In This Issue

Original Essays by Our Spring 2020 Fiction Writers and Excerpts from Their Forthcoming Books

JULIA ALVAREZ, author of ***Afterlife***, describes why she likes to be prepared, how her family's plans went out the window when they had to escape the Dominican Republic in a hurry, and how "mortality, which shouldn't have come as a surprise, surprised me" (p. 3).

Through writing ***The Mountains Sing***, a novel of the Việt Nam war, **NGUYỄN PHAN QUẾ MAI** could trace the footsteps of her ancestors, "bring to life the underrepresented women and children who often suffer the consequences of wars," and "imagine their dreams and hopes" (p. 10).

JILL McCORKLE's novel ***Hieroglyphics*** was inspired by a train crash from her father's childhood, the Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire in Boston, and how "everyone has a memory that haunts or lingers" (p. 18).

RICHARD FARRELL channeled his love of flying into his debut novel, ***The Falling Woman***, a story of the sole survivor of a plane crash and the investigator (and ex-pilot) assigned to find her (p. 25).

LARRY WATSON's ***The Lives of Edie Pritchard*** began as a novel about twin brothers in love with the same woman, but became a story of a woman who knew who she was, no matter how often others tried to define her (p. 32).

When **SHRUTI SWAMY**, author of the collection ***A House Is a Body***, was growing up, her father told stories that he made up on the spot. She learned then that "words could make a house, a place in which to live" (p. 39).

CAROLINE LEAVITT's ***With or Without You*** took off when she learned that patients coming out of coma sometimes experience significant personality changes. She writes, "I knew I had to write about this kind of transformation and what it might do to a couple" (p. 45).

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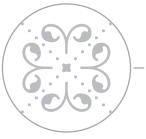
Living the Afterlife

AN ESSAY BY

JULIA ALVAREZ



I've always liked to be prepared: I like to know what to expect, what to pack, who will be at my surprise party. Even as a kid, I wanted a plan, and being a middle sister suited me just fine. Someone was always ahead of me, reporting back on what was to come. When I learned from my older sister about boys and sex, she cautioned that I couldn't think about it because if I did and died right then, I'd go straight to hell. That was terrible news. But I had to think about it, have a plan going forward. My American friend Elizabeth offered to help. We spent an afternoon kissing and petting in a part of the garden Papi had planted, which he called El Paraiso—just practicing, you know.

When the Girl Scouts came to the Dominican Republic, my older sister joined. A few months later, an American mom started a Brownie troop for us younger girls. At our first gathering, the mom explained we were going on a treasure hunt. We were to work together as a team: she'd give us the first clue to puzzle out, which would lead us to the next and the next clue, until finally we'd unearth a buried box full of candies. But I wanted to know where the treasure was beforehand. So I wandered off, searching for any recent disturbance of the ground. Sure enough, I found the mound, dug up the box, and hollered, "Candy!"

"Julia is not ready to be a Brownie," the leader told Mami.

I grew up in an oral storytelling culture, with a repertoire of family stories repeated over and over. I already knew the plots and characters, the twists and turns, but that didn't diminish the satisfying pleasures of encountering them again, old friends. My favorite storybook was *The Arabian Nights*. This smart girl Scheherazade had a plan: she bombarded the sultan with story after story for 1001 nights, stories I got to know by heart: "Ali Baba and

the Forty Thieves," "Aladdin and His Magic Lantern," "Sinbad, the Sailor." Scheherazade ended up saving her life and the lives of all the women in her kingdom. This is what came from good planning.

In 1960, we had to leave the country in a hurry to escape the dictator's dreaded secret police. All our plans went out the window. We landed in Nueva York, a huge metropolis full of strangers speaking a language I couldn't decode. What were they like, these Americans? Who did they love? How did they go about their lives? I became a reader, not to find myself in books—in fact, there were no "multicultural books." I read to find out about *them*, their daily lives, their idioms, their jokes, their families, friends, enemies. It was profoundly transforming to discover that these characters who were supposed to be so different from us were so much like me.

I started writing my own stories in large part to understand what was happening to my family and me in this brave new world. In my first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, I was able to imaginatively resolve the issues that arose in an all-girl immigrant family. *In the Time of the Butterflies* helped me to learn about and reflect upon my parents' generation, the wages of the dictatorship they had left behind. Writing was my GPS in the labyrinth of "real life." Otherwise, I would've ended up devoured by the minotaurs waiting around every dark corner. As I told a reader once during a Q and A, my writing process was "staying one sentence ahead of the furies."

You might think, then, that I'm the kind of writer who has a book all planned out ahead of time. I am a disciplined writer with a writing schedule I try not to veer from, and I do work best with structure. Like Flannery O'Connor, I'm a believer in the daily habit of writing. I'm not always productive or inspired, but the muse knows I'm home from nine to three. I wouldn't want to miss her when she deigns to come. That said, I rarely know where I'm going or even what I'm thinking until I write it out. To alleviate the stress, I do always have a safety plan as a lucky charm: this will be *the* ending; this character will end up doing this and that. (I hear John Irving always knows the last line of his novels before he starts. Jeez, some writers have all the luck!) Once I have a plan, I can let go and lose myself in the mystery.

This all worked fine for my young and middle-aged writing life. But then the safeties came tumbling down. Mortality, which shouldn't have come as a surprise, surprised me. I started losing the people I love. One of the

downsides of having a large extended familia is that when the time comes, you lose not just a nuclear handful but a whole flank of significant others: tías, tíos, madrinas, padrinos, abuelos. The losses kept coming closer: my parents, my beloved in-laws, my teachers, dear older friends left and right. Beyond these personal endings was a growing sense that we are living in elegiac times with the destruction of so many ecosystems, the extinction of many species, the poisoning of the air we breathe, the water we drink.

When I lost my older sister to suicide, I was lost. Following her was what I'd always done. I no longer had my scout, always a few steps ahead, making the mistakes I would learn from, preparing the ground for my arrival, and preparing me for what was coming. I tried writing my way out of grief, but I couldn't summon the fierce attention and affection a book requires in order to get written. My old tricks didn't work. The discipline, the staying ahead of the furies. I couldn't run that fast anymore. I couldn't whip out a chapter, channeling Anne Tyler. I realized at some point that I, too, had died—or at least my old selves and the younger writer who had written about them.

But I couldn't give up. None of us can afford to stop at despair. We owe the generations coming our deepest, truest activism: doing the work we love to do. And so, rather than abandon all hope and stay stuck in the underworld, I began to reflect on loss and last things. After the final no, there comes a yes, Wallace Stevens wrote. But where will the yes after the final no come from now?

It may come in such seemingly insignificant, often irritatingly inconvenient ways that we might miss it or dismiss it, were a story not there to force us to pay attention. It might come in the guise of an undocumented pregnant Mexican girl or a sheriff who really does have a heart of gold under his gold star or an exasperating manic sister with a noble heart. It will come at those moments when we act out of the larger versions of ourselves and edge a little closer to a more beloved community.

Afterlife is, then, my first novel written as an elder. I've been preparing myself, you know, befriending a world that is closing in on being the world without me. I call it "living the afterlife." If Scheherazade—a plucky woman with a crafty plan, who kept herself alive in the sultan's court—was my first muse and model as a young storyteller, who will be my muse for this time in my own and in our planetary life? I write to find out.

FROM

Afterlife

BY JULIA ALVAREZ

Today, the magnet on her fridge proves prophetic: *EVEN CREATURES OF HABIT CAN SOMETIMES BE FORGETFUL.*

You said it, Antonia agrees. She has just poured orange juice into the coffee in the mug she brought back from one of the fancier hotels. Must have been a special occasion for Sam to have chosen to stay there and for her to have allowed the expense.

You'd think you were born with money in your family, she liked to tease him.

I never had it to begin with, so I'm not afraid to spend it, Sam responded. He was always quick with a comeback. Used to get him in trouble with his dad growing up. Being fresh, it was called back then. Oh, the stories he told her.

Sam spoiled her, or tried to, and got scolded as his thanks—but it was the kind of scolding that must've made him suspect she liked being made something of.

There'll be no more of that now.

SHE IS KEEPING TO HER ROUTINES, walking a narrow path through the loss—not allowing her thoughts to stray. Occasionally, she takes sips of sorrow, afraid the big wave might wash her away. Widows leaping into a husband's pyre, mothers jumping into a child's grave. She has taught those stories.

Today, like every other day, you wake up empty and frightened, she quotes to herself as she looks at her reflection in the mirror in the morning. Her beloved Rumi no longer able to plug the holes.

Late afternoons as the day wanes, in bed in the middle of the night, in spite of her efforts, she finds herself at the outer edge where, in the old maps, the world drops off, and beyond is terra incognita, sea serpents, the

Leviathan—Here There Be Dragons.

Countless times a day, and night, she pulls herself back from this edge. If not for herself, then for the others: her three sisters, a few old aunties, nieces and nephews less so. Her circle used to be wider. But she has had to pull in, contain the damage, keep breathing.

As she often tells her sister Izzy, always in crisis, arriving for visits with shopping bags full of gifts and a broken heart: the best thing you can give the people who love you is to take care of yourself so you don't become a burden on them. No wonder Izzy's ringtone for Antonia is church bells.

Actually, all the sisters have followed Izzy's lead and assigned that ringtone to Antonia. The secret got out. The secret always gets out in the sisterhood. Our Lady of Pronouncements, Mona said by way of explanation. Good old Mo-mo, no hairs on her tongue—one of their mother's Dominican sayings. Tilly was kinder. Sort of. It's because you started going to Sam's church. It's how Tilly used to describe their denomination, to avoid using the word *Christian*. Now she avoids Sam's name. *Your* church. As if Antonia would forget that Sam is gone unless someone reminds her.

They're just jealous, was Sam's theory about the ringtone profiling. All your years of teaching. You've picked up a lot of wisdom. A head full of chestnuts.

