



# Black Rock & Sage

Issue 20, 2021  
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 (ISU) with assistance from the Art, Music, Theatre, and Dance 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](http://blackrockandsage.org) or @brs\_isujournal on Instagram.

Thank you to everyone who contributes to *Black Rock & Sage* in the form of expertise, advertising, donations, and time. Joey Gifford, in particular, provides crucial InDesign review. We are supported in part by ASISU. 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.

Cover: "Tears and Rebellion" by Stephen Aifegha



# Black Rock & Sage

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## Editor's Note

I am the epitome of a non-traditional student. What does that term mean to me? It means that I try and balance, no I don't balance, I juggle the many aspects of my life that need attention: children, work, school, running (yes, this needs attention). It means I almost daily question my life choices. So, why do it? Why take on the extra work and challenges that are an inherent part of attending college? There are a lot of ways to answer that question and the answer changes often, as all good answers should. But, for me, part of that answer always includes words: not words in general, but words in particular. I am forever in love with the elusive, transformative, complicated, and, at times, frustrating nature of writing and words, which is why being the Editor-in-Chief of *Black Rock* ☞ *Sage* this year has been such an exciting experience.

The prose pieces in this issue are wild, in the best possible way. They pull you in, and often leave you wondering exactly where it is you are, which leads to considerations, in very different ways, about the ambiguity of experience. The Prose Prize winner "The Horse" by Mason Wissert is a visceral short story that weaves together the themes of sexuality, death, and relationships. Cheyana Leatham's "Train" constantly asks the reader to reevaluate the border (if there is one) between what is real and what is imagined, and "Blind Corner" by Jessa Briggs takes place behind the scenes in a restaurant kitchen and explores bodies and boundaries during the COVID pandemic. We've broadened the scope of genres this year with our first one-woman play, "Tights Aren't Pants" by E.E. Curtis,

and a skateboarding-specific nonfiction essay, “Non-Sequitur” by Landen Fergus.

The poetry in this issue feels so considered, taking on a variety of scales and perspectives. We include poems that engage with specific histories such as this year’s Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize winner, E.E. Curtis’s sestina “Soldier’s Wages,” that Swetnam judge Sunni Brown Wilkinson describes as “a tribute to all immigrants who let go of a homeland and are painfully re-born into a new life” and Tamisha Green’s concrete poem “The Station Children,” which uses form as another means to amplify specific threads related to place. Also included are poems that live within the perceptions and misconceptions of a single perspective such as Curtis’s “Perfection” and Wissert’s “Mis en Place.”

What an amazing and collaborative process it has been to work on the 2021 issue of *Black Rock & Sage*. Community has become especially meaningful this past year; the ability to be together has suddenly become a luxury that a year ago was simply part of life. Managing Editor Sarah Rick has been the backbone of *Black Rock & Sage*, moving things forward and keeping us organized. We have fantastic poetry and prose editors, Braeden Udy and Sammy Stenzel, and a small, smart, close-reading group of assistant editors. Much credit and appreciation goes out to our faculty advisor Professor Susan Goslee, whose energy and enthusiasm for *Black Rock & Sage* makes publishing a university creative works journal possible. We are thrilled to be part of a community brought together by a passion for the arts and an interest in sharing the creative works of ISU students.

## *BR&S Musical Performances*

1. “I can’t answer the phone right now” by Jack de Tombe (1995)

Adler Patch, alto saxophone

Sam Lai, tenor saxophone

John Siler, trumpet

Aiden Niblett, trombone

Jack de Tombe, piano

Mason Wittman, electric guitar

Amanda Smith, electric bass

Nate Gregson, drum set

Boone Hunter, percussion

Recorded by Conner Gordon Coutts and Brenden Cellan

Mixed and Mastered by Clinton Patterson\*

2. “Human Vibes” by Jesse Malloy (1998)

Claire Smedley, vocals

Jesse Malloy, vocals and electric guitar

Mason Wittman, electric guitar

Jack de Tombe, piano

Jonathan Armstrong, electric bass

Joseph Emmanuel, drum set and electric drum set

Recorded by Brenden Cellan and Adam Redd

Mixed and Mastered by Jonathan Armstrong

3. “Quartet in F Major, I. Allegro Moderato - Très doux” by

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Ryan Tomlinson, saxophones

Recorded and Mixed by Ryan Tomlinson

4 “Unknown Caller” by Orla O’Connor (1998)

Orla O’Connor, voice and piano

Jesse Malloy, electric guitar

Jonathan Armstrong, acoustic bass

Joseph Emmauel, drum set

Recorded by Nick Thompson and Claire Smedley

Mixed and Mastered by Clinton Patterson\*

5. “Gigue from Bach Suite IV in Eb Major, BWV 1010” by

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Jerrel Martin, cello

Recorded by Jack de Tombe and Claire Smedley

Mixed and Mastered by Jonathan Armstrong

6. “Parking Violation” by Mal Layne (2000)

Eddie Ludema, trumpet

Mal Layne, trombone

Gabiel Lowman, electric keyboard

Jesse Malloy, electric guitar

Jonathan Armstrong, electric bass

Joseph Emmanuel, drum set

Recorded by Bill Stanton

Mixed and Mastered by Jonathan Armstrong

7. “These Days” by Claire Smedley (2001)

Claire Smedley, voice and piano

Nick Thompson, guitar

Recorded by Conner Gordon Coutts and Nick Thompson

Mixed and Mastered by Clinton Patterson\*

8. “Impossibility Reduced to Bricks” by Gabriel Lowman  
(1998)

Gabriel Lowman, piano and electric keyboards

Jonathan Armstrong, electric bass

Joseph Emmanuel, drum set

Recorded by Adam Redd and Jack de Tombe

Mixed and Mastered by Jonathan Armstrong

9. “String Quartet No. 8, Op. 110a” by Dmitri Shostakovich  
(1906-1975)

Bohan Hou, violin

Natalie Cohen, violin

Lydia Ring, viola

Jerrel Martin, cello

Recorded by Jack de Tombe and Orla O’Connor

Mixed and Mastered by Jonathan Armstrong

10. “Mozart Violin Concerto No. 3” by Wolfgang Amadeus  
Mozart (1756-1791)

Maggie Price, violin

Taylor Kneip, piano

Recorded, Mixed, and Mastered by Jonathan Armstrong

11. “Face To Face With God” by Conner Gordon Coutts (1999)  
and Seancey Richard Nelson (1997)

Conner Gordon Coutts, vocals

Recorded by Brenden Cellan and Nick Thompson

Mixed by Conner Gordon Coutts and Jonathan Armstrong

Mastered by Jonathan Armstrong



12. “Clockwise” by Adam Redd (2001)

Jonathan Armstrong, tenor saxophone

Sebastian Doren, trumpet

Eddie Ludema, flugel horn

Mal Layne, trombone

Adam Redd, piano

Jesse Malloy, electric guitar

James Breker, acoustic bass

Joseph Emmanuel, drum set

Recorded by Claire Smedley and Conner Gordon Coutts

Mixed and Mastered by Jonathan Armstrong

A link to these performances can be found at  
[blackrockandsage.org](http://blackrockandsage.org)

\*Clinton Patterson is an acclaimed Los Angeles-based music producer and recording engineer. His participation in the post production of select tracks for *Black Rock & Sage* is on behalf of a 2020-2021 grant from the ISU Cultural Events Committee.



Idaho State  
University

# TO THINE OWN ANDROID BE TRUE

ORIGINAL RADIO PLAY



May 6

5:30 PM

Youtube Premiere

Link available at [blackrockandsage.org](http://blackrockandsage.org)  
and on Instagram @brs\_isujournal

BR  
&S

## *Special Feature*

### Introduction:

#### *To Thine Own Android Be True*

To honor ISU's smart health precautions to reduce the spread of COVID in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, *Black Rock & Sage* did not organize or co-sponsor Write-a-Thons, Visiting Writers, One-Day Writing Workshops, or fantabulous Launch Parties.

We wanted, though, to continue our tradition of championing student arts and bringing students together on our primarily commuter campus. What might provide a pandemic-appropriate shared endeavor?

We decided on a radio play; we thought we'd just whip one up. And preposterously—thanks to the talent and generous volunteer time of a number of individuals—we did!

English major Joshua Lemrick wrote in under a week an original script for *To Thine Own Android Be True* with editorial assistance from Poetry Editor Braeden Udy. Managing Editor Sarah Rick convinced several individuals in our host department, English and Philosophy, that a fun weekend activity would be to study, rehearse, and record the play. She coordinated many full schedules to make that happen.

The following undergraduate and graduate students, and our Chair Jessica Winston (Woo!) starred as our amazing voice actors in our original cast recording via Zoom—

<b>Voice Actor</b>	<b>Role</b>
Caleb Greenwell	Bart
Garrett Heggenstaller	MAC
Cameron Sedlacek	Dalton Hedge
Heather Summers	Becky
Jackie Sutherland	Bertha / Actor
Jessica Winston	Bailey

Director of Jazz Studies Professor Jonathan Armstrong kindly and patiently explained the importance of mixing audio tracks to us. Music student Joseph Emmanuel graciously stepped forward to do the mixing.

On May 6, 2021 at 5:30 PM, we premiered the radio play on the College of Arts & Letters YouTube channel to great acclaim. Viewers chatted and cheered. A permanent link to the radio play is at [blackrockandsage.org](https://blackrockandsage.org).

*Black Rock & Sage* will find a way to salute the arts and celebrate our arts communities every semester, in every circumstance.

We would like to thank all those who helped make this happen, and we are delighted to publish *To Thine Own Android Be True* as a 2021 Special Feature.

—Susan Goslee, Faculty Advisor

*Joshua Lemrick*

## To Thine Own Android Be True

*Tone: Classic Noir detective setting. Maybe light saxophone behind narration.*

DALTON HEDGE (V.O.)

These days you can't even go outside without seeing an android. They'll serve you hot dogs, walk your kids, or even give you a back massage. But what happens when they go rogue? What happens when androids break the law? What happens when they don't pay taxes? They call me, that's what happens. The name's Dalton. Dalton Hedge, Android Hunter.

INT. ANDROID HUNTER HEADQUARTERS - DAY

*A door opens and heavy footsteps precede a loud grunt as DALTON HEDGE sits in a chair. Phone calls can be heard in the background. Somebody flips a lighter.*

BECKY

You want a smoke?

DALTON HEDGE

Sorry, Becky, I'm only addicted to justice. What do you have for me?

*Papers drop.*

BECKY

Mark 6 android pushed an old lady down a flight of stairs and is now missing.

DALTON HEDGE

Consider it already dead.

BECKY

Hold your horses, Dalton. We need to talk about something.

DALTON HEDGE

*(Confidently)*

I know I seem like the perfect man, but you'd be unhappy with me Becky.

BECKY

It's about the hospital you burned down.

DALTON HEDGE

Oh.

BECKY

Shockingly, I have to tell you not to do stuff like that.

DALTON HEDGE

Well maybe they shouldn't have all those oxygen tanks everywhere! Bit of a safety hazard!

BECKY

I know you hate androids and I'm sorry for what happened with your wife, but you're at an eleven and I need you to come

down to a three.

DALTON HEDGE

Well Becky, you're an eleven and I like you right where you're at.

BECKY

*(After deep sigh)*

The android left a note behind. Maybe it will offer some clues. Look into it. Don't burn any hospitals down.

DALTON HEDGE

Well how else am I supposed to get your attention?

BECKY

Well right now you're just getting HR's attention, so you might wanna consider leaving.

DALTON HEDGE

*(Shuffling sounds)*

Right, right.

BECKY

And lay off the alcohol, you smell like a bar.

DALTON HEDGE (V.O.)

Ah yes, alcohol. My first love. My true partner. Sadly, a night with the bottle didn't reveal anything about the note. Whatever language it was in, I didn't speak it. But the answer had to be there. Where did that pathetic hunk of metal run? Why did

he kill the old woman? I looked at the crime scene photos for hours. I fell asleep on the snap of a bloody acorn stairlift. Then I was up bright and early at noon to meet with an expert about the note.

INT. SCHOLAR'S OFFICE - DAY

BART

Dalton, is this a joke?

DALTON HEDGE

Why are you asking me? You're the expert.

BART

You said you wanted me to translate something. This is in English.

DALTON HEDGE

So, some kind of code?

BART

Shakespeare.

DALTON HEDGE

It's a joke about Shakespeare?

BART

*(After deep sigh)*

It's just plain Shakespeare, Dalton. Didn't you graduate high school?



DALTON HEDGE

The life of crime fighting called me early.

BART

“This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow,  
as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.”  
It’s from *Hamlet*.

DALTON HEDGE

Ah ha!

*(Pause)*

I don’t get it.

BART

It means what it says. It sounds like your android has  
experienced quite the epiphany.

DALTON HEDGE

But could it tell us where he’s gone?

BART

The 2026 Shakespeare Festival is in town. You could start  
there.

DALTON HEDGE

To be or not to be, eh?

BART

Uh, yeah sure. Hey, Dalton, can I ask a personal question?

DALTON HEDGE

*(Butchered pronunciation)*

Et tu, Brute?

BART

*(Quick sigh)*

Are you doing alright? I had no idea about what happened to your wife. I heard about it. I used to jest about your hatred for androids, but I didn't know one of them killed her.

DALTON HEDGE

Killed her? Who told you that?

BART

I don't remember.

DALTON HEDGE

No, she left me. She ran off with an android.

*(Awkward pause)*

I just came home one day and I thought the dryer was going, but it was coming from the bedroom.

BART

Forget I said anything. Please.

DALTON HEDGE

I had to move out because I kept finding bolts in the carpet.

BART

*(Papers being gathered)*

Okay Dalton, great talk. I have a ton of work to do.

DALTON HEDGE

I know it's horrible. I don't like talking about my past but if you have a few hours...

BART

Incredibly busy. The code for the door is Beowulf with a capital B, so feel free to let yourself out.

DALTON HEDGE

Right, right. Ha, fun code.

BART

2026 Shakespeare Festival. Give it a go. Beowulf. Capital B.

DALTON HEDGE (V.O.)

Shakespeare sure had his way with tragedies. And there I was, picking up the pieces of a different kind of tragedy. But it wasn't before a king or a throne. It was before an acorn stairlift. I needed answers, so I had the idea to check the Shakespeare Festival and see if I could get some stage directions to the android's whereabouts.

INT. SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL - DAY

*Lots of distant chattering and footsteps. Busy stageroom.*

BERTHA

...Okay we need that over there, thanks girls.

DALTON HEDGE

*(Footsteps)*

Looks like you're the person I need to talk to. Are you Bertha?

BERTHA

Who are you?

DALTON HEDGE

Dalton Hedge, Android Hunter.

BERTHA

Uh, okay. You can walk with me, I guess.

DALTON HEDGE

You seen any androids lately? Maybe a Mark 6 who loves confusing stage poetry?

BERTHA

People bring their androids to shows all the time.

*(Changes to excited tone as they pass some people)*

Peter, that looks great!

DALTON HEDGE

See any androids by themselves?

*(Faint growl)*

AHH!

BERTHA

Jamie, that zombie makeup is fantastic! Sorry, we're really exploring the modern twists on Shakespeare. Right now this is all for *A Midsummer Night's Zombie Apocalypse*.

DALTON HEDGE

Well? Have you seen any androids come here alone?

BERTHA

*(Sigh and pause)*

Yeah.

DALTON HEDGE

When?

BERTHA

He comes in for every showing and sits in the back. I only know because security has asked him multiple times not to recite lines aloud along with the actors. He didn't seem interested in our zombie projects, though, which is kind of insulting.

DALTON HEDGE

When's your next normal Shakespeare play?

BERTHA

Oh, we just switched to a more modern schedule. Classic performances won't start again until next year.

DALTON HEDGE

Well, can you go back?

BERTHA

The zombies are our way of speaking out, officer. These zombies are our voice and our footprint on modern art!

DALTON HEDGE

And you can go back to *Romeo and Juliet Strike Back* when I get my android. Is it really that hard to change production at the last second?

BERTHA

Well, I know a better way to get him. I know where he works.

DALTON HEDGE

Where he works? Androids can't have jobs! They're an insurance nightmare!

BERTHA

Yeah, I've seen him at the McHermanos across the street. He's just working there like anyone else.

DALTON HEDGE (V.O.)

Shakespeare? A job? The only thing juicier than a McHermanos' chicken tender was the story behind this lunatic of an android. So I walked across the street. The smell of grease was thick enough to see, and I was ready to grease the employees for the truth.

INT. MCHERMANOS FAST FOOD - DAY

*Busy. Voices and footsteps. Maybe sizzling fry cookers in the background.*

BAILEY

*(Somber)*

Welcome to McHermanos where our hearts and chicken are tender. What can I get you?

DALTON HEDGE

I'll take a number two and a hefty side of answers.

BAILEY

What?

DALTON HEDGE

Any androids work here?

BAILEY

My manager says to tell anyone who asks that "no."

DALTON HEDGE

Well, what about law enforcement? Dalton Hedge, Android Hunter.

BAILEY

Are you talking about Mac?

DALTON HEDGE

Mac?

BAILEY

Yeah. It's short for Macbeth, I think. Or it's just Mac.

ACTOR

*(Butting in)*

Hey, you can't say that name out loud! Not with a theatre across the road! I think you meant the Scottish play...

DALTON HEDGE

*(Confused by stranger, before turning attention to Bailey)*

Okay...where is Mac?

ACTOR

And could you hurry up? My break is over soon.

DALTON HEDGE

I just want the android!

BAILEY

Have you ever thought about how they came up with the short versions of names? Or like how ones like Jacob change their spelling when they're shortened?

DALTON HEDGE

Where is the android?

BAILEY

Or how some names really don't have short versions? Like, what's the nickname for Dalton?



DALTON HEDGE

That's a good question, I don't know.

BAILEY

Exactly, see?

DALTON HEDGE

This wouldn't be a ploy to distract me while "Mac" runs off, is it?

BAILEY

Yeah, it is.

DALTON HEDGE

He wouldn't be going out the back, would he?

BAILEY

Yeah, he is.

DALTON HEDGE

Right, right. Everybody out of my way!

*(Immediate running sounds and possibly stuff dropping as Dalton bolts)*

DALTON HEDGE (V.O.)

Androids only run if they're guilty. They always think the stage is bigger than it is. Soon, though, I meet 'em at the stairs. And people at the gym make fun of me for my extreme cardio. It's so I can run faster than crime. My breathing was perfect. Like a radiant, cardio-enhanced seagull.

EXT. ROOFTOPS - EVENING

*Distant car noises. Maybe wind. Dalton's running footsteps.*

DALTON HEDGE (V.O.)

He was fast, but not fast enough. I lost sight of him for a bit, but cornered him on a rooftop. It started to rain, but that didn't stop me. He had given up. He was just sitting on the edge, looking down at his hands. He still had his apron on.

DALTON HEDGE

*(Completely and utterly out of breath)*

Freeze! Don't move!

MAC

*(Robotic voice)*

I am motionless.

DALTON HEDGE

*(Heavy breathing and footsteps)*

Don't try anything!

*It begins to rain. It patters against the android's metal frame. There is no thunder, just rainfall. It is almost peaceful.*

DALTON HEDGE (V.O.)

I don't know why I sat down with him. Sure, I was out of breath, but that wasn't it. I think I was a different kind of tired. And so was he.

MAC

Are you going to terminate me?

DALTON HEDGE

*(Still a little out of breath)*

It's my job.

MAC

This is acceptable. I dislike flipping burgers.

DALTON HEDGE

Murdering androids can't be left on the street. I'm here to shut you down, buddy.

MAC

I did not want her to be hurt. I tried to help her.

DALTON HEDGE

What are you talking about?

MAC

She would listen to my poetry. I was reciting a piece and she forgot to buckle herself into her stairlift. Now I have no one to listen.

*There is a short silence. Just raindrops.*

MAC

Well? Are you going to complete your programming?

DALTON HEDGE

In a minute.

MAC

I would very much like to verbalize my most recent piece, even if just the pigeons listen.

DALTON HEDGE

Go ahead. I got time.

MAC

The floor is cold as metal / the rail leads to your body / I miss your circuits / The whirr of your words / I wish I could fix you / Pop the dent out of your head / Perhaps you have warranty information / Is there a number I can call? / Can I take you to the shop? / What wrench fits humans? / I have no manual for you / Who else will entitle me “dear”? / But now I know your parts are different / And you cannot repair a burger.

DALTON HEDGE

It’s hard to lose a loved one. I know how you feel. I lost my wife.

MAC

Really? Tell me more.

DALTON HEDGE

*(Voice fading out)*

Well, it all started one day when I came home and thought the dryer was going...

DALTON HEDGE (V.O.)

I didn't kill him. I didn't see all the cards until then. There was a rook hiding in the corner the whole time. I was all in on a bad hand. By the time the curtains closed that night, I forgot the weight of the badge in my pocket. There was no dramatic encore or applause. Just the rain and the android who smelled like chicken tenders.

## Bears

Dorothy was on the edge. She looked at her boots and kicked round, leery stones into the ravine. Usually, she would have taken time to admire the way the sun was just visible over the mountains and filling the woods with a red glare, but her mind was occupied. The scenery didn't catch her attention, but for a moment, she thought she caught her reflection in the water of a stream hundreds of feet below: small.

