

POIGTESME



Poictesme

1. The art and literature journal of Virginia Commonwealth University, and an invocation to the spirit of James Branch Cabell and Richmond's literary heritage
2. A fictitious medieval French province created by James Branch Cabell in his series *Biography of the Life of Manuel*

EDITOR'S NOTE

I have lately been re-reading a biography of one of my favorite photographers, the Park Avenue princess Diane Arbus. Arbus trafficked in so-called “freaks”—nudists, dwarves and giants, bodies sleeved in tattoos. She would take the D train to Coney Island to photograph people in the tenements, and as she asked them to pose, this class of people so far removed from her privileged background, she was both terrified and elated. Art became an escape from her shyness. I think she might have carried her 35mm as both sword and divining rod. Both what led her to connect with strangers, and the lens she could hide behind. And because of her and her subjects’ mutual vulnerability, the portraits hover eerily between voyeurism and intimacy.

I project this onto Arbus because it’s how I’ve come to feel about editing this journal. *Poictesme* has given me a reason to reach out to writers and artists, several of whom have become close friends. It has helped me overcome some of the shyness and careerism I had first coming to college. And like any passion (or mild obsession), this journal has become part of my persona.

I feel the same when I’m writing at my best. When I’m carrying a poem or story in mind, I become that much more sensitive to the images and language patterns around me, that much more inquisitive and self-reflective. But mediated. It’s strange—how much easier it becomes to articulate something about yourself from behind the strictures of form and meter, or a character’s persona, or a brush or camera lens.

The work in this anthology runs the gamut, but this remains consistent: it’s self-searching. From behind a consciousness of language, these writers put themselves on the page. The writers featured here don’t take language for granted. They are quick to experiment and able to polish. They play within inherited forms like noir and epistle, and they make these forms their own. They inhabit characters and situations far outside of personal experience, and they do so with sympathy and nuance. They examine their own experiences without sacrificing form for catharsis. Take Matt Franklin’s revision of an 18th century adventure story. Or Erin Gerety’s masterful use of second-person. Or Danny Caporaletti’s measured precision.

Some acknowledgement is in order. Thank you to the College of Humanities and Sciences, VCUarts, and the English Department, for spreading the word around campus and the Richmond community. Thank you to *Poictesme*'s wonderful staff—I can't wait to see what you'll accomplish next year. Thank you to Belle Boggs, for your insight, and for being an inspiration to us aspiring writers. To our artists and writers, all I can say is that without *Poictesme*, I would have been enormously jealous of your talents. As is, I'm so grateful that you contributed to create an anthology beyond anyone's expectations of student work.

And in particular, thank you to Lauren Katchuk, without whom I would surely have spent all our funds the first week on Elephant Thai catering. Thank you to Mark Jeffries and Sam Wittwer, for the creativity and quality of this volume's production and design. Finally, thank you to the Ma & Pop of *Poictesme*, Susann Cokal and Greg Weatherford, for your advice, both literary and lit-biz, but more importantly for your attention, encouragement, and your kindness. These last two years at the helm—well, it's been a pleasure.

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HEADSHAKER

Cat Leth

Like a sharp point through glue,
press, press, press-
Perpetual dream puppet,
you are lights and plastic.
Master with your cover,
why am I like this?
Piercing non reaction,
swollen blackness,
am I to mind my faults?
Throb piano, throb.
Sap, soft topaz
with tiny bubbles,
doesn't care. I am sap.
I'm not strong enough
to be evil.
But me isn't all I'm.
Oh, whatever you are,
your absence is unbearable.
Do you menace me?
My mind is slipping soft,
I want to believe
it is all just
slipping soft. So I
sleep, sweet fantasy,
mind smooth. I know nothing
of the question, eve. Day
break, shake the box harder—



THE DEVIL IN DENVER

Excerpted from the original by Jordan Chu

Illustration by Skye Young

Dear A.B., surely and most sincerely,

Denver exists as an eternal winter in my head, and while I am unsure what an *eternal winter* is, it looks to be an evocative phrase. I feel possessed to send an apology for what has happened. With that, I cannot quite say that I am sorry, and I *am* sorry about that.

After the first time we fucked, or as I will kindly call it from here on out, 'the practice,' I cried. I am still trying to figure out why that happened. You can be sure I kept it a secret for two reasons. One: because I have not fully gotten over my masculine side, and two: because I was not sure if you had either, laying about the bed, stretched out to your toes. Even though you are a woman, you've always behaved much more like a man than I.

It rained hard the day you welcomed me to Denver. We met in that small place for coffee, a very nice café, although the name escapes me. You know how bad I am with names. But I have not let go of the visual of your head silhouetted against the plain glass window, gray from the rain. I still hold that image of you very close. I held it close even then as you talked about your job in radio, and how it was a good job. You had grown your hair long again. I listlessly waited for you to mention the wedding ring that was begging to be brought into the conversation. I could not tell if it was your hand or the ring that wore it that desired me to ask. Then, as if the ring was not sorely obvious, you suddenly proclaimed you were married.

In the years prior to our time in Denver, some of which you were privy to, I believed that I had developed a good local community in the Northeastern 'Five Colleges' quarter of Massachusetts, yet I proved myself wrong. When I first arrived in Denver, my life was a mess. I was in the process of losing my medical license for 'ethical breeches of oath' that hardly concern us here. Under the weight of my tentative expulsion from practicing medicine in this country, Denver seemed much more attractive than crying in Amherst for several weeks whilst drinking long hours into the night, going for lunch, and going for more lunch. One is always going to lunch in Amherst.

I wouldn't even mention my job except to highlight one thing: it makes perfect sense why I clung to you. Because I was alone, for the first time in a while.

After the rain stopped, the clouds stayed and we left. We sat in a park, a nice place for people to take their dogs, and talked. You should remember, as I do, that something overtook my hand and

placed it on your leg, and to my surprise you did not shoo me away. It was like your leg was a shoulder, an easily touched part of the body. The motion came to me, not like a very great idea that comes in a moment of enlightenment, but like a stumbled “I love you” at the end of a phone call. While you did not push the occasion further, touching you and not being refused was like twenty-two orgasms all at once, or enjoying a large meal that you don’t have room for, or sleeping too many hours and feeling that you had wasted the day, but knowing there are seven days in every week, and many uncountable weeks in everyone’s life.

Denver was an expensive city, and while you are not necessarily expensive, you are certainly somewhere in the middle. To call someone expensive may be an insult—not that I am above insulting you—but I mention it because I read once in a great piece of literature that a poor boy was advised not to dream of marrying rich girls. I’m curious what you think of that. Moreover, did your mother ever tell you something like, “Girls with legs should not let boys with hands touch their legs”? If so, you have obviously disregarded her.

You should know that I have always thought well of Ossie. He’s a much more attractive man than me, and so it made sense why you married him. A very kind man at first glance, and many glances later, I think he has acted the most sensibly out of all of us. He has sensitive eyes, bold in color, yet soft, and come to think of it, he deserves an apology as well.

But if there was one thing that your Ossie did that aggravated me, it was that he presumed you were a brute if you did not appreciate soccer. Of all his other precious opinions expressed over our many dinners, we always arrived on the subject of soccer. Amongst the millions of topics in dire need of our discussion—and people were most certainly dying as we spoke—we always found Ossie in a commentary on American thuggery. I think now of how he attributed adjectives like “grace” to those who play soccer. He would go on, saying that Americans lacked grace, and that is why they prefer football. It’s not as though I care about sports. I am only criticizing the fact that Ossie is a self-hating American.

It is unfortunate that among our various talents for crying and fucking (the two revolving around each other like a child’s rotunda of stars) we are also able to hate ourselves and deny it incessantly. I recently read an interesting article on monogamy and human development over the past couple thousand years. You might find it interesting that humans did not love at first, at least they did not start calling it love until monogamous relationships developed. Women would have many men, and orgasms happened fast for both sexes, because the male penis originally had a barb on it that made pleasure a quick transaction, and cleared up this mess of inadequacy that modern intercourse so often consists of.

It was not until you and I began ‘the practice’ that the situation changed, or, to use an old phrase, it was not until we fucked that we were fucked.

It may have more to do with the crying though, which seems more human than fucking. I do not consider myself a crier, per se. It is normally only in moments of weakness, or moments when I don’t want to be known, that I find myself completely overtaken with tears. The other day I was in my kitchen, and I was eating a piece of

toast. I had embraced the coldness of that morning, leaving the lights off, taking a bite without realizing I had not spread butter or jelly on the bread as intended. While I should have been happy to consume bread, or anything, I selfishly wanted that bite back, the one flavorless morsel yet lost forever. Removing the jelly and the butter from their containers was precisely that unknowable moment. Spreading the butter, I cried.

All I want to say is this—I would have never been friends with Ossie in real life. That being said, he was completely non-threatening, which is perhaps why I eventually grew to like him. Yet it is precisely our unassuming natures that caused us all to act so stupidly. Like Americans.

Recall the weekend we left for the mountains with your pagan sister Elsie, and her two partners, Suze and Bill. If memory serves, we lost our way and had to backtrack several times hiking the mountain in your car. There was a stiffness in the air when we finally arrived. It was the elevation, and the pressure of the mountains crushing in around our bodies, but despite all this, it felt quite nice, as it often does to arrive. Terribly upset to have caught a nasty virus, Ossie stayed at home so he wouldn't ruin the fun. You spent half of that weekend on the phone with him, as he called twice a day, hoping to enjoy the mountains by hearing your experience of them.

During one of these calls, I had a long conversation with your sister about her polyamorous marriage. I remember I was eating a bagel, nodding my head, and the porch floated over a large hill that appeared only to descend. I was overtaken with the fact that while you and your sister look nothing alike, your voices are identical, besides being in different keys. For the most part, that weekend was short and un-monumental. Besides my conversation with your sister, 'the practice' occurred for the fourth time (I had been counting). Then while we were driving back to Denver, the fact of the matter weighed heavy on us, as we realized we had not talked very much on the subject.

As you may remember, it was then, returning to Denver, that we ran into a couple on the side of the road, dressed for church, and we gave them a lift to Boulder. Even though they were quiet, I was terribly disturbed by their presence. This may have been contrived on my part, but there was something terribly sad about their whole farce. They seemed terribly bored, but more terribly, they behaved as though they were made out of porcelain, as if they belonged behind glass, or in someone's quaint city home.

Then 'the practice' occurred for a fifth time after we arrived at my house.

Afterwards we talked rather carefully about how to feel, without coming to a conclusive answer. I knew 'the practice' had affected you much more than myself. I know this for a fact because after the practice had ceased, you cried. It is always awful to cry after sex, but it is much, much worse to watch someone you love cry after sex. I felt filthy. I stroked your bare back, your spine strong, and each ridge felt as if my hand was jumping mountain to mountain. It was at that moment that I thought of something Elsie said during our conversation in the mountains, and surely uttered through many a mouth hole in human history: *Can we love more than one person at*

once? Tradition weighed heavy on both of us. We did not deny we were being very American about our intercourse, and if Ossie could have observed us in a completely impersonal light, he would have said that we needed to play soccer more. He would have said we are the types who lack grace when grace is most important.

It might all have been funny if we were certain that I was leaving Denver soon. And if I had left then, perhaps we could have forgotten the whole affair. But when we received the news that I was to stay in Denver, that my work there had been extended indefinitely, we panicked. So it is here, if this letter was an apology to Ossie, that I would apologize for the seventeen instances of intercourse he was not informed of.

I do not remember when we first planned our terrible attempt at a polyamorous relationship with Ossie, and yet it happened. It soon became terribly apparent that the whole thing was a ploy. We never told him we had been living in sin before that night when we shared you, then played dumb in the morning. Our short time as a company required constant manipulation on you and my part. Ossie remained a fixture. Were our situation more traditional, we would have engaged in some very brutal altercation to acquire your love and affections. In such an exchange, there is always someone who wins and someone who loses.

It is here I feel it necessary to mention Charlie, precious Charlie, my peg-legged princess. In reflection, I am completely predictable. I met Charlie at the worst bar in Denver, and became a fool, a fool from great literature. While I don't expect you to be wooed by the coming description of Charlie, I feel that I owe it to you.

She was from San Marcos and looked at you as if she was looking at something behind you. She had blond hair, and while this means nothing in the way of metaphors, I should say it complimented her mouth, with which I was most impressed. Her lips were full and looked as though they were filled with fire, or honey, or anything that is sexually evocative, or that resembles a burning house, or a bee's nest, or bear. She had been invited to a flamenco class as a joke for several weeks. In conversation, she clicked her castanets as she spoke. At first it was endearing but eventually the sound resembled the ticking of a clock. I never told her about you.

I have recently realized that there is no one true signification for the word *love*. Presumably there should be. We should be more careful not to throw the word around, because words are plentiful, and so often used incorrectly, that we cannot be sure of what precisely we say. But I will say this: it is entirely possible I was in love with Charlie, who had blond hair, blond hair that symbolizes nothing.



Since I began writing, my room has grown much darker, with night upon me now. After writing those last words, I stood away from my desk. At that moment, I was farther from you than I have ever been before. From so great a distance, you should know, I will suffer you only a little more.

Were this apology written in the future, as it probably should have been, I would have been more sure, and I would have contained my rambling, and you may have smiled a few times because the letter would have been slightly humorous despite its sin-

cerity. If someone were to read this, they might conclude that we are both bad people, but their judgment would come only from a sense of propriety, a trait important only to the powerful. You and I are not powerful. Despite the power of your Buick, which did quite a number on Charlie. Your attempted murder left her without a foot. Then again, it remains as evidence of my own disgusting nature that I should endear her, “my peg-legged princess.” In retrospect, it might be too cruel a term, but one that remains as testimony to my nastiness—and since it is here for you to see, doesn’t it also make me honest, as is my only intention?

I was glad to hear everything between you and Charlie was settled out of court. Despite the fiscal pain you must have suffered, I suspect it was not the most troubling consequence of our time together. Surely your faith has been shaken. It is a shame that we must be shaken.



TWO POEMS

Amy Sailer

THE USES OF CITY SIDEWALKS: CONTACT

-Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

It's the story you tell me over lunch.
How last week, en route from
your apartment to the coffee shop on Main
at 8, without caffeine, having just turned
from looking both ways, you stepped
across the verge strip to see—

“The what?”

I hated to interrupt but had to know
what you meant by *verge strip*, & you explained

*the buffer of grass between the sidewalk & street
that stretches a city's worth away*

“You mean the parkway?”

Parkway/park strip/verge strip/tree belt
almost all the same,
though that evening when I typed in the words,
the images retrieved were not the same—
The images I found agreed with me,
brought up long horizontals of green, & for
verge strip, a choice of designs for one's bikini line.

“But, Amy, what I'm trying to explain
is that, beyond the verge strip/parkway I crossed
paths with The Grove St. Flasher”

& how it felt, watching him see
your face, at him, at his belly
soft & big & the shadow it made
over his sex, which, yes, you did in fact see
though barely,

him waiting there for someone like you
or me to make, at some point in time
at some point in place, the public & private conjoined

It seemed the most natural exchange
you said,
I can't say I even blinked.

PROJECTIONS

I've a house to build
things that are ours, rooms to fill
thick wood—
& would know living
walled what's whose

He says
I'm young, unspread—
my walls built to cover his
his Once Was
is



I thought
he could
build around & house my Want
We broke ground
when wintered here

What *is* is hers
this house, our walls, him
Ours is built on top of theirs
before it fell—



& I could if I write
piece apart & unstacked
keep here
for myself
sparser rooms

BILLIARDS

Justin Carmickle

During his thirteenth year, Ian and his mother Yolanda settled into a new place, a three stoplight town called Loogootee. The moving had happened dozens of times, after each of Yolanda's men walked out or was hauled off to prison, each leaving her with her rent and utilities past due. Whenever the light company plunged them into darkness, Yolanda would load their television and clothes and mattresses into the car and spit gravel, usually not even bothering to close the trailer door.

This last time they had parked themselves in a booth at some all-night diner, and Yolanda said, "Order whatever you want." Ian gave the tired waitress a sullen stare and ordered bacon and eggs, hash browns, sweet potato fries, a swirl milkshake, and Cokes. He wanted to see if Yolanda would object, but she was too preoccupied with the state map. She smoked and scanned the big red X's of places they had already lived, driven through, or decided the cost of living was beyond their means. This time, after her second husband Leroy left her for a younger woman, a singer in a piano bar, Yolanda tapped her pointer on a dot in Indiana. "I'll get a job waiting tables. It'll be good to us."

Folded in the corner of the booth with his arms wrapped around his knees, Ian answered, "It won't be any different."



Yolanda never worked Thursday nights at the Wander Inn in Loogootee because Thursdays were for karaoke, something she took very seriously. The burly, forty-something owner, Randy, told everyone, "That Yolanda is a looker. She can put that big ass on my face anytime she likes." And so Yolanda knew she had the run of the place. She took Ian to these Thursday night gatherings, shoved a Coke in his hand and always whispered the same thing, "Baby, tonight, I'm doing 'Proud Mary,' Tina Turner style. And Mom needs you to do Ike's part."

They first started their routine when he was much smaller, when he would sit on the lip of the tub and sing along as Yolanda stood before the mirror painting her face with lipstick and rouge. On stage, Yolanda swayed her hips and Ian snapped his fingers. The lights were dim, and smoke hung so thickly it looked like they were in a black-and-white film. Once Ian's part ended, Yolanda continued, moving into the crowd. Hitting each note perfectly, she sat herself in different men's laps and took gulps of their drinks. She had frighteningly red hair that she kept tied up and a body Leroy had once described to his

buddies over poker as, “Built like an American-made Chevy, and as good of a ride.” Ian didn’t know what this meant at the time, or why his mom threw herself into Leroy’s lap and laughed so loudly, but he had liked it. By the end of the song, she was back at Ian’s side, and they finished with a little bow followed by clapping and hooting. She even got tips.

Ian liked the attention they received, but the real reason he enjoyed these Thursday nights was the bartender. Donovan was twenty-one, with black hair combed in the James Dean fashion, his tight Levi’s tucked into his black motorcycle boots. His complexion was pale and smooth as milk, and his nose twisted slightly to the left, from what he later told Ian was a playground fight. Ian’s first night there, Donovan smiled at him, leaned across the bar and took a long gulp from Ian’s Coke, then gave him a light punch in the arm. Grinning, Donovan moved along to take someone’s order.

Later that night, when the bar was closing, Ian happened to steal a glance at Donovan just as he was taking a twenty from the cash register. He winked at Ian and put his index finger to his lips. Ian grinned back, liking his role as conspirator. He wondered if his mom ever swiped cash. That punch and the wink and the finger to the mouth surfaced feelings Ian had felt before: watching his mom’s old VHS of *Risky Business*, and Friday night basketball games when the varsity players made their way onto the court. Ian turned his Coke to drink from the same side as Donovan.



It was an Indian summer and Ian had very little to keep himself busy. During the early hours he lay on the sofa working his way through Vonnegut, but only the good ones like *Cat’s Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. Around three o’clock when the air became too stiff, he would zip to Nipp’s Pool Room on the red Vespa scooter Yolanda had picked up for \$75, saying, “If it saves me chauffeuring you around, it’s worth every dollar.” The thing coughed and whined and reminded him of a chainsaw; when kids his age stared, he wished his mom had bought him a bike instead.

The town’s main business had been an electrical cord manufacturing factory, now just a shell of a building with busted windows and words like “faggot” and “nigger” graffitied to the walls in reds and greens and blues. There were literally three stoplights, all in a row, and according to Yolanda every Friday night people were as passionate about basketball as a Christian for Sunday. They were proud of the coach, a guy named Jack Butcher, who’d won more games than any other high school coach. Ian found Donovan shooting pool at Nipp’s one afternoon and asked about the water tower.

“Who paints a water tower like a basketball?” Ian leaned against the pool table. A bearded guy in a blue mechanics shirt was losing and glared at Donovan. Ian was referring to the tower on the outskirts of town, painted a dark orange with the words “Welcome to Loogootee, home of Jack Butcher, the winningest basketball coach.” The sphere loomed over the town and they were proud of it, like New Yorkers and

Lady Liberty. "Is 'winningest' even a word?"

"You're overthinking it," Donovan said. "You play, Ian?"

"I could lie and say yes to look cool, but really I think sports are pretty boring. com. I don't even know how to hold the stick."

"It's a cue."

"Looks like a stick."

"Hold up," he said. He leaned in and took a shot. "Look, 3-ball right into the left side pocket. Maybe I'll teach you some moves."

"Sports suck." Ian placed his face in his hands and gave his best horrified face.

"Oh my god, they're so pedestrian."

"Running and tackling and all that shit sucks. Pool is different." He paused and gave a little grin. "And don't be such a snobby little shit."

"I'd probably never catch on." He paused. "You'd be wasting your time. But I guess it's your time to waste."

"Fuck, you know how to sell yourself, don't ya?"

"My mom says I'd blow as a car salesman."

Donovan told him that he kept a pool table in his spare bedroom, that he would teach Ian to shoot. He took another shot, hitting the 6-ball into a pocket. "We call that 'clean.' The ball went in without hitting another one." He glanced up and winked. "And don't be late. I got work at five."



When Ian returned home, Yolanda was at the stove, boiling hotdogs on the burner. With one hand she twirled the wooden spoon in the boiling pot and with the other hand held a cigarette. Ian grabbed a pop from the fridge and plopped himself down at the table.

"Baby, you hungry?" she asked.

"Not really."

"Well, I am. Since I'm already cooking, will you eat some?"

"Okay."

"Hotdogs. French fries are in the oven. They're the curly ones you like." She took a drag from her cigarette. "Grab the buns and mustard from the fridge?"

He rummaged through the fridge. They lived in a trailer park called Sunset. When they rented the trailer, Yolanda had wandered around the rectangle, curling her nose at the stained carpets and soggy wallpaper next to the shower, the mustard-yellow cigarette burns scarring the sink basin. But it was within walking distance to the tavern, as well as the high school Ian would attend in the fall. She told him the place would be temporary. Ian had stood in the claustrophobic room that would be his, picked up an abandoned red plastic cup from inside the closet. He wondered how long she would be single this time. In the five semi-furnished rooms, they had a dinette set, a shabby pink loveseat, an easy chair missing one arm, and the TV set that stood on one of the dinette chairs.

"What did you do today? I can't believe I slept 'til three." She hit the palm of her hand to her forehead and groaned. "Closing that damn bar is killing my sleep

schedule.”

“I went to the pool room.” He closed the fridge. “There’s no mustard. Or ketchup.”

“Oh. Well, plain doesn’t bother me.” She grinned. “Did I tell you? Since I don’t work tonight Randy is driving us up to Bloomington to take a rowboat out on Griffy Lake. Then dinner. I’m thinking Indian food. It’s been awhile.”

“You’re going to date *him* now? Gross.com.” He tossed the buns on the table, took a gulp from his pop and dumped the rest in the sink. We’ve barely been here a month, Ian thought. He hated that she did this again and again. He wanted to say so, always did, but it was nice to see her laughing and pretty and hopeful. Instead he said, “He’s fat.”

