

In This Issue

*Original Essays by Our Fall 2019 Fiction Writers
and Excerpts from Their Forthcoming Books*

After her father's death in Southern California, debut author **CRISSY VAN METER** found herself "scribbling notes about whales, every sea creature, and Evangeline—a woman who must learn to love again." Over a decade later, as her novel *Creatures* is about to be released into the world, Van Meter writes, "My father is not gone. He's in this book. He's everywhere" (p. 3).

Growing up on Chicago's South Side, **GABRIEL BUMP** saw his home "represented in two extremes": the Obamas' "spectacular selves" on national television on one side, and on the other, images of shootings, police brutality, and other instances of violence. In his debut novel, *Everywhere You Don't Belong*, Bump explores "the sometimes plain and sometimes harrowing journeys of all of us in the middle" (p. 11).

BROCK CLARKE's new novel was strongly influenced by Graham Greene's *Travels with My Aunt*, but also by John Calvin, criminal masterminds, international misadventures, pellet stoves, and the questions "can we get far enough away from the things we hate," and do we even deserve that opportunity? Clarke writes, "I have my doubts, but I also have my hopes. *Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?* is my most hopeful novel, just as *Travels with My Aunt* was Greene's" (p. 19).

The late, great **LARRY BROWN**'s voice lives on in the forthcoming *Tiny Love*, the complete collection of stories by this inimitable American writer, as well as in the priceless letter that you'll find in these pages: Brown's moving and amusing response to a rejection from famed editor Gordon Lish (p. 29).

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 Curt Merlo

The Green Flash

— AN ESSAY BY —

CRISSEY VAN METER

A green flash is a phenomenon that occurs when the setting sun appears green for a few seconds. A wobbly, neon green disk sinking into the horizon. Sometimes, a green ray follows and for a moment a light flashes and the entire sky exhales a giant breath of emerald glow. This flash is caused by the refraction of light, the atmosphere bending. Beautiful, strange, and almost supernatural, it is not always easy to see with the human eye.

Some have said that if you are lucky enough to see a green flash you might inherit magical powers, you might find true love, you'll never go wrong in matters of the heart. It is not likely you've seen a green flash, because they are rare, and if you have, you might have missed it if you blinked.

I've seen it once. Sitting on the sand, side by side with my father. I'm still a kid, sweatshirt over my knees. He smells like beer, I love him, and everything is wildly green. He says casually, *Don't blink or you'll miss it*. He means the magic.

My father explains that there must be perfect conditions to see a green flash: an unobstructed horizon, the moon and Venus and Jupiter at the skyline, clean air, and the belief that the earth, that our love, that everything is so much bigger than us. Also, luck. The green flash, the moon, the sky and the sea—this is a religion. Everything about my father is magical.

CALIFORNIA REPORTS the highest number of green flashes spotted. We are Californian. Our mythology is an abyss—my great-grandmother buried under a tree steps from Marilyn Monroe, my grandfather caught stealing cars on Hollywood Boulevard in the 1930s, and my parents growing up in the 1950s suburban sprawl of Orange County citrus groves. We spend Christmas on the beach. We believe in the ocean above all, and despite all of our tragedies, we are guided by the tides and our hearts.

My father lives on the Balboa Peninsula for most of his life. He's a waterman, he loves booze, he's charming, he's unexplainably rare. We spend most of our time watching the sea, he quizzes me on everything lurking below. On three sides we are surrounded by water, which brings happiness but also the sensation of drowning, of being trapped, my father constantly trying to be better, to be sober, and never living up to it. He is lovable and sometimes terrible.

MY FATHER DIES SUDDENLY—a drunken fall, a fatal head injury—and I get the midnight call in New York City. I had fled years before, after college for a job, an excuse to leave it all behind. *The wrong coast*, he always said. *The Atlantic is too salty*. I never want to go back to California. I feel surrounded by water again.

I have so many questions: How can I forgive? How can I ever love? How can I go on without him? What if there is no magic? What if I blink? What if I'm drowning?

As I navigate years of grief, I find myself remembering so much of our drowning and so much of our love too. I begin to piece together memories of our past: my father's notes on the Pacific Ocean, my memories of girlhood with a man who drank, and cussed, and yelled, and loved more than anyone I've ever known. I think of my father loving me so hard, and of his misfortunes, our moving, our having nowhere to go.

There were good years when he was fit, woke us up at sunrise to ride bikes, play catch, swim as far as we could. The rigorous morning runs along the water's edge where we dug our feet so hard into the cold sand that my legs were on fire. Surf fishing at dusk. A tall shadow upon the water, a full head of nearly black hair, a contagious laugh. There were bender years where he'd drink all day, avoid my calls, lie about everything, and hide into the night. He'd miss softball games, graduations, meeting me for lunch. When he was there, he was not always there. And then, mostly, he was everything in between.

I find myself scribbling notes about whales, every sea creature, and Evangeline—a woman who must learn to love again.

I FINISH WRITING *CREATURES* in California. Nearly a decade has passed since I sprinkled my father's ashes into the sea. I have been one hundred people since he left.

I am back at the beach now. My husband and I share a little rent-controlled apartment in Santa Monica. The ocean *right there*. A mural of dolphins at the end of my street. I've adjusted back to two seasons: cool and very hot. Sometimes I visit my great-grandmother at the cemetery. It's impossible not to feel the past here, especially on the crystal clear days when the Channel Islands appear on the horizon and I am reminded of being swallowed by the sea.

Some mornings I spring from my bed before the sun has risen all the way, like I am possessed, like there is some inherited madness, and I say something like, *Today there will be a green flash*. And each day I look, I say, *Don't blink, don't blink*. I beg my husband to drive me up the coast with no real destination.

I keep searching. I marvel at the moving water—my father out there somewhere; I watch for whale spouts, praise the stormy weather, describe the perfect flash conditions. We listen to the Beach Boys to be ironic but then sing along with every word, and my life after grief is a totally different and unexpected kind of happiness: some sadness, but a lot of hope. We don't see a green flash, but I know it's there and that's enough.

My life is full of love again, and my father is not gone. He's in this book. He's everywhere.

