

The background is a complex collage of various textures and colors. It features large, soft-edged brushstrokes in shades of pink, yellow, green, and blue. There are also areas of fine-grained paper, some with faint grid patterns, and a dark, textured strip on the right side. On the far left, there is a vertical strip with a series of black dots connected by thin lines, resembling a molecular structure or a decorative border.

KANSAS CITY VOICES

a periodical of writing and art

volume 12

We are tireless advocates for the arts. We support established artists and inspire new voices, growing the community and conversation.

POETRY

Switchblade Helen <i>Darrell Lindsey</i>	4	Floating Like Undiscovered <i>Anita Ofokansi</i>	25	Dragons <i>Irma Hudson</i>	48	Ways of the Wind <i>Roy Beckemeyer</i>	74
Black Ice Driving Guide <i>Timothy Volpert</i>	8	Permanence <i>Jose Angel Araguz</i>	30	No Purple Heart <i>Tina Hacker</i>	51	Ave Maria Amor <i>Walton Whittaker</i>	75
Jack 1941-1959 <i>Roy Beckemeyer</i>	10	Bud's Twelfth Christmas <i>John Mark Eberhart</i>	34	Bedroom at Arles <i>G. M. Monks</i>	56		
Michael's Tears <i>Kimberly Beer</i>	11	Eleven-Year-Old Shoe Shopper <i>Diandra Holmes</i>	37	Plea to Unpublish the Whale <i>Becky Mandelbaum</i>	65		
Per His Request, <i>Jeff Tigchelaar</i>	15	The Boys <i>Brian Daldorph</i>	38	To the Lady Who Gave Out Pencils on Halloween <i>Paul Hostovsky</i>	70		
Control <i>Maryfrances Wagner</i>	16	Ladder <i>Lois Marie Harrod</i>	39	Remedies for Losing a Cat in Spring <i>Irene Sherlock</i>	73		

PROSE

2AM, Hayward, California <i>Daniel Ward</i>	5	Final Hours <i>Anita Ofokansi</i>	42	Last Times <i>Phyllis Galley Westover</i>	71
Wild Acres <i>Gladys Haunton</i>	12	Jamaica <i>Nicole M. Rivas</i>	43		
K in the Dirt* <i>Craig M. Workman</i>	26	Height of Her Powers <i>Kyle Ellingson</i>	46		
A Faded Photo from the Seventies* <i>Eve Ott</i>	28	Friendly Wars <i>Ndaba Sibanda</i>	49		
A Fairy-Tale Life <i>Mark L. Groves</i>	31	A Prison Sentence <i>James Fox</i>	50		
Girls in Trees <i>Valerie Cumming</i>	35	Empty Chamber <i>Marvin Shackelford</i>	52		
		What Comes Around <i>Kimberly Beer</i>	66		

ART

Desolate Highway <i>Brian Compton</i>	9	Lullaby <i>Cynthia Bjorn</i>	22	Glimpse Into Eternity <i>Linda Yates</i>	59
Mother and Daughter on a Peaceful Day <i>Brent Kallenbach</i>	17	Pop & Lock #2† <i>Lisa Rogers</i>	23	Indian Pony Run <i>Kimberly Beer</i>	60
5 Fingered Blues <i>Ken Knieling</i>	18	The Spinster's Claw, or Handholding of Benediction* <i>Claire Brankin</i>	24	Crossing the Tracks <i>Marla Craven</i>	61
Appearance <i>Noelle Stoffel</i>	19	Kansas Prairie Rainbow <i>Larry Roggenkamp</i>	40	Billy Beale, Blues Guitarist <i>Andrea Brookhart</i>	62
Jellyfish #10 <i>Hall Jameson</i>	20	Peacock Redemption <i>Ed Coletti</i>	57	Figure Burning in the Dark <i>Ivan de Monbrison</i>	63
Landscape #4 <i>K. Carlton Johnson</i>	21	Window #2 <i>Wood Dickinson</i>	58	Underwater Existence <i>Nuncio Casanova</i>	64

*Winners of the Annual Whispering Prairie Press Contest

†Featured cover artist

KANSAS CITY VOICES

VOLUME 12

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Three years ago a magazine fell into my lap. Exactly how that happened I will never know. When the board asked me to be managing editor I thought I wasn't qualified, and it didn't make any sense, and I already had a day job. I knew that just because my brain bleeds stories when I dream, it didn't necessarily mean I would be a good managing editor. But, after lots of over-analyzing, I realized being given a magazine and told, "Do whatever you want. We trust you.", was a gift I just couldn't pass up.

