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Contents

11

Editor’s Note 6

Fiction

Julian Hoffman Trinkets 32
Ryan Shoemaker The Righteous Road 61

Nonfiction

Katie Martin Nobody Here By That Name 8
Abigail Larkin For the Americans Missing Home 52
Cecile Mazzuco-Than Living in the Clair de Lune 107

First Chapters

Sharon Harrigan Road Test 21
Evelyn Somers Katybomb, Katybomb 86
## Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Kelly</td>
<td>The Departure</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Edmondson</td>
<td>Rachel in the Eternal City</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Turner</td>
<td>DMZ</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eating Snake in Guangzhou</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>Gathering Dust</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet McNally</td>
<td>Gretel Has a Garden Now</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dido Reads the News</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara Tomash</td>
<td>Canopy</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After Woods</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sentences Split Open Like Seeds</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She Is Justified Against the Margin</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flight</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace Andreacchi</td>
<td>Study in White</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly Chastain</td>
<td>Eleanor Leonne Bennett</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Author Biographies

123
My father put a bicycle on the roof every Christmas until I was fifteen and had stopped outgrowing them. For some of those years, I’m sure, his brain had already started to die, although my mother and I didn’t know it, wouldn’t know it until I was almost twenty-two. For all those years, there would be a note in my stocking, in odd, unfamiliar handwriting, almost as if someone had written it with the wrong hand. “I couldn’t fit all of your presents down the chimney. I hope you don’t mind going outside.”

When I was almost five, the first Christmas the note was left in my stocking, I stood in the damp morning grass beside my mother, both of us hugging our matching plaid flannel robes against the dry Arizona winter. My father emerged from the garage in his pajamas, also matching, a creaking steel ladder across his shoulders. On my feet were my second-favorite gift, red glitter Mary-Janes that flashed in the sunlight like the crushed rubies I believed they were encrusted in. I rolled on tiptoe over and over, soil seeping onto the glint of my fabulous feet. The world was still washable then; everything could be fixed by my parents. If not by one, then certainly by the other. I rocked onto my heels.

“I hope there’s something up here.” My father’s voice from the roof sounded the way I imagined mountain climbers did as they clung to the side of the Swiss Alps. “I wonder what Santa could have brought that wouldn’t fit down the chimney,” he said. I squirmed with anticipation.
“It’s getting chilly down here, Santa’s Helper,” my mother called up to him. She pulled the robe tighter around my chest and cinched the belt until I shoved her hands away.

My father’s slippered foot finally swung onto the first rung of the ladder. His pajama bottoms barely grazed his ankle bone, both of us tall and used to sporting high waters. His angular shadow splayed across the grass and into the street, my mother and I fidgeting beneath him. I thought of the pictures in my Bible of Moses emerging from the clouds with the tablets straddled under his arm, just as my father held the bike now. He was superhuman, godlike. Then the bike seemed to levitate down from the roof, its red paint unbearably shiny, the curling ribbon streamers tangling in the breeze. “Does a little girl name Katie live here?” he would ask every time for the next eleven years.

Shortly before his fifty-second Christmas, my father would be diagnosed with Lewy Bodies Dementia, a rare but for us, not rare enough disease that would kill over seventy-five percent of his brain cells in the next two years. By the time we knew what was happening, over half the cells were already dead.

But on this Christmas, the bike’s oiled wheels hit the grass, and my father held the handlebars upright as I saddled the white patent leather seat. He moved behind me, one warm hand on my shoulder, the other gripping the seat. “Ready?” he asked, and I was. I was ready to pedal to town, to a dig site in Mumbai to hunt for shrunken elephant skulls, to New York to see the library lions, to Mars with Charlie and Willy Wonka. The expanse and scope of my new freedom stretched lifetimes, and there wasn’t even a tiny part of me that doubted my father would always be behind me, keeping me from tipping over.

I pumped my legs fiercely, all four wheels shivering over the little pebbles in the grass. The bike jumped from the grass to the sidewalk.

