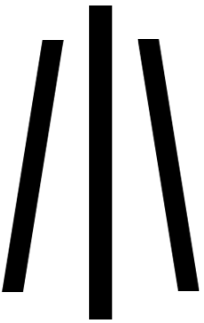

Glass Mountain is a literary journal edited by undergraduate students at the University of Houston. Dedicated to showcasing the work from undergraduate and emerging artists around the world, *Glass Mountain* publishes volumes each fall and spring.

Cover Art

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"Burst of Butterflies"

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Burst of Butterflies

Christine Stoddard

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Dedicated to the next generation
of artists, thinkers and doers.

"To climb the glass mountain, one first requires a good reason."
– Donald Barthelme
1931–1989

Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

There's something about a deadline that is so tantalizing. It could be a self-fulfilling prophecy, but I seem to get my best work done when I've backed myself into the tightest possible corner. Another option? It's average work, terrible work, but the relief of finishing the work blinds me to its mediocrity.

Eh. Who knows?

Over half of the submissions published in this volume were submitted in the week before the submission deadline. I'm not certain, but I think that in volume 19, a sizable portion of the work published had also been sent in during the week before the reading period closed. Any number of factors could account for the phenomenon, but I'm sure that if you asked any artist, even the most prepared of us would confess to turning in at least one thing at (or past—oops) the deadline.

As I'm writing this letter, four days after I swore I'd turn it in, I'm grateful for the artists who are able to operate within the strict systems of creativity: writers who complete second, third and fourth drafts before turning a piece in, painters who meticulously mix their gouache until the paint oozes perfectly. I'm grateful for the artists whose creativity comes in a burst of brilliance ten minutes before the work is due. Everyone who exists between the two states or accomplishes their art in a totally different way—thank you. Choosing the right word or pencil stroke isn't easy. The art that you make matters, so don't stop. Keep going.

With this volume, my time with Glass Mountain is ending. Just as I'm not sure about the person I am without the magazine, I don't know what Glass Mountain will be without me there to shove my disdain for serial commas down the editors' throats. Uncertainty is terrifying, but that exhilarating potential offers relief, too. We haven't reached the summit yet, so we'll keep trying, keep climbing and keep going.

With love and affection,

Kim Coy
Editor, *Glass Mountain*

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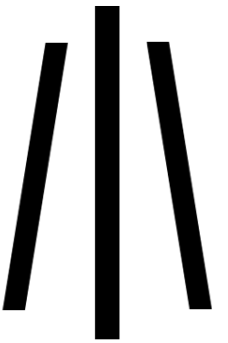


Poetry & Prose Contest Winners

Bri Griffith
Poetry Winner

Bri Griffith studies creative writing at Carlow University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she emcees the Red Dog Reading Series. Griffith is a proud member of the Madwomen in the Attic writing workshops. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Alien Mouth*, *Rogue Agent*, *Maudlin House*, *Pittsburgh City Paper*'s online feature "Chapter & Verse" and elsewhere.

Like Her

Selected by Hayan Charara

Opening the sandwich line, Trish calls me
baby doll, asks me to pass her a French baguette
and I do. She's 23, lives on Lawn Street,
short brown hair completely covered
by her hat. I notice her tongue ring
when she says, *Shit*, after realizing
I didn't grab the scoop for the quinoa.
She's not mad, says, *Who puts quinoa*
on oatmeal? Shit's nasty, before sitting
on the counter to eat strawberries I cut
only moments ago. I know I want to be more
like her when our gloves touch between passing
breakfast sandwiches, clearing orders. I want
to feel comfortable saying, *No*, like she does
when our manager asks her to clean the bathrooms
because it's not her job. When he sends her home
early for having an attitude, she kicks the door open
and wind blows in fallen leaves and other debris.
I want to follow her, but our manager says, *Sweep please,*
and I do.

Susanna Space
Nonfiction Winner

Susanna Space's essays and lyric prose have appeared in numerous literary journals including *The Cincinnati Review, Pleiades* and *34th Parallel*. Her mixed-form memoir, *Regarding Your Absence*, was a finalist in the 2018 Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards, and her essay "Rental," a lyrical exploration of nature, family and economics, received an Honorable Mention in the 2017 New Millennium Writing Awards for Nonfiction. A New England native, Susanna holds a BA in English from the University of New Hampshire and is a graduate of the Emerson College Publishing Program in Boston, Massachusetts. She lives with her family in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Threshold

Selected by Antonya Nelson

Daylight. Peel back the satin blanket still body-warm. Register the hum of cars idling at the light beyond the curtainless window. Past the patch of yellowed grass not meant for playing.

Pad to the door, finger the moldings. A floorboard sighs underfoot. Familiar colors and textures set in new geometries: rug, table, chair. The modest stack of records, now unboxed. Her books lining exactly two shelves.

Another sound. Footsteps? Yes, in the rooms above. And on the far wall another stranger, a pale nude kneeling in a sunlit garden framed in silver. I move closer, examining the place where, in loose brushstrokes, petal becomes flesh. Yet another geography my child-mind struggles to comprehend.

Breathe it then, her scent, marriage of wool and cedar, of coffee ground to perfume. Yes, there she is at the oak table in jeans and loose cotton blouse, worrying that spot on her lip, sunlight splashed across newsprint rendering her bobbed hair a syrupy shimmer. Absorbed in the day's news, she presses the paper to creasing. She has made scrambled eggs in the cast iron pan. That scent, too, the pure yellow of it.

But where is her Revlon Kiss Me Coral lipstick, her barefoot tending of the lily of the valley? Left behind, with the scent of another meal, another day's newspaper.

There, at dawn her fingertips would nestle in my hair, rain drumming on the roof, water spilling from gutter to black soil. There, another floorboard sighed beneath the weight of my father, his birdwing rustle of pressed white cotton, chin up for a looping of the tie, pale fingers pulling quarters from the string jar.

She would rise then, stormclouds receding beyond the maple branches still restless from the wind. The long note of the closet hinge would enter my dreams as she lifted the sea-blue caftan from its hook. I'd open my eyes to first light on her smooth waistcurve vanishing behind cotton drape.

Here, though, where only footsteps drum above and cars idle at the light, there are no neckties, no coins in a string jar, no lily of the valley. And she, unaware of my small presence, my galloping heartbeat, allows her gaze to rest on the bare walls of her new home.

She pushes aside the paper. Rises, scrapes the yellow from the pan. Outside the window traffic washes in and out.

I cross into the light. The floorboard beneath issues its music.

She turns. "Oh," she says, "you're up."

She closes the tap, reaches for a towel. Movements so ordinary. Beneath gauzy cotton my muscles tighten. The nude watches us from her delicate garden. Sunlight flashes golden across my mother's small back, blesses her hair like wonderful rain. And just like that I am ruined.

Arthur Pike
Fiction Winner

Arthur Pike is an emerging writer who's been practicing the writing craft in professional and personal settings for several decades. He recently completed a collection of short stories, *The Size of the World We Don't Know*, and is focused on completing a young adult novel with his brother. He lives with his family in Houston, Texas.

Love: An Investigation

Selected by Peter Turchi

Day one of my yearly pilgrimage up state to Truth or Consequences to meet with Ruben Jalisco. Ruben, years married to the same woman, values my services. He's a regular customer, a victim, suffering from the advanced stages of jealousy, a disease that never goes into remission. Every year or so the phone call comes; every year I answer. We're sitting together, late afternoon, in the Silver Spur Café.

"She moves differently these days." He shakes the soda in his glass on the table. "Like this," he says, pointing at the bubbles. "Fizzy."

I write this down. Moves fizzy. The notebook is a piece of it; people like to think detectives take careful notes.

"As your investigative consultant, I feel compelled to remind you that you've jumped at these shadows before, Ruben."

"This time is different, man." He leans forward, big nose and compact ears, straining with it. "I'm telling you, Caldwell." He stirs the fizz up in his soda again. Holds it up to my face.

The Silver Spur, Broadway and Foster, Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, soaks in sun and stink from the overworked swamp cooler. Slow afternoon. Just me and Ruben, and one other guy, hawk-faced, good hair, nursing a coffee off in the corner, crisp and dignified, studiously not paying us any attention.

Ruben leans forward and grips my forearm. "I have to know, Caldwell. You understand?"

Has to know. I write it down.

"You got a name for this alleged transgressor, Ruben?"

"Don. Petersen." He snatches the pad from my hand and then the pen, leans in close to print the name life-size, then flips it back around for my viewing pleasure. "Don. Petersen." He could be spitting tobacco.

"Got it," I say.

He stabs a thick forefinger on the name scratched on the paper. "I have to know." He grinds his finger into the pad like he's putting it out. I take hold of it and slowly work it out from under his hand and back to my side of the conversation. "I'll need a place to stay for a few days," I say.

After putting a line out on this Don Petersen, it's back to the Silver Spur by mid-afternoon, this time to meet Mrs. J. She doesn't seem particularly fizzy to me. I ask her about the state of her union.

"I made him trim his personal hair," she says, referring to Ruben I assume, glancing significantly down at her lap. "He was like a shaggy bear down below. I ask you. Wouldn't you find that offensive?"

I coo sympathetically, but not so sympathetically she gets the idea I want her to continue with this line of explanation. "That's actually a lot more information than I need, Mrs. Jalisco."

"Personal grooming matters to me," she says.

"We all got our lines in the sand," I agree. I don't like the flavor of something in her voice. I take a flyer. "Don Petersen. He keeps himself neat, does he?"

She firms up her already nail straight back. "I wouldn't know," she says, eyes looking past me.

Jesus. After all these years, Ruben's finally got something to worry about. I'm a firm believer in marriage, or at least my own version of it, but it's true you hardly ever encounter a healthy specimen of the animal in its natural surroundings. Still, it cut some to think Mr. and Mrs. J might be added to the extinction list. "You're breaking his heart."

"This, of course, is none of your business."

"It certainly isn't," I agree.

We sit silent under the clicking tin roof while the heavy T or C traffic passes out front, two, maybe three cars every fifteen minutes.

"You been married how long?"

She glances at her watch. "Forever," she says.

"Everybody gets tired, Mrs. J. Everybody gets bored. You

don't throw what you got away because of it."

She keeps her back straight, her gaze fixed ahead.

"We're talking pubic hair, Mrs. J. You know?"

She sighs, holding firm.

As usual, Ruben puts me up in one of his rent trailers at Butler's on Riverside. I hate trailers. Excuse me, manufactured homes. I hate manufactured homes. I especially hate manufactured homes in the rain. There's nothing worse than a dripping, creaking, smelling manufactured home in the rain. Like being buried at sea in an 800 square-foot coffin. That night, in my shorts, I talk to the television about it.

"What's this all about?" I ask some Dan Rather lookalike delivering the ten o'clock facts, figuring him for some inside knowledge.

"Stop taking everything so personally," he says.

The rain just keeps slicing mindlessly down. The desert has a short temper when it comes to water, tending to blow any excess back in the face of the nearest inhabitants, like it was our fault. Thus, the flooding on the streets of Truth or Consequences that night, the gagged storm sewers, the drainage ditches, normally dust dry, now mightily running. All very elemental, although it tends to lose its charm once your leathers are thoroughly soaked. Locked in the leaky coffin, pounded at from all sides, I put in a long distance south to the wife, my partner.

"I'm lonely," I tell her when she answers.

"Buy a goldfish," she says. I hear her shuffling pages. "Got a headline for you. 'Two-Headed Alien Baby Autopsy Results Revealed.'"

"Needs tightening."

"What a day," she says. "Between the desperate kids out on bond and the pimply-faced sheriff's deputies, the office fairly stinks of pent up testosterone."

"Fumigate before I get home."

"You're a very popular investigative consultant."

She gives me what she's got on Don Petersen, then we say our *I love*s and hang up. I go to the bathroom to wash the day off. See the face of Jesus in the plug of hair clogging the tub. Back in the living room, toweling off, there's a knock at the door. I answer it.

"Mr. Caldwell?" says someone out there, darker than the dark all around him.

"Nope."

"You know a Mr. Caldwell?" I can't see anything in the pitching rain but a line of shadow under a crisp, black cowboy hat. His voice is polite but hard enough to cut through the driving precip.

"Nope."

"Not from around here? In town to meet a friend at the Silver Spur this morning?"

"Sorry."

He stands it out a minute longer, rain sluicing off the brim of his hat, while I stare back at him from behind the safety of Ruben's guest towel. Then he steps back and bows stiffly. "Sorry to bother you."

There is something familiar about him. And I mean besides the fact that he'd been the hawk-faced gent in the Silver Spur earlier, studiously ignoring Ruben and me. Something else.

The next day is all peace and prosperity like the viciousness of the night before hadn't threatened to lift all the manufactured homes in the valley off their moorings and tumble them down the Rio Grande into some massive particleboard logjam somewhere in Texas.

Don Petersen drives an immaculate dualie. Big white beast. That morning, I follow him at a discreet distance, but not so discreet that I don't get the trailing edge of a blast of diesel from his exhaust. He trucks it out to the McDonald's on the runway up to I-25, north end of town. He parks in the next zip code section of the lot, disembarks, and sets his black cowboy hat for

the walk to the front door. I watch him go, hitch up my belt, and follow him in under the Golden Arches.

Inside, I stand for a minute adjusting to the game show lighting. Petersen, I see, has joined a table with five others about his same speed and station, all in various configurations of denim, leather, and wrinkles, all clutching senior coffees. Subject located, I walk it over to the counter and order up some flapjacks.

I'm just pouring high fructose onto my short stack when the door opens. It's Jesus Christ Ruben Jalisco walking in. He steps across the threshold, spots me, and freezes. With that, the whole place comes to a standstill; even the fryolator back of the counter seizes. Petersen and the other members of the liars club stare. I slowly ease a maple-soaked triangle of pancake between my teeth and will the world to get on with it.

And it does. Ruben comes back to himself, tucks hands in pockets, and sheepishly makes his way over to the only place in town he shouldn't be, the liars club table. I studiously avoid watching him, but it's hard to ignore the hearty greetings and back slapping as Ruben joins the assembled oldsters. I turn to the parking lot view out the window and chew my cud, keeping things casual, just a weary traveler lingering over breakfast before returning to the adventure of the open road.

Listening to the clucking of the men at the liars club table, I open a conversation in my head with Ruben about how on those occasions when one of my clients has turned out to be great, good friends with the person I've been hired to investigate, I've found it helpful to be let in on that fact before the chase is joined. Alternatively, I muse, I could skip the lecture, exit forthwith, and tell Ruben to figure it out himself. This option comes with bonus points for allowing me to avoid another night entombed in a weepy particleboard crypt. Lost in these thoughts and lulled by the bright Plasticine surroundings and the warm, syrupy mush settling in my gut, it's possible I lose my focus for a minute. Next thing I know Don Petersen's standing over me.

Up close, he's impressively weathered, wiry and muscled,

the kind of product desert living produces if it doesn't kill you first. He's tanned brown as a well-handled penny with a white swath of precisely trimmed beard hugging his lower face. His eyes are the color of pool water just after the chlorine shock. His smile's a charmer.

"We've not met." His voice sounds like he's coming down with something, like he's been standing out in the driving rain in a trailer park recently. "I'm Don Petersen." He offers a hand.

I lick the syrup off my fingers and take his mitt.

"And your name is?" he asks.

"Not something I typically give out to strangers."

He nods his head in commiseration. "We do live in uncertain times."

His shake is firm, bordering on extra firm, and it's clear he's not letting go anytime soon. "Be that as it may, as a new face in our community, I'd like to be of service should you decide to extend your visit." He takes a business card from the inside chest pocket of his jacket and leans it up on my coffee. Don Petersen, it says. Retired. Lists an address in Monticello, a ghost town north of the current metropolis.

"Appreciate that." I wonder if the Jaws of Life are available to extricate my hand from his grip. "Just down off the highway for the quickie breakfast. Nothing to see here."

"I look forward to meeting you again soon." He raps once on the Formica table, slices off another ultra-brite smile, and pivots away. He raises a hand to the liars club stragglers on his way across the floor. They wave him out the door into the big, bright morning.

Idling over the last few soggy swallows of my big meal, I follow the arrow Petersen's drawn on his card around to the back. *10 a.m. Wed.* it says.

Back at the Silver Spur, later that afternoon, back in the booth with Ruben.

"What did she tell you?" he asks about his wife.

"It was a bit hard to figure, Ruben. She's got a thing about personal grooming. But first things first. Let's review the basic rules of engagement, shall we?" I have my detective voice on, and I've written the words "ground rules" on the pad between us. I've double underlined them for good measure.

"Him." He shakes his head.

"Here's one," I say. "If client has a close personal relationship with the person said client has hired the investigative consultant to investigate, client should disclose said relationship to the aforementioned consultant."

"Of all men." More head shaking.

"The better to reduce awkward encounters between investigator and subject of investigation in fast food franchises."

"He was always the black one." He glances at the ceiling, snaps his fingers twice. "The sheep. The black sheep."

"So we're clear, then? On the need for transparency?"

"Inheriting all that he did, the herds, the land, the estates. The Monticello Valley is his, Caldwell. All of it. But the ranching life was not enough for him. Not for Don Petersen. He wanted more. He went back to school. Became a barber."

"What? You mean a hair-cutting barber?"

Ruben's head continues its bopple of despair. "The hairstylist. He's like a priest, isn't he?"

"Tools of the trade are distinctly different, of course."

"We feel we can share our most intimate secrets with him. He knows us like no other."

My half of the conversation officially grinds to a halt.

"Wealth," Ruben says. "Great skill. Fashion sense. If you were her, which of us would you pick?"

I try not to hesitate. "No contest."

He looks me long and hard in the eye. All the years, all the times I'd come to town to meet with him, suss out his suspicions, set him back right. I guess I'd never seen the guy.

"I appreciate your truth-telling, Caldwell," he says. "But I tell you, today, here and now, I will fight this. I will win her back." He pounds the table and his voice ricochets off the walls

of the Spur. "They have not seen the last of Ruben Jalisco."

He falls silent, jaw squared. I clear my throat.

"Write that down in your little pad, man," he says.

Night two in the dripping, creaking coffin of doom, rain once again on special order from some anti-desert world that rode in on dusk. An oxygen tank on wheels like a defeated Electrolux complete with brown, wormy looking plastic tube in the master, gives me the creeps, puts me off another night in the bedroom. I retreat to the living room couch, which is like a polyester-lined rectangle of quick sand, a tar pit cleverly disguised as a used sofa.

What do I have? A long-term client and the man he'd hired me to track making nice over senior coffee every morning. A sudden aversion to pubic hair. A summons out of town. I palm the business card and dial her up.

"I need to take a trip up valley tomorrow."

"Noted."

"I don't expect any trouble."

"There's two words that don't belong in the same sentence."

"Just informing you."

"Understood."

"Thanks."

"That's how the buddy system works."

I should take to my car and flee back to her and her good sense, but fall asleep alone instead, lulled by the soft sucking sounds of the sofa taking me under.

Next morning at the mirror, my shaver grinds out its electric refrain "Colorado, Colorado, Colorado" until it runs down half way through my left side. "Mississippi." I rub some of Ruben's hard water on the remaining stubble to stunt it back.

I grab a cuppa at the McDonald's and take the drive out toward Monticello, sun chopping its way through the mid-morning clouds at my back. Flats, flats, flats. Then suddenly you're there and gearing back for a long downhill into a hidden valley that shields the place from pesky intruders.

I slow roll the descent, letting my head adjust, get stopped at the bottom of the hill by a raft of cows standing in the road, immune to horns every last man of them. Ease the car forward, right up to them, bumper to knee. Try to nudge them along. They don't take the hint. They mill about, get me surrounded, stare in at me from all sides, chewing grass over my hood. I'm tempted to get out and mingle in that same way you're tempted to jump off tall buildings. Herbivores? Carnivores? I can't remember. Finally, someone up front gets the memo and they separate to let me through, sulking. I watch them plotting their next move in my rearview.

