Gravity Tender

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GRAVITY TENDER

By

Darrin Moir

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

Masters of English

Graduate Studies Office

2012
SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis:

Gravity Tender

This thesis by Darrin Moir is recommended for approval by the student’s thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

GRAVITY TENDER

By

Darrin Moir

This thesis project is an exploration of the interdisciplinary connection between literature and art. I use both of these forms simultaneously to concepts of gravitational pull in the scientific and often traumatic sense, as well as, the pull between individuals.

To meet the objectives of studying the connection between art and literature, I developed multiple forms of illustrations to go along with stories. I also wanted to see how it affected the story to have an illustration that focused on a specific image from the narrative, or perhaps an image that wrestled with the entire metaphor behind the words. Some are clear; some are more ambiguous. My goal was to ensure the artwork wasn’t there simply to help the story, rather they should both be affected by the presence of the other.

Picking what to illustrate in the story was always difficult if the idea didn’t come while I was writing, for the stories always came first. Nevertheless, prior to this project I’ve always had a tendency to the capture quiet, everyday moments, and I found myself including these same images in my stories as well. Regardless how zany or action packed the story might be I found myself being pulled toward these gravitational moments that might otherwise be passed by without the contemplation they deserve.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to everyone who has contributed thoughts and support. I especially want to thank Professor Jen Howard, my Thesis Director, for all of her suggestions and enthusiasm over the big ideas as well as the smallest details. She is always gracious enough to let me barge into her office, in panic or excitement, or both, and sink into her bright orange couch for answers. Jen has been encouraging even while I’m staring at her stark pen lines slicing through some of my favorite sentences because her attachment to the project was so authentic and caring throughout every step of the process. She introduced me to flash fiction and the constant mantra for cutting all of the unnecessary pieces away. Get rid of the tonsils. The throat-clearing. Keep the heart.

Also, I need to express my gratitude to Dr. Russell Prather as a reader and art critic, for pushing me to rethink the purpose of illustrations. My work would not have near the aesthetic and philosophical purpose if it weren’t for his close reading and meaningful suggestions. Additionally he has provided me with many contemporary and historical examples to learn from.

My thanks to Professor John Hubbard, as well, for helping me grow as an artist over the last six years. He never let me be completely satisfied with a good painting. Often, I would think I was finished, and he would tell me I was halfway done. I would not have the clarity and understanding of my work if it were not for his constant heckling to experiment.

Much of this work owes a thank you to my fellow graduate students and many other instructors for their constant energy and interest during writing workshops. I know I’ll
neither have the same opportunity as now to receive pages and pages of comments from a
dozen or more different perspectives on a single story, nor the wonderful environment
where I am surrounded by other writers geeking out over linguistic images and poetic
moments.

This project would have been logistically impossible without the Excellence in
Education grant I received from the Grants and Research Office at Northern Michigan
University. The funding helped purchase supplies and equipment, and covered printing
and binding costs. NMU deserves recognition for their generosity and support they give
to student research projects and creative works.

Thanks to my family for always supporting me in so many ways as an artist and
writer. Undoubtedly, that encouragement has put me where I am today, especially my
grandpa Warren for patiently bearing and even validating hours of discussion in his
basement over angsty teenage poems. A seed was certainly planted amongst the dust and
boxes upon boxes of computer wires lining the walls.

Lastly, I am forever indebted to my wife Sara who has sacrificed many hours for me
to complete this project. She single handedly keeps our little family is woven tightly
together, healthy, happy, and she still finds time to provide me with some of the most
rewarding criticism a writer or artist could ever wish for from his audience. She keeps me
grounded in the most important things and inspires me constantly. There isn’t a day
where I can thank God enough for her presence in my life.
PREFACE

I’ve seen parallels between developing a story and creating a piece of art. For voice, there is stylization. Form and composition. Color theory and mood. Revision. Always revising and smoothing sentences or lines, adjusting colors and shapes, making sure everything is in proportion to the main idea. I can’t help but see pictures rising into my head and asking myself what I want my audience to focus on, what I want them to see and feel when they respond to my work.

This got me thinking. Maybe they belong together more than I previously thought. I found myself wondering what would happen if I combined the two ideas, and my thesis project seemed like the perfect opportunity to explore the relationship between images and text. I wanted to see how these creative forms affected one another, while I worked on the project as well as how they would interact as a finished product in book form. This was all new to me. An experiment, often leading to notebooks filled with doodles that went nowhere except crumpled on my bedroom floor or straight into the trash can by my desk. Yet something always came, an image to show more than a story could alone, something to introduce or close the narrative. As with the story itself, I was wary of explaining too much.

Consequently, I developed multiple forms of illustrations to go along with the stories. I also wanted to see how it affected the writing to have an image that focused on a specific image from the narrative, or perhaps an illustration that wrestled with the entire metaphor behind the words. Some are clear; some are more ambiguous. My goal was to
ensure the artwork wasn’t there simply to help the story, rather they should both be affected by the presence of the other, a synthesis of the visual and the written.

Picking what aspects to illustrate in a story was always difficult if the idea didn’t come while I was writing. Prior to this project I’ve had a tendency to paint quiet, everyday moments, and I found myself including these same images in my writing. I’m often pulled toward these meditative domestic moments that might otherwise be passed over without the contemplation they deserve.

The title, *Gravity Tender*, came to me after many long lists and trying to pick out threads that were holding all these stories together. Surely, there was one because I’ve let so many go that don’t fit the collection. Eventually, I realized that many of my stories evoke the pull of an invisible force, sometimes leading to tragedy. Yet, out of affliction there is tenderness. Hopefully, through the combination of fiction and nonfiction stories with paintings and drawings crashing together or whispering silently to each other on the page, sharing breath and energy, the harshness of falling and breaking is intertwined with the warm embrace of another human being.
King of the Hill

We leveled a spot overlooking the meadow and moved our house from town, about eight miles of lifting power-lines and flagging cars to make way for the two-story farmhouse on airplane wheels. On Bryant Hill Road, there was little to worry about except for bee-stings, cougars, drowning, broken bones, stray dogs, leeches, widow makers, poison ivy, heat stroke, possums, beaver-fever, quicksand, and Joseph the kid up the hill.

Bryant Hill Road was a giant sloping field with a damp meadow and a creek below. For the most part, my three brothers and I had it all to ourselves. In the summertime, our mom counted on not seeing us for several hours at a time, if not most of the day. She just took her referee’s whistle from the junk drawer, stepped out onto the porch, and blew it as hard as she could to call us home. An ideal arrangement, until our next-door neighbors moved in.

From the beginning, we should have smelled trouble. Having five acres to work with, the Holdahls propped their trailer on cinder blocks within shouting distance from our house. Despite the suffocating closeness of the new neighbors, our mom brought them housewarming gifts of homemade raspberry jam and newly canned applesauce, and Dad told them to let us know if they ever needed anything. We played with Crystal, their red-headed daughter, though she was dirty and smelled of beer, cigarettes, unrefrigerated food, and B.O. Worst yet, she was bossy and whiney. Then she began trying to touch us, thinking it would be okay to kiss and hold hands. We turned savage and sent her home,
raining her with dirt clods and insults.

Dealing with an annoying neighbor girl and having less territory bothered us, but the bigger problem was the trailer. They assured us that the single wide, shit-brown, run-down piece of construction was supposed to be temporary, something to hold them off until they built a sturdy three story log cabin up the hill. We were equally excited about the dream cabin and the proposed distance between us and them, but then Crystal’s mom, Pat, started attaching phrases like “when we win the lottery” to the idea. Meanwhile, we let them use our running water from an outside faucet bordering their property, or a little electricity through an extension cord hooked up to an outlet in our garage, whenever their generator was on the blink or ran out of gas.

