JEANNE WAGNER

AFTER THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR TELLS ME HE WON'T NEED THE SHOES

Remember when we saw that French film
where a reveler drinks champagne
out of a satin pump

then puts his hand inside it and walks it
around the room?
Marchéz, marchéz he says,

like a child with his push-toy, his puppet.
Where does the body end?
Put your foot into one of those little caves,

first the gaping mouth,
then the shove into darkness.
Sense the tightness, like bedsheets binding

you in before sleep.
Hopkins says the *soil is bare now,*
nor can foot feel, being shod.

TIM LEHNERT

B & E

In the summer of 1982, following our senior year of high school, Troy and I committed eleven burglaries.

We'd go through an open window or back door left unlocked, cut a porch screen or kick in the wood panel that surrounded the hose venting the clothes drier. If a job required skill, or was going to be difficult or dangerous, we didn't do it. We weren't ambitious, and we weren't pros. We robbed places with obvious clues (overflowing mailbox, fliers on the door handle, old newspapers on the porch) that the occupants were out of town.

We targeted houses on the East Side of Providence, choosing nice places, but not ones so nice that they would have alarms. Troy, who lived

off Blackstone Boulevard and whose father was a dentist, fashioned himself a Marxist, or as much of one as is possible for a high school student. The way Troy understood Marx, without having read him, was that some people had too much, or "excess profit," and others had too little. Therefore, it was appropriate to "skim the excess," or "go skimming" as Troy put it. He argued that laws against theft prioritized property over people and existed to legitimate inequality in society. There's something to this, but even then I knew it took a particularly self-serving application of Marx's work for it to justify one privileged person stealing from another.

Rarely did our hauls net more than a couple of hundred dollars worth of stuff. We didn't take jewelry, art, or anything big or heavy. We nabbed odds and ends: binoculars, flashlights, tape measures, cigarette lighters. Since we conducted the burglaries on foot, and had no idea how to sell stolen goods, we were limited in what we could take. And we had a code. According to Troy, it was acceptable to steal if you needed something, but selling the goods was not allowed, unless you needed the money for food or rent. Since we lived with our parents, we had to use what we took.

A typical break-in would have us leaving with a three-quarters-full bottle of gin, a calculator, three dress shirts, a handful of cassettes, a sports coat, a few books, a bag of cookies, a pack of Pall Malls and some cash (if any was left in a jar by the door or some such other obvious place). When he grabbed an item and put it in his backpack, Troy would sometimes intone for comic effect, "Ladies and gentlemen, we've just had a transfer of ownership." We drank the liquor, smoked the cigarettes, and wore the clothes we stole. At concerts (Blue Öyster Cult, the Kinks, the Police) we peered through our newly found binoculars and held aloft appropriated Zippo lighters.

We got a big kick out of stealing shirts from the man of the house's closet. We wore them in ridiculous combination with shorts and high-top sneakers. As we sat in a park or cemetery drinking beer and reminiscing about one of our "skims," Troy would adopt a stentorian voice: "Dolores, what happened to my blue pinstripe shirt? I've got a big meeting Monday. You didn't forget to pick it up from the dry cleaner's, did you?"

"No, Henry, I hung your shirts in the closet where I always do," I'd respond, playing the part of the high-voiced *hausfrau*.

"You don't think those *thieves* took it when they broke in last month, do you? For God's sake! I'll have to add this to the police report." Beer would spew from our mouths as we laughed.

Occasionally, we fudged the "need code" and sold some cassettes or LPs, but Troy usually had some complicated reasoning that made this okay. It's true I could have met my basic wants by getting a summer job, but Providence's economy in the early '80s was slow, and even jobs scooping ice cream, sweeping tennis courts, and bussing tables were hard to come by. Not to say that these positions didn't exist, but, as my father put it to me one June evening, "You're not getting on the stick about a job because you're too shy to look. And you're lazy."

It's been so many years that the burglaries have blended together; it's almost a generic East Side house from which we stole. Still, a few do stand out, like the big Tudor place whose owners left their back door unlocked. Troy was poking around the living room while I headed for the second floor. I stopped on the landing halfway up and looked out the window at the expansive backyard and its well-tended hedges. These people really did have way more than they needed. As I turned to ascend the remaining stairs, a voice came from one of the bedrooms, "Mom, that you?" Some kid, probably our age, still in bed at 11:30 am. I ran downstairs and grabbed Troy. We fled out the rear door and across the wide spongy lawn. Our escape was almost complete when I foolishly looked back and thought I saw something move behind the landing window; it was impossible to tell for sure, and I quickly turned away.

