

UPHEAVALS



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“Great literature must spring from an upheaval
in the author’s soul.”

— *Robert Benchley*

Contents

FICTION

Sarah Freligh

The Absence of Gravity 1

Julia Ballerini

Ultimatum 14

Catharine Leggett

The Melancholia Vine 38

Emma Wunsch

Airplanes 54

NONFICTION

Grant Price

On Leave 75

POETRY

Lynne Burnett

Vanishing Point 84

Robin Carey

Howard Prairie 86

Linda Ferguson

First Impressions 88

O Pioneer! 89

Donna Isaac

Roasting Vegetables 90

The Golden Ratio 91

Entrepreneur Sans Wall 92

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Linda Ferguson, Donna Isaac, Catherine Montague,
Jonathan Travelstead



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Contents *(continued)*

Catherine Montague

Fire Followers 93

Jonathan Travelstead

god Particle 95

Contact 96

About the Authors 99

The Absence of Gravity

Sarah Freligh

By March the days are warm enough to melt the snow into rivers that empty into the depression near the end of the street. At night the water freezes into a pond that extends into the intersection. Vince sits in his easy chair by the window, a magazine open on his lap. He listens to the clicking of tires on the wet street, the silence when the car reaches the ice, tensing for the accident he's sure will happen. Some nights he'll put on his overcoat and stand in the intersection, a paper bag in his arms, scattering handfuls of salt on the ice, cursing nature for the weather, the city for its indifference. Warming up in the kitchen with his hands around a mug of coffee, he says to Marie: *One of these days somebody's going to get killed out there, mark my words.*

On an early spring evening, a light snow starts falling at dusk, polishing the ice underneath to a high shine. Vince is opening a bottle of beer in the kitchen when he hears the crash, the thump of metal followed by glass shattering. By the time he gets outside, the driver is out of the car and staggering around the intersection. A kid, Vince can see, blood running from a gash on his forehead onto the white "E" of his varsity jacket. Vince takes the boy by the arm and leads him into the house, steering him to a chair in the kitchen where he calls for help. Marie calls an ambulance, Susan brings a clean towel. Vince will remark to Marie later how the kid smelled like a brewery; drunk as that, he had no business driving a damn car, fast or slow. But Vince calls him "son," offers to give him a clean shirt to wear home from the hospital.

“His name’s Billy,” Susan says. He’s one of the wild boys at her high school. She knows him by reputation, admires him the way she would a tiger in a cage.

Her father looks at her, surprised.

“Billy O’Rourke,” she says.

A month later, they pass in the hallway at school. The scar on his forehead is scarlet against the deep tan of his skin. He has been in the South somewhere—Tennessee or Kentucky—with the baseball team. Susan has already heard the story of how Billy and two of his teammates pooled their money one night and bought a bleached-blond hooker who drank a pint of bourbon and danced a shimmying limbo under a broomstick. Afterward, the hooker took Billy to bed while the other boys huddled in the bathroom and listened.

“Hey,” he says now, touching her shoulder. His eyes are turquoise against the tan of his skin. “Thanks. Tell your dad thanks.”

Susan nods. She shifts her books to hide her heart. Surely he can see it trying to pound its way out of her chest.

“Sure,” she says. “Okay.”

He says something else to her, something she can’t hear over the sound of her heart sliding sideways, skidding into love. No time to brace for a collision.

Marie and Vince don’t understand. *That boy, that drunk.* No more son and solicitude. Now whenever Billy comes around, Vince shuts the door of the den and turns the radio up. Marie, though, can’t leave her alone.

“Those shorts you’re wearing. I thought I threw them away.”

“I found them again.”

“You can see your rear end hanging out.”

“So?”

“So? You dress like a tramp, you act like a tramp.”

Susan turns away. Marie stomps up the stairs, her mouth set in a slash of disgust. Susan can hear her thumping from bathroom to bedroom, trailing words like exhaust.

“I don’t understand . . . that girl . . . why she can’t . . .”

When Billy honks for her, she slips out the door, shutting it on her mother and her disapproval.

In the car, she slides up close to him. He folds her into his arms. “I love you,” she says. She rests her head against his chest and feels his heart beat, like a bird’s wings as it rises from the ground.

Man is about to walk on the moon for the first time and Susan is bent over the toilet in Annie’s bathroom, throwing up the Coke she’s been drinking to keep from being sick to her stomach. After she’s finished, she stretches out on the floor and rests her cheek against the cool tiles. She can hear the rumble hum of the refrigerator, Billy and the others watching television in the living room, the voice of Walter Cronkite weaving over and under the noise. “Man on the moon,” she says out loud. She still can’t believe it.

When someone knocks on the door, she lifts her head enough to say “Go upstairs, okay?” She hauls herself up with the help of the toilet and tucks her T-shirt into her cutoffs, tries to smile at herself in the mirror. In the fluorescent light, her skin looks yellowy-green. She splashes water on her cheeks and forehead and pats her face dry with the one of the guest towels Annie’s mom has hung next to the sink. She reapplies

mascara, adds eyeliner. “Not bad,” she says. *Not good*, says her reflection. She gives it the finger.

In the kitchen, she pours herself another glass of Coke. *Little sips*, she thinks. Marie’s voice, Marie’s hand on the plastic Captain Kangaroo cup Susan drank from whenever she was sick. The reflection from the television glitters in the kitchen window, ghostly rows of crew-cutted men in white shirts.

Simple physics, Mr. Mondschein told her physics class. Thrust. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Man on the moon reduced to numbers and equations, no miracle there. The classroom was over the cafeteria, the windows open for comfort in late May. The tomato soup smell of the cafeteria rose and filled her nose. She had to swallow to keep from throwing up all over her notebook.

For every action.

Billy comes into the kitchen, carrying a handful of empty cups that he sets on the counter next to the sink. “You okay?”

“Fine,” she says. Marie’s Law: You dance to the music, you pay the piper.

He opens the refrigerator and pours himself a beer from the keg, tipping the plastic cup to catch the right amount of beer and foam. He holds it up. “The perfect beer,” he says.

“Perfect,” she says.

“Refill?”

She shakes her head. The smell of beer makes her stomach feel as if it’s sailing on rough water.

“Tell me you’re not hung over already,” he says. “Not on rum and coke.”

“I’m not hung over,” she says.

“Good,” he says. “Because the night’s young.” He sets his beer on the counter and picks up the copy of *Life* magazine Susan was reading before she got sick. He rolls it into a tube

and hefts it like a baseball bat, pausing at the end of his swing to stare down the pitcher.

“He takes ball one, low and *way* inside.”

Susan looks past him at the white-shirted men on the television. What a job they have, spinning men out into purple space and back again, to a car-sized spot in the ocean. What faith in numbers, in action and reaction.

“Swing and a miss, strike one.” Billy steps out of the batter’s box and pretends to spit over his shoulder. He touches his crotch and stands in again.

“The windup, the pitch and it’s going, going . . . It’s gone! A home run for O’Rourke over the right field wall. This kid can really wallop the ball, Ernie.”

He starts to trot around the imaginary bases, then stops. “This is where you’re supposed to cheer wildly.”

“Oh.” She rattles the ice at the bottom of her cup. “How’s that?”

“Not very wild.”

“Nope.” She is so tired. In the morning, iron hands hold her close to the bed, pulling her back into sleep. She wakes and is still exhausted.

He taps the rolled-up magazine against his thigh. “Paul and I are going downstairs to play pool,” he says. “If that’s okay.”

“You don’t need to ask.”

“I’m not.”

“So go.” *Not very nice*. Her reflection again.

“Fine, I will,” he says. But he stands there, looking at her like a dog waiting for a command from its master.

“My uncle used to do that,” she says. “The thing with the magazine. All the time. He always had something in his hands.”

“You sure you’re okay?” he says.

“Yeah,” she says. She reaches up and touches his bicep. She loves him best there, the soft skin sheathing the hard clot of muscle. But when he grabs her fingers and tries to hold them, she yanks her hand away.

“What the fuck, Susie?” He stands there, halfway between hurt and angry.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I am, really. It’s the heat, it’s so hot.”

She hears him exhale, realizes he’s been holding his breath.

“Yeah,” he says. He touches her cheek with the rolled-up magazine. “Look, I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Sure,” she says. She watches him walk away, his wide, pretty shoulders. Graceful, she thinks. He would laugh if she told him that, said it out loud. Or be a little pissed. *Guys aren’t fucking graceful.* So many things she can’t say to him.

In the kitchen window, her smudged reflection winks and smirks back at her: *Chicken.*

When it was no bigger than a suspicion, she would lock herself in a stall on the third floor bathroom at school and pray: Stupid, made-up prayers, whispered over and over, until the hurried words jostled and shoved up against each other in their urgency: *Please god dont let it beso.* The hoods lit cigarettes next to the open window, fanning the smoke with their hands, while she sat on the toilet and made deals with God. Afterward she’d flush the toilet and wash her hands. The hoods studied her, slit-eyed, through shrouds of smoke. They knew.

At first she tried to pretend it away. What else was there? She’s heard of things, of ways out. A rich girl in Erieville, Pauline Hawkins, whose parents sent her on a week’s vacation in Sweden. Afterward the gossip, the snide remarks

that trailed her down the hallway: *In the middle of winter?* A thousand dollars, cash. Susan doesn’t have a thousand dollars and even if she did, she knows she couldn’t go through with it. She couldn’t trust the airplane to get her there without crashing or the taxi to deliver her to the clinic without a collision or the Swedish doctor not to sever an artery that would cause her to bleed to death. She is afraid to die, but every morning when she leans over the toilet to throw up, she wishes she were dead.

She pours herself another Coke and opens the French doors to the patio. Annie is sitting on a folding chair in the shadows at the edge of the patio, smoking and looking up at the moon. Susan kicks off her sandals and goes outside. The flagstone feels like cool water on her feet.

“I think I see them,” Annie says. She holds her thumb up, squints at it.

Susan drags a chair up next to Annie and sits down. “See who?”

“Neil Armstrong and Buzz whatever the hell his name is.”

“Aldrin.” Susan sits down, undoes the button on her cutoffs. Better.

Annie gestures with her cigarette hand. “See? Those black specks there. It’s them.”

Susan laughs. “You’re high.”

“God, who names their kid Buzz anyway? A little baby.”

“His name’s really Edwin.” She’s surprised at herself. A fact, a shining nugget, retrieved from the soggy water of her brain.

Annie snorts. “That’s even worse. Edwin. Geez.”

“Edwin Drood,” Susan says.

Annie looks at her. “Drood?”

“It’s a book,” Susan says. “By Charles Dickens.”

Annie snorts. “Miss English Major.” She tosses her cigarette into the grass. “What are they doing in there anyway? I’m afraid to go back in the house.”

“Paul and Billy are playing pool. Dane’s passed out. Marion got pissed off and went home.”

“Slut,” Annie says.

“Billy loves her. He says to me, why don’t you do your eyes like Marion’s? Why don’t you wear boots like Marion’s?”

“Those ones with the high heels that make her butt stick out?”

“She’s claims they’re leather but they’re really vinyl,” Susan says.

Annie yawns and reaches for her pack of cigarettes. She pulls out a joint and holds it up. “Voila!” she says.

“You smoke too much,” Susan says.

“You sound like my mother,” Annie says.

“Or mine,” Susan says. When Annie hands her the joint, she takes a deep drag and then another, holding the smoke in her lungs until her ears pop.

They pass the joint in silence. Already the moon looks softer. Maybe it’s not made of rock, but something loose and shifting, like baby powder. She imagines the astronauts stepping out of the lunar module and disappearing into that. Who would save them before they suffocated?

“So,” Annie says finally. “You told him yet?”

“Nope.”

“You said you would.”

“I will,” Susan says.

“You said that last week.”

“Maybe later.”

“Yeah, right,” Annie says. “Look. If you get married now while you’re still skinny, you can wear a white dress and

nobody’ll know any different.”

“They’ll know,” Susan says. Whoever *they* were. She supposes she has been they, whispering about the girls who dropped out of school one year and were back the next. Hoody girls who screwed their heads off with everyone and their cousin or mousy, unlikely girls who did it once and got caught. Stupid girls. Now, here she is, in the same stupid boat.

“They have the cutest wedding dresses down at Stram’s,” Annie says. “Ones you could cut off and wear later, for New Year’s Eve or something.”

“With a baby? Yeah, sure.”

“I didn’t mean *this* New Year’s,” Annie says.

“How about New Year’s 1999?” Susan says. She holds the joint in her fingernails and takes a last drag. She imagines her lungs inflating, growing like balloons that will lift her from her seat and into space where she will float with the satellites and the astronauts.

“Besides,” Annie says, “you can always get a babysitter.”

“Where do you think that comes from?” Susan says. “Babysitter. BA-by, SIT-ter.” A cheerleader of a word, all bouncy and rah-rah, doing handspings across her head. She laughs out loud.

“I don’t know, someone who sits on your kid?” Annie says.

“Yeah. Until 1999,” Susan says. She does the math in her head: 1999. She’ll be 48, god, 48, ancient, the kid nearly thirty. Not a kid anymore, but still her kid. Her baby.

She shuts her eyes and sees red—pinwheels whirling away from a nucleus, atoms shattering and forming other atoms, the original in pieces. What are you then, who are you? Vince shut away in the den with his baseball games and

train books, Marie banging dishes around the sink, talking out loud to herself.

She opens her eyes. Vince and Marie evaporate, Annie condenses, atoms and molecules. She's bent over, picking the nail polish off one of her toes. "A marriage of convenience," Susan says.

Annie looks up at her, surprised. "Don't you want to get married?"

Ten years they've been friends and Susan has never noticed how pretty Annie's feet are, tidy little hills of bones and muscle where hers are jagged and sharp. "Your second toe is longer than your big toe," she says.

"What else can you do? Not get married? Give the baby away to some total stranger?"

Susan twists a strand of hair around her finger. "Maybe I'll go to Paris," she says.

Annie bursts out laughing. "Yeah, right. Why not the moon, too. While you're at it."

"They make dresses in Paris," Susan says. She pulls her finger away and lets her hair corkscrew over her face. "I can sew."

"Look," Annie says. She taps out a cigarette, lights it impatiently. "You ever see an old lady close up? How their lipstick smears up into their wrinkles? It's what I do all day at Cunningham's. I watch old ladies put on lipstick."

Marie applying her lipstick in three impatient strokes, saying: You think you know everything, but you don't. You don't know what love is.

"Yeah and?" Susan says.

Annie exhales, blowing plumes of smoke through her nose. "So I don't want to work at Cunningham's for the rest of my life."

"So come to Paris with me," Susan says.

"I'm not going anywhere," Annie says, "and neither are you."

What was it Marie had said to her that day? Shopping for a prom dress, she looked sad and tender when Susan walked out of the changing room in a blue dress, the color of dusk. *Does the neckline have to be so low?* Marie said, snapping a loose thread with her fingernails. *You think that at these prices they could finish a dress properly.*

But she had bought the dress, paying for it with Vince's credit card. In the car, the box on the seat between them, Marie had touched Susan's arm and said: *Honey, I'm sure you think you love this boy. But there will be others.*

And Susan, swallowing down the lump of nausea rising in her throat, thought: *no there won't.*

"Say you're not going anywhere," Annie says. "Out loud."

"I'm not going anywhere," Susan says.

