MARYELLEN BEVERIDGE

Out of Season

Dirty. Dirty earth endless dirt. Five acres of it outside the kitchen door, falling in clumps from the pads of the Basset hound walking heavy with milk across Sasha Greenwood's floor. In summer the earth kept its heat, it was cool inside, what could she do. A mother said Whoof at the screen door, Sasha let her in, the hound settled among her pups boxed in the open space under the sink, suckled them contentedly. The puppies were sighted now, unsteady. They fell roughly onto each other climbing the patient and immobile flank of their mother, fed noisily, and were licked clean by a tender pink Basset tongue. The mother came to Sasha for a pat on the head and a biscuit, wagged her hound-dog tail, pushed the screen door open with her big wet nose, and left dirt all over the floor. The child watched alertly from her highchair, testing the atmosphere with outstretched fingers.

And there was Clifford, making offerings of root vegetables at Sasha's feet, practically. Should she pat his head too, say Well done? Had she known, what could she have done when Clifford lay down their old life like the burden it had become? After a two-day journey by car he took her on secondary roads bordered by woodland and up a steeply inclined road, the entrance guarded by boulders deposited during the glacial retreat. He drove up the long drive to the house and told her it was theirs if she would have it. He walked her across the abandoned, silent land, past weeds, brambles, bare, dry earth, and through the rooms of the shuttered house built a century before, with its root cellar smelling of underground things, its pantries, closets, and storage areas containing the odor of must. Sasha looked into her husband's war-weary face and knew she must accept. Now there was too much. Too much to pare, boil, brown, chop, to pickle or can or put by. She would succumb to blisters on her fingers, fevers from fire

burns, the sudden vertigo from standing over a hot stove, regret for the life Clifford had left behind, where she had known exactly what to do. In the dry season the winds sheared across the soil and blew fine grains of mica and quartz into the noses of the dogs and they sneezed and bit at the wind as if it were a living thing. In the shadows of early morning the surfaces of the furniture glittered with a layer of mica dust that had blown in through the window frames during the night. The dogs howled at midnight over a cloud that obscured the moon or a possum that had come out of its den to forage. In the evening, Sasha heard the beat of moths' wings at the screened windows in the darkness beyond the light of the lamps.

Clifford brought beets, carrots, spring onions, and potatoes across the field to her, his large shirtless body finely gridded against the screen door. Dirt was clumped in the eyes of the potatoes and caught in the long, pale root hairs that anchored the tubers to the soil. What must it be like to take a spade and turn the soil and uncover a bed of potatoes, like a cache of copper coins. Sasha took the strange bouquet from Clifford's dirty hand. He winked at the child Lucinda in her highchair, eyed the puppies under the sink. The screen door closed after him. His work boots left muddy prints on the floor.

Sasha, witness to the morning mew, moil, and feed and to Clifford's harvest lying on her now dirt-strewn countertop, lifted Lucinda from her highchair and held her against her blouse. The child spread her arms and tried to arc backward out of Sasha's grip. Sasha held on, felt the child's bottom. Not quite two, all was well. Maybe I am dehydrating her instead, Sasha thought. What did she know about not quite two-year-olds anymore? She settled the child back into the highchair.

Lucinda wore yellow overalls and a yellow cotton T-shirt. She had a blonde ponytail and bangs cut halfway around her head. Wisps of hair stood up along her ponytail, as if it had been electrified. The stray hair that didn't fit into the ponytail was held by two red barrettes. Her bangs were pushed to one side of her forehead, as if her mother had tamed them with fingers rather than comb or brush. Sasha wanted to undo the band that held the child's ponytail and calm the electrified hair. But then what would her mother say? Sasha was careful to return Lucinda to her mother just as she had been delivered, even if that meant she always seemed hurriedly assembled, which made her look neglected.

Sasha tore fresh thyme into a tomato and basil soup and stirred the applesauce that simmered on the stove. She shook Clifford's vegetables out the door, glancing down the border of honeysuckle bushes along the driveway. Clifford had set the woven basket under the shade of a honeysuckle bush by the edge of the drive. The basket was large, with woven handles and a deep interior, and with a patina of wear that had turned it a

silvery brown. It went each week from Clifford's hands to the child's mother, Hannah Baines, and returned to him empty and vegetable-stained and sweet-smelling. Sasha had seen the older Baines girl, Felicity, try without success to lift the heavy basket at the end of the day to give it to her mother.

Clifford's work shirt hung on a peg outside the kitchen door. The shirt belonging to Lucinda's sister Felicity was draped over his. Felicity wore a thin sleeveless undershirt that showed the bars of her ribs. She had waited outside the kitchen door for Clifford to complete his errand. Now she followed him at a near distance, her digging stick in her hand, and they moved in miniature past the flower garden toward the kennels, dwarfed by the detail of color: beds of phlox, gladiolas, hollyhocks, snapdragons, and the open faces of the tiger lilies, Shasta daisies and deep orange California poppies lifted to the sun.

Clifford had built kennels for the hounds under an ancient oak on the rim of land that overlooked the field. The hounds lounged on the soft dirt within the wire mesh pens or in the shade of the kennels. The hounds had droopy ears that flirted with the ground when they walked, and their long tri-colored bodies were supported by stumpy legs wrinkled at the knee, but they were an old, noble breed and they brought a good price as hunters. Clifford tried to keep the bloodline vigorous, but Five-star, acknowledged head stud, lay claim to each litter, first working his way through the rope tied to his collar and then under the fence erected between the male and female hounds. Five-star sat watchfully on the roof of his kennel. Each year Clifford negotiated trades with breeders as far away as Maine and Pennsylvania to strengthen the line. Still, when the females birthed, all the pups were marked with Five-star's white forepaws.