"It's too early for this, Olivia," the psychic on the phone used the name Dorothy had given her.

"Please. It's serious."

There was a sigh instead of an answer, then nothing.

"You there?"

"Of course, honey. What happened?"

Dorothy knew the psychic was annoyed. The words said one thing, while the tone said, "Go to hell." But it was important, and Dorothy had no one else to call.

"Phillip killed someone," Dorothy said. The air grabbed onto her words and carried them. She imagined them resting in the fog of the evening, soaking into the mud on the ground, finding themselves at the entrance to the lodge down the trail. They were free from her mouth and he would know.

Maybe he could hear her now? With a quick turn, she checked over her shoulder, but the trail she had climbed led into empty woods.

"We've talked about this."

"I know," Dorothy continued. "But he's collecting hair in jars. Long and—"

"You know I would do anything for you," the psychic said.

"I promise you I used a good swan. She was pretty, with a yellow nose."

"You mean beak?" Dorothy kicked another rock. It didn't fall to the bottom of the ravine but tumbled down only a foot or two before getting stuck.

"No. Nose. Anyway, she was beautiful, and her liver told me that your husband is not a murderer."

Dorothy tried to argue, but the psychic cut her off, "You've even said yourself how gentle he is."

Telling people that he was a gentle person was something she had done often. Phillip didn't present himself that way to those he didn't know. "So, he's not a killer?"

"Of course not."

The words were stated so matter-of-factly that they could be true. It would be easy to believe if she allowed herself. She sifted through thoughts and rocks until she spoke again. "I found a sheet buried in our yard yesterday. Why would he do that?"

"A sheet?" the psychic questioned. "Was there blood on it?"

"There was mud on it."

"But not blood?"

Dorothy hesitated. After she had pulled the corner of the teal sheet from the dirt, she had buried it again. If he had seen her, how would he react? Would he take her to the forest and kill her? "I don't remember."

The psychic forced silence for a moment then spoke again. "Look Olivia, it's the middle of the night here. Call me back tomorrow, and we can talk about the sheet if it's really such a big deal. I'll even do another tarot reading, but right now—"

"He brought me to a bed and breakfast in the middle

of nowhere,” Dorothy interrupted. “He said he wanted to do something romantic and spontaneous, but I think we’re running away. Or maybe he’s planning on killing me.”

“Wait, Olivia, remember I read for you last month that there would be an increase of romance in your future.”

Dorothy paced along the edge and agreed that she might have said that.

“Don’t think about it anymore. Get some rest.”

“Okay.”

The psychic hung up while Dorothy took some time to pull her phone from her face and press the end button. She would have to go back to the lodge where Phillip was. There was nothing else she could do but walk into whatever waited for her.

She sighed and started back, but on her first step the stones spilled from under her. The breath left her body as she fell. Reaching out her hands for something dry to grab onto and driving her toes into the mud, she stopped herself from sliding backward into the ravine.

The entire front of her was covered in mud and her hands shook as they gripped dead weeds. Still, she pulled herself up and kept walking.

When she got back to the lodge, she entered through a cedar door that creaked as it opened. The owner of the bed and breakfast looked at her from the front desk. She wore a large, frayed hat. Though she looked to be in her fifties, her light hair, clothing, and way of moving made her seem much older. Dorothy had met her when she first arrived. The woman had said her name and though Dorothy couldn’t remember for sure what it was, she thought Ellen sounded familiar.



Ellen had mentioned that she took care of the bed and breakfast alone, but she looked like she would break just by moving.

“You were right,” Dorothy said. “I got reception up there.”

When she looked closer at Ellen, Dorothy realized her face nearly blended in with her pale hair. She stood stiffly, and Dorothy worried that she would shatter.

“Are you okay?” Dorothy asked her.

Ellen sat behind the wooden desk and blinked, until finally speaking, “Your husband has already gone to your room. Number four.”

Dorothy nodded and headed down the hallway. When she was almost out of sight from the front desk, she heard the sharp ring of the service bell. She turned back, and Ellen’s hand was resting on top of the bell. She was staring at her. The bell rang again. A third time.

Dorothy met her eyes before turning the corner and rushing away. The door to the room was open slightly, so she didn’t have to knock to get in. She closed it behind her, locked it, and leaned back.

Phillip had been asleep, but he woke when the door slammed. “What happened?” he slurred.

She didn’t answer. He got up from the bed and led her to sit on it. “I’ll get you some tea,” he offered.

She grabbed his wrist and stopped him. “It’s alright. It’s nothing.”

He wavered then nodded and laid back down.

Dorothy crawled under the comforter, smearing the sheets with mud. The teal color was familiar. She tucked the corner under her as if she were burying it in the yard again and put her hands over her face.

“Are you sure you’re fine?” Phillip asked.

“She said I need rest.”

When she woke up, she wore one of Phillip’s t-shirts. The blanket was damp but not mud-soaked. Phillip wasn’t in the room.

Shutting her eyes again, she imagined him taking care of her. In her mind, he was careful as he tried not to wake her. When he put the shirt around her neck, she tensed up, but he didn’t tighten his hold at all.

She got up and made her way to the suitcase that Phillip had brought in the night before. Her possessions were tucked where she left them, and she relaxed at the idea that he hadn’t gone through the bag.

After dressing, she left the room and went to the lounge area. Ellen was sitting at one of the tables alone.

“Hello,” Dorothy greeted cautiously. Would the woman mention the night before? Would she act the same way?

Ellen looked up and smiled. “Good morning,” she laughed.

Dorothy made her way to a nearby table and sat down. “I’m not an early riser,” she said sheepishly.

“True.” Ellen clapped her hands and took off towards the back room. “It’s not too late for breakfast, though. How about a bagel?”

“Thank you,” Dorothy said to her as she left the dining room. Ignoring what happened the night before was strange and a relief.

While waiting, Dorothy shifted in her seat and tried to count how many bears were in the décor. There was metalwork, a photo with four cubs in it, a wood carving sat

next to the fireplace, and a bearskin rug hung on the wall near her face.

She lifted her hand and felt its teeth and then put her fingers into the thick fur. The fur could almost absorb her whole arm. Its eyes must be marbles, but they were glazed over like a dead animal. Then, she must have been looking at them too long because they shifted and looked back at her.

Dorothy jumped.

It turned its massive head slowly to face her as if confused about what she was doing so close to it.

"I keep telling my kids to quit buying me bears. So many damn bears. Now they just do it to annoy me." She hadn't noticed Ellen had come back to sit by her.

The bear went back to hanging with its head down.

"Do you have children?"

The bear was still. Its eyes were plastic, like the ones in a stuffed animal. Dorothy thought back to when the eyes were real, when the bear was freshly dead, when it was skinned. The eyes would have been left behind then, right?

"Do you have children?" Ellen asked again, acting as if she hadn't seen the bear move.

Dorothy was tired, that was all. Another moment went by before she answered. "No, Phillip can't," she stopped.

Ellen patted her shoulder, but physical affection from a stranger added to her discomfort. "There are other ways, though."

Dorothy tried to speak, but her lips felt rubbery. Finally, she forced out a reply. "It's not that," she continued. "He's not father material."

Ellen put her hand on Dorothy's, and she tried not to pull it away. "Right, but there are other ways."

Dorothy didn't want to be having this conversation. She didn't know if she would live through the weekend so planning a future with children was pointless. Of the things she was concerned about, this was low on the list.

"Actually, we're not really parent material."

"Why not?"

Dorothy thought about the words at the door that were still waiting to be let inside. That's what she should be talking about.

"He's going to kill me," she almost said. But she didn't. She didn't say anything.

The woman was still too close to Dorothy. She turned her head and her hat blocked them in, creating a small space of privacy. "If he's done anything to hurt you, you can tell me. That's not your fault, you know."

"No!" Dorothy snapped. She must have let on more than she meant to and now that the question was nearly on Ellen's lips, Dorothy had to protect him. "He wouldn't."

"I've seen men like him before," Ellen went on. "He's so cold. Like there's a part of him missing inside."

Dorothy knew what she was talking about. There was this feeling. Maybe he was carrying death with him while he was still walking. He wasn't exactly cold like Ellen suggested, but there was the hair, and the sheet, and a feeling she had when lying next to him that was like being in a morgue next to a stranger who's in the same predicament. Familiar. Comforting. Terrifying.

"He's not like that with me," Dorothy said.

Ellen was trying to make eye contact, to tell her something, but Dorothy looked away and cleared her throat.

"Thank you for breakfast." Ellen didn't reply, and Dorothy

went back to her room.

She went to her suitcase and grabbed a jar she had wrapped in one of her dresses. She removed the cloth carefully and observed the contents. Long and brown, the incense sticks almost looked like hair.

When Phillip got back, Dorothy was sitting on the window sill over the heater. The window and curtains were open, but it was dark outside and the lights were off, so they were both silhouettes to each other.

“Hey, Dot.”

“Where have you been?” The quiet of the room made them whisper.

“I went for a hike.”

“How was it?” she asked.

“It was nice.” He walked over to her and grabbed her face, kissing her forehead.

“Did you dig something up?” She looked at his arms that were covered in mud to the elbow.

Phillip laughed, “No, I’m just clumsy like my wife.” He stepped back. “You’re rubbing off on me.”

“You’re rubbing off on me.” Dorothy smiled and brushed off the mud he had smeared on her face. He laughed and apologized.

Phillip went to the bathroom, and Dorothy listened to the sounds of the running water of the sink.

“The lady out front asked if I could smell something burning,” he hollered.

“What did you say?”

He looked at her from the bathroom and smiled like they had their own secret. “I lied.”

“You’re good at that.” It was a line spoken without a thought.

He approached her again and frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She looked for the words, but her tongue went dry. What would happen to her if she said the wrong thing? Would he leave her body there? In the woods? And there were the bears. The hundreds of bears that would walk by to take a bite from it. What then? Would she turn her head to look at them too?

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” she said.

He looked like he was going to argue further but Dorothy cut him off. “I was burning incense because of the bears.” She wanted to change the subject quickly, so she talked about what had been on her mind.

Phillip hesitated before sighing and sitting on the bed. “What bears?”

“The bear rug downstairs. It turned its head and looked at me.”

“It looked at you?”

Dorothy couldn’t tell from his tone if he believed her or thought she was crazy.

“Do you think that’s possible?” she went on, “that it could have been dead and looked at me anyway?”

He must have seen that she was serious, or maybe he just felt bad for her. He reached out his hand and pulled her from the window to the bed. She landed trapped in his hold.

“Sure it is.”

Dorothy thought to herself that she did love this man. He didn’t believe her, but he was going along with the idea anyway. It was the only thing anyone had said to her in days that made her feel sane. When he held her, she leaned into him.

“Is it possible, that you can be like this and still be a murderer?”

Phillip’s face fell. He went to say something. Stopped. Started again. “What are you talking about?”

“The hair.”

“What hair?”

Dorothy wanted the answer, but she was also curious to see how the conversation would play out. “The jars of hair you’re collecting. And the sheet buried in the yard.”

He sat up straighter and grabbed her arms, holding her still. “Listen. That’s your hair. It’s not what you think.” His voice was begging, but he was towering over her on the bed, and he was large.

His grip had gone from comforting to terrifying in a breath. She had to be right, or he wouldn’t be getting so defensive.

“Don’t kill me.” She decided on the words and said them before she had time to stop herself.

His hands loosened and she slipped slightly. If he let go of her completely, she would fall off the bed.

“I would never kill you, Dot. I would never kill anyone.”

Dorothy wasn’t listening to his words. She was looking at his eyes. In the dark, they were a glimmering green, a light of their own—like an animal in the woods.

“Where are we?” Phillip asked. His eyes were focusing and refocusing as if they couldn’t see her.

“What do you mean?” Dorothy asked.

“Where are you, Dot?” He was yelling now. His panic was making them both imbalanced and Dorothy was worried they would fall.

“I’m in a hotel room!”

“Where am I?” he whispered.

“You’re sitting on the bed.”

“No,” he breathed. “I’m on the edge of a cliff, I think.”

Dorothy’s first thought was that her accusations made him lose touch with reality, but that didn’t seem right. She grabbed his face and tried to make him see her. “You’re not. You’re here with me. Sitting on the bed.”

Dorothy tried to push his weight towards the middle of the bed, but he wouldn’t move.

Someone—it had to be Ellen—started knocking at the door. Dorothy jumped, but Phillip acted as if he hadn’t heard it.

“Let’s get the door, okay?” Dorothy suggested gently.

He finally saw her. He shook his head and then purposefully let go of her arms. Startled, Dorothy fell back and reached out her arms to grab onto his neck, making them both fall. She yelled in surprise as they hit the ground. It wasn’t painful as much as it was shocking.

When she turned to look at Phillip, he was face down. Blood was pooling under his body. There was more blood than there should have been. She jumped to her knees and grabbed him. Feeling his ribs shattered under his skin and breaking more as she moved him, she tried to understand what had happened. He wasn’t breathing. His face was contorted as if he landed on it from hundreds of feet.

Dorothy screamed and looked away, then looked back and screamed again. On her third scream, the door opened, and Ellen rushed into the room, pulling her back away from Phillip.

Dorothy refused to stand on her own. She was watching his face and waiting for him to turn and look at her.



*Mason Wissert*

## Mise en Place

Knives that could be sharpened  
and counters with cigarette burns  
from nights when we could barely  
call ourselves friends. Chickens  
and crock pots and Barbacoa tacos  
on Tuesdays when everyone comes over.  
Whiskey Rebellions then too.  
Where I cook cube steaks and onions  
and baked potatoes,  
'cause they're your favorite.  
Crying, I wish the landlord  
would cut a hole in the ceiling  
for the smoke to escape.  
Chickpeas and quinoa  
when we're trying  
to take better care of ourselves.  
The moistest yellow cake  
with chocolate frosting  
and it's not even your birthday.  
Cowboy cookies until  
you can't anymore  
'cause you're worried  
you're getting too fat.  
Thank you for meticulously  
doing the dishes.  
My cashmere sweater  
smells like tobacco

like when you scoop me  
from behind while I scrub the sink.  
A tea cloth crimsons  
when you slice your pinkie  
but don't worry,  
I know a trick for that.

*E.E. Curtis*

## Tights Aren't Pants

One-woman play

*So my daughter is riding her bike. And she gets to the part that some guy driving by threw something at her I start to get alarmed. It was a drive-by quarter throwing!*

*Some guy threw coins at you?! Like a lousy stripper tipper? Like you asked him for anything? I want to go back to yesterday, smash the hood of his car in with a bat that I've conveniently got with me.*

I tell him as we drive to get him home. We've been on the road since it was too early to even think about breakfast. He's told me about what he's growing and smoking. We talked about his son for the first time in years. His chickens. He's just explained his philosophy on dog-rearing, right at the exit that takes us downtown.

We pull to a stop at the tracks. We wait for a graffitied train to pass.

*"Tights aren't pants," he says.*

*What?*

*Tights aren't pants.*

*Oh please—not the tights aren't pants thing.*

*You should only show what you're willing to have a stranger touch.*

*What the—*

*It's like I'm walking around with Pinkie and seeing these little twelve-year-old girls in shorts that show the bottom of their cheeks hanging out. What are their dads thinking?*

*Ok, I get that but—*

*When I wear a tank top I have to be ready for dudes to hit on me.*

*(He tends to get hit on by men a lot).*

*Guys I already put in their place. Man I'm not interested! You know that. But I show up in a tank and it's like they forget. They see skin and they forget. We see skin and we forget.*

*That's like saying a woman is responsible for her rape because she was wearing a skirt.*

*Well.*

*The lady in the car next to us must see us, two grown-ups yelling, gesticulating. A spectacle on mute airing live beside her.*

*And that whole thing about only showing what you're willing to have someone touch. That's BS. I've been cat-called, hit on, ogled when I was fully dressed.*

He starts to interrupt.

*NO! I was wearing a freaking puffy coat and sweats. My head was even covered. So you can't tell me—*

*That's different. That's creeps. They don't care what you're wearing.*

The tail of the train passes us and the crossing gates lift.  
Bump, front tires cross. Bump, back tires.

We stand next to the car. Now we're two people saying goodbye. He has time to smoke one last cigarette. I have time to kiss him, quick on the cheek. I watch until he steps into the bus.

*\*\*\*For a live performance, the actress should be wearing leggings.*

## Tailsman

“You’re Alan Suresh?”

“Most unfortunately,” he replied.

The nurse looked slightly uncomfortable.

“Could I see your ID please?”

“What, I don’t look like my drunk nephew?” he muttered but pulled out his wallet.

It was quiet outside the hospital at four in the morning, but inside, it seemed a separate world. The doctors and nurses were too awake for the black sky outside, and Suresh felt the need to squint at the bright sheen they seem to reflect off their crisp white coats.

He certainly needed to squint, though, when they brought him to the patient lying in the hospital bed.

It wasn’t his lanky nephew with brown skin and all angles. It was a very white man, slightly pudgy, and this physique seemingly held together by the blankets wrapped around him.

“Who is this?” Suresh demanded.

“You don’t know him?” the nurse asked slowly.

Suresh folded his arms, glaring at the nurse.

“We aren’t sure who he is either. We were hoping you could tell us. He won’t speak, but we did find a scrap of paper in his jeans pocket with your name on it. We assumed that you were his, um, next of kin?” But her sentence ended in a question as her eyes darted between Suresh and the pale, pudgy man.

“I don’t know who this man is,” Suresh said firmly.

“Excuse me for a moment,” the nurse said.

And Suresh was alone in the claustrophobic hospital room, the fluorescent tube lights leeching all the color from his own skin as he felt emptier and emptier, staring at the white man that had tried to kill him the week before.

Jai had hired him. That was no secret. Jai, Priya's husband. He hired the white man only because the community had found out that Suresh was sleeping with Priya, and he was embarrassed that other people now knew. He made the obligatory attempt on Suresh's life by shouting loudly at the local market to ask if anyone wanted to make a few quick rupee and shoved the money and paper with Suresh's name and address on it at the first person who approached him.

"Kill the bastard," he said and considered his honor debt paid.

The man had tried to beat him to death with a glass bottle, but when the glass broke, and the man cut his own hand, he just stood there, dumbfounded, as he watched the blood snake down his hairy arm. Suresh had simply kicked him two or three times in the balls, slapped him upside the head for good measure, and walked away. Priya was waiting for him, after all.

Suresh lived in a tiny apartment on the fourth floor so he had to haul the man's ass up four flights of stairs that night. He dropped the receipt for the hospital bill somewhere on the second flight of concrete steps and realized this on the third floor, so he left the man propped in the corner of the stairs and doubled back to tuck the receipt in his front pocket.

Suresh delivered lunch boxes, and by the time the failed assassin was laid on a pile of cushions in the corner of his room, he was due to begin his route picking them up for delivery. He knocked on a door on the second floor, and Priya

calmly handed him a collapsible three-tiered metal lunch box. Suresh placed it carefully in a wooden crate, empty for now.

“Jahyin has three new gold rings,” she said. “One has a jade in it too. She claims it’s some high-quality thing from China.”

“I have a guest in my apartment,” Suresh replied.

“Oh?” Priya said. “That’s nice. Jahyin says that the jade is supposed to suck all the bad luck from her body and bring her health. I don’t suppose you could buy me one?”

“You should ask Jai about things like that. I need you to watch my guest, make sure he doesn’t rob me.”

Priya placed a hand on her hip, her fist gathering a fistful of fabric from her apron. “You always tell me to ask Jai, but I see you buy your cigarettes. You could go without them for a while and buy me a jade ring for that amount. It doesn’t have to be from China.”

But Suresh hefted the crate box onto his shoulder and left. Priya would have the keys to his apartment.

When Suresh arrived at the school where Jai worked, he handed him the receipt for the hospital bill along with the hot lunch box.

Jai squinted as he read the printed receipt.

“You don’t look injured.”

“It’s not for me. It’s for that man you hired last week.”

“The plumber?”

“No, the pudgy man.”

“The butcher?”

“What did you hire a butcher for? No, that pudgy man who tried to kill me with a bottle.”

Jai nodded. “Ah yes, that one. What about him?”

“Well, I got a call to pick him up from the hospital, and I



went because I thought my nephew was drunk again, but the hospital made me take this man home instead.”

Jai glanced at the receipt again.

“I don’t have this kind of money. What happened to him to need such expensive medical help?”

“Well, I did kick him a few times.”

“Mmm...” Jai returned to his lunch as if the matter had been resolved.

Suresh cleared his throat.

“Need I remind you that I would not have needed to attack the man if someone hadn’t hired him to kill me?” Suresh said.

“Need I remind you that I would not have taken such measures if someone had been more discreet with my wife?” Jai said, not looking up from his lunch.

“I didn’t breathe a word. Priya was the one who told those gossip market ladies, and surely you wouldn’t leave the man to rot,” Suresh said.

“You know what my measly wage is as a lunchbox delivery man.”

Jai sighed.

