fly back at me

Bernard Grant

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for Judith Kitchen and Stan Sanvel Rubin

CONTENTS

Wind

A storm is coming. Scout Master Crosby turns up the radio and yells over the weatherman for everyone to pack up. His son, Jerry, is helping him pull up tent stakes. The campfire hisses. Lanterns go out. Still, boys mess around. The ones just back from the lake snap towels at each other's butts. Other boys play cards, betting with loose change. Some boys pretend they're at a party. They dance and chug soda and take off their shirts and twirl them over their heads.

I'm pulling poles from my tent, trying to decide which group I would join if Mamma weren't here. She's packing up the car. Her headlights light up the campsite. I pretend not to hear her yelling, telling me to hurry. They shouldn't have let her come. She's not a scout leader. Jerry never gets to mess around either, but I don't think he wants to. He spends all his free time reading, or else he's working on badges. He's not even old enough to drive and he's almost an Eagle.

Earlier today, while we were fishing, Mr. Crosby put Jerry in charge and went in the woods to pee. Some other boys stripped Jerry and pushed him into the water. When Mr. Crosby came back, everyone started saying Jerry took off his clothes and jumped in.

I didn't say anything.

Mr. Crosby put his hands on his hips. "Jerry," he said. "Don't lie. Lying only makes it worse."

Jerry turned to me. "You know I didn't jump. Tell him."

Even though the ground was rocking, and it seemed like all the fish were about to jump out of the water, I fibbed. I said Jerry jumped.

Lightning strikes. Jerry screams. There's several cracks of thunder. Boys start undoing their tents. By the time Mamma and I have everything

in the car, the storm's here, spitting rain sideways and blowing around everyone and everything. I jump into the car. She puts on a bright yellow poncho and goes to help the other boys. Jerry hops in next to me, wetting up the seats.

He's holding his arm, gasping.

"The wind," he says. "Picked up my tent. When I was working on it. Dropped me. My arm, I think it's broken."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize, not for that."

"I'm not."

"Then what are you apologizing for?" The yellow shape of Mamma flashes by.

"I—I'm sorry I said you jumped in the lake."

He must've not closed his door all the way because it swings open. He reaches for the handle. The rain's loud. The fire's out. In the darkness are the shadows of boys running back and forth. Tents flip. Jerry cries for his dad. Makes me remember all the times I screamed for Mamma. All the times I acted like a child. Lost in the grocery store or mall or on the beach, crying, until one of the legs going by stopped and bent, and someone helped me find her. I push him.

Cursive

On the way home from school, I tell Mamma I started learning cursive today. All she says is, "That's nice, child." She's quiet the whole way home. When we get to the driveway, she finds my eyes in the mirror and says we'll visit Granny tonight. Last week, Granny had another stroke. She's had two before, one before I was born and one last year.

*

Spaghetti casserole with cheese. I can smell it from my room. It's my favorite, but it smells burnt. I'm not hungry anyway. Laying on my bed, I focus on writing the alphabet in cursive. Loops and curves like a rollercoaster. Usually, I rush through my homework so I can play video games alone in my room. Or basketball with one of neighbors. Then I ride bikes with anyone, anywhere, until the sun goes down and the streetlights blink on. Now, I practice my cursive. I want to show Granny.

*

Tubes. One curls out from her nose. Another in her arm snakes to a bag of clear, dripping liquid. There's a third in her hand, beneath a strip of tape stretched across her skin. She squints, rolls her head toward me. My knees are cotton. She cries. My knees are air. A nurse comes in, apologizes, and closes the curtains around the bed. There's grunts and clanking. The curtain opens. Granny's there, in a wheelchair, arms crossed over her lap. When the nurse leaves, Granny points at the TV. The news. She says my school was on fire.

"Smoke taking the souls of them poor churren to heaven." Mamma pokes my back. I step up to the bed and hug Granny.

"It's not my school," I say.

