Plenty  Abigail Carney

Gleason hits August in the stomach and laughs.
'So, are you gonna be able to get by all winter without her?' Gleason asks.
'Who?'
'Annabelle,' Gleason says.
'I always get by!'
August and Gleason never see anyone but each other, Gibbon, and their parents once the real snow hits, Gibbon's gone though, left in the summer. They did have a winter with a baby girl once, but she and the other girl are dead now.
They've just finished the beets and Gleason and August have stained their hands and the fronts of their trousers with the deep scarlet beet juice. They dug the cellar last September and Gleason thinks it's strange still, the way they have a cellar and no real house. The house was meant to be built that summer but Gibbon left and the planting and raising and harvesting took more time than they were meant to.
This is homesteader country and most things were and are made quickly, other than those built in winter. In the cold months, girls and their mothers linger over stitches and the soles of shoes, redoing and refitting them until the sun is gone. The first winter out of Illinois, August and Gleason's father made a new bed to take the place of the one they'd left behind.
Piles of carefully chosen oak filled half of the room and the five of them all slept huddled around the stove for weeks. 'The building of the bed was the only thing John hadn't wanted his sons' help with. When he finished, the bed was beautiful, too big to fit into the room.

John is rubbing the meat of a deer with salt.
People don't leave their homes often this time of year. The Remmingtons are supposed to be visiting. The real heavy snows haven't started yet but they will. Soon the roads will disappear and everyone has heard a story about a farmer going out and getting lost in the white. But the Remmingtons have always been fortunate and Howard Remmington told John he'd visit. He said he wanted to try out his new snowshoes at a distance and that he'd bring over a few extra pints of whisky for one of Etta's pies. Etta doesn't make pies in the winter but Howard doesn't know that.

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Howard likes to joke about how he'd leave Grace for Etta's pies. John doesn't think it's too funny. When John was working on marrying Etta, Ozro Sampson said something like that too. John hit him harder than he's ever hit anyone. Etta knows there wasn't anything noble about it. It's just that men like to own things. Sometimes John touches Etta's back or smells her neck, and sometimes she traces the veins on the backs of the hands. Mostly, she watches him come in and out of the house. She's quieter when he's in the room. She's learned his footfalls and he knows hers but it isn't something either of them intended. When you spend every day next to anything you start to memorize it, and then forget it.

They've got a dog named Maggie in the animal house, along with the twelve chickens, a rooster, and two oenx. The animal house is just across from the one August lives in, with a roof connecting the two, so that you can always get across even when the snow is deep. The animal house doesn't have a stove though. August sits with Maggie sometimes when he's taking a break from working. She isn't useful in the winter, except on the rare days when they brave the snow to go hunting but she isn't all that useful then either. John says she's stupid but August doesn't care about her wit. He just likes to scratch her ears and smell her neck, it smells like dirt.

The family is at supper with the dog beneath the table. John doesn't like to let her in, but he didn't notice her until he started eating. Even he won't break the meal, to take her out. It's always August's fault when Maggie comes inside. He slips her a scrap of bread under the table and John stares at him.

'Dogs are work animals August,' John says.
'The cellar is full,' he says, feeling brave.
'Supper shouldn't be wasted on the work animals,' John's voice gets louder.
'Putting Maggie out to die isn't gonna make the winter any easier,' Etta says.
'What will?' John asks.
'Hard work's the only thing that'll make winter easier,' Etta says.
'Hard work, hard work, hard work. Who needs those machines they're building in Chicago? We've got ourselves to work and churn and feed the oxen. You might as well feed me to the chickens when this winter's done with me,' John says.

'Stop it.'
'Stop what Etta? Stop talking? The four of us are together here and we will be for a while.'
'C'mon John, c'mon it's suppertime.'
'Even if I stop talking about the dog the bitch'll still be there.'
'You're drunk.'
'I'm not. What difference would that be?'
'You can't be rational when you've had too much whisky. It's supper. It's suppertime.'

The family eats quietly, except for their chewing. John has always chewed loudly, Gleason does too. August hates this. He believes that it isn't meanness or lying that makes one loathe another. It's the way they chew, the way they tell a story.