• • •

What was one to do with an unconscious person lying in the corner of the room? Priya wondered. She called the hospital to find out exactly what kind of care he would need, but it seemed that he was mostly dehydrated and had passed out from heatstroke.

So she brought him water, a bowl of rice, and some naan bread. She was saving the meat for dinner later that week.

The man accepted the food gratefully, scarfing it down without chewing. He ate messily but took care to pick each grain of fallen rice off of the cushions and his pants.

"Do you know who I am?" Priya asked him haughtily.

The man looked at her dumbly.

"I am the wife of the man that hired you to kill Suresh," she declared. "It was an act of revenge, as I had seduced Suresh to lie with me." She folded her arms, straightening her back and thrusting out her chest as regally as she could.

The man just handed her the bowl and pointed to its empty depths.

"Mute and greedy," Priya murmured. "Such is my plight, to be surrounded by ugly, unintelligent men that can provide me nothing. When I was growing up, my uncle used to tell me I could be the wife of a Prime Minister, you know? I was pretty enough to be one."

The man still held the bowl out, but she ignored it and settled onto the floor next to him.

"I would have married rich, I tell you, if my slimy uncle hadn't touched me when I was 14. Mother tried to keep it a secret, but no one wanted to marry a girl who wasn't a virgin, so Jai was the best I got. Did you know he is the same age as my grandfather?"

The man seemed to realize that he wouldn't be getting more rice and laid the bowl on the ground, setting it down carefully as if it were an item of worship.

"I haven't seen my family for years. I don't have friends because I don't have children, and all the women my age have children, and they don't seem to know what to talk about if I don't have children. What am I—a woman—to do all day without children or family to care for? I cook and clean, but our room is so small there is only so much to do. Maybe I could audition to be a movie star."

Priya sighed.

“Have you seen some of the ridiculous movies they’ve released? I could probably act better than some of those women. I practice some of the lines when I’m alone, and I can hear the heartbreak in my own voice so much more clearly than on those moving pictures. You know what it is that they have that I don’t have? Luck. That’s what it comes down to. They get lucky. Heaven knows I’m not lucky.”

“Water,” the man said in English.

Priya took the bowl from the ground and stood.

“Oh, why do I bother. It’s not like you can understand me,” she said.

She returned with a pitcher of water and a small cup, the kind for taking shots. She sat with the man until Suresh returned.

“Did he take anything?” Suresh asked, dropping his crates by the door.

“No, he just sat here.” Priya stood.

“Jai says he will be home late. He’s going to the hospital to see if he can talk the bill down. We’re splitting it fifty-fifty. I said that he should pay two portions out of three since you started this damn mess.”

“I’m out of oil for my hair,” Priya said. “Can you get me some more? I like the ones scented with lavender.”

“It’s so expensive with you women,” Suresh said, flopping down on his bed. “Every time I see you, it’s something to buy.”

“If you can’t afford the lavender scented one, just get me the cheapest for now.”

“Do you have dinner ready?” Suresh asked. “I’m too damn tired to cook after arguing with your husband, so the least you could do is make me something to eat.”

Priya shook her head, stepping beyond the door.

"If you can't afford the regular size bottles, a small one will do," she said as she closes the door behind her.

• • •

The man did speak Hindi, after all. She learned he was traveling to New Zealand and had a layover in Hyderabad, but the flights were all canceled when a dust storm rendered the skies too dangerous to fly.

"At the airport," he told Priya on the fifth day at Suresh's apartment. "I went out to buy some new clothes, and I got lost. I ended up mugged in the night and lost my wallet. That's how I did it, you know, trying to kill Suresh. I imagined that Suresh was the man who mugged me, and it became remarkably easy to swing that bottle. I mean, I could've just taken the money, but I thought that I might as well be honest in a new country and carry out what I said I'd do."

"When will you leave?" Priya asked. "You can't stay here forever. I can't feed you on charity for free. We're already paying your hospital bill."

"When I feel strong enough. I'm also waiting for my wife to send me some money. It's supposed to be wired through the embassy or whatever, but isn't that a while from here?"

"Two days by train," Priya answered.

"Right. And I don't want to faint again, so I'd better wait until I feel well enough to travel, and who knows how long that will be."

Priya pressed her lips together. She liked him less and less after he started talking. She preferred the mute version of him. Each time he opened his mouth, he seemed more menacing.

"Maybe if you had a jade talisman, like my friend Jahyin. She says it brings health and luck," Priya said.

"I don't have money until we get to the embassy, but I

guess if I had one, I could give traveling a try.”

“Buy him the damn talisman,” Jai said the next day after she told him about their conversation. “If it gets the man out of my hair, it will be money well spent.”

“Plus, he stinks up my apartment,” Suresh added.

Jai and Suresh were sitting together at the table, arguing over percentages of splitting the hospital bill.

Well, if it benefits you as well, you should pay for part of the jade trinket,” Jai says.

“It was your wife’s idea. You should pay for her silly ideas!” Suresh shouted.

“Who will travel with him?” Priya asked.

“Do you know how much such trinkets cost?” Jai said. “She showed me one such thing at the market, and I can’t imagine just paying it myself in addition to the bill here.”

“He can’t travel alone. Who will travel with him?” Priya asked, louder.

“Damn, woman!” Jai cried, slapping the table. “If you had kept your legs shut, none of us would be stuck with this fat foreigner. You take the idiot. I’m not investing anything more into this ridiculous situation.”

• • •

They split the talisman thirty-seventy since Jai had to send his wife away on the trip. Priya had gone to the market three times in the past two days to make sure that the one she wanted was there the day they would go to buy it. The seller assured her it was Chinese, a pale green stone carved into the shape of an elephant. It was flat and fit easily into the palm of her hand. There were red cords tied to it so that she could tie the entire thing to a purse or a bag.

“Such a wonderful husband you have to buy you such a

lucky item,” the vendor had said.

Priya clutched the jade between her palms all the way home, willing it to bring her luck. She let the fat man hold it once they got on a train, though, so that he wouldn't faint or become ill in the meantime. He wrapped the red cords around his wrist and let the jade dangle against the back of his hand. He was particularly bright and cheery when they finally reached the American embassy and exited with a manila envelope, thick with bills.

“Ah, that's a good woman. She must be worried sick,” the man said. He patted Priya's hand when he returned.

“Now, I must be on my way to the nearest airport. Will you go back to Hyderabad? I think we may be on the same train for the first leg, but if not, take this for your troubles.”

He handed her a few bills, and she bit back her angry retort that it was barely enough to pay for a single train ticket, let alone the tickets they bought for him, the hospital bills, and the food.

“I imagine you won't need the talisman?” she asked.

“Oh, this thing? I suppose you can have it.” He tugged it off of his wrist and handed it to her.

They sat in the same train car for the first leg of the journey, as he suggested. The train broke down, and they sat for hours before the air conditioning was started back up. By then, the man stepped out for some fresh air, and when he returned, Priya was gone, and so was his manila envelope.

Priya took a taxi.

“I'm going to be a movie star,” she told the driver the minute she sat down in the cab.

“Hmm,” the man said.

“My uncle told me I was pretty enough to be one,” she

mused, stroking the elephant talisman against her cheek.

“Sure, why not?” the man said.

He didn’t even look at her.

*Karlin Wurlitzer*

## String Theory

The summer air is warm when I make my way to the garden, but for the first summer since I've been to Idaho, there's still snow in the tree.

It's not a garden so much as it is a small park—there is a patch of grass tucked behind a building and a lone tree. I come here to think sometimes because it's so quiet, and the grass is soft. The wind is blocked just enough by the building to drift through as a cool breeze.

Upon further inspection, the snow on the tree is not snow at all. It's a single patch of white on one of the lower branches, so bright that it appeared to be ice from a distance. Instead, a tangled bunch of thread hangs there, blowing gently in the wind.

I sit under the tree and watch it sway. It doesn't seem to be one strand but instead several threads jumbled together and hung over the branch like the remnants of a spider's web. There is a road nearby; perhaps it fell out of a passing car or garbage truck and got carried by the wind into the tree.

It's too high to reach, so I leave it be. One day it'll probably break free and drift off to its next location. Until then it can keep me company.

*Buckle up*, I say to it, *We've got a lot of thinking to do*.

Classes haven't even started yet and I'm already stressed. I can tell I'll be in the garden quite a bit this semester.

• • •

I'm sitting at a desk, notebook out, pen uncapped when the professor pulls up the PowerPoint. The title is *Laws of*



*Thermodynamics*. I cap the pen.

Every major has its *thing*. It's a topic that's so fundamental, or significant, that there's a section on it in every single course. Say the words "logos," "ethos," or "pathos" to a literature major and watch their eyes immediately glaze over. Psychology majors have mentally named one, if not all, of Pavlov's dogs. Physics majors have had Newton's Laws of Motion beaten into them like one beats a dead horse.

(And according to his third law, the dead horse beats them right back.)

I'm a psych major myself—I named the dog Maurice—but also a bio major, which means I have heard the term "phospholipid bilayer" more times than there are genes in *C. elegans*. None of this compares to the number of times I've learned about the Laws of Thermodynamics in a chemistry course, and I've only taken three of them.

*First Law*, the board reads. *Energy cannot be created or destroyed.*

I vaguely wonder, then, where all *my* energy has gone.

*Second Law: All natural processes increase the entropy (disorder) of a system.*

My mind drifts to the tree in the garden. The giant tangle of thread had to have been orderly once. It had to have been wrapped in neat lines around a spool or tucked securely into the hem of a t-shirt. That's certainly not the case now, and every gust of wind ensures further descent into disorder.

I wonder how long it took for it to look like that. The universe, supposedly, has trillions of years before it reaches maximum entropy and—well, does whatever it'll do after that. String, I think, has got far less patience. Look at earphone cords in a pocket or long hair on a windy day. Tangling is

almost instantaneous. The universe tends toward disorder, and string is its most earnest disciple.

I uncap my pen, scribble something for the first law, and then write *Second Law: string*.

I probably won't remember what that means when I review my notes for the exam. That's okay, we will have gone over the Laws of Thermodynamics six more times before then.

*Third Law: At 0K, the entropy of a perfect crystalline structure is zero.*

• • •

I sit under the tree in the garden and Google "behavior of string." This doesn't really give me anything helpful because most of the results pertain to string format in programming. I wonder what a computer science major might call their thing. I've only ever taken one coding class, but I'd venture a guess that "did you forget a semicolon?" is up there.

I clear the search bar and try again.

• • •

"Tell me about yourself," says the psychologist.

"Um," I reply. I exist and that's about the extent of my self-knowledge.

The second question is a little easier. "How do you identify yourself, to others?"

The average person fills out six hundred forms in their lifetime. On most of them, this question is asked with a list of boxes to check. I go down the list as I answer.

Japanese American. Hawai'i-born. United States citizen. English-speaking. Full-time student, otherwise unemployed. Double major. Student athlete. Tax dependent, so please do not ask me anything about a W-9. No, I have never been in a car accident. Yes, I have health insurance. No, I would not like

to subscribe to your e-mail list.

(I only tell her the first two.)

“What do you like to do in your spare time?”

“Sleep, mostly,” I reply on instinct (see checklist item 5).

The psychologist is unimpressed with this answer. Then again, she’s probably heard it a thousand times before. I wonder what a psychologist’s thing is.

“Besides that.”

My next instinctual answer is that I don’t really have any spare time (see also items 6 and 7), but I doubt she’ll be satisfied with this either, so I take some time to think about it.

*You stared at a tangle of thread swaying in the wind for an hour; and then Googled it, my mind supplies.*

“I like to read,” I say.

I have not picked up a book in years.

The psychologist doesn’t ask for more than that, just nods and writes it down. Or maybe she knows that “I like to read” is another instinctual answer from kids who actually did like to read, at one point, but have since been unable to find the time. These kids are probably considered smart, or even gifted. They coasted through grade school and, if they’re lucky, make it through the first couple semesters of college without incident. When the first taste of failure hits, it hits hard and it does not go away. As a result, they spend most of their time studying because deep down they still yearn for the safety of perfection.

“I like to read” tells you a lot about a person, actually. Just not whether they actually read.

Either way she takes it, the psychologist moves on.

“So, tell me, what brings you here?”

There’s no list of checkboxes for this, nor an instinctual

answer. There's just a story, a hunch, and a question.

I start with the story.

• • •

My fifteenth Google search ("behavior of strings on a string") is a little more fruitful than the last fourteen: It yields just one programming result. I read a lot about resonance and vibration. String's behavior makes it useful in guitars, pianos, tennis rackets, et cetera.

I look up at the web of threads. The wind blows through, no sound comes out, no ball bounces off. It's not what *individual* strings do that interests me; it's what happens when you put them all *together*.

I try another search to that effect. There are ten results for Java programming, and another three for C#. I want to throw my phone.

• • •

"Is that a new haircut?" My friend asks, and I look up. Our eighth-grade English teacher has sharp eyes and coarse salt-and-pepper hair. It's the kind of hair that always looks tangled, even though it isn't. We've just entered her classroom, lunch trays in hand. I don't know why my friend had started insisting on eating lunch in here but I'm not complaining. The lunchroom is usually too loud, anyway.

"Yes, it is," the teacher says, shaking her head to let her hair flow. She's chopped it really short, though, so kind of just bounces.

"I like it!" My friend exclaims through a mouthful of canned peaches.

"Thank you," she replies.

I study the look. I don't know how you can like someone else's haircut. You're not the one who has to deal with the

hair, so what does it matter? All haircuts basically do the same thing; the hair gets shorter. Is this always supposed to be accompanied by a remark on the change?

She runs a hand through her hair, making the black and grey ends stick up all over her head. Maybe it does warrant a comment.

“You look kind of like a porcupine,” I say.

This does not go how I expect it to.

Later, I will frown when another teacher—this one does Science—informs me that our English teacher cried after lunch. I will flinch when my friend laughs and claps me on the back. “Dude, you’re such a savage,” she will say.

I will learn that haircuts are not supposed to be accompanied by a comment on the change. Haircuts are supposed to be accompanied by a compliment on the change, and there’s a big difference between the two.

We won’t eat lunch in her classroom again. My friend won’t mind, and she’ll inform me we were only there because she was struggling in the class. I will be confused, because for all the times we’d been in there, she hadn’t asked for help once.

“It was grammar,” she’d say. “I just don’t think I’ll ever get it. It’s whatever.”

This will confuse me too because it’s not whatever. Grammar is pretty much the only thing in the English language where they actually give you the rules.

Seven years later, when I’m sitting in front of a psychologist and she asks me what brings me there, this will be part of my story.

• • •

In another Google search (“behavior of PHYSICAL

STRING”), I am informed about the concept of String Theory. It has *nothing* to do with physical string. It involves ten different dimensions that call me stupid in all of them. I briefly reconsider my identity as a science major.

• • •

“Can you believe it’s almost over?” my friend asks.

Of course I can. There are one hundred and eighty days in a school year, times twelve years of school. I can’t do the mental math—I’m more of a reader, myself—but I know the number resulting is finite, and that we’re nearly at the end.

I shake my head no—because that’s how you’re supposed to respond to that sort of thing. It’s taken me a while to learn this, but I have.

“One more week, and we’ll be out of this prison for good!” She laughs.

I’ve also learned it’s somewhat of a *thing* for high schoolers to relate themselves to prisoners. I nod and agree while inwardly arguing that the food is much better here than in prison.

One more week of exams and high school is over. My acceptance letter to Idaho State shines from my e-mail inbox, beckoning me to bigger things. Until then, I sit with the other valedictorians at graduation practice, singing class songs and accepting fake diplomas graciously.

In between the activities, they whisper about exams and stress and all the studying they still have to do. Even though it all really doesn’t matter; even though we’re basically already onto whatever’s next. We’re still the kind of students who like to read, in the broadest sense of the term. Studying is muscle memory.

“We’ll keep in touch, right?” My friend asks me after

another round of fake diploma acceptance. I didn't know so much went into a smile and a handshake. "After it ends? We'll still hang out?"

"Yeah, of course," I say because that's what you're supposed to answer to that sort of thing.

I know there are no more lunches, or classes, or recesses left. There's nothing keeping us in touch anymore. It's likely that after I receive my real diploma, I'll never see her again.

I still haven't.

• • •

Partly out of exasperation and partly to explore alternative career options, my next Google search is "string in the humanities." I scroll past various institutions' advertisements for their string quartet and finally, *finally*, my interest is piqued by a website about Greek mythology.

The Moirai are three Greek deities—Fates, they're called—that spin thread. One unwinds, one measures, and one cuts. The catch is, they're spinning out human lives. To be spun is to be born, to be cut is to die. Not even the Gods may alter what the Fates spin; our destinies are predetermined by a trio of weavers and a pair of shears.

I look up at the tree again. I try to visualize *people* in the strings.

I do, but there's no gleaming golden light of life coming from each thread as I'd imagine the Fates can see. It's not how strings behave by themselves that gives them life, is it? It's what they do when you put them all together.

Second Law of Thermodynamics: with every natural process comes disorder. The threads reach out to one another, twist round at the ends, tangle together until you couldn't undo the knots if you tried. Lives weave together in a way no

deity can predict, and no pair of shears can separate. Just as the universe tends toward disorder, so do humans tend toward connection. It's the end product of every twist of thread. It's the cornerstone of achievement. Run your hand through the tangle of human existence and you'll find our greatest stories where the knots are.

I pocket my phone and stand up, stretching broadly. A chilly breeze runs through the garden, warning of winter to come. I should start bringing a heavier coat I think as I begin the walk back home.

A breeze blows again. Behind me, the tangled thread tangles even more.

• • •

While I sit in the waiting room, I scroll through Twitter. Some basketball player has broken a record. A dog celebrates its birthday. Some man complains about his bills, 108.4K people agree. A woman is tying the knot with her fiancé.

I crack a smile at this. The more you look, the more ways you find people relating themselves to string. Marriage is called tying the knot. Soulmates are connected by an invisible red thread. Jada Pinkett Smith calls her affairs an entanglement, the internet goes wild.

The next tweet I see links to an article about knitting; specifically, the mathematics of it. *It's amazing*, the caption reads. *Yarn itself holds almost no stretch, but in the right knitting pattern, it can increase its length almost twofold!*

*Of course*, I think. *We've always been stronger together, haven't we?*

The waiting room door opens. The psychologist calls out. "You ready?"

I smile, nod, and stand.



• • •

“How do you think the fall semester is going?” My coach asks.

The four coaches sit across from me at a long table. One sits at a laptop, poised to type. The cursor blinks on a PowerPoint slide. One holds a pen and looks like she wants to be clicking it. One is scribbling something in a notebook. All of them have their eyes on me.

“Um,” I reply, because the semester is going, and that’s about the extent of my knowledge of it.

I do manage more words, though. Words like *learning curve and room for improvement and definitely some progress there, I can feel it*. They’re words I know will earn nods and get me to the next PowerPoint slide.

Every major has its *thing*. Student athletes have *progress* and *room for improvement*.

The slides continue. They err on the side of *room for improvement*.

“Here’s what we think you can work on,” my coach continues. The slide shows three bullet points.

*Fitness* is number one.

Well, when is it not?

*Explosiveness* is number two.

In my free time, I sit and stare at a tangle of string in a tree. There is not a single explosive bone in my body.

*Communication* is number three.

“We need you to be a leader,” my coach says, folding her hands together and placing them on the table. “I know you’re not the vocal type, but we know you know your role and our expectations. You have to be the puppeteer back there, giving constant instruction. Think you can do that for us?”

I think of a puppeteer, pulling strings, giving life to things once inanimate. Score another point for the string metaphors.

Pulling strings alone seems hard enough. I think if I tried, I'd end up with something like—well. You know. And for the strings to each *do* something...

Actually, it might be easier that way.

From what I know about coding now—which is far, *far* too much—there is no way to generate something truly random, or natural. It's much simpler to create order, to give each string a purpose.

I look at the PowerPoint. *Room for Improvement*. Puppeteers aren't born, they're taught. They give you the rules for this sort of thing. String is their craft, and they study it extensively.

"Yes," I reply. "That, I can do."

After all, I like to read. Studying is muscle memory.

Another nod, another click, another slide.

• • •

The winter air is cold when I get to the garden, but for the first winter since I've been to Idaho, there's no snow on the ground. Or the tree.

My eyes drift up.

The tangle is still there. I frown.

I get up on my tiptoes and reach.

• • •

"How was your weekend?" A classmate asks.

We're standing in a hall outside the classroom, waiting for the class before us to finish up.

"Fine," I reply. Because it was. "How was yours?" I ask. Because that's what you're supposed to ask next.

He talks about it, complains about waking up early, shows

me pictures of the party he had. Well, no, party isn't the right word. Nobody throws parties these days on account of "the new normal."

"The new normal" has become everybody's thing. No matter what your major, hearing the phrase "with everything going on right now" causes something akin to repulsion. *Six Feet Apart* has become a battle cry.

I realize I've not been paying attention and may have missed a question.

"Huh?"

"I said, are you ready for the exam?"

The exam is on the Laws of Thermodynamics. I have been ready for this exam for the past three semesters.

"No," I reply, trying my best to convey a grimace with my mask on, because that's what you're supposed to say to that sort of question. It's not so much a question, really, as it is a bonding moment. It's reaching out, it's a *hey, you're suffering, right? Me too! Let's suffer together!*

Natural processes.

