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FICTION

PUNCH PROSE

NONFICTION

POETRY

POETRY

ART

ART

SPOTLIGHTS

FOREWORD

As writers and artists, we know that to tell the truth at all is an undertaking of epic proportions. It is a commitment to beauty and to connection. And though it may be said that creative souls are sensitive, we are not faint spirits. There is something deeply heroic about the attempt to capture and make sense of human experience—to mold its restlessness out of nouns, verbs, paint, and clay.

We know what it costs—we know we must set out into the dark places where the cyclic cry of a whippoorwill mixes with the voices of too many tired bodies. We have left our homes to enter into the disquieting challenges set before all people—the gas station robberies and the snakes that flee through waters unseen. We have stayed to walk through the death of a grandparent and the eleven years of apathy that can pass by without our knowing. And though sometimes we have chosen to ignore the knocking on that door and crept away with head turned, we persist, knowing that to live at all demands great courage.

And yet, if this centennial edition of *Ivy Leaves* tells us anything, it's that though we all go to those hard places, we do not go by ourselves. Though we may feel alone from the moment we're born, a child cast in the mold of fatal history, we are never truly lost. We run, we drift, we fight, and we hold one another up when our spinal columns begin to crack from the weight of it all. And then we push forward—forward through The Game of Life to see state auditing buildings bathed in new light, ex-Mafia men made into missionaries, and the world stitched together at the bow of an old canoe. When we come to the end of our journeys, we are all left marked, our own pieces of art—measured by the things we survived.

So lean back, let your head hit the sand—breathe in the scent of lavender and know that no matter the miles you choose to go, we will go together holding onto the promise that "It'll all be fine, fine, fine."

BROKEN DOWN

Angel Hisnanick

"Of all creatures that breathe and move upon the
earth, nothing is bred that is weaker than man."
–Homer, *The Odyssey*

I am a midnight voyager, my Argo
a rusty pickup truck, my resting place
a gas station—the only sign of grace
or life I've seen for miles. I'm drifting slow
at sea—a shipwrecked sailor sunk below
a father's apathy. His angry voice
still echoes in my mind with the humming noise
of neon lights. My youth died long ago.
My mother cried because I made the choice
to leave—I tried to prove it was my right.
But as refrains of old songs play endlessly
rebellion gives no reason to rejoice,
for no matter how far I run the fights
I left behind are never really gone.

GRINGA TO MARKET

Jenni Harris

Vendors claim their spots,
spreading their goods across
wooden tables that line the streets,
standing over potholes and trash heaps.
Displays of pink-skinned chickens—

raw bird meat
bakes beneath the blue tarp sky
that holds in the morning heat
and drips rainwater from its folds,
warm on my neck.

Bugs begin to swarm
at noon when the air smells sweet
and coppery with spoiled meat.
Foreign phrases are shouted—
cat calls and whistles.
Motorcars buzz by like red beetles
trailing fruity exhaust smoke.

I turn
left right left through the streets,
and my fingers
brush against bald-spotted dogs at my feet,
barking, showing teeth,

pink skin boiling in the heat.

KENT STREET

Grant Looper

Why some people gamble with their lives is beyond me. I once knew this girl who almost killed herself swimming in some random creek over in Africa. Why? Beats me. People are stupid.

I had some friends in college that were obsessed with hiking. Not the nice, spring day mountain trail hiking; I mean serious hiking. You know, the kind where you dig holes and wipe yourself with leaves. I heard there was one kind of leaf in Australia that was poisonous, that when one guy wiped himself with it, he shot himself because it hurt so badly. Nature's pretty messed up.

My wife isn't one of those nature-loving, danger-loving freaks, but she still doesn't really get the whole stay-alive-past-thirty thing. She's always going to the bad parts of town by herself late at night for something stupid like a jug of milk.

"Heather," I say. "Why do you go out at night for something stupid like a jug of milk?"

"Because we need milk, Bill," she says. She looks at me the way I imagine she does at her students when they say something dumb or disrespectful.

"No kidding," I say. We have this talk at least once a week.

I'm hoping all of that will change now, but last night, though, my wife did it again.

"Where are you going?" I asked from the couch when I saw her grab her purse and keys.

"To get some eggs. We're out."

"It's dark out."

Heather looked at me. "So?"

"So it's dangerous to go out by yourself at night."

"I do it all the time."

"I know," I said with an exasperated laugh. "And it's really dumb."

Heather rolled her eyes and threw her purse over her shoulder. "I'll be fine."

"When are you going to get your permit?"

"What?" Heather turned around at the door.

"Your concealed weapon permit."

"We're not talking about this right now," she said, and walked out the door.

"Make sure you have your pepper spray!" I yelled after her.

I would've gone with her, but it'd been a stressful day at work. It was the month's-end, and that was always tough for accounting. Heather got to hang out with kids all day. I still can't imagine what would be so difficult about teaching fifth grade English.

When she was gone, I did some internet research to find stats about concealed weapons and violent crime. It proved to be a challenging search. Headlines like "Gun-Carrying Granny Stops Mugging" and "How to Defend the 2nd Amendment to Your Communist Democrat Friends" appeared on every page of my Google search results.

Eventually, I gave up and shut my laptop. I took a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes off the table next to me. I didn't have my lighter with me, so I had to get up and walk all the way to the kitchen to get one. I groaned as I got up and felt the blood rushing from my head back into my legs. That feeling always makes me grouchy.

It was nine-thirty, and Heather had been gone for an hour and a half. I sat in my recliner, fuming to myself, and smoked through the pack on the table. Heather usually made me go outside when I smoked, but it was hot outside, and there were mosquitoes. Plus, the recliner was more comfy. When Heather got back, I was laying back in the recliner, smoking my eighth cigarette.

"Why were you gone so long?" I said, looking at her from under heavy eyelids. She walked into the kitchen to put up the groceries.

"There was a better sale on eggs at the Kwik-Foods on Kent Street."

"I told you not to go there," I said, sitting up. "They have a shooting a day over there. I mean, what are eggs, like a dollar?"

"No, they aren't," Heather said. "And I needed bread, too. And milk."

"You sound like my mom." I snuffed out my cigarette in the ashtray, which was almost overflowing. Heather walked into the living room.

"Were you smoking?" She said, sniffing at the air and frowning.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it relaxes me."

"Only because your body thinks it relaxes you. It's a placebo."

"Well," I said, trying to think of a good comeback. "Whatever."

She stood there for a moment, looking at me. Then she shook her head and walked back to the bedroom. I watched her walk away, straining to get a better view as she disappeared into the hallway.

I fell back into the recliner and stared at the ceiling. All the smoking had left me thirsty, but if I got up, I'd get one of those headaches again, so I just laid there for a few more minutes.

The light was out in the bedroom when I went back there. I could see Heather lying in bed by the light of the window. I stepped lightly to the bathroom to brush my teeth. It bugged me that she insisted on going out late at night. It was really careless. She didn't even seem to care what I said about it, just as long as she got milk and eggs for a half penny less.

I started to brush my tongue and cringed at the burning sensation caused by the fluoride mixing with the tar from my cigarettes. I spit out the toothpaste when I was done and looked in the mirror. My beard was growing in a little bit, and it was almost time to shave. I picked up the razor but put it back down. There was always time to shave tomorrow. I washed my face to get the tobacco smell off my skin and climbed into bed with Heather.

"You smell like smoke," she said.

"Sorry."

Heather sighed and kept facing the window.

"You know I just say that stuff because I worry about you," I said.

"I know."

"I worry about you because I love you."

"And that makes it all better doesn't it?" Heather said, sitting up slightly and turning around.

"Does it?" I said.

"Not quite," Heather said, laying down with her face to the window. "I'll give you an E for effort, though."

"You mean an A for effort?"

"No, not quite."

The next day when I got up, Heather was pouring herself a last cup of coffee, already dressed in her teaching clothes. "I made an extra cup of coffee," she said without looking up.

"Thanks," I said, blinking the morning light out of my eyes.

"I'm running late," she said, looking at her watch. "I'll see you tonight." She kissed me quickly and started to unlock the door.

"Listen," I said. "I'm sorry about last night. I won't smoke inside anymore."

Heather opened her mouth to say something, paused for a moment, and then turned away. "Ok," she said.

"Drive safely," I said.

I stood for a moment, alone in the kitchen, looking at the door. Then I walked to the window in time to see Heather pulling out of the driveway in her red Prius. I decided to have my coffee with a few cigarettes. On the porch, of course.

I didn't have to go in to work for another hour and a half. Heather had to go in really early because she had an early class and liked getting her material ready. She's always been one of those overachiever types, wanting everything to be perfect. I've never understood people like that.

The coffee was cold, so I had to heat it up. As it was sitting in the microwave, I looked at the paper on the kitchen table. One of the headlines read, "Two Shot in Gas Station Robbery." I gripped the back of the chair, imagining what it'd be like if that'd been Heather. I'd plan an elaborate way of getting back at the shooter. Maybe I'd go rogue and track him down, and go into his house at night and slice his innards out. Then I'd tell him who I was as he lay bleeding out on the ground. I'd say something like: "You killed my wife," followed by some remark about how he'll burn in hell or something like that.

The timer rang on the microwave. I peeled my sweaty fingers off the chair and got my coffee. My jaw was aching because I was fantasizing about killing my wife's murderer. Grabbing my cup and cigarettes, I walked out to the porch. It was nice out. I lit a cigarette and looked around the backyard, taking an occasional sip of coffee.

It's Florida, and it's what you'd expect. There's a live oak tree with long branches that shades most of the yard throughout the day, and there are a few weird tropical plants along the fence. I'm not sure what they're called because I grew up in Tennessee, where there were no tropical anythings.

I stayed out for a while just looking around the yard before I picked up my empty mug and walked inside. I brushed my teeth, being careful not to scorch my tongue with the fluoride again. Heather hadn't done the laundry yet, so I had to take the least smelly shirt out of the dirty clothes basket. I did have some clean pants. It didn't matter to me that they were wrinkled, so I put them on with the semi-dirty shirt and grabbed a tie from a hanger in the closet. Before walking out, I stuffed my little .380 caliber pistol into my pocket. My office building was near the bad side of town.

I got into my car and pulled out of the driveway, glancing at the clock on the dashboard. Eight-forty. I was running a little late. It was a thirty-minute drive.

The first light I came to turned yellow when I was still fifty feet away. I decided I could make it. Gripping the steering wheel, I kept my eye on the light. It turned red right as I passed under it. I glanced into the mirror to make sure there hadn't been any cop cars conveniently placed at the intersection. There weren't any.

I eventually made it to work only two minutes late. Nobody really seemed to care. I sat down at my desk and turned on the computer. As usual, it took a few years to boot up. A stack of paperwork was sitting to the left of my keyboard. I sighed and went to work.

The guy who sits at the desk next to me is Dave. He's a nice enough guy, but he always wants to talk to me about extremely personal matters during my busiest hours. He thinks he's some kind of psychiatrist or philosopher or whatever.

"How are you doing, Bill?" Dave said, looking over at me with an uncomfortably intense stare. He had weird, watery blue eyes. Like Sméagol from *Lord of the Rings*.

"Fine," I said.

He nodded. “Are you really?”

“Yes.”

I didn’t look up, but if I had, I know I would’ve seen Dave give me one of his signature “I’m here for you, buddy” looks. I didn’t want that look. Nobody wants that look. It’s creepy.

“How’s Heather doing?” he asked.

“She’s fine,” I said. I glanced at the photo I had of her on my desk. She was giving her signature smile; a bright, infectious smile. I couldn’t help but feel happier when I saw it.

Dave was quiet for maybe five minutes.

“Can I ask you a question, Bill?” He said finally.

I really hated how he said my name all the time. It made my skin crawl.

“Sure,” I sighed.

Dave looked into the air, thinking. Then he leaned back into his chair and looked at me with that intense stare. “Are you happy?”

“I’m going to have a cigarette,” I said.

I grabbed the pack from my desk and walked to the back of the office. I could feel Dave’s Sméagol eyes watching me all the way to the door.

Walter, my boss, was already out there smoking. “Oh,” I said, squinting in the sunlight. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he said.

“I just came out here to get a smoke.”

“Join the club,” Walter said. “How’s Heather?”

“She’s fine,” I said. Then I laughed.

“What?”

“It’s nothing. Just, Dave already asked me that. Then he asked me if I was happy. I think he’s a Russian spy.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Walter said, snuffing out his cigarette on the metal wall of the building. “Why’d he ask that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I paused for a moment. “Heather and I did have a little fight last night, though. Nothing big. We’ve had worse.”