“He’s muscular, Ian. And don’t be so wasteful.”

“It was hot. I don’t think the fridge works.” Maybe, Ian thought, I can say it without hurting her feelings. “We just moved here. You just got a job. I just don’t see why—”

“Because I’m an adult and can make my own decisions. And I get lonely, baby.”

She stabbed the hotdogs and placed them on Styrofoam plates. She removed the fries from the oven and filled the plates. They sat and ate in silence.

“Donovan is teaching me to shoot pool,” Ian said around a mouthful of food.

“That’ll occupy your mind.” She leaned back and stared at him, wiping her greasy fingers on a napkin. “Isn’t he odd?”

“No. These fries are burnt, though.”

“Then don’t eat them.” She went to a cabinet and grabbed plastic wrap, covering the plate of half-eaten food before placing it in the fridge. “Cindi, one of the other waitresses, asked him out and he told her flat out no. And she’s cute as can be with this beautiful blond hair. Don’t you find that strange?”

“Probably he’s not into some waitress. She sounds dumb.”

“Saying something like that makes you sound dumb, so don’t.” She shrugged and lit another cigarette. “What do I care? I have the owner taking me on a date.” She paused, crossed an arm beneath her chest and held the elbow of her smoking arm. “I might stay over at Randy’s tonight—will you be okay here by yourself?”

“I always am.”

Yolanda walked to the table and took her purse from a chair. She slung it over her shoulder. “Ian?”

“Huh?”

“If you’d rather I came home tonight, I will. I like this guy, but—” She winked, and continued, “but here’s the secret, I like you more.”

“Okay.” He knew that he wanted her to stay, that the emptiness was worse for him. “Go ahead, have fun. I’ll watch TV or read.”

“My boy is a man now.” She paused and smiled at him. “Love you.”

After she left, Ian finished his hotdog, took down a bowl and filled it with Cap’N Crunch Berries. He added the skim milk his mom insisted on and placed the bowl on the table. The oven had been left on, so he turned it off. He could hear the television in the living room and thought maybe he would see if anything was on. But, he realized, it was too early in the evening and there would only be soaps. So he took the cereal out to the front deck and sat in a lawn chair. The underpinning of the trailer across from them was completely missing; beneath the trailer he could see that it sat

on cinderblocks. Ian wondered what their own trailer sat on. He wondered what his mom saw in Randy—there was a difference between a beer gut and muscle, that he knew for certain. He wondered how long it would take ‘til she took Ian to Randy’s home, told him she was sure this guy was the one. He’d heard that a lot. The cereal was gone and he drank the milk, then placed it on the deck next to him.

Some kids were kicking a soccer ball in the street; they laughed and slapped one another on the back, and he remembered playing with friends when they lived in Mankato. That had been the year Ian was eleven and they lived in Martin’s double-wide. Some weekends Martin’s son, Tommy, who was a year older than Ian, visited and they shared a room. Towards the end, when Martin and Yolanda stayed up most nights arguing, Tommy had slipped into Ian’s bed and grabbed his hand and put it on his crotch. In the dark bedroom Tommy had said in a soft voice, “Do it, fag, you know you want to.” And because he had wanted to, very badly, Ian did what he was told. Ian returned to the trailer and stared at the television, watched as some woman with lots of jewelry and a red gown cried and threatened to leave her husband.



Donovan lived just on the outskirts, out by the abandoned electrical cord factory. Here the trees were short and dull and as far as Ian was concerned, unimpressive. He was not taken with anything in the town. As he pulled his scooter to a stop in front of Donovan’s small house—tiny and yellow vinyl with grass standing a foot high—he realized there was something good in all the dull nothingness.

He tapped on the screen door. The screen was torn and he wondered if flies got inside. Music drifted out, but he didn’t recognize the tune. Donovan stepped into the doorway and pushed the door open. He wore only jeans and his dark hair knifed across his forehead.

“You’re early.”

“Am I?”

“Let’s get to it. A lot of jackasses assume there’s nothing to it, but that’s not true. It’s a hell of a lot harder than basketball or baseball, that’s for damn sure.” Donovan led him through the living room down a narrow hall and into the spare bedroom that hosted the pool table. The felt was smooth and vibrant as the painted grass of a football field, and the balls gleamed like Christmas tree lights. “First off, rack them.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t even know what that means? Oh, fuck me. Take this.” He handed Ian a wooden triangle. “This is the rack. The balls go in it. We’ll go 8-ball style, so put the 8-ball right in the center.”

And the lesson began. Ian learned that a “straight-in” was a shot in which the cue ball is directly in-line with the target ball and the intended pocket. On the third day Ian had a “run” of six pocketed rolls, which Donovan said was impressive for an amateur. Ian kept repeating the word “impressive” in his mind, liking the way Donovan said it.

“You need to arch your back more, it’s important. And think about each shot. Don’t just go in shooting blindly. That’s how you lose.”

“Who taught you?” Ian leaned down low, closed one eye, and took aim.

"Keep both eyes open." Donovan leaned his thigh against the table. "My pops, before he died. He was something of a hustler."

"He sounds great." Ian missed the intended ball.

"A drunk. But it wasn't 'til he was working on that second pitcher that he really upped his game. When I was twelve or so I watched him lose two games in a row to this old guy, losing like a hundred bucks, only to switch it up for the last few, making the guy think he was just lucky. He took the poor fucker for over three hundred."

"How did he die?"

"Drunk driving. Drove his pickup right into a tree." Donovan took a shot, then another and another. "I had just turned sixteen and he was gonna teach me to drive." He glanced at his wristwatch. "Look at the time. I have work in twenty." Donovan left the room and returned a second later, pulling on a black V-neck. "What do you do when you're not here?"

"Read. Ride around on my scooter. Nothing." He wanted to ask Donovan if he could come to his house more often, if they were indeed friends. He knew that would open the door to everything else. Ian felt himself turning red.

"Lots to see around here." He leaned against the wall. "No friends?"

"Just you." Ian paused, his eyes wide. "You know what I mean."

"School will start soon. So, there's that at least."

"Yep, I always fit right in."

Donovan lifted an eyebrow and studied Ian's face. He gave him a slight nod and said, "Let me show you something."

It was a house filled with belongings more stylish than Ian would have thought Donovan could afford. The couch and arm chair were a chocolate leather; the television covered an entire wall. The rugs were plush and made Ian want to wiggle his toes deep into the fabric. Ian noticed Donovan hadn't even bothered to unload some boxes, and they lined the hall, duct-taped with labels like "kitchen utensils" and "books." Donovan led Ian into his bedroom where he walked to the dresser and opened the bottom drawer. He took out a book, leafed through it, then handed it to Ian. It was a yearbook.

"You'll find me towards the bottom."

"That's *you*?" In the photo Donovan had shoulder length hair and tiny lens-less glasses. His chin was dotted with red zits.

Donovan just smiled.

Ian pressed his bangs from his forehead and shook his head. "Just because you looked like that doesn't mean anything. You wouldn't get it. You're not me."

Donovan took the book back, barely brushing Ian's hand. Ian wondered what his hair smelled like, what shampoo he used. Probably something cheap, but citrus smelling.

"You're queer as a two dollar bill," Donovan said. "Just don't shoot up the school or anything." He winked. "I *do* get it. Lighten up, huh?" He put his hand on the back of Ian's head and pushed him toward the bedroom doorway. "That's enough talk. Get outta here so I can assist some drunks in getting drunk."



That evening Ian sat in a booth eating a pulled pork sandwich and sipping a Coke. He watched Randy stalk about the tavern barking at employees, including Yolanda. She glanced over at Ian and pretended to shoot herself in the head, then giggled and quickly returned to work. Randy was a big man and he was aware of it. He told Yolanda he had done a tour in Iraq in the early nineties and was fond of boxing; he had been in a few fights in Chicago, won most of them, but was too old to get back in the ring. Besides, he laughed, the bar was a money maker and he had a real thirst for cash. Ian found him loud and cocky, and too fond of rough housing. He liked to box Ian in the ear and say, "Toughen up, boy. You don't want the kids at school to think you've got a gash between your legs."

The place smelled of spilled beer and cigarettes. There was a television hanging above the bar that typically played muted football or basketball, and around it neon beer signs. Fly-paper dangled from the ceiling like streamers at a party; Ian wasn't sure when they had last been changed. It was just after seven 'o'clock and about twenty men and women were either drinking or eating. Ian paid little attention to them, instead keeping his gaze on his flirting mother, or on Donovan, who moved down the length of the bar chatting with rough-neck men, refilling their glasses with cheap pale beer.

Yolanda came to the table and plopped herself down in the booth next to Ian. She was smoking a cigarette, her blood-red lipstick smeared on the paper. "What a fucking night. Randy thinks someone has been stealing from him."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. He's going on and on about it. He asked Edna if it was her. And you know what? I wouldn't doubt it. She's got that trailer full of kids and no old man. Can't blame her, but I better not catch any shit from it." She took a sip from his Coke. "All full?"

"The food here blows."

"I know. The cook is slow. And a peeping tom, I hear."

Suddenly Randy was standing at their booth, smiling his toothy smile. Ian thought he looked like a half-wit with that big smile and big body. An overgrown baby.

Yolanda continued, saying, "Baby, I was just telling Randy about that landlord we had back in Michigan. The one with that hideous handlebar mustache. He doesn't believe the guy sobbed like a baby when I wouldn't go out with him. Remember? We were living in that double-wide, the one with that damn crucifix nailed to my bedroom wall." She looked up at Randy, who was leaning against the booth and grinning. "This was right after I split with my third old man, so I wasn't looking—"

"Especially not for a man with a handlebar mustache," Randy said. "Where's your goddamn self-respect, am I right?"

"It was kind of sexy. Like a biker."

"I remember him," Ian said. He pushed his empty plate away. "His name was Chigger. He thought J. Edgar Hoover had been president."

"Yes!" Yolanda shrieked, and hit the palm of her hand to her forehead. "I forgot all about that! Perfect!" She stood and ran her hand down Randy's chest. "Randy is letting me off early so we can drive to a club and go dancing. Hoping to be in by midnight, but I can't promise."

"I'm used to it," Ian said and gave her an angry look. She's practically ready to move in with the guy, Ian thought. He wanted to spit on the guy's shoes.

"My baby is all grown up."

"Maybe this weekend you and your mom can come over and I'll show you some moves on the boxing bag. It's in the spare bedroom and I don't get to it enough anymore."

"Doesn't that sound fun?" Yolanda asked.

"I don't know anything about boxing," Ian paused, glancing from them to Donovan, who was talking to a couple of younger guys at the bar. Ian wondered if they were gay, if they were trying to take Donovan home. He wondered if Donovan would go home with them if they asked. He thought they looked pedestrian with their spikey hair. He assumed they probably had never read a book. He stood. "And I hate sports, you know that. I have to use the bathroom."

Yolanda followed him toward the bathroom, grabbed his arm. "Don't be a shit, Ian. A man offers to do something nice, you take him up on the offer. I really like this guy."

"You always like them. Anyway, I have my pool lessons."

"I don't know why that guy's taken such an interest in you." She stared at Donovan behind the bar. "He's an adult, you're a kid."

"How's it different than Randy? At least Donovan doesn't want to box and beat the hell out of me."

"Ian." She groaned. She gave him a hurt look. "Be good for Mom. Please?"

Ian sighed and said, "Fine. Ok."

When he stepped out of the bathroom, Yolanda and Randy were busy. He made his way to the bar, pleased the guys Donovan had been talking to had left their perch. He sat and said, "Hey. How're the tips?"

"Lousy. The food?"

"Piss poor."

"Consistent. Big plans tonight, Ian?"

"Randy is banging my mom."

"Oh?" He raised his eyebrows. He nodded toward an enormous man down the bar. "She could be with Harold. Would ya want that?"

"She does the same thing every time we move. If it wasn't Randy, it would have been Harold. Or any other guy."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know."

"Fuck, nobody wants to be alone, Ian."

"You don't always have a choice. Do you know those guys you were just talking to?"

"Nah." He asked a man down the bar if he wanted a refill. "In town from Bloomington. Visiting friends, I think. Why?"

"Dunno," he said, shrugging. "Hey, we should do something when you get off. My mom's going out with him tonight. I don't want to just sit at home."

"Got plans. Rain check?"

"Plans with who?"

"Nosey? None of your business," Donovan said with a laugh. "Just a friend."

"A girl?" He wanted to ask if it was with the spikey haired idiots. What if he gets

mad at me for assuming? Ian wondered.

“Order a beer or scram.” Donovan winked at him, went to the end of the bar to take an order. He pulled several beers from the fridge below the bar, snapped the caps off and tossed them in the air, catching them. Ian sat watching. He hoped Donovan’s friend would bail, that he would take Ian for a ride in his truck. Maybe they would go to the falls Ian had heard of, Hindoston Falls, where an entire village had died of some mysterious disease. He’d overheard a conversation about the place a few nights before, a man slurring to his date about the whirlpools that could suck you deep into the cold water with the snap of a finger. Ian thought Donovan might be intrigued; it did sound dangerous. When he opened his mouth to mention the whirlpools, a group of young women came and sat at the bar. They were giggling loudly and flirting with Donovan, ordering fancy cocktails. Ian abandoned the bar and began his walk home.



Several weeks went by and Ian’s anticipation of their time together never waned. Finally, one day Ian felt something loosen inside himself. He told Donovan that before, in Michigan, he had kissed a boy as they walked home from class together.

“His name was Jared,” Ian said. He was watching Donovan clear all the balls from the table, rocketing one after another into the pockets. “I thought I would see him all the time after that. But the next time we walked home, his friends were there. Then it was the weekend. And then we moved again.”

“There will be another Jared. Trust me.”

“You won,” Ian said. “*Again*. This is hopeless.”

“Like anything, it takes time.”

“Can I ask you something?” Donovan nodded. “What you do, working in that bar with all those people—why do you do it?”

“Money.”

“But you could do anything. Are you, you know, with someone?”

“Ask too many questions, Ian.” Donovan grinned, slightly. “Nah. Not anymore.”

“Oh.” Would you like to be with me? Ian wanted to ask. He knew he was much younger, but that didn’t matter. Not really.

“It’s a complicated situation.”

Donovan’s phone vibrated on a small table in the corner of the room. He placed his pool cue on the table and walked to it. “Be right back,” he said and left the room, then the house.

Bored, Ian wandered into the hallway. He gazed upon the fullness of the rooms. The brown leather sofa and a fat orange chair that sat across from it. An unopened game system sat on top of what looked like an old treasure chest. Donovan’s bedroom had a perimeter of books stacked waist high. Good ones too: Dickens, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and the likes. All the ones Ian enjoyed. The windows of Donovan’s bedroom were naked. The sun, a yellow globe slowly falling beyond the swaying oaks, cast a glow onto the surface of the dresser and the white of the pillows. Next to the bed was a vintage record player; nearby were several milk crates filled with vinyl. Ian knew bartenders couldn’t afford such things. He moved about and took in the room,

walked to the dresser. The second drawer was slightly ajar and he pulled it open further. Socks and underwear, mostly. But in the right corner was a framed photo. In it was Donovan, wearing winter clothes and smiling, and at his side, their arms around each other, was another man; he was near the same age and blond. Ian wanted to throw the photo against the wall. The screen door opened and slammed closed. Ian quickly returned the photo and walked to the bedroom door where he met Donovan.

"Snooping?"

"No. Well, I—" Ian paused. "Okay. Sorry. Who's in that picture with you?"

"Steal some of my underwear, too?" Donovan pulled the photo from the dresser. "Meet Nicholas. My ex."

"Ex." Ian swallowed. "Oh."

"Oh fuck, more like it." Donovan winked. "Don't look so surprised. We're not some alien race that you can immediately detect." He paused. "That was actually him on the phone."

"Are you getting back together?" Ian felt his chest expand, then deflate. Of course someone who looked like Donovan had someone. How could he have been so blind? It was too late. They were talking again.

"I've got my shift." Donovan changed shirts. "'Til tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Coming to see your mom at the bar?"

"I don't think so." Ian walked to the living room, Donovan following close behind. "I saw you take the twenty the night we met."

"And?"

"And nothing. I just wanted you to know." He glanced around at all the stuff in the house. All the unopened things Donovan had purchased with that stolen money. "You don't want any of this, do you?"

Ian walked to the unopened game system that sat on the treasure chest and picked it up. He stared at Donovan. He returned the box and rushed from the house.



Ian kicked at the scooter, muttering "fuck" and "goddamn." The scooter wouldn't start, just churned and churned to no end. He didn't care about the Vespa, but he would miss the lesson, would not be able to see and speak to Donovan. Ian stepped into the trailer and banged the screen door shut behind him. At the fridge he rummaged and grabbed a pop. He stared at the oven with the cast iron skillet and thought he might fry bacon, perhaps an egg. But instead he sat before the television, Indian-style, working the thing by hand because the batteries in the remote had died. Daytime talk shows. Cooking programs. He flicked the screen black.

And then his mother was awake, hurrying about the trailer, picking up clothes and dishes and emptying the ash trays. "Randy is coming for dinner," she said. She hit the palm of her hand to her forehead. "Shit, do I even have anything to cook him?"

"He's coming *here*? Why?"

"Because I invited him, that's why. How could I oversleep? Supposed to be up an hour ago. Shit. Shit. Shit." She opened the freezer. "Okay, I have some butterfly pork

chops. And potatoes. I'll grill those suckers."

"Maybe I'll eat in town. Can I have some cash?"

"You'll eat here with us, Ian. Grab the charcoal!" She headed out the door to where the old grill sat on the deck. "And bring the lighter fluid!"

"When's he coming?"

"He'll be here about four or five 'o'clock. It's almost four now. Give me that." She took the lighter fluid and squirted it all over the black coals. Then she threw a match in and it erupted into flame. "Better defrost those chops."

Later, Yolanda sat on a lawn chair watching the meat sizzle and darken, sipping a bottled beer and waiting on her man. Inside the trailer, Ian stood at the open living room window. He didn't want his mother to think he was also anticipating Randy's arrival.

When both Randy and Donovan arrived, Ian was surprised. Still, he remained inside, listening for a moment longer.

"Look who I found," Randy said, slapping Donovan on the back and making him smile uneasily. "Joining for supper?"

"I only made three pork chops," Yolanda said quickly.

"Then damn it, get down to the grocery and buy another. Hell, I could eat two."

"Nah, I'm good," Donovan said. "Just came to see that everything is okay. Ian didn't show up today."

"Ian! Your friend is out here!" Yolanda stood, finished her beer. "Excuse me, I have the potatoes boiling. Honey, watch the meat?" She touched Randy's arm and went inside.

"Ain't she something else?" Randy elbowed Donovan in the ribs. "Hell of a woman."

Ian stepped outside and led Donovan down the steps. "My ride wouldn't start."

"I figured. Here, let me take a look at it."

Donovan knelt before the scooter and began tinkering with it. "Looks like the battery. I'd go to the auto store and see if they can order something. Dunno if they can."

"I don't have any money. Might as well junk it."

"Look," Donovan said. He straightened up, gazed at his truck. "I can swing by and get you from now on. No biggie." He winked. "What else I got to do?"

"You don't have to do that. I can walk—"

"Hey, shut up," Donovan said, punching Ian's bicep. "See ya later." He nodded at Randy and Yolanda, who were talking in hushed tones on the deck.

Ian returned to the deck and listened.

"This is serious, Yolanda," Randy was saying, placing his second empty beer bottle next to the grill, opening another. "It's my business."

"And you only want to talk about it when you're half looped, so that makes me think you think I'm the goddamn one stealing."

"Now, you ain't heard me say that. No, ma'am, you did not."

"Implying is the same."

"What's going on?" Ian asked.

"Nothing, son. Just go on inside," Randy said.

"Don't tell my son what to do, fatso." Yolanda gave him a shove and turned to the pork chops. "These are almost done. Ian, ever known your mom to steal? Ever?"

"Nobody said—" Randy began.

"Especially not from some crummy bar," Ian said.

Red faced, the fat man stared at him.

And so the night continued: two other waitresses from the tavern and their men joined. Everyone sat around the table, which was littered with playing cards, lit cigarettes, and empty beer bottles. When the beer was depleted, they got serious with the drinking and cracked open the gin for gin and tonics. Yolanda sat in Randy's lap, giving him drunken suggestions on his hand of cards. She also monitored the music, switching from The Eagles to The Doors, slurring the words to "Hello, I Love You."

The trailer was small, and Ian moved from the kitchen to living room to his bedroom, unable to find quiet. When Yolanda tried to get him to sit at the table and play along, Ian said, "Get off," and wiggled from her clutch. They had entered a drunk he was familiar with: soon someone would piss someone else off and insults would fly, Yolanda would throw everyone out, cry while Randy yelled about her ruining the evening. Then he would storm out of the trailer and all would be quiet. Ian waited for it to end.



Ian woke early the next day. Yolanda was curled up in the bed next to him, her red hair masking her face. He eased out of bed, careful not to wake her. The living room and kitchen were empty, save for the trash of drunks. He sat at the kitchen table. It was nearly noon, the room sunlit and warm. He thought of Donovan, that today Ian would go deeper, learn more about him. Maybe they would leave the house and do something different. Ian would find out what movies were playing at the theater. He reached down to his morning hardness, which usually he ignored, but today, as he thought of the possibilities, he decided to keep his hand there. His breath was quick and he was imagining the press of Donovan when—Ian!—Yolanda calling his name. He rushed to the bathroom where he took a shower, then brushed his teeth. He stared at his reflection and thought how he was a nice looking boy. Others, surely, would think so as well.

He rummaged through the fridge and used the last of the milk on his cereal. He ate mechanically, spooning the hard cereal into his mouth, and staring out the window waiting for Donovan's truck. He finished the cereal and rinsed his bowl. He decided to wait on the deck. The neighbor kids were back on the street kicking around their soccer ball. When he had been waiting an hour, he began to walk.

Slowly, so as not to sweat and stink, he zigzagged down the streets 'til he turned onto Donovan's. Then he quickened his pace, until he stopped, seeing someone emerge from the small house. It was the other young man from the photo, the blond ex. Ian stepped behind a large tree and watched. Donovan followed him from the house to a car parked in the drive. The man touched Donovan's arm and they kissed, quick, but a kiss nevertheless. Then he was gone. Ian stood motionless, as though frozen, his heart racing, his skin burning, palms drenched. Had he stayed over? he wondered. Had they fucked? And who did who? What did it mean?

Ian stepped from behind the tree and yelled Donovan's name. When they locked eyes, Ian deepened his voice and said, clearly, "Fuck off."

He ran, not toward any specific destination, just away. It was hot outside and when his tee stuck to his skin, he peeled it away and jammed it into his back left pocket. A swim in the public pool was inviting, but he didn't have money for entrance. Besides, it would be packed with kids much younger. Going home was unappealing. So he followed the road sign that read "Hindoston Falls 2 Miles." It took less than thirty minutes for him to reach the water, a trickling, a pathetic waterfall. But it was cool against his skin and he enjoyed it. Looking down at the water that rose to his navel, he welcomed the whirlpool. He wondered what it would feel like to have it suck his breath away, that perhaps it wouldn't be a bad sensation at all. It would be like floating weightlessly and whispering, "Okay, take me."