That was our eighth job of the summer, and it gave me pause. It didn't seem to bother Troy as much, but he hadn't nearly come face to face with an occupant of a place we were stealing from. Ultimately, nothing came of it. Probably the kid didn't even get out of bed, or if he did, was too brainless to figure out what was going on. We joked about it that night, doing our voices routine. "Uhh . . . duh, Mom, that you?'" Troy asked.

"Yes, Sweetie-pie, Mummy is here," I answered in my high-pitched female voice.

"Hey . . . uhh, Mom," Troy continued, "What're you doing? How come you're taking my stereo? Mom, that's not cool. Hey! . . . wait a sec, you're not my Mom!" We laughed, but it was a bit hollow, and it bothered me that the kid might have seen my face from the window.

Neither of us joked about our last break-in of the summer. We were descending the back steps of a place near Miriam Hospital when a woman next door came out on her porch. She was in her sixties, wearing a floral print dress, clutching a mug. I pegged her immediately as a busy body, the kind who is fond of saying, "I keep an eye out." She asked us point blank what we were doing; Troy tried some line about a painting job, but she wasn't having it. We kept walking, proceeding along the side of the house and then out the front gate. The woman had turned around and gone back inside after interrogating us. She was calling the cops, we knew it. Years of minding everybody else's business were finally paying off.

We split up and ran. I dumped my bag of stuff (an umbrella, a baseball, some postage stamps, a bottle of vodka) in some bushes, and tried to look casual as I walked down a side street behind the hospital. I saw a police cruiser, without its siren on, shoot up Rochambeau a few blocks away. It was just like on TV, the squad car comes for the bad guys. I felt a distilled panic. What to do, what to do? Running seemed like a bad idea. Hiding, sure, but where? The hospital seemed too official, a part of the system, a trap. Instead, I changed direction and walked up to Hope Street, a few blocks away.

There were some people on Hope, but not many; I could easily be spotted. What had I been thinking? I thought of pressing on to Swan Point Cemetery, but that was a five or ten-minute walk. I also considered going into a diner but didn't want to be confined. How long could I stay in there? If the police came in, that would be it; I'd be nailed at a lunch counter.

It was hot and humid, and sweat soaked my shirt and stung my eyes. Every escape option seemed bad, and I was about to enter a drug store to further ponder my options when a city bus came into view. I ran to the stop on the next block and got in line; there were three people ahead of me. The bus arrived, shuddered to a halt, and hissed. The doors opened and a few passengers got off, then the first two people in line quickly boarded. I waited, a clammy dollar bill folded in my hand, as the hunched elderly man ahead of me stood at the fare box, trying to extract coins from his wallet with shaking hands while he asked about schedule changes. Eventually, he shuffled into the seat behind the driver, and I stuffed my dollar in. Finally, the door closed behind me, and the bus pulled from the curb. I walked to the back, took the last seat, and rode the bus downtown.

I was the last one off. The bus driver followed me, carrying his seat cushion and making loud jolly chatter about the Red Sox with a uniformed man who stood on the sidewalk, smoking. I wished I was a carefree drone with no worries other than who was pitching that night. I'd half expected a police officer to be at the bus terminal to meet me, but no one was there and Kennedy Plaza was almost deserted, everyone lying low in the warm sticky weather.

I had no place to go and so wandered around downtown's rutted parking lots and vacant buildings, wondering what had happened to Troy. A police car drove past me as I walked by the main library; I breathed slowly and looked straight ahead, but not too straight ahead. The car kept going and didn't slow. I soon realized that the cops weren't going to grab me off the street now, but if they'd caught Troy they were probably at my house, asking my mother if I was in, wanting to know when I would be back, wondering if she knew where I might have gone. All of those abstract fears about arrest, court, and a record that I'd had while stealing now seemed tangible and immediate. I walked past a run-down bar and watched a man stumble into its dark glass door on his way in. There's nothing romantic about being down and out, a marginal character or a petty criminal—it's not cool, it's not pretty, it's not fun. I nearly started crying; I wasn't a thief in my heart, I didn't deserve to be arrested, but maybe I did.