It became clear we were being duped when they built additions onto the trailer made out of leftover doors, chunks of plywood, and wooden shipping pallets. When Pat came over and told our mom about wanting to build a house out of quilts and asked if she would help them put the thing together, we soon realized buying our own airplane and building a landing strip was more likely than the Holdahls moving out of their makeshift citadel, fortified with car doors, chicken wire, and oil barrels.

After a while, our parents grew tired of being used and the neighborliness dwindled down to duct tape and hostile signs covering any access to plug-ins and water faucets. Yet the Holdahls persisted, stealing electricity when they thought we weren’t home and asking to keep road-kill meat in our freezer. Jeff, Crystal’s dad, had cut up the deer and wrapped it crudely in butcher paper. They said we could take a little if we wanted.

Then Tessie, Crystal’s aunt, a retired hooker, moved in with them for a while. She
looked like an overweight hyena, and she would come over pacing around, asking our mom to sew her some swimsuits or pop the boils on her butt. She was certain the guys wouldn’t be able to take their eyes off her at the lake that year. Mom never let her come inside, but Tessie would stand in the yard for hours, bragging about her glory days, sure that she could seduce our dad if she really wanted to, pushing up her sagging boobs and fluffing a mullet of dead hair.

Living next to them was like living next to a circus in a war zone. We couldn’t roam freely like we used to, and we especially weren’t supposed go near the Holdahl’s property. Crystal’s dad, Jeff, owned guns, mostly combat weapons, life-sized versions of the guns melted into our G.I. Joe’s hands. On top of that, it wasn’t unusual to see Jeff with a crushed can in his back pocket, a sloshing beer in his hand, and a fresh one waiting in his front pocket. Still, we boys couldn’t help thinking it was cool when he chugged his beer down, set the empty can on a post thirty feet away and blasted it with a machine gun, barely having to aim.

_Fully automatic_, we whispered.

Jeff leaned back against his bright orange Chevy truck from the seventies, took a swig from the fresh can of beer and wiped his beard. “Yep,” he’d drawl, the four of us standing there with open mouths. Mom didn’t think it was so spectacular and asked our dad to buy her a shotgun for Christmas.

One day Pat came over and told our mom about her and Jeff’s disappointment in our new bathroom curtains. Through the old ones, they said, they could still admire our mom’s sexy body, and enjoyed looking at her from their trailer window; hell, they said, it was better than looking at Playboy. That’s when we helped our dad build the six-foot,
cedar plank fence and planted fast growing fir trees between our house and theirs.

It made matters worse when Jeff burst into our laundry room one night with a rifle in his hands and threw bulletproof jackets at Crystal and Pat, who had come over to use our phone. “Put these on!” he yelled, “Sombody’s out there godammit and they took my guns. Just stay inside. Don’t call the cops.”

We tried to make sense of what he said, but he disappeared into the night to find “them”. Our mom had the desperate look of a wild rabbit protecting its young. Crystal and Pat stood in the middle of the laundry room in oversized vests staring dully at the wall as if waiting in line for a boat ride. My brothers and I fidgeted and reveled in the excitement of being at war until Jeff got back. He had misplaced his gun, forgot about moving it, and panicked. He mumbled an apology and they disappeared back to their trailer.

We didn’t see them for a while, but we knew it was only a matter of time. Soon, our dog caught one of their cats. She loved cats. She loved the sounds they made when she caught them by the back of the neck, biting down as hard as she could. All the way to the house she’d carry the thing limp and swinging from her mouth, smiling her Labrador smile. That really upset Crystal, but we didn’t get too worried about it. The Holdahl’s animals disappeared all the time. We imagined they ate them.

One morning we stepped outside and saw their scraggly little white dog standing next to our tipped garbage can, trash spilled out across the lawn and driveway, grinning dumbly, licking his chops. Our mom was pissed. This wasn’t the first time. She had already been over to the trailer once and banged on their hollow front door. Jeff had answered in a sleepy stupor, and she told him to come over and pick up his dog’s mess.
Tiny and furious, our mom stormed back over to the garbage littered across our lawn, dragging the giant, stumbling Mr. Holdahl behind her before he could get a sip from his morning beer.

We knew to stay out of her way then, as she went cursing and hissing into the house looking for a permanent marker. We watched in awe as she dug the marker in hard and wrote in bold capital letters on the dog’s white fur: *KEEP ME HOME.*

The tension kept rising like this, until one summer my mom caught Crystal kissing our four-year-old brother Trevor on the mouth, taking the whole playing house thing a little too far. She was old enough to know better, Mom said, and he was still practically a baby. Of course we teased him relentlessly and made songs up about him liking it, love songs about them getting married, him joining the Holdahl clan, eating possums and dogs, a wedding cake made of Hoover hamburgers frosted with expired ketchup.

He threatened to get knives from the kitchen to settle the matter and we dared him. Yet, the whole thing unsettled our mom something terrible. She didn’t want to deal with the Holdahls anymore, so we took matters into our own hands.

“Something needs to be done,” our oldest brother Dusten said. He usually came up with solutions to our problems. Once he got us all to put garden slugs in our slingshots to keep Crystal away. It poured rain all the time on Bryant Hill Road, so we found ammo readily available for most of the year. The sound of slugs hitting human flesh was almost more satisfying than the screams of revulsion that followed. The trick was to be the first one to make a direct hit; otherwise we’d be laughing too hard to get a good shot in.

So Dusten said we needed a plan that would finish this once and for all, and we all
nodded in agreement, anticipating the details. Joseph the neighbor kid showed up and things escalated. Even though we had felt the consequences of his ideas before, butter fights in our mom’s kitchen and the firecrackers in each other’s sleeping bags, none of us cared how crazy his ideas got. We just wanted to keep the Holdahls away. For good.

We brainstormed and spent an afternoon throwing toys off the porch roof as a possible attack, then Joseph thought of booby-trapping our doorway. We started by putting dirt, leaves, and mud in a bucket. Then someone tossed in a dog turd, and the next thing we knew we were trying keep our balance on the rooftop with our pants at our ankles.

For a couple of weeks, we got used to the radiating heat from shingles in place of the cool porcelain toilet seat. We dreamed of the opportune moment to tip the bucket on our unsuspecting neighbor’s heads, the flush.

Then our mom noticed her blue, plastic mop bucket about half full, teetering near the peak above the entryway, waiting to solve all our problems.

She climbed out the window to retrieve her bucket and within five feet, she knew what it contained, but seeing it piled halfway to the rim sent her into a rage.

We tried explaining the genius of the plan. She just told us how disgusting our idea was. We tried telling her that the Holdahl’s were the gross ones, not us. This only made her angrier. When we realized we weren’t going to win her over, we blamed Joseph.

*You can’t hang out with him anymore. You are not allowed at his house, and he’s not allowed over here.*

*Please?*

*Absolutely not!*
What about...

No.

We told him all about it at the creek the next day, acting oblivious as to why she blamed him for the whole ordeal.

Still, we didn’t go down without a fight. After all that hard work and strategic balancing, we couldn’t let the Holdahls walk through our door without paying the price. So we settled for the next best thing. Water balloons. The next time Pat and Crystal came over we waited on the roof and unloaded.

Victory hovered for a second or two after the first balloons left our hands, bursting on their lice-covered heads. The instant our balloons made contact they soaked Crystal and Pat to the bone and surprised them so much that they just stood there, easy targets. We threw until we had nothing left to throw anymore, then just as the last balloon was lobbed off the roof, our mom opened the door and caught some of the splash off Pat’s back.

Direct hit, we yelled.

We were sure we had solved everything. No more nasty neighbors mooching off our parents. We laughed and high-fived and didn’t notice our mom apologizing and offering them towels.

Crystal bawled like the big crybaby she always was, but Pat was determined as ever to use our phone.

