

The Summerset Review



Fall 2009

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Editors' Notes

Years ago, the Editor's Note in an issue of a fine literary journal began:

Some readers take comfort in literary labels. They want the boundaries of prose clearly mapped: novel, novella, short story ... short short, tale, fable ... memoir ... personal essay ... and so forth. This anthology ... contains all of the above, the entire spectrum from fable to fact. But they are not labeled as such. Some will be easily recognizable, others will be harder to tag: fact or fiction? The idea is to invite the reader to experience the full range of the prose herein and to speculate on the author's intent, the narrator's relationship to the author, and *actuality*. Mix up the genres a bit. Break down the walls of the labels, of obsessive-compulsive classification and division.

Are you one of these readers? One who prefers to speculate? Though there are many people who might not mind doing so, we find it a bit uncomfortable. And yes, that probably gives us obsessive-compulsive status when it comes to literature. Optimally, we'd like to know, right out of the gate, what we're diving into. Fact? Fiction?

Of course, there is always that concept of blending one with the other; better fiction will summon interesting and relevant facts throughout, and better nonfiction will provide embellishment and ambiguity while visiting actual circumstance. But in the end, or shall we say the beginning, we want to know the underlying platform.

We've made a few changes in technical policy with this Fall 2009 issue. You might say "big deal" as you read this, but for us who are passionate at providing work in the best manner possible, the changes did not come without undue deliberation. Perhaps you will find all of this simply funny.

For one, instead of referring to each piece as a story, essay, or poem, it is now being categorized as fiction, nonfiction, or poetry. This was caused by "Rape Me Barbie," a short nonfiction piece released in this issue, which, for some reason, seemed odd to represent as an essay.

Read it and see if you can spot—or to use the verb above—*speculate* why.

We also changed the convention of the spelling of *O.K.* to *okay*. Again, this decision came with much sweat and insomnia. The former spelling was used to respect an entire article written about the word in *The New Yorker* years ago. (And we have little doubt one of our dedicated readers will write to us now, citing the exact issue.) *Okay* seems more like a word and just visually flows better, we've come to realize. Although we don't like the word very much, we're happy with this decision.

Big deal, right? These changes are simply things you don't care about? Or maybe you would say, "Well, fine, you do what you need to, as long as you keep giving us the beautiful and excellent."

Okay, then. Here you go. We hope you enjoy the fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in our Fall 2009 issue. Thank you for reading and tolerating our obsessive-compulsive nature.

We have two Lit Picks of the Quarter this time, one being very short fiction published in the 30th Anniversary Issue of *Passages North*, Winter/Spring 2009. It is entitled "Moon Story," by Francine Witte. We enjoyed the great moon metaphor in this piece, and a voice which grew to give more and more of the situation, slowly, yet still in as little as 250 words. The story begins –

When she was little, she thought the moon was an egg. A round one. But an egg. Each month, when the moon was full, she would wait for it to crack open and drop its slimy yolk into the sky.

Our other Lit Pick is a much longer story, appearing in the 2009 Southern Lit issue of *Oxford American*, entitled "The Invitation," by Barb Johnson. The setting is a laundromat called The Bubble, nestled in a drug-riddled area of the South, the main characters women lovers. Resentment, hope, love, and charity are blended to give us an endearing glimpse of lives here, making us want to be a part of an anniversary celebration. An excerpt -

I'm watching the party from the loft. Fragments of conversation float up to me like messages from a collective unconscious. The strings of bright lanterns inside The Bubble look like highways of happy, blinking light that run straight into a hopeful future. Outside, termites—Formosans—hover in clouds near the windows where they fling themselves against the glass, hungry to get at the blinking lanterns hanging over the crowd. If they could get in, they'd eat the paper shades in a second, but the hot lights would kill them for their greed. Even so, I imagine that they die happy, having gotten exactly what they wanted.

The Sunnerset Review

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The Summerset Review

We are nineteen years old,
spooning in a dorm room,
entwined like commas
in the last chapter of afternoon.
Light bobs, weaves. Unspoken
words pulse in the air,
vines of smoke
bind us like ampersands.
It is October,
it is Tuscaloosa
and we are electric.
We believe in *and*.
Cake & eat, sooner
& later, love
& always. But
or perches
on the other shoulder,
carries a spiny fork.
Kiss her or
don't. Speak now or
forever hold
a memory in your arms
like trying to see
the impression
left on a bed by a body
no longer there,
sheets smoothing,
daylight waning.
Plurals & possessives
jettison apostrophes,
grasp for the singular.



by

Amorak Huey

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Rape Me Barbie

by Jenniey Tallman

I am a happy orange-haired girl playing with dolls. Playing store and house. Playing with Mommy's hippy clothes from the closet. I label them and price them, set up shop. I sell the clothes to myself and package them carefully in plastic Kroger bags. I have twelve dolls named Barbie, all identical, save for certain hairstyles and clothing.

I sway my shoulders and move the dolls back and forth to a song filtering in from the next room. Stevie Wonder. The dolls are old and ratty; one is missing a foot—chewed off by my little sister. The feel of lightness made heavy digs into the pit of my stomach. Light made heavy. Always a dull thud down low. Always a scratching at my insides. Silence like Superstition.

Very superstitious, writing's on the wall. The lyrics drowning behind twanging too loud, inside brass and bass drum pedal-squeak, under electronic riff. Too loud and my head is too heavy from the sound of that song. My body painfully out of place. Something is hiding. Something is creeping. And I am not okay. I wrap myself in clothing, pull the fabric tight to my chest. Pinch my nipples angrily through the cotton. Too much. Is it wrong: with no one to molest me, I molest

myself.

I begin to strip. I am ten years old. All games turn to rape. I tear Barbie's panties off and wrench her legs to the sides of her head. Ken looks at me eagerly.

Staring mute at her breasts—large, tapered, smooth—it is what is not there that leads me astray. It is the missing nipples which beg me to find them; the missing cracks which invite me to make them.

A tingling down below. A dark smack of pleasure and quiet. A pain, impossible need. I rub Ken against her, break her legs to make room for his hips, scissor her blonde hair off. We ravage the Barbies.

I make the universe. I control the s-e-x. Barbie likes it. She is using Ken. She is insatiable, desirous. Shh, whisper now: f-u-c-k.

I utter the word, quiet and low. Silently. Eyes turned down, a far away look of suspicion. Fucking. I want to lay under the mulberry tree with Bobby Tucker, to feel his body pressed to mine, on top of me, still and curious.

I dress the remaining dolls: high heels and a ball gown; a bikini top for one, tiny shorts, plastic flip flops, and earrings; a nurse uniform. They are so tempting in their little clothes. Ken greedily takes three dolls at once. He leaves them scattered naked on the floor.

Barbie wants to live with a different girl. A girl who takes her to tea parties, beauty pageants, and swimming with Skipper, Midge, and Stacey in the pink pool with rubber lawn chairs and pocket-sized towels. Laughing with their graceful hands holding their long wavy hair off their perfect smiling faces.

My favorite has brown hair and eyes that are clear and green. I dress her carefully and slowly, in little white panties with lace edging, blue jeans, tennis shoes, and a pink T-shirt. We save her for last.

You don't wanna save me, sad is my song. The pink T-shirt is barely on, stretched tight over her protruding breasts, before I am pulling it off again. When all is done and Barbie and I are both down to our underwear—skin to skin, cheek to cheek—I watch her out of the corner of my eye. I sit cross-legged on the floor with my small body too big compared to Barbie's slender limbs. Ken is tossed aside; I will be her assaulter. She smiles warily at me, wondering if it is time for a change of clothes. She does not want this.

Title graphic: "Pink T" Copyright © The Summerset Review 2009.

The Somerset Review

Orpheum

On days I wasn't in school, I'd cross
into its chill dark, descend
that steep carpeted aisle, sink
into my worn plush seat, as dark-

rimmed eyes from the Odessa Steps
sequence of *Battleship Potemkin* pleaded
with me from the murals covering
both walls, though I ignored them, intent

instead on those shadows
before me, much larger than I, but condemned,
it seemed, to confront me with all that I was
missing or, of course, had yet to miss.

One afternoon I watched Cocteau's
La Belle et la Bête twice in one sitting,
each time disappointed by its ending,
not yet understanding

that such disappointment may have been
the artist's intention, though even Garbo
is said to have cried out when she first saw it,
Give me back my beast, as the lights

came up for her as they would for me,
and I trudged back into the lobby
unsettled because I had eaten nothing
but concessions that day, and because,

glancing back I could see
only ushers sweeping up,
while ahead of me burned
a day so bright I wondered

if it would hurt like that forever.



Two Poems

by

Reed Wilson

The Somerset Review



Two Poems by Reed Wilson

The Other Reed Wilson

is a successful cardiologist.
I used to get his calls—*Dr. Wilson?*
I'm sure you don't remember who I am,
but last week, I brought my mother in.
I need to tell you a few more things
about her condition. . . .
Or, Hi Reed! Welcome to Beverly Hills!
We have some special offers just for you!

Phone pressed against my ear like half
of a broken stethoscope, I'd politely
provide a referral. Meanwhile,
my modest rented living room
spilled out around me—
crayons, Legos, and Barbies strewn
like the aftermath of a cataclysm.

Each night, I'd tidy up: this
was *my* job then, among others,
saving my patience for what some
part of me knew would come.
Soon, that marriage would end, my kids
would be with me half-time, spaces
once overfull would still, and empty.

I know he's just another guy like me.
We even attended the same university.
Even now I'll bet he rocks
on the same waves of middle age as I,
pours himself a drink, anchors
himself on his sofa and reads up
on all the latest science, and the art,
of encouraging the heart.



Kittens

They were four girls born over six years, followed somewhat later by the one boy, Elizabeth's new husband Charlie. They had been a jumble of girls, curious, bounding, sharp-elbowed, almond-eyed. Their father had once observed that they were like a basketful of kittens, and they had demanded he give them kitten names. The names stuck: Vim, Pip, Dilly, and Honey. Elizabeth had been told their real names, but there was no reason to remember them. Their mother had died of some quick, savage cancer when the girls were teenagers.

His sisters were attracted to men like their father: men soft- and fickle-hearted, well and expensively dressed. Elizabeth hadn't met Charles Sr., who did a lot of business in South America. "He tosses his love around like Mardi Gras beads," Charlie told her. At some point each sister had married one of these suave playboys—though this was another thing Elizabeth had a hard time keeping straight—the marital status of the various sisters. Charlie said, "I almost feel sorry for them. It's a recipe for disaster."

"Disaster?"

"Needy women and faithless men."

"So what happens?" Elizabeth asked.

"Problems arise."

To date there were no children.

Grindstone Harbor

There's a vacation home, as was frequently the case in these oversized families with vague, inherited wealth. This year, Vim, the eldest, had organized a "girls-only getaway" to start the summer season.

Elizabeth hadn't allowed herself a moment's hesitation when Vim called—she would not have shilly-shallying appear on her permanent record with the sisters. Charlie hadn't asked her about her decision. Perhaps it seemed obvious, based on her own family history, growing up as an only child. She wanted the chance to explain that she knew these women would never be her family *exactly*. Her own mother was remote, dependent on pain medication and deception, and her half-brother, half-estranged, lived in Ft. Lauderdale. There was an uncle, a monk in Northern California.

They left it open whether Charlie would join her for the weekend—he didn't know when he'd get back from LA and he was going to Chad the following week. Charlie and Elizabeth had known each other for fifteen months, been married for two, and she'd calculated that as of the previous week they'd spent more nights apart than together by a 2.5:1 ratio.

"Pack your vitamins." Charlie sat on the bed next to her suitcase as she counted out socks, panties, and T-shirts. "You'll need to keep up your strength." This was spoken matter-of-factly. Charlie was never ironic.

"They're not that bad are they?"

He was rolling her pairs of socks into tight rolls.

She had met the sisters on several occasions, in twos and threes. They hosted cocktail parties and bought tables at fundraisers. Performing some sort of internal calculation, Charlie decided which of these they would attend.

"I wouldn't say *bad*, but they're frivolous, sloppy women and they're not very nice," he said. "I'm nothing like them." Before she could interpret this remark, he said, lightly, as though it was just a postscript to his previous comment, "I think you should stop taking birth control."

She felt her mouth open and close like a fish. Open-close.

"Something could happen to me, you know. The places I travel..."

He tossed her a pair of white socks. "We don't have to talk about it now. You can think about it while you're gone."

"You're here!" Vim shrieked theatrically as Elizabeth got out of her car. For just a moment Elizabeth felt clever, though actually she had taken the previous ferry, and had been sitting in the driveway for over an hour browsing through poetry anthologies.

Her car smelled of mildewed upholstery and, more faintly, Elsa's wet fur. The right rear window wouldn't stay rolled up. Charlie thought that the car, a battered Toyota she'd had since high school, should be replaced. Although Elizabeth's friend Jean had agreed to care for Elsa, her beloved, aged, poodle-ish mutt, for the nine months of her term at the Montessori academy in Dublin, Elsa died in her sleep a month before Elizabeth left for Ireland. Charlie was allergic, and though they hadn't actually discussed it, Elizabeth understood there would be no pets in their household. Elizabeth hung on to the car for the smell of Elsa and for the pleasure she got imagining Charlie's scowl as he came upon the dented yellow Corolla parked in front of their house.

"For some reason, we almost always arrive in birth order," Vim said as Elizabeth helped unload groceries from her trunk. "Dilly was about thirty cars behind me on the ferry and Pip's flying up later. Who knows when Honey will get here—the last ferry of the day, probably." She dropped the emptied plastic sacks on the floor.

"Did you know that our father designed this place?"

"I didn't know he was an architect."

"It's what he went to school for," she said.

When she didn't elaborate, Elizabeth asked about the name of the harbor.

"Eccentric local knife-sharpener or treacherous underwater topography—take your pick." Vim tore into the box of Haagen Daz vanilla and dark chocolate ice cream bars. "Leave the rest on the counter. I'll get to it in a bit." She stood at the counter gnawing at the ice cream, taking it down to the stick faster than Elizabeth would have thought possible. She repeated the performance with a second bar and flipped the sticks into the sink. A moment later she dropped to the couch, flipped on The Weather Channel, and was snoring within minutes.

As quietly as possible, Elizabeth put the remaining frozen food items in the freezer, including the one ice cream bar left in the box. Now what? Her suitcase sat pert and optimistic, feelings she couldn't share.