The television is filled with men. Men are walking on the moon, staggering around like Frankenstein's monster in their white spacesuits guided by rows of men in Mission Control, their cowboy voices furred and thick with static: *Roger that, Eagle.*

The room is full of men playing pool. Billy leans into his cue, calls his shot: Six in the side pocket, makes it. Now Walter Cronkite, no, a replay of Walter Cronkite the moment the Eagle landed, removing his glasses to wipe his eyes. *Whoo*, he says. *Boy*. Walter Cronkite in black and white, younger then but somehow older, removing his glasses and turning to glimpse the clock before announcing that President Kennedy had died in Dallas. That weekend, the funeral. Susan remembers sitting on the floor, the scratch of her father's

armchair against her back, her father saying: *I never said I hated Kennedy. I didn't like his politics, but I never hated him.*

Marie saying: *Somebody did. Enough to kill him.*

Is Kennedy dead? The magazines in the checkout line at the supermarket write that he's still alive, hiding out with Jackie on an island in the South Pacific. There are photographs of him lounging on a sailboat, boyish and tan, his head whole. The story says the CIA faked his death to fool the Communists, to lull them into thinking things were safe. Maybe he'll come back now that man has landed on the moon. Or maybe the moon is fake, made of green cheese, and the whole landing is some kind of a stunt, a bunch of actors on a Hollywood sound stage.

Now Annie is holding up a six-pack and asking who'd like another beer. She rips open a bag of potato chips and pours them clicking into a plastic bowl. Paul and Billy peel the tops back, bump their cans together in a toast.

"What are you guys drinking to?" Annie says.

Paul looks at Billy and shrugs. "Nothing."

Billy is kissing her neck, working his way around to the front of her. His face seems huge, round and soft as a volleyball. "I missed you," he whispers. His breath smells of beer and potato chips. When he kisses her again, she hugs him, hard. She wants to love him. She does.

"Hey," he says, sounding pleased.

"God, you guys! Look!" Annie says, pointing to the television.

The astronauts are bounding across the moon's surface, bouncing around like rubber balls in their fat, white space-suits, like children made graceful by the absence of gravity.

A baby the size of a seahorse is growing inside of her. Jack Kennedy is alive and sunbathing on a beach in Fiji, Jackie

stretched out next to him in a bikini. Which is real, what is real? Men are walking on the moon, high above the blue ball of earth where she sits in an air-conditioned basement watching the astronauts on television while they look back at her, earthbound and anchored, Billy's arm heavy across her shoulders.

They're gesturing to her with their gloved hands: *One last trip, they're saying. Come on. Let go.*

And oh, she's floating up and up, out of the armchair and into navy blue space, watching everyone she knows and loves—Billy and Annie, Vince and Marie, Jack Kennedy and Walter Cronkite—grow smaller. Their features blur to smudges, their faces turn to pale dots against the panorama of the landscape.

Before they fade away altogether, she waves to them, first with her hand, then with her whole arm. Waves to them as if she were celebrating something.

Ultimatum

Julia Ballerini

Her babies, now in their fifties, have issued an ultimatum: live-in aide or retirement home. The two of them sat right there on her new sofa, looked her in the eye. Your choice, Mom.

Nancy, the younger—and always the bossier—had already placed her on a waiting list at Brookhaven not far from where she lives a suburban Connecticut life with husband and two children. You should move before next winter sets in, she said. Think of us. Michael and I worry ourselves sick about you.

Ultimatum. *Ultimare*. Come to an end. *Ultimata*. Ultimatum. The words roll gently on the tongue, belie the harshness of their meaning. Winter. Ice. ICE. Ultimatum.

TRIPLING OF ICE FORCE DEPORTATIONS TO BEGIN

Winters in her Manhattan apartment come to an end? Yes, she's mostly housebound when walking is perilous, but there's take-out: Vietnamese, Thai, Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Mexican. She nests in the big chair by the window, watches cars inch by and buses lumber to a soft stop disgorging intrepid passengers into a whitened morning. Watches the dogs in the park across the street leap and run in a frenzy of delight—big dogs jump over little ones jacketed in plaids. Many live in her building and she gets her fill of waggles and licks in the elevator and lobby. It's been years since her rescue dog, Carlos, died, yet she's still part of the scene, even if not vigorously so.

Vigorous, vigor. Not a common word these days. She looked up its usage on line. As a teacher of English as a second language, the communality of words was important to check or she'd risk introducing obscure words from her extensive vocabulary. Looking up the diminishment of a word's recurrence on the internet became an addiction, especially after retirement. Vigor: the lines on one chart peak in the 1850s and stumble downhill from then to the present. The word loses its vigor.

Not that Betty doesn't get out. Not a quitter. "Give in but don't give up," is a motto.

I am a hearth of spiders these days: a nest of trying. (Ada Limón)

She's not sure what to make of the spiders yet the image makes sense. She is a nest of trying. Trying not to get lost, not to be caught in the wide web of her wandering mind. She makes notes, schedules, accommodates, adjusts to what is possible.

She rides buses these days. She can manage subway stairs, just not the push and shove of passengers. And the pole dancers! She once cheered them on, celebrated their spinning twists to muscular horizontals, their flips to prance on the ceiling. But as she aged she could see all that could go wrong. In what had seemed joyful she saw only danger. She'd hold her breath, anxiety mounting, as when she saw her youngest grandchildren scramble on jungle gyms.

Yes, she could distance herself from the acrobats, take a far seat. It was the shuffling supplicants supplicating the length of the cars she couldn't avoid. *Ladies and Gentlemen... don't want to disturb ... need something to eat... please help... just got out of hospital ... God bless.* A lot is scam, money goes to drugs, still that's not what gets to her. Scam or not, it's desperation.

Like so much that is desperation in these desperate times. The pole dancers seem desperate too.

***ROHINGYA REFUGEES LIVING IN LARGEST
REFUGEE CAMP IN THE WORLD***

Betty volunteered at a homeless shelter in the Bronx for twenty years until getting there became too difficult. She'd get confused, disoriented by demolitions and constructions that blocked sidewalks forcing her to cross the street and upending her sense of direction.

Some of the women still keep in touch. Donna, whose speech was so mumbled as to be almost incomprehensible (years of blow jobs, she explained), tells Betty she's been hired as a receptionist in a doctor's office. Over the phone, Donna's vowels and consonants are carefully articulated—the result of the hours, weeks, months they'd spent transforming slurred utterances into crisp pronouncements. Not exactly ESL, but Betty's years of teaching were put to use.

Haydee also calls. Haydee, who insisted on doing Betty's nails. Five months pregnant when she lost the baby, now has a job in a nail salon.

Betty misses them, but she's resigned to signing petitions on the web and donating to worthy causes: Mercy Corps, Fresh Air Fund, Amnesty, ACLU, and the like. Black Lives Matter too. White Guilt. Privileged Guilt. Survivor's Guilt as the planet erupts, floods, burns, melts, as bees and butterflies and owls die out. Species lost forever.

And intimate, domestic guilts. Not paying more attention to the children, not remembering a friend's birthday. The shameful extra glass of wine. Skipping chair yoga class, skipping flossing at night. Guilt for feeling guilty. Moral defect? Loosen up, she tells herself. There's only so much you can do.

Ultimatum. *Ultimata*. Ultimatum. She's besieged by *ultimata*.

***DEPORTATIONS TO BEGIN
DREAMERS LOSE PROTECTION***

She spends more and more time writing letters. Specific letters in support of specific individuals. One attempt to contain her sense of helplessness.

Each request from the sanctuary center comes with a template, but she takes care to make every one unique. She foregoes the computer to write each letter by hand in her wobbly script, an indication of effort and sincerity, she thinks.

Dear Honorable Immigration Judge:

My name is Elizabeth Miller. I am a US citizen. I am writing to respectfully urge you to release Marcos N (Case No. A56703) from detention...

I have the good fortune to have always lived in the city in which I was born. Marcos was forced to flee his country 30 years ago. Six months ago, he was torn away from his wife and 2-year-old child who rely on his financial support.

Marcos works two jobs, yet he makes time to tutor children in English, his second language. As a parent and as a former ESL teacher, I well know importance of his remaining with his family and community. The separation of families is not what our country, built on immigrants, is about.

Donations, petitions, letter writing take up most of Betty's mornings. Three afternoons a week she doggedly works out at a nearby gym and shops for groceries. Occasional evenings she attends lectures or discussions at libraries and bookstores.

It wasn't long ago she had dinner with Sally, one of her friends who still goes out evenings. They'd descended a few steps to an outside table (quieter). Pedestrians' feet were at eye level. Stiletto heels, thigh-high boots, three-inch platforms. Been years since they could wear such shoes. The occasional dog on a leash poked a quivering snout through the café's railings.

Give up dinners with Sally, give up the gym where she's told she's amazing for her age? (She wishes they'd leave off the age clause.) Give up the park view, bookstore and library events?

She closes her eyes to listen to the familiar sounds that sift to the tenth floor through double paned windows: a hand cart grumbles along the sidewalk, car door slams, airplane murmurs by, siren wails in the far distance. People talk, shout, sing in different cadences and languages. Give up city sounds?

Move to an institution with dementing and dying people?

Dementing. To dement. A noun become a verb. Platform is another. Only the first three cars will platform at the last stop. Which part of her will platform as she dement? And where?

Is there an actual brook at Brookhaven? Deep enough to drown in? Stop. Make the best of whatever will be.

She reminds herself that she's a highly privileged individual who has been spared the first-hand terrors of war, spared massive injustices and senseless losses.

***ROHINGYA REFUGEES LIVING IN LARGEST
REFUGEE CAMP IN THE WORLD***

Not that it helps. Her situation is hers, and hers alone.

That first act of flight just before migration is painful, almost unbearable. Nothing can rid the bird of such pain but the rapid flight of its wings. (W. H. Hudson)

Living day in and day out with a stranger meddling with her possessions, meddling with her life, and reporting her fumbles and slipups to her children—is equally dismaying.

Hovering. A live-in aide hovering. Nancy used to accuse me of hovering. Not Michael. Sweet Michael, too sensitive of others for his own good. I still worry about him. But not Nancy. She can look out for herself! Don't hover, Mom. Stop hovering, Mom. Got so I could hardly be in the same room with her. Now she's the one who hovers. Thinks she's in charge, can tell me what I can and cannot do. No longer needs to rebel. I humor her. Trade off. Now Nancy thinks *she* has to take care of me, she can love without restraint. Be worried, concerned. Concern. Yes, concern suits her.

Suits me too, come to think of it. I've always been concerned about somebody. First the children, then the homeless, and now immigrants. I'm more like Nancy than I imagined. Why the need (compulsion?) to worry about others? Power trip? Think about that another time.

The live-in stranger would likely be a woman forced by dire circumstances to leave her own home and family. Bozena (on whom Betty now relies to replace light bulbs in high ceiling fixtures along with dusting and vacuuming) shows her pictures on her phone of children and grandchildren she's left behind in Poland. Her son, his wife and little daughter stand

in front of a house under construction. A house, a home, where they plan to live out a life, a life Bozena is distanced from. Yes, they Skype almost every day. Pixeled sound and sight. Not the hot breath of a child's secret whispered in her ear, not the stickiness of a hand holding her own, not the warm chubbiness of a body in jammies as it snuggles against her for a bedtime story.

Certainly, there would be women in Bozena's circumstances working at old folks homes (institutions disguised as resorts), but they wouldn't be in her home, doing her labor, a daily reminder of families torn apart every day, wailing children wrenched from mothers as they are deported ... sisters, brothers, lovers, husbands, wives all cleaved asunder.

***RETURN TO HARD LINE ON IMMIGRANTS
TRIPLING OF ICE FORCE***

It was only yesterday she read of a baby pulled off a nursing mother's breast. The baby a citizen, the Honduran mother not. Were there dribbles of milk rimming the edges of the infant's gummy mouth? Trickle of the unsuckled trailing down the mother's breast?

Was the baby a firstborn? Michael was Betty's firstborn, the first she held close to her heart sleepless night after sleepless night pacing back and forth across a room. Shush... shush...shush... until tears dissolved into little hiccups and soft drowsy breathing. Michael, the first she bathed in a plastic tub on the kitchen counter, hands slithering carefully over his smooth, soapy skin. Michael, the first to give rise to a love she'd never known existed, a love that ached almost to bursting, a love so intense it still brings tears to her eyes remembering it. She loved Nancy too, but Michael was the revelation that such emotion was contained within her.

Bozena comes only once a week for four hours. Someone every day and night showing her pictures of faraway loved ones? No. Someone telling her what she can and cannot do, telling her she cannot luxuriate in a bath with scented oils (a pleasure strictly forbidden by Nancy). No.

Betty had vowed to live out her life in the three-bedroom divorce-settlement apartment with its high ceilings, decorative moldings, and hardwood floors. You'll have to get me out feet first, she'd said. How long ago was that? Michael was six and Nancy was three when Stanley went AWOL with Elaine. Elaine who happened to be—to have been—Betty's best friend. Stanley always went for what was most convenient. His secretary was an elderly woman.

No mortgage on the apartment and that of the upstate house she bought on her own has been paid off. It's just a small getaway that the children cram into on weekends and holidays. She's a guest there now. She resented their takeover at first, then she was glad to be relieved of the responsibility of keeping up the property, glad not to feel obliged to shuttle back and forth because it's there and paid for (typical privileged guilt). She was always forgetting something in one place or the other.

A phone call from Nancy: a one bedroom in Brookhaven has become available. You could move in a month, she says. It's already empty, just needs fixing—painting, new carpets, some repairs. It has a balcony and a lovely view of the lake. There aren't many like this. I've put down a deposit. You have ten days to decide. Mom, I want you nearby and the children will be so happy to see you more often. Before you know it, they'll be off to college.

Off to college.

Alberto took great pride in attending the recent graduation of his oldest daughter from Brooklyn College.

TRIPLING OF ICE FORCE

Dear ICE Officer:

I am writing to respectfully request Alberto not be deported. He came to the United States 40 years ago at the age of 10. He barely recalls the country he left and no longer knows anyone there. His US-citizen parents and US-born siblings are all in the US. His children and a grandchild were all born in the US. He took great pride in attending the recent graduation of his oldest daughter ...

Ten days! A one bedroom! What will happen to her belongings? Furniture, paintings, books, and the contents of seven closets, every last one stuffed with god knows what. What to throw away? Give away. To whom? Decisions that never came easy for her. A recurrent dream of miscellaneous stuff scattered helter skelter throughout her home. She's dashing from room to room trying to make order, things keep accumulating. Shirts, sweaters, socks, dishes, pots, glasses, books, notepads, unidentified objects all tumble off shelves, spill out of drawers and closets.

... not be deported ... not separated from children ...

For each person expelled from the US, a remaining friend or family member is told to pack the deportee's bag and bring it to ICE to be examined. It can't weigh more than twenty-five pounds. These are the only belongings people have to start

another life. A few items of clothing, a photo or two, a precious letter, a Bible. Belongings, longings, of the unbelonged.

What would Nancy pack for her? And Michael? They wouldn't make the same choices. Nancy would be practical: spare set of clothing, sunscreen, sunhat, extra pair of reading glasses and yes, family photos, obligatory shots of them grouped together at Christmas. Michael also would include photos. Maybe add one of his family dog. He would slip in a few of Betty's most cherished objects: the tiny statue of Tara, Buddhist goddess of peace and protection, the mother deity he had given her for her seventieth birthday. It always sits on her desk.

Would know to pack Leonard's little wooden parrot that also sits on her desk, head cocked sideways, round eye staring out at her? Balefully? Quizzically? Or merely attentively?

She'd resisted moving in with Leonard forty years ago. He'd suggested buying his own apartment in her building and she squelched that idea too though the children were all for it. Leonard, a tireless social worker, her only meaningful love affair. If a couple of others also lasted several years, it was mostly due to inertia.

Leonard called her Elizabeth. With a Z, he said, like "zany," not S. Never was she Betty to him. She didn't call him Lenny as did most others. Formal names were a sign of affection between them. Nicknames and abbreviated names are supposedly indications of familiarity, but not always.

She'd wanted Leonard back. Too late. He'd already married Eleanor on the rebound. She likes to believe he called her Ellie or Nellie or some such diminutive. Meanspirited, she knows.

Leonard died quietly in his sleep, she was told. He always was a gentle, unobtrusive man. Was ninety by then, had lived

a long life. Betty hadn't seen him in years, and yet she misses him, misses knowing he's somewhere not too far from her. His a good death, not a tragedy, she reminds herself.

