

The Metropolitan



Inner Landscape (white figure) Oil on canvas Kari Sagal Allgire

A Magazine of Writing
by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2012

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“Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me
truth.”

Henry David Thoreau

The Metropolitan 2012

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The Metropolitan publishes all types of academic and literary writing, including descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive works, as well as creative prose and poetry. We encourage writings from across the disciplines and also welcome visual art. Our goal is to showcase the best of the many voices, styles, and subjects MCC writers and readers find meaningful and to support critical thinking, creativity, and expression at Metropolitan Community College.

The Metropolitan is published once a year. The print edition includes the best selections from the full web edition which can be read at <http://resource.mccneb.edu/metropolitan>

Inquiries to metropolitan@mccneb.edu or to
The Metropolitan c/o Cindy Catherwood
South Omaha Campus
Metropolitan Community College
P.O. Box 3777
Omaha, Nebraska 68103-0777

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2012 Writing Awards

For his poem “We Do What We Can,” Jonathan McGill is the winner of The Metropolitan 2012 Prize for Student Writing, a 13.5-credit-hour tuition remission. The first runner-up prize goes to two writers this year. Brigid Amos is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for her play *Stair Lift*. William L. Coleman is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for his essay “Return to the Nodaway.” The second runner-up, Stephanie Cleary, receives 4.5 credit hours tuition remission for her poem “Only Girl in the Subway.” The GED prize of 4.5 credit hours tuition remission goes to Nicholas Proski, whose essay “Si Vis Pacem” is published at <http://resource.mccneb.edu/metropolitan>.

We Do What We Can

Jonathan McGill

She leans on her tiptoes, places the angel Gabriel
on top of the tree, pauses a moment to hold him

steady. We stand away, smile at what we’ve done,
and she can’t help herself—it’s not her fault

she’s got so many good stories to tell. She holds up
a homemade card, says to me, “This you did

in first grade,” and it’s just a flimsy, folded paper, ratty
and bent to hell and red as love itself. She asks

if I remember, and I’m sorry, I don’t. I never do. These
days I’m so smoothed out nothing ever sticks. But I say

“I do, Mom, of course I do” because the feeling I get
is she needs this more than anything. And before

either of us understands what has happened, the table
is full of old photographs and albums, and she’s grabbing

the baby blue one, peeling through the plastic pages.
She stops on Christmas ‘86. And we’re all there

in festival glow, arms slung around shoulders like ropes
about to fray. “Look at you,” she says. “So tiny and cute.”

Her hand rests on the page, her finger over my printed
heart, and the kid isn’t me—we’ve grown and grown

apart, and all I see is how the Coumadin has bruised her,
made her skin near see-through. And I don’t know

what to say when she says, “You were always my favorite.”

Return to the Nodaway

William L. Coleman

I remember that day in late December. It was cold and cloudy. It had just snowed a couple of days before, and I had just given up on my dreams. As I heard the slush splashing under the wheels of my brother's van, I gazed outside at the gray of day, seeing nothing but distant memories. Thirty-five years of fighting for the American dream. What a waste. I had nothing to show for my efforts. My family traded me in for a newer model. My house—my castle—gone. I lost everything I owned. Where did I go wrong? My brother was taking me to my mother's house, a place in Iowa that was as dead as the sun was to me, a place that I had run away from as a teenager, vowing never to return, *so help me God*.

There was nothing there, and nothing ever changed, but I needed a break. I needed a place to rest, to figure out my place in society, because I refused to accept my current situation.

Rod and I didn't speak too much on that two-hour drive through snow-blanketed fields and scattered Iowa pine. If I had opened my mouth, I might have cried for two hours, and my brother probably knew that.

My mom, a short, gray-haired, Christian woman, met me at the door with open arms, ready to give me a warm, knowing hug. She embraced me. I tried to hold the lump in my throat down. With a broken voice, I excused myself and grabbed a couple of Hefty bags filled with my most valued possessions. All that I owned I carried up the creaky steps to my old room. Nothing had changed. I looked out the milky windows toward Main Street. A piece of paper rolling across Grove Avenue brought with it a reality check: I had wasted all my time only to return to where I started from.

I was so tired, and nothing made sense anymore. I stayed in that dark, little, dust-filled room for days. The walls were covered with a print popular in the early sixties. The linoleum floor was equally outdated and cold on my feet. I didn't feel like doing anything, not even looking out the window. My mother would

invite me to eat with her at times, but I was too ashamed to be in the same room with her. I remembered old phone conversations, bragging about how good my life was. Now I didn't own a car, and I didn't have a job or even the heart to get one.

