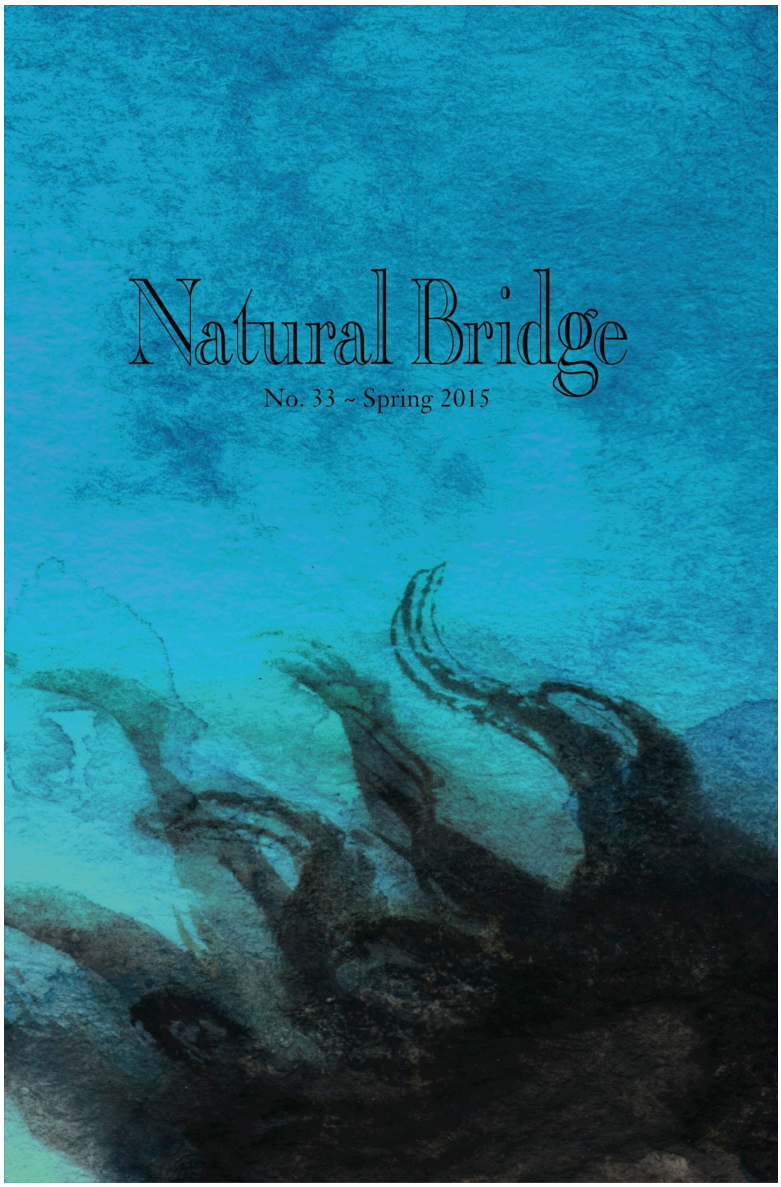
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J. Camp Brown

Mandolin in White Wood, Assembly

Bake a plank of me from the mire.
  Lay me stickered to dry. Scroll a pencil
around your pattern, and, with bandsaw,

slice me out. By gouge and hammer,
  shape me. With block plane, whittle my gut.
Cut my soundhole. Your thumb:—tap it on my crown,

and, until the thump bells, thin me,
  sanding, me smooth, me fleshy. Blow off the dust.
Glue me to my rod and headblock. Leave me

unfilled, an air chamber you could quaver
  and strain once I'm strung taut and struck,
and please ring me like quarter-sawn spruce.

If I am an instrument, there must be a Luthier.
If I too cage my breath, if I too am kerfed with ribs.

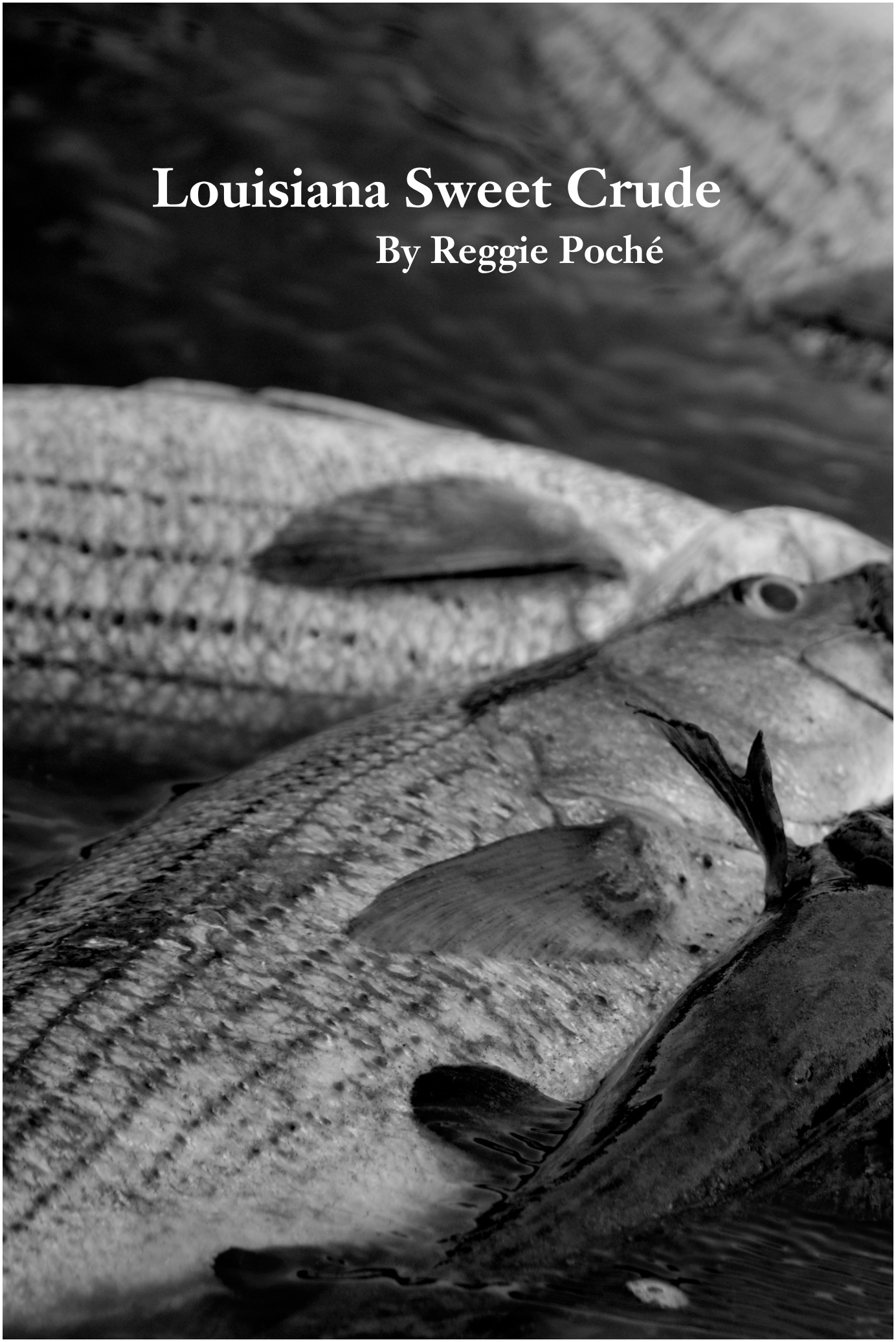
Chuck Tripi

There in a Great Composure

And when he died she stared out the window.
The old broken oak became beautiful. Swiftly
passed the days, and the days after that. Never
did the beauty of that broken tree leave her.
Its branches filled with crows. A lurid sky
behind it in winter, into which the noises
endlessly went, was empty of narrative,
held no particular epiphanies, only crows
and their caws, leafless branches, colors
of an approaching nighttime. To watch her
there in a great composure was to see it too
through the window, even if into a glare,
to hear it too as if the house's walls,
even as if the stones were utterly of air.

Louisiana Sweet Crude

By Reggie Poché



The dehumidifier's motor had burned out the night before, changing their usual bedtime routine just enough for Carl to take some notice. Instead of her usual flannel pajamas, Ingrid wore a loose tank top and a pair of his boxer shorts, her hair pulled back in a tight pony-tail. She stood over the antique bassinette next to their bed and made these little mothering sounds: a nighty-night whisper here, a munchkin giggle there, and a blown kiss for each puppy snuggled within. They answered in soft, satisfied, milk-soaked grunts.

This most recent litter belonged to Pepper, her Cocker Spaniel, who Ingrid said lost all interest in being a mother. "After four times, I guess so," Carl told her. Whenever he came back from The Roustabout, his fishing camp on the Louisiana Gulf Coast, Carl could tell—by the light dusting of baking soda and baby powder on the sheets—that she had brought all five puppies into bed.

"It's starting to smell like pee," Carl said, running his palm over her side of the mattress. Ingrid paid him no mind and continued to tuck in her puppies for bed. She covered the bassinette's faux satin pillows with diaper pads, which she changed twice daily, and then sprinkled baking soda liberally. "I said it smells like pee," Carl said again.

"Your imagination. I just bathed the Weenies two hours ago." She tied a hot water bottle to a stuffed toy giraffe and placed it in the bassinette. Then she wound her alarm clock and tucked it underneath, so her puppies could hear something like a mother's heartbeat throughout the night.

"You're a spoiler," Carl said when she got into bed.

"It's so they don't whine all night."

Ingrid let him hold her from behind and massage her breasts. Falling asleep was sometimes easier like this, as if it were just enough to feel his warmth against her back.

"I wish you'd spoil me like those puppies," he said, kissing the back of her neck.

"I do, but you get so much of a good thing you don't notice."

Talk like this had always embarrassed Ingrid. Of course, she loved her husband and wanted to make him happy, even when loving him was hard. But she didn't need to make a production of it and howl at the moon.

"Why don't you come with me to the camp tomorrow?"

"You know I can't. The Weenies are on a three-hour feeding schedule. And Pepper could care less."

She only followed him to The Roustabout once a year for the annual blessing of the fleet—when they decorated his boat, the *Suzanne Jeanette II*, in colorful lights and streamers and joined the parade of other vessels waiting for a priest to sprinkle them with holy water. The last blessing had been about eight months before.

"We could take the puppies with us. And Geoff's already there. He'll help out, so we can go out on the water."

