

*sweet*

A LITERARY CONFECTION

7.1

**POETRY**

JESSICA LAKRITZ  
THOM CARAWAY  
RYAN PATRICK SMITH  
JEN KARETNICK  
HUGH BEHM-STEINBERG  
ROBERT LUNDAY  
ELISE GREGORY

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

DEAR MIKE POLANSKY  
NIGHT WORK  
SHADOW MANUAL  
MIGRAINE CHANT  
LONG-BILLED CURLEWS  
TELEPHONE ODE  
INVITING IN THE WILDS





**PATRICE GOPO**  
**COURTNEY KERSTEN**  
**SCOTT SANDERS**

**TWO SHORTS**  
**THREE SHORTS**  
**CIRCUS PRAYER**

**BRITTANY CAGLE**  
**SARA WALTERS**

**ELLEN FORNEY**  
**ABIGAIL THOMAS**





## Editor's Note

Years ago, in the first month my wife and I lived in Anchorage, Alaska, we survived our first earthquake. I say survived, though this measured in the three to four range on the Richter, comfortably in the "noticeable by people but none to minimal damage" territory. News fit for the back page of the local section. Something a hair taller than a seismic blip.

The word *tremor* is more accurate than *earthquake* because it felt like that—a bit of a shake that lasted only long enough to be noticed. Alaska is one of the most seismically active places on the planet, and this one was puny in comparison to the two or three each year that crack plaster walls and break picture frames and empty people's bookshelves.

That first one caught us while we sat on the couch in our third-story apartment, staring at the television. Suddenly some great terrestrial force, horizontal and strange and alarming, ripped through the apartment. We had no idea what it was. We sat looking at each other as the television squawked in the immediate aftermath. It felt, and sounded, as if a garbage truck had plowed into the front of our building. I remember standing and checking outside for the garbage truck, and then, in a thrilling epiphany, shouting "Earthquake!"

We huddled in the doorway, though oddly I don't remember being scared. My wife mentioned, with no great worry, that the big ones come with series of shocks and aftershocks, that there are progressions to quakes, whole processes of vibrations and tremors and shakes and jiggles that ripple on long past that first initial jolt.

Nothing else came that night. But even though ours was less a series than a single, minor, episode, it was exhilarating. The entire evening had changed. My life to that point had been lived without the intrusion of an earthquake, without the very ground coming alive, and I was suddenly in new territory.

Something like that surprises you in a peculiar way, though surprise seems an inadequate word. Surprise seems too small. It's a reminder of sorts, a bell-ringing. It reminds you that the world is a strange and unpredictable place that will, without warning, strip you of your inattention and demand some departure, however short, along the path to awe. And like the immediate claim good literature makes of you, it will stay on, alive, dividing your life into the before and the after. In your memory it will feel, as [Jessica Lakritz](#) writes in this issue, like "The lovely chaos of beginning again."

Who can ask for more? We hope you find that lovely chaos here.

— K.C. Wolfe, Founding Editor

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

## *Jessica Lakritz*

**Dear Mike Polansky,**

It ended as one great body of water. Nowhere to land. As if the oceans swallowed it all up. An iceberg on which I'd been floating. Grief. Empty sea to empty sea.

Then there we were, strangers. In a strange city, a wedding, a surplus of ceremonial magic amassing between us in the mess of hearts and bodies.

I wonder what it's like to find meaning in coincidences. To be the one who maps them out. Some could be valleys, some archipelagos, some cities on islands, some cities lost.

You grabbed the book from my hands, read the final page to me. A makeshift-keepsake-bookmark, an old San Francisco bus transfer, fell out, drifted like my heart's last feather to the floor. I could have gone back to last year. With him, up to my chin in precipitous hills. Western glow of fog sitting midair. But I left it.

Perhaps it's just a concept being brought to life. The lovely chaos of beginning again. I barely knew you, but in your hands you held a small fire which you gave to me. If your experience differed from mine, don't worry. How we feel has little to do with reciprocity, and this is good. I only want to thank you.

With love,  
Jessica

JESSICA LAKRITZ writes poetry on a grey futon in her apartment in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, usually sweating, unless there is a breeze. She lives for that breeze, and for sweating, and for poetry. Because the inevitable clutter is distracting, she has given up on owning a desk. Her MFA in poetry from the Inland Northwest Center for Writers at Eastern Washington University is meaningful to her for the depth of guidance (not just on writing, but living) it continues to provide even years later. Her first book is an evolution of emotion, a story in poems. She is looking now for a publisher.