Full of B.S. That's what the sisterhood would say.

Who now to champion her way of being in the world?

She empties out the ruined coffee and starts over.

The little phone she is carrying in her pocket begins ringing. She hasn't set special ringtones for anyone, except Mona, who insisted on dogs barking. Not just any dogs, but Mona's five rescues, which she set up on Antonia's phone.

Today it's Tilly calling. A few days ago, Mona. Izzy weaves in and out. The sisterhood checking in on her. You take her this morning. I'll call her this weekend. The frequency has dropped off the last few months, but it has been sweet.

How are you? they ask. How are you doing?

Come visit, they all say. Knowing she won't take them up on it. She is the sister who hates traveling even during the best of times.

It's beautiful here, Tilly brags. Why do you think it's called the *Heart*land? They have an ongoing rivalry. Vermont or Illinois. Who gets spring first, who has the worst snowfalls?

As she chats with her sister, Antonia hears plates clattering in the background. Tilly cannot abide being still. What are you doing? Antonia confronts her sister.

What do you mean what am I doing?

Those sounds.

What sounds?

How easily they slip into bickering. It's almost a relief when Tilly brings up Izzy. I'm worried, Tilly says. Izzy has been increasingly erratic. She is selling her house just outside of Boston, or not—they can't be sure. She is sleeping in friends' spare rooms or on their couches while she remodels her house.

But you're selling it, aren't you? the sisters try to reason with her.

It'll bring in more money if it's perfect.

Perfection takes time, not to mention money, which Izzy is always saying she doesn't have. Didn't she stop seeing her shrink because she said it was too much money? But you have insurance, don't you? The sisters again, the Dominican Greek chorus they become when some sister, usually Izzy, is headed for a downfall.

I don't want some insurance company knowing I'm going to a shrink. A shrink seeing a shrink! It would ruin my professional standing.

That bridge was burned a while back, according to Mona. Izzy is no longer at the mental health practice she helped start. Even master sleuth Mona isn't sure what all came down.

And she's also stopped the meds she was on, Tilly adds. Mona says you can't do that with those kind of meds. Tilly sighs, eerily still for a change, and then says, They had a huge fight. Those two, I tell you.

Antonia imagines Tilly shaking her head. It is odd that Izzy and Mona, the two therapists in the family, can't apply their professional skills to getting along. You said it, Antonia agrees, so as not to append something negative and quotable that will get back to the others, bring on more bickering.

Anyhow, sister, screw them. How are you doing?

I'm okay. Antonia's mantra of the last year. Somewhere she read that *okay* and *Coca-Cola* are the two most universally understood words. It depresses her to think the ties that bind are so flimsy. Even silence would be better.

But silence is all she gets when she addresses Sam these days. What she wouldn't give for his voice coming from the afterlife, assuring her that he's okay.

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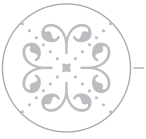
Climbing Many Mountains

AN ESSAY BY

NGUYỄN PHAN QUẾ MAI



In 1983, when I was ten years old, I went secretly to the post office in my hometown to mail a letter to Hà Nội. The letter contained my entry for a writing competition. When a notice arrived announcing that I had won a prize, my parents were shocked. Due to the long history of Vietnamese writers' experiences in my country, my parents reminded me of their wish that their only daughter would not become a writer.

I had to put aside my dreams of writing to do a variety of jobs to earn a living and help support my family. But the writer in me always listened to other people, always asked questions about their experiences during the war, and memorized their stories. In my teenage years, I began to travel to my parents' villages to talk with our elder relatives and family friends so I could imagine how life had been for my grandparents, who had either died or been killed before I was born. Gradually, the more I began to understand Việt Nam's painful past, the more people shared with me the events of their lives.

Unbeknownst to me, at that young age I was already carrying out the research for *The Mountains Sing*. It was only with time and distance and my ongoing academic research that I could comprehend the complexity of Việt Nam's history and its relation to other nations. My extensive exchanges with Vietnamese and American combat veterans, as well as volunteer work with victims of the war, has expanded this understanding.

The Mountains Sing embodies my yearning to know my grandmothers, and to bring to life the underrepresented women and children who often suffer the consequences of wars the most but must hide their sorrows to become

pillars of strength and comfort for returning soldiers. Through Grandma Diệu Lan and her granddaughter Hương in the novel, I could talk to them, trace their footsteps, and imagine their dreams and hopes.

It may seem ironic that I have chosen to write this novel, by far my most personal work to date, in English, which is also the language of invasive military powers and cultures. But this language has given me a new voice and a way to fictionalize the turbulent events of my country's past, including those that have not yet been sufficiently documented in Vietnamese fiction, such as the Great Hunger or the Land Reform. I am also responding to Hollywood movies and novels written by those Westerners who continue to see our country only as a place of war and the Vietnamese as people who don't need to speak—or, when we do, sound simple, naïve, cruel, or opportunistic. The canon of Việt Nam war and post-war literature in English is vast, but there is a lack of voices from inside Việt Nam.

When I first learned English in eighth grade, I didn't know that one day it would be the language that would save *The Mountains Sing*. Khương Dụ, the small northern village where I was born, did not have an English teacher. Bạc Liêu, the southern town where I grew up, didn't have many people who could speak English. For me, a student who also worked as a rice farmer and street vendor, the Western world was mysterious, existing only in the black-and-white movies I would occasionally catch a glimpse of while selling cigarettes in the town's cemetery, which also served as our only open-air movie theater.

I didn't know any English words until well into secondary school, when one afternoon my eldest brother brought home a notebook. He told me he had just learned English from someone and would teach me. I was so excited I could barely swallow my dinner. That night, after I had lit the oil lamp (we had electricity only occasionally) and put on long pants and a long-sleeved shirt to ward off the zillions of mosquitoes, my brother solemnly brought out his notebook. He opened the first page and pointed at a strange-looking word. "Sờ cu lờ," he said, and then looked at me, expecting me to repeat after him.

"Sờ . . . sờ . . ." I said, and brought my hand to my mouth.

"Sờ cu lờ," he said again.

"Sờ . . . sờ cu . . ." I repeated and burst out laughing. I couldn't help it! The words that had just escaped my mouth sounded like the Vietnamese phrase for "to touch a male's genitals."

So ended my first English lesson. Because I hadn't been able to stop laughing, my brother slapped his notebook shut and stormed out of the room. His face was as red as a *gấc* fruit.

"Brother! Teach me, please," I called after him, but he didn't turn back.

Later, much later, I found out my brother was trying to teach me a very important word: "school."

I didn't dare ask him to teach me again, but occasionally I would steal his notebook when he was gone, hide under the mango and coconut trees that circled our fish pond, and stare at the English words. I sensed that behind those strange-looking words existed some magic doors, and if I managed to push them open, I would be able to enter the big, wide world.

And now, with *The Mountains Sing*, I am taking my baby steps into that world. It took me seven years to write and edit, hundreds of revisions, many sleepless nights, tears, and countless moments of doubt. I doubted that I was a good-enough storyteller. I doubted my ability to express complicated thoughts and emotions in English. But I never doubted my decision in 2006 at the age of thirty-three to return to my dream of becoming a writer.

By turning to the first page of *The Mountains Sing*, you will open the door into an authentic Việt Nam where proverbs are sprinkled throughout daily conversations, where lullabies and poems are sung. You will experience the colors, richness, and complexity of our culture, beginning with our Vietnamese names and language, which appear in full diacritical marks. Those marks might look strange at first, but they are as important as the roof of a home. The word "ma," for example, can be written as ma, má, mà, mả, mạ, mã; each meaning very different things: ghost, mother, but, grave, young rice plant, horse. The word "bo" can become bó, bỏ, bọ, bơ, bở, bờ, bô, bố, bồ, bổ (bunch, abandon, insect, butter, mushy, shore, chamber pot, father, mistress, nutritious).

Just like Hương in *The Mountains Sing*, for several of my childhood years, books were my only friends; they allowed me to escape from desperation and poverty. My family had moved from the north to the south of Việt Nam; it was just a few years after the war, and despite the country's unification, the

north-south tension ran strong. While living amidst this tension I understood the deep wounds that divided our country and families. Many of these wounds have still not healed, even though nearly forty-five years have passed since the war's ending on April 30, 1975.

Tremendous progress has been made in terms of reconciliation between Việt Nam and the United States, but the wounds that divided our country and families, both at home and in the diaspora, remain profound and painful. For that reason, *The Mountains Sing* places our people at the center of the Việt Nam War in the hopes that we will be open to difficult but necessary conversations that can help one another heal. And at the same time, I hope the story of Hương and Diệu Lan helps international readers discover our common humanity, as in the words of Hương: "Somehow I was sure that if people were willing to read each other, and see the light of other cultures, there would be no war on earth."

FROM

The Mountains Sing

BY NGUYỄN PHAN QUẾ MAI

Hà Nội, 1972–1973

Grandma is holding my hand as we walk to school. The sun is a large egg yolk peeking through a row of tin-roofed houses. The sky is as blue as my mother's favorite shirt. I wonder where my mother is. Has she found my father?

I clutch my jacket's collar as the wind rips through the air, swirling up a dust cloud. Grandma bends, putting her handkerchief against my nose. My school bag dangles on her arm as she cups her palm against her face.

We resume walking as soon as the dust settles. I strain my ears but hear no bird. I search, but there isn't a single flower along our path. No grass around us, just piles of broken bricks and twisted metal.

"Guava, be careful." Grandma pulls me away from a bomb crater. She calls me by my nickname to guard me from evil spirits she believes hover above the earth, looking for beautiful children to kidnap. She said that my real name, Hương, which means "fragrance," would attract them.

"When you come home today, you'll get our favorite food, Guava," Grandma tells me.

"Phở noodle soup?" Happiness makes me skip a step.

