera up for her to see.

She smiled and said something in Spanish.

"Just do what you were doing," he said. He waved toward the bay.

He wasn't sure if she understood, but she looked again to the water. On the table next to her cup was a collection of postcards and a pen. The shutter snapped many times, but didn't seem to disturb her. In a moment she began to write.

"No one writes letters anymore," she said, with her head down as she scribbled. Her hair hung over the side of her face so her voice sounded like it came from the air all around him. "I just told my sister I was dreaming of what to write when this curious man came with a camera."

"I hope it wasn't a bother," he said.

"It was no bother. It was fun."

He put his camera down and sat at the table. A man came and he ordered coffee like hers. He made small talk while he waited for the coffee. He told her he was taking pictures for a travel magazine. Then the coffee came.

"I'm only in Spain a little while," he said, "but can I call you for dinner?"

“All talk on phones is awkward,” she said. “You never get to say what you really want. So send me letters. Even better, send me postcards. I want to see all the places you see.” She took one from the stack and wrote her address on it.

It made him nervous. He wanted to see her again. After a minute he said so.

“You will,” she said. “There.” She pointed to a long concrete stall with boards covering the openings. “Tonight we will eat fish by the bay.”

#

Virginia stirred in bed beside him. Her knees were curled up to her chest, and she had tucked the bedspread tight all around her. She moaned an elongated “no.” Rob rolled onto his side and watched her features shift in the dark. A lock of thick black hair stuck to the corner of her mouth, and he brushed it away. He thought about waking her, but for a while she was quiet, then began to snore.

The sky outside his window turned from black to navy blue. He got up and crossed the room to his desk by the kitchen. It was a small apartment, but he didn’t have much: two chairs set across from a small round table, his bed, the desk, and bookshelves with novels he meant to read and travel guides to places he wanted to go; his camera bag and tripod hung from a coat rack by the door. After returning from Spain, he never went anywhere else.

He kept Carmen’s postcards in a cigar box on his desk. He sat down and turned on the lamp and looked back at Virginia. The light barely touched her and didn’t disturb her sleep. He took the postcards from the cigar box and read them from the first to the last.

For a while her postcards all began with “How I miss you!” and then she would tell about her life in Oña with her parents and grandmother. At 25 she was the youngest of four—two brothers and a sister, all married and living in cities like Madrid, Barcelona, and Paris. She was finishing a degree to teach English to Spanish children. “My English grows and grows,” she wrote in one note. “These postcards are so fantastic practice. I met some Londoners the other day and they said...” It was hard for him to read on the first time. He imagined tall clean-faced boys with charming accents. It frustrated him to not be there to get between her and the better-looking men to be found there. But in another, as if responding to the fears he never expressed, “Spanish men are so boring. They are so concerned with their faces. They are like women, they never

grow any hairs.” She asked questions about his life and about the city. St. Louis was one of those cities she would have heard of but had no way to think about. He didn’t want to tell her much. He had a decent job doing commercial photography for catalogs and magazine ads, though it wasn’t what he wanted to do. He went to Spain on assignment for a travel magazine, but it was a one-off gig that never amounted to more. He wanted to make it seem he could be back in her country at any moment, and he wanted to be. Instead he told her about the Arch, the City Museum, and the Mississippi River. That seemed to satisfy her.

Almost a year before, she wrote, “I cannot live in Oña any longer. It is filled with lechers and old women.” And in the next month, “I am in Alicante now. It is warm here all the time, it is filled with young people, and I go to the ocean every day.” The front of the postcard showed a marble statue of a skinny bearded knight, a look of almost comical concentration on his face, squinting into the distance. Fat pigeons clung to his spear and his shield. Beyond him stretched a spit of white sand and blue ocean. All the people he could see had their backs to him, all broad, well muscled and tan. He could pick out no women except among the shapes that floated in the waves. The furthest one out looked like Carmen, though he couldn’t see her face, and it seemed to him every other figure was marching into the sea to meet her.

#

By the time he finished reading the last postcard, the sun was up. It hadn’t yet risen above the tall buildings outside his window, but already the light of day out-shone the desk lamp. He switched off the lamp, stood and stretched and looked at Virginia. She was on her back now. He could see the shape of her breasts through the old shirt he gave her to wear and the flat plane of her stomach where the shirt was pulled up a little.

In the sober light of day it seemed less exciting that Virginia was in his bed. He felt a dull sense of regret that they had only slept, but it was mixed with relief. Nothing about them changed last night, so he could relax and act normal. He took some clothes with him into the bathroom and showered. He took a long time. He started out thinking about Carmen. He thought about the give in her flesh when he squeezed her arm or wrapped his arms around her waist. He thought about how his fingers would have sank into her ass cheeks. Before he finished he was thinking about Virginia. He thought about climbing into bed and sliding his hand beneath the shirt he gave her and under the elastic band of the pants he gave her.

When he finished he came out, and Virginia was still asleep. She was on her side now, facing where Rob had lain. Rob stood at the foot of the bed watching her. Why not go for it, he thought. He and Virginia had been friends for a while, shared the same interests and opinions of

things. He only had to make a move. The only reason he hadn't made one yet was Carmen. She had blinded him to other women.

"Dude, are you watching me sleep?" Virginia said. Her voice came out thick and slow. She propped herself up on her elbows. Her hair was a tangle around her head, under her eyes was puffy and flushed.

"I was just thinking," he said.

"You were just thinking about what?"

"I mean I was only thinking, so I wasn't really seeing what I was looking at."

"Don't look at me when you do that, okay?" She had a way of looking at Rob that made him feel wrong, whether he was or not. "I'm still a bit freaked out," she said.

Virginia had come to him last night. She came in like a wild bird and flew around the room talking fast and in half-sobs. Rob poured her a glass of wine, like he always did when she was upset. A man she went on one date with had been calling her yesterday. She hadn't been excited for a second date, so she ignored his calls, letting them go to the machine. The man filled up her answering machine with threats and angry messages. When she saw him out the window of her apartment at the payphone across the street, she called the police. The man jumped into his Buick when she saw him, and sped away. Because she didn't know anything about him other than his name and the kind of car he drove, the police could do nothing but take the tape and wait for something more to happen. They suggested she stay with a friend for the night.

"Sorry," Rob said. "Do you want breakfast?"

"Okay."

Virginia took last night's clothes into the bathroom. Rob heard the shower come on and he cleared the wine and beer bottles from the coffee table and made eggs and toast for them both and sausage for himself. He was sitting in the chair facing the bathroom, both plates on the table, when she came out.

"I feel stupid for being here," she said.

He looked up at her. He hadn't touched his eggs.

“Not stupid, I guess,” she said. She came and sat in the other chair. She pushed her eggs around on her plate then got up and crossed to the kitchen in six quick strides and got the ketchup out of the refrigerator and came back. “I just feel like this guy ran me out of my home. I feel ashamed.”

“You shouldn’t,” Rob said, “feel stupid or ashamed.”

“I know, and I don’t. It’s smart really, being here.” She pushed her eggs around in the ketchup and ate them in three big forkfuls. “If he broke into my apartment, I couldn’t fight him off, and that’s not me being weak. That’s just fact.”

She showed him her arms as if he needed reminding of the shape of her body. The thin arms, the long curve of her nose, the large wet eyes. Each part considered separately made her seem sickly somehow, but together they were beautiful.

“Will you come with me to the apartment later?” she said. “I want to grab some things.”

