

THE BREAD LOAF JOURNAL

VOLUME III | SUMMER 2015



Writings from the School of English

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Middlebury Bread Loaf
School *of* English

Bread Loaf Journal 2015

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COVER PHOTO:

"Along the Edge of the Pool," 2012 by William Connally, williamconnally.com

Introduction

This is for the writer who sits by the stream each day, filling his or her notebook with verse in hopes of contributing to the conversation. This is for the nearly one hundred writers who submitted work to this year's journal; those selected represent the diverse writing styles that define The Bread Loaf School of English. This is for our family. Welcome to the 2015 Bread Loaf Journal.

—*Leo Connally, co-editor*

Assemblage

STACIA BOWLEY

I have never been comfortable taking risks in life or love, and this is why I am a thirty-five year-old English teacher living in Austin, Texas. Even when I moved to New York in October of 2001, I wasn't being edgy or not caring about *The Terror*—I was trying to keep pace with the kids I'd graduated college with six months earlier who had had the money to move right off, where I'd had to stay home and work and save for a summer. Then I moved to a place where I could never rest because I had to make up time, because I didn't have money, because I was afraid that I didn't have talent. In that moment, I began to make decisions about my life without knowing it, trading out the time I'd have spent staying true to the version of myself that I liked for time spent doing things that felt bleakly necessary. What happened to the person who I was?

So, with each year, I rehearse the forensics of each failed foray in the Land of Couples, each professional dream deferred. For example, I'm not a published poet. I didn't try to work in advertising. When I blew my own mind in 2004 with an idea for hydroponic catnip called Meeowwee Wowie, I sat on my hands. Look where I am, now. Correcting grammar and doing stand-up routines about literature in a city known for being easy. No fame, no glamour, no fortune.

I'd been trying (but not very hard) to regain my bearings for years. Add to that new guilt about my mother having died alone, and flying to Washington D.C. to visit the Museum of Personal Relationship Histories became a welcome duty. A couple of weeks after the funeral, long enough for the funeral director to tell the Social Security Administration that she was dead, I got an invitation in the mail to fly out and vet my mom's exhibit before it became open to the public. Maybe if I was thorough, I could find some means of atonement for not being the one to notice that she'd died, or not putting her up in a nicer hotel when I last saw her. I also thought that walking through the highlights of her life might shed some light on mine, and maybe in that space I'd see a way to get back to the smart, funny, productive person I was when I was younger.

The flight from Austin to D.C. happens in two parts: you have to stop in Atlanta. I had a long-ish layover wherein, practicing for my work the next day, I stared at everyone I saw. I tried to guess how their exhibits would look, what their important moments would be. It was kind of fun and tragic and fascinating to play that game of inference and extrapolation. I'd look at couples and try to figure out if they would last, who had

kids, what peoples' relationships were to one another. After a while, I settled on a pattern of parents, siblings, friendships, partners, children, parents, friendships, partners, and, finally children. But, once I began feeling adept at guessing things about people, I immediately started to feel presumptuous and obnoxious, casting hypotheses and judgments around the terminal like Mardi Gras beads. Right as I began to really castigate myself, it was time to board the flight.

I cabbed it from the Dulles to a formerly-fancy hotel on L'Enfant Plaza, and then on to dinner near DuPont Circle. The review on Yelp said "intimate and polished." I noticed that everyone there was ten years younger than me, at least, and I secretly hoped they were spending their parents' money. How else could they be so well dressed and clearly not caring that there was no wine on the menu for less than \$11 a glass? I thought about ordering something light, conscious of the implications of a woman eating by herself. Ultimately, though, I asked for some pasta involving squid ink, crab, lobster, and cream. How often, after all, would I be here again doing this errand? Why not have something decadent as I prepared to spend the following day immersed in what I could never have again?

It was a relief to spot an open liquor store on the way out of the restaurant. I picked up some bourbon and promptly went back to my room to make a hangover with a splash of sleep. My appointment was in the morning, and I wasn't sure if I would like to be exactly sober for it. Sometimes, hangovers create a hazy, magical space where it's easier to love things that are difficult, and I was bent on getting there. The next morning in the cab, I knew that I'd arrived before we even got to the museum. Unable to pay attention to anything besides the plaque on my tongue and the way black coffee made it feel like a coral reef of disgusting, I tasted my way to the glistening elevator kiosk—all glass, brass, and marble—near the back of the Aeronautics Museum and descended several stories before I found myself in a dark, silent lobby.

Even if you have never been to where I'm talking about, you have been to a place like where I am talking about: mahogany-paneled walls and dark blue carpet; recessed lights set in a dark ceiling shine with an intensity that accentuates the darkness they seem like they should guard against, and it's that light/dark tension pulls you into chamber after chamber. At intervals, there are huge plate-glass windows that expose large and intricate dioramas that are well-lit, and while we are all used to seeing these rooms populated with springbok and lions, with river otter and salmon and bear, the ones where I was contain tableaux of the most telling scenes of each significant relationship in our own human lives. The painted veldt becomes

a kitchen or a classroom, and the taxidermied lion becomes a lifelike replica of a person who is dead. It's the NSA's gift to the American people, the dandruff from our national tangle of phone calls and Facebook posts. It looked like they did a nice job.

A small, middle-aged docent in a navy blazer, skirt and walking shoes took me through a labyrinth that I half-tried to follow on the map she handed me. I followed her sporty, blonde head, bobbing as it talked, through rooms and halls and more rooms and halls. Eventually we stopped at a threshold with my mom's name above it in brushed aluminum sans-serif government-museum font. I knew that, even if what I saw once I went in didn't make me proud, I could hold onto the nice feeling of seeing her name mounted on mahogany dado like that. It was warmer-looking than the headstone I still have to buy, and it was all only hers.

The docent stood aside and I walked in. The dimensions and lighting in the space were the same as all the others, but many of the cases held furniture I had lived with, faces I knew, and replicated places where I'd been. I saw my mom, the baby, cradled by my grandmother, cooed to by my grandfather in their old apartment on Court Street. I saw her, about age four, forced-smiling with her younger brother, and a few years later, cradling her younger sister. Then she was in a desk at school being scolded by a nun. She was a beauty in high school. In one case, she was wearing a softball uniform and kissing a boy named Angelo. Then she was posed on a beach in Falmouth on the Cape where she waitressed for a summer, with a tall, handsome boy who apparently loved Vitalis. Then she was in a nursing uniform, staring intently at a doctor. You wouldn't even know it was her, there, the way she's kind of stuck behind him in a desk while he appears to lecture, but because it's her exhibit, I know she's in there somewhere—like Waldo. In the next, she's still a nurse, but her hair is longer and she grew out her bangs. Her pin says "McClean Hospital." I squinted and decided that was James Taylor in the background.

She was at maybe a reading with a tweedy, bearded older man who seemed both academic and lecherous. She was looking devotedly into the side of the face of a guy who I'm 99% sure is the peanut vendor from Fenway Park who really broke her heart. I saw her locked in an embrace with a dark-skinned man who might have been the great love of her time in Cairo, but then there were three or four other guys, each smiling with her in front of a pyramid or a Bedouin tent or the Nile as her hair and weight fluctuated.

My mom in front of the Louvre...with a man. My mom outside Big Ben...with a man. My mom with her best friends Pauline and Joyce in an

apartment in Miami...with a pack of men. How could it be possible that she identified these relationships? I knew all of her best girlfriends, and Pauline and Joyce were up there on the list, but in the display case, they are part of the photographed background—they were not their own man-nequins, but the men were. What did this mean? Where were the rest of her friends from those years?

I practically ran to a case where I recognized her with my dad, head-back laughing, drunk and dancing at the end of a pier in Boston Harbor. This was more like it. I saw her with my dad and grandfather after my parents eloped. The baby shower in my Aunt's living room with their cousins huddled around my mom, years before she put veneers on her teeth. There I was, cute and cute again, and then there was a case of her at work, talking to a man named Ed, who was her supervisor for a while. There were people I don't know toward the end. Packs of men wearing union t-shirts, the tenor section of her Young At Heart™ chorus, my friend Paul who lived close to her house and would do the yard. My dad's cousin Donovan, the one who found her dead at home and called me.

I wandered around the room, between the twenty-four cases, among them, looking at nothing, at details, at my own image, at my reflection. I pressed my cheek and cried a little. In total, I appeared in two cases, not counting one where my mom was pregnant. There were five of my dad. Four were of Paul-who-cuts-the-yard. That hurt. There was a smattering of family. The rest of the cases were filled with men I didn't know and would never know, and while a part of me wanted to tell the docent that the curators had done a horrible job, and where did they get these people from, and shouldn't I be able to tell them how far off they were, I couldn't. I mean, I lived with my mom for a long time, and I liked to think I knew her well, but maybe I didn't. Maybe, crushingly, this was the way she really looked at her own life.

I stood between the can-lights in the islands of dark. I got bored like I spent too much time with photo albums, and I Kleenex-scraped my face until I felt the sting of raw skin replace the hot-faced embarrassment of suddenly realized insignificance. I wandered for less than a minute before the docent with the blonde bob padded over and, with an inscrutably nice (and definitely rehearsed) face and tone, asked: how was I doing, did I have questions, how did it look? I couldn't put together a sentence. What I should have asked was, why do people come here? And, who is ever happy with these displays? And, are children often shocked to see they aren't the centers of their parents' lives? I should have asked to see some other exhibits of dead mothers to compare—but even then, what could the lives of

strangers tell me? I mustered, “It looks really OK.” She asked, while I was there, did I want to do a quick fact-check on what was on file so far for me?

Have you ever been hungover and pining for your past? I really, really wanted to see where I fit.

The place where you go to see your life before you are dead looks like a study carrel with a microfiche machine that loads itself with holograms, not news from the sixties. The cheerful docent showed me the instructions, turned on the machine, punched my Social Security number on the keypad, and closed the door behind her. The first screen was my name. Then:

1. My mom holding me, new.
2. I wrap my baby hand around my aunt’s finger.
3. My dad sits on the couch in his underwear holding me and smiling so big.
4. I’m under a table with a boy from nursery school, Peter Connelly.

The years scroll. I’m hunting for Easter eggs at Terry Cook’s. I’m leaning over David Assa’s shoulder at a computer programming competition in fifth grade. I’m standing opposite Chris Brooks in a middle school production of *Little Shop of Horrors*. I’m dying Dan Cashman’s hair black. My first boyfriend, Ben McCray, and I meet in front of the Middle East Night Club in Cambridge, Mass. waiting to see Beck play.

And here comes the time when I feel disappointed with my life. I guess that I’d forgotten just how much there was to cringe from.

There’s Brian, a boy with dead eyes and dreadlocks, getting into his ’87 Golf as he leaves on Phish tour while I stand, poker-faced, a few feet away. Craig, who once accused me of leaning on my horn outside his house at all hours (even though he knew I lived in another state) kick-flipping his skateboard in front of a party where I’m on the porch. Hans, who drank so much he peed the bed, grins at a Bikini Kill show where I’m dancing near the stage. Josh, who looked like a regal, tattooed baby, fries chorizo in a pan while I make a gagging gesture next to him. Clifford looks dreamily at a folio of Donald Judd’s art while I lie next to him feigning sleep. Darren and I brush our teeth in a mirror. John, with his broken front tooth, walks away from my house holding a tallboy. You can see me watching, longingly, from just inside the front door.

I wander through the years with few (represented) friends and many men, and the two-columned punch sheet I was given as a ballot suddenly has a long chain of perforation on its right side: I rejected almost everything. There was no way that I’d measure myself with those yardsticks. Although, if this was a measure of time spent, not actual importance,

could it be that this assemblage was accurate? I could see their tattoos so vividly in the little case. Some of the scenes were in their cramped, dusty, cluttered rooms, which I judged to be sad, not representative even of the filthy thrill I had while I was there.

Some of the people who showed up, I sincerely couldn't remember. Who chose them? What were they to me? I was left unsure if there something I forgot—something lovely and sweet that left its mark on me without my knowing. How awful to overlook a person who one didn't remember, but who contributed to a decision about one's life? On the other hand, how awful to forget a person who sneakily passed on traumas that one might only understand after years and years in therapy? Does memory assign importance, or does the trajectory of a life? And where in that trajectory does importance lie? What about fortune? What about love, or getting what we want? What we work for? And, if we insist that we curate our own history, are we inherently revisionist and vain? The hangover had thinned to a whining headache. Plus, my breath was so bad.

I said "fuck it." After some wrestling with the heavy paper, I pulled the ballot out of the metal frame, shoved it in my purse, and left. There was no way I could ever know anything about this shit.