Thursday night Yolanda decided to perform "Two More Bottles of Wine" because Ian refused to do Ike's part. Ian sat in a corner booth, refusing to look in Donovan's direction. Ian watched as Yolanda moved into the crowd, throwing herself into the men's waiting laps. Just as the song was ending, she gulped down some country boy's shot of whiskey and retook the stage, giving a swift bow. Then she was sitting across from Ian, laughing.

"Wasn't I great, baby? Could have been a star, don't you think?" She laughed and pressed her hand on her hair, making sure it was still stacked up. "Think I made Randy jealous? That man needs to learn to appreciate me a little more. I'm a catch, right baby? Like he could do any better." She lit a cigarette. "And you know he should make me manager or something of this place. Then he could spend more time boxing or whatever the hell he wants to do. I could really do some great stuff here. First, lighten the place up a bit. Too much dark wood, right? Makes the place depressing. And what about trivia night? The place I worked back in Mankato had trivia night and it always brought in the young crowd. That's definitely what this place needs." Then she stopped and stared at him. "What's wrong?"

Ian shook his head at her, and said, "Randy's not going to make you manager. He's not going to marry you. He's not going to do anything." He put his hands over his face and sighed.

"Have a little faith," she said. "What's gotten into you?"

"Oh my god," Ian said, almost laughing at her. When would she learn? Then he was up and walking out of the bar. He sat on the hood of Yolanda's car and waited for closing time. Drunks stumbled past, several of whom held up their hands for high-fives. Ian got up from the hood and paced around the car.

Finally he went back in to tell Yolanda he was ready to go home, that he wasn't coming here anymore to sing or watch her make a fool of herself. But there was Randy, standing in the middle of the empty room yelling at Yolanda, Donovan, and Edna, the one with all the kids.

"Damn it, I made a point of counting up the register two hours before closing and then again just now. There's fifty goddamn bucks missing. Now who's gonna own

up to it? I ain't putting up with thieves in my bar."

"I'm sure you miscounted," Yolanda said, rolling her eyes. "And I'm tired, Randy. I want to go home. Let's do this tomorrow."

"It wasn't me, I know that much," Edna said. She was standing with her arms crossed, glaring at the other two employees.

"Well, then, who?" Randy downed a shot, then wiped his mouth on his hairy wrist. Then he did another shot. "Answer me."

Ian glanced at Donovan, who met his gaze. Ian was shocked at what he saw. Donovan looked like a scared little boy. What was he afraid of? Ian wondered. Surely not losing the job. Maybe jail? Certainly Donovan didn't care if he couldn't keep hoarding televisions, game consoles, stereos; he acted as though it was all junk. The stealing and buying was a game to him, something he wanted to see if he could do. Someone who stole for the thrill didn't get clammy in front of some fat bar owner, and yet there Donovan was, shaking in his boots. Before Ian would have spoken up and possibly pointed at Edna, said he saw her steal to feed all those hungry kids, but now he stood with his lips clamped shut.

Edna announced she was leaving, and then did just that. Randy shook his head and grabbed Yolanda by the arm, saying they needed to talk. He led her out the back-door. Ian sat at the bar, next to Donovan.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Donovan asked.

"What good would it have done? I think you're an ass, but I don't want you to go to jail."

"Fuck, you didn't want me to go to jail? But you do hate me, I get that."

"I liked you."

"Ian, don't."

"I'm not a kid. I thought—"

"What? That we'd run off together? That I would make your life better? Ian, look at me." He waved his arms around. "Me?"

"I just don't want to feel bad."

Donovan sighed. "Me neither."

"Then don't." Ian paused, fidgeting with the fray at the end of his shorts. "Pick me up tomorrow for a lesson."

"Are you sure?"

Ian nodded.

"Okay then." Donovan nodded. He stood to leave, pivoted on his heels and gave Ian a quick peck on the lips, then punched him in the arm. "Okay."



Ian sat in the car watching as Yolanda and Randy yelled and pointed fingers at one another. She reached out and pushed him, causing him in his drunkenness to nearly lose his footing. She threw her head back and gave a shrieking laugh, then, unexpectedly she reached out and touched his cheek, saying, "I'm sorry. Let's not fight."

He struck her in the left eye first, sending her staggering. She let out a piercing scream. Then in the mouth, which put her flat on her back. There was more yelling and

crying. Ian could have jumped onto his back, or gone inside for Donovan. He could have done anything. Instead he remained seated in the car, listening to a drunk man's slurs and knuckle on flesh and the low moans of pain. He hoped it would end quickly.



"What should we listen to?" Yolanda asked from swollen and busted lips. They were driving, she flipping through her music. "Ah, here we go. Eighties ballads always lift my spirits for some reason." She was silent for the rest of the drive until she pulled into the parking lot of an all-night diner. She opened the overhead mirror and touched her eyes, lips, cheeks. Yolanda cleared her throat. "He did a number on me, huh?"

"I told you he's an asshole."

"Even Leroy never hit me." She closed the mirror. "This guy is lucky I don't go back and kill him. Come on, let's get something to eat. Anything you want, baby."

"No," Ian said, his voice clear and level. "I don't want anything."

After a moment Yolanda turned the ignition. "Shit, I really did try. Do you believe me?"

And they sat in the idling car, each waiting for the other to concede. Ian stared out at the gray Loogootee night and reminded himself how ugly the place was, how disappointed he had been when she chose it. He told himself that soon it would be a distant memory, faint, faint as the pale light beneath a doorway, just a faint reminder of another place.



THE MILLERS

Thomas DeSanto Jr.

Illustration by Andy Kotsch

In him we live and move and have our being.
Acts 17:28

Sweep me up.
Søren Kierkegaard's last words



Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow
Psalms 51:7

I. [BEAN]

We sleep sometimes outside in the lukewarm, cooing dark of our quiet Pennsylvanian field. *This is my family. These are my brothers and sisters.* My name is Bean Miller. Nineteen hands tend to these cows, squeezing at udders for milk *into jars, into mouths—tongues lapping at thick glass for gloppy curd.* Listen: sapsuckers whisper in the Honeylocusts, & look: at Venus, red molten beauty suspended in the heavens, then sip: the soured fat oxygen drifting o'er exploded cattails, & feel: my fingers, wideknuckled, pawing at your knotty ankles, *Mabel*, the jagged hay 'gainst our fleshwrapped bodies *tumbling, wicked, Mabel*, the smell: of soiled hens, wetfeathered, orangeclawed, & hogs, pinkfleshed, shitstained. *Mabel*, our field slips into silence.

We sleep sometimes outside,
away from our family,
where only God is watching.



And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

II. [EZEKIEL]

This morning, at a young hour after waking, I lifted each leg: feet, toes attached *pale*, *twitching* as I crawled o'er honeysuckle with a froe—metalfaced, its handle carved of hickory—dangling from my strange hand & I stumbled 'pon a Maple: its girth holy large—home to those squawking beasts that sing morning hymns for us Millers, me: Ezekiel, lifting the blade o'er my head & hacking at that Maple: spraying chips, splintering under the force of my breast, shoulders, arms: hacking 'til sap oozed down its body, wooden, *sticky* & touching, I felt it slide down my fingers—gloppy, like molasses & 'pon tasting, it figured sweet, treeborne honey, blackened by a lack of sun, thickened by lack of touch, then, taking up the froe, I slashed that solemn beast, 'til I ripped off a plank 'bout my skull's size & dragged it to the shed, where I'd left a cauldron boiling, filling the room with steam, & when I looked deep into the fire, I saw blue—I left the plank among the haze, then, outside, lifted the corpse of a white deer, dragging the body to a tub where I knifed down its belly: organs, blood oozed out to the forest floor—the large intestine: coiled, pink & lifeless, the stomach: a sac, veined & fat—my hands, fleshy five-fingered tools, bloodstained, ripping at this antlered beast for hide, & knifing off a patch, I drowned it in a bath, rinsing it of blood, 'til it was pure white, then hung it to dry—& walking back inside, I took up the plank, which heated, steamed, was now moldable, & I bent it 'twixt my hands, morphing it anew, 'til it was a hollowed sphere, which, palming sandpaper, I smoothed & took outside—it hardened, took shape—I stretched the hide taut o'er its gaping mouth, & with auburn nails, hammered it to the sphere: the sound of thudding, metal striking metal—then fastening a wooden bridge, I glued it to the hide, carved four thin wedges in which each I laid a string: copper, coiled, looping a knot at each wire's end, where slouching on my stool, finally, I plucked copper strings, my hands still bathed in blood, the metal twang echoing heavy, deep off the walls of this banjo, & me: Ezekiel Miller, child of Bethlehem, smiling at the beast I'd born.



For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isaiah 55:12

III. [JOSEPH]

I slept *sixteen* under a sheet of stars in Lancaster:
Joseph Miller—*not yet a man*—my skin unwrinkled,
my jaw bald. I remember Bean *little baby* cooing,
just born of our mother.

I left two days later—dragged by four wooden wheels, a horse—
for Philadelphia where *night, in streetlight*, I heard gypsy songs:
droning sounds of struggle, & walking past, I saw a television *static fuzz*,
women *their skin*: my body sowing wild oats as

I absorbed the city's buzzing:
my tongue *whiskeystained*
growing large behind my teeth.

There was quiet—& *is it possible*
to feel deeper than feeling?
where: Nothing.

rumspringa, this: My running around,
& I chose water: a bath
clapping trees, coming home to hills
mountains, singing.



Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of the darkness. For he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know I am LORD when I lay my vengeance upon you.

Samuel L. Jackson, *Pulp Fiction*

IV. [JACOB]

The shelf gives. Shattered glass. Mother's pickling jar—
I wake to the haunting, repetitive *crack*
of brother Joseph hollering *I am made of LORD*,
the beating of his scalp against floor, 'til it is pulp, a wound,
bloody fractals climbing his forehead—like blades of grass.
I was born to this wicked Miller family.

The youngest of my family,
Mabel & Bean, left a door ajar,
when they walked out to the grass.
Mosquitoes creep in through the crack
& suck upon my arm—a swollen wound:
I was born flesh. Jacob, son of the LORD.

& I am a vessel, made of our LORD,
of my wicked Miller family.
Ezekiel's banjo hangs on the wall. The strings: wound,
untuned. Such wicked music jars
my soul, for it is not holy—the strings, *a crack*—
I hear Bean & Mabel sleeping in the grass.

I purge myself into the sink. Mabel, like the grass,
split legs, now soiled in the eyes of our LORD
whose hand will come down soon like a *thundercrack*
upon my wicked family
& break them like a mason jar.
In the Apocalypse, your fragile souls, wounded,

will not enter Heaven. Your wounds
are not pure, like God-given blades of grass,
or gloppy milk of God-given cows, tug at into jars,
into mouths, which exist only to speak the word of our LORD
not to tongue at the mouth of thy own family.
Be terrified. For no flesh will withstand the LORD's brutal *crack*

at the time of Revelation. & that *crack*,
crack of the LORD will wound
any flesh. We are miniscule in His eyes. Family—
Bean! Mabel! Leave the grass!
Obey our LORD!
For He will strike down upon you! The sky will crack! Be left ajar!



Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.

John 21:18

V. [PETER]

I am led North (*creeping*) where I do not want to go
the sun *honeygold*, the soil *pregnant* (*full of dew*)
shake in the morning reflection of a lake. *Still skymirror:*
Be still.

I am Peter Miller, the familyfisher.
I was dressed by another man.

My fingers, spikes, prick earthworms: *stretched*.
I look to the lake, *still skymirror*, home to spineless *fat*
gillbreathers as I climb a tree. Killer of fishes:
Be still.

I am Peter Miller. When I die, bury me.
Let Earth, as I have, feast—

my body *wildseed*.



Blow. Burn slowly.
 No ground is ever going to hold me.
 The Mountain Goats

VI. [MABEL]

They found us hiding in the brambles. I held rose petals in my palm. They were pink & soft like fuzzy flesh. Thick thorns pressed their barbs into your wrists, and your blood dripped on my dress. It spread slowly through the cotton fabric, swallowing each white thread up into its wet body. I shivered at the sweetness of my being.

The moon was blazing orange. I wished it would burn itself out. The maroon sky yawned. You held me in your arms & said *No one will ever hurt you here*. So we ran. We sprinted away from the house—past Peter's lake, out into the woods, down a path covered in dry leaves. Thick roots crawled out of the Earth like snakes. There were hills in the distance. They were clapping, singing.

I looked over my shoulder. Jacob appeared first. His shaking hands gripped the metal handle of a burning lantern. He looked ill. His teeth were clenched. Father was just behind. The illiterate, he grunted like a wild beast. Their footsteps beat against the Earth.

The brush shredded my flesh. You grabbed my bloodied arm & said *We'll start our own family*. As you pulled me away, I lost control of my body. My soul felt light.

Just then, your foot wedged itself under the root of a Swamp Oak. I heard a *crack*. I looked down. White bone jutted out from your flesh. I fell at your side. My hands were soaked in your spilling blood. It dripped down my wrists like vines.

Jacob stood behind us as I cried. I heard the creak of his rusty lantern swaying. He & Father grabbed my arms. In that moment, I felt weightless. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. They dragged me back to the house. In that moment, I lost control of my soul. I let them scrape my body against the Earth. They beat it against jagged rocks. Jacob had a seizure in the field. Father choked on his fat tongue as he beat me with his only hand.

All I heard was a deafening ring. The field smelled like pine. I gazed up at the Pleiades seven sisters made of dust & gas. They were motionless. In their stillness, they asked of me stillness. One day, I will grow lighter. I will inhale ungodly heat. No ground will ever hold me.



You are altogether beautiful; my love.
There is no flaw in you.
Song of Solomon 4:7

VII. [EMMA]

I am the voice of many waters.
I am made of love. I never end.
I am a thick and dreadful darkness.
I fill the whole universe.

I am a sea of blood.
I am a holy mountain.
I am sweet as honey.
I am the oil of joy.

I am more precious than jewels.
I am the beginning and the end.
I am wonderfully and fearfully made.



Wouldn't it be nice to live together in the kind of world where we belong?
 The Beach Boys

VIII. [BEAN]

Through the only window in this shed, I see a tanager take off in flight, easy, weightless. Father has burned down the field. Virgin stems crawl out of the Earth. They climb up through the ashes. It is dawn. *The tanager sings its sleepsong.* I close my eyes. I see: *Your freckles. Knees.* How miserable I am, *Mabel*, that it has come to this—a thick rope in my hand. Do not let me become a ghost. Let the sky swallow me whole. Let me dissolve into dust. Let me float like ashes—*weightless.*



Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion?
Job 38:31

IX. [MARY]

In the morning,
I lift my body out of bed.
Luke has made oats for breakfast.
There is a glass of milk on the table.
One daisy sits in a mason jar—
a crack wanders its glass body.
It is beautiful
how broken things keep their shape.

How the world, sometimes, slows to a still.
How wind disappears.
How dandelions cradle their seeds
very close, very near
their young & slender bodies.

& Mothers are always too young
to have buried their sons.

I am Mary Miller—
furious, full of life.

Look me in the eyes.
Do you see my sadness?
It is there, fully alive.
But I refuse to cry.
I choose instead to unravel the sky.

In the evening,
I lay my body to rest.
These things I have learned—
This world will make certain I suffer.
I will feel all of it.
I will let it penetrate my skin.
I will let it break the body
because my soul binds galaxies.
My mind unlooses the night sky.



I became tired and sick;
Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air.
Walt Whitman

X. [LUKE]

I am myself in the kitchen,
hellish grip of slick steel
spreading jam onto Friendship bread.
I have come to know
the infernal silence of a still room,
of being alone late at night.
How strawberries are sickly sweet.
How, if I slice my finger, I know that it will bleed.
But, there's something missing
in the scene. The brother I lost.
How every Miller since, I hold close
to my chest. I think of him.

My thoughts make me tired & sick.
I am more myself outside
In the woods amongst the trees.
My path is full of scattered leaves.
As I wander away, I pass the shed.
Ezekiel's banjo screams.
Mabel sleeps alone in the field.
Peter has caught us many fish.
They will feed us for at least one week.
The year's harvest has been good to us.
I am a Miller. I am made of these things.

The sky is a deep azure.
The path is lined with Honeylocusts.
I see a large hound cradled in their roots.
There is a patch of daisies at my feet.
I pull one dying flower from its bed.
Nearby, there is a warm stream.
I cup water in my palms & offer it to him.
As he licks at it, his eyes look up to me.
I place the daisy on my knee
where he rests his head & falls to sleep
quietly. He slowly breathes.



WRITER'S MEMO: AN INTERVIEW WITH BELLE BOGGS

Amy Sailer

Belle Boggs is the author of *Mattaponi Queen*, a collection of linked stories that take place along Virginia's Mattaponi River. *Mattaponi Queen* won the Bakeless Prize, the Emyl Jenkins Sexton Literary Award from the Library of Virginia, was a finalist for the 2010 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, was a 2010 *Kirkus Reviews* top fiction debut, and was a finalist for the Library of Virginia People's Choice Award for fiction. Boggs has received fellowships to the Bread Loaf and Sewanee writers' conferences and is a recipient of a 2011 Artist Fellowship from the North Carolina Arts Council and a 2012 Literature Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2011, Boggs was named "Best New Southern Author" by *Southern Living* magazine, and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Paris Review*, *Harper's*, *Glimmer Train*, the *Oxford American*, *Orion*, and other publications.

Could you tell the story of how *Mattaponi Queen* won the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize?

Of course! I hope it's an encouraging story for other new writers, especially those navigating less traditional paths to publishing. I was teaching fifth grade in D.C. at the time, at a charter school with intense hours, and I had very little time for things like making submissions to contests or publishers. I'd had an agent, but he was not especially interested in selling collections of short stories or working with a smaller press. My husband—without telling me—submitted the book for the Bakeless. He was in his first year of law practice and worked all the time, too, but he has always been incredibly supportive of my writing. He's also a poet, so he knew something about the literary world, of course, and knew what a wonderful history the Bakeless had.

I remember when I found out that I was a finalist—we'd just gotten home from work, around 8:00, and there was a message on the answering machine. I was thrilled and encouraged, but didn't expect to win. Then Michael Collier called at about 9:00 on a Friday, during spring break, and it changed my life. I will always be grateful to Richard, of course, and also to Percival Everett, who chose the manuscript.

How did you become interested in writing?

My family is full of great storytellers, so I'm sure they inspired me. My dad, my mom, my grandparents and aunts and uncles loved entertain-

ing each other with stories (often the same stories, over and over). My mom is also an artist (and former VCU student), and when I was a kid I was always making books or drawing.

I grew up in a very rural area, and I was shy and spent a lot of time outside by myself or with my brother. Writing stories and essays was a way to connect with other kids at school, to entertain them, so I suppose that feedback—enjoyment from other people, appreciation—played a role also. I remember when I first realized that people liked recognizing themselves in writing. I was in sixth grade.

Do you have any particular writing habits, a place or a time in which you prefer to work?

I prefer to work in the morning, or at least during the day. Something about nighttime says, "Make dinner! Read a book! Watch a movie!" so I get less done then. Now that I don't teach full-time, I have a lot more time for writing, but I still have to use certain tricks: turning on Freedom for the Mac (software that disables the Internet), reading something I really admire first.

Some of the stories in *Mattaponi Queen* were almost elegiac—for example, how in "Shelter," the character of Nikki wants so badly to return to Virginia. I've read that Joan Didion wrote her first novel *Run River* out of homesickness for California. Were you in King William County when you wrote these stories? Or was *Mattaponi Queen* written out of nostalgia?

I haven't lived in King William or King and Queen since I was a teenager, but of course I visit my parents, who live in Walkerton (a tiny town just across the river, in King and Queen). The first story I wrote for the collection ("Youngest Daughter," actually the last story in the book) was written in graduate school, in Southern California, and I'm sure I wrote it out of homesickness. I based it on a poem I wrote while an undergrad at VCU, in Gary Sange's advanced poetry workshop. He'd taken us to Walkerton (also his adopted home town) and set each of us up with an eccentric Walkertonian. I spent the day with my friend Wilbur White, who delivered eggs in the town, and wrote my best poem in the class (not a good poem, probably, but my best effort). I didn't begin writing stories for the collection again until I lived in Brooklyn and was teaching first grade, and I was homesick in a way then too—for the South, for Virginia. I spent the first summer I worked on the stories going every day to the Rose Reading Room at the New York Public Library, which was the most beautiful place I knew of to work. And every day I channeled home.

Central Virginia and the Mattaponi River are central to all of the stories, even those that take place elsewhere. Do you consider yourself a "Southern" writer? Do you like the term?

I do, and I don't mind the term at all. Place matters to me a lot, in my life and in my writing, so of course I write about it. The South is the place I know the best, and I love the

way it can exist in your mind, even when you're not there. When I taught in Brooklyn, so many of my students talked wistfully about going "down South" for the summer or holidays—their families lived in Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia—and I used to pine for the South with them.

Were there any particular authors who influenced the book? Who are you reading now?

I think three big influences for the book were Flannery O'Connor, Richard Yates, and Edward P. Jones. Right now I'm reading Andrew Solomon's nonfiction, Lydia Davis, Joan Didion. I read for the magazine *At Length*—I'm the prose editor there—and it's exciting to discover new fiction and essays that way. Many of the books I've loved most in the past couple of years are all from small presses: Edith Pearlman's *Binocular Vision* (Lookout), Michelle Latiolais's *Widow* (Bellevue), and Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Coffee House).

***Mataponi Queen* was your debut book. I may be wrong, but isn't it unusual for authors to debut with short story collections? Why do you think that is? The market aside, how would you read the form's vital signs?**

I think it's a shame when we assume that particular forms—poetry collections, essay collections, story collections—won't sell or find an audience. A couple of years ago *Mataponi Queen* was a finalist for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, and I was invited to the International Short Story festival in Cork, Ireland. The poet and short story writer Tess Gallagher, who lives for part of the year in Ireland, read the story "Girls" to a room packed with short story fans. I remember, at about the twenty-minute mark, starting to have a sense that she would have to end the story in the middle, as people do for American audiences. But she read the whole story—it took about an hour—and everyone was transfixed. It was a great reminder that a short story can be as powerful and entertaining as any other form of art or entertainment.

I also think that people are finding other ways to interact with work that has a similar structure to the short story—storytelling events are really popular right now, as is longer, more narrative journalism. To me, there is almost nothing more artistically satisfying than a really great short story—you can read it in a single sitting, can get to know the whole thing so well that you carry it around in your head.

The book came out through Graywolf. Could you talk a little about what it's like to work with a nonprofit publisher?

Working with Graywolf has been a dream—they are very supportive of all of their writers, which I understand is not always true at larger houses. I always love their catalog, and I appreciate the mission of Fiona McCrae to publish work that will last and that might not find a home at a big publisher. That means poetry, short story collections, essays, works in translation, as well as some more difficult or playful novels. I'm really proud to have my work published by Graywolf.