I accepted the role with one caveat: I needed the people who were turning over the operation to stay on board for a year or two. They were to be my sage advisors, people who talked me off ledges, and people who were crazy enough to trust me when I said something like, "Hey, we're overhauling the entire aesthetic." Or, "Our Web site looks like 1987." To which they answered, "Jessica, the Internet wasn't around in '87." And then I said, "Exactly." Lucky for me they did stay on, and I'm grateful to every one of those people for helping *Kansas City Voices* and me.

Today *Kansas City Voices* is a catalyst for the arts and writing community. We give creative individuals a place to showcase their work. We arrange free events to get the public involved with our writers and artists. We give first-time artists a chance to meet their more established counterparts. We see our veteran creative minds mentoring those who are new to the field, and we let the excitement of the newly published fuel those of us who have been around a while and need a little recharging.

I am indebted, grateful, and in awe of my editors and board members who volunteer their time and skill. Our staff has so much talent I get overwhelmed when I look at their credentials. Did you know we're an entirely volunteer organization? No one on the editorial staff or board is paid. The only way we can afford to print is because of the generosity of our donors and grants from local arts organizations like ArtsKC and the Missouri Arts Council. Thank you to all of our volunteers for your countless hours and hard work. Thank you to our donors for funding this creative enterprise. Thank you to the bookstores and venues that sell our wares and promote our artists. I am proud of what we do.

I ask my editors to look for pieces they physically react to. If you tear up or shiver or speak out loud when you're reading/seeing a piece, there's something there. And one of my absolute favorite things is when we ship magazines to the coasts or overseas and it says Kansas City in the title. People pick it up expecting to see cowboys or Dorothy or cows, and instead they find a publication that holds a strong voice and unique viewpoint paramount. It's fun to challenge people's expectations, and I am sure you'll find a piece or two in this issue that makes you stop and think.

Jessica Conoley

DARRELL LINDSEY

SWITCHBLADE HELEN

Helen always had a switchblade
in the floorboard of her Camaro,

& a broke boyfriend
who thought the weekend started on Monday.

She first eyed her latest thrombosis, Bo,
at a honky-tonk named Jitterbugs

while she was line dancing with a suave gentleman
who had a faint halo

on his ring finger—
(which she finally noticed through the neon haze),

& was reciting Browning
between bouts of her margarita flurry.

Bo was given to petty schemes, parking lot ploys,
& seemed of even lesser intelligence

than the typical unshaven beasts
who visited her trailer park diva dome.

Three nights ago (& I saw this myself),
she pushed him out of the Camaro—

& he bounced down the street
like a flicked cigarette.

Quite a shame that Helen of Troy
never met Helen of mugshot.

DANIEL WARD

2AM, HAYWARD, CALIFORNIA

After ten, eleven years of repairing restaurant equipment, living a mostly trouble-free life, his criminal past was now just one of his quirks, a way people knew him, like the way he did his yoga. He was always one move behind everyone else in class, not because he didn't get it, but because he never rushed anything; he moved through his poses like he had all the time in the world.

He had unpredictable fits of generosity. Panhandlers, homeless guys—nine times out of ten, maybe more, if someone came up to him while he was working, he'd tell them to fuck off. Every now and then he'd stop, listen to some guy tell his whole story, then open up his wallet and hand him a hundred or two hundred dollars.

If anyone asked him why he gave away cash like that, he'd get a hard, level look on his face and say with an absolutely flat voice, "Because it's my money."

A lot of people in town knew him. The restaurant and bar owners in Kansas City knew him as a guy who did good work and charged what it was worth. The charity people knew him as a guy who usually would buy a ticket. The yoga teachers knew him as a skinny, serious man who'd come to class five or six times a week when his business was slow. No one knew where he lived, no one knew what he drove besides a plain white van, and nobody knew that no one else knew it.