In a strange city, hungover and hungry, I speed-walked through some other lives before I finally found a different docent. She handed me, and I signed, a waiver that said "Everything I saw was OK." I took the elevator up to the back of the Aeronautics Museum, leaving behind one world for the next.

Later, I ate an omelet, drank two bloody mary's, and fell asleep watching Skinemax. I flew home when I woke up the next afternoon. In the terminal in Atlanta, I kept my headphones on. I ate some awful pizza. I drank a beer. There was no reflection—or if there was, I wouldn't see it.

Equating

JULIA WOODWARD

I've never been good at math. Two times three equals six. Fourteen times four equals fifty-six. Does it? I preferred to write, to feel. To put words on a page, even when it was hard to find the words. Even when it was hard to find the page. Words never had to be broken into syllables, la, fa, per-pe-tu-al. Words were seamless wholes to start with. No tangent, no derivative involved. I took math. Algebra, pre-calculus. Statistics because I had to. Skivved off physics. Screw differential equations for sure. There was a joke about math that I liked though. Something about lying tangent to your curves. I could lie tangent to your curves, if you wanted. See, I think Wollstonecraft had it right when she wrote about rational love. I love you rationally. Tangentially.

The Red One

MAGGIE BYKOWSKI

He could hear her voice on the cheap answering machine he bought on his way down. He hadn't bothered to record an answering machine message yet, so when she called, there was no real voice, no human voice to greet her unanswered call, only a mechanized consolation prize.

"Frank," the voice said, tinny through the tiny speaker. "You don't want to come back. I don't want you to come back. And that's fine, because you know it wasn't good anymore." The voice stopped. "We weren't good anymore. Aren't good." The snick of a lighter and then the sigh of a breath-held-too-long joined voice on the recording. "He misses you. Just. . . answer a letter, or call him, please. Anything. He keeps waiting for you to come home. Just consider being a father, okay?"

The letter lying unopened on the counter in the man's studio apartment read like this:

Dear Dad,

How's things in Santa Monica? Mom says that you're going to burn to a crisp there. Be careful, because I keep imagining you looking like a piece of bacon

and I'm afraid the seagulls will snap you up and chomp on you like Barkley does sometimes with your shoes.

The other day, Miss Cruise said that I would get to go to the fourth grade early because I'm such a good reader during quiet time and that I do my math faster than everyone else but it's still right and so I'm supposed to be considered gifted and talented. She thinks I wasn't picked out before because of my u-n-i-q-u-e personality, which means I'm one-of-a-kind.

I was the green one after school today and James let me be the green one even though I'm usually the blue one. Kevin said I could be the red one when I showed them that I could do it, so I did the monkey bars faster-than-you-can-count like you said to one time before.

Barkley and me'll see you at New Years'.

Love,

Michael

The woman stared back at the receiver in surprise when a deep male voice answered her call on the sixth ring. When she realized it was merely an answering recording, she knew for sure that it was the third time he tried recording it and that this was the final version.

"Frank?" She waited, hoping he would pick up. "Frank," she sighed, "we need to talk. I know you don't want to, but I'm worried about Michael. He's so wrapped up in when you're coming home. If you could just give him a call, he'd start feeling better."

Dear Dad,

How's things in Santa Monica? Today I learned the word "arabesque" from the word of the day calendar you left on your desk in your office. I asked Mom if you wanted it where you are but she said no because you have a dictionary so you don't need a word of the day calendar so I can have it.

She was busy with stuff so I went outside to ask Mr. Collier how to say it because it looked so weird on the calendar and he said it was "air-uh-besk" like "air-a-desk". I bet you knew what that meant without the calendar. I bet you know it now but I'm going to tell you what it means anyway. It can be a design or a music thing or that dancing move that Katie Lombard does during recess.

During recess yesterday, Kevin and James let me be the green one. I think I'll be the red one once it gets nicer and stuff outside. Sometimes I think they don't let me be the red one because they are jealous of my present that I got for my birthday from you.

Will you come home for President's Day? I made Barkley a three point hat like Mr. Washington the President had. I made one for you and for mom and for

me, too, so we can be the founding fathers except that Mom's a mother so she's like Betsy Ross. Except she can't sew.

I'm going to teach Barkley to do an arabesque now. He'll be better at it than Katie Lombard. I know he will because he's a boy and he's a dog.

Michael

Michael sat on the curb next to his mailbox, waiting for Mr. Somers to deliver the letters and magazines for the day. He clutched an envelope in his hand, waiting resolutely for the postman to arrive; putting up the flag would not be enough today.

Dear Dad,

Miss Cruise said that gifted and talented students get to use the internet during free time before they get into fifth grade if they are doing it for educational things which I think includes what I was using it for. I found out that the red one is a good one like I thought it was. When I got home, I asked Mr. Collier to figure it all out because I'm still not very good at some words even though I'm gifted and talented. Mom says that I'll know those words if I stay patient and keep learning the words from your calendar.

Today's word was g-r-e-g-a-r-i-o-u-s which means a g-r-e-g-a-r-i-o-u-s person likes to be around other people all the time and is very easy to talk to. I think Mom is g-r-e-g-a-r-i-o-u-s,

I got to be the red one today for the first time and I thought that that made Kevin and James very g-r-e-g-a-r-i-o-u-s.

Anyway, Mr. Collier helped me figure it all out so now I know that I can give you the best present ever.

He helped me put this on the internet:

Full sized Red Ranger. 5 feet, 9 inches.

Made at a famous Hollywood Studio that scanned the red ranger for the Power Ranger Movie.

A very rare find.

So now I just have to wait but Mr. Collier said \$340 would be enough. So now you can come home for Father's Day.

G-r-e-g-a-r-o-u-s-l-y,

Michael, the Red Ranger

The Perseids on the Night of the Super Moon

PAIGE BONCHER

This is the summer of dads dropping dead
of natural and unnatural causes. Just last night
Robin Williams hung himself with a belt, leaving
a daughter who this morning on Twitter
vowed to see him *forever in the stars*.

In our campsite I study my own greying father
as if he were next on the list, memorize
his pigeon-toed walk as he collects kindling
the width of lemon peel he drops into his drink
his ratio of Campari to wine.
I say *Teach me how to build a campfire*.
Though I have seen him build one a thousand times before
I fear my powers of observation have failed me
and I must gather his secrets
while I still can.

My iPhone, blinding as the super moon overhead, buzzes
that the Perseids will be at their brightest tonight,
but I am covering a napkin with advice Google will never give:
Collect the kindling before the sun goes down.
Check the paper for stories before you burn it.
Use three logs not two to maximize the flow of oxygen to the flame.

I stand in the way of the smoke,
absorb the stinging pine I used to flee,
inhale as he breathes into the dark spaces
and just as I begin to doubt whether the wet wood will take,
a flame emerges.
The moon bleaches the stars.
The ashy ribs of the logs glow pulse shift
until one collapses.

Katie's Mom and Dad

CHRISTOPHER MCCURRY

They ate in the near dark, the light from the kitchen masking their faces in shadow and light. “You could try it, you know? It might help,” he said to say something. And as soon as he said it he knew she would disapprove of the slight lilt in his voice that indicated, almost imperceptibly, hope, and almost immediately she began bullying the minuscule amount of spaghetti on her plate with her fork, scraping the tines across the surface.

Neither of them spoke for a while. Eventually, she sat her fork down without taking a bite and looked up at him. Her eyes looked punched out and the corners of her mouth turned down, tight against her face. Tears collected at her eyes’ edge and slid down.

“I did try it.” Her head went back as she said this as if she were firing the words off by force, or like they were escaping despite her efforts to keep them locked in.

No you didn’t, he wanted to say. *No. Not really. You only looked and muttered something you thought I wouldn’t hear under your breath.* But he nodded and pushed a meatball around his plate, then stabbed it with a fork and chewed it up noisily.

Six months ago Katie crashed her green Camry into a tree on the way to graduation. That day was cloudless and hot like the many days before it; late May and already the grass was browning. He’d had been preoccupied with the inflatable slide ordered for the after party killing the grass. Katie put her makeup and dress on with her girlfriends upstairs and his wife worked with the photographer readying the front porch. Their porch was kind of a tourist attraction for their small town. Large and colonial, all the middle school dances, formals, and proms began with pictures on the porch. People were in and out of the house, stopping by to say hello. Distant relatives called to wish the graduate best of luck in college. He overheard her tell an aunt she couldn’t wait to be out of the house, but he knew she didn’t mean anything hurtful by it. She was a confident and independent girl. *Woman.* That’s how they had raised her. That didn’t mean it didn’t hurt to hear her say it. No matter the full-ride to Columbia and New York apartment, pride could not trump his desire for her to stay in his home. As he passed her on the way out to meet the caterer, he kissed the top of her head, still secretly hoping she would change her mind: live with them and go to the state college. It was the force of the impact that killed her. The airbag deployed but still her ribcage was crushed and skull spilt. More than likely, the sheriff told them, she was reaching for the radio

or checking her phone, when the front tire slipped off the edge of the road, sucked the car right off the road.

He cleared his wife's plate then came back and sat with her at the table. She sat with her chin in her hand staring directly at the wall. How many nights since then had this scene repeated, he wondered. Not too many to count yet each one more unfathomable than last.

"I used to think about this, you know," she said without changing her expression, her voice flat and clamped down.

"Those dreams you used to tell me about?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Oh. What did you mean?"

"I used to think about what my life would be like if she died. Like how my life would be different," she said.

He could have said, *yeah, me too*, but he didn't say anything.

"Sometimes I'd imagine you dying with her and how I would sell the house and change careers, live in an apartment with next to nothing while I studied pottery or art history. Completely reinvent myself; or if she died, I would just leave you one day without a word."

He cleared his throat.

"I'd be this enigma. People would be drawn to me because I had this past that no one could comprehend. They'd say to me: *I can't even begin to imagine what that would feel like*. And I would say back to them...I don't know...something...something..."

"That might be normal."

"Especially in the beginning. When she was still young, a baby. I thought I was crazy, but I kept telling myself, *I don't want her to die. I just wonder what it would be like, if she were dead*. I got so that I would think about her dying as a way of preventing it. Like if I could think about it before it happened then it couldn't happen. When she went away on that mission trip, I couldn't stop seeing her plane crash, or someone body kidnapping her, or worse; most of the time worse. I thought about the after-shocks and her being trapped under rubble."

"And now?" he asked.

"Now?"

"What do you think of now, when you think about her?"

She sat motionless, like she hadn't thought about it before, but the answer came quickly enough, though she struggled to say it. Her mouth opened to speak and then closed again, so that nothing could escape that might continue to make this any more devastating. "Now? Now, it's like I have to remind myself she ever even existed. It's like the past seventeen

years of my life is gone, and it feels like all I can remember are the times I thought about how my life wouldn't be all that bad if she were dead."

He was listening to his wife, but not really comprehending. She was a stranger across the table. He couldn't help but feel sorry for her.

Abruptly, she stood and took her plate to the kitchen; it clattered in the sink and steam from the hot water rose around her face as she rinsed it clean before washing it.

He slid his into the sink, and she washed those too, without thought, then drained the water, and began drying her hands with a dishtowel.

"Glass of wine?" he asked her.

She shook her head and told him she just wanted to get in bed. "Will you come?"

"I don't think so, I've got some work." The cork in the bottle popped and he poured a small glass. He tried not to look at her. Lately he felt only pity and he feared how plainly it showed on his face.

"It's not real. You know that. I know you know that. You're not crazy. You know it's not actually her. I looked into it. It's algorithms, not even real people. They get access to her social media accounts. They Photoshop her into places her friends have been. It's sick." She stopped herself for a moment, but kept going when she saw he couldn't look at her. "She's dead and you're acting like she's out there at the beach with her friends."

"It cost extra for photoshoping," he finally said.

Her eyes bugged. "You're paying for it. You are actually giving people money to pretend to be our dead daughter. To pretend she still has a life. How much?"

He shook his head.

"How much are you paying!" she screamed it at him and her foot came down on the tiled kitchen floor with a smack.

He went to reach out for her but she pushed him off with a shaky hand, leaving the room half bent with grief and anger.

He stood there for a while and poured a second glass of wine. He could hear her going through her nightly routine. Washing her face, brushing her teeth, using the bathroom one last time, putting lotion on, folding down the covers on the bed. Somehow none of that made sense to him. None of it seemed real.

The last swallow of the wine went down warm. It had been a big second glass and his face was flushed. He felt guilty for feeling even a little good, but still he hummed as he went back to his office.