The house holds two books, the requisite family Bible and The Complete Works of Shakespeare. The title The Complete Works of Shakespeare is misleading. It's one of the volumes that was made in the thousands and thousands as America tried out its first printing presses and most families own it. It's missing about half of the comedies. After dinner one of the family will tell the rest a story from the Bible, or from Shakespeare. They're Lutheran United Revivalists and they became so in Illinois but there's no church like that near them now, so they pray and worship on their own. The family figures God made Shakespeare and they treat William like a prophet.

The family never reads the stories out, they tell them from memory and the tellings are often twisted. Jonah finds a twin in the belly of the whale. Hamlet is a saint and is stoned to death. Gleason's favorite one comes from nothing other than what he dreams at night and is about a man living off the blood of a tree. There's no one to tell them their stories are wrong, and they aren't wrong, not really.

They don't talk about Gibbon's story but it goes like this. He was the smartest and the most trouble too, always getting beat for shaving dirty symbols across the backs of the oxen, or for staying at school too late. Gibbon never wanted to work on the farm but there was nothing else, especially as he was the oldest. Even the next real city was two states away. The railroad hadn't made it anywhere near them yet, but Gibbon found someone else who was leaving, a traveling preacher. He told the preacher he wanted to become a missionary, and with a bag of apples and the family fiddle, he walked out the door. The letter said all that but it didn't say what Gibbon would do once he got to the city and left the preacher too.

Gleason's teacher said that sometimes there's one buffalo that just wanders off by itself away from the herd. No one knows the reasoning behind the leaving of the buffalo.

'It freezes August. The buffalo dies.'
'August's face becomes hard, and Gleason works to undo it. 'But we're all freezing,' he laughs out.
'Do you think Gibbon is freezing?' August asks.
'I don't know. Maybe he's a buffalo. Maybe we're all buffalo.'
'And we're all frozen?'
'When's the last time you went out without your snot sticking in your nose?'
'What do you think Annabelle is doing? You think she's a buffalo? You think the Remmingtons are buffalo?'
'I don't know August. Is God a buffalo?'

Gleason has been told that God is like a man but if God was a man they wouldn't spend so much time talking to him.

Nights are long. You lie down when the sun sets and get up when it rises. Most don't sleep all the way through. When it's the mother and father awake they try to keep quiet about it but when the children hear them they never say anything. They couldn't. When August lies awake he counts his fingers again.
and again and thinks about Annabelle. Gleason tries to imagine God but mostly sees angels. He likes the thought of them but they’ve never felt too real. He holds his hands against the feet of the stove for as long as he can. His palms are already worn with calluses and they can handle the heat for several of August’s quiet snores.

Each morning the animal house is visited, the eggs collected, the oxen checked. The cistern is emptied. The floor is swept. The holes in the roof are patched. Wood is chopped and brought in. One morning August visits the animal house to find two of twelve chickens dead. No fox got in, the hens aren’t bloody. They’re just brown and going cold. August sits and pets Maggie and lets her tug at his coat for a few minutes longer than usual. He picks up the chickens by the feet and carries them across the room. His palms are already worn with calluses and they can handle the heat for several of August’s quiet snores.

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Then John looks worse than August once he realizes what’s happened to his son.

‘You idiot,’ he says.

Etta lets herself feel frantic for a moment, and then focuses as a mother has to when her son has nearly ripped his hand off.

‘John, would you keep on with the chickens? August, sit down, on our bed. I’m gonna take your mitten off.’

She gasps at the blood. It’s not that the wound is unusually large or deep. Injuries on the farm are common. Etta even had a brother take a whole hand off with a trap one winter. Tools are dangerous. Horses are dangerous. It’s just that the mitten had made the stain look contained, painted. It hadn’t prepared her for the torn flesh, popping out muscle.

‘Is he gonna die? Gleason asks.

‘I don’t know,’ August says.

‘Well I’ll cook them for tonight.’

‘And the Remmingtons!’ Gleason says. ‘They have to come today if they’re coming, since they didn’t come the last week. Hey Ma, you should make me a chicken hat.’

‘A chicken hat?’ August asks.

‘Yes! I’ll be a chicken!’

