

## Volume 19 (2016)



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'Fairy Tale' by Katharyn Howd Machan  
'How the Shyness Unfolds' by Cathryn Cofell-Mutschler  
'Carnivore' by Gary Hanna  
'Funeral' by Trent Busch  
'Sonnet XII' by Chris Bullard  
'Bubbles' by Mark Defoe  
'Classics by Request' by Bruce Taylor  
'The Blackboard' by Susan Richardson  
'Noir' by Katharyn Howd Machan  
'Kitchen' by Greg Moglia  
'Madonna on a Country Road' by Joe Taylor

### Fiction:

- Inside Tricia's Room – Roberta Hartling Gates  
And Another Flew Over the Sea – Corran Harrington  
The Blackboard – Susan Richardson  
Madonna on a Country Road – Joe Taylor  
It – Len Kuntz  
Hush – John Duncan Talbird

### Creative Nonfiction:

- The Trouble with Wet Pavement – Alena Dillon  
Snowball Effect – Jim Landwehr

### Poetry:

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Between – James Scruton  
Relocation – Richard Dinges  
A Wardrobe of Stolen Dreams – Beth Konkoski  
Our Own Time – Thomas Sabel  
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Northern Reproaches – Elton Glaser

- The Afterlife of Rain – Cameron Morse  
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Prospective Titles, possible first (or last) lines. – D.G. Geis  
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Noir – Katharyn Howd Machan  
Biology of Opinion – Rich Kenney

**Art:**

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Living Again – Fabrice Poussin

The Weight of a Man – Holly Day

Hair Today – Allen Forrest

Bird – Steven J Hughes

Michelangelo Captive – Allen Forrest

Untitled – Andrew Helman

Their Place in the Sun – Fabrice Poussin

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Paul's Hands with Boot from Vietnam War – James Sedwick

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'Red Emma' by Linda Scheller



Red Emma

Linda Scheller

"If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."  
--Emma Goldman (1869-1940)

when my nature led me to misbehave  
my father  
flew at me in rage  
beating me until helena  
succeeded in pulling him off  
jewish girls  
he snarled  
need only know how to make gefüllte fish  
cut noodles  
and bear their husband children  
he yanked from my hands  
a french grammar  
and threw it into the fire  
he planned my marriage  
i refused  
helena and i left russia  
for america  
and found all its promises  
like lorelei songs  
a ruse



## 'Fairy Tale' by Katharyn Howd Machan



Let me tell you about redemption.  
Let me tell you the way a dragonfly  
shapes a heart when it copulates

with the other dragonfly that's drawn  
to put all possible sin behind and make  
a fine new creature. Let me

share the story of a woman in love  
who found red wine and lavender  
in southern France and bore a daughter

and loved that daughter so much she tore  
a sacred promise to shreds. Redemption.  
Once upon a time a fox

dared cunningly to slide inside  
the barely open kitchen window  
of a family of three bears: guilt/

gilt turned to Goldilocks, removing  
beast from beast. What can a mother  
tell her daughter

to keep her happy and true?  
Let me say—let me say it once:  
regret spreads wings as dark as shadows

that keep on beating, reaching for light  
to turn it into the darkest jewel  
a woman must reach for every night.

## 'How the Shyness Unfolds' by Cathryn Cofell-Mutschler



I want to say it's a banana or a potato  
being peeled, the slow curl and reveal,  
but such a bland yellow thing.

I want to say it's a shirt from a drawer,  
a billow of purple and Bounce,  
but it's sweat and crumple in a pile.

I want to say it's a virgin's fantasy first,  
soft hall light and Harlequin,  
tender and gasp as they keen and grasp.

I say tender but mean tinder:  
a birch tree stripped of its bark,  
doused with lighter fluid, flame exposed.

I say exposed but mean explode:  
a shrapnel of four-martinis,  
a face reflected as pale and abhor.

When I say abhor I mean whore,  
for FICA and retirement,  
food and rent.

When I say rent I mean rend.  
When I say rend I mean rend.

'Carnivore' by Gary Hanna



When I wear underpants  
I am a creature of nature  
shackled in chains, dutiful  
to a tee, a changeling trained  
to perform like a robot,  
constrained in the perfunctory  
use of time and desire.  
I take the sun in preppy  
Bermuda shorts, look my best  
in a business suit, dandle  
children on my knee, never  
teach them to hunt or run free,  
always obey, never wade  
in the stream, bind them  
to desks, teach them to learn  
from books and older members  
of their kind, do all the things  
expected of dad. But underneath,  
I wake in the night, long for  
the woods, howl at the moon,  
yearn for the chase and the cave.