“Oh no,” Pat said. “It was kind of hot out here, anyway. I was just wondering if I could make a quick call.”

Man, did we get it.
We climbed slowly back through the window to face our seething mom, asking us what we were thinking, warning us that if she even saw us on that roof again we’d be grounded for a month. We could hear Pat’s voice, half of a conversation, sifting through the floor.

But things would get worse. Way worse. More trailer settlements popped up around the base of the hill, until we felt surrounded. They collaborated and festered, leaving trails of rusty truck parts, drug paraphernalia and stolen goods. We chanted. *We gotta get out of here. We gotta get out of here. We gotta get out of here.*

But it would be years before our house sold.

And sometimes our youngest brother and I would crawl out of our bedroom window, onto the porch roof, pulling and shoving wads of blankets, and sleeping bags and pillows. They spilled out onto the gritty tarpaper shingles like blooming flowers. We spread them flat, covering the roughness of the rooftop.

Up on the roof there were no neighbors. We sank into our blankets, staring up at the sky, which seemed closer than ever. The passing cars on the highway sang a whirring lullaby. The baritone of a log truck, the high notes of a motorcycle, all of them mesmerizing in their own way, pulled us farther and farther from the world below. We’d wake up with our feet dangling in the gutter, feeling like we had just arrived.
Blue Heron

It’s just me, a great blue heron, and a lot of blood.

One hand rests on the soft feathers of his belly, and I wrap my other hand firmly around the bird’s long, elegant neck. I’m holding him down in the bathtub, hoping he doesn’t hurt himself even more than he already is.

A question seems to hang on the end of his long beak, claws scraping against the fiberglass bathtub, slow and rhythmic.

I look closer at the mess of mangled flesh and shattered bone on his wing and abdomen. A little rhyme pops into my head, a rhyme my friend Yan made out of my name when we were younger.

*Darrin, Darrin, the great blue heron.*

Circling like words to dance around a plague. Only, later they won’t resonate with his laughter, just the muffled echo of a mother’s howling grief.

But this Heron, there’s nothing I can do for him.

My little brother Trevor found the wounded bird on the riverbank below our home, and he’s been on the phone for help ever since he dragged it into my bedroom dripping and injured and ripped me from my dreams. He’s calling everyone we can think of, from the humane society to the closest zoo.

“Doesn’t look like you’re going to make it,” I say to the heron.

The giant bird’s eyes are now just slivers of gold, slight but radiant.
Trevor returns to the bathroom, looking heavy like the time he fell in the river with all his clothes on. “No one’s answering,” he says, and his voice is caught in a torrent of breathing. Whispering in and shouting out.

Just a bunch of machines, he tells me. What now, we ask each other.

Both of us stare at the heron.

“Put him out of his misery,” I tell my brother.

“Yeah. Why the hell would anyone shoot him in the first place?”

Drying blood tugs at our skin.

He lifts the dying bird out of the bathtub like an awkward sleeping child, and it kicks out of reflex before going limp in his arms again. The powerful neck that once speared fish out of rivers hangs like a wet towel over his arm. It swings a little as he carries the heron outside, then he sets it down in the front walkway and runs back inside for a gun. After settling on our father’s .22 caliber rifle, he snaps the loaded clip into place and races back outside. The polished wooden stock looks warm and familiar in his hands, but this is different than shooting pop cans and bulls-eyes.

He approaches the heron slowly like he’s expecting it to spring back to life in a flash of silvery feathers and peck out one of his eyes as we’d been warned would happen if we ever got too close to one. But it doesn’t become the majestic creature we’ve grown up with in the river valley, the giant pterodactyls we imagined as small boys running barefoot through wetlands and open fields.

I stand on the front porch and watch him grab the beak with his free hand. He lifts the bird’s head to get a straight shot. The cracking sound of metal and gunpowder rings out across the valley, ricocheting off the milky, green river water and towering old-growth
cedar trees.

In an instant, the heron is a crumpled pile of hollow bones. A few feathers catch and dodge in the sunlight as they make their way back to the ground from the jolt of the gunshot. My brother stands there for a moment, before gathering up flesh and feathers and carrying the heron back into the woods.

Years later, I find myself curled up in the front seat of a car listening to a sermon through a pair of headphones because I’m too sick to go inside the sanctuary. The car is parked in front of the church, thousands of miles from the river valley of my childhood. I have married and moved away. Yan is dead, having shot himself with his father’s favorite gun the year before. They found him at the front door of the house that pressed him, a house that drove him to the river where he went to soak on the cool, green banks. He soothed his anger with the damp moss before returning to his search for a more permanent calm.

The first summer I was married, I wrote him a letter, trying desperately to crack the thickening silence between us.

You are my brother.

A giant, gray bird flies in front of my windshield, swooping out over the rows of cars. He lifts upward and lands on the peak of the church. It’s a great blue heron, slipping and trying to catch his balance, before pushing off and disappearing into the overcast, gunmetal sky.

The visiting preacher’s voice crackles through the headphones, saying his goodbyes through the static. I’m overwhelmed with nausea and the preacher’s words bursting in my
ears, “May we meet on the golden shore,” and it reminds me of the last conversation I
had with Yan.

Almost a year had passed since we had spoken and there was never a reply to my
letter. His silence was deliberate: I found what he was looking for and left without
goodbye.

Then he called.

I kept saying how happy I was to hear from him, and he kept congratulating me on
how full my life was. “It’s out there for you too,” I said. But I was too busy pretending
this was just another conversation on my parent’s front porch, afraid that if it felt any
different the silence might seep back through the phone line and leave me with nothing
but static. So I avoided the pulsing words in the back of my throat.

It feels like you’ve come back from the dead.

I kept pushing the words downward until they rubbed against my ribcage. When my
brother called to tell me what Yan had done, they circled in my diaphragm for days and
then months, searching for some place warm and quiet to land.
Dave

Dave sat in his lawn chair watching molehills. He was motionless, shotgun in hand, pointing towards the sky. Dave meditated on the movement of the earth.

Sometimes, his wife or daughter would bring him glass of cold lemonade. He would turn around, red-faced and irritated, a calloused finger pressed firmly to his lips, the rest of his hand curled in a knotted fist. They held their breath and walked lightly with the lemonade extended out to him.

With each drink, Dave settled into his plastic lawn chair, cursing the clinking ice. He felt empty and watched the fresh piles of dirt. “That’s the one,” he thought, honing in on a certain molehill, disrupting the green carpet of his lawn, and it wasn’t long before it began to shift.

One. Two. Three steps and he hovered above the molehill, shadow thrown behind him. He wet his lips and took a deep breath, one eye squinting in the sunlight reflecting off the barrel.

*Wait a minute. Wait a minute.*

Then, when the right sense of calm washed over him, his blood seeming to ebb back out into the ocean of his body, he pulled the trigger.

Dirt erupted into the air. The sound echoed through the sky, deafening him like his ears had been hollowed out with a spoon.

Everything was quiet while he shoved his hand into the cool soil in search of warm fur. Sometimes it was wet with blood, but often the concussion of the gunshot was enough to kill the mole.
Later, the moment would linger in the back of his mind beneath the high whine of the saws at the lumber mill where he worked. As cedar board after cedar board was planed and cut and stacked for shipment, there was the infinite quiet of fresh dirt crumbling in the yard, the excitement of doing nothing until the time was just right, of letting the clouds cast shadows across the lawn as they passed overhead and crashed into the Cascade Mountains.

Then one day he got a call at the mill. It was his daughter, Jessica, calling from the gas station and convenience store where she worked.

For the last few weeks a man had been coming in and telling her how beautiful she was. He ran his hands across his oily beard, rubbing at the gray flecks as if there were cigarette ash needing to be brushed away and he would be young again. He told her that the age difference wasn’t a big a deal anyway. Looking at her made him youthful, full of pep, if she knew what he meant.

