WISING UP ANTHOLOGIES

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2008

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2012

DARING TO REPAIR: What Is It, Who Does It & Why?
2012

CONNECTED

What Remains As We All Change

Heather Tosteson & Charles D. Brockett
Editors

Wising Up Press
Decatur, Georgia

Wising Up Press
P.O. Box 2122
Decatur, GA 30031-2122
www.universaltable.org

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Catalogue-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.
LCCN: 2013954746

Wising Up ISBN: 978-0-9826933-0-8

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HEATHER TOSTESON

LIVE QUESTIONS

This anthology can be seen as flowing naturally from two of our earlier anthologies dealing with reinvention and repair (although it is very capable of standing on its own). All of them feel to me quintessentially American in their interest in how we conceptalize human connection—or the lack of it—within ourself, between us and our family, friends, romantic loves. However, the two earlier ones are filled with that constructive, can-do stance toward human relations that permeates much of our national philosophy and our psychology of self-actualization, self-realization, self-transformation, self-acceptance, co-dependency and our recovery from it—even as they contemplate the costs and limits of trying to reform our lives (and, intentionally or not, the lives of those around us) to better match our ideals of what life in general, and our lives in particular, could and should be.

In contrast, the stories, poems, and memoirs in this anthology invite us to take a more musing stance towards our experience and our relationships. They invite us to contemplate a reality that exists, often despite our best (or worst) intentions, often outside our consciousness: something continuous, impermanent, its shapes and expressions continually challenging and superceding our ideas of what love should and can be, a reality that lifts and carries us and grounds us simultaneously. For one of the essential elements of a sense of connection is a sense of time, its ineluctable flow, the losses inherent in that movement and in its inevitable destination. As a character in Margaret Karmazin's story "40 Years" observes bitterly: "They don't tell you this when you're young. . . .That by the time you love someone exquisitely, your life or theirs may soon end. If they did and you actually listened, you'd be too scared to live."

Another interesting difference here is our understanding of volition, for a sense of connection, like belief, cannot be willed into being. But it can, through the simple conjunction of presence *and* change, come to permeate

PAUL HOSTOVSKY

DAYLIGHT

In the dream my son is a little boy again,
and it feels like daylight savings time
in the fall, when we all fall back. It's a bit
of an adjustment, getting used to his
tiny body again, which he had just
finished growing out of. Home
from college now, he's a toddler again (it
makes sense in the dream) so we have to
adjust all the clocks. And it feels
strange picking him up and carrying him
on one hip, and then the other, changing
position like that, feeling his small bones
on my big bones again. I ask him if he
pooped, because it's our shared business
again, and I can't help wondering at
the imposition of it, like a curfew, though
it's no imposition in the dream—I love it,
I welcome it, like a time change in the spring
when there's more time and there's more
light, and it feels like the world is growing
young again, though really it's just as old
as ever, and growing older, and darker all the time.

POCKET COMB

When I found the complimentary black comb
the school photographer gave to my son
baring its pointy black teeth like pure
evil among the toothbrushes, I was frightened
because I didn't know where it came from or how
it got into the house, sitting on the white
bathroom sink, perfectly at home, smiling.
Nothing prepares you for this—these invasions,
these divisions of your home by the denominators
your own child carries around in his pockets
as smooth as stones. The magic of childhood
is not knowing where you end and the world
begins; is carrying pieces of the world around in your pocket
like charms—a dead beetle, a harmonica, deciduous
teeth, a complimentary black comb. The magic
beans get planted in the most unlikely places, grow
enormous and hairy in a bathroom in the time
it takes to lift the seat, take out the garbage, tie
a sneaker. One minute he's biting into the hypotenuse
of an egg salad sandwich you cut diagonally
in half for him, and the next thing his nipples
and navel have formed a face, a mystic triangle, a man
in the moon in the body, luminous and aloof,
outstripping the clouds, following you over the earth.

SHARON LEDER

THE TWO FATHERS, 1955

"No. It's not true! Shooting up heroin? Josef and Spencer? Impossible!" The screams, Sara's mother's, came from the kitchen.

What's "heroin"? Sara wondered. A word she had never heard before. Is Spencer someone bad? Sara, eight years old, had just arrived home from Public School 16, her younger brother in hand. She settled her brother down on the rug in the living room, where drawn blinds kept the room dark in the afternoons. She turned the TV set on loud to *The Merry Mailman* and rushed into the kitchen. The aroma of stuffed cabbage filled the room. She saw her mother trembling, holding the phone, and she shut the swinging kitchen door behind her.

"Why should I believe you?" her mother shouted angrily into the receiver. The ladle her mother was holding in her hand dropped to the floor. She didn't bother to pick it up. "My husband's not an addict. Do you hear?" Slamming the receiver down, she collapsed into a chair. "No, he wouldn't do this to me."

Her mother looked more bewildered than ever before, even more upset than when Sara's father began working on Saturdays.

"Mommy, please," Sara begged, grabbing her mother's arm. "What's wrong? What trouble is Daddy in?"

"No trouble, sweetheart," her mother answered feebly, stroking her daughter's hair. "It's just this call gave me a bad headache. That's all." She stood up, walked to the stove, and turned off the flame under the cabbage.

The phone rang again. With her head in her hands, her mother said, "Let it ring, Sara. We won't answer it now."

"But it could be Daddy!" Sara cried and automatically picked up the phone.