I traipsed around downtown for a few hours more, ordered but couldn't eat a wiener and fries, gave the three dollars I had in my wallet to passing bums, and finally walked home. It was dinnertime when I arrived. No squad car was outside. I entered. My mother told me to wash my hands for dinner, and my father agitated about the front lawn looking shaggy, and since I wasn't working it seemed like I would have plenty of hours in the day to do something about it, and where had I been anyway? I pushed down some food, engaged in excruciating chatter about the automatic garage door opener my father had just purchased, and watched a rerun of M*A*S*H in the living room.

I turned the television off and asked in as offhand manner as possible if anyone had called. Was I expecting a call? Oh, no, no, just wondering, that's all. I went upstairs and dragged the phone by its long cord down

the hallway and into my room. I shut the door, sat on my bed, and called Troy. We exchanged a few cryptic words and agreed to meet at the park.

Troy had headed the opposite way when we split up, throwing his goods into a garbage can before heading down the hill toward North Main. He'd gone into the Dunkin' Donuts and sat there for a couple of hours before going home. We leaned on the monkey bars and smoked many cigarettes, but had no desire for beer, pot, or joking impersonations. We'd made it, but we were still nervous. The woman had clearly seen us both; the police had been summoned. We realized that it wasn't too bright to be robbing places so near where we lived. There was also the matter of the stuff we'd taken. Could it be recovered and fingerprinted? We'd planned on a dozen "skims," but decided, like a sports team forfeiting the last game of the season, to stop at our current count of eleven. There were only two weeks of summer left before college began anyway.

II

September came and Troy, the Marxist, left for Williams College while I started at the University of Rhode Island. I had low expectations going in. I had been a mediocrity in high school: no girlfriend, not particularly popular, unexceptional academically, unathletic. My friends and I had excelled only at finding ways to denigrate our more ambitious and with-it peers. I was part of that great gray mass that lies below the high school stars, but above the dropouts, stoners, and complete social rejects.

By my second week of college, I had already begun to fall behind in my reading and find my classes boring. URI was an improvement over high school in that I was away from home and could smoke freely, but I had yet to feel any inspiration, academic or otherwise. I entertained thoughts of quitting school and moving to Colorado to work in a ski resort, but I'd never skied and didn't know how I might engineer such a move. Instead, I slept through my early morning classes, and stayed up late watching TV in the dorm common room.

My luck changed when I met Erin, who was assigned to my group for a physical geography project. We had a few casual geography related meetings, sometimes in the company of the other two group members (a barely present athlete of some sort, and a high-strung girl whose fingers were a mess) and then a few actual dates before the "girlfriend" and "boyfriend" labels were applied.

Our relationship took on typical and idealized aspects of the college romance: studying together, going for walks, midnight giggling in coffee shops. Erin wore little makeup and looked particularly fetching in jeans. Moreover, she was a good person—kind, ethical, an opponent of meanness, bigotry, and dishonesty. While I had been stealing, she had been working at a camp for the disabled. I told Erin I hadn't done much of anything over the summer as I'd contracted mono in late June, and by the time I was better it was almost Labor Day. She was very sympathetic that my summer between high school and college had been so depressing.

Once it was established that Erin was, in fact, my girlfriend, I began to mention this casually in conversation whenever I could. "See you later, I have to swing by the library to meet my *girlfriend*," I'd tell my acne-plagued roommate, a video arcade devotee. I also began to favor a preppie mode of dress, and often walked around with a book, even when not going to class. I was, you see, a COLLEGE STUDENT WHO WAS INTELLIGENT AND SERIOUS AND HAD A GIRLFRIEND. I was immensely pleased with myself and assumed that the delightfully novel situation I found myself in would prevail indefinitely, that it would not at some point end. I envisioned Erin and myself progressing through our degrees, earnest young people that we were, going to movies, having sex, making plans for the future. Erin was going to be an elementary school teacher, and I was entertaining unspecified notions of "public service" as I grandly put it.

After we had been going out for a month or so, Erin invited me over to her parents' place in Westerly one Saturday. They lived in a substantial house, with a garage that had at one time been a barn, and a big white front porch with a glider. Erin's father was outside when I arrived, wearing a red checked shirt and raking leaves. He shook my hand firmly and said, "So you're Brian, the famous boy from Providence. Nice to meet you."