## 'Funeral' by Trent Busch



The light that kept  
her fingers brown once  
opens onto the beach,  
across the dunes,  
past the pines,

then stalls but a second  
above the clearing  
where a pitcher pump  
and rusty cup  
lie abandoned in weeds  
beside a shed.

On the limbs  
of the oak scrubs  
roofing the road  
leading in, dew hangs  
before it unbuttons  
to hundreds of  
craters in the sand.

The light that made  
her words day once  
closes its hand and lies  
down like the wind,

the weeds and tracks  
and waves tucked  
tightly in before  
the great mountain.

'Sonnet XII' by Chris Bullard



I'm all for redemption, if you get fair value.  
The more sins you haul in, the more grace  
you get back, am I right? Enough saliva-  
wilted green stamps got mom a coffee pot,  
so why shouldn't I expect a seaside villa  
in perdition. If I confess my imperfections,  
can't I still take some pride in the ebony  
I've perfectly smudged my milk bottle soul?  
Don't tell me I've got to do time doing good.  
That's such a Hollywood cliché. Look,  
I'm coming as a little child unto you: candy  
on my lips and a slingshot in my pocket.  
I know there's room for sinners at this bar.  
A multitude can fit in a cup of absolution.

'Bubbles' by Mark DeFoe



We float in the crystal globes of self  
And decorate our orbs with pretty toys,  
Mementos on every sagging shelf—  
Our victories, our glory, our joys.

Around us other bubbles rise.  
Some may burst, most cannot last—  
We turn away from their pleading cries.  
Our sparkle in the sudden blast

Is our obsession. We must catch the drift,  
Buoyant balloons embellishing the air.  
We must sail and kite. We must lift  
Up hot as a star, a peal of prayer.

Inflated at God's lips, he sighs, and puffs.  
We dance and bob, a whim, a gleaming fluff.



'Classics By Request' by Bruce Taylor



It seems so sometimes,  
Mozart on a Monday.  
Schubert in a drizzle.

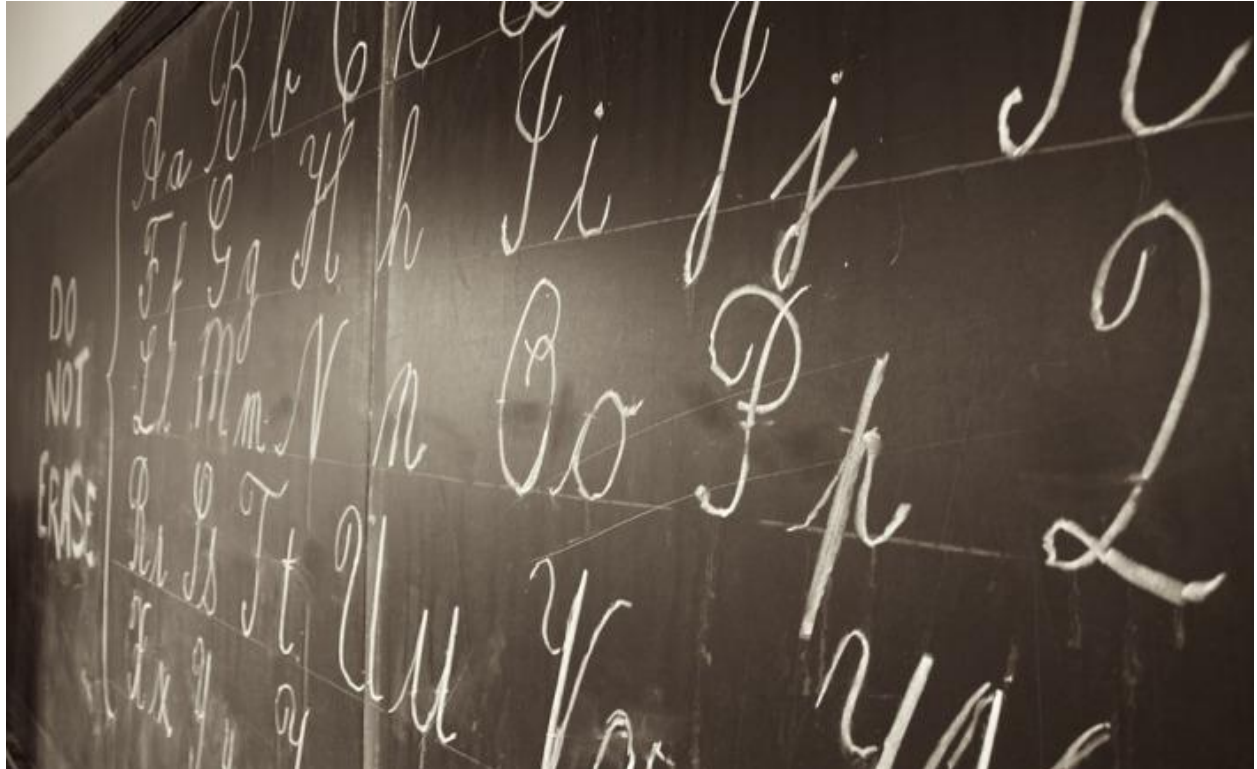
Say Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*,  
say exactly the one you're  
sitting at the lake in

