



Black Rock & Sage

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Idaho State University

Black Rock & Sage is a journal of creative works published annually through the Department of English and Philosophy at Idaho State University with assistance from the Art and Music Departments. All artistic contributions, from design to literature to music, have been produced by graduate and undergraduate students in departments from across the university. Submissions are received from September through February. For more information about the journal, see our website at www.isu.edu/blackrock.

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Cover: Detail of "Black Dynamic Tree" by Reagan Hailey

Black Rock & Sage

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Editor's Note

My one-year-old son has a Pack' N Play in the editor's office. During the first few months of this job, I spent lots of time in the office working. When it was naptime, I would choose one of Max's Pandora stations, usually Disney songs, Pete Seeger, or Miles Davis, and he would fall asleep in my arms while I typed op-eds or memos or emails. He's already invested a high percentage of his short life in this venture, and I'm alright with that. It's still a little early for him to understand the point of all of this, and yet I feel that the editors' efforts on this year's issue have already begun to affirm the importance of artistic production, dialogue, and activism.

The writing in this year's issue of *Black Rock & Sage* is an encouraging reflection of ISU's creative writing faculty and students. Our prose pieces include Christopher Swensen's story "The Wake," this year's Prose Prize winner, in which a girl's relationship with her deceased father takes shape in the hauntingly powerful image of a whale trapped on a shoreline. Stephanie Bachman's whimsical piece, "A Face in the Crowd," uses a beleaguered store clerk's interaction with store mannequins and customers to explore the relationship between identity, pop culture, and representations of femininity, while Mallori LaMoure's "The Try after the Tries that Fail" follows an unwed mother trying to do what is best for her son while struggling to balance issues of family and school.

The poetry in this issue is equally impressive and diverse. "Meditation on Nothing" by Shelley McEuen, "Garden Lawns" by Jacob Thomas, and "All the Girls" by Galilea Lavariega investigate through different scenarios complex connections between language, ethnicity, and conformity. "Haiku in Idaho," a sequence of six Irish-Gaelic haikus written by Séamus Ó Súilleabháin and translated by

Séamus and Junichi Ito into English and Japanese, use linguistic diversity as a way to de-familiarize the traditional haiku. And speaking of de-familiarization, Tommy Flynn's poem "Love" provides a fascinating representation of romantic love in the interactions of two dodos building a nest and wagging their tail feathers in satisfaction.

This issue would not have been possible without the support of the other senior editors, Corinna Barrett and Anelise Farris. I also thank our many assistant editors, whose opinions were both instrumental and insightful in selecting pieces for the journal. I am grateful for our faculty supervisor, Susan Goslee, her drive to improve the magazine year after year, and her faith in the editorial staff. Finally, I'd like to thank all of our contributors who have not been named here, as well as our faculty judges and consultants in the English, Art, and Music Departments, both at ISU and at the University of Utah, for their contributions in helping us produce a high-quality and diverse journal and continue our mission to foster and facilitate creative expression and community.

BR&S Musical Performances

- 1 Rumeng Liao, Freshman Violin Performance Major.
Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Minor, BWV 1001, *Adagio and Presto*,
by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750).
- 2 Alyssa Gardner, Freshman Piano Performance Major.
“*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir*” (Sounds
and perfumes swirl in the evening air), *Preludes*, Book 1, No.
4, by Claude Debussy (1862–1918).
- 3 Shaun Stubblefield, Senior Vocal Performance Major.
Natalia Lauk, piano, Graduate of Krasnoyarsk State Academy of
Arts, Krasnoyarsk, Russia.
Premonitions, by Charles Ives (1874–1954).
- 4 Kyle Strunk, Junior Percussion Performance Major.
Jake Knievel, marimba.
Catching Shadows, by Ivan Trevino (b. 1983).
- 5 Shelby Murdock, Junior Music Education Major.
Matthew Hartz, guitar.
Sherelle Christensen, bass.
The Growling Old Man and Cackling Woman Medley
(traditional), arr. Shelby Rae Russell-Murdock (b. 1995).
- 6 Adam J. Merrill, Freshman Piano Performance Major.
Intermezzo in C-sharp Minor, Op. 117, No. 3, by Johannes
Brahms (1833–1897).
- 7 Kiya Fife, Senior Music Performance Major.
Natalia Lauk, piano.
Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho (traditional), arr. Mark
Hayes (b. 1953).
- 8 Bradley Korth, composer, Senior Music Performance Major.
Connor O’Farrell, trombone, Junior Music Education Major.
Jedd Greenhalgh, violin, Junior Violin Performance Major.
Three American Majesties, II. Grand Canyon, by Bradley
Korth (b. 1989).
- 9 Alister Tencate, Senior Physics Major and Music Minor.
Prelude and Allegro, from Suite No. 1 for Solo Cello,
by Ernest Bloch (1880–1959).
- 10 Marissa Walker, Junior Vocal Performance Major.
Alexis Walker, piano, Junior Piano Performance Major.
“*O mio babbino caro*” (O My Beloved Father) from *Gianni
Schicchi*, by Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924).
- 11 Hui Sun, Senior Music Performance Major.
Étude Tableaux in C Minor, Op. 39, No. 1, by Sergei
Rachmaninov (1873–1943).
- 12 Kyle Strunk, composer, Junior Percussion Performance Major.

Green

Why trade loose needles wet spring dripping long
for an incline of fragment? Fresh
fragility spokes spread in strength test—
spine-resolve amidst besieged song

and no crocus certainty or offer
thrust through dirt decaying toward warmest ray-
filled air. Moss-brain, moss-feet, moss-heart made gray
with rodent voice all disclaimer and fur-

drip, dripping resolve wearing against heat-pierce,
awl-scorch. Absorption in softer softening
softest drip until no caked force more, the

yielding slow in form-ful grace
bolded most when quietly moon-orbed.
Breathing fecund space is to be made, finally green.

Hayden Holbrook, soprano saxophone, Senior Music
Performance Major.

Jonathan Armstrong, alto saxophone, Assistant Professor of
Music.

Douglas Withrow, tenor saxophone, Senior Music Education
Major.

Jack de Tombe, piano, Sophomore Piano Performance Major.

Lisa Summers-Hall, bass guitar.

Matthew Tanaka, trombone, Junior Bachelor of Arts in Music
Major.

Bleeding Blue, by Kylie Strunk (b. 1995).

13 Matthew Tanaka, composer, Junior Music Major.

Hayden Holbrook, soprano saxophone, Senior Music
Performance Major.

Douglas Withrow, tenor saxophone, Senior Music Education
Major.

Kylie Strunk, drums, Junior Percussion Performance Major.

Jack de Tombe, piano, Sophomore Piano Performance Major.

Lisa Summers-Hall, bass guitar.

Call of the Void, by Matthew Tanaka (b. 1994).

14 Hayden Holbrook, Senior Saxophone Performance Major.

Aaron Hayes, piano, Graduate of Wheaton College.

Concertino da Camera, by Jacques Ibert (1890–1962).

thrill.

Speeding without brake fluid
on a prematurely frosty night, looking
all ways while turning because of the head
between his legs, Driver plows forward
to Parkinson's Street. He is trying something to numb
that he read on everyone's tumblr, a rush.

Nervous about not crashing or crashing makes
it hard to enjoy the head between his
legs. Driver imagines the Tropic of Cancer's
beach to make it hot and to make blood
flow. He is trying something to improve that
everyone's psychiatrist told him, a trick.

The head between his legs is using too much
bone on bone as Driver speeds by
Dementia Discotheque towards Seventh Street. He
considers entreating a different game
in the car. He is trying something to live that
everyone's *GQ* wrote down, a method.

A settling frosty night taints the roads
and the vehicle as Driver slides into a
semi for Bloodsugar Bars, and the head
is just barely between his legs, a visible
crack. He is seeing something
Saw envisioned, a gore.

The denying truck driver sees
Driver wallowing in hot blood flow
while he walks up to the aftermath. The head
between his legs leaves the world on
Third Street by Suicide Sweets. 911. He is doing something
everyone's television showed, a

A Face in the Crowd

It had been the starting week of December when Diane McDermitt first noticed that the mannequin had moved on its own.

It was closing time, and she was hastily assisting two elderly women: one with a handsewn scarf that smelled like mothballs and old cologne and the other with a set of false teeth that clattered when she opened her mouth. They spoke in dawdling, shaky voices, pointing at different blazers and asking for her to take them off the mannequins. Diane had to pause and remind them again and again, “Those are display only. But if you come over here we have what you’re looking for . . .”

The one with the false teeth clucked in disappointment. Her long, huge-knuckled finger pointed at the mannequin’s navy silk blazer. “This one has a white scarf with it. Marlene, we want scarves with the blazers, don’t we?”

The one with the smelly scarf, Marlene, grunted, “I’ve got mine already. See if you can match ours. Sherry, we’ll look like quite the pretty peaches when our husbands see us.” She turned to Diane. Her eyes vaguely found her face. “It’s a cruise work party; we must look darling for it.”

Diane smiled with a tight mouth. Out past the pillars of clothing racks and jewelry stalls, the lights in the shopping center were fluttering off. “I can assure you that you will.” For an extra portion of flattery, she went on, “Your husbands are lucky to have elegant ladies like yourselves.”

Neither of them answered back, though they had heard her, and meandered back to the mannequin’s blazer. Diane not-so-furtively kept glancing at her silver watch with false crystals dotting

its circumference. She drew a few heavy breaths. Her husband would get home before her. He would see the Christmas gift decorations—mason jars and pinecones and glitter—that were intended for every family in the neighborhood, still scattered all over the living room floor, and spill into a stern lecture over wasting time and money on tacky holiday crafts and how no one wanted a mason jar with a pinecone stuck inside it.

“That’s not what they will look like though.” She groaned through her smile as she lowered her silver watch. She’d heard of the idea from her other co-workers and had decided to try it this year.

“Marlene, pull the arm through—I’ll hold it.”

Diane shifted her head toward the two elderly women. The one with false teeth, Sherry, was hugging the mannequin’s legs, her face stuffed into its pleated skirt, as Marlene raised her arms high and began peeling the blazer off like she was peeling an orange’s skin.

She swept toward the situation at once, her pencil skirt constricting any stride longer than a foot. “Ladies.” Her voice was sugary. She blinked a few times, as if the sight of them tugging the clothing off the mannequin would vanish with the closing of her eyelids. “As I said before, we do not take the clothing off the mannequins. I can find the correct size and color of blazer that you are looking for. Please release the display.”

Sherry withdrew her grasp instantly, and the mannequin was yanked off its stand and collapsed into dilapidated pieces onto Marlene. The woman shrieked and leapt away from the tumbling white limbs, still gripping the blazer in her hand.

Diane smiled tighter. “Ma’am, please.”

Marlene raised the blazer up. The mannequin’s torso flipped around. The other arm unlatched from the socket and slid like a snake out of the sleeve. It rattled to the floor.

“I wanted this blazer,” Marlene said, shaking it out as if it’d been covered in dust. What she really needed to do was shake out her mold-smelling scarf, Diane noted, and her woolen sweater. Luckily the woman was buying something more in fashion. “Its shade is more cobalt than the others—those were navy.”

Diane’s smile stuck even as she stared at the mannequin’s scattered torso and limbs. At least its head—complete with a red wig—was still attached to its body. The head was the most difficult to put back on.

As soon as Diane rang up two blazers, two scarves—Marlene decided to buy the one on the mannequin as well—and two new pleated skirts, the two women vanished behind the sliding glass doors into the dark, snowy night. Diane slowly began to unravel her face muscles. It hurt to smile for so long, but it was the constant genial attitude that brought the customers in. She rubbed her cheeks and drew her fingers back—and paused. Faint tan smears lined her hands.

“Oh, drat,” she announced, and glanced in the jewelry mirror near the cash register. Just as she feared, streaks of her foundation had smeared off onto her hands. She must have been sweating for it to come off. Her regular pale skin stood out. She fixed and rubbed it in the best she could, straightened her white collared shirt with her name tag, and began de-cluttering the front desk.

Really, it wasn’t even her job tonight. Her other co-worker, Linda, should’ve been here helping. But she ditched early, saying there was a showing of *Roman Holiday* and Gregory was promising to take her to that new seafood restaurant that opened last month after. She’d left an hour before her shift ended, leaving Diane the lone employee to manage the store. They were open slightly later than the other stores in the mall. By the time Marlene and Sherry left, the main lights out in the shopping lobbies were dark.

Diane fussed with the jewelry that’d fallen from the racks when the elderly women poked and prodded while waiting for their clothing to be bagged. Most of them were plastic; and when they hit the laminated tiles, the beads or crystals would break, or they’d tangle together and she’d have to meticulously pull them apart.

She stood stiffly (the pencil skirt was lovely but didn’t provide much movement) and checked the time. Ten-twenty-one. She was supposed to have closed twenty minutes ago. And she still hadn’t finished cleaning up!

Her husband, Franklin, would certainly be home by now. She imagined the distasteful shake of his head as he stared at the messy living room. She’d already been chastised last week, and the month before then. Franklin wasn’t fond of the creative gifts that she would sculpt in her free time. Last week it was the hand-painted aprons for her book club, with wagon wheels on a red background she sketched and painted herself, in honor of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Way West*. And before that, it was a whole wardrobe of Barbie clothes for her niece Connie’s birthday, who lived way up in Vermont.

“Are you sure Connie even has a Barbie doll?” Franklin had asked, blinking at the fabric strewn out across the kitchen table as if the pink shade assaulted his eyes.

“Every little girl her age does, darling,” she had replied.

Diane admired the newly-fixed jewelry rack and turned to the mess of a mannequin, where she’d left it on the laminated, glowing white tiles.

Where she’d left it.

Where had she left it?

It’d been in front of the rack of navy blazers, hadn’t it?

She left the front cashier desk and stopped where the mannequin had been. The stand which it had been resting on was

occupied. The mannequin's red-wigged head was tilted to the side, its painted face elegant with pomp, its body poised with upturned hands, as if it was in a puzzled state. The blazer and scarf were gone; the old woman had stripped them off. Only a collared white shirt and pleated skirt remained.

Diane stared. Had those old women picked it up before they left? No. She distinctly remembered them swinging their bags and crashing them into clothing racks on the way out. Had she fixed the mess? Sometimes she blanked out while she was working. It wasn't a job that required much intricate thought. Just smile, be pretty, and let others know that they too will look pretty if they wear the latest balloon jacket and bugle joy skirts with silk floral patterns.

And yet Diane couldn't recall any moment in which she had picked up and pieced the mannequin back together.

• • •

Later that night, she set down a plate of string bean casserole and settled into a chair opposite of Franklin's. The newspaper was shuffled up to his nose, his eyes darting over the ads section.

"Frank, the oddest thing happened at work today." Diane dug a large spoon into the casserole. "There was this mannequin that some old ladies had knocked over, and when I went to pick it up, it was already back on its stand!"

Franklin slowly lowered the paper. "It's that job of yours . . ." His voice was flat. "You must be going slightly mad. I don't know how you manage with all those women who demand the most expensive things." A distasteful grimace appeared on his face as he set the paper down. "String beans? Again? Darling, we had this three days ago."

"There were leftovers." She bit into the rubbery spoonful. "And as it's Christmas time, I thought we could save up some extra

money for gifts for each other."

He made a noise in the back of his throat and glanced down at the paper again. "And what is it that you want?"

What Diane really wanted was that expensive black and white tulle dress that they'd had in stock for a few months, the one that was based on the dress that Grace Kelly wore in *Rear Window*. It was elegant and sensual, and she thought that if Franklin happened to see her in it, he might fasten his eyes on her and lower a cigarette from his mouth (he didn't smoke, but many gentlemen in the movies did, and they always lowered it when the female lead appeared), astonished at her finely-cut and graceful figure.

"I know." He pointed a finger at the newspaper ad and said with a lighted voice, "A dishwasher! You always complain about doing the dishes. This will free up your evenings."

"Dishwashers can be expensive." She rubbed her fingers absently. "And I don't mind dishes as long as I can get a little help from you. But I have an idea of what I want—I've been eyeing it since October."

He tapped the dishwasher ad a few times as if making a mental note before raising his head up. "And what is that?"

"It's a black and white tulle dress at my work. I haven't had a new dress for at least a year, and all my others are beginning to fade."

"Another dress?" His finger tapped the ad again. "We bought you a skirt just a few months ago. What's wrong with that one?"

"That is one for work." She replied. "And as I wear it as my uniform, it's gotten rather worn out."

"Well then I'll get you another skirt." He pinched his lips together, sliding his finger off the ad. "And perhaps some more jewelry. Anything you like, within reason. But just tell me if you have your eyes on a certain piece, and I'll stop by."

Diane just slipped a goopy string bean spoonful into her mouth and chewed.

• • •

The second week in December brought in a swell of customers. Diane was at the cash register, where there was a flurry of hands exchanging pastel skirts and plastic high heels and thick wads of dollar bills over counters littered with silver necklaces and wooden hairbrushes for only fifty-five cents. All around her were smells of perfumes—cinnamon and vanilla, fragrances of sultry scents or pageantry daisies, all wafting off customers who chattered and laughed. The sounds and smells of it all was a sanctuary to Diane, especially since last night when Franklin had chided her yet again on the mason jar craft after dinner. He'd stepped barefoot on a pinecone and had erupted into colorful language—she cringed when he used words like that. She was glad when he dropped her off at work. Here she was among sights and sounds she enjoyed and didn't have to deal with his angry moods.

At two she shifted from cash register to assistance, and she walked around with a wide grin and let ladies know what measurements would work best for an apple or hourglass shape. She had just finished helping a young college girl fit into a high-waisted skirt when she heard a voice behind her.

"I need your help."

"Of course. What can I help you with?" She said in a chirpy voice, spinning around with her skirt flouncing at her calves. No one in her direct sight was looking at her, though there were people all around her. Perhaps they had been speaking to someone else.

"This way. I need your help."

No. That voice was distinctly speaking to her. She caught her

reflection on a wall mirror. A dash of white and black shifted behind her, behind a clothing rack.

"Excuse me?" She turned once more and followed where the figure had gone with the clothing article. If she wasn't mistaken, it was the black and white tulle dress, the one that was placed near the front of the store. Her heart dipped. Someone was buying it. Someone with a husband who was willing to spend a little more on her, someone who would love to see the material against her skin.

Diane caught the same black and white flicker again, directly ahead. She parted her mouth, then startled. The customer's skin was a porcelain white, with red painted lips and reddish hair so elegant it seemed like a wig. On her arm was the tulle dress.

Diane hesitated a moment too long because the customer shifted behind a horde of high school girls.

And then Diane turned and began toward each of the mannequins' displays. One sluggish day Linda and she had named them. Edith was by the shoe section. Sandra, the mannequin who resembled a past co-worker, was by the purses and coat section. Regina, Deborah, and Francis—named after schoolgirls they'd both disliked in high school—all advertised the winter fashion in the common clothing area. And Judith, the one who'd been manhandled by the old women, should be by the formal wear.

Should be.

Diane's heels clicked as she strode across the white tiles and maneuvered around clusters of women. She slowed near the formal wear, catching a glimpse of mannequin Judith's red wig before the view was blocked as a heavyset woman in a cashmere coat sauntered by. Once the woman passed, Diane stopped in front of Judith.

Her smile quivered. Judith's hands were still poised as if questioning. She'd put a new blazer and scarf on the dummy, a gray

one with giant, clear buttons. But in the crook of the mannequin's elbow was the black and white tulle dress. Diane stared into the plastic figure's face, inspecting the slight chip in red painted lips, the just barely noticeable fading eyelashes, like they were inked words whose typewriter was just beginning to run out of ink. Then she reached out and removed the dress from the mannequin's arm.

Someone placed it there. It did not move. Someone placed it there. Diane's heels clicked with the syllables in her mind as she walked around the store and placed the dress gently back on the rack. On her way back, she nearly collided with Linda, whose arms were full of brown shoe boxes. Her co-worker's balance teetered. Diane quickly snatched the boxes out of Linda's hands and righted her friend.

"Diane," Linda laughed breathlessly, "that fall could've damaged the shoes. Thank goodness you were here."

Diane set the boxes down in the shoe section and turned to Linda. "I think Judith moved."

The humor in Linda's eyes lessened. "Judith? The mannequin?"

"Yes."

They both remembered the last time this happened with a past co-worker. Linda walked over and began taking the shoes out of their boxes and placing them on the stands. She then faced Diane. "It means nothing. It is a busy season, so of course they'll seize the chance to move around."

Diane glanced away from the brown Mary Janes to one of the mirrors hung about the store. Her face was pale, like her porcelain china plates in her dining room. She didn't put on her foundation that morning—Franklin was never a fan of her make up habits, and she wasn't in the mood to have a quarrel with him as they both got ready.

Diane's eyes drifted to Linda's shoe display, though it

was displayed in an awkward layout. She absently stepped in and rearranged it so that the eye was drawn to the most expensive one, a high heel with a satin poppy print.

Linda watched her, her eyes like a mouse's: watchful and quiet. "You've always been so good at displays. How did your Christmas mason jar gifts come along? I would love to help you get them finished—it was such a creative idea."

Diane laughed. "I had to toss the pinecones. Franklin stepped on one and said the glitter was a nightmare to vacuum up."

"Well you still have the mason jars," Linda said. "Let's do something with them. Mason jars are so flexible when you're deciding what type of crafts to make. How does that sound?"

• • •

By the end of the week, Diane could already sense customer fatigue. Ladies who'd sought out in vain the best clothing were now on their third and fourth outing to find something at least suitable for their sisters, mothers, daughters, friends. They were more agitated, more likely to bark answers than reply in enthusiasm. *These few weeks leading up until Christmas were always the worst*, Diane thought.

It was an hour before closing time on a surprisingly slow Saturday night when Linda pressed a hand to her temple. "There's a few customers wandering around the front of the store. I don't know what they want. Diane, I have to order some more stockings and jewelry. Would you please attend to them?"

Diane, in all politeness, nodded briskly and headed out. She was supposed to have tonight off. Franklin had his off, and he was at home right now strewn out on the couch. Perhaps he had moved the mason jars off the kitchen table to set down his dinner plate, or perhaps he brought his plate to the couch to eat. He'd set it on the

couch's arm when he was done. When she walked through the door after work, she'd pick it up and go rinse the crusted food off it.

She saw the customers—recognized their handmade scarves and old false teeth. Both old ladies were bent over floppy white hat displays. "Good evening, ladies. Is there anything I can help you with?"

The one she remembered as Marlene straightened her back as best she could and said, "I want a hat like this," she pointed at an eggshell-colored hat with lace and beadwork at the hem, "but I don't want the color or the shape of it."

Diane paused. "So, you want a different type of hat."

"No." Marlene waved her hand in dismissal. "I want this hat, but I don't like the frills or the little beads on it. And I want it in mauve."

"Or pansy-colored," Sherry commented, poking at a hat made of cotton.

Diane went to a different hat and picked it up. "This one is similar to the white one—same structure, but no extra decorations. And its slight maroon shade is the closest we have to mauve."

"That one looks far too old-fashioned." Marlene pointed at it with her quivering finger. "Don't you have any others in stock?"

Diane smiled with her teeth. "I'm afraid this is all we have."