I mumbled "Hello," threw in a false sounding "Sir," and awkwardly offered to help rake. Erin soon came out holding several pairs of gloves and a bunch of garbage bags—we were going on a beach cleanup. I sat

in the back of the family wagon, in between Erin and her chatty younger sister on the ten-minute drive to the shore. Erin didn't do this under protest; she actually thought picking up trash with her new boyfriend and her family was the perfect way to spend a weekend morning. Her parents were earnest but not judgmental; even though they hadn't voted for Reagan, they were restrained in their criticism—he was the president after all, and they would pray that he do his job well.

I was crazy about Erin and completely reinvented myself. I now thought education, principled behavior and hard work were important, and gladly traded in my previous life as a cynical underachiever and common thief for this new one. The new me saw little of my old friends; Troy was away, and while a few of my other cronies were at URI, they disgusted me: partying, dropping courses, aimlessly cruising through their freshman year with no sense of purpose or mission. Naturally, I hid my old self from Erin, and that's another reason I avoided my high school friends on campus. I was afraid they'd ask me for a cigarette (I had more or less quit, although I did sometimes sneak one in the dorm common room late at night), or start talking about kegs or scoring weed. I spent most of my time with Erin and her friends. They were pleasant enough, although a little boring, forever dragging their lunch about in Tupperware containers, talking about getting a good night's sleep, and being "stressed" about biology labs.

There's a problem, however, when you fashion yourself a new identity with a romantic other as its retaining wall. When that wall collapses, so does everything else. After Thanksgiving, Erin began to seem distant, but I didn't ask her about it. Classes ended for the semester, and Erin said she preferred to study for exams by herself. The coolness that had emerged unsettled me, but it also made Erin even more attractive in my eyes, and a gnawing desperation and desire took over.

We spent New Year's together, at a party held by Erin's best friend. It turned out, as I had expected it would, to be a tame and uneventful affair. One girl drank too much and threw up, producing grave concern from the other revelers, and cementing for everyone present that alcohol just wasn't worth it, and why did people get drunk anyway. At one point during the festivities, I managed to separate Erin from her friends, put my arm around her, and whisper that I loved her and was really looking

forward to 1983. She arched away slightly and said something about years just being numbers. I didn't like this kind of talk but didn't know what to do about it.

We spent the rest of the evening apart; I ended up drinking beers and talking hockey with a guy from Detroit who went to Brown. Just before midnight, someone flipped on the TV to see Dick Clark and the ball dropping in Times Square. The party broke up soon afterward; Erin was staying over at the friend's and started helping her cleanup. I kissed her on the cheek and drove home to my parents'.

Around noon on New Year's Day, Erin called and said she was driving up to Providence to see me. It was odd; she'd never been to my parents' place before, and I wasn't sure how I should handle this visit. She arrived an hour later and chatted in the living room with my parents who, for the occasion, had morphed into friendly outgoing types. I suggested we go to the Newport Creamery in Wayland Square for coffee and ice cream, not knowing what else to do. We sat at a booth, and I nervously played with the sugar dispenser. I looked up and noticed Erin was crying. I'd never seen her cry before and touched her arm. She blurted out that she didn't think we should see each other any longer, and that I was really sweet and she was so sorry, but she just didn't know if it was a good idea, and she really couldn't say why.

I had no defense for what I took as a surprise attack. I was stunned. I could feel the blood rushing to my face and flushing my cheeks. I asked if it was anything about the night before, or something I'd said or done. She shook her head. We sat for a while and I said okay; I didn't know how else to respond. I'd never had a girlfriend before and so had never broken up with anyone. I drove her back to my parents.' We stood out front for a few moments, then she hugged me, got into her car, and was gone.

I went inside. My parents noted that Erin was nice and that they hoped to see more of her. My mother said that I was lucky to have a girl like Erin, who, incidentally, was "cute as a button," and she hoped that I was behaving myself. I went upstairs to my room without saying a word. I closed the door, lay on my bed in the winter's afternoon gloom, and felt immensely sorry for myself. I felt a retrospective humiliation for the New Year's Eve scene; no doubt she'd told her friends that she was going

to break up with me, and there I was, a clueless fool, telling her that I loved her.

