

Quercus

a journal of literary and visual art

Volume 27

2018

(kwîrkûs) Latin. (n.) The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub

Editor: Christopher Murphey

Assistant Editor: Sarah Thilenius

Literary Editor: Margaret Shanks

Advisor: Carl Herzig

Editorial Staff:

Cassie Hall

Seth Hankins

William Hibbard

Sam Holm

Miranda Liebsack

Celeste McKay

Abbigail McWilliams

Mary Roche

Jaren Schoustra

Copyright © 2018 by *Quercus* All rights retained by the authors and artists.

Quercus publishes creative writing and artwork by St. Ambrose University students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Address questions, orders, and submissions to Quercus@sau.edu or *Quercus*, St. Ambrose University, 518 W. Locust St., Davenport, Iowa 52803.

cover image:

Stella Herzig

Waiting

Digital photograph, 2018

Opening excerpt by Darian Auge ('17).

Special thanks to Chris Reno.

words

Fall Leaves	<i>Abbigail McWilliams</i>	9
Suspirium	<i>Olivia McDonald ('16)</i>	10
Last Night	<i>Hannah Blaser ('17)</i>	12
Summer Storm		13
Coal Valley, Illinois		14
we leave the air conditioning off all summer	<i>Bailey Keimig ('15)</i>	16
dead ends		18
her lips	<i>Mary Roche</i>	20
Stolen Fruit Tastes Better When Eaten by the Mississippi	<i>Mariah Morrissey</i>	22
Bucket List		24
Vermin	<i>Emily Kingery</i>	26
Plague		27
roots	<i>Sarah Holst ('11)</i>	29
sing the sun awake		30
Miriam and Sheshan		32
The Year the Drought Broke		40
Fragility	<i>Nancy Hayes</i>	63
Bipolar Bees	<i>Maranda Bussell</i>	67
Monday Nights	<i>Carmen Martin</i>	68
More Precise Than a Sinner	<i>Jeremy Burke ('99)</i>	69
An Apology	<i>Anna Badamo</i>	71
The Pastor's Son	<i>Jaren Schoustra</i>	72
The Coercion of Saint Paul	<i>John Hagar</i>	76
Day Wages	<i>James O'Gorman</i>	79

images

Ventura Watershed <i>Pen and colored pencil</i> 20" x 30", 2018	<i>Sarah Holst ('11)</i>	45
Girl Power (torch) <i>Oil on canvas</i> 30" x 36"	<i>Leslie Bell ('72)</i>	46
Celestial Milkmaid <i>Oil on canvas</i> 48" x 55", 2007		47
Mines of Spain <i>Mixed media</i> 11" x 8", 2018	<i>Kristin Quinn</i>	48
Looker <i>Acrylic on canvas</i> 12" x 12", 2014	<i>Brad Bisbey</i>	49
A Quilt Guide to Domesticity <i>Screen print on fabric, sewing</i> 12" x 12", 20XX	<i>Alison Filley</i>	50
Filed Away <i>Mixed media on wood</i> 5" x 5", 2017	<i>Susan Waddell ('96)</i>	51
Handle With Care <i>Mixed media on wood</i> 5" x 5", 2017		51

Brainstorm <i>Oil on rag paper</i> 20" x 30", 2017	<i>Megan Peterson</i>	52
Self Portrait <i>Photoshop with scanned materials</i> 11" x 17", 2018	<i>Cole Mueting</i>	53
Intrigue <i>Silkscreen collage</i> 20" x 30", 2017	<i>Karen Blomme ('81)</i>	54
Puri Portrait <i>Digital photograph</i> 2018	<i>Carl Herzig</i>	56
Entrance <i>Digital photograph</i> 2018		58
Dancing Dogs <i>Oil on canvas</i> 35" x 40", 2018	<i>Karen Blomme ('81)</i>	58
Bring 'Em On Home <i>Oil on canvas</i> 24" x 20", 2016	<i>Kristin Quinn</i>	59
Chosen <i>Oil on canvas</i> 24" x 36", 2018	<i>Christopher Murphey ('17)</i>	60

Flamingos on the Water	<i>Emma Hubner ('17)</i>	61
<i>Oil on canvas</i>		
<i>20" x 48", 2017</i>		
Still Life With Frozen Trout	<i>Randy Richmond</i>	62
<i>Photograph on archival pigment paper</i>		
<i>18" x 24", 2017</i>		
Abramham, Martin, and... Don?	<i>Leslie Bell ('72)</i>	74
<i>Colored pencil on bristol board</i>		
<i>9" x 12", 2018</i>		
Mitch's Plan		75
<i>Colored pencil on bristol board</i>		
<i>9" x 12", 2017</i>		
Bummed	<i>Louis DeMarco ('16)</i>	79
<i>Dyed pulp and handmade kozo</i>		
<i>6" x 4", 2016</i>		

*she's sick, we know,
but are you brave enough
to peel her in half
just to find out*

what went wrong?

Fall Leaves

I walk in pigeon-toed baby steps
and long-legged leaps
to hear the crackle of the leaves
beneath the soles of my feet.

Their autumn song resonates;
they flutter into storm drains,
collect along cement curbs.

I admire the hues of their skin:
faded, bright, and burnt.
The sun warms their veins
but doesn't try to renew their pulse.

I watch them decorate Locust Street
and leave the branches speckled.
The limbs look on, at peace,
knowing spring is no better than autumn.

–Abbigail McWilliams

Suspirium

(n.) Sigh; deep breath; heartbeat.

Bands of amber and rose pierced the horizon,
rousing avenues from their slumber.
Street lamps blinked against the dawn—
shielding listless eyes beneath dark caps,
they turned in from the long night-shift.
Distant engines rambled,
their voices deep and hoarse but excited
at the crunch of fresh pavement.

On the corners, the traffic lights teased,
blushing scarlet to passersby—
as if they'd never done this before—
holding them just a moment longer
before winking their green eyes
and sending them on their way.
The skyline sighed,
grasping the edge of night—
fingers heavy with half-begun dreams—
as if to tuck the shadows under his chin
and furl more tightly into his foundation.
You've been gone so long, he murmured
as she inched closer,
Come and lie with me a while.
Over highways and
up the spires of the tallest buildings,

she reached for him, and
when Light kissed his cheek,
soft and slow,
he rose up to meet her.

–*Olivia McDonald '16*

Last Night

I read you *The Love Letters of Dylan Thomas*
while you fell asleep, and tried not to think
about his words in relation to you, to us,
who always find ourselves on the edge.

If there is anything to be said for the time
it has taken us to get here, the years
we've spent looking at each other, unsure,
let's not say it. For once, I won't

Speak

to me. If you have something to say,
say it in person, say it on the couch
in the middle of your favorite movie,
say it in bed, during my favorite letter.

I want to trace a map on your skin of how we got from there to here.
I want to write my own letter. I want you to stay awake until the end.

—Hannah Blaser ('17)

Summer Storm

How can I come home to you
and not love you even when
it's raining? Now I have awful
dreams of a murder in every
room of the house, not just
the basement. And there are
so many missed phone calls,
even in my sleep, I'm worried
I might lose you there too.

I am trying to be better,
but isn't that what everyone says?

The murders don't always happen
in the basement. Sometimes
it's the bedroom. Sometimes
it isn't a knife. Sometimes
it's just the rain.

—Hannah Blaser ('17)

Coal Valley, Illinois

My grandpa still splits wood before the snow settles on the farm like a dusting of powdered sugar, or a dumping of clumpy, wet flour, depending on who you ask and the year, still carries it in and feeds it to the flames that spark and pop in a lightly-veiled threat that they would lick us up, jump from curtain to carpet to couch in a second if we would only let them out of their grey metal prison. We don't, so they turn the top and sides of their confinement into sizzling heat traps that look sleepy.

We used to pinch boxelder bugs between sticky fingers and drop them onto the living room stove to watch them dance. I did this until I realized the stovetop was a tomb of tiny bodies that smelt like burning, until I started to grasp at strands of *to end*. My new mission became to scoop them up off the stove with a paper plate, but their legs would bend, then break. Their end only came slower. How do you save something you can't?

A lot of lambs born in January die. Pushed into the hard winter somewhere beyond the wood piles, tiny black and beige bodies begin freezing immediately to the sludge-snow. They get nestled under armpits inside Carhartt coats and brought before the stove where calloused hands try to coax life from the corner it's backed into. Sometimes glazed eyes squint open and shallow breaths become more frequent. Sometimes there is a slow fade and a curse escapes the mouth of the hands that tried to save it
(a prayer disguised as a curse).

The ground is too hard, and the dead are too many;

a fire will be started in a burn barrel in the barnyard.
A lifeless body given to the greedy, uncontained flames,
a warmth that needs no threat, that needs only to wait.

–Hannah Blaser ('17)

we leave the air conditioning off all summer

so we chase breezes outside
sink our toes deep
into the damp chill of the earth
and gather speckled foxgloves
by the armful

i place the blooms in jars of honey
bees still pulsing in their throats
watching spring-green spiders
flee an effervescent trickle
sliding down the glass

we lie on sun-bleached lawns
sucking on rosy plums
letting the juice run
sticky down our arms
staining us with purple

i run my hands along
lemon-colored lilies
their drunken sweetness
soaking into my fingertips
when the sun dips low
we drink yellow wine
cutting the sweetness
with dandelion stems

you take my hand and kiss
the pollen from my skin
and we drink until stars fall
in our hair and we glint
like beetle wings

layers of lightning bugs
disappear with the night
and with sweat and morning
dew dusting our backs
we wander home

–Bailey Keimig ('15)

dead ends

from the car we watch
black grackles leaping,
snapping moths from the air
with sharp staccato cries,
lifting yellow clouds of dust
into the air every time they land.

your hand travels to my knee,
and i close my eyes, wondering
how long those powdered wings
keep fighting as they slide down
hungry throats of creatures
programmed not to care.

our eyelids twitch like insect
fragments littered on the sidewalk,
the pulpy tattered wings pasting
snuffed-out cigarettes
to the ground, urban sundials
lying about the time.

you rip me at the seams,
your teeth strip me to my bones,
my skin glitters, useless,
while my mind hovers near
a cantaloupe-colored sun,
and your eyes suck me in for days.

the pungent breath of the mississippi
blows warm across my face
as i drive home, windows down,
the breeze cutting the remnant
tendrils of tobacco from my hair

and drowning out every other sound.

i see a fox on the side of the highway,
guts spilled in a burgundy shock,
reminding me of the wine-
flavored drink we bought
when we were seventeen,

thinking we were so slick
for not getting carded
and spending the whole night
pretending to get drunk enough
to touch each other.

now you stand over the sink eating
cold potatoes, use your fingers
to scoop up the butter and herbs
congealed into a pastel slick
at the bottom of the bowl
and gently place it on the red
tip of your tongue.

my hands tip-tap a rhythm,
restless on the tabletop, picturing
your eyes, black feathers drifting
and weathered beaks clicking shut.

