

poictesme

a student anthology of literature and art



2007

virginia commonwealth university

poictesme (pwä-'tēm) n.

1. fictitious medieval French province created by James Branch Cabell (Richmond writer and VCU library patron) in his *Biography of the Life of Manuel* (18 volume series), made most famous in *Jurgen, A Comedy of Justice* (1919) because of its immediate denouncement by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice for its obscenity, making Cabell and *Jurgen* famous worldwide throughout the two year court battle that Cabell eventually won.
2. a portmanteau (see Lewis Carroll) of two actual city names; originally thought to be an anagram, a specialty of JBC
3. **fixed law of P.** that all things must go by tens forever
4. the literary journal of VCU, adopted to replace *Millennium*, whose outdated name was deemed irrelevant by the surviving and new staff as irrelevant.
5. name that ensconces the spirit of Richmond through the memory of JBC; an invocation of the arts through its literary roots; a distinguished, yet obscure connection to VCU, the journal's place of origin and headquarters where eventual domination of the literary world will begin to take place.
6. a social revolution and a way of life.

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Richmond

the masthead

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Poictesme is an annual literary publication funded by student fees that is now accepting submissions year round. The editors invite submissions of short fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, drama, and artwork. Submissions guidelines are at www.poictesme.vcustudentmedia.com. Please send your submissions and/or questions to pwatem@gmail.com or send in monetary donations, fan mail and/or all hard copy submissions to: *Poictesme*, VCU Student Media Center, 817 W. Broad St., P.O. Box 842010, Richmond, VA 23284-2010.

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cover art

WHITNEY RAINEY, *Giving up the ghost*,
20" x 20", monoprint

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poictesme

SEAN PROIETTI

Thumbless Hitchhiker

Stand me a rum,
or a four-fingered glove,
put the sense in my occupation.

Throw the wood
on the funeral pyres
of the words that eluded
the visceral writers.

With me sing the sweet chariot down.

Did She Look Unnatural?

Nonfiction

"I didn't want to see Dad in his coffin. I made that mistake with Mom. Once was enough," Dad said. He stretched out his long legs, settled back against the fireplace, and made a little coughing noise in the back of his throat. I looked at the backs of my hands. "Yes," he said, "I'd say once was definitely enough."

"Why? I mean, did she look unnatural?" Angela asked.

He paused before answering, licking his lips. I suddenly noticed that his hair had gone almost completely gray around the sideburns, and that there were deep furrows on his forehead. "She'd had an autopsy, you see. Mary didn't know that—so she'd asked the funeral home if she could dress her. And they said yes. And when she picked up her head, you know, to slip the blouse on, there was a big hole in the back of her head."

"Jesus," Angela said.

I could hear Eric crying. We were sitting in Angela's living room on Eric's second birthday. Eric, Angela's son and my nephew, had just been put to bed upstairs. I imagined Eric standing up in his crib, holding on to the bars with tiny clenched fists. I imagined how dark it must be in his room—I imagined anything I could, just so to not visualize what Dad had just said.

“They’d taken her brain out,” Dad continued. “I don’t know what they do with the brains.”

“To see if that was the reason they died—if there was a tumor or anything,” Mom said. “When my mom died, it was so sudden, you know, so they had to do an autopsy, just to rule out what they called ‘unnatural causes.’ I don’t know why, but Jillian showed me the autopsy report. My mom’s heart weighed 296 grams. The man had written on her report that her lungs were ‘not unsatisfactory.’”

Was Eric laying down now? I could still hear him crying. Were his tiny little fists still clenched up against the bars? What was he thinking about? Was he hungry or thirsty or—“How did she die?” Kevin asked.

“They decided that she’d had an aneurysm. You know, it wasn’t even fair—Dad had just died three weeks earlier. She’d started going out to tea with some of her old friends. She’d just started coming out of her shell. Dad wasn’t there to hold her back anymore. And then, she was sitting in her chair in the living room, and Jillian was making her tea in the kitchen, and when Jillian came back, she was dead.”

“Did you see her in the coffin?” Dad asked.

“Yes.” Mom was sitting on the edge of the couch, her bare feet planted firmly on the carpet, her hands on her thighs. “Her face looked terrible, not like what she’d looked like at all. They’d put makeup on her. They said if they didn’t put the makeup on, she wouldn’t have looked life-like, but why the blue eye-shadow? It made her look like some sort of sick joke. She’d never have thought of going out with blue eye-shadow on.”

“Right. That’s exactly why I didn’t even go to Dad’s funeral. I’d have had to fly all the way over there again, just to have a terrible image like that burned into my memory. I wanted to remember him how he was—that last day we saw him, when he asked me for Guinness and gave Catherine that book of poetry by John Clare,” Dad said. “At my mom’s funeral, her head looked sunken on the pillow. Somehow, she wasn’t all there. I’ll never get that image out of my head. I just didn’t want that for my dad.”

Eric’s crying suddenly stopped. The silence was deep and stretched taut and tight over the living room. My mom shifted her weight on the couch, and then said, “You know, I was thinking the other day that I can’t remember what my dad looks like anymore. I have an image of his big bushy white eyebrows—I remember being embarrassed about that when my friends came over—and he had blue eyes and I remember his rough hands because he was a carpenter. But I can’t put all of his features together onto a face.”

“That happens,” Dad said.

Epilogue

Right now it's only a feeling I get sometimes.

You can see, broken, a little man on a bench of aged concrete, steeped in graffiti, warming his feet by a complex nest of ads he has taken the time to arrange and set ablaze. The fire consumes the flyers and coupons, like the charred wreckage on the horizon, of improved appliances updating and outdating the old, ever forward, ever progress. The tribal fear of being made obsolete. The fire snags a new dye in the board here or there, generating a strange tint. A slow show of colors plays over the bum's face. Now blue, now a chemical purple, now green outlining his nose. The heat on his toes reminds him of how cold the rest of his body is, and he shivers, oh he shivers, but this fire occupies his mind. It's something definite you can create and watch. In mere minutes the fire is born, it grows, becomes aggressive, as aggressive as a flicker can be, peaks, falters, realizes its mistake, cowers down to nurse its wounds, and settles among its victims, into vibrating embers. Ash.

Cough. "It wasn't always like this." The bum wades through a slew of digestion, muddled tissue, and nameless trash to find a spot to take a leak. He is dying, and Huck Hutz knows this. He follows the bum with his eyes from behind twisted metal.

Once the promised rainbow, now, with ink cartridge low, just a lumbering force in drunken flight. Some chunk directly above from where you are, huge, plummeting, instead we receive this rotting metal instance, the grey sound of gravity, incoming, oh. You don't remember it (most asleep at the time anyway) and as soon as it comes it is over. Your hands gather only the aftermath—always aftermath—in heaps. Anthills to a civilization. Wires stripped bare, muscles open and touched by night, cold, hits like a brick, nerve endings gathered, exposed, the feel of that frozen air deep within. The crashing buildings, the busted mainframes, this gutted Jumanji, a condemned parade you spend with the could-have-beens; apologetic home appliances looking up at you, German engineering, silent auctions attended by no one, gold, worthless gold, sifted from the shit-choked creeks and skeletal millionaires, all that occupies the realm of the living huddled around, looking for a thetan; shrugging decades of progress, disaster preparedness kits, enough to fill you, time capsules, disposable microwavable dawns, landfills of landfills, scrapheaps of scrapheaps. Trash into the Final Frontier, and an ice age of pure, shimmering latex. A bulldozer comes and goes in the early, rat-colored hours of the morning. The instance is brief—the aftermath forever. It is this commemorative dump we have to sort out.

The bum shakes and returns to his nest. It is now time to strike.

