**When Are You Coming Home?** (first appeared in *Blackbird* 10.2)

Robert Cannon kept busy in his new part-time job as a locksmith. He'd spent thirty years running his own handyman business, everything from window repair to ceiling fan installation, plumbing and electrical to carpentry. He was quick and reliable, and his boss — a man half his age who wouldn't know a pin-and-tumbler if it hit him in the face — called on him often. In this new city, Cannon drove the unfamiliar neighborhoods with a map open on the seat next to him while his wife took swim lessons down at the Y. People were always moving, landlords switching locks for the next tenant, and the jobs blurred into one another: empty rooms, vinyl blinds with slats missing, the odors of cigarettes and cat urine in the carpet submerged by the fumes of cheap paint. Pop out the knob and the cylinder plug, rearrange the pins, pop it back. In and out, easy peasy, a paycheck to flesh out the savings. That was fine. He didn't need money so much as he needed to keep busy.

His boss called early that morning. We got a live one for you. Lady's all upset. Right-o, let's get on over there, pronto. At home, Cannon sometimes made a joke of his boss's strange patter: Right-o, buck-o, let's get that dinner out pronto, he'd say to Jenny, and sometimes she'd smile before she caught herself. The job was in an older neighborhood in central Phoenix, not far from where he and Jenny had rented a little condo off Central Avenue, their own house up north in Flagstaff locked up tight, the phone disconnected, the utility bills forwarded, Jenny's piano covered with a sheet. Cannon had taped a small *Out of Business* sign in the window of his shop.

The job was on a street called Heatherbrae. Cannon said the name aloud, liking the airy sound of it. He pulled up to the curb and left the engine idling with the A/C on low as he gathered his paperwork. Though it was only March, the days down here were already well into the 80s, thin blue skies and sunshine that burned his pale skin through the truck windows. He rummaged in the glovebox for the tube of sunscreen he'd put in there. His hand fell on a plastic baggie of keys, spares he'd kept from earlier jobs. He held them up to the light for a moment then tucked them away.

In the Heatherbrae yard, a cardboard sign stuck on two sticks and plugged into the grass read YARD SALE. EVERYTHING MUST GO! Several blankets stretched across the browned-out Bermuda grass. On the blankets were heaps of clothing, mismatched dinner plates, a food processor, an old rotary phone. Dangling from a branch of a small olive tree was a wedding dress. As Cannon got out of his truck, a woman stepped from the doorway and flung an armful of what appeared to be men's flannel shirts onto a blanket. The woman stood next to the blanket with her hands on her hips. She looked at Cannon. She'd been crying, he could tell, her face blotchy red. She was young, maybe late 20s, with brown hair that corked off her head in tight curls. About Felice's age, or a bit older.

She said, "I'm not ready yet. Come back later."

"Ma'am," Cannon held up his hands. He pointed at the magnetic sign on the door of his truck. "I'm here for the locks."

She stared at him a moment and then nodded. "Oh. Right. There's only two doors, front and back. I'll show you." She waved him to follow her. He stepped over the edge of a blanket, over an old manual typewriter and a box of books. He caught a title, *Serpent-Handling Believers*.

The house was a small postwar brick ranch, with low ceilings, plaster walls, a great room with painted concrete floors, casement windows with the cranks missing. Inside, a girl sat on a giant pillow on the floor in front of the television. Cartoon noises echoed in the sparsely furnished room.

"Gigi, turn that down. Good grief." The girl didn't move, just kept staring at the cartoon characters on the screen. The woman turned the volume down. "I don't usually let her watch TV. Look at her. It's like crack." She ruffled the girl's hair, dropped a kiss on her forehead. The girl kept her eyes on the screen. The child was about his granddaughter's age, six or seven. Cannon had seen his grandchildren only twice in four months, since his daughter-in-law's funeral. His son's burial. The other grandparents had custody, of course, no question there. No question.

The woman said, “I lost my purse. Left it right in the shopping cart.” She thumped her forehead with the heel of her hand. “My license has my address on it. It’s probably overkill, but better to be safe, right? There’s the back door there. Can I get you something to drink?”

Her hair was a bit of a wonder, actually. He had the urge to pull on a curl, to watch it spring back. “No, ma’am. I’m fine. I have water in the truck.”

“I’m Kyla,” she said. “Just holler if you need anything. I’ll be in and out.”

“Bob,” he said, though he’d been Robert his entire life. “Thank you.”

He set his toolbox near the back door and pulled a new set of keys from his bag of tricks, as Jenny called it. He pictured her down at the Y, in her swim cap and goggles that left deep indents around her nose and eyes and hairline. She had never learned to swim and had always been terrified of the water. When they moved down from the cool pines of Flagstaff to the desert of Phoenix, with all of its flashing backyard pools, she’d decided to give it a try. What else am I going to do? she said. I mean, really, what? She took private lessons with a young man who competed in triathlons, his arms and seemingly hairless chest lean and roped with muscles. Jenny practiced floating on her back or lying face down in three feet of water. Prostrate, she clawed and clenched at the young man’s hands as if she were sliding off a cliff. She’d flail upward, gasping, until her feet touched bottom. At home, in the condo’s heated pool, she’d get a death grip on the tile gutter and practice putting her face in the water, blowing bubbles, her silver hair poking out from the edges of her cap. Every time, she jerked up for air as if someone were trying to hold her down. Cannon could swim fine and he offered to help her practice, but she didn’t want his help. At the pool, he sat in the shade with the newspaper unread on his lap. The smell of orange blossoms and cut grass hung like fog in the air. He obsessively rubbed sunscreen along his pale neck, into the tops of his hands.

He had the backdoor knob off when he noticed the little girl, Gigi, standing next to him. She hopped on one foot then switched to the other foot. Her hair was cut short as a boy’s, but he could see her mother’s curl in it, little swirls along her scalp. The shortness of the bangs suggested she’d gotten hold of the scissors, and the short cut was a fixup job.

