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PROVING GROUND

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Carolyn Denise Marin



# **PROVING GROUND**

A Thesis

Presented to

The College of Graduate Studies

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

Carolyn Denise Marin

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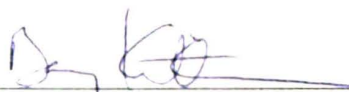
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We have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content. We recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art in English.



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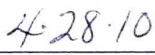


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For Robert, when it was you and me

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## **I wrote the anniversary of your death on the calendar**

Ten years ago today was a Friday, too. A twenty-four hour day with seconds and minutes that only the Egyptians can explain. It goes back as far as that. The naming of days. Counting of hours. And I question the Egyptians with their beliefs of existing before birth and after death. And how can they know that you being gone is merely an interruption until you are whole again—wholly someone else who is merely the essence of the you I knew—but who recognizes me. It is after the body that we learn to know each other. When the interruption comes and parcels out the spirit we are able to act and react without the incomplete consciousness, the fumbling body.

## Reclamation

Where will you go with your bruised chest  
and narrow view of love  
or something like it.

A young soldier clears your path through the graveyard—  
keeping your feet in motion and your eyes fixed  
through mist, or the transparency of nothing that is alive.

The time between he is and he was  
shortens with every nuzzled breath,  
what you give away suffocates there,  
and the plastic flowers fade.

They recognize that in you—the disconnect  
of rivers—their obedience garnered from some primal place,  
where territories are marked in stone.



## Wreck

His message of stuff and blood  
took root in the most shallow places,  
exposing clocks and daisies.  
A fixed gaze, etched by barbed wire,  
mirrored bronze flame and wild dogs.

\*\*

A brown paper sack.  
Inside: clothes, keys, wallet, shoes.  
Torn denim revealed no secrets, not even blood  
to confirm anyone had ever been there.

I held the bag, top rolled down tightly,  
pinning the story in the palm of my hand.

\*\*

If she knew, I would be less than him—a traveler picking thistle on a crooked road  
and nothing more.

\*\*

Debris littered a country road.  
A man called for help while the wheels  
spun in the air trying to quit.

## Upheaval

My husband told me several times during our marriage that he did not want to be buried. He explicitly told me he wanted to be cremated. It was the moment I looked into his mother's eyes that I knew I would not be able to honor his last wishes, and I allowed my mind to muddy the facts. Her eyes were swollen and red from crying. The tissue in her hand was falling apart. She asked in a quiet, insistent voice, and her expression conveyed urgency. As his wife and beneficiary, I had control of everything. She perceived it as a direct insult. I could not refuse.

As I followed her through the cemetery, I wondered why he didn't answer the phone when I called that day, and if he knew he was going to die. The air was heavy, with a hint of the gulf. It is a smell that I always associated with his home. He would not be happy about my decision. In our life together, he would always allow me the time to ponder a situation, and then he would make his case, which was always the opposite of my position. It just worked out that way. I tell myself that in some weird cosmic way he is communicating his unhappiness; my next thought is how to resolve the contradiction of cosmic messages relating to a situation clearly "of the earth."

Cluttering my thoughts is the essential truth that if I had to make this decision again, given the circumstances, I would. I would recognize the devastation in his mother's eyes with the same intensity, the same regret, and the same willingness to alleviate her pain. I would allow the Catholic mass, spoken in Spanish, even though he did not believe in the Catholic doctrine, and was not fluent in Spanish. I would allow those who had turned their back on him to pay their respects at the funeral home, even though I know he would have asked them to leave. I would allow people to blame me

with their questioning and nods of disapproval, even though I know he would have protected me by telling the truth of the situation. I would bury him, even though he never wanted that.

His mother chose the plot because it was close to other family members who had been buried there, in the cemetery across from her sister's house. Shaded by large oak trees, the ground was soft underfoot. The chunky heels on my boots snuggled into the earth while his mother made visual measurements from the plot to her sister's front door. I wondered if I stood there long enough if I could sink six feet, or if I would have to shift my weight back and forth to mimic my heavy breathing. They discussed the details of his burial, sometimes breaking into Spanish. Unable to understand their conversation, I imagined this must be the way I would hear English if I were covered with soil. Muffled, but with sudden sharp intonations that could move a grain of sand.

His family shared a past, a cemetery, and a language. I stood unrepresented, holding the hands of our children who were breaking underneath the weight of duty. Although I prepared myself for the blasts of the gun salute, bullets screamed his name, tearing open the sky. Spent shells glowed gold hot against green brown grass. My strength, derived from an unknown source that my father calls my "stock," tasted like sulfur in my mouth. The bugler's eyes stared straight ahead while his fingers played Taps into a mild wind. I wanted for one moment to hold the wind in my hands; to own it. I wanted to possess the moment so that it would not blur. Death is possessive. It stakes a claim, and takes possession with an air of superiority as if to say, "You were always mine." It is what I wanted to say.



When the soldier placed the folded flag in my hands, I was filled with pride, and engulfed in shame. My husband, who spent countless hours filling sandbags to protect families from rising floodwaters, had no one to protect him from the backfill of dirt that would entrap him forever. My husband, who patrolled borders in Bosnia and Macedonia to protect civilians from threat, had no one defending his rights. My husband, who rescued lost animals, was alone. After years of sacrifice for those he loved, those he admired, and those he took an oath to protect, he was given to the earth, which he did not trust, and betrayed by the one person he thought he could. I had left him behind.

Eight years later I have to relive the nightmare. I will have to bury him again, and transgress once more against the man who taught me perseverance by his acts of indulgence. I will dig through paperwork that bears his signature to find correspondence that will prove someone used my grief to pad their pockets. I will open his briefcase and reach past the small, brown envelope that holds his dog tags, to find the packet that reads documentation of death and burial in sloppy handwriting. I will sift through photographs avoiding the faces of my children to find the one with the best perspective of the position of the casket.

The phone call disrupted my Monday. Disrupted as in “to throw into confusion or disorder,” not just an interruption. A private investigator from Texas introduced himself and told me how uncomfortable he felt making this call. His Texas drawl made the conversation painful because every word was drawn out and it took him forever to get to the point. He told me the story of a cemetery that sold out to a large corporation and had been involved in illegal practices such as digging up and moving caskets without

contacting family members, and selling plots that were not surveyed for interment. I was a victim in that corruption. He relayed the facts to me as compassionately as a stranger can. My husband had been buried in a walkway. I don't remember the walk upstairs to dig through my husband's belongings.

