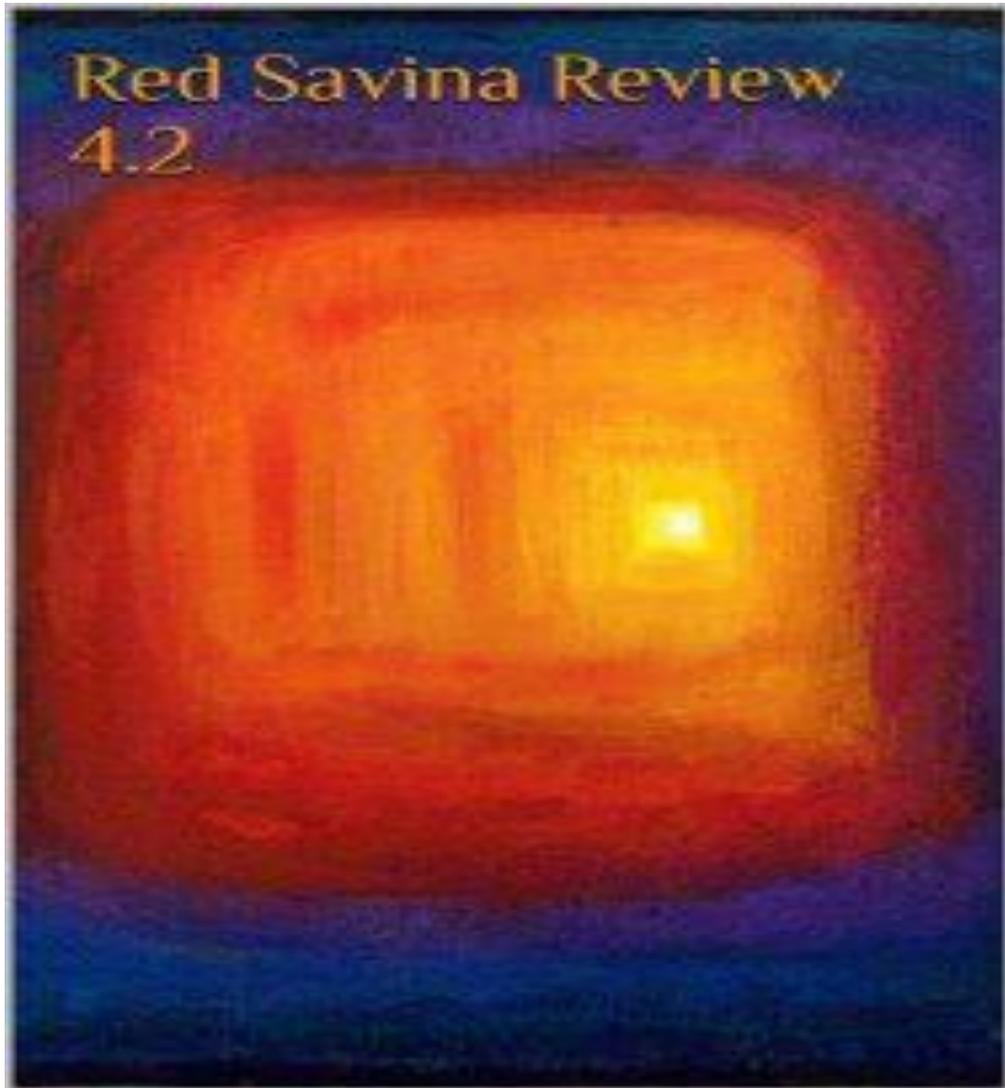


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Contents
Creative Nonfiction

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>Ryan R. Latini</i> | <i>Back through the Rifling</i> |
| <i>Donna L. Marsh</i> | <i>In the Shade of Apparition</i> |
| <i>Lauren Walden Rabb</i> | <i>The White Dove of the Desert</i> |
| <i>Robert Vivian</i> | <i>Cricket Song</i> |

Poetry

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>Marisa Adame</i> | <i>only prayer</i> |
| <i>Roy Bentley</i> | <i>The Dead Reveal the Secrets of Newark, Ohio, Black Bear Plays with Pink Balloon</i> |
| <i>Alan Basting</i> | <i>FOLLOWING LOVE</i> |
| <i>Nick Conrad</i> | <i>On a Death</i> |
| <i>Elizabeth Crowell</i> | <i>THE PATRONS</i> |
| <i>Juditha Dowd</i> | <i>Calvin Claimed God's Grace Was Irresistible</i> |
| <i>Charles Kell</i> | <i>Repeat Offender</i> |
| <i>Sandra Kolankiewicz</i> | <i>Communique #6</i> |
| <i>Kristin Laurel</i> | <i>Faith, Revisited</i> |
| <i>Pamela Rader</i> | <i>Hair the Color of Oak Leaves</i> |
| <i>Luke Roe</i> | <i>Exit, Crash Dummy</i> |
| <i>David Anthony Sam</i> | <i>Prayer of Vapor</i> |
| <i>Gerard Sarnat</i> | <i>Don't Look Back</i> |
| <i>Christian Stock</i> | <i>brick and knife fight</i> |
| <i>Laura Sweeney</i> | <i>Gustavo's Sorrow</i> |

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <i>Sarah Brown Weitzman</i> | <i>WHEN I WAS A CHILD, "WINGS OF DESIRE"</i> |
| | |

Fiction

| | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Crystal Lane Swift Ferguson</i> | <i>Meth</i> |
| <i>Sean Padraic McCarthy</i> | <i>Render Unto Satan</i> |
| <i>Forest Arthur Ormes</i> | <i>Vanderdecken</i> |

Art

| | |
|----------------------|-----------|
| <i>Allen Forrest</i> | <i>In</i> |
|----------------------|-----------|

Ryan R. Latini

BACK THROUGH THE RIFLING

It was predawn and the blackness of the woods was darker than the surrounding night. I had never been aware of shades of black, but there they were. There was a three-mile dirt road off the highway into State Game Land 127—25,000 acres in Monroe County, PA. I realized I was very much a passenger in Tim's truck, but I had gone to worse places with worse people.

I was sober for about a year and a half when I started hunting deer in the fall of 2014.

The tires cracked and popped along the road. Nerves and my layered clothing summoned steam to the truck windows. Would I be able to kill a deer?

I remembered a frog from my youth.

A nocturnal storm had ground over the town, summoning earthworms like sexless Lazaruses onto the sidewalks. I was eleven. I remember crouching in the August steam of asphalt and ozone, looking at the frog's rear quarters smashed to the street by a bicycle or car tire. I remember putting a sewing needle through the head of the frog. I don't know why I was going about town with sewing needles, and I don't remember seeing a frog in town before or after that day, but the image is still easy to conjure—the front three-quarters of the scrambling frog with its back quarter smashed and fused to the street, swimming in place, toward and away from something.

I think it was a mercy kill, but I don't know. Reasons aren't helpful once the needle is pushed by little-boy fingers, thimble-less (I do not remember having a thimble), through the frog.

Needles came and went in other forms after boyhood rainstorms gave way to adulthood torrents—deluges of indulgence through which I whirled, ever grasping for reasons. Reasons, again, aren't very helpful once the plunger of the needle is pushed down and the flash flood rumbles through the washes of the veins.

The twelve steps that I've embraced over the last two years hinge on a higher power, and I could not relate to the God of my childhood sitting in the clouds with a clipboard checking off boxes each time I masturbated or erasing checks each time I helped an old lady cross the street.

Perhaps I was God. God, though, probably never had to disimpact feces from his own rectum—the texture of tree bark—because his opiate-saturated, but otherwise desiccated body had been constipated for days.

Godlike? No, but I had not lived like a human for years. I was not even an animal. I embodied many things—appetite, desire, hatred—but humanity was not one of them. I wanted to get close to what it meant to be alive—again, or maybe for the first time.

The wonder I have toward the indifference of nature is undeniably something higher—not divine, not magic, not mystic, just fantastic, terrifying, and beautiful. I made peace with the God of my childhood, and went looking for a bigger God out in the woods.

The woods are not scarce in Southern New Jersey. Twenty minutes east or south will land you in bogs, Pine Barrens, and disused, overgrown farmland. This part of the Garden State is a residue of an ancient inland sea, but the part that I knew was suburban, more of an offshoot of Philadelphia than cranberry bog. The skyline and the towers of the Walt Whitman Bridge glowed during the night.

There was a patch of woods, a few acres of mangle, that filled in an old, manmade gully dug in 1906 for a rail line—The Westville Cut—but if those few acres were still full of kids like me, I figured I should stay out of the gully, especially if I wanted to avoid a drink or a drug.

If I wanted woods, I would need a guide. I didn't know God's neighborhood, so I sought the guidance of my older cousin, Tim. Tim, I am fairly certain, does not know God, but he knows woods, bows, bullets and whitetail deer.

In the months leading up to the hunt, God looked a lot like a hand turning a kaleidoscope before my eyes. After speaking about hunting with Tim, there were things he kept reiterating, so I noted these as “rules”:

1. No Baiting—that is not hunting, it's shooting. Mere target practice.
2. Do not take a shot you're not sure of. No gut shots. Heart / lung shots. We are not in the business of wounding deer.
3. Be quiet walking in and quiet walking out.
4. Unload rifle / discharge arrow before moving.
5. Don't “fuck about.”

I pushed the steamy, frog splattered street of my youth from my mind and looked at the steam on the truck window. The steam was only on my side. The windows on Tim's side were clear. It was 5:30 in the morning and we were heading for Brady's Lake.

We slipped our gear on, attached the quiver to the bow, and set off into the waning night. We crossed an earthen damn that holds the south end of Brady's Lake. Brady's Lake was

manmade, constructed in the 1890s to accommodate the ice industry. After a quarter mile, we were on the other side of the lake. We followed an old logging road for another quarter mile away from the spillway of the dam.

We turned off the logging road, followed the tree line along the edge of a field, and entered the woods. A few hundred yards later, clipping bright eyes to branches as we went, Tim signaled, cupping our headlamps so we didn't blind one another, and I saw from his gesture that this was to be my tree—the tree from which I would hunt. I watched his headlamp recede into the night. There was the occasional snap of a twig in the distance, but Tim was remarkably lithe and quiet for a six-foot three-inch man.

I looked at my tree.

Isaac Newton apparently had great realizations beneath trees. The Buddha had a few things click beneath the Bohdi tree.

Now I was beneath a tree.

The tree was limbless for at least fifteen feet from the base, which is necessary for the type of tree stand I was using—a “climbing tree stand.” Sporting goods stores sometimes refer to this style of tree stand as a “self-climber.” I secured the platform of the tree stand to the trunk with a notched steel cable and locked it around the tree. I angled the base upward twenty degrees or so because as you climb, the tree tapers and the angle of the platform changes. You cannot adjust the cable once you are up there because it is holding all your weight. I stepped up onto the platform, put my boots in the stirrups, and began inch-worming up the tree.

About five feet up the tree, I realized I hadn't cocked the crossbow. The 200 pounds of force it requires would be difficult to generate up on the 20 inch by 28 inch platform. I climbed back down and cocked the bow.

I began inch-worming back up the tree, got to about 13 feet, and set up. I clipped the linesman rope to the back of my harness and secured the other end around the tree. I screwed my hooks into the tree, pulled up the bow, and hung it. I began pulling up the rope with my gear, but it felt very light, and without needing to adjust my headlamp and look down, I realized I had forgotten to tie the other end to the gear.

Back down the tree.

Finally set up, I undid my bundle of cloths to add a layer as I was sweating and growing colder the longer I sat in the October predawn. When I loosened the cinch, my clothes fell to the ground illuminated by my headlamp.

My gear, hanging from some scrub brush at the base of the tree, looked like the hastily shed clothes of a man about to make spontaneous love. I didn't want to climb down now that daylight was coming through the autumnal canopy. Tim was a hundred or so yards to

my south. I didn't want to disturb the silence. That's not true. I didn't know what to do.

So I sat with my crossbow across my lap. I remembered my last night "out there" as they say in the rooms of recovery.

I had been drinking at a West Philadelphia bar, Queen of Sheba, and sniffed the last bit of the last gram of cocaine that I bought earlier that day. I had been awake for seventy-two hours. I attempted to drink away the fact that I was out of cocaine; it never worked. I tried anyway. I still had my last sixty dollars and, not remembering where my car was, I couldn't drive to the familiar places to get what I needed, so I set out on foot and walked west down Baltimore Avenue into Kingsessing. I did not know the neighborhood in the way I needed to know it—where the right corner was if there was indeed a corner to be found. My best efforts would yield something—anything would be better than nothing.

A man could tell I was looking for The Man. I knew I was getting robbed before I got robbed. He looked homeless, so I knew he didn't have a gun (he would have sold the gun and not robbed me); but this was not my side of the Delaware River and, shot or not, stabbed or not, I would likely die anyway. I didn't have a fight. I didn't have a hope. A moment later, I didn't have my sixty bucks.

I walked down Baltimore Avenue toward University City. I needed money—well, I needed drugs, but money was step one. My cell phone was dead. It had been ringing a lot. Back across the river in New Jersey, I owed quite a bit of money. I found some college kids in front of a gas station and asked to use one of their cell phones. I had two hundred and fifty dollars remaining on my last credit card's credit limit. I would call for a cash advance. At this point in my life, I had never used an iPhone, so I had to have the kids help me. They wanted to leave. My chubby, inexperienced fingers mashed the screen, and for the third time, I typed in my credit card number incorrectly. I begged them for one more try, but they were drunken, rowdy college kids, and I was an emaciated, blind-with-sleep, freshly-robbed junky, so I forfeited the phone.

My nose started bleeding. I didn't have a hanky. I wept. The morning was seeping up the horizon. I always cursed the sunrise and the ensuing birdsong—it meant another day of doing what I do to exist the way I exist.

I wept and bled and smoked cigarettes on a bench in Clark Park. I was in rehab a week later.

The sun rose. I looked at my clothes at the base of the tree and hoped that the sun would warm me. There were still leaves on the trees catching and throwing the October light to the forest floor—stained glass throwing light to the chapel floor.

God was an arsonist setting fire to the sky. I tried to catch the day, to find the threshold where night walked past day, the pair tipping their hats to each other as they changed shifts.

God was a black bear that ran out from a thick dome of scrub brush about two hundred yards from where I had set up thirty minutes after the morning broke.

My delight gave way to shivering. With my clothing on the ground, I began to experience the chill of the October day. It was in the high 40s, but with only a layer that is meant to whisk sweat from the body and allow air through, the 40s began to feel like subfreezing temperatures after hour two in the tree.

I suddenly existed solely in my cold legs. I couldn't perceive anything except cold. The cold brought me somewhere else—somewhere beyond the neural cage behind my eyes. It didn't end there—it couldn't end there. I felt alive, chilled through, like the boughs of the tree holding me, the mountain holding the tree, the cosmos' bed of space and time holding it all.

If an army of goose-stepping deer came through selling cocaine that morning, I would have missed them.

In the midst of this existential dilemma, the cold disappeared, the shame of the past was off somewhere with the chill of my legs, and three hours, it seemed, passed in the time of a breath. The sun had moved across the sky without my focus or attention—amazing.

Did I just hunt? Was this hunting?

Tim did not see any deer that day either. On the ride home, I told him it only took me fifteen minutes from arrival at the tree to being set up in the stand ready to hunt. I truly believed this. He said it was closer to an hour: he could see my headlamp going up and down the tree.

* * *

In my addiction, I had become a liability. I was failing physically and emotionally. Legally, there was a crescendo growing around me. For the last five years “out there,” no one would come close enough to touch me.

So it was baffling the next week when Tim called me to hunt again. We went each Saturday throughout bow, muzzleloader, and rifle seasons.

On a snowy Saturday in December, during firearms, a fog rose to meet the sun. The thin spires of the treetops rose around the clearing over which I was set-up. The bare branches crosshatched the squinting dawn—a bloodshot eye peeking through on the patch of woods.