“Ah,” Walter said. “Just remember, flowers never fail.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, not with my wife, anyway. But of course, Heather could be different. You never know. Women are strange creatures.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“Give the flowers a try, though,” Walter said. He smiled, then opened the door and went inside.

When I sat back down, I looked at the picture on my desk of Heather smiling at me. I worked for another hour or so, glancing repeatedly at the picture.

“So,” Dave said. “Have you given my question any thought, Bill?”

“What?” I said, looking up.

“My question,” Dave said. “Are you happy?”

I looked again at the picture. “I’ll be right back,” I said. It was four o’clock; Heather was off by then. I took my phone out and called her.

“Hello?” came Heather’s voice.

“Hey, Heather,” I said. “Listen, don’t make anything for dinner tonight. Let’s go out somewhere. Is that okay?”

“Sure,” Heather said. She paused. “What’s the occasion?”

I laughed. “Do I need an occasion?”

“I guess not,” Heather said, laughing. I could hear the tension leaving her voice, and I smiled to myself. “Okay, well that sounds good. I’ll see you when you get home.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

I hung up and walked back inside. I could decide where to go on the way home. For the time being, though, I had to try to finish my work without Dave distracting me with questions about my general happiness.

On my way to the florist, I realized I was out of cigarettes. There was a gas station two blocks from work, on Kent Street. I parked in front of the shop and walked in. I was feeling pretty good, so I thought I'd get some lottery tickets, too. A sleepy looking obese man with a foot-long gray beard was sitting behind the counter. I walked to the back of the store to get some Coke.

When I went back to the front, the man behind the counter looked wide awake and fidgety. His fingers were fumbling with the cash drawer. I looked past the counter to see some guy with his face mostly hidden by a hoodie standing there. He had a gun.

"Just give me the money, and I'll get out of here," the guy said.

I stood dumbstruck for a moment, just watching. Then made a potentially fatal mistake: I dropped the Coke.

The robber jerked his head over to me, and I could see a wild desperation in his bloodshot eyes. I brought out my pistol real quick, like in one of those westerns, but the robber was faster. He fired a few times, and I fired a few times, hitting the display of discounted three-liter soda bottles behind him and shattering a window.

I don't remember if I could feel the bullet hit me, but I remember falling back against the aisle and onto the floor. Just my luck, I thought, laying on the floor. The robber ran off with the money from the cash register, which was probably no more than eighty dollars. The guy behind the counter took up the phone and started calling 9-1-1. He knew I was there, but he didn't seem to know what to do.

I knew that my dinner plans had been ruined. Then it occurred to me that this may be more helpful with Heather than the dinner would've been. I lost consciousness while looking up at the attendant behind the counter, still on the phone, yelling something incoherent.

I woke up only a few hours later in the hospital, which is where I am right now. The bullet didn't hit anything super important, which is lucky for me. Apparently I hit someone's windshield when I fired at the perp. I don't know if they'll take action against me or not. I'm sure they won't mess with the poor guy who's just been shot. It's going to be a great card to play.

Heather left the hospital about thirty minutes ago. She was pretty worried. I guess that's to be expected. I was right about this helping my case, though. I'm thinking that if I don't overplay my hand, then I can ride off of this for the next few weeks, if not months. That "Florence Nightingale effect" thing is looking pretty exciting right now. I'll have an excuse to be lazy. I'll get lucky with Heather more often. I didn't even have to buy flowers. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

PARKING GARAGE

Anonymous Author

There are five stories between my dangling feet and freshly dried asphalt. I look out across the smoothness of it, the crisp yellow lines startling against the dusk. It's my freshman year at my university and the dorms are spilling out and over with loud, laughing girls. I left my roommates in the middle of a battle of epic proportions concerning which detergent belonged to who. I breathe the dusk air deep into my lungs trying to expunge the bitterness and frustration I feel. Looking down, I click my heels together nervously. I try to relax despite the surely fatal or worse, crippling fall that would accompany a momentary lapse in balance. The head-rush of adrenaline isn't entirely unwelcome as I have done little but study and play mediator these last three months. This place and the events that it bears witness to have been my refuge.

It's eight-thirty p.m. and the sun is starting its slow backward fall out of the sky. I wait patiently as the headlights of cars start to illuminate the roads laid out before me. The parking deck is completely vacant. Driving up, you can tell how little attention the upper deck receives by the rubber skid marks of aspiring fast and furious drivers who come here to practice donuts in peace. Wrappers of candy and empty Mountain Dew cans catch the fluorescent light of the overhead lamps. The city of Anderson is like a sleeping giant shifting back and forth in bed. Occasionally a car alarm or drunken howl will pierce the silence, but the gentle hum of cars and electricity snores on.

I wait patiently perched on the edge of the parking deck. On rare, serendipitous occasions, two bodies will wander out onto an adjacent rooftop patio. The patio is lined with sprawling ficuses and small shrubs, illuminated by Christmas lights. Some nights they sit at a picnic table catty-cornered on the edge. But on my favorite nights, they dance. The air around me becomes saturated with memory as Sinatra or Nina Simone bounces off the adjacent concrete walls. My eyes crinkle at the edges watching their bodies spin away and back into each other.

I really can't tell if they are good dancers, but occasionally laughter will intermingle with the crooning jazz and I can tell it doesn't really matter. I watch their silhouettes weave in and out of the shadows as they cover every inch of the patio. Occasionally, someone will spin out too far and I see a momentary outline of the individual piece of this dynamic whole. After a time, they eventually stop spinning and dipping and merge into a single, swaying entity. This is when I consider how questionable it is for me to be watching without their knowledge.

Their slow sway ebbs into a stillness that feels like whole lifetimes will pass without their notice. I sit watching the couple hold each other and wonder if they're talking or just letting old blues singers spin the narrative of their emotion through familiar choruses and melodies. Eventually, their stillness almost makes me reconsider if they existed at all. I climb back into my car.

I am careful to keep my headlights off as I back out of my parking space and make my way down the spiraling deck. I have only witnessed the couple a handful of times. But in those miraculous moments of serendipity, I have never outlasted them to watch them separate and walk back into the place from which they came.

WATER & FLESH

Allyson Vaughan

Water like flesh is given to tender tendencies
when it's met with the pull of a finger it shrinks
back to where it came from afraid to stretch
too far from what it knows—itself
it can be a cruel thing with a habit
of forcing itself into places and angry
when pinched into a river it will widen
open its mouth to cannibalize the land
and become an ocean rolling and cresting
into wrinkled waves along the knuckles
across the body the largest organ
in the world made with the seas in mind—
when Aphrodite was born from the foam
excess gathered into a body she became
the goddess of skin and heart
and blessed the flesh with the same
rough suppleness of seas so that when two bodies
meet it's like waves crashing into a shore
and mouths she made a meniscus
to always be curved to one another.

MARRYING YOUNG

Maris Mabry

Part the ribs and find the treasure drumming
soft inside, the chambers always summing
the weight of this, result of that, woken
to promises the two of us have spoken.
Sifting facts through all the endless plumbing,

finding all the implications dumbing,
wondering exactly what is coming,
and searching every possible foretoken—
all to part the ribs.

You realize I'll be there thumbing
through your every thought and hear the humming
heartbeat, tapping Morse in its soft-spoken
language, the message clear, unbroken.
You and I, we know what we're becoming.
For that, we part the ribs.

DOUBLE DOORS

Haley Schvaneveldt

I stop to stare through the two tall, clear panes of glass that boldly defy my church's stained glass motif. Their sharp black frames fit with the rest of downtown but not with the soft, worn brick edges around them. My family walks ahead of me into the church, but I'm transfixed by the change. New gym doors are a jarring welcome home from college, but they are not the only change ever made to this steepled edifice I've called my second home for the last thirteen years.

For starters, they painted over the ocean mural in the gym without a warning. Then they took away the bronze-studded conference room chairs that looked like thrones and spun like a carnival ride. To the right of the double doors, three brick pillars used to support an overhang, the back wall of which served as a perfect "base" for endless games of "Ghost in the Graveyard." It was there that we squeezed the heels of our hands into our eyeballs until they ached, screaming the counting chant, "APPLES, PEACHES, PUMPKIN PIE, IF YOU'RE NOT READY HOLLER 'AH'!" But then they built walls of taupe cement.

They have threatened to pour a darker shade of cement over the field across the parking lot. We need more parking, it's true. But that field is where my first boyfriend told me that he liked me. It was where my wild-haired, gap-toothed best friend and I tied our bony calves together for the three-legged race every Fourth of July. It was there that we piled on to collapsed cardboard boxes and systematically determined the fastest way to slide to the bottom of the hill. Year after year, we sprawled out on picnic blankets, digging up clumps of grass with our fingers while we argued about which fireworks were the prettiest. I wonder if they'll cut down the mulberry tree that hangs over the field. Mothers, I'm sure, would appreciate an end to the purple-stained fingers, faces, and shoes, but cool kids in my day pretended to enjoy the sour green berries more than the sweet wine-colored ones. I wonder how future generations will attain their "cool" status.

It feels like someone should have checked with me before they took the old doors away. After all, they are the doors my first crush once held open for me. He was otherwise oblivious to my existence, but I talked of nothing else for weeks. Another time, those doors nearly chopped off my friend, Noah's finger. It was hanging by a flap of skin, they said. He was rushed to the E.R., the hero of the day. I remember secretly wanting to nearly lose my finger too.

It's not that the old doors were beautiful. They weren't. They were dingy and brown. But they were present for milestones like losing a tooth and for little victories like the two points I scored in a basketball scrimmage. When I skinned a knee, those doors opened to bags of ice, band aids, and attention. Those brown old doors creaked when you moved them and stuck when you opened or closed them, but the problem with the new doors is just the opposite. They close too easily and too quickly, leaving me locked out of the childhood that they were never a part of.

OMEN

Randi Adams

Easy to hear, harder to see—
brown-grey brindle blends
plumage into fading leaves.
The whippoorwill's dark
cyclic call at twilight
is revealed
in the hum of cicadas—
never wearying,
"Here I am."

BILLY GOAT SONG

Caitlyn Lamb

Andrew didn't come last weekend and I was willing to bet that he wouldn't come this weekend either. The children missed him. Half the time, I couldn't keep straight if I was madder when he didn't show up or if it was worse when he did. I knew that the children needed time with their father, but it was honestly painful to watch when he came and played the part so perfectly, all but the sticking around part. I paced the living room, bouncing Julie Anne on my hip. I woke up to her crying around two this morning and had been walking her around ever since, trying in vain to get her back to sleep.

"Shhh, baby. It's okay, Mama's here." I kissed Julie Anne's forehead and she whimpered on my shoulder. She was officially two and a half years old this morning. The living room was dark and quiet. There was a glow from a nightlight in the corner, but other than that single spot of warmth, the room was cool. A hum started in my throat and Julie Anne's wriggling and whimpering began to slow. Right after she had been born, Andrew would sing her to sleep. It didn't matter how fussy she was, once he started singing, she always immediately quieted down.

"Hush little baby, don't say a word, Mama's gonna buy you a mocking bird." Her brown eyes fluttered, and I pushed her fine hair back from where the few strands tickled her eyelashes. "And if that mocking bird won't sing, Mama's gonna buy you a—"

"Mama?" Clarke came around the corner from his room, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Hey, buddy. What are you doing up?" I bent my knees partway, stooping to his level. I took his little hand and walked him over to the worn out couch Andrew and I had bought at a yard sale two years ago and that I kept when the divorce was made final seven months ago. The couch was well past it's lifespan, but I was determined to make it last a little longer.

"I thought I heard Daddy." My heart stuttered and returned at a slightly angered pace. Did Andrew realize what he was doing when he never came to visit? Clarke saw and heard him everywhere he wasn't, and I wasn't sure that Julie Anne would even recognize him. She had seen him only a handful of times. He hadn't been there when she was born either.

"I'm sorry, bud. He's not here right now." Julie Anne squirmed on my chest as I moved her over to my left side so I could put my arm around Clarke and hold him close. He snuggled in close to my side. This was the only place I ever wanted to be.

"Why, Mama?" I looked across the dark room to the wall of pictures that held happy memories of the early days of our marriage. They were also the only pictures in the house that didn't have the kids in them. I wasn't sure why I hadn't taken them down yet. Maybe because of how much we had paid the photographer.

