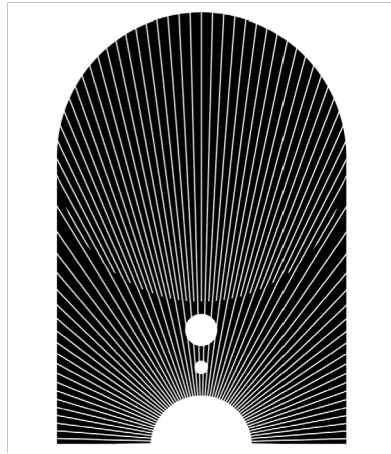


SOLUM JOURNAL  
WINTER 2022



# SOLUM JOURNAL

WINTER 2022

AN IMPRINT OF SOLUM LITERARY PRESS

*Solum Journal* is an online literary journal released quarterly with an annual print issue. It is a project of Solum Literary Press, a Christian small press publishing poetry, fiction, essays, homilies, and visual art.

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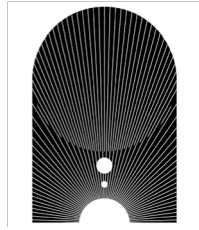
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# CALL TO PRAYER

# LORY WIDMER HESS

## **Annunciation**

Don't try to understand  
a mystery

Just listen  
and wait  
for no answer

Listen to what nature  
left unsaid

The gap  
between seed  
and tree

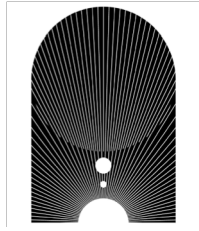
Listen like Mary  
trembling  
alone

Overborne  
by urgent creation

Asking only How?  
and answering

Yes

**Lory Widmer Hess** has been an editor, graphic designer, and English teacher, but her most transformative experience has come through her past decade of working with adults with developmental disabilities. Her writing has been published in *Parabola*, *Kosmos Quarterly*, *Ruminate*, *Braided Way*, *Untold Volumes*, and other print and online publications. She blogs about life, language, and literature at [enterenchanted.com](http://enterenchanted.com).



POETRY



# WHITNEY RIO-ROSS

## **Unbelief As Box Turtle**

It's no matter that I missed the ark. I weathered God's wrath well enough, though I won't pretend it came as naturally as I'd hoped. The men tired faster than they expected, but then again, they always overestimate themselves.

It's a story worth telling—even I'll admit that, though I'm sure most will get it all wrong. Should any artist choose to include me (they won't), they'll imagine an orphan in comically desperate stretch for the side door snapped shut.

But I bore no hope of being grafted in. The risks of a menagerie cruise on unproven timber outweighed curiosity. The selling point was more shelter than survival, and in that regard, I'm an evolutionary wonder.

So I came back to solid ground safe and sore, hibernated right through the rainbow, though I've seen plenty by now. To be honest, they make me shiver back to sleep only to wake warm and shelled and unshaken that I made the right choice.

That's what the prophets don't talk about enough—the crazy thing isn't that we're still here. You can find a dozen reasons if you only look around. No, the wildest part is how they say it started—that God thought they'd be best off naked. Makes no damn sense.

## **Saint Agnes, Fallen Near Baptismal**

*Urakami Cathedral, Nagasaki*

There was so much she couldn't have  
imagined. That the knuckles kneading her  
to life would one day gnarl to stone.

How the pool would soon thirst  
to baptize even talons splashing through  
the sacred. Why howls would lace  
the silence she must learn to love.

That her dreams of breath would choke  
to nightmare as vapor dissolved  
each echo she believed. Whether her god  
was named false or true.

But surely she learned what I haven't kept  
still enough to prove—that even the holiest waters  
won't reflect all they drink in.

It's still a matter of lighting.

**Whitney Rio-Ross** is author of the chapbook *Birthmarks* (Wipf & Stock) and poetry editor for *Fare Forward*. Her poetry has appeared in *Presence Journal*, *Psaltery & Lyre*, *Relief Journal*, *America Magazine*, and elsewhere. She was the winner of the 2021 Sacred Poetry Contest and lives in Nashville, TN, with her husband and pups.

# J.D. ISIP

## **The Lowest Part of the Ship**

To escape one must go inward first or swallow yourself up, grabbing each half of your mouth and pulling down like a pair of socks, your tongue a nice handle or hook to carry you along or hang you up, “I’m fine” or “It’s nothing” or nothing, nothing, nothing with your mouth wide open.

Then you’re reading the texts. A friend. A colleague. God. Everyone worries you’ll do it again, you’ll take the car or plane or boat, climb yourself down to the lowest part of the ship, stop reading their texts, put your face down into a pillow, say or scream nothing into it, dissolve, pull yourself down.

When Jesus did it, when his men were shouting their own inanity, he slept, and you only want to sleep through this current tragedy. Is that too much to ask? To be left alone to your own devices, maybe a drink or two, a lover or two, fire or ice or a razor, or a last resort, “Please! Please throw me over!”

**J.D. Isip** published his first collection of poetry, *Pocketing Feathers*, with Sadie Girl Press (2015). His second collection, *Kissing the Wound*, is available from Moon Tide Press (2023). “The Lowest Part of the Ship” is part of a new collection tentatively titled *Wherever You Find Yourself*, using the story of Jonah as a framing device. His works—including poetry, nonfiction, fiction, and plays—have appeared in many magazines and journals including *Ethel Zine*, *Clade Song*, *Pilgrimage Press*, *Fathom Magazine*, and *Calla Press*. He is a full-time English professor in Plano, Texas.

# JEFF HARDIN

## **The Text We Read Is Just The One We See**

How to say a thing and then to hear its implications requires more years than we are given. I still dwell on an oak in a field no longer there, replaced by three houses whose stories are not my own. I trim climbing roses obtained from cuttings of cuttings first planted by my great-grandmother born in 1894. She used to hide my brother in the folds of her dress. She outlived her husband by a generation. Inheritance that should have come down his line went down another instead. My brother once wandered away, was found hours later on a rock above the river. He would have drowned had he slipped. No one knows if he almost did. He was three, an age in which all our futures struggle for supremacy. The text we read is just the one we see, not all the versions that might have been. The barn loft I sat in as a child is no longer there, but I can still feel the rungs of its ladder against the arches of my feet. Is that why I try to find a higher vantage point from which to look upon my life? Off in the distance, corn tassels hold a secret whose whispers I lean toward. They sound like a river hidden in fog across which a voice is summoning all who will come. Daily I disappear from my life, sometimes only a moment, sometimes for hours. What if it turns out we've all been disinherited from a future we cannot imagine? I have no idea what's indeterminate or irrefutable. The wind covers as much as it uncovers and vice versa. A word says more than it says even if no one hears. Belief is a metaphor for doubt, doubt a metaphor for how we move all our lives toward beliefs we can bear.

**Jeff Hardin** is the author of seven collections of poetry, most recently *Watermark*, *A Clearing Space in the Middle of Being*, and *No Other Kind of World*. His books have been honored with the Nicholas Roerich Prize, the Donald Justice Prize, and the X. J. Kennedy Prize. Recent and forthcoming poems appear in *The Southern Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Laurel Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. He lives and teaches in TN. Visit his website: [www.jeffhardin.weebly.com](http://www.jeffhardin.weebly.com).

# SARAH LOUISE GARRIDO

## **Cold Lord**

*O lord, if you would but bruise,  
batter my body under the mass of stars,*

*I'd know you are.*

\*

Cold fire.

*Form the words with your mouth.*

If he made the trees,  
how could he be cold?

Dappled shadows creep across the ground.

I stare up the trunks of eucalyptus.

When they tremble, I can't see what moves them.  
When I call out for answers, they do not speak.

\*

Everyone has heard of the road.

I don't know when I found myself  
stumbling, the lord having become cold  
and his warmth wholly gone.

Middle of my life I found myself upon.

A dark wood.

A woman like me  
bleeding on the roadside.  
A woman who made her bleed.

I am (she) I am.

\*

The road full of curses  
is worth it. Yellow  
weeds on either side.

I bring my mother and father  
flowers and halves of broken songs.

But they do not heal.  
They lie down on the roadside.

Go on, go on, they cry, and watch me,  
bloodied and bettered, pass them by.

\*

The morning is still.

Only jays, then silence.

Flowers still bowing in reverence.

Honor thy morning,

honor thy road.

I listen for him  
in the trees. Eucalyptus leaves  
shimmer like sardines.

I know he came in those days.

A sharpness in the air.  
Footsteps in the grove.

Some see        and rejoice.

*What is it to believe?*

*What is it to believe?*

\*

Fires lit the road.  
Oxalis punching into summer.

My mother in the hollow of every dream.

Her voice on the road.  
I carry it with me.

She taught me to walk  
through the sweet grass  
on golden afternoons.

*What is it to long?*

*What is it to wait?*



I have the answers to the questions  
I hide from.

Shading my eyes against the light,  
I see sunflowers bob their heavy heads.

A million mothers nodding, go on, go on.