“Of course,” he said.

#

Virginia lived only a few blocks away, so they walked to her apartment. It was mid-afternoon and cool in the shadows of the tall brick buildings. They were quiet, and Rob was glad for that. He was deep in the new thoughts he was forming about Virginia. He concentrated on the rhythm of her hard-soled shoes on the sidewalk. For every two steps she took, he took one. He was very conscious of the way she swung her arm, and he swung his to match it.

They rounded a corner and stepped into the sun. On the street, parked cars lined both curbs, and the sunlight off the fenders and windows blinded him so that he fell out of step with Virginia. She was up the steps to her building before he recovered.

“You don’t have to come up,” she said. He stopped there on the bottom step looking up at her.

“What if he’s up there?” he said.

Virginia looked at the door. Her knuckles turned white around the pink canister of pepper spray attached to her keys. She looked small and breakable against the large heavy wood door.

“He won’t be,” she said. “He’s only left creepy messages on my answering machine so far. And if I can’t walk in my own damn front door by myself in broad daylight, I might as well give up right now.”

He wanted to tell her that was stupid, but she looked down on him and her eyes were big and wet and bright. And then her key made a sharp sound in the lock and she was through the door, and in the window above the door he saw her running up the stairs.

He waited. He heard the pop and crunch of tires slowly turning in the street. When he turned to look, a long white Buick moved past, picking up speed. Through the back window he saw the driver’s long brown hair moving in the wind and he thought he saw a pair of feminine eyes looking back at him in the rearview mirror. Then the Buick was too far away.

The hair, those eyes. Carmen, he thought. For a moment his heart sped up, even though he knew it hadn’t been her. She would never come to the U.S. He felt like a fool to have wasted so many years on pining for a woman who never conceived of coming to him. He was realizing now just how one-sided everything had been. Write to me. Come visit me. Think of me. It had been on him to act the whole time.

It embarrassed him to think of the last postcard he sent. On it the St. Louis skyline was cast in grey and blue on the bank of the Mississippi. The arch rose high into a field of pink clouds and seemed to hug two buildings beneath it, separating them from the cluster of hotels and skyscrapers. On the yellow ribbon of the Mississippi, a casino barge churned its way toward the arch as if to pass through it, out of one life and into the next. On the back he had written one line, thinking that he was bold, that he was ready. “If I come to Spain, will you marry me?”

Now there was Virginia. He could imagine a life with her. She was close and real in a way that Carmen never was. He had held himself back dreaming up a time when he could get back to her. He was thinking of what he would say to Virginia that night when she came out the door. Her face was red and the makeup under her eyes was smeared.

He started up the steps to her, but she waved him off.

“Let’s just go,” she said.

They walked back the way they came. He put his arm around her shoulders, and after a moment, she put her head against the side of his chest. It felt good. They walked like that,

awkwardly bumping hips, for a block. He kissed her hair. A few steps later she sat hard in the dark doorway of a breakfast diner and cried. She gasped for air and sobbed loudly.

Rob didn't know if he should touch her or not, so he didn't. He was ashamed to have been thinking ways to convince her to be with him. He knelt down beside her. He would wait.

Across the street people slowed and looked their way, but none stopped.

#

The next morning Rob woke up alone. Virginia had fallen asleep drunk in one of the chairs. He hadn't been able to wake her. The morning sky was grey and made everything look dull. He showered and dressed and when he came out Virginia had moved to the bed, blankets pulled up over her head.

He checked the refrigerator, then left a note saying he would bring back breakfast. In the foyer at the bottom of the stairs, he checked the mail from the day before. On top of a stack of white envelopes was a postcard. He stared at the picture without seeing it. He didn't want to turn it over, and then he did. He read the message on the back, and then he read it again. It was short, only one line: "You will never come to Spain."

The words were small in the middle of the card. They drowned there in all that white space, seeming to shrink to nothing. A series of slashes and dots, right down to ellipses, dot dot dot. That was it. What more was there for him to say? His lungs felt too big for his chest. He flipped the postcard over then back. There was only her name and the fat Spanish stamp showing some side-facing portrait of a bearded king. The city on the front was Segovia. There was no return address on the other side, but he knew that she had moved there. And he knew she was right, that he would never make it back there, that he was always never going to make it back. He was still looking at the postcard when he stepped off the curb.

He heard the keening of an engine in high gear, felt the metal bumper nuzzle into the fabric and then the flesh around his knee, felt the rubber sole of his sneaker bite into the pavement and his leg below the knee hold firm as the rest of him bent into the long inexorable thrust of the white Buick's hood. The rubber gave before the remaining tissue of his knee, and he slipped onto the hood of the car and slid toward his own reflection, eyes wide and uncomprehending, red mouth open in the O of an apology, and then another pair of eyes behind the glass, round and glassy and they held each other there. They were soft, perfect blue eyes surrounded by long delicate lashes and for a moment he fell in love with those eyes, even as he felt the cruelty and

contempt in them. Rob saw long brown hair around a man's long flat slab of face and thin lips pulling back from a pink triangle of tongue caught between long white teeth until it disappeared under the crawl of cracks that shot out from beneath his body.

As if in sleep, Rob rolled away, saw a seething grey sky and thought he was falling into it. Then there was white and wounds of rust, then sky, then his arms were open though he didn't open them, and he thought he might fly to Spain.

Then he was on his belly. He couldn't feel anything. There was a short screech of tires. A car door opened, and from a window above him a woman screamed. Then the car door slammed, and the high keen of the engine was carried away.

All Rob could see was the postcard—the Roman Aqueduct in Segovia humped its blocky way from the right hand edge of it, diminishing into the upper left corner. Beyond its skinny arching legs, he could see a city square, the median filled with tall mounds of lush green grass covered in bruise-red flowers. The people were little more than upward brushstrokes, but he thought they looked happy, moving fast through their lives. In the foreground drab cobblestones radiated out from the aqueduct like bad teeth jutting unevenly and at odd angles. This side of the aqueduct seemed tucked under a separate oppressive sky. An old woman clutched at the neck of a long brown coat and the knot of a black kerchief. She moved forward, but against a tremendous force. He could only see the half-moon of her face, wrinkles creasing every inch, lifeless brown hairs escaping the edges of her kerchief, her eyes squeezed shut, and she was smiling, but it was a terrible smile of grey square teeth full of menace. And he was in it, he was there. It was his whole world.

Finally, Rob felt pain in every part of his body, and he cried out for Virginia.

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Everybody Listened *Andrew C. Sottile*

Late May, surgeons scooped from my father's brain a tumor the size of a peach. Peach was the surgeons' word. It was July now, and my father's new wheelchair gleamed in the day's last light. His fists and feet were swollen, his arms tracked with table-corner bruises, his hands chapped and blood-crustled. He still had two black eyes.

We were on my father's deck, which jutted into the reeds and overlooked the salt pond. My stepmother was there. She and my father had met at church. My big brother, Carter, was there, up from Hilton Head. My daughter, Cora, was there. That summer she turned ten. Her mom was gone by then. Even my mother was there, in town to say so long. Hadn't been married to my father for 25 years. And with her I drank vodka tonics. She left the booze inside, but brought out an ice bucket and arranged a cutting board with fresh-cut limes.

Carter poured himself and my father glasses of O'Doul's near-beer and started telling about the time we fought a man after a day of skiing out West.

"Not too much," my father said, "or I'll need the commode."