## *Thom Caraway*

### **Night Work**

Ours is an old house, one that settles  
on a basalt foundation. Summer  
has broken, clouds gray once again,  
thick with mountain snow and piling.

First, the dog goes out back.  
I close the chickens in, the nightly fight  
for the best spots on the roost,  
small clucking and vicious beaks.

A pass through the house, close  
the kids' doors, shut off reading lights  
left on once again. Set the coffee-maker  
on automatic, ready for morning.

All closing is just preparation  
for opening. There's nothing final  
in a locked door, in a closed window.  
I stand on the front porch,

smoke a cigarette, and read something.  
I have to stand in the light to see.  
Something moves in the yard,  
a shadow against the grass.

One of the cats, or a skunk.  
A man rides his bike down  
the middle of the street,

The man in the house on the corner

shouts obscenities at someone  
who left months ago. These small  
lives and large, a couple in a hurry  
to somewhere else, refusing night.

If this is the heart of the city,  
the ventricles have grown decrepit,  
walls weak against all that moves  
against them. Inside once more,

I let the dog in, scratch her head  
before sleep. The doors locked,  
the house breathes its last, holds it.  
I can't bring the light back.

...return to Table of Contents

THOM CARAWAY lives in Spokane with his wife and kids. He is the editor of *Rock & Sling*, a journal of witness, and is the series editor of *Railtown Almanac*, an anthology of Spokane poetry. He keeps chickens of varying kinds and has mastered several potato recipes. His work has appeared in *Smartish Pace*, *Ruminate*, *Redactions*, *Theopoetics*, and other places, and you can see more at [thomcaraway.com](http://thomcaraway.com). His favorite confection is anything involving butterscotch. For a brief time this past summer, Ben & Jerry's made a Scotchy Scotch Scotch ice cream, and it was glorious.



## *Ryan Patrick Smith*

### **Shadow Manual**

Practice your edges and having  
no edges, what it is to dissolve.  
Understand motion:

Nothing can remain still,  
or anything but the signal of a body  
holding a light back.  
You must shiver as a lampshade does,

agree with the man spread over his bed  
to be any shape he asks his hands  
to cast against the ceiling:  
black dove, rabbit's head.

Be willing to wait. Be willing to move,  
slide, as though you are ice,  
keep your skin fluid and dark as a lake,

and maybe the man prefers the dove  
to the rabbit, maybe he doesn't, though  
he does love the angle and pulse  
of its wings. Give yourself to the day

when it comes, unstuff your animal  
self, your shadow taxidermy.  
Be willing to disappear.

RYAN PATRICK SMITH earned his MFA in poetry at the University of Missouri - Saint Louis and teaches writing at St. Louis-area colleges. He has also served as a community creative writing instructor and editor for *River Styx* and *Natural Bridge*. A native Kentuckian, he currently lives in St. Louis with his girlfriend and a dog, and when he's in the mood for it, he fights people with foam swords on his roof. His poetry appears in *Salt Hill*, *DIALOGIST*, and *Architrave*. His favorite sweet is Honey Smacks cereal.

## *Jen Karetnick*

### **Migraine Chant**

*Found lines from Tomas Tranströmer, "The House of Headache"*

It is an all-ages rave here  
in the house of headache.

The lights are like young children  
running, their bodies Morse code

in the house of headache.  
Sleep is the only solution

in the house of headache,  
but dreams are pigeons that peck

at the cerebral cortex for crumbs,  
hidden in the pewter, ancient folds.

In the house of headache,  
my left eye twitches, my left nostril

tingles, my left temple throbs,  
and no politics or religion survives;

I pray only to a god that flushes.  
In the house of headache

“traffic is unbearably slow.  
The breaking news is out.



And somewhere a telephone is ringing.”  
In the house of headache,

there is no choice.  
Soccer practice is over.

Even in the house of headache,  
someone has to pick up the kids.

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

JEN KARETNICK has had three books published in 2014: a chapbook of poetry, *Prayer of Confession* (Finishing Line Press, June); a full-length book of poetry, *Brie Season* (White Violet Press, September); and a cookbook, *Mango* (University Press of Florida, October). She works as the Creative Writing Director for Miami Arts Charter School and as a freelance dining critic and food-travel writer for multiple publications, for which she gets to eat plenty of sweets -- including those from her 14 mango trees.

