

Glass Mountain is a literary journal edited by undergraduate students at the University of Houston. Dedicated to showcasing the work from undergraduate and emerging artists across the nation, *Glass Mountain* publishes issues each Fall and Spring.

Submission guidelines can be found at www.glassmountainmag.com/submit

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

I proudly believe this edition of *Glass Mountain* is continued proof in the journal's ability to adapt and thrive with change, not only based on our growing staff, but on the quality and diversity of submissions we have received over the past year. Our art section is now larger and more sundry than ever, with pieces that push the limits of *Glass Mountain's* past aesthetic. This issue also includes one of the journal's first genre pieces, a tribute to our dedication to diversity of craft. Additionally, we have brought back author interviews, this time featuring one of the University of Houston's own former Creative Writing students and current professors. Likely the biggest change of all, however, is our addition of a permanent reviews section, as we now welcome and encourage in-depth examinations of any piece of art ranging from books, to music, to movies, and anything in between.

On a more personal note, as I sit here knowing this is the last volume I'll ever be a part of, I remain both excited for *Glass Mountain's* rapidly expanding potential, and grateful to everyone who has ever been a part of its history. I thank the staff who welcomed me at my first all-staff meeting all those years ago, and I thank the editors who came before them – the ones who had the audacity to start an undergraduate literary journal in the first place. And of course, I send sincere gratitude to the staff who has worked alongside me this past year. Not only have you been instrumental to *Glass Mountain's* success, but working-relationship aside, I have genuinely enjoyed getting to know each one of you during all those weekly meetings, readings, events, and late-night email chains. Even after the year is over, I am confident these friendships will survive beyond the pages of this journal.

But perhaps most of all, I would like to thank the woman who has believed in *Glass Mountain* since the very beginning: Lynn Voskuil continues to be a constant source for guidance and support, even after stepping down as our faculty advisor last year. I think I speak for every *Glass Mountain* editor, both past and present, when I say thank you, Lynn, for everything: for having faith in the journal when it was nothing more than an idea amongst an aspiring group of students, for offering up your own home for meetings when we had nowhere else to go, and for all your hard work and unwavering belief in us even nine years later. This journal would not have survived without your dedication and enthusiasm. Simply put, thank you for being awesome.

Much Love,
Rebecca Canak
Editor, *Glass Mountain*

For Lynn Voskuil,
who has been there from the start.

“To climb the glass mountain, one first requires a good reason.”
—Donald Barthelme, 1931-1989

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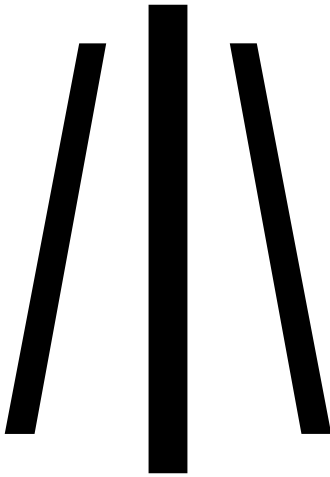
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PROSE CONTEST WINNER

WITHIN THE WALLS

Dania Mahmoud

There was screaming coming from the kitchen.

Nisreen found Aviva already in the doorway, rolling her eyes. “Guess now’s a bad time to make a sandwich.”

Their mothers were facing off over the counter. Nisreen’s mother had her lips coiled, arms only uncrossing to tuck a stray hair beneath her scarf. Mrs. Ackermann was red-faced, waving a packet of sweet cheese in one hand and a carton of goat meat in the other, shrieking, “You’ve ruined it! It’s not kosher!”

Oops. Suddenly Nisreen’s ears were red. She always forgot that the Ackermanns needed meat and dairy to be in separate ice boxes. She knew she should admit her mistake, but the fight looked like it had been going on for a while. Nisreen’s mother was only this silent when she was seething. The quieter she was, the more enraged Mrs. Ackermann became.

“Mama!” Nisreen’s older sisters were thundering downstairs. “Mama, the Ackermann boy peed in the hallway!”

“It’s not my fault,” Mica had tears in his eyes and a dark spot on his trousers. “They wouldn’t let me use the toilet.”

“It’s not your hour for the toilet,” said Selma.

“We never use it during your hour,” agreed Fatimah.

Mrs. Ackermann was beside herself. She screamed that it was harder for a boy to hold it, that the girls were just being cruel, and now there were clothes to wash and no hot meal to look forward to, she finished in a screech.

Nisreen was wondering if anyone would notice if she slipped away, but then she heard a bedroom slam open and her father roaring, “Every time I try to get a wink of sleep around here, all I hear is that insufferable voice, you damn woman!”

Mrs. Ackermann did not know much Arabic, but she did know when she was being insulted. She met Nisreen’s father with a tirade about lazy bastards who sleep at six in the evening. Individually, she and Nisreen’s father were loud. Com-

bined, they were earth shattering. Nisreen didn't mind. She was rather used to it.

She was beginning to wish she had spoken up sooner, though, especially when she felt Mr. Ackermann behind her. He gently pushed past her, and she caught sight of the first of a series of numbers on his forearm. Like her father, Mr. Ackermann had a beard that curled at his collarbone and a face wrinkled far beyond its years. From far away it was hard to tell the two apart.

Mrs. Ackermann seized at her husband. "Daniel! Daniel, these people are torturing your son. And they ruined our food! What are you going to do about it, Daniel?"

Mr. Ackermann looked from his wife to Nisreen's parents with long eyes. "Well, Mr. Tahar, Mrs. Tahar," he said. "What has happened?"

Nisreen thought this was as good a cue as any. "It was my fault. I was cleaning up after dinner and I forgot."

She wouldn't look at her father. She already knew he was scowling beneath dark brows. She heard his clenched voice, "We'll call the butcher in the morning."

Mr. Ackermann nodded gratefully. "And Mica will go outside next time," he said, nodding to his son. He led his wife out of the kitchen, to the bedroom they shared with their children. Mica followed, trying to cover the damp spot, still sniffling.

Aviva lingered, eyeing a bowl of oranges. Mr. Tahar had brought them home, and judging by the glare he was sending his youngest daughter, she decided now was not the time to ask. Nisreen caught her parting smile of encouragement.

Then her father started in on her. "This is the second time in three weeks, Nisreen! Do you know how expensive meat is?"

Nisreen tried to swallow the lump that was forming in her throat. Selma and Fatimah were shooting her withering looks. She wanted to stick her tongue out at them, but her mother was looking. Instead she apologized, insisting it wouldn't happen again.

But her father wasn't paying attention anymore. He was at the table with his face in his hands. Her mother's hand hovered over his shoulder, then fell to her side.

Nisreen's sisters decided they could leave. Nisreen grabbed an orange before scrambling to the basement, where Aviva was waiting.

"Sorry about that," she said, tossing the orange to Aviva.

She peeled back the skin, giving Nisreen half. “It’s ok. I don’t like goat, anyways.”

Nisreen liked that about Aviva; she didn’t get mad easily and she forgave quickly. Shortly after the Ackermanns began living with them, Nisreen watched Aviva allow her brother to take her share of the only chocolate they were going to get in months. Nisreen thought that was superhuman. She started testing Aviva. When no one was looking, she’d pull a strand of her thick, dark blonde hair, hard. Aviva would gasp and stare at Nisreen with wide brown eyes specked with green, but she wouldn’t retaliate. She wouldn’t even tell. After the third time, Nisreen felt pretty bad. She apologized and promised she wouldn’t hurt Aviva ever again, and if either of her sisters did, she’d hit them in the nose. That made Aviva laugh, and after that they were friends.

They were ten years old. None of the others got along half so well, but that wasn’t surprising. All of the Jewish and Arab families being crammed into houses together were prone to hatred.

The house the Tahars and Ackermanns shared was made of cement that must have been white once but was now rain-worn and bitter with rust. It sat on the side of an impossibly steep hill. The first time Nisreen saw it, she thought it was going to topple right off. It had a foyer, a sitting room, a kitchen, a basement downstairs, two bedrooms and a bath upstairs. A little smaller than Nisreen’s real home. A little older, too, or maybe just not as well taken care of. It might have been just like any other house in Palestine, except it was in a neighborhood surrounded by a barbed wire fence.

No one could leave al-Ajami without the military commander’s permission. Nisreen and her family were walled inside in 1948, along with the handful of other Arabs who had managed to stay in Jaffa City during the war. They had been told they had to leave in the middle of the night. They weren’t given time to pack. Everything that was left behind was quickly occupied by settlers.

That was why when the Ackermanns arrived two years later, they were told they would have to share a house in the ghetto, at least temporarily. The news extinguished the small breath of hope that had filled their lungs. They were exhausted and looking for a place to call home, and that was what they heard Israel was going

to be.

Nisreen remembered when the soldiers informed them that the house they were just becoming used to was being split into apartments. She and her sisters spent the day moving all of their belongings into what had been their parents' bedroom. Their father burst out over the injustice of it all. Their mother was just numb. "No more privacy," she said. "A house with the same people who might have--" She stopped then because she was about to bring up Sami. No one talked about Sami.

The Ackermanns moved in the next day. War was declared immediately. Mrs. Ackermann and Nisreen's father discovered they shared like tempers. Their screaming matches became the house's soundtrack. A mix of loyalty and boredom motivated Selma and Fatimah to constantly pick fights with Mica, who was always eager to fight back. There was a time when Nisreen's mother might have played peacemaker, but now she only glided through her daily routines. Only Mr. Ackermann made a real effort. He was as gentle-hearted as his daughter, maybe even more.

He was prone to nervousness, though. Aviva said it was because of the camp. At first Nisreen thought he went to a bad summer camp. Concentration camp, Aviva corrected. Once Nisreen saw him stare at the numbers on his forearm for a long time. Then he put his hand over them, as if to make them go away.

Work was scarce within the wire walls. Food was, too. Nisreen's father brought home a few handfuls of change a day, without pride. He'd taken to long naps in the afternoon. Nisreen and her sisters tried to tip-toe around him. Mr. Ackermann was allowed to leave al-Ajami during the day. He would go door to door, selling anything he could get his hands on. Mrs. Ackermann didn't think it was enough. Nisreen could hear their hushed arguments at night, Mrs. Ackermann moaning that they were never going to be free, not really.

The last five months had only been survivable because of the treaty the Tahars and Ackermanns managed to negotiate. They ate in the kitchen on alternate days. Bathroom use was scheduled. The sitting room was off-limits, unless there were guests. Food could be shared if both parties paid for it, but it had to be split carefully, and it had to be both halal and kosher, and anyone who violated the terms would accept responsibility.

That was why the butcher's wife arrived the morning after the kitchen incident. She brought racks of beef, chicken, lamb, and goat, all fresh. Nisreen's mouth was watering before the door was fully open.

"Miriam!" She hugged the woman around her ample middle. Miriam patted her head. Nisreen's mother greeted her guest with a kiss on each cheek. The small gold cross on Miriam's chest caught the sunlight and bounced off the sitting room walls.

Nisreen's mother disappeared to count out money from the savings jar. Nisreen and Miriam fell into easy conversation that was only interrupted when Aviva poked her head around the corner, armed with toys. She reddened when she realized Nisreen had company, but Miriam smiled.

"Your name Aviva, yes?" she said in broken Hebrew.

Nisreen said that Aviva understood Arabic, that she spoke three languages, actually.

"Almost four," said Aviva, unable to hide her pride. "I'm learning English, too."

Miriam was impressed. She motioned for Aviva to sit next to her and began telling her about how she and Nisreen used to be neighbors on farms just outside Jaffa. Nisreen would deliver oranges and help feed the chickens. In exchange Miriam would give her tall glasses of milk, still warm. Nisreen began visiting a lot more during the war, when she could no longer walk to the city by herself. Miriam didn't have children, and she liked the company. She and her husband were removed from their home the same night as Nisreen's family. Miriam held Nisreen's hand the entire way to al-Ajami.

"I like your cross," said Aviva, pointing to the pin on Miriam's chest.

"Thank you. It was my mother's."

Nisreen squinted. Miriam used to wear the cross every day, but this was the first time it appeared since the occupation. "I thought you lost that?"

Miriam bit her lip, placing a hand over the pin. When she looked at Nisreen, her eyes were shining. "I was able to go back."

"How?" Nisreen was leaning forward, her small hands clenched into fists. She half expected Miriam to be joking. Aviva must have noticed her agitation be-

cause she was looking at her with raised brows.

“They let me out of al-Ajami last week, to sell to the settlers,” said Miriam. “There’s a meat shortage. No one followed me. I could go anywhere I wanted.”

“You went to your house,” said Nisreen. Something strange was spreading through her whole body. She felt exhilarated.

Miriam nodded. “I had to try,” she said. “A boy was at the door. His parents weren’t home. He told me to come back later. He told me he wasn’t allowed to talk to strangers.” Miriam’s voice was far away. Her eyes trailed over Aviva. “He was small. He looked scared,” she said. “But I could see my furniture behind him. I could see the cabinet we kept the photo albums in. I told him I’d give him as much food as he wanted if he would let me inside. I knew Hazam would be mad, but I didn’t care. I took anything that fit in my pockets. My cross, Hazam’s razor, one of the napkins with the flowers embroidered on the corner.”

“He wasn’t angry?” said Nisreen. “The boy?”

“He was laughing,” said Miriam. “He said I’d made a bad trade.” She smiled, her wet eyes blinking rapidly. “I only wish I had bigger pockets.”

Nisreen’s mother was back, her fist closed around the money. “Did you hear anything of prisoners? Before you returned?” There was a hopeful lilt in her voice. It drained Nisreen’s excitement.

Miriam shook her head, her smile falling.

Nisreen’s mother forced her cheeks up. “Well. That’s only to be expected.” She counted out the change into Miriam’s palm. “Here you are, *habibti*.”

Miriam began fussing about it being way too much. She and Nisreen’s mother squabbled like they did years ago, each refusing to acknowledge that money was far more precious than it used to be. Eventually Miriam accepted the sum but insisted on gifting an extra carton of goat. Nisreen’s mother closed the door behind her, thanking her again and again. Nisreen put the meat away. When she came back, her mother was still standing against the door, looking at her empty hands. Nisreen thought about hugging her, pressing her face into her blouse so that she could smell the all-spice and coffee always lingering there. Instead, she trooped past her.

The basement was the only place Nisreen and Aviva could be away from

their bickering parents and prying siblings. At first, Aviva had been afraid. She said she never wanted to see a basement again. She and her mother and Mica hid beneath a friend's house during the awful time Mr. Ackermann was in the camp. When he finally returned, Aviva said he looked like a corpse that had come alive again. She even had a nightmare about him. It took a long time for him to feel like her father again, for any of them to feel like a family, even. Nisreen watched them eat dinner through the cracked kitchen door once. They moved around each other in silence.

Eventually Nisreen was able to entice Aviva down with dolls made out of newspapers and a deck of cards she found in her father's coat pocket. Now they escaped to the basement whenever they could.

Nisreen could feel Aviva's eyes on her. She raised her brows.

Aviva put her doll down. "What would you get from your house? If you could go back?"

Nisreen didn't have to pause. "My necklace."

"Oh," said Aviva. She picked the doll up. Put it down again. "What kind of necklace?"

"Glass."

"*Glass?*"

"Yeah. My brother gave it to me."

"Oh," Aviva said again. She only knew about Sami because once she and Nisreen caught Nisreen's mother asking Mr. Ackermann if he knew anything about prisoners, about what happened to them. Mr. Ackermann said he did not. Nisreen's mother might have left then, but she turned around. Begged Mr. Ackermann to find out, to talk to the soldiers in Hebrew. She looked like she was going to fall to her knees. Mr. Ackermann said he would try. He hadn't brought up the subject since.

Nisreen hadn't, either. Any time Aviva came close to asking about it, she would become far away. Even now she was staring at the doll in her hand without really seeing it.

She had been in the orange grove when Sami gave her the necklace. It looked like a misshapen arrow, skinny on top and wider at the bottom, with one side pointed. A green ribbon was wrapped around the edge.

Nisreen couldn't help but make a face.

Sami laughed. "I found it on the street," he admitted. "But I thought it was pretty. Especially after I cleaned it. See the way the light shines through? And I had the ribbon, anyways."

Nisreen's arms were around him before he could finish speaking. It had been ages since anyone gave her a gift.

Sami spun her around, tying on the necklace. "Don't take it off, okay? It'll be your *zakra* of me."

"*Zakra*?" said Nisreen. "A memory?"

"Yeah. So you can always remember you're my favorite sister." Sami was grinning his usual wide grin. It was infectious.

Nisreen smiled, too. "Am I really your favorite?"

"Of course." Sami leaned in. "Selma and Fatimah always smell like sheep dung."

Nisreen laughed. She didn't stop until a gunshot screamed through the distance.

Sami stood, trailing the smoke across the sky. He started to run.

"Sami!" Nisreen stood on her tip-toes, watching her brother turn around.

He already seemed far away. "I promise. I won't take it off!"

She saw him give a thumbs-up, still wearing that grin. Then she watched him run until he was gone. He was seventeen.

She tried to keep the necklace on after that. But the pointed side kept cutting her collarbone, and after blood stained one of her dresses, she placed it in her bed stand. She would open the drawer every night, watching the glass turn her bedroom light into rainbows. She could never be sure why she left it closed the night they were forced from their home. She hadn't remembered the necklace until she could not sleep in the new, strange house. The promise was broken, and Sami, she knew, was lost forever.

Nisreen's family might have lost their minds from sadness and stagnancy were it not for the garden. It wrapped around the house, bursting with apple trees and date palms and ivy that spilled over the clay fence. It would have been chaotic, but the Tahars expertly coaxed the herbs into straight lines, raked the fallen leaves,

and relieved the trees of ripe fruit. It was therapeutic; they worked in the evenings, silent but side by side.

Nisreen could always feel Aviva and Mica watching from the window. She usually fought the impulse to invite them. She did not want to spoil the fragile peace created when her family was patting down soil and passing the watering bucket.

That day, however, the Tahars and the Ackermanns were managing well. After Nisreen's mother gave Mrs. Ackermann the goat, Mrs. Ackermann made so many kebabs that there were leftovers, something rare. She presented the extra food to Nisreen's mother, who was so surprised, she barely managed a thank you. Nisreen and her sisters didn't hesitate to help themselves. Even their father could not help but mention that everything was very well seasoned.