It was late spring before I was able to break the boundaries of that old town home. I would take short walks through alleys lined with old lawnmowers, bikes and piles of split wood. Nothing had changed.

I walked down Main Street to the bottom where the feed store stood. Glancing in, I could see the old-timers drinking coffee and playing pitch. I knew what they were talking about: how many calves they got that spring or what they were going to plant and if the weather would hold up. Carmichael was still cutting hair on Main Street. Rule was you didn't go in the afternoon because he took his lunch at J.O.'s Outlaw, a tavern I frequented after school. I would play pinball and pool when I should have been doing my homework.

Then summer came, and on a sunny day I found myself walking near the railroad tracks. I used to play down there, chucking loose railroad spikes at trees and perfecting my rock throwing. The sun was hot. It warmed my skin like a cup of coffee on a winter morning. Curiously, I took the tracks out of town. Finding a spike, I heard the old thump of metal against tree. The birds were singing, and I heard a squirrel chatter but couldn't see it. As I "walked the line," I began to remember the summer days of high school. I knew where I was.

These railroad tracks ran next to the Nodaway River. The Nodaway is usually only about three feet deep, but there are holes along its steep slopes where the catfish like to eat and sleep. I've caught catfish, drum and carp out of the Nodaway. One time, I almost snagged a bull snake. My favorite place on the Nodaway had been the railroad trestle, about a mile from where I was walking.

I wondered if it was still the same. Cynically, I thought that it might be the only thing around here to have changed. Last time I was there, Scotty Lenz; the Minzer brothers, Bill Earl and Harry; the Snider brothers, Jerry and Gary; and I were skipping school.

Scotty and Earl soaked a tree with whiskey and an El Camino a few years back, and Harry's brain was about to give birth to the hereafter in the county home. I suspected he wouldn't be around much longer.

That bridge was over twenty feet above the Nodaway, and we boys would jump off into a deep, cool hole all afternoon. About five feet from the old cement pillar was our target. We were crazy; we were young.

I had nothing else to do that afternoon, so I walked that mile. When I got to the trestle, it was still the same, though this time I didn't hear the dares and laughter of my boyhood friends. Today, I only heard the birds and the breeze rustling the leaves of walnut, oak, maple and cottonwood trees.

I sat down on the sun-warmed cement pillar of that railroad trestle with my feet dangling above the murmur of the Nodaway, getting lost in my memories, my reasons for leaving this place. Now, deserting my dreams, I was back to the kind of life I had tried so hard to avoid. Would I be sitting in a bar, staring at a taken farm girl and working for scratch at the Safeway? What about the rest of my life? I still wanted to travel and explore, to build and to fish.

A crunch of leaves and twigs interrupted my thoughts, a doe and fawn, a playful drop in the water to splash them. Quietly and with slow movements, I tore my faded red pocket tee shirt off, and the moment it touched the creosote-soaked ties, they spotted me. In that second, we looked eye to eye. Then they blazed a trail through the undergrowth and were gone.

Old age must have been creeping up on me. Jumping into that hole blind could leave a man crippled or dead. So I barefooted carefully over the boulders and gravel, avoiding the pricks of wild rose and gooseberry bushes to see if my swimming hole was still there.

The current was slow, and the sun shone on the ripples I made as I tiptoed on the unseen rocks. I waded out to the base of the bridge and found my target. Still deep and cold, I swam under, kicking and grasping for branches and logs. There were none. Excitedly, I climbed out into the warm, bright sun, and with the abandonment of a teenager, I all but ran up the steep

bank to the tracks. Looking down into the water, I felt my face crack with a grin. My heart began to pound in my chest as I anticipated free-falling into the Nodaway.

I looked around and saw no one.

With two large strides, I was suspended between heavens and earth. Eyes closed and breath held, I cannonballed classically. My stomach was still up there, and I heard the sound of light as I felt the coolness of the river. When I came to the surface, spewing water, I laughed and cried out loud, thanking God for leaving the Nodaway unchanged.

As I opened my eyes, the air sparkled against the blue sky like fairies with sunbeams to feed their gardens. Floating on my back, I saw a hawk listing lazily, enjoying another summer day. As I treaded water, I felt the small fish pecking against my submerged body and was surprised. I had forgotten about that. I looked around at the rocks and sand, bushes and trees, and vividly saw the contrast of the rich soil against the many greens and bark. I heard the birds singing time with the babble of the Nodaway, a love song, I'm sure.