\*

I lie down to die,

but death is not with me,  
nor knows me as its own.

I belong to the road.

Shock of firs, needles prickling my arm.

Everything at risk  
of falling to blaze  
from a flick of fire and wind.

The forest waits and waits

for change.

To be burned down  
and built back up again.

But you, you take away

even the breeze.

\*

*What does he even know?*

Of plinking stones  
rolling the river on?

Of smooth edges—hewn from rock or water?

Swifts swinging  
through swigs of light.

He is glacial, icy spires resplendent.

Candles falling down  
from the dark, stars finding  
their places in our mouths.

Whose hands will move  
through the thick air  
between us first?

And how will he tear  
each pleasure away slowly?

\*

*So what is it for then?*

For scattering flowers, loves,  
tears, bodies, for losing all  
one's barely gotten or understood.

Heaven of long light against the hill,  
heaven of the late bird's sorrowful call.

*How can we find you?*

*How can we not?*

You of the solemn pine, you of the stream  
ever-turning up cold cold stones.

Wild wild god, we know you not.

**Sarah Louise Garrido** is a poet and creative copywriter from the San Francisco Bay Area where she lives with her husband and two young children. Her work has been featured in *Maiden Magazine*, *Pointed Circle*, *Zocalo Public Square*, and more, and her poetry collection has also been a finalist for the Yale Series of Younger Poets award. Follow her on Instagram @slouisegarrido.

# AUBREY BRADY

## **By Their Fruits**

Half eaten apples perch precariously on our fence ledge,  
The neighbors tree is shedding its abundance  
As it relents to the oncoming cold.

Squirrels scramble past sticks and stubborn leaves  
That cling,  
To pick apples that rot upon the branch.

Hummingbirds dance around the tree,  
Ignoring the murmurs of winter  
And the promise of budding leaves further south,  
Are filled by what appears to be dead.

The tree, now silenced in frost,  
Continues to give as creatures  
Whisk away what nourishment they can find,

From moldering sticks and frozen ground,  
Within death – life.

We, too, must root into the cold earth  
Searching for the source that allows us  
Even in darkness and dying  
To proffer what offerings we have,  
our knotted flesh, our not quite rotten rind.

**Aubrey Brady** has a BA in Music from Covenant College and is working on her MFA in Creative Writing with an emphasis in poetry at Lindenwood University. She currently works at Church of the Vine Anglican as their music director. She spends her days trying to keep up with two crazy little ones, playing piano, writing, and reading whenever her tiny bosses will allow. Aubrey lives in Oregon with her husband, Matthew, and their two children.

# ELIZABETH BATES

## **[The river] rests**

in late summer evening

when the last fisherman pulls in his  
line & there is stillness . . .  
while he kisses his wife's forehead  
in the doorway upon  
his return home.

in November

when the last brittle leaves  
of deciduous trees  
press against the water's surface  
like palms  
pressed against each other  
in prayer.

in December

when evergreen boughs nod off  
for a long winter's nap &  
the conifers shed pinecones  
from their branches like  
the fisherman gently  
sliding off his mud-coated boots.  
His wife soundly sleeps in the next room &  
the fisherman seeks  
not to disturb  
the peace.

## Visions of Christmas Eve

A curl of smoke  
    rises from  
a rooftop &  
the distinctive  
scent overwhelms the vaporous  
winter air.  
Relatives share a meal,  
the heat of a wood fireplace warming  
their backs.

Smoke & snow  
illustrate the landscape  
    on a brief drive.

Church  
windows hum with harmonious carols  
sung by  
three-part choirs,  
    faces illuminated  
    under orange candlelight.  
    The midnight  
    hour gleams.

Jesus is  
placed in the manger.  
An altar boy  
puts out the candle  
    & the smoke curls  
in the sanctuary  
at the end of Mass.  
The lights  
go out.  
Families head

home. The outside  
world is snow  
& shadows. A father  
throws  
logs on the fire  
    & the smoke billows.  
Children pull covers to their chins &  
struggle to keep their eyes closed.  
For the night,  
invisible and visible  
    trade places.

**Elizabeth Bates** is a Best of the Net and Pushcart-nominated writer living in Washington state with her family. She is the author of poetry chapbooks, *MOSAICS & MIRAGES* (Fahmidan Publishing & Co., 2022) and *ROSE GOLD: BETTY WHITE POEMS* (The Letter “B” Substack: [elizabethkbates.substack.com](http://elizabethkbates.substack.com)). Follow her on Twitter and Instagram @ElizabethKBates.

# MICHAEL J. ORTIZ

## **Dust and Light**

Come with me,

we're going further into  
this witness,

this action that is and isn't itself,  
that creaks open

the door of time.

Once when a boy

I opened a tall cabinet  
in our cellar:

it looked like a coffin standing  
straight up,  
with simple lines,

its door swung open as the morning  
washed through windows near the ceiling

where tangles of pipes hung.

At once, dust exhaled from  
fifty mason jars,  
stilled in their embossed



and orderly rows.

I felt like a priest bringing one out,

holding it to the light,  
its tiny sky now full

of sun.

**Michael J. Ortiz** lives in Maryland and teaches writing. He is the author of two books. He and his wife have four children, all better educated than he is.

# MARISA LIN

## **After the Blizzard**

It's time, Dad says as he hands me a shovel.  
Together, we push snow to the banks of the driveway,  
me scraping the trails he leaves behind. We clear  
the concrete while sweat collects under our scarves.  
We labor until heat and cold become one, so fused we feel  
nothing. We shovel until sky brightens, gutters glow,  
white mounds melt into earth. Together, we work  
in winter's warmth, unsure of who is doing more—us  
or the sun—but knowing that each weight lifted, set down  
will disappear.

**Marisa Lin** grew up in Rochester, Minnesota. She is an alum of the Community of Writers and Kenyon Review workshops, with work published or forthcoming in *Porter House Review*, *Poetry South*, *Lucky Jefferson*, and *The Racket*. Her work has received support from Roots Wounds Words, Elk River Arts & Lectures, and UC Berkeley's Arts Research Center. Her chapbook, *Dream Elevator*, will be published in 2024 (Kernpunkt Press). Marisa is currently pursuing a Master's Degree of Public Policy at UC Berkeley.

# AMY LINDQUIST

## **Mary and Eve**

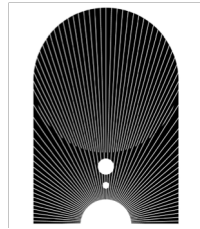
Mary crushes with her foot  
the head of the serpent that is wrapped  
around Eve's ankle like a living fetter.

Angels tip the boat of heaven  
leaning over its edge to see  
Mary gently take Eve's shaking hand

and lay it on her belly, grown  
full and round as a harvest moon.  
The baby kicks—the startled women laugh.

Out of dust, new green is showing,  
tendrils curling, buds unfolding.  
Mary, whispers Eve, I know these leaves.

**Amy** lives with her husband and two children in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where she lives out her faith in Jesus as a musician, home educator, hospice volunteer and writer. You can find her middle grade novel *Merrily of the Milky Way* (which features a ladder to the moon, a monk named Betelgeuse, and the tireless hounds of heaven) online at the [Blurb bookstore](#).



FICTION

# DOROTHY BENNETT

## Up The Bleachers

Ms. Smith saw D'Angelo steal the candy bar from the concession stand. There were kids in the bleachers, in the parking lot, in each other's laps, and on each other's nerves, but Ms. Smith's eyes were on D'Angelo, and D'Angelo knew it.

It was Friday night football, and the stadium was flanked on either side by private land. A few cows had nosed up to the fences to bask in the man-made light. The team's mascot, a pungent furred replica of a longhorn in a kitsch vest and cowboy hat, pranced down the sidelines. The many parents and grandparents and siblings were well bundled, with fleece blankets and scratchy scarves. The band players, gearing up for their halftime performance, were just starting to sweat in their inherited uniforms, though their fingers were pink from cold.

And lounging in a metal folding chair just outside the gate of the football field but well within the lights was the portly middle-aged policeman that law required to attend. It was usually Mr. Arroyo who sat through the games, checking up on the kids he recognized and getting to know the ones he didn't. But tonight, it was this man. He was smoking but trying to hide it by securing the cigarette between his forefinger and thumb, covering the rest with his remaining three fingers. He knew he was an ornament of the Friday night ritual – the parents knew it, Ms. Smith knew it, and the kids knew it. But he had to be there. And so, he waited, bored, giving the slightest homage to hiding his indiscretions, with a plume of smoke rising like a beacon above his shiny head.

Through the plume of smoke and the students and the teachers and the parents, Ms. Smith could see D'Angelo in a gaggle of students at the concession stand.

It was a Snickers, what D'Angelo stole.

The parent helper at the concession stand was a well-meaning woman, but as Ms. Smith watched and before the parent helper could turn back to the counter, D'Angelo's quick fingers had lifted the Snickers and his long legs had rounded the corner. He ducked into a shadow behind the stand and completely disappeared.