Huck approaches softly with an agreeable musk, and slips on a banana peel, unrecognizable as black slime. Standing, he reassumes his briefcase and pretends to laugh at himself. Ha, ha, ha, a grin big as a totem. Since

it happened, Huck has continued his dental care. One long hair plucked from center scalp to floss with each morning, a secret Hutz ratio of pastes applied three times daily, sixty-proofed mouthwash, swished, re-swished, and swallowed, for that inner clean, every couple of hours. His exhale is the envy of All Black Night, a flammable hiccup, his contribution to the world.

“How are you, sir?” cautiously, potently, “My name is Huck Hutz. You look like you could use a friend.” Cheesy dialogue for a movie Mr. Hutz fancies himself in.

The bum reclines and eyes the man, chewing some theatre popcorn from an old bucket. This man is one of the few living human beings the bum has encountered in some time. He is short, shorter than the bum, in a once nice suit and tie. He carries some vague notion of success in the pleat of his pants, or the swing of his fob chain, the eye being constantly redirected. The fat briefcase is an extension of his hands, muscles toned from carrying it long distances. His hair’s a mess. He takes a hit from his mouthwash.

The bum takes his time on one particular kernel. And he looks around. And what he sees isn’t new. Among the remains for some time, scavenging, reclaiming, the bum has come to know the land and its trash. All the residues, the runoffs, the styrofoam, the excrement—all that serves no purpose, all that was already trash. But then there is that which still serves some function, all the loot out there, all in bulk, somehow unscathed, for no one really, now trash in its own right. Parked vehicles with keys in ignition, working plumbing in beautiful country homes, unopened electronics fresh

off the conveyor, money, obscene amounts of it in Swiss bank accounts—none of it mattering anymore. Different rubbish in the same bin. What of this could he want?

The kernel is bone hard and the bum's teeth are soft mash.

"No, I don't think so," the bum pokes at his fire, inciting an orange swarm. Huck laughs into his chest. "I think you might. You may want to wait and answer 'til after you hear what I have to tell you, sir." He is ready. Huck knows what he's doing. He was born composed. "You see, friend, you and I've been betrayed by our own time. Look what our governments have done to us. They caused this, and now they're dead—now we're dead. It's a dangerous game they've been playing, people have spoken out, tried to put a stop, now it's over. There's no more. There's only a handful of us left and we don't have long. Do you see what I'm saying? We have no life left, no liberty, no pursuit of happiness. We've been wronged! Everything we hold dear, even life itself, has been taken from us. But I know a way. I've figured it out. I know a way back. There's hope man, I tell ya, there's hope!" A smile is blushed over his face, so excitable. He comes closer. "I know what you're thinking. You're sitting there thinking, What is this crazy man talking about? It's over. Hope? There's no hope. There is, friend, I come to tell ya there is!" He raises his fists wildly to the heavens. "I'll tell you what I'm talking about! I'm talking about rebirth. Listen, you have to listen to me. Sure enough, we'll die, I can't stop that. But in the future—in the far, far distant future—when organisms

evolve from this, this muck, evolutions upon evolutions, when humanity walks upright and rears its newborn head, I'm talking millions of years here, you gotta listen, when mankind relearns how to throw a bone, creates fire, invents the wheel, when mankind forms a language, their own history, they'll build cities, empires—they'll come a long way—when this happens, they'll want to learn from the past, try to discover what happened, what happened back then, all the evidence, the ancient cities, the buried artifacts. That's where you and I come into the picture, in absolute glory. And here it is: they'll find our bodies, unearth us from the soil, not to be put on display in some dusty museum, no, but to be miraculously brought back to life. Yes! The archaeologists of the future are our hope. In the future, once they surpass our technologies, our developments, they will go further, they will have the science to bring us back to life!" He is visibly sweating. "They can clone us from our remnants, our everlasting Dee En Ay. Pull our bodies from the proverbial sap, man! Our souls sucked from the boredom of the afterlife and stuffed back into our respective bodies as if to say, there is still more you must do! Why, you ask. Why would they even bother? You have no faith in me, man! All's well, just listen. Here's why. These archaeologists won't just find our bones, no siree. I have an ace up my sleeve. In here," he taps his briefcase with a trembling finger, "in here I have it, my friend. I've documents, official as can be, designating me as one of the greatest minds of our defunct time. It was I who spoke out, who saw it coming, it says here, I who warned of what the Testing would do, what it did do. I, one of the last few on Mother Earth, took it upon myself in my last

days, made it my duty, to document the end, detail the horror, and translate it into as many languages as I could find translations for. I've even made my own sort of hieroglyphics! I'll leave instructions, my will, proof of my research, my humanitarianism, my work for the greater good of mankind. Before this, this all happened, I was an attorney. I know legal documents, how to make everything legit, everything all right again. I've learned much in this short time. I even know how to properly preserve a body as well. I've been studying mummification for the past—never mind that, not the time. I've forged legal documents before! It's the real deal, man, it's golden." Fob chain glinting sharply on the eye. "And you. You." He isn't smiling. "Sir, I am offering you something your time—our time—could never give us. I'm offering you a second chance, I'm offering rebirth, I'm offering youth, and I'm offering complete and utter fame in a whole new world ready to love you. You can be right here with me on these papers. You and I warned them, we were among the greatest minds of our time, we saw it coming, we served mankind, we were so close to that cure for cancer. Us!" He stops, and rapidly drinks a New Coke.

The kernel has lost its flavor the bum decides, and sends it across the landscape to blend in with it all. He can't tell the lawyer's verbal offering from the rest of the torn and terrible landscape. He looks at him now, sucking air in through his teeth. This fool's gaze meets his own, but the eyes, Huck's eyes, they see nothing.

"What do you say, man? How would you like to live forever?"

"I say," the bum begins slowly, "the Fountain of

Youth is that way," pointing over the next hill, unto another. "I pass."

There is a snort, hurt and indecent, from Huck. His chin doubles. His lips twist. There is a beat, a shot of silence in his film. The weight of his suit, his case, his hair, his face, all too evident, it getting darker now. Backing up, "Have fun with the cockroaches, you bastard." He turns, kicking pizza crusts and bubblegum away from the shine of his shoes.

And Huck Hutz marches off into the sunset, briefcase in tow, among Father Time, Mother Earth, and the spermicidal foam, to await the Second Cloning.

The bum watches on for a little while, then turns back to his meek fire. It's smaller now, much smaller. Much smaller, much meeker.

To gaze about God's junk drawer must be something so exhausting, so defeating. But like I said, it's only a feeling I get sometimes.

Bonaparte

When our
love is done,
I ease
out of your
apocrypha.

Your stone fetus
claims democracy
will never
die.

But your politicking deafens
the sound of
nylon-string
guitars and
Napoleon.

KEITH GURGICK

Rio de Organero

*I can run faster with an empty body cavity. I feel light.
Eighteen hours.*

He is running through the airport. The people seated and waiting for their flights can't even tell he's not breathing.

Four hours ago his half-conscious brain conveyed that some horrible wrong had been done to him, though he couldn't recognize what it was. He felt like a cheap Easter bunny. *Shit.* He looked at his gut and realized: *Empty.* Colin stayed calm as his adrenal glands were sitting on ice en route to some other continent.

"What's up?"

"It's Colin. My organs are gone."

Al was silent.

"Hello?" Colin asked.

"Are you on drugs?"

"Never mind, I need to know where Felix is."

"Alright, he took a private plane out of the country a few hours ago. He said he was going on personal business so I didn't ask questions."

"Where will I find him?"

"The yellow pages, I don't know. Jesus, why are you asking me?"

“He stole my fucking organs!”

“How do you know it was him?”

“Do you know anyone else who was a surgeon for twenty years who also happened to suddenly disappear on the day my...”

“Alright.”

