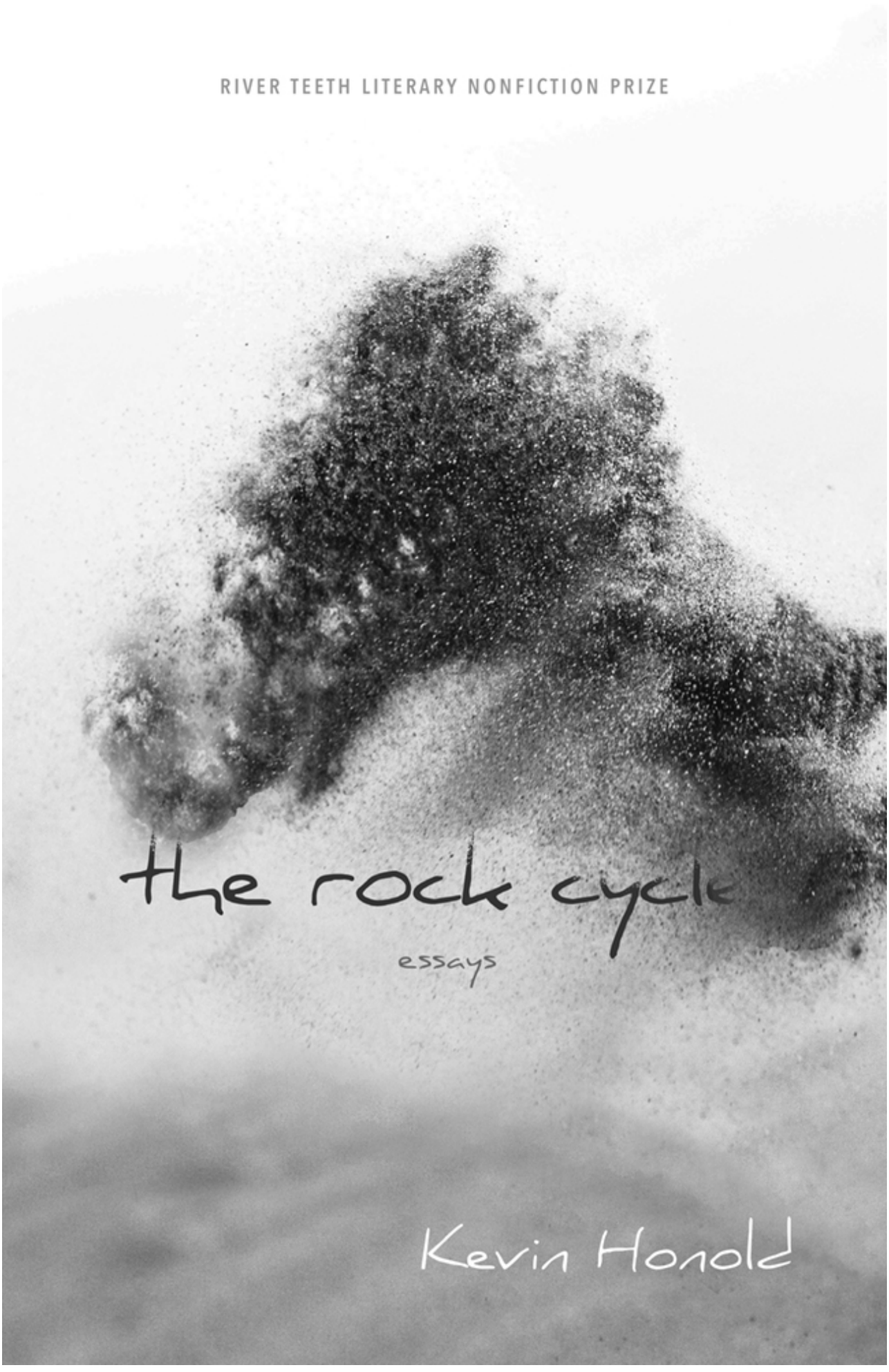
New Review: Mike Carson on Kevin Honold’s “The Rock Cycle: Essays”

RIVER TEETH LITERARY NONFICTION PRIZE



the rock cycle

essays

Kevin Honold

Kevin Honold's new essay collection, *The Rock Cycle,* begins in the Arabian Desert. It is 1991. U.S. forces have just invaded Kuwait to push Saddam Hussein's armies back into Iraq. Honold's unit is lost. They stumble upon a Bedouin camp. His Lieutenant asks the Bedouins if they have seen other soldiers, tugging at his uniform, then pointing at Honold and the others in Honold's unit. The Bedouins do not help them. The U.S. soldiers drive on. Honold says the Lieutenant was a decent man. He didn't want any trouble.