It is amazing how the mind chooses what to keep and what to throw away when one is grief-stricken. The walk through the cemetery to choose the appropriate resting place for my husband is blurred around the edges, but clear in the middle. The smallest details (the distance between headstones) are like smeared chalk, with no defined edges, while the smell of the wind is distinct. It was heavy...salty. Most people would see that the other way around. Most people would criticize me for not paying attention to that simple, critical detail. I know I do.

The trials in our life always rely on matters of perspective. In its simplest definition, I need a picture, a view of the burial site. Using the most common definition as in "to gain perspective," every decision I make in this case has to be based on my mental view of this grievance. Of course, when considering the spatial definition, "the technique of representing three-dimensional objects and depth relationships on a two-dimensional surface," I have six feet of dirt that I need to reconcile. Finally, when I understand perspective to mean "the relationship of aspects of a subject to each other and to a whole," the concept of "the circle of life" becomes clear, and I understand his mistrust of the earth. Stable ground is a fallacy.

My first thought is to exhume his body and have him cremated. Although a few of his family members speculate about the propriety of taking someone's life (after death)

into your own hands, and shaping it the way you see fit. But it is not my fitness. It is why we are here now. My second thought is to move him. But, where? Where will suffice when the cemetery has proved untrustworthy? My third thought is to turn it over to his mother and let her pain fall over the ink as she reclaims him. I wonder if it would be as painful as giving him birth. I wonder if the guilt of not honoring his wishes will be transferred to her, or if it will double, and will eventually break my back.

The private investigator's phone call made that Monday morning torturous. His pauses between facts were seconds of time as heavy as the concrete box that surrounds my husband—who never understood time. His logic was wrapped around his own simple truth that the world revolved only to pain him. He measured time by moments of peace; it is befitting that he died young. While the investigator droned out information, I stood against a window watching for signs that earth was still moving. If not for a barking dog, I could have believed that I was pinned under the same weight that proved my husband's truth. The investigator asked if I recall any conversation in which the consultant said my husband would be buried in a walkway. I wanted to scream at him and demand to know why he would question my character. "I would not have allowed that," is all I could muster in my rage. Wasn't the real question why I allowed him to be buried? Wasn't it inevitable that one day I would have to relive this loss considering the choice I made? The phone call ended with an affirmation of wrongdoing.

Most people recognize a face of grief. A face of guilt, however, is not always discernible. (Discernible...perceivable... I cannot help but question how my perception of my crime is shaped by my perspective of death. If in fact the body is merely a shell for our energy, then have I trapped his energy, or was it released into the universe at the

moment of death?) Guilt manifests itself in many ways, and it becomes more of an action than a visible reaction. It becomes a driving force that propels the guilty party into a repetitive behavior in an attempt to find relief. Denying my husband's final wishes warrants endless hours of hashing out the truth on paper before it can be spoken. And then, spoken to whom? The wickedness of guilt lies in its inability to be allayed until it is confessed to the wronged party. I cannot cry out loud enough for him to ever hear me.



## Religion

The man on TV says he's bringing people to the Lord one phone call at a time. Come be with us! It was the summer that I wore my hair up, and learned about electricity. You have to watch me or else I get into things. I never did get any better at tennis. Women in white skirts with glistening sweat on tanned legs were as close to God as I had ever been. Sparks flew in a summer rain, and thunder was the call I answered. The way pressure builds until the cover is lifted to release moisture. There was never a reason to question her faith. The 1-800 number written on the inside of her hand only smudged during the last set when lightning lit up an afternoon sky, bringing down a Maidenhair tree. The sole surviving Gymnosperms from 65 million years ago, its leaves aid circulation and memory. Ancient secrets spilled from her hand into my body. I imagined electricity the same blue as the ink that tattooed her communion on my skin.



**Somewhere to Be**

The steam from my coffee cup  
fogs a place on the window.

I draw a heart with my finger  
to outline the couple across the street.

He is handsome—  
she is worn.

His eyes fixed on her,  
she stares ahead.

The U-Haul is out of sight  
before he steps off the curb.

**P38**

It was one of those hot New Mexico days. The aluminum siding of our trailer made awful noises as it buckled and twisted. My mother was watching Soul Train, singing and smoking cigarettes. She always said that she'd be a famous singer if I hadn't of come along. My step-dad was away on another business trip. Things were much better when he was gone. Mother was busy a lot. She had to take care of my sister and said she just couldn't tend to me 24/7. She told me I was 13 and should be able to take care of myself.

Actually, I was quite an explorer. Since we lived in Roswell, I was sure that with enough searching I would find an alien right in my backyard. I loved digging through the shed mainly because it was packed full of stuff that belonged to Kenny, my step dad. He said I was forbidden to go in there. Some of his old army stuff was under the workbench, so I pulled it out and started looking for treasure. I didn't find anything particularly amusing except a picture of a half-naked girl with too much red lipstick, a pack of Marlboro cigarettes and a small, brown paper packet that said "can opener" on it. I put the picture and the cigarettes back exactly how I found them. I went to my favorite place under the slide on the old wooden swing set to open my new discovery.

Directions were printed on it, so I opened it carefully. When I held the small, metal thing in my hand, I had a strange feeling I was on to something great. It was a small piece of metal maybe an inch and a half long, three quarters of an inch wide and it had U.S. stamped on it. On one side there was a blade hinged at the top that looked kinda

like a stubby eagle's beak. The blade was only, oh, a quarter of the length of the metal. It was super sharp. The hinge didn't stay closed very well so I couldn't get it to lay flat.

Anyway, it was totally different than the can opener we had in the kitchen so I had to figure out how it worked. I snuck in the back door and took a can of peaches from the pantry. Mother was asleep on the couch. I tiptoed across the orange shag carpet, grabbed her burning cigarette out of the ashtray, and quietly made my way back to the slide. I smoked the rest of it and put it out in the dirt, making a little hole with my finger to bury the evidence.

