



Black Rock & Sage

Issue 16, 2017
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 14. For more information about the journal, see our website at blackrockandsage.org.

Thank you to everyone who contributes to *Black Rock & Sage* in the form of expertise, advertising, donations, and time. We'd like to extend a special thanks to Lois Spreier, whose generous gift of an endowment continues to help *Black Rock & Sage* this year and will help us for years to come.

Supported in part by ASISU.

Cover: Detail of "Moment of Depression" by Stephen Alfegha

Black Rock & Sage

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Table of Contents

Art & Graphic Narratives

Chris Brock	The Spectacular Wertham	33
Stephen Alfegha	Moment of Depression	41
Wendy Roberts	The Lightness of Memory	42
	Mysterious	43
	Memory	45
	Self Portrait Posterized	48
Tirazheh Eslami	Persian Calligraphy	44
Thomas Stephens	Bottoms Up	46
Corinna Barrett Percy	Be Wise, Be Colorful	47
Raquel Sacknoff	In Jelly, Inverted	49
	Split Personality	51
Nikyra Capson	Cyd	50

BR&S Musical Performances

Performers and Compositions	8
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Prose

Landen Fergus	Peculiar	12
Cody Campbell	Letting Go	14
Steph Bachman	The Bird-Children of '84	52
Diantha Smith	Fragments	73

Poetry

Shelley McEuen-Howard	Moonbird	11
	Irreconcilable Differences	68
Laura Neu	Locus	22
Richard Blackmon II	Into the Gray	24
Cody Campbell	Meat	67
	I Remember El Rey	77
Corinna Barrett Percy	<i>Stalag Luft III</i>	69
Samantha Rich	On the Rocks	76

Prize Winners

Ellie Bailey	1B-4B-8B High School Creative Writing Contest Winner— Salt in My Mouth and Salt at My Eyes	80
Tyanne Hintze	Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize Winner—Winter in Paradise	86
Steph Bachman	<i>BR&S</i> Prose Prize Winner— Harvest	89

Editor's Note

My wife sometimes muses that I am cheating on her with other women. I'm not, of course. This magazine is about as close to an affair as I'm going to get with my receding hairline, my screen-bleared eyes. Long hours, late nights, copy editing over a plate of crackers and pine-nut hummus: these are the elements of my passion. I would even call the magazine—what's that cliché?—a labor of love, if my gag reflex weren't sensitive to such tired phrases.

So, two years together, what a torrid time. Now it's time to call it quits. I will return to my wife and children, and I'm alright with that, as are they. But before I got to be drifting along, as Woody Guthrie would say, shred my stacks of papers, return my library books, pay my fines, surrender my office space, I am fortunate enough to have one more opportunity to introduce yet another great issue of *Black Rock & Sage*, its contributors, and their creative work.

Because I am a writer of creative nonfiction, one of my hopes for the 2017 issue included publishing at least one essay or memoir. To my satisfaction we published two. These essays deal with themes of memory, tradition, and fragmentation, both in local and global contexts. Cody Campbell's essay "Letting Go" details the narrator's return to the family farm only to find himself changed by his time away. "Fragments," an ekphrastic collage essay by Diantha Smith, presented as a series of responses to photographs, weaves the author's personal experiences in Syria with commentary on current political issues, particularly immigration and the destruction of historical sites. In addition to these pieces, we also received some wonderful prose fiction by Steph Bachman, including her short story "Harvest," the 2017 *Black Rock & Sage* Prose Prize Winner. Bachman's story is a

gripping and eerie depiction of the horrific struggles of family life in the Dust Bowl.

I am also excited about the caliber of the poetry appearing in this issue and the wide range of topics they explore, including alcoholism, family, race matters, and veterans' affairs. Samantha Rich's poem "On the Rocks" reflects on the ideals and narratives embedded in our culture, and the stories we use to mask uncomfortable realities, while Shelley McEuen-Howard's "Irreconcilable Differences" explores the complex intricacies of long-term relationships. Richard Blackmon II's rhythmic poem "Into the Gray" creates a dialogue about racial politics from the perspective of a narrator of mixed descent, and Corinna Barrett Percy's "*Stalag Luft III*" juxtaposes pieces of a WWII veteran's letters home with numbered lists of supplies, providing the reader with a highly structured depiction of a soldier's life during the war and the stark uncertainty he faces upon returning home.

I would like to thank *Black Rock & Sage*'s senior editorial staff, Anelise Farris and Chris Swensen, for all the hard work they have done. Planning events and putting a magazine together are time-consuming and laborious, and their work has streamlined the process. Our crack team of assistant editors was also a pleasure to work with, and I have enjoyed their enthusiasm and tenacious optimism. I am grateful to Susan Goslee, who nearly two years ago offered me the editor-in-chief position at *Black Rock & Sage*, an opportunity that has altered my writing, editing, and life goals for the best. I thank our faculty judges from the ISU Art and Music departments and our 2017 Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize judge, Michael Sowder, from Utah State University. Their contributions help make the journal what it is: a forum for emerging authors and artists. Thanks to these people's efforts, *Black Rock & Sage* will continue to make a tangible difference in the lives and careers of people like me.

BR&S Musical Performances

- 1 Alexis Walker, Senior Piano Performance Major
Robert Wilson, Violin Performance Major, 2016
KC Chojnacki, viola, Masters in Music Education from Idaho State University, 2016
Sophie Spreier, Bachelor of Music in Cello Performance, Utah State University, 2014
Piano Quartet in C minor, *Allegro, ma non troppo*, by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
- 2 Adam Merrill, Sophomore Piano Performance Major
Piano Sonata in A-flat major, Op. 110, *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo*, by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
- 3 Eponine Baker, Soprano, Senior Bachelor of Music Education Major
Alyssa Gardner, Sophomore Piano Performance Major
“Jabberwocky,” by Lee Hoiby (1926-2011)
- 4 ISU Saxophone Quartet:
Owen Flannagan, Junior Saxophone Performance Major
Brandon Alves, Freshman Music Education Major
Ryan Tomlinson, Freshman Saxophone Performance and Business Administration Major
Isaac Dayley, Freshman Music Minor
“Witch Hunt,” by Ulrich Schultheiss (b. 1956)

- 5 Alyssa Gardner, Sophomore Piano Performance Major
Desperate Measures (Paganini Variations), by Robert Muczynski (1929-2010)
- 6 Dillin Diggie, Senior Bassoon Performance Major
Hopi, by Philippe Hersant (b. 1948)
- 7 Marissa Dyer, Soprano, Senior Voice Performance Major
Alexis Walker, Senior Piano Performance Major
“Monica’s Waltz,” from *The Medium*, by Gian Carlo Menotti (1911-2007)
- 8 Kylie Strunk, Senior Percussion Performance Major
Jake Knievel, Sophomore Percussion Performance Major
“Unclear Faces,” by Kylie Strunk (b. 1995)
- 9 Gabriel Lowman, Freshman Piano Performance Major
Dallas McCrea, Freshman Music Education Major
Owen Flannagan, Junior Saxophone Performance Major
Kylie Strunk, Senior Percussion Performance Major
Jamie Burtosky, Senior Bachelor of Music Education
Jake Knievel, Sophomore Percussion Performance Major
Alec Newcomb, Freshman Trumpet Performance Major
“By the Light of the Moon,” by Gabriel Lowman (1998)
- 10 Owen Flannagan, Junior Saxophone Performance Major
Dallas McCrea, Freshman Music Education Major
Gabriel Lowman, Freshman Piano Performance Major
Kylie Strunk, Senior Percussion Performance Major
“Morning Coffee,” by Owen Flannagan (b. 1991)

- 11 Gabriel Lowman, Freshman Piano Performance Major
“Great Again,” original song
- 12 Conor O’Farrell, Junior Trombone Performance
Colin Brien, BME from ISU, 2004, Masters in Conducting from
Western Illinois University, 2008
Bride of the Waves, Herbert Clarke (1867-1945)

Moonbird

Truck-stop crow stands mute, witness to sacred
succulence, the worm-eaten. Sturdy god
of greasy compost advances, to slipshod
foraging, lurking. A forsaken vagrant.

Silly black vagrant outshining the moon-
brilliant oil slicks, neoned ruse of plenty.
Sentinel of wrecked weasels and many
smashed souls, empty beak pecking at a spoon

reflecting sky, sundown, the pulpy sheen
of feathers. Corvid companion decrees
in caws not lost at the Stinker Station—

a land of midnight chrome, temple to obscene,
consolation in fireworks of debris.
And each redemptive morsel, unforeseen.

Peculiar

\pi-kyül-yər

1: Characteristic of only one person, group, or thing: as in an in-group-out-group bias that creates prejudices or insecurities. **2:** The state of being different, odd, or obscure, such as a sheep in a herd of bulls or shooting three-pointers with a football. / It's walking through a new set of double doors for the first day of school every other year. / It's seeing unfamiliar eyes follow you to your desk. / It's changing desks because yours was saved for a non-foreigner. / It's scribbling words and illustrations on scraps of paper throughout the day. / It's staying up all night to build the perfect Lego city. / It's playing your N64 alone while all your friends are at Mutual, / which you don't attend because your family is not LDS. / It's trying to be cool by doing flips off the monkey bars, / then being called a show off and walking in from recess alone. / It becomes painting graffiti on your clothes, / sewing patches of your favorite punk bands to your jackets, / having spray-painted mohawks that never get washed. / It becomes hiding cheap wine in your 32 oz fountain soda so you can get drunk in class. / It becomes spray-painting your 1990 Cadillac Deville flat black with "skate and destroy" across the hood. / It becomes dropping out because too many hangovers won't let you leave the side of your toilet. / It becomes keeping syringes and burnt spoons bundled in the center console of your car. / It becomes brick jail cells with four-inch by three-foot windows and food that comes on a plastic tray. / It becomes prison bunks where you share your room with 200 people. / It becomes checking the box that asks, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" on every application you pick up. / It became drinking

Pepsi at family gatherings, / having conversations with your dad on his back porch overlooking acres of farm land. / It became having casual conversations across your PO's desk, / walking through hallways filled with law enforcement, making eye contact with a straight back. / It became going to meetings every week where you sit in a circle and share about learning to live. / It became sitting in a fortress of spiritual books seeking a Higher Power. / It became waking up with a silver coin that has "Two Years" engraved into it, clasped in your hands and a deep breath held in your lungs.

Letting Go

“This is going to be my last winter,” my grandpa said, holding onto the steering wheel with both hands. His arm and head jerking to the right in time with the road like a typewriter. I kept waiting for the ding so I could reset him. I couldn’t respond, so I just did what I always do whenever anybody tries to talk to me. I looked around. It’s a tradition. I acted like the interior of my dad’s old Chevy was more interesting. My eyes landed on my State debate sweatshirt. It was covered in oil, shit, bovine uterine fluid, and Coors Light. That sweater could survive anything. We drove past the cemetery.

“Do you know whose grave they’re digging right now?”

They weren’t digging any grave.

“Where at?”

“Down by your Fulmer cousins.”

“Those are our plots, Grandpa. No one is being buried today.”

I thought my grandpa was going to die last winter. When I visited for Christmas, he had gotten sick. So he hid in his room with the lights off and the news on. He wanted to know what was going on in China and the Middle East. Anything but the town he never really left. It’s a tradition. I heard every Marlboro cough that oozed its way under the door. At the time, I wanted him to die. At the time, I couldn’t remember how he taught me to ride a horse. Introduced me to my first love: The green lake behind the mountain that burned in the sunset. The only thing I could remember when he’d crawl to the bathroom with the smell of nursing home clinging to him like a Dr. Harris fragrance was the sound of his voice in the thunder when we were irrigating in a storm. The way the roiling black built up behind the curled tips of his hat. The smell of sulfur and mountain water

mixing together in the hay field. The glint of lightning in his silver shirt buttons.

• • •

I coasted over the hill. It's only a two-hour drive, but I hardly ever make it. I only had one hand on the steering wheel. I was going to get the perfect shot. A frameable picture. I got one every year. It's a tradition. A hundred yards down the last hill leading into the valley. Fifty yards before the tourist stop along the highway. Too far down the hill, you wouldn't get the river. Too far up and you captured the turn-off and the road. All I wanted was the Tetons and the river.

When I pulled up to my parents' house and parked between my dad's cruiser and the tractor, the world went mad. When I opened the door, winter greeted me. Caressing my face, leaving little kisses down my arms. Hugging me in her favorite white coat. The dogs were there, jumping, barking. The cows were lowing. A tractor turned diesel. Geese flew overhead, and a horse whinnied at the far end of the pasture. The air smelled like smoke. Applewood. Cow shit. God, I missed the smell of cow shit. My dad was there. Just home from work at the station. Standing in his Maltese stance by the corrals with crossed arms. Waiting for me in his old fire boots.

"Go change your clothes. I need your help."

• • •

I stood in the kitchen in an apron with my mother, and she was upset. She's lovely, my mother. She's like a brunette Molly Weasley.

"What's next?" I asked her.

"You cut the cheese in little blocks for the salad, just like the pepperoni," she replied.

"What happened at work?"

“We broke a colonoscope off in this guy’s ass.”

We talked about that for a little while, and then things turned to what they always turn toward. “Did you hear your father last night, acting all weird about that guy from work?”

I focused on my blocks of cheese. “Maybe he’s being weird because of that other guy from work?” I asked.

“Ed?”

“I don’t know his name, Mom. The one who gave you the stuffed bear as a Valentine.”

“Have you talked to your sister lately?” she asked.

“Actually, yeah, there was something I wanted to talk to you about. She mentioned something about her child development class and how she has to write a lot about Dad. She mentioned the shrink he was seeing. Said the reason he stopped going was because she said he had something called Borderline Personality Disorder.”