the small radio through  
the half-opened window  
fading, barely on

say autumn settles  
for a yellow moment  
in the mottled wood

and an *oboe d'amore*  
mourns and beckons  
on the other shore.

## 'The Blackboard' by Susan Richardson



The blackboard takes up a sixth of one of the walls in a high school classroom. Its edges are hazy with chalk dust the janitor missed when wiping down the board on his rounds through the school. (He wipes down so many boards; he can't be responsible for cleaning every inch!) In front of the blackboard sits the teacher's large desk, and then the uneven rows of student desks, and across the room from the board, the wide window looks out onto the basketball court, its hoops missing their nets, and, beyond that, the vast lawn where the kids gather before and after school.

Though the blackboard's mostly clean now, everything ever written on the board still lives in a room behind it. It's like life. We often experience, often remember only the surface. Not only that. Where the board offered solely brief snatches, the room holds entire stories, patches billowed out into fat bodies, wholeness. (Or does it?)

1. Joey + Janice in the top left-hand corner, encircled in a lopsided heart.

Yes, Joey loves Janice. But it doesn't work out. The two share choir, Joey standing diagonally one step higher. The conductor wonders if Joey has undiagnosed curvature of the spine. From where the conductor stands, Joey's body leans to the left (really Joey's right) and hunches down a bit. But Joey's only trying to sniff the coconut shampoo wafting off Janice's brunette shag. \* Joey follows Janice around, three steps behind like a servant. He carries her books to her locker. He waits for her at the doorway to each of her classes, then sprints to his own class, where the teacher usually writes him up for lateness. \* One thing Joey loves about Janice is her meticulousness. Her skirt and blouse always match. Her knee socks never fall down. Her shoes never betray a single scuff. Every hair of her brunette



shag stays in place, even in gym, where at the time Joey loves Janice the girls play volleyball. Janice is the best player. But even when she jumps up to spike the ball straight down over the net, her hair doesn't bob a bit. \* Janice lets Joey carry her books and follow her around like a puppy. But it won't go any further than that. Janice knew Joey in junior high, too. At that school, they also shared a blackboard. The math teacher would spend the entire hour pitting one student against another, having them race through math problems on the board. Whoever found the correct answer first stayed at the board; the loser sat down.  $24 \times 16$  or  $192/12$ . Janice was so good she could go through the class one and a half times before making a mistake. \* So, many times Janice competed against Joey. When she finished the problem they shared,  $213 - 67$  or the square root of 169, Janice would glance over at Joey, at her opponent. She noted what Joey did. He looked not at the board, where he should have been marking his answer, but at his fingers, on which he was counting. Like a little kid.

2. The situation adumbrates an ambivalent dichotomy.

3. Henry loves Bob, tiny letters scrawled along a right angle in the lower right-hand corner.

But it doesn't work out. Henry's gay. Bob isn't. Henry doesn't understand how his gaydar could have gone so haywire. Henry and Bob play on the football team. (There's no law says gay guys can't play football.) They shower in a communal bathroom. When Henry first viewed Bob in nothing but a towel, he almost fainted. Uh-hmmm, he told himself.

4.  $E = mc^2$ .

5. The Great Beagle sits on top of his doghouse, clacking away at a typewriter. It was a dark and stormy night, he writes. Nonetheless, he continues, everyone rocked around the clock.