That was why when Nisreen turned around to beckon to the Ackermann children, she did not feel uneasy. The October air was cool with good will. She and Fatimah began showing Aviva how to tend to the mint leaves. Aviva was a good learner, already eager to be doing something with her hands. Mica hovered above the girls, pretending to not pay attention. He made guns out of his fingers and chased an invisible villain around and around.

It felt good to be out of the house. Even Mr. and Mrs. Ackermann wandered over. They commented on the weather and the clearness of the sky. Nisreen heard her parents agree that it was all very beautiful. She smiled.

Then the roar of a military car broke across the street. Everyone became still. The roaring grew close, then stopped. Someone was knocking on the door.

Nisreen watched her parents' eyes become wide. She wanted to hold her mother's hand, but she was already moving briskly into the house. Her father motioned for the girls to stay back before he followed. Nisreen made her hands into fists, made them flat again. Aviva asked her what was going on twice. She snapped that she didn't know, and Aviva tried not to look hurt. Mr. and Mrs. Ackermann stood in the doorway, unsure.

They all heard the front door hinges squeak. Then Nisreen's mother screamed. Nisreen bolted inside, her sisters at her heels. The Ackermanns followed, Mrs. Ackermann scooping up Mica, Mr. Ackermann wrapping his arms around his

chest.

Two soldiers stood in the doorway. When they saw Mr. Ackermann they began speaking in fast Hebrew. He only nodded, brows furrowing. Nisreen turned from them, looking wildly for her mother. She and her father were standing a little apart. It looked like they were embracing, but when Nisreen got closer, she saw that there was a boy between them, tall and skinny, with moonlight skin. A wave of dizziness erupted over her.

“Sami!”

Nisreen’s sisters clouded around, trying to get at their brother, to feel him and to know he was real. Nisreen copied. *Sami!* The name felt strange on her tongue. She and her family formed a wailing ball of hugging limbs, not yet realizing that Sami stood unmoved in the middle. His hair was thin and fell in overgrown wisps. Odd patches grew on his cheeks. His lips were dry and long and slightly parted. He stared with empty black eyes at a point on the ceiling and did not look down.

Nisreen shifted from one foot to another, contemplating the figure on the mattress.

“Don’t wake him,” her sisters warned.

They were crowding above the apparently sleeping Sami like dwarves guarding Snow White. Sami lay on his stomach, cradling his head. He kept moving his feet, and he was breathing fast. Nisreen didn’t think he was asleep. She became impatient. She wanted to look at his face, to talk to him. She wiggled onto the mattress, ignoring her sisters’ furiously whispered protests, and placed a hand on her brother’s back.

Sami waited a moment. Then he lifted his head. Nisreen stopped mid-smile. A scar curved from the end of Sami’s eyebrow to his nose. His jaw was tight. He stared at Nisreen through lidded eyes, as if he was attempting to determine who she was.

Nisreen sat up. She started to say something, but her words caught in her throat. She tried again. “I really missed you, Sami.”

She felt pathetic. She should have let him rest. She looked at her sisters, red. Selma pulled her up by the shoulder, a little roughly. Sami sat up. For a mo-

ment Nisreen thought he was going to defend her, as he usually did.

“Water,” he said.

Nisreen stood dumbly. Her sisters did, too.

Sami looked between them and through them. One side of his face convulsed. “Water,” he said. He was starting to sound angry. “Water!”

“I’ll get it,” said Nisreen. She wanted to be out of the room.

Sami acted like she hadn’t spoken. She heard him continue to beg even as she dashed downstairs and filled two glasses to the brim. A tight ball was forming in her throat, making her breath rattle. She thought she might be sick.

That night, the Ackermanns sat at the dinner table and the Tahars on the kitchen floor, among pillows from the sitting room. “We’re eating traditional style,” Nisreen’s mother had said, but by the dirty looks Mrs. Ackermann kept shooting, Nisreen realized it was more of a sit-in protest.

It was the Ackermanns’ night to eat in the kitchen, but Nisreen’s mother had rallied for an exception. Mrs. Ackermann wouldn’t budge. Nisreen’s mother wouldn’t, either. Her son was home, she insisted, and he was going to eat a meal in her kitchen. She was so bent on the idea that she was willing to break the rules. She made spinach pies and baked lamb and pita pockets and mixed every kind of vegetable into a delicious rice, using up half the Tahars’ food supply. She looked extremely pleased watching Sami eat. He was shoving everything into his mouth as quickly as possible. Nisreen wrinkled her nose. She wondered if he was even tasting anything.

Conversation was dulled by the anger in the room. Nisreen looked up at Aviva. “Can you pass the salt?”

Aviva had to lean so far down, she almost fell out of her chair. Nisreen tried not to laugh.

She was sobered by Sami’s loud chewing. Her father chuckled. He hadn’t taken his eyes off his son the entire evening. He patted him between the shoulders.

“Pace yourself, *habibi*, slowly.”

Sami didn’t look up, just kept eating as fast as he could. It was as if a hungry ghost had invited himself to dinner.

“Gross,” said Mica, not loud enough for the parents to hear.

Nisreen could feel Fatimah bristling. She shot a glance at Aviva, who kicked her brother under the table. He only giggled. He said Sami looked like a pig.

Selma turned around. "Don't call him that, you brat."

Nisreen's shoulders were hunched to her ears. She was mad at Mica, but she was somehow angry with Sami, too. He was embarrassing, she thought, and then she felt guilty for thinking it. She wished dinner would be over.

Mica was laughing like he had come up with the best joke in the world. He looked straight at Selma and said with a gap-toothed grin, "He's a disgusting, slobbery pig."

That time everyone heard him. The silverware stopped clanging. Nisreen's father said that if he ever heard that come out of the boy's mouth again, he'd slap the mouth right off him. That sent Mica into tears. Mrs. Ackermann made a scraping noise against the tile and said that if the Tahars had stayed out of the kitchen like they were supposed to, they wouldn't have had their feelings hurt.

That's when the fight really started. Everyone was up and screaming into someone's face, except for Nisreen and Aviva, who were avoiding eye contact, and Sami, who was swallowing his last bite.

Then he stood. He shouted, in a voice that was not his own, "Shut up you damn, filthy Arabs!"

He appeared to be addressing not just his family, but the Ackermanns, as well. His wild black eyes darted everywhere but did not meet anyone's gaze. He was holding a dinner knife.

Nisreen blinked at Sami. The insane thought crossed her mind that they were being tricked, that this wasn't Sami, after all. She wanted to be as far away from him as possible. She saw her mother cover her mouth with her hands. Saw her father unclench his fists. He placed a palm over Sami's eyes, slowly taking the knife out of his hand. He led his son out the kitchen, still covering his eyes. Nisreen could hear Sami mutter the strange mantra the entire way up to the bedroom. "Filthy Arabs. Damn, filthy Arabs. You all need to shut up."

Nisreen didn't say anything when Aviva found her in the basement. Aviva didn't, either. She just put her hand over Nisreen's, sitting with her in the dark.

“He doesn’t remember us,” Nisreen said after a while. She hated that she sounded like water. “He doesn’t remember me at all.”

“Maybe,” said Aviva. “Maybe you could do something to remind him.”

Nisreen grew quiet. When she thought of it, she looked at Aviva with new light in her eyes. “The necklace!”

She stood, letting go of Aviva’s hand. She started pacing. “When he sees it, he’ll remember how he made it for me. How it’s our *zükra*.”

Aviva didn’t look as excited as Nisreen felt. She only said, “But how will you get it?”

“Miriam got stuff from her old house. I’ll just go and ask.”

Aviva sucked in her cheek. “You don’t think whoever’s living there threw it away?”

This had never occurred to Nisreen. She always pictured her house looking exactly the way she left it, everything from the books on the shelves to the marks on the wall that measured her height. “They can’t have,” she decided.

Aviva was not as enthusiastic as Nisreen wanted her to be. “What if they don’t want to give it to you? What if they want to keep it?”

Nisreen crossed her arms. “Why wouldn’t they? It’s a piece of glass, it doesn’t matter to them.” She stopped pacing. “What’s wrong? It’s a good plan. You said it yourself, I need something to remind him.”

Aviva stood. She tried to choose her words carefully. “It’s just that I don’t think they’ll like you being there very much.”

Nisreen looked down. “I have to try,” she said. She bit her lip. Looked back up. “What if you came with me? They’d like you.”

Aviva crossed her arms behind her back. “I don’t know if my parents would let me.”

“We’ll go tomorrow night, then, when everyone’s asleep.” Nisreen was staring hard at Aviva.

“Okay,” Aviva said finally. “I’ll go with you.”

At midnight, the guard at the gate went home and the next took his place. There was usually a five minute delay, and some of the older boys in al-Ajami took

the opportunity to hop the fence and steal cigarettes from the corner store nearby. When Nisreen and Aviva asked for help getting over, they shrugged and complied.

Aviva's father had taken her outside of the neighborhood a few times since they arrived, so she didn't seem as exhilarated as Nisreen was. Nisreen took a deep breath, staring at the stars. They were somehow different on the other side of the fence.

"It'll take thirty minutes to walk there," she told Aviva. "But maybe if we run, it'll be faster."

They broke into a sprint, their hair wild in the wind. When they arrived, cold air had filled their lungs and chilled the sweat climbing down their arms. Nisreen's old neighborhood had one street lamp, and it made a column of welcome light.

Nisreen stood on the porch she spent her early years napping on. The rocking chairs were still there, between them the little table her father had made for ash trays. The curtain in the door window was still the pink one with the swirling pattern. Nisreen had to fight the instinct to let herself in.

She had a sudden thought, and Aviva voiced it. "They're probably asleep."

Nisreen clamped her jaw. She didn't care. She knocked three times, extra loud. She remembered when she had been woken at night in the same house, in the same manner. She knocked again.

The porch light turned on. The curtain on the door slid open. "My husband isn't home right—oh!" The young woman in the window blinked when she saw Nisreen and Aviva. She opened the door. She was in a night gown, her hair loose and falling in smooth curls. One hand rested on her protruding belly. She looked surprised and maybe a little cross, thought Nisreen with some guilt. "What are you doing here?" she said. "Are you lost?"

Nisreen could not understand her. She looked to Aviva, but she was looking at her shoes, sweat still trickling down her arms. Nisreen tried in Arabic. "I left something here, and I was wondering if I could have it back."

The woman's eyes widened. She couldn't understand Nisreen, but she didn't have to. She let go of her belly and gripped the door knob. "You shouldn't be here. Where are your parents?"

Nisreen nudged Aviva, shooting her a pleading look. Aviva only gazed at the woman, petrified. Nisreen was beginning to regret bringing her at all.

The woman began to close the door. "I'm calling the police."

Nisreen wasn't sure if she should run or hide or just cry.

"Wait," Aviva said in Hebrew. Suddenly she was standing determinedly straight. "We just want to get something that was forgotten here. It won't take a minute. Then we'll be gone."

Nisreen still saw doubt in the woman's face. "I don't know if I should. My husband wouldn't like it."

Aviva took a step forward. "Please," she said.

The woman's hand was back on her belly. She glanced at Nisreen, then looked at Aviva. Then she opened the door just wide enough to let them in.

No one was using Nisreen's old bedroom. The necklace was still in the dresser. She grabbed it, careful to avoid the pointed side. She did not pause to rifle anymore through the drawer, which was filled with birthday cards and other treasures, did not take a second glance around the room, or out the window where she used to watch her father water the orange trees, back when he was up before the sun. She only ran down the stairs and out the house forever. Aviva was beside her the whole time.

They didn't stop running until they reached the gate. Then they stood, panting numbly. Nisreen hadn't thought about how they were going to get back inside.

"We could sleep in the bushes until morning," said Aviva wildly. "And then we could, I don't know, catch a ride with the first person who comes out."

Nisreen tried to think. She looked at the necklace, the ribbon a little old but still a deep green, the glass already catching the sun's first rays.

Then a heavy palm grabbed her by the hair and lifted her. She howled in pain and fear. Aviva screamed, and the soldier pinched her arm, not letting go of Nisreen.

"You two are in deep trouble."

Maybe it was because Nisreen had just seen her home, but the al-Ajami house looked worse than ever. It sat crookedly on the hill, the rusted cement like

fire in the breaking dawn. The soldier did not let go of Nisreen and Aviva until they were standing on the porch.

The door was open wide. All the Tahars and Ackermanns stood in the foyer, like they had been about to leave, but something detained them. They were so still and silent, they could have been statues of themselves. Nisreen realized they were all staring at Sami and Mr. Ackermann, who were so close, the tips of their noses might have been touching. Sami was grasping Mr. Ackermann's beard, holding it up. Nisreen squinted against the now fully risen sun, and that was when she saw the knife Sami was holding to Mr. Ackermann's neck.

She only saw it for a moment. Then a bullet flew through the left side of Sami's skull and came out through the right. He let go of Mr. Ackermann's beard and the knife clattered against the tiled floor. Nisreen looked up at the soldier. She hadn't even felt him aim the rifle. In the commotion that followed, the necklace fell from Nisreen's hand, slicing the skin on its way down. It shattered in an explosion of glass and blood.

Nisreen's mother told the story like this: She had woken to check on Sami, but realized Nisreen was missing. She turned on all the lights, and that of course woke everyone else. The Ackermanns found that Aviva was gone. The families scoured the house, first as a unified group, then as warring parties. When they couldn't find the girls they tried to leave, but somehow ended up in battle lines before they were out the door. They attacked each other with the worst words they could think of. Mrs. Ackermann was in hysterics. Nisreen's father could have had an aneurism. But worst of all was Mr. Ackermann. He was in a fit. He pulled at his beard, wringed his tattooed wrist, swayed from side to side. Then he howled, a loud, painful sound.

That was too much for Sami. "Shut up! You damn, filthy Arabs, just *shut up!*" Then he unveiled the retrieved dinner knife. He grabbed Mr. Ackermann by the beard, and that was when the soldier found them.

Looking back, though, Nisreen thought it must have been more complicated than that. The scene in the foyer had been too still. It had been as if all of them were standing in place for a long time. She couldn't understand why no one

was reaching for Mr. Ackermann or trying to hold Sami back. Why wasn't Mr. Ackermann resisting? Why wasn't Sami taking the plunge into his neck? For a while she thought a magic spell must have frozen them right there, right in the entrance of the house.

But the more she thought about it, the more she decided it must have been more real than that. She went through it over and over, thought about it even when the Ackermanns left for good, even when her family was able to move, even when the barbed wire around al-Ajami came down.

Eventually she decided that when Sami lunged at Mr. Ackermann, and they locked eyes, they must have really seen each other. Mr. Ackermann saw Sami alone in a black cell, he saw the knife that scraped through his face, he saw him being yelled at, being spat on, being blindfolded and burned, battered, beaten, being thrown around so much that his brain must have been knocked out of place, being deprived of all his youth in the span of two years. And Sami saw Mr. Ackermann become a walking skeleton. He saw the legs like needles, too thin to support anything. He saw him fall into a heap of snow and almost not get up and not want to, either. He saw the smoke that smelled of burning flesh and never went away, even when it disappeared into the sky. They saw each other, and their families did, too, and that was what Nisreen was sure she had discovered. All of them silent, unable to move if they wanted to, all of them in total awe of their sameness.

POETRY CONTEST WINNER

ARACHNE

Emily Cinquemani

Stop telling that same myth of someone destroyed
by pride—how Arachne’s human form fell away
and spider limbs clawed forward from her skin,
her final transformation caused by the cool tap
of Athena’s jealous finger. Instead, show her
weaving, low-born and motherless, the kind of plain-
faced girl people overlook, her hand-me-down
dress billowing over sharp shoulder bones.

Show her bent over a loom as though hunched
forward in prayer, her body curved like a sickle
moon as she draws images and patterns
from wool—known only for this: pulling threads
with her thin hands, causing strangers
to come from towns over and run their fingers
across the fabric. Show them twisting gold
rings around their thumbs while checking
for flaws, and then finding it perfect,
amazed that she could be nobody
and make such beautiful things.

She tucks her callused fingers beneath
her palms, unspeaking, knowing
somehow that she should keep her eyes
slanted down toward her feet and listen
while they praise Athena for her gift,
while the gods on high keep swooping

down and taking women, turning people
into stone, dashing ships against rocks.

She weaves, always, even at night
while her father sleeps. Show the way
the rhythm of it can fill a space
inside her, weaving as people go,
chariots raising dust from the earth,
and weaving still as more arrive to snatch
up her work, to keep praising god,

and tell the story of that first transformation—
of when she glances at her creation
and admires it herself, then decides,
amid all those voices, *this is mine*.
Say she knew the danger of defying
that immortal weaver, but still
looked up. Give her the power of turning
her face to the sky and speaking,
the power of stories and myths,
of what began unspooling
from the words leaving her tongue.

PROSE CONTEST RUNNER-UP

BOLIVIAN LOVE STORIES

Camila Cossio

After Todd's death there were some days where admiralty was the only thing that made sense to me. On days where I got to work early and ran into a raccoon calmly eating lettuce behind the morning fog, slowly blinking up at me while he continued to carefully chew his breakfast. On days when I was stuck in the physics building with Einstein and Carl Sagan posters because of the rain which later washed everything away—leaving all of the streets and the cars and the neighborhoods clean, awake, anew. On days when the baby sparrows came out, warm and safe from their nests, chirping for all of us—on those days—when I feel calm and assured—all of the policy issues that my Admiralty Professor had talked about would hit me in the gut and I understood: admiralty isn't like other laws, admiralty is supposed to protect its people, it's Romantic with a capital "R," it's supposed to be justice for those who deserve it, for those who need it—The Wards of the Admiralty.