Colin stepped into Rio de Janeiro, spotted a cab, and bolted in front of it. The tires spewed plumes of burnt rubber into the already smoggy urban air. The cabbie yelled until Colin threw a roll of twenties into his lap. It was a big city. But he knew where to go. Organs were bought and sold in backrooms and abandoned buildings in the Southeast section of the city, and that’s where he went..

Colin had depended on Felix for years. Felix worked the graveyard shift at the city morgue and stuffed the cavities of his cadavers with sand-filled balloons. Colin would then fly the organs to Rio and sell them to people in various markets: suppliers of delicacy, those too desperate to wait on a list. Felix always got forty percent.

Who does Felix know in this city? This thought turned his hollow skull into an oven. Dennis, the man he always went to with un-sellable organs. Dennis was disbarred from practicing law in America seven years ago, so he moved to Brazil. Although Felix knew of Dennis they had never met face to face. Dennis worked out of a dumpster complete with an industrial freezer big enough

to hold a few cows. He kept his stale, sub-par hearts and other miscellaneous organs stuffed in ziploc bags and piled into the freezer like frozen peas. It always turned Colin's stomach to see such beautiful machines treated so poorly, but money is money. And if you needed it enough and had a few extra organs lying around, he was always willing to take them off your hands.

Dennis's permanently sanguine fingers attested to his cannibalism. When Colin flung open the lid of the dumpster Dennis' head crept above the edge and broadcast a red grin.

"What do you have for me?"

"Nothing, I'm looking for mine. Have you seen these hands anywhere?" Colin held up a photo of Felix's hands. They looked dangerous, like five homing missiles made of meat and bone.

"Yeah, I got a liver from those hands this morning."

"Where is he?"

"He didn't tell me, he just dropped off the liver and left. Didn't even make me pay for it."

"Shit," Colin muttered.

"How much are they worth to you?"

Colin pulled out a knife and held it to Dennis's throat, growling, "Tell me or I'll cut your fucking throat open."

"I told him to stay at Casa de Gatos, a little whorehouse south of the river."

Colin had no problem with the lock, sliding his credit card behind the latch to get it open. He was shocked at the shitty, one bedroom hotel Felix had chosen. The air smelled of stale semen and there were multiple blood stains hiding under the over-bleached sheets. The single lamp was old and the shade covered in dust which cast a filthy, cigarette-fiend yellow over the room. There was not a single place to hide.

Try the bathroom. He walked in and an extended family of roaches snuck behind the sink as he turned on the light. Colin crouched behind the mildewed shower curtain, and waited for Felix to get back. He had been squatting for forty-five minutes when he finally heard the handle sound a satisfying click. Felix went straight for the bathroom. Colin listened to him unzip and begin to piss. He slipped out of the shower and silently raised the knife to Felix's throat. Felix stopped short.

"Where are my organs?" Colin whispered.

"They're already sold."

"Why?"

"Money."

"Who paid you?"

"Don't ask that."

"Tell me," Colin gasped as he pressed the blade into Felix's throat hard enough to draw blood.

Felix's face looked like a boxing match. "It was Emily."

Colin's eyes showed their whites. He dropped the knife and fell like a lead pancake.

L. E. PACE

Sydney Carton to Lucy

The cries of the Parisian mobs,
clad in crimson, almost overwhelm this cart.
 A light snow powders the worn road.

On that hot summer's night
twelve years ago, I found you alone in your father's house.
My drunk shadow played over
your needlework.

I watched your flash
of silver and cool green threads conjure
a pine forest, and a woman
in lilac among gardenias.

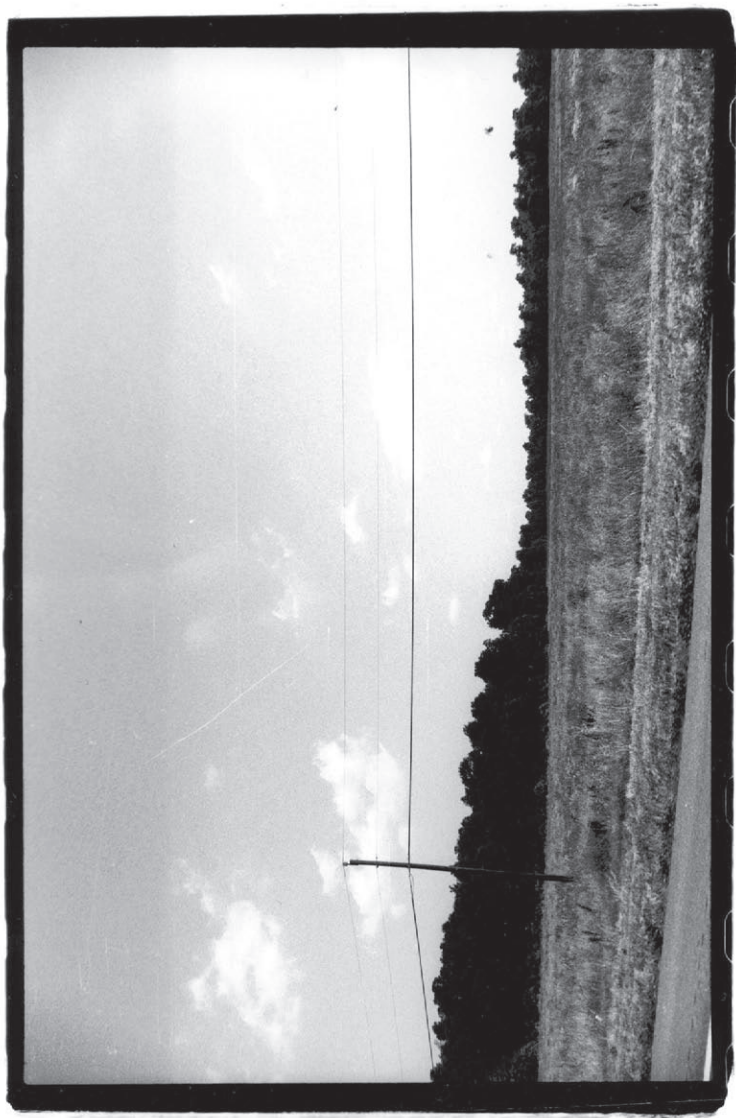
Many a night have I sat, empty bottle in hand, by the dying embers.
Like Circe to her swine, so you have bewitched me.
Your lips cry for your husband.
 Ahead, the burnished blade scatters sunlight.

I'll throw away my life as one discards an old garment,
without much thought and perhaps even a little disdain.
 The cart creaks and rattles along the dirt road.