As I walked home that day, the wild flowers waved and bowed to the prodigal son.

Stair Lift

Brigid Amos

A modestly furnished living room in a small house in Lincoln, Nebraska. Among other furnishings, there is an easy chair with an end table at its arm. A door upstage right leads to an unseen bathroom. Stairs upstage left lead to the upstairs of the house. These stairs are never used by the actors but should be indicated in some way. The unseen kitchen is offstage right. An unseen picture window, through which the actors look out over the audience, is downstage center. A twin-sized inflatable mattress made up with sheets, blanket, and pillow lies downstage center on the floor.

At rise, Mother, a woman in her seventies, leans on her walker downstage center in front of the mattress, looking up and down the street. After a few seconds, Ellen, a forty-six year old woman, enters from stageright and looks at Mother in exasperation.

ELLEN: Mother, why do you keep looking out that window?

MOTHER: I'm looking for the moving van.

ELLEN: The van will be here soon enough. They have the address. What do you think? They're driving around town looking for a house with an old lady staring out the window?

MOTHER: Ellen, please don't call me old! You know how that upsets me.

ELLEN: Oh, that's right. You're not old. I meant to say they're driving around looking for the house with a female septuagenarian staring out the window.

MOTHER: Now I don't even understand what you're saying.

ELLEN: You don't understand what?

MOTHER: That word you just used. I don't understand that word.

ELLEN: You mean septuagenarian? You don't understand that word? It means—

MOTHER: I know what it means. I'm not stupid. I know my vocabulary. I just don't know why you're using that word on me. Nobody uses that word that way.

ELLEN: Sure they do. They use it when they're not allowed to use the word *old* on someone well, and I mean well, into her seventies. Septuagenarian is politically correct.

MOTHER: Well, we didn't have politically correct in my day. We knew what we meant to say, and we said it straight.

ELLEN: All right then, how should I describe you? You don't care for the word *septuagenarian*, so give me a better word and I'll use it.

MOTHER: Well, I don't see why you have to describe me at all.

ELLEN: I won't then. I promise I'll never describe you again.

MOTHER: Good.

ELLEN: Mother, just come away from the window. Staring down the street won't make the van come any faster.

MOTHER: But I need my bed, Ellen. I need to sleep in my own bed on my own mattress. (*Kicking the air mattress through her walker.*) I can't sleep on this leaky thing one more night. I'm sorry. It's like sleeping on a deflated balloon. My hip bone is right on the floor.

ELLEN: It's not leaky. I just bought this mattress. I probably didn't inflate it enough, that's all.

MOTHER: That thing was a waste of money if you ask me. I could have slept better on the couch.

ELLEN: All right. I know that now.

MOTHER: Shouldn't you get it out of the way? Aren't they going to set my bed up down here?

ELLEN: Yes, that's right. Let's see... (*She picks up the air mattress and bedding, carries it upstage, and props it up against a wall.*) I'll just stick it over here. I'll deflate it later; it's kind of an ordeal. (*She strips the mattress and begins to fold the bedding. She may continue this business at other times as needed.*)

MOTHER: You'll never even use that thing again.

ELLEN: Sure, I will. I'll use it for houseguests.

MOTHER: Houseguests? What houseguests are you going to get out here?

ELLEN: Oh, I don't know. Maybe Sally and Greg and the kids.

MOTHER: Your sister is *not* coming here to visit. I can tell you that right now. This is not Sally's type of place.

ELLEN: What do you mean not her type of place?

MOTHER: The house, the town, even the state. Sally is used to a higher level of living. She's used to moving among a better class of people. I mean, look at this neighborhood, Ellen.

ELLEN (*joining her mother at the window*): What's wrong with it? Tell me one logical thing that's wrong with it.

MOTHER: Okay. (*Pointing out the window.*) See that white house across the street? There isn't a single tree, or bush, or flower, or any other plant besides grass in that yard.

ELLEN: Maybe they want to keep it simple.

MOTHER: Maybe they're just lazy.

ELLEN: You don't know that, Mother.

MOTHER: Besides, the grass is weedy, and there are bare patches everywhere. Would it kill them to throw down some grass seed once in a while?

ELLEN: I don't know, Mother. Maybe it would kill them. Maybe the whole family has a deathly allergy to grass seed and would go into anaphylactic shock in seconds if they threw down some grass seed.