"I don't know." I looked down to his face and wondered how in the world I was supposed to comfort my five-year-old when I wasn't even sure why Andrew constantly missed visitation weekends. It wasn't like he had to hide affairs from me anymore. "Just try to sleep, okay?"

"Okay, Mama." He settled in my side, and I started on the song again.

"So, where were we Julie Anne?" Her eyes were still wide open with no hint of closing anytime soon. "Diamonds, that's right." The pink bow of her mouth stretched open in a short yawn, a good sign.

"Can you do the billy goat part, Mama?"

"We'll get there, Clarke. You just have to be patient." I laughed softly and he leaned against my side again, singing along to the lullaby in his small, sweet voice.

"And if that diamond ring turns brass, Mama's gonna buy you a looking glass. And if that looking glass gets broke, Mama's gonna buy you," I paused a moment and looked at Clarke with his eyes half closed and smiled, "and brother a billy goat."

I woke the next morning with both kids sprawled on top of me, still on the couch. It was eight in the morning and time to get going. Fridays were grocery days. They were the first days of my weekend from my job as a secretary at a local Baptist church and I liked to get the chore out of the way earlier in the morning. I woke the children and got them dressed in record time with only a few complaints. Before too long we were in the car and soon after that we pulled up to Walmart. Unfortunately, I voiced how well the morning was going and jinxed myself.

So far, there had been only one snafu in the store. Clarke had picked an apple from the bottom of a stack and the rest proceeded to cascade to the tile. I apologized multiple times to the employee stocking the rest of the fresh produce and helped him pick them up while Clarke clung tightly to the buggy, seeming to think if he were overzealous in following the rest of the grocery store rules that I might forget this mishap. I pushed the buggy through the aisles of Walmart with Julie Anne in the buggy's child seat where she sat swinging her legs back and forth, periodically kicking me in the gut. I wasn't too irritated though. It was like a miniature work out every time I tensed before she kicked. In her accidental way, she was helping me get rid of the weight I had yet to lose from when I was pregnant with her. Clarke walked beside me.

"Mama, Mama! Look!" Clarke ran over to a life sized balloon of Spider-Man, his feet gliding over the almost-white tile. "I'm taller than Spider-Man!" And here snafu number two had begun.

Clarke had a better idea of how to act in public since he was older, but he was also the one that tended to try the boundaries more. Julie Anne was still at the stage where she wanted to be carried by someone more than she wanted to crawl or walk around on her own. Clarke, on the other hand, knew what he was supposed to do and what he shouldn't do when we were in the grocery store. "Look, don't touch," and "don't run" were the main rules I'd taught my children. But Clarke was testing my patience today.

"Yes, sweetie, but where are you supposed to be when we are in the grocery store?" I tilted my head to one side and gave a look that was all too familiar to Clarke. "I don't need more apples spilling all over the floor, bud."

"Holding on to the buggy." Clarke's shoulders drooped and he plodded over to me.

"That's right. Thank you."

"Sorry about the apples, Mama." He looked so defeated stuck beside the buggy. My heart softened a little. He was still just a boy. It was hard for me to see his head hanging down, disinterested in the colorfully marketed aisles, but he respected and listened to what I told him and I was thankful for that. I was not about to have a child that acted like the world revolved around him. He was Clarke, not Andrew Junior, no matter how much he resembled his father.

I saw the way the nursery workers at church talked about the other wildly behaved kids, the ones that supposedly came from good, whole families without mostly absent fathers who might show up once a month to say hello and then vanish again. I also

saw the way they looked at me the first time I brought Clarke and Julie Anne to a morning service. Since I was the church's secretary, I thought I should come to the church every so often, but the looks on their faces when I didn't fill out the father's information on the visitor's card made me want to turn back around. Even at church, all the children seemed to run wild, like they had no mind for manners or that the parents hadn't taught any. The first time I caught Clarke running down that sanctuary's aisles was the last time he even attempted to speed walk within sight of the Lord's house. I may be divorced, but I know how church people expect you to act in their buildings, and I was determined to show them that my unchurched children behaved better than their "angels."

"What's next on our list, Clarke?" I handed him the list and he visibly perked up at the chance of being responsible for the daunting task of carrying the list of groceries.

"Umm..." He squinted at the paper, holding it too close to his eyes to see anything in the first place.

"Toe-may-toos," he giggled, handing me the list back, repeating "tomatoes" in a variety of ways. Julie Anne laughed with each rendition of the word which only encouraged Clarke. Their laughter bounced back and forth as the pronunciations grew steadily stranger. Their eyes sparkled and Julie Anne clapped her hands together, only missing a few times. Tomatoes weren't actually on the list either. The notepad I used had a picture of a tomato in the corner but I wouldn't disappoint Clarke. He would get his "toe-may-toos."

We walked through the produce section and picked out various fruits and vegetables to use in dinners for the coming week. Anytime the buggy was too close to the food, whether it was the containers in the middle of the floor holding oranges, bananas, and the like, or the wall of greens, Julie Anne reached her chubby little fingers as far as she could. Many times she was only an inch away from reaching her goal.

"No ma'am," I said, popping her hand for the fifth time.

"Yeah, Julie Anne. You can't eat the food. Mama'll get mad." Clarke crossed his arms and stood in front of Julie Anne, her arm still outstretched.

"Don't worry about what Julie Anne is doing, Clarke." He looked sheepishly at his shoes before looking up and grinning at me. I grabbed a clump of greens held together with a colored band and saw out the corner of my eye a person guiding a buggy headed awfully close toward my own. There was a quick, loud clatter of metal on metal and a squeak of tires against the tile and then the person continued on past my startled children without any apology or acknowledgment.

Julie Anne was leaning at a precarious angle off the side of the buggy, too jolted to right herself. I felt my heart in my throat, my pulse hammering like the aftershock of an earthquake through my whole body. I sent up a quick prayer of thankfulness that she hadn't been trying to reach any food at that time because she would've likely been on the floor. I carefully pushed her back to her upright position in her seat, her brown eyes staring wide into my own, smoothed her hair back and kissed her forehead before I looked to Clarke. He stood there with his mouth hanging open and fingers hooked through the buggy's side, staring down the young man who shouldn't be allowed on the roads if he drove his car as badly as a buggy.

"Excuse me," I started toward the stranger, maneuvering around Clarke. "You just rammed into my buggy and almost knocked my child to the floor." He looked about the age Andrew had been when he'd proposed to me and rushed our marriage to happen only three and a half months later. His reasoning was that we didn't need a big, fancy wedding when we had each other. "I would appreciate an apology."

"Sorry."

The boy didn't even bother to turn around. My hands curled into fists, and pressure was building inside my head. I heard a slight ringing in my left ear and then felt a

soft tap on the back of my leg.

"Mama?" Clarke's big blue eyes looked up into my face, and I could feel myself swiftly calming down.

"It's all right, come on." I put my hand on Clarke's shoulder and walked the couple of steps back to the buggy, deciding to go to the other end of my list and work my way backwards. I threw one more futile nasty glare over my shoulder as I headed toward the dairy. He still wasn't looking anywhere but at the organic juice section in front of him. I wasn't quite sure what I would have done if he had responded, but I was ready to throw punches.

This stranger was another example of what the world was coming to—just like Andrew. He should have been my first example but, as they say, love is blind. My life should be enough evidence to prove the cliché true. People say they love you and then they leave when they find someone more beautiful and interesting than you on their "business trips" to big cities while you wait for them to come home, hoping to work it out for the sake of the children if nothing else. I fumed in silence and both the children were oddly quiet, almost as if they could sense the tension boiling inside me.

The rest of the shopping trip passed relatively uneventfully. I didn't run into the reckless buggy driver again and was even able to find a few things on sale. The other customers and employees in the store were overly pleasant and smiled, maybe because it was Friday and people were glad to have the weekend to relax, or maybe because no one could look grumpy compared to buggy guy.

"Mama, is Daddy going to be at the house when we get home?" Clarke looked at the different types of cereal and seemed to try to decide which one he would like that I wouldn't say no to. Clarke was too perceptive for a five-year-old.

"Daddy at home?" Julie Anne repeated Clarke's question, her soft voice tugging at my heart.

"I don't know, sweetie. He's supposed to be but he hasn't called me." Her chubby cheeks fell and her legs stopped kicking. "We'll find out when we get home, okay?"

Andrew got to see Clarke and Julie Anne over the weekends but he could only see them at my house. In the divorce, I had gotten full custody of both children mostly because Andrew didn't fight me for more time with them and because he was always gone on trips. However, he didn't always show up on his weekends which was par for how the six-year-long marriage had gone at least. He had told me he loved me when he proposed and that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. I didn't know that "spending the rest of his life with me" meant sharing him with his woman in the city or only when he felt like being home. I hated that he was even able to see the kids on weekends because every time he was in the house we had shared together, memories came flooding back, the good frustratingly ringing louder than the bad.

Three months into the marriage, I found out I was pregnant with Clarke and told Andrew a couple days after I knew. He started staying extremely late at the office without any reasons why. I knew we hadn't planned to have children this early, but I didn't understand why it would cause him to freak out this bad. Over a couple months' time, he had gradually grown used to the idea of our being parents earlier than we had planned. He even became the doting husband that all Hallmark movies seem to feature.

"Are you sure that's all you wanted?" Andrew called from the kitchen. "It's a strange combination." I was propped up on the small secondhand loveseat with my feet on the short coffee table we had found at a yard sale. Food Network was on the television, and I was quickly realizing how little I cooked anything not made from a box. I took a bite out of the chocolate bar I was munching on.

"I want some cooking classes," I replied, my voice sticky with the chocolate. Andrew was shaking his head and chuckling as he walked around the wall that blocked the kitchen

off from the living room. He had a plate with divided sections of pickles that he had dug from the bottom of the bread and butter pickle jar placed in the small section, pancakes in the larger, and a glass of sweet tea. He set the plates down on the opposite side of the coffee table from where my feet were.

"I cannot believe how strange these pregnancy cravings get," he said before kissing me lightly on the lips and pressing his hand to my growing stomach. "How many months are we at now? Six?"

"Yeah, we are at six. He was kicking the other day when you were at work." I took another bite of the chocolate and nestled further into the cushions. "Oh, did you grab a fork?" I asked and started to rise up so I could get one from the kitchen.

"Oh, shoot. Don't get up, I can get it." He quickly stood and repositioned the blanket on my lap and the pillow to my side before heading to the kitchen for the fork. I watched him as he walked away, my eyes following the line of his shoulders and the halo that the light put around his head through his pale blonde hair. When he came back with the fork in hand, he was holding it like a conducting baton, bouncing it to the beat of the commercial's jingle, before he laid it on my plate.

"Anything else, m'lady?" he asked, only sitting after I shook my head no. He handed me the plate of pickles and pancakes. The smile on my face felt like it was taking permanent residence as he put his arm around my shoulders and settled in, snagging a pickle slice before he turned his attention to the food being cooked on the television.

Something changed between Clarke's birth and when I got pregnant with Julie Anne. Andrew worked more hours to help cover the bills that a new baby brings, and soon those hours became his actual mandated hours, per order of his boss. He hardly came home and seemed to mind at first that his work was keeping him from Clarke and me, but then he was sent on a business trip. After that, Andrew looked like he was trying to find more time to stay at work. The amount of trips he had to take increased, and when he was home he only complained about the mess the house was constantly left in. When Andrew didn't show until the day after I gave birth to Julie Anne, I made it clear how much he screwed up.

"I'm sorry, Lori! I didn't mean to be gone when the baby came!" Andrew ran his hand through his hair, his stress evident in how he'd chewed his bottom lip raw. He'd supposedly gone to a friend's wedding on the way back from one of his trips, but I didn't believe much of what he said anymore. He was probably worried that he wouldn't be able to smooth this over. "I had a flat tire!" He nodded along with his improvised story, and I rolled my eyes. "Kept me on the side of the road for a while."

"That's a lie." I let out a dry laugh. "If you would actually spend time at home, flat tires on the way to see your child being born wouldn't be an issue because you would've been with me! Driving the car! You knew her due date at least six months ahead, I made sure of that! I'd hoped you could plan for your own child, but no. You were off who knows where doing God knows what."

We stood near the front door to our little two bedroom house. I had packed his clothes and the few things he left at the house after he left on his most recent trip in two cheap plastic bins and set them by the door for him to see whenever he walked in.

"Really, Lori, I know you're upset." I cut him off, laughing at the irony bubbling up.

"You think I wanted kids this early, either? They may not have been planned, but they're the best thing that has happened to this marriage."

