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Donna L. Marsh

LIGHT AND SHADOW

One day last summer the forecast was for a beautiful sunny, warm day and this day was promised between days that were not to be so bright. I planned, as I always do when I am promised full sun, to bask in the rays of energy that first bake skin and then core. But like any promise unfulfilled, the disappointment over the thing missing is never as wrong as the lie. So when the clouds thickened early I sat, trusting in their eventual parting so that the tethers of light could find me. I sat in the backyard, occasionally holding my hand out over my body to see in my shadow any evidence of light. I waited and waited, circling in confusion, circling in and out of the house, wondering whether to give up. I did not know what my day should be in sun's absence.

Late last night, in the late afternoon of my father-in-law's descent into Alzheimer's, he was born a widower. Once a proud and humble man, a doctor, thin of frame, but in body and demeanor certain of his life and accomplishments, he is now withering. His days are spent forgetting. In a full white beard and soiled underclothes, with little recognition of persons around him, he oscillates between awareness of his space in the home his work built and utter confusion about where he belongs. Should he sit in the chair downstairs in the living room, where before she was taken away by ambulance for the one and final time my mother-in-law sat nearby in her chair? Should he lay in the bed he once shared with her, my mother-in-law, our Polly? This was the home my husband Robert was born into. The smell of their skin and the mustiness of lives spent busy is no different today than it was when I was first introduced as Robert's girl.

In her final months, Polly could no longer walk without pain so great that the universe must surely have registered its scale. She sat in her chair, slept in her chair, ate in her chair, next to him in his.

He called her then, the woman who was not his wife. Sometimes, he would say, "I have to go now. Thank you for your hospitality."

She would respond, "Where are you going?"

"To find my family. To find my wife."

“I am your wife!”

“You’ve been lovely to me, but I must go home.”

“You are home!”

She would call to tell me these stories, always in her way, knowing the horror of what had happened, but, as was her way, as if this was some ridiculous joke, as if in laughing about it, the ironies, multiple and brutal could be mitigated. She had a light, lyrical voice and on occasion I could still hear the Boston inflection. In her house we never had dinner; we had suppah. At eighty-five she never sounded elderly. Never sounded so much the mom as she did still the daughter.

“I have to tell you what Dad said today,” she would begin our phone conversations, as the corner of the phrase held her smile.

“I told him, I am your wife. Arrrrrhhhh!” and then she’d laugh and I’d see her punch her fists in the air, to mime her frustration as she did when I was there. Then I would offer something serious, some tip. Like, lock the doors and set the alarm, or don’t hesitate to call 911 or it’s wonderful that we can laugh. And she would agree. But that wasn’t the point. She was not after advice. Nor agreement. The point was to laugh, to confront with joy and life the determined ways time took us.

When Robert got back to the family home after Mom, who lingered for seven weeks in the hospital, finally slipped away, he found his Dad awake. Confused. His night way of being. Robert showed him back to bed, and slept himself, the tears of grief, I imagine, not flowing, but leaking onto pillows, bought by her long ago.

In the morning, he found Dad peeking into the room where Robert had been sleeping, the room that had been occupied by his sister, Claire, his sister who passed away only months before. I remember, Polly saying, after Claire’s funeral, “He doesn’t even know it’s his daughter. He thinks it’s someone from down the street or from the parish.” This she did not find funny, though she knew as the nurse to his doctoring, that it was not he who forgot. It was the body left as the light goes dim. I knew that the pain of her body was compounded by the loss of her baby girl. Claire died one day before her 52nd birthday.

My husband got out of Claire’s bed. He took Dad into his room, washed him and changed him. And then they went downstairs to the dining room. And he told Dad that Mom was gone.

Dad nodded, and said, “She fought bravely, Robert,” and walked back to the chair in the living room where he sat in his fresh underclothes, slumped.

Robert stayed in the dining room where he could watch Dad sitting, the light from the door to the yard on the back of his head.

Dad rose and walked back into the kitchen. He asked, "What does up in smoke mean?"

Robert said, "I don't know."

Dad paused, pondered for a moment, and said, "She'll never go for that."

Chila Woychik

GUESSWORK

Introduction

I am not deep. My light wavers in the presence of brainy owls. What flies amid a long blue space, frankly, leaves me cold, and new theories pour thickly. Once I fell through an inner tube float while going down rapids—my mad rush toward death. In times like that, no one thinks about new theories, or even old ones; the taste on the tongue is all that matters.

Firsts

In the beginning were whistles, hums, and grunts. Sound rose off the waters, out of trees. Against the rocks, shadows thrummed and lifted, thrummed and lifted, for Eden meant pleasure and in pleasure is life. Words fell into usage like so much sky, color-filled and calm. Did Adam grow lethargic in the process of time? Fruit hangs heavy on the trees, heavy like hunger, heavy like sin. Every selfsame body struck a chord of immediacy in the shafted chasm called presence. Alice Walker thinks that in nature, nothing is perfect and everything is perfect. I think the sky is a burnt orange and lavender.

Views

Begin at the sky and talk downward: birds, trees, the cost of war. There are strings that work and others that merely get on. It's all about the cliffside paintings beyond the long dry desert or a snaking stream at the wax end of a valley of sheep. Keep the shoes dry and free of sand. Keep walking. A bird is poetry that never rhymes. Trees are arrows shot to heaven, until they're not. It's anyone's guess what a war costs, so maybe liken it to following yourself but never quite catching up, always out of reach.

How to carry on: return

We return to the land of our birth, the childhood stories, the family who raised us. Return through visions and memories long enveloped in the apples of middle life. We return when all is old and age no longer feared. The shadows of the middle clarify toward twilight. We change our mind about so many things, realize day isn't a puzzle as much as an abstract—finally learn to embrace

the hot edges of the sun. Most of all, we forget that we're supposed to forget with age.

Alice Walker again

“We have to wake up. We have to refuse to be a clone.”

In a dry space

The desert is a bone picked clean, the bland and bleak clung to a vulture's wing. When visiting a desert, find the skull marked “time,” and drink.

How to carry on – continued

Be forever reminded of something once released: a dream, a person, a hurt now healed. Never stop seeking closure and bright beginnings. Love is not what we expect, but if it's out there, it's worth wrapping around our shoulders and lugging along our journey.

Realities

All this farmland and those rolling hills used for pasturing cattle. Fields unfold in long corned miles. Most of Iowa's 33 million acres of tillable land are planted in corn and soybeans. In a neighboring pasture, rows of logs stretch on for nearly an acre, freshly cut timber harvested to help finance a widow's waning years, doctor visits, occasional trips to see places denied her in the early busy times, and a new house begun six months before her farmer husband's death by pancreatic cancer. Pesticide and herbicide use is rampant here. Some farmers wear masks while spraying their fields; most don't. Waterways and streams groan, and too much of the rich black soil no longer harbors life—earthen infertility. You have begun a dialog—you have peeked under the lid. Lift the item out with care, even if only to smash it to bits later; curiosity is fragile so we treat it as a gift.

Cats

Feline expert John Bradshaw tells us in a National Geographic interview that a cat treats a human like another cat, not like a superior or even a friend, as dogs do. Still I tell my barn cats on the way to the vet, “we're going where the nice people are,” but I'm not sure it helps.

In the case of religion

One blue-suited man is a little strange but he knows things I don't. Dragging that cross around must make him tired. How does that even happen? At what point does he die? This world is his petri dish, his eyes so deep and beautiful. All we really want to know is why, and where's the wine.

One tiny room comforts. The candles burn brightly and sanctification wafts on a holy breeze. The big bad world is bigger and badder through the open door into the land of rising and setting suns, but at least the space is endless there and every highway long.

Guesswork

Such brilliant mixes of him and her: an extra X here, Y there. Isn't variety jibing?

Riverbanks

At this riverbank ripples soft is said and bare winter trees. Brown grasses shock, shoot along miles winding down—every river has them. I stood at a ten-thousand-year old river and it had them: marsh grasses waterlogged weeded insistent. Fishes swimming through, it had them. Ripples, waves, it had them. It had mailboxes on the off-river side (for obvious reasons) and a sliding down bank mixed with here and there beaches. There is ivy and rough weeds, others, both here and then. Like the brown leaves falling, a carpet of crinkle. Like the gray-blue air, early-winter soft. Like tomorrow's utter wonder set on pale blue sight today. Like a finch on the feeder and a hawk in the field. Like a snowstorm strapped and waiting, held and ready, near. Like a moth, the wings, the take-off. Like the land. And land. And land.

A fisherman cast a net and caught a hundred fish. The net sagged from the possibilities but the fisherman felt mercy and cut them loose. Then he cast his broken net again and again and slowly starved to death.

