

Circle Show

17



Winter 2017

¹⁷
Circle
Show

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Cover Art

“Astronaut on Fire”
by Klaus Balzano

www.iStock.com/klausbalzano

Toni La Ree Bennett

Lost Glasses

On the way to the mailbox
a woman
loses her eyeglasses—

swept away by the wind
the strongest so far this year
the strongest she can remember.

Her thrift store muffler, palsied by a vicious gust,
whips across her eyes. It's too late
to see where the glasses have been blown.

She crumbles onto a bus stop bench and weeps
through useless eyes, mourning more
than the small loss is worth.

She should be used to this rhythm
by now; she knows how things flow
in and out. Lovers, children, money,
promises, bone density, friends,
muscle strength, memories,
papers, car keys, teeth, pets.

But the wave that is receding
with what she expected to keep
is so callous it takes her breath away.

Her battered heart has kept track
of the unrelenting rhythm like a stock market broker.
She knows the ledger is no longer balanced.

The next day, the woman throws crumpled papers
into the recycle bin. As they unfurl slightly,
she sees the end coming as unrepeatably as snowflakes.

Travel Imperatives

try to stay awake till evening

if there is a saucer with coins
it is unusual to ask for change when tipping

travelers should not photograph anything
perceived to be of a sensitive nature

floors may be more wet than you expect
be prepared to remove your shoes

be vigilant at all times
the doorway may be lower than you think

connection times may require you to quickly move from one gate to another
test the weight of your packed suitcase

be prepared to walk

if you miss a connection, and we hope you don't
you should be prepared to prove your relationship to the child

avoid excessive displays of wealth
take more money than you think you'll need

in the event that your luggage is lost in transit
we recommend luggage be light enough for you to carry short distances

gifts should be left unwrapped
you may arrive at your hotel before noon

try to keep awake till evening
set your watch to the time zone of destination
do not leave it in your suitcase

be prepared to encounter stairs, cobblestones, and unpaved, uneven surfaces
documents will be required at all border crossings

please be prepared to walk

adjoining rooms are side by side but may not be connected
the law requires you to carry your passport at all times

it is wise to always carry a small amount of cash
hide a couple of fifty dollar bills on your person

try to stay awake till evening

based on information from standard conversion tables
ask to see the menu before ordering

if you hold a passport from another country
traveling light is recommended

avoid conversation while commentary is in process
there may be times when reception is not possible

to convert to Celsius, subtract 32, then multiply by 5 and then divide by 9
knowing your ticket number is helpful

if you feel pressure in your ears
you should be prepared to declare everything

Jean Berrett

Gravity

Junior, the tough kid in that old neighborhood,
held his bleeding dog, hit by a car, in his arms
like a baby.

When the dog was for sure dead, he dropped down
and began to cry,
like a baby.

Across the street from Junior,
in front of the house with gabled windows,
my sisters and my brother and I
played on the cement walk and the dirt
of the beaten down lawn.

Under the shining leaves and fears
of a tall and beautiful Norway maple tree.

When they chopped it down—not enough sun in the yard they said, I cried
like a baby.

Some of the ancient hemlocks in northern Wisconsin
are still standing.

Alongside, in fallen, rotting logs,
a peculiar gray light flows into
seas of tiny burrowing things
who relish
the wrack and ruin.

Winter arrived first in the dark hours
and then in the bones.

The god to whom I bowed my head and prayed
said only
I would.

At night, I keep looking up.

Barbara Brooks

Playing with Zero

I like the number zero:
it signals those who are missing,
holds the place for other numbers,
like all those zeros after a one.

It lets me know that another day
is coming with its companions 1,2,3
every tenth year or century
but falls off when time has passed.

There are no multiples of zero:
zero times zero is zero
and there is nothing left after
division, one plus zero is always one
and two is all that is left after subtraction.

Sometimes zero is hard to calculate
like the quiet of the house when the dog is gone.

Sean Corbin

Vampires

We sat together in the living
room me on the couch you in your
recliner a bad vampire movie
on the television and we sat
in silence watching blood
spray across the screen
your bones were crying out
your muscles were tightening
you couldn't stay comfortable
couldn't find that one perfect
way to sit and the lesions in
your brain we didn't know it
but they were spreading sucking
your consciousness away a few
moments at a time you sat
there devouring yourself and I
had no stake no garlic no ray
of light to make the draining stop

Taylor Graham

Relics

Chunks of quartz litter the ground
outside the old mine, abandoned decades
ago. Worthless rock, they say,
on throwaway land – a wilderness
of coyote bush and manzanita
with a scruffy stand of low-altitude live-
oak and digger-pine, game trails
mazing deep into thickets that enclosed
the vagabond camps
before the homeless were evicted.
Worthless land, they say,
unless it's logged and graded for houses
with a hilltop view.
These days, we like to denigrate the past –
blame long-dead miners
for the land's scars, call the mined-out
stone an eyesore. It's our history.
I stoop to pick up a piece of quartz.
Not one fleck of gold in it.
Nothing but the shine of crystal light.

John Grey

Veteran's Memorial

The wall is more reunion than artefact.
There's Ray, the high school tough guy,
Joey, the kid with the acne complex.
Rick of waiting until marriage fame.

Ray wanted vengeance
on everything and everyone,
so of course
Communists easily fit the bill.

Joey longed for nothing more
than a face he could display
without embarrassment.
He must have showed it off too well.
He was taken out by a sniper
in a treetop.

And Rick, poor Rick, he died a virgin
which to me is like dying twice

You just wouldn't believe
how ordinary these guys were.
If you'd ask me years ago
would any of them ever do anything
to be worthy of a testimonial,
I'd have shook my head a thousand times.
Of course, I hadn't even considered death.

Khanh Ha

The Bones of Her Son

I live in a coastal town in the deep south of the Mekong Delta. During the war this was the territory of IV Corps, which saw many savage fights.

I work in a roadside inn. The owner and his wife are in their late sixties. The old woman runs the inn and cooks meals for the guests. I often drive to Ông Dộc town, twenty kilometers south, to pick up customers when they arrive on buses, boats or barges. Most of them come to visit the Lower U Minh National Reserve, twenty kilometers north.

I seldom see the old man. He stays mostly holed up in his room. Sometimes when his door isn't locked, I glimpse him wandering like a specter. He and his wife had a son who served in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. One morning I looked out the window to see the old man digging near a starfruit tree, a small figure clad in white pajamas and a black trilby on his head. The grassy ground was dotted with bluebells, and hibiscus bled in mounds on the grass. After digging down a foot or so, he stopped. From the pocket of his pajamas he pulled out a bone. It looked like a wrist bone. He sat on his haunches and placed the bone in the hole and scooped dirt over it. After a while the old woman came out, grabbed him by the arm and dragged him inside. The next morning he was out there digging again. The same spot. I could hear the sound of his spade hitting the bone and saw him stop. He picked up the bone, smeared with brown dirt, and dragged his spade to the lemon tree. There were fallen lemons on the ground, deep yellow and wrinkled, and they sank with the fresh loam into the earth. He fretted about the placement of the bone, turning it this and that way.

I had to ask the old woman, and she told me that their son was killed in action somewhere in IV Corps in 1967—exactly twenty years ago. They never found his body.

When I come back to the inn, it is still early in the morning. I find Mrs. Rossi in the kitchen boiling water to make tea. She came here to search for the remains of her son who was a lieutenant who served in the U.S. Army in 1967, exactly 20 years to date. Chi Lan, her

Vietnamese adopted daughter, is standing in the back door, looking through her camera at the old man, out in the back lot, digging up dirt to bury a bone. Mrs. Rossi adopted her in 1974 when she was five years old. She's nineteen now.

I tell Mrs. Rossi that I found a man whom she could use as a guide.

Her face beams. She grabs my hands. "Bless your heart, Giang. Who is he?"

"His name is Lung. He lives in the buffer zone. A war veteran."

"What side was he on during the *Vietnam* war?"

"Our side—the Republic of Vietnam. He'd also fought in the Indochina War. He was with the *Bawouan*."

"The what?"