"I must tell you, Helen," the frantic voice on the other end insisted. "If the police find Josef with marks on his arms, he's finished. They'll arrest

J. J. STEINFELD

A BROTHER'S LOVE

In the hodgepodge that passes for my life, there has been one constant: my love for my older brother, Barton. Through my marriage and divorce, through the death of my father and my mother's hasty remarriage, through my numerous "career" changes, through the dissatisfaction and restlessness and loneliness that paint my life, there has been Barton. There's no doubt in my boozed-up mind that I would have let go a long time ago, and not minded my drowning one bit, if it wasn't for Barton. I stayed in this city, live alone in a small apartment, because I couldn't bear to be far from my brother.

Barton, my Barton, he's always there, in that same building, in my mind. Sure he's changed over the years, but not like the world, not the way regular people change who live ordinary lives and grow older according to Nature's plan. He wouldn't have changed nearly as much if all those medical people wouldn't have tampered with him so many times. My older brother may be fat and nearly bald and have breasts like a woman; he may roar far less frequently than in the old days, not nearly as loud, but goddamn it, he still does roar once in a while and sometimes lets out those other growling and grunting and howling sounds that used to upset my parents to no end, and got Barton put away in the first place, thirty-five years ago.

The doctors remain surprised to this day that Barton is still alive—or functioning, as they like to call it. They used to predict that he wouldn't make it past twenty-five or thirty, and now he's forty-five and there's no sign of death in his eyes. I wouldn't be surprised if Barton will outlive me, outlive everyone on this planet. I can just see him, if there ever really is a nuclear war, getting his old roar back, and roaring away as the mushroom clouds spread. Only Barton, who has never learned words or definitions, will make sense at the end. Sometimes, after drinking too much, I fear my brother will somehow be silenced before then—after all, medical science with its breakthroughs and

HANNAH THOMASSEN

ELEGY FOR MY MOTHER

She does not reach for the kindergarten-colored
cups held out, nor even fork or spoon,
though her mouth with something in it
produces something like a c
draggle-straggle strands of hair
greasy as her plate, diapers bunched
between her legs, breasts
flopping in her shirt—

(those legs, those breasts she flaunted,
always on display)

In all honesty, I tell the girl spooning up the peas,
she was not easy to live with—she was beautiful.
She had a lot of fun.

(I do not add it was no fun for me)

Still, she is my mother. I was born between
those legs, held against those breasts.
I want to hold her dear.
I want to brush that dim, lank hair,
bathe those tender parts—
but she is unresponsive to my touch
or bats my hands away—
I lose what heart I had.

Her fingers dabble in the soup,
drool dithers down her chin,
lunch is done. Bib untied, hands
and face wiped relatively clean,
and she is wheeled into the lined-up array
of human disarray slumping in the hall.

I sit with her a while, I do.
I watch her nod and twitch.
Then turn tail and run, defeated
by her stubborn somnolence.

I never do go back.

But when she dies, oh how I laugh!
When she slicks outta here
through the infinitely expandable doorway of death
to rise up laughing through the trees—

The sudden kinship then. The good, clean love.

Now that was fun.

MAXINE SILVERMAN

THE ONE STORY WE TELL

When I finally locate Mother
among the old folks in the day room,
all soft in their chairs, when I stand over her,
mouth puckered and sunk,
bosom sprawled in her own lap, I kneel before her
and touch her arm. She brings her dull
her listing gaze to mine. At last, I think,
almost falling where I crouch,
here you are, helpless,
harmless.

Smack, smack to kingdom come, rattle
those three teeth in their gourd, spit
her maiming words back: no sport,
no sport in that. Besides,
I wrote that poem already, years before I knew
life would have its way with me, too.

Most of us have one story we tell. Oh, we might shine
its shoes, buy a snazzy book bag, new crayons,
but when you flip through the album, the same face
grins from the white grid, hopeful, more or less.

What I want is for someone to snatch me from the flames,
beat out the fire. When she holds me and I whimper
it hurts she murmurs *I know, baby, I know.*

Someone did that once for me.
Helen held me with her singed brown hands
fifty years and more. Last Friday she died,
about 7 p.m. Her sister called to say
Helen wearied, that's all,
looked around—*here*
is a good enough place. This is far enough.

Though the fire's ash and scars fade
my mother still knows who I am.
Look how she smiles.

MARK TARALLO

LAST SUMMER

Visiting the old house on holiday, I usually slip upstairs for a look out the back bedroom window. I see the four houses on Highridge Avenue, small east-coast houses, set close together. The brick is wine-dark and somber even in the summer sun. The houses almost appear to be crouching, covering up, holding their shapes with a vague sense of shame. All four nearly identical—two stories and an attic eave. In each eave, two small attic windows, like unblinking eyes. The houses are dwarfed by massive black oaks, with furrowed trunks that rise into a thousand branches.

The sense of defeat that these small crouching houses now suggest to me gives me the strange feeling that my childhood consisted of years of wrong impressions. That sense of defeat—which could simply be disguised guilt, leftover from disloyalty—wars against the sentimental lessons which persist in my memory: Justin taught me that trees were psychedelic and the McKennas taught me that men, not women, were the true romantics. I think that the McKennas themselves, in their stoicism, were actually great romantics; they knew that silence was the highest honor to bestow on mystery. But a Hallmark card sentiment like that would be the very last thing any of them would utter.