Marlene made a gurgling noise in her mouth and re-tossed her scarf over her shoulder. "When I worked in the '20s, I made sure we had whatever a customer wanted. This generation is like a wet blanket. Shall we go, Sherry?"

The other woman was trying on a straw boater hat and laughing at herself in the mirror. Marlene grabbed her arm and knocked the hat off her head. "Come along."

Diane felt a flutter of nerves in her chest. "We . . . we can find

another hat for you! I can check the back room to see if we have what you want."

"Go back to modeling that little name tag of yours, Darling," Marlene replied and exited through the glass doors.

Diane's neck and cheeks were burning as she stretched down to pick up the boater hat on the floor tiles. When she straightened, she came face-to-face with Judith the mannequin, who was standing with hands out in that pensive pose: *To buy, or not to buy?*

Diane scanned the mannequin's calm, relaxed expression, her figure draped in a golden dress. A black veiled hat was propped on her head, beautiful and elegant. She looked in total reverie with half-closed eyelids and a dreamy smile.

Diane sighed. Judith shouldn't be in this section. She stared up at the mannequin, half-stuck between picking her up or leaving her when Linda's heels clicked by.

"Diane! Where'd the customers go?"

"I did it wrong," she said, continuing to stare vacantly at Judith. "I should have shown them our nicer hats. Some of the purple ones we have in back. Or some of the mink furs we just got in stock. There's always something."

Linda grabbed Diane by the elbows, her eyes flickering toward Judith, and began leading her back to the front desk. "Never mind them. You should see me when a customer gets angry at the size charts. Always complaining they're a six when they're really a sixteen. I try hard, but I always manage to insult them. It's quite a sad attempt."

Diane rubbed her cold jaw as she listened to Linda prattle on about the day's customers. She kept glancing at the mirrors—at the red lipstick that brought out her creamy complexion and her smile that was beginning to hurt her cheeks, and the rigid black name tag on her shirt that was stiff and clunky against her chest.

They decided to leave Judith where she was for the night. Neither of them had shifts for at least two more days. “Let one of the other ladies worry about it,” Linda said as they flicked off the lights and locked the doors. From the glass windows, Judith’s shape was only a black silhouette residing near the entrance.

• • •

By the next week, Diane had thought of why Judith had been moving more frequently. It had always frightened her when any of the mannequins moved, but the whole situation had gradually shifted from Diane’s mind. She began to think of it in relative terms. What was a mannequin, anyway? A lovely figure who modeled clothing and smiled. She didn’t need to fear them. Perhaps, they, like her, admired the elegant shapes of Mary Janes, the frills of a silk blouse, and how the color black cut a mysterious, seductive figure like Jane Russell’s in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Perhaps Judith wanted to be moved out of the formal wear and to a different section, or one of her arms wasn’t in correctly since Marlene maimed her.

She didn’t tell Franklin anything more about Judith, however. He was far too practical and sometimes even boorish to take her words for truth. If anything, he’d tell her that her creative mind had seized the best of her. So when he dropped her off at work on Wednesday, she kept her anxious intrigue to herself.

“Diane, darling,” he said as she slid out of the passenger side of their brown station wagon, “I’ll stop by after work to look at some skirts and jewelry with you.”

Diane said, “For what?”

“Your Christmas gift, remember?”

“Of course, Frank.” She smiled her sugary smile at him and let him drive off.

Work was in full flux that afternoon, with hectic women trying to save money while getting the shiniest pumps, purchase a dress for a sister they’d forgotten about, or wander in not knowing what to get, just knowing that they had to get something.

Diane was bustling about serving these women, but, while she did so, she kept her real attention on Judith. Somehow she had been brought back to the formal wear section, where she was fitted into a black sleek dress and was clutching a white handbag. Her usually curious gesture was replaced with a more firm, assertive one: hands on hips, bag daintily dangling from her wrist.

Linda wasn’t working until three so Diane couldn’t speak to her about Judith and the whole issue until later. So Diane continued being at the beck and call of the customers, though when she would glance Judith’s way, she almost thought she could see a tight-lipped smile, something akin to disapproval.

When there was a lull in the store, Diane would stop in front of Judith and stare. Her painted face seemed vibrant and fresh, her eyes curved in savvy knowledge. Judith never moved or spoke, but her smile was just as poised as Diane’s was whenever she walked by.

It was two o’clock when something finally occurred. Diane was piling up hat boxes and rearranging the displays when she saw the vague gold figure and sensed the presence of someone behind her.

Diane lowered the hat in her hand—a black piece with a wispy veil as thin as spider silk. “You need help, don’t you?”

“I don’t need help,” a rather mundane, feminine voice replied. It partially sounded like her cellophane gift wrap, crinkly yet smooth.

“No?” Diane asked. “Last weekend you told me that you did.”

“I do need help,” the voice stated, “but not for a personal issue.”

“Oh? Then what type of issue do you need assistance with?”

Diane asked, lowering her head to eye the hat. She stroked its velvety top.

“It is a co-worker of mine,” the voice said. “She works so hard—it isn’t fair to see her treated poorly for her hard work. Once she attempted to intervene with two old women who dared lay a hand on me. They still managed to, but I feel like she deserves a reward for trying. And she was even kind to them when they returned—with nothing but an elegant attitude even when they were rude. I believe she deserves what she wants, not what she’ll settle for. I wish to provide aid for her.”

Diane nodded slowly. “So you wish for her to have a job promotion?”

“I do.”

“And how do you propose she get one?” Diane asked. For a few moments there was silence, then two ivory white arms went around her shoulders and grabbed the black veiled hat in her grasp. The limbs were balled connections at the joints. The white hands set the hat gently atop Diane’s head. And then her face muscles relaxed into a soft smile, the ache in her body fading.

• • •

“Linda?” It was Franklin. His brown hat was half-tilted on his head as he shuffled inside the store—his elbows kept near his body, eyes darting at all the swirls of colors and patterns.

Linda quickly dismissed herself from a served customer and bee-lined to Franklin, where he stood at the entrance. “Franklin, how may I assist you?”

“Where’s Diane?” He frowned, his heavy, dark eyebrows slanting into his brown eyes. Goodness, he was such a colorless man. Brown, brown, and brown. “I was going to buy her a Christmas gift

today. She needed me to pick it out.”

Linda shrugged stiffly and cast him a wide smile. “I haven’t seen her around for a while. Perhaps she’s in the back checking the stock?”

Franklin took off his hat to run his fingers through his hair. “May I see if she’s there?”

“Go right ahead. It’s straight ahead and to the left of the main desk,” Linda replied.

Franklin began in that direction. “Maybe she got held up matching fabrics together or is gawking at a new pair of gloves. Heaven knows that’s what she likes to do.”

Linda gave a small nod as he rushed off, then quickly hurried down the aisles. She passed Judith, who was poised with her arms crossed in a confident manner, her smile one of an appeased state. As Linda passed her, she hummed like she always did to keep her attention focused.

Then she paused at the mannequin at the entrance. It cut a fine figure in a black and white tulle dress, with red poised lips and glossy black curls. Linda shifted the black veiled hat up so that the eyes—smiling, content eyes—stared back at her. “See what you’ve done, now? Your husband is already here looking for you. You may think you look very quaint and elegant like that, but to remain like that for good now? I know you get stressed at times, but this is excessive.”

The mannequin continued smiling.

All the Girls

Todas las niñas are at the beach tryna tan
Pero I am here swimming in sunscreen
Porque the brown in my skin has got me in trouble.
Because the lady in the mall keeps a close eye when I show my mom a
purse and say
“¿*Que linda no?*”
And when I place the *bolsa* down her eyes follow me around the store
like flashing lights.

Todas las niñas are buying sombreros
And drinking tequila
Laughing because the fee-eh-stuh was such a fun idea.
Pero I am at home *con* box dye y toner
Tryna bleach the black from my hair
So *la maestra* will stop speaking to me in *dos* syllables at a time
Porque she thinks *que no la pue-do en-ten-der*.

Todas las niñas think my mom is *ilegal*
Y que I crossed the border at midnight
Pero the truth is *que* I was born here in California
And I can speak *el ingles perfecto*
But *el Española* is part of my tan skin and black hair
And I can try to strip *los colores* from my body
But the colors in my tongue are stubborn
And love to roll with every “r”
And love to dance to *el ritmo de Cumbia*
And I can’t *pretender* for long
That I am *todas las niñas*.

Juanita’s Lawn

those delinquent sprouts
have been at it again—
reaching their green
hands over the concrete
wall to play on the
sidewalk from poor
Juanita’s lawn—here

are some scissors,
boys—clip off the
tops of those sedgy
phalanges as they
peek over, then sweep
the finger-ends into
a pile—that’s it, that’s

how you keep the sidewalk-
edges free from grown-over grass

The Try after the Tries that Fail

At 18 Allison didn't know much about family, but her aspirations were simple and were for all things mediocre—a husband to watch the America's Best package from Dish Network; a white, pre-owned Chevy Tahoe with three rows of brown-eyed children; and her face on the back of a Costco card. But she had gotten pregnant too late. He wasn't going to go through with the wedding, and single moms were no longer scarce enough to validate attention. The girls who entered into single motherhood so carelessly had cheapened the brand for those who possessed the discipline to rise above it. *So, now what?*

• • •

"Now what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said. Someone in your situation should not be contemplating having more children."

"In my situation? And I never said I was having more children *now*. All I said is that you knew I liked 'Berkeley' as a girl's name; I told you that forever ago. It's pretty chicken shit that you would take that from me."

"And I'm just saying that maybe instead of naming hypothetical children, you should focus on finding a father for your existing one."

"Why? So I can run out and buy an Escalade the moment I find out I'm having a baby? So I can occupy myself all day by walking on the treadmill and watching *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* in my basement? Why would I want to be you? A self-righteous, glorified incubator whose nose is so high in the air that you could drown in the

pissing rain? You know, the only thing that would save you if that did happen would be the opportunity to flash your princess-cut diamond ring while you plugged that schnoz. I wouldn't trade lives with you for all the tea in China." Allison meant it too, even though she never drank tea.

• • •

"What do you mean you don't ever meet new people? You go to school with 20,000 other people every day."

"Yeah, but I don't, like, stick around to socialize. I park, put on my headphones, take notes, put on my headphones, and leave. I don't have the mental capacity to meet people."

"Jenna told me that you study with a boy; could there be something more there?" Kathy waited for a response with a look on her face like she had just caught Allison with her hand in the cookie jar—almost a smug, *don't worry, I won't tell your mom* look.

"First of all, Jenna's an idiot. Second, he's in my Psych class, but he's not someone I would ever be interested in. He's my study partner; we study."

"I shouldn't have asked, Sonny. You're probably right. You don't need a guy in your life right now anyway. Focus on Aiden; focus on your schooling. Your love life will work itself out in its own time."

"Cuz I can't hurry love? I just have to wait? Love don't come easy? It's a game of give and take?"

Kathy exhaled deeply as her focus abandoned Allison and settled on Aiden, who was sleeping nearly inverted on the couch. Allison noticed that her shoulders had dropped and become rounded. Kathy had great shoulders; they were toned from her many years of teaching kick boxing at the gym and were usually rolled back and cocked into a woman's predatory position. Allison had always slightly

envied Kathy's tactless confidence but mostly condemned her for it.

"Thanks for watching Aiden today. Jordan can't study tomorrow, though, so I won't need you."

• • •

"Whatchadoing?"

"I just picked up Aiden. What're you doing?"

"I was thinking about getting some dinner. You guys hungry?"

"Yeah. Applebees?"

"Yep, I'm in the parking lot."

Miranda had already been seated at a booth and had a highchair waiting for Aiden. Allison unloaded her everyday baggage into the booth and placed Aiden in his seat. She filed through her purse and placed her cell phone on the table, then went to the diaper bag and placed a Lil' People toy and small John Deere tractor in front of Aiden. He banged them on the table happily.

Miranda was last to order. She ordered a 2-for-\$20 combo; she said she would take the leftovers to school tomorrow for lunch. As the waitress walked away and Miranda defended her entrée selection, Allison stared at Miranda and noted her steady weight gain. Though Miranda was probably 20 pounds heavier than she was when Allison met her at the beginning of the semester, she wouldn't acknowledge her need for new—roomier—clothes. Luckily for her, probably ten of those pounds displaced themselves nicely on her chest, but this, paired with her ever-shrinking wardrobe, left her cleavage a force to be reckoned with.

"Miranda, your boobs are obscene right now."

Miranda looked down and pulled at the cami underneath her blouse. "Ugh, I know. They are being unruly lately."

"Is that a hickey?"

"Oh my God, where?"

"Right there." On the lower quadrant of her right breast was a purplish-pink smear.

Miranda told a story of a guy she met at \$1 draft night. Her stories were told as cliffhangers. *Will the mysterious one-night-stand call her? Tune in next time to find out!* But that's the thing about cliffhangers; they're only interesting the first time. As Miranda elaborated on the pick-up line used and the guy's promise to meet up with her again sometime this week, Aiden was trying to shove the Lil' People farmer figure into the John Deere tractor. The tractor did not possess the capacity to accommodate the Lil' farmer; they were different sizes, different shapes. They came from different manufacturers. They could be played with alongside each other, but the farmer would never drive the tractor. Aiden couldn't conceive this reality and was still mercilessly shoving the farmer into the cab of the tractor. Miranda continued talking about the \$1 draft guy.

• • •

Allison unlocked the mailbox for Apartment #1. *Junk, junk, internet bill, junk, credit card offer, hand-addressed envelope . . .*

Of course Jenna would request a \$10 book "in lieu" of a 99-cent card. Of course Kathy would think that's a charming idea.

• • •

"Sonny, you have to go to the baby shower. Jenna is your sister."

Please join us for a
Baby Shower
In honor of
Jenna Lamb
Saturday, August 28th
2:00 PM at the city park
In lieu of cards, please
bring your favorite
children's book with a message
for the sweet baby girl
RSVP to Kathy

“Stop calling me ‘Sonny.’ You gave me the name ‘Allison.’ Can’t you at least own up to that?”

Kathy looked at her, head cocked to one side, as if she was a priceless frame hanging crooked on someone else’s wall. This gesture could be confused for one made in an attempt at better understanding, an attempt to try a new angle or a change in perception. But Kathy didn’t want to understand her. She just wanted to better align Allison to the world—her world. A world where she could pretend that they were all a real family.

“How did it go with Jordan?”

“We just studied.”

• • •

“Can you please tell me what the hell your problem is?”

“Can you please tell me what you are doing here?”

“I am sick of you pulling your spoiled little twat routine with Mom.” Jenna pushed past Allison and went into the small, one-bedroom apartment.

“Sick of the routine that involves me not rolling over and letting Mom scratch my belly after the shit she pulled?”

“That was two years ago, and she came back, Allison. She made a mistake, but she came back and she’s trying.”

Over on the floor Aiden was playing with his toys. He had found the farmer and the tractor in the diaper bag from last night and was again trying to force them upon each other. Jenna continued on, but Allison got up, rummaged through the toy box, and set the farmer’s own tractor over in front of Aiden. Staring down at both toys in his hands, he set the farmer inside the grooves behind his steering wheel. Without a second thought, he put the small John Deere tractor in the farmer’s trailer, and he pulled it along, merrily mimicking the

engine of heavy machinery. Allison smiled and thought to herself, *The farmer is driving the John Deere tractor; touché, Aiden.*

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes, you’ve been saying the same thing over and over.”

“And what is that?”

“You think I need to try.”

• • •

Allison met Jordan from Psych at their usual table in the library. Jordan opened the textbook to the chapters of Sigmund Freud, but Allison didn’t dig in her backpack for her lecture notes.

“Hey, Jordan . . . We should get together sometime outside of the library.”

“You mean, like, study somewhere else?”

“No, I meant, like, let’s go do something. You know there does exist a world beyond these dusty stacks of books.”

“Ha. I wouldn’t know. But, hey, Alli, I have a girlfriend. I thought you knew that.”

For a moment Allison wished she had a dog she could go home and kick, but she didn’t want to give Freud that satisfaction. Instead, she pulled out her phone and faked a toddler emergency. She told Jordan she had to get Aiden.

When she got to the house, Aiden was standing on the cushions and peering over the back of the couch; Kathy was nowhere to be seen. Allison cursed her mother for leaving the boy unattended and went over to reprimand him for standing on the furniture. Just before she got to him, Kathy sprang to life from behind the couch like a character in a pop-up book and yelled, “Peek-a-boo!” Allison retreated, and Aiden wailed in delight.

Allison began gathering the contents of the diaper bag that

littered the carpet of the living room. Her phone vibrated three times in her pocket. Kathy and Aiden were still playing their game.

Hey

Sigmund isn't as good of company as u

Hope everything is cool with Aiden

Ya, he'll be fine

We still good for tomorrow?

I dunno. I don't think it's a good idea

Kathy was helping Aiden put on his shoes. "I love you, A. Same time tomorrow, Allison?" Allison put her phone back in her pocket.

"Yeah, I'll need you tomorrow."

Natalie Malm

Better Living through Organic Chemistry

So far Cristin's day has gone like this—

5:34 AM—Jolted to awareness by the *Adventure Time* theme song inviting her to grab her friends and go to very distant lands, Cristin hissed like a damned soul confronted with the pure of heart and groped for the emergency ear plugs on the night stand. Even though she'd never seen a single episode, the title sequence was burned into her memory with second-hand familiarity. Cristin often discovered herself humming the tune as she calibrated the new infrared spectroscope or refluxed substrates, which had prompted several coordinated cartoon-themed Christmas presents from her research assistants (that Junia appropriated for herself as the only resident fan).

To rectify her mistake, Junia audibly scrambled across the couch, toppling a pile of books in her haste to lower the volume to a more considerate level, but the damage was done.

5:55 AM—Cristin conceded defeat and gave up trying to fall back to sleep. Sensory deprivation of any kind made her uncomfortable. The ear plugs had her imagining numerous catastrophes she might be deaf and blind to each time she closed her eyes and began to drift off. Mostly fire due to an unsupervised five-year-old's activities or early morning burglary, but undead outbreaks also featured. "Might as well do something productive," she commanded herself, unearthing the stack of ungraded lab reports living on the left side of the bed in Lewis's absence.

6:47 AM—Productivity is relative, anyway. Ten out of eighteen was plenty of progress for now. In the inbox she had been resolutely ignoring, there were no less than six emails from students. Two from

Morgan Shipp, who felt he deserved special treatment simply for being a chemistry major rather than pre-med. Evidently, he missed a third online pre-lab quiz and wanted another extension. She typed out a reply, wondered if it sounded condescending, then remembered she didn't care.

6:53 AM—Purely for her own amusement, Cristin upheld her tradition and kept the instruction letters in Comic Sans font because it's reminiscent of a birthday party clown's résumé. Maybe it was wrong to take so much enjoyment from such a serious situation, but there was a lot wrong with the situation itself. A little more wouldn't tip the scales, either direction. The printer whirled to life, coughing out three papers, which Cristin carefully folded into thirds and stuffed into addressed envelopes.

7:14 AM—On the way to the bathroom, Cristin stepped in cold, wet dog shit. It settled between her toes and served as a nice reminder that chaos was a driving force of the universe. Doggie toilet training was not going as well as she had planned.

7:15 AM—She took Cooper outside to use the great, outdoor toilet that is the rest of the world. He sniffed around with intense focus before doing his business in the exact corner he used every time.

7:18 AM—Mess cleaned, she detoured through the world's most efficient shower, came out smelling of lilacs, and chose an outfit that wouldn't be missed if acidic substrate splashed on it.

7:30 AM—*Adventure Time with Finn and Jake* was no longer holding Junia's attention. She was plinking out on her electronic keyboard a barely recognizable rendition of that one song every kid knew how to play, regardless of how many lessons she had taken. Monica, who was between bands and couches and had been staying with Cristin since their sister had a nervous breakdown and kicked

her out, had been incrementally teaching her niece to read music. As it happened, Monica was up before noon, pacing the kitchen with a recipe card for Dutch baby pancakes in hand, chest emblazoned with "AC vs. DC" over the likeness of Tesla and Edison in a boxing match. Cristin pulled out her favorite 9x13 pan and preheated the oven.

7:58 AM—Junia decided Dutch baby pancakes, like crepes, were all right, but waffles were always better. Though she did enjoy watching it overtake the pan in the oven like it was alive, as if it were the world's fastest growing and most delicious fungus. Chokecherry syrup was smeared, not on her cheek or anywhere near her mouth, but above her eyebrow, near her hairline like a sticky birthmark. Her braid was loose and fuzzy, feet with mismatched socks swinging steadily with simple harmonic motion.

8:25 AM—It took two trips to take all of the papers she needed for lab into her Jeep—revised syllabus, this lab's procedures and materials, two-week-old graded lab reports. Cristin almost locked her keys in the car because she was preoccupied with thinking of what could convince the department head at the next meeting she should focus on her Organic Chemistry lecture next semester and not bother with coordinating one of the required labs. The time spent overseeing the bromination of acetanilide could be spent developing her own research on a new way to separate stereoisomers in the newest atypical antidepressant, which could significantly lower the cost of production and, eventually, the cost to patients. After that she wants to focus on another possible reaction to bond two carbon atoms in a way that will preserve the integrity of the existing molecules (in the privacy of her head, Cristin was already preparing the introduction to the acceptance speech for her Nobel Prize—and she wouldn't ever get there if she couldn't work on the problems).

8:33 AM—Junia climbed into the slightly too-tall car (clean

and fully clothed, which is what really mattered as far as elementary school hygiene was concerned) still telling her mother like she's paid by the word about her friends, Katie and Josie, who have summer birthdays just like Junia; the class pet gerbil (initially mistakenly called a squirrel) that she gets to feed some mornings and sniffs her hands and breathes so fast; and how the class will be learning about colors today, but she already knows most of them like pink and green and brown and the one on the walls of her room. Blue! She likes blue. It's probably Junia's favorite color, and she knows them really well, so she's excited to show Ms. Griffin she can name the colors. It has been absolutely fascinating watching this small being develop into the kind girl she had become—willing to include any kid who wanted to play with her and readily adaptable.

8:47 AM—Cristin couldn't be imagining the scandalized looks she was receiving from the mothers of the tall, beady-eyed, six-year-old boy and the girl with the purple horse backpack. During the last kindergarten production, the two women had sat next to Cristin and dragged her into their drama as though they were doing her a favor, bringing light into her undramatic life. They had short and instantly forgettable names like Mary, Sally, or Beth, and they were only interested in criticizing how the kindergarten teacher sacrificed fashion for modesty by wearing a shirt under her spaghetti-strap dress. "It doesn't even match, really," said maybe-Beth. Worst conversationalists since that one undergraduate summer she spent harvesting blood from horseshoe crabs on the Atlantic coast and her work partner only wanted to talk about the Mustang for which he was saving up, and how its seats would be leather, and it would be waxed daily with premium mermaid blood or unicorn tears, and how great he was at fixing cars, etc., etc., ad nauseum. To this day, she still flinched if someone brought up mechanics with a Boston accent. Cristin

suspected maybe-Mary was having an affair and made a mental note to contemplate this information at a later date.

