

In This Issue

*Original Essays by Our Fall 2018 Fiction Writers
and Excerpts from Their Forthcoming Books*

B. A. SHAPIRO, author of *The Collector's Apprentice*, discusses post-Impressionist art, the Barnes Foundation, con men, betrayed lovers, Paris in the 1920s, and how “passion, whether it be for a person or money or revenge or for art, can render the best of us blind” (p. 3).

MESHA MAREN tells how she wrote her debut novel in a one-room log cabin that she and her father built in West Virginia, and says, “In writing *Sugar Run*, I wanted to explore whether you can ever really belong again in a place you once called home” (p. 12).

D. WYSTAN OWEN describes how his debut short story collection, *Other People's Love Affairs*, was influenced by the different ways his English father and American mother spoke, as well as by his cabaret singer grandmother, countless books, and more (p. 19).

HEATHER ROSE's life was changed when she encountered the work of artist Marina Abramović, especially Abramović's performance piece *The Artist Is Present*, which ultimately inspired Rose's novel *The Museum of Modern Love* (p. 27).

GINA WOHLSDORF, author of *Blood Highway*, tells how her heroine Rainy Cain came to be, and how the character's journey “becomes a fight for survival . . . Whether or not she'll make it hinges precariously on how much she's willing to give up to save herself” (p. 36).

TIM JOHNSTON, author of *The Current*, discusses growing up with a lawyer father, a curious case of blue ink, and how he is fascinated by “the great wave of human behavior set in motion . . . the moment someone, somewhere, *breaks the law*. Or is accused of it” (p. 44).

Published by

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL

Post Office Box 2225

Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27515-2225

a division of

Workman Publishing

225 Varick Street

New York, New York 10014

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Cover illustration by Oivind Hovland / Getty Images

Art, Literature, Storytelling, and Mrs. Whatsit

— AN ESSAY BY —

B. A. SHAPIRO

When I was a little girl, I wanted to be an artist. My parents were accommodating, buying me paints and canvases, setting up a “studio” for me in a corner of our basement, and enrolling me in art classes at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Unfortunately, it became clear early on that this was not where my talents lay.

So I moved on to other things: the Beatles, the Flintstones, and reading every novel I could get my hands on. I read *A Wrinkle in Time* and decided I wanted to be Mrs. Whatsit, an extraterrestrial being who could bend time and space to her whim. When my mother gently explained that this wasn’t possible, I told her I wanted to write novels like Madeleine L’Engle. This, she assured me, was doable, but instead I became a sociologist.

Although I chose a more standard career path than that of artist or writer or centaur-like creature from the planet Ariel, my passion for art, literature, and storytelling never dimmed, and I’ve been a voracious reader, journal scribbler, and museumgoer my entire adult life. I was in my twenties the first time I visited the Barnes Foundation, a private museum in a magnificent beaux arts mansion outside of Philadelphia with arguably the best collection of post-Impressionist art in the world. As I stood in the main gallery, turning in a circle, taking in paintings by Matisse and Picasso and Cézanne, my first thought was that I could never be too rich. Why? Because nothing would make me happier than to be surrounded by great art. Particularly post-Impressionist art, vibrantly colored and emotionally charged, so brilliant and bold and free-spirited.

Although I was then in graduate school pursuing a degree in a completely unrelated field, I had an inkling that someday I would write a novel about

these artists and the man, Albert Barnes, who created this heaven on earth. Thirty-five years later, I finally have. *The Collector's Apprentice* is that novel.

When I returned to the City of Brotherly Love to begin researching the book, I was shocked to discover that the Barnes Foundation was no longer in its stunning suburban manse in Merion. It had been moved in its entirety to a harsh modern building on Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia. While I was pleased that the collection was now located in a more accessible place and open to the public, I was also taken aback. Albert Barnes's will stated that no piece of artwork could be removed from the wall on which he'd hung it, that each piece must remain in the same configuration within which he'd placed it—in Merion. And here it all was, in the center of the city.

Barnes chose his artwork with both genius and prescience in the first half of the twentieth century, when just about everyone in America believed Matisse and Cézanne to be madmen and their paintings to be rubbish. He planned to build a stately home for his derided masterworks and meticulously position them on the walls in unlikely groupings. His was a unique curatorial style that displayed art in a way it had never been displayed before—a way he hoped would allow visitors to see art as they had never seen it before.

But when he exhibited some of his post-Impressionist paintings in 1923—before his building was complete—disdain was heaped upon him by Philadelphia's high-society patrons and art critics, all of whom claimed the artworks to be “nonsensical clumps of nonsensical color” and “most unpleasant to contemplate.” Vindictive and stubborn, Barnes declared that his foundation would never be a museum where churlish and unsympathetic gawkers roamed. So instead, he opened a school. The entire building was his classroom and the entire collection his subject matter. But only a few Barnes-approved students were allowed to enroll—and only a few Barnes-approved individuals were allowed to visit.

How had this happened? How had a man's personal property been moved despite his clear intentions and written will? Who owns art? The person who buys it, or the worldwide community of art lovers who deserve to see some of the most masterful paintings ever created? Can you keep for yourself what belongs to posterity?

Now I was even more driven to write this novel, to dig into these questions and all the others I had. I immersed myself in the brilliance and

eccentricity of Barnes and his fascinating assistant, Violette de Mazia. De Mazia was a mysterious, passionate woman, and the tangles and intrigues of her relationship with Barnes were riveting, as were the multiple trials and legal proceedings that ultimately wrenched Barnes's beloved collection from his grasp. Even better, I lost myself in the study of post-Impressionist art. I visited museums and libraries, interviewed curators and art teachers and historians. I began to write.

It was all mesmerizing, to me at least, but unfortunately my initial pages were not. Too much legal jargon. Too many years covered. Too much repetition. Not enough action. Flat characters. I had a lot of details, but too little plot. Dispirited, I read historical novels and mooned around art museums, hoping to find the threads of my story and the depth within my characters. During this time, a friend was conned by a man similar to Bernie Madoff, and then another was left at the altar. I wondered how my friends—both smart, educated women—could have been so hoodwinked. How had they missed the signs that were right in front of them? And who were these men, so clever and charming and despicable, who had fooled them so easily?

As I wandered the galleries of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston one day, it struck me that this type of blindness happens frequently to many people, that seeing only what you want to see is an all-too-human failing. But more important, I realized that this notion underlay the story I was trying to tell: that despite an artist's intention, viewers see what they want to see in a work; that love is truly in the eye of the beholder; that passion, whether it be for a person or money or revenge or for art, can render the best of us blind. And then the most marvelous and villainous character came to me: George Everard, con man extraordinaire, who would wile his way into my heroine's heart and refuse to let go. When I read *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and envisioned 1920s Paris stretched out in front of me, suddenly it was all there.

Well, not really all there. It took another three years and dozens of rewrites to finish the damn thing. I fictionalized Barnes and de Mazia, collapsed time, added love triangles—one with Henri Matisse—and created a possible murder. Finally, the manuscript clicked into place. Although Mrs. Whatsit is nowhere to be seen, my love of art, literature, and storytelling certainly are. And like Mrs. Whatsit, doesn't every novelist bend time and space to her whim?

FROM

The Collector's Apprentice

BY B. A. SHAPIRO



Paulien is aware that being banished to Paris with 200 francs in her pocket isn't the worst of circumstances. But the city is vast and crowded and lonely despite all the noise and hubbub, not at all the way she remembers it. She wishes she were back in Brussels, filled with hope for the future, standing with her arms held wide as the seamstress made the final adjustments to her wedding gown. She looks down at the diamond on her ring finger. There is still hope. It's a crazy mistake, which George will straighten out.

His telegram read: NOT AS IT SEEMS. STOP. GOING AFTER SWISS BANKER WHO STOLE ALL THE MONEY. STOP. WILL COME FOR YOU WHEN SUCCEED. STOP. LOVE ALWAYS.

It pours the day she takes a bateau along the Seine, and she's unaffected by either the Eiffel Tower or her walk down the Champs-Élysées. Even a visit to the Louvre, a place of worship to her, leaves her as cold as the classical sculptures there. She worries about her parents and her brothers, wonders how they're holding up, what they're doing. She's edgy and skittish, startles at every sound, searches every face for a sign of George or her father.

Clearly she needs something more absorbing than sightseeing. She decides she'll look for a position in a gallery like the one she had in London after she graduated from college, gain a little more experience before she goes out on her own. George spoke about starting a new company. Why not here? It doesn't matter to her if she opens her gallery in London or in Paris or in Brussels for that matter. She smiles as she imagines asking her father's advice on which artists she should choose for her first show.

True, Papa and Maman were the ones who cast her out. *He has destroyed everything we have been building for generations—and you brought him here, allowed him to do this to us, helped him!* She can still hear her mother's words. *It is all gone. What we had, what you and your brothers and your children would have had. Everything that we are. Our name. Our proud name . . .*

The memory almost doubles Paulien over. But Maman will soon discover that she's worrying herself for no good reason. George will find the corrupt banker who cheated him and stole everyone's money. Then her parents will see they were mistaken to believe that there never was a banker or that George is a crook and a con man of the worst sort. George would never swindle them, never swindle her, of this she is certain. Paulien dons the one stylish suit she managed to shove into her valise before she left, tilts her hat at a rakish angle, and sets out to find herself a gallery.

It's a breezy late summer day in the most enchanting city in the world, and her spirits rise. She steps onto the teeming streets. Fashionable women with strappy shoes and short dresses drink coffee and smoke cigarettes, heads pressed together inside the red-fronted Le Pure Café. Tiny tables and wicker chairs pack the sidewalks, shops dazzle with the latest button-up boots and brimmed hats. The *boulangeries*, the marble facades, the cascading flowers, the promenades.

From under the bright green awning of Les Deux Magots in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a handsome young man with a thin mustache calls out for her to join him. She flashes him a smile and walks on. Between the carriages and carts, Paulien catches sight of a Studebaker Roadster dexterously dodging the bicyclists and pedestrians. It's the same model as George's, although in bright yellow rather than navy blue, and her eyes follow the car's path until it turns at the corner. Perhaps he will come today.