I now had a few Saturday hunts under my belt, so I set up much faster these days. This Saturday morning, because of the snow and the fog, I did not feel the usual dynamism of the woods. Everything was frozen, muffled, and hard to see due to the sun summoning the fog from the frozen ground.

Later that morning, I was flanked by a group of six or seven does. I did not have a good shooting lane on the large doe and, due to the muffling snow, I hadn't heard them approach, so they were in too close to position myself for a shot without spooking them. One doe lingered in my line of sight, but it was so small it would have looked like I was carrying a briefcase out of the woods if I shot it. The larger one behind me was over my right shoulder and getting a shot off without spooking it would have been impossible.

Despite the cloak of fog, I could feel Tim's eyes on me, imploring me to take a shot at the briefcase doe. I just sat and watched it walk back behind me, silently, no leaf crunch in the deadened snow, off into the fog. When I turned back around, I saw why they had run off. A tank of a buck was coming into the one-hundred foot by one-hundred foot clearing. I raised my rifle. He was quartered towards me at about sixty yards and I could see his snout and antler, but his body was blocked by a large tree. I kept the crosshair in front of the tree where I thought he would emerge if he continued walking. I looked at Tim, and he looked at me as if to say, "Why is your goddamned rifle raised? Are you fucking about?" He had not yet seen the buck.

He looked toward the buck and in one seamless act, like a swinging sickle, raised his rifle and shot. I couldn't see the deer, but there was a mess of snow and leaves kicking from behind the tree. Tim—the sickle still swinging—pulled out the bolt and cycled through another round. His second shot stopped all the movement.

God, this morning, was a transfer of energy.

Tim lowered his rifle, sat back on his pad in the tree stand, laid the rifle across his lap and slipped his hands back into his muff with a simplicity that said, Send another one my way and I'll drop him too, but for now, I am letting go of the moment.

We inspected the deer's massive body. Tim handed me his glasses and began gutting the deer while I hiked my gear out to the edge of the woods near the logging road a few hundred yards away. I went back for his gear and hiked it out while he finished dressing the deer. We dragged the deer out to the clearing. Tim asked for his glasses back for his return to the truck where he would piece together a small gurney-style cart, hike it back a half mile to where I'd wait with the deer and gear, we'd load the deer, and then hike out together.

But I couldn't find Tim's glasses.

I hiked back through the bloody bobsled track of snow to where he gutted the deer and found his glasses smashed into one of my boot prints. I knelt down. Maybe this was someone else's boot print. I suddenly felt a spasm in my gut. I didn't take the shot on the briefcase doe—it wasn't much, but it would have been mine. All those hours in the woods, and I would have had something to show for it. I didn't have a line of sight, no more than an antler in my crosshair, on the behemoth Tim shot. If the deer had walked a little faster, then maybe I would have had the drop on him. He would have been

broadside. He would have been mine.

If I didn't get robbed that night—my last night “out there”—would I have bought just enough to push me over the edge into oblivion?

None of this mattered, because it didn't happen that way.

I looked at Tim's glasses smashed in my boot print. I couldn't complete the task of holding his glasses without destroying them, so how would I ever bring down a big buck? How am I going to stay sober for the rest of my life? I begged air back into my lungs, walked back out to the clearing, and showed Tim his glasses.

God was frustration kneading my gut like dough. I had four rounds in my magazine, but it wouldn't be enough to shoot down the sun, to shoot down the fog, to shoot down the past.

That night, Tim and I butchered the deer in the garage of my uncle's house. Beneath the bare light bulb in the garage, I cut into that deer, following every membrane, along the bone, separating still-warm groups of muscle, cutting out vein and fat and tendon. There was nothing behind the muscle. Nothing behind the bone. The deer was not hiding anywhere in the pile of meat and bone. There was not much to any of it.

Tim's shoulder bumped the hanging bulb in the garage as we were cleaning up. It was a metronome. It was keeping time. I thought of Brady's Lake, carved and flooded by man for a purpose that was long dead. Off to the side of the logging road, there was still a stone block foundation of an ice house stacked beneath the vegetation. The bulb swung and I thought of the Appalachian Mountains and how hundreds of millions of years ago they were as high as the Alps—eroded and blown away like the men and horse teams pulling ice blocks from Brady's Lake.

I had only been sober for a year and a half. Maybe God is just time?

I remember thinking.

God was a broom ever sweeping dust. God was a broom that swept a piece of dust from the threshold of dark and light back into the light where it could whirl about (“fuck about” among the trees with its cousin) for a bit longer and delight in its existence. God was a swinging bulb in a frozen garage on the top of ancient withered mountains.

I think of the threshold I saw each Saturday morning—saw but couldn't pin down—when night yielded to dawn, and I just don't know. I don't know why Tim asked me if I wanted to hunt with him next season. I don't know why I said yes.

Donna L. Marsh

IN THE SHADE OF APPARITION

Before September 11th of 2001, in fact, since I was fifteen, I had recurring dreams of walls of water. In each of these dreams, I would either be running away from the wall or sitting or standing still in place with a loved one as the wall of water engulfed. Never was that loved one my daughter Vanessa. But in each of the dreams, by the time I understood that the water was powerful, it was already engulfing. Already poised overhead to fall.

On the days just following 9/11 in images transmitted through our televisions and computer screens I would see endless iterations of the same dream—only instead of water, the gray wall was concrete and chemical, flesh and blood and bone, the matter of earth that would crush the body of my first born, my baby girl Vanessa and her child, too, enwombed inside of her.

These are the dreams through which I have seen my Vanessa since that day. Each dream, a mark in our paths to reunite. And understand, before I lost her, I knew Freud, knew him so palpably that I would say to my students over and over again as an incantation: Freud gave us a gift—to know that when we sleep our dreams are anything but literal, that they are encoded and meant to be so, that they can mean anything, anything at all, except the literal. And one day as I was saying this, I wondered, is there only one kind of dream?

To say I miss her, cannot capture what the lack leaves behind. That lack, that absence has a form. Not often, but as needed I see her in my dreams. Though those walls of water, if only in my dreams, have stopped.

I

She stands before an office building in New York City. She is wearing a red dress with brass buttons, similar to one I loved of my own as a child, though mine was navy blue. We call this sailor style.

Her hair is shorter than she normally wore it when she chose the length, but once when my mother kept her for a weekend, when Vanessa was fifteen, my mother had it cut short, a bubble cut, because Vanessa had tight curly hair. Then I could see how much she longed for her length back. For perhaps the only time in her life, Vanessa did not act as if she knew she was beautiful.

She stands in front of the building in the red dress, her hair short, her face a hologram of the fifteen year-old and the twenty-nine year-old. She waves to me, gently. She says, though not in words, I have to do this. I'm not gone. I'm okay.

Her face is somber or sober (I cannot be sure which) but she does, she does love me.

II

She is in the whirlpool tub in my bathroom, her red nails and the marks they have left on the tub so clear to me. It is this that convinces me that I have been wrong. She is back. No. She has never been gone. She is sitting, her summer-browned skin glistening. I move toward her. Smell her fruity wild hair. Touch her cool skin, so smooth and so soft. I want to linger over her, to hold her.

But she says, abruptly, sharply: "I'm not gone."

"Then," I ask, "why am I am so broken?"

"I don't know. So stop."

"You're here?"

"I'm here. That's what I'm trying to say."

"Then nothing is wrong," I say, relieved. Relieved of burden so great.

Until that moment, that key moment when I wake to the sun blazing shards of light across my morning bed. And she is gone. She is all gone. Except for the red nail polish scars still on my bathroom light switch, those red marks I will never clean. Though someday, unknowing, a housekeeper will.

III

I am in a basement office of some official building. The office is one of several in a row on the same floor. There are windows on one side that tell of the sun this morning. There are, too, windows and a windowed door, covered in closed venetian blinds that face the hallway outside of the room. I am dressed in a skirt and blouse. Vanessa is here. She sits across from me, though not at the desk.

I am crying. Sobbing, though quietly. She is leaning toward me. "Stop, please stop," she pleads. "I'm here."

I don't say this, but I don't believe her. How can I?

She looks at me with loving sympathy, but she has to go. So I cannot, because I don't

want her to go, stop crying.

“Look,” she says to me, “I have to go for a minute. I’ll be back.”

“No,” I say. “You won’t.”

She takes her purse from her lap. She puts it in my own. “Would I leave this if I were not coming back?”

I look into her striking, sharp, clear blue eyes. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Then hold this and I’ll be right back.”

I almost believe her. So I clutch the black purse. And I watch her walk out of the door.

The phone on my bedside table jangles and I try to hold onto the purse and ignore it, but I am up. Clearly. There is no purse. There is only my white comforter, and I am bound in it.

I pick up the receiver. “I can’t talk. I’m sleeping,” I tell whoever is on the other end and I hang up and fall back to the office.

She walks back in. She comes to me and takes the purse. “I’m here,” she says. She says this as if she knew I would wake to the real world and find my way back to the dream.

“I am here.”

I will, on this particular morning, wake up again. Again my phone will ring. It will be my sister Robin who will tell me she, too, saw Vanessa. Only right in the middle of the dream, she tells me, her phone rang. And she, as did I, will hang up from life and return to a strange office, in a strange basement to the one face she most wants to see. Hand to G-d, that’s exactly how it happened.

IV

I am reading or I have read a year before (I do not remember) *The Likeness* by Tana French. The novel is about a female detective called to a crime scene where she finds a dead woman in a cave who is her doppelganger. I imagine, in the way a reader pieces together place from the details a writer offers, that Cassie (the protagonist) lives in a funky apartment with bad hardwood floors aged and dull and no longer meeting the walls, yellowed paint, and mismatched glasses. Right next to the door to the apartment is a coat closet.

I dream that I am in this apartment. But, and this is key: I am me. Though I share Cassie’s immersion in some primal mystery that encases her, I am Donna. I have two sons—James and Jackson and a daughter who is lost. But Vanessa is in the coat closet, cleaning it. I am so happy to see her. I go to her, but she is not in the mood for my embrace. Annoyed

almost.

“Why do you always do this?” she asks.

“I have to. I miss you so.”

“I told you before. I’ll tell you again. Nothing has changed. Only your imagination has changed.”

“Can’t I just hold you?”

“I have cleaning to do. And nothing is wrong.”

I don’t respond to her in words, but in my mind I utter the refrain, “Then why does it hurt so when I wake?”

I do wake. Again. To the utter and uttered and absolute fact that is the essence of earth, I do not have a daughter here anymore.

V

She is in a dark room with a high ceiling, higher than any I have ever seen on earth. Outside, visible through the large and clear gothic windows of the room is dark water on all sides. She is small though not young. She is guided by a man in a robe who has his hand on one of her elbows. She stops in front of a long semi-spheric table where she faces a tableau of judges who sit and one urges her to take a seat in a single chair at the center of the sphere. I cannot see them clearly, and she does not face me, but in some way she communicates: I am busy. I will see you soon. Wish me luck.

VI

The last day I spoke to her with my voice, not through a keyboard, I asked her, no, I demanded, “Do not call me!” I was angry. She was pleading for me not to be. I was right. She was right, too. An impasse. Our usual impasse. I held my cell phone in my hand in the mall near our home and as I stood outside of J Crew, and I hit end. How I wish this was a dream. How I wish I could have just said to her what I now say publicly to her murderers, that peace is a value. For the sake of humanity, for the sake of life, lay down arms. But I did not say this to her when she was here on earth. So I have worked for it in her name. And people listen: people who are against war in the names of 9/11—they listen. The Hibakasha of Japan, those whose ancestral ties to a bombing that made gel of flesh—they listen and they understand. But they also know that there are fewer of us than those who would produce more war, so they come often to my house to hear a familiar story.

A man from Japan is coming to interview me soon. He wants to tell my story to his people in Japan and the ex-pats who live here in the states who know well the power of

America's harsh judgments.

There are others who know the horror of endless conflict. I have been interviewed by many people before, usually around the anniversary when we in America take stock of what we have done in response. Each interview is similar—the questions of my motivation and then, for effect, the personal questions about my daughter, the “oh, poor you” moment in each essay they write or each radio or television interview.

Two nights before he arrives at my home, she comes to me. She is again in my whirlpool bath. I am grabbing at her arm and her hair and she is so loving toward me. She looks into my eyes and says with that absolute promise, “I love you, too,” but this time she adds, “I miss the boys.”

The boys are in the distance. We can see them. They are in a sports field. I think it's a soccer game, but only James played soccer. She says, “Can't we just play with them for a while? Can't we just have fun?”

“I just need to hold you,” I say and reach to touch her.

“We can do that later. Let's just play for now.”

I feel the tears drop to my legs as I remain on the side of the whirlpool. My hands shake gently as I stroke her arm. “Please,” I beg her, “I need you.”

“I am here. I will always be here, but we can all play together right now. Please let's just play with the boys.” And that is the moment that I snap, that even in a dream I cannot maintain the lie.

“You are so fucking not here. You say that,” I choke, “but in the morning, every fucking morning, I wake up in this fucking world, in this fucking bed and you are gone! You are not here. You are anywhere but here and I am facing that truth first thing as my eyes open, another fucking day ahead...” I am not finished, but she is holding me. I smell her hair, so fragrant, but not of her fruity shampoo; she smells of fruit, real fruit, peaches and plums. I continue, “The first thing I feel every time is the shock of you gone.”

“The shock of you gone, again. And another morning.”

“I promise,” she says, “that I am not gone. I am here.”

So I wake the next day. I have work so I am driving on Route 57, a large four lane suburban road, lined with all of the chain stores of suburban life. The day is bright. I come to the intersection where if I turn, I will be in front of the high school where all three children spent their days at different times. As gently as a touch, the touch of a love, the touch of a daughter who is gone, I play back the dream. It occurs to me. The dream that was not the first thing I remembered that morning. In fact, that morning I woke up refreshed. Feeling fine. Feeling renewed.

And for the first time since that horrid day, I know with certainty, she is right here.

The next day I open the door to the man from Japan. We sit at my kitchen table and he writes down the answers I give him to each of his questions: Why does a woman who lost her child advocate for peace? Why did your country go to war with Iraq? Why is Guantanamo Bay still open? Why do you want it closed? And I give my answer to his questions. On that horrid day, I lost a daughter and my country. One of those can be restored. I wait for the end of his Why? Why? Why? Until he has finally exhausted each of the puzzles of the body political and then he asks, in the way they all ask, the question of her. Only he asks it differently and I know that she has prepared me for this, too:

“When,” he asks in broken, Japanese inflected English, “was the last time you saw your daughter?”

“I saw her two nights ago.” And when I have finished explaining, he sobs.

VII

I am trying to tell the story of my loss. So I write and write and bring my girl back to life on the page. My fingers work to capture her, to place her back in the world. And just as I do each time I re-read a book I love or a movie, I pray the ending will be different. And I realize after seeing the text again, that it is never the end that matters, but the details we have missed the first time around. As metaphors unfold in our imaginations anew we are drawn to old texts. Freud told us dreams are meant for interpretation because they can never be literal; the writer understands that the images of every day are just as encoded, just as full a vessel as a dream for what the processes of knowing obviate. An ending never matters so much as the substance of the center, just as remembering a good meal is never about the last bite.

So I write to relive our life together and to apologize for every misstep. One morning, as I was engaged in the writing of one of my essays about Vanessa, I woke from a dream about groping for a brown pearl and in that metaphor, because I fear pearls, I knew I had to tell a story of something I did not want to see. Something about Vanessa. Something about me.

I asked her, with my lips, after I finished the first draft, is it okay? Can I tell this?

My cell phone alerted me to a text as I was in the process of revising one section. From my son James: How did you sleep last night?

Fine, y?

I saw Vanessa. It was weird.

I called him immediately. He told me his dream. “She was busy, and really disturbed. She said, ‘I always support you. Stop asking for permission.’ And then there was this witch.

She looked like a witch.”

“It’s okay, James. I get it.”

“I don’t,” he said. “The witch...”

“She was saying it was her, James. Remember? Her birthday is Halloween.”

When I hung up the phone, I asked her, “Why, why didn’t you come to me? I would have loved to see you.”