He took his time getting to the updates. He checked his mail, scrolled through Facebook, looked in on the progress of his fantasy football team. Finally, he opened a new tab and logged in.

Katie had been to the movies, one of her favorite things to do. She saw the new Transformers movie and thought it was *just meh*. He laughed a little, because he could see her expression, the big-cheeked smirk and left shoulder shrugged.

Wake from the Whale Dream

EMILY FLORENCE SMITH MCLEAN

That year I won gold
fish—a pair of them—by throwing
a dimpled ball into their clear
cup. Mom said they needed
room to grow. I held them
swimming in their swollen bag
until we poured them into the cloud-
ed brook near our house.
I dreamed them into whales
growing too big for even that water
I saw them one night while riding
my tricycle. Two tree sized golden
whales chasing each other in water -
chased, in later years, by wolves
out of dreams. Like that they ended.
Now I wake in sharp dark minutes
after beasts have chased my father
and me up into some anonymous
forest. I still my breath and hide
from nothing in my sheets.

And then, from my dark bed, covered,
it rose before me in the sea
next to the tar cracked ocean road.
Humped back twisting like a silver

cork screw. I hadn't seen a whale
dream in years. They are like flying.
That day, after I dreamt of the whale,
it rose before me as I walked—
like when sleep gods gift
me with illusory arms
belonging to you...
You, the dark air from stars
whispers under curtains
and lands on my cheek.

You, my whale dream
day when waking makes
me lose your laugh. And all day
I look under my eyes for you.
More afraid to fall to sleep
to wake after a new dream has consumed
you. The rarest of dreams.
The lightest of days.

Reckoning

R. REESE FULLER

Outside the boy's open window beyond the screen, the bullfrogs groaned and the crickets screamed in the humidity. He heard the old man shuffle into the kitchen.

"I can't find my keys," he said.

"Where did you leave them?" the boy's grandmother asked.

"If I knew that I wouldn't need to find them, would I?"

"You *need* to find Jesus."

"Well if he'd help me with those keys, that would suit me just fine."

The old man walked out of the kitchen.

"You ain't going to find Him at the bottom of a whiskey bottle or shooting pool at the Rack 'n' Cue!"

"Who knows," the old man said, "miracles never cease, right?"

The boy knew Jesus was magical. He knew He was God's son too and that his grandmother talked to Him whenever she complained about the old man. She had tricked the boy once into going to church with her to hear about Jesus, coaxing him with the allure of free donuts after the service. After listening to a preacher yell about Hell and The Glory of the Lord, the boy had asked for his donuts, and she had told him he would find them in Sunday school. There were no donuts, just store bought sugar cookies from a plastic bag. The lady in the room told him and the other kids a few stories about Jesus while they nibbled their cookies. He could make the blind see and even turn water into wine. The best story was about Jesus sleeping in a boat when a storm started. His friends woke Him up, but He wasn't fazed at all. He held out His hands and told the waters to calm down. And it did.

The boy heard the jingling keys.

"Got 'em," the old man said. "Back in a bit."

The front screen door slammed, and the boy heard the truck crank up and the tires crunching chert beneath as it headed down the driveway. As he dozed off, he heard the faint flick of his grandmother's lighter and the soft click of her cigarette pursue and then smelled the burning tobacco in the warm and wet air.

The old man was on his seventh Old Milwaukee with a Marlboro burning in the glass ashtray in front of him. He stared into the old TV behind the bar looking at the Taxi rerun, the volume off, while Webb Pierce sang on the jukebox:

*There stands the glass
That will hide all my tears
That will drown all my fears
Brother, I'm on my way.*

In the mirror behind the bar, the old man could see the wall behind him where a flag with an image of a grimacing skeleton trudged across a scorched earth, a headband wrapped around its head, and its own flag—all set against the backdrop of a larger Confederate flag and encircled by "THE SOUTH WILL RISE AGAIN." The two pool tables were empty.

Bobby stood behind the counter, washing and drying beer mugs. He was a thick Italian whose people came from out on Larto Lake. Behind the bar in a corner, Pete, a white cockatoo, sat in a cage. Bobby had trained it to say "repeat" any time he said its name. It had been hilarious for about the first six months—watching Bobby and the bird go back and forth—but within the last couple years the old man didn't find it funny anymore. It seemed like Bobby could teach the bird to do something worth a shit in-

stead of saying the same thing over and over again. But Bobby spoke little, and after listening to his wife all day, it's how the old man preferred it. He would sink ten bucks into the jukebox and listen to Webb and Hank and even Jerry Lee—not the rock 'n' roll but the later country music—until Bobby closed up for the night.

Doyle walked in, and the outside air stirred the cigarette smoke-filled barroom. In the mirror, the old man saw the gangly figure lurching towards the bar, but he couldn't make out who it was. His eyes were getting worse, and the beer didn't help. The figure slapped the old man on the back. A younger version of himself would have turned around and laid that son of a bitch out on the barroom floor, but the old man, his vision clouded by beer and time, turned his head quickly to see Doyle standing there, a scar running down the side of his face where his third wife had tried to cut his ear off six years ago.

"Well, goddamn, boy" the old man said. "Where you been? I ain't seen you in a coon's age."

The two shook hands.

"Good to see you, old timer," Doyle said.

The old man reached for his cigarette, the filter burning. He snubbed it out and lit another with the Zippo he had since Korea.

"You too, Doyle," the old man said. "Where you been?"

Doyle sat down on the bar stool next to the old man.

"Out on a rig with a bunch of coonasses, making money."

The old man didn't take kindly to the younger set with their pretty pickups and fashionable camo and fake country music. But Doyle reminded the old man of himself when he was younger just coming into his own, trading his life in the piney woods for the life out on the rigs and more money than he ever could imagine.

"Beer?" Bobby asked.

"A frog's ass watertight?" Doyle replied.

Bobby walked over to the tap and drew a beer.

"That's on my tab," the old man said.

"Like hell it is," Doyle said. "I'm shitting twenty dollar bills over here. Put *his* drinks on *my* tab. And set us up with a couple Wild Turkeys too."

Bobby raised an eyebrow and set the sweating mug on the bar in front of Doyle.

"Edith said not to sell you liquor no more," Bobby said to the old man.

"He ain't buying no liquor," Doyle said. "I am."

The old man took a drag off his cigarette.

"I don't want Edith coming back up in here swinging another god-damn cue at me," Bobby said.

Doyle laughed and slapped his hand on the bar.

"I don't see her in here, Bobby," he said. "So let's make with the kickin' chicken, goddamnit!"

The old man smiled and shook his head. Bobby turned around to fix the shots.

"How's retirement treating you?" Doyle asked the old man.

"Good as it can be. Just have to get out of the house sometime."

"Yeah, I hear ya. Me too. My place is just too quiet by myself. I need to get out there and scare up some tail. See if I can't find some chick to hunker down with while I'm back on solid ground."

The old man took a drag off his cigarette and exhaled.

"Be careful what you ask for," he said. "It might come true."

Doyle chuckled as Bobby set the two shot glasses down on the bar. The men toasted then shot their bourbon, slapping the empty glasses back onto the bar.

"Boy, that'll knock your dick in the dirt," Doyle said, shaking his head. "Another?"

The old man felt the burn in his throat.

"Maybe just one more," he said.

When the old man came to, he was laid up underneath the trailer of a parked semi-trailer. He was reclining as if sleeping and when he looked over to the passenger's seat, shards of glass fell from his face. Laid back in the other seat was a hippie. Blood ran down his face, and his white T-shirt was splattered with crimson spots.

"What is this?" the old man asked, dazed.

"Looks like we've run up under a parked semi," the hippie said.

The old man reached up and ran his fingers over the underbelly of the trailer, glass falling from his arm.

"Who are you?" the old man asked the hippie.

"An old friend."

"I don't think we've met."

"Sure we have," the hippie said. "You just don't remember."

Blood was clotting in the hippie's hair just over his left eyebrow.

"I don't know how I got here," the old man sputtered, "and I don't know how to get out."

"Just throw it in reverse and punch it," the hippie said. "You might lose the cab, but you'll make it out of here."

The old man dropped the truck into reverse and hit the gas. Gravel shot out from beneath the wheels, and smoke filled the cab before the truck broke free with the screech of metal on metal. The old man felt the truck break free from the semi and slammed on the brakes.

“Sweet Jesus!” he yelled. “We did it!”

The old man sat up in the truck, its cab gone, and turned to the hippie, but he was gone.

When the boy woke up, the old man was already awake, sitting in a white plastic chair stained with mildew and wearing the same clothes from the night before, his shirt unbuttoned and untucked, a 12-gauge shotgun across his lap. His eyes were puffy and bloodshot and focused on nothing in the distant pine trees on the hill.

“Where’s Grandmaw?” the boy asked from the kitchen, behind the back wooden screen door.

“Gone,” the old man said.

“Gone where?”

“Not sure.”

“When’s she coming back?”

“Don’t know.”

The boy looked around the kitchen and saw a white plate covered with another plate on the stove.

“What are you doing?” the boy asked.

“Waiting,” the old man said.

“For what?”

“A turkey.”

“What turkey?”

“The one that’s been showing up on that hill over there for the last couple days.”

The boy looked out into the field and saw nothing but red clay and pine trees.

“He’s been showing up—giving me the evil eye,” the old man said.

“Next time I see that son of a bitch I’m taking him down. We’ll have Thanksgiving early this year.”

The boy walked back through the house and stared out into the front yard. The truck sat next to the blooming white dogwood tree, its cab missing and its bumper dangling like a rusted chrome hangnail. The boy thought it looked like a boat on wheels, and he half-expected Jesus to emerge from the truck, hold His hands out at arm’s length and say, “Peace. Be still.”

Henry James Made Her Do It

H.E. BALLARD

It was not that she misunderstood the conditions under which they had joined together, for the allure was apparent once they had uncovered a shared sensibility for curiously pursuing subjects down one rabbit hole after another, a habit which itself unveiled a like-minded approach to analyzing new ideas, all of which came to them from far-flung corners of the internet, even though his wife had been her friend for at least a decade, and while the women frequently were mistaken for each other, their own close friends found this mix-up confounding for it was only the simplest of attributes, the color of their hair or their ages, that made them at all similar, and later, after it had all fallen apart she, the one who set herself forth as the harmed party, accused the other, without disguising her venom, that she had been only a smarter version of herself, but the smart one knew this was far from the reason he had been drawn to her, and her knowledge of his mindset was based in life and not on mere speculation for he had told her of the vacuousness of his wife and the hollowness of their married life and because his sentiment corresponded to her own acquaintance with the wife and occasionally was corroborated by some in their cohort over the years in question, the intelligent woman knew the absence of intellectual reciprocity was at the heart of the matter for the man, and despite the wife's ability to lasso him with the purse strings of her family's money, no matter the wife's inclination to bully him into staying close to home and hearth for sake of superannuated duty and implied obligation, or perhaps primarily for preservation of familial social status, for the opinion of others was part and parcel of the couple's social contract, which the wife enforced passively by preying on her husband's deepest desire which was that he wanted to be known for having the highest moral character, but his wife's lack of faith in his true self, her anxious unwillingness to accept him as he was, her self-effacing complaints about his husbandly performance expanded into an unreasonable demand for a degree of perfection that no mortal can attain and thus the cycle of effort and failure followed by condemnation and reproach bore into him like a spiral of dark poison which could not be purged, for neither could he be himself nor could he be what she demanded, even though for a time he thought he might be able to ignore or pretend her narrow-minded scolding to be of less import than it actually was—for who of us spends every hour evaluating whether we live the fulfilled life, leaving such theoretical reflection for moments of unbearable stress or staggering joy rather than be enervated by constant

navel-gazing—such that in the end, when the soap opera had run out its season, she, the smart version and not the wife, wondered if his need to be true to his self would win the internal battle, or having left it too long, like an overripe boil on a smooth face, would create a nasty mess and ugly scar because, she predicted, in times to come when the darkness returns—and the time would come—she felt confident he would startle anew at the magnitude of the opportunity that chance had presented, the path forward he had discarded in a sanctimonious fit of frustration with the wife's haranguing, and he will ask himself how possibly he could have opted for the phoniness of a life predicated on energetic fabrication of a glossy façade, how such a small minded personal philosophy might satisfy a man on the verge of recharging for the second half of a life begun with such promise, and when it arrives, the existential fear will produce a reflexive grimace and cause him to squint his eyes and grip his belly, and the breach will manifest itself as an electromagnetic pulse from heart to head, such that the wife will notice his distressed face and snap him to attention with a snug of the noose and when he gags and feels the ground beneath him slip away, his mind will balk at being relegated to Thoreau's life of quiet desperation even as he slips into his own anointed version, justifying it silently, telling himself he had no choice, that it was what he should have done, when truth be told, we always have a choice; even doing nothing is a choice.