A little later in the same essay, Honold talks about Euripides' play, *The Bacchae.* He calls it a strange tale. In it, the unbeliever as well as the believer are horribly punished. I find that confusing, he says. I don't. I have long found *The Bacchae* to be relatively straightforward. What I find confusing is Honold's *Rock Cycle*. There is much punishment, but no punishing. It is a painstaking record of human failure that is also an improbable document of human freedom. It's about integrity and decency and generosity in a world where believer and unbeliever alike are horribly punished.

I know. It's insane. Batshit crazy.

But that's the point.

In "Light Discipline," Honold's second essay, the author tells us that in the desert, "notions of order and disorder are irrelevant."

He then quotes Benedicta Ward's translation of *The Desert Fathers*:

"Macarius the Great said to the brothers in Scetis after a service in church, 'Flee, my brothers.' One of the brothers said to him, 'Abba, where can we flee when we are already in the desert?' He put his finger upon his lips and said: 'I tell you, you must flee this.' Then he went into his cell, shut the door, and remained alone."

You just went into your room, Abba.

There’s nothing in there, Abba.

Abba?

But I tell you, Honold insists (you reading this, you who thinks that you know, you who thinks that you are sad and wise, you who think you are not sad and wise, you who thinks you are anything at all), you must flee *this*.

Flee what?

After Honold’s Army unit leaves the Bedouin camp, they find the enemy. American planes and tanks then destroy the enemy. The enemy is no more. They are dispatched. Disappeared. Smashed. Smushed. They have been burned and shot and exploded. The Berlin Wall has fallen. The Iraqis are history. We are history. History is history.

Honold tells us he hid in his tent while the other U.S. soldiers cleaned up the bodies. He read Herman Hesse. Like all young boys do when we hide in our tents.

In the same essay he reflects that “there must be few things more shameful than to be held cheap by the dead.”

This will strike some people as silly. They were the bad guys, Kevin. You didn’t even kill them, Kevin. The war in Iraq started in 2003. People die all the time. And so on.

But this emotional cheapness, to Honold, is precisely the problem. This book is filled with the deliberations of thinkers who refused to be held cheap and hold cheap. Their imagination took them over the edge of History into something else, something that is history and is not history, where fidelity to the givenness of things does not become an idolatry of the necessary. And Honold (somehow) weaves these ancient imaginations into preternatural essays of his own, strange alchemies of syntactical discipline, reckless

curiosity, and impetuous generosity.

He admires thinkers who give without reason. Who hold nothing cheap, neither the dead or the living or the birds that watch over both. He also admires the worldview of entire peoples, like the Huron of the Ohio Valley, who believed stinginess the one unforgivable sin.

In “A Brief History of the Huron,” Honold tells of how the Huron welcomed the Jesuits when they arrived in their forests, armed with nothing but a fanatical eloquence and memories of their own martyrdom. The Hurons admired the Jesuits’ courage. Still, being un-stingy people, they wanted nothing to do with their heaven, that desperate either/or, this maniacal righteousness. It must have struck them as unimaginative. A little sad even. All this wealth and technology and History and this is the best you can do?

Some death bed scenes:

“Which will you choose,’ demanded the priest to a dying woman, ‘Heaven or Hell?’” ‘Hell if my children are there,’ returned the mother.”

“’Heaven is a good place for Frenchmen,’ said another, ‘but the French will give me nothing to eat when I get there.’”

It saddens Honold too. Not just the death-bed Jesuits, but all of us basically decent people who think the way out of the desert involves condemning others to tepid moralisms. He seldom gets angry, Honold, and then only at the fact that we, Jesuits and Hurons both, are not alive to how good we actually are, how good we want to be, and how this goodness is never, ever transactional and mercenary.

Here he is in a much later essay, as he cycles the Mojave in 2013 and is tended to by stranger after stranger in the fantastical and impossible union of disparate peoples that is the U.S.A:

“It’s a fact that most people are on the lookout for someone to be kind to. This might be in answer to some unconscious suspicion that existence is justified, in some small ways, by acts of selflessness. But much faith is required to accept the proposition that goodness is instinctive. The world belies that notion every day, in a million ways, and mocks it endlessly. To confess that sort of faith is to invite derision; to act on it is seditious, if not plain batty. Still, the fact remains.”

Plain batty. You said it, Kevin.

At the end of the “Brief History of the Huron,” Honold tells us the Jesuits strung fireflies to the trees when nuns arrived in Quebec. This too is a fact. Just like the women and men who reach out to Honold on his bicycle are facts. Just like the hysterical laughter of young Honold staring into the Persian Gulf is a fact. The book is filled with many facts: batty, seditious, insane facts. Reading this book is much like arriving at the end of the trail in Zanskar, India, stumbling, as Honold does, upon “a sheer flight of stone where the sky had been,” so close you “can smell the melting ice that streamed from its face at a hundred points.”