"Bataillon de Parachutistes Vietnamiens—the Vietnamese parachute battalion. Or BPVN." I shrug as I catch Mrs. Rossi's confused look. "How the Vietnamese say *BPVN* in their tongue to how the French say it, *Bawouan*, is beyond me."

"I won't try. Believe me, Giang." She pours hot water from the kettle into the teapot. "So he fought the French back then?"

"No, ma'am. He fought alongside the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 against the Viet Minh. I was six at that time."

"I'm confused."

"He belonged to the Vietnamese National Army—the French-trained, non-Communist Vietnamese government."

"I understand now." Mrs. Rossi puts the kettle back on the stove. "Say that word again for me, please?"

"*Bawouan*?"

Chi Lan walks back in, camera in hand. “Don’t make her say it, *chú*.” Her voice is soft with a lilt in ‘*chú*.’ Uncle. She tilts her head toward the back lot. “Yesterday she asked me about the old man’s name. She wanted to greet him . . .”

“His name is *Quý*.” I cut in.

“His last name.”

“*Nguyễn*.”

“I know,” Chi Lan says. “She had trouble pronouncing it. Not *Nu-gen*, I told her. Not *Gwen*.”

We sit down at the dining table. Mrs. Rossi pours tea for Chi Lan and herself, except me. She knows I drink only black coffee.

“I’m not sure I’m cut out for foreign languages,” Mrs. Rossi says. “I only wanted to know the man’s name so I could at least say hello to him when we run into each other. Mr. *Nu*—”

“Mr. *Quý*,” I say. “In Vietnamese your last name comes before your first name. And in greetings, your first name will be addressed. We go by the first name with a title of respect or a kinship term, like Uncle, Aunt.” Seeing Mrs. Rossi’s grimace, I smile. “Your name will be Rossi Catherine in Vietnamese, and a Vietnamese will address you as Madam Catherine.”

Chi Lan puts her cup down and looks at her mother. “I was about to tell you that, Mom. The Vietnamese name is arranged in opposite order of the English name. The family name comes first, then middle name, then first name.”

“I believe I already knew that.” Mrs. Rossi nods, then turns her face to me. “Your name is *Leh Zhang*. Correct?”

“Right, ma’am.” I know she meant Le Giang.

Chi Lan comes back from the pantry with a papaya on a plate. As she cuts it in half, lengthwise, the tiny peppercorn-black seeds glistening in the pith, a sweet smell wafts up like the smell of an overripe cantaloupe. She scoops out the seeds with a spoon. “Do you want a slice, *chú*?”

“No, thanks,” I say.

Chi Lan places the spoon and one half of the papaya in front of Mrs. Rossi.

“I love this,” Mrs. Rossi says. “And the local bananas. They’re so sweet and fragrant. What do you call papaya in Vietnamese?”

“*Đu-đu*,” I say.

Mrs. Rossi repeats the word.

I grin. “If you ask for a papaya from a Vietnamese, ma’am, your pronunciation will certainly get you in trouble.”

Mrs. Rossi rolls her eyes. “Why?”

“The way you pronounced it could mean . . . sexual intercourse. But it’s a vulgar word for it.”

Chi Lan laughs. Mrs. Rossi shakes her head. “Well, Giang. I told you I’m not cut out for this language.” Suddenly she stops and looks out the slatted window toward the back lot. The old man is dragging his spade toward a fenced-in garden plot. “Giang, he’s going to ruin it for you.”

I look, half rising from the chair. “That’s the mustard greens in the plot I just planted for his wife.”

“Poor soul,” Mrs. Rossi says as I hurry out through the back door.

Mrs. Rossi and I go into forest for the first time, in a sampan. There are four of us. Mrs. Rossi and me, Old Lung and Ông Ba—Mr. Ba. Old Lung found Ông Ba, a settler who owns a fifteen-foot-long sampan fitted with a Kohler outboard motor, the type that has become ubiquitous in the water grid here for many settlers who own a canoe or a sampan; you can never find them in the waterways without a motor.

We follow Biên Nhi Canal, going east. The canal was arrow-straight and clear with a paved road edging it on one side, with dwellers’ homes on the other side, mirrored in the blue water. Ông Ba said it was an elephant road before he was born—trampled down by

traveling herds to become a path—and whenever there was a dirt path there were migrators.

When the sun finally breaks through on the water's surface, we enter Cáy Tàu River, the waterway wide and brown. There are fish stakes pounded into the riverbed along the banks. We reach Trem River and turn south, seeing the forest on the far right, green with white flecks of cajeput flowers.

Past a sawmill there are lumber barges moored along the low-lying bank. Ông Ba says, "Yonder it is." He turns right into a canal, the sampan bobbing on the choppy currents where the canal enters the river, the banks high and thick with bear's breeches, glossy- and spiny-leaved, and over the bank you can see the sawmill's brown roof.

When we no longer hear the noises from the sawmill, at least a kilometer behind, Ông Ba brings the sampan alongside the bank where it flares into a shaded cove. Ahead, a hundred yards is the forest.

"This is the place," Ông Ba says, cutting the motor.

I translate for Mrs. Rossi. Old Lung simply watches her. She looks at the hand-drawn map and then across the grassy tract of land, brown in the sun. She gestures toward the open space: "I imagine the American Army base used to be over there?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

She tilts back her umbrella, her face full of sun, and gazes into the shadowy space farther downstream where the canal disappears into the forest.

Old Lung opens his knapsack and takes out a cigarette. In the rucksack he carries his lunch packed in a plastic container, a bottle of water, and a large bundle of clear nylon. He lights the cigarette, works the knapsack onto his back and picks up the machete and the long-handled spade with a small blade.

I borrow the map from Mrs. Rossi. In the hand-sketched map the U Minh forest is kidney-shaped, bisected by a river running north-south. From the confluence, the map says, where Cáy Tàu River flows into Trem, you go north for fifteen kilometers, and there you see the old American Army base sitting westward from the Trem River.

"You've done this before," I speak to Old Lung. "How will you go

about it with her?”

“You want to hear the truth?” Old Lung glances at me. “I helped many folks looking for bones. But they’re our own people. They’re poor and tough, who can put up with hardship and the forest scourge. Still, in the end many of them gave up and went back home. They got ill, and there’s no infirmary in this buffer zone. You have to go to Ông Dôc town for medical treatment.” He squints at me. “How long can she last? How much faith does she have? It’s a vast area and it’s only me and her.”

“I know it’s a vast area, but I already told you about her son. He was last seen here.” I point toward the map of the forest. “If he made it out of the base and into the forest, he wouldn’t get very far before the Viet Cong picked him up. There’s a creek not far after you enter the forest, and on the other side of that creek is swamps with bogs and many spots of quicksand. If I were you, I’d stay on the one side of that creek that’s safe and work your way down.”

“I’ve seen that creek. I believe it goes to the sea several kilometers toward the west.”

“Good. It’s a lot of land to cover, but not too vast. You do your best, old man, and I trust you.”

Old Lung clears his throat and scratches his head. “I should tell you this. There’s a woman who works as a medium for folks who came here looking for bones. She lives in our buffer zone and you should see her backyard. It must have over two dozen graves from the bones she collected by helping those folks search that forest and elsewhere. Unidentified bones that nobody wanted. But that woman has a good heart. She took the bones home, washed them with five-flavor berry leaves, wrapped them in nylon sheets, and buried them, each set of bones in a grave. She put flowers on every grave.”

“You mean to tell me that the bones could be anywhere, even in that woman’s backyard?”

“Yeah.” Old Lung taps his spade. “But I must start somewhere, right? You know why I don’t carry a spade with a wider blade? This dry season makes the clay soil in there hard as rock and you must use a spade with a small blade. You dig and sparks fly. Eh?”

His machete will help him clear the bushes and branches from giant

bamboo and ebony. But he has no help. When the remains-gathering crews go into the forest, they survey the area for half a day and then start digging. At night they hang hammocks and sleep in the forest. It takes weeks; sometimes they find nothing, other times they stumble upon a mass burial ground.

I hand the map back to Mrs. Rossi. “I wish I could go into the forest with you, ma’am. But I’m needed back at the inn. Mr. Lung knows the method. He has a good plan.”

