



The Bookpress Quarterly



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Infertility

Julie Schumacher

My name is Aaron Bishop, and I have been told more than once that I am a very particular man. Life is short, I have found; the less disorder and confusion in it, the better. An individual day, at its best, should mimic the symmetry and flow that we expect from the revolution of the planets. No surprises, no upheavals. No regrets. My wife, Caroline, left me, which was no surprise to the friends who encouraged her, probably cheered her, as she aired her complaints over coffee at the

ment at what was taken to be another's imperfection.

Roland was probably seventeen. He was Caroline's youngest brother, a premature runt-of-the-litter kind born a decade later than the rest. He looked as if he'd been raised in a hothouse, like an orchid.

"Why did you come to see me, Roland?" I asked. His family lived in Wisconsin. I was in Syracuse, New York.

He smiled again, shrugging. All the members of Caroline's family are small and thin, but Roland seemed

I rinsed out his mug in the kitchen, I heard the water running in the bathroom down the hall.

I work at home, on a free-lance basis, as a medical illustrator for magazines. I went through two years of medical school, leaving when my father died and my mother needed medical care herself, and am largely self-taught as an artist, though I have taken several classes here and there. I do consider myself an artist. Though my job is to reproduce faithfully and, some would say, without imagination,

clavicles and vertebra were visible through the skin. From the back, in fact, he might have been his sister.

"I'm air drying," Roland said. "I couldn't find any towels."

"They're in the wash. You should have called. There are more in here." I took a towel from the closet and handed it to him. He held it but didn't cover himself at all.

"I don't want to hurry you," I said, "but I assume that you're eager to get to the cabin. You're welcome to stay as long as Caroline will have you. I can lend you money if you need it." I used



C. Wolf

houses she was invited to alone. I hold no grudges. She had been trying to get pregnant for almost three years.

I had never spent much time with her family nor she with mine, and so when I opened the door of our duplex one morning about three weeks after she left and found a man—a boy—sitting on the step, I had no idea at first that he was Caroline's brother. I get up early, with the sun, and the first thing I noticed that day were the thin rays of light illuminating the face of this sleeping person on my porch. He wore thin faded jeans and a flannel shirt, and trembled slightly in his sleep. He breathed with his mouth partly open like an asthmatic child, his head thrown back against the wall. He seemed a poor imitation of some divine, ecstatic pilgrim. His crew-cut and his feet were wet with dew.

"Aaron," he said, with his eyes still partly closed. "I came to see you."

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure whom I would be addressing.

The boy had brilliant blue eyes in a lunatic's face: he could have been fourteen or forty-five. He smiled. He sensed that I didn't know him, and assumed therefore some kind of superiority. But looking at that smile I suddenly recognized my wife. She used it, too—a smile betraying certainty, a curling of the lips expressing amuse-

emaciated; he probably didn't weigh much more than a hundred pounds.

Because he didn't answer I let him in, handing him the afghan from the couch. It was early September, but the mornings were cool.

"I'm sure that you know that your sister isn't here," I said.

Roland nodded. "Can I have some coffee?"

I looked at the clock. Six-fifteen. I usually didn't make coffee until afternoon, when the work at my desk suddenly seemed less interesting, more tiring.

"Or tea," he said. "Whatever you've got."

I made coffee and brought him a mug in the living room.

"You aren't having any?" he asked.

I said I wasn't. "What inspired you to visit? You knew your sister was away. She's up at the lake."

"I know." He looked irritated, as if I were bothering him.

"I'm surprised you didn't call first," I said.

"I lost the number." He drank his coffee scalding hot, the way I drink mine. "Do you mind if I take a shower?" he asked.

I paused. "There's more coffee in the kitchen. I made a whole pot."

"I don't want it," Roland said. While

I take great pains to instill in my work a sense of the loveliness inherent in the body as mechanism. There is nothing more beautiful to me than the human heart, though my wife has often accused me of being heartless.

I cannot work if I am often interrupted. From seven-thirty until noon I unplug the phone and get my best work done. After lunch I make any necessary calls and run my errands; then I polish the morning's efforts in the afternoon. Roland had probably arrived without any money. In order to send him to his sister, I would have to cash a check, then drive him to the bus station in the hope that there would be a bus to Old Forge, one of the gateways to the Adirondacks, where my family has kept a cabin since 1910. Optimistically, I would lose half the day. It wasn't easy to contact Caroline; we had no phone in the cabin and in emergencies relied on the general store.

Half an hour after he'd shut off the water, Roland hadn't appeared. I knocked at the bathroom.

"Okay," Roland said.

"Does that mean, 'come in'?" I asked, opening the door. Roland was sitting on the edge of the tub with his feet by the drain. He was naked and seemed perfectly dry.

"Did you shower?" I asked. Roland's

the word *lend* deliberately, though I didn't expect to get the money back.

Roland turned around, and I noticed that his eyebrows were just the color of his skin. Caroline had always darkened hers with pencil.

"Why did she leave you?" he asked.

"That's complicated," I said.

"Were you cheating on her? Screwing around?"

"That's none of your business," I said. "I wasn't. Maybe you imagine us screaming and throwing things at each other. I suppose that would be romantic. The truth would probably disappoint you."

"Well, I'm ready for the truth," he said, in a monotone.

"I'm sure you are. I'll get you some clothes." I brought him a t-shirt and a pair of Caroline's old jeans that I knew would fit him. She had used to wear them when she gardened, which wasn't often. The yard, unless I took care of it, looked like a hodge-podge of dying flowers and creeping charlie. He put them on. The resemblance to Caroline was increasing.

"So she left you stuck here," he said. "Planted."

"I don't consider myself stuck, Roland."

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Infertility

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"Yeah, well, she's up at your cabin and you're in this glued-together building..."

"It's a duplex," I told him. "Use the name. Caroline and I are separated. It makes sense for her to stay up at the cabin; she's between jobs, anyway. Do you know what the bus schedule is to Old Forge?"

"I don't give a flying fuck about Old Forge," Roland answered. I felt the second half of my day begin to disappear.

Caroline and I first met when she was twenty-four and I was thirty-five. Friends advised her, she told me later, that a man my age who had never been "involved" in a serious relationship would be trouble. She found it touching, though, she said—the idea that I had waited, that in some sense I had been saving myself for her. That was probably true. I never had been in love before, and I fell in love with Caroline not only because of her beauty (her hands are as clean and exact and delicate as a surgeon's), but because of her tendency to look forward, her optimism. I think she initially approved, though she made fun of, the several schema I devised for our life together: a given number of years to save for a house, a given number of vacations, the approximate date on which our first child would be born. Caroline was surprised that I wanted children. She wanted them herself, but she used to wonder aloud whether I would be able to withstand their noise and messes.

"Look at you," she said to me in the bedroom, when I picked up her things. "Tidying up, cleaning up, putting things back where they belong. Stasis is your only hobby. Why can't we ever let things go? Why do we have to live in this—cleanliness all the time?"

"You almost said 'sterility,'" I told her, and at that she started crying, familiar tears.

"Nothing works out the way we want it to," she said.

I told her that she needed to hold on, that things still might work out eventually.

"I don't want to wait for eventually," she said. A few weeks later, she was gone.

Roland did call the bus station after breakfast. He found out that the only bus to Old Forge had left an hour earlier.

"Sorry," he said, without sounding sorry in the slightest. He settled himself in front of the tv.

"I'm going to work in my study," I said, hoping he would keep the volume down.

Roland didn't answer; I wondered how his parents tolerated him at home.

I'd been drawing a series of simple brain diagrams for an encyclopedia—

the transverse fissure, the pineal body, the corpus callosum, the optic chiasma—which had turned out well. Illustrators often sketch a cross-section of the brain and head, including a side-view outline of the nose, chin and neck. I went a step further, adding small details to the flesh—the lips curved slightly upward, a more distinct, individual nose, a higher-than-normal forehead. There was a person housing the brain, a person I imagined still ticking and walking, still using that three pound supervisory center of the body for emotion and thought. I imagined the person as Caroline. I drew her thinking of me, up at the cabin by the lake, thinking she would like to come home and begin again.

At dinner that night (I fixed Roland a sandwich for lunch, and brought one for myself into the study), Roland pushed his salad around on his plate and said, "Actually, I heard she left because she couldn't have a baby."

I decided not to answer. "How come you didn't adopt one?"

I sipped my water. Roland was silent. "That wasn't the only reason that she left," I said. "That was part of it. It added to the stress."

"So you thought of adopting," he said.

I finished my salad. It was six-thirty. I wondered what time I could politely go to bed. "We discussed it."

"Makes you think of a bunch of Asian kids dressed alike," Roland said. "Is that the problem?"

I got up to wash the dishes. Roland got up, too. "Stay where you are," I told him. "I'll do this alone."

"Dangerous work, huh?" He held up his hands as if I were getting ready to shoot him.