Endings

Age caught her on the wall between Jefferson Airplane and death. Time plays its hand; her tell is a flinch in strength, and dullness of reason. History is not a still life, Judith Kitchen said, but a coincidence of latitude. We fall into rabbit holes again and again, lack love when we need it, want it, bear an everlasting weight of weights. So ask for time like a gift because every breeze brings something new, and the taste on the tongue is all that matters.

Annie Blake

THE SPINNING TOP

for Paul

There is something about cold days—something in their snake winds that take you back to sun-filled days. I wonder how the rain still manages to feed the grass—even the weeds make their flowers yellow. There is something about time. It takes me back to a child with a spinning top. The only way to see those shiny pictures is to watch the top slow down and let it fall.

I start to see windows and windows of natural light. I can see inside the rooms of a cottage; my hands are on the cracked sills; my mom's thready hands are washing things. My dad's tanned hand is in the air with a hammer and I am sitting in my car, staring at the wind swallowing the weeds dizzy with winter flowers and my future without him. I watch his grey face staring down at the kitchen table. Thinking perhaps, of the picture on the placemat; the farm of his childhood, the yellow grass that never turned into a sea of wheat and his Momma's voice that never called for him to come and eat. The planes in the sky look like petty inventions—like plastic toys I can flick off the sky. I want to shake the world by the hair and wipe it away with one swipe of my big red hand.

Judith Cody

ODE TO NIGHT SONGS AND MARES

Paleolithic utterances
flow upon love's
guillotine—
ah—the last sweet part
lingers on then
sliced off clean
as salami.
Purity of dreams
chunked off
before realization
now enters
hominid reality
where the cannibals roam.

Griff Foxley

SERPENT AWAKETH

Serpent awaketh.
It has me all a-wiggle
from delta to cathedral.

It can't be worth a shilling
If it's also worth a shell.
So behave,
you sleek inventors, you—
you have grown mad and erratic.

You've gone way off your mark
And you do it all day long,
Like flicking horsetails or a swatter
At an all-pervasive swarm.

Your head bows and nods the low note
On its way to the swimming deep,
And then sharp and of a sudden
The loud chain of machine beeps
Makes retreat the sense of peace,

And now danger loads of minutiae
Swell to the forefront of the mind,
Hard and loud like a madness taking form
In a thick and menacing fog.

TJ McPhearson

chauffeur

spring is a kind of dying
the revenge of winter
in green tides of longing
and small fierceness of birds
in the sweet milk country

forgotten the litany of fire
the thinned and huddled blood
of discontent

on a good day i am water
that malleable prince

i see beautiful fools
stalking blind blonde summer
in the thickets of youth

i am smitten with the umbrageous
indolence of trees
the way air fits everywhere

i have found it takes a little hurt
to be approximately happy
and a long time to be late
riding the savage inconsolable limousine
of being

a billy budd song

—reality isn't real

ag

there is a foreigner in my skin
a stolen child carrying flowers
past the sagging balls of winter
to the buttered heart of spring
a billy budd song

among ancient edges and gristle of being
are heaped the long bones of the brave

we choose our colors from spring
but live in fall
thrown cheshire children
poling the edge of evening
waiting to catch the hot biscuit bus
to any world deserving a dream

Chris Muniz

Boy-Love

The two of us push against
the wind, the street
scurrying as fast as we can
from the car to the porthole
in the mute face-wall
of a city
eager to devour
boys like us
vermin of the night.

We feel the bite of cows flesh
beneath our jackets
a tinge of shame
that we hate ourselves
for feeling exposed
as we scurry through
hole after hole
door after door
the city's gutter
welcoming us
opening with a sigh
as we bury ourselves
in the scream of speakers
the whip-crack of skin

eager to taste the love-bite
of each other's pain.

Gravity

with your feet in the air and your head on the ground
gravity always wins.
I promise you this.

shell smashed, juices flowing
my heart is yours
That's what I do
I hold on to
my favorite dreams of you
still wash ashore
wasn't it clear
right from the start
that I'll be the one?

look at the stars
look at the sky
see how it tastes
even after you're gone
however far
whatever words I say
however long I pray

these memories keep slowly
taking me apart
scraping through my head
if I could just blow
someone listening in

the truth is for you
I would bleed myself dry
crawl back into your arms
make it clear from the start

gravity always wins.
I promise you this.

First Kiss

When I take your face
in my hands, I take more
than your tongue against mine.

You see, you
catch my eye
the same way certain stones do
in fields of desert sand, shards of light
reflecting flames of this falling star
we call the sun.
So it is with the crystal mirror of your eye:
my reflection
my smile
my voice
outside of this core I call me.

You
Are on the outside
the same way the stone is
and like the boy inside, trapped
beneath a heaving sun
skull burning red
sand pebbles in his scalp
glinting like a thousand eyes
I pick up the stone and realize
it's not as precious as it seemed.
Jagged quartz, tarnished crystal.
A rock I should stab my eyes out with maybe
but no, that would only make the pit deeper
for a narcissism so complete
that all I can do is kiss you
and love the way
you taste in
my mouth.

Stan Sanvel Rubin

Still Life with Omelet

The education of the heart begins at breakfast
in an empty room, with a frying pan
still smoking from overheated oil,
eggshells littering the stovetop.
No one shares the omelet, though
the bits of mushrooms are really good
cooked that way, crisp, dark, nearly burnt.

A Short Guide to Mistakes

You won't know when it happens,
but you will know
that they know.

The best sign you've
done it again is that they
pretend to ignore you.

It reminds you of the way
you try to ignore yourself
when you pass a mirror,

like a stranger at a station
lost among strangers he can't
really trust. This is a platform

of strangers. How can you tell
where anyone is going?
How can you know for sure

who is innocent, who is waiting
for you to turn your back?
The best sign you'll do it again

is when they wait for it.

A Short Guide to Terror

The first thing to understand is,
it doesn't matter what you did,
the accounting will be terrible,

as in the old dream
which, this time,
won't end in daylight.

You stand before nameless judges,
head bent in a hood of shadows,
eyes averted, looking for escape

until you see a shape move
along the edges of the floor
then suddenly turn toward you.

You watch it coming,
an insect, a large one, dark
as the underside of a snake,

crawling toward your ankles.
It won't stop at your ankles.
What it wants is familiar as skin.

The worst part is, you put it there.

A Short Guide to Innocence

This is not an illusion,
but a necessary face
to be perfected.

Let it spread over your lips
like a slow smile, your eyes
unmoving, narrowed

as if considering the possibility
that someone might have hurt someone,
that someone might have caused

someone pain. But you don't know
who or when or how. You won't
show them what you know.

You're like a card player
with a special trick.
He keeps one up his sleeve, one

in a back pocket no one knows he has.
If they knew, they'd kill him.
He keeps it there until he needs it.

That's the first rule.

Notes on Suffering

Pain and suffering are different
the way birds that fly into the night
and the night are different.

These are distinct states of being,
like the one who leaves and the one who is left,
even though it's something they do together.

First someone walks to the door and opens it.
Then the other fails to follow.
So the door is closed.

Everything is defined by what it isn't.
For instance, the one who walks out the door
is not the one who remains inside.

The one who stands inside
stands with suffering no one witnesses.
Can we believe him?

C.C. Russell

TRANSLATION ACROSS A DISTANCE OF CODES AND SYMBOLS

(For Sharon)

In fragments, I finally write
from a night here in the middle of the road
with words of apology.

Slight wars inhabit everything here
and I found myself dreaming in a gray voice.

What I am sorry for: Leaving you
so long, to allow this to pass without words.

But language lately
has looked like little more
than burning and nails

and so I offered what I could;
my small, frightened silence.

Claire Scott

PREEMPTIVE GRIEF

You could

practice now to sidestep grief's sting
travel alone to Mumbai, Mandalay, Marrakech
ride scuzzy buses, cramped trains
filled with mosquitoes and flies
sit next to strange men
with bad breath and wandering hands
take a safari through the Serengeti
watch lions doze, giraffes scarf Acacia leaves
sit bolt upright in your one-person tent
as zebras pound through your campsite
perhaps sleep in the spare bedroom
Mondays, Thursdays, Saturdays
waking stiff and surly
or set the table for one
a single potato with frozen peas
write eulogies, sing plaintive songs

Or you might

wear your black silk dress & spiked heels
arrange orchids in a crystal vase
pour two glasses of Dom Pérignon
share deep kisses honed over forty years
star-dance life's sacred songs
step by slow step while
the light lasts & the love
oh yes, especially the love

Eva-Maria Sher

GROWING OLDER

My Best Beloved still dreams of me
the way I looked at twenty.
He likes to tease about my
beauty—Rubenesque now—
and asks me to spread
less butter on bread
because he loves me better
thin.

If only, my Beloved
you could try
a few assorted
menopausal moments
a taste of what it's like:
your body changing
in ways that may just be
beyond control—acceptance
the rarest remedy.
Less shapely garments
goodwill toward
the force of nature
and yes—perhaps to spread
less butter on bread.