Jessica had heard he molested his own daughter. She remembered how a couple years ago his wife used come in with him at closing time, bruised and hollow, asking if they could have any food from the fryer that would otherwise be thrown away.

The glass counter and lotto tickets between them felt flimsy and breakable. She stood at arms length from the cash register, laughing nervously and wishing she had something thick and shapeless to wrap herself in.

Dave’s ears burned hotter and hotter with each new incident Jessica brought home to tell him. The burrowing in her guts grew stronger each time the guy’s rundown pickup came rumbling into the parking lot. He told her he only stopped when he saw her car outside, that late at night, when he had trouble sleeping, he pictured her lying next to him.
Dave told her, “If he tries anything else, even one little pick up line, you call me.”

The man didn’t show up but he sent flowers, so she called and read the card into the plastic receiver. Dave breathed the man’s name through clenched teeth and dry lips, as he passed car after car the whole forty minutes home. No one at the mill questioned his leaving. His face was the color of blood. His voice was the sound of bones breaking.

First, he went home and took a handful of muscle relaxers, hoping to find a sense of calm, to steady his hands. He tried slowing his breath as he drove down the hill to the convenience store.

For a long time, he stood outside, leaning against the metal cage that held the firewood for sale, letting the chain links dig into his back. The pressure felt good, kept him aware. Through the glass doors he could see the flowers with the card the man had sent to his daughter. It said, “I want to get know you better. See you tonight.” Telling her not to worry, they could just be friends, have dinner or go to a movie. She was just so beautiful, he couldn’t resist anymore.

After a while, Jessica stepped outside.

“Dad,” she said. “What are you going to do when he shows up?”

Dave lifted his shirt a little, showing the handle of his .357 revolver sticking out from the back of his pants.

“I don’t want to visit you in jail.” Her voice became shrill and fast but was wrapped with warmth. He could hear lungs and heart swelling under her words. Dave stared out over the parking lot.
Between him and the highway is a small swath of grass. Every car that hums passed is not the one he’s waiting for. Meth-heads and fishermen pull up and nod at him. They greet him in low voices.

_Dave._

It almost sounds like a question. He growls each of their names back as they pass through the glass doors. Dark molehills pock the grass around the sign of the convenience store, and Dave waits for the earth to move.
Anchored

When I was four, I lost a balloon to the sky. It had been bumping against my head and tickling my face in the backseat the whole ride home. Maybe it was the static electricity, but I felt a strong connection between us.

Once home, I got distracted by some ants in the driveway weighed down with crumbs ten times their size. I looked back and the balloon was already falling above the treetops. My dad looked at me with disappointment, pointing up. My heart, the size of a small bird, just learning how to sing, was tied to that balloon. I reached toward the sky and screamed from deep in my belly, stomping the ground for not holding on tighter.

“It doesn’t come back,” Dad said, “No matter how much you yell and kick and scream.”

He comforted me with a few words, grew tired of my whining and told me to let it go.

It was just a balloon.

Scared that other things might fall up, I threw myself at his feet. He fought to keep me from clinging to his leg, telling me to walk like a big boy, but I held on tight.

Later, I realized that he wouldn’t have fallen into the sky like the balloon. I had been acting childish. He was wearing shoes, and he must have known that tying shoes to our feet was really about tying ourselves down so we don’t fall up.

Once I made the connection, it explained everything.

Why it was so important to get all the looping and bunny-ears snug and double-
knotted.

“You’re going to fall and hurt yourself,” my parents said.

So I made sure Mom and Dad always tied their shoes on tight. I furnished their pockets with fistfuls of stones. Just in case.

Eventually I got another balloon. I kept it in the hallway closet, panicking whenever I found it near the entryway, having slipped out as someone grabbed their coat or their shoes, inching closer to the doorway of the great blue abyss.

Mom and Dad laughed at my reaction. It didn’t make sense, especially when they screamed at each other about dirty dishes and unanswered phone calls.

One day they screamed so hard the walls started to cave, and they used up the air in the house so that it was hard to breathe. I hunkered down in the kitchen carefully tuned for my name.

There was a final word.

A door slammed.

Heavy breathing.

When I came out of my hiding place amongst the Tupperware, my mom was in the entryway, staring hatefully out the window toward the sky, her shoulders were rising and falling with the hissing noise that she was making through her clenched teeth.

My father’s shoes stood neatly by the door.
Golden Hour

He cracks the egg.

With the gush of thick embryonic fluid and the gaa-lop of the yolk sliding into the pan, he thinks of birth. Of cells dividing. Nuclei and nuclear units, the binding of moms, dads, and children with runny noses and backyards.

Earlier that morning, his three-year old stumbled into the living room, a bright-blue pacifier dancing in his mouth.

“Good morning, Jack. How’s my orange little dinosaur?”

“Not your dinosaurs, mine.” Jack pointed to his belly, matching the dinosaur on his pajama’s toothy grin.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Did you sleep well?”

No answer, just a distant stare and an I gotta pee shuffle of his feet.

“If you gotta pee, go.”

Jack ran down the hallway to the bathroom, pumping his arms as fast as he could. After a little while, he came back calmer and a little more awake.

“Well, how are you, kiddo?”

“Free,” Jack said, and pinned his ring finger down with his thumb and extended his three fingers up. The pacifier was cocked to the side of his mouth as he smiled.

“It must be nice.”

“Look a cow and a horse, Daddy.” He pointed to a page of coloring book, at the big loopy drawings of mommy plastered over a bubbly farm scene. Jack had scribbled them out in the hospital waiting room the week before.
“Is that mommy at the farm?”

“No, she’s in the scary place with no faces.” Jack turned back to the coloring page and stared at the crooked mouths in his drawing, misshapen ovals for heads with two lines like bent wire for legs. No arms. No abdomens. Jack found a marker and filled in each face with dark purple circles.

He nudges the whites around the edges of the egg, each time watching a new wave of clear liquid spilling over his spatula, becoming translucent, then solid. Butter rises up and bursts under cooking membrane, and he thinks of the baby chicken it could have been. Behind him, Jack sits at the table like a shadow, pushing his cereal around, soggy and colorful, each hue bleeding into the next until it becomes the too-sweet, overworked grayish-green of brain matter.

A month earlier, they had been enjoying a quiet Saturday afternoon together. Jack was taking a nap. He could see the swell of Rebecca’s stomach rising and falling with each breath, a Cheshire cat grin of bare skin where her shirt slipped up the curve of her growing abdomen. Sometimes, there were faint movements out of step with her breathing, and he wondered if the baby was kicking or if it was all in his imagination.

“Oh man. I was gonna go the store and get some chicken for tonight.” She sat up in the recliner and pulled the Cheshire cat’s mouth closed.

“What do you want me to do?”

She thought about it for a moment. “No. No, I’ll get it, maybe I’ll grab a few other things as well.” She winked because the last time she did a grocery run, she found herself spreading sweet chile sauce on peanut butter cookies.
She worked her way out of the recliner, first gripping one armrest then the other, scooting herself to the edge of the seat cushion. She made the grunting noise, whispered about wishing the pregnancy were over already, and was out the door.

Then Jack woke up, and they whooped and hollered on a spaceship-boat-couch until their stomachs began to grumble for something more than moon cheese and fish fry.

He flips the egg, and the whites shoot out from under like the splatter of saliva on hot concrete, and he’s careful not to break the rich, yellow nucleus. Maybe this chicken would have lived miserably for six weeks, without beak or toes, with growth hormones and genetic alteration, always on the verge of being a carcass, tender and diseased, sent to a processing plant and executed by machines in an assembly line, purchased by a chain restaurant and used as chicken strips.