I took my new can opener and set it against the can like the picture showed and pushed down really hard. It must not have been set right because it slipped off the can and cut my finger. That didn't stop me; I was determined to learn how to use it. Trying again, I leaned it slightly into the metal ridge on the can, and when I pushed down, my thumbnail wedged between the hinge and the can, slicing my thumb. I cried. It hurt like hell. I was frustrated. Not only did I want to use my new gadget, I really wanted to eat some peaches. Mother didn't like for me to eat unless we were all sitting together because she said she had to keep an eye on me. She used to tell grandma that if I had the chance I would eat everything in sight. Sometimes she called me porky and poked me over and over in the stomach.

Anyway, so I try again, and this time I get it to work and there is no more bloodshed. I start moving it back and forth just like the picture showed, and it must have taken me half an hour to get that damn can open but I did it. I was so happy that I didn't even bother trying to sneak out a spoon. I just started pouring peach juice in my mouth and taking bites out of the big pieces that almost covered my nose.

For the next few months, I stole cans from the pantry and hid them in my closet. When they went to sleep I would get my flashlight, get into the closet, and with my eyes closed I would pick a can to open. Whatever I opened I would eat. It was great when I picked fruit cocktail, it was my favorite, but there were a few times I was not so lucky. It took me until 3 a.m. one time to swallow a whole can of creamed corn, and I was very careful not to steal that anymore. I found out through this phase in my life that peas were disgusting, green beans were better when they were heated, and a can of sauerkraut would make you shit for about three days straight. Eventually, I stopped stealing cans. Kenny caught on to what I was doing and he rigged the pantry with mousetraps. I reached in to get a can and WHAP! I triggered one of them. It caught two of my fingers, breaking one of them.

Well, I found new uses for my can opener after that. I learned I could carve my initials into things like school desks and piñon trees; pop the top off of coke bottles and dig out splinters. In the ninth grade, a boy told me his dad had one and he called a P38. He said that was the official army name for it. I didn't know if it was true or not but it sounded better than calling it a can opener. From then on it was officially my P38. I wore it around my neck on a silver chain. I have a bunch of little scars where it cut me while I slept.

## **Mondays**

My father's suit hung loosely  
from his frame,  
all angles and elbows.

His smile, the only thing that fit  
but not too well.  
His voice—like the limes  
in the painting over his bed.

He stumbled, grabbing the chair.  
His hands deeply wrinkled,  
slightly shaking.

An uninterested look  
in muddy eyes.  
                    (he wished he never had children)

Roast beef and carrots  
today. Three o'clock ping pong.

Pale against mauve curtains  
he started:

                    "Tennyson loved Hallam. Tell me,  
                    what do you know  
                    of love?"

I told him again, how the roses  
had buckled the fence  
and how the mailman was always late.



## Nerve

I imagine long gray-blue—

hidden there, beyond the flesh pinks of origin,  
wandering against the elements  
of what makes survival an instinct.

When a baby cried out from the cold,  
fire was discovered—the mother's impulse  
derived from the same sensory response.

The father cried out for deliverance.

Air too heavy to transmit sound  
suspended prayer in the hollow of the bone  
where creation wants but cannot choose.

## After All

At two a.m. Mackey passed the faded Garrit City Limits sign that leaned parallel to the road. Garrit was a stifling town littered with churches, banks, and bars. Mackey left two days after he graduated high school to join the Army, determined never to return. He had grown up with his sister, Gina, in an old house across the street from a cemetery, raised by his father. He had never known his mother, and no one ever spoke about her. His father avoided the subject whenever it came up.

Gina had called yesterday morning to tell him that their father had succumbed to his emphysema and had died in the night. She said there were too many arrangements to make by herself, and he needed to get his “ass” home. He loaded his car, and drove all night.

Gina met him in the driveway. She hugged him briefly and quickly began running down the list of things they needed to do before the funeral on Thursday. “Ya gonna bury him over there?” Mackey asked with a toss of his head.

“Hell no, Mackey,” Gina snapped. “Dad deserves better than a grave in an overgrown weed garden. Dammit,” she said as she headed towards the house. “You haven’t changed.”

He didn’t bother arguing with Gina. She was five years older than him, and as long as he could remember, she mothered him, bossed him around, and took care of him. Mackey loved his sister. He followed her into the house and sat in his dad’s recliner next to the radiator. Gina made lists while she told Mackey everything she expected him to do, but he only heard garbled noises as he breathed in stale air.

Mackey woke to the smell of bacon and Gina talking on the phone. Morning had cast a yellowish hue over the living room, highlighting the covering of dust on every surface. Shifting in the recliner, he pulled aspirin from his pocket. The wet ring from his water glass distorted letters his father had carefully penned in the *Reader's Digest* crossword puzzle. The smell of bacon made him nauseated.

"Hungry?" Gina said. She stood in the doorway looking down at him. "We need to be at the funeral home by nine, so you have about an hour. You look like hell, Mackey."

The ride to the funeral home was quiet. Gina looked like she was on the verge of tears, but she drove slowly, staring at the road. Mackey couldn't remember a time when she had cried. She had always been the solid one. Gina graduated with honors from college, and had gone to work with a law firm in town. He admired her drive and ambition, but wondered why she never left Garrit for a place with more opportunity.

"Please try to pay attention to details, Mackey. I cannot do this all alone," she said as she pulled into the parking lot.

They walked in to White's Funeral Home. Mackey's head was spinning. He wanted to cry, to run, to apologize. In the bathroom, he stared at himself in the mirror. He saw his father's eyes. Mackey felt shame as he thought about the times he ignored his father's request that he come home to visit. He regretted all the time he had let slip by without seeing his father. He splashed water on his face, and smoothed down his hair before walking out.

Gina was talking to the funeral home director, but her hands were tight fists at her side, and her voice was elevated. "What do you mean? I thought my father had this

arranged.” Gina dropped her head and turned to face Mackey. “You get your wish, Mackey. Dad has to be buried in that ramshackle ruin you call a cemetery. A small graveside service is all he gets. Let’s go.”

Pulling into the driveway, Mackey cleared his throat and began, “Look Gina, I think the cemetery just needs to be cleaned up, and it will be alright.”

“Seriously Mackey, you think pulling weeds and raking leaves is going to change things? You know the history of that cemetery. Half of the people buried there don’t even have names. No one cares about them.” Gina walked inside and slammed the front door.