But almost as quickly as I uttered the question out loud, the answer was plain—no matter the certainty of truths that come to me in slumber, I will always wonder if they are the writer, always at work to repair that which was not necessarily broken.

VIII

She comes as a child. Her eyes are the bright blue with only the slightest tinge of gray that I saw so many times when she was sad. Her hair is lighter, blonder and full of face-framing curls, just as it was when she was a child. Maybe she is three or four. She is reaching out for me. She wants to cry, but someone else is there with her.

For the first time since she is gone, when I wake up I am afraid for her. Two days later, James will have a similar dream.

IX

Night. I am busy. Cleaning. She is there in the corner. I haven’t seen her in a long time, but she is sitting. She is wearing a black dress that drapes down her body like dark water, stunningly beautiful, her eyes not ablaze, but subdued, calm.

I walk over to her where she is. Where she has always been. In the dream I know this, though I do not know it is a dream. She is in the corner of my life.

She looks about forty-four. It is 2015. I do not register this fact in the dream because she is not gone. In this dream she has never been gone. It is all I want. She is forty-four, so I am sixty-one.

I approach her slowly, to savor the moment, not because I miss her but because she is my daughter and I love her. She puts out her arms to me and I move to embrace, but before I pull her fully to my breast, I move my fingers so delicately through her hair. It is soft and I can feel each strand. Then I outline her cheeks. And her lovely arms. And she, because she is so with me in this moment, touches me, in the same way. I feel her deft and delicate touch on my hair, my face, my eyes.

We linger like this for a while. In this gentle world of mother daughter. I love that I have

a daughter so wise, so old.

Is something wrong, I wonder, I ask myself. But then I can't remember why I asked. Thank G-d, I say as I finally move in and hold her close to me, so real that nothing else can ever again be as true.

It is here I live.

Lauren Walden Rabb

THE WHITE DOVE OF THE DESERT

Off the road between Tucson and Green Valley, Arizona, the White Dove of the Desert rises out of the shimmering heat and glows in the distance. It is the San Xavier del Bac Mission, dating back to the 18th century. The brightness of its façade seems fantastical in the dusty beige and green landscape. But if you don't know to look for it, you won't see it.

I always look for it. It is a talisman, there to comfort me while my mother lies dying.

My mother has been dying for a while, in small increments, almost invisible to everyone except those who have known her the longest. She began checking out of life a number of years ago – it's hard to remember when. But slowly she stopped showing interest in doing anything or going anywhere, and her questions about family members were limited to asking if they were OK. Once assured they were, that was all she needed to know.

But more specifically, about a month ago she stopped eating almost anything. And then she got sick and stopped eating altogether. Turns out she has a complete bowel blockage, and she is not a candidate for surgery.

Now she lies in hospice. Prepared to go, ready to go, with a body that is taking its time. And I make the 45-minute drive between Tucson and Green Valley every day, to sit with her, and offer solace to my father.

If I forget to look for The White Dove of the Desert, I am distraught.

When my mother was twelve, she took the bus by herself from Queens Village to downtown Manhattan, and auditioned for Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts. She sang and tap danced, and walked off with a contract. When she got home, my grandmother promptly burst into tears and told Mom that her only wish for her daughter was that she would get a college degree. She was afraid that if Mom began performing professionally, she'd never finish school.

So my mother tore up the contract and went on with her life. She loved her mother more than she wanted to be in show business.

About a year ago, my mother announced that no matter what, she was not going to the hospital again. This was after her fourth bout with an unknown ailment in which she became incredibly weak and her blood pressure shot up. It was never determined whether her blood pressure spike was the cause of the weakness, or the effect, but in any event she would be admitted for three or four days while the doctors utilized every drug in their arsenal to find the perfect cocktail to stabilize her condition. Then they would give up on a diagnosis and send her home.

She hated every minute of her time in the hospital. She complained about most of the nurses, didn't like the food, and was annoyed by needing to call a tech to get up for the bathroom.

But we had to tell my mother that as long as she continued to have these episodes, the only way she could avoid being taken to the hospital was if she were in hospice care. My parents lived in assisted living, and due to insurance concerns the ability to avoid the hospital was somewhat out of their control.

So Mom asked us to bring in a hospice nurse to interview her, to see if she qualified.

The nurse, Kim, was incredibly sweet. She talked to us, she talked to Mom, and then had to tell her that she simply didn't qualify yet. Kim actually felt badly about it. She promised to check back in a few months.

Postscript to this episode: when my Mom went into the hospital this time, she was perfectly compliant and never complained about anything. And though she underwent some very unpleasant methods to remove all of the feces from in front of and behind the bowel blockage, she thanked everyone who treated her.

Second postscript: Kim is now her hospice nurse.

When my mother was sixteen, she went down to the local courthouse with her mother, stood before the judge, and asked for a restraining order against her father. The judge – perhaps because my grandfather was notorious in the neighborhood – complied. That was the end of my grandfather beating my mother.

He wasn't invited to the wedding my grandmother threw for her three years later. In fact, my mother didn't speak to her father again for over a decade, including those three years they still lived in the same house.

She relented when he had a stroke.

My father has been married to my mother for 61 years. They had an extraordinarily good marriage – which my brother and I took for granted. We didn't know how lucky we were to have parents who loved each other deeply and truly enjoyed spending time with us.

My father can't sit in the room and watch my mother die, so every day I encourage him to go do something. Play bridge, see a movie, even go to the casino. Something to distract him for a few hours. But I am OK sitting there, giving my mother sips of water, holding her hand. Talking to her. I tell her it's OK to go, that the afterlife she believes in is waiting. I tell her that soon she'll see Grandma, and she always smiles.

She can't speak much. The NG tube irritated her throat, and now she's hoarse from coughing. The nurse explains to me that as her body breaks down it is also hard for her to move phlegm through her throat. The constant coughing is clearing that out. It is hard to listen to, but doesn't bother my mother at all.

In fact, she seems comfortable, and doesn't want pain medicine. Most of the time she dozes. When she wakes up she glances and sees me there, and nods. But all she ever actually speaks about, is that her chariot is coming to take her to another building. Or her wagon is coming. Or her stretcher. At first I thought she actually didn't understand that hospice is her last stop.

My husband says that another building is a metaphor. But I don't understand why it's so specific.

When I was four, I became ill with a very sore throat. The doctor wanted me to have a strep test. But when I saw the long Q-tip swab that would have to go into my throat, I closed my mouth and refused to do it. The nurses – two of them – assured my mother that I would comply if she only left the room. They then cajoled, pleaded, and threatened to tie me down, none of which got me to open my mouth. In fact, by the end I was screaming with terror. In frustration they finally let my mother back into the room. She pulled me aside and whispered into my ear: "If you don't do this, I am going to break every bone in your body." Much to the nurses' amazement, I walked back and opened my mouth.

I was more afraid of my mother than of the nurses.

Throughout this ordeal, my mother has occasionally agreed to something when I ask, after refusing it for other people. This morning she refused morphine again. She claims not to be in any pain, but she moans when the nurses have to move her to clean her. So this afternoon the nurse tried again, and this time I smiled at her and said, "Just a small amount. So they can clean you without hurting you." Mom nodded.

But I cried when they gave it to her, because morphine also helps the body relax, and speeds its journey towards letting go.

When I was about eleven, Mom became a student of the supernatural. She went to mediums for readings, and spiritualists for advice. It seemed like a fad – a lot of the women in the neighborhood were doing it. But then it all took a strange turn. Our house was haunted for about 8 months.

Of course, I can't absolutely say that my mother's delving into the unknown led directly to the haunting, but nevertheless it happened at that time. It started simply enough. My mother was trying to close a table by herself after removing the leaf from the center. Of course this is impossible to do by yourself, so she left the room and figured she'd close it when my Dad got home. When she returned to the kitchen a few hours later, the table was mostly closed.

If everything the spirit did had been benign like that, it might have been rather charming. But whatever or whoever it was liked to scare me and my brother. I felt and heard it running up the stairs behind me. It turned the lights on and off all night in my brother's bedroom. It glowed on the wall of my room one night until I built up the courage to get my father. Objects mysteriously turned up in the bedroom hallway that didn't belong there. Overall, there was a feeling of heaviness – a strange sense that we were being watched.

It ended one night when my parents heard a knock-knocking on what they thought was their bedroom door. But no one was there, although the knocking continued. My father checked all of the house doors, and windows, and even went outside to see if a tree branch was scraping the house. But when he left the room he couldn't hear it. Eventually he and Mom discovered that they could only hear it from the bedroom, that in fact it was coming from beneath their bed. Since they couldn't see anything there, they simply decided to roll over and go back to sleep.

That was the end. I've always thought that my Mom's indifference forced the spirit to give up.

My mother should not still be alive. She has gone 21 days without eating, and she was very weak before that. For the last few months all she has been interested in doing is going to the dining hall, and lying in bed watching television. Her muscles have been atrophying for a long time – even lifting herself out of bed has been difficult for a while.

The nurses say that she is still alive because she is waiting. They think she is waiting for my parents' anniversary, which is still a few days away. But I can't imagine my mother caring about a few days here or there when it comes to a 61-year marriage.

I think she is waiting for a sign. I just don't know what it is.

Everyone in the neighborhood found my mother formidable. She was infamous for things like the time she got Sears to replace a lemon washing machine by threatening to stand outside the store with a sign explaining her disappointment in their service. Or the time she took our neighbor to court for not keeping his dog from peeing on our gas grill (it caused a leak). Once she picked up the dog poop from another neighbor's dog and put it in their mailbox. She was tired of asking them to pick it up themselves.

Some of our friends were afraid of her. She was fierce in her love for us, so if anyone said a mean word to us she would never forgive them – long after we'd ourselves moved on. Eventually we stopped telling her about anything bad that happened to us. When my first marriage was falling apart, I didn't tell her anything until I announced I was leaving my husband. I hadn't wanted to share any of the struggles we'd been through, for fear that she would never get past it even if I did.

Over the years this kept us from being as close as we could have been. I knew she loved me – that was never in doubt. But I began to feel that she didn't really know me, and that I didn't really know her.

These weeks in hospice have helped put some of that to rest. Just being there, every day, sitting by her side. As I think about the high standards she held us up to, I remember the pride she took in our accomplishments.

Her refusal to ever let anything or anyone get the better of her now seems like something marvelous. She was always unmovable; but for every time that was an obstacle, there was a time it was magnificent.

My mother's breathing is troubled, but she is comfortable. All day she has lain here without speaking to me. She barely knows I'm in the room, yet I am still careful and courteous. I want to put on the light or open the blinds so I can read better, but I don't want to disturb her sleep. Instead I put the TV on, very low. She always liked Judge Judy.

I think she must be very close to the end, but how can I really know? This is my first up-close death. If there are specific signs, I'm ignorant. All I know is that it seems unrealistic that she can go on much longer. So as I leave, I say something I haven't said before. "Mom, I'm leaving for the night. If I don't see you again, I just want you to know I love you."

At 1 am the phone rings, and of course I know. It is raining; rain in early June in the desert is a rare phenomenon. I tell myself that rain is a blessing. That the rain is in her

honor.

Mom and Dad followed us to Arizona. They had already retired to Florida, but once they learned we were going to Tucson they asked how we would feel if they came too – while they were still young enough to make their own friends and their own life. They understood that one day they might need family nearby.

I saw the wisdom of their plan, but I was concerned they wouldn't like it here. The desert isn't beautiful to everyone. It's a spare beauty – the opposite of the rich tropical Florida landscape. But Mom was an immediate convert. "Look at the Santa Ritas!" she said. "They're named after me." She loved those mountains; she told me once she believed she was reincarnated from someone who had lived in the southwest before.

But oddly, almost from the moment she got here and felt at home, she started leaving us. Perhaps she needed to come home to prepare to leave. For all that she loved the Sonoran landscape, she quickly stopped looking at it. The woman who used to fully enjoy long summer outdoor vacations – camping and traveling all over the east coast – became someone who rarely looked outside and never wanted the windows open. She began turning inward in action and spirit.

My brother and I couldn't comprehend it, and it made us sad and angry.

I get up, because I don't know what else to do, and I send the email to everyone I've been communicating with. As I sit down to write it I am filled with a strange sensation. I feel joy. It's the last thing I expect to feel, but I know why I'm happy. I have my mother back.

Not the disengaged stranger of the past few years who sometimes was mean to my father and didn't truly understand much of what I said to her. That woman was so like, and unlike, the true woman that I didn't dare think of what I was missing for fear I'd be bereft.

No. If there's an afterlife, then my mother is back again, whole. The real Rita Walden. My mother.

For a moment I think about The White Dove of the Desert, deserted at this hour. But shining brightly off in the desert under the rain. I silently thank it for getting me through this. For helping to give me the strength to sit at my mother's bedside for weeks, with love, offering comfort. While it offered comfort to me as I drove up and down the highway.

I am Jewish but it doesn't matter. The mission is a sanctuary, a place where heaven and earth can meet. I've been inside in the past, but stepping inside isn't necessary. It's just

the white light off in the distance that is the symbol of spiritual grace.

For in my mind, when my mother passed her soul rose out of her body. It hovered above the bed, then elegantly turned and flew towards my father's bedroom, and then on to Tucson where I slept. It graced us with a blessing, and then flew up into the sky – high out of the heat and towards the stars, rising with the power of her spirit and indomitable will. To another place. Rising on the wind and soaring away from us. Just like a bird. Just like a dove... like a beautiful white dove in the desert, that you wouldn't see unless you knew to look for it.

A few days after Mom passes, I go to my regular yoga class. The instructor, Julie, asks how I'm doing, and I tell her that I'm a bit disappointed that I haven't gotten a sign yet – a sign from my mother telling me she's still here in some way. Then I laugh and say, "But I suppose there might be an orientation period. I mean, it must take time to learn how to make a sign."

"Actually," Julie tells me, "in yoga they teach that if the patient has been sick for a while before they pass, they have to go someplace first to get their spirit rejuvenated. Sort-of like a hospital. They stay there until they become completely themselves again. And then they are released, fully healed. Just wait, you'll get a sign."

So that's what she was trying to tell me. Now I know what Mom meant by another building.

Robert Vivian

CRICKET SONG

Cricket in the dark before dawn sounding for me, for all of us, little lifeboat of tender feeling, chirper of hope and every windblown frailty, cricket inconceivable, cricket unbound, cricket hidden from all human speech and utterance, cricket as the one late summer sound comprising my every love, my every sigh, the love that can't be calculated, can't be solved or understood in a court or classroom only heard as something small and humble sounding in the dark, cricket of the unmailed love letter, the undeclared desire of kiss me, kiss me, kiss me where I stand or kneel, cricket of the astonishing verb to be, cricket pogoing for the longer blades of grass, cricket a two-syllable wonder and fricatives of rubbing legs and oh, how to my wonder and almost shame I have spent all of my life crawling to a river, cricket match and batman in the box, cricket poem and verse, oh, lover of this earth and how my very veins do tremble inside my skin, my body, mirroring rivers and how sore can I be, Lord, as I walk and wade these many miles of water and such clear windows to see through sustaining me, holding me, lifting up my spirit and the heartbreaking beauty of this earth whose roundness shapes my own in a loving swoon and embrace, leaf blown pages of a holy book whose spine is lunar pockmarks and endless staring, oh, my cricket, my windblown cricket, my frailest and gentlest folk singer and gypsy bard whose cadence blows back beauty in the dark from lonely chorus of forever and mutable mortality, little crucified redeemer of the world on your singular pulpit of grass, playing your homemade violin as I wake and sing this gasping praise, your tribute, your triumph, your many eyes that see and feel so much, taking in the moon, the sky, the holy trees swaying before you suddenly go silent.