A mile on, I spy the town square, havened by biblical cottonwoods. To one side, a white-washed stucco church with cross sailing high to catch lightning for the congregants. To the other side, an abandoned school from the looks of what's left, melting down to dirt. Right in front of me, a low-built ranch house, porched and tin-roofed, holding down the north face of the square. And there's Don Petersen, hair a-sheen, up front on that porch in a bentwood rocker.

Out of the car, I make a big production of stretching from my long, arduous prairie crossing, buying time to lock in on the set up, calculate escape routes, regret not calling for backup. Then I approach. He watches me, all patience and polish, nods when I finally settle into my advance on the porch, motions me to join him in a second rocker next to him. I climb up and take a seat. I plant my feet firm, will myself to sit still; I love rocking chairs.

Beside me, Don Petersen now has his eyes closed, his nose up, sampling the air. Whatever breeze is blowing for him isn't reaching me, but I imagine peace and prosperity smells fine.

"Nice spread you got here," I venture into his reverie.

His eyes open slowly, head turns to me, smile shines upon me benevolently. "My inheritance." He gestures expansively out in front of him, by which he could mean the porch, the house, the town, or the whole wide world.

"Hear you're in the hair game," I say.

"Don's California Concept." As he spoke each word, he sketched squares in the air that was also apparently his inheritance, bringing the phrase to life in front of him. "Retired."

"So let me ask you. The used barbicide. Is that just a pour down the drain?"

"The hair stylist's job is a noble one. Like any profession."

"Always been curious about barbicide-handling procedures."

"I like to believe that in some small way, I've been of service to my community. Generations passed through my shop. Fathers and sons. Mothers and daughters. I was a part of their lives."

"The part that sprays cold water on their heads and trims their eyebrows every two months?"

"But in your line of work, perhaps you also know the feeling."

"Which feeling is that?"

"Of serving your fellow man. Providing an essential service to those around you."

"Look," I say. "Technically, Ruben's my client here. But I don't want to see anyone hurt."

"Yes." He rubs the back of his neck and a smell like fresh biscuit wafts up off him. "I agree. Which is why I asked you here today."

"You got both ears."

"I believe if we could all sit and talk quietly and sanely, we could achieve an ample resolution."

"Define ample resolution."

He pauses then, closes his eyes, sniffs at his private breeze. "I have known her since we were children. At that school together." His eyes open and he gestures at the pile melting in the sun and the years.

"Maybe you need a new hobby."

"Have loved her for just as long."

I've left my notebook in the car. It feels more like I've left my pants.

"It is high time we were together." He sounds utterly convicted.

"Sounds good on paper."

"High time, Mr. Caldwell."

We sit a bit. Monticello melts some percentage closer to the ground, truckloads of heat and the rain just passed rounding off the final edges.

"Those your cows back up the road?"

"Most probably."

"Tame bastards, aren't they?"

"Wild animals, Mr. Caldwell." He glances over at me. "Just like you and I."

"Right." And me without my notebook.

He unfurls then, stretches hard in all directions, his tucked-in shirt never loosening from the cinch of his belt. The smell of baking rolls off him. "You'll excuse me if I retreat inside." He raises his arms in supplication to the sun. "The heat of the day." From his mouth it sounds like "the bread of heaven." His hand falls to my shoulder. "Thank you for your service today and in the future, Caldwell." He squeezes my shoulder and cuts at me with the fine edge of his smile, the same one he must use on Mrs. J. "You have my card should you need to reach me during the remainder of your visit."

I wait until I'm sure he's out of earshot. Then I rock.

There really wasn't anything for it, and everyone seems to have been expecting the calls when I put them through. By late afternoon, we are all together happy family-style at the Spur.

We take our seats and promptly sink up to the tops of our thighs into the plastic booth, bastard offspring of the couch back at the trailer. Before I can open my mouth to reel off the suppose-you're-wondering-why-I-asked-you-all-here line I'd been wanting to use since I was a baby investigator, Don Petersen jumps right into it.

"I'm afraid, Ruben," he speaks from his place sunk into the booth seat across from me and Ruben, "that your wife and I have been stricken with each other."

The waiter arrives then, pad in hand, expectant.

"Iced tea," says Ruben.

"Iced tea," says Mrs. J.

"Iced tea," says Petersen.

"Yeah," I say. "Tea."

The waiter scribbles on his pad and heads for the kitchen. The booth makes plastic sounds as we shift about, trying to get some purchase. "Listen," I venture. "I was asked to get us all in the same space, see if we couldn't talk this through…"

"And you?" Ruben turns to Mrs. J.

Somehow, she finds some additional reserves of straightness and brings them to bear. Her eyes water.

"Very well." Ruben reaches into his pocket and pulls out his checkbook. He writes out a check, bearing into it like he's carving a tablet. "Very well. For now." He signs the check tightly, rips, and passes it over to me.

"Excuse me, Caldwell," he says.

I squeak my ass across the vinyl and let him pass. "For now," he says back at us. He wedges on his cap and walks the long walk across the floor, never glancing to either side or back. The bell over the front door chimes his passing.

I shuffle my feet, caught on the rocks of indecision, then retake my seat. Waiter brings our teas then, big brown plastics dripping sweat rings on the tray. Leaves Ruben's in front of me; guess I look most in need of refreshment. I take a slug, undissolved tea powder coating my tongue and throat, sending me into a coughing fit.

In the light of the waning day, Petersen reaches across the table, takes Mrs. J's hand. Chins firmed up, they both stare hard at the back wall.

Later, I pack up my few dirties, leave Ruben's check on the counter in the trailer's kitchen, and sit out on the porch for a few, listening to the rained-up Rio Grande churn by across Riverside, carrying runoff down state. Watch a third-stage-rocket-burn of a sunset fade to dusk. Then load the car and set course for home.

Stop at the edge of town for gas. Pump and go inside.

I fill a portly plastic tumbler with soda and sally up to the clerk under the bright lights at the head of the establishment, a young person with not quite enough shirt to service her belly and tattoos on the run up her arms. She hits me with a perfect chamber of commerce smile, including a high-hat gold crown front and center.

"Phone?" I ask.

"Yonder," she says, affecting a hillbilly cadence. "Under the sign says 'Phone.'"

"Got it. Thanks."

"What I'm here for." She has the *Enquirer* open on the counter in front of her, a finger holding her place. "That and taking your money." She nods at the soda I brought to the counter and peels off a second gold-anchored smile.

I drop my coin in the slot and dial through. She's there in half a ring.

"Homeward bound," I say.

"Good."

"Case closed."

"Even better."

I stare out at the inventory. Jerky; sweating sodas; coffee, three hours past fresh. Surround sound abundance. I imagine Petersen and Mrs. J, hand in hand in those rockers under the thin Monticello moonlight, cows come gently into town to keep them company. Then I imagine Ruben in the moldy trailer, changing the sheets on the bed I hadn't slept in, plotting his next move. I sight down the bright row of chips, each hermetically sealed bag of Corn Pops with its own personalized expiration date. Everything passes, after all.

"What else?" she asks.

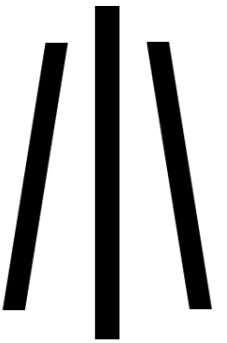
"Nothing. Glad it's you on the other end."

"Hurry home, sundown."

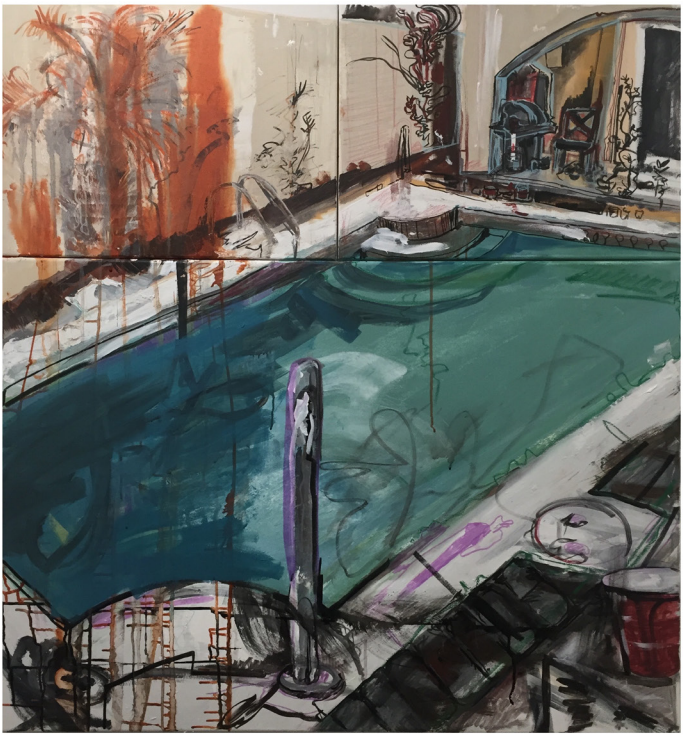
"Yes, ma'am."

Up front, head down, the clerk licks her finger, the better to turn to the next page of the *Enquirer*. "Two-Headed Alien Baby

Autopsy Results Revealed." I catch the flash of her wedding band in the fluorescents on my way out. Or maybe it's that tooth.



Art, Fiction, Nonfiction,
and Poetry



Thoughts from the Pool

Grace Deal

Acrylic, ink and marker on canvas

Petit a Petit (un proverbe Cajun)
Little by Little (a Cajun proverb)

Samuel Griffith

Little by little the bird rebuilds its nest
Please little bird, save some sticks for me

Little bird, little bird, don't go now
A city is drowning and you're in the clouds

I saw you, little bird
I saw you look down at me

Please, little bird
tell me you see me under the debris.

Petit a petit, l'oiseau fait son nid
Petit l'oiseau, s'il vous plaît sauver des bâtons pour moi

Whiteout

Alexa Terrell

January's breath beat
on the belly of my blackout
curtain as you licked
my mustard-tinged skin
clean of spice. The ether
air settled heavy like dead skin
over my eyelids, my peeled lips.
Like winter, you loved
excavating my flesh,
exposing my bones,
curdled-cream. A pocket
knife in hand, under the blinking
embers of Marlboro menthols,
you etched my collarbone.
Ten tally marks—how many times
you've exhumed my frame trying
to alter me into your idea of a home,
how many times you've crawled inside.

Ivy
Karen Walters
Acrylic on canvas

Achilles and a Turtle

Eli Cranor

She wakes up and screams as loud as she can. Can you imagine that? Waking up and screaming as loud as you can. Sometimes she just screams, rolls over, and drifts back to sleep. You try to imagine that as you're rocking her, because she didn't roll over, not tonight, she just kept screaming. She's pulling your chest hairs, taking her pacifier out every time you stick it in her mouth and throwing it on the floor.

You close your eyes.

You imagine hearing something in the hallway. Footsteps. The little crack of light oozing up from beneath the door goes black. Two thick shadows. Then a sound like thunder. A shotgun—or hell, make it a machine gun—explodes through the silence of your home. Za-za-za-za, goes the gun. Your daughter, the one who, moments ago, was pulling your chest hairs, bucking and squirming, screaming, is now fast asleep in your arms.

The door opens.

The man walks in.

He simply places the barrel of the machine gun on your forehead. Just places it there and it's not cold or anything like everyone says. You can't even feel it. The man reaches for your sleeping daughter. You think about jerking her away, standing up, fighting, but you don't. He takes her in his arms. Now she screams and you're proud, but she's tiny. The man removes the gun and backs away.

"You have no idea the power," says the gunman.

And then he's gone.

You think about things like this at midnight while your daughter pulls your chest hair because she is not asleep and you are not asleep and 5 a.m. will come fast and hard, without mercy.

There is no gunman.

There was no gunman.

You have never seen a gunman in your life, nor will you,

regardless of what the news says.

Your wife is naked and asleep in the next room. She will only be naked a few more months, if that. You love your wife and so the absence of a gunman is a good thing. Though the idea of him taking this chest-hair-pulling, never-sleeping baby from your arms and telling you something like, "You have no idea the power," thrills you, distracts you, keeps you up at night, dreaming of the day when you see a blue flash in a young woman's eyes—the leader of some Great Rebellion, cameras panning across her as she sits astride a tank, a T-90, her face smeared with paint, hair in dreadlocks, and you recognize the blue of her mother, your soon to be no-longer-naked wife.

But again, you're just imagining the Rebellion and the tank and the gunman instead of focusing on the little things, like the fact that she really is asleep now. Her breathing is steady, rhythmic, and there should be a peace in that. But there's not. There's only tomorrow: 5 a.m., work, poopy diapers and another sleepless night.

Every muscle in your back strains as you place her carefully, so carefully—as if she were the future leader of the Great Rebellion—into the crib, because you know if she opens her eyes, if she wakes, everything will reset. Her sheet is cool on the back of your hand. You sit her down, carefully. You're almost to the door when the floorboard groans, a sad sound like you would have made if the gunman had really taken your daughter.

A scream explodes from the depths of the crib. You try to imagine a thing that would make you scream like that. You try, but cannot.

Your wife, who is no longer naked but instead holding the baby, watches you push the lawn mower from the kitchen window. But she's not really watching you. She's watching the white stick dangling from your lips.

You still smoke cigarettes, smoke them every chance you get. You spend your life looking for opportunities to simply

smoke a cigarette. Somehow, you convinced your wife to let you smoke while you mow. "It's *me* time," you said, or something like that, but you just kept saying it and eventually she said, "Fine, but only one pack a week."

You'd pushed for two packs, just long enough to make her feel as if she had won. The first cigarette tasted like she did the first time, prom night 1999, your parents' king bed, the faint tinge of sweat, sweet and sour, *heaven*. The second cigarette, and all that came after, were burned in hope of returning to the first.

You're wearing gigantic noise-canceling headphones as wet grass clogs the mower blades. It's too wet to mow. You knew it. You're inhaling and puffing at the same time, your lips tight and hard around the cancer stick. That's what she calls them, cancer sticks. She said she knew, beyond any doubt, they would kill you. Your wife knows things with a certainty that scares you.

She's holding the baby up in the window, her face expressionless, almost sad, disappointed. The baby is all smiles, waving at the funny man with the headphones and the cancer stick. But soon, just as your wife will stop sleeping naked, the baby will see the stick for what it is, and years will be added to your life.

You moan at the thought.

Despite the headphones and the Jane's Addiction you have turned up too loud, you still hear the car roar past. It's driving too close, too fast. It always does. And despite the fact that your daughter is not walking, she will be. And there are black kids, a whole group of them, who live up the road and play in the street.

You despise the driver of the car because he reminds you of your brother, or more precisely, what your brother will become. The driver of the car is some sort of degenerate burnout. He lives with his parents, three houses down. He wakes up at 5 a.m., just like you, and starts driving circles, fast circles, around the block.

He drives all day.

You stop mowing and watch the car, one hand holding the bar that keeps the blades chugging, the other finally taking the

smoldering stick from your lips and flicking an inch worth of ash into the wet grass.

"Fuck-tard," you think you say softly, but you're forgetting the noise-canceling headphones.

"*Nathaniel!*" screams your wife, louder than the headphones, louder than the car.

You turn to her. The cigarette burns down past the filter.

She's yelling at you, pointing to the baby, raising her shoulders in exasperation. You can't hear her words, but you know what she's saying. You nod, light another cigarette, and push the mower.

Up ahead there's a mound of dirt. Fire ants. Before the baby came you mowed around the mound, tried to keep from disturbing them and in return they bit the shit out of you. So now, you mow right over the bastards, the red dust mixing with the wet grass. You imagine the chaos underground. Do they know it's Sunday? Can they smell the smoke, hear Perry Farrell blasting from the headphones? Do they sound an alarm? You are a hurricane, an earthquake. A tornado three miles wide. Do they test the sirens on Wednesday at noon?

You smile around your cigarette as you plow through the mound. They still bite you, the survivors, but at least now you've given them reason.

The dust settles.

You make the turn and follow the line in the wet grass back to the mound. The ants are panicking. You can almost hear them, the queen in there somewhere spraying her pheromones into the air, spraying out orders.

Releasing the handle, you kill the mower. The blades die off gratefully. The wet globs of grass win every time. You squat there beside the ant mound. You lean in close like a boy with a magnifying glass.

"We don't have to do this every week."

The ants scurry without acknowledgement.

"It's me, the man who destroys your world," you say. You don't realize it, but you're screaming again, and your wife is

watching from the front porch, the baby asleep in her arms, thank God.

"You could move, just pack up and move like thirty feet that way."

You're pointing to the bit of yard you never mow behind the fence.

"I'm sorry," you say. But still, nothing. You take the cigarette—and there's still a good bit of it left, so that means something—and plunge it into the decimated mound. A thin line of smoke rises from the rubble as you stand.

"You're still only getting one pack," says your wife.

You realize she's seen the whole thing, witnessed you yelling at the ant mound, and somehow, despite the disaster, chose those six words.

"Cooooool," you say, thinking of Paul Newman as you pluck the smoldering cigarette from the mound, hang it again from your lips, and there's a moment, just a second, where you let the imagery, the metaphor of capitulation, scan across your frontal lobe but then you inhale deeply and say, "Cooooool," again.

Your wife holds up one finger, raises both eyebrows, and storms back into the house. You cannot be certain, but you think your daughter is screaming. You're almost sure of it until your throat catches, realizing the sound is coming from you. You feel the first bite. Your ankle is in slow motion. There is no pain, though, no pain.

All of this happens on a weekend. Friday night, Saturday, and finally Sunday, a day of rest. But instead of rest you are caught in the wake of your brother, waves upon waves.

A week ago, his work called you. They said they hadn't seen him in forty-eight hours. Said he hadn't called or come in for two days.

Two days.

You left work early and went to his apartment. A gnarly woman in a T-shirt and panties opened the door. She smelled of urine and weed. She didn't look like your brother's type, not at all, but still, you asked.

"Is Jack here?"

"Jack?"

You found him eventually. He was asleep in another dude's apartment. The guy needed help with the rent, a roommate.

It took you seventeen minutes to wake him. He sat up, bleary-eyed, rubbing his face, mouth to nose, a sound like a dog licking his balls.

"What the fuck, man?" he had said.

You didn't answer the question directly. You told him it was time to go get help. You would take him right then, put him in the car and drive him to Little Rock and lock him away for this help. Then you told him you quit smoking. Told him it was the hardest thing you'd ever done and how you couldn't imagine what it felt like to have *that* shit in your veins. There was truth in it. There always is. He said, "Okay," and got in the car.

Today, though, your brother is still locked away in some shithole in Little Rock, and you and your parents, not your wife or daughter, are cleaning out his apartment. His roommate sits and smokes on the sofa, but says nothing.

You and your father try to lift a dresser. It's heavy as shit. Your father barks, telling you to stop. You sit your end down first. He's still straining, caught there in a wild tango with the thing, but eventually just drops it.

The bottom drawer shoots open.

MCAT study books.

Everywhere.

Your mother starts to cry and continues to cry, all the way until you pick up his toothbrush, wrap it in toilet paper, and place it in a plastic baggie. The baggie goes in a box. The box in the car. And then it's done.

On the way home, the sun is setting but you do not notice. You have one cigarette left in the pack and instead of watching God paint the sky, you think of that final cigarette. Monday marks the start of the week, a fresh pack, and all the joy that comes with

it, a week's worth. But the sun hasn't even set on Sunday yet, and only one remains. You think of the one. Think you should smoke it while you're on the interstate, but you don't. You wait, prolonging the pleasure, until you get off the exit and are turning the corner onto your street.

You keep the pack in your glove box, buried beneath papers and a box of tampons your wife keeps hidden there just in case. You're digging for it. Your heart thumps in anticipation. You've nearly got your fingers wrapped around it when you slam into the derelict's car.

You look up and realize the derelict is already out of his car. His eyes are glazed over but different, not his usual stony look. He's standing at the front of his car, crying.