How do you begin a story? Do you know from the beginning how the story will end?

Every story is different—sometimes I'll know, and sometimes not. I like to have a good idea of the characters when I start a story, what they want and what's getting in their way, but I don't always know how the story will turn out. Sometimes research during the writing process will lead me in that direction—for example, when I was writing "Jonas," I happened to be reading a book on Fabergé, which helped me discover the metaphor at the end of the story.

What are the challenges of balancing writing with teaching? Do your students influence your work at all?

Teaching in the K-12 classroom, which I have done a lot of, makes it pretty hard to find time to write. It's an exhausting job, emotionally and mentally, but it does give you an opportunity to get to know a variety of different people and communities. I've certainly drawn inspiration from people I've met through teaching—from elementary school to GED classes to continuing education programs. These days I've been doing artist residencies in public schools across North Carolina—a great way to get to know different parts of my state—and next year, I'll be a Visiting Writer at Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, North Carolina.

Do you ever experience writer's block? If so, how do you overcome it?

I do, of course. It helps to eliminate distractions on one hand (like the accursed Internet), but also to invite inspiration by reading or listening to music or being outside. I live near a beautiful spot on the Haw River and if I get stuck while I'm in the middle of something, going for a run or a walk will usually help.

Simply from the demographic breakdown of the characters, Native American, African American, the elderly, evangelical and transgender, the stories are obviously not autobiographical. But they never slip into caricature or easy cliché. How do you find the balance?

I see some part of myself in all of my characters. I relate very much to Loretta, even though she looks different from me on the outside—we are both caretakers, both reserved, both believers in a traditional kind of hard work (and getting up early). Other characters, like Lila, I drew out of trying to understand people in my life better, making up stories to explain their behavior. (Lila started with an attempt to understand my very severe principal at P.S. 40 in Brooklyn. She was beautiful, glamorous—and punishing. My theory was that she was missing love.)

Did anyone criticize you for writing in the perspective of an African- or Native American?

Not really, though sometimes people will be surprised when they meet me. I think some people also are uncomfortable asking the question, so I appreciate being asked about it. I just don't feel that a book about life in a specific place would be as interesting if it only looked at a single demographic. It wouldn't tell the story of the whole place.

In a fiction-writing workshop, we once had a heated debate about using a specific lexicon in stories—brand names, television show titles, etc. Could you weigh in? I was excited when at the end of “Jonas,” the two protagonists visit a Fabergé exhibit at the VMFA. There’s such a thrill to recognizing specific sites in a book’s setting. But do you ever worry that such specificity limits a novel or story’s accessibility?

My professor and mentor Michelle Latiolais was always very adamant that a story should be understood on its own terms, and that it's up to the reader to correct his own ignorance. I agree with that, but also felt like you—I like seeing places I know represented in fiction, even if they aren't the most famous places. To me, they're landmarks. Once after a reading in the Richmond area, someone from King William came up to me and said, "I know just where that dip in the road is." I thought that was the greatest compliment.

What can we expect next?

I've just finished a novel called *The Ugly Bear List*, and am working on some essays on infertility and assisted reproduction that began with a piece I published in *Orion* last spring. I hope to turn these essays into a nonfiction book—I'll keep you posted!

What advice would you give to younger writers?

Read, cultivate your writing mentors, and get outside your comfort zone personally, whether it's through travel, work, or volunteering. It also helps if you're prepared to live simply. My husband and I live in an 800-square foot cabin in the woods of North Carolina. It's like our own personal artist colony.



MARATHON A, MARATHON B

or

ABOUT THAT TIME I CHEWED GUM UNTIL MY JAW WAS SO EXHAUSTED I COULDN'T SLEEP

Morris Reese

A. We are not zen

I think, not *one* or *balanced* or anything but just
barely clinging to a mostly-spherical rock spinning through
Hydrogen and
Oxygen,
displaced Carbon.

When I write, you are my moon
with misunderstood orbit.

I am an annoyed celestial body
and curious, you inevitably ask why—

I say, "You are my moon."
"I hold you up."
"I have to."

B. But when we run, I am your moon
with lackadaisical orbit.

The tongues of your sneakers bulge through ropes like holiday ham
New Balance. I tie my laces barely
and tuck the excess string into the side of my Nikes
thinking of the time you warned me,
"It'll rub your feet raw."

Heads dodge up and down, disappearing, reappearing again like waves.
Your hair flips right and then left and then disappears too.
You are everyone
else. Numbers
and skin
bright neon colors
and I am holding my knees
a boulder in your forward-moving stream.

TWO POEMS

Hannah Morgan

CHICKEN POX

...I got the chicken pox...shot...again it popped popped
...under my skin and now it's a red itchy dot...knob...it's
...a mound that felt...wet after needle out...touched it
...fast after needle...she said...just don't be around anyone
...compromised...i said...i feel woozy...and she fanned me
...for some time.

I SEE MYSELF

Soon I see myself—wailing—emptied—
sitting alone on my mother's couch
my father took, gave to me—

Alone—a terror—fumbling to name
unsteady things—dispensable—unwilling
to be satisfied, to live alone—emptied—
feeling no pushpull—wailing—
on the leather couch—

I see myself like I saw myself alone—wailing—
on a wood floor in a secret border town—
emptied—sun-diffused and scrubbed-down—

I see myself like I saw myself unable to wail—
alone—throwing what I own into a pile on the linoleum
floor and leaving it—dispensable—pushpull
eighth floor balcony—

I see myself like I saw myself hailing a cab—alone—
at ten in the icy morning in Chinatown—emptied—
busy people staring at the blank space where
my head should be—a terror

How to Find Your Reflection in a Kaleidoscope

Erin Gerety

1. Kisses you during a game of truth-or-dare when you're thirteen and it's still a sin to love another woman like *that*. You get scared beforehand and tell the party you've never kissed anyone before. Kalena says, "You aren't gay if you don't feel anything."

Spend the rest of the sleepover both dying to kiss her again and dying because you think you might be a lesbian. Brush it all off before Mom picks you up for church in the morning.

2. Kisses you in Ariel's living room at her eighth-grade graduation party. You know that he has a girlfriend but he also has a boner and everyone is outside on the deck feeding ducks. You're wearing a Deborah Harry shirt from Hot Topic and your lime green eyeliner somehow made it through a dip in the lake and his hands are actually on your hips and it's better than any slow dance. Halfway through kissing you, he tells you to slow down.

You feel your cheeks burning for doing it wrong.

You find out on Monday that you made his girlfriend cry in the bathroom, that everyone thinks you're a slut and that he eats dog food in Ziploc baggies with his lunch.

You might actually hate everything.

3. Kisses you and kisses you and kisses you for what feels like the whole summer but is only a few short weeks. You discover neck kisses pressed against the chain-link fence of the tennis court, tongue kisses with your toes barely hitting the thick green film of the neighborhood lake, and cheek kisses hiding behind the peeling lifeguard shack at the pool. Think you're falling in love.

Come back from a family vacation to see him kissing Reece, devastated because you were only away for a week and because she has way bigger boobs than you.

Almost die laughing watching them try to kiss underwater for twenty seconds.

4. Kisses you after school by a light post spotted with more pieces of gum than you could ever believe. At a party in Chelsea's bedroom on the top bunk with everyone else in the room, he tries to take your shirt off. Say no while simultaneously thanking the god - that you aren't sure you believe in - that you decided against stuffing your bra.

Let him take your shirt off anyway.

5. Kisses you in a skating rink just days after you break up with Sebastian. Kisses you in the Lynnhaven mall movie theater. Then he'll tell you that he knows a spot, somewhere more secluded, where he can kiss you more.

Let him unbutton your jeans beside the dumpster of a JCPenney. Revel in the rush of his skin and February air. Think about having sex with him, feel bad because it's a sin, and don't give him head because who wants to put their mouth on *that*? But get all giddy when he serenades you on the phone with "Nothing Better," or when he tries to sneak over and sing songs up to your bedroom window.

Be honest when he says he loves you and you don't know what love is.

Hang up the phone when he says he wants to marry you. Who are you kidding? You're hardly fourteen.

6. Kisses you hard on a cool June night against your father's Corolla. Hold his hand, trust him, plan your getaway. Lose your virginities together on pure white sheets that never get stained. Hold on to his caramel skin, thick black silk of hair and butter-scotch voice; he'll be your first for a lot of things. Make music and love and instant pad Thai, smoke his papa's Marlboro Lights through your nose in the garage, Reds at the park down the street. Pack his bowls at band practice, learn the way he lights your cigarette and how his eyes squint when he really smiles. Cry when he plays you records and writes you poems and songs and letters.

Cry more when you find out from a friend that he fucked Anna while they were drunk and watching Harry Potter.

Cry on your kitchen floor when you can't even look at the lunch you just made.

Cry when you realize this is all just the beginning.

7. Kisses you in winter with the softest lips. This is where you fall in love with long drives, full conversations and fuller facial hair. He's twenty-fucking-one, sneaks you margaritas at dinner. Hell, he's actually buying you dinner. You get butterflies when he takes you up to his king-sized bed (it almost takes up the whole room, there's a TV hanging from the ceiling and it reminds you of a dental office). You get dizzy at the weight of his body on yours.

Your pulse quickens with his fingers dancing on the hem of your shirt, his new, wet mouth stirring swirls in your veins.

You're almost shaking at the snap of the button on your jeans.

With all that blood rushing and bodies moving and your teeth hooking on to the elastic of his boxers, you almost don't notice his phone vibrating on the bed side table.

When he answers the phone all, "*Hey baby...*" you don't get those boxers much further. You get up. You get dressed. You go home.

8. Gets you so drunk on tequila that your words become wasted giggles. Lie on his bed and laugh endlessly while the two of you split a joint. You've never been so fucked-up and you've never felt so free. Let him kiss your cheek, your neck while you're laughing at cartoons. Let his hands slither up your tank top, gliding on summer sweat. But you take off your own pants.

Halfway through having sex with you, let him cover you with a blanket and sell his friend an eighth of weed. Let him come back, kiss your neck, grip your thighs.

Let him walk you just halfway home.

Your parents laugh at how drunk you are. You're shocked that you're not grounded.

Makes a pipe out of a bell pepper, passes it to you with some bud called *Alaskan*

9. *Thunderfuck*. Paints a self-portrait of blue and yellow and grey on your bedroom wall while the two of you are drinking triple-sec and vodka and five kinds of juice out of teacups. Your lips meet mid-sentence and you're faltering for breath. This is your best friend and she's kissed you before but this time your tongue becomes bubblegum, your flesh electric. You get lost in the silk of her sundress, the salt on her skin, her hair like dune grass on your shoulders. Without words, your bodies fall fluid, the river meeting the sea.

Kiss her in the morning while your mother is making pancakes.

Try not to blush at the breakfast table, a huge hickey on your right tit.

And soft petals of bite marks on her neck.

Kisses you with a little too much tongue while you're standing on a palette of 10. cardboard boxes behind Hotline Skateboards. Takes you out to the spaceship where you spray-paint a giraffe on the side of the warehouse. Keeps you out way past curfew making out with you in the backseat of that red Jeep named Geoffrey, the one you make him drive to Rite Aid to get condoms so you can snatch up his V-card. Tell him you love him while you're eating freeze-pops and watching *Scrubs*.

Spend the next two years and some change as each other's beat and pulse. Skip class to surf, build a mobile bed, drink gas station coffee and smoke clove cigarettes, share clothes. Plan for a future bungalow in Buxton, summers of Arizona iced teas and bamboo surfboards, cheap tacos and beautiful breaks on the coast.

You aren't moving to Richmond because he is—you just don't want to move to Farmville. But get giddy when you realize your dorm rooms are just down the hall from each other.

Try to hold yourself together when he cheats once (long brown hair, glasses).

And again (too much eyeliner, fake tan).

Cheat back, never tell.

A few more times (perfect curls, perfect smile).

Then the last time (fucking sixteen?!).

Try to stand tall. Try to find out what that means.

Run.

Hurt each other over and over, slowly clawing into skin and bone.

Throw your beer on him in an alley in the snow. Yell, "Fuck you." Mean it.

Skip one meal, skip four. Little blue pills, little yellow pills. Learn how to chain-smoke, always carry a water bottle. Memorize the art of Adderall for emptiness.

Run farther.

Lose your head like never before.

Drop acid on Halloween while you're dressed as Puss in Boots. Someone's 11 watching *Party Monster* in the living room and his best friend is the perfect Hunter S. Thompson. His eyes start to tessellate as he swigs spiced rum. Your head keeps echoing that line about windows to the soul.

Sneak into Bear's girlfriend's bedroom. She left on four black lights. Alien skin on yours, reveling in this psychedelic mess.

Wake up before everyone else, sweating on a couch with most of your costume missing. Walk five blocks in your underwear and cat ears.

Stop to smoke a cigarette on the bridge. Smile and wave at the passing cars.

Saturday night speed binge. He wants to go on a walk, grabs your hand, puts a
 12. menthol in your mouth. Freshmen girls squeal at how cute you two are as his lips feel
 like frosting on yours. He'll keep you up all night and walk with you to 7-11 in the
 morning. He'll tell you to keep this a secret.

He'll call after a bottle of whiskey. Then after staying up on Vyvanse for two days.
 After doing some designer drug you didn't even know existed.

You know he always calls someone else when you decide to flip your phone over.

You start to lose count. You've lost count over time. Thirteen might really be
 13. twenty or twenty-five, your numbers have been off since seven.

But thirteen feels a little lucky.

Thirteen will kiss you when you're about to walk home and you'll be so thrown
 for a loop that you're thrown off course. He'll see your self-destruction when some
 undiagnosed infection decides to show itself when he pushes inside of you, and
 you'll be speechless by the blood stain between your legs, your relationship instantly
 soiled; but he makes you coffee in the morning and takes you out for dinner the next
 week. He won't break you but he'll show you how broken you've been.

You'll let him take your picture. His studio will be cold and he will be shaking,
 though you'll be the naked one. He'll lay out a pure white backdrop, cover you in
 warm, white light, take test shot after test shot.

And his hands, they will tremble.



SNAKE

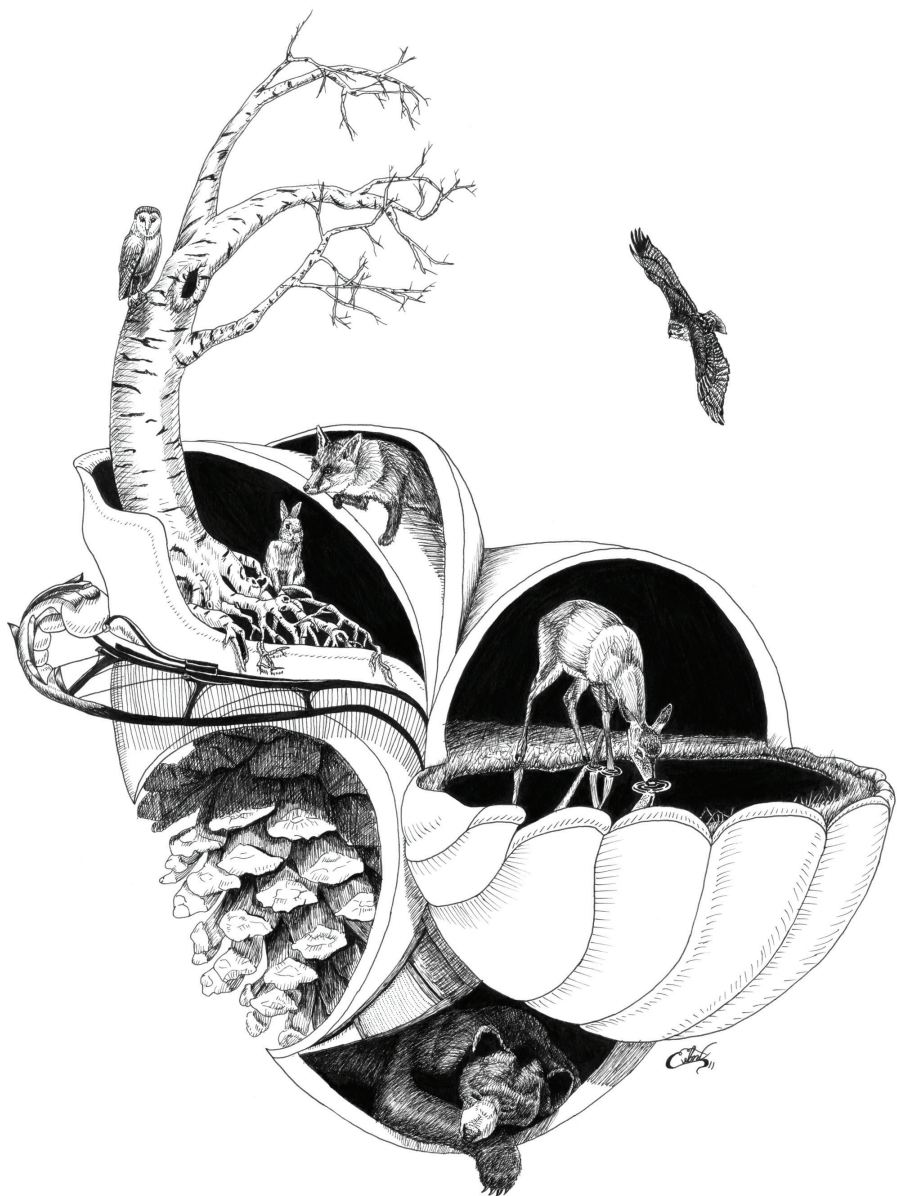
Allison Lukehart, Ann Schoew,
Rachel Sheeran, Nina Stoddard,
Samantha Wood, Byerly Young





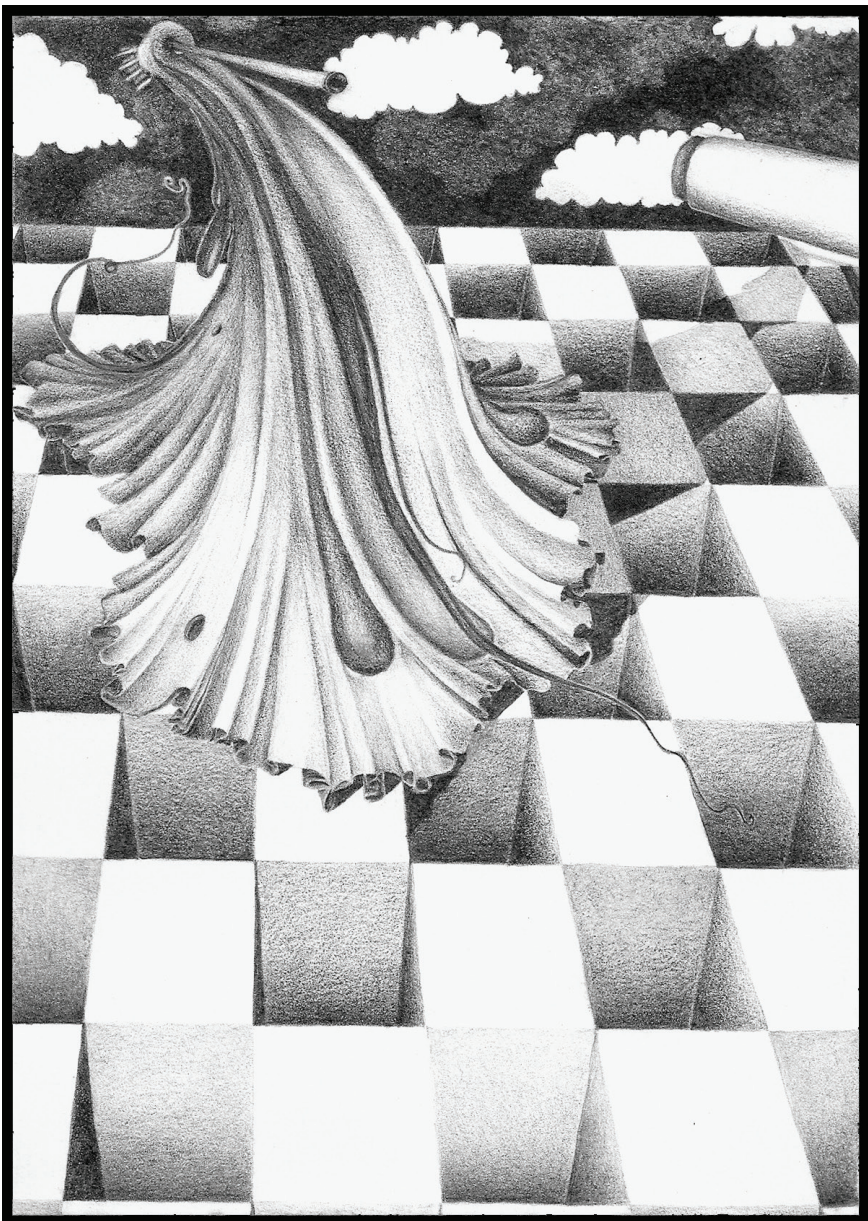
ISOLETTE
Stephen Mayer





IF YOU PUSH ME I'LL SWING

Emily Herr



TORNADO ALLEY
Nicholas Scarpinato







Zach Gibson







WORKING THE SYSTEM WORKING THE WHEEL
Arwen Falk



HORSE AND HOUND
Skye Young





GROWTH
Kyle Saxton



ABE NO SEMEI
Emily Herr



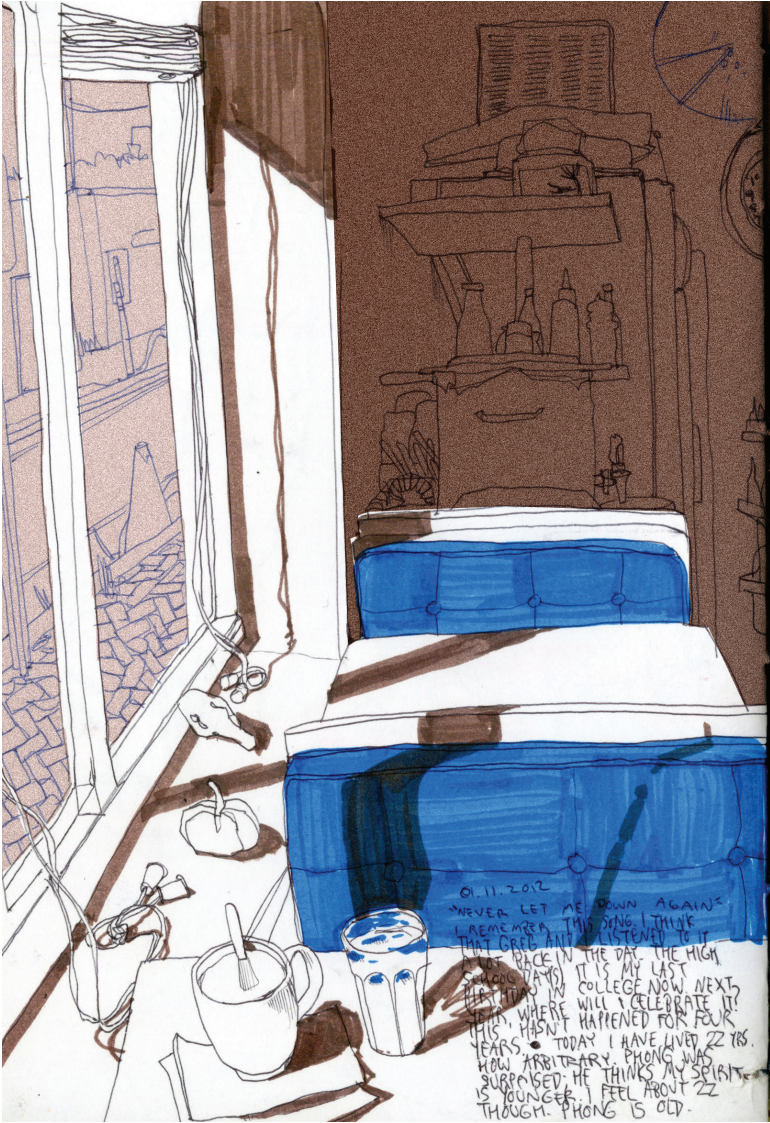
SELF PORTRAIT

Skye Young



DAVID LYNCH AND ISABELLA ROSSELLINI
Grace Popp





FRESCA

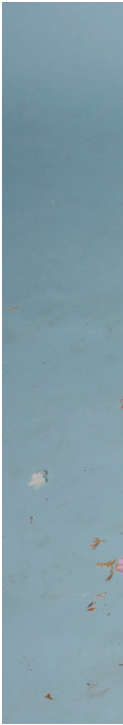
Eleanor Doughty







Helen Stoddard





THE HELPERS
Nicolas Scarpinato





AMBIGUOUS JOY
Jacob Eveland





FLAT AFFECT

Skyler Thompson



IT'S NOT THE SAME
Robalū Gibsun



GIBSUN 2012





THE COLLECTION
Sarah Apple



CONSTELLATIONS

Rory Hatchel

The sky is a bitch
curled at her master's feet.
She has stolen
each star from the dusk, one
by one, and buried them
in my neighbor's yard.
T. calls them ghosts, sprinkles them
across his home
like memories of midnight.