Marisa Adame

only prayer

i ask God to turn wide-jawed red river
back into water from which a pure child may drink
as i wake up with venial bruises
on my aorta
from ghost fingerprints' pressing on self-destruction the night before

my God,
i am laying teeth at Your feet;
i have pulled them from the mouth of my woes
and i will keep bleeding and hope
he never feels thirsty

maybe he won't leave
if the wine supply
doesn't
run
dry.

the blood is releasing from my insides,
eager to turn itself into wine
with which he can satisfy himself.

my timid lips gape as sobs escape them;
purple gums gnash enamel into powder
fine enough to sugar his morning coffee with

purple gums, purple love:
a balance between bittersweet and beautiful.

dear God, i implore You:
compel him to drop the hands of his demons,
see them as devil,
lift his knees in swift departure
in assurance that something truer than blood river exists
with which he can cleanse his soul.

when his fingers brush the bottle top,
make daggers from the ridges.

direct him to a chapel
where the solar spots encircling his pupils will radiate
as Brother Sun smiles on our union through stained glass windows;
communicate to him that i will not be swept away in blood river

when demon comfort deserts him,
turn wine into life-giving liquid—
tell him i will take his fragmented moments and tie them up
with ampersand

seep into his sleeping.

plant an image in his dreamscape:
a seedling with brown skin and blue eyes—
give him life.

Roy Bentley

The Dead Reveal the Secrets of Newark, Ohio

after D. Nurske

Some few always ask, what is it like being dead?

Like making out in a car in Dawes Arboretum,
in the backseat of a Firebird Formula 400,
a backseat barely existing in time and space—
sex in cars being the favorite sport of the living—
and being willing to try anything, never despairing,
but behaving with expectation of consummation
while it is gorgeous impossibility that registers.

Like lying on the car's summer-hot hood after
on blankets scented of sweat and lovemaking.

Like waiting for fireworks over the Courthouse
on the Square, the limestone spidered with vines
and ivies taking over while you divine differences
between the new growth and inexorable attrition.

Like rusted razor wire and padlocked factories
beyond Story, some of the dead are emptied
of any suggestion of the natural landscape.
Some apparitions echo how the body looks
new and old at the same time and is neither—
like any Firebird whose title changes hands
at each layoff or termination that opens us
to there being no world but this failed one.

Remember, death is leaving home
to return and see everything new again.

It's wading a brackish, polluted Licking River
to skip stones and try and forget your worst day
while you nod to the friend who has followed after
dragging a red fiberglass canoe to the bank, avenues
of river sand and sycamore under wind-rubbed cliffs,

Blackhand Gorge, the cliffs bright with vehemence
part the withering rage of men from the Midwest
and part names and hearts in praise of women.

Black Bear Plays with Pink Balloon

In every revelatory forest, there is that one
with the glint of delight in his eye, swatting,
following through as if that gratifying action,
however wholly unsanctioned at winter's end,
is a private caesura from predation and hunger.
The molecules of a self may be pink by design
or any bear in a national forest be the Almighty
by virtue of distance and the disdain for humans.
Who's to say the gift of speech might not accrue
to the bear in the moment it learns aerodynamics
is a function of surface displacement. To hear it,
the song of paw contacting balloon, and witness
the balloon rising at a rate faster than the fevers
of interest launched by ursine curiosity—to see
the joy, one's enthrallment must be greater than
the fear that Nature and humanity are in a state
wherein the one or the other is about to devour
everything of substance piece by bloody piece.
Oh sure, you love Nature or a notional Nature.
Oh sure, you're taping this on your iPhone 6s
from relative concealment like a fictional god
who doesn't mind being present if nothing is
required. In the national forest, a plastic yes
is lodged between breath and breathlessness
before being dropped at the feet of a creature
who stands on hind legs as if life's table is set
for when there are again no days above ground
and no one to label this as beating-heart tender
and beautiful and, therefore, desperate and real.
No one except a lucky bear at the start of spring
who discovers a toy as round and pink as a soul
and must then voice gladness in a ruined world.

Alan Basting

FOLLOWING LOVE

I am tired of being a roach of a man
Left in the dust of love

Under the thumb of bad ideas,
Guilt and co-dependence,

Crawling these empty rooms
Draped with shadows and breathing

Cupped in the hollows of my ear.
I am tired of my ears, the sound of dreams,

Wires struck with stones.
My tinnitus, a nubile violinist

Strolling canals beneath my brain.
How delicious it would be

To stop the ringing
With meat.

*

Without reason the daylight rests
Its engine under the idling sun

And warmth of the road home.
Breezes push the wheat in waves

And dancing over one hundred acres.
They nudge me along

To a tree where the shade beneath it
Is love, a blessing to the mind

Overheated with crows
And terrorists.

*

I don't want to go on as Stick Man
With a job and lots of money,

Worthless in the sight of Love,
Which would have me

Stroll among panthers in this town
Freely,

With the shining eyes
Of Superman,

My hair on fire,
My soles pressed to earth

And spears of grass flying up
From canyons between my toes.

*

Why be an inheritor of anything,
My love, except your volcano

And its eruptions,
Lips overflowing.

I raise my chorus of thoughts
In praise, my face an open mouth.

I heft love's bass drum to my chest
And begin marching.

Nick Conrad

On a Death

There should have been thunder,
there should have been lightning,
or at least a coyote's wail.

In the end, no forewarning
could forestall his long sought
forgetting. Cacti should have wept

that night for the fair haired one,
hobbled and long past saving.
Afterwards, all was still,

as if some ghost kachina's
dance was done, as if some
sand devil's spinning was all spun.

Elizabeth Crowell

THE PATRONS

They caught him in the men's room with a dictionary
of devils and demons, field guide to native flowers,
tucked in a canvas sack. The day after a thick-paged
slim history of the small town, hand-stitched, disappeared.
When a dictionary of saints went missing,
large as an atlas, with glued-in, colored plates
of human suffering, they suspected him as well.
The town social worker was checking on him weekly,
the way you might an empty house.
Soon, it was someone else, stealing biographies
— Ulysses S. Grant, William Wordsworth, Doris Day.
And then, yesterday's paper, bound with a bamboo rod,
kept going and then a series of mysteries set in Maine.
I want to tell you that the library vanished,
but, of course, it was the people.
One grew too old to walk; the other went on to another home.
In the rooms, the unread books lay on their shelves
no hands to flip the frail pages or eyes
to stare at the glossy photographs, mid-history.
Each word glowed with dark, bleeding print,
like a boat in which you could float away.

Juditha Dowd

Calvin Claimed God's Grace Was Irresistible,

and if among the Chosen we'd devote ourselves to good works, to piousness—that's how we'd know. And I guess he thought we'd recognize love's opposite, the grace withheld. Like Puritan Jonathan Woodman who encountered in the dark a white thing like a cat which did play about my feet. Winter, and the meager crop had failed again. He kicked the cat against a fence, heard the demon scream.

Now science says that violent human outbursts may be traced to living with a cat. A devilish cat parasite migrates to our brains, inflames them . . . But what of that lover, the one who kept no cats. As a boy he had two gerbils. He told me once how, blind with rage, he'd had to hang the female after she killed her mate. Justice, he called it. What would science say?

These days I wish I'd been less reckless, paid attention, not spent myself like small change tossed at a carnival game. You see where this is going. Why not blame my cat, its grim biotic community, its ticks and fleas. And their biotic communities, hungry, always with us—what Calvin, reborn as scientist, might realize as fate's messengers, the least of these. What if he always had it sort of right?

Charles Kell

Repeat Offender

Little red dots
on your upper left
arm raw from scratching.

Again this old architecture
sutures you in: spring bed,
metal toilet, dry spit

on the wall, newspaper bits
stuck into window holes.
What they call a pen

blues lined paper
you're lucky to own.
Lines of sound wrap

around each side you're on.
See this face in the mirror—
how one offers a self

up until one's gone. Wet
pastels. You said never
again. Pretend, stand

somewhere different. There,
take two steps now don't
move for five minutes.

Say never again.

Sandra Kolankiewicz

Communique #6

As the days become shorter, the nights stay what they always have been, long stretches of waiting. So many different kinds of medication: television, shopping, cupboards of delight, and the bed sagging afterwards, no untils unless they are already over. You remember how the ceiling looks from a pillow when you are trying to wake up. I'm not sure how we survive except we believe if not in ourselves, then in something that brought us.

Kristin Laurel

Faith, revisited

There are no footprints in the sand
there is only concrete in the crematorium
and she's been sweeping up her children's ashes.

My sister wakes up in a hospital bed,
to the only truth, that is true:
God feels far away, and the air in heaven is thin.

So many visitors, come and go
and even when they say the wrong thing,
she tells them "God bless you, too."
I pray with the ones that pray with love, but
when the fanatical become more fanatical
I open my eyes wide
and worship the orange jell-o
that trembles when they call his name.

Please! No more talk of angels, and heavenly gates,
how we should rejoice in his name. I say, if there is a God
he is not singing, he is weeping!

Little sister,
when you go home to that dark place,
the empty high chair, the vacant blue swing,
the crib, the sippy cups, baby spoons, car-seats, and strollers,
the bedroom filled with the echoes of two dead sons,

remember your horses in the pasture: the soft nuzzle, the breath,
the neigh. Remember the damp sweet smell of your dog's claw,
the wag of her tail. Sit in the living room by the big window
with your three cat's, watch the birds in your garden for any sign of hope;
let the rays from sun shine upon you,
stretch that light around you, use it like a rope;
wrap it around your waist, your chest, your heart;
reach up with both hands and

hold on, hold on.

Pamela Rader

Hair the Color of Oak Leaves

He was from the urban desert of Phoenix—
a sprawl of cinder blocks, cement pools,
and perverse greens. Artificiality
invokes its namesake: the counterfeit
rising out of the not-ash-aridity.

And I?

I am from the woodlands
and what remains of them.

And all I can recall is his hair:

it was the color of oak leaves—
the dried rust of autumn.

And a boy of the desert could not have known towering oaks.

All the rest?

All the rest I have elected to forget—
no dusting of feeling lingers.

Just leaves underfoot.

Like cast-off memories, mulching, becoming ash.

Luke Roe

Exit

This is not my room, littered
Pint bottles and crusty dishes, the ruins
Of last night's binge
Do not corrode the floor
This is not the third or fourth or fifth morning of hangovers
(Four moons around the planet furthest from ours)
This is not a thinning bank account
A face growing in texture and droop
A face growing on a face
(Craters on the side most seen)
This is not my leopard liver,
Or a cry for help

This is not my
Poached body
On the living room leather
Dry lightning in the damp tawdry
Diadem (these, the dried ancient lake beds)
That is not my child sitting alone
In his television chair
Chewing on a blend of channels
These aren't my stomach pains,
Or cries for help

This will not be
My future-
Rooms stacked with dusty chairs
Rooms stacked with ashes
Rooms stacked with myself-
Fattening beneath a husk of
Fly paper and its mummies
My house will not shrink into
Bones and loose skin
Piles of envelopes that were supposed
To carry
A stranger's cries for help

This will be my body in the morning-

Damp and unclothed, feathered in the early light
Getting dressed without the window blinds drawn
Getting dressed with water in my chest
Opening all the letters I have
Addressed to myself, opening
All the letters I've neglected to answer

Crash Dummy

It's amazing how the body takes over
How it drives my car after work
And pulls into the grocery store parking lot
How it saunters on its own to the beer aisle
How its hand reaches to pull a six pack from the shelf
How it opens the cans and orders the person
To fuck up the body as much as possible
Orders it to take it as far as possible
Even as the soul is clearly crying
in the produce section
And the person is no doubt subject to
Intense fear and warning.
The alarms tonight, they fire
Still I take up a glass and just *pour*

David Anthony Sam

Prayer of Vapor

I gather empty vapors from fog
trying to recall
a backward glance
out of a fading dream

I am the victim
of old growth
like a rock covered with the lichen
of ancient waiting

In cups of mournful hands
I pray with gray wanting
trying to recall
memories of salt water

The loom of sky
blackens my grieving—
the never betraying
promises of ever in a next life

I am made of such waiting
such gathering of mists
where flesh and dreams
conceive each other

Gerard Sarnat

Don't Look Back

Suffering since childhood
with PTSSD*, I had a vision
we stood on the roadside.
I flipped cards away
one at a time to strains of
“Subterranean Homesick Blues”
which Dylan strummed
on his banjo-bong,..
Hot-blooded man
Ladies' man
Hard loving man
Backdoor man
Hot-headed man
Cruel drinking guitar man
Hatchet man
Hit man
Cold-hearted man
Dirty little man
Creepy old man
A body that'd make a dead man rise
Family man
Humble man
God-fearing man
A good man in hard to find
Company man
Bodyman
Salaryman
Faceless man
Broken desperate man
Condemned man...

*Post-Traumatic-Shakespeare-Sonnet Disorder

Christian Stock

brick and knife fight

you filet me every chance you get,
running your pen-knife tongue over my corduroy, glazed eyes, and marble mouth
mumbled excuse for singing.

There is school-yard earnestness in the way you turn away with every smile, defiant to
wit and charm that may dull your edges.

I don't want to chip your blade as much as you don't want to slice my smile.

I see myself in your back pocket;
a sharpening stone to drag your tongue over
before cutting into the world.

Laura Sweeney

Gustavo's Sorrow

I swallow the words that die in my throat before they reach your soil.
I swallow the words that are ripped by the wind before they reach your ears.

While I sit with my hands in my lap, a fire 'round your shoulders
dissolves your contours and lines, drawn as if they are my plans.

You are my refuge from the clouds that threaten Guatemalan skies.
You are the green mountain I ought to climb in the silver dew.

Soon I will cradle you in the ocean's flaming corals.
Soon I will wake you like a hummingbird sipping from your neck.

Soon this paper will yellow, my tears will evaporate,
the pain will callous my existence.

But you will always be the heat that opens my door,
the sigh that ignites my obsession.

Sarah Brown Weitzman

WHEN I WAS A CHILD

When I was a child
and first was told about God

I couldn't understand
why those who believed

weren't in a big hurry
to go to live with the Lord.

To commit suicide
seemed perfect proof of piety.

But it wasn't until
I had my first kiss

that I understood finally
why everyone wants to dally.

“WINGS OF DESIRE”

Film by Wim Wenders

From Heaven's faded blue
and chalk clouds
angels waft down.
Entering our world, no wonder
they are dazzled – terra
cotta roofs, grass, parrots
neon signs, poppies, oranges.

Folding their wings flat
they press in close
to eavesdrop on our minds.
Our thoughts rise
to a great hum
of human longings
they, too, recognize.

But only a few will rip
out their wings
for the ruined splendor
of this life. Only a few
will take on colored eyes,
don raucous plaid, fall
in love, then taste
their own tears.

Crystal Lane Swift Ferguson

METH

Growing up, I had always been awfully straight laced, or at least tried to be. I went to church with my family. I never got in trouble. I followed all the rules. I can trace all my trouble back to when my parents divorced. Cliché? Sure. True? Absolutely. I wasn't conscious of it at the time, but it's damn obvious in retrospect. I picked up a nasty cigarette habit. Then came the alcohol. Then that one time with pot. Then came the day I saw girls snorting some kind of white powder through straws and rolled up dollar bills off of the bathroom counter at Scripps Ranch High School.

“What is that?” I asked.

One of the girls—tall, thick, had chola eyebrows and tits that made me green with envy—faced me down. “Who wants to know?”

“Me.” My voice was stronger than I'd expected.

The chola girl extended her rolled up dollar bill. “Try it.”

Rather than use her grimy cylindrical George Washington, I took out the only thing I had with me to put up my nose to aid with the snort—a notecard from my Spanish class presentation on the Mayans. I was underprepared anyway. I rolled up the 3”x5” cardstock and snorted hard. The meth hit my nasal passage, the back of my eyeballs, my brain, and my heart—all at once. It was Heaven and Hell all wrapped into one. I would never be the same. First hit, I was hooked.

So began my love affair with meth. The problem? I couldn't afford it on my \$5.15 an hour from the Souplantation. I had to resort to stealing.

It started slow. Backpacks left in the quad by rich white kids at school. Giving people too little change back at the Souplantation.

Then I got bolder. I watched for people to leave their wallets in their cars in the school parking lot. Started breaking into those cars. All for the meth. It kept me happy. Skinny. Wanting to stay alive.