***IMMIGRANT CHILD DETENTION CENTERS
BECOMING DEATH CAMPS***

NO. No way. If she decides to leave, better a stranger, not her children, help figure out what to bring and what to leave behind. Michael and Nancy are both minimalists: sparse monochrome furnishings with few carefully positioned paintings and objects in keeping with the composure of their décor. *Décor, decorum, good taste, propriety. Decorous.* Her children are the decorous offspring of a mother whose home has always seemed to them dismayingly cluttered, scattershot, flustered. Like her mind. Increasingly like her mind.

So then. Sorting is up to her. Take control of what's left to control. Second in line for a one bedroom! Ten days to decide! Plenty of time before having to move. She's not fleeing a home destroyed by a bomb. No erupting volcano, no giant tsunami wave, no mudslide, no avalanche is forcing her immediate eviction. She's not a Syrian refugee who has to pack a knapsack in a rush when forced to leave even family members behind. She doesn't have only an instant to decide what's essential, what matters most. A book, a hat, a photograph, medicines?

She's not being packed onto a train for *that* final solution. Betty's not Jewish though everyone thinks she is. Most of her friends are Jewish. Leonard was Jewish. Upper West Side of course.

... *polar bears scrambling on the ice chips.* (Gabrielle Calvocoressi)

She's not a polar bear standing on an ice chip, but polar bear or not, she needs help.

Nothing can rid the bird of such pain but the rapid flight of its wings.

Letting out a whoosh of breath, Betty looks up professional moving and organizing companies on the internet.

The photographs, oh god, the photographs: neatly pressed, color-coordinated clothes hang obediently in immaculate closets, rows of shoes prop tenaciously on minimalist racks, jars and cans stand at attention in kitchen cabinets. An invasion of zombies or a plague of toxic orderliness that has wiped out all humanity.

She books a "discovery call" from CLUTTER BEGONE. At least the name is ridiculous. And, unlike one site, it does not offer to help "get control of the problem that's controlling you."

Problem? How insulting. She's not a hoarder. Doesn't save old newspapers. Doesn't save tiny bits of string like the multi-millionaire stepfather who didn't leave her a cent. You never know, he'd say, jamming a couple of inches of twine into a drawer. Rich. That's a thing about old money, people can't bring themselves to get rid of stuff as if what they got by merely being born could be swept away if they weren't super careful. Guilt has a lot to do with it too.

It seems she's barely tapped in a request for a "discovery call" when the doorbell rings. Rings again and then again. Jabs of shrillness. Yes, I'm coming, I'm coming.

She clicks open the double locks, pulls the door open and is faced with a woman, age hovering around sixty, wearing a crisp blue suit and sensible shoes.

Hello Ms. Miller. I'm Stacy Robbins from Clutter Begone. I'm pleased to meet you.

Oh, I didn't think someone would come right away. Not just now, that is.

I don't mean to intrude, however your email message did say you would be home this morning.

I guess so.

I responded saying that I'd come over. I apologize for any misunderstanding.

I must have logged off.

Again, I don't mean to intrude but since I'm here do you mind if we have a look around.

Since you're here, Betty echoes. She steps aside to allow Stacy to enter.

Stacy places her smooth leather briefcase at the exact center of the hall table, clicks it open, removes a blue mechanical pencil and a pristine yellow legal pad.

Is it all right with you if I do a quick tour?

Might as well.

Leading Stacy to the living room, Betty takes in the familiar hodgepodge of it, breathes in its scent of bygone cats and dogs and plants and bodies and rugs and perfumed candles and city grit.

So? There's a hollowness in her stomach as if she'd just thrown up.

Well, we can —

So how does this work? Where do we start? She's interrupting, sounding harsher than intended. I mean, I've never done anything quite like this. She's nibbling at her fingernails, a habit she'd broken years ago, along with cigarettes. *Onychophagia*, from the Greek. She could never picture Achilles or Odysseus biting their nails to the quick, maybe Penelope.

Stacy looks around the room, jots a few notes on her legal pad. Betty glances sideways. Can't make out Stacy's

minuscule squiggles.

May I go down the hall to the other rooms? Stacy asks.

Why not. Betty trails after her to the bedroom.

The bed is unmade, patchwork quilt flung aside, sheets rumpled with insomnia, a pillow wadded to support a gimpy shoulder. Betty never makes her bed until afternoon and often not even then. A waste of mornings when she's mentally alert. She usually doesn't get dressed either, but the March morning was chilly so she'd thrown on sweats.

10 IMMIGRANTS DIE AFTER HARSH COLD WEATHER

A patchwork quilt tattered to grimy shreds was spread over layers of cardboard on the steps of a church she passed yesterday. Where had the occupant of the makeshift pallet gone? Was he still alive? Before that she was careful not to disturb a man in filthy brown rags lying masturbating in a dark corner under a scaffolding.

She draws the covers over her stainless, celibate sheets. Stacy is saying something about linens.

Would they be packed for the move?

Packing. *Stacks of folded longing*—a Terrance Hayes line pulls itself out of context—from his into hers. And regrets, she thinks, boxes of crumpled regrets.

Stacy is moving to the next room: Betty's home office. An old, battered suitcase spreads open on the floor—a corpse awaiting autopsy.

Ms. Miller, might you be wanting help sorting out the contents of this suitcase and other such containers?

What? Betty's mind is still with the dying and the homeless.

I was asking if you might need assistance in sorting out the contents of the suitcase and other containers of possessions?

Betty kneels down, slams shut the top, as disconcerted as though the suitcase were stuffed with pornography.

It's family stuff. No, I don't want *assistance*.

Assisted living with a nurse on every hall? An apartment with its own kitchen in a retirement home would be bad enough, thank you.

Stacy is leaning over her shoulder. She smells of lavender, a soothing scent, probably a job requirement. The suitcase is my geniza, Betty says, not because she thinks Stacy would know what a geniza is, but because she wants her to ask. Betty is somewhat of a factaholic and tends to trot out arcane facts when she's upset. Intellectual armor.

A geniza? What's that? comes the gratifying question.

Betty remains crouched, turns her head sideways. Stacy's solid calves, ankles, and polished brown pumps are inches from her nose. A geniza, Betty says, as she pushes herself up to her feet, is a repository in a synagogue for worn out books and old papers to be thrown away. Originally a Hebrew verb meaning "to hide" or "put away." Then it became a noun. Etymological identity transformation.

Well, I learn something new every day, but I do find it hard to understand why anyone would store things that are going to be thrown out.

Betty should let it go, agree with Stacy, yes, makes no sense.

She can't help herself. Any piece of paper, she continues, that contained the name of God, even personal letters, had to be kept until it could receive a proper burial. The idea was to preserve good things from harm and bad things from

harming. The famous geniza in Cairo was said to be protected by scorpions and a poisonous snake.

Oh my goodness. I guess I'd better stay away from that trunk!

Don't worry. I'm protecting it. I'm the scorpion and the snake.

Stacy takes an almost imperceptible step back. May I please use the restroom? she asks.

Sure.

Betty hears the click of the lock on the bathroom door. The thought of Stacy perched on the toilet, no-frills Haynes underpants around her knees, is reassuring. Vulnerable. Like everyone else. How do you organize vulnerability? Lists? Bullet points?

Stacy out of the way, Betty lifts the lid of the suitcase and removes a photograph: she and Stanley are holding hands as they race to the town hall to get married. They look happy. They were happy that day. Or were they just smiling for the camera?

She hears the toilet flush, slips the photograph back into the suitcase and shuts it closed.

Would you care to discuss what you want to do about the kitchen, Stacy is saying.

In the kitchen, a loopy, ineffective pot holder made of remnants of clothing hangs from a nail on the wall next to the stove. Afterschool crafts. A Christmas present from little Emily. Or was it a birthday?

Nana, I made it all by myself, Emily asserted even before Betty had a chance to strip away the wrapping to see what "it" was.

You made this all by yourself! I love it and it's just what I need.

I thought you'd like it. Emily's tone was deliberately casual, an affectation after she turned six.

Photo: pot holder like hers dangling from a shattered wall in a war-ravaged city. A home destroyed. And the child?

Photo: little girl in red tights and white t-shirt strewn with red hearts and strawberries hangs tight to her mother's blue-jeaned thigh.

Photo: toddler in oversized blue shirt stands crying in a forest of thick legs. He's at eye level with the cargo pants of a latex-gloved patrol officer frisking down his mother's inner thighs.

Stacy is talking. . . . list of the items you consider selling and what to donate to charity . . .

You mean now?

If I remember correctly, you said something about having to make a decision in ten days.

Oh no, I can't . . . I can't possibly do that now. I don't have to *move* in ten days, just decide if I'm *going* to move. I need time to think about this. You'd better come back another day. Sorry.

I'm here whenever you're ready. Take your time. I can hardly imagine how difficult this is for you.

I promise to call if I decide to move. Betty flushes with regret for her know-it-all geniza riff.

The double door locks click shut. She pours herself a jigger of Jack Daniels, no ice, and takes it to the living room sofa.

This shouldn't be so traumatic. She's already left one home, the home she created for Stanley and the children.

She'd painted the walls herself. Each room a different color. A pale yellow, a soft blue, a gentle gray of early morning mist, a pink so faint it seemed white. She'd sewn a slipcover of gray striped mattress ticking for the sofa from the Salvation Army in big-bellied haste to finish before Michael was born. She'd painted the bookshelf facing the sofa the tender green of new growth, the color of the sprouting plants she tended. Other plants of all shades, shapes, and sizes flourished on windowsills, on shelves, suspended from ceilings. She counted sixty at one time.

Now is different. She's leaving a home and a life she'd reconstructed fifty years ago. In the fog of caring for the children and the acrimonious, drawn out divorce, the pain of leaving the marital home itself was blunted.

*Dear ICE Officer...Alberto came to the United States
30 years ago...*

She's down to only a few plants now, survivor plants that are easy to care for. Two philodendron. Hard to kill a philodendron. And two considerate peace lilies that droop their leaves to let her know when they need watering. Yet even without the living greenery that once was, her apartment is still alive, vivid, and welcoming.

Maureen, it was petite, fizzy-haired Maureen who came into her living room, spread her arms wide, and exclaimed, Ah, the home of a life well lived.

Guests always felt at ease in her apartment, whether for a drink or a weekend. She didn't fuss, left it to them to uncork a bottle of wine, make a bed, a cup of coffee, come and go as they pleased. Shopping yes, she shopped. Soy milk for Cheryl, espresso coffee for Linda, Earl Gray tea for Eduardo. Shelter. She gave them shelter. A home away from home. Away from

home. They, in turn, got her out to museums and theater and concerts she would not have gone to on her own.

That was a while ago. Why has she become such a recluse? Is it that she strains to keep her wits about her in company? Even the friendliest conversation among friends is an exertion. Alone, nobody sees your slipups. Nobody to know you put the phone in the refrigerator, left the chicken out overnight and had to throw it in the garbage, left the apartment keys dangling outside the front door.

Should we have stayed at home, wherever that may be? (Elizabeth Bishop). She chose to leave. Walked away from three homes. Three loved homes, she wrote. But not into an old folks home. Never for Elizabeth Bishop. Homes in France, Brazil, Maine. In the end she died in her own apartment in Boston: cerebral aneurysm.

For so many it's not should we have stayed, but *could we* have stayed, Betty reminds herself.

VIOLENCE DRIVES IMMIGRANTS FROM CENTRAL AMERICA

A selfish, spoiled woman. That's who I am.

Yet the feeling of loss is there, a weight in her chest, a clog in her throat.

Betty has never gone along with Sartre's claim that the self doesn't distinguish between what is "me" and what is "mine," yet maybe he had a point. Leave much of the "mine" that is "her"? Every item bears the story of a place, a friendship, a lover.

My belongings. I belong to them as much as they belong to me. It's not just *what* I live with, it's *who* I live with. Every object haunted by wisps of recollections. Will I remember that week of yoga with Emily in Costa Rica without Rose the hand puppet? It was sharp-eyed Emily who spied the

puppets in a dim back corner of a convenience store. How often will I think of Tim without spotting the rag-tag collection of windup toys he brought me one at a time when he visited from Maine? The slender yellow vase, a gift from Cheryl, a student in a years-ago seminar. Will her Botticelli face and cascade of copper hair still be with me without the vase to prompt my memory?

And books, ceiling high shelves of books. Many with penciled notes in the margins. Novels and poetry mostly. Bring the poetry books, even if it means storing some with Nancy. Classic Greek plays too, some with my notes from high school. *Moby Dick* to reread. And Shakespeare, of course. And . . . so many I can't do without even if I may never open them again. Maybe stay put and live with the immigrant hired by Nancy to spy on me.

Oh! She must remember the chicken soup simmering overnight in the crockpot. Organic, healthy, bland. Nothing like the soup Holly made when Betty came down with the flu after she flew home from a conference in Chicago. A soup full of spices and surprises, like Holly herself. Betty hasn't kept in touch. It's been how many years?

Call to say I might be moving? To a retirement home! why haven't I bothered to call, or at least email?

My god! Is Holly still alive? So many friends are not.

Diane died. Long time ago. She was fifty-five. A linguist who became a photographer to befriend the gypsies whose folk tales she chronicled. Folk takes that Betty helped edit and gather into two books to be published postmortem. They'd have to come with her.

Azra died young; cancer like Diane. Azra, Diane. Betty could go down the alphabet with friends who are no longer of this world.

B for Mrs. Block, the sprightly, articulate German woman across the hall. After a few years a live-in aide moved in. One time the aide rang Betty's doorbell for help getting Mrs. Block up from the floor onto her walker. Mrs. Block and the aide are long gone.

C for Charlie from the seventh floor, a minister, a man of the collar, a collar he no longer wore by the time his shrunken body was in blue jeans that almost fell off him. Always a short man, he was reduced to the size of a child at the end. A lonely old child.

Neighbors whose names she never knew: the plump, old actress who wore a hat covered with shiny, round buttons promoting past political candidates and other merchandise. She'd sit in the lobby for hours chatting with the doormen and whoever would stop by. She had a fuzzy little dog. First the dog died, then she did. Heartbreak? A tall black woman who was a singer died. Betty saw the notice in the elevator.

Betty's is a vanishing population in a vanishing planet. Dying out like the spotted owls and butterflies and bees.

Healthy friends gone too. Mia to a big house in New Jersey with her new baby and three dogs, Shari to Baltimore for a new job. Renters priced out; also owners as monthly maintenance fees escalated. Doormen gone after years of service. José back to Peru—of his own volition.

RETURN TO HARD LINE ON IMMIGRANTS

Endings. TV shows ended their runs, some after years. *I Love Lucy*—gone. Long time gone. *The Wire* and *Homicide: Life on the Streets* are recent departures.

Familiar storefronts are shuttered. The one that sold African wares—gone. Last week Henry's, her beloved

neighborhood restaurant where the tables weren't squished together, closed forever. Lincoln Plaza Cinemas. Gone. Favorite clothing stores and the thrift shop on Amsterdam. Gone. Everything is online. Food online. Movies online. Clothes online where you can't feel a fabric between your fingers, can't know what a shade of blue might actually be.

You can't even call anyone anymore. Betty texts her children. Talk to your pharmacist, her elderly doctor said. Good luck speaking to other than a robot these days even after labyrinths of prompts. She tries to keep up: Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook accounts. Sites she never uses. She doesn't belong in this new world. Better to be among the forgetful ones of her own generation. Lost generation. The phrase takes on new meaning.

She's getting weaker; can't lift the big watering can when it's full. Can hardly open and close the old windows. She wouldn't have the strength to pull Mrs. Block up from the floor these days. Hearing is weaker too, especially on the right. Even with hearing aids, conversations in restaurants are almost impossible.

Aides. Stay where she is with a live-in aide when she hardly knows anyone in the building? All her new neighbors are busy young couples with small children and more on the way. They text on their phones in the elevator and lobby, discouraging even a friendly hello.