FROM

Creatures

BY CRISSY VAN METER



We lied about many things, but we never lied about weather. The constant foreboding of eerily colored skies, the dry summer winds, and the densely fogged harbor mornings did not hide. Even the mainlanders saw weather hovering over Winter Island as if it were a wall of dry island that had erupted from the Pacific Ocean to protect Los Angeles from oncoming absurdities. It sprouted from the bottom of the sea, angry and no stranger to loneliness.

That day, we thought the tsunami was just a hoax. A seaman rang the bell as he rounded the harbor. Preparations were made. Windows boarded. Evacuations planned. A deep chill lingered, and Dad had to hide his weed and coke. Just in case, he said. Just in case we made it out alive, he meant.

We were renting a room in back, the only way we could live like that, from two baseball players who were Dodgers, or once-Dodgers, and who had invested their injury retirement money into a monstrous vacation home on the Western Shore of Winter Island. In the early mornings, the neatly packed mansions left a shadow upon the sea. My whole world was a pile of sparkly jewels, salty men who loved the bottle, and rich families who vacationed for sport.

I don't know how Dad met the twins—maybe through cocaine slanging, or jokes over beers, or friends of friends—but Dad loved living in that glass-walled-concrete monstrosity. It had a pool.

Dad raised me like a boy, and with mostly no mother and many cardboard boxes of macaroni-and-cheese dinners. Sometimes we'd have hot dogs with fancy German names, and sometimes we'd eat a box of warm doughnuts with small cartons of chocolate milk. Sometimes we had money; sometimes

we didn't. Sometimes there were storms, and sometimes sunburns. We lived on fake money, famous money, and drug money, and always, it was just enough to never leave the island.

It was my fifth-grade teacher who parted metal blinds and gulped at the darkness building over the Pacific and said it was coming. That we'd all have to go home quickly. Without lunch. I scrounged nickels from other people's desks for a bag of Doritos and walked the shoreline home. The sea smelled saltier, and the air, thicker, and I shoved chips in my mouth, in case that was dinner.

Dad heard it on the TV while he was railing lines with the twins in the kitchen. They said it was coming and nothing could stop it. We were all to leave Winter Island. Los Angeles sent its gratitude to the little island that protects it from the wrath of the ocean, the newswoman said.

"You're fucking welcome," Dad said to the TV.

Islanders started a steady evacuation, and then dark pillows of clouds came. Neighbors sandbagged their doors and taped up windows. Otto House pedaled its hotel guests to the ferry on surrey bikes, with luggage tied to the sagging canvas top. Dad and the twins moved the bikes and pool toys into the garage. The ferry would close by twilight, and then we'd be on our own.

"We're not fucking leaving," he said.

"Will it really wash us away?" I asked.

Dad, who was born on Winter Island, said we'd stay, that we'd have a party to celebrate that monumental blessing from Mother Nature. No matter what could happen, he was not going to leave. He said we'd be just fine, like always, and that if the ship were *motherfucking going down*, we were going, too.

We bought the last of the ground beef from the butcher, and enough other food for a few days. Just in case the island actually flooded and the ferries never came back, Dad said we'd need protein, and that he could cook anything by fire. Dad said we'd be okay until help came or, as the twins suggested, we'd be better yet if no one ever came back. We bought the last of the old Easter candy on the sale aisle, water balloons just in case there would be time for fun, all of the chips, and a bag of apples, because the twins liked to eat healthy. When we returned home, I broke into the chips like they were a

cherished birthday present and ate them without caution. Perhaps we should have planned our rations better. Perhaps we should have considered leaving then, so we wouldn't be stuck there forever. Alone.

THE OXYCONTIN PILL GUY and Dad's coke friend stopped in. They were preparing for the end of the world, with the amount of illegal treasures they stashed in our kitchen drawers.

"You want cheese on your burger?" Dad asked.

He was wearing his KISS THE KOOK apron.

"Let's eat before this rain gets too heavy," he said.

Those who weren't leaving—the other single dads, a few Playmates the twins had over often, and the other beach druggies—began to take shelter at our place. They jumped in the pool and screamed things about the end of days.

By late afternoon, I could feel something was different. The color left. The clouds crept closer until they hung overhead. Dad and his buddies were so high they didn't notice. I floated on a plastic raft and watched black clouds cover the sun, smashing potato chips into my mouth and slowly swaying to the sound of waves nearby. Light rain tickled my face and made tiny pops against the pink plastic inflatable. I called for Dad, but the music was too loud. It all reminded me of the last eclipse—the time we stayed out all night to watch the moon turn into a purple sore and then watched *The Twilight Zone* on our little TV until there was sun.

The fake-boobied Playmates wore string bikinis before the real rain came. They draped the twins' press-conference-suit jackets over their shoulders and dipped their feet in the pool. They brought a gallon of Neapolitan ice cream and begged to braid my hair. I liked their tight gold skin and their painted-on eyebrows. They were like Barbies but bigger. The women that came in and out of that place were pretty and tall, and probably so nice to me because they pitied us. One of them would always feel so bad for Dad, so single and abandoned by a wretched, unloving woman. Those nights, I slept in my bunk alone.

The police were making their final rounds as the sun began to set. They begged people to leave. The lifeguards patrolled the dense, wet sand and boarded up their towers. They said there was no protection anymore. An officer had a clear plastic poncho stretched over his uniform. He commented

on the chocolate dried to my face while he stood under the soaked porch awning—a place he often stopped to be part of the party when he could.

“You guys are on your own,” he said.

The pill guy climbed to the roof, shirt off, and shouted at the sea. A dried nosebleed began to wash away from his face. He said that he could actually see the water receding. The news had said it would happen like that: We’d hit an all-time low tide, then an all-time high. There would be so much rising water that we’d flood and go under. If it hit us head-on, we might never see the mainland again. It wouldn’t be a big wave, but a slow parade of water. The cokeheads cheered in anticipation while Dad wrapped me in a towel.

“Wash the chlorine out of your hair,” he said.