He could do that little vanishing act, Ms. Smith thought, because he was very Black.

She was sure he had stolen it. But not sure enough to prove it. It had happened in the corner of her eye, and since they already had a relationship of discipline — she and D'Angelo — she wanted to be beyond sure before she confronted him. She would watch him the rest of the game, she decided, but for now, she had work to do.

She turned and smiled at a little white girl from the elementary school who was sinking her pearly teeth into an Airhead. There were the bleachers in front of Ms. Smith, and she clasped her papers close to her chest. Although her girth should've given her an expansive pleasantness, it hadn't. There was no generosity of spirit to sustain it. Instead, she always looked strained, in her clothing and expression, as if she spent half her energy focused inward, leaving a tired remainder to interact with other people. She began to climb, with her right round thigh thrust out and around the other so that her tiny foot could access the step above, repeating the move with the left round thigh and tiny foot. Her ascent was one of rolling hips, dipping shoulders, and a frozen expression of attempted nonchalance.

Ms. Smith was an Administrator. She'd worked in an elementary classroom when she was fresh out of school and kept up with the three-foot-high children well enough. She'd been adored by the parents and liked by her students. Then, she moved to a middle school classroom where she found the students harder to manage. The kids had a small taste of the future at that age — a future in which they would manage their own time and be treated with respect by the adults around them. They were impatient, and hungry for more. It didn't work out. From there she tried a high school classroom, and while she was great at writing curriculum, she could only ever implement it through tyranny, which led to small, continuous mutinies in her classes. She acknowledged to herself every night that she was reaching the end of her rope, and just as she was edging up to the point where she would re-evaluate her methods, the worst possible thing happened. A position opened to be a principal who oversaw the running of other peoples' classrooms. She praised the Lord for this blessing and jumped at it. In other teachers she found the perfect subjects. They were conditioned enough not to flaunt their rebellion and fearful enough of losing their jobs to tolerate any manner of intrusion. When they did well, she used the subtle art of turning any praise into a praise of her leadership. When they did poorly, she let them know their lack of success was due to their deviation from said leadership.

She ran a great school. Test scores were up, truancy was down, and parent involvement was at an all-time high since she had been installed into her quiet office where she called any real troublemakers to see her, instead of clicking her colorful heels through the endless tiled hallways to chase them down. Which was how she knew D'Angelo Tyson immediately from such a distance.

A few rows up on the bleachers, she turned to a Black couple watching her progress. They weren't all that Black. Sort of caramel. But

still Black to Ms. Smith, still Black to the town. She inched across the bleacher to sit beside them.

Ms. Smith started the conversation. “Mr. Jackson.”

Mr. Jackson nodded back at her.

“Mrs. Jackson —”

“— Mrs. Smith.” The wife spoke quickly back, overlapping the end of her own name in a polite southern rhythm. “How’ve you been doing?”

“Just fine. How’re y’all?” Ms. Smith didn’t necessarily inquire.

“We’re doing good,” the husband answered.

“Good!” Ms. Smith abandoned personal pretense. “Terry is missing several assignments in his biology class. Has he mentioned anything about it?”

Mr. Jackson’s face clouded. “No, he hasn’t.”

“Can’t be that many,” said Mrs. Jackson. “Why y’all just started up again!”

“There was a summer project, along with two quizzes that he wasn’t in class to take.”

“Well, he’s been terribly busy with —” Mrs. Jackson defended.

“He’s starting off poorly this year.” Ms. Smith didn’t wait for Mrs. Jackson’s sentence to finish. “If he fails a class, he doesn’t play.”

And if he doesn’t play, they all thought, he doesn’t get that scholarship to the state college that’s been courting him since last season.

Mr. Jackson’s eyes quickly found his son on the field. Even in the Friday night lights, with the rotating, colliding bodies identified only by color and number, he knew his son.

“He’ll get them in.”

Ms. Smith smiled in a tight flinch. “Good.”

Mrs. Jackson smiled back, but her eyes drifted to her husband.



The Administrator stood and moved away. The sound of her hose against her skirt, pressed tight around her rear, gave a dainty rustle.

Down by the gate into the football field, D'Angelo was now giving half the Snickers to Alicia.

Alicia stood slightly in front of her girl posse. Alicia had been seen flirting with the stars of the basketball team, the soccer team, and was now dating a favorite of the football coaches, a young Arthur Brown. She'd bloomed early, in middle school, and had never fumbled the power that becoming a woman first had given her over her classmates. She'd grown wide swinging hips and loomed over the skinny girls in her grade. Now, standing before D'Angelo — her large chest covered but not hidden by a school athletics shirt and her sleek long braids neatly swept up into a bun, like a crown on her head — she was a queen. And D'Angelo was Lancelot. He offered the spoils, tempting her away, while young Arthur dug his cleats into the worn turf and waited, sweating, for the whistle to blow.

Alicia chewed her big bite of Snickers slow. It was sensual.

Ms. Smith paused in her ascent with a long snort. The girl needed to reign it in, but that wasn't in Ms. Smith's power to say. Instead, she would talk with Alicia on Monday about her wardrobe. Alicia should wear a larger size athletics shirt from now on. Yes. That made Ms. Smith feel better. She could chastise Alicia and still technically abide by school policy.

Ms. Smith sat with a thud beside two students who had previously been so near to bumping each other's noses that they had taken no notice of her.

They jumped apart.

"Matt," she said sharp. Then, drawing it out like it was a lecture in itself — "Rachel Goodall."

The blond girl blinked limpid blue eyes up at Ms. Smith. Her full name, bearing the weight of her father's last name, caused a flush to burn at the base of her throat. Ms. Smith knew her father through church.

Ms. Smith looked down at her papers.

"Ninth A-P English." Ms. Smith had a list in front of her with *Rachel Goodall* typed in bold at the top. "*Red Badge of Courage* journals and a practice essay from your summer work, as well as a Vocabulary quiz missing from this week." She looked back up at the girl. "That's a lot from one class."

"I've been meaning to get them in — I talked with — well, I meant to talk to —"

Ms. Smith let her stutter for a bit before interrupting with a calm, clear guilt-trip.

"Your dad won't be happy to get this report card, will he?" asked Ms. Smith. It was rhetorical. Dr. Goodall, the brilliant systematics theologian from the Bible university the next town over, would of course expect more from his daughter's high school academic career.

Rachel gaped. She went fish-like with her protruding eyes, weak chin, and hunched shoulders. Nothing like the picture of healthy Alicia. But Rachel was also the school's chosen beauty, being so well connected and so blonde. She'd been Homecoming Queen last year.

"No," Rachel said softly.

"Until you've studied for the quiz and written some journals, I expect to see you doing more *productive* things with your time."

Ms. Smith rustled away.

She knew that her words, light as they were, would weigh heavily on the little Goodall girl. Same as she knew that Mr. Jackson would yell at Terry to get his assignments in, and Terry would do them, but he would begrudge his father for it, like he would begrudge his mother for trying to

smooth over his father's yells with womanly doting. Maybe it was a little early in the year to start badgering kids at sporting events, but Ms. Smith wanted to stay on top of things. It was the only way to control the students and controlling them was the only way to run a good school. There was a reason she made these rounds. It was effective. Not gentle, not compassionate. But effective.

Ms. Smith moved further up the bleachers.

There were fewer parents up this high. They preferred the low bleacher seats, with their personal cushions brought along to help aging hips. Up here, the kids reigned. Some discussed their favorite films and shows with high voices; some cuddled up against and then flitted away from their momentary flirtations; and some grouped themselves into familial units among friends. They overlapped each other, flaunting differences with the unwitting exuberance of the young, and accepting them with ease.

But up came Ms. Smith.

She openly struggled with the stadium steps now. They were awkwardly spaced, where one footstep per step would soon make a person feel as though they were striding too wide and two footsteps per step would make a person feel that they were prancing. She breathed in little huffs and worried that her powder would start to slide as her face moistened.

And then encouraged by her little talk with Rachel about her father, Ms. Smith's thoughts scurried back to Dr. Goodall's Sunday school class, where he had said something she was almost certain wasn't theologically correct.

He was a handsome man, even in his late fifties. She preferred learning from studied men who were handsome. He always expounded

his points well, with his shapely hands held at strong angles and his head turned winsomely to the side.

“It is hard to know if we would accept the miraculous today —” how had Goodall put it? “— a pimply Peter, a short Jesus, and a brown Paul.”

Ms. Smith shuddered. For her part, she knew, deep in her soul, that the miraculous would be to her taste. Sure, Paul might’ve been brown, but not all that brown. She was a staunch congregant. She often counted herself lucky that her hometown church was so well organized and so aligned with her own beliefs.

“A miracle was meant to challenge,” Goodall had said. “Touching an unsafe leper, pregnancy out of wedlock, eating what was not allowed by law.”

There had been a miracle recently. Ms. Smith’s oldest niece Susie finally conceived a baby. That was a nice time. They had prayed really hard for Susie and celebrated for months afterwards. They were a good couple —Susie and John. Grew up in the church and married on a Sunday. They deserved a baby.