Gleason runs around the room the best he can, flapping his arms and clucking. They’ve never had this much meat at the beginning of winter before. There was deer, and now chicken. But John is nervous. If two chickens can die for no seen reason at all, the whole flock can go too.

After August brings the chickens to his mother, he leaves to check the traps. As he gets better and better at finding a good placement for them beneath the leaves and shadows of pine he hopes more and more that the traps won’t really work. He likes eating meat and he likes getting it but he doesn’t like the blood and fur. The animal gets frantic as he gets close. John doesn’t always let August take his gun and sometimes August has to find a way to strangle the animal, sometimes he has to drag it back to the house. But he doesn’t complain. His family is always grateful.

There’s one trap that hasn’t caught anything all year. August kneels and puts his hand on the trigger to test it. The metal comes down fast and he pulls his hand out quick. The rusting teeth catch his finger through his mitten and a muscle tears as his blood begins to stain the snow. He laughs. His father will be angry, but the trap works, and he knows this now. August staggers home, shoulders the door open. Gleason dances around the bed, ‘You got it Augie. Think of Annabelle. Sweet, sweet Annabelle. Bet she could sew you up nice. Hey and the Remmingtons are coming! They sure will be interested in your finger. And Jesus is already here! Dear Lord. My brother was real stupid and tried chopping his own hand off. It didn’t work all the way so we’ve gotta sew his finger back on now. Let Ma sew it back on straight. Otherwise my brother will never be able to point at anything himself. Thank you Lord. Amen. See the Lord’s got you now Gusty.’

Etta sits up as August lies back and shuts his eyes.

‘Let’s hurry with the chickens then,’ Etta says, returning to the meat.

John walks out the door and Etta doesn’t say anything.
'You think the Remmingtons know how to find us?' Gleason asks his mother. 'Maybe they've been on the road for days and can't find us cause everything is white.'

'They aren't half a mile away. They can find us. They'll find us. They'll be here.'

'Is his finger gonna fall off?'

'I pray not. Help me tear this wing off.'

Hours later, the meal is ready and John is back inside, putting wood in the stove. August is still sleeping in his parents' bed.

'August? Can you move? Have you left us for the light? We cooked up your dead chickens,' Gleason says.

August only groans.

'Get outta bed August,' John says louder.

'He nearly chopped his hand off,' Etta reminds the family though it's been two hours. She piles the table with chicken.

John sits at the table. 'He won't get better if he won't eat.'

August sits up, and stands up. He's white but no one can tell in the light.

'Come on son. It's your finger. I've seen men lose legs.'

'Who have you seen lose a leg?' Etta asks her husband.

John doesn't answer but it was one of his brothers when they were children.

'Dear Lord,' John begins. 'We thank you for not taking my stupid son's hand.'

'We thank you for the health of our sons,' Etta follows.

'We thank you for the chickens dying,' Gleason is pleased.

'We thank you for the chickens cooked,' August takes more whiskey.

'We thank you for the chickens living,' John is holding his fork already.

'We thank you for the sun,' this is what Etta says when she has nothing else to say.

'We thank you for the Remmingtons,' they don't know if Gleason's joking but if he is, John would have to smack him so John assumes he's not.

'We thank you for the blood stopping,' August hasn't really stopped bleeding but it's slowed.

'We ask that you help us this spring with a son where they lay. If John or Etta noticed a chill in the morning they didn't mention it.'

If John or Etta noticed a chill in the morning they didn't mention it.

The snow comes hard all the time now and the wind too. If Gibbon ever wants to come back he can't until the melting. The Remmingtons never came and the family knows they won't see anyone until the spring. If they died now, if any of them died now, no one would know until the snow was gone. It's a curious thing, the coming together of the people after the winter. There are new babies, dead animals. Roofs have caved in. There are awful stories about nights up with sick cows and horses. Quickly, the ache of winter gives way to the first foaling, planting.

August does not like to think about spring. If he doesn't think about it he can even imagine he likes the winter. The days stretch into each other. Each night there is the ritual of prayer, eating, prayer, story, prayer, sleep. August doesn't really believe in God anymore but he doesn't think that matters. He bets the God they talk to was created by people just like his family, those who couldn't live through winter without anyone else.