*

We were celebrating Christmas dinner when my grandma re-told the story of her night in La Paz with Alvaro's corpse. Alvaro was the traditional South American business man—with the mustache, money, and hypocrisy. Alvaro—with that name that can't be translated—was my grandfather's step-dad. I never met him. When my grandfather was a child his dad went off to fight in *La Guerra Del Chaco*. I couldn't imagine—no dad to force you to go to soccer practice, to drink both orange juice and milk at breakfast every morning, no dad to yell at you when he caught you watching Sponge Bob, but who would yowl hysterically at Johnny Bravo. I couldn't imagine my dad eating rats to survive, sweating in the same underwear night after night, and killing his friends from Paraguay because they were from Paraguay. When my grandfather's dad returned from the war, he would sit on the hammock

for hours, never speaking, and one day he was just dead.

“Alvaro was walking home,” my grandma said. “They took his wallet, knocked him around, and then he died the day after.” I smiled inside as I saw Todd’s eyes widen. “He had a blood clot in his brain,” my grandma went on. “But no one had noticed because Alvaro had refused to see a doctor.” Todd was my boyfriend. He was a super hypochondriac who would give himself WebMD panic attacks and not recover for days; although often his reactions seemed more reasonable than mine. One time a really attractive supervisor sat down next to me to go over everything I did wrong when I tried to translate the Chilean Water Code. I started blushing really bad and then my glasses completely fogged over to the point where I couldn’t see anything and had to take them off. Todd’s reactions, I would say, are maybe less embarrassing, but still irrational. He said “conversate” instead of “conversation” once and he was sure, so sincerely sure it proved he had already had a stroke. When I first realized his anxiety was that bad it made me a little nervous—could I ever make fun of his stretch marks? Could he eat oysters? Could we ever travel overseas together?

*

Todd and I got really serious by the time I was in law school. My favorite class in law school was Admiralty Law. To this day, I have no idea why I took it. Todd liked the idea of going on a cruise. A cruise ship with the power to take us on an adventure with dictated fun— a resort, with showers and lavender soaps and bathtubs and Jacuzzis and pools and saunas and lots of drinks with happy colors and endless dreams.

Admiralty is basically law of vessels. I thought it would be more law of the sea or law of the water, but no, it really is law of vessels—vessels moving, vessels and commerce, vessels that keep commerce moving forward. None of that is relevant to me. I don’t even really like commerce. I hate buying things so Todd never knows what to buy me for birthdays or holidays because the only thing I’m kind of weird about are candles. I usually just want him to buy me some with specific scents. Peppermint, café au lait, cinnamon roll—stuff that reminds me of bakeries, you

know, bread smells. Of course Todd got really sick of my collection really fast.

*

“Your aunts were useless,” my grandma said to me. “They were trying to calm your great-grandmother down, but it wasn’t working so your grandfather and I had to step in. We were left in charge of everything, but it was, eh, Moni, how do you say-*toque de queda?*”

“Curfew,” my mom replied.

“Yes, curfew. The president had fled to the U.S.—another one of those—so the military was in charge, there were officers everywhere. We couldn’t go anywhere, everything was closed. We were trapped until morning in that huge, empty loft with Alvaro’s dead body.”

For context, it wasn’t even the 90’s when people were still really pissed about Pinochet. This was the early 2000’s, like when Jessica Simpson and baby Zac Efron were starting to be really relevant. Things like that just happen in Bolivia, like no-big deal. Parasites. Drug Laundering. Pachamamma. Tuberculosis. National curfews.

Bolivia is just like any other third-world country where everything can feel bizarrely conventional but backwards at the same time. I visited a lot in my early teens. My friends back home were always jealous, like I was going on a real vacation, not a lake-house or the beach, but a country they couldn’t visualize on a map, the kind of vacations they only knew about secondhand. As if I was making-out with guys named Marcello or playing with all of my piranha pets. I didn’t climb mountains or take buses by myself. I bought dream-catcher earrings and then felt stupid wearing them in public. There was poverty everywhere but it was hidden under luxury. Basically, every time I went it was middle-school all over again. Kids with the right last names over here, kids with the wrong last names over there. All of the cool kids wore Abercrombie and then the not so-cool kids wore American Eagle and then the kids that just didn’t get it wore Aeropostale. The same social strata that I was already too familiar with by 2003, except for one small difference: the kids that were really cool, like I wasn’t even good enough for those bitches, the kind of

inherited-European cool that doesn't really exist in traditional suburban American public schools, they wore Lacoste.

"The loft was empty except for the casket, his body, and two stupid candles," my grandma went on. She was being really loud at this point. "Man, your grandfather! Boy, did he help," she shook her head, scoffing. She looked over at my mom who was laughing, "Moni, how do you say—*embalsamar*?"

"Embalm."

"Ah—right! Well, first, it was freezing. No phone, no computer, the military and their stupid Bolivian tanks surrounded all of the streets and we had no contact with any of your stupid relatives."

"Embalm?" Todd asked.

"Embalm," My grandma repeated. "I had to inject him—by myself—because your grandfather—your *pinche abuelo*—decided he had to do something upstairs—you know, remembered that thing from so and so. Inject him right in his blood vessel, I had to search for it—search for his *pinche* blood vessel, by myself!"

I smiled, satisfied. Todd was laughing, staring at my grandma like she was wonder woman. A lot of people complain about my grandma, that she lies, exaggerates, makes promises she can't keep. Wishy-washy. But there are two things that they can't deny: she's too pretty for a grandma—with her long eyelashes, black arched eyebrows, and tiny waist and she's too stubborn for her own good—literally refusing to wear seatbelts or re-naming all the "Richards" she meets "Ricardo."

*

Admiralty isn't on the bar exam. Admiralty Law is actually pretty dated, like Labor Law. I could have taken law of music or natural resource law or wetland preservation or something useful like Administrative Law or required like Ethics, but I signed up to take Admiralty & Maritime Law with the same professor who gave me a C+ in Torts. Our class had 21 students with only three girls, me included.

My Admiralty Professor really cared about us and sometimes that realization was overwhelming. My Admiralty Professor liked to play the guitar. Sometimes he'd bring his guitar to class, he'd put his foot up on the desk, bending his old

knee—showing off his black-leather cowboy boots—and he'd let his backwater Louisiana twang finally come out, singing a re-written version of a Bill Monroe, Pete Seeger, or Lead Belly song. If he was feeling mainstream he'd re-do a Bob Dylan song, turning "Black Diamond Bay" into a criticism of Justice Souter's treatment of Proximate Cause. The first time he did it, I was a first year student confused out of my mind. I had to stare methodically at my illegible notes to keep from crying.

*

The year before I graduated from law school, Todd's dad decided to make fried squirrel for dinner. This was after he got on disability and stopped working and got tired of playing online poker with his very obese wife, so he escaped to the Texas countryside. Todd's dad started hunting a lot. He would go every week, disappearing into his tent with his gun. But he kept missing all of the wild hogs that were too smart to walk into his traps. He kept missing the deer and the bucks and the turkeys so he decided to do the next best thing—he shot some squirrel and drove home.

"Oh-my-god." I said.

"Yeah, I know, I almost didn't tell you." Todd said.

"But they own a fucking squirrel feeder?" I said.

"I dunno. I guess country squirrels are different." Todd said.

Todd and I started dating about seven years ago. We had mutual friends and went to a house party. I didn't know him very well, but since he was my ride home we had to talk. It was easy—*Big Lebowski* quotes, making fun of Matt who was throwing up in the bathroom, trying to get Todd to pronounce my name correctly in a very tactful way. As it got late and our conversation dwindled, he told me how his parents had grown up eating squirrel. I think he thought it would make him sound interesting or would spice things up somehow. The minute he saw my eyes he retracted, "I mean, not now," he said. "When they were children—they're really country. I mean, I haven't." I was horrified, but also hysterical. I couldn't stop laughing. I told him how my dad never had seafood because Bolivia's landlocked.

"What do you mean? He never had shrimp?"

“We lost our ocean to Chile, our fucking ocean!”

I told him how my mom first cooked shrimp for my dad soon after they got married: pan-fried with garlic and olive oil. The story goes that my dad ate it all, licked his lips, and then fell sick to diarrhea for not peeling the skin. Anyway, of course I never thought I’d live to see it—squirrel thighs fried in home-made batter in Todd’s parent’s cast-iron skillet—but I saw it all.

*

My grandma had to clean Alvaro’s dead body by herself. She took off his dead clothes and made him presentable for everyone who was happy he was finally dead. She dressed him in his military uniform, strapped on all of Alvaro’s official awards, and managed to preserve his tough expression by coloring in his dead mustache. My grandparents barely talked to each other the whole time, but occasionally my grandma would grunt at my grandpa to try and make him feel guilty. He couldn’t even look at the body without getting nauseous, so she did it all. They sat in the cold, empty room all night, as far away from the body as they could, huddled together near the candles, my grandma getting up to stab her dead father-in-law in his arteries.

“It only gets worse,” my grandma grinned.

“But wasn’t the curfew over by the morning?” Todd asked.

“He fell on me in the morning,” my grandma said.

Todd made a really unattractive sound—I guess a guffaw would be the only word I could compare it to, but it was more than that. It was Todd’s guffaw.

“You see, there was that hearse waiting for him,” my grandma said. “He was supposed to have a huge military procession. With those *pinche* wailing women—the fake mourners, yelling in my ears all day.”

“They pay for mourners?” Todd asked.

“Always. I mean, the military always pays for them,” she told him. “We had to get him out of the loft, but we were on the eighth floor and the elevators weren’t working.”

“Shit.”

“Exactly.”

Todd had always been ultra-aware of his mortality. I’ve never really thought about it the way he did. I mean, I’ve always been kind of morbid—when I’m bored I like to look up really specific things: how many people have been killed by crocodile attacks? How many people have gotten their hair stuck in air vents until all of their hair was ripped off? As a kid, I always imagined really violent things happening to me and my family—armed robbers in the middle of the night, lightning striking our house and then slowly burning alive, but I always had an escape plan—I always knew what to grab (my Ricky Martin collection, my cat under my arm) and what window to run to, what roof to hop on to, what doggy-door I could fit through, although I could never find a way to save everyone. Same in my nightmares, I was never asleep enough to not have some control—I never died, but there were always heartbreaking casualties.

Todd, on the other hand, lived with his nightmares. His dad had three heart attacks before the age of forty and then lung cancer, prostate cancer, anxiety, diabetes, acute vertigo—all crawling around in Todd’s pathetic genes. His idea of healthy included Lean Cuisines and light beer. I tried to not make fun of him too much, it was hard at first because it was so easy—his southern twang, his fear of touching raw chicken, the way he drooled every night, how he always said “thanks bud” or called me “shuga.” He had a panic attack on the first plane we went on together. I didn’t know what a panic attack was. I think Bolivian families like to pretend those things aren’t real—they don’t happen to us, they happen to white people, people who think too much about nonsense. I was scared, seeing his face discolor, his palm reaching up to his heart. The only thing I could think of was forcing him to play hang-man with me. We played on a napkin with a red pen. I racked my brain for distracting words: “S I O U X S I E - A N D - T H E - B A N S H E E S.” It worked, he closed his eyes as we landed and took my hand.

“He was so heavy,” my grandma went on. “A young soldier in the complex helped us get the casket down the stairs, but we had to take breaks. When we got to the third floor we stopped and set the casket upright, leaning against the wall.”

My mom was laughing—a light laugh as she added sugar to her coffee. We had finished dinner and all of the children ran towards the presents. It wasn’t mid-

night yet but they wanted to shake the boxes with their names, hold them up and guess—Barbies, Legos, journals? Those were the things we used to get. Now it was iPads, Wiis, and One Direction DVDs.

“I was sweating,” my grandma said. “Exhausted, hungry, so pissed at your grandfather when all of a sudden the pinche casket opened and *el pinche cuerpo* fell right on top of me,” my grandma said—her mouth thinning. “I’ll never be scared of anything again. Not death. Nothing. Never.”

“Holy shit.” Todd said. “What did you do?”

“What could I do besides scream! My husband got the body off of me—finally. It took ALL of that for the *cabrón* to help!”

My grandma and grandpa—with the dead body in tow—reached the procession. The heat burning the cobbled streets of downtown La Paz. Alvaro’s male relatives held up his casket and slowly walked uphill as my grandma and the other mourners trailed behind while the wailing women screamed—clutching their faces and throwing their hands in the air hysterically. My grandma was furious, carefully fanning herself with her funeral *abanico*, plotting for payback.

*

My Admiralty Professor would dumb all of the jurisdiction issues down for us. He said, “If it’s wet, it’s maritime.” My Admiralty Professor loved these “traditional” admiralty phrases. If it has that “salty flavor” it’s maritime. *What about maritime contracts? What if there’s a land portion involved in the transaction?* Well, he said, it’s maritime if the land portion is inseparable from the water portion, like Queequeg from *Moby Dick*. My eyes would always brighten during these moments. But hey—no expectations here, some days were really boring. For instance, personal jurisdiction days. I remember trying to keep writing notes—robotically transcribing everything he said—“the semen on the whore.” Of course later I realized he was talking about the sea-men on the wharf. The class brought out my most immature side. I got really good at that’s what she said jokes. I would make fun of Todd with his friends, talking about how I *owned* the vessel.

I had no idea what to expect with that class. I didn’t know anything about

seafarer life, so I really thought he was saying semen over and over again. I remember blinking hysterically trying to read people's expressions, until I opened the text book and learned about "sea-men." I had to look up everything. I didn't know what dry-dock was or a schooner, a barge, a dredge and a fucking scow? Todd loved admiralty. It was the one class where he knew so much more than me. He would sit with me and try to paint pictures in my head, describing all of the industrial parts that didn't make any sense to me. I felt like I was drowning in this very wet, very salty lego-land world. None of the guys had issues with these terms. They talked about derricks as if all of a sudden they were all little engineers. The only time I had ever heard "derrick" was in reference to Prince Derek from *The Swan Princess*. Then we got to The Death on the High Seas Act. Rules for Longshoreman versus Seamen. Maintenance & Cure obligations. Offshore Continental Shelf Workers. Navigability. Modus. It felt corporate sometime, almost like oil and gas except instead of siding with industry, admiralty seemed to have a strange sense of empathy with all of the broken sailors.

*

Todd never finished college. He, somewhat ironically, went right into sales. He had to learn to control his anxiety, learned how to be suave to older women in order to get them to buy Tempur-Pedics and learned to ignore the men with the big pick-up trucks who didn't respect young salesmen with skinny legs. He would tuck in his shirt and say "yes ma'am" and "no sir." After that first night, where he told me that his parents ate squirrel, we kept in touch but didn't start dating until we found ourselves in the same humanities course. He was the only other person in the back row who wasn't asleep as we went over *Madame Bovary*. He made nice commission in his mattress selling world and took me out to eat—beer, oysters, lemon, and french fries.

I went straight into law school and we did the long-distance thing for a while. I would frantically call him in shock when I realized half of my classmates were creationists (sort of)—and then I'd go off into very self-aware tirades. I graduated and he bought me a subscription to this international channel so I could watch

a bunch of dramatic period-pieces where the women always curl their hair and the men they love always make those really painful expressions and then a couple years later, when we were planning our future—trying to find a way to live in the same city, he died. It was one of those selfish things, when the warning signs are misleading—where your stomach starts to hurt but you don't want to make a big deal about it since everyone already thinks you're too paranoid, but by then it's already too late.

*

My grandpa had been sitting on the couch in the other room as my grandma told the story of his step-dad's corpse. He was pretending to be asleep but he'd occasionally glare a little and then grin a little. He got up when my grandma finished and put his hand on her shoulder. She moved her hand to hold his. "Burn me," she told him with a little twinkle in her eyes "When I die, burn me and throw my ashes as far away from your *pinche* family as physically possible."

My grandparents met in Mexico when my grandma was 17—hence all of her *pinches*. She grew up in Mexico City, always a *chilanga* at heart, but made Bolivia her home. She slowly got used to the cow-tongue, the peanut-soup, and the judgment. The fact that no one outside of Bolivia—not even the Argentinians or the Paraguayans or the Chileans who are so close, I mean they're literally right there!—could understand that Bolivian *salteñas* are better, infinitely better than their empanadas. She got used to the anachronistic derby-style hats the upper-class wore on weekends. The *autonomia* protests that kept happening. The stray animals, the nine-year-old shoe shiners, the ice cream—always served in fancy glasses with fancy spoons. She got used to it.

Bolivia lost its coast to Chile long before I ever existed. Che Guevara was murdered in our jungle and we were the first country to give legal standing to our environment—from our condors to the Andes to our unnavigable waters. Our waters aren't navigable in the admiralty sense, but we've had more water wars than any comparable country. Yet, my grandma was never nostalgic for her beautiful Mexican beaches or her Mexican seafood because my grandpa introduced her to Bolivian river fish. My grandma quickly learned to boil all the water before using it.

*

As my family was busy with Christmas presents, Todd and I went outside and sat on my porch. We were too old for my aunts to buy us gifts like they did for the little kids, but not old enough to want to sit with the other adults who watched with strange expressions as the children cried in happiness when they got what they asked Santa or in frustration with their toy cars that didn't come with batteries. I remember Todd was wearing a cardigan. I don't think Todd ever owned Lacoste. He wore a worn-in UGK shirt on our first date, his belly pudging out in the corners—a showing of *The Goonies*—I mean how could I—how could I not care?

I leaned into his chest as he put his arm around my shoulder. “You never finished telling me how you stepped on that woman's breast,” he said.

“What?” I looked up at him.

“That thing you were going to tell me before your grandma sat down with us, something in Spain?”

“Oh,” I said. “Right. Well, I was a little kid and we were staying on the beaches of Marbella.”

He nodded.

“My sister and I became friends with this Australian kid. We were super excited because he was the first person we met that would speak to us in English and we really dug his accent. We waddled around the beach, doing little kid stuff, collecting seashells, making sand castles, eating popsicles—people were always selling popsicles in Spain—until we started running. I don't remember what we were doing, maybe playing tag or something. Anyway, I was going really fast, and I stopped paying attention to the topless beach etiquette. So, out of nowhere these huge floppy boobs got in the way of my little feet, and I stomped right on them—toes first and then heel all the way down, flattening that tit out like a tortilla.”

Todd guffawed again and I looked up at him, at that expression and his innocence, his stupid laugh, his kindness, his strength.