Highridge Avenue is a small street, only two blocks long. Justin Innocente lived in the middle. He played the bass; a succession of pretty girls came to his house and rang his doorbell. Older, too cool to hang out with us, Justin only registered as a presence through music. He was enamored with sixties psychedelia, and out his bedroom window came old Pink Floyd and The Zombies, so loud you could hear it from the street. The music was perpetual summer: blissed-out echoing voices and shimmering guitar notes soaked in reverb. It was thirty years ago—I was not yet fourteen—but I

remember it as if it were last summer.

In the middle of Highridge Avenue lived the McKennas. There were seven McKenna children, six boys and a girl. I loved that, as I was an only child. All of the McKennas had nicknames except Ray. Donald was Dags, Marilyn was Mags, Bobby was Beeks, Karl was Keeks. They gave others nicknames too. My name is Ralph Stallo and they called me Kato Potato; I don't know why. Ray called me Kates for short. The McKennas were poor (well, not actually poor; lower middle class, I guess, but comparatively poor) and the inside of their house bordered on the squalid. I loved that too, as my house was clean and dull. Their mother was dead and their father was a sullen-but-harmless drunk.

Of the six boys, three (Keeks, Beeks and Ray) had hemophilia. The word impressed me; saying "Ray is a hemophiliac" made me feel important, and gave me the heady sensation of being wise, an explainer. In actuality, I knew next to nothing of the disease itself. Everything I knew could be encapsulated in one statement: once Ray started bleeding, it would be hard for him to stop. This gave him a kind of permanent fragility, but also an odd transformational power. What is more commonplace than a kid falling, and then bleeding, from an elbow abrasion or a scraped knee? But for Ray, a hemophiliac, this suggested catastrophe. He wasn't ordinary, he was better than ordinary.

A rock-true sense of right and wrong persisted with the McKennas, the most unshakable and the most unself-conscious I have ever encountered. Their disapproval of the crueler kids in the neighborhood was quiet but clear. The boys that were free from hemophilia, Dags and Billy, were athletic and wholesome-handsome and scrupulously honest, but too unfashionable to be very popular around town (they wore cheap sneakers, shunned partying, and refused to chase girls). They were stoical, unacknowledging of frivolity (except in the surreal world of their own nicknames) and kind, but they never drew attention to their own kindness. No McKenna ever mocked me, even though I was sensitive and over-excitable and kind of cowardly. I quivered sometimes and did funny things. Sometimes excitement would prove too much for me and I would jump up and down like a pogo stick and frenetically shake my hands, fluttering them like pom-poms. The McKennas would smile when I did this but they never made fun of me, and the privileged disbelief I felt at their acceptance made me shake my hands even harder.

My favorite McKenna was Ray. Ray had hemophilia, and he was the

MARK BRAZAITIS

"MAGIC" PABLO

Pablo and I liked to play "Let's Imagine." We'd be walking down the street, a basketball cradled under one of our arms. Clouds would be gathering in the east, as they tended to do in early evening. A light rain—*chipi-chipi* is what everyone in town called it—might even be falling.

"Let's imagine," Pablo would say, "that Michael Jordan is walking with us."

He would smile. "What would these people say?" he would ask, pointing to the women in dark blue *cortes* and white *húipiles*, the native dress in this town in the northern mountains of Guatemala. "What would they do?"

"They'd be amazed," I'd say. "They wouldn't know what to do."

Pablo would agree. "They'd probably run. But we'd just keep walking down the street, the three of us, to the basketball court."

Then Pablo would ask, "And how would we divide the teams?"

"Michael Jordan versus the two of us."

Pablo would consider this. "No," he'd say, "it'd be you and Michael Jordan versus me."

Pablo was sixteen when I met him, another indistinguishable face in my English class of forty-five students.

I was twenty-five when I arrived as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Santa Cruz Verapaz, a town of four thousand people, in January of 1991. I was prepared to be alone during my entire two-year service. I figured this was the way my life was supposed to be: silent sacrifice. I wasn't, at any rate, expecting to make a friend my first night in town.

But the night after my first English class, Pablo knocked on my door. I invited him in, and he entered, looking around shyly. On a table in my dining room, he saw a copy of *Sports Illustrated* that my stepfather had sent

from home. He pointed to the cover photo.

"Robert Parish," he said. "The Chief."

Pablo, it turned out, knew as much about basketball and the NBA as I did, and I was a former sportswriter.

I don't know where he got his information. *El Gráfico*, the only newspaper from the capital sold daily in our town, rarely had stories about American basketball. A Mexican TV station that reached Santa Cruz showed NBA games on Saturday mornings, but the town's electricity was so unpredictable—occasionally it would be off for three or four days in a row—that I wondered how many of these games he could have seen. Pablo just seemed to know, and he was familiar not just with Robert Parish and other All-Stars; he could talk about obscure players like Chris Dudley and Jerome Kersey as if he were an NBA beat reporter.

Pablo would come to my house at night and we would draft imaginary line-ups. Pablo liked non-American players. Hakeem Olajuwon was his favorite. He liked Mark Aguirre because he'd heard that Aguirre's father was born in Mexico. Dikembe Mutombo. Manute Bol. Drazen Petrovic. Selecting our imaginary teams, he'd always draft these players first.

I didn't get it. Why would he pick Vlade Divac instead of Charles Barkley? But the longer I lived in Guatemala, the better I understood.

The American presence in Guatemala is about as subtle as a Shaquille O'Neal slam dunk. Pepsi covers entire storefronts with its logo. In Santa Cruz, the town basketball court is painted with a Coca-Cola motif, right down to the backboards. In remote villages, children wear "Ninja Turtles" T-shirts.