She strolls into a gallery called Arnold et Tripp at 8, rue Saint-Georges. The street name is a good sign. The proprietor is at least fifty, with a heavy beard and what sounds like a Polish accent. She introduces herself and tells him about her experience at the Whitechapel Gallery, her studies at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels and the Slade School of Fine Art in London, her childhood in a house with an extensive art collection.

He's happy to listen to her, but in the end he says, "I am so sorry, mademoiselle. As much as I would enjoy the company of a young woman as knowledgeable and beautiful as you, I have neither the resources nor the need." French men are such flirts. Even the old ones.

She moves on to Brame et Lorenceau, a gallery with connections to the Manet family. But there's no job there either. She speaks with Marcel Bernheim at Bernheim-Jeune and Henry Bing at Galerie Nunes et Fiquet with the same outcome. She stops by a gallery specializing in old masters—painters she appreciates but isn't drawn to—and then moves on to Boussod, Valadon et Cie, which sells only prints of the popular Salon artists. No luck.

The shadows lengthen, and Paulien starts back to her hotel. She passes the Durand-Ruel Gallery and almost doesn't go in, but then she recognizes a Cézanne on the far wall: the luscious brushstrokes; the turbulent, uncontrollable energy; the bevy of rare juxtapositions and color combinations. Home.

She steps into the hushed, musty-smelling gallery and approaches *Léda au cygne*. Cézanne. Her father's collection includes Cézanne's *Five Bathers*, which she fell in love with as a child: the vivid blues, greens, and yellows; the roughness of the tree bark; the soft, fleshy women frolicking in the sifting sunlight. There was something magical about the diminutive painting, just over two feet square, which soothed and touched her in a way she was too young to understand.

Paulien appraises the canvas in front of her, guessing Cézanne painted it sometime in the early 1880s. She isn't familiar with this particular picture, and although she prefers his more mature work, her heart slips. Those succulent blues against the yellow-orange of both the swan's beak and Leda's ringlets, the sexuality in every twist of their bodies, in every swirl of the fabric, the desire in the swan's grasp of Leda's wrist. She catches her breath. She misses George, wants him.

"I see you are admiring our *Léda*, mademoiselle." A deep voice interrupts her musings.

She turns to the stocky man with wide shoulders standing next to her. Although he's broadly balding, his unwrinkled skin hints that he can't be much more than ten years her senior. "I am."

“You are a devotee of Monsieur Cézanne?”

“Yes, but I prefer the work he did in the last decade of his life.” She figures she might as well be honest, as there surely are no jobs to be had in this tiny gallery. “When he began to construct objects with color instead of line.”

He bows slightly and then extends his hand. “Alexandre Busler,” he says. “And I most heartily agree with you.”

“I’m Paulien Mertens, and I suppose I’m a little surprised to hear you say that.”

“Not every art dealer is so entrenched in the past that he cannot see what is the future.”

She returns his bow. “I’m sorry if I mistook you for one of those.”

“Apology accepted.” M. Busler turns toward the Cézanne. “But this painting is not without merit, no?”

“No. Not at all. It’s moving, provocative. All these curves—her hip, her arm, the swan’s neck, even her hair and the back of her chair—flow so, so . . .” She wants to say *erotically* but substitutes, “Beautifully.”

His eyes crinkle with amusement. “Yes, they do. As you say, so *beautifully*.”

Heat rises along her neck, and Paulien curses her pale skin, which constantly undermines her. “What I really like is how you can see his ideas evolving. Like here.” She points to the face. “Her skin isn’t classically smooth and pearly—it’s blotchy. Made with thick brushstrokes. And with colors you wouldn’t think of as skin tones: greens, purples, oranges.”

M. Busler leans back and crosses his arms over his chest. “Would you like a cup of tea? Or perhaps something stronger?”

“Tea would be delightful, thank you.” Paulien unpins her hat. Perhaps there is a job here.

He ushers her into a small alcove at the side of the gallery and prepares tea while they talk about Cézanne, Van Gogh, Seurat, Picasso, and her favorite, Henri Matisse. About when post-Impressionism began and who began it. After half an hour, they’re Paulien and Alexandre.

“Listening to you,” Alexandre says, “I would guess you are an artist. But your fingernails are too clean.”

She smiles fleetingly. “Right now I’m looking for a position.”

He appears confused.

“As an assistant. In an art gallery.”

“But you are only a visitor to Paris, no? I hear from your accent that you are not French.”

“Belgian. From Brussels. But then I was in London for school and stayed after I completed my studies. And . . . and now I’m living in Paris. Or will be soon.”

“You would like to work here? At my gallery?”

“I would. Very much.” Then she plunges into a recitation of her qualifications.

“Why did you leave London?” he asks.

She can’t tell him the truth, so she says, “I didn’t like it there. All that rain. And the English . . .” Her mother once told her that no specifics were necessary to convince a Frenchman of anyone’s antipathy toward the British. “Well, you know how they are.”

“Indeed I do.” Alexandre stands and retrieves a pen and notebook from his desk. He gives them to her. “Please write down all your particulars, how I can reach you, the exact years you were at the Slade, worked at Whitechapel, anything else you think I should know.”

When Paulien finishes, she hands the notebook back and asks, “So you have a position?”

“I would not have said so before you walked in, but perhaps there is something we can do. Although it will not be full time and will pay next to nothing. At least not at the start.”

“That’s fine,” Paulien tells him. “It will be fine.”

Alexandre squints at what she’s written. “You are staying at Le Meurice?” he asks. “Why would you want a small position here if you can afford to stay there?”

“I, ah, I . . .” She’s unprepared for the question, looks down at her ring. “Well, you see, it’s that I’m going to be married. Soon. And my fiancé is, well, he’s quite well off. So . . .”

Alexandre glances at her quizzically and then down at the notebook in his hand. “Mertens, Mertens . . .,” he mutters. “Belgium.” Then he straightens up. “Aldric Mertens? Are you related to Aldric Mertens?”

Paulien is silenced by his harsh tone, by the cold glint of his eyes.

“You are the daughter,” Alexandre declares, disgust creeping into his

voice. “The one who was involved with that maggot Everard.” He glowers at her. “It is no surprise then that you are so knowledgeable about art.”

“Please, Alexandre, please let me explain. It’s not what you—”

“My brother is dead because of . . . because of . . .” He chokes on the words, and his face reddens. “Your father, a supposed friend, persuaded him to invest, and he lost everything. Josèphe could not bear the embarrassment, the failure. He . . . he left his wife a widow and three little boys . . . without a centime.”

Paulien jumps from her chair and takes a step toward him. “Oh no. No. I’m so sorry. So very sorry. That’s—”

Alexandre holds up his hands, and she stops. “You need to leave.” His voice is raspy; he’s close to tears. “And if you are smart, you will also get out of that hotel. Out of Paris. This city is smaller than it seems.”

THE COLLECTOR’S APPRENTICE

by B. A. Shapiro

978-1-61620-358-0

On Sale October 2018

Montani Semper Liberi

— AN ESSAY BY —

MESHA MAREN

On top of Muddy Creek Mountain in southern West Virginia there is a one-room log cabin made of white pine. It was in that cabin that I finished writing *Sugar Run*, and as I sat there stirring sentences in my head I could see the familiar knots in the logs and the dark stain where the draw-knife had slipped and cut my fifteen-year-old leg. My father and I built that cabin by hand from trees that he planted the year I was born. My mother likes to tell how my father was out planting the saplings when she went into labor. She remembers that the neighbors were bailing hay that day and for the first few hours her contractions matched the rhythm of the baler making its rounds in the field outside her window.

I grew up on that farm, in a house without indoor plumbing and with a father who buried our money in jars in the yard instead of keeping it in the bank. I learned resilience more than anything. West Virginia has always attracted people who prefer to do it our own way. When the British drew the Proclamation Line of 1763, all the land that would become West Virginia lay on the far side. Any settler who bucked the government and dared to settle over there had no protection, but they did have freedom. *Montani Semper Liberi: Mountaineers Are Always Free*. The land is hard to love, and so those of us who do love it love it with an extra strength. It's easy to enjoy the beauty of the sun setting behind the blue ridges, but it's hard to live in a state where the politicians value the profits from extractive industries over human lives, and it's hard to live in a town where the only jobs pay minimum wage and when your neighbor overdoses, the hospital is an hour away.

Growing up, I was deeply affected by the geography of my home state and also by my father's work with incarcerated women in the federal prison in Alderson. I would go with him to the visiting room while he met with inmates from the Bronx and Chicago and Los Angeles. I was fascinated by

this camp full of women from all over the United States, all of them tucked away deep into the folds of the Appalachian Mountains. It was clear that the mountains were meant to form a barrier against escape. It was also clear that while the women were desperate to be free, many of them were fearful of life on the outside, fearful of going home. I remember overhearing my father counseling women who were soon to be released, and later, as an adult, I realized that their fears and desires were not unlike what many of us West Virginians felt about our own home state, a mixture of wild pride and deep frustration.

My neighbor once said to me, after attending a high school reunion with classmates who'd returned to our state for the first time in many years, "You know, it takes just as much guts to stay as it does to leave." In writing *Sugar Run*, I wanted to explore this idea of leaving versus staying and whether you can ever really belong again in a place you once called home. People talk about Appalachia as if it were only a place to leave behind. But as my main character, Jodi McCarty, began to take shape in my mind, I found myself exploring this question of returning. What does it look like to come home again to a hard but well-loved place?

When Jodi is unexpectedly released from prison after eighteen years, her childhood home in southern West Virginia is nothing more than a distant memory. She never truly expected to see those mountains again, and while she is delighted to return, she must also confront the difficulty of trying to build a new life in such an insular, rural place. She struggles to bridge the gap between dreams and reality. In her dreams her home state is a perfect Eden, but in reality the new life she is creating with her girlfriend, Miranda, clashes violently with the beliefs of the local community.