He and Jack had scarfed down a couple of bowls of mac and cheese, and called Rebecca’s phone. They had no idea paramedics were peeling back the crushed metal and cracked plastic to extract her from the car, trying to keep the body intact but leaving some of her memories wedged somewhere under the dashboard amongst the candy wrappers and exploded gallons of milk.

As the afternoon crawled toward evening, he was calling her phone every ten minutes. In between phone calls, he sent text messages to her friends. Have you seen Rebecca? With a steady reply, no, NO. No why? Nope. Is something wrong? Until the police knocked on the door: Your wife’s been in a serious car accident.

Then he and Jack were riding in the backseat of the patrol car, trying hard to pretend it was just their couch; they were on another screaming adventure to the moon.
After doing a thorough job cooking the other side of the egg he places it on a piece of toast, and stabs a fork deep into the yolk. The yellow liquid bleeds slowly from the center, then he rips it open with the prongs in short violent jerks, spreading the golden mucus around the rest of the egg, letting it run off the edges of his toast.

By the time they reached the hospital, the doctor met him in the entryway and took him aside to tell him about Rebecca and the baby’s condition.

“You must be the husband.”

No.

“Yes.”

“Your wife is very unstable right now. When the truck hit, it came from the driver’s side, so she sustained intracranial head injury. You see, upon impact, her brain bounced off both sides of her skull, which causes swelling.”

The doctor explained in detail how they cut away part of her skull to release the pressure, to avoid further damage to the brain tissue and possibly death. He said that she was lucky, that she made it to the hospital during the golden hour, a small window when recovery is still possible. They were doing every thing they could, but no one could guarantee what might happen next. She might not even be the same person when she woke up; if she woke up. Memory loss. Personality changes, and always a chance of relapse.

He had questions about percentages, recovery times. How much she would forget. And the baby.

“What about the baby?”
The doctor lost his composure for a moment, before continuing.

“I’m sorry. Your child didn’t make it. The internal bleeding, a separation of the placenta. Even after an emergency cesarean, the trauma was too extensive and… we couldn’t save your little girl.”

That’s how he found out what they were having, what they had.

He had never wanted to be father, was indifferent to children. Then he found out his wife was pregnant the first time with Jack. They both cried, mourning for part of them that would die. Stepping through the hospital doors with a newborn was like stepping into a parallel universe, glowing brighter and more menacing at the same. He felt the burning sensation of parenthood caught in the fleshy part of his throat just above the sternum, a tickling buzz of energy at the base of his skull.

Gravity pulled hard on his organs when he saw Rebecca’s swollen face and deflated abdomen.

He twists the fork in the middle of his egg, wondering if Rebecca will remember him today. Neighbor kids stand outside, waiting for the bus by the street, chasing each other in circles, laughing as they dance in and out of the reflections on the window glass.

He imagines his Rebecca coming downstairs and sitting across the kitchen table from him, reaching for his hands. In her eyes, he can see their memories overlapping. Something stirs inside him, something coming alive, small fists and feet pressing at walls of his stomach. He doesn’t look up at his son, as he caresses his own hands, trying his best to hold onto the image of Rebecca leaning over with a sleepy smile, working hard not to let it slip and smash into yolk-covered pieces on the kitchen floor.
He can hardly look past the mess on his plate.
And one day he was in his office eating leftover meatballs, and he knew someone was going to walk in. And someone walked in. It was his boss, just as it had been his boss in the dream he had forgotten until this moment. But that person had been a stranger in the dream, and the stranger’s words had also been strange, not the familiar echoes they were now. And a split second before the words fell from his boss’ mouth, he knew the words would mean they had secured a contract with an important client, which had meant nothing in the dream; even before he felt the warmth of it, he knew something like embarrassment would flush his face, meatballs stuffed in each cheek so that he couldn’t speak, and when he had dreamt of this moment years before, he had awoken and wondered if he was embarrassed by the meatballs squishing between his teeth and easing towards the opening between his lips, or if it was something else. But now, it was obviously humility and pride flushing his cheeks red, even though in the dream, the client was just a name of something, not the hinge of his career. Still he had responded then, “that’s fantastic,” so reality now echoed the word fantastic. And he knew a millisecond before his boss’ mouth opened to tell him that he just wanted to let him know, and let him know, that this boss, who was once a stranger in a dream, would let go of the doorframe, and his hand pushed off the frame of the door, concentrating the force of the push at his fingertips, making a point to pause, filling the doorway to the tiny office. This was the boss’ signature closing for an impromptu meeting, to then spin on his heels the way he had turned to leave in the dream and disappear down the hallway. And as those familiar
footsteps faded, the sensation began seeping out of his ears, fading the way the dream had faded with the last thing in his memory upon waking being the same feeling he felt right then in his dimly lit office. Something big was coming. Something big was coming. Then reality became singular again.
It’s Mary and Flo. Bigger Women. Pear Shaped and Square Shaped.

You might see them wandering down the street, bump into them on the bus. They don’t drive, only walk or ride. If they know you well enough, they might ask you for a lift, pull you into an uninhibited conversation. It might seem childish or trivial at first.

Listen closely to cut through their chatter, bursting into their own disjointed conversations with more disconnected anecdotes. Sometimes you have to follow three or four stories at a time, piecing and sorting as you go, shaking out what was past tense or present. Each conversation with them will be wrapped in a fog of unspecified pronouns, mumblings and lisps.

In a barrage of filler phrases from Flo, you’ll find that she likes bowling.

“What the heck do they know? You know. I went bowling on Saturday. Got a eighty… no… nintety…three… Ninety-seven. Kicked their butts. You know how that goes, you know. And I was like, well shit, you know.” She’ll either count the score out on her hands this way or pull a little notebook from her fannie pack that she jotted her score into last Saturday.

You might also notice the way Flo’s lips have a subtle inward curve because she always forgets her teeth at home. They don’t fit right, you know. Makes her forget em’.

At some point, Mary will jump into the conversation. Usually, it’s a confrontational narrative, an enthusiastic burst about almost punching someone on the bus. When you look at her incredulously, she just stares right back at you with huge
excited eyes, magnified by her thick glasses, nodding, splitting her face with a gaping smile. She’s a yellow belt. Goes every Thursday.

“Yeah. Don’t mess with her, you know,” Flo will say.

You’ll find empty spaces in her story and her dental work. She’ll tell you about how her teeth got knocked out on her boyfriend’s head during a car accident last year.

The mention of a boyfriend will launch them both into several different anecdotes about their current hubbies and past boyfriends.

Not husbands.

Flo will shake her head regretfully and murmur, “Won’t do that again.”

She will take a deep breath, push her glasses snug against the bridge of her nose, and let out a sigh that leaves her upper body hanging, miming the way the corners of her mouth are always turned downward. Even her thinning, greasy hair will sag more than usual.

“Threw me down the stairs. You know how that goes,” Flo will say in a heavy sigh. You might wince as she pushes the words past her gums. “Stupid jerk, y’know.”

This is where Mary usually jumps in about how glad she is that she never made the mistake of tying the knot. Nobody dared push her down the stairs. She’ll become animated, open her eyes even wider, slurring and lisping into another story about conflict.

Like throwing that stupid guy on the bus’s case of pop across the road. Bus driver told him to move the damn thing. She’ll make you lean back as she leans in, grinning huge, one fist on a pear hip, the other loose and ready for action.

Yet during your conversation with these women, you’ll find that there’s a tenderness to them, something you’ll notice if you have children with you.
Flo will always comment on how cute your kids are. Mary will tell you how much she loves ‘em, saying it with a Brooklynesque gruffness. Flo will probably crouch down to the child’s level, her arms outstretched for a hug. Mary might comment on her own girls, but she’ll slur her words together and phrase it in a way that will make you wonder if you heard her right. You’ll have her repeat what she said.