“Your father’s not crazy.”

“I never said he was.”

Then the door opened. My dad walked in with medals on his shirt. It’s a tradition.

“Thanks for helping your grandpa the other day. It’s great to have you home.”

• • •

I drove down the road on an old machine with flat tires. Churning snow and burying my face in the wind. Just a little jaunt down the road to get some sugar from Grandma. I saw the cherry in the swirling dark. The red tip hustling my cousin’s lungs in the cold night. I growled up next to him. Standing with the handle bars to keep my ass off the frozen seat.

“Hey, man, it’s great to see you!” I called into the night.

He did that autistic thing where he wouldn't look in your eyes.

"It's great to see you too."

"Can I get a drag off that?" I asked.

He held the fading butt in a shaking red hand. His sixteen-year-old face was tight. My kingdom for a lung.

"I thought you quit like two years ago," he returned.

"I did. Do you wanna share this moment with me or not?"

"Cody, you have no social skills."

I took the cancer from his grasp. The little bastard I knew better than my cousin. It's a tradition. A wolf howled in the dark.

"I didn't think they would let you come."

The wind let him light another smoke before he replied, "I only have community service."

"You got off?" I stared at him. "You're lucky."

"Cody, I can't even raise my hand in class. Do you really think I could rape someone?"

• • •

My boots were right where I left them. My farm coat too. With all the stains and tears from hooves and barbed wire. I hurried out the door into the snow. Climbed up into my father's tractor and sat half on the armrest and half on his lap.

"You haven't done it like this before have you? We don't even have to get off the tractor anymore."

Things have changed. No more tradition. The bales are a different shape. The cows are a different color. The oldest farm truck is gone. I loved that thing. It was older than my father.

I'd meet my father after school. Off the bus when he'd pull up. I'd grab the battery charger, and my father would grab the crowbar. We had a system. Heat the John Deere up so it would start. Then load the

hay onto the truck. Use a torch to heat the nuts on the tire so we could change it. Then, while I hooked the battery up so it could charge, my dad would break all the ice off the axles, the tires, and the place where the window should have been. And my dad would ask me, “Drive or unload?”

I always said unload. My legs were short. The truck was old. The gears sometimes slipped, and my father was impatient. So I’d climb on the back and lie across the bale. One arm on the truck’s crossbar, the other tucked deep in the hay. My nose in the prickly green stalks. I could hide in there while I waited for the truck to start. While it turned over and over. Belching out black smoke like my grandfather. The snow would fall on my back. The cows would wait in the field. The earth would turn, and I would breathe in the grass smell and pretend I was hiking in the woods or floating down the river. The engine would growl and whine like a cornered bull. Strain and strain until a crack echoed off my great-great-grandfather’s ruined homestead, and the truck lurched forward. It groaned with every turn of the wheels. The chains whipped against the ice and snow and ate through to the black earth beneath. The cows would run to me, tossing their heads and blowing snot. Beneath the moon. In the field. In the gray hours of early night. When the truck’s exhaust, my breath, and the cows’ heaving chests floated lazily above the ice. In the moon’s reflection on the snow. From its resting place on the mountain. I always wondered what I wanted.

“Pull this lever,” my father said with one hand on a spitter and the other pointing toward a piece of metal.

“This one?” I asked.

“Yes, but gently. See how the bale just unrolls by itself?”

We sat in the cabin of the tractor with a heater. In our T-shirts. Feeding cows.

“This sucks.” I cursed the new technology.

“You always hated the ranch. You never wanted to work,” my father chided.

“I know, I know. But this isn’t doing anything for me.”

• • •

My brother came home with some news. He was no longer a college athlete. He didn’t want to talk about it. So we waited until dark to fulfill our favorite tradition.

The engine screamed out into the darkness and wrapped around the holler. Coming back to us in waves as we hurtled across the snow. The track whipped the white confetti into a stream behind us. My brother held on to me with his legs and gently tucked his favorite toy against his chest. We flew across the snow in the night while our lights and the moon battled for the dark. We ran across tracks and then followed those tracks. Like Siamese hounds from hell. The engine our braying call into the night. When the quarry was found, we chased her down. Her cottontail a beacon in the dark. The gun was moved over my shoulder. The metal kissed my cheek, and we recoiled.

• • •

I was knee-deep in cow shit. There was a stick in my hand because I found it in the muck. I didn’t have a whip because my grandfather doesn’t believe in safety. I looked in the coal eyes of the animal I was driving. We both stood in a corral that hadn’t been cleaned in months. Every movement was calculated, slow. Our feet squelched and sucked at the ground. I wondered if it knew it was going to die. Wondered why we were taking it somewhere else. The chickens and pigs were slaughtered a mere hundred feet away. Beef is just not worth the trouble. I stared down the steer. Or rather he

stared me down. He outweighed me by nine hundred pounds. He opened his mouth and probably mooed. But what I heard was, “You want me to run down this narrow corridor? With you screaming and yelling behind me? Then run into a deep black cave?” But that’s what happened. I jumped up and down. I screeched and threw shit. I had a stick and no carrot. I broke the stick across his back and ran him into the horse trailer. Through the tunnel of cut logs and swamp of bovine feces.

My grandpa drove the trailer because I loaded the steer. We stared out the window. I let him talk about nothing. Just watching the flecks of white whip around the windows. I listened to the heater blow around the cab of the truck. He talked about the things he always talked about. The things he could never let go of. The way all the old men at the coffee shop did. Old names, faces, places. Things that should have been. Things that had been. Men that had died. Men that were dying. Their first wives. Their second wives. Their new brides. Their grandkids in college. Their grandkids in prison. The Second Amendment and Hillary Clinton. But then he stopped. A man who drank his marriage to death. A man who nearly killed his kids.

“This is my last winter.”

“I wonder what it’s all about.”

“That grave they’re digging next to your grandma Fulmer.”

The truck rocked our speech to sleep. The snow blew. The creek next to the road refused to freeze and kept crashing against the willows along the bridge. The windshield wipers wiped, the truck’s motor kept turning. The only thing I could think about was the green of the lake. The soreness in my thighs. The sweet smell of the horse’s sweat under the saddle blanket. The crunch of pine needles under my boots. Honeysuckle, sap, a burning sage branch on the side of our fire. The sun melting into the glacier while a wolf howled and

birds sang. A beaver tail slapping the water while a moose waded out from the shore. The heartbeat of a woodpecker choosing a pine over an aspen. How my grandpa was going to be buried next to his father. Next to his father. Next to the plot that will one day hold my father. Wondering why he wants to be buried in the cold ground next to the pioneers. Wondering why he wasn't interested in joining in with my final wish. Why he won't be waiting for my ashes to float down next to his. Melting into our lake. It could be our tradition.

Locus

When I think of the earth turning on its axis, I get woozy.
Streets and cable cars,
people stacked on top of people ten stories high.
Bodies turn to shadow. I fall
into the rabbit hole,
bottomless and all-dimensional.

In my home the walls are a network of arteries and veins.
I want to be
the Russian dolls on my windowsill tucked safely inside
each other.
Open doors violate the stillness
that settles so evenly throughout the house.
The aged snow on the porch is still unscathed.
It's been weeks.

At night, the cat-faced spider drops
from some hidden place up in the window frame.
I see her shape under the flickering porchlight.
When I grow tired—
When I grow lonely—
I think of her.
Her carefully crafted sanctuary, her biological need
for solitary.

Tonight, wings stretch from beneath her
pulsing abdomen, caught in her orb.
At first there is only stillness. Then,
as delicately as those transparent wings, her
legs swaddle the insect in silk.

Into the Gray

A Great Divide
begins and
remains to hide
the love one feels
for another
deep down inside.

Colors that should reflect
nothing
maintain an everlasting smug
of pride
and prejudice
retains and
survives
behind each one's eyes.

And I'm caught in the middle.

To be torn by one side
and the other
in order to
maintain an identity
slowly makes me rot inside.

Constantly exhausted defending an offense plaguing my conscious
conscience nauseous

I'm tired.

Too dark for one
too light for another.
From “Niggers ain’t my brother”
to mixed Mulatto sin breaking through like a sound of thunder
unable to stand next to a couscous “Caucas” brother
because
my brother’s mother dictates we should
take arms
against one another,
and put holes in our bodies
and bleed another color
in which we both share,
until us and our sons’
sons
are buried under.
It is a problem.
Tell me,
what’s the solution?

The media descends like pollution
with a story meant to
dilute us,
and we breathe it in like
we’re suffocating for
the last breath
in an air-tight room.

I just want to breathe again.

I, like my friends,
enjoy a good story,

but what happens when
those meant to present accurate times
lend out a gory lie
just to keep a fire lit
under our lives?
To the point in which we all meet demise...

...Yes, we're left torn by it.

But we can't blame them,

yet we need to place blame.

So each side chooses their

Martyr

and each side chooses their

Monster

and each side shoots

at the other.

A hooded black thug to a Neighborhood Watch hero

twisted "Protect and Serve" to "I can't breathe!"

No,

this can't be the nation once dreamed of

not so long ago.

Sadly the correlation to past and present holds true.

The boys in blue breached and their
horns grew.

They pressed upon a society
too fragile to protect themselves,
crushed under until they were
left with nothing but to cry out
"We Matter!

...Too."

But they were met
with negativity
and blame
as if they were set to say,
"only WE Matter.
Not YOU."

They were met with hate,
a never-ending hate
by a group blocking a subconscious question:

"But do you really matter?
Do you?
You sit and kill
your brother more than we do,

so why should it matter
if we do it too?"

And as I sit on this fence
hearing this twisted defense
I lean to one side and ask,

That's your excuse?
As if murder is an acceptable
action because
"black men already kill black men"?
White men kill white men at a rate
seemingly relatable,
so easily comparable,
and almost indistinguishable between the two.
But if you put on the shoes
of a society oppressed by those
we should trust,
I bet you would be singing
that you mattered too.
But we won't get on this
topic of
pocket comments.

I'm just going to watch Batman fail to save his fans

red aurora lighting up the theater ripping holes through plans

from a boyfriend holding his girlfriend's hand

to him being a bloody shield to protect his love from
the man with the gun

with the same skin tone as the thug

who walked into a school and sprayed children like it was fun.

But “white men don’t kill white men like black men do
presently”—a lie you walk into,

like Lanza, it’s elementary.

But let me digress,
back to the middle of the fence
with my Mulatto self
and compare
logically
the evidence you use.
Because no one’s right.
The death of a child
should not allow a society’s
violence on a city’s other minors.
These riots for
the sake of riots
just to place five fingers
over prices
and run off into the night’s end
act as Armageddon’s pilot.

It seems like this country
is obsessed with

the right sin.
Tell me when this
chaos will give.

When will we stop
dwelling under a
canopy of
“Fresh Gear,”
while
“leanin’” with
“bitches”
and obsessing over riches
and making praise to
a pathetic, hollow life
each year?

When will we assume control
and stop destroying
our children’s lives,
give them something positive
to aspire to inside,
with powerful morals and
a hope
for a better mankind?

To better not just themselves
but the lives
of their brothers and sisters
of all kinds
and all races alike?

The disappearance of quick draw and the
art of commanding
and demanding actions bent outside of the law
to vanish within a
graceful night's sleep,
landing upon a dream,
linking means of Great Ease
resting like leaves on the subconscious of
thieves for Change
stealing away moments of peace between color and taste.
This is a land of the brave.
I want to break free
and take hold of a lasting preached dream today.
Join hands with the
Pasty and Purple.
Forgive those who hurt you

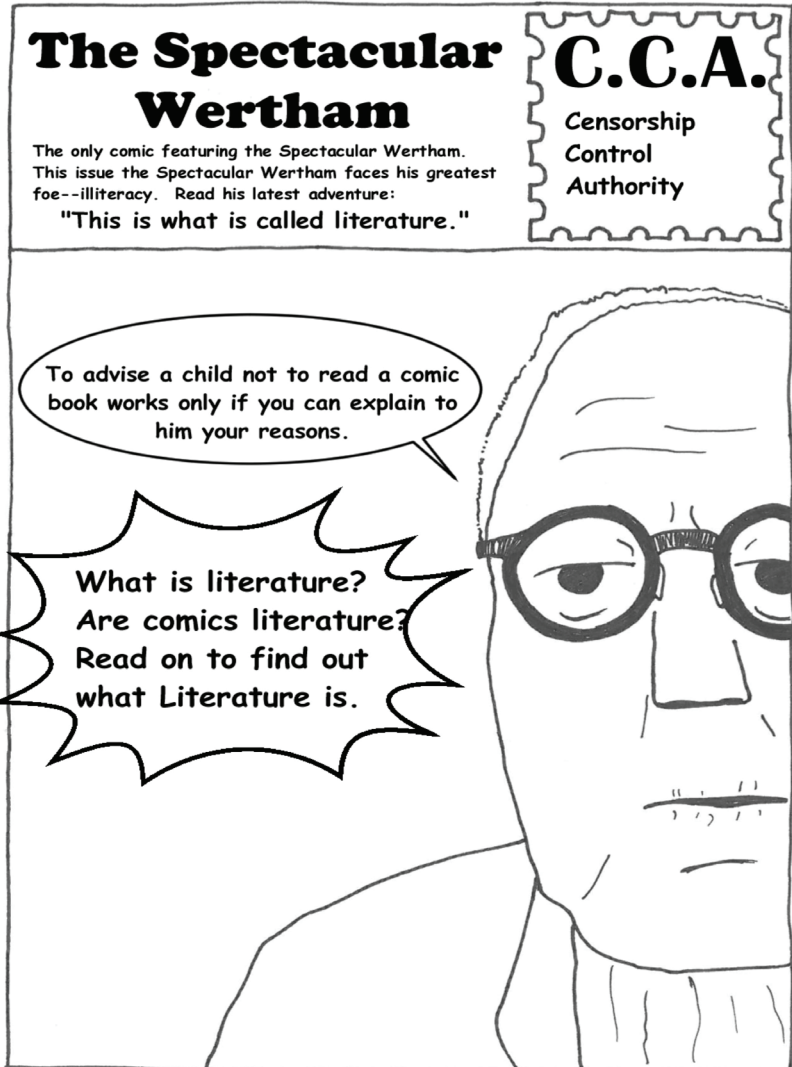
and realize
that you have hurt too.