We tossed water balloons in the rain, and the wild ones hollered at the clouds. At low tide, Dad bundled me in trash bags and a baseball cap and we followed his buddies to the shore. We stood like a wall, my hands protected by Dad’s, and the pretty Playmates guarded the house behind us. The wind seeped through every crevice of our trash-bag clothes, and we whistled and whined at the extreme darkness spread evenly across the horizon. Together, we walked to where the sea met our feet. Mounds of dead sand crabs looked as if they’d died trying to find water, and the shrunken trash, broken shells, and seaweed were no longer a mysterious part of the ocean’s floor.

“The pier is swaying,” a twin said.

The lights were out at Rocky’s Fish N Chips, and the rest of the old wooden pier stood like a bridge that had lost its way to land. Dad threw a piece of slimy seaweed at me. The twins found a wet tennis ball and traced the lines of a baseball diamond in the sand with their toes while the rowdy wind whipped around and we sounded like sails in a storm. The pill guy swung a big stick at the ball, and as he rounded the trash-pile bases, Dad tagged him out. The sea slowly devoured our playing field, and with absolutely frozen toes, we hurried back to the house. Then, hard rain.

“Take a good look, Evie. It might be your last,” OxyContin said.

Dad flicked him on the back.

“I’d never let anything happen to you,” Dad said.

He always said it.

I ate the rest of the chips for dessert that night. Dad danced to records and spun me around in the office chair until I felt sick. Playmate Sasha taught me

how to do the twist while rain pounded into the pool and a demonic wind rattled the windows.

Once we lost power, we crouched around lighted bathroom candles, and Sasha sang old country songs. The kind that made Dad's heart hurt. Then I was tucked in tightly on the top bunk for safekeeping.

We didn't hear all the water rising around us, or the sound of glass breaking, or the pool overflowing. We didn't hear nearby windows shatter or smell salt leaking into our living room. Dad was passed out cold, and I, dreadfully exhausted from chips and anticipation, slept through the worst of it.

In the morning, among the shadows made from partial sunshine, our house was flooded and smelled like a sunken ship. We had to paddle out in inner tubes and pool noodles to get anywhere on the bottom floor. Dad said not to swallow any of it. And when we recovered, red-eyed and lost, we began to clean up the mess. A cleanup that would take the actual rest of our lives. Still, we shouted wildly at the sea and called ourselves survivors.

CREATURES

by Crissy Van Meter

978-1-61620-859-2

On Sale January 2020

The Spectacular Average

— AN ESSAY BY —

GABRIEL BUMP

The number 15 bus—the Jeffery Local—ran near my house on Chicago’s South Side. I would take it to school if my parents were unable to drive me. I would take it home after soccer practice, sweating and weighed down with bags. Sometimes on a Saturday night, I came home too late and fell asleep in my seat and missed my stop. I didn’t get my driver’s license until after I graduated high school.

Senior year, my first class wasn’t until ten in the morning. I would wait at the stop on 69th and Jeffery Boulevard with other people from South Shore: prepubescents riding to middle school alone, adults with briefcases and suits, mothers and fathers holding their toddlers’ hands, and teenagers with tired eyes and headphones on, like me. When the bus would come at last, late and crowded, we would turn up 67th Street and ride toward Stony Island Avenue. We’d pass the old men sitting on benches passing brown bags hiding glass bottles back and forth. We’d pass the teenagers, boys my age, standing on corners, hands in their pockets, looking out for cops. Those boys weren’t going to school. They would spend hours on those corners.

We’d turn north on Stony Island, toward Hyde Park. We’d pass the empty basketball cages, the men sitting on benches smoking weed in peace, laughing and waving at old friends driving past.

Blocks later, I’d get off, sing to myself, nod my head, forget about the math homework I didn’t finish.

I wrote for my high school newspaper. My teacher, Mr. Brasler, encouraged us to read local and national newspapers, stay connected with our surroundings and communities, understand ourselves in a broader context. Senior year, my neighborhood and the surrounding neighborhoods were frequent topics in the news for two reasons. First, at the school year’s beginning, local folk hero Barack Obama was running a close presidential race against

John McCain. His wife, the former Michelle Robinson, had spent most of her youth in South Shore, blocks away from my house on Euclid Avenue.

Second, violence on Chicago's South Side had spiked and reached levels unseen in years. There was talk of bringing in the National Guard. There were comparisons drawn between Chicago's potholed streets and the bombed-out desert plains of Iraq and Afghanistan. Local newspapers ran daily murder counts. National news organizations sent crews to report on the despair.

From my computer in the school's journalism office, I saw my home represented in two extremes. Somewhere in the middle of this dichotomy, there was me and the other morning bus riders.

There was Barack and Michelle explaining on national television how the South Side of Chicago had forged their spectacular selves.

There were photos in the news of police cars, ambulances, yellow tape, and family members hugging each other and crying for their killed baby, friend, big brother, uncle, big sister, aunt.

There was us on the bus going home.

I was an average student. I was a good kid. I rode the Jeffery Local, read my books, kept my hat turned straight, kept my head down, crossed the street if two young men my age started fighting. Once, I cut class and had a friend call the school and pretend they were my father calling me out sick. The next day, I was summoned to the dean's office and asked what I was thinking. The dean reminded me that my parents had raised me better than that. He was right. I didn't cut class again.

After graduation, I enrolled in the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

At parties, people would wonder what it was like growing up in "Chiraq." Were you scared? People would share stories about the time they got lost in Chicago and locked their doors. I would remind them that the president still had a house on the South Side.

Yes, there were days and nights I was scared. There was the afternoon, coming home from school on a packed Jeffery Local, when a fight broke out and a woman pulled out pepper spray. There was the night I came home late after working on the paper, went to bed, woke up, and saw there was a shooting overnight, blocks away. Someone had gotten in an argument on a different

bus, walked off at the next stop, turned around, pulled out a gun, opened fire into the large windows. If I lived two blocks farther south, I would've gotten stuck in the crossfire. There was the morning when I stopped by the gas station, went inside to pay, and saw a smiling man in a bloodied tank top, a bullet wound with fresh gauze on his shoulder.

There were nights when I'd stay over at my girlfriend's house without calling my parents. I'd wake up to frantic voice mails from my mom and dad. A teenager had gotten shot and killed. They were worried it was me. They had just wanted to hear my voice.

I dropped out of Missouri after two years.