Her left lip is droopy. Her hair is wild and messy like a fire, except

it's black and white, like ash over a burnt building. I try to smile. Mamma watches me real close. I don't want her to know that I notice Granny is sick. Grownups don't expect kids to notice. Mamma doesn't think I notice. That she cries all night. That she bangs her fist against her head. She doesn't think I notice that the bruise on her own forehead, purple and surrounded by brown skin, isn't really a birthmark. She didn't have a bruise before Granny got sick.

*

Granny moves to a nursing home. That's like a hospital and hotel mixed together. Except it smells. When I ask the nurse about the smell, she says it's dead flesh. Mamma yells at her. You shouldn't get yelled at for telling the truth. You get yelled at for fibbing. Mamma fibs. She stops me in the hall before we go into Granny's room, takes my notebook, and says I can't show Granny my cursive because she's sleeping. The other day I heard her talking to Uncle Walter on the phone. Granny's in a coma. She won't see my cursive. She won't see Mamma's forehead.

Glasses

Nicole was a third-grader, a year below me, but she might as well have been the principal she scared me so bad. I almost ran whenever I saw her. Her red knees and red cheeks. I called her names instead. Spit on her. Threw rocks. The last rock I threw—the last time I saw her alive—nicked her glasses, big red frames that sparkled like lollipops. Mrs. Bean yelled at me. I told her there was nothing to be mad about because Nicole's eyes were protected.

"You're going to regret terrorizing that little girl," Mrs. Bean said. "Just wait."

After that day, Nicole didn't show up to class. The days were extra-long, like in the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. That Friday, in the car on the way home, I said, "TGIF."

Mamma turned up the radio, boring old love songs, and didn't speak until we stopped in the driveway.

"Child, Mamma got to talk to you about something. It's about your little friend. Nicole. She's been sick. You know what pneumonia is? That's like a flu, a real bad cold, and if it don't go away, fluid can fill up your lungs. Drown you. Mamma don't mean to hurt you, telling you all this, but—"

"She drowned?"

At the wake—this was my first, before Granny died—Nicole was extra pale, with red spots on her cheeks like a clown. Her knees were covered in white stockings. She didn't have her glasses on. Her eyes looked tiny.

Before we left, her mom was gasping when she tried to thank us for coming.

"I can't hardly breathe," she said. And then she took Mamma's hand, and put it to her belly.

"Feels like somebody…somebody…hit me with a rock."

Big

Uncle Walter pours half of my soda into a cup, but he lets Cousin Ray drink his straight from the can. The whole thing. We spent all morning playing out in the sprinklers, eating pecans and Japanese plums that Ray picked from the trees. In three years, when I'm a teenager, I'll be as big as him, and I won't have to climb. I'll just reach up and twist plums off with one hand.

Back out in the yard, the grass is wet, but it still pricks my feet. Uncle Walter rolls out his version of a Slip 'n Slide, a blue mat he puts under the sprinklers. Every time I run onto the mat, I fall back and hurt my neck, but I don't say anything. I don't whine that my back stings. I don't stop running onto the mat, either. Or else Ray will call me a baby.

I try a belly-flop, hear a smack, and feel it. A sting spreads up my chest. I can't see the sunlight flashing through trees like I could before, just the street coming closer until my face hits dirt. Spitting grass, I think: being a teenager might not be so great.

At bath time, I take off my clothes and climb into the kitchen sink. I can't get all the way in.

"Get out that sink, boy," Uncle Walter says.

"Why can't I bathe in the sink? Granny used to bathe me in the sink when—"

"When you was little, that's right. You too big now." He points his thumb over his shoulder. "Go on, now. Get in the tub."

I jump out of the sink, cupping my hands over my privates.

"Now, how you gone act like you got something I ain't seen before?"

He pats my butt, squeezes it, keeps his hand there. His callouses are warm and rough. He pushes me toward the hall.

"If I'm so big," I yell back, "why can't I drink a whole soda?"

"You ain't that big."

