

An aerial photograph of a dense forest in winter. The ground is covered in a layer of snow, and the trees, mostly birches, have bare, brown branches. The lighting is soft, creating a serene and cold atmosphere.

# AQR

## Alaska Quarterly Review

Vol. 32 No. 1 & 2 ❀

❀ Spring & Summer 2015

U.S. \$8.95 / Can. \$8.95



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Vol. 32 No. 1 & 2 ❖

❖ Spring & Summer 2015

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA  
ANCHORAGE



*Alaska Quarterly Review* is a journal devoted to contemporary literary art. It is published twice each year by the University of Alaska Anchorage, an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer and Educational Institution.

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Subscription rates are \$18.00 for one year, \$36.00 for two years, and \$54.00 for three years. Please add \$4.00 per year for Canadian subscriptions and \$10.00 per year for subscriptions to all other countries. Sample copies are \$6.00 for U.S. and Canada; \$16.00 to all other countries. Back issue prices on request. The editors invite submissions of fiction, short plays, poetry, and literary nonfiction in traditional and experimental styles. Unsolicited manuscripts are read between August 15 and May 15 and must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Send all correspondence to: Editors, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, University of Alaska Anchorage, 3211 Providence Drive, Anchorage, AK 99508.

Website <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/aqr>

Distributors: Ingram Periodicals, 1240 Heil Quaker Blvd., Laverne, TN 37086  
Media Solutions, 9632 Madison Blvd., Madison, AL 35758  
Ubiquity Distributors, 607 Degraw St., Brooklyn, NY 11217  
University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road,  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

*Alaska Quarterly Review* is listed in *Humanities International Complete* and is a member of CLMP.

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ISSN 0737-268X

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#### About the cover

Birches at evening light, Minto Flats, Alaska. Pilot Kirk Sweetsir.

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Bess Winter

## HELENA, MONTANA

Goodyear's mailbag cried. A ribbon of wails that spooled from the bag's sagging mouth where it sat in the corner of the post office, on the floor among two other sagging mailbags. When Goodyear arrived that morning to pick up his deliveries, his coworkers Jones and Bilson, each belonging to a mailbag, slurped from tin cups, leaned on the counter, frowned at him as if to say, *why didn't you get here sooner? Can't you quiet your mail?*

He approached the mailbag. Inside: a package wrapped with butcher paper, personal letters addressed in handwriting he recognized from a long history of correspondence, a catalog of undergarments enveloped in a modest paper sleeve, a baby girl. Her turnip-shaped head, her wet blue eyes, her tear-stained cheeks, her sagging diaper. She sat upright and smashed her fists against her bowlegs. She looked at Goodyear. She crumpled her forehead. She seemed to ask a question: *What are you going to do now, strange man?*

And he must have seemed a very strange man to her: skinny, knock-kneed and bald were it not for his mailman's cap, much like a baby, himself. Taller than either Jones or Bilson: so tall that, with upstretched arm, he could reach the top shelf of ingoing/outgoing

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Bess Winter's stories have appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *Gargoyle*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Flash Fiction International*, and the Pushcart Prize XXXVII.

letters. And frozen in time: not wrinkled or silvery, but no longer young, as if he waited for the next part of himself to arrive.

Goodyear lifted the baby. Set her on the counter. She wore a simple smock and a beige hand-knit sweater, pillowed all over, with crusts of old food worked into it in spots, and an inexplicable coal smudge on the sleeve. Her small pockets held all her belongings, all sized to lodge tight in a baby's esophagus: a tattered orange hair ribbon, a silver perfume vial yanked from a chatelaine, the lid off a gentleman's flask, a ticket stub for the Chippewa County Fair, a cat's black whisker, a pewter die-cast sheep the size of Goodyear's fingertip. He examined each and set it on the counter, and the baby watched this process with the curious detachment of one who'd passed through many strange hands. She wore a tag, pinned to her back and covered in stamps. She was postmarked Helena, Montana, and here she was in Swansea, Ontario, more than seventeen hundred miles away.