After months working in a nightclub, I decided to go back to school. I was accepted into the writing program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

President Obama was preparing for his second election. Children were still killing each other on the South Side.

For a short story class, I wrote about a kid like me, a kid like most of the kids I knew, riding the bus and keeping his head down. That kid, through workshops and graduation and graduate school, turned into Claude McKay Love, the narrator of *Everywhere You Don't Belong*.

Reading this novel now, ten years since my senior year of high school, I achieved what I set out to accomplish. I wanted to show the Chicago not many outsiders understand. I wanted to write a novel for the teenagers riding the Jeffery Local with their headphones on, their hats turned straight, their minds on girlfriends and forever love, their unfinished algebra worksheets crumpled in their backpacks, their dreams about belonging to a peaceful world. I wanted to represent the spectacular average—the sometimes plain and sometimes harrowing journeys of all of us in the middle.

FROM

Everywhere You Don't Belong

BY GABRIEL BUMP



The July before I started eighth grade, Paul had this scare. A blemish on an X-ray. After tests and hours of chain-smoking—nothing serious, just an aberration. Paul chain-smoked whenever he felt helpless. Paul chain-smoked in celebration, steak on his plate, whiskey at his goblet's brim.

"If I'm going to die," Paul said, "I'm swinging. Happy."

The doctors wanted him to change. Paul thought change meant melding into society, following, not leading. Grandma called him ridiculous. It was just steak, cigarettes, and hard liquor, not the right to vote.

"If I'm going to die," Paul said, cutting a bite-size triangle out of a New York strip, "I'm going to do it proud."

Jonah moved in up the street a month later.

Jonah's dad was a cop. His mom decorated houses up in Lincoln Park, up on the North Side. Jonah dressed like he was a pro. He was over six feet. I hadn't hit puberty yet. He dribbled up and down the block, between his legs, behind his back. I wanted his Nike sweatpants and Jordan tank tops. Paul only bought me Adidas. He thought kids got killed over Nikes and Jordans. Jonah moved like liquid.

"So, Jonah," Paul asked when Grandma invited the new neighbors over, "you ball like the devil?"

"Yes, sir," Jonah said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jonah's dad asked.

"Bad," Paul said. "You know, bad as hell."

"Oh," Jonah's mom said.

"What about you?" Jonah's dad asked me.

“What?” I asked back.

“You ball?” Jonah’s dad asked me.

“Claude’s too angelic,” Paul said.

“That’s wonderful,” Jonah’s mom said to me.

“Where did you play?” Jonah’s dad asked Paul.

“Paul can’t shoot dead fish,” Grandma said from the kitchen.

“I learned in a cage,” Paul said.

“What?” I asked everybody.

“The cage up the street?” Jonah’s dad asked Paul.

“Up from the Rucker,” Paul said, leaned back, rubbed his belly.

“Wait,” Jonah’s dad said, held up his arms.

“Hold up,” Jonah’s mom said.

“What’s a cage?” I asked everybody, again.

“You’re not from Chicago?” Jonah’s mom asked Paul.

“New York is basketball,” Paul said.

“New York,” Jonah’s dad said to his hands.

“Mecca,” Paul said.

“You’re from New York?” Jonah’s dad asked.

“You’re asking my son about basketball,” Jonah’s mom said.

“Who do you think you are?” Jonah’s dad asked.

“Where do you get off?” Jonah’s mom asked.

“I played against Tim Hardaway,” Jonah’s dad said.

“Me too,” Jonah’s mom said. “He’s my little cousin.”

“Doc Rivers,” Jonah’s dad said. “Cazzie Russell gave me his shoes.”

“Jwan Howard drove me to school every morning,” Jonah’s mom said.

“Michael Jordan was born in Brooklyn,” Paul said.

“Nate Archibald!” Grandma yelled from the kitchen.

“Ben Wilson is a saint!” Jonah’s dad yelled.

“Isiah Thomas!” Jonah’s mom yelled.

“Lew Alcindor!” Grandma yelled.

They yelled names at each other until Grandma served the pasta. They yelled with forks in their mouths, spit marinara across the table. Jonah and I sat there, exchanged apologetic looks. When Grandma put down her apple pie, Jonah’s mom gave up.

“Jonah,” Jonah’s mom said. “We’re leaving.”

“Jonah,” Jonah’s dad said. “Scottie Pippen is better than Patrick Ewing.”

“Madison Square Garden!” Grandma yelled as they drove away.

Under his breath, while we cleaned the dishes, Paul muttered.

“Willis Reed, Willis Reed, Willis Reed, Willis Reed.”

AFTER MIDNIGHT, someone threw rocks at my window. It was Jonah.

“Let’s hoop tomorrow,” Jonah said.

“I’m not good,” I said.

“It’s just hooping,” Jonah said.

“Okay,” I said. “Cool.”

I LEARNED, in the morning, about cages and courts. Paul and Grandma sat me down before school.

There weren’t many cages in Chicago. Courts were open air and surrounded by trees. The high schoolers played on Lake Shore Drive, closer to the beach, where the girls hung out, on a sand-dusted court. A standard cage had chain-link fencing all around the court, painted green or black. Fencing in the players—that was a New York thing. Grandma thought cages made us look like animals. Paul thought cages treated basketball like a precious act, something to protect from the dangerous world.

Jackson Park had a cage next to the golf course. We had the cage to ourselves. Jonah brought his five-year-old brother. Paul sat on the concrete with a beer. He patted the ground for Jonah’s little brother to take a seat.

The rims were soft and forgiving. Any shot worth anything went in. Jonah’s imperfect shots would spin, roll, and fall. His perfect shots would crack the net like a whip. I tried fancy layups that didn’t come close. Paul told me to stop acting like some Rucker Park disciple. Just feed the devil the ball, he told me. Jonah’s little brother nodded in agreement. So I did. I passed the ball to Jonah. He cared for it. He never looked at it. His eyes only showed concern the rare times he mishandled it, let it roll away, let it bounce above his waist. He was noble and righteous. He was spectacular.

As the sun went down, Jonah told his little brother to stand in front of the basket. He told me to throw the ball in the air.

“When?” I asked.

“You’ll know,” he said, and walked to half court. He turned around and started running. When he got to the three-point line, he looked at me.