THE END

13.02.1915—Time Unknown (Around Dawn)
Soldat: Lucien Jean Baptiste Bersot

SEAN CLEARY

Not an insignificant turn in the road...
By the light from a shed, by the groundcover of moss
you can see, a woman has been kissed here—a girl
maybe she remembers—that this turn of tarmac
hid not just the lane beyond where
she escaped her liaison—as she would say, so French, come to Picardie
from Marseille
Lucien: light of course, as a matter of course, arrives.
It arrives, descending through fog
or by dint of whisperings that let out tobacco smoke
And remind us of Morocco, or Algiers, or someplace
That the others come from
Someplace to call each other Ahmed, and blessed, and French.

Tarmac
The way it echoes and rolls
Like pavement, like falling from the height
of your head.

In memory of the near 300,000 victims of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti

CHANTAL KÉNOL

That morning

I let you leave without a word.

I chose to remain invisible. Not to suffer the touch of your gaze void of us,
on us. A bitter, moribund *us*.

I was already counting my dead.

That evening, when the seconds shelled under our wide-open eyes, I
thought to myself: you left without a glance. I desired the weight of your
glare, void of me, on me. Prayed, implored to feel its shadowy touch on a
new day of light. Not this dim light, filtered by the dust of fallen buildings
on the dreams of thousands of lives, but clear, as if illuminated from within
by other dreams, other promises. A look as bright as blood.

Blood...I turned away not to see it flowing everywhere or drying out on
skin bleached by dust from the rubble where emerged my people as from
open tombs. Blood, I followed as never before its journey through each one
of my veins, traced the birth of each drop to each contraction of my heart.
To each thought of you.

I cried out once. I called out your name as one speaks to the dead. Those
who are cherished, but do not know it anymore perhaps, those who left
without one word of love in the hollow of the ear. Without the emotion of a
final embrace.

I learned later, much later that you were alive. It's a lie to believe a minute
changes everything. Not in love. The sinuous path taken by love, diverted
by death catches up with us at the crossroad. It finds its way back like a
tamed animal.

I count you among my dead.

The Daughter-in-Law: An Almost Memoir

KATE YOUNGDAHL

In time, the house in Braintree would rot from the inside out till the porch stooped at an impossible angle, a hole gaped in the roof, and the cats—all of them black and white, with milky eyes and tattered ears—filled the basement windows. But the first time I saw it, the shingled cape with its respectable hedges looked as comfortably ordinary as the houses of my childhood. I walked confidently up the cement steps to the door. Daniel was finally introducing me to his family. They would all be there—parents and siblings, of course, but also aunts, uncles and cousins. Having never been to a funeral, I was even excited to be his date at a wake.

Stepping into the foyer, I was overwhelmed by the pungent odor of garlic and the crush of voices. Daniel was immediately seized by a short frog-faced man, cousin Art, who ushered us into the deeply shadowed front room. Oversized furniture surrounded a coffee table burdened with photo albums. Assuming we both needed a drink, Daniel left me in Art's care while he sought beer.

The cousin launched into a litany of notable relatives, frequently illustrated by the conveniently located photos. Here was the recently deceased Uncle Bob with Daniel's father, Jack, back in the day. Two handsome men, grinning widely in shirtsleeves, stood in front of a paneled bar in a rumpus room. Martini glasses in hand, they toasted the photographer. And here was a photo of Bob's wife Francesca and Daniel's mother Maria. Two bathing beauties, the Amaro sisters, struck a fetching pose on a rocky beach. Raven haired and curvy, they stared out at me laughing with saucy confidence.

Turning from the photos, Art pointed out the family's latest luminary, cousin Roberta. She was working on a novel! He motioned across the small room where two women stood: one with Botticelli hair, the other in the late stages of becoming a crone. I approached them, eager to speak to a fellow writer. In contrast to the chorus of male rumblings coming from the dining room, the women's voices were muted, confidential. I was right behind the Botticelli, when I heard the older woman pronounce, "Thank God, it wasn't one of us." I couldn't see the younger woman's face, but her outrage filled her voice. "He was *my father*," she hissed.

Roberta. Bob. Of course, she'd been named for her father, the dead man. I had almost blundered into discussing books with a grieving daughter. I backed away and studied the pattern on the armchair, wondering where Daniel had gone with my drink.

* * *

That funerals can be romantic has deep roots in my psyche. My father's parents met at the service for a mutual third cousin. I imagine them—Erik and Nellie—drinking strong coffee on opposite sides of the chilly church basement in Galesburg, Illinois. Big boned, with a raw farmer's face, Erik's prowess at first base had brought him attention from the White Sox. He put that dream away for Nellie. Growing up poor, she prized security, so Erik went to work at US Steel.

(Years later, when she was a hundred years old, I caught my grandmother daydreaming in her wheelchair on a hot August afternoon. Eyes closed and smiling, she kept wetting a cloth with cool water from a bowl in her lap. I asked her what she'd been thinking about. "When my sisters and I were girls," she said, "my mother made us matching dresses. We looked so pretty!")

When this ungainly fellow approached her, did Nellie feel like it was time to settle or lose her last shot at a home of her own? Or was it Nellie who noticed the big man across the room and, smiling shyly, convince him to give up baseball? My mother, whose own parents met in a boarding house, once told me that first you decide to get married and then you look around to see who's available. Perhaps a funeral is as good a place as any to meet people who understand who you are.

I didn't know anyone at the wake for Uncle Bob except Daniel. In that first confusing blush of dozens of Amaro cousins, I have no memory of meeting my future parents-in-law. Still I can fill in the faint image, for events always progressed in a predictable pattern at Aunt Mina and Uncle Arthur's house in Braintree.

Maria and at least two of her sisters were in the kitchen at any given moment. Each of them had a signature dish, but hers were my favorites: eggplant parmigiana, stuffed peppers, braciole. On a typical day, she would have been simmering tomato sauce in an iron skillet while Mina layered platters with chicken cacciatore, meat falling off the bone, drenched in olive oil. Mina's daughter, Little Minnie, sat at the small formica table in the middle of the room, curiously idle as the older women stirred, squabbled and laughed. When Daniel and I appeared in the doorway, everyone stopped to admire the adored son, on his way—they were sure—to becoming a television big shot in New York City.

Had he gotten in touch with cousin Lou Lozzi? Not yet? Why not? He had a fancy apartment on the upper east side. Daniel should move in with Louey. He was making it rich in laundromats. The whole time this conversation burred along, they eyed me, the tall, skinny blonde at Daniel's side.

Can you make quick sauce? How about aioli? We cook the broccoli first, see? Not too soft, better al dente. I sampled and nodded sympathetically, willing them to like me.

A conversation made in food did not come naturally to me. My mother was hardly a passionate cook. It's not that she couldn't produce food when she put her mind to it. There was a carrot cake, a blue cheese ball, a meat loaf. It's just that in general, her mind wasn't to it. When I came home from college, my father gestured to the empty nesters' kitchen and said, "We should just turn it into a library. All anyone ever does in here is read."

One mouthful of Mina's chicken or a swirling fork full of Maria's aioli spoke volumes. I had never experienced anything so richly and variously seasoned. Every dish was an extension of these round, graying women's souls, speaking a personal history that lingered on the tongue. Like Persephone I sucked in just enough, not quite realizing I was pledging myself to live in two worlds.

On Saturday afternoons, the food was carried out to the formal dining room, but not until Uncle Joe—the oldest brother and paterfamilias—had arrived. In coming years, I witnessed a particular scene countless times. While the elderly sisters remained in the kitchen, the rest of us would assemble around the table expectantly. Here were the men who had married into the Amaros. They were a congenial bunch, long associated not just by family but also employment. Each of them had worked at the company started by Uncle Joe, a pioneer in electronics. Bill did the marketing, Arthur ran the stock room, my father-in-law Jack built the prototypes of Joe's inventions, and the mourned-for Bob had kept the books.

Until the moment the patriarch appeared, the old cronies joked and commiserated about their wives and the Red Sox. Their manner with me was easy; they enjoyed having Daniel's young wife and later our two little boys as a new audience for well worn words. Then the back door would slam, and the sisters' voices would rise shrilly in greeting.

Sounds of bags being set down and a cajoling male voice leak into the dining room, where the air has suddenly shifted. The brothers-in-law quiet. They look down at plates or watches. In strides a small pugnacious man with thick black glasses, a bulbous nose and unruly white Einstein hair. The other men, all in their seventieth decade, stand up and salute Joe Amaro Senior. He circles them, handing each a twenty dollar bill. He reaches the head of the table, sits down and yells, "Mina! Where's the food?"

* * *

Where was it? Back at my apartment in Hartford or Daniel's loft in New York? In the car on the ride home from the wake? I can't recall when I knew. I feel like the story needs a place and time, but it appears in my mind like an island. So I will put it here, on this piece of paper, for no better reason than it is essential.

I was eleven when Uncle Joe's son called my folks.

He suggested I should come over,

do some chores for him.

Earn a little money.

But mostly he gave me gifts.

The telescope after that

first time.

Later, use of his boat on the harbor

or beer for me and my friends.

When I came home, each time

Ma would ask me, what

work did you do?

Pops would ask, what did Joey

have you do?

And I told them about

mowing the lawn, not about the

dirt.

The secret room.

The humiliation.

But they had to know, really.

Right?

Daniel spoke without judgment, but I was appalled, angry, frightened. He did this to you? And your parents did nothing? Why didn't they confront him? Why didn't they call the police?

I looked at the Amaros differently after I knew: their proud family ties strangled like a noose. Over the years, the horrors mounted. The launderer, Louey Lozzi, wound up in a car trunk on the West Side highway. Cousin Arthur, my frog faced host, got life for molesting his granddaughter. Joey Jr., about to be indicted for child pornography, drowned (some thought too conveniently) in a boating accident. There was tragedy too. Cousin Roberta published her novel, a luminous work highly praised in the New York Times. But within a year, she was dead—a plane crash in the mountains. Her mother, Aunt Francesca, never recovered.

Aunt Mina died and Uncle Arthur declined, leaving management of the house in Braintree to Little Minnie. Always weak in the mind, she

let things go. Instead of swarms of relatives, she was surrounded by cats which she kept cooped up in the basement till the foul smell of feline urine wafted out to the street. Daniel finally called the SPCA, which removed more than sixty malnourished, mangy animals. Minnie let it be known if she ever found out who reported her, she'd kill him.

I made a point of bringing the boys to Illinois at Christmastime so they could see how civilized people made their lives. On Christmas Eve, we had dinner: a well-done roast, black cherry jello mold, Swedish rice, pickled herring, and carrot curls. We opened all of the presents one at a time and thanked the giver courteously before passing each thing around the whole circle for everyone to admire. At midnight, we went to the service at the First Presbyterian church (but it was all right if you didn't want to go, and usually, we didn't want to go). In the morning, we ate brunch and played Hearts or watched football on TV. It was very simple really, wasn't it?

* * *

For many years after Daniel and I married, my mother-in-law had trouble remembering my name. She'd walk around her kitchen table with the coffee pot, refilling cups for Daniel and his sister Jackie, and then say to me, "Would you like some more coffee, uh...?" The siblings snorted, but Maria moved on unperturbed. I remembered the crone aunt at Uncle Bob's wake announcing with satisfaction that at least it "wasn't one of us." It took more than a wedding vow to be an Amaro. I felt grateful for that.

One afternoon, as I watched Maria carefully place dough into boiling oil, then lightly flip it as it puffed into a delicate pillow, I wondered aloud if she had learned to cook this way. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean, did you learn to cook the way that I'm learning, by watching your mother in her kitchen?"

She pulled out the fried dough and placed it on paper towels, before lightly dusting it with powdered sugar. "Well, no because I didn't grow up in the same house as my family."

Jackie's cup dropped noisily into its saucer. "What?" Coffee pooled on the table. "How did you not grow up in your own house?"

Maria blotted the table clean, her face impassive. "We were a big family," she said. "Eight children. There were too many of us. And there was a couple the street over one who didn't have any children, but they wanted one, so my parents said they could have one of us. They wouldn't send Joe or Benny because they were already big boys. And Marco was Downs Syndrome, so they wouldn't want him. The older girls were useful around the house so that left Francesca and me."