Mackey sat on the front porch and lit a cigarette. He stared out at the old cemetery thinking about the nights he and his friends spent there getting high and scaring the hell out of each other with ghost stories. Secretly, Mackey had always been more than a little scared. When he was little, he had seen strange things go on at night especially after someone was just buried. He tried to tell people about the things he saw but they just laughed at him. The only person who ever took him seriously was his dad. He listened intently while Mackey told him about the weird fog that covered the gravestones, moving up and down like the earth was breathing. Mackey’s dad never laughed. He explained the science behind fog, and how a boy’s eyes can play tricks on him when it’s dark outside.

When Mackey was nine years old, his father told him the story of Tilly George. He was a tall, bent man who had spent his life tending the grounds. Tilly’s father was a former slave of the cemetery owner, and after he was freed, he and his family stayed on as caretakers. Tilly was born there. For years, Mackey’s family and Tilly’s family worked almost side by side. Mackey’s dad related stories about his own father and Tilly standing



in the road, leaning on a rake or drinking iced tea, discussing broken gutters, and the suddenness of death.

Tilly had maintained the grounds meticulously. He used to say the dead deserved the utmost respect because they had already survived hell and shouldn't have to sleep among wreckage. He worked into the night, pulling weeds, straightening wreaths, and polishing headstones. While he worked, he whistled a tune that some say was the song of death, although no one could name it.

Tilly's real name was George, but people called him Tilly because he would till the soil of the cemetery until it was as fine as talc. Tilly said that hardened earth was breeding ground for ghosts. Some said that Tilly was crazy from grief because he had to tend the graves of his wife and three children who had all died before him. Others said that he knew voodoo. Mackey's grandfather was a friend of Tilly's, and he told his son that Tilly was just a man.

Mackey stubbed out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe. He wasn't ready to face Gina, but he knew she needed him. Inside, she was on the phone making arrangements for their father to be buried the next day. He watched from the doorway. She jotted down notes and shook her head yes and no as if the person on the phone could see her.

"I understand. I'll get someone out there to clear an area." Gina hung up the phone. "We have to have a space cleared before they will do anything. I am going to call around and try to find someone," she said, not looking at Mackey.

Gina rummaged through boxes from the hall closet, and stacked them along the wall. "I wish Dad had labeled these damn boxes. How the hell am I supposed to find the



papers I need in all of this crap?" She pulled a shoebox out, peeked under the lid, and sat it on top of the stack. "I need a break," she sighed as she walked away.

Mackey looked inside the box. It was full of pictures. He went to the recliner, set the box in his lap, and began sifting through family pictures. Some he recognized, others he was sure he had never seen. He stopped at a picture of his grandfather and the man he assumed was Tilly George. They stood side by side next to the mailbox in the front yard. Tilly was a good foot taller than his grandfather, but stooped slightly as if he had been walking under tree limbs his whole life. He had a familiar face with eyes the color of unripe olives. Both men held wide brimmed hats against their chests.

"Will you please go over and make sure they clear the right spot?" Gina's voice interrupted.

"Sure." Mackey set the box on the coffee table and went outside.

Four men worked steadily on a small area next to a cypress tree. Mackey stood at the edge of the road and watched from a distance. Mackey hadn't stepped foot in the cemetery since he was a teenager, and he was surprised when feelings of anticipation welled up in his stomach. Mackey brushed it off as grief, and walked back towards the house. He was eager to get back to the pictures. Mackey had never taken any interest in his family history. Now, his curiosity was in full force, he wanted to know if all the passed-down tales were true.

Mackey could see Gina through the small window in the door. She was holding a picture in her hand from the box that he had left on the table. Part of him desperately wanted to know which picture she was looking at, but the other part of him was scared to accept that his big sister was crying. What did that mean for him? She had always taken

care of him, and knew the best thing to do in any situation. He took a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, and walked back across the street.

The cemetery looked different in daylight. Mackey made his way through weeds and tangled vines to the oldest part of the cemetery in the far corner. He could hear the ripping of vines as the men worked, and the thud of each shovel of dirt as they dug his father's grave. Stepping over a dilapidated border of broken stones, Mackey noticed that the grounds in the corner had been cleaned up. As he got closer, it became obvious that someone had been tending this part of the cemetery for some time. He put his cigarette out on the bottom of his shoe, and put the butt in his pocket. He walked slowly, reading gravestones. Names he had heard in his father's stories lay out before him, etched in stone, and Mackey knew he was looking at the family history he had denied.

Mackey smoked one cigarette after another as he read the gravestones, and tried to connect children with parents. His family and Tilly's family were buried here, side-by-side, back into the farthest corner where the cemetery began. Mackey made his way to the old shed, barely visible tucked in overgrown holly, and stood motionless as he pushed open the creaky door. The shed was clean. Tools hung from nails hammered into four-by-fours that made up the structure of the shed. A crude workbench spanned the length of the shed on one side, lined with old coffee cans and jars filled with nuts, screws, and washers. Bunches of plastic flowers lay in a rusty wheelbarrow, and a pair of muddy boots stood next to it. He stepped inside, looking for signs of the person who had been here.

"What the hell are you doing, Mackey?" Gina asked. "I've been looking for you. The men told me you had walked this way. What are you doing in here?"

Gina slid past Mackey, and went inside. “I thought he had stopped this when he got sick.”

“What do you mean—stopped this?” Mackey asked.

“Dad has been taking care of this part of the cemetery for years. When he got so weak from his illness, I thought he had given it up.” Gina turned towards Mackey and pointed. “Those are his boots.”

“Come on Gina.” Mackey grabbed his sister by the hand and pulled her out of the shed. He hurried back to where the men were, dragging Gina behind him. “Hey!” he called, “Hold on!”

In the small corner of the cemetery, a handful of neighbors and friends gathered around the grave, paying their respects. He shook hands and smiled, but was eager for it to be over with. Gina hadn’t cried again, and Mackey was thankful for that. The sun was bright on the blue canopy covering the casket. Mackey watched as it was lowered into the ground. Until now, he hadn’t thought about his dad being gone forever. When he spoke to his dad on the phone, he knew he was sick, and would tell himself he needed to go home. He just couldn’t make himself go back to Garrit. And now, here he was. He couldn’t remember why he had had to leave.

Gina joined Mackey, and they watched as dirt covered the casket. The men arranged the flowers around the mound that was left. They stood in silence for some time after everyone was gone. The day was cooling off, and shadows started to fill empty spaces.

“Are you going to stay?” Gina’s voice was quiet.

“Yes.”

“What will you do?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“Dad would be happy.”

Mackey and Gina said their last goodbyes, and started back toward the house.