"Yes. . . . The bomb raids have stopped me from cooking. But it's been quiet, so let's celebrate."

Before I can answer, a siren shatters our moments of peace. A female voice blares from a loudspeaker tethered to a tree: "Attention citizens! Attention citizens! American bombers are approaching Hà Nội. One hundred kilometers away."

"Ôi trời đất ơi!" Grandma cries for Heaven and Earth. She runs, pulling me along. Streams of people pour out of their homes, like ants from broken nests. Far away, from the top of the Hà Nội Opera House, sirens wail.

"Over there." Grandma rushes toward a bomb shelter dug into the roadside. She pulls up the heavy concrete lid.

"No room," a voice shouts out from down below. Inside the round pit just big enough for one person, a man half kneels, half stands. Muddy water rises to his chest.

Grandma hurries to close the lid. She pulls me toward another shelter.

"Attention citizens! Attention citizens! American bombers are approaching Hà Nội. Sixty kilometers away. Armed forces get ready to fight back." The female voice becomes more urgent. The sirens are deafening.

Shelter after shelter is full. People dart in front of us like birds with broken wings, abandoning bicycles, carts, shoulder bags. A small girl stands alone, screaming for her parents.

"Attention citizens! Attention citizens! American bombers are approaching Hà Nội. Thirty kilometers away."

Clumsy with fear, I trip and fall.

Grandma pulls me up. She throws my school bag to the roadside, bending down for me to jump onto her back. She runs, her hands wrapping around my legs.

Thundering noise approaches. Explosions ring from afar. I hold on to Grandma's shoulders with sweaty hands, burying my face into her body.

"Attention citizens! Attention citizens! More American bombers are approaching Hà Nội. One hundred kilometers away."

"Run to the school. They won't bomb the school," Grandma shouts to a group of women lugging young children in their arms and on their backs. At fifty-two years of age, Grandma is strong. She dashes past the women, catching up with those ahead of us. Bounced up and down, I press my face against her long, black hair that smells like my mother's. As long as I can inhale her scent, I will be safe.

"Hương, run with me." Grandma has squatted down in front of my school, panting. She pulls me into the schoolyard. Next to a classroom, she flings herself down a vacant shelter. As I slide down next to her, water rises to my waist, gripping me with icy hands. It's so cold. The beginning of winter.

Grandma reaches up, closing the lid. She hugs me, the drum of her heart throbbing through my blood. I thank Buddha for the gift of this shelter, large enough to fit us both. I fear for my parents on the battlefields. When will they come back? Have they seen Uncle Đạt, Uncle Thuận, and Uncle Sáng?

Explosions draw closer. The ground swings, as if it were a hammock. I press my palms against my ears. Water shoots up, drenching my face and hair, blurring my eyesight. Dust and stones rain through a small crack onto my head. Sounds of antiaircraft fire. Hà Nội is fighting back. More explosions. Sirens. Cries. An intense burning stench.

Grandma brings her hands together in front of her chest. *"Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật, Nam Mô Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát."* Torrents of prayers to Buddha pour from her lips. I close my eyes, imitating her.

The bombs continue to roar. A minute of silence follows. A sharp screeching noise. I cringe. A powerful explosion hurls Grandma and me against the shelter's lid. Pain darkens my eyes.

I land feet-first on Grandma's stomach. Her eyes are closed, her hands a budding lotus flower in front of her chest. She prays as the thundering noise disappears and people's cries rise into the air.

"Grandma, I'm scared."

Her lips are blue, trembling from the cold. "I know, Guava. . . . I'm scared, too."

"Grandma, if they bomb the school, will . . . will this shelter collapse?"

She struggles against the confined space, pulling me into her arms. "I don't know, darling."

"If it does, will we die, Grandma?"

She hugs me tight. "Guava, if they bomb this school, our shelter might collapse on us, but we'll only die if Buddha lets us die."

We didn't perish that day, in November 1972. After the sirens had signaled that it was safe, Grandma and I emerged, shivering thin leaves. We staggered out to the street. Several buildings had collapsed, their rubble spilling onto our path. We crawled over piles of debris, coughing. Billowing smoke and twirling dust burned my eyes.

I clutched Grandma's hand, watching women kneeling and howling next to dead bodies, whose faces had been concealed by tattered straw mats. The legs of those bodies were jutting toward us. Legs that were mangled,

covered with blood. One small leg had a pink shoe dangling. The dead girl could have been my age.

Drenched, muddy, Grandma pulled me along, walking faster and faster, passing scattered body parts, passing houses that had crumbled.

Under the *bàng* tree, though, our house stood in glorious, incongruous sunlight. It had miraculously escaped damage. I broke away from Grandma, rushing ahead to hug the front door.

Grandma hurried to help me change and tucked me into bed. "Stay home, Guava. Jump down if the planes come." She pointed toward our bomb shelter, which my father had dug into the earthen floor next to the bedroom entrance. The shelter was large enough to hold us both, and it was dry. I felt better hiding here, under the watchful eyes of my ancestors, whose presence radiated from the family altar, perched on top of our bookshelf.

"But . . . where're you going, Grandma?" I asked.

"To my school, to see if my students need help." She pulled our thick blanket to my chin.

"Grandma, but it's not safe. . . ."

"It's just two blocks away, Guava. I'll run home as soon as I hear the siren. Promise to stay here?"

I nodded.

Grandma had headed for the door, but she returned to my bed, her hand warming my face. "Promise you won't wander outside?"

"Cháu hứa." I smiled to assure her. She'd never allowed me to go anywhere alone, even during the months absent of bombs. She'd always been afraid that I'd get lost somehow. Was it true, I wondered, what my aunt and uncles had said, about Grandma being overprotective of me because terrible things had happened to her children?

As the door closed behind her, I got up, fetching my notebook. I dipped the tip of my pen into the ink bottle. "Beloved Mother and Father," I wrote, in a new letter to my parents, wondering whether my words would ever reach them. They were moving with their troops and had no fixed addresses.

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by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai
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Writing Hieroglyphics

AN ESSAY BY

JILL McCORKLE

When I was growing up, there was a train that passed daily not far from our house. I loved the sound of it and the whole neighborhood loved playing on the tracks. Even though we were told not to go there—admonished and threatened with the terrible things that could happen—we returned to put pennies on the tracks and watch them get flattened, waving to the conductor and the occasional man standing at the rail of the caboose. There was always someone saying how destroying a penny was against the law and we could get arrested, but that fear usually dissipated with the flat copper treasure in our pockets and the view of the many miles we could travel, crosstie by crosstie.

My dad told another train story, his childhood memory that then became laced with my own. He recalled the train crash that happened in our native county when he was an adolescent, a catastrophic event that made all the national papers, and left the survivors hospitalized and stranded far from home. He had gone, as many people had, to see the aftermath of it all, a memory that clearly haunted him. Though I knew it had happened fifteen miles away, I pictured it there just beyond our neighbor's backyard and the pine trees where I played. The details were impossible to forget: a freak snowfall, a stalled train crossing the track, a broken warning light, World War II soldiers heading home for Christmas. There were presents strewn, a bridal veil in the limbs of a tree, survivors filling every hospital bed in much of the state. I was an adolescent myself when I heard the story for the first time, sitting on our back steps with my dad and looking over the dark yard. He was grilling steaks, our dog was waiting for a bone, and so my memory is of his story but also my own story of that time with him. I imagined the crash and

I imagined my dad as a boy witnessing the site, and I committed to memory the night I sat and listened to him, glowing coals, pipe smoke, the sadness in his voice as he described the loss. I was also haunted by the details and unfathomable grief, loved ones in other places waiting for news that would proclaim someone alive or dead: a clothing tag, a scar, a particular brand and size shoe—words and numbers and objects with the power to represent a life, convey a whole story. The dry-cleaning tag that looks like nothing but a dry-cleaning tag becomes an intimate object, as do the watch, the lucky coin, the button that person might have fastened in place before getting on the train.

DURING THE MANY YEARS I lived in the Boston area, I often heard references to the Cocoanut Grove fire with the same level of shock and reverence that all catastrophic events render. Lives end; time freezes. We look for clues and meaning and can't help but imagine the *what-if*s and *if-only*s. And then all those bits and pieces of life we often take for granted take on new weight and meaning. Just a couple of years ago I saw an obituary that made reference to the fire—someone who was supposed to be at the club that night in 1942 and then had a change in plans. The fire took place a year earlier than the train wreck, and quite a few of those who died in the crash were heading home to the Boston area. It was cold. It was dark. It was sudden. Loved ones were left waiting and searching through those personal items—a ring or necklace, monogram, card—that would lend information.

IN THE NOVEL, two of my characters—Lil and Frank—are dealing with parents who died in these tragic events. His father was on the train going home; her mother went to the club without telling Lil and her father that was where she was going. These losses led them to each other in the beginning, and now they have a long marriage behind them. Still, there is so much they don't know about their parents, and likewise so much their own children don't know about them and their life together. And there is Shelley, a young mother trying to raise her sons and working as a stenographer in the courts, her shorthand and recordings of local crimes helping her blot out much of her own troubled past.

Everyone has a secret. Everyone has a memory that haunts or lingers. Everyone has the door they want to close but for whatever reason, time

continues to blow it ajar. Frank has not wanted to look, and until now he has avoided going there. Lil flings hers wide open and goes in with a flashlight, determined to see and know all that she can. Shelley has locked hers multiple times, but the wind keeps rattling all that she cannot escape, while her son, Harvey, is just beginning to find his way, doing what all children do, imagining his future and along the way finding and collecting and hiding little things: matchbook covers and flattened pennies.