This baby, thought Goodyear, had seen more than he'd ever see in his life.

*Not smelling too rosy*, said Bilson.

*Diaper needs changing*, said Jones, who'd fathered so many children that he knew just when a kid was hungry and just when it was tired, and sometimes honed in on moments of conception that happened deep in the guts of women in neighboring houses, back alleys and barns. They sounded, he'd once said between sips from the same tin cup, like a mouse's eek.

*I don't know*, said Goodyear. He looked at the baby. She raised her scrunched fist to her lips. *She's a parcel. Do we change parcels?*

Bilson furrowed his brow. *That might be tampering. You've already tampered.* He pointed at the perfume vial, the ticket stub, the whisker, the sheep. Goodyear swept the knickknacks into his palm and stuffed them back into the baby's pocket.

Goodyear hoisted the baby in his mailbag, her turnip-head peeking out the top, sometimes a doughy arm pointing. He would walk his usual route. He would tread the path he always trod, stout brick roads and shushing summer trees.

But the baby. The address pinned to her sweater was for the least favorite house on his route. One whose mailbox he stuffed with bills from various creditors, whose only real letters were sodden and bent at the corners, sometimes stamped at the wrong end. When Goodyear got out between the trees and the road, and Jones and Bilson went in their own directions, he tasted worry and looked down at the baby, who looked back up at him.

She was calm. She pointed the way with a fat arm. He followed.

Goodyear was worn-out from sleeplessness. He had no baby at home, but he did have a wife whose teeth were going blue – *blue!* – from whatever sickness roiled inside her. She kept him up. She snatched at his collar in the night. She woke, from fever dreams, in a sea of sweat. Her eyes were set back in her skull now. Too far back, thought Goodyear. Her eyes were halfway out the door. But now the late spring sun stroked Goodyear's shoulders, and the weight of the baby swayed pleasantly at his side. Goodyear began to hum. This was happiness: feeling his own feet thump the ground, feeling the warm breathing body that cooed at his hip.

The first delivery was a package, placed into the hands of a young boy playing with tin soldiers on his verandah, who was drawn only to the baby. His sticky fingertips on the baby's soft cheek.

*Why's she in your bag?* He squinted up at Goodyear.

Goodyear shrugged. *She's a parcel*, he said.

*Oh*, said the boy. He fumbled with the paper edge of the package. He took a breath. *No, she's not. She's a baby.* He pinched his nose. *She smells like a baby.*

*Babies can be parcels.* Goodyear fought this: the urge to shove the little boy away from the baby, to slap the boy's pinching hand from her arm, where it left red welts. The baby didn't cry.

The boy looked around for a long time. The yard and the street were quiet but for birds. *Can I be a parcel?*

Goodyear imagined walking with this boy, or – worse – carrying this boy in his satchel, the ridiculous weight of him. And the constant questions.

*No*, he said.

*Why's she get to be a parcel and not me?*

*Her mum and dad paid for her postage.*

*How do you know?*

There was no answer for this. Still, the boy stared at him and waited. Goodyear fumbled for a response while he watched the baby, with a pickpocket's hand, ease a tin soldier out of the bib pocket of the boy's overalls and tuck it into her smock.

*I'm going to ask my mum to mail me*, said the boy. He started for the door, then turned back and raised a finger. *Don't move!*

Goodyear moved. He moved off the verandah and out of the yard and down the street, until he heard the boy's cries and quick footfall, and ducked behind a hedge. The boy came ripping past him, yelling, *Mailman! Mailman!* and waving a roll of stamps. He waited until the awful sounds were gone.

But the boy was right: the baby was not a package. Goodyear

thought this as he walked on. He thought it as he wedged the second package behind a storm door and the baby laughed at a skittering junebug. He thought it as the smell of her wafted over to a cluster of old men, whose faces puckered like old potatoes.

Everyone seemed old, now that he carried the baby. A carriage clopped by and the horses were old, their eyes bagged and milky, their coats dull as felt hats.