Ingrid pressed her face into her pillow. "They're too tiny," she said breathlessly. "And with all the mosquitoes and everything. They haven't had their shots."

"I really want you to come. We'll go crabbing."

"I'm not eating any nasty, oily crabs."

"There's no oil in Plaisance. Not yet, anyway. Nowhere near The Roustabout. Paper said a little washed up at Sugarland Pass, but they've got boom and a skimmer boat out there now."

Weeks before, there had been a rig explosion far out into the Gulf—at the Macondo well. Carl said it was only a matter of time before the tide brought the slick in. "So why not enjoy the water and good fishing while we can?"

"I really, really can't," Ingrid said, and they both fell silent but not asleep.

When they were first married, she'd try to keep him home on the weekends by sniffing out a Saturday night bingo game or a pool tournament at the most remote backwoods dive imaginable, or she would mention a movie all of her girlfriends were talking about. Sometimes it would work, but she had never seen a man so joyless after winning a bingo pot or a man fall asleep as quickly in a movie theatre. There came a point when she gave up altogether and left him to the bug-infested muck and mire he seemed to love so much.

After so many years of choosing The Roustabout over her, Ingrid wasn't so sure she could still get him to stay home on the odd weekend here and there. If she were to ask, he would tell her that he loved her more than that ramshackle mud hole and would give her as many Saturdays with him as she wanted. They'd spend their Friday evening swinging in his hammock on the back porch, and he'd do that

little thing of running his fingers through her hair and smoothing out her eyebrows with his thumbs as she fell asleep. The next morning, he'd get dressed and grab coffee and one of the biscuits she had made. He'd hitch up his boat and kiss her goodbye with barely two words passing between them.

Still, she loved her husband, but sometimes she couldn't help but think of him as nothing more than some warm fluff in the bed—a substitute between each litter of puppies. God knew he deserved it. He'd certainly found his own substitutes over the years—a gangly drinking buddy named Geoff and the women they'd bring back to the camp some Saturday nights while Ingrid stayed home with her Weenies.

*

There was a spot just before arriving at The Roustabout where a granddaddy oak tree stood at the foot of a gravel road. Whenever Carl passed, he fantasized that maybe Indians used to congregate around it, maybe dance or sell baskets or skin game from its lower limbs. Maybe people once dueled under that old tree or met lovers there for a romp in the swamp. But recently, lawyers had tacked neon-colored signs to it, all mentioning lost wages, environmental hazards, and unemployed fishermen. Lawsuit this. Class action that. Hold British Petroleum accountable. Carl felt sorry for all those guys—the shrimpers, the ice house workers, the oyster shuckers all the way up in New Orleans—but he couldn't help but worry that the circus was coming to town. Two more weeks, he guessed, and tar balls would be floating in the marshes of Plaisance Point like in a big bowl of Cocoa Puffs, journalists running around like happy children.

At the other end of the gravel road, The Roustabout, nothing more than a four-room pine shack with a galvanized roof—no telephone, no cable—stood sturdily on eight-foot-tall pilings at the bank of a channel that led to the marshes and eventually to the open Gulf. When Carl arrived, Geoff "Duck Lips" Hoffpauir, his friend and coworker from the chemical plant where Carl was foreman, met him with a beer.

"Hey Stringbean," Carl said to his thin friend. Geoff pulled up another mildewed lawn chair, and the two sat between the pilings under the shack.

"My man, you should've been out here yesterday!" Geoff said. "I got so lonely, and then around suppertime, this little stray cat I named Sweet Pea came around, and I took her inside. She drank with me for about three hours."

"Did this cat have long legs?" Carl asked.

"No. It was a real damn cat. I put down a saucer of beer and some shrimps, and we had us a good time. But then, I don't know, the radio was on, and I picked her up and made her dance around on her hind legs like a little puppet, and she went crazy and jumped in that big window fan and splattered all over the place."

"I been meaning to put a grille on that thing," Carl said.

"I was totally sober and lonely again," Geoff laughed, "when I finished cleaning up all the cat guts."

It didn't matter if his story were true or not. The two men commonly came up with a few little tales or clever anecdotes, often trying to outdo each other with their improbability. Sometimes they'd just sit out under the camp all weekend long, inhale the salty air that carried a faint odor of creosote, drink their beers, tell these stories, and not set foot on the boat. Those were good times. Those were times when Carl had felt lucky to have The Roustabout.

Damned if he could understand how his little place was still standing after Hurricane Rita had blown through and destroyed nearly every other camp up and down the bayou. Only his boat slip was swept away by her surge. And the screen door had been blown about sixty yards north into a palmetto grove, its remaining fronds drooping to the ground like eyelashes folding over drowsy eyes. "I can't believe the old girl held on," he had told Ingrid when they arrived to survey the damage. He had expected to see The Roustabout splintered into pieces, some remnants scattered along the bayou—like maybe his Frigidaire face-down in the mud like a bloated corpse and his mattress high up in a water oak. But no, his weekend retreat survived. Many others in Plaisance Point weren't so lucky. The Ramirez camp was decapitated, its roof frisbee-thrown into a bluish-green line of uptorn wax myrtles and prostrate sugarberry trees. The Remondets were left with only stilts jutting out from the ground like crooked birthday candles.

Five years later, all but the Remondets were back, and they built higher and stronger and fancier. The Albrittons were now on tall, con-

crete pillars—not old telephone poles like The Roustabout. The Blenks even got themselves a big winch and mounted it under their camp, so they could hoist their two new jet skis there—tucked away for safekeeping like precious eggs under a hen. The new people, the old judge and his wife, now had a widow's walk where they sat some evenings with binoculars and a bottle of wine, watching for white ibises and blue herons or any number of birds whose names they had yet to learn.

Only Carl had his old, familiar life intact. He had a Frigidaire stuffed with beer. He had his great grandfather's wooden tackle box and the lures it held, some of which were just as old. He had the rods and reels and the outboard he had always meant to work on. He had a shiny barbeque grill, a skinny friend named Geoff, and he had a wife of twenty-six years who spent most of her weekends alone.

"I thought you were fixing to bring Ingrid," Geoff said, half-slurring his speech and adding another empty beer to the pyramid of aluminum cans he had been building there under The Roustabout.

"No surprise. She's staying home."

"Well, that's nice," Geoff said. "Because I happen to have a surprise." He crossed his legs and whipped his head toward his friend. "I met her at the little carnival out on Big Lou Road a couple days ago. I don't know. Probably out here because of all those guys coming in to clean up the oil. Sweaty hazmat suits and fistfuls of cash. She was dancing at the bandstand, right in front of the speakers, and I said hi. She had a little girl with her—her daughter, she said—and I took the two of them out for supper."

"Just supper?" Carl asked.

"With some vanilla pudding for dessert," Geoff winked. "She said they live out at the public lodges by the carnival. I don't know. She might be squatting there. The little girl ran around outside while we did our business in their cabin." Geoff rolled his eyes. "I invited her out with us tonight," he said. Then he took a gulp of beer followed by a loud smack of his lips. He was nothing but lips and a massive overbite.

Carl thought of the little bottles of puppy formula Ingrid kept in the icebox—how she'd clean and fill them every evening while he'd smoke on the back porch and watch TV alone. He appreciated a woman who could enjoy the company of men. His wife, though never really spontaneous or gregarious, used to be like that in her own way.

They'd dance in the parlor. Play cards or dominos. Take quiet drives to Gulf Shores. Years ago, Geoff and he would take her to the horse track, which she seemed to enjoy. They'd all dress in their best clothes, masquerading as sophisticates, and she'd drink champagne and applaud stoically while the men hollered at the tops of their lungs. In those early years, when they were still trying to make a baby, it was even enough for them to just sit in the bath together and flip through a Sears catalogue, spending extra time on the maternity pages or rattling off a series of baby names like Rory and Rebecca and Jules and Justine. In the years that followed, their long list of names had been exhausted on the countless puppy litters born in that old bassinette. At least they didn't go to waste.

Ingrid snuck away to the farmers' market while the puppies slept—her usual outing whenever Carl was away at the camp. She'd browse the rows of produce and dry goods at the open market, inhaling deeply whenever she passed the dried bunches of bay leaves hanging from various stalls and admiring the size of the alligator pears and the length of the zucchini. When they were in season, she would snack on a carton of her favorite Ponchatoula strawberries as she strolled. But on this sticky summer day, she only had eyes for fat Gulf shrimp to throw in with the butter beans she had left simmering back home.

The first three booths she visited all said the same. No shrimp today. Maybe Tuesday after restaurants get first pick. The oil had been gushing from the bottom of the Gulf for over a month now, and shrimp was becoming increasingly difficult to find—unless she bought those puny Chinese shrimp they had at the supermarket. The vendor at the fourth booth, a pretty young thing with a nose ring and an anchor tattoo on her wrist, sang the same tune as the others.

"We sold out an hour ago," she said, "Isn't it funny how when something is gone we get crazy-hungry for it so much more?

"Any catfish?" Ingrid asked.

"A couple left. Lots of speckled trout, though."

"I'll take the catfish."

The pretty young thing went to work. She pulled the two catfish from their ice bed with a single hand while unfurling a roll of butcher's paper with the other. She patted the fish dry and then swaddled them

tightly in the paper. A little freezer tape once she folded in the ends, and the fish were ready. "Just a sec," she said, "We're gonna really make it pretty." A grease pencil came out, and she scribbled "Courtesy of British Petroleum" in a loopy script before moving the package toward Ingrid.

"There," she said, and looked up to find Ingrid wiping away tears.

"I'm sorry," Ingrid said, "Just having one of those days."

"No, no, no, no. Don't cry, sweetie. Why do you want to cry? It's not the end of the world. I can tell you a way to cook these catfish that will knock anybody's socks off."

Ingrid laughed a wad of snot right onto her purse. The pretty young thing handed her a napkin.

"See, bébé? It's not all bad."

"You're a darling," Ingrid said, blotting under her eyes. And then, inexplicably, she spilled her guts to this poor girl, who hung on every word with the grease pencil held at her lower lip, a girl who was too young to really understand what she was hearing. Ingrid told her of Carl. How she should hate him but couldn't. How he'd still take it upon himself, after all those years together, to polish her jewelry with a toothbrush and leave it drying on their nightstand— sweet little stuff like that. How making love to him felt pointless and joyless and only reminded her of her barrenness. How the puppies seemed to be growing up so fast whenever she was feeling down. How the Gulf had made her go without—even before the oil.