“Now!” Paul yelled.

“Now!” Jonah’s little brother yelled.

“Now, Claude, now!” Paul yelled again.

“Now!” I yelled, and tossed.

Jonah took off from the free-throw line. He spread his legs and caught the ball with one hand. He cleared his little brother by a foot. It looked like he would fly out of the cage and land somewhere in Ohio. He was a low-flying jet in the dusk. He returned to earth like a breaching whale. My legs quivered. Paul ran over and hugged him. His little brother held on to his waist.

“See that, Claude?” Paul asked. “That’s how sex feels.

“My God, son,” Paul said to Jonah. “You are a religion.”

The sun went down. We walked back in reverie. I noticed beauty in everything: the warped chain-link fence, the tags on the bus-stop advertisements, the glimmer from broken glass in the gutter, the breeze carrying sewer smells. We left the brothers on Jonah’s doorstep.

In our living room, Paul went face-first into the couch.

“If that boy ever stops balling,” Paul said into a cushion, “the world will end.”

Grandma looked up from her book and asked what happened. I told her Paul had been converted.

IN THE KITCHEN, over breakfast, Paul vowed to quit smoking. Cigarettes were too expensive.

“And they’re poison,” Grandma said.

“And they turn us into zombies,” Paul agreed.

“And they cost too damn much,” Grandma said.

“And I can’t breathe,” Paul said.

“A glass of wine,” Grandma said.

“That’s all I need,” Paul agreed.

“Quitting something is an important exercise in self discovery,” Grandma said.

“I will find myself,” Paul said.

“And Claude,” Grandma said.

“And Claude,” Paul said.

They wanted a response from me.

“Jonah knows who he is,” I said. “I want to know who I am.”

EVERYWHERE YOU DON'T BELONG

by Gabriel Bump

978-1-61620-879-0

On Sale February 2020

Go Somewhere, Anywhere, Everywhere!

— AN ESSAY BY —

BROCK CLARKE

Novels come from other novels. Writers and readers might think they come from other things—life, for instance—and of course that’s also true (one couldn’t entirely keep one’s life out of a novel even if one wanted to, and there are plenty of reasons why one might want to), but life cannot teach you how to write a novel, and life cannot remind you why you wanted to write a novel in the first place. You want to write a novel because you want to feel, and want your readers to feel, the way you felt when you first read the novels you’ve loved. Which is why so many novels fail, and get abandoned: because they can’t come close to living up to the standards of the novels that made you want to write a novel in the first place.

Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe? came from two other novels. The first was one of mine. At one point it was called *The Missing Father*; at another point, *The Radical*. It was narrated by a man very much like myself (middle-class, middle-aged, white) who lived in the same city as I do (Portland, Maine), and had many of the same thoughts and feelings as I do, and had a job and a family unit that were pretty much identical to my own. I was not dumb to this. It was intentional. I wanted to write a novel about How We Live Now. But really it was a novel about How I Live Now. And as anyone who has written a novel about How I Live Now knows, you eventually grow to hate the novel, and you also grow to hate how you live now.

I worked on this book for two years, and then I abandoned it. This did not make me sad; it did not fill me with despair. The novel was slick, and easy, and I was glad to finally give up on it. But once I’d given up on it, I didn’t know what to do with myself. And so I decided to reread one of my favorite

books—Graham Greene’s *Travels with My Aunt*—which is the other novel that helped give birth to *Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?*

Travels with My Aunt is many things. It is a love story, an unconventional love story about the love between a middle-aged man and his elderly aunt. It’s also a breakup story, a story about how the middle-aged man is coerced by the aunt into leaving a drab, moderately comfortable, enervatingly dull life in post–World War II England. And finally, it is a travel novel, a story about the places the aunt takes her nephew to make him realize how terrible the Way He Lives Now really is, and how he should go somewhere, anywhere, everywhere, to see if life there might be better, even if, in being better, it also might be considerably more dangerous.

I love *Travels with My Aunt* for its gentle but pointed sense of humor, for the antagonism and affection between its protagonists, for its sense of adventure, for the way it depicts the struggle—internal and otherwise—between staying and leaving, for the way it makes its large points in small moments. But as I read it in the wake of my failed novel, it reminded me what I had not done in that failed novel, and why it had failed: in it, I had stayed put. And I didn’t want to stay put anymore: I wanted to go somewhere, anywhere, everywhere. It won’t surprise you to hear that this was around the time when Donald Trump became our president, and as you’ll see, he occasionally creeps (that perfect verb!) into *Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?* the way he’s crept into everything else. Yes, Trump made me want to go somewhere else, in my life; and Greene’s novel made me want to go somewhere else, in my novel.

Which didn’t exist yet, of course. But then two fortunate things happened to me, which helped set *Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?* into motion. First, I overheard a man in an airport rhapsodize loudly, and at length, about his pellet stove. Second, I kept hearing the writer Marilynne Robinson rhapsodize loudly, and at length, about the Protestant theologian John Calvin. And I thought, God, I’d love to put these two people in a room together, or if not in a room, at least in a book. And so, using Greene’s book as a model, I did that: I made my narrator a blogger for the pellet stove industry, and his minister mother the author of a world-famous book about John Calvin. And then at the narrator’s mother’s funeral, I introduced to the book, and to the narrator, his aunt, who ends up being a criminal mastermind and who

leads my narrator on a series of international misadventures. Already, then, I'd gone somewhere else—I know nothing about pellet stoves, or blogging, or John Calvin, or criminal masterminds, or international misadventures—and oddly enough only then, by not staying put, did I end up doing what I'd set out to do in my first, failed novel. I ended up writing a novel about *How We Live Now*: about how awash we Americans are in religion, in technology, in nationalism, in violence and fear—fear of others and fear of ourselves. A novel in which characters try to escape, but also one in which characters are followed and haunted by those people, places, and things they want to leave behind. A novel that is, at its heart, a love story—a love story between the narrator and his aunt, who he very much wishes were his mother—but also a love story in which love is dependent on getting as far away as possible from the things one hates. My question in the novel—and I suppose in life, too—is: *can* we get far enough away from the things we hate, and do we deserve the opportunity for that kind of escape in the first place? I have my doubts. But I also have my hopes. *Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?* is my most hopeful novel, just as *Travels with My Aunt* was Greene's. I hope you feel about my book the way I feel about his.