Clifford spread his tools on a clean rag. He began to repair the wire mesh where Five-star had dug another hole under the fencing. He straightened the mesh and filled the hole with rocks and dirt and twigs, an intermediate measure before he could try again to outwit Five-star. The dogs sprawled on the dirt near Clifford, thrusting their noses through the mesh into his hands as he worked. Felicity dug a succession of shallow holes in the dirt with her stick. Clifford respected her projects, little mounds of earth dug with uncommunicative concentration near where he worked and filled again by the end of the day.

Sasha opened a tap at the kitchen sink and dampened a cloth. Through the window she could see the flower garden, the kennels, and the field beyond. The hounds wagged their tails lazily at Clifford. In his work boots and khaki pants he was a big shaggy god the color of a betel nut. Sasha turned from the window and wiped the kitchen table with the cloth. The kitchen had a deep brick fireplace for cooking, and the living room and dining room and bedrooms had fireplaces for warmth. The kitchen was low-

ceilinged and comfortable; the floors were pine, wide and worn, the walls horsehair plaster, and the ceilings timbered with oak. The house smelled of wood, from the floors, the beams, and the logs burned in the fireplaces. The fires were fed from the trees Clifford had felled to further clear the land. Almost two cords remained. On the far side of the house, the front door opened onto two large, flat stone steps that led to an overgrown trail once used for horses and carriages. Clifford had stacked the firewood near the trail, under a border of firs.

Clifford put the tools away in the shed and gathered a spade, a handful of stakes, and strips of cloth cut from his discarded dress shirts. He released the wheelbarrow from a brake of bricks. He came into the house on those first mornings of hard labor with sawdust caught in the graying hair on his chest and arms, carrying muscles that were losing their tension after the last difficult year in Germany, following the war. He was building kennels then, a garden shed; he was sinking fence posts; working the land with axe and saw. He came back to Sasha from the war wounded in his spirit and unsure how to begin to talk to her about it, or if he could. He brought her to this new place that he had begun to imagine in the rubble of Berlin, and cleared and sowed and weeded and harvested; it was the only way he was able to talk to her about the war.

Intelligence had assigned him to debriefings of survivors of the labor camps and concentration camps, and the information he gained from them was more cruel than anything he had witnessed during the war. In Paris he read the exhausted, passionate conviction in the eyes of the men and women of the Resistance in the same way he read in the eyes of the camp survivors in France and Germany and Poland and Czechoslovakia the knowledge of death. First the survivors had to be fed; they had to be brought back before they were able to speak of their experience. Too much food will kill a starving person; Clifford had seen it happen. The body shuts down. You cannot touch a starving man or woman without causing bruising, breaking the vessels under the skin. A sneeze will cause a tooth to fall out, or a nosebleed that can't be stopped. A cough will cause a hemorrhage in the lungs. He saw men and women who were alive only in the eyes, and they looked sad and crazy and visionary in a terrible, Biblical way, and yet determined to live, and to tell men like Clifford about the experience of the camps and about their missing families, even when they could not stand or swallow. Their skin was disfigured with numbers tattooed on their forearms; they would take this evidence of a fate they had partially escaped and see it ever after, when dressing in the morning, saying a prayer over a plate of hot food, embracing a child.

Clifford guided the wheelbarrow to the field. He moved between the rows, checking the plants for insects. He took the spade to the ground then tapped the stakes in,

pushed the soil around them, and tied stalks heavy with tomatoes with the strips of cloth. He straightened his back, shaded his eyes.

Clifford moved to a section of the field he had planted with beans—yellow, pole, and green. He snapped a yellow bean from its stalk and tasted it. It was more texture than taste—firm and sharp when he bit into it. Then its taste crept forward, mild and sweet. He dug precise holes, pushed the stakes in and tamped the soil around them, and tied the stalks with the cloth.

Felicity roamed the field in a row next to Clifford. When he stopped to examine a leaf, she did too. When he pulled a weed, she found one. When he spaded a hole, she dug one with her stick. Clifford halted his labor and massaged the muscles at the base of his spine. Arms at her sides, Felicity cut a circle with her body. The field revolved around her: its deep, variegated green, the house above it, the surrounding woods. She stopped and the field stopped too. Above it, new green tendrils, like fingers, like fingertips, sought space, air.

Rinsing the cloth at the sink, Sasha observed the child as a dart of browning skin. There was dirt on her elbows, a paint of dirt streaked across her shoulder blades. Her brown hair was chopped straight across her forehead and fell in tangles to her chin, its luster marred by the dirt and twigs that collected in it. Felicity, Felicity, the dirty one. Not quite five, she ran through the field, elbows pinned to her sides, bony shoulder blades jutting, head and chest thrust forward. It was an odd posture for a young girl. Sasha could not acknowledge the pure absorption, pure response, watching and waiting for the buds that grew secretly under the leaves to become a zucchini, an eggplant. Sasha would get the child alone, away from Clifford, if that were possible, and talk to her about posture and pleasing qualities in a girl, how dirt was not appealing. Gripping her by the arm if necessary.

Sasha draped the cloth over the faucet. What was the odd contentment her husband found with the little aborigine Felicity Baines, Sasha wondered, who performed strange rites in the dirt and didn't say Boo to anybody, at least in Sasha's hearing. Sasha thought of her as low to the ground, conducting some private ceremony with the earth. Sasha had broken her of digging the ground near the cords of wood off the old trail, where she had found her that first day, and she no longer walked the yard with a glass peanut butter jar in which she had captured the furious bees, but Sasha suspected that the jar was hidden somewhere on the property, full of dead things.