A change of clothes for Carl, an Irish shower of English Leather for Geoff, and the two then tore down Big Lou Road: an isolated alleyway of bald cypress, palmetto, and road kill. When they drove over the drawbridge at the Bonvillain Canal, Geoff stuck his head out the window and screeched like an ambulance, seemingly oblivious to the swarm of marsh flies, which popped against the windshield.

The gravel parking lot of the carnival was virtually empty, except for a couple of flatbed trailers hitched to muddy three-wheelers and a few pickups. Geoff ran ahead, kicking up slag with his scrawny legs. Carl went after him and hit him across the back of the head. "Stringbean," he said. They raced to the brightly lit bandstand where

they had planned on meeting their date, Geraldine. "From the get-go, I called her Gerry," Geoff said. "She don't mind."

The band was warming up with some psychedelic riff Carl could swear he recognized, maybe from the Mossy Pits, maybe Igor. Steam rose above the little white tents dotting the periphery of the muddy fairground, and Carl could smell a pleasant muddle of jambalaya and fried turkey legs and funnel cake.

"Sugar Snap!" Geoff said loudly and picked up the little girl, who had run to meet them. "Carlie, this is Sugar Snap," he said in a childish voice. "She's a rabid one, so keep your hands away from her mouth." The little girl laughed when he growled at her neck. "And there's another wild one," he continued, pointing to Geraldine, who walked up slowly with a tray of beers. She met Carl's eyes as she approached and smiled. Every step seemed deliberate, delicate, as if she were negotiating a minefield.

"I might strike oil with these heels," she said, moving gingerly over the soft ground directly in front of them.

"Did I ever tell you what happened to me one Good Friday?" Geoff said.

"Now how could you?" she answered, so close now Carl could smell her perfume—like a combination of lavender and baby wipes.

"Okay," he said. "But there was this one Good Friday when I was warned by an old man that you'd better not dig in the ground on that day because if you do, Jesus' blood will well up in the hole. And I don't know. I thought, now why would that be a bad thing? So I tried it. And sure enough, the blood of Christ geysered out. Scared me half to death."

"Shut up," Geraldine said.

"No. It's true," Carl said. "I was there."

She handed him a beer and looked him over. "Hello," she said.

"Hi," Carl answered. "I'm Bob."

"Carl-ie," the little girl said.

Geraldine gripped his hand firmly, knowingly, setting him at ease. Her lips were full and glossy, and her pink shoulders and curly hair twinkled with glitter. She couldn't be more than twenty-one.

"Where's the fun, Uncle Ducky?" she said to Geoff.

"You're looking at us," he said.

They spent two slow hours at the carnival. Geraldine kept looking at her watch. Carl ran back and forth for beer. Only Geoff and the little girl named Melly were having a time of it. They rode over and over on a creaky, jerry-rigged carousel, which sounded as if it were powered by a jet engine.

Carl's ears were still ringing when they arrived back at the camp, and his stomach had been cramping since they had left the carnival. He thought it was the fried frog's leg Geraldine had had him try. "Those bumpkins eat anything," she had said. He took some baking soda, and the cramps subsided.

"Nervous, Bobby?" Geoff asked.

Geraldine took the sleeping Melly from his arms and put her on the sofa. Then he took the duffle bag she had been carrying since the carnival and slipped an envelope in it.

"I'll go first," he said.

"What do you think, Bob?" Geraldine asked.

Carl patted Geoff on the back. "Yeah. That's fine. You must know this coonass is a quick one anyway."

"Greased lightning," she said.

Geoff pushed Carl. "My friend Bob's not one to take his time, neither. He just can't help it because he's a sick old man."

"Poor Bob," she said.

"It's true," Carl added. "I caught dengue fever in Nam. I'm lucky my blood doesn't run backwards."

"Oh, please. You're not that old. Are you?"

Geoff lowered to his knees and clasped his hands together. "Let's give it to Uncle Duckie, now. Please! Enough with all this chit-chat."

"You're both so clever," Geraldine said and turned toward the bedroom.

They heard her laughing, and both friends knew it had been because she saw the bed. Geoff had found it years ago at a flea market and gifted it to Carl. It had a round mattress, which came with a set of linens, including a purple spread, sized to fit. It looked like something out of a tacky Vegas fleabag, and Geoff loved it. He even bought two gold pillows with *Geaux Tigers* embroidered in fancy purple script. All of it too irresistible for a diehard LSU fan.

Carl smoked his Salems while he waited in the living room. He blew out the window so he wouldn't disturb Melly, who was still sleeping on the sofa. The water outside was still and black, and no crickets could be heard, nothing besides a little laughter from the bedroom every now and then and the low, constant hum of the old Frigidaire. The little girl was dead to the world, tucked in a ball like Ingrid's puppies.

There always came a point on these Saturday nights when his conscience gathered enough strength to speak to him, but its voice was always garbled and easy to ignore. "What's the point?" it seemed to say again that night. "Will you do this forever?" Carl inhaled those questions and exhaled nothing but smoke.

Ingrid had been sitting on their front porch swing, watching the hot pink of the sunset turn to purple. The decision to build their house facing west had always bothered Carl. The heat of the setting sun could be unbearable. But that evening, Ingrid took it in stride, pleased to be wearing the new sunglasses she had purchased at the farmers' market. The butter beans were set on their long simmer, and the puppies slept quietly with Pepper under the swing. And there were shrimp waiting to be stirred in, courtesy of her new friend at the market. "You're alright," the pretty young thing had said once Ingrid paid for the catfish. "For sure, you're righter than right because I know for a fact that some shrimp will be here before you know it." Then she reached under her counter and pulled out a little ice chest, which was about the size you see organ couriers carrying. "I put a few aside for myself even though I'm not supposed to. They're for you, sweetie. Make them so good that you'll show the hubbie what he's missing."

Any of Ingrid's girlfriends would have laughed and called the girl a simpleton. And yes, Ingrid would have agreed that the girl's thinking was simple, but certainly not simplistic. There was once a time in her life when Ingrid also believed that a loving act, no matter how small, even something as ordinary as making a delicious batch of butter beans or cleaning your wife's jewelry, could have all the fix-it power in the world. At fifty-one, she wasn't so romantic anymore, but it still pleased her to cook for her husband nonetheless.

Maybe if their family were complete, Carl would have had a reason to stay home. If they had adopted a child when they were young-

er, even one of the Vietnamese babies that had been in the news, they would never have built The Roustabout. "The babies are part American, at least," Carl had told her, but nothing could convince Ingrid at the time. And now, it was too late.

"Hey ma'am, you have any antifreeze?" A man was coming down the walk with an empty milk jug in his hand. On sight, Pepper rose and began barking, and the puppies yelped almost immediately, which stopped him in his tracks.

"Hold on." Ingrid pulled Pepper inside and came out with a basket for the puppies. "What now?" she asked.

The man rested a foot on the first porch step. "See, I was driving down from Tallulah and my old junker started smoking," he said. "Think I got a leak somewhere. I'm Mikey, by the way." His threadbare T-shirt showed off a strong, muscular build. Ingrid also noticed the pinky ring on one finger and Band-Aids around two others.

"If there's antifreeze, only my husband would know where."

The man set his milk jug on the ground, pulled out a cigarette, and then put it back in the pack. "Is he home?"

"He is." Ingrid scanned the neighborhood, trying not to look obvious, but no one else was outside. They never really were at that time of day.

"Can you please go get him? I would appreciate it so much, ma'am." The man smiled. His teeth looked as brown as his work boots. He was probably some stray come down to work on the oil clean up, she thought. They had been coming out of every backwater hovel in Louisiana and Mississippi.

"My husband's busy right now."

Stupid, she thought, say something specific. He's in the shower. Conference call for work. Say his blood sugar's low or something excusable like that.

"I don't have a problem waiting, ma'am." He crossed his arms. "Like I said. I was driving from Tallulah. It's good to stretch my legs."

Ingrid's friend Nettie, whose office was filing applications for BP, had told her just the week before that most of the people who applied for clean-up jobs had criminal records. "One *couillon*, that idiot, even listed a completion certificate from the Avoyelles Parish drug rehab program on his résumé. And there was this woman who was so

dumb she couldn't even pass a pregnancy test." Ingrid had laughed at the time. But now, beads of sweat tickled the back of her neck, and her sunglasses began to slide from her moist nose.

"Hold on a second," she said. She went inside and tried to lock the door as quietly as possible.

Something about the man had frightened her. It wasn't so much his appearance, she thought, but maybe it was the way he talked—as if he were trying to go out of his way to be polite, to sound sweet and harmless. She decided she would stay inside until he left.

Ingrid watched him through a split in the window curtains. He lit a cigarette and put the milk jug on the porch floor. Then he took a seat on the swing, and she suddenly realized she had forgotten the puppies out there. Her head reeled thinking of what he would do once he understood she had lied. Then her vision blurred when she saw him pick up Jacobi, the tiny black one, and rub its head. The puppy eventually found a finger and tried to nurse from it.

"Put it down! Put it down!" she said through the glass.

"Those are some cute puppies," he said. He held his cigarette between his lips and reached into the basket to pet the others.

"Go. Go out of here." Ingrid knocked on the window sash. "My husband said we don't have any antifreeze."

"Well, can I at least fill my jug up with some water?" the man asked.

"No, we don't have any." Ingrid hustled herself onto the porch. "Get out of here. Get," she said.

The man mumbled something to himself, threw his cigarette to the porch floor, and ground it under a boot heel. "Get," Ingrid said again.

She moved too quickly for the puppy in his hand, causing him to drop it hard to the floor. Jacobi's yelping stopped her in her tracks. She'd heard her Weenies cry for milk, whimper for warmth, but this was something completely different.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm so god-damn sorry," the man repeated as he walked backwards down the porch steps.

"You're a horrible man," Ingrid cried as she placed the puppy in the basket with the others and retreated inside. His hind legs seemed to shiver, and they stretched outward into the folds of the blanket and then

back inward like a sea turtle burying its eggs on the beach. He kept one foreleg tucked against his side; the other vibrated like that of a jittery rabbit. Ingrid thought that maybe he was in shock, so she put the rest of the puppies in the bassinette and tried to warm him with the hot water bottle. After lowering to her knees and praying that little Jacobi would survive, she placed the basket in her darkened parlor, covered its top with a bath towel, and tried Carl's cell phone, which she heard ringing somewhere in the house. The stranger kept knocking on her front door the whole time.