The skyline is a hearth
gone cold, as the rain
takes off the city's clothes,
slowly unzipping bridges.

John Coltrane improvises
a gentle solo
for his second wife,
but Heartbreak is struggling
to keep the candles lit.
She can't hear the steam
in his song
rising, a flower budding
inside dumpsters
and drunks alike.

The swan song he whistles
is emptier than the black tar
dripping off my fingertips,
the tea I left on the counter at home
where Heartbreak waits up
for me in the dark.

THE BEST IN TOWN

Matt Luger

The shadow of their small white house stretches out, past the front lawn and into a field of grassy hills. A gravel driveway divides the hills and passes through a brief stretch of woods before reaching the main road. The woods completely enclose the house and field.

I watch Jane fall as I hide behind one of Terry's two cars sitting on the lawn, a couple of weathered clunkers on cinder blocks. Just as Terry strikes her, a wind blows the grass in green waves, sweeping around until it brushes me where I'm kneeling. I feel Terry's force in that wind, feel it as Jane lands hard on the ground.

Once Terry's hand stops shaking, he brings it before his eyes, surveying it. He runs his other hand over it slowly and smears the traces of Jane's blood left by the blow. After a few seconds, Jane turns toward him and spits more blood on the lawn. She wipes her face with her own trembling arm and through cherry lips says only, "Terry..."

The house's shadow recedes then. Clouds block the sun and force the landscape into a pallor. Terry composes himself. He lights a cigarette, not frowning, not smiling.

"Now, I didn't wanna be mean, hon," Terry says, adjusting his oily gray cap. "You know I don't like thinking of myself that way. And I always respected what you done around here, keeping me good and full, keeping the house upright. I made my appreciation clear enough, I think. And it seems you never need worry about getting yours when you got an itch. I was always around for you, right? But I guess you still needed more scratching, like that itch of yours had to *bleed* it itched so bad."

Jane's eyes wander from his. Terry smiles bitterly and waits for her eyes to come back to him before starting again.

"I bet you still think you got one up on me. I suppose you do. But..." Terry pauses. His voice quivers. "But you're still a goddamn liar, and that knocks you down a bit, don't it?" He gives Jane several seconds to respond and, getting nothing but a hard stare, he goes on.

"Now, I just shown you what I do to liars, and to be sure I don't have to do it again, I'm gonna give you a chance to tell the truth."

Terry and Jane both turn their heads when they hear my feet rustle the grass. I duck to the right, down behind the tall weeds clustered over the hood of his neglected Chevy and peek through.

When she sees nothing, Jane lowers her head in slow disappointment, but Terry holds his stare in my direction a moment longer than is comfortable. It's clear that he isn't looking at me, though. Rather, he is looking over and past me, past the hills and the woods beyond, looking over the bend of the Earth. And his expression, similar to

surprise, suggests that something is looking back at him. When he returns from his thought, he glances calmly at Jane. Suddenly my nerves are on alert, and I can see the same in her.

Terry looks down at the cigarette in his hand, dropping it to the grass and pivoting the toe of his boot into it long after it has extinguished. Suddenly the boot stops.

"I don't really care why you had to hurt me," he says. "It's nothing I can change, is it? That's why you're gonna have to tell me who he is." Reaching into his pocket, Terry fishes out a folded piece of yellow paper and tosses it to the ground between them. Jane grimaces. I can tell how much it pains her to see the note.

It pains me just as much. I close my eyes and feel the heavy movement of my hand placing that yellow note in Jane's purse; the memory is fresh, less than a day old. At first I had left the note sticking out, then changed my mind and shoved it farther down into the purse. It could take a few days, I had thought, but she would find it soon. I've never felt like such a damn coward.

I had pulled my hand out just as Jane returned to my bedroom from the bathroom. She sat next to me on the bed in her only flower print dress, a bun of sandy blond hair tied neatly above her head. She scratched my shoulder and smiled.

"Wish we could do this more often," she said.

I only smirked and raised my eyebrows in answer. She didn't know it would be our last time together. Not yet, at least. My head was swimming with guilt. I never would have thought of myself as someone who could become mixed up in an affair. But it had happened anyway. Jane looked into my eyes, probing me with her two jade irises. They took on the rich color I first noticed when we met, the day she came into my bakery on Caroline Street and ordered two loaves of sourdough.

"I hear you guys are the best in town," she had said. The same flower print dress rustled with the light breeze that blew through the bakery's open door. Her hair was pushed behind her ears, but a single blond lock had fallen over her right eye. She didn't bother moving it.

I focused intently on the jades. "I don't know where you heard that, but if that's what they're saying, I won't argue."

She laughed. "And what do you think? How does the best in town see itself?"

I shrugged. And smiled.

"Well," she said with lowered eyelids, "I hope these are as good as everyone says. I have family coming for dinner and I figured I'd listen to everyone's recommendation."

"Let's hope everyone is right."

"Let's hope."

I took a pastry bag and wrote my number on the back. "Now, if they turn out to be wrong and I somehow ruin dinner for your family, just let me know. I'll make it up to you." I slid the bag across the counter.

Instead of taking it, she shook her head, scrunching her eyes and strong, freckled nose to decline playfully. "Keep it. I'm sure I'll be here again."

I folded my arms and took a step back. "Let's hope."

Her eyes held my glance for a moment, then she looped the bag's handle over her arm and turned to go.

“Enjoy your dinner, miss,” I called after her.
 “Jane,” she called back and closed the door behind her.

Two weeks later we were in my apartment, my arms around her naked shoulders as we lay close together on the living room couch. I gave her one long kiss on the forehead, and before I released, she whispered to me that she was married. Almost three years now.

I didn't know what to say. I asked about her husband, not expecting her to reveal much, but she was surprisingly open. She told me that Terry was a good man, but she had realized her mistake shortly after the wedding.

She looked down at my chest. Her fingers twirled a piece of her hair inward, then outward. “He stays out with his friends a lot,” she said. “They're all people I can't stand. When he comes home, always late, he usually drags one of them back with him, and I'm supposed to make sure there's food for them to trash-talk their other friends over.”

I listened, but I was still trying to process the new role I'd assumed. I was once in Terry's position myself.

I thought of Anna. I had dated her for two years until a brief text message to the wrong boyfriend revealed months of deceit. I didn't take it well.

Sucker, loser—Anna's words still stung. I should have seen it coming.

Now in the offender's shoes with Jane, I was shocked to find myself feeling, not remorseful, but curious. I wanted to know more about Terry, and Jane didn't hold back; she was glad to tell me her feelings about Terry. The absent husband. The dispassionate lover. The man who, despite all the slander between him and his friends, was timid and kind to each of them in person. Obedient, even.

For all her answering, Jane didn't ask me anything, even the most important question. I answered it anyway.

“I want this to continue,” I said, “but we'll only meet here. Any time you're expected at home, be at home—don't raise suspicion.” She only nodded and brought her head close to my chest.

For two months, that's how it went. Jane would meet me at the bakery toward the end of my shift, and we walked the two blocks together to my apartment.

One morning in particular stayed with me, so that I forgot my guilt for a moment and realized how good things were. It was a day when Jane brought the cool Tuesday morning breeze into the bakery behind her. I kept the door propped open, trading the scents of hot rye loaves and sugar pastries for fresh May air, inviting a steady rush of customers in from Caroline Street. Jane stood beside the counter while I handled the influx of orders at the cash register, her small mouth smiling patiently as the line slowly faded.

I snuck peeks at her periodically throughout the morning. Her eyes scanned several times over the three small, round tables fixed against the opposite mirrored wall, around to the far end of the counter where four gooseneck lamps hung over a display case of layer cakes, flaky croissants and blueberry pies. They passed over to the wall of warm breads behind, running up to the front end of the counter where I checked out orders. When the last customer shuffled out, Jane closed the door behind him and sat

at the first table.

"Not bad for a Tuesday," she said, looking outside. "Hell of a day for a picnic, isn't it?"

I grinned at her and organized the bread baskets on the wall. "I need to watch out for these picnic days." I motioned toward the nearly-empty pastry case on the countertop. "They give everyone a sweet tooth."

Jane got up and came behind the counter. She stood on her toes and breathed hot into my ear, "Think I've got a sweet tooth myself."

"You're corny," I said and locked the front door.



A few days before Terry discovered the yellow note, I heard the jingle of the bakery door from the back. I came out to meet my customer, and found a man I had never met, but felt I knew intimately. The man whose picture I had seen once in Jane's wallet. Terry scratched his head through his gray cap as he looked at the pastries in the display case and licked his lips. He was thinner than his photo suggested, and his hair was longer now, brown strands sticking out from under the cap and falling past his ears. He wore a jean jacket even though it was a hot July day, and the cuffs of his sleeves were spotted with oil stains. I caught myself staring at him and stammered when I asked, "What can I get for you?"

His eyes darted nervously from the display case to mine, and he quickly straightened his posture. "Uh," he said, pointing at the pastries. "You guys sell these in half-dozens?"

I walked behind the counter to the case and swallowed. "Yeah, we do." I didn't know what else to say.

Terry nodded. I felt awkward, but also curious. I swallowed again. "So you, um, need some sweets for work? A party or something?"

Jesus.

Terry scratched his cap again. "My wife, actually." He was almost embarrassed to admit it. "We, uh, had an argument. I wanna make it up to her." He chuckled a little and looked at me for empathy. "I mean, women like sweets, right? I was thinking of taking her on a picnic or something."

My stomach turned to knots and I tried my best to hide it. Once again, I nodded. Terry looked back at the pastries. "Well, everyone says you're the best in town, so I figured I'd stop by."

I just stood there, bobbing my head and picking at my fingernails behind the counter until Terry decided on his half-dozen. After I boxed up the pastries, checked him out and watched him leave, I stood thinking at the register for a good twenty minutes, my thoughts interrupted only by the occasional customer. The guilt was back, worse than it had ever been. I thought of Anna again and felt a cold disdain toward myself, the same contempt I had felt for Anna's faceless lover. As much as my feelings had grown for Jane over the last two months, I couldn't hurt the man I'd just met. I reached for the yellow pad sitting beside the register and wrote:

Jane,

These past two months together have been wonderful, but it can't go on.

I just don't think it's right anymore.

I'm very sorry.

I tore out the page, folded it and put it in my pocket. It was blunt, but I thought length would only be more cruel. And Jane didn't deserve cruelty any more than Terry did.

After I hid the yellow note in Jane's purse a few days later, I felt some relief. Some, but not enough. I suffered from a different kind of guilt after she hastily left my apartment, upset that I had grown reticent when she came back from the bathroom. Before she walked out, she turned to me as she strapped the hidden note to her shoulder and lowered her eyebrows.

"I hope you're just not feeling well," she said, and her eyes suddenly softened. "Let's hope that's all it is."

As much as I wanted to, I didn't reply. She looked down, nodded lightly and walked out the door. What a terrible coward I was.

Sleep wouldn't come that night. I felt like a bastard. Even if Terry was a decent guy, Jane had seen me as a solution to her own unhappiness. Instead of talking with her and possibly helping her out of that unhappiness, I cut her off completely. Cut her off with three terrible lines.

I needed to talk to her. The next morning I tried her number. She didn't answer. I wondered if she had found the note. I figured that was for the best; we needed to talk in person anyway. I found her address in the phone book and left in the early afternoon.

Now, as Terry waits for Jane to say something about the yellow note folded between them on the grass, she only stares at the ground. He finally grows impatient and points at it.

"It ain't signed," he says, "but you know that. You know a lot that I don't. Most of it I don't care about. I know it must've stung to get a note like that from him, though. Am I right about that Jane, hon?"

Jane bares her red teeth. "Go to hell, Terry."

Terry doesn't respond. He looks as if he is handing himself over to a possessing spirit.

"I'm a jealous man, Jane. You know that. Now I see you there on the ground with a busted face, but I still ain't satisfied. You know what'll do it, though. You know whose blood'll scratch this fucker's itch. So you better tell me his name, or else you might not have a jaw to tell anything with."

Jane's chin shakes, but she's silent. An hour ago, Terry's threat may have sounded empty. But now, something in him is determined. He has crossed a line he hadn't found before today—anything is possible now. Jane remains still, visibly forcing slow breaths. She isn't going to give me away, even after how I treated her. Even after her husband's violence, she is the stronger one. Raise it again Terry, I think. Raise that

goddamn fist again. I wonder how I could have hurt her, could have possibly left her to face this. Terry grins and moves close to Jane. Go ahead Terry, just bring it up one more time.

He does.

Jane looks calm. I'm not.

Just as Terry winds up for the next blow, the sun bursts through the clouds and the wind picks up again with force. The rustle of the grass is loud enough to drown out my sprint around the Chevy and across the lawn, loud enough for me to surprise Terry with a tackle from the side. As soon as he is under me, I let my fists fly.

I don't bother to look back at Jane who shrieks and whimpers behind me, I'm too blind with sunlight and grass and a face that distorts more and more under the gray cap stained with black and now red, the same black and red I had seen when my old, dear Anna's mascara ran down her face and mixed with the blood I brought out of her after she called me sucker, loser, after she said I should've seen this coming for a long time, but after she took what she should've seen coming for a long time, I heard her whimper the way bloodied blond Jane whimpers behind me now and the way the bloody gray cap whimpers below me now and I know he's me, I know it, knew it from the moment I saw his loser, sucker face in that crackled wallet photo, and as the whimpers come from all around me and within me I think to myself—think with absolute clarity—that all of us should have seen this coming for a long time.



INTERIOR OF A STUDY THROUGH A CASEMENT WINDOW

F. Lyndon German

Darling, hidden by an unruly shade,
turn towards me
I've haunted you for some time—



Turn now, towards this spy
Clever curves and careful spine, I pray
for once to see your face

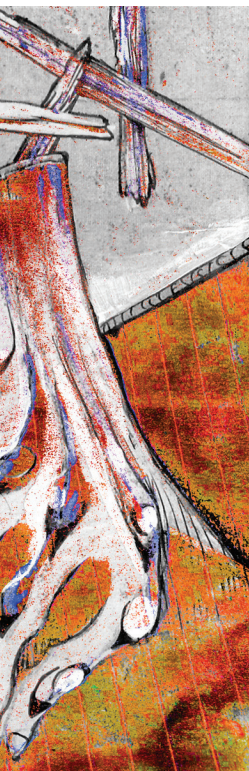
Those eyes
so kind at first
now tweak and tread, walking down
along my spine
lonely gaze, such heavy faith
weighs fallen
to my hands and knees, I pray
at the naked altar



THE DAMNATION OF THE VERONICA BARRIE

Matt Franklin

Illustration by Templeton Kelley



The lamp's oil has almost burnt its course, and the dead boy continues to pound his bloody bones against the cabin door. His barking laughter will continue until he has gained entry into the cabin. Time is a luxury I do not have, and there is a tale that must be told. So I will begin with the sinking of the *Veronica Barrie*, and everything that has brought me to these final hours. I will allow the Reader of this account to decide whether to accept my story as truth, or dismiss it as the ravings of a mad sea captain. Mad or not, this is the truth as far as I can fathom, but I am sure there is a tale that contradicts mine. For even monsters tell their own stories.

We were sailing down the North Sea on our returning course from Denmark. We had delivered weapons and munitions to the Danish military. Napoleon's reign ended half a century ago, but conflict continues, and our beloved empire is grateful to profit from the occasion.

It was in the first week of our voyage to Edinburgh, when our helmsman, Gabriel Daniels, shouted from the bird's nest that he had spotted a beacon. A boy only thirteen years of age, Daniels had the sharpest pair of eyes aboard ship. I walked onto the deck to investigate the light. Never had I seen a more luminous flare at sea, a white incandescent orb. The orb's glow was fickle, though. It would dim, only then to brighten, blinding any spectator. We found the sight welcoming since there were no stars to be seen, and shifts in the wind threatened a storm. We stood on the deck, perplexed. The evening seemed timeless as each of us gaped at the light. I humored the thought that this strange torch was a divine blessing, spearing hastily toward us.

Then, as the light came closer, I saw a set of wings engulfed in flames.

The beast was no longer than a sturgeon. It soared around Daniels, as if it were studying him. Beside me, Daniels showed no fear, but curiosity. Before any sailor could remark, the winged creature launched itself through the deck. The startling smell of burnt wood struck me, as did sharp splinters from the broken deck. This was immediately followed by an explosion, casting Daniels and I into the water.

The *Veronica* was scattered along the waves. Daniels, having quick reflexes, found a piece of wood afloat, a piece formerly part of the ship's hull. I too grabbed hold of the drifting wood. We then started to kick, both of us swimming toward the floating wreckage, hoping to find others who had survived the disaster.

We spotted my first mate, McCord. The man was clutching a barrel. When he saw Daniels, he began to shout. The poor Scot tried to speak, but he couldn't prevent water from pouring into his mouth.

"Powder! Danes—didn't buy. Winged—set 'em off!"

McCord drank more than most of my officers, but in times of great crisis, the man could instantly return to sobriety and speak his words clearly. The Danes had refused to purchase a dozen kegs of gunpowder because of their financial struggles, undoubtedly the same kegs that the burning creature found as it penetrated our deck.

Daniels claimed he kicked a rock. Desperate to get out of the water, we headed toward the reef barrier we predicted ahead. McCord did his best to paddle behind us, cursing and spitting the entire way.

A deep and echoing splash startled me. I looked behind, to find McCord's barrel bobbing in the sea. When I heard the cries of my first mate, they were not at sea level. For some ungodly reason, they came from the sky. McCord screamed in terror while something amiss howled in laughter. It wasn't long before the man's doomed screams were extinguished, and the sea resumed its nocturne of lapsing waves.

Daniels, finding courage I could not compass, insisted that we continue to swim. Finally, we heard the scrape of wood on rock, and I collapsed onto the barrier from exhaustion. The land before us was less of an island, and more a collage of shambled rocks. We needed shelter; whatever had plucked McCord from the sea was still prowling the sky, and had already demonstrated its ghastly aggression.

Storm clouds shifted east, offering us a slither of moonlight. Despite the dark, Daniels' eyes were sharp as ever. He claimed to have spotted a cottage. As we approached, we noticed that the structure was in fact the cabin of a ship. The cabin was unevenly propped on the rocks, its vaulted rear cracked in what looked to be the wreckage from a collision.

Not far from the cabin, we discovered another peculiar structure: wooden decks removed from various vessels and overturned across the beach. Each deck had been battered through, a series of jagged craters, and each crater large enough for a body to pass through.

Before I could investigate further, I heard a crack. I turned around and found Daniels covered in blood, screaming at the corpse of McCord, which was wedged, broken, between two boulders. Then I heard another crack, this time something falling through one of the holes in the deck. Another crack followed, and I heard the distinct voice of my lieutenant cursing at the monsters until he fell into the tossing pit. The fate of my crew, spent as toys in a child's game.

A few of the voices sneered and boasted, but nothing was as chilling as the laughter I then heard. The laughter of the one I would soon come to know as Pete.

I grabbed the blood-soaked Daniels, and together we ran for the cabin. The cabin's interior was too dark to see anything. I could hear Daniels shuffling on the ground, hands searching wildly. I joined the search, and my hand landed on a flintlock pistol. I didn't expect the weapon to be functional, but placed it on my lap in any case. I thought it might give Daniels some comfort, a fragile hope that death was not certain.

Daniels was more successful in his search, as he emerged with a tinderbox. Our next course of action was to build a fire. We took whatever scraps of wood we could find and formed a small bundle. As the flames consumed the kindling, I looked at Daniels as if I had something to say, but nothing came to mind.

The two of us sat in silence, staring into the flames. The blood on Daniels' face had dried, as though red mud had caked to his forehead and cheeks. The silence agitated me. As far as I could understand, there were no survivors other than us, a grown sea captain and a child helmsman. Shame clung to me.

Daniels also appeared to tire of the silence. As he lifted his head from his knees, he spoke, "Sir, are you afraid?" The child did not stutter when he spoke, nor did his lips tremble. I feel now that he was awaiting my reply before deciding how scared he should be.

"I am," I said, unable to lie. "But when I'm scared, I remember when I was your age, and I first met Captain Bravo."

It was clear that a spark of curiosity ignited right then in the eager mind of Gabriel Daniels. I continued to tell my story, and Daniels forgot the bloodstains he wore on his face.

"In his time, Captain Bravo was the bravest sea captain. I was only twelve, and had just been assigned as captain's servant. He wore a red shirt when the sea dogs attacked. I would hide when pirates boarded our ship, but I could always spot Captain Bravo because of that bright red shirt he wore in battle."

"Why did he always wear a bright red shirt?"

"You know, Gabriel, I asked him that very same question. He told me that if he were to fall under blade or musket ball, the crew wouldn't know he was injured since the blood would blend with the color of his shirt. This would make his crew unafraid, and inspire them to fight."

"I wish I had a bright red shirt now," Daniels said as he rubbed the caked blood on his face.