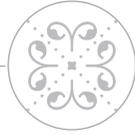
When I finished writing *Sugar Run* in that cabin on Muddy Creek Mountain, it was just after I myself had returned to live in West Virginia for the first time in about twelve years. Unlike Jodi, I was not returning from a stint in prison, but as a queer Appalachian woman I know well the feeling of not quite fitting in anywhere. There are ways in which I feel more at home in Appalachia than any other place and there are ways in which I feel stifled and constrained here. I began writing the novel in Iowa City, using it as a way to escape the cold Midwestern winters and slip into shimmering green memory-dreams of midsummer mountain heat. But actually living in West

Virginia again was different from dreaming about it. It was hard to come home and try to reconnect with my community, and it was hard to find a job in a state with a depressed economy while also finishing a novel that demanded so much of my time and energy. Jodi wouldn't let me abandon her, though; she haunted me, just like West Virginia never truly lets me go. There is something essential and powerful that keeps me coming back, and I feel like Jodi and I both realized at some point that although the home you've recalled so vividly during all your years away is a place that only truly exists in your heart and your dreams, it will always be inextricably a part of who you are.

FROM

Sugar Run

BY MESHA MAREN



At the Greyhound station in Dahlenega the van driver shooed Jodi and the redhead out into the parking lot. The rain had slowed to a thin, sifting mist.

Jodi tilted her head back and pivoted left, then right, trying to find east, but the yellow-gray dawn seemed to come from every direction. The redhead started toward the station, where a flannel-shirted man hunched under the tin overhang, smoking a cigar. Jodi followed. She couldn't think past this moment or else her mind washed all white again but the redhead seemed to have her feet set resolutely on a path pointed forward.

The station was warm, filled with the calls of departure times and TV chatter. Shelves of colored bottles lined the wall of the newsstand: the ribboned neck of Grand Marnier, stout-brown Jack, filigreed Wild Irish Rose, and below them, a spinning rack of sunglasses where, in the mirror, Jodi saw her own cavernous cheeks and pit-dark eyes. *Got the worst of both sides*, her grandmother Effie had loved to say. *British teeth and Injun eyes*.

"Can I get you something?" the newsstand man asked.

"Marlboros," Jodi said. Cigarettes, at least, were something solid and not new. When her eyes went back to the bottle of Jack, the cashier set it down on the counter beside the cigarettes.

Out front the wind smelled green. Jodi lit a cigarette, nodded at the flannel-shirted man, and stared through the window to where the redhead stood at the ticket counter.

"Cold for July," the flannel man said.

Jodi glanced back at him. He was small with age, bent deep in every joint.

“Where you headed?” he asked, his breath smelling of cherry Swisher Sweets.

“South,” Jodi said. “Chaunceloraine, Georgia.”

The man shook his head. “We weren’t meant to live in the low places. He tries to show us. Hurriken, flood, malarial fever.” The man pursed his lips and turned the corners down. “The Lord resides in the mountains,” he said, exhaling a funnel of pale smoke.

THE GREYHOUND WOUND OUT of Dahlonga and down toward the Piedmont, until the hills and ridges were nothing but bruise-blue humps beyond the yellow fields. Jodi had settled herself into the farthest-back seat. The bus was more than half empty, just a mustached man with a pencil stuck behind his ear, a woman in striped pajama pants, a mother with four kids, and a few other sleeping passengers. At Jaxton private space had come only by the inch, if at all. Silence came only in the middle of the night, and even that was often punctured by whispers or screams.

Jodi set her bag on the seat beside her and leaned back but even there, in the quiet of the Greyhound, the voices trailed after her, the roiling noise of the cafeteria. *Last supper?* Tressa had shouted the night before, tucking her hair behind one ear as she leaned across the table. Jodi had looked away and pressed the back of her spoon into her instant potatoes, flattening them out so that the watery gravy spilled into the creamed corn.

They weren’t supposed to know one another’s release dates but everybody always found out. And once you knew, you could see it, that palpable energy ringing out from a girl in her last week. Some of the women couldn’t bear it and they’d steal a girl’s date, slip something into her pocket or pay a cellmate to plant it, and next thing you knew she was being kept for another six to nine. The ones who played at husband and wife, they were all the time stealing one another’s dates.

“Where you headed to tomorrow?” Tressa had asked, and Jodi had glanced up at her. Neither of them said the word aloud but it had floated around them, that slippery *s* of *release*.

“I’ve got a little something I’ve got to move out of here.” Tressa leaned in, lover close, lips on Jodi’s ear.

“You’ll help me right?” Tressa said, and Jodi had smiled, shaking her head.

“No,” she said, and it had really hit her then, she was *leaving*. In twelve more hours it wouldn’t matter what shit favor Tressa needed or what retaliation she’d dream up later. Another world existed out there, another world that had kept on jumping and skipping and spinning for the past eighteen years.

THE RAIN QUIT but the trees still glistened through the bus window and the clouds sat low enough to hold on to. Just past Dawsonville the bus skirted a lake, the water dark and high to the brim, and from there they raced on toward the shadowed spikes of a city.

The highway ducked straight into the downtown and Jodi watched the buildings emerge, rocket ships of glass and chrome stretching so tall she couldn’t see the tops. Streams of people rolled across the sidewalks, clutching newspapers, cardboard cups of coffee, and cell phones. Jodi had seen the new phones on TV over the years but out here they looked even more odd: oversize metallic insects gripped tight in every hand.

“Atlanta,” the driver hollered. “Fifteen minutes.”

Jodi stayed in her seat, knowing for certain if she got off she’d somehow manage to get left behind. She craved a cigarette but opened the bottle of Jack instead and let the scent burn up all her thoughts.

Three sips in, the door to the bathroom opened, letting loose the smell of cigarettes and a chemical reek. She could have sworn the bus had emptied out but there, right in front of her, was the mustached man. He smiled a false-sweet smile and ducked his head down under the luggage rack.

“Hey, honey.”

Jodi pulled the paper bag up around her bottle.

“Hey, now, hey.” The man hunkered beside her. “Hey, I ain’t like that. I ain’t gonna tell nobody.”

Jodi shrugged and held out the bottle to him. Men like this were always popping up right in that moment of pleasant silence. Always jumping at you, like the groundhogs Effie taught her to shoot back down into their holes.

“You’re going to Jacksonville?”

Jodi swallowed her sip of whiskey slowly. “Chaunceloraine.”

Every time she said the name it sounded stranger and she'd have figured she made the place up if the ticket man hadn't nodded and printed it on her slip. The word itself was like something she'd bitten off, too big and complicated to chew. And her plan was nothing but a thin line connected by fuzzy memory dots, an invented constellation that only she could see. Paula's parents' address was gone, stowed up somewhere in her brain with the other memories she'd worked so hard to pack away. All that remained was the name of the town and Paula's little brother, Ricky Dulett.

PAST ATLANTA THE RAIN-CHOKED RIVERS gave way to flooded fields. Raw clay banks, limp tobacco plants, and peach trees. The water was a skin pulled tight between long rows, dimpled now and then by a gust of wind. Through the tangled branches the orange fruit glimmered, and around the edges of the groves, men huddled under tarps and stared at the gray belly of clouds.

They stopped in Montrose and Soperton, Cobbtown and Canoochee, and each time the bus rolled onto an exit ramp Jodi's gut pinched and she turned toward the window, searching for road signs, relieved only when she saw it was not her stop. She did not want the ride to end. Once the bus stopped there would be the street and all the new decisions that would come with it. She got the bottle back from the mustached man, took a long swallow, and quite suddenly those eyes—Ricky's blue, blue eyes—hovered in the near distant space.

SUGAR RUN

by Mesha Maren

978-1-61620-621-5

On Sale January 2019

A Literature of Reticence

— AN ESSAY BY —

D. WYSTAN OWEN

My maternal grandmother was a cabaret singer. My father (who is musical, too) immigrated from England in 1968.

I don't often say much about my own life. As a writer, I haven't found it terribly relevant, and anyway, privacy matters to me. But it turns out these details are important. A first book is a uniquely personal artifact—unique because it has, in effect, taken the author all of his or her life.

I worked on *Other People's Love Affairs*—directly on the writing, that is—for the better part of ten years. In that time I was married, held and left jobs, moved halfway across the country and back. I experienced joy and great sadness, disappointment, success. I read many wonderful books. By the time I had reached the end of a draft, it was hard to claim the stories even shared an author, since each one seemed to have been written by a different, irrecoverable self. Reading the manuscript was disquieting, strange. It didn't seem quite my own. To finish, to make it cohere, required an excavation, a search for threads to pull through, strands that might be woven together.

There were small ones I recognized, naturally. Chiefly the influence of all I had read. Here, I could see, was V. S. Pritchett's "The Saint." Here was Anton Chekhov's "The Kiss." Here were Katherine Mansfield, Graham Greene, J. L. Carr. The writers we love tell a kind of life story, which is perhaps why I began to more closely consider May Valentine in my story "Virginia's Birthday," singing in that frail, haunted way.

My grandmother, as I said, had been a singer, a torch act, at the famous "hungry i" nightclub in San Francisco. Afternoons, when we were at her house for a visit, she liked to draw my sister and me to her room, where a small cassette deck played piano accompaniments to the numbers she wanted to practice for us. Later still, after my grandfather had died and dementia had robbed her of everything else, she could still recall the lyrics to songs.

(I suppose the melancholy of that found its way to the Blue Parrot, too: the performer carrying on long after the audience has gone home.) Her favorite singers had been the ones—like Sarah Vaughan, Mel Tormé—whose talents seemed boundless, from whom notes seemed to flow without effort or impediment. Here we differed. I favored acts who performed the way May does (for that matter, the way my grandmother did): Miles Davis, whose horn seemed to probe and retreat, Billie Holiday, who would rearrange lines until they sounded like questions, apologies, pleas. As if reaching out with both longing and dread. This seemed more honest to a person like me, for whom speech has always required an effort.

My father was born in Bristol, UK, and raised in a borough west of London, near Heathrow. He moved to the US to marry my mother, and—it must be said—experienced immigration of the smoothest kind, sheltered from harsher circumstance by his race, native tongue, and the stability of his academic career. Still, one was conscious always in my house of two languages being spoken. This was not merely a question of his accent, but of grammar and cadence and syntax: all the gaps and pauses, emphases and avoidances that give shape and nuance to the meaning of words. To a writer, this awareness can be beneficial, but it can also cause a subtle estrangement from language, a constant awareness of the limits of one's own fluency. There is a grasping in this kind of speech: on the one side toward an unrecoverable past; on the other toward a sense of home in the present. The result is a kind of *linguistic* reticence, which I have always felt, and which came to resonate for me with the emotional reticence I recognized in the characters populating this book.