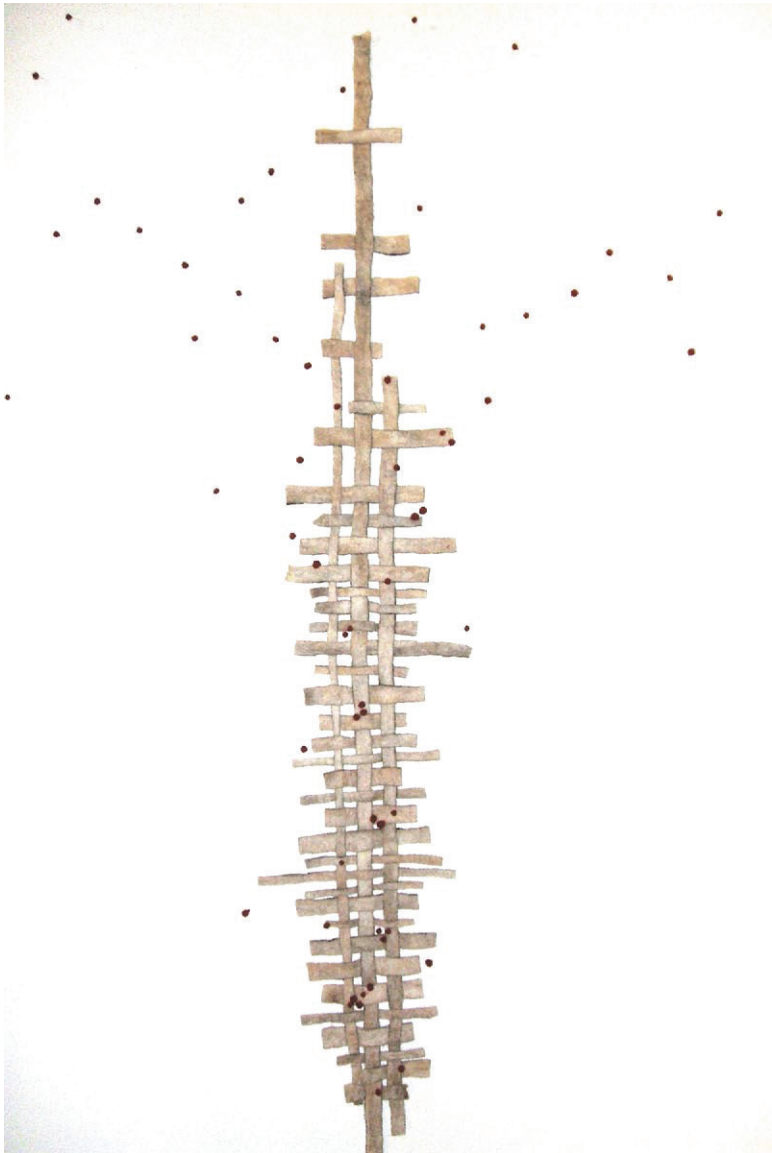
Pangaea

If you were to pull away,
you'd leave behind inlets in my skin,
and I'd always be able to see what part
used to fit where.

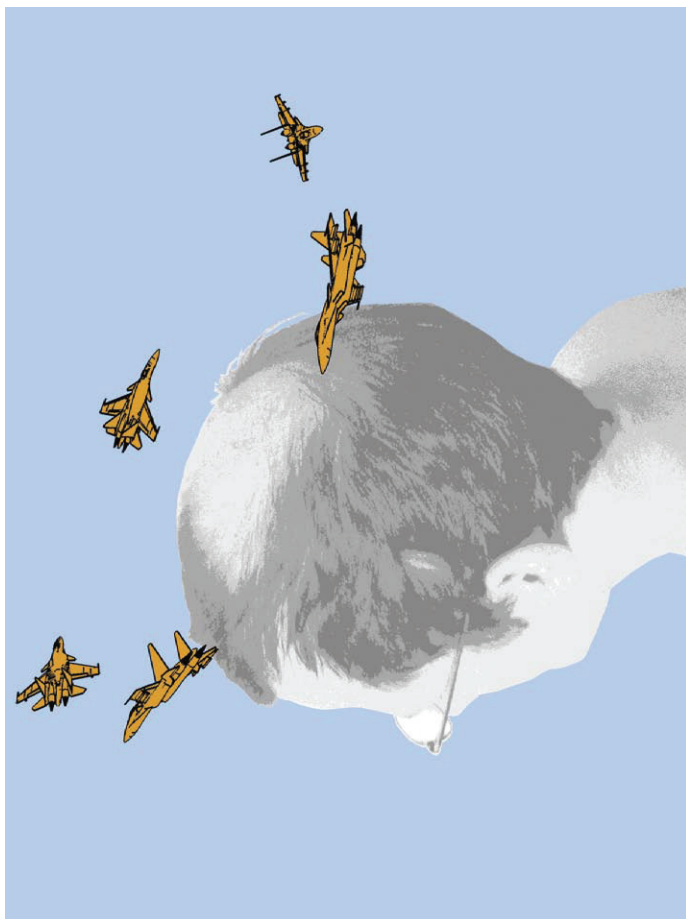
(pwä-'tēm)



HANNAH GUTHRIE, *The Trip Home*, 5" x 7", silver print



MEGAN MUELLER, *Tradition and Change*, 15'x 8', felt and yarn



DANIEL CRAWFORD, *Self-Portrait or Protecting My Plot of Land*,
10"x13", screen print

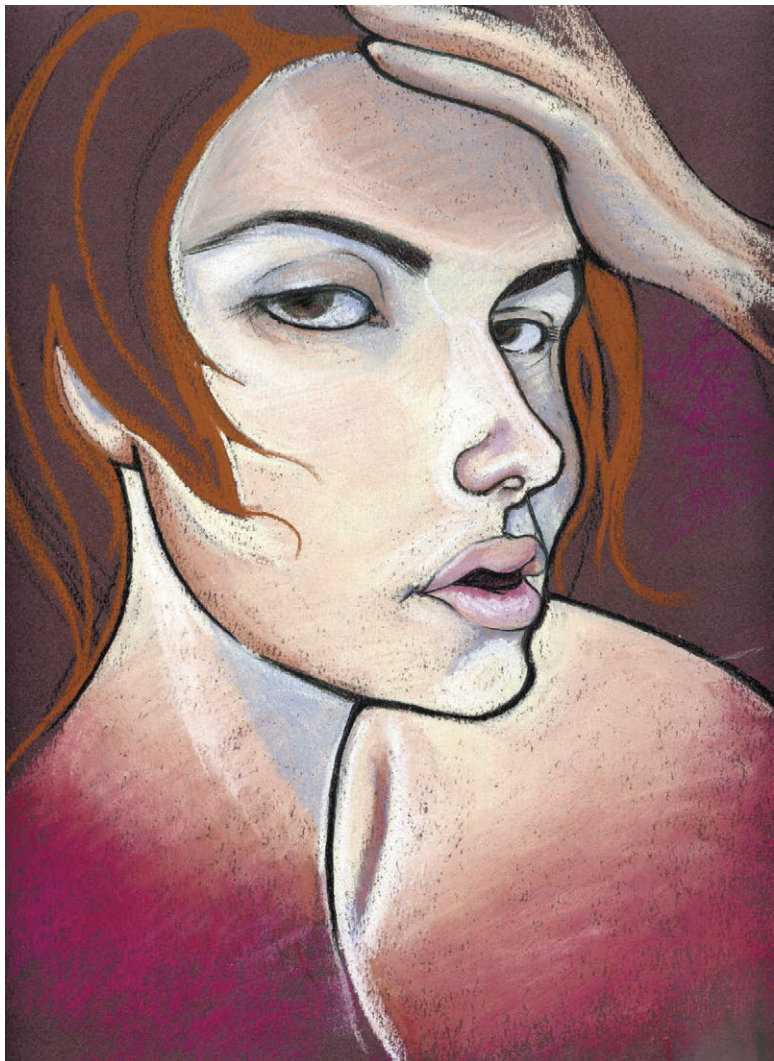


JEFF LASSAHN, *Petersburg, Virginia*, 8'x4', chalk pastel on paper

(pwä-’tǽm)



JEFF LASSAHN, *Those Who Make Decisions for Society*,
4'x 8', foam cut print with tempera on paper