Do not let a war of
Pigment cast by Shadows
drive us into
the routine of tamed
until we are lost to the act
in which we
so easily and
so willingly
betray.

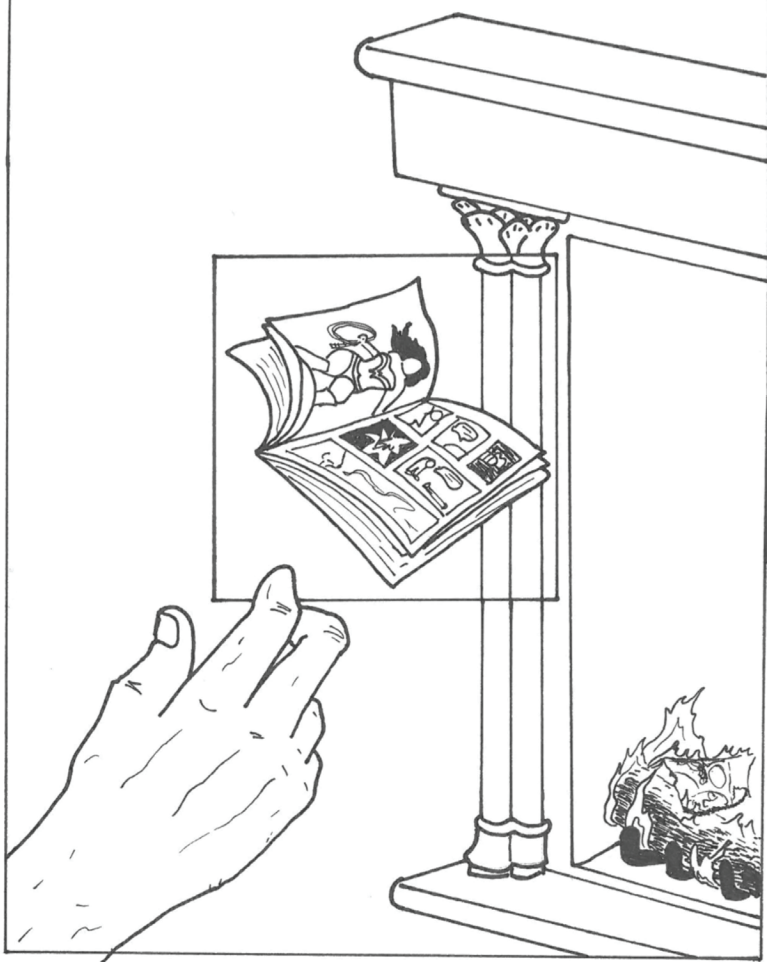
Please,

take my hand and follow me into the Gray.

The Spectacular Wertham



For example,-





She saw in her home many good books
and I took that as a starting point,

explaining to her what good stories
and novels are.

Supposing

I told her,

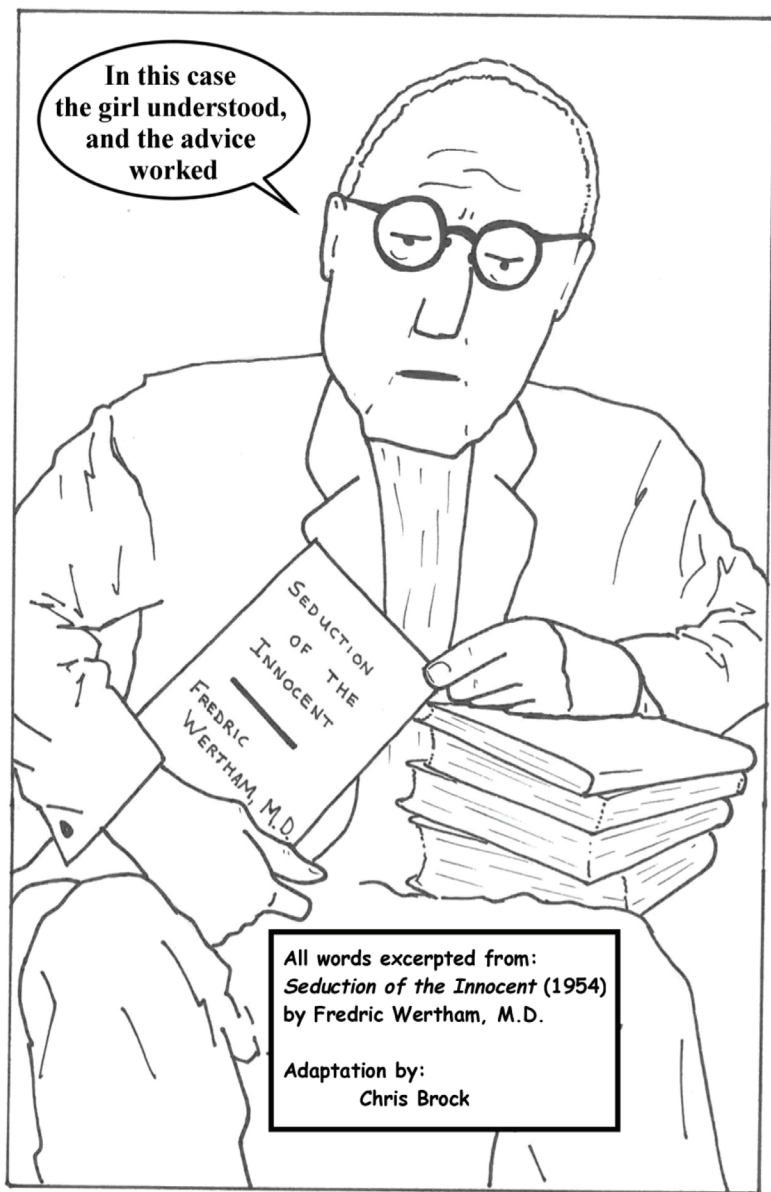
You get used to eating
sandwiches made with
very strong seasonings,
with onions and peppers
and highly spiced mustard.

You will lose your taste for simple
bread and butter and for finer food.
The same is true of reading strong
comic books.



This is what is called literature.

But you will never be able to appreciate that
if in comic-book fashion
you expect that at any minute someone
will appear and pitch them out the window.



Stephen Alfegha

Moment of Depression



Charcoal pencil on paper

Wendy Roberts

The Lightness of Memory



Ink on paper

Wendy Roberts

Mysterious



Photograph

Persian Calligraphy



Oil paint

Wendy Roberts

Memory



Oil pastel on paper

Thomas Stephens

Bottoms Up



Acrylic

Corinna Barrett Percy

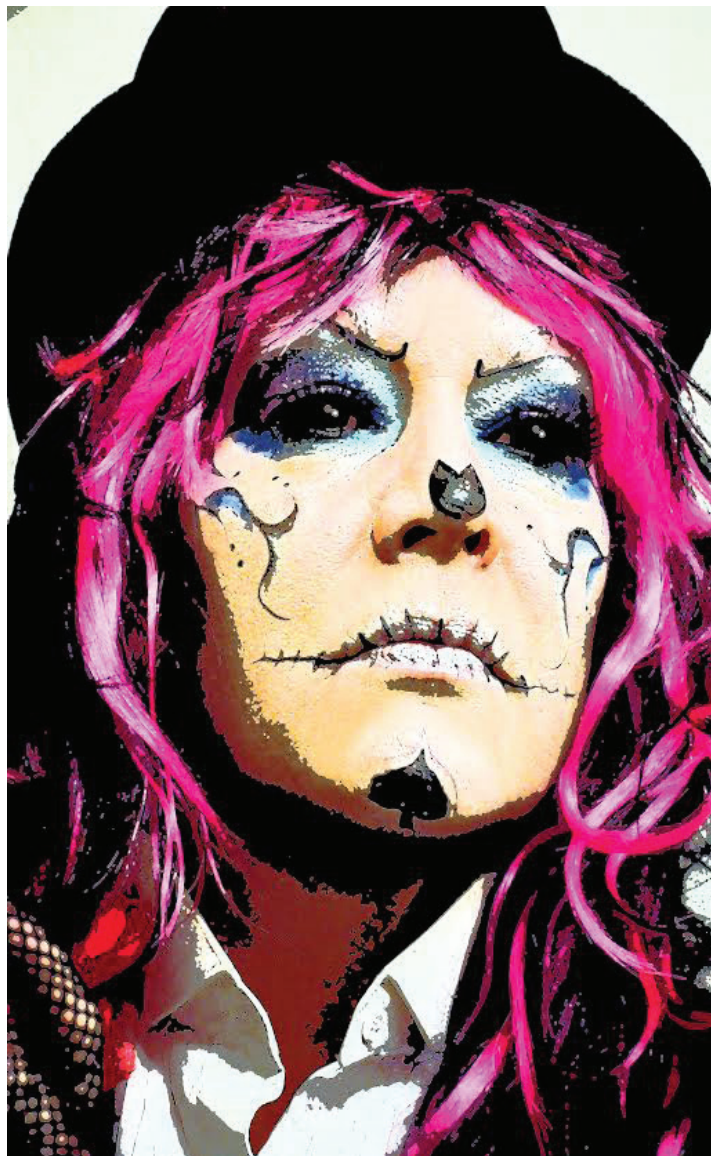
Be Wise, Be Colorful



Acrylic

Wendy Roberts

Self Portrait Posterized



Photograph

Raquel Sacknoff

In Jelly, Inverted



Photograph

Nikyra Capson

Cyd



Acrylic, charcoal, and ink on canvas

Raquel Sacknoff

Split Personality



Photograph

The Bird-Children of '84

The topic of the cages came up the summer I turned nine. Davie, Gregory Dean, my brother Bats, and I were all sitting at the docks, dipping our feet into the tepid lake water. It stung at the raw scratches I'd collected from diving into a patch of dead sagebrush to fetch our only baseball.

I had it now in my hands, churning it between my palms; it was a trophy of my "metaphorical balls," Davie had said. Yet I didn't feel gutsy at all. I think none of them wanted to go crawling through prickly dead bushes, so Gregory Dean persuaded me by saying that I'd be the coolest girl they knew, even though I was three years their junior and a scrawny, black-haired girl who bought them juices with the money I earned from pulling weeds for Mr. Sanchez.

"It's just up that dirt path." Davie was pointing a stubby finger towards the opposite shore. We all squinted, dirt and sunlight irritating our eyes.

"Real feathers?" I asked. "And talons?"

"Yeah. Talons." Davie wiped his gleaming forehead, his blond curls damp from sweat. Stains rimmed his collar and armpits.

"You don't even know what talons are," Gregory Dean said, and kicked his long legs so the rest of us got splashed.

"Sure I do," Davie grinned, like he thought something was funny. "They're the dangling thing off male turkeys' chins, right?"

I opened my mouth, but Bats gave me a pointed nudge with his foot and set his back against the dock planks. Mildew and fuzzy wood served as a thin pillow for his body. "Alright, Davie. You say it's up that dirt path, we'll go up that dirt path."

"They might not be there," Davie said.

I spoke before my brother could kick me again. “Then you’re lying about it. You said they’ve been hanging there for weeks.”

Davie heaved his body up, his cheeks and neck pink from the wet heat. “Let’s go now. I’ll prove it. I ain’t lying, and I never do. You know that, *Sloan*?”

I knew Bats would kick me into the lake if I mentioned he’d lied about his cousin who worked for Tom Cruise, about running a mile in under six minutes, or about how he kissed both Lauren Black and Erica Petersen under the school gazebo in the same day, so I just kept quiet and rose when Gregory Dean and Bats did.

“Lead the way, Davie.” Gregory Dean pushed his hands into his pocket.

The path was across the lake near the monstrous willow tree that dipped hundreds of its mossy fingers into the warm lake water. The tree hid most of the path from view, but most of us kids knew that if we followed it for half a mile, we’d be led up to barren, oatmeal-colored hills and a grove of walnut trees.

It was dusty as we romped along the path, pockets of dry dirt exploding when our shoe soles struck them. Crickets and bugs led a symphony of distant screeches in the dry brush. Ahead of me, Bats began to wheeze, so quiet and subtle that only I knew that his asthma was acting up from the dry dirt and hiking.

I touched his elbow, but he waved me away.

As we walked, Davie and Gregory Dean argued about who’d win the upcoming baseball game: the Dodgers or the White Sox. I rolled my stained trophy ball in my hands, observed the carved “LA” symbol in its coarse material, and spit dust out of my mouth every few minutes.

When we reached a cluster of squat but stocky walnut trees, Davie halted. “We’re almost there. I am absolutely, one-hundred-

percent, finger-licking serious about what I've seen. They'll be here for sure. When I first ..."

"Just show us already, Davie. It's too hot to be out here for long," Gregory Dean complained, leaning on one leg, his eyes all blue iris, no pupil in the harsh sunlight.

Davie's mouth hovered open for a split-second more before clamping shut. He jittered and walked like a windup toy between the walnut trees.

We followed.

Bats swore the moment they came into view. And for the first time that I could remember, Davie had told the truth.