In the early days of writing this novel, I read that when sites of orphanages or schools are excavated, there are almost always little caches of toys tucked away and hidden, children wanting to claim and protect what belongs to them. There are also the many versions of *Kilroy was here*—graffiti, handprints, notes in bottles—the stroke of immortality and desire to be remembered. I was thinking of each of these characters in terms of the mark they leave on the world they inhabit, from the most visible and easily discerned knowledge to the tiniest keepsake or scrap of paper to what is consigned only to memory and perhaps never revealed. It is an endless excavation, each discovered item carrying its own story. My hope is that the readers of *Hieroglyphics* will be entertained by these characters and their lives, but I also hope it will lead them to think of various fragments and images from their own lives and to experience the oldest and purest form of time travel—memory.

FROM

Hieroglyphics

BY JILL MCCORKLE

Lil
August 10, 2016
Southern Pines, North Carolina

You two have always wondered why I spend so much time filling these notebooks (Frank, you, too, if you're reading this!), but it is simply a part of my life, a way to clear my mind and to remember. Sometimes I just record the weather, something simple about the day. It is so easy to let everything run together. I had years that were that way, and I find such loss troubling; better to try to define something, the premature blue dusk of a winter afternoon or the long, clear light of summer, that kind of light that makes you feel immortal. And I guess that's why we hold on to our bits and pieces in the first place, because we aren't immortal, and though denial fills our days and years, especially those that have slipped away, that kernel of truth is always lodged within.

We all are haunted by something—something we did or didn't do—and the passing years either add to the weight or diminish it. Mine have diminished, perhaps because I've spent time thinking about it all. It might sound silly, but I see these bits and pieces as my contribution to evolution, the unearthing and dusting of the prints and markers that led me here. Some seem to bulldoze right through life and up to their headstones, but I want to take my time. I want to find the right words.

I IMAGINE MY RECIPIENT to be you two, or perhaps your children, and I hope this is so, rather than some stranger who comes in and hoists old boxes

into a dumpster, or rakes away the remainders of my life, like the sad debris in the aftermath of a flood or fire. I will never get over the sight of what we left behind at our home of over fifty years to move down here, a mountain of cast-off things—old towels and linens, papers and books and shoes and pots, side tables and lamps, hoses and hoes, packets of seeds I meant to plant, and a rubber squeak toy that had been safely hidden away in the back of my closet by one of the dogs long dead. And so much more: things not needed, things long forgotten, cans of cream-of-whatever soup and V8 juice (why?) and peas that had sat there forgotten for years, and things that never should have been there in the first place, like Tuna Helper, or those things in my closet like that geometric-print minidress I bought in the '60s, hoping to look like Petula Clark or Judy Carne—a perky-pixie kind of dress that I never had the nerve to wear and instead looked at it there at the back of the closet for years, along with a wiglet and a long frosted fall and some jackets with shoulders resembling a football player or Victorian monarch. We divided it all into Goodwill, consignment, recycle, or landfill.

But there were also the things I couldn't let go of—letters, reminders, souvenirs—and I am taking my time, relieved when I find something that might have gotten lost in that mountain of debris, like one of your drawings from first grade or the stub from a movie I'd forgotten I even saw, or a note from my father.

When the moving van pulled away that afternoon and we got in the car and turned southward, the space within the car seemed so empty, vacant, our suitcases and silver chest in the trunk, an overnight bag and thermos of coffee on the back seat, and I had that terrible feeling that I had forgotten something. Because I was thinking of all the times the car was filled with you two, your belongings, your music and voices, the dogs, while going to school or on vacation, or just to the grocery store where I bought all of those things that I then put on the shelf there in our dimly lit pantry—on the red gingham contact paper I spent one snowy afternoon forty years ago cutting and sticking in place—all those things that I placed there and then forgot about.

I LIKE TO IMAGINE that I will be your cornerstone, a reminder of what was. The old building crumbles away, and yet there I will be (me, my life, our life) like when you were assigned time capsules in school. Remember?

You both were in elementary school and were asked what you would take to leave on the moon. And then *your* children did it again with the turning of the century, and asked us to write a letter about what has changed in our lifetime. Your father wrote a lot! And he even made a timeline about all that had changed about cars and appliances, the telephone and the mail.

I have been writing notes and saving bits and pieces since long before you both were born, my attempt at explaining my life to myself, perhaps. I have so little of my own mother and have spent much of my life yearning for more. This habit of mine, trying to hold on to those days, was simply a way to reassure myself and to recall every detail of her—all I knew of my parents' life together and all I knew of her death. I was afraid of forgetting, a fear that has never diminished, and now I *am* forgetting things. There's no denying that I am forgetting. We all joke about it at a certain age (you will, too) but there's a line you cross when you don't talk about it in the same way. I am eighty-five years old, so what do I expect? You're all grown; your children are even grown, so what do we expect? That's what I keep saying to your father: "What do you expect?" We have both already moved past the estimated life expectancy for men and women in this country. We have both long passed the ages our own parents were when they died.

Sometimes, I feel like my life is all laid out before me: dots connecting, patterns shaped and designed, words naming and classifying me. We all have those moments when we are so aware of where we are; there are the moments when we feel graced and blessed, and there are likewise those when we say, "What am I doing here?"

I have tried to imagine my mother on that last night of her life. Surely, she asked, "What am I doing here? Oh God, what am I doing?"

I asked myself that same thing in that empty-feeling car, your father silent behind the wheel, as we got on I-95 and instead of heading north to Gloucester, as we had a million times before, we went south and kept going the rest of the day, neither of us saying much and yet both aware of the sad, questioning cloud hanging over us. And after a restless night at a Holiday Inn somewhere in Maryland, we rode much of the next day, until we got here and met the movers—belongings we had had for years looking so different in the warm, bright light.

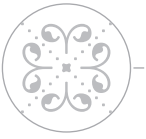
Remember how you were here to greet us, Becca? You were our reason for coming, and we are happy to have this time near you and your family, but I still wake some days and think: "What am I doing here?" Even though we have been here for over a year now, I panic, and then I try to rationalize it all, to name the reasons and the benefits of living here. We have followed the migratory path of the snowbirds we once saw as traitors—the weaklings, your father and I called them as we stood armed with our snow shovels and salt. And, yes, ice and cold are hard on brittle bones, and, yes, help is needed when dealing with worn-out hearts and lungs and words that won't come. The love and attention of a child nearby cannot be underestimated—please know we are grateful, Becca. And yet there remain those parts of me that simply refused to come along, and they pull my mind this way and that all day, especially when I'm in here sorting through it all and trying to give it some order. I try to collect and hold on to them, but it is like grasping the wind, and yet those are the parts—what I knew as a child—that seem the truest parts of me.

HIEROGLYPHICS
by Jill McCorkle
978-1-61620-972-8
On Sale June 2020

Gravity and Grace

AN ESSAY BY

RICHARD FARRELL



I was ten years old when I fell in love with flying. I remember the day, the hour, the very airplane—an AV-8A Harrier. Stuck in a fifth-grade science classroom, perpetually bored and staring out windows, I was not expecting a jet to zoom low and fast over the autumnal tree line. The year was 1979, and the first-ever Worcester air show had begun. For the next four days, this extravaganza of flight would transform the skies above my hometown. The heavens filled with more aircraft than a boy could imagine: vintage biplanes, World War II bombers, massive gray cargo jets, tankers, helicopters, and fighter planes with mythical names like Skyhawk and Corsair, Phantom and Super Saber.

Hour after hour, I'd whiplash my neck staring into the clouds, listening for the bassy whir of turbo props at breakfast, the thunder of afterburners at dinner. The sun scorched my face; my eyes ached from strain. With the roar of each engine, I'd burst from my house as if it were on fire to gaze at the next airplane. How did people continue with their routines? There were no pilots in my life. The neighbors were teachers and nurses, shop foremen and letter carriers. My father, an avowed white-knuckler, occasionally traveled for business but hated flying; I'd never seen my mother board an airplane. Until that air show, the world of aviation was as foreign to me as a Moroccan bazaar. And yet, for one glorious fall weekend, the skies above me became dramatically alive. My soul was utterly hijacked—a conversion every bit as profound as a prophet's, an annunciation so fundamental that my life changed forever. I devoted the next ten years to becoming a pilot.

I wrote *The Falling Woman*, in part, to channel this love of flying that once burned in me. That same passion informs the character of Charlie

Radford, a boy who grew up much like I did. Our adult lives suffered similar fates as well. Like Radford, I became a pilot but my flying career was cut short by a medical condition, and like Radford, at twenty-three, I was told that I could no longer be a professional pilot. It took a decade for me to recover from that loss; Radford's recovery is, I think, well underway by the time the novel ends.

After my flying career, for a brief time I too worked in an aviation-related job in Washington, DC, though not as an accident investigator. I came to see how the mythology and heroic imagination that I had once associated with flying quickly fizzled behind mounds of paperwork, bureaucracy, and regulations. The real tragedy was how completely the adult world sacrificed passion for the sake of mundane work. I wanted to keep Radford's joy alive, to sustain his idealism, to help him rediscover his wings.

At some point early in the writing, the chaos of trying to complete the novel began to overwhelm me. A hundred thousand words, three years of work, and I still didn't know what I was trying to say. I began to see that the work of an NTSB accident investigator and the work of a novelist share more than a few common traits. Fear, uncertainty, the balance of order and chaos, the puzzle-piecing construction of meaning—these are the central ingredients for the storyteller, as well as the accident investigator.

But then there is the falling.

I didn't set out to write a novel about an impossible story of survival. I wanted to write a quiet book, but on page one I blow up an airplane and send a passenger hurtling through the roof of a Kansas barn. Spoiler alert: she survives. Such a thing has really happened, at least five times from my research. There's no easy explanation for how. In World War II, three fliers fell (without parachutes) from exploding airplanes and survived. In the 1970s, a Serbian flight attendant, Vesna Vulović, was sucked out of an airliner, fell from six miles up, and lived. And then there is the story of Juliane Koepcke, a German teenager who fell out of a disintegrating plane from 10,000 feet, landed in a rainforest canopy, and crawled out of the jungle ten days later.

