The Red Wheelbarrow

w.c.w.

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.
the red wheelbarrow

1983-84
Editors' Notes

As always, we would like to thank the two people who make this possible, Delp and Therese.

Thank you as well to those who submitted and those who are reading.

Sincerely,
Amber Bard and Britta Krisjanis
Editors, Fall Issue, '02

This issue of The Red Wheelbarrow is dedicated to Nicki Baker, an important part of Interlochen no longer with us.

Cover Art: Jane Chung
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Wild Monkey Still at Large  
*Hachioji, Tokyo, Japan*  
*Melanie Drane*

All winter, I peeled tangerines for him  
by the roadside, left orange crescents  
in the snow, cracked the shells from walnuts,  
and broke dark chocolate into smaller bites.  
Sometimes I sang for us:  
I waited under the trees for hours, hoping  
for movement, the stirring of pine needles,  
his hands that parted the branches  
in gentle but urgent search.  

What the newspapers said is true: I told police  
that his eyes were lovely. Relief comes  
when someone finally meets your gaze. I knew  
he watched the town for months, that he moved  
through the frozen yards of our houses,  
shuffled in the dusty corners of our garage, studied  
what we threw away, lifted things to his mouth  
as if to taste what we were willing to give up—  
found his way silently through our lives in the dark.

The police were irritated by his boldness.  
No one was sure what he wanted,  
why he chose our neighborhood in a city  
where he seemed certain to be caught.  
I like to think it was what I offered him:  
the tang of citrus eaten cold, no questions  
asked, nothing sought from him in return.

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Night creeps in through the windows  
*Caitlin Harrison*

I.  
Night creeps in through the windows  
slowly blacking the room  
with each descent  
of her dying son.  
Oedipus reels back  
his dreams mother  
already slipping into subconscious  
so that he only feels milk  
sliding down his throat  
when he looks at her breasts.

II.  
Touch, taste, and feel  
he reminds her of her dead  
husband, her belly swelling  
with her new husband’s child.

III.  
Rolling around in his grave,  
grasping at himself,  
cursing his blood  
the old man slowly slips  
finds his body brand new,  
familiar surroundings, warmth  
blood.  
Sudden light, screams.
Through new eyes
he sees his wife's joyful face,
arms outstretched to take him
once again to her breast,
his son in the corner, scared and crying.

My grandmother leans toward sheets
glowing pale as pages. Her fingers
linger brokenly along the frayed hems
while shadows of empty branches
sign her name to the clean white wash.
“What a Beautiful Wash—"

Anne-Marie Oomen

She says, she who has not
spoken for weeks, who shuffles
day to day not knowing her name,
and now, as I drive her down old US 10,
past a farmhouse and tattered barn,
she speaks, this whole sentence toward a back yard
where drying laundry blazes in April sun—
a necklace between cedar hands.

We stop. I help her walk
between clothing walls
where she halts and sighs
over dusk towels, olive shirts,
unpolished lapis of denims,
bras of huge, uncultured pearls
hanging from one strap
like earrings.

She judges the placement of pins,
and even once shakes her head—
this is not the seam from which to hang
the baby dress—it will stretch—
though she never says, but lifts her face,
sniffs the soapy, well-ordered air.

Her eyes still unravel clean coils
of house dresses, shake out
skirts, wring pants in wind,
clothes-pin these husk of family
upside down.

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Man Poem

Brenin Wertz–Roth

The pine boards
lean against the wall
of the garage.
The table saw,
the skill saw,
the jigsaw
and the sander
are plugged in and waiting.

A longneck Corona
sits by the grill
where the coals
are glowing.

Other men see me
working beneath
the light
of the garage door opener
and wave from their pickups.

Good,
this is what I’m supposed
to be doing.

But little do they know,
after I’ve cut the pieces for the chair
and eaten my porterhouse,
I’m going to sit at my desk
and write this poem.
and time allotted, then takes over and spills beyond its borders, turns feral. And doesn’t it feel so odd that he seems so sure of what he’s aiming at?

There’s a gambler in there somewhere. Long shots. Bull fights. Macomber’s wife taking aim. Nick Adams heading into a dark swamp. We know his inner territory better than we know our own. Dissected and parcelled out in countless seminars and classes. We’ve read the literature. Heard the conjecture, stories about the boy/child who wore dresses. The litany of mistreated woman. The code. Hero after hero dancing to the same song.

But we also know the heart. We know in dreams that fragments of his heart settled each night in Africa, some on the Pilar, others on Kilamanjaro. Smaller bits of heart tissue scattered like debris from a place wreck: settling on ex-wives, sons, books not written, dust in an Idaho basement.

Maybe he’s bluffing. Maybe he wouldn’t pull either trigger. Maybe a second later he would have a grin on his face, offer the gun like any sportsman would offer his finest weapon to a friend.

But crawl through the barrels in the photograph, move down inside the actual heart and you’ll see scar tissue, words hanging in the air like cold meat. Look around at the dream-stuff he carved on the walls, take each one not as a symbol, but as something actually seen, recorded, almost luminous there in the coldest chamber of his heart. Even though you turn away to look back out into the world of the living, you’ll still see your own breath.
Maybe this is what it looks like when the demons are at the door. This is no one to tangle with, it seems. Notice the arms, the way the light grazes the left bicep, the chest pumped. The way the eyes are looking down, through you. There is just the slightest hint of challenge in his face, a look that begs just one more step forward. Even the room looks like something should be taken apart there: clean and sterile, the light, probably from a flash bulb shooting into the upper corner of what looks like a bathroom at the end of a kitchen. He looks like a dangerous man, perhaps a mental patient that has stolen a gun from his guard and will not sit down. It's as if someone, maybe a critic had scoffed at a sentence or offered up an opposing view. Then he raised the gun a bit more. A double barreled Purdy aimed at someone, kneeling perhaps.

But we know this is part of the show, don't we? We know his right thumb is flat against the hammers, the ends of the barrels like two vacant eyes. We know his hand is over the trigger guard instead of hovering a hair away from touching off two blasts at once. The pants tell another part of the story, just coming in from a walk on a darkening beach. And no shirt. The consummate fighter. This is a hard man with a neck like a champion boar. This is someone who has been there and back twice, armed.

What we know that he doesn't is that just outside the door, lingering in the air is the breath of a demon seven years in the future. A father's ghost hiding in Ketchum. A rendezvous with both double barrels waiting to happen. This is a man in a kitchen or a bathroom in Havana who looks like he's won a prize fight or two. Like he's hooked and landed more fish than ten men could in their lifetimes. And isn't that what this is finally all about? A lifetime. The way a life stretches itself out and flexes, moves into the space
George West

*Liz John*

George West lives on the farm that backs up to ours
with his cows, his corn, and his wife of thirty years.
He's had his truck even longer that his wife, and it's in better
condition
because a new coat of paint will go a long way to erase years from
the one,
but time won't ever turn back
for the other.

On the roof of the farmhouse, on the shingles by the bedroom,
a woodpecker begins to carve a home. The rat-tat-tapping
reverberates all through the house, and the shingles are splitting.
George takes the rifle from its cradle above the mantelpiece,
kills the bird with a single shot.

"It was a redheaded," he tells my father.
We are used to people telling my father things.
He is a man who could have been a priest,
had he believed in God.
"You couldn't see the blood for the red feathers, just the hole in his
head."
George’s faded blue eyes cloud over
and we catch a glimpse of something that—
in another man—
we’d call tears.

