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Roofing

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About the Contributor (Optional)

Kathryn Brewer is currently promoting Maimonidean obscurity whilst simultaneously cultivating her image as a poet by frequenting dark corners and brooding over caffeinated beverages. In her free time she drinks tea, practices yoga, and leads raft tours down the Nile River. She drives a golden Buick and grows lavender.

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ROOFING

It's 9am and we stand on the roof of the fading buttercream yellow garage behind Aunt Laura's small, rectangular bungalow. I crouch down at the top of the slanted roof that raises high at the front end of the garage, near the sliding barn door entrance. Further down Dad, Uncle Logan and Sam stand looking out over the black walnut infested yard, a pile of rolled shingling and a bucket of tar at their feet. Three men and I occupy the small roof, armed with hammers and nails. I can hear Mom talking to Sam's wife Mandy below us, "The boys all look just like Pa." The women nod and laugh.

The two brothers stand side by side, analyzing the roof before we begin to work. Dad is tall and broad shouldered while Uncle Logan stands shorter and barrel chested, but the physical relation between them remains. In the space between hairline and lips are those Brewer features: the proud nose, strong brow, and deep-set blue eyes. Next to Uncle Logan and Dad, Sam looks out of place with his red-brown hair and mahogany eyes, all that he has of his father: Borvan genes. At a look he has the Brewer build, just a different coloring, but closer eyes find the small distinctions, his more delicate hands. I never knew his father, but I can almost construct a picture of what he must look like in my head, an imaginary jigsaw puzzle of Sam's face and my own mental improvisation. Sam's ruddy complexion and smaller nose are the only remains of Aunt Laura's ex-husband, a man whose name I have never heard mentioned.

Dad takes over as the supervisor, directing Sam and me as we carefully measure out the length for our first sheet of shingling. Once the gritty plane is cut, Uncle Logan and I take our trowels and begin spreading the thick tar out thin over the roof (he chuckles) "like we're icing over a cheap cake." The tar smells of melted rubber. "This tar ain't the same consistency as that what we use to tar niggers with" Uncle Logan says in a thick, backwoods, southern drawl. My trowel pauses mid-motion. "That's what ol' hillbilly Pa would say, growin' up down in Arkansas." He laughs, thick gaucho-style moustache hiding his upper lip and boxy dentures. I want to remind him that he can't say things like that up here, in Yankee-land, north of the Mason-Dixon. We left the backwoods, we're cosmopolitan now, yet somehow Uncle Logan inherited Pa's vestiges of Confederate sympathy along with Pa's blacksmith anvil.

Sam, without any patrilineal heirlooms to claim (physical or

political), has instead inherited fear. At Mandy's mention of children his communication closes down with Brewer willpower, but the reaction is all Borvan. The father he barely knew, and no longer cares to know, left. If Sam has children, will the traits he has inherited from his father finally surface? Can he overcome his genetic impulses when he doesn't know how deep they run?

As soon as the tar is spread we ease the shingle down over it, maneuvering so that the edges are even on each side of the narrow roof. I nail down the piece for extra precaution as the men measure the next piece. "You know, if Ed Brewer were alive this roof would've been finished in an hour." Uncle Logan starts up again. He's the oldest, always something to say about his father. Dad nods, "It wouldn't have been done well, but it would've been done." Sam remains silent.

The roof is getting warmer as the day matures. I sit on my haunches, waiting for instructions as Dad and Uncle Logan argue about which would be the best way to layer the shingles: tar first and then shingle, or tar over the shingles? Both men have an opinion, and both opinions are the right opinion. Sam stands off to the side, arms crossed, waiting.