Still, the original question. The problem at hand. We are in our tents in middle of the desert. Bodies are piling up outside and have been piling up for 4 billion years and we are listening to a pop song. Reading Hesse and playing cards. Yet we are the killers. We are the ones doing the killing. We are the killers and the forgetters. But we are also the rememberers. We are the ones on the lookout for someone to be kind to. We are also the ones reading Honold’s book.

It doesn’t make any sense. We don’t make any sense.

In “A Natural History of New Mexico,” Honold discusses how Western education has taught us to mistrust our imagination. He tells us that he has spent his whole life unlearning this,

learning instead that “one event can bear multiple truths.”

Here’s a multiple truth: Yes, remembering everything would, as Honold points out, annihilate the world in an instant. Thank god for the fact we do forget. We live in a semi-comatose oblivion and this allows us to survive, to wake up in the morning, to move forward from unnecessary wars and failed relationships and the things we didn’t say and the things we did. But then there’s the opposite truth, as Honold says, “if we fail to bring the past with us into the future, we will arrive less than human. A rootless and death-forgetting people have no one to forgive them and nothing to forgive. They have no need of atonement, and therefore seek no absolution. For such a people, blameless in their own eyes, compassion and mercy become difficult.”

This is true too. We have two truths. Here’s a third truth, perhaps even harder than the other two (but no less true):

“But this forgiveness, for oneself and for the world, must proceed from a broken heart; a broken heart is the alembic in which compassion is quickened. That is why, in the old story, a man of sorrows came looking for other men and women of sorrows, and forgave precisely those who love too much. Brokenheartedness is a discipline learned in shame, in failure, and in years. Forgiveness is, in a sense, a homely art, self taught for the most part. It has a power to destroy power, and to make free. Human freedom is precipitated by this strange alchemy. I’ve read about it in books, I’ve seen it practiced. This is the truth that sets free. But the truth is beyond me, every day.”

The power to destroy power. What an idea! How wonderful! Actual freedom! Not the pretense of the thing, not the posture of it, but a memory of the past that is not a forgetting of the past. A way to have integrity without having to take away another’s integrity. To cast them into hell. To damn them with stinginess. But isn’t this morbid? Brokenheartedness? How can

you be forgiving and morbid at the same time?

Our imagination often fails us. Another fact. Not the last fact, but a fact nonetheless.

In “The Rock Cycle,” the essay that gives the collection its title, Honold comments on how early modern thinkers tried to explain away the fish fossils on mountain tops by calling them sports of nature, *lusus naturae*, God’s jokes. Nature’s comedy. Figure this one out, scientists, they laughed.

They did figure it out. Scientists are an imaginative and patient bunch. The most famous of them, James Hutton, watched the Scottish earth for twenty-five years. He concluded: “solid parts of the present land appear in general, to have been composed of the productions of the sea.”

Rocks move. They go up and down like blood pumping through geological arteries.

Deep Time. We live in deep time. Wait long enough and nothing stays still. Not even mountains. (“What you look hard at seems to look hard at you,” says Gerard Manley Hopkins in Honold’s first essay.)

But Deep Time only points the problem with a giant clown finger. *Nothing* stays still. An inferno of corpses is heaped outside our tent while we feverishly read and play and sing. We have not buried a single one of them. We don’t know where to begin. Our imagination flails. It strains and bucks and begs for mercy or calcifies into ignorance and pride and History.

Honold doesn’t have an answer. All he has are these essays. Essays are truer than answers, and more difficult, more dangerous. Instead of punishing because we have been punished, they give because we have been given. They flee the timid transactions of selfhood and self-aggrandizement for the terrifying dislocations of our innate selflessness. They

are—if we are being perfectly honest—insane. You should never sit alone in the desert, finger to your lips, listening to the rocks move and people forgive. Who knows what Deep Time might say to you? Who knows what our history might become?

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Kevin Honold's *The Rock Cycle: Essays* was the winner of the 2019 River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Book Prize. You can purchase it here.

New Poetry from Ron Riekki: "my"

WET ASPHALT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

my

brain was left back in the war, the burial
of civilian-normality, how my amygdala
kicks out the ladders in my head, falling
decades, erasing exes, fought for my nation
and now, hibernation, isolation, chairs
stacked in front of my bedroom door when
I don’t sleep at night, the end of the world
in my head, the tingling headaches in my
head, my head in my head, the dead that
lullaby me every night, stormed around
my bed, the hole in my head, how I smell
corpse and I’m medical now, delved into
Detroit, elated when the night is slow,
the moon is shrunk, smoking out in
the parking lot, a doe tiptoeing across
the wet asphalt, a northern red oak’s
branches waltzing behind it, and how
oak is so often used for caskets, how
beautiful they look only when empty.