And she’ll say it again, “I had twin girls. One stillborn, one died an hour after.” She’ll suggest you save your kids’ baby clothes. For their kids. That’s what her mom did.

Sorry to hear about your children, you might say; what a great idea, you might think. Mary’s twins wore her baby clothes at the funeral.

“Looked just like me,” she’ll say. “’Cept for their daddy’s feet.”

You’ll apologize and ask her to repeat that.

Mary’s grin will disappear and she’ll say it again, “You could tell they were my brother’s by the feet.”
Douglass House used to be the fanciest hotel available in the booming mining town of Houghton, Michigan. But the mines have long since closed, and the interior of the building is now filled with the aging and broken.

The brick walls of the building are red and darkened with age. On the roof are two classical white domes near the face, shining brightly above Houghton Avenue, the main downtown street. Along the eastside wall is a hand-painted sign brushed onto the bricks in black and white: Douglass House. It’s faded and chipped and was probably stenciled onto the building over a hundred years. This is where Frances lives, talking to herself to pass the time, to see how her thoughts feel in the open air.

“Now, Frannie,” Frances says. “Don’t you be going and feeling sorry for yourself. What do you expect? To be waited on hand and foot? No, this trash isn’t going to take itself out. Show them you ain’t some helpless old lady. Just keep a movin’, Frannie. Just keep a movin’.” Frances is hit with a blanket of sunlight when she opens the metal door to the outside. Standing halfway in the musty shadows of the hallway and partway in a sunbeam, Frances wonders if she can get Bubbles to install a bigger refrigerator in her kitchen.

“Maybe if you had a bigger refrigerator, you might do a little more cookin’ for yourself,” she encourages out loud. Bubba the maintenance man, whom Frances has called Bubbles ever since she moved in three years earlier, he’s doing his best. Problem
is: the kitchen’s too small. And her daughters aren’t much help, thinking her tiny fridge is enough since she’s living all by herself.

For the next couple of minutes, Frances convinces herself about how much better her life would be with a larger fridge, how having more food might help her to get a man to move in with her. What an improvement everything would be. Frances searches for someone who’s keeping her from having that bigger refrigerator, someone to pin her problems on. Her forehead bunches up into concentrated folds. She forgets she hasn’t cooked a decent meal for herself in over a year.

∞

She grew up on her family’s farm estate in Pennsylvania. When she was in her mid-twenties she eloped with John, the helping hand on her father’s farm.

What first struck Frances about John were his strong features. His parents had both immigrated from a small village outside Rakhiv, Ukraine, just before the Bolshevik revolution. His features were stern, carved of the same stone as the Carpathian Mountains his parents had watched the sun disappear behind every night.

Even then she had been talkative, and he had always listened, but listened in a way that when he spoke, she knew it was important, even if it was just a dry piece of humor floating between drags on his cigarette. His words and smoke intoxicated her. Nothing mattered but the strange and quiet man who had been smoking and working since he was twelve, since his father died, to help his mother feed his five hungry brothers and sisters.

Frances watched for him on the farm and made excuses to cross their paths, and each time they crossed, he seemed more satisfied with her glow, with the way her
laughter caught fire on the hay in the barn. Each time she wove her life through his, she knew it was less possible to undo.

Their marriage cost her an inheritance and ended her life as a lady of wealth and prestige in that area of Pennsylvania. Not only was John uneducated and poor, he was also a non-practicing Jehovah’s Witness in a land that was strictly Baptist, Methodist, or Catholic. Even crossing those religious lines was dangerous. Frances figured her father only kept John around while they courted because he was intelligent and quick about his work, full of humility and made her father a lot of money.

Her and John stayed on the farm for many years keeping the dairy operation going, but her father thought it was only fair that living rent free in the original farmhouse would be their inheritance. He was quick to point out to Frances how her two sister’s had educated husbands with careers, how they weren’t living in their houses without paying the bank.

∞

Early spring burns at the snow. Filthy piles of ice and slush are melting and turning black. The ground looks pale and charred. It’s been a long winter in Houghton and at the back of everyone’s mind is the same thought: it’s almost over. There’s a chill to the air, but the warmth of the sun against Frances’ skin lifts her spirits. She thinks of Florida, her tidy little trailer in the retirement compound.

The rancid bag of trash sits by the wall just inside the door. It’s filled with meals-on-wheels dinner trays and half-empty milk cartons, maybe a couple banana peels. Her daughter Lynn usually offers to take her garbage out for her, telling Frances she needs to
get rid of it more often because it smells up the apartment. But Lynn and her husband are out of town again.

Frances whispers to herself in repeating conversations, jumping from one to the other depending on her mood. Today her mood is light because of the nice weather, but underneath she’s feeling bad for herself as she always does when Lynn’s not around. Her self-pity is barely audible above the passing cars and blowing sand left over from winter; she feels abandoned.

“Lynn’s helpful, but busy all the time,” she says. “Doesn’t know what it’s like bein’ an old lady like me. And her husband, what’s his name? How could you forget his name? Nice young man he is, always fixing stuff for ya. In fact, it was, uh, Tony, of course Tony. See, I knew you’d remember. Tony brought all your stuff up from Florida and set you up the best he could. It just ain’t the same. It’s so hard to get around all winter long and with only one bedroom and hardly any closet space. Maybe you and George can go back this summer. Yeah, me and George. Isn’t that somethin’? Him calling you regularly again? You still got it, Frances. Eighty-nine years old and you still got it.”

Frances dreams of running off to Florida with her boyfriend, fixing him up real nice in that trailer with fresh oranges and jaunts to the beach. In her daydream, she’s an active housewife, an independent woman, not a lady who forgets how to check her own answering machine. In Frances’ dream, she and George are just starting out, a couple of young lovebirds with their whole life ahead of them. The sun feels like it’s being poured right into her body, filling her up to the thick scars where her breasts used to be.
Five years earlier, George and Frances lived across the hall from each other at a senior housing complex in Waymart, Pennsylvania. It had been seven or eight months since Frances had moved up from Florida to the single-street town, just minutes from her daughter Mary’s farm.

Her daughters had convinced her that moving to Pennsylvania was the best thing to do, fearful about her living by herself on the Gulf. After weathering the hurricane season one winter, Frances agreed to move closer to Mary. “If only to make my daughters happy,” she said.

Really, the storm had scared her, huddling in the community center of the trailer park with all her aging neighbors, sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups, medications locked up and forgotten in their trailers while the world was ripped apart outside. Frances made the best of it though, moving through the crowd beneath the howling wind as if it were just another dinner party.

Still, it had scared her enough that it was a relief to move back to light breezes of Pennsylvania and find a man to keep her company.

Quite often she cooked up a family recipe of pancakes and onion gravy for George, and he would bring hot soup and his guitar. She made a big ceremony about it, neither one caring that he was twenty years younger. He was nothing like her late husband, except for his quiet ways and admiration for her aged beauty and relentless charm.

On weekends, they went out to dinner together for a fast food meal and some soft-serve ice cream, and afterwards George and the guys played gigs at the fire hall or a
nursing home. Frances would go with, listening and gushing over the music, always keeping a close eye on the blue-haired competition.

She had other friends and family in the area. Other than Mary, though, Frances preferred spending time with a man. Plus, she wasn’t on speaking terms with many of the women she knew. Everyone was either dead or had crossed the line with her.

Sometimes they would have no idea they had upset her, then one day Frances’ words would be cold and hard like shears. She would cut them slowly, watching their guts tumble out onto their rug, staining it beyond any solution of vinegar or ammonia. Then she turned on her heels and walked away without another word and remained silent for decades.

Even with all its familiarities and bad blood though, she was content living in Waymart. She didn’t mind living close to Mary amongst the rolling hills and dead friendships, but the price of rent was always burning in the back of her mind.