He glanced down to see if the baby was watching the horses. She was, without enthusiasm. She worked her mouth and furrowed her serious brow. As if she'd seen a thousand horses. As if she'd seen every horse.

The letters were for two brothers, who'd lived together longer than Goodyear had been alive. They were from the same sender, written in the same script. It was possible they were identical copies of the same letter, though Goodyear would never stray from his duties to steam open the envelopes, or to hold them up to the sun side-by-side and squint. Goodyear gave one to the baby to turn over and over in her hands as they neared the squat duplex the brothers owned, that crouched behind a thatch of trees. Before he had a chance to touch the mailbox, the baby reached out and lifted its lid, deposited her letter with the poise of a secretary. A baby who knew how to mail a letter! Something surged in Goodyear. He had felt it many years before, when his future wife had burrowed her small hand in his, pointed at two ducks that skimmed Grenadier Pond and said, *They look married*. He'd been walking with her every Tuesday afternoon for the past year-and-a-half, meeting her at her doorstep, greeting her parents who nodded politely but without enthusiasm as this lanky, balding mailman took their daughter's arm and led her down High Park Boulevard. And he had waited a year-and-a-half of Tuesdays, gazing at this small woman nearly ten years his junior: the pleasing point of her widow's peak and the milky dome of her forehead and her eyelashes soft as moths' wings, waiting for a sign of her affection. Waiting for the ducks.

He gave the baby the catalog of undergarments to hold as he walked. For a moment, he worried she might peel off its sleeve, but she looked ahead. The baby had no interest in undergarments. The baby had a downright Christian attitude, thought Goodyear. He took the catalog from where the baby offered it and dropped it into the doctor's mailbox. Quick, the doctor was at the mailbox scooping up the catalog before his wife or anyone took it. He twisted it in his long hands. He inspected the baby.

*Not yours?* He looked at Goodyear with suspicion.

*She's a parcel,* said Goodyear, though he didn't believe it. He hitched

the mailbag up on his shoulder and looked down at the baby, who was now face-to-face with the squatting doctor. The doctor waved one finger in front of her face and she followed it. The doctor pinched her cheek and inspected the color of her eyelids.

*Dehydrated. Overheated*, said the doctor. With medicinal hands he removed the baby's sweater, still pinned with the address and stamps, and folded it away in the mailbag. He sniffed. *And needs changing.*

*But she's a parcel*, said Goodyear. *Would that be tampering?*

*She must've been tampered with a great deal if she's made it this far*, said the doctor.

Why hadn't Goodyear thought of this? Of the other mailmen who'd carried the baby on their hip, swung her in their mail bags, hoisted her into sacks and chairs, fed her from their waxed paper lunches, covered her with blankets as she slept? Goodyear was not special. He was only the last person in a long chain of people. Everything he touched, he thought, was dangerously close to the end of its journey.

This was the first time Goodyear had ever been jealous of another mailman. Even when Bilson was assigned the prime route, dogless, that wound under tall elms, Jones stomped the floorboards and splashed gritty coffee on a package from Sears Roebuck. Goodyear didn't get jealous. But now, well. The baby reached out and honked the doctor's nose. The doctor scooped her out of the mailbag and held her, let her reach into his pocket and take a cotton swab, let her examine it before tucking it into her smock.

Goodyear thought of her final destination and his stomach yawped.

But he walked on. Duty pulled him along his route, no matter what he felt about it. Sometimes it guided him gently and sometimes, like today, it dragged him with a rough hand. The baby leaned back in her mailbag sling, like a queen reclined in her litter. And here was the terrible outline of her future as it loomed up from below: the peeling house, the crumbling chimney belching out its oily curl of smoke.

It was worse than he'd remembered.

Goodyear had never seen the person who lived in that gnarled stumpy house, but now he scrutinized their dry garden dotted with doll limbs and spent matchboxes and curious lengths of string, their unswept walkway ruddy with decayed leaves, their greasy windows and their gate that never latched. Today, a squirrel gnawed maniacally on a paint-stripped fencepost. Goodyear tiptoed into the yard. A tiny ribcage cracked under his shoe.