"Dad," I said. "We took him just like you taught us."

Carter said, "One went high, the other went low."

"You were a bruiser," I said to my father.

He scoffed at that. He said, "I was a *boozer*."
My mother said, "You were something else."

My father sipped his O'Doul's.

Cora was draped across my lap, running her toes along the deck boards. "Can I have juice, Mamaw?" she said.

"I'll get it," my mother said.

"That's me," my stepmother said. "You're Grandma."

My mother put up her hands. "It's your house," she said.

My stepmother went inside.

I said, "Thank you." I said, "Cora . . ."

“Thanks,” Cora said.

“We were in Aspen,” Carter said.

I said, “We were *off piste*.”

“There’s a child here,” my father said. This was coming from a man who’d once drunk rye whiskey in his breakfast coffee and taught my brother and me how to fight dirty at the swing sets with sand in our fists.

“P-I-S-T-E,” I said. “Off the trail. In the backcountry.”

My stepmother brought back Cora a cup with a bendy straw slipped in. My brother raised his glass. Everybody cheered.

“What do you say?” I said to Cora.

“Thanks,” Cora said.

“I never skied a day in my life,” my stepmother said.

I told the table how I’d rung a ski club pal, how he invited us to swing through. He said he had couches. Our first day, we skied local spots, secret stashes they don’t tell about on trail maps. Tight aspen glades. Cliff hucks into powder pockets. Pine-padded pillow lines.

“It was epic,” Carter said. “Light like jockey powder.”

My father stared off, sipped his near-beer. He said, “Who’s this now?”

“We were staying with him,” I said. “My friend.

“He’s a big boy,” Carter said.

“A giant,” I said. “Six-five at least.”

“A Neanderthal,” my brother said.

I said, “He rented us helmet cams from the ski shop.”

“This,” my brother said, “is the key.”

“Too fancy for me,” my father said.

My mother said, “Video cameras strapped to their noggins.”

“We went to the backcountry,” Carter said.

“For Godfrey’s sake,” my mother said. “There’s boundaries for a reason.”

I told how Carter and I got separated from my ski club pal. And we’d never skied Aspen before, didn’t know the ridge-lines, didn’t know when to ski high or skate low. The pines muffled the wind. Everything was still. Carter and I stopped in a grove where the sunlight broke through. We called out, got nothing back. Only limbs shifting, snow poofing to the forest floor.

“Remember,” Carter said, “All this is on film.”

“Was cold,” I said.

Carter said, “Colder than a moose’s you-know-what.”

My father gave a quick scowl.

“Easy,” Carter said. He opened another near-beer and split it with my father. My mother took my glass inside, reloaded it with vodka. I chunked in ice, squeezed in lime, spilled tonic over top.

“Salud,” my brother said and raised his glass.

My father said, “You’ll make me need a restroom.”

Foam frothed Carter’s mustache. “Tell what happened later,” he said.

“Someone finally skied down,” I said.

Carter said, “A local skied us home.”

“You boys,” my mother said.

“What’s this?” my father said.

I said, “Someone led us back to the trail.”

“We found the Neanderthal,” Carter said. “We found our friend.”

“In the lift line,” I said. “Pure luck.”

I told the table how later that afternoon we skied steep chutes near the treeline under bluebird sky and sun. You could see the peaks. Bald Knob. Maroon Bells. Sleeping Sexton.

“That night,” I said, “we watch the playback.”

“With the Neanderthal,” Carter said.

“I don’t know why no one ever took *me* skiing,” my stepmother said.

“I was never an athlete,” my father said.

I said, “He did 12-ounce curls.”

My mother laughed.

My father took my stepmother’s hand. He said, “Then I met my wife.”

“Mom took us weekends,” I said.

Carter said, “She raised herself some powderhounds.”

I told how in Aspen we lounged out in long-johns, and my pal fixed us beers and bowls of chili. We watched the footage on a big screen. On came the part when Carter was filming, when he and I were lost off piste. You could see the panic on my face, hear it in Carter’s breath. This was at ten thousand feet, where the air gets thin and the headaches come easy.

“Remember,” Carter said. “The camera’s rolling.”

I said, “I start cussing my buddy out. Bleep-a-dee-bleep-bleep-bleep. Because it’s just Carter and me, not remembering the cameras are on. And we’re off the grid where ski patrol won’t do rescues. And I’m freaked. I’m venting. Airing it out. The camera catches it all.”

Carter said, “He was piste off.”

My father said, “Hey now.”

My mother laughed. “You got caught,” she said.

“We’re watching on video,” I said. “And here I am, giving my pal a good rogering.”

Carter said, “Every four-letter-word in the book.”

I tell how, there in the room under the big screen’s glow, all this doesn’t seem funny at all. The Neanderthal doesn’t just shrug it off.

Carter said, “The S-O-B takes a swing.”

“For heaven’s sake,” my mother said.

“I duck,” I said. “I go for the knees.”

My mother said, “Sounds like advice your father would give.”

“I clock him good up top,” Carter said.

“Just a love-tap,” I said.

“Like you taught us, Dad,” Carter said. “Taking care of my little bro.”

I said, “One went high, the other went low.”

“Textbook,” Carter said. “Absolutely textbook.”

“On the video,” I said, “which is still playing in the room, you hear me hollering, swearing him up and down. *Bleep-a-dee-bleep*. I call him a *cocksucker*.”

Right then my father swung his swollen fist and gave my shoulder a whack. “That’s my wife there!” he said. “And your mother.”

My mother didn’t look. My brother choked back a laugh.

My father said, “Your daughter’s here!” He hacked into his fist.

I said, “I slipped up.”

“A little *girl*,” my father said.

My stepmother kept her head down but shot a look above her glasses.

My mother took a glug of vodka.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I got caught up—”

“You’re a *father*,” my father said.

Carter said, “He’s just saying what happened.”

“Have another drink,” my father said to me. And he pinched the fat of my arm, did not let go, pinched me harder than anyone ever pinched me, before or since.

I was 35 that year, pincerred like a child by my dying father.

“He learned that talk from you,” my father said to my mother.

I said, “*Dad.*”

My mother said, “For Christ’s sake.”

My father coughed some more. “Don’t you say that name in vain,” my father said.

“It’s a *good* story,” I said. “Skiing with my brother. We hadn’t since Mom took us.”
My father pinched harder still. I dug my fingernails into his hand.

I said, “We got ourselves out of a bind.”

Carter said, “You taught us.”

“It’s no wonder,” my father said. He let go, turned to me, spittle on his chin. “No wonder your woman left.” His eyes were black as plums.

My stepmother said, “You’ve made your father upset now.”

“Oh, get off it,” my mother said. “He upset himself.”

My stepmother gathered the glasses and beer bottles and cutting board and ice bucket and took them in. My father called after, asked her if there were cookies in the cupboard. Dinner hadn’t filled his gut, he said. My stepmother said something back, but her voice became lost in the high ceilings inside. Once she returned, I considered the ease of cooking for one and how few laundry loads she’d run each week in the life she’d soon lead alone.

For a time no one said anything. But everybody listened. You could see it in our faces, hear it in our tight breaths and wetted lips. Gulls cried out overhead. Cora slurped the last of her juice. A foghorn called from the lighthouse. All the light had spilled from the sky.

My father’s hand was bleeding. He sucked the blood away. He rolled himself out from the table, pointed at his crotch, which was wet and darkened. His feet and legs in their sweat socks looked like clubs. My father burped.