Mostly, if someone asked him to tell a story about how he'd been to jail or how thieves really got things done, he'd wave it off and say that had all been a long time ago. Occasionally, just every so often, he'd give an embarrassed smile and talk about how he'd come up on the East Coast, working with a crew out of Philadelphia and Baltimore, stealing gold chains and diamonds.

Almost all of that was bullshit.

He'd spent his senior year of high school stealing cars in San Francisco. He hadn't needed the money, he'd just been a bored teen who'd fallen in love with being a criminal, in love

with the high of turning forty seconds of terrified sweating and thirty minutes of anxious driving into a fat wad of cash. Car theft was his first true love. Twelve years later, he could still remember the triumph, the pure aliveness of it.

He had knocked over a few jewelry places, that was true. One of the guys he ran with, a perpetually angry and terrifying man named Francis, had for some reason picked him as a sidekick. That was another thing he remembered years later—the fear when Francis would look at him and say, "Get your ass ready, Chicken Legs. We got work tonight."

When people asked him to tell a story, asked him what it had been like to be a thief, one story he wanted to tell—and it was a story he never could tell, because his plea bargain hadn't covered it—was one of the jobs where Francis had roped him in.

Back then he'd been named Bobby Conroy—honors student, National Merit Scholar, debate team member, awkward loner. Francis was waiting for him after school one day, leaning up against the hood of Bobby's Chevy Impala.

"Ready to work tonight?"

"I don't know if I can, Francis. I have a big test tomorrow, and . . ."

"Oh bullshit, motherfucker. You're going to be my wheelman tonight and you're gonna make a few hundred dollars for sneaking out past your bedtime."

"Come on, Francis, isn't there anyone else? Jimmy could do this, Raul could do it, Curt knows some guys . . ."

"Curt knows assholes who will fuck shit up. Jimmy won't ever shut up, and Raul is fucking high out of his mind every goddam time I see him. You don't get high, you don't talk much, and you're an asshole but you don't fuck shit up. So quit moaning and start earning because I have selected your ass in the first round of the Theft and Burglary Draft. I'll see you at midnight tonight at the Safeway out on Alameda."

Bobby hated working with Francis, not only because Francis smelled like cigarettes, coffee, and halitosis, but because every time they rode together Bobby wondered if he was going to live through the night.

Francis picked his jobs the same way: small businesses that kept daylight hours and needed big volume or big tickets. Dry cleaners, jewelers, coin dealers, breakfast-only restaurants—anything like that where the owners could get sloppy with the cash and the credit card receipts. They would do one job in a night, and if they couldn't get inside in under three minutes, Francis called it off, went home. When the job worked, Francis gave Bobby the cash, and kept the credit card receipts; he sold them to a guy who sold them to another guy in Hong Kong.

This place Francis had picked was across the South Bay out in Hayward. As Bobby drove, Francis listed all of the reasons why this was going to be a great score: rare coin store, owner struggling to stay afloat, cameras outside were fakes, lights didn't cover the back for shit.

Francis was a professional; he didn't steal thirty bucks from a gas station to score an eight-ball. They parked the Impala in a dark corner where almost no one could see it. They hopped over one fence, slipped their tools up and in to release the fire safety catch on the burglar bars; they were inside in less than a minute.

Just another night with Francis. It was all routine, nice and boring. It didn't go off track until they opened up the office.

There was a man in the office, sitting at the desk, half visible under the dim light of the desk lamp. At first Bobby jumped back and almost started to run, but Francis grabbed him by the arm, grip hard as granite.

“What the hell. He look like a threat to you?”

The man in the chair wasn't moving. He was in his sixties, white thin hair, jowly face, wearing a white button-down shirt, one sleeve rolled all the way up past his elbow. His head was tilted back and the comb-over of his thinning hair had flopped up. He was drooling a little, a stream coming down his cheek.

Francis walked into the office, started opening drawers and cabinets. “Hey, man, you hear me? You hear me talking to you?”