Then it hit me, a clarion, the reason Erin was ending it—she knew about my career as a burglar. Of course. She'd found out. How, I didn't know, but it was possible. I had a postcard Troy sent me from Williams which made oblique mention of our summer antics; maybe she'd read it. Also, there had been a short piece in the Providence *Journal* in August about a "spate of East Side burglaries," which I had stupidly saved and left lying at the bottom of my desk drawer at school. This was my karma; I was being punished. I hadn't gotten away with it. My indolence, my dishonesty, my deceit had come back to bite me. Erin was right to break up with me. I'd stolen, not once, but eleven times. I hadn't made any restitution to my victims and had lied to Erin and said I'd been ill over the summer. All this time I could have told her and hadn't. Erin had found me out and thought: he's a thief and not who he says he is; what else might he be capable of?

I consulted my newly acquired moral compass—I would confess to Erin. I would tell her everything and point out that I'd been "clean" for several months, and that meeting her had cemented in my mind how wrong and foolish I'd been, and that even more than the stealing, I regretted keeping it from her, and had only done so because her approval meant so much to me. I imagined myself saying this and then sobbing or some such thing, and her comforting and forgiving me, and then we would be back together and there would be some fantastic sex. Perhaps she would ask me a few more questions about the whole thing, and that would be the end of it. Case closed. Maybe I'd donate to a charity as penance or something.

The next day was a Sunday. I had to see Erin but was too nervous to call her. Instead, I borrowed my dad's car, drove to Westerly, and rang her parents' bell. Her father opened the door, looked at me dubiously, and offered that I come in. I declined and stood on the large porch for a long time waiting, passing the time by inspecting the white wooden railing. It was windy and cold, and I wasn't wearing a hat or gloves. I tried to guess how long I'd been outside—was it ten minutes that felt like twenty, or was it actually twenty minutes? Or longer? Should I ring the bell again? Humiliating. But I couldn't just leave. I decided I would

count to one hundred slowly and then try again. Somewhere in the forties, Erin opened the door and said she was sorry that I'd driven so far, but she didn't feel like seeing me right now and wished that I'd called. I lied and said that I had to have the car back in an hour, so why didn't we take just a short walk and then I'd be gone? She went back in to get her coat, taking a long time to do so.

We hardly spoke as we trudged down her street, and then just at the end of the block I blurted it out, that I was a house burglar. At the time, I'd not seen enough police procedurals or dramas involving marital infidelity to know never to confess to something unless you are presented with clear evidence of your culpability. I waited for Erin's reaction to my confession but couldn't see her face clearly; she was wearing a hat and had been angling her face away from me, avoiding eye contact. She asked me what I was talking about. It was too late to take it back. It was out there. She quizzed me briefly. I started minimizing my crimes, back pedaling. She said that things were getting really weird and wanted to know if I was joking, but it was plain that I hadn't been. My confession emboldened her. She said she was sorry, that she'd found herself attracted to someone else, but couldn't say who. Now she knew she'd made the right choice. Right away I knew it was Dennis, her "friend" from high school who was in her Western Civilization class. I asked if it was Dennis. She said that it wasn't important, and I disagreed as I thought it a key point. She didn't argue, but still wouldn't say who was replacing me. We walked back to her house. It really was over. She knew about the stealing, and regardless wanted to be with someone else.

I got on the 95 heading for Providence, hating myself, hating Erin. I couldn't go home; I just couldn't stomach a tedious conversation with my parents. I thought of Troy, but I hated him too; after all, he was partly responsible for the hideous mess I'd made of my life. What I felt like doing was stealing—not skimming, but really stealing. Skip the small stuff, the goofy trinkets that Troy and I typically pinched. I wanted to take TVs, jewelry, watches, whatever real thieves stole. Candlesticks if they were valuable. I wanted stuff for me. I wanted stuff to sell. Forget Troy's wannabe Marxism and his byzantine codes of theft. And fuck Erin and her smug disapproval, and that little prick Dennis, who I'd always been nice to, not knowing he was competition. The world was a tough place,

but I was a free agent now, a rogue, and I'd take what I wanted, and wouldn't have Erin or Troy to answer to.

I drove to the East Side, not far from where Troy and I had nearly been caught months before. I'd never robbed in winter. It was different. The streets were deserted, even in daylight. Nobody was mooning about their porch, mowing the lawn, or shooting baskets in the driveway. Everything was closed up, locked and sealed, but at the same time highly visible—the leaves were off the trees and bushes, and you could see into backyards.