The front door was shut tight against the warm afternoon. Everything was still. Even the coil of smoke above the chimney seemed

slowed almost to stopping. Goodyear stood in the yard for a long while, longer than politeness and duty allowed. There was the scritch of squirrel teeth on wood.

And there was a silhouette by the window. Goodyear could only just make out the stooped shoulders, the matted hair and the knobby hands. They clutched something that might have been a broom handle but might also have been a thigh bone. The figure seemed to swing this tool. Panic needled Goodyear's heart. Goodyear looked down at the baby.

The horror of this: as if some awful bond was between them, the baby raised a pointed finger to the silhouette.

Goodyear hitched the mailbag up on his shoulder. He clasped the baby's bottom like to hold her close to him, releasing the perfume of dirty diaper.

Squeak of un-oiled door hinges; the rasp of dead leaves pushed off the stoop. The figure in the doorway: a girl, perhaps sixteen, who relied on a small cane. She wore a man's old work sweater over a lumpen day dress. Goodyear noticed the shoes: one wooden sole had been built up to help a stunted leg that kicked back the rangy mutt that nosed the air between her legs. Her weird body lurched; she came toward them and the movement was terrible. Goodyear's own stomach leaped to his throat to surprise him there. She worked forward at an agonizing pace, dragging her leg, while the baby agitated the bag she was slung in, gripped at its strap and watched the girl's approach with a new excitement. The open doorway behind the girl was dark and empty. Goodyear stood, frozen, nursing his bad feeling.

The girl came close enough to touch. She had a smell. Burning plastic, perhaps, or naphthalene. She pressed her small red hand to her heart. Goodyear resisted the soft feeling that came from this. There was no use, agonized Goodyear, in seeing this awful girl's face. There was no use knowing any more about her as he delivered her package, did the terrible thing he was duty-bound to do. But, the face; it lingered and pulled Goodyear's gaze to it. Not pretty, but striking. A well-drawn mouth. Glittering sapphire eyes, strange against her pale skin. It came clear then, from the stopped way she watched the place just beyond his shoulder, that she was blind. Her attention fixed on the sound of him, on his quick breaths, her eyes unmoving. He guessed she might not know he was a mailman. He guessed she might not even know he held the baby. Mailman and girl breathed heavily. Their breaths coiled together in the air between them. Goodyear girded up baby and bag.

*Hello, said the girl.*

Electric fear in Goodyear. He'd expected her to be dumb.

The girl gazed after Goodyear as he backed away, stumbled over the celluloid body of a doll, went out the swinging gate and slapped the gate to. With kicking heart, Goodyear took one last look at the girl, at the moon-pale face. Something tight and aching there. Something he'd felt loom up, before, those times he was quiet and still.

This was how he veered from his route: with dashes that scissored the lips of grassy lawns. When he reached his own house, he turned quick into the gate and sprinted through the yard and did not stop until they were safe inside the foyer. The hum of his own blood retreated. Then the house was soft with blue shadows. Its musk was camphor and old rosy sprays of Bellodgia. Somewhere, a clock ticked and the plumbing shuddered. There was also the howl of his wife.

The baby whipped her head around looking for the source. She hooked her tiny fingers through one of Goodyear's belt loops to hoist herself up. When she saw nothing, she arched her back and began to howl, herself: a howl that reeled all the way upstairs to tangle with his wife's. The baby teetered and Goodyear snatched her up, squished her to his chest. She wriggled against his hug, pushing away from him. Her wriggling brought up her stench. Goodyear had never handled a diaper before. With timid hand, he lifted her smock; she was thick with diapers. Layers of clean diapers like onion skins fastened over the soggy inner mess with gleaming diaper pins. Maybe he could handle this, but he didn't know how to stop her howling. She wriggled until Goodyear thought he might drop her. He sat her down on the floor where, with quivering chin, she pinched the pewter sheep from her pocket and stared into its face.