The man didn't make a sound, didn't move, didn't open his eyes. There was a little gurgle in his throat.

Francis came over to the man and looked over at his face. “See that purple around his lips? This man's dying.”

Bobby didn't know what to do with that. “So, do we go get a doctor or call an ambulance or something?”

“Oh fuck no,” Francis said. “You want to explain to a doctor how we found this guy?”

Francis looked down at the desk. “Didn't leave a note, but . . .” He opened the right-hand drawer. “Yep, right where I thought it was.” Bobby came around. There was a needle and a rubber tube in the drawer.

“See, the thing with heroin,” Francis said, “the thing is that the purity changes from batch to batch. You just never know what you got. So, coin dealer here may have just made a mistake, or maybe he was tired of losing money. Tired of struggling to make a living. That happens, especially guys riding horse. Riding horse is easy, dealing with all the bullshit—that's hard. A lot of these guys—one day, they just ride the horse off into the sunset. I understand.”

“So we're just going to leave him here?”

“My grandmother, she was a diabetic.” Francis did that a lot, talked like Bobby hadn't said a word. “And this one time she slipped into a coma. And see, we started talking about her like she was already gone. Now it so happened, she came out of that coma, and man, let me tell you she let us *have* it. She heard every goddam word we said in that room, and she told us all just what she thought about us.”

“Tell you what, soldier,” Francis said to the coin dealer, clapping him on the shoulder like they were having a beer together. “We're going to be here as long as you need us. We're gonna see you out.”

“What?”

“You heard me. This man is going to have a proper passing. He might not have family around him but he's going to have company.”

Bobby stood there, burying his face in his hands, not wanting to see any of this.

“I don't get it,” Bobby said. “I thought you were some hard-ass killer.”

“I am,” Francis said. “I will kill you or Jimmy or Curt or anyone else if it is necessary *for my business*. Do you see any reason I should kill this man *for my business*?”

“No, of course not.”

“You see any way trying to save his damn life is going to *help* my business?” Bobby couldn't say a thing to that. “Or maybe you think he's going to get some visitors here at one in the morning.”

“Maybe he knew he messed up,” Bobby said. “Felt it going wrong and called an ambulance.”

“Feel his skin,” Francis said. “Go on, touch it. Not gonna kill you. Death ain't contagious, Chicken Legs.”

Bobby touched the coin dealer's skin. “It's cool,” Bobby said. “Not cold, but cool.”

“Now that tells you he's been here awhile. Hour, maybe two. Ambulance would have been here by now.” Francis clapped the man on the shoulder again, looked at him deep like he was surveying a melon at the market. “I don't know, soldier. Maybe you fucked up, maybe you just did the only thing you could think to do. I hope you're going some place better.”

Francis looked up at Bobby.

“Shit,” he said. “Even the people I've killed haven't had to die *alone*. Goddamn.”

They sat in the dark room for about an hour, not saying a word, Francis sitting on the edge of the desk, Bobby wishing he had something to read.

About two in the morning, Francis looked over at Bobby. “Your dad's a preacher, right? You go to church, say your prayers, all that?”

“I guess.”

“You guess. You believe in God or not, Chicken Legs?”

“I don't know, I guess so.”

“This man is listening to us, Bobby. Right now, he is hearing every word we say, and he knows he is dying. So go on, preacher's son. . . give him something he can use.”

“What should I say?”

“Shit, you think I go to church? I don't know how it works. I'm just telling you to help him out.”

“The Catholics do something called extreme unction.”

“Well, this man's a coin dealer, so pretty good odds he's Jewish.”

Bobby stood there. “Give me a minute.”

“I don't know if soldier here has too many of those.”

Bobby thought about his father's sermons. Hell was a big deal to Pastor Steve. After seventeen years of listening to him, Bobby had tuned him out. He wanted to say something his father wouldn't say.

The coin dealer started to wheeze, his body fighting to draw breath.

“Whatever you did, whatever you felt like you didn't do, all of that is forgiven,” Bobby said. “Go in peace.” He felt absurd, an impostor, like he was lying to children.