Family Man

A man comes to show us a Kirby. He pours cranberry juice on the carpet, then sucks it all up, pink soap bubbling. The next week he comes into the kitchen where I'm eating cereal. He's wearing a wife-beater and basketball shorts. Behind me, Winnie the Pooh laughs on the TV. The man squeezes my shoulder as he passes by the table. He pours a glass of orange juice. He calls me "little man" and says he wants to take me out today. Mamma comes in wearing a robe, sips from his glass.

"Aren't you sharing germs?" I ask.

Mamma laughs. "What?"

"Only when it's family it's not germs."

"Don't worry about it, child. Did Mr. Leon tell you he wanted to take you out today?"

I tell her he did. At first, I thought he was a stranger, and you don't go anywhere with strangers. But his orange juice didn't make Mamma sick, so he's family.

We spend the morning at the park, playing basketball. He never says much, except when he whispers on the phone. He even talks on the phone at the movies, during the previews, while I eat popcorn. *Stop wolfing it down child*, mamma likes to say. She worries I'll get sick. When Mr. Leon puts his phone away, he says we have to go, that he wants to visit his friend. The movie's barely even started.

Lit by orange streetlights, the houses sliding by are smaller than the ones in my neighborhood are. Barred windows, chipped paint, graffiti. The streets and lawns are marked with trash and holes. Driveways have sunburned cars; some are missing tires. The only place I feel safe on the east side is Grandpa's house. When I ask to visit him, Mr. Leon says

no, and then he says, "Stay quiet. Don't tell your mamma we visited my friend and I'll take you to rent a movie. *Winnie the Pooh* or some shit."

He stops at a dark house, makes a phone call. His friend runs out. Mr. Leon turns to me, puts a finger over his lips.

I don't speak. Not now, nor after Mr. Leon gives him money, and the guy, who smells nasty, like cigarettes, hands him a plastic bag bulging with white pebbles. I don't speak when a lighter sparks, and a flame tips into a glass tube sticking out of his mouth, nor when he leans back and sighs. Liquorice-smelling clouds halo his head. Scatter. The only time I speak is on the way home, when the movie store slips by and he doesn't stop. He doesn't say anything. I hope Mamma gets sick. Otherwise he's family.

Bubble Baths

I was born early, small. Yellow.

"Jaundiced," Mamma says. "Too small to snip your little teetie-weetie."

Sweet smells woke me up this morning. Pancakes with chocolate chips and pecans. Cinnamon toast on the side. There was a candy apple in the fridge. Mama handed me a cup of hot chocolate and promised to take me to a movie tonight. Any movie. Now, she's telling me to undress and climb into the tub.

A few months ago, Grandpa forgot to lock the bathroom door while he was peeing. I walked in on accident and saw his privates. Saw he was missing skin. Later, when Mamma came to pick me up, I heard him tell her I was old enough. She said it didn't matter. But he said dirt collected under the extra skin, and that it would matter when I became a man.

It's been two weeks since the doctor cut me. Mamma won't look at me, not even when she says pulling off the bandage won't hurt. On Saturday mornings, she usually tells me to keep the TV down. All that cartoon noise weighs on her nerves. But this morning, she calls me into her room and hands me the remote.

"Get comfortable," she says.

I sit in the tub, take the cap off the strawberry bubble baths to pour under the faucet. She snatches the bottle.

"This isn't that kind of bath," she says.

"But I'm dirty. Grandpa said so. And bubble baths makes you extra clean."

"Don't listen to your grandfather," she says. But didn't she?

She pulls a piece of the bandage. I scream. She pulls the rest. I scream more. Blood curls down into the water, darkening it until I can't see myself. I scream until I cry. Usually when I scream or cry, if I see a spider or fall or papercut my finger, she tells me boys don't act that way. Now, as she hurries from the bathroom, wiping her eyes, leaving the water running, she promises it'll be okay. I can't keep my legs still. The Bubble Baths bottle falls into the tub. Pink syrup oozes into the water. White suds foam up, smelling sweet.