Carl had expected Geraldine to clean up immediately, maybe have one of them drive her back to the public lodges as soon as they'd finished. But she slept instead, naked, on her stomach, her face turned toward him. The glitter she had left on her pillow shimmered, and she moaned lowly with every other breath, or nearly.

He felt himself begin to doze when screaming came from the other room. He didn't see Geraldine race out before him, but when he walked into the light, she was kneeling down to comfort the little girl. "What the fuck's going on?" she asked Geoff who was standing on the other side of the room, shirtless and unsteady.

"Nothing. I don't know. She woke up, so I tried to rock her back to sleep," he said.

Geraldine stood and covered her nakedness with the little girl. With her free hand, she grabbed the duffle bag and went into the bedroom.

"What did you do, Geoff?" Carl asked. He felt as if all of his breath had left his body. His stomach tightened, and the cramping began again.

Geoff took one of Carl's cigarettes from the pack on the windowsill, lit it, and exhaled a plume of smoke above his head. "Man, nothing," he said. "I try to do the right thing and get her back to sleep—get her back to sleep so you all can sleep, too—and she bites me."

"Give me a real answer, Geoff." Carl walked toward his friend, hoping his tone was threatening enough. "Come on, Geoff."

"That is a real answer. That's the real truth."

"You do not rock a strange woman's baby. Do you know what that looks like? Do you know what that can be, you asshole!"

Before Geoff could speak, Geraldine came out, half-dressed and still holding her daughter.

"Where's the money?" she asked.

"It's right where I put it," Geoff said.

"Where's my money!" she yelled.

"In the bag! Just look, damn-it!"

"Stop! Everybody just stop!" Carl wedged himself between Geraldine and the door. He tried his damnedest not to take in another breath because he knew it would only exhale in a few weak, mealy-mouthed words. "I need to know what's happened here, for fuck's sake. This is my place. It's mine. If something happens, I need to know what all this is that's going on in my place."

Geoff put on a shirt and calmly smoothed down his hair with a little saliva. "Don't be so bashful, Carl," he said. "Just go and say it. I know what you think I did. You'd say you can't help but think it, right? You'd say it's because the both of you weren't in this room to see for sure what really happened. You're right. You didn't see that I haven't, in fact, done anything except get a bite from a fussy little girl."

"My little girl is not gonna get 'fussy' for no reason!" Geraldine tried to shoulder Carl aside, and Melly's arms coiled more tightly around her neck. "Just let us get out of here," she whispered to him.

"Let's sort this out first." Carl had never wished so much that Rita would've blown the The Roustabout away when she came through.

"If you want to call the law all the way out here, then call the law. I'll say the exact-same thing of what I'm telling you now," Geoff said.

"Let us out!" Geraldine screamed.

"I could never hurt a child. Would figure you'd know your friend better than that."

That was entirely it. That's what Carl had been trying to wrap his head around. That's what had made him swallow his breath and go dumb for a second. Even though he suspected Geoff really did nothing wrong, he couldn't be absolutely sure. You can be certain of some people's goodness—like Ingrid, the kind of person who would take sin itself into her home, feed it supper, give it a bath, and sing it a lullaby before bed all the while knowing it will sneak out and get filthy all over again. But with Geoff, who knew? Carl understood what that meant about the

company he kept, and he shivered at what it seemed to say about him.

He moved away from the door and unlocked it for Geraldine. "Let me give you a ride home," he said. There was no way she could possibly carry the girl, the bag, and whatever else all the way back to the lodges—not to mention the lack of streetlights in the wild. She was adamant in her refusal, but he persisted, and tears began to well up in him.

"You trash can't be trusted," Geraldine said.

"Please," Carl said. "I can follow in my truck. Let me just follow as far as I can." He was weeping openly now. Through the tears, Geoff looked thoroughly disgusted with him. But then there was the thought of his back porch, then of the puppies, then Ingrid—how peaceful it must have been back home. Suddenly, his pleasure of watching Geraldine sleep just minutes before went completely sour.

"Okay, you can follow. But only you, mister. So stop your titty-baby crying."

The radio in Ingrid's car was going on about British Petroleum needing volunteers to ferry oiled pelicans to the clean-up facility in Cocodrie. Carl had been right. The oil was on its way—slowly, sneakily—like some deep-sea predator advancing on a school of helpless guppies.

"Can I put it louder, Miss Ingrid?" the man from Tallulah asked.

"Okay, Mikey," she said, stroking the quivering puppy in her lap.

Mikey. Big, muscular Mikey. Mikey with the pinky ring. Mikey from Tallulah. She couldn't believe that she actually got in a car with this man. She couldn't believe she was in her own damn car with a stranger behind the wheel, the two of them speeding out on a nowhere country road that cut through nothing but sugar cane fields and cattle pastures.

What was she supposed to do? She couldn't very well drive and care for the puppy at the same time. And Carl, of course, was having his weekend, so he couldn't drive her. There was only Mikey, who had stayed out on the front porch while she tended to Jacobi inside. "I can go get a doctor, ma'am," she had heard him say just as she was dialing the vet's office.

The woman at Dr. Breaux's after-hours answering service, who Ingrid suspected was really just his wife talking on their kitchen phone,

had said that the vet couldn't examine Jacobi until the morning. Ingrid left her name, said the puppy's yelping was incessant, and asked to be seen first thing in the morning. She prayed that he would last until then. It took Dr. Breaux no more than five minutes to call her back and say that he'd meet her at his office that very night. "You're a special case," the good doctor had said.

In her pearls and evening attire, Dr. Breaux's wife was waiting for them at the practice's front door. The little cottage, which fronted a dark wood of tall loblolly pines, was lit up like a jack-o'-lantern—with the two front windows for eyes and a little frosted-glass transom above the door for a nose. The trilling of crickets out on that country road was deafening.

"Dr. Breaux's waiting in the exam room," the wife said curtly. Yep, she had the same voice as the lady on the phone. Ingrid wanted to apologize for stalling their evening plans, but she quietly went with Mikey across the waiting room, which smelled as if it had been freshly disinfected with bleach, and entered the little exam room at the cottage's center. Dogs were whining from a backroom kennel. Jacobi twitched a little in Ingrid's arms.

"Is this Carl?" Dr. Breaux asked, offering a hand. "It's so good to meet you."

"My name's Mikey."

"Carl's at his camp this weekend," Ingrid said. "Mikey's my ride. Mikey's…. Mikey's my friend."

"Still good to meet you, sir," Dr. Breaux said and then went about his business.

The vet moved slowly but confidently— checking vital signs. He listened to Jacobi's heartbeat. He ran his fingers gently over the puppy's urine-soaked body—in search of what, Ingrid couldn't tell, but she trusted that his wrinkled, practiced hands knew what they were looking for.

"Little fella's heartbeat is like a hummingbird's."

"I'll pay for whatever he needs," Mikey said.

Dr. Breaux, rubbed Jacobi's extremities. When he reached the left foreleg, the puppy yelped mercilessly, his cries answered in whimpers from the kennel out back.

Mikey's voice cracked as if his throat had cinched at the sound. "I'm sorry, Miss Ingrid."

Ingrid remained calm, strangely at ease. She was glad to have Mikey there. To notice her steadiness next to this giant, woe-gathered man gave her peace.

"We're going to do an X-ray on this tired-out little fella," said Dr. Breaux. "It's probably a fracture. We'll splint it and let him get some rest. Okay?"

"Miss Ingrid, what about all of this?" said Mikey. "What about what the doctor said?"

She nodded and continued to stroke Jacobi's head.

Ingrid and Mikey waited while the doctor had Jacobi in another room. She imagined the other puppies back home—snuggling contentedly with Pepper, yawning periodically and stretching their legs, gently nudging each other with wet puppy noses. Quite simply, they were just puppies, nothing more. To ask anything else of them just wouldn't be fair. Then the whining from the backroom kennel died down to a low murmur, and Mrs. Breaux's designer heels clicked softly on the linoleum in the waiting room.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Ingrid," Mikey said.

"That's nice, but it wasn't your fault, you know." Ingrid rubbed her hand in small circles over his broad shoulder. "A thing just happens and you go on from it."

"When we're done here, I'll hitch a ride back to my truck."

"Of course you won't. I have supper waiting at home. But let's stop somewhere and buy you some antifreeze first."

After walking fifty yards in those high heels, carrying Melly over one shoulder and the duffle bag over the other, and with Carl patiently bringing up the rear in his truck, Geraldine finally accepted a ride. "I don't know what's worse—snakes or fucking rednecks or crying titty babies," she said, "but I guess I'll have better chances with you."

They made their way back down Big Lou Road toward the lodges—back to her bored oil spill workers awaiting deployment to the Gulf, back through the alleyway of bald cypress and palmetto, back through the thriving, primordial ooze of the Louisiana swamp. A

strange blue moon hung above—its misty, electric glow barely cutting through the haze. It looked as if its light would peter out any minute.

"No," Geraldine said. "We're not going back there. We're going someplace else."

"Where? It's the middle of the night."

"Find me a hotel, someplace clean." Melly stirred in her mother's lap, rubbed her eyes, and fell back asleep.

"We'd have to go all the way to Bayou Labiche to find a place like that."

"Then that's where we're going, mister."

"What about your stuff?"

"You'd be amazed by how much you can fit into a duffle bag."

They found the Travotel just outside of Sootville—a little v-shaped motor lodge with a triangle courtyard, the center of which had a boomerang-shaped swimming pool surrounded by sago palms and marigolds. The place was old, but well-kept. Each unit even had those old jalousie doors with the adjustable glass louvers and a simple wrought iron balcony reminiscent of the French Quarter in New Orleans.

"This'll do just fine," Geraldine said. She woke Melly with a little nuzzle to her cheek and a whisper in her ear. "We have a swimming pool, Doodle Bug. We're gonna have a swim-party. You and me." The little girl smiled but quickly closed her eyes again, saving her excitement for the morning.

"How long are you going to stay here?" Carl asked.

"I have enough for the week. Maybe a little longer."

"That's not very long. I can help you out a little." He told himself that he wasn't trying to buy things back to right. You're being protective, he thought. A young mother alone with her little girl—it would simply be the charitable thing to do.

"No. We'll be fine."

"At least, I want you to know that I'm not a very bad person."

"I know," she said and gave him a little pat on the knee. "I'm not a very bad person, neither."

"I know."

"And that's all we each need to know."

Geraldine collected her daughter and duffle bag and went into

the motel office to pay for her week of peace. Carl waited in his truck until she came out with her key, which she jingled above her head, waving him off, before disappearing into her room.