This time, I had gone too far. The car I broke into was that chola's car. That chick that introduced me to my one true love—meth.

My life flashed before my eyes as she pulled out a gun and pointed it at me. I started to walk away. She started to put the gun back in her purse. I took a breath.

“Fuck you anyway!” I shouted at her.

Then, it was the second time she pointed that gun at me. So there I stood, possibly taking my last breath, and all I could think about was: more meth.

“Who the fuck wants to know?” the girl in the bathroom repeated herself with an expletive added for emphasis. “Yo, white bitch,” the chola snapped, “wake the fuck up.”

I blinked once, twice, was back in the bathroom, the chola girl still holding out her dollar bill-straw. My entire love affair with meth had been imagined. I locked eyes with the girl for only a moment, then and scurried out of the bathroom, toward my Spanish class to present about the Mayans.

Sean Padraic McCarthy

RENDER UNTO SATAN

Bibi was shouting about Jesus. Running down the street with her nightgown open in front and blowing in the wind behind her. She was barefoot, it was December, the ground frozen, but it hadn't snowed really yet, and as far as Dale knew, there were no patches of ice. It was just after eight a.m., rush hour traffic, and as she cut across Main Street, flailing her arms, two cars swerved and blared their horns.

Dale was at the window of their second floor apartment, one child—two year old Brett—on his lap, and his cell phone to his ear, trying to get hold of his brother-in-law, Phillip, upstairs. Dale's four-year-old, Molly, had her chin resting on the sill, and the baby was screaming. Across the street, Bibi exposed her breasts to a passing car. "Love him!" she shouted. "I just love him!"

Dale had every intention of running after her, but first he needed to get hold of someone to watch the children, and he knew Phillip was up there. He had heard him walking, probably already planning his menu for dinner. When he still didn't answer, Dale carried Brett in one arm, the baby in the car seat in the other, and nudged Molly up the stairs. He cracked open the door. Phillip was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. A Home Goods circular spread open before him. Phillip didn't work; he owned the house, a three family, and just collected rent. He looked at Dale.

"Just five minutes," Dale said. "Five minutes, I swear. I'll be right back."

By the time he reached Bibi, she was down on her knees, her arms out before her and palms flat to the earth. She caught sight of him, and then she was off and running again. Dale would never have guessed she could move so fast.

He caught her by the tail end of the nightgown, the material tearing as he yanked her towards him, and he spun her around, grabbing her tight. Her face was just inches from his. Wide brown eyes, and long, beautiful red lips. Long dark hair, now a mess.

"I love Jesus," she sputtered.

"I know you do," Dale said.

“I love him. Just love him.”

“Of course you do. I know you do. But Jesus doesn’t want you outside, not in the cold. He’d rather have you inside.”

Bibi wrestled an arm free and slapped him. “Blasphemer! Don’t you tell me what He wants me to do!”

Dale winced with the pain of the slap. It was worse in the cold. He got his arms around her again, and then Phillip’s roommate, Barry—graying hair, dark circled eyes, yellow and wiry, and a cigarette dangling from his lips—was jogging down the street. Barry took one arm as Dale took the other, and they started back to the apartment.

Bibi had always been religious—raised Catholic—but things had never been like this. She had met people on line and joined a new church. She initially told Dale it was a Baptist church—Dale himself had been raised Baptist but he had gotten as far away from his parents and religion as soon as he could, first joining the service, and then moving east—but Dale wasn’t so sure; they met in a rented hall, and the preacher, the Reverend Mike Goode, zoomed in via satellite, and it didn’t seem very Baptist. “Speaking to millions at once,” Bibi had said, her eyes dilated as she grabbed Dale by the shirt front as he was trying to read a new book by Kundera. “Millions at once.”

At first, Dale hadn’t minded her going if it kept her happy—Bibi, high strung with a volcanic temper, was almost never happy—but he missed the Bibi who had started out as his pen pal and used to send him dirty letters and nude pictures when he was stationed in Germany. Polaroids of her happily cooking in the kitchen without a stitch on. Subtle suggestions of how wonderful their life would be.

Now she tore off her nightgown, running room to room, as he soon as he got her inside. She opened the living room window and began screaming down to the street, pledging her love again, and then Dale had no choice but to wrestle her to the floor. He pinned her hands, her chest heaving, and then she spit at him. Called him the Devil. Dale could feel the spittle dripping from his nose but he didn’t dare let go of her hands. When he looked up Molly was standing there holding her doll Louie, one lazy eye, by the hair— the doll’s legs brushing the floor—staring. She must have snuck down the back stairs.

By ten a.m. he had convinced Bibi to take an extra Ativan, along with her Paxil which she had been refusing since last Wednesday. Dale had forgotten to call work—a health insurance agency that he had started at eighteen months earlier—and now he was lost in a cold sweat as he left a message with the secretary: Molly was sick again, he said, allergy flare up, he had to stay home. He had been calling in all too much lately, and he was beginning to wonder when his boss would call him in to speak to him. Bibi sat at the

kitchen table, silent, stirring her coffee. The kitchen was tiny, as was the rest of the apartment, and with five of them now, Dale was wondering how long it could contain them. They wanted a bigger place, wanted a house, but he didn't see how they could ever afford it; as it was, she was giving a hundred dollars a week to the church.

They had the gate up, the kids in the living room. The baby flat on his back on his play mat, reaching up for the cloth birds and stars hanging above him, and Brett and Molly surrounded by toys. A repeat of Blues Clues was on the television—Steve's face growing larger in the camera; he suddenly had puppy dog eyes and an enormous nose.

Dale stepped away and took a seat across from Bibi. She had her bathrobe on now. He reached over and put his hand over hers. "Are you all right, hon?" he asked.

She took a breath. "Fine. I'm absolutely fine. I just got a little excited, that's all. That happens sometimes, they call it 'the excitement.'"

"Are they all naked when they get excited?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so. That's just my own thing." She put her hand to her forehead. "I just got carried away. Sometimes I think Jesus needs to see me as I truly am." She shook her head a little. "I know. It doesn't sound like it makes a lot of sense. It's hard to explain." She waved her fingers. "If it hit you, then you would know. Then you would understand. I don't know how to explain it to you."

He squeezed her fingers. "Maybe you should go talk to someone."

"Like who?"

"Like a doctor, a new doctor. Someone besides your OB."

She sighed. "No. That's okay. My mother is coming over. I already called her."

Charlotte came rushing in an hour later, purse clutched tight in her hands. She only lived five minutes away. She glared at Dale. Before they were married Charlotte had nicknamed Dale "the idiot" because he hadn't proposed immediately after returning to the states, but since they were married he had graduated to "the asshole." And now, with Bibi in the new church, he was getting the blame.

Bibi jumped up as soon as Charlotte entered the kitchen and pulled her into her arms. Bibi was taller, but Charlotte was wider. Her hair was dyed auburn, and her eyes were empty and blue. "I'm sorry," Bibi sobbed, "I'm sorry."

Charlotte patted her back. "You have nothing to be sorry about, dear. This happens to lots of women after they have babies."

Dale had a vision. The streets full of new mothers. Half dressed, barely dressed, not dressed at all. All running about and shouting like lunatics. It would at least make his own situation easier, he figured.

“I don’t think that’s it,” Bibi sobbed. “I think it’s the Devil.”

Charlotte glared at Dale. “Asshole,” she hissed.

“Not him,” said Bibi. “I mean the Devil.”

Dale had left them alone to talk, taking the kids to the park. The park was usually empty this time of year, but the kids liked to go there to feed the ducks. He had Ernest in his carriage—wrapped in so many blankets that you could barely see him—and Brett was thundering about, picking up rocks to toss towards the water. He walked with sideways steps—looking as if he couldn’t bend his little knees—and his fingers stretched out as if were walking on ice, struggling to keep his balance. He was a solid little boy with dark hair and dark eyes, and there was an emptiness to his eyes that had been worrying Dale almost since the day he was born. Nothing inside.

Molly was different. Chatty and curious. She was chasing about the ducks now, kneeling down with an animal cracker held out between the tips of two fingers, and Brett was watching. The ducks looked hesitant, but then one approached, lunging forward, snapping quickly, and Molly dropped the cracker, and fell backwards on her bottom.

Nothing had been good lately. And Dale had to wonder where all the good had gone. Everything had been set for perfection before he returned to the states. They were soul mates, she assured him each time she wrote, each time she called. And the calls were full of dirty whispers and promises, describing herself as “monogamous nymphomaniac.” “I never realized how horny I was until I first saw a picture of you,” she had said on the phone.” She had gasped. “God...,” she had said, “now it’s like no matter where I am, every time I think of you, I have to stop and play with myself. Work, home, out shopping. Doesn’t matter. There I go. Last week I found myself climaxing in a bathroom stall at Macy’s. Can you believe that? Macy’s!”

And Dale had believed it. Wanted to believe it. At that point he had two passions in life—literature and sex—and he hadn’t even come close to getting his fill of the latter, never really had a full time girlfriend before. Growing up a Kentucky Baptist, it had been violently clear to him since the time he was old enough to look down and recognize his unit as part of himself, that you weren’t supposed to get your fill of the latter. Not unless you were intent on giving the Lord more little Baptists. When he was fifteen his father caught him in the bathroom with a magazine glossy of Courtney Love he had pulled from a People Magazine at the corner store, and then held him down in the yard rubbing dirt in his eyes, asking him repeatedly if he wanted to know how it felt to go mad and blind. Is

that what he wanted? Dale had not in fact wanted that, and as soon as he had graduated high school, he had enlisted in the Army.

The Army brought him opportunities he could never have at home. He got to read *Lolita*, Portnoy's Complaint, and *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and he got to spend time with a prostitute named Tess who lived down the street from his barracks and would spank him gently while reading excerpts from *The Ginger Man*, but he still wanted more.

And then he met Bibi through the mail. A pen pal program set up through her old church. Starting with care packages, short notes, and following with pictures, and longer letters. And then the phone calls, the promises. She had been saving herself for him, she said, all the things she so desperately wanted to do, and she hadn't even realized it until she first heard his voice. And then it blossomed like a flower, she said. All lit on fire. She was going to light him on fire.

And she had followed through when they had finally first met. Everything he could imagine. He had finally finished his four years, and rather than return to Kentucky, he had gone straight to Boston.

Bibi was working downtown as a waitress then, and she greeted him at the airport. Still in uniform herself, high heels and black skirt. She moved with hurried, nervous flutterings, and wide eyed and open mouthed, everything she said came across as exciting, pausing after each statement as if waiting to see if he would join her in the wonder of it all. And just one look at her, one smell of her perfume, and he was willing to join her. She had pre-prepared dinner at her apartment the night before, and now all she had to do was pop it in the oven, and it would be ready in a snap. She fluttered her fingers. "And my roommate is gone for the weekend, so don't even worry about that."

The apartment was in Quincy. Bibi brought him into the dining room—half dining/half living—and poured him a glass of Asti Spumante. Told him she would be back in one minute, that she just had to slip the lasagna back in the oven to warm it up. "Lasagna always tastes best the second day," she said. "So I'm actually glad I made it yesterday. It's just one of those things."

Dale sipped the champagne and looked about the room. The table was set—china, cloth napkins, and tapered red candles. A print of Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* hung on one wall, and Van Gogh's *Irises* on the other. Beside a framed copy of George W. Bush's first inauguration speech. A book caught his eye on the side table next to the couch. Black jacket bordered in bright green. A hardcover. He picked it up. The collected works of James Joyce. Poems, stories selected from *Dubliners*, excerpts from *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, and *The Portrait of the Artist in its entirety*. In its entirety. His heart began to pound. It was all too good to be true. She was too good to be true. Was she really reading Joyce? Dale had touched upon his literary tastes with her before in letters, but he had never mentioned Joyce. He was sure of it. And here she was with the collected works. She was right, he suddenly realized, they were soul mates.

“Are you reading this?” he asked as she hurried back into the room, a long grill lighter in hand.

“Oh, that, yeah. No big deal. I just picked it up at Barnes and Noble a few weeks ago. I love his stuff so much that I wanted something portable, you know? I mean, you can’t bring all his books with you everywhere you go.”

“No.” Dale was dumbstruck. “Of course not.”

“Dubliners is fantastic,” she said, leaning over to light the tapered candles. “So is Portrait. But so much of Ulysses just gets by me. I don’t know. Maybe I’m just stupid.”

Dale still had the book in hand. “Well, don’t sell yourself short,” he stammered. “It takes some commitment.”

She brushed the comment aside. “I devoured Dubliners, simply devoured it, but I think I’m going to have to read Ulysses again if I really want to digest it.” She looked with his eyes, her own peering into his soul. “There are so many things I want to digest.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “But the problem is time. Where do you find the time?”

“Well, that’s one thing about Ulysses,” he said. “It certainly takes time.”

She picked up her own champagne glass. “Here,” she said. “Let’s toast. To time. And to having you back in the states. Back where you belong.” Dale clinked with her glass and sipped from the wine, and then he felt her pressing his hand in her own. She was staring into his eyes, and then a moment later, she had her hands on his shoulders, pushing him backwards and straddling him on the couch.

It didn’t stop for days—handcuffs and whipped cream and every position he could imagine—and she was just as beautiful as he hoped. Maybe not exactly an intellectual but she had some practical intelligence, and that was all they needed. They were engaged six months after he returned home, and married within the year, the conception of Molly coming two months before the nuptials. It was with Molly that things had started to change; Bibi put on a lot of weight with Molly and went to bed for two months after she was born, crying into her pillow and leaving Dale and her mother in charge of the bottles and diapers. But then on the seventy-third day she was up, and online, determined to get her head clear and to get her weight back down, she said. She ordered diet cookbooks, a poster of Ghandi, a stationary bike, exercise mats, and a treadmill. And then as soon as her weight was back down, and she was back to herself, she was pregnant with Brett.

She meditated with Brett so she wouldn’t be tempted to eat as much, and then by the time she was pregnant with Ernest, the meditation wasn’t enough, she said. If she was going to

stay skinny, she needed a closer connection to God. She had met some people on line, chat rooms, and they had told her about their church, and she was just a little curious. She would never convert, she said, it would kill her mother, and besides, wasn't that blasphemous, or at least a pretty big sin? But the women she spoke with were involved in Bible study groups, and that was what she needed, she said. A clearer understanding of the Bible. It was the only thing she could really connect to, the only book she liked to read.

Dale had sat there, a PBR in hand. "But what about Joyce?"

"Joyce?"

"James Joyce. Back when we met you told me that you wanted to digest James Joyce."

She hesitated, looked confused. "Oh, you didn't really buy all that did you? I just knew you liked to read, and I read your profile on line before I started sending you the packages. God, Dale, I think I'd rather drive some pencils into my eyes before ever actually reading that stuff again. There's only one book for me."

The meetings had gone from one to three to four nights a week, and four hours in church on Sunday. The church was in Bridgewater, and Dale attended with her a few times after she pleaded with him. An empty hall, a stark crucifix—no blood, no Christ—above the altar and an enormous flat screen television where the Reverend Michael Goode beamed in from Tempe, Arizona. The Reverend was young and handsome with dark hair and blue eyes, a cleft to his chin and the shoulders of a linebacker, and he preached to the masses across the country every Sunday, exposing evil in all walks of life, all corners of the country, the world, and encouraging his parishioners to look for it inside themselves, their spouses, inside their homes, workplaces, beds, and hearts, and to repent, to beg forgiveness. For we are all evil by nature, it dwells within all of us, he reminded them, and it is only through the light of the world that we can drive it back to Satan. Render unto Satan the things which are Satan's, he said, and unto God, the things which are God's.

"I think the quote is Caesar, not Satan," Dale had said to her riding home following a service.

"Caesar was Satan," Bibi said. "Maybe you missed that." She was quiet a moment, as if trying to think. "We all are Satan if we let ourselves be," she said. "That's the problem. That's the problem with the whole world—it just takes someone like the Reverend Goode to expose it. He's so awesome. That's the only word I can think of to describe him—awesome. I look at him and I melt. I simply melt."