Night Terrors

You know what terror is. Walking down the sidewalk while crossing the street, asleep and still both at once. Broken as a dream, running through the house shattering pictures, vases, bones. You look past your mom and yet you're biting her hand, breaking skin. “Like there’s a ghost behind me,” she tells doctors.

You go for tests, sleep overnight in a hospital. Wires clinging onto your skin, like your Granny the last time you spoke to her. The night terrors started the night after her funeral, on your eleventh birthday. You scooted down the pew and ran outside and sat behind the church on prickly, sunburned grass, gazing at bees hovering over wilted flowers. Bent, purple tubes that you think your Granny called lilacs, but they could’ve been lavender.

At the hospital, they give you juice and cookies. You sleep fine, dreamless. In the morning, doctors say you’re fine, normal—that night terrors happen to little boys with stress. Your mom starts taking you to Six Flags Fiesta Texas every weekend. She buys you more video games, takes you out to eat—to Luby’s and Shoney’s, sometimes Red Lobster for calamari and cheddar biscuits you slather with applesauce. She stops nagging you about homework. Doesn’t mention your Granny. Doesn’t step inside your Granny’s house when she takes you to visit Grandpa.

The woman you saw four days a week, who babysat you, who cheered the loudest at your school plays and basketball and soccer games, has disappeared like the pictures of her that once hung in your house. She might be a figment of your imagination. So, for half a year, at least twice a week, even after the hospital, you try to walk down the sidewalk while crossing the street after you’ve fallen asleep, searching for that figment.

Stone

A dirt trail leads from Mr. Leon's back porch to a pond near the woods. He takes me and Mamma there when we visit him. We eat sandwiches and toss rocks into the water. Mr. Leon likes to skip them across. The trick, he says, is to use a flat stone so it'll skim the surface, skipping a couple of times before it sinks. Every time I throw a stone, even if it's flat, it smashes into the water.

One time, I skip a stone, but Mamma and Mr. Leon don't see. They're on the blanket smiling at each other. When Mr. Leon goes to the house for sandwiches, I sit next to Mamma. She squeezes the back of my neck and asks if I like him. Just when I'm about to fib and say I do, hot static fizzes over my legs. Mamma grabs my hand, and we run back to his house.

Mr. Leon stumbles outside, slipping a lighter into his pocket. "Fire ants," he says, calmly. He smells smoky, piney.

When he goes back inside, I say, "I don't think I like Mr. Leon. He's mean to you and he—"

"He taught you how to skip stones. You liked that, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I think he does—"

Mamma slaps the ant bites on my leg. "Skip stones, child. Don't throw them."

The screen door creaks open. Mr. Leon comes toward us waving a medicine bottle and wiping his eyes. They're pink, like the cream. The cream smells like medicine. But it stops the stinging. He hands me a soda and promises ice pops later.

Mamma eyes me as she stoops to wipe the cream on her legs. "My son acting like he don't like you. He silly."

Knives

Mamma goes to the grocery store and leaves Cousin Ray in charge. He's older, so he's been home alone before, but he's never been in charge. It doesn't matter because I can watch myself. I tell him that when I go to the freezer for the last frozen spaghetti. He snatches the box, lets it clank the counter.

"I'll make it," he says, and then he points to the table.

I sit, pick and flick a red crust off a placemat. The table is glass, and through it, I can see my feet kick above the floor. His feet touch the floor when he sits.

The microwave beeps. Ray is pressing buttons. He presses the black rectangle. The door springs open. The plastic on the frozen spaghetti isn't cut. I tell him so.

"You pull it back when it's hot and ready to eat," he says.

"You have to cut it first, so it doesn't blow up."

I grab a knife. He grabs one too. Light skips off his blade. We've done this before, we've done it a lot, we even practice. Whoever stops the blade between two fingers wins. He swings. The knife rips the web between my thumb and pointer finger.

One time I fell from a tree and ripped my shirt on the way down—the slice sounds like that. But I don't feel anything this time, not until I see the blood on the floor and hear Cousin Ray run out the front door. Then, my hand is on fire.

Christmas

I.

