Lindsey Harding

Beyond the Field of Vision

Before we left on our family vacation, our first with our son Brody, I had stopped taking pictures. That is to say, I still had weddings to shoot, but when I later looked at the pictures on my computer, the images surprised me, as though someone else had aimed, clicked, and captured. My desk was scattered with bags of Jordan almonds and folded vellum invitations from every weekend in May and June, but despite that proof, I felt decidedly that I had been elsewhere all that time.

I began to feel the same around Brody and Colette. At the end of the day, I wondered whether I had held my son or talked to my wife at all. I suspected I had, but I couldn't remember the smell of Brody's skin or the quality of Colette's voice. How odd: my life felt like a picture forgotten in the developing tray, all details blurring together, the real picture ruined by the carelessness of the photographer.

The night before we left to meet my parents at Lake Chautauqua, three hours north of our home in the Pittsburgh suburbs, I cleared the wedding favors off my desk and found a handkerchief, no longer white but worn sepia and tattered. I owned a limitless supply of handkerchiefs, Christmas gifts every year from my father for as long as I could remember. This one, I knew, wasn't mine. I held the antiqued cloth to my nose and smelled soil and hay, summer and corn. I imagined my father, leaning against a fence post, pulling this very handkerchief out of his pocket to draw across his forehead as the day began to fade, his eyes trained on something I couldn't quite see, something beyond my field of vision. As I sat with the handkerchief pressed against my own forehead, I had the sense, the same one I had as a boy and even as a teenager, that what he was seeing across the green and golden fields was something magical and profound. I suspected the vision wasn't something you could capture with a picture, and that made me sad. My wife and baby were sleeping. The house was quiet. I pocketed the handkerchief and went upstairs to pack.

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On our third morning in Chautauqua, mom and I were up early. "Great artists always wake up early, and the best never go to bed," mom said, making tea at the counter in her lavender robe. I wasn't an artist: I was just too damn sad to sleep. We sat at the kitchen table, across from each other but far, far apart. I posed with my coffee and newspaper in a white undershirt and pajama pants, now fuzzy with age. My feet traced the floor's wood grains. Mom sipped her Earl Grey and attended to the lecture series schedule.

When she stopped talking about an upcoming art history session, I looked up. Her chair was pushed back and she was away from the table, her reading glasses askew in her gray-tinted hair. I hadn't heard my father come down the stairs, but mom must have. She met him in the doorway, and as I watched over the paper's edge, dad picked mom up and swung her around. She giggled and sighed as they turned in circles. A carousel of contentedness. He set her down, and they held each other; my father's big, tanned arms plowed across mom's robe, her face tucked into his wide

shoulder. But then, life spoils moments by moving on. Dad lit the stove and started frying some bacon. Mom poured his orange juice and began outlining the day's itinerary. I turned back to the paper, which I didn't read at all.

Sitting there, I felt a tug on my heart. More than any picture I've taken, watching my parents captured for me the yearning for more – even when you aren't sure what you want more of. Even when you are a husband and a father and a son and a photographer and the smell of bacon makes you want to cry, and if your father taught you anything, it was that you carried handkerchiefs, but you didn't cry.

For the rest of our time on the shores of Lake Chautauqua, surrounded by farmers' markets and string quartets and rocking-chair-strewn porches, I couldn't stop thinking about that morning. Colette seemed to sense my preoccupation, but when I caught her staring at me, I only shook my head. I didn't know what to say. There was nothing to say. I focused on my parents. For the first time, I saw them as people. Julia and Leo. Complicated, storied, layered. Who were they, really? I had heard the usual tales over weeknight beef stew and biscuits and Sunday morning French toast and eggs while growing up. That wasn't enough.

Our last night of vacation, I rocked my son to sleep. I held him against my shoulder and wondered if my unshaven chin and cheek tickled or bothered him. Colette had asked yesterday if I was ever going to shave again, and I told her I would think about it. Brody was about double the weight of my camera with the lens attached, but softer, newer. Holding him, I felt the burden of my childhood and the malleability of his. Brody fell asleep. We rocked. The chair creaked, rubbing against the wood. I missed Colette terribly. She was in the next room sleeping. When had our marriage become a distance I couldn't cross? A conversation I couldn't have? A picture I couldn't take? I lay Brody in his crib. I sat back in the chair. I rocked.