MAX CHARNLEY, *Self Portrait*, 8.5" x 11", chalk pastel



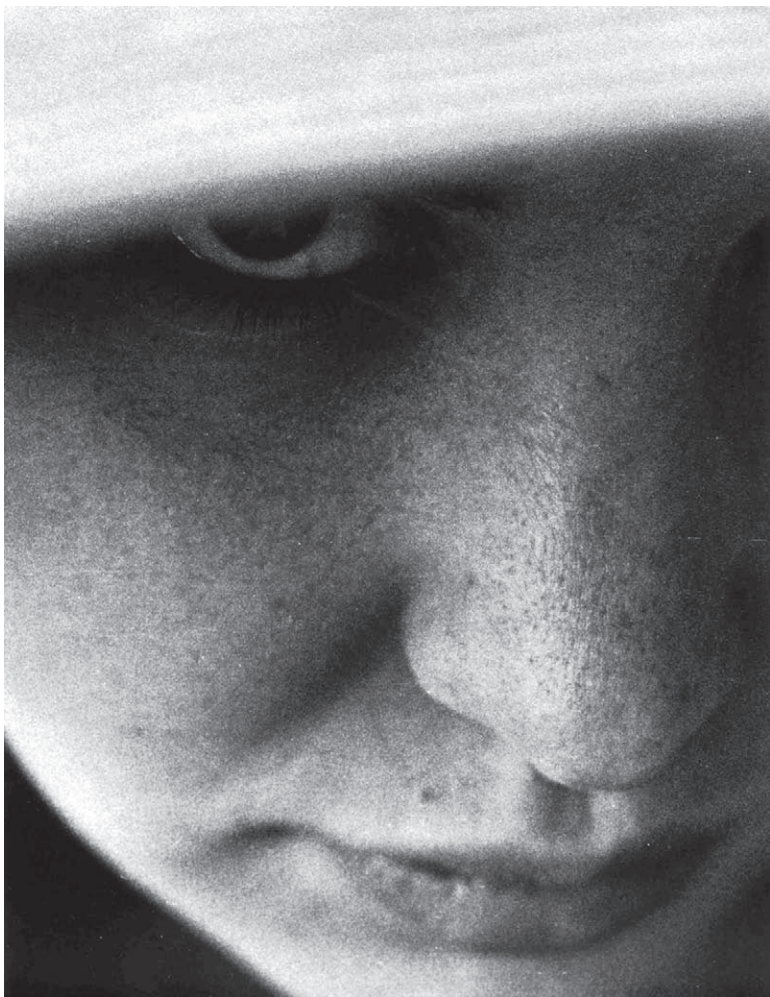
STEPHEN WILLIAMS, *Untitled*, 10"x10", silver print



LEIGH COLE, *Cinderella*, performance art



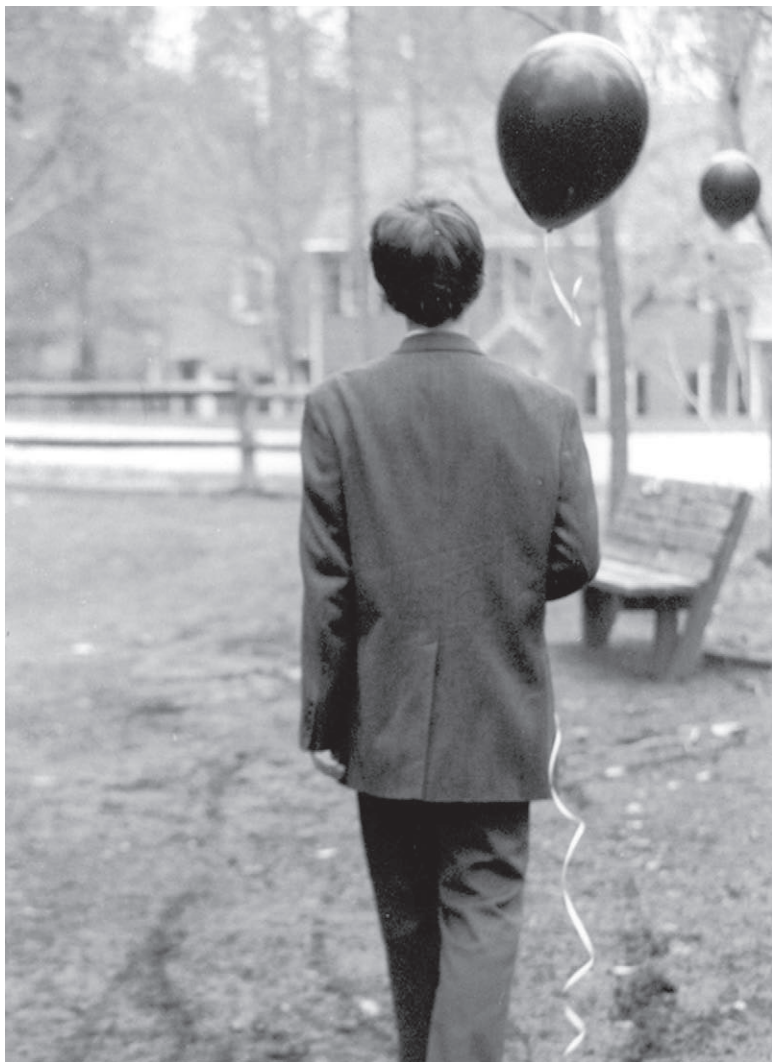
LEIGH COLE, *Kidnapack*, 4' x 3', digital prints



HEIDI ORTEGA, *Judgement*, 20"x 24", silver print



XIANG YU, *Birdman*, painting



NISSA LIPOWICZ, *Certain Grace*, 11"x14", silver print

Zion

There wasn't a big crowd like down in Zion when the big top would come down before Flag Day and Mom would let me wear my summer dress, the one with the daisies in yellow, because we were in Susquehanna, and Susquehanna was no Zion. Daddy had dropped Louisiana, Caroline and I off a couple of hours ago at the fair grounds because he and Uncle Ethan wanted to go hunting; and Daddy said it was a prime day for hunting. He always said things like 'prime' and 'well done' and whenever I thought of him I would think of a big fat steak sizzling on the grill out in the backyard in Zion. And if Daddy were a steak, Momma was a fish. She loved to swim, and you could tell too, because she always smelled like chlorine. Back in Zion she would do laps every morning at six before we got up for school and she would come back, her hair still a little wet, and would make us breakfast and I swear you could smell the pool in my oatmeal. And she wasn't at the grounds because she was at the Y doin' laps; catching up she had said. But that was okay because Daddy had given us 20 dollars. Well, he gave it to Louisiana, who was being a jerk.

He was walking ahead of Caroline and me like he was doing all day, so I grabbed Caroline's hand and tried to catch up but he pushed me back. "Keep your distance," he spat at me.

"Watch it, you'll crease my blouse!" I pouted a bit then I watched him walk ahead of us again. He was looking around all funny, and sticking out his chest like a silly

ole rooster. And he was swinging Daddy's pocket watch around again on his finger, which he wasn't supposed to do because it was real expensive. It was made of Sterling silver. He was walking so fast I was afraid he'd ditch us, not that it'd be the first time, so I squeezed Caroline's hand and we stopped in the middle of the field. I made a sour face and glared at the back of Louisiana's greasy black head. He had put too much pomade into it, making his head look as shiny as a bowling ball. And when he stopped and turned around, we was pins that wouldn't fall.

"You think I wouldn't leave you, huh Dorothy? Cause I would."

"Na-uh."

"You better believe it missy."

"You wouldn't. I'd tell Daddy. And then I'd tell him how you've been swinging round' his Sterling." I saw Louisiana's eyes pucker up a bit and then he spat on the ground. He was afraid of Daddy. Back in Zion they would get into really loud fights, screaming and such at each other and almost always Louisiana would end up sulking on the porch until we would get Caroline to come fish him back in. He had a soft spot for her like nothing else. She used to be so clingy with Louisiana. Back in Zion, before he had a job, he had to watch her at home while I was at school and Daddy and Momma were at work. When I would get home in the afternoon they would always be on the front porch goofing around. One time I caught them playin' in the yard and the laundry that was supposed to be hanging on the line in front of the house was spread out all over the ground, the whites that is, and it looked as if a big ole' picnic was being held with all them sheets. But it wasn't a picnic they was using the

sheets for, instead Louisiana had wrapped Caroline up in one of the big sheets, used for Daddy and Momma's bed probably, and took hold of the two ends and he picked her up in it. Then, standing in place, he swung her around in it like the hands of a clock going really fast. They used to have some real fun. But I was never jealous cause I was Daddy's favorite. He listened to me. I told him *I* would never leave Zion.