“Can I help?” she said. “Daddy lets me help. I’m a really good helper.”

Cannon picked up two screws he’d set aside. “You can hold these for me.” She grinned and held out cupped hands. Cannon’s hand trembled as he set the screws in her palms. He put the knob back together, popped it back in its slot, and tested the new key.

“Looks good.” He held his hand out. Gigi, the tip of her tongue taut against her upper lip, poured the screws from her hands as if they were precious gems.

“You’re a good apprentice,” he told her.

“I know.” She nodded, eyes wide.

“Let’s do the other one, then.” He picked up his tools and headed to the front door. Gigi trailed behind him, jumping from foot to foot as if doing hopscotch. His grandchildren did that, too. He balled his hands, willed them to be steady.

“Daddy and Judy have a cat. His name is Mr. Cat. Do you have a cat?”

Cannon shook his head. He knelt in front of the door, and just then Kyla came bursting through it. The knob hit him in the throat, taking his wind, and he fell onto his backside.

“Oh my god. Oh!” Kyla bent over him, her hand at her mouth. “Are you all right?”

Gigi ran toward the kitchen. “I’ll call the police! 9-1-1! 9-1-1!”

“No, please. I’m fine.” He coughed. “I’m fine.”

“Gigi, stop. Put the phone away. It’s all right.”

Kyla held out her hand, but he ignored it. He grunted and struggled upright. As he stood, a wave of dizziness hit him, and he slumped against the wall.

Kyla reached up under him and he gave in, rested some weight on her shoulders. She smelled of sweet shampoo, green apples or some kind of berry. She said, “I’m so sorry. I’m such an idiot.” She led him to the sofa and then got him a glass of ice water. He sipped at it, touching his throat.

In the corner of the room, Gigi dug around in a set of toy bins.

He said, “It’s good she knows to call for help. These days.”

Kyla glanced at Gigi. “Her father taught her that.” She gave a short laugh. She nodded at the room. “I’m getting ready to sell this place. I’m done with memories. Time to move on.”

Gigi carried a toy first aid kit and a doll. She held out the doll to Cannon. “That’s Florence. You can hold her if you want.”

Cannon took the doll. It had matted red curls and was missing a button eye. Gigi opened her kit and held up a roll of white gauze. She hopped up on the sofa next to him.

Kyla said, “Gigi.”

“It’s all right,” Cannon said. The ice in his glass rattled as he set the glass on a coaster. Gigi started to wind the gauze around his head. She dropped the roll, and it unraveled down his arm and to the floor. Gigi breathed on his neck and kept winding the gauze. Chill-bumps rose on his arms.

Cannon watched the ceiling fan spin. It was a little off balance. He spotted a crack in the plaster near a window. He said, “I do repair work. If you need help with the house. I’m retired technically, but I do it on the side for a little extra.” He hadn’t meant to say it. He hadn’t done anything but locks at all down here, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t. He pulled an old business card from his wallet, scratched out the number and put his new cellphone down. He handed it to her, holding his breath as she looked at it. Would she recognize the name, connect it to headlines? Such news had a way of traveling.

But Kyla just smiled and put the card in her shirt pocket. “That’s very nice of you. I probably will take you up on that. I promise not to knock you off a ladder or anything.”

He smiled back. Gigi bandaged his arms next, then his hands.

“I’ll take care of you,” the girl said.

When Cannon got home from work, Jenny was in the pool, which was in the center of the U-shaped condo units. He saw her shiny purple swim cap as he pulled into the covered parking space. She didn’t look up as he approached. She held tight to the wall, blowing bubbles and jerking her head up for a breath every three seconds or so.

"Jenny." He leaned down and tapped her head, and she let out a scream, flailing upright.

"Good Christ. You scared me," she said, her eyes unreadable behind the tinted goggles. She flexed her hands on the wall. They were shriveled at the tips from the water and chlorine. "You're home early."

He said, "It's late. You're pruned up. I think your back's burned. Come inside."

He expected her to argue, their standard exchange lately. Instead she waded to the steps, climbed out, and toweled off. She'd lost weight from her already small frame. The suit gapped at the top, sagged around her legs. She snapped off her goggles, which left red indents around her eyes.

"I'll lotion your back," he said.

"I'm fine," she said.

Inside the condo, Jenny set to work making supper, still in her short toweling robe over her damp swimsuit. All of the tile made the place sound empty though it came furnished. Cannon missed the sound of Jenny's piano, her flawless posture, the way her long fingers seemed to float over the keys. Cannon set the table and watched her tense, sloped back as she moved in the short space between stove and sink and refrigerator. After thirty-five years, he knew how she moved. He knew a pressure was building in her. She hated confrontation, avoided it until the emotions she had tamped down erupted, forced out like flames from a ruptured gaspipe. In those hot moments, he'd seen her tip over sofas, break whole sets of wine glasses, bash in the hood of a car, though she never struck him or their son. She'd gotten better over the years, learning to talk it out, more of a controlled burn than explosion. But Robert Jr. never had learned. Cannon had seen it in him as they worked together in those last weeks, saw it in the hunch of his son's back as he turned wrenches and hammered nails and changed air filters. There was an edge in his son's voice when he called Felice: That's not what I meant. Don't put words in my mouth. Who's going with you? It's just a question. It's *just* a question. After a call, he sat pale and slumped in the passenger seat of the truck. Tamping it down. No sense in prodding him, Cannon had thought. He'd talk when he was ready. But he didn't.

Cannon looked down at his hands. His son's hands had been exact replicas, down to the long nailbeds and thick knuckles.

"Jenny," he said.

"Don't pick at me right now, Robert," she said. "Just leave it be, all right?"

"I'm not picking," he said. "I was going to tell you about my day."