We had long arguments about who was the best player in the NBA. Hakeem Olajuwon versus Michael Jordan. Hakeem versus Patrick Ewing. Hakeem versus Magic Johnson.

Pablo stuck by his man.

Pablo and I played basketball on the court next to the cow pasture. Pablo was taller than Muggsy Bogues but shorter than Spud Webb, both of whom played in the NBA. When we first began playing, I could move him around with my body, backing him close to the basket. If I missed, I was tall enough to get the rebound. In games to twenty-one, I would beat him by nine, eleven, thirteen points.

Pablo was the first to tell me about Magic Johnson. He came over to my house one night, late.

"What is it?" I asked.

SUZANNE HERMAN

TEN DAYS

There are two kinds of snowfalls. It used to snow here every winter. Whether a dusting or a storm there would always be flakes, gathering on doorposts and window ledges behind which people sat, warm and dry. But once the last storm broke, the largest the town had ever seen, it never fell again. It was like we had used up our allotment, like we'd been greedy and were being punished, like we'd spent it all on one last hurray. It hasn't snowed here in over twenty years. But I was here when it did, and I still know about the snow. I know, for instance, that there are two kinds of snowfalls. There is the one that leaves the air gray and foggy, the other that leaves it sharp and refreshing to breathe. People in the first kind of snowstorm grow irritated, they stomp the water from their boots and shout over the noise and inconvenience of the snowplows. Families who try and venture out in that weather are soon driven away by ice and sludge and the layer of dirt that lies hidden beneath even the cleanest snow. The second type of snowstorm does not complicate the world. It is not an obstacle to overcome. Instead, things are laid bare. The slate is wiped clean of grime and replaced by pure, flat light, encompassing everything. It silences the noise and casts a hush over people and homes.

In first grade Lucy and I had cubbies next to each other at school. The colored paper that hung above my cutout in the back wall of the classroom was blue, hers red. Together, I told her proudly, we made purple.

For the first few years of our friendship I recognized no difference between Lucy and me. When we played make-believe under the slide at recess we imagined the same fantasies; when we spent sleepless nights giggling in each other's bedrooms we had the same questions and the same fears. To me our hair was not respectively blond and brown but jointly a dark gold.

STEPHANIE HART

THE GIRL IN THE NEXT BED

The light from the hallway fell into the room, and I could just about see the girl in the bed next to mine. She had Shirley Temple curls and a smile that turned up at the corners. It was my first night at boarding school in the fall of 1956. The room felt big and cold. Our beds were lined up in rows facing one another.

The girl made a grumbling sound in her throat. "Who are you?" she asked. I could hear a smile in her voice and a frown too.

"I'm a second grader," I said. "My name is Stephanie."

The girl leaned closer to me, taking the sheets and blanket with her.

"I'm Jill. I'm in third grade. I'm from Florida. I like alligators and salamanders. I don't like it here. My parents are going to take me home soon."

"I live in New York City," I said. "I like swimming and ice skating and—"

Loud heavy footsteps were outside our door. "Go to sleep, girls," our headmistress, Miss Rohm, said in a deep, scary voice. I could feel her presence in the hallway waiting for us to comply.

I closed my eyes and opened them again, trying to adjust to the darkness. The sheets felt scratchy and unfamiliar. I ran my hand against the silky rim of the blanket, which was soft to the touch.

My parents had driven me to school earlier that day, but now that seemed a long time ago, and they seemed far away. I turned toward the window. A sheer curtain covered it and through the curtain I tried to see the night sky. Finally Miss Rohm began walking in another direction.

"Are you asleep," Jill whispered, "or just pretending?"

"I'm awake."

"Wanna climb out the window and look at the stars?"

"Isn't it cold out?" I asked.

Jill laughed. "We can take our blankets."

JUDITH GILLE

IN GRACIA'S KITCHEN

There are many women, including myself, who rack up thousands of frequent flier miles each year traveling the world in search of themselves. It's a major theme in women's travel writing. From Isak Dinesen and Beryl Markham to Frances Mayes and Elizabeth Gilbert, women have written compelling memoirs about how their stints in faraway places not only changed their lives, but also helped define who they ultimately became.

Yet the majority of the world's female population doesn't have the luxury of trotting around the globe in hopes of defining who they are, creating a new life abroad, or discovering love in places like Italy, Africa or Indonesia. My friend Gracia certainly doesn't. She has a husband and four children to support. But one day, while hanging out in her kitchen, I come to the realization that she's traveled as far as I have in the eleven years we've known each other. Without ever leaving home.

I've been hunched over my computer all morning, editing an essay, and need to stretch my legs and quench the thirst that is ever-present on Mexico's arid central plateau. So I stroll across the alley to Gracia's store in search of a Sidral. But the doors to her tiny *tienda* are closed.

Her youngest son, Cholo, is squatting on the steps above me, bouncing a soccer ball between his legs. He points toward the kitchen, indicating that his mom is up there.

Gracia's kitchen lies at the back of her house and is reachable only from an outside set of concrete stairs. I make the steep climb, not only for the soda but because it's our daily habit to check in with each other. I check in with her because her house is lively and full of people I care about. She checks in with me, I think, because she sees me as lonely and a bit pathetic. My

MARGARET KARMAZIN

FORTY YEARS

1971

"You were gassed? Far out," said Brenda.

She leaned forward, the better to observe this hippie friend of David's. David was Brenda's teaching buddy at Montbleu High and having one of his frequent parties. The woman sported the hippie chic look Brenda wished she herself could achieve, but wasn't the physical type for it.