“You mean he knows where to look?” Mrs. Rossi says.

“And how to spot a makeshift grave. Like a hump of earth above the ground. Things like that. I can find more men to help, if he finds that he can’t dig by himself anymore.”

“I understand, Giang,” Mrs. Rossi says. “I understand perfectly.”

It’s forenoon now. It rained when I went into town. Rain hasn’t let up. Water started rising on the roads on my way back from the town. On a rainy day like this, Mrs. Rossi stays home.

Back then, the woman innkeeper told us, shortly after the North and the South were reunited, people from all parts of the country journeyed to the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta to search for the remains of lost sons, lost husbands. This region, with its vast wetland forest, was known to the North Vietnamese Army as Military Zone 9, the name borrowed from the French Colonial days. You would see people at dawn heading into the woodland beyond the inn, across the grassland and rice fields, carrying knapsacks, spades. At dusk they would come back out. Some of them stayed here at the inn. Mostly civilians. Sometimes you would see soldiers but they didn’t stay at the inn. They came in organized groups—called remains-gathering crews—and they would camp in the woodland with their trucks for a week or longer. Many crew members were war veterans who had fought in Military Zone 9 and knew the region well. They remembered where they had once buried their comrades in makeshift graves. Before searching, they would burn incense and pray for the lost souls to guide them to where their remains could be found. During the war thousands of soldiers were stationed in this region, always deep in the swamp forest. Many died from bombing and shelling and ground

assaults. In that forbidden swamp, the flesh and bones of soldiers on both sides lay under the peat soil.

Rain is falling on the inn's red-tiled roof that slants sharply over the veranda. Sluicing over the low-hanging edge of the roof, falling and glittering in a white-water curtain. The veranda, deep and always shadowy even on a sunny day, surrounds the inn and shields the first-floor rooms from the pelting rain. Bundled up in my raincoat, I quick-step onto the veranda and set down the two bags of groceries and household supplies on the cement floor, next to the entrance door.

We also have new guests who arrived at the inn three days ago. A couple from Ireland. They drove down from Hô Chí Minh City. The husband is a journalist. Since their arrival he has gone around the U Minh region, always with a camera, backpack and palm-sized voice recorder. The wife, in her late thirties, made friends easily with us. When she first heard of the purpose of Mrs. Rossi's visit, she said to her, "Jasus, ye break my heart."

The door opens with the familiar scratching noise the bottom-edge wire mesh makes against the cement floor. Since I came, I have sealed each door's bottom edge with a wire mesh to keep out bugs and rodents and even snakes, especially during floods. Chi Lan stands in the doorway, holding a mug in her hand.

"*Chú*," she says, "give me a grocery bag."

"Where's everyone?"

"My mom's in the back with Maggie," she says. "Washing clothes. Alan went off somewhere in their car."

I notice steam rising from her mug. "What're you drinking?"

"Café *phin*. I made it myself."

"Black?"

"No. With condensed milk. I can't drink it black like you."

"I've got you into drinking café *phin* now, huh?"

"We'll be even when I get you to quit smoking," Chi Lan says. She steps back for me to come in. Barefooted, her toenails look rosy, freshly polished.

I smile at her gentle tone. I have indeed thought of cutting back on smoking. It is cool inside the house. She wears a black T-shirt and white shorts. My sandals squeak, leaving a wet trail behind me on the gray cement floor. Clean as the old woman of the inn demands it. At the end of the big room is a pantry that has a refrigerator. Chi Lan sets her mug on a shelf and puts the groceries into the refrigerator. She stops and holds up a paper-wrapped baguette.

“*Bánh mì!*” she says, sounding as if she’s just found gold.

“I bought plenty of them for lunch. Hope you and everyone’d like it.”

“I love it. What do we have in them?” She takes off the rubber band, opens the wrapper and peeks inside the baguette. The fillings—pork bellies and liver pâté garnished with cilantro, chili peppers, cucumber slices, and pickled carrots—seem to please her. “I’ve tried to make these at home,” she says, wrapping up the baguette and tying it with the rubber band, “and they never came out like this—the smell, the taste.”

“Because most of the fillings are homemade. The pork bellies in particular. They made the bread themselves too. Didn’t you know that?”

“And because I’m an amateur cook.” She picks up her mug and sips. “Are you a good cook, chú?”

“I can manage on my own. Alan asked me about a snake dish the other day. I told him before he and his wife leave, I’d cook a snake dish for everyone.”

“Oh my.” She closes the refrigerator. “Did you tell him you used to catch snakes with your father? And about the snake gallbladder?”

“No. I’ve never told anyone that. Except you.” I set down the supplies bag, squatting on my heels, and inspect the four legs of the cupboard, each leg shod with a tin cup half filled with vinegar. In one cup floats a mass of dead black ants.

The air stirs faintly as she kneels beside me. “Must be the sugar jar in the cupboard that attracted them. Look at them.” She bends closer, sweeping back her hair over her ear. “That looks like a moat around a fortress—the water and the cups. Is this your idea, chú?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re a good custodian.”

“It’s not water in those tin cups. It’s vinegar.”

She looks again. “What’s the difference?”

“Ants might survive in water and they’ll crawl up into the cupboard.”

“I didn’t know vinegar kills them.” She turns to face me, her eyes gently holding my gaze. “My mom appreciated having that clothing trunk in our room to store our clothes. I didn’t know why it’s lined with tin till you told us. Otherwise our old suitcases would’ve crawled with moths and cockroaches.”

“I’m going to replace the vinegar in those cups.” I take out a bottle of vinegar in the bag. “When I lift a leg up, can you remove the cup under the leg for me?”

“Go ahead, chú.”

She remains on her knees, head bent, as I plant my feet and slowly raise a corner of the cupboard. I glance down as she slides the cup out, and through the open top of her T-shirt I can see that she’s braless. I hold my breath, set the cupboard back down. She tilts her face up at me.

“What now? Should I empty the cup—and the ants?”

“Yeah.”

Each time I heave the cupboard, despite my knowing what I will see when I drop my gaze at her, I still look down through the crescent opening below her clavicles, admiring the milky white of her skin, the fullness of her bosom. What comes back to my mind is a child’s innocent eyes and a man’s disturbed thoughts.

On the rear veranda Mrs. Rossi and Maggie, the Irish woman, are scrubbing clothes in a round rubber tub. The woman inn owner normally does this chore. Though old, she can still scrub and wring

garments with her small hands. At times she would tread on them the old-fashioned way, while hoisting the legs of her pantaloons.

“Giang,” Mrs. Rossi calls to me, “you’re back already.”

Maggie, her face wet, raises her voice with a toss of her head. “Made it back in one piece in this bloody weather, didn’t ye?”

“Roads are flooded now,” I say to them. “Where’s your husband, Maggie?”

“Went to meet his local guide and then off to the jungle.” She means the U Minh forest. “I said go aisy on a day like this. He’s beyant control. Wouldn’t you say, Catherine?”

Mrs. Rossi shrugs. I step closer and look at her lower legs. Above her ankles are crowds of deep purple marks like she has been hit with a buckshot.

“Leech bites?” I ask her, pointing at them.

“How d’you know by just looking?” says Mrs. Rossi.

“I’ve got scars on my legs from them.” I pull up my trousers legs. The women and Chi Lan stare at the pea-sized scars on my shins and calves.

Her face scrunched up, Chi Lan shakes her head. “You’ve got them during the war, chú?”

“From years in the jungle.”

Mrs. Rossi drops a wrung-out sock into an empty basket next to the tub. “Every night when I take off my socks, they’re bloodstained from those suckers. The first few days in the forest I was near tears from putting up with them. Mr. Lung, he seemed unperturbed by leeches and bugs. You know how he got rid of those leeches for me?”

“With his cigarettes?” I say. “Make them drop away?”

“That or I just pulled them off my legs.”

“That’s why you’ve got scars like these.” I sit down on my heels and put my fingertip on her calf. “Do like this. Slide your fingernail under the sucker’s mouth. It’ll break off. Won’t leave any scar mark on you,

I guarantee.”

“Is there any way to keep them from latching on to you?”