"What the fuck, man?"

He shows no sign of understanding.

"Why are you stopped in the middle of the road?"

Nothing.

Something about the derelict's tears move you. You think of ants and the gunman. You move slowly to the front of his car. In the road is a small black girl, the youngest of the bunch. She's sprawled there, sleeping. She's sleeping because there is no gunman, nor will there ever be.

The derelict gets back in his car and zooms away. You bend to the girl. You wait for the machine gun, the lawn mower. You wait for your brother to come banging on your apartment door to find a gnarly woman wearing only panties. The cigarette rests unlit between your lips. You think about lighting it, but you don't. Instead, you whisper into the setting sun, you speak to the girl in ant-sized words. The cigarette tastes like sweat and Heaven. You place it in the girl's blue lips. It rises proud and tall, a flagpole on the moon, a claim staked. You imagine the girl standing and saying, "Whew, that was a close one," and lighting the cigarette with a spark that jumps from her finger. She offers it to you. You smile, shaking your head, and decide to walk the rest of the way home.

You read somewhere about a race between Achilles and

a turtle. Something called Zeno's Paradox. Something about halving your distance on to infinity and never getting where you're going. You can see your house. Your wife on the front porch, screaming baby in tow. You might be a hundred feet away.

You walk fifty.

Twenty-five.

About twelve, probably a little less.

Six.

Three.

And when you finally look up, you're not there, but you're so close it doesn't matter.

A River Runs Through It

Jim Ross

Photograph

A boy

Robin Gow

Popped off my knees like bottle caps & became a boy
Daddy crushed diet coke cans & i became a boy

hands gold-fished in the creek—colorful pebble feet
Don't feed her too much or she'll grow into a boy

Flag pulled down from its perch—waved laughing upside down
The monkey bars at the park know she will be a boy

Reflected in rain-windows—chest wrapped in white gauze—
I scissor cut mountains—pressed my lips to a boy

Catch tadpoles & swallow them wriggling & whole—
Amphibian mother—gills are a silly thing for a boy

The first man was sliced down the middle—half & half
So you're wondering which half of you is a boy?

I wrote my name first in the fogged window, a boy
a soul planted in pumpkin seeds, harvest the boy

The Dissection of My Mother's Miscarriage

Anne Anthony

1. Wake to fierce contractions four months early.
2. Shake your husband. Whisper: *Something's wrong*. Shake again.
3. Call your neighbor to watch your sleeping children.
4. Pull off your nightgown. Grab your purple-flowered dress. Fumble buttons.
5. Brew his coffee. Scramble eggs. Burn his toast.
6. Watch him eat.
7. Ignore hot red drips that stain the floor.
8. Grab a dish towel from the counter. Cover the seat in his car.
9. Circle flowers with your finger in the pattern of your dress.
10. Rest your head against the mattress.
11. Pray to Jesus. Pray to Mary. Pray for mercy on your baby's soul.
12. Drift to sleep.
13. Release your longing for the son they scrape away.
14. Bow your head for God's blessing.
15. Shake off the fruitless prayer: 'the Lord has His reasons.'
16. Forgive the priest.
17. Beg your husband to drive home.
18. Rest your head against the window.
19. Circle flowers with your finger in the pattern.
20. Reject suspicion.
21. Deny you brought this on yourself.
22. Circle flowers with your finger.
23. Wave your husband off to work.
24. Send your children off to school.
25. Climb the stairs to the bathroom.
26. Slip your dress from your shoulders.
27. Circle flowers.
28. Wash away your pain.

29. Dump your dress into the tub.
30. Strike a match.
31. Inhale the flame.
32. Melt purple flowers into grey.
33. Give birth to a poet two years later.
34. Share your secrets.

Visits From Young Fred

Danielle Haas Freeman

The problem with Fred was that he believed things could be fixed and solved. This was, perhaps, an unexpected quality in a man who had never kept a job for more than a few years at a time—although times were hard in the thirties, when he was a young man and a father, and that was no fault of his. Fred Painter had worked alternately pouring molten metal at the steelworks, clubbing trespassers in the railroad depot, and fixing roofs after cyclone season. But even after all these years of brutally temporary work, Minnie still found the pages of diagrams strewn over the bookkeeping desk they kept in the basement—diagrams of standalone fishing rods, miniature camping stoves, and self-designed tents. Maybe if she'd had his instinct for fixing or inventing, she wouldn't have married Fred. She wouldn't have felt the need to. But she'd never had that instinct.

If Fred had known about Young Fred's visits, he would have tried to fix those, too. He would have convinced Minnie that they were dreams or hallucinations. He might have even called the doctor and paid for pills to treat insomnia or hysteria; this, even though Fred avoided all unnecessary expenses and some necessary ones, too. Which was why Minnie never told him about Young Fred.

Was it insomnia, or hysteria? Minnie asked herself this as she sat on the porch and watched her younger daughter, Louisa, walk about the yard following her own son, Mike, who toddled on his wooden bicycle. Insomnia, hysteria, or something more insidious? Minnie set down her soda and put her thoughts on pause; she reached for a thread of numbers in her mind and felt it spool out before her, as familiar as hymn or a prayer: seven, fourteen, twenty-one, twenty-eight, thirty-five… No, so long as the numbers came to her easily, she didn't think there was any reason to fear dementia. And that was a good thing too—she was not even sixty years old.

Louisa stepped onto the porch, carrying the baby. "Mama!" she said. "What are you crying for?"

Minnie wiped the tears from her face. "I was thinking of Young Fred."

"Oh, Mama," said Louisa.

"Never mind," said Minnie. "Your father had his war and your brother had another." She gestured to Mike. "Pray that he doesn't have his."

"This will be done by the time he's grown," said Louisa. She set the baby on his grandmother's lap. Then she picked up Minnie's Coke and drank—and made a face. "It's warm," she said.

"What do you expect? It's a hot day."

"I'll bring some ice."

I'll bring some ice, she says. When Minnie was young, ice was expensive in summer, and abundant in the winter—and there was nothing to be done about it either. But Louisa took after her father in one way at least. She had embraced the fixing of things and the buying of things that do the fixing: electric stoves, the newest of washing machine models, and refrigerators with built-in ice dispensers. No, it wouldn't do any good to tell Louisa about Young Fred either—not that she had seriously considered the idea in the first place. Minnie was never the kind of mother to confide in her children.

Young Fred woke her late that night. He didn't touch her or make any sound to indicate his presence. But in her sleep she felt her stomach twist with vertigo, and when she opened her eyes, she knew that he was somewhere nearby.

She couldn't see anything at first. The room was dark; no light came through the window blinds. The elder Fred lay huddled next to her, a warm lump, and over his shoulder she could see the dim red light of the digital alarm clock that sat on his bedside table. Her eyes followed the red glow as it diffused out toward the rest of the room, and there he was, Young Fred,

standing in his beige uniform near his father's feet. His shoulders were hunched, and his head was bowed. As Minnie watched, her son slowly lifted his head as though it were a heavy weight. She waited in suspense to see the whites of his eyes flash in the dark room, to see his pupils latch onto her own. He did not look uncomfortable; his clothes were not wet as they would have been when he drowned somewhere in the Mediterranean. This was not a vengeful ghost.

When his eyes met hers, he opened his mouth as if to say something. The muscles around his lips twitched, but no sound came out. Instead, his mouth stayed open in a deliberate *O*, like the mouth of a goldfish. He lifted an arm, extended his index finger, and pointed towards the bedroom door.

"What is it?" Minnie asked him.

Young Fred only pointed more insistently.

"What is it?" Minnie asked again, growing frustrated this time. It was like when the children were little, when they sat at the kitchen table scowling or frowning and she could not get them to tell her why. Young Fred had carried this charade far enough.

"Tell me," she said. "I got little enough sleep when you were nursing. You've no right to keep me awake now."

Next to her, her husband rustled the blankets. "Minnie?" he said.

"Yes?" she answered, still looking her son in the eye.

"Go back to sleep."

She turned her head to look down on him sourly. When she looked up again, Young Fred was gone.

To test whether she was dreaming, she tugged at the thread of numbers. Not sevens this time, but squares: one, four, nine, sixteen, twenty-five, thirty-six, forty-nine…They were all there, awaiting her command.

As she walked up the stairs of the General Mills plant office, she could not get the vision of Young Fred's ghost to leave her

be. For so many years, the part of her that had broken the day she'd heard the news of Young Fred's death overseas pulsed with a steady ache. It was a constant reminder, like the stiffness in a once-broken bone. She had become afraid of forgetting his face; she had become afraid when she realized that the image her mind offered at the sound of his name was from the photograph on the mantelpiece, rather than a true memory. In recent years, she had started looking into Louisa's face, and her husband's face, trying to find some trace of her son there. This was not something she had done before, looking at them, and it made both of them uncomfortable, she could tell.

Now, without invitation, Young Fred had offered himself back to her in this incomprehensible manner. And she had no idea what he was trying to tell her.

In the office at the top of the stairs, Minnie set down her purse on the familiar wooden desk that belonged to her. The room she worked in shared a wall with the factory proper, and she could feel the rumble of voices and machines vibrating the floor. Through the years of Fred's odd jobs, Minnie had earned a reliable wage keeping track of payroll for the cereal assembly line workers. For her, it was easy work, because of the long thread of numbers in her mind which made arithmetic a child's game. Once upon a time, her parents had seen promise in this unusual talent. Here, no one applauded her for it; she was simply another wife renting out good bookkeeping skills. But she knew they knew, in their mundane way: they always called her in for extra hours during the busy season.

Lately, the General Mills plant had worn on her. Of course, she and Fred didn't need her to work there as they had before. Times had changed. Minnie came back to General Mills more out of a sense of thrift than anything else, but she was tired of the same dull sums that kept the factory running, and presumably kept all of Omaha running, and all of the country beyond. Hours worked, pay per hour, and money owed—what a joke it seemed that the world turned on these most mundane of calculations, like clothes turning in the wash. Lately, she couldn't

concentrate. Louisa distracted her with stories of the children; or it was letters from Peggy, her older daughter; or it was Young Fred, long dead, pointing towards the bedroom door. A woman's life did not belong to her once she became a mother. Even, it appeared, after her children had died.

At home, Louisa sliced peaches while Minnie rolled out the dough for the pie crust. Her husband Henry's business associates were coming to dinner, and Louisa could not trust herself to cook alone.

"You never did manage to teach me, Mama," Louisa said cheerfully, and she was right: Minnie had not been able to transmit to her daughters her skill with numbers, or her quick-fingered ease with needlepoint, or her patience with cooking (which, she claimed, was all it really took). It was not that her daughters were unintelligent, but they seemed to lack a certain focus that Minnie had always taken for granted in herself. This was rather distressing because it suggested that Minnie was the aberration of the family.

Minnie looked out the kitchen window and watched as a mother pushed a baby carriage down the sidewalk.

"Those are the Spooners, aren't they? From down south?"

"Yep," said Louisa. "And guess what they named their baby girl?"

"What?"

"Jackson."

"Why on earth?"

"Because they want the poor girl to be tormented her entire life?"

"Well, they're from the South. People are strange down there. There's a girl at the office from Florida whose parents kept alligators for a living. They had a homemade zoo in the backyard."

Louisa laughed. "Mama, how did you choose my name?"

The question surprised Minnie. "You're named for your grandmother Louisa, of course."

"But why her?"

"Because she was my mother. Does there need to be more of a justification?"

"No," agreed Louisa, who was now wiping the counter clean of peach juice with the same brand of paper towels advertised on the commercials on television. Louisa believed strongly in brands. When she was done wiping the counter, she peered out the window over the kitchen sink and frowned. The skin was tense around her blue eyes, and there were creases Minnie hadn't noticed before on her forehead.

"Look at me," Minnie said, and Louisa, puzzled, met her gaze with those startled blue eyes. Minnie had a sudden memory of those same blue eyes turning on her as she swung the clothes iron against a twelve-year-old Louisa's skull, for some reason, she didn't remember what—for distracting her or complaining as she was doing the ironing and watching the pot on the stove and adding up the sums in her checkbook all at the same time, because there was never enough time. Minnie didn't remember the reason, but she remembered the rage that had filled her in that moment, unlike anything she had ever felt. This rage knocked her youngest child to the ground with an easy swing of her arm. Maybe it was since then that Louisa did not willingly meet her eyes. Children were so delicate, and it took Minnie just a little too long to realize it. Empathy, compassion—of all her talents, those were ones Minnie did not have.

That night, before Young Fred woke her again, Minnie had made up her mind: if resisting her son's attempts to get her out of bed had not worked when he was three years old, there was no reason to expect that it would work now that he was dead.

Instead of interrogating her son, this time Minnie put a finger to her mouth. Then she stepped quietly out of bed and slid her feet into her slippers. She stood up and met her son's eyes. She was startled to remember how tall he was. She raised her eyebrows at him, questioning.

He pointed towards the bedroom door.

So Minnie walked out of the bedroom. For one horrible moment she stood in the dark hallway, with the blackness of the space rushing past her eyeballs and into her skull. There was no digital alarm clock or silvery mirror to mitigate the darkness of the hall. Minnie fumbled for the light switch and felt her heart skip as a lamp turned on. She turned back to the bedroom and peered around the door, but Young Fred had disappeared. Her husband was a huddled lump on the bed.

She pulled the door closed. The hallway before her was now no more than a hallway, and Young Fred was nowhere in sight. "That's it?" Minnie asked.

She walked down the hall and opened the doors as she went, flipping the light switch beyond each door. She inspected the guest room, the bathroom, the sewing room, then stepped out into the den, the dining room, and finally the kitchen and laundry room. In every case, the lights revealed no more than the rooms Fred and Henry had designed, whose corners Minnie was intimately acquainted with. It bothered her that she could find nothing out of place, no indication of what Young Fred might have been trying to tell her. She felt like she was walking in a dream, or a fairytale, where everything familiar—the ironing board, the coffee pot, the portrait of Roosevelt on the mantel—everything must be hiding something behind its innocuous domesticity. Even her own framed squares of needlepoint on the walls of the den were sinister; they were no longer hers but some artifact of her son's message to her. Bluebeard, that was the fairytale she was thinking of. Behind every door she expected to find something ghastly, but whatever ghastly thing awaited her had yet to reveal itself.

She opened the door in the kitchen that lead to the basement stairs and pulled the cord to light them. This was a Midwestern basement, made for living in, and Minnie walked down the stairs without qualms. At the bottom, she saw only the familiar extra twin bed, the bookkeeping desk, fishing rods, camping equipment, Fred's toolboxes, and stacks of roofing shingles. In

one corner sat the boxes of photo albums and old letters. In the far corner, separate from the rest, sat a wooden chest that only Fred was allowed to touch. It held the relics of his war: the rifle and hand grenades that he'd come home with, the gas mask, the extra bullets, the heavy wooden club that he later used in his work as a private security guard. More than once had it occurred to Minnie that all those hand grenades packed in the wooden chest constituted a bomb sitting under her kitchen. But she knew better than to argue with Fred over the safety of his military possessions. He would only insist that they might "come in handy" someday.

Minnie sat down at the desk and pulled the nearest cardboard box towards her. Without looking for the label, she ripped the tape from the top and pulled the flaps open. Then she reached a hand inside and pulled out the objects she found there: envelopes of paper currency and heavy pouches full of coins. She pulled the drawstrings of one pouch and poured the coins on the bookkeeping desk on top of Fred's diagrams. There were francs here, and English coins, and shiny Nazi currency marked by tiny swastikas. There were other, more unfamiliar coins—from Egypt? She remembered some mention of Egypt. The box she had opened was from her son's war, heavy with mementos of the places he'd traveled, places Minnie had never seen and never would. Minnie knew little of the world; excepting the occasional trips to Council Bluffs, which lay across the river from Omaha, she had left the state of Nebraska exactly four times. As a young woman, before her marriage, she had longed to travel. But since then, the world had become claustrophobically dangerous, filled with communists and atom bombs, and hysterical foreign peoples who had drawn her son into war.

Minnie dug deeper into the box until she found the letters, easily identifiable by Young Fred's appalling penmanship. Like his mother, Young Fred had had his knuckles rapped at school for writing with his left hand; unlike his mother, he had never managed to learn to print neatly with his right. *Dear Mother…* *Dear Mother & Father…* How formally he wrote! As if he had

ever called them anything but Mama and Papa at home. *Thank you for the chocolate & the new gloves…We had a close call with the Italians… Had to thrash Stevens yesterday for stealing the cigarettes I had stored in my bunk… Couldn't sleep through the foghorn blasting all last night…* These letters, while sparse and short, were unusual evidence of her son's humanity. *Give my love to Peggy and Louisa*, he wrote—yet when had Young Fred ever expressed love for his sisters besides in these letters? Minnie almost wondered if he meant it or if he had written it because it was a stock phrase, since he lacked the originality to write anything other than a stock letter. That was a cruel thing to say about her own son, but Minnie was always surprised by the maturity of these letters, and perhaps distrusted them because of it. She could not relate them back to the young man who left the house in the night to smoke cigarettes and drink with his friends, and who seemed to view the war—at least, before he left—mostly as something to do that wasn't shingling roofs with his father.

In death, certainly, Young Fred's ghost had acquired a solemnity and single-mindedness that her living son never had. His bearing was calmer, his eyes had lost their sarcastic, youthful glint. He no longer seemed to resent the life he had been given. Was this what he was trying to tell her? Was he simply trying to improve his own standing in her memory by sending her down here to read his letters? Minnie felt shame flood her lungs. She knew she judged her children too harshly; you only had to hear Louisa talk to guess that. Had her judgment made her son's spirit so restless that he'd left his watery grave to vindicate himself in her memory?

"But I loved you!" Minnie said out loud to the basement. "I know I could be harsh—I know that you hated school and I made you keep going, and that I was never satisfied with your friends or your lack of ambition. We were barely able to keep living for some of those years! There was hardly enough money to feed you three, and nothing left over to buy new shoes or clothes, and no sign that it would ever end. I wanted better for you!"

Young Fred didn't answer.

At the General Mills office, Minnie sat at her desk, parsing through time cards, adding long rows of ones and tens, carrying digits, checking wage rates, reeling in the long strands of times tables residing inside her brain. She could see them, sometimes; the strands were long and silvering, like wisps of her own hair, and the numbers on each strand were like beads on a necklace.

When she heard the crash, she thought the Soviets had finally done it, and that her world had ended. Everyone knew that Omaha was home to Strategic Air Command, which meant that they would be the first to go—not Washington, not New York.

Minnie was never able to explain to Louisa what she did next, although it had made perfect sense at the time. She got down on her hands and knees, crawled across the office floor, opened the paper supply closet, and slipped inside. She closed the door behind her and sat on her knees with her hands braced against the floor, trembling. She could hear crackling outside, and the horrible sound of metal crunching, and screams.

She went into the closet for protection from the light and from the blast wave. They talked about this on the radio all the time, and she knew the children learned about it at school, too: the light of a nuclear bomb was the light of Judgment Day—just seeing it could blind you. And while you stood there helpless with the eyes burned out of your head, the blast wave would hit you, and it would melt the clothes and skin off your body and turn all of your cells radioactive. It would also break all the windows and send shards of glass flying into your blinded face. Maybe you would live—but if you did, there wouldn't be enough of you left for life to be worth living. Judgment Day used to be about separating the faithful from the sinners, but since mankind had stolen the power of God, none of that mattered anymore. Even in the moment, Minnie was rather shocked by this thought; crisis was supposed to reinforce one's faith, but she, sinner as she was, feared more the power of man than heaven. It was as though heaven had become obsolete along with every other reminder of her youth: horse-drawn milk carts, gas ranges,

men's haberdasheries, and Golden Spike Days.