And so it was this reticence—this *effort*, above all—that began to bind the stories for me. An effort that became a grammar, a language. It was the strangest thing, probably, about these otherwise traditional stories: the ambivalence they embodied in the telling. In Colm Toibin's book on Elizabeth Bishop, he writes, "For her, the most difficult thing to do was to make a statement . . . [Her] writing bore the marks, many of them deliberate . . . of things that had been said, but had now been erased." I began to see my own stories as aspiring to a similar tension, in which the assertion inherent in every sentence was opposed by a competing desire: erasure.

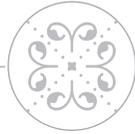
Reading the book in this way, as participating in what might be called a literature of reticence, I began to see its evidence everywhere. In the title, for instance, which suggests a remove, a limit to what can be known of its subject. (Where that title came from, I am not sure, but I suspect I had in mind a sentence from *The House of Mirth*, about Lily Bart's shy and diffident cousin, Gerty Farish. "Such flashes of joy as Lily moved in," Wharton wrote, "would have blinded Miss Farish, who was accustomed, in the way of happiness, to such scant light as shone through the cracks of other people's lives.") In the village, too, whose name, Glass (chosen for no loftier reason than its pleasing my ear), connotes not just delicacy, but also a transparent, impermeable barrier. And in smaller, equally unplanned details: the childlike paintings of Klee and Kandinsky to which Johnny Elford is drawn in "The Patroness"; the windows through which Louise views the world in "Housekeeper"; the annihilation (the *erasure*) longed for by Rose Goodrum in the final pages of "The Well Sister."

The book coheres finally, I think, not because it is the product of a coherent self, but because it is the means through which a self was created: cautiously, painstakingly. Its characters are attempting the same, reaching across fractured space, time, or language. There is strain underneath this; there is effort. If their hands shake, if they stammer, if they even briefly lose heart in the telling, perhaps then I may trust that they are telling us the truth.

FROM

Other People's Love Affairs: Stories

BY D. WYSTAN OWEN



From "Virginia's Birthday"

Sunday nights along the boardwalk are slow: locals retired, weekenders gone. By midnight, the Blue Parrot has emptied. Tables lie unoccupied in front of the stage upon which May Valentine sings with the band. Where guests dined, candles flicker and die, a highball has here or there been abandoned. Above the piano, catching the light, turns the pale, bluish smoke from Ham's cigarette. A number ends, "The Nearness of You," and from his place, sitting at the rear of the club, Walter Chapman applauds, alone in the shadows.

It is a painful evening for Walter. Every week Sunday evening is painful. The club is not open on Monday or Tuesday, and the knowledge that he will not see May in that time makes it so. He watches her now, draped in a shimmering fabric like water: here pooling, here running over hipbone or breast. Her skin is deep brown, pearls iridescent beside it. He has loved her since the day in 1954 when she answered his first-ever call for auditions. "Stardust." Another Hoagy Carmichael tune. Not thirty, already she sang with a wisdom; her references told of an itinerant past. Mr. Chapman is what she called him that day, and has continued to call him the better part of two decades since.

The band starts again, "You Go to My Head." The arrangement, like all their arrangements, is sparse. Once soft-textured and warm, May's voice has begun to grow brittle of late. Sometimes, summoned for a bend or a pickup, it strains and then cracks like a bird's hollow bone. Walter doesn't mind.

The fragility suits her. She always had a gift for turning a phrase as if it took all the strength in her body to do it. The suggestion was of privacy, solitude; you couldn't help but fall in love when you heard it, and now, even knowing she does not love him back, it is a comfort and consolation to him. The band plays, Walter has caught himself thinking, with the frail, haunted beauty of a burned-out home: the rhythm section—discordant and lurching—like high ruined rafters and walls, through the cracks in which Posey's trumpet emerges, a shaft of light, the mere suggestion of a note in his breath, and around which May's voice has twisted itself, like the bright, tattered silk of a scarf—not undamaged but somehow, miraculously, spared—lifted on an updraft of fiery air.

After the set, he finds her alone in her dressing room. He knocks, though he knows she will not be indecent. She never changes her clothes in the club.

She regards herself in the mirror, not appraisingly but with resignation, with boredom. The pins have already been removed from her hair.

"It was a good show. You sounded good, May."

"If only someone had been there to see it." She pours a drink: gin, kept among her perfumes.

"Sunday night," Walter says. He watches her swallow. Her lips leave another red stain on the glass.

"I'm glad you liked the show, Mr. Chapman."

She does not invite him to sit, does not offer to pour him a drink. When she speaks, she addresses his reflection in the mirror. She closes her eyes and with the pads of her fingers massages the skin about her temples and jaw.

"Birthday's coming up," he says. "She excited?"

"Virginia? I imagine she is."

Each year at the club there is a small celebration: gifts and a cake. The band plays something special.

"Sweet sixteen."

"That's right." She plucks a stray hair from her brow. "Thursday. And every bit of it, too. Just last week she failed an exam. Algebra. Chemistry, maybe. It used to be she was top of the class."

"She's a good girl," he says. "She'll do well on the next one. Seems no time ago she would come round the club."

May used to be apologetic about it, but he never minded the girl. He enjoyed bringing her soft drinks and pretzels, playing jacks or pinochle while her mother performed. He gave her crayons and pens to draw pictures with, stamps that she pasted into a book.

“Doesn’t it?” May says now, abstracted. “I rather think it does seem a long time. Some days it feels like a million years.”

MAY ARRIVES HOME after two in the morning, having stayed for a drink with Al at the bar and then hitched a ride with him back to the city. Virginia is asleep on the sofa, the TV left on with the test pattern showing. She does not stir when the screen is shut off, as she didn’t either when May had to fuss with the door. May knows that Virginia takes drugs. The kids at school must have gotten her on to them. Pills, maybe: she hasn’t smelled drink or reefer. It worries her to think about that, and because it does she brings over a blanket. It is spring, but the nights are still cold, and the window in the bathroom doesn’t properly close. In the darkness, Virginia looks peaceful. May would like to sit for a while—a girl needs her mother, she knows—but it is so late, and she makes her way instead to the bedroom, from beneath the door of which there comes no trace of light.

She undresses and slides herself under the covers. “Move over, old lady,” she almost says in a whisper, as if she’d forgotten that Agnes is gone.

She runs a hand along the sheet where once a warm body slept. Agnes always took more than her share of the bed, but May never minded that very much. If she were here now, Agnes might reach out to touch her, she might pull her into a folded embrace.

“Did you sing nice tonight?” May hears her say. Agnes used to ask her that every night.

“Yes. We did ‘The Nearness of You.’”

Sometimes she still finds traces of Agnes: small hairs in a comb, perfume in a scarf. After three months that is all that remains. Soon, she thinks, there will be nothing at all.

“Of course, there was hardly a soul in the place.”

They met in a tea shop. Outside was a hailstorm; Agnes had come seeking shelter. She was dressed far too lightly for winter, a trench coat over a thin cotton dress. The first woman May had seen with natural hair. It was

cropped short. Her face was angular, stern, a strength in it that was somehow recalled in the extreme narrowness of her wrists and her hands. Later, May would wonder at that, the power contained in that willowy frame. When Agnes reached for her in the night, her grip was sometimes overwhelmingly strong.

“I’m a singer,” May said, when they spoke in the shop. “A jazz singer as a matter of fact.”

Agnes said, “I’m keen on church music, myself.”

The hail abated and gave way to hard rain, which ran down the windows behind them in sheets. Headlamps from cars could be seen from the street, washed out, indistinct, like jewels glimpsed in water.

“Do you believe in God?” Agnes said, and May admitted she didn’t. “That’s all right. Sometimes love can take time.”

They lived together eight years.

In the darkness, May says, “He’s sure to go under. I don’t know how he’s managed this long.”

There is comfort in speaking aloud.

“Did Virginia finish her homework tonight? Agnes, do you think she takes drugs?”

In the living room, Virginia lifts her head from the pillow. Like a strange, ghostly detail from a dream, she recalls her mother having been in the room. The keys in the lock, the television switched off: these sounds register after the fact. The pills she took are stronger than the previous ones. Jeanene has warned her of that. She doesn’t know what is in them; Jeanene doesn’t either. They make you feel like you are taking a bath. Whatever the color, that’s the name of the pill: red, blue, yellow, or pink.

Another sound emerges, more immediate now. It is her mother’s voice, a murmur from under the door. She is talking to Agnes again; knowing that, Virginia feels sorry for her. These months they have suffered apart, not able in their grief to comfort each other. Fly-by-night is what May called the man Agnes left with. Virginia could not recall having seen him. There had been people who came and went through the years, new congregants and preachers who guided her spirit. She was the sort of person always searching for something; a holy fool, May sometimes said. But nights, when they were alone, she would tenderly braid Virginia’s hair. They would laugh at stories

of childhood mischief, old jobs from which Agnes had got herself sacked. When first she'd come to live in their flat May had called her Virginia's aunt. But Agnes never made any mention of that. Standing over steaming pots in the kitchen, she explained the proper way to make curry, or soup, having been taught in just the same way as a girl.

It would not have changed anything, the truth being spoken. Things would have been better, in fact. She does not mind that her mother is that way. It doesn't matter at all. She only wishes there had been no pretense, that she might have loved Agnes unfettered by lies. Sometimes Fergie Davidson says things about it, and about Mr. Chapman as well. At school, people say Fergie fancies Virginia. That's why he hurts her feelings so much. Four Eyes he used to call her. Lemonade because her complexion was pale. Lately he has begun to say other things, things that make her scalp itch with discomfort: "What's two and six buy me? Three? Have a heart. I'll starve. You drive a hard bargain, Missy."

"There was wickedness here," Agnes said when she left, and Virginia knows that was painful for May. She wouldn't have been in her right mind to say that. It would have been a madness, speaking that way.

She turns over, frightened all of a sudden. The voice from the next room continues to drone.

"How will I manage?" May says in the dark, sleep, like warm limbs, bearing her up.