We see George at the corner—
you can’t mistake his truck—
and sometimes at the community barbeque,
shaking hands with the mayor.

to turn golden brown. Remove promptly and let cool on wire rack.
Recipe yields 4 to 8 dozen cookies, depending on size of child.

Watching your weight? Substitute margarine for butter and drain
all baby fat.

*Note: The choice of children will greatly affect the outcome of the
cookies. For example, disagreeable or cross children produce cook-
ies that taste okay, but will disagree with you later on. Whiney
children often create a bitter aftertaste. Loud children make
dough too hard, and criers make it too soggy. For best results try
to pick polite, well-behaved, bookish children who only speak
when spoken to but have a very vivid imagination.
Include Your Children When Baking Cookies
Published headline found online at Strange News

Lesley Alicia Tye

Kinder Cookies

Delight your guests at your next party with these delectable treats.

1 cup sugar
1 TB spice (equal parts cinnamon, clove and nutmeg work best)
1/2 cup firmly packed brown sugar
2 sticks butter (softened)
1 tsp vanilla
2 large eggs
2 1/4 cup flour
1 tsp baking soda
1 tsp salt
2 plump children* 

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Sift dry ingredients together and set aside.

In large bowl, combine butter, sugars and spice and mix with electric beater until blended. Add vanilla and eggs until smooth. Slowly add dry mixture, mixing well between each addition. Remove beaters and fold in children by hand with large wooden spoon. Optional: Add chocolate morsels or coconut, but no chopped nuts. Most children hate chopped nuts. Cover dough and refrigerate for at least one hour. Once chilled, dough can be kneaded and rolled out for cut shapes, or dropped by the spoonful onto ungreased cookie sheets. Bake for 8-10 minutes or until edges begin to brown.
Back in the lake, I pass a boat full of people I could've known, I waved to them, but they didn't wave back. Or was it the other way around?

“Who?” I said, thrusting out my chest. “Who? The dead?” They don't have ears!

Death somehow rolled those black eyes up and then downward, between his sandaled feet. “You're never lonely in a cemetery.”

“Ha!” I said. “I like that—I should write that down...”

Death gave me a disgruntled look and decided to change the subject. “What’s wrong with my image? And what do you mean when you say I’m a lie?”

“Oh, Death—” I plunked myself down on the shelf of a mausoleum. “Death, your trouble is...is that you don’t know anything.”

Death bared his teeth at me. “Shut up, mortal.”

“Don't sulk,” I said. “Listen—I've been thinking...I've been looking at medieval art when people were scared to death of the plague and stuff—”

“Ha. Ha.”

“—and they drew you all mean and nasty-looking. People do that because they're afraid. I thought if you started to act nice, and had puppies and kittens and stuff—”

“And a big red nose,” said Death, with his arms akimbo.

“—people would like you more and—”

“LIKE ME!” Death squawked. “Why would I want people to like me—I am Death”

“Who’s lonely and scared of little dogs!”

“I am not LONELY! Who says I’m LONELY? I'm not—”

“Then why'd you talk to me, huh? Why?”

Death shut his eyes and just dissolved, leaving me and the puppy and the rest of the cemetery alone.
“Dog food. Milk. Water. The occasional scrap or tidbit. Give him a big bone to chew on, to take care of his teeth—”

Death said, in a small voice, “Bo—"

The puppy found that Death’s robe trailed on the grass and sank his teeth into it, shaking and growling and nearly bursting with puppy fierceness. “N—” I shouted.

I burst out laughing instead. It was just his expression—this, “Ack! What'll I do?” expression that no skull had ever worn, and then I remembered—

“Oh! Oh God! Say—say ‘No,’ Death, say no! Nice and firm!”

He was regarding the puppy with terror.

“Firmly! Like you mean it!” I said.

“N-no?” hazarded Death. He was shaking, his teeth rattling in his hollow skull like dice. “N—AUGH!” because all of a sudden there was a wicked RIP! and Puppy had the black hem trailing like a mummy’s shroud and dove beneath and found—ANKLES! Bony ankles! This time Death SHREIKED—

“Oh, dear,” I said, and ran in to save him.

“It nearly killed me!” Death hollered, when I had the puppy once again safely sequestered in my arms. “It—"

“You’re Death,” I said with a great deal of interest. “How can you die?”

Death stopped clutching his robe and dropped his “I'm reporting you!” stance to say, “Oh. I forgot.”

I tittered. I had to titter because I was trying not to, trying not to embarrass him, and it didn’t work.

He stamped his foot and shouted, “What is so funny?”

“You!” I shouted, putting down the puppy. Then my eyes opened up and I stood up straight and threw out my arms. “HEY!”

I screeched to the whole world. “HEY, EVERYONE, DEATH IS FUNNY! HEY! DEATH IS A BIG FAT LIE! HE—"

“Be QUIET!” Death snapped with his hands over his ears—do skulls have ears? “Someone might hear you!”

Drowning Aunt Betty
Mariama Lockington

(It is early afternoon and MARIA walks into the living room of Aunt Betty’s house. She is about eighteen years old and is dressed in black. In the corner of the room sits an old blue recliner. She walks over to it and strokes it for a while, then begins to talk to it as if the chair is an old friend.)

MARIA

It was this morning, you know, the funeral. Mom, Dad, Izzy and I, along with some of Aunt Betty’s friends, went down to Reeds Lake. Dad was the one carrying her, Aunt Betty, I mean. Well, he was carrying what was left of her anyway, we had her cremated, it’s what she wanted. You know what she said to us before she died? She said: “Don’t you dare bury me under a pile of dirt, put me somewhere I love!” That’s why we went to the lake. She loved the lake. Dad said the Lord’s Prayer and then we all sang “Amazing Grace” while Aunt Betty floated in a basket full of lilacs over the water...you want to know what the funny part was? I looked at that basket of lilacs carrying her—my Aunt Betty—and felt nothing at all. I wasn’t even sad! Didn’t even cry! It was like I went numb all over. You know that feeling you get when your foot falls asleep, all tingly and prickly—well that’s what it felt like but all over my body. I was so numb I barely noticed Izzy tugging at my sleeve! “Ria,” she whispered to me, “how did Aunt B fit in that little box?” (MARIA laughs.) Isn’t that funny? It’s hilarious! But you
I was so numb I didn't even laugh, I didn't even smile! I just told her to go ask Mom and walked away. I don't think I realized it was the last time I would see Aunt Betty, even if she was just a box of ashes floating in a basket on the water. (Short pause.)

So, anyway, after that we came here, to Aunt Betty's house. Everybody else is out sitting on the porch eating lunch. I'm not hungry, well not really. I just don't see how they can be out there laughing. I can't stop thinking about her. It's like nothing has happened. As if she is still here, cooking her...her...famous roast potatoes in the kitchen and singing along to Christmas music on the radio...well you know about her music, don't you? Boy did she love Christmas music; it didn't matter what time of the year it was, what time of day even. She'd listen to "Jingle Bells" during breakfast and...and..."Deck the Halls" in the afternoon while she was working in the garden! Remember when I was little and used to have sleepovers here, I would even fall asleep to her humming "Silent Night" or some other cheery tune! (MARIA sighs.) It's so strange, that she's not here anymore, you know? I keep walking around and touching things, smelling things. It doesn't smell like her house anymore, does it? Well I guess it hasn't ever since she started chemo. Remember how it smelled them? Like medication and those...those sheets they use in hospitals! It does smell like much of anything anymore...something is missing, you know? (MARIA pauses.) But everything is still here! Sitting exactly where it as always been. I mean, look, these pictures on the walls, her glasses resting on the sewing table and over there on the shelves, her collection of Beanie Babies! Oh yeah, and you, how could I ever forget you. Aunt Betty's blue recliner, always sitting there in the corner of the living room. God you're old. I mean you look like a piece of junk I might find in an ally somewhere! She's had you forever, hasn't she?

