

it's better to try than to lock yourself in a cell of your own making. But I say nothing; she's young, and these are things she can learn only on her own.

I finish my coffee; usually I make only one cup, but now I wish I'd made more, so I could offer some to Britt and join her for another cup.

"Do you like the guy?" I ask, nodding toward the house across the street.

"No." She stares at the grass, which needs watering. "I don't have any friends," she says. "Not *real* friends."

"I suppose I don't either," I say. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you're about as close a friend as I have."

"That's pathetic," she says, but not cruelly. "I know what you mean, though."

Mr. Yunker's dog begins to circle around a spot of grass, and we can hear Mr. Yunker praising her, drawing out his words as if talking to a baby: "Find the poo-poo spot. That's it. There you go. That's a good spot. Good poo-poo."

"That's pathetic," Britt says.

*To everyone their faults*, I think.

We watch Mr. Yunker clean up after the dog with a plastic bag; then he heads inside. We're quiet for a while until Britt stands and stretches. "I need to sleep," she says.

I don't see Britt playing her violin in the park that day, and that evening I listen for the opening and closing of the garage door, but I don't hear it. When I wake in the morning, I look through the garage window, then search the street for her car, but I already know she's gone.

I sit on my lawn chair in the morning light. Linda Lowe drives by, and we wave. Her window must be down, for I hear the false, overexuberant voice of a morning disc jockey. Mr. Yunker appears in his yard with the paper in one hand, the leash in the other. His dog has found something in the grass and digs furiously, only to stop and press her nose into the dirt, then sneeze. Across the street, the boys' house is dark and still. To my surprise, I miss Britt. I wish I had told her more, though I'm not sure what: maybe about prison or my wife, though of course neither would have been appropriate. I wish she had told me more about herself, but then, I didn't ask. I demand little of anyone, and, in turn, few requests are made of me. Of Britt I know only that she was unhappy, that her mother didn't seem to love her enough, that her father was absent, that she played a violin and slept with boys. I was scared to ask her more about her life, just as I have been scared to ask anyone. And so I didn't know that Maria is married and misses her husband, or that Linda Lowe's boyfriend holds her at arm's length. I only swim in a pool and eat at a soda fountain and stack fruits and vegetables at a grocery store while watching those around me with caution. For all purposes, I might as well sit on my front lawn and watch the world pass by me. Suddenly I feel like talking, and I want to call my wife, but I don't think she'd want to listen. It's a bit early, but I rise and cross my yard, past the garage, to stand before Maria's front door, readying myself to knock. I feel bold and reckless, and I know the feeling will pass, but I want to hold on to it. ■

## Time Out

MARK SMITH-SOTO

The gift of death glows through the October afternoon.  
Nothing stranded in the seasons belongs to eternity.  
But I feel like a god sitting on my back porch.

Only a god would look to the left like this  
and understand the redness of maple leaves  
and hear the cardinal shiver in the holly

and feel the sun and cold wind sweep  
through the porch screens and not care  
what time it is, or what time is,

barely remembering when things were different,  
the azaleas aflame, the lawn a velvet rug,  
the loved woman wandering somewhere in

a poem. And this moment too will end, is ending,  
the acorns pattering on the roof are saying so  
with the fanfare of their leave-taking,

the gray neighbor dragging her recyclables to the curb  
is saying so, even the geese calling over the house  
proclaim I am not a god, no, not a god —

but my hearing's tuned beyond any murmurings,  
the afternoon stretches on, golden and heedless,  
and death itself is just half-listening.