Etta keeps dreaming that she's pregnant but the last baby, the second baby girl, took whatever
piece of her she had left to give. When she wakes her belly is sore. Sometimes she turns to John but he is always too gone in the fury of snoring. Etta and John never thought about much like love. He might've happily kissed her behind the schoolhouse once when she was near fourteen but if so she can’t really remember it.

One afternoon John comes in and pushes his wife against the table and kisses her. August is sitting, trying to fix a lantern, but his father does not see him. Etta is frightened, not by whisky in John’s mouth but by the absence of it. It isn’t only the drink that makes them wild. August reworks a piece of the handle as his father grips his mother’s waist.

When all the chickens die, it is John that finds them. He’s been imagining this all winter, every winter. He sees a caved-in cellar, a bloody-mouthed fox as he lies in bed each night. He sees his family starve. There has always been enough, his wife tells him, but one morning he opens the door to the animal house and the rooster is still alive. Each of the ten hens that were left is going stiff and cold.

He, Gleason, and August carry the meat into the house by the necks. Etta reassures John that the cellar is nowhere near empty yet. John asks her to cook all of the meat for that night. He wonders what God, if there is God, might be telling them.

The table is piled with meat. Etta begins the prayer. ‘Dear Lord,’ she says.

‘We thank you for laughing at us,’ John says.

‘We thank you for the chickens,’ Gleason says.

‘Thank you for the seeing,’ August says.

‘Thank you for family,’ Etta says, and the family cycles through.

‘Thank you for the snow.’

‘Thank you for the sky.’

‘Thank you for the walls.’

‘Thank you for the heat,’ Etta finishes.

‘Amen.’

‘For laughing at us John?’ Etta picks up her fork. ‘If He wants to use us for humor I don’t mind one bit.’

Gleason and August begin to eat.

‘Meat’s never tasted like this before,’ Gleason says.

The family eats with fervor, without speaking, dripping meat juice down their shirts, drinking hard cider and whisky.

‘We’ll build a great big house in the spring,’ John tells them.

‘We will?’ Etta asks.

‘A stove in every room,’ John reassures.

‘We’ll build a great big barn for the animals too,’ August can see it.

‘The animals. I’d like to get pigs next year.’

‘Sheep.’

‘A horse.’

‘How will we?’ August asks.

‘We will. We’ll have to work all through the night but we can just sleep through the winter,’ John isn’t smiling.

Gleason gets excited, ‘We won’t have to sleep in the springtime.’

‘Horses.’ Etta says.

‘Maggie will be jealous,’ Gleason laughs.

‘Can we bring Maggie in now?’ August wants to know.

‘No. And I’ll shoot that dog now,’ John says.

August drops his fork, ‘No! Pa, please, no, Pa, Why?’

John stands up and gets the gun from the wall.

‘Pa, Please.’ Gleason begs.

‘Unless you’d like to do it yourself son,’ John walks out the door.

Etta looks down and keeps eating. She touches the knot of hair at the back of her head.

Gleason and August know they won’t cry but that they’ll want to. August holds his knife and wonders how killing a dog is different than killing a man. There’s a shot, a moan.

John walks back in the door and his foot is bleeding. He sits down, and takes a whole other quarter of chicken for his plate. He chews loudly.

‘Pa, Your foot?’ Gleason asks.

John swallows, ‘It’s fine. Maggie is fine.’

Etta looks under the table. She gasps.

‘John,’ she says. ‘Let me. I need to.’

The younger brother looks at the spot of dark red settling into purple. The blood is staining the floor.

‘You’ve shot yourself,’ Gleason says.

John bows his head, ‘Let’s enjoy this perfect meal.’

He lifts his fork and puts more chicken in his mouth. The family watches him chew and then pick up the next piece of meat with his hands, the juice running down his fingers, his chin.

His sense of where the shot hit moves from a constant burning knife edge to a swollen warmth that catches each of his ribs.

‘Blessed us all,’ August says.

‘There’s never been this much meat in the house before, has there?’ Gleason says.

Etta puts a hand to her stomach, ‘We’ll be starved by spring.’

The fork in his hand is twitching and he sees he is trembling. He sits straight, stares at his fingers until they calm.

John looks up, feels the pain in his foot. ‘We have everything.’
Tell us a little about your history, your entrance into academia.