What fascinated me about these miraculous stories was how little the survivors talked about their incredible luck. Koepcke did eventually write a memoir, but she spent less than a page on her actual freefall. It was as if these

miraculous falls could not be addressed, as if the stories were too unbelievable to be told.

And yet, as I wrote various drafts of this novel, solving the mystery of Erin's freefall became less important to me. I was drawn to aspects of her character not because of her freefall, but because she'd spent two decades yoked to a traditional life—a restless wife, a working mother, a privileged suburbanite who voted and tended to her gardens. What does her everyday life mean outside the shadow of this miracle? Spared against all odds, does she have an obligation to live her life differently? Do any of us? Contemplating these questions eventually helped me solve the mystery of the novel itself.

The French writer Simone Weil once wrote: "Utter permanence and extreme fragility give an equal sense of eternity." *The Falling Woman* wrestles with extreme manifestations of this paradoxical truth. Barely over a hundred years old, powered flight is the very embodiment of one of humankind's deepest yearnings. But we take the awe for granted, forget how miraculous the everyday world truly is. In the end, though, no matter how high or fast we fly, we are ultimately falling—falling toward each other, toward despair and hope, toward love and loss, and, with a little luck, falling toward a deeper understanding of ourselves.

FROM

The Falling Woman

BY RICHARD FARRELL

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES PANEL INVESTIGATING POINTER AIRLINES FLIGHT 795 (FIRST SESSION):

"Could you state your name for the record?"

"My name is Charles Radford."

"And your involvement with the investigation of Pointer 795?"

"I was an investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board."

"In fact, sir, you were the lead investigator for the survival factors working group. Isn't that correct?"

How many times, he thinks, do I need to answer that question this week?

He reaches for the glass of water in front of him and glances down at his notes. Sixteen congressmen stare back at him from the stage. Behind them, pages, interns, and lackeys tussle with papers and phones. For the third day in a row, Radford has crossed the National Mall, checked his reports, sworn the oath, and sat stock-still in uncomfortable chairs waiting to testify. Three days of note scribbling, of listening to others, sidebars with attorneys, frantic calls home, and second-guessing. The entire Go Team—including Lucy Masterson, Shep Ellsworth, even Ulrich and the director herself, Carol Wilson—have gone before him. Now it is his turn. At his back, cameras record every move, every word.

"Need we remind you that almost twelve months ago, a commercial airliner exploded over southwestern Kansas? Need we remind you that 123 people died, or at least that was the initial assumption from your agency? Need we remind you that this country has waited for a definitive answer?

Terrorism, a bomb, a missile, a meteor, a short circuit in the plane's wiring, a lightning strike?"

"No," Radford says. "I'm well aware of what happened to Pointer 795. I've spent countless hours sifting through debris fields, maintenance records, and logbooks. I've waded into ponds to extract bodies. I've interviewed orphans and widows. I'd say I'm well acquainted."

"But you have no answers."

"I don't deal in answers," Radford says. "My job was to ask the right questions."

"For the record, sir, how many aircraft accidents have you investigated in your career?"

Radford shrugs. He knows the number but refuses to make this any easier.

"Would you classify the investigation of Pointer 795 as standard, as routine?"

"In the beginning," he says, "there was only havoc, devastation, and raw loss. Any solution seemed impossible. I needed to figure out which questions to ask."

"So, is that a yes, sir?"

"Events gathered in reverse," he says. "A chain of a thousand invisible mistakes had to be pumped back through time. Complex decisions teased apart, examined, challenged, abandoned, and reexamined. A forgotten switch closed. A valve not pressurized. A checklist item skipped. It's always about asking the right questions."

He knows he is rambling. Is he losing his grip on reality? He reaches again for the water and tries to organize his thoughts. So many others have sat here before him, men and women in positions of great power as well as the meek like him. Even this conference room, located in the bowels of the Rayburn House Office Building, imposes its will, with its bone-white ceiling, its sticky chairs and sweating pitchers of water. On the wall is a framed painting of the Great Seal of the United States. The American eagle—wings outstretched, talons clutching thirteen arrows in the left, an olive branch in the right—stares down at him along with the congressmen.

"Mr. Radford, what we're concerned about is where the investigation deviated from protocol. Why were you reassigned?"

"Sequences accrued," he says.

He knows they have no right to be doing this, no reason to challenge his expertise. He knows he has done nothing wrong. He simply followed the evidence. About the rest, about the way the rest unfolded, about that he has no regrets. The contradictions, the impossible contradictions of this investigation, these were not his fault.

"Sir, the investigation quickly went off track. Why did this happen?"

"The job demands you filter out assumptions," he says. "You gather the millions of scattered pieces and reassemble fragments into questions. If you ask the right questions, the rest will follow. To get from chaos to order, you have to trust cause and effect. This is how the work begins. Hours and days and weeks pass. Some pieces lost forever. The wreckage must be rebuilt, one rivet at a time."

He pauses and looks up at the eagle on the wall.

"Three babies were aboard that flight," he says. "Each body deserved a name, a next of kin to grieve it. That was my primary responsibility."

"Let's concentrate on the bodies. How many had you identified before you were reassigned?"

Why does he still hate uncertainty? Why is it still so hard to talk about? These congressmen don't understand his work.

"The short history of human aviation," he says, "is barely more than a century old. Flying used to be incredibly dangerous."

"Mr. Radford, we'd like to stay on track."

"You demand answers," he says. "You expect nothing to ever go wrong. But your need for certainty is an illusion. You take it for granted because you fail to see the miracles anymore."

He's trying to explain why the sky is inside him. If they mined down into his soul, they would find wings. The sky runs through him, into places of himself he still hasn't mapped. A calling, perhaps, the way a priest is called, or like the passion of great lovers. Since the winter day when two brothers from Ohio closed their bicycle shop and fashioned together a rickety kite frame made from spruce wood and Roebling wire rope, thousands of others have been likewise called, and followed a path into the air. A coin flip and a steady Atlantic breeze changed history. What followed was more than just another invention. The airplane expanded human imagination, took us into

places that we'd only dreamed about since we first stood erect and told stories. Radford has been more faithful to the sky than to anyone or anything he's ever loved. He has never doubted this love, not once, not since he was ten years old. But what has he been chasing all these years? For the first time in his life, he's not sure.

"Sir, refusal to answer this committee is serious violation of federal law."

"What a crock of shit."

"What was that, sir?"

"Do any of you," Radford says, "understand the first thing about flying?"

"You're walking a fine line here."

"I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't ask for any of this."

"Do you need a moment to gather yourself, Mr. Radford? We need a full accounting of the events."

Radford reaches yet again for his water, but the glass is empty.

"We need you to take us back to that day, sir. To the events that followed. A year has passed since Pointer 795 exploded. Why have millions of taxpayer dollars been spent on an investigation that has gone nowhere? Don't we deserve answers? Mr. Radford. Don't we deserve the truth?"

"You're asking the wrong questions," he says.

"What questions should we be asking?"

"My father was a stonemason," he says. "In many ways, that has been my work too. I reassemble fragments. I work brick by brick. Process is all that matters. I worry only about where the next brick will go. That's how you get to the end."

"What happened with Pointer 795? Why did the plane explode over Kansas? How did this investigation go so wrong?"

"I had obligations," he says. "I had a responsibility to follow the evidence, wherever it took me."

"And where did it take you, sir?"

"The hardest part is letting go of what you've been taught."

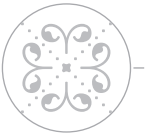
"Mr. Radford, what about the Falling Woman?"

THE FALLING WOMAN
by Richard Farrell
978-1-61620-857-8
On Sale May 2020

Do You Know This Woman?

AN ESSAY BY

LARRY WATSON



My family is rife with twins.

My great-grandfather was a twin, my mother was a twin, aunts, uncles, cousins, a nephew and a niece are all twins. And as I learned in 2013, this preponderance of twins is an occurrence not limited to my closest relatives.

That was the year I attended a Fisketjon family reunion in Bismarck, North Dakota, my hometown. Over a hundred descendants came to the event, among them contingents from Norway, Guam, and throughout the United States. I received an invitation because my grandmother (who gave birth to two sets of twins) was a Fisketjon. She immigrated to the United States from Norway, as did a good many other Fisketjons.

At a banquet on the final night, my cousin (whose father was a twin) stood up and asked the assemblage how many of them were twins or had twins in their immediate families. So many raised their hands—many more than the statistical average birth rate for twins. A rush of twin stories followed, most of them humorous and one or two heartbreaking. As you would expect, many of the anecdotes featured mistaken identities, even though, as genetics decrees, most of the sets of twins were fraternal.

But of course, twins needn't be identical to cause confusion. I remember as a child listening to my mother and her twin sister visiting in another room. I couldn't tell who was talking, and when the conversation became a heated argument, I couldn't tell whose position was whose.

Was it at the Fisketjon reunion when I decided I would do something more with twinship in my fiction? It might have been. In previous novels

and stories, I'd often included twins, but mostly those characters had simply been a way to pay homage to my clan. Twins as primary characters, I thought, would allow me to explore a theme that had always interested me: uncertainty about identity. I began to work on a novel whose working title was *Edie and the Linderman Twins*, and as originally conceived, the story featured twin brothers who were in love with the same woman.

But something happened in the writing that I hadn't expected. It was not the twins, but Edie, the woman they loved, who came to dominate the story, largely because she was the one who embodied the theme of confused identity. The confusion, however, was not in how Edie saw herself—or how she saw the Linderman twins—but in how others saw her. Pragmatic and unpretentious, she was a woman with a realistic sense of self. But she was also beautiful, and beauty often blinds people to qualities of heart and mind that can be every bit as rare as beauty.

