instead of a still image, as if one day, magically, my brother might appear.

That was February, ten months or so after Aunt Janet had asked us to search. The check was delivered. Then—eerily—nothing.

The following July, early on a Thursday, my phone rings in Northern California. It's my brother Hank, in upstate New York, saying he's just got off the phone with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff.

George, Hank says. They've found his body.

What? I ask. How?

He hanged himself.

Hanged himself? I ask.

In a field, Hank said. Parked his bike. Put the rope up, sat down beside a tree.

How do they know it was him, I say, not saying, Instead of some other nobody?

He had the check on him, Hank says. He never cashed it. That's how they knew to call me.

He hanged himself, I'm thinking. I am physically shocked but in no other manner surprised.

Oh my God, Hank, this is terrible, I whisper. Are you all right?

Shocked, he says. Not surprised.

He still had the check? I ask. I thought he needed money.

Maybe he found no way to cash it—no ID, no Great Western anymore, that kind of thing?

Jesus, I say. The rude cold shock of our brother's death splashes over me in waves, but there is no wonderment at all that his life would end this way.

Graham Greene says a sliver of ice lies in the heart of every writer—this is what we use as our weapon, as I've always known, to be able to survive what we must live through. I feel that ice, the clear calm pain that centers me. I feel no sense of loss, no sorrow, no other feeling that I can name.

The story of our father's death had run on the front page of the L.A. *Times*. He was an architect; his family, long in California, was prominent in real estate development. Graduate of Cal, brother of Janet, husband of Margaret, father of three.

Our brother George had been a vagrant, one of those human-shaped barely moving shadows in the corners of freeway underpasses living that way for three-fifths of his life. I want to write him up in order to proclaim him but it's hard to imagine the paper where this obituary might run.

I want to say he was singular: my brother, my parents' son, my aunt's nephew, my cousins' cousin, the uncle to three children he never met. I want to say too that over the course of adulthood we have come as a nation to calmly step over the bodies of three-and-a-half million American men and women, most of whom suffer from severe mental illness. We accept that they live as we would not allow domesticated animals to live, in the heat and cold, nowhere to rest, without food and water.

Maybe this is the truth of what happened at the end—that our brother, whose family has been in this country since 1644, had become an undocumented illegal and lacked the ID that might have allowed him to cash that check. Or maybe it was this: George put what was his, this check, to the best use he could, by using it to send him back to us, so we'd know how his travels had turned out.

The word *obit* means the simplest thing in Latin: *he died*. But this is that truth's corollary: my brother—our cousin, son, nephew, uncle—was someone who lived as well.

Jane Vandenburgh's most recent book is *The Wrong Dog Dream: A True Romance* (Counterpoint Press, April 2013). She is also the author of two novels, *Failure to Zigzag* and *The Physics of Sunset*, as well as two nonfiction works, *Architecture of the Novel: A Writer's Handbook* and *The Pocket History of Sex in the Twentieth Century: A Memoir*. She has taught writing and literature at UC Davis, the George Washington University, and Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California. She lives in Point Richmond, California.

JOE RAVETZ

Bus Riders #2, 2013
Photographic Collage, 16in x 20in.

courtesy: the artist