Out of the corner of her eye, Ms. Smith saw him.

D’Angelo was back at the concession stand.

She paused.

The parent helper was pulling a hair tie out of her pocket but watching the students this time. It was only a flute player buying a Mars Bar, and D’Angelo.

Ms. Smith’s lips pursed into a tight smile.

D’Angelo hesitated. He stood, hands in pockets. The Friday night allure was in his slouch, his lifted chin, and his heavy-lidded eyes. He stood, half in and half out of shadow. He was playing at being a man.

The parent helper's child came running to the booth. It was the little blonde girl Ms. Smith had smiled at. The girl had finished her Airhead. The parent helper quickly opened a package of Skittles and poured some into the child's waiting hands.

And D'Angelo was gone. This time was also a Snickers.

Ms. Smith looked down at the progress she had made up the bleachers. To walk down them all, to track down D'Angelo, to convince him she had seen him steal, when the candy bar would be gone before she'd got halfway there — it was too much. How unfulfilling it was to not curb him, to not manage him.

But this time, the policeman saw D'Angelo. He shouted at D'Angelo. D'Angelo stopped. D'Angelo saw the uniform and froze.

It was a strange moment, down there on the ground and up in the bleachers. It was suddenly, inexplicably awful.

The policeman threw down his cigarette and snuffed it out with his booted toe.

D'Angelo's face was stiff. The near adult he had been playing at was gone. The child he still was had returned, and he was afraid.

The policeman gestured.

Ms. Smith didn't realize she was holding her breath.

D'Angelo took a hesitant step. He was going to go to the policeman. D'Angelo's shoulders were tense as he took a second step. The small scene filled Ms. Smith's vision. Alicia and her posse stood close by, silent. The little white girl was open-mouthed, with the half-chewed unpaid-for Skittles making a rainbow of her tongue. They all watched. It looked wrong, thought Ms. Smith. Did D'Angelo act up because he was always going to act up, or because it was the only way to feel the fleeting freedom of self-expression while under the numbing tyranny that was Ms. Smith's expectation of his bad behavior?

Far off — like from a television in another room — the referee blew his whistle.

And D'Angelo ran.

Ms. Smith gasped.

If it had been Sheriff Gonzalez who'd been coming to give presentations at the school since before D'Angelo could read, or Mr. Arroyo who was usually at the games, or even Mr. Trent who patrolled the neighborhood D'Angelo lived in, they wouldn't have done what that policeman did. But it wasn't them that Friday night. It was this guy, and this guy took off after D'Angelo. He kicked up his legs, grabbed the side of his belt, and with one arm pumping, he ran.

The policeman was fast, like he had trained for this moment.

But D'Angelo was faster.

Ms. Smith watched them run, and then she watched the other students watch them run, and then they all watched the parents watch them run.

The policeman ran for speed, effort turning his face red. D'Angelo ran for the thrill of it. He was all hardened muscle and childish enthusiasm. The tightness in his face relaxed. He dipped under the arm of one parent and began to sprint straight up the bleachers, elbows to lifted knees, wild face grinning up and out. The watchers could see the untouched talent in his legs and arms. Here on display was the reason the coaches courted him every opening season. He didn't have the grades to stay on the team. But they could see, given the chance, he would have been glorious. An artisan of moments and looks and steps and movement. He wove between the parents, over the knees of the students, and even around the huffing policeman. D'Angelo did not scramble. He did not sweat. He danced. There, against the sterile gray of the bleachers, below the blinding football lights, D'Angelo lived.

He ran up to where Ms. Smith stood. What quick work he made of the ascent she'd labored over for the last half hour.

He stopped.

She stared at him, mouth slack.

There was a moment, eye to eye on the bleachers.

Then, D'Angelo passed her — knowing, somehow, that there was no control of this. She couldn't rob him of this feeling, even if she could punish it afterwards.

In front of Ms. Smith's eyes, he ascended.

D'Angelo flew.

Right up to the top of the bleachers, right onto the guard rail, and right off into the welcoming velvet black of night — D'Angelo ran, jumped, and flew. He was a young man slipping into the soft embrace of the night sky, leagues above the upturned faces of the gravity-bound crowd below.

Ms. Smith blinked. She was looking up, squinting until she could see stars despite the flood lights, searching for D'Angelo. The kids around her also peered at the night sky, whispering to one another:

“Did he just — ”

“He flew!”

“Where is he?”

“He went straight up!”

“Impossible.”

“D'Angelo!”

“Look! The cows aren't bothered. He didn't go down.”

“He wouldn't've made it down from all the way up here.”

“D'Angelo! Where—?”

“I saw it, he flew.”

“Nah.”

“He flew?”

Ms. Smith shook her head. She rushed towards the side of the bleachers, gripped the metal siding, and leaned over to look. She was met with the bewildered stare of Alicia’s enchanting face looking back up at her. They looked away quick.

Did he fly?

Ms. Smith leaned back. She had seen the ripple of his unzipped sweatshirt as he leapt. She had seen the bottom of his sneakers peddling in the air. She had seen the expression on his face.

She wanted to stop thinking about it. The ecstasy. She rubbed her head. And then he fell, she told herself, he had to have fallen. Nothing else was possible from up here. Young men didn’t fly. Guilty kids didn’t ascend into the heavens. The miraculous was not meant for regular people that Ms. Smith didn’t even particularly like.

Now she just had to find him and confront him about stealing the Snickers.

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# SHANNON BAKER

## The Sycamore

*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?*

*~ Mark 8:36*

Out beyond the sycamore tree is where the men would go to lose their souls. There was no specific place, no marking—not even an upturned clod of grass along the banks of the river or a fossilized boot print in the deep, red clay—nothing, nothing at all that would give a passing sojourner pause, that would make them think, *here, here is where it happened. Here is where the men beat the odds and lost it all.*

Like the earth, the river is quiet. The sycamore, too. It stands tall and old, mottled bark peeling in places, leaves broad and canopied, casting shade on the river grasses. The wind passes through the green, *whooshing*, but the tree stays silent. What happened is done; what more can be said? Volition is a terrible, beautiful thing.

Once or twice, a man was on his way to out beyond the sycamore but stopped. Instead, he climbed the sycamore to see better. His feet scraped the red-and-white bark of the sycamore, which hoisted him up to the highest branches. The leaves danced in soft breezes that day, joining the chatter of passing crowds. Branches were broken in the man's hasty descent, but the sycamore only felt the promise of renewal. Those days were good, when it was climbed, when its branches shed both bark and wisdom and it was more than just a monument to things of old. When it was climbed for truth and not passed for profit.

As time went by, however, fewer and fewer stopped to climb the sycamore. Their hands would graze its peeling trunk, brushing the red-and-white wood with wistful fingers, almost as if their souls knew what they were about to do before they did. Which, in most cases, was quite true—and the sycamore always felt a tremor through its trunk, passed along by their touch: the internal war of the soul versus the man. But volition is a terrible, beautiful thing, and it is Man’s, not Nature’s, to decide what to do with.

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It started with a hunger, or rather, an absence. An absence of satisfaction. If a man wasn’t satisfied, he was hungry, and though he might pretend otherwise, his chief priority in life was quelling that hunger. The hunger would come. Without fail it would come—what he had was not enough, though it was never supposed to be. But instead of treating his hunger as proof of this fact, the man treated it like a beast—and a beast it would become. It would grow, slowly, steadily, until it consumed the man’s thoughts with its gaping, vacant expression: *Feed me*. And so, he would look for ways to feed this “appetite”—to quiet it—to make room for other appetites. Because that was the thing about feeding appetites: when one was dethroned, another inevitably took its place. It might be of a different sort, with a different voice, a different drive, with a different recipe for satiation. But whatever the appetite was, there was one consistent truth about the *next* appetite in line: It was always bigger.

He would build for the appetite an empire, thinking he was protecting it, thinking he was reeling it in, making it a home, keeping it happy, so that it wouldn’t destroy him. But over time, the appetite lodged

itself somewhere he could not see, and it would carve its dwelling slowly, embedding deeper and deeper, making for itself a home in the real estate of his soul.

The hunger was never the problem. The hunger was *good*. But the men took what was good and made it a beast, and the beasts dug holes, and the men tried to fill them. They poured fixes into the yawning, creaturely mouths of their appetites, gorging the beasts but starving themselves.

And as time went by, the sycamore began to notice: The crowds of men that went out beyond it were of a certain way, and the ones that stopped to climb—fewer and farther between, yes, but there was the occasional man—were of another way. All the men looked different, and at first glance, you could not tell one from the other—those who would choose to stop and those who would continue out beyond—but there was something distinct when they brushed by the sycamore’s trunk, something internal, something visible to the constant, patient gaze that only Nature could manage. It was difficult to put into words—and Nature did not—but it came down to something of an awareness. An awareness of emptiness. It could be seen in the eyes of the men who stopped: They stumbled over branches and roots until they reached the sycamore, and then they paused, eyes wide and searching, sensitive to the tug within. The emptiness was there in the black wells of their pupils, but it vibrated. It had been found out, and it was being given up. And for those that climbed the sycamore, it was handed over. Having handed over their emptiness, the men would climb back down, eyes shining, and the sycamore would shudder, passing what was handed over down through its trunk, flushing it by its root system, and the water that coursed in the river would swirl and eddy and dissolve it all. Gone. And the men who were once empty would be full, turning back to their life and clasping their souls tight to their chests.