We our drive South, back into the gray hills of Pennsylvania and I wondered how Julia and Leo had done it? How had they met, started a family, reached their fifties, and been able to spin around, giggle, and hold tight to each other. The answer, I knew, couldn't be found in questioning them. Parents censor for the sake of their children in an impossible effort to preserve innocence. And, too, I felt an unsettling urgency to know their story, as if I had this car ride and only this car ride to acquire that knowledge or else dire consequences awaited. I didn't have any other choices. I needed to know. With the details and anecdotes I remembered, I would reconstruct their past by filling in the rest with my own imaginings. Brody was in his car seat, head slumped forward, a string of drool hanging from his bottom lip. Colette, too, was passed out next to me, her hand unmoving and soft on my leg, hair behind her ears, and cheekbones reflecting the window's glare, like photo flare.

I pulled my father's old handkerchief from my pocket and held it against the steering wheel. Then it was just me and the road and my imagination.

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Julia attended James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

For spring break freshman year, she signed up to go to New York City with her art history class to tour the museums, sketch in Central Park, and "soak up the creative energy of so many restless, yearning, poor souls." That was how her teacher, a balding man who used words like copasetic and conundrum with charming regularity, had billed the trip, and Julia had submitted her down payment the next day.

At National Airport, she wandered into a magazine shop to browse *People*. While flipping between an interview with Olivia Newton John and an article on why people fall in love, Julia's purse disappeared. Fortunately, her parents had given her a document holder to wear under her clothes while traveling. All that was lost was a tube of Pretty Pink lipstick, a few bobby pins, and her boarding pass. Julia hurried to the ticket counter. The wrinkle-shirted attendant frowned as Julia explained, and Julia mistook her frown for sympathy. Perhaps the attendant was upset because she had discovered last night that her boyfriend of two years had a tattoo of his ex-girlfriend's name – Cynthia – on his right foot. For two years he had probably worn socks during sex and socks to bed. Most likely, she had assumed he had cold or ugly or smelly feet. When Julia said, "Miss, you see, I need to get a new boarding pass printed right now," the attendant had nodded and known what to do but would have only heard Cynthia, Cynthia, Cynthia.

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Brody shifted. I reached back to hold his hand. The smoothness of his skin surprised me. He pulled his hand away, settling back to sleep. Did he dream? With his eyes closed, did he see rattles and stuffed animals the way I saw hay stacks, tractors, and silos?

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Julia grabbed the boarding pass and scrambled for the gate. She was the last one to board. In the window, she saw her own glossy hazel eyes framed by a pearl face, then mahogany hair. Past that, she saw brush strokes of roads, rivers, and worlds. Hot tea in hand, she looked around for her classmates. She saw none and heard only the squeak of the refreshment cart. She asked the gentleman rocking beside her where the flight was heading. He didn't look at her, just continued rocking and said, "Cincinnati."

She cried.

A hand extended from the seat behind her. A calloused, hairy hand. In that hand, there was a handkerchief, long since newly crisp and white, fraying in one corner. Julia took the worn, soft cloth and blew her nose. Loudly. The gentleman beside her paused and the man to whom the hand and handkerchief belonged laughed. Julia followed the hand and the laugh back to see a cowboy hat, a boyish, tan face, and a Farmer's Almanac open in a lap. When the landing gear came down, Julia was rocking gently, too, and had learned the ins and outs of crop rotation from Leonard, who owned a farm across the border in New Alsace, Indiana, off State Route 1. Julia thought he looked too young to own his own farm, but he assured her he wasn't. "Been milking cows and growing corn my whole life." He was on his way home from a convention. "Tractor talk," he called it.

By the end of spring break, Leonard was Leo and Julia had a pair of overalls and tan lines on her neck, arms, and ankles. A seed of something sweet had been planted between them.

Back at JMU, she turned her art interests towards Regionalism and the American Midwest. Leo wrote letters every week and sent over a shipment of early corn to spur her on while studying for finals. (Did she still have those letters now? Tucked away in a shoebox perhaps in her closet or under the bed? Did Colette save the photographs I sent her while we were dating? What would those images show now? Had they endured or had they blurred?) Julia sighed when Leo compared her skin to cow's milk, her voice to the twitter of crickets in a dewy morning field, her smell to that of upturned soil. He was simple and lovely. She barely passed French II and told her parents the problem with foreign languages was the foreign part. That summer, she went organic.