The coin dealer coughed, a feeble hack, not a spasm. Suddenly he was gone; it was that clear, that easy.

“Like he turned off the lights and left,” Francis said. “Seen a lot of shit, but I ain't seen much like that before.”

Bobby was sniffing.

“What the fuck you all teary-eyed about?” Francis said, not angry, just curious. “Man passed easy. You and I—we ain't gonna get it *nearly* that good.”

“Now,” Francis said. “When the body is discovered, they are going to go over this room very very thorough. So we're just going to leave everything here, go out the way we came, and it's gonna be like this never happened. Curt ever asks you anything about this job, we didn't run it, I changed my mind. You understand?”

Bobby nodded, still sniffing.

And that was it. Francis and Bobby never talked about that job again. Bobby never told the story to anyone else, just like he never talked about what happened to the Mexicans and their money, or what really happened to Florio Martinez, or what he'd done to the Cuban who'd found him in Texas.

Over the years he became a man of secrets. Sometimes when he was doing yoga, he would start to tally all the secrets he kept and he wondered how he was still living with all of these things crawling inside him. He wondered if secrets could be like worms.

He wondered a lot of other things too. He wondered why a killer like Francis wanted to stay and wait for a man to die. Was that some attempt at compassion from a broken violent man? Or was it some kind of act? Had Francis set it all in motion somehow? That mention of the coin dealer being Jewish—that never settled comfortably. Why had Francis looked for a note? How had Francis known to look in the desk drawer for a junkie's works?

Most of all he wondered if the coin dealer had heard him. Had he given the coin dealer permission to leave? Was that more blood on his hands?

The questions were like midge flies—they came and went, and there was nothing that could be done when they came except suffer through them.

Later on, Bobby testified against the crew, ratted them all out. Francis got sent up for seven years on felony theft. He'd promised Bobby that one day he was going to find him, and kill him slowly. That had been a long time ago, but there was no reason to think Francis had forgiven those sins. Some days he thought he should probably find Francis, put a bullet or six into him.

But before he finished Francis off, they were going to have to talk about that coin dealer.

TIMOTHY VOLPERT

BLACK ICE DRIVING GUIDE

- Turn into the skid.
- Feather the brake pedal like a confident jazz drummer lays out during someone else's solo.
 - This is the skid's solo. Turn into the skid. Accelerate.
- Accelerate. Accept that this is happening.
- Don't think about:
 - Your kid is sick, delirious;
 - Your lack of bachelor's degree;
 - Carbon emissions from your car's exhaust;
 - Income inequality;
 - How you could have let your high school sweetheart down more gently.
 - There is a time to think about these things.
 - This is not that time.
 - This is the time to turn into the skid.
- Turn into the skid like a young magician turns his assistant into a deceit of lapwings by mistake, wonders where the doves have gone.
 - Don't wonder where the doves have gone.
- Ask the young magician to send you thirty, forty seconds back, let you slow down on the slick like you know you should have done, like Marianne will say you should have done when you make it home.
 - If you make it home.
- Focus on where you want to go, not what you want to avoid.
 - The barriers are coming, whether you want them to or not.
- Accelerate. Learn to love the skid. Visualize:
 - The smooth arc of your tires on the ice as your mother's smile;
 - Your mother's arms flurrying to encircle you like a pitying of turtledoves;
 - You are not above becoming misty, in this instant.
 - Do so as the need arises.
 - The young magician whisking you and your mother to the curbside.
 - Don't wonder where the young magician comes from.
- Avoid understeering as your arms go limp.
- The importance cannot be overstated of feathering the brakes.
- Above all, remain calm.