6. Is Ulysses the greatest book of the 20th Century, or is it simply a textbook for writers? Would any of you curl up with Ulysses for a cozy read in bed? Write a 500-word paper on this topic.

Ulysses is a textbook for writers. It teaches them stream of consciousness, how to fit an entire day into a novel, how to rip off a classic and make it new. The only great chapter is the last one, where Penelope gasps, "Yes! Yes!" and even more "Yes!" She instructs us how to live.

Hereafter followed, on this student's paper, 447 instances of "Yes!"

7. Ms. Tippetts sux big green hairy donkey dix, written in large block letters across the entire board.

Ms. Tippetts, the English teacher, inflicts modern and contemporary poetry on her students: "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," The Book of Nightmares. They understand none of it, and during class, they text each other or fly paper airplanes or doze with their eyes open.

Ms. Tippetts does indeed suck dicks, though not donkey dicks, not green ones, sometimes not big ones. Her students know nothing about it. In dark hallways of smoky bars, late at night when she can't sleep. Her long cornflower-blue fake nails graze the man's denim thigh where she strokes it. He grasps the nearby door jamb with one hand, smokes a cig with the other.

After a few hours of blow jobs, Ms. Tippetts, her tongue swollen and mouth and knees sore, goes home and falls asleep as soundly as a jackal after the hunt.

8. Your mom wears combat boots.

This could say something about the woman's lack of fashion sense. Or it might say she sweats/reeks/strides/swears/straddles like a man. The equivalent opposite? Your dad wears polka-dot high heels.

9. And many more . . .

10. Joey ends up with Henry. They live platonically ever after. Janice becomes a prima ballerina, falls in love with the audience, never marries. Her swollen joints and exhausted tendons end up in a tacky nursing home.  $E = mc^2$ , upon which so much of physics is based, turns out never to have been proven!

11. STORY no longer exists, someone has written in chalked-over letters on the board. The "someone," a writer, has been sending out her stories for months, years, now decades. Enticing stories. Stories about love affairs and plots against the world and IRS agents siphoning off the dough and irresponsible citizens gumming up the rings of Saturn. To publishers of magazines and short story collections and novels. Who return them. To agents so uninterested they never even shovel her submissions into the trash, but leave them sitting, coffee-stained and Danish-sticky, in a pile on the corners of their desks. Will no one ever read her stories? When she goes to the movie theater, she notices how empty the auditorium has become, how talk resounds clearly in the empty room, how very few people (mostly oldsters) even watch new movies anymore. STORY is dead, she writes, and she means it, in the same way someone else once wrote, GOD is dead. It's that significant.

Yet even this (see above) makes a story.

12. And miles to go before I sleep. / Ditto.

13. The plot thickens.

'Noir' by Katharyn Howd Machan



And if the prince is evil.  
If his fingertips are dangerous  
when he pries loose the golden slipper  
from tar, from pitch, from wax.  
Ochre waistcoat, mustard sleeves, thin  
necktie in a saffron knot  
below a bearded grin. If  
every night he plucks black swans  
and floats their feathers down the stream  
that runs fast past his castle,  
then chews their curved necks raw  
to spit out their splintered bones,  
laughing as he shouts the name  
of the shining girl he'll seek and find  
to marry, then cut off her feet  
so she'll never dance again.

## 'Kitchen' by Greg Moglia



I turn on the kitchen light and there is the steak knife  
Mother threw at my knee when I dared to lounge at the dining room table

Not even a sting, only the first trickle of blood  
And the rattle of the knife onto the floor

Pulled me out of the stupor of sport page reading  
Dad for a moment leaving the TIMES says to mother *Are you crazy?*

Mother answers *How many times did I tell him*  
*Knees off the table*

Grandpa Pete cuts up stale bread in a soup bowl and plans  
To soak it with coffee – his poverty breakfast in a middle class home

Look the yellow rose dishes free with one movie admission  
Collected by mother for years until she had place settings for eight

And there is Grandpa Pete dying of heat stroke in a kitchen chair  
And brother Ron pleads to Mother to call 911

While mother worn out from cleaning Gramps dirty underwear  
Says to my bother...*Not yet, not yet*

And on that last cancer filled day my mother asks me from her bed  
To make a soft boiled egg

And when I brought it to her tells me I made it too hard  
I grit my teeth and decide who in the world I knew best of all

Until picking up her tray and heading towards the kitchen  
I hear a voice I did not know saying

*Thank you Greg* and suddenly the air  
Filled with my ignorance and never smelling so sweet

## 'Madonna on a Country Road' by Joe Taylor



Just out of high school, just in college, seven of us packed into a Ford Galaxie for a nighttime country romp. Well, I'm lying on one point: Galen was just out of the Navy, had never been to college. There were three girls and four boys salt-and-peppered throughout the huge car, though again, Galen surely counted as a man, having served nearly four years. He'd been released early because of his political views on Vietnam. He sailed on the sister ship of the Lester Maddox, which wound up in some troubles in those Vietnamese waters, while his own ship cruised the bars and brothels of the Mediterranean to hear him tell it.