8:53 AM—Cristin bid her daughter goodbye at the door. Junia waved and flounced into the classroom, taking her spot at the carpet mat closest to the class pet that was decidedly not a squirrel, the blue in her hair non-offensive but definitely noticeable. Last week, Cristin came home from lab smelling of chlorine and ready to decompress from a packed schedule, but as she walked in the door of her house, Junia accosted her, demanding to know how much she liked the new stripe of electric blue in Junia's previously dirty-blonde hair. Junia's mother carefully didn't react. Monica couldn't help but be inflammatory. Really, it was best not to respond at all if Cristin could help it. (Unfortunately that sometimes backfired if Monica read it as a challenge to *make* her respond.) Hair will grow. When she got over the shock, Cristin thought it looked rather fetching. At the same time, Cristin was worried Monica would take her lack of censure as blessing, and next week she would come home from campus and her five-year-old would have pierced eyebrows or small starting gauges or a drug habit. Cristin hadn't told her husband during their phone calls, and she was glad for the delay of the inevitable as Lewis hadn't mastered video calls. Even after all this time, it was difficult to gauge what his reaction would be, due to his unpredictable, if infrequent, bouts of conservatism.

9:30 AM—As she held the door to the physical sciences building for a student burdened with several school books who didn't even glance up at her, Cristin hummed, "With Jake the dog and Finn the human, the fun will never . . ." until she caught herself. It played in the back of her mind for most of the day.

9:35 AM—Cristin exchanged pleasantries with the secretary of the physical sciences department until the secretary was called away.

She then seized the opportunity to dig through Michael Soren's and Derika Challis's respective faculty mailboxes, removing the envelopes intended for her and leaving the letters she printed that morning underneath other papers. As the secretary reentered the office, Cristin grabbed the papers in her own mailbox and left as swiftly as she could without projecting deceit. This hadn't come a day too soon.

10:29 AM—A final mass swarm of students filed into the doorway and took their seats in the windowless classroom. It was funny; after the first few weeks of school, the students essentially assign themselves a seating chart. Rarely does a student deviate from their rigid, self-imposed routine.

10:33 AM—Wielding her dry erase marker with the precision of a scalpel, Cristin tore into the discussion of the new amine reactions, beginning with an overview of the Cope elimination (which transforms an alcohol into a carboxylic acid) and examination of the intricacies of enamine chemistry and how they are used in various biochemical processes.

11:18 AM—There was a lot of ground to cover, so Cristin couldn't be blamed if she ignored Blake Salter's questioning hand for a few more minutes than is strictly polite hoping he would give up and let her move on to the next part. Salter asked an incomprehensible question about something barely relevant to the topic, which was typical. Some of his questions were surprisingly insightful, but most were bafflingly simple for one of the highest testers in the class.

11:41 AM—To the class, Cristin posed a question about why enamines were used more often than enolates in synthesis. Judging from the blank averted stares and the wave of pens the students hid behind (*Don't ask me, I'm writing something down. Notes. It's very important.*), they hadn't paid much attention to the enolate section last week. Feeling generous today, rather than call at random on

students avoiding her eyes, Cristin repeated the question one more time just in case it jogged someone's memory. When there was no sudden realization, she prompted them through the reasoning until Katrina Marsh, who did physics homework during class half the time and implemented too much eye contact for Cristin's taste, recalled enamines don't require strong bases during synthesis.

12:15 PM—Lecture was dismissed. Darian Verna, taking Organic for a second time, came up and asked for clarification on the sections she hadn't understood, pushing her forward-parted hair out of her face every few minutes. The loud undergrad that sat in the fourth row whose name was not Colin, but Carson probably, wanted to know the lesson plan for next week as he had a "family thing" to attend. Behind him a queue formed of various students with various questions of various levels of difficulty.

1:07 PM—Grateful as always that the walk to the commons was painless, Cristin scoped out a two-person table near the glass wall and began unwrapping her pita. Fina dropped into the seat next to Cristin, complaining about the midterm evaluation the microbiology department had just relayed to her. Fina could tell who said the rude thing because she recognized the blocky, perpetually capitalized handwriting, though he did use a pencil rather than the same pen he does on tests, as though that would be enough to protect his identity. (Fina compared it to spies in movies that only used wigs in their disguise. "If that was enough to make someone unrecognizable, haircuts and dye jobs would be a *much* bigger deal," she said.) She also wanted to know whether Cristin's lab would be four for five with instigated marriages, having forgotten the second semester didn't have lab partners. Students did share a bench with one another, but there's something about forced cooperation in the first semester that sparks some sort of chemistry between lab partners. Soon Fina was off again,

rushing to another meeting, and Cristin ate the rest of her lunch in solitude.

1:36 PM—Lewis called from Irvine while Cristin was walking back to her office, passing Michael Soren, an inorganic chemistry teacher, and Drika Challis from the biology department in heated conversation. She had never seen them together before then, and it disturbed her. Lewis really liked California. Beautiful weather. Much warmer than Washington. He only had one more interview to go, and he'd be home to finish up his book. Didn't have a title yet, but it's about the evolutionary significance of peer pressure from a psychological and statistical perspective. By the time Lewis hung up, with promises to call Junia over the next couple of days, she had forgotten about Soren and Challis, and it was time to regather all of the lab papers and haul them down the stairs.

2:02 PM—As far as labs go, brominating acetanilide is not difficult or particularly dangerous. There are no strong acids or bases. No toxic chlorine gas fumes were created in flimsy glass beakers. But it was time-consuming. With the class, Cristin went over the procedure step by step, clarifying and altering the instructions as she went. White powder acetanilide and white cubic crystals of potassium bromide were dissolved in a mixture of ethanol and water to form a clear, homogenous solution. Bright orange crystals of ceric ammonium nitrate were added to deionized water, which then formed a yellow-orange and cloudy solution, which was then added dropwise to the acetanilide/KBr solution until the solution became milky white. Product of white powdery crystals was isolated using vacuum filtration. Simple, really.

2:22 PM—Cristin turned them loose. The thing is, every student had to do every part individually—there were no lab partners in upper-level courses. The more dependent peers slowed down to

stay on the same step as the student across the bench from them so they could compare their solutions. Others kept a constant stream of questions. *Is it refluxing yet? Is this the right color?* Yes. Please, just follow the instructions to the best of your ability. Shipp, the chemistry major that had emailed her twice in the early hours of the morning and thought deadlines didn't apply to him, finished quickly and efficiently, but, as usual, had a low percent yield of expected product and had broken three stirring rods, two large beakers, and a glass drying tube this semester alone.

3:45 PM—Ancient hot plates provided for the chemistry department were unable to hold constant temperature, and it made the labs 40% longer than necessary. Cristin should bring this up at the next department meeting. Again.

4:05 PM—Most students were finished with the lab and began taking the melting point, IR, and CNMR of last week's product to gauge how successful the experiment was. Cristin received a text from Monica, who was home alone with Junia: 'do u kkep charcoal inthe hous,' which was frightening in its vagueness. Then later 'dont worry i got it,' which, contrary to its intention, merely increased her worry, with the final 'what kind f dog is cooper' for good measure.

5:16 PM—Cristin had to trudge back up the stairs because she couldn't recall if she had locked the lab door behind her. In her haste, she had not. The lab now for-sure locked, Cristin contemplated calling Monica to hear what she had to say or just leaving it until she arrived home so she could read her facial expressions. Quicker info or more accurate read? It was a tough call. Her deliberation was cut short when she saw Michael Soren and Drika Challis leaning against her Jeep, waiting for her.

5:19 PM—Unsure how to react, Cristin politely pushed past her colleagues and laid her hefty stack of papers in the passenger seat.

Derika saw the envelope she had put in her faculty mailbox only this morning.

“Grant money.” Derika wrung her hands like a sopping dishrag. Cristin’s padded income and resources for her research had not been unnoticed, and she had a ready excuse for anyone bothering to ask after it. “I’m such a fool.”

“This was much more frightening for me when there was no name, no face, no observable weaknesses from the enemy front.” Soren loved to hear his own voice. His eyes shined with vicious light, limned with the brutality of which Cristin had photographic proof he is capable. “The way I see it, there are two courses of action from here. We go to the police. Maybe an anonymous tip. Maybe personally. If I’m going down, I’d rather take you down with me. I’ve been saving the hard copies of each letter and a record of each payment. We have physical evidence and two collaborating witnesses on our side.” He trailed off, evidently hoping Challis would continue his diatribe to give it maximum punch, but she didn’t move. He continued. “Or we could negotiate. You give us the proof you have of our . . . indiscretions. We’ll stop the payments, and all of us will move on with our lives,” he said in his most reasonable voice.

Cristin knew if the authorities dug, they’d find the others. It’s a possible fifteen-year sentence for each blackmail attempt. Suddenly, she had this horrible vision of Junia raised by Monica. Misguided facial tattoos. Vanity plates. Law school applications. No. She couldn’t entrust them with her only leverage.

“Soren. Even you are not stupid enough to go to the police. The information I have would ruin you. You’d be sentenced right alongside me. Would your freedom be worth your fragile pride? You wouldn’t have confronted me at all if you really felt that way. You would have just gone straight to the station, do not pass go, do not collect

\$200.” No matter his impotent rage, Soren wouldn’t try anything rash. Probably. Surely he realized their conversation was being recorded by university surveillance. In case he actually was that stupid, Cristin kept her eyes on him as she considered Challis, whose falsified research papers enabled her to climb the ranks of the university years earlier than expected.

“And suddenly Challis wants to risk her job, her reputation, the admiration of everyone who knows or will know her. All for the sake of your pride and a little money. Is it worth your livelihood, Derika? I don’t buy it. No. How about this: We continue. I won’t raise the rates, and you will discretely put the installments in my mailbox instead of your own. No one gets hurt.”

She knew she could convince them to see it her way. It’s just money, after all.

7:42 PM—Walking through the door of her house, there was no obvious crisis. Junia bounded to her, and she had no facial tattoos or any outward indicators she might eventually apply to law school. It was a good sign. Cristin was hopeful about this new arrangement. Extortion would be much easier to carry out now that half of her . . . clients knew who she was. As she mentally budgeted out the money she would need for future research expeditions, the universe’s tendency for entropy once again expressed itself as she discovered someone with small shoes had stepped in dog poop and tracked it around the sage green carpet.

Love

Two dodos trying to build a nest.
All assertions—unsure jabs:
pushing sticks into and out of piles,
squawking about designs and time,
dreaming of a product beyond the builder's means,
rubbing faces and useless wings,
in love. They wag their asses
in celebration of the stick pile's new form.
Lacking allusions to make sense of where they stand,
they bond as unique and believe in their dream
of formidable walls made of spit, mud, and sticks—
withstanding thwarts of wind, rain, and time.

Rain—has them waddle this evening, under thunder,
to the close, dense bush to huddle side by side
and watch and wonder if their heap will wash away.

Spudtown U.S.A. Loves You

The banners were hung declaring *Spudtown Loves its Veterans*, which was of course a variation on its now-famous ad campaign winner of the Winthrop Meager Society's PR of The Year Award two years in a row: *Spudtown Loves You*—or more accurately, *Spudtown "heart symbol" You*—while a cartoon spud-man named "Spuddy," a more relatable working-class Mr. Peanut really, gives a hearty thumbs-up. *Spudtown Loves You*.

It had come about when spurious research in Japan had discovered that Idaho potatoes could be seen, with creative interpretation of the data, to be good for heart health. The Spudtown Frozen Foods Megacorp had then set its PR men to quick work producing the newest and slickest slogans: *Spudtown Loves Your Ticker*. Almost, but no cigar. No, no, *Spudtown Loves Hearts*. Until finally as marketing manna, *Spudtown Loves You* came with explanations of why on every Spudtown product. Both nutritional facts and loving affirmation provided with Heartfelt Efficiency.

There had been no more perfect slogan produced by the minds of men, and some had whispered in the darker corners of marketing folklore that such a perfect slogan could not have come from such imperfect sloganeers and was most certainly proof of the touch of the divine.

Thus the banners hang, and the music plays, and a crowd of Pale-Faced Loving Americans cheer as required in the Spudtown Sports Arena, awaiting Heartfelt Efficiency and Spudtown's love to find them.

• • •

It had been twelve years since James Lymon had seen him; and although since the last time they had been together, he had forever had to walk with a cane, he had forgiven him as was the Godliest thing to do, and he had missed him utterly.

He had got back to town after attending the university and with his wife, Erica, had found a Perfect Home, with Perfect Yard, Perfect Pickett Fence as Seen on TV, and Perfect Garage with Driveway, along with a Perfect Home Owners Association that had Rigorously Approved them—which had made them feel more at home than anything else—in his old neighborhood, which had changed very little. The marriage had not always been perfect, but was Suitably Wholesome. The promised children had not come, but Erica had seemed every morning to be happy and hummed as she prepared for work at the dentist’s office producing White Smiles.

With his Business Management Degrees, he was a shoo-in for a three-title position as Senior Assistant Manager at the Spudtown Frozen Food Headquarters. He had after all been best friends with the mayor’s son—though he was away at Iraq at the time—and with his degrees, LDS background, and homegrown familiarity, it was like a puzzle piece falling into place. Next he would get a dog. Maybe it would be a sad-faced rescue. It all was falling into place with Heartfelt Efficiency.

They had attended LDS Sunday services, and though he had fallen asleep almost every time, he had enjoyed mingling with the upstanding citizens of Pockten, Idaho. He had even used his privileged position to bring them samplings of Spudtown Spuddy Tot Dippers and had recorded mentally that the proprietary honey barbecue was a local favorite.

• • •

The Spudtown Senior Executive Manager of Operations, Joe Everett, had been excited to hear James had a relationship with the mayor’s family. Joe had been both a boss and civic mentor for James after his return and hire. Joe had known all The Big Wigs in Pockten and was as spiritually inspiring as an LDS leader as he was business savvy. Joe was, according to his own folklore, born on the Fourth of July and announced it with a hearty slap on the back, “Can you believe it, eh? A patriot from first breath!” He had put up a *Born on the Fourth of July* movie poster in his office even though he had never seen the film, but he could point to it and laugh, “That’s me alright!” He was the sort of man that kept trinkets, toys, and an overabundance of family photos on his desk. He had worn Star-Spangled ties and socks. He drank his coffee—“Don’t tell the missus”—in a mug that declared “Fun Boss,” a title he had tried to live up to provided you did not steal office supplies. “Last warning, Beth, last warning . . . “

It had been inevitable that he would take James to meet the mayor. They too had been friends and golf adversaries for a long time, and so, with some nervousness, James went to City Hall. James was wearing his most patriotic tie, besmeared with soaring eagles. For his special pumped-up sneakers, he had gotten a Star-Spangled Banner pair made. He chose his most understated cane, a serious, business-like gunmetal black.

The mayor, Butch Campos, was not very different from how James had remembered him. Plump and hearty, he greeted Joe and James with a handshake and Campaign Perfect Smile. The mayor looked James up and down and smiled and hugged him, “Jeez, son, it’s been a spell, hasn’t it? I remember when he was just a boy. Well, look at you now, soon to be a pillar of society!” He slapped James on the back so hard James almost lost his cane, all the while smiling nervously. The mayor looked at his tie and shoes, “And jeez, you have

the dress sense of Joe here.”

“Just a couple of patriots is all,” Joe said with a laugh. The mayor leaned in.

“Has he shown you the poster?” James gave a slightly nasally laugh and an embarrassing but soon repressed snort. “Maybe you should run for mayor!” Butch laughed. “Born on The Fourth of July on all the banners, just imagine the ridiculous things he could wear. Well, well, let’s go to my office. By the way, how’s the leg, son? Good? Good.”

The Office was Mahogany Perfection and whiskey decanters of crystal next to small American Flags, and behind the mayor’s large leather chair a stuffed Lion he claimed to have shot on Safari—in reality it had been taken out by Animal Control after the Lion Town disaster of ’02—and on the mayor’s desk photos and expensive pens. The mayor sat with a grunt and James sat slowly, while Joe settled in like he owned his chair. Off to the side the mayor’s brother and Curator of the Pockten Historical Society, Ernest, was pouring himself a whiskey and looking over the men with his plump eye-patched face.

“Jesus, son, it’s been a spell!” Ernest said shaking James’s hand.

“Yep, yep, just got back in town.” James had only vaguely remembered “Uncle Ernest” who loved fireworks and other amateur pyrotechnics a little too much. The mayor guffawed.

“First, we talk about the Lord’s Name. Second, why don’t you pour one for each of us?” The mayor settled back while Ernest distributed three whiskeys, until James turned his down, and Joe had warned them to not tell the missus, against Church Doctrine and all. Ernest leaned against the mayor’s desk smiling and swirling his drink while studying James, all of which made Butch sigh.

The mayor put his glass on the desk and smiled, “Well, Joe,

here’s the thing. My son’s getting back from the deployment soon, and I was thinking, maybe a special event honoring all our local vets, and was thinking maybe you could help him on the employment front or something.” James leaned forward without realizing.

“When’s he get back? Haven’t seen him in a while.” The mayor smiled.

“Yes, yes, I remember when you two were thick as thieves. I am sure it would be a blast from the past for him, and I got to tell ya, he was real sore about the whole leg situation.” James put up his hands.

“No, no, ancient history, just wondering how he’s doing these days.” The mayor picked up a picture from his desk and turned it. “Well, he joined the Army after school as I am sure you heard, and I am just so damn proud. Here he is right here. I am just so damn proud.” Butch held the portrait in his plump hands, and there James saw the face he had seen only in memory for twelve years, the sharp eyes and pointed chin, the Roman nose, looking off in the distance in a beret. He felt his leg ache. It was the face he had only ever forgiven, forgiven after everything every day and forever. James nodded. “Be good to see him.” The mayor was silent now and contemplative.

“Yes, I suppose after everything, it would be good for him to see you. Well, let’s set up something. I was thinking at the big Homecoming game.” The mayor set down the picture.

“Excuse me, I need to use the restroom.” James stood up, suddenly feeling nauseous.

“Jesus, Ernest, help him with the door.” James hobbled his way out, and Ernest closed the fine mahogany doors. Joe put his empty glass on the desk without a coaster, which made Butch sigh.

“What gives, with the whole leg situation, I mean?” Joe was speaking with that absurd spoken whisper. The mayor leaned back

into his chair, while Ernest poured himself another glass.

“Well, those two were thick as thieves, used to always play together, built this perfect treehouse. Well, I had some contractors mock something up, but after that it was their little hangout, right in the backyard.” The mayor laughed. “They spent hours in there I am pretty sure looking at girlie mags, and you know how boys are. Well, one day I guess they fight, and my boy pushes him from the house, and he lands strange and hurts his leg. Real mess. Well, the parents are real sore about the whole thing, so I make sure all medical expense is paid, and they never see each other again. Glad to see it’s all water under the bridge. It was a real shame.”

“He doesn’t seem tore up about it, so that’s good.” Joe leaned back. “All I ever got was a tire swing.” The door opened and in came James struggling with his cane. Everybody was looking at him, and he smiled nervously.

“What did I miss?”

“My brother was just talking about how you and his boy used to spend time in that treehouse.” Ernest declared half in his fourth glass. Butch was shaking his head. James stopped and his whole face flushed, like he had been stricken by some blow. He looked the men over, then with his nasally laugh snorted, “Well, you know how much boys love their forts.”

• • •

When Zach was reunited with his father, he suddenly found himself mired in a world of obligation. More than anything he was looking forward to plain clothes, but there was no question that would have to be held off—there was the ceremony at the arena, and there were photo shoots galore, like the one where he was kneeling in the grass with the family dog, Lucky. “Local Hero Reunites with Family

Dog,” the newspaper man proclaimed. Man and Collie both smiling for the paper because the war had turned out fine, and man and dog could live in perfect glory now. It was not the Lucky Zach had known, of course. The real Lucky died four years before, and the day after his passing Zach’s father would sit in his office blubbering like a baby while he held a portrait that now sat on his desk. A photo-op like this could not be ignored, however. After all, Zach was a future Pillar of Society. His father had talked about how he would soon be ready to run for office, and Zach had pretended to find the prospect invigorating while he thought of slipping away for a drink or two.

His father had also lined up future wives, a dozen names, some familiar evoking the rich folklore of adolescence, of who was “easy” and who was not, and some not so easy to remember. His father made his own peculiar recommendations with comments like “Bazangas you can’t believe.” He would say it holding his hands up to his chest. “Bazangas beyond belief.” And Zach would nod and smile for the photographers.

• • •

The moment had come. Ernest took his place to sing the National Anthem while the returning vets took their spots in a perfect line saluting. From the stands, next to Joe and the mayor and their wives, he saw Zach at a distance standing proud and straight. He gripped his cane and watched the men in their regulation uniforms.

Joe went down to the basketball court and with microphone in hand declared to cheering faces how proud both Pockten and Spudtown were of their returning vets. A giant American flag was unfurled from the roof. Red and white and blue balloons featuring a saluting Spuddy in an army uniform came floating down. Joe declared Spudtown and Pockten would honor their sacrifices, and in honor of

their brave service, each and every one of the soldiers would receive a lifetime supply of Various Spudtown Products. The crowd cheered, and many Pale-Faced Americans even began to tear up, because it was all lining up, because this was how God's own were supposed to be on their Shining City on a Hill.

Ernest began to sing the National Anthem with perfect pitch while a man in a Spuddy outfit fired T-shirts at the crowd. James watched the soldiers shuffle out a door on the opposite side. He watched Zach exit. Suddenly the arena went dark, and AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" blared loudly while fireworks of Ernest's design lit up, sending red, white, and blue sparks into the air. It was The Pregame Show, and the crowd went wild. Spuddy was running back and forth doing flexing poses, while people threw plush potatoes onto the court. Spuddy began to wobble wildly, and the towel boy who handed him a basketball later said he swore the man was speaking in tongues from the face hole. With basketball in hand, he ran towards a well-placed trampoline beneath one of the baskets, wobbled and veered wildly off course, and, catching some sparks from the pyrotechnics, ran streaming smoke. The crowd rose with shouts. Ernest was laughing on the microphone. Spuddy hit the tramp with an odd but swift canter, and was sent spinning and smoking through the air like a tossed flapjack, limbs gesticulating wildly. He landed on his face hole with a loud thud. Paramedics approached as the lights came up. Heat stroke was the ultimate diagnosis.

• • •

The moment came, and with Erica, who he had kept in the dark about Zach's own involvement on his leg, and the mayor and his wife, Peggy, James walked down one of the dark hallways. James could see Zach's figure cut against the concession lights in the distance. His

steps grew short, his eyes watered. Zach was talking to another soldier when he saw his father and James. His face changed, the way it had then, it changed, and James' leg ached. Butch and his son embraced, and then Butch looked to James. "Look who it is, a real blast from the past." Zach looked at James and his cane, forced a smile, and shook his hand.

"Long time, I guess."

"Yeah."

They shook hands, and the mayor patted them both on the back.

"A real blast from the past, eh?" Zach looked at his father

"Well, me and the boys are going to get something to drink."

And he strode away with some other soldiers, strode away from James while Butch and Peggy looked on.

"Well, guess he is still tore up about the whole thing, son."