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I pulled into a rest stop. The handkerchief fell from my hand as I reached over to shake Colette. Brody had been whimpering for ten miles, and now he was awake and hungry. "Babe, time to feed Brody." She turned, her face grimacing. Then she unwound her arms and legs from her blanket and looked at me. I attempted a smile and felt my face strain with the effort. Had facial expressions always hurt? Colette looked beautiful: hair unkempt, clothes wrinkled, face clean and bright and young. She smiled back, hesitant, almost pleading. But what could I give her? She deserved more than a pose, a painful grin. I offered to change Brody's diaper while she ran to the bathroom.

When we got back on the highway, Brody fell right to sleep with a full belly and Colette turned towards the window, her back hunched in fatigue or frustration. I picked up the handkerchief and set cruise control. The road stretched on ahead; my parents' story did, too.

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Julia and Leo spent their wedding night in the hay loft. In the morning, their backs were rubbed and red, their hair flecked with blond, stiff streaks, and the cows wouldn't leave them alone. The honeymoon had to wait until after the last corn was harvested, but by then Julia couldn't drink milk right from an udder and had to nap every afternoon before lighting the dinner fire.

Eight months later, wind cut across the southern Indiana landscape, mincing it, ravaging it until bits of grass and fence and barn and cloud blurred, as though a brave photographer dared capture a Midwest winter only to have his camera whipped around in the wind (I feel Indiana's wind sometimes in the middle of winter when I'm lying on the cusp of sleep. Fifteen years after leaving the farm, it still clings to my dreams on blustery nights.) Inside the farmhouse, Julia mistook a puddle on the kitchen floor for melted icy footprints, one on top of the other.

Just then, the snow started. Inches fell in seconds. The world turned white night, and when Leo tried to call the doctor, the line only hummed. They were on their own at least until a lull or perhaps morning or maybe spring.

But the baby wouldn't wait. Julia spread herself on the bed and hiked up her skirt. Leo crouched between her legs as he had for so many mares. Together, they prayed and cried, their voices competing in fierceness if not piety with the wind. Julia bit into one of Leo's softest handkerchiefs and gripped the bed posts while Leo clung to her calves. Four calloused hands hanging on for a dear life.

Three hours later: "Welcome to our family, Everett Rainier Scott," Julia said as she clutched her baby. Leo cut the umbilical cord with a kitchen knife and bathed his son in a bucket.

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"We need to talk." At first, I thought I had turned the radio on, but then I saw Colette looking at me. I rubbed the handkerchief across my eyes and let it fall into my lap.

"Let's not do this now," I said, passing an Expedition. A man was driving, singing along with the radio and air drumming. He looked like an idiot. I wanted to be him. I could handle a melody. Harmony I couldn't bear.

"When, Everett, when? You said after work, so I waited. You said after vacation, so I waited. It's after, Everett, and we need to talk." I heard her pitch rise on the last four words. Tears would fall.

But I hedged again, "When we get home. As soon as we get home."

"At some point later is going to be too late," Colette warned, curving her back into a harsh C and pressing her face to the window. Her body shook, trembled really.

The problem with trying to comfort someone's sadness when you're sad is emotional proximity. When you're zoomed in too much, it's hard to know what you're seeing. I drove on.

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When Everett was five, Santa gave him his first camera. Julia wanted him to appreciate art and Leo said, "Indiana farmland is the prettiest there is." A camera was the compromise. That spring, Leo finished building a studio for Julia, and she quit her job teaching at East Central High School to paint full-time. In her studio, Julia breathed in the smells of plaster, plywood, and acrylics. She put color on canvases and turned her dream into works she sold at Cincinnati art festivals. During the days, their lives diverged: Leo outside with nature, Julia inside with art, and Everett in and out, attending school and snapping pictures. They all cultivated and created.

But sometimes, bounties can be too great. Over-exposure ruins photographs. Bliss burdens the bearer. The heart, joy's silo, can only hold so much.