ROY BECKEMEYER

JACK 1941-1959

flying off the levee road at 85 or so
 his '48 plymouth scraped bark off a
 sycamore nosed over and flipped
 top down into muck wheels spinning
hell he had no chance the stupid fuck the
 state trooper said we all drove together
 to see back behind the body shop
 right side up roof shoved down into
 the seats no blood just dirt
oh shit was all anybody could say
 he was still there in the yearbook but
 wouldn't be tossing his damn cap
 in the air at graduation *remember*
them slick hunting knives he made
in his dad's shop said frankie and we
 all nodded felt our thumbs scraping
 the blade hefting the damn lovely
 balance of the thing before we handed
 over a month's gas money to buy it
 remembered his open mouth grin
 at the low whistle one of us would give
 at the craft he put into it hell none of us
 could believe it till the funeral home with
 noreen crying and his dad red-eyed
 and jack's hair combed back in that
 duck tail he liked and dammit his eyes
 were closed almost like the cool way he would squint
 because of smoke from the pall mall
 that was always hanging at the corner
 of his mouth but so tight now there
 was no way he would see us again and his
 mouth was closed too and there was no way
 he was ever going to tell any of us
 why

KIMBERLY BEER

MICHAEL'S TEARS

I found the tears
 I cried for you
 wadded up in a tissue
 in the pocket of a coat
 that I hadn't worn
 in almost a year

since your funeral

I found them
 right before church
 where the message was
 to seek guidance
 to say "yes" to God
 even on a cold February day
 when there is snow
 clinging to the ground
 lingering
 refusing to go away

just like last year

Just like last year
 when I walked by your casket
 on the way outside
 into the cold light
 when I thought
 what a crying shame
 to bury a California boy
 so deep in cold Missouri clay

GLADYS HAUNTON

WILD ACRES

It was always my job to let the stale air out of the cabin when we arrived. Jeff might step in to pick up his tool box if a gate hinge needed fixing or his bow saw if a tree had dropped limbs across a path; but I stayed inside, propping the door wide and opening windows until curtains lifted and dead flies stirred across the floor. I liked to wait there while the atmosphere quickened and the scent of field clover or goldenrod, depending on the season, penetrated the hot-attic stifle.

I say “cabin,” but it’s really just a Tuff Shed, built in a single day to specifications we chose from a sheet of options: twenty feet long by ten wide, six windows, two skylights, barn style double door oriented to the south, and a loft in the east end for storage. From the outside it looks like a place to secure a riding mower and a wheel barrow or two, but we outfitted it with cot, futon, wicker table and chairs, small cabinet, and woodstove. Patchwork quilts and throw rugs help sell the living-space concept, though probably not to anyone with a timeshare in the Rockies. It has suited our needs, however. Shelter from the weather if rain or snow overtakes us as we’re rambling our surrounding forty acres of pasture and ravine. A place to eat a picnic where wind won’t whip away our paper plates. A place to stash field guides and constellation maps, sunscreen and insect repellent, the makings of a cup of instant cocoa. And for me it was at times a cabin in the truest sense—a place to spend the night.

Jeff never saw it that way. He likes his sleep facilitated by an innerspring mattress and central heat or air conditioning, so he always drove home after a day’s outing. But I liked to watch from the doorway as darkness filled the hollows and climbed toward the high meadow. I liked to lie on the cot and mark the progress of moonlight from wall stud to wall stud, wakening to

coyote calls from a sleep I didn’t know had overtaken me and hearing, through the throbbing synchronization of crickets, rustling sounds of a raccoon, maybe, or an opossum, nudging the earth for grubs just beyond the thin wall, inches from my ear.

Sometimes, if I’d been busy or distracted, I stretched out on the cot as soon as we arrived, hoping to enter that watching-listening state as the cabin aired. It takes a shift of mental gears for me to receive what our wild acres have to offer, and waiting in silence while that little room inhaled the prairie freshness reminded me how to breathe it in.

That’s what I was doing the day the mouse discovered me and approached like a curious explorer, all wide eyed and slack jawed—or so it seemed to me. She showed no fear. Spotting me from the edge of the loft, she traced a route in my direction so unhesitatingly that it must have been a well-worn rodent path. Loft edge to crossbeam, down a stud to the curtain rod and across that to another stud that led her to the futon’s metal frame beside my cot.

She paused there and studied me, turning her face from side to side as if comparing the data from her left eye with that from her right. Next, in what seemed like a struggle to contain her agitation, she did a rapid, jerky dance of short advances and retreats, limited to a space of nine inches or so along the frame and interrupted by little freeze-frame instants of rigidity when she trained her eyes on me again. I read challenge or determination in her stare. Her brazenness unnerved me, and I sat up, thinking my abrupt movement would send her skittering. But no. It only closed the distance between us to a few inches, where all her startling individuality came into focus.