Dilly arrived in a snit, cartoon zigzags of fury nearly visible in her wake. Her underlings were already in disarray and a junior editor had gone completely AWOL. "I can't count on *anyone*," she declared. "Getting away is just impossible." Her hair was tinted an angry shade of red and moussed into hostile swirls. She had brought several bags of her own provisions. Putting these away she assessed Vim's choices, emitting vague snorts of disapproval.

Next came Pip, armed with questions regarding Elizabeth's preparedness: had she brought walking shoes, plenty of warm clothes, poetry for their nightly recitations? Thankfully, she had. Pip's eyebrows were plucked into skinny angular wings that swooped and dropped as she talked. It was hard not to stare.

"Good work," Pip said, sincerely or insincerely.

"That's why Charlie picked her," Dilly said. "He needed someone who could follow instructions."

"But we never thought Charlie would marry someone so young, did we?" Pip said.

"*Who* never thought that?" Vim scoffed.

Honey arrived just minutes after Pip. She dumped her monogrammed red leather luggage in a heap and flopped right next to Elizabeth on the couch. Honey had a secret. Elizabeth smelled it on her, a tang of fennel just beneath strawberry shampoo and mint lotion. Honey rested her head on Elizabeth's shoulder. "It's good that you're here." Her wild blonde curls crackled with static electricity. Several kinky strands latched onto Elizabeth's black blouse. Pip glared at them both.

"Charlie was Pip's pet," Dilly explained. "He didn't learn to walk until he was two because she carried him everywhere."

Vim squeezed onto the couch on the other side of Honey. She sniffed at Honey's neck and Elizabeth wondered if she smelled the secret, too.

Honey batted at her sister's face. "Stop it! You're tickling me."

Vim kept up her nuzzling and snuffling.

"I mean it. Stop! I'm all sweaty."

"No," Vim said, pulling away. "It's something else."

Accommodations

Cocktail hour entailed Bombay Sapphire martinis, goldfish crackers, Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, and the kittens carrying on with their solitary concerns. There was only one phone—an old black rotary on a battered school desk in the hallway leading to the bedrooms. At the desk sat Dilly, making long distance pronouncements and threats. *That is completely unacceptable. Is this just a hobby for you, or would you like to have a job next week?* Pip and Honey ignored her, watching the TV news with the sound off. Well into the second hour Vim put down her knitting, grunted to her feet, and started banging about in the kitchen.

Elizabeth had been granted what must have been the parents' room, spacious but now under-furnished with just a small three-drawer bureau and a double bed with a scuffed, white wicker headboard. Her silver 26" Titan Spinner Trolley was the nicest thing in the room by far. Charlie had bought it for their honeymoon. "This stuff is sturdier than ballistic nylon," he told her, "and it's got a fantastic warrantee." It was his luggage, of course, that took the regular beatings on international flights. They had actually driven to Vancouver for a long weekend after their courthouse wedding. She liked her suitcase. It was *substantial*, like her chunky-heeled Frye boots and the black fox fur hat that Charlie brought her back from Uzbekistan (even though it made her head sweat). Despite being the only one of her friends to have lived overseas and to have married, she often felt unformed, unfinished. Just look at how substantial these women were. (She tried to remind herself that of course they had more substance—they were older. Even Honey, the youngest, was thirty-seven to Elizabeth's twenty-five.)

The parents of the children she taught usually looked through or past her: she was the help, almost a child herself. The two- to four-year-olds to whom she devoted almost all her working hours, who swore their love and allegiance and often clung to her skirt at the end of the day, were unlikely to remember her at all a few years from now.

Charlie had begun as an engineer, designing state-of-the-art temporary shelters for refugee camps. Though he was now in high

demand as a logistics advisor to NPOs and foreign governments, he still enjoyed tweaking his designs. He was thin and wound tight with muscle. Sun and wind had burnished his face to a dry nut brown. Elizabeth's face was pale, dimpled, a bit doughy. Charlie liked to pat her face with his fingertips, push at her soft cheeks. "My girl," he said.

Elizabeth sighed and turned on her cell phone. It wasn't that they hadn't discussed having children. Of course she wanted a family. But they were newlyweds and childbearing was surely a matter for the future. What she'd *thought* she'd be pondering this week was the marriage itself. She'd hoped she might find clues here, among his sisters, insight even. Like being struck by the fact that Charlie could hardly have chosen a woman more different than his sisters. Hadn't he complimented her on her reasonableness, her even temper, her ability to get along? But what did it mean to be loved for being soft-spoken, pliable, and obedient? Or, what did it mean to be loved for what you weren't?

"Elizabeth." When Dilly spoke she was right behind Elizabeth, who jumped and stubbed her toe on the dresser. "The only place to get a signal in the house is the bathroom."

"Thank you," she managed.

And so it went. The kittens didn't knock. They didn't cover their mouths when they coughed or sneezed or yawned or burped. They chewed loudly.

Dinner was open-faced sandwiches, hot dogs cut in half and covered with sliced tomatoes and a square of melted American cheese, and tater tots.

"Honey's favorites," Vim explained.

Elizabeth could barely eat, nauseous from drinking gin on an empty stomach and longing for their approval.

Pip swung her bare feet onto the coffee table. Elizabeth kicked off her thongs. She couldn't bring herself to go barefoot on the bristly, damp carpet. Pip's feet were dirty. Her toes were long—the first three almost equal in length. Black hairs sprouted from her toe knuckles and her heels were thickly calloused and cracked. "You are a beautiful woman with very ugly feet," Dilly said.

Pip wiggled her toes. "They're Daddy's feet."

"Why do you let them get that way?" Dilly asked.

"It amuses me," Pip said.

"It's not like you can't afford a decent pedicure," Dilly said.

According to Charlie, Dilly had been financially cleaned out by a wretched settlement with an ex, whereas Pip lived sumptuously on "the spoils of divorce."

"My feet are a wreck!" Honey cried, though they were no such thing. Only a thin unpolished line near the cuticle betrayed that her frosty pink pedicure wasn't brand new.

"Foot massage?" Vim asked, taking Honey's feet into her hands.

Honey groaned. "You are my favorite sister." She arranged her hair like a cape over her shoulders and arms.

Vim planted a loud kiss on each of Honey's insteps. "Your feet are as yummy as candy."

"I really don't know if I can stay past tomorrow," Dilly told them. "Things are really falling apart at the office."

"You just need to learn how to take a vacation," Vim said.

"Talk about the pot calling the kettle black," Pip said.

Dilly leaned over the coffee table to pluck out a hair from Honey's hairline.

"Ouch! What the hell?" Honey hollered, yanking her feet away from Vim.

"Nothing, dear. Just a grey hair," Dilly said.

Honey's face froze. "You're kidding."

"Oh my," Dilly said. "Your first grey hair. I'm sorry, sweetie, really, I am."

Honey studied a handful of hair. "Forget it. It doesn't matter."

"So how long does this girls-only deal last?" Pip asked. "I told Carlos I'd fly him up here as soon as we lowered the drawbridge."

"We agreed on the whole week," Vim said.

Dilly snorted. "*You* said the week."

"So he can come up on the weekend, like Friday?"

"Friday! Since when is Friday the weekend?" Honey asked.

"I don't know why I should be punished just because I'm the only one—besides Elizabeth—who's in a relationship."

"Hello. I'm married," Vim said.

"Oh, is that on again? I can't keep track," Pip said, and Vim winced.

"Meow," Honey said softly. When they all laughed at this it was a bit like cackling.

Elizabeth was standing at the head of the tub, the farthest corner of the bathroom. She had stuffed a towel into the crack beneath the door. The window was open. The smell of a neighbor's barbecue competed with the scent of Honey's mint soap, the shelves and the sides of the bathtub with jars and tubes of gelées, scrubs, butters, and hair products.

"I feel like I should be smoking a joint," she told Charlie.

"Just ask Pip, she'll set you up."

"That's not—"

"You're going to have to talk louder," Charlie said. "I can barely hear you."

"I'm sorry." She raised her voice slightly. "I just wanted some privacy."

"I'm afraid that's going to be in short supply." He sounded impatient.

"I wasn't complaining."

"You know, it's really all right if we don't talk every day."

"This is the first time I've called!"

"I'm just agreeing about the lack of privacy."

"Okay." Her throat tightened. "But I thought..."

What had she thought? She knew he was tired, had spent the entire day in meetings.

"Are you still there?" Charlie asked.

Why had it seemed so important to call when she actually didn't want to talk to him? Was she really any more connected to him than she was to *them*? A door squeaked open along the corridor. Dilly's clogs clattered past.

"I should go," she said, still half-wanting him to disagree.

"Right. Time for recitations."

Recitations I

Lamps extinguished, they gathered around the scarred and sticky coffee table, ablaze with votives. Honey began. She cleared her throat and recited Denise Levertov's "The Ache of Marriage" from memory. Her smoky voice was perfect, giving each noun just the right ephemeral weight: "thigh and tongue" and "beloved" and "leviathan" and "belly."

Was this how the sisters communicated? Was there something Honey wanted them to know or was she wrapping her secret in the poem's words?

Dilly, reading from a book, spat out Stevie Smith's "Pretty," a long and beautiful curse. "Cry pretty, pretty, pretty," she dared, her voice a witch's mocking.

There was no talking between poems, just a five-beat silence.

Elizabeth had guessed that the poems should be by women and that they should be smart poems, as far from sentimental as possible. Of course the poems *said something*. That was the problem: what did she want to say and would the poems be heard as she intended? She'd clogged the anthologies with sticky notes, then removed them so as to appear nonchalant.

When Pip said, "Your turn," Elizabeth felt a flush begin below her collarbones. Flipping through the anthology she thought, no love, no sisters, no husbands, no tree branches swaying, no blood, no mothers. They waited.

She pulled out the folded sheets she'd stuck in the back of the book, poems she'd printed off the web. These were the innocuous choices of

Ted Kooser. She chose the shortest one, hesitated again. "Nest,' by Marianne Boruch," she said. "I walked out, and the nest / was already there by the step. Woven basket / of a saint / sent back to life as a bird..." Twelve lines later she was done.

"Read it again," Dilly demanded.

She did. What happened next? She felt they might start throwing things at her.

"Time for bed," Honey said. "You start tomorrow night, Vim."

The kittens had a hard time settling in. Cupboards and doors opened and shut for hours, soft clicks and near slams (that had to be Dilly). Would it be an exaggeration to say that this had felt like the longest day of her life? (And she'd been here less than ten hours!) Elizabeth lay in bed trying to focus on her own breathing rather than the sounds of the sisters and the thump and gurgle of the plumbing. She felt as though she'd been drafted into some kind of diabolical endurance trial during which tiny, sharp screws would be tightened into each and every tender place.

The last two lines of the Levertov poem stuck in her mind like a bit of gristle between her teeth. *Two by two in the ark of the ache of it.*

Perches

Of course they each would have their own spot, so it was just a matter of waiting to see who went where before Elizabeth could find her own. Charlie's spot at home was at his vintage maple drafting table. It was where he took his coffee and read the newspaper. Sometimes he spun in his chair while they talked, and it made her dizzy. The importance of the drafting table and his dedication to his work were the two things she knew best about him.

Pip's claim was to the back porch. She smoked a couple of hits at a time off a thick joint, drank from a Thermos of green tea, listened to her iPod, and sunbathed nude.

Dilly caught Elizabeth staring at Pip through the screen door. She'd been nearly mesmerized by Pip's seamless dark tan, her enormous brown nipples, her stillness like a lizard's.

"She's something, isn't she," Dilly said, or asked.

The front porch was Dilly's territory, and she invited Elizabeth to join her there for lunch.

"Dr. Walters must have made some bad investments—no new car for the good Mrs. Walters this year. Look at that—Amanda Plover's gained about twenty pounds and adopted another greyhound. She obviously hasn't heard that skinny dogs are like horizontal stripes. *Pfoot.*" A bit of eggshell landed on her plate. "How hard is it to properly shell an egg?"

Vim had made egg salad sandwiches—Honey's lunch favorite. The horseradish in the mustard stung Elizabeth's nose. The others grabbed their sandwiches and scattered.

Following the arrival of the noon ferry, the deliveries began.

"Important documents," Dilly explained as she collected thin envelopes from UPS and FedEx.

"Donald's your real name?" Dilly asked, reading the FedEx guy's name badge. "You're not operating under a pseudonym are you?"

"My friends call me D.R."

"I'll keep that in mind."

He flushed, glanced at the street.

"I'd like to suck his eyeballs dry," Dilly said as he pulled closed the back of his truck.

The third package came via Airborne. "Hey, Dilly, long time no see," the driver said. He looked like a male model, his jet black hair as sculpted as Dilly's.

"Hey, James. Miss me?"

"Pined away, barely survived. Who's this?" He pointed to Elizabeth.

"Charlie's new bride."

"Charlie's here?"

"Nope. No boys allowed this week."

"Guess I'd better shove off then."

"Guess so," Dilly said.

He smoothed the hair on his arms, though, and hesitated, but whatever he was waiting for wasn't forthcoming.

Elizabeth figured D.R. had better hang onto his eyeballs.

"Jesus, Vim," Dilly yelled. "Could you stop scrubbing for five minutes? I can smell the bleach from here."

"Well, pardon fucking me for cleaning up before I start dinner."

When Dilly sent Elizabeth inside a few minutes later for Diet Coke, Vim was sitting at the butcher block table pretending to read a magazine. Vim managed a large temporary employment agency in Seattle, was a docent at the art museum, and served on the board of a half-dozen foundations. Enforced idleness would be a curse. Elizabeth noted that from Vim's barstool you could see the back of Dilly's head on the front porch and Pip's profile on the back.

"Daddy is a Gilbert man," Dilly said.

"Pardon me?"

"Jack Gilbert." She quoted, "'I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell, / but just coming to the end of his triumph.'"

Elizabeth bet that Honey had the best spot. Once Dilly dismissed her, she toured the property again. After awhile she got thirsty and started to worry about appearing either too aimless or not aimless enough, while also aware that it was unlikely any of them cared enough to

keep an eye on her. She made her way back to the house for a drink of water.

"Where's Honey?" Pip asked, venturing in to refill her Thermos. Her skin was already a shade darker. "The usual?" She looked skyward.

The roof?

"Honey gets claustrophobic," Vim explained.

"She's not on the roof," Dilly hollered from the porch. "She's been in the bathroom for the past hour." She banged through the screen door. "And that's about long enough." She pounded on the bathroom door. "Honey, please, give us a break."

"Piss off. I'm busy."

"What the fuck!"