• • •

When Zach had first seen James in that hallway, he had known almost immediately who he was, and though he had not shown it, he had almost felt pity for him. The special tacky shoes, the cane of understated gunmetal black propping him up awkwardly with each step. He held himself up, and the way he had smiled had stirred something in him. To see James after returning home had filled him with a rage he had not expected, even as his eyes had watered at the sad sight of him. His father had mentioned a "special surprise," but Zach had not expected this, and when he escaped that hall and escaped the Spudtown Sports Arena that reeked of popcorn and hotdogs, he breathed in the night air made fresh by a recent summer rain. He walked alone a ways, telling the other soldiers he would meet them at the bar known as "The Alamo," and strolled instead

through town down the pathways he knew by heart. He had gotten home from the war and was finally getting comfortable, and now this, this dredged-up feeling from a time he had buried with thoughts of Regimented-Life, Proper Discipline, and a chance for The Perfect Home. He laughed like a madman in conspiracy with himself. He thought of just getting a forty in a brown bag and retreating to some hotel in plain clothes. He would tell his father he was up all night, and he would drink and smoke and pray the only way that had worked for him, the slow inebriation that had filled him with an anger that consumed any nostalgia that appeared in his dreams of a place high in a tree in the sticky summer heat.

He stopped by the old gas station, with its glowing promise of Free Slushies for Police and Servicemen! The ghost of a younger Uncle Ernest was there to greet him with fireworks and bad advice, no, a homeless man asking for change, so he could make a phone call, please. He got himself the promised forty and a pack of cigarettes he had not smoked in six years with an American flag lighter. "Hey, man, don't forget your change, hey . . ." He lit one up, but the smell made him nauseous. He was out of practice. He headed north to the place he had remembered the nicer hotels had been, up on the hill, and saw the lights of Pockten simmering in the summer heat. He could only think now of bicycles and spitting on the skateboard kids in passing, and he and his co-conspirator would laugh and laugh and laugh . . .

He threw the bottle on the ground, and it shattered. *Fuck this. Fuck him.* He had allowed a moment of feeling badly for the leg, for everything, but it was him that was robbing Zach of his hometown, wasn't it? Robbing him of his rightful place. He was the mayor's son. American Hero they had called him. It made him laugh, but they said it was true, didn't they? He tried another cigarette and shook his head like it was all a joke. He threw the second one down and stamped it

out. He headed back down towards town, towards The Alamo.

• • •

James told his wife he was going out with Joe, and together they headed to The Alamo, which advertised half off for Vets. James had known they would be there, and Joe, figuring the whole scheme half out, smiled, "Ah, yeah, reunion with your old friend, okay. I am hoping for some Real War Stories myself, and don't tell the missus, against Church Doctrine and all that." They entered the crowded bar, with its neon lights and loud danceable Nashville-sound Country Music, where the singer had gone down the checklist of Relatable Americanisms: Pickup Trucks, Painted on Blue Jeans, Beer at Night . . .

James and Joe saw Zach, who was sitting alone at the bar while other soldiers played pool. His head perked up when he saw James, then went down once more while he turned his beer mug in his hands. Joe put his hand out towards Zach.

"The mayor's boy, right? Heard all about you." Zach's mind raced for a moment, but he only smiled, smiled like he did for the newspapers.

"Oh yeah, what have you heard?" He looked to James, who held on nervously to his cane.

"Way I see it, you're a Goddamn hero, son," Joe said, patting him on the shoulder while he finished his mug.

"I guess that's why I got a lifetime supply of Spudtown Products," Zach said, putting the mug down hard.

"Damn right," Joe said, perhaps a little thickly. "Say, I bet you got some Real War Stories."

Zach looked at James.

"Yeah, I got stories alright."

Joe smiled.

“Well, you could tell them to me and your old pal here.” Joe had his hands on James’ shoulder. James smiled nervously. Zach took them both in and stood up, making James nervous.

“Tell you what. Buy me a pitcher while I hit the john, and we can talk.”

“For you, anything.” Joe pulled out his wallet and gestured to the bartender, while Zach strode towards the restroom in the back. James watched and patted Joe on the shoulder.

“I got to hit it too.”

James followed as quickly as he could. He had questions to ask. He had to know why. Why the change? As he followed and the Country Music crooned and his head swelled though he was not drunk, and his leg ached though he did not slow down, he thought of the Treehouse. He thought of the summers that stretched out while they were handsome potbellied children who ran through the sprinklers and laid in the prickling grass that stuck to their bodies. He thought of the Treehouse that smelled always of sawdust and sap. The summers they spent there with the magazines Ernest had given them along with a seeming endless supply of M-80’s. (And one day he had promised them beer and cigarettes. “But no ratting; snitches get stitches,” he said with a laugh sending them off to vicarious mischief.) They had been together in that warm Treehouse and had laughed and laughed and laughed, and it had been Zach who had reached out, had made James’ head swell and his chest burn. And then they had said nothing, and the Treehouse was always and forever their own, and James had thought about it at night as he lay in his bed in the dark wondering what it had meant, what had changed in the world. Then one day James had reached out in the Treehouse and had whispered something in Zach’s ear that had been like a slogan he had seen said in the Movies, though never like this.

Something had changed, and Zach stood up and looked at him different and told him to get out, to get out now. He shoved him and yelled at him and sent him tumbling out with one last shove, and it had left James with a sharp pain the rest of his life. He wanted to know what had changed as he looked out his window in his leg cast, and his parents prayed over him and left a telescope for him by the window that he never used, and with what was left of summer, he looked out his window and wondered what had changed everything.

Now he was following Zach, and Zach was not going towards the restroom, but the back exit. Zach went out the loud metal door, and soon James was close behind. They both entered a dark alleyway, the music muted in the distance, the sound of lonely alley cats mewling and hissing in the dark.

“Zach, wait.” Zach stopped and turned hastily towards James. James’ head seemed to sink into his shoulders. He gripped his cane tight, and Zach came closer, smelling of whiskey, and grabbed James by his collar with two white fists.

“What do you want?” His voice frightened James, who had a hard time looking him in the eyes, with his shoulders shrugged. His voice timid, he replied, “I just thought we could talk, and if you’re feeling sore, you know I forgive you, we’re friends and all, and I, just thought, like, you know, I just thought we could talk and catch up or something.”

Zach looked at James with nothing but contempt, nothing but the look that was back then, and James did not know why.

“You forgive me? What the fuck is the matter with you?” Zach let go of James. “You about ruined my life with your sick shit, you know that?”

James held himself up on his cane with both hands and tried to straighten out. He looked at Zach with nothing but puzzlement. It

seemed unfair to act like Zach had never been the one to change that place. How could he deny he had made it something else? Yet James could only forgive him, forgive him always.

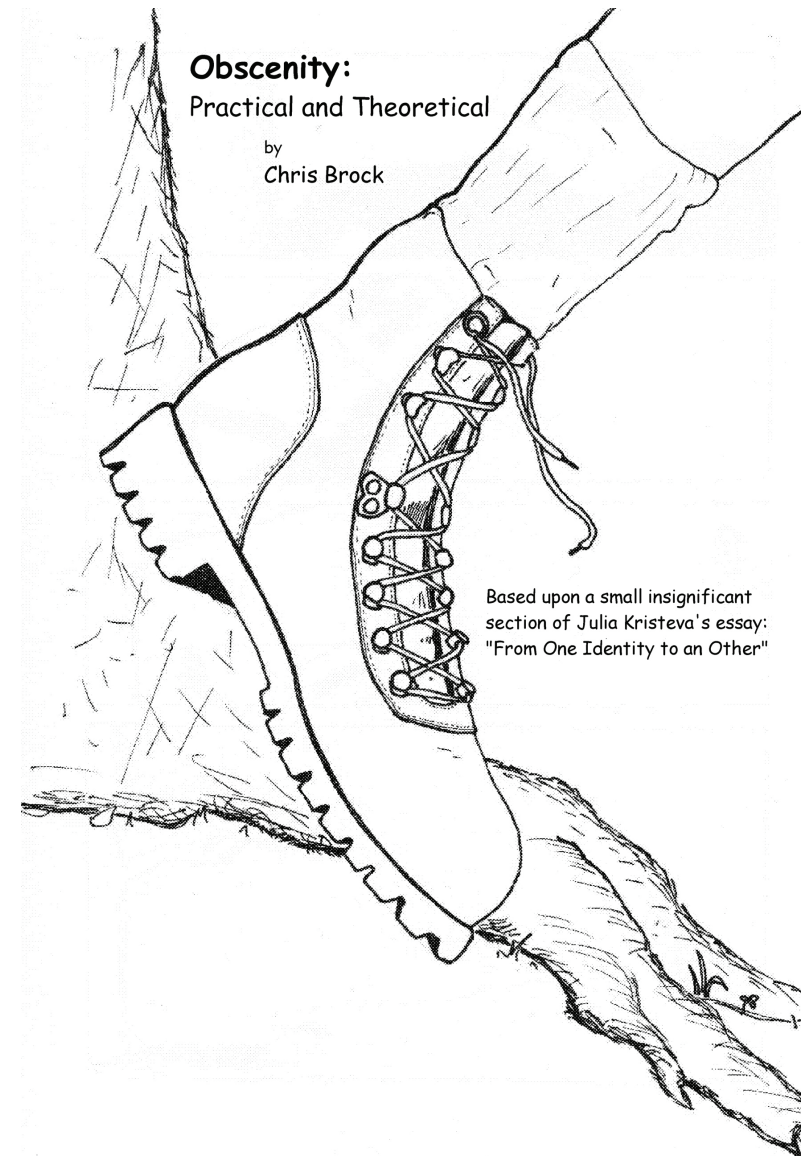
"I don't understand, I mean, we were friends and all and we, nothing really changed, or had to change or, uh, guess I just thought we could talk about it, and catch up or something, you know?" He looked at Zach, while rubbing the back of his neck, "I just thought if you wanted we could talk, and I just thought we were friends and could catch up."

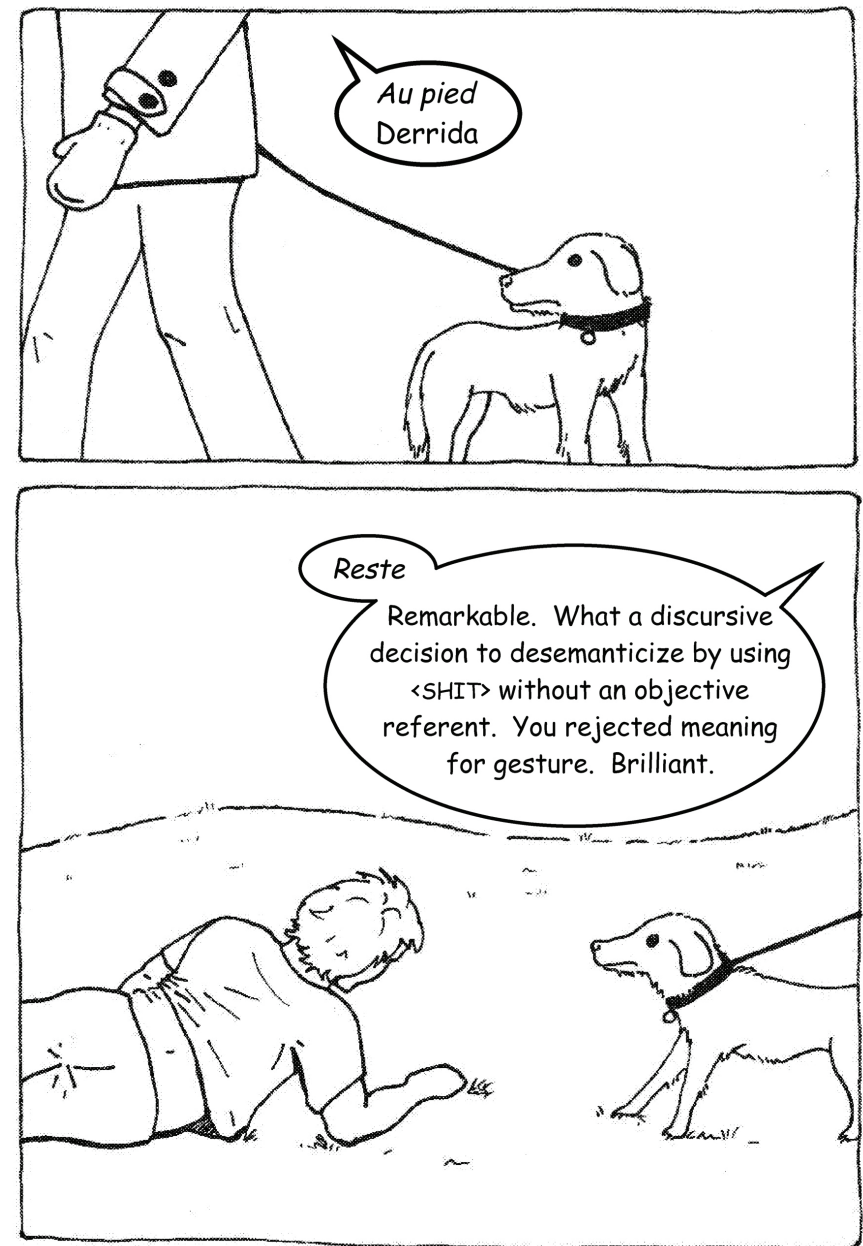
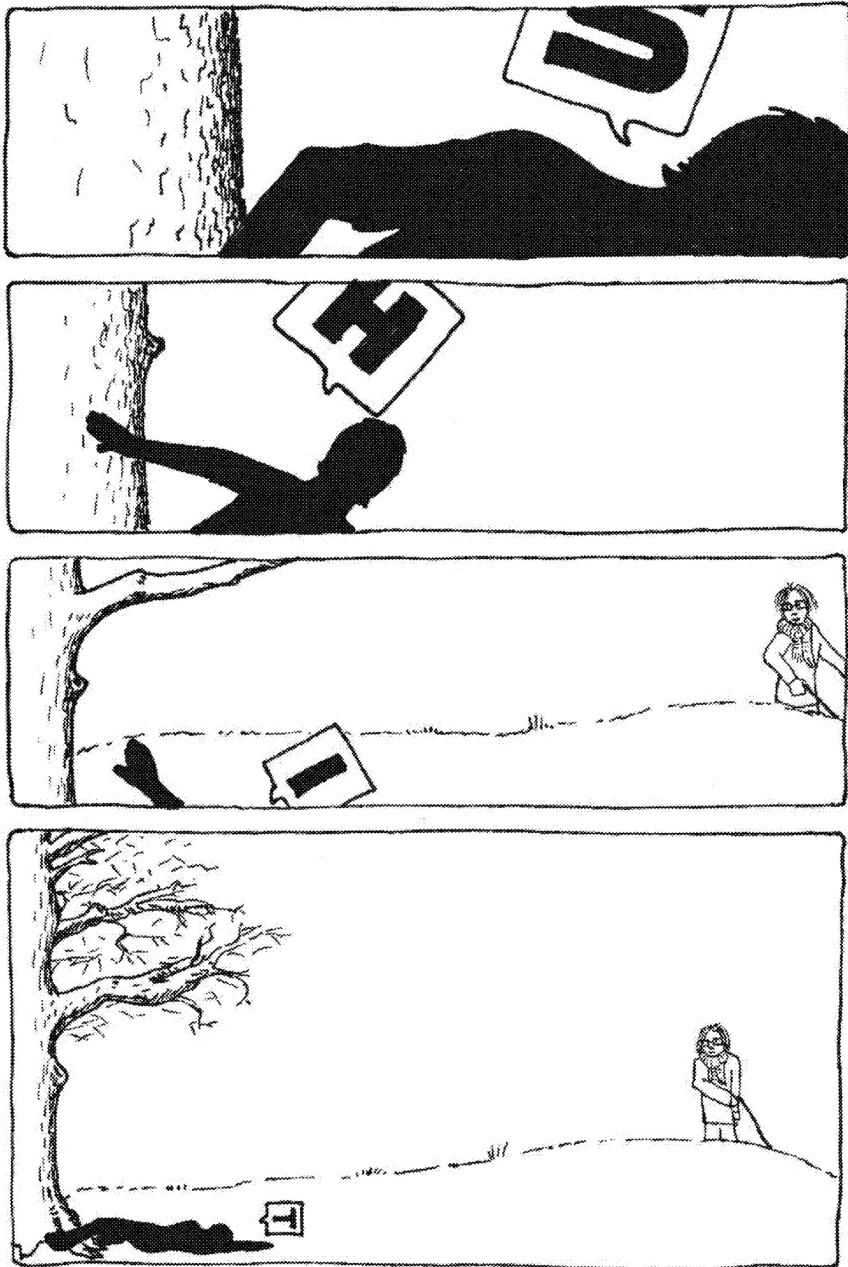
Zach rushed forward and shoved James, who made no sound, had only looked at that stern face like it had been the mystery that had both made and could break his world, his whole life. He hit that pavement hard with his cane and shouted, grabbing his leg that pulsed with new agony. Zach looked down at him, silhouetted by a billboard of a smiling Spuddy watching on ever lovingly.

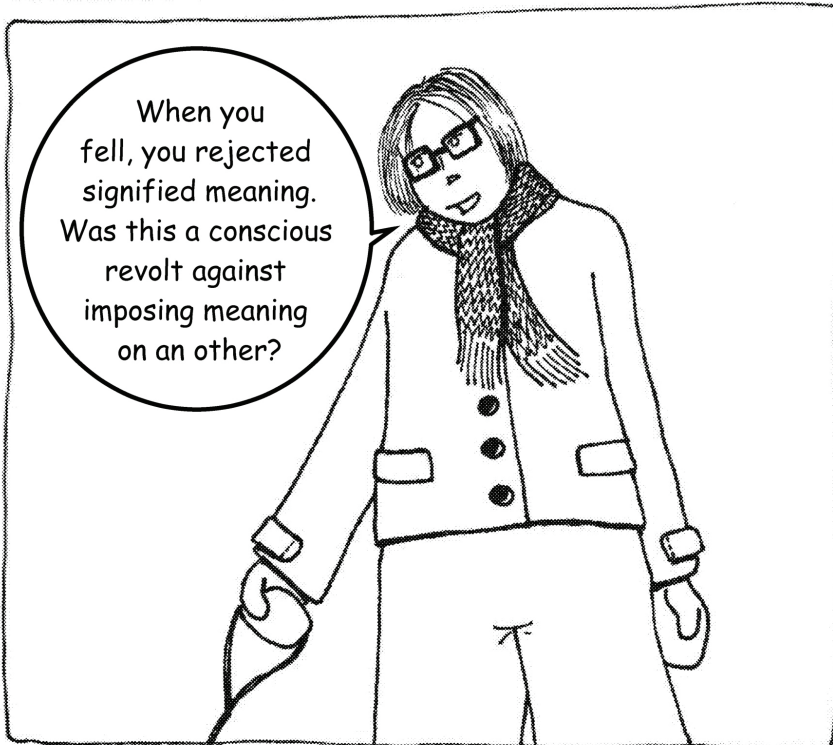
"Stay away from me, you faggot."

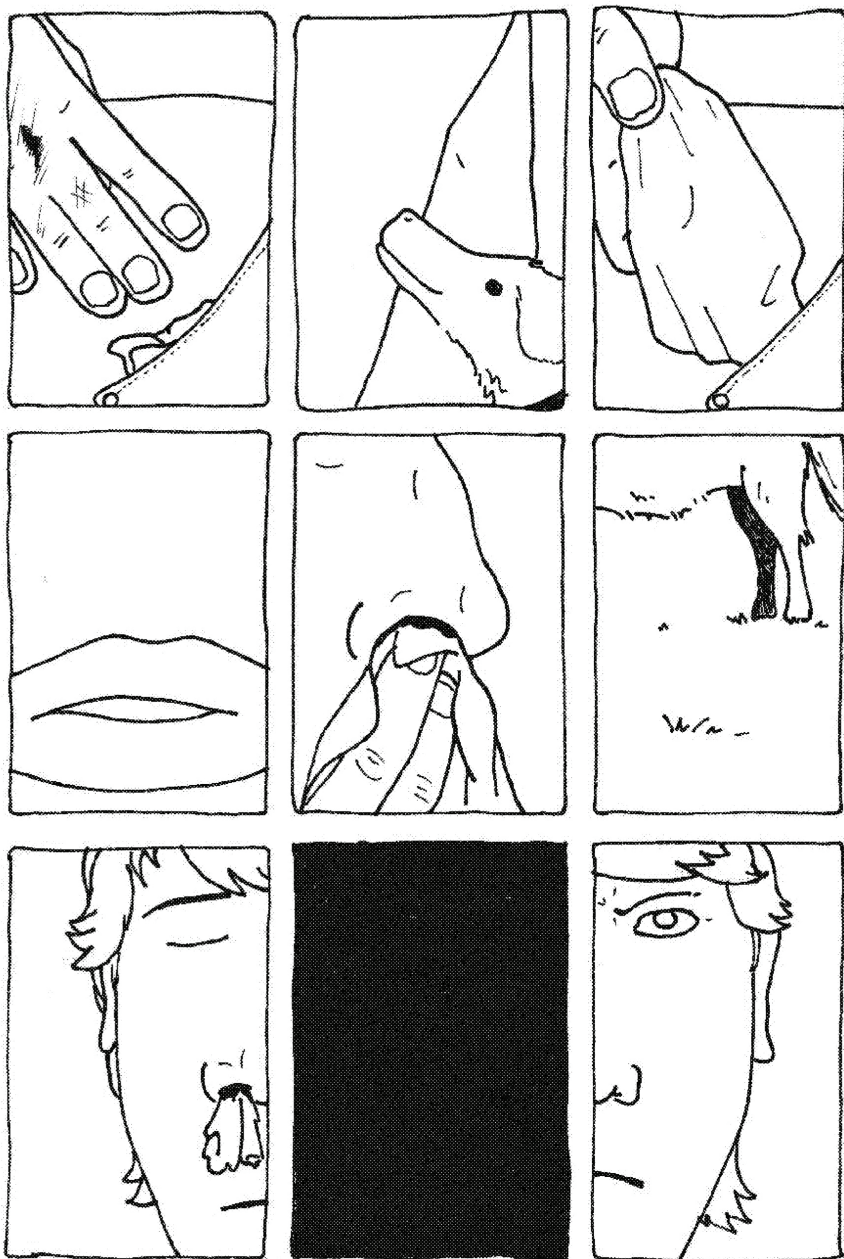
Zach walked toward the street, leaving James in that dark alleyway. The sad crooner's music wailed in the distance of a perfect blonde, blue-eyed love lost; the glittering eyes of patchy lonesome cats watched on; and Spuddy smiled with approval looking down, while distant neon lights buzzed with beer promises across the street and distant shouting and broken bottles rang out. James raised himself slowly and straightened out, walking at first towards the street. Then he could only stop, and without making a sound stood for a long while in the silence. Stood for a long while alone.