“Grandpa,” Cora said. “You smell like a beer can.”

My father said, “I smell like an old man.”

My stepmother wheeled him out of the nighttime and into the light of the house.

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Pearl *Erin Ruzicka Trondson*

The duvet drapes and billows from the backs of the dining room chairs to make a plush and lovely fort. All of Pearl's dolls are lined up in front of tea saucers full of sliced green grapes and crackers. There is no place to go. The shadows stretch with the moving sun, the only indication that time is passing.

It is silent outside the windows. Pearl thinks that silence is not actually the absence of noise, that it is in fact something you make. At least it is today, as she and her mother create an entire world inside their small apartment in the quiet. It is New Year's Day, the very first day of the year 2000.

Pearl's mother starts to bake bread, wanting to make the smells more than to make something to eat. Pearl will want to take the crusts into the fort with honey and butter to spread.

Pearl helps by measuring the flour, the baking soda, and then Pearl's mother realizes the yeast is old. The store, and all the city, is closed. It is so quiet. Quiet like snow. Quiet like eyelashes.

The young are still sleeping off their hangovers. The families sip their coffee perhaps letting their kids watch extra TV. Pearl and her mother step over a house of cards and sit down to continue the tea party. The grapes and cracker tea party.

All of Pearl's dolls are there except for the one with the short hair, the one that Pearl tried to give bangs, but she couldn't get it even, so she just kept cutting shorter and shorter, and now the doll has strange and spikey hair and Pearl doesn't let her join tea parties any more.

Pearl's mother decides to switch to baking cookies, no need for yeast with cookies, and Pearl starts counting out chocolate chips. She has 63 lined up along the windowsill. Pearl's mom begins reading again. She is reading on the long green couch. She puts her hand across her face.

Pearl is wearing her mama's silk nightie. She feels like a princess and takes the wooden spoon as her wand and dances around the room. She makes her mama smile and chuckle and scoop her up.

Pearl knows her mom is different than her friends' mothers. There are lots of things that are different, like the shoes she wears and that they live in an apartment and not a house, and that when Pearl is at Morgan's house the refrigerator is full of anything you could possibly want to eat, but when the ice cream truck goes by on their street, Pearl's mom just makes silence and shakes her head, one quick 'no,' looking at the ground.

And Pearl knows the two big differences. One is that her mama doesn't have a husband. The second is that she is a lot younger than the other moms. Pearl doesn't mind the no husband part, it makes it so Pearl and her mom belong to each other, and she likes that.

Some days they go to movies and suck on milk duds until they are just balls of caramel and then stuff their mouths with popcorn to turn it into caramel corn. Pearl is pretty sure that if her mama had a husband to go to the movies with, Pearl would not get to make caramel corn with her.

They also fall asleep together in the nest of the futon with all the duvets and pillows circling around them. Pearl likes to rest her head on her mama's tummy, and her mama pets her hair.

Pearl does mind her mom being younger than the other moms. And Pearl's mom is not younger like Pearl is three-and-a-half and her best friend Morgan is four, but younger like Morgan's mom is 40 and Pearl's mom is 22.

Yesterday was Morgan's birthday party. Morgan is Pearl's best friend and they play the BEST games of kitty. They pretend that all the teacups in Morgan's house are kitten saucers and they lap up the milk. But yesterday was her gymnastics party. Morgan turned four. Pearl is already four and now Morgan has caught up.

Pearl was jumping-jumping-jumping on the trampoline. Popcorn kernels popping with her friends. There was Morgan and Lucy and Margo and Emily and the gymnastics lady let them all sit on the trampoline while she jumped with her big big legs until they all rolled and bounced, laughing so much that Lucy peed a little and had to borrow the extra pants they keep at the gym. The pants said "All City Twisters" written with a marker across the butt. Lucy didn't want to wear them because they were brown. And mostly boys wear brown.

Pearl was having so much fun she wanted to show her mama. She looked for her mama around the gym excited to show her how she was being a popcorn kernel. She saw the group of mamas. There were little brothers and a sister the mamas were chasing. They were laughing and the little buggers.

But Pearl knew her mama wouldn't be there. Pearl always saw her mom try and talk to the other mamas, but they would raise their eyebrows and pinch their lips until she walked away.

When Pearl saw her mama alone at Morgan's birthday party, she ran over and said "let's go" and so they left before the buttercream cake, and before Morgan got to open the fancy cat collars that Pearl had wrapped for her.

Later Megan came over to their little apartment. Pearl loved when Megan was over. Megan was Mama's best friend like Morgan was Pearl's best friend. Although Mama and Megan didn't play kittens, they mostly talked, and laughed, and told stories to Pearl.

Pearl and Morgan liked to play baby dolls and carry their babies and feed them when they weren't playing kitty. Megan didn't have a daughter. So that was different for them too. The

friends her mama had weren't mamas and the mamas weren't her friends, so it was like she either got to be a mama or a friend but not both.

Last night Megan was really dressed up. She looked like a fairy princess with glittery eye-shadow and shoes that sparkled. Pearl tried on the shoes and looked in the mirror. She tried on Mama's silk nightie. She was like Cinderella with all that pretty stuff.

Megan could only stay for a moment—only a moment! She was going to a big fancy party. Megan put Pearl to bed, she sometimes did this to give mama a break and Megan told Pearl that where she was going all of the girls would be in gowns, and there would be balloons and dancing and that she might kiss a boy at midnight.

Pearl watched through the crack in the door as Megan hugged her mama a big big tight hug, but said she had to go, Megan said, she was already late. Mama smiled at her and told her to have so much fun, and thanks for stopping in, and happy new year dear dear friend.

Pearl's mama closed the door behind Megan and then she started to cry, and it was the worst kind of crying, Pearl thought, because it was the quiet kind. Pearl knew that it took a lot more effort to make the silent cry, mostly your body just moved and breath came out.

And of course the tears. Pearl saw Mama wiping at her cheeks really fast and then she looked at the ground and put her fingers in the corners of her eyes, but it didn't plug back the tears like a bathtub plug cause the tears rolled right over her fingers and landed on the lap of the pretty nightgown she was wearing.

The nightgown was the prettiest pink Pearl could ever imagine, it was like peaches, and when you touched it, it was soft like the outside of the peach. When the sun shone through it, it turned golden, like the color of hope. But now, where each one of mama's tears landed, the soft pink color turned a dark color, and the color was brown. When pink gets wet with tears, Pearl saw, the color it makes, is brown.

Erin Ruzicka Trondson is the winner of the third annual Apprentice House Chapbook Competition for her poetry collection, *Nesting*. Her manuscript *Silk Sutures* was a finalist for the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Poetry Prize in 2013. Trondson's poetry has also appeared in such journals as *So to Speak*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and *Connections*. She was a day fellow at Edenfred's arts residency program, part of the Terry Family Foundation in Madison. She is currently the Executive Director of a Montessori School, and lives in the countryside of Wisconsin with her husband and daughters. "Pearl" is her first published work of fiction.

What You Eat *William Hoffacker*

One Saturday afternoon in summer, back when my cousin Dan and I were still friends, I was sitting on the far right end of his big, red sectional sofa, playing Nintendo in his old apartment. I came here most Fridays and Saturdays whenever I was home from school. After I went away to college, from New York to Pennsylvania, Dan and I couldn't see each other year-round like we used to. Dan never moved anywhere for school, always stayed in Whitestone where we grew up. Throughout my high school years and earlier, I could always call him up on weekends, and if he wasn't out with friends, we'd hang out, watching movies or playing Magic the Gathering, week after week.