(MARIA pauses, remembering, then climbs)
Death stuck his hands in his pockets. "So are you ready?"
I shook my head. "Not for a while."
I shocked Death—first the black holes widened like the ones in space, then they contracted and he looked angry, and then sort of went al oval-y and he looked absolutely crestfallen. Which is an odd expression, if you think about it, for a skull. "Why am I here, then?"
I said, "I want to talk to you."
Death snickered and looked sly. "So does every mortal—usually it consists of 'Help!' 'Wait!' 'No!' and 'Not yet!'"
"I suppose it would."
Birds sang.
Death asked, "What's in the basket?"
"A puppy."
"An!—"
I set the basket down on the grass, opened it, and said the silly, fluffy wuffy things people say.
Currently it was asleep, that puppy, asleep in the hot June air in that deep sleep reserved for small things. He was round and roly-poly, like all puppies are, a little bag of chubbiness with a stub tail and paws so big they looked like he had swapped them with another dog. He was gray, with spots here and there like pen-nies, and he had slate ears. A hunting dog, a hound, in that floppy fall-over stage. The insides of the basket looked a bit chewed.
I held him up, all loose in the joints and making little whimper noises. "See? Here." And before Death could protest I had pulled up his hands and plopped the puppy in them, who was now squirming in his skin and hard to hold onto. "For you."
Death didn't hold the puppy close, like you're supposed to, or put a hand beneath the puppy's stomach so it wouldn't be afraid of a fall, like you're supposed to. He just let it whimper and hang and said, "Why?"
It sounded a bit shrill, actually.
think I couldn’t feel anything because I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to believe she was gone. I guess I still don’t. I don’t want to remember her as a basket of lilacs, or even a box of ashes! I want to remember her as my Aunt Betty, the woman with the huge personality who...who loved Christmas music and...and carrot salad you know? I want to remember her as my rescuer, the one person that has saved me from drowning so many times. She has always been here to pull me ashore, always. (Short pause, as MARIA sighs, thinking hard then softly she begins again.) I stood there watching her float, the basket kinda rocking gently in the breeze, then slowly sinking into the water and I couldn’t feel Izzy’s hand tugging at me! I kept seeing Aunt Betty’s eyes, the way they were right before she died? Stale yellow and tired—so tired. I kept wanting her to sing (MARIA hums softly) Silent night...holy night...all is calm...all is quiet... (voice fades off.) She was drowning in medication, needles were stuck into her like...like thumbtacks, tubes up her nose and I wanted her to sing to me! I wanted some sign that she was still with us, still holding on. (Softly.) I wanted her to sing to me. (Very softly.) I’d never felt so helpless standing there knowing I couldn’t help her, knowing soon she’d be gone—I never want to feel that way again...ever. So I went numb this morning, at the lake, shut out the world and stood there like a block of ice watching Aunt Betty drown.

(MARIA climbs on the chair again and begins to stroke it with love, burying her face in it.)

I can’t get that image out of my head. The basket, it kinda bobbed for a while at the top then tipped over and all the ashes fell out mixing with the lilacs...it was so beautiful, they told me. They told me she loved the lake, told me she was happy there. But all I saw was the lake pulling her down under the water and her eyes the
pressed the blade into the soil, all my weight on the handle. Rain still trickling down steadily, I felt it dislodge a chunk of wet clay.

I picked up the chunk and stared at it, smashing the compact brick into crumbling dirt.

I noticed the kitchen light was on again. Grandma was up, puttering around the kitchen in her white night gown, a pale apparition against kitchen cabinetry.

I dug the holes, one by one, and started to place the plants in the clay. I scattered the black potting soil and placed the bare roots in the wet clay.

I couldn’t see Gramma through the kitchen window anymore. I heard the backdoor slam. She walked towards me in the rain, hands clutching her elbows. In the dark, she was a blob of white, small and shapeless. I thought of petunia petals in the breeze.

“What are you doing up, Gramma?” I said, standing up and brushing the dirt from my clothes. “What time is it?”

“Oh, it’s about one. I always wake up about now. Pills only last so long. Can’t go back to sleep.” She was barefoot in the grass, her feet white blobs in the dark, wet grass.

“Why can’t you sleep, Gramma? Why can’t you sleep?”


“Gramma,” I said.

She stared off into the dark purple sky.

Bending down to get a petunia, I shook its roots out of the rectangular shape of the pot.

“Come here, Gramma,” I said. “Put that in here, down here. Go slow.” I placed the mess of roots and stem into her hand. She stared at it, dumbfounded. “Pleased, Gramma.”

She slowly squatted down and placed the plant in the hole. I squatted beside her and began to brush the soil in around the roots. For a moment, our hands brushed together.

(MARIA whispers:) I couldn’t save her...I just can’t get that out of my head.

(MARIA curls up into a small ball in the chair and begins to rock slowly. She hums “Silent Night” softly and the lights FADE OUT.)
The clay soil along the Mississippi is hard to break through.

My grandpa unlocked the backyard shed for me and got out a few shovels he probably didn’t consider to be too old, though the dried out wooden handles cut into my hands and the force of my weight could not push the dull blades into the clay. This wasn’t like the black, moist soil at home in Illinois. This was cracked and rigid, a primitive brown clay that deserved to have fresh dinosaur prints squashed into it.

We had only been there three days, just to get Gramma settled back in from the psychiatric hospital, but I felt as though my mom and I had been staying in that little house in that musty bed for years. My stomach growled as I bent into that shovel, trying to bring up another brick-hard lump of clay. It was hard to eat in that house. Everything felt dirty. While washing the dishes, I noticed the dried food stuck to the edges of the plates, pulled everything out and washed every plate, bowl, teacup, and glass in the cupboard. I scrubbed the tub before I got in and still felt filthy when I got out. This was clean work, though. Clean dirt work. I was wearing one of my grandpa’s old plaid shirts I took from his workbench. It smelled strongly of wood and motor oil, sweat and old-man aftershave.

I didn’t want to go back in that house and sit in silence in that small, bitter-smelling living room where Gramma sat in her blue armchair. She would ask me through her false teeth when school started and tell me it was too bad I had to come all the way out here just to sit around and do nothing in her boring house. She would tell me how boring her life is. She would ask about mine.

She didn’t want any plants for her yard, she said. We
I could hear Gramma’s quavering voice through the floor. My head felt hot. A sour feeling built up behind my eyes. I sat down on the edge of the bed and pressed my palms into my eyes. Outside, the sky was moving fast, grey moving into purple, swirling together. Go to sleep, I thought. Just go to sleep.

A cool wind blew through the room, waking me. It was late in the evening—starting to get dark. Rain pattered against the screen and tapped on the aluminum siding, just loud enough to make its presence known. I hoped they had already eaten dinner. I hoped the rain would last all night.

Downstairs, Grandpa was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee.

He didn’t look at me. “Harriet,” he said. “Your mother went to the grocery store and Gramma’s gone to bed. I was supposed to tell you that. I remembered to tell you that.”

I looked at the clock. It was nine-thirty. “Have you eaten dinner, Grandpa?”