For their tenth anniversary, Leo surprised Julia with a trip to New York City. He had arranged for her parents to stay with Everett on the farm. Leo had been saving up from each crop to give his wife the trip she had missed out on to meet him. When he said it like that, Julia laughed and looked away. "Thank you," she told him, the words grainy and rough

on her tongue. For the past few months, maybe years now, and more and more frequently, Julia found herself in her studio staring at the fence bordering their land. Life seemed fine, just fine, but still she played with what-ifs. What if she had gotten on the right plane in college?

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Something rattled behind me. I looked back to see Brody's fleshy hand reaching for the giraffes hanging down from his toy bar. The noise didn't awaken Colette, and for a moment I felt a kind of peace: My wife next to me. My son playing quietly in the back seat. Our family life unfolding day by day. Was that enough? Shouldn't that have been enough? I tightened my grip on the steering wheel. Dad's handkerchief felt like a reminder of something I had forgotten long ago and now wondered if I had ever known in the first place. Perhaps something unknowable entirely.

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The trip was what Julia needed. Mostly. They stayed in a midtown hotel with a bellman who stopped addressing Leo as Sir when he saw the trail of soil his boots left on the red carpet. Walking around the concrete fields of the city, Julia took in a place where calloused hands and soft handkerchiefs felt sorely, embarrassingly out of place. On the streets, she and Leo moved parallel to each other, sometimes bumping up against the other when crowds condensed at street corners, waiting for the light to change. But then they visited the Metropolitan, the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, and SoHo galleries. In those places, Julia felt her head throb with the beauty and thrill and energy and mystery of it all. In those places, she and Leo held hands. (When was the last time Colette and I had held hands? I wasn't really the hand-holding type, but still I imagined we had at some point. Couples held hands. Couples who loved each other. So we must have, right?) In those places, Julia was inspired. At night, they made love, and it was the kind of love-making that seeks and searches and wonders how ten years had passed and if happiness alone were over-rated. Wasn't marriage about something else? Something more enduring. Something like art.

On their last morning in Manhattan, Leo and Julia waited on the curb while the bellman hailed a taxi for them. "I won't miss the noise of this place. Or the crowds, that's for sure," Leo said, rocking back and forth in his boots. They waited, standing under the hotel's gold awning, watching the flow of black trench coats pass before them. When at last a cab pulled over, Leo climbed in first and Julia followed, dragging her feet and glancing up at the skyscrapers and around at the hotdog vendors once more. As she was pulling her hand, her painting hand, into the car, the bellman slammed the door on it. They drove away. Leo squeezed her other hand, kissed her cheek, and offered her his handkerchief. Outside the cab window, the city blurred: street blocks and apartment buildings and billboards a wide ribbon of gray.

By the time their flight took off, Julia could bend her fingers again and fold her hand into a fist. Everything was fine. Just fine.

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Colette rolled over, turning her body towards mine but keeping her eyes closed. I saw their red rims. Black eye make-up ran down her cheeks.

Her lips held a stubborn, tight pout. I had a hard time believing this was the same woman who had woken up so beautiful before. I sensed my responsibility in this transformation, but from a distance and only vaguely. I reached out to tuck a straying strand of hair behind her ear, but then remembered the handkerchief I was holding. She was right. We needed to talk. But not yet. If I were to start talking now, she would comfort me and that would be that. I didn't want just that. I kept my hands on the steering wheel.

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Back in her studio, though, Julia's hand wasn't fine. Her brushes hurt to hold. Lines wobbled. Figures wavered. Scenes shook. One day a few months after returning from New York, she drove to Dr. Hildabrand's farm. There, she told him about the cab door and the swelling and increasing pain in her finger joints, especially in the morning. He examined her knuckles and told her what she had already feared: "Early-onset arthritis. It's common in painters, and the car door didn't help. You can take pain killers, but it's only going to get worse."

That night, Julia told Leo. "I'm sorry, Jules," he said, moving his hand gently along hers. She could feel his hardened skin. A stiffness of its own.

"The pain's not that bad."

"What will you do?"

"Keep taking Tylenol."

"That's not what I mean."

"I know."