"No you weren't."

"So now you can read my mind?"

"Here we go," she said.

He looked at his palms. Working hands. Rough hands.

"He had your temper," he said to his wife.

Jenny didn't answer. She picked up the pot of peas she'd set to boil on the stove and turned them onto the floor. They steamed in a green pile on the ceramic tile, the water spreading into the channels of grout. She stepped over the pile and hurried to the bedroom, her plastic shoes smacking the tile. He got a whiff of chlorine. He could hear the bath running. Soon, she would be in there, making herself float face-down inches above the porcelain tub. Breathing, breathing. It grew dark as Cannon sat at the table. Finally, he got up and headed to his truck.

The moon shone bright through the thin branches of the paloverdes and jacarandas lining the driveway, and he gazed up at it for a long moment. The city's light pollution, though, dulled the stars. Back home, constellations and planets burned diamond-white against a velvet sky. As he backed out of the drive, he pulled the baggie of keys from the glove box and set them on the seat. He hadn't started out keeping them. One afternoon, he'd found an extra set in his shirt pocket from that morning's job, a little brick house for rent on Osborn Road. He'd gone back to hand over the set, but the landlord was long gone. He'd put the key in the lock, an absent-minded test, but when the door unlatched, he stepped inside the empty space, shutting the door behind him. He walked through the rooms again, the carpet soft under his boots. He noted a crack in the plaster ceiling. He flipped lights on and off, knocked on walls, straightened

a blind in the master bedroom. He turned on the faucet and let it run, hand-tightened the P-trap nut under the kitchen sink. After ten minutes, he locked the door and went back to his truck, back to his day. Now, in the evenings when he couldn't sleep, or like tonight, he checked on these places that he knew by street names: Osborn, Montecito, Glenrosa, Indianola. Sometimes he just drove by, and sometimes he went in, wandering the dark rooms, listening to the creaks. Nothing nefarious. He had no intentions. He just had an urge to check on things, these homes that did not belong to him.

The rental house on Osborn was still empty. He parked in the driveway and let himself in the front door, calling out a Hello just in case. No one answered. The electricity was off, so he walked through the dark hall, running his hand along the drywall. In the back bedroom, he opened the closet where the breaker box was. He stood there, trying to decipher the labels on the panel, wishing he'd brought his flashlight. He rattled a clump of wire hangers.

He never said it aloud. In Flagstaff, where he'd lived for his entire fifty-four years, he'd never had to. Everyone knew. They knew Robert Cannon and his family: wife Jenny, son Robert Jr., daughter-in-law Felice – freckle-faced Felice whom Cannon nicknamed Dots – two young grandchildren. Cannon had met Jenny at the university, back when she had brown straight hair down to her waist and gave piano lessons to help pay for tuition. Jenny taught music at the high school for twenty-eight years. Cannon built her a house, a wood and stone split-level off Lake Mary Road, the same road he'd grown up on, where they hiked, biked, and in winter cross-country skied in the woods behind the property. Cannon was the do-it-all handyman, owner of his own business, Cannon and Son – trustworthy, fast, affordable, just like it said on their cards. He'd coached soccer and Little League, and Robert Jr. had too. They went to Lowell Observatory on summer nights, stood in the cold, pine-scented air and gaped through the telescopes at the moon's wavy craters, at comets and planets and other fuzzy celestial objects. They traveled in the region and once to Europe, for his and Jenny's 25th anniversary, and they would do more when they retired. That was how he believed he was known, how he wished to be known, how he knew himself. That life was

bountiful beyond what he could have ever imagined. But now. Now. Everyone knew a different version. They all knew what he could not say aloud.

Cannon moved his hands in the dark, empty space of the closet, a movement that he imagined both sleeping and waking. He could not stop seeing it, or the results. Thumbprint bruises on a freckled neck. The scald of gunpowder on a face. He thrust his arms forward, then back, then up, banging his elbow on the closet door.

Her temper. His hands.

A week later, Kyla called Cannon and asked if he could repair windows. She had a few cracked panes in the casements. He could. He certainly could. After he finished with locks in the early afternoon, he called Jenny and left a message that he'd be home late and not to hold dinner. She didn't call back. He headed to the house on Heatherbrae.

Kyla was in the kitchen when he arrived. She wore a blue kerchief over her curls and denim overalls with a smear of white paint on the bib. "Kitchen trim," she said. She grinned and held up a pint of paint. She showed him the windows, and Gigi left her post in front of the television to follow him as he made measurements. The child, who wore a headband with a pair of glittery shamrocks bobbing on springs, chattered about Mr. Cat and a loose tooth. When he returned from the hardware store with cut panes, Gigi brought him a plastic tumbler of lemonade and sang for him, a little song she'd learned at school, something about good fairies and field mice getting bopped on the head. He smiled. He removed the old glass and set the new panes, quick with the caulk and glazing, humming a bit under his breath. He wiped his mess and put his tools away. Kyla was still in the kitchen, and he caught small bursts of paint fumes. He stopped the ceiling fan, duct-taped a penny to the top of a blade to make it balance. He turned it back on, pleased when it spun steady.

Kyla stood at his elbow.

"Mr. Cannon." She had a fleck of paint on her cheek.

"Bob, please." He looked down at her, and his heart gave an awkward jump.

"Bob. Would you like to stay for dinner?"

"We're having pizza!" Gigi yelled.

"Yes, it's fancy-pants dining around here these days. But we'd love to have you."

"I'd like that." He said it quickly, before she could take the offer back.

"Do you need to check with your wife?"

He scratched his ear and shook his head. "She's away."