Edie possessed, for example, both physical and emotional strength when she was the only person who could rescue her brother-in-law after a horrific highway accident. When Edie saw her young husband obsessively pursue a doomed attempt to salvage his pride—and impress her in the process—her patience and understanding were strained to their limits. She struggled to keep her frustration from turning into anger when her husband's sexual desire diminished—and his brother's longing for her became almost uncontrollable. When a man she once loved was dying of cancer, she was willing to disrupt and dislocate her settled middle-class existence just to pay him a final visit. A very different test of her loyalty came when she had to choose between returning to an abusive, possessive husband or abandoning her teenage daughter. And many years later, Edie placed her own life in jeopardy in order to save her granddaughter from a pair of dangerous, predatory young men.

Many of the tests—and revelations—of Edie's strength, courage, loyalty, and intelligence occurred during a series of road trips. Those urgent, often harrowing journeys, undertaken at twenty-year intervals and each with unnerving parallels to the others, became the basis for the novel's structure, a novel that had come to focus on the stages of Edie's life, from the time she was a young wife to being a grandmother. Hence the novel's final title, *The*

Lives of Edie Pritchard: the story of a woman who often found that others, men usually but not exclusively, had projected on her an identity that suited their needs rather than hers.

For most of her years, Edie lived in Gladstone, Montana, the small town where she was born and grew up. People there knew her, or believed they did. *Edie Pritchard . . . Was it her dad who died when she was just a girl? About as pretty and popular as any gal at Gladstone High . . . but what was it she did on graduation night? She worked at the bank, didn't she? And wasn't she married to one of the Linderman twins? But was it Dean or Roy? I could never keep those two straight . . .*

Perhaps it was this that drew me to Edie's character most of all: through her many lives, despite others' attempts to define her, she was sure of who she was. I hope you recognize her.

FROM

The Lives of Edie Pritchard

BY LARRY WATSON

1967–68

Sunlight glints off the slope of the hood like a snowdrift, and Roy Linderman puts on his sunglasses. Like a man born to drive, he lets one arm hang out the window of his Chevy Impala while the other rests on top of the steering wheel to keep the big car in line.

The air flowing through the car is as hot as the August wind blowing across the prairie, and to make himself heard above the rush and the steady rumble of the Chevy, Roy raises his voice. "How do you know it isn't the flu?" he asks. "Maybe we'll all get it."

"My aunt in Bozeman is a nurse," Edie says, "and she says it's almost always something people ate."

"And what makes you so sure it was the hot dog?"

"Please. Sitting all day in that greasy water? It was the hot dog."

"And you didn't eat one? So you're safe."

"That's right," Edie says. "I'm safe."

"When we were kids, whatever was going around, he got. Measles. Mumps. Chicken pox. Like maybe with twins, only one of us had to get it. And Dean would be the one and it'd pass me by. Strep throat. Tonsillitis. He had his tonsils out and I still got mine."

"I remember when he had strep." She gives her head a rueful little shake. "I remember that very well."

"I wondered if maybe you did," Roy says.

On every side of them, nothing rises more than knee-high, and the wheatgrass, needlegrass, blue grama, and fescue—all the color of a sweat-stained straw hat—bend down lower in the direction they're always bent, west to east.

"What are we going after again?" Edie asks.

"It's a 1951 GMC half ton. Low miles."

"How did you find out about it?"

"It's Les Moore's uncle's. The uncle had to sell his ranch, so he doesn't need the truck."

"Doesn't anyone else want it?"

"Hell yes. But we'll get there first."

Ahead a dust cloud, high and thick enough to tint a corner of the sky a darker blue, swirls, and well before they draw close, they can taste its dirt. "The hell," Roy says. "Someone's plowing something. Close the windows."

They both crank up their windows, then Edie crawls over the seat to get to the rear windows. She has to swing one bare leg, then the other past Roy's head, and he takes his eyes off the road to watch her make this climb.

"Stay back there," he says. "You can roll them down again in a minute."

As the windows close, the air changes pitch from a steady whoosh to a fast-paced thump, as if a propeller powered their vehicle. Then the interior suddenly quiets, and their voices lower as though they've entered a church.

"My God," Edie says and draws a deep breath. "It's like the inside of an oven."

"I'm never getting a car again without air-conditioning," Roy says. "I swear it."

Edie keeps one hand on the window crank.

"Your place gets plenty warm, doesn't it?" says Roy. "I told Dean anytime you two need a good night's sleep, come on over and you can have my bedroom. Air-conditioned comfort. You can't beat it for sleeping."

"And turn you out of your bed? Where would you sleep?"

"I can always find someplace to bunk down."

"I bet you can."

"Or maybe you want your own unit? If the store has any left at the end of the season, they always put them on big sale. I could use my discount and get you an even better price."

"We'll let you know."

"Talk it over with Dean," Roy says, then twists his head as though he needs to know exactly where she is in the back seat.

"We'll let you know."

In another minute the sky clears back to its undifferentiated blue. Roy says, "You can roll them back down. And get back up here. I'm not your chauffeur."

The truth is, Edie would rather remain in the back seat, out of Roy's reach. These brothers . . . For some time now, Dean has acted as though he's been warned to keep his hands off her. Even in bed, he sleeps on a narrow space away from her. Meanwhile, Roy has been . . . well, Roy. Could it be that desire is something like mumps or measles, one brother coming down with it while it passes the other by?

Edie points a finger straight ahead. "Take me to the thee-a-tah, my good man."

"And I'm sure as hell not your good man."

As Edie climbs over the seat again, Roy reaches out a hand, but whatever he was going to do, he must think better of it because he puts his hand back on the steering wheel. Once she settles back into her seat, however, he takes his hat from where it's been resting in the space between them and tosses it into the back.

Roy asks, "You ever been up to Bentrock?"

"When I was a little girl," Edie says, "my dad took us up to Canada. Just drove across the border and turned around and came back again. So we could say we'd been there. Would we have gone through Bentrock then?"

"You might have."

"Then I might have been there."

"Well, whatever you remember, it hasn't changed since."

Edie slips off her flimsy rubber sandals and hooks her toes up on the lip of the dashboard.

"You'll probably get your feet dirty today," Roy says. "I don't think Bentrock's got but the one paved street."

"I thought I'd wait in the car."

"Hell no. I need you to keep him distracted during the negotiations."

"Really? What was Dean's job going to be?"

"Drive. That's all. Just drive."

Roy takes a pack of Camels from the pocket of his white shirt and shakes a cigarette up to his lips. He offers the pack to Edie, then pulls it back. "I forgot. You don't smoke."

He pushes in the lighter. A moment later it pops out, and he presses its

glowing coils to his cigarette. He inhales deeply and when he exhales, the wind whips the stream of smoke out the window. "Don't you have any vices, Edie?"

"You know better than to ask me that."

Roy turns his head toward her and with his finger slowly traces in the air the length of Edie's bare leg. "Tell me something," he says. "How do you get so tan working in the bank all day?"

Edie quickly lowers both feet to the floor. She says, "We've got a folding chair we set up behind the building. During breaks and lunch hour, I sit back there. And I'm out on weekends of course."

"I wouldn't think you'd get much sun in that alley." Roy pinches his cigarette between his lips and extends both arms. "Me? I'm like a steak cooked on just one side."

The car floats over the centerline, and Edie starts to reach for the steering wheel, but then Roy takes hold of it once again.

"About the only time I get out of the store," he says, "it's in the car, and then one arm hangs out the window and the other doesn't get any sun at all."

The only other car visible on this stretch of highway is at least a couple miles ahead, and then it vanishes, curving its way into the first of a series of low hills, each stitched to the next with a narrow dark strip of cottonwood or bur oak.

"Now you," Roy says, "you probably have to hike your skirt up plenty high to get so much sun." He leans forward to look at her. "And maybe undo a button or two."

She doesn't say anything.

"Of course with those miniskirts you've taken to wearing . . ."

"For God's sake, Roy. Can't we have a normal conversation?"

Roy smiles the smile of a man confident of its power to heal or beguile. "Why sure, Edie. What did you want to talk about?"

But she says nothing and turns her head away from her brother-in-law. She knows women whose husbands would never let their wives get into a car with Roy Linderman. But not Dean. No, not Dean.

THE LIVES OF EDIE PRITCHARD
by Larry Watson
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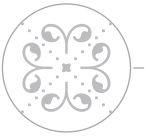
The Story House

AN ESSAY BY

SHRUTI SWAMY



I was born in America to Indian parents, and the place I'm from is the small, strange country my parents built between the walls of our house in the memory and against the memory of India. From this country I ventured into white, suburban nineties America every day and back, where every point of strangeness—my country's food, manner of dress, religious customs, and concepts of honor and filial piety, not to mention the overwhelming darkness of my limbs and face—grated against the frictionless ways of being white. The dark difference irritated whiteness, and so whiteness pointed out and shamed the difference until the desire to shed it, shed all that was possible to shed, overwhelmed the protective love I felt toward my parents and the customs I used to feel connected to them. It was easier to be American: I chose to be American.

Passively I resisted learning Sanskrit, Bharatanatyam, Karnatik music. I named myself Elizabeth in every game I played, giving myself the blond hair and blue eyes of the good Wakefield twin. I threw away all the lunches my mom packed me even when they were my favorite. I spent entire summers at my best friend Becca's house, becoming fluent in the ways white parents and children spoke to each other, that is, with an exasperation and mutual familiarity that felt almost illicitly comfortable to me. It was easy to be American, but each time I was, I poked a hole in the wall of the house I lived in, willfully destroying it. I felt each American act as an act of betrayal against my parents, whether or not they saw it—only decades later can I see it was an act of betrayal against myself as well. Once the house had so many holes it no longer kept the world out, I kicked through it and stood fully in America:

but I was not white, so America did not want me. Only once the house was gone did I think to miss it.