It was fairly on into this night, pulling close to eleven. No property lines as yet had been drawn between the sexes. You might say the surveyors were still working their transoms and plotting the lay of the land.

We were drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon and Boone's Farm, smoking cigarettes, saying all the silly things youth are up to saying, and driving on a country road that temporarily paralleled Elkhorn Creek on the right. Every road in Fayette and the surrounding counties sooner or later seemed to parallel this creek. It was winter and it was cold, with patches of snow remaining from a storm ten days before.

A house lay ahead on our left, its white outline glaring a death-mound of persistent, smothering snow. As we neared it, Libby and I screamed. The driver, Tim, stopped the car, and we screamed again, joined by Goldie, a tall blonde who fancied himself a poet.

"Go! Go!" Libby yelled.

She yelled because on the front porch of the Kentucky shack sat a figure this side of pale, emitting an actual yellow glow. Neither the bitter cold nor our presence on the road made the least impression on the figure. It sat rocking, rocking, rocking, staring somewhere that wasn't our where.

Tim sped off, spinning the rear wheels on black ice.

"I think he was nude," I said.

"In this cold?" Galen asserted.

"He had a rifle across his lap," Goldie said when we stopped a hundred yards away, where the road veered from Elkhorn.

"She was a woman," Libby said, "with yellow hair and a baby."

"In this cold!?"

"I'm saying what I saw."

A beer tab popped, two cigarettes got lit. Libby rolled down her window and looked back. God, don't get out, I thought, almost touching her tan woolen coat that smelled of kittens.

"I hear something."

We all listened. There was a high drone, like wind in trees or tires on a long silvery road leading straight to the moon. But the sound didn't increase or decrease in pitch. A dark movement slipped through the winter-straw underbrush to our left.

"I once had a calico kitten," Libby said. I felt her breath on my cheek.

"I think it was a weasel," someone in the front seat said.

"Out of the water?" Galen commented. "The creek's on the other side."

The droning wind rendered all our statements true, as surely as it rendered all of them false.

"It's going to snow," Libby stated.

"It's been clear for three days," Galen countered.

"What's that have to do with anything?" This from Libby, who shifted, her right knee bumping mine. While Goldie pretended to be a poet, Libby led her life as one, for the motions of this earth never seemed to tabulate much with her: rather, her ears were always listening for some ethereal sound, her blue eyes always chasing some slanting light, her thin hands always twitching at some promised caress or threatened nip. It turned out that two years later she would declare herself a lesbian. Of course, this made her all the more attractive to me. I think, though, her real reason for declaring herself so was that this drastically diminished any human contact she would need to make. I know, I know, sexual inclination is not a choice. That's exactly what I'm saying. Libby had no choice.

"A baby," she insisted. "Back there. The woman held one. I think she was nursing."

We just had to drive back on hearing that.

"I could back up," Tim suggested.

"Yes," Libby said, her face once more pushed out into the cold, her hair whipped with a sudden gust.

"What if I'm the one who's right, and he does have a rifle?"

The rest of us didn't need any hooting owl, keening wind, or flashing lightning to urge caution. The decision was made to circle

around and approach from our original direction. This time, Tim turned out the headlights before we neared the house. Except we never neared it. We all leaned forward, searching the ribbon of road, but only darkness reached

into the car. Tim braked several times as black creatures scuttled on the road before us. Soon, we were back at the turn that led away from Elkhorn Creek.

We had to have missed it, Tim decided, because the car lights were out. Libby again rolled her window down.

"There, hear it?"

The same drone presented, higher, louder. Tim again suggested that he could just back up, but he was once more voted down, even Libby joining in on the side of prudence, plus she feared we wouldn't see the black kittens going backwards and might run over one.

"They're not kittens."

Not weasels, not kittens, I thought.