Obscenity: Practical and Theoretical

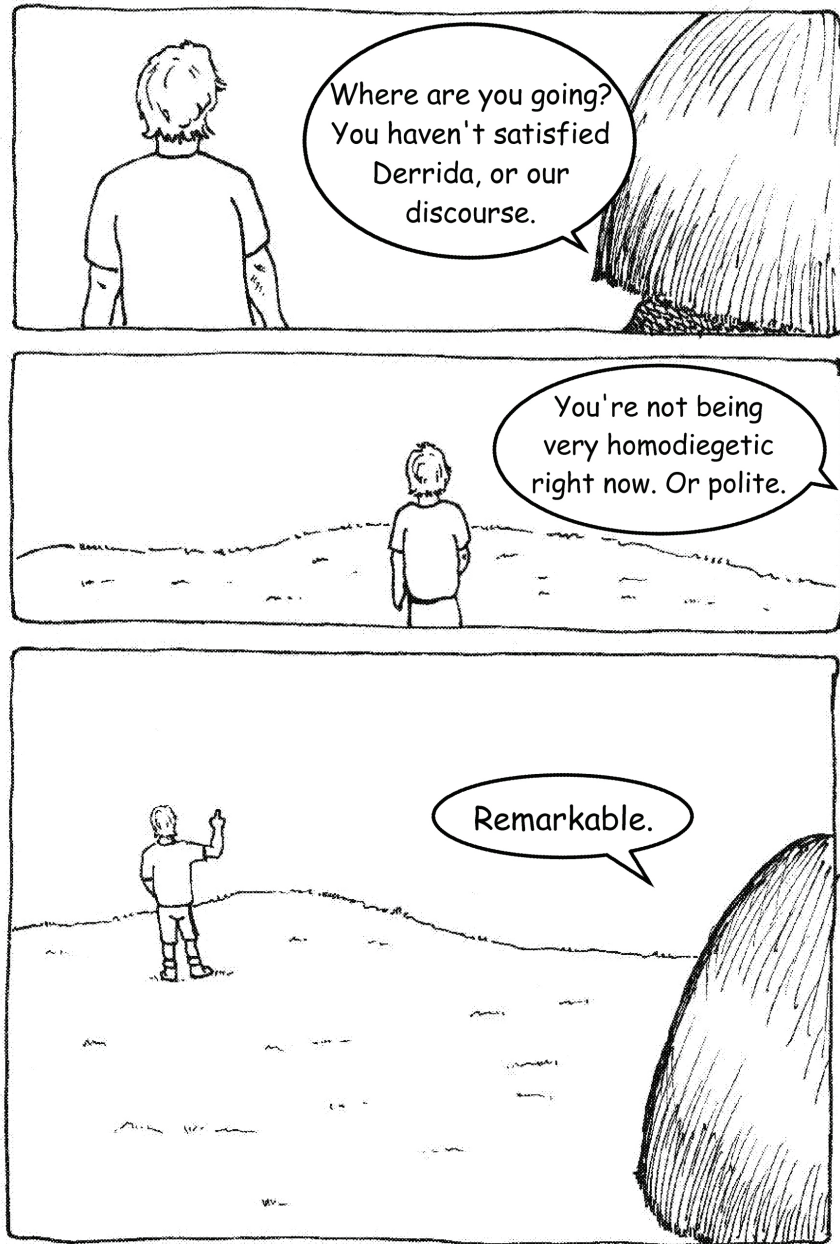








Bear Gulch



Most summers there are fly fishers on the Big Hole
casting in army green waders for a strike,
all of them tiny bright spots
from the road, which winds me around Thompson's Corner, through
Dewey, on to Wise River
with its single gas pump and so much jackleg fence,
but ten miles later I take a right

to end up at the Middleton Place. Timed just right
up the dirt road, sun flames the mountainside, engulfing it whole
while Em begs to peek out the sunroof to feel defense-
less, free. Rounding Tin Can Alley, we strike
the cattleguard and know we're close. The river
behind us now, we spot two deer on the hillside, spots

at the salt lick amidst Indian paintbrush red. Em spots
my mother immediately, arms waving. It's easy to pretend all is right,
the months ahead a lazy river
of nothing and everything ordinary and whole.
We enter. Mom coughs heavily as the door strikes
the cabin with a bang. Strong coffee and whiskey is served as talk
turns to fence

maintenance, the neighboring Nasstrom-Mattson fence
having fallen to disrepair through rotting spots
or traveling moose, a common winter casualty. Strikes
me now how quickly we mend fences each spring, and I begin to feel

an honest right
again, the whiskey working, a hole
temporarily filled. I will go to the river

tomorrow to remember why I came. The river
where my mother's father taught me to fish away from barbwire fence,
the willows and truck. My grandfather who took pride in digging his
own holes—
for a septic tank, root cellar, and fence posts. This place is his vision, a
spot
chosen more from dumb chance than planning, but his rite
of fishing continues. Tomorrow morning sun will strike

the river with fury. Fish will also rise and strike.
She will live three more months, my mother, the river
of cancer unstoppable, and I came to remember the basic rite
of casting, patience, and uncertain reward—to identify the spot
where I am always whole.

But the fill won't stay, the hole
too wide, river-stretched by sand, rocks and time, and I am right
to find my own fury, my spot bleeding her unfair strike.

What's Lost in the Literal

If it had been an eight-page, analytical essay they wanted,
or the recitation of Christina Rossetti's poetry, or even how to make
an origami fortune-teller, I could have given them that. But as I
stood noticing for the first time the scuff on the toe of my new white
Converse, I couldn't manage to formulate any sort of answer.

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I was at a crossroads. Actually, I wasn't at all—to switch was
the obvious choice. We drew from a hat to decide where our volunteer
hours for NHS would be spent, and I retracted my hand from the
sweat-lined Red Sox cap to find myself placed at Discovery Care
Center. That name always struck me as odd because for the life of
me I couldn't figure out what the elderly, both confined and sedated,
would be discovering. More so, nursing homes just weren't my gig.
I couldn't stomach the smell of what I gathered to be sterility and
decay. Trish contorted a face that I'm sure matched my own when she
found her crumpled paper to read: Innocence Daycare. She was the
type that would head to higher ground when children were around;
she literally once jumped up on a chair to avoid her own niece who
had glow-in-the-dark green snot sliding over the bridge of her top lip.
So, of course, she nearly passed out when the infant then slurped it
up with her bottom lip. Needless to say, both of us were in complete
satisfaction when we traded our volunteering fates.

We wouldn't start our placements until the following
afternoon, which left me daydreaming all sixth and seventh periods
about the kinds of activities and arts and crafts I was going to do with
the kids—and by “daydreaming” we all know I mean Pinteresting; is

it unfortunate that people can't even daydream anymore? After the bell rang, I found Trish waiting for me by my red Oldsmobile Alero that my mom had driven all through college. We took turns driving each other to school—I drove on the even days, and she drove on the odd days. I proposed the arrangement, and she never objected until the first month when 31 days came and she had to drive two days in a row. I remember being proud of myself for that one. Trish was pulling on the door handle repeatedly as she waited for me to unlock the door. I swung my backpack from my shoulder and unzipped all the crannies looking for my keys. While I searched, Trish continued her lifting of the handle, now in a rhythm I recognized as “Jingle Bells.” I told her that for someone who hated kids so much, she sure acted like one. I deflected the mechanical pencil she threw at me and set my backpack on the ground to better facilitate my search. After all of the contents were sprawled out on the asphalt like a back-to-school yard sale, I decided that my keys were nowhere to be found. I stood back up and smushed my face against the tinted window; I could see the monogram “A” keychain dangling from the ignition.

“Damn it, Amber,” Trish drawled out. “How do you always manage to do this?”

It was impressive, really, how many times I had let it happen. In fact, because of it, my sweet Nonnie had gifted me a year's membership with AAA for my 17th birthday. After I hung up with the AAA call center, Trish and I sat on the sidewalk of the high school's parking lot and waited for the locksmith. Whenever we had nothing else to do, we would always end up in some sort of a debate. On this particular day, the discussion was over whether or not the phrase, “Want in one hand and shit in the other and see which one fills up faster,” held any sound logic.

“I just have never understood it.”

“What do you mean you don't understand it? It's just saying quit wanting stuff and be happy with what you have. It's simple,” Trish reasoned as she pushed around a discarded Gatorade lid with a stick.

“Be happy with what? The shit you have in the other hand? That's not very comforting. I guess I get what it's insinuating. I just don't understand its reference.” I knew I had opened a can of worms with Trish. She never let me off the hook without seeing things her way. Usually I just played into this character flaw, but I wasn't ready to give up on this one; I really didn't understand the saying, and it had always kind of bothered me.

“You're just being dense,” she said matter-of-factly, abandoning her stick and lid to look me in the eye.

“No . . . ok, it's like on one hand you have all the things you want, which could be infinite, and then on the other you have literal shit, but a person can only shit so much, so is it saying that your wants will fill up faster cuz you can have more of them? Or is it saying that, like, wishes and desires are abstract where shit is concrete so the shit would fill up faster because it's measurable, where wants are not?”

“I have no idea what you just said. But you are either the dumbest smart person I have ever met, or the smartest dumb person, I'm not sure which.” Trish proceeded to tell me that I either overanalyze things or don't give any thought to them at all, and as I surveyed the situation we were in, I had no choice but to accept that.

The next day, Trish and I drove our own vehicles so we could go straight to volunteering. I was revisiting my “Daycare” board on Pinterest on the way over when I had to slam on my brakes for a man in the crosswalk. I passed the oversized billboard that warned about texting and driving on my commute every day, and yet I still drove with only one hand and one eye on the road. Driving bored me to tears; there was never anything on the radio, and the traffic through town

was terrible. Besides, I wasn't texting. I was pinning. The man in the street had caught me phone-handed, and I could practically hear his thoughts—cursing all millennials as he did the arthritis-shuffle across the road.

I arrived at the daycare four minutes before Siri's estimated time of arrival. Not bad. When I pulled up, I noted the awkwardness of the lot. Aerially, I bet it looked like a shoestring border between a trailer park and a Tastee Treat. The building itself was well maintained. It sat maybe forty yards off the main drag and was perpendicular to the street. From the big front windows, I imagined the stunning view of the trailer park's chain-link clothesline.

Through the front doors, the first thing I observed was the lack of presence. Besides the large case of narrow shelving with names jotted across them, the foyer was empty. Just as I was about to invite myself in, the epitome of a voice meant for children spoke and then manifested itself as a woman in the hallway.

"You must be Amber from Vallivue High School. I'm Tiffany," she said as she inserted her hand into the space between us. The daycare owner had big, bulbous eyes that you would expect to find behind coke-bottle glasses. She was young enough to be wearing her Rock Revival jeans, but old enough, probably, to know what it was like to use her boom box to record the Top 40 from the radio onto a cassette tape.

"Hi, yes, I'm Amber. I'm here to fulfill my volunteer hours for National Honor Society . . ."

"Oh, yes, your supervisor called and told me all about it. Nice guy, Dave was it? I'll admit we did get a little off topic when I noticed his Boston accent, though. My whole family is from back East, but of course I was born here in Caldwell—my parents wanted a slower lifestyle for us kids. Personally I like the pace of the city. I love that

energy. Oh, for heaven's sake, listen to me rambling on. Come with me and meet the girls."

"The girls" were all nice enough, but I found myself mentally checking out as Tiffany went into full backstory with each one. After introducing the one who grew up in Parma and adopted the three-legged dog, the only relevant information she offered me before she fled out the door was when she told me to just pitch in however I could. I was shocked and a bit horrified at the abundance of exposition and lack of instruction from my mentor. I thought back to a documentary I had watched where the lady goes and sits, completely unmoving, with gorillas day after day until they become used to her company and she can adequately study them. I saw a similarity among the two worlds and figured this situation could be approached in the same manner. I located a plastic chair of half-proportion and had just set up camp when I heard a rustling noise from behind the toy box. I scooted the box away from the wall to reveal a stunning blonde-haired toddler who had been tunneling behind all the furniture in the room. She was all of maybe two. I went against the better judgment of my inner gorilla-studier when I offered her my name.

"Well, hello there. My name is Amber. What's your name?"

"Bless," she replied.

"Bless?"

"No, Bleeeeeeess."

"Her name is Bliss," offered an eavesdropping worker.

"Oh, Bliss. That's beautiful," I told the little girl.

I learned the names of a few more kiddos and then I assisted in the production of homemade playdough. The recipe I pinned called for corn starch, and they used flour, but I guess that was neither here nor there because, regardless, the kids had a blast, and by the time they were through, the floor looked like the board of Candyland. We

saved the mess to clean up while all the kids were having quiet time. All of the little dears had settled onto their mats when Tiffany showed back up holding a heaping box of envelopes. The other girls quickly dismissed themselves to the kitchen to clean up the playdough and left me in charge of sorting and placing each kid's monthly statement into their mail slot within the big shelves in the foyer. The envelopes were in no order, and neither were the cubbies. I could not navigate a task without some form of order and so chose to sort the statements alphabetically. I was completely enthralled in my task and made great headway.

• • •

They asked me how I could've let this happen, how I could have missed the door opening and closing right in front of me.

My eyes veered from my shoes to the playdough traces left behind from earlier. I followed the litter haphazardly across the floor until I finally picked a trail that piloted me to a chair in the far corner of the room. Asleep in the chair, slumped against the armrest like a well-loved rag doll, was the toddler in question. Bliss' long eyelashes sat subdued atop two plump cheeks, one of which was hung up on the side of the chair. She was exquisite: a vessel of dreams and Goldfish crackers. The man who had returned her still looked panicked, as if she might jump from her sleep to dart out in front of him again. The police arrived to do a formal inspection of the daycare; in this case, Bliss was okay so there was no real reason for it—divine intervention was not a box on their inspection sheet. No one handcuffed me, but I knew a little girl with chubby cheeks would never be able to run into the back of my knees in the grocery store without me feeling like I had done her more of a service than I had for the one slumped in the threadbare rocker. I should have stopped her. Bliss had to cut right

behind me to get to the door. To be honest I think I even remember hearing it, but I was told to stuff cubbies with envelopes, so that's all I did.

To the Right of the Foothills

It's the backwoods hunters who get a kick out of it, not me. I'm the provider, the man they come to when they're feeling itchy. They'll drive south eleven miles from Rockville into the foothills, around jackknife-turns, and park right up beside my house. It's more of a shack, with a metal roof and barrels full of turnips and potatoes sitting just outside the front door.

The only way I know if it's a backwoods hunter is the black and orange striped flag they'll tie around their car mirrors. If there's no flag, then they're most often teens out exploring or on a dare to approach my house. This bothers me, but if the license plate says it's local or nearby, I'll sit in my gray recliner and stare at my jars of peach preserves or sometimes read the tattered pages of *Of Mice and Men* that I borrowed from the town library, until they lose their nerve and leave.

A few times a brave, or stupid, kid will come up to the front door. Their Technicolor Nikes or Vans will cause my porch to creak. All I have to do is make a noise—oftentimes I'll drop an empty bottle and shatter it, or cough—and I'll hear them piss themselves and flee.

But if the car that comes up here is not local and not marked with black and orange, it's free game. They'll climb out of the car. Usually it's a man, an irritated expression on his face, and he'll explain how he and his wife, his kids, his friends, or just himself, were driving these mountain roads and got lost, and he'd appreciate directions as to where the easiest road that leads to civilization would be.

If he's agitated at being lost, he'll gladly take the directions I give him. But if he's suspicious of a lone man living out in the empty foothills with no electricity, it won't be as simple. I usually have to

bring a wife and kids into the equation. "Well, Beth and the kids went into town to buy some more groceries. We're out of their favorite cereal, you see. They eat it as often as they breathe." Talking casually will coax some relief into him, and mentioning that you have a family grounds the man into a calm.

Then I'll explain to him the directions: take a right at the end of the road, you'll hit plenty of twisty dirt paths that keep leading up and up, and before you reach the top of the hill you'll see the wind turbines—great white windmill-looking things—and from there you'll be able to see the town and find the road that leads to it.

The man, or sometimes woman, will thank me endlessly, and I'll sit on the porch while they reverse their car and take a right. I'll wait. Usually fifteen minutes is best. Most folks take their time on the roads, as one quick turn and they'll skid off and tumble down the steep sagebrush and pine hillside.

Then, I'll stick a cigarette between my teeth and hop into my pale mustard-colored '78 Chevy and turn right.

Their car is usually parked at the top of the hill, with them standing a few feet from it, hands acting as a visor against the bright sun as they search for said town. The smell of sagebrush and bluebell and warm, buttery air is strong up there. The wind turbines, which one person once said looked mystical, surreal, and alien up on these natural hills, will be in view, and their gigantic fans will usually be grazing the bluest skies.

They'll see my car, relief spanning their features, as they realize I've come to correct them on their directions.

Then I'll pull my Winchester out from my passenger seat, my finger on the trigger. If I've been lucky to date, then this is the first time their faces will drain of color or their chests will stop mid-breath. But by then, if I remain lucky—and I'm always lucky—then they're

mine.

The sun is a hot, blazing fleck in the empty sky when they first arrive. I sit on the porch, eating stewed carrots and beef cake, admiring the rust- and pumpkin- and scarlet-colored trees and purple-blue wildflowers that sift in the cool breeze. Through the windows of their Chevy Tahoe, I see bright orange vests and denim coats draped across the back of the seats. I see two of them in the front, a man with a short beard and a woman—no, a teen girl—with an orange baseball cap drawing back her long hair. I see no orange and black flag on their window mirror.

They slow at the sight of my house. The girl says something, and the man drives slowly until he eventually stops. The girl firmly holds two long, beautiful rifles against the seat.

I tap my fork against my dish, thinking.

The man steps out, and I notice he has a slight limp, like his knee is aching some. He's perhaps twenty years older than me, with gray peppering his beard. His jacket is a plum-colored Carhartt, and he has a bright orange vest over it. His eyes are the color of mouthwash. They narrow on me: on my stocky, clumpy build, on my fingers the size of sausages.

The girl is watching us from the car window.

"Afternoon," he greets me, his voice husky and deep.

"Good afternoon," I reply. "What can I help you with, sir?"

"Well we've been on the other side of this mountain here all morning." He nudges his head behind me, where the hills slant further up into the sky and the sagebrush turns to coarse, thick pine. "And around six in the morning we spotted a five-point, saw it go over the ridge. Thought to follow it down and see if we could find it again. Then I tripped and strained my leg, and now we're just trying to find the way out."

The car door slams, and the girl approaches us, gripping the rifles out from her body. Her arms sag from their weight, and she rests the butts on the tops of her boots. "We're out of water, Grandpa." I stare at her thin arms and the man's crooked posture and make the decision. "I have some well water that's always cold. Got any canteens, little lady?"

The girl looks to her grandpa, who is still staring at me. She says, "No. Just plastic water bottles."

I rise. "You can fill them up, regardless. I've got a water filter, too." I look from her to the man. I am a whole foot taller. "You lost?"

He laughs in a self-deprecating manner. "We are, actually. Thought I knew this place well enough to get back, but, as it is, I'm running low on gas so we need to get to a town or station soon."

I nod my head and mimic the humor in his tone. "I get quite a lot of lost folk asking for directions. You could say I'm the unofficial park ranger here." I set my dishes on my seat and begin to point. "Take a right . . ."

They leave after I fill their water bottles up and the man puts a ten-dollar bill in my hand. "Appreciate it," he says.

I hold the bill in my hand now, pinching the soft paper between my rough fingers. Wisps of dust still float from where their Tahoe stirred it up. I wait five minutes. Grab my vest and click it on. Ten minutes. Throw on my denim jacket. Line the inner pockets with stubby, thick red shells. Fifteen minutes. Sit two of my rifles horizontally over my backseat. Slide a pistol between my hip and jeans. I know each situation is different. You must prepare for any obstacle or problem that arises.

Their Tahoe is near a turbine. The windmill stretches inhumanly upward, its body like an immense white stalk with petals. The dust still hasn't settled. From the hill, all you can see are the

rolling fields of prairie grass the color of butter. No. It's not a field. It's a sea, rising up until it reaches the hills as if they were sand and we were castaways.

They both stand outside, staring out at the sea, baffled. Their rifles are inside, on the passenger seat. I parked my truck before the last hill and hiked up. They don't hear me as I open the passenger door. The car smells of jerky and gunpowder and laundry detergent. I take the rifles, crouch against the car, and boot out their shells. Luck involves smart action. You must take precautions against any chance of it going wrong.

"Grandpa," the girl speaks. She's younger than I thought she was. Fourteen, perhaps. Doesn't yet have the curves of an older girl. I wonder if this will hurt my payment or aid it. The highs from backwoods hunters aren't always predictable. "Let's go ask that man again. We must have taken the wrong road."

I step out from behind the car. "I see that you're lost." Both startle at my voice, but I keep approaching. I draw my pistol out and point the barrel at the girl. "If you'll follow me, I can show you the way."

The girl inhales a shrill breath, but the man just stares at the pistol in sinking dread. Luckily, I know he's not going to put up much of a fight. He can't. I am twice his size, and he is leaning awkward and stiff, with no pressure on his leg.

He mutters something to the girl.

"It's this way. We'll take your car," I say politely.

It's four days before a backwoods hunter arrives. We eat a dinner of chicken soup and freshly-grown corn he brought and joke about old school NBA athletes who're now living back at home after spending all their cash on stupid things.

I hand him the hunting list and rinse the dishes while he

makes the decision. We banter over prices before he finally agrees to pay the whole. "Business is business. A man's gotta eat," I say as he hands over half the cash, "but I got what you want. It'll be a lively night."

I tell him to wait until after I release them and return home before he can take his bow and go.

By the time I drive the two miles, the dark sky has cast shadows on the pen. As always, they scream at me when I come into view. I force myself to whistle as I go into the small shack and bring out their nightly meals. They claw at me when I slide their food in. I try to remember where all of them came from, how long some have been there, but it blurs. There's a woman hiker who laughed about losing the path, who I invited in and had a drink with before depositing her here. There's a couple who'd gone on "a night exploration adventure" and taken the wrong turn, though the woman is gone now. There's a teen boy who'd gone climbing with his friend and broken his wrist. His friend is gone too, but he sits in the cage and cusses me out whenever I approach.

The fourteen-year-old girl stares at me through her cage bars. Her eyes are swollen and red. In the cage beside her, her grandpa shifts about. "You're a bastard," he spits at me. "You'll rot in hell for this."

I can't help but find this humorous. "I know," I say. It's not that going to hell doesn't frighten me. It does, and I do believe in that. It's just that it's addicting, you know. Seeing them in their iron cages that once had been for bears, knowing you have the power to free them or keep them, to feed them and give them blankets when frost chills the ground.

The only issue is trying to keep the whole business quiet. The backwoods hunters won't spill, but it's rumors that are most

dangerous: people vanishing in these mountains. I have to take care not to stir up suspicion, you see. That's why I drive their cars into one of the many deep lakes around here. I keep them quiet with sedatives. I tell the men who work with the windmills that I've had to shoot quite a lot of bears out here. They usually don't venture out much after I tell them this.

I stick a cigarette between my teeth and light it. The smoke drizzles upward in wisps, the end a golden spark. This is the only light they'll see at night, among these thick pines. When I first got into this business, we'd staked out four square miles and lined it with barbed wire that rose six feet up. Usually, the game won't get within ten feet of it, however. The game ends before then.

I unlock the cage of the teenage boy with the broken wrist. He's already sobbing when I kneel beside it.

"C'mon, boy. You're up. Don't disappoint." I drag him out, and he thrashes as I tie his hands together, then his legs. I carry him back to the truck.

We drive deep. Then, in an open field with dead sagebrush, I slice his foot bindings, boot him out, and drive off. He staggers after me, tied hands swaying in front of him, incoherent curses spewing from his mouth.

Back at my house, the hunter is pacing my porch. He's one of my regulars, always has his compound bow at his side and will hunt any age, any gender. Tonight, I know he's itching for adrenaline and challenge.

"Alright." I mark off a paper. "Hundred-and-forty-pound male. Upper teens. Been here for three months, so he'll be smart but frantic. Get a move on."