He closed his fingers around his coffee cup. “Yes. Yes. I believe I have eaten dinner. Yes.”

“May I heat up your coffee for you?” A pale film was beginning to form over the top of his coffee, the way it does when it’s been sitting cold for a while.

“No. I reckon, I reckon I’ll be heading back down into my workshop.”

I nodded. All right, I thought, this was an improvement on our previous exchanges.

The front door swung open and Mom came in carrying bags of groceries. She set them down on the table and began to pull things out and put them away systematically. Cold stuff first.

“Blah,” she said. “I bought ice cream and I’m going to eat it.” Mom sat down with the cardboard half gallon of blueberry crunch in front of her and began to eat. She scooped out swirls of shouldn’t bother, she said.

My mom and I had driven her out to the garden store that morning. Gramma wore long sleeves to cover up the marks from being restrained. Imagine being seventy-seven and having to be restrained. The air was hot and smothering. Gramma apologized for being such a nuisance and making us take her places. My mom didn’t say anything.

The sun was so hot and bright that the pavement seemed to burn from black to white in the parking lot. “I can just sit in the car,” Gramma said.

“No, Mom, come pick out what you want,” my mom said. “Harriet, help Gramma out of the car.”

I got out and opened her door, the hot metal pressed into my palm. A freckled, veiny hand reached from the darkness inside. I pulled her up, her flesh like a film of plastic loosely draped over melting Jell-O.

The garden center of the grocery store was made of stacked wooden pallets spread with flats of flowers and white plastic tents of potted perennials. Around the entrance, black pots of daylilies—white, red, pink, yellow—were arranged on crates. I squatted beside the flowers to touch their petals and reed-like leaves.

“How about a red one?” my mom offered. “That’s your favorite. It can go in the corner over by the fence so you can see it blooming from your window.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know. I’m going to find a place to sit down.” She started to slowly move away.

“We’ll bring you what you might like, Gramma,” I said.

Mom and I walked towards the flats of petunias. Walking behind my mom, I remembered the stories she had told me about Gramma—about a woman who would stay in bed for weeks at a time, who would run into her bedroom and slam the door if someone knocked on the door.

I ran my hands over the tops of the papery flowers, reds,
yellows, stripes. I pulled out a pack of white petunias and brought them over to Gramma, who sat on a bench in the shade.

“These are cheerful,” I offered.

She was digging around in her purse. “Here, honey, give this to your mom.” She held out a wrinkled ten dollar bill. “I don’t want you having to pay for this.”

“No, Gramma,” I said, shaking my head. My mom was looking through some dahlias. “You’ve got to let us do this for you.”

“Then you take it, honey. Take it.” She waved the money desperately through the air; it flapped, limp and dangly.

“No, Gramma. What flowers do you want? Do you know what you want?”

“Well, George likes some of them purple cone flowers.”

“You want them?” She stared off into space. How was I supposed to get an elderly woman who tried to poison herself a week ago to take an interest in flowers? “You all right Gramma?”

“Oh, I’m fine, I’m fine, don’t worry about me. Don’t worry about me.”

She stared off into the swaths of color, layers of red and yellow over green. The muscles of her face seemed to melt as she stared off past the flowers.

Mom came back carrying a daylily and some petunias. “You ready to go?” she sighed.

I got up and walked with her to the counter. She set down the plants and turned around to look at Gramma alone on the bench. “You know she’s always been this way.” I nodded. “That’s why I have to find joy in small things. That’s why I have to get excited and happy about things. You know? There is no joy in her and there hasn’t been for the fifty years I’ve known her.” Mom wiped her hands on her shirt sleeves. The sun was high, nearly lunchtime. I hadn’t been able to eat that morning. Everything in the fridge felt dirty to me.

The clay soil along the Mississippi bank is hard to break through. Rivers cut through it without the padding of sand banks, only mud and rushes. Hot sweat was dripping down my brick. The shovel hit the ground like it was hitting concrete; I couldn’t push it through.

I could hear the sound of Grandpa’s power tools from the basement. She should have tried using through, I thought, and then tried to exorcize the through from my mind. She had gone through all the drawers in the house, swallowing every pill she could find. She took it with room temperature tea in a mug with bluebirds on it.

The soil was too hard. I wasn’t going to be able to get the flowers in that day. I hated what she had given me—this mind, this sorrow. “Oh God,” I thought. “Oh God, please don’t let me grow old like her.”

I scraped some of the clay up in my fingernails and rubbed its sticky grittiness into the grooves in my fingertips. Looking up at the sky, a gray glaze had washed over the bright blue sky. In the east, thick white clouds were churning into the sky, white slapped down and mixed into diluted Payne’s grey on a glass palette. I kicked at the dense earth, hurting my foot more than I ruptured the clay.

The sky churned and folded throughout the afternoon. I sat in the small bedroom with the window open, waiting for cool storm winds to supplant the thick heat. My mom was downstairs talking to Gramma. Telling her she needed to sleep. She needed to take the pills at the right time. Maybe she needed to get out of the house more often. Maybe she could take a class somewhere.

Gramma’s house is full of laminated bookshelves, stacked with paperback mystery novels. Being in this house was too much. Being here with her in this small space, surrounded by illness. I skimmed over the names of the mysteries. I pulled one off the shelf and watched the pages fall out onto the floor. Nothing around here can keep it together, I thought.
yellows, stripes. I pulled out a pack of white petunias and brought them over to Gramma, who sat on a bench in the shade.

“These are cheerful,” I offered.

She was digging around in her purse. “Here, honey, give this to your mom.” She held out a wrinkled ten dollar bill. “I don’t want you having to pay for this.”

“No, Gramma,” I said, shaking my head. My mom was looking through some dahlias. “You’ve got to let us do this for you.”

“Then you take it, honey. Take it.” She waved the money desperately through the air; it flapped, limp and dangly.

“No, Gramma. What flowers do you want? Do you know what you want?”

“Well, George likes some of them purple cone flowers.”

“You want them?” She stared off into space. How was I supposed to get an elderly woman who tried to poison herself a week ago to take an interest in flowers? “You all right Gramma?”

“Oh, I’m fine, I’m fine, don’t worry about me. Don’t worry about me.”

She stared off into the swaths of color, layers of red and yellow over green. The muscles of her face seemed to melt as she stared off past the flowers.

Mom came back carrying a daylily and some petunias.

“You ready to go?” she sighed.

I got up and walked with her to the counter. She set down the plants and turned around to look at Gramma alone on the bench. “You know she’s always been this way.” I nodded. “That’s why I have to find joy in small things. That’s why I have to get excited and happy about things. You know? There is no joy in her and there hasn’t been for the fifty years I’ve known her.”

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I could hear Gramma's quavering voice through the floor. My head felt hot. A sour feeling built up behind my eyes. I sat down on the edge of the bed and pressed my palms into my eyes. Outside, the sky was moving fast, grey moving into purple, swirling together. Go to sleep, I thought. Just go to sleep.

A cool wind blew through the room, waking me. It was late in the evening—starting to get dark. Rain pattered against the screen and tapped on the aluminum siding, just loud enough to make its presence known. I hoped they had already eaten dinner. I hoped the rain would last all night.

Downstairs, Grandpa was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee.

He didn't look at me. "Harriet," he said. "Your mother went to the grocery store and Gramma's gone to bed. I was supposed to tell you that. I remembered to tell you that."