"Of course the kids are! But we need to talk about this. You can't just kick me out! Clarke and Julie Anne need their dad!" I laughed out loud at his last protest.

"Talk? Oh no, there's already been too much of that. You're never home to be their so-called 'dad' anyway. Go back to Alyssa or whatever her name is." He winced at the low blow, and I almost felt a semblance of pity.

"I told you, Alyssa was a one-time mistake. These last two times I have been gone have really been strictly work, I promise." His eyes pleaded with me, but I turned away, not wanting to give in to what I wished could happen and mentally berating myself for wanting it to happen.

"Look, your stuff is ready to go. Leave, just leave, please. It's not like you wouldn't vanish in about another week anyway."

Looking at Julie Anne in the buggy in front of me, I felt a longing for Andrew to be the father he had claimed he would be. Not for my sake, but for hers, for Clarke's.

"All right kids, let's go check out."

Thirty minutes later, I had the groceries loaded and the kids buckled down in their car seats. Five songs from their favorite Disney sing-along CD later we were home. Julie Anne was sort of singing "The Circle of Life" in her own words when another car pulled into the carport behind mine.

"It mooooves us awll, to the paaairs of woooope," her voice cut off when she saw the car.

"Daddy!" Immediately, she began wriggling in her seat and struggled against the belts keeping her away from the man getting out of the car.

"Andrew." I stood at Julie Anne's door with my hand on the handle, trying not to look through the window at her squirming. My eyes looked to his though he avoided my gaze. I frowned at the skipping my heart still did when he was near.

"Lori." He nodded in my direction but kept his eyes on the car door.

"You mind helping?" I motioned in the direction of the trunk full of groceries.

"What? Oh, yeah. Sure." We grabbed armfuls of groceries, Clarke managing one bag and Julie Anne tottling after, her worn stuffed bunny named Cotton, rescued from the car floor, dragging behind her.

Out of earshot and eyesight of both Clarke and Julie Anne for the moment until they came in the kitchen, I whirled to face Andrew, dropping the bags to the countertop as noiselessly as I could.

"Still got the couch, I see," he commented. "It's definitely got some years left in it."

I huffed, annoyed he'd beaten me to speaking first. "Well that's why I haven't gotten a new one," I said in reply and quickly moved on. "But what in God's name are you doing here?"

"It's my weekend. What do you mean, 'What am I doing here?'" He set the bags he had carried down slightly softer than I had.

"You never show up for the weekend visits. I can count on one hand the number of times." He started to speak and I held my hand up. "I'm not done." I paused, giving him a chance to butt back in. When he didn't, I finished. "Why now?"

Clarke came around the corner at that moment, and both Andrew and I forced smiles as best we could.

"Thank you, buddy," Andrew said, leaning down to him. "Go to the living room. Daddy will be in there in a minute." Clarke beamed and ran out of the kitchen to the living room.

"You too, sweetie," I said to Julie Anne. She followed after her brother, and I let my expression drop back to annoyance.

"Because I want to see my kids. Is that so hard to believe?" Andrew leaned back against the stove, his hands on the handle that opened the oven door.

"Yes, honestly, it is." I motioned my arm toward the living room where the children were. "Clarke hears and sees you everywhere. Just last night he thought he heard you while I was trying to get Julie Anne to sleep by walking her around the living room."

He sighed and looked down at his feet, an expression like acceptance coming over

his face. “When you don’t show up, they’re the ones losing out.”

“Can I spend time with them now at least? I don’t get much.” He looked up, pleading once more with his eyes.

“Fine.” I turned and walked out the front door, leaving him alone with the kids for a moment. The storm door slapped behind me and had finally settled back in its frame when I was back with the other bags and let it slap behind me again. I caught Andrew’s eye as I walked by the living room to the kitchen, and he hesitantly smiled the smile that had gotten my heart in the first place.

“Billy goat song,” Clarke said to Andrew as I set the bags on the counter. I placed my head against the cabinet in front of me, next to the top of the refrigerator, listening to the whirring of the machine. Soft voices drifted from the living room, and I could barely make out what they were saying so I moved to sit in front of the sink and let my back rest on the cabinets and my knees fold to my chest.

“Daddy’s gonna buy you a horse and a cart. And if that horse and cart fall down, you’ll still be the sweetest boy—and girl—in town.” I felt a tear slip down my cheek as I whispered along with Andrew, unseen and unheard. There was that ache again—that longing for what Andrew and I could’ve had.

“So hush little baby, don’t you cry, your Mama loves you and so do I.”

POMPEII

Allyson Vaughan

It was not the volcanic eruption but the destruction
of passivity that frightened me, the way it caught
the people by surprise and how their bodies centuries
later were cast into preserved demise—mine to study
their final pose. I thought one of the bodies was caught
in prayer, but it was only their hands hugging their mouths
trying to keep the fire out of their lungs; no time to suffocate,
deaths rushed, leaving no screams on their faces.
There are the ones that laid chest to floor with arms crossed
above heads not wanting to see it coming behind them,
that spew of malignancy. Then those that laid back
in peace and went with the smoke—I wondered where
the mother of the child lying alone had gone in the chaos,
if she were like those that held up their arms to block the end
though it was over already when the earth spat out its judgment,
but the fist-in-gut tragedy was the body that rose on its arm
looking upwards towards the sky falling in fire and the gaps in his face
where what he'd seen burned out his eyes. They must've
thought it was the gods arriving with their punishment
for failing in a crisis, and what if I too, with the inability to move,
would always be cast in the shape of fatal history?

ELEVEN YEARS

Shelby Swing

Her confession came on a late summer afternoon,
when the day was long in dying.
She told me she couldn't do this anymore,
each word a nail in a long wooden box.
All I said was, "Eleven years."
Yes, eleven years—feeling her body
leave our bed to go running,
watching her drink tea out of the same blue mug.
Eleven years of studying her back—
a mole on the left shoulder—while she undressed.
Eleven years worth of jokes
for which she had no smile.
A symbol of our love arrived each summer:
on an otherwise tanned hand,
a pale circle around my ring finger, hidden with gold.
Our heads and hearts—
a clockface without hands—
stood still.

OUTER DARKNESS

Grant Looper

I walked alone through the lawn,
lit only by a lamp post,
with moths swarming around it
in aimless, confused circles,
bouncing off and returning
again and again and a—

A couple was sitting there,
under the lamp post, kissing,
the light shining around them
with a soft, ghost-like aura.
I crept away with head turned,
hidden by the night's darkness.

LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

Shelby Swing

The phone's ringing and I race to get it, not quite missing the sharp corner of the coffee table and nearly skidding into a kitchen chair. "Hello?" I say breathlessly. This is typically how all the members of my family answer the phone. When my siblings and I were kids, my mom, being the homeschool mother she is, attempted to teach us proper phone skills. This included the greeting of one's choice and the stating of one's first AND last name. She aimed high with her expectations, hoping that when we didn't meet them (and there was no meeting them) we would at least fall into the realm of mediocre, and maybe rub off on our father. Long story short, I think we ended up laughing at how cringingly formal Mom sounded when she showed us how to properly answer the phone: "Swing residence, this is Brenda speaking, may I ask who's calling?" She eventually realized that her kids couldn't even manage "yes, ma'am" and "yes, sir," so she ran with it, pretending to answer the phone in grotesque voices just to make us giggle.

That was years ago, and now there is no hope for phone etiquette. I rub the thigh that got nicked by the coffee table as the person on the other end says, "Brenda? It's Kim, hey. I was just thinking about what you said earlier about—"

"Um, no, it's Shelby. Sorry." I try to rest the phone on my shoulder while I meticulously straighten a stack of mail on the kitchen counter in front of me, then yank my hand back when I realize it's a gesture my mother would do.

"Oh, Shelby!" Kim laughs into the phone while a kid chants, monotone, in the background: mommy, mommy, mommy. "You sound just like your mom, you know that?"

I force a chuckle. "Yeah, people say that all the time."

People say that all the time.

Since I was small enough for my mother to put me in pink floral dresses with puffy sleeves and socks with lace around the top, people have told me, "You look like your mother." I remember one Sunday after church when my family went to lunch at our favorite restaurant, a little place that claimed to be Chinese but served fried chicken. We were out the door and almost to the street when a short older woman stopped us, her tone full of glee and wonder. She aimed an arthritic finger at my mother, grandmother, and me. "You three look SO much alike! Spitting images!" My grandmother got so tickled at the remark that before I knew it, I was being moved by my shoulders into a line beside my grandmother and mother while a crowd gathered and the elderly woman stared from face to face to face. You would have thought we were the eighth wonder of the world.

Now that I'm older, I like to think that I've grown into my own face. My cheekbones, a trait from my mother, are hidden in plumpness I inherited from my father. My nose is my father's, too, and my earlobes. But my long, vast forehead is the same forehead my mom has. She hides hers with bangs. I try not to focus on mine when I look in a mirror.

Now, at age twenty-one, I may not look as strikingly similar to my mom as I did when I was younger, but I have grown more like her in other ways over the past several years. For instance, I have become a believer in hand sanitizer. When my mother started using hand sanitizer more frequently, it wasn't a problem. It wasn't a problem that she

kept two or three bottles in her purse (because one wasn't enough). It wasn't a problem that she stocked all family vehicles with two or three, which would regularly swell and explode come July. It wasn't a problem that she kept a huge thirty-ounce bottle on the counter at home—right next to the sink. It became a problem when she heartily insisted that my dad, my siblings, and I use it before meals in restaurants, after being in the grocery store, when we sat down in a movie theatre, or when we touched door handles or really any public surface. The rest of us were extremely skeptical about the power of hand sanitizer and remained so for a good long while. "Kills ninety-nine percent of germs!" But what about that one percent? The worst part was having your hands smell like alcohol, and then tasting it if you were eating finger foods, like those little pigs-in-a-blanket.

There was a period of time when my mom reined in her hand sanitizer enthusiasm, and that was after she read an article about a preschool child getting drunk from sucking on sanitizer-coated hands. First she wondered aloud at the fact that the child wasn't perturbed by the alcohol flavor, her tone suggesting that she suspected the entire report to be a scam. She then took to lamenting the fact that she hadn't thought to put hand sanitizer on my thumb from age three to ten and thus save all this money that was being funneled into orthodontic fees. Finally, she hesitantly conceded that maybe hand sanitizer wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. There was less sliding the little clear bottle across the table at restaurants, less barking to "hand sanitize!" as we piled in the car and reached for snacks. Bless the little drunk preschooler, because he or she sucked some of the life out of the hand sanitizer monster and brought a little bit of my mother back.

Hand sanitizer kills ninety-nine percent of germs, and the drunk preschooler killed roughly a quarter of my mother's faith in it, but somewhere along the way, I developed full confidence that the stuff is my savior, from Dollar Store cart handles during flu season to contact with infant snot during church nursery volunteering. Hand-washing may be necessary in extreme cases, but it is steadily becoming a thing of the past. If I'm eating at my desk while working and my fingers get salty, I hand sanitize. If I'm putting on eyeshadow and my hands get smudgy, instead of taking three steps to the bathroom sink, I hand sanitize. During the sweltering summer months when my hands get sticky with sweat, I hand sanitize. When I'm driving my ten-year-old Jetta and the steering wheel disintegrates little black rubber grains onto my palms, I "hand sanitize!" It's as if mymother's mantra has made a permanent home somewhere deep in my brain, and in a smallway, I have become a robot, taking every situation as one appropriate for hand sanitizing. When I pull the little clear bottle, like a flask, out of my purse at functions and restaurants, sometimes my mother and I meet gazes and she smiles knowingly, proudly.

At my parents' house, there are two shelves of kitchen cabinets that are full of various bottles and containers. These aren't hand sanitizers. They aren't drugs, either (who do you think my mother is, anyway?). The bottles are full of vitamins and herbs—calcium and magnesium, ginger for inflammation, Vitamins A through D, echinacea for cold symptoms, huge, foul-smelling flaxseed oil capsules, even bigger and more foul-smelling fish oils, garlic, ginkgo, ginseng, goldenseal, turmeric, and probiotics. In the back there's Tums and children's chewable Tylenol because my sister can't swallow pills. If anyone in the family feels the slightest abnormal twinge, they go to Mom, who goes to the hospital-size holistic medicine cabinet. The doors are flung open and the fluorescent overhead light glints off of the colorful glass bottles, its subtle, steady buzz a poor replacement for the "Hallelujah Chorus." You realize the possibility of having to swallow some large pill, or worse, breaking open a large pill and dissolving the powdery contents into a glass of water, the result being a murky, unpleasant concoction. Sometimes it

helps the ailment, sometimes it doesn't. But this is the unnegotiable first step before giving up, which is going to the doctor to demand drugs. Those will just wreck your immune system and give birth to a number of other health issues that are disguised as side effects, according to my mom. Just look at all my health problems, she says. The work of antibiotics, she says.