–Bailey Keimig ('15)

her lips

her lips
are the sunrise

curved so perfectly
deliciously
make me ravenous

her lips are plump
with words
i've missed you
how's your family

her lips are kinder than mine

i have never seen them
press together in a thin line
in silence
when she's angry
her lips say
i love you
i'll be back

her Cupid's bow is crooked
once it was flooded with tears
and i drank from it

she laughed at me
not in the way i'm used to
her laugh said
i can't believe you're real
and you're not leaving

she laughs the way i laugh at her

one night
we were kissing and kissing and kissing
and i went to lift her shirt
she pulled back and opened her lips
red and kiss-swollen and majestic
could we just make out for a while
i'm a little tired her lips said

she looked guilty
i pressed my thumb to her bottom lip
i said *we've got all the time in the world*
i'll kiss you all night
i'm not leaving

she laughed at me
i don't mind when she laughs at me
her laugh is more beautiful than her lips

—*Mary Roche*

Stolen Fruit Tastes Better When Eaten by the Mississippi

Your wedding day was supposed to be the happiest day of your life. It wasn't. The happiest day of your life was when he linked his fingers through yours and led the way up the slope toward the river. The street lights were casting the night in orange, dipping it in warm, liquid light, and you could feel the jagged ridges in the asphalt through the thin soles of your Walmart sneakers.

"Here we are," he said as you crested the hill. And there you were. The hill was the dull shell of a geode, and as you two crept over the edge, you pressed the heels of your hands against your eyes, momentarily overwhelmed by the bed of shimmering gems beyond. The city hidden behind the hill sparked with a million lights. The stars were muted into nothingness by the purple, green, red, orange, and white that spangled the western horizon. The Mississippi rolled by below you, its waters capturing the lights and melting them down into rippling reflections that floated atop the black river. The slap of water against the rocks was barely audible over the rumble of a train a few blocks back, but if you listened carefully you could make it out. A flare rose above the trees on the opposite bank and bloomed dandelion yellow across sky and water, the fireworks' resounding boom echoing off trees, buildings, and river.

"Oh my god." You stumbled backward as more fireworks shot up over the trees and arched overhead.

He laughed at your expression. "Pretty nice, huh?"

All you could do was nod.

The two of you meandered down the paved walkway, the river to your right, your hands wound together the way they had been on your wedding day. Then there had been a rope wrapped around them, fastening you together. Now you were bound by the golden rings that glinted in the dim orange night.

The evening was cool for July. A breeze ruffled the surface of the water and disturbed the clouds of gnats that swarmed above the path. After a while, he tugged you toward the edge of the pavement, saying, "Let's get closer to the river."

The slope leading to the water's edge was steep and covered with

rough, uneven stones. You followed after him, holding your arms out to keep your balance. The orange glow was barely enough to see by, and once or twice you had to crouch down and grip the edge of one of the rocks so that you wouldn't pitch headlong down the hillside. He waited for you at the edge of the water, hands on his hips, head turned to the side so that you could see his profile. He looked Jewish, the heritage that he seemed to have forgotten reasserting itself through the shape of his eyes and nose, the tight curls that brushed over the tops of his ears, and the dark beard that he hadn't trimmed since early June. It was as if in the two seconds that you'd taken your eyes off him, King David had come up out of the river and taken his place. It was startling. It was miraculous. And all you could do was stare at his profile silhouetted against the rippling assembly of light that might have been the gleam of Jacob's ladder.

You squirmed on the wobbling stone where you were perched, suddenly feeling a little guilty. Surely it was shameful to be this euphoric? Why were you allowed to be happy when it was denied to so many others? Yet here you were, exulting in a stolen moment like a thief who'd crept over the walls of Eden and sat gorging herself on the dewy apples of life.

Chewing your bottom lip, you waited for the flaming sword to fall and shatter this dream. You waited for this unexpected sweetness to turn to ashes in your mouth and for the cherubim to cast you into oblivion for daring to attain what had been denied to man. But Holy Vindication never found you. Instead, King David glanced back at you and grinned, reverting into the stoner boy you loved. The orange night invited you into happiness. Life's apples swung just above your head, golden and tantalizing, and you decided that if somebody was going to taste them, it might as well be you.

—Mariah Haring

Bucket List

“I wouldn’t mind dying in April.”

“That would be okay,” Nel said. “The weather would probably be like it is now. Funerals should be rainy.”

I nodded. We were standing in a downpour, two young women dressed in black on the edge of a dark crowd. I could hear the raindrops drumming on the too-small umbrella. It was Nel’s umbrella, only big enough for one person, but I’d forgotten mine and she’d taken pity on me. Now we each had a shoulder getting wet.

There was a preacher speaking at the front of the crowd, but I couldn’t make out any of the words. His voice was just a low, thundery rumble that paired nicely with the rain. I didn’t mind that I couldn’t hear the service—funerals are all pretty similar.

“Do you think people can sense when they’re about to die?” I wondered, glancing over at Nel.

She shrugged. “Probably depends on the person. And the situation.”

“Do you think Maggie knew?” My voice was low, but she shot me a withering look.

“Be respectful,” she hissed, glancing around. She didn’t need to worry; the rain drowned out our voices. “No,” she continued. “I don’t think she knew. No one could have known.”

“No one?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. She didn’t seem to hear me.

It had been in the paper and broadcast over all the local TV stations. Maggie’s face was smeared across social media like she’d been a celebrity instead of a waitress. Every day, people would walk into my work and ask how I was doing, like Maggie had been my grandmother or something. It was strange; I’d only really known her as my coworker, but now she seemed attached to me. She was there when the sunlight struck my eyelids in the morning, when the bell chimed as I walked into work, while I was serving her regulars their meatloaf and chicken sandwiches. And she was there after every shift when I shrugged into my jacket and walked across the dark parking lot. Sometimes I would eye my vehicle, sitting there beneath the street light, and speculate if Maggie had felt a

shiver of intuition right before she'd slid into the front seat of her rusty Subaru.

The preacher finished speaking. A few people were walking forward to pay their last respects to the box of ashes that were all they'd found of Maggie.

"Do you think they'll ever find out who did it?" Nel asked as the crowd began to disperse.

I waited for an elderly man to pass before I answered. "No. They won't figure it out."

We tramped back to Nel's car, complaining as the rain rolled off the umbrella and made us even wetter. Finally, Nel'd had enough. "That's it, you're on your own." She yanked the umbrella back over her own head, leaving me out in the downpour.

I made a face at her and tugged up the edges of my collar before hustling over to her car. Mud splattered up my legs as I ran across the patchy, half-grown lawn. When I reached the car, I hopped into the passenger seat and huddled there, waiting for her.

"Jerk," I grumbled as she slid in.

"You're the one who didn't bring an umbrella." She turned the key in the ignition and put the heat on full blast, even though the car wasn't warm enough to blow anything but cold air. "Get out the list."

I rummaged through my coat pockets and pulled out a creased piece of paper. I smoothed it out on the dashboard. At the top, the words Bucket List were written in purple ink.

"You have a pen?" I asked. She handed me one from her purse. "Alrighty then, item number fourteen: Attend the Funeral. Who's turn is it to cross it out?"

"You can do it," Nel said. "I got to cross off Maggie."

-Mariah Haring

Vermin

Someone is eating the old woman's marigolds, some animal slipping past the fence to lop off their heads. *I thought no one would eat them*, she wails. *That's why I plant them every year, and now what's left?*

Motherhood is ugly. The absurdity of its sadness, all those fat openings—loosening, graceless. Meanwhile, there are dozens of blondes laughing at the table beside us, frothy orange petals tumbling from their mouths. The brightness is irresistible. Their teeth are so young.

Their drinks arrive, weighted with garnish they will chew for hours so you will believe they are never hungry. You lick at your mouth; your hand moves in my hair. You believe blonde is who we all are. We stack up your words with the rest, fake coins in a machine. We tell you, *You're different*, that small ejected prize.

You will touch me one day and marigold wilt will fall from your sleeve. There is *no reason to cry*, you will say, and I will gather it up like a brood of someone else's children.

Perhaps it will be as you say: falsehood, invention, trash. My woman's heart thriving on easy, pungent blooms. But there is the fact of the yard, the thick, dark dirt of it. There is the image of you spread out on the table, making angels in flower heaps. The future of you returning to me, smeared in the musk of dead things.

—Emily Kingery

Plague

We felt safe in our neighborhood until the omens appeared: roach clips, flocks of snack wrappers, glistening. The first time we saw a smashed frog on the sidewalk did not startle us. But the second. But the third. Our husbands rolled calm and silent from our driveways, to our driveways, sated with expensive beer.

How else could we have prophesied than in our mothers' way? We took inventory. We secured plastic binders, neat and thick with lists. We illustrated them with splayed corpses. We stacked them inside our fridges and on plushy ottomans where they would be seen. Our husbands rasped with laughter at their plasma screens. The binders warped from circles of condensation.

We set our phones aglow on our pillows, pinging between houses—talk of how we were used and used to. Talk of mulberries under bicycle tires, the oiliness of old summers, our boys zooming through the neighborhood, littering, when they were young. Our gestures threw accidental shadow puppets. They leaped; we flinched. We heard our wine pendulum in our glasses. Our wrists, our lips, moved with the tide.

The frogs began to multiply, though we never saw them alive. The air draped over us, thick as bath towels, and we ran for our lives. We fumbled spare keys from under stone frogs, ground them into our locks, frightened even of garden rocks lumped beneath bushes.

We made a pact to reemerge when it rained. We would walk unafraid of frogs slimed up, no different than gray blood of grocery ads. Yet the humidity never seemed to pass. Flies landed in clusters on the bodies and danced. We saw demons springing. We heard tiny music: deep, sulfuric horns. The plumpness flattened out to parchment. The flies wrote hellish sixteenth notes in divots where eyes should have been.

The story about frogs boiling to death, oblivious, is a myth. Our mothers stuffed porcelain frogs at their sinks with steel wool and mottled dishrags. They showed us how to pour hot, foaming butter into dishes shaped like flowers. Our fathers' headlights swung evenly up our driveways. We thought, Weak frogs. We thought nothing would stay in a cooking pot that didn't deserve to die. We smoothed our napkins judiciously. We tore at the hips with our teeth, like queens.

—Emily Kingery

roots

I take my
morning coffee
somewhere over Iowa
above the clouds

on my way
to green mountains
with trees so tall
the sky laughs

my love
sits beside me
hands folded
in his lap
hairs like
white roots
on his wrist

*upon our weakness
the sun has shone*

*you choose to
dwell with us
in flesh & bone*

—Sarah Holst ('11)

sing the sun awake

it is good
to remember
that it is
this dark
every morning

then a crack
in the sky
brightens

flame gold
against tin blue

the color of God's skin

watercolor wash

a crystalline drink
from Grandma Ellen's
silver cups

first mouthful
of dark coffee
poured out
as an offering
to the lakeside
ground

will these trees
always reach with
rising joy?