"What's the theory behind your coming here?" I asked. "Are you sent by your parents to cheer Caroline up? Or did they take a longer view and ask you to pressure her to divorce me?"

Roland continued holding his hands up.

"We could call the general store and leave her a message," I said. "She'd probably get it in the morning if she goes there to buy some coffee or a paper." Caroline never bought enough coffee to last more than a week; we used to run out of it all the time. "I don't want it to go stale," she used to say. And: "There's more to life than efficiency, Aaron." I dried my hands on a towel and pointed to the number on the pad of paper by the phone. "That way you can warn her that you're coming."

"That's okay," Roland said. "Forget it."

"How about calling your parents, then?"

Silence behind me. "Jesus, Roland," I said. "Do they know where you are?"

"They might figure it out," he said. I turned off the water and left the silverware in the sink. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. He had an expression—part stubbornness, part anger, part despair—that I'd come to miss on Caroline's face. There was a poignancy about it that I had tried and failed to capture with a pen.

"Tell me," I said. "Or I'll call your parents."

"They're in Bermuda," he said. "Doing their bourgeois vacation."

If I were a different man I might have put my hand on his shoulder. He had come to me and I owed him something. "Roland," I said. "What happened? You can tell me. What did you do?"

I have to confess to certain eccentric habits. Caroline used to berate me. "Why does the tv. remote control have to be perpendicular to the table? Who in hell folds their dirty laundry before it goes in the machine?" I didn't bother to dispute her, but said I would allow her to have her own unusual habits as long as they didn't interfere with mine. "You're my eccentric habit," she said to me once.

An unspoken habit that I never confessed to her is this: after observing a person's character I often imagine what internal organ they would correspond to, what their physical function within the human body would be. Caroline I imagined as the vestibule of the inner ear, the labyrinth in which equilibrium was delicately and precariously maintained. I've imagined myself as a kidney, separating salt from toxin, water from waste. So far Roland seemed more difficult to classify: he was a wild card, a virus, a lymph node out of control. I made up the living room couch as a bed for him that night and went to sleep reviewing our conversation, asking myself what, in the morning, I was going to do.

In the morning Roland had a fever. He had thrown off the blankets and was sweating as though exposed to a tropical sun.

I put my hand on his forehead. "You should have told me you didn't feel well."

"I don't feel well," Roland mumbled. The thermometer registered 103. I brought him a bottle of aspirin, a cool wet washcloth, and an extra quilt.

"What time does my bus leave?" he asked.

"You can't take a bus when you're sick." I wondered if his illness could be deliberate.

"You could pack me in ice cubes; I'll be fine."

Duly noting Roland's first attempt at humor, I thought of my desk in the other room, the unfinished cerebrum. I considered Caroline's reaction when she saw her brother borne on a stretcher through the woods. "You'll stay in bed. I'll call and leave her a message."

"Do you want her to come here?" Roland asked. "And hover around over her baby brother?"

I hesitated. In truth I didn't want Caroline to come home unless she was ready. Unless she wanted to see me.

"Better wait," Roland said. "If you tell her I'm sick, she'll come. Blood's thicker than water. I'll just lie here on the couch. You can call tomorrow."

I opened the door to get the morning paper.

"Do you have any jello?" Roland called.

"No. Do you need some?" "Well, how about juice. And a tv. guide."

I went into the kitchen. "And some crackers and an extra pillow. If they're handy," Roland said.

I brought him the pillow and arranged the juice and crackers on a tray. "Anything else?"

"No, I guess that's it for now." He turned the tv. on with the remote control. "Call if you need me," I said. "I'll leave the study door open." "Yeah, great," Roland said. "You can call if you need me, too."

It was difficult to work. First, as I said, I don't like interruptions; the tv. noise was distracting. And then there was Roland himself. What he had told me the night before deserved more thought than I had yet given it. I had pressed him for information and he had delivered. He had a girlfriend, he said. Laura. At first he hadn't liked her very much but then she broke off with him and he loved her. He loved her so much, he said, that he had burnt up her parents' front lawn and made three hundred calls to their answering machine. He loved her so much that he had sliced her car tires and then set out to find me when the police arrived at his parents' door. We were two spurned men together, though he didn't label us as such. "I still do love her," he said. "But I don't know why." "That isn't love," I said. He'd gone to the refrigerator and gotten a beer. He raised his eyebrows in a question. "But don't ask me to define it," I said. "You know you aren't old enough to drink." "Then it's very irresponsible of you to keep alcohol in the house when a minor is visiting." He popped the top. I got a wine glass from the cabinet and opened a bottle of chardonnay. "I still love her but I want to strangle her," Roland said. "You know what I mean." "I don't want to strangle Caroline," I said. He rubbed a hand over his crewcut. "There she is up at your cabin, on your piece of property, when she's the one who wanted out."

"You don't look good, Roland." I should have felt a responsibility to his family; I should have called them. I may have decided not to do it to prove to myself that I'm a sympathetic man.

Roland finished his beer and got another. "You look like shit, too."

During the years that she was trying to conceive, we went through the standard procedures and tests. Charting her period. Taking her temperature every day. Sperm count and motility. Ultrasound. Then the tests got more invasive. Caroline is squeamish. One of the strategies we resorted to involved my giving her daily injections of Pergonal just before intercourse. I was told to practice on oranges, and when Caroline saw me jabbing into the fruit with a hypodermic she started to cry. The first time I gave her the injection my hand shook, which surprised me. Caroline locked herself in the bathroom when our amorous adventure was over and done.

I'm sure she never suspected that I dreamt up our children. I saw their faces; it was their bodies I sketched

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The Bookpress Quarterly Statement of Purpose

The Bookpress Quarterly is a journal of fiction, poetry, essays, and artwork, published as a supplement to *The Bookpress*. It shares with *The Bookpress* the goals of encouraging literary community and conversation in upstate New York and showcasing that region's best writers and artists.

Illustrations by: J. M. Barringer, M. J. Carroll, Annie Campbell, Christa Wolf, and Gillian Pederson-Kraig



Infertility

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when I did my work. I know she imagined that she craved children more than I did, that her desire to be a mother was more essential, more biological, than my desire to be a father. I didn't talk about my desire. Since our barrenness technically lay with her, within her body, I couldn't openly express the force or extent of my own craving; that would have been blaming her, emphasizing her failure to conceive. In the end, not knowing a better alternative, I let her pine for our children, for our first scheduled child, all alone.

Caroline called early the next morning. I had unplugged the phone but, since I'd left the study door open to listen for Roland, heard her voice leaving a message on the answering machine. She had heard from her parents: Roland was in trouble. If there was any chance he had been in contact, would I please leave her a message at the store.

Roland heard it, too. He came into the bedroom where I was listening to the message for the second time. "Your parents are back from Bermuda," I said.

"Yup," said Roland.

"They might appreciate a call."

Roland shrugged. He hadn't been into the bedroom before. He seemed surprised that Caroline had left her jewelry, and that the top of her dresser was strewn with scarves, lipsticks, hair fasteners and other odds and ends. I had cleaned nothing. I hadn't touched it. Dust was beginning to build up among her things.

"What are you holding there?" Roland asked.

I looked down at the drawing in my hand. It wasn't work; it was something I drew between other efforts. Sometimes I doodled smaller versions on scraps of paper, unaware.

"Let me see." Roland took it from me and held it, turning on the light to study it better. By the expression on his face I suspected that, unlike Caroline, unlike most people who appreciated my talent, Roland saw the art behind the draftsmanship. He studied the illustration for quite a while. "What's this part?" he asked.

"That's the bladder." I had shadowed it in.

"That's the womb," Roland said. "That much I know. Whatever the word is."

"Uterus," I said.

"Is this realistic?"

"Basically. It's stylized. I took some small creative license here and there." Together we looked at the drawing. I had begun it during one of the long evenings when Caroline was crying in the bathroom down the hall. Two small ovals east and west, then a pair of wilted tulips, the petals drooping just above the ovals, left and right. The stems of the tulips led to a large, amorphous blob in the center of the page. I had colored it a dark eggplant. I imagined it stark and lonely, asymmetrical, like the continent of Africa in shape.

"I think it's the best of all your drawings—the ones I've seen," Roland said.

I agreed, though obviously it wasn't saleable. "These are the ovaries, where the eggs are, and these are fallopian tubes." With my finger I traced the path of an imaginary egg. It pushed off from an ovary island, traveling east through the Atlantic in a graceful arc, as if following a tide. I lifted my finger before it reached the Ivory Coast.

What a cruel distance, I often thought. What an intimate geography.

I stuffed my hand into my pocket. Whenever I looked at the drawing too long I felt an anger like Roland's, a love so close to fury I was afraid to allow myself to speak.

"Why don't you drive up to the cabin?" Roland was still studying the illustration. "It belongs to you. It's yours."