Louisiana snorted and rolled his eyes then started walking off, a lot slower this time, allowing for us to catch up and so I grabbed Caroline, and she squealed a bit, but I told her to hush and she quieted. She could be noisy sometimes for a five year old. Back in Zion, I had to hold her hand all the way to the daycare everyday. She wouldn't have it otherwise, else she'd scream bloody mary. We used to have Louisiana walk her, cause she would quiet around him, and if the stars were in place she might talk a bit, but he couldn't do it no more after he got a job. She doesn't talk much around me though, just moans and screams near and then when she doesn't get her way. She's little, she just doesn't know any better, I guess, but she was mostly behaving today though. Mostly.

We caught up to Louisiana and walked around the grounds some more. We had seen a lot of it already; the Ferris wheel, the petting zoo, and some of the games, like the ring toss booth, which we were at for a good while. The man in charge looked about as old as Louisiana, and he had almost as much pomade in his hair as him too. And they got to talking about what kind of dap they use and what was a good brand up here in Susquehanna, but I couldn't make out a lot of what the man was saying cause he was talking too fast like he was jumblin' words up on purpose, trying to be slick or something. Not at all like

Zion. I was half listening to them chat while Caroline and I was spending Daddy's money on the ring toss.

"You is a smart guy then anticipating it. Better to be off in with the experience, the fellas with the smarts and real training, I mean, than to be drafted into it with a bunch of lame asses who don't have their heart in it," said the ring master. He was chewin' on something awful and brown. He spat before he spoke again. "You know there are some of them guys here you know. Got a tent up near the stables."

All the while, Caroline and I were trying to hook these little rings around the necks of milk bottles by pitching em' from afar. It was tough. We weren't that good and the rings would plink off the bottles real loud so everyone would know we'd missed. I'd spent about five dollars before Louisiana wanted to go. I hadn't won anything, of course, but as we where leaving the ring master yelled over the booth, "You go ahead and get your glory pal, get it good!" I don't know what he was talking about, but it made Louisiana grin, which made me uncomfortable.

I kinda felt sorry for bringing up Daddy with Louisiana, I mean I didn't mean for us to get in a tussle since today was supposed to be fun, so I pulled Caroline with me up next to him and asked where we were going. He straightened up and put Daddy's Sterling back into his coat pocket.

"I was thinking we would head over towards the pens, see the prize animals."

I was going to say that we see horses and pigs all the time in Zion but I didn't because Louisiana had already started walking away. So I just pulled Caroline along

and looked around the grounds.

Back in Zion the big top was better. There weren't Ferris wheels or anything but the people were nicer. Like if someone bumped into you when you were carrying butterscotch and it fell on the ground they would buy you another one. That happened to me once. And also people would smile at me a lot and pinch my cheeks and tell me to say hello to my parents for them, and that was nice. No one did that in Susquehanna. And the animals they had in Zion were grand. Lions, and tigers and I even saw a black panther once. You couldn't touch them, as they were in cages and men with big hats and curly mustaches would yell at them and make them jump through hoops and things like that. It was really something. Not like Susquehanna. The only animals they had at the stables where pigs and horses. I didn't care for pigs at all and I saw horse's everyday when I walked with Caroline to school. I don't know what kind they were but we would pass them about half a mile out on the east side of the road. They were fenced in, of course, but it was a little ways off from the road so we never got to see them up close. But they looked real pretty from afar. Pretty and proud, trotting around with all those gates and bars and stuff lying around; and if we were lucky, which we rarely were, we got to see someone riding one of those horses. He would make the horse go through the obstacle course, leaping and galloping like it was nothing. The animals in Susquehanna just sat around. Nothing like Zion.

When we finally got to the stables Caroline started moaning. Louisiana wasn't paying attention though, so I grabbed him by the shirt tale. He smacked my hand and yelled at me. "What's the matter with you?" He tucked his shirt back in and looked at Caroline then me before

speaking again. "Ya'll go 'round the other side to see the Lamas, their stables are right next to the horses; see over there," he pointed to a stable that had funny noises coming out of it, "I'll meet you two on the other side when you get out and we can go see the horses together."

"Where are *you* going?" He ignored me so I grabbed him on the shirt sleeve. "Why don't you want to see the Lamas?"

"I have to take care of something, but I'll be waiting for you at the other end of the stables."

"Take care of what?"

"None of your business. Guy stuff."

I was gonna make him tell me, but I didn't want to bring up Daddy again, he got real sour last time. So I said fine and grabbed Caroline's hand and we walked off towards the stables. But I was real curious about what he was doing. I didn't want him leaving us like he said he was going to earlier, and I was afraid of being all alone with Caroline. If it was the big top in Zion, I wouldn't have had a problem, but it wasn't. It was Susquehanna.

As soon as he turned the corner towards the back of the horse's stables, I tightened my grip on Caroline's hand, and she moaned but I shushed her, and followed around behind the middle section between the stables of the horse's and the ones of the lama's. I had a hard time trying to find him again, as we ducked low behind the horse's wooden stables, but sure enough I found him. He had the Sterling back out and was twirling it around his finger, while doin' that silly walk of his. Then Caroline started moaning again, and I had to tell her to shush, but she wouldn't listen this time, so I just held her hand. I was sure Louisiana couldn't hear her from where he was,

plus the horses where kind of noisy. He strutted around for a while, and it was easy to follow along side of him in between the two stables. In between the swishin' tails of the horses, I was able to spot Louisiana stop in front of a green tent. Two guys in military uniforms shook his hand and handed him some papers or something. I wanted to hear what he was saying to those two fellas, but if we got any closer he could probably hear Caroline's whining, even over the horses. But I guessed they were talking about the war or something like that because of the uniforms. That's what Daddy and Louisiana talked about a lot. So I figured it was what he meant by guy stuff.

One time, real late at night when Momma had left for the weekend to visit her sister's on the coast, she went at least once a month, I caught Louisiana packing up some clothes in a really big bag, like the kind mailmen use for parcels, in the dark. I didn't say anything cause I didn't want him to know I was awake, so I just pretended to be asleep and kept one eye open and watched him move about the room. He then walked over to Caroline's bed and just kind of looked at her for a while, like he was thinking about taking her with him or something, I don't know. It was kind of odd. But before he left the room I saw him take the Sterling off the dresser and tuck it in his jacket. It wasn't long until I heard some shouting outside, so I got up and peeked out the window. Through the cold glass I saw Dad and Louisiana yelling at each other. The duffel bag was thrown on the ground, and Louisiana's clothes were scattered all over the lawn, his whites were shining real bright in the moonlight, and it reminded me of the time I caught him and Caroline playing in the laundry. They were yelling at each other for a while. Eventually I saw Daddy come back inside,

and that's when I ran downstairs as fast as I could and as I hugged his big stomach I told him I would never leave Zion. He hugged me back for awhile then he took me upstairs and tucked me in good and tight. I remember waking up later that night, which must have been early in the next morning, to the door opening and Louisiana walking slowly in. He had his duffel bag with him and he threw it down on the floor beside his bed, but not before he put his Sterling back on the dresser. But instead of going right to sleep I watched him walk over to Caroline's bed and re-tuck her in. She was what Daddy called a violent sleeper. But Louisiana took care of her. He tucked the end closest to her feet back under the bed, and the other back up over her chest. Then I watched him climb back into his own bed, which was under mine, and I listened to him fall asleep.