"Give me five minutes."

"I'll give you one and then I'm breaking the door down."

Dilly, Vim, Pip, and Elizabeth stood there while the seconds ticked by. The door swung open. Vim screamed. Pip squealed. Dilly's mouth gaped but no sound came out at all. Honey had shorn her hair down to just a close-fitting cap of golden curls. Her discarded hair was a nest on the floor behind her. Honey smirked. "What do you think?"

The sisters gathered around her. They led her to the couch, touching her arms, fingering the short curls and murmuring, as if she'd been injured. "Oh, Honey, your gorgeous hair," Dilly finally said. Elizabeth was certain she was right about Honey having a secret. As distressed as Honey might have been over the grey hair, this was a stunt to divert their attention.

On the verge of martini time, Elizabeth found it. From the house it looked like nothing more than a dilapidated storage shed. The small building was shut up and smelled of sawdust and sun-warmed dust. A workbench took up one whole wall, but held only a drill and a few bits, a hammer, some other tools, and a couple of jars full of screws and nails. The walls had been whitewashed. The windows opened with surprising ease.

Stacks of cardboard boxes sat in a corner next to an old wooden croquet set and a cedar chest full of skeins of wool. Near the door stood a rolltop desk. A big floral-printed easy chair had been set at an angle to face the window overlooking the water. Sitting in it, she caught the trace of a woman's perfume, powdery and old-fashioned. This had been the mother's place, Elizabeth guessed. Some gentle disposition was responsible for the faded yellow and white gingham curtains. The desk had been emptied except for a stack of crisp airmail writing paper in the top drawer. Perhaps the mother had come out here to escape the tumult of the kittens, too. On the top sheet of paper someone had neatly printed *Be Clear*. It would be nice to think that this quaint building, the note, and the chair had been arranged for her, a kind of invitation.

Q & A

The big black phone rang. Dilly charged at it from the front porch. "For you," she told Elizabeth. "Your husband."

"You're there," he said. "I thought you might have run away."

"I'm making iced tea." Something to sober her up over dinner.

Dilly stood with her hand on the front screen door but didn't even pretend to be not listening. Vim was planted on her stool.

"It looks like I'm going to be stuck out here for a few more days."

"I can't remember, do you like your tea sweetened or unsweetened?"

"You don't have to stay, you know. If the kittens aren't behaving."

"I don't know what you're talking about." She heard his sigh. He was crazy if he thought she'd speak an ill word about his sisters.

"It's just looking less likely that I'll make it up there this weekend. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Do you know how to swim?"

"I'm a very competent swimmer and diver. What's going on, Lizzie?" He didn't want her to talk about her feelings—she'd made that mistake previously—he wanted her to stop being difficult.

She tried to picture his body in swim trunks. A man bouncing on the end of a diving board, calf muscles and buttocks tensed. Wrong body, she thought. Charlie was more wiry than her imaginary diver.

"Do you know how to swim?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What's your best stroke?"

"Best? Backstroke, I suppose."

"Me too!" His exclamation sounded genuinely pleased. She pictured him in his hotel room, dipping a teabag into a white ceramic mug.

Maybe he had his doubts, too, wondered if he really knew her. Maybe he sometimes woke beside her, startled to find this person next to him. A wife.

"You know, Elizabeth, before you left, I only said what I said because _"

"I can't talk now. *Here.*" She looked over at Dilly, who tipped her martini glass at her.

"I just don't want you to—"

"Like you said, we'll talk later."

"We're trying to pamper Honey because of the divorce," Vim told her as they set the table for dinner. Cheese quesadillas and homemade salsa and guacamole were on the menu.

"Melted cheese is very comforting," Elizabeth agreed.

Honey was still on the roof, enjoying the breeze, she claimed. The sisters were concerned, though. One didn't miss the cocktail hour.

"Cheese gives her gas," Dilly complained. "You're on the other end of the house. You don't hear her farting all night."

A few more bits of Charlie's stories began to click into place. Honey was going through a bitter divorce. Her husband was crying poor and claiming half of her import business even as he jetted around Europe to cheer on his twenty-year-old German tennis star lover.

"It almost goes without saying that we told her not to marry him," Pip said.

"What was wrong with him?" Elizabeth hadn't intended to speak.

Pip's eyebrows disappeared beneath her bangs.

"He's a man isn't he?" Dilly said. "Oh, I'm sorry, we're not supposed to bash are we? Not in front of the newlywed."

"We did agree," Vim said.

Dilly was divorced, Vim was in a decades-long cycle of separation and reconciliation. Pip's rich ex had been her second or third.

Pip threw Elizabeth a smile. "Though we also agree that Charlie's a special case."

"I'm not altogether convinced that there is such a thing when it comes to men keeping their peckers in their pants," Dilly said.

"That's just because you have no self control," Vim told Dilly.

"Fuck you, Vim." Dilly wasn't smiling.

"What did you do now?" Honey asked, rubbing her eyes sleepily as she came in.

"There's too much lemon in the guac," Dilly said.

"Not enough pepper jack in the quesadillas," Pip said.

"Honey requested mild," Vim said.

"It's true," Honey said.

"It's all very good, thank you," Elizabeth said.

The sisters chortled whenever she said please or thank you.

"Besides your impeccable manners," Dilly said, "we don't really know that much about you."

"It's why we've so been looking forward to this," Pip said.

Elizabeth held her breath, waiting for the trap to spring.

"You weren't a virgin when you married Charlie, were you?" Honey asked.

"No!" she blushed.

"Have you ever snorted cocaine?" Pip asked.

"No."

"Have you ever had sex with more than one man on the same day?" Dilly asked.

"No."

"Have you ever gone more than two days without a shower or bath?" Vim asked.

They stopped waiting for her answers.

"Have you ever kissed a woman?"

"Gone skinny dipping?"

Uproarious was a word invented for their laughter. So pleased they were by their new game.

"All right, that's enough," Honey said. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"What do you mean?"

"Remind us what it is that you do now," Pip prompted.

"I teach preschool, Montessori," she started to explain.

"Like Lady Di before she married Prince Charlie!" Dilly hooted.

"So what will you do after that?" Honey asked.

"Have babies like Di," Pip said.

"That's right. She popped out William in less than a year, didn't she?" Dilly said.

She'd been thinking she might want to open her own Montessori school someday.

"Our Charlie has always wanted children," Vim said.

"Our Charlie has always wanted an *heir*," Dilly corrected.

"Like Daddy," Vim said.

The sisters nodded glumly.

"Children aren't very interesting," Pip observed, as though trying to cheer them up.

Elizabeth watched for Honey's response.

"Most people aren't all that interesting," Honey said.

"How true," Dilly agreed.

How utterly ridiculous, Elizabeth thought. She felt a little pang of missing them, her preschoolers. She knew them better than she knew anyone. She didn't know what Charlie was afraid of or what made him cry (or *if* he cried). But she knew Darla Mason cried when her shoelaces came undone. And poor little Louis Pahlniak was afraid of milk!

Recitations II

Vim read "Ode to Semen" by Amy Gerstler, which might have been a tension-breaker if only she had cracked a smile: "Whiteish brine, spooners' gruel, / morality's nectar, potent drool."

Dilly read "Trouble in the Portable Marriage," by Linda Gregg.

Pip read "Afterthought," by Diane Ackerman.

Were Pip and Dilly speaking to her? What did they think they knew about her marriage? Or were they just airing their own heartaches? Ackerman's voice was angry—"You gulled me, you led me a dance." Gregg's was resigned, forlorn. "Your hand touches me and then withdraws."

Elizabeth read a nine-liner, "The Knife Grinder," by Rosa Fabregat, a Catalan poet seldom translated into English.

"You're cheating, I think," said Dilly. "Playing it safe."

"The knife grinder grinds / and the scissors / raise stardust." She repeated the first three lines in response. Of course she wanted to play it safe.

"Leave it be, Dilly," Honey said. "It's late."

Once the sisters finished in the bathroom, Elizabeth took her turn. She sat on the edge of the tub. Honey's soap was pungent. She pushed the window all the way open. A nearly full moon rose over the trees, its twin reflected perfectly in the calm water. She couldn't remember if she'd shut the windows in the shed. The speaker in Gregg's poem believed the moon smelled like sweet wood smoke, but from that moment on Elizabeth would always sniff for mint.

She'd been at loose ends when she met Charlie during her last week in Dublin. She dreaded returning to Seattle to an apartment without Elsa, looking for a job, reconnecting. She spent her last night in the city with Charlie in his hotel room lying on the bed fully clothed, talking. She was on her side, her stomach bloated with Guinness, his body pressed to her back. He murmured in her ear, "You're perfect," and she'd thought, with Charlie, to be making a new story for herself. Now it seemed likely she had walked into the open door of Charlie's story. A bachelor of a certain age, set in his ways. How had she failed to consider his motives?

Define *Trouble*

The house was impossible. Dilly was shouting into the black phone, still threatening her premature return to Seattle. Gripping her phone with her shoulder, she angrily clipped her fingernails, bits of nail flying wherever. Pip was talking dirty to Carlos on her cell while shaving her legs with the bathroom door open. Honey was scooping cookie dough from a bowl in front of *The Price is Right* while Vim cleaned the oven in the kitchen, ammonia fumes wafting.

Elizabeth had never heard Charlie raise his voice. She had never heard him curse or complain, much less fart. All grooming activities were performed behind a closed bathroom door.

Given his sisters' habits, she appreciated his decorum, yet it seemed a little pathetic, choosing your partner and molding yourself in opposition to others. Was Charlie really loyal, or was he simply not a philanderer? If everything you were and had was not someone else's,

then what did you have of your own? Was that what children represented to Charlie?

Earlier that morning she got three bars on her cell phone out on the end of the dock, but she knew she could be seen from almost everywhere on the property. And who would she call? Her friends would be at work building careers her sisters-in-law would approve of. She had disappointed her friends by not having a wedding and now they crankily demanded news from the other side. But what to tell them? That, like the woman in Gregg's poem, her marriage was a solo bike ride on a dusty road? That Charlie cloaked his indifference in decorum? Or something juicier—that he preferred her to lie silent and still when they had sex?

Elizabeth snuck down the hall. If Honey wasn't yet on the roof then she could flee to the shed unseen. Honey's door was wide open. She was smoothing lotion up and down her arms—more mint. She turned, and there it was. Elizabeth had guessed correctly. Honey's round belly revealed her to be more than a little but not a lot pregnant. What a bombshell she held in her belly. How interesting that Vim hadn't yet figured it out, the way she watched everything. But how could she be expected to see something so unprecedented? It just wasn't done, after all. The kittens did not have kittens. The kittens were sufficient unto themselves.

Honey looked up. Unhurriedly, she pulled a loose sundress over her head. "Are you having an okay time?" She fluffed her shorn hair.

Was Honey going to try to make nice to buy her silence?

"You shouldn't take any of it personally," Honey said.

"I'm having a fine time," Elizabeth said evenly.

"We don't like anyone, you know. It's not just you."

The curtains were pulled shut, the chair pushed back against the wall, and the writing paper removed from the desk. There might as well have been a giant *Keep Out* sign posted. Oh well. Why should she be surprised? She shoved the chair back in front of the window and yanked the curtains open. Clouds had rolled in and the water was a dull, rippled grey. At home her spot was a plump, green corduroy chair with a beautiful halogen reading lamp beside it—a gift from Charlie. The chair was in their bedroom. Charlie explained that this would work best because she hummed when she read and he really needed silence to concentrate.

So that was to be her job, presumably. Keep the children quiet. Raise the little darlings while their father was off doing serious grown-up things on the other side of the world. Deal with their unruly emotions. Perhaps the reason he'd presented the idea so nonchalantly was because he thought it was understood. Why else would he have married her? The nice girl who was terrific with children and wanted to be loved and admired and might as well be made of Play-Doh.

She was, however, actually getting used to the taste of gin.

"Does Charlie still do that thing?" Dilly asked.

"What thing?"

"With the coins."

Charlie read the date on every coin that passed through his hands, announcing "2002" or "1996" in a voice suggesting it had the utmost significance.

"Ha! I'd forgotten about that," Honey said.

"He did have a coin collection," Pip said.

"C'mon, Charlie's a dweeb," Dilly said. "Even Elizabeth couldn't disagree with that. I bet he still polishes his shoes every Sunday afternoon, right?"

Elizabeth nodded, trying not to smile.

"Tell us about his sock drawer," Vim demanded.

Honey hooted.

"He's a bit of a neatnik," Elizabeth said.

"He's a neat *freak*," Dilly said.

And now Elizabeth did laugh, picturing Charlie buffing the water spots off a spoon before he stirred the cream into his coffee.

"So is Charlie coming out this weekend?" Pip asked.

"Make him come, Elizabeth," Honey said. "We're better behaved when he's around."

"Don't lie. Dilly never behaves," Pip said.

"Charlie is coming, on Saturday," Vim said. "I talked to him this morning."

"Oh goody," Pip said.

"Goody gumdrops," Honey said.

Dilly clapped her hands to get their attention. "I have big news," she announced.

Honey frowned and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Daddy's planning a visit," Dilly said.

It was like a giant bell had been struck. *When? When? When?* the sisters clamored. Drinks were topped off. Toasts were made.

Why? Elizabeth wondered. *Why was Charlie coming?* Vim must've caught him off guard. Was it possible he missed her? Was it possible that this place—these women—were playing tricks on her, twisting her thoughts around? More likely he was coming to check on her, to embark on his campaign.

For a moment, she couldn't remember Charlie's face. But there he was—on the mantle—multiple Charlies in mismatched wooden frames. Swarmed by sisters as a baby, embraced by sisters as a kid, flanked

by sisters as a teen. Even if she still couldn't picture his exact face, the photographs reminded her of what he looked like. Even his baby face had been serious; in none of the photos could he be said to have been cute. He had the angular bone structure of a man who would grow ever more coolly handsome. Even his sweat smelled tart, like cloves. She inhaled deeply, relieved to recall this precise scent. Her husband.

The girls were coming down from their high. The prospective visit was over a month away.

"But why is he coming now?" Honey asked. Was she worried about how the patriarch would take her news? She had to know how betrayed her sisters would feel. Was she taking her leave of them? (Who was the baby's father?) Would she tell her sisters now or wait until their father arrived or failed to arrive?

"Something business-y, of course," Dilly said.

"He could change his plans," Pip warned. "That's what Daddy does."

"Or not," Vim said.

"He said he was coming," Dilly insisted.