MOTHER: I wish you would just speak plain English once in awhile.

ELLEN: All right.

MOTHER: I mean, I know you have this doctorate and all that, but it doesn't give you the right to bombard people with these ten-dollar words.... Anyway, that little white house is not the only problem house on this street. Take a look at this other one.

ELLEN: Which house? That yellow one there?

MOTHER: Oh, yes. The yellow one.

ELLEN: It looks all right to me. I see a linden tree in the front yard, a yew hedge by the house, some hostas coming up in the bed there. Seems to pass muster if you ask me.

MOTHER: Have you gone blind all of a sudden? How many cars do you see parked there?

ELLEN: Well, I see four in the driveway and three parked on the street out in front. Plus there's a two-car garage, so there may be more parked inside. Oh, and there are two more parked on the lawn over here next to the house. So?

MOTHER: Doesn't that seem strange to you?

ELLEN: Maybe they're having a party?

MOTHER: And everyone who comes to this party drives a junker car manufactured before 1980?

ELLEN: Probably not.

MOTHER: So? There must be an ordinance against that sort of thing. We should notify the authorities that this person is keeping junker cars on his property. I bet they aren't even registered.

ELLEN: I don't know whether they're registered or not.

MOTHER: So you'll call the authorities?

ELLEN: No, I'm not calling the authorities, Mother.

MOTHER: Why not?

ELLEN: Because I live in this neighborhood. I live right down the street from those people. I really don't need that kind of trouble.

MOTHER: Well, I have to live in this neighborhood, too.

ELLEN: What?

MOTHER: I said I have to live here, too.

ELLEN: Oh, yes.

MOTHER: I have to look at all that now.

ELLEN: Yes. Mother, sit down, would you? You're making me nervous.

MOTHER: All right. I am feeling a bit tired. (*Goes to the easy chair.*)

ELLEN (*trying to help her mother sit in the easy chair*): Do you need help getting down?

MOTHER (*waving Ellen off*): No, no. Leave me alone now. I can get down all right. It's getting up that I need help with.

ELLEN: All right, all right! Comfortable?

MOTHER (*reaching underneath herself*): Sort of. Is there a spring popped in this seat?

ELLEN: I don't know. I bought it at the Salvation Army. It didn't come with a warranty.

MOTHER: Hmph! Well, we can replace it with my nice blue brocade armchair when my furniture comes. (*Pause.*) Is there any coffee left?

ELLEN: No, we finished it hours ago.

MOTHER: Well? Couldn't you make another pot?

ELLEN: Another pot?

MOTHER: Yes, another pot of coffee.

ELLEN: But you had three cups this morning, Mother.

MOTHER: Well, I'd like another cup, maybe even two.

ELLEN: Oh ... well ... how about a small glass of milk? Good for the bones.

MOTHER: Good for the ... I don't want milk; I want coffee. What, it's not the custom in Nebraska to drink coffee in the afternoon? Is it being rationed for some reason?

ELLEN: No, but you—

MOTHER: I'll pay for the coffee if that's the problem. I have plenty of money.

ELLEN: You don't have to pay for the coffee; it's not that. It's just that when you drink coffee, you always have to go to the bathroom.

MOTHER: Well, excuse me for being human.

ELLEN: No, I mean more than usual.

MOTHER: So? The bathroom is right there.... Oh, I see.

ELLEN: What?

MOTHER: You resent having to help me. Well, you don't have to, you know.

ELLEN: I don't resent it, really I don't. And yes, until I get the bathrooms made handicapped accessible, I do have to help you.

MOTHER: I am not handicapped.

ELLEN: Right. Not old, not handicapped. I got it.

MOTHER: So?

ELLEN: What?

MOTHER: The coffee?

ELLEN: It's just not a good time, don't you think? I mean, the movers will be here any minute, and if you have to go to the bathroom while they're here, and then I have to take you and deal with them at the same time.... Couldn't you just wait until after they leave?

MOTHER: Oh, all right.

ELLEN: Thank you.

MOTHER (*pause*): Ellen?

ELLEN: Yes?

MOTHER: I have to go to the bathroom.

ELLEN: Really?

MOTHER: Yes, really.

ELLEN: All right. (*She goes to stand in front of her mother to help her up.*) Hold onto me. There you go. Careful now.

MOTHER: My walker, hand me my walker!

ELLEN (*handing her mother the walker*): Here you go. Got it?

MOTHER: Yes, yes! (*She grabs the walker and moves faster than usual toward the bathroom door.*)

ELLEN: Slow down, there's no rush.