“The woman was yelling like crazy, the way Spanish women do, with their strange conjugations and all of their joders, and instead of stopping to apologize, to explain myself, to sincerely say I am sorry, I am so sorry, it was an accident, I just sprinted off—as far away from the beach as possible as far away from the coast and

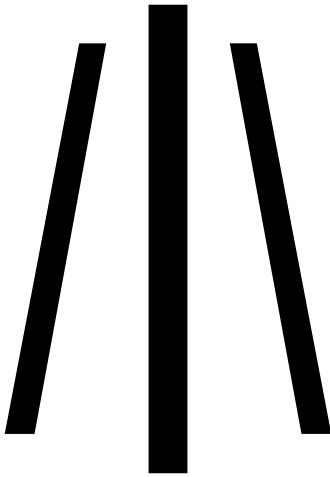
from the sunscreen and the tourists as far away from the hairy legs and bright bikinis and from the swarm of topless breasts and into the cold, clear water.”

POETRY CONTEST RUNNER-UP

UPON BEING DISTURBED AT 3:00 A.M. ON AN OTHERWISE UNEVENTFUL SATURDAY NIGHT *Jarek Jarvis*

Move away from the windows dear,
I can't tell if it's coyotes or men standing out on the porch.
They kicked over our sun tea jars
and they leave their cigarette butts in piles.
Hear how they whine and yap?

I wasn't drunk until you looked at me,
and no one said anything about entertaining guests tonight.
Do you feel all right? I don't feel all right. Dear,
I might check-in for the night.
You can come if you like,
we can drink the rest of this wine
and leave those coyotes
outside.





MEMORY OF A MOUNTAIN
Daniel Calderon

FAT GIRL EDUCATION

Karen Fischer

1st Grade

Beginnings don't always start at one. Sometimes there isn't a reason.

2nd Grade

You had this red hair that you didn't know how to straighten. It was years before frizz and humidity and instead you remember the tumble of curls, the deep red that you could never find the right combination of Crayola crayons for. Not orange, it didn't do it justice. No complementing colors fit. Just, *red*. You were loud and boisterous and confident, you won a contest in the 2nd grade for the best drawing of chimpanzees to print on buttons for a field trip to the zoo. Your victory cheer included jumping up sporadically and dancing across the back of the classroom. One day the afternoon announcements came on over the loudspeakers in homeroom and one boy kept asking other boys to repeat the announcements for him. "Clean the earwax out of your ears!" You said it mean, a youthful get-your-shit-together kind of mean. The teacher scolded you, again, for jolting, for constantly saying things before thinking about them. You were already bursting with something.

3rd Grade

You craved. You were picky with these greasy fingers. You were still young enough to have to ask your Mom for a bowl of potato chips. You'd bite your lip and eye the folded plastic bag in the tall cabinet in the kitchen, contemplating how loud it would crunch if you snuck a handful. You salivated for most fried food, that was something your family could depend on. You were so picky. You didn't eat vegetables. Except raw carrots. Iceberg lettuce. No fruit. Except watermelon—sometimes. Maybe apple slices if you felt like it. Your parents knew you *would* eat deep-fried crinkle cut fries with no ketchup. They bought them in bulk at Sam's Club. You could eat spaghetti without the sauce, with only dry sprinkled parmesan cheese from green Kraft canisters. They could rely on that too. You would even eat the frozen blocks of chicken nuggets and French fries. Didn't even matter if they were cooked,

as long as you had them to nibble on. You preferred frozen meat to potato.

4th Grade

You gained the weight in the fourth grade. Like a ritual each day after school, you sprawled out on your L-shaped living room sofa alone with the lights off. You were free to indulge in the twilight of television before your parents came home. You wouldn't get caught shoving the Utz potato chips from the cabinet in your mouth, licking your fingers clean. You'd eye the little girl with the black hair and red bow printed at the top of the plastic bag, a little girl so familiar she became one of your only friends. You ate and licked and watched Sonny on *General Hospital* with a hunger far too old for your prepubescent mind.

You liked cooking shows too. Rachel Ray was the best. You cooked dinner for your family one night after watching one of her *30 Minute Meals* episodes. You sautéed onions, cooked ground beef in a scratched skillet, drained the excess oil in one of your Mom's Foldger's cans in the sink, carved the filling out of a loaf of french bread, laid the meat inside, toasted it all in the stove. Your family ate the food with static Thanks, not really thinking much of it.

You ate greedily with a hunger that morphed into a canyon, a hunger that couldn't be filled.

5th Grade

Your family would take these vacations every year to Ocean City, Maryland for your birthday in August. You would slip into the Atlantic each day and ride colorful boogie boards into the surf. You would limp on the edges of your bare feet to the hotel and try to avoid stepping on sharp gravel. You had sand etched into your scalp, trapped in your hair. You'd go home and clean the rest of the wet sand from all of the crevices in your one-piece bathing suit. A blue one with white snags, stretch marks in fabric. Forewarning.

Every year on your birthday your parents would drive down the only highway in Ocean City and ask you where you wanted to go for your birthday dinner.

Tony's on the Boardwalk to have pizza, burgers, chicken, anything. They begged you to have *anything* other than what they knew was to come. "Karen, what do you want for your birthday dinner?"

"Can we go to the McDonald's with the big arches?" You'd swirl your fingers into the air like two upside-down U's while your parents exchanged a heavy glance across the front seats.¹

6th Grade

You never realized you were ugly until the 6th grade. A girl who lived down the street felt the need to give you counsel.

She was in the 8th grade and you both rode the same bus to middle school. It seemed like all the boys liked her on that bus, even if they called her fat often and made fun of her for giving a boy head at her old middle school. She was *wise*. She had *experience*. You had Taco Bell for the first time at her house. She ate everything with ranch. One autumn night when the leaves outside crunched and the sky shone a curtain that ran jagged from pink to purple, she laid heavy on her living room couch, curled up, and explained some things to you.

"That roll-on body glitter you put on your face isn't cute. And you need to start getting jeans instead of all of those stretch pants you wear. Especially jeans without back pockets, they accentuate your butt."

She was the one that wore those kinds of jeans. You lowered your eyes, played with your fingers, and thought about that orange roll-on body glitter. It was from Bath and Body Works, and your Mom bought it for you. You always liked it, it smelled like citrus and you thought rolling it over your eyelids looked seductive.

Not long after that a different friend from school told you one day that Joey O. was talking to Ben C. and complaining about how only fat girls in your grade had big boobs and what a shame, what a shame. You were a fat girl. They didn't want to

¹ [The final elementary memory you may excuse, omit, you do not know where it belongs, if it actually happened. Your father in your family home, chasing you into the coldest tiles of his bathroom. Exposed storage space, pink fiberglass plush bleeding out of the walls. Hollow banging on wooden doors. "Don't you want to lose weight? Don't you want boys to think you're pretty?"]

like your boobs.

The love of your life was Cameron R. One day in biology class, he grabbed a ruler and gestured for Ben C. to watch. He put the ruler to his crotch, whispered in Ben's ear, eyed you. He knew about the poetry you wrote for him, how much you adored him. He snickered, looked up at you, "Big Penis." He'd see you every morning in class, "Hey BP!" You didn't understand at first. You pretended it was something that it wasn't, that he wasn't insulting you for even daring to have a faint interest in him, that he wasn't calling you a man. Years later, you still shied away when you drove by the BP gas station on the highway, put your back up against the glass.²

7th Grade

Your nicknames began to range. King Kong to Gorilla to Big Mac. Ryan S. would hop around the back seats of the middle school bus on the way to your neighborhood while dancing to "SexyBack" by Justin Timberlake and "Promiscuous" by Nelly Furtado. Whenever you tried to chime in on any conversation he would yell, "Raise your hand if you want King Kong in the back of the bus." No one put their hand up. You'd make a limp comeback.

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you."

Over and over until one day he asked you, "Is that all you know how to say?"

Ryan S. only left you alone when your Best Friend rode the bus home with

² This is a sad thing. One night in college, your boyfriend who loves you beyond words can say asks, "Why do you always write sad things?" When he says that, you stand at the dark blinds in your bedroom, holding the phone in one hand and fingering the plastic slits with the other. You watch the light-soaked streets of downtown Chicago through the window, so incredibly far from middle school and rulers and Maryland and the torment. You miss only one thing when it comes to Maryland—the stars. You wonder why there is never purely night in the city and wish there could be. Stars were the thing that moved you past the mess of classrooms and jabs of words that boys always wanted to say to you. You can't latch onto stars as your fire escapes in a city.

you too. Everyone thought she was beautiful—so incredibly beautiful. Long brown hair to her hips, always straightened or in delicate curls secured with gel, not frizzy hair that her Mom had to straighten for her. She had a body that filled out her bras and jeans, not her gut. You both giggled and danced to Def Leppard and Skid Row and Kiss and she knew your brothers and spent almost every weekend in middle school sharing your twin-size bed, but you still couldn't accept the fact that you *had* to live vicariously through her. You could never be her.

Each time she rode the bus home with you, Ryan S. always wanted to take part in your conversations. He liked her. He flirted with her in school, would drop by her lunch table and tease her in that way that girls like—teasing that didn't involve coercing everyone around to vote on whether she was a beast. She would laugh and flip her hair in response to his lunchroom comments. On those days, when she rode the bus home with you, no one would dare call you any names.³

8th Grade

This Best Friend was the one who had a MySpace. She would post photos with you in them, but you didn't want her to. *Please, don't post that one. I look fat, people will comment about it.* They had before. *No, I'll delete the comments, it will be fine. It will be fine.*

Like all of the torture to the soul could be erased with a clean click.

One day a boy in the Spanish class you and the Best Friend shared started calling you Big Mac. He wouldn't stop. "Stop calling me that, shut the fuck up." He

³ You found Ryan S. on Twitter nearly ten years later. It wasn't difficult. The background of his page was a zoomed-in picture of a girl's cleavage clad in a Ninja Turtles bikini top. You cannot tell anything else about this girl, and the pixel-y photo makes you think that this might have been someone he knew, a private photo someone sent to him that he applied to his page as a revenge tactic. At least, that's something you start to think when you scroll through his tweets. He tweets about being lost, not knowing where he is. A strange thread of disorientation, wanting to end his life.

"Just end me now I'm done."

"Fuck this shit I'm done with you all."

And, pleading,

"Will someone just end me already?"

kept snickering, kept saying it, over and over and over. You felt words tangled in your throat, expletives falling short, and you had a fear that this would never stop, that you would be stuck in this moment with quivering lips and a racing heart and that poisonous, public hunger forever.

The Best Friend was sitting right behind you at a manila desk, heard the whole thing. She didn't say a word.

9th Grade

You started smoking cigarettes. You started making New friends. You had braces. You were heavy. You were too shy to eat in front of boys. You wore black Chuck Taylors and jeans every day. You wore this black Vans hoodie every day. You fell in love with a skinny boy with long dark hair and a very Italian name. Once, he was over at your house when your Mom made spaghetti. You were too shy and ashamed to eat in front of him. He rubbed your thigh. "Karen, if a boy ever makes you feel bad for eating, you should have nothing to do with him."

He became your best friend and then suddenly wasn't. This broke you. He told you one night on your unmade bed, after months of ignoring you, that he only thought of you as a friend. When he told you that, you were stoned, it was the cusp of winter, and you tilted your head back to your bedroom wall, peeled the paint and the cold months back to April, and March, and the memories from spring-time, back when you met this boy for the very first time. That Best Friend from the school bus was there with you. The afternoon was crisp and he was sitting up on this damp brick wall a few feet off the ground, his high-top black Chucks swaying in the breeze. He had waved his hand to the Best Friend to come hug him, to come in between these legs dwelling above the ground for the embrace. His fingers lingered a little too long on the pink flesh in the small of her back and you knew why. He never held onto you like that, he never wanted to touch that spot.

10th Grade

You went to the Annapolis mall with one of the New friends to try on

dresses in Nordstrom. You stared into one of those floor-length mirrors in the fluorescent stall with only your bra and panties on. Picked up folds of your naked, doughy flesh, rolled them in on yourself, tried to tuck it all away. Imagined for a moment, the slightest of all moments, the bones that you were supposed to be.

This was not supposed to be you. You were not meant to be fat.

11th Grade

In the 11th grade you had your first real, consensual Boy(friend). You had finally gotten your braces off and had lost 25 pounds from depression medication. A few months before your Mother had gotten worried again, finally brought you to a doctor to talk about your feelings, and the doctor recommended you to heal your sorrows with a cocktail of amphetamines and mood stabilizers. Every day. You became a zombie, but a zombie with straight teeth that was shrinking, kept shrinking, and people liked that.

The night Boy took notice to you, you were on his couch smoking a bowl. Tight jeans in a size you had never been small enough for before. Belt notches ticking off, the farthest from the tip of white leather you had ever got. Your friends brought you to his house, they were the only reason you had ever come there. They gushed over you, “Karen, you look so pretty with your new teeth!” You smiled, “Yeah.” The new teeth were long, clean; you didn’t cover your mouth with one hand every time you laughed anymore. You had all of these smiles to give away for the first time. Boy looked up from plucking a paperclip out of an ashy bowl, or from lighting a Newport with a translucent crack-lighter, or from petting his dog named Zeus, and looked into your face. The space between his eyebrows softened. It was the *first time* you had ever seen this boy at ease. He was always very anxious, generally on edge; very, very... Hardened. And you made him unravel ever so briefly, even just this single moment.

It meant something.

You shifted in your seat.

His gaze transfixed on you, like you were an apparition or simple, pure desire: “I almost can’t recognize you.”

Boy had these messy, yellow teeth. A few weeks later you laid next to him on that stained living room couch, head nestled in his arm. “What the fuck?” He stuck a finger into his mouth of crooked teeth and pulled out a chunk of his molars. His teeth were rotting away. His eyebrows hardened, “I fucking hate my life.”

He was never soft for long. He constantly argued with you over the most miniscule, banal shit: who you were texting, especially if it was a boy, why your Mom was picking you up later than usual, why you asked him to paint his bedroom walls plain white again to get rid of all of the black Sharpie graffiti. When he used to throw parties, he would throw open his bedroom door and offer his own walls as entertainment. Among the wall wreckage,

“Liz was here”

A drawing of a tree with extensive roots.

“Call XXX-XXX-XXXX for blowjobs”

A hole that he punched in the wall one night.

Piss-stained clothes in the corner, clothes you watched Zeus lift his leg over. You didn’t move till he was done.

You and Boy could not get along. But how were you to *know* how to make things work? You two split up, the weight was still off, and you had never been so confused.⁴

One night after Boy, you ran completely naked around a party when you were only half fucked up. You felt you had everything to prove—that you were still desirable, that you weren’t that gorilla in the back of a bus, that if this was a *test*—if you put yourself in the most obvious position to be fucked—it would validate things to people about your skin that you really needed to prove to yourself. You thought Boy was an animal, but you didn’t want to think about how he still thought you were an animal too.⁵ A couple intertwined their hands in your fingers and pulled

⁴ You couldn’t finish a bagel anymore. All of your jeans from Delia’s were too loose, constantly shrinking. Your dress size plummeted down. You could get away with not wearing a bra for the first time since elementary school. You bought your first flower-patterned Maxi dress. You were so small and he still didn’t want you. You were *small*. *Why didn’t he want you?*

⁵ Where in the essay do you write that Boy *did* end up apologizing for everything and kissed you on the cheek one night in the rain? Does the rainy kiss from Boy with the messy teeth excuse and erase all of the times he screamed at you over text messages, having your period, the explicit walls?

you behind a bedroom door. The chlorine walls. Your extremities became Jell-O, your mind oil, all of the parts of your body elusive. You stared at blurred fibers in the carpet till it was over. You stayed an animal, a feral summer.

12th Grade

One night in September you were stranded by two boys on a highway in a mess of fog. One of the boys texted you after the rubber tires screeched away, red eyes blazing in the distance, with a paragraph-long text. A guttural frustration, a solid confirmation of all that dark abyss that was your body politic—he said you were ugly, he never wanted to fuck you, he never would fuck you, you looked like a man, you were fat, your face looked like it had been shoved through a meat grinder. A piece of meat. Something to stuff away.

That girl down the street from the sixth grade? The one who said no orange body glitter? She picked you up in her car. Brought you out of the fog. You told her what happened, and she shook her head, said, “I hate when people are mean to girls, especially when guys are mean to girls.” You quietly huffed, stared at the shadows on the road.⁶

After that friend from the 8th grade picked you up on the highway, you sat in her basement smoking a blunt. The concrete floor, the bones of vertical plywood exposed. The basement was never constructed like it was supposed to be. You didn’t think anyone would ever build the flesh, the walls, the plaster around those bones. No one cared enough to. It was temporary anyway, that home. Rented, no one stayed in these houses for long. You thought back to the dressing room at Nordstrom, the flesh and the moment you saw your invisible bones. This house never *had* to build a home.

⁶ Where in the essay do you say that the boys that left you on the highway were tired of you taking advantage of them too? That you used them for rides to and from your part-time job? If the ends are tied together in this story, if lives that were intertwined cease, does the pain inflicted previously stop? If you hurt others and they hurt you back worse, where does that leave you?

College Addendum

Before you were on the phone with your boyfriend fingering the blinds and dreaming of the east-coast stars, you had an overwhelming urge to buy beer. You never buy beer. You stood in Walgreens at the end of an aisle, completely still, stared at the reflections of snacks and paper towels from the opposite shelf in the glass of the beer coolers. You could see your reflection—loose clothing to hide in, a draped green scarf, Chucks with holes in them. Red curly hair pulled back. No smile.

You thought about the prospect of buying beer, a ton of beer, *more than you could carry*, dragging it along, and passing a twist-off to every bum in the street to congratulate them on staying alive. You couldn't tell if the thought was the overly sensitive artist inside of you trying to be poetic, trying to revel in misery, or if the idea was something pure. You meant it, you did. You wished you could give away beer and sit on a corner and sit in silence with people who portrayed all the interior lonesomeness you felt on the exterior of their bodies.