"I can't," I said. I had suggested,

passive into dreams while I reviewed the things we'd said, revised our conversations and our plans. My nights were full of nervous watching: lives went wrong and came undone, and even as you held your arms out as a net, the things that you loved most were falling through. "Quite a saddle," Roland said, within a dream. I left the light burning in the hall.

The note he left was short. "Thanks,"



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when she wanted to leave me, that Caroline stay at the cabin for a while. She didn't like the idea at first because the cabin itself was a sore point: we had rarely visited it together. I am my parents' only child. If I do not will the cabin and the seven acres of land it sits on to a daughter or son, it will revert to the Adirondack land trust. I wanted Caroline on Bishop property like a seed, a symbol of insemination. Caroline probably wouldn't believe me capable of such faith in symbolism, such trust in the interrelationship of things.

"This is her right here," Roland said. "This is Caroline in this drawing, isn't it?" "What are your plans, Roland?" I asked, putting the illustration down. "I don't have any," Roland said.

We agreed to wait another day. Caroline called again that evening but we didn't pick up the phone. We were playing cards in the living room. I had limited Roland to only one beer. "Call me either way," she said in the message. "Whether you've seen Roland or not. I'll be at the store by nine-fifteen." "I guess I'll call her tomorrow," I said. "Good idea." "Do you think you'll want to talk to her?" I asked. "I might." "What about Laura?" Roland shrugged. "I need to stay away from there for a little while."

That night I had trouble sleeping. In fact I got out of bed and watched Roland sleep, remembering the nights when I used to watch Caroline as she slept. Even right before she left she slept so easily and well; she glided

it said. "R." I drank some coffee with my breakfast and waited an hour before picking up a pencil by the phone. I could tell Caroline that I got her message late the night before, that Roland had made up a fabulous story and disappeared before I had a chance to call. But I am not a convincing liar. I could drive up to the cabin, too. I could try to explain to my wife that I am better and more than she imagines, and that her desires are very fervently my own.

The telephone rang. I imagined Roland standing on the highway sticking out his thumb, the money I had given him wadded up, obvious, in his pocket. I would worry about him from that moment on. That was presumably the nature of children: their guardians were inflicted with worry and trouble, affection and chaos and untidiness and apprehension. As I heard Caroline's voice on the answering machine in the other room, this time high-pitched with concern, I put my hand on the receiver, all my senses flooding with love. I closed my eyes and saw our cabin full of children. I saw myself running up the rough dirt road toward the lovely shelter; I saw my children crossing the threshold and running toward me, imperfect and unfinished as any art, but welcome, welcome.

Julie Schumacher holds an MFA from Cornell University and lives in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her first novel, The Body is Water, was short-listed for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Her collection of stories, from which "Infertility" comes, was published by Soho this year.

Elegy for the Luminous

*After centuries,
pink roses remain dewy—a few
weighed down
by headiness. You'd like to inhale the
golden-orange freesias: not a scent*

*of turpentine. Crocuses open beaklike,
snowdrops droop,
colors swirl up Rembrandt tulips,
persimmon lilies arc*

*backward in the vase aswarm with
flowers
of every season—combinations
no gardener ever saw.*

*In your garden one loveliness
replaces another
or shoots down in their roots in an
eyesore
patch of earth you can't paint over.*

*Winter gessoes your canvas white.
You sketch on it with a stick
and dream of seeds—their hidden
pigment. Eternally pink*

*petals collect at the bottom
of this Dutch Still Life,
where grape hyacinths spike up, and
higher—star delphiniums.*

*Poised leaflike on a stem, the subtle
butterfly's beyond delirium.
Despite the museum window's darken-
ing landscape,
despite the pithy insights on the paint-
ing's placard,*

*you don't notice—farther down the
wall—
the framed timepiece, mirror, skull,*

*but admire the lushness of the peony,
he creamy yellow strokes of composite,
the unblinking delft verbena.*

*The lizard
lolling in the shadow, deepened by age,
takes in the viewer who, forgetting the
reaper, gleans*

*the moment, and wanting all bounty, all
seasons
at once, loses sight
of the heavy frame.*

—Laura Glenn

*Laura Glenn's poems have appeared
in numerous magazines. Her illustra-
tions have appeared in The Bookpress
Quarterly. She works as a freelance
editor in Ithaca, where she lives with
her husband and son.*



A. Campbell

Splitting Sticks

Lisa Harris

I love my father more than an Arizona sky, and despite how angry I have been at him for twenty-nine years, I will love him until I die. I love my father as much as I love secrets, maple syrup, and the smell of ink. I loved his sharp blue eyes, his handsomely crooked teeth, his one bow leg, and the way he manicured his hands. In late autumn he burned leaves daily in an old oil drum which he set in the center of a pit. I miss him—both what I remember of him and who I imagine he would have been in his late eighties, the age he would be now. I see myself driving up to the house he built for my mother and for the children he imagined he would have.

The Hudson Valley fills with fog most autumn mornings, and the fog holds the smell of burned leaves the way I hold my love and anger for my father; the fog holds the smokey smell tightly within its moist folds. I hold one thousand images of my father behind my eyes in boxes of all different shapes. There are images inside each box, memories that I want but cannot always have. Sometimes I can open them and other times I find myself under water where the ribbons slip from my fingers and the box floats away. Smoke, water, fog and a fire that burns—elements of my love for him.

I asked my father where he would live when he grew old. "Will you come and live with me, Daddy? By then I will have my own house, three children, and a puppy. I'll make you oyster stew and home fries. I'll play 'Autumn Leaves' on the piano and rub your shoulders."

At first I think he hasn't heard me because he does not answer, instead he stares out through the kitchen window.

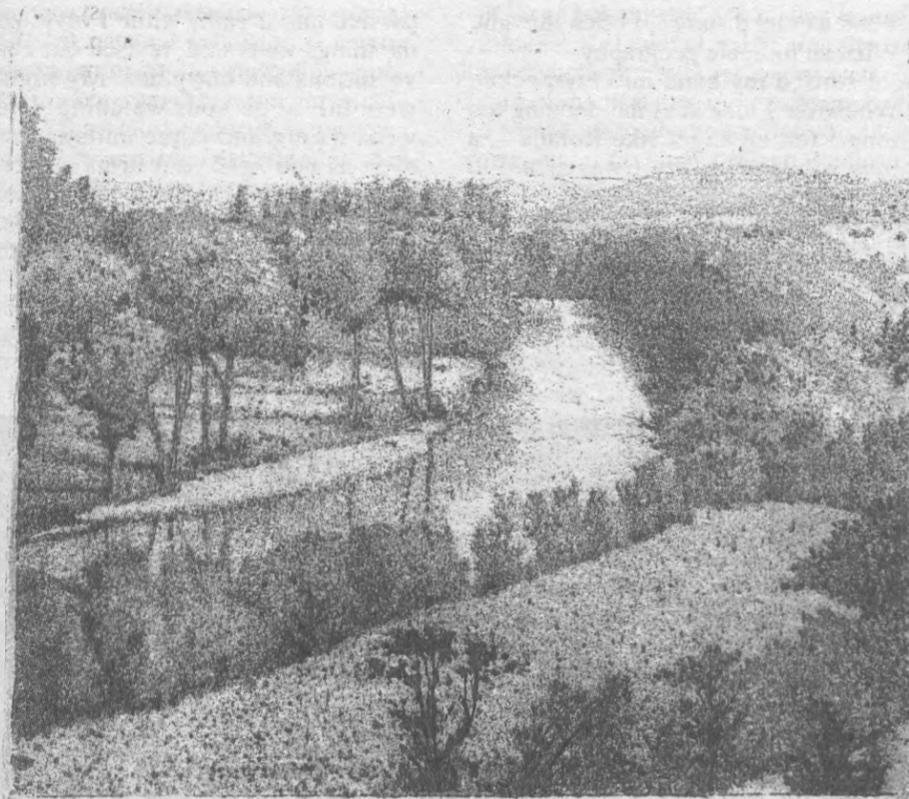
"Daddy?"

"Yes, Eliza, I heard you. When I am an old man, I'll visit you, but I won't stay long. Fish and company go bad after three days. And when it is my time to die, a time I know will come, I will walk up over the hill into the deepest part of the forest where I will sit under a tree and wait for death."

He reaches out for the top of my head like a priest at confirmation, and the touch of his hand silences me. It is the first time I fear the future, and I fear it because I do not know for how long he will be a part of it. It is not a reasonable fear, whatever that is.

To cross the Hudson River is fairly easy to do since there is a series of bridges to choose from, and I have crossed it at every place where there is a bridge. But the bridge I love because it signals home to me is the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge in all its silver glory letting me swing out over the river in an arch that makes my breath feel weighted with joy—like a good ring on my finger, like a lover's lips on my own.