OTHER PEOPLE'S LOVE AFFAIRS

by D. Wystan Owen

978-1-61620-705-2

On Sale August 2018

An Unflinching Gaze

— AN ESSAY BY —

HEATHER ROSE

The *Museum of Modern Love* took me eleven years to write. It started back in 2005, when there was a Dutch Masters exhibition in Melbourne, Australia. After taking in the Van Goghs and Rembrandts, I wandered into another part of the gallery and came across a black-and-white photograph. The interpretation panel said this was *Rhythm Zero* performed by Marina Abramović in 1974 in Naples, Italy. On the table in the photo were 72 items—including a bottle of olive oil, a rose, a loaf of bread, a feather, and also chains, a whip, a gun, and a bullet. Abramović gave the visitors to the gallery complete permission to use any of those items on her over the course of six hours, and she would remain passive. (The audience nearly killed her.)

The interpretation panel also said that Marina Abramović was known for a performance called *The Walk*, in which she and her then-partner, Ulay, walked from either end of the Great Wall of China, meeting in the middle after 3,000 miles to end their relationship and say goodbye.

That got me. The idea of a woman who could be so tough, so fearless, with those 72 items, and so romantic with that long walk. “There’s a character for a novel,” I thought. I didn’t know anything about performance art. I knew nothing else about Marina Abramović. I couldn’t find much about her on the internet in those days. So I did what we novelists do. I began to make it up.

In 2007 I was given a fellowship in Edinburgh, Scotland. At the end of that residency, I traveled to the Isle of Skye, where I’d worked years before. I found a small hotel to stay in. It was a balmy evening and the french doors of the restaurant were open to the sea. There was a golden light across the water and magic in the air. I was dining alone. Suddenly I saw my main character, a performance artist, sitting opposite me, and she was eating what would be

her last meal. She didn't know this, but tomorrow at the end of her performance, she would die. Through the course of the dinner, her last supper, she was visited by the people and ghosts from her past. There was a composer, a film director, a mother, a journalist, a daughter, a student, a muse . . .

I went upstairs and wrote until dawn. I could see the whole novel before me. The characters and the food and the parts of a life. When dawn arrived and I was still writing, I thought that this would be a fast book. A novel done in weeks, not months. How wrong I was.

In 2009, I heard that Marina Abramović was to do a show in New York the following year. It was going to be called *The Artist Is Present*. I knew I had to go.

I booked myself a room at the Chelsea Hotel, flew from Tasmania to New York, and found my way to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). It was my second trip to New York, my seventh or eighth to the United States. By then I'd been revisiting that idea of the artist at the table, on and off, for five years, squeezing it in around other novels, family, business and community commitments. Still, despite all the distractions, the idea wouldn't let me go. It turned out that writing a novel about commitment took a great deal of it.

Sitting opposite Marina Abramović at the blond wood table in the atrium at MoMA in 2010, I was startled to realize that, for me, she had always been sitting at a table. At the heart of *The Artist Is Present* was *the gaze*. Abramović maintained eye contact with anyone who sat in the chair opposite. This gaze might last two minutes, two hours, or a whole day. The show began to get a lot of media attention. People began to line up, often for hours. As time went on, people were lining up overnight, sleeping on the street outside MoMA, desperate for a chance to experience Marina Abramović's gaze.

The gaze, it appeared, had the capacity to transport people. It transported me. I sat four times. It was surreal, beautiful, and haunting. I understood then that Abramović was too powerful, too magnetic, and too real for me to fictionalize her or her life.

So I sought permission to include Abramović as herself in the novel. And Marina Abramović, who knew nothing about me or my work, said yes. With no caveats. She went on to sit at MoMA during *The Artist Is Present* for 75 days, six days a week, for some 736 hours. She did not move from morning

until night. She maintained eye contact with everyone who came to sit facing her. More than 850,000 people came, from winter until spring. More than 1,500 people sat in the gaze with her.

After the 2010 trip, I began another draft of the novel. Now at its heart was the real Marina in the atrium at MoMA, seated and silent at her table. Gone was Scotland, gone was the meal, but here were all the characters, still. Arky, the composer; the student; the widow; the art critic; the muse. Add to that the estranged wife, Lydia, recuperating in solitude at the beach.

In some ways, Lydia's illness connected me to the story. All my life I have lived with a crippling arthritic condition. It's erratic. When I was well, I ran the family business, swam, mothered, cooked, entertained, cared for my aging parents, squeezed in time for writing . . . and then for a month or so every year or two, and sometimes more frequently, I'd be unable to walk. The pain during these times is extraordinary.

My husband had planned on being a rock star, and it hadn't happened. This thing about fame gnawed at him like an amputee's itch. He could never satisfy it. Any acclaim or recognition that came my way wasn't easy for him. The more that came, the harder it was. And he found my illness challenging. It was an inconvenience.

I wrote a novel about a musician whose wife has a serious illness. She decides to give him all the time and space in the world to write music. But he has to agree to not see her, to let her either die, or recover, in solitude.

Life is never what you think it will be. Before *The Museum of Modern Love* was published in Australia, my twenty-year marriage ended. It was only afterward, assessing the world with new eyes, that I realized I had written a love letter to every woman who has dared to pursue her art. And I had written a blueprint of how I might carve a different life for myself.

I went through the launch of the book and all that has come after, the accolades and prizes, the public celebrations and events, the health challenges and legal complications, with a broken heart. And I began to get well. Really well. Better than I've been in decades. And I have loved my solitude.

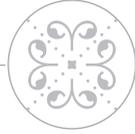
In the novel, every character is drawn to *The Artist Is Present* for different reasons. None of them come away unaffected. Arky has to find his way through his dark night of the soul. But this is fiction, of course, not real life.

Love is a remarkable adventure. And sometimes, like Marina Abramović on the Great Wall of China, it's time to say goodbye. It took me eleven years and a woman with an unflinching gaze, a performance artist with a fearless heart, a character who became a real woman, to help me find the way.

FROM

The Museum of Modern Love

BY HEATHER ROSE



He was not my first musician, Arky Levin. Nor my least successful. Mostly by his age, potential is squandered or realized. But this is not a story of potential. It is a story of convergence. Such things are rarer than you might think. Coincidence, I've heard, is God's way of being discreet. But convergence is more than that. It is something that, once set in motion, will have an unknown effect. It is a human condition to admire hindsight. I always thought foresight was so much more useful.

It is the spring of the year 2010 and one of my artists is busy in a gallery in New York City. Not the great Metropolitan, nor the Guggenheim, serene and twisted though she is. No, my artist's gallery is a white box. It's evident that within that box much is alive. And vibrating. But before we get to that, let me set the scene.

There is a river on either side of this great city and the sun rises over one and sets over the other. Where oak, hemlock, and fir once stood beside lakes and streams, avenues now run north-south. Cross streets mostly run east-west. The mountains have been leveled, the lakes have been filled. The buildings create the most familiar skyline of the modern world.

The pavements convey people and dogs, the subway rumbles, and the yellow cabs honk day and night. As in previous decades, people are coming to terms with the folly of their investments and the ineptitude of their government. Wages are low, as are the waistbands of jeans. Thin is fashionable but fat is normal. Living is expensive, and being ill is the most costly business of all. There is a feeling that a chaos of climate, currency, creed, and cohabitation is looming in the world. On an individual basis, most people still want to look good and smell nice, have friends, be

comfortable, make money, feel love, enjoy sex, and not die before their time.

And so we come to Arky Levin. He would like to think he stands apart from the riffraff of humanity, isolated by his fine musical mind. He believed, until recently, that he was anesthetized to commonplace suffering by years of eating well, drinking good wine, watching good movies, having good doctors, being loved by a good woman, having the luck of good genetics, and generally living a benign and blameless life.

It is April 1, but Levin, in his apartment on Washington Square, is oblivious to the date and its humorous connotations. If someone played a practical joke on him this morning, he would be confused—possibly for hours. The morning sun is spilling into the penthouse. Rigby, a gray rug of a cat, lies sprawled on her back on the sofa with her paws stretched high above her head. In contrast, Levin is curled forward over a Model B Steinway, his fingers resting silently on the keyboard. He is so still he might be a puppet awaiting the first twitch of the string above. In fact, he is waiting for an idea. That is usually where I come in, but Levin has not been himself for many months. To write music he must hurdle over a morass of broken dreams. Every time he goes to leap, he comes up short.

Levin and I have known each other a very long time, and when he is like this he can be unreachable, so caught on the wheel of memory he forgets he has choices. What is he remembering now? Ah yes, the film dinner from the night before.

He had expected questions. It was why he'd avoided everyone, hadn't attended a function since December. It was still too raw. Too impossible. For the same reason he'd ignored emails, avoided phone calls, and finally unplugged the answering machine in February after one particularly upsetting message.

And then last night, in a living nightmare, three of them had got him at one end of the room and harangued him, berated him. Outrageous claims of abandonment and lack of responsibility.

"You don't seem to realize I had no choice in this," he had told them.

"You're her husband. If it was the other way around . . ."

"Her instructions are perfectly clear. This is what she wants. Do I have to send you a copy of the letter?"

“But, Arky, you’ve abandoned her.”

“No, I haven’t. If anyone has been abandoned . . .”

“Please tell me you are not suggesting, Arky, that you have the raw deal here?”

“You can’t just leave her there.”

“Well, what exactly did you have in mind?” he had asked. “That I bring her home?”

“Yes, for God’s sake. Yes.”

They had all seemed stunned at his reluctance.

“But she doesn’t want that.”

“Of course she does. You’re being unbelievably blind if you think anything else.”

He had excused himself, walked the twenty blocks in a rage, aware also that he was weeping and grateful for the handkerchief he never went anywhere without. The bitter taste of helplessness lingered on his tongue. He scratched at the rough patch on his hand that might be cancer. He thought of the night sweats too. Waking drenched at three a.m. Having to change his soaked pajamas and slide over to the other, empty side of the bed, where the sheets were dry. He wondered if it was his heart. If he died in the apartment it could be days before anybody noticed. Except Rigby, who would possibly settle on his corpse until she realized he was not getting up to feed her. It would be Yolanda, their housekeeper, who would find him. Yolanda had been in their life for years. Ever since they were married. Lydia had thought it as normal to employ a maid as keeping milk in the fridge. She had stayed on, Yolanda, through the move to Washington Square. Levin never liked to be home when Yolanda came. Lydia was good at small talk with shop people and teachers and tradespeople. Levin was not.