As afternoon slipped into evening, my stomach gurgled with emptiness, wondering where my dinner would come from. "Susie and I are gonna order Papa John's delivery," Dan said. "If you want regular pizza, I'll order it but you gotta pay for it. Or, I'll order pizza with no cheese for all of us, and I'll pay for it."

Dan's odd offer was due to his new vegan diet, chosen not for health but moral principles. He'd been dating Susie for a few years, and she'd been a vegan from the start. I didn't oppose his choice, but I also harbored a little resentment that he'd changed while I was away. What else might change in my absence? What if, one of these breaks, I came home to a family member I no longer recognized?

I weighed my pizza options in a debate between my taste buds and my wallet. The prospect of generic, chain-franchise pizza sounded bad enough without removing cheese. But with the right veggie toppings, maybe it could be good, like a bruschetta. And besides, I was a guest in Dan's home. I should at least try to do things his way, rather than flaunting my lactose-tolerance. "I can't say no to free pizza," I told him.

Soon I found out that no quantity of onions and mushrooms could make the thin, dairy-free slices of soggy, warm dough seem appetizing. As I wolfed down three pieces, I held back my grossed-out cringe-faces, struggling not to squint and pucker my lips. I stared at the big-screen television set in the corner of the small living room packed with sofa, chair, bookshelf, coffee table, videogame consoles, two laptops, and hardly any floor space to walk on. Dan's pit bull, a rescue, sat at our feet, wagging his tail and wanting human food, not knowing what an awful treat this so-called pizza would make.

I didn't say much as I stomached the limp bread-triangles, nor was I really watching the Jimmy Kimmel segment on TV. I was remembering how things used to be. Was this the same apartment, with the same two tenants, where just six months prior we watched five back-to-back episodes of *Man Vs. Food*? Not my choice, by the way, as I had no love for the show, found it boring, but the old Dan couldn't get enough of watching this overweight man take on gastronomical challenges, umpteen-pound hamburgers and world's-hottest hot wings. New, vegan Dan wouldn't even sit in the same room as a TV tuned to the Food Network.

And could this be the same cousin who, when I was in high school and he in his fifth year of not finishing college, introduced me to Cristina's Deli, my favorite eatery in all of Queens? The old Dan went there three times a week, late at night, drunk on vodka Red Bulls, because they were open 24/7. "One large mozzarella fries, no gravy," he ordered every time. The Middle Eastern man who worked the graveyard shift there came to recognize him. When Dan picked up his food, this guy at the counter would say, "Hey, Cheesy Fry, how you doing?" New Dan, who orders pizza without cheese, must feel ashamed of his former nickname.

Growing up, Dan was always a picky eater. I could count on fewer than ten fingers the foods he liked—cereal, pizza, ziti, Vienna Fingers all at the top of the short list. For a snack he put tomato sauce and a Kraft single on a bun and microwaved it for thirty seconds, which he called a "Sloppy Danny." In high school his favorite food became Taco Bell chicken quesadillas, with a packet of "Fire" sauce for each wedge. Chips and salsa became a staple as he got hooked on the heat. He drank cans of sugar-free Red Bull. Then came the vodka and a taste for light beer.

In his early twenties Dan had a stomach ulcer. His doctor told him to avoid anything too acidic. "Stay away from spicy food, carbonated drinks, alcohol." This, Dan complained, was his whole diet.

As a kid, I never understood Dan's eating habits. I loved when my mother made hamburgers or hot dogs for dinner, and I preferred ketchup to marinara. Food was one area where, out of the two of us, he was the oddball, not me. But I rarely teased him for his culinary eccentricities; because anytime I mentioned food I gave him an excuse to call me fat. In elementary school, I preferred Ben & Jerry's and Nickelodeon to the outdoors and gym class. Dan used to call me "Pop 'N' Fresh," the mascot for Pillsbury. A pudgy little white blob-boy. I had no idea how to defend myself, or retaliate, to be anything but an outcast, the butt of the joke.

Still he was the funniest person I knew, and I wanted only to spend every weekend in his parents' basement playing Super Mario and listening to Ska music with him. Those feelings

hardly changed through three years of college. At home on holidays, I'd visit his apartment once or twice a week to watch R-rated comedies and play Call of Duty. Dan was the closest thing I had to a brother. But we don't hang out anymore when I'm in New York, and we haven't talked much in the last few years.

The change started with the cheese-less pizza. Dan scarfed down slice after slice, no toppings whatsoever. I believe he paid for dinner so that I would try it and like it, so that I'd see you could be a vegan and still have pizza, so that I might consider his way of life for myself. The effect, in fact, was the complete opposite. I couldn't wait to eat cheese again.

"Pretty good, huh?" Dan said through a half-chewed mouthful, pointing his pizza crust toward me. I nodded and smiled, then took a big swig of soda to drown out the taste.

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Later that year, I came home for Thanksgiving, which Dan's mother hosted for our extended family. With help from her two daughters, she cooked all the standards of a holiday spread: a huge turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, green bean casserole, macaroni and cheese, corn, cranberry sauce, the works. Dan did not attend. I saw him the following Saturday, on my usual visit to his apartment.

"We missed you at Thanksgiving," I said as he answered the door.

He scoffed. "Good," he said. We sat at opposite ends of the L-shaped couch. He sipped a can of Coors Light. "I'm sure everyone understands why I stayed away from their celebration of gluttony centered around an animal carcass."

"Your mom also made pasta," I said, knowing the plain noodles were cooked with him in mind. Even before he was a vegan, Dan never ate turkey on Thanksgiving. Instead he'd have a big plate of ziti, which he ate across the table from me while I swallowed mounds of dark meat and stuffing.

"I don't need to see my mom up to her wrist in a dead turkey's asshole, shoving breadcrumbs in it," Dan said.

"Most of us just call it stuffing," I said.

“Yeah, but think about why you call it that.” He laughed. “Besides, I don’t need all the extra grief they’d give me. I’m sick of their jokes.”

The jokes, I knew, were made even in his absence. On Dan’s bookshelf I saw a photograph of a turkey. I grabbed it and flipped it over. On the back were printed the turkey’s name, date of birth, and the date that Dan had “adopted” it, along with a thank-you message from an animal sanctuary. Dan explained how a week earlier he had donated some money online so that this turkey would get some food and care instead of a trip to the slaughterhouse. Word of his compassionate gesture had made its way around our family days before. “I can think of better things to do to a turkey on Thanksgiving,” I heard my great aunt say at the dinner table. “I can think of better things to adopt,” said a cousin.

Since Dan “came out” vegan, flippant comments like these have become the norm from our family. His job, he told me, was even worse. He worked for a cable company, running wires and setting up Internet connections in office buildings around the five boroughs. His co-workers were older, blue-collar guys, bred on meat and potatoes, who couldn’t wrap their heads around the choice to live as a vegan. Day after day Dan heard questions like, “What do you wanna do with all the farm animals, just let ’em free?” and “Don’t you know how many animals would eat you if they had the chance?”