"Same," he agrees. "I haven't even started studying." I don't know what comes next. There's no precedent for this in my experience. Am I supposed to agree with this too for reassurance? Am I supposed to warn him of how long the study guide is? Is this a trick question, because surely the Laws of Thermodynamics are ingrained in his memory by now?

I settle for the best sympathetic look I can give with just my eyes, and an "I'm sure we'll be fine."

He sighs, rolling his eyes in a way that I think is supposed to mean something. "Let's hope so."

Natural processes.

This feels anything but.

• • •

Even on my tiptoes, even reaching as far as I can, I'm too short. White thread sways above me, almost tauntingly.

I jump.

• • •

Three months, three sessions, and seven hundred questions after I tell the psychologist my story, she meets me over Zoom and gives me the answer to my question.

"So, we can conclude that you are, indeed, on the autism spectrum."

I blink. She points, with her cursor, at the report she's sharing on the screen. "As you can see, it says here that you're classified at Level 1, which basically means you have no intellectual disability."

Of course not, I like to read.

"And you are able to live independently because your level of dysfunction is relatively low."

My level of dysfunction was described in great detail on pages seven and eight of the twelve-page report. I have minimal trouble engaging in organized behaviors. I can manage my personal finances. Where I struggle—where the bulk of my dysfunction is—is establishing and maintaining social relationships. I fail to connect with others.

If people are string, the screen seems to say, in twelve-point Times New Roman, you are my kind of string. The coding kind. The tangled mess of human connection is foreign to you. Every movement you make, everything you say, has to be learned. It's programming.

Natural processes do not govern you.

• • •

At the highest peak of my tallest stretch of my biggest jump, the tangle of thread remains just out of reach.

A cold breeze blows through the garden. The tangled strands tangle even more.

I don't move with them. I don't know how.

And then—

My head goes back, and I laugh in relief.

• • •

"What do you want to achieve in the spring?" My coach asks.

The PowerPoint slide is up, the cursor blinks at the ready.

I think of my *Room for Improvement*.

*Fitness* will come over winter break, I'm sure of it.

Recently, I've found that running helps me think, and there's a lot of thinking to be done.

*Communication* will come too. It won't be instantaneous; it probably won't even happen this year. It will be deliberate and methodical and feel very unnatural at times. But anything can be taught, and I am ready to be a puppeteer.

That leaves *explosiveness*. My coach elaborated on the term back when she gave me the bullet points. It was quickness and agility, and speed over short distances. It was also power and a higher reach on jumps. "It comes largely from your work in the weight room," she explained.

I smile. I think of reaching.

"This spring," I begin, and even my words feel more sure, "I'm going to improve on my vertical jump."

• • •

"Any big plans for winter break?" My classmate asks.

We're walking out of the last class of the semester. The joy going around is palpable, dampened only slightly by the

looming prospect of finals. The typical college sentiment seems to be the consensus here: it's a problem for later.

"I don't know," I reply. Because I don't. "Quarantining, mostly."

He nods in the sort of careful, almost euphemistic way everyone has learned to concerning matters of "the new normal."

"That sucks. I'm sorry."

There's something I've yet to learn, how to respond to "I'm sorry" when it's used in this context. A reflexive "it's okay" doesn't really give the right sentiment because it's not really okay. "I forgive you" is just plain wrong because it's not their fault. Not answering isn't really an option, though, because an apology is being given, and it would be rude to ignore.

"At least I'll be able to stay warm," I try, which warrants a "true" in response. The conversation goes on. It almost feels natural.

I smile behind my mask. Score one for the puppeteer-in-training.

"Well, have a good break," I say as we approach the parking lot where we part ways.

"You too," he replies. "I'll see you next year." Before he gets in his car, he gives me a look that I think is supposed to mean something.

From somewhere in my chest, something tugs as he drives away. *Oh*, I think, and then *yes. Right*. I smile and chalk up another point for myself.

Sometimes you can't know a knot's been tied until you try to pull it apart.

• • •

If humans, overall, had a *thing*, it would be how to connect to each other. We are born crying out for someone else. We grow up learning not just to talk, but to communicate, and to reach out, and to understand. To most, it all seems like one thing. The grammar is the hardest part, the rest is second nature.

Those natural processes do not govern me, but I *do* observe them. I probably won't ever be able to replicate the mess that I see—it sounds exhausting to try, honestly—but with time, and a fair bit of help, I will figure out how it works. I'll pull strings and tie knots. I'll reach out in all the ways I know to find more. I will find my way in the tangle of human existence, even if it takes more studying than most would like it to. I know I'm capable of it.

After all, I do like to read.

*Caleb Greenwell*

## Memory Glands

There is distance between me and  
my camera, although  
one is always  
strapped to my  
thigh.

I perform a more  
personified method,  
closing shutters  
in my mind.  
A primitive form of capture,  
cataloging  
in my brain.

This advancing leads to losses,  
or maybe my memories weren't meant  
for remembering.

Sometimes I fear the  
hippocampus assassin is  
shaking  
from  
within.

Threatening to dry up  
the water line.

If a man  
  
falls  
in the world and doesn't make



a sound,  
did his Earth even exist at all?  
Is life measured by the perseverance of a  
m o m e n t,  
or the perception  
of love through  
a lens?

I hear the Neurotoxic Ocean,  
the passed are  
past and  
maybe  
they should lie like  
that.

These images formed from  
chemicals,  
have a tendency to

d  
r  
i  
p

*Milo Bossler*

## Goodbye Fire City



*Stephen Aifegha*

Untitled



Mixed media

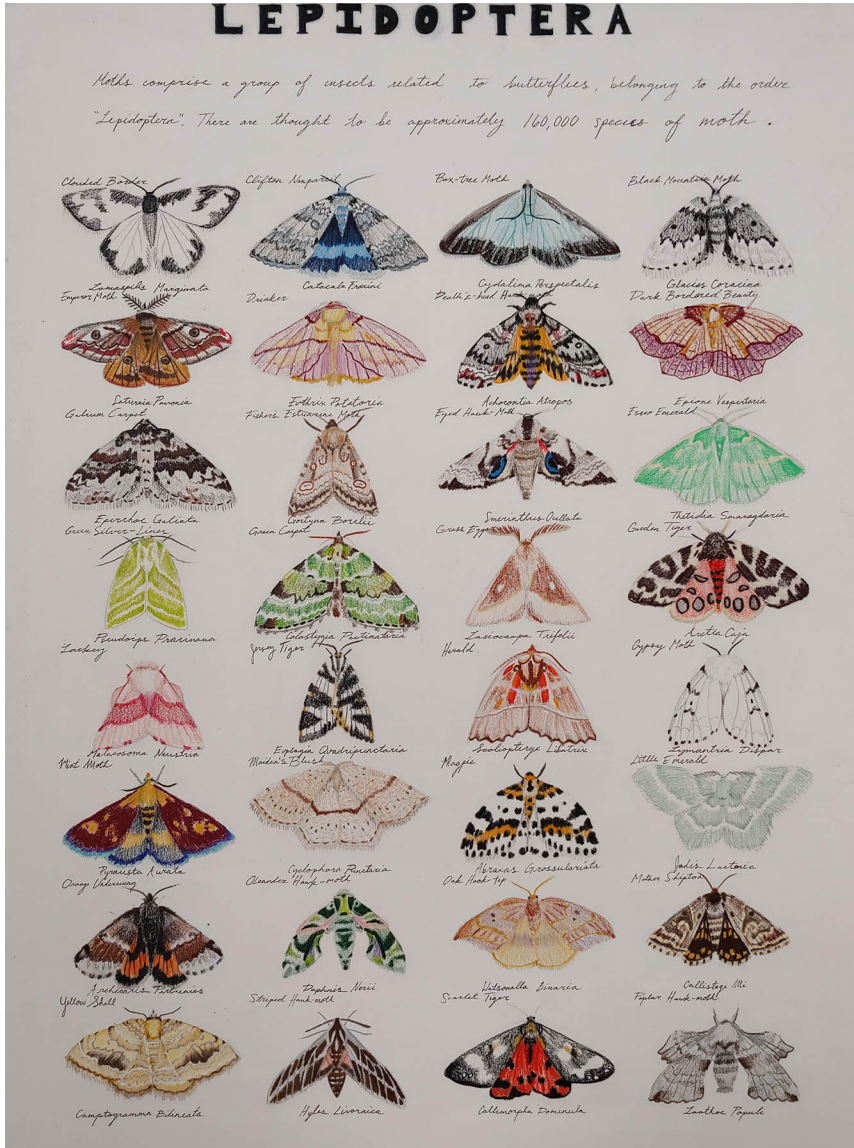


*Mary Unger*

Nie Wieder



Lepidoptera



*William Bybee*

## Boystown





*Mariah Larson*

## Qween



*John Bybee*

## Invoking Doiteain





*William Bybee*

## West Hollywood



Acrylic ink and paint

*John Bybee*

Varsity





*Stephen Aifegha*

## Tears and Rebellion

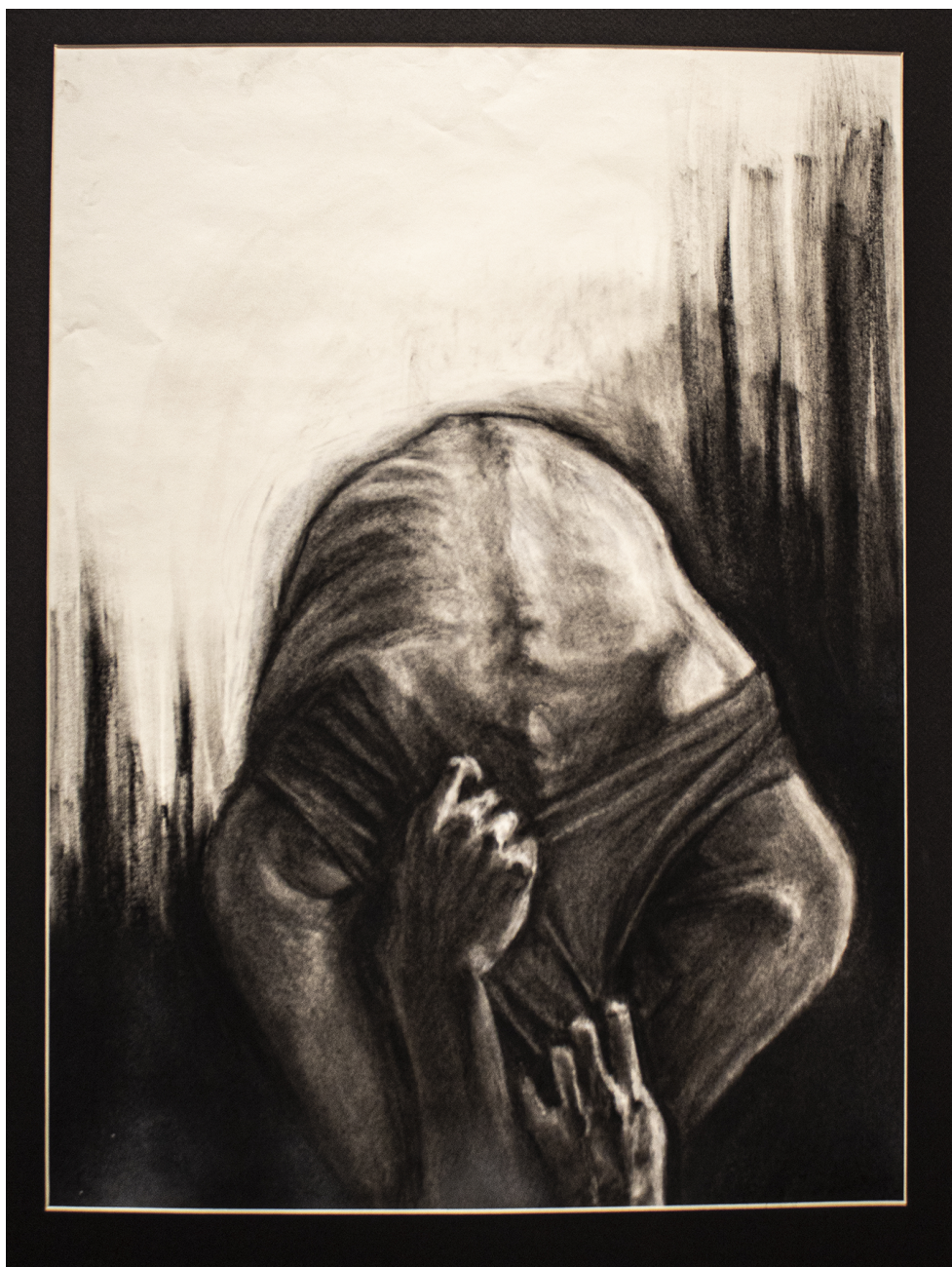


Mixed media

85

*Milo Bosser*

## How to Hide a Ghost





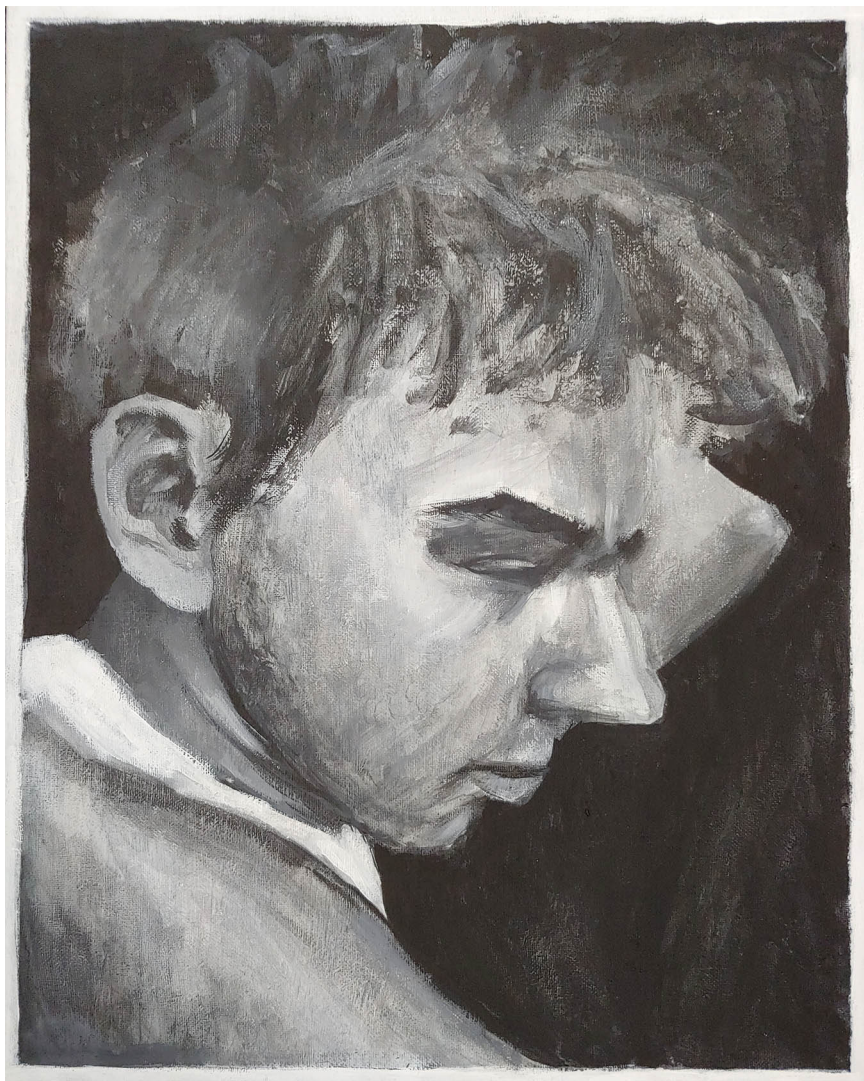
*Mariah Larson*

## Situs Inversus



*Kate Brown*

Leaving Too Soon



*E.E. Curtis*

## Perfection

Zero to none, that's what  
you aim for. Unnatural food sweetened with  
xylitol. Won't eat anything over 3 fat g.  
Weight fluctuates hourly  
veers down steadily, veins show blue-green  
under paper skin.  
That moment you realize you could be an extra for  
*Schindler's List*. Starving, emaciated  
ribcage. You have perfected  
quiet vomiting, silently  
puking in the sink. Cramming chunks of food down the drain  
when they get stuck.  
One hundred and three. You are almost double digits.  
Nutrition labels scanned,  
memorized. Always hungry to  
lose more. A force unstoppable  
killing.  
Jog in place in the shower. You've even invented exercises for  
when you're sitting down.  
Image in the mirror, there's no way to  
hide  
glad smiles when the counselor reprimands you for being  
thinner.  
Fistfuls of hair falling. Still, that body  
eludes.  
Disgust over thick  
calves. You are not  
beautiful. You are not even perfectly  
anorexic.



## Train

A relentless tone echoed through the nearly empty train. Louis was the only person in the passenger car. He was looking out the window, watching the last remnants of dusk.

*Soon, he thought, I won't be able to see anything.*

There weren't city lights out there. A path had been cut through the pines, just big enough for the train to flow through. When the night took over completely, he would have to imagine the forest outside the window. That thought brought back the familiar anxiety, the one that made his leg—where his leg used to be—itch.

It was an older train, but the inside was nice: brown cloth seats, an orange shag carpet. It had the faded smell of a familiar perfume. Most importantly, it would take him away from the city. He needed a change in scenery.

Louis didn't turn his head away from the window, but he did close his eyes. The monotonous movement of the train made it impossible to keep them open. Still, he tried not to sleep.

"What do you think?" Margaret asked. He opened his eyes and glanced down. His cast was covered in thick red, orange, and yellow paint. "It's a sunrise."

*"Inspiring." Motivational. Life-changing.* He looked away.

Her smile fell, and she stood up, spilling red paint on the floor. "I don't know how to help you, Lou."

A branch must have hit the window. He jumped, looking around the train. Empty. He grabbed his crutch and stood up. He was the only person on the train, but he had been sure



Margaret had been there.

He sat down again tentatively and rested back into his seat.

He didn't use to have dreams that vivid. Margaret was getting to him. He wanted her to understand, but there was no way to explain it to her. He replayed what happened again and again in his head, looking for answers. He's in the garage. It smells of propane, so he goes to turn off the heater. As he reaches for the small tank, a spark travels up the hose, but he grabs it anyway and turns it off before it catches fire. That was the only thing out of the ordinary.

He had tried to explain that to her, he yelled, cried along with her, promising and begging, but she always finished the conversation in the same way.

"You're not well, Lou."

Louis sighed. He knew that.

He resumed looking out the window. If he had been sleeping, it wasn't for long because he could still make out the surroundings. The train was heading towards the mouth of a tunnel. As it entered, the overhead lights powered off, and he sat in complete darkness.

He scratched at his knee and waited for the lights to turn back on.

"Why?" He heard her say.

Louis turned his head back and forth, trying to pinpoint the location of the sound in the dark. "Margaret?"

He was answered only by his voice echoing around him.

The lights came back on in a wave. He searched again but already knew he wouldn't see anyone there.

"I really am losing it, Margaret," he said to himself. This type of thing hadn't happened since before he lost his leg.

He told her that he was in the garage. That he turned off

the heater and took a single step when his leg gave out from under him—or rather, disappeared from under him. That didn't explain the blood on the saw or his lack of screaming. He knew that, but he told her that cutting off his leg would be a stupid way to try to kill himself, but she couldn't understand any other possible motive. He pretended that he didn't hold that against her.

Louis put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. "It wasn't mine anymore. It wasn't supposed to be there."

"Sir?" Louis didn't look up. "Sir?"

He scratched his knee.

"Excuse me." A hand touched his shoulder; at the warm contact, he jumped back. "I'm sorry to wake you. I'm just letting you know that we'll be delayed a couple of hours." It was a woman. She was young, Margaret's age probably.

"What?" he asked dumbly, trying to get his bearings.

"We'll be delayed for a few hours," the attendant explained again.

"Why?"

The woman hesitated before finally saying, "The train ahead of us was apparently in an accident. I'm sure everything is fine, though."

Louis nodded blankly.

"Can I get you anything? A blanket? Something to eat?"

"No, thank you."

She started to walk back out of the car when she stopped and looked down. The bottom of her white sneaker was smeared with red. She held her foot up and looked at it with wide eyes. "I'll come back to—" she cleared her throat, bringing her voice back up to a professional octave, "clean this

up.” She finished and walked quickly out of the room.

After she left, Louis stumbled out of his seat and onto the floor; it was easier to go by crawling. When he got to the stain, he put his hand on the carpet. When he pulled away, his palm was covered in the sticky red substance. He brought it up to his face and breathed in. He recognized the piney scent of the oil paint Margaret liked to use.

He took a breath and started to crawl back to his seat when the lights went off again, and the car around him filled with chaotic voices. Some were screaming, yelling like they were getting torn apart. He couldn’t hear individual words over the sound of blood running through his neck, but he knew they were all just as afraid as he was.

When the lights powered on, he was alone again.