They sat with their plates on their knees in the living room, the cardboard pizza box on the coffee table. He drank a cola straight from the can. He told her he and his wife were retired now. He told her he had two grandchildren. He asked about her. He sat with his hands on his knees and listened to her talk. As Gigi turned her attention to a coloring book, Kyla told him about her ex-husband, how he just came home one day with the news that he was in love with someone else. "It was like I stepped into a ditch, you know. Just, whoops! Down I went, my legs out from under me." She gave a short laugh. She had a freckle under her right eye. A few nods and mmm-hmms seemed to assure her, and she kept talking. She worked at Kyla's school. Just a secretary, she said. It wouldn't be for forever. He liked that phrase, for forever. She was going to take a class at the community college. The ceiling fan pushed a breeze on them, and that's how it felt to Cannon, listening: breezy. Fresh air on skin.

Gigi fell asleep on the yellow pillow, and he looked at his watch, surprised at how late it was. He stood, though he didn't want to.

"What do I owe you?" Kyla smiled up at him. "For the windows."

"Pizza," he said. "And a soda."

"No. Please." She rose and grabbed her purse. "I pay what I owe."

He waved his hand. "It was nothing. It was my pleasure. I enjoyed the work. And the company."

"Next time, then." She shook his hand then leaned forward and hugged him. Her curls brushed his mouth, and he stepped back, catching his balance.

When he let himself into the condo, Jenny was already in bed. He undressed as quietly as he could, careful not to let his belt buckle hit the tile. He crept under the sheet and curled up against her. Here, in exhausted sleep, she relented. He slid his arm about her waist, calmed by the warmth of her skin. But she was gone at first light.

March turned to April. April grew hotter, the smell of orange blossoms fading. The grass in yards grew thicker. Spindly branches sprouted outrageous purple and yellow blooms. The desert pollen attacked his sinuses, and he carried packs of allergy medicine in his pockets like gum. He changed locks. Jenny tried to swim. The condo smelled of chlorine and mildewed towels. He changed locks. He changed locks.

Kyla did not call again. When he drove by, a Realtor sign was in the yard.

On a late April night, Cannon slid out from bed around midnight, unable to sleep even against Jenny's pliant back. He drove to his properties. The Osborn house was occupied now, a green plastic Adirondack chair on the front stoop. He drove past Montecito and Glenrosa and Indianola. He drove to Heatherbrae. He pulled to the curb and sat a moment with the engine off. The For Sale sign now had an Under Contract slat on top. The flowerbed along the walk held fresh flowers and shrubs. Water glinted on the petals and soil. The windows were dark. Kyla's sedan was parked in the carport. He took off his boots and set them on the seat. He pulled out his keys. In his socks, he walked across the grass to the front door.

He let himself in, quickly, quietly, the lock smooth and precise. The blinds were cracked open, and in the light from the street, he could see boxes stacked along the far wall. The couch and TV were gone. He stepped into the hallway. His eyes adjusted to the dimness. The bedroom doors were open. He walked to the far end of the hall and stood in the doorway. Kyla's room. In the glow of the alarm clock, he could see her shape among the pillows and bedding. A leg kicked out from under the covers. He could hear her breathing. Deep and even. He stood a moment and just listened.

He stepped backward down the hall to the other bedroom. Gigi's nightlight was bright, with glitter inside of it, throwing patterns on the wall. The child slept on her back, her arms flung wide, her mouth slack. They could sleep through anything, couldn't they? Robert Jr. was like that. Would fall asleep at football games, in traffic jams, at his and Jenny's poker parties, right in his chair. Cannon would scoop him up and carry him to his bed, tuck him in the cool sheets. He never woke up, a tiny body at rest, calm with primal trust. The sleep of the dead. Cannon held his hands in front of himself, spread his fingers in the dim light.

The little girl stirred. She sat up in bed.

"Daddy?"

Cannon blinked and stepped forward into the room. "It's me," he said. "I'm here."

She rubbed her eyes. "When are you coming home?"

"I'm home now. I'm not leaving." He stepped closer, a few feet from the bed. "You won't leave either, will you? Do you promise?"

She nodded slow, half-asleep. "I promise," she said, and something in the pitch of her voice startled him, shook him out of his daze. He realized then exactly what he was doing. He stood still, frozen in terror.

"It's just a dream," he said finally. He stepped backward. "Just a dream, honey. Go back to sleep."

"Daddy, don't go." She held up a hand and started to cry.

He moved backward fast. He hurried to the door, quiet in his socks, as Gigi's cries grew louder. He stepped out and locked them back in. He started the truck by the light of the moon.

When he pulled up to the condo, his headlights flashed on a shiny purple cap in the pool. Three a.m., and Jenny was in the water. He took off his socks and stuffed them in his boots. He got out of the truck in his bare feet.

She looked up at the creak of the gate. She folded her arms on the tiles, rested her cheek on her forearm.

He rolled up the cuffs of his jeans and sat on the side next to her. He dipped his feet in. In the pool light, they were as white as caulk, cut with blue veins. His toenails looked thick and yellow. Old man feet. The water felt warm in the cool night air.

She pulled her goggles off and looked at him. “Where were you?”

“Driving. Couldn’t sleep.”

“Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere.”

She lowered her mouth in the water, blew bubbles.

He picked up her goggles and stretched the rubber band. “We have to go home,” he said.

“Home,” she said. She put her mouth in the water again.

“They’re ours, too.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“I know it. Nonetheless. They should know us. Some part of him.”

“Which part?”

He shook his head, swished his pale feet.

“Do you want to hear something terrible?” She continued without waiting for him to answer. “I scored it.” She hiked up the strap of her suit. The fabric bagged, the elasticity eaten thin by chemicals. “I was standing there at the sink, doing the dishes, picturing it, you know, and I started putting music with it. Like it was a scene from a movie. Piano. Strains of violin.”

“Jenny.”

She grabbed his calf, digging with her fingernails. “It was an accident. Wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know.” He reached down to take her hand, but she pulled back.

“I can’t do this. I can’t.” She yanked her cap off. Her silver hair stuck up on end, and her eyes gleamed.