Dale had looked at her and smiled. "If you start having dirty thoughts about him, you're going to end up letting the Devil in."

“You’re disgusting.” Bibi looked away. “Besides, I’m done with all of that stuff.”

“What stuff?”

She took a deep breath. “The sex stuff. I talked to the congregation, and they all agreed, it’s the only thing I can do. I told them everything. Everything you made me do.”

“What did I make you do?” he asked, a little taken back.

“You know? The bad stuff. Everything. We all have to tell each other everything eventually. It’s necessary if we’re going to repent. I mean, really repent. Without it, there can be no healing.”

“You told them all that?” he snapped. “Like in detail?”

“I had to.” She opened her pocketbook and pulled out a package of peanut butter and crackers. “Now, look what you’re making me do. You’re making me eat.”

“I’m not making you do anything. And I didn’t make you do anything before. You were all for it.”

“Don’t yell at me!”

“I’m not yelling!”

“Don’t you think I confessed my own sins?” she said, crumbs falling from her lips. “What good is it if I don’t confess my own sins. It’s my soul, not yours! Of course I told them the things I did! I even put them in a letter to the Reverend Mike so he can see it all in black and white! It’s horrible. Can’t you see that?”

“It’s not horrible,” he said. “We loved each other.” He reached out to put a hand on her knee. She just looked at it. “We do love each other,” he said.

“That’s just the Devil talking,” she said. “He wants us to think that acts like that are committed in the name of love, but they’re not. It’s horrible. He speaks through you. Love is not a four letter word.”

“Yes, it is.” Dale withdrew his hand.

“Not that kind of four letter word.”

That had been two months back. Now in the park, Brett chased after one of the ducks. Arms outstretched and mouth open. The duck retreated, one eye on the little boy as he did. Run three steps, fly three more. The boy kept coming. Dale had the baby out of the carriage now, propped in his arms as he fed him a bottle. “Stop it,” Dale said to Brett.

“You can’t eat the duck.”

Brett stopped, feed spread wide apart, anchoring himself, and he clenched his fists. Raised his chin, eyes emptier than ever, and said. “Brrmmmmmm.” That’s about all he ever said. Almost two and a half years old, and he never said more than “brrmmmm.”

“Grandma ate a duck once,” Molly said, crouched over and writing in the shallow winter soil, pebbles and sand, with a stick. “She told us about it.”

“Grandma probably cooked him first,” said Dale. “I bet.”

“Maybe that’s what Brett wants to do. Maybe he wants to cook him.”

When they got back to the apartment, Charlotte was alone in the kitchen, reading T.V. Guide. She put a finger to her lips. “She’s resting now.” She stood up to go. “I think that’s all she needed. This winter is getting to everybody. It’s been going on too long.”

Dale put the baby in his crib, and turned on the T.V. for Molly and Brett. Brett approached the set, and pressed his open palms against it, then his face, but Molly was playing with her dolls and didn’t seem to mind. Dale went into the bedroom. Shades drawn, and a draft coming through the windows. They were old, wooden windows, putty flaking, that Phillip needed to replace. The floor of the room was covered in clothes, dirty and clean. Used baby bottles, the formula inside clumping and turning, and the children’s toys. Everywhere. The big red numbers on the digital alarm clock cut sharply into the shadows. Bibi lay flat on her back with a sleeping mask covering her eyes.

Dale took a seat on the edge of the bed. Reached out and put his hand over hers. “Are you feeling any better?”

She remained silent for a moment, and he ran his fingers lightly up her arm. “Honey?” he said. “Do you need anything?”

Bibi took a deep breath, but she didn’t remove the mask. “Yes,” she said. “I think I need an exorcism.”

Two nights later she came home elated from her Bible group. She tied her apron on, began going through the cabinets, pulling down spices. A package of chicken from the refrigerator. She had seen a delicious recipe online a few days before, she said, and she was dying to try it. Dale was squeezed in between the kitchen table and the wall watching her, almost elated himself, happy to see her happy.

“It sounds delicious,” he said.

She stopped, smiled. “I didn’t even tell you what it is.”

“That doesn’t matter,” he said. “If you’re making it, I’m sure it’s delicious. You’re an awesome cook. I mean it.”

She pulled out a Pyrex pan, sprayed in some olive oil, then tore open the package of chicken, tearing the fat off the breasts with her fingers. “I hate doing this. It’s the worst part. Dammit!” She lifted a breast to her lips, caught the yellow piece of fat between her teeth and pulled. Dropped the breast into the pan and spit the fat into the sink.

Dale swallowed his breath. “Maybe you should use a knife.”

“You’re probably right. I’m just in a hurry. It’s already so late.”

“Yeah, but you don’t want salmonella or anything like that.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I washed it. Besides, I have stomach like a cast iron kettle. I’m just getting a little anxious, I mean with everything happening.”

Dale felt his mental antennae rising. He had missed something. “Everything?”

She turned at him now, beaming. “Everything. It’s all set. We made the call from the hall tonight, and can you believe it doesn’t even cost all that much? I mean, it costs, but nothing like I thought it was going to.” She ground some sea salt onto the chicken.

“What’s all set?”

“The exorcism.”

He took a breath. “Like a real one?”

“Yes.” Bibi sighed. “A real one. With Reverend Mike.”

“An exorcism isn’t real unless it’s performed by a Catholic priest,” Charlotte said. “Is it a Catholic priest?”

“Ma,” Bibi said, “I’m not talking about this with you right now.” She had the baby on her lap, shirt up and breasts exposed. Both of them. Nervously switching from one to the other. “You’re too close minded.”

Charlotte had brought Bibi’s grandmother with her, and Dale had gone down to help her up the stairs. It took ten minutes. Step, pause, breath. And then the old woman would clutch his arms, unsteady on her feet, or at least pretending to be, and then she would whisper something to him and smile. Unlike Charlotte, the old woman liked him for some reason, he had no idea why. “You’re a handsome thing,” she liked to say to him. “Why if

I were younger, well, who knows?"

Once in the kitchen, Dale helped her into a seat, the old woman falling heavily. She looked around panting a bit, and then lit a cigarette. She was deep into her eighties with blue white skin that was nearly transparent. Red rimmed, hooded blue eyes, and blue hair to match. "I haven't been up here since Phillip first bought the place," she had said to Bibi. "You've done a lot with it."

"I know." Bibi put the baby on her shoulder to burp him. Slapping hard. "You never come and visit me. It makes me crazy."

"Well, I can't. A woman my age, with fluid in her ankles, arthritis in my back, and three kinds of cancer. If your husband wasn't here to help me up the stairs, I never would have made it. It's just this news your mother tells me that got me over here. I find it very concerning."

"It would be a lot more concerning if I didn't do anything about it," Bibi said. "At least I'm doing something about it."

"Well, that's what concerns me. Messing with other religions. You don't know what you're getting into."

"We're all Christians," hurried Bibi. "The exorcist, Reverend Mike is Christian. He's the head of my church. He's incredible."

"Your church is on Adams Street," said Charlotte, "And it's called Saint Gerard's."

"They're both my churches," said Bibi. "I belong to all different churches. I'm a woman of God." She positioned the baby against her again, began to push her nipple into his mouth; tight lipped, the baby was resisting. Bibi pried his mouth open.

"A woman of God would go talk to her priest," the grandmother said, "you don't know what you're getting into. This is dangerous business. You need someone who knows what they're doing. I had a friend when I was younger who had a cousin, second cousin, I believe, who was in a similar situation, and she ended up gouging her own eyes out. It was absolutely terrible; they were never able to get them back in, I mean, not so she could see right. She spent the rest of her life wearing dark glasses."

"And what happened to her?" Charlotte asked, hands clenched together. "Eventually, I mean."

"The last I heard she jumped off a bridge. I'm not sure if she survived the fall. Terrible. Absolutely terrible. But you see, she went about it the wrong way, she didn't get help through the Church. I like your eyes, they're very pretty. It would be a shame to see something happen to them."

“Mike, I mean the Reverend Goode is more than qualified,” Bibi said. “Believe me. He performs like twelve exorcisms a week, sometimes more when he does a really big group thing. He does rooms full of people all at once, everybody screaming and crying. Thousands of Devils. All gone. Just like that. It’s amazing.”

Dale was standing, his back to the sink. Arms folded. Charlotte kept shooting him daggers. He knew what she was thinking—he was a Baptist, he started all this.

The grandmother dragged on her cigarette, watching Bibi carefully, the room disappearing in a cloud. “What would be amazing is if you put yourself in the hands of God, the real God, and the Blessed Mother. You could see how fast things would turn around, how quickly you would get better.”

Bibi forced a laugh. “We’re all talking about the same God here. That’s what’s ridiculous.”

Her grandmother reached into her purse and pulled out a small, clear plastic bottle. Unscrewed the top, whispered something, and then threw the contents across the table, splashing it across Bibi’s face. Holy Water. Bibi winced, and then she started to cry. Her grandmother shouted a “Glory Be to the Father” prayer, and then blessed herself with the sign of the cross. Bibi took the baby and ran from the room.

Both of the women looked at Dale.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I remember in the movie, the girl said it burns.”

Charlotte’s eyes were still cutting him. “Only if you’re not Catholic.”

The day of the exorcism, Dale had been able to get nothing done. He had thought long and hard about it in the days leading up to today, tried to reason a little without arguing—the arguing just made her cry. He wanted her to stay possessed, she said, because if she was possessed she would still do wicked, dirty things. He didn’t care about her, she said, didn’t care about the Devil, and what was worst of all, he didn’t care about Jesus—he only cared about himself. Money and sex. Dale had insisted that he cared about her and about Jesus. But not the Devil, she said, and he said that he did, sometimes he cared about the Devil, but she just started to sob. Yes, the exorcism was going to cost three thousand dollars, she said, but that was nothing if it meant saving her soul.

“But what if it doesn’t?” he said.

“Doesn’t what?”

“Save your soul?”

Her jaw dropped then, and she started to shake. “How can you say that?”

“I just mean we don’t know for sure. Sometimes it doesn’t work, right?”

“It always works if you believe.”

“In that case,” he said, “maybe we can get someone to do it for less than three grand.” And with that she had hit him in the head with her shoe.

Three thousand dollars. They didn’t have one thousand dollars, never mind three. They’d have to use a cash advance from one of their credit cards, and their credit was terrible, the card at 22.99% It would take at least three years to pay back three thousand dollars. But what if he said no and things got worse? Three kids, he couldn’t afford for things to get worse. And even if the guy was a charlatan—which Dale secretly believed he had to be—there was still the power of suggestion. She could be right—as long as she believed, it just might work; and once it worked, they could get on with their lives. A clean apartment, hot meals. No more running up the street naked, no more neglecting the children. And of course, no more dirty, kinky sex. He was hoping that little side effect of the exorcism might wear off after a couple weeks or so, but something in the pit of his belly told him that exorcism or no exorcism, the fun was gone, the dawn of the new era—keep it clean, keep it neat—was here to stay.

When he got home, the kids were watching TV in the living room and Bibi was lying spread eagle on the bed, arms out as if waiting to be crucified. Wearing a sheer blue nightie that looked as if she had nothing on beneath. She stared at Dale as he entered the room. The sun had set, the room bathed in shadows, the only light coming from the small yellow lamp beside the bed.

“Aren’t you going to tie me up?” she asked.

Dale took a breath. “Uh. What for?”

“Oh, forget it. I just saw that in a movie. I think they had to tie her to the bed because she kept levitating.”

“Do you feel like you’re going to start levitating?”

Bibi hesitated. “No. I think I ate too much for lunch.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“I think I did once though,” she blurted. “I don’t know. It might have been a dream. It was very confusing. I woke up, and I was floating above the bed, and then I looked down and I could see you sleeping—you had your hand down your shorts—but I was still sleeping next to you, so I couldn’t have been levitating, right? I mean, if I was levitating, I couldn’t have been there lying beside you.” She sat up, brushed the idea aside with her

hand. "I know. Don't pay any attention to me. It sounds crazy, I know. I just can't wait to get this over with, and be free. Free." She smiled. "Be back to normal."

Dale took a seat beside her. "What time is he coming?"

"Who?"

"You know who."

"You mean the exorcist?"

"Well..."

"I need you to say it. I need you to believe. If you don't believe, nothing is going to happen." She started to cry again.

Dale put his arms around her, pulled her close. "Okay, okay. The exorcist. What time is he going to be here?"

"Soon. Seven o'clock. I want the kids to be in here."

"No," Dale said. "The kids cannot be in here."

"I want them to understand," she sobbed. "To see what can happen."

Dale took a breath. "Yeah...I don't think that's a good idea, sweetie. Maybe your brother can take them upstairs."

"He can't. He's having an Irish linen party."

"Well, how about mother?"

"No. That woman's crazy. She's not going to help."

Dale rubbed her back. "Well, maybe I'll just turn the T.V. up real loud, and we can keep them out in the living room. The baby should be asleep by then anyway. How long do you think this is going to take?"

Bibi wiped at her eyes. "No-one knows. Sometimes it takes just a few hours, but sometimes it can run into days. Weeks."

"Not weeks. That would have to be a pretty stubborn devil, don't you think?"

She shut her eyes. Breathed through her teeth. "This one is stubborn. I can feel it. You need to pray."

Dale nodded. "Don't worry. I will. I'll pray."

Bibi took his hand and placed it between her thighs. "Rub right there. Oh, God, rub right there. This is so wrong, but I can't help it. I'm so horny," she whispered in his ear. "I want it every which way you can fuck me. Please." Then she yelled. "He has hold of me so bad! Rub it! Oh, please!" She pushed Dale back on the bed, and straddled him. "Quick," she said. "We've got to make this quick."

Dale looked up at her. "The kids might come in."

Bibi took a deep breath. "You're right." She rolled off him and lay flat on her back again, arms outstretched and eyes squeezed tight. "Stop it!" she screamed.

Dale met the man at the door. The baby was asleep, and he had the little ones in their room. Had given Molly a Little Golden Book, and Brett a raw potato to gnaw on. Brett had some more teeth coming in and he seemed to like to gnaw on raw potatoes—it could last him an hour or more as long as he didn't try and force the whole thing down his throat. The man was smaller than Dale had expected, and older. Round wire rimmed glasses, and a shiny bald head. Not Reverend Mike. He had seen Reverend Mike, and this was not Reverend Mike. Dale smiled. "Are you the sub?"

"The sub?" the man asked.

"For Reverend Mike. I think she thought Reverend Mike was going to be here."

"Reverend Mike?" the man said. "He's still out in Arizona. I'm pretty sure, I mean. He travels a lot though, is needed many places, so he could be anywhere as we speak. Satan has cast a shadow across the land."

"He's cast one across my home, too. At least my wife seems to think so." Dale stepped aside allowing the man to enter. He stopped and listened, cocking his head. The house was silent except for the television. The Cartoon Network. Down low. Sponge Bob was screaming for Patrick.

"And the manifestations?" the man asked.

"Manifestations?"

"How is the Devil presenting himself?"

Dale swallowed. "Well," he said, "I guess there's a lot of things."

The man had Dale write out a check, furnished the receipt, and as they entered the bedroom, Bibi was sitting up, back to the headboard. Chin up, and smiling wide.

Completely naked. She looked at the man, then at Dale. “Where’s Reverend Mike?”

The man shut his eyes and began to pray.

Dale nodded. “Reverend Mike is in Arizona, sweetie.”

Bibi’s eyes flashed from empty to rage back to empty. “Arizona?”

“Yes,” Dale said.

“We paid a lot of money for an exorcism.”

Dale nodded. “We did.”

“So what the fuck is he doing in Arizona?”

Dale nodded again. “Well, I guess he had a lot of people to tend to. This is Mr. Wyman. From what I understand, he’ll be performing the exorcism.”

Bibi chuckled. “Mr. Wyman? Is this some kind of joke? We paid for Reverend Mike. Everyone told me it would be Reverend Mike. They said he flies out in person.”

The man was still whispering, praying.

“Mr. Wyman is just as good.”