## *Hugh Behm-Steinberg*

### **Long-billed Curlews**

The literature of sleep splits between those who say it's about escape, you fall asleep and in your dreams you hang out with curlews on Candlestick Point, before the stadium was built,

before the last flocks were shot down by hunters, you dream you're wading through abundance and it worries you, because in your dreams wealth is only there to be lost, wrecked or stolen;

you think the birds are oblivious, you keep trying to save them: one school says of course this keeps happening, you are asleep, so this is about death, it sucks,

what sport is there to shooting long-billed curlews that hunters would climb into your dreams to wipe out even the imaginary ones?

The breakdown is unpredictable so it's hard to be trusting. Your habits are indefinite one curlew says,

so it's hard to maintain control. You're asleep and erotic as you're embodied; one school says we fall

asleep to be downlisted,

but I'm more hopeful than that. Barnaby claims the group he saw seemed preoccupied with stalking clumsily through the muck after small fish or grubs, but I think there's nothing

that's clumsy; it's an observational problem: you are not a curlew, you cannot tell if they're being clumsy or careful, but Barnaby I'm asleep right now, or writing this poem, which is the same

thing,

which means I know, and now you know I know, you already knew, like the long-billed curlew telling my wife when we sleep we're writing creation's book, and in it we're ok, we're going to be ok.

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

HUGH BEHM-STEINBERG is the author of *Shy Green Fields* (No Tell Books) and *The Opposite of Work* (JackLeg Press). Bird poems have appeared in such places as *Spork* (*From Brown Thrashers - Part 1* and *From Brown Thrashers - Part 2*), *Spiral Orb*, *The Bakery*, *Sink Review* and *On Barcelona*. He teaches writing at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, where he edits the journal *Eleven Eleven*.



## ***Robert Lunday***

### **Telephone Ode**

Praise to the old phones in their heavy black formal wear, their Bakelite or nickel skins;

two-fisted candlestick phones, wall phones with twin bells like warrior-woman breast cups –

their many-eyed dials, hooking the numbers in sweeps: static, wrong numbers, busy signals, phones off their hooks and the ringing without end;

phone booths, space capsules on night-corners; the roomy British booths, wood-paneled train-station booths for last goodbyes;

the angelic operator, Mademoiselle O – so curt and businesslike, yet at times so kind; her lovely unseen face, her syllables of eyes;

old phones with heft! – we did not carry them, but went to them; made furniture for them and placed them in nooks as for idols and icons;

old phone, homunculus, casket or samurai head, your gnomish squat; enormous cartoon phone leaping and shaking with business and passion!

(You, on the other end: I wanted never to leave messages, but only to reach you.)

ROBERT LUNDAY is the author of *Mad Flights* (Ashland Poetry Press). Recent work appears in *The Yoke*, *Black Sun Lit*, *Poet Lore*, *Field*, *Poetry Daily*, and *Beloit Poetry Journal*. He teaches at Houston Community College and lives on a small horse farm in central Texas with his wife, Yukiko.

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## *Elise Gregory*

### **Inviting in the Wilds**

I  
Two-by-two animals crawled  
up my legs and inside my chest for the winter.

Crows and hens began it--  
scratched my lungs out of place, settling in.

Deep in my belly bobcats nested  
and birthed a litter of kits.

Goats knocked inside my thighs  
like my fat, kicking boys.

And coyotes split my heart  
in a sumptuous two-way bite.

Colder things took over toes  
while skittish bears stole my body's skull.

II  
Housing the wild was harder than either fetus:  
they bounced bones with every step.

But gathered in the clouds were the skirts of winter.

III  
The body burrowed into bed--  
fed on curds, raspberry tea, and bread.



Set in a small puzzle, the animals slept  
until the first green fists of spring.  
Bears slipped free, then came the cats.

Birds flew from my chest  
while toads and salamanders waited  
for rain--the last.

I lay empty then, wrapped in soiled sheets.  
While I nursed the wilds, we shared something  
though I don't know what.