“Let go, let go!” I said, my elbows extended, the handlebars rigid. “I can do it.”
“Are you sure?” he asked, his breath on the back of my neck a reminder of his closeness. “I’m sure,” I squealed. “All right, peddle hard!” he said, but this time his voice was not right behind me. I did peddle hard, but the sudden untethered speed startled me. The wheels were turning faster than my legs. I could hear my parents behind me, hooting encouragements like bystanders at a baseball game. *That’s a girl. So fast. Grease lightning.*

The incline of the hill leveled off, and I dropped my feet from the pedals onto the pavement, a liberated woman. My father jogged to meet me, my mother still beside the ladder, squinting through the sun. Without the rush of air through my ears, the day seemed suddenly still and quiet. I had never done anything I was this proud of.

He held up his hand to shield the light from his eyes while I basked in the glow. In our shared silence I studied his face, the face everyone would say we shared as I grew older. The “banana chin” a cartoonist would give us at a boardwalk in Orlando, long and thin. The hair that was never quite curly, never quite straight. The English skin that would burn, peel, freckle, but never tan.

My father squatted beside me, his face level with mine. He ran his thumb along the frame of the bike, picking up shards of red glitter and chipped paint. I looked at my feet. The insides of both shoes were worn down to a plasticy red leather, the glitter all rubbed off onto the sides of the bike. The bike’s paint was gone too, sandpapered away under the grind of the shoes kicking at its frame.

I waited for him to fix what I’d done as he had always fixed everything else. There was nothing particularly permanent about this disaster compared to any other. He would take care of it.

I was twenty-one, it was October, and I was rapidly approaching my one year anniversary of pretending I didn’t have a father. My
parents had been separated for that year, but since the diagnosis, my mother called off the divorce. Now he was in a “memory care” facility, and I had passed the point at which I could have visited casually; it had been too long. Any visit would have to be monumental now. I was comfortable as the only child of an only parent, two girls in a girly looking new house with a girl dog. My father had been buried, and now my mother had dug him up.

I sat in my car in the dimly lit parking lot drinking a cup of cold coffee that I had bought two hours ago when I first decided to visit him. I had bought a Snickers bar too, in a new “shareable” size, but thought I was entitled not to share it. The parking lot was empty except for my car and a white converted school bus used to transport patients. A silhouette of a couple dancing was painted on the chipped bus door. The woman figure was about to be twirled and dipped by a lanky man in a hat and tails. I tried to think if my father had ever dipped my mother, decided he probably had. I got of my car, a cluster of creatures that I thought were either bats or birds swirling in the light of the yellow, gnat-filled street lamps. Handicapped parking places took up the first three rows, there was only one row for visitors in the back of the lot. I wanted another Snickers.

A woman dragging a dripping fluids sack and chipped green oxygen tank faltered through the doors, stomping the carpet flat. She was much too thin, but only in certain places, her blotchy legs disproportionally twiggy below the rest of her body’s soft rolls—above her bra, below it, above the elastic of her pants. The skin around her lips was bunched like an accordion, the hollows of her cheek bones were almost gray. She wore no shoes, only the rubber tread socks that toddlers kick off and throw out of strollers. Her eyes were sunken beneath a day’s coating of melted mascara, and her short hair was the strawberry blonde of a hurried box dye. Her arms were covered in deep red blotches and looked torn in places. I didn’t know skin could tear. She tugged the oxygen tubes from her

Katie Martin
I sat on the curb in the hot parking lot of Henry Ford High, *Chemical Reactions of Lichen* open on my lap, and watched my classmates pass their road tests.

When you’re sixteen and live in Detroit, driving is your birthright. Failure doesn’t even occur to you.

One after another they finished the course then high-fived Mr. Littlefield, the driver’s ed/gym teacher, as if they were about to take him to the drive-thru at Taco Bell to celebrate. He wore black Converse sneakers, stars Magic Markered into pentagrams, barely visible unless he inched up his pant leg. A crocodile belt with a dollar-sign buckle trimmed his slim waist, obscuring his age. Did anyone know how old he was?

Marcia Klinger made the test appear effortless, pouffing her feathery hair over her shoulder but not out of her eyes, flirting with Littlefield the way everyone, except me, seemed to know how to do.