"Yeah, the pigs gassed us. It was amazing. Everyone scattered, Susan and Terry ended up in jail. They met some really interesting people there."

"I'll bet," said Peter, another friend of David's Brenda had never seen before tonight.

David was gay and Brenda loved him. Not romantically; she wasn't that dumb, but in a best friend way. He was always trying to fix her up, as if he had a mission to marry her off.

"Why?" she asked him once. "Are you afraid I'll come on to you?"

"I just think you're the marryin' kind. So, I keep my eyes open."

So why had he never fixed her up with this Peter?

Hippie chick tossed her long hair and shot Peter a contemptuous look. "Yeah, we *did* meet interesting people in there. We invited them to join us at the commune we're starting up."

Peter smiled in the manner of a jaded police detective. It was so convincing, Brenda wondered if he actually *was* a cop. But if so, he might have gotten pissed at the reference to "the pigs."

"I'll bet you're a vegetarian too," Peter said in his sly way and for a moment, Brenda felt torn, part of her sympathetic to the woman's hippie culture, another part disdainful and enjoying Peter's dig.

"Do you have a problem with that?" the girl snapped before turning away, dismissing someone so bourgeois.

Brenda looked Peter over. She could tell somehow that he hadn't gone to college, or if he had, possibly on the GI bill. He had a different look from the preppie men she usually dated. His clothes seemed just a shade gangsterish.

As the party broke up, he approached her by the front door. She was staying to help David clean up. Looking down at her, he said, "You want to go out sometime?"

She wasn't surprised. The whole thing seemed fated, as if she had no choice in the matter. Not that she minded. "Okay," she said, writing down her number.

"Nice meeting you," he finished before going out the door.

It seemed forever before the guests were all gone. *Finally*, she and David were alone. He said, "I caught that, girl. He asked you out, didn't he?"

"Yeah. How come you never mentioned him? I thought we discussed all your friends."

He picked up wine glasses, holding them between his fingers in the manner of a seasoned waiter. "I didn't think he was your type, hon."

"Yeah?" said Brenda. She ran the dishwater hot and sudsy

"He's pretty blue collar. Moved here from New Jersey a couple of years ago with his wife."

Brenda felt herself grow hot all over. "What? He's *married?* That *bastard!*"

"No, no," said David quickly, "he's divorced now. She was a piece of work, ran around on him, stole drugs or something."

"Wow." So he was from New Jersey; that explained that difference in the way he dressed. She had a certain TV image of the state just across the river from her own.

"You sure he's over her?"

"Far as I know, he's washed his hands of her. Good riddance."

"What does he do, this blue-collar man?" she asked, grinning. Why was she grinning? Her facial expressions seemed to be out of control.

"Electrician. They do okay in the money department, but—"

"But—" she repeated.

"Well, anyone I know you've dated has had a college degree and that one guy from Philly was plain ole *rich*. So, I assumed—"

She was staring into space. "He seems so—I don't know, dangerous and stable at the same time?"

David wiggled his arched eyebrows. "Dangerous and stable, oooo, I

WILLIAM CASS

TRUTH IS

I almost threw the letter away. It looked like junk mail. But when I opened it to be sure and saw that it was from the law firm representing the children's hospital where my son, Sam, was a longtime patient, I sat down on the wicker chair in the entryway and read it through twice. The content informed me that there was a payment due of just under eleven thousand dollars for his broken leg and hospital stay earlier in the fall. It said my insurance company had denied the claim because it appeared that the injury had not been caused by an accident. It requested payment in full in a timely manner in order to avoid litigation.

I blinked several times and looked out the window. Some kids were climbing on the utility cage at the school where I worked across the street. Normally, I would have gone outside and chased them off, but I just sat there staring as the dim, awful blush that had begun as I read spread through me. I was sitting like that with the letter grasped between two fingers when my Sam's home nurse, Cindy, came out of his room pushing his empty wheelchair, which she tucked behind the couch. It was the end of her shift. We looked at each other.

"Uh, oh," she said. "What?"

I told her what the letter said.

She pursed her lips in that matter-of-fact way of hers and said, "Well, I told you what the ER doc said the last time she and I were in there for a broken bone. He pulled me aside privately and said, 'Do we have a problem here?' I told him I didn't think so, but he told me in no uncertain terms that they wouldn't take another incident in her care lightly. Or words to that effect."

This latest injury had occurred at my ex-wife Shannon's house on a Saturday, so Cindy hadn't been there, and, of course, neither had I. I'd been over at my classroom doing lesson plans and didn't return home to Shannon's

MILTON TEICHMAN

INFLUENCE

"It's not that I don't enjoy the children," Debra said to David on Sunday morning during her weekend visit in Rhinecliff. They had returned from a scenic walk along the Hudson River and were now finishing their breakfast. The fall semester was soon to begin, and Debra was anticipating returning to her kindergarten class in the city. "It's that the classes are so large I can't possibly give the children the attention they need."

David listened. He could hear the frustration in her voice.

"Would you believe it, David, there's been a cut-back in teacher aides? I'll have less assistance in the classroom this fall than I had last year."

David shook his head sympathetically.

"I hate to be complaining this way. It must be boring."

"Not at all, I want you to be happy." He remembered telling her more than once that her happiness made her all the more beautiful. He was saddened by the predicament in which she now found herself. There was a solution to her problem, he thought. Debra would find it. Her good cheer would return.