Gina stopped and pointed at the stone border.

“This was supposed to become a wall. Granpa and Tilly started building this back about twenty years ago. But Granpa got real sick and died in ’54. Tilly worked on it some, but he died the next year. It was weird.”

Mackey woke up Monday morning and lay in the bed looking around. The sun was coming through the tiny holes in the old aluminum blinds; there was no sound. Gina had stayed with Mackey for two days and helped him get settled. They cleaned up the house, packed up some clutter, and set up the front bedroom for him. It was a small room that his dad had used for storage for as long as he could remember. They found pieces of furniture, clothing, and boxes full of what looked like yard-sale items. Mackey had moved the twin bed down from his old bedroom, and put the few clothes he had in the closet.

Mackey was eager to sort through the photos. He separated the color ones from the black and white ones, and then separated those into piles of people he knew and didn’t. It felt like this was the only way he would know about his family now that his father was gone. Gina looked sad when she talked about it, so he didn’t ask many questions. Mackey’s attention settled on a black and white picture of a young woman in a



pair of overalls, sitting next to his father. They both looked to be in their early twenties. He couldn't tell from the picture what color her eyes were, but they were familiar. She had a broad smile and straight-dark hair that was pushed behind her ears. Her skin tone was much lighter than Tilly's and Mackey couldn't be sure she was related to Tilly.

Gina came over with KFC later that day, and Mackey asked her to tell him everything she knew about their family. The only thing she never mentioned was their mother. He was afraid to ask. She told him about Tilly and how he would always bring her rock candy. She told him that their dad had cried the night Tilly's wife and son died during childbirth. She told him that Tilly's oldest daughter always took care of them when their dad was working, and she had died of pneumonia shortly after Mackey's third birthday. He showed her the picture, and she affirmed that the woman was Tilly's daughter, Regina. Gina had been named after her because Regina and their dad had been best of friends growing up.

Mackey pondered out loud if Regina could have been their mother. He watched his sister as she walked out the back door and sat on the porch swing. Her face was tense as she stared into the distance. He didn't have to ask. Tilly was his great-grandfather. He stared at Regina's picture, quietly piecing his family history together. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do next. He got up and put on a pot of coffee.



## **An Account of Vermouth and Ceremony**

She tours the downtown bus station,  
her suit set off by a feathered hat and polished army boots.

She pries gum from the bottom of the water  
fountain as she drinks. She rolls it between her fingertips  
as she asks for directions to Los Angeles  
or somewhere she can get a martini.

I've made up her whole life story, one she can be proud of.  
I want to tell the homecoming queen, mother of three, commanding officer—  
that feathered hats are still in style, but shouldn't be worn inside.  
The pin, straighten, and remove becomes its own ceremony, much  
less mechanical than the application of boot polish.

When the bus driver calls last board for Riverside, I want to convince  
her to come with me, promise to drive her the last fifty-eight miles.

I want her life story to include me.  
I have enough for two martinis.

## The Price of Soup

If you will kindly refill my mug,  
I'll take a minute to explain some things.  
Says here you ran the forklift at Northrup's  
Grocery, and never missed a day's work.  
Your ambitions don't go unnoticed,  
most people know me to have the gift  
of discernment. I call a spade a spade.  
Deepest apologies Ms. Johanson,  
I cannot accept your application.  
Although it appears you've some handy  
skills, even a timeliness about you,  
this factory needs no dusting. See,  
production depends on four twelve-man crews  
working daylight to dark. Your delicacies  
would reduce manpower by at least half,  
if not more. Why, even considering  
the idea is unprudent on my part,  
I'm figuring you'll agree. The main  
house is best suited for your disposition.  
Mrs. Crocker seems quite satisfied  
with her earnings, and the work is better  
fitted. The men are usually too tired  
to give much trouble, they hardly notice  
a woman if there's warm stew and a hot fire.  
It's the perfect arrangement, you've  
made a good decision Ms. Johanson.

## **Xmas Only Comes Once a Year**

I kept imagining my mother with a peg leg and a patch over one eye as she made her way through my grandparents' house. Her movements were hurried and jerky, and I couldn't help but wonder if her daily regimen of mood pills had finally started to short out her nervous system. When she spoke, I stared at her contorted mouth and tried to make out the words, but all I heard was the hum of the window air conditioner that had been set on high and was dripping slowly onto the bright orange carpet. Mother lifted, sorted, and rummaged, desperately seeking anything that had a tag with her name on it; she went through the expensive items first.

Both of my grandparents were suffering from Alzheimer's. My grandmother had been placed in Twin Palms nursing home a year prior, and now, my grandfather would take up residence there as well. His dementia had progressed much slower than my grandmother's, and he would kick a chair or call names if anyone suggested he join his wife, so he stayed in the house. A nurse came by twice a day. My mother, my aunts and I took turns sitting with him at night. My last weekend with him, we ate ice cream at midnight, and he told me stories of his time in President Roosevelt's CCC and how his old man was a worthless human who only wanted to take my grandfather's paycheck when he came home on leave. The sleepless hours I spent with my grandfather, whose mind wandered in and out of the past, were rich with histories, legends, and truths of our family. I learned more about my mother that year than I had learned in thirty-eight years of being her eldest daughter.

It was up to my mother and two aunts to take care of my grandparents' possessions, sell the house, and pay for their care. My mother, the oldest of the three, became the team-leader by default. My aunts didn't mind, but I think they were afraid to set her off and watch her have one of her episodes. Aunt Janis was the youngest sister. Secretly, she adored my mother so it was easy for her to overlook her neurosis. Aunt Frances was the middle child. She was intolerant of my mother's fits, but being of a different generation and upbringing, she treated my mother with respect and never confronted her. Mother doled out instructions while her sisters sorted furniture and knick-knacks into piles. My cousins and I, all grown with families of our own, stood quietly and watched.

Grandmother had tagged her furniture and expensive items right after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She told us all at one of our weekly family dinners that she didn't want anyone to fuss over who got what. She said it while she spread apple butter on a biscuit without ever looking up. It's a good thing, too, because she would have seen the look on my mother's face go from *this is good ham* to *what the hell do you mean by that?* Right after dessert (biscuits and jelly) my family decided to relax in *that* chair, or lay *there* on the floor. Everyone wanted a chance to peek at the mysterious stickers. My mother went to check her hair a few times and disappeared down the hall for long stretches of time. I sat on the floor in the living room and played *Trouble* with my younger cousins. Christmas gift stickers peeked out from underneath tables, and behind picture frames. She had written the names in red ink. It matched the small holiday pictures on the corner of the stickers. I got the brass bed, and next to the faded red ink were the remnants of Santa's face.