Are you, who claim to love me
Best Beloved
reluctant to accept
that I have walked beside you
for nearly thirty years
and gravity has had its pull?

Can you still see the one
beneath the outer form:
woman of years
flowering wiser, stronger
more sweetly by our love
than when we met at twenty?

Richard Weaver

Alchemy of smoke

Each holds as if to warm his hands
a long pipe with blue porcelain bowl.
Their eyes are thin slits of darkness
in the afternoon shade. On each bowl
a story has been glazed, in each puff
of smoke there is the shape of a woman
assuming the air around her.
Blue-eyed mulattoes draw figures
in the dust to ward off wind.
Their bamboo sticks reach out
as if to touch, the same way lepers
might touch their own eyes in disbelief.
Slowly, the street and the blue bowls glow
white hot. Even the sun exhausts
the possibility of forgiveness.

David Desjardins

SONG OF NORWAY

Joey led the boy forward into the cool air. It felt like decades since he'd been inside a church, but he remembered the uneasiness his own father had modeled for him years ago and ducked his head in an almost reflexive genuflection. Behind him the heavy oak doors closed with a gasp.

He tugged Justin's hand gently. "Just try to hold it for a few more seconds, okay?" They walked briskly up the chapel's center aisle. It was homecoming weekend at the college, and a few of the visiting parents were sprinkled among the pews to either side. Some wore sweatshirts with the college logo on the front. The women smiled knowingly at their matching tuxedos.

"Dad, what —"

"It's okay," he whispered. "They're praying. We're almost there."

At the far end of the brass communion rail, he swept aside a curtain of ornate beads. In the side chapel before him was what looked like a large birdbath, and the boy reached up to run his fingers along its rim. The limo guy who'd chauffeured them all to the campus for the photo shoot had said the restroom was inside the sacristy, whatever that was. Joey pulled the boy toward a door on the opposite wall. He knocked uncertainly and, when no one answered, nudged it forward.

A kaleidoscope of stained glass flared on the wall, dazzling him briefly and kick-starting a banging in his head from last night's drinking, but then he spied through a small closet door a curve of pearl-white porcelain.

"Here we go, big guy."

He helped Justin twist the cummerbund aside and peeled the stiff fabric around the top two pants buttons. The boy scanned the beige walls as if he were in a museum: the hissing radiator that towered over him like a slab of polished granite, the crucifix near the tiny window, the massive water basin streaked with greenish stains. High above his head a large container was bolted to the wall over the toilet, beads of water dotting the bottom.

"Dad, what's that?"

Joey glanced up. "That's what you flush. See?" He shook the long chain dangling along the wall. "I'll show you when you're done."

He paused at the door and left it cracked open a couple of inches. "I'll be right out here, okay? Checking on Uncle Eric and the rest of them."

Across the sacristy, a small gray-paned window interrupted a wall lined with fat red books. Satin ribbons stuck out from the base of each binding like snakes' tongues. He opened the window and tilted the pane horizontal, and found that he could see them all out there: the photographer bossing everyone around, the other ushers resting their beers on the uneven turf beneath the maples, and the bridesmaids shooting looks at them. Eric was walking toward the women and poking at his phone, and immediately Joey heard a chirping in his own pocket. He pulled out his cell

.
Joey WTF where r u.

He texted back: *Call of nature Justin not me* and dropped the phone back in his pocket.

On the wall near the bookshelves was a framed poster: A Madonna and child gazing at each other. The halo over Mary's head had words curving on it: "SS Mater Boni Consilli Ora Pro Nobis" and the one above Jesus, "Jesum Filium Tuum." Both Mary and Jesus had tired, sad smiles, yet oddly each looked contented in their sadness.

Outside, the flower girl was scooping up the red and yellow leaves and tossing them skyward. Kelly stood by herself over near the lamppost, her dark hair piled high like it was way back then. Obviously remembering their own, and feeling just as awkward here as he did. Why the hell had Eric let Gina invite her? Dude, grow a pair, why don't you.

Seeing the limo driver check his watch and glance toward the chapel, Joey said over his shoulder, "You about done, kid?"

"No!" That tone, he thought, like, what a stupid question. And he's only five. Gets it from her.

He looked outside again. Now it was the parents' turn to surround Eric and Gina while the photographer crouched behind his viewfinder to capture the fidgeting group. Behind them, a bank of bright-orange flowers swam in the autumn sun. Were they there six years ago? Probably not, he thought. Theirs had been in the spring.

He heard steps behind him. A priest glided into the room, tossing a folder and prayer book onto a bookshelf with one hand and unbuttoning his light-blue cardigan with the other.

"And a good afternoon to you." Spoken cheerfully yet absently, like a professor entering a classroom after the bell has rung. He was beefy like a wrestler, and his cologne was so strong it filled the room.

Joey edged back toward the restroom, as if he'd been caught straying from his post.

“Sorry to intrude, Father.” He nodded toward the door. “The boy had an emergency, hope it’s OK we came in.”

“No problem. Happens all the time.” The priest peeled off his white collar and tucked it in his shirt pocket. He turned and held out his hand, crushing Joey’s in a massive damp grip.

“Father Tom.”

“Nice to meet you, Father.”

“Dad, who is that?” Justin sounded faintly alarmed or just curious; his father couldn’t tell.

“Just the priest – the man who works here. We’re okay.”

The priest bent low over a large drawer and riffled through a stack of garments that gave off a smell of flowers. He checked the label on one closely before easing it gently from the others.

Joey sat down near the restroom. His phone chirped again.

Gina’s having a cow, bro.

He thumbed out an answer. *She can fucking wait OK.*

Eric. Married all of 45 minutes and already pussy-whipped, he thought. Worse, he wants to pull me back into that puddle. Last night at Hooters he and his brother had taken their beers over to the corner of the function room while their cousin was embarrassing himself with the waitress, and he’d told Eric for the hundredth time: I mean, do what you want, but don’t fool yourself, okay? A kid won’t make the slightest difference; if anything you’ll be *more* miserable. I know what I’m talking about.

But Eric knew better, always had, ever since they were kids.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“The floor in here is the same as at Mom’s house.”

“Huh. That’s cool.”

He glanced up at the priest, who was inspecting himself in front of a full-length mirror as he adjusted the long, flowing garment over his massive shoulders. He caught the guy sneaking a look at him, all sympathetic like, and glared back till the priest dropped his eyes. Not your fucking business, dude.

He tried to remember a time when it was right between the two of them. Good luck with that. The honeymoon was one, of course. It'd be pretty pathetic, wouldn't it, if you couldn't enjoy a week of doing nothing but screwing and sleeping late and snorkeling, not to mention the all-inclusive food and booze. Kelly had loved everything about Aruba, especially the swim-up bar at the hotel pool, hadn't bitched about the drinking then.

The priest pulled out what looked like a long scarf. He swatted a few invisible pieces of lint from it, then kissed it and draped it around his neck.

A loud flushing sound came from behind them.

“Dad, this is *cool!*”

Joey smiled at the priest's reflection.

“Yeah? You ready for me to come in, then?”

“Okay.”

Inside the restroom, he rebuttoned the boy's pants and slid the cummerbund back into place.

“Alright, little man. Just wash your hands now and we're good to go.”

Maybe it would have been different back then if Kelly's girlfriends had gone down the same road. It's got to be tough, being stuck at home with the kid while they're still out living the dream, and you have to scroll through selfie after selfie of The Gal Pals Minus One: Here we are toasting with mojitos at TGIF, and check us out clowning around with the microphone at Karaoke Night. It gets old real quick. Go through day after day of that and who wouldn't get depressed? “Clinical” was her mother's term for it, looking at you like: You've got to step up, Mister, it's in the damn vows, just read them, for Chrissake. So then it's all on you, every night when you get home from work. Make it better, make it better — but you *can't* make it better. Oh, and just try to enjoy a beer or two and she's all over your ass like Manny Pacquiao on that skinny Mexican dude.

No, they'd never had a chance. They just hadn't known it. It was like that “Gulliver's Travels” picture book he'd read to Justin, with all those Lilliputians staking Gulliver to the earth with a thousand thin ropes. How the real world drags you down.

He dried the boy's hands with a wad of brown paper towels. “Justin, one last thing: I have to pee too, so wait out there for me, okay?”

The boy stepped outside, then spoke through the closed door.

“But let me flush it, okay, Dad? When you're done?”

“Sure, bud.”

As he was zipping up, his phone chirped again. He didn't look at it. He knew it would just be Eric again or maybe Gina, trying to light a fire under his ass. Why were people always trying to hurry you along? He remembered that day in Aruba at the beach: he and Kelly just lying there on towels, their fingers touching, all blissed out, and along comes this dude with a megaphone trying to round up the cruise-ship tourists he'd bused in for the snorkeling. Repeating over and over: “Song of Norway, time to go,” and all these dopes with bad sunburns lumbering in from their water sports to be herded off to the next stop on someone's idea of a Caribbean bucket list. Kelly had been the first to lose it, then he'd joined in, and before you knew it the two of them were cackling to the point of tears. For the rest of the honeymoon, it became their thing: Whenever something ridiculous happened, they would turn to each other and mouth the words “Song of Norway” and they'd be off again.