They dispersed, moving from room to room, picking up magazines and the TV remote, then putting them back down. The refrigerator rumbled loudly. Honey ate a banana at the counter. Vim seemed to have forgotten about dinner. Finally, Pip cracked open a fresh fifth of gin, and the snap of the bottle top drew them back together. Elizabeth watched from the couch.

"You're *not* leaving," Vim told Dilly and snatched the ferry schedule from her hands. "It's already Wednesday night. How badly can things fall apart by Friday?"

"That's what I don't want to find out."

"Why don't you close the office for half a day? Cut your losses, be a nice boss," Vim said.

"You are such a bossy kitten," Dilly complained.

"Well, I'm a horny kitten," Pip announced. "I got Carlos on a flight first thing Friday morning."

Dilly groaned.

"Ah, the mysterious Carlos," Honey said.

"He's not mysterious, sweetheart. You just haven't had the pleasure of meeting him. What about you? Do you have a rebound lover waiting for you at home?"

The sisters looked expectantly at Honey. She plucked at the cuffs of her long-sleeved tunic. "Nothing up my sleeves," she said. "Dilly, let me have another look at Daddy's itinerary. Do you think he'll want to come up here?"

"It's been years, hasn't it?" Pip asked. "You'd think he'd want to inspect the premises."

Dilly took a calendar from the kitchen wall. "See, I've already marked the dates."

Shoulder to shoulder, heads bowed, they studied the calendar page as if it held a secret message. These women—as elaborate and brittle as porcelain figurines poised on a narrow shelf—Elizabeth felt a gust of fear for them.

Herself—a damp bit of clay, pushed to the side, and for the moment, safe. There were worse things.

Title graphic: "Four and Green" Copyright © The Summerset Review 2009.



She got the money,
I got the monkey

by

James Dissette

I said it was ok, I didn't need a king's ransom
and credit made me nervous, so Boris and I set off
to make our fortune(s) hand to mouth. We started
door to door with little skits, juggling moles and sketching
palominos on the skin of the air
and after a few months of leftover nickels
for a few grand moments with an accordion by starlight
Boris wanted to go out on his own, learn a language,
maybe be a banker or settle down to imagine
how many vines were woven into the vault of heaven,
I said it was ok with me. Sometime later
I heard old Boris got shot breaking into the city zoo.
He'd ripped off his clothes on the way, tossed his wallet,
comb and St. Christopher but kept his waterproof Rolex.
They made a lot out of it in the newspaper.
But I knew Boris and he just wanted to tread water
across the rippling moonlight.



According to the Overlee Otters press guide, Justin Taylor weighs in at six foot three and 265 pounds. The starting outside linebacker is sitting across from me in the campus security office, red-faced and trying to catch his breath as I look up from my report. "Anything else, Justin?"

Justin leans forward. "I thought I should say something, you know. In case it's ..." He looks over his shoulder and lowers his voice, like someone might be listening. "In case it's the one from the newspaper."

"You did the right thing," I say, not looking him in the eye. "Let's just make sure this report is accurate, okay?" Standard procedure requires that I verify all information with witnesses before filing the paperwork. I take a deep breath and begin to read my account of Justin's story.

Student on bench outside library, 11:30 a.m. Squirrel approached from nearby tree. Squirrel made eye contact. Student stood. Squirrel ran at student, jumped onto leg. Student wearing jeans. Student knocked squirrel to ground with hands.

I look up. Justin is casting glances out the window at the oak trees on the quad. Of course I am concerned about these unexplained attacks (four so far), but all I want to do is go home to Kaylin and Molly, smother my daughter in kisses, take my daily stab at convincing my wife the world isn't falling to pieces.

Squirrel did not flee. Squirrel jumped at student again. Student hit squirrel with backpack. Backpack contained heavy books. Squirrel seemed dazed. Student, uninjured, ran into library. Squirrel ran into bushes near Mayne Hall.

Justin coughs. "That's it," he says, shaking his head, as if he's at a funeral. "I can't believe it happened to me."

When Justin leaves, I lean back in my chair and press both palms, hard, against my eyelids until I see ghosts. I look at the empty desk across the room and consider calling Richie in the Bahamas. He'd know how to handle an evil squirrel. He'd call it a "minor

disruption of daily activities." He'd be outside setting up traps, running wires in the trees, organizing a sting. All I've done is file reports, contact the Ohio Division of Wildlife, and walk around campus looking for mysterious movements in the shrubbery.

Molly, my wife, says I should be calling reinforcements. She says I'm not doing enough. She wants me to tell Richie to get his ass back to campus to deal with this emergency. She and I both know: Richie, my boss, would find this crazy squirrel, and Richie, bless his heart, would kill it.

Since the first attack ten days ago—the one that left the UPS delivery guy bleeding and speechless on the Albrights' porch—Molly has not let me take Kaylin outside.

Kaylin is packed into her stroller and we're heading for the door when Molly grabs my arm and shakes her head. "No," she says, squeezing to let me know she means business.

"Relax, Molly," I say. "We're a mile from campus. I'll take my gun."

Molly crosses her arms to let me know she doesn't like my joke. She stands in front of the door looking the way a linebacker should look. Bubbles flow from Kaylin's mouth, and she bangs her fists up and down like pistons on the stroller's safety bar.

Molly's reaction is not a surprise. Sixteen months ago, right after we found out she was pregnant, Molly started wearing reflector vests at night when she walked Fitzzy, our beagle. She'd look out the window at our neighborhood of sidewalks and say, "It might be dark by the time we get back."

"I'm not being unreasonable, Brandon," Molly says now, glancing down at Kaylin. "Lights out." Our code for *this argument is over*.

"You were in the paper again," Molly says. She marches into the kitchen and returns with *This Week in Westerville*, already reciting the front page.

Westerville and the Overlee College campus were under siege again yesterday—terrorized by what some are calling a "Super Squirrel."

At least four squirrel bite reports have been collected by Westerville police, Overlee security officers and St. Ann's hospital over the past two weeks. Two people were bitten yesterday.

"The attacks appear to be from the same squirrel," said Overlee's Assistant Head of Security Brandon Hunter. "It's pretty aggressive—for a squirrel."

Hunter got close to subduing the Super Squirrel yesterday near Center Street. "He managed to throw some rocks at it," said witness Don Richardson, who was walking near campus when the encounter took place. The squirrel was unperturbed by the barrage, according to Richardson, and it managed to escape.

On their website, the State Department of Wildlife says, "Squirrels have not been known to cause rabies in humans in the United States." Still, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that anyone bitten by a mammal should consult health officials to determine if a rabies vaccine is necessary.

Molly, I know, will clip this article, just like the others, and post it on the refrigerator, right next to the Mr. Yuk magnet with the number for Poison Control.

"Should I go on?" Molly says.

I lift Kaylin from the stroller, and Molly's voice follows me upstairs to the nursery: *"Hunter, a former Westerville police officer, admitted the squirrel has been difficult to track. 'The squirrel was last seen at approximately 12:25 p.m.,' Hunter said. 'It was*

running up a tree."

I miss the old Molly. We used to lie in bed and she would listen to me talk about some stupid teenage party I'd busted over in Spring Grove. This was back when I was a Westerville cop, redirecting parade traffic or cruising by the high school tennis courts to crack down on potheads and their underage girlfriends. If you ever got busted in the parking lot at Hoover Dam while making out with your Homecoming date five minutes after curfew, that was my flashlight tapping on your window. I used to tell Molly about the idiotic excuses from green-haired truants at the mall arcade or the tears on the faces of half the girls' soccer team when I pulled over a carload of them for drunk driving. She'd listen and rub my head and tell me I was fighting the good fight. She'd assure me I wasn't crazy for wanting to grab one of those kids by the collar and shake his brain back into functioning. "You're doing the best you can," she'd say. "I'm proud of you." Then she'd tell me about our future, the one with the baby and the dog. Life, she promised, would be perfect.

As soon as she got pregnant, Molly, my Molly, began to dissolve. She quit her job as an advertising sales rep, cut her hair short, and started putting bottles of Purell in every room in our house. When I'd get home from a late shift, Molly would be asleep, her legs wrapped around a snake-like pillow as long as our bed. We had to withdraw from the mixed doubles tennis tournament at our church (even though we were defending champs), and, playing solo, I got crushed in straight sets in the quarterfinals.

The day we saw the 3-D ultrasound, Molly squeezed my hand so hard, my class ring gouged me, drawing blood. Of course, I was a little bananas, too, buying an arsenal of inflatable sports equipment and the entire collection of Dr. Seuss. We did what all the experts told us to do. We nested, we prepped, we practiced breathing in counts of five. The day Kaylin was born, I rubbed Molly's neck until my fingers started to cramp, and then, poof, presto, ala-kazzam, Kaylin was here and Molly was gone.

The next day, the lactation specialist spent over an hour in our room, and, after several experiments involving ice packs and a hair dryer, came to the conclusion that Molly's nipples might not be suitable for nursing.

"It happens," she said. "Sometimes they just don't pop. Let's talk about formula."

Molly started to cry, and the nurse handed Kaylin to me. I could see her eyes moving beneath closed lids. "Be nice to Mommy," I whispered. "She loves you very much."

After another hour, in which Molly was fitted with something resembling a little Chinese hat for her breast, Kaylin finally latched on. Molly closed her eyes, her head sinking into the pillow. The nurses slipped from the room, and I was alone with my family, silently watching my girls from a chair by the window. For the first time in a long while, I was afraid of nothing.

Ten minutes later, Molly opened her eyes and gazed down at Kaylin, whispering words I couldn't hear.

"You both look happy," I said, rising, ready to place my hand on someone's head.

Molly moved sharply, as if she'd been startled, and Kaylin slipped from her breast.

"My gosh, Brandon," Molly said, poking her new hat at Kaylin's gaping mouth. "I didn't even know you were here."

As a general rule, squirrels and campus security officers, like myself, are enemies. Richie made this clear last year during my first week on the job. "Look," he said, like he was letting me in on a big secret. "All a squirrel's gonna do is tear up the flowerbeds, eat holes in the garbage bags, and shit on the picnic tables. When the kids are back on campus in the fall, these guys will be getting creamed all over the streets. You'll be out with a shovel at least twice a week. So if you see some idiot getting cutesy and letting a squirrel eat peanuts out of his hand, you stop that nonsense. You do what you gotta do."

Richie showed me the animal traps he kept in the basement. "We use these when we run into ... problems." Richie said the last word in finger quotes. "Like when a squirrel gets stuck in the walls of a sorority house."

"What happens when we catch them?" I said.

Richie grinned. "Legally, you've got two options. You can release the squirrel back onto your own property, which is like crapping in your own pants. Or, you can make the world a better place, and kill the sucker."

From my days as a cop, I knew that releasing animals on someone else's property was illegal, but drowning a squirrel in Alum Creek didn't sound pleasant for anyone. Then again, I'd never had to shovel a pile of squirrel guts into the trunk of my security cruiser.

Richie, who was three years older than me, laughed and grabbed my shoulder. "Kid," he said. "On this job, it comes down to one simple rule: The only good squirrel is a dead squirrel."

I am applying Bactine to my raw and bloodied knee when the security office phone rings. I see that it's Molly. I will not tell her about this latest wound, my graceless plummet from a tree.

"Squirrel Squadron," I say into the receiver. "Secret Agent 007, here."

"Funny," Molly says. "You catch it?"

"Umm," I say.

"Call Richie," she says.

"Richie's on vacation. I've got it under control."

Molly sighs. "I'm taking Kaylin to Dr. Keck. Can you pick up a prescription later if we need one?"

"No problem," I say, trying to sound sunny. I cradle the phone with my shoulder and stretch a Band-Aid across my knee even though I know it will never stick.

"I'm sorry about being a pest, Brandon. I know you're trying. I just wish Richie was around."

"Don't worry about it," I say. "Lights out."

"Lights out," Molly repeats. "I love you."

I put down the phone and look at the family portrait on my desk. Molly cradles Kaylin, while I hover behind them, looming, it seems to me, with my hands on Molly's shoulders. I'm supposed to look protective, but I look more like I'm pressing a suspect into an interrogation chair: *we can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way.*

Outside the office in the hallway of University Hall, I pass a series

of bulletin boards advertising student activities. Someone has posted a Photoshopped image of a squirrel in a beret holding a bazooka. Beside it, a sign announces an anti-war protest in pink bubble letters: An Eye For An Eye Leaves Everyone Blind.

I glance out the window at the quiet, green campus. Why do there have to be so many trees?

At the Campus Center, I grab lunch, a plate full of broccoli, which I love, and spinach, which I hate. Molly doesn't want me to eat cheeseburgers every day.

At the table next to mine, a kid in a baseball cap that says FCK U is reading *This Week in Westerville*. The banner headline screams: SQUIRREL ATTACK. Beside it is a sketch with the caption: "An artist's rendering of the Super Squirrel." It looks exactly like every other squirrel I've ever seen.

I stab a broccoli tree and cram it in my mouth. Molly, who used to be all about broccoli, gave it up after Kaylin was born. She said it was too gassy for someone breastfeeding a baby.

"So no broccoli for two years?" I said.

Molly nodded. "Possibly three."

On Wednesday, when I get home at sunset, Molly and Kaylin greet me at the door. Molly kisses my cheek while Kaylin pulls my hair.

"Well?" Molly says, same as yesterday. "Did they catch it?"

I shake my head and move to the fridge. I grab a Budweiser and a bottle of formula that I hold up to Molly, whose nipples haven't been popping lately. "Is it time?"

Molly adjusts the bundle on her shoulder. "Just had one," she says. "Getting tired now." I can't tell if she means Kaylin or herself.

I set the bottles on the counter, reach for Kaylin and lift her toward the ceiling. I wonder what Kaylin must think when she's looking down on her world. It is something I do without fail: the lift. Raising my giggling child toward the sky. I want Kaylin to feel that I'll always be there to hold her above the messiness of the world, to give her the chance to see what I cannot. The lift is the best part of my day.

Molly hates the lift. She reaches for my shoulder, paws at my sleeve. I am waiting for the day when she mentions the perils of sudden altitude change. I will sacrifice for Molly (quit the police force, paint houses on my off-days, sell my motorcycle, drop my bowling league) but I will not give up the lift.

Kaylin makes a sound like a flooded garbage disposal and a splash of drool hits my cheek. I bring her down and we touch noses, both of us laughing. Then I spin Kaylin so we are looking at Molly. "Come on, Mommy," I want to say. "You can laugh, too."

"Did you see about signing up for classes?" Molly says, turning away.