Dan’s foreman, and his ride to work, was his older brother, Ross, the ringleader in making a mockery of his convictions. At work and family parties, Ross loved to come up with phony questions of can you eat this, would you eat that. “If you were trapped on a desert island with a pig and another person,” he said once at their parents’ house, as Dan rolled his eyes and took another sip of Red Bull. He answered, “I can eat whatever I want,” which I’ve heard him repeat like a sitcom character’s catch phrase. “You know what they put in Red Bull,” Ross said with a chuckle. “Bull piss.”

To this day, over Dan’s years-long span of veganhood, family members’ jokes and questions, both behind his back and to his face, have hardly let up. Last winter, we were both at a birthday party for one of his nephews, and it seemed like not an hour went by without a sibling or a cousin or an uncle offering him a slice of pepperoni or a cube of cheese with a big grin on their faces. Dan gave each of them the fake laugh of sarcasm and slunk further into his chair.

I placed the turkey picture back on Dan’s bookshelf, the closest thing his tiny apartment had to a mantelpiece, where one might keep a family portrait. I wondered how he spent his Thanksgiving. It must have been like any other day off, sitting on this couch with his girlfriend and dog, watching Netflix and eating noodles. Were Susie and their pit bull enough company to

keep him from feeling lonely? How many people in his life were pointing, laughing, and making him an outcast? He must need me, I thought, to take his side, to be a friend.

“The other day,” Dan told me, “I emailed my mom a photo of a piglet at a farm where Susie and I volunteered for a day. You know what she wrote back?” I didn’t want to guess. “Cute little guy, he’d look even cuter in my slow cooker.”

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About nine months into his veganism, Dan and Susie moved into a new, slightly bigger apartment. On a Friday when I was home from college, he instant-messaged me, inviting me over. “Sure,” I said, “I’ll just grab a few things and be right there.” Sometimes I brought my own food to his old place, leftover pizza or a sandwich, because I’d stay for hours and didn’t want to mooch from his kitchen.

“About that,” Dan typed. “So far we haven’t had any animal products in our new place, and we’d like to keep it that way.” Bit strange, I thought. It’s not like I was bringing food for him or Susie to eat. But: his place, his rules, so I agreed.

I looked through my parents’ kitchen for anything that could cross Dan’s threshold. I searched every shelf in their fridge, the cabinets, and the pantry for food that contained none of the “secretions” (his word) that Dan despised. All I found was a box of Saltines. I put a sleeve of them in my messenger bag and left.

Twenty minutes later I was back in my place on the red sofa, watching Conan with Dan and Susie in their new living room. Soon I took the plain Saltines out of my bag and started snacking on them. Dan saw my crackers and laughed. “Is that how you think we eat?”

“It can’t all be this bland,” I said. “But I’m not gonna buy special food just to bring to your apartment. I did the best I could with what we had. All our snack food is, like, Oreos and junk.”

“Oreos are vegan,” Susie said.

“No way.” She insisted. Later I found that a website called “Is It Vegan” has a page on Oreos that states, “It depends on your stance on refined sugar.” I can confidently say that I hold no position in the refined sugar debate.

Had I known Oreos would pass the Vegan Apartment Test, I still would’ve left them behind, because my dad might have been saving them for a batch of his famous “Oreo balls.” For

a few years his hobby was making desserts: maple-flavored whoopie pies, shortbread cookies with strawberry jam. After Dan became vegan, Dad bought a book called *The Joy of Vegan Baking*. For a party at Dan's parents' house, he made an unfrosted vegan chocolate cake. Its real intended audience, Dan, never tasted it because he doesn't like chocolate. Before I even tried the dessert, I came up with a slogan for it: "Vegan chocolate cake—the only cruelty is to your taste buds."

This brand of comedy shows why Dan and I don't hang out anymore. Once he declared his veganity, his newfound passion for animal rights revealed a sincere side of him that I'd never seen before. We used to joke about everything, but on this issue, Dan has no sense of humor.

I could no longer visit his apartment without hearing a story of how a friend or co-worker didn't understand his plight. When I was at school, all our online conversations became about what he called his "soul's purpose." I couldn't IM with him without reading sly reminders about my enjoyment of "dead flesh" and my approval of "legalized genocide." "Martin Luther King spoke in defense of animal rights," he wrote to me in January, "but they didn't teach us that in school."

The worst of his preaching started about a month after his move, when he joined Facebook. The old Dan insisted he'd never have a Facebook, that it was a pointless waste of time. What changed, I'm guessing, is that his friends were spending less time with him, and he wanted to reconnect with people. Or maybe it was his plan all along to use Facebook as a pulpit to spread his gospel to all his meat-eating friends with posts like: "Once you come to terms with why you don't eat dogs, cats, monkeys, and dolphins, you'll begin to understand why I don't eat cows, pigs, chickens, and lambs' ~ Edward Sanchez." I listened to Dan and heard the conviction of a prophet and the martyrdom of a messiah.

After he friended me, I saw his vegan propaganda in my News Feed every single day. For weeks, getting online felt like having his political campaign crammed down my gullet like so much stuffing in a turkey's butt. I finally had my fill the day I logged into Facebook and saw a crudely drawn comic strip that he had found online and reposted. In it, a man thanks a pig for his "sacrifice," and the speaking pig insists it doesn't have a choice. "But I don't want to die," reads its word balloon. Was that supposed to be a punch line? What annoyed me was not the message, but the fact that, like New Dan, it wasn't funny.

He had changed while I was away, and he was unwilling to let others stay the same. When he first told me he was vegan, for a while I thought, this shouldn't affect our friendship—it's only the way he eats. It turned out his choice would overshadow his whole identity, and start to

impose on mine as well. I first sensed that danger when he invited me over and put limits on what I could eat in his space. As I chewed the Saltines, I understood he didn't just want my emotional support; he needed me to change with him.

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Almost a year into Dan's vegan life, I was again in his second apartment hanging out with him and Susie, drinking Coors and watching reruns of *The Office*, as their pit bull curled up next to me on the couch. I scratched his neck and belly, called him nicknames in my best cutesy, taking-to-a-dog voice, and leaned in to let him lick my unshaven face. Dan saw how happy the canine affection made me. "How can you just melt so much over a dog, and yet you don't care about other animals?" he asked. I had no good answer.

I could already tell he was recruiting. Susie had just told a story of her local activist group trying to liberate some rabbits from a pet store. "See," Dan had said, "we have the same cause, only she's more of a rebel, working outside the law, like Magneto. I like to take more of a Professor X approach, gentler, more inviting." He was trying to appeal to me with nerd language, while keeping the mood light, though he only increased the tension in the room by comparing himself and his girlfriend to comic-book nemeses.

"I get it," I said. "I love dogs. I don't want to be a hypocrite. Maybe when I'm on my own, I'll cut down on the meat. Right now, when I'm at home I eat whatever my mom cooks, and at school I have a meal plan, so I eat whatever the cafeteria serves. Trust me, they don't put much thought into a vegan option, unless you love Brussels sprouts." I, too, was trying to lighten the mood, but no one was laughing.

"Can I show you a video?" Dan asked.

I sighed. I knew what this was. "I'd prefer if you didn't," I said, "but I probably won't get up and leave if you do."

"We'll watch the short version," Dan said. He already had the video loaded and ready to play. He connected his laptop to the TV so we could see it on the big screen.