No one knows the story inside of bones. You kept writing this essay, portions at a time, and would succumb to the onslaught of memory. You would remember how even now, ten years later, you still have the fear of people calling you fat on the streets in Chicago. You have the voice of Ryan S. burning in your memory forever. You made it into a college, relocated your life to a place where you knew no one, went to Europe, wrote spiral notebook after spiral notebook of journals, got essays published, fell in love with a boy who treated you better than you have ever treated yourself, but you are still scared. You will always be scared. You feel a peculiar solidarity with other women in writing classes when they tell their stories about struggling with their bodies. Not just the prospect of losing weight, but the reality of all the commentary that women receive from outside entities on their own desirability.

You feel that.

You feel that with people.

You do not want to give commentary. You want that goddamn beer; all of it, and what the hell, you might as well buy the spiciest chicken wings you can find and vegan burgers from the Chicago Diner and buttered noodles with parmesan

cheese and cereal that gets soggy before you eat it and a grilled cheese with jalapeños, cilantro, pepper jack, and green onion. You might as well bring all the things you have ever loved that people told you not to; you want to give it all away, cease all commentary on the only public bodies you know. On that corner of your dreams you'd eat Wingstop and grilled cheese with greasy fingers, and you'd tell whoever was next to you, *hey, tonight, we'll try to let it go together. We won't get there all the way, and there's no way in hell it can ever go away, but if I'm with you and you're with me we can sit silent. Eat. Drink. We can at least know that even in our most silent moments, we are not silencing ourselves anymore.*



WHERE I HIDE MY ILL DOINGS

David Delgado

1995 DIXIE YOUTH ALL STAR BASEBALL TOURNAMENT

Cody Smith

Once my father yelled
so hard his false teeth fell out.
“Swing the bat!” he gumbled
from the first base coach’s box.
My name stitched above the pinstripes
itched my back. No runners
on base: the pitcher took his long
windup—the left foot gliding back,
the right foot pivoting on the mound’s
rubber, arms pulled back and over
the head, the release, the red-stitched
seams falling end over end
from his fastball. I hoisted
my front leg, opened my hips,
and in less time than it took
the third base coach’s snuff spit
to ground in the dirt, I decided the pitch
was a low and away. The ump punched
out three fingers, his voice
parting his facemask as he called me out.
Dad was a bubble of red,
Big League Chew about to pop.
Relieved not to be the center
of attention, my skin burned
in the batter’s box.

After the game, Mom told me
to sit in the car. His and her fingers
and shouts jousting one another

as the next game's wave of parents
and children circled the parking lot,
vulturing our spot.

The ride home, no one spoke.
Dad dropped his dirty teeth
into the car's center console
cup holder like loose change,
and I pretended to sleep, wishing
they would change the station.

COLD GLASS

Kelsey Vaillancourt

His hand trembles as he reaches down,
picks up the bottle of club soda. I set
a glass of ice on the counter, watch him
pour, watch the tremors of old age as they
go up his arm, elbow, to his shoulders.
The ice cracks and swirls, his glass fills
with carbon, and I hear the light fizz.
He reaches for the scotch, shakes
his head, says, *Gotta have my morning
apple juice. Keeps me big and strong.*

I watch his drink turn amber, knowing
it's alcohol, that he knows I know.
But I smile, keep to the illusion,
wishing I still believed in apple juice.
Then he points to the back door, says,
*I need to go check the grass. Gotta
make sure it's still growing,* and I only
see the front pocket of his shirt, where
he keeps his cigarettes, a box of Marlboros,
what he lost his wife to, my grandmother.
He picks up the glass, his hand thin, his
fingers long and I step back, let him pass.

I hear his labored breathing, even as
he walks away. There's the familiar rasp,
the wheeze, the crackle of broken lungs.
He steps slow, a hand on the wall to keep
steady. There's a long, low creaking
as he opens the back door and steps outside.
For a moment I smell dead leaves, wet earth,

early morning. I shiver, reach up, rub my arms, try to push the heat back into my skin.

I want to take the scotch bottle by the neck, dump it down the drain. But I don't, I look away and walk to the window, lean my head against cold glass. I watch. He lights a cigarette, puts it to his lips, closes his eyes as he breathes in deep. His shirt is too big, or maybe it's him that's too small. Maybe he has been washed down, burnt away and now nothing is left but bone, wrinkled skin, dark peppered hair.



CAST IN LIGHT
Megan Colvin



NOURISH EXHAUST CONTAIN OBSESS
Cameron Doby

OFF

Ellen Prescott

The masks we wear keep everything invisible. That's the way we like it.

In history class, we stare at the projector through the thin material. Our teacher plays a movie. None of us say anything in the darkness as actors move through the scenes. Their bodies are animated, but their faces remain still. Sometimes, features bulge underneath their masks. We can guess where their noses, lips and eyes are, but we cannot see them.

Our teacher lounges, looking rather bored. His legs are crossed and propped up on the desk. His face is turned towards the screen, but his head tilts forward now and again. We twiddle our thumbs and wonder if there is going to be a test on this video when it's done. If we should be actually paying attention. It beats a lecture at the very least.

There is the sound of crying part way through the movie. We all shift uncomfortably in our seats. There is no one crying on screen. In fact, we are pretty sure everyone is dead right now. We follow the sound with hesitation to a corner in the back of the room, and we just stare through our masks.

There is a classmate crying, clutching her face with her fingers. Her shoulders shake even as she tries to muffle the sound in vain. None of us say anything. None of us can say anything.

I don't know how to react.

Our teacher slowly shifts in his chair, and moves to get up. We are not sure if it has taken this long to do something because he was asleep or because he also wasn't sure what to do. The thought terrifies us.

Our teacher walks over to the girl in the corner. Her crying has grown louder now. The teacher's hand twitches in the air above her for a few seconds before he brings it back to himself. "Do you need to go to the nurse?" he asks.

I'm not sure if the nurse can fix this.

The girl pulls her hands away from her face and her sobbing calms. She looks down at her desk. Her body is surprisingly relaxed now, even as tears drip down onto her books. We, however, are stiff as boards, unsure of what to do with ourselves. We see the tears drip; we can actually see them dripping down skin. We are completely unprepared at this display of nudity. We are terrified.

We are captivated.

The girl decides to stand up then, even though the teacher hasn't given her permission. She reaches up and wipes her cheeks.

I lean forward in my desk, mimicking her bold movements in my mind. But my body still clings to the seat.

We can see her eyes. The tears are wiped off with the back of her hand and have melted away the material from her cheek bones to her brow. It's crumpled like papier-mâché. Just soggy patches around the window. We can't help but stare into those eyes in fascination. They are red and swollen and a deep, deep blue. Like the ocean. What creature swam beneath its depths, unconfined by the glass of a tank, beyond our sight, relishing in the expansive and unknown. But that seems too cliché. I struggle to find the right word. Something different, but the tears make them shiver like the surface of a pond. Still, no. Bathwater. No. Liquid painkiller sloshing in a capsule. Punctured with a nail; spilt into your drink. Still no.

The teacher steps back from her as she creeps towards the door. "The nurse should have some spares," he says just before she leaves. Our classmate snuffles, but doesn't say a thing to him or to the rest of us.

I watch as she opens the door and disappears into the hallway, leaving us in the darkness, still staring at her in awe. Even when she is gone, her eyes have been burnt into our minds. They haunt us.

But I'm not sure why.



BODY TECTONICS
Jacqueline Lung



LABOR DAY
Christopher Fuentes



ROXANNA
Christopher Fuentes



ANXIETY
Stevie Falter

BRIEF SHELTER

Emily Cinquemani

The drum of rain against the car's hood made me feel young, though I was old enough to drive the last stretch of the trip while my father slept beside me. Elevated highways cut open silent spaces each time we passed beneath them and reminded me of the way he used to trick me into believing he could stop the rain. He'd snap his fingers below each overpass, then look back at me tucked into my car seat, pretend he'd created that brief shelter, a momentary hush.

A passing car cast a quick shadow across his darkened shape, and the wheel of an old pickup truck rolled free from its rusty body as it merged into the lane beside us and sent a spray of sparks rising up from where the metal frame scraped along the road. I shouted when I saw that orange burst bloom up from the pavement, but by the time he woke up, I'd already sped forward and missed the loose wheel, the truck's jagged swerve.

The glow behind us dimmed into something he couldn't see as he turned to look back, then looked at me. Headlights shone into the gap between our seats, and the white dashes that marked the lanes shimmered and blurred. Even as I told the story, pieces of it wedged deeper into me, became mine alone, beyond the reach of his calm voice and quick hands.

As we continued forward, another highway stretched over our car and muffled the world for one still moment before shooting me back out into the space before us—back onto the road growing slick with rain.

DAVE AND THE DEVIL IN ARIZONA

Seth Peterson

Dave was a man on the run. He wasn't a fugitive, not from the law at any rate. Dave wasn't the type to get into that kind of trouble. Dave was the type who went to college for four years; who married the first girl who said yes; who fathered two kids and moved to Phoenix to be an insurance adjuster, a job that eroded away Dave's confidence and personality, practically turning him into a drone. That's trouble of a different sort.

Trouble that stacks itself over the years. Trouble that starts with one bad performance review at work snowballing into a layoff, which then becomes the revelation of an extramarital affair with the supervisor that can't be stopped because divorce isn't an option. Finally the realization domino falls, shining a harsh light onto an utterly meaningless life of unemployment and disrespect. It's enough to make a man snap if he has to endure it long enough.

Dave snapped right in the middle of a barbecue. He had just returned from an unsuccessful day at a job fair at the Phoenix convention center. He was tired and forced to cook food for his wife, their two kids, and his wife's lover: Jason, Dave's former supervisor. Dave dropped his spatula, got into his beat up Geo Metro, and left, driving into the Sonoran Desert in only his job fair clothes: a blue polo shirt with his nametag pinned to it, khakis, and generic brand tennis shoes. He didn't bring a road map, food, water; only a strong desire to get away from his life. Dave made it halfway out of Phoenix before he ran out of gas. Now he had to walk and, like anybody new to the desert, he became hopelessly lost. It was then when he came upon a crossroads.

The left way went east toward New Mexico and was lined with coyote dens. The coyotes often prowled about at night looking for an easy meal: rabbits, rodents, or wayward travelers. Beyond that was a rocky outcropping where meth heads and bobcats fought over territory in the shade of Palo Verde trees. If Dave made it past that he would end up in Santa Fe, work for a local burger restaurant, Po Boys, befriend a stoner named Kurt, and get high with him in his basement every other weekend. Dave would forget about his wife, his life, his kids, everything. His brain would be a peaceful, marijuana-addled mush.

The straightway continued south toward Mexico. It was lined with beautiful marigolds and jagged, sharp rocks. The marigolds were pollinated by wasps that

stung anyone that got too close. Under the rocks were tarantulas and scorpions that also stung anyone who got too close. Past that was a barbed wire border fence that led to the small Mexican town of Magdalena. Dave didn't know a word of Spanish and would be even more lost if he made it there. Eventually he would be taken in by a large Mexican family, the Garcias. Abuelita Garcia would teach him Spanish, marry him to her twenty-five year-old daughter, Maria, and they would have eleven children together. Dave would work as a hotel maintenance man with Maria's brother, Julio. He'd enjoy his new wife, his new life, his new kids, everything, especially the daily afternoon siestas.

The right way went west toward California and all of Dave's dreams. Beyond the mountains and mountain lions that hunted javelina and humans alike, beyond the creepy little Gila monsters that crawled up the sides of the mountains was Los Angeles. If Dave made it there he would get a job as a production assistant, like he always wanted, work his way up to producer, like he always wanted, and go from one A-list actress to another, like he always wanted. No wife, no kids, nothing but a life of sex and success that would last until he died.

Dave didn't know any of this.

He didn't know anything about the desert, its dangers, the wildlife, or how to survive. He didn't even know which way to go. All Dave saw were three different horizons, each with its own line of Saguaro Cacti salesmen.

Dave undid the top button of his polo shirt and wiped sweat from his forehead. He had fled one barbecue for another. Dave wondered how he was going to survive. He also wondered about the Native American man sitting in the middle of the crossroads, staring off into the distance. The man had long black hair that poked out from underneath a gray fedora and ran down his back. The fedora had a hawk's feather in it that blew back in forth in the wind. The man wore a button up shirt colored like a sunset with red mixed with orange and purple and blue jeans. His face looked as leathery as the brown shoes he wore, with wrinkles as deep as the craters on the moon.

"You lost?" the man asked without looking at Dave.

"No," Dave lied.

"Where you headed?"

Dave looked down all the paths trying to find a good answer. He had nothing. “Uh, you know, to the town—down the road a ways from here,” Dave managed.

“So you’re a moron then.”

Dave’s face shriveled as if he had just stepped in dog shit. Where the hell did this guy get off? Calling a complete stranger a moron isn’t a great way to start a conversation, neither was staring off into the desert pretending the other person didn’t exist.

“It’s in the way you walk,” the man said.

“What is?” Dave asked.

“How I can tell.”

“How you can tell what?”

“That you’re a moron,” the man said. “You have a particularly moronic walk.”

Dave was getting angry.

“Oh really? What else can you tell about me, oh great and powerful medicine man?” Dave asked. “Can you tell what college I went to by the way I flare my nostrils? Does crossing my arms a certain way let you know how small my bank account is? Can you measure the shadow of my ass from the sound of my farts?”

“I know your name is Dave.”

“And just how do you know that? Are you a mind reader now or something?”

“It’s on your nametag,” the man said, still not looking at Dave. “Moron.”

Dave was exasperated now. This guy, sitting in the middle of a crossroads, thinking he knows everything about every stranger that passes by. Who was he, the devil or something?

All of a sudden the man’s head whipped around so fast it made Dave jump. He looked at Dave like a cat about to pounce, his mouth curled into a snarl. Dave became locked in the man’s gaze, desperately trying to remember how to control his bladder.

A diamondback rattlesnake slithered out of the brush toward Dave. It sniffed the air with its tongue and rattled its tail at him menacingly. It slinked off toward the man and tongued the air again before moving past him. An east wind piled dust on the road. The dust blew in Dave’s face, messing up his already messed up hair. The heat of the desert formed pit stains around Dave’s armpits and chest.

Dave noticed none of these things. He was too busy worrying for his life.

Then another thing happened that took Dave by surprise: the man smiled. More than that, he was laughing. Shining white teeth showed underneath his lips. Even his wrinkles seemed to smile. The man walked over to Dave and smacked him on the shoulder, as if he had just told the funniest joke in the world.

“Does this mean you can show me the way to go now?” Dave laughed nervously. “Or do I have to give you my soul first?”

The man stopped laughing.

“No, I can’t do that,” the man shook his head. “You have to choose for yourself. But know that you are committed to following whatever path you go down. There is no turning back.”

The man went back to the middle of the crossroads and resumed his staring. Dave scoffed and threw up his hands. Without thinking, he started for the left path. The man shook his head like a disapproving parent.

“What?” Dave asked.

“You really want to go that way?”

“Why? Is there something bad down that way?”

The man shrugged. “Could be.”

Dave shook his head and tried to go straight. The man rolled his eyes. Dave made for the right way. The man whistled as if he couldn’t believe how big a mistake Dave was about to make.

“Why do you keep doing that?” he asked.

“I like whistling,” the man said.

“No, I mean, every time I try to make a decision you act like I’m about to walk into the jaws of death or something.”

“Maybe you are. Or maybe you aren’t.”

Dave sighed and sat on the ground. He was getting nowhere and there wasn’t much daylight left. His polo shirt was soaked with sweat, his face was red from too much sun. He was thirsty. He was hungry. He was nearing the point of desperation.

“Have you considered all your options, Dave?” the man asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Crossroads run in four directions. You could always go back to Melissa and your kids.”

“How do you...?” Dave started, but looked back behind him. He could just barely see the Phoenix skyline. He didn’t care if the man was the devil or not. It was too hot for that. Dave was reminded of the hot mess he had left. Melissa had thrown it for Jason, the man who had fired Dave. The awkwardness didn’t stop Melissa from forcing Dave to cook for everyone, nor did it stop her nagging about Dave’s smoked sausage. Perhaps Jason should have cooked. After all Melissa loved his smoked sausage. Darren and Gillian had invited all their annoying high school friends over to play baseball in the backyard. One of them hit a homerun right through the window of his Geo Metro. Sure it was shitty and a remnant of Dave’s college days, but it was his. Darren and Gillian just rolled their eyes. Melissa told Dave to calm down and finish the food. Afterwards she and Jason excused themselves into the house to get more drinks. It took forty-five minutes to get those drinks.

“Should I go back? Is that the right path?” Dave asked.

“You should make up your mind,” the man answered.

“Why can’t you just tell me?”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

A jackrabbit bounded by on its way down the road. A hawk soared through the air, screeched and seized the jackrabbit with its talons. The jackrabbit squealed its last desperate breaths as it rose higher into the air. The hawk flew back to its nest and tore the jackrabbit to pieces to feed its young chicks. The man got up and walked past Dave.

“Wait a minute, where are you going?” Dave asked.

“It’s time for me to go,” the man said. “And it’s time for you to make a decision.”

“But I can’t. I don’t know where I am. I don’t know where these roads go. How do you expect me to make a decision when I don’t know anything?”

Dave looked down all the paths again. All he saw was the spotted horizon colored pink and orange by the sunset. The cacti along each way waved at him. Sweat dripped off the tip of Dave’s nose onto the ground, sizzling when it hit. He

breathed a little harder, the fatigue of the desert getting to him.

“My God, this is hell,” Dave said.

“You have no idea.”

Dave turned and looked around. The Native American man was gone.

Night was approaching. Perched owls watched him with even wider eyes.

Packrats crawled out from the brush. Kangaroo rats peeked their heads out of their burrows. The whole desert was waiting. Dave had to make a decision.

“So what’ll it be, Dave?” he asked himself.

And Dave chose the right path.

CLASSIFIEDS

Daniela Di Napoli

Papa never once missed breakfast.

I'd hide behind my lukewarm bowl
of Cream of Wheat that tasted like
the smell of old newspaper clippings,
and papa, papa would hide behind **BUSINESS**
and a photograph of a young black man
in front of a white car, probably wishing
he was home with a tumbler of cheap Scotch
and a lady pretty enough for most standards.