Home is where I live now, on the east bank of the Hudson River in Rhinecliff, New York, I make my living as a teaching adjunct at several of the area's colleges. I have four children instead of three, an old dog who was once a puppy, a bird, three cats, and a sometimes husband who is a lawyer in the city and comes home to us when he can. I have grown accustomed to absence and silence from men, and I am thankful that my husband is willing to go into a city that used to seem exotic to me, but now only seems foreign, that he will go daily into a place I will only go if dragged, and he willingly wheels and deals for the kind of money I will never make, the kind of money that pays for braces and summer camp, the kind of money that was able to buy our house outright and makes it possible for me to spurn tenure, prevents me from having to teach in a public or pri-



G. Pederson-Kraig

vate high school, and allows me to keep my diaries, dreams, and gardens in order.

I am usually pleased to see him when he comes home. We live close enough to the train station that he can walk when the weather is good. And it is good most of the time. My husband is a man who prepares for all conditions; he travels with an umbrella and rubbers in the rainy season from March until July and from September through November. In the winter he wears boots, heavy gloves, dense coats and a hat. He has only phoned me for a ride four times in five years, and only once was I not home to fetch him. That time he took a cab which worked quite well because it turned out that the cab driver also moonlighted as a gardener and landscaper, and, yes, he knew how to reconstruct stone walls and clear away the ivy that covered our house.

My husband may not be home very much, but when he is, he is perfect. He knows our children's idiosyncrasies and can gauge their moods. He knows which presents to bring them. Nick, our first born, sees life as a series of problems, discreet and finite. For him my husband provides puzzles—concrete and abstract, jigsaw and mathematical, easy and daunting. For our second child, Zoe, my husband gathers antique toys, buttons, and books. Zoe keeps all the gifts from her father in a five-shelved cupboard where they have been arranged chronologically. Jane is our third child and we supposed she would be our last. She is dark haired like my family and dark eyed like her father's. To this child my husband brings candy—hard candies—sour and strong which she sucks while he holds her on his lap in the old nursing rocker that was my grandmother's. Jane, who is no longer our youngest child, continues to be her father's baby. Our youngest child, Matt, is the hardest child for my husband because they are most alike. My husband brings Matt gadgets, electronic devices that are somehow difficult to use, easy to break, and dependent upon batteries.

My husband, Elliot Matthew Friday, Esquire, seldom brings me presents, but when he does, he brings me potted plants and diamonds—begonias, violas, mums and poinsettias—earrings, rings, bracelets, and necklaces. Elliot is nothing like my father which helps me to feel safe. Maybe he will outlive me. Maybe his children will only be angry at him for small things and for short periods of time.

The Hudson Valley, filled with myste-

rious fog most mornings, is also near enough to the Catskills that when I am homesick for the Alleghenies, I can still see mountains on the clear days. And on other days, if the fog stays thick and low to the ground, at least I can drive away from the river, across the bridge, and into the mountains—their great heads and shoulders insisting on permanence, insisting upon eternity.

I don't go back to Pennsylvania much anymore. Why should I? The people I visit are cordoned into a small plot of land in Askey's Cemetery, the headstones are either gray or brown—the names are usual for the area, and for years and years they were the names spoken frequently in the town: Henson, Schankley, Mothergat, and Saft. The names are English and German and the soil where they lie is hard scabble, too poor to grow anything on—which is partly how it became a cemetery. The other reason it was chosen was for its view, an irony, of course.

If you dig at the gravesites to plant flowers or trees, take a strong man with you to help with the rocks, take a sharp shovel to cut through the clay. "When I die, I may not go to heaven, I don't know if they'll let me in, but if they don't, send me back to Pine Glen, and let me lie among my next of kin," my adaptation of Tanya Tucker, a song I sometimes hum.

When Elliot and I drew up our wills, he spent a lot of time detailing our funerals. We would be cremated and put in ceramic urns. We would have no wake, no calling hours, no service, no hymns. Our children, when it would be convenient for them, would gather in the back garden at Rhinecliff to tell their best and worst memory of each of us over champagne, and then walk in a group down to the train station where they would throw our ashes into the Hudson. After he had written this all out, he read it back to me and was surprised at my objections.

My plan is to be taken in my casket to Askey's Cemetery and to be laid in one of the remaining plots among the Hensons, Schankleys, Mothergats, and Safts after there have been calling hours in Rhinecliff and a full-fledged Methodist funeral filled with the voices of my friends joining in song—singing "Amazing Grace," "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds," and "Texas is as Close as I Been." I'll also expect the women's ritual group of which I am a member to sing "We Circle Around" and "We are The Ebb."

Of all these songs, "Amazing Grace"

has been with me the longest—a song about epiphany, revelation, and how to join with the invisible. Think about it: being gone ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun.

The children may tell their best and funniest stories about me, but I'd just as soon their worst stories were told later privately among the four of them or that they were never told and died with me, instead. And I want Elliot to be buried there with me—either his ashes or his corpse. I won't insist, either way will be all right with me. But I want us fixed in time and space together, and I want us to be home. Home is always going to be central Pennsylvania where all my ancestors are, underground, forever.

After days of discussion, Elliot agreed to be buried beside me in Pennsylvania—not his body but his ashes, and he promised that if I died first, he would make sure I got the full Methodist and pagan treatment. And when I pushed him to have some formal version of God for himself, he agreed to a rabbi and Kaddish. He thinks I am too concerned with the dead and dying, that I'd be better off thinking about our children's study habits and which colleges they will attend, that if I want to write, I should do grant proposals or edit manuscripts. "What's the point of keeping diaries, all those notes about your life? Who for? Is it for the children, none of whom have a curious bone in their bodies? Is it to blackmail me with in case I ever leave you? Who are those diaries for, Eliza?"

And, of course, I do not answer him. The diaries are for no one and for everyone. The diaries are written for the world and for myself; they are the record of my having lived. How I wish my father and grandfather, my mother and grandmother had kept diaries, because then I would know them more and differently. I would know what they thought and felt instead of having to imagine them. And I would have more of my father, the person I knew the least of the four of them and the person whom I search for in the boxes in my dreams, the boxes under water where the ribbons slip from my hands before I can untie them and let the memories I have of him float out and free to the surface, the way I imagined Elliot's and my ashes floating on the surface of the Hudson River when he read his funeral plan to me.

I am struck by my own contradiction—of wanting the close tight air of the casket for myself, while I resent my father tied up in gift store boxes with fancy ribbons, boxes under the water of memory, instead of boxes under earth. Now that he has escaped the container of his body, why do I expect him to be all in one place and transparent to me?

So I do not explain who the diaries are for; I do not defend who I am, I put the lid on the box that is me and remain quiet in that containment. I find talking, especially explaining what seems obvious, very tiring. I used to think I was lazy when it came to talking, but it is not laziness; it is a fatigue born of my certain belief that very few people will understand my explanation. Of the few who understand, even fewer will accept it, and so I am better off not to talk. No, I am not a lazy communicator, but a realist.

I am lazy in love and it is a laziness born out of fear. I am afraid to roll in the green grass of my love, but I will walk across the sharp rocks of doubt, letting myself feel loss and anguish, practicing what they will feel like, anticipating them. I protect myself from joy the way I have protected myself from many of my needs. As a child I was often thirsty, a great thirst made out of camels and

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Splitting Sticks

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deserts, but when I went to the pump behind the dairy porch, I only allowed myself one half-cup of water in the tin. I drank it slowly—sip, sip, sip—parched. And the parched part of me waited for the water as if awaiting a miracle, hoping the cup would return to my lips and that each time there would still be water within it. Waiting, my virtue, rewarded by the miracle of water.

I am no longer frugal about water, but I continue to be frugal when I consume love. I buy quarts of chilled water at gas stations, convenience stores, the grocery—wherever I see it for sale, and I drink it in great gulps. It is how I want to take in love, drinking and drinking until I am filled. I want to love better and be more joyful in that love—I want to be more loving in my joy.

When I was a girl growing up in Pennsylvania, it seemed like such a normal state: one of the first thirteen colonies, a commonwealth with a lot of land mass, the boundaries making the shape of a scotch terrier's head. In Pennsylvania people get misty-eyed over the Nittany Lions and the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Philadelphia Eagles and the Pirates, over limestone quarries and coal mines, over sporting events and at Lions' Club dinners where the national anthem is sung off-key. To a New Englander's ear, many Pennsylvanians sound southern, but to a southerner's ear, they sound Yankee through and through. There is a slowness to the landscape and to the language where endings are dropped off words, where sentences are left to hand unfinished. I still talk this way even though I left the state years ago. The borders of another state surround me now, but my

mind is bounded by Pennsylvania, the rim of the blue line on a map, the jagged edge of the mountains in my dreams. Pennsylvania's slowness comes from wanting and waiting, from leaving things unsaid. It is not the slowness of Alabama, Georgia, or Mississippi made of the intrepid heat, of swamps and of sorghum.