MOTHER: Yes, there is.

ELLEN: Oh.

MOTHER: See? It's nothing to do with coffee. (*She enters the bathroom.*)

ELLEN: Well, you had three cups this morning. (*She follows her mother into bathroom.*)

ELLEN (*from the bathroom*): Okay, hold onto me here. Can you get that zipper yourself?

MOTHER: Yes, yes! (*Beat.*) No! It's stuck! Help me.

ELLEN: All right.

MOTHER: Hurry up!

ELLEN: All right already! There, it's down now. Easy does it. All right, just call me when you're finished. (*She exits bathroom.*)

MOTHER: Close the door!

ELLEN: All right, I'm closing the door. (*She closes bathroom door, takes out a cell phone, and dials. On cell phone.*) Hello, this is Ellen Redmond—Yes, that's right. When do you think you'll get here? Oh, I see—No, that's all right. I just wanted some idea of when you'd be here. You have my address? Yes, that's right. Oh, I need to ask you something. When you get here, could you just park the van on the street and wait until I signal you to come in? No, we'll see you pull up. We're right here in the living room.

MOTHER: Ellen, I'm finished!

ELLEN (*on cell phone*): Okay. Thank you. (*She puts cell phone away. To her mother.*) Coming, Mother! (*She opens bathroom door and goes in.*)

ELLEN: Okay, hold on around my neck. Ready? One, two, three. Upsy-daisy. Can you manage that? Here's your walker then.

Mother exits bathroom. Ellen follows her out.

MOTHER (*looking around the room*): Were you talking to someone?

ELLEN: Just the movers. They'll be here soon.

MOTHER: Are they lost?

ELLEN: No, they're not lost. They'll be here soon.

MOTHER: Good. I can't wait for my bed to come. So, we're going to set it up here in the living room?

ELLEN: Just temporarily, until I can put in a stair lift so that you can go up and down the stairs. Then we'll move it up to the spare bedroom.

MOTHER: And the rest of my furniture?

ELLEN: We'll put it in the basement until I can sell mine off.

MOTHER: You don't mind?

ELLEN: No. I can just ship all this stuff back to the Salvation Army, if they'll take it back, that is.

MOTHER: It's just that I'd like to have my own things around me. It'll give me the illusion of being back in my house in Connecticut.

ELLEN: No, I understand.

MOTHER: If I squint my eyes and don't look at those hovels across the street.

Sound of a distant toilet flushing.

MOTHER (*looking upward*): What was that?

ELLEN: What was what?

MOTHER: It sounded like someone flushed the toilet.

ELLEN (*pointing upstage to the bathroom door*): You were just in there. It's probably still running. (*Moving toward the bathroom.*) I'll go jiggle the handle.

MOTHER (*looking upward, moves toward the stairs*): No, not that toilet. It sounds like it's coming from upstairs. Is there someone up there?

ELLEN: No, how could there be someone up there?

MOTHER: Go up and check.

ELLEN: I'm not going to go up to check. I know that no one could be up there.

MOTHER: But it sounds like a toilet flushed upstairs. (*Yelling up the stairs.*) Who's up there?

ELLEN: Mother, don't yell up there like that; there's no one there, I tell you.

MOTHER: If there's no one there, what difference does it make if I yell up there?

ELLEN: Oh, hang on a minute. I know what you heard. You mean that sound like running water?

MOTHER: It was clearly a toilet flushing. Upstairs.

ELLEN: Yes. That's right. The ballcock on that toilet doesn't seal properly. The water slowly drains out of the tank, and then it triggers it to flush on its own.

MOTHER: You should really get that fixed.

ELLEN: Yes, I will.

MOTHER: I mean it's a terrible waste of water. You really should get it fixed as soon as possible.

ELLEN: I will. Please, Mother. Why don't you sit back down again?

MOTHER: Oh, all right. I'll sit. But if I have to sit, I want a cup of coffee.

Ellen looks at her mother in disbelief.

MOTHER: What? I already went to the bathroom. What harm will it do now?

ELLEN: Oh, all right. I don't want to argue this with you anymore. I'll start a new pot.

Ellen exits stageright to kitchen. Mother sits down in easy chair.

MOTHER: Don't take this the wrong way, Ellen, but I really wish I could have moved to Greenwich.

ELLEN (*from kitchen*): Greenwich? How were you going to move to Greenwich?

MOTHER: I mean, move in with Sally.