New Fiction from Logan Hoffman-Smith: “Hunger”

There were sixteen of us before the storm hit: truants and runaways and young offenders, girls in insulated yellow snowsuits, left to the dark Montana cold. We marched like ants across the tree line. We were terrifying and tiny and gone. Above us, icicles swayed from conifers, threatening to crush us alongside the mountain passage’s unstable walls of rock and

snow. Only the counselors had radios. We had no say in where we'd go. The state had sent us to Bitterroot Wilderness Reform after we'd called our mothers bitches and spray painted tits onto bridges and robbed Safeways with unloaded guns, said we could choose to hike and talk about our feelings or go to juvie. We chose the mouths and crags of mountains, chose six weeks of litter-clearing and cold. We signed a form that swore if we died, Montana wasn't liable, that we weren't the kinds of girls anyone would come looking for. When the line of turkeys cut in front of us and a few girls jostled to look at them, one of our counselors, Candy, got bumped and slipped on an ice patch. The sound her head made against the ground was like a melon smashed against a brick. Wen reeled back and raised her hands to assert her innocence while I shielded my face and shouted "Wait!," but by the time we'd lowered our mittens, the fourteen girls in front of us were gone.

Ivan Shishkin, “In the Wild North,” 1891. Museum of Russian

Art, Kiev.

We could've run after them, but we had consciences. Maybe ulterior motives. We wouldn't leave someone to die. Snow scraped our reddened faces as the line of birds scrambled toward the nearby cave for cover, and the two of us huddled together until Wen separated and bent down in front of Candy, her knees vanishing under the snow.

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We'd been paired into twos when we first got here, asked to look out for and rely on another delinquent. For six weeks, we'd distribute supply weight between our shoulders, go to the bathroom when the other had to, match each other's footfalls step for step. Through our closeness, our scents would intermingle and become a new scent. Ideally, we would become indistinguishable from each other. Our counselors had linked Wen and me together due to the order of our last names, merged us as if under one skin. It was easier for them to keep track of us if we were accounted for together as if we were numbers instead of people, but Candy was different. We felt she wanted to know us. We wanted to know her.

When we first met Candy, she told us her real name was Candice but to call her Candy instead. Candy like sugar. Candy like something sweet. She greeted us on the roadside after we piled out of the van, and we shied away from her ringed fingers, from every white woman who'd hurt us before. The thing about sweetness was it was good in moderation but in excess, it rotted your teeth. The thing about white women was the kindness they promised was always too good to be true. I thought about the news story about the mother who'd adopted four children from China and shot them all in her basement. The mother who'd driven her eight adopted kids over a cliff. How, inexplicably, a woman who promised to care for you could turn on you, and how I didn't even care if I was murdered, so long as someone took me in, and, when the barrel was held to

my forehead, promised this was a way I was loved.

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Wen thought Candy could care about her because she didn't scowl at her like she was a hairy caterpillar under a magnifying glass or something. One of those pipe-cleaner-haired creatures that conjured the same feeling as an uncle's pesto-filled mustache on your family's annual trip to Olive Garden: crusty and externally-organed but somehow alive. How amidst our wide berths and arctic glances, she, too, felt like a fuzzy thing under a magnifying glass, a too-large and duplicitous moth. She listened with the rest of us as our driver into the wilderness gave us our first lesson on nature and its relation to our humanity: a lecture on prey fowl and predatory birds.

"It's in the eyes, see," he said, a wad of jerky wedged between his teeth. "In the ratio of white to pupil. It's in the way they look at you, keen—there's a shine that non-raptors don't have. Big birds, always predators. Small ones, you've gotta check their beaks and eyes. Predators have mouths like hooks. Mouths for tearing. Mouths for skin." He paused as we passed an Avalanche Warning sign. Wen looked down at her hands, their breadth like loaves, knobbed and callused to garlic knots, and ran a finger over the cracks in her lips. Big birds, always predators. Big girls, hungry and dangerous too.

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"Okay, stand back. I, uh, saw this in a movie," Wen said. She cupped Candy's chin like a baby rabbit's, raised it carefully, then pressed gently with her arm against Candy's chest. Two pushes. Three. Nothing happened.

"Can you check her pulse?" I asked.

Wen pressed the back of her glove against Candy's neck, then

shook her head. “I don’t feel anything.”

“Take your glove off.”