Much of my joy has been tainted by loss—the shadow of clouds on a meadow. And when I see the meadow, I see the shadow of the cloud upon it and the storm within the cloud as it pushes against joy. On stormy days my eyes change from blue-green to a gray that has just a hint of purple in it; it is the same gray-purple of stone that makes Snow Shoe Mountain. Great machines cut through that rock and exposed the bone and vein of stone. It is the way weather cuts into me. Each incision leaves its mark on the blue-green of my irises,

while the gray and purple of reflected stone are amplified.

When I left Central Pennsylvania, I could not take the purple mountains with me even though I wanted to. But, of course, I was not leaving without my eyes. Even in the anthracite region of Wilkes-Barre and the orchards of the Hudson River Valley, my irises continue their game of changing with the weather and my moods. There is no more purple stone to reflect, but somehow my stubborn eyes cling to their own purple-streaked grayness, carrying the history of the land my ancestors claimed from the Delawares in the 1740s. Maybe I wish my eyes held some piece of those mountains when, in fact, there is no purple in them at all—just the gray of overcast skies and the dark part of limestone.

—Lisa Harris

Ground Control to Shannon Lucid

The hospital television blares the news.

I am smoothing lotion onto my mother's long, brittle feet.

I must be careful with her translucent skin and skinny bones:

so frail, she can crack a rib with a cough,

can turn in bed and crumble a vertebra.

Her thin skin bruises with the least pressure.

I run my slick hands along her feet and up her calves and thighs,

following the clear map of blue veins, leading towards her heart.

Though she has shrunk four inches, her feet remain wide, bony boats,

as if they were still needed, as if she could lurch

from this angled bed; rise and walk with her once-wide stride.

She is vertiginous from valium and calls me her best friend's name.

*Shannon Lucid has already broken
the American space endurance record,
yet still remains on Mir.*

*One hundred sixty-nine days
have passed, and nineteen more
to go before she lands on Earth.*

She will have traveled

sixty-seven million,

four hundred fifty-four

thousand, eight hundred

and forty-one nautical miles

by her return, circling the earth

three thousand and eight times.

Her family has gathered in Cape Canaveral,

(husband, son, and two grown daughters)

where they await her descent from the sky.

I take the stairs to the basement cafeteria,

spooked by that elevator feeling of falling while standing still.

My fashionably heavy heels clatter. I pass her elusive doctor:

he climbs rapidly, two steps at a time, and catches my eye.

"Lift some weights," he says as he turns the curve, out of my sight.

"Bones absorb more calcium under pressure..." floats down.

Yuri and Yuri, Lucid's Russian

cosmonaut partners, went

for a space walk. Before they left,

they placed red tape over

the communication panel controls.

Lucid tells People Magazine

"I would have done the same

if it had been my ship."

Once, she scared them by shouting

"Let's fire the engines and head for Mars!"

She had to say she was kidding.

She politely changes the subject.

"My calluses have disappeared.

We're near zero g."

Tonight, all she will touch is chicken, a skinned breast, overbaked and dry.

She's awkward, hunched, balancing the plate on her belly grown huge.

As she loses height, she gains girth, her stomach, intestines, and heart

pushing forward for space, like a tumor or a fetus.

She looks pregnant, like a freak show lady, gray and wrinkled,

yet still fecund, but all that's inside her is her, no more.

She is delicate with the bird, removed,

dreamy and intent as if she was painting a landscape,

peeling each string of dry meat away, leaving

the lucent, purple, impossibly thin, strong webs of tendon,

and the knob cuff of bone where the bird's wing has been wrenched away.

After six months in zero g,

Lucid may have lost

twenty-five to eighty percent

of extensor muscle mass

in her calves and thighs.

Her cardiac muscle has atrophied,

and calcium has leached from her bones.

Everyone who travels into space

loses about one percent

of bone mass every month.

"There is some evidence

that bone loss cannot be reversed,"

says osteoresearcher

Christine Snow of Oregon State.

By the time I reach the gift shop, I've forgotten what she asked me to get,

distracted and confused by the endless, similar, antiseptic, halls.

I borrow the house phone and dial upstairs.

When she doesn't answer, I take a deep breath and remind myself

it takes a long time to get from bed to bathroom and back,

maneuvering a wheelchair, trying not to tangle her long oxygen cord.

I pace for ten minutes and call back. She answers but the connection is bad.

"Who is this?" she says, her voice weak over the necessary hiss of oxygen,

"I can hardly hear you. Honestly. This is no good."

Lucid is a biochemist

and is studying the growth of embryos

in space, using quail eggs. At night,

while the tiny birds grow inside

their fragile shells, she lies

on the floor of her lab and reads Dickens.

Sometimes she e-mails her kids.

Also, combustion experiments:

how does a candle burn in space?

She is setting the stage for the future

babies of Mars, or, at least, their

romantic, candlelit conceptions.

I am driving the rental car down to Ithaca, luxuriously alone in the dark.

On the stretch of 13 South between Cortland and Dryden,

there are no streetlights, and the sky is autumnal cloudy.

If there was a moon to see, I could not see it here.

I glance at the dashboard: I am doing seventy.

I flip off the headlights and drive down the long, curving hill

foot on the gas, navigating the half-ellipse from memory.

This is it, my bad craziness, my moral weightlessness,

my body gravid with no child or religion,

the racing pulse that my mother feels when she grabs my wrist

with her bony fingers and asks me not to leave her

for this long drive towards the empty, fireless house I call home.

But Mom, I am sitting still yet moving so fast! Look, no hands!

She was born Shannon Wells,

in Shanghai, 1943,

daughter of Baptist missionaries.

They were interned by invading

Japanese for her first year.

Released, they stayed in China

until 1949,

when Mao took power

and drove them back

to Bethany, Oklahoma.

"My mother was so happy

we were staying in one place,"

said Lucid. "And I kept saying

'When are we going to move

again?'"

—Bridget Meeds

Bridget Meeds' long poem "Light" will appear in Wild Workshop, a trio anthology forthcoming from Faber & Faber, Ltd. of London, in Autumn 1997.

Lifting Stones

Lisa Harris

Stones are used to build retaining walls in central Pennsylvania—red, orange, white, purple, and gray. The stone walls make homes for chipmunks, snakes, and salamanders. Sometimes toads and spiders seek the safety of their crevices, too. My father could not lay the stones well enough to build good walls, but he did know how to select them to bring back to town for building walls. He drove a red Chevy pickup with a rusted tailgate when he went out past Pine Glen to the deep woods around Quehanna; there he picked the rocks to build his own and his neighbors' walls. Most stones were about two-inches thick and about a foot across. When he selected the rocks, he also considered the effect they would have when they were combined into a wall: sizes, colors, shapes. He wore heavy cloth gloves to protect his hands and a green felt cap because he disliked his curly black hair. He had often wished he had his sister's hair and she had his. Hers was brown and straight, not noteworthy except for its shine.

I think my father liked the suspense of lifting the rocks. He named what lay under them in his stories—millipedes, centipedes, potato bugs, and nameless semi-formed things living in their own world, a world of dark dampness that was their sustenance and their haven. He carried an old Maxwell House coffee can with him half filled with dirt, and it was in there that he put the best-looking worms for his fishing trips.

He had come close to being struck by big diamond timber rattlers that loved the coolness found in pits. He never tried catching snakes; he tried to leave them be in the same way that he did not kill the insects he found under the stone. In the ten years he spent gathering stone for his and other people's walls, he only killed one snake—a copperhead, *ancistrion confortrix*.

It was not one he found under a stone, but one he thought had been watching him for months, maybe years, from the periphery of the pit. Copperheads are gregarious and impressionable, with the ability to remember. About a year before my dad killed the copperhead, some linemen for the electric company had killed two and then nailed them to a pine tree up near the access road. Dad figured the snake he killed was kin to them—a child, a parent, a cousin, or maybe an aunt seeking revenge. And just as Dad didn't know what one snake's relationship was to another's, he figured the snake didn't know Dad's relationship to the linemen. The striking, then, was not personal, but linked instead to how like mixes with like, and in that mixing how boundaries are set and allegiances formed. He was man; they were snake. The linemen were men; the copperheads were snakes. Neither one holding any share in the other.

I didn't see it that way. I felt a kinship with the snakes and the centipedes, the rocks and the creatures underneath them, a kinship and an alienation that was as strong as what I felt with the linemen and most of the people in the town. I was a chameleon, an actress, a shape-shifter.

Perhaps my father was a shape-shifter, as well, but he chose to shift and change in death, greeting me in pieces from the boxes in my dreams. While I knew him, he seemed solid as a tree, permanent as stone. He was a man who called things as he saw them, who used words as if they cost him money, but who listened with the same care and concern, as if he had to pay for the words from the other person's mouth, and that he would have to pay up at the end of the story. He listened with care, and he tried not to judge harshly, because judge he would, judge he must

to make sense of what was said, to make sense of the world around him.