Mamma took me to meet Santa. All the kids cried on Santa's lap. Not me. Not even when he blew hot, smoky air on my neck. I slid down and stood next to him for my picture. Back home, when I look at the photo, I notice his eyes are low, bored. He's just a man in a costume. I'm in the front yard, sitting under a tree, staring at his pale face not smiling under the curls of his beard.

There are loud pops and screams. I duck. A black van screeches down the street. I lie in the grass, frozen, until Mamma opens the front door and yells at me to come inside. That night, we watch the window like it's the TV. There are people everywhere. Standing around. Talking. Hugging. Crying. Ambulance and police lights flash brighter than the Christmas ones do.

II.

Because of the drive-by last week, Mamma makes me go with her to a Christmas party. Cousin Ray was going to watch me, but Mamma doesn't want me home without her, not until we can move to the Northside. I don't want to be alone with him. Not that Mamma's friends are much better. They pinch and tickle me, and they ask me silly questions, like what's my favorite subject in school and what did I ask Santa for. The worst reason I don't want to go to the party is King. He breathes real heavy and he wears an earring in one ear and puts ketchup on everything. Sandwiches, pizza, even tacos and potato chips. He's thirteen, like Cousin Ray—so old his parents gave him a bedroom in the

basement. Posters of women in bikinis hang on the walls. He tries to make me look at them. I like them, but it feels weird with him in the room, standing behind me. His ketchup breath on my neck.

III.

The policeman says it's safe to go inside. The other cop stays with me in the driveway, rubbing my back and telling me I'm safe. Her breath is bubblegum sweet. They just came out of the house. When we got back from the Christmas party, the door was wide open. I thought it was the wind until I flipped the light switch. The computer, the TV, the Christmas tree are on their sides, broken into the carpet along with bulbs and ornaments. Mamma told me to get back in the car and we waited near the mailboxes at the end of the street until the police came. Then we followed them to the house. They went in with their guns up, flashlights beaming, like cops on TV.

IV.

The police offer to help clean up, but Mamma says she'll clean. They say not to worry. The criminals won't be back. People who break into homes on the holidays aren't looking to get caught or hurt anyone. They just know this is the time of year people keep a lot of valuables in one spot. If they knew about the child—me—then they knew the presents were all hidden in one spot together, under the bed or in her closet. The lady cop hits the man cop. He covers his mouth, clears his throat, looks at me like I didn't already know. Mamma hides presents behind the living room couch. She doesn't know I know she's Santa.

Rusty and Lulu

Before Grandpa's dog Cocoa ran away, she was skinny and she wagged her tail so hard I worried she'd snap in half. She's fat when she comes back. Until she has puppies. She spends most of her time lying in a corner letting them suck on her. They're palm-sized. Tan. Squeaky and blind. I take two. I name them Rusty and Lulu.

Mamma doesn't like dogs. She's afraid to touch their bodies, soft beneath their fur. What if she hurts them? What if they hurt her? She only touched me when Granny was around. Now that Granny's gone, only other people touch me, even people I hate. Like Mr. Leon. He hasn't come around lately, not since he yelled at Mamma, and she chased him out of the house with an extension cord.

This morning, before we leave for school, I push back the back door blinds and see Rusty climb onto Lulu. Mamma says it's time to get her spayed. We can't afford to fix them both, and because Lulu can make puppies, she goes to the vet.

Not until Lulu got spayed did I think Rusty would hurt anyone. Stitches crisscross Lulu's belly. She's flopped on the warm concrete of the patio and she stares at her angry brother. She's been lying there, panting, since she got home from the vet. Since then, Rusty's been chained to the fence. Growling. Barking. Howling. He scares her. I say so.

"It's the other way around," Mamma says. She stands behind me at the sliding-glass door. "Lulu don't have reproductive parts. He don't need her, so he's afraid of her. But he a man, so he gone act like he don't like her."

We hear a screech. Mama goes to the living room and opens the curtain and says, "Oh, hell no."