She was not the common house mouse I’m familiar with, but a plump little creature, the tawny gold of a white-

tailed deer with a deer’s cream-white underside. Her ears rose round and prominent, lined in pink that deepened in their hollows like peach blossom petals. Her black eyes were huge, in terms of mouse dimensions, as round and glistening as pushpins in a wall map. She trained them on me, and we had a stare-down. Its duration stunned me. Stillness swelled between us. The veil of separation stretched membrane thin. I remembered childhood moments when my dog gazed at my face until I thought she’d spoken.

I willed a child’s patience and belief now, but adult concerns interfered and, to my shame, I broke the spell first. Afraid that only rabies could explain her fearlessness, I stood suddenly, making cot springs screech and quilt tumble to the floor. She disappeared so fast I missed the direction of her flight. And just that fast, I wanted her back with me. I wished I’d risked disease for one more chance to read her urgency and understand what pushed her past the usual boundaries to hold us there where something else seemed imminent between us. But she was gone, and I hurried out to tell Jeff the story.

Reentering the cabin moments later, I picked the quilt up from the floor, shook the dust from it, and spread it back across the cot. I smoothed the wrinkles and reached to fluff the pillow, then stopped. Something wasn’t right about the shadowed indentation where my head had lain. I bent closer. The weight of my head had flattened something deep into the pillow: a wad of fibers—shredded fabric, maybe, and downy stuffing from the vest Jeff kept on a nail by the door. But something moved the wad about so that it shivered and twitched. With a spasm of revulsion, I saw it clearly then—a writhing knot of baby mice, naked as grubs and as sightless, their future eyes bulging like blisters beneath stretched skin.

Did some genetic memory of plague-bearing rats

trigger the horror in my response? I pulled the clip from my hair and shook it out full-length, bending low and raking my fingers through it, expecting to rain rodents onto the floor. Nothing fell, but that only convinced me that I felt them tangled tight against my scalp and struggling. I grabbed the pillow and carried it flat, at arm’s length, like a tray of toxins, out the door and up behind the cabin to the tall grass. Then I dropped one end, grasped the other with both hands, and shook it with a snap and another snap and still another.

The nest flew skyward, loosening as it rose and disintegrating at the apex of its arc, spilling pink babies that rotated in the sun like a handful of jellybeans cast by a parade clown. They dropped into the grass, where distance separated them from one another for the first time ever and, I kept imagining in retrospect, filled them with some rodent version of despair as heat shriveled them to raisins.

For the second time that morning, I felt the heaviness of wanting to undo an act I’d just completed—watching it backwards like a video rewinding and searching for the point where I’d squandered my opportunity. If I’d recognized the mouse pups right away for the individuals they became as they tumbled through the sunshine, I’d have seen the adult, too, for what she was: not rabid, but maternal. Aggressive, yes; but animated by postpartal chemistry, or whatever marvel of mammalian engineering governs the fierce protectiveness of mothers.

Giving birth turned me into a wild thing. Intellect was no match for the instinctual behavior that kicked in—triggered, I suppose, by a flood of hormones. In the first postnatal hours, body chemistry energized me for whatever tasks a woman delivering alone might need to perform for the survival of her baby. But I was not alone. Professionals eased my son from the

birth canal, severed his connection to me aseptically, and laid him on my chest just long enough for his light-struck eyes to sweep my face before they whisked him away. My husband, drained from coaching me through hours of labor, slipped off to phone relatives. I didn't even have to summon the strength to sit upright. Prone on the gurney, I watched the ceiling slide over me as a nurse in pink and blue scrubs wheeled me from the delivery room and parked me in recovery. There, in spite of my physical depletion, energy deluged me. I recognized exhaustion in my limbs and back, my diaphragm and shoulders; but euphoria kept me from feeling its effects.