I know my heart
has not always
abided in wonder

but fog rises
on the Kettle River

and I know
what it is to feel
whole and bright
calm and adaptable
as groundwater

light climbs
the dome of the sky

a flashlight
under the blanket

sneaking
one last
whispered
story

before
headlights out

and day is here
with a final flash
of fireweed pink

—*Sarah Holst ('11)*

Miriam and Sheshan

1)

do you think
the desert
was lonely
before Miriam
helped God
bring Her people
to its harsh
liberating lands?

do you think
the rocks cried out
for justice

wailing
for their cousins
the people
in bondage?

did the dry riverbeds
know that Miriam
bitter-water woman
carried the song
to bring the wet life
back to their surfaces?

2)

Miriam
whose brown hands
cradled Jochebed's cheek

as Moses was pushed
on a red sea
of mighty love
into the world
that would always remember
his name

Miriam
whose brown hands
helped her mother's
 skilled and godlike
 in their craft
make Moses
a baby-ark
and set him
among the reeds

Miriam's
brown hands
held her mother
 as Miriam herself
 had been held by the women
 in the community
 their songs of
 courageous
 resistance
 pulsing
 in her veins

Jochebed
knee deep
in muddy waters

let her baby go
downstream

would there be
compassion there?

would God
take care
of Her son?

3)

Miriam knew

the waters
of her soul
 rushing
 quenching
 compassionate

like the waters
that swept
her brother
downstream
to the reeds
where
Miriam's beloved
bathed

the daughter
of Pharaoh
 Sheshan

lotus woman
who like
her plant namesake
had struggled
up from the deception
the murky bottom of privilege
the dehumanizing darkness
clouding her eyes

Sheshan
worked and listened
to a place where
she saw the light
and her love
for Miriam
and her people
bloomed

lotus
watery pink flower
among the green reeds

4)

the Egyptians
Sheshan's people
did not go down
to the water

did not bathe naked
did not feel the call

of the wilderness

instead
they decreed
 murder
 slavery
 subjugation
 violence

Sheshan
like Jochebed
and Miriam
and the Hebrew midwives
did what the
cruel imperial
system
could not
imagine

she collaborated
with women
and water
and created
the conditions
of survival
underneath
the nose
of an institution
of death

she held
the possibility

of freedom
in her hands
like she held
the baby Moses

5)

Miriam
and Sheshan
with mud caked
on their brown legs

whispered a plan

Jochebed's milk
and her revolution songs
which made
Miriam

strong and adaptable
as reeds
in rushing river

would form Moses into
a prophet in the footsteps
of his big sister

6)

when the time came
to lead the people

into the wilderness
the desert already
knew the names

Miriam and Sheshan

the rock pigeons
sang of their
subversive love
that had set God's
plan into action

and Miriam sang
with the voice her God
had given her

when the sea named
for the reeds
she knew so well

swallowed up
threat

and yet
Miriam's song of the sea
regretted the loss
of Sheshan's people
their hearts that did not see

but Sheshan's brown hand
steadied Miriam's shaking one
as the water followed
the love of the women

through the desert

what was more likely

the water inside
the rocks

or the love
in the heart
of an Egyptian?

both
rose in springs
when Miriam called

–*Sarah Holst* ('11)

The Year the Drought Broke

The year the drought broke, I developed a creeping uneasiness about toads. We all rejoiced in May when the fields were animated with amphibian song. It was a resurrection that drew solemn amazement from us. We stood in the yard and listened with breaths caught in our throats to the chirping nocturnal orchestra: the fresh, wet voices coming from everywhere. The warm darkness held our respect for the serenade that filled the gap previously occupied by all of our prayers for rain.

By July, there was no bump of country road that had not been touched by toad feet. Headlights revealed a river of them lurching and hopping into the tall grass of the ditch. The dog would frequently stop and dine, munching on smashed toad. We remembered caustically the lone toads that used to be special guests in the yard; we had even named the one that lived under the rhubarb. Children from town would catch a few on fishing trips to some miles-away, modest pond and bring them home to the flower garden to catch spiders and grasshoppers, to eventually die small, parched deaths. We noticed when they were gone. Now a person would step on two or three on her way to the garage refrigerator. Someone who has never stepped on a toad in the darkness cannot imagine the sensation that creeps into the lower back after she has unwittingly murdered in such excessive quantity. That summer, my sister and I, home from college on break, found ourselves longing for the desert.

“It’s like every life that exists here has really worked to be here,” I said to my sister, who was looking out the windshield at blessed desolation and taking a draw from an old milk jug that we had filled with water for our trip.

She pointed a dusty smile at me and handed me the water. “Someone I was talking to a few months ago wouldn’t stop talking about the gift of rushing water and the justice of God and life abundant. Let’s see, who was that? They had short hair and mud on their face. They kind of looked like you . . .”

I concentrated on holding the jug between my bare knees and

securing its blue twist-on top without spilling our water supply. “Well, maybe God can only handle so much abundance.”

She squinted at the road. “Who’s made in whose image?”

“Hey, shut up. We’ll be able to go barefoot tonight without fear.”

She nodded a quiet “hoorah.” I had long ago given up scraping caked toad from the soles of my boots (boots that faithfully remained on the rug by the back door at home). I swung my legs up to rest my bare feet on the dashboard. I was born in the desert. I always felt more like myself surrounded by mountain sage and iron-rich soil. We did not have a plan apart from the tent in the back seat, the longing in our chests, and the maps in our skin: just the way we preferred.

That night, we pitched the tent and set up our lawn chairs overlooking a gnarled rock canyon. We clinked our beers and stoked the fire and chatted in low voices about dry, toadless things. Later, red sand pebbles stuck to the skin of our knees as we crawled into the tent.

My sister always rose first. I remember being little and opening my eyes to her brown, animal ones watching me. Now, of course, she did not need my permission or company to leave the tent and go for a run and make coffee or do whatever it is that morning people do. I turned out of sleep when the sun beat down long enough to make the sweat between my skin and sleeping bag a kind of sweltering glue. I exited into the day in a slow, bedraggled huff. The lemon sunlight washed the canyon walls and sage air cooled my hot, sleepy head.

My sister sat with her back to me on a rock a little ways off. There was one of those little green baskets of cherries on the ground next to her. I poured myself a cup of slightly cold coffee.

“Do you need some more coffee?” I called down to her.

“No, thank you,” she answered. Her voice sounded squeezed, and under the influence of its timbre I noticed that the sky had turned terrible blue.

A few years ago, a friend of my sister went missing. They looked for

him for a week or two before they found his pickup on National Forest land. They found a body inside the cab, but they needed dental records to identify it, the sun and the heat of the vehicle having done hard, gruesome work on the soft, tender flesh. There was also a gun. He haunted her, and I knew it—they had shared a quiet, friendly love. The person she knew was glad and kind, and so the end of the story was ghastly and unexplainable. She did not know how to grieve. No one had taught us how to grieve. I did my best with careful presence. I offered hands to hold. But I didn't know what to do, and I knew that she was not okay. Her paintbrushes went untouched—anything too quiet let all the ghosts inside. She tried to ignore and distract herself from the abiding nightmares that had made a home in her depths. I wished we could shake her out and put her soul and story through the wash, drape her over the clothesline and let all of the terrors fly to the wind. We would take her off, crisp and sweet and unvarnished by sorrow.

As I approached her, the language of her bare legs dangling over the rock about sent me crumbling. It's one thing to bear the burden of the violent and rapacious forces of life in one's self, quite another to see those elements bash around in the person you love the most. I picked up the little green basket of cherries so as to occupy my hands and mouth. I wanted to enter her space as gently as possible. I raised a cherry to my lips, broke its taut skin with my teeth, and set my expectation for the spongy blood-like juice, only to be met by bitter rot. I quietly spit it out, the purple moisture stagnating on the top of the dust.

She turned to me. "I think I'm ready to talk."

Her body was too full to know where to start, so we skipped the beginning. We talked about blood. Our ancestors rose in the languid air from the stone nest of the canyon to meet us in the brutality of life and death. The grandmother who got her hair tangled in the fence and was gored by a bull. The aunt who drowned playing in the river and her

brother, our grandfather, who always let his children swim in spite of it. We came from settler people who displaced and corroborated in the violence against indigenous folks (who, like us, held the land sacred but who loved it longer and better.) Our people, who told lies and loved deeply, and tried so hard not to cry. My sister talked droughts and flash floods. She told me about not being able to cry for months and then one day finding herself bawling uncontrollably over a lilac bush. She told me that she tried so hard to stay on the trail—to make sense of the destruction and desecration and guilt and anger in acceptable ways. Said it was more like a wild dance of rock and cactus flesh. We talked about deer freezing in the headlights of a semi-truck and somehow running away, and how they go back to their deer community and shake and shake and shake the traumatic experience from their body. My sister wailed; we shook our arms, our legs, our bellies. Her coyote eyes reflected the fire of the day, the sunset, the night as it settled in.

The darkness sang. We were anticipatory but somber. I had always scoffed at the Church's language on Easter: The Solemnity of the Resurrection. But under the prism of stars, I got it. After a journey to obscurity and despair, after living in a river of anxiety and shame, the telling of the stories is not triumphal joy. The hope of going on living is fragile and naked. The stories are both brief and forever—terrifying and common. We were afraid and unafraid. We shared the jug of water. We laughed about the time our cousin tried to eat a prickly pear and got spines stuck in his fingers. My sister rested her head on my shoulder and looked out at the wild night.

“When will we be healed?” Her voice was muffled against my shirt.

“Who? Us?” I rested my hand on the top of her raven hair.

“Well, yes and no. I meant broadly. What is healing? How do you go on and keep trusting, knowing the terrible things that are part of being human?”

I stayed quiet, and she continued, as I knew she would.

“What if we can only be fully healed if shit like this no longer

happens? And even then, it already has happened, so it cannot be undone.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Etched in stone. Etched in your body. Etched in God.”

I left for a second and brought our sleeping bags back to the rock where my sister learned how to speak about pain. The night was huge and dark around us. The stars were so bright. I remember thinking that some of them must have moved into my chest. My sister and I dropped off to sleep until the turning planet brought the chilled, calm of the salmon morning upon us. I opened my eyes on a fresh world and looked to my sister, for once still sleeping. She was sleek and wet. Birthed anew.