I looked at the clock. It was nine-thirty. "Have you eaten dinner, Grandpa?"

He closed his fingers around his coffee cup. "Yes. Yes. I believe I have eaten dinner. Yes."

"May I heat up your coffee for you?" A pale film was beginning to form over the top of his coffee, the way it does when it's been sitting cold for a while.

"No. I reckon, I reckon I'll be heading back down into my workshop."

I nodded. All right, I thought, this was an improvement on our previous exchanges.

The front door swung open and Mom came in carrying bags of groceries.

She set them down on the table and began to pull things out and put them away systematically. Cold stuff first.

"Blah," she said. "I bought ice cream and I'm going to eat it." Mom sat down with the cardboard half gallon of blueberry crunch in front of her and began to eat. She scooped out swirls of shouldn't bother, she said.

My mom and I had driven her out to the garden store that morning. Gramma wore long sleeves to cover up the marks from being restrained. Imagine being seventy-seven and having to be restrained. The air was hot and smothering. Gramma apologized for being such a nuisance and making us take her places. My mom didn't say anything.

The sun was so hot and bright that the pavement seemed to burn from black to white in the parking lot. "I can just sit in the car," Gramma said.

"No, Mom, come pick out what you want," my mom said. "Harriet, help Gramma out of the car."

I got out and opened her door, the hot metal pressed into my palm. A freckled, veiny hand reached from the darkness inside. I pulled her up, her flesh like a film of plastic loosely draped over melting Jell-O.

The garden center of the grocery store was made of stacked wooden pallets spread with flats of flowers and white plastic tents of potted perennials. Around the entrance, black pots of daylilies—white, red, pink, yellow—were arranged on crates. I squatted beside the flowers to touch their petals and reed-like leaves.

"How about a red one?" my mom offered. "That's your favorite. It can go in the corner over by the fence so you can see it blooming from your window."

"Oh, I wouldn't know. I'm going to go find a place to sit down." She started to slowly move away.

"We'll bring you what you might like, Gramma," I said. Mom and I walked towards the flats of petunias. Walking behind my mom, I remembered the stories she had told me about Gramma—about a woman who would stay in bed for weeks at a time, who would run into her bedroom and slam the door if someone knocked on the door.

I ran my hands over the tops of the papery flowers, reds,
The clay soil along the Mississippi is hard to break through.

My grandpa unlocked the backyard shed for me and got out a few shovels he probably didn't consider to be too old, though the dried out wooden handles cut into my hands and the force of my weight could not push the dull blades into the clay. This wasn't like the black, moist soil at home in Illinois. This was cracked and rigid, a primitive brown clay that deserved to have fresh dinosaur prints squashed into it.

We had only been there three days, just to get Gramma settled back from the psychiatric hospital, but I felt as though my mom and I had been staying in that little house in that musty bed for years. My stomach growled as I bent into that shovel, trying to bring up another brick-hard lump of clay. It was hard to eat in that house. Everything felt dirty. While washing the dishes, I noticed the dried food stuck to the edges of the plates, pulled everything out and washed every plate, bowl, teacup, and glass in the cupboard. I scrubbed the tub before I got in and still felt filthy when I got out. This was clean work, though. Clean dirt work. I was wearing one of my grandpa's old plaid shirts I took from his workbench. It smelled strongly of wood and motor oil, sweat and old-man aftershave.

I didn't want to go back in that house and sit in silence in that small, bitter-smelling living room where Gramma sat in her blue armchair. She would ask me through her false teeth when school started and tell me it was too bad I had to come all the way out here just to sit around and do nothing in her boring house. She would tell me how boring her life is. She would ask about mine.

She didn't want any plants for her yard, she said. We fruit and ice cream, savoring it on her tongue. "Wow, this is good." She licked a drip off from the edge of her spoon. "Is Mom in bed, Dad?" she asked.

It took him a moment to process her query. "Yup," he said. "I s'pose I'll be having some of that too," he said, getting up and taking a spoon from a drawer.

"Have some, Harriet," Mom said.

"Maybe later."

I stepped out into the rain. It was picking up speed now, tumbling down in chunks of cool water. I threw my head back, letting the rain wash over my skin, into my eyes, nose, and mouth. I hugged my arms close to my chest and threw them open to the rain, humming idiotically up to the sky. I threw my body down on the grass and let the rain wash over me, drench me. The sky as obscured behind torrents of rain, only a dark purple blue smudged in pink and power lines.

I thought of the two of them in the kitchen, eating that ice cream. I laughed. I was going to spend the night out here and I didn't care. I let the rain rinse me, I held out my arms to the sky. I asked the rain to wash it away. Not to let me grow old and never know joy. I pressed my fingers into the clay earth, softened by the rain, I pushed through the roots of the grass holding the clay down in place. The dense clay subsided to the pressure, water rushing into the spaces I created. I pushed my fingers down through the clay and lay back in the gentle rush of rain.

Eventually, I saw the kitchen light go off. only the digital numbers on the stove clock shining through the kitchen window.

Here it was, God knows what hour of the night and I way laying in a backyard lawn in northern Iowa. The rain was beginning to subside and I could make out the shape of the plastic flower pots.

Peeling my hands from the earth, I sat up and walked to the shed. I hadn't locked it. I took out one of the old shovels. I
pressed the blade into the soil, all my weight on the handle. Rain still trickling down steadily, I felt it dislodge a chunk of wet clay.

I picked up the chunk and stared at it, smashing the compact brick into crumbling dirt.

I noticed the kitchen light was on again. Grandma was up, putting around the kitchen in her white night gown, a pale apparition against kitchen cabinetry.

I dug the holes, one by one, and started to place the plants in the clay. I scattered the black potting soil and placed the bare roots in the wet clay.

I couldn't see Gramma through the kitchen window anymore. I heard the backdoor slam. She walked towards me in the rain, hands clutching her elbows. In the dark, she was a blob of white, small and shapeless. I thought of petunia petals in the breeze.

"What are you doing up, Gramma?" I said, standing up and brushing the dirt from my clothes. "What time is it?"

"Oh, it's about one. I always wake up about now. Pills only last so long. Can't go back to sleep." She was barefoot in the grass, her feet white blobs in the dark, wet grass.

"Why can't you sleep, Gramma? Why can't you sleep?"

"I don't know." She turned away from me. "I remembered everything I've ever done wrong. Everything I've ever said to hurt anyone. My whole life. What I've done wrong. I've done it all wrong."

"Gramma," I said.

She stared off into the dark purple sky.

Bending down to get a petunia, I shook its roots out of the rectangular shape of the pot.

"Come here, Gramma," I said. "Put that in here, down here. Go slow." I placed the mess of roots and stem into her hand. She stared at it, dumbfounded. "Pleased, Gramma."

She slowly squatted down and placed the plant in the hole. I squatted beside her and began to brush the soil in around the roots. For a moment, our hands brushed together.
I didn’t want to believe she was gone. I guess I still don’t. I don’t want to remember her as a basket of lilacs, or even a box of ashes! I want to remember her as my Aunt Betty, the woman with the huge personality who...who loved Christmas music and...and carrot salad you know? I want to remember her as my rescuer, the one person that has saved me from drowning so many times. She has always been here to pull me ashore, always. (Short pause, as MARIA sighs, thinking hard then softly she begins again.) I stood there watching her float, the basket kinda rocking gently in the breeze, then slowly sinking into the water and I couldn’t feel Izzy’s hand tugging at me! I kept seeing Aunt Betty’s eyes, you know, the way they were right before she died? Stale yellow and tired—so tired. I kept wanting her to sing (MARIA hums softly) Silent night...holy night...all is calm...all is quiet... (voice fades off). She was drowning in medication, needles were stuck into her like...like thumbtacks, tubes up her nose and I wanted her to sing to me! I wanted some sign that she was still with us, still holding on. (Softly) I wanted her to sing to me. (Very softly) I’d never felt so helpless standing there knowing I couldn’t help her, knowing soon she’d be gone—I never want to feel that way again...ever. So I went numb this morning, at the lake, shut out the world and stood there like a block of ice watching Aunt Betty drown.