Wen peeled her glove back and concentrated, her mouth screwing up as if she’d eaten a slice of sour grapefruit.

“A flutter?”

Alive, alive.

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We paced around Candy’s body for a while, unsure of what to do or where to go. All week, we’d had people to yell at us or shepherd us into motion or prod us back into our line. Back home there was always at least someone to tell us to move faster or we’d be left behind. We stood alone and motionless for the first time, watched the snowfall as if we were infants trying to comprehend the moons of our mother’s faces. We heard the turkeys cackle from the cave but we made no sound. On the ground, where our feet once swam in evergreen needles, a coat of white gathered and hid signs of life. If we were normal girls, we might’ve taken handfuls of the new snow or stuck our tongues out to taste it. We might have marveled at how it tasted blue as mountains, tasted of fir trees and clear glass sky. If we’d been born better or less afraid, we might even have packed it in our hands and hurled it at each other like tickets from hometown arcade machines, but the truth was we didn’t know how. So instead, we stood motionless for a few minutes, then moved on.

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The wind picked up, sending fragments of rock and ice from the formations above us and scraping red lines against our cheeks. Candy once said frostbite was most dangerous when you didn’t notice it, after you’d been outside too long and became numb. She told us this on one of the first nights when I woke up

from a terror about being trapped under the snow. One of the program's worst rules was weren't allowed physical contact with each other outside of necessity, but Candy rubbed my shoulder, gave me the mercy of a caring touch. One night, she gave Wen her mushroom soup after she spilled hers, all the kindness we'd never known except for now.

We thought of Candy's warning as snow gathered inside the crevices of our snowsuits, gathering in small piles on our shoulders before blowing to the ground. The cold began to soak through our clothes and so we, like the turkeys, retreated to the little cave. We carried Candy with us to a dry spot and slid her drenched coat off her shoulders. We bundled her up in a sleeping bag. We kept her warm. We cleaned the gash on her forehead and pressed it with snow. We sat on a damp stone and counted the food we had between us: four sachets of Uncle Ben's ready rice (Tex Mex flavor: tomato, garlic, and puke), six blocks of shattered Maruchan chicken ramen, a carton of cashew-heavy trail mix, two packets of off-brand, likely expired Walmart fruit snacks, and an instant cup of mashed potatoes with a swollen lid. We tried to think of what to make and what the components of an actual meal were supposed to be. Candy looked so tiny in the sleeping bag, all nestled and motionless like a just-bathed sparrow shrunk to one-fourth its size. We thought of the way she carried a bag of popsicle stick jokes to share with us and walked beside us while we straggled, of how she only ever had praise for us and how she promised she'd never leave us behind. We thought of how stupid and corny she was when she talked about the importance of trees, and how we knew nothing about her but wanted so badly for her love.

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"If one of you chickenshits lost the mac and cheese, I'm going to literally have an aneurysm," I remembered someone saying a couple of days ago. Wen had looked downward and I'd shaken my head. Under a tarp the night before, the two of us had caught

each other staving our hunger on raw macaroni beneath the cover of night. Each of us had watched each other in the darkness, our tongues blue and eyes wide as searchlights. Our breaths circled each other. In the cave, we put our pot up above the fire and filled it with snow. The water came to a boil, and we poured in a packet of puke-tomato-rice. We listened for the sound of bubbles, waited for that warm, gas station smell. We thought of how quickly a figment of warmth could become a vessel for all our hungers, for heat our bodies didn't have. We wondered: What would become of us in the morning? If we made it out of the wilderness? Where would we go? Under masks of shadow and firelight, we hid our pitiful thoughts from each other, wore the learned disguises of predatory birds. Or maybe we hadn't adopted curved beaks and claws as survival mechanisms but were instead born defective, and maybe our glimmers of innocence were merely tricks of the light.

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There were things you learned when you didn't have anybody: how to float in a neighbor's bathtub and pretend it was the wide, cold ocean. How to fend for yourself and your siblings or you alone. What type of footsteps meant "bad" and what type of footsteps meant "good" and how to prepare yourself for either. How on the right morning on the right day of November you could convince yourself you were actually worth something and still be so stupid you got arrested for shoplifting the same day. How to bandage and cradle yourself after scraping your own knees against asphalt. How it was your own monstrousness that got you here and nobody else's. How if you used the right voice for the right story and fabricated exactly the right details, everyone would believe you. How if you broke yourself down into something perfect no one would know. How you could do everything, yes, everything, alone and be prepared for a heart attack or a tornado or a Montana blizzard, and how your aloneness made you immortal. How there

was only one spot between the shelves of canned food in the Safeway the security cameras couldn’t catch, and how if you ran every day you’d become faster than anyone, how you’d run fast enough to find a spot under the sun where you could lick a stolen ice cream cone for a few minutes, and nobody would come to run over you or your prize.