Just as I was initially skeptical that hand sanitizer could take away the germs of the world, I was also an unbeliever in the assurances of natural medicine. Sure, I took a daily multivitamin, and it wasn't even a gummy one, because "those are full of sugar." But apart from that, I avoided the medicine cabinet and its bottles of different sizes, some with blazing sunrises on the labels and some with only unpronounceable medical gibberish: Matricaria recutita and Hypericum perforatum. Sometimes I'd come to the kitchen table with my breakfast and sit across from my mother, who would be surrounded by thick, well-loved medical guides or long articles printed off of nutrition websites. She'd point out how her such-and-such was aching and how this-and-that might help it. I'd nod and agree, nod and agree, nod and agree. We all have our weird obsessions.

My mother has her set of health issues, and over the past few years, I've developed my own. None of them are genetically inherited from her, though I expect that to happen eventually. Young people complain about inheriting their parents' health problems, but when one actually stops and thinks about it, it's one of the lesser problems of life. They're not necessarily unexpected; you know they're coming. They're right up there with death and taxes. Also, you are allowed to watch how your parents handle those health issues, such as what they do or don't do to prevent and treat them. They're the guinea pigs, so when it comes your time to suffer, you know how to do it correctly, or atleast you know what to avoid doing.

Naturally, my mom often suggests that I start taking such-and-such to help with this-and-that, and while sometimes I say, "Pass, because such-and-such smells and tastes like rat intestines," sometimes I'd take a few days to consider it and then say, "Sure. Can you add such-and-such to your shopping list?" To which she'd giddily agree, and that is how I ended up needing a vitamin container, one of those long, plastic ones that pharmacies sell, with the days labeled on each little lid. Sometimes I wonder if, instead of becoming my mother, I'm becoming an eighty-five-year-old woman. Most females are closer to eighty-five with each passing day, but I think I got lost in traffic and am now in the fast lane.

I'm not the only one in my family that owns a vitamin case, though. I looked up from a meal I was eating at our kitchen table one time and counted one, two, three, four vitamin cases sitting in front of various placemats. My brother has one that's blue, my sister's is purple, mine is teal, and my mother's is an extra-large one with twice as many slots, for day vitamins and night vitamins. My father has one that he either takes to work or hides in the medicine cabinet. It's quite a sight, all those vitamin cases sprawled out. We take them up when company comes, though, which I think is kind of a shame. I took my vitamin case to college, and I still enjoy my roommates' reactions when I pull out my gallon-size baggie full of bottles once a week and restock my vitamin container. They used to make comments, but now they just stare as I expertly plop pills into each hole, my own personal pharmacy set up right there in our kitchen.

There's a characteristic that I'm worried about inheriting even more than my mom's health problems. It's the characteristic that makes opening presents on Christmas morning a difficult task. It complicates birthday phone calls and trips that require getting on the road early. It's her love of sleeping in. There's some unseen force that prohibits my mom from leaving her bed until long after the sun's up, but we'll call it a love of sleeping in. It's actually a result of her being more of a night owl than anyone else I've ever met. The woman will save important tasks for the nighttime. She says

she does her best work at one, two, three in the morning. She waits until the kids are in bed and my dad's snoring in his recliner with *Alaska State Troopers* muted, and then she turns off the TV, curls up on the couch, spreads her work out all around her, and stays that way until she runs out of steam in the wee hours of the morning. Granola cereal is her fuel of choice, even though the health blogs she reads say to not eat past eight o'clock, and that one gets the best sleep from eleven to twelve. Eventually she'll go to bed, waking when my dad leaves at five but not budging from under the covers. I'm not entirely sure she'd move even if the house caught fire at say, six a.m. What better way to go out than in your favorite place in the world? And her bed is by far her favorite place. That's why it took my family fifteen years to convince her to go camping—in the backyard.

Before any other claims are made, I will say this: my mother is one of the hardest working people I have ever met. She never gives up. That is her perfectionist spirit, another thing that I see steadily evolving in myself and which I continuously try to put down like an animal at the vet. That being said, mornings are not my mother's forte and never will be unless God works a miracle. And if that happens, I will never doubt again. Growing up homeschooled, my siblings and I were expected to get ourselves out of bed, do our morning chores, make our breakfasts, and begin independent work until Mom got up. Speaking of miracles, it was a miracle that we never burned the house down while heating toaster waffles and bagels. There were some mornings when our screaming at each other to "puh-lease give the bouncy ball back because it's MINE" woke her up, and those mornings were ones I'd rather not remember. We know better than ever now that it's best if Mom sleeps till ten or ten-thirty, because she really does work best late at night and she really can't do mornings.

She claims it all started in college, which worries me even more. She had always been one of those ideal students who studied even more than necessary and made A's on every test. Her study sessions lasted through the night and into the morning (meanwhile, my dad was partying and shooting bottle rockets out his dorm room window). Sleep was not a priority in college, and it didn't help that my mom was a terrible sleeper in the first place and suffered from mild insomnia. It didn't get better after college, though. She got a job teaching at an elementary school and stayed up late every night grading, writing lesson plans, and making learning supplements. That is how my mom became a night owl and her sleep cycle was permanently screwed up.

As for me, I've kept all this in mind during college and have made extensive efforts in making sleep a priority. The horror stories of exhausted students blacking out and making trips to the hospital have helped. My health aside, I love sleeping entirely too much to voluntarily give up anything short of eight hours per night. My attitude starts souring with anything less. Thankfully, I don't share my mother's insomnia, but I do share her love of sleeping in. Remember playing "house" as a child, and before everyone pretended to go to sleep, everyone had to decide who would be the first to wake up? My housemates and I have an unspoken understanding that I will always be the last one up. Take this morning, for instance, and almost every morning this semester. My roommate wakes with her first alarm, jumps out of bed like a baby bird springing from the nest, goes for a run, and is back and in the shower before my feet touch the floor. The other two have been up and studying for hours. It's not that I physically can't get out of bed in the mornings. It's that if I don't have a good enough reason to, I won't.

If I could have hand-picked the qualities of my mother that I'd receive, I wouldn't have chosen her love of hand sanitizer, herbal medicine, and sleeping mornings away. I'd have chosen a much different quality, one that's much more a part of her and has been both a blessing and a curse: her sensitive spirit. My mother is, hands down, the most sensitive person I know. This means that she is easily hurt but also easily sees

the good in people and situations. Sarcasm is lost on her; she doesn't have a cynical bone in her body. This is where we differ the most: I, on the other hand, am always prepared to criticize or make light of any tender-hearted situation. Hallmark movies are my playground and weddings are my battlefield. I once made a joke about Flannery O'Connor having lupus. Sometimes my cynicism is good fodder for making people laugh, but most of the time, it's used in bad taste—a missile accidently aimed at an ally. My mother's sensitivity and my insensitivity have clashed on occasion, resulting in her being hurt nearly every time. The worst of it is, I didn't get this from my father, so I can't even blame him for it. This part of my mother is on my wish-list for the years ahead—maybe I'll gain some of her sensitivity.

When I first realized I was slowly but steadily adopting my mother's habits and quirks, my first reaction was to try to put an immediate stop to it. Less hand sanitizing took place. I couldn't stop that habit altogether, though, because like my mother, I have a wimpy immune system and an autoimmune disease, Type 1 Diabetes, while she has ulcerative colitis, which is hereditary and I hope to God I won't develop. I'd purposefully forget to take my vitamins in the morning, which was easy to do when I was at school. I took pleasure, or at least tried to, in rising early and sharing that news with anyone who'd listen. But eventually my efforts to reverse this inevitable process waned, and I hesitantly slipped into a spirit of acceptance. I know women my age who enthusiastically embrace their journey to becoming a carbon-copy of their mother, but for those like myself, I'm not sure we'll ever wholeheartedly come to terms with it. It's one thing to love someone dearly; it's another thing to want to be exactly like that person.

The times when I'm home from college with my family are the times I realize how similar I am to my mother. Over just a weekend, I can be heard saying phrases, HER phrases, like, "Y'all need to come put your dishes away. I'm not doing it for you," to which my brother and sister will reply, part genuinely and part sarcastically, "You're just like Mom." My mother didn't want a big dog, and yet we now own a Goldendoodle, a mixof two very large, hairy breeds. This particular dog has cat blood in her veins and therefore likes to lounge on the cool hardwood floors in the kitchen, limbs fully stretched out in every direction. On average, my mom will say, "Move it, Maggie," to the dog about twice hourly. When I've come home in the past, I've caught those words being the first ones out of my mouth as I walk in the door. There has been a time or two when my dad has hollered a greeting from the other room, only to follow it with, "Oh, I thought you were Mom."

Oh, but I am.

FREEWAY

Claire Foxx

Of course the fast lane is monopolized by commuters who won't let me dodge in to pass the chickens. A rusted trailer drags several hundred down the freeway, stacked in cages for ventilation but not for comfort, their feet like scabbed twigs clawing at the wire. Still, as chickens go they're remarkably calm, probably because panic takes up space, and as space goes they have none.

Al cranes forward from the backseat.

"Are those chickens?"

She can see them for herself—she isn't asking if they're there. She's asking why.

"Good, Al. Are you wearing your seatbelt?"

She's wearing her school shoes, the new ones with laces. She can button her own jumper now, but I didn't want it to go to her head, you know? Already she doesn't want to be called Al anymore. I told her she can't change her name until she marries.

"Are they really chickens?"

"They're poultry."

"What's poultry?"

"...Chickens."

Although the farther I lag behind the truck, the more they look like hastily paired white socks.

"Where are they going?" She asks.

"Alice Elaine. Seatbelt. Now."

Later she can learn what industrial transport has to do with farm animals; today she'll make it to preschool on time and in one piece. To be sure, I catch her eyes in the rearview mirror and hold them until the buckle snaps.

But I can do nothing to stop the fox—the sudden, red-wool flash of it under the tires and then the stain behind, thickly bright on the pavement though, at highway speed, quickly lost to distance. Except for that sick percussion there are only her tiny gasps of shock for a mile, two miles.

"Al, I'm sorry."

The chickens trundle on, cage on guileless cage.

"Where are they going?" She asks.

STILLBIRTH

Jenni Harris

My mother wore gardening gloves
when she helped our dog give birth.

Crouched in a bed of sawdust
beneath a heat lamp, I hugged her hips—
six years old—and watched
the blood spill out dark and thick,
stretching through pools
with visible strands of darker yet
and small tufts of fur.

Her swollen womb emptied four
wriggling, slick pups headfirst
into the dust, under the artificial sun
that opened them up, bulbs
with roots reaching out for water,
milk, light. My mother lined
them up to be filled, and I trembled

to see the earth stained with blood,
and the blood stained
with earth—bits of dirt sticking
to matted fur. Then the dog howled
for a fifth pup she could not pass.
Breech, its legs sprouted between
her own—browning tendrils

that had wilted in the dark.
My mother slowly pulled out
front paws, a head, a small pink tongue
that unfolded and shriveled in her hands
like petals. She left me
and found a spade to plant
a mother's blood offering

in the blackness between two trees
where their roots could grow together as one.

KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN AND PETS

Shelby Swing

A golden pothos plant, "Devil's Ivy," breathed out oxygen and took in carbon dioxide as a girl became a woman. Flashback to twenty-two years ago when a baby carrier was set down on carpeted floor, and a wide-eyed calico hesitantly stalked over to smell. The pothos sat on top of a horrendously gold bookrack, its long, leafy vines hanging within inches of the floor. The teardrop-shaped leaves, though mostly green, wore yellow marbleized streaks, each leaf different and beautifully apologetic for its shiny metal throne. The plant label read: Toxic! Do not ingest.

Growing up, the plant was always present in one room or another and survived a chaotic move to a new house. It outlived numerous other houseplants, even a mistakenly drowned cactus. The lack of a green thumb in my family didn't stop the pothos from being witness to more screaming babies, the blindness, deafness, and eventual death of the calico, the addition of a suicidal beta fish, a bite-happy hamster, and a large, relatively well-behaved canine.