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My mother was born in 1946 to poor parents who had hoped for a boy to help them work the cotton fields. Grandfather was a dark-skinned, stocky man with a faded anchor tattoo on his left forearm. His broad cheekbones and prominent nose made him look like Geronimo but I never told him that. Grandfather was extremely prejudiced, and the thought of any unnatural blood coursing through his veins made him furious. I think he married grandmother to make sure his children would be fair-skinned. Grandmother was of Danish descent (or so she said) and she worked the field in long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, a scarf and hat so she could retain the milky color of her skin. When she laughed, her whole mouth opened wide so the gap in her front teeth was displayed. Grandfather called her *high-falutin'*, to which she would always reply, "It's a level of decency that I wish to acquire." My grandfather told me their story between bites of Rocky Road.

"After the CCC ran out of money, I joined the Navy. That's where I got this (he lifted his arm to show me the anchor tattoo). I came home on leave as often as I could, but I stopped going out to my daddy's house because he had married a money-hungry whore from Carolina, and her two daughters had taken over the house. I stayed at my buddy's house out in Monrovia. The family directly across the way farmed a good piece of land, and most of those farmers were girls! My buddy and I went over to offer a hand so we could introduce ourselves to the ladies, and from underneath one of those straw brims was the prettiest pair of blue eyes I had ever seen. I knew that day that I had to marry her. She was the oldest of the bunch, and they all called her Mama due to the fact

that her mother had died of fever years earlier. One more trip out and another trip home, we were married. I walked right out there and told her that I was going to make sure she didn't have to pick cotton for the rest of her life. I stayed good on my word too. She was a handful though. She had the idea that she wanted to live like the ladies in the long skirts who had Sunday outfits. It never mattered to me what she wore."

My mother was the perfect combination of her parents. Her mother's flawless skin stretched over high cheek bones and a strong jaw line; her hazel eyes were deep set and perfectly spaced; and light brown hair waved gently around her shoulders. Even as a small child she had an air about her that commanded respect and servitude. She was taught to be a pleasant child, and she was put to work at a young age. By the time her sisters were born she was able to make biscuits, change diapers, and keep a fire going. Grandmother used to say my mother tended to her sisters and the house like a regular old woman. I always wondered if my mother heard that so many times it aged her. What I didn't have to wonder about was the resentment she felt towards my aunts. The stories she told about her childhood included bitter remarks about the boy she couldn't see because she was raising her sisters, or the dress she couldn't have because Frances had to have teeth pulled. My mother remained pleasant on the outside, but her insides never matched. By the time she had a child of her own, she gave up being pleasant altogether.

My grandfather got a job at the nearby military installation, and moved the family into a house closer to town. The house sat at the edge of the neighborhood where the mill workers and their families lived. Five long streets were lined with white-sided shotgun houses, so named because it was said that if someone fired a shotgun while standing at

the front door, the pellets would fly all the way through the house and out the back door. Grandmother took on sewing jobs and soon was sought after for the fancy Sunday dresses that she sewed by hand. She taught herself to sew the dresses she had seen on the ladies that lived by Bushing Creek. Mother joined the local church group and the debate team at school. Her talent for using scripture to make a point started early on. I found out much later that the “honor thy father and thy mother” speech was never really meant to keep me in line; it was just something she knew by heart.

There is a portrait of my mother in one of grandmother’s dresses. It is light blue with a handmade lace overlay. Small pearls are stitched around the neckline and at the end of each of the sleeves, which reach just beneath her elbows. My mother sits at the edge of a piano bench and the dress falls mid-calf. Her ankles are crossed. Her hands are poised in her lap holding a pair of white gloves, and her hair is pulled up with small tendrils down each side of her face. On the floor, on either side of her, sit Frances and Janis in plain skirts with green sweaters. Frances is smiling straight ahead; Janis is smiling but her gaze looks beyond the camera. In the background, three stockings hang from the fireplace mantle. This portrait hung over the green nalgahide couch in my grandmother’s living room for as long as I could remember. It reminded me of Victorian portraits except that Frances and Janis should have been Springer Spaniels and my mother should have been wearing a tiara. It was out of place amidst the country décor and furnishings of my grandmother’s house. Grandmother didn’t tag it.

“Me and Mama always tried to instill in our girls the good behavior. You know you look a lot like one of my girls,” he said as he studied my face. He held his crossword



puzzle book curled in one hand and tapped his pencil against it in a rhythm that sounded very much like the *The Star-Spangled Banner*. “We worked hard those first few years so we could provide a better life for them. It was hardest on our first born because when she was old enough, we had to put her to work. She never complained and attended to her sisters like their own mother. A few times when the cotton was bad, we didn’t have much to eat, and she gave her portions to one of the little girls if they asked for it. When I finally moved my family to a better place, I indulged her every fancy to try and make up for all she had done. Mama didn’t like that I did that.”

My parents met in high school. They started dating as sophomores and were high-school sweethearts. In their senior year, they were photographed for the yearbook as the “Most Fun” couple. The picture was the two of them trying to pickpocket a police officer. My father had on a white t-shirt with rolled up sleeves, jeans that were folded up at the bottom, white socks and penny loafers. My mother wore a black sweater, white capri pants, and tennis shoes. Her hair was teased high behind her bangs, and her tortoise shell glasses sat low on her nose. I commented once on their fashion and she replied that I “didn’t know a damn thing about fashion because they were almost voted ‘Cutest Couple,’ but Mary Jo was dating one of the boys on the yearbook staff so they got that spot.” The picture was taken when my mother was a month pregnant with me. She didn’t know it at the time. The first time I saw the picture, I commented on how pretty she looked. She commented that I had ruined her figure and her summer. My grandmother refused to let my mother go out anywhere until she was married.



My parents married that August. The ceremony was followed by a small reception at the house of my mother's aunt who had never married. My grandmother sewed a dress that hid her small belly bump, and she made lace doilies to put underneath the small triangle sandwiches. My mother never told me the story. My grandfather relayed the events. Except in his version, it wasn't his daughter, it was his niece.