And her apartment—three bedrooms, separate dining room, eat in kitchen—way too big now the children hardly ever come for an overnight. Things are always breaking down and the maintenance is always going up.

CHILDREN COMMIT 85-YEAR-OLD MOTHER TO ASSISTED LIVING

Not worth reporting, but a headline in the story of her life. And yet, a one bedroom all to herself in a residence where everything is taken care of and help is a buzzer call away might be a relief. She'd have lots of company among the lost generation.

Dear Honorable Judge, I am writing to respectfully request that Graciela be granted asylum status I do not believe that she should be separated from her three U.S. born children, husband, and the community that cherishes her.

... separated from her three children ...

Betty's children and grandchildren would be close by. And they're worrying themselves sick about her.

Why not move? She's had a good run.

As she's having dinner, she hears the wail of a saxophone coming from the park: Izuro! A flight along ascending and descending notes, a flurry of wings. Two months ago his face was slashed from mouth to earlobe and his sax stolen. Thanks to fellow musicians (and Betty too), he has a new instrument. It still hurts, he told her, and then played another riff. A quavering, a tremble, a small cry of release. A homeless man in pain who has nothing and gives everything to his music, gives everything *from* his music. He's going back to Japan. His brother has booked him a ticket home. Izuro and his jazz evensongs will also be gone.

Betty puts down her fork, gets up to throw on a jacket and let Izuro know that she too is moving, that her daughter has booked her a smaller home elsewhere.

Michael suggested a transitional weekend in the upstate house after her apartment was emptied and selected belongings moved to Brookhaven. Just the two of us, he said. She doesn't tell him that halfway through the dismemberment of her home, she'd stopped caring what came or went and left most decisions up to Stacy.

He drives her in what had been her car (she was glad to be rid of that responsibility too). As he turns into the driveway, she notices that lilies of the valley have spread further along the north side. Their brief sweet-scented florets bloom under the shade of scrappy young oak trees.

Rhizome roots, she tells Michael, those lilies over there have rhizome roots, roots that don't go deep into the ground. They just spread outward barely beneath the surface.

Interesting, he says.

Even if the roots are cut apart into pieces, she continues, talking beyond the patient boredom in Michael's voice, they give rise to new growth.

... Graciela three U.S. born children, husband, and a community who cherishes her....

Is this about you, Mom?

No.

No?

Maybe, but not only.

... Sergio become a respected member of the community ... in the restaurant business for 12 years ...

The terrain must be hospitable, Betty adds.

The Melancholia Vine

Catharine Leggett

Jean picks her way along Wellington Street, arms straight and stiff, her hands on either side of the box, clamping it, careful not to jiggle the tarts. All morning she worked on them, her first attempt alone, following along with her grandmother's handwritten recipe handed down through the family.

She passes the Wellington Street United Church and the closed paint factory with its weed-infested yard and boarded-up windows. Aunt Denise will be pleased the crust turned out flaky, continuing the family tradition of good bakers. The merest rattle would crumble the delicate shells. The bus shelter isn't far now, just another block, and she'll be able to rest.

Her scalp is on fire where the sun beats down on the center part; she should have worn a hat. She doesn't usually go out in such heat. What if the sun softens the tarts? Aunt Denise never liked runny filling, said it was the sign of an inferior baker; Jean has family tradition to uphold.

Three boys mill about outside the bus shelter—teenagers between fifteen and seventeen, she guesses. One of them strikes a match and lights a cigarette. His pants ride low on his narrow hips and display an underwear band of skull and crossbones. Another spits off to the side and examines it; he appears enthralled by his body's secretion. The third picks a scab on his arm, then suddenly kicks the shelter wall with his black unlaced boot, rattling a chain that dangles from the pocket of his shorts, his thin chest lost inside a sloppy t-shirt that says *Dirk's Bar*.

Jean enters the shelter and sits at the far end of the bench to avoid an ugly blotch that might be excrement. Heat

sprouts a patch of perspiration across her forehead. Dizziness overcomes her, but is it any wonder? She's taxed herself with her mission; she isn't used to walking distances. Perspiration dribbles down the folds of her belly under her floral muumuu, her breathing heavy and belabored. Her weight, her constant companion, keeps people away, protects her in a way that starving herself never did. She no longer seeks invisibility. People turn away from fat people; they're repulsed by them.

A blast from her puffer offers some relief as she takes furtive glances at the boys who are now engaged in a strange dance of milling, pacing, throwing each other the odd punch, strutting about like agitated chickens. She places the box on the bench and pulls it in close to graze her right thigh.

Another day when it isn't so hot would be a better choice for visiting Aunt Denise at the Shadow Lawn Nursing Home. Cousin Ruth, Aunt Denise's only other surviving relative, wrote to Jean over a year ago informing her of Aunt Denise's move from Grove Corners and how Uncle Ron's generous insurance policy allowed her the best of care. Ruth intended to visit the old woman from time to time and she encouraged—*encouraged!*—Jean to do the same. Yes, Jean wrote back, she would go, but so far she hasn't. She marked today on the calendar as the day she would visit, no matter what. Her guilt for not visiting would only be exorcised once she lived up to her familial obligation. While Aunt Denise lived at Grove Corners she seemed as far away as another planet, with no possibility of ever coming to this one. But now she is here.

Uncle Ron told stories about "the olden days"; he said he and Jean had much in common since his father left when he was very young, leaving his mother and aunt to raise him. "Come, sit on my knee, and I will tell you." His hand spread across the bare skin beneath her sun top and felt warm. Since

her feet couldn't reach the ground, he prevented her from falling. *Insurance*.

He grew up on the prairies on a farm, watched calves being born, fed chickens, got lost in wheat fields; it felt like swimming in a sea of plants. Then they moved to Regina and everything changed. Kids picked on him because he had big ears, a big nose, and droopy eyes. They called him Basset, after the dog, and treated him like an outsider, an outcast. He rubbed her shoulder with his rough hand. "Kids can be very cruel, Jean."

"What's in the box, lady?"

She squints up into the sun. One of the boys hovers over her and points down at the box. "There a bomb in there or somethin'?" His head blocks out the light and his face comes into view, his beautiful blue eyes fringed with long lashes, though his skin is badly broken out. Too much junk food, though she's one to talk. His skin will clear up; he's young, but he needs to change his diet, give up the cigarettes, too.

The freckle-faced boy with red eyebrows, his brush cut so close to his head it barely shows its red tinge, laughs. "Yeah, a bomb. No doubt." He turns to the third boy who is now watching, and lowers his voice, "She's a fat old terrorist," he snorts with laughter, horks another gob beyond the sidewalk, watching it to see how far it gets. "A bomb. As if."

The joke, if that's what it is supposed to be, isn't worthy of the attention Spitter gives it. He's carrying on for Acne, obviously the leader. Spitter wants to impress him and strokes his ego.

What would be the harm in telling them? "I have tarts in the box," she says as Acne stubs his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe, even though the sidewalk looks like one big ashtray.

"You taking them for a walk?" The third fellow, who hasn't so much as looked at her since she sat down, picks away at the scab on his arm. Blood bubbles up along the old scrape.

Jean smiles to feign amusement but he wouldn't notice, he's so preoccupied with his old wound.

"If that's what you're doing they must be restless tarts." Scab looks up, his face invaded by a cockeyed smile. "Myself, I like restless tarts."

That gets them all going, and their bodies twist and writhe with their misguided sense of cleverness. They'd think she was too old to pick up on the innuendo; youth often mistakes age for naiveté.

"I know how to make a tart less restless," Acne says.

"Me too." Scab crosses his hands over his crotch, thrusts his pelvis back and forth, his tongue hanging out. Spitter chimes in with grunts and gasps.

Scab steps outside the shelter and calls for the other two to join him. He points to something up the street.

Jean inhales deeply, relaxes a little. Hopefully they won't come back inside the shelter and its unbearable heat.

She tries to imagine how Aunt Denise will look. She might have put on weight, though she was always slim, which was surprising considering all the baking she did, every day except Sunday.

Jean's mother said baking made her sister feel useful and productive—it had to do with her barrenness. Jean imagined Aunt Denise standing on the edge of a vast plain of tundra, the kind her social studies teacher said gave early settlers no amount of hardship. A great, flat expanse of unproductive land. Jean thought of Aunt Denise as a kind of geography—quiet, without relief, her personality lacking hills or valleys. She suffered from melancholia, a condition that made her

seem sad. Melancholia was a vine with grasping tendrils that could extend and engulf.

Jean was Aunt Denise and Uncle Ron's favorite child, on loan to them every summer, though Jean would never fully appreciate how much she meant to them, her mother said. They looked forward to her visit at their cottage high on the bluffs of Lake Huron more than anything all year long, and it was up to her to behave and not spoil anything for them, and to appear grateful no matter what. *No matter what*. Her mother said she must remember that the only time Aunt Denise's sadness eased a little was during Jean's visits, and it was a lucky coincidence it worked out for her too. She didn't have to pay to have Jean farmed out to someone, as she put it, while she was at work.

Despite the heat inside the shelter, a long slow shiver ascends Jean's spine like a dormant root stirring from somewhere deep and dark. A drop of sweat splashes the tart box lid and Jean imagines a bug splattered against glass.

Acne steps into the shelter and approaches her. She recoils slightly and hopes he doesn't notice the persistent tap of her pulse in her neck. He shoves his pack of cigarettes in front of her face and bends low enough she can feel his breath. "Smoke?" The question articulates through his nose and not his mouth.

She leans away from his hot breath. "No. Thank you." Her eyes slip to her lap then to the box, to avoid eye contact. Any reaction could have the misguided effect of egging him on.

Acne moves in closer, his dark hair flopping over his blue eyes. "Maybe if you smoked you'd drop a few pounds." Spitter and Scab, back inside the shelter, congratulate his insult with riotous laughter.

This thing they are doing, this performance, is acquiring its own energy and feeding itself. They've no idea of the

dangerous course they encourage each other along. She must shut it down before it takes them beyond fun and games and teasing. She places her hand on her chest to disguise its sudden rise and fall.

"Have you seen the number 8 bus? Do you know when the last one went by?" Hopefully, they didn't detect the quiver in her voice. She'll give them something to think about, a problem to solve, and they'll quit their disgusting display.

"The number 8. Hm." Acne strokes his chin. "Can't say as I have, have you?" He faces Scab.

Her plan is working. They've become contemplative, almost quiet.

Scab shrugs. "Come to think of it, yes, yes, I have. Let's see, when was that?"

Now Spitter says, "Last week, weren't it? Oh wait, or was it last month?" They all talk at once, their voices melding into one as they huddle over her question, the reasons for which must be transparent to them.

Acne sits down on the bench on the other side of the box. He opens his hand and runs it over the lid. "Hmmm," he tries for seductive overtones but doesn't come close. "Feels like a tart, all smooth and slippery."

A droplet of sweat beading at her grey hairline dribbles down her face.

A young man around their age walks by the bus shelter and they all rush out to talk to him, someone they know. They're busy, distracted, no longer interested in her.

Aunt Denise let Jean watch while she cut fruit and made pastry, explaining how it could not be overworked or it would become tough, and good pastry was flaky pastry.

Jean was not allowed to participate and get her hands dirty. After Jean dried the dishes, they went for what Aunt Denise called her quiet time.

Jean lay on the day bed beneath the window on the sun porch and leafed through old issues of *Woman's Day* magazine, wondering if she'd ever be as pretty as the ladies in the pictures.

Aunt Denise changed her routine when Jean became old enough to take Uncle Ron his sweets in his workshop, a green and white outbuilding frilled with hollyhocks that attracted humming birds and hundreds of bees and looked so cute it might have come out of a fairy tale or a postcard from England. The bees bashed against the window as if they wanted to get in. Why were they beating themselves to death?

"So, here's what I don't get." Acne stands in front of her and Scab and Spitter fall in behind, the fellow they'd been talking to on the sidewalk now gone. "Why does someone take tarts on a bus?"

"What if you get hungry during the ride? Then you got something to eat. Looks like she gets hungry a lot." Scab thinks he's struck the idea of the century, cocks his head to the side and gives a goofy grin. Jean knows he's thinking, *That's a pretty good joke. I'm funny.* He kicks at the dirt with the toe of his unlaced black boot and dislodges a stubborn pebble. "She don't trust the taxi to take her, that's why. Thinks he might try to swindle her, steal her tarts."

The idea of taking a taxi has never crossed her mind. Disability payments only stretch so far.

"What if you have to stand on the bus? Won't your tarts get all busted up?" Spitter's head glows orange in the sunlight like a balloon, orange on the outside, empty on the inside.

"I will hold on tight," she says.

"She's going to hold on to her tarts tight. You hear that boys?" Spitter says.

Scab removes a wallet on a chain from his back pocket, and gives it a twirl, swivels his hips at the same time. "She must be one of them. A tart that likes tarts. She kind of looks like one of them. Wait. Do I see a moustache? Maybe she's a man-woman."

They step back to appraise her, cross their arms, stroke their chins, but she stares straight ahead, mouth rigid, eyes unblinking, her breath coming in such short spurts she thinks she might choke. They aren't just testing her to see what they can get away with, they are testing themselves.

Perspiration sprouts dark blossoms on the front of her muumuu. Fearing they will notice the enlarging stain makes her sweat more; it tickles as it meanders between her breasts and stomach folds. She dares not scratch, as she can only imagine the crudeness that would encourage, and quells the urge to step outside the shelter and catch whatever breeze there might be. Has the heat ruined the tarts? she wonders.

"Who you taking those tarts to anyway?" Spitter asks from the shelter door.

"My aunt."

"She must be some kind of special. I always want tarts brought in, but I can't never arrange it."

So much for them giving up on their vulgarity. But why would they when she was their audience and source of amusement? Why not carry on with the filth and squawk like chickens at what they mistake for original thoughts.

A motorcycle passes and takes their attention away. They talk about machines, choppers, and hogs; Jean is thankful for the short diversion.

Aunt Denise called from the kitchen with a cup of tea and a plate of desserts, enough for Jean and Uncle Ron, then slowly climbed the stairs, the floorboards groaning under each deliberate step, and went to her room, opposite Uncle Ron's and next to Jean's, for her quiet time.

Jean asked her mother why they slept in separate rooms, as her girlfriends' parents slept in the same bedroom and so did the couples in the *Woman's Day* magazine.

Aunt Denise's two conditions—barrenness and melancholia—required a great deal of solitude, space, and silence. Rest was essential for her health. "If she doesn't get it, she'll fall completely apart, and I doubt she'd ever come back together again." Her mother made Aunt Denise sound as fragile as the crust on her baking—she could not be over-handled.

Acne slides along the bench until he is beside Jean and places his hand on the box lid. "Lady," he says, his face down, his hand rubbing the box, "look what's happening to the tarts. There's sweat all over the bottom of the box." He looks off into the distance and appears to be thinking about something. "My mother used to make pies. Delicious pies. Her own crust and everything." His voice is soft, vulnerable, unlike the voice he's used in front of the others.

"Why did she stop?"

"She left when I was eight." He falls silent, then mutters, "No more pie."

"That's grease on the bottom," she tells him.

Spitter steps back into the shelter. The large gap between his front teeth and his protruding ears makes her think he would have been teased and bullied when he was younger. Bullied children are more likely to become bullies themselves.

"I do believe those tarts are getting runnier, wetter, hotter." Scab pulls up his t-shirt, thrusts his chest out, massages his nipples, and moans, his head tipped back, eyes closed. "I know how to heat up a tart and make it runny."

Spitter shifts about as if he's standing in a patch of stinging nettle.

They pretend; how they pretend. They don't know the first thing about sex, their immaturity so apparent by their vulgarity and outlandish display.

An old man advances towards the bus shelter, pulling a bundle buggy. He lingers in the shade of a maple a few feet away, pulls a hanky from his back pocket and dabs at his forehead.