What I saw was a documentary-style educational short film that exposed what happens at large-scale factory farms around our nation, composed of footage with blurry faces, obtained illegally, I assume, by activists with cameras who infiltrated these organizations. The five-minute video was divided into sections including "Beef" and "Poultry," so I got a good look at where

my mom's supermarket-bought meat likely comes from. A solemn narrator spoke about cows forcibly impregnated so they would produce milk. I saw hundreds of fluffy, yellow chicks lined up on a conveyor belt carrying them to a machine that chopped off the tips of their beaks. I saw crippled cows trip and fall in their own shit. I watched a faceless, laughing man hold a squealing, wriggling piglet in one hand and cut out its tiny testicles with a knife in the other.

Throughout all of it, I was concentrating hardest on maintaining a blank expression and not looking away. I neither winced nor flinched. I measured my breaths in seconds so that I wouldn't gasp. If I could have stopped blinking, I would have shut that off, too. Yes, I was sickened, but I wasn't going to let them see that. I couldn't let him win.

The video ended, and Dan turned off the TV. "What do you think when you see that?" he asked. This was a test, and I was going to fail.

"I've heard of some of it before," I said, unprepared to explain my carnivorous ways, yet reluctant to change them.

"And I assume you don't want this to go on," he said.

"You're right, all that was horrible. But nothing I can possibly do will ever come anywhere near stopping it," I said, aware that I was repeating sung by all my spineless ancestors who lived to see enslavements, genocides, and other travesties that were convenient for them, or "none of their business."

Dan shook his head. "I have to believe I can stop it," he said. "We're going to make it stop."

If I were talking to the old Dan, I would have laughed then. It sounds like a joke: a twenty-something college dropout and his ragtag band of vegans overthrow the factory farm moguls, rewrite the USDA regulations, unfetter all the captive animals and pamper them at rescue shelters. But this wasn't Dan's usual comedy; it was idealism that kept him going. He wasn't kidding when he painted himself as a superhero. If I think his dreams of a cruelty-free world are naïve, I must seem like a cynic and an asshole. If I don't fight the good fight beside him, what does that make me—an innocent bystander, or the villain?

When I went home that night, I drank a tall glass of milk. I thought I should embrace my role as brazen, heartless bad guy. I searched for stories online about dolphins that raped one another and chickens that incessantly defecate in their own food supply. I reveled in any signs

that animals share our penchant for malice, or that non-humans are mindless poop-machines. Anything to support my flimsy justifications for eating the way I was raised to eat. I faced a decision to either change or stay away from a friend I grew up with. I chose to stop visiting Dan's apartment.

Six months after the night of the video, I moved into my own apartment in Ohio for graduate school. As I shopped for my own groceries and cooked my own meals, I continued to eat chicken cutlets, pork chops, fish filets, cheeseburgers, the occasional lamb, all kinds of cheese—everything Dan lies awake at night thinking about. Meanwhile I slept well believing myself an insignificant part of the problem because I would buy certain items “locally.” Every Saturday I went to the town farmers' market, where I purchased ground beef patties from a woman who assured me that all their cows were grass-fed and given a humane amount of space. Dan would roll his eyes if he heard this. “Oh, good for you,” I imagine him saying, “giving your money to small-town murderers instead of big corporations.”

By rejecting Dan's way of life, I've rejected him, too. For as long as I can foresee, we'll both stay this way. Dan will carry on his mission as a militant vegan, and I'll continue drinking milk from the local creamery, and we'll never meet somewhere in the middle, and we won't spend weekends drinking beer and playing videogames (at least not together). He'll go on telling stories of animal torture, and I'll keep eating what tastes good, and we'll remain set in our ways, brothers in stubbornness.

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Only Bar In Town *Marissa Schwalm*

We walk into Lil Robert's Place, the only bar in town. We've just moved to Concord, North Carolina, just 45 minutes northeast of Charlotte, two weeks ago. It's practically empty, the bartenders outnumber the clientele, and mostly it's men in Jesus sandals and women with dated clothes from some department store. It is only 7:30 and as we approach the bar a woman with giant, rolled-back bangs eyes me up and down. I pull at my work shirt, feeling overdressed for this dive that's covered in local, mostly dark artwork of busty, tattooed women and hybrid animals that are combinations of cats/dogs/monkeys/bears. My husband—a word so new that it gets caught in my throat, something that feels like a mistake or joke to say—is smiling, happy to be out of the house, walking the length of the bar to see what's on tap.

“Hey, ya’ll,” the bartender says. She's wearing thick-framed glasses, her hair is dyed an unnatural black, and her shirt covers very little. She pours me her favorite and I play back in my head my first week at my new job. People's faces blur together in my mind, flipping quickly like a Rolodex. I look around and grab Mark's arm.

“If we run into someone,” I say, “I want you to introduce yourself quickly so that the other person has to say their name.” He stares at me, lifts his eyebrows. “It's just there's no way I can remember everyone I met this week. And this—” I wave my hand across the room, the faded couches, the band setting up in the corner, the old TVs on top of wooden shelves, “this is the only bar in town.”

He nods and leads me over to a row of plastic chairs up against the wall. He sits forward in his seat, stares at the band, especially at the bass player.

“Stupid fucking hats,” he says. “Why do they have to wear those? They don't even fit their heads right.”

I nod in agreement and murmur a groan of disapproval. When we first started dating ten years ago I would be sitting here with a group of friends and he would be the one up on some stage or in a corner setting up. I liked the way he used to barely move on stage, how his body just shifted side-to-side with his arms wrapped around his bass. He mostly stood in the shadows, off to the edge, sometimes his body would even shift so much that the audience could see only his back as one flat, black mark. Not like his lead singer who would rush across the stage, gyrate into his guitar, and sometimes even spit

into the crowd; not like my own father who used to saunter across the stage, mic in hand, body pulsing.

Pushing back into the plastic seat, I try to settle into the night. We've already been all over. We did Concord's art walk, dinner at the Mexican place, walked around the 1980's style mall that my co-worker joked was worth checking out just for laughs, and now we're here. I know that Mark will want to see the band, want to just be out. Since we've arrived in North Carolina every minute I've been out of orientation and now officially working has been like this. Mark's job hasn't started yet and each evening when I walk in the door his mouth whirs like an old toy whose string has been pulled. He needs to start work—he needs to be doing something, always moving, like me. I need him to start working again, I think and turn to face the band. I need him to have something else to focus on other than my tired, overwhelmed face and my unconvinced eyes when I walk in the door. I picked this job, this town; I made this decision for us—again. So each night we've found something to do, some distraction. In fact, we walked the short stretch of downtown earlier this week, it's how we happened upon the only bar in town.

That night we stood outside, leaned into the window, and laughed at the hours of operation posted on a small sheet of paper taped to the glass.

"10:30 closing time on the weekends?" Mark asked, snorting. "Did we move to the town in Footloose?" I pictured all of the bars that were in walking distance to us in the town in upstate New York where we last lived. How he could walk to them or to his friends' houses. Even that day earlier this week the bar was half-empty and as we stared inside, seemingly not ready to make that the visit where we went in—needing to stretch out what we could do here—we turned our heads back and forth, tried to take in the façade of the bar, the street, the people who walked by with ice creams in their hands from the local creamery. This is where we live now, we both were surely thinking.

A little boy was being pushed toward us on the sidewalk by his mother in a red faux-trike stroller. His mother's face caught me, the way her mouth was pulled tight in a firm grimace. She kept turning her head back and forth to stare at a man, presumably her husband or the child's father. The boy's little feet pushed and pushed at small pedals though to no avail; they weren't connected to anything. He was strapped in at the waist and every time the mother turned back to stare at the man, her left hand on the bar pushing him, the trike would wobble, twist toward the road.