She scrubbed the vegetables under the tap and arranged them on a sheet of newspaper to dry. She left the pots simmering on the stove and the blonde child in her highchair, dreamily sucking her thumb. Walking down the hall, she brushed her palm against the wall switch by the bathroom door, illuminating the room with a hard blue fluorescent

light. Her tinted hair was curled around her temples from the heat of the stove. Her face looked older under the harsh light. Since Clifford had taken her from their home at Fort Bragg, where she had waited for him to return, lunches with the wives of the other officers, volunteer work at the base, even the ceremony and danger of the coming war seemed distant and unclear in her memory. Now there were dogs and children who were not hers and the relentless green field. Sasha ran the water in the sink until it was ice cold. She dabbed it on the nape of her neck and the pulse points on her throat, then plunged her forearms into the water until she felt the heat, like a physical complaint, leave her body.

She dried her arms and folded the towel over the rack. The bathroom still held some remnant of military order, like all of the rooms that she and Clifford had inhabited during their marriage. She was surprised when Clifford made the decision to leave the Army, then she was alarmed. He had fought in Greece and Italy and had helped liberate France (and she had raised their two sons alone). When the discharge papers arrived he folded his uniforms and stored them away. Then he brought her here. His body, which seemed fuller now under the weight of axe and saw, had a different bearing entirely. At Fort Bragg he had left her in the mornings and sometimes for weeks at a time, and in the war years she lived among the other wives who waited. Then he put his uniforms away and took his shirt off and raised vegetables and flowers and dogs. Sasha could not admit to him that she felt left behind. She put her hand on the countertop, disoriented and unsure why she had walked so quickly down the hall to this room.

She fingered through the Bakelite box on the countertop, trying to locate her purpose in leaving the child unattended and pots simmering on the stove. More by touch than sight, she reacquainted herself with eye shadows and rouge, face powders and lipsticks. Until Clifford retired, under other hard blue lights she had selected and applied the colors from the Bakelite box. She had chosen carefully, after consulting with the women at the make-up counters in the department stores. She felt herself flush slightly, remembering the inordinate expense. She had sat at lunch with women whose husbands were of similar rank. The dining room attendants bowed as they brought each dish to the table. There was something cautious about their meetings, something unsaid, and Sasha found herself exhausted afterward, the luncheons always unsatisfactory, because she had wanted women friends, she had wanted true friendship. But they were military wives and they lived in a kind of war as well, over rank and privilege and ambition. She became adept at public life, the parades and shows of arms, conversation across a banquet table with men of rank and their wives. She stood in receiving lines next to her husband and extended her hand.

Sasha opened the curtains. Beyond the flower garden the land dropped toward the road. The house from which Lucinda was delivered to her each weekday morning lay directly across the road, built on a small rise so it overlooked the neighborhood, a cul-de-sac bordered by woods. The house needed paint. The windows in the front porch, cracked from the bitter winters, were covered with sheets of plastic. The steps were chipped and crumbling. Small yellow flowers were beginning to open in the broom grass growing in the yard, tall and dry as hay. On the small patio in the side yard John Baines sat, his injured leg positioned in front of him. Those mornings Hannah emerged from the house in her dress and white gloves, carrying Lucinda across the road while Felicity, walking next to her, looked up at her silhouette. She put Lucinda down at the end of the drive and waited for Sasha to appear at her kitchen door. Hannah was neatly dressed but always hurried and looking, like her children, somewhat neglected. They called each other Mrs. Greenwood and Mrs. Baines. Before relinquishing her to Sasha, Hannah knelt in front of her older daughter and held her at arm's length by her narrow shoulders, as if surprised that she belonged to her. She spoke in a soft, pleasant voice to Sasha, but she always seemed to be elsewhere, as if in some dream that had left her.

Sasha uncapped the lid of a small pot of rouge, made of plastic so heavy and black it had the sheen of onyx. She admired the texture of the pure red substance within it, its perfumed scent. She ran her fingertips along the black tubes of lipstick. When she and Clifford went out for an evening (they had a military car then, a driver), or entertained the other officers and their wives, she wore a shade of lipstick that complemented the color of her dress. Then the war came. Sasha hoarded the pots and tubes, wore the colors sparingly. She painted the seam of a stocking on her bare leg. She shook the Bakelite box on the countertop, scooped the tubes of lipstick into her hand.

Lucinda sang to her from her highchair. She sang some unknown song. She sang, "Hh, hh, hh," as if she had just discovered her own breath. "Hh, hh, hh."

Felicity ran through the field. She stopped at the tomato plants that made her skin itch and examined a stalk. She twisted a tomato from its stem. She sat among the plants, hidden from Clifford, and bit into the fruit. She knew where the blackberries grew in the woods, where the wild pear trees dropped their fruit. In the ruined orchard she ate the windfall apples, their meat so tart her eyes watered. Corn eaten from the cob made her stomach turn, and a cob was difficult to bury. The wild strawberries that grew along creepers on the ground were sweet and delicious. The berries were hidden by small green leaves the shape of spades, and Felicity competed with the swallows and crows for them. She finished eating the tomato and licked the juice from her fingers. She scratched a hole in the dirt with her stick and buried the stem, hiding the evidence of her hunger.

Sasha took hold of Lucinda's outstretched hand and kissed her palm. She put a finger to the tomato and basil soup and tested it. It was done. She opened the oven door and checked the firmness of the rising bread. Lucinda reached toward the odor of yeast and wheat flour and honey. Sasha opened a can of sardines and took a wedge of cheese from the refrigerator to soften. Lucinda kicked her legs against the highchair and breathed, "Ha, ha, ha." Then she spoke to Sasha, "Ah, ah, ah."