Why was she thinking about milk carts and haberdasheries while she sat here huddled in the closet, possibly breathing her last breaths? They said you could see the whole of your life before your eyes when you were about to die, and that time slowed down so you could have a chance to evaluate your life and judge for yourself whether it had all been worth it. Minnie couldn't understand why, then, all the thoughts flashing through her mind felt just as muddled as usual. Milk carts, haberdasheries, ironing boards, little Louisa staring at her not with hurt, or fear, but with a dazed expression, one that made Minnie think she had killed her own daughter by knocking her across the head. Peggy's letters from far away, describing her honeymoon on the coast of Maine, a place that Minnie could not even imagine. Young Fred dying a hero's death, or so they said, and the empty coffin they'd buried for him. Her husband Fred scribbling plans for standalone fishing rods as though this invention were the Holy Grail of human achievement.

And now here she was, hiding from the apocalypse in a closet in the General Mills plant offices, and she did not seem to be able to find any sense of closure for her life. All she could find was a faint sense of self-disgust because she had been weak as a young woman, because she had married a man she could not respect, because she had hit her daughters when they were young, because she had expected her son to be a genius when instead he'd been a thug, and had only stopped being a thug so that he could go die in a foreign war. There was no resolution here.

Then she heard her name shouted by a man's voice.

Perhaps this was a test; perhaps the devil had sent a demon to trick her into unlocking the closet door and baring herself to the nuclear blast wave.

"Minnie!" She heard her name again and shook her head, putting her hands over her ears. But as she bowed her head to look down at the floor, she was surprised to see a man's boot in

front of her inside the closet. Her eyes traveled upward from the boot to the leg, to the torso, all covered by government-issue cloth.

Young Fred stood before her, staring down at her, his silent mouth forming the word *Go*. He pointed to the door of the closet. Trembling, Minnie reached up a hand to the door knob, turned it, and pushed the door open from her position sitting on her knees.

"Here," she called, hoarsely—the air had grown hazy with smoke in the two or three minutes that she had been inside the closet.

The man who had been shouting her name turned around; it was Gary Hayes, one of the men who worked in the office. He stared at her. "You dumb woman, do you want to die of smoke inhalation?" Then he grabbed her arm and dragged her to her feet. She stumbled after him as he led the way down the office stairs to a window on the back side of the building that someone had broken open. Gary lifted her like a child and swung her through the window to another office worker standing on the outside.

"Where was she?" asked the other office worker.

"Hiding in a closet!"

"What in hell?"

Minnie felt dizzy, and she clung to the new office worker—Dick Gregory—for support. "I thought it was a bomb," she murmured.

Dick stared down at her, open-mouthed. He and Gary each took one of Minnie's arms, as though they did not trust that she was capable of walking, and hurried her down the alley behind the offices. At the end of the street, they found the other office workers gathered. The other women bookkeepers, whom Minnie had always spoken to with polite superiority, let out a cry and rushed around to embrace her. Minnie, still dizzy, let them pull and push her about. Behind her eyes, all she saw was Young Fred, absolving her—it seemed—and pointing at the

closet door.

"I thought it was a bomb," she said again. One of the female bookkeepers said, "It was an accident. A man lost control of a gasoline transport and drove it into the building."

Later, Louisa and Fred arrived, and Louisa threw her arms around her, sobbing, "Mama, Mama!" Fred took her hand and led her gently to the car, not speaking, because they had not spoken much for years. But he led her gently, as though she were something precious. Through all of this, Minnie felt as though she were not all there. She should have been happy to be alive, but more than anything she was confused—confused by the mundaneness of the situation, confused by the fact that Omaha had *not* been obliterated by a nuclear holocaust, confused by Young Fred's undying dedication to her, which surely she did not deserve. Why had he saved her? Why had he saved her measly, miniscule, miniature life? She was so pathetic, so useless, that she had nearly killed herself by closing herself inside a closet in a burning building. What was worth saving there?

Louisa, sitting next to her in the backseat, saw the tears roll down her cheeks. "Mama!" she said. "Mama, don't cry. It's all right now. You're safe now."

Minnie put her arms around her daughter and sobbed into her shoulder as Louisa murmured, "Don't cry, Mama. I love you, Mama. I'll keep you safe."

The Brush

Wendy Perez

Acrylic on canvas

Familiar Strains, Minor Variations

Jeff Howard

I.

I heard The Story during my first Maxwell beach trip. Less than twenty-four hours after kneeling by the desk in her living room and sliding a piece of costume jewelry on her left ring finger, I met Amy's entire family and spent a week with them at Topsail Beach, North Carolina. I watched Amy skim across the surface of the warm Atlantic water on her board, but I could do no better than caricature her graceful motions. The waves rolled over me, buoyed me, then tumbled me in the shallows.

At one point the ocean started pulling me out toward the horizon. A weak swimmer, I envisioned between gulps of seawater being drowned or disemboweled by tiger sharks. But Amy swam faster than currents or sharks, grabbed my arm, and towed me to the shoreline. The sun had crisped my neck and shoulders medium-well and salt water had rasped my nipples and crotch raw, so I retreated to a white Adirondack chair and *Dave Barry Is from Mars and Venus*, while the youngest children built crumbling castles or dug giant holes in the sand near my feet. Finally seduced by the laughter of Amy and her brothers, I forced myself to risk death and slog again through the waves to join the fun.

Boogie-boarding and relaxation led to dinners of flaky tilapia and flounder, breaded and butter-brown, the freshness of the ocean still clinging to the filets like barnacles to a yacht's hull. People ate in the white deck chairs overlooking the ocean, at the kitchen table with the children, or slumped across the sectional in the living room like a pride of lionesses.

Some evenings music abounded, Amy's brother Ted on his banjo, her mother with a violin tucked beneath her chin. We sang old songs like "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," "Banks of the Ohio," "You Are My Sunshine." At other times family stories were the primary fare. As shouting children with fake guns and

loud laughter ran around the kitchen, packed their cheeks with brownies still warm from the pan, thundered downstairs to recommence their play, Grandpa Peterson exercised his narrative muscles, displayed flashes of brilliance from his repertoire of wisdom, jokes, autobiographical anecdotes (some of which he adapted from *Reader's Digest* or Steven Wright's stand-up). Each story jogged someone else's memory, every shared account inspiring another tale.

And then Amy told me one.

"My great-great grandfather was a murderer."

On a Tuesday morning in Iowa, December 1895, George Wolfe—a Jew of German descent thought to have possessed some familial connection to the Rothschilds—shot and killed three people: his wife, Cynthia; her sister, Barnetta Payne Ratledge; and himself. Cynthia had separated from George and taken their sons, two-year-old Richard and four-year-old William, to live with Barnetta, or Nettie as she was called. While she had endured threats and abuse from George for some time, the specific trigger for her overdue departure remains unknown. Perhaps they'd had the dispute of their lives, a knock-down drag-out over something major, but in such a marriage even trivial sparks ignited conflagrations. I later came across a newspaper headline chronicling the event:

MURDER AND SUICIDE IN JORDAN
Jordan Township the Scene of the Bloodiest
Tragedy Ever Committed in this County
GEO. WOLFE THE DEMON IN THE ACT

Richard and William were playing in the yard when George rode up to the Ratledge home. George entered, gripping a loaded pistol he had borrowed from his friend, Dr. Golding, "to have a little fun hunting rabbits." The first shot killed Barnetta instantly. He then fired at his wife, but the bullet missed, lodging itself in the wall. Cynthia attempted to shield herself by moving behind a cupboard. But George followed and fired another bullet

into her stomach. She passed four days later. George left the boys physically unharmed.

Following the murders George rode his horse half a mile to the Moore farm. He made threats, waved his gun. But his rabbit hunt was to claim only one more victim. Fury spent, nerves shot, with the barrel to his brain, he squeezed the trigger, one final quieting round. George died where he fell. Richard and William were placed in separate foster homes, where William died the following year, leaving Richard the lone survivor of the Wolfe family. He later changed his surname to Maxwell to distance himself from his family.

After Amy recounted to me her just-so story ("How the Maxwells Got Their Name"), I spent about ten seconds in awe and incredulity. As I had no such drama in my family tree, it resembled a penny dreadful more than family history. In my experience ancestors tended to conquer nature with spade and plough and seed and irrigation; they didn't Lizzy Borden each other. The most tragic thing that had happened in the last four generations of my family were the yarn-headed dolls my Great-Grandma Hyde sewed for her great-grandchildren. Awe turning to horror, I spent the next twenty seconds rethinking my commitment to Amy. But given such a family history, who would dare renege? And so, dear Reader, I married her.

Aspects of this story raised questions in my mind. Why then? Their marriage had always been troubled. George was a fierce, controlling man. Cynthia feared him, feared he would make good on the many threats he made. Her own brother, Andy, according to the *Onawa Weekly Democrat*, had already been "sent up" for murdering someone in Turin. Cynthia had every right to believe George capable of the same. That being said, why would George choose to visit her on that December day unless something had altered the situation? Cynthia's move to the Ratledge farm was a likely factor. The physical removal of herself and her children from George's influence signified a strengthened resolve; she had finally absorbed as much of George's toxic authoritarianism as she was going to. No doubt the enraged George viewed the

separation as defiance and his wife as a rebel who had forgotten her place.

But Amy saw it from another angle.

"He thought she cheated on him," she told me. The newspaper accounts said nothing of a betrayal of this sort, but Amy protested, "That's the way I thought the story went."

But if Cynthia had been unfaithful, why did Nettie have to die? How was she caught in the crossfire of such a dysfunctional marriage? Was she simply in the wrong place at the wrong time? Perhaps, but one piece of evidence suggested otherwise. After George, the "fiend in human form," shot himself, an inspection of his pocketbook revealed a statement, written by Nettie, witnessed and signed by a Lizzie Owens (a friend, perhaps, or a neighbor), which read,

> Cynthia Angeline Wolfe is incapable of raising children in any sense of the word, and further that Mrs. Nettie Ratledge will do all she can against the husband and father, George Wolfe, out of pure malice and spite work [sic] and nothing else.

Though Nettie perceived Cynthia as an "incapable" mother, both women, in their own fashion, had undertaken a similar venture: liberation. Cynthia refused to be governed by George or cower beneath his influence. Nettie would fight him as an equal. Like Cynthia's departure, Nettie's brazenness must have incensed George, threatened him, her passionate words a stinging shot to his perverse ego. George would have perceived Nettie's testimony as yet another punishable offense, the Ratledge home a hotbed of subversion, and George himself as the one to whom fell the grisly duty of curbing their rebellion.

It was a tidy theory. Yet, if the actions of these women prompted George to murder them, what prompted his final shot? Why turn the gun on himself after his so-called "hunt"? A bullet stopped his breath, but his life had already ended, even before

Nettie let him in the house. Not because he was a murderer who would be hunted down and hanged for his crimes, but because he was a man whose identity revolved around terrorizing and dominating women who no longer fell in line. Reduced to nothing, George's cup of self-loathing ran over. Cynthia had escaped him not once, but twice, and George could never hope to escape from himself. Therefore, the bullet was a wedge to splinter and smash what remained of his already broken mind.

Whatever the answers may be I reassured myself that family history was just that—history—incapable of reaching beyond the events of a remote past or the chaotic symbols of our dreams. But all is not certainty all the time. History does not stay in the past; we carry it in our minds and our genes, our behaviors perpetual reminders that the time is out of joint. Sometimes my sisters include Amy in hours-long, battery-draining mass texts comprising emoji, memes, acronyms, scripture verses, rants, snapshots of my curious nephew nesting in the toilet like a happy, little eaglet. Eight months pregnant, belly stretched like patience and bursting with strange movements, Amy, hands shaking, flings her phone toward the couch cushions. It ricochets, tumbles across the stained gray carpet with a series of muffled bumps, and I wonder what exactly she is capable of. Is a piece of George gestating in there? Does she carry him like she carries our unborn son? Will he finally force his way out one day, fall into our hands, covered in blood and screaming?

II.

Before marrying me, my wife dreamed of starting her own band. She can play the mandolin, the tin whistle, flute, piano. She and two friends even lit on a band name, Three Mormon Girls with Candy, which sounds about as fetishized as Britney Spears attired in a Catholic school uniform.

Music is an heirloom in Amy's family. Her Peterson and Maxwell lines run heavy with it. Some people might even believe

her skill hereditary, like weak ankles and male-pattern baldness are for me. Her Grandpa Maxwell had a wonderful voice. Grandpa Peterson and Amy sang "Perhaps Love" at our wedding luncheon. Both of her grandmothers are accomplished piano players, her father earned a Ph.D in music theory from Indiana University, and all of her brothers play at least one instrument.

Yet in spite of her gifts, Amy chose to marry a musical IQ of 13 with practically no understanding of keys, rhythm, tempo, chords, flats and sharps, harmonies, strum patterns, finger placement, or transposition. My musical background consisted of rising for the national anthem at August rodeos; plunking out "Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater" on the black keys of my parents' discordant piano; learning from my father the folk songs of the playground, such as "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of the Burning of the School" and "My Dead Rover":

One leg is lost and the other is gone, and
one is spread all over the lawn.

Small wonder I was better suited for the egg shaker than the guitar at Amy's neighborhood jam sessions, still better suited for beating a plastic bucket with a stick.

Acquiring any new skill can challenge a learner, but Amy massaged my knotting frustrations.

"Practice doesn't make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect," she chanted, the adage and her chipper lilt twin inheritances from her mother, a piano and violin teacher with a bachelor's degree in music.

Despite Amy's positivity and advice, more than one jam session ended in an argument. I accused her of nagging, of moving too quickly, of expecting too much, of condescension, of pedantry. But my ability did improve, despite my tender feelings, and a heavily edited recording of our gig at the community library made the five o'clock news (They cut out the part when I knocked the music stand with my arm and Amy dropped her mandolin pick).

Before her first pregnancy Amy and I jammed all the time. I came home from work, we ate dinner, and it took very little for Amy to convince me to go through a few songs with her. It was something she looked forward to, a way to boost her spirits and maximize our time together. But circumstances have changed since then. Perfect or no, practice requires time I don't have. Her mandolin case has been latched since Christmas. My hard-earned calluses have become music history. We have reserved one corner of our bedroom for broken or rarely played instruments, bongos, banjo, dulcimer, uke, a monument to silence and dust and good intentions, to remind us of the way we were and what we had together. A harmonica beneath the bed in a broken blue box, an egg shaker in a candy dish. I might as well add my shabby guitar to the whole sad, silent heap.

Amy tries to be upbeat, find the silver lining, but pregnancy can obfuscate the positive, incite disloyalty among the faculties. Euphemize all you like, call it the blues, but it's deeper than an ongoing funk. You can't just snap your fingers or dream your troubles away, no matter what the experts claim, be they in a therapist's leather chair or the wooden pew behind you at church, doling out snacks and coloring books to their undrowned children. For months before and after Max came Amy rode a vast ocean of moods: a little choppy at times, and afterwards a smooth ride until it dropped her through the surf. I recall our return from a Christmas vacation in New York; she was smiling and content until I pushed open the front door and threw our luggage on the floor. Amy entered next and proceeded to lay into her green duffel bag with her foot. The boys next door had been at their hookah, and the smell had permeated the walls. The duffel never had a chance. It was like watching the elevator scene from *Drive*.

Now the signs are manifesting again. They've come early. Yesterday she woke up from a nap sobbing, then sobbed until she fell back to sleep. She says, "This is so frustrating!" almost as often as she says, "I love you." In my mind I see her, in yoga pants and a wine-red jacket, pulling the front door closed as she

slips out for some much-needed exercise. Max lies asleep on his stomach curled around my forearm, and from the window I watch her chest expand and retract, her back straighten, relieved of the weight of whimpers, the pinch of bad latch, pink gums that howl and suck. To Max she might as well be a clever automaton sporting a pair of soft breasts. Oh, to never be touched again.

In the warm summer dusk she pulls her jacket tight around her ribs, her deflated stomach, paces alone along the edge of the sidewalk. Eighteen-wheelers and speeding Harleys rumble the pavement as they pass.

III.

Amy's belly has become a garden once again, burgeoning with our second child, another boy, and here I am philandering. Work is a taxing mistress, an affair sans romance, sans spice, and has been for a while. I cannot see beyond each deadening rendezvous: polishing cover letters until mere tolerance has replaced all passion and I want nothing but out; revising a chapter on *Moll Flanders* at 1 a.m. only to walk three miles home in the dark, my backpack laden with reference materials, notes, and paper clips; all spare energy and time and initiative funneled into this arduous (not amorous) tryst that drags on like a Molly Bloom internal monologue: "I think while I'm asleep then we can have music and cigarettes I can accompany him first I must clean the keys of the piano with milk…" A period, please. Full stop, coda, rest. Yes, rest. I want to be faithful again.

Tonight we eat dinner. Together. We chat over squash soup, rolls, juice. The rolls are pillowy, brushed with melted butter. The juice is juice. The soup lacks…something.

We clear the table, stack and rinse dishes, wrap and stow leftovers. Amy announces that everyone needs a haircut. As usual she will be our barber. Max takes his place in the chair first. His hair looks even until she cuts too closely above his left ear. She makes a stab at blending. After a few minutes an audible exhale proclaims her surrender. She will sweep up after I am done.

I remove my jeans and shirt, toss them on the sofa. She cocoons my half-naked body in a ratty brown bath towel. The warm clippers vibrate across my scalp, severing root from strand. Clumps of thin brown hair float to the floor. With a musical laugh, Amy shares the highlights from her day, her voice competing with the drone of the blade, rising above it. Her round abdomen presses against my shoulders. When she leans forward to chase stray hairs on my neck, her voice ceases. I can almost feel her breath on my skin. Another pass. Another pass. A jagged nick in the blade scrapes across my neck.

"Ow!" My fingers fly to nurse the cut. It stings. Blood adheres to my fingers, my palm as I cover it. Amy switches off the clippers and steps backwards.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry…"

Her body leans against the counter, guilt wells in her face. The cut is not deep. The bleeding has already begun clotting. Soon enough the two sides will knit.

The two of us gaze at each other, and a thousand regrets pierce my mind. Finally, I see. I see what her eyes have implied, the cost of my neglect, and I know I need to be home more and I ought to be more attentive and I can be more in tune with her needs and I'm sorry I broke up the band and I'll try, I swear, to be grateful for the soup.

Alder
Elizabeth Gates
Acrylic on canvas

Stop Me

Erin Andrea

I stand in my sister-in-law's bountiful kitchen
muffling the howls of my unsown loins.

Poison parches my ovaries and
scabs are caked in my cunt. Festering.

My foolish husband hands me his newborn nephew.
The in-laws rush to snap photos, grin and size
up my hips. Their hearts are pregnant
with future cherubs.

I nestle his little cone head
on my fruitless flesh;
cradle his scratchy swaddle cloth
on my desolate womb.

His probing sapphire eyes search mine for love.

I want to bash his squishy head on the counter,
drown him in my overripe wine,
feed his pumpkin poop to my unwitting spouse,
feed him to their blubbery mutt.

His hand grips my unfilled breast.
Fear curdles in his throat; he shrieks;

Shhh, little angel, I coax him,
bouncing my knee, bouncing,
bouncing, praying he'll fall.

His tiny soul can explode with mine.
Phantom tears pour down my cheeks.
All my loved ones will break;
They will pray for a replay
in a better world,

filled with happy sapphire eyes,
fresh with fertile skin,
flush with hope and milk, and
free of me.

The Heron and the Fish

Michael A. Beard

I.
The heron's feathers vibrate back and forth
as it darts closer to the river's surface
after eyeing its prey like a cat eyeing
a laser's dot. It pierces the water with
its beak, imitating that of a javelin, creating
a monument out of the water for milliseconds
before gravity pulls the monument apart.
Gripping a fish's body like chopsticks
taking hold of sushi, the heron swallows its
prey, filling its stomach one fish at a time.

II.
The fish's body of tiled scales streams
through the river's water like a meteor
swimming through the earth's atmosphere.
The sun's waves brush against its
scales, reflecting light back into
the water. Then, its translucent
fins are pinned, its chain-link armor
punctured on both sides of its body, the river
no longer its clothing. The fish's carcass
limps like a piece of bread held at
one corner and slides into its volant grave.