“I’ll get you some chopped tobacco. Soak your socks in the tobacco water and then dry the socks before putting them on. Leeches won’t bother you again.”

“Does it really work?”

I nod. “Or you can cut the leech in half.”

Looking at me, Mrs. Rossi leans back slowly and smiles. “But it’ll regenerate itself, won’t it?”

“No, ma’am. Mother Nature is fair to us that way.”

Mrs. Rossi pats my hand. “You’re a kind soul, Giang. I know today is your day off, and you volunteered to go with me into the forest to help Mr. Lung. Bless your heart. I’m thankful for this torrential rain that keeps us from going out.”

Maggie laughs. “Zhang, people like you will do us all the good in the world, won’t it?”

She rises with the tub in her arms and empties it over the edge of the veranda, then re-fills the tub with rainwater sluicing like waterfall from the edge of the roof. I have seen her and Chi Lan washing with rainwater, cleaning and scrubbing themselves until their faces glowed. Precious rainwater. When it rains I would fill jugs of rainwater for the old woman to wash and bathe the old man, and for cooking and drinking, too. Once, while filling the jugs, I told Chi Lan that in the jungles we soldiers used to wait for rain so we could shower, and sometimes it was just a passing shower which stopped before we could get all the suds off our bodies. She laughed.

“Is she sleeping?” Chi Lan looks back into the house for the old lady.

“She’s feeding him,” I say.

“You want me to fill the water jugs for her?”

“No.” My hand touches my shirt pocket where the cigarette pack is. “We have all we need for now.”

I catch her gaze at my gesture for a smoke. I leave my hand on my chest and in my mind I see the creamy white skin of her bosom. She squats down and begins scrubbing a mud stain off her mother's jeans in the tub.

Mrs. Rossi arches her back, drawing a deep breath. "I must say I admire the old lady for washing clothes like this. My back is killing me already."

Maggie is wringing her denim shirt until veins bulge on the backs of her hands. "That's why that ol' lady walks bowlegged." She shakes out the shirt loudly. "Mother o' God give us a washer and a dryer. That's one thing we need here."

I have told them to air-dry their clothes in the sun once a week, so the sun would kill any eggs that might have been deposited in their garments. The books they brought with them too. Shake them out once in a while. On the first day of their arrival I heard her scream upstairs. I saw a trail of black ants that led into their room and heard her say to Alan, her husband, "I won't touch that thing for the steam of their piss." So I went in and there I saw a dead scorpion under the dresser. I picked up the scorpion and told them I would get rid of the ants for them. "Oh you're a treasure," she said. "Please make them bloody eejits go 'way."

Now Maggie hangs up her shirt on the cord strung across the veranda and clips it with a wooden clothes-peg. In her late thirties she is lean, small-bosomed, her sandy-blonde hair tied into a ponytail. Bony in the face that's freckled heavily under the eyes, clear blue eyes, she smiles a lot, the ear-to-ear smile that brings a smile to your face, too. She comes back to the tub for her cotton slacks. "You ever got caught with this sorta rain in the jungle while ye go about yeer business?" she asks Mrs. Rossi.

"Oh I've been in those downpours and the misting after the monsoon rains. It's miserable, Maggie."

"Tell me, love, how on earth can ye find anything in such a place? In that wilderness God doesn't plant a sign that says, Dig here! Ye know what I mean."

Mrs. Rossi skims the suds off Chi Lan's forearm with her finger. "Mr. Lung has a method," she said. "We kinda divided up the area

and went from one section to the next. When we spot a mound of earth here and there, he'd dig and dig, bless his old heart. He never stops going until I beg him to take a breather. Then he'll take a sip of water, have a smoke, and then be back at it. Most of the times we find nothing. A few times we found bones, human bones, and God Almighty I'd feel myself shaking. And you know something? You can't tell one skull from another. They all look like they were cast from the same mold. Those unclaimed skulls belong to unknown soldiers and that's why somebody like me is still searching for them."

Listening to Mrs. Rossi, I couldn't help thinking the same thought. You can't tell those skulls apart. You can't tell a Vietnamese skull from an American skull.

Mrs. Rossi shakes her head, as if trying to chase away something unpleasant. "One time we found a Penicillin bottle among the bones. It was closed tight with a rubber cap. Mr. Lung opened it and there's nothing but a piece of paper inside. Well, he doesn't speak English like you, Giang, but after a lot of gesticulating and with much pidgin English, he got me to understand that it had to do with a soldier's identification. Things like name, combat unit, rank, birthplace and hometown. He said that back when the remains-gathering crews would arrive searching for the remains of their comrades, the bones they found without Penicillin bottles would be brought back and buried in the National Military Cemetery in Hô Chí Minh City. The unidentified bones would be interred in the section for the remains of unknown Vietnamese soldiers."

Maggie frowns. "The Americans must've bombed the bejesus outa the jungle. So what's left in there to find?"

I cut in. "Sometimes all you rebury are a few bones. The rest got blown away."

"And if ye find them," Maggie says, "how d'ye take them out' bones back?"

I plug a cigarette in my mouth without lighting it. "They pack them in nylon bags and hang them on tree limbs. Keep them away from termites because the remains-gathering crews would stay in the forest for weeks. They bring all the bags back to the cemetery when their stay is over."

Maggie screws her eyes at me. "Say ye stumble on a skull of an

orangutan. Can ye tell? Or ye bag it up and bury it in your National Military Cemetery among the oul' souls of yeer soldiers?"

Mrs. Rossi eyes Maggie with a bemused expression. I take the cigarette from my lips. "The men of the remains-gathering crews know about bones. They know how to tell a monkey skull from a human skull. A woman's skull from a man's skull . . ."

"Seriously?" Maggie chirps up.

"Yeah," I say. "They can tell. A woman's chin bone is smaller than a man's chin bone. The eye sockets are deeper. That sort of thing."

"Ah, now," Maggie says, nodding. "Nurses, weren't they?"

"Soldiers. Women fighters."

Mrs. Rossi wipes foam off Chi Lan's cheek. "We did find a couple of skulls and Mr. Lung said they were women's skulls. I had the faintest idea why he said that. But women soldiers?"

I told them the women's skulls must have belonged to a vanguard unit of women fighters who took risks to spearhead into enemy territory. That was their mission. All of them were women.

Maggie whistles. "All women, eh? Aw for Jaysus sake . . ."

Mrs. Rossi sighs. "Mr. Lung was respectful with the bones we found. You must see how careful he was with those bones when he came upon them. . . ."

"He's a gravedigger and undertaker around here," I say.

"I admire him for his professionalism," Mrs. Rossi says, "but more so for the personal feeling in the way he treated the bones. Before he dug, he'd light a stick of incense. Then you just watch him stab and stab the ground with his shovel and sometimes it'd hit rocks and sparks'd fly and then he suddenly stopped and looked down and there lay a small bundle in the hole, just a nylon bunch tattered and gray and when he ran his hand over it, the nylon fell apart. Like ashes. A skull cracked and chipped. Like broken china."

"What'd he do with them?" Maggie asks. "In the name of Jaysus, Mary and Holy St. Joseph!"

Mrs. Rossi's voice drops. "He rewraps the bones in a clean piece of nylon he brought with him and shovels dirt over the pit and says a prayer."

I feel as if she's living her wish through Old Lung's acts, to see her son's remains ever cared for by a stranger in an unknown place.

Mrs. Rossi continues, "After he reburies the bones, sometimes with a skull, Mr. Lung flattens the dirt and removes the incense stick. I asked him why he did that and he explained, while miming, that'd wipe out any sign of a grave. Why, I asked. So the bad people wouldn't come upon it, he said. That's as far as I could get to the truth."

Her wrinkled face holds a dogged patience. I tap the cigarette on my thumbnail. "Mr. Lung did the right thing," I say. "There are bone crooks who go around digging up bones and selling them."

"Selling bones?" Mrs. Rossi's mouth falls agape.

"Swindlers. Bone profiteers."

"Selling bones to whom?" Mrs. Rossi asks.

"To contractors who build the National Military Cemetery."

"I might be obtuse," Mrs. Rossi says. "Would you please explain that?"