Sasha carried Lucinda to the stove and gave the applesauce a final stir. She spooned the sauce from the rim of the pot, blew on it, and offered it to Lucinda. The sauce was made from green apples stored on the floor of the root cellar, not in season again till autumn. The applesauce was part of Sasha's commentary to Clifford for having taken her to this place in ignoring the freshly picked vegetables and giving him something out of season to eat. It was all from Clifford's hands anyway, in season or out, but she enjoyed setting something in front of him that would not have existed without her intercession. The child turned her head and the applesauce spotted her cheek. Sasha offered another spoonful. The child accepted it and grinned at Sasha.

"Uppy," the child said, struggling to be free of Sasha's arms.

"Another visit with the uppies?" Sasha said. She wiped Lucinda's cheek and nuzzled her neck, smelling the child smell under the soap and powder, sweet and musky, like wet earth in early spring. "The buyers will come soon," Sasha said. "We'll have more litters again in the fall. By then maybe you'll be able to say a word or two in English, and then what will we do?"

Lucinda formed a bubble of spit between her lips. She breathed rapidly and shallowly through her nose. She shrieked at Sasha, a tropical sound. A few discontinuous syllables followed. Sasha returned a few syllables of her own; she liked making them up. She raised her eyebrow at Lucinda. The child listened to the still air. Then her smile compressed and disappeared. She sucked her thumb.

"We have a few things to do before lunch," Sasha said. "Do you want to help me?" Lucinda nodded her head. Sasha cradled the child against her side. She held the child as if she were a football, a hold she had learned from witnessing her two sons' backyard scrimmages in the years before Roosevelt took them into war, when Clifford already had been called away to England, and their sons played the rough sports of boys. Sasha held Lucinda as if she were a football, from the memory of her grown sons' childhood games. Encircling Lucinda's waist and hugging her to her hip, Sasha carried the child to the bedroom and laid her gently on the rug. She straightened the bedspread, erasing the impression of Clifford's body where he had sat to tie the laces of his boots. Lucinda ran across the rug to stand next to Sasha as she plumped the pillows, her blonde head a small light at the edge of the mattress. Sasha carried the child to the living room.

Lucinda played on the rug while Sasha arranged the newspapers Clifford no longer read in a stack on the small table next to his chair. She squared the jigsaw puzzle on the card table in front of the fireplace. It had been missing a piece since spring. The piece was of a woman's eyes and one high-colored cheek against a sliver of sky. In the puzzle the woman, in a long white dress, walked in a summer garden with her companion, her expression incomplete, unclear.

Sasha touched the space on the card table where the missing jigsaw piece should be, as if trying to apprehend its whereabouts. She lifted Lucinda from the rug and checked her bottom. Holding the child to her chest, she carried her back to the bedroom. She put a towel on the bed and changed her diaper, cooing at her all the while. Lucinda waved her legs in the air. Done now, Sasha brought her back to the kitchen and set her down near the puppies.

At not quite two, Lucinda heard Sasha's words spoken to her as though through a long tunnel, echoes and reverberations, something lost to her between vocal cord and ear. She had known a vague liquid light before her birth and before that other voices, sounds that burst upon her with random clarity then static, along a frequency transmitted with less force as she moved day by day from it.

These intrusions awed her, as did her not quite two-year-old life. There was the liquid light, then a bright light that made her cry, and her own crying startled her, so she cried some more to test and relish the sounds she could make after so much silence. Hands and breasts and warmth, the smell of perfume on skin. Milk, mush, urine and shit. A pair of bigger hands, a face that loomed close to hers, dark brown eyes with great silences in them, a close-shaven beard that scratched her skin and made her cry. The hands and face went away and her mother lifted her up. Her sister's rough hand took hers every morning as her mother carried her across the black surface. Brittle colors fell to the ground, large blue spaces opened above. The colors at first were motionless and gray then pastel, then bright and chaotic like her drift in the liquid light. A profuse fragrance enveloped her. She was awed by everything, too awed yet to form the words spoken to her, to speak them back to the voices coming across the scented air. They came too along the frequency that had pulled her from that other place she no longer knew.

Across the black surface and into the chaotic light Lucinda was placed in a chair high off the floor in a house with words and odors very different from the words and odors of her own house. She spent the day deciphering and coding words and odors while her feet touched air. A woman not her mother turned from her walking, reaching, chopping, mixing to speak to Lucinda in languages not the language she usually

spoke. What is the language you speak? she seemed to be asking Lucinda, murmuring unfamiliar sounds to her.

Along the frequency echoed the words the woman spoke in her search for the language of not-quite-two. The words formed in the woman's throat and vibrated across the room and Lucinda heard each word belonging to the woman. She tried to speak them, but now the man arrived, bringing colors in his hands, and the woman spoke the language of Lucinda's mother, and Lucinda felt the transmission cease and her effort at words fall back on her.

There was all of this to do: walking, chewing, seeing, hearing, swallowing, warm, dark, light. Sun, snow, mother, father, sister, hands over hers, color, earth, fur, tickle, milk. Everything the way it was. She closed her eyes and the world dropped away. She opened her eyes and it came back. What do words do. Give something a word and what does it do. Could she give something a word and change it completely, a tree in the kitchen, her mother and father?

Lucinda chirped, laughed, gurgled, kicked her legs on the living room rug. She swung her head. The room careened to the right, careened to the left. The woman took the flashing ponytail as a signal, brought Lucinda up into her arms, checked her bottom, took the wet away, wrapped a fresh cloth around her, made her dry and cool. The woman's fingers were long and slender. She smelled of cooking spices and clean clothes. The woman straightened a strap on Lucinda's overalls and set her on the kitchen floor. Lucinda walked tentatively to the sink and sat under it. The woman allowed Lucinda to sit not in the boxes but on the floor next to them. Lucinda touched the fur and it moiled and nosed toward her, pink tongues on her face. She coded the odors of their bodies, not unlike hers: newness, spit, uncertainty.