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

ELISE GREGORY manages four sheep, two goats, ten chickens, three human boys, and one spouse. Her work has been published by various literary journals including *Redactions*, *Fine Madness*, *Stoneboat*, *Verse Wisconsin*, and *Hubbub*. Elise's first chapbook was published in 2011 and she's collaborating with an artist for another. Visit her blog for more information at [midwesternwriter.weebly.com](http://midwesternwriter.weebly.com)

## Before

*Patrice Gopo*

The day I lay my daughter to nap on her great-grandmother's bed, I think, *I have been here before*. Outside the air is warm like a breath in my cupped hands. Past the front door, a dense fog blinds me to the landscape beyond as the call of a rooster joins the rustle of leaves cloaking thick trees. In this cramped corner room I know I have seen this mattress pressed against a wall. I have watched light from the small window pierce a dark room. But of course this day is my first time in this hidden pocket of rural Zimbabwe. Today my daughter is introduced to her great-grandmother, my husband's grandmother.

I have been here before. I have stood by this bed. And not this bed. Here. And not here. In a clearing through the trees. Through the secret passage between bowing branches. In this small home. In these rural areas. Not these rural areas. Rural Jamaica. Not a clearing through the trees but the top of a mountain. An introduction to a grandmother I don't know. I look up to a high bed, my grandmother's bed. *How does she sleep up there, how does she climb in bed*, I wonder. There is a light from the window, the small window just above where the mattress meets the wall. The afternoon sun casts streaks of gold across the dim. Someone's arms lift me. My worn body is placed on the crisp, tight sheets. Even in the cool room, the heavy air and low voices nearby feel like the warmth of a soft blanket. As my bare arms rub against the smooth bed, I turn to the side and curl my knees towards my chest. I drift towards sleep, thankful to be inside as heat bears down beyond the door. For the length of a nap, perhaps the length of a day, I am part of what blows through rural Jamaican leaves on top of this mountain.

In Zimbabwe my daughter sleeps in my arms with her body curved into my side. Her chest inflates and deflates in a rhythmic cycle while soft sleep breath tickles my shoulder. Beside where I stand is the bed she will soon rest on. I don't remember the climb up the mountain, the fragrant scent of hibiscus saturating the air, the symphony of tropical birds singing in the trees. I can't taste the rainwater from the heavy drum, dribbling down my mouth, cool like metal. And my grandmother remains without a face. My daughter won't remember the tears of dew rolling off bright leaves or the chickens skipping across the damp ground. She won't recall sitting at her great-grandmother's feet while leather fingers crushed thin peanut shells. Her great-grandmother's song that welcomed us to this rural home will elude her.



The clap of footsteps on the concrete floor breaks the quiet, and someone spreads a woven blanket across the bed. The strands of wool dive over and under each other as if racing to the worn edge. They lock together to form the tight weave that will separate my toddler from her great-grandmother's bare mattress. Even as I pull her from my shoulder and place her body against the scratchy surface, her eyes remain closed. My wrists flick a baby blanket in the air, and a cool breeze runs across her body before the weight of warmth settles against her skin.

Is this where longing begins? The desire for passports streaked with stamps. A yearning for cities that become temporary homes. A fake love of skyscrapers and fast planes. Will she also one day take walks through cities with perfect grids and hope for bends in rustic roads? Will unfinished books gather on her nightstand as she stares at rivers with tangled currents moving to some vast unknown? I think this is the birthplace of searching, a searching for something that is lost before we can even remember. Crisp sheets, humid air, the feel of woven blankets beneath us. A searching that doesn't diminish with a generation but likely grows and grows until it encompasses the breadth and depth of the world.

I stare at her asleep on the blanket. The sunlight crawls across the bed, parting the room's shadows. Wait, no. Beyond this window a drizzle blankets the ground, burdens the air. A grey light. Yes, a grey light grazes the dim and reveals her face. I think perhaps one day her dreams will unlock this bed, this window, this moment. If nothing more, perhaps she will remember a mattress pushed against the wall and a small window that ushers in light. Perhaps she will say she has been here before.

