

# **THE CORRIDORS OF LONGING**

Gary Fincke



*The Corridors of Longing* by Gary Fincke

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# The Corridors of Longing

1

At twilight, driving Route 8, my father refused the headlights, saying, he said, the bulbs. Three lanes, that road, passing a dare. Always, the oncoming cars would flash the code for fear, but still he blinded us, ready, traveling Route 8, to hoard the minutes and challenge the darkness, proving, by the mile, he could see to drive by passing the brightly lit.

2

She was flicking the headlights on, then off, sending some signal into the game lands where we'd parked, creating, before I opened her blouse, the evening and the morning of the first day, telling me we were alone as Adam and Eve, reciting the passages about births from clay and rib, God's recipes so simple, yet perfect, flicking the lights again as if she wanted God's finger pointing at us as I found her breasts in the dark, secretive as the newly created, in love with the knowledge of her body, saying "yes" to whatever she believed about dirt and bones.

### 3

Twice in twenty years my father had laughed. I admit that he may have chuckled when I was absent, when he became his secret self, free of the need for work and the God of restraint. More than once, more often than he smiled, my father said he felt sorry for me, meaning I would live to experience the world's end by God or man. Hopeless was a thing he saw in others. What's said and done was proof.

### 4

Because she sang soprano in a church choir, my father worshipped her visits and never tried my room's closed, but unlocked door. He blessed our privacy, turning up his television so we could hear approval played by the champagne music makers while her thrumming pitched into a shriek I fractured with my urgent hand.

### 5

When the road seesawed, narrow and choked by forest to the shoulder, my father slowed for stories, each one ending with "I meant to" as if expecting a huge migration of the dead to cross the road from one wooded darkness to another, his parables meant as headlights. "Wives are meant to be widows," he said, the night shaking its shaggy head as it shredded a skinny album of ancient photographs.

6

Always, she said, the worst thing is safety. Warnings are exhausting, I said, and watched the road testify, tirelessly perjuring itself. Always, I thought, the worst thing is loneliness. That day's driving was an examination. My symptoms were caution and concentration, the radio loud and without mercy until she unzipped me and sang "speed" to my body.

7

My father dreams my bones, wakens to trace my face with his fingers, telling me how scientists reconstruct the faces of the ancient dead from their salvaged skulls, and I overhear his wish to be a curator for immortality, arranging selected photographs throughout our house until my mother is perfectly displayed.

8

Sometimes, I've learned, the eyes of birds weigh more than their brains. Sometimes their bones weigh less than their feathers. Sometimes, while touching her face, I became a boy who believed her eyes exclaimed "Yes, go on," because, sometimes, undressed, she felt so light her body lifted toward me, extraordinary as the moment she became an etched inscription on a mausoleum plaque—she was, she loved, she would have—an odd conjugation of loss, a wound in the private museum of the past, the corridors of longing where light is interrupted by the stunned levitation of her accident.

9

Even as we park beside the house sold twenty years ago to strangers, even in the front yard so small a child could hop, skip, and jump across it, I can't hear one word from my father who has made me drive here to remember. Traffic coughs its constant jargon. At the end of the street, two houses down, the world ends at a cliff blasted one lot closer for a widened highway. My father, from where we're standing, tries to distinguish an old path become a wide, astonishment of air.

10

Where my father and I are now, the wires are down, and the rain manages the back road. A channel opens beside us. The squall hoards our light. Pulled over on the shoulder, shuddering in the dark, I am asking Siri for directions. *Please repeat*, she says, *I do not understand you*. My father whispers, "Who is that, someone you know?"

## Worship

As everyone at your Zoom meeting begins the odd good-byes of isolation, Denise says, “Would you like to see our butterfly collection?”

None of the eight face-filled panels blacks out. Denise tilts her laptop so the camera shows the dining room wall behind her is nearly covered with hung boxes of butterflies. You count twelve, nine in each box. 108 butterflies that look, to you, identical.

“It’s our best wall,” Denise says. “They come dry in the mail, then Harry moistens them and fixes them in place. He builds all the boxes himself.”

She has never mentioned the butterflies at the meetings before the lockdown. You search the faces in the panels, looking for a match to your wonder. Two panels go dark.

“We’re just getting started,” Denise says. She stands, the room swaying through her camera. She carries the laptop closer to the wall. All of the butterflies seem to have the same deep blue with golden specks in a simple, consistent pattern. “They have names,” Denise says, beginning a slow pan across the boxes. “If I turned these frames over, you’d see them on the back. They’re all the same species, but more like cousins than brothers and sisters.”

Four panels are dark. “Harry is in self-quarantine,” Denise

says, but so far, he's fine. He has a new set to keep him occupied. He is so incredible with the tweezers and pins and the syringe."

She moves her laptop closer to the wall, holds it steady. You think of an atlas you once owned, how the biggest cities were enlarged in panels. "We have so many walls," Denise says. "The butterflies are raised on farms. They are plentiful. Eventually, we'll be surrounded. Don't these look well-cared for? Don't they look as if they could fly?"

You are alone with Denise. This virus will bring you back to her dining room for months, or longer, another wall sprouting something like an ivy of boxes. What she will show, and you will call beauty's still life while those others who meet with you go quickly dark into their ordinary, private lives.

You vow to look up the species. To ask her now seems taboo, an interruption of worship. You imagine Harry busy with a new specimen, carefully restoring something dry and fragile under a brilliant light. While you stare and stare, all that is left of Denise is breathing.

## About Gary Fincke

Since its inception, Gary Fincke has been co-editor (with Meg Pokrass) of the annual anthology *Best Microfiction*. His books have won the Flannery O'Connor Prize for Short Fiction, The Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Nonfiction Prose, and what is now the Wheeler Prize for Poetry. His latest collection of full-length stories is *Nothing Falls from Nowhere* (Stephen F. Austin, 2021). Besides having work chosen to appear in *Best American Essays 2020* and *Best Small Fictions 2020*, he has recently published flash fiction at such sites as *Craft*, *Wigleaf*, *Vestal Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Pithead Chapel*, *New World Writing*, and *Flash Boulevard*.





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