Acne rises from the bench and joins Spitter and Scab outside, and once again they lose interest in her. She takes a deep breath and feels her jaw slacken. She looks at her watch. Visiting hours are over at 4:30 precisely at Shadow Lawn. The receptionist informed her as if giving her a warning, adding that it took time to feed the residents and get them ready for bed.

Her aunt is lucky to be in such a place, she supposes. Since Uncle Ron was in insurance, he would have made certain she had the very best coverage, in the event of his dying first. Which he did.

"What is insurance?" she asked as Aunt Denise rolled out pastry.

"It means you are well looked after and don't need to worry. Uncle Ron makes sure I never have to worry."

Jean loved the sound of that. Since she was at their home for the summer, and since she was so important to them, as

her mother kept reminding her, she imagined Uncle Ron wouldn't want her to worry either. Her mother worried all the time. Jean's father left when she was three; her only memory of him, his red plaid slippers.

His departure left a huge hole into which her mother poured endless worry. How would she make ends meet? Would they end up in the poorhouse? The bailiff would come knocking at the door at any moment. Sometimes a wolf prowled outside the door but somehow, they managed to keep it away. When she was old enough, during the school year, she stayed alone in the apartment while her mother worked or went out with friends. She turned her chair to the door and kept an eye on it as she watched TV, just in case the wolf came leaping through. She wished her uncle would wave a magic policy over their apartment and wrap them up snugly in insurance.

The old man has resumed his journey along the sidewalk and passes the shelter, ignoring all of them as if they weren't even there. When he shuffles far enough along, Spitter strikes a dominant pose at the end of the bench, his hands on his hips and legs akimbo. "Slide your fanny, granny," he says.

She is a puppet being jerked around by their boredom. She's been played before; she knows how it goes. Since she sits at the end of the bench she can only slide towards the center, forcing her to sit on the disgusting blotch. Spitter sits down beside her, close enough she can smell him, a boyish scent of cheap cologne and BO. Scab sits down on the other side and she is bookended by the heat of their bodies. Sweat drops from her chin to her chest. She picks up the tarts, balances the box on her knees, and stares straight ahead at the maple tree on the other side of the street, hoping her unlikely fascination will escape their notice.

"Wow! She sure is gripping her box tight. I imagine that feels good. I can grip your box for you, if you like," Acne says, while the others groan and say, "Gross!" He stands in front of her, obstructing her view of the tree, but she continues to stare straight ahead. "My hands are free," he offers, and raises them, fingers splayed, then wiggles the middle digits. "Diddle, diddle," he says. The other two gag and pretend to throw up.

She concentrates on the electric buzz of a cicada, a thin drone about to snap.

At the lake, the sound of the cicadas made her think nothing was going on in the world, as if time stood still and everything was suspended in motionlessness. From the day bed under the window, she listened to the continuous interplay between the cicada drone and the inevitable lap of water as she waited for Aunt Denise to call her into the kitchen, a plate of butter tarts in her hand. "Take these to your Uncle Ron. I'm going to lie down."

When her feet almost touched the ground, she thought she shouldn't sit on his lap any more, an idea she got from something she read in *Woman's Day* magazine. She asked her mother about sitting on his knee, whether she should still be doing it. "You ask the most ridiculous questions, Jean! I've no idea what you mean. Put that question out of your head."

Jean was being stupid, saying stupid things, and she should learn to keep her mouth shut, control her thoughts.

Acne gestures towards the box, as if to open the lid. "Let's have a look." She jerks the box away in a protective gesture. "Oh. Aren't we just a little touchy? No touchy my boxy?"

"Touchy time now, Jean." Uncle Ron slid his hand over her back. "Does that feel good?" She nodded yes, nibbled on

a tart. He rubbed her shoulders. “Such smooth skin, just like your Aunt Denise. You’ve inherited good skin.” He rubbed her back every day that summer, and rocked beneath her, sometimes singing songs he learned when he was a little boy.

She asked her mother if touchy time was okay. There was no mention of such things in *Woman’s Day*, though she went looking. Her mother said childlessness made Aunt Denise and Uncle Ron sad in a way that was impossible for Jean to understand. Uncle Ron was treating her like his own daughter—Jean should feel very lucky and very special. Her mother said she didn’t like what Jean might be implying, though she hadn’t been implying anything and thought she was asking a question. She said if Jean’s thoughts—vulgar notions really—continued along in the same vein, there’d be consequences. “I’ll take you for a talk with the minister.”

Jean lay awake nights fretting about what kind of terrible mind she had that would have her ask such a horrid question. A mind she could not trust.

Uncle Ron started putting his hand under her shirt at the front, but since she was only starting to grow there, she didn’t think it counted. All summer long he rocked under her as she watched the bees swarm around the hollyhocks and pound the glass, trying to get in or trying to kill themselves.

“Come on, let me into your box. Let’s get it opened up; I want to lick your tarts,” Acne says.

Aunt Denise said, “Today, I will tell you how to make the butter tarts and I will watch you make them, step by step. Never over-handle the shortening and make it warm, always use the coldest of water, best with ice, and never use too much or the pastry will be tough. Don’t be afraid to get your fingers in there. But touch lightly, rub lightly.”

His fingers in there. Just to check he said, nothing to worry about, more a medical thing, he assured her. *I insure you*. Her heart racing, her thoughts questioning, but he was in the business of taking care of people, making sure they never had to worry; he would know. She could not be trusted! She had terrible thoughts and jumped to hideous conclusions.

Aunt Denise let her stir. The butter swirling in the pan, the corn syrup, cornstarch, raisins, egg, brown sugar. Thick and rich. “Just the right amounts, especially the starch. Your uncle doesn’t like the center too runny.”

He licked his fingers to remove the crumbs. “You made those, did you? Carrying on a family tradition, are you? They were perfect, not too runny.”

Wood shavings from a birdhouse he was making for Aunt Denise’s garden lay in curls on the floor. “Lean back. I’ll tell you a story.” Once he’d gone into the attic of the house they moved to in Regina, when he thought there was no one home, and found his sister and a boy together in a way meant for older people. “She was your age.” His breathing changed; he rocked harder beneath her.

They are having a tug of war until Acne pulls the box from her hands and throws back the lid, sticks his finger into the center of one of the tarts. “Runny, soft, and juicy. Succulent.”

Runny, wet. His breathing harder, his hands down the front of her shorts. He is rubbing and she is crying and frightened, but all she can think is, *I am a bad person*. She makes up things, she gets ridiculous ideas in her head! She is wrong, not him!

Suddenly she shouts through her sobs, “I didn’t make the tarts by myself! Aunt Denise told me how!” As if that would make everything right.

It's over and she doesn't really know what happened. A roar in her ears, an explosion, like the crashing waves on Lake Huron during the worst storms, and the blinding whiteness of lightning. The sensation of being cut in two. One rages and destroys, the other watches, detached, cheers the other on, delights in its violence, encourages it to keep going, keep going.

She bends over panting, struggles to catch her breath as her whole body shakes. Butter tarts drip down the glass of the bus shelter, splotch the sidewalk, smear the bench.

Butter tarts splatter Spitter's torn shirt. "Lady, what the hell was that?" He clutches his arm and tart filling dribbles down it like blood.

Acne's hand covers a red mark on his cheek. A butter tart is mashed into his hair and runs down his face. His blue eyes are filled with confusion and vulnerability, the way he should look as he steps out from behind a dark, misleading façade.

Scab says, "Holy fuck, holy fuck, holy fuck. I've never seen anyone go off like that before. You're a fuckin' freak." He wraps his arms around his middle and bends over. "I'm calling the police," he says.

"Leave it," Spitter says, facing her. His squinty eyes burn into hers, but he doesn't say anything.

She stares back, doesn't blink, overcome by calmness, a sense of order and control. She did this. Her chaotic frenzy, her explosion, made them stop.

It took her weeks to tell her mother, weeks to build up the courage to say where Uncle Ron put his hand and how he rocked his body against her. Maybe she should have chosen another time, another day and not a Friday, the end

of the work week when her mother was tired. She looked at Jean in shock. "Your Uncle Ron?"

She pushed away from the kitchen table, stepped over to where Jean stood, and slapped her. Slapped her as hard as she'd ever slapped her before. "You watch your filthy mouth! Why do you make up these terrible stories? Is it for attention? Is it because I leave you to go to work? Am I being punished?"

After she developed the habit of not eating, she became too sick to go back to the cottage ever again. They never came to visit. Not once.

The three boys whimper like children. But that is just it, isn't it? That is what they are, and she has reminded them they are boys, not the sexual predators they pretend to be. She looks at their shoulders curved inwards, their slim waists, imagines the many times their hearts will be broken, how much real pain and sorrow they will endure. Her heart breaks for them, it really does, these adolescents, their innocence under siege by something monstrous, something evil. Run, she thinks, run, and let this be a fair warning that this game you so casually play could take you somewhere deadly. Go home, slip out of your costumes, be who you are and forget this phoniness that keeps you from truth, that keeps you from yourselves. Your sweet, innocent selves.

The cicada drone picks up; the world is once again suspended. She turns her back to them and walks away, her hands empty. She would never see her aunt; her aunt had never seen her. None of them had. The family traditions they so staunchly upheld, their betrayal of her. They were a disgrace.

Airplanes

Emma Wunsch

Matty is thinking about pot. He's staring at his math homework, a set of differentiation formulas, and imagining pounds of weed, Ziploc bags stuffed with it like on TV, all crammed in his backpack so at lunch when Jacob and Tyler are all like *hey man got that weed*, he could be like yeah and then dump it, pound after pound of it, right on the table. Of course, this is impossible: $f(x)$ does not equal one dumping marijuana in a high school cafeteria. What he'd really do is casually say *let's take a walk, guys* and then somewhere between the soccer field and the senior's parking lot he'd hand it over. Of course, they'd be totally impressed, but Matty would just be like, *whatever dude, it's just weed*.

But Matty doesn't have any pot, it's mid-October, and Jacob and Tyler are getting pissed. Probably the only reason they've been sort of cool about letting him sit at their table is because of his brother. But Toby just smoked pot. He wasn't a dealer or anything. And now he's in college up in Buffalo and never responds to texts.

He could ask Anna. She's his brother's girlfriend. At least she was last year. She was supposed to go away to college too, but then her mom got sick so Anna stayed in town and just goes to the community college. Even though Toby has been gone for almost two months, it seems like Anna is always at his house.

Matty's mom says he has to be especially nice to Anna. Her mother is dying, she's an only child, and her step-father is emotionally distant.

But Anna would know about buying pot. And doesn't she owe him? This morning, Matty was late because *Anna* was

in the shower. *His* shower now that Toby's not here. When he knocked on the door, she was like *just a sec* like she lives here or something.

Matty shuts his math book. He can't concentrate. He calls Toby. *Make Toby feel great again. Leave a message. Peace.*

"Toby. Call me. Back. Please." Matty doesn't want to sound desperate but what can he do? Then again even if his brother tells him where to buy pot, how will he get it?

He walks into the living room where Anna is watching TV. She could take him to get weed. She has a car. It was her mom's but her mom can't drive anymore.

"Hey, Matty." Anna smiles.

Since starting high school, Matty has realized how different, how much better his life could be if he was Matt. Or Matthew. Matthew Hewitt is also a freshman, but nobody would ever mess with him. It might be because Matthew Hewitt is six feet tall, is already on the football team, and it might be because he's black.

"I can change the channel," Anna says. "What do you wanna watch?"

"Nothing," Matty says. "I don't care."

Anna has a reality show on. Upstairs, Matty's mom is watching the third and final presidential debate, which is taking place in Las Vegas.

Anna flies through the channels, lingers on the debate, the camera hovering on Trump's large, smug face, but then she moves on, whizzing past cooking shows and crime scenes only to come to an abrupt stop on a show about treehouses. A blonde woman shows off the views from an enormous treehouse in Alaska. Matty opens his notebook.

"Homework?"

"Math."

“Ugh. I hate math. How’s high school going, anyway?”

He shrugs, annoyed that she’s acting like she just happens to be here, like they haven’t seen each other in a long time when she’s eaten dinner here for the past three nights. “You know. It’s high school.”

“My college feels like high school.” She puts quotes around college.

Matty checks his phone, but there’s nothing from Toby. There’s nothing from anyone. A man on the TV talks passionately about glulam. Matty finishes the assignment which, when he’s not freaking about getting Jacob and Tyler pot, is easy. Anna gets up, goes into the kitchen, and comes back with ice cream, which is nice, but also weird. Matty thinks that ice cream might give him diarrhea, but he eats it anyway.

“I’m going to get fat if I keep eating this much.” Anna scrapes the bowl with her spoon. “People keep bringing food. There’s like six lasagnas in the freezer.” She laughs, dark and heavy.

“You’re not fat,” Matty says. Anna, with her long brown hair and blue eyes is pretty in a nice way, unlike some of the popular girls at school who are pretty in a mean way. She often wears red Converse and his brother’s ancient Mets hoodie. She’s not skinny or fat.

“I hope Toby puts on the freshman fifteen.”

“Huh?”

“They say when you go away you come home fifteen pounds heavier from eating tons of carbs and drinking beer.”

“Probably get the munchies from pot too,” he says hopefully. *Speaking of pot, do you know where I can get a pound or two?*

Anna nods. “Not that fifteen pounds would make a difference on you skinny boys.”

Matty feels a gnawing wave of anger in his gut. It wouldn’t be so bad if he was tall like Toby, but he hasn’t grown in over a year. His mom says if he’s not taller in January, they’ll go back to the hormone doctor. His mom is opposed to drugs but Matty is opposed to being the shortest boy in 9th grade. The only people shorter than him this year are twin girls, Lex and Liv, who are pretty and popular and mean.

“Maybe he’ll have gained like fifty pounds.” Anna sounds like she knows Matty is annoyed.

“Maybe five hundred.” Matty doesn’t want to sound too bitter. It’s not her fault and he does feel sorry for her.

Anna giggles. “Well, we’ll see on Friday.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” She sounds happy. “He’s coming home for the weekend.”

“I didn’t think he was coming home till Thanksgiving. Like my dad.” Matty’s dad just left on another month-long book tour. He’s been traveling so much lately that Matty can’t remember where he is now.

“He said he needs a break from the dorm. Plus, he probably has tons of laundry.”

A weird thing about Anna is that she washes Toby’s clothes. A few years ago, Matty’s mom showed them how to do their laundry and that was that. Once Matty saw Anna folding Toby’s underwear, which, for reasons he couldn’t explain, he found vaguely intrusive. He can’t imagine a girl ever willing touching his underwear. He likes girls, but he knows they don’t like him. But it’s not like he’s diseased or anything. Jacob and Tyler have girlfriends, Kate Dollar and Emily Van Ness, and they sit with them at lunch sometimes and sometimes their friend Hannah Park sits with them too.

Anna yawns. “I should go home.”

Matty looks at his phone. It's later than he thought and of course he hasn't heard from his brother. "I should go up." He turns off the TV.

"I'm surprised you're not up in your room making planes." She laughs, then sighs. "Wow, I'm so tired all of a sudden."

He imagines telling her to stay. Since Toby went to college, she's fallen asleep on the couch a lot. His mom doesn't say anything about it, but Matty doesn't want her here. Who does she think she is calling him skinny and talking about his planes? His stomach cramps. Why did he eat that ice cream?

He watches her gather all her stuff. She always has a lot of stuff here. "Later, Matty," she says.

Fuck you, he thinks, looking at the bowls and spoons on the coffee table. "Later," he says. "See ya."

The truth is Matty does make airplanes. He started making them when he was little and never stopped. Even if he could explain he never would because they'd probably think he was on the spectrum, but when he looks at a table or a picture on a wall, he'll imagine a kind of corresponding plane. Some people, but not all, are planes, too. His father is a plane. His mother is not. Anna is not a plane. Esther Yoon, his biology lab partner is not a plane either. But last week Esther looked at his moth glider and then made a curious face at him. Esther Yoon was valedictorian of their elementary school because her parents, super-religious immigrants, make their four daughters study and pray all day. At least that's the rumor. But Esther said she'd never made a paper plane so, as Mr. Fusco droned on about Punnett squares, Matty showed her how to make the most traditional kinds.