I have a Ph.D. in English from Princeton, and I started off as a medievalist but moved to the 18th century, and actually ended up doing a dissertation about canon formation. I have a Ph.D. in English from Princeton, and I started off as a medievalist but moved to the 18th century, and actually ended up doing a dissertation about canon formation.

About what?

Canon formation. How we decide which books are canons. Like, during siege.

And then something changed, right? Well, like someone who once I think I'd always been a passionate reader. I got to the point where I was reading a lot of non-fiction, a lot of John McPhee, a lot of Joan Didion, a lot of the long pieces that were running in the New Yorker, for example. And I realized I just didn't want to be writing academic prose, because it wasn't fun to write, it wasn't fun to read. It was sort of on the degree of specialization that actually meant the world was newly mined, and you want to focus on your tiny little thing, but the world you lived in wasn't mine anymore. So in the early '80s basically thought—and I am really interested in how to write in a completely different way by offering a counter-traditional mode to write to the way I wanted to write, which is not at all that surprising. People do all the time. They offer courses in things that they don't know that much about but they want to learn a lot about.

How did that go for you?

It was great. It was really successful. Some of my earliest students from that class became columnists. And it really was inspiring to me because it took the academic prose that I had written in, which is the same stuff you guys are trained in, and just really break it apart, using the analytic tools I had been given as a reader of poetry, and when I was done, I had a completely different prose. It was sort of natural and hyper-energetic—it was really trying to show of what I could do. And then if I omitted, and it got much better. And I did what I always tell my students to do, which is publish anything. Publish in a local place, something special interest, a magazine, a blog. I wanted writing about fly-fishing. It was a tiny little world, but I figured, I'm a writer and I can show how to do this. And then I wrote a piece—"The Rural Life"—that has to do with my experiences on my farm where you live, and that always struck me as a really bold thing to print in the New York Times, where presumably a lot of the readers are city dwellers, metropolitan kind of people. You have any sort of conflict with the audience?

Well, most of the audience is deeply romantic about anywhere rural where they live. They all want to have farms of their own, or imagined farms of their own. Actually after a certain age, about 40 or 50, everyone has an uncle or aunt, a relative who has a farm. It's only when you get to a younger age where people are wondering about that connection. People are very interested in the idea of where I think I live, but there's always a counterpoint. About once every 18 months Gawker will write a piece saying—

"Verlyn Klinkenborg Must Be Stopped!!" Yes, which is not so Michael Chabon. Try and stop me. And I'm supposed to say I think the idea that The Rural Life would speak to everybody is just absurd. And finally, it fits column inches for Gawker so more people to read. My favorite response actually is a woman who is writing a blog, I read Verlyn Klinkenborg so you don't have to.

Yeah! I was wondering if you knew about that one?

Well, I don't know how she's in L.A., but she is actually a sweetheart, because first of all they're funny—

She refers to you by your full name, every time.

Yeah, and my favorite one is—"I wrote something I can't remember what it was, and her companion says—Verlyn Klinkenborg is really high today! But you know, when I went to California, I went writing into it because I wasn't home, but I submitted my piece, and as the piece was writing—"Welcome back!" And I think it's a very saying thanks. I read your blog, I really like it, and she said, "If this is really you, I'm flattered, if it's not, you really played To me, it's just fun. You talked about your interest in dissolving those various structures that prohibit writers from writing well, or writing at all. Is there something you wish you could unlearn yourself, some kind of writing tick that you have yet to overcome, or have been dealing with?

I think that's the sort of thing I experience when I read something that I really hate. I'll have to be more like that. But I think for anybody who has worked as a writer for a long time, part of your job is to always be looking out for those tick, and eliminating those. Otherwise you end up—and I think this is really one of the reasons why people get in trouble talking about voice and style—otherwise you end up with the...
You talked about your interest in disseminating these various structures that prohibit writers from writing well, or writing at all. Is there something you want to give yourself, some kind of writing kick that you have to overcome, or have been dealing with?