ELLEN: Oh.

MOTHER: I mean, just to stay close to my old life. To not ... uproot myself so much. Do you know what I mean, Ellen?

ELLEN: Yes, I know what you mean.

MOTHER: I mean, it really would have been better, right? It just would have been a short move for me. I would have been able to see my grandchildren any time I wanted. I could have even helped raise them. That's how it used to be done. And it would have been better for you, right? You wouldn't have had to get rid of all your furniture to make room for mine. I mean, this really is an inconvenience for you, isn't it?

ELLEN: There's no inconvenience.

MOTHER: But don't you think it would really be better for me to live with Sally? I mean, you're a single woman and—

ELLEN: Oh, here we go—

MOTHER: No, I don't mean that as a criticism. You always take everything I say to you as a criticism. I just was trying to point out that it would be hard for a single woman to have her mother living with her. Hard socially, I mean. It's going to be very difficult for you to meet anyone with me living here.

ELLEN: Oh no, Mother. That won't matter.

MOTHER: Well, it will matter to some man. How do you think he'll react when he finds out that you've got your mother living with you? And how will you entertain him?

ELLEN (*entering stageright from kitchen*): Entertain him?

MOTHER: Here in your house? How will you entertain him ... overnight?

ELLEN: Mother!

MOTHER: Oh, please. I'm not so old that I don't know the score. I know how it's done nowadays.

ELLEN: Well, this is really not something you need to worry about, Mother.

MOTHER: Don't you want to get married, Ellen? Don't you want to have kids?

ELLEN: Mother, I'm forty-six years old. There aren't going to be any kids.

MOTHER: Why not?

ELLEN: My eggs are ... past their expiration date.

MOTHER: There's no need to be crude. (*Beat.*) It's not too late, you know. Well, maybe it is too late for the children, but it's never too late to get married. Remember your great aunt Rita? She married for the first time at fifty-four. In the 1960's. That was quite a feat back then.

ELLEN: Wasn't her husband like eighty-something?

MOTHER: I'm just saying it can be done at any age.

ELLEN: Okay, Mother. I'll work on that. (*Looking out the window.*) Where is that van?

MOTHER: I hope it never comes.

ELLEN: Oh, hell.

MOTHER: Yes, I hope it never left Connecticut. That there was some mix-up or something, and that all my things are still sitting in a storage vault back in Connecticut, and that I could just get on an airplane and go back. Today, that I could go back today.

ELLEN: The house is sold, Mother. And anyway, you can't—

MOTHER: No, not back to my house. I mean, I could go to Sally's house.

ELLEN: You can't go to Sally's house.

MOTHER: Why not? She has that big beautiful house in

Greenwich, in a lovely neighborhood. There's plenty of room in that house. There's even a guest room with a bathroom on the first floor. She wouldn't even have to install a stair lift, which is going to cost a fortune if you ask me.

ELLEN: Yes, it would have been nice for you at Sally's house.

MOTHER: Then why did you insist on dragging me out here? My life isn't here, you know. My life is in Connecticut. I'm too old to start over like this, Ellen. I don't mind saying it myself, but I'm too old.

ELLEN: Well, that was the problem, wasn't it?

MOTHER: What do you mean by that? What was the problem?

ELLEN: That you were too old to live on your own anymore in that big house with the big yard in Connecticut.

MOTHER: Ellen, I told you to stop calling me old! Didn't I just say that? I wasn't too old to live on my own. It was just getting a little hard, but I was managing.

ELLEN: But you *weren't* managing. Don't you remember when Sally couldn't get you on the phone, and she had to call the local police, and they came to the house and found you on the patio? You'd been lying there on your back for five hours.

MOTHER: I fell, that's all. Everyone has a fall sometimes.

ELLEN: And the time you fell in the supermarket? You sat right there in the middle of the frozen food section, with all the customers wheeling their carts around you for almost half an hour before you'd even let the employees help you out to your car.

MOTHER: That story just proves my point. I drove myself there and back. I could still be driving, you know. I'm sorry I let Sally talk me into selling the Cadillac.

ELLEN: You ran over Mrs. Kelly. Right in the driveway.

MOTHER: I did not run her over. I only just tapped her a little. She's fine. Anyway that wasn't my fault. I didn't ask her to come over right when I was trying to get to my hair appointment. And then she goes disappearing where I can't even see her. One minute she's talking to me through the driver's side window and the next she's walking down the driveway behind the car.

ELLEN: Well, where do you think she went? Did you think she flew up into the air and hovered over the car?