Clifford moved among the rows. The field released its heavy perfume. He wrestled a clump of weeds from the soil and heaved it into the wheelbarrow, its metal belly dull with rust. Felicity ran to the wheelbarrow. She slipped into the space between the handles. Clifford directed the barrow along the rocky edge of the field. Felicity wrapped her small fingers around the handles, in front of his.

Felicity felt the long pull of the season like a great watery undertow. Her memory seemed to have begun here, walking behind the wheelbarrow with Clifford, or crouching near him, digging into the yielding soil. Each week the woven basket was placed under the honeysuckle bush and readied for her mother, a bribe of sorts, a temptation to bring her across the road when the shadows began to slant across the flower garden, to take her children home. Felicity wanted to give something of her own to her mother, to place deep within the basket, a blue ring, the wing of a faerie.

She ate secretly from the field, and followed Clifford, and searched with her stick for something to give to her mother.

Clifford tipped the wheelbarrow and the weeds fell into the underbrush. Felicity spirited across the field, her browning arms and her undershirt smudged with dirt. Clifford took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face and neck. He glanced across the field, to the kennels and the hounds, and the house that Sasha had retreated to. Felicity ran past the kennels, holding a red pepper. At the woven basket she placed it on top of the yellow beans and purple eggplant, their colors clashing and vibrating.

Felicity tried to break a stalk of rhubarb and fell flat on her back. She said, "Ugh, ugh," and struggled with the rhubarb as if it were a dog that she couldn't coax to come with her. Clifford opened his Army knife and cut the rhubarb and Felicity stood next to him until he had cut enough, and she carried the stalks to the basket.

In the flower garden Felicity picked tiger lilies for her mother. The long stems holding the outward-curving orange pedals looked like torches burning above her head. She lay them on top of the basket.

Clifford surveyed the field. He thought of the small pleasures of the little blonde girl who gurgled rather than talked, and of Felicity and her mother, of John Baines who was tormented by memory. Clifford, tormented also, lost himself in the land to try to unbind himself from memory as well. He returned his handkerchief to his pocket and walked toward the basket, handfuls of green beans plump between his fingers.

Felicity dug at the soil in the garden. She was looking for a golden flower to uncover, hanging heavy on its stem, that grew in darkness. She found roots, small jagged quartz rocks, slugs. An earthworm tunneled into the soil. She looked up to where Clifford had been releasing the green beans into the basket, lifting the tiger lilies from it, brushing spider webs from the stems. The space he had filled in front of the honeysuckle was empty, a blank background of green and yellow. Felicity rose to her feet. She ran into the field. Then, remembering, she looked toward the kennels at the hounds, whose muzzles always pointed in the direction of Clifford's movements. He was standing at the rose bushes at the front of the house, pinching a petal. He held a coffee can under it. Felicity ran to the rose bushes. The air was sharp with the smell of gasoline. She scratched the ground with her stick, concentrating on the scars it made, as Clifford continued his work. He took her arm gently and led her to a rose bush.

"This is a Japanese beetle," Clifford told her. He showed her an insect, feeding from a petal. Its back was metallic green, and when Clifford touched it, its back opened and the brown wings showed briefly. Clifford named everything in the garden and field for her—aphid, sparrow, Monarch butterfly. "They can kill an entire rose bush," he said.

Felicity knew from what Clifford told her that the Japanese beetle was bad. The Japanese beetle seemed to have something to do with her father. It seemed to have something to do with a place her father had come back from, though she did not understand how this insect had harmed her father when he had been so far away. She did not understand how a beetle could make her father so.

She looked up at Clifford and tried to form a question about her father. The beetle had harmed her father, it was in the past a long way away but here too, in the rose bushes, surely too in the tall grasses of her own yard, and this is what had harmed her father. It was in the past and not; it was far away and close by. This was in the past and the Japanese soldiers would come through the side yard that led to the patio where her father sat, and he wouldn't be able to stop them, and the soldiers would come out of the sunlight into her house in their bloodied uniforms, their rifles held in front of their faces.

She tried to respond to what Clifford had told her about the beetle. But there was her father and the soldiers who would come into her yard with their rifles. She pleated her shoulders and made her body small.

"They won't hurt you," Clifford said. "We'll take care of them." He took her arm again and watched her body unfold. He showed her how to pinch the beetles off the roses without hurting the petals, and they shared the coffee can with its inch of gasoline between them. Felicity pushed a beetle into the can with her stick, and she watched it swim in the slick of gasoline, its brown wings issuing helplessly from its back.

Sasha opened the screen door and called to Clifford. The basket of vegetables and flowers was like a complicated jewel lying at the end of the driveway. Across the road, John Baines sat at the table on the patio. A chess board was opened on it. He had turned his chair toward the deep woods behind the house, and his eyes were fixed on it, as if danger lay within it, or escape.

Hannah had left Felicity in the house with the new babysitter and driven to her first day of work, her gloved hands arranged on the steering wheel. Her pelvic bones were spreading; she could feel them in the night, the ligaments stretching and cramping. Late that afternoon Sasha watched unmoving at her kitchen window as Hannah searched the overgrown yard for her daughter, a crack appearing in her voice as her calls went unanswered. Sasha had found the child behind the cords of wood at mid-morning, her knees splayed, burying a peanut butter jar with three bumble bees in it beating angrily against the sealed glass. She was dirty and mud-streaked. Sasha brought her to the house and ran a warm washcloth over her face and arms as Felicity tried to twist her narrow shoulders away.