FROM

Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?

BY BROCK CLARKE



1.

My mother, Nola Bledsoe, was a minister, and she named me Calvin after her favorite theologian, John Calvin. She was very serious about John Calvin, had written a famous book about him—his enduring relevance, his misunderstood legacy. My mother was highly thought of by a lot of people who thought a lot about John Calvin.

2.

My father, on the other hand, was a high school coach—football in the fall, basketball in the winter, baseball in the spring. In the summer he ran clinics for athletes who would be playing their respective sports during the regular school year. His name was Roger Bledsoe. My father has left this life, and he is also about to leave this story, so before he does, let me tell you a few things about him. He was seventy-seven years old when he died. He was bald on top and was always neatly dressed: pressed chinos, tucked-in oxford shirts—even his boat shoes were polished. His eyebrows were the only unkempt things about him: they curled and hung over his eyes like awnings.

So I remember what he looked like. I also remember his sayings. “You bet your sweet bippie,” he liked to say, and also, when he needed to go to the bathroom, “I’m going out for a short beer.” But mostly he liked to say, “This isn’t my first rodeo, you know.” Most of his pregame pep talks included that phrase. Most of his conversations did also. Several months before he died, I told my father that my wife and I were separating. This was after one of my

father's baseball games. I was forty-seven years old, and I still went to all my father's games, went to all my mother's services, too. I have no memory of whether his team had won or lost that particular game, but I do remember that the wind was up, that my father's eyebrows were waving at me like cilia. "So, you're getting a divorce," he said.

I insisted that wasn't necessarily so. "Lots of people who get separated don't end up getting divorced," I said, and he squinted at me skeptically and said, "This isn't my first rodeo, you know."

3.

And then he died of a heart attack. Three days later my mother and I were in the cemetery, standing over his grave, next to the pile of dirt. The rest of the mourners had left. The hole was still open. The cemetery workers were waiting there with their shovels, their backhoe idling and rattling loudly behind them. This was in Maine. It was November. The air was filled with snow and with the feeling of last things. I wondered if the workers sensed this, too. This was probably the last hole they would be able to dig before the ground froze.

"That was a beautiful eulogy," I told my mother. In truth, the eulogy had surprised me. I'd expected it to be more, I don't know, *personal*. I'd heard her give nearly identical ones at the funerals of friends, members of her church, even relative strangers. Those eulogies, like my father's, had been filled with inspiring lessons about this life and the next as taught to us by the theologian . . . well, you know which one. It was strange: my mother and her book and her sermons always insisted that while Calvinists were reputed to be severe and full of judgment, John Calvin himself had been forgiving and full of love. But she always wrote and said this in a way that seemed severe and full of judgment.

"You must have always wondered why your father and I stayed together for as long as we did," my mother said—to me, I guessed, although she was looking at the hole. This surprised me even more than the eulogy. In fact, I had not wondered this at all. I had not ever even considered my parents' not staying together a possibility. I had not ever even considered my wife

and me not staying together a possibility either until it actually happened. But I didn't say this to my mother. I wanted there to be peace between the living and the dead and also between the living and the living. "Why does anyone stay together for as long as they do?" I asked—rhetorically, I thought, although my mother answered anyway.

"God," she said, "family, fear, loyalty, sex, security, compassion, companionship, complacency, children, guilt, money, real estate, health insurance, not wanting to eat alone, not wanting to go on vacation alone, not wanting to watch television alone, not wanting to drink alone, not wanting to go on cruises alone, not wanting to go on cruises at all, not wanting to leave one person and find another person who then wants to go on cruises, not wanting to leave a person and not find another person at all, not wanting to find another person, not knowing what you want, not knowing what your problem is, love."

I had never heard my mother say anything remotely like this—it definitely didn't seem like a lesson she could have learned from John Calvin—but before I could say that, or anything else, my mother nodded in the direction of the cemetery workers, and they advanced on my father's grave with their shovels and their backhoe, and a few minutes later he was truly buried, and only then did it feel like he was truly gone.

4.

If you live, as I did then, in a small town in central Maine, there is no more visible a job than that of a high school coach or a minister. Is it any surprise that I chose a somewhat less visible job? I became a blogger for the pellet stove industry. You may not know that there is a pellet stove industry, or that it has a blogger, but there is, and in fact it has two. I am the blogger who extols the virtues of the pellet stove: its cost and energy efficiency; the way it's good for the environment and the economy; the way it sits on the crest of the wave of the home-heating future. The other blogger is named Dawn, and Dawn's job is to spew vitriol at the makers and the sellers of the "conventional woodstove." This is what she calls it in her blog, always in scare quotes: the "conventional woodstove." All Dawn's Monday blog posts

begin with a story of someone she's met at a "weekend party" who has asked her what's so wrong with the "conventional woodstove." If you're ever at a "weekend party" with Dawn, please don't ask her what's so wrong with the "conventional woodstove." Because she will say, "Oh, don't get me started." And if Dawn says that, it means she's already gotten started.

5.

Anyway, not six months later, my mother died, too, at the age of seventy-nine. Her car had apparently gotten stuck, or stalled, on the railroad tracks just outside of town and was hit by a northbound train carrying propane tanks destined for Quebec. The train struck the car directly in its gas tank. Which exploded. As did the propane tanks. The propane-and-gasoline-fueled fire was so intense that even my mother's bones, even her teeth, had been burned into nothing. There was nothing left of her at all. The volunteer firemen said they'd never seen anything like it.

6.