–Sarah Holst ('11)







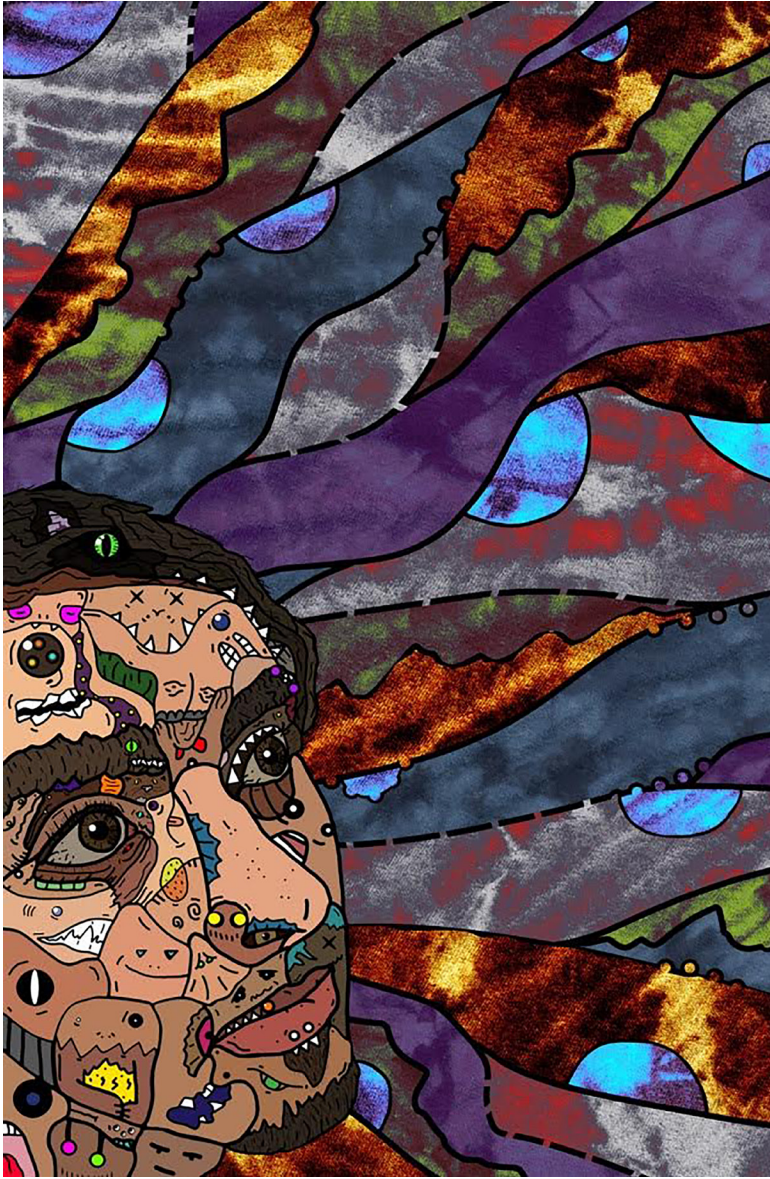






























Fragility

I.

An icicle dangles outside
our living room window

refracting
sunlight
spangles
off last night's
snow,
a swaying
frozen
translucent
jagged
spike
of
ice

hanging from an
invisible
thread
sliding
down the
slenderest
cobweb
melting
barely
in the
win-
ter
sun

II.

Two parallel wing tips slice
the fresh layer of spanking white
as some swooping belly leaves
a shallow impression
next to a
deeper, jagged one
where the rabbit tracks
stop.

III.

Emerging from brush, eight brown deer
file across the frozen creek
that cuts the ravine in two,
lifting slender hooves,
a sleek, slow-moving caravan
mounting the steep
snow-covered ridge through
a screen of black trees.

The last deer slows her pace,
turns back her tawny head,
casts back again, again her glance,
when a ninth deer, unsteady,
dragging her right hind hoof,
hobbles into last place.
One by one, the other deer
look back, not one aloof.

IV.

A glossy-eyed carp
swishing waggishly
through dark waters
below the ice shelf
stretched
across Stubb's Eddy
near Lindsay Park Marina
darts toward the light
of the open channel.
A sharp-eyed eagle
perching imperiously
on the ice shelf,
aloft in a flash
at the silver flurry,
in fractions of seconds
dips and sinks its talons
into its shimmering,
surprised scales,
swoops upstream
with its flailing prey
and lands in the top branches
of the towering white pine.

Who knows what struggles
took place above
our pedestrian heads
before our walk?
The still glittering, foot-long
matte-eyed carp lies
motionless
on the snow,

a tiny splotch of red
near its tail.

–*Nancy Hayes*

Bipolar Bees

Today, the bees
are thriving, surrounded
by rejuvenated flowers.
The honey is bitter-
sweet, flowing incessantly.

The bees cruise back and forth:
background noise
in a crowded room.
Sticky words drip
from a jittering tongue.

Tomorrow the bees will die,
surrounded by shriveled stems
reaching for light:
crystallized honey lying
clumped on your skin.

In one week, you will scrape away
the sugar—you
will run from any buzz
tempting your bleeding ears;
you will repair the damage.

In one month it won't be
the stickiness you'll miss.
It will be their energy:
the home they made
inside you.

—Maranda Bussell

Monday Nights

I am a girl with biracial blood and fierce brown eyes, one darker than the other.

I have a warm smile that fades as it suppresses a twitching tongue.
At the end of the day, a worn recliner receives me with a big hug,
encouraging me to unwind.

My pizzazz is worn from providing advice that goes unheard.

My identity is nomadic, lost from the internalization of denying my beliefs.

My mind is outraged because strangers feel they know me well enough to criticize.

I cannot fix any of these conflicts with my speech or my actions.

I melt in the red velvet as its smooth fibers ease my discomfort.

My tongue still twitches with an urge to scold and criticize.

My eyes search for a vent for my fire.

Then I see the familiar Celtic cross and I recall my dad's words:

"Allowing them to anger you allows them to control you."

On Tuesday, I will smile brightly;

my eyes will still be fierce and my blood hot and strong.

—*Carmen Martin*

More Precise Than a Sinner

Easter lands like another dead bird.

I turn to the woman in the white dress next to me
to shake her hand, as I would my old friend,
Jack, when he climbs from the interior
of his brand-new Honda.

I am not her lover:

no kiss on the cheek, no side-hug,
just *Peace be with you*. We speak
in unison and shake hands,
briefly—one downward thrust
toward the brown wooden kneeler
resting at our Easter Sunday feet—
my black dress shoes obscured
by the kneeling pad, her white high heels
hidden, just two ankles rising from the checkered floor.
Then, leaning over the pew in front, I squeeze
an old woman's hand and repeat, *Peace*.

From her seat, looking up through large-framed glasses,
she barely squeezes back, eyeglass chain trailing
into her bluish white hair. She almost smiles
but says nothing. Her son then shakes my hand. I shake
my father's hand. My mother reaches around my father
and shakes my hand. Signs of peace pass throughout the nave—

we all feel summer sneaking up
our pant legs. A warm lump
rises to my throat. I do not cry.

I smile with everyone else,
feeling Eastery. I am not a religious man. If you ask me, I'll tell you
I'm a post-Catholic Zen Buddhist with Taoist leanings.

Everyone laughs whenever I say this
because they know it's not true.

Two priests walk with aspergilla down the aisle
sprinkling Holy Water across the faithful

and the faithless. Some hits me squarely between the eyes
(his aim apparently more precise than a sinner would guess).
A drop rolls down my nose to dangle beside a nostril.
I leave it as I would a tear, my Easter doused
with ebullient pride—as if it took some effort
to make it this far
into the almost-summer, the fast-fading spring,
the end of my first mass in thirteen years.

And I walk out singing,
God's a-gonna trouble the wa-ter.

—*Jeremy Burke ('99)*

An Apology

She pinches her tiny tummy between two fingers.

“I call these my chunky rolls,” she said.

“I—but why?” I stammered.

“Because it’s chunky.” Her voice tells me that I am asking a silly question.

“Oh, well, I have chunky rolls, too,” I say and pinch my own stomach.

Before I can ask where she learned that she is, apparently, chunky, she skips off to play. Her hair is up in a ponytail to match my own. We did it together before we left the house. “Do my hair like yours,” she told me. She watched me do it. She watched me brush through the tangles, pull my hair tight on top of my head, and wrap the band around it. Then she repeated the process: brush, pull, and wrap.

That is how I know the fault lies in my hands.

I’m sorry for the way I twisted and turned in the mirror before proclaiming that nothing ever fits me right. I’m sorry for the way I absently pulled and pinched at my body. I’m sorry I had not noticed the way your wide-open eyes had seen it all.

—Anna Badamo

The Pastor's Son

The escape plan was my comfort. On bad days I could just close my eyes and go through the steps: take the pills, drive to the old bank building downtown, park the car, climb the fire escape . . . If the panic attacks were too much, if I started to miss you, if I cried that day, felt sick, or ran out of hand soap, I could just think, *Tonight. Tonight I can do it and all the bad stuff will go away.* Every once in a while I drove by the old six-story bank, just so I could look at its tallness again. I wanted to visualize the plan more clearly.

I never jumped. I never made the climb to the top. I never even stopped when I drove by the building. Every time I thought about doing it, I'd just come up with a different reason not to. Like, I wanted to have tater tots for dinner one last time, or it was my turn to vacuum, or the thought of someone having to clean my splattered body off of the sidewalk made me feel bad for whoever's job it was to do that.

Then came one of those wet, ghostly chilled spring nights. I was driving us back to our college campus. We'd driven to our usual spot in the woods. There, in the passenger seat of my car, I'd let you sink into my body, your stresses dissolving off of you and dirtying me like a hot bath. After you finished, you always felt the need to talk about stupid stuff you thought I found funny. You listed reasons why you could survive a zombie apocalypse way better than the characters in *The Walking Dead*. You bragged about the time you used the word *leprechaun* in a political-science presentation on a dare. I always laughed for your sake. When the conversation died, I let myself space out as I sped down the endlessly flat highway in the dark. I began to imagine how you might react if I dropped you off at your dorm building like everything was normal, and the next day you saw my found body on the news. It was just a passing thought.

We got to the parking lot. You apologized for being quiet. "Sorry," you said. "I was thinking about somebody dying, and it disturbed me, which is kind of weird . . ."

I chuckled; you thought you were so cool for musing about death. "That weirdly correlates with what I was just thinking about," I said.

You laughed. "What, you thinking about murdering me?"

"No," I said. "Not you."

"What?" I don't think you were expecting a serious answer.

You raised your voice then; that was the first time you ever yelled at me.

"Don't *kill* yourself!"

I kept my eyes on the dashboard. You leaned over from the passenger seat, wrapped your arms around me, and rested your head on my shoulder. Heat perspired from your muffled sobs.

"Would it matter?" I asked.

"Yes!" You seemed beside yourself now. "I would leave." You paused to think about it. "Yeah, I would never be able to stay here." You looked away from me. "And I would blame myself."

I knew you would, too. How could you not?

Maybe that's why I never did it, why I never allowed you that power.

—Jaren Schoustra





Highly intelligent elected officials deciding on the future of your health.
Stay tuned for what we'll tell you about when and how you may die....