They chose to keep Francesca and send Maria. She was six years old.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Jackie said indignantly. Maria shrugged. It had happened. What could she do? By the time her parents died, Joe had gotten a job at a big lab in New Jersey. He brought her and Francesca, now in high school, with him. When the two sisters found husbands, he gave those boys work too. In the Depression, this was no small thing.

And when his son raped her son, she did not have power to speak, I thought.

My grandmother reminisced for a hundred years about three little girls in matching dresses. Maria had memories so bitter she kept them to herself nearly as long. The most egregious injury she never spoke of at all.

* * *

Uncle Bob’s wake lasted till late in the evening. After many awkward hours and several beers, I began to feel at ease. For the first of what would become many times, I sat at the big dining room table in a crowd of cousins. At the chair closest to the kitchen, Aunt Francesca held court. She spun story upon story of things that Bob had said and done, each more outrageous than the last. We laughed till we hooted and gasped for air. At the crescendo of hilarity, Francesca’s eyes suddenly lighted on me.

“But you never knew him,” she said and burst into tears.

“I did not,” I confessed, mortified.

Shaking her head slowly, she said, “You missed knowing a wonderful man.”

Decades later, her words still ring in my ears. I did miss knowing him, but I believe I’ve come to understand him. For he and I had much in common, reluctant members of a family at once miraculously gifted and confoundingly complex, tyrannical, terrifying and tender.

Daniel and I named our two boys Jack and Bob.

The Illustrious Karma of the Incognizant Francis Jung

LUCAS GONZALEZ

Francis Jung was a curiosity, and nothing less. Nothing more, either. He was a strange, stout, unpredictable and quiet fellow of sixteen years. Though bright in all his subjects, he remained a social anomaly in the secondary school where he walked his week out in the long halls, headphones tangled in his frayed, elbow-length hair as they blasted the tinny pang of fantasy metal.

It was not as though Francis did not enjoy the company of others. It was just that Francis was the kind of kid who never really thought about much else but about himself. This is what to Francis Jung, who in an incognizant manner lived his life quite simply on his own, made the very most simple sense. He desired not to be a ripple or a splash, but to find calmness where he could in the world.

He was just like any other kid, hypnotized by the internet and obsessed with certain kinds of toys. Lately, it was miniscule peons he'd intricately painted and poised on a bookshelf at home, preparing to fight any intergalactic war that should cross their way if it ever came. He was just like any other kid, pretty much, he thought, certain—but he could tell by his parents' quiet talk and voice beneath doorjambs that they disagreed.

To an Asian family, he was a blemish. A disgrace. He knew what his parents really thought. His strange demeanor, so calmly curt and a-verbal, so un-studious, yet so exceedingly smart—it made no sense to them, so they pondered it for some time as he grew up into a high-schooler not unlike his isolated first grade self lost in some puzzle in the corner with a peanut butter celery stick as a paintbrush. Now, instead of the blank block of dough yeasted with possibility, he was a kind of test tube, quiet, calm, translucent, but brimming with chemical reactions, nothing more.

What was it that set him apart, his parents and the educational and cognitive and behavioral scientists, experts, and professionals asked—apart from the fact that he was apart from the set? Francis did not feel guilty for his parents' confusion, and did his best only to help them understand using no words that this is who he was, and naught could change it. He had once heard it said that actions speak louder than words, and so took this to heart. He was satisfied in how the world's response to him seemed to insulate him in the lonesome chambers of his own strangeness, absolved of the fearsome currents of the enormous world. He didn't mind this feeling either that he had more to live up to than just his own satis-

faction—but Francis was a loner and not much seemed bound to change about it.

Francis had discovered and become accustomed to his hobbies and pursued the fulfillment of his interests completely alone since he was a young child. He had known no other way. There were people out there, he was certain: his parents, his mates at school, his teachers, his pastor, the likes—but these people were all—circumstantial. They felt to him like cardboard figures who stood where they stood at certain times, but sometimes hid in corners and came out to surprise him at the edge of his bed or on a street corner. They seemed empty and vengeful, drab. He loved them, though—yes, he did in fact love some of them to some extent, at least to the extent that he agreed to give in to what they meant by love, which meant the privilege of calmness and solitude—to the extent that they were relatively benign, most of them, and made his world as easy and comfortable, soft, calm, and polite. He found peace in that overwhelming predictability that seemed so perfectly and meticulously curated by adults. Surprises enraged him as much as his parents' badgering. Any small disruptive change might set him off, and on that day, if you met him, you might think he were a bit odd, perhaps curiously uncurious, a bit stiff, or to himself. If you met Francis, you would think he was uncurious, in the most curious of ways—so curiously uncurious, you might do your best to go your separate ways. It might make you uncomfortable, but willing to ignore him. And this is largely what was sought by Francis Jung.

The outside world?

Oh, he dealt with it. He loved certain textures, but hated certain sounds. Corduroy was an opiate, and police sirens were like hot sauce leaked into a broken cornea. Linoleum floors were akin to water torture, the clicking of a pen or the roar of steel subway trains euphoric. Taste was king and pain was deplorable to some extent, at least—to the extent that it had the tendency to rule over us. Waiting long periods of time was difficult without gnawing on his cuticles in want of distraction. The full moon made him feel impatient, distant, misunderstood, alone in sentience like the rest of the human experience.

Francis lived in Queens in a neighborhood where nothing important seemed to happen. You might have passed him in the street or in a station or subway car on his way to school. Otherwise, he could be found most days perched at his desk in the frame of his bedroom window, the moon passing over the nighttime grey of the spotty lawns and gardens all winter, spring and summer. Francis spent most of his off time between school and meals at his computer on his two-screen Dell system playing video games,

a sample platter of which include such coma-inducing, eye-glazing titles as *World of Warstuff*, *Battlestar Something Or Other*, *Final Tragedy Eight*, or whatever first-person shooter or role playing adventure game was being popularly played by the unsupervised youngsters of the time. He was relatively normal, one might relatively say. He enjoyed the taste of Annie's and Kraft macaroni and cheese, he masturbated regularly, which is really to say, he masturbated all the time, or at least, quite frequently—as frequently as a sixteen year old boy regularly did. The plastic trashcan in his bedroom was filled to the brim with soda cans, empty single-serving bags of potato chips and used Kleenexes his mother ignored. One finds ways to pass the time. His mother never seemed to notice, or perhaps, did not care to acknowledge the weekly accumulations of tissues and unapproved junk food as she tied the plastic lips into a knot and set the trash in the dumpster in the alley around the side of the house every week—Francis was an 'A' student with little or no signs of rebelliousness or vitriol apart from his aggressive taste in volume. He had never smoked tobacco or marijuana, and even really had much more than a taste of whiskey and white wine. His father had occasionally let him sip at the brim of his whiskey glass when he was a young child, if only to see his funny infant grimace.

On a Saturday afternoon he was wandering the city and counting the numbers of windows that he could see. He counted several hundred, but then lost count when he noticed an enormous red double-decker roofed with a dazed group of cold, wet tourists in ponchos. As he made his way across Water Street onto the cobblestone walkways of the Seaport, he was thinking about how he had achieved a grade of 105% on his Chemistry exam the day before. His mother and father had been appeased. In their steady, cold and rapid Cantonese, they allowed him as they often did to wander on his own in the wilderness beyond the inner walls of their Asian austerity. It had been months since Francis had gone missing for a few hours and been brought home by police. Officers had found him standing wide-eyed and upright, but otherwise soaked and unresponsive in the middle of a public fountain in Washington Square Park in the middle of one of the hottest days of summer. By the time he was home he'd come to, and the officers had already been invited in for tea by his mother. Francis had been feeling a little better by then. The evening was strangely cool. He didn't think it was strange that nature might have sensed his discomfort and let him climb down from the fever of his mind.

Francis was peculiar in the most un-peculiar ways. He was short and dark enough to ignore, but just big enough that he would be difficult to pass by unperturbed if you saw him standing in the middle of a public

fountain. His narrow eyes only looked out on as much as he needed to see of the world. His glasses were thick enough that he never needed to get into a fight, and his arms thin enough that he should never truly want to. He was not handsome, and he knew this. But Francis was in some ways stubborn. He had fallen in love with the most delicate and pale young Chinese girl, whose Americanized name was Suzie. Suzie sat at a 47-degree angle to his left in Pre-Calculus and always with tremendous smile would say ‘Hi’ to him, but little more. Now, Francis was walking along the sidewalks of South Street looking to buy chocolates at the Godiva chocolatier, a gold box that would accompany the white and silver script card that awaited the clumsy un-poetic stumble of his felt-tip marker.

Francis Jung may have been intelligent in some, perhaps even in multiple peculiar capacities, but the vast interface of communication known as “people” were a plane on which Francis, quite simply, did not operate as efficiently as he did on the plane of such things as algebraic or chemical equations which had the consistency that mood and tone and emphatics never could. He achieved basic forms of friendliness and passive conversation with no particular level of dexterity, but with perhaps an imperceptible aura of good neutral intent that helped people to see him as perfectly unremarkably polite. Francis was like that city in which he lived, multi-faceted, understanding the world just a layer below its surface, just a bit of a ways out from the center, isolated in the gray normalcy of the suburbs. He was lost in thought again. He looked down. Before him was a large, golden doorknob. He twisted it and walked through the door as it opened.

The girl who worked at the counter was slightly grotesque in the shape of her body and wore too much make-up to match her clearly false red and black hair. She had spoken in a rushed and rehearsed manner at first, which did not bother Francis Jung because she seemed as locked into predictability as he was. Moníqua arched her eyebrows as she always did when confronted with the anomalous. She was watching as a short, squat, brown Asian boy in thick glasses, with long, black, wiry hair wearing a rigid puff jacket waddle into the store, look around at his surroundings with a tense reluctance, and scruff his salted feet on the soaking carpet.

“Hello, and welcome to Godiva today, my name is Moníqua, how can I help you?” said Moníqua. Francis stood there, frozen. “And how are you doing today, boo?” she said, breaking her formality.

Francis stared blankly back, where she stood behind a burnished glass counter shelved front to back with dimples, knots, clots, and dominoes of chocolate delicacies of all shapes and hues. The colors were overwhelming. The sweet and nutty scent was intoxicating.

“H-Hi,” stammered Francis in a quiet and retracted fashion.

“Coming in to look at some of our Valentine’s Day specials, baby?” asked Moníqua in her slick, motherly Brooklyn accent, albeit fast enough to have never heard Francis’ small response.

“Huh?” Francis uttered nervously.

“Valentine’s Day! Now, ain’t you got a sweetheart somewhere that’s waiting for a little sugar for the holidays?” Moníqua laughed imploringly.

Francis swallowed and nodded.

“Oh, I see. You the quiet type. So! What’s her name? What she like?”

Francis searched for his response. He realized in that moment that Suzie was not really her name, and that her real name was Xinpín, or something with an unusual number of I’s mixed with unusual pairings of consonants. After all, she was very Chinese. All of a sudden, he realized that he should have been somewhere on Mott Street buying sweets for her there, at one of those bakeries with the pink frosting, baked buns, and spongy yellow fruit or bean cakes. Being as curious as he was, he wondered why he had become so convinced that the mainstream convention for expressing his love through chocolate had seemed to be the most appealing. Moníqua only stared back at him from behind her weave with a suspended interrogative grimace.

“Honey, you gonna buy something or not?”

“Sorry. It sometimes takes me time to fully form responses.” Francis remembered the explanation his therapist, Doctor Larry, had helped him devise. “What was the question again?” he said flatly.

“Here honey, try this chocolate hazelnut seashell,” Moníqua said.

“Now I know she gonna love this,” she chuckled.

Francis took the toothpick from Moníqua and placed the chocolate morsel on his tongue. His eyes lit with a gentle, but bright and clear glow.

“I’ll take twelve,” he chewed.

Moníqua laughed and packed the morsels into a gold box, wrapped it in a gold bow, and placed it neatly in a gold box with gold tissue paper. Francis carefully placed the bag inside of his own knapsack and went on his way, back onto the subway train and focused for the next errand.

It was February, and Francis though Francis was now prepared with most of his materials. Even with a more important plan taking priority, he didn’t mind delaying his next at-home chemistry and economics project as an exception. After many months of obsessively documenting her comments in class and meticulously analyzing the tone of each of her ‘good morning’s,’ Francis would recede each day into his innermost thoughts at the intoxicating aura of her presence, everything closing down and

isolating his mind as it centered on the thought of her, scrambling the symbols of his sentences and equations in each class they shared together. After many months of longing and observation, little Suzie's name had taken on a name so lustrous and filled with passion for Francis, that it was nearly impossible to pronounce. So difficult to pronounce, he pronounced it often to hear its subtle and strangely disconnected, unified sounds. Suzie enjoyed saying "Hi" to him in the mornings. She thought he was cute because he was so shy, but was also very shy so as to never venture beyond the most rigid smile.