Levin thought that if he died, the trees on the deck in their tall glazed pots would almost certainly die too for lack of water. He got up and made another pot of coffee, sliced an onion bagel, and lowered one round into the toaster. Within minutes it was smoking and blackened. With the second half he assumed complete vigilance, spearing the thing with a knife when he sensed it was ready, hoisting it up and reinserting it in a slightly different position. Why had Lydia bought this particular toaster and not a version that didn’t destroy his breakfast every morning? How was it possible they

could invent drones to kill a single man somewhere in Pakistan, but not perfect the toaster?

Leaving his plate and cup in the sink, Levin washed his hands and dried them carefully before returning to the piano. On the music ledge was an illustration of a Japanese woman with long blue-black hair and vivid green eyes. He wanted to write something spellbinding for her. A flute would be good, he had decided a few days before. But everything he came up with reminded him of *The Mission*. He felt like a beginner again, searching through old melodies, attempting transitions that didn't work, harmonies that tempted and then became elusive.

And so for the next few hours Levin immersed himself in the process, moving from the Steinway in the living room, where so many of his ideas began, to his studio in the western end of the apartment with its Kurzweil keyboard, Bose speakers, and two iMacs giving him every variation of instrument at his fingertips. He took the ink drawing with him and put it back on the corkboard where storyboard sequences in the same distinctive style were pinned. There were also more illustrations of the same Japanese woman. In one she was bending over a pool of water, her dress the green and shimmer of fish scales. In another she was reaching out to touch the nose of a huge white bear. And in another she was walking with a child along a snow-laden path, red leaves the only touch of color.

Levin switched from flute to violin on the keyboard, hearing the same transitions from C to F to A minor. But violin wasn't right. It was too civilized for forest and river. I suggested the viola, but he dismissed me, thinking it too melancholy. But wasn't melancholy what he was looking for?

I had encouraged him to take this film score because solitude may be a form of contentment when you live in a fairy story, but not when you are an artist in New York who believes your best years are still ahead of you. Artists are stubborn. They have to be. Even when nothing is happening, the only way through is to work and work.

I drew Levin's attention to the day outside. He went to the window and saw sunlight dazzling the fountain in Washington Square. Purple tulips were blooming on the walkways. He looked again at the audio file on his screen. It reminded him of the previous evening, before the women had pinned him against the table. He had sat with his old mentor, Eliot, who had told him of

the Tim Burton exhibition at MoMA. It was not the Burton I wanted him to see, but it was a way of getting him there. For all he wasn't listening to my musical suggestions, he was amenable to an interruption.

"You will have to wait," he said to the Japanese woman, but he might as well have been talking to me. In his bedroom he chose a favorite blue Ben Sherman jacket and his dark gray Timberland sneakers.

He took the E train and got off at Fifth Avenue, crossed the street, and walked into the Museum of Modern Art. With the membership Lydia bought them each year, he skipped the lengthy queue for tickets. The narrow corridor to the Burton exhibition was jammed with people. Instantly he was surrounded by the warmth of bodies, the gabble of voices. Within a few minutes the illustrations of stitched blue women, their wide-eyed panic and long-limbed emptiness mingled with the odor and proximity of warm bodies, began to make Levin nauseated. He saw with relief an exit sign. Pushing open the door, he found himself in an empty corridor. He stopped, leaned against the wall, and breathed.

He intended, at that moment, to go downstairs and sit in the sculpture garden to enjoy the sunshine. Then the murmur from the atrium drew him in.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN LOVE

by Heather Rose

978-1-61620-852-3

On Sale November 2018

The Hail Mary

— AN ESSAY BY —

GINA WOHLSDORF

I graduated high school in 1999. The Internet Bubble was fully inflated, the federal budget was balanced, and a gallon of gas cost ninety-eight cents.

I graduated college in 2003. The economy was in freefall, the job market was a bad joke, and 9/11 had created an atmosphere of doomsday paranoia.

I had triple-majored at Tulane University, but all of those majors were in the liberal arts. I probably could have found a nine-to-five job anyway—nothing satisfying, something that at least came with a decent paycheck—but I was one of those annoying millennials everybody was starting to rail about who had the nerve to want more than that. One of those millennials who remembered adults crowing that she could be anything she wanted to be, even though all those adults seemed now to turn around and say, “Just kidding. Suck it up.”

I got three part-time jobs. My highest pay rate was \$9.75 an hour. I’d get done closing a bookstore around 11:30 at night, hop in my dangerously old Honda Civic, and head for a 400-square-foot studio sublet with a sad, shitty air mattress.

And sometimes, I couldn’t do it. Sometimes, I kept driving. One night, as a sunflower field flew by and the moon was a lonely slip of itself, I thought of a story I had written when I was in high school. More of a sketch, really, about a girl named Rainy, a crabby millennial like me.

I was too poor to buy a computer, so I went to the public library and used one of their study rooms with an ancient PC. In four months, I finished the first draft of what would one day become *Blood Highway*, tears streaming down my face as I wrote the last lines. I was twenty-two years old.

But then I put it away, and I tried, for a period of about three years, to live a normal life, to be anything other than a writer, as Lorrie Moore says one must. I failed.

After that, having gotten my own apartment for the very first time, I read the novel again and realized how bad it was. But it had a heart, and it kept calling to me still, insisting that I become adept enough at the craft of writing to let Rainy and her story see daylight. But how? I was a nobody with no publications, living far from the book world's epicenter. No old friend from Yale I could call. No sorority sister who knew somebody in publishing.

Of course, the life I'd created for Rainy was a lot worse than mine, and, weirdly, I resented her for that, for stealing my misery-thunder. Maybe that's why I gave her my face and kept rewriting. Maybe that's why, despite the fact that I wrote eight other books—also not published—between the ages of twenty-seven and twenty-nine, I returned to Rainy over and over again, putting her through brand-new dimensions of hell.

Because that stubborn little bitch just wouldn't die. I'd throw everything I had at her, the darkest nightmares from the darkest pole of my imagination. We'd get to the end again and she'd be on the ground, soaked, hurt, shivering. Then she'd grin up at me with blood in her teeth. And she'd growl, "That all you fuckin' got?"

It took me twelve years to start listening to her. It took my agent—who'd sold another novel I'd written by this point—asking me, in a proposition as ingenious as it was terrifying, "How about first person?" It took me growing up, took my admitting that I came of age in a cold house and in a frightened era. It took me embracing that angry, combative, hyper-verbal smart-ass who lived inside my mind, and it took some of the greatest friends anybody's ever had, helping me in ways large and small: encouraging me when I wanted to give up, buying me lunch when I couldn't take another bowl of forty-cent ramen, putting a roof over my head when I had no money for rent.

And man alive, it took an editor, Chuck Adams. He went Rambo on this thing. He massacred every darling and made the manuscript read like a thriller instead of like a Volkswagen Beetle dragging ten dead horses through a swamp. There's no way he could have known what was really going through my mind as I told him about *Blood Highway*, but it was something along the lines of, "It's my baby, it's my candle in the window, it's my lighthouse on the rocky shore, it's the one thing I have to see in print before I die, please!"

So. Thank you, Chuck.

Rainy Cain is seventeen. She lives in Minneapolis. After her mother's suicide, the father she's never met shows up and takes her on a cross-country odyssey to hunt for the four million dollars he believes is buried somewhere in California. A good-hearted cop is right behind them, haunted by his own demons, intent on bringing her home. But as time and miles go by, Rainy's road trip becomes a fight for survival. And whether or not she'll make it hinges precariously on how much she's willing to give up to save herself.

I've thought about this book and its impossible journey a lot. Here, at the real ending, it reminds me of a football game—like the ones where I'm from, in the uppermost Midwest. It's November and the weather is miserable. As you huddle for warmth, snow seems to blow sideways, tiny ice pellets that sneak through any minuscule gap in your four layers of clothing so their edges can cut you before they melt. On the field, some backwoods B-team is getting their butts kicked. There's two minutes left in the third quarter and they're twenty points behind. But the people in the stands figure, "Hell, I've probably caught a cold already." And the hot chocolate's good, and everybody's cheeks are rosy.

And they are incredibly impressed that their skinny quarterback is still taking snaps. Her nose is broken and her head is bleeding and she should've stayed down after the last devastating hit. But instead she's smiling a little in the huddle now, saying: "We might not be much. But goddamnit, we're here."

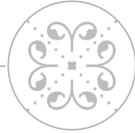
She goes to the line. It's third and goal. It's so son-of-a-bitching cold, and the wind is howling so loudly she has to scream to be heard. She takes the ball in chapped fingers, as the crowd gets to their feet and raises a cheer, and as her teammates dash over the muddy field, looking up toward the heavens like they truly believe a moment lived right can live on forever.

My dear reader, we'll win this game yet. Catch.

FROM

Blood Highway

BY GINA WOHLSDORF



I put my backpack frontways and unzipped the smallest pocket. It took a dozen bobby pins to get my hey-look-at-me hair secured. My wig was shoulder-length and dark brown with thick bangs. The bangs annoyed my eyes; they also hid them. I stole the narrow black apron from Ty's house last time I stayed there—her sister was a waitress at Chili's. The finishing touch was a thick slather of maroon lipstick. My bearing had been northeast this whole time, and now downtown stretched in front of me, the glass-enclosed footbridges of the Skyway like tubes in a hamster's cage.

I got a free day pass at a gym and went to their locker room. I shrugged on a white button-down shirt I kept wrinkle-free in a freezer bag and stowed my backpack. The Skyway map was framed on a wall close by, but I didn't need one; the network's bends and loops and intersections were branded on my long-term memory. Aboveground mole holes connecting theaters, concert halls, museums, sports arenas, restaurants, six-figure apartments, luxury hotels, little stores, and massive multidepartment monstrosities. The tunnels themselves overlooked the streets, so the cars passed underneath you in a tide. Seeing those millions of streetlights and headlights and shop lights in straight lines, beckoning, still choked me up when I was hormonal.