The Coercion of Saint Paul

Saul walked away from the stoning of Stephen with a smile. If he could arrest and kill a few more of the Nazarenes' captains, the rebellion would be over. The Law of Moses would be satisfied in Judea. Within a few paces he was joined by two trusted companions. They plotted which of the "apostles" would be the next to suffer the Lord's wrath. Moving from the place of the stoning, the noon sun began to melt their conversation. Saul, ever diligent, hurried along the dusty road. As he rounded a curve in the road, something struck him hard across the forehead. A light consumed his vision and he fell to the ground. On his back with his hands reaching toward the sky, he heard a voice.

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"—the voice impatient and fury cold.

"Who are you, sir?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting."

Saul stretched his ears, hoping his companions would come to his rescue.

"You, companions of Saul. What have you seen here today?"

Both answered in the same hollow, scared tone, "Nothing, Lord."

"Good." The voice sliced through the air. "And what have you heard today?"

One companion cleared his throat. "I heard Jesus rebuking Saul, my Lord."

"That's what I heard," echoed the other.

Confused by his blindness and enraged by the pain in his head, Saul knew Jesus was dead. He felt a presence moving close to him, and warm breath as the owner of the voice whispered in his ear, "I have returned from where your brothers sent me. Now, you are mine. Get up and go into the city. Ananias is waiting to give you my instructions." The presence pulled away, leaving a coldness as Saul passed out.

The chill in the air let Saul know it was after dark when he woke. He knew it was dark, though his vision was consumed with a solid white light. He struggled to his hands and knees and listened. He heard faint voices. One knee at a time, he crawled toward the sound. Three times

the sun rose to burn, and the night fell to chill as he crawled. He smelled water and pulled himself over the threshold.

“You’ve finally made it. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Saul was lifted to his feet and would’ve fallen if two sturdy figures had not held him up. The men half dragged, half carried him into a shelter and laid him on a wound of straw. Water was splashed in his face, and his tongue reached around and captured a few drops. When the unseen benefactor rubbed his head and washed the filth of the road from his eyes, the white blinding light began to recede, and he could make out the shapes of men gathered around him.

The one washing his face spoke: “I’m Ananias, a servant, and you are Saul of Tarsus, the murderer of servants. I have received reports on you and the harm you have done to our own people in Jerusalem. You have the authorization of the chief priest to arrest all who call on the name of Jesus. Where is your chief priest now? My friends and I all serve Jesus. Will you arrest us?”

Saul looked at the crowd of strong men. Some had staves; others had clubs. All were armed and glared down on him.

“Stephen,” Ananias said, “was a true servant of Jesus and a friend of all here. How many stones did you throw?”

Saul gasped and choked.

“If I had it my way,” Ananias said without waiting for an answer, “I would serve you the same stones you served Stephen.”

“Don’t kill me!” Saul said, suddenly finding his voice. “I will change. I swear, I will never again persecute the servants of Jesus.”

“Not good enough,” Ananias tossed back. “Jesus has a plan for you.”

The surrounding crowd chuckled without humor.

“He told me that you are his chosen instrument,” Ananias said. “You will proclaim the name of Jesus to the Gentiles and their kings. Jesus said you will suffer much for his name.”

Saul paled.

Ananias stood, and the crowd did the same. They closed in around Saul. Each, in turn, reached out their weapon and touched his

swollen forehead.

Saul winced as Ananias held his staff on Saul's bruise.

"You will never again come to Jerusalem. You will go into the world and profess the name of Jesus. No one will declare as loud as you. Wherever you go, know that we are watching. If you turn your back on he who saved you, he will turn his back on you and his protection will be lifted."

The crowd lined the way to the door.

Ananias pointed toward the door and said, "Go into all the world preaching the good news."

As Saul moved through the line of men, their eyes burning the sentence into his being.

"One last thing," Ananias said. "Saul the Judean is dead. Now and ever after, you will be known as Paul, the Apostle."

The crowd rattled with mirthless laughter as Paul stepped into the light.

-John Hagar



Day Wages

Mother once told me to stay clear when strong men clash. “They take no prisoners, and they won’t stop until the other’s dead.” I never had the chance to ask how she came to know this, for one fall morning I got called into the principal’s office and learned that while I’d been waiting for the school bus, some drunk had crossed the yellow line and killed her in the middle of her paper route. With Dad already gone, that left me alone. Social Services made sure I got taken care of, and by the time I’d reached eighteen, I was older than most my age.

I hear it was easier once for someone with no education to make something of himself. They tell stories about union jobs and assembly lines and wages high enough to have a decent home and nice things. But I never longed for what I never had. I did expect more than what I could get scraping by. Social Services made sure I had a roof over my head and food on my plate, but they couldn’t replace the parent who loved me for me and not for what I could give back. You lose that when you lose your parents, especially your mom. All other relationships are negotiations and exchanges. Mom taught me a lot, but that I learned on my own.

I can’t blame anyone for what I walked into—give Tommy Lee Jenson credit for something, God rest his soul. With him I did something I’d not done since that drunk crossed the line. I trusted someone. I listened to someone. I believed someone. And, worst of all, that someone was a strong man.

I met Tommy Lee while doing a day-labor job through Temp Masters. I’d been laid off a month earlier and needed some quick cash to make ends meet. I had a vehicle, he didn’t, and the job required two, so we teamed up and got sent out.

The warehouse had a truck needing to be unloaded and another one loaded. We worked hard, earned our eight hours of minimum wage. Other times I worked with people who did just enough to not get sent home, but not Tommy Lee.

Tommy Lee claimed to be from Oklahoma—claimed also to have attended the University of Oklahoma for two years before dropping out.

He said he did well and made good grades. I never trusted a person who spoke highly of himself, especially upon a first meeting, so I listened, kept my skepticism to myself, probed a bit to test, to verify. He didn't talk like many day-laborers. He had a vocabulary beyond a couple four-letter adjectives most had. And he could talk about ideas, too, and wasn't shy about sharing his views on politics, economics, and the dignity of man. So, over the course of the loading and unloading, I came to believe that maybe he had taken a few classes.

Tommy Lee had a good fifteen years on me, and it showed. He had a hard-lived look etched in lines down his face, most likely from smoking as from anything else. He took advantage of every smoke break offered, and I was convinced whatever voice he once had had become notched and cracked because of it. But he held up his end of the load. Didn't mean he couldn't be annoying.

"Get your feet under it," he said, that cracked voice barely a whisper. I was on the other side of a king-sized hide-a-bed. We'd been moving beds all morning, and I didn't like being advised now. "Your back."

"Hasn't bothered me yet," I said.

"I've been watching. Can't stay quiet any longer. Your spine's a timebomb, son."

I ignored him and lifted the bed like I'd lifted all the beds before it. I knew how to lift, and didn't need Tommy Lee to explain it to me.

"You learn that at OU, too? Philosophy of Lifting 101?"

"You're clever, and almost correct. I learned the concept in a class." We had the bed off the ground and were going in the direction of the truck. "Homo faber—that's what it's about. Man the maker. You control your environment through the tools you possess. That's what gives you worth and value. And right now the only tool you have of any value is your back. Lose that and you've just become worthless. Think Temp Masters will want you if you tell them your back's bad? If you can't lift and carry, you can't make them money."

"What are you talking about? Homo fabulous? Whatever."

We got the bed loaded and were in no hurry to move another one. “That’s enough education for now,” Tommy Lee said, gyrating and twisting, loosening himself up.

We finished the day, and on my way to drop Tommy Lee back at the dispatch room, he said, “Let me buy you a beer. Least I can do you running me out there and back.”

Having a beer with a co-worker after a job was rare. Most wanted to get back, get their money, and head off in whatever direction they’d come. Besides, most times your partner was so different that there’d be no reason to spend more time together. Tommy Lee fit into that category. But the unusual thing was his acknowledgement that he owed me something, having no ride when the day started.

My first inclination was to say no. He must have sensed that, because he didn’t give me time to answer. “Pull over there,” he said, pointing to a neon Schlitz sign in a window—a parking space outside. “A quick one, that’s all—don’t tell me you couldn’t use it. Damn, they worked us hard, didn’t they?”

I couldn’t argue. Nothing worse than carrying hide-a-beds. “Don’t you want your money?”

“We both know dispatch stays open until midnight for those doing later shifts. We’ll get there.”

He knew more about Temp Masters than I did. I pulled into the open space. “One,” I said. “A quick one.”

“Fine. We’ll make it one.”

Sitting in my car must have stoved up poor Tommy Lee, for when he got out of my pickup he did so with several loud grunts and a sigh, and his limp didn’t work itself out until he was halfway to the barstools.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Old injuries. A hard day at work stirs them up. Sitting for any length doesn’t help.”

We found our spots at the bar. Two tables were taken behind us—two women older than they wanted to look, and four guys who’d probably been there all day.

“Been here before?” I asked.

“Maybe. All these places look the same after awhile.”

He had a point. Lately I had to stop and remember where I was, because one town’s strip is pretty much like another’s—chains and franchises having done that. I even wake some nights wondering the same thing, like where am I and how did I get here? Been happening more since my lay-off.

The bartender asked what we wanted.

“That looks good,” said Tommy Lee, pointing to a beer tap.

“Same,” I said.

We got our beers and Tommy Lee held his up for mine to clink. “Nothing beats a cold beer after a day of work.” He took a long swallow.

The beer was cold and good. I’d never been a drinker, having decided early that I could waste my money in other ways. Never having enough meant parceling out what I did have. I’d known people who spent their way into repossession and foreclosure. My foster parents, for example. They must have taken me in hoping whatever Social Services paid could buy them a way out. It may have for all I know.

“I’ve seen you before,” said Tommy Lee.

I put my glass down. “What do you mean?”

“At Temp Masters. Just saying I noticed you. A young guy doing day labor. Can’t find other work?”

“You know what it’s like. Doolittle’s laid me off. Got my applications out. It’s not a good time.”

He finished his beer and held up the empty glass. “You care to join me in another, Travis?”

I finished mine also. “Might as well.” The bartender got our drinks.

With a fresh beer in hand, Tommy Lee said, “I’ve been thinking lately—now it may sound strange to a younger man, but as things unfolded, it turns out to be a real shame the Soviet Union ever broke apart.”

“Meaning what? We ended Communism—that was good.”

“Maybe. But think about it. Once it ended, it was open season on

us, son, the laboring class. Sitting ducks in Corporate America's crosshairs. At least when there was an alternative, they had to pretend to behave themselves. Don't need to anymore."

"Sounds like you've put in a lot of thought about me and Temp Masters. Strange you having nothing better to think about."

"Oh, I think about other things. For example, ever notice the owner of Temp Masters, Bill Bassett? Forty something, soft, shorter than you, wears fancy clothes, keeps his mustache well-trimmed and his hair slicked back. You don't see him often."

"I know who you mean." I had to be told who he was the day he came out to the dispatcher's desk. He didn't look at those of us in the waiting room slouched against his walls, sitting in his molded-plastic chairs, drinking his coffee for which he charged a quarter. He said something to the money man that made the money man nod, look down, shake his head like a scolded dog, mouth an apology. Then he disappeared back to wherever he'd come—an office, I reckoned, to sit at a desk surrounded by files and papers and a calculator.