He wondered how many families had checked into the little motel over the last fifty or so years, all coming or going from fishing trips on the coast. He imagined all the mothers and fathers and freckled children splashing in the pool or taking snapshots in the parking lot next to their station wagons. If life had turned out differently, he could have been one of these happy ghosts—smiling for the camera with Ingrid and their own little doodle bugs, their own little Weenies.

Turning northward toward home was easier than he had expected. When he arrived there in the dark, early morning, he found Ingrid sleeping in the back porch hammock. She said that there had been some accident with Jacobi, that Dr. Breaux had a hell of a time making the tiniest of splints, and that they were fine thanks to a Good Samaritan she had met. "He showed up at the right time," she said.

"I'm here," Carl said, and he kissed her on the forehead.

"Yeah, you're here. Why so early?"

What could he say? He had the whole ride back from Bayou Labiche to think of something—more lies. Funny how telling a lie now frightened him more than telling the truth. But the truth of what had happened that night was so complicated, such a rotten maze of awful, any rational person would call it a lie anyway. What do you say when neither the lie nor the truth is adequate?

"Fishing was bad? The oil?" Ingrid asked. Of course, he thought, leave it to good Ingrid to write a script for him. She always had, and it shamed him to no end.

"No fish around," Carl said. "And no crude yet. But the place is gonna be spoiled soon enough. Spoiled for a long, long time."

"Well, I did better than you. Got my hands on some shrimp today. Stewed some butterbeans and had a nice, late supper with them."

They went into the kitchen where Ingrid warmed him some for an early breakfast, and that horrible night began to sink away.

Ingrid watched him eat from the same spot where Mikey had sat a few hours before. She had let her friend do most of the talking over their supper. He told her about his plan to visit his little daughter, who

he hadn't seen in two years. He couldn't even imagine what she must look like now. "There's a birthmark on her neck like an acorn," he had said. Ingrid had told him that he was welcome to a puppy once they were weaned. "Cockers and little girls go together like butter beans and shrimp," she laughed. "Oh, and Butter Bean would be such a precious name." She served Mikey a glass of sherry on the back porch before he left, and he promised to check in on Jacobi in a couple days.

Ingrid poured Carl a cup of decaf, so he gave her a kiss. Pepper whined from under the table, so he slipped her a shrimp. They both deserved more, so did the whining basketful of puppies in the other room.

"I'll wash the dishes if you want to see about them," he said.

"Okay. Rinse out the coffee pot, too."

Carl washed the two other plates and forks he had found in the sink, making sure everything was completely dry before stowing them in the cupboard. Then he had a smoke in his hammock and noticed the brownish filter of a Camel that had been snubbed out in his ashtray. He wouldn't ask Ingrid anything about where this Good Samaritan person came from or how long he had stayed. It was Sunday morning, after all, and Saturday should stay with Saturday.

William Trowbridge

Gold Diggers of 1933

The women who want a showbiz job
instead of marriage are the "gold diggers"
in this Depression comedy that starts

with a pre-code Busby Berkeley take
on "We're in the Money," showing enough
sassy flesh to re-energize the censors,

the girls looking how you can't imagine
your grandma would have looked
had she been among them, kicking up

their heels, counterpoint to the boys
goose-stepping through Berlin
and Munich, who later, off in Poland,

will dig their gold from human molars
and give a new twist to "concentration,"
though now the Nazi nights are rife

with giddy marchers in formations—
phalanx, rune, swastika, moving
in torchlight on a Seig heil! tidal wave—

inversion of the Berkeley numbers, whose girls
combine their amplitude into posies,
violins, and Deco wedding cakes. In Germany,

the beauty Irma Grese, then 10, who dreams
of movie stardom, will later get an SS job
and earn fame as "The Beast of Belsen."

Sean J. White

Homage to Robert Frost

When I saw the word
downloading in a poem
I knew the world
had driven away without me
My own vehicle broke
down on the gravel
shoulder of the two-lane
country highway hazard
lights flashing me still
idling behind the wheel

Patricia Zylius

Thief

When I answer the door, there she is
on the top step, smiling, tiny garnet in her nose,
tie-dyed bandanna corralling blond dreads.
I'm Jasmine. I used to live there.
She points over her shoulder
at the decaying rental on the corner.
I took this from your porch when I was little.
She holds out a rusty horseshoe
and walks off lightened.

I turn the heavy hunk of iron over and over,
finally remember it hanging above the door
where my husband nailed it, before we fell apart.
It turns my fingers orange. I rub the rust
onto my pants, look down at the stains.
Think how I'd stand, fists at my sides, refusing touch,
kisses held captive in my own clenched mouth,
hoarded kindnesses.
Call it thievery by neglect.
I robbed him of what I didn't give.

Now I want to reach back
and wrap my hand around some solid offering.
But what door could I knock on
that a dead man could open?
What would rest in my palm?

Joshua Coben

Prenuptials

While I undress
under the lamp
a mosquito
staggers in
hasty as a groom
before the wedding

lingers
as if to say
later my sweet
in the dark
we shall meet

and in the morning
by the trace
of my kiss
you shall know me

Dunbar's Folly

by Matthew Duffus

As soon as Provost Nickerson asked him what he intended to do in his retirement, George Dunbar knew he was in trouble. *Transformation* was the new watch word: out with the old and in with the less expensive. He'd seen it happen to Bob Toback, in Music, and to the English Department's Medievalist, Sheri Albertson. But they were both practically seventy while he was a mere sixty-four, a wonderful age, numerically speaking. It was even, which he liked, and the product of eight-squared, four-cubed, or two-to-the-sixth-power, which pleased

him to no end. He kept these numerical predilections to himself and countered the provost's buy-out offer with a statement of fact.

"You and I are the same age, David. When will you be transformed?"

The provost smiled, predictably—the man was known for the fifty-seven varieties of his smiles—and said, "My position adds value to my age, whereas you..."

"A mere history professor, doing nothing to contribute to the administrative bloat at the top. Thank you for clarifying my situation."

Nickerson dropped any pretense of enjoying the conversation. "This is the best offer you'll receive," he said. "And it comes with a very narrow window."

That afternoon, Dunbar accepted, after he'd discussed it with his wife, a lawyer, who agreed with the provost's position *vis-à-vis* the fleeting nature of the deal. She'd been helping the local hospital lay-off workers ever since the economic downturn had begun and knew whereof she spoke. After thirty-five years at Magnolia University, in the same office—on what had jokingly been referred to as the Non-productive Wing, at least until being nonproductive had become more of a liability than usual—he was out of a job, left with nothing but his lifetime library privileges. The day after he submitted final grades, he submitted his keys, as well, and drove his possessions home in his pick-up truck. He would have felt sick, depressed even, if he weren't still walking around in a daze.

The truth was that Dunbar had no clear plan for his retirement. He'd daydreamed about spending his Golden Years puttering around his English garden, but three decades of work had left nothing for him to do. He'd replaced the scraggily, clover-infested fields with Bermudagrass; planted Groundsel, American Beautyberry, and Bigleaf Galberry bushes; and lined the perimeter of his eight acres with stately White Oaks, saving more colorful Tulip Trees for the interior. He and his son, from his first marriage, had built a pier that jutted out into the pond at the center of the property, and a local sculptor had cast three iron nymphs that sat on concrete pillars in the murky water. His dream garden had been achieved.

Faced with a summer centered around shuttling his daughters from activity to activity, he did what he always did when at a loss: he retreated to his books. Sitting on the floor surrounded by the unpacked boxes from his office, he went in search of inspiration. What better use of his time than the writing of a *magnum opus* that would shame Nickerson for putting him out to pasture? At the end of an afternoon, however, he had nothing but sore buttocks to show for his work. It had been seven years since he'd completed *Off With His Head: Pride's Purge and the Rump Parliament*, about Charles I's execution, and many more since his lone success: *The Protection of Capital in English Law, 1720-1800*. The thought of embarking on a project that would easily take him into his seventies seemed too daunting, especially when his wife was hinting about him picking up classes at the local community college. At the bottom of a box of books on the House of Stuart, he found *The Complete*

Guide to the English Garden, a fifty-year-old encyclopedia as thick as a metropolitan phonebook. He remembered coming across it in the local bookstore after he'd first moved to Mississippi and the almost physical pain elicited by its sixty-dollar price tag.

Over the next few days, while he mowed the acres of lawn that surrounded his modest home, he thought about the *Guide*, about the excitement he'd once felt, following it step-by-step, creating the closest thing to a classic English garden that he could in such an inhospitable climate. It had been akin to the thrill of watching his three children being born, of experiencing their milestones along with them. But he never got that thrill any more: Jenna, his youngest, was twelve, and her older sister, Kat, fifteen. They didn't seem to need him. And his son, Andy, had a family of his own, in Memphis.

Dunbar's property was divided into quadrants with the pond in the middle. His remodeled home and detached garage comprised one quadrant, as did the separate garage where he kept all of his landscaping tools and machinery. The remaining two, the ones closest to the road, were empty fields that a neighbor woman kept pestering him to hand over to her prairie reclamation project. Sitting atop his riding mower in the upper of the two fields, he suddenly had a vision of something far grander than a habitat returned to nature. He didn't know where it came from, exactly, though he could trace the germ of the idea back to those books in his study, the *Guide* chief among them. When he looked through the swarm of mosquitoes at his well-tended enclosure that afternoon, he pictured the outline of a majestic structure rising above the treeline to the east. George Dunbar was going to build a folly.

Not just any folly. What he saw before him was a replica of the Battle Abbey, in East Sussex. Built by William the Conqueror as penance to God, and Pope Alexander II, for the blood shed during the Norman Invasion in 1066, the Abbey sat on the field where the Battle of Hastings had taken place. William had died before it had been completed, and the centuries had been less than kind to the building, all but destroyed by Henry VIII. It remained as nothing more than a facade, which was exactly what Dunbar's folly would be. He relished the thought of building the faux ruins of an actual ruined abbey. Plus, he remembered a line he'd read in a book once: *Unlike the erection of other ornamental objects, folly building flourished in times of hardship, when their*

construction served as a form of poor relief, providing work, and therefore wages, for peasants and unemployed artisans. His wife had a good job, so economic hardship wasn't in their immediate future, but Dunbar still saw himself as someone in need of relief.

*

"What do you think?"

"Mom's not going to like it." Jenna, Dunbar's youngest, stood next to him, hands on her hips, watching the men pour the concrete footing for the folly.