Hanging fifteen, twenty feet from the ground were massive, gold-wired birdcages. They dangled from tree branches, emerald leaves spiraling and wrapping around the top of the cages. Inside were children. Or what looked like children. Their beady eyes were watchful and cold and black in their shadowed faces.

I threw the boys a wide-mouthed gape. For once, none of them were squirming or pinching each other or tugging tall grass out by the roots and shoving it in each other's ears.

"What'd I tell you?" Davie said. "Freaks."

I stared longer at the children. What looked like wispy black and gray feathers were jutting from their shoulders, upper arms, and down to their wrists. Their dark faces were distinctly different from ours: gray noses and mouths that were pushing outward, as if they had swollen upper lips filled with pus and blood. There was the absence of ears, just a slick scalp with hair that gnarled at the base of their necks. Their fingers were ash-gray talons that gripped the bars or palmed the cage floor at their feet. A sheet that looked like rumpled wool fraying out expanded from their talons to their shoulder blades.

I didn't like what I saw. I didn't like how they were staring at

us. And most certainly, they didn't like how we were staring at them.

I heard my voice, trembling and soft. "Let's go back now, you guys. The sun'll be going down soon. We'll miss dinner, and our parents won't be happy. Let's go, guys. Let's go, Bats." None of them replied. The bird-children had shifted their pebbly eyes onto me.

"What are they?" Gregory Dean spoke quietly. Those pointed eyes shifted to him.

"I told you," Davie said, crossing his arms and leaning to one leg. "Freaks. They've been up here each time I've come."

"Do they speak?" Bats was glaring. He always glared whenever he was nervous, like the time he and I were riding our bikes out late. A brown station wagon jerked to the sidewalk, and the driver asked us if we were lost and wanted a ride home. Bats had glared then and shifted towards me. He did that now, his elbow knocking into my upper arm.

"No. They're dumb," Davie said, wiping his forehead again and dropping into a crouch. "Watch." When he rose, a rock catapulted from his hand and nailed the nearest cage. The inhabitant shrieked, its voice scratchy and harsh as the cage teetered. Black feathers floated down.

Something lodged deep in my throat, and cold chills rippled over my body despite the ninety-plus heat.

"Can we go, Bats?"

"Sloan," he growled, but only I heard. He was watching Gregory Dean and Davie. "If you're scared, then go home."

My mouth tilted to a frown, and I clutched my baseball. "I'm fine."

"Where'd they come from?" Gregory Dean asked, hands outside his pockets. He smiled at Davie and Bats. "What if they're some science experiment gone to hell, and they've been put out here to starve?"

They don't look starved, I thought. But they did look hungry.
“No. Who do you think feeds them?”

No one answered my question, but Davie said, “There’s more of them this time. Last time there were seven. Now there’s ten.”

Gregory Dean picked up a diamond-shaped rock. He chucked it through the bars of one of the cages and struck its occupant. This time, the cry sounded like a girl’s: light and unmistakably human. He and Davie laughed nervously. Bats looked away.

“Guys, let’s go,” I said, turning to face the boys, my back to the cages.

Davie’s murky eyes rolled over the red scratches on my limbs. “You’re such a wimp,” he muttered. “If you’re being chicken, then you can go back yourself.”

Anger flushed unbearable heat through my face. I didn’t want to admit to any of them that I was scared, or that I was even more afraid to go back by myself. And I noticed that Bats had moved another few inches away from me, distancing himself from his stupid baby sister.

“I’m not a chicken, and I’m not going back,” I said with defiance, then hurled my baseball at a large cage in which a bird-child with no arms sat.

“Sloan!” Bats yelled before the ball hit, but when it did, his voice was swallowed up by the screeches. The cage rocked violently on its branch.

My ball bounced and rolled only three feet away from the cages, nesting among a pile of black and gray feathers. I winced at its proximity to the cages and the shrieking triggered by the ball’s impact.

I stared at my baseball, at the “LA” scrawled into it, but I stayed rooted to the ground. Bats shoved into me. “Why’d you do that? That was our only ball, and you could have lost it!” he said, all the

while looking at the beady eyes of the bird-children. “Guys, I’m taking her home. She’s nothing but dead weight here anyways.”

I was fast, especially on the schoolyard against my classmates, but Bats was lean and lithe like me, and he was faster. His hand clapped around the back of my shirt before I could dash away. “Ow!” I hollered. “Let go of my shirt—you’re choking me!” I knew I was making a scene in front of Gregory Dean, but I didn’t care. I wanted to stay, but I didn’t want to stay, so either way there’d be a fight.

Bats was glaring at the powdery dirt at our feet as he dragged me away from the clearing.

“What about my ball?” I whined.

“You don’t get it back. You lost it.”

• • •

It took a few days of silent pleading and taking out the trash (the chore Bats hated the most) until he let me rejoin him and his friends. The boys sat on the dock, arguing about baseball scores and Lauren Black’s new hairstyle, a short bob, very different from her previous waist-length hair. I sat opposite of them, poking a long, drooping grass strand into the water. I’d tried adding comments to their conversation a few times.

“Lauren Black donated her hair, you guys. That’s why she grew it out so long,” I said.

“She looks like a boy now,” Gregory Dean said. He spat into the water.

“She looks awful. Glad I didn’t kiss her when I could have,” Davie said, popping a piece of pink bubble gum. “She looks worse than you do, Sloan. Like that white-haired gremlin in that movie.”

Gregory Dean laughed while I stabbed the grass strand completely into the water and crossed my legs. My jean shorts were

Bats' old ones, cut off above my knee and fraying. I picked at the white wisps and peeked at Bats.

He was by the entry of the dock, swatting an imaginary ball with his silver-and-red aluminum bat. The air *whoofed* whenever he swung. My ball was still beneath the cages. None of the boys had retrieved it.

"He'll go to the major leagues by the time he hits high school, for sure," Davie said, also watching my brother. "Play for the White Sox."

"Who'd want to play for that weak team?" Gregory Dean said. "Besides, Bats has asthma. They'd never let him play in the big leagues. He'd hit a home run but fall down and die before he reached second base."

I got the urge to shove him off the dock. Mom always said Bats might grow out of it, the way I grew out of my shoes every few months. I told him that.

"Sloan, listen. There are some things you don't grow out of." Gregory Dean sat beside me, his back straight like a stick. It reminded me of the black-and-white-suited business men sitting before a large, gleaming table on TV shows my mom always watched. I never liked those shows because all they ever did was say big words, and I never understood what they said. "Take Davie's stupidity, for example. He won't ever grow out of that." Davie replied by making a gesture I didn't recognize, but guessed to be crude. "Or you always annoying us. You've been following us for close to—how old are you?"

"Nine," I fumed.

"For close to four years. That has never changed. Why, listen, do you..."

He didn't get to finish, because I'd risen and stomped off—not home, but along the lakeside path where tall, green cattails that looked

like speared-through hot dogs rose above me, sheltering me from view.

I knew I ought to go play by myself. Grab my jump rope, eat a popsicle, draw pictures with chalk—it was summer for, Pete’s sake. But then I remembered my ball and the bird-children, and I continued around the lakeside path, past the willow tree, up the craning dirt road to the grove.

My ball was beneath one of the occupied cages, where a bird-child with an actual beak sat and stared down at me. It was the one that I’d hit a few days back. Its eyes were black and bottomless, but so searching and waiting that I couldn’t remain quiet.

“Hello,” I said and waited for one to answer. None of them did.

I frowned at the bird-child frowning at me, or at least I thought it was frowning at me. Then, on the count of three, I burst forward into a sprint. The squawking began the moment I touched my ball. Its coarse surface scratched the skin on my hand as I staggered back with it amid the colosseum of the cages and bird-children screeching.

I pivoted and ran. I didn’t look back.

The boys were still there when I returned, fishing poles in hand, lines sunk in the lake. Gregory Dean had the pole he’d *borrowed* from his older brother’s room, Davie had an extra of his dad’s, and Bats had one that he’d received for his birthday. I’d brought my homemade one, but it sat on a flat, brown rock nearby.

My huffing didn’t garner their attention, but my waving the ball in their faces sure did.

“You got it?” Davie’s mouth fell open. “But aren’t the birds still there?”

“They are,” I said.

“Sloan,” Bats gave me a heavy gaze, which I mostly ignored.

“They were all screeching at me, too.”

“That’s all you did was pick up your ball,” Gregory Dean said, not bothering looking at me as he tossed in his line. “Bent over, picked it up.” There was a slant to his shoulders that I didn’t like, nor did I like his careless flick of his line.

“She got the ball,” Bats said suddenly and walked over to me. “We can play baseball now. The fish aren’t biting anyways.”

I didn’t protest when Bats took the ball from my hands. I was still glaring at Gregory Dean, who shrugged and said, “Leave then, if you want. Fishing takes patience. It’s a waiting game. You can’t just expect to get one in the first five minutes.”

Davie’s mouth, which still gaped as if he’d unhinged it and forgot to shut it again, finally closed, and he turned back to the lake. Bats flicked his eyes from them to the ball, which he put back into my hands. “Hold onto it. Don’t lose it again,” he said, then wandered back to the docks and poked his fishing line back in the water.

I swallowed hard. I put my ball near my fishing pole, which I picked up, even though I didn’t feel much like fishing. I made my pole from a rod I found in the garage and red yarn hooked with a safety pin and weighted with one of Mom’s thimbles. Nothing like Bats’ or the guys’, with invisible line and curved hooks and metal reels.

I sat at the dock’s edge and swung my line in after puncturing a plump, squirming worm with my makeshift hook. Later, when the boys had had a few bites and even caught a six-pounder, they joked about kissing its wet, fishy lips as they put their shoes back on and drew in all their lines. When I finally pulled mine up after a tug-less hour, my hook was empty.

• • •

It was three days after I retrieved the baseball when the

boys wanted to show Erica Petersen and Lauren Black the bird-children. We were all gathered in the cul-de-sac in front of Davie's house, whose structure resembled that of all the other houses in the neighborhood—white, gray, or blue; windows framed with white curtains; garages that were almost always shut save for the occasional foot-high opening for a cat to glide in and out.

Lauren and Erica stood beside each other on their rollerblades as Davie huffed in the heat, explaining the cages and bird-children. Gregory Dean stepped beside him. "The birds are weird. Look like people. It's a nice hike with some shade up there, too. If you're interested."

Erica kept glancing at Bats, whose figure cut a lean shadow on the sidewalk, and at Gregory Dean, whose blue eyes were the color of a clear winter sky. She gave Lauren a penetrating look, but Lauren just smiled back. I thought it was odd, how they could communicate like that, without a word spoken. I thought of cats right then, how they seem to just go up to each other and speak without noise. I'd read somewhere that they only meow when speaking to humans, as if that was their attempt at communication with us giants and there was some undiscovered way that they communicated with each other.

The girls nodded. "We'll come. Just let us get our shoes."

As we all hiked around the lake, past the green willow tree, up the powdery dirt trail, we were all quiet, although I don't know why. My brother rested his bat over his shoulder, glaring and darting his eyes to the two girls and then down at the soft dirt. Davie was breathing heavily, almost so much that it seemed as if he were the one who had asthma, not Bats. Gregory Dean led us, silent and sure.

I rolled the baseball in my hand, looking at the girls as they whispered into one another's ears.

“Lauren,” I said. “Where’s Celia today?” Celia was Lauren’s younger sister, and she was my age. We’d swap fruit snacks and cookies at lunch and watch cartoons with each other on Saturday mornings.

“Don’t know,” she shrugged. “Home, probably.” Her shoulders brushed the tips of her short black hair.

“She sure likes to play at home, huh?” I said. “Does she ever like to play baseball?”

Erica made a twisted expression. “Celia doesn’t even like to play outside. All she ever does is read space books all the time.”

“Do you guys ever like to play baseball?” I asked. I could see the boys giving me stares, although I couldn’t tell what type they were.

“Yeah,” they said at the same time, then giggled at each other. Lauren said, “But only on certain days. Today is too hot.”

I was about to say that the best baseball players trained in the strongest heat. They didn’t just stop because they got sweaty. But then the girls started doing that puzzling wordless talk again, laughing at the dust on their skirt or pant bottoms, so I gave up and went to walk alongside Bats.

When we got there, all the cages were occupied. Gold- and emerald-colored leaves wove in and out of the cages still, with the bird-children chirping and fidgeting. Some of them even were swaying. Erica gasped, while Lauren frowned as if the very sight displeased or confused her.

“What are they?” Erica asked. “Where’d they come from?” She clutched her navy blue skirt.

“We don’t know,” Davie said. He eyed the closest one, which had rough, orange-yellow, three-toed feet. “I just found them here a few weeks ago. Cool, aren’t they?”

“More like freaky,” Erica replied. Lauren was still frowning. Davie replanted his feet, clenching and unclenching his hands as he inched closer to the cage.

“Want to see me get closer to one?” he started to ask. That was when Gregory Dean strode forward, as if pushed, walked beneath one, and began climbing the trunk of the tree.

“Greg—what are you doing?” Lauren squealed, her mouth contorting into a nervous smile. I gripped the ball tighter in my palm.

Gregory Dean stopped, eye level to one. The bird-children’s voices grew to an uproar of cacophonous noise, mixing bird screeches and—what made Bats come stand beside me—children laughing.

“Gregory,” Bats spoke for the first time. “Don’t touch them.”

But he didn’t listen. He reached out his hand, with a forced grin on his face, and stretched out his fingers to the bird-child in the cage. It inspected the smooth skin over his hand, the many fingers, the dirt making dark half-moons beneath his fingernails. Then it launched at him, striking the cage, which swung out violently and rattled. Gregory Dean yelled out from surprise and fell.