Molly has been urging me to enroll part-time in Overlee's education program. She wants me to become a teacher like her dad, a job that she argues will have better insurance and retirement opportunities. Fewer squirrels. But no matter how aggressively she pushes, I can't see myself standing in front of a room full of spaced-out teenagers, trying to explain the Missouri Compromise. I haven't dared to ask when Molly plans to return to work.

"I didn't have time," I say.

"The squirrel?" Molly says.

I hold Kaylin like she's an airplane, moving her in dips and dives.

Her laugh is like a songbird. Molly reaches out and takes Kaylin from my arms. My brain sends the signal—fight or flight—but all I do is stand there, empty-handed, as Molly turns away and carries Kaylin into the kitchen. I see my daughter's smiling face bouncing above Molly's shoulder. Then Kaylin reaches up and waves goodbye.

Later that night, I am stretched on the floor of our bedroom, the muted TV glowing green with highlights from the Reds game. Kaylin sleeps on my chest, riding the waves of my breathing as if she's floating. Whenever she grips my thumb, I know that she'll one day grow to play a flawless second base, flipping the ball perfectly to start a wicked double play, grabbing the cut-off throw and firing a bullet to nail the runner at third.

Molly sprawls on the bed, reading, the covers kicked to the floor. The moment she found out she was pregnant, she started to collect what everyone calls "The Baby Books." She has filled two shelves of the bookcase in our family room, replacing my grandfather's complete works of Mark Twain with titles such as *Baby Steps for Parents* and *The New Baby Owner's Manual*.

Tonight, she is reading *Baby-B-Safe: Everything You Need to Know to Have the Healthiest Baby on the Block*. It is one of her favorites.

Molly hits me in the head with a balled-up sock. "You cleaned your crap out of the garage, didn't you? Alex is coming tomorrow."

Alex is our real estate agent, the guy who's supposed to sell our house. Molly is obsessed with keeping everything clean for next weekend's showing. Yesterday she vacuumed the dining room three times. When I tried to ask her what she wanted on her salad, she looked up but didn't turn off the roaring machine. I was left in the doorway waving a tomato at her like an idiot.

I don't want to move. I like our house, our first home, but Molly can't stand that we live on a street where the speed limit is thirty miles per hour. She's convinced we'll be able to find something bigger and cheaper if we just keep looking.

"I'll take care of the garage in the morning," I say, pretending not to hear Molly's sigh.

"One more thing," she says. "Kaylin's eyes still look weird."

I return the sock with a blind hook shot that misses the bed completely.

"They were flickering," Molly says. "Her eyes."

I can't even imagine what this would look like, but I lift my head and say, "That's what eyes do, honey. They flicker."

"And she's having trouble swallowing. You've noticed, right?"

"Molly," I say, placing one hand completely over Kaylin's bald head. "She's swallowing like a baby swallows. And her eyes are fine."

I wait for Molly to finish her list of symptoms, and when she doesn't, I carefully slide one hand under Kaylin and shift her as I would a pizza slice from my chest to the floor where I place her in a nest of pillows.

I twist around, rise to my knees and lean across the bed where I can reach Molly's toes. I count her piggies until she pulls her feet away and slides them under the sheet.

"Kaylin's fine," I say. "Dr. Keck says everything is normal. Just like the last check-up and the one before that. These books are putting ideas in your head." I look down at my sleeping child whose arms are above her head as if indicating a successful field goal. "Our baby is an angel."

Molly tilts her head. Beneath the sheet I see her toes wiggling as she sets the open book down on my side of the bed. She reaches over to switch off the light, and I am left in the blue glow of the nightly news.

"Put Kaylin in the crib," Molly says, as if I could possibly forget to do this. A minute later, I realize Molly is crying, her quiet sobs the closest I've ever heard anyone come to "boo-hoo-hoo." I crawl onto the bed and run my hand through Molly's hair.

"Talk to me," I say, hoping Kaylin won't wake up to find Mommy in tears.

After several deep breaths, Molly rolls to face me. "I know you think I'm being crazy sometimes," she says. "But nothing is easy. So much can go wrong."

"I know," I say. "It's okay."

"I just want Kaylin to be safe. I want you to understand."

"I know," I say. "I do."

If I were a stronger man, I'd raise Molly in a lift, hold her to the sky, show her we have everything we need. I'd spin her in circles, not stopping until she lost her breath laughing. Then we'd bump noses, adrift in the promises of each other's eyes.

I lie there until I hear the sleep rhythm of Molly's breathing. Then I rise up on my elbow and stare at the TV, some movie about killer insects. Eventually, I ease out of bed, lift Kaylin like she's a giant egg, and carry her across the hall to her crib. My head hits the mobile as I place her in and the tinkling of bells, like fairy wings, fills the air.

I can't sleep. I watch the play of headlights moving shadows across the walls. Molly lies on the edge of the bed, more than an arm's length away. My daughter, the angel with the flickering eyes, is behind bars in the nursery, probably dreaming of ice cream. Molly wants Kaylin to be safe. Molly wants me to understand. I reach for the night table, grab the baby book, and slip downstairs for a glass of milk.

Baby-B-Safe. I study the cover, two hands cupped beneath an infant's skull. When I hold Kaylin like this I can see the pulsing of her fontanelle.

Outside, the motion-sensitive patio bulb pours light into the corner of the yard and I lift my head. I get up and open the sliding door. There's a rustle in the trees. A skitter? A voice? Stepping into the yard, I am disoriented by the sharp shadows darting across the grass.

The noise is coming from the tall maple near the fence, the tree I used to envision as the site of Kaylin's future tree house. Now I know there's zero chance Molly will go for any plaything that rises more than a foot off the earth. I walk to the base of the tree and hear it again. Chattering, like someone nibbling crackers in the back of a movie theatre. The noise a giggling rodent might make.

"Okay, squirrel," I say under my breath. I think of the attacks on campus, what they're doing to Molly. If I can defeat the squirrel, maybe Molly will rub my back like she used to, tell me she's proud of the man I've become. Winning the battle will be like hitting a big, red reset button.

But it's dark, it's midnight. I can't see beyond the shadows of the first two branches. I'm still holding *Baby-B-Safe*. I imagine a squirrel up there, bigger than a dog, carrying Kaylin away in its jaws. The commotion gets louder in the leaves above, and, without thinking, I fling the book skyward, like a live grenade. It doesn't

come down.

"God damn," I say, staring into the tree. Now what?

I head inside and return with a flashlight. *Baby-B-Safe* is twenty feet up, draped over a branch like a towel. The chattering has stopped.

I stare at the book—everything I need to know—suspended high out of reach. Grabbing the lowest branch with my free hand, I shake as hard as I can. Nothing. I flex my knee and feel the Band-Aid hanging loose on one side. Behind me, the patio door slides open, and I spin around, startled. My flashlight beam hits Molly in the face. She squints and puts up a hand, a pose familiar to any cop who's ever worked the nightshift. I leave the light there for a second, watching Molly cringe, before I lower it to the ground.

"What are you doing?" she says, in a hiss that actually means, *what is wrong with you?*

I walk toward the house and swing the beam back at the maple. "I thought I heard something. In the tree."

Molly arches her eyebrows. "It's after midnight," she says, waving me toward the open door. "For a minute, I thought you were a prowler."

I have never heard Molly use this word. "Sorry," I say. Then I follow her inside. We're in the kitchen when we hear the familiar squawk coming from upstairs, Kaylin's wake-up call.

"I'll get it," Molly and I say at the same time, our hands colliding on the refrigerator's handle.

"I'm already up," Molly says. "It's okay."

I let go of the handle and watch Molly slip away up the shadowy staircase. The patio floodlight is still on, and I reach to flip the switch. Leaning my forehead against the glass door, I stare at the giant tree. Somewhere in the leaves, *Baby-B-Safe* hangs like an apple. I decide that's where it belongs.

On Friday, the squirrel strikes again.

I pull up next to the arena in my cruiser and see three people beside a blue Corolla. One is a Westerville cop, a younger guy I used to work with on parade duty, Eddie Hanzo. His thumbs are tucked into his belt and he is rocking back and forth on his heels as he listens to a kid in a sleeveless shirt. The kid gestures wildly with his hands and arms, a combination of sign language and interpretive dance. As I approach, the third member of the group steps toward me. She eyes my badge and offers her hand.

"You're Brandon Hunter?" she says. "I'm Becky LaPierre. We've spoken on the phone. This Week in Westerville."

"Miss LaPierre," I say.

"Call me Becky."

Becky can't be more than three years out of college. She immediately reminds me of Molly—before the reflector vests and the no-broccoli diet. Becky wears her hair in a tight ponytail and the sleeves of her white blouse are rolled past her elbows. I shake her hand and nod.

Eddie turns to me and smiles. "Brandon Hunter," he says. "What a world."

I nod again and wonder how these people got here before I did.

Eddie grabs the kid by the shoulder and says, "Donny here was just telling us about this attack." He looks at me and winks. "It's

that darn squirrel again. I'd have thought you guys would have shot it by now." Then he sizes me up. "Oh, yeah, that's right, they don't give you guns."

I consider pulling rank and asking Eddie and Becky to leave because the incident took place on university property, but they all seem to be getting along, and the last thing I need is to come across as a prick. Eddie has that covered.

Becky clears her throat. "Tell us again," she says to Donny.

Donny gets into what appears to be a wrestling stance and explains how he was going back to his car after working out when he saw a squirrel drop from the trees on the other end of the lot and race toward him. "So this thing was all crazy, you know, and he ... it ... whatever, just keeps coming, so I figure I've just got to dodge it, right?" Donny bobs and weaves. "But it's, like, zeroed in on my leg, and when I jump to the side, it just swerves around and bites me on the ankle." Donny points to the scratches just above his sock. "So I reach down and grab it and throw it." Donny stands up straight. Apparently, the story is over.

"You threw it?" I say.

Donny nods. "It seemed pretty dazed after that and ran off toward the baseball field."

Eddie steps forward. "Did you throw it down real hard, like on the pavement?"

"No," Donny says. "I didn't think of that. I just threw it. But I threw it a long way."

Twenty minutes later, after Eddie has left to drive Donny to the hospital, Becky looks at me and shrugs. "So now what?"

According to Richie, Rule Number One when dealing with people, especially the media, is to take every situation seriously, no matter how bizarre the circumstances. This rule is useful, for instance, when breaking up a fraternity's naked initiation ceremony or finding grownups giving each other hand-jobs in the bushes during Alumni Weekend.

I look around the empty campus. "It has to stop sooner or later," I say. "I keep waiting for the hidden camera guys to pop out and start laughing at everyone."

Becky closes her notebook and stuffs it in her bag. "It's no prank, Mr. Hunter. But what I can't figure out is why everyone is acting like the sky is falling. I mean, don't you hear some of these stories and just want to laugh? Or am I the crazy one?"

"I get paid to take things seriously," I say. "It's your newspaper that's treating this situation like the new *Jaws*."

"We're treating this situation like it's the news, Mr. Hunter. *That* is what I get paid to do." Becky takes off her glasses and puts them in a case. "You know, there are rumors going around. Angry raccoons downtown. The police got called out to the dam last night. Heard it was a wolf."

"You're not reporting that, are you?" I say, thinking of Molly.

Becky shakes her head. "Just rumors, right? Some people are just crazy."

I look into the leaves of a nearby tree. "So what's the real story?" I say. "What's going on with this squirrel?"

"You mean, like, what's my theory?" Becky says. "Could be sick. Could be insane." She shifts the bag on her shoulder. "I talked to this researcher at Ohio State who said that any time an animal's behavior is a bit ... off, there are usually babies involved. Frightened mothers will do just about anything to protect their young. It's kind of romantic, don't you think?"

I shrug, catching Becky in an awkward stare, the kind of gaze Molly

used to send my way right before we turned out the lights. "Call me if anything comes up," Becky says, handing me her card.

I watch Becky climb into a rusty Civic and wave goodbye, then I place my hands on the roof of my cruiser. It's nearly dinnertime. I promised I'd make the salad.

As I approach the arena parking lot, I see Coach Reynolds locking the gym doors. I ask if he wants me to say anything about the squirrel to the eighth-graders at basketball camp. He shakes his head. "No," says the gray-haired man whose career record is 395-86, "I think they're better off not knowing. We're talking about a squirrel, right? I wouldn't want them to panic."

I am in the garage, sweeping the corners, staring at the oil-stained cement that will never come clean. Molly is in the kitchen assembling ingredients for the oatmeal cookies she will bake before next weekend's open house. I scan the white walls, looking at the spots where my tools used to hang. Anything with a blade now lies in a heap on the floor of my parents' shed on the other side of town.

Three months before Kaylin was born, Molly cracked the spines of four baby books and placed them on the kitchen table. They bloomed open like fountains while she read from a series of checklists.

I tried to lighten the mood by saluting as I left the room to unscrew cabinet handles and stick plastic covers over the outlets.

Later, Molly carried one of the books into the garage to supervise my mission: I was stacking buckets. Molly wanted them gone.

"Can't we just put them in the basement?" I said.

Molly dangled one in front of my nose so I could see the sticker on its side. The pictogram showed a toddler falling headfirst into a bucket. "Babies can drown in less than three inches of water," the label warned.

I carried the buckets out to the curb and set them down beside a bottle of Drano and a bag full of refrigerator magnets.

Now I look around at a room devoid of danger. Even the windows are washed. I pull a string and the garage door rumbles open. Sunlight streams in, and I squint against the brightness.

Molly opens the door to the house and leans out. "What are you doing?" she says.

I turn, puzzled by the question.

"Keep the door closed," she says. "You're letting in dirt and bugs and god knows what. You don't want to have to clean it again."

"What's the big deal?" I say, unsure how hard I should push. "I'm letting in some fresh air."

Molly looks stumped, like she's doing a math problem in her head. "I just want everything to be perfect," she says. "Plus, you woke up Kaylin."

I hold out my arms, gesturing around the garage. "I'm just trying to do what you asked me to do."

Molly hits the button and the door begins to lower. Then she hits it again and it reverses. "I've been looking for one of the baby books," she shouts to be heard above the growling door. "Know where it is?"

I think of *Baby-B-Safe*, high in the tree. "No," I say. "Look under the bed."

Molly again hits the control and steps inside as the shadow of the descending door cuts across my face. My brain fires up a primal signal, and I feel the impulse to escape, to dive, Indiana Jones-style, and roll outside onto the driveway before the door clamps shut. But I'm too slow. The opening seals with a final rattle, and I can feel the tremor in my toes.