Pining

Anne Trisler

Her peace was
the gentle splash
of a forest creek,
yellow aspen
mirrored on the water.
It was also, she sees now
a sleeping bear

and the desperate
dust billowing
heel grinding
on a cliff's edge.

The earth will shake her
so hard
she may fall
into darkness.
Every day she pushes
against the black door
shut over the sky,

yearns to rip apart
curtains, step back
into the peace
of a Van Gogh
painting,

to dive in
and fly
from
star to star.

the cello you can sometimes hear in my bedroom late at night

Colin Sturdevant

sister, if you were to quietly
wait behind the windows
of my bedroom—

you'd hear
the sadness
deep
in my wooden body

quiver

the way you do some nights
when you remember your trauma—

blood on your face & body
waking up below a freeway underpass.

clothes & belongings
scattered about. torn.

how i blamed myself
never picking up a phone call.

it wasn't you but your ex.
i've learned about neurosis
in therapy. how i think
i'm the cause of your disaster.

some nights when alone
i howl. truly
howl. smashed
& broken like an animal. like glass emptied

of liquor. of soul. of hurt.

on some nights
the woods creep out
of my body—
spruce.maple.poplar.willow

as I cry myself to sleep

cursing the godless, starless
nightsky

Extra Sharp

Melissa Ostrom

At some point during the summer of his sixteenth year, Charlie Forzoso turned beautiful. The extent of this transformation was revealed to his best friends article by article, baseball cap then watch then T-shirt then shoes.

Nat and Heather confronted the revelation on the west end stretch of Hamlin Beach, right before the sand gave way to pebbles and the shore jutted abruptly into the water, forming the peninsula called Devil's Nose. With cirrus clouds striping the blue over his head and Lake Ontario lapping his feet, Charlie stood gloriously dark and tautly muscled in his swim trunks, telling the staring girls he'd known for twelve years about the old motorcycle his cousin had bought for practically nothing and fixed up and named Gato. "Isn't that funny?" he asked, pleased with their apparent interest. "'*Venga*,' Raul was always saying. 'Come pet El Gato.' Stupid. And creepy, you know?" Charlie laughed and kicked at a wave. "He's such a dork."

The girls listened a little and watched a lot. They were astonished. If they could have spoken, it would have been to ask something like, "What the hell?" They were not prepared for this development. Nat had spent all of July and most of August at her dad's new place in Burlington, Vermont. "Making his wife nervous and eating too much Cabot Pepper Jack cheese and basically turning into a cow," she'd emailed Heather. Heather, meanwhile, had been stuck at home. Day after day, sprawled across her parents' bed, taking advantage of the only air-conditioned room in the roasting house, she'd read and reread every John Green novel, texted profound quotations to Nat, and cried regularly.

"Aren't you coming?" Charlie asked over his shoulder. He plunged into the water, then shot up with a gasp. His hands sluiced sopping bangs out of his face. In the lake or Grandma Stowey's pool, while Nat and Heather would toe the shallows

and shiver inch by inch in a lengthy process of acquaintance, Charlie always tackled the depths. He'd never, however, done so looking as he did now, all angles, ridges, and gleam under coursing rivulets of shimmer. "Come on!" he called, grinning.

Nat dropped the duffel bag to the sand.

Heather didn't move.

"Don't you want to swim?" Nat asked. Her fingers fidgeted with the hem of her shirt.

"Hmm?" Heather turned her face a fraction in Nat's direction without removing her gaze from Charlie, who was now floating on his back.

Nat glanced around at the sparsely populated beach, taking in the lifeguard, two older women sitting under a large umbrella, a couple swimming farther away, and a group of five girls, college-aged, sprawled on blankets spread close to the pavilion. Was it just her imagination or were they all ogling Charlie?

She foresaw bad months ahead. Wrestling, Charlie's only sport, never as popular as soccer, basketball, or baseball, would surely draw great crowds in the coming year. Myrtle High's chess club, of which Charlie served as founder and president, would probably swell with fascinated novices. In band, once the ensemble got a glimpse of this new Charlie pulling out the old trumpet, the flutists, oboists, and clarinetists would finally, no doubt, stop dissing the brass section. Charlie was going to get swarmed. How long before he started eating at a different lunch table? How long before he quit MasterMinds and art club? How long before he quit Nat and Heather? "This is going to be a problem," Nat muttered.

Heather smiled distractedly. She'd already stepped out of her shorts. Now she removed her tank top, pulling it slowly over her head, tossing it behind her. She liked the way her fair hair felt, dry and heavy, coursing down her back. She liked the way the breeze licked her front. She stared down at herself and adjusted her bikini top. She gazed at her breasts and smooth belly and longish legs like she'd never seen them before. Then, without pausing to test the water's temperature, she strode straight into

the lake and joined Charlie, the friend she'd never really seen before either.

Nat observed the subsequent collision, the splashes, jostling, and laughter. *Holy crap. It's already a problem.*

She didn't join them, didn't even strip to her swimsuit. Self-consciousness immobilized her. This, after a lifetime of not caring how she looked, at least not in front of Heather, with whom she talked while sitting on the toilet and playing video games and watching movies and sleeping and swimming—and not even in front of Charlie, who'd pretended he was a robot for all of fifth grade, who'd studied the fourteen languages sporadically used throughout *Lord of the Rings* and gained some proficiency in Hobbitish, who daily had walked through the school hallways with a *Harry Potter* pencil tucked behind his right ear and called it his magic wand, and who (at one time, not so very long ago) had been shaped like a pencil, too.

Bounding his new body in and out of the waves, swiping the surface with a remarkably muscled arm, hurling the water at the bobbing Heather and lurching back when she retaliated in kind, Charlie laughed, "Hurry up, Nat. The Heathen Child's trying to kill me."

Nat flapped a dismissive hand, feeling the foolishness of the small motion, the kind of shooing Grandma Stowey delivered with her, "Oh, you kids. Cut it out." Not a cool gesture. She sat heavily on the sand and stared at her sandy bare feet. Was she going to have to worry about looking cool now? With her best friends?

She sighed and dug around in the beach duffle for the lunch her grandmother had said she'd packed for her, then groaned at the sight of the plastic grocery bag. Why hadn't Grandma Stowey used her lunch sack? Grumbling under her breath about squandered fossil fuels and carbon emissions, she unwrapped the cheese sandwich and, taking a desultory bite, watched the seagulls' interested approach without bothering to scare them away. What was the point? She felt tragic, like she might as well give the birds the sandwich and her own flesh as well, and just let

them peck and peck and peck.

Brushing crumbs off her shirtfront, she tried to rally. Maybe junior year would go quickly. Maybe it wouldn't all be bad. Like one whose house has just been burglarized, she wandered the quarters of her mind and considered what in her life had been stolen and what was left.

The findings depressed her. So much of her daily existence belonged to these friends (who currently, to their obvious mutual delight, were performing and receiving a piggyback ride among the whitecaps). But at least she still had her environmental club. Charlie's jazz band practice and Heather's Tuesday afternoon babysitting job meant they'd never joined. If next year turned weird, Nat would have that single pristine planet on which to land and hide. She wadded up the sandwich baggie, stuffed it in the beach duffel, and tried to comfort herself with the thought of Friendly Earthlings. *There* anyway, once a week, she could pretend nothing had changed.

Her friends started playing Marco Polo. Nat watched glumly. Heather, laughing her "Polo" just a few feet from the shut-eyed Charlie, didn't seem all that intent on evading his outstretched hands.

Nat made a face and reached into the grocery bag for her soda.

As soon as she took out the can, the empty bag swelled and fluttered. She dropped the Pepsi and jerked forward to flatten the ballooning whiteness but ended up slapping sand. The bag slid along with the lake breeze. She nosedived toward the airy object, but it skittered away.

Then a great gust fully billowed the plastic interior, carried the bag high into the air, and shot it straight across the beach.

Nat took after it. She alerted her friends of her departure with a quick wave. They didn't wave back—didn't even notice her. Heather was on Charlie's shoulders now, her hands cradling his wet head.

Had the wind carried the bag west toward Devil's Nose, the thicket bordering the bluff probably would have halted its progress. But the air was moving in the opposite direction, which was just a long, long beach, the perfect location for flying things: flat, smooth, and relatively empty. She raced behind the unfettered bag, her heart pounding and feet burning from the sunbaked sand. In no time at all, she was drenched with sweat and out of breath. Her calves felt tight and sore.

Every so often, the wind died, and the bag lagged. Nat, with a surge of hope, would lunge forward. But like a faster opponent with a malicious sense of humor, the bag—just when she came within an inch of claiming it—would reel into the air, exuberantly, like one rolling and romping with helpless hilarity. Then it'd take flight again.

The cartoonish quality of this chase was not lost on her. She passed the sunbathers by the pavilion and their giggles followed her. She passed the two older women who sat under the wide umbrella and heard one titter, "Oh, dear." Worst of all, some boys had put up a volleyball net, and not only did the beach—already raucous with wind and water and seagull cries—take on the additional noise of their laughter, but one of the teens clearly recognized her. He shouted, "Stop polluting the environment! You're a Friendly Earthling!" Hahaha.

She stumbled, straightened, and kept running.

The situation presented a quandary. If she stopped peeling after the plastic bag, she could stop looking ridiculous. She was short and round. Her breasts, insufficiently supported by the swimsuit she wore under her t-shirt, bounced painfully. However, the boy's snide comment was true. In fact, even as he'd yelled it, she'd pretty much been thinking the same thing. *I'm treasurer of my environmental club. How can I possibly let my garbage desecrate the beach?* So she continued in pursuit, panting, aching with a terrible stitch in her side, and willing the plastic to stop.

Instead, it flitted over the last of the sand, grazed a neatly mowed lawn, and approached what looked like a family reunion, picnickers lounging on blankets, talking at a table, manning the

grill.

Nat heaved a sigh, certain now at least the bag would meet some resistance.

But like an object possessed by the spirit of someone who'd helped perpetrate terrible environmental disasters, the bag expanded and, right before dancing into the family's golden retriever, rose eerily. It floated high over the gathering.

She staggered, dumbfounded, then shot between the picnic table and grill, panting apologies and wistfully noting the tempting luncheon spread (watermelon wedges, potato chips, an entire cheese tray with at least three kinds of crackers). The dog barked at her intrusion, sprang forward, and began to chase her, so that for a terrifying moment—until the pet complied with his owner's "Muffin! Come! Jesus Christ, get back here, Muffin"—bag, Nat, and dog raced, single-file, over the grassy stretch, across a park road, and toward the campgrounds, as if fleeing from an invasion of violent Torontonians from across the lake.

When the angry dog stopped chasing her, Nat slowed her sprint to a half-hearted jog and then an exhausted trudge.

The bag, at last, had stopped.

Straight ahead, in the campground's A-loop, a tall tree held it on a branch. The plastic flapped from its twig skewer like it was waving to Nat, urging her to come up and get it so they could play some more.

She growled through her panting. She'd get it down, alright. Then utterly destroy it. Or at least recycle it.

The road that cut through the grounds was narrow and dark. Trees ran along its edges and separated the sites into leafy quarters, so the RVs and tents on either side of Nat were mostly hidden by foliage. She felt like a voyeur when she glanced between two hickories and caught a glimpse of a bare-chested man crouched on a weedy clearing, smoking a cigar and stirring a small fire with a stick. Across the way, there was a shout of laughter. Through the web of branches, she made out the peaks and folds of red and blue tents and the distant sparkle of

water and the slow flashes of meandering campers in colorful swimsuits and t-shirts. The thick smell of charred meat and smoke wafted around her. A child hollered, "Mine! That's *mine*," and twangy music drifted from somewhere up ahead. Yet despite these indications of occupancy, the loop seemed like a shadowy place of solitude, and Nat blew a huge sigh, grateful for the lack of audience.

As she neared her target, anxiety returned. When she'd first broached the slim road, the branch-trapped bag in the distance hadn't looked that far up. Now, however, she could see retrieving the nuisance would require climbing, something she hadn't done since she was a little kid. Something she'd never liked doing even then.

She glanced around. A breeze rustled the leaves and the canopy filtered the light with a delicate dappling. No one was watching. How easily she could just walk away—abandon this difficult endeavor.

Yet the lack of observers paradoxically complicated the temptation. A Greenpeace activist, Audubon Society supporter, or World Wildlife Fund member surely clung to her values, whether she was involved in a peaceful protest with her comrades or simply standing alone in her backyard. It was impossible to imagine a Ducks Unlimited conservationist deciding to shoot and stuff a rare specimen of waterfowl when nobody was looking. What kind of environmentalist would Nat be if she only protected her planet when she had an audience?

She, Natalie Adeline Stowey, was a Friendly Earthling. And she would stay one, no matter what. Others might prove fickle in their notions. Others might change entirely. An old pal might spend a summer in Arizona and return as a full-grown, muscular, outrageously good-looking man. Another old friend might pass all of July and most of August getting high on sentimental novels, dreaming of doomed love, and turning into a romance junkie. A mother might ship a daughter off to an ex for seven weeks with

the hopes of finishing, uninterrupted, her memoir about how much she hated that ex. And a father might take in this daughter for the summer without doing much to help his new wife adjust to the additional household presence.

Nat, however, refused to change. She understood who she was and knew what she cared about, and what she currently cared about the most was getting the stupid bag out of this beautiful tree because trees, God damn it, didn't deserve to get covered in people's plastic shit.

Taking hold of the lowest limb, she stepped on a knot a couple of feet up from the ground and hefted herself into the crook between the trunk and branch. She sat for a moment, rubbing away the ache in her palm where the bark had dug into her skin, wishing she had gloves, missing her sneakers, and eyeing the flapping plastic overhead. She turned, embraced the trunk, and carefully rose to her feet, then tested the sturdiness of a higher branch with her left foot before stepping onto it and dragging her body in an upward maneuver around the trunk. She winced at the long scratches this motion cut into her inner thigh and rested for a moment, nervous, her scraped skin stinging. Fortunately, the next two moves were easier to manage, and her flagging confidence revived.

But then leaves suddenly swished over her head. Startled, she held fast to the trunk. A chickadee flew out of the foliage.

When her pulse eased, Nat willed her shoulders to relax and distractedly added disturbing a bird's nest to her worries (which already included mangling her unprotected skin, falling, and breaking a leg). From her precarious stance, she considered her options. One limb looked promisingly sturdy. But though this thick branch would take her up, it also would move her around the trunk and, therefore, increase her distance from the bag. She'd have to finagle an additional dangerous step to return in its direction. Another limb was skinnier and higher up yet directly under the plastic. If she could manage to move onto this less accessible branch, she could easily grab the bag.

She chose the faster, steeper route and, hugging the trunk,

managed a sideways, high-stepping climb, wiggling her foot as close as she could to the slender branch's base with the hope that it would hold her when she hauled the rest of herself up. In this aerial, diagonal split, she remained for a moment, glancing up through the canopy, then glancing down to the ground. Dizziness assailed her. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, counted to three, and finished the lunge.

There.

Exhaling loudly, she wrapped an arm around the trunk, then reached for the bag. It fluttered so close to her from its twiggy peg on the higher limb that she didn't even need to lean sideways or stand on tiptoe to seize it.

She yanked it loose and wadded it in her hand where it crumpled to practically nothing. Such a paltry thing. Still, she didn't trust it. Though her shorts had pockets, they seemed insufficiently imprisoning for this particular object, and she imagined it sneaking out of the cotton folds, unraveling itself, and hopping the first wind that came along like a fugitive jumping on the back of a train. Instead, holding herself steady on her slight perch by wrapping an arm around the heartier branch from which the bag had waved, she nudged up her shirt and stuffed the bag into her cleavage, where the tight material of her swimsuit sealed off any means of escape.

She sighed again and looked at the ground, so far away. How to get there? Technically, a retracing of her ascending route made sense. Yet, for some reason, these steps looked trickier and farther away from this angle than they'd appeared heading up. Biting her lip and still hugging the higher branch, she glanced around, wondering if a different course might be easier. It was hard to get a good idea of the possibilities from where she stood, with her back pressed against the trunk and foliage hiding so many of the branches.

She shuffled out on the limb to improve her view. Her outward venturing was cautious, an inch by inch progression that bore no resemblance to a balance beam act: she kept her right arm slung over the higher branch.

But without any warning—no ominous creaks, no scary sagging—the branch under her feet abruptly broke. It plunged through the foliage and hit the ground even before Nat could manage a scream. Then terror stole her voice, and with nothing louder than a squeak, she hung in the air for a second, held up only by the arm she'd curled around the higher limb.

Adrenaline surged. She secured her dangle with her other arm, threw her right leg over the branch before moving her left. Blinking dazedly up through the flickering leaves, she pictured herself in this position, like a large animal tied on a pole for roasting over a fire. With gasps and winces and a great deal of sweat, she managed to rotate herself onto the branch, breaking twigs as she did so, getting a leaf in her mouth, and catching a corner of a spider's web with her forehead. Finally, she wiggled, caterpillar-like, across the branch. Heart racing, she hugged the great girth of the trunk to her trembling body. From her precarious place in the V made by the trunk and the limb's base, she looked down. She looked to the right of the trunk. She looked to the left. From what she could see, there was nothing, *nothing*, within easy reach. She'd broken the one accessible foothold.

She sagged on the limb.

She was a failure. Consider what capturing the bag had entailed: breaking branches, cracking a whole limb. Probably taking down a nest or two. So much for protecting nature.

As she slumped against the trunk, a recollection slithered back to her, not an old memory but something recent she'd tried hard to forget: an exchange with Julie, her father's new wife. Dad had thought for sure they'd get along. "Jul's a vegan, Nat. Isn't that cool? You have a ton in common."

Except they hadn't. Nat was a vegetarian—actually more of a dairy-an, subsisting on delicious cheeses and omelets and bowls of ice cream. Dad's wife, in her quiet manner, had once lectured Nat on the inclusion of dairy in her diet.

But the lecture had meant so much more than just that.

Her father's new finance job kept him at the office for long hours, while his wife, an artisan, did her weaving in the studio attached to the house. So all summer, Nat had spent more time with the latter adult than the former. She'd had repeated opportunities to learn Julie's expressions and anticipate what would stiffen her narrow back. She'd even managed to read some of what the older woman was feeling, if not saying. And basically what she'd read boiled down to, *Go away!* It wasn't only the vegetarianism, or what Julie called, "ecological hypocrisy," that dismayed the woman. Nat's very existence accomplished that.

So during Julie's gentle lecture on the evils of dairy, Nat had received both words and impressions: "A true environmentalist goes vegan, Natalie. *You pretend to care about the environment, but it's all show.* Avoiding meat isn't enough, *you loathsome person who got dumped in my lap for an entire summer.* Don't you know the cows that provide the milk for the cheese you love so much are harmed, too, *fatso?*"

Nat had stammered, "But—but you don't kill a cow to get her milk."

"After she stops producing the milk, you do, *stupid*. And that's after four, five years of her life. *And how old are you anyway? Sixteen? Seventeen? How much longer until you're in college and not a threat to my happiness?* A factory farm doesn't keep a nursing home for dried-up cows. *And a newly married woman shouldn't be asked to provide a home for a little cow either.* That's not how it works. *Duh*. These people want to make a profit. They're not out to comfortably house some big-eating mammals. *Like you.* Same goes for chickens, *Miss Messy Omelet-Maker.* You might not gorge yourself on KFC, but you like eggs. *Too much, by the looks of you.* And chickens have one, two seasons max, of good laying years. *I can't wait for you to grow up and get the hell out of my hair.* Then they're killed, too. *I wish you were dead.*

Reliving this sharp scold, Nat expelled a shuddery breath, sniffed, and wiped her wet eyes on her shoulders, first the right then the left since she couldn't let go of the tree. Maybe she was

exaggerating the memory. Maybe it wasn't that bad. Julie had tried to like her. Or at least she'd tried to *look* like she liked her. But no one, not even Dad, could fail to notice the tension. And Nat, intensely relieved when it was time to go, left Burlington with the knowledge that her father was less her father than he'd been before, that his new home was not remotely hers, and (thanks to Julie's pointed lecture) that she, compared to a healthy, mindful vegan, was not such a Friendly Earthling, after all.