Bibi put her feet on the floor. Waved a hand in the air. “No offense, but ah, no. I’m not going to sit her all naked and ready while the Devil tears apart my soul, my whole insides, for Mr. Wyman. Are you kidding me? The Devil isn’t going to listen to him—the guy is shorter than you are, for chrissakes.” She walked past Mr. Wyman, and grabbed her bathrobe off the back of the door. The man turned as she did, still praying.

She waved her hand again. “This is ridiculous.”

“‘And the beast was taken,’” quoted Wyman, “‘and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them...’”

“Beast?” Bibi said. “Are you calling me a beast? I’ll squash you.”

“Honey,” said Dale.

“Don’t ‘Honey’ me. Dale. What did you do? Call the church and ask for the budget plan? A discount at the door? What did you pay him? A hundred bucks? Is that what my soul is worth to you, you cheap little prick? I give you three beautiful kids, and so much sex that the Devil fucking consumes me, and you’re going to bring this guy in? Are you kidding me, Dale? Is that the trade off?” She pulled on the bathrobe.

“There is no trade off when viewing the immortal soul,” said Mr. Wyman. “It is the man who falls prey to such a trade that loses himself forever. Lost to the inferno. I can see that he has you. We need to pray.”

Bibi shut her eyes, took an exasperated breath. “Listen, I’m sure you mean well, and I understand what you’re saying, I really do—I’m very devout—but they told me Reverend Mike was going to be here, I was counting on Reverend Mike, so this isn’t going to work. I don’t have time for this.”

Bibi marched across the room. Mr. Wyman had opened his Bible. He began reciting some more from Revelations. Dale hoped for a minute that hearing the verse might calm Bibi down, soothe her, and then maybe he could coax her back into the bed, and then... well, maybe if she would listen, anything was possible. The power of suggestion. The power of her beliefs. But she wasn’t calming. She went to their closet and pulled out a large duffle bag and began tossing clothes inside—shoes, panties, blouses, skirts, and slacks—still ranting. Dale was a cocksucker, a spineless little fucking worm. Pathetic, did he hear her?!! Fucking pathetic. She tossed a book at his head. *Tender Is the Night*. Dale ducked and the book hit the wall.

“I discern the spirit,” Mr. Wyman said. “And Christ called forth...”

“I can’t believe this,” Bibi shouted. “Just can’t believe this! All I wanted was an exorcism. A...simple...fucking...exorcism!”

“Honey,” Dale said, “that’s what he’s doing. Listen.”

Another book. Duck. “From the Reverend Mike, you fucking imbecile! You can just stop,” she spat at Mr. Wyman. “Because this is getting us nowhere. Believe me. Nowhere. My whole life has lead to nowhere!”

“Honey,” Dale said, “you’re becoming hysterical.”

“Hysterical! You’re damn right, I’m fucking hysterical. I’m possessed by the goddamn Devil and this, this, is like someone setting you up on a date with George Clooney and having George Constanza show up instead! I just can’t believe this. I really cannot fucking believe this!”

Still barefoot, she stormed towards the door. Mr. Wyman jumped aside as she did, and Dale stepped in her way, tried to get her by the shoulders, but she overpowered him immediately, and pushed him aside. Wyman had his hand up, palm open, again behind her, and his eyes shut, calling out. “And the fifth angel blew his trumpet...!”

Dale chased after her, but by the time he hit the kitchen, he could hear her footsteps on the stairs. He went to the window to see their headlights turn on, the car backing out of the driveway. He turned to see Wyman behind him. Dabbing his forehead with a

handkerchief.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Wyman said. His voice was shaking. “She was right. He has consumed her.”

The dark had settled across the city. Just headlights and streetlights—the neon of Cumberland Farms three doors down. Dale sat at the window, waiting. The dark was so heavy and quiet this time of year, you could feel it coming through the cracks of the windows, settling into the corners. Shadows. It made the electric light feel so unreal. A half hour had passed, Mr. Wyman was gone. Dale looked the phone, the antennae broken, hanging on by the wires—thrown against the wall by Bibi in a fit of rage the month before—and smeared with fingerprints. Chocolate and grape jelly. He picked it up to dial the police, but then he looked up and Brett was standing in the kitchen doorway, the raw potato stuck in his mouth. Dirt from the potato smeared all over his cheeks. Dale looked at him and tried to smile, and then he rested the phone back in its cradle. He patted his knee, and the boy scurried over to him. Yellow footie pajamas.

Dale lifted him onto his lap, and took the potato out of his mouth. The boy smiled a little, drool wetting the corners of his lips, and then he looked at Dale from the corners of his eyes and reached for the potato. Dale held the potato high. “How about I get you some supper instead? Spaghettios, right? Can’t go wrong with spaghettios.”

A quiet shuffle of noise came from the bedroom down the hall. The baby stirring, starting to cry, and then a voice beginning to sing to him. Molly. A voice so small in the quiet that the baby’s cries were already fading. It was peaceful in the quiet. Brett reached again for the potato, and Dale pulled him close and kissed his head.

Forest Arthur Ormes

VANDERDECKEN

I was sitting in the track kitchen as usual when he entered.

“Jonathan Vanderdecken,” he said, thrusting forth his hand as he sat down at my table.

“Reverend Peter Kruger,” I replied, grasping his hand and squeezing hard.

Vanderdecken had a hell of a grip even for a padre like me.

When he told me he was a trainer, I asked: “How long?”

“Too long,” he quipped.

He mentioned some of the tracks where he had trained – Gulf Stream, The Fairgrounds, Tampa, Monmouth, Oak Lawn, Canterbury, Remington, along with the class tracks of Saratoga, Belmont, Pimlico and Churchill Downs. When he started talking about Mountaineer, I figured he had been to most every track in the country.

I remained in the alert but relaxed posture of the racetrack chaplain who had heard a thousand different stories about a thousand different lives and now anticipated one more. Vanderdecken stared back at me. Finally, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a crumpled white envelope. He removed a single white sheet of paper.

“Read it,” he ordered, thrusting the paper at me and keeping the envelope.

“I’ve known you less than five minutes....”

“Out loud,” he interrupted.

“...and you want me to read your personal letter?”

“I’ve been working on this letter for thirty years, Padre,” Vanderdecken responded. “As chaplain of Hickory Downs Racetrack, your position gives you an automatic personal relationship with me. Spiritually, you are honor-bound to minister to me.”

“I’ll read your letter, if it will help you emotionally.”

“You have a little of the shrink in you?”

“Part of my training. If it offends....”

“No offense taken, Reverend.”

He nodded to the paper in my hand, and I began to read from the few hand-written lines.

“To my wife, Ruth,” I began.

“You think it starts out too formal?” he asked.

“ Yes, perhaps....”

“Your suggestion?”

“Dearest Ruth!” I suggested.

“Very good,” he answered.

“Dearest Ruth,” I pronounced. “My exit from your life was inexcusable. I wouldn’t blame you if you ripped this letter to shreds, then tossed the fragments to the cold Midwest wind. They would catch me, you know, those fragments.”

I stopped here.

“That’s all I’ve written,” he said.

Slowly, he raised the envelope and placed it directly in front of my vision so that I could not miss the address on it.

Ruth Vanderdecken
c/o Orchard Hill Cemetery
5700 N. Blackwood Drive
Chicago, Illinois 60660

“How long?” I asked.

“Thirty years,” he answered.

A strange malady, I thought. Beyond my training and ability.

“Is there some relief you hope to get by writing a letter...to your dead wife?”

Vanderdecken stared silently back at me.

“Why... so important to get the words right?” I persisted.

“You’ve done a lot of pastoral counseling over the years, haven’t you.”

“Forty years... here and Lincoln Meadows.”

“I know,” he answered.

“What do you know?”

Vanderdecken’s eyes glowed momentarily before returning to a solemn stare.

“This little... date between us, padre. It’s been on the agenda for a long time.”

“You’ve been planning to meet me here in the kitchen... to talk?”

“Talk is what they pass on about you at the other tracks. How you’ve tried to get the racetracks in this state to institute a swing groom position so regular grooms can get a day off. You fought for better sanitary conditions. They told me about the new dorms the feds ordered the track to build for families at Lincoln Meadows? That was you took them to court.”

“The old ones were deplorable! The only way to get them to...”

“... until, finally,” he continued, “the president of Hickory Downs labeled you an “insurrectionist.” He restricted your ministry to the kitchen on Sunday evenings — indefinitely. Lincoln Meadows won’t even allow you on their track. For the past seven years, you have entered this kitchen on Sundays at exactly six o’clock, taken a seat and waited for racetrackers like me to sit at your table and begin their stories.”

“I don’t know where you got your talk from, but I consider what I did a way of ... praising God.”

“To this day, if you are caught on the track outside the perimeters set by Hickory Downs president, you will be arrested and barred from the racetrack... forever. Lincoln Meadows has your mug shot hanging up in every guard shack inside the backstretch. Reverend Kruger,” he said, leaning forward: “How can you endure... forever?”

“Why, Vanderdecken, does the forever part of my... exclusion... trigger so much of your attention?”

“It connects us.”

“Connects us! How?”

“One saint, exiled forever; one damnation, cursed forever.”

“I’m no saint,” I said, and then leaned toward him.

“Why, Vanderdecken, do you think... cursed and damned... forever?”

“I don’t think it, Reverend. “

“You’re talking to an ordained minister. If you think you are damned, then you are equally ... ‘honor-bound’ ... to explain.“

He turned his head and looked around the near-empty kitchen. One man sat at the table in front of the cash register, three beer cans lined in front of him. Two men sat three tables away in front of the television which was showing the afternoon football game. Out of deference to my weekly presence, Vince, the owner of the kitchen who was sitting at the cash register, had turned the volume to mute.

“First you must tell me something about you.”

“Seems like others have told you enough about me already.”

“Can I ask or not!”

“Shoot.”

“I enter this track kitchen and spot an aging chaplain sitting here at six o’clock in the evening. ‘This man should be at home with his wife,’ I tell myself. ‘Unless he’s widowed like me, or divorced.’ “

“I’ve been divorced twenty one years,” I said to him.

“Why?”

“Why is it important that you know?”

“Knowing a little about you... maybe... will help tell a little about me.”

“If I had saved that extra ‘praise’ I gave to God, if I had saved some of it for my wife, I might not be the divorced preacher sitting across from you tonight.”

“Your divorce, Reverend.... Was that part of the praise?”

“You know it wasn’t.”

“You gave too much to God?”

“Yes.”

“And when she left, God wasn’t enough?”

“What do you mean?”

“You needed a little extra help.”

“Go ahead. Finish,” I said.

“You wear a fading red nose on your face, Reverend.”

“Yes, ‘the little extra help’ after my divorce.”

“How long?”

“Seven years drinking.”

“And how long sober?”

“Fourteen years...as of today.”

“The quitting didn’t get her back?”

“She had gotten used to living alone.”

“You gave too much to God, so God took your wife and you spent seven years in the fog.”

“Fourteen years sober offers space and time to heal.”

“You have not re-married?”

“I’ve gotten used to living alone.”

I paused, and then said: “Vanderdecken. As personal as they were, I just answered your questions. Now, if you don’t mind my saying, I have the impression you and God are not on good terms. If you want to tell me about it, I won’t judge you.”

“Judge not, least thou be judged?”

“I can’t say I won’t try to argue God’s case. But I won’t judge.”

Vanderdecken breathed in deeply.

“Thirty years ago, when I was hitting my peak as a trainer, I had a horse named Shumen’s Wind. He was the kind of horse every trainer dreams about. My wife and I

lived in a modest three bedroom house just a few miles from this racetrack. I had been racing locally here at Hickory Downs, then shipping out at the end of the year and not returning until the summer meet at Lincoln Meadows.”

“A friendly question for you?”

“Shoot.”

“Forty years I worked these tracks. I knew the trainer of Secretariat as well as his exercise rider and groom. I was blessing a trainer’s horse in barn 26 when Perillo raced his last horse. I’ve met most every trainer ever worked these tracks. Forty years and I don’t remember seeing you.”

“Friendly fire?” he commented.

“I don’t remember you. And it bothers me.”

“If I told you... we just happened to miss each other through the years?”

“I’d say, ‘You can’t bullshit me.’”

“And I’d say, ‘I don’t need to bullshit you.’”

“The end of November arrives,” he resumed. “My wife pleads with me not to ship to the Fairgrounds. I was going to hit the winter circuit early that year, Christmas or no Christmas. I wouldn’t be back until next November. From the Fairgrounds to Tampa, shipping up to Saratoga. Get some wins and move up. I had this plan. Start winning allowances, then the stakes, then move up and move up again after that. I had the horse. The experience. The skill. The determination as well as the bitterness.”

“Bitterness?”

“I had been assistant trainer to Charlie Geroulous for five years and before that had groomed for Perillo himself. I had been the one who convinced Geroulous to go long with Formal Occasion. He took my advice and won the Breeders. The Breeders, padre! Do you know what that means!”

“I know.”

“Of course you do! And you know how much he made? “

“By the value of today’s coin? I’ve got a pretty good idea.”

“You know what he gave me? “

I shook my head.

“I practically got him to the Breeder’s Cup – almost a million dollar race at the time — and he puts a hundred dollar bill in my hand... like he was tipping a bus boy!”

“A gyp, trainer. I know.”

“No you don’t know. You can’t. ‘All those years working for men half the trainer I am,’ I told my wife at the time. ‘This is my chance, Ruth. Not only do I train the horse. I own him! Now is my time.’

“‘It’s your wife and children’s time, too, Jonathan,’ she said. ‘Christian and Peter have never known a father home on week-ends. God, you even go to the barn on Christmas morning. How long to wait before they get their father! Peter can’t even concentrate enough to graduate with his class. Christian’s already running wild and she’s only fifteen. I’m working four days a week helping to pay for feed, vet and shoeing plus the mortgage. For God’s sake, just for once can’t you put us before the horses!’

“‘Damn your God’s sake,’ I answered. ‘I’ve been on the shit end of a long stick all my life. Leaving home at sixteen and on the racetrack since.’

“‘You don’t have to keep living that part of your life,’ my wife answered me. ‘You can choose... happiness.’

“‘I’ve been putting money into the pockets of self-promoters who are afraid to get mud on their boots and calluses on their soft hands. Racing is all I know, Ruth. I got no other place to go. No other choice.’

“‘How much longer before your family has to be that ‘other choice, Jonathan? In God’s name how long do we have to wait?’

“‘Until I win. For eternity if necessary!’ I answered. ‘Tell that to your shit-end-of-the-stick God!’”

Vanderdecken breathed deeply, took off his black stocking cap and ran his fingers through his gray hair, then looked over at me.

“That, Reverend, was the curse I perpetrated upon my wife and family. Today... my wife... long buried. My daughter... last I heard ... was hooked on heroin and prostituting in St. Louis. My son... getting monthly disability checks and living in Section 8 housing. The psychiatrists have him on three different medications for bi-polar disorder and depression. Once every three months Peter stops taking his meds and goes on a bender. Then all over again he starts the task of stabilizing himself. In His cruel way, God has passed the sins of the father onto the children. Over and over again for poor Peter.... and purgatory for poor Christian. And all because they were guilty of nothing more than getting born my children.”

He paused a few moments.

“Every seven years I ship to Hickory Downs. Every seven years I visit Peter, then drive past the small house where Ruth and I lived as husband and wife, mother and father. Every seven years, I work on that God-forsaken letter addressed to Orchard Hill Cemetery. Three sentences, the result.”

Vanderdecken lowered his head.

“Three sentences,” he repeated.

“Can I ask....” I began.

“Yes.”

“I understand you’ve lost your wife. Your children are....”

“.... cursed and damned like their father.”

“What I don’t understand.... I don’t understand the curse and damnation.”

“Every Sunday... whatever track I’m training at ... every Sunday I go to church.”

“Seeking forgiveness?”

Vanderdecken smiled momentarily before resuming the solemn expression which seemed permanently molded upon his face.

“Vanderdecken, “ I said, staring back at him. “How did your wife die?”