“Jesus,” I said, nudging Mark, and I got ready to move out of the way, to share the small space of the concrete sidewalk with them.

As they got closer a streetlight illuminated a deep purple circle around his eye. “Nice shiner,” Mark whispered to me.

“Well, c’mon!” she shouted to the man. She twisted almost entirely around, her hand pulled on the bar of the trike, and the kid began toppling over, his small body falling out the side.

I started to step forward, reached my hand out. I could see it all happening so clearly in my mind: his little body twisting out of the trike only to crack his small head on the lip of the curb. But then the mother righted herself with a firm jerk, nearly slamming into Mark who leapt against the stone wall of the bar. The boy let out a yelp, a siren of panic, and the mother reached down and plopped him back in, pressing forward into the small bar, the man a few feet behind.

Just as I’m about to now make a joke about her, about the boy, about her mystery man, the band begins to play. It’s something blue-grassy and mellow. The men with the hats struggle to harmonize at first but then finally find their stride. Mark groans at moments, nods at others. He passes me his bottle of beer to try. I take a quick sip; it is dark and heavy, thick with caramel and coffee. Then I wrap my hand firmly around my beer and watch as the crowd begins to grow around us. More men in sandals. Women with too much hair spray. I pull down at my pants; try to straighten them at the crease.

I want to tell Mark that I’m ready to go. We’ve been here over an hour and after this week—my first week at my new job, for heaven’s sake—I’m ready to go home and change, to sit on our couch. I want quiet, not music and people laughing, and some sports game on TV. All these people with their friends. Everyone so contentedly knowing each other and where they are. Couples with their arms around each other. I want to say to someone: Whatever it feels like to be newlyweds this surely isn’t it. I look at the bartender, the one with the thick-rimmed glasses. Where the hell is she from? I wonder. What part of this small town does she go home to at 10:30 when this place closes down?

A flash of red catches my eye. In walks the woman pushing the faux-trike stroller. A man follows behind her and watches as she grabs the boy and plops him on a couch near the band. He heads to the bar and I stare at his face as he passes by. He looks like no one and everyone. His skin seems to only just fit, as if it is stretched in some places.

From here, in this light, I can see that the boy's hair is even blonder than I thought when I saw him earlier this week on the street in the darkness. The woman jams the faux-trike into a small space between the couch and the wall and then sits next to her son. Her eyes catch mine and I will myself to look away. Does she recognize me?

I am pulled to her, the way she wears her chaos so freely, the way her body seems to move in waves. More and more as the years go by, as I move up in my job, start a new position at a higher level, I feel like a straight line. But I've seen her twisted face of rising anger on my own face behind closed doors and wonder about motherhood, about compiling a family, about keeping it all together. We are in our thirties, we are far from home, and we are adrift together and with each other.

"Let's go," I say to Mark. He can't hide his disappointment, although he tries. His face moves around, as if he's searching for the right response. "It's just," I start. I can't even begin to find the right words. "I'm bored," I say. "I'm ready to go." My voice begins to get sharper, faster. "I don't know how you do this. How you can just sit here like this. All these people. It's all so boring."

I lead us toward the door; feel Mark's hand squeeze my arm as we pass by the mother and son. The last two months since our wedding people keep asking us when, and sometimes if, we'll be having kids. The boy's eye is still a deep purple, circled almost perfectly around. We drive home in almost near-silence, except for the radio on low playing some song we both have never heard before.

Marissa Schwalm received her Ph.D. in creative writing and English literature from Binghamton University, and her MFA in creative writing from Chatham University. Marissa has been previously published in *Wake*, *Decompression*, *Ragazine*, and *Clockhouse Review*, among others. She currently lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, and is Assistant Professor of English for Pfeiffer University.

Namesake *Chris Wiewiora*

My brother Joseph was always going to be called Joseph. Mom had picked the name. Her mother-in-law Anna said the name was perfect. Anna's father's name was Josef, Polish for Joseph, a good Catholic name. However, Mom had picked the name from the Bible, she hadn't picked the name Joseph for Josef or even Jesus' stepfather. Mom had picked the name Joseph from the son of Jesse: Joseph with the coat of many colors. Joseph whose brothers sold him into slavery. Joseph who became in charge of Pharaoh's palace. Joseph who forgave his brothers and gave them grain during famine.

My brother Joseph was sometimes called Josef, but Josef was always called Jaja. One picture shows the same-named generations together: Josef's white and thinning combed-back hair stays in place. He tilts down to look at the crook of his arm. His light blue cardigan matches the blue blanket of the swaddled turnip-face of Joseph. A tuft of slicked dark hair sticks out of the great-grandbaby's head.

My brother Joseph was named Joseph, because of the Bible story and he shared his name with Jaja, but Joseph also shared his name with the place and date of his birth. On March 19th, 1985, Mom birthed Joseph in her hometown of Buckhannon, West Virginia, at the same hospital her United Methodist mother had her children. At Saint Joseph's Hospital, the nun-nurses didn't wear habits, but they were all called sister. The day that Joseph was born at St. Joseph's a sister told Mom that Joseph was the perfect name. Before Mom could explain Joseph was named for a different Joseph in the Bible, the sister said, "It's Saint Joseph's Day!"

I always call my brother Joe. Joe always calls me Chris. My parents weren't sure what they wanted to name me.

Mom liked the name Jacob. She thought that since her and Dad's names rhymed, then we brothers could share sound, too. Our parents were Ruthie and Rich, and then we would be Joseph and Jacob.

I don't know if Mom considered the Bible story of the twin brothers Esau and Jacob. Esau came out first, but a hand still inside held on to his ankle. Another baby, Jacob came out second. Esau grew up to be a hunter. Jacob grew up to be something like a chef. After a hunt, Esau traded his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew.

Dad liked the name Christopher. Christopher means Christbearer. Maybe it was because Mom had picked Joseph's name or maybe Jacob was too Jewish a name for Grandma Anna, or maybe it was because Christopher still meant something about holding someone, but Dad's choice became my name.

Like Joe, there's a place and a date connected to my name. For every grandchild's birthday Mom's father Grandpa Almond would get the folded-into-a-triangle American flag from the utility closet of his house and then go outside to drag the flagpole out of the garage. He attached the flag to the pole, walked across his front lawn, removed a slat covering a hole by a chestnut tree, and then stuck the pole in the hole.

A picture taken on June 14th, 1987, shows Joe standing with Grandpa in the front lawn under a hoisted Old Glory. That Sunday, Corpus Christi as well as Flag Day, was the end of Joe being an only child. He looks confused, unaware at two years old what the day meant and unsure of a new name he would come to know.

Summers later, spent in Buckhannon, Joe and I discovered the best patches where wildflowers sprouted between the clover. We chased rabbits into the hedges. We guided croquet balls across the uneven grass through wickets. We stepped on the wooden slat covering the flagpole hole without it cracking. We climbed to the top boughs of the chestnut tree. We caught lightning bugs in Mason jars. We pointed to constellations connecting stars together.

Chris Wiewiora is a third-generation West Virginian born in Buckhannon. Currently, he lives in Ames, Iowa, where he earned an MFA in Creative Writing and Environment at Iowa State University. His nonfiction has been published on *FOUND*, *The Huffington Post*, *Matador*, *Nerve*, *The Rumpus*, and many other magazines.