The Skyway was unusually busy for a Thursday. I trailed a knot of women and girls who all had the same long brown hair. They talked in such quick succession I felt like I was in a *Gilmore Girls* episode. They peeled off and went to an escalator. I hit the door at Fourth Ave, hopped down the dull stairs, tied on my apron, and waited around the corner from City on Tap's hostess station, examining my nails.

A party of four came in, business-casual. They were trading polite laughter at a joke that had been delivered outside. They passed me, disappeared.

“Four please. Nonsmoking.”

The plunk of menus and a tinkly hostess voice: “Right this way.”

I went in.

The secret is posture. If you stand up straight, everybody thinks you belong there, wherever you are—as long as you look the part, and I did. A trifle young, maybe, but the tables at City on Tap were low and candlelit, putting a helpful distance between the diners and me.

Lots of awkward dates going on. My favorite. Women never cleaned their plates on dates, but a surprising number of dudes didn’t either. I found a Brooks Brother and a native of Banana Republic in a corner booth. She was talking with her hands while he nodded and sipped an inch of liquor. He’d left two sliders; she’d hardly touched her—what were those? Wontons?

“All finished?” I said.

“Yes,” the woman said, not looking at me. “It’s breathtaking,” she continued. “I’ve spent my whole life in ignorance of what an interior designer can bring to a room, and now I’m converted.”

I turned. It wasn’t just any turn; waitresses do a kind of ballet. As I curved around another booth, a hand rose out of it. “Miss?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’d like our check. We’ve been waiting ten minutes.”

“Right away, sir. Just let me set these down and I’ll be right back with that.”

The busing station was adjacent to the kitchen but not in the kitchen, which was another reason this place ranked high in my marks. I took a paper sack from the ten or so folded in my apron, snapped it open, and tipped the leftovers in with a trio of fluid motions. They were tucked away when another busser approached with a brimming tub. We did a two-step around each other, and I cruised right for the front, untying the apron and tucking it under my shirt.

“Thanks,” I said to the hostess.

“Have a great night,” she said.

I mounted the stairs, banding the wig back into a ponytail. I unbuttoned

my blouse, rolled up the sleeves, wiped off as much lipstick as I could. I found a bench with a view of Marquette Street and opened the bag.

They were wontons. Fried, crab. Not bad. The sliders were greasy, juicy, bacon-y handheld heaven. After that, I wanted something sweet. And a beverage, other than water-fountain water. I didn't like pulling the waitress shtick more than once a night, so I backtracked to my backpack, carefully folded and ziplocked my button-down, left my apron, and coded the locker shut.

The Barnes & Noble café was crammed. I got some E. E. Cummings and claimed a seat. In less than an hour, I'd collected three two-thirds-eaten pieces of cheesecake, various flavors, which translated to one whole piece of cheesecake, or, as I preferred to think of it, a cheesecake sampler platter. All it involved was watchful observation and table-hopping. When I was done, the barista called out a hot chocolate that nobody claimed for a full two minutes. It was fate.

So, exiting onto the street at six thirty, backpack situated firmly on my shoulders, I felt almost uncomfortably full. It'd gotten chillier while I was inside. Not some wimpy five-degree dip, either—my sweater might as well have been made of mesh. The sky above me was clear, spookily so. No clouds, no stars. Flat black. People were still out in force. Minnesotans hold on to their warm days with a denial that's almost admirable.

I took the ponytail out, but I left the wig on. I had another hour before my house was feasible, and I liked to pad it, give her an extra twenty minutes for the pills to kick in.

Tomorrow was Friday. It'd be smart to get cash for the weekend. I didn't want to; I never wanted to. I tried to think of ways around it, but I failed.

Most of downtown was pretty open, not a lot of alleys. The exception was an area around Target headquarters, where the retail chain had elbowed its way into an already dense crop of luxe restaurants and bars with kitschy drink names—those places you gotta go when your life is nine hours in a box and two more each way in another box, eat, bed, get up and do it again.

A handful of corporate buyers were huddled at the bus stop, checking their watches. A guy in his early thirties—pudgy, geek glasses—was trying to crowd a few women farther under the overhang. He was catching runoff

from the stop's plexiglass roof. He could've avoided it by staying to the side, but clearly it was the principle of the thing.

"Excuse me," he said, and turned to see who'd bumped him.

"Sorry," I said, and raised both my hands. Empty. "I'm so sorry," I said, pouting my contrition. There's really no such thing as laying it on too thick.

He got an eyeful of me. This delightful moment of incredulous blinking, his long, tedious day a dissolved cloud. He took a wide step, holding an arm out to indicate where he'd been standing a second ago. "I insist," he said.

I went where he pointed. The women had witnessed all this and had formed an opinion of me that was as negative as his was positive. Two crossed their arms. A third's smile said, "If murder were legal, I'd stab you in the throat with my pen. Oh, yes I would."

"Long day?" the man said.

"Very," I said sweetly.

"At least the weather's holding."

"Yes, it's nice."

The third woman piped up. "It's supposed to snow a foot tonight."

The man said, "Maybe a miracle will happen and it'll pass us."

"Christmas miracle," I said, intent on the sidewalk.

Men love women who hate themselves. And most women do. We're taught to from the age of nine or ten: you bleed, you're weak, ick, ack, you're disgusting. A great many women fight their self-hate, though, by hating other women more. Particularly women they're jealous of. I had ample experience with this. I had, after all, lived through junior high.

But men? They're scared shitless of us. And not because of any complicated Freudian business where they think our wombs are going to open wide and swallow them, negating the existences we have the power to create—but because they want to fuck us, always, and these days they have to ask our permission unless they want to face about a 2 percent chance they'll get jail time.

I was a virgin, obviously.

"Finally," someone said, and I knew the 7 was close.

"Could I—" The man took out his phone, a Nokia so new it didn't have a flip feature. "I'd really like to call you sometime."

I mumbled nine digits. He asked me to repeat them, and I waited for the bus's loud rush of air. He'd think he typed it wrong. He'd think: Wasn't meant to be.

"Go ahead," he told me.

"I'm waiting for the nine."

"Oh." He waggled his phone.

"You should hurry," I said, grinning. A flattered damsel.

He climbed on, the doors closed, and the bus gusted away.

I stayed alone at the stop until it swung right, then I took an alley. I pulled his wallet out of my sweater cuff, pushing against remorse at his dorky driver's license photo. Ignored the name, counted the cash: eighty, all twenties. I stuffed it in my pocket. I took off the wig and unpinned my hair. When I emerged on Tenth, I tossed the wallet into a trash can and reluctantly aimed my legs toward the house.

BLOOD HIGHWAY

by Gina Wohlsdorf

978-1-61620-563-8

On Sale August 2018

Blue Ink

— AN ESSAY BY —

TIM JOHNSTON

After the divorce, it was settled that my little sister would live mostly with my mother, while my two older brothers and I would live mostly with our father. A lawyer himself, our father, tasked all at once with the rearing of three unruly boys, naturally fell back on what he knew, and as a result my brothers and I were exposed at an early age to the principles, and often the consequences, of due process. To what extent this parenting style shaped the adults we became is inconclusive: one son would grow up to become a lawyer as well, while another, taking an alternate path, would often need his brother's services. No judgment here. Just the facts.

The youngest son would follow a third path altogether, becoming a writer of stories and novels. And while it's true that the writer this boy became would be motivated by many of the themes and ideas of his upbringing—themes of guilt and innocence, for instance; ideas of perception and reasonable doubt, which are the qualifiers that make absolute fact, or objective truth, seem entirely impossible the moment the wheels of justice are set in motion—there was little evidence at the time that the boy was taking these concepts to heart. Or even that he recognized them when they were playing out before his very eyes.

Take, for example, the incident of the pulled fire alarm.

I was in middle school, and my friend Randy B and I were skipping second period, wandering the empty halls, when he dared me to pull the fire alarm. That is: he dared me to *pretend* to pull it. To put my hand on the little red handle *as though* I were going to pull it.

Not much of a dare, as dares go, except that we were standing just around the corner from the principal's office, and that made it juicy. That made it irresistible.

The little red handle seemed to hum when I gripped it, like something alive. It wanted me to test it, to see how fixed it was, how resistant to pulling. And so I leaned back a bit, and I turned to give Randy a look, a smirk of victory—and was suddenly sitting on the floor. The alarm was blaring like the end of the world, and Randy, pausing just long enough to lock his eyes on mine, turned and flung himself toward the exit.

In those first stunned, surreal seconds, my feet and my heart and my brain were all in agreement: *Get up and run, you idiot—and do not stop.* But if I was a boy of considerable foot speed in those days—as any smart-mouthed little troublemaker had better be—I was also the son of a lawyer, a man who'd taught his children the meaning of right and wrong, the importance of lawful behavior, and the total irrelevance of all such things once you get busted. And it was that kid who knew that *running*, when the school fire alarm had been pulled, was exactly the worst—the most *incriminating*—thing you could do.

And so I walked. With that alarm clanging away in my heart I walked through the exit, made my way around the end of the building, and walked up to the students filing out and blended myself into their ranks. Randy had the same idea, I saw, but we did not speak and did not make eye contact. The important thing now was to stay cool. To wait for the all-clear, and to file back into the building with the rest of the students and go on with the day as if it were any other one.

And this I did, and with such faithfulness to character that, come fourth-period art class, fire alarm all but silenced in my heart, I got my hands on one of Miss P's ink pads and set about staining my fingers a rich navy blue. Why? Because that was the kind of kid I was, and because this was just any other day.

Five minutes into fifth period, I was in the halls again—not skipping class this time, but on my way to see Vice Principal H, at his request.

I knew Mr. H well, and believed he harbored a kind of head-shaking fondness for me, thinking I was not a bad kid, not really, but only pretending to be one to get attention. He expected me to grow out of such nonsense, I understood, and, if not make something of myself, at least do the world no real harm.

On this day he waved me into his office and closed the door and told me to take a seat. He leaned on his desk awhile in silence, then sat down in the chair beside me.

“Let me see your hands,” he said.

I showed him, and we stared at my blue-stained fingers.