When he emerged from the restroom, the priest was sitting down, fingering a set of rosary beads and mumbling rhythmically. Justin stood directly in front of him, watching intently, as if trying to figure out a magician's card trick.

“Justin, let the man be, pal.”

The priest stopped his prayers and smiled. “Really, it's okay. Jesus said let the little children come to me. And who am I to argue with Saint Matthew, right?”

He held out the rosary. “Would you like to try them?”

The boy took the string of beads in his hands and dangled them in the air. “How do they work?”

“Well, you go from bead to bead, and you say an Our Father, some Hail Marys, and a Glory Be,” the priest said. “It's pretty simple, but it helps if you can memorize the prayers.”

He stood up and opened a cabinet high on the wall. “But here's the most important part: At the same time you're doing all that, you think of something good that you want God to do, and you ask him to do it.”

Justin swung the beads so they reflected the late-afternoon sunlight.

“So... it's magic, right?”

The priest stood on his toes to reach far back into the cabinet. “Well, not quite, because you never know just what God's going to do. But I like to ask him anyway.”

He pulled out a small plastic container holding a new rosary and blew the dust off it before handing it to the boy.

“We gave out a bunch of these at Our Lady's feast day last week, but there's lots left over. So now you can learn all about it yourself. There's an instruction sheet in there with the prayers.”

Joey nudged the boy's shoulder. "What do you say, Justin?"

"Thank you."

"No worries." The priest took back his own rosary and pulled up the heavy sleeve of his vestment to check his watch. "Look at that. I have to go start the service. You fellows enjoy your big day." He touched the top of the boy's head and left.

Joey's phone chirped again.

"What do you think? Shall we go see how they're all doing out there?"

"Okay."

Justin walked slowly toward the door, cradling the plastic box in his hand like a compass. Then he stopped suddenly and ran back toward the restroom. A loud flushing sound followed.

"Yes!"

Outside, Joey saw that the photographer was screwing around with his lenses, and everyone else was cooling their heels. His cousin was still holding his beer for him, and Joey took a long pull from it as he joined the other ushers.

"I guess you must have fallen in, huh, kid?" his cousin called out as they watched Justin run toward Kelly.

Joey watched as the boy showed off his prize to his mother. She crouched down and admired the beads as he held them before her. As they talked, Kelly tried to press his stubborn cowlick back into place.

Justin came back and tugged on his father's arm, dragging him over toward the lamppost near Kelly.

"Dad, tell Mom about the priest."

"Let's see." Joey drank from his beer. "Well, he was huge. Think Hulk Hogan in a dress."

Kelly rolled her eyes and glanced toward the church.

"Okay then. Thanks for that image."

She looked tired, like she always did when he picked up the boy every other weekend. He had heard that she'd gone out a few times with the shortstop from his old softball team. Guy was a total loser, and she'd find that out soon enough, if she hadn't already.

Justin pulled out a small sheet of paper from the plastic box. Joey couldn't tell if his son understood what he was reading.

“So, you been okay?”

She looked back at him with an expression he couldn't quite read. Maybe that was their problem.

“Yeah. Sometimes.”

The thing about good times, he thought, is they're always followed by bad times. But the opposite also had to be true, right? And yet that never seemed to be the case. Maybe, for things to work out, at least one of you has to think that way.

They stood there quietly. After a minute or two, Gina rushed over, her panties all in a twist, and took the boy's hand.

“Justin, honey, the photographer wants to take some with you and the flower girl. Can you let your mom hold that and come quick with me?”

She looked up at Kelly.

“Sorry, Kell, it's just that we're running so *late*.”

The two of them watched Gina drag the boy off.

He couldn't help it. He caught Kelly's eye. He wanted to say it, and he could tell that she did too, but it was scary, what might happen if you did.

Teri Moore

THE SAFEST PLACE IN THE CITY

The radio crackles with an incoming call. I think of the joke: When people ask if LAPD is just like the old TV show Adam12, we say no, but we're still using the same equipment. I smack the radio like a bad child and hear the dispatcher say, "14 Adam 10, see the man, 1647 Bonaparte Court, DB, Code 2."

Training Officer Haynes' eyes blaze. He grabs the mic and sails the police car leftward across two lanes. "14 Adam 4, we'll take that call, we're close," he says. He does a U-turn and flashes me an electric smile. "Your first dead body." He clicks his tongue warningly. "I hope you have your kit."

I wonder if he's like this with his male rookies, eager to put them through a gauntlet of experience. I surmise that he's not. There's a certain cherry-popping exuberance of the male training officer toward the female probationer. "Gee, thanks," I say with a grimace.

Of course, I have my kit. It's in my police bag in the trunk. Vasquez, my previous training officer, helped me assemble it. The kit consists of a box of latex gloves (for the everyday dead bodies), heavy rubber gloves (for the messy ones), a white paper mask, sanitizing fluid, and a jar of Vicks vaporub. "You shove the vaporub in your nose for decomposing bodies, so you don't throw up and ruin the crime scene," Vasquez advised. "And keep two pairs of latex gloves rolled up in your pocket. You'll use them every day patting down those hypes and Skid Row types." I pat my pants pocket to confirm the gloves are there and hope it's a fresh and clean body, hope I don't need the kit.

We wend our way up gritty Lincoln Boulevard and I mentally tick off cross streets as we pass them, Maple, Pine, Cedar, Pearl—I don't have to look at the signs anymore. I've studied the maps, mentally traced routes on long runs after work. Haynes may suddenly pull off the road, grab his chest dramatically and yell "I'm shot, probie, where are we?" And I'd better know. Immediately. Even Vasquez, normally so playful, would drill his black eyes into mine when I failed, saying, "It's the first rule of the street: always know where you are. You never know when you'll have to put out a help call."

I pride myself on this: I always know where I am.

From Lincoln we head east on Pico, then duck into the tony neighborhoods just south of L.A.'s border with Santa Monica. Off the harsh geometry of the main streets, we enter a softer, gentler world. Sinuous roads curve past sprawling expanses of bright, expensive lawn. It smells like a damp meadow, maybe the only place in this desert city that does. An etched stone sign announces we're in Shady Hills. Around the next bend, we pass below a sea of massive jacarandas that snow purple blooms all over us like a ticker tape parade. A plum-colored celebration of my first DB.

Farther in, the million-dollar matte brick homes peek out from under the arms of giant oaks. Brick homes are rare here in earthquake country. They feel exotic and solid, like ancient stone relics in a land of mirrored glass.

"Rich bastards," Haynes mutters. He parks us discreetly across the street under heavy branches. "Fancypants neighborhood like this, folks only like to see us cruising. Parked police cars means the neighborhood's going downhill. Remember that." It's a phrase Haynes uses often.

He used it the first day I rode with him, just three weeks ago. "Take a deep breath and be ready for anything. Remember that," he said. As if to illustrate it, he gunned the accelerator for a half-block and screeched to a halt in front of a dilapidated house. The two Crips out front leaped to attention, as surprised as I was. Haynes jumped out of the car and slammed his door shut. He strode up to the older one, C-clamped his neck and smacked him hard against the wall.

I slipped from the car and dropped into a fighting stance, but the younger gangster took off. I looked to Haynes, who had twisted his adversary's arm behind his back, holding him against the wall. His indignant glare told me to give chase.

I bolted down an alley, sheathing my baton as I ran so I could scale each fence as it came up. With blood pounding in my ears, I considered what I might have done had I caught him. He'd committed no crime, I had no probable cause to arrest or even detain him. I knew this could go nowhere; my boots and belt felt heavier than ever. He was better at jumping fences than I was, and I soon lost sight of him.

At the end of the alley I saw Haynes pull up in the black and white, smirking. As I got in, I noticed the back seat was empty. Of course he'd let the guy go—there was no charge. Too furious to control my expression, I felt my eyes narrow. When Haynes slapped me on the back playfully, it was all I could do not to swing back.

"Had to make sure, heh-heh" he said, breathing hard, massaging one sore hand with the other.

"Of what!" I spat.

"That you didn't freeze up, girlie. And you didn't. Everyone wants to know," he said. "Remember that."

I shake off the memory and hit the “Code 6” button on the console computer to show we’ve arrived at the location. I sheath my baton in my duty belt and don my “bus driver” hat. The other training officers don’t require me to wear the hat. Vasquez never made me do that, treated me like an equal partner. But Haynes is different, with an earnestness that can lapse into swaggering arrogance. Before he exits the car, he touches his badge with his right hand quickly, almost imperceptibly.