Francis had been building up to asking her out. He wasn't sure how to do it, since teenagers tend not to know how to do things like that, especially a teenager as curious as Francis. He used his deductive thinking, looked on the internet, and found the best reviews' consensus that he should ease into things by first exercising charm and talking casually to establish a rapport.

Charm seemed a curious word, and he struggled to decipher whether he had such a thing. It seemed they had broken the ice to some extent—if only cracked it hoping more pressure might do the trick and help him fall through the threshold of fear that held him back. Considering the tips the internet had offered him, he decided on a subtle, but overt gesture to express his inexplicable feelings for her. He decided that February would be the perfect month to make his move, and began by meticulously, day by day, row by row in a symmetrical and even matter shifting desks until he was only two desks away. It was Sunday. The next day would be Monday, and this was the week that he would sit next to her in Pre-Calculus and go forth with his plan. On day one, they would work together on a few equations. On day two and three, this would continue, and they might have a chance to work together during study hall. On day four, the day before the weekend, he would say something bold, like "I hope you have an awesome weekend." Monday, without considering the days that would follow, he would make his move, she would accept, and they move forward together bound into a golden and painless future.

Francis meticulously packed his bag as he did every evening in the same way. This time, he omitted certain extras to make room for the clumsy size of the box of chocolates he had purchased at Moníqua's Godiva. His art history book, Chemist's almanac, and personal journal would stay behind today. He woke the next morning, ate breakfast, and walked to the subway train. He looked down the tunnel once or twice waiting. The train arrived. The train left. He left. He arrived. Then, it was homeroom. The teacher first read the name of each child in the room, to make sure

everyone was accounted for. Then, because it was early, he showed a video of kittens playing with yarn and then drinking from a saucer of milk, then climbing on furniture and running through autumn leaves. Students reacted accordingly, agreeing the kittens were cute. Francis was counting the number of kittens and lost count several times. To him, they were just fragile organisms. Francis wondered why human felt sympathy for fragile organisms. Perhaps people themselves are fragile organisms. Then, it was first period. Then second. Then, Pre-Calculus. It was time.

Francis was sitting at his desk waiting for class to begin. No one came. The room was empty. He checked his schedule. He became hot and confused, and his heart began to race. This was the wrong period. He did not have this class until later in the day. He was furious and embarrassed, though there was no one to see it. He went to the right class, where Suzie was not. He had his schedule memorized since September. Why was he becoming disoriented and confused? He knew that people were sometimes guided by emotions. He also knew that emotions were not necessarily rational, and therefore, he knew that caution should be exercised when handling them. The thing that Francis was yet to understand is how to recognize his own emotions, and where they seemed to blur his judgment like a drunken state. For the rest of the day, he could not focus. Then, it was a break before last period. He went down to the student commons because he was for the first time that day overcoming his nausea, suddenly drawn to the idea of macaroni and cheese poppers when he turned a corner and Suzie was there. He froze as cold as the nuggets would have been before entering the fryer.

“Hey, Francis!” said Suzie, who smiled with an inebriating and subdued enthusiasm. She was wearing a red blouse and blue skirt.

“Hi, Suzie!” said Francis robotically, even frantically, seeing in the moment only that he’d botched the body language and posture patterns that his therapist had advised him about.

“Here,” she said sweetly, “Sit.”

Francis sat down in the chair next to Suzie.

“How are you?”

Francis thought for a moment. He arched his neck back and his eyes widened. Until then he had been looking down. Calmly as possible, he looked up at Suzie with a quiet, maniacal anxiety.

“I-I’m Good.”

That was Francis in his mumbled monotone, obviously disoriented by her presence. Suzie could tell that Francis had been trying very hard. She had been trying hard too.

“Have you seen the new video that has just gone viral?” asked Suzie, copying what she had heard from some of the boys in third period.

“Viral,” said Francis, pausing like a contestant at a spelling bee. “A rapidly self-replicating phenomenon of pop culture.”

Suzie giggled.

“No, silly. It’s a song.”

“Song?”

“It has a dancing fox!”

Francis couldn’t grasp the concept.

“Well, anyway—it only funny because in the end by the time Ms. Wolekensi even noticed that they weren’t using the right beakers, they hadn’t even noticed that the other had forgotten to remind them about step three and I guess that’s when things caught fire for a quick sec. It was crazy.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Francis confirmed.

“Totally. Anyway, they’re crazy.”

A long paused transpired. Lazy light and the soft hum of voices filtered through the commons. Suzie and Francis both spoke at once.

“I got you something,” said Francis on one end.

“So maybe those math problems—” said Suzie on the other.

“Sorry,” said Francis.

“No, no—what were you saying?” Suzie said.

Francis would not dare repeat it. He placed the gold bag on the wooden café table. Suzie looked stunned, her glasses a bit fogged, like Francis’ were.

“Oh my god,” said Suzie. “Francis! You got me Godiva?”

Francis beamed.

“That’s so nice I can’t believe that! Is this the place by the seaport?”

Francis nodded and said “Yeah.”

“Oh my god, I go there all the time!”

Suzie hugged him. Francis felt a ferocious joy consume his entire body.

“That’s so nice, Francis. You are such a nice guy and good friend. Here—let’s eat some of them. Wait,” said Suzie. “You got me a card, too?”

The color drained from Francis’ face.

“Oh my god, you didn’t have to do that,” Suzie said, sounding somewhat smothered, taken aback. Only now could he perceive his mistake. He raised his hands in a feeble attempt to stop her from opening the gilded envelope, but could barely utter a syllable before she’d torn it open and begun to open the cream colored card where Francis could see his monstrous and vulnerable words seeping into Suzie’s mind. He looked at her. Her hands

began to tremble as she read. She looked up at Francis. Then, she started to cry. Suzie stood up. Then, Suzie ran away and disappeared into the girls' restroom. Francis was paralyzed. Tears filled his eyes, too. He knew she'd come back for her bag. She came back quickly, a few moments later, tears still brimming like shimmering jewels from her narrow brown eyes. Her face was red and her breath was quick and too fast.

"I like you Francis. You are a nice boy, but I can only like you as a friend!" She snatched away her books and notes, slung her bag onto back and stormed off.

On the way home, trying to think of nothing curious at all, Francis ate the chocolates.

callbacks

JESSICA FILION

you oil your
gun
within sight of your neighbor's windows

take it apart
clean it
put it back together

set its sights on your
temple
forehead
chest

you want to show off how tightly
your strong leather belt
conforms to your neck
sustains your body

your neighbor
waves hello while watering

black dahlias
purple belladonna
white oleander

maintains
well-manicured nails
not shiny pointed crimson
short
neat
clean

drives
innocuous, dark colored car
when you look in its windows
no passengers
just reflection

never
asks to borrow a cup of sugar
or a power tool
sleeps

packages arrive
flower arrangements
slim envelopes
enormous boxes
your neighbor has many lovers

you wish to lie pillowed against breasts
have limbs entwined around torso
seek center heat
your relationship remains chaste

you long for your neighbor's
clean-nailed soft skinned hands
to caress your cheek
coo with almond scented breath
everything will be alright
you set the stage for your audition
to be her next lover

full aspirin bottle
brandished glock
leather belt
your wife, mother, and sister
attempt to coax you
dismantle this production
your neighbor's no good
you don't need that kinda company

you know they too
designed sets of their own
your wife: a leather belt, just like you
your mother: knives and pills and booze, over years and years
your sister: Aleve and Cabernet, she's fancy
your neighbor rejected their auditions

you are all lovers spurned

pre-dawn night glowing embers mirror your own
nightmares you shrug
your neighbor doesn't make conversation,
doesn't ask for a smoke
or a light

today
you trudge to work
eat
take out the trash

invisible wounds
stink of rot
leak pus
blood

you wonder which will it be
your neighbor finally accepting your proposal
or beckoning you in

Welcome Home

ANNIE WILHELMY

The apartment had been spotless for the last three days. All of the piles of dirty clothes had been laundered, folded, and put in the proper place. Dishes that had been crusted with old macaroni and cheese and caked in milk residue were washed or, in worse circumstances, thrown away. Allison looked around her tidy apartment with admiration. Everything was going to be perfect.

Patrick emailed Allison that he was scheduled to be dropped off from the airport at 5 pm, but she couldn't be sure if he would be early or late. He had insisted on leaving his cell phone at their apartment six weeks prior in order to go fully, as he called it, "off the grid". She recalled a frantic international call from Patrick who was hiding out in an Internet café nearly five weeks ago in which he lamented over feeling so disconnected from home. "Everyone here has an iPad. How was I supposed to know that a hostel in Tanzania would have Wifi?" In this reverie, Allison searched under the coffee table for dust bunnies and she silently congratulated herself for being right. All of the fights about him leaving, the times she stayed up silently crying to herself lying next to him in bed, the razor sharp insults hurled between the two of them the day before the taxi came to pick him up—all were smoothed over now. Patrick was coming home, back to their home, and that was that.

Their relationship hadn't always been so contentious, though, and it was Allison's hope that they would return to life before Patrick's wanderlust became the third person in their relationship. Allison had always loved how Patrick would pour over paper maps from the places they would visit together. She would follow his fingers as they traced along roads and circled lakes. She would watch his eyes as they moved faster than his fingers, narrowing for focus then widening as he imagined a new destination.

"I heard there's a great place to get pancakes right at the trail head," he would yell to her as she fixed their coffee. She could always count on him to find the best diners on all of their trips together, no matter how rural or remote.

But as he planned his trip without her, Allison wanted less to do with it and him. She watched as he began his journey without her even before he left, as he excitedly paged through travel books of Eastern Africa. She didn't want to hear about the currency exchange rate, the hostel in the rain forest, or how he was going to get from the airport to wherever.

But that was six weeks ago, and things were going to be different now.

Allison kept walking back and forth in the apartment, fluffing pillows and rearranging shoes that were sitting at the door. She ran to the window when-ever she heard a car door slam shut. It was only noon, so she still had time.

Her friend Meredith had been texting with her that morning for updates of Patrick's arrival.

—What time is Patrick coming home?

—What do you guys have planned for tonight?

—Just text me if you need anything.

—We'd love to get together once he's all settled.

—Text me if you need anything!

Allison answered these texts with nervous embarrassment over how excited she actually was for Patrick's return. She figured that the reason Meredith was so concerned today was because of the many tearful conversations they'd had before his departure. Allison remembered a dinner she'd had with Meredith three months before Patrick's leaving in which she picked at her pasta and tearfully unloaded her frustration on Meredith. "Why does he want to leave me to go on this trip? We have something good. We help each other," Allison sobbed in between tissue swipes. She explained how Patrick felt a need to shake up his life, get out of a rut, and live truly uncomfortably for an extended period of time. How he had come to the time frame of six weeks was a mystery to Allison. To Allison's surprise, Meredith sat across from her and dabbed at the corners of her own eyes. Strangely this moment of tenderness had infuriated Allison.

"I'm so sorry Allison, just know that Ben and I are here. No matter what." Allison thanked Meredith while she calmed her crying, but knew it was for nothing. Ben and Meredith had been together for the better part of their post-college years, and didn't really understand why people couldn't just work things out. They had their life together, filled with dinners and trips with other couples, and Allison without Patrick didn't seem to fit in.

Meredith made an effort to get together with Allison often enough once Patrick left, but Allison eventually started to avoid their meetings, making excuses to skip out. Their conversation was never about anything other than what Allison was going to do about Patrick. This weekly, then bi-monthly routine became tired and forced, despite Meredith's helpful intentions. Allison sensed Meredith's desperate judgment of her, and began to regret sharing so much anguish and uncertainty with her before Patrick's trip. Also, Allison didn't want to think about what could go

wrong. Patrick would come back in six weeks after “finding himself” and then, who knows. They would figure it out.

But the six weeks were up, and Allison still hadn’t figured it out. She knew the motions of what she was supposed to do as the faithful girlfriend: clean the house, cook his favorite meal, and dutifully ask him for details of his trip. But a small voice knew that this was for nothing, as well. These acts of love and excitement were flat, routine. The proof of her feelings needed to be visible and tangible.