"We've already discussed it. She's fine." Dunbar had wanted to do everything himself, but the time it would have taken to mix and spread the cement, not to mention the danger of fouling up the entire project with one miscalculation, had convinced him to hire a local firm for the crucial first step. When Jenna remained silent, he said, "Why don't you think she'll like it?"

"It's big," she said. "Really big."

Dunbar ran his hand along his brand-new mason's hammer, itching to get started. The first load of bricks—blonde waterstruck, guaranteed to look 200 years old upon delivery—sat on a pallet near the cement truck, useless until the footing set. In the meantime, the project lived on in its ideal state in his mind.

"What's this thing even for," Jenna said. She spun his chalkline in the air like a yo-yo.

"It's not *for* anything. It just *is*. Like the nymphs in the pond."

She snorted. "The skinny dippers?" Before Dunbar could correct her, she corrected herself. "Joke. I don't need a lecture on Greek mythology. The bedtime stories were enough."

Once the men had finished and their truck had rumbled down County Road 319 in a plume of diesel exhaust, Dunbar led his daughter around the perimeter of the structure, pointing out which sides would be built highest, where the bricks would have to be split to look as though they were crumbling. "William the Conqueror ordered that the altar be placed at the exact point where King Harold fell in battle."

"I'd like to renegotiate my fee," Jenna said. "This is going to take way longer than I thought."

Dunbar had offered both of his daughters an hourly wage for their help, but Kat claimed she would be too busy with The LadyKillers, her alt-country band—whatever that was—to help, so he'd been left with only one assistant. In the past, he might have asked his wife to take some vacation time and pitch in, but now that he'd been deemed unnecessary by the university, he was eager to prove his resourcefulness, particularly to the one person whose opinion of him mattered most.

Shortly after the publication of *The Protection of Capital in English Law, 1720-1800*, he'd been invited to give the keynote address at the law school honors society's annual dinner. His future wife had been a third-year student, and the recipient of most of the top awards. She'd impressed him, afterwards, with her questions about the Poor Law and Combination Acts, and had made it clear during several coffee dates that she found him equally impressive. He'd dated sporadically after his first marriage had ended, a too-young match exacerbated by the lack of opportunities for his wife in northern Mississippi, but he had never thought of himself as the type to date someone closer to his son's age than to his own. In the years since, people were often disappointed that Megan hadn't been his student, that nothing scandalous had gone on between them. The age difference was still enough to make Dunbar conscious of his own mortality, to keep him going to the gym, fighting the daily battle with ear-and-nose hair, and regularly updating his wardrobe. Being mistaken for his daughters' grandfather was bad enough. He refused to be seen as his wife's doddering father.

The next morning, younger daughter by his side, he set the mason's line around the perimeter of his folly. His father, a master carpenter, had passed on his love of manual labor to all three of his sons and that love, combined with the two hours he'd spent watching tutorials online, had helped prepare Dunbar for the work ahead. He mixed the mortar in a wheelbarrow, showed Jenna how to transfer it to the mortar board and load a trowel, how to spread it evenly on the bricks, including when to scrape off the excess and when to leave it alone. Jenna was a quick study. Within a half-hour, he was able to leave her alone and concentrate on hauling and setting the first tier of bricks.

By lunch, his hands were already sore, callouses appearing as tiny buds beneath the skin of his finger pads. The bricks were heavier than he'd imagined, and he knew already that he'd underestimated how

many it would take to fill each tier. He intended to insert a perpendicular layer of bricks, both for variety and stability, after every three horizontal layers, which would require even more bricks that he hadn't ordered.

The work went slowly but steadily throughout the afternoon. Dunbar stripped down to his undershirt, offering Jenna his pullover to wipe the mortar from her blond hair, but she declined. Every time he complimented her work, she shrugged, then turned away, smiling to herself. When Megan arrived home from the hospital, where she was senior legal counsel, they'd completed an entire course, including the perpendicular row that had frayed Dunbar's patience and used up Jenna's remaining mortar.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Megan said, shooting her daughter a look, "but this is bigger than we discussed."

The three of them stood in the middle of the folly, where the first rows of the congregation would have sat, centuries earlier, listening to a priest drone on in a language they didn't understand.

"It only *seems* larger, because you can't see the scope of the project yet."

"We never talked about a budget," Megan said.

"I'd rather talk about what a great job Jenna's doing on the mortar. She's already a pro!" He bent down to point out the details. "We're using an English garden wall bond, with a header after every three stretchers. This means quite a bit of work for Jenna, I can assure you."

"Why do I feel like you're trying to confuse me."

"*Educate* you, that's all. Once you know what we're doing, you'll be as excited as we are!"

Jenna looked at her mother, shrugged, and headed toward the road leading up to the house. "I need to get cleaned up," she said. "If that's okay, boss."

Once she was out of earshot, Dunbar told his wife, "She tries to hide it, but she was really getting into it."

"Sure she was." Megan gave him what he thought of as one of her courtroom looks, one part impatience to two parts bemusement. "You could use a shower yourself," she said.

*

They completed the first story by the Fourth of July. The folly was eight feet tall at that point, with the rear side left half complete. Dunbar's t-shirts had grown snug at the shoulders and arms from the muscles he'd developed, and even Jenna's forearms were toned from the repeated scraping and smoothing of the trowel. The American Beautyberry bushes around them had turned from a rosy red to purple, and the summer's heat sent them indoors by mid-afternoon, where they drank sweet tea and laid on the hardwood floor, letting the living room's ceiling fan cool their sweat-soaked bodies.

The morning after the Fourth, Dunbar awoke to find his daughter standing over him. She'd been shaking him for some time, she claimed, but since they'd begun working on the folly, he'd been sleeping better, and more deeply, than ever before. Jenna's words threatened to overturn this hard-won peacefulness.

"We've got a problem," she said. "A big one."

Still in his bathrobe, Dunbar followed her outside. The air was sticky, like walking into a warm mist, even though the sun was barely above the tree-line. Jenna was silent, marching purposefully toward the folly. When they were within sight, she pointed at the offending structure and waited for his nearsighted eyes to adjust.

"What happened?" he said. The upper half had collapsed on two sides, bricks strewn all over the ground. Some sections looked as though they were still deciding whether or not to come down: the lower courses twisted, mortar bulging out of gaps that shouldn't exist, the upper ones leaning at precarious angles.

"All this work gone to waste," Jenna said. He didn't know what to say. He wanted to go back to bed, get up in an hour and see if this wasn't all just a bad dream.

"You ever hear of a buttress?" Jenna waived her smartphone at him and continued. "Five minutes online and I know all about them. Shit, Dad. What were you thinking?"

"Language," he said, but he knew his chiding lacked authority. She was right. He'd been kidding himself thinking that he knew what he was doing. What if it had come loose while Jenna had been standing beneath it?

He picked up a fallen brick, ran a fingernail along the jagged

mortar. "I guess it'll be more of a ruin than I thought."

"What?"

"I'll pay up once I go to the bank. Then you'll have the rest of the summer to yourself."

"You're *quitting*?" She looked angry, threatening, shaking her trowel at him.

"I'm afraid we've exhausted my limited expertise," he said.

"If we can build eight feet up from the ground, we can build a couple of buttresses. They're just fat walls."

"But what if something else goes wrong? I don't want you getting hurt. Besides, once your mother finds out—"

"Who says she has to know? We'll tell her we noticed a flaw or something. That we had to rebuild."

As much as the ease with which his daughter crafted a believable lie bothered him, Dunbar was bolstered by her enthusiasm. He had a tendency to "go negative," as Kat would say. That attitude had killed too many projects to count while they were still in their infancy. He'd abandoned manuscripts after years of research simply because the first draft didn't come together as smoothly as he had dreamed they would. He owned a piano, guitar, and harmonica that he'd tried, briefly, to learn. And he still cringed at his one attempt at local theater.

"We have to do something before your mother leaves for work. She'll see it from the road."

Jenna smiled. "I found some tarps in the garage. Should we add a Closed for Remodeling sign?"

It took three weeks for them to rebuild the walls and add the necessary supports. Dunbar was as embarrassed by his failure to notice the buttresses on the original Battle Abbey as he was proud of Jenna for asserting herself. She calculated how wide and tall the supports needed to be, how many bricks they would contain, and how far apart they should be. In the end, they added two to the front and three to each side.

The completion of these improvements also marked the upper limit of his agreed-upon budget, so Dunbar took one morning off in late July to meet with the Dean of Instruction at the local community college. He wore a linen suit with a white shirt and red-and-blue striped tie and mistook the Dean, in Polo shirt and gray trousers, for a student

waiting for an audience with what he assumed would be a more professionally-attired, and significantly older, administrator. The Dean, in tasseled loafers without socks.

"We're pretty relaxed around here," Dean Zelinski said. "You can call me Curtis."

Curtis Zelinski? The name sounded a bell deep in his brain. But before he could place it, Zelinski said, "My brother, Chris, was one of your students. From what he told me last night, this meeting is certainly pro-forma. If you won't mind my saying so, Magnolia's loss is our gain."

Dunbar nodded. Not wanting to let the entire day go to waste, he'd shown Jenna how to use a mashing hammer and blocking chisel so that she could split a stack of closure bricks they'd need to make the folly look authentically decayed. Instead of listening to Zelinski, he wondered how she was doing, worried that the task was beyond her and that she'd give up or, worse, do a lousy job.

"...afraid the most I can offer you at this time is a Western Civ survey," the Dean said. "We're mostly American-centric here and don't have much need for British history."

Dunbar swallowed his objections, grown rote over the years. How can you understand American history, his protest usually went, without knowing the history of the country it sprang from? The country, the Empire, that was one of the world's greatest powers for four centuries? Instead, he resigned himself to the slight and said, "Western Civ One or Two?"

Curtis's mouth twisted to one side and he fidgeted in his chair, doing his best imitation of a beginning actor's portrayal of discomfort. "We've condensed our curriculum somewhat in recent years, eliminated excessive requirements in order to help students make quicker progress. Studies show, especially at the two-year-college level, that students are more likely to drop out if they feel that the course load is unnecessarily onerous."

"Which means..."

"We've combined the two Western Civs into one. Which should be a boon for you. The students are more engaged because they aren't beaten down by required classes, and you have the freedom to choose whatever you want to teach from the entire sweep of Western history, so long as it's in the approved textbook."