"These bone crooks go into the forests. The worst of them follow the poor folks after they've recovered the bones of their relatives and outright rob them. Then they sell the bones to the contractors in the city. You see, ma'am, for each tomb the contractors build, they charge the government. The more tombs the more profit. The contractors divide up the bones they buy from the bone crooks, and instead of building one tomb for a dead soldier's bones they build two, three tombs and charge the government. For the unknown remains, they'll end up having several unknown markers for one dead soldier. But the worst, ma'am, are those who rob the relatives. Instead of being properly buried back home with a tomb and a headstone, a dead soldier will be buried in the National Military Cemetery as an unknown soldier with his bones in multiple tombs."

Maggie taps her forehead. "Aw Gawd, I sure never heard of this me self."

“Me neither,” Mrs. Rossi says. “Who could think of such an inhuman thing?”

I gaze at her wrinkled face as she tosses her head back, fanning her face with her hand. *Why a Vietnamese adopted child?* Did it let her hold on to the memory of her lost son? I like Mrs. Rossi. A retired high school principal. A sweet old lady. I admire her determination to find her son’s remains. More so, I admire her faith. Painful faith. Yet it never dies in her after twenty years.

Sean Lause

Mr. Shade's Redemption

I step into the shadow of a gull,
and leave the earth for a timeless breath.
A black wing guides me through a graceful wind,
and now whole wheels of them descend,
weaving the air with light,
a white fountain to quench all thirst.

I step from my body through a door
in the air, and all is well, all
will be well, as if this fall
and flight and longing were only
a dance of random angels biding time.

As if chess pawns, suddenly weightless,
are leaping nights and moons to ripen
into queens, and sometimes
in the midst of whirling cries of hunger,
and the chaos of the frozen sun,
the words and the worlds they play
suddenly come aright.

Joseph Murphy

Doris

1.

She smiled as she pushed along:
Still using her walker; still at home.

Frail, beautiful, the former model
Greeted me with a kiss.

A boy then, she was the first I saw ill.
Polio had struck in her late twenties; before 35
She'd be bed-ridden

I visited the hospital once.

She offered a smile,
But her words were slurred, high-pitched,
Agonizing to hear. Shortly, anger
Overwhelmed her. She flailed her arms,
In tears; my uncle
Hand on her forehead,
Tried to calm her.

2.

While she could still sit on their porch,
I had helped him plant hollyhocks,
As she sipped tea.

The tall flowers still remind me of her
And summer evenings
I spent eluding dragonflies
As she looked on.

Simon Perchik

*

You lower your voice and dig
till it comes up empty
stays in place though you

are the only one who talks
as the sound dirt makes
when taken away night after night

to fill the hole in this bed
—from such a darkness
you carry up the Earth

to look for the sun
where an afternoon should be
and there you wait

gently pushed along
by some hillside on tip-toe
quietly leaving your mouth.

*

You lean into this tree as if its roots
struck something made from wood
no longer moves, became an island

with mountains laid out in rows
and though they have no arms
they open them when someone

is left close by –under such a weight
their hands break apart the Earth
from feeling their way around it

grave after grave, blinded by moonlight
as the chunks you never saved
form this nearly empty night

with nothing but the bright green hole
this dying tree drains, keeps dry
between what you wanted and the shine.

*

You dead still look out at water
are sheltered inside these row-houses
laid down along the shore –each grave

waiting for your Moses-like wave
the way a valley is dried
for rafts made from stone

though water never leaves you
covers each afternoon
with the few hours it needs

between your hands
kept separate to clear a path
as if nothing happened.

David Spicer

Ancient Soul

I have little power, more focus. I ache
like an antique watch. Some wags
call me Douglas Fairbanks, others
Narcissus. Comments like this don't
faze me any more than a diamond
the size of an orange. I exult about
wolves loving shrews, sharing
a scorpion when they orgasm—not
a geek's mouth licking me.
So wrap chains around me to capture
my omnipotence, scratch my craw,
and I'll pose as a smoking drunk whose
lungs puff out like poison mushrooms.
No joke: I still search for Venus
wearing a candelabra or antler's horns—
I can't decide which. And here are my
ancient soul's tips: Don't stoop when
you bend or bow after you dance,
and ignore a comic's snarls when he
tires of laurels and fanfare, someone my
ego worships, even if he's Narcissus.

Yuma, Where Are You?

Yuma nightmared tonight.
She was a seagull with an apple
in her mouth, willows below
seancing to ensure safety
against dingoes in the bog.
She awoke, flailed and yelped.
I kissed her on the navel, sucked
her toenail. Folly. She ignored
my plot to console her, leapt
from the bed, accused, *Junkyard cat!*
I may as well have been in an igloo.
Dashed after her to the bathroom,
played a zither serenade. The door swung
open as she pronounced, *This chapter
is over. The dream was your fault.* Gathered
an umbrella and headed for the bridge.
No victor here. My question: was her
endgame in sight? I couldn't x-ray
her mind, couldn't garner an answer.
I zigzagged outside. Gone. Oh, Yuma,
my soul's kleptomaniac, you've vexed
and stung me. Undo your caprice,
don't vacate my company or I'll salivate
foam. Don't hide, don't travel far and
wander into a haberdashery, for I'll find
you, I'll erase your suspicion and carry you
home, we'll bang the gong we once shared.

Robert Joe Stout

Dying Clown

The geranium is dying. I talk to it,
tell it how I loved its blooms, small,
lavender, profuse. *Geranio payoso*
—clown geranium—the flower seller said,
not like the ones beside it, a pink,
a red, growing well—new leaves,
new buds—and from some obscure gloaming
I sense Larry, strong, robust, approach
to take my hand. We laugh, start to tell
theater jokes and... he's not here.
Dead. A heart attack. How long? Twelve,
now maybe thirteen years. Why him,
not me? I shake my head and realize
I'm staring at the flower. A dying clown
between two healthy specimens. Why it
and not the others? Glancing up I peer
towards mountains, rocky, sere and far away,
try to extract meaning but find none.
Life and dying part of an equation
sensed but not explained. Instinctively
I touch the drooping branches. They
respond, acknowledging a sharing.
Or just affected by a gust of wind?

Roger Topp

Crystal Bakes a Cake

Find it curious you can make coffee all day long and no one will stop you, two cups at a pour until your head is a hot swollen watermelon. No one is going to sympathize. No one is going to take away the mug and hide it behind the puffed wheat. If there are ill effects apart from a sunlit, watermelon sized brain, you will need to keep them to yourself.

Midwinter. Lost at sea. Your cabin smacks of mold and barnacles. It is a shambling, top-heavy shipwreck inside of a bottle fallen into the kelp-forests of a pile rug. The sails are half furled, the boat half at anchor, the journey a half accomplished affair. If you try and fix everything by poking it with a stick, you will crush the yards and free the cannon. Darkness and the winter ocean will swallow the cabin and the stove will grow cold waiting for you to learn surgery. If you paw carefully through the wreckage you will find all the little parts for all of autumn's board games. If you rummage, you will find a hand-penned note from a friend asking you over for drinks. The signature is in code. If you only look at the debris, everything will appear uniform and uninteresting. The rug-forests are alien, the bits foreign and all gone on vacation from themselves. The details swim like they belong to someone else's adventure.

No mistake, these are all your lost things. Wake up. Relight the fire. Stagger to the kettle with your arms out like a zombie, your pajamas keeping your heels warm. Pick up a hunk of wood. From a beach or a forest or a river or a field... It used mean something. Next a toy elephant, a catalog, a bruised Matchbox car, a dried flower, a love note, a silver bowl, a wooden bowl, a ceramic bowl. This last is local and cracked. The wood is pine and from far away. The car is die-cast. The catalog is 100% recycled coffee cups. It smells of mildew. Your cell phone, if plucked from the wreckage, is dead. You stare at the ghost in the glass and try to remember what the home screen looks like.

Your windows are a blaze of white winter sunlight and folds of drifted snow washed against stiff trees. The knots of the silver birch are the only physically precise features on the landscape. They are the whorls that won't make you blind.