“Doesn’t look so hard,” I said to Mark Berger, the cutest boy in our class. His Darryl Strawberry jersey made him resemble a Detroit Tiger on the bench between home runs.

“Just do what you practiced,” he said.

“You practiced?” Nobody had told me I had to *practice*. This was 1984, the reckless days before seatbelt and driving log requirements. I’d heard stories about preteens taking their parents to the hospital for emergencies. Nobody ever said they had practiced.
Mark eyed me as if I’d accused him of being stupid just because he was gorgeous. Before I could clarify, he was already folding into a moan. The girl behind me had slipped out of line to massage his bare shoulders.

I couldn’t remember Littlefield ever telling us to drive before the test. Neither had my older sister Terry, who’d had “My Way Is the Highway” tattooed on her arm the day she earned her license. “You live in Detroit,” she’d said. “You know how to drive.” Here you’re born with a foot that fits the gas pedal.

I seemed to be missing so many of the innate social skills of my peers, like knowing enough not to open a book on my crotch with microscopic pictures remarkably similar to vomit. But driving was in my genes. If I knew anything about myself, it was that.

“Lisa Sharkey!” Littlefield motioned for me to take my turn. All I had to do was edge around twelve cones without knocking them down. In the manual, it had appeared so easy.

I slid forward on the seat of the Crown Victoria, which looked like an unmarked police car. The denuded upholstery was wet with the sweat of previous test-takers, and the air stank of strawberry lip gloss and Irish Spring soap. I blamed my goose bumps on the excessive AC. The key slipped in, the gas pedal eased down with my sole, and we veered forward. It couldn’t be harder than the calculus I was teaching myself at night. It seemed as straightforward as pushing a lawnmower or riding a bike.

The tires cleared the first cone, then I rotated the steering wheel left and glided between the next two. Just a few more slaloms and Littlefield would fawn over me the way he had with all the other girls, might even linger on my palm during the high-five. I started planning my own celebratory meal, starting with a Red Pop at the Pinto Diner, where my sister Terry worked after school.

I almost touched a cone, so I decided to take the next curve at a more obtuse angle. Angles I understood, so I tried to calculate the number of degrees I should turn to the right to approach close
she has a 24-inch screen coated with a bluish grey emulsion, and a 19-inch transparency with a vectorized image on it of fog. the fog she had captured on a glass plate in northern california and burned thereafter onto light sensitive paper as a photogram, in a dark room that was actually a miniature trailer, called a scamp, with the windows blacked out with triple-ply garbage bags and duct tape. she says droplets of fog cohere around particles of dust and dust may be anything—like bits of dead heroes or from a star. so when you capture an image of fog, you document the congress, in a moment and place, of the various remains of god knows what, but, essentially, anything—and probably some things magical.

so the image of fog—or of water around dust of a thousand fantastical origins—is what she had on a plate of glass and afterwards transferred to light sensitive paper, and thereafter scanned to our computer and opened in illustrator and converted to vectors, and the vectorized image she sent to an epson printer that humps when it prints, a thrusting and squirting and thrusting and squirting, humping the image onto the 19-inch transparency. and the transparency she is going to put on another piece of glass—a quarter-inch thick glass tabletop, about three-and-a-half feet square that she found leaning against a telephone pole on ainsworth in the humboldt neighborhood about four months ago. she brought it home, of course. “look what i found. it was free!”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I dunno yet. but it’s such a nice piece of glass, it’s hard to believe someone just put it out on the curb.”

for a long time, she hadn’t done anything with it. it had been against the wall of her studio, stuffed behind a floor-to-ceiling shelf she had made out of plywood, the shelves buckling beneath the weight of art supplies and power tools. we had a ton of plywood. she made
My mom held her hand over the phone. “It’s Reed,” she whispered.

I took the phone and leaned against the countertop. “Hello,” I said. “Hello.”

“What, Derrick? No call?” Reed asked.

“I didn’t know you were home.” I lied.

In November Reed sent a practically illegible postcard. He was always sending postcards, from Istanbul, Mumbai, Munich, Hong Kong, all written in a sharp, hurried scrawl. *Let’s get together over Christmas*, he wrote. *It’ll be like old times.* I’d studied the postcard with its photograph of a cramped and filthy open market in Jerusalem, bins of dried fruit and lentils, skinless goat and lamb carcasses suspended from steel hooks.