Until recently, it sat watching from a much less hideous white bookshelf in the loft, where the plant's vines resembled messy hair. Its companions were an occasionally-used stationary bike that doubled as a toy for my siblings and me, a plaid sofa, and a small, boxy television that was so grainy you had to squint to make out anything. From its perch, the pothos saw us barreling up the stairs and my parents grunting, knees cracking, as they reached the landing. It witnessed my family saying goodnight with kisses and prayers; it witnessed midnight arguments, sleepwalking, and the sun working its way through the blinds the next morning. Atop the bookshelf, I didn't notice it yellowing and eventually disappearing until long after the trash was put at the street.

FOGGY MORNING ON JOCASSEE

Maris Mabry

A gouged-out valley, glutted with run-offs
and waterfalls. Low-hanging clouds obscure
the peaks, and all the trees are held aloft
by the very shade they cast: an allure

to bald eagles and those red-shouldered hawks
who, in their flight, prefer to shriek unseen.
The depths of water find a way to mock
those seeking where the village had once been

some three hundred feet drowned below the lake.
There, Cherokee hunters had traded skins
before the flood came rushing in to take
their place—whitewater covering white sins.

Below, the rotting skyline of great loss;
above, a surface still enough to cross.

PRINCESSA

Jenni Harris

It was our fifth night in the jungle, and fourteen voices—eleven girls, three guys—were all screaming above the high-pitched buzz of mosquitos in our ears and the water-droplet calls of the cowbirds and the low, steady hum of the generator pumping out our third and final hour of electricity for the night and the hard smack, smack, smacking of Tess's tennis shoe on the wooden floor. *Kill it, kill it, kill it*. Hayden did not relent, pounding the cockroach into nothing more than a long, oozing smear that stretched across two of our floorboards. The rest of us looked on, holding our own shoes in our hands, our own Bibles, whatever we had grabbed at first instinct to try to kill this insect we had initially mistaken for a vampire bat because of its size and the way it flew at our necks. Even now, Ruth was clenching at the spot where it throttled her—a large, red welt swelling from beneath her jawline to the base of her collarbone. Molly, a six-foot-tall collegiate volleyball player from Oklahoma, stooped down to measure it, putting her hand beside the body. It stretched from her thumb socket to the tip of her index finger.

By the time the generator expired and our two dim light bulbs flickered into blackness, our floor boasted three kills. The second was the curled up body of a tarantula and its amputated legs beside our pile of rain galoshes. We had just finished dinner when Tess spotted it crawling up the mosquito nets we used to cover the open doorway into our jungle home. Parker hacked it to death with one of the machetes we were given by our ministry contacts for such occasions. The third was another eight-legged creature smashed into the bloody imprint of a star beside our kitchen table—a Brazilian wandering spider that evaded death for several minutes, the hairless, disembodied hand of a skeleton flying back and forth between our feet until Hayden killed it with the same tennis shoe. We had screamed and screamed and then laughed, wiping the sweat off of our upper lips and the tears out of the corners of our eyes, relieved and incredulous and wanting to clear our vision so we could remain vigilant. When the darkness came, we climbed into the mattress-less bunk bed frames we outfitted with our sleeping pads and spent a few extra minutes checking that our respective mosquito nets were secured. In the morning, we would sweep their bodies out alongside the numerous other bugs caught in the gaps between our floorboards—black ants, leafcutter ants, bullet ants, spiders, moths, flies, chiggers, gnats, mosquitos. They would land in murky puddles of cow urine and our toothpaste spit. But that night we restlessly turned, listening to the chirping, the buzzing, the sniffing, the humming, and the rumbling, panging tin-roofed thunderstorm drowning out the red-eyed thought pounding its drum between my ears—*What am I doing here?*

Here was deep in the Amazon Jungle; *here* was a two-room, stilted house hidden behind three massive hills and a floating blue boat dock on the Marañon River. *Here* was on a two-month-long mission trip with thirteen other college-aged students from across and between the various corners of North America. We arrived via an hour-and-a-half boat ride from a town called Nauta, and to Nauta via a two-hour bus trip from Iquitos, and to Iquitos via airplane from Atlanta, Georgia. We were all under twenty-five and strangers, having spent only four days together before leaving for *here*. We all

applied and even paid a few thousand dollars to go on a mission trip to Perú, but we did not learn that we applied to go on a mission trip to the Amazon Basin until one month before we left. And even then, we were told we'd live in Iquitos—the largest city in the world inaccessible by major road, a city of four hundred thousand people and Western accommodations. We stayed there for only one night after our flight, in an urban compound with fans and flushing toilets and mattresses and a little, white Maltese puppy named Princessa that kept trying to jump in our laps during dinner. The road we travelled to Nauta the next morning was the only one leading into or out of Iquitos at all, a two-hour stretch of broken pavement and dirt pushing farther into the northern jungles.

Here was a place called "the farm." Beginning at the edge of the river, there were about sixty makeshift steps up a steep hill—boards of rotting wood forced into little slots tallying the nearly vertical earth. These steps dislodged during rainstorms, slipping into and out of place as they attempted to bear our weight and combat the slickness of the mud beneath. At the top, more slender boards partially eaten away by weather and time pressed into the dirt and lined a path that wound beside Pedro's home—our ministry contact and boat driver—where he lived with his wife and three-year-old son. They had their main house, a stilted one-room space with hammocks hanging and a few plastic chairs around the edges. To the left of that, they had a smaller building made mostly of mosquito netting and thatch where they filtered their water and prepared their meals.

To the right of their house and down a small hill back towards the river was the shower shack and well, a wooden stall standing precariously on stilts and covered with a large piece of tin. It was outfitted with a small white bucket looped with paracord to pull up water from the well, a plastic tub to pour the water in, a measuring cup to pour that water over our bodies, and a thin canvas sheet that hung down like a shower curtain and left gaps of several inches between the inside and outside worlds. There was a large hole in the floor of the shower itself, and the walls were spiraled with twisting trails of termite tunnels. Heather was the first and the last to use it during the beginning of the trip because when she did, she came back with red welts all over her. She counted the bites on just one of her legs and only the ones below her knee and gave up at two-hundred-and-forty-six. And we were shocked but soon learned not to be—mosquitos rose out of the ground in thick clouds in the cool of each afternoon, mosquitos that bit through our jeans and left our knees as red as if we had been kneeling on uncooked grains of rice. We were itchy all the time, and when we scratched, our fingernails often broke skin and the dirt beneath them would leave long, bloody brown streaks all up and down our bodies. We joked about if the ministry we were working with were to use us as the subjects of a promotional video—what we would look like on screen, slapping away the bugs and scratching ourselves raw, our hair wild and our clothes torn and little bleeding whelps all over us, eyes darting around on the lookout for whatever poisonous spider was coming our way next. *Come live like us, come serve the Lord*, we would say, and their numbers would plummet. We laughed at our own sense of martyrdom on our way down to the river to bathe, our solution to avoid both the bugs in the shower and the always present feeling that *here*, we had been thrown into the deep end of a pool complete with piranhas and electric eels. We laughed as we helped each other wash our hair so nobody would have to put their head completely underwater.

To get to our house, we would climb a hill behind the shower shack, making sure to step as lightly and as quickly as we could so we wouldn't sink knee deep in the mud. Often that happened anyways, and we would have to pause and offer hands and arms to pull people out. Then we wove in and out between towering palms and several large, often aggressive cows, following the trails worn into the gnawed, thick grass by previous footsteps. Looking right or left showed a wasteland of decaying knee-high stumps and limbs, and beyond that only thick jungle canopy. The trees were like gangly

giants stretching, their hair tall spiky fronds, and their arms vines dragging the ground. They stood together in a united front and cast ominous shadows on and between their hairy, tree trunk legs. But push onward and up one final hill, continue to follow the browning stretch of earth and grass trampled underfoot, and there was our home for those next two months—that two-room house built on a steep decline, made of wood and mosquito netting and a tin roof.

The front steps rested evenly on the earth itself, but the back of the house was supported by stilts nearly fifteen feet high. There were no doors, only seven-foot wide rectangular openings in the front and back walls that we tried to patch together with our own mismatched mosquito nets and duct tape. The house opened up into our kitchen and eating area, where there were two tables—one for eating at and the other, an elevated counter space—and five wooden benches where all of us could barely gather. Against the right wall, a propane stovetop with three burners provided a place for us to cook our food. A multilevel shelf was filled up with our groceries, and our pots and pans—some containing the unpackaged foods that we did not want the bugs to get into—were stacked on the floor. Fat, red spiders dangled from the corners of the meshed windows above the stove overlooking the river. It was in that space where there were chipped, white mugs and blue plastic plates and not quite enough silverware to go around. There were cans of tuna, trays of brown eggs, packets of banana oatmeal, jars of peanut butter, pasta noodles, tomato sauce, instant coffee, loaves of bread, strawberry jelly, rice, carrots, potatoes, onions, and a bucket of salt. Two blue bins sat beneath the counter and were used to wash dishes—one for rinsing, filled up with the rainwater we caught outside using skinny, sliding pieces of tin to redirect the runoff from our roof into two large barrels and the other for cleaning, more rainwater with a drop of bleach. The sponge we used smelled like mold; we had no dishtowels, only an old skirt.

When I tossed in my bed the night of the three kills, I was tossing in the very first bunk in our bedroom, the second room of the house. I was on the bottom, and Cassie, a four-foot and eleven-inch tall girl from Vancouver, Canada, slept on top. The room stretched on to include six more of those bunk bed frames pushed against the left side wall, each occupied by one of my teammates and their belongings—backpacks, sleeping bags, travel pillows, first aid kits, clothes, towels, headlamps, bug spray—mostly covered by a rectangular box of mosquito netting. In the back corner, next to the other wall opening, someone had strung up a rainfly for us to change our clothes behind. The rest of the room was largely open space except for another tarp hung up in the adjacent corner, behind which lay a small white bucket for when it was raining too hard to venture outside for the proper bathroom, a crudely built stall standing fifty feet away from our kitchen. It consisted of a couple boards nailed together, a tin roof, and a yellow piece of canvas cloth that only partially covered the structure, leaving the user's knees and lower thighs visible. Inside, there was a porcelain seat with no tank that had to be flushed manually by throwing a bucket of water into the bowl, and that only worked a quarter of the time anyways. Used toilet paper had to be collected in a garbage bag that hung by a nail on the inside, and the stench attracted so many flies and mosquitos that it was nearly impossible to open our eyes, mouths, or to even breathe at all. The farm had no running water, no air conditioning, no reliable source of phone or internet service, no sort of emergency transport if medical attention were necessary, and approximately three hours of generated electricity—amounting to the illumination of two light bulbs and dense swarms of bugs—per night if it were not storming.

Every morning I slipped as quietly as I could out of my net and walked down the foot-worn trail that led to the hill overlooking the shower shack and the river. I sat on a discarded two-by-four and watched the sun balloon white-hot over the water and

illuminate the current flowing black, bobbing logs up and down. They disappeared and then appeared once again like paintbrushes stroking yellows and oranges across the bottom layer of sky. I slapped away the mosquitos biting at my neck and my ankles and the spaces behind my knees, and I knew that up the hill, there were others doing the same thing. I had seen it—the way Stacy took her guitar out to the fields and strummed softly, the way Eliza would journal for hours on end, the way Kyle would put in his headphones and close his eyes. And even though we all tried to make the best of it, even though we sat around at night sweating through long-sleeved t-shirts, trying to keep the bugs off of our skin and sang old Taylor Swift songs when we exhausted our spirits of worship, I saw the ways we were approaching whoever it was who brought us here, asking why and how. I had been taught in church to ask God to send me to the hard places, but I didn't feel sent—I felt left for dead. I spent my mornings pleading with God to show Himself all to trudge back up the hill and feel the jungle exhale its sticky morning breath, blowing the tarantulas that strutted across our ceiling rafters off balance so they fell onto our shoulders. I lamented that I was never taught how to hold a machete.

But after catching glimpses of toddler-sized iguana tails swishing around in tree branches and after having come to terms with the possibility of seeing folds of spotted snakeskin stretch as long as the river itself, undulating and pulsing with its own current, after preparing to see bulging lumps work their way down from serpentine throat to intestine, the last thing I expected to see in the rainforest was that little white Maltese puppy from Iquitos scratching at our kitchen trash bag early one morning. The fur around its face had matted together in thin brown strands that hung from its muzzle, and its paws were caked in the mud and manure softened from the previous night's rain. When it heard us standing there behind it, it turned its tiny body and pounced on our feet, jumping up and down and licking our legs.