Try for the third time today to change course and turn your week around. Because it takes time to heat water for dishes, this is an easy task to begin. Then work on a pillow shaped like a fish. Bang it around at the floor and the bookshelves and the ceiling. The propane roars and dust clouds swirl. The pot of water plinks to remind you to pay attention. You should put music on but you find yourself rearranging CDs. Ultimately, you make do with the ones in the changer. Tell yourself this is cleaning up, and it is. Your digital collection will never be so tidy. Relearn how you pick things up, put them together, and make bigger and better and more useful things. A piece of thread and a paperclip make a fish hook. You have no idea when you will find it handy.

You lose interest in the CDs and the scary junk caught in the sofa. You begin picking up loose and possibly dirty clothes. They are not exactly strewn about, but the pile is in entirely the wrong place. It will suit better over there, by the thing. Now what are you forgetting?

Feed the fish. Watch as he gulps his scant crumbs and then helicopters around looking for a friend. For the tenth or twelfth time you decide he needs a little castle to go in the center of his bowl, something he can orbit. Or maybe he likes interiors, a bowl within a bowl in which he can hide all the time. Perhaps he isn't one of those swimming about fish. You stick your nose to the glass and tell him being inside is no good. It'll just drive you crazy. Crank up the engines and go somewhere.

Crys knocks on the door. She has very long arms. She can cold, bare-knuckle rap on the wood as she waves at you through the kitchen window. She is underdressed, but that's because her cabin is close and coats are for wusses. She firmly believes the hot tub should be steaming furiously before she runs outside naked, towel over her shoulder, feet sticking like Velcro to the ice. If she is not submerged in heat within seconds she will drop the towel, look at you the way a fox looks at a buffalo, and turn around and walk back inside too slowly for words. She will close the door. You will not get to see what happens next. The towel will remain cemented to the patio for the remainder of the season.

Look again. Crys is not so undressed as all that. Never underestimate her experience with winters. Her coat is cut well, and you should not judge her by how she dances at parties.

She's wearing her glasses, so you're screwed. She smiles, so let her in.

Good choice. Crys has baked a cake. The cake is gluten free, egg free, dairy free, nut free, soy free, and caffeine free, not that any of that matters to you. Crys wants a hunk herself and these are her terms. Once her hands are free she wants to check your forehead for excess heat. Luckily there is a layer of black ice still buried under your skin. It's broken up now. It's moving, running to those deep places. Crys has thin, bony fingers and long toes to match. She seems satisfied.

“Your hands are cold,” you say.

She seems to know where your knives are. “We want you to investigate,” Crys says after you've taken a first bite of the cake. She's been generous and sly. Yours is a large piece with the fine print written into the icing. “We think you bring perspective. Not that we don't have perspective. We got perspective like a tiger has spots—or stripes. Stripes. But you're like observant and shit.” She shouts this last bit the way the neighbors do when they are perfectly aware how far away the next the pair of ears are—and don't care. She stands with her legs apart, her finger giving orders. She pulls off her coat and her sweater steams. “You know you have to feed that thing,” she says pointing at the wood stove.

“What perspective is that? Who is we? And what's in the icing?”

“Terrible accident or foul play,” she says. “Only reasonable explanation.” Crys sticks out her tongue. It's just slightly blue and you can't imagine what she's been eating. “We're concerned about Bob,” she says.

Bob's been missing for a few weeks now. His cabin was froze up, wallet and phone still there. No note. Doesn't own a car. Nothing wrong. Everything wrong. Maybe he used his passport to travel south.

Crys starts checking off her fingers. “You were his best friend. You discovered him last time. You were the first to notice he was gone this time. We is we.”

“Bob's gone to Mexico,” you say, because Crys said as much last week and agreeing with her makes her happy. No one really believes it. People always joke about going to Mexico, but no one really goes to Mexico. It's cheaper to stay at a motel and get photos taken at an unused soundstage.

Don't forgot about Bob spending that night and a day in a snow drift, telling you, with frosted eye-lashes, all about how he learned how to make snow caves in survival class. When you found him, he was nice enough to invite you into his shelter. "My lodge, my sanctuary," he said. You thanked him, handed back the Scotch, and said you didn't want to track snow inside. He appeared to understand. "Is this about Crys?" you said then. "Should I go get Crys?"

"No, no." he said.

"Sorry about the door," you said.

"No worries. Just push the snow back up," he said. He'd patch it up from inside.

Neither you nor Crys need reminding. "Not his best friend," you say. Snap your fingers like you've caught a clue. "You're his ex though."

Crys laughs like you're not being funny. Her mouth curves sourly despite the cake. "So I'm more suspect than detective. Probably shouldn't be in charge of finding him. But I could tell you loads about his—state of mind. And if you need a second opinion—" Crys clicks her tongue and looks up at the rafters, whistling like she's burying guilt with guile. Note she does not join you on the couch, but shelves her butt between the few books that are still on the shelf. She drinks the coffee you make for her. She scrapes the cake from her teeth with her tongue. You don't bother to mention you ran out of decaf weeks ago.

"Discover's the right word," you say, thinking back.

"Did you move anything?" she asks.

"I should be asking you—"

"Yes. Absolutely. I think crime scene tape. I think the works. But no police," says Crys. "We don't want to involve the police. Not yet. It's probably nothing. The police always botch these things."

"Botch? What? Help with a search?"

"What's the point—now, until spring? When he gets back from Mexico."

“Oh.”

“Ask!”

“Did you move anything?”

“Why are you asking at me?” You—

“I’m investigating! Did you move anything?” You could get used to this sort of authority.

“I wasn’t there.”

“Are you sure?”

Crys thinks for a moment. “Yes. I am sure. Wait. When are we talking? I have been there—obviously.”

“Prior?”

“Well of course. Don’t go dusting around the—well, you know.”

“Safe to say your fingerprints are all over the place?”

“Maze of twisty little passages, all alike. As are yours.”

“How can you know that? I touched nothing!” you say.

“Prior! Twisted. Passages.”

“Never really visited,” you say. “How about after?”

“Umm. After what?”

“After he went missing.”

“Oh right. Yes. Sure. I went there. What’re you going to do about it?” Crys laughs but it’s quick and a little depressing. “Just a little fun,” she mumbles. “He’s in Mexico, the bastard. That’s what they do when you don’t go round. They make you feel bad. Get all mysterious. Sneak out. Go to Mexico. We’ll get a postcard in a few.” Crys brightens. “I care! Just not every day.”

“Did you ever bake him a cake?”

“Never! I know the bastard is on a beach right now. He already has a tan.”

“Should we be laughing about this?”

Crys sobers, just a little. “I’m unreliable. Mexico. Really. Mark my words. Hey, when I find him I won’t be laughing. He won’t be laughing, not when I kill him. Oh. I shouldn’t say that. He went to town. You know he went back to town. Got himself a girl. Girl with a rug, with a tub, with a TV and a flea-bag couch, dirty curtains and neighbors who shout at each other every night.”

“Your old place?”

“No! Bob’s. Were you even friends? Don’t answer that. I know how you treat your friends. When I met him, I think I was half happy just for his shit apartment. One home in the woods, a second in town. Aspirations. Love.”

“You said she?”

“Girl with a rug. Boy with a rug. Same difference.”

“What exactly in this cake is blue?”

“Hey, I like your fish. Is it Miller Schmidt?”

“They sell fish?”

“Honey, they sell everything. Too bad. Bob had a Schmidt fish. Never fed it. Not once. Did just fine. Bad water, whatever — didn’t matter. Tough bugger.” Crys laughs. She bobs about with her tongue poking out. She glows a little. She puts her fingers on the little fish bowl and the fish comes to say “Hi,” or just comes to try and eat her fingers. Something. Anything. You’ve been feeding it croutons.

Blood rushes to Crystal’s fingertips. Ten rose colored moons reflect about the globe, “Hang-on,” she says, “You saved Phil.”

“I call him Bob.”

“I forgot to look for him—you know, when I went over there.”

Everyone is cute when sheepish. “To pick up some stuff I left behind.

Place was so cold.”

If you ask her about the relationship, she will brush the glass gently and bring her lips to the watery lens. “I miss you,” she will say. She leans forward, her well-worn, soot-stained, cable-knit sweater clinging to her spine and her hipbones. The gesture is so slight and poised and soft you just know she is going to crush the little water world between her hands. You are not afraid for the fish. The fish is a spinning coin trying to see all her fingers at once. It grows eyes on its tail.