That night Molly curls into me as we lie in the dark. She is running through her list of names for Kaylin's future brother when I drift into a half-dream.

Molly and I are walking down a neighborhood street in the middle of the day. Molly carries Kaylin in a pouch on her tummy. I hear a screech of tires and squint into the sun just as a car swerves around a corner and runs into Molly. It gets her right in the Snugli.

Molly, not the dream one, pinches my shoulder. "You were making your noises," she says.

"No, I wasn't," I say with a sticky mouth. I roll over and mumble about getting some water.

With the lights out, I run my fingertips along the wall to get to Kaylin's room. I know right away she is sleeping, and I listen to the beautiful rhythm. At times her breathing sounds like something coming unstuck.

I trip down the stairs into the kitchen and reach for the refrigerator. Ice clunks into my glass, followed by the hiss and spray of water from the built-in tap. I flick on the overhead light and collapse at the table.

The baby books. They're here. Stacked in piles like they're waiting to be inventoried. I grab a thick one off the top: *The Mother of All Baby Books* by Abbey Massoud-Tastor. Colorful strips of sticky paper protrude from various pages, creating a rainbow effect. These are the passages Molly wants me to read.

Page fifty-seven suggests that a toilet paper tube can be used to determine whether a toy is a choking hazard. Or, like Molly, you can buy an official plastic No-Choke Testing Tube for five dollars. I am baffled by two seemingly identical photographs on page 255 that claim to show the difference between a sealed blisterpack and one that has been tainted by a cyanide capsule. I learn that, since 1975, seven toddlers have died from iron supplement tablets. I am horrified to discover there is such a thing as Floppy Infant Syndrome. In chapter five, I cringe at the warning not to bathe Kaylin in the kitchen sink. The words garbage disposal are in bold print. Flipping to the index, I find nothing listed under "Squirrel."

I don't want these books in my house, reminding me of disaster. Nothing is going to happen to Kaylin. For Molly's sake, I've got to stay faithful to that belief. Where will we be if I don't?

Molly will miss the books, I know, but I sweep them into my arms anyway. We don't need them anymore. "The books are gone," I'll say when she comes to me in a panic. "Lights out." I carry the manuals into the backyard and stand at the base of the maple.

When I am finished, I look at my creation. Hidden among the foliage, the baby books sit like ripened fruit. I look up at the bedroom window where Molly lies sleeping and allow myself an impossible fantasy: one day in October, as the leaves start to fall, she will look out the window while washing a coffee cup at the kitchen sink. She will shake her head, not believing her eyes. She will gather Kaylin in her arms and carry her outside to gaze at the tree. She will point and whisper as she places Kaylin down in the bug-filled grass, marveling at the miracle in her own backyard.

I hear the pellet shots coming from Front Street during my afternoon walk around the campus perimeter. It's the Albright boy, on his porch with a BB gun, pointing across the yard. He was the squirrel's second victim, the kid who reported grabbing the creature by the tail and snapping it off his back like a wet towel. He sees my uniform and yells, "That's the one. Black tail. He's going downtown."

I look toward College Ave. and, sure enough, I see the squirrel. It's moving on a wire, darting between leafy branches that span the road. I put up one hand to stop a passing SUV, then sprint across the street in pursuit. The confused driver leans forward and squints up at the sun. "Don't shoot," I call to the Albright kid. "Get inside."

The squirrel soars from wire to wire, branch to branch, zigzagging in no detectable pattern like a pinball. I sprint to keep up, trying not to fall on my face while gazing into the trees. Cars are stopping. Pedestrians are staring.

I am breathing like a prizefighter when the squirrel races down a tree trunk and bounds across the grass toward the Student Union. A girl in pajama pants is sitting on the steps, talking on a cell phone. "Move," I yell. "Squirrel."

The girl pulls her knees to her chest and shields herself with a notebook as the squirrel and I race past, leaving a slew of priceless camera-phone videos in our wake.

I have become a frenzied predator, heart pounding, focused on my kill. The squirrel has been in control for long enough. It is time to restore order.

The squirrel zooms ninety degrees up the wooden fence surrounding the baseball field and disappears on the other side. I skid to a stop and launch myself awkwardly over the fence by swinging my legs to the side and pushing with my arms. I end up in a pile, face down in the centerfield grass. The squirrel is rounding third and heading for home.

As I lurch to my feet and limp toward the dugout, I catch a break. The squirrel scampers down the phony turf of the batting cages by the first base dugout and slows to a stop, surrounded on all sides by thick netting. Trapped.

The two batting cages are like a tunnel, with netting that drops down from a rectangular frame. The mesh holes are smaller than a baseball, smaller than a bat handle. A squirrel would have to eat its way through to escape. As soon as I step inside, I unhook the flap that drops the last piece of netting, effectively sealing the cage. The squirrel has nowhere to go.

The squirrel doesn't realize this, of course, and spends several minutes racing around the perimeter of the cage, even scurrying up the sides of the netting and clinging, upside down, to the top. For a moment, I think it has found a hole, but after fitting only its head through, it wriggles backwards and drops to the turf. I am fifty feet away, with my hand at my hip, where my gun would be if I was still a cop.

The number for Animal Control is in the cell phone on my belt. I should let the experts take it from here. Richie will be back in two days, tan and hungover, barking orders left and right. He'll tell me I should have called. But I can't. This is my campus, my town. This squirrel has done something to my family, and I want to know why. I want to be the hero.

The squirrel crouches at the other end of the cage, staring. As I was trained to do at the police academy, I scan the area for potential weapons. In addition to my baton, there is an overturned bucket near my feet beside a half-eaten bag of sunflower seeds. I return the squirrel's stare. If we were in an old Western, we'd hear a distant train whistle or the sound of a cracking whip.

I pick up the bucket and walk forward. The squirrel skips back and forth, like a boxer, bobbing and weaving. I have no idea what I'm

doing. This particular scenario was never addressed in the handbook.

When I get within ten feet, both of us freeze. "Okay, Squirrely, Squirrely," I say in the voice I use when I want Kaylin to go to sleep. The squirrel rises on two legs and sprints forward. I hurl the bucket and it makes a hollow thud as it bounces into the corner and rolls back in my direction. The squirrel, unharmed, reaches the end of the batting cage and turns, picking up speed. I stumble backwards and trip over the bucket, landing flat on my back as the squirrel darts like a blitzing linebacker. By swinging my boot, I am able to deflect the squirrel's charge, but I feel a sting on my uncovered forearm. The squirrel's claws are a tiny rake scraping my skin, and the animal is trying to bite my thumb. I fling my arm up violently and the squirrel, as if launched by a catapult, hits the netting at the back of the cage.

Scrambling to my feet and using the bucket as a shield, I face my foe. At least one of us is bleeding.

I set the bucket upside down and slowly take a seat. My palms are upturned in what I hope is the sign for peace and goodwill throughout the animal kingdom. The squirrel leans back on two legs, but shows no sign of another charge.

"Truce?" I say, keeping the squirrel's gaze. With a slow reach, I pick up the bag of sunflower seeds and shake some into my palm. "Everything will be okay," I say. "Let's just take it easy."

I let some seeds fall through my fingers, and I see the squirrel's nose twitch. I toss a few more onto the turf. "That's it," I say, as the squirrel inches forward. "Seeds are good." I put a few in my mouth. "Yum." I've done this with Kaylin dozens of times. Winter squash, avocado, blueberry puree.

I outweigh this creature by 190 pounds, yet I'm not sure I can kill it. It looks almost cuddly, nibbling at seeds, bringing its paws to its mouth as if trying to conceal a laugh.

After ten minutes, the squirrel is still eating, and I am still tossing seeds on the ground. We've fallen into a rhythm. I shake the bag, click my tongue, and say, "Who's hungry?" Then I scatter the seeds. The squirrel munches away, grabbing the dark husks and inhaling them like a vacuum cleaner, occasionally standing up straight to demonstrate what I interpret as kung-fu poses necessary for digestion.

I dump the rest of the seeds from the bag and slide my baton from my belt. The squirrel stands up and cocks its head to the side, as if considering whether I, too, am food. I hear Richie's voice in my head: "Hunter, you better kill that sucker. If he was big enough, he'd kill you." I hear Molly's voice on a loop: "Nothing is easy. So much can go wrong. Nothing is easy. So much can go wrong." Becky chimes in: "Some people are just crazy." Kaylin remains silent, napping through the chaos.

The world is full of tricks, and I can't stop any of them. Mad squirrels, collapsing bridges, school shootings, dirty floors. I tell myself that one day Molly will feel safe enough to walk outside in a thunderstorm, laughing at the raindrops. One day Kaylin will come to work with her daddy and see that I am doing the best I can. One day all the squirrels will stop attacking.

I imagine sitting with Becky LaPierre for a triumphant final interview, Becky smiling and reaching out to touch my hand. The headline, SQUIRREL SUBDUED, beams across the front-page. On page two, a photo of me holding the dead squirrel by the tail as if it's the head of a vanquished enemy.

I tell myself that I'll have the old Molly back once this is all over, when the squirrel stories are gone from the newspapers, when our house is sold, our bills are paid, and our daughter is once again allowed outside. Life will be different. All it will take is one mighty swing.

The radio on my belt is crackling, but the squirrel continues to

gnaw at the seeds. The sun is disappearing behind the left field fence, and I flex my legs. My knee is swollen. Molly will notice the limp. I look at the shadowy trees surrounding the field. How can anyone ever feel safe?

I look into the squirrel's eye, black and shiny like a marble, staring at my raised baton. It is the way Molly used to look when we'd be watching a news story about a police officer killed in the line of duty. Molly would cry, even when the victims were from places she'd never been: New Bedford, North Dakota, Nebraska. She'd pull the blankets over her head and tell me she couldn't raise a baby with someone who wore a bulletproof vest every day. I'd crawl under the covers and nibble her chin. "I'll find a new job," I'd say. "We'll make it work," I'd promise. "I love you," I'd swear.

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The Sunnerset Review



Phil or Seymour

by

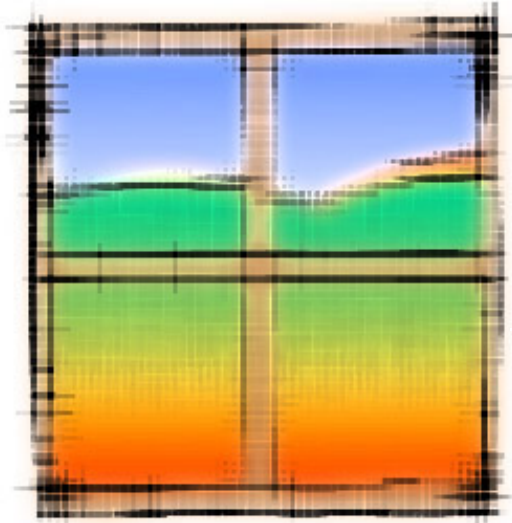
Paul Lieber

We have something to tell you and I knew the seriousness because they never had anything to tell that they didn't just tell. That grandmother of yours who we said died before you were born is living at Rockland State Mental Hospital. I want to mention how things explain themselves eventually, like Mother's fishy smiles when we talked about grandparents or Father always handing coins to gone women on the streets. Next was the visit. We took her for a drive. Dad was never David, but Burt or Harry and Mom never Kate though she repeated I am Kate to Selma who was always Selma in the front seat of the Ford Fairlane between Father at the wheel and Mother's surrounding arm. Grandmother was so friendly with her perky mistaken names and locations. I sat as Phil or Seymour in the back seat on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in Long Island and Warsaw. It was 1937—before I was born.

The Sunnerset Review

The Summerset Review

Flying with Peter by Shari Stenberg



Even in January, Zoe runs shirtless through the house, jabbing a paper towel roll sword into the air. "I'm Peter Pan the avenger!" Her pink bedroom walls are adorned with her own Crayola-marker illustrations of Peter flying, Peter fighting Hook, and Peter holding hands with Wendy. Each night before bed, Zoe turns on her CD of the Broadway musical, hoping to hear Peter's crow in her sleep. She lives in Peter's world.

The intensity of her relationship with Peter, heightened with each new version of the story she discovers, has fostered a deep loyalty to Peter's rules. Peter does not care much for mothers, and consequently, Zoe sometimes pushes me away, a gesture I never expected as early as age five. Last night as I leaned down to kiss her flushed cheek, she extended her arm. "I am not to be touched," she said, her words spiked with Peter's self-righteousness. "If you're around, he won't come to get me."

We'd just finished J.M. Barrie's story, whose closing paragraph promises that daughter after daughter—Wendy's and then Jane's and then Margaret's—will fly with Peter to Neverland. When Wendy allows her daughter, Jane, to float out the nursery window with Peter, it is with a hint of remorse. "If only I could go with you," she says. As I read this line, I tried to hide my glossy eyes from Zoe, who sees everything. "Why are you crying?" she asked. "Because Wendy can't go with Jane," I said. "But Wendy can't fly anymore, Mommy," Zoe explained.

It isn't easy to bid Neverland goodbye, but it's even more difficult to let your child go without you. How, I wondered, did all those mothers trust Peter with their daughters? And yet the grown-up in me knows that the perils of Neverland, where good always wins, pale in comparison to the ambiguous mess of the real world.

Just a few days ago, Zoe had a taste of the world that is not Neverland. She reported during our drive home from school that her friend Natalie snapped, "You are not my friend. Go away." Like me, Zoe has to battle tears at even the slightest offense. I gripped the steering wheel of my mini-van and reminded myself to breathe. "What could you say to Natalie when she says things like that?" I asked her, hoping she'd come up with a better answer than I could.

Zoe's pause lasted too long, and I glanced in the rear view mirror to see if she was suppressing tears. I dread that expression:

pursed lips and widened eyes, as if she's expanding the well so the overflow doesn't betray her. But she was only thinking. "I don't know," she said. "I guess I could say it's not appropriate." Words she's heard from me, coming out of her mouth—terrifying and gratifying.

"That's a good choice," I responded. I wished I could have said that at work hours ago, as I watched an intelligent grown-up throw a tantrum during a meeting and get her way. I was as confused as I was appalled. These are the rules of adulthood? I wished someone would take her out on the pirate deck for a fair fight.