Dunbar left the meeting thoroughly demoralized. He hadn't taught Western Civ since graduate school, but even he knew this was no way to do it. How was he supposed to cover the Stone Age through 9/11 in fifteen weeks? Preposterous. Almost as preposterous as the high school-level textbook Dean Zelinski had handed him on his way out, which contained more illustrations, photographs, and flowcharts than it did actual text. In its fifth edition, the book allotted more pages for Acknowledgements than it did for the Napoleonic Wars. Dunbar had rarely used textbooks in his classes, preferring primary documents, even in undergraduate surveys, where he at least expected students to gain familiarity with the *Magna Carta*, the 1628 Petition of Right and 1689 Bill of Rights, and a smattering of Edmund Burke, not simply a collection of historical soundbytes in overpriced form.

At home, he pulled the car onto the grass and marched toward his daughter. She was still splitting bricks, the finished ones littered around her in pieces as though she'd tossed them over her shoulder when she was finished with them. As he walked, he thought about that smug, juvenile Dean and his administration speak—contact hours, student-centered experience, knowledge-for-transfer—designed to hide the truth, that this job catered to the lowest common denominator, demanding the least amount of fuss from all involved parties.

Jenna dropped the hammer when she saw him coming and fixed her messy ponytail. "How'd it go?" she said.

He waved her off, picked up the mashing hammer. The handle was slick with his daughter's sweat. She'd made more headway than he'd expected.

He split brick after brick, energized by the thought of that ridiculous textbook and the "recommended" syllabus the Dean had handed him on his way out. So much for academic freedom. So much for having the leeway to teach what he wanted. So much for forty years of schooling, studying, and professing.

"Take it easy, old man. You're going to stroke out." When he continued to ignore her, doubling his efforts instead, she said, "Seriously, Dad. Let's take a break."

But he kept going, waving off his daughter's assurance that they had enough bricks. This was his project. He'd know when they had enough. Even though his arms were aching, he kept going, splitting

two, three, four more bricks, continuing even after he started to lose his grip, even after he split his left pinky almost in half. Blood poured forth more rapidly than the sweat streaming down his face, more blood than he'd ever seen, even at his children's births, even when his son had broken his leg in a high school baseball game, but he kept going until he became woozy, until his daughter tackled him and threw the hammer into the Beautybushes.

"What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Find my finger," he said, examining the clean cut, right above the top knuckle. He wanted to wipe the blood away to admire it even more closely but feared infection. He was in shock. He knew this, intellectually, even though he couldn't grasp what it meant. That there would be consequences: namely, pain, sharp, nausea-inducing pain.

*

"Have you considered calling it quits?" his wife said. She sat behind him on the bed, rubbing his shoulders. Even this gesture sent lightning strikes through his pinky, already throbbing from the stitches. Vicodin was overrated in his estimation.

"I can't believe I did that in front of our daughter."

"You could leave the bricks on the ground, like rubble. It might look even more authentic that way."

"She was a trooper, didn't even blink when she picked up the finger."

"You're not young any more, George. You need to start acting your age."

"What does that mean?" He looked at his finger, wrapped in so much gauze and tape that it was almost as big as the other four combined, which seemed odd, considering it was a joint shorter than the rest. The doctor had chosen not to reattach it, claiming that since the lost half-digit wouldn't impede the functioning of the hand, it wasn't a priority, especially considering his age. What did *that* have to do with it, he'd asked, only to have the question dismissed by the forty-year-old surgeon. "Are you a concert pianist?" he'd said, "or a court stenographer? If not, I don't see where giving you back fifty percent the range of motion you used to have is worth the hassle of the surgery." Spoken to

anyone else, he would have admired the man's bluntness.

"I'm not going to lecture you, especially right now." Megan shifted on the bed so that they were face-to-face. "But is that any way for a sixty-four-year-old man to behave? I never should have agreed to this project."

"I don't need your permission," he said. Stitches and Vicodin. He'd lost half a finger and that's all they'd had to offer? Six weeks in a splint, showering with a plastic bag over his hand to keep the wound dry, six weeks he wouldn't be able to work on his folly.

"You see yourself as some lord of the manor," his wife said, "but look at you. Can you even tie your shoes?"

"I'll be fine," he said.

And he was, thanks to Jenna, who soldiered on without him. She laid and mortared bricks, made lunch, and, yes, tied his shoes for him. She was his lifeline—not Megan, who continued to look on with disapproval—until she began school in mid-August, at which point he commenced ripping apart the syllabus Curtis Zelinski had given him and building it back up from scratch. His first day free of the stitches, splint, and gauze, he spent the morning on the scaffolding, mortaring bricks, and the afternoon preparing for his introductory class at the community college.

That night, he stood before his students, all thirty-eight of them, with his chisel and hammer poised above the instructor's copy of *The Bradshaw Survey of Western Civilization*. "In this class," he said, "we will read the most important documents in Western history, unfiltered by the views of publishers who see their textbook divisions as ever-increasing cash cows." With that, he brought the hammer down, splitting the book in half and burying the chisel in the desktop. The students jumped at the noise. While he worked the blade out of the desk, he added, "Everything we read is in the public domain, so I don't care where you get it or if you read it in hardcopy, on your computer, or on your phone, *so long as you read it*."

When he asked for questions at the end of class, a young man held up his copy of the *Bradshaw* and said, "Will the bookstore take this back?"

Dunbar shrugged. "I'd recommend pulping it." By the next class meeting, one-third of his students had dropped the course. He

didn't care. Twenty-five was a more manageable number.

Throughout August and September, they compared the floods in Genesis and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; read a carefully curated smattering of Plato and Aristotle and the bloodier portions of Sophocles, Homer, and Virgil; and studied the epistolary styles of Seneca, St. Paul, and St. Augustine. Each week, Dunbar provided his students with the best that had been thought and written in the Western world, augmented by whatever knowledge he'd gleaned over the years, and each week, more students fell by the wayside. By the time they moved to *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxons, Dunbar had only eleven students.

"Don't be boring." That's what both of his daughters said when he asked for their advice.

"Your standards are too high," his wife said. "Just because it's a required class doesn't mean it can't be a little bit fun."

His wife would have gotten along with Dean Zelinski. After several emails expressing his concern at the falling enrollment, the Dean called Dunbar into his office. "I'm concerned about your enrollment," he said. "It keeps falling."

"When you hired me, you said sixteen was the average class size. With that in mind, I'm merely slightly below average."

"We expect a certain amount of attrition, but you've lost more than seventy-percent of your students. In an entry-level course. That's never happened."

"There used to be a belief that not everyone was cut-out for college," Dunbar said. "That's considered elitist now, I know, but that doesn't mean I can't hold my students to some minimal standard." He hadn't expected to make a speech, had planned on letting Zelinski do most of the talking so that he could get out of the office as quickly as possible, but once he got on a roll, as his family and remaining eleven students knew, he couldn't be stopped. "If this course is going to transfer to Magnolia, or any other four-year school, the students should have to meet the same expectations. If they can't do this in an entry-level course, what point is there in having them hang around for another semester or three? The term 'weed-out' class has too many negative connotations for my taste, but why shouldn't they be challenged? If it were me, I'd want to know if I was cut out for this. If I am, great. If I'm not, I'll save my money and move on to Plan B."

Zelinski looked like he'd just witnessed a high-speed, ten-car pile-up. But instead of twisted steel and severed limbs, he was face-to-face with the educational philosophy of George Dunbar, PhD. If he were an Anglo-Saxon warrior, he'd have a nickname like Dunbar the Great Reducer. He'd vanquish tribes of Inclusionists and Low-Standard-Bearers. Instead, he was an adjunct at a community college in northern Mississippi, where he was defeated by a Dean who had pledged allegiance to The Bottom Line. "I always expect some growing pains with new hires," Zelinski said. "Especially those who come from four-year schools. So I don't want to overreact here. However, if you lose any more students, we're not going to be able to continue this partnership."

Dunbar cancelled class that night and went home to his folly.

From the top of the second story, nearly complete, he looked out on what he'd done, not just recently but over the thirty-five years he'd lived there. He'd been unable to afford anything larger than a quarter-acre near the university, so he'd convinced his first wife to move outside of town, where they'd have privacy and all the space necessary for the brood of children they'd planned on having. But to his wife, privacy had felt like isolation, and the brood of happy, outdoorsy children they'd planned on stopped with Andy on account of a difficult delivery. No matter how Dunbar had shaped the land, he'd been unable to make Colleen see that living there wasn't so bad. Finally, when Andy was four, she'd moved him back into town, to a condo she paid for with her job as a copy editor for university publications. She'd never forgiven him for taking her away from her family and her beloved Chapel Hill.

Alone, he'd funneled even more of his energies into the property. He'd had the pond cleaned and stocked, added Groundsel bushes, with their billowy white flowers and penchant for attracting butterflies, all around the perimeter and made sure the Galberry Holly, White Oaks, and Tulip Trees all stayed trimmed. He composted and studied natural remedies for the various pests and climate challenges of the Deep South. Later, he rebuilt the pier overlooking the pond so that it could hold more people, then began inviting colleagues to his house when he discovered that he didn't have enough friends to fill the new space. He'd wooed Megan with lavish meals served on that pier, by candlelight, the flames dancing up and down the bodies of the water

nymphs in the pond.

Balanced carefully on the top of the folly, he realized that his work was nearly complete, that he had almost nothing left to do. Wind blew through the oaks, and he let himself sway back and forth with the breeze even though giving up control frightened him. He waited until the rustling in the trees had died away to climb back down to the ground.

*

Two days later, he stood before his students, explaining the migratory pattern of the people who became the Anglo-Saxons when he had another, even sadder, realization. Not one of the eleven was paying attention. He looked around the room, wondering who would be the next to drop. Would it be Tyten, the HVAC repairman, who hoped a degree would get him a job as a bookkeeper? Would it be Gloria, who worked in a nail salon and just wanted to know enough to keep up with her children's homework? Or perhaps it would be Holly, a recent Elgin High graduate who'd managed to learn absolutely nothing about subject-verb agreement or any major historical event in twelve years of schooling. Ultimately, it didn't matter who it was. Someone would be next, like the plot of a bad Agatha Christie novel. He didn't care about getting fired by Dean Zelinski—at least not *that* much, he didn't—but he took it personally that he'd been unable to reach them. He had a wall full of teaching awards, he felt like telling them. That should count for something.

"Anyone know what a folly is?" he said, leaving the origin of the Jutes for another time.

"A mistake?" Brie Foster said. Like Holly, she was an Elgin High product, though unlike her classmate, she was only there to save money on required courses.