It’s a habit I’ve seen him do at every call, and I know why. Once, over greasy tacos, he took off his badge, cupping the face of it in his palm. “This is what I’m all about,” he said. On the back was taped a photo of a little girl, maybe three or four, with big blue eyes and masses of light brown curly hair. “Sarah Jane.” For a moment he froze there, lips pressed tightly, eyes shimmering, then he doused his tacos with a second layer of hot sauce.

Word around the station is that his ex is busting his balls in custody court, so I try to cut him some slack.

We take the walkway, flanked by meticulous flowerbeds, up to the front porch of 1647 Bonaparte. Under a grand portico, an old man leans against a rose bower. He uncrosses his arms and smooths his steel hair back with a wrinkled hand. He’s been waiting for us. At the steps, Haynes drops behind me and cautions, “It’s your call, but I’ll be watching you.” I nod. With Haynes, the less said, the better.

“Good morning,” I say, extending a hand to shake. “I’m Officer Moore and this is Officer Haynes.”

“I’m John Givens,” the old man says, encasing my hand with both of his. He has a kindly face. Wrinkles have stitched half-moons under his eyes and at his jawline. “I’m Carl’s best friend, the one the housekeeper called. I’m the one who found him, and then I called you. Please come in,” he says, as if inviting us to a buffet lunch. He opens the carved glass door.

I steel myself, images from countless TV dramas slideshowing across my mental screen. I visualize a body sprawled across a living room floor dotted with shell casings, blood spattered up the wall. Or worse, the raw hamburger of a bludgeoning. Or would it be some lonely old fart, found dead by a friend or relative, still sitting on the toilet bearing down for a shit, having blown a vascular fuse? Vasquez told me that happens all the time.

It’s a pristine living room, flawless, dustless, like something out of Good Housekeeping. There’s an island of cream silk-upholstered furniture with carved arms and lion-paw feet planted in plush beige carpeting, freshly raked. John Givens glides through the room, and we follow, fat and clunky with our 20-pound duty belts, our thick-treaded boots stamping footprints in the carpet. A collection of ceramic Hummels beam their baby faces at us through an illuminated glass cabinet. I’m shocked by the stillness, and chide myself. For Christ’s sake, what else should I have expected from a dead body scene—a party? Nothing at all moves. Even the ceiling fans hang still, like giant spiders pinned to the ceiling.

Givens’ eyes blink nervously. “I left the sign up for you, left Carl’s letter, left everything just as I found it. I’m not sure what you need,” he says, his voice going raspy.

“I’m sure you’ve done just fine, Mr. Givens,” I offer, “but we need to see Carl first. You don’t have to go with us. Just tell us where he is.”

“Upstairs,” he says, pointing up a grand, arching staircase. “First room on the right, in the bathroom. But don’t you want to know what happened?”

“We’ll get to that, thanks sir. Is anyone else in the house?”

“No. Carl’s wife, Jean, is at the beauty parlor. Maria’s at my house next door with my wife. Maria’s the housekeeper.”

“Ok. We’ll need to talk to her as well. Please wait here, sir.”

Haynes motions me ahead up the stairs. My baton bangs the bannister and I reach down to clamp it against my thigh. Above us, a skylight spotlights a polished marble floored landing, inlaid with an intricate rose design. Four doors spin off from the landing.

To the right is the only open door, and it gives onto an immaculate master bedroom, handsome with an ossified grace, so spotless that I pity the housekeeper. The dresser is polished mirror-bright with not a drawer askew, adorned only with a cut crystal vase of white silk peonies. The nightstands are bare but for a posed photograph of an elderly couple flanking a young man and woman, each holding a young child. A massive four-poster bed dominates the room, with a gold brocade bedspread adorned symmetrically with three blue velvet pillows. On the middle pillow balances a thin white business envelope, like a ring in a wedding. In the far corner the pendulum of a grandfather clock fills the room with mechanical reverberations. I wonder how anyone could sleep with all that racket.

Givens’ loafers squeak behind us. He points a trembling finger toward a white bathroom door hanging ajar. A piece of paper taped to it says CALL POLICE.

“He’s in there,” Givens says, as he perches on the too-high bed, covers his face with his hands. I glance at Haynes, who motions toward the bathroom door with his chin, so I lead the way, hardening my reflexes against blood, against body parts, against all the movie murder drama scenes my memory has catalogued.

I open the door. My eyes sweep the room—outward, upward, sideways—anxiously. But it’s the last thing I expect: It’s as if the sun itself occupies the room. Surgically bright light ricochets off brassy fixtures, off wall mirrors, off a white marble floor that leads us to a large soaking tub at the back of the room where a man lies slumped back as if sleeping in his bath. I see no blood anywhere, and for a moment I wonder if he’s actually dead. But as we approach the body, I am struck by the quality of its pallor. The skin is slack yet rigid, as if bleached and solidified over centuries.

My peripheral vision blurs, then narrows. I realize what’s happening. I remember in academy class Officer Riley making a tunnel with his hands and cinching it down to a pinpoint. “Tunnel

vision,” he said, “is a stress reaction. Keep pushing your attention outward or you might miss something crucial, putting yourself and your partner in danger.”

But this is a dead body call, not a tactical situation. I let the tunnel vision happen, feel my focus tighten and lock magnetically on Carl’s faded eyes, which I know I will remember forever, will see again many times, so that this feels like a *déjà vu* in reverse. Against my will, my mind records it. His eyes are a watery and insubstantial blue, bulged with shock, as if, having never died before, he found it more terrifying than he had imagined. I’m surprised at how clear and veinless his eyes are, until I remember that when the heart stops pumping, the blood vessels collapse.

His gray hair is tucked up neatly into a clear shower cap. His neck is craned far back, resting on the marble frame of the tub, his mouth is wide open as if to snore broadly.

Haynes stands against the wall, arms crossed, legs locked John-Wayne-wide—a giant forked animal. He rocks back on his heels looking bored.

I squat down and peer into Carl’s wide open mouth, at the hole blasted through its corrugated roof, charred with gunshot residue. From the far corner of his mouth, a few elastic drops of dark blood trickle and pool onto the clear plastic sheeting that covers his naked body from the chin down, anchored in place by his arms. In his lap lie his lined and pillowy upturned palms and a small black pistol. His right index finger is still threaded through the trigger assembly, and a single brass casing has tumbled into the crook of his right elbow.

Under his body is another sheet of plastic, encasing him above and below like bedsheets, and I wonder why he is wrapped in this way. Is it to protect him from the tub or the tub from him?

I’m lucky—I won’t need my kit. This body is a fresh one, an unusually clean one, allowing me a scientific calm that is both relaxed and focused at the same time. There’s something empowering in the presence of the helpless. I wonder if this is how doctors feel, pulling a newborn from the body of a woman or massaging a still heart back to life. I catch my mind lingering there and retrieve it.

I pull on my latex gloves with a snap-snap and carefully twist and lift the pistol from Carl’s finger, pop an empty magazine, rack back the slide and lock it open. There is no second round in the chamber.

“Wow,” quips Haynes, “talk about your one-shot deals, heh-heh.” He bobbles on the balls of his feet.

I set the gun on the floor, nestle the casing beside it, and begin inspecting the body without moving it, as I’ve been trained to do in the academy. The inside of the nose is crusted. Fresh blood has settled into the ear hollows. The lower jaw has a five-o-clock shadow of gunshot residue. I check the roof of the mouth for trajectory. I inspect what I can see of his scalp and find nothing. Even pressing the shower cap against his hair, I find nothing.

“What are you looking for?” Haynes asks.

“The exit wound. It should be here,” I say, “right near the crown.”

“I’m bettin’ there isn’t one,” says Haynes. “That pistol’s a twenty-two. A .22 round usually won’t penetrate the skull. It just pinballs around in there. His brain’s gotta be mush by now.”

I imagine a quivering gray soup in the bowl of Carl’s skull. It calls to mind something almost lost to memory—my 7th grade biology partner, Cecilia, and I, neither of us wanting to pith the frog before us, but both of us knowing that I’ll end up doing it.

“What’s your theory, Moore?” Haynes tests

“I guess it’s a straight-forward suicide,” I reply.

“What else do you look for? How do you know it’s a suicide?”

I know I’ll have to search for syringes, sleeping pills, anything of interest, but I think I’ll find nothing. “Because I don’t see any signs of foul play, so far anyway.”

“What about his head at that weird angle?”

“Maybe the blast threw it back?”

“Right,” he says. “So what do you do now?”

I call to mind my academy training, natural death vs. overdose vs. homicide vs suicide. “Call the coroner,” I say.

“Righto, probie,” Haynes says, clicking his tongue approvingly. I know I’ll have to take statements, do my incident report in duplicate. I stand up and start to pull my gloves off, but Haynes winks at me. “Keep your gloves on. This’ll be a day you’ll never forget.”