I parked the car and walked a while until I came to a duplex with a newspaper lying on the porch. It was mid-afternoon; the occupants were probably out of town for New Year's. I went along the side of the house toward the back and found the plywood panel where the clothes dryer vented. I gave a quick look around before kicking it with the heel of my boot. The wood popped free, but the window was too small to get through. I tried again, this time splintering the frame. Another quick kick and the molding broke and the window cracked, pieces fell and hit the basement floor. There's nothing to absorb sound in the winter; the glass shattering on the cement seemed like it was being amplified and broadcast.

I jumped in, and the shards of glass crackled underfoot. It was dark, and there was lots of junk strewn about, but I found the steps leading up to the first floor. I climbed the creaking stairs and opened the door slowly. I was in the kitchen. I could tell that the people who lived there were middle class at best and were probably old; everything looked worn-out. I walked down a hallway and into a large space with a dining room table and living room. There were paintings on the faded walls, but were they worth anything? They didn't look like much, but often that's not much of a guide to value. I recognized one, and another, before I realized that I was looking at reproductions of old masters. One was by Monet, particularly painful as I'd given Erin a Monet print for Christmas.

The only thing worth taking in the place was a Betamax that was perched on a large TV console. I untethered the machine and wrapped it in a towel that I'd grabbed from the bathroom. I sat down on the sheet-covered sofa to contemplate my score. The drapes were drawn and it was dim inside the house, although some murky daylight leaked in, and a feeble overhead in the front hallway had been left on, probably as

a deterrent against burglars. I could hear the occasional car going by on the street out front.

Where had the Betamax come from? I pictured an elderly couple, probably around my grandparents' age, receiving it as a Christmas gift. Perhaps they'd won it in a church raffle, or maybe it was their big purchase for the year—they'd decided to splurge and get with the times. The bulky device rested on my lap, immobilizing me, and I wanted to turn on the television in front of me. There was a thump from the bedroom. I sat up straight, clutched the Betamax, and looked toward the hallway. Shit. An orange and white cat entered, approached, meowed loudly and dug its head into my shin, demanding I scratch it behind the ears. I obliged, and the cat, "Popeye" read its tag, jumped onto the sofa. It tried to sit on my lap, but the Betamax was in its way. Instead, the cat sat next to me, his head resting against my side.

A few drops of dirty water from my boots had settled on the floor. I moved the towel-encased Betamax onto the coffee table in front of me. I couldn't go home and hook it up to my parents' TV, nor did I want to. There were no jokes surrounding it I could share with Troy, and Erin and I wouldn't be cuddling together watching movies, that was for sure. I sat for a little while longer, not wanting to go, but knowing that I had to.

I got up, reconnected the Betamax, and used the towel to clean the water from the floor. I folded up the towel and stuffed it in my coat—doubtful it would be missed—and returned to the basement where I used a rickety lawn chair to hoist myself up and through the broken window, trying not to cut myself on the glass still left in the frame.

I stood outside for a moment. Nobody was around. I probably hadn't been seen. It was important that I not run or act nervous; after all, I hadn't even taken anything, except for the towel. Some flattened cardboard boxes were lying next to the garbage cans in the driveway; I grabbed a few and leaned them against the broken window to prevent snow or rain from getting in. The broken window would be disturbing and puzzling, and would need to be fixed, but there wasn't much I could do about that now.

They probably wouldn't be away for long; after all, they'd left the cat. There was an errant paving stone near the driveway, and I leaned it on the cardboard to make it more secure and prevent Popeye from

escaping—a missing pet would be a sad way to start 1983. As I walked the several blocks to where I'd parked my Dad's Buick, I realized Popeye would be fine. I'd closed the door to the basement; there was no way he could even get down there. I felt happy for the old couple; broken window or not, Popeye would be there to greet them when they came in, and it would be nice to be home. Maybe they'd watch a movie together. I hoped so. ◆

KRISTIAN O'HARE

A SUDDEN HEAVEN

Cadaver dogs seek out charred remains—
imprints of a body: a snow angel of ash,
bits of bone, broken teeth. They snuffle
a bundle of fake flowers: English cabbage
rose, in eggshell cream; silk petals burnt
to a grit-black powder. They push past
skeletons of metal pipe, the melted red
plastic of a Big Wheel, a weight bench,
its foam stuffing crested like a fungus.
They detect a flame still burns, in the
hollow of an old-growth redwood,
a chimney tree, fire-gutted and scarred.
They look up as the sky unthreads a
sulphuric blanket of greenish-yellow light.
The clouds skim like golden milk to reveal
a wounded blue—a sudden heaven.