Still I had stories. Growing up, my parents told me the stories of our gods and ancestors, of their childhoods in Bombay, a place that grew its own lush glamour in my mind, utterly separate from the reality we visited every couple of years, and my father told me stories of his own invention, a dear nonsense of which I have no memory. The only memory is waiting in the dark for him to think up the next thing, demanding impatiently—*then what happens?*—as though it had all already happened and just needed to be remembered instead of pulled, as he did, out of thin air. Words could make a house, I learned then, a place in which to live. Devanagari, the beautiful script of the beautiful language I do not speak, translates to *dwelling of the gods*. It is in my blood then, the knowledge of language's power, where even the divine seek to make their home.

There are books now I come home to, books that speak to that deep place in me, books in which the rhythm of the language sounds exquisitely familiar, if more beautifully articulated than I could ever manage. For most of my life I have lived there, in these books, and I have written stories too, to make small rooms for myself to be alive in. I have written the stories in *A House Is a Body*, all of them, as a map of the possible, as an act of survival. I ask myself *then what happens?* and wait for the answer to come—it is the question that builds the house, sentence by sentence, page by page. I live *here*, in my daily existence, making oatmeal for my daughter, riding my bike, figuring out my taxes. But I live *there* too, in the body on the page that hums with longing, with pleasure. I live in the story as I make it, a doubleness that inflects my life in the oatmeal world too. It is the way I have figured out how to rebuild what I once unwittingly destroyed. It is the only way I understand how to be an American.

It is my hope that my body, my voice, my stories, make more room for yours. I hope I have made a home for you too, with this book, a place in which, for a time, you can live.

FROM

A House Is a Body: Stories

BY SHRUTI SWAMY

from "Blindness"

Sudha and Vinod had a modest wedding. At their parents' insistence, Vinod had ridden in on a horse. It was wedding season in Delhi, and every night the streets were filled with the raucous dancing of the families of bridegrooms, the weather gentle, still a few weeks away from ferocious heat. Sudha's body was covered in turmeric the night before. She didn't think she would enjoy it, but there was the undeniable pleasure of being touched by so many loving hands. The turmeric was cool, and resembled in texture and consistency the river-mud of her mother's ancestral home, where she had swum summers as a girl. She also took a milk bath. How do you feel, her mother asked her, bathing her like she had when Sudha was a child, and because of this, Sudha had not felt any shame in her nakedness.

Fine, said Sudha. She smelled of bitter herbs, but tomorrow she was promised she would look beautiful. When she got out of the bath her mother rubbed her down vigorously with a rough towel.

And your wedding night?

What about it?

Are you ready?

What is there to be ready for? But then she smiled at her mother and her mother knew that she was just teasing. At night some weeks later Sudha and Vinod climbed up to the roof of their new flat to smoke a cigarette. It was the last of the weddings before the punishing heat, and from somewhere in a twist of road below them they could hear the brass sounds of the wedding

band. They didn't speak, just passed the cigarette back and forth. There was a cap of smog that made the sunsets blaze with color but obscured the stars. Sudha took her husband's hand. It was thin and dry and warm. She had memorized the lines in his palm, cut deep as though in wood. She listened to the sound of his breathing. Once she had lain on top of him, very still, and kept her face close to his so that she could taste the air that came from his mouth, tinged with clove from the kernels he sucked for better digestion.

Do you find me handsome?

Do you?

Yes, he said, smiling his kind smile, I find you very handsome.

I do too.

We'll have to stop smoking these things soon. It's bad for us.

Is that what you're thinking about?

No, he said. I was thinking about the time you tried to teach me how to swim, and I nearly drowned. Do you remember?

I remember.

How old were you, nine?

I was eight, you were nine.

Did you find me handsome then?

No. I wasn't thinking like that.

The music from the street faded. There were kites in the air, but who was flying them? It was late, and Sudha felt tired, leaning against the concrete railing, her lungs full of the smog of the old city. It felt close to dawn, though it was not nearly that late: the sky was a deep purple. Downstairs she took off her clothes, and lay down naked in the bed. Her body took to water, while Vinod's rejected it, and he had flailed his skinny arms wildly, his mouth gulped down lungfuls of riverwater. At first she laughed, thinking it was a joke; then, with effort, she pulled him out. In her mind as she fell asleep: a cigarette, a river, a baby, and her husband's eyes, the same dark eyes of that drowning boy.

DO YOU LOVE ME? she said.

I love you, he said. He entered her. She had pushed her dress up around her breasts and pulled aside her underwear. She closed her eyes. Look at me, he

said, but she couldn't look at him. When Dhritarashtra's mother made love to his father with her eyes closed, her son was born blind. Look at me, he said again, but she still wouldn't. Fear, a sick-good feeling, tenderness, a strange terror. Hush, she said, and he bucked against her, breathing hard on her. The sound of his breathing was like a train she was trying to catch. She raced after it and she knew that if she could leap onto it, it would carry her away.

Should I stop? he said. Sudha—

Don't stop, she said, and thrust him deeper. He pulled out and came on her belly. They lay beside each other not touching. She didn't move to wipe his semen off her belly. It was warm, the air was warm, the sweat on his back dried against the sheets and thickened into the fabric. Things that seemed like they should be disgusting were suddenly not disgusting. She was amazed by this.

IN JULY A BLACK FEELING RETURNED and she left work early, rode the Metro home and sat on the hard divan in front of the television, muted, not really watching anything at all, sitting in the living room and gazing at the actors' lips shaping soundless words. Vinod found her like this and tried to speak to her, but she felt he was very far away. She was all blurry, translucent and unreachable, and she watched Vinod as he paced around the living room in great agitation. What is the matter? he said.

I don't know, she said. She could feel the voice in her throat, but it didn't sound like her own.

Should I call someone?

Call who?

A doctor? Your mother?

She shook her head. I'm fine, she said. When she was a girl she would fall asleep on her arm, and turning in the night she would wake and realize her body had pressed the blood out of it, and heavy, it became a stranger's arm. In the minutes before the needling pain came, she would touch it with her other hand, running a fingertip along the skin of her forearm, the fine hair, the burl of her elbow. It was then the feeling arrived, but on those nights she had felt only the first pricks of it, the way a person crushed to death by stones might enjoy the first on his chest, the pleasant heaviness of them, the way they make the body feel smaller, or held in an embrace.

She did not know how to explain it, so she stayed silent until it passed, and then gorged herself on the cold dinner Vinod had prepared, sat in bed beside him, watching his fingers twitch in sleep.

A HOUSE IS A BODY: STORIES
by Shruti Swamy
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Where Did the Old You Go?

AN ESSAY BY

CAROLINE LEAVITT

I fell in love with my husband, Jeff, on our second date, after he told me about his favorite unchangeably-in-love couple, Jake and Abby. They'd been dazzlingly happy together for seventeen years. They didn't crumple under life's blows, but seemed to grow stronger, starting an antiques business when their editorial work dried up, raising kids and dogs and cats and vegetables, weathering illness and celebrating joys. When I finally met them, just on the cusp of Jeff and me marrying, I fell in love with them, too, making their relationship a model for ours.

Until Jake became someone else, in a way that can only be called cataclysmic, something that eventually haunted me into writing *With or Without You.*

Jake, who had always been amiable and low key, potbellied with a mop of hair, came home one day with twenty-pound weights. Abby thought nothing of it, until the weights multiplied and Jake began working out downstairs until three in the morning. His body changed dramatically: tightly muscled, he shaved his head, oiled his skin, and traded khaki for spandex. But his personality changed, too. He stopped reading anything except for bodybuilding magazines. He didn't want to go to movies anymore or even take walks. Worse, his unconditional love acquired conditions. Why didn't Abby work out? Why wasn't she more social? Why did she always have to hang on him? "Talk to me," she begged, "tell me what's happened," but instead, his silence grew stonier. When his greatest achievement became training for, entering, and winning a contest pulling an eighteen-wheeler by a rope held in his teeth, she no longer recognized him, and neither did anyone else. Abruptly, he left his marriage, his job, our friendship, and moved away without explanation. And none of us ever knew why.

Desperate to understand, I began to think more and more about the ways and whys that people in long relationships change. I popped "personality change" into Google and there, like a shock, was something personal: coma, a state I'd been in for over three weeks after the birth of my son. But while I hadn't really changed, my research showed me how others coming out of coma often did, and in mind-blowing ways. A shy eighty-one-year-old man became a predatory sex maniac. People woke with brilliant new skills, taking to the stage as a concert pianist when before they couldn't play "Chopsticks," speaking perfect Mandarin, or showcasing an obsessive talent for painting. What would that be like, I wondered. How would you know who you really were? I knew I had to write about this kind of transformation and what it might do to a couple.

That's when I saw the first scene of *With or Without You*: Stella and Simon, in their forties, arguing in their NYC apartment during a blizzard. Stella, a very practical nurse, wants to buy their apartment and have a child before it's too late. Simon yearns for his one last chance at recapturing his rock-and-roll fame. There's drinking and drugs and passing out. But in the morning, Simon wakes, and Stella is in a coma, and Simon's last chance seems to have vanished. Plus, when Stella wakes, she has a new, unrestrained personality—and a new talent that eventually puts her in the spotlight that eludes Simon. The more I wrote, the more involved I became in their lives, which seemed so different from my own.

Until they weren't. Until I had an identity change as startling as Stella's.

SINCE I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, part of my identity has been that I'm sick with asthma. My world was ERs, hospitals, inhalers, steroids, and nebulizers. Bullied in school for being sickly, I grew shy, shamed. Cold weather could decimate my lungs, but so could humid air, so I was a victim of weather. My clothes always had to have pockets for my arsenal of meds. I never talked about my asthma, but I did write about it in *Pictures of You*, which helped me come to terms with being a person with a chronic illness.