"Bassett's never put in a hard day's work in his life, but he needs us more than we need him. Needs our tools. And unlike us, he's a rich man, son."

There you go calling me son, again. "Name's Travis. Okay?"

"Relax. I know what your name is, knew it before we got sent out today. And before you go telling me how strange that is, too, know that when a man shows up to dispatch wanting work and all he does is sit because he doesn't have a car, he hears things, he pays attention. It helps pass the time. I heard your name called, that's all. I'm more observant than strange."

"Then I'll call it strangely observant."

Tommy Lee took a deep breath. "Listen, I'm just saying having a car's a good thing. Having a pickup's even better—another tool, if you get the reference."

"You seem like a man who'd have his own truck," I said. "What happened?"

He got up and stretched his legs and back. “We’ve already blown past that one beer. Want to close the place down?”

“Not really.”

“I guess I don’t either. But you won’t object to me getting another, will you?”

“If you want another, go ahead. You’re not driving.”

The bartender sat down a fresh beer. Tommy Lee took a drink, then wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve. “I’ll tell you this, most of what’s happened to me I had coming. My own fault stemming from my own foolishness. But not everything—that I do know. And that I’ll never forget.”

His jaw was rigid when he said this, and he said it not to me or to himself, but to someone or something in the distance, across the room, on the other side and beyond. He turned quiet, nursed his beer, knowing it would be his last. My empty beer glass was gone, the bartender having taken it and towelled the place where it rested, erasing all evidence I’d been here. The two women had left, taking the four men with them, or so I imagined. They’d been replaced by an old couple, he using a cane and she in a dress that looked faded and sad even from where I sat. Two laboring types played foosball in the corner, the slamming and spinning of the game competing with the country tunes from the jukebox.

“It’s not entirely true what I told you,” said Tommy Lee.

“Now what are you talking about?”

“I knew more than just your name.” I looked at him, kept looking at him, daring him to turn and face me. “I hear you’re short on cash.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“And I know what happened at Doolittle’s.”

That stopped me. “The hell you talking about?”

“They suspected but didn’t know. Not for sure, anyway. Not enough to do any more than let you go and call it a layoff.”

“You don’t know anything about it. Work slowed. The job ended.”

“It’s okay, Travis. I also worked at Doolittle’s years back, that is until

a forklift knocked over a pallet of fittings right on top of me. The company had been told there wasn't enough space between aisles, but OSHA didn't investigate, left it to Human Resources to fix. The blame was laid on the forklift driver just earning a day's pay. Wasn't all his fault. Don't get me wrong, I wish he'd never done it. I still have friends there, people who remember. I heard what happened, but it wasn't until Temp Masters that I connected you with Doolittle's."

We've all done things we aren't proud of, and I'd been pretty good about making peace with most of those times. But the one at Doolittle's was too fresh.

"Want to tell me about it?" he asked.

"Not particularly."

All I'd done was leave the back door ajar. For that I'd get a cut of what they'd take out and sell. Blame it on high copper prices and a threatening debt collector hounding me to make good on an emergency room bill six months past due. Doolittle's suspected, Tommy Lee was right about that. I worked in the backroom, and I was the last one to clock out that day. But there were others, and that was all they had. Still, losing the wire and the pipe didn't go down well, even if they had the insurance to cover it.

"I got laid off because of the housing downturn," I said. "It's in my employment record."

"Will they recommend you to the next employer?"

"Don't see why not."

"Think they'll bring you back?"

"All my evaluations were good."

Tommy Lee swallowed the last sip, stood, and dug his wallet out from his back pocket. "I bet they were, Travis." He peeled off several bills and fanned them out on the bar. "This cover it?" he said to the bartender who turned, looked, nodded.

He followed me to my truck. "Let's go get our money," he said, laughing as he climbed into the cab. "Our riches await us."

At dispatch the teller behind the three-inch pane of glass counted out our day's wages twice—once to himself then once to us, before sliding the bills and coins through the slot. Minimum wage times eight hours, minus taxes. Pocket change.

Outside, I said, "Need a lift home?"

He lit a cigarette and closed his eyes, enjoying a long drag.

"Figured you were done with me."

"I am. Feel free to turn it down."

"Before we call it a night, Travis, there's one more thing. I got something that you need. You got something I need. We best be thinking how we can partner up."

"You lost me."

"Do you really think you'll ever find a job again in this town? You're as good as blackballed. Doolittle's has seen to that."

"Then I'll move. Lived someplace else before I moved here. Anyway, unlike you, I got a truck—and I'm not a cripple."

Tommy Lee tossed his cigarette and stepped closer. His hand shot to my throat quicker than I'd thought him capable. I smelled his warm breath of cigarettes and beer. "You're more like me than you want to admit," he said. "We've both been screwed by forces we have no control over, and we haven't done a damn thing about it. I'm suggesting we get back a little of our self-respect."

I broke his grip and pushed him away. "Don't ever do that again."

"I hope I'll never need to."

Despite being younger and in better shape, I was breathing harder.

Tommy Lee relaxed, and said, "For some reason you thought it was a good idea to leave that door open—that the deed was worth the risk. I'm thinking whatever those reasons were, they never got satisfied. They only got multiplied."

"Go to hell."

"Let me know when your mind changes."

I avoided Temp Masters the next week, my work and pay coming from a sign I'd posted at the Piggly Wiggly offering to haul people's stuff

for a flat fee. A couple wanted a couch moved from Goodwill to their apartment, a woman needed yard waste taken to the landfill, a minister had his congregation's collected canned goods delivered to Shelter House, and a man about Tommy Lee's age had to move his belongings to storage following eviction from his motel room. He begged me to reduce my fee—I did. I kept busy and everyone paid in cash, but it was still tight when the month ended.

Events that week also got me thinking about Tommy Lee's talk about tools. If the ones I had consisted of my back and my truck, I'd better be damned careful how I used them both. I could save my back by letting those hiring me do the heavy lifting—which worked until I saw the minister in a wheelchair. Lifting his boxes of canned goods put a twinge in my spine I'd never had before.

Then my truck—paid off and a good ten years out of warranty—needed new brakes. My clutch began to slip and my insurance company sent a third and final notice that my policy would soon lapse.

We met at the Hometown Cafe on Framingham Road after the breakfast rush and before the lunch crowd. Tommy Lee had gotten there first. He wore the same clothes he had the evening I left him in front of Temp Masters. I slid into the booth across from him.

He sipped his coffee and sat it back in its saucer. The waitress appeared, refilled his cup, and said to me, "Coffee?" I nodded. She filled a thick ceramic mug. "Menus?"

"Leave a couple," Tommy Lee said. "We have some catching up to do first." When the waitress left, he said, "To what do I owe this pleasure?" He smiled like he knew the answer.

"I missed your company, Tommy Lee. Missed your conversation."

"What you're missing is a good job, money in your pocket, and the love of a good woman." He leaned back. "I can't hire you, and love is your own business. But maybe I can help with the third one."

I never considered myself a saint, but I did think myself a person who took his decisions seriously. Circumstances led to most of my difficult choices. You need the right cards if you're going to play a decent

hand—unless you can bluff. Most folks get but one hand to play, the lucky ones more. Birth and background determines the number. He'd been right. I'd left that door open for a reason and was now stuck, mud up to my rims. "What do you have in mind?"

He leaned forward on his elbows, got close and lowered his voice. "The world's not working for folks like you and me—you know that. Seems we're walking backwards watching people move past us and getting smaller as the distance grows." He sat back. "A strange world we find ourselves in, Travis."

"Maybe you should have stayed in school."

He found that funny. "Wasn't for me. A few classes got me thinking, but in the end most of it was bullshit. The University as corporation. It's gotten worse since my time, too. Now they got CEO's running the show. University presidents with MBAs. How do you think the liberal arts co-exist with its antithesis? I'll leave you to ponder that." He sipped his coffee then stretched out his back. "You called me a cripple. Remember?"

I'd felt bad about that and started to say something.

"You weren't far from wrong. I can barely work two, let alone three days a week. Forget me ever pulling a forty again. Workers comp didn't do much. Another good idea that went to hell. But I don't dwell on unfairness anymore."

The waitress refilled our cups, asked if we wanted to eat, and was told by Tommy Lee probably later. When she left, I said, "What's on your mind?"

"What do you think about Temp Masters?"

I shrugged. "I need them right now. I can work everyday if I want."

"Congratulations. You've got yourself a minimum wage job if you want it."

"Right now, minimum is better than nothing."

"I see." He sat back and stroked the unshaven graying stubble on his chin. "You do know when you go out you're replacing a worker making at least twice what you're making?"

“Something like that.”

“And what does Temp Masters get out of it?”

“I suppose the difference.”

“And who do they use to make their profit?”

“I suppose people like you and me.”

“Crippled folks and the disgraced who can’t find work. You don’t think that’s pretty low?”

“Never looked at it that way.”

“There’s no lower person than one who benefits off another’s misery. Did you know Temp Masters is a publicly traded company? Buy their stock and you too can make money off its business practices. People who’ve never worked a day in their lives benefiting from a poor person’s labor.”

That got me feeling defensive. “When I need money, they’re there for me.”

“Well, that brings it down to the human level, doesn’t it? When his man sack’s in a vise, Travis has a partner paying him the minimum for the right to keep tightening. That it?”

“What do you want?”

He sat back. “Nothing big. Some payback, maybe. And something to keep us going for a bit longer. Do I look like a man who asks for much?”

The last time I’d been approached like this was by a man calling himself Beau. Along with the money I’d get for so little work, he’d told me stories about the evil Doolittles. Most of that I figured was him just sealing the deal—making me feel righteous about doing something he wanted done. He could have stopped at the money, so desperate was I at the time.

“Why aren’t you on disability or something?”

“Tried—got turned down on appeal. It’s not happening.”

“Social Security?”

“Do I look that old to you?”

“Some rehab program then.”

He smiled, shook his head. “No, for this I need another person.”

And a truck.” When I didn’t say anything, he did. “It’s time we eat.”

I ate, but my appetite diminished the more Tommy Lee talked. His wasn’t a plan so much as an idea, and one not that different from what I’d done at Doolittle’s. He knew a place with high priced inventory and little security. He’d break in, load the truck with as much as we could, and then take it to an acquaintance who’d unload it.

“That’s it?” I said.

“I’m not telling you everything. It’s better that way for now. How much you owe the garage for your truck?” he asked.

I told him. “They’re okay until the end of the month. Then they’ll want their money.”

“Of course they do. It’s their labor. They’re owed.”

“I’m not arguing.”

“You’ll have it. And then some. Maybe get a better truck.”

“And no one’s getting hurt?” I said.

“Weren’t you listening?”

As Tommy Lee limped away from the cafe—his body tight and in need of movement, he paused at a bench, picked up a discarded newspaper. He never looked back and soon I moved on myself.