He hesitated, but then reached out and smoothed a tuft of her hair. He tugged off his T-shirt, lifted his hips, and slid down into the water. He waded out. His jeans grew heavy, dragging against his skin. He stopped at sternum level, in the middle of the pool.

“Okay,” he said. “To me.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. I’m right here.”

She stared at him. She turned her back to the wall, braced the flats of her feet against it, and grabbed the gutter with one hand. “Don’t you dare move.”

“I won’t.” He reached his arms to her. “Come on.”

He held his breath with her as she threw her arms forward and pushed off the wall. She put her head down and kicked like mad, the water churning. She propelled her arms in a panicked, ugly stroke, her body thrashing like a predator wrestling down its prey. She lifted her face out of the water, shaking it from side to side, her eyes shut tight. She couldn’t see that she reached him. He stretched forward, grabbing her hands.

Jenny’s chest heaved as she gulped the air. “Don’t let go,” she got out, panting. She clung hard to his wrists.

“I won’t.”

He pulled her close. He wanted this to be a good moment, a strand of hope, a tiny victory to counter these endless sleepless nights, these thumbprint, gunsmoke images that lurked just behind their eyes. But her body was stiff with terror. She tried to climb his limbs. She pressed on his shoulders and thrust herself upward, trying to save herself by pushing him under. He lost his balance and plunged back into deeper water. He scissor-kicked, his legs weighted with denim, and hot panic shot through him. In the wavery liquid light, they gasped, fumbled, and clawed at each other. Jenny, for God’s sake! he yelled.

Abruptly, she stopped struggling and went limp in his arms. He kicked hard toward the shallow end until his feet touched the bottom again. He caught his breath as the water lapped at their skin. She pulled back and looked at him.

"Don't," she said. Her voice gave, and her face crumpled.

He started to shiver. He shifted his grasp, cradling her under her knees. He waded toward the steps. Floating, passive now, she was nearly weightless in his arms. Like carrying a sleeping child. Like walking on the moon. Lit from below, their bodies did seem unearthly, lunar in their tremulous pallor. He, his wife, and his boy had watched that first moon landing together. In the darkened, hushed living room, the boy sat between them, his short legs sticking out straight on the sofa. They all watched, wide-eyed, taking in those crackling images, the scratched echo of voices, the bounding steps those men took into the unknown dust. Cannon watched his son's face, illumined by the screen. The boy looked up at him and whispered, Dad, they made it, and Cannon said, They sure did. The astronaut said, Beautiful, beautiful. Magnificent desolation. Cannon then leaped up and opened the curtains, searching for the moon in the sky, suddenly frantic to see that reassuring orb from a distance, to connect the unimaginable sight before him with reality. And when he couldn't spot it, for a moment he remembered thinking, Well of course it's gone away. They changed it. It won't ever be the same again.

**Wrestling Night** (first appeared in *The Yalobusha Review* 13)

Friday night, Clara Teague sits ringside at the Coliseum. Her newly dyed hair floats at the edges of her vision, the red of comic books, of bar drinks, of poofy clown wigs. The chemical stink wafts from her blistered scalp and stings her nostrils, and she catches other smells, too: popcorn, sweat, a dash of hay and dung from past state fairs. In the ring, amateur wrestlers strut in shiny robes and tights, trading grunts and insults. The crowd shouts and chants as The Atom gives a killer knee-drop to his nemesis Chop Suey Matsui. They bang on the bleachers and yodel and beat their chests when the Flying Swede cuts loose with his signature clogs of death. Clara stays still, quiet as church in her elastic-waist polyester slacks and

sensible shoes. The only movement is from her thumbs, which lift and jerk in small circles, a habit of a lifetime.

Just an hour ago, she had locked herself in the bathroom while her husband of twenty-six years packed up. She had stared in the mirror until she didn't recognize the jowly, underbitten woman reflected there — as her high-school students would say, she had *zero clue* about this woman. She had found the box of hair dye — Scarlet O'Haira — under the sink as she searched for a rag and bleach to clean up her vomit, and she couldn't remember where or when or why she had bought such a color. As her husband of twenty-six years shut the front door with a solid click, she bent over the sink and worked in the paste, the fumes scorching her eyes. Finally, with her newly seething hair, she wandered out of her newly empty house in the central Phoenix neighborhood behind the Coliseum, the corner lot ranch that she'd inherited from her parents at age eighteen. In the yard, she yanked spring flowers out of her prized bed and piled them like animal pelts until the bed was bare, save for the hulking slab of her husband's computer screen. The palm trees sagged against the darkening desert sky, and the orange blossoms sprayed their scent like a cat in heat. Her dirty thumbs began to twitch. She started walking and ended up here, at this Coliseum, simply because she heard the sounds and she followed.

The crowd bellows as one Walt "The Butcher" Winklemann enters the ring, wearing a kinky black wig, glittering eye mask, and blood-spattered apron over a sleeveless black spandex suit. The Butcher is small and lean-muscled, more cheetah than lion, but his quick, lethal forearms have made him a wrestling night favorite. Even the assholes who torment him at school now chant mindlessly from the stands, oblivious to his identity, and this secret revenge revs him up. He stifles a laugh as his opponent, Slim Jim Jericho, long and lean in leather chaps and cowboy hat, enters the ring.

Walt can't believe he's here at all. Most of the other wrestlers on the Phoenix amateur circuit are working men with bristle-broom beards, married with kids and mortgages; Walt's a senior in high school, seventeen, and he bags their wives' groceries at his after-school job and then goes home alone to his

geometry book. When he isn't The Butcher, he is Pansy Ass, Gaywad, Faggety Fag Faggot. At school, he runs or hides when he sees packs of muscled boys in the hall. At home, he is simply alone. Mom works nights as a cashier at Bashas', and Dad is a butcher there. Dad works days, but he heads out to the Indian casinos at night, stopping home only to change out of his stained aprons and raid the cash stash. Walt has no friends except for Mrs. T, his history teacher who lives two blocks down. She lets him stay over for hours after school — he does his homework while she digs in her flowerbed — but she shoos him out when her husband gets home, sending him off with a *Keep up the good fight, kiddo.* He walks the two blocks home, his pockets full of rocks from her flowerbed or napkins from the snacks she feeds him, which he adds to the stash in his room.