*What is that?*

His wife stood at the top of the stairs. Her yellowed nightie hung on her, sail-like, and she hung on the banister, humped and exhausted, like an old woman, much older than herself. Her hair fell down in tangles. Even in this dark, Goodyear saw her squint.

*That's a baby*, she said. She took a rattling breath. She started down the stairs like a wheelbarrow about to pitch over. Goodyear rushed to help her but she brushed his help away. He followed her down to where the baby sobbed. He watched her scoop the baby up into her brittle arms. He worried she might break under the baby's weight, but she hoisted her easily. He smelled her sour odor braid up with the baby's ripe one as she rocked her. Until the baby stopped crying. Until the baby rested her head on his wife's sharp shoulder, and sighed.

His wife turned to him, jiggling the baby. Her face was old leather, but these were the young olive eyes he'd fallen for, watching him now after many years.

*What's her name?* she asked.

Goodyear thought of the baby's tag. There was no name; just postage stamps. Just a destination, and a return address in Helena, Montana.

*Helena*, he said.

She smiled. *Helena*, she said to the baby. The baby blew an orb of spit, maybe in response.

And Goodyear watched as his wife stepped out of herself. He followed her, this woman now impossible as when they first met, as she went easily about the house, changing and bathing Helena, singing soft songs, boiling and mashing carrots that she spooned into the baby's mouth, helping her sip warmed milk out of a juice glass, swiping dust from the sills and the mantel, where he never cleaned. When she sang, her voice was clear – not the rusty scrape he was used to – and she smiled for the first time in – how long? He didn't know. Her teeth still blue, but blue like moonlight spilled across water. Goodyear remembered the woman he had guided under the oak and the pine in High Park those years ago: a doughy woman with wide hips and a plush breast, with soft hair done in rag curls, with pink complexion and a full complement of eyelashes that swatted her cheeks.

She was before him now, holding Helena on her hip, and she was looking at him the way she'd looked at him that day on Grenadier Pond. He saw the ducks.

And he saw himself, in the early days of their marriage. How helpless he was; he'd only realized it after their union. The deep ache he'd felt the few times they were apart when she'd gone to visit family in Windsor, or even on particularly long mail runs. The way she'd finished a ramekin of mashed potatoes with a thick pat of butter; the way she'd warmed their socks on the radiator; the tough rasped skin on her fingertips: how simple. How afraid he'd been to need her, then.

*Sit with me?* he asked.

She sat on the sofa and bounced Helena on her lap, humming softly. He sat beside her and circled her shoulders with his arm. When he pulled her in close she was still all bones and sinew and vinegar smell. He pushed this back in his mind, to where he pushed all unpleasant things. To where he pushed the truth about Helena. To where he pushed the blind girl. But the truth would not stay hidden. He felt it bust its way out, and the feeling was like clutching after a slipped bar of Pears.

*She's a package*, he said.

His wife laughed. *She looks like a baby to me.*

*She was in my mailbag this morning. With stamps.*

His wife lifted Helena to her feet and stared into the serious face. *You can mail a baby?* As if she were asking the baby. Helena smiled,

all gums. For the first time, she seemed to know nothing. She had no answers.

Goodyear's wife turned to him. The room was unlit but he had no trouble seeing her worry. He knew this look, too. It was the same look she wore when the doctor had first leaned over her with wrinkled brow, had first looked back at him, had first shaken his head. It was the same look the girl had worn, as he'd pulled the baby out of her reach.

*Was she addressed to us?* she asked. She seemed to smudge, just slightly, like a figure in a watercolor.

There was a long silence. The thing to do in this moment, thought Goodyear, was to hold her close as long as he could. He looked down to where Helena had reached over and taken hold of a bright button on his mailman's jacket. To where she yanked the button away with a tug, turned it over a moment in her hands, and tucked it into her pocket, out of sight, among her other treasures.