I did another shift at Temp Masters, this time helping to unload an overturned train car full of Pepsi products. I also dropped off two applications: one to Floyd’s Garden and Landscape, the other at Broadway Propane on Highway 12. Both shots fired into a dark sky.

That Thursday we were to undertake our real work, as Tommy Lee put it. We met at the same bar we’d stopped in after the first time we’d worked together. The same bartender was there, and I swear the same four women were at the same table wearing the same clothes. Had three weeks even passed? He even waited for me on the same barstool. He didn’t turn when I sat beside him. I waved off the beer the bartender started to pour.

“You’re late,” he said, sounding sullen, not turning to greet me. I ignored him, figuring he needed time to re-acclimate himself to the company of another. “How many have you had?”

“Three. Only wanted one. That’s how late you are.”

“You don’t have a watch, do you?” I knew he didn’t. “If you did, you’d know I’m right on time. You have this thing about being early. You know that about yourself?” He stared straight ahead and moved his mouth as if chewing on a tough bite of steak, doing this thing with his eyes that made them look like they were going in and out of focus. “You okay?”

When he at last looked at me, I knew. He may have been on his third beer at this bar, but that wasn’t his third beer. He’d been sucking down the contents of some bottle somewhere for a lot longer. “You don’t know anything about me, do you?” he said.

“Some things.”

“Sure, some things.” He got the bartender’s attention and pointed to his empty glass. “Did you know I have a kid? A boy—name’s Eugene. Well, he’s no boy any longer.”

“Didn’t know that.”

“Haven’t seen him in . . .” he paused, doing calculations in his head. “I don’t know. Suppose it doesn’t matter.” He picked up his fresh beer.

“But it’s been too long,” I said.

He nodded.

“How old was he?” He looked at me, confused, unsure what in the hell I was talking about. “When you last saw him?”

“Seven. I packed his lunch that morning. Took him to school. ”

“What happened?”

“That forklift I told you about. Spent two weeks in the hospital.” He paused, drank. “It’d never been that good between his mom and me. Argued too much. Money was tight, always had been. Couldn’t blame her for wanting better. But our luck was turning—it was about to work out. It was. We had plans—I had plans.” He looked at me, his eyes more clear, more focused. “We were about to have something better.”

“But then the forklift?”

He smiled to himself. “She just lacked the required patience. Figured I’d be out of commission for a while, not working, not fulfilling my

end of the bargain. Didn't really know until I got out and went home. Thought it was funny she only came by once, but, hell, she probably figured being away from me was same as a vacation."

I got the bartender's attention and settled Tommy Lee's tab.

"After a while I wasn't even that upset about her being gone. But damn, I missed my kid. Still do. We were good together."

"By the way you look, I'd say we're not undertaking our plans this evening."

He ran his finger around the lip of his empty beer glass. "No, tonight's not a good night. Other factors have intervened. Let's say the place I have in mind wouldn't work tonight."

"Come on, I'll take you home." He didn't put up an argument—just got off his stool. Outside, I pointed to my truck. He used the walk to light a smoke. At the truck, he looked in the bed, moved tools around, thinking.

"Looks like you got everything," he said.

"Got what you told me."

"Add a scythe to the list."

I got in the cab and turned on the radio, waiting for Tommy Lee to finish his smoke. When he got in, I said, "What made you think about your son?"

"Some evenings are like that. No accounting for memories—you should understand."

"What do you plan to do with that stuff?"

"The tarp and rope will hold things steady. The tools are just in case."

"Just in case? Anything I need to know?"

"I'm tired, Travis. Can we just let this unfold?"

I started the truck and backed into the street. At a stop light I saw Tommy Lee's eyes were closed. Checking whether he was asleep, I said, "A scythe?"

To show that he wasn't, he said, "Just in case."

The next night, I picked him up outside his one-room apartment.

Tommy Lee got in and closed the door.

“We on?” I asked.

“We’re on.”

“Again, I drive. I stay out of the way.”

“And do what I tell you to. That’s all.”

“And no one gets hurt?”

He sighed. “You’re asking again?”

We drove around waiting for the right time, our conversation nonexistent. I’d stopped wanting details, deciding he was right—the less I knew the better. After ten more minutes he pointed to an alley.

“Park there.”

We stopped several blocks from a strip mall—the same one that housed Temp Masters. I couldn’t think of a business in the area that had anything of great value. “What store you hitting? It can’t be Temp Masters. There’s nothing there.”

“You’ll know soon enough.” He tossed me a ski mask. “You may need this. But put it on when I tell you.” Then he closed his eyes and breathed hard for a few seconds. I was about to shake him when he smiled, opened his eyes, and patted my shoulder. “We’re going to start making things right, Travis. Stay put—I’ll be back.”

I watched him walk down the alley smoking and in a stride that once his bones and muscles loosened was as confident and purposeful as I’d ever seen.

If asked, I wouldn’t have been able to provide a good explanation why I was there or what I thought I was doing. Nothing in my life was so bad that I couldn’t have figured something out. I should have listened to my heart—the heart that beat hard near where my stomach moved in ways that were unknown—instead of to Tommy Lee. The idea of driving away and leaving Tommy Lee on his own crossed my mind, but I couldn’t.

Twenty minutes later, two men entered the alley—one behind the other, and once the cloud moved past the half-moon light I saw that the one in back wore a ski mask like mine and was holding something at

the other's neck, and as they approached I knew that something was a handgun. I got out and saw that the man's hands were bound and his eyes were covered with duct tape. Then I realized the bound man was Bill Bassett, the owner of Temp Masters.

Tommy Lee motioned for me to keep my mouth shut and to open the tailgate. He sat Bassett on the opened tailgate—Bassett twisting, making sounds behind the tape—then pushed him down on the tarp, taped his kicking legs together, rolled him in the tarp, bound the tarp with rope, then cinched his wrapped body with more rope to the side panels. He slammed the tailgate closed and pointed for me to get into the truck.

Inside, I said, "What the hell?"

"Start your engines. I'll tell you where to go."

I started from the alley. "This is kidnapping. You didn't say anything about this."

He pulled the ski mask from his head. "Hungry?" I wasn't, but Tommy Lee told me to go to the Taco Bell on West 6th.

"What about him?"

"He's not going anywhere. It's the receipt I want. Being three miles away at the same time gives us cover."

I checked my rearview, afraid I'd see Bassett sitting up or jumping out. "I don't like this."

At Taco Bell, he had me park far from other cars and then went inside to order. He returned with two crunchy tacos and a Gordita Baja. "Got something for you in case you change your mind."

I stayed on West 6th driving out of town toward Bellamy. We got past the city and free from the lights. Tommy Lee ate a crunchy taco—the sound and the smell putting me as much on edge as Bassett tied up in the back.

"Won't his family be worried?"

"Divorced. He lives alone. Another middle-aged man with nothing to go home to but his possessions."

"How do you know?"

“I know.” He took another bite—the crunch getting on my nerves, the smell making me ill.

“This isn’t what you said we’d do.” He looked at me and took another bite.

Fifteen minutes later he pointed ahead and told me to take the gravel road north. Clouds blocked the starlight from the night sky. We passed two farmhouses. I heard dogs barking in the distance.

“Slow down. Turn right at the next intersection.”

Several miles later, he said, “Pull in here.” I saw what had once been a road, now overgrown and tangled with weeds. “Go on. It’ll take you behind that tree row.” I drove slow hoping not to damage an axle. Near the trees I saw an abandoned farmhouse.

“Stop here.” Before he got out he pulled his ski mask on. “Put yours on too, then stand over by the sycamores.”

From the trees, I watched Tommy Lee open the tailgate and drag Bassett onto it. He untied the ropes and removed the tarp, then untied the ropes binding his feet, legs, and arms, leaving the tape around his hands and over his mouth and eyes. Then Bassett was on his feet, tottering to find balance. Tommy Lee waved me closer. “Watch him,” he said.

Tommy Lee removed the shovel, axe, and pick. He motioned for me to follow. I guided Bassett as he felt his way over unfamiliar and uneven ground.

Tommy Lee stopped a short distance from the farmhouse, dropped the tools, then cut Bassett’s hands free using his pocket knife. He said to Bassett, “Brace yourself, you’re not going to like this,” before ripping the duct tape from his face.

Bassett may not have liked it, but all he did was blink, fixing where he was and who we were behind the masks. “What do you want?” Bassett said, sounding more defiant than scared.

Tommy Lee pointed to the tools. “We need a hole dug. A large hole, and that hole may need to become a trench. You have the tools you need and all night to do it.”

Bassett, working his wrists, rubbing his face, said, "You want me to dig?"

"That's what I said," said Tommy Lee.

"What's this all about? What do you want?"

Tommy Lee handed him the shovel. "Dig."

"I'm not taking that," Bassett said.

Tommy Lee slapped his face. "Dig."

"You're crazy."

Tommy Lee slapped him again. "Dig."

Bassett said, "No."

Tommy Lee slapped him harder and then slapped him again. "Dig," he said, again handing Bassett the shovel. This time he took it. Tommy Lee toed a line in the soil. "Start here." He toed two other lines. "Make it this wide and three-feet deep. Keep digging in that direction until I tell you to stop."

Twenty minutes later, Tommy Lee said, "You're slow."

Bassett tossed a shovel load to the side. "Blisters."

"Take these." Tommy Lee tossed him a new pair of leather work gloves.

Bassett sat the shovel aside and eased them over his hands. "Nice if I had them sooner."

"You got them now."

An hour later, Tommy Lee said, "Break time," and handed Bassett a water bottle. "You have ten minutes." Bassett sat and drank so fast that water spilled from his mouth. The hole hid Bassett up to his shins and was long enough to lay in. I heard night sounds—crickets and barred owls sounding like wounded cats.

When ten minutes passed, Tommy Lee said, "Get up. The hole's got to be deeper and longer. There's more to do."

"Is this my grave?" Bassett asked.

"If you run into roots, you got the axe and pick to use."

Bassett picked up the shovel and Tommy Lee walked around to the far side of the hole to watch.

“It’s rocky,” Bassett said.

“Soil quality’s uneven around here. You take your chances.”

“If you intend to bury me, I might as well let you kill me now and leave the digging to you.”

“You’re giving me ideas, Bassett.”

I sat against the farmhouse’s stone foundation not liking how the evening was turning out. I’d stumbled into this for familiar reasons, but this time with a possible outcome far worse. I’d hitched myself to Tommy Lee at the bar when he said that because of my past, day labor was my future. And here was Mr. Temp Masters himself digging a hole. But for what?

Tommy Lee was different tonight. He was unpredictable, and unpredictable people were scary and volatile. Was this about punishing Bassett? I didn’t come here for that. I looked at my watch. The hour was late. To stay awake, I walked around the farmhouse, looked through the broken windows, then hiked down the dirt road to where we’d pulled in. I tossed rocks at road signs. Some time later he yelled for me to return.