I can’t get that image out of my head. The basket, it kinda bobbed for a while at the top then tipped over and all the ashes fell out mixing with the lilacs...it was so beautiful, they told me. They told me she loved the lake, told me she was happy there. But all I saw was the lake pulling her down under the water and her eyes the

Death in the Afternoon
Erica Lynn Stratton

“Death!” I called. “Hey, Death!”
I was in a cemetery, and birds were singing in every tree.

Death came.
He was bony—hugely bony, astonishingly bony. Well, not huge. He wasn’t huge—he did not have massive Brachiosaurian bones—he did not have a stride that covered cities. His fingers were delicate as the tiny, tiny twigs you see on the end of branches. He wore the traditional cowl—black. Of course. He wasn’t very tall, either—he came up to my shoulder, and that was all.

But there was something there. Of course, what he looked like was obvious, but it was...no, not a smell of dried flowers. No smell at all: his bones were clean and white. It was rather, instead, like being close to a balloon after you’ve rubbed it against felt. A slight, a very slight electrical charge is what you’ll feel, not really pain or a tickle but a...difference. You feel it near strong magnets, too, when you try to push the wrong sides together. Death was like that.

He wore sandals, little leather sandals, which I hadn’t been expecting.

I said, “You look just how I thought you would look.”
Death smiled. He could smile, and frown too, somehow. Like bone was putty, and he could move it around. Fortunately that was all, and he didn’t have eyeballs—just holes. Eyeballs would have been too much. I would have run away screaming for all I was worth, watching ‘em roll around in there.

“I come the way they see me,” he said. “Did you know there is death in a rabbit, death in a flower? Once I was a boxspring bed and once—once I was a very handsome red Corvette.”

I smiled.
Death stuck his hands in his pockets. "So are you ready?"
I shook my head. "Not for a while."
I shocked Death—first the black holes widened like the ones in space, then they contracted and he looked angry, and then sort of went al oval'-y and he looked absolutely crestfallen. Which is an odd expression, if you think about it, for a skull. "Why am I here, then?"
I said, "I want to talk to you."

Birds sang.

Death asked, "What's in the basket?"
"A puppy."

"A p——" I set the basket down on the grass, opened it, and said the silly, fluffy wuffy things people say.
Currently it was asleep, that puppy, asleep in the hot June air in that deep sleep reserved for small things. He was round and roly-poly, like all puppies are, a little bag of chubbiness with a stub tail and paws so big they looked like he had swapped them with another dog. He was gray, with spots here and there like pen-nies, and he had slate ears. A hunting dog, a hound, in that floppy fall-over stage. The insides of the basket looked a bit chewed.
I held him up, all loose in the joints and making little whimper noises. "See? Here." And before Death could protest I had pulled up his hands and plopped the puppy in them, who was now squirming in his skin and hard to hold onto. "For you."
Death didn't hold the puppy close, like you're supposed to, or put a hand beneath the puppy's stomach so it wouldn't be afraid of a fall, like you're supposed to. He just let it whimper and hang and said, "Why?"
It sounded a bit shrill, actually.

Remember when I was little? I used to play on you for hours. I used to pretend you were my ship and I would sail all over the world fighting off pirates and looting gold. (Laughs softly.) When the sea was calm I'd rock you real softly like this (She demonstrates), but every once in a while there was a storm, because there has to be a storm else it was just no fun. Anyway, you remember how it would storm and I would sit here rocking you so hard and fast that I would fall off onto the carpet, ooops! I mean the "Ocean", and almost drown? Aunt Betty always came and rescued me at this point, and remember what she would do? She'd smile at me and say: "What a beautiful little girl that's been washed ashore, I think I'll call her Maria." Maybe you didn't know this but then we would go to the kitchen and eat carrot salad together, that was always the best part.

God I miss her. I miss the way she laughed at anything. The way she smelled like lavender and mint, I even miss the way she used to pin her hair back at the sides with those two tortoise shell barrettes. Remember how small she was, not even five feet tall but she had this huge personality, you know? It made her so much more than what she appeared, didn't it? There was just so much to her, I...I...just can't believe she is gone. (MARIA pauses.) But you know what I keep thinking about more than anything today? I keep thinking what Izzy said to me at the lake—how did Aunt Betty fit into such a small box? How is it that her life now is nothing more than a basket of lilacs at the bottom of the lake and this empty house? She is so much more than that to me! And...and to
know what? I was so numb I didn't even laugh, I didn't even smile! I just told her to go ask Mom and walked away. I don't think I realized it was the last time I would see Aunt Betty, even if she was just a box of ashes floating in a basket on the water. (Short pause.)

So, anyway, after that we came here, to Aunt Betty's house. Everybody else is out sitting on the porch eating lunch. I'm not hungry, well not really. I just don't see how they can be out there laughing. I can't stop thinking about her. It's like nothing has happened. As if she is still here, cooking her...her...famous roast potatoes in the kitchen and singing along to Christmas music on the radio...well you know about her music, don't you? Boy did she love Christmas music, it didn't matter what time of the year it was, what time of day even. She'd listen to "Jingle Bells" during breakfast and...and..."Deck the Halls" in the afternoon while she was working in the garden! Remember when I was little and used to have sleepovers here, I would even fall asleep to her humming "Silent Night" or some other cheery tune! (MARIA sighs.) It's so strange, that she's not here anymore, you know? I keep walking around and touching things, smelling things. It doesn't smell like her house anymore, does it? Well I guess it hasn't ever since she started chemo. Remember how it smelled them? Like medication and those...those sheets they use in hospitals! It does smell like much of anything anymore...something is missing, you know? (MARIA pauses.) But everything is still here! Sitting exactly where it as always been. I mean, look, these pictures on the walls, her glasses resting on the sewing table and over there on the shelves, her collection of Beanie Babies! Oh yeah, and you, how could I ever forget you. Aunt Betty's blue recliner, always sitting there in the corner of the living room. God you're old. I mean you look like a piece of junk I might find in an ally somewhere! She's had you forever, hasn't she?