Who would have thought that at age fifty, a year after the pain and disorientation of divorce, he would meet a kindred spirit, a woman his own age, a woman who loved the arts as he did—literature, painting, music—who had a generous spirit and a loving heart and welcomed intimacy in the fullest sense. Two wonderful years together. He remembered their many walks in the city until they were drunk with fatigue, their hikes amidst the beauty of the Hudson Valley, their hours together at concerts and museums, their conversations about the things they loved and the things they wished for. Though Debra lived in Brooklyn and he lived north of the city in Rhinecliff, the distance between their homes was not an impediment. Debra loved Rhinecliff on the Hudson. To her, living her entire life in the city, this quiet hamlet was *the country*.

Soon after they met, he told her about his work as a college teacher of English, about the breakdown of his marriage, about his son Edward, who was now on his own. She told him about two long-term relationships that ended. She spoke about her disappointments in a matter-of-fact manner, without sadness or bitterness. "I've been *almost* married twice," she said, a gentle smile on her face.

Now, sitting across from her on this late-August morning in Rhinecliff, he witnessed a mood of dejection in Debra that saddened him.

"And there's all the clerical detail that's expected," she continued, "daily lesson plans that have to be turned in—despite the fact that I've proven myself as a teacher for thirty years."

"As a teacher myself, I can imagine how you feel."

Debra paused, as if unsure about continuing. She looked down at her coffee cup and then up at David. "I care about the children, David, and I know I can give them something . . . But I guess after so many years I'm just depleted. I want a new work experience—a real change in my life."

"I can understand."

"If I stay on the job another five years, I can get a larger pension—but I don't want to be carried out." She laughed nervously. "If I leave, I should do so while I'm well—while I can bring energy to whatever else I choose to do."

"What would you like to do, Debra?"

She ran her fingers through her close-cropped brown hair. Her hazel eyes that David loved to look at, seemed to take on a richer coloring.

"I think I'd like to take a year or so to get a second master's degree."

"It's a great idea!"

"There's a master's program in the humanities at the New School. It's designed for adults who want to expand themselves. I could take courses in music, art, literature, philosophy . . . " Her face brightened as she spoke.

"You'd be terrific in such a program, Debra. For you it would be a form of recreation."

"Nice of you to say that, David." She chuckled, a sound David was pleased to hear. "But I need to be realistic, too. I haven't been in a classroom for twenty-five years. I'm excited, but I'm apprehensive also."

A week later, on the telephone, she told David that her plan was to take a single course at the New School while she continued to teach during the coming fall semester. She could get credit for that course toward the degree. If she continued to think positively about full-time graduate study, she would

LORI LEVY

FLOWERS AND WOLVES

It's a pattern we weave, a repeating design
where dark threads follow the lighter ones
and themes recur—the flowers, the wolves—
though shifts are sudden and never planned.
On and on as each new row
conforms to the whole. From time to time
the needle slips, threads unwind:
errors, too, part of the pattern.
A process so familiar it begins to tire,
the same responses to the same mistakes;
the carpet suddenly grown so heavy
it threatens to crush if we don't let go.
Together we rip out weft and warp.
Create a clearing. Open. Unknown.

JAMES VESCOVI

ENOUGH

She said it was *enough*, but she was dying, what did she know? Her cancer came on quickly. She rebelled, denied, and then accepted it. Toward the end, she went peacefully and told me that my suffering after her death would be eased if I saw things as she did.

Mary Ellen and I were married for twenty-nine years. We'd been filled with such idealism: a honeymoon in Costa Rica; a cozy starter home with a backyard hammock; and three children, all girls, who arrived in the first five years. Despite loads of dirty diapers, slim paychecks, and a sex life dulled by exhaustion, we maintained a dream of a happy marriage for as long as we could.

After the first ten years, I finally was brave enough to admit to myself that things were not right. I felt no fire for my wife, not even a tiny flame. The marriage was like some leftover in the fridge, which you'd rather discard than reheat. She must have felt the same because my birthday presents from her could have been picked out by a stranger. When the girls were away at summer camp, and Mary Ellen and I had the house to ourselves, she worked alone in her garden, while I tinkered in the basement or read in the den.

When I told her how I felt, she didn't reciprocate. Instead, she tried to prop the marriage up by being more attentive and more available, in and out of the bedroom. But she couldn't keep it up for long and eventually she made her own feelings known. We switched roles, and I became the savior. In the end, we realized we were sinking together. We became angry. With children at stake, a standoff developed: Which one of us would quit first?

Neither of us did, and life continued. I was vice president of a chain of regional grocery stores, and Mary Ellen was a housewife and part-time volunteer at a home for battered women. We took the kids on vacations to Yosemite and New Orleans; we dined out with a coterie of friends; and the girls were doing well in school and in sports. Our middle daughter was a state

champion in the high jump. As they became teenagers, and Mary Ellen had more time on her hands, she took evening classes to get a master's degree in Spanish literature so that she could teach junior college students, a longtime dream of hers. Everything was fine, except for us.

There was no adultery or violence—no meteor strike from a dark past secret whose impact sent up a cloud of dust and choked us off. There was no animosity between us caused by radically different political views or disgusting personal habits. We simply stopped caring about one another. Worse, neither of us could recall—I hadn't a damn clue—what had brought us together as lovers in the first place. That precious, barely invisible thing a couple possesses on their wedding day, whose potential is bigger and better than both of them together—to me it was as mysterious and ungraspable as a quantum particle.