Mr. Leon. He sometimes stumbles and slurs his words. His eyelids so low it's like he's sleepwalking. I go to the window when Mamma rushes outside, leaving the front door open. She charges toward him, waving her hands. He hurries backward down the driveway and jumps in his car. Mamma kicks his tire before he speeds off. When she comes back in the house, she's panting.

Duck

On July Fourth, Mamma brings Cousin Ray with us to Sandy Shores, a hotel in Corpus Christi. The sand comes up to the back patio. From there, you can see the beach. Huge waves crash, splashing people on tiny boards. Closer up, other people are laid out on towels, some beneath umbrellas. There are girls in bright bikinis. I try not to let Mamma catch me looking, but Cousin Ray goes right up to a girl. She has braces and long, curly hair. She invites him to dive off the pier, where people fish and take pictures.

If they know kids are gonna be in the room, the hotel people put a rubber duck in the bathtub. It's yellow and squeaky and floats anywhere. In the pool, in the ocean. Earlier, after he fought me for mine, Cousin Ray called me a baby for wanting the duck, but he didn't stop Mamma when she called down to have them bring up another one for him.

I take my duck into the ocean, make it dive and watch it surface and float until it's night and the water's so dark I can't see my legs. Ray's coming back. The girl is with him. Some of her friends walk behind them. Two boys and another girl. Ray's the only one with a towel not wrapped around his waist. His shirt's slung over his shoulders.

I walk up to Ray. I say, "Hey, here's your duck."

His eyes dart out toward the water. His mouth hangs open like he's seen a shark.

"Didn't you want this duck?" The girl touches her mouth.

"Aw, your little brother's so sweet."

"I'm not his brother," I say. "I'm his cousin. He was mad that there wasn't a duck for him in the hotel, so I'm giving him mine."

Cousin Ray's new friends start laughing. He takes the duck and throws it out into the ocean so far it disappears. Then, he pushes me down onto the sand. Mamma runs over, slaps his behind, scaring his friends off, and says it's time to go in.

We're quiet in the elevator. Everyone has their arms crossed. Before Mamma goes to her room, next door to ours, she tells us to order room service. I've never had a hotel room without her. I'm jumping on the bed, flipping through the menu, when the other duck squeaks against my head.

"You should have ducked," Cousin Ray says, and then he laughs at his own dumb joke. "I was gonna give it to my girl back home. But you can have it."

I run out to the balcony, toss it over. Someone yells, "Watch it, fucknut!"

That makes us laugh. For the rest of the night, we say fucknut. We call our grill cheese sandwiches fucknuts. Our pay-per-view movie is a fucknut. When we go to the beach to watch fireworks, we say fucknuts, our voices hidden beneath the shouts and crackles. Everything is a fucknut. The coolers, the shirtless men drinking from them, the camping chairs beneath the shirtless men, and especially the girl from earlier who comes and takes Ray's hand. She leads him away, and when I try to follow, he turns around and pushes me into the sand.

"Go play with your duck, fucknut."

But I just sit there and try not to cry as they fade into the dark, beneath bright splinters of every color. A box of crayons emptied from the sky.

Old Folks

While I wait for Mamma to put my new video games on layaway at Wal-Mart, an old lady with tennis balls on her walker sits next to me. She smells like cleaning soap. Hair sprouts from a mole on her cheek. There's hair on her lip and on her chin. That hair's black like her, like us, but the hair on her head is white and short and stands up like a cartoon character that's stuck a fork in the toaster. She's fat, so every time she moves, her arm—stretched and wrinkled—touches mine. I move a seat over. I miss Granny. Kids at school say they have pretty grannies, but my Granny was pretty for real, with big cheeks and big eyes that got bigger when she saw you. And she didn't smell like anything but the grape candy in her purse. She liked purple. Purple dresses, purple makeup over her eyes, purple as a bruise, and she never scared me. Never made me think about dying. Like this old lady with a walker. Her smell, her hair, her mole. She'll die too.