“Sir?” She was back a while later. He had pulled himself up to his bench and was sitting quietly. “I’m sorry, but we’re going to have to walk to the station.” She glanced at his crutch sympathetically. “It isn’t far.”

Louis nodded and stood to lift his luggage down. She offered to carry the bag, but he declined and followed her out of the train wordlessly.

She was right about the walk. It wasn’t far. Louis and the handful of employees on the train walked with flashlights, but those weren’t needed for long. They could see it before they reached it. The flames were still high and burning. The crew rushed forward to help, leaving him behind.

He followed as quickly as he could manage, and for a moment, he felt like his leg was back, helping him along. It wasn’t attached, but it was near.

*Tamisha Green*

## The Station Children

Overnight I became a mother,  
after the firebombs rained down,  
angry tears from the sky.  
Thousands were incinerated in the streets.  
The trains stopped coursing through my veins  
after pieces of my body were burned  
and ripped open,  
oozing wounds.  
The children of Tokyo took refuge  
in my breast.  
Their faces smudged with soot,  
their lungs shriveled raisins.  
Smoke curled from their lips  
with each breath. Some  
were naked, pieces of their skin  
stripped down to the  
bone from the fire.  
Others wore tattered pieces  
of their clothes like  
badges of honor.  
They huddled against my broken ribs,  
searching for someplace warm to sleep,  
together but alone.  
Their sandpaper coughs echoed in  
the chambers of my lungs.  
They smelled of iron  
and kerosene. I lost half

of them by morning.  
After the bombs,  
came the intruders,  
flocking back to my body  
to run the trains again.  
They ignored the children  
made of smoke and skin,  
stepped over their bodies, cracks in  
my bones. The police took them  
to die somewhere else.  
*Station Children,*  
they called them, as if to say  
they were no one.  
But they were mine.

## Non-sequitur

The first time I clearly remember seeing a female skater posted on The Berrics' Instagram was of Rayssa Leal. She was probably between eight and ten at the time. In the clip she was heel flipping a four stair in a fairy costume. I remember watching her roll up, blue fairy costume on, blue tutu, blue mesh fairy wings, blue wand in hand and silver tiara on her head. I remember how good the heelflip was. Her front foot flicked the nose and poked forward fully extended, her back foot hovered, waiting for the board to rotate into the catch, and in that moment, she was a ninja kick silhouette dressed in a fairy costume. She rode away with control that seemed too mature for her age and right into Instagram fame. The Berrics' post exploded with comments of flame emojis and hearts. People applauded young Rayssa, and she has in the past few years continued to be reposted by The Berrics and grow into a recognized face in skateboarding. The positive reaction to Rayssa, however, was an exception. More often, Berrics' posts of female skaters are not as well received.

In another post by The Berrics, they shared footage of Cata Diaz. She had multiple clips; ollies over some gaps, a bigspin front board on a flat bar, a tre flip down a five set, and a bail. Yet, the comments section ignited with male skateboarders calling into question The Berrics' integrity as a major skate media platform. Scrolling through the comments is a text assault filled with male skaters in an uproar that the standard for female skaters to be shared by The Berrics is lower than the standard for males. They claim that The

Berrics is posting skateboarding that isn't good enough when they post female skaters. These charges lead me to ask, what should The Berrics be posting, what is this standard that the comments section calls into question, and why isn't refuting the backlash of this sexism more obvious?

I've been skating for sixteen years. I've been obsessed since the first time I stepped onto a skateboard and started pushing down the street. My imagination reflexively cycles through ideas of skating. Not only tricks I want to try, but also what different aspects of skating mean to me as a skateboarder. One aspect is why I look at Instagram in general. Why do I spend so much of my time cycling through my Instagram feed? Why, when I'm sliding my thumb up my screen, watching clip after clip and trick after trick, do I stop and tap the heart icon? Why do I follow the skaters that I do? What is the value for me as a skateboarder to scroll through Instagram watching other skateboarders skate?

I obviously do this, at least partially, because I want to see the progression of skateboarding. I love skateboarding. Watching skateboarding progress is like watching a monument being constructed. I may not be one of the engineers, but I can bring my wheel barrow of rocks and be proud of how great this monument has become. More so, for me, is that I watch skateboarding to be inspired to skateboard. When my thumb is scrolling through the infinite feed of Instagram, across the monument's construction, what I want to see is skating that I want to mimic. I want to see skateboarding that makes me want to skate. This doesn't always mean the "best" skating. For me, this means skating that I connect with as a skateboarder, similar to an artist who admires another artist's work.

Skating's lack of regulations creates freedom for each of us

to express ourselves through skating in whatever way we want. The clicks that one skater hears as they grind across pool coping can create the same feeling that another has as they wait for their board to finish flipping beneath their feet in that fraction of a second in the air above a ten set. One skater could slappy a curb, hearing crust and metal battle under the arches of their shoes, while another could be sliding a back tail, perched with no resistance, smooth as if their tail was actually hovering millimeters above the ledge, and both could roll away with the same satisfaction. A kid learning to kickflip for the first time knows the same psychological battle that a pro does while filming a flip in flip out manny trick. Anyone who skates does it for the same feeling, even if eliciting this feeling varies in trick selection or terrain. Each of these skaters is being inspired and has the means to inspire other skaters simply by skating, and likely each skater's source of inspiration came from a different other skater. This ebb and flow of inspiration can be seen through the feed of pages like The Berrics'. Seeing these different kinds of skating get shared means that what a page like The Berrics is doing isn't posting only the best of the best when it comes to skating; it shows that they are posting what inspires people to skate, which is diverse.

The diversity in skateboarding, the styles and trick selections, shows that there isn't an objective criterion for what good skating is. As a skateboarder I have gone through phases of being inspired. I can go through and look at all the old footage of myself and see the story of the kind of skater I have been. In the beginning I only wanted to learn to skate in general; the basics were the only goal. As I progressed and was able to shape my skating, I began gravitating to certain kinds of skating. The punk rock skaters like Corey Duffie and Ali



Boulala grabbed me early on. They wore black leather jackets covered in studs. They spat on the fisheye lens in videos and carried an air of fuck you with them. They had anarchy signs spray painted on their shirts and they jumped down shit. So, I bought studs and patches, I started listening to Left Over Crack and The Ramones, and I started skating gaps. This phase passed; I started gravitating toward the skating of Grant Paterson and Bastien Salabanzi. I started wearing baggy clothes, trying to learn more technical tricks, and I started listening to Hip-Hop. Along the way I started to see that I could emulate the styles of skaters. Then, I found Mark Appleyard and the rest is history. I found the skater who I wanted to look like when I skated, I wanted his effortless style and to look, as Apples does, like skating was as natural to me as walking. Today, my skating is drawn from an amalgam of skaters. My inspiration continues to grow and morph. Where these shifts draw from though is seldom from the skating that wins the most points at Street League or the X-Games. It comes from the skating I can relate to, either through the desire of physically feeling the tricks the way another skater is doing them, or the desire to create a similar moment in time where I am, as they are, mindfully present of only myself and my skateboard. For me, this is why I'm compelled into watching the diversity of skating that drenches the likes of Instagram; I go there to be inspired.

That The Berrics posts every variation of this diversity shows that they recognize and respect the varieties as having the potential to inspire. They see that what the skate community wants isn't an assembly line of perfectly replicated front feeble and nollie inward heels; skateboarders want variety. Inevitably, with variety, each variation will be received

differently. Not every smart phone that's held in the hand of a skateboarder will have its screen double tapped. Odds are some of these smart phones will have their key boards brought up and have a complaint explaining why the screen hadn't been double tapped added into the comments. Posts of female skaters aren't the only ones that get this kind of backlash in the comments. Reactions to tricks that step outside of conventions receive similar treatment. Commenters love to express that what a skater like Richie Jackson or Matt Tomasello is doing isn't real skateboarding. When these clips aren't received well by the population of Instagram viewers, they attempt to claim that it isn't meeting some standard similar to how they claim female clips are beneath what is expected from The Berrics. Those who try to argue against these commenters often use the rebuttal that skateboarding is about having fun and that as long as these people are having fun then they are not skateboarding wrong. The problem with this argument is that it doesn't address the actual claim by those in uproar, which is that the clips aren't good enough to be posted. Those in uproar assume that the standards of being posted by The Berrics' Instagram page are objective criteria that the skating should fit, rather than the criteria being an aim at subjective inspiration for some of their followers.

As skateboarders we have the right to dislike or be disconnected from other skaters' ways of skating. We can make a personal judgement about any skater that skates in a way that we don't want to watch. We don't have to watch them. We have that freedom. Although, these are all personal decisions, we lack the authority to bring objective criteria into skating. Every skateboarder lacks that because it doesn't exist. We don't have the authority to say that another skater's skating isn't

worth viewing altogether. Any judgment towards The Berrics not upholding the level of skating that is expected from their page is a judgement that assumes that what is posted is meant for the person judging. The goal of The Berrics is to give the entirety of their vast and various audience access to the sensation of being motivated and inspired by another's skating. This notion that each clip needs to satisfy your needs must be surrendered. It supposes a greater importance than each of us has within skating. Humbly, we need to recognize that our place in skating is small, that our opinion matters, but not that it is the one that matters most.

When we come across clips that don't do it for us, that don't show us progress or elicit inspiration, we need not do anything but scroll on. We can keep scrolling and not comment with disapproval at the least. But, I think there's a better way. I think there's more value to supporting skating that isn't necessarily for me than there is to simply not voicing my own disconnect.

I've grown up skating in a small skate community. At our max number, there seems to be about fifty skaters at a time, yet in our lulls it is often closer to ten. Having a skate scene that is small causes a closeness with the skaters of the area. I know everyone that skates and have been skating with them since I was a kid. When I entered the skate scene I was a typical grom trying to do kick flips with a half push of speed. I lacked skatepark etiquette. All I wanted to do was talk to the older dudes who were good. I would watch them all skate together, taking turns on the manny pad or the bank to ledge, and I wanted to be a part of that. I skated by myself. I went to the skatepark everyday and tried tricks over and over. When I eventually landed something, I'd hear a few boards

being slapped onto coping and a “yeah!” or two come from somewhere in my periphery. This was my acceptance into the scene at the time, the beginning of my integration into their skate crew, and an outside signification that my skating was supported. My skating being supported in this way, by skateboarders I respected, added drive for me to continue skating. This support was a rung for me. I doubt I’d know all the moments of triumph and joy that I’ve had through skateboarding had it not been for the older dudes who tapped the coping as I learned to do kick flips, which brings me to my point.

When we comment or like a post by a page like The Berrics we support the skater in the clip. We are virtually slapping the tails of our boards on the ground and coping all around the world. When we comment that their skating isn’t up to some standard, we muffle the sounds of crisp decks on steel and concrete. If we do this till we succeed in having these kinds of posts abolished from the feeds we love so much, we take away a clip that might inspire someone to pick up their skateboard and go skate today. Our lack of support tells the skater, and anyone who might have been inspired, that we aren’t standing behind them. Not every clip is for every skater, but every skater should want every other skater to know the joys of skating. Clips of females skating, like unconventional clips, extend the reach of skateboarding to a larger audience of people who can connect with what they see. Supporting these posts by The Berrics or any other skate media page is supporting the construction of the monument that is skating. It is supporting the spread of skateboarding and the joy that comes with it. We don’t have to be inspired by every clip, most skaters aren’t, but we should support every skater’s ability

to inspire another. This includes female skaters' posts, who are likely to reach other female skaters and inspire them to go skate. If, as skateboarders, we want to spread the joys of skating, if we want others to know the way skating makes us feel, and we want skating's reach to grow, then supporting female skaters is what we want.

*Jessa Briggs*

## Blind Corner

The clock ticked 3:57 PM. Servers leaned against the counters on both sides of the restaurant's alleyway, scrolling through Instagram and Snapchatting. Addie, with her gloved hands in the pockets of her apron, stared through the heated window at the line guys as they scrambled to fill everything up in the three minutes before opening. Friday nights, without fail, started with a bang. There was no leeway between unlocking the door and the ruthless dinner rush. Addie scanned the faces in the back; Henry mashing the potatoes, Javier's music wafting from cold prep, the three line guys setting up their spaces. They were all masked, as per the Health Department's demands, but they jostled together in the small space, sliding around each other to get what they needed, laughing and horsing around with no care for so-called "social distancing."

And there *he* was, pushing open the door to the meat room, maroon beanie low on his forehead. He must've been cutting meat, donning a hoodie under his apron even though it averaged 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the kitchen. Cutting meat meant he'd been in the meat room—basically a freezer—for hours before open, trapped in cold isolation while the rest of them sweated in the hotness of the grills and the ovens and the heat lamps of the steakhouse. Addie's heart did a stupid flip and she stepped to the left, shifting her attention. The window already had the metal bin of fries in it.

The clock ticked another minute. Her legs pressed against the little refrigerator compartment under her station. The

alley flooded with bodies. The whole night shift had all shown up at once. Although Addie knew she wouldn't see most of them for the rest of the night, the claustrophobia of so many people breathing the same air and existing in a space too small for this number of bodies stressed her out. She pulled at the edge of her blue gloves, scooted her mask a little bit further up her nose and navigated through the servers that blocked the five steps to the broil-slash-baker room. She leaned against the entry with her hands clasped behind her.

The broiler that day—her original trainer—threw her a smile. “Hey Addie!” he exclaimed.

“Hi Webb.” She flinched and laughed as he clapped his tongs at her. “Ready for tonight?”

“Oh yeah.” He rolled his eyes and played with the blue mask around his chin. “John called out again.”

“I'll watch out for Prio's then,” she joked. It's what they called steaks cooked to the wrong temps, and if Webb was going at a Friday night alone, she was going to be sending back lots of too-rares and too-welldones.

Another minute passed. With 3:59 blinking down the alley, tables were escorted back by chatty hostesses, lips and noses carefully covered by a rainbow of required masks to “Stop the Spread: Idaho.” Buttered rolls glittered at the baking station under the red-shaded light. Addie mingled back to the window. It was like she dived into a sea of bodies, everyone crammed next to her, in her space, popping her bubble. She fiddled with the top of her black fabric mask again, making sure it was covering her nose and not tucked in around her cheek bones. The cheese in her station looked a little dry. Had it not been properly sealed last night? She shifted the dry strands of cheese into the rest of the container.

The clock struck four. Immediately, the scree-scrree-scrree of printing receipts echoed from Broil, Point, and Fry. Someone had been just waiting to press send online for To-Gos. Speaking of, someone shouted “Corner!” and the cold-prepper rounded the blind corner from the front to the alley carrying a to-go slip ready to be cold-packed.

More receipts printed. Within a minute, seven orders were hanging, the white side of the two-ply facing the line guys, the yellow side facing Addie so she could scan orders ahead of time. Sizzling meat’s delicious aroma spread through the store, shouts of kitchen lingo cutting through the melodic sound of cooking food. Tor, one of the line guys that Addie worked with the most, dragged shrimp into the mixing bowl by the tong-full to be seasoned and cooked. Next to him, the lanky form of line-guy two, Myles, was bent over the ribs grill, cutting the four-bones for rib kicks, the half-slabs for combos, counting the bones for the full-slab entrees. Addie pulled down the appetizers being slid to her from Fry, wiping the grease off the plates and scooping the ranch, calling for app runners when servers let them sit due to watching the latest Snapchat story.

“Addie Joy Anderson.”

Addie turned as her kitchen manager stuck out a hand, a little tuft of black hair sticking out from under his maroon beanie. His eyes didn’t match hers, but a smile brightened his face. Addie’s heart jumped, spun, then settled in her ribcage. She smiled through her mask and shook his bare hand with her gloved one. “Hello there, Brady Office.”

“Hello Addie Joy Anderson, Esquire, how are you on this fine day?” he joked, still shaking her hand. His dark eyes only flitted over hers before focusing somewhere else.



Addie laughed, couldn't help the way it bubbled up her throat and into the world. She could feel her eyes crinkling and tried to tone down the smile, even though her mouth was hidden. His nose was still pink from the cold of the meat room. "I'm good, you weirdo. How are you?"

"I'm great, thanks Captain Anderson." Addie snorted at the TV show reference, one of the many shows they had in common, that they spent all their non-work-related conversations talking about, hiding behind masks and fake worlds.

They broke the handshake and Brady pressed the back of his hand against the bare skin of her forearm. Addie gasped, and pulled her arm back so he thought it was for the shock. "Oh my god! Why're you so cold?" she looked at his hands—the fingers were puffy and red.

"Cutting meat," he said simply, like any excuse was totally fine for his hands to be negative-twenty-seven degrees. This time he pressed the pads of his fingertips around her wrist. The touch tingled all the way up her arm, down her back with goose bumps. Addie had to force her arm away, knew he expected it, still wanted to grab his hands and warm them up instead.

"God!" she exclaimed, but both her and Brady laughed, hers trapped in her cloth mask, his unfiltered, flying free through the restaurant.

Then Webb jumped on Brady, his arms thrown around Brady's shoulders. Brady's responding laugh echoed through Addie's ears as he struggled backwards into the Broiler Room. Just like that, his attention hauled away. She only had a minute to think about it before Tor pushed five plates towards her and

she had to, like, actually do her job.

The tickets didn't stop. That wasn't so much of a shock considering it was a Friday night, but it didn't make it any less painful for the people in the kitchen. The alley was 83 degrees. Down to the right, around the broil and baking stations to the line, the three boys in charge of putting the steaks in the right order and grabbing the sides for Addie to prepare, they worked in a smoldering 118 degrees. With the pandemic they were down half their staff, trying to keep people safe. That left one fry guy when there were supposed to be two, and three line guys when there were supposed to be five, and that just added to the pain. Addie manned the Expo station alone while Brady—who was technically supposed to stay in the window with her all night—helped Webb on broil and Henry on hot-prep. Almost unconsciously, she kept her eye on him during the brief interludes of unrelenting tickets.

Around eight, with the summer sun draping on the edge of the mountains, the new wave of after-movie couples filled all the open tables. Eight should have been their lull, the end of the insane rush and the beginning of the close, but reprieve didn't come. Why were so many people cramming into one building? Crowding shoulder-to-shoulder in the entryway, faces unmasked, knowing that if one person breathed the wrong way, everyone could be infected. Sure, Addie had been skeptical at first too, about the pandemic and wearing masks all the time and the strict social rules. Then her uncle came back from the hardest-hit hospital in New York City, eyes hollow, voice bland when he told her he lost 4-to-5 patients every day. For months.

She got it from then on. Understood that even though she didn't like it, the least she could do was wear a mask,

make sure she stood her six feet away in case someone was uncomfortable with her being closer. It wasn't about her anymore, it was about those who were more susceptible to getting sick and having dire symptoms, who were scared for their lives over a virus no one really understood, to which there was no cure, no known way to really fight it. These people hoarding into the restaurant, who had been holed up for months during the national lockdown, they didn't care. They just wanted out, wanted back into a normal life that no longer existed. So here they were, rushing the restaurant at the end of the night in a wave the workers weren't prepared for.

Addie mindlessly wiped at the spilled butter and picked up the stray bacons and cheeses that had spilled during her frenzy of potato-loading. Her eyes weren't focused on that though. Brady was settled in the window of hot prep, framed in the heated metal window. His green tie-dye mask was pushed hastily under his chin—it was hot and hard to breathe back there, and it was only him and Henry in the hot prep station. His mouth was pulled down in a sort of grimace. He was mashing the potatoes for their mash pot; Brady wasn't the tallest guy in the world so instead of mashing straight down, he went about it in a winding motion, lifting his body up on his toes and dropping his body weight down on the pot. Watching him work heated the bottom of Addie's stomach like she'd just downed a whole cup of searing coffee. He managed the kitchen like his life depended on how well it ran.

Addie came back to herself and looked away hastily. Scratching at the top of her thigh, she took a deep breath. Stared at the butter, adjusted her mask to fully cover the top of her nose. More tickets rang in. Servers came and went, dancing with the food and swimming down the alley. Addie

prepared the plates and focused on her music from her right earbud, oblivious to anything not relevant in the moment.

That's why she jumped violently when Webb yelled across the store, "Office! Someone's here for you!" then he turned to Addie, "Where's Brady?"

She just shrugged. "He hasn't been in the window all night. Last I saw him he was in hot prep." Her eyes flickered over, but only Henry was there now.

The store's nightly bartender, who had been winding through the alley to avoid Creepo Number Five, screeched "My Squish!" and clapped her hands as she bounced from the beverage machine behind Addie to the doorway on her right.

Addie barely glanced, knew who was there. She moved to the far side of her station to give the former employee and baby space to be fawned over without getting in the way. The former employee was mask-less, crazy head of curls down and too close to the food for Addie's comfort. The baby was transferred from the former employee's arms into the bartender's, who giggled over his chubby cheeks and fat rolls. Addie's chest tightened and she scratched at the ear loop of her mask, properly adjusted over her nose and mouth.

"Where's Brady?" the former employee asked, eyes roaming the store before finding Webb, who was leaning on the hole in the wall between broil and expo.

"Who knows?" Webb shrugged. "Hold on." Webb twisted his body into Addie's station. Addie focused on him. He was familiar, he was a friend, he was masked and safe. He unhooked the walkie off the wall and said, "BRADY OFFICE, TO EXPO. I REPEAT, BRADY OFFICE TO EXPO."