The child was out of earshot of her mother's voice, solemnly piecing together the jigsaw puzzle on the card table in Sasha's living room. Sasha brought Felicity down the driveway. Hannah ran wildly into the road and began to cry. She held Felicity, and the child's arms were wrapped around the taut curve of her mother's belly. "The babysitter. Oh—A slow, heavy girl," Hannah said to Sasha, after she had stopped crying. "I must call her mother." Hannah released Felicity's arms and gently pushed her away. The babysitter had arrived promptly at eight on her bicycle, Hannah explained to Sasha, but then she had pedaled down the road guarded by great glacial boulders, surely called away by the silent house from which she forgot to return.

Hannah spoke to Sasha in front of the honeysuckle bushes while Felicity chipped pieces of moist dirt from the peanut butter jar. The bees, now dead, lay stiffly at the bottom of the glass. Sasha had been too frightened of the bees' anger to uncap the jar. Clifford was at the farm-and-garden center, and Sasha did not tell him that Felicity had been trying to bury something in the dirt behind the firewood or that she had allowed the bees to die.

"My husband isn't able to work yet," Hannah told Sasha. "He isn't gaining weight as he should. I often wonder, will he ever gain it back. He was so thin already, when he was called up."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Baines," Sasha said. She began to walk back up the drive. "Your daughter seems to have suffered from all these miscalculations."

Hannah turned her slender back and walked across the road with her child. She climbed the crumbling front steps and took her inside. Sasha did not want to see the interior of the house and be shocked (she was certain) and then feel badly but then not at all surprised at the way the family lived. Even though she had been willed by her husband to forsake the old ways, the other part of her, trained as deeply and well as Clifford, felt absolute justification in appearances, in presentation as creation, as reality. She knew if she went into the house that needed paint, with its cracked windows and a yard one could hardly see the end of, she would be confronted by a sink full of dishes and clothes in a laundry basket in need of ironing and a tear, perhaps, in a lampshade. There would be testimony to desire, to hunger, beyond the relentless demands of breath, and bone—a figurine on a mantle, a row of good books leaning against brass bookends, a glass vase—small protestations against the divination of the ruined lampshade.

At dinner that evening Sasha said, "That woman across the road, that Mrs. Baines, left her child unattended and drove off to town. I found her in the yard, dirty as a muskrat."

"Sasha," Clifford said.

"What could I do?" Sasha said. "She wouldn't speak to me. She wouldn't go home. I washed her face and hands and kept one eye on her until her mother came back. Mrs. Baines is expecting another child; her dress can't hide that. Her husband must have been sent home again in time to— He must have been well enough to—"

Clifford folded his napkin on the table and walked across the road. The next morning he waited at the end of the drive for Hannah and watched as, grateful and shy, she put the palm of her hand on her daughter's back and guided her across the road, where Felicity entered into his care.

Hearing Sasha call him from the kitchen door, Clifford cleaned his hands with a rag and put the coffee can away in the shed. The dogs stirred in the pens and bayed at Clifford. Clifford spoke to the hounds and calmed them. At the rose bushes he spoke to Felicity in the same even voice. She put away her stick and walked with him. He took their shirts down from the peg outside the door, and they each pushed the buttons through.

Sasha picked Lucinda up from under the sink and brought the child with her while she reapplied her lipstick. The child tried to touch the colored stick, but Sasha held her fingers while she closed the tube and returned it to the Bakelite box. She blotted her lips, then arranged her hair quickly with her free hand. She kissed Lucinda's soft cheek, leaving an orange smudge. She wiped the smudge clean and kissed Lucinda again, and Lucinda gurgled at her.

Clifford ran his fingers over a puppy's paws, felt its chest. The puppies mewed and climbed over each other, searching for his hands. He changed the newspapers that lined the box and shook and refolded the small blanket where they slept. The puppies scrambled around on the floor. They fell on their sides. Clifford returned them to their box, one by one.

Sasha smoothed the collar of his work shirt, placed a hand to his face.

He stirred the tomato soup, tasted it. "The tomatoes in the field are still ripening," he said to her. "There may be enough to can in the fall. We've never tasted better tomatoes, have we, Sasha?"

"I daresay we haven't," Sasha said. After all the want of war, food was good again. Clifford's presence was good again. Every aspect of him—his body muscled now, relaxed into its own strength; his eyes, made older by war, revealing indebtedness for the moment, whatever it held—seemed to have come into being from the dirt-encrusted vegetables he brought from the field to her door. But she still woke in the morning and couldn't quite locate herself in the place her husband had brought her to. Lying in bed she would hear the dogs barking and the brush of fir needles against the roof and meet again the slow awakening of the land. Before dawn the mourning doves

began to call. Robins pulled earthworms from the ground, black crows shrieked from the branches, white butterflies and yellow-and-black striped bumblebees and black-spotted ladybugs coursed across the flower garden, and at dusk swallows swept across the field. Sasha turned off the burner, got a ladle out. Felicity hung back by the door, unsure of herself in the house, with Sasha.

Clifford took Lucinda from Sasha's arm, chucking her gently under the chin. She looked at him with recognition and curiosity. "Felicity," Clifford said, "take your sister here and help her wash her hands." She looked at him with her dark eyes. He rested his hand briefly on her tangled hair, an unfamiliar gesture between them, and sent her down the hall with Lucinda. Clifford and Sasha heard the scrape of the stool under the sink and the running of water, and Felicity as she did every day before lunch telling Lucinda about the sliver of soap that had disappeared in their father's hand, like magic, while he was helping her wash for supper. Soon they reappeared, sparkling slightly. Sasha settled Lucinda into the highchair. She tried to tuck in Felicity's shirttail, but Felicity wrenched herself away and sat next to Clifford.

Sasha took a tray down and placed a soup bowl and plates on it. "Why don't you have Felicity take the tray today?" she said to Clifford. She didn't like Clifford crossing the road to the house, for any reason.