“They sell the food too,” she says as if she’s on to you. She can smell the creature’s desperation and she knows you are more interested in her figure than feeding Bob’s abandoned pet goldfish. “If you want mail here, just need to get a mailbox. Miller Schmidt, page four.”

“How is that going to help?”

“Umm. Okay. Let me explain.” Crys tucks her fingers back inside her fists to keep them warm. She pokes them out as she needs them. “If you want to receive mail from the postman, you need a box on the Drive for her to put the mail in. Bigger boxes are better because you can get larger parcels you don’t want to carry across the river yourself. Can’t put the box on your porch or halfway up the path. Needs to be on the Drive, otherwise you won’t get nothing, box or no.” Crys imitates someone with no hands you’ve never met. It’s all very theatrical. “So... get a box. Put it up. Get stuff without having to cross the water. No brainer.” When she’s excited you wonder how you can spend half a day reordering CDs.

“The postman delivers here?”

“Of course. If you put up a box, it’s bound to happen.”

“I’ve never seen him.”

“Could be a woman.”

“Even so.” You look out the window as if the post-lady might be right there and waiting for this point in the conversation, ready to give you a wave and go on her gelid way. “Have you seen her?”

“Uh, no. But I get mail. Not every day, but I get mail. Getting mail is important.”

“Yes it is,” you agree. The postman walks all the way out here?”

“Why are you trying to bust my ass? Or has a dog sled or a fucking, fast snow machine.” Crys senses more than your skepticism and offers both her cold fists and an alternative. “Miller Schmidt guarantees it, I think. Pretty sure they do. Page four. At least their own stuff. Right up front. They have our hearts in mind, our minds in their hearts. They know hard it is to get outside.” You hold her hands thinking they might warm up in a couple seconds.

“Peter?”

“Peter? Peter go, Peter pick up, and Peter deliver your mail? Not fucking likely. Not if you say please. Not if you sleep with him. Boy draws hard lines. So, what are the letters for?”

Ah! She has noticed your shoebox of old scars, which means now is not a good time to close the lid. “Old wounds,” you say and push the box under the couch as if that changes the subject, as if you were in the middle of doing this when she came in. You scan the rug for the note that got away. There’s no sign of it now. All eyes follow. The holes need to breathe.

Crys looks at you carefully. You are aware she wants to check your temperature again. “Care to take a walk over?” she asks. “Maybe if we put our heads together?” She rests her forehead on yours, only because you keep really still. She has mistaken you for a wall.

“Okay.”

“See if our Bob’s come back?” she says gently, rocks like a rolling pin.

“Thanks for the cake,” you say, a little sad there’s less now, a lot sad you can’t stay like this for the rest of the day.

Crys shrugs. “Peter turned his up his pretty nose. Otherwise you’d be shit out of luck.”

“Did Peter say I stopped by?”

She gives you a curious, concerned, but medically untrained once-over. “I heard you talking. He told me you thought Bob was AWOL, his place frozen. Peter was going out to the trap line early.

I went over.”

“Hmm.”

“Hey, this is Peter we’re talking about. Me, I put energy into lots of things.” She snaps the lid back on the cake.

You start to leaf through your Miller Schmidt catalog. For appliances, turn to page 35. For sunrooms, turn to page 67. For the icing on the cake, turn to page 872. “Or perhaps you’re interested in a case of the latest Argentine varietal. In a year it’s all everyone will be talking about. For a taste, turn to page 567. \$25 off if you recommend Miller Schmidt to a friend.”

Miller Schmidt LTD is run by a couple out of Freeport. They cater to the narcoleptic needs of the north and a people who are tired of being rejected by retailers who won’t deliver to the frontier. Miller Schmidt, however, will send you anything! Let them worry about the bizarre world of shipping vagaries. You just need to relax in the confidence your purchase will be at your door soon as supernaturally possible. Says that right on the cover. Sometimes you need to believe in a fantasy to get you through. This is evolved 21st century millennial-run retail. Wondering how they do it is the best sort of customer satisfaction.

The owners were in the news recently, some inquiry in the uneven hands of the justice department, but the rumor is—it was all rumor, started by Miller Schmidt’s savvy new marketing machine (page 757. It has a bright red button and a crank handle with a silver knob). Nothing like a justice probe gets all the loyal customers ordering like there might be no tomorrow. For means of escape, turn to page 67.

Once the stove is banked, you pull on your biggest, happiest coat. Crys watches each of your movements as if she’s looking for her own clues. She keeps up her high-cheek smile and you know its job is to hold her features steady against the storm of what she’s really thinking. “It’s not like you’ve seen Bob and you’re not telling us?” she says.

If you leave her wondering, you’ll put a little more spring in your step. You don’t think she really cares about Bob anymore. Mexico, right? She wants to know something else. Shake your head and nod at the same time. “Who is us?”

Consider that now might be a good moment for an apology, but the day is bright like blue glossy fingernails. You have to squint. The air has warmed, but without the cloud cover, tonight is going to be cold.

“If you need to talk, I’m here,” she says. Nod if you want to. She won’t see it.

Do the choices help? Here is Crys, who knows exactly how to ask a friend for pretty much anything she needs, else order it from a catalog. Here you are, walking to a cabin at the end of a path on the wrong side of a frozen river. Everyone here has already “gotten away” from things, everyone is a curiously excommunicated “we.” You want to ask Crys how she can possibly feel all the same jealousies and the same guilt as you do, but that’s a question a teenager asks. No. It’s a question a parent asks. The teenager already knows, because nothing has actually changed in 10,000 years. So live longer and find ways to spend more time making a mess and cleaning it up.

Does best-friend-Bob-gone scare you—or suffuse you with envy? You don’t want to know for sure he’s in Mexico, and you don’t want to know that he’s become an ice block under a thin skin of snow. Best maintain the mystery until you know which way to dodge. Choose, instead, to believe in the fantastical.

“Well, that was easy,” Crys says. “Now, the longer I can keep you out here, the more the cleaning crew can tidy up your mess back there.” Crys scrunches her face like she is kicking herself for not really doing this.

“Really?”

“Page 245. My gift to you,” she says.

“How can you afford it?”

“Good question. Let’s put it on Bob’s tab.”

“Yes,” you say. “I seriously despise his ability to go missing. Sorry about earlier.”

“How so?”

“I was confused.”

Crys laughs. “That was ages ago. Billions of snow-somethings ago. But, answer me this. Did you call me a whore because I left Bob, because I found Peter, or because somewhere in the middle there was a little bit of artwork in the offing?”

“I never used that word.”

“What, artwork?”

She’s too cute. You want to touch her on the shoulder or put your hand on her hip, but you know better. You could ask her to dance if it would make you feel warmer. Here in the middle of the road, it would shore up your memories. Once spontaneous, always spontaneous. You can laugh at that. “Goal-oriented spontaneity,” Crys said once. “Can’t just completely wing-it. It’s like poetry,” she said. “You build arbitrary rules that allow you to be creative. Without, it’s all sloppy and shit and maudlin. Have goals and the whole endeavor becomes like a wonderful, floating, ephemeral piece of affair—or art—like a sandcastle or an ice sculpture. You make early choices that will determine events. You adjust as you go.”

Crystal makes sense when she wants to. “Snowflakes,” she says. “Billions of snowflakes.” Fresh air is good, as they say. When you get back to yours you might actually start cleaning the place.

Bob’s cabin looks like a cabin frozen up. If you could see smoke, there’d be a good chance someone still lives here. No smoke, so you really don’t know. As usual, there’s junk left on the porch: ski boots, a cardboard box, and half a couch that isn’t even very good for one person anymore since the frame’s been cut in half. Sticking out of the box is an older Miller Schmidt catalog and half a dozen gallon-paint cans at angles that suggest they are past empty.

You tick off the options with gloved and club-like fingers. Anyone watching your hands will not be able to follow along. “One, he went to Mexico—or wherever. Two, he was stupid. He purposely made himself a Bob-shaped hole in a snowdrift. Three, he screwed up, went through the river or pissed off the dealers. Of the three, the last feels the least likely? Feels like wishful thinking.”