His announcement echoed through the store and all eyes raised to the security camera screens above the hot-food

window. Even through the choppy, blurry feed of the meat room, they could all see Brady shake his head and pull his maroon beanie lower on his head before he made his way to the alley. He'd stripped off the blue gloves he wore during hot prep, and his bare hands swung by his legs, green rubber wrist band dangling from his wrist. Were they as cold as they had been the first time he was in there? Would he ask the former employee to warm them up for him? His mouth was covered again by the green tie-dye mask, but his nose poked out. His eyes were tired, drooping, no signs of a smile crinkling around the edges or sparking light in their brown gaze.

"Hey Ash," he greeted the ex-employee and took the baby from the bartender.

He pressed the baby to his chest and kissed his little bald head. The green rubber bracelet around his left wrist bounced on his tan skin as he rubbed the baby's back. Addie had to turn away. More servers flocked around the couple, enthralled by the baby, excited to see their old friend. Addie had started at the restaurant after Ashley went on maternity leave (then never came back), so she didn't have any type of personal connection to her. Addie tried to stay out of everyone's way, scrolling mindlessly through her phone. She didn't actually see anything, and her ears stayed sharp on the conversation, as much as she wished they wouldn't.

Eventually, everyone thinned away. They'd gotten all the food of the (hopefully) last rush out, and the servers were finally realizing that oh, they could start cleaning and getting out of the restaurant. It left Addie, glued to her station, the baby, and the couple. Brady handed the baby back to his girlfriend and pulled out his wallet. Addie was in the middle of prepping a ticket, but she heard him whisper, "That's all I

got,” and Ashley giving a murmured reply. Then she left with the baby.

Brady leaned against the counter at Addie’s station and sighed, rubbing at his forehead. He had shed the maroon hoodie and underneath wore a black manager’s shirt that left his colored tattoos out in the open. His mask had managed to find its way under his chin again, revealing the small blemishes around the joints of his jawline, the thin beard that wrapped his chin and cheeks and upper lip.

Addie bit at the dry skin on her lip. “She’s not sticking around?”

Brady jolted—just barely—and flicked his eyes over her face. For once, she was glad she was wearing a mask. “Um.” He looked away and folded his arms. “Yeah. Just here to take my money and leave.” He flashed her a smile like he meant to joke, but it didn’t match his demeanor in the slightest. His shoulders hunched towards his sternum, folded arms tensed.

“Ah,” Addie said noncommittally. “I see.”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat and turned to face the heated window, glancing over the four tickets that hung on the rack. “Damn. I’m tired.”

“I don’t blame you.” Addie scratched harshly at the black tattoo on her own forearm. “You were running around like a chicken without a head.”

Brady shrugged and picked at the scruff on his chin. “Yeah, well. Everyone was drowning. I was just trying to keep the store from crashing.” He caught her eye for a second and looked away again. “You did great, though. Handling that rush all by yourself. That was awesome.”

Oh. She shuffled on her feet and ran her fingers through the ponytail sticking out of her hat. “Yeah—uh, thanks. It

helped that Tor was paying attention, so I didn't have to double check everything."

"Sure, sure." At some point Brady had stepped closer, and now they were side-by-side, both facing the window. If she just rocked slightly to her right, their shoulders would brush. She stayed very, very still. "It was mostly you." He turned his head to smile down at her.

Her cheeks burned. She fiddled with her mask. "I try."

"I know." Brady glanced at the clock over their heads; Addie followed suit. 10:45. "Shit. We close in fifteen minutes."

"Yeah."

Tor pushed a two-plate ticket towards them. Brady—to Addie's surprise—picked up the yellow receipt and hung it up. She took the time to change her gloves, giving her poor hands a couple minutes to air out. Brady was careful with his expo, movements deliberate, arranging the plates so they would be eye-catching and mouth-watering when set in front of the guests. He'd been working so fast she wouldn't have been surprised to see his hands blur earlier, but now fatigue seemed to weigh on his arms, slow his process.

"So, I watched the new episode last night," he offered, reading the hung-up ticket carefully.

Addie's excitement sparked. They both watched a little off-brand true-crime series that had come up one day out of nowhere. Now Brady mentioned it almost every, if not every, shift they worked together. "Really? What'd you think?"

Brady let out a half-laugh and shook his head, sold the ticket. "They're so funny, oh my god. Those Scottish accents they tried to do?" Finally, his eyes crinkled with a real smile.

"I know right?" Addie laughed to herself, thinking back to the hosts of the show, their brotherly-jesting dynamics. They

were the weirdest mix of genuine and disrespectful of the tragedies they covered. “They’re my favorite.”

“Yeah, for real.” Brady scratched at his beard, stepping closer to Addie as a server picked up the plates. Addie quickly scanned his legs, wondered if it was all in her mind that he was leaning forward on purpose, getting closer to her.

“How long do you think you’ll be here tonight?” she blurted. It wouldn’t be an easy close. The store was a mess: none of the stations had started cleaning, and dish was down two people. Stacks of dirty and clean dishes muddled every surface in the dish pit.

Brady whipped off his beanie scratched at the back of his head. His black hair stuck up in all directions, fluffy and frizzy and too much for Addie to handle. “I dunno. One maybe? If I’m lucky.”

“One?” she repeated. “Really?”

“Yeah. Dish is super behind and I haven’t even started on my paperwork.” He looked at her unexpectedly, just in time to catch the anxiety straining her face. The worry lines on his forehead smoothed as his face curved into a smile. “It’s okay, Addie. I’m used to it.”

That didn’t make it any better. She didn’t say that though.

“Alright.” Brady scratched at his beard again. His eyes flitted around her but never seemed to find somewhere to land. “I should probably help get Henry outta here.”

Of course he would. He wouldn’t let anyone drown. “Yeah for sure. I’m good here.”

“Okay.” He nodded to himself and pushed off the counter. Then, to Addie’s surprise, he came towards her. It would’ve been faster to turn his back and go mess around with Webb in the broil station, then around to hot prep. Instead, he passed



Addie—the opposite way. Their shoulders touched when he passed, and as he walked away, he brushed his fingers down her wrist. Deliberately. Intentionally.

She shivered, but he was already gone. Addie blew out a curse, caught in the thin fabric of her mask.

Well.

Okay, then.

Addie's hands shook on the floor scrub brush as she finished her close. It took her approximately ten seconds after her area was done for her to decide to help dish. The idea of her friends staying until 1:00 am and her going home at 11:15 clenched her stomach. Exhaustion from the night was written in the slumped shoulders of her co-workers, drooping eyes poking out over their masks. Brady seemed barely able to walk, feet dragging on the tile floors as he went from freezer to beer cooler to walk-in, counting produce and making the next day's prep sheets. She would pass him as she put the clean dishes away, her headphones blaring. He would throw her a smile every time, one that she returned even though her mask... well, masked it. He disappeared into the office sometime, and she forgot to think about him, subdued in the monotony of listening to music, running dishes, going back, grabbing more, running those.

The minutes ticked by. One by one, the kitchen staff left. By 11:45 PM, it was only Brady, Addie, and John, the closing dish guy, in the kitchen. By midnight, dish was caught up; it would only take like fifteen minutes for John to finish his cleaning and get out of there. Addie was a nice person, she really was, but she'd done her cleaning for the night. She was going to call it good. Feet aching, Addie jumped up onto the

metal table by her expo station. She took a deep breath that just got caught in the fabric of her mask and pulled out her phone.

Brady came around the corner and stopped dead. Addie looked up from her phone, and straightened up, heart kicking at her ribs. A clipboard hung limp from his left hand, a pen dangling in his right fingers. He stared at her, mouth dropping into a small O, drawing Addie's attention to his lips, uncovered with his green mask abandoned somewhere.

After a couple seconds of silence, Addie finally said, "What?"

"You're still here." His eyes raked her, like he'd never seen her before and was just realizing he liked what he saw.

Addie put her phone by her hip and hid her shaking hands under her thighs. "Er-Yeah. I was helping dish, 'cause you said you'd be out of here around one..." The fabric of her mask got sucked into her mouth with every-other word, but nerves pulled the words out with pliers. "I'm sorry. I should've asked—"

Brady shook his head and marched towards her. He dropped his clipboard and pen on the far side of the table Addie sat on. They fell with a clank and skidded to the wall. Addie barely noticed, stared as Brady strode to her, didn't stop until he was standing in the V of her legs. Addie stopped breathing. They weren't touching—not quite. For all his strength and vigor, Brady was not a very big guy, standing at 5'6" and probably weighing less than 160 pounds. His slim hips barely missed the edges of Addie's knees, and she froze her muscles. Refused to move. Would not take that step to contact if he didn't initiate it.

For the first time, Brady's eyes were steady on hers, their

woods-like conglomeration of green-and-brown distracting. She'd never realized, all this time, that he had green in his eyes. Brady's hand came up from between them, skimming the inside of her thigh with the little space they had. Addie choked and bit the inside of her lip. He hesitated right before he reached her cheek, let it stand a couple inches away from her ear. "Why are you apologizing?" he whispered.

Addie flexed her fingers under her thighs. Her voice shook. "I don't—um."

He finally reached for her face. His fingers were warm, welcoming as they came in contact with her skin. She could feel a slight tremor in them as they slid up her cheek bone, playing with the edge of her mask, all the way up to her ear. She was about to ask what he was doing, until his fingers circled her ear and he unhooked the mask she never bothered to remove. It swung off her jaw, and reflexively she took a deep breath of fresh air.

Brady watched her breathe, his own chest stuttering with his uneven breaths. "God, that mouth," he sighed, and though she was pretty sure she wasn't supposed to hear it, she could feel it in the warm puff of his breath, the imagined movements of his mouth on hers. "You always hide those pretty lips."

Still unsure if she was supposed to be taking part in this conversation, Addie swallowed forcefully before blurting, "er—masks?" Addie fumbled it lieu of an explanation. Her entire vocabulary had apparently taken a vacation.

Brady's eyes flipped back up to hers and his mouth twitched in a sweet smile. "I know, you're always following the rules." He laughed, unfiltered and genuine and beautiful. Addie's whole body buzzed with the sound. "You're incredible."

He cupped her face with both hands, the cold of his skin awakening the stalling atoms in her body. Then he kissed her. He pressed his lips on hers so gently, a whispered of a touch. One of them sucked in a breath and reality came rushing back in the prickle crushed black pepper and over-heated air and a rough metal table under her; light hands on her face and soft lips on her mouth. Her fingers dug into his shoulders and he increased the force, turning their gentle connection into a real kiss, mouths working together to shape a masterpiece of unspoken thoughts and desires, of months of lust and worry, everything they were ashamed of blooming into something that now tightened Addie's stomach and sweetened the taste in her mouth. He kissed her again, harder, one of his hands sliding around her back to apply a gentle pressure, pushing their bodies together. He stepped further into her space; her knees dug into his hips. Addie clamped her hands on his shoulders, trying desperately to find some anchor, to prevent her disappearing into these sensations.

Brady slid his fingers from her face to her messy ponytail, biting her lip when she kissed him. One of them made a sound, it could've been Addie or Brady, she wasn't sure, couldn't tell where he started and she began. She ran her fingers down his chest, to the hem of his shirt. With her sitting on the counter she was only an inch taller than him and reaching for the bottom of his soiled manager's shirt only pressed them closer together, chest-to-chest, Brady's fingers tightening in her hair, his mouth straying to the sensitive skin of her jaw. She worked up the nerve to flip her fingers under his shirt, feeling his breath shudder in her mouth—

Shattering glass wrecked the silence of the store. Brady jerked back as if hit. Within a second, his hands were off her,

his mouth gone, the weight of his body ripped away. Addie opened her eyes belatedly, hands dropping like dead weights to the counter under her.

Brady's eyes were wild, dilated pupils eating his irises. His lips were shining, kissed red and puffy. His chest heaved with every breath. A caged animal. Hastily he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and took another step back, giving them a solid seven feet of distance.

"I—" his voice was hoarse.

They just stared at each other. Addie couldn't catch her breath. Something evil was crawling up her chest, and each step it took was an icepick in a rib bone. Brady's jaw worked, like he was chewing on the words he was trying to say. Then his head whipped to the left. Addie's response was slower; the closing dish-guy was half-way through his sentence before Addie realized they were no longer alone.

"—one of the margarita glasses..." he sighed. A thin trail of blood ran from his thumb, down his wrist.

"I'll be right there, John," Brady responded. His voice was still coarse, like he was getting over a cold. "Wait for me by the office. I just have to check Addie out."

"Okay, boss." John turned back the way he came. Addie's next breath was cut short when Brady turned his attention back to her.

"Er—Thank you," he finally forced out. He was back to not looking her in the eye. "For staying. I'm sorry." When he wiped his mouth this time, it was with his palm, a long drag that pulled on the skin of his cheeks. "I'm sorry." He stumbled over himself turning around and disappeared to deal with whatever John had done.

Addie slumped forward, her elbows on knees and her head

in hands. After a few deep breaths, she jumped off the table to shaky legs, clocked out, and left. The cold night air hit her like a slap after the waving heat of the restaurant's kitchen. The parking lot was desolate. A mask lay neglected in the gutter. She stuffed her own into her Goodwill purse, unsteady legs threatening to tumble her into the shining black asphalt. The wind blew dead leaves against her windshield, and when she unlocked her car, the headlights spotlighted the neglected leaves spread across the grass.

She turned on the car. The heater and the radio were off. She turned them off every time she shut off the car. A maintenance message scrolled across her dashboard: CHANGE OIL. Her lips buzzed.

She'd change her oil on her next day off.

As she drove away from the dead leaves with the heat on low and the radio on high, with glassed eyes and trembling limbs, a sinking feeling told her that tomorrow, everything would be the same.

*E.E. Curtis*

## Remodeled

The hole is still there.

Maybe a child, a woman, a man who lived there after her  
poked their finger in the hole and wondered  
*How did this get here?*

Edges are sharp, unnaturally round.  
Perhaps the fire poker fell  
dropped by careless hands.

They will know that a spark from a log fire can't create this  
kind of hole.  
Big enough for a child's index finger to explore.  
Likely no one would ever guess, no bullet  
shell to connect events.  
It was swept up  
long ago.

She remembers the yelling,  
dog skulking off  
tail low.

When the bullet struck  
she was standing near  
Mother  
Father  
Dog

Girl

She knows that the house has been remodeled.

By chance she saw the listing—

New carpet

Fresh paint

Bedroom wallpaper stripped,

that print she used to trace

with her finger

in bed.

She wonders if she could still fit her index finger in the hole

now that she is grown.

The hearth, that grey slate stone,

is likely gone. Torn out,

replaced

so the house can be neat, tidy,

remodeled,

whole.

She never saw any after pictures to take away the image of the

before.

In her mind it is always there—

Round like her finger

Round like the bullet

Hole.



## Buried

I'm sitting in the center of the school gym. Teachers usher in the younger kids. They buzz with excitement, and their feet squeak on the linoleum floor. Finally, they settle on the cold metal chairs. The entire school is in one place. I wonder why we are here. It's a swarm of bouncing heads, giggles, shuffling knees, and whispers of *quiet* from teachers.

I must have missed what the presentation was going to be about. My thoughts pull inward until I disconnect. Most days, I just follow the body in front of me. I stay in line. We're so often in lines, moving from one place to the next. I'm one among many until the last bell.

I don't even remember sitting down. I feel like an ant.

Familiar faces surround me. All my classmates. All except one. She isn't here. She won't sit by me. Not anymore. Rick plops down next to me and grabs my shoulder, pulling on my coat. He's become my best friend since last winter. He's been practicing karate since he was five, and last Halloween, we TP'd half a block in the middle of the night while his step-mom slept. We stayed up the entire night playing air hockey in the basement and went to the nickel arcade in the morning. I've become his shadow as I follow him wherever he goes.

"Ready for the spaceship?" Rick whispers. He smiles with his teeth clenched as he jostles me with both his hands. His brown hair sticks up on one side. He must have woken up late again and ran to school. "My step-mom was talking about it all morning before school. Where's the TV?"

"What spaceship? Is it a movie?" My eyes narrow. It's not

Friday or a special holiday. I frown and scrunch down into my coat.

“When are you going to take that off?”

Rick knows I won’t, even though it’s already too warm with everybody in here. With my coat, I’m protected.

I have a fascination with space. It’s far away, where I want to be. There is darkness in space. Unknown things. Anomalies. It is a word I learned from Ms. Anderson, and all week we have been learning about space. Black holes are anomalies. Light cannot escape the gravity within a black hole. I don’t like what I see inside me. I wonder if you can have a black hole inside you. Not like the kind in space. Another kind. Then I would be an anomaly.

Principal Woods rolls out a big blocky television set on a black cart. Students chitter. The tube pops into life and displays a news station. CNN is covering the launch of a space shuttle. The shuttle stands white like snow with a large orange middle booster to take it into the sky.

I shift in my seat. Orange is the color of a dying star before it becomes a supernova before it becomes a black hole.

The teachers hush us and tell us it’s a historic day. One of our own will soon orbit our world. We are lucky. We are going to view the shuttle launch live. I lean forward and imagine it already in space, heading towards a black hole.

Rick shakes me. I blink. He stares at me a moment. He liked Karee too, though he seems to have already forgotten. “Stay here, okay. Earth is a nice place.” He laughs.

“You still coming over today?”

I give a little laugh and nod. “Yes. I’ve been collecting nickels.” Nickels for the arcade. I can smash buttons, lost in the colors and sound.

“Your mom won’t mind?”

“She won’t care.” I doubt she would even notice. “We’ll call her from your place, okay?”

“Okay,” he says.

Rick’s place is better than home, way better. He lives on the hill behind my apartment, in an actual house.

I never bring friends home to my apartment. I never think to ask. I sleep a lot at other people’s houses. I used to sleep at Karee’s. Now I sleep at Rick’s. I couldn’t go to her house anymore. My family never meets my friends. My apartment is too full. I didn’t like to sleep on the brown-carpeted floor. It was old and often cold. I didn’t want my friends to sleep like I did.

In the summer, I would trace the whorls in the carpet, the old fibers separating, sometimes finding an ant, and I would let it walk along my fingers as I brought it outside to join the others. I would pretend it was an alien robot, my fingers a spaceship, and the grass a new world to explore.

There are no ants in winter. They live deep in the earth where there is no light. I would like to vanish down holes into dark, mysterious lands. I would be part of a vast kingdom where there is plenty of room and friends, where my mom is a queen, and I don’t have to share a room because I am an ant. I can dig out my room, and other ants can sleepover.

Principal Woods adjusts the volume and then sits with the other teachers. The school TV is big enough to see the shuttle in detail.

There is a small black-and-white TV bigger than my head on a nightstand in my home. Foil covers one antenna, and sometimes the picture flips, a perpetual motion like the show is plunging down into some imaginary place.

It crawls inside me as I sit on the metal seat in the gym. It is a pull, a sinking, though my head is level. Part of me falls deeper into the coat. It's January, but the school is full of warm bodies—still I won't take it off. If I do, I will lose that part of me that is holding on. I will lose her. I will sink into that place of muddy ice and silence. I can't escape that memory. I bite the metal zipper at my chin, my eyes on the TV screen. The announcer says the countdown will begin soon.

Ants have hard exoskeletons to protect them. Why don't we have any protection? How soft we are. Even the astronauts wear only flimsy white suits and glass helmets. We smash too easily. If I were an ant my size, I would be safe. Instead, I have scraped hands and knees. My pants are torn. I fall so many times playing. Sometimes you don't stand up again. My coat will have to be my exoskeleton, holding me together.

Rick is talking with the fourth graders in front of us about video games. Hiding in my coat, I wonder if they see the hole there? I imagine them all sensing it. Row upon row of children, flanked by teachers in chairs, hushing children or taking them by the hand to the bathroom. I imagine heads turning, but too late. I can only hold it in for so long. They don't cry. It is too fast. They recognize the anomaly, and they are all pulled in. No escape.

A black hole is made from a collapsed star. Once while I shivered in the cold, a star collapsed before me and never rose. Her collapse formed a hole in me.

In the gym, the kids behind me pull my hood down. I tell them to stop. They laugh and do it again and again until Rick punches one in the shoulder. The boy yelps, and the teacher pulls Rick and the boy away to talk to them.

Karee liked ants. She liked dinosaurs like I did, but not

black holes, not space, although she liked stars. She carried bright silver, purple, and pink folders to school covered in silver stars. We watched the stars from her bedroom when I spent the night. Karee would wish on them. She'd wish for her dad to be safe driving truck. She'd wish gummy candies. They are not true wishes, she would say. Yet every time her dad came home, he always had gummy animals for her. True wishes, she said, come only from falling stars.

I'd watched a movie called *The Black Hole* at the local drive-in three years ago. My brothers and sisters and I scrunched in the back seat. Our heads tilted up to see every inch of the screen. It had trash can robots and evil red robots. But what I liked the best was the enormity of the black hole, its maw consuming all things. As we drove home after the movie, I looked at the starry sky. Was there a black hole waiting up there, a piece of heaven broken, looking to devour the stars and me?