So after circling, Tim drove even slower and kept the car lights on. Maybe a hundred feet away, the house's outline showed through the trees.

"Douse 'em," Galen said. Tim turned off the lights.

We drove ever so slowly—I could have kept up alongside in a stumbling jog—but once more we found ourselves at the turn that led away from Elkhorn Creek, and once more there was no house. Libby fluttered her long-fingered pale hand out her window.

"Snow," she said, pulling her hand in. I couldn't believe that I reached to touch it, but I did. Of course, any snow that may have been there had evaporated. Libby recoiled at my touch.

"That cry, it's not kittens, it's human, it's a baby," she commented. "A tiny baby, a nursing baby."

Three more windows got rolled partway down, and we listened. The wind, the wind, the wind. Snowflakes as large as my thumb fluttered like Libby's fingers.

A third time we circled, with the same no-result result. Tim thought he saw rubble from a foundation, but it was just clumped weeds.

"Sailors avoid the Bermuda Triangle if they're smart."

But Libby opened her door and bounded from the car. Now, impossible thumb-thick snow swirled in a mad dance, already accumulating on the road in our headlights. My heart leaped toward

Libby's retreating figure, as my surveyor's transom focused boundary lines hard and clear. I too scrambled from the car.

"Libby!"

In my mind now, these years later, she ran like an eight-year-old, her calves and arms flailing at odd angles. But I know that then she ran with intent, not slipping—I was the one who skidded on an ice patch—she ran with hard intent toward the spot where the house should have been.

Behind us, a mix of admonitory shouts and drunken hoots erupted from the car. My hand stung where I fell, but I righted myself and ran on toward Libby, who had left the road to jump a shallow ditch and enter a line of thin trees. Wet brush and twigs tore at my face as I followed. Snowflakes fell on my forehead and cheeks, melting or glancing off. Something dark flashed to my right.

"Libby, please!"



And then, in front of us sat the house, illuminated in wavering yellow as if rows of Edison's original filament bulbs lighted the wrap-around front porch. We both stopped. I had nearly caught up with her; she was within arm's length. I held back, though, from reaching out, remembering her reaction in the car. Black hunks and patches like repressed memories skittered atop the railing guarding the porch, while snow sifted through the trees, which grew thicker around the house, the opposite of what you'd expect. It was as if the trees were congregating and keeping vigil. A steady creaking channeled underneath the moaning wind, coming from either the trees or the house itself. I looked to the porch and once more saw a figure, rocking, rocking, rocking. Libby let out a guttural yelp and stretched her right arm forward. I'll see her that way now sometimes before I go to sleep, all these years later: her long fingers splayed, her tan woolen coat straightened. I know that her cherubic cheeks are facing the house and the Madonna. I know that she is the Madonna.

Libby was right: the figure was a woman and the woman was cradling an infant. On hearing Libby's outcry, the woman protectively covered the infant, and, standing to turn from us, entered the house, giving us one last fright-filled glance from the door, which banged.

The snow turned incredibly thick, belying Galen's judgment about clear skies. The wind that had been moaning now howled. A back door to the house slammed. A tree or a heavy tree limb crashed to the earth. Off the house's back porch—I made this out through white

railing that hung at my eye level—a woman leaped and began to run, shuffling side to side the way someone does when she is carrying a weight close to her body.

"No! No! Stay for me," Libby pleaded. She began running toward the woman.

I ran after Libby, looking back—that's what we humans always do, isn't it? Look back?—looking back to see if the others were coming to help. I could make out the car's headlights back on the road. I twisted about, but there was no house now. I thought, I must be facing the wrong way. The car horn blared, pulling my glance again. I heard hooting and music. Then I saw the five of them in the car's headlights. They were dancing with abandoned exaggeration, their knees lifting to their chests, their arms akimbo. One of them pumped a branch like a spear in the air. Their dance circled around a slithering black weasel that writhed up into the freezing blackness and seemed to dance with them.

"Libby!" I turned and ran toward her. A vine snagged my right foot and I nearly fell.

The woman with the infant had advanced so far that she was hidden by the thickly falling snow, the trees, and the underbrush. Now only one figure ran ahead of me, Libby. I closed in, making out her tan coat and her bouncing yellow hair she had gotten up into a ponytail.