He landed on his stomach, his breath knocked out of him, but he still scampered toward us even as the other bird-children began striking the bars of the cages. They teetered precariously from the branches, and I couldn’t help but think of dandelion puffs and how easy they were to sever from the flower. But even though they had something akin to wings, these bird-children could not fly, at least not in these cages.

When the first cage fell, it banged on its side and rolled towards Davie, who spewed out a trickle of curse words and leapt out of its way, falling onto the cushion of his belly.

Lauren and Erica were frozen, their eyes wide and white. My brother swung his bat from his shoulder and said, “Run back to the

lake—now!” he added, when they remained staring at him. I didn’t see if they listened because at that moment another cage that had fallen stopped a few feet from us. A bird-child with three gray, many-jointed fingers fumbled with the cage door. I didn’t know how we hadn’t noticed before, but there was no lock on it—on any of them. We’d only assumed that there was.

If Bats yelling at them didn’t get the girls to run, the idea of one of the bird-children outside its cage did. They fled while Bats grabbed my wrist and yanked me in a vague direction, as if he wanted to go forward, but also backwards, so it was easy to yank my wrist back.

The bird-child with the gray fingers managed to unfasten the latch and kick out the cage door with its three-pronged feet. Gregory Dean gave a wordless pant and tugged so hard on Davie’s collar to get him up that he almost pulled off his entire shirt.

Davie responded by rolling to his feet. He swatted at Gregory Dean’s hand, eyes on the bird-child. It perched on the cage, raising its head up high, looking towards the sky. Gray feathers jutted from its pasty-white skin, its eyes like black seeds. It was roughly Bats’ size, maybe slightly bigger, and when it lowered its head it seemed to look at all of us at once.

“Guys!” Davie hollered, and that seemed to ignite something in all the bird-children because the cages began to fall like shooting stars due to the rustling and screeching and banging. The fall either broke their cage doors or they had semi-fingers like the first bird-child did because they began to escape. Then the one perched on its cage launched at Gregory Dean, and he fell without a word while scratching out blindly. I didn’t see what happened to Davie, but I could hear him, and he was screaming in hoarse curses, then pleas, then just vague screams that continued on and on.

Bats and I were running beside each other, and I could hear the pop and wheeze of his breath. He clawed at his chest, at his throat, slowing up, and I slowed with him, turning around and expecting to see a bird-child after us. Sure enough, there was one flapping a few feet above our heads.

Bats turned as well, saw it, and struck his bat upwards just as the bird-child came down. Its screech reminded me of a baby's angry cry while it swerved and scampered deeper into the grove. I watched its head bobble as it fled. Beside me, a rasp of a breath lodged in my brother's throat, and he fell to his knees, his wheeze growing as he sucked in breath after breath.

"Where's your inhaler?" I picked up the bat he'd dropped, throwing my eyes toward the thicket of walnut trees where I could see the birds unhooking themselves from cages, awkwardly stumbling about on land like it was new to them and they were testing it out.

Bats didn't speak—but he did point toward the walnut trees. He'd dropped it.

"Quick," I said, "Hide in the bushes. I'll get it."

He grabbed my ankle. His grip was weak, but his glare was heavy. I tugged my foot away and drew in a long breath, then released it. "I'll be fine." With the weight of the bat in my hand, I approached the trees where I could see the bird-children circulating, clattering, squabbling in distress of the fall. I didn't see Davie or Gregory Dean.

One bird with a contorted set of gray-black wings was pecking at something white and red in the dirt. Bats' inhaler. I paused in front of it, and it raised its huge neck to stare me in the face. It was the one whose cage I hit with my baseball a few days back. Out of all the bird-children there, this one was the most avian-like. It had no arms, just its molted, shredded, black wings, and it was covered head-to-toe

in black feathers. Its eyes were not child-like either; they were old. Separate. Estranged. Its beak was shaped like the metal end of garden shears.

Its eyes moved to the items in my hands, and I waited for it to pounce on me. Or it waited for me to hurl my ball again. When neither of us did either, I set my ball down, I set the bat down, and I crouched down.

And I stared at it, and it stared at me, and we gave each other a long, open look. I stretched my hand out for the inhaler.

Meat

The cheeseburger was lying in the ditch
sesame seeds in the dirt, loose onions stretching towards the sky
The Machine waits with rusting chains

The patty was bloated, putrefied, sweet
and pink slime oozed between the rye
The cheeseburger was lying in the ditch

A slice of cheese hung limp, melted in her open mouth
while crows danced loosely, like promiscuous lovers, only shy
The Machine hitched up his rusting chains

Crickets, worms, and swarms of flies seasoned the meat
A bear circled, sweating, waiting to gorge on human-product lies
The cheeseburger was lying in the ditch

Servers asked in polished boots, "Is it rare?" Bleu, she just rolled over
her feet
Life's pun, we're just chewing our cud
The Machine waits with rusting chains

Drink your milk, shaken, neat
Waste away on vegetables, don't bother asking why
the cheeseburger was lying in the ditch
The Machine waits with rusting chains

Irreconcilable Differences

We declined the goodnight kiss, realizing that the slightest spark
could ignite the poorly stored munitions of our love.

Well, some of us mortals have to get up tomorrow morning.

I'm not sure we still carry the Wonderbra.

Should I rationalize or backpedal?

Forget it—I'm not helping you dig up another one.

I heard that.

Every year the zebras get faster and faster.

Can you please identify which hand was mistakenly amputated?

We're always looking for new ways to increase the suffering.

Could you stop making that breathing sound?

If I could do only one thing before I died, it would be to swim with a
middle-aged couple from Connecticut.

Would our big tacky objects look good here?

Helen changed our song, and she refuses to hum even a few bars to
me.

Are you sure you're not confusing manic-depressive with awake-
asleep?

This book club isn't fun anymore.

Nice, but we'll need an environmental-impact study, a warranty, recall
bulletins, recycling facilities,
and twenty-four-hour customer support.

True, you have irreconcilable differences, but they're mainly about
flossing.

Corinna Barrett Percy

Stalag Luft III

Italicized parts taken from letters and personal journal of Second Lieutenant James Allen Barrett while a POW in *Stalag Luft III* (1943-1945).

August 1943

The smell of meat loaf and fried bananas
invades the air. The kitchen ablaze with
late afternoon sun.

*In case, Honey, something does happen and you get a telegram
saying "missing" in action, don't give up hope.*

An expected knock
ricochets off the door
a smile unfurls on her face.

I regret to inform you report received status your husband...

Her smile folds inside itself

*Darling, of those crews that do go down about 85% of them are
either captured or bale-out and escape.*

It did not say killed...
She grips her hope like a
badge of honor.

Plane shot down, he floats,
falls through the air.
Staccato yells, hands lifted in
gratefulness, surrender.

*Wish I could be with you for Christmas, but I guess I won't be
able to quite make it this year. Love Jimmy*

Block 138, Room 15—11,000 men

No names, just numbers

Dearest Folks:

In case there is any shortage of steak and eggs, save up an ample supply in anticipation of my return. Don't worry though because we have the necessities of life. (written March 27, 1945)

A day's rations:

257 grams bread

$\frac{1}{2}$ bowl dry vegetable & barley soup

62.5 grams cream cheese

300 grams potatoes one day a week

Journal Entry, March 27, 1945: It is my firm conviction that with no Red Cross parcels a man would slowly starve to death.

She turns off the oven,

extinguishes the flame.

She could not eat a bite.

Journal Entry, April 12, 1945: Soon the spuds will be a memory.

33 foods on the must-eat list:

Hot biscuits & 6 kinds of jam

Boiled heart sandwiches

Hot dogs

Pies – pumpkin, mince, butterscotch, blueberry, cherry, custard

113 books read as a POW

7 war bets:

War will end Dec. 31, 1944—

no Dec. 15.

Roosevelt re-elected

Logan married before he's 35

(ha, who would take him?)

Haven't received any mail from Francie yet, but soon I hope.

War not over by Oct. 5, 1944—

no, by Oct. 31.

War not over by Feb. 28, 1945.

Most of my time here is spent in living in the past and in the future. As for the present, I just exist and let time go by.

Tiny handwritten calendars in a pocket

journal. Days crossed off.

2 letters sent home every month.

Counting is a kind of sanity.

Haven't received any mail at all since I last wrote

None at all from Frances. I have hopes every day, but they are shattered just as sure as time.

4 cigarette stores

A .273 batting average

86,400 seconds tick by in a day.

January 27, 1945

Evacuation of *Stalag Luft III*

5 hours billeted in a stable

30 km march to Grossschweren

Journal Entry Jan. 30 (6:00 PM): Sleep in a barn with straw, but no lights or heat.

25 km to Muskau

1 piece of bread

$\frac{1}{3}$ spoonful jam

18 km to proposed destination

24 hours

Journal Entry Feb. 1 (5:00 PM): Got a drink of water today.

50 men on a French train

No E-1009632

65 hours in a boxcar

Arrival: *Stalag VII A*

0 food

3 days of delousing.

*Journal Entry: I feel this to be about the limit of this war, and
also my limit.*

92 more days until liberation

37 days to touch American soil

630 days as a POW

June 12, 1945

*Have arrived in New York coming west soon. Will try to keep
you posted along route. Will probably get leave from Denver.*

SEE YOU SOON

Jim

800 days . . .

He steps onto the front porch,

the smell of fried chicken

and potatoes.

He raises his hand to knock.

Fragments

March 2001: The background of the photo is overexposed. You can't really see the distant columns or the castle perched on the hill. But you can see the ruddy-faced boy in a long brown robe and tennis shoes, pulling a bow across a homemade instrument. I realize now that I should have given him some money. At least fifty lira. After all, he did his best to pose in front of the ruins for me. I should have given him something. At the time, I wasn't thinking about the boy. I was a twenty-year-old student who still thought I was poor. I hadn't travelled enough to know that when a little boy follows you around for half an hour in a city like Palmyra, he wants more than a place in your photo album.

March 2001: Arin is laughing. Majd has a silly grin on his face. He probably knows he's not doing the steps right, but he doesn't care. Arin in his arms, in their house, hair flowing free from its hijab because no other men are around. Sarah and Joyce, off to one side, dance together so Arin and Majd can see how to waltz. Sarah is saying something about where to put your feet, doing her best to avoid tripping on the coffee table. In the corner, I am giggling behind the camera.

April 2001: Laura and Meijken are standing inside the musty citadel, flanked by three university students in hijabs. The Syrian students look shy. They are not used to cameras. We don't speak Arabic very well, and they don't speak English very well, but we learn a little about each other. Just like us, they are on a field trip, learning about Aleppo's

history. Unlike us, this is not their first time in the citadel. They live nearby. Can we come and visit? Have some coffee? No? Well, maybe another time.

April 2001: A perfect spring day. The sun bright but not hot. We are having tea outside, under the same tree that grew the flowers from which they made the tea. Jennifer, Sarah, Darin, Victoria, and Fares look up from their conversation and are smiling at me. I can't remember the house numbers or street names near Victoria's home, just that it's near an Armenian church. I hadn't thought of it before, but we might be somewhere near the house in which Paul stayed, waiting for Ananias to heal him. Wouldn't it be something if he had stayed in Victoria's house?

August 28, 2015: Aerial photographs of Palmyra in a news article from *The Washington Post*. Two are grainy, sepia-colored squares. One has a few dark areas near the center, shadows from the walls of the ancient Baal Shamin temple. The other picture has no shadows, just a round, gray crater surrounded by empty space. The captions simply say: "The temple before its destruction" and "The temple after its destruction."

December 2015: A post on Facebook. Arin is wedged between two boys, her sons. She is wearing a white hijab and smiling, her eyes tired. The boys' eyes are bright and both have wide, toothy grins. The younger one looks like her, the older one like Majd. Majd is in Egypt. He did not want to join the Syrian army, did not want to die.

August 19, 2016: Photograph in a news article from *Aljazeera*. A rescuer named Khaled is holding a child who has just been pulled from a bombed-out building in Aleppo. The child has no shoes on. It's

hard to tell if it's a boy or a girl. Khaled has been cradling the child. Blood covers half of Khaled's face and most of his neck. Other than the small child, there are only men in the photo. I wonder where the child's mother is. I wonder if the only photograph left of her in the entire world is sitting in a blue photo album in my bedroom.

January 27, 2017: Photo from a CNN news article. Two men are standing between a large gold-and-green star. Just above the star, a plaque with a single word on it: Valor. The president is sitting. He is wearing a black suit with a red tie and a small pin, an American flag. He is bent over, signing a piece of paper. One part of the paper says: "Pursuant to section 212(f) of the INA, 8 U.S.C. 1182(f), I hereby proclaim that the entry of nationals of Syria as refugees is detrimental to the interests of the United States and thus suspend any such entry until such time as I have determined that sufficient changes have been made to the USRAP to ensure that admission of Syrian refugees is consistent with the national interest."

March 2017: Snow is falling again. The sky has turned steely gray. I hold my phone up to the window and push the camera button. I attach it to the message I will send my sister: "Can you believe this?" Just a few days ago, I was sure spring had finally come. The sun out, the snow melted, the grass outside my window beginning to recover. But apparently, winter isn't done with us, and now the wind is howling. I look down and see a blue photo album sitting on my desk. I smile and open it. Inside, the sun is shining.

On the Rocks

NASA didn't stage the moon landing.
We faked it ourselves—
we made deflective lenses from scraps of aluminum foil.
Landing on its cratered surface,
we shouted triumphantly across the room
at Mom watching with a constrained smile.
She gave you a look, and you began to dismantle
man's greatest accomplishment.