"You know she's too small to carry the tray," Clifford said. "The last time I brought her there, John started singing to her. 'Waltzing Matilda.' He sang it like it was a lullaby. He tried to lift her but his hands shook, and he had to put her down. She climbed up on his knee herself—his good knee—and picked up the spoon and began to feed him. I think it was your zucchini soup. She was perched on his knee like a sprite. John ran his hand through the ends of her hair, as if he had never seen her before. After lunch Felicity hid in the woods and I had to get Five-star to find her." The hound had tracked soundlessly through the woods and found her crouched in the bracken. Five-star had licked her downturned face until she allowed him to lead her back to Clifford.

Clifford brought the tray down the driveway. John Baines sat at the table on the patio, absently nursing his injured leg. Clifford had seen the leg, the previous summer, on a hot day when John uncharacteristically had worn shorts. It was badly scarred from a Japanese bayonet. John had been too long at Cabanatuan for it to heal properly. Clifford, whose eye had been educated in the camps of Europe, had guessed that John suffered from malaria, a standard disease of the tropics, and he probably was still recovering from dysentery, which compounded his struggle to gain back his weight. Malaria, dysentery, malnutrition, Pacific Theater. Tuberculosis, dysentery, malnutrition, European Theater. It was just a matter of geography.

John Baines was dressed in trousers and a white long-sleeved shirt. He was clean-shaven and his hair was cut in military style, like Clifford's used to be. Under his pallor he had the color of a fair-skinned man who had spent time in the tropics. Clifford could not read in the *Iliad* of the relentlessly detailed slayings on the battlefield without getting sick to his stomach, and it seemed strange to him that the trauma of war had only been officially recognized and given a name in this century, following World War I. Clifford, keeping a benign eye on the household across the road, speculated to Sasha that John Baines frequently returned to the Veterans Administration hospital, and came home often looking the worse for it. We survive, he thought, and then where do we find life possible again.

"John," Clifford said. John looked up from the chess board and stood in greeting. Clifford put the tray down and shook John's outstretched hand.

"Clifford," John said. "Can you sit a while?"

"How are you, John?" Clifford said.

"Very well," John said.

"And Hannah? I see her sometimes on her way to work and then of course when she fetches the girls."

"Hannah, "John said.

John had returned from the Pacific Theater, he had returned to Hannah. He had night sweats and nightmares that woke Hannah into whatever battleground he lived in during the night. The house began to deteriorate into wasps' nests hanging under the eaves, paint that chipped from the walls, floorboards on the stairs leading to the rooms where Hannah put the children to bed and where Hannah and John slept that creaked as if a heavy foot walked on them.

Hannah's dreams had fled. Night was darkness and then the day came. John heard her weeping over the baskets of vegetables she carried up the front steps to the kitchen. They seemed like a rebuke because she was empty, she had become empty in various states and now she was empty completely. She placed the vegetables on the kitchen table and cried. She took them down the back steps and left them in the high grass because how was she to chop and pare and simmer and turn? Her children were full of need.

How can one love anyone, ever again? One has used oneself up in trying to be alive. One's body is reduced to a small flame which must be guarded. John lay on his back in the night and tried to see only darkness. Hannah was crying. Someone was crying. He went to the patio and smoked. The stars were formal and ancient. John signed himself into the Veterans' Administration hospital. The doctors had him on a regimen to gain

back his weight, and they were trying to help him with the nightmares. John was in and out of the VA hospital, in and out. He had only returned again in the spring.

The day was bright and vivid. The woods whispered around him. There was a bird somewhere. John couldn't be in the house as another man could, who hadn't seen war. He sat at the small table in the early afternoon sunlight. He looked again at the chess pieces, arranged since his homecoming for the game to begin.

John pulled a chair out for Clifford. He looked with disinterest at the tray of food. "Is Hannah bringing your lunch?" John said.

"This is from Sasha," Clifford said.

"Sasha," John said.

"I bring her too much food. But it's become my duty. After all that hunger."

"Yes," John said. "After the hunger." At Cabanatuan he had dreamed of food. He had dreamed of tables of food.

"Would you join us for lunch today, John? The girls are with us at the house. And Sasha, of course."

"Hannah wants me to read this book," John said. "She said it would help focus my mind." Clifford saw that it was a book of winning chess games by world champion Paul Keres. John had it opened on the table. "We made the pieces from bamboo," John said. "The tan bamboo was the king. The green was the queen. The bishop. I can't remember the bishop. We scorched one side of the bamboo piece, so we would know which was black and which was white." He closed the book between his hands.

Clifford stood. John stood and shook Clifford's hand again.

"I'll come back," Clifford said. "To see how you're doing. If you want, I'll show you the dogs. Great hunters. Lucinda likes to play among the puppies."

John sat at the table again. The beautifully carved chess pieces were of smooth, yellowing ivory. "I played a pretty good game with the bamboo pieces," John said. "I got used to the feel of the bamboo."

Clifford walked back to the house. Felicity sat mutely at the kitchen table, waiting for him. He ladled the soup into the bowls and took them to the table. All the other dishes were laid out. Sasha swung Lucinda's highchair around next to her and she and Clifford took their places across from each other. "I told this one to have her mother bring her hairbrush next time," Sasha said, looking across the table at Felicity. "The child always has litter in her hair."

Clifford inclined his chin at Felicity. "Hungry, Little One?" he said. He placed a tea towel over the warm loaf of bread and cut a slice for her. She began to eat.

Sasha helped Lucinda with her soup, wiping her cheek after each mouthful. She looked at the dark-haired girl across from her. Sasha granted her her silences, preferable

to a story she might tell about the house across the road. When she was smaller and allowed Sasha to accompany her to the bathroom, Sasha, ashamed of herself now, looked for marks on her body. There were none, only the mute eyes that followed her, until she had Clifford take the child out of doors with him again.