One night, flicking through the TV channels, Walt had stopped on the cable access channel: *Phoenix Presents Wrestling Mania!* He opened his front door, and he could see the blue lights of the Coliseum glowing over the palms and hear the cheers in tandem with the TV. He turned up the volume and stared at the masks and glitter and gleaming muscles, at the flamboyant leaps and spasms. He tied on a bedsheet for a cape, and with walloping chops and seesaw legs, he mimicked those moves. He crashed into furniture and walls, a glassy-eyed boy oblivious to time, space, cold and heat, loneliness. Walt could see the fear in his imaginary foes' eyes as he whipped toward them. Towering over them, his pigeon chest puffed, he made them pay for their insults, their pummelings, their indifference.

For weeks, he watched the matches and practiced on the dock behind the Encanto Park boathouse or in his crammed bedroom, honing his freakish speed and strength. He perfected his knife-hand chop, the flapjack, the clothesline, the flying somersault and baseball slide, the leg sweep and neck snap. In his small, silent world, he grew stronger, skilled and lightning-fast, until one day he tried out for wrestling night. No one saw him coming.

Clara Teague pushes back her shoulders and clears her throat, watching The Butcher romp around the ring in his mask and fright wig. He looks like just a kid, not much older than her students with their

relentless needs and barbecue chip breath. She realizes she hasn't thought of her students all day, though normally they can take up whole days and even nights, but now she can't even summon them. After all, her divorce won't even be a blip on their radar. Her life is nothing to them.

She looks at The Butcher's swift young arms. His skin is as smooth as a ripe, unsplit watermelon. Just starting out, all the potential in the world. She'd met Stony around that age, long before he'd become *Stony Teague,* poet and professor of prominence. Stony had been in her first college poetry class. At nineteen, with her parents dead within a year of one another — Papa of heart failure, Mama crushed inside her Galaxie by a speeding delivery truck on the interstate — Clara watched her college peers from the outskirts, alienated by her warped entry into adulthood. She owned a house. She paid insurance. She ate dinner alone every night on a mahogany table that sat eight.

After class one night, Stony surprised her on the stairs outside. With his thick, kinky black hair and even thicker black-rimmed glasses, his lumpy hips, he reminded her of a roly-poly bug — one flick and he'd curl up around himself. He reminded her, well, of herself. He squinted at her with his hazel, myopic eyes and then held up one pudgy hand. In that small gesture, Clara's thumbs began their twitch. She ran to those stairs, to their future relationship, clomping in her enthusiasm and thick shoes. She latched on to Stony Teague with the fervor of missionaries, a blind almost autistic love.

In the ring, Walt tries to calm his thudding heart and short breaths. He reels dramatically from Slim Jim Jericho's high-flying round house, rolls silver-quick from Jim's hang-gliding slam off the ropes — Slim Jim's one tall, skinny bastard, and he gets some air, his fringed chaps and vest aflutter. The crowd chants *Butcher, Butcher,* and Walt raises his arms in a menacing V. He flies at Slim Jim, pummeling with ferocious speed. He grabs Slim Jim about the neck and shoulders and holds him tight to his chest, breathing in the tobacco on his skin.

An hour earlier, when Walt had arrived at the Coliseum, Jim was leaning against the wall by the entrance, still in his street clothes, just a T-shirt and faded jeans with a hole in one knee, scuffed brown

boots. Walt's stomach had fluttered. He has confided in no one about his longings, not even in Mrs. T. Certainly not in his parents or schoolmates — as if he would give his asshole tormentors more ammo.

Jim held out the cigarette pack to Walt, a wordless hello. Walt didn't smoke, but he took one from the pack anyway and let Jim light it.

"Ready for tonight?" Jim said.

Walt said, "Think so." He leaned next to Jim, puffing and trying not to cough.

"Don't be too hard on me in there," Jim said. He punched Walt on the arm and cracked a grin. Smoke escaped from his mouth in a curl. "You go to Central?"

At Walt's nod, Jim said, "Yep. Me too. Back in the day. Wasn't my scene." Jim looked at the tip of his cigarette, as if analyzing it for clues. "You and me should hang out some time."

Walt stopped himself from saying, *Me*? He tried to sound casual as he answered, "Sure."

Then Slim Jim caught Walt's eye and held it for four heartbeats, until Walt felt heat in his stomach. With a smile, Jim broke the gaze and crushed his cigarette beneath his boot. "See you in the ring, kid," he said.

Walt nodded and smashed out his own cigarette. He lifted his fingers and held them to his nose.

In the ring, Walt reels from Jim's sharp elbow in the ribs, and he turns and runs. Flight. His first instinct. Jim starts to chase him around the ring, and Walt remembers the first day he met Mrs. T: fleeing down her street, flinching as fistfuls of pea gravel hit his back, the pack gaining on him. Then Mrs. T popped up out of her flowerbed, all fuzzy brown hair and flashing sunglasses. Walt veered up her driveway, his short legs chugging.

Mrs. T yelled, "Stop, you little rat bastards." She held her rake overhead and tromped down the driveway, calling his tormentors each by name and threatening to call their parents. They scattered down the street and into bushes.

Mrs. T. squatted down and squinted at Walt, and then gave a brisk nod. "You're all right."

He nodded, hiccupping and wiping at the sudden tears.