“It’s not the most logical. Palatable, maybe.”

“Which is crazy,” you say.

“But you know what I’m saying?”

“Of course, but I never told him about us.”

“No. Me neither,” Crys says. “Still, I would fucking kill him if he skipped out for Mexico and left me here.”

“You left him.”

“Still, petty jealousies run hard.”

“Yes.”

“But maybe not that hard,” she says.

“No.”

“I’ll never believe he did something willingly—to himself.”

You can agree with Crys, or you can play devils advocate to hurt the both of you. “Same,” you say.

Often as not there will be things lurking, in any yard, under the snow. Where the terrain appears lumpy, there’s a reason. Could be a tuft of weeds. Could be a deflated soccer ball or a tailor’s manikin. Here it could be another can of paint. Most of the snow around the cabin is churned up like a phalanx of marmots has tunneled its way through. “I poked around,” Crys says. She didn’t enjoy it, as if sometimes she had to stab her stick a few times, doubting she knew well enough what a frozen body felt like.

You both step onto the porch and it creaks like an old boat, as if it has never known two people to step up to the door at the same time.

“I once heard about a guy who locked himself out and—”

“Checked,” says Crys.

“You looked under the house?”

“Fuck, I crawled under. Snow machine parts mostly. And rotting posts. Lot of snow machine parts. Nothing Bob put there. No Bob.”

“There wasn’t any blood here before?” you say, hand already on the door handle. You aren’t even inside yet. You are both still standing on the porch.

“There’s not any blood here now.” Crys sighs and scratches her hat. “I guess there’s an advantage imagining something terrible happened, right? Because then we should do something about it, rather than worry that what’s done has been done. When there’s nothing, you have to think about it for a while. What did Bob say, last?”

“I didn’t see him. We weren’t talking.”

“But he didn’t know? No, when you found him last time.”

“I think that was—temporary. He didn’t seem to be coping. He was upset at—you know. But he got over that.”

“I never told him.”

“No, just you leaving him.”

“He better not be on a beach somewhere.”

You both know there's nothing more to see. Crys locked the door the last time she was here. She used either Bob's keys or she used a lover's gift-spare. You haven't asked if she can let you both back in. So, you have a choice, turn back to the trail after a last poke through the snow, which will reveal nothing of interest whether you look, search, or inspect snow, yard, or swamp. Or you could turn the door handle, because it's there, because it's an obvious choice, because it's shiny, because why not try things again and again and again and see if something different happens this time. Maybe the door has magically come unlocked so that you can now worry about the future instead of the past. If you do that and hear the bolt slide clear, if you open the door and go inside, you will die.

“What are you thinking?” Crys asks, because you’ve gone very still. Don’t answer that. You want desperately for Crys to put her hand on yours and say not to bother with this door, this time. For second chances, turn to the end.

Crystal’s hands remain in her coat pockets.

Martin Willitts Jr.

Light

the trace of light upon one branch
is never perfect
but it is always unique
moment to moment
yearning to be seen
to fulfill and be fulfilled

why would we not want this

Mystery

a spider is an enigma
making and shattering her sticky web
of deception

emigrating across cellar cross-beams
taking her mystery
like a bound fly

entering shadows and skulks
hunching over like a gypsy
reading misfortune in a crystal ball

and in a black and white movie
rain is allegorical
for criminal intent

just like the woman
stabbing her boyfriend ten times
to make certain he'd never do *that* again

When a Pond is Touched, It Ripples, Alive

1.

I don't want to hold remnants of yesterday. All I need is maintenance, a clear settling rain, a wakefulness to birdsong, and I will be alright. It is all in approach, like a plane arriving. If I dwell in the negative, I will become that end result. I do not want to admit the day is coming. None of us do.

Yet, we are all walking towards our deaths, numbly considering we are unable to do anything. But we can. I am turning over mornings, appreciating each one, searching for trillium in shady areas, hearing robins, appreciating dew on grass, holding your hand, a keepsake;

I won't let go. Tomorrow is not as important as now. Right now, you are sleeping, and I do not want to disturb you. I want to slip in next to you, cuddle, feel your body heat, hear you murmur your dreams. Instead, I watch continents rise and fall with your breath, more alive, more accessible, mine.

2.

She drops an heirloom vase;
he picks up the shards,
spends minutes gluing it.

She climbs a ladder, hurls the vase;
he gathers fragments, spends a day
with glue, gold, and lacquer.

She takes a ball-peen hammer to it,
hands him the powder remains,
daring him to fix it.

It does not matter who does what.
There are some marriages like this.

3.

He is in the cancer ward, final stages,
eaten alive inside
by the cannibal disease. Less visitors
come now that he is ashen and withering.
It is not catchy, he insists to no one.
It is lonely towards the end.

A nurse comes to change the sheets,
gazes at the pattern on the monitor
like it was a pattern of wintering geese.
The room is emptying, and he hears the IV drip,
leaves peeling slowly and regretfully from trees,
the grass browning and laying low for snow.

There is not one stitch holding him together.
The doctors have taken away all devices
except this unit giving him extra brief moments.
They promised painlessness; they never mentioned
isolation, how life lingers and struggles.
This is a different and exacting pain.

Back to the Drawing Board

If I wanted to catch a bird, I was told, pour salt
on its tail, but I was never told which bird
or how to accomplish this task before it flew off
leaving me emptyhanded — except for a salt shaker.

I had decided someone must have succeeded.
How else could they catch parakeets?

My brother wanted to knock birds out with a hammer.
He never had a subtle approach to anything.
My sister trusted if she spread her arms out,
they'd land on her palms like St. Francis.
That didn't work either.

The cat, staring at the cuckoo clock,
was determined *that* bird going in and out of a hole
might be easier to snatch.

James Audubon felt it was easier to draw birds
when they were stilled lives.

It was easier than painting them while in the sky.

As if to prove this point,
the cat dropped the wooden bird in front of us,
licking its paw, quite pleased with its accomplishment,
glorifying in the moment,
practically beaming;

or maybe it was the trick of light.

Contributor Notes

Toni La Ree Bennett received a Ph.D. in English at the University of Washington. Her work has appeared in *Poemmemoirstory*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Society of Classical Poets*, *Journal of Poetry Therapy* and *Viet Nam Generation*, among other publications, and she has several poems included in the anthology *The Muse Strikes Back* published by Story Line Press. She is also a freelance editor and photographer and lives with a flock of feisty finches.

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Joseph Murphy has been published in numerous journals, including *The Ann Arbor Review*, *Northwind* and *The Sugar House Review*. He recently had collection of poems published, *Crafting Wings* (Scars Publications, 2017); his second collection, *Having Lived*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books. Murphy is also senior poetry editor for an online literary publication, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, and a member of the Poetry Society of Colorado.

Simon Perchik's poetry has also appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere.

David Spicer has had poems in *Chiron Review*, *The New Verse News*, *Alcatraz*, *Gargoyle*, *Easy Street*, *Third Wednesday*, *Reed Magazine*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Midnight Lane Boutique*, *Ploughshares*, *The American Poetry Review* and elsewhere. The author of *Everybody Has a Story* and five chapbooks, he's the former editor of *raccoon*, *Outlaw* and *Ion Books*. His latest chapbook is *From the Limbs of a Pear Tree*, available from Flutter Press.

Robert Joe Stout's poems have been published in many journals including *The Tishman Review*, *Into the Void*, *Existere*, *Clover* and *Fifth Wednesday*, among others. He is the author of the full-length collections *Monkey Screams* (FutureCycle Press) and *A Perfect Throw* (Aldrich Press). He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and received national awards for journalism.

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Martin Willitts Jr. has over 20 chapbooks, including the winner of the Turtle Island Quarterly Editor's Choice Award, *The Wire Fence Holding Back the World* (Flowstone Press, 2016), plus 11 full-length collections, including National Ecological Award winner *Searching for What You Cannot See* (Hiraeth Press, 2013), and most recently *Dylan Thomas and the Writing Shed* (FutureCycle Press, 2017).

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