"That's one definition," he said, then explained the project he'd spent the past four months working on. "This weekend, I intend to lay the final brick. And seeing how the Battle of Hastings is relevant to what we'll be discussing next week, I think it would be educational for you all to be there."

He heard groans from all over the room. At least at Magnolia

the students had made some attempt to stifle such a reaction. "Complain all you want," he said. "But there will be food and drinks. And music."

"Is this required?" Tyten said.

"I don't think it can be," someone else said. "It's not during class time."

"Tell you what, if you come to my house, eat my food, imbibe my drink, and watch me put one final brick in a sixteen-foot-tall monument to western civilization, I'll increase everyone's grade by one letter."

He erased the map of Europe he'd drawn on the board and replaced it with detailed directions to his house. Suddenly everyone, even Tyten and Holly, had folly fever.

Everyone but his older daughter. "I don't know why you need a band just to show off that dumb thing you wasted the summer building," Kat said.

He thought he'd been subtle when introducing the subject of The LadyKillers playing what he'd come to think of as a party, not merely an extra-curricular event. But Kat had always been good at sniffing out obligation, so he added, "I'll pay."

She put down her phone and looked up. "How much?" she said.

"Forty bucks per person, not to mention the priceless educational opportunity."

"Lay off the *educational* stuff and we'll do it. I'll have Mandy send you our rider."

"Your what?"

"Our requirements. You know, catering, accommodations, and other stuff."

"You're fifteen. You don't get *accommodations*."

"Then *you* don't get a band."

So he wasted Friday morning, when he could have been finishing the folly, wandering the aisles of the local grocery store looking for Boar's Head Double Gloucester Cheddar Cheese, Wellington Organic Flax Seed and Wheat crackers, and assorted flavors of bottled teas. Once he'd iced down the tea, per Mandy's request, he picked up Jenna at the middle school so the two of them could attack what was left of the folly. While Jenna chipped away at the edges of the bricks that would

make up the top level, providing the distressed look Dunbar desired, he laid and mortared the rest like a man possessed. He *was* possessed. By the thought of his students, his daughters, and his wife marveling at the finished product. Kat would see that what he'd spent all these months on wasn't *dumb*, Jenna would have the satisfaction of being part of something larger than herself, and his wife would realize that all the money they'd invested in the folly had been well spent, that it wasn't mere ornamentation. It was a 320 square-foot stand against mediocrity, in all its Nickersonian and Zelinskian forms. As for his students, he simply hoped that it would keep them interested enough to finish out the semester. If he couldn't keep them in the room, he couldn't teach them anything.

In his exuberance, he looked down from the scaffold at his daughter, who'd earned a not inconsiderable fortune as his assistant, and said, "This has been fun, hasn't it?"

She blinked away a cloud of clay dust and rested her hammer on her shoulder. "It hasn't been that bad," she admitted, then went back to smashing bricks.

*

Dunbar lit the torches half an hour before his students were to arrive, aiming for the most dramatic effect possible. He'd affixed sconces to the interior and exterior walls that morning, even though it ran contrary to the original Battle Abbey's construction, positioning them to insure that no part of the structure would be left in darkness. By the time the last of his students had arrived, he had burgers and hot dogs going on two grills and The LadyKillers were set-up on the pier. It had been Kat's idea to put the band down there, illuminated by a quartet of torches. The music came to him on the wind, like a dream, and he was relieved that they sounded more alt than country, though he still had no idea what that meant.

Megan worked the buffet table, passing out buns and condiments, fries and onion rings, and doing her best to keep the three minors in his class away from the beer, while Jenna offered tours of the folly, unprompted. In a gap between songs, he heard her tell Holly and Brie, "I did a little bit of everything. Mortaring, laying brick, squaring

the corners. It's not that hard, actually, if you work at it." He hoped to hear more, but The LadyKillers launched into their signature song, "Can't Spell Killer Without Her," before Jenna could continue.

Once everyone had eaten but before they had a chance to get tipsy, Dunbar led the group around to the back of the folly, where he'd ringed the scaffolding with white Christmas lights and aimed a spotlight at the corner where the final brick would be laid. He climbed quickly, noticing that his little finger no longer hurt when he grasped the metal rungs, and signaled for the band to stop playing. Unnecessarily, it turned out, as the band's four members had already abandoned their instruments and begun walking toward him. From the top of the scaffold, he looked at the strange group below. His wife and Jenna, Kat and her friends, all eleven of his students, ranging in age from nineteen to mid-fifties, looked up at him, even Tyten, who'd eaten three hot dogs and a hamburger, washing each one down with a beer, and Holly, who called his construction a foully.

He did his best to savor the moment, but now that it had come, he wanted to lay the brick as quickly as possible, tear down the scaffolding, and challenge Tyten to a beer-drinking contest. His first wife would have accused him of being in *one of his moods*. Broody, she'd called him. But that wasn't it, not exactly. He'd hoped that turning the completion into an event would stave off the feeling of futility he got at the end of a long project. But even this party couldn't keep him from fearing that all he'd done was build an elaborate variation on the garden gnomes and lawn jockeys his mother had favored. What if he hadn't proven anything beyond asserting his own hubris? Whoever owned the property next would tear it down, he was sure, or worse, turn it into a children's playhouse. It would never last, not the way he wanted it to. He hadn't built a monument; he'd erected an encumbrance.

Before he could banish such thoughts, the sound of a single voice drifted up toward him. He couldn't make it out at first, not in his distracted state, but once he began paying attention, he heard the word "folly," repeated, rhythmically, over-and-over again. Someone was chanting. He squinted and searched the faces beneath him until he found the chant's origin. Tyten. He had a beer—his fifth?—raised aloft in Dunbar's direction while he urged on the assemblage with his free hand. Soon others joined in, Jenna and Megan chief among them. By

the time his entire class had picked up the chant, even Kat and The LadyKillers were shouting as well. He didn't care if she would later claim she was being ironic or sarcastic or whatever else she was always being, it felt good hearing her cheer for him.

He waved to Jenna, encouraged her to join him, but she wouldn't, yelled something he couldn't hear above the sixteen other voices raised in unison. "Folly—folly—folly," they shouted. The LadyKillers' drummer kept time with her drumsticks, hitting a rung of the scaffolding so hard Dunbar could feel it all the way at the top. He studied each face, trying to commit their expressions to memory. He knew that some of them, his students, members of the band, would laugh about this moment later, but after he set the final brick, Dunbar couldn't resist raising his arms in triumph.

Kathleen Boyle

How I came to see the flock swoop across the Portland sky

Because I forgot my hiking boots. Because I had abnormal cells the autumn I was supposed to leave for Africa. Because it had been raining, then stopped, then started again. Because a singer we knew but could not place was on the radio and we stopped talking for a minute to listen to his voice, thicker than my milky tea. Because the trees had already lost most of their leaves and the salmon were thrusting themselves upstream. Because I still carry the scar, the nerves forever crossed in the wrong direction. Because that particular tree was evergreen. Because the house we had lived in together burned down, and so my sister moved to Portland. Because they raised the sound of his voice, then lowered it. Because the fluffy headed child kicked hard against the bench. Because the guy in the stegosaurus t-shirt left. Because my sister was using my laptop so I sat at the other end of the table. Because I wore a knit hat to hide my unwashed hair, and it sat heavy on my head. Because I no longer eat eggs. Because a plane took off, and another one landed. Because the birds knew the storm would last for several days. Because the past six years are over, and we are hopeful. Because there is a bullet hole in the hood of my car. Because the hawks here are extinct. Because the rain taps against the steaming window, and reminds me to look up.

Kim Lozano

Then and Only Then

Somewhere behind you a child cries quietly on its mother's lap,
a cry you recognize that leaves you stunned for days.
Yesterday a gull alighted on your shoulder and its touch still lingers.

You once found yourself sprawled face down
on a foreign street, you could not lift yourself,
your bones worn down by the abrasion of absence
so you offered the money you held in your mouth
to a beggar with no hands.

Once a cigarette girl offered you a knife with a lighted handle.
You walked an entire Sunday until everything went dark.
A lover called to you from across the city and you did not answer back.
Once a holy man said to you, *in what do you believe?*
and you took the blade and cut off his hands.

There is a place where trees bloom with unnamed colors
and songs are played in unknown notes. A place
of beauty so great that to know it is to be chipped away by love.
But to find it you must first let hunger have its way with you.
You must eat the fruit, bless the rock, buy the knife
and pay a fair price for it. You must be invested
with the right amount of damage.

Jen Hirt

If You Don't Stop Right Now

If I could time the blind hound's slow bark keeping me up against the law,
I'd use a wooden Wittner metronome for pianos set slower
than my dour view of practice. Brat of a child. Measurably so.
Now the hound is fugues and nocturnes, sorrows so broken-chorded for the
fat tabby lazy under the sodium street light or for the sharp-shinned hawk
on every shed. (Who names birds for their shins?) Who needs to *Practice your piano*, parents scolded. *Stop fooling with the metronome*. I quit
when I was twelve, quit guitar when I was twenty, incapable of
practicing the sections, instead running the whole classical etude
through and through, wrong and worse, my teacher holding head
    to hands and saying
I will weep if you don't
stop
right
now
blind
hound
I will weep if you don't.

Holly Karapetkova

4 am

Neither of us
is sleeping.
Outside
in the darkness
a house finch
trills and warbles
and tweets
and will not stop.

Your sighs slam
the room
like a bird
trying to ram
through glass

and if we
could just sleep
past this night
just put that
conversation
behind us

but the bird
won't quit
won't quit
and neither will we.

Daniel Tobin

And All I Say

(Four poems after Paul Celan)

Life in the Hollow

Being's sign-posted burrow—
on its breezy verandah
the lungs' empty bellows
blossoms….
        And what blows
from sleep's mouth
is a handful of seeds
stammered out plumb
to congresses of snow.

Slutish Time

on its rounds, and eternity,
blood-black, babbled
to the boondocks…

My faith—you are
fouled with the slough
of your own hair.

Two severed fingers, far
from any hand, row themselves
toward the sump-pool of a vow.

Daniel Tobin

What

flug us together
shatters us, shrieking—

a rock, a world
from remote suns, humming.

Down

Brought home to forgetting—
the genial intercourse
of our lingering eyes.

Brought home, syllable by syllable, cast
among the day's blind dice, for which
the playing hand reaches,
flagrant, roused.

And all I say, its wantonness,
lies down where it has risen up
with the little crystal

inside the habit of your silence.