Nat exhaled wetly against the bark. If she leaned sideways and followed the way of the broken limb, would she break, too? Could she manage to die? Or would she also fail at that and just paralyze herself?

"What are you doing?"

Nat jerked away from the trunk and peered down.

Grandma Stowey was standing at the foot of the tree. Arms akimbo, she shook her head, her expression irritated.

"Grandma." Nat frowned, disoriented. "I thought Charlie's mom was picking us up."

"I thought so, too. But your friends called and told me you were missing." She raised a halting hand, then corrected, "Charlie told me. Heather called first, but that girl cries so much, no one can understand a thing she says."

This news cheered Nat immeasurably. They were searching for her. They hadn't forgotten her. She crouched as low as she could while still clinging to the trunk and scanned the road behind her grandmother. "Where are they?"

"Still looking, I guess." With a shrug and a cryptic expression, she added, "In their own special ways. Some picnickers pointed me in this direction." She fluttered a beckoning hand. "Come on. I'm going to miss my show."

Nat stared at her. "But—but I can't."

"Sure you can. We've got lots of trees in the yard for you to climb, and if we leave now, I can get us back before my show

starts. You can call Heather on our way and tell her she can stop crying."

"I'm not playing up here. I'm stuck."

For the first time, Grandma Stowey peered closely at Nat's perch, took in its difficult location, glanced at the broken limb in the road, and groaned, "Jesus, Natalie. You and your nature adventures."

Nat opened her mouth to defend herself, then closed it. Her grandmother simply wouldn't appreciate the mission that had required this climb.

"I guess I could call Charlie," Grandma said, "and see if he can help."

"What's he going to do?"

"Have you seen the muscles on that boy?" She whistled, and it wasn't a whistle of amazement.

"That's gross, Grandma. He couldn't help anyway. I don't need someone's muscles. I need a ladder."

Her grandmother stepped closer, studied the tree some more, and conceded Nat's point with a nod. She glanced around. "Sit tight, sweetheart." And she wandered off to one of the campsites.

A few minutes later, people spilled into the road. The bare-chested man she'd noticed earlier arrived first, still smoking a cigar. From the lot adjacent to his, what looked like an entire extended family bounded toward her, a few women in ratty T-shirts and shorts, four scruffy men, all carrying bottles of beers, and several children, most of them on bikes. They poured in Nat's direction, like waves gushing over a broken levee, and teemed at the tree's base. Bikes whirled around the trunk, one little rider emitting a convincing imitation of a fire engine siren. Another circling child wobbled precariously, as he tried to eat a candy bar with one hand and steer with the other. He finally just crammed the rest of the chocolate into his mouth, tossed the wrapper on the ground, and pedaled hard to beat the others in their laps around the tree. A ponytailed woman and the bare-

chested man, their frowns fixed on the leafy canopy, discussed the situation; "ladder" and "trampoline" floated up to Nat and then, with sudden chuckling and a wink her way, "axe." A bespectacled tween got out her phone and, holding it up, called, "Say cheese." Nat smiled weakly while her picture was taken.

Behind the other spectators, Grandma Stowey was deep in conversation with one of the beer-drinkers (the best looking of the lot, Nat noted sourly). When they stopped talking, they strode across the road and disappeared. Nat squinted to try to see through the barrier of trees. What was Grandma thinking, just leaving her here?

But a moment later, the roar of an engine filled the air. From the spot into which her grandmother had disappeared, a huge RV backed into the road. Grandma Stowey waited until it began to slowly roll toward the tree, then walked in its wake, her arms folded. The handsome beer-drinker was driving the huge tan and cream vehicle. He leaned out the window and, cutting a beer-brandishing arm through the air, yelled, "Get the kids out of the way, Meg."

When the children had been herded to the side of the road opposite Nat's tree, the man brought the RV very close to the trunk, so close, in fact, that its roof was an approachable distance from Nat.

She remained in her perch, however, until after the man climbed out of the vehicle, slammed the door, absently settled his beer on the first bend in the branches, and with a coaxing expression, murmured, "Come on down now, honey. Nothing to be scared of. Just come on down, nice and easy."

After slinking down to her holding branch, she reversed her earlier rotation and, hugging the limb tightly with her arms, let her feet drop. She felt the hard top of the RV with her scraped toes. From there, it was only a matter of easing herself into the driver's arms. He grunted and set her on her feet.

A loud cheer burst from their audience. Bicycles shot around her and her rescuer in a celebratory circling. The bare-

chested man came forward, dropped the butt of his cigar, ground it into the road with his flip-flop, patted the RV owner on the back, then reached out and ruffled Nat's hair. The entire group grinned, as if every single one of them had been instrumental in happily resolving an emergency.

Which, given their willingness to perform a kindness, was true.

After a few minutes, the crowd dispersed.

Grandma Stowey looked at her. "Ready?"

"In a minute." Nat glanced around. When she was certain no one was watching, she reached under her shirt and plucked the plastic bag out of her swimsuit. Then she quickly collected what had been left behind: the candy bar wrapper, the empty beer bottle in the crook of the tree, the cigar butt, and a filthy microwave dinner tray she'd spotted in some Queen Anne's lace. She tightly gripped the bag. "Now I am."

Bitter Sweet, Precious Life

Matthew Barrett

Photograph

Attending the Graduation Ceremony of the Law School at Washington and Lee University

D. M. Rice

Surely what the world
needs now are more lawyers
I thought. Processions of violet
robes marching under the banner
of bagpipes. After all, it is through
speech we breathe eternal and words
lose essence by tongue alone. Above
the devil was beating his wife with light
lilac sky falling lush on the baptismal lawn.
As the night of commencement died down,
    the knowledge-bearers locked their steps
    down the center lane, their features torn
    asunder after decades of gorging on sophistry.

    In the speckled radiance of speech
    we leave no room for mass graves
    and the bodies begin to pile until
    they touch the ceiling.

Megan keh man Irani am

Lida Hedayatpour

Megan keh man Irani am
They say my skin is an eggplant
I can't read or write in Farsi
I can only write my name
This name that even the Republic says is not really mine

Megan keh man Irani am
But I was born in America
I speak with an English accent
I roam the streets with boys
Don't wear a headscarf
Don't face God five times a day

Megan keh man Irani am
but I don't know my family
Maman says, "This is your Aunt, this is your Uncle"
Baba says, "This is your Aunt, this is your Uncle"
But I see only a phone or a television

Megan keh man Irani am
Sometimes
I laugh so loud that my family says with their bodies that they don't want me
They look down on me with their band-aid noses
Their noses in the seven skies

And they get mad when I say I want to be their guest, not their monkey
I don't want to be a doctor
I don't want to be like you
Because I'm not you
I don't want to sing them a song
Megan keh man Irani am

Rapture

Solana Warner

I like to think that god is a cone snail.
That it crawls along the deep seabed
in blissful ignorance of our faults.
When it fails to rebuild a fairer world or
rapture us to sea, I'll know
its eye stalks simply don't extend far enough.

Dragging pink underbelly across a
plum-ripe sand, god sees only
aqueous desert trenches ahead.
It does not see bodies tossed to the surf
10,000 leagues above.

It does not see, because it cannot see;
opaque green glass, the crushing force
of compressed and stacked atmospheres.
[Man-in-the-sky god has no such excuse.]
The view is clear and simple from silken clouds.

My god does not dole out deliverance
or absolutes, because
my god is a killer.
It does not pretend to be otherwise,
[and so it is forgivable.]

And while I absolve myself of praying,
I can't help but hunger to watch.
When I die, I want to see god churning
custom venom, preparing to strike me down.

After shooting a venomous dart,
perhaps it will pause,
transfixed
watching me sputter like static.
Then it will part its gramophone lips,
and suck me whole to different dimensions.

If a god is our origin,
then it lies at the bottom of the sea.
And when the sun boils the ocean,
like lobsters screaming on the stove,
I'll know my god suffers and shrieks
in flawed and fallible tune.

Trash Maximized

Alyssa Basquez

Acrylic on canvas

Seawater

Jeremy Amorin

Para el MA

Remember the pony.

— Mort Utley

The turquoise water, a pastel sea, washes against the edge of the island. Somehow, the sweet breeze permeates the entire Caribbean port town—walkways, bakeries, and even the heart of the forest, where the sound of waves is far from audible. A teenage girl, already a woman in her culture, now notices the forgotten smell, having learned to shut off her nose from the stench of her own sweat. A child brings to the shack a new bucket of opium pods and hurries back to the forest plantation. Rows of tables are crammed in the tiny space to bear all the workers and their trays of sticky, brown latex.

Yemi scrapes the coarse skin of her pods with a sickle, collecting the dried seepage of the incisions. She sets the sickle down and cranes away to wipe her forehead; salt is notorious for ruining the product.

A table ahead, a young boy is beaten with a plank for having seemingly taken a break.

The girl reaches for a new pod and bumps the sickle off the table—it pierces her palm, and blood seeps through the cleavage of her fist. She tears a strip from her blouse with her teeth to bandage the wound, unintentionally tearing an entire sleeve; the blouse slips beneath her right breast. She wraps the gash tightly, unconcerned about anything else, and reaches for the next pod before a supervisor can notice delay.

The second-in-command, a middle-aged man not so much skinny as taut with muscle, hears the spatula fall and finds that, fortunately, the noise came from the girl he was looking for. Aldo watches Yemi tear the blouse, wrap her palm, and resume

working as though nothing happened.

She pretends not to notice his approach, but the methodical pace of his jackboots is too sharp to ignore; her coworkers flinch upon each clomp. She works on, wiping the runny palm against her blouse—blood is also well-reputed to ruin the product.

Aldo, behind her now, snatches her ratty hair and drags her with him to the rear of the shack. Yemi holds the yelp inside her throat and does her best to facilitate his pulling. They pass her endless rows of coworkers, the maimed and battered natives of the island. Endurance has become the sole resource left in their grasp, from which they wring their daily nourishment. A sparse word uttered is one of gratitude.

The pair arrives at the tall canvas tent pitched against the back wall, bound in place with twine. The canvas at one point surely was taut and pleasantly coarse to the touch, but now grows rings of fungus, brown-green in degrading patches, and exudes the stench of tobacco. Aldo pulls a drape aside and enters, the girl's hair still in his clutch.

A fat, bronze-toned man sits in a wooden chair, hand carved for a man of stature, chomping away at an indeterminate snack. Gray has long invaded his beard and stomach, proudly exposed, and the hair of his scalp has fled to the fringes. Yemi has never seen him up close before, but no matter how badly she'd like to examine the man for whom she's been working, she keeps her face to the soil. Aldo smacks her cheek to make her look up. Raúl, chomping away, grins and outstretches a hand—the one cupping his delicacy—and Aldo releases the girl's hair. She steps forward, tentative, and takes a piece of his offering: some foreign nugget in yellow paper with gaudy blue fringe. She examines the writing, but the Western markings are illegible to her: DUBBLE BUBBLE.

She looks to Raúl for permission before placing the piece in her mouth. What decadent sweetness!—and a softness that beckons chewing! Her eyes gape, flitting across the ground as her brain rewires to record the experience. Raúl laughs at her expression, pops another piece into his mouth, and dumps the

remaining into Yemi's hands.

'*Considéralos como la versión mía de un anillo,*' he tells her. He bursts into another guttural laugh, almost rocking the chair along with himself. A stocky young man behind him laughs, too; he peels a Jolly Rancher and stuffs it into his cheek, flinging the wrapper aside. Aldo translates Raúl's words into her language for her: the two have now been wed. Yemi is sent back to work, and Raúl's laugh reverberates through the entire shack.

She returns home that night—late enough to be morning—to her mother, father, five siblings, three grandparents, and two little cousins getting ready for bed, all exhausted from their strenuous days of labor.

No one asks about the smears of blood marring her blouse.

She hugs them all lingeringly, kisses them goodnight, and places her daily two dollars in the little reed crate buried in a corner of the hut. She doesn't say a word about the marriage. The event itself is hardly present in her mind. Instead, she dreams of the day she can place eight, maybe ten dollars in the crate whenever she visits home—marital per diem. She shuts the crate, replaces it to its tomb, then remembers something. From her pockets fall handfuls of bubble gum, clunking inside on top of the dollars. She reburies her family's fortune.

On the bed, Trice polishes his unstained rifle. In the barracks with his three squadmates, he sits silently as the others freestyle rap of their sexual prowess, military-themed.

'I fire till the trigger break,' starts Riveroll, 'then I eat your girl out like a dinner date.'

Trice finally gets the imaginary stain off his barrel and loses his evening's preoccupation. He considers doing some PT out in the tropical heat, maybe joining his squad members in their poetry, when he remembers the letter from home that has sat in his locker untouched for weeks. He pulls it out and looks at it, tentative, then looks at Aryal, who digs in his girl 'like a cemetery.'

Dear Sweetie,

We miss you so much! I know you're always busy, so I'll brief you briefly. I caught Alondra with a pack of cigarettes. I don't know where she got it from, but I've dealt with her. On a positive note, her grades have been picking up! Sweet deal, right? She still hates middle school, but she told me she promised her therapist to show you a report card of all As by the time you came back. (Aww!)

Secondly, my español has been going awesomely! I had a whole conversation with this door-to-door guy who'd just moved from Michoacán and wasn't quite English-savvy. Speaking of which… I bought a mini butter churn! Did you know that butter churned in-home has less LDL cholesterol than the store stuff? HDL is the good one, LDL is what the doctors say to stay away from. You're welcome for keeping us all away from heart attacks.

Unfortunately, I'm still not a real man. I took on the Triple Burger Challenge down at Gary's Real Old School Sandwiches again for a lifetime of free shakes *and* a trucker hat, and I was only over by a few seconds! Then I went to go puke, as usual. (When I came back, Alo told me that I keep paying Gary eight dollars just to go vomit, but the way I see it Gary gets the sore end of the deal. I keep paying eight dollars and vomit for the best burger of my life lol.) But it was far from my last attempt. Anyway, come home soon, we miss you!

Con todo mi amor,

Daniel

If you want to be a real man, come over here and shoot somebody in the chest, Trice thinks. Daniel has always been too soft, sugary, as if he and the world around him were spun of cotton candy, and now his weak-handedness has led to their daughter wandering further astray. In their early years together, Trice found it endearing, but lately Daniel thought that killing a man would be healthy for him.

Someone calls the room to attention. A U.S. freight ship has been raided and sunk in the archipelago. The pirates stole

nothing more than some ice cream, bubblegum, gas station candies. Captain Ramos has ordered Aldana, Aryal, and Riveroll, led by Trice, to search the forest tonight where they believe to have pinned the pirates. The squad is dismissed, and they gear up.

Lacing his boots, Trice wonders if the relationship is really something he needs to be in anymore.

'It's bad luck if you don't say at least *one* bar before we deploy,' inputs Riveroll, grabbing his cover. Trice sighs and gives it a halfhearted go.

'I'm about to go on a night raid…' he says. 'And your girl slurp me up like Kool-Aid.'

Yemi tugs at the free lock of hair by her temple, twirling it around her finger while walking with her proud husband to the beach. Her hair has never felt so smooth or soft, washed and French braided by Raúl's hired hairdressers (the French braid his personal request), and her silk gown, so much gentler than her typical garb, flows behind her as if to draw her back. She chews on a saved piece of bubble gum.

She watches the sun approach the sea, at which point the commemoration will begin. Raúl's crew is already gathered, tens of men marking the air with their cigars and fraternizing with the dancers: richly bronze women, voluptuous, wiggling in grass skirts. The flames of the rotisserie lick at headless chickens, catching every drop, and baskets of sweet bread are set atop a stone slab circled by rum. Raúl's gunmen, with whom he communicates through a handheld radio, are posted out of sight at the beach's perimeter, the edge of the forest.

Yemi sits by her husband, her chair just as ornate as his, digging her toes restlessly into the sand. The only familiar faces are those of supervisors—she has yet to mention the marriage to her family. *They'll just worry too much,* she thinks. *They'll only understand once they see the money. They'll understand once they taste the American sweets.*

Someone hands her a bottle of rum. The drums are struck,

guitars plucked, and dancing erupts in the sand; grass skirts whip the air, and liquor splashes into men's mouths and onto fistfuls of bread. Yemi takes a sip, still justifying her silence: *And if I were to inform them so early, it would only brandish my ego.…*

The opium workers hurry to escape the rifle banter, leaves of moonlight flying across their shoulders. Aldo throws his emptied weapon to the ground and tears into the tent to rummage through the garbage: old clips, candy wrappers, cigar butts. Beyond the canvas, the gunfire ceases, and a shout sounds from the Americans. Aldo finally finds the radio but fails to get a word out before a bullet clips his skull. Trice whips around in the tent to find a stocky man cowering in a corner of trash, trying to bury himself away. An open tub of Blue Bell falls from its perch above him, spilling the yellowed, fly-ridden residue onto his uniform, down between his thighs. Trice, rifle aimed, approaches the man. '*¿Cómo te llamas?*'

Leo's lips quiver in a way that would alert a mother when her child was about to cry, and he bursts into shaky, broken English to direct Trice straight to the beach—directions, who's important, what they look like, and anything else that might be of relevance. He's only a grunt, not worth being shot, he says, and he attempts to dig himself deeper into the garbage.

Trice examines the man. He looks at his arms, swollen with vascularity, and the sharp jawline hooking behind his ear. Then he looks at Leo's trembling fingers, just as shaky as his voice was moments ago. The repulsion of the tent is overshadowed.

Trice exits the tent and guides his squad toward the beach, leaving the off-white puddle of ice cream beneath Leo to grow dark, tainted by the blight of sanguine rolling down his thighs.

The sun has disappeared beneath the sea, and torches are lit along the shore. Raúl, seated in his throne by his dear wife, watches his friends enjoy his celebration on the beach. He turns to Yemi,

who appears (can it be?) even more beautiful now than she does behind those trays of latex. There is surely, Raúl believes, no dispute as to who the most entrancing woman on the island must be.

She, on the other hand, struggles to conceal a grimace as she watches the dancers. Shreds of regret have seeped into her mind. Should she have been more belligerent? Or perhaps have bartered? In fact, what *would* her family think once they heard the news? Her mother would surely try to deflect the brunt of it, compliment her smile or hair in passive denial. Her father, though, would hug her close to his chest and repeat his favorite adage: *The world is a beautiful place. But if fish always tasted the sea, they wouldn't be able to stand the salt.*

The party has hardly been a thought since it began until now that a gentle palm presses her thigh—she winces. Raúl smiles and rubs her leg, the thin linen brushing against her soft thigh….

She has never lain with a man before.

Her second thought, now striking her, is that she has no justification to fend off her husband's advances. Suddenly, she can't bear to look at him—the hand on her leg is taunting, grating to her skin.

She pulls the bottle of rum from her lips when she realizes something further, perhaps a torch in the void. She has been granted the most intimate access to him; if she fails to use it in the interest of her people, would she be any more than a traitor? At the end of the night, she'll seduce him, guide him into the private room he has certainly prepared—no. She'll slay him where he sits and demonstrate that the heart of her people yet swells with blood. Her bottle of rum, meant to be shared between the couple, is now on its last legs. She'll shatter it on the armrest and thrust it through his neck. Then she'll kill herself to escape retribution by those repugnant drunkards clutching about the dancers by the sea; her fingers tighten around the bottleneck.

The hand formerly on her thigh is now extended before her. Raúl, in a rare feat of standing, invites Yemi to dance. She

hesitates, but with her mind in a haze, is unable to formulate an adequate objection; the language barrier has turned her into but a mute visage before him, regardless. She downs the final drops of liquor, leaves the bottle in the sand, and places her hand in his.