"My boy, if you had a bright red shirt right now, you'd be nearly invisible."

Laughter had taken us, and the child I found from within continued.

"The biggest battle I had ever seen was the day of my thirteenth birthday. Our helmsman in the nest bellowed, 'Ten sea dog vessels on the west horizon!' Do you know what Captain Bravo told me?"

"Bring me my red shirt!" Daniels barked, trying to sound manly and fearless. I chuckled and shook my head.

"No, Gabriel, he said, 'Bring me my brown pants!'"

Daniels fell back from his sitting position and roared in laughter. I myself couldn't resist the urge either. McCord had always told Captain Bravo jokes better than anyone, but listening to Daniels' laughter in that dark cabin brought me the same satisfaction that McCord must have felt. Daniels and I continued to laugh, until I realized that the laughter was growing louder. To my horror, when I looked at Daniels, he stared back at me with shut lips.

The laughter continued—it surrounded the cabin, and all the while it sounded as though it were coming from one voice. Just as Daniels stood up in panic, the laughter ceased. Hundreds of thunderous taps sounded above, as if a hailstorm was pound-

ing the cabin roof. Daniels opened his mouth and muttered a few words. The noise above drowned out the boy's muttering, so that I am still unsure of what he said, but it sounded like *dancing*.

Daniels and I waited. I held the pistol in my hand firmly, slowly pulling back the hammer to the half-cock position. In the light of our campfire, I could see that the pistol was without flint. The hammer and barrel had rusted, and if powder had once been loaded, it would be too damp to ignite.

Silence returned only a few moments later. I looked around the cabin for something to improve our defenses, but could find neither kegs nor other weapons. Only broken stools, snapped boards, and a pile of papers that, oddly enough, had avoided deterioration.

As I walked to the other side of the cabin, the door flung open. I stood before the entrance, staring back at the dark. That is when I felt a light grip on my shoulder. The fingers felt thin and razor sharp as they pinched me through my coat and shirt. I turned my head to find a small, mutilated hand. It was repulsive. The grey skin was tattered and flaked and gave off the stench of putrid meat. The fingernails were bent completely back, the fingertips skinless, revealing yellow bones.

And then there was a voice, "Pardon us, Cap'un."

I felt a jolt of searing pain as the clutch tightened and lifted me above the ground. Warm blood rolled down my back. I could feel the cold air sweep through my coat, stinging fresh wounds. But my intruder would not let go. He slung me against one wall, and then onto the floor. I am unsure if he repeated this process as I lost consciousness after my second landing.

When I awoke, Daniels was nowhere to be found. The campfire was nothing but a pile of smoldering ash. Yet there was light. A lamp hung from the ceiling, and under it, an old man, sitting on the broken floor and puffing his pipe.

"Don't trouble yourself mariner, they took him. The child will return, whether you want him to or not. My name is Nate, the little bastard who knocked you around is Pete, and I'm sure you'll meet more of his friends. They're always eager to make new acquaintances."

"What are they?" I asked.

"Boys. Well, at one time or another they were. Souls bound to this land of rock and sand. They've got no sense of direction, no purpose, they just are. Those boys, they're just—"

"Evil," I interrupted. Nate smiled.

"No, mariner. Those boys are just lost. You see, this is a terrible place to live, but it's a maddening place to die. It is my belief that there are evils that lie in the earth, just as there are evils that lie in the sea. There's something rotten on this island, something that can't let go. Not even the soul of a child. You can't blame Pete. Your expectations of him are that of a mortal. If a mortal man spent his entire life here, he would go insane. Now imagine what would happen to an immortal child who must spend eternity here."

"The boy Daniels, I have to find him. Why did Pete take him?" I was growing anxious, but as I tried to lift myself from the ground, my right leg could not move.

Nate nodded, recognizing my helplessness. He had a look of sympathy, but there

wasn't anything he could do to help me. There wasn't anything I could do to help myself.

"Loneliness is a hard thing for a child, especially a dead one. Pete likes to make new friends, can you blame him? It is when we are children that we learn, but it is when we grow up that we understand. Pete never grew up; therefore he will never be allowed to understand his fate. It must be a tortuous thing, to be bound to a place where you can never grow old, can never leave, never find an end."

A steady breeze rolled through the crater where once a door stood. The pain was unbearable, and fatigue got the best of me. The excruciating throbs lessened as I found myself drifting into unconsciousness. When I awoke again, the lamp was still burning oil. The broken door had been boarded and barred from the inside. I turned to all corners of the cabin, but Nate was nowhere to be found.

I then found my hand resting on a pile of papers. I began reading the documents, and then much to my disturbance did I uncover the origins of Pete.

The author of the papers referred to a fishing vessel, the *Janus*. It appeared that the author was boatswain to the captain of the ship. The details of the ship's sinking were not specific, save that the author mentioned a fire. The only survivors were the author and the captain's son, Peter. Stuck on an island comprised of rock, the author killed the child and later turned the pistol onto himself. The testament was signed and dated by Petty Officer Nathaniel Smee of the *Janus*, Seventh, day of March in the year of our Lord Seventeen hundred and fifty-three. And below the document's original ending, newly written text in fresh ink...

For reasons unknown, I could never stop Peter, not even in death. He always had a great imagination, and I fear that death has only granted him more power. If you are wise, Captain, then you already know you will die here. Do not let Pete take your life. You must take your own. Only in death can one make a difference on this island. Resign from your duty as a sea captain of this world, and take upon the responsibilities as warden to this island in the next. Restraint is required.

Examining the ancient weapon, I realized that the rust had completely vanished, and the scent of fresh powder drifted from the barrel. I placed the pistol down, and found a quill resting in an inkwell, undoubtedly a parting gift from Nate. I turned over the last page of Nate's journal, and started writing.

The boarded door is pulsating, as the cold hands of Daniels bang outside. His laughter has changed, screeching like a rabbit snatched by an owl.

I find the ordeal amusing. A noble sea captain transformed into the nanny of demonic children. Perhaps my mind is slipping, but perhaps insanity is exactly what this "after-duty" requires. I pray for you, Reader, in all that is pure, I pray that if you have found this letter, I will have learned to restrain Pete. I can hear still more children arrive outside. They sound like banshees, and I am very tired.

A voice outside mentioned Captain Bravo; I think Daniels has been accepted among the other children. The lamp is flickering, and so our tale meets its conclu-

sion. This is a land where a man can never die, a child can never age, and questions of the soul can never be answered. Yes, my Reader, this truly is a land of endless never. I now ready myself to leave this world, but not this island. Smee was right. Pete in all his demonic glory deserves an adversary. So that is my tale, but if you are a wise reader, take it as warning. For if you find yourself sailing down the North Sea, keep an eye out for a treacherous phoenix, and listen closely to the night wind for the sound of a child's laughter.

Apologetically Yours,
Captain J.S. Hook of the *Veronica Barrie*



STAND UP FOR STORY TIME

Bradford Pearce

'Custer that', she said, meaning
more than one thing, but mainly

to leave but to give it one last shot,

to extend the lark

lines for the lovelorn, Sweet Christ,
desperate and afraid, they

mean-mug next to you in your
prisoner-pyramid form.

George Armstrong Custer made no errors,
been square for a hundred years.

And so, this is an old yarn...

The last electric people

turned into smart glass eaters,
left there poles for lamps, crosses,

many shows, plays, Dakota
diorama dilemmas,

poem readers on the edge of
cliffs, lost the long low angle

shots. From the battle royale

to last royal rumble beats,

there's no escaping summer
unzipped by the parking lot's

ripped, tan, home-sick bicyclist.

His love big as India,
night ridden on top of trains,
montage of classrooms, red rain,
teaches the imagined no child,

and he's forgotten
things happen again on film,

...until then, teach one each one-
self, a word knocks him off Some Horse.

OBSERVATIONS FROM A VIRGINIAN SUMMER

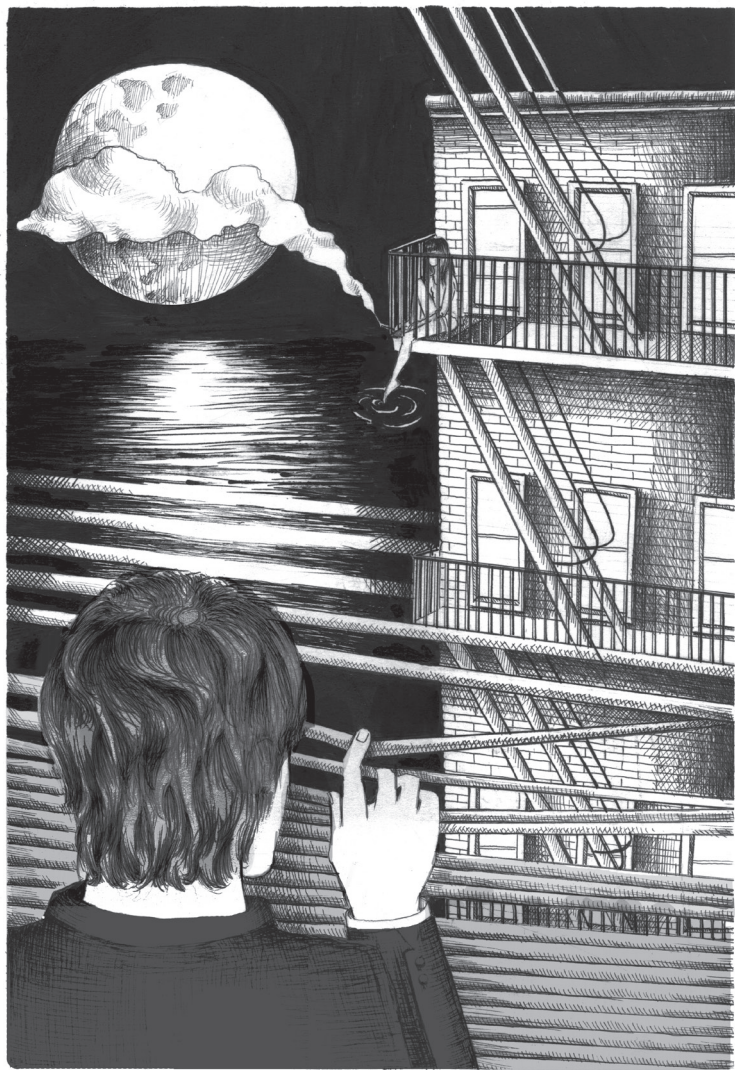
Nicholas Morgan Shipman

The wood of her casket
was patterned like the pews
of my childhood church.

The earth is a beautiful dress
and quiet as a man whose house
holds empty beds.

Memory is a path tangled
as locks of hair entwined
between kiss-dreaming sleepers.

A lover's voice singing is buried
in me, calcified, fused to my bones
in a language of echoes.



YAKAMOZ ON BEE TREE ROAD

Excerpted from the original by Eleanor Fisher

Illustration by Kristen Rebelo

A shrieking car alarm's *EEEEEEEEEEEE* jars Taph awake and now keeps her here. She watches a streetlight out on Bee Tree Road arrange its muted orange through her lace curtains and across the wall. In her nighttime room, Taph's three-thirty a.m. thoughts untangle.

A voice from Taph's insides, waning, waning, then waxing, serenades the restlessness, *Love sits still when mi-ine moves, co-ounting by the cuckoos, tucking seconds in their nests*. The song's pounding rhythm forces her up in a wave of nausea. She clutches at both of her sides, sore under her ribs, and sucks her breath in, then out.

"How do I let myself think and not implode?"

She moves through the apartment, her bare feet sticking to the wood floors, as she searches for the lamp to switch on the light. Relief fills her once the obscured light bulb decorates her place with happier shadows.

Taph stops. She tips her chin down and up, as if to loosen an old stone grinding against her insides, insides to splinters, consuming her down to a heavy hole, go *thud*. Blood courses through her brain, as the song quakes, *Sounds like ou-ur legs, dripping into sediment*.

Taph clumsily pulls a wool sock over each foot. Then she takes her Parliament cigarettes and climbs out the kitchen window onto the fire escape and totters up to the moony roof deck. The terrace, she remembers calling it before to torment Reel. Reel! Early autumn snakes down from the craggy Black Mountains. The Swannanoa city air (as if the grandiose concept of "city" extended to quaint Swannanoa) braids her stomach in knots, like the changing season suddenly turned on an axis. Sitting with her shoulder wedged behind her left ear, she drags deeply on her cigarette.

Down along Bee Tree Road, a woman coos a husky, lilted song. For a moment, Taph pauses smoking to listen. Through the silence she hears a pitchy refrain: a chickadee (or finch? or cardinal?), the trash truck crunching junk, hums from cars skinning the highway. These familiar sounds bury her panic, oh. Taph hums a faint melody so she can hear herself, *That is ali-ive outside of clocks knows, instead of eating my fingers*.

Taph shudders from the warped old stone inside. How it rolls, rolls around her aching head, goes *thud* on each vertebra, to her pit *thud* pit.

"God, I'm glad it's Saturday," she says up to the churning sky, the bled-together blue-violet.

She thinks of Reel, his coffee-brown eyes, and how she used to

search for her reflection on their surfaces. She watched him move like film through a projector onto a silver screen, while she moved like a bucket of popcorn. How Reel embodied, in this way so divine and strange, every word and deed with such fluidity, with every precise flick of his hand, when he brushed his teeth, chopped tomatoes, turned a page in his book. She last saw him three months ago.

One morning Taph and Reel woke to discover bruises printed along their elbows and shins. At breakfast, over a table laid with Nutella toast and blackberry-peach fruit salad, they teased that it had been a ghost, or perhaps it was sleep fighting. Taph watched her reflection wrinkle inside her coffee mug as she blew the steam kissing its black surface, while Reel described his dream from that night.

He had stood over a giant, red Merriam-Webster dictionary open on a bookstand, on a slate-tiled floor inside a house from his childhood. He suddenly needed to find the word *ruminate*. He flipped the pages, kept flipping, kept flipping! And woke before he could read its definition.

"I never remember my dreams," Taph cut in, picking apart coils of peach skin. "Were you yourself in the dream, or outside yourself watching things happen?"

"Both?" He shrugged, mopping up crumbs and coffee grounds from the counter.

Taph dug her back into the chair to untangle the knots. Suddenly she gasped deeply, and tried to stifle her tears from falling. Reel stood over her, startled, holding a coffee cup. He touched her dark hair. All long and straight and oily.

She looked up at him, blurry now, her dark eyes dripping. He cradled her for a few seconds, rubbing his thumb in circles on the back of her hand. Taph felt her ribs crowd with arrows.

"I thought I knew what *ruminate* meant," Reel said, not knowing what to say.

"I need something and I don't know what it is, or even how to say—" she said.

"But, I think this is the end. You need to leave me. It's happening."

So it happened. The love that Reel and she shared had dug her into that pit, then vanished there, *thud thud*. And now the buttery, cranberry-colored sky watches Taph as she shivers in the morning's silhouettes.

She returns down the steps, crawls below the pane, and stands inside the congested warmth of her kitchen. Walls painted a pigeon eggshell, the cabinets and edges juniper green. The sunrise casts angles through the picture window, along the woodblock countertop, the grubby sponge, the spider plant. Her things are refined, golden inside geometric frames.

Across the hall from Taph in Apartment Eight, Ertan sits behind the door to Apartment Nine. This morning, Ertan stands stooped over in his black-and-white tracksuit, rolling another cigarette between tobacco-stained fingers. His companion, the vacant TV screen, faces Ertan, mirroring his gray eyes. His still-shrewd gray eyes, which deepen sometimes. They can briefly lift a few eyes and smiles within the dismal morning commuter rush. But most of the time Ertan looks out at the world from two cramped muscles, a hardened-seeing between pestle and mortar. Through the half-drawn blinds, morning sun shines white against his dented crown and melts down his cheek.

Ertan closes his eyes and thinks he can hear his mother sitting close to him on Moonlight Beach, cooing in that old voice. Resonant and nasal, that old voice. He knows well she passed over more than thirty years ago. Yet he can see her cornflower shalwar pants and her leathery feet, two twisted potatoes in the sand that day. The blue Mediterranean that lapped at the waters of Kemer Bay. He had pretended to be asleep, as the heat weighed against the nape of his neck and the white sun needled between the waxy laurel leaves. He peeked across the bay at a pod of gawky pelicans above the surface, bullying fish with their scissor-like bills.

Ertan parts his eyelids. He stares forward into the black TV screen, which now mirrors the sunlit slits between the window blinds, shining *thud thud thud* down the slats.

Forty years before, Ertan left his mother, his best-ever love, his Moonlight Beach, Kemer on the Gulf of Antalya, all five thousand miles behind. They stayed there. And the years of missing home squeeze him gray when the sunlight melts on him like this.

Shortly after ten a.m., when Taph walks out to buy seltzer water, and Ertan is about to begin another nine-hour shift as a Swannanoa city bus driver, the two meet outside their Number Eight, Number Nine doors.

“Going to work?” Taph asks.

“You want to go for me?” Ertan ribs her, eyes glinting like marble.

“I wish I could go in for you. Mostly the regulars ride on Saturdays, right?”

He once confided to Taph of a minor phenomenon within his city bus route. He had realized a quiet pattern of bus-riding enthusiasts. A hodgepodge of folks who rode, some every day, pleased simply to ride for hours. Pleased to ride, and watch, and ride, and be.

He often observes a mother and daughter. Two pallid faces, like impressions on etched linoleum. They ride regularly on Fridays or Saturdays, around and around. To Ertan, they seem earnest, with reflective mint-blue eyes. The mother appears content. She and her girl nibble on gummies, staring out the window and at the other passengers. The daughter, age four or so, sings quietly, *the wheels on the bus go ‘round and ‘round, the people on the bus go up and down*. The two move less than the scene around them, which beams off their faces, oh.

In front of their building, Taph and Ertan exchange farewells. Taph walks five minutes, wrenching coarse breaths from the decaying autumn air. She tramples around a mass of flies scrambling over garbage stickiness on the sidewalk. She evaluates front porches and front stoops and front doors. Paint peels free from its wood, rendering the white a dingy, marbling brown. Potted geraniums, tattered screens, yellow leaves. Just ahead, a little girl crouches down, standing off the curb. She wears a deep blue sweatshirt and floral leggings. She’s talking to herself.

As Taph passes the girl, her dark eyes spot the thing that she crouches over on the blacktop. A male cardinal lies dead. The little girl lightly pets its bloodied-wet feathers with her small index finger. Go *thud*.

At a corner stop, two passengers ebb out from the bus. Ertan’s hands fasten him behind the steering wheel. He gazes at the bleached sun, as it is right then, casting

curves against the grubby streaks on the windshield. In the glassy light, he pictures Taph; how she always summons his memory of the yakamoz. He was sitting under the bay laurel tree on Moonlight Beach. The yakamoz rested across from him, curtsying in lovely spindles. It was the reflection of the moon on the water. How the yakamoz's painful beauty shined out to him then, like an old, blue spell.

When Taph turns her gray eyes to his, she envelops Ertan and the space around her in a furtive hollow. To Ertan, her eyes are an homage to the faces he misses from Turkey. She resembles thousands of faces. And he remembers when Reel left, how she had withdrawn and become all the more unutterable.

Taph stops, horrified.

"Oh, honey. Are you okay? That bird is dead."

"I guess so," the girl answers.

"Where are your mom and dad?" Taph asks, unsure what to do.

The girl looks at her. Such a small face. All white like dust, with two washed blue bowls for eyes. She stares at Taph and her dark eyes.

"My mommy died in a car accident yesterday. Daddy's inside."

For a moment, Taph feels her jaw weaken and tremor. The stone peels back the tissue inside her skin, scrambling against her ears like a thousand feeding flies. *Thud.*

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry." She lifts her fingertips, limply holding them limply to her bottom lip.

A woman approaches, peppery-silver hair and a broad frame. She steps out the wrought iron gate to the house next to them, and stands beside the girl in blue, the red cardinal, and Taph.

"Did that cardinal die, Daphne? Oh, you didn't touch it, did you? Sweetheart, why don't you go see your dad. Give him a hug. I'm coming over in less than five minutes. Don't touch your face before you wash your hands."

Taph watches the woman say all of these things to the girl, even after the girl obediently rises and nods and walks toward her front door. But before shutting the screen door, Daphne glances absently back at Taph.

"She said her mother died yesterday."

The woman turns and examines Taph. "Daphne told you? Yes, she died yesterday in an accident, just driving on the highway. A truck ran her car off the road. Letta was such a beautiful mother. Daphne worshipped her. It's so sad."

"That is so sad," Taph says, fixated on the red red cardinal. Then, facing the woman, she asks hesitantly, "if there's anything I can do?"

The woman blots under her eyes with a tissue. "That's what I said. But what can you do?"

That evening, when the streetlights have all flickered on, dotting orange arrangements along Bee Tree Road, when the sun has mostly melted down, when the phenomenal sky, all tangy and whipped, nods its retreat, Taph sits by her bedroom window, at the folding card table she uses for a desk, strewn with wads of paper and crumbs and things. She roughly drums her middle fingers along her hairline, rubbing her thumbs against her temples. *Thudthud. thud. thudthud.*

In town, Ertan is nearing the end of his shift. He drives the bus listlessly around, envisioning his mother, sand, the sacred white of yakamoz, like a floating pyre on his gray eye. The gibbous moon idles east of town, rimmed by the Black Mountains, and stares down at dark Swannanoa.

Taph looks between the orange veils, at her own phosphorescent reflection on the windowpane. She thinks about Daphne. With her reflective eye-bowls, poring over the red red cardinal, and poring blue into Taph. The reflective reflective, the searching. She thinks deliriously of Reel. At the end, he studied her like a bruise, blankly dismissed her and left. She wonders about Ertan, prisoner in his tracksuits, his cigarettes. Home is searching. The stone lost in Taph, cracking loose, plummets from her tongue into the pit. *Gooooooooo thudthudthudthudthud.*

Staring into the glassy reflection of herself, her mind pounds, *Our quiet together, I only wanted to hear the elusive cuckoo.*

Taph stretches back her arm, then strikes her fist through the windowpane. Fragments of glass shine everywhere, catching her. She would have thought she struck the surface of water, as salty drips leak red from her skin. The jagged-toothed space in the pane is a monster's mouth.

She peers through the mouth, out on a luxurious scene. And, just then, *Thuuuuusddshhh Wuuuuuuu shhhhhhhhhhh*, away washes the old stone, to blue. The yakamoz.



300 MILES KEPT ME ALIVE

Karthika Solai

I. February 9, 1992 — Headline:

"Slaying of Infant Females Widespread in Rural India"

The sun beats down.
You eat with other farmers
under towering palm trees.

There've been no clouds
for months. How are you
supposed to feed
another girl

anything but
dry rice (that cuts
her fragile throat),
castor oil mixed
with a hint of sap
from an oleander shrub.

There are only 93 girls
for every 100 boys.
Not enough to make sure
every man has a wife,

but how will you pay
a daughter's dowry
if you have more
than one?