A month later, Julia met with the superintendent about returning to the classroom. "Well, we can't offer you an art position in the high school, but we are short a fourth grade teacher," Mrs. Klinesboro said, leaning forward on her desk. "Evelyn Fletcher just had her baby over the weekend. Nine pounds, can you believe it with her such a petite bitty thing? How does tomorrow look for you?" Julia held out her left hand and asked where her new classroom would be.

Then, and as it happens, time passed. (Was our ride home almost over? Already we were only two exits away. I used to think I had power as a photographer: with a snap of my lens, I could suspend time. But that power had never really been mine, I understood that now. Just a clever trick of flash and film that betrayed the truth – that time passed just as it was passing now.) Julia liked walking into her classroom, greeted by hanging pictures and sketches her students had given her over the years, pictures of her smiling at the chalkboard or a family dog named Spike or a farmhouse at noon, the sun quarter-sized, throwing yellow spears through clouds above corn stalks with fierce green plumes. The cushion on her chair was as soft and worn as one of Leo's handkerchiefs.

And when she came home after work, Leo would look at the drawings and listen to her stories and watch her face brighten as though she had won the school-wide spelling bee.

And during the harvest, Julia would make bacon and pour orange

juice for Leo before he left for the fields, and at night she let him rest while she and Everett took over the household chores.

And when Everett graduated from high school and left the farm to attend NYU on scholarship to study photography, Leo would ship fresh corn in time for finals and Julia would call to talk color and composition.

And later in bed, they would make love some nights and other nights they wouldn't. Some nights they would read. At times, they argued – about money, about Everett's New England prep school girlfriend, about the farm – about what couples argue about when it's just them and the rest of their lives stretching out before them like a wheat field in August, wispy and haunting. Other nights they just held each other, Leo's hands plowing rows on her back, cultivating warmth, tender and sweet.

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I eased the car off the interstate at the Fox Chapel exit, slowing for the red light at the end of the ramp. Three left turns and a right and we would be home. Our suburban two-story on a suburban cul-de-sac in a suburban neighborhood waited for us. Sunlight bounced off the windshield, reflecting and refracting light. I fiddled with the air conditioner vents, trying to direct enough cold air my way so I could breathe. Just breathe. Cars passed: yellow hatchbacks and red sports cars, blue and orange and silver beetles, and for an instant before the light turned green, I was somewhere else, watching another red light sink down and rest on the land's edge. I stood at a fence post, alone in a field, green stretching and waving and growing all around me. There, I could almost see what my father must have seen at the end of every day. I pulled the handkerchief across my face, and the light turned. I stalled. I wanted that vision to be mine, a continuous sight, not something that had to be farmed or framed. Staring ahead, I hoped to discover what was there, past the fields but in them, too. My foot stayed on the brake until the car behind me honked – a raucous, ugly noise. I crawled into the intersection, needing more time, but traffic swept the car along. Already we were at the second light. And now Colette stirred, moving a hand across her mouth, the other through her hair. I blinked hard. I tried to go back, to see what was there. I opened a window. We passed a strip mall on our right, Wendy's and Sheetz on our left. I kept looking. All I needed was a ribbon of green, a row of ready soil – thick and brown. A third red light stopped us.

"Here," Colette said, "That one you have is dirty and wet." She held out a clean white handkerchief from the glove compartment. We traded, and as I held the crisp cloth to my eyes, my nose, I felt a new softness. I saw earthy stains, dried tears. I heard cicadas, cow bells, a baby's cry. I drove, past cornfields and white farmhouses, past giant cows resting in the summer heat or posing for a picture, past silos and memories, imaginings and horses lazily chewing grass or sipping water in a trough, past hay stacks and fear, nostalgia and regret. Another red light. I drove, past memories and into moments, into the unimaginable future and the calm comfort life can provide when at last we surrender to it. More crying now. And cooing, too. Colette reaching back for Brody, letting him know it would be okay, we were almost home, almost there.

Surrender was sweet. As sweet as summer corn and fresh milk, cut hay and tilled soil. When we talked, this is what I would tell Colette.

"Beyond the Field of Vision" is Lindsey Harding's second literary journal publication. Last spring, her story "Morning Routine" was published in the online literary magazine *Wanderings*. Currently, she is an M.F.A. student at Sewanee University.