“After our children escaped the nest into the purgatory of mental illness, addiction and prostitution, my wife killed herself. It took them a week to hunt me down out east to tell me... she was dead.”

Vanderdecken stared straight past me as he said: “I killed her, Reverend. All this evening, you’ve been talking to a wife-murderer.”

“You may feel responsible, but you did not kill your wife. You owe neither her, nor God, this torturing penance. Are you going to go on racing your shoe-string stable of horses forever? Until you drop dead in some lonely tackroom? Or let the loneliness drive you insane?”

“My story’s not finished, padre. I know you preachers like to stand in the pulpit and neatly break everything into chapter and verse.”

“My pulpit, Vanderdecken, is this kitchen.”

“The reason I attend church, Reverend – insane as it may strike you — is to find another woman who would be faithful like my Ruth. If I could find one woman willing to wait an eternity for this curse sitting in front of you, then I would be released from the damnation of my unending chase.”

Now it was me who remained silent.

“Still no judgment, padre? No accusations? No condemnations? ‘You’re going to do the same thing again to another innocent woman!’ Why don’t you say that.”

“I promised no judgment.”

“Churches are a nice place to meet widows. Whenever I go out with them.... By the fourth or fifth date, after I’ve told them I am looking for a woman who possesses the courage to wait for me, they ask: ‘How long?’ ‘Until I win my one big, race,’ I answer. ‘Forever, if necessary.’ Each time, every one of them responds with the same words: ‘My God! To die, waiting? Never!’”

“Imagine how a woman whose known you for only a few weeks would feel when she heard the words: ‘Marry me. And wait forever,’” I said.

“You think I’m crazy.”

“I promised no judgment.”

“How Christian of you not to play the secular shrink.”

“Listen to me, will you?”

“Are you going to offer me your expertise on how to marry and stay married to a faithful wife full of devotion?”

“I haven’t judged you. Don’t judge me.”

“The kind of commitment you expect,” I continued, “only grows after years together. And then... only a chance for it. Shipping to God-knows-where and then coming into town on some kind of old testament schedule every seven years! That is crazy. And you’ve been doing it to yourself for decades! You’ll go on chasing the kind of devotion you seek.....”

“Forever. Say it, Reverend. For — ever.”

“No woman would answer yes to a man asking her such a question — except one suffering from the same kind of delusion afflicting you.”

“After declaring he won’t judge, the shrink inside the preacher can’t help but put a label

on me. 'He's mental.' That's what you're thinking."

Vanderdecken paused.

"I know I'm a strange one. I don't deny it. But you know what?"

"What."

"You forgot something."

"What?"

"I found Ruth. Ruth was not a delusion."

"You know what, Vanderdecken?"

"What Reverend?"

"We both forgot something."

"What, padre? "

"Something as clear and simple as a child's laughter."

"Says the padre inside the shrink."

"If you take the time and get lucky enough to marry, maybe, after years together, you might find the kind of love you are seeking.

"It is my salvation."

"It's not salvation, Vanderdecken. It's human sacrifice. Your wife fell under it. Mine escaped."

Vanderdecken stared up at the wooden lady positioned over us. The lady had been taken off the bow of a wrecked ship, then wired to the wooden beams supporting the roof of the track kitchen. She stood in simple dress with an aging but handsome face.

"All these years, traveling the circuit, and now a broken down, exiled padre seeks to comfort me by putting on his shrink's cap and declaring...."

"Your horse will never get the big win, and you know it!" I interrupted. " You'll always be chasing it. Forty years on the racetrack. I've seen it. Over and over. I recognize it. You are just its... extreme example."

Vanderdecken allowed a few moments to pass, then looked at me and smiled.

“When I passed through town seven years ago, I sat down on the ground and fell asleep against a tree next to Ruth’s grave. It was a beautiful October afternoon. Indian summer. A policeman’s flashlight woke me up in the darkness. Do you know what I said to him?”

“Tell me.”

“I pointed toward Ruth’s gravestone. ‘I’m visiting my wife, officer,’ I said. When I explained how I am in town once every seven years and that this was the only chance I have to visit Ruth, the officer was kind of enough to give me a pass with the warning not to fall asleep among the dead after the gates to their resting place are closed.

“Later, as I was driving back to my cheap motel, I thought: ‘Imagine. One small dispensation from a city cop with more forgiveness than your God who has cursed me to a life of pulling a trailer up and down and across expressways and highways for an eternity of thirds and fourths and, when He is feeling particularly cruel, a case of seconditis for weeks and weeks. From Lone Star up to Remington across to Saratoga down to Gulfstream and Tampa, taking a shot now and then over at Canterbury before hitting the big ones at Churchill, Pimlico and Belmont. Not one Win allowed for Jonathan Vanderdecken. Seconds, thirds, fourths...on and on without end. That, Reverend, is the blessing your God has bestowed upon me.’ ”

Vanderdecken again lowered his head. He seemed to shrink before my eyes, collapsing from an aging, robust, tall man into a shriveled, inert, emaciated being. I could see the stubble on his chin. Along with his unwashed hair, it made him look like one of the unshaven homeless exiles from the nearby shuttered mental hospital.

I sat there, trying to organize my thoughts in order to offer some kind of sustenance to the sliver of hope his unexpected appearance presented.

“Vanderdecken...” I began.

Before I could pronounce my first sentence, he suddenly came to life, rose from his chair, walked to the exit doors and disappeared. I hurried after him, pushed the glass doors to the kitchen open and stepped outside to the parking lot. The truck and trailer which I had seen parked along barn D when I had entered the kitchen, the name Shumen’s Folly painted on its side, was gone. Heedless of the restrictions placed on me, I circled to the dirt road in back of the kitchen and looked down the shedrow barns. I could see no sign of Vanderdecken anywhere. The man had disappeared.

“Vanderdecken!” I said out loud. “Vanderdecken!” I shouted.

I stood there for a few minutes. I told myself that he must have parked his truck and trailer in the parking lot alongside Calumet Avenue, then gone to tend to his horses in his assigned barn. When I called the Horsemen’s Association Monday morning to find out what barn and stalls he had been assigned, the secretary told me he had shipped out the

previous night. When I asked her to check where he had shipped, she answered that the destination line on the sheet was blank.

Literary Bios

Marisa Adame, a Latina actress/poet/storyteller from Dallas, Texas, has acted internationally and competed at the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational. She has previously been published in St. Lucia zine. Currently completing college in Ohio, she seeks to create work that balances joy and despair through the use of rhythm in language.

Roy Bentley is the recipient of six Ohio Arts Council fellowship awards, as well as a fellowship from the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs and a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Poems have appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, and *Prairie Schooner* among other journals. He is the author of four collections of poetry: *Boy in a Boat* (University of Alabama), *Any One Man* (Bottom Dog Books), *The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana* (White Pine Press), and *Starlight Taxi* (Lynx House Press) which won the Blue Lynx Poetry Prize (2012).

Alan Basting was born in Detroit. He earned an M.A. in English/Creative Writing at Colorado State University and a M.F.A. from Bowling Green State University. His chapbooks include *Singing from the Abdomen* (Stone-Marrow Press); *What the Barns Breathe* (Windows Press); *Suddenly, Herons*, *The Writers' Cooperative of Toledo* and *Deep Time, Daily Habits and Events* (The Arts Commission of Toledo, Ohio). His most recent collection is *Nothing Very Sudden Happens Here* (Lynx House Press). He lives in the heart of the Manistee National Forest near the village of Bitely, Michigan, with his spouse and two dogs.

Nick Conrad poems appear most recently *Orbis* (UK) and *Southern Poetry Review*, *Badlands*, *Blast Furnace*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, and *Kentucky Review*. Work appeared in *Stoneboat*, and accepted at *The Cortland Review* and *Valparaiso Poetry Review*. Other recent publications include issues of *Blueline*, *Borderlands*, *The Chariton Review*, *Colere Dos Passos Review*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *J Journal*, *South Carolina Review*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, and *Stand*(UK). One of his poems has been featured on *Verse Daily*. Another was favorably mentioned in a review on *websitenew pages.com*. *Valparaiso Poetry Review's* Twitter list highlighted one of his poems as its Poem of the Week (2012). Poems recently appeared in *P & Q Press' anthology, Bridging New York*. Several poems appeared in the *Winterhawk Press Anthology Zeus Seduces*.

Elizabeth Crowell holds a B.A. in English from Smith College and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Columbia University. She taught high school and college English for many years and currently lives outside Boston with her wife and two children. Her work has appeared in *Nimrod*, *Atlanta Review*, *Doubletake*, *Feminist Studies*, *Paterson*

Literary Review, The Cortland Review, English Journal, Harpur's Palate and many other fine journals.

Juditha Dowd poetry has appeared in The Florida Review, Spillway, Poetry Daily, Kestrel, Cider Press Review and elsewhere. She reads with Cool Women, an ensemble performing poetry in the NY-Philadelphia metro area and on the west coast. Her full-length collection, *Mango in Winter* was released by Grayson Books, following two chapbooks from Finishing Line Press and a third from Casa de Cinco Hermanas.

CLS Ferguson, PhD speaks, signs, acts, publishes, sings, performs, writes, paints, teaches and rarely relaxes. She and her husband, Rich are raising their daughter and their Bernese Mountain Border Collie Mutt in Alhambra, California. clsferguson.wix.com/clsferguson.

Charles Kell is a PhD student at The University of Rhode Island and editor of The Ocean State Review. His poetry and fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in The New Orleans Review, The Saint Ann's Review, *floor_plan_journal*, The Manhattanville Review, and elsewhere. He teaches in Rhode Island and Connecticut.

Sandra Kolankiewicz's work has appeared widely over the past 35 years, most recently in Appalachian Heritage, BlazeVox, Gargoyle, FifthWednesday, Prick of the Spindle, Per Contra, Prairie Schooner, Prairie Schooner, and Pif. *Turning Inside Out* won the Black River Prize at Black Lawrence Press. Finishing Line Press published *The Way You Will Go*. *Blue Eyes Don't Cry* won the Hackney Award for the Novel. Her novel with 76 color illustrations by Kathy Skerritt, *When I Fell*, is available from Web-e-Books. She lives with her family in Appalachian Ohio. Blog: sandrajkolankiewicz.blogspot.com

Ryan R. Latini is a freelance and fiction writer living and writing in southern New Jersey. He received his M.A. from Saint Joseph's University where his fiction appeared in *The Avenue*. He is currently on the editorial staff of *The Schuylkill Valley Journal*. When he is not copywriting for other blogs, he posts on his own: *The Narrative Report* (ryanlatini.com). Follow him on Twitter @RyanRLatini, or contact at ryan.latini856@gmail.com

Kristin Laurel owes her passion for writing to The Loft Literary Center (MPLS). Her work can be seen in CALYX, Gravel, Glassworks, R.k.vr.y, The Main Street Rag, Grey Sparrow, The Raleigh Review, The Mom Egg, Apeiron Review, The Doctor TJ Eckleburg Review, Split Rock Review and numerous others. Her first full-length book, *Giving Them All Away*, won the Sinclair Poetry Prize from Evening Street Press. To read a free copy, go to eveningstreetpress.com/kristin-laurel-2011.html. Most recently, her

CNF piece, Terminal Burrowing, won first place in The Talking Stick (2015).

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 (Winter, 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.

Sean Padraic McCarthy's short stories have been published or are forthcoming in Glimmer Train, The Indianola Review,, Existere, The Sewanee Review, 2 Bridges Review, Prole, Confrontation, Hayden's Ferry Review, Shadowgraph Magazine, Fifth Wednesday Journal, and West Trade Review among others. His story "Better Man"—originally published in december magazine—was listed as a "Distinguished Story" in The Best American Short Stories (2015), he was recently named a finalist for the Gertrude Stein Award in Fiction, and he is a recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council's Artist Fellowship in Fiction Award (2016). This is his second story to appear in Red Savina Review.

Forest Arthur Ormes' stories have appeared in past issues of Amazing Stories Magazine, Blue Lake Review, Long Story and North Dakota Quarterly. He worked for two decades as a bi-lingual licensed therapist and addictions counselor, serving the horsemen and women of the Chicago-area racetracks. Many of his stories take place in this setting. He and his wife, along with two dogs and five cats, divide their time between residences on the southwest edge of Chicago, and small homestead in central Kansas.

Lauren Walden Rabb is an art historian and author. She has three published novels: Walking Through Time (1998), Interview with Mrs. Berlinski (2005), and The Rise and Fall of the Trevor Whitney Gallery (2014). Her shorter writings about art have appeared in the literary magazines The Whistling Fire, Driftwood Press, The Vignette Review, and Still Point Arts Quarterly.

Born in upstate New York, **Pamela Rader** was a transplant to the Rocky Mountain region where she felt at home in the open spaces and earned her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. She currently lives in central New Jersey where she teaches literature and writing at Georgian Court University.

Luke Roe is a father and poet from Spokane, WA. His poems have appeared recently in Wire Harp, RiverLit and Ricochet. He was RiverLit Magazine's 2015 Poet in Residence.

David Anthony Sam is the grandson of Polish and Syrian immigrants. He has written poetry for over 40 years and has two collections, including *Memories in Clay, Dreams of Wolves* (2014). He lives in Virginia USA with his wife and life partner, Linda, and currently serves as president of Germanna Community College. www.davidanthony.sam.com. He's had poems accepted by *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Carbon Culture Review*, *Clementine Poetry Journal*, *The Crucible*, *Empty Sink Publishing*, *FLARE: The Flager Review*, *From the Depths*, *Heron Tree*, *Hound*, *Literature Today*. On the *Rusk*, *Piedmont Virginian Magazine*, *The Scapegoat Review*, *Spirit Wind Poetry Gallery*, *The Summerset Review*, *These Fragile Lilacs*, and *The Write Place at the Write Time*.

Gerard Sarnat is the late-career author of four critically-acclaimed collections: *HOMELESS CHRONICLES from Abraham to Burning Man* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014) and *Melting The Ice King* (2016). Work from *Ice King* was accepted by over seventy magazines, including *Gargoyle* and *Lowestoft Chronicle*, and featured in *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review*, *Avocet: A Journal of Nature Poems*, *LEVELER*, *tNY*, *StepAway*, *Bywords* and *Floor Plan*. For *Huffington Post* and other reviews, reading dates, publications, interviews and more, visit GerardSarnat.com. Harvard and Stanford educated, Gerry's spent time in jails as a physician and social justice protestor, built and staffed clinics for the marginalized, been a CEO of healthcare organizations and Stanford Medical School professor.

Christian Stock has been involved in his literary community for the past five years. He isn't afraid of dying, but still sometimes ducks through the dark part of hallways. His favorite color is green and he hates that geniuses supposedly pick green. You can tweet him @loCStock2sbrls

Laura Sweeney facilitates *Writers for Life* in central Iowa. She represented the Iowa Arts Council at the *First International Teaching Artist's Conference* in Oslo, Norway. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Main Street Rag*, *Folia*, *East Jasmine Review*, *Yellow Chair Review*, *Wordrunner eChapbook*, *Balloons Lit. Journal*, *Canadian Woman Studies*, and *Nuclear Impact Anthology*. She is an assistant editor for *Eastern Iowa Review*.

Robert Vivian is the author of *The Tall Grass Trilogy*, *Water And Abandon* and two meditative essay collections, *Cold Snap As Yearning* and *The Least Cricket Of Evening*. His first poetry book is called *Mystery My Country*—and he's co-written a second called *Traversings* with the poet *Richard Jackson*. He teaches at *Alma College* and as a core faculty member at *The Vermont College Of Fine Arts*.

Sarah Brown Weitzman a Pushcart Prize nominee, has been widely published in hundreds of journals such as *America*, *Zymbol*, *The North American Review*, *Rattle*, *Mid-American Review*, *Miramar*, *The Windless Orchard*, *Slant*, *Poet Lore*, etc. She received a Fellowship for “Excellence in Poetry” from the National Endowment for the Arts. A departure from poetry, her fourth book, *HERMAN AND THE ICE WITCH*, was published by Main Street Rag.