Raúl calls something to the musicians, and a slower melody dawns: dimmer, softer, as if drawn from the night itself. His arm goes around his spouse, and he begins to dance. Yemi is rigid, a cinderblock to her husband's fluidity—easily the most genuine disclosure of her feelings yet. She tells him of her fear and pain, that which stains her steps: those opposing torques of powerlessness and resolve that hold her torn, as though bound by the wrists and ankles to a medieval rack.

Raúl hears the cries in her steps but does nothing to allay them. Instead, he responds with his own steps, swaying beneath the drape of music as delicately as those dark wisps by her temple. He tells of a man who met an irresistible woman who, at the mercy of circumstance, strode over both peaks and troughs with unprecedented grace. Life, the man understood, was not a condition dealt fairly, but a mere circumstance in this lawless world. The woman understood this just as well, yet had filled her life—forsaken though it may have seemed—with love and stoic hope. Raúl's steps speak with affectionate resolve, an arm wrapped ever firmly around his wife.

Yemi is now immobilized by his look. Her bottom lip, reddening with her cheeks and steadily growing warmer, falls. They are no longer two strangers dancing on a beach, but one flesh—she is absorbed into his grip, and her steps glide along with his. Astonished, she finds herself pulling closer to him, wresting from her subconscious that bygone flavor of the gum she still chews, the decadent sweetness flowing now from her tongue onto her hot, parted lips…

A string of gunshots sounds from the perimeter of the beach. The familiar clapping of the local automatics wanes as Raúl's security men run into the shadowy forest, merging with the foreign-sounding shots. The hula dancers scurry away, spraying sand in their wake.

The clapping dissipates ever more quickly until there is but one of Raúl's men running back to the beach, screaming a much-too-late warning. He falls to the sand after a final shot from the trees, and the beach of drunken men storms the forest with their pistols.

Brilliant plan, four against fifty, thinks Aldana, ducked behind a tree.

The soberest of the men surround Raúl, who scoops his dance partner in his arms and carries her with him to a safer stretch of the beach.

The gravity of their convoy arrests Trice, even in the blackness, and he maneuvers through the trees in its wake. He feels Raúl's weight even at this distance: a man whose presence commands military operations—whose men would *dispose* of themselves for his protection.

Trice halts, fires at the convoy, and continues.

Raúl's men, he thinks, seem to have embraced an inherent incompetence and have conceded their very lives to him. Somehow, the man's weight only increases: *A man of such merit as to earn the lives of those around him…*

Trice is hardly able to see his target anymore and halts, hoping to fire the ultimate shot—his trigger is fixed in place. He cannot bring himself pull it, and Raúl, the singularity of not only his world but that of all those around him, waddles farther off, pushing into the darkness. His pursuer watches beyond the sights of his rifle, the mere sculpture of a soldier erected in the sand.

Like a gem upon rock, the sculpture is destroyed.

Meanwhile, Raúl, feeling weaker than he's ever felt, brushes a matted lock of hair from Yemi's forehead back to her perfect temple, helpless to her growing colder in his arms; the warmth drips down his fingertips to the sand, seeping from the immaculate French braid.

Turning off the asphalt road, the girl jogs up to the porch, sets her sample case down, and raps on the door in her signature manner. She takes a moment to wipe the sweat from her chin and neck. This Friday is by far the hottest day of the week, and tomorrow is predicted to be even worse.

She knocks again and waits, now brushing the blond strands stuck to her forehead, bouncing on her toes. She dreams of the lovely air conditioning she would be enjoying had she not totaled her car just weeks before this college internship. *I'd be doing so much better with Mercy,* she thinks, *even in this dirt-poor county.*

'Can I help you?'

She pauses to not come off as too eager, just how she was trained, and turns to the man with a smile. 'Sorry! I didn't mean to sneak up on you. My name's Vyvy.' She stretches out a hand, which he shakes from the wheelchair.

'Daniel,' he replies. He's almost middle-aged, not quite fifty, but still bears that tired look of fatherhood in the creases. The skin across his body is marred by patches of dark, wrinkled calluses—scars of an ill-treated burn—and an old cap mats his ashen hair.

'Cool, I'm just doing my summer internship. You must be the busy dad of the house.'

Daniel smiles up at her, familiar with her pitch from summers past. 'Not interested. But sweet deal, good on you for making the world a smarter place!' He brings his milkshake to his lips and takes a long pull.

Vyvy ignores this and continues, verbatim from the sales talk. 'No big deal. I just get to show those educational books that help babies all the way through graduation with homework. Are your kids more like elementary, high school…?'

Daniel's continuous sip from the shake taunts her, and he looks to the ground. 'Would you like some water?'

Between the girl's feet, a dark circle has formed of fallen sweat. She gives herself permission to deviate from the pitch for just a moment. 'Please.'

He returns from inside the house with a tall glass for

now and a bottle she can keep for later. She downs the glass, simultaneously stuffing the bottle into her sample case, and in the silent moment questions why she even chose this program for a summer job, wagering her health on the chances of a Good Samaritan. The chill of ice water rolling down to her stomach is by far the pinnacle of her week, especially given her failure to make a sale since Monday. She peers beyond her glass into the man's shabby duplex: dirty walls, tattered furniture, an odor—*Education is as far from this county as a can of air freshener,* she thinks.

'That water's pretty nice, huh?' Daniel says. 'You students run around in the heat every summer with these books, I can't believe it. Sweet deal, though, bravo.' He brings the straw to his lips again. 'I wish they were something my daughter would've used.'

Vyvy hands the glass back, disheartened at yet another household with no children, and reaches for her case. 'I'm guessing I'm a bit late to catch your daughter in school, then.'

Daniel says nothing for a moment, chewing on his straw. 'Alondra killed herself a couple months ago.' The case almost slips from Vyvy's hands. 'My husband died in combat recently,' he continues, 'and she just didn't want to get out of bed anymore.' He scratches at the callus that wraps his neck; the scraping of coarse skin reverberates in the girl's ear.

'I'm so sorry…' she begins, but Daniel shakes his head.

'We all agree to take life as it comes by staying alive, don't we? I guess she just didn't like the deal anymore. It was her choice, after all.'

Vyvy tucks away some hair insecurely. Daniel notices.

'Do you believe in God?' he asks her.

'I do.'

They stand quietly. The man chews his straw.

'You know, I prayed for the first time when my husband died,' he says. His eyes dampen. 'But the strangest thing happened with my daughter. The only thing I could think of was how she'd never tried my favorite burger place. I met my husband there. Just random chance, the first time I ever went.' He smiles at

the girl and adjusts his trucker hat, which reads GROSS in bold letters across the front. 'I know it was her choice and all, but… just that she'd never have the chance again, I don't know. It was like she missed out on something great.'

My Brother's Grief

William Piedimonte

I wrote your suicide
everywhere: on the walls,
under the floorboards,
so that even when our mom
ripped up the carpet,
put in hard wood,
shattered our home and
glued the pieces back together
without you,
the concrete foundation
etched with your name
stayed.

In a hundred years when
I look back to see
her still repainting
the walls the color of April,
I wonder if,
when the attic rots
and the roof comes down
on the basement,
I'll sit reading
your suicide to the dark.

Instructions for Beginning Gardeners

Daniellie Silva

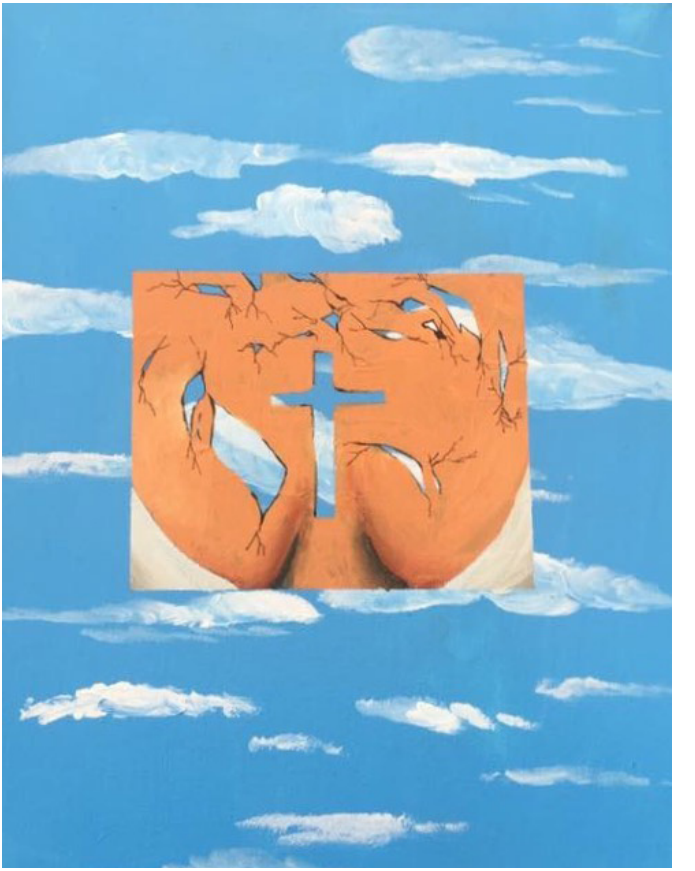
Slash and burn all the limbs
And build a shinier one,
A lifeless one.
Plant your seeds into the vibrating, black soil
And drain it of its breath.
Swim into the ocean and catch a wild tuna
And then throw its carcass back into its salty tears.

Breathe in silvery air;
Exhale shadowy smoke.

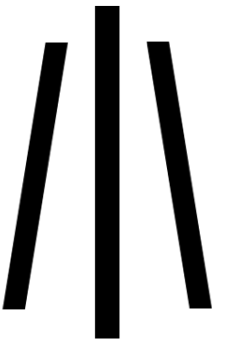
Drill into the unyielding ground, extract the blood you'll find
there
To give life for silver creatures.
Get lost in the greenery of your mind,
And find a paved road to a cardboard cutout home.
Rip into the plastic womb,
And let the yolk-colored sun blind you.

"Did you pray in the chipped, wooden church?"
'No. God was not there.'

Forsake your mother in her wounds.
Bury her with the melting waters.
Do this and soon the ground will swallow us whole.
Our catacombs lay beneath the rusting play-grounds.
Plastic trees will bloom in the shadow.



Religion to Bigotry
Samantha Cooley
Acrylic on canvas



Interviews and Reviews

Faulkner's Use of Character in "Barn Burning"

Austin Svedjan

"Barn Burning"
Short Story
William Faulkner
Harper's Magazine, June, 1939

In his short story "Barn Burning," Southern literary heavyweight William Faulkner presents a complex question: Which is more important, loyalty or morality? Faulkner gives his own answer through the development of his protagonist—Colonel Sartoris "Sarty" Snopes, while also presenting Faulkner's antithesis through Sarty's father, Abner. Whereas Faulkner illustrates an untarnished morality through Sarty, he portrays loyalty—more specifically familial loyalty—through Abner, effectively presenting, as critic Marilyn Ford puts it, "good versus evil, son versus father, and individual versus familial identity" (Ford 4).

The story opens in a courtroom in which Abner is being prosecuted for burning down a barn. Sarty, as the only other witness, is asked by the court to testify against his father. In this instance, the reader may first glimpse Sarty choosing morality in favor of loyalty, as the guilt weighing on his conscience almost causes him to the tell the truth, thereby incriminating his father. Luckily for Abner, the Justice of the Peace does not make the boy testify against his own father, and simply forces the family to leave the county. After his family leaves town, Abner warns his son of abandoning blind loyalty, saying, "You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you" (Faulkner 159). This expository scene not only acts to cement the opposing views of father and son, but additionally to introduce Faulkner's depiction of familial sacrifice in hopes of achieving morality—a theme prevalent in Post-Civil War literature of the South.

After moving to their new home, Abner purposely ruins the rug of his new employer, Major de Spain, furthering the depiction of Abner's moral depravity. Abner, the head of a poor white family and a sharecropper, is a character purely motivated by his pride as white man, and who viciously lashes out at anything that would subvert that racial identity. This is what ultimately drives the hyperbolic, warped sense of loyalty that he demands from Sarty as well. After receiving a punishment in the form of a cut of his crop earnings from Major de Spain, Abner sues his boss and landlord. Sarty—acting as Faulkner's symbol for moral superiority, is hopeful that if justice is passed against Abner, his father will "stop forever and always from being what he used to be" (Faulkner 164). However, mistakenly believing his father is on the defense for another barn burning, Sarty exclaims that, "He ain't done it! He ain't burnt…" (Faulkner 165). Faulkner utilizes this relapse of Sarty into loyalty for his father not as a symbol for morality, but rather as an accurate depiction of the resilience of loyalty.

After losing the trial in court, Abner attempts to burn de Spain's barn as he has presumably done with his previous adversaries, and Sarty's morality finally takes hold of his motivations. First, Sarty refuses to assist Abner once again in a barn burning, which Abner perceives as succumbing to his own ethics. Fearing that his son will make de Spain aware of Abner's intentions, Abner orders Sarty's mother and sisters to keep him restrained while he commits the arson. Sarty, and his newfound moral virtue, cannot bear to see his father hurt someone again, and escapes his bondage to alert Major de Spain of his father's actions. De Spain runs to the barn, and Sarty hears three loud gunshots. It can be assumed that de Spain has killed Abner for attempting to burn his barn. Sarty is subsequently struck "with a sense of guilt for betraying his father; amidst his grief, the young boy refines their relationship by replacing the endearing cry of 'Pap! Pap!' with the formal cry of 'Father! Father!'" (Ford 5). One could argue that this signals a total polarization between Sarty's choice of morality and the beliefs of loyalty held by his

father. By referring to Abner as the formal, biological "father," he has essentially changed his view of his father not as a caregiver, but solely as a parent.

Faulkner presents an argument in "Barn Burning" to answer the question posed in his own story. Faulkner imbues the character of Sarty with the prioritization of morality over familial loyalty, while also displaying the manners in which blind loyalty can corrupt in Sarty's father Abner. Sarty has been made to grow up all too quickly due to the crimes and harsh sense of loyalty imposed on him by his father, which he has forced Sarty for his entire life to take a part in. At the closing of the story, Faulkner conveys to the reader a more matured, more determined Sarty, still only ten years of age, who cut all ties to not only his father—and his father's actions—but his silent family who were complicit in his father's corruption as well. Sarty walks into the forest, leaving all he knows behind him and "[does] not look back" (Faulkner 169).

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Nightmare Unending: Why *Bloodborne* is an Artistic Masterpiece

William Faour

Bloodborne
Video Game
Hidetaka Miyazaki
FromSoftware, March 24, 2015

On one gruesome, terrifying night, many citizens of Yharnam, a city greatly inspired by Victorian London, fell ill to a strange plague, and beasts overtook the town. Hunters rose up to purge this scourge, and one fought back the source of this epidemic to end the nightmare. *Bloodborne* is a video game released in 2015 for the PlayStation 4 and integrates story, setting, and gameplay in such a way that it could be considered one of the new millennium's better narrative-driven games.

Although one can play *Bloodborne* while encountering minimal story, the true brilliance of the tale it tells requires scouring every corner, getting to know each character, and paying close attention to the items found throughout the quest. Every item, from a top hat found in a graveyard to a pistol given at the beginning of the game, has an extensive history that helps paint a greater picture, the full scope of which can only be deciphered on a subsequent playthrough. For example, a tune from a music box that drives the tragic Father Gascoigne to madness will later be found to have a connection to a late game foe, and some players will find that an item that allows teleportation is used to imperfectly mimic the technique of one of the plot's central players. Additionally, the game rewards players who seek out information about the world. The brutally tough enemies who roam Old Yharnam, burned to ashes in an attempt to stop the plague, will cease attacking the player and run to preserve their own short lives at the sight of flames.

The gameplay, much like the story, is deceptively simple but

holds much depth. The controls allow multiple attacks, running, rolling, and opening the menu, but as the enemies become more complex, the setting more varied, players will find that each movement counts, and even one mistake will result in death. Although the environments—from a forest containing enough snakes to give Indiana Jones a heart attack to a great church featuring enemies that would make Lovecraft blush—are hostile and unwelcoming, the player may return at any time to the Hunter's Dream, where a doll made to serve them and Gehrman, a mentor-type character, will be glad to help equip them for the hunt.

The music adds to the Victorian aesthetic. Ryan Amon, Tsukasa Saitoh, Chris Velasco, Yuka Kitamura, Michael Wandmacher, and Nobuyoshi Suzuki worked together to create an unforgettable soundtrack. *Bloodborne*, much like parent series *Dark Souls*, takes a minimalistic approach by leaving footsteps and terrifying noises of approaching foes as the majority of the sounds a player will hear. Boss battles and certain locations all contain their own tracks to help dictate the mood. Some battle songs, such as "Blood-Starved Beast" and "Terror," feel ripped out of an old film noir and help immerse the player in Yharnam. Other ambient tracks, such as "Hail the Nightmare" and the ironically named "Soothing Hymn," will leave the player with many sleepless nights and warn them that these new locations are far more dangerous than what came before. Likewise, the soothing "Hunter's Dream" and "Moonlit Melody" will tell the player that, for once, they're safe from the heart-pounding terror that is *Bloodborne* and can relax until they're ready to leap back in.

Of course, one cannot discuss *Bloodborne* without mentioning the many prevalent themes and motifs. Perhaps the most prominent is that of eyes, or lack thereof. The very first thing players see when starting a new game is an eyeless face, and once they enter Central Yharnam, they'll find that this is not unusual in the slightest. Many friends and foes the player will come across have either no eyes or far too many. One character

will ask to be granted eyes, and even one boss is nothing more than an amalgamation of many eyes. Some witches collect eyes and attempt to steal the player's. One of the game's key mechanics, Insight, focuses around lining the brain with eyes to understand more. *Bloodborne* turns into a quest for knowledge as the player progresses, and the conflating of eyes with wisdom reinforces the theme that in the end, everybody simply seeks knowledge, and what differentiates people is only the ends to which each will go to achieve it.

Many other themes help further *Bloodborne*'s conflicts, but these are hidden beyond events that completely change the nature of the game and should be experienced firsthand. While the hunt takes center stage at the beginning of the game, there are countless details and elements that keep it compelling. From witnessing the increasing grotesqueness of the beasts as one ventures deeper into Yharnam to meeting the few individuals foolish enough to be outside and learning what they reveal about human nature, the game refuses to lose the player's interest.

Bloodborne has no happy endings. Every character the player meets will either be lost to madness by the end or has already given up. The player may come across a seemingly friendly figure only to be ambushed, and old allies will not always remain that way. Even the few safe havens for the terrified citizens can eventually be compromised. The game relentlessly punishes the naïve just as hasrhsly as it does the cynical with little to no relief. By the end, after witnessing devastation take everyone the player works to protect, they may find themselves just as mad as the characters within the game, struggling to find something that isn't there, and that is the true brilliance of *Bloodborne*.

The Self-Made Artist: An Interview with Damir Zoric

Miranda Ramirez

He stands on the corner, wearing skin-tight black jeans and an orange flannel, topped off by a dated NBA ball cap—no team, just the NBA insignia—as I parked outside the studio apartment in Upper Kirby. I had kept in touch with artist Damir Zoric via Facebook Messenger; he'd been enthused in his comments but a bit difficult to get in touch with up until the day of the interview. A jovial and boisterous guy by nature, he leads me through a small stone and gravel courtyard with a tour-guide-esque flourish. He describes the patio furniture and the neighbors in the small complex as we walk to the apartment. He shares his home with Sage, his "wife"—a loving title given with no regard to legality. She warmly offers me a cup of tea as we settle in.

Untitled

Not wanting to put Damir on edge, I start a casual conversation about the day—small talk naturally leads us to talking about art anyway as I'm an amateur painter myself. I share with him that I paint simply to improve my writing.

He laughs. "Do you think it will work in reverse for me?"

We sit in a room at the heart of Sage and Damir's home, a blue futon under my ass and a hairy orange shag carpet under my feet—he seats himself on the floor directly across from me. A large piece of unstretched canvas hangs dominantly in the background, the Dream Pop Spotify station plays lazily from

a wireless speaker on the coffee table between us. I gesture to his latest work—a four-by-six-foot Buddha seated on a cheeseburger.