When I got back, he looked pissed off. “Where’d you go?”

“Took a walk. Didn’t seem as if I was needed.”

“I want you to see something,” he said.

What I noticed was the dirt pile so high I couldn’t see the hole or Bassett. “Where is he?”

“He’s not dead, if that’s what you mean.”

I followed him to the other side where I could see Bassett face down in the hole, his hands duct taped behind his back.

Tommy Lee said, “Roll over, Bassett.”

He struggled, but once on his back I saw his sweat streaked face and ruined clothes. He had become unrecognizable.

“You did a good job,” Tommy Lee said. “Not a full day’s work, but you earned your pay.”

“What are you talking about?” Bassett said, too beat down to sound angry.

“You’re getting paid. You earned it.” He opened his wallet and

pulled out some bills. "I figured with breaks and everything, you put in about five hours. I didn't mess with taxes." What was he talking about? "Jump down there, Travis, and give him his wages."

I looked at him, confused. Why couldn't he do it?

"Go on. When you're done, we need to talk."

I didn't move, wondering his motive for wanting me in the hole with Bassett.

"What's the matter? I'd climb down myself but I'm a cripple, remember?" Then, as if reading my thoughts, he patted my shoulder, and said, "Think I'm going to do something to you? If it makes you feel better, I'll go stand by your truck."

I didn't move.

"Okay, I'm going," he said, and headed off.

Without turning my back on him, I jumped down, put the bills in Bassett's shirt pocket, then climbed out. I met him at the truck.

"What gives?" I said.

"We have to take care of him."

"What do you mean?"

"Think. We kidnapped the man," he said, glancing back to Bassett. "Can't very well let him resume his duties at Temp Masters."

"What about your receipt? Or were you just hungry?" He didn't answer. "This wasn't part of it."

"It's where we are now."

"Only if he knows who we are—and he doesn't. We kept our masks on."

"You don't think he can't narrow it down? Two men, a pickup? Our voices? Who might do something like this if not someone who knows Temp Masters?"

I wanted to pace—to walk—to move. "But that was always going to be the case. What changed?"

"Listen, this serves notice on all those who use our bodies, our tools to pad their accounts, to build their mansions, to join their clubs."

"This was always your plan, wasn't it? Getting even, that's what this

is. Well, I'm not part of it."

He smiled and moved as if he wanted to pat my shoulder. I stepped away. "You are part of it. Always have been. You were part of it even before you decided to leave that door open. I know you."

"Have you ever killed a man?" I thought his answer would be no, he hadn't, and that might be enough for him to reconsider. But with my question came a passing across his face of something remote. A look of great distance across memory.

Then he said, "I'm not asking you to be the one."

"He can walk back. That will take hours, and we can use that time to figure out what to do. Hell, maybe enough time to clear out."

He shook his head. "I clear out when I'm ready. That's not now."

"If I leave, what are you going to do?"

"You're not leaving. Not before we're finished."

"I don't believe you can stop me."

"Let's think about this, Travis," he said, taking a step closer. His voice reasonable, comforting, like a parent convincing his son of the more logical choice. "We've gone too far. You've gone too far."

"I've not gone so far as you think. I can drive away."

He came closer and said in that sensible voice, "No you're not, Travis. You're seeing this to the end. I need you to."

I started to turn and walk away to prove him wrong when he grabbed at my throat like he had at Temp Masters, only this time I stepped back far enough that he stumbled forward.

"Don't be so gutless. Show me something, Travis."

I continued moving back and to his side, circling, waiting for him to back off or to strike.

"You're a runner, aren't you, Travis."

He followed, feinting a charge, testing me, seeing what I would do, what defenses I owned. I could tell he had once been quick, agile, able to anticipate and attack. Once maybe, but no longer. His breath soon quickened, then labored—his legs unsteady on the rutted soil. He'd become an old man ravaged by his habits and his past.

“Back off,” I said. “There’s time. We can work something out.”

“There’s one way and you know it.” He coughed, wiped his mouth, and moved forward.

“Stop this.”

“No time,” he said. He made another lunge—a lunge easy to avoid. He lunged again, and again, each one weaker, more ineffective, until he stopped moving and his arms went slack. He looked at me confused, like a man who had lost the point of a conversation. Then he turned, peered off into the night for something I could not see. In a whisper, he said, “There’s no time.”

I kept my distance in case this were a trap. I listened to him breathe—the rattling in his chest, the cough which had started minutes before beginning to subside. With his arms down and his eyes toward the horizon, he looked like a man waiting for the sunrise.

“Tommy Lee—you okay?”

He spat, sleeved his mouth, took what breath he could, then pulled out and lit a cigarette. “Know what this place is, Travis?” he said, as he blew out the smoke. “Here, this ground upon which we stand?”

“No idea.”

“This was mine once. Was going to be, anyway. Had made the offer, paid the earnest money, every cent we’d saved. The bank pondered it, the loan, you know. We waited, waited a long time. Finally, they said yes.” He turned to see if I was listening. “They said yes, Travis. And you won’t believe where I was when I found that out.”

“Tell me.”

“At the hospital, the day that forklift toppled the pallet. Funny thing, right? But what’s more funny is the bank kept the earnest money. You see, I broke the agreement, a man broke in every way possible. Fate—you can’t beat it. Now that’s a funny thing, too.”

I walked up beside him, careful to remain far enough away, and looked for that sunrise Tommy Lee seemed to be searching for.

“What are we going to do?”

He took a long drag, letting the smoke ease from his nostrils, the

night breeze chasing the vapor into nothing. “Take him back. Tell him you had no choice, that I had a gun. Tell him that I wanted him dead and buried in the hole I made him dig but that you wanted no part of it. Tell him it was me, Tommy Lee Jennings from Oklahoma, who made you, and that you left me at the old Hibbard place. Tell him all of that.”

“And you?”

“I’ll wait. I’ve got time now. And enough smokes.”

“That’s good, Tommy Lee. That’s the right thing.”

I got Bassett into the truck bed and drove away. After several minutes I stopped, freed him, and helped him into the cab where he sat shivering. Shock, I figured. I told him what Tommy Lee had told me to say. That he’d made me do it, had threatened to kill us both, but that he and I had fought and I’d gotten the better of him. Bassett nodded, rubbed his wrists, his mouth, looked out the window, fidgeted with his hands, his legs. When I finished, he pointed to the truck panel and said, “Heat.”

By the time we reached the city limits, Bassett had stopped shaking. “Take me to Temp Master. Know where that is?”

I looked at him, surprised. No longer was Bassett the shaking victim. He’d used the time to gather himself. He sounded like a person in charge, a man to be listened to. “Not the police?”

“Think I want to spend the next six hours rehashing what I’ve just been through, being asked questions, the same questions over and over? Anyway, my car’s there.”

I drove past the Taco Bell where Tommy Lee had ordered his food. “How do I get to get to Temp Masters?” I said, trying to maintain the ruse.

He looked at me, smirked. “Think I’m stupid? You know where it is.”

“Best remind me,” I said. He laughed.

I stopped in front of his business. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going inside to straighten up, get a few things. I don’t want the police anywhere near here poking around. But if they come, I’ll be ready.”

My business is private. My books are private. You understand what I'm saying?"

"You're not worried about Tommy Lee?"

"Him?" He found the idea funny. "I know him. He can barely stand up." He opened the door to get out, thought better of it and turned. "If this evening doesn't stay between the three of us—" he paused, shook his head. "If I get any hint it didn't, son, you have no idea what I can do." This time he got out. "And never come back here. You're finished. Both of you." He looked at his storefront, then back at me, smiling in a way that wasn't pleasant. He pulled out the bills I'd placed in his pocket and waved them at me. "Hardest damned money I ever earned. I can't believe you people do this work for such little pay." He laughed, stuffed the bills back in his pocket and slammed the door. I left when his office lights came on.

Driving away I thought about what had just happened. Instead of Bassett demanding revenge, he only wanted us to go away and to leave the cops out of it. Knowing that Tommy Lee was set to kill him an hour earlier only made it more puzzling. Had he not known the danger? He had to straighten up, he'd said, had to get a few things. He wanted me to know his books were private. Tommy Lee had gotten something right: the guy was a crook.

I had things to tell Tommy Lee, things to get off my chest—about how he'd used me, played me, made promises he had no intention of keeping. I'd hear him out before telling him what I thought. I made my own decisions, after all. Maybe we'd have that fight, the one we'd been rehearsing. Probably not. He didn't need a fight, he needed help.

Light formed a muted band across the horizon by the time I pulled in. I parked near the sycamores and got out. The breeze was colder and stronger than it had been earlier. In the distance, I heard the dog pack barking.

"Tommy Lee," I shouted. I walked around the farmhouse then stopped at the dirt pile. This land could have been his, I thought. I

picked up a dirt clod and powdered it in my hands before tossing the dust back. He may have been able to make something of this place, given enough time. I'm sure at one time he could have, before the accident and before his life went the way it did, robbing him of his tools and leaving him alone and dependent upon others.

The dawn light spread. "Tommy Lee," I called. Maybe he tried walking back, I thought, then dismissed the idea.

I went to the other side of Bassett's trench and found him. He sat in the hole, back against the side, his handgun inches from his fingers where it settled after his arm dropped. Blood splattered his shirt, covered his face, stained the ground. I jumped in to feel for life.

Once I got home and loaded what I could, I left town, heading west. I planned to keep driving in that direction until the sun dropped into my eyes. Then I'd be faced with a decision. Either I'd turn south or north, a decision I'd make when the time came. The southwest might be nice—a dry heat is healthy, so I've been told. Or the northwest. Rain, for sure, but I hear the people are decent.

At Bassett's hole I'd thought about how a decision focuses the mind. The decision has to be made, and until that happens your brain works on it and works on it until it is. Relief follows, or doubts from second guessing. I'd always thought of myself as someone whose decisions were better made than most. What I'd done at Doolittle's should have told me otherwise. Maybe I needed Tommy Lee to get me to face things I'd been refusing to.

The last thing I remembered about Tommy Lee—once he'd given up and had turned his back on me—was him looking out for the sunrise that hadn't arrived. In that gesture I'd hoped maybe he'd come to a better decision, one that might keep him going. I wondered what he would have thought of Bassett wanting to keep the evening just between us. Relieved? Vindicated? Both? Regardless, I suspect he would have found some justification for what he'd done—more proof about unfairness and power, more contempt for those holding the keys.

I placed the ax, pick, shovel, rope, and the scythe we never used in my pickup. The more tools, the better, I'd learned from him. I used the tarp to wrap his body, binding the ends and sealing the seam with the duct tape, then laid him in the middle. I set the handgun beside him, then shoveled in enough earth to keep him safe from predators.

Two hours out of town the highway remained a straight line between flat green fields, power lines, and an occasional exit to a small town with gas stations and fast food franchises. The truck drove well—an indication of the quality of work the mechanic put into its repair. I would pay the garage—I would—once I got settled.

—James O’Gorman