The westward expansion didn't die.
We conquered it ourselves—
we rode the backs of sofa-cushion stallions into the sunset
projected from the grainy surface of the television screen,
a scene from your favorite movie, paused in place.
Your horse was a little too rambunctious, you said,
that's why you kept falling over into carpet-sand.
Cowboys smelled like whiskey, didn't they? So did you.

The Northern Lights haven't faded.
You saw them yourself—
deep, deep at the bottom of a glass,
room spiraling neon, pink, blue, green, music pounding,
you swore you saw the sky yawning wide.
And if you couldn't find it there, you'd try again.
Another glass, another opportunity.
Mom bit her tongue when she noticed
I chased after the bright lights, too.

I Remember El Rey

America was their amante

They sang Ranchera to her in the early morning dark

We woke up in the fields with the sun on our backs

Buenos dias, cervesa, and habaneros in our breakfast

Made American slaves again

When I was young, the dew leapt from the barley to my legs

in the fields we worked as kids blanco with the illegals

until there were only brown men

And they said, "Go far, mi amigo"

When I got older, we worked in the kitchens

Longer days, less dinero, and we solidified

their stereotypes by taking liquor that wasn't ours

Tequila helps your cough and moves your legs at the pachanga

Make America dance again

They helped me forget about my jaina

And I sang in broken Spanish

Una piedra

En el camino

Me enseñó

Que mi destino

Era rodar y rodar

Life is different in the white places

I moved on to calculating the percentage

effects of different conservation methods for loggerhead turtles.

The Jefe wears skinny jeans. He has a beard

but he can't change a tire.
Make American men again
I still haven't learned proper español
But I can sing in broken Spanish
No tengo
Trono ni reina
Ni nadie
Que me comprenda
Pero sigo siendo
El rey

My viejos amigos laughed when I found Latinos at university
with straight A's and dry backs
I don't want to be just another Mexican
they say to me
Mix American color again
The machismo is addicting
Professional Latin men that sing in perfect Spanish
Con dinero
Y sin dinero
Yo hago siempre
Lo que quiero
Y mi palabra
Es la ley

Brown and white are lovers spooning
North and South
They sing to each other in the old ways
In the fields, on the horses
Make America work again

And the vaqueros will sing
El Rey's ranchera to their lost amor
Yo sé bien
Que estoy afuera
Pero el día
Que yo
Me muera
Sé que tendrás
Que llorar

Salt in My Mouth and Salt at My Eyes

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

My brother Cody dropped me off but refused to come inside. I shifted to snatch at my water bottle and turned around in time to see Cody touching my bag. I gave him a look of “What the freak, man!” as Noah would say.

“Just zipping up your bag. It was open.”

I nodded, not wanting to cause trouble right before we parted. I determined to ignore it. My brother’s actions had not been normal for years, so why would this be any different? He shrugged when I asked him to at least poke in and say “Hi” to Peyton, excusing himself.

“I’ll talk to her next time.”

A brutal thought entered my head, akin to “What if there is no next time?” Instead of addressing it, I grabbed the overnight bag and ran to the front door, trying to avoid the autumn leaves threatening to fall into my near-perfect bun.

A note in cursive adorned the window in the door:

Nicola, love, just walk in. Peyton’s in the living room. If you have time, help her with her homework, would you? Claire

I smiled at the familiarity of the handwriting of Peyton’s mother. I shoved open the door, took a deep breath, expected vanilla. Instead, a hospital smell permeated the front entry.

“Peyton! I’m here!”

I heard a weak “Hello” from down the hall. I walked delicately into the room.

“How are you?” I asked.

Peyton’s smile was a shadow from two months ago. But she flipped back her thinning blonde hair and invited me to cuddle on the couch next to her.

“Much better now that you’re here. How was the drive with Cody?”

We spent five minutes stabbing awkwardly at conversation. It was not the companionable quiet we were used to, but one with bars instead of open spaces. I offered to grab us a snack, and Peyton readily agreed. She wanted saltines.

I returned to see Peyton sneaking a look into my backpack. Or maybe taking something from it? My eyebrows raised.

She justified herself, “I wanted to see the cute PJs you texted me about.”

My brain hazed, and I lamely commented back, “Oh, yeah.”

After a few more minutes of twisted conversation, I was internally dying. Not in the same way Peyton was, but it felt real. Suddenly there were so many new questions. I did not know how to treat my best friend. Cancer was eating away at her body, and it appeared that she and my brother were having secret communications through me. And here I sat on a couch, with too much salt in my mouth and salt at my eyes.

“How’s your new friend...What was his name?”

“Do you mean Noah? Or his cousin, Mack? I’m friends with both of them.” I silently congratulated myself on having as many as two new friends.

Peyton’s gray eyes lit up.

“Wow, you have two other friends? Didn’t see that coming.”

I laughed harder because Peyton had picked up on my train of thought without realizing it. Her oxygen equipment whooshed along with me.

“What’s that?” I asked, as a newly released sheet of paper swished from Peyton’s journal, toward her wasted lap.

“Nothing.”

The paper was gone. All I noticed was a name at the top of the sheet. I had no wish to get angry, but Peyton's life now seemed to be ruled by secrets. Secrets that no less than two months ago she would have freely given to me.

Noah's God? Would He listen?

I mentally dusted the thought away and chuckled at the Noah allusion: *Which Noah was I referring to?*

"Peyton, I'd like you to know how nerdy your best friend is. Honestly, I'm the worst."

Peyton smiled at my comment but didn't inquire after it, her mind, no doubt, struggling as much as mine. What to say to a best friend who can no longer understand what you are going through? Or maybe she wouldn't ask because she seemed to hate forming questions, because thinking was too much of an obstacle, and questions required follow-ups and explanations and a PowerPoint presentation...and Peyton wasn't up for that.

"Want to start on homework?"

What a lame best friend I was. *Hey, I know you're too sick to think and homework is annoying, but do you want to spend the next hour on it with me?*

Peyton smiled again, this time a bit broader, as if she knew the struggle going through my head. My heart was her favorite song, and she knew all the lyrics. She could tell what went behind every sentence I said aloud. But her thoughts were a tune I had never heard before, the song that came on the radio just as I pulled into the carport. So how was this friendship going to continue? My thoughts betrayed me again: Maybe she would die before our friendship deteriorated any further.

Then she shook her head "No" and flipped on the TV sitting at the foot of her bed. She darted in and out of channels, the remote

like a fish, before making her selection. It was the same episode we watched on my neighbor's lawn the day I found out.

In truth, I started counting time after that day. BCE = Before Cancer Entered. Now I was in CE = Cancer Entered. Would I start counting again after Peyton died?

The theme music ended, and the episode started. Cue the gorgeous main character crying over a letter someone had given her. Peyton teared up a little, but I guessed it wasn't from the passionate cries. That gave me a chance to shed some too, and mine were for a friendship I didn't think was coming back. It was too difficult when one could still read the other, while the second trembled at beginning conversations.

It was black outside, and my soul reflected it, but could I help myself? Happy thoughts were hard to come by at Claire and Peyton's house. My phone blinked 3:22 AM. Peyton grimaced at the light, and I worried about stealing any of Peyton's precious sleep.

I glimpsed the paper that had fallen from her journal. It was as I suspected. My brother's name traced the top. It could have easily been slipped into my backpack by him—and stolen out by her. I quietly shifted toward the door of the bathroom, where I could read it without interruption.

With Eyes, Your Eyes—Cody Pratty

Peyton with eyes the color of day-old smoke. But if her eyes the smoke, then her mind the fire. She is the one who takes the long way to get answers, brain smoldering with thought. Her actions fiery, content to not just burn, but blaze.

She used to be the first one, the one who would when no one else moved. First to the food, first to the dare, first to get a license, first to break the law. Peyton was the one name implied when teens begged, "But everyone else is doing it." She was the spark that ignited the rest.

But her friend list? Few. No one could keep up with the girl who flared. Competing flames could never match with Peyton, and so burned off, somewhere Peyton was not a distraction. Her one best friend, not a flame, then, but a coal. Someone to keep warm, ready, but content with Peyton as the fire in the hearth.

And I? Could my green handle the gray from her fire?

I saw my brother's tears on the paper, splashes everywhere. I tried not to add my own to the collection.

My dream that night, cloudy and dark, once again a reflection of me. It began with a memory. Three years ago in seventh grade Peyton had tried to hypnotize me, and I climbed up the tree, fell, and broke a leg. But the memory shifted. In a trance I found myself kissing Noah, although I doubted I needed much influence from Peyton. Suddenly Cody was there, laughing with Peyton, who handed me a piece of paper that apparently told my destiny: "Time will begin again with 'Cancer Entered'—your own cancer."

I woke up. Peyton's oxygen moved in and out with her. Climbing trees, no longer an option with her fluctuating tank of air. She was still asleep. Now my phone shimmered 8:31 AM.

I glared at her journal, where I knew the paper lay. Now I was angry, betrayed. My brother was constantly writing songs for his band (his band that was going nowhere fast). But he had never written one for me or even about me. Now, the first time I was even mentioned, it was lyrics to a song about my best friend, where I was nothing but a coal. Jealousy turned my thoughts as green as my brother's eyes. My best friend who could read my thoughts and my brother who loved her more than he loved me. Soon I would lose my best friend to the cancer in her body, and yet I could not shake my anger towards her.

Internally, I wrote a new paragraph to Cody's final lyrics, my eyes closing as I tried to block out the anger directed toward my dying friend.

The flame stutters, now. The smoky eyes that once held stories of yesterday's brilliant catastrophe now struggles to hold anything but gray. Her spark is no longer her mind, but her cancerous body. Now a shell, the cancer a flame that not even her fire could overthrow.

I opened my eyes again, to the now-familiar green. Was it wrong to want her eyes to stay closed?

Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize Winner

This year's poetry contest judge, Michael Sowder, is the author of *The Empty Boat*, chosen by Diane Wakoski to win the 2004 T.S. Eliot Award. His most recent collection, *House Under the Moon*, explores the challenges of living a contemplative life in the contemporary world. He lived in India with his family as a Fulbright Fellow in 2014. His work has appeared in *American Life in Poetry*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Sufi Journal*, *New Poets of the American West*, *Pilgrimage*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere. His book on Walt Whitman, *Whitman's Ecstatic Union*, was published by Routledge, and he writes a religion blog for the *Huffington Post*. A professor of English and Religious Studies at Utah State University, he lives in Logan, Utah, with his wife, the writer Jennifer Sinor, and their two boys.

He writes this about the winning selection—

I was immediately struck by the authority of the voice and the control of emotion in "Winter in Paradise," the way the intensity of the narrative scene contrasts with the measured tone. The imagery and clarity of the poem transport the reader immediately into the dramatic scene. There are no wasted words. Metaphors come relentlessly: "the snowcapped walls of nature"; "He gently fenced in the heated 9mm / between my palms as though he was / placing his heart in my hands." The ambivalent attitude toward the marriage, the flashbacks of tender moments in the face of "The feeling in my gut that told me no"—and the lack of any clear resolution to the narrative—*Does she shoot her husband?*—keep the poem alive in the reader's heart and mind. A beautifully crafted poem with high stakes and a true heart.

Winter in Paradise

My husband and I drove in silence
through the snowcapped walls
of nature. I gazed out the window
at the buzzed pine trees lining the road
like guards watching over a prison yard.
He pulled off the road and halted.
He opened the door and broke
the cold silence. "Honey, let's go."
I stepped out and glided at first
over the surface of the snow.
Each step went deeper and deeper.
I trudged through the snowflakes
until I became stationary behind him
at a large embankment dammed
with ice and dead leaves. He had a gun
aimed at a tree that stood tall and stout
like a decorated soldier. BANG! BANG!
He shot nine times, then grasped my hands.
He gently fenced in the heated 9mm
between my palms as though he was
placing his heart in my hands. Then
he stepped into the line of fire.
I stared at him, then the gun,
the only color under the gray sky
that the sun had burned from crimson to ash.
I looked up and saw the limbs
of a soldier reaching out and entangling him.

He stood in front of me. Trapped.
Our past burst through my brain.
The wedding day two years past.
The feeling in my gut that told me no.
The lonely nights when he was nowhere
to be found but behind a Beretta M9
halfway around the world.
How he holds me now every time I cry,
my head placed on his chest,
his arms shielding me from what's to come.
The wrinkles around his eyes
when he laughs as he counts my ribs.
I heard a small twig snap.
I lifted the gun, aimed,
and fired.

Harvest

BR&S Prose Prize Winner

It was the dust they were trying to beat. Soon copper plumes would blot out the gray October sky and fling pellets of dirt against their bodies.

Virginia blamed Joyce. “If you hadn’t wanted to go all the way up to Jeanie’s house, we would’ve been home by now.” She was the only one who was unmasked. Her fingers looped through the eyeholes of her handcrafted papier-mâché rabbit mask. It jounced beside her calico skirt.

“No one was handing out much candy,” Joyce replied. “And this was Etta’s first time. We couldn’t head back without at least something good.”

Joyce looked from the horizon back at their youngest sister, who trailed them by a few feet. Her wool socks peeked out from the rips in her boot tips. She had insisted on keeping her mask on—a plain, brown turnip bag with irregular holes cut for her mouth, nose, and eyes. In her four-year-old mind, she’d tried to replicate an old scarecrow nailed to a post on a farm near theirs. To her, that sagging shape was the scariest thing in the world, and she decided to be one after Darryl had said to all three of them, “This holiday is for scary things, but also a time to beat those things that scare you. When you wear a mask or confront what you’re afraid of, you’re yelling at it that you’re not afraid and that it should see your courage.”