My dad, so the story goes, had loaded all but the last of his purple and red stones into his truck when he saw the copperhead coil to strike. "I must have smelled the snake first—that odd blend of cucumber and wet oak leaves coming from the air of a pine forest," he said. "My nose saved me. It helped me to move quickly enough to drop the big rock I still held in my hand on the snake's head."

I am opening a very small box. It has no wrapping paper, but it is tied with a red satin ribbon, and when I touch it, the red dye bleeds onto my fingertips; it is the red of blood, but I do not know whose blood it is. It may be an animal's, a fish's, or a snake's. It may be human blood or the blood of God. It may only be ribbon dye and mean nothing. Blood is my teacher. It became my teacher despite other plans I might have had. I mean I preferred the kind of teachers I was used to—gentle ones like the garden that taught me about growth and reproduction and harvest. I didn't think of the harvest as death, but instead I saw it as completion.

I listened to the teaching of the elements, checking thermometers to see which coat to wear, looking out the window in spring and fall to see if I needed an umbrella or a scarf. I remembered the teachers who taught me kickball and gymnastics as well as the ones who sunk their fingernails into my tender scalp. Indifferent teachers blurred together into nameless, pale beings who could not remember my name.

An early lesson in blood was a cheap one, a torn knee—the soft container of my skin ripped off by the blacktop and the speed with which I fell from my bike. Other lessons came to me with blood as the teacher. Some I could anticipate, and in my anticipation I could shield myself, sometimes. My classmate falling on the gym floor, bones protruding through the skin of his leg; my girlfriend landing on her face on the basketball floor and her teeth lying there beside her.

Blood arrived between my thighs when I was eleven and my mother announced that it was normal and meant I was a woman. Every month from then until now, the blood has come to remind me of this part of who I am.

When my hymen broke, blood came again to tell me what I had lost, what had changed, in what way I had opened up. And I knew I was glad to be rid of the encumbrance of my value and sad to have let someone in I didn't care about—someone I picked right off the street in a moment of disillusionment.

When the blood stopped for nine months, I celebrated its surcease and listened with my heart to who lay in my belly. I felt the flutter, the hiccup, elbows, knees, and head.

The first time I saw blood when other people did not was on the battlefield of Gettysburg. It was my sixth-grade class trip, and we arrived amidst a stream of yellow school buses for the educational tour. Almost everyone else was thinking ahead to the fun part: a trip to the Hershey chocolate factory and then plenty of time to spend at the amusement park. And the boy I loved, Richard Morris, wasn't looking at me. So I concentrated on the tour guide's words and the battle he was describing.

"On the morning of July 1, 1863, John Buford's Federal cavalry was patrolling the roads northwest of Gettysburg, on the lookout for rebels. The quiet market town of Gettysburg which you see on the panorama in front of you accidentally became a battleground when Harry Heth's Rebels, seeking shoes there, ran into Buford's Union cavalry." Confederates, a long way from home, walking barefoot.

"Buford's men were soon in trouble, and he called on John Reynold's I Corps for infantry support. Shouting, 'Forward! for God's sake, forward!'" That's when I began to see and smell blood. We had moved outside so the tour guide could gesture more broadly over the landscape, away from the safety of the panorama and into the real world: Devil's Den, Little Roundtop, the Peach Orchard and the Wheat Field, the Trostle Farm, Cemetery Hill, and finally, the Angle, the focal point of Picket's Charge. It is early June and the breeze is cool, the dew still wet upon the grass, but I am feeling so hot that I remove my jacket. July hot mixing with spilled blood, new

blood. It is the tortured heat of the July battlefield, with no water and no shade. The more the guide talks, the stronger the blood smell becomes, and now I hear the agony of the wounded.

Mrs. Bangor is kneeling over me, and I am confused. I have been removed from the battlefield and am lying in an office. Mrs. Bangor is cooing at me and patting my hand. "We were just getting ready to call your parents, Eliza. Are you all right, dear?"

"Where have they taken the wounded?" I asked.

Mrs. Bangor looked at me nervously and then away, to the wall and ceiling, as if they would know what I was talking about. But I knew where the Confederate wounded were—riding southward on springless wagons for seventeen miles. I could hear their distant crying. And the Union men's groans remained loud in my ears, close at hand. A harmony and a discordant sound of brothers, cousins, uncles, fathers, sons—men, noble in spirit, fighting for land that spoke to them about their roots as well as their futures. In the non-language of pain, I understood everything that their echoing cries named: honor, loss, love, death, courage, strength, and departure.

I don't remember going to the amusement park. My friends told me I rode the Ferris Wheel with Richard and that he held my hand on the bus ride home. They say I sang along with the rest of the kids on the bus, sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" with gusto and "My Country 'Tis of Thee" with tears on my face, but I doubt them. I was not feeling patriotic or musical. I was feeling the weight of the stone walls that divided the battle field and the heft of the grave-stones covering seventeen acres with one out of every three graves marked "unknown."

I thought about Lee wanting Harrisburg because of its railroads, and how he had to plot and plan to get the cornfields between him and there in order to get there where he never arrived. I thought about how Gettysburg had not been planned, but the battle at Antietam had been. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee and Order No. 191, the order that someone dropped

Bill Parsons' Farm

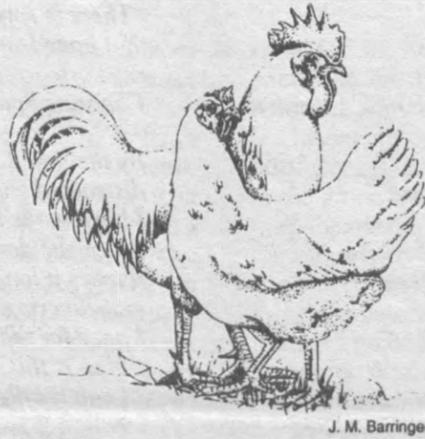
*Torn from branches, leaves rattle over fields, snag in brambled hedgerows. Cold rain begins.
You'll never sell, our neighbors promised,
though your brother scalawaged south,
left you to harvest, paint the barn.
On a ridge wizened heads of clover that ducked spinning blades.
Tired of frost and drought,
your father smoldered to plant perfect rows of cookie-cut homes.
You fought his silence, would have lost if not for his liver.
Small lavender is a gift as is the creased light topping a stand of walnuts. No doubt your callused hands smell of loam and your desk stuffed with generous letters from Mormons holding woods to the east, this farm a buffer against subdivisions.
Truffle. Grouse. So much evades us. It's been rumored wild turkeys walk at night among your clover, feed corn snapped at the neck.
On two legs or four,
what keeps its patience persists.
Not quite. The truth is glacial talus and clay, test after test the fields wouldn't perk.
Red Parsons cursed each engineer, called you Absalom, Cain.
There's little money in clover and days when the wind brings its black overcoat.
Though we haven't learned the name of your cross-eyed mutt,
the difference between winnow and thresh, even when the fields are smothered white
we'll hear the hum of your tractor in our sleep.*

—Thom Ward

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and two Union enlisted men found, the order that tipped McClellan. An order identified as authentic because Lee's assistant adjutant general's handwriting was recognized by one of McClellan's men from their days together at West Point, before the war. The order that exposed the division of Lee's troop by Lee: one part of the Army of Northern Virginia under Longstreet who had been sent to Hagerstown, Maryland; one part under Hill at Turner's Gap in South Mountain; and the third part divided three more ways under Jackson with the mission of capturing Harpers Ferry. McClellan took action slowly, but he did attack the division at South Mountain which forced Lee to concentrate his fragmented troops at Sharpsburg, seventeen miles from Harpers Ferry, on Antietam Creek, September 17, 1862, the bloodiest one-day battle, 24,000 dead men. Seventeen acres, seventeen miles, September 17. Farmer Miller's Cornfield, the 40-acre Holocaust, with men falling dead between the rows of corn, with men falling wounded among the dead between rows of corn. Major General Joseph Hooker, fair-haired and light-eyed in

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J. M. Barringer

Lifting Stones

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the photo portrait of him, has a furrow between his brows. History has quoted him as saying, "...Every stalk... was cut as closely as could have been done with a knife"—his brow, the field.

In a photograph taken by Alexander Gardner, the Southern dead lay fallen like all men seem to fall when killed in uniform. No faces are visible, but six hands and one raised knee can be seen among the fifteen bodies. To the right is the split-rail fence, four rails high, and to the left a road, leading toward Harrisburg if traveled north, leading to Virginia if traveled south. If the photograph in my history book had not had a caption, I might have placed the battle in another time period—1917 and on the Western Front or 1936 in Poland. Nothing in the picture makes it clear that it is 1862 in a cornfield in Maryland. What is clear is that these men are dead. They are the fallen.

For years after the Gettysburg trip, I laid in bed at night and heard the hum of the Earth where the dead had fallen. The hum moved up through the ground, up through the basement, through the floor of my bed chamber and into the bedframe—a vibration that traveled sometimes from south-central Pennsylvania up to the ridges and valleys until it found me, a listener, waiting. I was not frightened by the sound, but I did not tell people about it either.