One of Zoe's favorite Peter Pan scenes to reenact is Peter's victory over Hook, when he issues the ultimate punishment: "Say you're a codfish!" She directs her dad as Hook, who never seems to get the intonation of the blubbing fool quite right. "I'm a c-c-codfish." It's important that he does, because it's such a tasty line. The good guy wins, and the bad guy has to admit not only that he's done wrong but also that he's nothing more than a cowardly bully. We don't get this kind of satisfaction very often in real life—though I haven't yet broken this news to Zoe.

Since I'm no Peter, I go to books for answers about raising my daughters—and, let's be honest, myself—in this ambiguous world. Recently, I gained some insight from *Girls Will Be Girls: Raising Confident and Courageous Daughters*. The author, JoAnn Deak, suggests that due to both nature—patterns of neurological development—and nurture, girls tend to be less open to ambiguity than boys. "Boys often see ambiguity as a game, a challenge, fun," she writes. "To girls, more often it feels uncomfortable, unsure, unsafe." And yet, it is impossible to avoid life's murkiness, so Deak suggests that the best we can do is to help our girls negotiate uncertainty, which sometimes means letting them "live with some chaos and ambiguity and struggle on [their] own" (28). I hate that.

As a child, tiptoeing through my own shadowy territory, I, too, latched onto a Peter—mine was Huck Finn. I discovered the tales of Tom Sawyer and Huck because my mother, a seventh grade English teacher, read the book to her students. I delighted in the way Tom enticed his friends to whitewash the fence for him, teetering on the edge of trouble with no discernable fear. I, on the other hand, harbored deep worry about stepping into trouble, partly because I wasn't altogether clear on what might submerge me into my parents' anger.

One summer afternoon when I was five, my neighbor, Susie, several years my senior, and I took our play to the bathroom, where we decided to dip our index fingers into the toilet. We giggled as the cool off-limits water soaked our skin. It was an experience that needed language, and so I conjured up an appropriate word to name it: "fuck." I coupled each finger dive into the water with this gratifying combination of sounds: "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." It still sounds like an apt label for toilet-dipping.

But Susie, with her eight-year-old wisdom, knew I hadn't invented this word. Just as I established a good dipping rhythm, Susie darted out of the room, upstairs, and out the door to find my mom. By the time I located them outside, my mom had already silenced the lawn mower to hear Susie's tattle. I was greeted with a whack on the behind from my mother. "But I didn't know," I protested, humiliation flooding my body. "I thought I made it up." I'm not sure either of them ever believed me. Worse than not being believed, though, was learning that joyful expression could result in punishment.

Tom Sawyer would have found a way out of it. And if he couldn't, then his friend Huck, who was no Susie, would have. But I didn't just want Huck for my friend. I wanted to be him, the boy who "came and went, at his own free will," the first to go barefoot in the spring, the last to don shoes in the fall, and who, best of all,

could "swear wonderfully" (40).

I was Huckleberry in my childhood games and coerced the girl down the street to be Tom, a character she'd never heard of. All we needed to do, I explained, was pretend we wore cuffed overalls and straw hats, and then we could raft down the sidewalk in search of adventure. When I was Huck, I was audacious and bold, relaxed and free. I was a boy.

Folk musician Dar Williams begins her song "When I was a Boy" with these lines: "I won't forget when Peter Pan came to my house, took my hand, I said I was a boy, I'm glad he didn't check. I learned to fly, I learned to fight, I lived a whole life in one night. We saved each other's lives out on the pirate deck." She narrates the tale of her conversion from a free-spirited "boy" to a girl who learns that she needs protection from the world. I wonder: When did I lose the desire to be Huck, and begin to long, instead, for someone to guide and protect me?

I search for answers in my childhood, knowing we pass along to our children, implicitly or explicitly, the survival strategies we learned as kids. For my mother, the child of an alcoholic, those tactics had much to do with pleasing and rule-following, so as to keep her thumb in the dam of chaos and conflict. She has exiled most of the stories of her father's drinking from her childhood narratives, but occasionally a few scraps of sadness or shame find their way home. Then I learn that she couldn't bring friends to her house, for fear that the man who returned from work wouldn't be the same man who left that morning. Or that her mother struggled to make ends meet with the little money left after her husband drank his earnings away. The truth is that while the stories themselves may have been banished, their fumes seeped into the walls, the carpet, the furniture of our home, like stale cigarette smoke.

My childhood memories have my mom with a Tab in hand and a watchful eye on our dinner plates. I still hear the words of Susie, the tattletale, offering her own evaluation of the situation. "Your mom is really skinny. I bet she takes diet pills." I knew she was being convicted of something.

"No she doesn't," I retorted, responding to the tone of accusation more than its content. But I began to put the pieces together.

I understood that food was to be feared; it had a power to seduce and attack. That's why the rare bag of candy that entered the house had to be hidden. My mom bristled at my paternal grandmother's pushing of food on us. The cookies and candy in abundance at her apartment were a sign of over-indulgence, weakness. My grandma's phrase, "Clean your plate or the sun won't shine tomorrow!" was regarded as an affront to something she held sacred.

I learned that it was better to deny yourself than to clean your plate. If you must eat the pie, leave the crust. On one splendid occasion when my mom allowed me to select a treat in the check-out aisle at the grocery store, I was scolded for choosing a peanut butter cup. Didn't I know how fattening they were? I chastised myself for not having known, for not being good.

While Zoe thinks Wendy is beautiful and good, it is not Wendy she portrays in her imaginary play. Wendy, after all, is taken to Neverland to be a mother to the Lost Boys and Peter, to do spring cleaning of the house and to tell the boys bedtime stories. Wendy has to be a grown up in Neverland. Nor does Zoe choose to be Tinkerbell. The trouble with Tink is her jealousy of Wendy. Silence and female jealousy—already tired roles for girls, something even Zoe has realized. No, Zoe chooses to be Peter. Peter is the actor, the agent. While Wendy, Tinkerbell, and Tiger Lilly, the other female character, all find themselves needing rescuing, Peter is the clever boy who simultaneously protects them and defeats evil in a world whose rules he creates. Zoe swaggers through the

house, her back straight and belly extended, her chin lifted in the air. "Say your prayers, Hook!" she bellows at her dad. She offers me the role of Wendy, and I decide to decline. I'm tired of being Wendy.

As difficult as it was to remain within the boundaries of rules in my childhood home, I found them even more difficult to navigate in the massive red brick building called junior high. Suddenly friendships were dictated by labels inside clothing and boyfriends had or not. Girls became easily angered and turned nasty quickly, unexpectedly. From ages twelve to fourteen, I spent my evenings perched on my bed with a phone pressed to my ear. I talked with one friend, who back-bit another; I joined in to assure my friend's approval. Then I'd call the victim of the back-biting to make sure she hadn't telepathically sensed our conversation and become angry. Above all, I feared anger—my own and others.'

I longed for escape from the tangle of adolescent relationships, but the imaginary trips down the river were no longer enough. Or, really, they were no longer an option. The door of freedom through imagination somehow closed and locked, without my even noticing. What I did know was that in the world I inhabited, something was wrong. With me.

This wasn't entirely a surprise: there had been hints for some time. When I was eleven, I approached my mom to ask permission to bike to a friend's house. As I spoke, her eyes refused to meet mine, instead scanning my body, up and down. As I waited for her answer, her hand darted to touch my belly. "Oh," she said, relieved. "That's your shirt bunched up. I thought it was your tummy!" A narrow escape.

While my friends had coltish legs that fit perfectly in the Guess jeans I coveted, I was stuck with a muscular, solid body. I wasn't fat, but I wasn't waifish, delicate. Worse, I was bigger than many of the boys—taller, more muscular. A stump surrounded by reeds. My mom watched my changing body with scrutinizing eyes in which I saw disappointment.

Peter Pan ignores scornful looks from grown-ups. Perhaps this is why I have, as an adult, greater respect for Peter than I did as a child. While I hide from my own shadow, Peter is deeply troubled by the loss of his. In the musical version, when he finds his shadow in Wendy's nursery and convinces Wendy to sew it back on, he is thrilled. "Wendy, look. My shadow! My very own shadow!"

"It's only a shadow," Wendy scoffs.

"Yes, but it's all mine. Oh, I'm clever. Oh, the cleverness of me!"

He launches into "I've Gotta Crow." "I'm just the cleverest fellow 'twas ever my fortune to know," he belts. Zoe loves this song, and she can't help but dance with Peter as he peacocks around Wendy's nursery, lifts his extended leg to meet his fingers (because he can), and parades tickled self-satisfaction.

Peter wears his confidence like a hand-tailored suit, flattering from every angle. It isn't surprising that Zoe wants to try it on for size every chance she gets.

I wish I could wear it, too.

During early adolescence I could not interact with my peers without measuring my body against theirs. We were our appearances, and if only I had the lithe limbs of my friends, I just knew everything would be easier. They seemed to eat effortlessly, enjoying endless treats and a carefree relationship to food. It didn't touch their bodies or their minds.

I feared food, but even more, I feared the consequences of being found in its clutches. I ate when my parents left the house, once hastily stashing an emptied dish of ice cream under the bed. I was

caught, of course. It was humiliating to be discovered succumbing to desire, and worse, to having hid the evidence. I understood that this wasn't normal, that I wasn't normal.

I'd make it up to them, I thought. I'd show them.

My revenge, my protection, came from dieting. When I was twelve, my mom and I began our diet together, writing down the food we ate and tallying the calories. I took secret pleasure in the fact that I could do it better than she. I could eat fewer calories and display greater self-control.

The diet separated me from the mess of adolescence. It allowed me to withdraw into a world where rules and rewards were clear. I began to decline social invitations and escaped both the poison of the calories and of the social culture. Loyalty to the scale brought declining numbers and a shrinking body that slid easily into now-loose jeans. Betrayal meant surrendering to the overwhelming hunger I felt, filling my belly as quickly as I could while my family was out of the house. And then, ridden with shame, hanging my head over the toilet to force it back out. My reward, my punishment: isolation and deeper withdrawal into myself.

Eventually, though, even the dieting betrayed me. My attempt to become invisible made me more visible. My once sturdy one hundred twenty pound frame now withered below ninety. "Your gym teacher asked me today about your weight loss," my mom accused. I felt scrutinized again by people's concern, which I regarded as judgment, another source of my mother's shame.

I sought help when the dieting began to consume me: I looked in the mirror and could no longer recognize the skeletal creature staring back, no longer in control, no longer powerful. My hair fell out in clumps as I brushed it, and worse, my thoughts refused to deviate from a narrow, suffocating path of food and dieting. My parents were relieved that I'd asked for help. After the first visit to a therapist's office, my mom dropped me off at the door, for fear, I imagine, of being spotted in the waiting room. She worried aloud that a classmate of mine, who worked at the public pool across the street, might see me enter or exit the therapist's office. I snuck in and out, small and desperate—a five-year-old in a fourteen-year-old's body.

While the therapy helped me climb back, after about nine months, to a healthy weight and provided strategies that enabled me to challenge the anxiety and self-loathing that accompanied eating, it didn't do quite enough to quell the issues that sparked the dieting in the first place. And so I sought safety another way. I linked myself to someone who seemed stronger.

Her name was Alexandra, every syllable clearly uttered, no nicknames allowed. She was tiny, with a trim boyish frame, save for her full breasts. Her hair was the color of apricots.

Like Peter, Alexandra was always certain. She was clever and insightful, and when I was with her, I felt powerful. When my first boyfriend broke my heart, she served him nasty glares from across the room. My code of niceness kept me from offering my own scathing glances, but I knew she had me covered. I took pleasure when friends, usually boys, said, "I wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of you and Alexandra." Even so, I knew that her hand could turn on me in an instant—banish me from Neverland—and so I didn't challenge her when she treated me less than fairly. She selected those who surrounded her carefully, and when a better option came along—someone with more popularity, more power, more appeal—she quickly traded up. I wondered, as I heard her shred others, what words sliced me when I was out of earshot. I constructed the narrative as it might be, instead of as it was. But I was still afraid; I was still voiceless.

One evening, Alexandra called her mother from my family's kitchen to ask for an extended curfew. She planned to leave my house early to make a secret stop at her boyfriend's house. As the cord she wrapped around her fingers began to tint them purple, her voice climbed. "You never let me do anything! You don't trust me!" I watched my mom pretend not to listen as she read the

paper nearby. A small part of me was glad that I had a witness to this side of Alexandra. Watching together, it seemed more absurd and less intimidating. "I'll come home when I want. I hate you!" She hung up. While these displays usually served as fair warning—stay out of her wrath—the light had shifted, and instead of audacity, I saw meanness.

As much as I loved the idea of boldness in the face of trouble, she didn't look like Huck Finn or Peter Pan in that moment. *Grow up*, I muttered to myself, under my breath. But I didn't dare say it out loud.

For Christmas this year, Zoe's friend gave her the 2003 film version of Peter Pan, which she refers to simply as "The Version." While Peter's avoidance of responsibility and adulthood is delightful in the Broadway musical, it is darker here, more psychologically complex. The exchanges with Wendy are less playful and more intense, Peter's resistance less defiant and more defensive.

In one magical scene, Peter and Wendy waltz in flight, encircled by orbs of fairy dust. They hold each other's eyes for a moment, Wendy's face tranquil with pleasure. Then Peter breaks away. "Wendy, it's only make believe isn't it? You and I are." She reassures him that it is. He is not really the Lost Boys' father. He is not really her husband. But she begins to descend.

"Peter," Wendy asks. "What are your real feelings?" Peter is confused by the question. He takes a step back.

But the issue is urgent to Wendy. "What do you feel?" she presses. "Happiness? Sadness? Jealousy?" She pauses. "Love?" She's looking for a particular answer. She wants to know if he loves her. She wants to know if he is capable of love.

"Love?" Peter faces Wendy, his brow rumpled.

"Love," Wendy responds. Peter is not escaping this line of inquiry.

Peter thrusts his knife into its holster. "I have never heard of it."

"I think you have, Peter," Wendy cajoles. "I dare say you've felt it yourself, for something, or someone..." But this brings Peter to a place he is not willing to travel. There will be no more waltzing in the sky. Wendy's grief is almost palpable.

Peter leans over as if to kiss her cheek. Instead, he whispers. "Never. Even the sound of it offends me." For the first time, Peter is dressed not in possibilities but limitations. This suit is not nearly so flattering.

It took me until college to disentangle myself from Alexandra. I knew that I was stepping out of our rhythm when my first response to her stings was not hurt but anger. When I tried confronting her about her habit of speaking for me—carefully, using "I" statements like I'd learned in a college communications course—she berated me. I had upset her on the evening before an important exam. How insensitive. It was the first time I faced her anger directly, so well-honed was my skill at dodging it. I listened, half child, feeling the heat of shame trying to overtake me, half adult, rolling my eyes at the sloppy strategy, the childish game. Eventually, I chose silence instead of engagement. What was the point? I got the rules now. There would be no fair fights, and unlike Hook and Pan's battles, there would be no promises of good form. I hung up the phone.