Joyce readjusted her pumpkin-head mask so it would stop slanting. In her hand swung her wool stocking less than a quarter full with candy. “Besides, Jeanie’s family always passes out caramel cubes. And I’d been telling Etta about them all summer.”

Virginia stalked ahead by a few feet. “Well, fine, Joyce. You’ll

explain everything to Momma and Pa when we get back. You're the one at fault, anyways."

Joyce ignored her. Virginia had been restless all afternoon as they visited what few houses gave out candy. There were times Virginia hadn't even walked up the sidewalk with them, but had hung back, her mask pulled tight over her face. Joyce didn't know what was wrong with her. She snagged her younger sister's hand.

"C'mon, Etta."

In the heavy silence that followed, there was a growing whisper of dust being peeled up from the ground by the wind in the distance. Joyce could visualize the coliseum of dirt, and from the way Virginia pressed forward, Joyce sensed she could too.

The last time had been just three weeks ago. It had uprooted the last of their pea plants and unearthed the sugar beets. They'd been strewn out, naked, their ragged red-brown flesh like sinewy cow hearts. Dust had slipped through cracks in their farmhouse. It had taken them four hours to clean out the dirt from all the drawers in the house.

Momma said it was called the Dust Bowl. Pa called it Dust Hell. "If the devil wanted to make a man go mad," he'd said after one storm had robbed them of their clear well water, "this is how he would do it."

Etta's small voice rose. "It's not going to come now, is it?"

"The storm?" Joyce asked.

"No." Etta leaned her head back to look Joyce in the face.

"The scarecrow."

"It's not real, Etta." Virginia's hard voice came from ahead. They could only see the back of her head, although the rabbit mask in her grasp stared bottomless at them. "When Darryl first mentioned it, he was teasing you."

“But I seen it.” Etta’s voice was muffled. “It was tall and skinny and walking by the shed a few nights ago.”

Joyce cleared her mask’s eye sockets of dust. It’d been a dream—Etta had woken up crying, which in turn woke up Baby Harold and made him cry. Momma had to calm her down and explain to her that nothing can walk about like that except humans, and that it was just a silly little dream. Etta hadn’t believed her.

Joyce said, “Well, maybe it wasn’t doing any bad things. Maybe it was going to meet up with the rest of the scarecrows and have a little dance in the moonlight.”

“But why would it want to dance, Joy?” Etta slowed up. “Why?”

Virginia looked back at them both. “For heaven’s sakes, you two have taken forever to get anywhere today!”

A trickle of crisp wind tickled the back of Joyce’s neck. It was getting late—although they’d left town by four. They promised Momma that they’d leave by then. *If they’d known the storm was coming*, Joyce thought, *Momma wouldn’t even have let us go*. It was four miles from their house into town, a little over an hour’s walk back home if they were fast. Joyce looked at the vanishing sun and really *looked* at the dirt path.

“Oh.”

Virginia squinted with a frown. “What?”

“I don’t remember passing Mr. Jeffrey’s house. We always pass it coming and going a mile from our house.”

Etta pointed at Joyce and nodded. Her brown canvas mask covered her face. “Mr. Jeffrey has a scarecrow, too. Its eyeholes are real wide, remember?” Her small fingers poked below her eyes. The brown mask crinkled like decaying skin.

“Yes. I know. The crows had pecked and torn them,” Virginia replied.

“Virginia,” Joyce said. “Where are you taking us?”

She didn’t answer.

Joyce’s fingers dug into her pumpkin-head mask in anger. Pulp wedged under her nails. When she’d first put it on and looked into the murky well water at her reflection, a creature with a massive, irregular-shaped head stared back at her.

She wanted to huck the mask deep into the well. Wanted to sink it to the muddy bottoms. It reminded her of the dead family they’d passed when she was four years old, when they were just settling in the panhandle of Oklahoma along with a string of other weary families searching for farmland. Virginia had been in the wagon, but Joyce had been walking alongside with Momma. She was the one who saw them.

The family had been dead for a couple of days: their faces bloated, hair in matted clumps. Their weedy clothes were blowing off in the wind. But what Joyce remembered most was the red, dusty dirt. It sank into the slight crevices of their agape eyes, like dried, bloody tears, clogged their nostrils, ears, and parted, cracked lips. Joyce had thought that if they cut into their insides, they’d be stuffed with reddish-brown dust. She’d thought that the prairie lands had claimed the family, made them all fall down dead at the same time.

But Momma’s soft voice was in her ear, something moist and chilly at once, and she’d said that the family was tired, and that they’d lain down to die peacefully, together.

Joyce didn’t reply, but she remembered thinking that if her family wanted to lie down and let the red dirt bleed from their eyes, she would keep on walking even after her shoes lost their soles.

“Joyce, let’s keep going,” Virginia said, shaking her sister’s shoulder.

“No.” Joyce’s feet remained rooted. “It’s the other way. We’re not headed towards our house. I know where you’re taking us. This is the road to Russell McCown’s farm.”

Virginia’s face pinched tightly.

Etta’s small whimper was barely heard. “This is where the scarecrow walks. I seen him here.”

“It was a dream, Etta,” Virginia said.

“I don’t want to go near Russell McCown’s farm,” Joyce replied.

“You two are making me angry!” Virginia shouted. “We went to Jeanie’s house for the caramel cubes that you two wanted, and I want to go to McCown’s house for Halloween, so it’s only fair we go. I am the oldest out of us three, so I know more than either of you. Now I say we keep going this way, and you two better follow or else I’ll be telling Pa you didn’t listen.”

At Virginia’s threat of telling Pa, Etta was receptive at once. She toddled after Virginia, her entire body stiff. Her mask half-covered her eyes. Joyce stood firmly in her same spot. She wanted to slap Virginia for being so bossy, and she wanted to dart the opposite way because she wanted to go home, not to McCown’s farm. But the thought of her sisters alone—and even more so, herself all alone—made her shuffle after them.

Virginia didn’t say much after that. They trudged through the vast fields of sifted dirt and skirted around limp tumbleweeds. The sky was darkening now. It was as if it was zipping itself up in a dark curtain and turning its gray face from the land below it to evade the wrath of the wind storm. Virginia had once told Joyce that she hated this part of the storm. Where you could sense it in the air, but not see it. “It’s easier to remain calm,” she’d said, “when I can see it and know that it’s still a good distance from me.”

Maybe Darryl will come, Joyce thought. Maybe Pa had sent him to go search for them, to bring back his three little girls who would soon be lost in a dust storm. She longed to see his familiar shape walking towards them in the fields.

Joyce readjusted her pumpkin mask again, glad that the dust couldn't fleck her cheeks raw. Virginia was still stomping ahead; her rabbit mask's ears dragged in the wind like two arms stretching out for something inchoate in the distance.

When her family had first arrived in the panhandle, they were told the farming industry was doing well. Yet as the years inched by, Pa would get into arguments with townsfolk about his fields. "By stripping off the topsoil, you're causing these storms," some would say. Other voices growled, "All you grow here is dirt and dust and make all us out here starve," while others would outwardly approach Joyce and ask when her Momma and Pa intended to leave.

They'd lost neighbors and friends over the short years, too. There was Lucy May and her family. And Shirley Riviars, who at seven years old could darn and mend better than any old grandmother could. They all left after the grasshoppers snacked too often on their papas' string beans and their eyes sank deep into their sockets. Old Mr. Jeffrey and his blind wife remained, thanks to their children's spare clothing, which they sold to travelers for food and supplies.

And their nearest neighbors—three miles from their farmland—the McCowns, had remained. Joyce only knew that once there'd been three of them, a couple with a daughter. She'd only ever met the papa, Russell McCown, who didn't come by very often, though Joyce remembered how he'd once visited their house when Pa was out in the fields. Momma had left the front door open although she'd always scold them for doing so. Her knuckles were white as she grasped her knife and cut a potato into the smallest white cubes while he talked and talked about the lack of food.

But Joyce remembered hearing the whispers in town that came in tiny threads. That Russell McCown tried to sell soiled, smelly dresses after rumors unearthed that his wife and daughter were dead. How a few neighbors had gone over to help bury them and hadn't found the bodies and McCown shooed them away with his pitchfork tight in his grasp. How everyone in town only spoke of him in hushed tones that faded into silence whenever she or Virginia would walk by after school.

Yet Joyce had interacted with him alone once before.

It'd been a few months ago. She'd been near a fencerow, freeing tumbleweeds that'd blown up against them, when she saw a long shadow fall over hers. A man stood above her, his shirt and trousers so crusted and brown that she thought if he moved quickly, they'd break off in chunks. He had sunken, dark eyes like moldy plum pits, and his cheekbones were concave. He was ugly, mirroring the landscape. Dirt-weary and barren, he had towered over Joyce.

"Hello, sir," Joyce had said. Momma had been teaching her polite talk so that when she grew up, she could speak just as well as the town girls. "Do you need to talk with my pa?"

He'd stared at her. "You're Joseph."

She untwined a tumbleweed from the fence and let it free on the opposite side. It blew across their small, ragged pumpkin patch. "Pardon? Joseph is my pa. Do you need to speak with him?"

"You're Joe Randall's. You're one of his three girls." A rusty pitchfork with one missing prong was in his hand. He poked her bare knee with one of the remaining two. "There are three of you."

"And my brothers." She rose. Brushed the feeling of the pitchfork tooth off her skin. "Darryl and Baby Harold."

"I had a daughter." He poked the ground in front of her. "Red hair, like all this dust here. Not gold like yours. Gold doesn't last long here. The dust spoils it."

There was a long pause, as if he expected something out of her. So she said, "My pa is just out trying to work with the sugar beets now. I'll go get him for you."

"No, no, don't bother." He dragged his broken pitchfork in small circles before her feet. His voice was like cracked leather. "Such clean knees still," he said, almost impressed, and before she could stop it, he raised his hand and his pitchfork tooth punctured the skin above her kneecap. She didn't wait to see if it drew blood. She swatted it away. "I have to finish my work," she said hotly, pointing to the tumbleweeds crashing over the pumpkin patch.

"Mirabelle and Bonnie wanted pumpkin seeds." He acted as if he hadn't heard her, and perhaps he hadn't. But his eyes wandered at every little thing—her elbows that showed through the sleeve holes, the meat on her calves, her cheeks that were chalky with dust. "They wanted and wanted and never stopped wanting. Then the dust got in their lungs, and then they stopped. But I was left wanting. Our turnips were eaten by those damn grasshoppers, and when I started to eat them insects, they left. And then there was Bonnie and Mirabelle, with their skin like sweet sugar beets and they weren't moving..."

He spoke as though she were a grown-up, and so she nodded as politely as she could, trying not to focus on the sour stench of his mouth and the throbbing of her knee. "Momma might be willing to let you have a pumpkin if you want, sir. As soon as it's ripe."

A wheezy breath blew from his throat. He tilted back his head, and she could see the thin veins and rigid bones through his patchy, soil-stained neck. "Better take them while they're young," he said. He motioned his head to the pumpkin patch on the other side of the fence. "Still alive and untouched by another pair of teeth. They die after not too long. They decay fast."

She took just a moment to look over the pumpkins. They were

still small, barely the size of a peach, with pasty white flesh. She knew if she bit into one, it'd be sour and dense and crunchy. "Pa said they're not ready. Not till harvest, sir."

His yellow eyes drifted to the horizon, where a fresh cluster of dust clouds was flooding the plains. "It won't last. The dust always beats the crop. Tell that to your pa."

She didn't return home and tell Pa anything. She didn't even tell Momma that Russell McCown had spoken to her. Momma would scold her about straying too far from the farmhouse and fret over the cut Russell had given her. But she never forgot that cold-hot touch of his pitchfork tooth against her leg, or the harsh, coyote-starved look in those pebbly, black eyes.

Up ahead of Joyce, Virginia was increasing in speed. Etta bobbed beside Joyce, her worn shoes puffing the dirt up with each footstep. Joyce huffed and jogged up to Virginia, snagging her sleeve.

"Stop!"

Virginia turned. Red dust clung to her skin, and her eyes were raw. She was glaring, though whether it was at Joyce or from the pain, Joyce didn't know.

"We're not going to McCown's farm," Joyce said, then turned to Etta. "You don't want to go, right? McCown, he'll eat all our candy."

Virginia shot her a dark look, but Etta tilted her head back, peeping at her from the gaping holes of the mask.

"He won't, Etta." Virginia knelt down. Her rabbit mask's eyes stared back down the road they'd been on. "He has candy there. We'll get sugar tarts."

"You shut up!" Joyce pushed her roughly. "He does not! He doesn't have any food for himself, Virginia. We're going home before the storm hits." She gathered Etta and began walking, hoping, praying that Virginia would follow.

Instead, Virginia hollered back with one big lie. “That’s not the way home. That’s the way to Jeffrey’s farm and his scarecrows.”

Etta lurched back and yanked hard away from Joyce’s grip. “I want to go home. McCown’s scarecrow lives at his farm. Mr. Jeffrey’s, too. I don’t want to go to either.”

“We’re *going* home,” Joyce coaxed.

“The scarecrow can walk, though,” Etta pleaded. “It will walk to us.”

“It won’t get us at home.” Joyce tugged at her, again.

Etta’s voice stung with tears. “But it comes to the window.”

Sometimes, Joyce would have dreams about McCown. He would lather mud on that dead family she’d seen, bite into their calves, their stomachs, or even their heads, and when he was finished they would look like the scarecrows that were strung up around their neighbors’ farms. “It comes to the window,” Etta cried. “I seen it in the window at night. Lots of nights.”

“The scarecrows aren’t real, Etta,” Joyce whispered. “They aren’t real.”