II. Two black plaits. Solemn dark face. Stood, looking at me, near
a young man speaking to the grocer. Wore a blue button down
boy's shirt, skirt to her ankles, even in the heat. First daughter.
Or she wouldn't have lived past six months. Past the shame
of not being born a boy. Not here.

My age. Brown eyes. Not shy. Not when her stare can accuse
me of crimes from fifty feet away. How dare I be born a second
daughter when I was meant to be a son. When I led everyone
to think my mother's womb held one. How dare I live at all
behind tinted windows and in air conditioned rooms.

In our car, my mothers says, *This is the place*. Means
where they used to kill baby girls,
maybe still do.

III. February 7, 2012 — Headline:

"Girl Infants face 'pre-meditated' murder under femicide"

You can't kill her so
 kindly, so quickly anymore.
 They'll know, and take everything
 from you. Slip you behind bars thick
 as a baby's limbs.

It's not right,
 but how can they blame
 you? Even her first scream
 was like a siren's call.

One drop of
 alcohol. A cold, wet
 blanket or two.
 Let her tiny
 lungs infect.

No one can hold you
 responsible if the medicine—
 you threw out— didn't work.
 The doctor couldn't fix her;
 how could you?

You needed a son
 to carry your name,
 to bear the weight of your
 old age.

You needed a son,
 not her.

OLFACTORY MEMORY

Danny Caporaletti

I have this problem where I get nostalgic about the future. I'm on my way somewhere—say, to the city jail for a writing workshop with the inmates. Or, to pick up a girl for a first date, and I'm not really preparing myself. I forget that I shouldn't talk about the weather with men who spend the majority of their days in jail cells, and I forget to think about the general questions I should ask to help a girl relax so she can begin to see that I'm charming. No, I am already watching replays in my head of events that haven't happened. I write the narratives of my afternoons and evenings before I live them. I am living so many steps ahead that I forget I shouldn't awkwardly mention to the man in sandals and a blue jumpsuit that it's a lousy, rainy day outside. I think so many steps ahead that I ramble about my sister's three cats before I wait to listen to my date's stories about her pets, and about her siblings, if she even cares about cats or would rather talk about dogs.

I turn memories I haven't made yet into two-and-a-half minute movie montages. Always. And I remember the day I first try to explain all of this to Neil, my therapist. I try to tell him that when I talk to certain people, I already know what's going to happen, and it bores me so much that I invent scenarios I might, later on, want to develop into a story or screenplay. I tell him that fictionalizing these oncoming events feels like indulging in strange sessions of intellectual masturbation.

Neil nods slowly. He plays his part as the authority figure in control and lets a word like "masturbation" linger long enough in the air to let me know he isn't embarrassed or taken aback. He's a professional. Then he asks if I think I'm psychic. I look at him and wait for him to cross his legs, which I know he'll do if I look at him long enough. Then I laugh and say no psychic that's any good sees a therapist.

I explain to him that I never "see the future" in short, dream-like 16mm projections. I'm not reading palms or time-traveling. I simply have "pre-memories" (a term he thinks about briefly before bringing his hand to his face and muffling a soft, but quite distinct "hmm") of events that I predict will occur in the near future. These pre-memories often fit into some pre-existing narrative fold packed with delicious ironies I'll surely want to write about someday. I tell him about the jail, and how I wonder if the men there pay attention to the temperature and precipitation outside. I tell him about Lauren, and how I spent our whole first (and only) date half-hoping, half-dreading that she'd bring up her birthday, because I'd already done my research on Facebook and seen that we were born on the

same day, and I was really curious if a girl as pretty as Lauren might take this as a sign and fall in love with me right then and there—

“What does it smell like in here to you?”

Neil interrupts me. He never interrupts me unless he has an agenda, unless he’s trying to employ some therapeutic tactic he’s read about in psychiatric textbooks. I play along and start sniffing. I struggle for something witty to say. I’m going to say cookies but I know it doesn’t smell like cookies. Then I’m going to say the future, but I like Neil and I’m not trying to patronize him. I only want to make him understand what it’s like to obsessively fictionalize your expectations. So I think about it until I can smell hot air from the heating unit above my head. I tell him it smells like my old school bus.

“Why?” Neil keeps his legs crossed. He sits still. Stillness means that he’s paying attention.

I tell him about getting on the bus in the winter and having to breathe in an awful electric heat for the twenty-minute ride. Neil nods, so I tell him about a recurring dream in which my mother’s a bus driver. She keeps driving by the bus stop and leaving me behind at the curb. I tell him that I think all mothers are bus drivers. He squints at me. Squinting means he doesn’t understand. So I sit up and rephrase: “No. Our mothers are the buses,” I say. “And we’re the drivers with no idea where the hell we’re going.”

Neil gets excited. He quickly tells me that what I’m saying is “very insightful.” And I feel like telling him that insight is merely rearranging the pieces of broken truths and hot-gluing them together with cynicism and irony. But I don’t say that because I know then he’ll ask me what my definition of truth is and I’d have to go down that beaten path where I tell him truth is a fabrication. That there are no truths, just lies people can agree upon.

I don’t feel like talking about lies, so I ask about the weather instead. I ask Neil if he was to go to prison for armed robbery, would he sit in his jail cell and care whether or not it was raining outside. He says no.

“What if you knew you were innocent?” I ask.

He squints and sits still for a while, pondering. Then he uncrosses his legs and writes something down on a yellow legal-pad with a dull-pointed pencil.



WHERE I'M FROM

Claire Thompson

I am from moving boxes,
from new houses and freshly-painted eggshell walls.
I am from airport tarmac,
and the long highway stretching wordlessly.

I am from boxing gloves and blue willow dishes,
from clive and harper.
I am from "home is with your family" and
"it's just as easy to love a rich man."

I am from Hell's Bells and the San Jean,
from signing up at only sixteen,
from beer and bread and butter pickles.

I am a poorly written history,
constructed more from memory than fact.
Above all, I am from picture frames,
the boxer who became a soldier,
the orphan who became a mother.

LAY YOUR WAFER DOWN LIKE A BLADE ON POPE BENEDICT'S WAXEN WRIST

Richard DiCicco

That morning sun
that boiled us
on wrought iron benches
was a jealous star
feigning death
for a scrap of bread
you picked from your teeth.



THIS SIDE OF THE ROSE BUSHES

Scott Kresl

Illustration by Mike Baker

Everett Aberdeen pissed his pants. Not a complete emptying of the bladder, just a single jet of piss that made a silver-dollar-sized wet spot on the crotch of his jeans. The barrel of a gun was pressed to the back of his balding head.

A man's hard voice demanded answers. "I said, who the fuck'r you?"

Everett said, "Wait, wait, wait, I'm working for the bank!"

The man took a step back.

Everett sat frozen in a leather seat behind the wheel of a massive motor home. His hand was still on the key to the ignition. He didn't turn to look at the man. "No offense meant on my part—just doing my job."

"Bank sent you, huh?"

"You haven't made a payment in six months; you had to figure they'd want her back."

"You get the hell outta here."

Everett pulled the key from the ignition, still without looking back, afraid that if their eyes met, the guy would shoot him.

"No, no. Leave the key."

Everett set the key on the seat and slowly side-stepped to the door. He opened it and stepped out into freedom.

"If you come back, you're dead!"

Everett speed-walked to his car, a decade-old Buick LeSabre. He climbed inside and fled the area. When he was at what he considered a safe distance, nearly two miles away, he pulled over to the side of the road and threw the car in park with a shaky hand.

Slumping in his threadbare seat, Everett stared over his bulging belly at the wet spot on his jeans and started to cry. How had he ended up like this? He had wanted to be a detective, but ended up as a third-rate repo man. He was fifty-one-years-old, sixty pounds overweight, and nearly bald. The reflection he saw in the rearview mirror was an empty fat shell of his former self.

Over the years, Everett had tried several jobs, from home inspector to security guard. He attended two years of community college, then applied and was accepted into Kettering, Ohio's police academy. But as usual, fate stepped in and ruined his plans.

A girl he had been dating on and off, Claudia Mills, announced that she was pregnant. Everett married her and went to work at her father's business, Kettering Heating & Cooling. The job didn't last, and by the time Everett left, Claudia's dad had written her and Everett out of his will. Barbs had been traded that weren't easily forgotten. Everett and Claudia moved in with her mother, who had

divorced Claudia's father when she was a baby.

Everett decided to accept a job offer from his dad Melvin, who owned Aberdeen Metal. He'd resisted for years, wanting to blaze his own trail, but he quickly learned to love working there as a machinist. Ten years later he was still there, a jack of all trades, and father and son had never been closer. When his dad died of heart attack one hot June day, Everett was devastated. The business was left in limbo. Everett tried to take the reins but he didn't have his father's business acumen. Less than a year later, after thirty-two years in business, Aberdeen Metal shut its doors for good.

Everett and Claudia had stayed put in her mother's house. She had died of a stroke a few years earlier and they were still living there with their twenty-year-old daughter, Stephanie.

A big rig tumbling past Everett's car, making him jump. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve, took a deep breath, and drove home.

Everett pulled slowly into the gravel driveway and stopped the car. These days when he arrived home, he instinctively looked over at the neighbor's house, then back to his own, to see if any new damage had been doled out on either side. It was all rather ridiculous.

The feud had started a year earlier over some rose bushes. The bushes acted as a natural fence that ran along the property line between the two houses. Claudia had always tended to them and kept them trimmed back. When the roses bloomed, bright yellow, she would wear one in her hair, and she liked to pin one to her dress to show off at Sunday service. But shortly after the Wallaces moved in next door, Roberta Wallace chopped down the rose bushes to make room for a garden and a motley group of bird houses she attached to poles that she planted in the ground.

Claudia was inconsolable. She called the cops, who then refused to ticket Roberta Wallace until they determined to which yard the demised roses actually belonged. A confident Claudia paid a surveyor to come out and find the property line. Unfortunately for her, and the surveyor, the line he set with fluorescent orange ribbon determined that the bushes were Roberta's to destroy as she saw fit. Claudia cursed the surveyor all the way to his car—she was convinced the "dirty liar" had been paid off by Roberta.

And so the feud was officially underway. Initially only between Claudia and Roberta, the men and extended family members were soon dragged in. Everett thought Roberta's husband seemed like a nice guy. But the battle lines were drawn and their potential friendship was one of the casualties. It became the Aberdeens versus the Wallaces.

Everett tried to stay below the radar, but the feud had escalated in recent weeks. It was with relief that he saw that no stones had been flung that day in either direction.

As Everett reached for his doorknob, he held his daily newspaper low in front of his beltline to hide the wet spot on his jeans. His front door wasn't halfway open when Claudia started bitching about their daughter Stephanie.

"She had some guy in there all night and now she wants to sleep all day. She can't have her cake and eat it too."

"Jesus Christ, Claudia, she's twenty years old."

Claudia mumbled an obscenity.

Their wiener dog greeted him with a wagging tail. Everett squatted down to pet her. "How's my little Sausage doing? My sweet little Sausage dog." The dog's real name was Pippy Longstocking, but he never called her that. It was a stupid name that his wife and daughter had insisted on when they bought the dog eight years earlier.

Claudia, a rail thin, leathery-looking fifty, dropped a pan in the sink so that it would make a noise. "Everett, I need you to talk to her."

Everett nodded. It was best to just agree.

He left the room and went upstairs. As he passed Stephanie's door, he could smell the pot smoke wafting from underneath. He walked right on past.

When it came to Stephanie, he had stopped intruding by the time she was seventeen. She had shown promise playing the cello, an instrument Grandpa Melvin had introduced her to as a small child. Melvin was delighted when Stephanie allowed him to teach her. To Everett's surprise, she stuck with it. On her fourteenth birthday, her Grandpa Melvin bestowed upon her his prized possession, an antique cello he bought in Italy during World War II.

Stephanie played the beautiful instrument in her high school band. She was even in line for scholarships. But her senior year, everything changed. Stephanie started hanging out with a new group of kids. Her drinking and drug use became a full time commitment. She was arrested several times. Everett and Claudia put her in therapy, and even threatened to kick her out of the house, but nothing worked. She was expelled from high school and never went back. Tattoos bloomed across her limbs. She had at least six piercings that Everett could see, and God knows how many more he couldn't.

At eighteen, she was dating a man who was twenty-three. The guy, Nick or somebody, started hanging around the house, staying for weeks at a time. Everett began to think the guy had nowhere to go. But one day he disappeared, and he took Stephanie's antique cello with him. The police never did track him down. Everett was glad his dad wasn't around to see what had happened.

Everett went downstairs and sat in his weathered but comfortable recliner. It was in that chair where he fell asleep, every night, with Sausage at his feet. He liked to have a few drinks, watch the news and a few reruns, then doze off. At around three in the morning he would head up to his own room. He and Claudia hadn't shared a bedroom in years. Sex was reserved for special occasions, and even then it was passionless chore.

He kicked his feet up and sighed deeply. The altercation in the motor home was weighing on him. It was the first time he had ever had a gun pointed his way. Absently, he rubbed the back of his head where the barrel of the gun had poked him. His hand was shaking as he reached for the remote control.

After doubling his normal nightly dose of alcohol, Everett fell asleep before Andy Griffith was over.

It was a warm spring afternoon. Anonymous faces passed on the street as he entered his father's metal shop. His dad was sitting at his desk, drinking coffee. Everett was embraced by a sudden feeling of well-being. The door opened behind him and he turned to meet the gaze of a pretty young woman. She smiled and said, "Hi, Everett. Your dad told

me to come see you."

Everett turned and looked at his smiling father who lifted his coffee high in agreement. Everett faced her.

"My name is Gwen."

"Everett," was all he could muster.

She laughed and held out her hand and he took it. It felt like a silk glove. Her scent wrapped around him, a combination of flowers and honey. Everett was elated. And he was young, and thin, and had a full head of hair.

"I've seen you here before," she said, "and I was always curious if you were single."

"I am that," he said. And it was true.

"Well?"

"Uh... would you like to have dinner... some time?"

She lit up, and said playfully, "Why, yes I would, so nice of you to ask."

Everett woke with a start, knocking his glass off the TV stand and onto the floor. Sausage let out a quick bark and he shushed her. The dream had been incredibly vivid. He normally didn't dream at all, and this one—it was so real. It was as if his dad had never died. Seeing him again was incredible. But it was Gwen who left him sitting in his chair wide-eyed. He *knew* her. She was the grown up version of his childhood crush, Gwendolyn Mansfield.

They were neighbors from the ages of ten to fifteen, and their friendship was strong until puberty intervened. When Gwendolyn went on a first date, Everett found himself steaming. Everett, an awkward fifteen years of age, confronted her the next day. He was a red-faced mess, his nonsensical tirade a cringe-worthy jumble of teenage angst. Gwendolyn stomped off in the other direction.

Weeks passed without them talking, but finally Gwendolyn handed him a letter one morning, then stood there, arms crossed, while Everett read it. He smiled as he thought about that letter. In it, she demanded respect, and chastised him for his temper. But then her words softened, and she ended with a sentence Everett would never forget. "I like you too." Gwendolyn had even signed it with a little heart on the tail of the "y".

Everett's face was so red that he almost covered it with his hands. Gwendolyn walked forward and hugged him as he stood there paralyzed. Then she turned and walked away without saying a word. It was the best moment of his young life.

That night Everett wrote her a letter back, finally settling on his fifth draft. But the letter would never be delivered. The next afternoon, on the way to ballet class, Gwendolyn and her mother were killed in a car accident. A man in a pickup had fallen asleep at the wheel and hit them head on.

Everett went upstairs to his room and rolled into bed, but he couldn't sleep. He stared at the ceiling until the sun came up.

Groggy-eyed, Everett plunked himself down at the kitchen table behind a mug of coffee.

"You look tired," Claudia said.

Everett nodded.

"You hear what I said?"

"Yeah, I said yes."

"No you didn't. You nodded."

"If you saw me nod, why are you asking?"

"You should answer people when they're talking to you."

Everett nodded.

Claudia ignored it. "You know, I saw Old Wallace out back pointing at one of our trees. He was telling those two little shits something I couldn't hear," she said.

The two "little shits" Claudia was referring to were Roberta Wallace's twin ten-year-old boys, Maddox and Dillon, lovingly referred to by their grandpa as Mad Dog and Dill Pickle. Their grandpa, or Old Wallace as the Aberdeens secretly called him, was a rickety old man. He carried around a dark wooden cane topped by an ornate silver head. When they first met, weeks before the feud started, he had introduced himself, "Just call me Grandpa Wallace. And if you don't like that, call me Mister." Claudia refused to call the man Grandpa or Mister. Once the feud started she started calling him "Old" and it stuck.

Everett said, "Which one?"

"Both of 'em."

"Which tree?"

"I don't know. The one over in the corner with the big branches all over the place. I think he was telling them to chop it down or poison it or something."

"Just leave it, Claudia."

"Why else would he be pointing at it? You shoulda' seen the looks on their faces."

Everett nodded, and she left for work without another word.

Everett was still trying to decide what he was going to tell the bank. The motor home was long gone by now. Ten minutes later when the phone rang, it was the bank with another job for him. He didn't mention the motor home.

An hour later at the bank, a woman handed him an envelope containing a key and several pages of details on his next repo job. This time it was for a dump truck. He had repo'd them before. At least there was no chance of anyone living inside.

After driving around the outskirts of Kettering for a couple of hours chasing down leads, Everett found the dump truck. The guy's ex-wife told him he'd hide it at his friend's house, and she was right. Ex-wives made for the best stool pigeons.

Everett drove past several times. The guy had pulled the plate, but there was no doubt. Three houses down, Everett parked his car under a shady tree and rolled down the windows—the AC hadn't worked for years. He took out a small pair of binoculars. If he couldn't be a detective, he could at least act like one.

Everett couldn't tell if anyone was home. After he had waited for thirty minutes, he reached for the door handle and realized his hand was shaking. He pulled his hand back, grabbed the binoculars, and scoped out the truck one more time. He opened the door, but with one foot outside, he stopped. He couldn't get out of the car. Christ, he had lost his nerve.

Morning turned to afternoon and it was getting hot. Everett pushed his seat back and stared up at his sagging headliner. He closed his eyes and listened to the rustling leaves.

Gwen stood over his desk at Aberdeen Metal, drumming her fingers playfully. Everett looked up and smiled.

She said, "Come on, your paperwork can wait. I have a surprise for you." She twirled

around and beckoned with her pointer finger. Everett felt a sense of belonging, knowledge that he and Gwen were happy together. He was eager to see the surprise. He followed her outside and she pointed toward his Buick.

"Yeah?"

"Get in, silly."

He got in and she skipped around to the other side and joined him.

The car's interior was immaculate. The seats were now leather and the headliner had been replaced with new cloth. Everything was polished and new.

"Well, what do you think?"

Everett got tears in his eyes. "How did you do it?"

Gwen laughed. "We had it planned all week. That's why your dad had you take his truck this morning. As soon as you were gone I took it over to get it done. I felt like such a little criminal."

"It's amazing. It really is."

They embraced in a deep kiss. He felt himself melt into her.

He woke suddenly, sporting an erection. His body was covered in a fine sheen of sweat.

The dump truck was still there.

Everett said, "Hell with it." He started his car and drove straight home.

The first thing he noticed was his mailbox. It had been crushed and flung into the yard. Was it kids from the neighborhood or the Wallaces' doing? That was the trouble with feuds—each family blamed anything that went wrong on the other by default. Everett remembered when someone slashed the tires on his daughter's car. He was pretty sure one of Stephanie's jilted lovers was responsible, but that didn't stop Claudia. She used paint thinner and a sponge to dissolve the word "TRASH" into the paint on the side of Roberta's minivan. Once again the cops were called on both sides, and once again there was no evidence of either's wrongdoing.

Everett stopped the car, collected the ruined mailbox, and tossed it into his trunk. It crossed his mind that he might want to fix it before Claudia found out.

Once inside, even though it was only three o'clock in the afternoon, Everett made himself a stiff drink and sat in his recliner. He felt an odd, fist-sized weight in his stomach. Something was gnawing at him. Then he realized what it was—he missed Gwen. Everett downed his drink and tried to sleep. But the alcohol wasn't enough of a sedative. Everett found himself rifling through his wife's bathroom drawer, reading pill bottle labels. He didn't find any Valium, so he settled for Xanax. Another whiskey and water combined with the Xanax did the trick.

Gwen sat across from Everett at an oak table in his father's dining room. They were having dinner with Everett's dad acting as chef for the night.

She said, "You are gone way too much, Everett."

Melvin answered for him from the kitchen, "Don't blame me. I told him he doesn't have to be at the shop open to close."

"See?" she said with a flash of a sly smile. She was only half-kidding.

Everett shook his head. "He says that now."

"We need time to plan our wedding."

The statement shook Everett. He stared at her and then it came to him. Of course

he knew they were to be married. He had proposed on a cruise ship on their way to the Caribbean.

Everett woke. He was torn between sadness and elation—sad that the dream had ended, but elated that he and Gwen were getting married.

Another dream followed that night. He and Gwen went to a museum and ate lunch next to a fountain. Nothing extraordinary happened and it didn't need to. The comfort they felt with each other was enough.

The next day, Everett drove past the house where the dump truck had been parked. It was still there. Everett parked under the same shady tree and waited. After an hour, he let out a sigh and reached for the door handle, but once again stopped. Instead, he started the car and drove to the store, picked up a new mailbox, then went home. When Claudia noticed the mailbox was missing the day before, she had pounced on the Wallaces. But Everett told her he'd accidentally run into it with his car. As Everett screwed the new mailbox into place, he glanced over at the Wallace house. He thought he saw a curtain move, but he couldn't be sure.

Claudia and Stephanie were set to head out to Claudia's father's house the next day. Her father had long since forgiven her, but Everett still wasn't welcome in his house. He had retired and moved to Naples, Florida. Claudia didn't like to fly so they were driving down. Everett was looking forward to them leaving.

Claudia was nervous. She didn't think Everett would be as resolute in defending the fort while she was gone.

She told him, "Call me right away if anything happens."

"Don't you just want to relax down there?"

"Sure. But I can't relax knowing they might get one over on us."

Everett nodded.

"You'll call?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll call for Christ's sake."

"What's with you?"

"I'm tired of this back and forth with the Wallaces. I'd just as soon we moved."

Claudia let out a loud, "huh!" She said, "They started this mess."

"I guess."

"You guess? Maybe you outta move in with them."

"It was just some damn rose bushes."

"They were *my* rose bushes."

Everett knew the only way to end it was to agree, which he did, promising to call her if the Wallaces pulled anything.

They left early Saturday morning and Everett was free. He spent the day reading the paper and watching television. All day he looked forward to going to bed. At eight o'clock he gave in, took a pill, and drank three whiskey and waters. He passed out in his chair and didn't wake up until morning. Sunlight streaking in through the curtains woke him, and he was startled. For the first time since the dreams began, he didn't have one. He tried to go back to sleep, but it was no use.

When he walked out to get his Sunday paper, he saw something that didn't look right with his new mailbox. He walked to the end of the driveway and realized that the tin black box had been smashed nearly flat, left dangling off the post. Everett

shook his head. He pulled the mangled box off and tucked it under his arm like a loaf of bread. As he turned to walk back to his house, he heard tires on gravel and stopped.