The crowds of men that went out beyond the sycamore felt the tug in their souls the same way, but their yearning fingers grazed the bark of the tree only for a moment before they flung themselves forward and out beyond. Their eyes held the same emptiness as the other men's, but the difference was this: They did not notice they were empty. It could be better said in this way: The men that stopped at the sycamore had a full, dizzying emptiness, and they knew it. The men that went out beyond had a dizzying, empty fullness, and they did not know it. They held loosely to their souls as they jostled past the sycamore, putting themselves up as collateral for the game that lay ahead.

The game that lay ahead. It was a ruthless game—enticing and unforgiving, and the more they played, the more they lost, though it didn't feel like losing in the moment. But the sycamore knew better. Of the men that went out beyond, very few of them came back. There was the occasional man, the man who played the game and saw that he was losing, and, at the last moment, snatched his soul from the creaturely mouths of other men's appetites and hugged it to his chest. Turning on his heel, he struggled to ignore the voices that grasped at him—that tried to pull him back—but something *else* was stronger now, and he pushed past other greedy bodies and flailing souls and ran, ran, *ran* back the way he had come. Sometimes it took a painfully long time—he'd forgotten the way—but the Something Else was resilient, and nose to the wind, feet stumbling and catching, he followed the scent carried on the wind from the old tree by the river. When the sycamore saw him barreling over the hill and along the banks of the river towards it, chest heaving, eyes red and frantic, the sycamore waved its branches, the wind *whooshed* through its gaps, and it bent towards the man, tremors rippling down its trunk, stilling only when the man collapsed at its base and pressed his palm to the bark with the relief of return, his quivering soul quieting within him.

The wind frequently followed the course of the river and over the hill to out beyond, letting its fragrance turn the heads of the many men whose Something Else still quivered, even buried deep within after years of playing the game. The wind would tickle lightly, and some men would respond, but those whose appetites were so engorged often did not glance at the stirring grasses that played at their feet. Instead, they set the sights of their appetites on other men's souls, and there they cast their lots.

The men playing the game did not look different from any other man. They were simply *more*: their edges were often crisper, their mouths often wider, their eyes often sharper. Their voices were louder, fueled by the growling of their appetites, though these stayed hidden as they burrowed deeper, deeper, deeper into the men's souls. The men with larger appetites preyed on the men with smaller appetites, and when a man first went to the out beyond, it took some time for him to learn who to play with. He first played with the men he arrived with, whose appetites were also yet juvenile and untrained. One appetite would surge and lash out, and the other, unsure how to defend itself, would fall injured. Snarling and retreating to its corner, it would take a piece of the man's soul and hand it over. The other man's appetite would feast—nothing tasted quite so good as another man's potential—and it would grow, already looking for the next round.

Looking on the carnage, it was easy to assume that the man whose appetite feasted had won. He became more...*more*, and this was all anyone wanted in the out beyond, never realizing that if *more* was the goal, it couldn't possibly be reached. At the end of the game, there would be no winners, but even in the moment, onlookers would have been mistaken: The men who lay broken and bleeding, having just handed over a piece of their eviscerated soul, still had appetites, and these raged and howled and picked the men up again so that they could throw themselves

back into the game, limping, wincing, eyes slanted and dark and bent once again on *more*. Meanwhile, the appetite of the man who had feasted licked its gluttonous lips, buried itself more deeply into the man's soul, held on tighter and, never satisfied for long, craftily set its sights on new arrivals.

The game space was quite a sight. A battleground, any onlooker would say (though, of course, out beyond, there were none, only players). Appetites prowled while souls cowered, doing their best to hide in the open expanse while they nursed their wounds. But a dying soul was vulnerable, and the men would not shield them, not even their own—their eyes were so set on the beasts. And so, when a soul was finished, the potential vanquished, there was nothing left but the husk of the man who realized too late his mistake. And the ground burned in indignation, a smoke signal rising to the sky, but of course, no one paid it any attention.

Fires ravaged the plains, beasts stalked souls, men egged them on. Everything was desolate, but if an onlooker fixed his gaze on the men who were *more*, the ones whose appetites gorged freely, he might have forgotten the charred rocks and blood-streaked dirt. He might have done away with the image of the fallen on the grass, whose souls flitted in desperation over their disillusioned eyes, trying to distract them from their own appetite that growled within, alive and well. For the men who were *more* were captivating, even to the fallen, with their crowns and their winnings draped across their shoulders—shiny, resplendent things that beckoned new arrivals in droves—*this, this is what we're playing for*. An onlooker would be mesmerized too, until the winds blew again from the sycamore, and, guiding their eyes upwards, reminded them that the crowns were smoking, too.

And so it went. The men played, casting their lots in a game they were already bound to lose, consuming one another and being

consumed themselves. But though the sycamore sent its wild, knowing wind and rustled the grasses at their feet, the men kept on. They became *more*, even as their buried souls yearned, even as their bleeding faces turned back towards the river and the tree that they had passed. Still the wind blew, sometimes in wisps and sometimes in gusts: In the worst case, it still alleviated Nature from the burning towers of fire that scorched the face of the plains; in the best case, it lifted the eyes and nose of one man among thousands, a man whose weary, beaten soul was still open to the Something Else that churned within him, beckoning him home.

The return—the sycamore was old and tired, but oh, it lived for the return. In the return, after stumbling through the plains and following the wind, the man would tremble against the tree, shaking not so much from the fatigue of his journey but from the good newness of the cool red-and-white bark against his cheek. For as he rested against the solid trunk, the horrors of the game he had played seemed to pass through his mind and into the sycamore, which accepted them, flushing them out through its roots and into the river below. The man did not forget the game itself—it was necessary to remember—but gradually his soul breathed evenly again, no longer tormented by the appetites that had relentlessly sought its life. And when the man became strong enough, as he learned to climb the tree, he found that he did not miss the empty fullness he had left behind.

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There is much more that could be said about the game, and the men of *more*, and their smoldering crowns. But at the end of it all, what more *should* be said? The same thing that allowed the burning of the plains also allowed the heeding of the wind and the climbing of the tree. Should it not have been so? And if not, what then? A more sinister fate, surely, than volition—that terrible and beautiful thing.

No one can quite say what ended the game once and for all, but like the river, the earth is quiet now. Beasts do not prowl the plains and souls do not cower in fear. New grasses have grown over the ravaged land of before. Clay that was once imprinted with the shapes of fallen men has been smoothed over by many seasons of rain, the stench of the air fumigated by ever-passing gusts. Yes—the only sound out beyond the sycamore is that of the wind, which still whispers and blows, stirring the grasses, taking the few remaining memories of the horror they endured and carrying them back on the breeze, back to the swirling eddies of the river and the cleansing roots of the sycamore, which stands there still, quietly healing, at the gate to the out beyond.

Having grown up along the North Shore of Lake Superior, **Shannon Baker** has always felt most at home in the outdoors. Now, living in central Iowa, she still draws inspiration from the wild spaces around her to create stories and poetry bent on transmitting messages of hope, joy, and redemption that is ever-present in the natural world. When she's not writing, Shannon enjoys reading, kayaking, hiking, traveling, picking away at guitar or fiddle, connecting with people, and dreaming of ways to visit all the national parks. Her other poems and stories appear in *Plain China: National Anthology of the Best Undergraduate Writing* and elsewhere. You can read more of Shannon's stories and poetry on her website: <https://shanbake13.wixsite.com/shannon-baker>.



# EMILY VER STEEG

## The Hole

Wilford was digging a hole. Buckley'd been sipping coffee and scrolling social media when he noticed his old neighbor, a shovel slung over his stooping shoulder, hobbling to the edge of his property where the bermuda was shored up by a retaining wall to stop it slumping into the marsh below.

"Jen," Buckley said. "What the hell's he doing?"

*Good Day Atlanta* cut to commercial and Jennifer peeped over the top of her chair to see what Buckley was agitated about now.

"Gardening," she said, and turned back.

"With that giant thing?" he said, meaning the shovel.

Wilford lifted the inappropriately sized shovel high as he could, which wasn't very, and heaved it down. He couldn't have made more than a dent. Buckley abandoned his coffee and phone and pressed his nose right up against the kitchen window to get a better look. Wilford lifted and heaved again, used his foot to further plunge the shovel into the soil, and levered up a small clump of red clay.

"He's, what, seventy-five? Eighty?" Buckley's breath fogged up the glass and he wiped it with his sleeve.

"Well, folks today's going to be a scorcher! Highs in the mid-nineties with humidity hovering around eighty percent."