There was nothing of my mother left to bury. But nevertheless, I buried her next to my father. It was May. The ground was once again unfrozen. My father's funeral had been attended by his athletes and his fellow coaches; my mother's, by her churchgoers and also by the many fans of her work on John Calvin, including some of her fellow ministers who were also writers. This group was particularly gloomy: they frowned at me from behind their horn-rimmed glasses; they were like thistles among the just-blooming forsythia. They made me nervous, understandably. I was expected to give the eulogy, and I knew it was expected that the eulogy would contain some words of wisdom and comfort from John Calvin. But what if I chose the wrong quote? For instance: "I consider looseness with words no less of a defect than looseness of the bowels." This was one of my mother's very favorite quotes from John Calvin. She often applied it to me when as a child, and even as an adult, I was taking too long reaching my point or if she suspected I didn't have one. But I didn't think it was exactly right for a eulogy, and I wondered

how severely my mother's fellow writers and Calvinists would judge me if I used the word "bowels" to celebrate, or mourn, her passage from this life to the next. God, they were a cold bunch. I bet not one of them had ever felt the warmth of a pellet stove.

I don't know how long I stood there waiting for the right words to come to me, but just when I began to suspect that they never would, a voice called out, "You must submit to supreme suffering in order to discover the completion of joy!" I could not see who in the crowd had spoken, but I didn't recognize the voice: it was bright and warbly, a sweet voice that sounded like it came out of a big body. Anyway, the crowd murmured approvingly—the quote was, of course, from John Calvin, and apparently the concept of supreme suffering was just the thing to bring them joy—and so all I said was, "Yes, exactly," and then, probably gratuitously, I added, "I love you, Mom." No one murmured approvingly at this. In fact, I had the definite feeling that later on I would be getting written critiques from my mother's fellow Calvinists, disapproving of the sentimentality and obviousness of my eulogy. But for now, they scattered. I nodded to the cemetery workers, and they moved forward and began to fill in the hole.

As they did, I noticed a woman walking toward me. She was tall and rangy, like one of my father's basketball players, and was wearing the kind of wraparound sunglasses that old people wear even when there's no sun (there was no sun), but her hair was a young woman's hair: it looked coarse and shiny, like horses' hair, and swept dramatically across her forehead, and was black—jet black, I'd say, although I've never actually seen a jet that color. Her face was dark brown and deeply weathered by the sun. She wore bright red pants that stopped just above her ankles, which were bare, and a green-and-red argyle sweater with a green turtleneck underneath, and old-fashioned bright white canvas tennis sneakers. Over the sweater hung a necklace, a silver clipper ship on a silver chain. The necklace was chipped and tarnished and faded as though the ship really had survived some sort of storm. The woman definitely did not look like she was dressed for a funeral. I judged her to be about my mother's age, and in fact she walked like my mother—like a stateswoman, like someone used to approaching and departing a podium—but in other ways she didn't look like my mother at all. Like most

ministers, my mother had looked as if she were made in the winter, for the winter. Her clothes—heavy sweaters, loose skirts and dresses—were always gray, and even if they weren't, even if they were other colors, the colors were muted, as though the gray had somehow overpowered them. Perhaps the color came from inside her, because my mother's face had been gray, too. Of course, so had her hair, which she'd refused to dye, and when my father once had made the mistake of wondering why, my mother had glared at him and quoted fiercely, "There is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice."

"Okay. Jeez, *sorry*," my father had said. He'd seemed surprised at my mother's fierceness, and I remember thinking, *Really?*, and I remember also thinking that, you know, maybe this really was my father's first rodeo, no matter what his favorite saying said.

You might be wondering why I'm comparing this stranger to my mother. I wasn't at the time; I am now, in memory, because of what the stranger said to me next.

"Pulverized by a train!" the woman said, and I recognized the bright voice that earlier had called out about suffering and joy. "A wonderful way to die. Although poor Nola probably didn't think so." She paused as though she expected me to respond. But what was I supposed to tell her? The truth, I suppose, which would have been "Probably not." "Tell me," the woman continued, "was she as cold a mother as she was a sister?"

I didn't say anything to that, not right away. I could see myself in her glasses. There was one of me in each lens. Both of me looked confused. "Sister?" I said. Because as far as I knew, my mother didn't have one.

"But what's wrong with that?" my aunt continued. "After all, the cold can teach us many things."

By the way, I soon learned that this was how my aunt spoke: she would say something, and then you would respond directly to what she had said, and then she would not respond directly to your direct response but instead would continue on with her original thought. Only when you consented to follow her thought would she then return to yours.

"What *can* the cold teach us?" I asked, and she smiled. When she smiled her upper lip peeled back and you could see plenty of gum, and I also noticed

that she was missing a tooth. It was her left canine. But the missing tooth didn't seem to make her self-conscious. She smiled, happily showing gum and her missing tooth and her remaining teeth, which were as white as her sneakers.

“Twin,” my aunt said, letting me know the kind of sister she was.

WHO ARE YOU, CALVIN BLEDSOE?

by Brock Clarke

978-1-61620-821-9

On Sale August 2019

A Letter from the Late, Great Larry Brown

— WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY —

KATHY PORIES

Those of us who were lucky enough to have spent any time with Larry Brown knew that he wasn't just a prolific and gifted writer of stories and novels; he also wrote the kinds of letters that were so good you'd want to read them over and over and over again. I still have one that sits on my desk at work, his oversized handwriting on the envelope, and then the three-page typed letter where he talks about the writing shack he's still building, the creepy guy who wouldn't stop staring at him at a party, the novel he's working on, the land he's clearing, his grandbaby soon to be born, his uncle Everett almost burning down his house down the road (the five firetrucks in the yard trying to put the fire out), the latest book he'd read and loved (George Singleton's stories).

Larry's writing came from such a place of genuineness and desire to convey what he was seeing or feeling, you were there with him. I think that's why all of us who got letters from Larry saved them. And his letters, like his stories, could have been written by no one but this kind, complicated, smart, canny man. The forthcoming collection *Tiny Love* compiles the complete stories of Larry Brown. Before his untimely death in 2004, Larry published nine books, but like all writers, he also received rejection letters. Here's my very favorite letter of his, written to famed editor Gordon Lish after receiving a rejection. Honestly, suitable for framing.