In order for the time to pass more quickly, Allison turned on the radio, then on second thought, played old albums that she and Patrick would dance and sing to before he left. She hummed along, low and throaty, still thinking about what needed to be done before Patrick’s return. She went to the bedroom, straightened the messy bedding, and walked out. She secretly hoped that Patrick would be so exhausted that he would want to just sleep. She hadn’t thought ahead much further than that.

Heading toward the bookshelf, Allison rustled through construction paper and scissors, string and markers. She cut the paper into long ribbons, spiraling and swirling, creating a sense of whimsy and celebration. Attaching the paper to the string, she strung the garland around the room. She sang Sam Cooke loudly, too loudly, along with the melodies of lost love and heart-felt pleas for forgiveness. Standing barefoot on the corner of the couch, reaching up to place the garland on the curtain rod, she sang loud enough to be heard through the closed window *If you wanted/to leave me and roam/when you got back/I’d just say welcome home*. In a frenzy, before the thought could leave her head, Allison plopped down on the couch and feverishly drew a detailed picture of their home with an airplane flying above it surrounded by pink and red cartoon hearts floating behind the plane and above the home. She wrote those lyrics artistically around the drawing; a message that serendipitously captured what she wanted to relay to Patrick. She didn’t want to talk; she just wanted these words to speak for her.

She placed the finished drawing on the apartment entrance door, carefully taping the sides so as to not crease it. She liked the tender yet plain message. Allison closed the door, went back to decorating, and waited.

At 5:12 exactly, the sun went down in the late-February sky, and the sound of a car door slamming and a hurried “Thank you!” sent Allison back to the window. She froze in place as she watched Patrick turn away from the taxi and toward their apartment, not knowing if she should run to the street to greet him, wait in the door for him, or pretend that she was engrossed in some other activity then act surprised when he unlocked the apartment door. She jittered between the kitchen, the window, and the

door before she heard his heavy footsteps heaving a backpack toward the door. As she heard him struggling with the latch, Allison simultaneously turned the doorknob. There was Patrick. Tanned, tired, bearded. He was doing his best impression of a travel-weary backpacker.

“Hi,” she breathed as she reached up to his face to pull it toward her for a kiss. “How was your trip?” He kept his hands on his backpack straps, counter balancing six weeks’ worth of luggage, and she met the corner of his smiling mouth with her lips. Although she had heard nearly every detail from him via long travel-log style emails over the last weeks, she couldn’t think of anything else to ask him.

“It was good, but I’m definitely tired. It’s after midnight in Tanzania, but I don’t even know what day it is. I think I’ve been travelling since yesterday, or maybe two days ago, you know, hours-wise.” Patrick looked around the apartment as he set down his backpack. “Wow, the place looks good. Very, uh, festive. Thanks, darling.” And with that he closed the door and kissed the top of her head. It felt like an old comfortable pair of jeans to hear him call her ‘darling’ like that again.

“Let me get a look at this beard you’ve grown,” she playfully ran her fingers through the scruff between his chin and cheek. “Wow, how long have you been growing it?”

“I decided that I would document its growth every day with a selfie in an interesting place. Like in front of a pride of lions or something. And I was good about it for a little while, but then I sort of forgot or wouldn’t do it for a couple of days. So, yeah, I’ve been growing it since I left. I just wanted to see how long I could get it.” As he spoke, Patrick unzipped his backpack, taking out his Sony camera along with dirty clothes and crinkled maps, making loose piles on the floor.

“Here, why don’t we eat some dinner before you go through your bag. I made lasagna and salad, and there’s bread and wine. Let’s just eat first. I want to hear about everything.”

Allison moved toward the kitchen as Patrick washed his hands. He sat at the table, and Allison watched him pick at his beard as she brought out warm bread and the hot lasagna dish. When she came back, he was holding his cell phone from the desk drawer and had it turned on, narrating every old text message he had received over the last six weeks. Allison answered with ‘Oh, yeah, they were asking about you’s and ‘Uh huh, I talked to them last week’s. She was balancing a butter dish, two full glasses of wine, and a water pitcher.

“Oh, wow, have you talked to Simon and Jake recently? It looks like they wanted to get together as soon as I got home. I wonder what they’re

doing now,” Patrick said this more to himself than to Allison. She caught his weak smile as he glanced back at his phone then the table. “This looks so good, darling. You made so much!”

Allison breathed deeply in and out, then took a draught of wine, “Yeah, why don’t you ask them to come over? They can join us.” She went to the kitchen and took out two more plates and placed them on the counter.

The next twenty minutes were a rush of excited stories about waterfalls and muddy motorcycle rides punctuated by the buzz from Patrick’s cell phone. Allison perched the wine bottle within arm’s reach and never allowed for her glass to empty.

A jarring knock focused Allison, and she went to unlock the door for Simon and Jake.

“Hey Allison! How are you?” Allison was swept up in two big hugs. “Did you draw that sign on the door? That’s really great, perfect for Patrick, right?” Allison nodded and thanked them, leading them to Patrick who was sopping up tomato sauce with a crust of bread.

The apartment was a collision of cheers and hellos, joyously crashing among laughter and curious questions of Patrick’s travels.

“Yeah, I mean, it was definitely pretty scary for a little while, especially when I first got there. But, you know, I got the hang of it, and it was ultimately really fun.” Allison rolled her eyes to herself and stifled a snort as he spoke, remembering his child-like tearful whining in the early stages of his trip where he explained how his white skin, blue eyes, and soft curls marked him the slang word: *mzungu*.

Now he threw that word, *mzungu*, around like an inside joke, one between him and his fellow Tanzanians, where they were in community with one another. Allison’s blurry eyes pierced through his act of cultured world traveler. The longer she listened the harder it was to keep from laughing or crying or throwing something at him.

Abruptly, Allison stood up from her chair, “Why don’t you guys go catch up at the bar down the street. I’m feeling pretty tired, and I don’t mind cleaning up.” She gripped the table for balance, “Yeah, I’m just sitting here bored anyway.” She meant for that to come out as a joke, but the uncomfortable silence signaled that a little bit of the truth had sneaked out.

Patrick gave her a bewildered look, then checked his friends for their cues. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. You guys want to go?” The three old friends put their napkins on their plates and pushed in their chairs in one motion.

“Sounds good to me. That was so good, Allison. Thank you for inviting us over tonight. I hope we’re not stealing him away from you so soon.”

Simon was attempting to both protect himself and his friends with his niceties.

“Yeah, Allison, you really are a great girlfriend for having us over on such short notice. You need some help cleaning up?” Jake began to half-heartedly stack plates.

“No, no, it really doesn’t take long. Promise. Plus, I’ve been getting these updates from Patrick this whole time, so it’s not me he wants to talk to.” Allison laughed to herself then refilled her wine glass with the meager remains from the bottle and drank it down. She unsteadily placed her glass on the table and walked toward the door. Patrick, Simon, and Jake found their jackets and scarves and said their good byes.

Allison didn’t look at Patrick, but he kissed her cheek quickly, and said, “Thank you for dinner. This really was great,” before zipping his jacket and closing the door behind him. She leaned against the closed door fuming. She heard Simon say as they walked out to the street, “Did you see that sign on your door, dude?” Allison heard a murmur from Patrick followed by faint laughter.

Allison bypassed the table piled with dirty plates and flatware, and undressed in the dark, falling into bed. She squinted at the screen of her phone that had been sitting on her nightstand and saw that Meredith had texted her 45 minutes before.

—How’d it go?

She breathed deeply and relaxed into the mattress. Her thumbs pressed the screen to form her message.

—Well, he’s back. I’ll have to call you tomorrow. Drunk.

Before she could even put her phone back on the nightstand, a swirl of events from the night hovered in Allison’s head as she tried to decide what she was going to share with Meredith. The swirling turned into spinning, faster and faster. The acidic slush rose as Allison clumsily bolted out of the bedroom and toward the bathroom. She made it as far as the loose piles of dirty clothes still on the living room floor. Wiping her mouth with an old t-shirt, Allison looked down at the mess. In a sudden rage, she gathered the pile, vomit and all, opened the front door, and dropped it next to the door-mat. Allison closed the door, latched the chain, and went back to bed.

Woodshedding

STUART GUTHRIE

He arrived at his father's cottage sometime in the dusk of autumn. The Bronco's tires skipped over the loose dirt and stone of the final hill, kicking up pebbles and dust as they went before settling into the overgrown, rain-soaked lawn. Mathew exited the truck with a stretch, looked at the weeds and faded paint of the place and reached in the back for a beer. Although he had fond memories of his mother warming up cider on the stove and his father tossing the Frisbee with him on the lawn, the place looked like it could be condemned. He hadn't yet decided if he was going to sell it or keep it, but in the meantime, he didn't have any place else to go. Before letting himself inside, he made his way to the toolshed beside the house, dragged out a sickle and the old lawnmower and got to work while there was still some light.

The previous week, he sat in his old residence waiting for Karen to come home, but she never returned. She was going to wait him out, give him time to move his stuff from the house they rented together and find somewhere else to stay. He sat boiling on the couch, flipping through the channels. His stomach ached and he coped with their finest bottle of scotch, straight up. She could at least afford him the opportunity to let it out, vent, shout in her face about how fucked up this all was. But no, fighting was not in their repertoire, and he would only feel ashamed about yelling at her or making her feel guilty. So she was going to spare him that, staying with her sister on the other side of town until he was gone.

A few days after the break up, Karen had stopped by the house while Mathew was at work to pick up some necessities, and she left him a letter. It was impersonal and to the point. "I'm sorry," it started, "but the quicker we do this, the easier it will be." Take your shit, leave the keys, don't take forever, it said in so many words. It was signed, "Take care of yourself, Karen." There was a space between the last line and her name, as if she considered signing "love," as she typically did, and decided it would be best if the word was absent.

* * *

Each morning he wandered through the surrounding wood, collecting manageable logs and branches, dragging them back to the front steps of the cabin. By then, the coffee had percolated and he afforded himself the luxury of sipping his morning cup on the deck, unhurried. When he was ready, he went to the bathroom, splashed some lake water on his face from

a five-gallon bucket, and went back to work, sawing and chopping, looking to fill the woodshed with enough firewood to last the winter.

He would hold the smaller limbs away from his body; stomp down with the heel of his boot as closely to the center of the branch as he could, tossing the snapped pieces into a pile. With the logs, he would first go to work with a chain saw, gliding through the bark and ringed trunks with delicate force, occasionally raising the blade up just a bit, before dropping it down on its path again. Sooner or later, he would bring the chainsaw out with him on his morning walk, cutting down any dead stumps that hadn't yet fallen. This idea annoyed him as he breathed in the heavy fumes created by the weather-beaten machine. He loved the sweet smell of gasoline, but the reconfiguration of its molecules into an odorous gas, he abhorred.

Once the wood was hacked into smaller, more manageable pieces, they were placed around the stump to be split, easily Mathew's favorite chore at the cabin. He would eventually get around to all the tasks necessary in preparation for winter: cleaning his rifle, fixing the pipes, (or was it the pump?), putting chains on his tires, making a final run to the grocery store for rations, a majority of which were beans, hotdogs, cases of cheap beer, and a few good bottles of whiskey. But today, he would be splitting wood.

He raised the ax and dropped it with resounding force on the first log. Initially, he used too much lower back, whipping the head of the ax down with more brute force than was required. After a night when he needed four Tylenols and a few fingers of whiskey to alleviate the pain in his back, he learned: let gravity to do the work.

Relishing a little back pain, Mathew returned to the stump in his heavy flannel shirt. He wanted to achieve the same sensation he had the previous day. Everything about being alone in the woods with an ax felt right. He worked up a sweat over the next hour. He liked the immediate effect of the log tumbling away into the damp leaves, the violent heave of the ax over his shoulder, his hand readjusting at that moment of weightlessness when the blade was at its apex, sliding his right hand down the handle, knowing that the weight of the ax-head was enough to split that son-of-a-bitch in two. He liked the fluidity of the entire motion. He liked the sound it made, the crack of the steel blade wedging into the top of the log, and its expanding head entering the wood so violently that the log disassembled itself before the blade ever reached the bottom. He liked the rhythm of it, the heave of the blade coming up, down, thwack; up, down, thwack. He loved creating a necessary provision for himself through such destructive force.

* * *

On one of the most picturesque days on Lake Champlain, the sun fluttered in through the yellow blinds Karen had picked out. Mathew had missed two days of work after receiving her note, waiting for her to come back, even just to pop in just to see how he was doing. He stirred in front of the television and spilled his glass of scotch resting on his belly. It ran down the side of his T-shirt and collected in a puddle on the tan sofa, part of the set he had finished paying for last month. He stood up quickly, then relaxed, letting the scotch seep into the fabric. He owned everything in the apartment, at least partially owned, and the bitterness he was trying to overcome rose up in his gut again. It was time to leave.