Mr. Fusco was so old and done with teaching that sometimes he would repeat the same lecture two classes in a row. After class ended, Matty gave Esther the planes, which she tucked into her biology folder.

"You should fly them sometime," he told her.

Esther didn't say anything but Matty did notice that the planes weren't in her folder the next time they had lab.

He sleeps through his phone alarm the next morning and by the time he gets up all he can do is get dressed and barrel out of the house so he can make the bus since his mom left early to phone bank or something. His stomach hurts the whole way.

Miraculously, his stomach recovers and he's actually starving by lunch. Without thinking too much about it, he gets two slices of oily pizza and three semi-disgusting, semi-delicious, too-soft chocolate chip cookies. He breathes deeply before walking across the cafeteria and plunking down his tray.

"Ya talk to your brother?" Jacob asks without looking up. Matty swallows. "Yeah. He's coming home Friday."

"Awesome." Tyler punches the air with his fist. "Shit's so fucking dry here. He's hooking you up, right?"

"Yeah," Matty says. "He should. He will." *Please Toby*, he thinks, *bring pot home*.

"He better," Jacob says with just a touch of nastiness. "Or else."

"He will. Anyone want a cookie? I can't eat all these."

"I will," Emily leans over Jacob and takes it. "I'm like totally p-m-s-ing."

"Me too," Hannah says cheerfully.

“I just got mine,” Kate squeals.

Jacob and Tyler look at Matty and roll their eyes. *It’s going to be okay*, he thinks. *Everything will be fine.*

He calls Toby when he gets home and, incredibly, someone picks up.

“Toby’s phone,” a girl says, laughing.

“Uh...this is Matty.”

“Matty! How’s it going?”

“Um. Fine.”

“You’re probably wondering who this is?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Liz. I’m. A. Friend. Of. Your. Brother’s.”

“Is he there?” He hears laughter in the background.

“Totally.”

He hears more laughter before his brother finally gets on the phone. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Who was that?”

“Liz.”

“You’re coming home?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“Why are you so interested, Shorty?”

“Don’t call me Shorty, Asshole.”

“Hold on, Sweetheart. I’ll get ya some info.”

While he’s waiting, Matty walks into his brother’s room and opens his desk drawers. He’s looked through them before so it’s not that exciting. But when he slides over some index cards in the center drawer he sees rolling papers. And a glass pipe! How did this get here? Matty looks for a secret stash, but finds nothing but crumpled candy wrappers and chewed pens.

“Yo,” Toby says. “Liz says we’re leaving before noon on Friday.”

Matty closes the drawer. “We?” He puts the rolling papers in his pocket.

“Yeah. Me, Liz, and Bill George.”

“Bill George?”

“Yup. Bill George James. My roommate’s got three first names.”

“They’re all coming?”

“What do you care?”

Why does he care, Matty wonders? *What does it matter?*

“We might go to a party in the city. And we might not.”

“Oh.”

“Listen, I gotta go to class.”

“Now?”

“Yup. One class and it’s not till five o’clock shadow, little man.”

“Don’t call me little man,” Matty says. “I need you to bring—,” he adds but Toby has already hung up and when he calls back no one answers.

Anna comes over with insurance forms she says she doesn’t understand and of course his mom helps her fill them out and by the time they’re done it’s after six and of course his mom tells her to stay for dinner and of course Anna sets the table and then goes on about Toby coming home and how maybe they’ll go out to dinner or maybe just order in and stream something on Netflix.

“What about the party?” Matty asks.

“What party?” Anna looks right at him.

“In the city. With Liz and his roommate....”

“That’s right,” Matty’s mom says. “He’s getting a ride with his roommate... Jim George something.”

“No, he’s getting a ride with Liz. Bill George is his roommate.” Matty likes having information for a change.

“Oh. I thought he decided to take the bus.” Anna looks worried.

“I talked to him today,” Matty says.

“Liz on his floor?” Anna asks.

Has *something happened between Liz and his brother?* Why would Toby bring Liz home when Anna is always here? “And Bill George,” Matty says. “His roommate has three first names. Bill George James. Everyone calls him Bill George though.”

“That’s nice,” his mom says. “I’m going to write some more postcards. Do you have homework, sweets?”

“No.”

“Do you want to write postcards? You can do your part too even if you’re not eighteen.”

“No.”

His mom makes a face and then says, “Well, why don’t you go make a plane then.”

Jesus Christ. Is there anything more infuriating than your mother telling you to make a paper airplane. There’s no way he’s clearing the table now.

Anna picks up his plate. “I’ll do the dishes,” she says.

“Stupid airplanes,” Matty tells the nameless cat on his bed.

Nameless opens one eye, then closes it.

He looks at the print out for the DC-3 on his bulletin board. He picks up a piece of paper, but realizes he’s in too

shitty a mood. The DC-3 needs commitment. He made two last weekend but they bombed because he kept messing up the right wing, which has to be not exactly parallel to the trough. Making sure his door is fully shut, he takes out the rolling papers from the hiding place under his bio book. He lays a single paper out on his desk, being careful not to rip it—it’s much thinner than airplane paper. Matty rolls the paper onto itself. If there were anything in there, it’d be perfect, but now it’s just empty nothing and he still has nothing for Jacob and Tyler so he crumples it into his palm till it’s basically gone.

Anna is there in the morning. “My car wouldn’t start last night,” she tells him “Your mom went to yoga. She said you should eat breakfast.” She smiles.

He ignores her, opens the fridge, finds nothing appealing, closes it.

“The car is bad timing. I have class today and I’ve missed a lot. Early classes suck.”

“Toby’s class doesn’t start till five.”

“Yeah. I’ll definitely take later classes next semester. If I even go back.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“It’s lame. I’m sick of this town. Anyway, I’ll probably go live with Toby in the spring.”

“You’re going to go to college there?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. I’d need to be able to come home if my mom got *really* sick.”

Isn’t she really sick now? Matty wonders. “What about your step-dad?” He knows basically nothing about Anna’s step-dad except that his name is Jerry and he works for the government.

“He wouldn’t care. He literally doesn’t care about anything.”

“So, you’d just like live there? With Toby?” He sits down and takes a banana from the fruit basket for something to do.

She sits across from him. “Toby and Bill George are in a triple but the third guy never came.” She sounds excited. “He’s got a lot of meal swipes. I could use the library....”

Immediately Matty knows this is a bizarre and terrible idea.

“Hey, Matty? Has Toby said anything to you?”

“About what?”

“Um. I don’t know...me? Him? Us?”

“No.” Matty shakes his head, tries not to think about Liz answering Toby’s phone, and stands up. “We haven’t talked much. I’ve got to go. I’ll miss the bus.”

“Want a ride?”

“Your car works?”

He sees it—the momentary oh shit moment, but he has to give her credit for a gold star recovery. “It never hurts to try it again,” she says.

Once in Anna’s car he realizes it’s the perfect opportunity. “Hey, do you have any weed?” He tries to sound casual.

“Pot?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Do you know where I could like get some?” Sweat streams down his back.

“You want to go buy weed?” She takes her eyes off the road and looks at him.

“Yeah. I have money.” Please God let Anna know where to go. They could go right now. It would be so easy: she’d pull right up, tell him just hang out for a sec while she ran

up to one of those shabby houses on the other side of town with too much plastic furniture out front.

“I don’t think anyone has any,” she says, finally looking back at the road. “A guy in my lit class sells Molly, but that’s it.”

“Where did Toby get it?”

“There used to be a guy at Mobil Mart, but he moved. Leo got it for him sometimes. I don’t know. Pot’s not really my thing. I’m more of a vodka girl.” She fake laughs. “JK.”

What about your mom, Matty thinks. Don’t you get lots of drugs when you’re about to die. He could tell Jacob and Tyler that instead of pot they should take this bottle of Oxycodone. But of course Matty says nothing, ashamed to even think about asking his brother’s girlfriend, if she is his girlfriend, to steal her dying mother’s painkillers.

The rest of the drive is silent.

The high school, a gigantic, monolithic rectangle the color of ash, looms especially large and portentous against the gray sky. For a second Matty imagines telling Anna to keep driving. Fuck it. There’s nothing for him inside and she’s probably going to flunk out of community college anyway. The two of them should just drive until they run out of gas. They could probably make it down to the city or up to this cabin in the mountains his family used to go to. But then what? Break into the cabin? Fuck? Fall in love?

“Sorry I can’t help you, Matty.” Anna sounds so genuinely sorry that for a second he wonders if she knows how precarious his social life is before he remembers she’s only talking about not having access to weed.

“It’s not your fault,” he says. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about.”

“Where’s my dope?” Jacob asks at lunch.
 “My brother’s coming home later.”
 “You better get it, Lippmann. I got plans.”
 “I’ll get it,” Matty says. “Swear.”

A blue Prius with an enormous #FEELTHEBERN bumper sticker is in the driveway when he gets home. Toby and his friends are in the living room and the first thing Matty notices is that Liz is beautiful and that Bill George, who is even taller than Toby, is wearing shockingly orange overalls. Liz is smaller than Anna, but model pretty with pin straight black hair, high cheekbones and beautiful, small dark eyes. She’s wearing fishnet tights, a short skirt, and tight pink t-shirt under a jean jacket. *Liz is a plane*, Matty thinks. A beautiful origami plane that can fly very fast. Anna, in her jeans and Mets hoodie, is still not a plane. Anna looks normal. *Normal and maybe kind of plain*. Liz is so pretty that it’s hard not to look at her, but he forces himself to watch Bill George who is animatedly talking about someone named Kristoff, which is making Liz and Toby, who are on the couch, laugh. Bill George is on the fancy recliner. Anna is on the floor. For the first time, Matty wonders what kind of person his brother is. *Plane versus plain*, he thinks.

He corners his brother when he comes out of the bathroom. “Jesus,” Toby says. “Can’t a man piss in peace?”

“Do you have pot? I need pot.”

Toby raises his eyebrows.

“I have money.”

“I don’t have any. Since when do *you* smoke, Matty McFly?”

“I don’t know. It’s not really for me. It’s for my, uh, friends.”

“Alex and Ben?” Toby looks confused.

“No. Jacob and Tyler. They’re sophomores.”

“Oh. *New* friends.”

Matty kicks the stair. “Tell me where to buy it.”

Toby shrugs. “I can’t help ya. The random guy at the Stop and Go got busted and Seth-o isn’t home till Christmas. I’ll help you, *maybe*, at *Christmas*.”

Christmas? Christmas stretches so far into the future that it seems like a different country. “What about the apartments on Stanton?”

Toby shakes his head.

“Text someone. Put it on Snapchat.” It’s ridiculous, but he might be serious.

“Sorry, man.” Toby runs his hands through his hair. “Don’t worry. If you grow it, it will come.” He laughs and runs back downstairs.

Matty kicks the stair again.

“Mercy,” he hears Liz yelp as his phone rings. This is surprising because no one calls him. It’s not a number he knows, but he says hello anyway.

“Yo.”

“Uh”

“It’s Jacob, Fuckhead.”

Shit, shit, shit. Why the fuck did he just answer? “Oh. Yeah. Hey. What’s up, man?”

“Not me.”

“Yeah.”

“No, I mean I’m not *up*. Because I don’t have weed. And it’s like killing me, dude. So. Did your brother hook you up? You told me not to worry.”

Matty leans his forehead against the window that looks out onto the lower section of the roof and the driveway. If

he doesn't give Jacob weed, then on Monday he'll have to sit with Alex and Ben, who might be less than cool about his ditching them for the last seven weeks. Eventually they'll forgive him and from here on out, his weekends will be spent in the Shertinsky's cold, half-finished basement eating Doritos and uploading dorky videos onto YouTube. Matty doesn't want to sit with the people he's supposed to sit with at lunch. He doesn't want to just hear about parties for the next four years.

But.

But.

If he gets pot, he'll sit with Jacob and Tyler on Monday and maybe give Hannah his extra cookie. Maybe next Friday he'll have plans. Things happen. People change.

"It's cool," he tells Jacob. "I got it."

"Awesome. Let's meet at school."

"School?"

"Yeah. It's between us. More or less. I just googled your address."

"Oh." It's seems crazy to Matty that Jacob Meyer took the time to map out a route that involves him.

"I'll meet you there. 8:00? Near the benches?"

Matty looks at his phone. It's only 5:30. "Sure. See you then."

During dinner Bill George, Liz, and Toby talk about the girl on their floor who only wears unicorn onesies and answer his mom's predictable questions.

"I like aerodynamics," Bill George tells his mother. "I thought I was going to be a pilot. I dig astronomy and physics and stuff, but it's like super mathy. I only made it through

like half a class before I had to drop out." He laughs and bites off half of his pizza in a single gulp.

"Matty makes airplanes," his mom says. "He's really good at it."

"Mom." Matty feels his cheek flush.

"Model planes?" Bill George asks.

"Paper," Toby says. "He's got like five hundred of them in his room."

"Wow," Liz says. "That's a lot planes."

"I don't have *that* many," Matty mumbles.

"It's weird but it's cool," Toby says. "The planes are like really complicated. One plane had like thirty-five different steps, right dude? I couldn't do that shit."

Matty can't tell if Toby is impressed or mocking him. "I didn't make that one," he says. "The DC-37 is impossible."

"You need to fly those fuckers," Toby says.

"Toby!" Their mom says half-heartedly. "Language."

"I do fly them," Matty says.

"In your room. You need to let them go outside. Spread their wings and fly."

"Like an eagle," Bill George says.

Anna excuses herself.

"I can't make anything," Liz says. "I'm like the worst at arts and crafty stuff...one time my sister . . ."

It's not arts and crafts, Matty thinks. But he's grateful that the conversation has gone back to Liz. What's *he's going to do?* Jacob knows where he lives.

Matty takes his plate into the kitchen where Anna is standing by the sink. Water is running but she isn't washing anything. Out of utter desperation, he opens the cabinet and slips a bottle of oregano into his pocket. Upstairs, he uses the remaining papers in Toby's pack to roll three joints. One two

three just like that. Neat, perfect, easy. *They'll know though*, he thinks. Jacob and Tyler aren't stupid. With one puff they'll know he's a lying ass liar. But what else can he do? He puts Toby's black, fleece-lined hooded sweatshirt over his green one, and puts the oregano joints in his messenger bag. He looks around. What else should he take? A flashlight? An airplane? He looks at the stacks of planes around his room. Maybe Toby's right. He should fucking fly them.

"I'm going out," he tells his mom thirty minutes later. She has more postcards she's sending to women in North Carolina. Liz, Toby, and Bill George are on their phones trying to figure out where they're going; Anna, squeezing lemon into a Diet Coke, isn't looking at anything.

"Oh." His mom looks up. "With who?" She does a terrible job of hiding her surprise.

"Jacob. We're going to play video games," he says loudly so everyone will know that he's a very normal fourteen-year old. "Doom."

"I hate violent video games," his mom says feebly. "Do you want a ride, sweets?"

He shakes his head.

"Be home by eleven then."

"Eleven!" Toby looks up. "Seriously? Nine thirty was my curfew when I was a freshman."

"He doesn't go out that often," his mother says. Her tone isn't mean, but it's true and he wants to die.

He walks slowly to the school. His stomach hurts. No more pizza. He has to tell his mom so she'll take him to the doctor and while they're there he'll get his growing shots. What's going to happen on Monday? Ben and Alex? Maybe he should fuck it all and go sit with Matthew Hewitt. Matthew Hewitt sits with three other black kids, some junior girls,

and a few other football players. Monday morning, Matty could put his tray down at that table and say, hey Matthew Hewitt you don't know me since I'm a short skinny dork whose been trying to pass as popular for the last few weeks, but I know you because, well, you're one of like eight black kids in this rich white school and you're gigantic and popular and we have the same name. Matty kicks a partially crushed beer can that's lying on the sidewalk. It sails halfway down the street, but isn't satisfying.