Through the horses I was able to watch Louisiana sign some things and shake the two fella's hands again before he started walking off again. He still had his Sterling out, twirling it around, I kind of got lost in its sparkle. It would spin up, then down and wrap neatly around his finger. Then he would unwind time and spin it forward, repeating the neat trick endlessly. He was real good at it. It was then that I knew that he was leaving for sure this time. Caroline was moaning again but this time instead of shushing her I kissed her on the head, picked her up and carried her around back to the Lama stables. Inside we petted the lamas on their soft coats and Caroline wasn't moaning as much, but she was crying a little, I think the lamas scared her a bit. But I cooed her and told her that it's okay, that I can be her Louisiana if she'll be my Zion.

ALIS GRIFFIN

Photographs from Halabja

On March 16, 1988 Iraqi aircraft shelled Halabja,
a Kurdish town in Northern Iraq, with a
bombardment of chemical weapons.

The attack left 5,000 dead and 7,000 injured—
many with long-term illnesses.

BBC News, March 2002

I.

The girl's mother did not know. She washed
dough from her fingernails with cold
water the girl had carried from the well.
The mother dried her hands then pulled

bread from the brick oven
behind their two-roomed, house made of mud.
Back at the well, the girl lowered her bucket with a
tight
rope knotting its handle.

Steel blades hacked the blue air above.
Red dust blew into their eyes.
The blades whipped the dust into stillness.
Then silence was sitting on the floor,

as the father dipped bread into hummus. Soldiers
dipped artillery into their village, plastic
ducks. The scented bombs fell
soft like downy powder cushioning their thin metal
fall.

poictesme

The family ran to the cellar. Near the well, the girl was
on her knees,

head to earth praying to Allah.

The hacking swoosh returned bringing apple-smelling
clouds,

Intoxicating, downing the pigeons to vast,
grass beds. Silence once more like the last imagined
symphony,

before the choking screams fold into deaf air.

A yellow beam of light and dust streams
through the seam of the cellar's door.

Seconds go by like lifted lives.

Ooze flows from the mother's nose. Her eyes
burning like coals in the outside pit.

Through red panes she sees her parents twitching,
roaches on their backs,

drool slithering from their mouths.

Urine soaks their clothes. The air smells of shit
and morning orchards. The old are panting now like
race horses.

Last breaths like bottomless, seizing gasps
after a lifetime of crying.

The mother drops down with her baby
three feet from the cellar door. Stone breaks
teeth, dirt fills her mouth. The earth takes her back.
The girl looks back for her mother.

Mushrooms of clay dirt reach the sky,

swallowing her home.
A small, lost boy cries nearby.
He jumps on his new mother's back
The girl is now an old woman
running from the clouds,
running with widow legs
toward a charred half-life.

II.

A boy pushes himself from his mother's
body. The mother stares at him like a caught fish
searching to exist. Life seeps from her nose and
mouth.
Her eyes tell the boy her last
story. The boy pulls his dead
baby sister from his mother.
In the time he struggles to free her, he goes blind.
His hands tighten a dam closing in on itself.
He feels his little sister's cold fingers brush his chin,
as his eyes
dig into his skull, as his eyes dig into his last breath.
His head hits the ground like a pebble skipping to the
sea.

III.

Grasshopper men drop from the sky,
breathing in the rising surge of their serene other
world
like scuba divers with kits and cameras they study
their work. The village laid out in grids. Babies,
children lying in alleys are their teacher's apples.
With open eyes the grounded saw the return of the
locusts,

poictesme

with open mouths they taste the nectar of their
maker.

In the distance, the girl kneels
mouth praying to her mother,
to Allah, to the earth,
Assalamu alaikum
Assalamu alaikum
Assalamu alaikum.

SEAN PROIETTI

Autumn in Passing

Your name in print
will never smudge strange hands
nor come undone
and all
unfolded
spilling out of Sunday papers
onto some hungry,
unworthy Sunday lap.

Your name on lips
unremitting, is sand
'neath high noon sun
and we
collect it,
heaping high our searing treasure,
our noisome trophy,
somnolent autumn ash.

The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet

A man dies, a child is born, someone finds love, and nothing really happens. I place my fingers inside of my jacket and feel the trigger of the gun. When God holds you around the throat, what else can you do but take as many with you as you can?

I think back on everything and it all seems so fast, so intense. The blood flowing through my body pumps so hard that my lips become warm.

Her name is Allison. We met at Vibrance, a dance club. I'm with my friend Jerry. He just broke it off with his girlfriend, and needed to meet somebody. I go along. I have nothing better to do.

"Hey," she says. She orders a drink. I ask her for her name.

"I took some ecstasy," she replies, "and I'm going to be honest, I don't have a fucking clue what's going on."

I tell her that I like the color of her eyes.

"Everything is moving too fast," she says. "The colors are like, *whoosh*. I don't even remember how I got here."

I tell her that she reminds me of a girl I used to know.

She pets the inside of her shirt and looks back at me stunned. "Did you spill something on me?"

And from that moment, we were inseparable.

I can still remember everything like it was in the movies. The echo of the telephone crept through the hallway and into my ears. I make my way towards the kitchen. I grab the receiver and answer.

“Jeremy?”

Speaking.

“Hi,” she says. “It’s Allison.” Her voice is straight, serious. I sit down, scratching the legs of the chair against the ground. I ask her what is the matter.

She pauses for a second. “I have AIDS,” she says. “You should get tested.”

The dial tone blares against my ear. Her words were quick and cold. Bitter and unforgiving.

The doctor’s office flies by and I’m left in the waiting room, tearing through the pages of a gossip magazine. Counting the ticks of the clock in my head.

“Jeremy Cornwell?” A voice calls.

I stand up and look at the doctor standing in the doorway,

“Come with me.”

I’m going to shoot her in the face, I think. I’m going to knock on her door, pull out my gun, and shoot her in the fucking face. I walk up her front steps and check the address on my palm against the one on the door. I give the door three hard pounds.

Inside I hear soft footsteps approaching the door. I knock the hammer back inside my jacket. I grit my teeth, grasping my gun, waiting for a fireball to leave my fingertips.

She is the reason that I feel the way I do. She is the reason that my family and friends have abandoned me. She is the reason I am going to die so young.

Her face is pale and bony, her cheekbones pushing through her worn out skin. Her hair is thin and stringy, her hairline balding from the top of her skull. An IV dangles from her wrist. She looks at me with her dark, baggy eyes and smiles.

"Jeremy," she says. "It's so good to see you. Come on in."

I don't say a word and I follow her inside. The smell of illness lurks in her house. Trash and wrappers are scattered across the tables and floor. She stutters and stumbles as she takes a seat. I sit on the couch beside her.

"I'm so glad you came to visit. I don't get much company these days," she says. "How are you doing?" she asks.

I tell her I'm doing good. Everything is good.

"That's good to hear," she says.

For a moment, the television hums in the background.

"I've always felt bad," she says, "about all this."

She looks like she's going to cry, and presses her brittle hands against her chest. I tell her it's alright. Everything is alright.

She licks her lips and makes a throaty noise, and I ask her if she wants me to get her some water. She shakes her head. She places her hand on top of mine. I ask her if there's anything I can do for her.

"Well," she hesitates. "There is one thing."

Anything, I'll do anything.

"I just want to be kissed. One more time before I die."

Her breath smells strangely sweet next to my ear. Her nails are unusually clear, and everything about her feels weak and frail. I feel strong next to her.

I stand up and lean over her. She closes her eyes and tips her head back, exposing the blue veins in her dead lips. My head dips down and our lips touch, barely. Her tongue flares against mine and she sucks on my lower lip. Her mouth doesn't feel the same. Suddenly I realize I'm not kissing the same girl. This is not Allison.