(MARIA pauses, remembering, then climbs)

I said, "I thought it would help. You know, so people..."
I thought about people and decided to change what I was going to say.
"It's to help your image—"
"My image!" squealed Death, and dropped him. The puppy thumped onto his little bottom on the grass, looked puzzled, then howled.
"My image!" Death exclaimed over the noise, hand on his hips. "What's wrong with my—"
"You dropped him."
Death stopped.
I picked up the puppy and felt him all over—he didn't seem to be hurt. He stopped howling as soon as he was snug against me, warm and with a heartbeat to listen to. I glared at Death as no mortal had ever glared before. "You dropped him!"
Death looked sheepish.
"Honestly!" I went on. "Don't you have any SENSE? It's like a baby—you have to take care of it, no DROP it..." I buried my face in the puppy's short fur. "Honestly, you've been around since the beginning of time and you don't know that you can't go dropping puppies...Honestly, Death—"
"How would I know?" he whispered. Then he remembered who he was and put his hands on hips. "How would I know?"
"I could teach you," I said to the puppy's fur. I put him down in the grass and watched him waddle around and sniff at where things had been and play with blades of grass.
"Alright, listen," I said, meeting the black holes. "I'll pretend you don't know anything. Dog care for dummies. First—" I was ticking them off on my fingers—"you have to feed him."
"Feed him?" said Death, the way people said, "Who? Me?"
I let out all my frustration in such a gust of air it nearly blew Death's hood off. "Yes, you must."
"What...what sort of things?" asked Death humbly.
“Dog food. Milk. Water. The occasional scrap or tidbit. Give him a big bone to chew on, to take care of his teeth—”

Death said, in a small voice, “Bo—”

The puppy found that Death’s robe trailed on the grass and sank his teeth into it, shaking and growling and nearly bursting with puppy fierceness. “N—” I shouted.

I burst out laughing instead. It was just his expression—this, “Ack! What’ll I do?” expression that no skull had ever worn, and then I remembered—

“Oh! Oh God! Say—say ‘No,’ Death, say no! Nice and firm!”

He was regarding the puppy with terror.

“Firmly! Like you mean it!” I said.

“N—no?” hazarded Death. He was shaking, his teeth rattling in his hollow skull like dice. “N—AUGH!” because all of a sudden there was a wicked RIP! and Puppy had the black hem trailing like a mummy’s shroud and dove beneath and found—ANKLES! Bony ankles! This time Death SHRIEKED—

“Oh, dear,” I said, and ran in to save him.

“It nearly killed me!” Death hollered, when I had the puppy once again safely sequestered in my arms. “It—”

“You’re Death,” I said with a great deal of interest. “How can you die?”

Death stopped clutching his robe and dropped his “I’m reporting you!” stance to say, “Oh. I forgot.”

I tittered. I had to titter because I was trying not to, trying not to embarrass him, and it didn’t work.

He stamped his foot and shouted, “What is so funny?”

“You!” I shouted, putting down the puppy. Then my eyes opened up and I stood up straight and threw out my arms. “HEY!”

I screeched to the whole world. “HEY! EVERYONE, DEATH IS FUNNY! HEY! DEATH IS A BIG FAT LIE! HE—”

“Be QUIET!” Death snapped with his hands over his ears—do skulls have ears? “Someone might hear you!”

Drowning Aunt Betty
Mariama Lockington

(It is early afternoon and MARIA walks into the living room of Aunt Betty’s house. She is about eighteen years old and is dressed in black. In the corner of the room sits an old blue recliner. She walks over to it and strokes it for a while, then begins to talk to it as if the chair is an old friend.)

MARIA

It was this morning, you know, the funeral. Mom, Dad, Izzy and I, along with some of Aunt Betty’s friends, went down to Reeds Lake. Dad was the one carrying her, Aunt Betty, I mean. Well, he was carrying what was left of her anyway, we had her cremated, it’s what she wanted. You know what she said to us before she died? She said: “Don’t you dare bury me under a pile of dirt, put me somewhere I love!” That’s why we went to the lake. She loved the lake. Dad said the Lord’s Prayer and then we all sang “Amazing Grace” while Aunt Betty floated in a basket full of lilacs over the water... you want to know what the funny part was? I looked at that basket of lilacs carrying her—my Aunt Betty—and felt nothing at all. I wasn’t even sad! Didn’t even cry! It was like I went numb all over. You know that feeling you get when your foot falls asleep, all tingly and prickly—well that was what it felt like but all over my body. I was so numb I barely noticed Izzy tugging at my sleeve! “Ria,” she whispered to me, “how did Aunt B fit in that little box?” (MARIA laughs.) Isn’t that funny? It’s hilarious? But you
Back in the lake, I pass a boat full of people I could’ve known, I waved to them, but they didn’t wave back. Or was it the other way around?

“Who?” I said, thrusting out my chest. “Who? The dead?” They don’t have ears!”

Death somehow rolled those black eyes up and then downward, between his sandaled feet. “You’re never lonely in a cemetery.”

“Ha!” I said. “I like that—I should write that down...”

Death gave me a disgruntled look and decided to change the subject. “What’s wrong with my image? And what do you mean when you say I’m a lie?”

“Oh, Death—” I plunked myself down on the shelf of a mausoleum. “Death, your trouble is...is that you don’t know anything.”

Death bared his teeth at me. “Shut up, mortal.”

“Don’t sulk,” I said. “Listen—I’ve been thinking...I’ve been looking at medieval art when people were scared to death of the plague and stuff—”

“Ha. Ha.”

“—and they drew you all mean and nasty-looking. People do that because they’re afraid. I thought if you started to act nice, and had puppies and kitties and stuff—”

“And a big red nose,” said Death, with his arms akimbo.

“—people would like you more and—”

“LIKE ME!” Death squawked. “Why would I want people to like me—I am Death”

“Who’s lonely and scared of little dogs!”

“I am not LONELY! Who says I’m LONELY; I’m not—”

“They why’d you talk to me, huh? Why?”

Death shut his eyes and just dissolved, leaving me and the puppy and the rest of the cemetery alone.
Include Your Children When Baking Cookies

Headlines
Lesley Alicia Tye

Kinder Cookies

Delight your guests at your next party with these delectable treats.

1 cup sugar
1 TB spice (equal parts cinnamon, clove and nutmeg work best)
1/2 cup firmly packed brown sugar
2 sticks butter (softened)
1 tsp vanilla
2 large eggs
2 1/4 cup flour
1 tsp baking soda
1 tsp salt
2 plump children*

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Sift dry ingredients together and set aside.

In large bowl, combine butter, sugars and spice and mix with electric beater until blended. Add vanilla and eggs until smooth. Slowly add dry mixture, mixing well between each addition. Remove beaters and fold in children by hand with large wooden spoon. Optional: Add chocolate morsels or coconut, but no chopped nuts. Most children hate chopped nuts. Cover dough and refrigerate for at least one hour. Once chilled, dough can be kneaded and rolled out for cut shapes, or dropped by the spoonful onto ungreased cookie sheets. Bake for 8-10 minutes or until edges begin to brown.
George West

*Liz John*

George West lives on the farm that backs up to ours with his cows, his corn, and his wife of thirty years. He’s had his truck even longer than his wife, and it’s in better condition because a new coat of paint will go a long way to erase years from the one, but time won’t ever turn back for the other.

On the roof of the farmhouse, on the shingles by the bedroom, a woodpecker begins to carve a home. The rat-tat-tapping reverberates all through the house, and the shingles are splitting. George takes the rifle from its cradle above the mantelpiece, kills the bird with a single shot.

“It was a redheaded,” he tells my father. We are used to people telling my father things. He is a man who could have been a priest, had he believed in God. “You couldn’t see the blood for the red feathers, just the hole in his head.”

George’s faded blue eyes cloud over and we catch a glimpse of something that—in another man—we’d call tears.

We see George at the corner—you can’t mistake his truck—and sometimes at the community barbeque, shaking hands with the mayor.

to turn golden brown. Remove promptly and let cool on wire rack. Recipe yields 4 to 8 dozen cookies, depending on size of child.

Watching your weight? Substitute margarine for butter and drain all baby fat.