Turtle

Grandpa takes me to Brackenridge Park and shows me how to cast my line into the lake. Mamma told him I need to get out of the house more, and he promises that if I don't have fun, he'll never make me come again. It's boring, watching our bobbers float on the water, green and dark, dead leaves floating on top.

The sun blazes. I down three cold sodas, but that doesn't help. Bottles lie. Sodas don't cool you down. Bug spray doesn't repel mosquitoes. Aloe vera doesn't stop the itchies. We've been out here forever. Long enough to miss Saturday morning cartoons and the ice cream truck. Fuzzy men argue on the radio. I haven't caught anything. I'm not hungry, but I go to find a mini bag of chips next to the cooler. Grandpa asks for one.

"What kind?" I ask. I'm shuffling through the bags.

"Dori—oh! Come here, child. Hurry up now."

He holds my fishing pole with one hand, waves me over with the other. I take the pole. The weight pulls me down. He comes up behind me and helps me reel it in. The tip bends. The pole jerks. A shadow darkens the water. A dark hump surfaces. A shell. Four kicking legs. My eyes warm up. A tear tickles down my cheek. Grandpa takes the pole and sets it on the ground. While the turtle squirms in his hand, he slides out the hook and tosses him back into the water.

"He all right," Grandpa says, patting my back. "Let's go on, child. Get you some lunch."

Before he picked me up this morning, Mamma said for me to bring back something good, a big fish we can eat on all year. I was

worried I wouldn't catch anything.

When he starts unwrapping the sandwiches, I tell him I won't eat, not until he promises we won't fish anymore.

Whip

I down two Cokes and run around the living room, jumping from the couch to the recliners, cartwheeling and spinning, until light catches on a set of vases behind the couch. In the triangular space for the base of a floor lamp that towers over my head. Glitter-specked. Wide-bodied. Narrow-necked. Blue and red swirling into green.

I grab one and whip it against the wall. The vase shatters into a million pieces. Some pieces, so small I can't see them, fly back at me, itching my arms and legs. Mamma runs into the living room, screams at me to go to my room. She doesn't know I've been cut.

I lie in bed on my back and beat my knuckles against the jagged edges of a bent Coke can. Blood rises from my hands and smears the blanket as I hammer a nail into a can of bug spray. Mamma swings the door open. Her eyes grow big as a coat button. She snatches the can. As she walks out, the can hissing in her hand, she looks up at the ceiling and says, "Oh, Lord. How has the damn Devil gotten ahold of my child?"

She didn't see my knuckles.

I get out of bed, burping, and lie on the floor on my back, my arms spread over my head, like yesterday when Cousin Ray held me down and stuck his tongue in my mouth. I can still feel the little bumps of his tongue, his spit swirling like the colors of the vases, his hand cupping my private places. Gentle. No pain. Except in my stomach. He said I should be glad he wasn't rough like Uncle Walter was with him. Like Mr. Leon is with me sometimes.

In the living room, I throw another vase and stand closer this time so that new invisible specks join old ones in my skin. Mamma

screams my name. My full name. All three of my names roar through the house. I take off my belt. I hand it to her when she comes in. I pull down my pants. Kneel on the floor. Aim my bare butt. My face pressed into the couch.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the following publications where these stories were first published:

Fiction Southeast: "Wind"
Hermeneutic Chaos: "Cursive"
Blue Lyra Review: "Big", "Family Man," & "Knives"
Talking Writing: "Stone" & "Turtle"
Kindred: "Glasses"
Emerge Literary Journal: "Night Terrors"
Cooper Street Journal: "Christmas"
Cactus Heart: "Rusty and Lulu"
Star 82 Review: "Duck"
Perigee: "Old Folks"
Thin Air: "Whip."

Sundress Publications • Knoxville, TN

ISBN: 978-1-939675-65-1
Published by Sundress Publications
www.sundresspublications.com

Editor: Stacey Balkun
Editorial Assistant: Jane Huffman
Colophon: This book is set in Garamond
Cover Art: Sarah Reck
Book Design: Stacey Balkun