"Carolyn was beautiful. They stood underneath an archway her father built for her. Her mother made her dress and covered that archway in peach colored flowers from her garden. You couldn't tell she was pregnant. Me and Mama knew. Well, I guess most people knew or at least suspected. She confided in us because my brother has a bad temper and there's no telling what he would have done. To make matters worse, the boy's family had mixed blood. No one ever knew for sure what they were mixed with, but it caused a ruckus for sure. I heard it said that they were Gypsies from over in Russia or somewhere. Well, she took to one of those dark-headed boys and I guess you can figure out the rest. She stayed holed up for months because she was ashamed to be seen in public, and even after they were legal I don't think she ever got back that respect. She told Mama that her mother wouldn't talk to her anymore because she had disgraced the family. Her mother told her she should move away so they could regain some decency about them. I guess she did. I haven't seen her in years."

We lived in a four-room house with an outhouse until I was two. Of course I don't have any memories of the house, but my mother does. Over the years, whenever something would go wrong, such as a toilet leak, she would compare it to the bad

conditions of that house. There was always a big spider involved in every story. My favorite one was about the window that fell out during thunderstorms. The first time it happened it broke out the glass so they filled it with cardboard, but my grandfather loaned them the money to have it fixed. There is a complete narrative and timeline of events surrounding the broken glass, the replaced glass, the pillows on the floor to prevent the glass from breaking, and her nerves that had broken in the interim. I hated that she said her nerves were broken because I knew it was impossible, and because it didn't sound as good as raw nerves, or a last nerve, but she always used that word. I guess it kept continuity to the story. I giggled when she told the story, and she reminded me that being poor and deprived of basic human needs was never funny. My basic needs list doesn't include windows, but I have always had them.

“I showed up out there after the storm to help with any downed tree limbs and such, and she was so upset,” my grandfather started. “Carolyn walked out to the car all the while trying to tell me about the window. Her face was beet red, and she swung her fists as she walked. I thought it was a little bit funny that the damned old window would shake loose and fall with a little rain and wind, but she didn't think it was funny at all, accused me of not caring that she didn't have a good house. Well, I did care. I gave her the money to fix the broken glass and told her I would help her secure it in place after it was done, but that husband of hers said he would handle it. He wasn't a good man, really. I guess he was just young. But he strapped her with everything and ran off to join the service, never sent any money home. We helped out as much as we could, but Mama

always said that there are some things a person has to figure out for themselves and she reckoned that this was one of those times for Carolyn.”

My father liked beer and girls. Shortly after they moved into a house with plumbing in a neighborhood behind the local Winn Dixie, he had an affair with my mother’s best friend and my parents divorced. I don’t remember much about it except that he was gone one day and all I got in his place were occasional cards and toys in the mail. He came twice to take me out to eat at Pizza Hut, and once he dropped by to give me a kitten he had found. My mother wouldn’t let me have the kitten in the house, so I locked him in the laundry room at night. The laundry room was outside on the back of our house. One morning I found him dead. He had squeezed behind the dryer and a piece of metal from the tubing cut his stomach open. My mother wrapped him in newspaper and threw him in the trashcan out by the road. The “heaven” speech didn’t make me feel any better.

I stayed with my grandparents every day while my mother worked. My grandmother showed me how to take care of the garden, and when my grandfather came home from work, he would let me help him work on a project in his shed. I liked to hammer more than I liked to pick tomatoes. On the days that my mother picked me up, we ate supper at the big picnic table in the kitchen, and my grandparents asked her about her job, and what she did in her spare time. She was always mad when we left. I rode home in the storage space behind the back seat of our Volkswagen Beetle, and she smoked cigarettes and talked to me. Occasionally she looked at me through her rear-view



mirror. I couldn't hear very well because the sound of the engine drowned out her voice, but I knew by the look on her face that she had questions.

My mother met Kenny when I was seven. He was younger than she was, and very handsome. He was an MP in the army and he spoke different than we did. I sat and listened to him talk, and sometimes when I didn't understand a word he flicked me on the head and asked if I was "awake in there." I always told him yes. There are only a handful of photos from the day they got married. My mother was dressed in a yellow sundress, and Kenny wore slacks with a white shirt. I wore a yellow dress similar to my mother's. In one picture, I am standing on a folding chair hugging my grandmother. She is crying. My grandfather looks on stoically. The next day, my grandparents came over to help us pack our house and load up a U-haul. My grandmother cried so much she got a nosebleed all over the porch. The blood on the concrete was the same color as the roses that grew up the side posts. She and my grandfather stood by their car in the driveway. I waved goodbye from the window of Kenny's green Vega.

"I was sad to see them move. We had been neighbors for, oh, about twenty years or so. The little girl would come over and help me work in the shed, or help Mama out in the garden. We felt sorry for her because she always looked so sad. Her mother worked all the time, and when she came home with that good for nothing soldier, we knew it was a matter of time before they moved away. That man never was nice to the girl. Used to thump her on the head a lot and call her names. I spoke up a couple of times, but he said that I was just an old man who should mind his own business. Mama offered to keep the



girl so she could be close to her family and friends, but her mother said no. I don't know what came of them."

New Mexico looked different than Alabama. We lived with Kenny's mother in an adobe house. Out the kitchen window I could see the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. They made everything around them look small. The backyard had rocks instead of grass, and the trees didn't give shade; they stood straight and tall. Kenny's mother was short and had long black hair. She talked to my mother in Spanish and while my mother smiled, Kenny's mother would make hand gestures and shake her head. Instead of biscuits we ate tortillas, and the tray with sliced tomatoes and pickle relish no longer appeared at dinnertime. On Sundays, everyone went to church leaving me and my mother home alone. My mother would call my grandmother and tell her how things were going, but she always ended up crying and asking my grandmother why she couldn't come back home. I wanted to know too.

We moved several more times. My mother worked odd jobs while Kenny worked his way to management with UPS. My sister was born when I was eight, and the first time I looked at her she screamed. Not much has changed since then. My mother started acting different shortly after Andrea was born. Sometimes I missed school because my mother would not come out of her room, and then Kenny would come home and yell at me because the school called him at work. He was starting to work more and was gone for days at a time. My mother would be cooking steak one minute, and crying in her closet the next. Occasionally she checked me out of school to go shopping, or to go to Furr's Cafeteria for meatloaf and mashed potato specials. Once, she let me buy high heels

and wear them all day. By the time I was fourteen I had numerous pairs of shoes, and had gone to court for truancy. My mother dressed me in my best outfit and pulled my hair back in barrettes (which she never did) and we went to see Judge Roland. She told him that I was needed at home to help care for my sister. The judge told my mother that if I missed any more school he would file an order to have me removed from the home. She had a meltdown standing at the oak podium and they had to call an ambulance.