*Note: The choice of children will greatly affect the outcome of the cookies. For example, disagreeable or cross children produce cookies that taste okay, but will disagree with you later on. Whiney children often create a bitter aftertaste. Loud children make dough too hard, and criers make it too soggy. For best results try to pick polite, well-behaved, bookish children who only speak when spoken to but have a very vivid imagination.*
Maybe this is what it looks like when the demons are at the door. This is no one to tangle with, it seems. Notice the arms, the way the light grazes the left bicep, the chest pumped. The way the eyes are looking down, through you. There is just the slightest hint of challenge in his face, a look that begs just one more step forward. Even the room looks like something should be taken apart there: clean and sterile, the light, probably from a flash bulb shooting into the upper corner of what looks like a bathroom at the end of a kitchen. He looks like a dangerous man, perhaps a mental patient that has stolen a gun from his guard and will not sit down. It’s as if someone, maybe a critic had scoffed at a sentence or offered up an opposing view. Then he raised the gun a bit more. A double barreled Purdy aimed at someone, kneeling perhaps.

But we know this is part of the show, don’t we? We know his right thumb is flat against the hammers, the ends of the barrels like two vacant eyes. We know his hand is over the trigger guard instead of hovering a hair away from touching off two blasts at once. The pants tell another part of the story, just coming in from a walk on a darkening beach. And no shirt. The consummate fighter. This is a hard man with a neck like a champion boar. This is someone who has been there and back twice, armed.

What we know that he doesn’t is that just outside the door, lingering in the air is the breath of a demon seven years in the future. A father’s ghost hiding in Ketchum. A rendezvous with both double barrels waiting to happen. This is a man in a kitchen or a bathroom in Havana who looks like he’s won a prize fight or two. Like he’s hooked and landed more fish than ten men could in their lifetimes. And isn’t that what this is finally all about? A lifetime. The way a life stretches itself out and flexes, moves into the space.

Winter Morning
Mike Bushnell

There was the morning, starless and unnoticed; a mere breath away from previous night. Even the sun is clearing its eyes of sleep—black fades into purple, then pink.

Why do we even bother with the rest of the day—She said, hand over her mouth as if the afternoon may hear. Each morning is a gift, mysteriously placed in your waking hand.

Through the calm eye of the window, everything is in its place. Sun reflects; the thick bank of snow at the curb.

Change is a mysterious thing, especially when it happens slowly; or not at all.
and time allotted, then takes over and spills beyond its borders, turns feral. And doesn’t it feel so odd that he seems so sure of what he’s aiming at?

There’s a gambler in there somewhere. Long shots. Bull fights. Macomber’s wife taking aim. Nick Adams heading into a dark swamp. We know his inner territory better than we know our own. Dissected and parcelled out in countless seminars and classes. We’ve read the literature. Heard the conjecture, stories about the boy/child who wore dresses. The litany of mistreated woman. The code. Hero after hero dancing to the same song.

But we also know the heart. We know in dreams that fragments of his heart settled each night in Africa, some on the Pilar, others on Kilamanjaro. Smaller bits of heart tissue scattered like debris from a place wreck: settling on ex-wives, sons, books not written, dust in an Idaho basement.

Maybe he’s bluffing. Maybe he wouldn’t pull either trigger. Maybe a second later he would have a grin on his face, offer the gun like any sportsman would offer his finest weapon to a friend.

But crawl through the barrels in the photograph, move down inside the actual heart and you’ll see scar tissue, words hanging in the air like cold meat. Look around at the dream-stuff he carved on the walls, take each one not as a symbol, but as something actually seen, recorded, almost luminous there in the coldest chamber of his heart. Even though you turn away to look back out into the world of the living, you’ll still see your own breath.
"What a Beautiful Wash—"
Anne-Marie Oomen

She says, she who has not
spoken for weeks, who shuffles
day to day not knowing her name,
and now, as I drive her down old US 10,
past a farmhouse and tattered barn,
she speaks, this whole sentence toward a back yard
where drying laundry blazes in April sun—
a necklace between cedar hands.

We stop. I help her walk
between clothing walls
where she halts and sighs
over dusk towels, olive shirts,
unpolished laps of denims,
bras of huge, uncultured pearls
hanging from one strap
like earrings.

She judges the placement of pins,
and even once shakes her head—
this is not the seam from which to hang
the baby dress—it will stretch—
though she never says, but lifts her face,
sniffs the soapy, well-ordered air.

Her eyes still unravel clean coils
of house dresses, shake out
skirts, wring pants in wind,
clothes-pin these husk of family
upside down.

Man Poem
Brenin Wertz-Roth

The pine boards
lean against the wall
of the garage.
The table saw,
the skill saw,
the jig saw
and the sander
are plugged in and waiting.

A longneck Corona
sits by the grill
where the coals
are glowing.

Other men see me
working beneath
the light
of the garage door opener
and wave from their pickups.

Good,
this is what I'm supposed
to be doing.

But little do they know,
after I've cut the pieces for the chair
and eaten my porterhouse,
I'm going to sit at my desk
and write this poem.
Through new eyes
he sees his wife's joyful face,
arms outstretched to take him
once again to her breast,
his son in the corner,
scared and crying.

My grandmother leans toward sheets
glowing pale as pages. Her fingers
linger brokenly along the frayed hems
while shadows of empty branches
sign her name to the clean white wash.
Wild Monkey Still at Large  
*Hachioji, Tokyo, Japan*

*Melanie Drane*

All winter, I peeled tangerines for him  
by the roadside, left orange crescents  
in the snow, cracked the shells from walnuts,  
and broke dark chocolate into smaller bites.  
Sometimes I sang for us:  
I waited under the trees for hours, hoping  
for movement, the stirring of pine needles,  
his hands that parted the branches  
in gentle but urgent search.

What the newspapers said is true: I told police  
that his eyes were lovely. Relief comes  
when someone finally meets your gaze. I knew  
he watched the town for months, that he moved  
through the frozen yards of our houses,  
shuffled in the dusty corners of our garage, studied  
what we threw away, lifted things to his mouth  
as if to taste what we were willing to give up—  
found his way silently through our lives in the dark.

The police were irritated by his boldness.  
No one was sure what he wanted,  
why he chose our neighborhood in a city  
where he seemed certain to be caught.  
I like to think it was what I offered him:  
the tang of citrus eaten cold, no questions  
asked, nothing sought from him in return.

Night creeps in through the windows  
*Caitlin Harrison*

I.  
Night creeps in through the windows  
slowly blacking the room  
with each descent  
of her dying son.  
Oedipus reels back  
his dreams mother  
already slipping into subconscious  
so that he only feels milk  
sliding down his throat  
when he looks at her breasts.

II.  
Touch, taste, and feel  
he reminds her of her dead  
husband, her belly swelling  
with her new husband's child.

III.  
Rolling around in his grave,  
grasping at himself,  
cursing his blood  
the old man slowly slips  
finds his body brand new,  
familiar surroundings, warmth  
blood.  
Sudden light, screams.
but those steady, unblinking eyes, deep blue, almost black, the color of a lake that refuses to freeze.

It is spring now and I wonder if it was foolish to risk so much, to expose such yearning, that hunger that left us both waiting daily by the edge of the road for messages sprinkled on the crust of snow, while five patrol cars circled, and fourteen neighbors made emergency calls to warn that they had spotted him crossing a bridge, climbing over the tiled rooftops of our homes until he disappeared into the night and the treetops were left to sway without weight, without expectation, open but offering nothing—empty hands moving in a sightless sky.
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the red wheelbarrow
1983-84
The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.