He asked how I got blue ink on my fingers, and I told him the truth: fourth-period art class, the borrowed ink pad. Idiotic, immature, to be sure, but hardly worth a visit to his office. But then he told me what happens when a middle school fire alarm gets pulled—it shoots blue ink onto the puller’s hand—and a series of realizations began to dawn on me:

a) This visit had nothing to do with Miss P’s ink pad,

b) If the alarm had indeed spat ink at me, it missed—perhaps because I’d fallen to the floor,

And c) What were the freaking odds that I would *stain my own fingers* on the day when a booby-trapped alarm had failed to stain them?

I knew I was guilty of pulling the alarm, and I knew Mr. H knew I was guilty of pulling the alarm, but all that mattered to me, the lawyer’s son, in that moment, was that the blue ink was not from the fire alarm. It was not *proof* of my guilt.

I wanted to get Miss P up here, I wanted to get those kids who’d witnessed my handiwork with the ink pad, but Mr. H had moved on—explaining that when the fire alarm gets pulled, the fire department is alerted and must respond, and that costs the school district a lot of money—*a lot of money*, he emphasized. A report of vandalism must be filed, and cops must be called in. Detectives . . . would I rather talk to a detective?

I did not want to talk to a detective. I wanted to talk to my lawyer.

And at that thought, the prospect of explaining all this to my father, Mr. H got his confession—a tearful, shameful one in which I swore it was an *accident*, I never *intended* to pull the alarm, I was just *messing around*. (I did not mention Randy B; I may have been a vandal but I was no rat.)

In the end my father was called, he and Mr. H talked, and I was sent home. Two days later I got the verdict: I was to see a child psychologist. A shrink. “It’s the best deal you’re gonna get,” my father told me, and I burned with shame and anger. That I was in fact guilty did not concern me. What

mattered was that the evidence that had nailed me was entirely, randomly, *freakishly* circumstantial.

In my new novel, *The Current*, a lawyer tells a young woman, “Justice is blind, but she also can’t see worth a shit.” Not to equate my little tale of school vandalism with what happens to this young woman, or any other injustices of real consequence in the real world, like wrongful conviction, like victims who are not believed, like the guilty walking free, but I can see the connection between that boy with blue ink on his fingers and the writer I’ve become. And as I wrote *The Current*, it was not so much the wheels of justice that drove the story, although those machinations do fascinate me; it was what happens the moment someone, somewhere, *breaks the law*. Or is accused of it. At that moment, due process is only one component—and possibly the least consequential—of the great wave of human behavior set in motion, the irresistible undertow of cause and effect as lives are pushed along toward actions and reckonings they never would’ve foreseen.

I pulled that fire alarm. I did it. But all these years later I feel the pang of being accused of it—and confessing to it—for the wrong reasons. I wonder how I ended up in Mr. H’s office that day, really. Had word gone out to teachers to look for a kid with blue ink on his hands? Do school fire alarms even shoot blue ink when pulled, or had Mr. H, seeing the ink on my fingers, improvised that little detail on the fly? If so, my hat is off to the man.

Or did Randy B, whose name I never mentioned to Mr. H, rat me out?

Innocence and circumstance play out in many ways, sometimes benignly, sometimes with dire results.

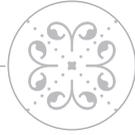
In real life, two boys wander an empty school hallway. There are consequences.

In *The Current*, a young woman walks a dark road at night, by a river. Lives are changed forever. Ten years later, two young women stop for gas in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere. There’s time and place, and there’s deciding to do one thing and not another—that moment of choice—and then there’s everything after.

FROM

The Current

BY TIM JOHNSTON



An hour later Radner pushed through the gray door and began to make his way to the truck, loose-legged and head down, his face shielded by the bill of his cap.

Sutter got out of the truck and shut the passenger door behind him, wondering at the strangeness of his own legs, calling it the time he'd spent sitting in the cold truck waiting and not his nerves, or his sickness. He saw Radner look up at the slam of the truck door. Saw his eyes under the bill when he saw him, and saw his gait change hardly at all as he kept on, hands in his jacket pockets. He stopped a few feet short of the truck, of Sutter, and stood taking him in, jacket first, then the face. Then the rest, down to his boots.

"I know you," Radner said. "You're the man had me looking under his hood today."

In his breath cloud Sutter smelled the Seagram's and 7. A smell and a taste from the old days, before she got him to give it up for good.

"But you weren't wearing that jacket earlier," Radner said, raising one forefinger in the air and wagging it at him. Playacting a man who would not be duped.

"Is this your truck?" Sutter said.

Radner lowered the finger. "What's the trouble, Sheriff?" At the movement of Sutter's arm he glanced down, then showed his hands. "I'm an unarmed man here, Sheriff."

Sutter studied him. The hooded eyes. The smirking and almost girlish lips that wanted to be slapped. Sutter raised the gun. It was his father's old .38 revolver. Now his. He stepped aside and gestured with it.

"I want you to shut up and place your hands on the fender of the truck."

“What’s this about, Sheriff?”

“What did I just say?”

Radner regarded him blankly, drunkenly. Then he stepped forward and put his hands on the fender of the truck.

“Spread your feet.”

Radner spread his feet and Sutter patted him down. He fished the young man’s keys and phone from his jacket pockets and slid them into his own. He glanced at the door of the bar. If anyone else came out it changed everything.

“Put your hands behind your head and lace your fingers.”

Radner did so and Sutter gripped the fingers in his free hand and pocketed the .38. He pulled the bracelets from the hip pocket of his jeans and drew down Radner’s left wrist and cuffed it, then drew down the right and cuffed it to its fellow.

Radner was glancing around the lot. “Where’s that Ford of yours, Sheriff? With the Minnesota plates and no whattayacallit. Official insignia.”

“I won’t tell you again to shut up.”

Sutter opened the truck door and gave Radner a push and Radner got himself in and Sutter shut the door, then walked around to the driver’s side and got in. The smell of the young mechanic had already filled the cab: booze and grease and gasoline.

“Whatever this is—” Radner began, and Sutter struck him with the back of his hand.

Radner sat looking at his lap, tasting his lower lip with his tongue.

“You want to say anything else?” Sutter said. He saw Radner’s eyes go to the door of the glovebox. “It’s a short drive,” Sutter said. “It won’t kill you to keep that mouth shut till we get there.”

The truck started up, the wipers swept snow from the glass, but under the snow was a film of ice and he sat staring at it, his heart pounding—all that waiting and you never thought to scrape the windshield? He tried to crank down the window, but it was either frozen or didn’t work, and finally he reached under Radner’s legs for the metallic scraper, got out of the truck again and went quickly and foolishly at the ice, and with each scrape he saw more of the cab, more of Radner, and it was like the reveal on one of those lotto games, one of those scratch-and-play cards, only this one told you not what you’d won but what you’d lost.

He turned left out of the lot and drove down the road two blocks and turned right, and then right again, down a lampless road where the buildings were all dark and window-boarded and the lots had not been plowed, and he pulled into a lot where the only tracks in the snow were his own tiretracks going in and the tracks of his boots coming out and he followed these to the back of the building, a one-time machine shop, according to the faded signage, and pulled up alongside his sedan and parked the truck and killed the engine.

He turned to Radner, but Radner was looking out the ragged hole Sutter had scraped, and Sutter looked too: the flat, undisturbed snow of the lot, the dark old building. The snow that fell on everything with no prejudice and no sound whatsoever.

Christ—what are you doing?

Sutter got out of the truck and walked around with his eyes on Radner and opened the passenger door. “Get out.”

Radner stared at him. The smirk gone from his lips. His face shining. Then he looked away. As if not seeing Sutter was the same as Sutter not being there.

Sutter took him by the arm and pulled him stumbling from the cab. He walked him a few steps and turned him around again.

“Get on your knees.”

Radner did not. He said, “Sheriff, I’m not putting up any kind of resistance here.”

Sutter stepped behind him and put his boot to the backs of Radner’s knees, and down he went. He swatted the billcap from Radner’s head and took the cuffs in his hands and jerked up on them and leaned over until his face was near Radner’s right ear.

“Do you remember where you were three nights ago?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Three nights ago—?”

“Tuesday night.”

Radner shook his head. “I got no idea. I swear. I coulda been anywhere.”

“You weren’t anywhere, you were at the Shell station on County Road F24 and you were assaulting two young women with your buddy.”

“Hell I was.”

“How’d you get those scratches on your face?”

“At work. A tire blew up in my face.”

“You are full of shit.”

Radner shook his head again. “Swear to God, Sheriff. Ask any of them at work. Ask Toby, he was standing right there.”

Sutter’s heart was banging. He saw his own ragged breaths bursting white into the air. The empty lot, the old machine shop, the falling snow, all seemed to be turning in some sickly way. You can still drop this. Right now. You can get into that sedan and just drive away. Go talk to Toby . . .

“You watch the news?” he said.

“What?”

“Do you watch the news.”

“Yeah, sometimes.” Radner groaned. “Please, Sheriff, you are breakin my arms.”

“Do you know what happened to those two girls, after you ran them off the road down the riverbank?”

“I never did. I never ran nobody down no riverbank.”

“One died, Ryan, and the other one almost did. So guess where that leaves you and your buddy.”

“You got the wrong man, Sheriff. You got the wrong man.”

“Assault, attempted rape, attempted murder on two counts, murder on one count.”

“All right,” Radner said, “so take me in. Haul me in, man. Let me talk to a real sheriff. Let me talk to a—” He howled. Sutter had raised the cuffs.

“Where is it?”

“Where’s what?”

“You know what.”

He shook his head. “I swear I don’t.”

“The backscratcher, Radner. Where is it?”

Radner craned his neck to look at him. Fear and pain in those dark eyes.

“You’re crazy,” Radner said. “You’re just plain crazy. You better let me go before this gets any worse. I won’t say nothin. People make mistakes, I get that. I won’t go to the sheriff or nothin. You just go your way and I’ll go mine, how about that, huh? What’ve you got to lose?”

Sutter was silent. His breaths smoking. His heart slamming. He looked up at the sky. Slow tumble of flakes, landing cold on his face and melting. Faintly there was the fishy, muddy smell of a river . . . but any river would be frozen and you wouldn't smell it, and then he understood that the smell came from Holly Burke—from her wet hair, from the air trapped in the white bag and escaping like breath when they unzipped it.

THE CURRENT

by Tim Johnston

978-1-61620-677-2

On Sale January 2019