"Why do you spoil everything?" Peter accuses Wendy after the interrogation about love. "We have fun, don't we? I taught you to fight and to fly. What more could there be?"

Wendy reaches to put a soothing hand on Peter's cheek, but he dodges it. "There is so much more. I think it becomes clearer when you grow up." She seems to have surpassed Peter.

"I will not grow up. You cannot make me." Peter is desperate. His very boyhood depends on his declaration. "I will banish you like Tinker Bell," he threatens.

"I will not be banished," Wendy is defiant. She rallies to her own cause.

"Go home! Go home and grow up," Peter retorts. "And take your feelings with you." He spins on his heel and ascends into flight, away from Wendy.

"Peter! Peter! Come back!" Wendy calls. She runs in her white nightgown to the Wendy house the Lost Boys have built. She curls on her side and sobs, folded hands held to her cheek. There is no pain like being banished for one's feelings.

It appears she has lost—lost Peter, lost her place in Neverland. In the past, I have read this moment as one more tired example of a girl insisting on romance as the ultimate adventure. But I think I have sold Wendy short. It takes bravery to step out of a game whose rules confine her. Peter cannot, will not, join her in this adventure. Peter will swoop in to save her from Hook, but he is not brave enough to listen to her feelings. He is not brave enough to change. This time, she steps to the edge of the plank alone.

A few nights ago, when I walked upstairs to check on Zoe in her room, I found her sitting on the floor at the foot of her bed, hands crossed, hardbound Disney Peter Pan book in her lap. "Please let Peter Pan be alive," she whispered. "Please let Peter Pan be alive."

Grief inched its way up my chest. I want Zoe to know that she will be just fine without Peter, and yet, I want Peter to be alive, too. Or, more accurately, I want him—or at least parts of him—to remain alive in her, in me. Peter the audacious. Peter the bold. I don't want her desire to *be* Peter to devolve into a desire for Peter's protection. The cost, the risk, is too great.

I know, because I have spent too much time teetering on the brink of my own plank, waiting for Peter to swoop in, wondering if I am strong enough to swim. I still collapse into a fetal position, at least emotionally, when I, like Wendy, dare to push on the boundaries, to use my voice, only to be met with a threat of banishment. But I get up a little quicker. I don't long, at least all of the time, for a forceful protector.

Somewhere I know that despite our best efforts to protect our children, no child will dodge life's pain. The best we can do for our daughters is to let them watch us negotiate the ambiguities in our lives, to show that we can face them and survive.

Several days ago as I drove Zoe to school, I looked in the rear view mirror to see tears rising in Zoe's eyes. We'd been having a good time, singing along to old Buddy Holly tunes. "Zoe, are you crying?" She first denied it, and then assured me that they were happy tears.

A few pauses later she said, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I told her I needed to know what she was thinking before I could answer. "Do you think I look like Peter?"

"Oh, yes, I do," I told her.

"Right around the eyebrows," she said. "That's why I was crying happy tears. I think I'm half Peter." I told her I thought being half Peter and half Zoe was a good combination, because there's a lot Peter could learn from Zoe: about feelings, about kindness, about compassion. But it's good, too, to keep Peter alive in us. "I am joy! I am youth! I am freedom!" we recite together.

In the final scenes of Barrie's version, Peter returns to Wendy's nursery after years of forgotten promises to retrieve her. He is taken aback to see her grown up. For almost the only time in his life, writes Barrie, Peter is afraid. But Wendy is not. "She let her hands play in the hair of the tragic boy. She was not a little girl heartbroken about him; she was a grown woman smiling at it all, but they were wet smiles." Happy tears.

While she may no longer need Peter, Wendy knows that there is a place for him in the world of a little girl; she knows that there is something in it for her daughter Jane to fly with Peter, to learn to crow. And so she lets them float out the nursery window together.

Title graphic: "Inside the Window" Copyright © The Summerset Review, Inc. 2009.

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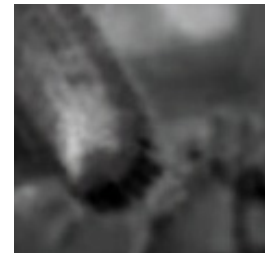


Contributors' Notes



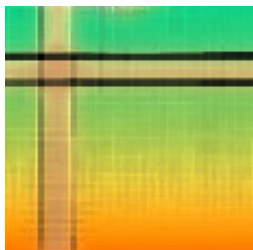
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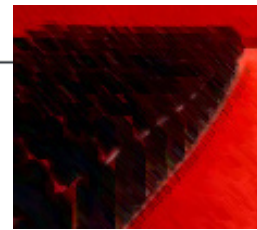


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Valerie Vogrin's novel, *Shebang*, was published in 2004 (University Press of Mississippi). Her short stories have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *AGNI*, *The Florida Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Black Warrior Review*, and elsewhere. She is currently an associate professor of English at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, where she also serves as prose editor of *Sou'wester*. vvogrin@siue.edu.



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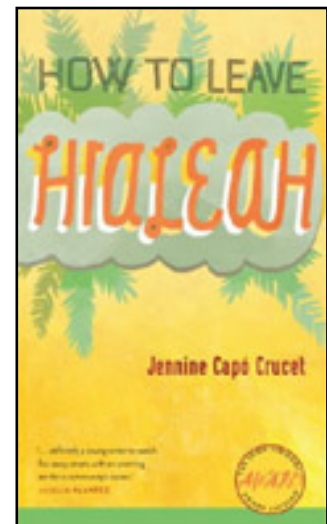


Book Review

Reviewed by **Lindsay Denninger** -

How to Leave Hialeah by Jennine Capó Crucet
Stories
University of Iowa Press - September 2009
ISBN: 1587298163, 184 pages, \$16 (softcover)

Hialeah is a section of Greater Miami unknown to anyone who is not a resident of South Florida. Predominantly Hispanic (and home to the largest Cuban-American population within the United States), it is representative of the real Miami: no South Beach clubbing, no million-dollar yachts, no Star Island. Jennine Capó Crucet grew up in this neighborhood, and her debut collection of short stories and the winner of the John Simmons Award in Short Fiction from the University of Iowa Press, entitled *How to Leave Hialeah*, chronicles the sights, sounds, and sometimes, smells of her home community.



The book opens with "Resurrection, or: The Story behind the Failure of the 2003 Radio Salsa 98.1 Semi-Annual Cuban and/or Puerto Rican Heritage Festival." Jesenia, a young radio-station intern, has just returned, possibly still inebriated, from a raucous night out. She stops in a church and explains to a nun (as well as a santera) that she needs to resurrect salsa great Celia Cruz from the dead in order to save her job at the radio station. The darkly funny and absurd "El Destino Hauling" portrays a Cuban funeral through the eyes of a young girl. Theatric, disorderly, and loud, Crucet's depiction of the all-night affair demonstrates what she does best: poking slight fun at the traditions and rituals of her culture without turning it into slapstick.

"And In the Morning, Work" is the only story of the collection that takes place in Cuba. Published in *The Summerset Review's* Spring 2009 issue—the story of a woman who reads aloud to workers in a cigar factory, it feels a bit disjointed from the rest of the works in *How to Leave Hialeah*, but is at the same time essential to understanding the themes of "home" and "away" as demonstrated in the collection.

Crucet's characters continue to face the ultimate immigrant question: How does one make a new and different place, though only some ninety miles away from what is considered the motherland, feel like home? She artfully details the ultimate struggle within the Cuban psyche: the pride in their rich heritage but the realization that a great deal of the painful past must be let go. After all, there was a reason behind the mass migration to the United States. Crucet's stories portray everyday life and heartbreak in a way that is not specific to the Hispanic community. What works in *How to Leave Hialeah* is not only the poignancy and humor in Crucet's storytelling, but the themes of love, freedom, identity, and family that extend to humans no matter their location, religion, or language.

The Somerset Review

Fifty-for-Fifty Contest Award

We are awarding fifty dollars and a complimentary print issue to readers who submit the best feedback on pieces appearing in each issue of *The Somerset Review*. For information on how to submit your feedback, see our [Guidelines page](#).

For the current issue, running now through December 1, 2009, the purse is set at \$100.

The following are the award winners who commented on pieces in the Summer 2009 issue. Each will be awarded fifty dollars and a complimentary issue of Volume Two:

Jenna Rindo of Pickett, Wisconsin
Pat Tompkins of San Mateo, California

We want to thank all those of you who submitted entries. We recognize the investment you've made to read our publication and write to us. We sincerely appreciate the interest.

Jenna writes -

Scott Miles brings many layers of both subtle and obvious conflict to his story "Cupco." We feel tension around political, religious, generational, gender and communicative discord between the characters. We notice Americans' general ignorance of international political conflict and its preoccupation with scandals (such as the Clinton/Lewinski affair). At first, Dina notes her bony hand and wants to be plumper. After a few months in America, she thinks Lewinski would be more attractive if she lost a few pounds. There's the mismatch of Dina's perceived relationship with her American/Bosnian sponsor, Esma, after exchanging letters and meeting in person. Cowlicks wilt with age and lurk at family gatherings, teeth are unavailable, and American idioms (plenty of mice in the sea) are off by just a word.

As a teacher of English as a second language in an elementary school, I found myself thinking about my Hmong students who come to me with complicated histories and family members who still wait for safe passage from Laos and Thailand. Often my students have the added responsibility of interpreting for their parents as they go to medical appointments and complete job applications and school paperwork. I'm hoping Miles' incredible use of detail will help readers grow some empathy for new arrivals.

Pat writes about "Speaking from the Throat" -

I am glad Aubrey Hirsch decided to speak up about her medical problem and treatment. I have also suffered from a misdiagnosed thyroid problem, although in my case the problem was a supposedly hypo- or underactive thyroid. She addresses an important, all too common health care ailment: the misdiagnosis. Doctors even have a fancy word to say *I don't know what's causing the problem*: idiopathic.

Her essay also told me something I didn't know. The scary radioactive treatment and the possibility of contagion was news to me. What a lonely, frightening ordeal. It is the kind of experience you can't fully understand without having gone through it yourself, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't write about it. Hirsch is talking about more than a bizarre treatment; her writing is a blend of the personal and the universal, a key element of meaningful essays.

As much as I like what's in the essay—details like the failure to have a throw-away bowl—I also appreciate what's absent. There's none of the *Why Me?* angst common to many essays about serious illness. And she conveys her lesson without using any popular jargon like empowerment.

The Somerset Review

Guidelines for Submissions

Literary Submissions

Writers are invited to submit literary fiction and nonfiction of up to 8,000 words, and poets may submit up to five poems. To get more of an idea of what we are looking for, please read *The Somerset Review* or consult our Recommended Reading List.

Email submissions to editor@somersetreview.org as an attachment in MS Word, or as plain text. We suggest you include the word "Submission" in the title of the email, so that we don't mistake it for junk mail. For prose pieces, be sure you specify whether your piece is fiction or nonfiction.

Though email submissions are greatly preferred, you may alternatively submit in hard-copy by sending to 25 Somerset Drive, Smithtown, New York 11787, USA. We prefer disposable copies of manuscripts. We can respond via email in lieu of a SASE if you so designate.

All submissions receive replies as quickly as possible. If we have not responded within three months, please hassle us. We read year-round and never go on hiatus.

Excerpts of longer work will be considered if you believe the work stands alone. Reprints will be considered if the work has not appeared elsewhere within the last two years. Simultaneous submissions are encouraged.

Contributors will see drafts of accepted pieces for review prior to release, and will be sent complimentary copies of a print issue from our archive after publication. Contributors retain all rights to their work. We request credit be given to *The Somerset Review* in the event the work is reprinted and was first published here.

We nominate stories annually for various anthologies and awards, including *Pushcart Prize*, *Best American Short Stories*, and many others.

Enter Our Free Fifty-for-Fifty Contest

Anyone is invited to submit comments on literary material (excluding photo essays) appearing in the current issue of *The Somerset Review*. We award fifty dollars and a copy of a print issue, each quarter, to at least one person who has written at least fifty words, and will include the comment in our next issue, along with the reader's name and home town (can be withheld if requested).

Comments can be in any form and there is no fee. Only one entry is allowed per person, per quarter, and the entry must pertain to a piece appearing in the current issue. We are particularly interested in how the material affected you; what impact it had, what memory it stirred, what idea it precipitated. Be honest and lucid. Writing style is not critically important.

The deadline for comments is two weeks before release date of the next issue. Issues are released on the 15th of March, June, September, and December.

Email your entry to editor@somersetreview.org. Include your name, town, state, and country (if outside the USA). Qualified entries will receive acknowledgement of receipt within a few days. Email addresses will not be published, circulated, or archived.

By offering this prize, we hope to increase the awareness and appreciation of literary magazines in our world and culture.

Questions for Reader Groups

Readers and Reading Groups are invited to provide answers to questions we have posted on the material in our current issue. See "Questions for Reader Group Discussion" in the Table of Contents for details on how you can win a complimentary copy of *The Somerset Review* if you or your reading group provides meaningful answers to the questions.

The Somerset Review



Questions for Discussion

Readers and reading groups are invited to discuss the topics below relating to some of the material presented in this issue. Send answers to editor@somersetreview.org and you will be eligible for a complimentary copy of Volume Two of *The Somerset Review*. All questions must be answered and received by December 1, 2009.

Include your name, town, state, and country (if outside the USA) in your entry. The editors will decide the winner(s) and send out notification when the new issue is released. We plan to announce the names of those who are awarded free copies, so if you do not want your name to appear in the journal, please let us know. Postal and email addresses of all entrants will not be published, circulated, or archived.

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1. Why is the word 'good' in the title of the story, "The Only Good Squirrel"?
 2. In the story, "Sisters-in-Law," are the lines: "...what does it mean to be loved for what you weren't?" and "Was Charlie really loyal, or was he simply not a philanderer?" Did you feel a question being asked in this piece on whether a relationship can be strong by virtue of the lack, rather than the possession, of certain character traits in the other? Discuss.
 3. Discuss the specific situation in "Flying with Peter," about a mother letting her child go with her imagination, and the more general thought where it is stated late in the piece, "Somewhere I know that despite our best efforts to protect our children, no child will dodge life's pain."