When I married Elliott and agreed to move to New York state with him, I worried about leaving my mother alone in the house my father had built for her and his children, who turned out to be only me. I worried also about losing my hearing, the one that let me hear the messages I received from the fallen, from the Earth, and from beyond.

I did remember the blood from my father's murder. I had been sprayed by it. The blood outside him instead of in, the blood dripping from the bullet wound, the blood leaking from his lips. My mother bled, too, from the bullet wound that killed him, except she bled inside—under her skin until she was one large bruise.

Rhinecliff, New York is made up of a few streets and a few houses, finite enough to tally if I were ever to take the time. It is also a town on Amtrak's north/south route. When we looked for our house, I not only looked—I listened, hoping to hear the hum of my private telegraph system. Trains make a sound quite similar to the Earth's sounds of movement marking life and death, coming from within the Earth and from on it, coming through—a vibration that we come from and to which we return. Ashes to ashes, perhaps, but certainly silence to sound and sound to silence.

In a Christmas photo taken when I was two, my father is holding me on his knee, his big well-tended hands are crossed over my stomach and his chin is resting on my thick dark hair, making a stacked totem of our heads: mouth nose eyes, mouth nose eyes. We are a two-headed, four-handed being with twice the potential of a human. We are staring openly into the eye of the camera, our four eyes—looking.

I have another shot of us at a big family Halloween party in my mother's dining room. I am six or seven, which makes him almost fifty. All of us are wearing orange half masks, pointed black party hats, but the picture shows only my father and me—the Lone Ranger and a little raccoon. These two photos are well thumbed from my hands. For years I have been handling them, try-

The Unfinished Girls In Pink

"Manipulating memories has proved so successful that he now also offers Digital Reunion, in which he inserts relatives who just happened to miss that not-to-be-missed gathering."—*The New York Times Magazine*, on the services of an innovative photographic entrepreneur

*marquisette clutch their bouquets
and tilt apart, shy of the bridal*

*axis. Eight and ten, they are
spinning, gussied, skirted, overskirted,*

*underskirted, hooped, ready to roll,
ruffled, wired bonnets set for all*

*the world like inverted tarts spilling
meringues of bow. Oh, how that banana-*

*curled girl I was ate up every cake
that spelled forever! Now they tell me
photos*

*of my backyard, al fresco wedding years
later can be digitized, reseeded*

*like a Renaissance masterpiece, Madonna
and Child positioned carefully among*

*saints and chosen members of the family
of so-and-so. As usual she'd have*

*nothing to wear. She'd spend the night
turning up a hem, jumbo pink*

rollers logjammed on her head.

ing to discern who he was and who I was, trying to figure out how I became who I am and trying to imagine who he would have been if he had lived. When I have considered all this for as long as I can, I try next to realize who we would have been as adults—a father and his daughter—the power of one mind, one heart, one soul doubled.

Underneath the blacks, whites, and grays of the photos, I can hear the sounds of our family, smell the wood smoke drifting up the chimney that my father built—because although he could not lay stone, he knew how to lay brick—the wisp of smoke sneaking into the sky on this windless day. I hear the sounds of my mother in the kitchen—chopping celery and onions for the stuffing she is making to go in the freshly dressed chicken. She holds a piece of bread between her teeth to prevent herself from crying. I sit on my father's lap in front of the black and white TV watching the Yankees play another team. The shortcomings of memory, the shortcomings of photographs, partial pieces of truth, illusory.

I also watch my friends whose fathers lived, and as I observe them, I try to gauge what is similar and what is different between the relationship of my friends and their dads and the imagined relationship of myself and my father. The closest Frances can come to joining in this discussion with me is by including her memories of her grandfather and what her mother, Golda, has told her about the relationship she had with him. Mostly Frances doesn't want to talk about it. She thinks I am unproductively obsessive when it comes to this, and she may be right. But it is something I have to explore. It is my history. "And," I remind her, "my obsession, if it is that, with my father, is no stranger than your passion for the War Between the States." I am a good friend, so I do not bring up all the silence which surrounds her love life or her sort of adopting all the children who stare at us from her refrigerator.

I think I'd let her slip in by the day

lilies, a teapot of a woman
poised forever steeping first flush

memories. Might as well, while I'm at it,
decolorize my pink-flowered lawn

wedding dress, wrap it in a cloud
of lace. Might as well make the cake

a corniced wonder, iced facade festooned
with swags and dotted with dragées

of expectation. Well, I expect
I'm finished now, photos put away

unchanged. Not to be changed. A mixed
bouquet is what it is, the past imperfect

as the present, where the dead are with us
differently. Hear them in their tissue-

lined boxes, the way they fret and rustle
and course for all the world like that

river no one steps away from.

After pictures, there were toasts and cake

and jordan almonds. Everyone held on
to someone as the world began to spin

off flowers and finger sandwiches and
promises
not to be kept.

—Nancy Vieira Couto

I cannot gauge what my relationship with my father would have been. It's like asking, "What would the United State be today if the Confederacy had won?" The answer is, of course, who knows? "What if Order 191 had not been dropped from my soldier's hands and picked up by another's?"

So I think, "Get over it. Get past it. Live in the present, it is all you have anyway. What can you do with memories and imagination?"

So I stop what I am doing wherever I am and look around at what presents itself to me. Today when I practiced looking at now, when I practiced living, what I saw first were the blades of grass rising around my sneakers while I stretched to run. Lying upon the blades of grass were snails and drops of dew the size of pennies. While I ran, I saw nothing because I forgot to look, but I heard the wind through my hair and as it came in my mouth and out through my lungs. On my drive to work, I saw a gray-haired man stretching at the sidewalk's edge and when our eyes met, we acknowledged our mortality, and in that moment, life.

My best friend, Frances, tells me to stop feeling sorry for myself for not having a father. "You had him for fifteen years. He married your mother, built a house, worked a job, and held you on his knees. That's five more things than my father did, the man my mother refused to marry.

"Get over it, Eliza. You're forty-three years old. He's been dead twenty-nine years. Worse things have happened. Get over it."

We are working in the backyard at her house. I am trying to show her how to lift stones and stack them to rebuild a wall, a small wall, not running for acres like the ones do on the Gettysburg battlefield. I listen carefully to Frances who knows different things than I do.

Poem In The Letters Of The Mohawk Alphabet

*who she is she wants to know
on Water Street in the stone store
where she is she knows she wants
no worse to wear on Water Street
in the stone store oh roar her heart
oh hear her north the snow she
shines
her sharks are near her store is sorrow
she who knows she is no saint
is heat is show is taste is thirst
on Water Street in the stone store
is torn is worn is art is arrow
is near the shore oh stone the oar
oh nearer to thee oh see oh we
who know no sin who throws the
stone
on Water Street in the stone store*

The Mohawk dialect of the Iroquois uses only eleven letters (A, E, H, I, K, N, O, R, S, T, and W).

—Nancy Vieira Couto

Nancy Vieira Couto is the author of The Face in the Water, a collection of poetry published by University of Pittsburg Press. She lives in Ithaca, New York.

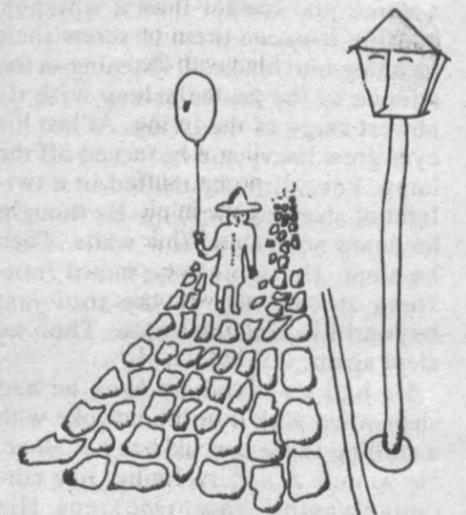
"You'd be better off never having known your dad—like me—if all you are going to do is focus on his murder. Remember him before he got shot. Remember that you loved him. In some ways, I figure I am lucky. I can't miss something I never had."

I wonder if she really believes what she is telling me, and so I wait for her to rise from where she is kneeling on the ground, I wait for her to rise and see me eye to eye. Her eyes are a very light green, extracted from a new maple leaf. They do not change with the weather. They do not change with her mood. Yes, she believes what she is saying. "Memory is important, Eliza, but it is also an enormous waste of time, dragging you back to times and places that no longer exist and over which you have no control.

"Hand me another stone, please."

We work silently. A mosquito buzzes around my head—solitary and insistent. I circle around Frances—insistent and solitary.

Lisa Harris, who has lived in Trumansburg for thirteen years, won the 1996 Bright Hall Fiction Award for Low Country Stories. "Splitting Sticks" and "Lifting Stones" are excerpts from her novel-in-progress, Boxes.