He looked at the television. An alarming red mass obscured a map of the Atlanta area. Alarming, because it was October, but not unusual, because no matter how many environmental states of emergency

Congress had declared over the last ten years, the globe just kept getting warmer and warmer.

“This heatwave will be broken by some showers, but not until later in the week,” the meteorologist said. “So stay inside and stay cool.”

“He’ll die of heatstroke,” Buckley said.

Wilford struck the earth again, and as he lifted, he lost his footing and stumbled forward, nearly stepping in the depression he’d just made.

“Twist his ankle.”

“What, honey?” Jennifer said.

He opened the back door and descended the wooden deck stairs. The air sat heavily on his shoulders like a wool blanket. “Hey, Mr. Wilford!” He cut across his lawn toward the old man.

Wilford turned and Buckley waved. “Whatcha got going on here?” he said.

“Diggin a hole.” A drop of sweat followed a path of deep wrinkles down the old man’s face, from bald forehead to whiskered chin.

“Bit hot,” Buckley said.

“Mmm,” Wilford said.

“Why don’t I get my boy come help you after school, huh? He could use a lesson in hard work.” He laughed, but Wilford just looked at him.

“Ruther do it myself.”

“This heat’ll kill ya.”

Wilford looked into the morning sun. “I’ll be careful.”

“Don’t go digging your own grave is all.”

Wilford didn’t laugh at that joke either, and Buckley felt nervous in his stomach. His smart watch buzzed. “Shit,” he said. “I gotta go.”

Wilford nodded his head and turned back to his hole. He lifted the shovel, plunging it feebly into the earth.

“You’re late,” Jennifer said when Buckley rushed past her.

“Oh, come on.” His wife didn’t seem to understand that no one ever noticed if he logged into work on time—or at all.

He took the stairs two at a time and stripped his now-sopping shirt. He pulled on a new one and came back down and kissed her. “See ya after work.”

He descended another flight of stairs into the basement, crossed the wide carpeted area where the kids played video games, and entered a windowless back room. He powered on the computer and became one black square in the sea of black squares that represented the employees of Gosford Industries.

He worked in the Strategic Growth division and contributed to initiatives that expanded Gosford’s reach in the B2B consultancy market for service-oriented industries. What that really meant was his calendar was full of reminders and meetings, his task list always a bit too long, and at the end of the day he struggled to explain to his family what, exactly, he did all day.

He emerged at lunch and let his eyes adjust to the bright, natural light of the kitchen. The kids were at school, Jennifer out doing... something, and the house was quiet. Except for the faint scraping sound of Wilford digging his hole.

So the old man was still at it. Buckley watched from the window while he ate his sandwich. The hole was just barely bigger than before. Wilford must’ve taken a break at some point.

There was that nervousness in his stomach again. It was the way the old man had looked at him when he’d made the quip about digging his own grave. Was Wilford trying to kill himself? Death-by-hole? A pretty rough way to go. Easier to just take some pills or put a bullet in your head. Maybe he couldn’t handle that sort of direct action. Buckley

finished his sandwich and turned away from the window. Or maybe the old man just had a dry sense of humor.

#

Soon as 4:59 ticked over to 5:00, Buckley logged off for the day. The kids were doing homework in the kitchen.

“Dad,” Jeanine said. “I need help.”

“Baby, I been staring at a screen all day. I’m gonna need a minute.”

“I’ll turn the brightness down!”

“Where’s your mom?”

Braxton didn’t look up from the glow of his EduTablet. “Wasn’t here when we got home.”

“Alright hand it here, Jeanie Baby.”

Jeanine pushed her own EduTablet across the table to her father. A multiplication sign with a cartoon face and a speech bubble said, “Welcome to Math Module Five” Buckley was supposed to solve the multiplication problems, and he knew the answers just by looking, but the directions said he should use an array.

He typed “multiplication array” into the search engine on his phone. Something about drawing boxes and shading them in. “I don’t know what this is.”

“Ugh!” Jeanine slammed her small fists on the table. “Mom always helps.”

“There’s not a video or something? Or maybe Braxton can help?”

Braxton grimaced and shook his head.

Jeanine snatched the EduTablet out of Buckley’s hands and opened the Help Module. A sing-songy voice said, “Alrighty kids! Today we’re learning multiplication! (*Yay!*)”

“Dad!” Braxton said. “I’m concentrating!”

“Jeanie Baby, where’re your headphones?”

“They hurt my head,” she said.

“Can’t you use yours, B?” Buckley said.

Braxton rolled his eyes and pulled giant black headphones out of his backpack. They made him look like he had bolts for ears.

Buckley was about to text Jennifer when she burst through the door, grocery bags hanging from both arms. “Y’all come help,” she said.

The kids trooped out to the van and Buckley stood to follow, glancing out the window. Wilford had made decent progress for an old man in this heat. It was surprising, really.

Jennifer helped Jeanine finish her homework while Buckley and Braxton put the groceries away. After dinner, everyone sat in the living room, scrolling and watching and tapping their phones and tablets.

#

The next day Wilford didn’t appear. Buckley watched all morning and again on his lunch, but no sign of the man.

“I think I should go check,” Buckley said.

Jennifer was cutting vegetables for dinner. “Check what?”

“Wilford. He could be dead.”

“You think one day of digging a hole’s enough to *kill* a man?”

“If you’re old as that guy.”

She stopped chopping and looked at Buckley. “You need to mind your own business.”

“Someone’s gotta talk sense into him.”

“You do this all the time.”

“He could be dead,” Buckley said.

“Who’s dead, Dad?” Jeanine had come into the kitchen looking for a snack.

“He just wants to dig a hole in his yard,” Jennifer said. “Sure it’ll look bad but it’s his yard. No one else’ll see it.”

“It’s weird though,” Buckley said. “I don’t think it’s just a hole.”

“Dinner’ll be ready in twenty minutes.” She said it both to Jeanine, who was rummaging in the pantry, and to Buckley who had his hand on the door to the garage.

He crossed the side yard and knocked on Wilford’s front door.

“Buckley.” The old man looked tired, but no worse off than normal.

“You doing alright?” Buckley said.

Wilford nodded. “Come on in.”

The house had the same floor plan as Buckley’s, only it was a ranch instead of a two-story with basement. Out the large living room window where in his own house Buckley saw trimmed grass and a flower bed, there was the hole. He sat on the couch and Wilford sat opposite in a recliner.

“Been tired lately,” Wilford said. “You know.”

“Hard work, digging a hole.”

Wilford shrugged his shoulders. “I’m all stiff,” he said. “Gotta wait till I feel up to it again. Can’t wait too long though, you know.”

“I gotta be honest, Wilford. I don’t know.”

The old man looked over Buckley’s shoulder at the hole outside. “Well, you know.”

Buckley waited.

“My age,” Wilford said. “Who knows when my time’ll come.”

The word “know” started to sound strange to Buckley’s ears, the auditory equivalent of looking at a word too long and thinking it was spelled wrong. “I mean, what you’re doing is likely to... you know,” he twitched, “make that happen faster.”

“It’s gotta be done beforehand.”

Buckley laughed. “What, are you gonna be buried in it?”

The old man looked at him.

“Wilford,” he said. “No.”

“You can’t tell nobody.”

Buckley had to consider this. Who would he tell? It wasn’t anyone’s business if his next-door neighbor had lost his mind. It wasn’t even Buckley’s business, which Jennifer always had to remind him of. But at the same time, it might be his neighborly duty to save Wilford from himself. The man had kids—Buckley’d seen them come and go every week—shouldn’t they know what their father was up to? They were here all the time though, so they’d notice the hole eventually without any help from Buckley.

“Alright,” Buckley said. “But you can’t bury yourself. Who’s gonna put you in and cover you up?”

Wilford scratched his chin. “Hadn’t got that far.”

“This is,” Buckley tried to think of the best way to say it, “A bad idea.”

“You said you wouldn’t tell no one.”

“I mean—”

“You promised.”

Buckley rubbed his hands down his face. “Can’t you just be cremated like everyone else?”

“Not gonna let no one destroy me like that,” he said. “They did that to my Lucy and I shouldn’t’ve let them.” He gestured to a black urn on the mantle.

“Just your body’ll be... you know.” Buckley didn’t want to use the word “destroyed” in reference to a man whose body was very much intact.

“It’s the same as if it *was* me,” Wilford said.

Buckley didn’t know what to say. For the last several years, everyone who died had to be cremated. It was one of the environmental

laws Congress had passed. But it wasn't like it affected all that much anyway. Most metropolitan areas had long run out of available land for cemeteries. Plus, people said the legislation wasn't about the environment at all since cremation releases CO2 into the atmosphere. News commenters speculated that big developers had pushed the bill through to free up what little land was left for more subdivisions and strip malls.

"Is it some sort of protest?" Buckley said.

"No one'll know about it," Wilford said.

"What about the people who buy the house after you?"

"How'd they find out unless you told them?"

"Your body's gonna decompose, Wilford. Especially with no coffin or nothing. And no one to embalm you. Hell, you don't get that hole deep enough," Buckley stuck his thumb out behind him toward the grave, "And a wild animal'll dig you back up."