I drew whorls with my finger on the back window—little black holes. Black holes don't have to be big to swallow you whole. I looked at my fingerprinted whorls and the night sky above. I didn't wish on stars. I wished on the holes between to take me away.

I've seen ants missing legs, and my dad said they are fine. They're just bugs. They don't feel pain, he said. I wonder if that is true. If it is, I would like to be an ant.

*The Black Hole* was the first movie I remember seeing. The second was *E.T.* My baby brother cried so much my dad had to take him out and missed most of the movie. I wonder why she never cried. When you are hurt, you are supposed to cry unless you are a bug.

The teachers hush us again. On the TV, the CNN man

begins the countdown as the picture cuts to the space shuttle. Its black engines flare a bright orange. Curly brown hair hanging over her orange jacket is what I remember.

Has it been a year already?

Even when very young, I knew about death. My father and his church tell me God is love, wrath, and forgiveness. I think God is death. He let's all things die—even his son. Every Sunday, I am reminded of that death. Every Sunday, I remember that day.

Do ants miss other ants when they are gone?

The teacher gives Rick and the other boys a warning. He giggles at me and then looks at me and then the group of girls nearby, their eyes as glassy as mine. Sometimes he forgets. I wish I could. He leans his head on my shoulder just as the shuttle launches. Bright flames erupt, and the shuttle launches into the sky.

I've often tried to find a falling star. I've never seen one in the sky. I wondered if black holes swallowed up wishes like stars. I want to leave.

I watch the shuttle. The cameras track it from the ground, a line of fire screaming towards the sky. A mechanical voice drones on, relaying the shuttle's speed and height. The voice calls out the successful launch.

"Look at it go," Rick says and then makes whooshing sounds. "So much fire!"

The astronauts would seem like ants if I stood and looked up at them. All eyes are on the shuttle. It's moving so fast.

A ball of fire erupts. I blink. Tires are sliding on ice. The shuttle vanishes. Broken and falling. The kids make a mix of excited and hushed noises. Streaks of red. A choked sound.

A cry cuts off behind me. Flames split in the sky—black hole eyes.

I can't see the shuttle anymore—only a growing cloud of fire and smoke and twin trails of rockets. I'm shaking. I see Mrs. Woods run towards the TV. The TV shows the cameras tracking falling lines of smoke.

"How could this happen," A teacher sobs. Children are crying—some laughing, misunderstanding. I've frozen again.

It was so sudden. Karee smiling. A ball of fire on a cold television screen. The sound of the impact. Ice running through me as I sweat in my coat. No shuttle. No Karee. I can't breathe.

Principal Woods turns off the TV. The teachers are talking to their classes. So many voices until all is silent.

It's too hot now. I peel the zipper down and tug the coat off. It falls to the ground. My face is wet. I look at Rick, and he is ghost white. I fall.

My coat lays there, crumpled and still.

I wonder if the ants would notice.

*Cheyana Leatham*

## The Starship

III.

I want to exhale  
what happened, but you're in front of me,  
talking about it again.

*Shift shift shift.*

"Quiet!"

We are in the crowded ballroom and people  
have stopped to listen. All at once—  
though now that you mention it,  
you may have always appeared that way—

I can't look at

your eyes. I would only see the sockets  
that frame the back of your skull.

Instead, I can only watch  
the fly that orbits your champagne.

They did say that someday we could all go to the moon.

It falls in and you take a drink,  
as I lick my teeth to feel the brittle texture on my tongue.  
You are so much alike.

II.

I understand, right?  
Understand why you had to do it?

Listen to you.

She had said that your skin was  
falling away.

That you were a walking exhibit of physical anthropology.



I find you in the hallway, holding the extinguisher.  
I tell you to put it down.  
It's red so they can't see any blood on it.  
I always know how to comfort you.  
I know I would never think that you are only bones.  
Let's go back.

I.  
And so, I think back  
to 2020. They talked about this future  
the way they shared their surreal dreams  
about the decomposition  
of the human race.  
They said that someday we could all go to the moon.  
They were right.  
We embark  
on a last-ditch effort to save our  
minds. I set the date when I got overstimulated by the sound  
of your jaw popping  
when you pushed it side-to-side.  
"Let's take a trip."  
*Shift shift shift.*  
I translated that to a yes.

*Emery Steele*

## The Dream

High School Creative Writing Contest Winner

The last thing Alora could remember before she blacked out was her mother screaming her name. The scream was filled with such pain and fear that it broke Alora's heart. For what seemed like weeks, she could hear it echoing through the darkness, slicing through her consciousness and tearing her apart. When it stopped, the dream came. She was stuck in a dark room with vines covering the walls, hiding every piece of them from view. She sat on a small wooden chair covered in roses that wrapped around her hands as makeshift cuffs. She was wearing a long white dress made from the finest silk. It was short sleeved with lavender blossoms sewn through the cloth in a flowing pattern, and the skirt was made of thin fabric stacked together to create something a ballerina would wear during a performance. A voice whispered through the room like a breeze on a long summer day, so silent that she couldn't tell what it said. Once the breeze was gone, a darkness so great that it had become a monster surrounded her, ripping her beautiful dress and leaving her in rags. The darkness was a black hole, constantly trying to suck her in. It was full of hate and evil, and it brought back memories of the scream. All she could do was tremble as the inky blackness fell over her.

The darkness would circle and scratch her until she was paralyzed with fear, and then it would disappear in a cloud of smoke, starting the dream over. Alora had lost count of how many times the dream had repeated itself, and it soon became impossible to bear. She tried to force her eyes closed when it came, but something was holding them open, making her

suffer through it over and over again. She knew that it had to stop, that she shouldn't listen, that she shouldn't expect something else to happen, but every time the whispering breeze whipped over her, she was filled with such hope and longing to know what it said. If she knew, she could get out of this room of endless torture and be with her mother once again. But she was trapped in a loop of pain and longing, not sure how she had gotten there at all. As the cycle continued, she soon began to lose herself and any sense of who she was. She just knew that she needed to get home.

Then something strange began to happen. The vines slowly began to reseed, revealing four grey walls and uncovering two windows on one side of the room and a multitude of small statues that lay across the floor. Each one of them was a human-like creature that resembled parts of the forest. Maybe they were nymphs. The whisper became clearer with each repetition, and the roses began to unwind from the chair, slowly freeing her hands. Her memories came back to her in clusters. Her hope began to rise once more, and with that hope came determination. She would get free and find a way back to her mother. She would no longer succumb to the darkness and let it overwhelm her. The light would defeat the dark; she knew it would.

Her mother had collected statues of nymphs. She had been obsessed with mythical creatures for as long as Alora could remember, and the statues were a reminder that she had something to fight for, that there was hope. As time moved forward, she was able to decipher what the whisper was saying,

“Only from the gloom can the light prescribe. Only through

breaching the surface of your own moral will you be free.”

Alora had no idea what it meant or how it could help her, but she knew that she had to get out. Soon, the bonds of roses fell away, and she could leave the chair. She raced toward the windows on the side of the room and tried to open them, but they wouldn’t budge. Both latches were rusted shut. Alora looked around the room and settled her gaze on the statues of the nymphs. A plan began to form in her head, and she realized that the only way to get out of the room was to break the windows.

She bent down and picked up one of the small statues and hurled it at a window. The glass fell to the floor, shattering into a million pieces and cutting her feet. Despite the pain, the prospect of freedom washed over her, refreshing her like a cool glass of water. Before she could get through the window, the darkness returned. It grabbed her from behind, causing numbness to spread over her body. Everything was cold and dark, and she couldn’t form a thought. It dragged her back to the chair, starting the cycle over again, but this time it stayed. The darkness moved around the room, encircling Alora in doubts and fear. The only thing she could do was to run for the window. The darkness was close behind her, clawing at the back of her dress and nicking her skin, causing blood to drip down her back like sweat. The glass had disappeared, revealing two large holes in the walls. It was easy for Alora to slip through.

On the other side of the wall was a new room, maybe the size of an elementary school gym. It had white walls and flooring. The floor was littered with random objects—a pocket watch,

a bicycle, a collection of books. It was as if they had been long forgotten. Rust covered many of them, and small plants grew through cracks in the ground, twirling around each object. Alora bent over to touch a small, golden, heart-shaped locket. Before she knew what was happening, the darkness came up behind her and lifted her over its head, plopping her onto the chandelier, and made a noise that almost sounded like someone yelling “no.”

A ray of bright red light sliced through the air coming from the locket she was just about to touch. The ray disintegrated anything it touched. Horrified, Alora hung from the chandelier trying to push herself off, but she only succeeded in falling face-first onto the ground. The darkness was standing a few feet away from her, staring toward the ceiling, but there was nothing there. Alora looked around and found a dagger on top of a black crib. It was tiny, but sharp. It looked like something straight out of a movie with a black handle and ruby-encrusted hilt. Maybe she could put it to use. Dagger in hand and keeping an eye on the darkness, she started to search for a door.

Suddenly, the darkness seemed to snap back into focus, turning its head and moving toward Alora. She was done being its puppet and allowing it to make her feel fear and pain. She turned toward the darkness with the dagger raised to what she hoped would be its heart. She let out a battle cry and lunged for it. The darkness easily blocked her. Alora wasn't very skilled with daggers, or any weapon for that matter. The hand of the darkness began to elongate and sharpen, creating a long, jagged sword. They turned toward each other and parried their weapons. Alora was able to block the first three

stretches of its sword but got nicked on the shoulder with its next one. She was failing at offense and stuck in defense. She tried to be quicker than the dark blade, but she was weak from sitting on the chair for so long. Soon, the darkness was able to hit her dagger so hard that it flew across the room and landed in a broken jewelry box.

Alora fell to the ground in exhaustion as the darkness loomed over her. She crawled across the floor, unable to get up. Her foot touched against something cold, and she looked down to see the hilt of a sword tucked under her toes. She curled in on herself so she could grab the sword, acting as though she had given up in defeat. The darkness came closer, and when it was a few feet away, she rose to half its height and plunged the sword into its side. The darkness crumbled toward the ground, making a sound so close to that of her mom's scream that she fell to the ground with it and began to cry. Alora had no idea what she was supposed to do. There was no door in the room, and the only advice she was given made no sense to her.

That's when the scene reset. The darkness was back again, but this time it didn't try to come toward Alora. It knelt by the floor with its face turned toward the ground, looking at a nymph. The whisper came once again, but louder now, and this time it said something new,

"You know what you have to do, I have already told you."

Alora was ready to scream at the walls when an idea came to her. It was one of the most reckless ideas ever, but if she were right, she could finally escape. She moved toward the darkness and slowly knelt next to it. She reached upwards and touched

what she hoped to be its shoulder. The darkness flinched away at first, but then leaned into her touch. Soon, she was hugging the darkness.

Alora realized that the darkness was hurt and full of pain just like her, and that, even in the darkest of spaces, the light can still exist. As she hugged the darkness, something inside of it seemed to click, almost like a lock finally being opened after years of stillness. Suddenly, a wave of blinding light washed over the darkness. As it tore at the darkness, the ink that had covered it slowly melted away, leaving only the light. It began to move, forming a sort of circular portal. Alora knew that she had to walk through the new passageway. She knew it was the doorway to her old life, but fear began to encompass her. What if everything had changed and couldn't go back to how it was before? She needed to be brave. She would be back with her mother, and that was the only thing that mattered. She took one long breath and looked around the room before walking through the light.

When she looked up again, a different light was hovering over her. It was like the light over a dentist's chair. When she looked around, she could see that she was in some sort of hospital room with equipment and wires sticking into her skin. None of that mattered to her, though, because her mother was sitting in a chair right next to her. Her eyes were closed, and she was holding one of the little nymph statues and a book of mythology, one of Alora's favorites. Alora reached over and took her mother's hand in hers. Her mother started, and when she saw her daughter awake, her smile lit up the room, and she began to cry tears of joy.

“Mom, what happened? Why am I in a hospital?”

“My darling little girl, we were in a car crash. You hit your head and have been in a coma for the past two weeks. I thought that I was going to lose you.”

“Well, I’m here now. That’s the only thing that really matters, that we are together once again.”



*E.E. Curtis*

## Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize Winner

“Soldier’s Wages” is a tender elegy to a grandmother who left Japan only to recreate and, in many ways, lose herself in America. It is also a finely-crafted sestina that cleverly plays off homonyms and shifts language but never loses sight of the intricacies of both the form and the delicate and complex emotions within the poem. And it is also a tribute to all immigrants who let go of a homeland and are painfully re-born into a new life. The speaker suggests gratitude that the grandmother “could not buy / anything that could conceal, alter / [her] essence,” admiration that she “didn’t accept / poor treatment of [her] children,” and, in the poem’s final chord, honors her with the deepest devotion: “Grandmother, I accept your genes.” “Soldier’s Wages” is a deeply-felt and richly-crafted poem.

Sunni Brown Wilkinson’s poetry can be found in *Western Humanities Review*, *Sugar House Review*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *SWWIM*, *Ruminate* and other journals and anthologies. She is the author of *The Marriage of the Moon and the Field* (Black Lawrence Press 2019, finalist for the Hudson Prize) and *The Ache & The Wing* (forthcoming 2021, winner of Sundress’s 2020 Chapbook Prize). Her poetry has been awarded *New Ohio Review*’s NORward Poetry Prize and the 2020 Joy Harjo Prize from *Cutthroat Literary Magazine*. She teaches at Weber State University and lives in northern Utah with her husband and three sons.

*E.E. Curtis*

## Soldier's Wages

He could have acquired anything but he chose to buy  
your freedom, paid-off debt of indentured servitude. Across an altar  
you joined lives. Across an ocean current  
driving you from your homeland, you came here  
to become a Good American. To accept  
a new life necessitated annulling your genes.

Your beauty in a kimono, a tradition of generations of genes  
subjugated by tailored dresses, the type you could buy  
at a department store. Your language shushed except  
a few words that still slipped. The pressure to alter,  
conform so extreme once you arrived here  
post WWII. Being from an enemy nation, the current

social, political viewpoint a recurrent  
reminder that your genes  
were different here. You were different here.  
You could buy cosmetics, dresses, home decor, but you could not buy  
anything that could conceal, alter  
your essence. The English you could now speak except

for the pronunciation of "r" in your own name. *Teruko*, I hear  
your name brutalized by unfamiliar tongues. The exception  
was tea with other war brides you could sit by  
chattering in your native language about current  
trends families you left behind the jeans  
your sons now wore the dresses altered.

You never saw your family in Japan again, once that altar  
joined you to an American. Here  
your sons were taunted for genes  
I hope they were proud of. You didn't accept  
poor treatment of your children, the current  
of your anger stretched. Such sacrifice by

my grandfather's side, altering  
the current of your life, of mine, here  
in America. Grandmother. I accept your genes.

*Mason Wissert*

## The Horse

*BR&S Prose Prize Winner*

The horse couldn't have been dead that long.

When I saw it the first time, I was riding in the backseat with my friend in her dad's blue Chevy Silverado. Its hair was still clinging to its bones; I couldn't see its ivory ribs, only the shape and texture of them with fur stretched across their cage. I asked her what happened to it. She told me that her neighbors were horrible people and rode it until it died, leaving its body on the side of the dusty desert road that led to her house. The rider walked those few miles home, likely distracting himself by focusing on the smell of sagebrush and pondering the silver that used to fill up the hills. I never understood how they could leave it there, a meal for the coyotes, the vultures, and the magpies, which my friend hated.

"They're pests," she'd say.

She lived in a small cul-de-sac with four or five houses, in a valley, tucked away inside the Nevada desert. Other than those few houses, there wasn't much around. The nearest grocery store took at least thirty minutes to get to by car.

She also told me the same neighbors smoked marijuana and she knew because she smelt it. That explains it...drug addicts, I thought. But I had never smelt marijuana before. When I asked her what it smelled like, she couldn't explain. They had a pool and the husband was always more than happy for us to come swim. He'd sit out poolside and laugh with us, even though we didn't pay any attention to him, only each other. Once, I walked into their guest house for a drink of water. He was standing in the middle of the kitchen,

looking out of the window to the pool at my friend with his pants down. He shook. His eyes rolled. I ran out and don't think he saw me. I told her. We never told our parents or went swimming over there after that.

Horses get sick and they die. People get sick and they die. There is always some sort of weakness that exposes itself beforehand. My father's heart attack was preceded by a week of him feeling like absolute shit. I'd call and talk to him on the phone. I could hear a sickness in his voice. Probably a cold or the flu, I thought. But I wasn't going to prod. Still, this neighbor thought it wise to get on that horse that day. Or they didn't think about it. Which is worse? If they knew the animal well enough, they would have recognized some sort of change in the look in its eyes. They didn't have to call out the vet or load it up in the trailer and take it for a diagnosis, but they should've known the thing well enough to know that today was not a day to cinch up the saddle, to stuff that metal bit in its mouth, and to mount their large body on its back and force it to carry them through the dryness.

My friend and I would compare our changing bodies. To this day I'm not sure if that's typical of young girls at the age when we're watching educational videos on what's happening inside of the space that makes us different from the boys. I remember the first time we saw each other in our complete nakedness. Before that I hadn't ever hated my body and didn't realize it was something that anybody did. After that, I was always jealous of the way her stomach curved as her hips joined her legs. She was jealous of mine for the opposite reason. She resented the indentation of her hips.

We would take baths together and dunk our hair in the tub so it went over our faces and then flip it back and pretend

to be George Washington's wife. We'd speak in our fanciest voices. We'd laugh and laugh. Our favorite was baths in her parents big, deep, pink bathtub. We could only do that when they were out at some local bar, where men would come in with mud on their boots and didn't care who'd be left to clean it up. Under neon lights, both of our parents put brown bottles and tiny glass cups to their lips. They would come home smelling like stale tobacco and have trouble walking straight. Their eyes looked empty. By now, we were used to parents acting like this.

Once, we went into her parents' closet when they were out and pulled out their videotapes. This wasn't the first time I'd seen this kind of stuff. My dad had magazines under his side of the bed and on the back of his toilet—as unconcerned as a bachelor. When we brought them to her brother, he had something to show us in the crawl space under the floor that was covered in brown-speckled carpet. When he lifted the lid of the floor, I saw dirt and thought about all the spiders that call that shallow basement home. Her brother had a collection of magazines and videos he had stolen from his parents that he kept to himself in his own private, underground stash.

"I have some too," he said. He wasn't nearly as surprised or jolted as me. He was seven. In his brightly lit room, we played one. The three of us watched, eyes glancing nervously yet curiously at this natural thing that didn't seem so natural. It was the most vexed and twitchy I ever remember feeling, sitting on the edge of his bed atop race car sheets with the blue light from the screen reflecting on our soft faces.

We knew our own bodies would soon betray us, and we couldn't wait. We wished for cotton swabs with tails and thick sticky notes with wings, rough cardboard applicators, and

crimson-stained panties. All of us girls did. Conversations and gossip on the playground often involved how so-and-so started, or how so-and-so said they started, but we were pretty sure they were lying because they were jump roping.

We'd climb the monkey bars and fall off and knock the wind out of ourselves.

The first night I stayed at her house, I slept on her pull-out trundle bed. I was nine and wetting the bed nightly, whether I was at my grandparents on the bed with the weird, protective cover that crinkled anytime I shifted, or on her living room floor as we fell asleep to the movie *Bring It On*. As we watched the movie, we'd decide what character we liked the most, who we wanted to be. In those days, I feared I would be twenty-nine and soaking through whatever soft surface I rested on. That I would always see eyes of disguised anger trying to pretend they aren't *pissed* at their trundle bed being ruined, or their carpet being soaked for at least eight hours. After that first night, the living room floor was always our designated sleeping area.

"I stepped in it," her mom told her once. I was embarrassed my body did things that I didn't agree with. My dad took me to the doctor, and the doctor gave me round little red pills to take every night before bed. He also checked my newly plump breast, which I thought was the result of an infection from scraping my chest on a rock at the river.

"Everything is fine, she appears to be developing," the doctor said. He pressed firmly on my left breast, in front of my father, while asking if this hurts or that hurts. It didn't.

I'd swallow the pills and I wouldn't fall asleep until I knew my bladder was empty; this usually involved between ten and twelve visits to the bathroom until I could trust my body

enough to not forsake me, or I was too tired to care. When I'd say my prayers, I'd pray for my mom, my dad, my sister, my grandma, my grandpa, my dogs, the whole world, and not to wet the bed. It never did matter though. I would wake up soaked despite all my best efforts. I'd have to make a new floor bed a foot or so away and hope it was dry by morning and nobody would know. It never was. They always knew.

Mornings when we were free from the burden of third grade, we'd make breakfast, which was usually fried potatoes and maybe eggs. Most kids aren't allowed knife privileges for a long time. My parents trusted me with sharp objects for as long as I can remember. I'd be in charge of skinning and slicing the potatoes into bite-sized pieces. My friend's older sister, who would visit from the city from time-to-time, felt the whole thing was irresponsible.

"You can cut yourself with that knife."

"Oil gets so hot; you can burn yourself."

Not going to happen, sis. I've been doing this every weekend with my dad since before my mom left.