I give him a quizzical look and he chuckles. He’s enjoying this too much and I wonder what’s in his mind, a body cavity search? Something worse? I look back at Carl’s helpless body and my guts shiver and churn. Suddenly, I feel sorry for Haynes’ wife. “You’re the boss,” I say, and I radio dispatch to send the coroner.

When Haynes and I come out of the bathroom, John Givens is still sitting on the bed, turning the envelope over and over in his hands. The flap is open, and Jean is scrawled diagonally across the front. Givens looks at the name as if it’s a hieroglyph.

“Mr. Givens, are you ok?” I ask, wiping my gloved hands on my pants legs. But he doesn’t answer. “Do you think you could tell us what happened?” I sit down next to him, pull my little notebook from my shirt pocket and click my pen. Haynes stands a ways off but still within earshot, looking at his cell phone.

Mr. Givens passes me the envelope. He rubs his face hard, as if trying to rearrange his features, leaving it red and puffed.

“Well,” his voice catches, then breaks. He clears his throat and looks up at me through his tangled eyebrows. “My wife and I were home, just sitting there watching TV when Maria flung open the back door and came running in, terrified, unable to speak. She grabbed my hand and pulled me next door, I mean here, and up the stairs.” Givens shifts his gaze to the wall behind me, and his eyes lose focus. “She calmed down enough to say she was washing the dishes when she heard a gunshot from upstairs. She knew Carl was up there so she ran up the stairs, but when she saw the sign on the door she came to get me. She didn’t call the police.”

I scribble furiously. “Right, to her we’re all federales. I get it, but I’ll have to get her statement.”

“She won’t like that,” says Givens, shaking his head. “And then I went inside and found Carl, you know, just like you see him there. So I called you. Oh, and I found this on the bed. It’s to his wife.” A sob catches in his throat. “I admit, I read it—just had to know what it said because Jean’s like a sister to me, and now I don’t know what to tell her. I’m afraid to call her.”

“Where is she now?” I say, pocketing my notebook.

“Getting her hair done, then to lunch with her friends. Like she does every Thursday. She’ll be home in a little over two hours.”

I ask him for the envelope, retrieve the note. The handwriting is giant, all geometric and angular, long sticks carefully balanced to hold each other up.

My dearest Jean,

I can’t do it anymore. I can’t do the doctors and the checkups and the pills, the country club lunches and all. I can’t do the empty days and nights and no sex. I’m all dried up. I can’t do the no sex. I can’t live like this.

You have your house, it’s always been your house anyway, and all the money.

I made sure there’s no mess, as best I could.

Love,

Carl

“I knew he felt this way,” says Givens. “Been telling me about it for years, but God, I never thought he’d do this. I mean, he beat cancer ten years ago. He’s got grandkids. Jesus!”

I’m not sure what to say, so I look around for Haynes but he’s not there. Before I leave the room I fold the note up and tell Givens, “I need to take this for evidence.”

“I know,” he says.

I find Haynes on the front porch smoking. He holds the cigarette backwards in the cup of his

hand like a mobster. I show him the note and watch him as he reads it.

“Heh, that sucks.” He throw his cigarette down and mashes it with his boot. “What a sorry bastard.”

I remind myself that this is probably a weekly event for Haynes, that this is likely upwards of his hundredth DB. I wonder if I will say the same thing at my hundredth one. He hands the note back to me and narrows his eyes. “You’d better hop-to on that incident report, with a carbon for a duplicate. The coroner should be here soon. Tries to get here quick for these fresh ones, before they go into rigor, ’cause then it’s a real bitch getting them out of the house.”

I search the cabinets for clues, but find nothing out of the ordinary. So I follow Givens next door to take Maria’s statement, but she’s hiding in a closet. It takes ten minutes of promising not to deport her before she opens the door slightly, talking to me in halting English through the six-inch gap. “Den I hear gonshot,” she says, “I know de sound. And I go get Señor John.”

I scribble the last of my notes as Givens and I walk back to Carl’s house. On the way, he tells me about Carl. “We came here together from Indiana. That was back in the 1940s, just after we returned from the war. That’s when everyone was moving to California,” he says. “Carl and I opened an engineering firm together. We designed the Vincent Thomas Bridge. Do you know the Vincent Thomas Bridge?”

I tell him I live out in San Pedro, right near it. Sometimes I jog over it when I get off work.

I go to the front porch of Carl’s house to find Haynes, but he’s turned toward the outside wall arguing on his cell phone. I can hear the woman’s voice shrieking from the phone. He cups his hand around the conversation and turns his face away, so I duck inside the house and finish writing my report at the kitchen counter. Givens is there too, slumped on a kitchen stool in a corner. I tell him he can go if he likes, but he declines. “Jean’ll be back in a while. I have to be here for her.”

Through the window, I see the coroner’s van pull up next to our black and white. He probably knows to hide too in these neighborhoods.

Haynes pockets his phone and shakes hands with the coroner in the entryway. The man is carrying a black leather medical bag. I assume he’s a doctor until the jacket of his gray suit falls slightly open, revealing a badge clipped to his belt and next to it a holstered gun. Haynes grins broadly. “Make her do all of it,” I hear him tell the coroner. “Every little thing.”

“All of it? Are you sure?” Behind his nerdy round glasses, the coroner’s eyes flare. His forehead tightens in surprise.

“Yeah, as much as you can anyway,” says Haynes. The coroner eyes him for a moment, cocks his head a bit. Then he nods, sighs, and walks toward me.

“Ok, Officer Moore, I suppose we should start,” he says gloomily, almost apologetically, pulling latex gloves from his pocket. We chat on the way up the stairs. His name is Schultz and he’s a

sheriff. He's doing his year as a coroner so he can be a homicide detective. He looks me square in the eye when he talks to me, like Vasquez always did. I decide he's a nice guy.

In the bathroom, he lays open his coroner's bag like a book. It's full of shiny tools, all held there by elastic loops. He withdraws a small camera and while he snaps photos—first the body and then close-ups of the wall and ceiling—I examine the instruments. There are curved probes, delicate pliers, something T-shaped. There are two long, thin tongs, bent at the ends like talons. There's a gauge wired to what looks like a knitting needle and a vise on a crank. I wonder which ones we will use today.

“We have to work quickly, before rigor sets in,” says Schultz as he hangs his suit coat from a towel hook and pulls on his gloves. Just what Haynes said. Hard as he is to work with, I concede that Haynes knows a lot. I can learn from him. I ought to cut him more slack. Schultz says, “Let's get him out of there. Don't know why he's on that dropcloth, but it makes our work easier.”

I use the surrounding plastic sheet under Carl's body to wrap his feet. I'm worried I'll drop him, which will make me, and by extension all female officers, look weak. It's an unspoken rule among female officers: show no weakness, no matter what. I clamp my hands tightly around the plastic-wrapped ankles and wince, feeling tendon crush against bone. It's a corpse, I chide myself. Schultz hikes up his white shirt cuffs and scrunches fistfuls of plastic sheeting. Using his upper arms, he pushes the head and shoulders vertical so he can hook his forearms under the armpits. Carl's teeth clack as his jaw hinges shut, but the eyes stay open, crazed, as if sighting a ghost over my shoulder.

“Okay, one, two, three,” Schultz says, and we lift the plastic sheeting and body together. The body is unbelievably heavy, dead heavy, so that I have to slide my stance wider for stability. Carl's hands slip from his lap and dangle over the edge of the plastic sheeting. One of the hands flexes and I jump. “Ha,” Schultz laughs. “That's just the nerves firing.” He has an easy, cheerful laugh. “Spooked me the first time too. I forgot to tell you, he may let go of some urine or bowel as we move him, so be ready for that.”

But there's no shit or piss, and I'm not surprised. Carl is fastidious if nothing else, and I realize he thought of this too, when he was planning it all—the gun, the ammo, the plastic, the shower cap.

We lay the body down carefully on the white marble floor. Carl's butt and the backs of his legs are blushing underneath his papery skin. “That's the lividity starting,” says Schultz, squatting on his haunches and pointing at the marbled flesh. “When the heart stops pumping, gravity pulls the blood downward.” Schultz raises Carl's neck and tilts his head back, unleashing a faint tracheal sigh that smells of copper and singed meat. He hands me a caliper, has me estimate the diameter of the entry wound, removes the shower cap. Squatting there, watching Schultz inspect the scalp for an exit wound, I realize that Carl had done his research, knew the capabilities of a .22 round, and used the shower cap and plastic sheeting just in case. He's a belt and suspenders thinker. It occurs to me that the Vincent Thomas Bridge is the safest place in the city. I think it will never fall.