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

*sweet*

7.1

## Cracks

*Patrice Gopo*

To start with, I put the baby calendar in the giveaway pile. *Nothing like us*, I decided as I glanced at the illustration of a plump pink baby with a wisp of blonde hair. Later I sat your tipsy body in front of a full-length mirror. Dimpled legs curved into a diamond while your dark eyes focused on your reflection. From high above, I stared down at ripples of black curls and stubby arms flung wide as if



you knew something of balance. *Mirror time*, I said while I poured out words about beautiful, brown skin and perfect, coiled hair—words it took me years to believe about myself. And because of my annoyance with those fair-skinned heroines and their endless mounds of straight hair, there was my ban on animated princesses. Instead you sat next to me as the butter glow from your bedroom lamp illuminated stories of gutsy African queens with tight cornrows. We let our fingers slide across glossy illustrations of orange and green fabrics draping earth-colored complexions. Then I sent you beyond our home buoyed by the strength of what I had laid.

But still the ugly found us—like weeds sprouting through cracks in pavement. You returned to me with splinters in your voice. Under the hard bathroom lights, your gaze focused on the mirror. *I don't like my hair*, you said. Your preschool palms clenched ebony twists and yanked as if you could uproot each strand and let your scalp begin again. With a new color, a new texture. *I wish we were white*, you added. Your index finger touched the light switch. *White like that*, you said. Just beyond the bathroom door, my body slumped to the floor. I pulled you to my lap, and we pressed our damp cheeks together. Your torso curled against my chest as if you were still the infant you used to be. Back and forth we rocked as I repeated again and again, *beautiful, beautiful girl*. Despite my best efforts, I knew nothing of killing weeds.

PATRICE GOPO, the child of Jamaican immigrants, was born and raised in Anchorage, Alaska. Her most recent essays have appeared in [River Teeth's Beautiful Things](#), [Rock & Sling online](#), and on Charlotte, North Carolina's NPR Station [WFAE 90.7](#). She is currently writing a group of essays exploring race, immigration, and identity with occasional diversions into her Alaskan childhood. Nearly every week she treats herself to an ice-cream cone—preferably soft serve.

## The Banquet Hall Dishwasher

*Courtney Kersten*

David is man composed of six-parts water, four-parts funk, and seven-parts despair.

David is the dude who operates the giant slot-machine-like industrial dishwasher where every fork, knife, cheese grater, and forgotten Sweet-and-Low packet passes through on a daily basis getting a fire-engine blast bath to nudge off and annihilate lipstick residue, dried oatmeal nibbles, calcified ketchup, and other such dining casualties.

David has said a total of four words within the span of seven months:

Yah'? Yep. Nah. Wha?

Never spontaneous. Only when provoked by questions from an authority figure.

Sometimes I eat left-over wedding cake and watch him from behind the coffee cup racks.

More than sometimes. I do this often.

David has washed his uniform, perhaps, a total of zero times in the span of seven months.

I think this because when David places soup ladles on the top shelf you can see the yellow stain of half-a-year's worth of funk encrusted in the pits. Like aerial views of forgotten backyard pools.

When exposed, the pits' seams lurch in a sort of psychedelic, Carrie bending-spoons-with-her-mind way as if the threads are trying to break away from the fabric they help hold together, as if they're attempting to escape from their fetid existence. Lemme out!

I fantasize about bringing him a piece of left-over wedding cake and a section of the want ads.

I fantasize about going to the Shopko down the street and buying him a pack of white t-shirts.

I calculate the amount of time it would take to walk to the gas station to buy him a beer and a bar of soap. And I wonder if that profound despair staining the pits is not the threads lurching away but



some manifestation of David himself.

...return to Table of Contents

*sweet*

7.1

## **Dobogókő, Hungary**

*Courtney Kersten*

1.

We promised the other to only eat vegetables for two weeks in advance, smudged our bodies daily, and hid bottles of vodka and red wine in the distant caverns of our neighbor's apartment. We beat ourselves with branches Finnish bath style and prayed to earth fairies and spoke of our souls as bursting stars of love and light and peace. No coffee, no cigarettes, no pork, no beef, no chicken or tuna and a maximum of five grapes per day. To bed at nine and to wake at four! No listening to Tina Turner electro-pop and no stopping for sweets from the bakery or ogling men on the metro. And even if neither of us ever went to bed at nine or awoke at four and even if it's hard not to stare at people on the train (because what else can you have to do but stare) and even if we sat in the bar drinking Kőbánya pints and eating pork rinds at noon before boarding the bus, we still kept saying to the other in-between wiping oily fingers on our jeans that we gotta be pure for this.

2.