Kathy Pories
Executive Editor
Algonquin Books

29 April 83

Dear Mr. Lish:

I don't hold no bad feelings about it; shit, you got your work to do and I got mine. I figure we're both moving toward the same thing. I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel like laying down and crying when it came back, but nobody ever twisted my arm and told me to try to be a writer. No sir, everything I bring down on myself, every crush, is something I asked for. I wouldn't do the crime if I couldn't stand the time. It'll probably be a while before I bother you with anything again, cause I got to back up and regroup here. git all my trash in one bag per se. I have faith in myself. I have to have that. I couldn't go on if I didn't. I'll write some more stories for Easyriders in the meantime, in between working on the new book. It's going pretty good, I've already done about 20,000 words on it. Sometimes I just don't know, though. I ain't trying to unload my burdens on you, hell, you've got your own troubles. I get down when this stuff comes back. I get down bad. Low. My wife says I drink too much and that all our problems come from my writing. Maybe so. I just wish to hell I had somebody to talk to, you know, somebody who could tell me what I'm doing wrong. I don't understand your letters sometimes. People, editors, tell me my stuff is good but they don't buy it. I know I'm ignorant of things like theme and mood, grammar in places, the basic things. You're talking to a twelfth-grade flunkout here.

You been good to me, though, and I know it. I went to see Mr. Hannah a few times and he encouraged me, pointed out a few of my weak spots. But I can't

keep running to him and worrying him with my stuff. Hell, I'm a grown man and he don't want to hear about others going through what he already went through and survived. I didn't know you were his editor when I sent that first bunch of short stories to you. It was only after I looked in the front of Ray that I figured out who you were. And then, when I saw The Tennis Handsome, I hated I even mentioned his name in my first letter. I wasn't trying to gain any points like that. I wouldn't do that.

Anyway, I guess what I wanted to say was that I appreciate what you've done for me. There ain't but one other man in New York City who's taken the time with me that you have, and that's T.E.D. Klein, at Twilight Zone magazine. He's been damn good to me, writing letters and such, encouraging me. I don't know what you want but I damn sure aim to give it to you. Know this. I decided a long time ago to make this my life's work. I pump a firetruck ten days a month but that ain't my life's work. Writing is. And nothing has happened yet to make me change my mind. Do you need some puppies? My puppies have had puppies. My puppies' puppies have had puppies. You wouldn't believe my Puppy Chow bill.

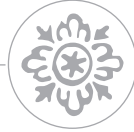
methodical in Mississippi,

Larry Brown

FROM

Tiny Love

BY LARRY BROWN



Tiny was tiny, but he had a wife and he loved her. The love he had for her was a lot bigger than he was. He did it all for her, ate the bologna sandwiches, changed the flats on the side of the road in the cold winter evenings when the rain was coming down, worked in the danger of the factory. Especially the factory, where gigantic presses could smash his hands and crush them, make nubs of his fingers. The machines crashed and pounded, and the huge wheels at the tops of the presses turned, and Tiny slid his little piece of metal under the die and hooked both hands on the buttons, and the presses turned over and came down with unbelievable force and stamped out one part at a time. He hooked the part with a little rubber suction cup on a rod, drew it safely out of the way, and inserted another piece, inhaling the exhaust of the Towmotors while standing on a skid to raise himself up to the level where other men stood.

He smoked constantly, not looking around, always watching his hands and where they were, because he knew Sonny Jones and Duwayne Davis who worked in the stockroom with their nubbed and shortened hands, victims of the same machines he stood before. The young boys drove the forklifts with cigarettes dangling from their lips and threaded the forks of the lifts into the pallets with insolent skill, blue fumes roaring from the grilled exhausts in the back.

Every afternoon Tiny spent his two dollars. Every day he drove by the liquor store, the last one on the way out of town, and picked up a half-pint of Four Roses or Heaven Hill or Old Grand-Dad or any of the other cheap and hangover-producing brands of whiskey, whichever one she had summoned from her bed that morning as he stood with his lunch sack in his

hand at the bedroom door. All day he kept the name of that label in his head and that afternoon he fired up his rusty '71 Ford Fairlane with the busted muffler and drove out of town with a smoke hanging from his lip, winter and summer, good times and bad, and stopped by the little store on the outskirts of town where he was a regular but unknown customer, a place run by college boys whose faces always changed, and there he would shuffle in and pick what she wanted from the shelf and produce his two dollars and change and take his bottle once they'd sacked it and move once again through the coming darkness toward his small house in the country, where he had a little vegetable garden, a car shed, some rusted and warped pianos sitting in the yard in a muddy collection like a neglected group of behemoths.

He would stop the car in the driveway and get out and grab his jacket and go in, pulling on the screen door, and there she would sit on the couch in front of the gray television screen, in her robe and her nightgown, her nicotine-stained fingers trembling, her mouth moving in the first tremblings of a smile, and Tiny would think, Lord, I love her. She would reach for him and the bottle at the same time, and Tiny knew that the hug she had for him was at once a hug for him and a hug for him for bringing the bottle, and he would bend and kiss her quickly and go to the kitchen and fix her a glass of Coke with ice so she could mix her first drink, and then he would sit down and she would begin to tell him about her day.

Men lost their hands in the presses. The presses were thirty feet high and they had wheels that were twelve feet in diameter, and they were made of iron and they weighed hundreds of tons, and a man's hands were a small thing in the face of the quarter-inch thickness of metal parts the presses stamped out without stalling. A man had no power in the face of power like that. The press-department bosses looked sharply in the press department and watched where men put their hands and talked to them and measured small pieces of metal with micrometers and checked blueprints and eyed everything and ordered runs for the presses, and Tiny hooked both his hands on the buttons and watched the die come down and make another part. He hooked it with his little rubber-suction-cup rod and drew it out safely and inserted another piece. He leaned on his machine and thought, Lord, I love her, and the press came down and Tiny, locked in his lifetime's

work, watched his hands and where they were and rehearsed the name of that afternoon's bottle in his mind.

He ate bologna sandwiches every day. It never changed. It was always bologna, and he bought a pound a week, seven slices, where Mr. Carlton Turner sliced it on his machine and where the people who lived in the community with Tiny and his wife knew him and knew that she drank. Tiny would always hang around the store for a while, looking lost, talking about the weather or whatever had just happened, and he would twist the neck of the paper sack that held the bologna tight around the small, cold mound of meat inside there, and he would tell everybody to just come on and go home with him. But nobody ever did. It was just something to say, like people in the country often say.

TINY LOVE

by Larry Brown

978-1-61620-975-9

On Sale November 2019