Then, a flash of hope! In our eighteenth year of marriage, Mary Ellen and I came simultaneously to the same realization: If we could just hold on until the girls entered college, bide our time in this becalmed sea, we might be able to resuscitate our relationship. The stress of raising children would subside, and we would have the time and resources to get reacquainted and to heal. We would be in our late forties, which was years away from coronary malaise and the first signs of Alzheimer's. Mary Ellen and I discussed it with a marriage counselor, who encouraged us to hold on. Mary Ellen saw it as a flower of the agave family, which needs decades before it first blooms.

When our youngest went away to college—literally, the day we dropped her off at Denison—Mary Ellen and I were like teenagers who had a weekend to themselves. We were giddy. We made love at odd hours and places. We made last-minute trips to lakeside inns. We consumed expensive wines by candlelight. I surprised her with tickets to Madrid. She brought out old dresses that she asked me to tear off her.

At first, we were too tense to feel joy. We seemed suspended in air, waiting for our feet to alight on new ground. We held our breath to see if the dark cloud hanging above us for so long would lift. Were we strong enough to will it away? Could we count on a plain old-fashioned miracle?

We worked hard at it. We tried to love and even to like each other. I planted bulbs in the garden. We read McCullough's *John Adams* together. But familiar feelings resurfaced: indolence, passivity, fatigue. Neither of us was much interested in the thoughts of the other, let alone dreams and aspirations. There was no love; there was no hate. We were tuned to a wavelength of

FELICIA MITCHELL

NEED SOMEBODY TO LOVE

My lover is a ghost. When I need to turn to him in the middle of the night, I open the front door and step outside to face the sky. I whisper to him, and he touches me with his wisdom the way he used to hold me with his arms. He knows something I do not know. I feel a need for this knowledge well up inside me like desire. The stars sparkle. I am not naïve enough to think that the biggest star is his sigh. He is dead, voiceless save for the words I give to him. I know the sighs are mine, my sighs, my voice burning in light that is shining here light years from a past that I can barely fathom it is so far gone. He can fathom everything. He knows what I cannot know.

He knows me now. I know it. He knew me then. I know it. There was a time when he was here with me, my lover, taking my clothes off on a quilt in the backyard where we would lie near the chicken coop and take each other's clothes off and put them back on and take them off again before dawn. Those nights, the stars felt heavier, like heartache, a reminder of how small we were in the face of infinity. We held them off with our talk. Our whispers about this and about that, about everything we wanted to say to each other, were a tent protecting us from the entire universe. We lived in our own world. We were innocent together in our need to be immortal for each other, even if we were also worldly enough to know that we were the opposite of immortal. We wanted to keep each other safe from harm and delusions. Who knew when we first began our story that my cells would multiply, his brain would bleed, and one of us would leave this earth before the other?

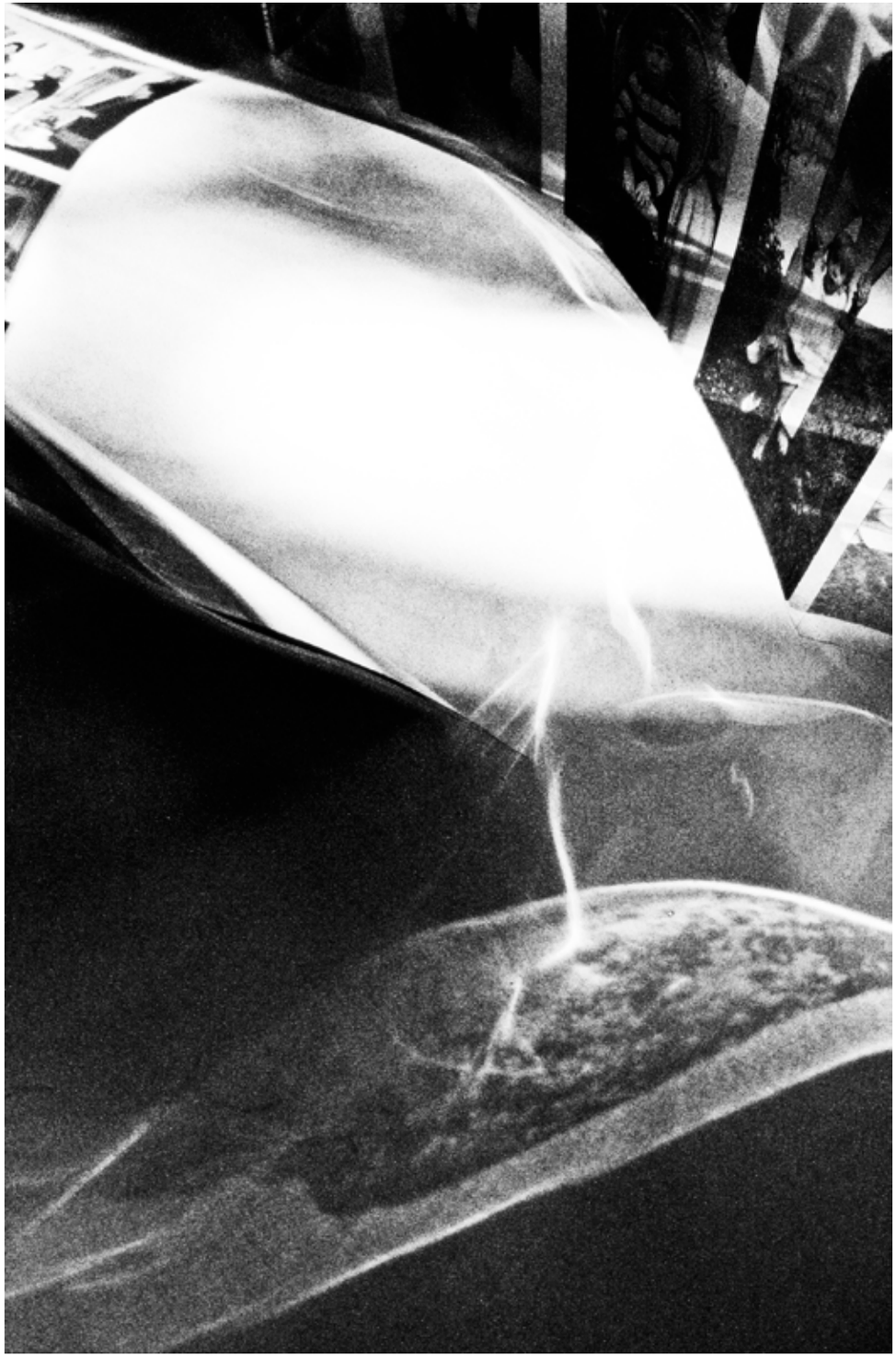
It is a true story. I got sick when we first found each other. He held me closer. For him, I wanted to survive. For him, I learned the who-who-who of the Great Horned Owl and other codes for longing that nature gave us. For me, he learned the language of poetry. We reversed our roles. He became the poet when we made love, I the scientist who experimented with his rhymes. We reversed our roles. He remembered he was the scientist and asked me

