

MATTHEW VOLLMER
GONG BANG CLEANSE

THE LAST TIME I VISITED MY PARENTS, my father, who has been a dentist in a small mountain town for over forty years, told, as he often does, many stories. He told the one about a patient, who may or may not be a relative of blind country star Ronnie Milsap, who drank a case of Coke—two dozen cans—every single day. He told the one about a state trooper who'd been accused of offering the pretty girls he pulled over the chance to trade the tickets he was on the verge of writing for blowjobs. He told the one about the man who was struck by a semi while changing a tire on the side of the road while his wife and child watched, and how the man was then “chewed up” inside one of the truck's wheel wells. He told the one about the deputy a few towns over, a female jailer who'd witnessed female prisoners hiding things—a carton of cigarettes, an entire bedsheet—in various orifices, and who claimed to know a woman who loved drugs so much she'd have sex with just about anybody, sans protection, in exchange for said drugs, and due to her high fertility, had often become pregnant, and over the course of her life had pumped out twenty children, each of whom had been snatched up by the Department of Social Services, and that this so-called “drug baby” producing mother was just one of many. He told the

one about the tiny widow who once asked him to fetch the gold from the mouth of her dead husband, who was lying in a casket at Townsend Rose Funeral Home, and so even though the gold itself wouldn't have added up to more than a few dollars, certainly not enough for my father to charge her anything, he'd gone during his lunch break to extract the teeth, but the funeral home was experiencing a power outage, so the staff members there opened the doors and rolled the body into the doorway so that there would be light enough for my father, who looked into the mouth of the dead man and saw that fluid had pooled in the back of his throat, to do his work. He told the one about a man named Purl, who was, at one time, the only black man living in our town, and whose legendary strength granted him the power and endurance to slaughter as many as twenty hogs in a day—killing them, dipping their bodies into boiling water, shaving the hides, gutting them, and butchering them—during which he filled and tossed back cups of blood, at least until he was shown, in Leviticus, that “for the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life,” so Purl, from that day forward, gave up his blood drinking. The story that meant the most to me, however, and the one that I kept replaying in my head, was the one about the old woman who'd been living for years in our old house—a house on a hill above the intersection of two streams in a cove at the base of a mountain, the one my parents sold so that they could build another, nicer house farther away from civilization. At the time, the selling of this house had upset me, mostly because, over the years, the house had become essential to my understanding of the word “house;” in fact, to this day, whenever I read a story, and that story involves a house, and the narrator fails to give adequate details concerning this house's particulars, I automatically place the characters in the house where I grew up. At any rate, the woman—the woman who lived in my Ur-house—had recently died. Her demise, as it turned out, was swift, and had begun when she'd attempted to retrieve something from the utility room larder, the door of which, she was always happy to remind me, whenever I had occasion to visit, preserved the pencil marks that recorded the respective heights of myself and my sister over the course of a decade, and which had

been drawn there by our father, who'd held a yardstick against the tops of our heads and made slashes with a pencil against the wood where the stick met the door. My father explained how the old woman had failed to grab hold of what she'd been reaching for, lost her balance, and fell backwards, a fall that had been bad enough to land her into the hospital, where, perhaps because she was confused and desperate, she had tried to climb out of bed and fallen, and broken more bones, and was subsequently transferred to a nursing home, where my parents visited her, and where she either didn't recognize them or pretended not to, perhaps because she was embarrassed to be seen in her enfeebled condition. Soon afterwards, she expired. "It was like she willed herself to die," my father said. I didn't know that such a thing was possible, but I wanted now to visit our old house again, and when I asked my father if we could go, he said yes. I had no expectations of actually going inside, had simply wanted to walk its perimeter, stand on the front porch, and maybe follow the flagstone path to the springhouse, but when we pulled into the driveway, a little round woman exited the front door, accompanied by a slender woman in her midtwenties, wearing a ragged felt skirt and tights, an ensemble that gave the impression that she might've just come from a production of *Peter Pan*. The little round woman had known the old woman, and now she and her granddaughter were cleaning the house, readying it for sale, and no, she didn't mind if we took a look around, so we did. Most of the furniture was gone, and the floor was littered with turd-like pellets. In my bedroom, I searched the ceiling's plaster for the abstract patterns I stared at as a boy, before I drifted off to sleep: the shapes of men with spears riding horses with cartoonishly elongated legs, as if Salvador Dali had updated the drawing of the picadors from the children's book about Ferdinand the bull, but as hard as I looked, these figures were nowhere to be found. In the basement, which the old woman had turned into a meditation room, I noted the absence of our wood burning stove, where my mother had once cooked us pancakes after we'd lost power during a blizzard. My father flicked on a light in a bathroom that the woman had remodeled, and said that the old woman had liked to fill up the tub and turn off the lights and

float in the dark and that it was, she'd claimed, like returning to the womb, a desire with which, it may come as no surprise, I could sympathize. When I thought about the house going up for sale, and when I imagined potential sellers walking through it, part of me wished that I could buy it myself; what use I would have for such a house I can't say, though perhaps, supposing I had the resources, I might have it demolished, which is the only thing I can think of that would discourage me from attempting to make future visits. Before we left, I noticed a gong—the size of a large serving platter—hanging in the living room. I remembered that the old woman had once claimed that the reverberations of this gong had the power to restore positive energy, and since I figured I might be the last person who would ever strike it, I took hold of the accompanying mallet and swung.