Virginia was sullen as the storm blew dust into her irritated eyes. She gave Joyce and Etta a long look. Then she continued trudging in her own direction. All around her, the earth looked hungry and tired of dust, not allowing it to settle. And Virginia was looking planted in the soil even as she moved forward. Joyce thought of McCown’s starved eyes. She felt that same starved sense coming from the very ground they stood on.

Joyce let her sister keep walking, but she kept watching her.

She wanted to tell Virginia that she had seen them. Behind the barn. It was almost suppertime—boiled cabbage with bits of a snared rabbit. She had wanted to tell Virginia that he’d done almost the same thing to her, but instead of his pitchfork, with Virginia he had used his

sharp fingers. They'd squeezed Virginia's cheeks and arms. Virginia didn't swat him away, though. She looked him straight in the eye with a look that seemed foreign. Then he touched her long gold braids and Joyce remembered he'd grinned—his teeth irregular and yellow and dark like their dying fields, the cracks in his lips filled with dry soil. Joyce had thought, *Has he been drinking from the dirt?* when he drew Virginia's braid to his mouth and bit it, as if it were a stalk of wheat. That was when Momma hollered out for them once more for supper, and he'd dropped her braid and ducked below the fence, looking back once to see if she'd moved.

Joyce knew she hadn't, not for a whole minute. And then when she finally did, she turned and vomited beside the barn wall.

Joyce hadn't mentioned it to Virginia, and Virginia never mentioned it to Momma.

But the thought of Virginia behind the barn, frozen and unmoving while McCown looked at her with the same starved eyes he'd looked at her with, pushed Joyce in the direction Virginia had just gone.

Etta whimpered, slipping her hand into Joyce's.

They caught up to Virginia moments before the storm was about to drop its weight on them. Dust had deposited itself in the pleats of their dresses and clogged their boots. Joyce could taste the earthy minerals in her mouth. They staggered forward, masks shielding their faces but also disfiguring their vision. Virginia took her hands and rested one on each of their shoulders, pushing them forward like a plow.

Virginia would say, "I think I see a fence" or "I just want to see the house, then we'll go right home" or "Darryl or Pa could find us any moment out here, if you're too scared," and Joyce would give a nod of her head, as if agreeing with her. Etta didn't speak once; perhaps

she couldn't hear in the rough wind and behind that brown canvas of a mask. Her small body whipped back and forth in the strong currents. Joyce couldn't help but think of her as a handkerchief Momma had once lost in a storm.

The sky darkened. The wind went soft. Joyce's mouth unhinged to tell Virginia what she'd seen behind the barn.

She wanted to tell her that McCown wasn't just a starved-looking man. She wanted to tell her that he'd grown from the ground. That he'd been among the people who'd died crossing the plains and he'd eaten the dusty soil and had risen in a night when it had rained, long ago, in search of something to fill his already dirt-stuffed belly.

She wanted to tell her she forgave her for taking them toward the McCown farmhouse instead of home. She knew when something was frightening. She wanted to see it for herself, too, so it wasn't an apparition of a nightmare but something tangible and able to be broken or blown away.

And right as she had begun to tell her this, Etta stiffened and stopped. Her younger sister cowered against her side, and with a scream that was heard over the wind, cried, "I told you! I told you it was going to walk to us!"

In the chaos of the dark red storm of dust and wind was a tall, wiry shape stalking forward. Joyce watched it approach for just a moment.

"Virginia, let's keep walking," Joyce gasped out. "We need to keep moving."

Virginia's grip on their shoulders fell. Joyce took a wide step back, snatching Etta along with her.

"Virginia!" Etta pleaded.

"Just let me see it," Virginia whispered. "I just want to see who it is. Then we go."

But Joyce knew by the time they could distinguish the figure in the storm it would be too late to turn back.

Contributors' Notes

Stephen Alfegha is a citizen of Nigeria. Born in Lagos, his love for art started at a very tender age. He is currently a freshman at Idaho State University majoring in the Fine Arts. He is a self-trained artist. His career as an artist actually began in high school as he worked with several art teachers who took an interest in his great potential. During high school, he was exposed to art exhibitions, gallery and museum excursions, and several art competitions. His current projects are to be exhibited for the upcoming undergraduate art competition in the Fine Art department.

Pocatello native **Brandon Alves** has been studying the saxophone for ten years and currently studies classical saxophone with Dr. Shandra Helman. He is a Music Education major here at ISU. His aspirations include continued work on classical saxophone, with a particular emphasis on the larger instruments of the saxophone family.

Steph Bachman is an English major and enjoys the three “Rs”: running, reading, and writing. She also adores well-written horror stories, the gray skies of England, and Marshmallow Mudslide ice cream.

Ellie Bailey is a senior at Highland High School who loves creative writing and is currently working on a book.

Eponine Baker began taking piano lessons at age 5 and began participating in choir and singing at age 12. Eponine currently studies with Dr. Diana Livingston Friedley. Her participation in the music

program at ISU includes singing in the Concert and Chamber Choirs, as well as performing on the Senior Recital of one of her fellow classmates, Kiya Fife.

Richard Blackmon II is currently a senior working on his last semester at ISU. He hopes to begin his career as a professional actor after graduation.

Colin Brien has been contributing to the Pocatello music scene in numerous ways for over a decade. He is Director of Bands at Century High School, has been the director for the Idaho State-Civic Symphony Youth Orchestra, and has played horn in the Idaho State-Civic Symphony. Also a skilled pianist, he often collaborates with ISU students.

Chris Brock is currently living and working in South Korea. He occasionally makes contact with friends and professors at ISU to let them know he will defend his dissertation in the coming semester. He has been doing this for two years now with no real end in sight. But *now* he assures everyone that he will defend his dissertation this coming semester.

Jamie Burtosky is a Music Education Major from Pocatello. She is currently studying classical clarinet with Dr. Shandra Helman and jazz bass with Professor Jonathan Armstrong. She looks forward to graduating and working with Southeast Idaho-area schools.

Cody Campbell is a junior studying Ecology and Environmental Conservation. He grew up in a small town in Idaho that transcends country stereotypes in good ways and bad. He grew up on a farm

which was essential to his survival yet something he never enjoyed. He has a vast intellect and zero common sense, so you can usually find him in situations much more suited for social butterflies and avid birdwatchers. He spends most of his time outside, cursing our relationship with smartphones.

Nikyra Capson is from Blackfoot, Idaho and is working toward a degree in Advertising and Fine Art with a minor in English. She hopes to continue her education and get a Masters in Fine Arts. She wants to work as a professional artist as well as in the advertising field.

KC Chojnacki is currently in her fifth year as the orchestra director for School District 25 in Pocatello. She graduated from Concordia College with a B.M. in Music Education and from Idaho State University with a Masters Degree in Music Education. She plays viola in the Idaho State-Civic Symphony and frequently performs chamber music with ISU music faculty.

Saxophonist **Isaac Dayley** studies classical saxophone with Dr. Shandra Helman and jazz with Professor Jonathan Armstrong. Isaac is an active participant in many ensembles here at ISU. As a burgeoning jazz musician, he plans to continue working on jazz and improvisation at ISU.

Dillin Diggie was born in Blackfoot and began taking bassoon lessons at the age of 12 with Jan Eddington. He currently studies with Dr. George Adams. Past awards include State Solo Contest second place in 2010, and third place in 2011. He has performed with the Idaho State-Civic Symphony for the past three seasons.

Marissa Dyer has performed many leading musical theatre roles at ISU and most recently performed the role of Monica in Menotti's *The Medium* with Old Town Actors Studio. Marissa loves performing and teaching, and has enjoyed working with her many students over the last few years. She has been studying with Dr. Diana Livingston Friedley.

Tirazheh Eslami is a graduate student in the Department of Art. She immigrated 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 has enjoyed this exploration thoroughly, but she continues to feel a strong pull from her past. Her work incorporates traditions of Persian painting and calligraphy into a succinct narrative, and she has used her artistic voice to break the exclusivity standard.

Landen Fergus is twenty-five years old. This is his second semester at ISU. He's a full-time student and full-time employee as a cook/supervisor at a local restaurant in Pocatello. He's a recovering drug addict, and his clean date is June 24, 2014.

Junior **Owen Flannagan** is from Silver Spring, Maryland and has been studying the saxophone since age nine. He currently studies jazz with Professor Jonathan Armstrong and classical saxophone with Dr. Shandra Helman. After completing his Bachelor's at Idaho State University, he plans to pursue graduate study in music.

Alyssa Gardner was born in Pocatello and has studied piano since the age of seven. She now studies with Mr. Mark Neiworth. She has participated in the Idaho MTNA and Musicians West competition, where she has won several prizes. She is also a violin minor and plays the violin in the Idaho State-Civic Symphony.

Tyanne Hintze is from a small town in Arizona. She graduated from Safford High School in May 2014 and graduated a semester later with her associate degree in sports medicine from Eastern Arizona Community College. She is currently working towards her bachelor's degree in elementary education with an emphasis in English at Idaho State University.

Hailing from Pocatello, Idaho, **Jake Knievel** 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 degree in percussion performance. With continuing hard work and dedication, Jake hopes to be a highly-sought-after musician.

Gabriel Lowman is active as a classical pianist, jazz pianist, jazz percussionist, and composer. He plays in the ISU Wind Ensemble and Jazz Big Band, and with several singers and instrumentalists. He has many competition awards, including first place in the piano division of the ISU Summer Institute for Piano and Strings Competition in 2015.

Music Education Major **Dallas McCrea**, from Boise, is a trombonist here at Idaho State University. He currently studies with Dr. Patrick Brooks. A former Physics Major, he looks forward to his continued musical study here at ISU.

Shelley McEuen-Howard lives in Twin Falls where she teaches at the College of Southern Idaho. She knows I-86 well and is looking forward to completing her Ph.D. She enjoys novice birdwatching, optimistic gardening, stupid jokes, and the analog aspect of film photography. She also makes a decent loaf of sourdough.

Adam Merrill won first prize in both the 2015 State MTNA

Competition, and the 2014 Idaho State-Civic Symphony Young Artist Competition, which awarded him a performance with the symphony, and second place in the Musicians West Piano Competition. He is also a voice minor and sings in the ISU Chamber Choir. He studies piano with Dr. Kori Bond.

Laura Neu is a senior in her final undergraduate semester, double majoring in creative writing and psychology with a minor in linguistics. Her work has been prominently featured in various college-ruled notebooks and in the margins of class notes.

Trumpeter **Alec Newcomb** is a music major here at ISU who currently studies jazz with Professor Jonathan Armstrong and classical trumpet with Professor Tom Banyas. He is an especially talented beat-boxer and looks forward to future compositions involving that skill.

Conor O'Farrell began playing trombone in the sixth grade. He performed in both the Idaho All-State Band and All-Northwest Band in high school and placed third in the Idaho State solo competition. He recently won the Idaho Federation of Music Clubs solo competition, and studies with Dr. Patrick Brooks.

Corinna Barrett Percy is a Ph.D. student in English at ISU. She is currently working on her dissertation project, which focuses on soldiers of color in World War II literature and masculinity studies. She is obsessed with vintage clothes and cars, Elvis Presley, ballroom dancing, and, of course, WWII history. She also enjoys a good Netflix binge when she has time.

Samantha Rich is a gay, left-handed vegetarian from outer space.

She is attending ISU for creative writing and Japanese, which will help her eventually take over the world. She is interested in the strange, wonderful, and horrendous, and will stop writing when you cut her hands off.

Wendy Roberts is enjoying her second year of studies at ISU pursuing an art degree. She has a fascination with people and, after photographing them for 30-something years, she has found she prefers using them for subject matter in her art assignments. When she is not in class, she enjoys visiting her three grandchildren.

Raquel Sacknoff is a second-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, she was awarded Photography Student of the Year her senior year in high school, and her photography was published in the 2016 edition of *Black Rock & Sage*.

Diantha Smith is a Ph.D. student in English and the Teaching of English. She likes all the things English majors typically like, and she also likes being outside in the sun.

Sophie Spreier is an aspiring collaborative artist, teacher, and performer residing in Pocatello. Sophie can be found managing various projects, some of which are/have been the Spreier Suzuki Cello Studio, the Speakeasy Concert Series, and her latest venture, forming a band called “Find Sophie A Husband.”

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 graduated with a B.F.A. in May of 2016.

Kyle Strunk, from Nampa, Idaho, has had success as both a performer and composer. He has written many pieces that include symphonic compositions, chamber ensembles, and percussion ensemble. He was recently published by TapSPACE publications for his piece Oaxacan Fantasy, which took 2nd place in the annual Portland Percussion Group composition contest.

Freshman **Ryan Tomlinson** has been playing the saxophone for seven years and currently studies classical saxophone with Dr. Shandra Helman. He is an active member of ISU's Wind Ensemble and Chamber Jazz Ensemble. An enthusiastic student, he is undecided on his major here at ISU.

Alexis Walker is from Idaho Falls and studies with Dr. Kori Bond. She has established herself as a piano teacher in the Preparatory Piano Program and is highly sought after as a collaborative pianist for singers and instrumentalists. She has worked as a rehearsal pianist and a pianist for the Star Valley Music Festival.

Robert Wilson completed his Performance Degree at ISU, studying under Dr. Keum Hwa Cha. He is now studying violin and viola from Dr. Hyeri Choi. He now teaches an after-school strings program in Soda Springs and plays in the Idaho State-Civic Symphony. He is also a composer and has featured his own works publicly at ISU. He participates in many types of ensembles.

Colophon

Issue 16, 2017, of *Black Rock & Sage* is set in Dutch 766 BT type at Idaho State University using Adobe InDesign. *BR&S*'s cover and footer font is Futura Medium. The journal is printed on 60 lb. Cream Tradebook (436 PPI) by Bookmobile in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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