When I left the hospital and responsibility shifted from the professionals to me, a darker side of the postpartum buzz revealed itself. The energy remained; but instead of joy, it fueled hyper-vigilance. On the short drive home, every approaching car veered dangerously in our direction and all intersections seemed patterned for disaster. At home hair-trigger reflexes ricocheted me from one startle response to another all day. At night shot me from sleep lactating at my baby's first whimper. Obsessive rumination on that tiny creature's vulnerability, coupled with sleep deprivation, sapped my powers to concentrate on anything else. I forgot how to put on eye makeup and check out library books, though I could remember the exact time and nature of the baby's every body elimination for the last week. I forgot a meatloaf in the oven until I smelled it burning, but I could gauge the normal duration of the baby's sleep cycle without consulting a clock—low-grade agitation distilling into cold fear if he remained silent ten minutes past his usual waking time.

I expected to grapple with identity shifts in the early stage of motherhood, but I saw this as a problem for the mind. I planned to reason my way across the gap between worksite order and domestic unpredictability and think my way from experienced professional to learn-as-you-go parent. This

unfamiliar inner self, however, rewired to bypass reason and draw on some primitive power grid, was a complete surprise. She was an animal, and nothing had prepared me to house her in my body.

I don't claim to know what the cabin mouse *thought* when she found me lying on her nest. But, because in my own early weeks of motherhood I felt stripped of thought and reduced to the raw material of instinct, I believe we shared a chemistry that makes us kindred. The feral intensity that birthing induced in me links me closer to that driven rodent than to those of my human sisters who are not much bothered by postpartum hormones. Yet in spite of our bond—because I recognized our bond too late—I was the agent of the very disaster that all that racking energy is programmed to prevent. I can hardly bear imagining what that programming did to her when she returned for her babies and found them gone.

Eventually I relinquished the cabin to the mouse and her subsequent litters. After our meeting, it was more hers than mine. Unwilling to take any of the measures that humans use to claim wild space from its local inhabitants, I ceded the territory as a kind of penance. I salvaged the quilt and rugs, moved field guides and maps to the trunk of the car, and made no more claims on the building. The community now flourishes. I've wondered since how long the matriarch survived and how many of her female descendants have been involved in shredding the curtains and gutting the futon. Jeff still stores his tools there, but he sends me in to get them. He knows whoever enters will meet with a flurry of frantic mice, and he is not physically disposed, as I am, to sympathize with them. But he lets me have my way, and I let the daughters of cabin mouse have theirs.

JEFF TIGCHELAAR

PER HIS REQUEST,

a poem for Sam
on Wednesday morning
at the dining room table
as he eats his Nutella
on toast and we listen
to Aaron Copland and Sam
asks for a sip of my tea
and proceeds to chug half the mug
after which I read him what I've got

and he says it's not done
and then says it's not a real poem
it's just about us
and I say Sam
that's really all I know and then he
lunges for the paper with a marker
and says he's going to put lines
all through what I wrote so it will go away
and I say Oh no you're not you little

and now he is crying
and also he is screaming
and now I've got him pinned
and it's a struggle for the marker
and we are both fighting for the poem

MARYFRANCES WAGNER

CONTROL

I.
 Mother set four sandwich triangles
 on my plate, six Pringle chips, six
 orange slices, six apple slices and a cookie.
 She sat beside me with the same meal.

*The wrens are trying to fly, she said.
 They chirp when I talk to them. We
 nibbled and watched birds. Your father
 doesn't think Ray's a good match for you.*

*You wouldn't want to disappoint him.
 I was nineteen. She scooted closer,
 her hands bunched like a bouquet,
 her coiffed hair sprayed into place.*

We looked out the window in silence. Wrens
 chattered. We ate the last orange slice. Peels
 curled on plates in smiles, under the slice
 of sunlight slanting in.

II.
 Twenty years later, my father and I
 sat at the same table for Sunday pasta.
 We were single again, discussing
 what we might like in a mate.

*Whatever happened to Ray? he asked.
 Did he get married? I looked up.
 I thought you didn't like Ray?
 He blinked. Who told you that?*



MOTHER AND DAUGHTER ON A PEACEFUL DAY, Brent Kallenbach
 Graphite/Digitally Colored