MOTHER: Oh really, Ellen!

ELLEN: And by the way, that was not the only accident you had in the Cadillac.

MOTHER: I had some bad luck, that's all. I was doing fine on my own. (*Pause.*) I feel so tired all of a sudden. Is that coffee ready yet?

ELLEN: I'll get you a cup. (*She exits to kitchen.*)

MOTHER: Thank you. That would be nice.

Sound of light footsteps.

MOTHER (*looking upward*): Ellen?

ELLEN (*from the kitchen*): I'm pouring the coffee, I'll be right there.

MOTHER: I hear someone walking around upstairs.

ELLEN (*enters from stageright with a cup of coffee*): What did you say?

MOTHER: Listen to that. Someone walking around upstairs. Don't you hear it?

ELLEN: It's an old house. It makes noise. (*Setting down the coffee cup on the end table.*) Here you go.

MOTHER (*picking up the coffee and starting to drink it*): Thank you.

I'll try to hold it for awhile.

ELLEN: It's okay, Mother. If you have to go again, just let me know.

MOTHER (*looking upward*): That's so strange. It really sounded like.... You've got a nice little house here, Ellen. I didn't mean to be so critical.

ELLEN: It's okay, Mother. I know I haven't done as well as Sally.

MOTHER (*with genuine admiration*): Yes, well your sister Sally has an MBA and a great job in New York. Plus, she has the second income, you know. That Greg. One thing's for certain, that guy knows how to make money.

ELLEN: Yes, they do just fine, don't they?

MOTHER: There's no reason you couldn't have done the same. But you were so determined to *not* be successful, so determined to *not* make money. I mean, what is wrong with all that?

ELLEN: Nothing. Nothing is wrong with it.

MOTHER: And why Nebraska, for heaven's sake? Why couldn't you have found something in the Northeast?

ELLEN: I tried to, Mother. I applied everywhere. You don't know how hard it is to find a job in academia, especially in my field. I didn't move out here to be defiant or perverse or anything like that. It was just ... a bad decision, I guess. But here I am, and there's no going back to the Northeast at this point, believe me.

MOTHER: Well, not for you maybe, but I intend to go back. You can spend the rest of your life here if it suits you, but not me.

Sound of light footsteps.

MOTHER (*looking and pointing upward*): Listen...there it is again. I'll be glad when the stair lift is put in. Then if I hear a noise, I can just go up on my own and check it out.

ELLEN: You could.

MOTHER: And when the bathrooms are renovated, I can go by myself.

ELLEN: That would be better.

MOTHER: Still, it would be even better at Sally's house, wouldn't it? They have plenty of money to do that kind of thing, don't they?

ELLEN: They do. Mother, do you remember what Sally talked to you about when you started having trouble?

MOTHER: What do you mean?

ELLEN: I mean what she suggested. What living arrangement she tried to get you to consider?

MOTHER: No, I don't remember.

ELLEN: Yes you do. Sally and Greg took you to visit that assisted living place? They told you they were taking you out to lunch at a restaurant, but they took you to that assisted living place.

MOTHER: Oh, that. I don't know what got into her. It was that Greg, I'm sure. That man never liked me.

ELLEN: You figured out that it wasn't really a restaurant, and you refused to even set foot in the place.

MOTHER: I refuse to nail down my own coffin!

ELLEN: Mother—

MOTHER: No, that's what those places are. Coffins for the living. That's where old people go to die. I don't belong in a place like that. I don't want to be around those old people all day with their aches and pains and all their complaints. I don't want to smell old people up and down the halls. And I've never been crafty, you know. That's what they make you do in those places; they herd all the old ladies

into the craft room, and they make you knit or weave baskets or make scrapbooks or whatever. No, that is not for me, waiting to die while I make stuff that nobody wants or has a use for. I want to enjoy my life. I want to be involved in my grandchildren's lives on a day-to-day basis. If I'm stuck in one of those assisted living places, those kids won't want to go there to visit me. They won't even know me then, and when I'm gone, they won't remember me. That's why I wanted to live with Sally and her family. But no, no, you had to step in and convince all of us that I should come out here and live with you. For what? It's no good for you, and it's no good for me.

ELLEN: This wasn't my idea. It was Sally's.

MOTHER: Sally's idea? That doesn't make sense. Why would she want me to come out here to live with you?

ELLEN: Because you were so stubborn. Because you refused to go into assisted living. She thought that if we could get you out of your house, get you out here, you would go willingly.