Even when my mom was gone, Saturday and Sunday mornings in my family's small, rented house were filled with either the smell of sausage gravy and biscuits and or Canadian bacon, English muffins, and cheesy hollandaise sauce. And always fried potatoes. I hate you; I'd scream into voicemails those mornings. I thought maybe then my mom would call back. She never did. Dad yelled at me. I'm sorry; he'd demand I'd say in another voicemail. I would. I wasn't. I said it for the three of us.

After breakfast at my friend's house, we'd wash up. I'd work the extra foods and stuck bits out of the garbage disposal after we'd rinsed the dishes and loaded them into



the dishwasher. Once, I had barely pulled my hand out of the disposal a second before she turned it on. When I told her that, she tensed, and I knew what I was in for.

“You should ask before turning it on,” I’d say, envisioning my shredded fingers and thinking of my future without the use of my right hand. Looking out the window over the sink, I’d imagine my blood staining the white kitchen. Do you know how scary it is to almost lose your hand?

She argued back.

Her brother laughed.

I knew it wasn’t my responsibility for being in the way of a weapon when the weapon went off. It’s the responsibility of the weapon holder to know who is in the way of the weapon.

The hot grease would splatter on my young skin as I put the potatoes in the pan.

Every time I went to her house, we drove past the still horse as it gradually became part of the landscape. Over the course of two years, I watched the varying stages of decay. With each right turn off Highway 50, I watched what the scavengers took from it and what they saved for later. Until there wasn’t any more to take or save.

One day she called me crying. Her old dog Shelby was dead. He greeted her as she got off the bus. Later, he was found dead in her backyard, next to where the zinnias bowed down thanks to the black and white birds that would perch atop them and the brush that met the edge of the grass. Her dad dug a hole and buried him in that desert. A year later they sold the house and moved. They took the goat, the one that would chase me when it was grouchy, and the other one who would scream for no apparent reason. They took her horse and her younger brother. They left the dead dog.

I wish I could recall that thing that made us end our friendship, but I really can't. Before they left, I'm sure we got into some sort of disagreement. Maybe she had enough of me putting ketchup on my nose and pretending her brother kicked me in the face on the trampoline for laughs at her expense. Maybe I had enough of her talking about her boyfriend. I had a boyfriend then too, for like a day. He was tall and handsome and freckled. We broke up because he liked the brunette cheerleader more; the one who is married to an army man now and posted a picture of herself masturbating on Facebook. She quickly deleted it and offered no apology.

My parents sent me off to Catholic school, where the boys were mean and the girls were meaner. I got my first bra at Christmas and when I unwrapped it, was ashamed. The lace played peek-a-boo in my fifth-grade school portrait. My dad had his first heart attack that year. Her parents moved her to the closest big city.

"If you're going to be grumpy, I don't want to talk to you," was the last thing I said to my father on the phone from Las Vegas, a city full of cocaine cowboys I thought would save me. The city where I first fell in, and made love, with one in a thunderstorm as the July moon shown full; lying on a plastic chair as water fell from the sky onto me and into the pool that I was spread out next to, I worried lightening might strike me as fingers pushed into me and mouths pressed into fur. Palm trees where rat families lived shook in the wind. I climaxed as electricity lit up the sky. Three months later, a man fired more than one thousand rounds out of a 32nd floor window during a harvest festival.

Less than a week after our phone call, he passed away. His literal heart was too weak. Not like the first time, this time

took all of him. I watched him give love to my mom despite all the things she didn't do to deserve it. I wonder if all this giving was too much and his body wanted a way out. My mom came home from work to find him in a bathtub, his skin beginning to turn blue as the clear plastic shower curtain clogged the drain and flooded the floors. Big industrial fans were brought in, but it took time to dry. For weeks, every morning as she got out of bed and planted her feet on the carpet, death water would wet them. I asked her what he looked like when she found him. She said he looked like he was sleeping, and that she stroked his head and his beard as she said her goodbyes. I wanted to see him so bad, just one more time before he was turned to ash. I knew he wouldn't look the way he did; his big cheeks would no longer be flushed. The gleam: I wouldn't be able to see with closed eyes, and the way they squinted when he smiled. I expressed this, sitting around a big wooden table, chairs arranged far apart, with my family and my sister's new boyfriend at the funeral home. My mom and grandparents decided it was best I didn't. We looked at necklaces that could hold a tiny amount of his new form.

My sister and I wear our ash necklaces with remembrance now. My mom keeps the rest of him in a box, tucked away somewhere in the trailer she shares with her new boyfriend.

No longer do desolate roads pass by dead horses and blinking red neon lights. Nor do they pass by heaven-high casinos where men shatter golden windows to point automatic rifles at concertgoers below. They pass by potato fields and tribal burial grounds in my father's hometown. Men closer to his eternal age than my own hold me there. They laugh with me and help me get up when I fall over after too many lemonades, spiked with huckleberry vodka and flavored with

local fruits. Their bald heads feel smooth when my palms and fingers trace them. Their beards feel rough and remind me of how I think safety feels. I don't even mind their bellies. Sometimes they'll complain to me about their girlfriends or fiancés. Sometimes they'll swear to me they're going to leave.

"It's not your fault. It's been a long time coming."

I'll hand myself over to them and they'll kiss my pale skin like I swear it's never been kissed before and for a little while I'll pretend even to myself that I believe them. Being chosen sounds so nice.

When I rest my hands on the shelf that is my hips now and when I stand naked in front of full-length mirrors, I think of my friend. An internet search revealed a marriage website, a generic one that you buy for  $x$  amount of time, hinting that she was recently married. But now I can't find the website anymore.

I have seen her once in the flesh since we got in our last silly argument that escapes me. A few years after our fallout, as Daddy drove us home from the waterpark and my mom rode shotgun, my sister and I sat in the backseat exhausted. As I was nodding off for a short car nap, the kind that comes so easy when you're little and have had too much fun and sunshine, my parents mentioned they had seen her there. She looked like she hadn't been eating. She was as thin as me, they said, only she didn't wear it as well because it wasn't natural. The next time we went to the water park, the four of us, Daddy, Mom, Sissy, and I loaded our sun-kissed bodies into their white Riviera and made that hour drive into the biggest little city. Their Camel smoke swirled around us and poured out the windows, the faux fur covered seats sticky and damp with our sweat in the dry heat of a Nevada summertime. We

walked the black asphalt parking lot which seemed so large then. We passed go-karts as they sped in circles around the track. We waited in the queue with other families to be let in. After an eternity we entered. My parents separated from us to go over the bridge that only those of drinking age could cross. And then I saw her standing on a stair landing that led to a slide high above me. They were right. I could see the shape and texture of her ribs in her tiny blue bikini. She could likely see mine too, as I awkwardly carried the two-person tube from the lazy river to the wave pool.

We locked eyes for a second before I looked away. My little sister followed closely behind, not aware of the stares as they followed her dripping body and wet feet leaving marks on the hot summer pavement.

## Land Acknowledgement

The land on which Idaho State University's Pocatello campus sits is within the original Fort Hall Reservation boundaries and is the traditional and ancestral home of the Shoshone and Bannock peoples, their elders past and present, their future generations, and all Indigenous peoples including those upon whose land the University is located. We offer gratitude for the land itself and the original caretakers of it.

As a public research university, it is our ongoing commitment and responsibility to teach accurate histories of the regional Indigenous people and of our institutional relationship with them. It is our commitment to the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes and to ISU's citizens that we will collaborate on future educational discourse and activities in our communities.

## Colophon

Issue 20, 2021 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 80 lb cream Lynx opaque Ultra smooth (328 PPI) by Bookmobile in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

## Contributors

**Stephen Aifegha** is a mixed media artist who uses original African fabrics and newsprint as major elements in his art. The African fabrics are used to show his identity and also give an insight that his subject or narrative concerns issues regarding the African continent and its diaspora. The newsprint, on the other hand, is used to make social commentary, statements that define the politics and narrative of his artistic expression.

**Milo Bossler** is an artist, illustrator, and designer who ranges between diverse media practices, from traditional drawing and painting, to digital design and graphic illustration. Milo tends to find inspiration in many places and continuously seeks to experiment with new techniques, practices, and subjects.

**Jessa Briggs** was born and raised in Idaho with feuding parents and two little sisters. Since she was old enough to form letters, she has been a creative writer. She graduated high school with top honors and now attends Idaho State University because she can get a good education without going into too much debt. She now lives in Pocatello, Idaho with her adorable cat, Ainsley. She is studying for a degree in Creative Writing and pursuing her ability to change the world.

**Kate Brown** is a BFA Painting and Art History student involved in examination of the nature and materiality of memory. A new mother, Kate's most recent work focuses on

the feelings of joy and loss that come from childbearing. She has dedicated herself to the creation of work with strong ties to critical theory and will continue her research in graduate school.

**John Bybee** is an undergrad at ISU working toward his BFA with an emphasis in fiber arts and metalsmithing. His work deals with gender roles and sexuality as well as alternative spiritualities.

**William Bybee** is an MFA Candidate at Idaho State University. His research has been centered around his love of abstract art. Abstraction has given him a way to talk about subjects that matter to him, but not force his thoughts on a viewer who is not ready. Through abstraction he is exploring the world of codes and Queer Abstraction.

**JoMax Christensen** is returning to ISU to finish his degree. He is a non-traditional student, a junior majoring in Creative Writing with minors in History and Professional Writing. When he isn't writing or going to school, he is playing games with his two boys.

**Natalie Cohen** is a sophomore at Idaho State. She is a violin performance major and a piano minor. She studies violin under Dr. Hyeri Choi and piano under Dr. Kori Bond. Natalie participates in many of the ensembles at Idaho State, including the Idaho State Civic Symphony, quartets, and chamber jazz ensemble. Along with music, Natalie also enjoys painting and drawing as well as other types of crafts, such as



crocheting and embroidery.

**Conner Gordon Coutts** is a big-time kid from a small-time town. He got his start in music playing with his friends for fun, and his hobby quickly progressed into a passion. He likes edamame with way too much salt, studying politics, and letting Seancey write his bio.

Solar-powered nature lover **E.E Curtis** writes novels, poetry, and short fiction. She is working on a BA in English and Music. A shortened list of hobbies (due to word count) includes baking, hiking, running along the ocean barefoot, reading, DIY. She has a website for writing, [eecurtis.com](http://eecurtis.com).

**Jack de Tombe** began studying piano at the age of four under Margarete Nichols. While still working on his Bachelor's, his notable achievements include playing Shostakovich's 2nd Piano Concerto and touring with the band "Mass Hipsteria."

**Joseph Chidiebere Emmanuel** is a Nigerian drummer currently majoring in music at Idaho State University. He is also sponsored by Canopus Drums, Bosphorus Cymbals, and Salyers Percussion Drumsticks.

**Landen Fergus** is a skateboarder, avid reader, essay writer, poem botcher, and fiction wheel-spinning-on-er. He graduated from ISU in December of 2020 with BAs in Philosophy and Literature. He begins his MA in English in the fall of 2021. Until then, he'll be line cooking through his bills and thinking about words.

**Tamisha Green** is a senior in the undergraduate English program who is a Creative Writing major and double minoring in Literary and Professional Writing. Next spring, Tamisha will get a Bachelor's degree and hopes to get into the English graduate program to work towards a PhD.

**Caleb Greenwell** is an undergraduate in the English program with a focus on creative writing. He has lived in Idaho most of his life. He grew up in Oakley, Idaho and moved to Pocatello in 2015 after he separated from the United States Air Force. He was originally studying psychology, but within the last couple years he changed course toward an English degree. The classes he has taken have increased his confidence and understanding of the craft. He has appreciated being able to use writing as a type of expression and therapy, which has been very helpful during these seemingly tumultuous times.

**Bohan Hou** is from China. She is a violin performance major at ISU, studying under Dr. Hyeri Choi. She has studied the violin since she was five years old. Bohan used to be the concertmaster of the children's orchestra in Wuhan Youth Palace when she was a child. In 2017, she participated in the Qingdao International Music Festival. She has been a member of the Idaho State Civic Symphony since 2019. In 2020, she participated in the Young Artist Competition and entered the finals of the senior group.

**Mariah Larson** is on track for a BA and will be completing her junior year spring 2021. With her degree, she plans to better pursue a career in freelance illustration and independent comic book production. Part of that goal has been completed as of 2019 with the first issue of her comic book, *Puella Maledictum: Into the Mists*.

**Mal Layne**, who graduates in the class of 2022 with one music degree and one science degree, plays trombone (jazz and classical) in several ISU ensembles and plans to study trombone performance full time in graduate school.

**Cheyana Leatham** received her Bachelor's degree in English with an emphasis on creative writing and a minor in global studies and history from Idaho State University. She is an aspiring author who enjoys writing in genres such as horror and magic realism.

**Joshua Lemrick** is working to attain his Creative Writing degree at ISU. He has been serious about writing since he was nine and is always trying to learn about writing from whomever he can. He hopes to one day fully support himself as a novelist.

**Gabriel Lowman** is a 2021 graduate of Idaho State University's music performance program. "Impossibility Reduced to Bricks" is primarily a personal reflection on the emotionally intensive year that was 2020.

**Jesse Malloy** writes, “We are all ISU students, with different backgrounds in music. We are all currently enrolled in the commercial music class/program, with hopes to combine all of our creative strengths and record cool songs.”

**Gracie Marsden** is a proud Asian-American with degrees in the humanities and in teaching. She enjoys reading and writing stories that center on the human condition. Her hobbies include playing tennis, studying philosophy, and spending time with her two cats, Totoro and Haku.

**Jerrel Martin** is a cello performance major at ISU, studying under Dr. Eleanor Christman Cox. He has studied cello since he was 11 years old. Jerrel has participated in many ensembles, including the Honors Performance Series Chamber Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in 2017, the Idaho State Civic Symphony, ISU Faculty and Guest Chamber ensemble, and the Blue Lake International Orchestra as principal cellist in 2019. Along with music, he has a passion for painting, film, and fashion. As a senior, Jerrel is making plans to continue his education at a higher institution to receive his Masters in Music.

**Seancey Richard Nelson** has a special kind of mind that is often found in the likes of nuclear physicists and linguistic anthropologists (maybe he’s overexaggerating). His understanding of mathematics and sound allow him to create music overflowing with precise instrumentation and dreamlike melodies. While his career is undecided, he has many talents including letting Conner write his bio.

**Orla O'Connor** is a member of the concert and chamber choirs at Idaho State University and is a past member of the Idaho State Civic Symphony. Orla's main instruments are fiddle and voice, but she also plays some guitar, piano, and whistle. She studies and performs classical music, but her passion lies in folk music from all corners of the globe, and she is excited to travel and experience some of these folk styles in person. Orla is a native Gaelic speaker and works with the Friends of Irish Studies Idaho to promote the language in Pocatello. Other than music, Orla's interests include baking/cooking, learning about different cultures and languages, going on scenic walks, and getting to know new people!

**Maggie Price** is studying to receive a Bachelor of Music Education with a minor in piano. She has performed in many small chamber ensembles as a violinist. She also participates in the Idaho State Civic Symphony. In her free time, she enjoys hiking, climbing, and skiing.

**Adam Redd** has been composing from a young age for piano and combos. "Clockwise" is his most recent and it's been in the works for a couple months now. Adam is primarily a pianist, but also sings as well. Music composition is Adam's love. He is a freshman in the music department and hopes to create so much more during his years here!

**Lydia Ring** is a freshman at ISU, studying Music Education in hopes of teaching at the high school level. They have played the viola for 9 years across several orchestras, and they also play trombone in the marching, pep, and concert bands. When they're not working or studying, they enjoy taking care of their pet fish!

**Claire Smedley** is a sophomore in the Music Education program.

**Emery Steele** is a ninth-grader at Hillcrest High School. She has lived in Idaho Falls for her whole entire life. She is a soccer player and has been playing for nine years now. In fourth grade, she began to be interested in writing and has been doing it ever since.

Pocatello native **Ryan Tomlinson** graduated from ISU in December 2020 with a Bachelor of Music degree in saxophone performance. During his time at ISU, Ryan had the pleasure and opportunity to study under many incredible teachers, including Dr. Shandra Helman and Professor Jon Armstrong, who were key in his development both as a musician and a person. Ryan played in a number of groups including the ISU Wind Ensemble, Big Band, Chamber Jazz Ensemble, Idaho State Civic Symphony, and both student and faculty saxophone quartets. He also performed three solo recitals, the last of which he recorded and mixed himself. In his free time, he continues to practice saxophone, hike, and work on his car. Ryan has his eyes on continuing his education in grad school,

hoping to eventually receive a DMA and teach saxophone at a university.

**Mary Unger** is part of the 2021 graduating class of Idaho State earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. While Photography—specifically film—is her preferred medium of choice, all forms of 2-D art are worth exploring and working with, even if it is for just one project—which is why she thinks art is magical.

**Mason Wissert** is an undergraduate student studying English with an emphasis on creative writing. She lives with and loves her dog, Layla; her cat, Mimis; and the stray cat she feeds, Cici.

**Karlin Wurlitzer** is a biology-psychology double major at Idaho State University. She plays soccer and in her limited spare time, enjoys sleeping, reading, and staring at trees. She is constantly on the lookout for new ways to help herself think, and writing happens to be one of them.



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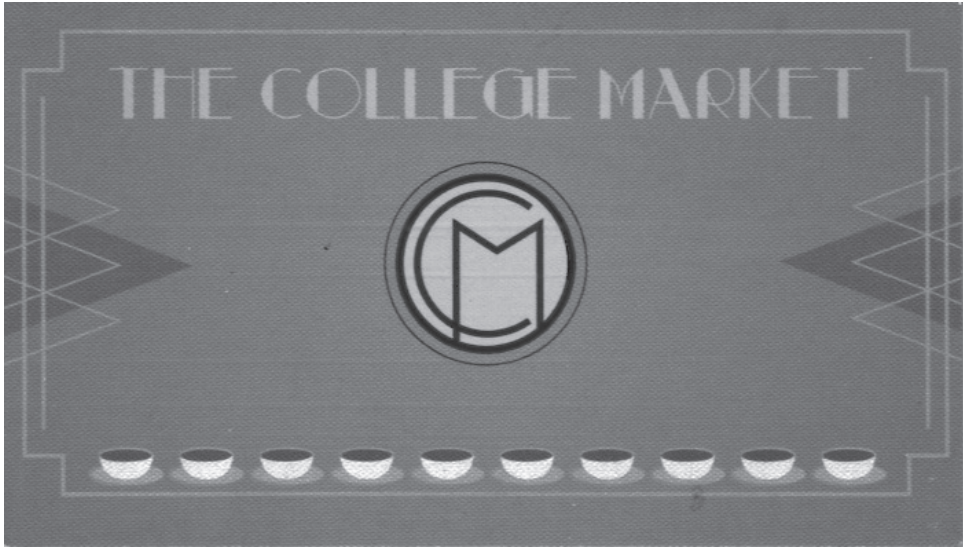
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NIGHT

*348 North 3rd Street  
Loads of parking!*



233 N Main, Suite B, Pocatello, ID 83204, [enchantmentss.com](http://enchantmentss.com)

## A Healthier Place to Eat

123 S Main, Pocatello, Idaho

208-233-6300

Open: 11:30-8 M-F and 12-7:30 Sat

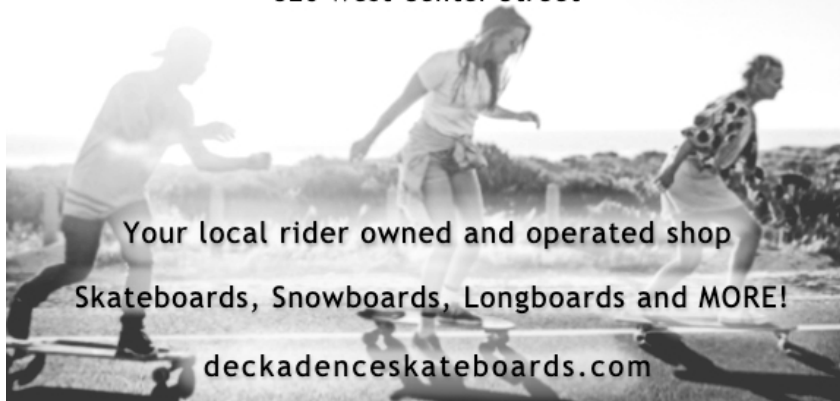
Full menu with vegan and gluten-free options

## Deckadence Board Shoppe

Board Shoppe for Bored People, est. MXXI

Located in Historic Downtown Pocatello

326 West Center Street





758 South Main  
Pocatello  
208-232-5559



## Round River Baking

Land • Community • Craft

Baking real breads and  
pastries featuring local  
and organic ingredients  
at 250 N. Main St.  
in Pocatello

Come By For A  
Delicious Cup of  
Coffee

- \* Mochas
- \* Lattes
- \* Drip Coffee
- \* Frappes

We can ICE or  
BLEND Anything!!

**546 S. 5th Ave.**



**Open to 9pm**

Free Wi-Fi

Lovely Porch Seating

Stellar Ambient  
Music

Always Friendly  
Service



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715 NORTH MAIN STREET  
208-589-8396



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