We gotta be. Because this is where the Dalai Lama camps out, this is where Krishna and Jesus and Buddha and celestial creatures we haven't even conceived of come to play, where spirits and visions and winged-translucent-glittery things enter your body through a metaphysical trap door and induce total-soul trip outs. We gotta be conduits, we gotta be love and light, treading one-step below nunhood, we need to be ready.

3.

But the mountain wasn't wrapped in Tibetan Peace flags or foaming Technicolor sludge beneath its grass nor did it resemble a churning vortex of vegetation as I'd envisioned the earth's heart chakra to be. It was a mountain. So we sat and waited.

4.

Two Hungarian hikers found us sitting in the trail.

I knew enough to know that they were friendly, that they were asking us where we were going, what we were doing, that they were asking us where we were from.

I only knew enough to respond with *Mi nem tudom*.

We don't know.

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

*sweet*

7.1

## **My Father in Wisconsin**

*Courtney Kersten*

When my father was a young man, he blew off that fleshy part of your hand, the part across from your thumb, when a handgun exploded in his right hand while shooting clay pigeons in some abandoned field near Augusta. The skin that has since grown over looks like a macabre leather quilt stitched into his wrist and ending at his heart line.

Also when my father was a young man, he climbed in a car with his buddy, best-friend even—this guy named Kenny Wineman who was dark and handsome and played on the football team and had the tendency to get blitzed Tuesday through Sunday and drive around Chippewa Falls with apparently no concern for the deer or bunnies or small children crossing the road. And on that day when my father climbed in with Kenny, they ran over two kids and skidded into the trees, car aflame. The children died. Kenny did community service and my father had a deep valley of flesh ripped from his back, crisscrossing his spine, the scar healing like a topographical map, pillowy and newborn pink at the seams.

When I was younger, I would watch him shirtless and swearing and lugging things around the front yard unable to fathom how such deep gashes were able to heal.

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

COURTNEY KERSTEN is a native of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. She currently studies in the University of Idaho's MFA in Creative Writing Program. Her work can be seen or is forthcoming from *DIAGRAM* and *The Masters Review*.



## Circus Prayer

*Scott Loring Sanders*

Dear Lord,

Thank You for letting me survive the seedy and derelict circus that showed up on the ball fields of my New Jersey elementary school in 1979. If You recall, there were two shows: the early and the late, and I went to the former. I remember the pair of tigers sitting on pedestals with metal collars, the O-rings at the ends of their heavy chains affixed to steel spikes driven into the outfield. There was no fence or wall between the tigers and the incoming circus-goers. There was no cage of any sort. No, Dear Lord, the only dividers were landscaping timbers resting horizontally on cinderblocks, not more than a foot off the ground. A single line of those timbers created the only “barrier” as the patrons streamed into the tent. But anyone, from an adult to a toddler, could have easily stepped over and walked right up to a tiger if they had had the *cajones*. Could have easily, if so inclined, slapped one of the beasts across its beautiful whiskered face.

It was at the late show where all the excitement happened. But I wasn't at that show, Dear Lord. No, for whatever reason, You found it in my best interest to go to the early one. And I remember that after the incident, as a nine year old, I was angry with You. Not because You let the tragedy happen. No, instead I was angry (and also jealous) because I wasn't there to witness it while many of my friends were. You chose to have me at home as that tiger leapt off its pedestal with just enough play in its chain to pounce on the boy, a boy my age from the next town over, who had strayed to the wrong side of that useless little barrier. Who had his neck bitten, mauled, and eaten by a three hundred? four hundred? five hundred? pound tiger. Who was killed by that tiger in front of a tent-full of onlookers. Who was pulled from the jaws of the beast by our school's custodian, Mr. Van Sulkama, albeit, a tad too late.

The following day, Dear Lord, the circus had fled. But at recess I, along with a girl from my class, found a bloody, goopy pile of something in the grass near third base. Something the size and color of a juvenile eggplant. A deep purple that resembled smashed poke berries. Thirty years later, after I located the girl on Facebook, I asked if she remembered that goopy pile or was it something my young mind had invented. She remembered.