He exits, and I settle into my gray recliner and count the cash. The dollars are tattered at the edges, and marked up with blue

pen in scribbles. On one of them it says CURRENCY TRACKING PROGRAM. I half laugh and stuff the money in an old sugar can and slide it behind a broken plank in the wall. The hunter had brought me the local newspaper. I read it to kill time, learning that the town's girls' basketball team lost in districts, a woman was charged for a DUI, the funds for the city's recreational swimming pool were in need of donations. I make a mental note to donate fifteen dollars when I drive into town for gas and food.

Somewhere along the evening I fall asleep.

The fireplace embers are low when I awake to the sound of whining. It sounds like a woman screaming, which is odd, as the hunt consists only of the backwoods hunter and the teen boy this time, and you can never hear any screaming this far from it. I listen for a few minutes as it nears my house, whining, whimpering, yapping, and then quiet.

I reason it out as coyotes, but as soon as I settle back into my recliner, a different whining grows outside my walls. I get up.

It's a fox. Blood leaks out of its middle and puddles in with the dirt and butter-colored wildflowers. I kneel and stroke its ear between my fingers. It's like silk. I pinch its tender, soft flesh until it whimpers, then I scoop it in my jacket and take it inside.

"You hurt, little guy?" I coo as I rest it beside the fireplace. "Got a nasty bite?" The fox is the shade of shovel rust and chalk dust, and its ruffled fur is shredded so both colors churn together, intermixed with blood. I grab a half-filled bottle of whiskey and gauze I keep in my cupboards, and I watch it squirm as I clean its wound.

By the time the hunter gets back it's well past two AM. He asks for stuff to clean his arrows, and I hand it to him.

"Lock the gates?" I ask.

"Yeah."

“Put the trophy in the cellars?”

“Yeah.” He sits in the chair near the fireplace. His face twists when he sees the fox lying near the embers, sees its middle wrapped in ivory gauze. “Why do you do this crap? You’ll bring in disease.”

I turn to put the bandages away. He gently sets his arrows near his compound bow and rises, following me into the kitchen area. He looks at my pictures pinned to the cork board: me and a few season regulars, my dad before cancer ate him away, lizards I found and kept for a few weeks until they died.

“Jesse Travis,” he says, looking at my canned meat and vegetable oil and pile of onions and rolling pin, and then slaps the rest of the payment into my hand. “Why don’t we go on a run?”

I return his smile. “Aren’t you tired from your last one?”

His eyes glint as he grins. There’s something jagged in his expression. “That last one only got me more revved up. I want something emotional. Something that really kicks my adrenaline on.”

I take a swig of whiskey. “I have something on my mind for you.”

“No,” he says. “I want you hunting beside me.”

The alcohol drains more slowly as my throat tenses up. “I don’t hunt. I just provide.” I tap the hunting list. “But I can offer you a discount—”

“No.” He steps closer to me, and there’s something raw in his features. I’m not a small guy. I’m six foot five, with a barrel chest and strength that could throw a hundred-and-ninety-pound man across the room. But this hunter is tall enough that he doesn’t have to tilt his head back to look into my eye. And I know he’s done far more with his hands than I have with mine.

“Come with me. There’s something engaging with two hunters—the game is much more chaotic. The blood pumps through

you faster. There’s a camaraderie that can’t be felt anywhere else.”

I look at the fox resting on the hearth. Its small chest is rising in rapid breaths. But beside me I can feel the hunter’s breath, smelling like salt and stale air. It’s hot against my face. I feel cornered, and soon I’m in the front seat of my truck, my shotgun rattling in the back. The hunter is beside me, still cleaning off his arrows. I see blood flecking his wrists when he pushes his sleeves up. I pinch a cigarette between my teeth to settle my nerves, but the smoke only accelerates my pulse.

The only time I’d ever done this type of hunting was in the Ozarks, back when I was a tall-for-my-age middle schooler. I was with my dad and his brother, and they hadn’t told me what we were hunting for until we were on the grounds ourselves.

“This type of hunting involves numbing down your head, and letting that numbness hit the muscles in your arms, in the tips of your fingers, in your gut,” my dad said, observing how I cocked the shells nervously into place. “It isn’t like animal hunting at all. With them, you’re in pure adrenaline when you see your target, and you become numb when you’re shooting. With this type of hunting, you’re numb up until the point you shoot. Then your adrenaline hits you, and your fingers can’t help but tap that trigger, tap tap tap.”

When we came up on our target—a large male in white Adidas that were half-torn at the bottom—my dad made sure I got a shot in. The small pellets sprayed out after a deafening *bang*, and I waited for the adrenaline to kick in, the adrenaline that would kick in at any moment. But instead I felt cold chills all over my body, little prickles like I was consistently being stabbed with an icy thimble.

I’d taken him down first shot, his body vertically aligned on the ground in front of me. Dots of red bloomed from his gray shirt. But it was the image of his white Adidas with the torn bottoms that

imprinted on the back of my eyelids whenever I blinked. I'd dropped the gun, and my dad and uncle laughed it up. "Trigger finger."

I'd shot too soon. Shotgun pellets usually spray out and grow distant the farther they get unless something blocks them. I'd done it once before with a pheasant, and its body looked as if it'd gone around a few seconds in a blender.

Soon after that hunt we moved, leaving behind my uncle and the Ozarks. But my dad wasn't finished with the sport. He decided to set up his own lands, with a low-key hunting ground and told only a few guys about it. I was in charge of helping draw people in when I was in high school, and I remember the first was a pathetic, quiet boy. Everyone said his father beat him and his mother was a meth-head. He'd looked startled that I'd asked him to come by after school, as if he couldn't believe his luck of gaining a potential friend. I started exchanging jokes with him on the way home, but my eyes were on his gray Nike shoes with flimsy laces.

I never saw him again after that night, and my dad said he was in the cages for three weeks until a customer came around.

The cash came in soon afterwards, and my dad would lend me a twenty every so often, and I'd start to search for other potential game. The backwoods hunters who'd come by were good company if you didn't insult them, and I never had to see the shoes on the bodies go limp and slack the moment after they were shot. It became the cycle, an addiction, a way to earn a living, and when my dad died, I kept it up.

"We going in or what?" The hunter clears his throat impatiently. I realize I've been sitting in front of the gate to the pens and jerk the truck into park. "Wait here."

"Hey, J.T." The hunter rolls down the window and passes me some dirty bills. "Here's extra. I'll pay more afterwards." His tongue

runs along his lips. "You got couples?"

I blink and turn to unfasten the cord that binds the gate closed.

"Yeah."

They're both whispering to each other as I come by. I shine the flashlight in their eyes to silence them, and pull the cigarette from my mouth. For a moment, I think about telling the hunter that I don't have couples. I've never been fond of setting loose two at a time, especially when they're obviously attached to one another. But I think of the blood flecking his wrist that he doesn't bother to clean off, and I kneel beside their cages.

I offer the man a cigarette, but he's sobbing too hard to take it. I shift to the girl, think for a moment, stuff my cigarette back in my mouth, and fetch a fresh water bottle from the small shack. When I set it inside her cage, she looks at its beautiful, silver water. Then she unscrews the lid and downs it, sighing a little after it's gone. That sigh—lovely, musical, human—injects cold prickles into my spine, and I jerk up to my feet.

In the distance a woodlark's call rings out. I unfasten the rope I have with me and open up one of the cages. I whistle a song to myself, bite down on my cigarette, and think of what I'll have for breakfast in the morning, but the icy sensation seems to spread through my veins, clogging them up.

When the hunt begins, I cut their bindings loose but don't immediately grab my gun. Instead, I listen to the backwoods hunter hoot out while I clean the front seat of my truck. Yellow and red shotgun shells have fallen between the seats, mingling with gold-tipped sniper bullets. Grocery receipts clutter my drink carriers, and their rustling mingles with someone's cry and another's scream. A bottle of half-drunk Pepsi sits on my dashboard. It's mostly full of

foam. I stare at it until the time comes that he tells me to come, and when he does, I come.

Back in my house, he slams the money down, plus an extra hundred. “For the company,” he says, and, when he leaves, he shakes my hand. I wipe my hand on my pants, but it’s a useless gesture. There’s blood there, too. But I’m too cold to care much about the mess, and instead I fall in front of the fireplace where the dead coals are and rush to get it burning.

When it sparks, I see the fox lying limp beside me, and its bandages are soaked through. I know if I pick it up it’ll be as listless as a wet shirt, so instead I set my hand over its chilly body and pat it. Red blood sloshes between my fingers. And I know no matter how big that fire grows, or how hot its flames get, it will not be able to warm me.

Haiku in Idaho

No. 1

tráthnóna geimhridh- seabhac ag imeacht faoi scáth an tsléibhe	winter evening a hawk enters the mountain’s shadow	冬の晩 鷹ぞはいぬ 山の陰
--	--	---------------------

No. 2

lánghealach ciúnas gach áit faic...	full moon silence everywhere nothing . . .	満月や 四方静寂 何もなし
---	--	---------------------

No. 3

dhá eile ag siúl sa cheo- craobhacha sneachta	two elk walk in mist snowy branches	鹿二匹 霞に歩む 雪の枝
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No. 4

ar dhíon an tí thréigthe stánann siad i ngach treo- préacháin	on the old house they stare in every direction crows	廃屋や 無下に群る 烏かな
---	--	---------------------

No. 5

sa lochán
folcann dreoilín óg
ina íomhá féin

in the puddle
a young wren bathes
in his reflection

水たまり
若鳥遊ぶ
影映し

No. 6

faic scríte ann
ó tosnaíodh é
dialann zen

nothing written
since starting it
a zen journal

何もない
始めてみしも
禅日記

Diantha Smith

Untitled



Photography

Thomas Stephens

Distressed



Acrylic

Michele Walters

Falling I



Oil on canvas

Thomas Stephens

Watchman



Acrylic

Michele Walters

Sunset Stillness



Etching

Tirazeh Eslami

Persepolis I



Oil and acrylic

Reagan Hailey

Japanese Cherry Blossoms



Photography

Rachael Mayer

Scarred



Handmade bamboo paper, pine, canvas

Reagan Hailey

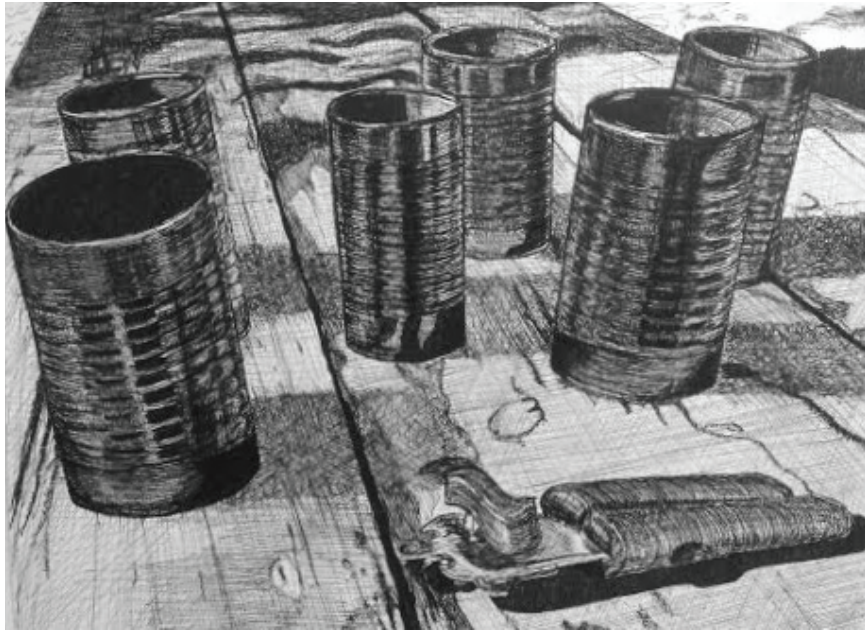
Black Dynamic Tree



Photography

Mary Morriscal

Disposable Relationships



Ink

Wendy Roberts

Needle Core Biopsy



Charcoal and graphite on newsprint paper

Raquel Sacknoff

Abandoned



Photography

Raquel Sacknoff

Room 306



Photography

Michele Walters

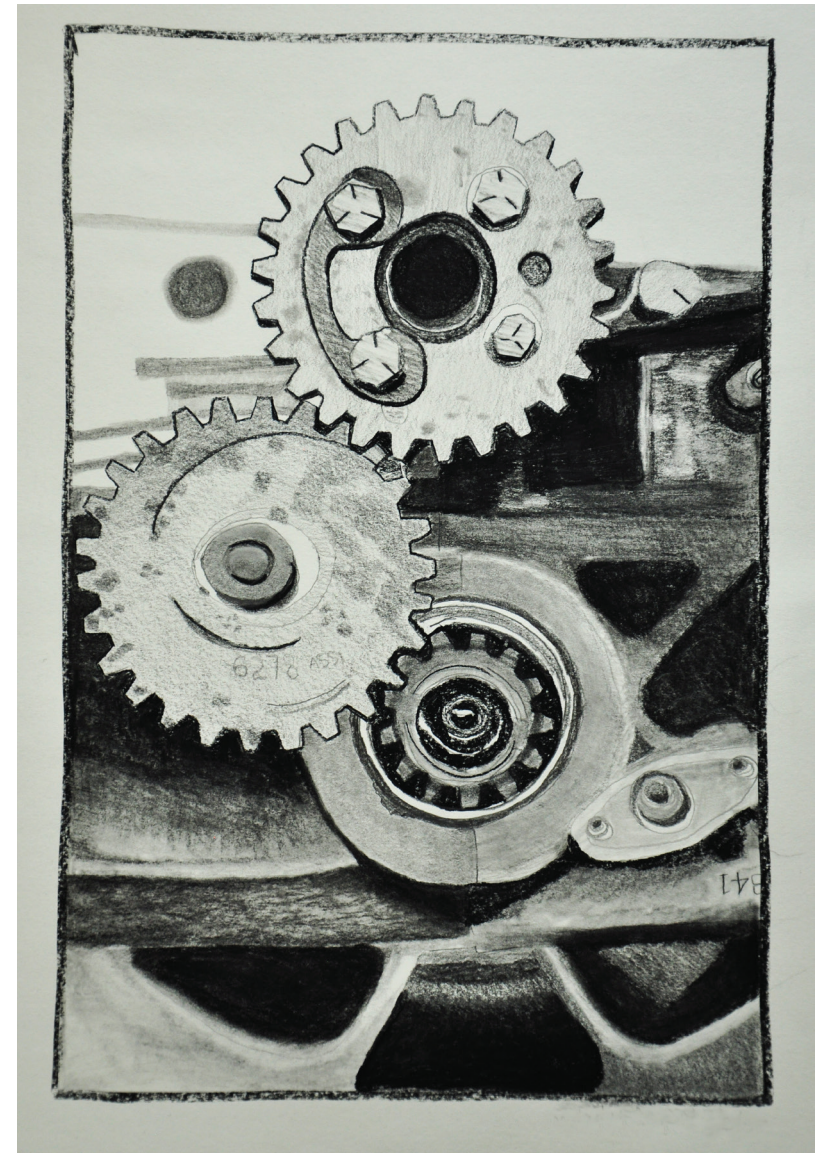
Fall Harvest



Etching

Wendy Roberts

Inner Workings of an Airplane



Charcoal on paper

Meditation on Nothing

nothing began
to dissolve
into something more than quietime

and my scheduled
nothing
begins to feel closer to a beehive—
all electric pupas
wriggling for wile.

What smells
like wild?
Cold skin—
I lose my resolve
to commit to
nothing, to be
still,
even for a small period of time
all turnstile of closethought flecks,

doing and making nothing.

Let go and let nothing.

Ser nada.

Creer nada.

My grandmother
loved wildflowers,

picked and pressed
in books
they remained closed until

falling,

tattered and brittle, absolved
of all beauty and form.
Time
to let flower dust be.

Come back to the meditation.

Garden Lawns

no lawns—no, every
inch of dirt is planted
with something that
grows—even the soil

spaces between the
cinderblock slabs
used to park cars
sprout onion leaves,
watercress, swamp
cabbage, convolvulus,
ipomoea aquatica—

stirfry vege from
southeast Asia—
edible xeriscaping

The Precedent

“So you can’t do it,” Carver says.

Romelia arranges a dark curl out of her eyes in a way
suggesting vague amusement. “I didn’t say that.”

It is high noon outside the West Gate Public Library. Romelia
is nothing like the image Carver had built up in his mind. During
their first and only phone conversation, Romelia had flat out told
Carver she no longer had access to a car and didn’t want to lead a
possibly dangerous amateur occultist to her small house. This isn’t
the first time she has used the concerted water display outside the
library as a convenient public rendezvous. Carver is also reassured
scheduling their meeting here. Nothing historic ever happens at
libraries. Several meters away, a girl around eight years old bosses
around her younger sister, holding her back from the stream while she
squirms past her defenses in cheerful defiance, giggling through the
jets.

“According to you, it’s not possible.”

Romelia picks up one of the papers on the bench between
them and examines it expectantly, as though she had asked it a
question and was politely awaiting a response. “‘Authors of the great
Iron letter, dissenters thoughtfully condemn,’” she reads, her voice
taking an odd sort of gravity. Her mouth thins in confirmation as she
sees the signature at the bottom of the block of text: *Indira Kovero*.
“One of my mother’s.”

“Most of them are. Figured it was best to consult with the
source for this sort of thing. An expert.”

“How many are already fulfilled?”

“The small ones. The family connection prophecy. New

treachery. Sightless eyes.” He points to the corresponding paragraphs. There are nine in total. Five of them have for sure been completed, but that leaves four unknown elements. Four slated catastrophes.

“Such a wide variety,” Romelia admires. It’s unusual to see such a collection. “This one from Jovi Minear is over two hundred years old. A bit conceited, assuming they all apply personally to you.”

“Conceit.” Carver picks up his wooden pencil, uselessly rubbing at the green oil-paint stain with a thumbnail. “Maybe. Doesn’t matter. I’m sure they’re for me. But even if they aren’t,” Carver shrugs, twirling the pencil through and around his fingers and back the other way with practiced, subconscious movements. When he turns his hand up, for a moment Romelia can see a partially worn-off, matching stain concealing the veins on the underside of his wrist.

“Maybe it’s not impossible.” Romelia stands up, her knees popping painlessly. “We’ll start at once.”

“Yes?” Carver had been aggressively prepared to make his case. Expecting the daughter of a prominent prophet to dismiss the entire idea out of some sort of seer etiquette or ethics, he’d thought long and hard about how to win her over and had amassed a collection of excellent points. Well. “Alright. Uh, good.”

“I can’t think of a single instance anyone avoided fulfilling a prophecy by *trying* to have nothing to do with the prophecy. Luckily for you, I have an idea of where to begin,” she says, thinking of the green marring Carver’s wrist.

After a brief search through Carver’s Passat, an aged marker is found wedged between the passenger seat and the car wall. “Do understand: this is just a temporary fix,” the woman says, as she sweeps the felt tip across the flesh of his shoulder blade, arcing stark lines into several ancient runes. Disconnect. Fortification. Two runes which combined mean impunity. “Ukrainian Consumer will work

better, especially together with the runes. But the runes will sort of take you . . . offline. Block your soul from the outside influence of lei lines. If we don’t give it an opening, maybe we can subvert the fate before it happens, so it’s important the lines are uninterrupted.” She throws in a few more words Carver has only heard in movies so he nods like he understands what the hell she just said and vows to do his utmost to not feel (or at least not to act) weirded out by anything that happens next. He did sign on for this, after all. It’s strange. He doesn’t have much experience with runes but thought he would feel . . . something from them. He can’t even tell they’re there until Romelia leans close to inspect her handiwork, brushes a finger across a harshly angular rune, and mutters an incantation. Runes activated, Carver shivers into the sensation of cool breath fogging the mirror of his back.

Emphatically, he thanks her for her help as she closes the door to his car, still lecturing about basic ritual procedures and rune arrays. She breaks off to say, “Don’t thank me. I haven’t done anything yet you couldn’t do for yourself with proper instruction. Thank *you*. You’ll never understand what a feat this will be, the doors it will open if this experiment is successful.” She raps against the frame of the driver’s door and hands him a paper with numbers and a street name. “Tomorrow. This address. Eight o’clock. Whatever you had to do tomorrow—cancel it. Get some sleep.”

• • •

Romelia slides the voice memo recorder from its stiff leather pouch. It’s fresh from the package, but she checks the battery life anyway. Carver is dutifully choking down the last dregs of blended Ukrainian Consumer, which turned out to be a viney plant overtaking several plastic totes in the kitchen. Romelia had compared the runes

to building a dam, and a plant suppressor like Ukrainian Consumer to turning off the faucet as it degrades his soul's ability to align with lei lines. "It's not a perfect metaphor," she had said, "but close."

He looks at the recorder. "This really isn't necessary."

"Of course it is," Romelia says, not glancing up from fiddling with it. "Even if this is unsuccessful, the information could aid future attempts. This is for your benefit, really."

"Is success more or less likely, d'you think?" Carver's concern is not alleviated when the woman shakes her head like she can't even be bothered to acknowledge the question, let alone legitimize it with an answer. With the press of a button, her device emits a single tone to signal the beginning of the recording.

"October the seventh, eight-twenty-three AM. Experiment commences. Subject is Carver Dylan, employed at a gas station by the interstate on-ramp, painter, silent-movie enthusiast. Youngest of three, favorite color is yellow." Not only does Carver not understand how his passing fascination with silent film or his favorite color has to do with anything, he is also weirded-out against his will. He certainly never told Romelia any of this information, and he is equally disturbed by the idea that she had researched him before today's meeting, or that research hadn't been necessary at all. "Carver is the subject of nine known prophecies. We are attempting to block Carver's soul from lei lines and outside influences until a seal can be permanently affixed utilizing a rune array and ritual of my own design. Of course, this is based on the premise that prophecies affect foretold events rather than simply stating what will happen. This has never been proven, but we make do with the information we do have."

After this clinical summation, Carver feels even less confident in this endeavor, but it's worth the risk. He'll handle any complications, like he always does.

"How do you feel, Carver? Take us through your thought process."

"Us," he repeats, feeling on-display like a captive in a Carver Dylan zoo exhibit. Come one, come all. See the sad prophecy boy; he fancies himself a painter and likes silent films more than your grandmother ever did. "I don't follow."

"Okay." Romelia changes her line of attack. "The runes. Can you tell they are activated?"

"Sometimes. Like background noise. Everything seems muted except me. Or maybe it's me that's different—I'm in sharper definition. I forget about it for an hour or two, until I notice it again, and it's all I think about."

"You're also now taking Ukrainian Consumer."

"Haven't noticed a difference."

"We'll check back with that later. First things first. It's dangerous to take this suppressant for an extended period. Given enough time, toxins will build up in your muscle, so we'll need to finalize proceedings quickly. You are going to gather most of the ingredients yourself."

"Where would I even find these things? Amazon-dot-com, witches-dot-org? Ebay? I guess it doesn't matter."

"It does. With rituals, you will find everything is important. We will get better results if we work hard for them." The list of things he personally needs to track down is fairly short but excruciating. As soon as their session finishes, he books it out the door, hoping he'll be lucky just this once and this endeavor won't be complicated.