"That's not the point."

"The point!"

"A man deserves to be buried is all."

Buckley felt unsettled. Like something was simmering somewhere. Like Wilford was the one making sense and Buckley, somehow, was not.

"What do you even do all day?" Wilford said.

"What's that supposed mean?"

"You just stay inside on your screens and type and scroll, and that's not anything. It's nothing."

"I—I work." Buckley's ears felt warm. "I put food on my kids's table."

"All anyone cares about is this." He tapped his head. "No one gives a lick about this." Wilford smacked his arms and legs.

"Look, I just wanted to help," Buckley said. He would've been upset at the insult if he wasn't so concerned about Wilford's sanity.



“Don’t need it,” Wilford said.

“See, I’m afraid you do,” Buckley said. “I’m afraid you do.”

#

Buckley felt all coiled up that night. He couldn’t figure out what Wilford’s deal was. When he told Jennifer about their conversation, she’d said to drop it. That the guy was clearly senile. But the more Buckley thought about it, the more he felt Wilford was sane. He hadn’t had any wild or crazy look in his eyes, and his tone had been calm the whole time, even when he accused Buckley of being lazy. Or, it wasn’t exactly that he’d said Buckley was lazy. More that Buckley’s job didn’t matter? He didn’t understand what the old man meant. Buckley worked out, he gardened—he took care of his body. Jennifer always cooked healthy meals. Whatever Wilford thought, taking care of himself *did* matter to Buckley.

He woke up the next morning with a headache and sore throat. He still logged into work, but as the day wore on, he felt worse and worse. Wilford must’ve felt better, though, because he worked on his grave little by little all day.

That night, Buckley took a sleeping pill, but it gave him troubled, shallow sleep. He was too hot, then too cold. The sheet rubbed wrong against his skin. In the morning, he was burning up, his head splitting. Jennifer put her cool hand against his forehead.

“Fever,” she said.

He sank into a heavy sleep. When he woke again, two white pills and a glass of water stood on his bedside table.

“Jen?” he said. “Jennifer?” But she wasn’t home.

He sat up carefully, holding his head and squinting against the light coming through the windows. He took his medicine and stood under a

cool shower until the headache subsided. On his phone he tapped an email to his boss, and then he went to the kitchen for more water.

Wilford was still digging. The hole—the grave—was bigger than it should've been, like the old man had some sort of supernatural strength. Maybe he could sense that the end was near.

While Buckley drifted in and out of sleep on the couch, Wilford kept digging. Every time Buckley awoke, the grave would be a bit larger, until toward late afternoon it was roughly eight-feet long and three-feet wide.

Buckley slept through dinner. At some point, Jennifer made him eat soup and take more medicine. It must've kicked in about two a.m. because he woke up feeling fine, alert and covered in sweat. He went downstairs to watch TV, and something glinted out the window. Buckley'd installed floodlights out back after a string of break-ins the previous year, and Wilford's shovel and his bald white head caught the light whenever he popped over the edge of the hole to deposit the displaced earth. Rain began to thrum lightly on the deck, but the old man kept going. Television forgotten, Buckley sat down and watched. The thrumming increased to a patter, the patter to a shower, and still Wilford dug, though he slowed down. Buckley counted the seconds between each appearance of shovel and head.

Any second now and his neighbor would pop up again. If Buckley got to sixty, he'd go check. He counted to sixty, then seventy. At ninety he'd go check on Wilford. One hundred. One-hundred-and-twenty. He willed the frail man to appear, or at least the shovel. Maybe he was too deep now. Rain pounded the deck and the roof. Buckley lost count.

"You've gone and done it, old man," he said, and put on a raincoat over his pajamas. He shoved his feet into galoshes and trooped out the back door.

Wilford lay in the shallow grave, spent. Buckley stepped in and felt for a pulse. He was still alive.

“Wilford!” he said over the wind and rain. Buckley patted the man’s cheek. “Wilford, come on, get up!”

Wilford opened his eyes and pushed up on feeble arms. Buckley gave him a boost over the edge of the hole and half-carried him inside and sat him down in a kitchen chair.

“Where’re your towels?” Buckley said. “And you need dry clothes.”

Wilford pointed toward his bedroom with a shaking hand. Buckley went into the closet and grabbed the warmest clothes he could find. He found a few bath towels and snatched a blanket off the bed. When he came back to the kitchen, Wilford had lain his head on the table.

“Here,” Buckley shoved the towels at him. “Come on, dry off.”

Wilford didn’t move.

And then Buckley did something he’d only ever done for his children: He made Wilford stand up and peeled the clothes off the man’s skinny frame. He looked wasted, his skin sagging where it had at one time been tight and firm. Buckley patted his neighbor dry and maneuvered fresh clothes onto him. He draped the blanket over Wilford’s shoulders and led him into bed.

Now Buckley was shivering. He couldn’t tell if it was from the rain or if his fever was returning. Maybe it was both. He searched for a phone and found an ancient flip-phone in the drawer of a desk in the living room. The only numbers in it were Frances, Lucy, Melissa, and Pastor John. He called Frances first. No answer. Then Melissa. After what seemed like too many rings, a woman answered.

“Dad?”

“It’s me—I’m, I’m his neighbor,” Buckley said.

“Where’s my dad?” The woman was frantic.

“I found him outside. In the storm. He’s in bed now.”

“Sweet Jesus,” she said, but not like a curse. “We’ll be there soon.”  
And she hung up.

Buckley didn’t have his own phone on him, so with Wilford’s he texted Jennifer. Then he sat down, shivering, and waited.

#

He felt a hand on his shoulder and sat up. A woman stood over him, maybe forty or forty-five. Her brown hair was pulled back and she wore a raincoat over pink pajamas. She said something Buckley didn’t catch. He was tired and cold even though his skin felt hot. She went into the bedroom and came back out. Soon another woman was there, similar looking to the first. They were saying things and Buckley was saying things, but whenever he thought back on the night later, he could never remember what had been said.

One of the women had given him a towel and he dried himself off. The other presented him with some of Wilford’s dry clothes, but they were too small. He remembered saying he would wait for the ambulance. When it came, people paid almost as much attention to him as to Wilford, who was strapped to a gurney and rolled out the door. An EMT took Buckley’s temperature and told him to get into dry clothes soon.

Then everyone was gone.

Wilford’s shovel was still outside. The rain would make it all rusty. But instead of bringing it in, Buckley stepped down, into the hole, and dug. He’d get it deep enough tonight and then it would be there when Wilford came back, ready to receive him.

Buckley’s heart beat in his chest and his shoulders burned from the work. Rain rolled down his body and he felt alive.

#

Jennifer woke up alone in the middle of the night.

“Buckley?” she said.

She got up to go to the bathroom and glimpsed him out the window. There he was, digging that crazy old man’s hole—in the rain and with a fever, for God’s sake. He was way too interested in other peoples’ lives. He needed a hobby.

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# SETH WIECK

## Under The Sun

Tommy scanned the horizon toward the Lees' house but saw no signs of his cousin Maggie. He jumped from the tractor steps as wind gusted through the crop along the north fence line, sifting toward him. Heat reflected off the yellow wheat and swung the air up and around itself into a dust devil that sucked chaff and fallen stalks into the sky. The devil swirled around him in the road and finally dropped the chaff into the thin stand of wheat behind him. The grain had withered in the drought and this field didn't produce enough to harvest, so his uncle Lee-boy hired him to plow it under. Tommy's stomach growled.

Dust finally billowed along the county road and sunlight glinted off a windshield. The brown Ford pickup he was expecting fishtailed around the corner, barreling down the road with a wake of dust spreading out over the crop. The tires bounced along the road, and his cousin Maggie peered through the steering wheel. She slid to a stop next to the tractor. A whisper of dust silted on the beards of wheat. Maggie waited inside the cab until the dirt settled and then jumped out carrying a lunchbox and a thermos.

"Sorry I'm late. Mom went to the café to get sweet tea."

"Tell Lee-girl thanks." Tommy looked at the tractor and back to Maggie. "I'm hungry."

They rested in the shade of the tractor, and Maggie unpacked meatloaf sandwiches on thick heels of wheat bread, wrapped in paper towels. She wore her blonde hair long and down. Stray curls would fall in

her face until her eyes were hidden, and then she'd flick the curls aside to look him in the eye. It caught him by surprise every time.

"This is good," he said, lifting his sandwich.

"Glad you like it." She leaned back on one hand. "You're gonna have a birthday tomorrow."

"*We're* gonna have a birthday."

"Do you think God meant something, making us born on the same day?"

"It means our moms had sex with our dads about the same time."

She rolled her eyes. He sighed, changing his tone.

"I'm an accident. All these grown ups around and no one knows who my dad is. Then they tell me that you can't have kids unless you're married, but nobody was married that had me. Couldn't have been too much meant by it."

"You ever try to figure out who your dad is?"

"In the mirror. I see my mom and some of your dad, but they're twins. I'm bound to have whatever he's made of in me."