After all, it was only ninety dollars a month to keep her trailer in Florida. Living in Waymart was over double that and was cutting into Mary and Lynn’s inheritance. No matter how much her daughters told her to spend the money on herself, she knew what it felt like to be shortchanged by family. Mary and Lynn should never have to experience it, she thought, and all this flirting with George made her feel as though she might live to be a hundred and twenty. The money would need to last.

Then something in her apartment started making her eyes itch. Her face began aching from sinus problems and her throat was scratchy and dry like after a full day of haying, only a glass of ice water and a warm bath offered no relief.
“I’m allergic to somethin’ in that new carpeting,” she told Mary over the phone.

“I think they used some awful kind of glue. The wrong kind, maybe.” Mary brought over an air purifier, but Frances hardly used it, figuring it would cost a fortune in electricity. The symptoms got worse, and before Mary could find another place in Waymart, Frances packed up her stuff and drove back down to Florida, hoping George would follow shortly after.

∞

A young woman walks towards the doorway, probably going to visit a grandparent because everyone in the Douglass House is either a grandparent, a great grandparent, or completely alone. It breaks Frances’ concentration. Yet when she smiles at the young woman, she can feel a piece of Florida is still caught in her teeth.

The girl smiles back as if Francis took the heaviness out of the air, the fear out of getting old. Frances’ complexion has always been naturally golden, the fabric of her skin tightly woven. Her face is decorated with wrinkles that radiate from her eyes and fall across her tender cheeks as if gravity had been running a gentle hand against Frances’ face all her life.

They exchange distant hellos, and the girl appears mesmerized, unable to pull away from Frances’ eyes, which are so blue they appear violet, dark jewels set deep in their sockets, framed by heavy lids and full lashes. Even at this age Frances can make a person’s heart quicken in a glance. A burning wonder seems to fill the girl as she stumbles into the dark hallway, into the smell of stale smoke, dead skin, and absent minds. Frannie picks up her garbage bag, stepping outside, wondering: who is that girl, and what did she want with going into the apartment anyway?
A gust of wind catches her swooping gray curls, still rich with auburn in places. She feels the breeze and remembers she’s due for another permanent. Even with the warm sun, it cuts through several layers of clothing and a down jacket.

∞

Frances woke up in the trailer and didn’t feel well. She was sluggish, not ready to move. She had a headache and no appetite. Through her bedroom window, the Florida palm trees seemed to sag in the heat.

“This isn’t me,” she said into her pillow.

She pictured herself as a weak and aging woman, the one her daughters worried and fretted over, nothing but an old lady getting behind on her bills and falling for car warranty scams. The Frances she remembered baked cherry pies and spent the end of summer shucking corn and running a roadside produce stand.

Not this Frances. She’d find traces of her age in the carpet needing washing, the floors needing scrubbing. She left things lying around like dried up banana peels and wads of money she couldn’t retrieve or stumbled across without recollection. Frances couldn’t seem to keep up with herself any more.

She sat straight up, her back against the cool metal rods of the bed frame, determined to make herself move.

“Even if you did accidentally flood your trailer a couple times, it wasn’t your fault someone called and interrupted you while you was washing your socks in the sink. Of course you didn’t turn the water off, you didn’t expect to be on the phone for an hour. It dried out after all, Frannie. And Even if you do lock yourself out once in a while, or lose your wallet. Those are just small things. Just things folks do once in a while. You keep a
goin’ still. And wasn’t it you, Frances Lessun, who caught that man running around the trailer park looking into people’s cars? Everybody else was sleeping. There you were, minding your own business…” Frances had been sitting in the dark at the time, watching late-night television. Her motion light went on outside. When she got up to look, there was a shadowy figure moving from driveway to driveway.

She got worked up all over again telling the story to herself, “There was a man snoopin’ around, so you kept an eye on him. Oh boy, it looked like he was just a tryin’ to work his way into your neighbor’s cars, maybe even yours, checkin’ if they were unlocked. He was too young to live here, below the age limit set by the park, so you called the police. Said you hated to bother them but you thought there was a thief in the neighborhood, and that officer came out. Remember what he said? They nabbed that bad man, told you a lot of people’s stuff was saved from being stolen.”

The phone rang and broke through her recollection. She struggled to get the bedding off of her legs and her feet on the floor. By the time she sat on the edge of the bed, the whole room was spinning. It took until the phone stopped ringing for the room to finally slow down.

“How long are you going to have to put up with this, Frannie?” She breathed heavily.

Several days earlier she smelled something like propane seeping into the kitchen. The gaseous odor was faint at first, but it got so bad it gave her pounding headaches. She couldn’t escape except to go outside.
She called the gas company then. In fact, it could’ve been them calling her back on the phone, or maybe it was one of her daughters, trying to convince her of their latest plan to move her closer to them.

The room stopped, but the air constricted around her head, pulled the life out of her arms and legs. “You shouldn’t have been so cheap, Frannie. Right from the beginnin’ I told you to check yourself into a hotel room. Instead you sat in this smelly old trailer making yourself sick.”

Frances ran her hands over her face. “Somethin’ ain’t right with me,” she said, sinking back into the bed.

That was how the gas company found her. Limp, fragile, and nearly incoherent. Later, she barely remembered the service man showing up. She didn’t notice him frantic with why the dispatcher didn’t send him out sooner. A neighbor lady came over to help convince Frances to go to the hospital. Even in her weak state, Frannie tried refusing medical assistance.

“Well, you know, hospitals are expensive.” She argued, “I don’t have the money to spend for one of them rooms. I’ll be fine. Why, when my husband John was dying of cancer, you should’ve seen the amount they charged to help him die slower. Put me right back to work after his funeral. It takes a lot of money to do these things, and I don’t know how I would get back to the trailer. There’s no one here to pick me up or nothin’. You two don’t have to worry about me. I just need a little fresh air, maybe. Check into a hotel room.”

Her neighbor lady didn’t budge. “If you don’t call the hospital, I will.”
The man from the gas company called. They had what Frances thought was a conversation but was really like talking to death and waited for the ambulance to arrive.

∞

Frances walks down the handicap ramp out to the main sidewalk from the Douglass House. She feels top heavy with broad shoulders inherited from her German father. When she walks, her body sways, clumsy and agile at the same time.

Even as a young girl, she delicately bumped into things as if to grace people and objects with her touch. A conversation sings in her head, words pouring through her like music. There’s still an elegance to her walk, only now she sways a little too far at times, shuffles her feet, and recovers with a nervous giggle like the quiet ring of tapping on a crystal glass.

This is the way she descends the ramp, occasionally grabbing the metal railing. Frances shuffles onto the sidewalk. It’s covered in sand and salt residue from the road, crunching and shifting beneath the soles of her white tennis shoes that look too big in comparison to her petite ankles.

But Frances isn’t worried. She feels young again in the warm sun, a wealthy farm girl in Pennsylvania, thinking she’s invincible, believing she will live forever.

∞

“Mom you need to accept their help. That’s their job.” Frances’ daughter Lynn sounded exasperated. She’d been on the phone with Frances for well over an hour.

No one was sure how long she stayed in the trailer with the fumes, or if the gas company really neglected to fix the problem for several days. According to Frances it was at least four days before the company finally sent someone out.
The hospital confirmed she was poisoned, but now she was refusing help from the home health nurses who had been doing routine checkups for the last several weeks.