MOTHER: Go to ... but the stair lift ... and the bathrooms.

ELLEN: Mother, I rent this house. I don't own it. I can't make all those changes. Even if I did own this house, those things would cost a fortune. I don't have that kind of money and don't expect to get it out of Sally and Greg. I'm barely making it here. You keep telling everyone that I'm a professor at the university, but I'm not; I'm a part-time adjunct instructor, and I'm still paying off my loans. I couldn't even pay the rent here without taking in a roommate. I might as well tell you now; I have a roommate living in the other bedroom. That's what you've been hearing upstairs.

MOTHER: But I don't understand. How can I live here if you have this roommate? I can't sleep in this living room forever.

ELLEN: No, of course not.

MOTHER: So I'm right about Sally's house. I should go live with Sally.

ELLEN: You can't live with Sally. Sally doesn't want you living in her house. Sally sent you here. Sally dumped all this on me, and I let her do it because she made me feel so guilty for coming out here and not being there and not being able to help.

MOTHER: I'm so confused. This is so strange, I don't even know what to say.

ELLEN: Oh. The van just pulled up.

MOTHER: Can you believe the timing of these people? Here I just sat down with my coffee.

ELLEN (*goes to stand in front of her mother*): Let me help you up, Mother. Hold on to me. Ready? One, two, three, up. Here's your walker.

Mother goes to the window to look out.

MOTHER (*bewildered*): That's not a moving van. It's too small to be a moving van. It's just a regular van.

ELLEN (*goes to the window to stand next to her mother*): Yes.

MOTHER: My furniture couldn't possibly fit in that.

ELLEN: No.

MOTHER (*realizing her situation*): It's here for me, isn't it?

ELLEN: Yes, it is.

MOTHER: Where are all my things?

ELLEN: Sally sent some of them to the place. The rest she's selling at an auction. You gave her power of attorney over all your affairs, remember?

MOTHER: Yes, I remember. She insisted we go to the lawyer and sign those papers.

ELLEN: And then you just let her do whatever the hell she wanted.

MOTHER: She's my daughter. I never thought she would.... Why are they just sitting there? What are they waiting for?

ELLEN: They're waiting for my signal. I told them I'd give them a signal when you were ready.

MOTHER: So give them the signal.

Just before the blackout, Ellen and her mother turn to each other and exchange a look of silent understanding.

END of PLAY

Lap

Kristin Pluhacek

Slip carefully beneath the cold, wet surface,
sheathed in a sharkskin of lycra and silicone.
Float forward, the standard superman pose will direct you.

Now surge,
your churning thighs
exciting the heart
force-feeding blood to
the fluttering muscles
that make your arms
rise, and reach,
and pull,
to complete
a single stroke.

Allow this
heartbeat rhythm
to take control.
You are methodical,
a streamlined machine
following a path—
black on blue tile—
to its “t” end,
until you flip,

Shoulders dropping,
stomach crunching,
toes rising then breaking the surface,
seeking the square solidity of the wall.
Once horizontal, feet planted, hand atop hand,
push off and corkscrew beneath your wake, where you will be

silently suspended, pressure soothing while projected reflections
make entertaining
webs of the floor, whispering, “linger.”
But a breath could be deadly, even at this shallow depth,

so rise
and explode,
revived by the blur
of the lane lines
in the periphery
of your goggles,
colors fixed
as you pass
marking
white, blue, red,

making you feel
sleek and fast,
a “Hell’s Angels” bomber
in a dogfight
attacking amid clouds,
contrail marking your path
so the camera
can judge
your speed.

Only Girl in the Subway

Stephanie Cleary

The station was full of men, the kind
who woke up next to wives who cooked

hot breakfasts for them,
taking care not to
burn the bacon. Men

who were welcomed home at the end
of the workday with a smile and a couple

fingers of Scotch
to take the edge off. She
didn't want to take

the subway. She hated being
stuck in the sewers with all those
rats wearing fedoras. The bench

she sat on was
long, and she sat

on it alone. She kept her eyes
low, she didn't want anyone
to notice her and think maybe she

was the kind
of girl who didn't

mind about the Scotch and the wife waiting.
Men in suits with cuff links and silk ties and
shined shoes had a long record of bad

behavior when she
was caught all alone.

In this Issue

Brigid Amos

Stephanie Cleary

William L. Coleman

Jonathan McGill

Kristin Pluhacek



W. S. M. Oil on canvas Jacob Fyfe

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