• • •

Carver doesn't let himself think about what he's doing; he simply pulls the door outward and pushes the janitorial cart into the

men's bathroom of Judd's Convenience Store. The things he has seen here defy the laws of physics, of nature, of God—not always in that order. All over the walls. On the ceiling. He will never understand why that happens, and he doesn't want to. And customers insist on using the third stall even though Carver has personally posted clear signs on the inside and outside of the door, even atop the toilet itself, that the toilet is broken. Fantastic.

None of this helps his nausea. That vegetative suppressor is nasty stuff. Stomach upset started shortly after he left Romelia's house to begin ingredient-hunting. A fever settled in like a shut-in roommate around the third dose, and Carver thinks he might be hallucinating a little. It started out small. A car alarm in the distance no one else could hear. Imaginary formaldehyde smells haunting him for several hours one memorable Saturday night. Even now, he tries not to flinch at how the water in the bowl he is cleaning appears to be frothing and steaming.

But the menial movements aren't enough to monopolize his attention, and his thoughts wind back to the exhausting ritual preparations. Some of the ingredients have been tracked down—the easy ones. He has no idea where to begin looking for two grams of raw, untouched silver or what Romelia considers a Devil's Plaything. Is it code for something? Whispers in the back of his mind pick up. His hands tingle like lancets marinated in IcyHot, overwhelming his nerves' defenses, and he can't breathe. He's choking. Back braced against the wall, Carver slides down until he meets the floor, and he concentrates on breathing out his nose in a steady rhythm. It's difficult to do anything past paralyzing terror and loss of control.

"Hey man." A white dude with dreads holds onto the doorway, appearing as though he's looking for any reason not to have to call an ambulance or something. "Alright?"

Carver stares him down until the man backs out the door, and he is left alone with a cart full of commercial-grade disinfectant.

• • •

It has been nine days since Carver was tasked with ingredient harvesting. Other than the occasional phone call, he hasn't been in contact with Romelia much. For this reason, panic stings Carver when he spots Romelia through the streaked front windows of his place of employment. She steps around each oil stain without ever looking up from chipping at her emerald nail lacquer with a ragged thumbnail. It's nearing the end of his shift, and Carver assumes his hallucinations are becoming much more intricate, but, as he stares, the visual doesn't waver at all. Index finger now bare of polish, Romelia meets Carver's eyes and gestures toward Carver's Passat. She then proceeds to get into his unlocked car, like she owns it, and continues compulsively chipping at a second nail.

Mark shows up for his shift only five minutes late, which for Mark is almost ten minutes early. The moment Carver clocks out, he takes off the crumpled purple vest that is his Judd's uniform and balls it into his backpack, exposing his plain black shirt and least holey khakis that had been hidden under the polyester monstrosity. As he doesn't want their every conversation to become an interrogation, Carver doesn't ask how Romelia arrived at Judd's Convenience Store despite having no car. It seems a bit far to have walked, but imagining Romelia boarding a bus and making small talk with the person next to her takes quite a lot of imagination.

"Good to, uh, see you," Carver begins instead. "Are you hungry?" What could he buy with twelve dollars and sixty-three cents in nickels and pennies? Romelia hmms. Carver has no idea how to take it. Wait, he recalls the blueberry Pop-Tarts and emergency toaster

in his trunk. (And does the toaster ever make the difference. It doesn't matter if Carver is late for work. He will stand in his kitchen, wait for the toaster to do its thing, and savor the processed pastry with all the love in his anxious soul. Nowadays he just packs the toaster with him if he's running late.) Just as he is about to offer his companion the most delicious food industrial America shall ever produce, Romelia spies the large neon sign looming ahead with a yellow five-pointed flower for Yeeonja, the local Korean fast-food joint.

This is how Carver finds himself trying a low-quality Jjajangmyeon dish with gritty black bean paste and noodles that are definitely not authentic. It comes in a very American cardboard container, and Carver loves everything about it.

Romelia does not contemplate the menu, directly ordering kimchi. When their order arrives, her plate looks like something Carver would be willing to try. Maybe. That is, until she pulverizes and stirs together her plate of fermented vegetables until it closely resembles what any food looks like shortly after it is consumed.

"Actually, I wanted to pick your brain a bit," says Carver. Romelia ponders his statement like he is the morning's crossword puzzle, the crease between her eyebrows surging and flattening back out like a glacial EKG. She eats another spoonful of mush. Carver can't look away.

The last several days Carver has been working diligently on ingredient-hunting. He knows he can't contribute much to the ritualized aspect, lacking the knowledge base and intellectual discipline to design the rune array or translate incantations, but this he can do. He's already almost halfway through with the laundry list of occult miscellany. Having already procured several heavy hitters, Carver's proud of his progress, but the rest are . . . difficult. But maybe Romelia will shed some light on where to acquire the thymus of

a mink.

Leaning forward in the metallic chair to brace his forearms on the two-person circular table, Carver reveals his plan to cut out his own bricks, mix his own mortar, and build his own wall while wearing heavy-duty gloves and taking care not to allow skin contact with the materials. "Do you think that would count as mortar untouched by human hands, or do I need to indenture a vampire or draw up a contract with a dwarf or something?"

Romelia doesn't seem to appreciate his joke, eyes unfocused as she peels off the nail polish of a fourth finger. As the chips of polish hit the table, they re-liquidize and roll across the shiny black surface. Carver is reaching for a flower-emblazoned napkin before he realizes that couldn't be happening. More of the hallucinations are slipping past his defenses, but at least he hasn't scared anyone with his reactions too badly.

"My mother was brilliant, you know. Bit difficult to get along with at times. Passionless. She hardly reacted at all when my father left us, and she moved on easily. I used to sneak into her workshop when she was preoccupied and peek at her research papers. She never erased a line, never crossed out a word. I don't think she knew what a final draft was, and, if she did, she'd probably think they were a waste of precious time and energy."

It's the first information Romelia volunteers about her family. Around a bite of noodles, Carver hmms, unsure how he means it.

"I made a grave miscalculation in the ritual. It might have killed us both." Romelia meets Carver's eyes again, searching for his reaction, but he doesn't have one yet. Fear. Uncertainty. The urge to reassure. He can interpret Romelia's reaction. Frustration. Stress. "I'm sorry. Really. I have a new ingredient list for you."

With that, Romelia stands up, passes him the new list, and

throws away the plastic containers on her lacquered tray. The list is barely recognizable. Salt of a raven instead of mink thymus. Footsteps of a cat instead of pickled witch hazel. Still the grams of untouched silver. “Are we moving the ritual back?”

“No. Let’s still plan on the thirty-first. Times of transition are magically potent. I’ll just have to help you with the list this time.”

Carver gives Romelia a ride to her house. Carver turns on the radio and sings along to the Queen song. Romelia traces several runes onto the dashboard with a ragged fingernail, mouthing their names to herself.

New agenda on hand and still the deadline inching toward them, Carver picks Romelia up after his shift most days. They traipse around the state, negotiating with seedy occult shop owners, breaking into mines, ordering ravens off the internet. It’s a hoot. Carver sleeps less and less, and he only has two panic attacks on the job.

• • •

His manager wouldn’t trade his shift. Carver has no choice but to show up in the morning for the last time so Mark would go home rather than complain to the manager or call Carver at a time requiring dedicated concentration.

Carver loped through the aisles, gastrointestinal tract demanding attention with the flair of a spoiled toddler. Carver only lasts an hour before he closes the convenience store in the middle of the day. He didn’t bother penning a resignation, simply hoping the crinkled polyester vest left on the counter would suffice so he never had to come back to this place. As he locks the front doors, he catches sight of his sallow reflection in the security mirror, hair borderline-stringy, flesh under his eyes dark like a bruise. Four and a half weeks of preparation have come to a head, and it isn’t a breath too soon. God,

is he starving. Hasn’t eaten as part of a fasting purification, and his Passat may permanently smell of burnt sage, but he doesn’t want to chance that he’ll have to drag this process out a few more weeks, so he’s doing this right.

If pop culture is to be believed, basements are always a dependable choice for the modern mystic. Carver fully expects to be led to a murder-basement or a garden-variety occult abandoned warehouse, but Romelia instead reveals a large greenhouse that takes up most of her backyard. She is prepared with a camcorder this time, and, as she sets it up, Carver paces up and down the edges as he sucks down the Ukrainian Consumer smoothie, examining the plants in the hope of taking his mind off the taste that is not unlike an allergy-induced sneeze. Orchid, mistletoe, foxglove, chamomile, spearmint. Some he recognizes. Others he doesn’t, such as a grapefruit-sized, green, scaled bulb sitting atop the soil with a lacy, tendril-less flower stalk growing out the top like a feathery pigtail. He wonders if all of them have occult predilections.

Camera now rolling, Romelia stalks through the cleared space in the middle of the greenhouse and chucks a large quadrant on the concrete. The quadrant is then used as a guide for the complex rune array she paints with leftover off-white paint. Carver comes behind her with a power tool and carves the angles and lines into the floor as cleanly as his recently unsteady hands allow.

“Will this require live animal sacrifice?” he ventures. Not the best small talk topic in the world, he admits.

“Bit late in the game to worry about that now. But no, not this time.”

“Could I ask . . . I was surprised you agreed to this. Something in the world might be broken if these prophecies are unfulfilled.”

“No one is historically irreplaceable,” Romelia counters,

finishing the last rune with a flourish. “It’s illogical to say the world would still be in darkness if Thomas Edison never invented the light bulb. If it wasn’t him, it would have been someone else. Another would have seen the problem and the opportunity. I think if something is meant to happen it will happen. The act still plays out and the show continues, even if the actors and faces have changed. I don’t think this will have a detrimental effect on . . . anything, really.”

Despite himself, accused as he is of overestimating his importance, Carver is vaguely insulted. He throws his weight further into his task and lets the subject die a painless death.

Romelia also begins carving the runes into the concrete. They are almost finished. “Why do this now, Mr. Dylan? What are you fighting?”

“Is it so wrong to want some control over my life?”

By the time she responds, the floor is completed and they begin painting a different set of sigils on most of Carver’s flesh.

“Control is overrated. Prophecies aren’t supposed to ruin your life. They’re guidelines. They’re meant to help you prepare, give reassurance, warn you. It’s a blessing to have purpose. You’re choosing to feel as directionless as the rest of humanity, stumbling around sightlessly with nothing to anchor you when you have a chance to do something significant. Enjoy what you do have. It’s only a curse if you wear it like one.” And after sharing her most humble of opinions, Romelia is careful to steer the conversation to light topics and quizzes Carver on the portions of the ritual he will have to intone unprompted.

It’s been an uphill climb. Not just today but every day since Carver picked up the phone with the intent to track down Indira Kovero’s next of kin. The sun is setting, and the ritual is ready.

Now that it’s down to it, Carver finds himself hesitating before the plunge. He thinks of the miscalculation. They hadn’t really talked

about it. Whispers of anxiety spark down his spine. He could still call this off.

The prophet’s daughter must see something in his face. “Look. Do you want this or not?” Romelia straightens a bowl containing still spring water and a smooth black rock, polished by thousands of miles of river bed and signed by Carver in blood. “You came to me, Carver. I’m not going to chase after you, hold you down, chant in your unwilling face. I’ll still have to charge you, of course, for supplies and labor, but you can go home. Watch some TV. Go to work. Stop running from fate. Maybe walk your dog or take a poetry class or something.”

“No, I do. I do want to do this.” Each morning Carver wakes up, eats breakfast, walks his dog, and cleans convenience-store bathrooms, wondering when the shoe will drop. As he paints, his mind conjures new, horrible scenarios, and he hopes no one is caught in the crossfire the next time. The panic attacks are getting more frequent—enough that he sometimes wonders if he is on the slope into insanity. If he thought any licensed therapist could help him, he would employ three. “I’ve done my part. I want something for myself now.”

With that, he steps into the array, and the world changes.

• • •

The seal is an unprecedented success.

As Carver drives back to his apartment in the dark, his car doesn’t break the speed limit once. Colors are not brighter, the air not any sweeter than it was before, but his hands are no longer shaking, and the whispers in the back of his mind are silenced.

• • •

For thirty years, Carver relishes the privilege of rarely thinking

about the prophecies except in passing. One day, he stands in the shade of a poplar tree, sunscreen massaged onto his aging skin, the youngest grandson on his shoulders like a mantle, fingerprinting the sunglasses perched atop his baseball cap. Authorities have come to collect Carver's daughter's husband. Two agents, expressionless in the way only the highly trained are, pressure Jared into a car, and he doesn't even look surprised. Merely a spectator, as Jared ruins their family reunion, Carver feels Indira Kovero's words reverberate through his soul.

Jeremy Wilson

The Forest Path

1B-4B-8B High School Creative Writing Contest Winner

Leaves fall past your head as you walk down the dark forest path. The sound of the wind blowing through the trees, and the crunching of the leaves beneath your feet is all you hear. The forest is oddly quiet. No birds chirping or animals rustling in the bushes. It's getting increasingly dark, and you see no end to the path in sight. Suddenly, the path stops. There is no distinct path through the darkened undergrowth. The sun continues to go down. Your only option is to keep going. As you work your way through the dense bushes, a cold breeze flows past you. You seem to have lost track of time, as you look up the sky is pitch black and there's no star in sight. The only light now is the dim glow from the full moon. There is something wrong with the air suddenly. It seems hollow and empty. The shadows grow behind you. You start to sprint, desperate to reach the other side of the forest. Your arms and legs burn from the dozens of miniscule cuts made by low-hanging branches. Finally, there appears to be an end to the seemingly infinite trees. You push yourself to get there, but the ground falls out from beneath you. You tumble down the rocky hillside. You just keep rolling and rolling, unable to stop yourself. You land face-down in a small stream that runs through the heart of the forest. You lie there for a while, the pain too much to keep moving. The cold water slowly numbs your senses, but you know you must continue. You crawl out of the river and on to the sandy beach. Horrible pain pulses through your arm as you lie there. You find yourself incredibly tired and drift off to sleep.

When you finally wake, you are surprised to see that the moon

is directly overhead. You find the strength to get to your feet and begin the long walk into the depths of the forest. Clutching your arm close to your chest, you slowly work your way through. As you continue, the trees open up to a path. In the distance, you see a faint light coming through the trees. You rush off the side of the path toward the source. A small cabin comes into view. You run to the door and start banging on it and calling out for help. No answer. The door slowly creaks open, but there is no one there. As you step into the house, it doesn't take long for you to realize that you need to get out. In the flickering light of the fireplace, you make out the remains of the people who had lived there, ripped to shreds and thrown about the room. Blood and guts soak all the furniture. Whatever had done this had done it recently. Very recently. The door behind you begins to creak open. As you turn, a bright light almost blinds you. You can only make out a figure moving toward you. Terror grips you, and you are unable to move an inch. As your eyes adjust to the light, you begin to make out the facial features. You're shocked to see that it is your father. Something seems off about him as his eyes shimmer in the light of the fire. His face appears to whirl and change as his mouth forms into a great big smile. A sharp pain spreads from your stomach. You fall to your knees and collapse, your shirt now soaked in blood. You look up, the space where your father once stood is empty. Then your vision goes black. The moon remains in the sky as your body is dragged away. Death followed you this night. Did you not see it?

You are not sure where you are. Your vision is all black. All the light in the world seems to have been sucked away. You feel nothing. Nothing is heard. Your vision is empty. The air is oddly stale. You can't tell what is what or even if what is anything at all. There is no

end to the black void. But then, a darkened landscape comes into view around you. The tall black trees seem to sprout and grow all around you. Through the trees, the faint glow of the moon shines. Something about the place is familiar. Maybe you've been there before. It also feels just as strange and new to you. The moon is too big and even the shadows seem to move independently. This land is full of death and despair. Finally, you are able to sit up. Your torn clothes are fixed, and your injuries are gone. You seem fine except for the scar that runs from your stomach to your chest. Your skin still has no feeling. You get to your feet and examine your surroundings. Still there are no stars in the sky. You don't want to keep going. You know what waits for you deeper within. The farther you go into the forest, the more you lose yourself. There is no way out. The only option is to keep moving. Death will find you no matter where you are, so why wait for it to come to you? A path seems to suddenly appear, the trees and shrubs moved away. You slowly begin your walk. Each step seems to be uncertain. Even though your demise is unavoidable, you still cling to the hope that somehow you'll escape your fate. There is no wind now. The leaves of the trees remain motionless. Your slow walk becomes a light jog and then into a full-out sprint. Behind you, trees begin to wither and die. Death draws closer. Your time is running out. You can't keep going on like this. You can feel yourself getting more and more tired. Your energy seems to be draining from you. You stop and turn to face your destruction.

Instead, you see an end to the forest. The only way out is to surpass the essence of death. Using the last of your strength you run toward freedom. As you go, the trees seem to be more lively. Inches from your salvation, you are stopped. Some force keeps you from moving as you are dragged back into the forest. No one can escape the

forest. Your death is unavoidable.

Somehow you still live, forever trapped in this maze, running for your life from something you cannot stop. Nothing ever changes. The moon always remains alone in the dark sky. Death always finds you, and then you wake up back where everything started. Endlessly you run. Every time you die. Every time the cycle restarts. But not this time. The only way out is to surpass the essence of death that inhabits the forest. You must accept this. The stick is finally sharp enough to do its job. You push it as hard as you can into your neck. Blood leaks from it as you begin to fade. Then, nothing. Those who seek death find it, for death is an unavoidable burden that we must all suffer through.

You suddenly find yourself in bed, unharmed and alert. Maybe it was all just a dream. You sit up and stare down at the wall. The light protruding from underneath your bedroom door goes out. You sit there in pitch black darkness. The slight click of the door closing is barely audible. Your breathing becomes rapid. A chill fills the air. You scramble to pull out your phone and shine its light around the room. There is no sign of anyone or anything else in the room. A soft scratch sounds on your floor. You wave your phone around the room once more. Still nothing. You lie back down in your bed and close your eyes. Maybe you're just paranoid. It's all in your head. You're just still in shock from the dream. These thoughts race through your head. You open your eyes and use your phone as a light one more time. And illuminated an inch from your face is some horrible abomination. Its teeth seem to be endless, its mouth like a black hole. The eyes glow

a dim red and appear hollow and sunken in. Its nostrils flare as it exhales. Its long claws tap against your chest. The light on your phone goes out. You still feel it there, leaning over your bed. Then suddenly the sense of foreboding leaves the room. You seize this opportunity and leap off your bed, running full sprint toward the door. Your hand clasps the door knob, and you push the door open. You begin to run down the stairs. Something hits you in the back hard. You tumble down the stairs and land in a heap. You continue to crawl, ignoring the immense pain in your chest. The house seems empty. You pull yourself to your feet and limp toward the front door.

Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize Winner

This year's poetry contest judge, Mike White, is the author of *How to Make a Bird with Two Hands* (Word Works, 2012). His work has appeared in journals including *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *The New Republic*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *The Yale Review*. He lives in Salt Lake City and teaches at the University of Utah.

He writes this about the winning selection—

“He Never Actually Hit Me” gathers momentum through the repetition announced in the title. The refrain serves of course as a denial of misconduct—a denial that each lyrical stanza undercuts in succession, troubling our too-clearcut notions of damage. Meaning pulls in two directions, subtly emphasizing the dissociation that can result from a prolonged pattern of abuse. The poem does not satisfy, it unsettles—and herein lies its urgent strength.

He Never Actually Hit Me

There were lonesome nights
and mild cat fights
But he never actually hit me.

There were bills not paid
and blame passed my way
But he never actually hit me.

There were moves once a year
and lost friends who were dear
But he never actually hit me.

There were more good times than bad
and more happy than sad
But he never actually hit me.

There were babies being born
and addictions to porn
But he never actually hit me.

There were infidelities
and insincere apologies
But he never actually hit me.

There were demeaning words said
and the TV remote that struck our boy's head
But he never actually hit me.

There were fists full of hair
and pets thrown through the air
But he never actually hit me.

There were broken guitars
and emotional scars
But he never actually hit me

There were gifts from his lovers
and fights with his mother
But he never actually hit me.

There were grabbing of my wrists
and threatening with fists
But he never actually hit me.

There were pillows shoved on my head
and he wished I was dead
But he never actually hit me.

Christopher Swensen

The Wake

BR&S Prose Prize Winner

Nora Daly walked alone on the gray shore. Her dog, Boatswain II, or “Boaty,” had pranced off after the scent of a crab. She was headed as always to the lighthouse and back on that gray noon, when she saw in the distance a dark form on the pale sands. Boaty was already sniff-snuffing about its great mass. When the little girl got close, she saw the whale sideways, puffing dryly. Its fins fanned the air; its tail stroked the earth.

She reached out timid-like. Nervous, pale fingers met the blubber skin. The beast wheezed and groaned. She could see herself in the well of its eye, alone against the bright sky. She felt pulled by its gravity; she leaned against its breathing mass. She could feel its moaning, could feel it even in her bones.

• • •

Soon the entire village had converged. This was the second time a whale made such an appearance. Her Aunt Evelyn, the newspaper man, the restless mischief boys, and all the familial lingering faces of roundabout grownups arrived to look at it. She even met a “local expert,” a tweedy and mutton-chopped man, whose spectacled face explained: “Sometimes they get lost, or maybe even sick.” She watched as the generous folk bathed its lumbered form with cool water from buckets. Boys tried to climb it; creative scoldings were flung quickly. Eventually compelled by something that could not be explained, they all gathered to return the form to the waves. The whole town gave great shoves and curses alike. The wave-returned whale puffed away haughty. The town boys groaned with disappointments. They had heard tales of “Dynamite Removal”

and blubber raining from the heavens with humorous thuds. The lighthouse keeper was with the newspaper man. Pipe-faced he smiled, "Seems a waste; could've had fillets." For some reason after hearing this, Nora grew red-faced.

"You shut your Goddamn mouth!" Everybody laughed. Evelyn made sure Nora tasted soap for three days.

• • •

It was a *was* and *used to be* kind of village there along the shore. There was a humming and lunch-whistling cannery. There used to be a filled dock, the fisherman's cages bristling with crab legs or bulged with fish. It was mostly that once-hated Hibernian race that clung to that shore and cliff side even now as times got worse. Nora lived here all life long, now with her Aunt Evelyn, a kind and soft-spoken widow who had a fading beauty about her and was far too kind to everyone. Nora was beginning to hate her for reasons she did not understand.

It was a leafy suburb with old houses creaking in the wind. She lived still within sight of her old home, wearing its white paint that was coming off in flakes. She would remember always how in the afternoon she would walk along the beach with Boaty to the old lighthouse and back.

After that whale business she was out again, yellow raincoated against the gray noon. There was a sound in the distance. A mischievous bellowing. It was Timmy and his toadies. He was throwing eggs at the face of a large sea turtle. The creature made a face and retreated within its shell. "Ha ha! Got you with your own babies!" Timmy triumphed about before tipping the shell-withdrawn creature onto its back. "Ha!" Nora strutted towards the boys. She had hoped for Boaty's support, but he was nipping at seagulls in the

distance.

"Leave it be, Timmy!" The toadies balked. Timmy strutted towards her face and stood right in front of her in his little suspenders. The toadies were all snicker-faced and goady. "I don't do what girls tell me." The toadies watched eagerly.