Frances pressed the phone tight to her ear until it hurt, she couldn’t tell if her daughter’s voice was muffled by the phone or the thick film that seemed to coat her brain like corn syrup. “Well, I do feel a bit sluggish, Lynn, but I’ll be fine. If I can keep a movin’ and maybe do a little this here, a little that there. Don’t you be worryin’ about your mother. You have your own life, Lynn. I know that. I don’t want to be a burden on nobody. People tryin’ to make me soup and clean this place up, and they don’t need to do that while I’m lying around doin’ nothin’. I’ve taken care of myself my whole life. Why, I raised you and Mary. Took care of your grandma when she was sick. Helped your dad on the farm. We got by all right. Your father would milk the cows, the neighbors stoppin’ by at all hours for tractor parts. Sometimes I even ran the hay baler. Doctor told me I couldn’t keep a going like that. ‘I’ll just keep a movin,’ I told him.”

“Listen, Mom. Tony and I are coming down there to check on you. He’s looking for tickets right now. We’ll probably try to get down there in the next couple days.”

“No. Don’t do any such thing. I’m fine down here. They’re taking good care of me, and there’s no reason that you or Tony need to mess up your schedule. I’m all alone down here, sure, but that’s okay. I get by. You know you can come down here whenever you want and it just doesn’t ever work out. I don’t want to bother you. No reason to come rushing down here just because of a little gas leak. Although, if somebody was down here with me, if somebody came checked on me once in awhile, none of this would’ve happened. But there’s no reason for you to come a rushin’ down here. Why, if I’d a wanted someone to take care of me I would’ve married one of those rich men begging me
to remarry. I don’t know, maybe I shoulda’…” Frances ignored Lynn’s voice growing shrill on the other end.

A few weeks later, Tony and Lynn were in Florida and the entire trailer was in disarray. Papers are strewn about the living room. Everything was covered in dust and remnants of food. Whatever was in the fridge was rotting, except for three pounds of sauerkraut, and her closets were stuffed with stacks of Bush’s baked beans and rows of gallon-sized jars of pickles. The whole place smelled like talcum powder and old band-aids.

Later that evening, Lynn called Mary and told her how scared she was for their mother, that they had better go through with their plan to move Frances up to Houghton where Lynn and Tony lived.

Within a month, there was an opening at the Douglass House. At first Frances was resistant to the idea, but underneath her pride and resentment, she knew the gas leak had slowed her down. She slept more, ran out of energy quicker, and her thoughts felt fragmented and weak. Later, she would admit to Lynn that even as she refused help from the home health nurses, when she could barely get herself a glass of water.

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Houghton is built on a steep hill made of stone. Dark mining houses loom above the Douglass House and the rest of the downtown. They are weather beaten, peeling, and sinking into their granite foundations. Yet after a hundred years of long winters, these houses still seem sturdy. They persist.

Near the bottom of the hill, Frances lifts the black lid of the dumpster and lets out a small moan. A sharp pain shoots through her chest and she shoves the small bag of
garbage under the lid and lets it drop closed. The slapping heavy plastic against cold metal leaves her feeling triumphant, but there’s a buzzing sensation running from her armpit to her chest to remind her of her aging body. A year after her double mastectomy and it is still painful to lift things above her head. In between heavy breaths, she wheezes, “Just a keep a movin’, Frances. Just a keep movin’,,” and does her best to regain her composure. She straightens her back. The sun catches Frances in the eyes, lifting her like two warm, calloused hands on her face.

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It was corn season in Pennsylvania. The air was weighed down with humidity and the rolling hills had been rubbed dull by the last few months of summer. Dust blew down the highway, settled on people’s skin, and mixed with sweat. Frances sat in her plastic and aluminum lawn chair, feeling impervious to it all.

John had been dead only a few years, and she still felt irritated for having to go back to work to pay for all the medical bills.

“Now John was a smart man,” she would say to the customers, “but he shouldn’t have been smoking those cigarettes, with a family to think about and all. I just didn’t know what I was going to do when he passed away. We made a good team when he was alive. Worked like clockwork. But I went out and got a job anyway, making pretty good money as a flagger for a construction company and selling corn like this for Charles and Mary. I just keep a working. A lady my age should be enjoying herself a little more, I think. That’s okay, isn’t this corn beautiful. Look at the inside,” she tore into the husk of one of the ears of corn, cracking the soft green fibers, “that nice golden color. I’ve never
seen anything like it. You better take few more. Never know when you might get a little
company. You don’t want nobody goin’ hungry…”

People gathered around as she talked them into buying more than they intended.
Frances tucked the bills into the small breast pocket of her tank top. It caught the eyes of
aging country gents. One of her bra straps hung off her shoulder, pulling them in for a
sure sell. It was almost too easy, enjoying the sun, talking to people all day.

She let out a small laugh that mingled in the dust and sunlight, found its way into
people’s throats, and took the next person’s money.

∞

For a moment, Frances is stunned by the happiness lodged in the base of her skull,
but the wind drives her back toward the Douglass House. She contemplates stepping in
the road to avoid an iffy looking patch of sidewalk, shiny with snowmelt, but decides to
keep walking. She goes back to thinking about her refrigerator and John, Florida and
George, gas leaks and inheritances, and suddenly there’s no ground under her feet
anymore.

It happens so quick that she’s in midsentence, “Keep a movin’ Frances. Keep
a…” then gravity and ice slam against her so hard something explodes in Frances’ hip
and shoots up her back. Her scream comes from her belly, a sound women make when
they’re in labor.

Everything is white to Frances. Then it’s blue. It’s a sky, but it pulses in time with
the pain that’s pushing through her body. The way her legs are bent against the concrete
seems all wrong. Moving them is so painful her vision flickers.
“Oh God,” she moans, “not this.” On the icy ground, the sun can’t quite reach her. Instead of lying on the Earth, it’s feels like it’s on top of her, pressing into her back.

The pain keeps her in the present, more present than the last twenty-six years since her husband died. It holds her above a lifetime of grudges, and Frances longs for the people she’s pushed away, for everyone she’s guilted and smothered, everyone she loves. Lying in an empty world with nothing but sand, salt and the heavy hand of God, she moans and sighs a prayer from her childhood.

∞

This is how you’ll know what loneliness is. Loved ones aren’t miles away. They’re all dead. Everyone you ever loved is dead, but it doesn’t feel like they’re waiting for you somewhere in the afterlife. It feels like they’ve never existed, that you dreamed them up your whole life to wake up on your back and find nothing but ice and concrete.

Then the ambulance comes and pulls you out from under the Earth, screaming through the frozen air, pushing you a little closer to the surface. You wake up in a clean white hospital bed. Strangers asking how your pain is and ignoring you when you tell them. They pat you gently on your broken hip. It’s a ten you say and cut them to pieces with your icy blue eyes.

Someone you recognize finally shows up, but you keep confusing them with two or three others. You try calling them by several different names and they just keep smiling that same smile while you wait for their face to change to distinguish who they are. Everyone is layered and compressed like this, smiling until it’s hard to tell whether you’re dreaming or awake. You tell them you’ve been thinking about them. About someone.
There’s a buzzing memory of a life before the fall.

Frances is sitting in her wheel chair staring out the window. The leaves are dark, showing the end of summer. She imagines the parking lot of the nursing home is an open field, pictures the way the dry stalks would sway with the trees. “Somebody better get all that hay in,” she says. Off in the distance a man steps into her father’s barn.

John.

She comes up with a good excuse to go out and meet him, quickly rising from her chair and bursting through the doors, trying to imagine what else she’ll say to him. The wind funnels past her ears, whispering applause. The dry alfalfa crunches beneath her feet like a hushed chorus mingling with her heartbeat.

John turns, and the expression on his face tells her that he has something to say, that she’d better listen. Frances slows her run to a walk. She smells late summer pouring off the field. Dry and earthy. It clings to John’s clothes and mixes with the curling smoke from the cigarette dangling in his mouth. Sweat and oil cover his overalls and shirt. She wonders if he had meant it the day before, about the two of them going off together, leaving everything. Frances ignores the pain in her chest and leg and waits for him to speak.