I think that it’s the sort of thing everyone does. I know that I’m really, I think I’m really kind of—I think I like to work as a writer for a long time, part of your job is to have this sort of just sort of—people tend to think about voice and style—otherwise you end up with this sort of self—personal dio de la que no pensar sobre \textit{Ley de la vida}...
It gives us joy to present this semester's issue of the Lit. We have separated the poetry from the prose and interview for a total of two objects. Each can be read from front to back and is also a poster. Unfold it.

One shows a photograph of a statue of Mary paired with one of intertwining feet, by Maya Binyam. Is this ironic? It was chosen based on the poems—by Olivia Valdes, Eli Mandel, Max Ritvo, Jake Orbison, and Samuel Huber—which are similar. Looking out from the head, you tend to see the pedestal; you have to give yourself another face.

Devon Geyelin’s line patterns, on the other poster, are as stark as Abigail Carney’s prose. We interviewed Verlyn Klinkenborg, a teacher here and a writer, who is confident that the sentence can accommodate all different kinds of attachments to reality.

The Lit extends thanks to all the artists and writers whose work has been included, and to the many who assisted in shaping the magazine, whose names are listed below. We would also like to thank our board, whom we love, and our razor-sharp designer, Jacqi Lee.

Sincerely,
Andrew Kahn and Sarah Matthes
Joy from West Africa

Joy from West Africa, she young girl, she hear you make good match. She releases a leg from the stouthearted snarls of speech and deliverance, the night-long, headlong hustle and stray. No, philanthropic doctors cannot mend the hole in her balmy West African heart. Your love is not an NGO. She will like you contact her, even as evening strikes the cracks in her vagrant reaching palm, even as the sky thickens with flight. Please my dear, she resting, she waiting for your mail.
Life Optics: Hummingbird

In the garden I could not bear your appearance.
That vertical stroke, the green sidewise zip:
I am like a plant, you said—Look there—
and then you cut my sight.
Optician's probe, indistinguishable razor in the cornea,
if I threw this fork at you, you wouldn't understand
the miss; that is what it means to be insufferable.

Listen, hummingbird: diminution
is the exclusive purview of the slow-lived.
Your ruby heart hammers a thousand seconds
in an instant, and when it bursts,
you'll be gone already to the next frame.
Teach me how, then: teach me how to leave
this thought behind.

ELI MANDEL
Winner of the Frances Bergen Prize for Poetry
Postcards from Mount Blanc

Slept in loft,
Frenchmen fucking each other in sleeping bag next to me,
Oh, Antoine! Antoine! Michel! Mon dieu!
Opened window, it was stifling.
French believe cold air causes malaria.
Maldelaire! Maldelaire!
Tried reasoning. No fucking mosquitoes at this altitude.
He threw a piton,
and narrowly missed my neck.

French went to sleep. Had to piss
—no bathroom. Pissed out window.
Phil pushed me out.
Kept pissing as I fell.

Wish you were here:
rocks look like construction equipment
abandoned when the rules changed.
Water Lily

For all almanacs and operations
Where there exists a you—

Let x equal water lily.
The period takes a stand
in the wet sand
that the whole equation
rests on: a respite, a spit of
variable splash on the
ocean’s unwavering black.

Let water lily be
the foundation of
a sandcastle;
the muddied hands
scraping the fleshy strands
with the names of beloveds—
and their ampersands.

Let you be x.
On different days talking,
with some sine
or other integral,
you and the variables
tend to change outfits:
today you were dancing; now you’re asleep.
But x is still x with its clothes off.

Let’s tumble towards the waves.
The periods and premises
we washed away will wallop
the water’s hem; the horizon.

JAKE ORBISON
Weekend Story

Last night by the bar
before the speakers blew out
and we all moved on to the next thing—
autumn, pushy and unselfconscious,
and everyone drinking John Dalys.

Are you listening?
Last night, you could say, I had this dream:
Me, you, not-you, and someone famous at the kitchen table.

Someone famous calls me a power bottom.
This kitchen is none of ours, in none of our houses,
and the people in other rooms are doing things
we may have done or may yet do with them.

You offer someone famous an apple;
I slide him the knife and cutting board.
No, he's a top, says not-you,
for sure, and looks at—not me—for something like confirmation.

You shrug. Sling?
You shrug, not knowing.

Not knowing—someone famous slices the apple,
laughs, talks to anyone else.
Not-you says either,
That's love, or,
That isn't...