I hear Haynes' footfalls coming up the stairs, and Schultz and I shoot each other a quick glance. Haynes doesn't say a word, but leans triangularly against the bathroom wall in supervisory stance, beefy arms crossed, wide-spaced shins two feet from our backs. But something is different. His mouth is turned down at the corners, lips pressed in a tight line. I hear him breathing like a riled bull.

I wonder if Haynes is angry that I've messed up or angry that I haven't. I review my mental checklist: investigation done, statements taken, report complete, and here I am working with the coroner on my first dead body. Already I've learned so much. I've discovered that the key is to compartmentalize, shrinking my focus to regard just the entry wound, just the scalp, the hands, the feet—pieces of a man. That way I can look at it mechanically and keep the butterflies in my stomach down. I think I understand why surgeons drape the bodies of their patients, exposing only what's necessary. I congratulate myself on my calm, my clinical detachment.

Schultz reaches for the knitting needle-looking instrument with its trailing gauge. He flips a switch and explains. "First we get a reading of the ambient room temperature. See here, it's 75 degrees." He jots it on his clipboard, along with the time. "The liver cools at a calculable rate that we can use to work backwards to find an accurate time of death. We see if it corroborates the testimony of the witnesses." With his pen he points to a place on the upper right side of Carl's chest and withdraws a scalpel. "I make an incision here between these ribs..."

Haynes clears his throat and coughs so loudly it's almost comedy. He rolls up on the balls of his feet for a moment. I think of aggressive animals who puff up their size and I stifle a laugh. I decide he's a clown and I should definitely cut him some slack.

Schultz hands me the scalpel and inks a dot on Carl's pale chicken skin. The bright edge of the scalpel unnerves me, chases my clinical detachment away. Something half-formed rises in my chest, and I again remind myself that this is a corpse. But I hesitate. I can't seem to make my hand do this.

Haynes nudges my knee with the toe of his boot. When I look up at him, he raises his eyebrows. "It's okay," he croons. "Maybe you're just not cut out for this line of work, heh."

I turn back to Carl, picture myself messing it up, the dermis ripping open, organs spilling out. But I close my eyes, constrict my focus, tamp the feeling down. I will my cool clinician to reassert itself, and, to my surprise, it does. I make a little cut in the chest, and the sides gape gently, making little rosebud lips. There is no blood, only a thick, clear syrup that weeps into the wound. Schultz hands me the knitting needle. As he directs the tip inside the cut, something sour coagulates in the back of my throat and I turn away.

"You're doing great, now keep going..." Schultz counsels, letting go of the needle. I force myself to look again, constricting my focus to just the needle and the hole, compartmentalizing my thoughts, and it works—I can swallow the sour taste down. I press the needle in farther, navigating between muscle layers, maneuvering around bulbous organs. Then the needle stops. I push again and it bounces back. Schultz says, "That's the liver. We need to get in the middle of it,

so you'll have to punch through the membrane.”

My guts are churning, but I feel Haynes standing over me. I know I have to perform. I wonder why Schultz is obeying Haynes when clearly he doesn't want to. But I've noticed at the station that even the seasoned officers obey Haynes. It's in the folded and geometric way he holds himself, the cool command presence that sets him apart.

I look up at Haynes. I see his nostrils flare, his jaw muscles bunch, his brow furrow. He's not angry, I realize, but insular. I understand now why his wife left, why she's fighting him for custody. I decide not to cut him slack anymore.

I gather my resolve and punch through the membrane. Suddenly the needle is being pulled in, and I know it's in the center of the liver. A bubble of queasiness rises and bursts silently, but this time I let it fill my chest. “Perfect,” whispers Schultz. After a few seconds, he checks the gauge and scrawls the reading and the time on his clipboard.

Schultz brushes off his pants and stands up next to Haynes. “Good job, Moore,” he announces. Haynes clucks approvingly and leaves the bathroom. I hear the ring of his boots fade down the stone stairs.

Schultz goes to his van to get a gurney while I bag and label the evidence: the gun, the magazine, the casing, the shower cap, the CALL POLICE sign, the note. It's only when I take a final look around to make sure I haven't missed anything that I notice an odd-looking crack in the tub enamel at the edge of the drain. I peer more closely, noticing it's too curved to be a crack. It's something Carl never intended, something that fell through despite the plastic, something nobody would ever think about except maybe Maria, the housekeeper, or us, the evidence collectors. It's a single kinked pubic hair. Reflexively, I reach for it with my glove, small evidence bag in hand, but at the last minute decide to leave it there, untouched.

When Schultz returns with the gurney, he squats to scrutinize Carl's face. “Look here how his pupils are constricting. We don't have much time.” We load the body onto the gurney quickly, while it's still pliable, but I can feel the rigor settling into the joints. The slight rigidity has made Carl easier to handle. We roll the plastic sheets and stuff them into a large evidence bag. Schultz takes a few last photos of the room, pristine like the rest of the house, as if Carl never existed. We strap the body onto the gurney, maneuver it down the stairs with it, and roll it out to the van. It takes only a soft push to send it gliding into the back of the van, the articulated aluminum legs folding themselves under perfectly, an engineered precision Carl would have appreciated. I wish Schultz luck in homicide, thank him, and give him a copy of my incident report.

As I walk back to the house, I silently congratulate Carl for a mission well executed. It was almost perfect—quick and final for himself, unsoiled for Jean, and almost uninvolved for his best friend John. It should have gone flawlessly, the police removing his body before anyone he loved had to see him. But he hadn't realized that someone like Maria, who knew all about gunshots, all about disappearing, would never call the police.

I understand now that Officer Riley is right—the key is stopping that cinching down, that

narrowing detachment that distances. A burning furnace blast of shame floods my face, literally stops me in my tracks, as I remember that I too wished so fervently for this to be a tidy death. I stand there transfixed and overwhelmed for just a breath or two, reeling at my own depravity, and then am shocked to recognize that for a single moment in time, I have forgotten where I am, something a police officer can never, ever do, not even for a moment.

The sudden ripping sound of a leaf-blower motor cuts through the air, yanks me awake. A young dark man across the street, a rag tied over his head, is herding the purple blossoms to the edge of the lawn.

As I re-enter the kitchen, I take off my gloves inside out, rolling one inside of the other, according to my training. I throw them into the kitchen trash, but, imagining Maria or Jean finding them, I fish them out and stow them in my pocket. Not like I'm getting another day out of this uniform anyway.

"Hey Moore," I hear Haynes call from the living room. "Hey, hurry up. She's here," he says.

"Who's here?"

"The wife. You get to tell her."

"Because I'm a probationer?"

"No, because you're a girl."

Through the living room bay window, I see her gold Buick in the driveway. She steps out of the car, carefully smooths the lapels of her crepe blouse, hangs a big square handbag on her forearm, and pats her lacquered hairdo. Her hair is almost translucent—pale yellow tinged with a coppery purple, the color of a bruise in the final stage of healing. I recognize her from the nightstand photo. Her close-set eyes lock on the ground in front of her, and her little feet mince forward. I'm amazed that she hasn't seen our car or the coroner's van. Then I remember the enormous handwriting of Carl's note to her and realize she doesn't like to wear her glasses. I worry about her driving.

While I watch her, working so very hard at those few steps, I consider the resilience of prostitutes and addicts clinging to a precarious existence back on Lincoln Boulevard, of the Marias who sneak across badland borders in the middle of the night for the chance to mop floors and blow leaves across lawns. Then I think of Carl who, in a palatial marble bathroom of a brick house under the foot-thick arms of a hundred-year-old oak, willingly pithed himself like a frog.

Jean is climbing the brick steps now, sideways, slowly, and one at a time. Her wrinkled lips gather with the concentration of her effort. Behind her, the setting sun burnishes the sky like a new red planet. A gust sends a shower of purple jacaranda blooms across the lawns of Shady Hills and across the windshield of the coroner's van, which slips away silently in the street. I will not tell her about Carl's note, and I believe John Givens will not either. I take a deep breath and open the heavy glass door.

Michael Twist

FOREST FOR THE TREES

“I don’t think I can do it,” Jerry said.

I knew I couldn’t. But that wasn’t what Jerry needed to hear. “Three years,” I said after a moment. I had meant it to sound like a brief stretch, a walk in the park, a blink of an eye, but it didn’t; it sounded like an eternity. “Maybe less with good behavior.”

“I’m just not built for prison, not wired right,” Jerry said, smoke curling from his mouth and nose.

I pondered this for a moment. “No one is,” I finally said.

Lost in his own thoughts, Jerry appeared jarred. “No one is what?” he asked.

“No one is wired for prison,” I answered. “It’s anathematizing to the human condition.”

I was unaware that I had said the second sentence aloud until Jerry sputtered, “Anathematizing? Is that one of your college words?”

I winced, fearing I had driven a wedge neither of us could afford on this of all days. “I made it up. There’s no such word,” I offered.