She leaned close enough that he could smell her peppermint breath. “You’re one of the good ones, I can tell,” she said. “Do you want a soda? Come on. Come over here and help me with this planting a while. I’ve got a whole flat of petunias. Gardening takes your mind off things.” She held out her rake to him.

He stared at the rake in her dirty palms, then up at her face. The sun set her wild brown hair afire, a warrior princess. She seemed taller than he could ever imagine. He took the rake, felt the wood scrape the pads of his fingers. Later he would sneak it home and prop in the corner of his room with the rest of his possessions. For now he lifted the stick over his head like a scepter, and he vowed to love her forever.

The Butcher’s arms wrap around the neck of Slim Jim Jericho, whose cowboy hat has fallen off and whose face is turning purple. Clara thinks of Stony, of doing that same move to him until his head pops clean off. She savors the image of his thick glasses shattering on the cement, his salt-and-pepper head rolling down the front steps of their old home, smashing into pulp at the bottom. She imagines scooping up the mess with a flat shovel and using it as fertilizer. She imagines cooing pigeons feasting on brainy flesh. Bile rises in her throat.

She found out that afternoon in the stupidest of ways — stumbled on their emails. She saw her friend’s name and opened it, naturally, because the woman was *her* friend, or at least longtime acquaintance — a plump, pretty co-worker, seven years younger, with whom she shared rides and school gossip and news about Stony’s achievements. It was this woman, in fact, who had driven Clara to the doctor when her final miscarriage hit during fourth hour at school. Clara had blinked at the computer screen in a long, blank moment of incomprehension: Why in god’s name was her friend sending a poem? A pornographic poem?

Stony confessed to all of it, the length and breadth of the years-long affair. He couldn’t wait to drop that heaving cardboard box of lies he’d been lugging around. As he talked, Clara kept trying to think back, to pinpoint what she was doing when it first happened. She would have been adding to her flower

garden, transferring her coddling tendencies to the earth. She'd have been driving the same used Honda, teaching at Central High, where she'd always taught. She'd have been cleaning house and mowing the yard and buying groceries and driving to meetings and giving lectures on the Taft-Hartley Act and grading tests and patting students' shoulders and helping Stony with mailings, typing his manuscripts, making copies, keeping his increasingly busy schedule. She'd been happy to do it, to be part of something.

On and on a repentant Stony rambled, and as she watched his fillings glint with saliva, she realized that somewhere along the line, he'd grown accustomed to having the stage. Talk, talk, talk. People clung to his words, boosted his ego into preposterous volumes. He had grown taller — was that even possible? — no longer the stubby college boy. A distinguished presence. He held court.

He blinked at her from behind his still-thick glasses. He said, "There was no one else."

"Just one, then." She laughed, the crack of breaking bones.

"Tell me what to do, Poodle," he said. "Tell me what you want me to do."

She stared at him, at the reality before her. She'd spent twenty-six years of her one and only life on a lie. Her existence was reduced to something out of a bad poem. She was that woman. Poodle. She stared down at the computer monitor, still blinking with its sordid news. In one spurt of adrenalin, she pulled it from its desk moorings, lugged it down the hall, and heaved it, like a bag of drainage rock, out the front door. Then she gagged and ran to the bathroom.

The boisterous crowd chants for The Butcher, who's thwapping Slim Jim about the neck and head, and Clara shivers with a sudden sense of deja vu — when was she last here? at the state fair? when? — but the moment slips past before she can grasp it. Something grows large and aching inside her, travels up her spine, slides into her scalp, throbbing with the chemicals. Her thumbs resume their flutter, matching her hummingbird heart.

Slim Jim ducks and picks up Walt by the legs, heaving him over his long back, and Walt braces himself for a wicked piledriver. His head meets the mat and he lets out a lung-bursting howl, vamping up

the convulsions. He rolls fast to his feet and lets out a long growl. Here, with his mask and gaudy costume, he is something beyond himself, bigger, strong, unbelievably quick. The matches are staged, but sometimes he lands blows and sees the surprise in his foes' eyes: *Well, what have we here*. Even the painful jolts he himself takes, the black and citrus-yellow bruises and occasional vomiting, are worth it. The best moments come in the finale, his victory laps and bows, the brief moment before he goes back to being just the pasty kid who watches TV alone, who bags groceries with Mom, who hides out in the gym equipment room. He wishes he could capture those finales somehow, like butterflies, put them in glass jars with holes poked in the lids so they could breathe. He'd hoard them in his closet at home, in his graffiti-tagged locker at school. He'd put one next to his father's laundry basket. He'd give one to Mom to keep at her register. He'd give a shoeboxful to Mrs. T. to line up on her school desk, on her mantel, so that people could see. They'd see.

But the moments don't last. They fritter like ash, gone as soon as the spotlight careens off to the next contenders, and Walt walks home alone, his costume stuffed inside an old pillowcase. So Walt drags out the action in the ring, hams up the pratfalls, feigns injuries and comebacks. Tonight, with Slim Jim, it is a strange, violent dance, shuffling feet and jousting hands, chests pressed close. Walt presses closer, breathing hard. He gets as close as he can.

Clara shifts on the arena bench, smoothes the tops of her slacks, barely registering a jolt from the elbow of a cheering woman behind her. She pictures Stony at the little dive bar at the end of McDowell, where he'd confessed he often met up for pints with Clara's friend and his graduate students. She can see him there among the bar regulars, the old jukebox flickering and pulsing. She can see her friend there, too, her sausage fingers resting on his forearm. She blinks hard until the image disintegrates, and she refocuses on the ring. Her thumbs flutter as she watches those boys circling, landing their bone-crushing blows. The ring pulsates with exaggeration and silliness, like a carnival show, and moments come flooding back, rushing over her until she can taste salty sweat on her lip.