"Something new?" I ask.

"Something new, kind of. This is a commissioned work for a good friend who recently lost her house in a fire."

"Whoa! That's intense," I say as he watches me consider the work.

"Yeah, she lost all of the work she had bought from me before, and I'd been supposed to complete this one for years, so it's lucky that I had been dragging my feet." We share a cynical chuckle at the irony. I take out my phone and tell him that I plan to record our conversation. His mood shifts slightly; I can tell that he is a bit more nervous than before. Consent granted—we begin.

HOW DOES PURSUING ART AS A LIFE BECOME A CAREER?

"It's hard to say. It just kind of happened. I had a natural ability, it was always kind of evident. I just kind of pick things up…I guess I was sort of good then, but I also worked at it."

WHAT ABOUT EDUCATION?

"No…not really, with the exception of taking every art class available in high school."

I comment on how that is pretty limited for an artist of his success.

"Yeah…[I'm] pretty much entirely self-taught. As far as deciding to pursue it as a career…you know, it just kind of happened."

At this point, Sage pipes up and says that Damir is happiest when he's making art, when he's creating. An exchanged smile between them seems to encourage him to continue.

DID YOU DECIDE TO PURSUE AN ART CAREER BEFORE OR AFTER YOUR FIRST SALE?

"I think that it came well after. It was inherent and undeniable from about 15 or 16 years old on. I started getting really into [art], thinking about it more and exploring it conceptually and kind of falling into it. [Then, I started] trying to develop the craft. Everybody seemed to like it. People [started] buying this shit, so I thought, I guess I can make money off of it…fuck a desk job."

WHEN YOU CREATE, ARE YOU REFLECTING ON YOURSELF OR SENDING A MESSAGE?

"I don't actually know what the fuck I'm thinking because most of my work is all reflective in one way or another. For me, when I make art, when I create, the vast majority of my work is completely non-premeditated. So I have no idea what I'm trying to paint or explore. Sometimes I'll have a bit of a mind map or maybe just words, concepts, ideas, or things maybe, and through the culmination of my daily experiences and things I am exposed to, the content and the emotions [of the work] start appearing, developing on their own [over] about a week or two, sometimes longer."

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A POP SURREALIST?

"I don't know if those are even my words. I would say the general scope of my work, the aesthetic, the nature of it, is surrealism-based [because] that's how I got into art. The early surrealists: [Salvador] Dalí, [René] Magritte, [André] Masson…you know, those guys. Then came later…I forget the artist's name. [Gerald Scarfe] did a lot of the artwork and art direction for Pink Floyd, especially on *The Wall*, [and he was] very similar to Ralph Steadman, who has also been a big influence on my work."

CAN WE TALK ABOUT YOUR PROCESS?

"Yeah, I paint with acrylic and house paints, typically matte."

We share another laugh—Damir has a way of making everyone

feel like a friend he's known for years. I prompt him to continue by asking him if he chooses to use mundane materials with intention or to be cost effective.

"It's both, for sure. It's also just really convenient. Just fucking going over to Home Depot to pick out twenty or thirty very particular colors—these guys just spit them out, mix it for you right on the spot—is actually one of my favorite things to do and to go contemplate the swatch wall. It kind of informs some of the work, too, but yeah, it is cost effective."

Hidden Kingdoms

It's easy to picture him standing cross-armed in the paint aisle, seeking inspiration from the various color palettes on display before him. It's reminiscent of Rockwellian images of little kids in candy stores.

"I can do [good work] just as well with a $3 can of paint. It is always acrylic because oil is just too slow. The work is very layered, and who wants to sit around and watch paint dry? I also use a lot of tape."

A cursory glance at the materials lying about the room indicates that this artist builds his own wood panel boards. There are at least five or six of them leaning against the walls and furniture, crowding the small living space. I ask him if building his own boards is a preference and why.

"Wood panel is pretty much all that I've painted on for seven or eight years now. It's cheaper, more practical, and more durable."

It's interesting to hear an artist talk about practicality so much, a consideration—rather, a *requirement*—for the

contemporary artist, or at least one trying to avoid the "starving artist" cliché. Sage chimes in again, informing me that Damir is a Virgo.

He laughs at her and continues, "I like to get right on top of [it], you know." He kneels to demonstrate. "Sometimes [the canvas] is on the wall, but a lot of the time, it's on the floor. I've got to be sitting on top of this shit."

WHAT IS THE ELEMENT OF YOUR WORK YOU ENJOY MOST?

"I want to say linework. It's really important in my work and it's one of the things I'm very proficient at. It's something I've been really inclined toward, for as long as I can remember. Then, of course, color, composition, [all of those] things that are essential to making art."

WHAT'S UNIQUE ABOUT YOU AND YOUR WORK?

"As kids, we all make art, drawing on shit we aren't supposed to. It's one of the first things you learn. Art came back into my life after immigrating to the United States in the 90s from Bosnia at the age of nine. Coming from a completely different part of the world, having to integrate into a completely different culture at a young age…starting school two or three weeks after we got here, not speaking the language…"

I ask him what his native tongue is.

"I'm from Bosnia [and Herzegovina]. Serbian is the predominant language. So art was kind of a vehicle for communication before I picked up the language. I got into drawing and comic book art."

ARE YOU COMMUNICATING VIA ART?

"I'm not exactly sure. It's the general conversation. We are all experiencing the same thing. We all have Trump as our president. Our daily waking experiences are curated in a way. Outside what you choose to focus on, there is a general narrative that pervades our subconscious. I don't have a plan. I'm just a kind of

receiver. That's really what the mind is—a receiving apparatus. Consumerism is an overall theme of my work, pervades all of it."

WHAT EXPERIENCES HAVE ENRICHED YOUR WORK?

"Living through a war. There was quite a big conflict in Eastern Europe at the time—in the Balkans. The country I was born in was formerly Yugoslavia, and, in the late 80s and mid-90s, there was a huge conflict—one of the messiest and most misunderstood wars in recent history. [It] had an impact on how I view the world. I can't say it was the worst experience, though. I mean—as you can imagine—it wasn't a highlight, but it came to shape a large part of my character. I'm definitely not a pacifist. I'm kind of aggressive but more passionate, compassionate, empathetic and grateful. I like to inspire peace in people but with no hesitation to get right to it. As far as injustice goes, I'm going to be like, 'no, hold up, player,' but [after escaping] four and a half years of conflict and having to do without supplies or electricity—people like to complain about fucking everything. People often forget about how much they actually do have. I guess the whole experience has made me more appreciative of things."

He stops for a moment, clearly reflecting on that time in his life.

"You know the words…just leave me, but that helped inform my political inclinations. The questioning of authority, the hierarchy of things, the general intersection you'll come to when you start thinking about life. You ask, 'hey, what's really going on here? This is completely fucking corrupt.' It's unavoidable. My work used to be unintentionally political, but that was what was being unearthed in me—what was coming

out. After a while, I was like, 'holy shit…whoa, hold up, why is [my work like] this?' That was in my mid-twenties, and I'm thirty now. I got to the point where I had to question why I was so politically inclined, and why it was showing up in my work. I realized that it was because I was a war refugee."

IS ART A CATHARTIC RELEASE?

"Totally. I'm sure that's what it is primarily, and then it's everything else."

I ask Damir if he recalls the title of the work he first sold. He doesn't, but he shares that he's always been a self-promoter. He recounts the times at sixteen years old when he'd wander into feminist bookstores and little cafés to ask them about putting his work on display. Damir notes that, since then, not much has changed.

"I've always tried to intentionally stay away from the bureaucracy of galleries, the institution of it. I prefer to just kind of go: 'What's up, guy. I see you've got some wall space, and I like what's going on in here. You want some of my weird art?'"

WHAT ARE YOUR ART WORLD PET PEEVES?

"Aw…man. I've got a book—a big one. People who criticize art and have no idea, who don't make anything. People who have read books about art, and want to tell you what's 'really' going on. The over-intellectualization of art, too."

WHAT'S GOING ON NOW? ANY CURRENT PROJECTS?

"Well I've been thinking about *Brave New World*, *1984*, Big Brother, shadow governments and things like that. I feel like people should question things instead of being like…"

He starts to laugh, and imitates the indifferent populace:

"'Oh, yes, may I have another?' 'I didn't even read the label. I'll have two.'"

WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO HOUSTON?

"My family emigrated from Bosnia to Milwaukee, Wisconsin—a

city built by socialists. I met Sage there, too. It's super fucking cold there. It's like Winterfell [from the show Game of Thrones]. Winter has come, and it's not leaving—it's too cold."

Sage turns to me and says they came to Houston for the art.

I ask them about their feelings towards Houston, its art scene in particular.

Sage explains. The scene here is ever growing, and they are much fonder of the warm weather.

Damir continues, "There's a lot of opportunity here, plus a good economy. The scene is fairly eclectic, and it's one of the most diverse cities in the country."

IS THE SCENE WELCOMING?

"Yeah, but I'm kind of on the outskirts. I'm also a hyper-social creature, embracing of all people. I'm just like, 'hey, what's up guys, want a hug?' I don't have much experience with the galleries, the institutions."

I ask him if he would ever show in one of these institutions.

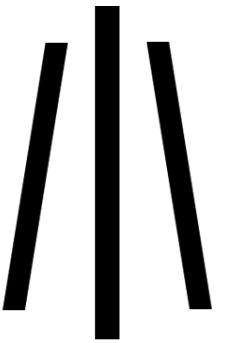
"I'm not sure. Maybe. Like I said, I somewhat have an aversion to it all, but [it] depends on the people."

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN ARTIST?

"It's just a never ending shit-show or shit-storm of challenges and confronting resistance. Art is getting more and more important. It's 2018, and the world has changed so much in just a couple of years. It's going to continue to change exponentially, and infinitely faster. There's such a disconnect between people these days. I think it's vitally important for people to remember that we're all the fucking same. We are all here for each other. Let's make the most of it. Inspire one another via art, music or whatever. Connection is what is most needed in the world today, and I think that music and art have [the ability] to bring people of different backgrounds, belief systems, and perspectives—suspend them for a moment beyond all that—to have this shared experience where none of that matters. Because it doesn't."

A Growing Disconnect

Find out more about Damir Zoric online at damirzoric.com



Contributors

Jeremy Amorin is a writer, filmmaker, and entrepreneur from Houston, TX, who aspires to be a renowned name in original fiction throughout the world. He is a first-generation American—both of his parents are from Accra, Ghana—and his dream career is unencumbered storytelling through every available medium, from literature to film to music and more.

Erin Andrea is full of nightmares and fears. She beats them up in Krav Maga and runs from them on horseback through the desert. She also feels compelled to share them in her writing. She's an undergraduate student with the University of Houston, and *Glass Mountain* is her published writing debut.

Anne Anthony's poems have been published in *Poetry South, Postcard Poems and Prose Magazine, Atlas Poetica: A Journal of World Tanka, Blue Heron Review* and other literary journals. Her poem, "Dry Creek," was included in *Inside the Bell Jar's* mental health anthology, *We Run Through the Dark Together*. She recently co-edited an anthology of flash fiction for adults with memory loss, *The Collection: Flash Fiction for Flash Memory.* She lives in North Carolina.

Matthew Barrett is a junior photography/digital media major at the University of Houston. His work has spanned the likes of journalism, sports, art and commercial work since enrolling into the program. The Marine Corps veteran specializes in photography and videography and established Matthew A. Barrett Digital Media LLC in November 2017.

Alyssa Basquez is currently studying at the University of Houston to get her BFA in painting. She is a junior. Painting is hard for her, as she feels like she can't dominate the direction the media takes, like graphite on paper, but she still enjoys painting regardless. She has been challenged by the pursuit of her degree.

Michael A. Beard is a nineteen-year-old aspiring writer and author. He is currently a freshman at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and is majoring in creative writing. The most notable publication Michael has been part of is the 2018 edition of the *Sequoya Review,* UTC's annual literary and arts magazine, where one of his poems, "Down and Up," and letters, "Dear _____," were published. He was also a part of his high school's literary magazine, having two poems featured.

Samantha Cooley is an aspiring author and artist. She has recently self-published her first poetry and art book, *Your Breath and Other Drugs*. Currently, she is attending the University of Houston and working part-time selling her art work, which features the daily struggles of LGBTQ, women, and people of color.

Eli Cranor writes from Arkansas where he lives with his wife and daughter. His work is forthcoming in the *Greensboro Review*, and has appeared recently in *BULL*, *Electica Magazine*, and the *Arkansas Review*. For more information visit elicranor.com.

Grace Deal is a Houston-based painter, visual artist, and student. She was born in Dayton, Ohio, but has relocated to Houston to further her studies. She's currently studying painting in the Block program at the University of Houston, and plans to receive her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the university's Honors College in the spring of 2019. She has been published in *Houstonia* and *Inkblots*. To see more of Deal's work you can visit her website, gracedeal.com.

William Faour is an aspiring writer who's dabbled in the world of short stories and literary fiction before and is currently focusing on writing a series of novels. He enjoys reading all sorts of literature and stories under such a critical lens that some of his friends believe that he doesn't enjoy anything. He studies creative writing and political science at the University of Houston as a sophomore and is enrolled in the Honors College.

Danielle Haas Freeman is originally from New York City, where her first writing teacher was her mother. Her father grew up in Omaha, inspiring a fascination with this Midwestern city. Danielle is also a graduate of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where she completed her degree in chemistry and hispanic studies. In 2014, she won Bowdoin's Nonfiction Prize. In 2017, she founded a project at Bowdoin promoting public awareness of science through writing (students.bowdoin.edu/student-scientists). Since graduating in 2017, she has worked at Bowdoin as a chemistry lab instructor and writes stories whenever she is able.

Through painting and sculpture, **Elizabeth Gates** investigates gender politics and domestic norms hoping to create a positive dialogue about the world she wishes to live in. Her work personifies her love of home and hearth mixed with her determination to live life on her own terms.

Robin Gow's poetry has recently been published in *Synaesthesia, The Write Launch, FIVE:2:ONE* and *Corbel Stone Press*. He is an undergraduate student at Ursinus College studying English, creative writing and Spanish. He runs two poetry blogs and serves as the production editor of *The Lantern*. He is an out and proud transgender man passionate about LGBT issues.

Samuel Griffith writes and studies in Austin, Texas. He studies writing and rhetoric at St. Edward's University, where he spends his time running, writing and searching for new challenges. Originally from New Orleans, Samuel's work focuses on the intricacies and issues of his hometown, as well as the people who surround it.

Lida Hedayatpour is a sophomore attending University of Houston Honors College. While she is seeking a career in law or academia, one of Lida's hobbies is to write poetry. She most commonly writes about love, mental strife and her relationship being both an Iranian and an American citizen. She has been published in Z Publishing's *Best Emerging Poet Series*, has taken a poetry writing course at UH, and has performed spoken word at Girls Rock, an event that showcases the talents of women at UH.

Jeff Howard is the former editor of the campus journal *Black Rock & Sage* at Idaho State University. Prior to being editor, he also published poetry and essays in that journal and in Utah State University's *Scribendi*. He lives and writes in Pocatello, Idaho, with his wife and two young sons.

Melissa Ostrom teaches English at Genesee Community College and lives with her husband and children in Holley, New York. Her fiction has appeared in *The Florida Review, Quarter After Eight, The Baltimore Review* and *Passages North*, among other journals. *The Beloved Wild* (Macmillan, March 2018) is her YA debut. Macmillan will also be publishing her second novel, tentatively titled *The Unleaving,* in March 2019.

Wendy Perez is a junior at the University of Houston. She is currently completing a studio practice as a part of her studies in painting. She will earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts with a minor in business. Perez concentrates her style of painting in a manner in which the subject or object should be the main answer, and laid in front of the canvas.

William Piedimonte is a senior pursuing a BFA in creative writing at Truman State University. He has been published by *Prairie Margins* and *GFT Presents: One in Four*, and will pursue an MFA in poetry at Bowling Green State University in Fall 2018.

Miranda Ramirez is an artist who works in a variety of media. A heart and soul Houstonian whose works are enriched with a desire to convey a poignant message regarding reaction, equality and femininity. A current student at the University of Houston whose artistic focus is creating meaningful works of fiction and poetry, while incorporating both into her love of printmaking. An educator and active member of the community, Ramirez is eager to be a positive influence on the diverse culture that is Houston. She hopes that her writing and visual artistry can serve as a pulpit for this goal.

D.M. Rice is a nonbinary writer from Dallas, Texas, with interests including psychoanalysis, ancient religions and a nice cup of tea.

To resuscitate his long-neglected right brain, **Jim Ross** resumed creative pursuits in 2015 after retiring from public health research. He's since published 60 pieces of nonfiction, several poems, and over 180 photos in 70 journals in North America, Europe, and Asia. His publication credits include *1966, Bombay Gin, Columbia Journal, Entropy, Friends Journal, Gravel, Ilanot Review, Lunch Ticket, MAKE, Pif, Stoneboat, The Atlantic* and *Thin Air*. He hopes to move in the direction of more long-form reporting with photos. He and his wife—parents of two health professionals and grandparents of four toddlers—split their time between Maryland and West Virginia.

Daniellie Silva is a junior majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing. Currently, she is trying to master the language of Spanish. Her home country of Belize, the reality dating show *The Bachelor*, Mexican telenovelas and obscure poetry are major influences in her writing.

Christine Stoddard is a Salvadoran-American writer and artist, the founder of *Quail Bell Magazine*, and a VCUarts graduate. Her work has appeared in the New York Transit Museum, FiveMyles Gallery, the Ground Zero Hurricane Katrina Museum, the Poe Museum, *The Huffington Post*, the Queens Museum and beyond. Last summer, Christine was the artist-in-residence at Annmarie Sculpture Garden & Art Center, a Smithsonian affiliate in Maryland. Her next books, *Water for the Cactus Woman* (Spuyten Duyvil), *Belladonna Magic* (Shanti Arts) and *Desert Fox by the Sea* (Hoot 'n' Waddle) are forthcoming.

Colin J. Sturdevant obtained his BA in creative writing with a focus in fiction from the University of Houston. He is a high school English Language Arts teacher and serves as Faculty Editor for *TX.CAN.LIT*—a lit mag that publishes work by high schoolers. His work has appeared in *Rufous City Review, Banango Street, Zaum* and elsewhere. He's also more interested in the people reading this.

Austin Svedjan is a budding literary critic and Research Travel Fellow studying English literature at the University of Houston. He is currently the Co-Managing Editor of *Glass Mountain*. His work is published in *Drunk Magazine* and *Glass Mountain*, and is forthcoming in the fall 2018 anthology *Through Mama's Eyes: Unique Perspectives on Southern Matriarchy*.

Alexa Terrell is a senior at Washington & Jefferson College where she studies English literature and serves as Editor-in-Chief for the *Wooden Tooth Review.* Her poetry has been published in *1932 Quarterly*.

Anne Hunley Trisler is a poet, musician, and songwriter whose work has appeared in *Mothering, Struggle, Barbaric Yawp, The Sow's Ear Poetry Review* and *Wild Goose Poetry Review,* and is forthcoming in *The Iris Review* and *Phoenix Literary Arts Magazine*. A winner of the University of Tennessee's Margaret Artley Woodruff Award for Creative Writing for her poetry and an Eleanora Burke award for her creative nonfiction, she lives in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Karen Walters is currently pursuing her BFA in painting. She tries to paint, as many do, as a form of exploration. She believes it's important for everyone to have a medium to express themselves, as she feels that through communication we can find a connection that needs to be strengthened in today's society.

Solana Warner is a writer and senior undergraduate student at Ursinus College. Her work has been published in *Pennsylvania's Best Emerging Poets* and Ursinus College's literary magazine, *The Lantern*. She currently serves as Head Editor of *The Lantern* and intends to pursue a job in the publishing industry after graduation.

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