The last story my grandfather told me that night was about his oldest daughter running away from home. She was in her twenties, left home, and never came back. I wondered how his brain catalogued information, and if he knew somewhere in the deepest recesses that the facts he relayed were not complete. His memory of the past was vivid, and he recalled every detail as if it had just happened. Grandfather remembered me as a little girl, and my mother as a young woman looking for her place in the world. He told me that his daughter called home every weekend for a while, and every time she did, my grandmother would hang up the phone, then retreat to her room to write in her journal. He promised that he never peeked at what she had written, and I believed him.

My grandfather was quiet, strong, and ornery. He was my Papaw, and I was his suggywumps. He wore a hearing aid and would often act like he didn't hear things even when I know he did. It was usually when grandmother griped at him. He would look at me over his crossword, wink, and give me a little smile. I knew we shared secrets. When he was moved to the nursing home, my heart broke for him. I knew that because of the Alzheimer's, he was already in a world that didn't make sense to him. Taking him away from familiar surroundings could only be more disorienting. The grandfather that I

adored would spend the rest of his days in a foul-smelling nursing home, without his family, his bed, and most of his memories.

Watching my mother sift through the pile of things with her name on them made me nervous. I could tell by the look on her face when she was thinking I never wanted this. It was a look I had seen before. She inspected a crystal vase, pushed aside a Longaberger basket, and laid a blue and white afghan across the back of a chair. She put my grandfather's silver bracelet on her wrist and got lost in her admiration of it. I ran my fingers over the top of my music box and watched her over my glasses. I couldn't help but wonder if she was driven by greed or pain, but I didn't really want to know. I just didn't want her to go off on one of her tangents and make me feel guilty about living far away again. She called me twice a week and tried to convince me to move closer to home so she could see her grandchildren and me. When I explained that my job would not allow that, she accused me of being money-driven and shallow. She would cry and I would have someone call my name or ring the doorbell so I could get off of the phone.

Frances began loading things into her car, and Janis was on the phone with the realtor. My mother suddenly got up and took off down the hallway. I followed after her wondering if she just remembered the location of whatever it was she was seeking. She went to the back room and opened the closet door.

"Help me with this," she said.

"What is it?"

"Just help me get it out of the closet."



She was referring to my grandmother's cedar chest. It had been put in the closet to make room for the recliner we slept in when we sat with my grandfather.

"I think we might have to take off the sliding doors," I said. "What's in it?"

"Just help me get it out. There's nothing in it. I don't know if it has a tag. Are you going to help me?"

She looked at me with the slightly raised eyebrow that I had grown to hate. It meant different things at different times, but none of them were good. I grabbed one of the sliding doors with both hands and lifted up to release the bottom peg. When I brought the door forward, the little white disc that ran the track popped off and flew straight up into the air. I started laughing and my mother punched me in the arm.

"I can't believe this is all so damn funny to you! Can't you do one thing without laughing about it? You broke the damn door. Now what are we going to do?" She started to pace in a few quick steps, and pivot, and pace.

Frances appeared in the doorway and looked at me with scorn on her face. I propped the door against the wall and grabbed the other one. I removed the second door, propped it against the first, and stepped out of the way. My mother got down on her knees in front of the chest and slowly lifted the lid. I felt myself holding my breath as if she really were about to expose a treasure. Frances had moved closer and we both stood slightly leaning over my mother to see what was in the chest. One by one my mother lifted items from the chest, viewed them and set them next to the chest on the closet floor. Two rolls of Christmas wrapping paper, twelve skeins of blue yarn, a ceramic poodle vase, an assortment of postcards and letters, and a red shirt.

"Is that it?" Frances asked.



"I guess so," my mother answered.

"Do you want me to put the doors back on?" I asked.

They both turned and scowled at me. I grabbed the chest by one of its handles and gently slid it out of the closet. I turned it on its side so Frances and my mother could search for a tag, but there was none. They discussed who should get it and why, and I replaced the unbroken door. I saw something lying in the back of the closet partially propped up on the wall. I pulled out the leather-bound notebook that was tied with a piece of twine and presented it to Frances and my mother.

"Hey, look at this."

"Give me that," my mother snapped as she grabbed it from me.

She held it in both of her hands and looked down at it and at Frances, then back at the notebook.

"There's a tag on the back of it," I offered.

My mother turned it over, read the tag and stood very still for a moment. She looked at me through squinted eyes and shoved the notebook in my chest.

"You did this. You knew she left it for you."

"I didn't know anything," I stammered. "I don't even know what this is."

On the back of the notebook faded silver bells sparkled next to my grandmother's handwriting. I wanted to open it immediately, but by the reaction my mother had, I decided to wait.

"The one damn thing, the one and only damn thing I wanted. She left it for her!" my mother yelled at Frances. "First it was you, then Janis, now her. I want my turn. I want my damn turn!"

My mother stormed out of the room and Frances followed after her. She banged her fists on the walls and screamed all the way to the living room where she tore the portrait down and threw it at the front door. One by one, all the items tagged with her name ended up on top of the portrait she kept calling hideous. I walked past her to the back door and closed it behind me.

**Finite**

The glow from your cigarette  
looks like a moon  
in the pitch black,

and I follow quietly  
trying to hear the gulf breeze  
as it warms the air  
and diffuses the scent

of honeysuckle through the old  
cemetery covered by Spanish moss  
that hangs so low  
it dusts gravestones;

its movements  
mimic a graceful revenant  
who's come to lead us through wild ferns  
and tangled ivy to find bronze markers,  
lying bare,  
waiting for our etchings.

**Lament**  
—After Rilke

So much is gone.

What's left behind  
has shown me how to live.  
Stars, born of gas and dust  
strive for the balance  
of gravity and energy;  
I imagine the brightest  
lives for me.

The riddle of mortality  
is tedious; each deliberation  
an incremental death.  
I want to ask the question  
and be answered  
with time.  
I think I could believe  
if I were sure.