A debate immediately ensued among us. Was this actually Princessa? I picked it up, fitting my thumbs in those winged spaces where its torso thinned out into stubby, little legs, hazarding a glance to see that she was indeed, female. She had to weigh less than ten pounds. Our eyes were level, but one of hers was crossed and staring in the distance—somewhere back beyond my left ear—and her panting tongue hung like a pink ribbon out across a severe underbite.

"I don't think it's the same one," I said, handing her off to Eliza whose hands were extended. We had not seen her owner—a petite, grandmotherly woman with short, dark hair whom we affectionately called Mama Ingrid—anywhere nearby. In fact, we hadn't seen any of our other ministry contacts from Iquitos at all since we left there. It was then, that first night in Perú, that we found out we would be living on the river itself. When we arrived at the missions compound, we were taken behind a gate and into a high-ceilinged room with walls made of concrete. Dozens of flags from every corner of the globe hung from the rafters that stretched across the wide expanse at the top, rippling gently over us as Mama Ingrid helped carry in our luggage. As soon as all of our bags were thrown into a big pile in the middle of the room, she hugged each of us, warmly whispering, "*Bienvenidos, bienvenidos,*"—welcome, welcome. After spending the night on the floor of the Lima airport between flights, we were all tired-eyed and needing showers, but she was ecstatic that we had come here to work with her ministry. I began to relax into my circumstances, into the four solid walls around me and her soft voice telling me how glad she was I was there. One of the men at the compound translated for her and the news of our impending jungle departure was slipped in so discreetly that I didn't even flinch. It wasn't until she left to tend to other matters and that our translator started giving us the details of our living arrangements that I began to retreat back into my unease.

We ate dinner and that tiny Maltese puppy pressed its paws up against our shins beneath the table, and then when we went to bed, she slept a few moments at each of our sides, migrating from bunk to bunk until she grew annoyed with our collective tossing and turning. Our imagined jungles hung their canopies over our eyes, and around three a.m., I heard her push open the door of the room with her nose, probably searching for somebody less terrified that this would be their last chance to sleep without the fear of crawling beasts feeling warm-blooded bodies through the damp, red earth and coming to us with growling stomachs. Lying on my bottom bunk, I looked up at the bed slats above me and saw their gentle bend as one of my teammates from North Carolina, from a town only an hour from where I grew up, tossed throughout the night. We lived only an hour away from each other nearly our whole lives, and we didn't meet at a birthday party for a mutual friend or at a high school basketball game, but *here*. I don't know how that happens. Noises were coming from all around the room—the groans of bedsprings and the sounds of running noses. At the earliest trace of sunlight, Mama Ingrid loaded us into a bus bound for the port of Nauta.

In the farm kitchen, we passed the dog around, each of us holding her at arm's length, inspecting her matted fur and crooked teeth and still arguing:

"The dog in Iquitos didn't have crazy eyes like that."

"That has to be her though!"

"She's so gross looking."

Brenna put her back down on the floor, and she began to play with our shoestrings. Her tail wagged and she pounced from side to side, and we all just stood there and watched. All of our hands were grimy from holding her; little tufts of white fur stuck to our sweaty, dirty fingers. She looked up at me, and I felt a familiar thought bubbling back up to the surface—*What are you doing here?*

It took several nights of that puppy scratching at our bedposts and wanting to be let inside of our mosquito nets to sleep with us before we found the answer. We were still waiting for Pedro to get back to us with ministry details, and until that happened, we could not leave the farm. We spent our days exploring the thick jungle surrounding us, carving our own trails past the swollen, exposed tree roots and watching out for camouflaged predators. Then one afternoon, when we were just about to make lunch, we spotted the black head of Mama Ingrid bobbing up the hill. The dog had been lying on our front step, her eye wildly drifting up, searching the sky like she was looking for something that could airlift her out of there and back to her double-storied home of safe concrete and mattresses. But the moment that she saw her owner, she bounded toward her. We all came out, saying, "*¡Hola, Mama Ingrid!*"

In knee-high galoshes and bearing gifts, she responded with the only three words we had ever heard her speak in the whole English language, "I love you!" She smiled warmly, like she was carrying the sun in her hands instead of the fruit she had brought us—browning guanabana, a fruit we tried earlier and termed "snot fruit" because of its milky consistency. Her soft wrinkles folded at the corners of her lips stretched taut. We pointed at the dog, now bouncing around her feet, pointed at the dog and then pointed back to her over and over again. "*Sí, sí,*" she said, "*¡Princessa!*"

"*¿Por qué en la selva?*" Tess asked. *Why in the jungle?* And from my elementary understanding of the Spanish language and from context, I could only loosely translate Mama Ingrid's next strand of words:

"*Because she kept defecating on the beds.*"

Tess, who had taken seven years of Spanish and acted as our amateur interpreter in that moment, relayed the following information. She told us that Mama Ingrid had apparently been visiting several villages up and down this stretch of the Marañon during the past week. She dropped Princessa off here to live with Pedro so she would

still be on ministry property. She stopped by again on her way back home to Iquitos just to check up on us and make sure that we had adjusted well to the jungle. I looked down at Princessa and remembered her former lapdog state—in just a few days, her white fur had yellowed with the elements and she had obviously adopted a much more nervous temperament. We all smiled at Mama Ingrid and said we were getting used to things here.

But then Mama Ingrid said that she had to be on her way. She pointed to a large, blue boat that was floating by our dock—one I just then noticed—and she pointed a wrinkled finger to her own chest. "Iquitos," she told us and then opened her arms wide. All fourteen of us lined up single file to give her a hug, and I could feel my chest tighten, holding in a small voice beckoning—*take me with you*. She went through the ranks, grabbing us by the hand and kissing us on the cheek, saying *I love you* over and over again until there were none of us left—*I love you, I love you, I love you*—and we said it back, meaning it with all of our hearts. But even as she pressed her beating heart against mine, I was confused as to why it had to be like this and why this sweet woman would abandon her own pet in a place where anacondas could swallow her whole rather than housetrain her. But there was no harshness in her voice, and when she turned and began her descent to the river, Princessa followed at her heels. We watched the pair traverse the hills and the makeshift stairs by Pedro's house and then teeter across the thin wooden board that connected the shore to the dock. We watched Mama Ingrid board the boat, watched the driver untie the ropes that harbored it to our little piece of earth, watched her begin to float away from us.

And then we watched her pick up that little white Maltese puppy and throw her off the boat. Our eyes collectively widened. Princessa was suspended in midair just above the deep waters where we had been bathing, an area where we had to hold on to an algae-covered log to keep from floating away or drowning because we couldn't touch the bottom with our feet. She flailed her four puppy paws at least six feet above the ripples before she began to drop, and it wasn't even like watching something in slow motion. Her muscles jerked back and forth rapidly; her legs skidded across the memories of her old home. She fell just inches within the dock's reach. We all gasped, our voices stuck in our throats, watching her claw at the wood, barely pulling herself up onto its surface and barely escaping the murky waters. And Mama Ingrid just waved to us from her boat, her mouth moving to say *I love you*.

When Princessa pressed her muddied paws against my shins during dinner, I picked her up and put her in my lap, letting dark brown stains smear across my legs. I felt her heart beating against my thigh as I scooped a few spoonfuls of rice and sliced carrots into my mouth—a steady thumping and the gentle exhales of a dog nearly drowned just a few hours before. And at the same time, she was not where she was supposed to be and she was where she was supposed to be—in the jungle, falling asleep in somebody's lap. Something in my chest ached when I thought about the days she must have spent in her old home, curled up on Mama Ingrid sitting in a plastic chair beneath all those waving flags. I could see the way she must have followed her blindly to the jungle, trotting behind her and nipping playfully at her heels all the way onto that boat and then all the way up those makeshift stairs until suddenly she looked around and saw Mama Ingrid was gone. I ran my fingers through her fur trying to the get the knots out, listening to forks scrape dinner plates—the screeches of metal against plastic, the sounds of chewing and swallowing, of conversations punctuated by the slapping away of mosquitos and of our soft breathing. I could not understand how someone as sweet as Mama Ingrid could float away from this little white puppy that she had raised and fed and loved—how anyone at all could do that to something so unprepared. But then there were fleshy, white elbows with dirt smudges and ant bites propped on the table

and I knew we were all flailing a bit, scrambling to cling on to this one piece of wood, this table sitting between us and holding us together.

The next morning and many mornings thereafter, I watched the sunrises from that discarded two-by-four down on the hill above the shower shack that overlooked the river. I watched the silhouettes of hunchbacked men paddle their canoes against the current, and I watched the sun crack open the sky and bleed its yolk across the wideness of time and eternity—the ever-beating river that carried away Mama Ingrid and what felt like God Himself, leaving us all behind. I looked down at my feet, my toes stained brown by the mud and manure. And I didn't understand how we were supposed to do this, but only that we were there at that moment, in that place—a place where we were not supposed to be and in exactly the place we were supposed to be. And I had a feeling the why would be measured in the things we would survive.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

MARYLEE OSBORNE

Written by Grant Looper
Photographed by Cameron Ohls

From a young age, Marylee Osborne has been interested in both art and the human form. Her original plan was to pursue a career in the medical field, but a perceptive high school teacher who noticed her unique talent and artistic eye intervened. "I took three years of biomedical science in high school. I would say, 'I have to go to the career center,' and he would just say, 'Why? Why are you doing this?'" Marylee laughs at the memory now and her teacher's bluntness. She is now majoring in both Art Education and Painting and Drawing and anticipates a career in teaching.

Marylee was raised in Belton, South Carolina, a rural town near Anderson. She appreciated the small town setting, and anticipates a similar experience when she moves to Traveler's Rest with her fiancé after their wedding in June. However, place is secondary to Marylee in her art, as her primary focus is on people. "People are a big part of my work," she says, "and relationships. Sometimes even people I don't know but just people I see."

Honesty is more important to Marylee's painting than ideals. She would rather focus on details—the muscles and flesh of a figure. "I guess that goes back to biomedical science," she jokes. Marylee believes that focusing on minute physical detail is a way to emphasize a person's individuality and thus provide a reason for self-acceptance. She cites photographer Sally Mann as one of her influences, particularly in her reliance on honesty rather than aestheticism. She mentions giving her models few instructions during photography sessions in preparation for painting. She says it adds to her desire to capture the most natural image possible. Marylee is also passionate about restoring legitimacy to watercolor painting, a medium she says many have come to associate with elementary school arts and crafts. She has adopted her own style and makes heavy use of negative space in her portraits.

Family and friends have had a profound impact on Marylee's artistic journey. She recalls visiting her grandmother several times as a child and her grandmother having various arts and crafts waiting for her.

"People are a big part of my work...sometimes even people I don't know but just people I see."

"We actually did a lot of watercolor," Marylee says, noting that this was likely the beginning of her interest in the method. Joe, her fiancé, has also been supportive and sometimes doubles as a model for her portraits.

Although being an art major is not without its downsides (expensive art supplies to name one), Marylee is excited at the prospect of helping children develop their creative skills in the future. She instructed gymnastics from the age of fourteen to her second year of college. "I really fell in love with the children," she says, "and I loved to watch them grow, not just as gymnasts, but as people." She anticipates a similarly rewarding experience as an elementary teacher following graduation in December.

In the meantime, Marylee will likely be spending long hours in the studio, Trevor Hall or Bishop Briggs playing in her earbuds, hard at work creating other honest, meaningful portraits.