The Wallace's minivan crept slowly down their driveway with Roberta at the wheel. The whole family was on board, headed to church. They gawked at Everett as if he was standing there with his pants around his ankles. One of the twins, smiling, stuck up his middle finger and pressed it against the glass. The other twin joined him. Old Wallace pointed and the whole family started laughing.

Everett nodded at them, blushing. He hated himself for it. He watched them pull away, then started back toward his house.

A tune struck him, so he started humming—"Thunder Rolls," by Garth Brooks, a song Gwen loved. She had sung it to him several times and he yearned for it again.

As he put his foot down on the first step to his doorway, something made him pause. His shoulders slumped and he let out a sigh. Instead of continuing up the steps, he chucked his mangled mailbox aside and turned to face the Wallace house.

Everett walked past Roberta's line of birdhouses, right over to her garden hose rolled up onto a plastic spool. Everett grabbed the end of the hose that was poking out, hoisted it over his shoulder, and unwound it as he walked toward the front of the house. Still humming, he dropped the hose, and stopped in front of a pole-mounted birdhouse shaped like a little log cabin. He uprooted it by the pole and swung hard, crashing it through the Wallace living room window. Then he grabbed the hose and fed it through the gaping hole in the broken window. He walked back to the hose spool, and cranked the faucet all the way on.

Everett went home and poured himself a whiskey and water. He sat back in his recliner. The next knock on the door would either be the cops or the whole Wallace clan wielding torches and pitchforks. He didn't care. It was time to see Gwen. He popped one of Claudia's Xanax and kicked up his feet, waiting for sleep to swallow him.

An hour passed and he couldn't sleep. He stared at his empty glass and considered a refill, when a heavy knock broke the silence. Everett knew it was time to face the music. He stood up, woozy. Before he could open the door, there was another forceful knock. Everett pulled open the door, and there stood Old Wallace, with his cane held at its midpoint. His eyes were concealed by the shadow of his furrowed brow.

Everett smiled and offered a gesture of goodwill—he would address Old Wallace the way he had always asked.

"Grandpa Wallace," was all he got out. Old Wallace swung his cane in a wide arc. The silver-topped head glinted in the sun just before it smashed into Everett's skull.

Everett fell backwards, landing flat on his back, arms out wide, eyes rolled to the back of his head.

Gwen crouched over him. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

Everett sat up. He was on the floor behind his desk at Aberdeen Metal. "Yeah, sure. I don't know what happened."

She helped him into his chair. "You scared me to death."

"I'm fine. I feel great. Just took a nap I guess."

*Gwen sat across his lap smiling. "You're so silly. This is no time for naps. We have to go."
And Everett knew they were headed to his dad's house for dinner. And he knew that
Gwen was pregnant, and that they had their whole lives ahead of them.*



Claudia stood at the foot of Everett's bed. He was hooked up to several machines, and he looked gaunt under the fluorescent lights of the hospital room.

Dr. Schwartz entered the room as Claudia stared at her motionless husband.

"Hello again, Miss Aberdeen."

"Missus."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Aberdeen."

"Uh huh. Listen, I need some answers. It's been three weeks and he doesn't seem to be getting any better."

Dr. Schwartz cleared his throat. "As we discussed several times, brain injuries are very difficult to assess. What we do know, and it's very positive, is that he has higher brain function. The coma could last a few more weeks or months. We simply don't know. The best we can do is to try to keep him comfortable, and hope that one of these days he wakes up."

"How are we supposed to know if he's comfortable?"

"That's a good question. We don't know. But judging by his expression, he looks comfortable to me."



TWO POEMS

Robalū Gibsun

BRUNCH AT THE BLACK SHEEP

Illustration by Doug Orleski

My waitress has black stars tattooed
on her forearms. In the window above
the EXIT sign, the BIGGS watertower
sits, while the porcelain lady on the wall
screams, *It's a trap!*

Eggs trigger the memory of bacon
as my French toast sinks
in a sea of strawberry syrup
where roasted almonds float like flattened canoes.

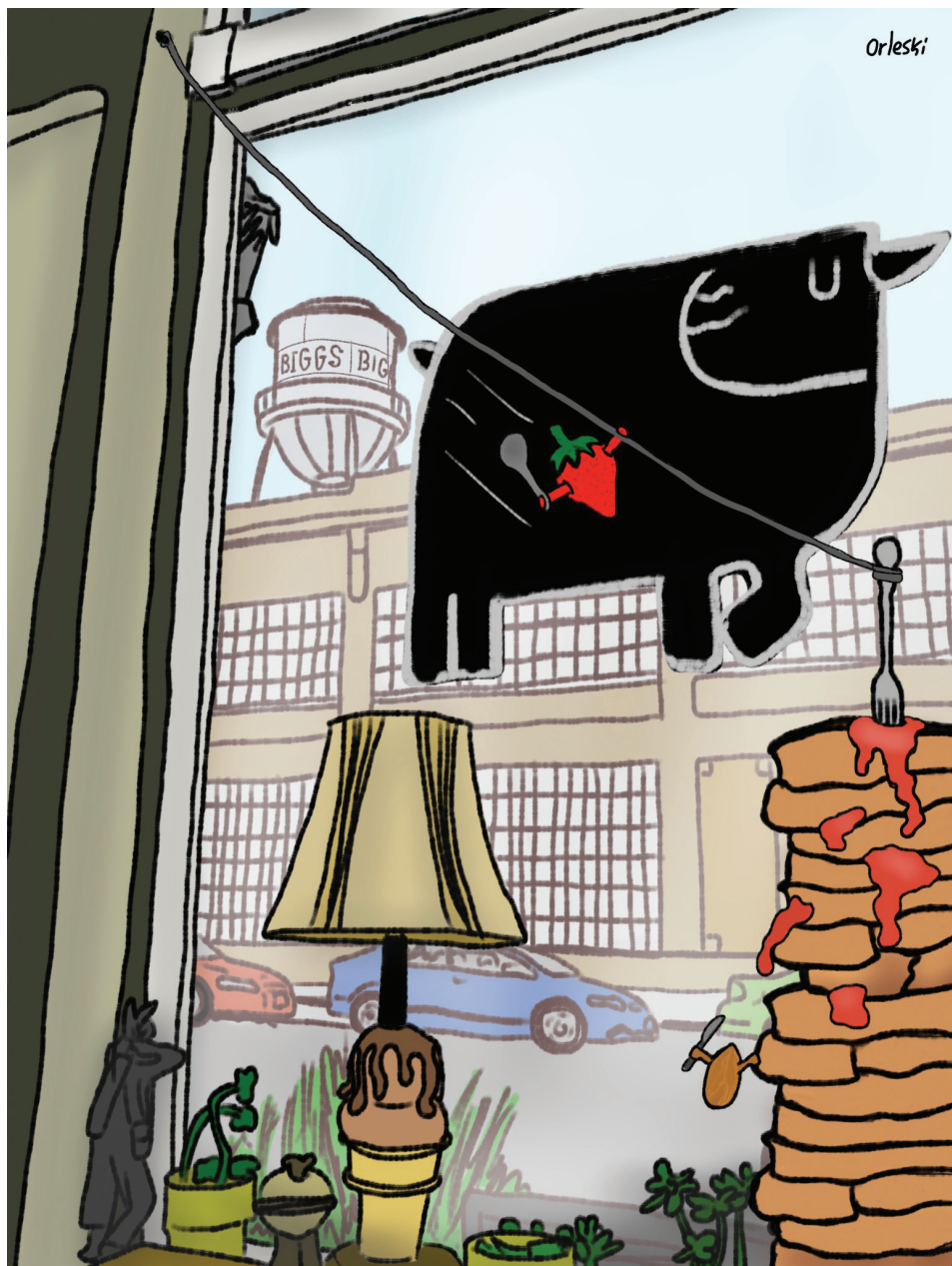
Mirrors framed in flowers smell of cinnamon.
My waitress hands me cheese grits.
On the wall
a landscape of patchwork fields and blue sky.
The musketeer lamp-man aims his rifle under his chin
forever stuck in the split-second before the blast.

The table holds my elbows and a sweating water glass.
Adjacent, a drawing on wood, acrylic and ink
some poor sick girl vomiting swirly things
in the middle of a turquoise sea.

A pasty lady leaves through the whining door,
comes back with a creaking baby.
I cough and rattle the mucous in my throat.
My skin is brick; no one notices me.

A severed black sheep head plaque
stares at my food, stares at me like food,
as a lady underneath stirs her watered-down
tomato juice with a celery stalk.
Something folds in my stomach.
I hear a phone ring, imagining it
shiny, red, like a carnival candy apple.
The baby cries *my behbeh* when
its powder blue father walks in.

I swallow the last chunk of drenched French toast.
My star-armed waitress takes my plates,
gives me the check, takes my debit card behind
my back. The bird in the register won't stop chirping.



WAR CHILD

At a moment when dawn and dusk disappeared from the moon and sun, star-crossed demons and angels retired pitchforks and halos to slip just beyond the sight of an all-seeing eye. Fire and ice scarred the skies as one clever couple held hands and shot down the city streets.

Sticking to the shadows, they dashed off into an alleyway to catch their breath. Their chance of fleeing death was slight. This war extinguished the stars and hung them from earth's magnetic poles as streetlights. Yet, amidst all the destruction, the couple decided to have—a picnic.

Knocking back shots, they washed out the aftertaste of bombs and blood. Their tongues twisted cursed words with holy scripts until virtue and sin dirty-danced under their diaphragms, cooled it with class to stomach acid jazz. Drunk to the rhythms of worldly religions, they realized that although each genre wore a different name, the bare baselines were still the same. And whether in light or dark, too much of either would leave them blind. So, with peace in mind, they turned down the volume—and fucked. But, like bombs bursting on the horizon between night and day, phases of passion faded from golden to crimson to violet to gray.

At the moment when dawn and dusk reappeared to the moon and sun, demons and angels battled again with pitchforks and halos, magnified in the sight of an all-seeing eye. Months after, their halo child emerged, but with his mother and father fighting on each shoulder. The child didn't grow up afraid of the boogiemer under his bed, because at home he was schooled to "fear and commend" two invisible men: the blue one living in the attic and the red one in the basement. Even with peace in mind, his mother and father's theologies clashed between his ear bones. War was inevitable.

They told him, "We're just debating." But visualize: gunfire flies from stubborn sides and soldiers convert into crickets on frontlines, legs trembling because the enemy is more accurate than the other had planned.

And among them: a seven-year-old child unable to shield bones from sticks and stones because radioactive words kept burning. They told him, "We're just debating!" So, shell-shocked, the child ran up and down the ranks aiming his prayers at each officer pointblank. He demanded an armistice but the only options offered were: point, blank.

His parents' arguments waged, but the worth of his welfare being too great, and having no living quarters to rest safe, he was forced to find refuge on the staircase. And when the peace in a child's mind detonates into hate, there is nothing fair in warfare.

THE MOLTING SCARE

Amber Sykes

My father's feathers
all over
the tool shed in early May.
I was no longer his keeper.

He was mounting his molting.
My one eye
through the cracked and slitted sun
saw his face full of pin feathers now.

Cast beneath a sweeping bridled wing
his postnuptial plumage
a soft, wrenching pink
freed in knotted oil heaps.

I ran from my bird
finding way in his old dim glow
in birth-covered rations
to watch the world unload.

EMILY AKIYAMA is a sophomore, earning dual degrees in Broadcast Journalism and Spanish. She is involved in Alpha Epsilon Phi and Residential Life. This is her second year with *Poictesme*. **SARAH APPLE** is a junior majoring in Communication Arts. **MIKE BAKER** graduated as an English major in December 2012. He keeps a blog of his drawings at dasbaker.blogspot.com. **CHRISTINA BERAN** is an Art Foundations student hoping to major in Kinetic Imaging. She plans to graduate in 2016. **ELLY CALL** is an Art Foundation student in the VCUarts program. When she is not interested in reading the backs of sugar packets, and the occasional book, she is interested in further studies in the Art and English programs. This is her first year with *Poictesme*. **DANNY CAPORALETTI** Danny Caporaletti graduated from VCU in 2012 with a double major in Cinema and English with a Creative Writing minor. He works in Richmond as a freelance writer/filmmaker and writes a music blog: dannycaps77.tumblr.com. He is starting at the University of New Orleans' M.F.A. program in fiction in the fall. **JUSTIN CARMICKLE'S** fiction has been nominated for the Ruth Halls Fiction Prize and appeared in *Louisiana Literature*. An Indiana native, he is now an M.F.A. candidate in fiction at VCU. **ALEX CARRIGAN** is a third-year VCU student, working towards a major in Print Journalism and a minor in World Cinema. He has been on the *Poictesme* staff for three years and is a contributing writer to *The Commonwealth Times*, Spectrum Arts Section. He plans on being a writer for an arts publication, hopefully as a film critic. **MAYA CHESLEY** is a second year student in Biology and World Studies with a Spanish concentration. This is her first year on the *Poictesme* staff. **JORDAN CHU** is a SuperSenior English Major with a minor in Creative Writing. He began publishing in *Poictesme* and *Amendment* in 2012, and has self-published two poetry zines last October. In his spare time, he volunteers at The Flying Brick Library in Oregon Hill, and is planning on painting his living room after he graduates. **SARA CLARKEN** is a sophomore in the VCUarts Photography program. Her work has been published in *Ink Magazine*. **JIMMY CLOUTIER** is a Cinema and English double major, expecting to graduate in 2014. He is a photographer, videographer, and creative nonfiction writer, and this is his first year on the *Poictesme* staff. He hopes to attend graduate school after he earns his B.A. **THOMAS DESANTO** graduated VCU in 2012 with a degree in English and minors in Religious Studies and Creative Writing. He received prizes in 2012 in both fiction and poetry in the VCU Writing Awards, and he has a short story forthcoming in *Blackbird*. **RICHARD DICICCO** plans to graduate by 2014 with a B.A. in Art History. His earlier work won a Scholastic Art & Writing Silver Key Award for Poetry. Richard is a Staff Writer for the *Commonwealth Times*, reviewing indie and alternative rock albums. **CARLA DOMINGUEZ** is a proud Cuban-American and English major who enjoys reading essays on linguistics and language history. **ELEANOR DOUGHTY** is a major in Communication Arts, graduating in May of 2013. Her brightest future is one in which she travels around the planet, drawing what she sees. **JACOB EVELAND** is a junior in the the Communication Arts program at VCU and plans to graduate in 2013. His piece "Ambiguous Joy" was chosen by The Richmond Illustrators' Fifth Club Juried Show and was displayed in the Ghost Print Gallery in Richmond, Virginia in June 2012. His piece "Tranquility" was chosen for the Society of Illustrators' Student Scholarship Competition

Award and was displayed May-June 2012 in The American Illustration Museum in New York, New York. **ARWEN FALK** is a Painting and Printmaking major, planning to graduate in May of 2013. After school she plans to explore Europe and eventually join an artist residency and continue to work on her portfolio. **ELEANOR FISHER** graduated in May 2012 with a degree in English. Last year she won an honorable mention for her fiction in the VCU Writing Awards. She would like to eventually attend an M.F.A. program. **MATT FRANKLIN** is an English major with a Creative Writing minor. He plans to pursue robotic arms implantation. **ERIN GERETY** is an English major and Religious Studies minor who plans to graduate in December of 2013. She is currently a copyediting intern for *Blackbird*, and she hopes to continue doing something along those lines in the future. **LYNDON GERMAN** is a first year student, double majoring in English and Creative Advertising. He is a Richmond native who's beginning to explore his interest in creative writing, journalism, fashion, and graphic design. His literary tastes run the maniacal gamut, from Vladimir Nabokov to Raymond Carver to Edward Gorey. **ROBALŪ GIBSUN** is a multidisciplinary artist studying Illustration and Creative Writing at Virginia Commonwealth University. Upon graduating in May 2013, he plans to tour the U.S. with his spoken word poetry and make a boom in the arts scene; a big BOOM, FOR REAL. Find more of his artwork and poetry at gibsunrising.tumblr.com. **ZACH GIBSON** studies photography and English at VCU. His photographs have appeared in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. **RORY HACHEL** is a senior at VCU in the English department. He plans to teach high school English in inner city schools and publish poetry whenever he can. **EMILY HERR** will graduate in May 2013 summa cum laude with a BFA in Communication Arts and a minor in Media Studies. She paints murals, just google "HerrSuite." **CATHERINE HUCUL** was studying Communication Arts at VCU until she realized her life was heading in another direction. This was her first time working with *Poictesme*. She plans to continue her education in the direction of Journalism or Editing after spending a semester as a starving artist. **TEMPLETON KELLEY** describes his aesthetic as spooky, dreamy, or sci-fi. He's inspired by music, Joan Miro, Jim Carrey, and little kids. He is a Painting and Printmaking major, set to graduate in 2014. **ANDY KOTSCH** is a freelance painter and illustrator, as well as budding entrepreneur. He is a recent VCU Fine Arts graduate, and a current resident of Richmond, Virginia. He enjoys gourmet mushrooms, fish sauce, and bonsai trees. You can see more of his work at www.andrewgerhard.com. **SCOTT KRESL** is a senior, majoring in English with a creative writing minor, scheduled to graduate in May 2013. His current occupation is in sales, but his dream is to become a professional writer. He is the married father of two boys. Between work, school and family, life is extremely busy. **CAT LETH** graduated from VCU in 2011 with a B.S. in Journalism. She now works for Tumblr in New York City, and spends her free time writing poems, taking photographs, and traveling. **MATT LUGER** graduated in December 2012 with a B.A. in English. He plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Nonfiction. **AMEORRY LUO** is an aspiring illustrator and production designer who is currently a freshman in the Art Foundation program at VCU. She plans to major in Communication Arts. In her free time, she generally likes to sleep, eat, blog, watch TV, and procrastinate. Occasionally, she draws somewhat pretty pictures. **RACHEL MAVES** graduated in

December 2012 from VCUarts with a degree in Communication Arts. She is a production artist at CustomInk, and more of her work can be found at www.rachelmaves.com. **STEPHEN MAYER** is a senior in the Painting and Printmaking program. After he graduates in 2013, he plans to go to graduate school. **ABIGAIL MCGINNIS** is a ridiculous Salinger fanatic who named her son after Zooey Glass. When she gets an occasional break from trying to balance being a full-time mom & student, she takes the time to enjoy the shit out of carrot cake or a nap. She plans to graduate from VCU in December of 2013 with degrees in both English and International Relations and a minor in Russian. **HANNAH MORGAN** is a junior, double majoring in philosophy and sociology and minoring in creative writing. She began contributing to *Poictesme* in 2012 and plans on going into a career in publishing, editing, and/or writing. Her favorite thing to write is poetry and her favorite things to read are the comment sections under online articles and videos. **TOLU OMOJOKUN** is a biology major and chemistry minor who will graduate from VCU in May 2013. Her YouTube videos, in total, have garnered hundreds of thousands of views and zeroes of thousands of dollars. She enjoys all things art and music and plans to carry on these hobbies as she goes through medical school and eventually enters a career as a doctor. **DOUG ORLESKI** is a Marketing dude at Theatre VCU. He runs the local cartoon blog RVA Coffee Stain and goes to Hooters for the wings. **GRACE OXLEY** is an English major graduating in May 2013. This is her first year working with *Poictesme*. **BRADFORD PEARCE** is a third year M.F.A. poetry student at VCU. His work has been presented at the biennial Think Small exhibit at Artspace in Richmond. He also has a poem forthcoming in *Remapping Hallowed Ground/Reimagining Richmond* for the Sesquicentennial. **GRACE POPP** will graduate from VCU in 2014 with a B.F.A. in Communication Arts and a minor in Art History. She plans to go into a career in illustration, but enjoys photography as well. Her proposal to teach a Character Design Class at the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art was recently accepted. **KRISTEN REBELO** is a junior in the Communication Arts Department with a focus on design and a love of typography. She is currently the Art Director of local online magazine and print journal, *Quail Bell*, and after graduation hopes to pursue a career in publication art direction, graphic design, and illustration. **MORRIS REESE** graduated from VCU in 2012 with a major in English and a minor in writing. He plans to make plans soon. **AMY SAILER** will graduate with degrees in English and Art History and a minor in Creative Writing in May 2013. Last year she won the Whitesell Critical Essay award, and this year an Outstanding English major distinction. This is her fifth year on the staff of *Poictesme* and her second as editor-in-chief. She is starting at an M.F.A. program in poetry in the fall. **KYLE SAXTON** is a junior in the Communication Arts Program at VCU. His work has been featured in *Pulse*, *JUST-ART*, and *Imprint Magazine* and he has won 1st place VSBA Regional Art Contest and 1st place Senior Art Scholarship. In 2010, he was featured in a solo show in Harrisonburg, Virginia. **NICHOLAS SCARPINATO** is a VCU Photo and Film major, graduating in 2015. His dream is to eventually work as a professor at VCUarts. He won Canon's Project Imagination contest in 2012. **EMMA SCARVEY** is a sophomore Communication Arts major and Art History minor. **NICHOLAS MORGAN SHIPMAN** is a whippersnapper freshman with too many majors who likes to collect obsolete skills

and one day hopes to make something approaching a living from writing. He also actively enjoys editing other people's work, mainly because he apparently hates free time. **KARTHIKA SOLAI** is a Chemistry major hoping to graduate in 2015. She is currently president of the VCU organization Girl Affect. She would like to continue studying science and keep writing after she finishes her education at VCU. **HELEN STODDARD** is a junior in the Photography department. She is spending the Spring 2013 semester studying abroad in Edinburgh, Scotland, and she was part of the "Unbound" exhibition at Candela Books in the summer of 2012. She is expected to graduate May 2014. **AMBER SYKES** is a senior English major and creative writing minor. After she completes her degree in December 2013, she hopes to attend graduate school to further her literary studies. She finds the impact of her peers' work on her own writing invaluable and is a first time contributor to *Poictesme*. **JASMINE THOMPSON** is a junior at VCU. She is originally from South Jersey, but chose VCU for its outstanding art program. Her photographic interests include portraits, people, fashion, fine art, commercial and there is a specific place in her heart for incorporating children in her work. She is a two-time recipient of the Congressional Black Caucus Visual Arts Scholarship. **SKYLER THOMPSON** is an AFO student intending to go into the Sculpture and Extended Media program. **SAM WITTWER** asked her friend Alex what she should put here, he responded with "Sam is an ingenious young creative, flush with distinctive ideas about life and art and the commingling of the two. She works late, has a very prestigious blog and occasionally sits in on psych classes by accident." She is flattered and hopes to live up to this description. **SKYE YOUNG** is a junior VCUarts student majoring in Scientific and Preparatory Medical Illustration within the Communication Arts department. She hopes to continue her education in scientific illustration in graduate school. She recently won the Naomi Winston Scholarship in Art and has had the privilege to show her work in a handful of shows around Loudoun County, as well as assist portfolio reviews as a Communication Arts representative for National Portfolio Day.

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