M. J. Carroll

The Palmieri Secrets

Anthony Caputi

It might have been called a *palazzo*. Strictly speaking, it was an enormous rectangular apartment house now sufficiently faded and peeling to look like a *palazzo*, and it seemed to move out in all directions from Matt's bed, like Rome, on all sides rolling out into a honeycomb of streets and quarters, ruins and monuments of the past. And into time as well, an ocean wearing away at the shores of the present, receding into unthinkable depths.

When Matt said goodnight and picked up the flashlight that was to light him down to the bathroom at night, he was tired but still aglow from the *spaghetti alla carbonara*, frascati, and images of Stefania. She was somewhere in the house, down the central staircase to the third floor, around the corner of the ell and along the corridor. Had she squeezed his hand when shaking it the second time?

He placed the flashlight on the table alongside the bed and settled down in the dark. After all that had happened that day, he must try to orient himself: to his father, whom he called Lysander, to Rebecca, and to the rooms below, the wing abutting theirs with the Palmieri apartment on one side and the extensive apartment of General Orsini on the other running around to the short side where it met Rometerna and its offices and workrooms.

So many rooms, spaces designed and re-designed, adapted and readapted, layered so that past uses seem to deliquesce into present ones, past inhabitants into present ones. His room began at the Orsini wall and once had been the bedroom of one, maybe two, servant girls, peach-cheeked *signorine* from the *castelli romani* or some place with ancient echoes like Sabina. The Rometerna extension along the street, Signor Pascare, estate agent, had explained, had been small apartments housing teachers, shopkeepers, and clerks. There had probably been strict rules in those days about hanging out laundry across from the posh terraces of the Palmieris and Orsinis.

Realizing that he would not sleep soon, he turned on the lamp and opened his notebook with the words and idioms he had copied from Manzoni's *The Betrothed*. He had read the book once before in a class at Cornell, and now he was re-reading it with special attention to the language. That didn't make it any easier, he found, because he was continually taking down words and phrases, so many, in fact, that reading was often more discouraging than reassuring. But he was determined. People did learn languages. Lysander had. And he must if he was ever to get inside the skin of this people. And so he studied on, pronouncing the words and phrases in a voice just louder than a whisper, pausing between them to screw their meaning into his head, listening in the silence to the house asleep with its newest cargo of the living. At last his eyes grew heavy and he turned off the lamp. For a time he drifted in a twilight of sleep and waking. He thought he heard noises and low wails. Then he slept. He thought he heard footsteps on the stair to the roof just beyond his wall. A voice. Then he slept again.

He had no idea how long he had slept when with a start he awoke with a chilling sense that he was not alone. He waited. A soft swishing, like curtains swaying. Then soft steps. His eyes were wide open but it was too

dark to see. Even the round window was only the dimmest of eyes looking at him. Then he felt someone or something near him. An odor? The warmth of a body? Now a face was quite near his own, and he could feel breath on his forehead. A voice said softly, "*Dormi, figliolo.*" Fingers, warm and smooth as satin, touched his cheek, and the words were repeated: "*Dormi figliolo.*"

He managed to sit up slowly and light the lamp. Standing over him was an old woman in a nightgown, white hair loose on her shoulders, her face a mask of gentleness and pain. She spoke again with a sing-song intonation, but very softly; in his excitement he did not catch a word. She seemed to be pleading something with an urgency suggesting she had been at it for some hours. He caught the statement, "*Hanno ammazzato mio marito,*" which he thought meant "They've killed my husband." But that was madness! She took his hand and repeated the line several times. At last he got out of bed slowly and stumbly asked, "*Sua camera, dov'è?*" ("Your room, where is it?"). She looked at him for several moments still holding his hand, then led him—after he had stopped to pick up his flashlight—into the hall, past the stairway to the roof and the central stairway to the lower floors, around the corner and into the Palmieri attic. They passed a series of rooms which looked like storerooms. The second from the end was hers. He stopped at the doorway, lighted her in, and said "*Buona notte.*" She dutifully got into bed. Retracing his steps to his room, he glimpsed in the beam of his flashlight the pale outlines of figures in the fading wallpaper hung along the corridor many years before.

Sitting on his bed, he waited in the dark. There was no sound, nothing but his breathing. He looked up the word "*ammazzare.*" It did mean "to kill." "They have killed my husband!"

Matt was awakened by Rebecca calling, "Are you coming down to breakfast, Matt?" He lay for several minutes reassembling himself. In the morning light the visitation of the previous night seemed a dream. He got out of bed and went to the corridor, then to his left past the narrow stairway to the roof to the corner where the Palmieri attic began. At the sight of a woman who had apparently stopped at the sound of his approach, he drew up short. She was middle-

aged and slender, and she was carrying a tray. She looked at him calmly, not nearly as surprised as he was, and after a brief silence said, "*Sono Matilde.*" Matt answered that he was Signor Holt, the son of the professor. She smiled easily and started down the central stairway. Conscious that he had no business there, he went back to this room. But he had seen again what he had seen in the light of the flashlight as he had led the old woman to her room.

In the sitting-dining room two flights down Lysander was already stirring hot milk into his coffee and Rebecca, still in her bathrobe, was going into the kitchen to make more, urging that they were going to need a larger pot. Their breakfast was to consist of fresh *cornetti*, a flaky, gleaming half-dozen of which nestled in a napkin-lined basket. Lysander and Rebecca seemed particularly exhilarated by the promise of the morning.

Matt waited until they had finished before telling them what had happened. No one said anything for several minutes. Rebecca went into the kitchen and returned; Lysander gazed fixedly at Matt, as if waiting for more information. Then they slowly began to raise questions. "But who was she?" "Why had the Palmieris said nothing about her?" "What was she doing sleeping in an attic room?" "And what did she mean about her husband?"

Lysander at last reasoned that she was probably Signor Palmieri's mother. Signor Pascarelli had told them that Signor Palmieri's father had died a year ago, and it appeared that he and the present Palmieris had shared their apartment before the new one had been created. This, then, must be the mother. Perhaps they hadn't mentioned her because she had become senile, and they dealt with that by putting her in an attic room where she is looked after by the Matilde whom Matt had seen on the stairs. "Certainly a gentler solution than putting her in a nursing home," Lysander concluded.

Rebecca wasn't so sure. Nursing homes weren't necessarily bad, she said, particularly for patients who scarcely know where they are. "It could be that they didn't mention her not because they're embarrassed by her condition, but because they're embarrassed about the way they're handling it."

"But why would she say they've killed her husband? Who are the

'they'?" Matt asked.

"It could be her husband's doctors in the hospital he died in," Lysander proposed. "It could be his business rivals, or the world at large. It could even be his family, though that seems unlikely."

Rebecca squinted in the grips of a new thought. "Suppose that the idea of killing is really a metaphor for what she feels the family's doing to her! By extension she projects it back onto the loss of her husband. That was probably a terrible trauma for her."

Matt and Lysander looked unconvinced. She went on. "Look, it's not so far-fetched as all that. Women know about this kind of killing that puts you in a room and keeps you there. This woman, given her age, is probably very traditional. She wouldn't speak against her condition ever. Wouldn't even admit it to herself. But let a general kind of freeing up occur like what we call senility, and a deeper truth surfaces. She sees it for what it is—killing."

Lysander waited for a few moments before replying. "That's very interesting—and it's possible. You're always interesting," he smiled.

"Don't patronize me! Listen for a change!" Suddenly her face was flushed and her voice sharp and trembling. But she checked an impulse to go on.

"I'm not patronizing you, dear. You know better than that. The truth is we don't know what she meant. It's a remarkable statement. It could mean anything. She could be talking about her father and not her husband."

Matt waited for him to go on, and when he didn't, said: "But suppose it means quite simply what it says, that somebody killed her husband? That could explain her derangement."

"But who's the 'they'?" Lysander answered.

"The family?" Matt offered.

"Not likely. Do they look like a family of parricides?" Lysander spoke vigorously now. "No. The statement turns on some kind of transference. The trauma of losing her husband was and is so painful for her that it becomes a killing. That is, if it's her husband she's talking about. And it's impossible for us to know that for sure."

"Well, I think you're both ignoring a key fact when you ignore that this is a woman who's saying this," Rebecca said, having regained her poise. "When Matt says it could be the family, it could be. It usually is. And when you," and here she gestured toward Lysander, "say the idea of killing involves a transference, you're probably right too. But you both miss the boat in failing to see that she's probably not talking about her husband at all, but herself." She paused as if reviewing what she had just said. "Now I've got to get dressed," she added and, with a theatrical sweep of her robe, rose and started off toward their bedroom above. Lysander and Matt continued to sit for a few minutes, diddling with knives and spoons. Then Lysander followed her. Through the garden window-doors Matt could just catch a partial view of the Palmieri terrace. It was empty.

Anthony Caputi is a retired professor of literature who lives and writes in Ithaca. His novels include *Loving Easy and Storms in Front*. "The Palmieri Secrets" is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress.