And the parents Lord, oh, the parents. Two sets in this instance. Because You didn't have the boy go

with his own parents, no, but with the parents of a friend. So *they* were responsible for the boy's wellbeing. How does one live with that sort of guilt for the rest of their lives? And then the actual parents, Lord. They send their son off to the circus and he never comes back? Not abducted or kidnapped, not killed in a car accident, but eaten by a tiger? How many parents, in the history of all parents in civilization, can say their child was killed in such a way? A hundred maybe? Ever? And at least if it was in India or wherever tigers still roam, at least then the parents could make some sort of sense of it. Still painful, yes, but it could be rationalized. But in New Jersey, Lord? How do the parents begin to make heads or tails of that one? How awkward must that conversation be, even thirty years later, when new acquaintances ask innocent questions about family, maybe while at a dinner party and they see an old photo of the boy on the wall? "Oh, who is that handsome little guy?" And then the mother, or maybe the father, tries to explain. Why would You do that to those poor parents? Were they atheists or something? Had they denounced Your name at some point way back when?

Is it bad, Dear Lord, that I wanted to be there that night? To see that boy ripped open and partially eaten by a tiger? Why did You spare me that, yet, in Your infinite wisdom, allow me outside for recess the very next day to find the boy's viscera lying in the hot sunshine beneath a swarm of hungry green-bottle flies? To let my imagination run wild with disturbing visions possibly more horrific than if I'd just witnessed the actual event? I know I'm not supposed to question the whys of Your ways, Dear Lord, but I'm asking anyway because quite frankly, it doesn't make a whole lot of damn sense. No sense that I can see anyway. As You well know, I'm not much on praying, so I'm not sure about etiquette here. How does the prayer stop? Do I thank you? Do I cross myself or leave some offering? Or do I just end it, and hope that somehow You'll reply?

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

SCOTT LORING SANDERS lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. He has memoir pieces forthcoming in the fall issue of *Creative Nonfiction*, as well as in *Spittoon* and several other journals. In fiction, a story he published last year will be included in *Best American Mystery Stories 2014*, due out in October. He's published two novels with Houghton Mifflin, was the Writer-in-Residence at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, and has been a two-time fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. He teaches Creative Writing at Virginia Tech.







Brittany Cagle

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

Dear Abigail,

I read *Safekeeping*, well, because I had to, and because that's what graduate students do: we read and then talk about what we read and then try and do something like it ourselves, and then maybe talk about why we particularly sucked at it. Something that came up repeatedly in the conversation about your book was the question of genre: is *Safekeeping* a collection of essays, or are they prose poems? Is the book one cohesive piece? What is it? The conversation could have driven me mad. Half of the class, the half more inclined towards this habit of labeling and categorizing pieces of writing, wanted to do just that, and struggled to shove *Safekeeping* into their pre-made mental boxes that house different modes of creative nonfiction. The other half, the one I fell into, wanted to just take the book as it was, to enjoy it as a collective whole, and to do away with any kind of feeble attempt to break it down in terms of what criteria it did and did not meet.

I read *Safekeeping* because I had to, but I read it again because it was beautiful. I read it again because it was one of the first books about relationships that did not make me want to slam the cover closed and toss it forcibly at a wall. There is something immensely honest and human about a person attempting to understand her experiences through writing. After all, that's why we do it, isn't it? To try and understand all the things we feel and do, to unravel the ridiculous simplicity of something we thought was earth-shattering, and to sit with the thickness and quiet of the complicated parts? Over time, as writers, and as people, we learn, and maybe allow the world to teach us, what is worth trying to understand and what should be left as it is. Like you taught me in your book, sometimes things simply are what they are. "She had learned by then," you wrote, "it wasn't necessary to keep setting the record straight."

This book is a perfect example of a writer both unraveling ridiculous simplicity and sitting with the complications of adulthood, parenthood, and relationships. Even its alternating structure of short, to-the-point vignettes to longer, more intimate recollections and reflections, this book seems an accurate portrait of the way we remember things—in pieces, and not always in order of importance or worth. As you showed in this book, even those small, seemingly insignificant moments are deserving of pages in our story, like the way someone we love speaks our name in that way that only they can: "It was the inflection maybe, something you put into those three syllables. And now you are gone and my name is just my name again, not the story of my life."

I read *Safekeeping* because I had to, but I'll keep revisiting and reading it again and again because it validates the parts of writing that I love the most, the parts I think reflect the most about the human experience—brokenness, honesty, and a desire to understand.

Best,  
Sara Walters

[...return to Table of Contents](#)