Sometimes I'd clink my spoon in the bowl
just to hear his slow, smooth words slither
through the ink and wrap around my wrist
telling me I was being rude. "Stop that.
Clinking is for the people who can't afford
to leave food on their plates."

I knew more about the sports highlights
than my papa's nose, which may have been
crooked from some childhood rough-housing
or birth, but I never bothered to ask.
Every time I tried, my voice would get tangled
in the weather graphics when they wouldn't
let me speak up, which would make papa mad.

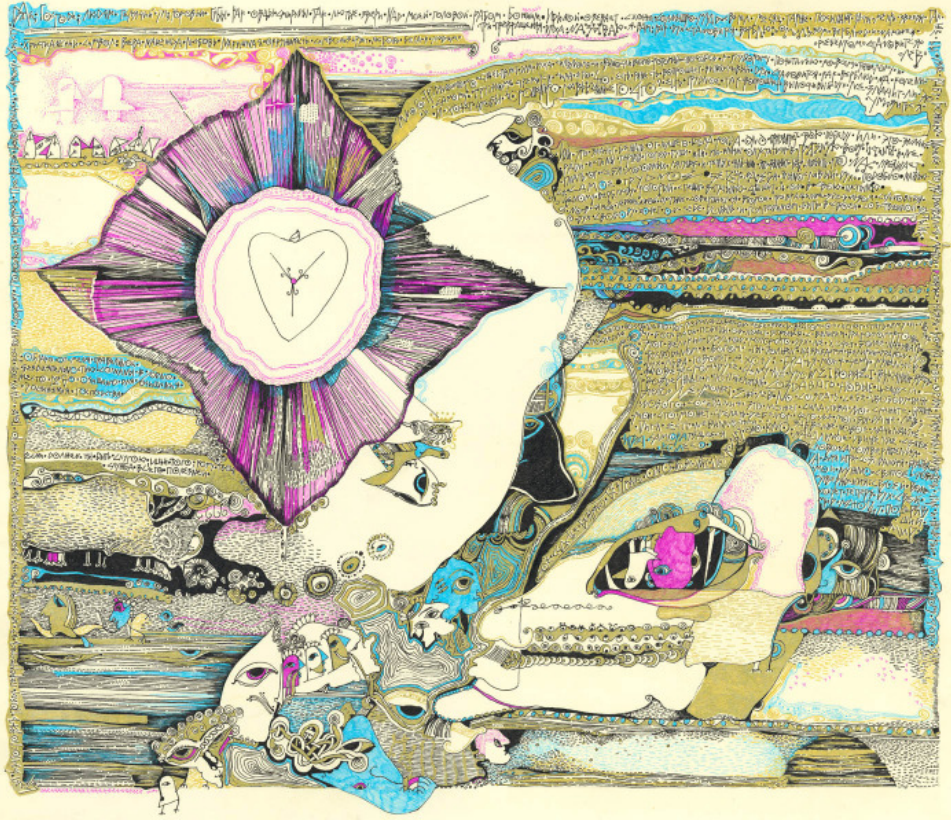
While most kids memorized their papas' hazel,
almond eyes and sandy hair, I memorized
this one ad for half price on developing photos
that always ran two slots under an ad
for some "Life Special" that I hoped

was for helping papas like mine see the faces
of the children behind the black ink,

but papa, papa never once missed breakfast.



LIFE, DEATH, AND REBIRTH
Grace KW Moon



METAPHYSICS OF LIFE

Iryna Lialko

TRINKETS

Tiffany Norman

It wasn't my intention
to collect your love
and place it on a shelf.

The dust makes you sneeze,
and I'm sorry, I've just
been busy.

It takes a lot
for me to climb my step stool
to break up

the cobwebs that
have settled on you
and Paul and Chris and Jake.



ABSTRACTED FORM
Clay Zapalac



INSPIRING A POET
Nicholas Perry

DRUGSTORE SOAP AND THE
JACK O' LANTERN
Hannah Lawless

rhinestones embedded
in each of your scabs and
the times you shower
you watch the droplets
race over them and wonder
if there ever has been
such a blue
and if it would take your hand
and if it would buy
a carving kit and
scoop hollow your heart,
place a candle there



MERMAID CURL
Adrienne Duncan

CURSED LOVE ON THE CORPORATE LADDER

Sims Hardin

I was reborn into darkness, still wet with blood, burdened with a newfound hunger. Cursed to the shadows, knowing only moonlight, and the malevolence in my crooked soul. Doomed to bear the weight of this burning thirst. Yes, I am a vampire (dramatic *hissing*)! But it hasn't always been such a bummer. There used to be some pretty spectacular perks, actually: a cool castle with a scenic, Eastern European view; a butler equipped with the standard hunchback; a velvet lined coffin; a giant pipe organ with ominous sheet music; money; fear; power; *respect*! The problem with living for eternity is that things change, shit happens, and life sucks—no pun intended. Look at me now, working my way up the ladder at GameCon at the pace of a tormented snail, doomed to endure a slow and painful spiritual death. My evil manager, Clint, salting my slimy cursed body with insults and demeaning complaints about the copy machine and the water cooler. Not to mention my fierce competitor and arch nemesis, Wendy Sugarfield, with her condescending sweet, soft tone, batting her long, spiderlike eyelashes at me. She does not fool me for even a second!

“Vigor, can I see you a sec in my office?”

“Clint...” I wanted to drain the life from the vein throbbing above the Snoopy tie that clasped his vanilla neck. “I will humor your request.”

“Whatever... just come now. Okay?!” I closed my browser that displayed the scepter that I was continually being outbid on by some lame eBay troll; hell-bent on keeping me from what was rightfully mine. I paused the Depeche Mode that pulsed through my ear-buds, and floated into Clint's glass office. His workspace was littered with inspirational cat posters, and the low volume Kenny G was enough to make me drive a stake through my own heart.

“You have requested my presence, Clint.”

“Vig, we need to discuss some of your phone etiquette. I've been receiving complaints that... how do I say this? You're creeping people the heck out. Frankly, the callers think you're rude, awkward, and... uh... strange.”

“The fools of the videogame world burden me with insolent questions of *Halo*, *Minecraft*, and The Legend of the Pathetic Knight known as *Zelda*.”

“This is what I’m talkin about, man! You gotta tone down this attitude. I don’t know how things are back in Bulgaria or wherever, but in America you gotta play by our rules! Take Wendy. Look at her out there. Always smiling. Laughing. She’s cheerful! That lets me know she’s being friendly and helpful to the customer.”

“I despise Wendy.” Her golden curls bounced and shined with the radiance of the sun, and her eyes sparkled bright like all the jewels of the Roman Empire. Each of her teeth a pearl from the Dead Sea, and her smile glimmered like a thousand stars burning in the night sky. She disgusts me.

“Fine. Whatever. You don’t have to like her, but if you don’t watch out, she’s gonna snag that new assistant manager position... I’d hate to see a hard working guy like yourself get passed up *again* because you can’t hang with a twenty-three year old intern who’s been here half the time you have. *And!* Zelda is the princess. Link is the knight. Step it up, bud.” I imagined smashing in Clint’s skull with one of his bowling trophies. His brains littering the Persian rug like spaghetti. I would lap the pooled blood from the roof of his skull like a fat Maine Coon.

“I will double my efforts, Clint! Now you must excuse me as I vacate the tormented hell that is your office. There is work to be done! Wendy will rue the day that she ever challenged the infamous and deadly Vigor Dragovia!”

“Yeah... just try to treat the callers with a little more respect.”

It is often a heavy task living in this confounded modern era. The crumbled Romanian economy has driven me to this wretched western continent. Night jobs are few and far between, and the test of feeding my thirst has become an atrocity. I’ve found myself often living off the sullied blood of the homeless, stray cats, and those who dare muster the courage to oppose me at work. Despite my efforts to combat my infantile opponents, I have been passed up for the same promotion at work three times. It’s obvious that the imbecile, Clint, desires only the most weak and stupid of the office drones. There is no other reason why a magnificent specimen such as myself cannot climb the bedeviled corporate ladder that is GameCon. Well, not this time! Wendy will soon see her doom.

The last fool who summoned the courage to challenge me to the assistant management position was... *Tim*. Tim thought he was so great with his jokes and his “humor”. Well... he wasn’t! Great, I mean... more like the opposite of great.

Tim was always pulling blasted pranks upon me, trying to make me the office jester. He once even laid a rubber hen on my work throne when I went to the restroom to check my fangs for janitor blood. When I returned I sat upon the cursed fowl, and the infernal gadget belted a deafening flatulent racket!

Everyone in the office laughed and laughed... *at me!* The Count of Doom! The creature that struck fear in the hearts of the feeble Romanian peasants, scattered across the countryside! That was his final mistake. It seems that *someone* filed a T-9 transfer form for Tim. Apparently he “*was relocated to Alaska*” (ominous laughing).

He’s dead. I drank him to the last drop.

“Vig, can you change the water cooler, buddy? Thanks!”

“At once, Sir Clint! The water drinkers of the office shall go unquenched no longer!” The subservience in my voice left a sour, metallic taste on my tongue.

“That-a-boy! Now there’s the GameCon spirit I’ve been lookin for! Keep up the good work.” As he winked at me, I imagined dropping him from the forty-fourth floor of the building, reveling in his agony filled screams as he plummets to his death.

At the water cooler, I tipped the Ozarka bottle, and imagined the crimson blood of my fallen enemies churning in the cool steel run of the Danube. Memories of the days of yore flooded my mind like the waters of the Ozark flooded the white, plastic cooling unit. The feeling of triumph coursed through my undead veins, and I was a great warrior, for a moment, once more.

“Hey, Vigor! I like your tie. Is that new?” Wendy’s red dress taunted me. I could see the blood schematic paint her neck delicately, a black widow’s web.

“Hello? Anybody home?” She waved her hand across my face.

“Forgive me, Wendy... I hear you are interested in the new assistant management position?”

“Yeah maybe, but I doubt I have a chance against you.”

“Well, forget it! You don’t stand a ch...oh...” What witchery was this? Was she trying to confuse me with some sort of spell of kindness? Well, it won’t work!

“Yeah. I don’t even know why I’d be considered. You’ve been here for *way* longer. I mean, you obviously work really hard, and you’re, like, the smartest guy in

the office. Either way, good luck!”

“And to you, I wish great luck, as well! You are a worthy adversary, Wendy. Do not doubt yourself, as I do not doubt you. But I will crush you. I will watch you fall, and I will drink your tears in my chalice of victory!”

“Oh my god. You’re hilarious, dude.” She laughed, pressing her hand to my chest, my body tensed stiff. She looked deep in my eyes and slowly pulled her hand away. “Look, all the boring work talk aside, we should grab a drink sometime... I kind of think you’re really cute...” She blushed, pursing her lips. I may have too, if I had any blood. “I don’t know... You should call me.” Wendy slipped a folded napkin in the pocket of my shirt, and I felt a chill run the length of my spine. I warmed almost as if my heart beat once, only for a second, and I swallowed hard.

“Okay... that sounds... nice.” Nice?! Who the Hell am I!? That vixen! Well, it only makes sense. Wendy is some sort of necromancer, attempting to cast a spell in an effort to destroy me! She wishes to take the assistant manager position! You can’t fool me, witch! I will use this “date” as an opportunity to destroy the infernal Wendy Sugarfield... with her sweet, fresh cinnamon roll smell, and eyes that glow like the rings of Saturn.

If I am to destroy Wendy, I must vanquish her sinister charms. Her dimples and gentle aroma have sneakily begun to seep into my mind. Now, I can’t seem to think of anything else. Confound her witchery! Luckily I recently purchased a new self-help tape, “How to Avoid Romantic Encounters in The Work Place” by Dr. Ira Gladstone. After preparing my mind for the perils that lay ahead, I dressed in my finest cape, and took a yellow, steel carriage to the unspeakable hell that is Olive Garden. I would meet the succubus, Wendy, for a romantic date, and eviscerate her body into the food of dogs!

At the Olive Garden we were seated immediately, which was peculiar. I had not even given the hostess the name from my online reservation. I began to tread lightly, weary of the mysticisms that were at play.

“Hello, sir... ma’am. My name is Terry, and I’ll be your server. Can I get you something to drink?” I noticed that the pustules cascading his face formed the shape of Orion’s belt.

“Terrance, we will have your finest bottle of Chianti with a side of the par-

mesan breadsticks.”

“Uh... sir... we only have Yellow Tail Shiraz and chardonnay... oh and the sangria... which is the other two wines mixed together and served with ice.”

“I’ll have that!” Wendy chimed with young, spirited exuberance.

“Make that two sangrias, young Terrance.”

I ordered a raw steak, with *no garlic*, but our waiter informed me that they were only allowed to serve the steaks medium rare. I cringed, but did not want to portray any signs of weakness. Wendy ordered the bottomless salad, as it was the only other thing on the menu without garlic. She could have easily destroyed me, but somehow wanted to nurture my “garlic allergy”. A seemingly foolish move, but I dare not doubt her cunning.

“I’m glad you came out with me... you’re like... so mysterious and stuff. You’re like the hot, European dude from work.”

“I see past your flattery, and I am afraid, my dear, that I am immune to your charms.”

“*Ha!* Dude, you crack me up! So why don’t I ever see you out? You don’t really hang with anyone from GameCon. Chad, Ted, none of the guys.”

“Chad is a fool! I don’t care to spend time with any of them. I would sooner watch their lifeless bodies wash ashore the beaches of Costinesti.”

“Well, I’m glad you came out with me. I don’t know... it kinda makes me feel special or something. It’s a trip!” She smiled and laughed. I could feel steam building in my shirt like the innards of a locomotive engine.

“Well, now that you mention it. No one else has ever asked me to ‘hang-out’... I mean... I hate them all, and wish to one day dance upon their cold, forgotten graves... but they could ask, I suppose.”

“They’re probably just intimidated by your worldliness... so, what *do* you do for fun?”

“I don’t know... I mean... I work... I strive for excellence! I vanquish those who oppose me... ” I could not help but laugh. “No one has ever asked me that before. I don’t really *do* anything. Well, not for *fun*. I don’t have any friends or family... I spend most of my time alone, plotting.”

“*Am!* Poor baby, that’s so sad.”

“No, it’s pretty good, actually. I hate everyone.”

“What about me? Do you hate me?”

“Uh... I don’t... hate you. You’re okay, I guess.” My hands began to shake like the 17th century Romanian Princess, Adelina, when I sucked the life from her heart.

“Do you like me? Because I like you... a lot.” She put her hand on mine, and looked deep into my eyes. It felt wonderful! This cannot be! “Don’t worry, Vig. I’ll be your friend.” She slipped her hand down my leg toward my undergarments.

“I... I have to go! Forgive me...”

“Wait why? What’s wrong?! Don’t leave!”

As I ran from the restaurant in a panic, rain poured from the sky like blood down my throat. What was happening to me? I stopped in front of a mirror store, and although I had no reflection, I gazed in searching for an answer within myself.

Who am I?— a sort of non-reflective self-reflection.

The next night at work, I could feel the eyes of the office follow me. The laughs of my coworkers echoed under their breath. She must have told them that I ran from her advances like a sniveling coward. *How embarrassing.* After sitting at my desk for nearly an hour, fearing the worst, I decided that it was best to clear the air with Wendy. I had to try to explain myself.

“Wendy, may I speak with you by the copy machine?”

“I don’t know, Vig. I really don’t feel like talking right now.”

“Please let me explain. I promise that my reasoning was valid, and that my actions are a source of deep regret.”

“Okay, but I have a lot of work to do. Just... make it quick.”

We rendezvoused by the CPX-9000. She was so beautiful. I felt like I needed to try to explain who I was. Who I am. That there was torment deep in my very soul. I was tired of hiding my true self from her. A love was growing inside me. I was changing.

“What?” She looked away, rolling her eyes.

“Wendy, I am not who you think I am... there is a darkness that lives inside me. I have a hunger that many have shunned me for. In Romania, I was chased through the streets like a rabid dog. I have a dark secret... a sort of incurable sinful

hunger for flesh. Do you understand what I mean?”

She gasped, as though a great awakening had sparked in her mind. She knew now. “Oh... my... God. It all makes sense now! The capes. The coiffed hair. The extensive knowledge of wine. The glittery complexion! Your fear of letting people in...”

“Look, Wendy... I was afraid of what you might say, but I’m not a monster... I prom—“

“Of course you’re not! Poor baby! Come here!” She hugged me so tightly I thought I might die... if that were possible. How could this be? Why was she not afraid of me, running for her life? What was this strange new acceptance? Maybe America is different. “I just want you to know you don’t have to hide in the shadows anymore!” I realized then that I had longed for this feeling for many moons. This feeling of... understanding... of acceptance.

The following night when I arrived at my cubicle, there were post-it notes splayed across the surface of my desk in rainbow patterns. Upon the rainbow pallet the word “acceptance” was written in purple sharpie. I assumed that Wendy posted them there to convey a message of cheerful empathy. Forgiveness. Love. What an amazing woman! Maybe I was wrong? What if I am not the creature of darkness that I once thought I was? Maybe I could love!

“Vig, hey buddy. I just want you to know that we are having a company meeting in the conference room. It’s about you, but don’t worry! It’s not a big deal. Everything’s fine.” Clint smiled and winked at me. Something wasn’t right.

“Sure, Clint...” What’s happening? Maybe I’m getting my promotion. Maybe Clint is not a douchebag after all. Maybe he sees that I am a superior worker to all of the infantile feedbags that surround me! Then again... what if I’m getting fired, and that worm is just adding the kiss of death. What If Wendy has told them that I am a vampire! What if this is all an elaborate ruse to finally slay me!

When I entered the conference room everyone was looking at me, and smiling awkwardly. “Hello, fellow GameCon employees.”

“Vig, I’m glad you’re here. Look... I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable, but Wendy told us about last night.” I lowered my fangs, and prepared myself for the imminent bloodbath. “She said that you came out to her about who you

really are.” The moment of silence that followed was broken by a long, slow group clap. “I’ve called this meeting because we all just want you to know, that we don’t care. We accept you for who you are!” How could this be? “Honestly this explains a lot, buddy! I’m so proud of you! We except and love you, Vigor!” Clint, Wendy, and the entire office surrounded *me* in a cocoon of compassion, with a large group hug.