But then five years ago, I developed terrible new breathing problems no doctor seemed able to diagnose, let alone treat. I bounced from specialist to specialist for over a year, near hysterical with panic, until I was able to get an appointment at a renowned respiratory clinic. The doctor spent over two

hours taking my history and giving me tests, and then announced, "You absolutely don't have asthma. You *never* had asthma. It's your meds and your anxiety that are giving you breathing issues. And you need to stop them immediately."

I sat there, stunned, furious, and terrified. How had so many doctors been so wrong? What was it going to feel like being healthy? Going off my meds made me feel untethered, even more so when I discovered I didn't need them. I started meditating and seeing a cognitive therapist to feel better. But who *was* I if I wasn't sick, if I never had been? I gave that disconnected feeling, that exploration of self, to both Simon and Stella.

The more I wrote, the more I found I was writing myself into the story. Hey, it always happens. Like Simon, I had my own issues with identifying myself as a success, which could define or destroy you. I had had sudden fame in my twenties with my first novel, *Meeting Rozzy Halfway*, catapulting me into a limelight I loved. I was finally somebody, a star! But like Simon, my glow didn't last. I bounced from publisher to publisher and none of my books did well. No one knew who I was anymore—including me. My ninth novel was rejected on contract as "not special enough" and I knew I could no longer call myself an author. But then, unexpectedly, I became a success again with Algonquin—a two-time *New York Times* bestseller!—but what did that mean? Success didn't feel like the this-is-why-I-matter identity of my twenties anymore, but something very different. Success was now simply a river I traveled on, with twists, dams, broken places, and sometimes gorgeous islands to rest upon. It was a thing, but it wasn't *me*.

Writing *With or Without You* made me think about personality change with a new kind of wonder. Does transformation ever stop? Can we control it? Every seven years or so, our bodies replace our cells. Could it be the same with who we are? I realize that the only thing any of us—including my characters—can know is that everything you thought you knew about yourself or others can derail. But unexpected transformation can also revive, burnishing new possibilities you never expected, and that new person you might become can actually turn out to be your truest self of all.

FROM

With or Without You

BY CAROLINE LEAVITT

Stella maps out time by noise, music, scent, and heat. The morning sun on her body, the coolness of night, sometimes the rough wash of a cloth over her body. Everything looks and feels different now. Sounds are sharper. She sees colors behind her lids, but when she tries to focus, tastes flood her mouth. Apples. Roast beef. Once, strawberry ice cream, just out of nowhere, like a kind of wonderful surprise. Her senses are all mixed up and she keeps thinking, More. Please, more, more, more. The surprise of it makes her feel more alive. It's something new, something positive, so surely it means things are changing. Someone touches her hand and she sees a flash of turquoise. Someone says something and she smells oranges, making her mouth water.

Stella shivers at a kiss on her hand. She knows it's Simon's, and though she can't see him right now, she feels like a light has been switched on. His lips seem to blend right into her skin, heat coursing through her body like a stream. "It's time for you to wake up, honey," she hears him say, but she doesn't really understand what he means, except for the word *honey*, but in his mouth, it sounds sad rather than loving, and that bothers her.

She hears people yelling at her, calling *Stella, Stella, Stella*, her name like the clang of a bell. She hears a banging noise so close to her face that she would flinch back if she could. She hears Simon, and sometimes Libby, too. Libby. Her friend Libby. She knows when Libby is there because she can smell her, like coconut, like a weird float of red and blue that has a scent all its own. She can feel her stirring the air.

She shimmers above herself. Her memories are hazy. They seem like a book she had read one too many times, but a book she had loved. Who was that Stella? What was on her next page?

"Simon," she hears, and she recognizes Libby's voice, and a flood of happiness washes over her. Libby, she tries to say. Libby, my friend!

"The drive," Libby says. "That was nice."

What drive? Stella thinks.

"I know a place that has the best pizza," Simon says. There's a funny silence and Stella rides it like a wave, coming down with a bounce. "I sometimes go there when I'm done with the hospital. You should eat, too. Something other than that awful hospital food."

Stella listens in wonder. She remembers how much Libby had disapproved of Simon, how she didn't think he was good enough for Stella. Do Simon and Libby like each other now? Stella hopes so because she loves them both, but still there's a flare of jealousy zigzagging through her stomach. They can like each other, she tells herself. It's all right.

"Stella," she hears him say now. She tries to let him know, sending out thoughts that have sound attached, but he doesn't say anything more to her, so she has to assume that he's oblivious. He cries, but there's nothing she can do about it, except think, meanly, Well, why didn't you cry before? "Come back," he says. "Please come back."

I'm trying.

Simon never gives up hope. She knows this about him. He always thought he was going to go right to the top in music and stay there. He thought he would be the next Dylan, that his band would be the next Pearl Jam, that the songs he uploads on the band's website would go viral. And at first it seemed possible. But then she saw how his audience was getting older, not younger, and that wasn't a good sign, how the concert halls weren't filling anymore, so the band had to play at fairgrounds, singing to drunks and kids who were only there to snag some weed. The band was background noise, a reason for another beer, another toke, but she didn't say anything to Simon. She had always just hoped he would find his way, and fool that she was, she had hoped that his way might be her.

Light pours into her, warm as a shower, and she feels herself contract. "Oh, that's good," Libby says, and Stella wants to scream, I'm here, I'm here, don't go away, I'm here.

The light gets brighter and she feels herself flinch again. "Come on, Stella," Libby says, and Stella thinks, Oh, shut up. I'm doing the best I can. She read once about people who saw white lights when they died, but she never believed it. That was hokum, just the brain being starved of oxygen.

The body trying to keep itself from reaching the edge of panic. The light flashes again, and her mind rolls over it like water over a stone. Is she dying? Is this all there is for her? Peggy Lee sang that, she remembers. Simon played the song for her. She needs Peggy Lee singing.

Simon comes closer. His sorrow is rich and fragrant. "She doesn't know I'm here," he says.

Yes. Yes, I do.

She had had lots of men in her life when she was in college, guys who wanted to be doctors, psychologists, electricians, but she had never loved any one of them enough to settle down with. Then, degree in hand, her career under way, she met Simon.

"We don't know that," Libby says, and her voice has something new in it that Stella can't place. "Stella, wake up! Stella, wake up!" Libby says.

I would if I could.

Coma, she hears someone say, and something twists in her stomach. She had seen coma patients right here in the hospital. There was a single mother, and Stella still remembers her name: Doris Harper. Young and blond and gorgeous, with a tiny diamond nose ring and a big smile. She came in all by herself to have her baby, and everything interested her, the labor pains that she said were like having a *T. rex* inside her, the monitor, even the surgical gown that she fastened in the back with two glittery diaper pins. But something happened on the table. Her heart stopped. She went into a coma for two weeks, and when she came out of it, she didn't ask about her baby, a burly little boy she had wanted to name Jake. She didn't want to see him. "Why should I?" she said. "I'll be gone again. I made the wrong decision. I want to go back."

The doctors monitored Doris. The nurses put Jake in her arms, and she rocked him, sang to him, and kissed his little cheek. Everyone thought everything was going to be fine. But then Doris had gone home, with her baby, and two weeks later, roiling in postpartum depression, she killed herself and her baby went to Social Services.

You never knew how things were going to turn out.

"Coma," Stella hears again, and then Libby's soothing voice. "She'll come out of it, Simon. You told me she was a fighter." When, Stella thinks. When had Simon told Libby that?

Well, this state is nothing like coma. Not that she's ever been in one before. Not that she would know. But this feels like nothing anyone who has come out of coma has told her. It's nothing like anything she has ever studied. She can feel Libby and Simon moving about the room, and then suddenly, she is moving, too. Like a spirit.

She swirls about the hospital and sees and hears things she didn't notice before. Is she hallucinating? she wonders. She rounds a corner, and if this is a hallucination, well, the details are all so right, so specific, right down to the hand lotion on the nurse's cart, the stack of diapers on the bottom. Is this all some sort of vast cosmic joke, and is she the punch line? In her room again, Stella sees Madonna in a black lace bustier smoking a cigarette and grinning at her before she flies away.

Stella knows that there are specialists who work to bring people out of comas. But, really, who knows what works? A child's puppy licking his face. A favorite perfume. A swish of velvet.

A kiss from someone you love.

In her bed again, Stella tries to think of what she knows about herself. She is here. She can sense things. Something is wrong. She loved Simon.

The past tense bothers her.

"Baby girl," she hears, and she thinks, Mom, Mom, Mom again. She wants to reach for her, to burrow her face against her mother's warm neck.

Something feels different. There's been a seismic shift. Or a time loop, the past and present all entwined. Animals know when an earthquake is about to happen. People, too, sense things, and she feels herself floating up again, as if she is moving into the future. She can't tell what's in the future, though. All she knows is this bed, the smells of the sheets, and the senses around her.

Now she hears something crashing against her ears, and then she's floating higher, up against this raging tide, and her ears hurt, and then her skin hurts, and then there is a blink of light before she falls back again, settled more deeply into the dark. She feels different now, new somehow. She wants to laugh out loud.

"Stella!" She hears her name and something sharp is poked under her nose. Cinnamon, she thinks. Or maybe table salt. She's rising up again. Something is trying to get out of her body, and for a moment, it hurts. Pain.

For a second, she feels as if her body is moving. Her hand. Just a twitch. That's what it is. When was the last time she felt pain?

There is that blink of light again, growing stronger, pressing against her eyes like a thumb, and she opens them, and everything is so bright she can't see for a minute. Her body, heavy and dense, falls back into the bed. "Glasses," she says, and it is strange to hear her voice, hoarse and hollow and filled with fluid, but she means sunglasses, not the glass of water someone is handing her because it is all so bright, so new, and then she blinks and her vision clears a little, and there, standing at the foot of her bed, beautiful and strange, his whole body shimmering, is Simon, before she's pulled back down, into the murk. "Simon," she tries to say. "Simon."

WITH OR WITHOUT YOU
by Caroline Leavitt
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