"You think just because your Ma and Da beat you, you're tough, but you're not." Toadie disbelief washed over the gaggle of boys. Timmy was scowl-mouthed. "At least I have a fucking Ma and Da!" He kicked her in the shin and made a hasty retreat, toadies trailing laughter and mockeries. *One of these days*, she thought, *So help me God*.

• • •

That day she would always remember. It was days before the whale graced those shores for the first time. She was sitting with her Da on the couch. His moustache dancing on his face. He was sitting there with her, listening to the radio. Occasionally he would nervously brush back his hair. He was right there, in his stretched suspenders and threadbare wool sweater. They were sitting under the artifacts of the Old Country, the watching saints, sepia-bathed Ma smiling from within the frame. "You and Boaty go out." He still had the Old Country lilt. "Go on. I won't be repeatin'." She sighed. Was it relief in those days? Out they swung past the screen door. Finally after a few hours, fetched out and her hair washed with the tide spray and salt, they headed back in the late afternoon. She saw the neighbor's bicycles lined up, dropped hasty-like even, right on their sides. She walked in. She could hear the upstairs floorboards creaking. *Get his legs, damn you!* she heard a voice say. Her brother Sean? She walked upstairs. She saw her father's boots resting on a bed in the crack in the door. Her Aunt Evelyn saw her, came through the door, and

cradled Nora's head in her hands. Together they went back down the stairs. Evelyn was telling her *everything will be fine*.

The night after, she was sitting in her room staring at the ceiling. The lighthouse beam would pass swiftly through her room, crawling along her walls, past the sacred stations of her crude drawings from years before. Drawings depicting the holy life of Boatswain the First (christened by Ma, a romantic at heart). Crudely drawn illuminations of the saintly hound by the sea, sitting by the house, or chasing a devilry-inspired black tomcat. At the final station, the apotheosis of the mutt. He was ascending to be rubbed on the tummy by St. Peter, and his angel kin, Ma, too. All of them petting the hound, who was every bit epitaph-worthy as Byron's own.

Her aunt came in and sat next to her on the creaky bed. She would stay with her, starting tomorrow. Her brother was away too much, it seemed. Silence for a great while. "You should have this." She handed Nora a locket, from Ma, to Da, to her, it seemed. She opened it. In it was a picture of an old saint, crimson-bearded and sorrow-browed. She sat up.

"Who is it?" said Nora, looking at it. Her aunt looked it over too.

"Saint Jude, I recall." Her voice was inflected with confusion. "Your Ma got it when she was sick. I felt it a queer choice at the time, but she liked it."

"He important?"

"He's a saint, isn't he?" She held it and explained the axe-anointed Jude was as important as every last one of them. Loved by God and watched over.

"If God loved him, why didn't he just save him?"

Her aunt laughed, "He's a saint, isn't he? Saved enough, I should think."

Nora took the locket and rolled back over on her side, looking out the window. Her aunt's hand rested on her shoulder briefly, and she headed to the door. Nora looked at the locket. Sad little thing. The "gold" seemingly peeling off. The chain's links looking stretched. She held on to it. Apparently there is saved, and then there is *Saved*. Grownups will believe anything. As Evelyn was leaving the dark room, Nora suddenly called out.

"Doesn't really matter. Truth is, he was kind of a bastard anyway. He barely was a father. He barely was anything at all." Nora was looking at the window when Evelyn looked at her. She wanted to scold her but couldn't.

"Goodnight, Nora."

• • •

It was a night like that one. She snuck out with Boaty. The dog gave her an *isn't it a little late* kind of look but came grunting after just the same. Nora began her ritual procession, through the village and towards the shore. In the distance music could be heard. Nora would eventually pass *The Epona*.

• • •

There the new world pub, *The Epona*, stood near a crossroad. From its proud front window could be seen all the townsmen and ladies in drinking, singing Hogartian excesses. They were a smoky and oily lot now, picturesque and inviting. By the front door Brady, "The Night Watchman," was keeping his current vigil. He had a reputation as the town drunkard, no small thing in this company. In recognition for his achievements he was often met throughout town with the hopes and prayers of watchful neighbors, *Christ, Brady, Put yourself together man*, and most helpfully of all, *If your Ma and Da could*

see you now . . . He would give a bow with his flat cap in hand and continue on his way, conspiring with a boat-mender's wages for the night's work at hand. He was now accustomed to shame like his well-worn trousers. In some ways shame was his town coat, his armor.

Here our plump man stood in front of the pub, his victualing office giving its accounts to the ground with a grotesque expulsion. Between the spewage at hand would come a break and unchristian language that had a poetry all its own. Nora stood observing this quivering form that seemed for a time to speak in tongues, hands against the masonry. Boaty paced gently up to the results of this ritual and began to lap it with his tongue, his nostrils greedily taking in the reeking angel's share. "Don't get a taste for it mutt," Brady laughed.

"What are you doing?" Nora asked.

"What in the fuck does it look like I'm doing? Humorous lot you are, it's you who often do the buyin' and the shamin' and I . . ." He turned mid-slur and saw little Nora in her raincoat. "Christ Almighty." He stood at attention like a soiled gentleman and held his hat in his thick hands. "Sorry, little miss, didn't recognize you and your little mutt. Bit late to be out and about, don't you think?" He stood confident as any adult, but Nora had a fierceness about her, the dark eyes glittering against the pub's yellow glow that crawled along her face. It was a face that reminded him of all the women in his life, and a couple of Mother Superiors who go rap-a-tapping through his psyche. Slowly he broke down, his posture growing craven. Some of his faculties rallied. He saw she was looking not at him but the window. He suppressed a belch and let loose, "I suppose I should say sorry for your loss, little miss." Only now did Nora seem to see him.

"What are they doing?" She looked at the window with something like disappointment. Brady looked back as though he needed to be reminded, as though he needed to acclimate himself.

"Ah this, an early wake of sorts. I don't think it would be appropriate company for you, but I suppose given everything, you could, if you want, go and find your brother." He was spinning the hat in his hand like a ship's captain at the wheel. His eyes anchored to his shoes, clearly soiled and in need of a mend.

Nora was looking at the window at the grownup's world that included even her brother, a world of smoking and revelries, dimly lit and behind dusty glass.

"Doesn't really matter. Doesn't matter at all." Nora was still looking.

"Right, of course, little miss." Brady stood quietly by, kneading the dough of his mind. "What doesn't matter?" it suddenly occurred to ask.

Nora called to Boaty and walked away into the dark. At first Brady felt a sort of relief, having been cut loose from the world of obligation he avoided all lifelong. Then feeling a vague sort of responsibility, he pointed into the dark with his hat in hand and called out, "You be sure to head straight home, little lady." With this he felt satisfied and put his hat on his head, realizing it was a bit soiled too. He felt some kind of weary pride nonetheless, feeling he had done something vaguely civic. With that he resumed his earlier position and continued the night's work at hand. Suddenly a voice called out to Brady after some time.

"Brady, have you no shame?" A roaring voice he knew all too well.

"Christ Al . . ." Brady said, turning. There he saw Father McNabb, sullen-faced and in his black preacher's clothes. His tall, slim form was one that always brought a feeling of heaviness to anyone nearby. Brady again could scarcely look at him. Brady had, once again, his hat in his hands. "Sorry, Father," he said, crossing

himself backwards. McNabb looked at Brady with his gaunt face, his jaw rolling like a millstone. He looked at the window, pointing with a finger normally reserved for the sky or the floorboards.

“What is this, Brady?” Brady looked again, not for acclimation but hope for some diplomatic epiphany. He knew all too well McNabb’s view on everything that happened, that he had already refused to speak at the upcoming Mass or go to the burial. Yet Brady could not lie, either convincingly or spiritually. Too many of those Mother Superiors patrolling the halls of his mind.

“Well, Father, it’s something of an early wake.” McNabb stood with his hands on his hips, looking at the window.

“A secret wake for that coward of a man.” McNabb spoke ominous and low.

“Well, it’s hardly secret. Almost everyone’s there.” Here again that vague but familial sense of failure. Brady’s eyes took to his shoes once more. “I mean he was well-liked just the same.” McNabb strode, with those heavy steps of his, into the pub. “Oh, Christ.” Brady suddenly felt a welling up in his body, and resumed his ritual for the third time.

• • •

McNabb was the sort of preacher that walked like every step sunk him into the ground. Little was known about him. He had been in that village for years, maybe before it was a village. He seemed like he came out of the earth and stood ceaseless against the years. Only the waves could wear him down. He was feared and respected, like any decent man of God must aspire to. The stories that circulated about him inspired laughter or admiration, depending on who you spoke to. There was of course the one about when Suzy Clayton was but a girl. She played at being possessed, throwing everything in her

widow-mother’s house about in a hurly-burly of laughter and childish triumph. It was Father McNabb who strode to that house like a soldier. When Suzy gave him an earful, she was met with a firm backhand. He pointed at her as she sat silent and tearful. “You be behaving now, you hear me?” Exorcism or not, this was how the fear of God came to the Clayton household. Even now when the full-grown Suzy would see McNabb, she would recoil in fear.

When McNabb stepped into the wake for Mr. Daly, all suddenly fell quiet. All fiddling and singing and revelry were made silent all at once as all eyes fell on Father McNabb. McNabb took stock of all the faces present, and especially of Sean Daly, who remained seated looking at his glass. Sean was thin, dark-haired, bright-eyed like his father, and too well-liked. It was he who first spoke after standing up with his glass of whiskey in hand, and holding it up he looked to Father McNabb. “Father, perhaps you came to say a few words at this humble fisherman’s wake, since I know you won’t be doing Mass.” Many in the smoky pub shuffled and looked at the two men, like they expected some terrible rout.

McNabb put his hands on his hips and finally spoke.

“Tomorrow is Sunday, and I expect to see you all at church. Nothing more.”

With that he turned to leave, Sean about leaped upon him, but was held back by at least three loyal friends.

“You fucking bastard, at least one kind word! Even you could manage it!” He writhed with gritted teeth in a tangle of limbs, then finally he slackened. He was finally released, and brushed himself off and muttered, “I’m fine, I’m fine.” Then he leaped suddenly once more and was held barely once more. Finally after much coaxing he was released again, and after one more minor intrigue was let loose only to try yet again, until Murdock, something of a local strong man,

had to place him on his stool and keep an arm on his shoulder.

"Christ, Sean, stay seated." Murdock clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, Father," Murdock said crossing himself.

Suddenly Sean's Aunt Evelyn appeared at the entrance in her night gown, a prospect that twenty years ago would have inspired excitement and thoughts too rude to be relayed in good company, but now it only brought alarm and confusion. With all eyes on Evelyn, Father McNabb turned slowly and seeing this woman's visage improper and flushed he could not hold back, "Christ Almighty." And crossing himself, "What are you doing, woman? Are you mad?"

"Sorry, Father, it's an emergency . . . little Nora, I couldn't find her anywhere in the house, she's gone! Brady said he saw her just walking about, that she just took off." Evelyn looked to Sean; he did not look to her. Sean was listening from the bar, looking at his glass and turning it in his hands while nodding his head. He knew his little sister all too well. He seemed less concerned than McNabb's eyes seemed to expect, and with vague disappointment the Father looked to the crowded, smoky congregation.

"All right, gentlemen, you heard the lady. Your Mr. Daly's daughter is out and about. Get sober quick and search for her." The congregation shuffled, in some broad imitation of sober dutiful movement, and made its way past McNabb in one long line, each judged by him in their degrees of drunkenness or their efforts to conceal poorly from him the night's effects. Only Sean remained in his stool. McNabb looked to him, "Christ, boy, it's your sister."

Sean picked up his glass and drank the whiskey in one go, slamming the glass down.

"She'll be fine." McNabb stood with rare shock. McNabb turned and left with a new share of judgment. When it seemed the congregation had gone, only then did Sean get up, and picking up

his hat he exited *The Epona*. He had some idea where she might be and knew she would not want to be found by them. He walked alone toward the shore.

• • •

The spray of stars and beaming moon lit the way. Nora passed the old house, creaking in the wind. It was only this path along the silver shore that calmed her mind on nights such as this. Nora threw a moss-covered stick, and the fetch-obliged hound slowly retrieved it. The low tide near the lighthouse whispered along the sand. The pharos beam swept the sky. Boaty perked and barked off. There were voices calling in the distance, vague and phantom-like, but she took no interest. She walked on till she saw a dark shape in the distance.

When she got close, she saw the whale. Fins limp, tail struck against the sand. She reached out. It puffed quietly. Her eyes burned, her throat sobbed. She tried to shove against it, but it moved not even an inch. She pushed and kicked and beat against the blubber hide. She screamed at it. The beast gave out a great moan. She could feel it, even in her bones. She heard her name called out, felt hands grab her. Sean held her back, "Leave it be, Nora, leave it." He held her as she sobbed. The voices grew closer, McNabb at the head of the crowd. They stood before it, and looked again at that great and immovable thing.

Contributors' Notes

Chris Brock is currently in dissertation limbo in South Korea, where he works as an EFL professor and as a long-time procrastinator. His chosen field of study is the graphic narrative, which he occasionally uses to mock his other chosen field: semiotics.

Joseph Crupper is a junior studying Creative Writing and Gender & Sexuality Studies. He hopes to move to a large(r) city and write for the stage. His activities include singing in church choir, doing female impersonation, hanging out with undesirables, and working at a new age gift shop

Tirazeh Eslami is a graduate student in the Department of Art. She emigrated to the United States in 2006. As she spent time away from Iran and the Persian culture, she took the time to study Western Art. She enjoyed this exploration thoroughly, but she continued to feel a strong pull from my past.

Kiya Fife is from Rupert and is a senior studying with voice Professor Kathleen Lane. This fall, she will pursue a Master's in Vocal Performance at Washington State University, where she has been awarded a full scholarship and teaching assistantship. Kiya has been cast in ISU's *The Gondoliers* and *Guys and Dolls*, and also been featured as a soloist in many of ISU's choral performances.

Tommy Flynn is a junior at ISU majoring in Creative Writing. He

was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, but he has been a Pocatello patron for twenty years altogether.

Alyssa Gardner was born in Pocatello and began piano lessons when she was seven. Prior to beginning college, she studied with Mark Neiworth and competed in competitions such as Musicians West, where she received first prize in addition to other prizes, and the Idaho Music Teachers Association State Senior Competition. She currently studies with Dr. Kori Bond. Alyssa also began studying the violin at age five, and is pursuing a violin minor with Dr. Keum Hwa Cha.

Reagan Hailey is in her third year of earning a degree in Communications through ISU. Although she is almost 21, she has been pursuing art since a young age. Her artistic endeavors include acrylic and mixed media paintings, drawing, photography and tie-dying. She hopes to utilize photography and painting to her fullest abilities in her career and throughout her life.

Hayden Holbrook is a senior studying saxophone with Dr. Shandra Helman. Hayden currently performs with the ISU Wind Ensemble, ISU Saxophone Quartet, ISU Jazz Combo and ISU Jazz Band. In addition, he plays bass with the Idaho State Civic Symphony. Hayden traveled throughout the U.S. as a drum major for the Cascades Drum and Bugle Corp in 2014. He is currently on staff with the Century High School Marching Band.

Junichi Ito is an international student from Japan and a graduate student seeking an M.S. in Anthropology. He currently works as a TA

under Dr. Chris Loether. Music and Languages have been his two major interests, and since he was not able to pick between the two, he ended up graduating from ISU three years ago with a B.A. in General Studies with minors in Music and Linguistics. Some ISU people may recognize him as “the piano guy at Japan Night.” He has played the piano (accompanying the Pocatello J-Choir recently) on stage six years in a row.

Hailing from Pocatello, **Jake Knieval** is a very active musician, performing in many ensembles at Idaho State University. Currently studying under Dr. Thom Hasenpflug, he is working towards his bachelor’s degree in percussion performance.

Bradley Korth began piano lessons at the age of nine in Idaho Falls and currently studies with Dr. Kori Bond. He is looking to pursue a composition degree and currently takes composition lessons with Dr. Grant Harville. Bradley has been an active member of the ISU Concert Choir and is active as a collaborative pianist.

Mallori LaMoure says there’s a teacher in her heart and a writer in her head. To live harmoniously with the two, she has pursued a career as an English teacher at ISU—hoping that her love for literature and her respect for the craft might be instilled in future students.

Galilea Lavariega is from Idaho Falls, Idaho and graduated from Bonneville High School. She is a Creative Writing major, and this will be her first authentic publication. When she is not reading or binge-watching Netflix, she is spending time with her pitbull, Buzz.

Rumeng Liao comes from China and has studied violin since the

age of three. Currently, she studies with Dr. Keum Hwa Cha. Rumeng was the concertmaster of Nanya Middle School Symphony Orchestra, Vice-concertmaster of The Orient Orchestra of Wuhan Conservatory of Music. She is the assistant concertmaster of the Idaho State Civic Symphony and the member of ISU Chamber Jazz Band.

Natalie Malm is a senior in the Division of Health Sciences at ISU. For her, writing is a cherished creative outlet. She spent many of her high school classes composing haikus and sonnets in lieu of taking notes, and she often mispronounces words because she learns them from reading and has never heard them spoken. Outside of class and writing, Natalie enjoys playing the piano and guitar and counts pills to pay the bills at a local pharmacy.

Rachael Mayer is a Master of Fine Arts student at Idaho State University specializing in fiber and paper work. She is fascinated with the push and pull of decay and preservation within the larger landscape. Although she began in embroidery and photography, she now works in weaving, tapestry, paper, and installation work.

Shelley McEuen rides an Electra Amsterdam and enjoys creative challenges, including writing about aspects of the life she loves in the Magic Valley. A composition and literature professor at College of Southern Idaho, she is also an ISU Ph.D. student studying aspects of marginalized urban wild spaces. She believes the stories we tell define us.

Adam J. Merrill began playing piano as a 12-year-old. Among other awards, Adam has recently won first place in the Idaho State Civic Symphony (ISCS) Young Artist piano competition, as well as the state division of the MTNA piano competition. In 2014 Adam performed

as guest artist with the ISCS. In addition, Adam also teaches piano, studies voice, and collaborates with many musicians at ISU.

Mary Morrical (born in 1971 in Aberdeen, Idaho) makes drawings, mixed media artworks, and conceptual artworks. Morrical's work derives from everyday experiences of the artist. Morrical is currently a senior at Idaho State University completing a B.A. in Art and Secondary Education. Mary works in the Office of Admissions at Idaho State University.

Shelby Rae Russell-Murdock is a Music Education major at ISU. She studies violin with Dr. Keum Hwa Cha and plays in the Idaho State Civic Symphony. Shelby has won many state and regional fiddle titles, including Best Female Entertainer at the 2012 National Oldtime Fiddlers Festival. Shelby will graduate in the Fall of 2017.

Séamus Ó Súilleabháin won the 2011 *All Ireland Poetry Slam* and was the first winner who composed and recited his poetry completely *As Gaeilge*. He is in residence here at ISU teaching Irish as part of a Fulbright Language Teaching Assistantship.

Wendy Roberts is a second-semester sophomore transfer student at ISU in the Art Department seeking a Bachelor of Arts and Letters in Art. She is returning to school after 30-something years of raising a family, having a photography business, and teaching. Having been surrounded by art her whole life, she is now appreciating learning how to make art. It's a wonderful time in her life!

Raquel Sacknoff is a first-year undergraduate student at Idaho State University. She began her photography career in junior high school,

and although she is majoring in Medical Laboratory Science, her passion for the arts continues. In 2015, her work was featured in the Boise Art Museum, and she was awarded Photography Student of the Year her senior year in high school.

Diantha Smith is a Ph.D. student in English and the Teaching of English. She tries to get outside as often as possible.

Thomas Stephens comes from a long line of artists. He started his art career in the early 70s but had a 30-year break while he supported his family as a postal carrier. After retiring, he returned to complete his education and will graduate with a BFA in May 2016.

Kylle Strunk, from Nampa, currently studies percussion under Dr. Thomas Hasenpflug. He has had success as both a performer and composer. He has written multiple "Classical style" pieces, which include percussion ensemble pieces, chamber works, symphonic works, and jazz pieces. He is sought after as a chamber artist and has been a featured soloist with several ISU ensembles.

Shaun Stubblefield is a native of Pocatello and studies voice with Professor Kathleen Lane. He is attending NAU this coming fall to attain his Masters of Music in Musicology. His performances include Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls* and the Narrator in *Into the Woods*, as well as many other local performances. He also played the role of Guglielmo in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* in the Astoria Music Festival, Oregon, in 2014.

Hui Sun, from China, is currently a student of Dr. Kori Bond. She has earned first place in the Musicians West Young Artist Competition,

the Idaho Federation Collegiate Keyboard awards, and was first alternate in the Idaho MTNA Competition. She has played percussion in both the ISU Symphonic Ensemble and Wind Ensemble and been the pianist for the ISU Chamber Choir, as well as the keyboardist for the Idaho State Civic Symphony.

Christopher Swensen is a student of English literature and hopes to one day devour all things worth reading.

Jacob L. Thomas is an English Ph.D. student at ISU with a focus in medieval literature and religious history. He previously attended Utah State University and Snow College. He lives in Pocatello with his wife, Melissa, and their daughter, Eleanor.

Matthew Tanaka, from Burley, Idaho, began playing music at age five and now studies trombone with Dr. Pat Brooks. He is highly involved in various ensembles at ISU and is an avid composer.

Alister Tencate is a music minor and studies cello under Dr. Eleanor Cox, and previously studied with Dr. Brian Attebery, and has received quartet coachings from Dr. Keum Hwa Cha. He has spent five years playing in the Idaho State Civic Symphony and the ISU Chamber Orchestra, where he serves as section leader. He has also performed with multiple quartets, and is sought after as a collaborator for vocalists and choirs.

Alexis Walker is from Idaho Falls and currently studies with Dr. Kori Bond. She has established herself as a piano teacher in the ISU Preparatory Piano Program and is highly sought after as a collaborative

pianist for singers and instrumentalists. This semester alone, she will be performing three degree recitals with fellow music majors.

Marissa Walker, soprano, studies with Dr. Diana Livingston Friedley. Most recently, Marissa performed as Sister Sarah Brown in ISU's production of *Guys and Dolls*, and as Miss Hope Harcourt in ISU's summer musical *Anything Goes*. After graduation, Marissa plans to continue her studies in a Master's program to pursue her singing career.

Michele Walters is a graduating senior BFA in Art. Her priority is to justly represent the challenges, triumphs, and emotional evolution of the happenings in the world today. Artists have the task of reflecting and preserving history in its most sincere translation. At this point in time she strives to challenge preconceived notions to provide an outside perspective of what "reality" could be.

Jeremy Wilson is from Pocatello, Idaho and is currently a junior at Century High School with an interesting in creative writing.

Colophon

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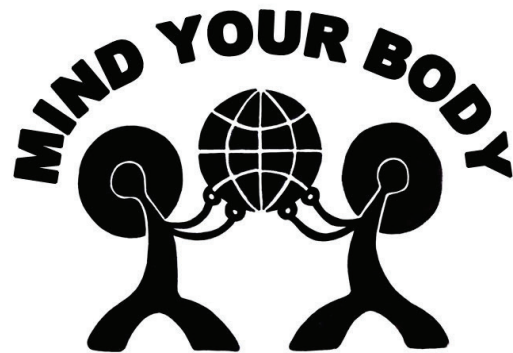
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