And then there were his letters, as long as novellas, self-aggrandizing rants stuffed in manila envelopes he’d decorated with intricate and baffling designs. The message was always the same: the minute details of his service among the impoverished and downtrodden masses, and his grandiose plans for a future that had us saving the world from tyranny and environmental annihilation. I couldn’t finish the letters, nor could I respond with equal enthusiasm. The letters were too rhetorical, trying to persuade me to recapture some embellished memories from years past. Unlike Reed, I’d grown up, moved on, gone to college. I was in my last year of law school at Brigham Young University. I was engaged.
“I knew you wouldn’t get the postcard,” Reed said. “They were going through my mail. Israeli secret service. The Mossad. Sometimes they’d follow me. But that’s life.” He said this as if the inconvenience of wire taps and surveillance were a fact of his workaday world. “What’s important is that you’re here,” Reed said. “There’s someone who needs our help. Eight at my house. You in?”

I could only guess who this somebody might be: the Palestinians, Mexican border crossers, old growth Douglas firs, the spotted owl, hump-backed whales? I imagined one of Reed’s windy, vainglorious speeches, a call to action to save the oppressed or right some ecological wrong, and me sitting there nodding ecstatically as if I still devoutly believed in the cause. I was ready to tell Reed I had to catch a plane in the morning, which was true. I was flying to Aspen to spend the weekend with my fiancée, Cassie, and her family. But the thought of another night playing Scrabble with my parents while my dad grumbled about his irritable bowels and diminishing retirement seemed unbearable. Worse, I imagined Reed showing up on our doorstep.

“I’ll be there,” I said.

My mom was on me the second I hung up. Behind her, the Christmas tree winked on and off in a way that hurt my eyes.

“I never liked Reed,” she said, “even when you were little boys. Always a bad influence. And all that mischief in high school. I never believed you thought of it yourself. His parents had a handful. Edna Swenson still calls me. She cries about him. Did you know that? She wonders where she and Bob went wrong. She blames herself.”

“Boys will be boys.” I said this to get a rise from her, not because I believed it. I was of the opinion, and had been for years, that Reed needed to move beyond the perpetual adolescent state he lived in.

“But when do boys grow up?” my mom said. She began rearranging the nativity on the coffee table. “You grew up. Maybe
you can talk some sense into him.” She pointed a shepherd at me. “Tell him to go to college and stop giving his parents grief. Tell him to go back to church. He’s still young enough to serve a mission. It’s Edna’s dream.”

“I’m not going to talk some sense into him,” I said. I didn’t want the responsibility of steering Reed back into the fold. Besides, Reed worshipped Mother Earth. His congregation convened in the tops of trees while angry loggers cursed from below or outside third-world sweat shops where the repressed toiled for a nickel an hour. His sacrament was a thick joint and cheap wine.

“You just be careful over there,” my mom said. “I can’t imagine he’s changed much. I’m sure he’s still the same old Reed.”

Her warning annoyed me. As if Reed had any influence on me. He was a vestige from another life, an adolescent, simple-minded incarnation of myself I would never relive.

We grew up in the same wooded subdivision outside Auburn, Washington, had the same teachers at Lake View Elementary, attended the same ward. The sand box, Sunday school, cub scouts, T-ball. When didn’t I know Reed?

He always had this deeper ecological and humanitarian consciousness. Our Sunday school teachers, sweet old ladies who brought us oatmeal cookies, stared incredulously as Reed decried the cruelty of Mosaic animal sacrifice or questioned the goodness of a God who required the massacre of every Canaanite living in the Promised Land. At twelve, Reed’s first youth talk in sacrament meeting was a five minute criticism of God’s command to Adam and Eve to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. “Why can’t all His creations just have an equal relationship?” Reed asked. “Why can’t everything just be free and happy without people messing up the forests and the air?”

When we were fifteen, Reed’s ecological sense found a focus. It was one of those boring summer nights, nothing to do but sit in Reed’s living room and flip through channels until we were
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