"You look different. You must be growing."

"Not as fast as the boys in town. They all got armpit hair."

"Gross."

"It's just what it is."

She leaned back, the sun on her face, and her hair dropped back between her shoulders and touched the ground.

He opened the thermos and tilted it to his mouth, a trickle running over his lips and rinsing a line through the dust that had settled on his face. He wiped the wet away. Maggie held him steadily in her gaze.

"I think God meant something by it," she said. "I'll always be attached to you."

"If we're meant to be attached, then I guess I'll look after you."

“Do I need looking after?” she asked.

“I don’t know that answer. I gotta get back to work.” He stood and climbed the steps. “Thanks for the tea.”

The tractor started with puffs of blue smoke, and he pushed the throttle forward and dropped the machine into gear. He twisted in the seat to watch Maggie, but she was already halfway down the road dragging a train of dust behind her.

That night it rained. Not a lot but enough that the roads would be mucked up. During the storm, Tommy woke from a dream. He lay on the bed looking into the dark and seeing nothing. “Hello?” he said.

He got up and crossed the hall to Maggie’s room. “Maggie,” he whispered.

She didn’t stir.

He walked down the hall to his aunt and uncle’s bedroom.

“Lee.”

“Hmm?” she answered out of the dark. His Uncle Lee-boy snored quietly.

“Did you call me?” Tommy said.

“No.”

Tommy walked back to his room and got in bed. Heaviness pulled at him and he sank back to sleep.

Again he woke in the darkness, his heartbeat quickened, his breath shallow so as not to miss what he thought he heard.

He got out of bed and crossed the hall to Maggie’s room. He listened to her breathing in the dark and then went to his aunt and uncle again.

“Lee.”

“Yes?” Lee-girl said.

“Did you call me?”



“No. Go back to bed.”

He lingered in the doorway listening for any sounds in the house. The clock in the kitchen ticked. He held his breath, listening to the second hand moving, and then his body urged him to breathe again. He walked to his bedroom and got under the covers. He exhaled and rested. His fingers tingled and his flesh grew tired. He slept again.

He swam to the surface at the sound of his name for the third time. He threw back the covers and ran to the Lees'. He knelt on Lee-girl's side of the bed.

“Lee.”

“What?”

“Did you call me?”

Lee-boy sat up. “Who's there?”

“It's Tommy,” she said. “It's okay.”

Lee-boy dropped to his pillow and mumbled.

“Tommy,” she said, “what did it sound like?”

“Someone called my name.”

She sighed. “I want you to go back to bed, and if you hear it again just say, ‘Here I am.’ Maybe it's the Lord.” She rubbed her eyes. “Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Go back to bed.”

He lay on his back, blinking in the dark as the rain tapped on his window. He heard it again. In a motion he was out of bed, yanking the closet light on, and then back in bed to hide under the covers from the voice that called his name.

In the morning he opened his eyes to Lee-girl lying next to him. She'd been watching him.

“What happened?” she said. “Tell me everything.”

“It was just a dream.”

“Thomas Moor, tell me what happened.”

“I was scared so I turned the light on.” He looked over Lee-girl’s head into the closet.

“Why’d you get scared? The Lord isn’t gonna hurt you.”

“How do you know it was God, Lee-girl? I coulda been hearing things.”

“You could be hearing God,” she said. “What most people would give for that.”

“I turned the light on. I think most people would have done the same.”

“I wouldn’t have.” She rolled out of bed.

“Then God should have called you instead. He ruined my sleep!”

Rubbing his eyes, he followed her into the kitchen. Maggie was scrambling eggs. “Happy birthday,” she said.

“You too.” he said. “Thirteen. We aint kids no more.”

Maggie scooped eggs onto four plates, and Lee-girl put bread in the toaster and sliced apples. Lee-boy came in and twitched a smile and a nod in Tommy’s direction, and poured a cup of coffee. The pot clanked in the machine.

Tommy said, “Can you grab me a cup while you’re there?”

Lee-girl looked up from the apples. “When did you start drinking coffee?”

“As soon as he gets over here with that cup, I guess.” He took only two sips the whole meal. The first one burned his tongue.

Lee-boy drove him to the tractor after breakfast. Tommy gazed out the rolled-down window. Nine o’clock and ninety degrees. Heat shimmers blurred the horizon all the way around.

“You think the fields are dry enough?” asked Tommy.

“Yep.”

“Can you cut today?”

“The west place should be ready this afternoon.”

“You want me to help?”

“After you finish sweeping this field. If you’re done before lunch, come back in with Maggie. I’ll pick you up at the house.”

The rain had washed the dust off the tractor windshield. The remaining acres to be plowed appeared clearly. Tommy reached for the choke and the key and cranked the engine. He set the throttle, dropped the tractor into gear, and cut a new line in the crust where the mud had dried. Under the crust the dirt was dark and moist. Tommy kept the windows open, letting the wind drag off some of the heat. After three rounds he could see his earlier work changing color and drying in the heat, and then the dust began to rise from the plow. He closed the windows on eastbound rounds because the westerly wind that was steadily rising pushed the dust and enveloped the tractor. With the windows closed, the tractor cab became an oven, so he shed his T-shirt. Sweat shone on his skin and then chalked with the dirt filtering through the faulty window seals.

The tractor pulled a fourteen-foot plow, and a full round took twenty minutes, eating away the morning, three rounds an hour.

On a westbound round, he opened the thermos and poured the water into his mouth. The overflow ran down his chest and cut a swath through the dust. The cool refreshed him. He shut the thermos and set it back in the wedge between the seat and the wheel well.

Along the edge of the field, a coyote loped. “You’re brave out in the daylight,” he said.

The coyote crouched into the wheat. Signs of its path appeared. Then a big-eared jackrabbit burst out, the coyote bounding after it. The rabbit easily outstripped the coyote until a second coyote, posted ahead of

the rabbit, lunged out of the wheat and caught the jackrabbit by the back of the neck. The first coyote trotted up, and the two of them shared the meal.

Nine rounds and it was noon. Ten rounds and it was almost half-past. His stomach crawled with hunger.

“Where are you, Maggie?”

Twelve rounds and he was nearly done with what was left of the field, but he was hungry. He pulled the rig over to the road running through the property and sat with the engine idling for a while, watch for the cloud of dust on the county road that meant she was coming. Nothing. He turned the key and pulled the kill switch, and the engine wheezed to a stop. He grabbed the thermos and his shirt and stepped off the tractor.

His stomach growled as he walked east toward the Lees'. He looked back to the field.

“Just finish,” he said, but his stomach urged him on and he kept walking. In a mound of dirt he saw a padded paw print that had broken through the crust. “There’s the coyote, rabbit. Coming to get you. You don’t even know he exists, but he’s on his way.”

He kicked the dirt mound and the paw print scattered over the gray crust. The air sponged the heat and carried more than its own weight down his lungs. He walked north now, toward the county road. “Where you at, Maggie?”

When he turned the corner toward the Lees' he saw the brown pickup, wheels up, in the ditch. He ran. Just before he reached it he stumbled through a deep rut and fell into the weeds beside the truck. The driver's side lay facing the ditch, and the soft dirt had been dug away. He crawled to the driver's door.

“Maggie, you here?” The back window was busted out and tiny bits of glass sparkled in the dirt. A trail in the dirt and crushed wheat

stalks led away from the truck, then doubled back toward the ditch. An imprint of Maggie's body lay in the dried crust of dirt, and blood, then dragging footsteps away from the wreck. He ran along the road, passing her shirt drenched in blood, and came upon her lying in the ditch in her bra and shorts.

The left side of her face was black with the blood and dirt and her eye was smashed shut, her nose turned. Mud caked her mouth and hair. Her left leg twisted above the knee.

He moved to lift her but stopped to judge the distance to the Lees'.

A mile, at least.

"I'm going get your dad."

He ran, stumbling through ruts. His mouth dried as he ran and there was no air. He ran and his legs hurt and his feet were hot, rubbing in his boots, his toes jamming in the boots he'd outgrown. He walked until his breath came back to him and he ran again. When he burst in through the back door, his aunt and uncle could see there was something wrong and grabbed the truck keys before he explained. In the truck, he finally was able to coax some words from his parched mouth, but all he could say was that Maggie was hurt.

At the wreck, they loaded Maggie into the pickup and roared down the road, leaving Tommy by the ditch. He watched them and their dust go, and then he walked through the wheat toward the tractor.

"Finish the field." When he came to the road that ran through the field, he crumpled like a hollow reed next to the wheat under the sun. He lay in the dirt, the beards of skimpy wheat no shelter from the scorching sun, his pupils shrinking against the light.

"Here I am," Tommy said. "Here I am."

**Seth Wieck's** stories, essays, and poetry can be read in *Narrative Magazine*, *Ekstasis*, *Grand Little Things*, and *The Broad River Review* where he won the Ron Rash Award in Fiction. He's currently a candidate for an MFA at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, and lives in Amarillo with his wife and three children.