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We waited for Candy to wake up, to move or make a noise or do anything. Without her, we were afraid and so lonely. We imagined ribboning our elbows against cave walls and crying just to feel her hands on our shoulders, for her to run circles against our backs, smooth and even. We wanted to curl into ourselves and become infants again – back before we’d done anything wrong, when a womb was an ocean and we only had to be passengers. Back when our lungs didn’t work and we slept when our mothers slept and we fed ourselves through the gristled tripe of her stomach. Back when the sun didn’t exist unless she saw it. We wanted to ask what we’d done wrong and what we’d done to deserve this. We wanted to ask: why is the sun warm and why does it burn? We wanted to know why there was no “d” in “refrigerator” but there was in “fridge,” why there was salt in both the ocean and the blackheads lodged in our noses. We wanted to know where the world came from: its burnt archipelagos, snow and sky. We wanted to know why continents were ridged but not planets and what the deal was with white people and farmers’ markets. We wanted to know why our mothers didn’t love us and because they didn’t, if she could. *“Tell us a story,”* we wanted to ask, so we could curl into her voice like a pillow fort and stay there forever. So we could hold on forever and not let go.

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Wen and I took our sleeping bags, zipped ourselves together, and crawled inside. We held each other like sea otters through the cold. After Wen fell asleep, I worried about how something

precious could always be taken from us in an instant. If Candy died, she'd kill the girls we'd whittled so carefully from our own bodies for her, the girls she believed us to be, the girls she wanted to hold. If she woke up different or changed her mind about our goodness, I knew we'd morph into something monstrous, who we'd been and who we'd always be. In the silence, I crept towards Candy's motionless body. I checked her pulse, *alive, alive, alive.* Wen made a frightened sound in her sleep and I crawled back under the sleeping bag, and we became us again, and we hoped she'd die or wouldn't die there, and in the morning, we sifted for something to eat.

New Poetry from Hannah Jane Weber: "My Childhood Smelled Like," "Surprise Dawn"

FROSTED WITH MOONLIGHT */ image by Amalie Flynn*

MY CHILDHOOD SMELLED LIKE

cabbage, salted tomatoes, and cracklings.

the flume of dust I awakened when my fingers
untangled the shag carpet’s red mane.

crayons I melted against the wood stove,
our terrier’s feet, with that same scent of fire.

night crawlers, shad, algae, and lake,
blanketing our boat after a morning of fishing.

Dad’s scrapyard, fragrant with hot tar
and smoke from his brown cigarettes,
acres of rust and grease, a twisting maze
leading to one abandoned refrigerator after another,
each filled with jars and jars of ancient rot.

fireworks and muddy gravel roads,
leadplant, elderberries, horsemint.

Grandma’s lilac bushes,
reeking of booze from the bar next door,
their purple bunches lighting up the dark
with neon liquor perfume.

SURPRISE DAWN

rows of cedars push through slats of slain brothers
dense boughs gushing berries
frosted with moonlight

my bike light skims twilight from creamy sidewalks
a premature dawn blaring from the flashing bulb
illuminating the wind’s fabric
in rustling leaves

I lean far from the sweep of branches
but my jacket catches the emerald froth
and propels me into the flustered chatter of birds awakened
and tossed about by my helmet’s pillage of their feathered
hearth

New Nonfiction by James Wells: “Signs”

June 27, 2008

I count between my mother’s breaths*: one-thousand one, one-thousand two.*

Thirty minutes ago, her breaths were one second apart, and an hour ago, they were less than half a second apart. In the next few minutes, I know the interval between her breaths will become even longer, and soon, they will cease altogether.

My mother’s big, beautiful, brown eyes are now glazed over, her eyelids almost closed. Her mouth is half-open, and her teeth, teeth that had been pearly white for nearly her entire life, have yellowed, most likely because the care staff at the nursing home had not brushed them as often as she once had herself. My brown eyes, which many have said remind them of my mother’s, stay fixated on her mouth and chest as I watch the gap between her shallow breaths grow longer.

As I put my face closer to my mother’s and kiss her forehead, I recognize her smell. It’s Pond’s Moisturizing Cream, mixed with the scent of her hair and skin. The only sounds in the hospital room are my mother’s shallow breathing, the clicking of the I.V. machine pumping antibiotics into her bloodstream, and the occasional whispered conversation between myself and our oldest daughter, Millicent, who was able to meet me here about a half-hour ago.

My mother lived a remarkable yet tragic life. Today is no different.