His stomach clenches into itself when he gets to school. He prays the inevitable diarrhea will wait. He walks over to the swing set. Two swings are missing and the one remaining one is swathed in duct tape but Matty sits on it and swings to keep warm. *Maybe he won't show*, he thinks. So he doesn't think about his stomach, he closes his eyes, imagines what Liz would say if he made her an origami plane. *Fold the first corner diagonally. Cut off bottom to make a square. Rotate.*

Jacob appears in an extremely puffy coat. At first Matty thinks the coat is preposterous, but then he realizes that his hands are numb, that's it's gotten seriously cold.

"Hey, Lippmann," Jacob says. "You got it? You got the stuff?"

Matty stops the swing, which feels like slow motion. *Fold in outer corners to the center line.* "Yup." His voice sounds strangely gravelly. "I got it, Meyer." A freakish wave of calm has washed over him. His stomach doesn't hurt anymore. *Fold down peak.* He gets off the swing, opens his messenger bag, and hands the joints to Jacob.

"It's really good." Matty tries to imagine Matthew Hewitt's expression if he were to sit next to him. Matthew Hewitt must eat a ton at lunch. Maybe Matthew Hewitt would like Matty's extra cookies.

Jacob takes out his wallet. "I only bought like edibles like one time so I don't know about joints...."

"Twenty is cool." *Lift up peak and accordion the sides to make a diamond.*

Jacob hands him the money. "See ya Monday. Have a good weekend."

Matty walks home not feeling cold. Not feeling at all.

He's freezing by the time he steps onto the porch though. The Prius is gone and most of the house is dark. Just as he puts his key in the lock, Anna opens the door.

"Matty! Holy shit you scared me! What are you doing out here?"

He shrugs. *Fold the bottom half of the diamond up.*

"Wow. It got so cold. It feels like it might freaking snow." She blows on her hands then sits on the top step next to an enormous uncarved pumpkin. She lights a cigarette. "Don't tell your mom."

He nods. Weird. Anna practically lives here but he never knew she smoked. And doesn't her mom have lung cancer?

"Where's Toby and them?"

"The city. They're crashing there. Your mom didn't want them driving back at three in the morning."

"How come you didn't go?"

"Yeah. I should have. I don't know. My mom. . ."

But you're not with your mom, he thinks. You're with your boyfriend's dumb-as-shit-younger brother.

"Liz is pretty. Don't you think?"

Yeah, he thinks, she's really pretty. He sits next to her even though he really needs to use the bathroom. He feels like it would be wrong to leave right now. It feels almost like her mom just died. Like her step-father or a nurse just called to tell her, but she can't get home because maybe her car really

isn't working this time and his mom is out knocking on doors and his dad is still wherever he is and Toby is back at college not answering his phone. The only one is Matty. What would he do? Say sorry? Buy flowers? He could give her his planes. They could walk to the hill above the high school, on the other side from where he and Jacob met. He doesn't have 500, but he has enough for a whole afternoon. They could just sit and be sad and launch airplanes. One after another after another.

But that's ridiculous, he thinks. And not how it will happen. More likely he'll come home after school and his mom's eyes will be puffy and she'll say quietly, *Anna's mom died today, honey.* And Matty will say okay and they'll be quiet and then he'll set the table because Anna won't be there. And neither will his dad or his brother. It'll just be him and his mom and she won't write any postcards or make any calls until the next day when Toby comes home without Bill George or Liz and puts on a suit that's gotten too small and who knows what will happen to everyone after that.

"I just sold fake weed to a popular sophomore," Matty says. "I just ruined my life. For like the next four years."

Anna nods. The light in his mother's room goes off and then on and then off again.

What the fuck has he done, he wonders in pulsing waves of disbelief. Oregano joints. Who does he think he is?

"Sometimes I hate my mother," Anna says. "I mean it, Matty. I really hate her."

Matty looks at his feet.

"I remember one time when I was little and it snowed in October. It was this freak snow storm right before Halloween and my mom made me wear my costume outside my snow-suit and I was so angry." Anna takes a drag, then exhales. "I was so mad about wearing my tutu over my snowsuit."

Matty watches his breath cloud evaporate into the cold air.

“And now, I’m angry about waiting. And I’m angry that I’m angry and I’m just waiting for something to happen and I’m so afraid of being here,” Anna says. “And then I get afraid of not being here.” She waves her hand in front of her face, then looks at him like she expects him to do something, say something profound.

He wonders if she’s going to cry. But he has nothing to say, nothing he can tell her. *Should he kiss her*, he wonders. *Fuck her?* He could fuck her, fuck Toby. He looks at her, then stands up.

“Toby is a moron,” he announces. Anna is his brother’s girlfriend, not his. “He really is,” he tells her, opening the door and walking in. “He’s really fucking stupid.” He closes it gently so as not to wake his mother. Then he stands there, waiting to see what Anna will do. Will she come back inside? Spend the night in his brother’s bed? His bed? Maybe she’ll leave and never come back. Maybe he’ll never see her again.

Matty waits but nothing happens. No sound is made. It seems no one in the space they all momentarily occupy, neither him, nor Anna outside, nor his mother upstairs, or even his brother watching a pretty girl at a party far away, in this moment, even dares to breathe.

On Leave

Grant Price

It’s an insular kind of existence, growing up with a soldier for a father. The army is everything. It gives and it takes away. It is your friend and your enemy. It is the reason why you can never truly call a house a home and are forever packing and unpacking boxes on housing estates whose streets are ruled by Lord-of-the-Flies army brats. It steals your father away for months at a time, forcing him to slog through jungles and deserts and snow while you remain at home, slogging through homework and paper rounds and puberty. It arranges “Family Days” that are held only when all the dads are away and are really just an opportunity for the lonely mums to drink too much. It makes sure his letters written on blue paper reach you, his spiky handwriting using up every bit of space and a disembodied voice telling you to keep looking after your mother. The army is God.

Eventually you grow up and you move out and you start a life of your own. For the most part, you let the vagaries of your army childhood fade to sepia. But there’s one thing you can’t let go. It comes at you in the night sometimes, poking you, bothering you, forcing you to remember. Something you wish you could unthink. And that something is this: back then, growing up, you sometimes wished your father would never come home at all. Each time he went away, you spent so long trying to become accustomed to the father-shaped hole in your universe. It was hard and it hurt. And just as you’d become accustomed to the pain and learned to live with it, there he was again. But he wasn’t the same father who stepped out the door three months, six months, a year

ago. He was a stranger to you. You didn't recognize him, and he didn't recognize you.

And that caused some problems.

When my father returned home from exercise, peace-keeping or (twice) war, two people walked through the front door. One was Dad, the man who built spaceships out of Lego for my younger brother and me and taught us how to wire a plug and took us running with him. The other was the Sergeant. We were scared of the Sergeant. He was unpredictable, mean, mocking, aggressive. He could erupt like a bottle of fizzy drink kicked across a playground. Other times he was adrift from the world, so lost in a headspace that was protected on all sides by a chain-link fence and barbed wire that he couldn't hear us when we spoke to him. My brother and I couldn't work the Sergeant out, and after a while we stopped trying.

My father's return after a long absence changed the entire dynamic of our home life. Over the course of a week, lines would be drawn in the sand, defenses would be prepared, and every activity, conversation, decision and remark would be used as ammunition in the battle between him and my mother, my brother and me. Before long, it was all against all. We were tectonic plates: part of the same world yet doing our best to destroy it whenever we rubbed up against one another. It would go on like this for days, but nobody would say anything about it. We would all refuse to acknowledge the Sergeant in the room – at least up to the point when the Sergeant tore the room apart. Then, after the clouds of smoke had dissipated and we emerged from our hiding places under the bed, at a friend's house or down at the pub, we'd pick up

the pieces and tape them back together. We would find that the Sergeant had disappeared. Dad was all that remained.

One year, my father arrived home on leave without telling us he was coming. Leave was like holiday, but for us it had nothing to do with beaches, theme parks, flights or ice cream. Leave just meant my father was at home, with us, until he had to go back to the army — until he had to leave. This time around, we hadn't seen him for six months. He knocked on the door and my mother answered it without peering through the window first like she usually did. Her scream carried all the way up to my brother's bedroom, where we were surreptitiously watching a copy of *Die Hard*. We ran downstairs to find him standing in the living room, his rucksack almost as tall as he was. He grabbed us and held us against him, and we breathed in the heavy perfumes of the army. Cheap washing powder. Cigarettes. Clothes that had been worn in a sodden field, stripped off, aired and stuffed into a bag before they were completely dry. Excitement, danger and boredom all mixed together. He held us close and my tears wet his uniform.

I didn't know whether I was crying because I was happy or because I feared the tempest to come.

He was home for two weeks, just long enough for a proper explosion. Things started small. I ratted out my brother on the second day just to get some attention. I'd been out riding my bike on the estate, and on the way home I spotted him climbing over the fence into an empty end-of-terrace with a couple of his friends. Through a hole in the fence I watched as they threw clumps of mud at the windows and

tried to kick in the back door. I spilled it to my father that night over dinner. Instead of rewarding me, he stood, took our plates from the table and emptied them into the bin. Then he told us go to go bed. I didn't understand. I hadn't done anything wrong. So I said as much.

That was a mistake.

The Sergeant lifted me up from the chair by the throat. My mother shouted for him to stop, but he ignored her. He stuffed two fingers in my mouth, caught my tongue between them and pulled it until it felt as though it would tear off at the root. This, said the Sergeant, is your tongue. You aren't using it the right way. If you see your brother or anybody else doing something they shouldn't, you don't wait six hours before you speak up. You say it in the moment. Otherwise you're no better than they are. The Sergeant let go of my tongue and gave my brother and me a few slaps around the head before we ran up to our rooms. My mother cried. My brother didn't speak to me for two days. I didn't blame him.

My mother was next. Her joy at having my father back was long forgotten by the end of the week. She didn't like the way he rearranged the cupboards, how he re-parked the car if she didn't back it into the spot, how he advised her to coil the garden hose around the tap in the garden rather than storing it in the overflowing shed. I don't think he even realized he was doing it. In his mind he was making things more efficient, just as he'd been trained to do. For my mother, though, he was like a new employee picking holes in routines that had stood the test of time for decades. Maybe her ways weren't the best, but they worked, and she kept the house ticking over just fine when he wasn't there.

After the big shop at the supermarket on Friday afternoon, my father and mother were putting away the groceries in the kitchen when he reached into one of the bags and took out a jar of ready-made pasta sauce. In a cool voice, he asked what it was. My brother and I stopped hunting through the other bags. The Sergeant was back. I could hear the tension in my mother's voice when she replied. He could read the label just as well as anybody else, she said. His gaze narrowed. Why had she bought a jar of ready-made sauce? Because it was easier, she said. Because sometimes she didn't have forty minutes to spend putting together a proper sauce for two kids who wouldn't appreciate it anyway. The Sergeant shook his head and told her he wouldn't have it in his house. My mother made to snatch it, but she tripped on one of the plastic bags on the floor and her outstretched fingers pushed the jar out of his hand. It shattered. My brother and I jumped out of the way of the shards, one of which cut my mother's finger open. She dissolved into tears. The Sergeant, incredulous, asked her what her problem was. You're interfering, she said, as blood dripped to the floor. Always interfering. You come back and you think you know everything and you judge the way I live when you're not here. We're quite happy without you. The Sergeant stared at her for a moment, then grabbed the car keys and stormed out. My brother and I were asleep long before our beat-up Montego slipped into its parking space in front of our house again. My father was silent at breakfast the next morning. We all were.

Castle Bravo detonated a few days before my father was due to fly out to a country whose name I'd heard for the first time on a special report on the news. It was one of those dull

afternoons that strangle imaginations and turn childhood into a chore. My father was watching a film on TV in the living room. *The Guns of Navarone*, *Spartacus*, *Lawrence of Arabia* or some other classic he'd seen a hundred times before. My brother and I were sitting on the floor doing a jigsaw of clouds against a blue sky. Neither of us was too invested in it. I think we just wanted to be around him before he left. My mother poked her head around the door and asked us what we wanted in our sandwiches. We asked her what she was offering. Cheese, ham, peanut butter, chocolate spread, salad or lemon curd. My brother and I debated what would be best. I was keen on ham, but only if it didn't have the gelatine bits that made me want to retch. My brother asked for chocolate spread, but my mother reminded him he wasn't allowed it after the time I convinced him to open his sandwich up, wipe the contents all over his face and sit at the table smiling until she noticed.

As we were chatting, my father asked us to keep it down. He couldn't hear the film. We made our choice and got back to our jigsaw. Barely a minute had gone by before my mum poked her head into the room once more and asked us what crisps we wanted. What flavors were there? This time she had to check, and she returned with a multipack made of plastic and white noise. She had to walk in front of the screen to bring it over to us. We pulled out the packets to see what was still available. My father had a tendency to eat all three packets of salt & vinegar in one go, but this time there was one left and my brother and I both wanted it. We made a compromise to split it. My father reached over for the remote and turned up the volume until the speakers bled, so we raised our own voices. We had another packet to choose. Ready salted or cheese and onion. My mother called from

the kitchen. Turn the television down. It's too loud. Then she shouted to us that our sandwiches were ready. We were still sorting through the crisp packets. She appeared in the doorway, holding two plates, and asked us if we wanted to eat in the living room. Yes, we did. She asked my father to turn the TV down again. But it wasn't him sitting in the armchair. It was the Sergeant. As she moved in front of the screen once more to bring us our sandwiches, he rose, walked over to the TV, and started taking the ornaments off the top of it. A glass dish, an enamel figure, a wooden carving he'd brought my mother from Belize. My mother's back was to him, so she didn't notice anything. Neither did my brother or I. We were too busy tearing open the foil packets. The speakers continued to blare.

The Sergeant shouted a question over the noise. You don't want to be quiet? We turned to look at him. His hands were around the set. The V of his legs hid most of the picture. I could make out cliffs, lapping waves, part of a man's head. He lifted the set up until it was close to touching the ceiling. The cable pulled taut and jerked free of the socket. The image disappeared and the sudden absence of sound felt like being thrown forward against a seat belt. The Sergeant snarled and spoke again. If you can't shut up, nobody gets to watch.

He threw the TV against the wall.

A bang and a thud. The housing split apart. The back came loose and the green guts of the set spilled out. A white splotch like the tip of a cloud mushroomed behind the glass. My brother screamed. I watched, mouth open, one hand still in a packet of crisps. Reality hit us. The TV was gone. We both started crying. My mother got to her knees and wrapped her arms around us and told us it was okay. The Sergeant stood by the empty TV cabinet, eyeing us with what

I was sure was hatred. I was scared, but I didn't stop looking at him. He turned on his heel and left the house. It took us half an hour to calm down. When we were okay again, my mother told us to eat our sandwiches. Then she started to clean up the dead TV.

A new television waited for us in the living room when we woke up the next morning. It was large, with grey borders and an indentation underneath the screen that looked like a tight-lipped mouth. A low voice called our names from the kitchen. My mother was upstairs, still sleeping. The moment we walked in, I could see the Sergeant had packed his bags and left. It was Dad who sat at the table. Lines creased his tanned face and he looked much older than usual. His hair stood up in three different directions. I'm sorry, he said. I'll never do that again. I don't want you to fear me. Then he faltered. There were a hundred things he could have said to us but never would because it required an energy and a patience that he didn't have, and a maturity that he would only possess when the time to talk about it had long since passed. He left his seat and crouched down and gripped us in a bear hug. And in that moment nothing else mattered. We forgot about the Sergeant who took control of our Dad and poured hot water on his brain and sent electrical shocks into his arms and legs and fists and used his tongue to say terrible things that we could never shut out. We forgot it all and we listened to his breathing and wished it was always like this.