"I have the oddest feeling," Sasha said, "that there's something I can't find. This morning I found myself walking down the hall, looking for something. I don't know what."

"The old days," Clifford said. "Is that it?" He had wished for her something else, something more.

"The old days," Sasha said. Now there was this. The field gave up its fruits, dogs birthed in winter, flowers bloomed all year long. In December golden-orange flowers opened on the vines clinging to the house, looking to Sasha like the trumpets of angels. The Christmas cactus on a table in the living room bloomed with fuchsia flowers from October to March. Three of the Basset bitches gave birth late that first winter. The puppy boxes stayed under the sink. Watching the mothers clean their newborn pups, Sasha felt betrayed by the seasons that were no longer regular in their cycles, and by Clifford, who needed life, abundance, all from his hands, as a way to annul memory. She tried to follow. She tried to locate something that would belong to her.

Sasha fed Lucinda a spoonful of applesauce. Lucinda chirped at her. Sasha had almost put aside the old loneliness she had felt while she waited for Clifford to return. In Berlin he had under protest from his superiors resigned his commission. He came home and took her away from all she had known. The new days, Sasha thought; what were these days: a field surrounded by woodland, its depths and quiet and insulation, which were helping Clifford fully return to himself. Did all this space and quiet (except for the excitable dogs) help John Baines too? She had forgotten to ask, she never asked about him; Clifford seemed to accept that she needed a certain distance from the place he had brought her to, and from a man who had been wounded too deeply to fully return, and a woman who took her husband's car hesitatingly down the road every day to work. The Baineses must have married just before the war, Sasha thought. These were to be the new, bright days for them, after his return. Hannah must have thought of them often, waiting for him. Sasha put her hand on the tray of the highchair and Lucinda grabbed her thumb.

After lunch Sasha helped Clifford clear the ground where he had harvested the summer squash. They gathered the dead vines and threw them into the wheelbarrow. Clifford wore his work shirt buttoned to the collar. His muscles worked under the shirt as he loosened the soil with his hoe. Lucinda sat in a portable playpen nearby, swinging her ponytail. Felicity moodily dug with her stick a few yards from where they

worked. She collected acorns from the trees at the edge of the woods and buried them. The hounds barked at them intermittently, wanting attention. Felicity carefully wiped a smooth gray stone and slipped it into her pocket.

Sasha took Lucinda in for her afternoon nap, leaving Clifford to finish his work. She washed her hands and wiped the remaining lipstick from her mouth. She lay down with Lucinda on the bed she shared with Clifford, covering her with a light blanket. The child closed her eyes. Sasha gazed idly out the window, waiting for sleep.

Felicity walked past the window and Sasha saw her vanish behind the cords of firewood. A crow called from a fir tree. Sasha waited. The child next to her breathed softly through her mouth. Felicity emerged from behind the firewood and walked out of Sasha's line of vision, around the side of the house.

When it was time to return the children to their mother, Sasha brought Lucinda to Clifford and he waited with the children for Hannah to turn the car into the driveway and walk across the road. At Clifford's feet was the basket he and Felicity had prepared for her. Clifford said to Hannah Baines, coming pretty and shy to the edge of the yard in her white gloves and belted cotton dress, "How are you, Hannah?"

"Oh, how beautiful!" she said, bending over the basket and holding a tiger lily by its stem. "It's so kind of you and Mrs. Greenwood." Felicity stood next to her mother. Lucinda, in Clifford's arms, sucked her thumb. Clifford lowered Lucinda gently next to the basket. Hannah took off her gloves and lightly massaged her hands, working the exhaustion out of them. "They have me typing," she said. "I've never seen such typing. I'm afraid it's ruining my hands." Clifford offered his hands, brown from the sun and hard as leather, and they laughed. Hannah said, resting her hand on Felicity's hair, Felicity stilled, calmed, by her mother's caress, "Were they good today? Did you help Mr. Greenwood today?"

Sasha draped a cotton sweater over her shoulders. She opened the front door and, stepping off the old trail, found the square of earth behind the cords of wood that had been dug and covered over. She crouched to the ground, as she had seen Felicity do, and dug into the soft earth with a stick of kindling. The jar was wrapped in a piece of clean rag. Inside it were the dried remains of the bees, a smooth gray stone, a couple of acorns and the missing piece of jigsaw puzzle of a woman's high-colored cheek.

Beneath the jar Felicity had buried a smaller package, wrapped in another clean rag. Sasha lay it in her palm and opened the rag. She was careful not to touch the objects inside. The black tubes of lipstick were laid side by side. She held them in her palm. A mother-of-pearl button from one of Clifford's dress shirts was pressed between them, the white threads thick and ragged, as if they had been torn from the cloth or bitten free. She shook it into her hand, losing it briefly in the dirt. She loosened the dirt from

the button and rubbed it between her fingertips. She stood and walked away. She had left all of the buried things where they were.

Clifford spoke to Hannah in the shade of the honeysuckle. Lucinda played at her mother's feet. Felicity looked up at her mother. Across the road, in a slant of sunlight, John Baines's hand drifted above the white king.

Sasha walked down the drive. Her hands were full of dirt. Felicity took a step toward her mother. The baby reached into the worn basket and pulled a tiger lily from it. A glove, like a white leaf, fell from Hannah's hand. Sasha spoke to her husband. "Clifford," she said. "Clifford," she said again.

MARYELLEN BEVERIDGE is an honors graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her stories have appeared in literary magazines including *Notre Dame Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Cottonwood*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *The South Carolina Review*. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and her collection was a finalist for the 2013 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. She is a former member of the faculty at Emerson College, where she taught fiction writing and literature courses.