Despite the attentive care of a nurse and the monitoring of all of the medical equipment, I knew my mother gave up her struggle fifteen minutes before any machine or medical professional did. I was able to detect the very slight change in her breathing before the monitors or staff. As soon as I noticed the difference from what I felt were struggled breaths to more relaxed breaths, I called the nurse. After checking my mother and the monitors, she told me there was nothing different about my mother’s condition. To me, the change in her breathing occurred as clearly as the transfer in sound and rhythm of a muscle car shifting from a lower gear into overdrive. Her breathing, which seems more relaxed now, tells me that she has resigned herself to her death and is coasting on overdrive to eternity.

But this wasn’t the first strange thing to happen today. About five hours ago, I was at a Delta Airlines gate at Bluegrass

Airport in Lexington, Kentucky, waiting to board a flight to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I planned to meet my wife, Brenda, who was at a conference near there, and for us to embark on a thirtieth wedding anniversary cruise. We'd already canceled our trip once before when Brenda's mother became very ill, and this was our second try.

As I watched the first passengers move toward the gate to board, I received a call from my mother's nursing home in Versailles, Kentucky. One of the staff there told me, "We think your mother's bronchitis has flared up again, and to be on the safe side, we've admitted her to the hospital for tests." She suspected that my mother would be fine and back in her room at the nursing home in a few hours. Despite her reassurance and my eagerness to get on the plane, I still didn't feel right about it. My mother was treated at the same hospital the year before for pneumonia, so I called the hospital and asked for more information. My call was transferred from Reception, to Emergency, and then to my mother's ward. I was reassured when the nurse informed me she knew my mother from her previous visits. She told me my mother might have pneumonia and that a round of antibiotics should knock it out of her, just as it did the year before. When I told her my predicament and pressed her for more information, she informed me that the worst-case scenario was probably an overnight stay in the hospital, and given my mother's present condition, I should not cancel my plans to go out of town. But I still felt uncomfortable about the idea of getting on that plane. I called my daughters Millicent and Emily. I also called my older sister, Kathleen, and my brother, Ora, neither of whom live in the state, and briefed them about the changes with Mother. They all said, "Get on the plane." I even called our Episcopal priest, Father Allen, who visited my mother at the nursing home. He told me the same thing. "Get on the plane. Do the badly needed, over-due cruise with Brenda." I called my wife, waiting in Orlando. Only she recommended forgetting the cruise and be with my mom.

I can’t explain it, but as I was about to board the plane after I heard the last call to board, I changed my mind, convinced the Delta agents to get my already checked luggage off the plane, and rushed to the hospital, only twenty minutes away.

Just a few hours later, I am cradling my mother in my arms and watching her die. I hate to think how I would have felt if I had gotten on that plane and my mother died alone. If that was God’s miracle, I know that it was intended more for me than it was for my mother.

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three.

Mother was a very bright woman, the smartest in her high school class, and graduated first in her nursing school class during World War II. Fifty years later, when my siblings and I admitted her against her will to an alcohol detox facility, the mental health professionals there measured her I.Q. to be very high. The medical and mental health staff there could never convince her that she had an alcohol problem. Sometimes I wonder whether she really did, too.

We never heard my mother slur a word, never saw a stagger or stumble. However, the mountains of empty, opaque green and brown sherry and wine bottles in her basement made us wonder. I suspect the alcohol helped numb the pain of her overwhelming grief. Today, when I see the large trashcans full of empty beer and bourbon bottles and crushed beer cans in my garage, I wonder whether the same demons that haunted her might now haunt me.

She was an introvert, an avid reader, and in the last decades of her life, a hoarder and a recluse. She and my father were polar opposites. She was studious. He was not. She was a good writer and speller. He had to struggle with every word and sentence he wrote. She was always calm. He had a bad temper. She took her time and often made him late. He always had a lot

of energy and wanted to get things done right away. They were so opposite that my father often wrote about how he felt he did not deserve to be married to my mother.

My mother was a widow at the age of thirty-eight. After my father's death in Vietnam, she never dated, went out, or even spoke to or about another man. For years after his death, my siblings and I would wake up in the middle of the night and hear her not crying—but wailing like a wounded animal, for my father. I never thought about the difference between crying and wailing, but those nights, I learned. Her crying and shedding tears in silence could have been a private communication to my father that she had not accepted his fate. But the prolonged, high-pitch scream of her wail was a mournful plea designed to convince the heavens to let my father come back from the dead. We would all eventually fall back asleep, wake in the morning, and pretend that everything was normal.