“I don’t know what to say... Thank you everyone! I just want you all to know, you don’t have to worry. I won’t come after you!” I was very unsure about the validity of what I had just said. With my fangs erect, the group hug tempted me to leave the entire office staff a lifeless pile of cadavers wilted on the tile floors.

“Well, that makes me feel better!” Clint laughed and gave me a playful nudge with his fist.

Wendy approached me. Her eyes welled with tears. “Oh, Viggy! I just told everyone because you seemed so afraid of who you were. I want you to be happy! I want you to be you! Here in America, we want people like you to be free! To dance in parades! To embrace your love with a sense of pride!”

Wendy. What an angel. To think, I was going to snap her neck like a twig, and watch her body shake until her eyes closed forever into nothing.

Throughout the rest of the week, everyone in the office was so nice to me. They walked by my desk smiling, saying things like, “Good for you!”, “I always knew it.”, and “Be proud!”

I can finally be the person I truly am. Clint even walked in on me sucking the blood right out of the janitor’s neck, quenching my thirst, and didn’t say a word. He just smiled, laughed, gave me a quick thumbs up, and scurried away giving me the privacy to finish my lunch. He even gave me the promotion that I had been working so hard for. He said that it would be a good move for company diversity standards. *Hey, that works for me!*

America is a place like no other. Where men are free to be vampires. Where we can drink the blood of the children without having to hide in the shadows, fearing for our lives. It’s a place where you start from the bottom, a nobody, and climb the corporate ladder like a triumphant, bloodsucking tarantula. America is a place where love can grow between a worm-like mortal being and an immortal horrific undead super being. This is a country where acceptance grows from the ground like

Sims Hardin

elm trees towering above with glory. Where a simple vampire, down on his luck, can bloom into a blood-red orchid, wild and free.

THE OLDEST SOUL AT A COLLEGE BARN DANCE

John Milas

We are the flannelled and jeaned, loose
threads shedding on the floor of a pastel
school bus, clutching water bottles

filled with vodka, stumbling out, scooping
armfuls of beer cans from a tub
next to a barn echoing hip hop music.

The only boots I have to wear, the combats
with a dog tag still trapped in the laces,
are more confused about their own past

and future than those of us tumbling further
from the lives we think we want while we still
have a chance to sleep through a morning lecture.

A girl will see these boots
from the other side of a bonfire
and ask if I ever killed anyone,

and since the only one I killed,
the spirit of a boy who hated coloring
other people's drawings, doesn't count,

I won't answer
and she'll whisper
into someone else's ear instead.



THE FAKE TOOTH
Trinh Sari Nguyen



THE LETTER TO TOM
Trinh Sari Nguyen

SECRET CHARTS AND DREAMS IN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC AMERICAN SOUTH- WEST

Patrick Larose

Wolf in White Van

John Darnielle

Novel (Fiction)

September 16, 2014

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

Following your escape from Las Vegas and after crossing the Nevada hills, you find the astrologer's shack. Inside the shack, you will find the astrologer's body.

This is one of the many turns a player takes in the roleplaying game nestled in the center of John Darnielle's new novel *Wolf in White Van*. "There's power in thinking you're about to meet somebody who knows what's next for you," Sean, the game's creator and novel's narrator, says in an explanation mirroring the reader's own examination of his life, "and there's another level of power in seeing that person's body on the floor, having to get that information from him somehow now that he's no longer in any condition to give it." Welcome, survivor, to the *Trace Italian*.

When we're introduced to Sean, he is living in isolation. His face is disfigured following an accident in his teenage years and now his only connections to the outside world are through his window, the nurses who visit him, and his text-based roleplaying games. The game's title, *Trace Italian*, is a reference to the medieval star forts, *trace italiennes*, and the name of the last stronghold nestled in the post-apocalyptic American Midwest. Players take their turns by writing letters to Sean and describing their character's actions across the wasteland. In response he sends them simple choices: *Forage for Roots/Hide in Dumpster/Head North to Nebraska*. Anyone familiar with John Darnielle's work as the singer and songwriter for his band, the Mountain Goats, will feel at home with his themes of disregarded youth and the desperation of survival, which are accompanied by the same type of emotional rawness he delivers in his music.

Stepping into Sean's mind becomes stepping into one of the many labyrinthine dungeons that populate the Trace. The novel weaves between the past and the present, the real and the unreal until each page becomes one of the many turns in a maze and we descend deeper into the darkness and humanity of his psyche, reaching for the mystery and trauma asleep in the heart of the story.

Wolf in White Van is a character-study and scarcely remembers to hold a plot. Even though Darnielle keeps only a few characters and presents handful of dialog scenes, which would cause other stories to stumble, the novel charges forward through the almost hypnotic rhythm of Sean's mind. The blunt beauty of the prose and a main character filled with such a developed and gripping imagination and darkness makes you willing to follow Sean anywhere.

The novel is steeped in a type of 1980s pop culture nostalgia. Embedded are references and digressions from Conan the Barbarian to even more obscure fantasy like the film *Krull*. These references never feel like pandering or winks to a niche audience, but instead, become another entrance to understanding Sean, his depression, and his game. "People underestimate just how starved everybody is for some magic pathway back into childhood," Sean says to describe his subscribers, though the same truth is cast on him. His memories of Conan and his escape through role-playing games and imagination are attempts to reach back to the Sean who existed before the accident.

There are many times where Darnielle could have taken an easy way out. Coming out of the shadow of Saturday Morning Specials about Dungeons and Dragons and their satanic influences, he could have portrayed enacting with your imagination as something unifying. The *Trace Italian* is a place of escape for both Sean and his players—together, they retreat into a collective imagination. In their letters to Sean, the players sneak in reverberations from their real life into the game. One player will write his friend who used to play, and haunt his turns like a ghost. "If Jeff were playing, he'd probably attack the guard," the player writes to Sean, "but I'm not Jeff." Sean is passive in these interactions; and for every letter, pulls a premade response from his cataloged filing cabinet.

The personal crossover in *Trace Italian* between reality and the imaginary reaches its peak with two teenage players, Lance and Carrie. The two become so

consumed by the twisting fantasy of the game and their disturbed imaginations that they cannot untwine.

Darnielle does not flinch. He could have hidden behind imagination as a transformative and reformatory force, but rather explores its complexities. Whatever mental protection the *Trace Italian* offers its players from their lives also allows them to trace their way back to their childhoods. Through fantasy, Sean is able to find numbness from his pain and connections to the outside world, though there's still an undeniable dark side.

No matter how much we feel the need to retreat into our imaginations, there are moments where our imaginations transport us too far and we become taken with them and too separated from the world. Our imaginations are tempting and dark, urging us towards edges we might never want to walk towards otherwise. Bad thoughts. Evil thoughts. Sean faces this with the actions of his players, Carrie and Lance, when they bring the game to the real world.

Survival is the key to the story of *Wolf in White Van*. Sean once says how he doesn't believe in happy endings, and Darnielle stays true to this. What ultimately matters most is surviving, and the compromises and mindsets we will slip in to stay alive. Our imaginations are only as useful as they keep us living.

The greatest aspect of *Wolf in White Van* is that nothing comes to the reader easily. Darnielle will lead the reader to questions and mysteries but never flatly divulges the answers. Your journey must be like the survivors and astrologer—meaning must scrounged for, hunted, and meditated on. The subtlety in the players of the game and complexity of Sean's character are handled so deftly, so minutely, and with so many ticks and crevices, that you will follow them to the end, moving along steadily like the Searchers of the Trace.

FEATHERING A NEST: A THIRTY-MINUTE ROLLER COASTER RIDE

Zachary Weber

Caddywhompus

Feathering a Nest

Album

November 11, 2014

Community Records

As I watch five different species of birds and one existentially confused squirrel engage in a territorial battle over the feeder in my backyard, I can't help but think of Caddywhompus's new album, *Feathering a Nest*. This six-track LP, crafted by the Houston-born Chris Rehm on guitar and Sean Hart on drums, is a bombastic, yet sonically refined answer to their previous experimental, lo-fi albums *Remainder* and *The Weight*. Defining their sound, however, is a difficult task: for the most part, Caddywhompus rests comfortably within the realm of high-voltage indie-rock, but the duo is never hesitant to push their sound past the boundaries of aggressive math-rock, playful pop-punk, and noisy art-pop. These sizzling ingredients make for a very unique and percussive range of sounds that the band executes with style and ease.

The first track, "Feathering a Nest," defines the musical extremes this duo will fluctuate between through the rest of the album—constantly switching between explosive bursts of raw energy, driving syncopations, and soft echoing riffs accompanied by haunting melodies. The song's opening lyrics, "Worried and stoned / fall asleep on the couch again / words come so slow and you feel like an island," effectively summarize the album's central feelings of restlessness, anxiety, and alienation. However, the duo is obviously more focused on the energy and texture of their instrumentals, and not on the reverberated, somewhat unintelligible lyrics, which simply enhance the songs melodically.

The title track's heavy, dirge-like ending transitions seamlessly into the second song, "Stuck." This song opens with a deceptively playful indie-rock vibe, with occasional outbursts of energized strumming and percussion, but it quickly and unexpectedly plunges into a chaotic punk chorus. Chris Rehm's guitar tone in this

section, bolstered by a frightening chain of overdrive, fuzz, and bass-boost pedals, is something akin to a finely-tuned industrial chainsaw—which, coming from another guitarist with a pedal obsession, is not an easily-earned accolade. As soon as your ears are hooked on this catchy riff, and you notice your head nodding to the jagged rhythms, the song drops back down into a pensive, low-energy section, which is typical of Caddywhompus’s style—no matter how appealing the musical idea, nothing lasts more than necessary, and is rarely ever brought back to be heard again.

However, this fleeting songwriting style is surprisingly contradicted in the fifth track, “Entitled.” After a melancholy introduction that completely lacks percussion, the song is predominantly focused on two choruses that are in the same key, but slightly different in character. The first is an instrumental, rhythmically subdued progression in 6/4 time, while the second is an anxious pop-riff in 4/4 with full vocals and endless momentum. Sean Hart’s drumming on this second chorus is almost frantic with its raw emotional energy, but he never fails to stay in perfect sync with Rehm’s playing. For these reasons, “Entitled” is certainly the most accessible and memorable of the songs on this album—it highlights the dynamic chemistry and performative passion shared by the two musicians.

The album’s final track is a gargantuan ten-minute song that can only be described by its title—“Layers.” Listening to this song is like waking up one morning and finding an onion the size of a watermelon in your garden; one that you can’t help but peel away at for, you know, *scientific purposes*. All jokes aside, the song follows the signature Caddywhompus idiom of never returning to a particular musical section, but continuously transforming into the next. However, this approach is taken to entirely unexpected levels when a new riff is often heard interrupting the current action, which doubles the music’s attitude of unpredictability—and effectively summarizes the duo’s compositional style as a whole.

In terms of musical prowess, “Layers” is definitely the most virtuosic song on the album—making frequent leaps between the extremes of the duo’s sound. It is an appropriate track to end the album with; however, the final chord is sustained for two whole minutes—slowly morphing into a static noise that is reminiscent of nuclear fallout. There are some who will argue that this is a cheap way to kill an extra few minutes on an already brief album, but given the explosive and volatile na-

ture of *Feathering a Nest* as a whole, the metaphor of atomic “white noise” is somewhat fitting.

Small criticisms aside, the album’s only true downfall, in my opinion, is that I wanted at least three more tracks—even with the final ten-minute song, the album rounds off at about thirty minutes exactly. However, releasing a full-length LP can sometimes be a double-edged sword: the more songs you include, the more likely it is that some of those songs will be seen as “insignificant” or “filler” tracks, while a very select few will unfairly stand out as “singles.” Caddywhompus justifies their decision to record a brief, no-nonsense LP by making each of the six tracks incredibly diverse and memorable. All in all, *Feathering a Nest* is a charismatic testament to Rehm and Hart’s flexibility as musicians—one that deserves to be listened to on repeat.

PRINCESS KAGUYA, AN EXAMINATION OF JOY AND SORROW

Carolina Cao

Kaguya-hime no Monogatari / The Tale of Princess Kaguya

Directed and Written by Isao Takahata

Anime Feature Film

English Dub by GKIDS

Premiered in Japan, November 2013

U.S. release, October 2014

Studio Ghibli

“The Tale of Princess Kaguya” might have been a story you read when you were little, the one with the sad ending. Perhaps you vaguely know of this Japanese folktale about a bamboo-cutter who finds a tiny girl in a bamboo shoot, but this does not matter. Isao Takahata’s *Princess Kaguya* is vibrant with original charm. The style is distinct from traditional Studio Ghibli pictures—bearing an animation of soft charcoal and painterly colors that command power in stillness and movement. This is Takahata’s first feature film in fourteen years, and his comeback film is breathtaking. It shares staples with the works of Takahata’s more famous colleague, Hayao Miyazaki, in that it features Japanese mysticism. However, Takahata’s fantasy tends to be more deeply rooted in familiar traditions, while his mysticism mostly serves as an undercurrent to the narrative, rather than a forefront as seen in Miyazaki’s stories.

The graceful animation makes the tiniest of character gestures and flutters of nature a feast to the eye. Rarely does it break its restraint of movement, except in an iconic moment, when the animation erupts in harsh, grotesque pencil lines, and our heroine tears across the meadow. The animation finds simplistic beauty in the setting. It illustrates the subtle psychology in nature, such as opening flower petals and buzzing insects.

The tale begins in pastoral scenery with an old bamboo-cutter discovering a radiant tiny girl within a stalk. Believing her to be a blessing from heaven, he takes her home, where she rapidly transforms into a baby and grows expediently into a

little girl. Her adoptive pa names her “Princess”, because what doting pa wouldn’t? She savors her childhood in the pastoral life, earns the nickname “Little Bamboo” by neighbors, and develops a burgeoning affection for her neighbor, Sutemaru. Eventually, her father stumbles upon riches and finery within the bamboos, apparently sent by the same entity that gave him his daughter. Seeing the chance to maximize her happiness, the father uproots her from the countryside to reside in a city as royalty.

The story then shifts into a critique of the upper-class traditions, complete with familiar tropes of royal drawbacks. Though our heroine resists her stern instructor, she ultimately complies to please her well-meaning father, becoming an emotional martyr for his happiness. Her father is too absorbed in upper-class ideals to notice her despondency. The animation portrays her deterioration in understated anguish. Witness the process of her succumbing to the rituals: tearing up silently as her brows are plucked and her handmaidens dress her in layers of kimonos.

Some viewers have reservations with the middle act and accuse it as cliché and meandering, though I object. Seldom is the arranged-marriage trope treated organically. Each extensive episode with the suitors gives weight to her situation. Each suitor recites love poetry as a marriage proposal, equating her to legendary treasures. To deflect them, Kaguya tests them with the impossible: to bring her these treasures. The inept suitors have their individual quirks and are diverse in their wooing, but they are all the same in their motives for winning the prize. Takahata does not shy away from depicting a double standard: Kaguya’s father and the suitors falter in their grace and slip into buffoonish conducts, yet they are exempt from criticism while Kaguya and her mother receive reproach for improper behavior.

To sum up Kaguya’s handling of her suitors, compare it to Pixar’s *Brave*, where an identical marriage plot unfolds: its feisty princess protagonist protests, “I’m not ready,” whereas Kaguya humbly laments, “That’s all I am to these gentlemen. I’m a fake, jeweled branch or a fiery robe that turns to ashes,” after another false courtship gift is exposed. The former reflects how tiresome the marriage trope can be in American productions, while Kaguya presents the trope with emotional depth and a darkly comedic edge. The courtship arc delivers compelling dynamics. Cinema is often so worried about being subversive with the traditional marriage

trope that they forget to delve into the psychological torment that the traditions will bring, Kaguya's relief over repelling the first suitor does not sustain her amusement. Only through botched courtships does she become closer to comprehending the hollowness of the tradition. Kaguya learns the hard way that the more she makes herself unattainable, the more men will value her as a prize. The critique of Kaguya's patriarchal environment is treated with refreshing intelligence and poetry rather than the stale crassness in typical cinema.

The English dub radiates warmth without crossing into sentimentality. The vocal performances channel class-consciousness. Chloe Grace Moretz gives Kaguya an inflection of free-spiritedness as well as a safe shade of authority without becoming overtly defiant. The parents are just as pleasing: Mary Steenburgen speaks with soothing maternity, and James Caan as the father emits bumbling vibes that make him endearing as well as condescending. Lucy Liu as Lady Sagami has a tricky task, considering that Sagami is the stock stern instructor. However, Liu executes the role with nuances to suggest that her character views this harshness as tough love, and even welcomes admiration for the character's rigid patience. Hynden Walch as Kaguya's handmaiden conveys a bubbly supporting character that believes in the sincerity of Kaguya's suitors. Like the instructor's sternness, her naiveté is very much a product of Japanese class ideals.

The third act does stumble as it saves its crucial foreshadowing from the first act, making a dramatic point almost too sporadically. Regardless, *Kaguya* rotates its themes and drama with elegance. The first act is a love letter to countryside life and domestic affection, the second is a soft satire of Japanese restrictive mores, and the third is a tragic finale. Takahata gathers the final music, visuals, and dialogue to convey a bittersweet and ironic closure. It is a tragic coming-of-age tale, though her earthly life was not lived in vain—

And well worth the tears.

THE BOOK OF WANDERINGS: A MOTHER-DAUGHTER PILGRIMAGE

Rebecca Canak

The Book of Wanderings

Kimberly Meyer

Novel (Nonfiction)

March 24, 2015

Little, Brown and Company

It's the kind of journey we often see fictionalized in contemporary pop culture, from the Wes Anderson flick *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) to James Thurber's classic short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (1939). It's the kind of journey we dream of having for ourselves, the one that makes us want to sell all our belongings and quit our jobs and embark on an impossible mission to see the entire world, and then some. In the new memoir *The Book of Wanderings*, author Kimberly Meyer takes us on her own pilgrimage with her daughter across the Eastern world, "from Venice to the Mediterranean through Greece and partitioned Cyprus, to Israel and across the Sinai Desert with Bedouin guides, to the Palestinian territories and to Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt."