Her house is behind the fairgrounds — she remembers when this sway-back Coliseum was built, flooding the neighborhood with a lovely blue light. When the state fair came every year, she would sit in her backyard and watch the light filter through the mesquite tree while inside Mama and Daddy played cards with the neighbors. She'd catch smells of the cotton candy and the Indian frybread with powdered sugar sold on the thoroughfare, bursts of music and squeals. Her mouth was full of braces trying to fix her underbite, and her worn Capri pants bagged around her knees. Her head was full of the overzealous poetry that she scribbled, of far-off city skylines. She would smooth her frizzy hair and watch the top of the Ferris wheel flit through the tree and think of the large and waiting world, of far-flung places full of sea salt and whitewashed hotels and scattered languages. Her heart pulsed and her unpolished thumbs twitched at the thought of when her day would come.

Walt is scheduled to be tonight's winner, and the ringmaster gives him a sign. With a final slingshot catapult into the ropes, Walt jumps up and clotheslines Slim Jim, knocking him flat. Slim Jim falls down for the count, giving Walt a quick wink. Walt puts his foot on Slim Jim's chest and raises his arms high over his head. He smiles until his cheeks ache, looking down into Slim Jim's lightning-bright face. They lock eyes again, and in this exquisitely blind moment, Walt can't see that Jim is simply curious, that they will have a mere two months together until Jim will marry a cross-eyed girl name Beatrice, whose groceries Walt then will bag — they will eat a lot of canned stew. He can't see that he will then take up smoking, puffing and inhaling, gasping at the acrid smoke, keeping close the smell of first love. Or that wrestling night will be over in six months, a fad driven into the ground by bad management, and that he will work at Bashas', as a cashier like his mom, for the rest of his life, a steady and decent income. Or that over the years, he will sleep with dangerous men dangerously, getting his heart broken again and again and again, because he is too needy, too clingy, he wants too much, because he cannot help himself, trapping them, hoarding them, because he wants — needs — to believe. Or that he will die of lung cancer — not AIDS, as many of his asshole classmates assume — at the age of forty-four.

He can see none of that. Right now, standing in a sweat-stained wrestling ring, Walt "The Butcher" Winklemann quivers with happiness. He feels it in him like a transfusion — new blood, humming loud with life.

Clara stares at The Butcher, standing so puffed and posed. Holding court. She feels a crack in her sternum. Her thumbs stop whirling, and the frenetic twitch moves to her legs. She gets to her feet with the rest of the crowd. She darts over the security bar and pulls herself into the ring, rolling under the ropes. Then she is on her feet and running straight at The Butcher. She tackles him against the ropes, a red-haired dervish in polyester slacks. With closed fists, she starts whaling on his puny chest.

Walt puts up his hands, guards his face from the sudden attack. The woman's hair is an unholy red, bright as blood on snow. He realizes with a slow, dumb blink that it is Mrs. T. He tries to push her shoulders, to grab her wrists. "Mrs. T," he says, "Mrs. Teague, it's me, Walt. It's me." But she doesn't hear him or the bewildered silence of the crowd. She keeps coming, all knuckles and sharp nails.

Walt rips off his mask and wig. "Mrs. T, it's me."

She stops as fast as she started, dropping her fists. Walt. Her student, Walt Winklemann. She stares at him in a long, confused moment. She asks, "What are you doing here?"

"It's okay," he says.

She blinks, and the truth of her life comes rushing back. She winces at the lights, the crowd.

"Walt. Oh, God." She feels her knees give and she starts to fall, staring with wide eyes at the boy. She can't see beyond his face, this day, this moment. She is engulfed in her pulsing halo of pain. In this moment, she can't possibly imagine that with her divorce settlement, she will retire early and travel for months on end, her hair as bright as the sangria that she will drink by the tumbler full. That she will sell her old house for a ridiculous profit and move out of this old neighborhood and send Walt Christmas cards and postcards with stamps from far-away countries — *Keep fighting the good fight, kiddo*. That she will embark upon a few short-lived yet shockingly sexy and gratifying romances overseas. That she will travel

and scribble in journals and substitute-teach for the sheer joy of it until she is old and wrinkled and wispy on the scalp, resorting then to gaudy, angular wigs. She can't imagine that she will outlive Walt and see his obituary in the paper one morning over her coffee, and weep, her eyes full of this long ago wrestling night and the boy's sweet face and for what he did next in that ring, the thing that might be the beginning of what saves her.

Up close, Walt sees how pale Mrs. T is. He sees the blisters on her scalp, the puffiness of her eyes, her dirty fingernails. All he can think to ask is, "What's wrong?" but she is going down, and he doesn't have time to think much less speak. Fast as ever, Walt grabs Mrs. T's elbow, pulling her up. The crowd murmurs now, gaping. Someone recognizes him and calls out *Fag* in a kneejerk hee-haw. Slim Jim has rolled away to the corner, agog as all the rest. Walt holds Mrs. T. up by the elbow. She is dead weight, shaking, and she seems so small, too small. She opens and closes her mouth but says nothing, dazed and hooked on his arm. She should be taller, he thinks. She is taller than this.

Impulsively, Walt grabs Mrs. T around the waist and hoists her up to his shoulder. With a slight stagger, catching his balance, he leans into the ringmaster's microphone and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, introducing The Scarlet Tornado." Then, holding her around her knees, Walt begins to walk the perimeter of ring. She's light as a butterfly. Light, so much light.

The crowd erupts, and Clara looks down on the boisterous throng. From her perch, the people are a deafening, swaying, open-mouthed sea. They're *cheering.* For her. For Walt. She looks down at Walt's small, wide-eyed face, and she lets out a surprised hiccup of a laugh. He grins up at her, red-faced but steady on his strong legs. She pats his head, squeezes his shoulder, and he holds her up. For a brief moment that night, under the heavy lights and applause, they shine like naked beating hearts. They pulse and shine, pulse and shine, exposed to the eyes of the world.