Despite the yoke of grief she could never escape from, my sister, brother, and I agree that she couldn't have done a better job raising us. After my father's death, her only job, her sole motivation in life, was to take the very best care of us and give us the best possible educations. With my father's life insurance funds, she put us in some of the finest private college prep schools in the South. She helped us with our English, French, Spanish, German, algebra, calculus, and trigonometry lessons. She drove us to band, dance, swimming, wrestling, football, and soccer. She put all of her energy and resources into raising us and did nothing for herself. For example, in the forty-three years separating her death from my father's, she only bought three cars, the last one in 1972. By the time my siblings and I all finished college and got our M.A.'s, M.S.'s, M.D.s, and Ph.D.'s, she knew she had accomplished her mission. Left only to the company of her grief, without us being there, she started to go downhill a little faster. My father's death broke her heart and destroyed

her mind; she just kept it all together until we finished our education and started our own families.

We were kids, and awareness of mental illness was not as prevalent as it is today—and so we never recognized our mother's depression since our father's death. Had we known what we know today, had we been a little bit older, a little more informed, we would have encouraged her to seek help. The years of depression eventually led to her self-medicating with alcohol, which years later probably led to her dementia.

A few years ago, we had to put my mother in a nursing home after the assisted living community's management kept complaining about her behavior. She began acting as if my father was still alive and would do odd things, such as set an extra plate at the dining table and insist it was for Jack. The last straw for the management was when she packed her small suitcase, went down to the lobby, and told everyone she was waiting for Jack to pick her up in his car.

One of the toughest and most memorable days for me occurred when I took her for an eye doctor's visit. She was holding onto my arm as I helped her up some steps. As she lovingly looked at me with her big, brown eyes, she said, "I'm so fortunate to have a husband as good as you." I faked a smile back at her and said to myself, "Shit, she now thinks I'm Dad." My heart broke as I realized that the primary foundation for her existence for over forty years was now cracked and crumbling away right in front of me. After being faithful to his memory, she had forgotten his death and the sacrifices the two of them have made. To this day, I have not made up my mind whether that statement from her was a blessing or a curse, for her, as well as for me.

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four.

My mother's death did not begin this afternoon. It started in

1965. I knew what killed her and what haunted her for decades. In addition to her grief and depression, it was not knowing why my father felt he had to do the things he did, as well as the mysterious circumstances behind his death.

It won't be long. It won't be long before my mother and father are together again. After being apart for over four decades, within minutes, she will be with him. And in a few days, her casket will be placed directly on top of his in a national military cemetery.

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four, one-thousand five.

How is she still holding on? Why doesn't she let go? As my daughter and I hold her and stroke her face, and with tears streaming down both of our faces, we whisper for to her to "Go to Jack, go to Jack."

One-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three, one-thousand four, one-thousand five, one-thousand six, one thousand sev….

And still no breath. My daughter calls for the nurse. The nurse comes in, bends over, and places her stethoscope on my mother's chest. She says that Mother's heart is still beating. We wait…ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds. The nurse removes her stethoscope and stands up. Her actions tell us everything. No words are necessary. My mother is gone.

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Three days after leaving my mother's hospital bed, while going through her box of "important papers," I come across a note she had left among her financial records and insurance policies. There is no date on it, but knowing she wrote it on the back of a mimeographed assignment for a class I have not taught in twenty years, I suspect its date was around 1990. At that time, we lived within a half-mile of each other, and she

would often babysit our youngest daughter at our house. I suspect she removed the assignment from the trash can in my home office. She would often leave notes on little scraps of paper all over the house when her memory started to fail.

The note reads:

Jack had written about how furious a certain Vietnamese colonel was at whatever Jack had said to him. I couldn't help but wonder at the time, when Jack was shot down, if that colonel might have had something to do with it; might have had connections with the V.C. – or somehow been involved – yet of course, perhaps not.

I think again of that moment at the eye doctor's visit. I now believe that she was telling me that day to assume my father's role and investigate his death's actual cause, as he would have, being a career military police officer and criminal investigator. The downing of the CIA plane my father was a passenger in may have been a random act by the enemy. It may have been an assassination order by someone in the National Liberation Front, the South Vietnamese government, or God forbid, the U.S. government.

Signs pointing to what really happened could be anywhere.

I thought of the alcohol bottles in the basement. The screaming at night, when she thought we were all asleep. I thought of the mysterious force that told me not to board that plane, to be with Mother, and not go on vacation with my spouse. I thought of my own future, my own children, the way the past does not go away, and how the crimes and sins of the past persist, and haunt the present.

Right there, holding my mother's note, the clue she left hidden in the tragic wreckage of our past, I make a promise to myself that I will do everything I can to uncover the truth. I will learn the truth about what killed my father, and that killed my mother—before it kills me, before it kills my

family.