The Book of Wanderings tells the story of a mother-daughter journey retracing the footsteps of the 1483 pilgrimage of one Felix Fabri, a medieval Dominican friar who is known to historians today for the extremely detailed accounts of his many pilgrimages taken across parts of Europe and the Middle East during the fifteenth century. Though Fabri remains largely forgotten to most recent history books, the written records of his journeys that were left behind paint an intimate illustration of man's inherent need for exploration, the need for constant motion and adaptation to a changing world and the desire to experience it on one's own, a notion which is captured and reinvented in the pages of this book.

Such is the power of writing, in fact, that readers find themselves connecting and relating to these personal accounts of a man who lived over half a millennium ago. It's a shame, actually, that tales of his travels aren't more widespread in classrooms, as one only needs to read a short biography of his life to understand

what an interesting and unique character in history he was. It seems rather inevitable, then, that his life would eventually inspire such a work as *The Book of Wanderings*.

Meyer, a graduate of the University of Houston's Creative Writing doctoral program, is the kind of storyteller that leaves readers both in wonder and inspired as she expertly details her sights and experiences on this epic adventure, from sailing on the Mediterranean to sharing tea and cigarettes with Bedouin guides in the Sinai Desert. She tells of a dream had by many: to see the world and learn about it firsthand, to travel through foreign lands and discover a home both inside and outside of oneself. We've all had the dream at some point in our lives, whether as recent grads attempting to delay reality for just a little bit longer, or as aspiring-professional gadabouts, content to live out of a backpack. This, perhaps, is what makes *The Book of Wanderings* so intriguing and relatable to the adventurer in all of us. Meyer tells of her pilgrimage with such familiarity and warmth, that rather than stirring envy in those of us who cling to the word "someday", instead inspires readers into action.

Though the book is most assuredly about the deep-seated need for travel, it is not to be confused with your average travel book, one which might recommend restaurants and five-star hotels. Rather, it is the kind of book you wish you could write yourself, a story laced with personal experiences and observations about real places that go beyond what one could gather from the pages of the average textbook. *The Book of Wanderings* is a deeply private internal monologue of one woman's search for meaning and appreciation for simplicity, which Meyer herself describes as a "bohemian-explorer-intellectual kind of life", one that she long dreamed of having after being forced to set aside her wanderlust with the birth of her daughter during her senior year of college. How wonderfully full-circle, then, that it is with this same daughter, now an adult herself, who took the journey with her years later. Indeed, perhaps even more interesting than the places that they visit is the intimate bond that quickly forms and strengthens between Meyer and Ellie. It reads not only as a tale of self-discovery, but also as a tribute to the unique, lasting bond shared between a mother and her daughter.

The book ends on a poignant note, as Meyer, back in Texas, reflects on

something she wrote in her journals at the beginning of her trip while in the Venetian island monastery of San Francesco del Deserto: “I’m drawn to the mendicant orders, to this idea of wandering. It’s a kind of detachment from the world. But that internal feeling of separation and longing, that state of wandering – is that sustainable? Even the mendicant friars eventually settled down to their convents and grew fruit trees and made a life.”

This depth, right here, is what separates *The Book of Wanderings* from other books of its kind, as it acknowledges the shortcomings of this oft sought-after “bohemian-explorer-intellectual kind of life”, while in no way diminishing its value. The question of sustainability is one she doesn’t explicitly answer, as it undoubtedly varies with each individual person. But, it seems, it is an answer begging us all to discover for ourselves.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KIMBERLY MEYER, AUTHOR OF *THE BOOK OF WANDERINGS*

Rebecca Canak: Did you go into this journey knowing you were going to write a book about it?

Kimberly Meyer: I thought that I would write something about it, but it turned into a completely different book than I thought it would be. I thought the book that I was setting out to write was just about my journey on top of Felix Fabri's, and I didn't really think the whole mother/daughter relationship was part of the story at all. I was entirely focused on this lively character I found in Fabri, and the time period he was travelling in right before the world shifts Westward with the discovery of the New World. He lived during such a historically rich time, so I thought I would be writing about his journey, and his pilgrimage. But it turned into the story of the pilgrimage I took with my daughter.

RC: Felix Fabri isn't exactly a well-known historical figure – what was it about him that interested you so much?

KM: I think I found him relatable. His writings really give a sense of this restlessness that existed inside of him, this need to keep going, which I really responded to. He was such an interesting character in history, someone who was uniquely able to record the details of his travels in a way that he was clearly able to look and see what was actually in front of him, rather than just writing about the mythology of the places he visited. He was really good about writing about particulars, about evoking that specific time and place in history.

RC: Do you have a favorite memory from the whole experience?

KM: Actually, I do – it happened towards the very end of the trip in Alexandria,

after we'd been travelling for two months. We stopped there because it was the last port city where Fabri stopped before sailing home. This was the day before we were scheduled to fly back, and we were so exhausted and sick of traveling at this point, but I got up early that morning because I really needed to see a couple churches, and just sort of do my duty in regards to the purpose of retracing Fabri's steps. I didn't want to drag my daughter so she just stayed behind in the hotel. So I saw the churches, snapped my photos, went back to the hotel, and I literally had my hand on the doorknob when this guy came up to me. He looked harmless, he had these little booklets in his hand, the exact equivalent of a Mormon missionary, but Muslim. I really don't know why I decided to engage with him, but we started having this theological debate in the streets of Alexandria – cars whizzing by, there's this grime in the air, I was very aware of all this noise and heat in my surroundings. We went back and forth debating about all sorts of things, about women, and why they're viewed the way they are in Islam, and eventually he asked me if I believed in one god, or a divided god, and my views in general...and I knew he was trying to get me to say that I believed in one god because this would mean that I was Muslim. Finally he just told me that that wasn't really the issue – the real issue was what was going on with me internally, what was going on in my own soul. He told me his reformation story and how it changed his life. And then he asked me to listen, and started chanting these verses from the Quran – right in the middle of this busy, hot, noisy street in Alexandria. And I suddenly just really found myself totally in tune with the sound, and with him, and all the background noise just faded away, and I felt totally alone with him in this sacred enclosure. And then he stopped chanting, and the noise around us came back. And I understood what he was trying to make me hear. It was like a brief moment of transcendence, a moment in time that will always resonate with me.

RC: So you took this trip back in 2011 – how long did it take you to write the book?

KM: It was a long, drawn-out process, but altogether it took somewhere between 2-3 years.

RC: I know you teach as well, so what was your writing schedule like?

KM: I had to have it written on my calendar every day so that I would stick to it. Actually, though, it was the time of day I always looked most forward to. I would much rather be doing that than, say, preparing teaching materials.

RC: What's some of the best writing advice you've ever been given?

KM: I'll always remember Adam Zagajewski, a Polish poet who taught at the University of Houston when I was a student, telling us to "find the metaphor" – meaning for your own life. I didn't really set out to "find it" with this book, but the pilgrimage metaphor emerged on its own, especially with the whole mother/daughter relationship, which I feel ended up explaining so much to me about myself. That's probably the main piece of advice that has always stuck with me over the years.

RC: What other kinds of writing are you interested in? Do you ever write fiction or do you consider yourself strictly a nonfiction writer?

KM: I do write pretty exclusively nonfiction, yes. Years back, before this book when I was still in the Creative Writing Program, I used to write essays about these trips around America I would take with my husband and daughters, who were young at the time. I was really interested in visiting places that were considered sacred, but sacred in a strictly American way – like the Grand Canyon, the Laura Ingalls Wilder little houses, Plymouth, the Redwood Forest, Graceland – these kinds of things. All places that are in a way viewed as holy, but not necessarily in a religious way. I think I've always been interested in the idea of the sacred,

and so I've done a lot of research on the topic of secular pilgrimages, which is ultimately how I found out about Fabri – and, of course, is what led to this book.

RC: Do you have any plans for your next writing project?

KM: Actually what I really want to do at the moment is a little different. So much of this book was not only about my journey outward into the world, but about my journey inward as well. I'm interested now in writing less about myself, and spending more time with immersive journalism – burrowing into local communities, discovering individual niches in American culture and trying to understand them and write about them. I don't know if that will add up to a book or not, but I like the idea of starting small again and just seeing what comes out of it.

Contributors

Daniel Calderon is an undergrad sculpture block student at the University of Houston. In Daniel's artwork, everything becomes a material. Dreams, memories, and feelings are starting points for his creations. He works in the moment, manipulating materials such as wood, paper pulp, and plaster while allowing the multiple influences that shape his identity to drive placements and arrangement. His materialistic expressions are paired with irrational relationships that help to mystify the meanings behind his final forms.

Rebecca Canak is a senior Creative Writing major at the University of Houston, with a double minor in History and Global Studies. A member of the *Glass Mountain* staff since her freshman year, she now serves as the journal's current Editor. Following her graduation, she will begin a one-woman mission to trot the globe, beginning in Thailand, where she has secured a job teaching English to youngsters in a small Thai community. She has no doubt that she will be the one doing most of the learning.

Caroline Cao, though Florida-born, considers herself a full-Houstonian spiritually. In her spare time, she conjures ideas, documents them, and processes them into stories or open mic performances... or relaxes by staring at the ceiling as a remedy for writer's block. She has a poem recently published in Volume 8 of *The Aletheia* magazine, and serves as a devoted crewmember and writer for the CoogTv comedy sketch show "Skitzo".

Emily Cinquemani studies Literature and Creative Writing at Elon University in North Carolina. She's found that she has an affinity for mythological characters, and thus enjoys writing about them. Inexplicably, she almost always has a good day when it rains. Her current life goals include being good to her fellow humans and reading and writing a lot of beautiful things.

Megan Colvin is a sophomore Photography/Digital Media major at the University of Houston. Although she is an introvert in everyday life, photography is how she finds a voice and tells a story. This photo is a product of a rainy day spent at home building blanket forts and drinking hot chocolate. To discover other stories and adventures, follow her on Instagram: @megancolvin.

Camila Cossio is currently a J.D. Candidate at the University of Texas School of Law. She serves on the board of the Environmental Law Society, Student Animal Legal Defense Fund Chapter, and is an editor for the Texas Hispanic Journal of Law & Policy.

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David Delgado is a 2014 University of Houston BFA Sculpture graduate and has been previously published in *The Aletheia*. In his sculptural works he addresses the definitions placed onto objects in order to understand the world around us. These works are often innocent misleadings that hope to question the viewer's preconceived notions. In his drawing practice his current focus is the development of a personal narrative.

Daniela Di Napoli discovered her love for writing in second grade after spending hours creating a story about a spotted, purple monster. That purple monster led to years of writing poetry, which led to working towards her Creative Writing degree. Her only hope is that her poetry can impact at least one person, and that in the meantime she maintains herself through journalism.

Cameron Doby, (b. 1988, Houston, TX), is an interdisciplinary artist working in a multiplicity of materials and mediums in an attempt to create a sensorial experience that explores an understanding of the physical, mental, and spiritual. His most represented body of work is found in his graphite drawings. Recently, these have drifted towards conveying connected streams of thoughts and feelings through smoothly rendered, flowing imagery. Cameron's drawings have previously been published in Vol. 13 of *Glass Mountain*.

Adrienne Duncan is currently in her senior year at the University of Houston as an English major with a minor in Fine Art. Her work has ranged from drawings to printmaking and some painting.

Stevie Falter is in her final year at University of Houston and will earn her BFA in Photography/Digital Media in 2015. She has a variety of work exploring the power of the human subconscious as well as examining the fragile human body. Her current project focuses on the intensity of young psychological portraits. She is inspired by the concept of how every human being is connected but we all possess our own individuality. After graduation, Falter desires to be a concept artist for books and films.

Karen Fischer is a writer residing in Chicago. She has essays published with *The South Loop Review*, *Midway Journal*, and *Cactus Heart Press*. You can visit her online at kfischerwrites.com

Christopher Fuentes is a Houston-based painter who is completing a BFA in Painting at the University of Houston in the Spring of 2015. He works in acrylic as well as oil. The bulk of the work consists of figurative paintings based on idealized images of close friends in memories and past moments of leisure.

CONTRIBUTORS

Claire Gage is a Texas native currently residing in La Porte, Texas. She is a senior in the Photography/ Digital Media program at the University of Houston working towards a BFA in May 2015. Her photographs often reference her past in her family and community. She is currently working in digital photography media.

Sims Hardin isn't a bad guy. Not really a good one either. Fiction enthusiast. Night shift janitor. Probably on the Internet. Probably not working on his website. Softly pissing in the wind. He can be contacted at simshardin@gmail.com

Jarek Jarvis was born and raised in Fairmount, Indiana. He grew up in the shadows of a dead 1950s movie star, a lasagna-loving, Monday-hating cat, and the cornfields of central Indiana. Now, he is a junior at Indiana University. He majors in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. His only previously published work appears in the student-published *Canvas* magazine at IU.

Patrick Larose is a senior Creative Writing student at the University of Houston. He is also the current Fiction / Nonfiction Editor at *Glass Mountain*.

Hannah Lawless is a second year student at the University of Georgia, majoring in English and minoring in Studio Art. Within her more recent poems, she tends to explore failed relationships, anxieties relating to bodily functions, and the intermingling of the two. You can find more of her work at hannahrlawless.tumblr.com.

Iryna Lialko was born in central Ukraine in 1981. In 2006, she graduated from the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture (Kiev, Ukraine) and is currently working in graphic and picturesque forms, such as murals and ex libris. She is excellent in creating digital graphics and uses classical techniques. From 2010 until now, she has been engaged in performance/show business, creating live shows involving sand drawing and speed painting. She also creates hand crafted costumes for stage shows and has performed in 30 countries. In addition, she has participated in art exhibitions and competitions for painting and photography.

Jacqueline Lung is an emerging jeweler currently studying at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), and has studied at the Högskolan för design och konsthandverk in Gothenburg, Sweden, for one semester. Her work has been in exhibitions at RISD and will be part of the IMPACT juried exhibition in Brookline, MA, in conjunction with the annual Society of North American Goldsmiths conference 2015 in Boston.

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Dania Mahmoud wanted to be an artist when she was young, but she was discouraged after discovering she could not color within the lines. She settled on being the person who says “You’re watching Disney Channel” between commercial breaks. Then she fell in love with Harry Potter in the first grade, and she was inspired to try her hand at writing, instead. She went on to write some truly awful stories, along with a couple that earned praise. She has selective hearing, so she focused on the praise. Today she continues to pursue her dream while studying Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

John Milas is a Marine Corps veteran and writing student living in Central Illinois. His writing can be found in *Hypertext Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Smile Politely*. He can also be found on Twitter @johnwlits.

Grace KW Moon, born in Gwang-Ju city, Korea, began to find her interest in art as she scribbled on the wall next to artworks of her aunts. Consequentially, her earlier artistic practices were revolving around the realm of drawing, painting, and illustration, and those works have been extended to her current practice in sculpting and performing. She is currently studying in Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and expected to receive a BFA in 2016. She has recently had various shows around RISD campus and a group show in Seoul, Korea.

Trinh Sari Nguyen is a Houston-based artist currently pursuing a Bachelor Degree of Fine Arts with a painting concentration at the University of Houston. She has exhibited her works in Houston, Dallas, and Las Vegas. As an artist, Trinh’s intention is to redefine “The Me” within herself using unspoken secrets of feelings. Her sources come from direct observation of lone objects related to the unspoken feelings. For her most recent body of work, “Soft Spoken,” Trinh applies acrylic on top of soft white fabric for visual softness and to emphasize emotional sensitivity. Trinh challenges viewers’ curiosity with an element of mystery leading them into an intimate conversation with the paintings.

Tiffany Norman, a native Houstonian, closely identifies with the passage about the fig tree in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. Should she become an entomologist and study butterflies? Or maybe a yoga instructor. What about a career in marketing? A beekeeper? Regardless of where life has taken her, Tiffany has always been compelled to write. So she does.

Nicholas Perry is an undergraduate at the Peck School of the Arts in Milwaukee. His work is physical documentation of his experiences of memory. These experiences of memory are the sensations he felt during the event. His drawings present an unknown space to the viewers, removing reference to the real world and providing vulnerability for a true contempla-

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tive act. His work has appeared in *Cream City Review*, *Cactus Heart Press*, *Dirty Chai Publishing*, *Driftwood Press*, *Empty Sink Publishing*, *New Plains Review*, and many more.

Seth Peterson is a senior at the University of South Florida majoring in English with a focus on Creative Writing. He has only ever been published one other time in his university's own literary magazine, *Thread*, for poetry. This is Seth's first fiction submission. Seth loves long walks on the beach, singing in the rain (and the subsequent pneumonia that follows), and bacon. Lots of bacon. When he has the time he writes with what he hopes is intelligence and a sense of humor that readers will enjoy.

Ellen Prescott is an undergraduate at the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program. Ellen spreads her creative juices between school work, writing short stories, table top role play and drawing comics. Where she gets all that juice, no one knows, but it's likely she has captured some mythical creativity beast and held it hostage for milking purposes. If spotted, please contact the authorities. "Off" will be her first published short story.

Cody Smith is an undergraduate at the University of Louisiana at Monroe and a sojourner, educating himself one road trip at a time. His work has appeared in *Dark Matter*; *Otis Nebula*; *Full of Crow*; *The Rain, Party, & Disaster Society*; *JMWW*; and *Cactus Heart*.

Kelsey Vaillancourt is a sophomore at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. She is majoring in English Writing with minors in Religion, Psychology, and Classical Studies. She plans to graduate in 2017 and go to grad school somewhere on the east coast. She is previously unpublished.

Zachary Weber's biography is ongoing.

Clay Zapalac will receive his Bachelors in Fine Arts from the University of Houston in 2015. He is a multidisciplinary artist who works in sculpture, performance, video, and installation. He anchors ideas of epistemology and ontology into familiar spaces, architecture, and objects. He works and shows in Houston, Texas. He has shown work at the Caroline Collective in 2013, in the Oracles of the Auric. He has also participated in the CounterCurrent Festival through the Aurora Picture Show in 2014. Clay in addition has performed with the performance group Continuum and has shown in their show "The Big Machine" in 2014 and "Subliminal Fixtures" in 2015.



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