In those few seconds, my memories shoot back to when we were together, and I'm reminded of every moment I was with her. In her eyes I find the courage and the motivation I had been searching for. I reach for my gun.

the soothsayer

Aging peppermint's lost pregnancy
that took its final breath in infancy
before a father's first glimpse
(and long forgotten since)
Rowing across tempestuous waters
An empire of deities, sex, and solder

Rows upon a suede of gentle purple
in a calm of war and fervor
The marrow of a promise
Forgotten like the Gospel
As laying a newborn to rest
in its dead mother's womb

An aggregate of war and blood
posh cars, bronze, and Apollo
A flock of women
open their legs
to the soldiers of hypocrisy:

christians and godless modernity.

SARAH SPROUSE

Haunted

Summer's blessed humidity fed
the wilting willows along their way.
These three—
the golfer's daughter and the pair of sisters,
limp curls and mosquito-bitten knees,
tramping through moist backyards
and along the swampy, mossy trail.

The neighbors, Steve and Flora, were
at it. Again, the girls heard
the shouts and banging of doors,
the startling crash of a flying dish
making contact with some surface.

Furnace-burning odors never escaped the
rotting shack looming ahead.
David dared the little girls to pinch
a prize, a Victory trophy
to prove their bravery.

Sunburned faces peered in smashed windows,
the little dark-haired girl wanted to go home.
Her taller sister shushed her and ran
into the house. Each wall blackened,
closing out the trickle of daylight
left in the garnet-and-grey atmosphere.
"Where are all the ghosts?" Then
a scream. She squeaked back—
scampering out the door.

Suck-luscious leeches reached
the golfer's daughter, and she whimpered.
"Pull 'em off! Pull 'em off!"
Lurching forward, the eldest sister cried
as her fingers ripped the parasites
from their host, flinging them across the clearing.

Shade-loving sword ferns fought
their attempts to flee—
The sweltering heat of the dwindling
afternoon stifled the screams of ghosts,
but the youngest girl heard. She heard
and shouted back, crying and heaving
as she escaped the skeletal grasp of pine needles.

It was summer, before dinnertime—
no trophies to show for their troubles.
Flora and Steve are arguing, their
shouting match can be heard from
the other side of the cul-de-sac,
the ghosts are locked away,
separated by pine trees and swampy mud.

RICH ROSE

Josie

It all started with Josie. Daddy used to hit Josie, and now Josie wants her boyfriends to do the same. Daddy died when his liver failed. That was the beginning.

I went home. My lips tasted like Josie's. That night I thought about Josie. It felt good. The next day, Josie had a black eye. She told everyone she had fallen down the stairs. She sure did.

There actually was a Josie I knew, but her name was Elizabeth. She wanted to be called Lizzy. No one every called her Lizzy.

Jack helped me with my math homework during lunch. I got a question wrong, and he corrected me. Suddenly I had the urge to punch him in the face. I have no idea where it came from, but every time I looked at him I just had that feeling.

Lizzy liked knives. I don't really know why, but she was fascinated by them. There was rarely a time when she wasn't carrying.

I hadn't thought about violence for the rest of the week. Then came Monday with Josie. We were making out when she suddenly pulled out a knife. She

said that people who cut themselves do it to focus their pain. Physical pain heals quickly, emotional pain takes a while. In a sense we're just converting our pain from emotional to physical, like changing from potential to kinetic energy.

Josie cut both of us on our bottom lips. She said that we should make a pact to never be without each other for the rest of our lives. It sounded sickly romantic, so I agreed. We took a blood oath with a kiss.

Some people have red blood. Some people have purple blood. Some have blue. Once the blood hits the oxygen, though, we all bleed red. Red is the color of life, passion, power. Red provokes us. Red excites us.

Lizzy came to school today with a limp. Her whole left side was a mess of black and blue. She thanked me. I had no idea what I had done to her. All I could get out of her was a smile and that it had something about a wrench. When she kissed me goodbye, she bit my lip, opening up my scab. It started bleeding all over the place.

We are the latchkey generation. Our parents watched the Brady Bunch for hope, then completely forgot about it when they had kids. I raised my brothers. The oldest one is two years younger than me. Where were we supposed to find our role models? Movies? Books? Jesus? Where are our martyrs? Our parents just want to mow the Astroturf and forget that we exist.

Josie looks weaker than usual. She seems deflated, but happy. Her lips still bleed red sometimes when we kiss.

I met Chuck Palabniuk at the back door of a book signing. I spoke with him until his van showed up. He said he prefers to travel this way because people don't think he's anyone special. I was about to go with him, but his agent said he had to be somewhere. Bullshit. Lizzy and I followed him back to his hotel.

Josie stabbed me today. Three inches deep. We went to a “doctor” downtown – the kind that doesn’t ask too many questions. It hurt, but the whole time Josie was smiling at me. She seemed so happy. And then I realized I was happy too. I’d been stabbed and I was happy about it.

While I was being stitched up, I got the urge again. Josie must have seen it, because she started mouthing “do it, do it.” I waited until Dr. Rosso had finished, then grabbed him by the neck.

Death is the way to end all suffering. Josie agreed. I said that we should kill ourselves, so that we can be happy. Josie said that would be selfish. We need to help others out of their misery.

I stole a red uniform from a bellhop and made my way to the hotel's kitchen. An order came up for a “Mr. Durden” in room 1138. I went up the elevator.

I pushed the cart into his room. His agent looked

uncomfortable, but Palabniuk seemed amused. I just flashed a smile.

"Want something to eat?" he said.

"Sure." He had a plate stacked high with ham and cheese sandwiches.

"This way I can tell if people fuck with my food. Laurie, can you go downstairs and get us some Cokes?" Chuck shot her a look that was some sort of code. The agent left us with our cheese sandwiches. I pretended to scratch my back and made sure my butterfly knife was still in the back of my pants.

"They say the books that have the most impact on you are the ones you read as a teenager." And then he kissed me.

At school, teachers used to tell us that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. Unless you get polio, I always thought. How wrong the teachers were. Death is what makes you strongest of all.

I pulled his jeans down and put his cock in my mouth. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. A few minutes later Lizzy knocked on the door. She said she was room service. There was something poetic about mailing his balls. One to Doubleday and one to Anchor. Each of his publishers.

Josie inherited two things from her father: a relentless pursuit of alcohol, and a small arsenal of weapons. We decided to go to the cemetery. People go to the cemetery to grieve over the dead, because they can't be with them. They can't be dead. How do they turn this emotional pain into physical pain? With

Josie and me.

Red flowed across the cemetery as we opened fire. Josie and I walked among the grievers and helped them out.

Josie screamed. She was pointing at a couple she shot. As I came around the coffin I saw the two of us, Josie and me, dead. We weren't just dead, we were old. And we were happy. I took her arm and walked over to the casket. We opened it up, but there was nothing inside. Josie and I climbed in and shut the lid. She kissed me so hard that blood started squirting everywhere. We put our guns to each other's hearts and cocked.

"I love you," Josie said.

"I love you."

Salt at Sundown

I sit on the edge of the metal chair
and strain to hear my mother's
jangle of keys,
the click of a lock.

Daylight wanes with the rise
of droning cicadas, the ticking
of my watch.

Weeks ago, before you went
to visit Gramma and Grampa,
we watched *Sleepless*
in *Seattle*, munched

on buttered popcorn. I am sleepless, imagine
I will soon wear
dark clothes and feel the sting
of salt on my cheeks, smell
my mother's red carnations and freshly turned

earth. I wasn't yours,
but still you carried me.

Dusk falls
on the deer and her fawn.
The crickets' chirp
rises from the lawn.

As a pair of white headlights
cuts the dusk,
I see your lengthening shadow.
The lock clicks.

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