“Liar.” Jerry snorted. He tossed a handful of the grass he’d picked on me; his way of letting me know the wedge was nulled. I let the grass linger in my hair, on my arm. “I’m not an animal, not like some of those guys,” he nearly whispered.

Neither of us said it, but we were both thinking about the shower scenes we’d seen in a half dozen movies; jokes about dropping bars of soap no longer laughable. “You’ll get through it,” I said, avoiding his eyes as I lit another of his cigarettes.

Jerry snorted. “Easy for you to say.”
“What do you want me to say?”

“Nothing. Not a damn thing,” Jerry retorted, seething disgust.

I knew he was wondering what stroke of karma had the cop turning left and running into him rather than right and into me. A part of him hating himself for wishing it had been me before the judge. I knew this because I knew Jerry better than I’d known anyone, our mothers; neighbors, best friends, sisters.

“Look. I wish I could...” my words fell short.

“What? Split the time? You take the odd days, leave me the even?” Jerry scoffed, plucking grass like one scratches an itch.

“Not fair,” I said after a moment.

Jerry ground his smoke out in the bare spot of dirt he had created and left it among the dozen crippled butts between us. “Why not? You’re just as guilty as I am,” he snarled.

“I’d serve more days,” I said quietly.

He glared at me for a moment before his face softened into the only smile of the day as he figured it out, the odds, evens, and ends of calendar pages flipping through his mind. “Jackass,” he muttered.

“Fuckstick,” I returned.

It was quiet as we continued to work our way through his pack of smokes, knowing he couldn’t take them inside. I thought of all the things I’d miss, all the things I take for granted. Oddly, I realized smokes, books, and coffee were likely all available, making the cop’s karmic left turn all the crueler, since Jerry didn’t like to read.

Late afternoon shade stalked and eventually overtook us. “I don’t think I can do it,” Jerry said for the second time that day.

“Not much of a choice,” I whispered.

“You’ve always got a choice,” he said, looking at a hawk patiently circling the field beyond.

I shook my head, dubious, picturing frenzied German Shepherds tugging at leather leashes as they followed my cousin’s scent. “You don’t wanna run, man.”

Jerry looked at me, a flicker of confusion the equivalent of a body language hiccup briefly registering on his face. “No.” After a beat he added, “I wouldn’t even make it out of the county.”

A long silence followed and Jerry leaned back on the grass, looking at the nearly cloudless sky above, probably wondering when he would next feel a breeze or even see clouds herded by one. “You wanna get something to eat?” I asked, stubbing out my final cigarette.

“Not really.”

“How ‘bout some beers?”

Jerry’s right eyebrow arched like a string had been pulled. “You buying?”

My throat was raw, and I was suddenly overcome by the urge to do something, anything, nice for Jerry. “Sure. My treat.”

It was hours after I dropped Jerry off, cheap pilsner working its way through my system, before I revisited my cousin’s flicker of confusion, the hiccup.

Literary Bios

Annie Blake is an Australian writer who has work published or forthcoming in *Antipodes*, *Uneven Floor*, *The Voices Project*, *Into the Void*, *Southerly*, *Hello Horror*, *Verity La*, *GFT Press*, *About Place Journal*, *Gravel*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Cordite Poetry Review* and more. Her poem 'These Grey Streets' was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize by *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*. She holds a Bachelor of Teaching, a Graduate Diploma in Education and is a member of the C G Jung Society of Melbourne.

David Desjardins is a journalist with roots in Rhode Island, having worked at The Boston Globe, The Providence Journal, and other newspapers. His short story "The Sixth Game" was included in the anthology "Further Fenway Fiction" (Rounder Books, 2007).

Judith Cody is a poet, composer and photographer who has won national awards in poetry, music and photography and is published in over 110 national and international journals. A poem is in the Smithsonian's Institute's permanent collection, in Spanish and English editions. Poems were quarter-finalists for the Pablo Neruda Prize and won honorable mentions from the National League of American Pen Women. Cody was Editor-in-Chief of the first "Resource Guide on Women in Music," from San Francisco State University and wrote the internationally noted biography of the American composer, "Vivian Fine: A Bio-Bibliography," Greenwood Press, also "Eight Frames Eight," and "Woman Magic." She edited the PEN Oakland anthology, "Fightin' Words." One of her poems was chosen from a world selection by the Norton Center for the Arts to be featured in a gallery exhibit highlighting literature and photography. Her WWII B-17 photography ranks #1 in the world on Google. Her website is: www.judithcody.com

Griff Foxley's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Alembic*, *Burningword*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Evening Street Review*. He holds a bachelor of arts in English literature from Vassar College where he studied with Eamon Grennan, and an MBA in Sustainable Management from Presidio Graduate School in San Francisco. Foxley is a member of the Los Angeles Poets and Writers Collective, and frequently participate in the Jack Grapes' Method Writing Workshops. A New York City native, he's been a Los Angeles resident for the past 11 years, and works as a food business entrepreneur, social justice activist, and writer. He enjoys listening to music, bike riding through the city, and spending time with my wife and two toddlers.

Donna L. Marsh teaches writing and rhetoric at Syracuse University and lives in central New York with her husband, Robert O'Connor. Her creative nonfiction essays have been published in numerous journals and magazines including *Arrive Magazine*, *Rose Red Review*, *Refinery29.com*, *Weirderary* (forthcoming), *WraparoundSouth.org* (2016), *Stone Canoe Journal* and *AwayJournal.org*. She has been publishing on Huffington Post and

the Guardian UK as Donna Marsh O'Connor for the better part of the last ten years.

TJ McPhearson is a poet who lives and writes in Silver City, New Mexico.

Teri Moore served two years in the Peace Corps before settling on a career in law enforcement as a military police officer in the army and then as a patrol officer with the Los Angeles Police Department. She now lives and works as a freelance writer and editor in Sarasota, Florida.

Chris Muniz is a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California in the Literature and Creative Writing program. His creative and critical work center on the intersection of race, identity, and culture in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and American West. A former Editor-in-Chief of Gold Line Press, Chris is currently nearing completion of his first novel, *Owl Medicine*. This is his first publication of poetry.

Stan Sanvel Rubin's work has appeared most recently in *Poetry Northwest*, *The National Poetry Review*, and *The Laurel Review*. His fourth full-length collection, *There. Here.*, was published by Lost Horse Press (2013). He lives on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state.

C.C. Russell lives in Wyoming with his wife and daughter. His writing has recently appeared in such places as *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Word Riot*, *Rattle*, and *The Colorado Review*. His short fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best Small Fictions, and Best of the Net. He has held jobs in a wide range of vocations – everything from graveyard shift convenience store clerk to retail management with stops along the way as dive bar dj and swimming pool maintenance. He has lived in New York and Ohio. He can be found on Twitter @c_c_russell

Claire Scott is an award winning poet who has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Enzagam* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

Eva-Maria Sher was born in Germany at the end of WWII. She was already writing poems as a child. At seventeen, she emigrated to the United States, studied literature, taught, raised three children, and in the past ten years rediscovered her passion for writing. She lives near Seattle, Washington, where she offers workshops for children and adults in poetry, book-making, collage, and puppetry.

Michael Twist's work can be found in *Cafe Aphra*, *Tethered by Letters*, *Pooled Ink 2015*, *F(r)iction*, and *Story Shack*. Michael has won several fiction contests, including the William Faulkner Riverfest Literary Competition (2011) and the Quid Novi Festival Writing Contest (2011) as well as the Tethered by Letters (2015) Flash Fiction Contest. Additionally, Hourglass Literary Journal awarded Twist its Special Jury Award (2016). He teaches literature in Portland and lives in Sandy, Oregon with his wife and two

daughters. Twist is the winner of *Red Savina Review*'s First Flash Fiction Contest for his flash piece "Forest for the Trees."

Richard Weaver lives in Baltimore Maryland where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank. One day he hopes to make the last payment on his student loans. His book, *The Stars Undone*, was taken from a larger collection about the Mississippi artist, Walter Anderson. Four poems later became the libretto for a symphony, *Of Sea and Stars*, composed by Eric Ewazen of Juilliard. His 2016 publications or acceptances include *Aberration Labyrinth*, *Allegro*, *Clade Song*, *Conjunctions*, *Crack the spine*, *Dead Mule*, *Five 2 One*, *Gingerbread House*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *Gnarled Oak*, *Kestrel*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Magnolia Review*, *Modern Poetry Quarterly Review*, *OffCourse*, *Quiddity*, *Red Eft Review*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Steel Toe Review*, *Stonecoast Review*, *The Litterateur*, & *Triggerfish*.

German-born **Chila Woychik** has bylines in journals such as *Silk Road*, *Storm Cellar*, and *Soundings East*, and was awarded the Linda Julian Creative Nonfiction Award (Emrys Foundation, 2016). She craves the beautiful and lyrical, scours the pedestrian Iowan countryside for such, all while editing the *Eastern Iowa Review*.