to explain how much I loved him in so many words, with great precision. I pointed to the Milky Way. I said, "There it is. I want to survive."

Words could have failed us. They almost did when he said he liked me better with long hair, hair that would fall around his shoulders when we slept outside or inside, warming him with its weight, the weight of our world. Before I lost it, I would lay my head on his chest and drape this hair across him, the two of us hand in hand even with our hands far apart. After I got sick, I had no hair for him to caress, only the memory of hair and small breasts on a thin body. Sometimes before it was time to sleep, to take off my scarf, I would take my scarf off my head and unwrap it, laying it across his shoulders like a shroud. Sometimes he would touch my scar. He did not want me to become his ghost. To cheer me up, he called me his space alien. I was a space alien without having to travel to outer space but instead into clinical rooms where I sat wired into my future. He said he loved his space alien even if she did not have long hair. I laughed and cried and tried hard not to become a ghost. I took my medicine. He kept trying to love me the way I was, different and the same.

Some nights when we were still together, here, before we were here and there, together, the moon would be full. We loved the stars, and we also loved the moon with the stars. It would make us drink wine and go outside, leaving a warm bed and woolen blanket to listen for the breathing of deer while sticks and rocks poked through his mother's faded quilt. One of these nights, drunk not with wine but my fear of my fate, I let go of the earth. I let my time come before it was time for me to go. I was ready to launch into outer space. As I was levitating, he grabbed me hard and hovered there a time with me before I was convinced I would not float away. He held onto me the way I would later let go of him: hard and fast and crying in the face of what life gives us, death. The sky was close that night, and far away, and it was quiet in the woods next to the place where we finally came down to earth, or the ground, and slept with the owls and deer and chickens. We were where we were supposed to be that night. I am not sure we are now.

I was the one who was supposed to die, or not die. I was the one who was sick, her hair falling out, her breast excised, her cells multiplying fast the way time flies and wrinkles in time. Even before it was my turn, I wanted to be the first to die. I wanted to die in his arms. I wanted to be his memory. What did he do with the long blond strands he found in the house during that time, other than telling me that he had found another hair? I wonder if I



FRANK SALVIDIO

PARADOX

It always seems forever since I saw
You last, yet like you never left when you
Are here, as though there were some hidden law
Of physics which, although unproved, is true
For us—a law which measures space and time
For us and demarcates our universe
As does a sonnet's necessary rhyme,
Sometimes elaborate, and sometimes terse.
Yet there's no poetry that I can write
To explicate this paradox—to give
Me understanding why I feel delight
Or am bereft according as we live
Or near nor far apart—nor calculus
Of love that measures distances for us.

JANET LUNDER HANAFIN

THE QUESTION

A short story in two parts

JULIE

"Whose wife will she be in Heaven?"

Julie jerked her head up so fast that Owen turned to see what was the matter.

"That's right," Pastor Maggie said, pausing in her stroll down the center aisle. "They asked, 'WHOSE WIFE will she be in Heaven?'"

Pastor Maggie was telling about the woman in the Bible who had married seven brothers. She called the oldest brother Abner. When Abner died, Martha, the unfortunate widow, was married off to his next younger brother who also perished, and then on down the line until she got to number seven, who succumbed as well. It was a trick question. The Pharisees were trying to trip up Jesus on some theological technicality.

Theological technicality? Really? Marriage was "til death do us part." Julie clearly remembered that. When she was a bride it had seemed a long time down the road, and heartbreaking if you stopped to think about it. Owen's' wife for eternity . . . Now that was something she hadn't considered lately.

Next to her, Owen was paging through the hymnal, looking to put his bulletin in the right page for the hymn that would follow the sermon. That was Owen. The Eagle Scout. Always planning ahead. Always prepared. Their wills were done, trusts set up for the grandchildren.

Bible woman, Martha, must have been a real femme fatale, Julie thought, with emphasis on the fatale. Julie wondered why, by the time Martha got to about number four, the boys hadn't figured out something was fishy and gone looking for plainer but less deadly spouses. She would guess that when it was the youngest brother's turn he had tried to run, screaming, from the altar.