

Okay

by Lowell Jaeger

There's a man in the road, waving.
We're driving home from Hot Springs,
my wife and I, and our three kids.
He's holding something bundled
in his arms. *Don't stop*, my wife
telegraphs to me with a sideways glance.
I'm okay with that.

It's a dog! the kids shout, *He's*
carrying a dog! So, okay, I stop,
roll down the window.

Please help, the man says, tears
leaking down his stubbled chin.
The dog is bleeding. He's rolled up
in an old rug, eyes open, miserable.
I just run over my dog, the man
blubbers, He's drunk. And stinks.

Okay, I'm thinking, I'm stuck
with this. The kids squeeze together;
the man and dog huff and groan,
sniffle and slide themselves into
our lives. My kids' faces in the rearview
are pinched, afraid to breathe –
wet dog, blood, booze, rotting socks.
The man whimpers, cradles his dog,
I'm f-ing sorry, man. So f-ing, f-ing
sorry. This is less than okay.
We spit gravel behind us and speed
back to Hot Springs to find a Vet.

It's a Sunday, my wife whispers, *everything's*
locked up. I'm thinking, Okay, what now?
At the one payphone on Main, I pull over
to let the man and dog out. *You better call*
someone, I say. My voice sounds afraid.
The man's eyes are shut, not asleep,
but almost. The dog's eyes are shut, too.
You better call someone, I say louder,
Okay? Okay?

The man stands at the payphone, his dog
bundled on the sidewalk. He just stands there.
My kids cry silently. My wife trusts me
to be the man she hopes I am. I don't
know what's okay and what's not. The man
is fumbling in his empty pockets for change.
I feel a lot like that.