"Libby!" This time, a vine did trip me and I fell hard enough that my breath left me. From overhead came a vast inhalation, which turned into mortal gasps. The black branches, wintry and deprived of leaves as they were, bent inward and downward and outward with those gasps. "Libby." This time, my call seeped out weak and factual, as if I'd spotted the distant exhaust of a bus that was to carry me to midnight Christmas Mass, where I was to meet my true mother. The branches overhead were still swaying inward, outward, downward with their huge gasping breath, except now the branches were clacking with ice and fright as they swayed. They sounded like the telling of rosary beads, the tabulating of an abacus, the last clatter of a baby's rattle as it rolled under a dresser to be forever lost. The wind whistled, the snow swirled.

I lay on the cold ground in that country of no-consciousness that a yoga practitioner would label no-mind meditation. Except that my mind struggled mightily to find its grip. The wind whistled, the snow swirled. Two figures running, waddling heavily under their loads. Two figures becoming one, running under its load. Running under her load. A moaning that became gasping, that became howling, that became

keening. The wind whistled, the snow swirled. A thud that became a falling limb. A thud caused by a vine or root. A beating that became so regular that I went to sleep. A beating that quickened, so that I awoke. Liquid, warm, life-giving liquid filling and pumping through my lungs. Air, rushing icy air, filling and pumping through my nostrils. My nostrils that burned from cold, from heat.

I gagged and startled, coughing, my head in Libby's lap. Her fingers skittered through my hair, which was sticky and wet. She peeled something from around my head. It was thick and moist, and it quickly transferred all its warmth to the open air. She tossed it on the ground, where it made a heavy, sloppy plop. My eyes felt glued, as if some kid had taken flour paste and covered them. Still, I fought to open them and search.

"Where is she? Where's the baby?"

"My baby," Libby cooed, peeling another damp, iron-smelling skein of flesh from behind my right ear. This she also tossed aside. It made a wet plop and my eyes opened. I saw a black creature dart and gather the skin or whatever it was in its teeth, shake it viciously, and turn away.

I realized that I was shivering, that the only warmth was coming from Libby's lap. "How'd I get so wet?"

"My baby," Libby cooed again, giving a jerk of her fingers to pinch and pull mucus from my right nostril. I breathed much easier and realized that my lips had been puckering in a sucking motion. Libby touched a finger to them. I heard a button pop, and Libby placed it in my shirt pocket with a smile, her fingernail scratching my chest enough that I inhaled. Then she bared her breast in the cold and bent down. I sucked in thin liquid warmth. I felt Libby's heart and timed my suckling to its beating, beating, beating . . .

"How'd I get so wet?"

"You fell out . . . you fell into Elkhorn Creek."

"We need to turn up the heat," a voice interrupted.

"It's as high as it'll go," a second voice replied.

"The creek's on the other side of the road," I said.

"It's everywhere," Libby replied. "Everywhere."

Years later, at Libby's funeral—she had overdosed—when I was looking down at her pale face, her yellow hair, pristine in her blue-bronzed casket, I keened like the winter wind that night, though it was

mid-summer. I keened and I sucked in air, bending over. A friend of hers grabbed my elbow and put her hand behind my neck, pulling me outside the funeral home, into the summer sun.

There, after I was able to breathe and stand on my own, she told me that Libby had lost an early third-trimester child when she was sixteen and had never . . . Some asshole punched her stomach. / Her boyfriend? / I don't know, probably, if you want to call him that.

This friend had been with us on that wintry drive. I asked her why they were dancing in the road. What do you mean, she replied. / Dancing. In the road. I saw you all in the headlights. There must have been some dead animal you all were kicking as you danced around it in the snow. / Animal? Dancing? We waited in the car until Libby yelled. / You mean when she yelled at the woman carrying the baby? / What woman, what baby? There wasn't even a house, just a leaning shed. You were drunk and fell into the creek. That's why she yelled. When she got you into the car and the dome light came on, you were covered head to toe in blood and black crap that looked like

afterbirth I've seen mares slough off, about five pounds' worth of the horrible, slick stuff. She reached, just as Libby had that night, to pinch my nose.

I'd kept, through four wallets, the as-good-as-virgin white button that had popped from Libby's blouse. I pulled it out now and showed it to our mutual friend, who shrugged in confusion. There was no sense in trying to explain. Behind her, I saw pallbearers carrying Libby in her casket, at rest at last and alone at last. "Libby," I called weakly. Momma, I thought. The world clogged about me and I once more swayed, then coughed and opened my mouth to breathe.