The last day of leave was perfect. He took us on a day trip to London. We watched the Changing of the Guard, walked

along the Thames, took photos at Madame Tussauds and ate fist-sized dumplings in a Chinese restaurant. We didn't get back home until after midnight. Dad carried my sleeping brother into the house and put him to bed. Before he said goodnight to me, he told me to look after Mum once he'd left. I said I would, and he said he knew it already. He placed a calloused hand on my forehead and told me to go to sleep.

We saw him off the next morning, trying in vain to hold back the flood. He was dressed in his fatigues again. His heavy rucksack hung from his shoulders. As he climbed onto the idling transport that would take him to camp, he shouted to us that he would be back in a couple of months. We waved until the lorry turned the corner at the end of the road. Only two months, said my mother with a shiver. That's nothing. My brother and I silently agreed with her, and the three of us trudged back into the house. And we all knew it wasn't the temperature that caused her to shiver. It was the fact that when Dad next turned up on the doorstep, the Sergeant would be with him.

Vanishing Point

Lynne Burnett

When the capable businessman,
amorous husband, loving father

translates to a sixty-three year old
Caucasian male first in a chair

then a stretcher, finally a bed
and questions asked of him

are the same ones over and over
by different people holding clipboards

and I think they must be writing in
disappearing ink, no one remembers

what he said except him who, to keep away
the pain that brought him there increased

his wine consumption to ten glasses a week
by the time they moved him to the fourth floor

four hours later, is anyone listening?
strip a man down like that and

all his accomplishments, his suit
of armour falls away, he's at the mercy

of a titanic amoeba camped on his liver
and the relentless crawl of a pen across paper,

this is not his call to make, what he thinks
doesn't matter now, he's nobody he knows

when his heart pulls him from the sterile sea
of pillows and sheets, eyes leaking

and I'm nobody I know, treading water,
reaching for his hand.

Howard Prairie

Robin Carey

People still call this reservoir Howard Prairie.
The white-tipped waves ripple and wonder why,
because water fills the edges to the banks,
and game paths lead carefully down
from every direction to this undrinkable name.

But the nature of reservoirs is such
that old ghosts, drowned and splayed,
float in to the sandy shorelines sometimes,
like the water-logged roots of the Council Tree,
where Shasta and Takelma gathered,
teepee stones and fire stones around, and listened,
cries of the cross-bills clearer there, quail calls clearer,
and the meanings of sound, the pooled spring at its base
like an eye of the prairie as a prairie.

I saw a yellowed photo once of this same oak
brought from a dove-tailed drawer,
six gutted bucks hanging at dawn
and the old man's hand that held it
almost fleshless over the bone.

Now the dowitchers cut and swerve
to the difference of water, the occasional
wedge of geese skids in to a reedy bay,
while the stubborn inland owl, turning her head round
and round, keeps searching the absent hunting ground.

And Howard Prairie, as a name, continues its hold
like settled law, though snags keep washing
unwittingly up onshore and old men keep recalling
waves of tawny grass across the windy meadow.

First Impressions

Linda Ferguson

It's my mother's third time, and she says her labor
just feels like cramps or the indigestion she gets
from a bowl of popcorn and a bottle of orange soda pop.

Dad, with his cranberry-red cardigan and his freshly buzzed
crewcut, is kept waiting in another room.

I come out of my mother so fast mucus plugs my nose,
and the doctor has to give me mouth-to-mouth
before I can feel the first touch of my mother's skin.

When my father is allowed in, his big hand trembles
as he cups my head.

Later, my mother cradles me by the window and waves
to the two small boys who stand in the parking lot below.
They're wearing matching coats and caps.

It's November, and they must be cold.

O Pioneer!

Linda Ferguson

She turned the coffee pot over
in his lap and left, the screen door
slamming shut so hard
the tails of her bright
apron bow flapped
like a gesture, a
thumbing of the nose, or so
the story goes.

I like to think of her
like that — my grandmother
in a powder blue skirt
and freshly ironed blouse,
unbeknownst to her,
pregnant with my father,
arms pumping
through the thick
August air
as she marched off,
clutching a red checked
dish towel in her fist.

“Ha!” she must
have thought. The bully
couldn't burn toast
without her help,
and she had two long legs
to carry her into town.

Roasting Vegetables

Donna Isaac

Turns out, Brussels sprouts did originate in Brussels.
Belgium also lays claim to French fries,
despite France's protestations,
spas, casinos, tulips, oil painting, the saxophone,
intricate lace, and Tintin. It is home to fine chocolate and beer.

Once, briefly in Bruges, I sampled crispy fries
served with mayo and tried waffles with whipped cream.
I remember castles, rocky walls, cold rain.

Tine Nys can no longer remember, taste, or see
Belgium, which allows euthanasia for the terminally ill
or for those deemed in psychiatric distress like
Tine who was autistic, non-verbal.

Two doctors let her father hold
a needle in place for her fatal injection,
the family invited to listen to her heart go still.

Somewhere in Belgium, people sip Duvel in heavy mugs
or taste the melt of Godiva truffles on their tongues.
Others decide life or death,
in Flanders, specifically, where poppies still grow.

The Golden Ratio

Donna Isaac

Spiraling depression was given as the cause
in the obituary about the lonely boy
who finally gave in.

Not the kind of spiral we admire
like the twirl of a chameleon's tail,
a whorl of Romanesco cauliflower,

things with a Fibonacci formula:
pine cones, sunflowers, and nautilus' shells,
but a slow descent, an unfurling,

an unraveling like no other
until a fall into darkness
took it all away,

a paisley of blood on a bed
where they found him curled up
like a baby fast asleep.

Entrepreneur Sans Wall

Donna Isaac

Across the border in the expectant night,
Ciudad Juarez sparkles like so many stars
beyond the desert darkness. An iron gate
encloses an ancient graveyard.

Alma and her son make a nightly raid
into El Paso to buy dozens of Krispy Kreme
donuts and then go back to sell
them from the trunk of her *coche*
to citizens who like plain glazed.

In the early morning hours,
customers might be drug dealers,
hookers, and hungry addicts, longing
for sugar, a lick of jam. They pay
pesos and/or dollars for the sticky goods.

Alma makes pennies on the dollar
so that her children can take classes
at Vista or the community college,
so that their *abuela* can buy masa and meat
for tamales she sells at Christmas,
so that they can feed their yellow dog
tied up, bones showing, in a yard filled with old tires.

Fire Followers

Catherine Montague

Five months after the fire
visitors to burned hillsides talked about
a plant they'd never seen before—
the Whispering Bells.

Emmenanthe penduliflora
the lone species in its genus
requires the heat of wildfire
to rise from seeds hidden for years.

California's chaparral country—
canyons stacked with fuel—
only noticed by outsiders when the winds
throw flame across the ridges.

After the rainfall of the winter months
charred branches point toward endings—
the shattered soil holds a different story—
new stem and leaf, then inflorescence.

The Jepson taxon page, precise and dry,
calls the calyx lobes —“bell-shaped, glandular,
yellow or white, hairy, persistent in age,
withering, papery, enclosing fruit.”

No mention of how the bells whisper
until I turn to the Calscape page—
“a rustling sound when a breeze comes through”
describing those persistent, aging lobes

hanging along the tough, sticky stems
each fruit waiting to become a seed
patiently standing through the dry season
dropping back to earth among sisters

dreaming for years about the next fire
each *Emmenanthe* seed, flat, wide-elliptic,
brown, surface honeycombed,
holding the memory of the landscape.

Those fresh yellow bells of May are not
the ones that whisper. I will return
to hear for myself their rustling sound
in the season we call September.

god Particle

Jonathan Travelstead

They say the device dredged up from Antikythera's history
is a computer ahead of its time. New tools, new science.
New science, new problems. The number '42' found beneath

quark & gluon. The solution to the next riddle yields
spider silk glimmering between all things. How perilous it is
learning this world. Today, a few tentative steps onto an

iced stoop while elsewhere two bits of light hurry towards
collision where one of two things happen: *BANG!* 1) Cloud flutter
& blue earth, tattered into confetti at your sneakers,

or 2) The Wild Hunt for the God Particle begins. Watch
the beady-eyed labcoats toss photons, & hope for snake eyes.
Watch now as they fossick newfangled teeth. Worry nautili

from the sky's helices. Asters of light. Listen. Hear the ceramic
rattle in the universe's breathing. Listen. Notes warbled
on a bent saw. Here: a thin voice rises,

then a glossolalia of stars.

Contact

Jonathan Travelstead

(Come on sign, any sign)

Eighteen. Primed for contact. Prone to messages I believed
hailed me from the stars, I kickstarted my Honda & spooled out
over Illinois' chaff dust. Doglegged abandoned coal roads.

Numbed my wrist from choking the throttle on Orient No. 2,
then Old Ben where conveyors spanning the road were fuselages
of rockets silhouetting the sky. Rusted silos, omens someone

was coming for me. I thought my clutch could unpin their
ignition,
so I shielded my eyes for launch. Thought believe harder
& the gray bodies from my dreams

(Come on sign, any sign)

would sway into existence just beyond my instrument gauge's
green glow. Astral dogs, baying my name from the colossus
crane

I motored past, amniotic with grease. Twenty-stories tall,

the dragline's boom tent-poled the sky, its pool-sized bucket
barely holding the earth down. Common monsters calling
me through
oxide, through clay. Unable to wait,

(Come on sign, any sign)

I cut the engine & headlight. Nightblinded then by
a bumrush of stars blaring their songs to me, I let go the
handlebars.

Helmet craned to sky, I gathered the night close as if an enigma

might be clearly seen on the keyhole's other side. Spark of
meteor.

The fiery rune scrawled over soy field told me they'd come
for me. I downshifted towards light which rippled

the fieldlike fabric. Witness accounts said I would freeze.
Be tractored in. Wake in the stubblefields. None of that
happened.

I only motored through watery, blinding light,

(Come on sign, any sign)

emerging into a fishtailed warble, dumping five hundred pounds
of motorcycle as I ground to a stop. Twenty years. It's been
twenty years & I haven't changed. I'm still peeling chat gravel

from road rash. Waiting for tomorrow's newfangled geegaw
that will let me reenact my attempt at ascension, assuming
this time

it will be different. Every day I curse my stupid,

(Come on sign, any sign)

lonely need to be saved by something beyond this world.
I curse Michelangelo's painting of God & Adam. I curse myself
& I curse you for how close we think we come,

but then just fall short of brushing the celestial when its robes
dip low, draw close enough to touch, then lift away again.
Left behind by the holy which it seems is always leaving us,

not read to connect with the stars.

(Come on sign, any sign)

About the Authors

Julia Ballerini

An historian of photography and former professor of art history, for the past fifteen years Julia Ballerini has devoted full time to writing fiction. Many of her stories, as does “Ultimatum,” address elders and understandings and misunderstandings across generations, cultures, and social strata. She has a lifelong history of volunteer work with immigrants and the homeless. Her academic publications are extensive and several works of fiction have appeared in print and in online journals such as *Persimmon Tree* (2012), *The Tishman Review* (2015), *2Elizabeths* (2018), *Bare Fiction* (2018 award) and others. Forthcoming: *Linea* (2019), *The New Guard* Volume VIII (Contest Semi-Finalist 2019).

Lynne Burnett

Lynne Burnett lives in the Pacific Northwest. Recent publications include *Arc Poetry*, *Blue Heron Review*, *Comstock Review*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *IthacaLit*, *Mockingheart Review*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Ristau*, *River Styx*, *Tamsen*, *Taos Journal of Poetry & Art*, *Underfoot Poetry*, and several anthologies. She is the 2016 winner of the Lauren K. Alleyne Difficult Fruit Poetry Prize, has been nominated for Best of the Net and was shortlisted for Arc's 2018 Poem of the Year. Finishing Line Press published her chapbook *Irresistible* in March, 2018. She maintains a blog/website at <https://lynneburnett.ca>.

Robin Carey

Robin Carey has published three books of creative non-fiction, a photography book text, a number of short stories (one, “Postcard,” is in *Wordrunner eChapbook’s* Rites of Passage issue, March, 2018), and a smattering of poems. He is an Emeritus Professor living with his wife and extended family in Missoula, MT. Awards include the Oregon Book Award for *Baja Journey* and a National Endowment for the Arts Award in creative non-fiction. See his author page on Amazon for published books.

Linda Ferguson

Linda Ferguson has won awards for her poetry and lyrical nonfiction and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize for both fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in many journals, including *Cloudbank*, *Saranac Review*, *VoiceCatcher*, and *The Santa Fe Review*. Her poetry chapbook, *Baila Conmigo*, was published by Dancing Girl Press. As a writing teacher, she has a passion for helping students find their voice and explore new territory. <https://bylindaferguson.blogspot.com>

Sarah Freligh

Sarah Freligh is the author of *Sad Math*, winner of the 2014 Moon City Press Poetry Prize and the 2015 Whirling Prize from the University of Indianapolis. Her fiction and poetry work have appeared in *Sun Magazine*, *Hotel Amerika*, *BOAAT Journal*, *diode*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and in the anthology *New Microfiction: Exceptionally Short Stories* (W.W. Norton, 2018). Among her awards are a 2009 poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a grant from the Constance Saltonstall Foundation in 2006. More details at: <https://sarahfreligh.com>

Donna Isaac

Poet Donna Isaac is a teaching artist who helps organize community readings in the Twin Cities, Minnesota. Published work includes a poetry book, *Footfalls* (Pocahontas Press), a paean to her formative years growing up in the Appalachians; two chapbooks, *Tommy* (Red Dragonfly Press); *Holy Comforter* (Red Bird Chapbooks); and work in journals, e.g., *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*; *Perfume River*; *The Saint Paul Almanac*, and others. Details at: donnaisaacpoet.com

Catharine Leggett

Catharine Leggett’s prize-winning short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies and journals in Canada and the United States, as well as online publications, and on CBC Radio. She is the winner of the Okanagan Fiction Award, and a two-time finalist in the Columbus Creative Cooperative Great Novel Contest. A novel, *The Way to Go Home*, will be published in the spring of 2019 by Urban Farmhouse Press. A short story collection, *In Progress*, won the Eludia Award and will be published by Sowilo Press (Hidden River Arts) in the spring of 2019. She lives in London, Ontario, Canada. Details at: <http://catharineleggett.com>

Catherine Montague

Catherine Montague is a writer, professor, and education researcher who divides her time between Sebastopol and Berkeley, California. Her poetry has been published in the Redwood Writer’s *Phoenix: Out of Silence* and *Something to Crow About* anthologies and the Point Reyes Seashore Association newsletter.

Grant Price

Grant Price is the author of the dystopian climate fiction novel *By the Feet of Men*, which is scheduled to be published by Cosmic Egg Books in September 2019. He currently lives in Berlin, Germany. Further details are available at <https://grantrhysprice.com>.

Jonathan Travelstead

Jonathan Travelstead served in the Air Force National Guard for six years as a firefighter and currently works as a full-time firefighter for the city of Murphysboro, and as co-editor for *Cobalt Review*. Having finished his MFA at Southern Illinois University of Carbondale, he also turns a lathe, crafting pens under the name Scorched Ink Penturning. His first collection *How We Bury Our Dead* from Cobalt Press was released in March, 2015, and *Conflict Tours* (Cobalt Press) was released in 2017.

Emma Wunsch

Emma Wunsch is the author of the YA *The Movie Version* and the chapter-book series *Miranda and Maude*. The third book in the series (Miranda and Maude: Recess Rebels) will be published in early September. Emma's short fiction has been published in a variety of journals including: *The Tishman Review*, *Passages North*, *The Best of the Bellevue Review*, *Lit, J Journal*, and *The Brooklyn Review*. Her story "Looking for Cat Stevens" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2017. Emma is currently working on a collection of short stories loosely linked around the 2016 election. More information is at emmawunsch.com and on Twitter @emmawunsch.