He moved most of his things out quickly, bunching up his clothing in suitcases and garbage bags. He tossed the things he didn't want or no longer needed; tossed all of the pictures of Karen except any that captured the memory of his father as well, packed the coffee maker and coffee, left her the rest of the appliances, took the books he planned to read, or eventually reread, and forfeited the DVD collection. The Bronco was packed in record time and seemed remarkably spacious for containing all of his earthly possessions for his future life. Standing behind the truck, looking in through the open rear window, he remembered one last possession he needed to retrieve.

He climbed the stairs to the attic and caught a glance of Lake Champlain out the third story window. Sailboats were speckled across the lake. "We should do something with this space," she had said when they moved in the previous summer. It would have taken plenty of weekends and fistfuls of dollars to renovate the third floor, but she was right—it had a great view of the lake. Although it was late September, the tree line around the lake was still remarkably green, with only a few smatterings of fall foliage, the early and unripe yellows and oranges. The vivid blue sky reflected off the lake, and taking a last wistful glance through the glass, Mathew said "Fuck it." He retreated to the dark corner of the attic and found the mound he was looking for, roughly the size of a desk, but oddly shaped, its contents hidden under a thin blanket. He pulled the blanket from the stained emerald green Ludwig drum kit his father had given him for his tenth birthday, a basic five piece kit, a bit dusty, but still mint. The sight of it made his stomach turn up into his chest and he squatted down to his heels for a moment to gather the strength required to lug the set to the truck.

It had been just over two months since Mathew's father had died. Kidney failure. He guessed Karen was planning on leaving him before that, and the death became a hiccup in her timing. The two months she stayed

was the appropriate grace period for a grieving boyfriend. In retrospect, he suspected he made that time extremely taxing on her. He was depressed about his father and his crap job and the prospect of spending another year in a town which offered no excitement or possibilities for him. He was also jealous of her success in her first year teaching at the college, her ability to make new friends when he could not. The warning signs were there. They didn't fight but there were signals. She didn't care to watch their favorite shows, didn't stroke his hair or rub his back when she crawled into bed late after grading stacks of papers, didn't wake him up in the middle of the night perched naked on top of him, wanting him to take her in that sleepy-love state. She spent more time with friends, and there was that one night over the summer when she didn't come home until 4 a.m.

"Where were you?" he asked when she finally climbed into bed.

"Out with the girls."

The bars close at two, he thought as he rolled over, pretending to go to sleep.

* * *

After there was no more wood to chop or after he decided his current load would suffice, he placed the ax in the corner of the cabin, behind the door. He sat down at the 50's dinette set and cracked open a PBR. Four baby blue vinyl chairs with chrome legs, and the speckled Formica table top with matching vinyl lining, these were all that distinguished the kitchen area from the living room of the cottage. Mathew breathed slowly, sipping his beer for a moment, admiring the bundle of firewood he had brought in from the woodshed and stacked meticulously in a small area between the sink and the stove. He never did get around to fixing the plumbing and was unsure he ever would. The idea of tinkering around under the house for days, dealing with filthy water, rusty pipes, and the headaches that would ensue with countless trips to the hardware store a good forty-five minutes away in Fair Haven was more than he could bear; all this without any assurance that he would fix the problem. He'd just as soon relax. He was content with this alternative: use the outhouse behind the cabin and import water when the time required.

Before he was half-way through his beer, he stood up and threw some smaller pieces into the wood-stove, crumpled up a few loose sheets of newspaper, and lit a fire. He returned to the table, took a few more swigs, and resolved to get started with the drum kit.

The sun felt nice on the back of his neck and in the dampness of his flannel after cooling down in the cottage. He lugged the black cases,

metallic rods, and green set pieces out of the Bronco, up the deck, and into the living space in the back corner of the cottage, next to the record player. It took five or six trips to retrieve all the pieces, and he arranged them crudely into the rough shape of a drum set. Sitting down behind the snare, he gave each of the heads a whack to get a sense of their tuning. He began systematically tightening and loosening the lugs with the key, and flicked the skin in approval before moving on to the next drum. Next, he went about adjusting each drum's positioning to his liking, taking several trips around the snare and toms, moving one of the rack toms closer to him a few centimeters, or dropping the front leg of the floor tom just a hair. He flipped the drum closest to him over in his lap and tightened its snares taut on the bottom head, so as there would be no rattle, all pop.

"Start with the basics," he thought, and began playing a simple beat. Eighth notes on the hi-hat and ride, quarters on the snare and bass, a couple of fills and crashes here and there, mixing it up with minor variations. It took a day or two for his internal rhythm to stand up, dust itself off, and return to his arms and wrists. He practiced rudiments. "Par-ra-did-dle," he said over and over again, but he found it helped more to verbalize the hand movements, "Left, right, left, left. Right, left, right, right." The motions of drags, flams, and rolls, he knew, but they had been lying dormant for ten years and felt awkward and strange again.

Over the weeks, the beats became smoother, more complex. He noticed he was favoring triplets in his fills and pushed himself to deviate from what initially felt natural. He played songs he wrote in high school, imagining the ghosts of teenage bandmates jamming along with him, playing in basements and garages. It had been one of his favorite times in his life. Every weekend they would have a few beers and pass a joint between sets, talking about gigs and girls and how securing one would intrinsically ensure the other. It had been a warmer time; a period marked by endless possibilities and chances, risks and mistakes without regret. He pushed the pace, breaking a sweat.

* * *

He dreamt of 4th of July barbeques at the cottage back when his parents were still together. His memory and subconscious swirled together a blend of reality and fiction that would take minutes, sometimes days to sort out after he woke up. He dreamt of his uncle getting too drunk outside the cabin playing horse shoes and passing out on a lawn chair. He dreamt of his first date with Karen at an Indian restaurant, in which he warned her about his propensity to perspire when eating spicy foods, and the way he

made her laugh by making the streams of sweat a joke they were both in on. He dreamt of bellowing out the chorus to Elvis Costello's "Red Shoes" with his father in the old coupe. They were wearing matching Ray Bans, and his dad looked so cool with the wind screaming through his hair. He dreamt of the time he introduced Karen to his father, and his dad taking him aside after a couple of beers. "Hold on to this one," he told him; "I like her. This girl is good for you."

* * *

Webs of frost climbed up the window panes in the brisk morning mountain air. Mathew could see his breath as he lay staring at the white tile ceiling. After a few moments, he would crawl from the middle of the caved-in mattress, wrapping the heavy blankets over his shoulders and head, and toss some wood onto the hot coals in the stove.

Then he would play a record, one of his favorites from the cabin's mish-mash collection that accumulated over the years through the efforts of Mathew and his father by process of selective buying at second hand record stores, donations by family members and friends making the upgrade to cassette tapes and compact discs, and whole collection acquisitions at yard sales and flea markets.

He would place a record on the platter, sit down at the set, and wait for his cue. His drumming consumed the music, the phonograph rendered virtually inaudible. It didn't matter. He used the music more as a referential metronome for keeping pace, rather than dictating how or what to play. When a stick shattered on the snare's rim or the crash symbol, he tossed it on the floor, and simply retrieved a new one from the Pringles can duct-taped to the floor tom, diving right back into rhythm with the fuzzy recording. He began training himself to play double bass drum kicks of Master of Puppets with a single pedal, and when he couldn't match the feverish tempo, his calf muscles locked up trying. On Milestones, his sticks took a life of their own in the hands of Philly Joe Jones, abandoning a steady beat for fills, scats, and rifts. At night he had to play The Freewheeling Bob Dylan, stripped and devoid of all percussion, just to fall asleep. Otherwise, he would wake from a pulsing dream with his toes stretched out to the brass foot-board, tapping music into the hollowed bar. He played along with the classic rock awesomeness of Bohnum on Physical Graffiti, the heart-wrenching up and down sweet thumpings of Nevermind with Grohl, danced between the ride, crash, and splash with Copeland on Zeynatta Moondatta, slowed it down, bouncing along to the melody with

Ringo on Abbey Road, and just fucking destroyed the set with the end all, be all: Who's Next.

He beat on, fulcrum gripped, until the palms of his hands developed blisters, tore open into raw, pink sores, scabbed over, under the cover of athletic tape until thick callouses formed, his hands evolving to suit his art.

He wailed until sweat coated his body, until the tips of his hair stung his eyes, his shirt stained into dark U, his seat became a swamp of hot mess, his feet slipped out of his socks on the pedals. Steam rolled from his body when he went outside for a five-minute breather between sets.

By the time the snow came in heavy, damp blankets, he was able to skip from tom to tom with a practiced flick of the wrist, instead of single, distinct strokes, and although he wasn't able to achieve machine-gun, rapid-fire Keith Moon madness, he was almost there.

Manic, his arms became a blur, whirling around the snare, toms, and cymbals. Sticks broke; their tips flew off or completely shattered to bits. He discarded the broken pieces in the stove and allowed a fine dust of hickory, oak, and maple to collect at his feet.

He could feel the cabin pulsating. He knew the music could be heard for miles on freezing Vermont nights, when the icy air is crystal thin, his beating and wailing echoing across the tree trunks, the crashes drifting up to a still black sky. If anyone were to investigate the disturbance, he was sure they could follow the sound to a cabin, light flickering through the windows. In the warm glow of a wood-stove fire fueled by split wood and shattered drumsticks, they would see Mathew laboring at the set, legs thumping, arms flailing faster than the eye could follow, working, with each stroke, on getting better.

Partial Memory of a Mushroom-Lunger

DORA N. GASKILL

My father lunged through a Colorado creek
to catch a giant mushroom, intended for the grill
but attempting fluid escape.

Brazen volunteer, between dazzling fangs and praise
he dangled a snake, ever cool unafraid
for all of Florida to behold.

I salted that first fish with tears of regret, as I learned
commitment to the kill. We hiked Yellow Stone
Grand Canyon Mesa Verde slithered our station
wagon around cliff edges. He flowered every
dance recital, hopped along rain-gutter ladder-top
my hot-pink bicycle birthday eyes popping.

I remember things he said:
Give it an effort. You little snot.
No, I want joint custody of all of you.
Talk some sense into your brother.

I remember the first newspaper article,
the word methamphetamine in print, rumors
of the woman he ratted
out to maintain his freedom.

Second article, photograph of his beloved
truck, vehicle of long-haul escape
black-and-white before big-rig jack-knifed his back.

I imagined I heard center-divide impact
motorcycle and cement drag him 200 yards without a helmet
sever a chapped leather leg, shatter ribs.

My intrepid mountain dad in a wheelchair
punctured lung breath, the unwilling whine of pain
sounded just like the hesitation scraping
before his lies. Cognitive damage erased me

maybe but I've been raised
not to believe him.

Maybe I'll see him next
sitting in another wheelchair
hissing more lies.

Then it will be my turn to lunge:
Do you really
not
remember me?

What I Know Now

BRIAN SOL WHITE

Thick hands caked hard by the graveyard shift
in the soap factory could cup a bowling ball and
hurl it like thunder.

He read slowly. Mouthed words when he wasn't careful.
My father lived his body.

Twenty-two years he is gone, and it is that robe
I think of on nights like this.
I try and try to sleep. Nuzzle into the pillow and wait.
The linens are crisp, and smell of no one but me.

The hard afternoon light poured in through
the windows in the breakfast room.
If I brought a friend over after school,
Dad's half eaten bowl of corn flakes would sit
snickering on the table, and we could hear him
shaking the house with his
Thud thudding toward their bedroom..
We ditched our after school backpacks in chairs
and in corners, we'd unwind our day in
snacks and silence mostly until Dad emerged,
his comb over still tangled wild by his daytime sleep,
wearing brown Dickies, a tee shirt faded to grey, and
navy canvas slip-ons that weren't Keds,
cinching a black leather belt around his hairy white belly.

I was too embarrassed to tell friends why he had
fled from the breakfast room—
That he hadn't wanted them to catch him
wearing my mother's powder blue quilted robe
as he broke his fast and waited for her, for us,
to come home from work and school,
His day beginning, ours ending.
Most afternoons his vigil went uninterrupted,
just him, the cornflakes, the sunlight, and
the robe that smelled like her.

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those who write

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Sometimes the things that mean the most are best expressed simply.

In humble gratitude of all the voices and work that has made this possible.

—*Jessica Fillion*



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