MARYLEE OSBORNE

Four watercolor paintings on watercolor paper in the order they appear:

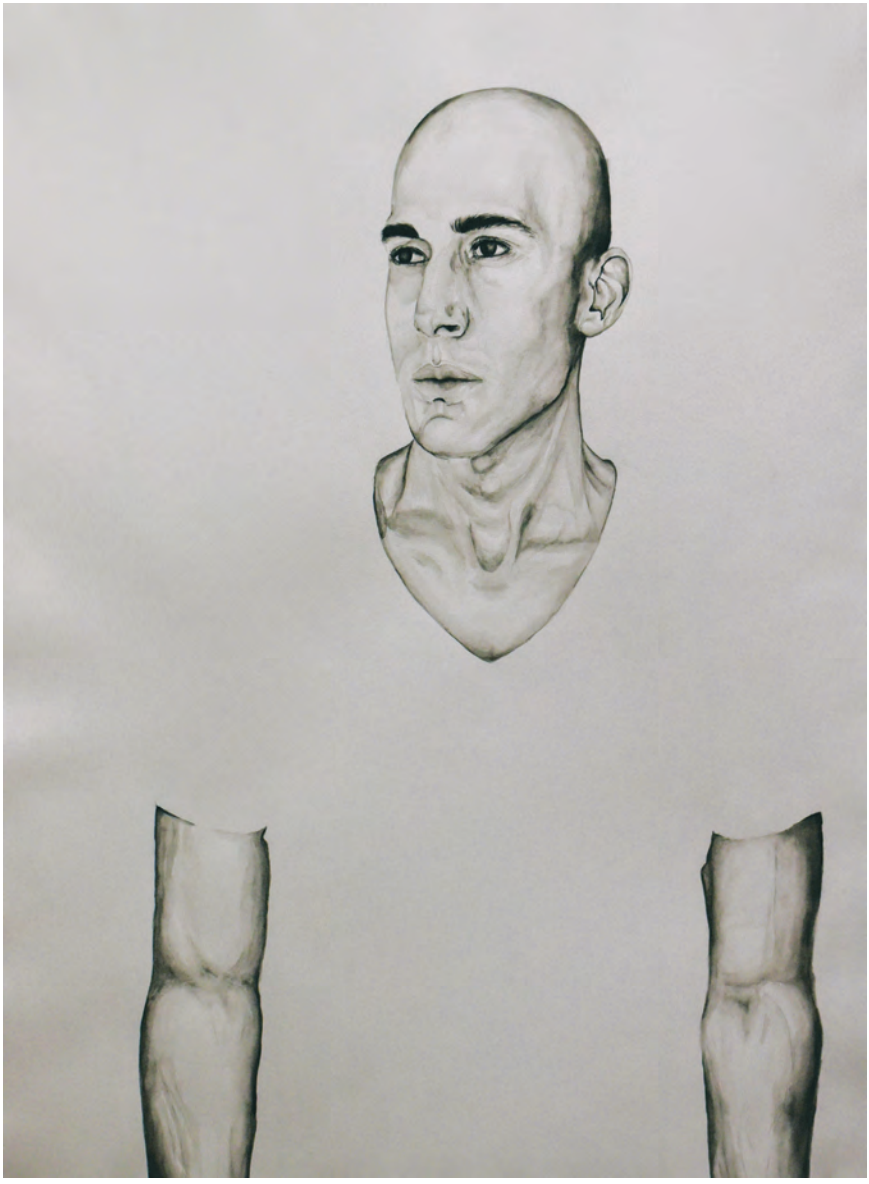
PAGES 50-55

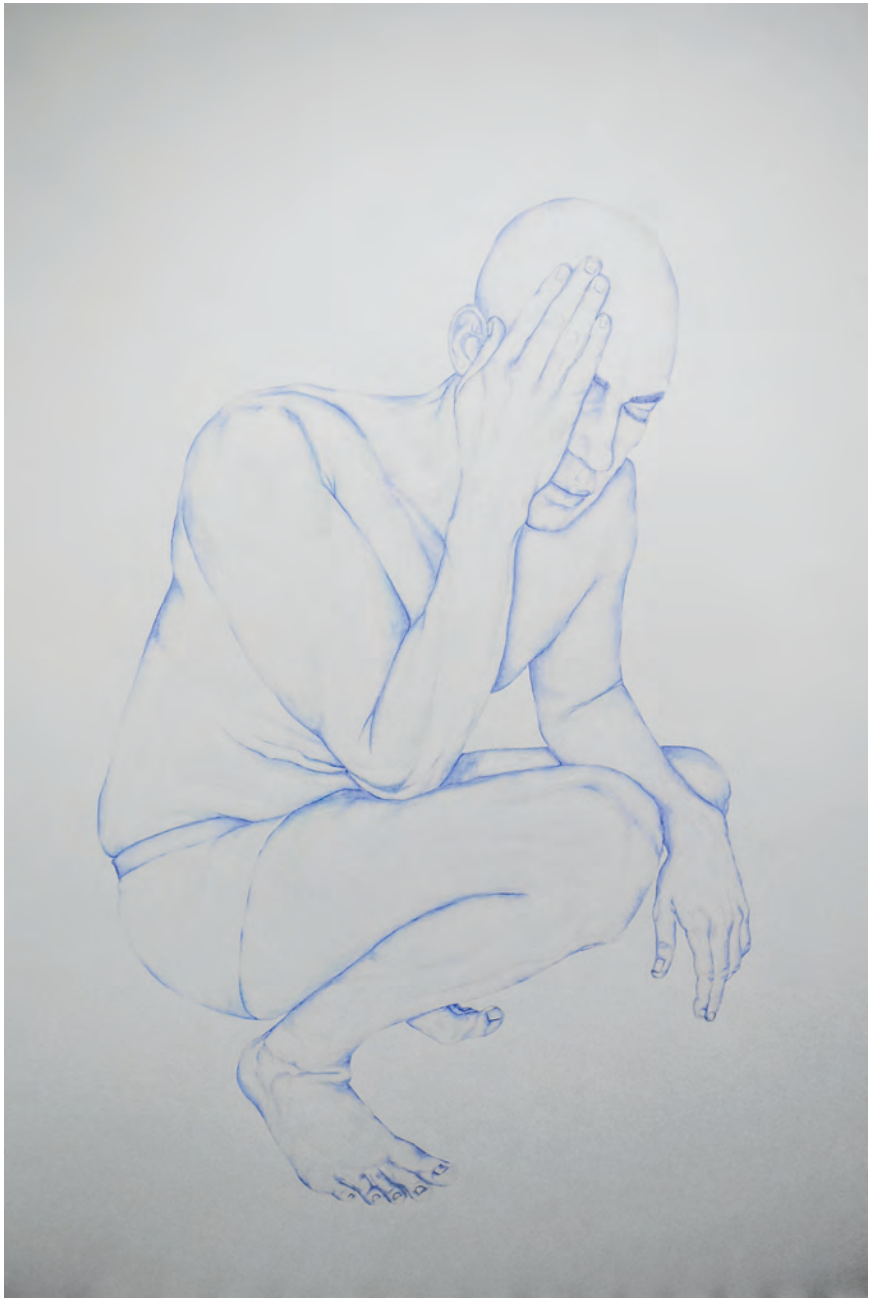
TWENTY ONE
22 x 30 in.
Watercolor on Arches 140 lb. Hot Watercolor Paper

TWENTY ONE, DETAIL
22 x 30 in.
Watercolor on Arches 140 lb. Hot Watercolor Paper

THIRTY THREE
22 x 30 in.
Watercolor on Arches 140 lb. Hot Watercolor Paper

UNTITLED
42 x 51 in.
Watercolor on Arches 156 lb. Hot Press Watercolor Paper





REPRIEVE

digital photography by Michaela Staton

SUFFOCATION AND EXALTATION OR HOW FAMILY CAN SUFFOCATE AND ALSO BRING JOY

digital photography by Kristen Curtis

MADE-UP

(R) cosmetics on panel by Lee Ard

SELF-WORTH NO. 3
digital photography by Jessica Wortkoetter

DRIPS NO. 1
digital photography by Rachel Garrison

DRIPS NO. 2
digital photography by Rachel Garrison

MINI WATER BEAST
ceramics by Caroline Hopper

MATRIARCH
oil on panel by Caroline Wright

POP
acrylic on canvas by Caroline Wright

TOUCH NO. 1 & NO. 3
digital photography by Lindsay Higgins

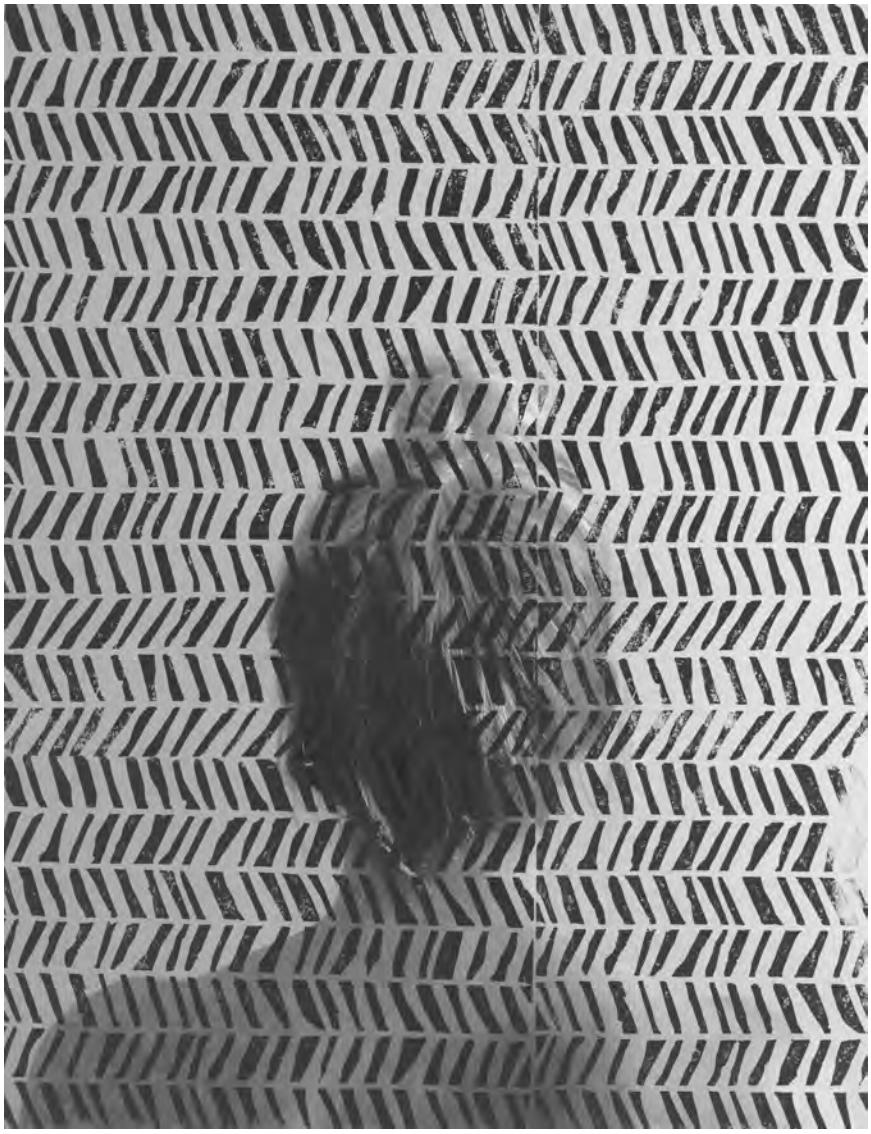
SAVE PAPER
digital photography by Caroline Hopper

SAVE WATER
digital photography by Caroline Hopper

HOLD YOU
digital photography by Rachel Weldy

SIDEWALK CHALK
digital photography by Rachel Weldy

PATTERNS IN THE SAND
digital photography by Anna Tabor



CURTAIN
photography and woodblock print by Sara Cantrell

WRITER SPOTLIGHT

JENNI HARRIS

Written by Randi Adams
Photographed by Cameron Ohls

There's always a momentary pause before Jenni Harris answers any question put before her—in every literature class I've had with her and as we laugh our way through a spur of the moment interview. If you pay attention, her eyes glance upward as if scanning every word she's ever come across in order to explain what's on her mind in the most perfect way she can. She never disappoints, as her responses are always meaningful. Her literary works have heavy underlying themes, but Jenni never shies away from a chance to laugh and she always smiles a little bit bigger when talking about her cat, Bev.

Jenni took her first creative writing class during high school in Gastonia, North Carolina, where she grew up, and jokingly admits everything she wrote was "garbage." Even before coming to college as an English literature major, she's always liked writing. When she got to Anderson, there was a mix up that had her listed as a creative writing major, and instead of having the issue fixed, she decided to pursue both literature and creative writing. Within the literary realm, Jenni's biggest influences are Barbara Kingsolver and Anne Lamott. She finds Kingsolver's use of imagery and language compelling and tries to emulate a similar use of description in her own work. Of Lamott, Jenni says her writing is incredibly honest and candid and that "she isn't afraid of mixing irreverence in with religion." Jenni is adamant about exploring truth within her writing.

In a more personal sense, she has been most inspired by Dr. Teresa Jones. "It has made such a difference—having someone believe not only in me, but believe in me as a writer and in the stories that I'm telling." Jenni laughs about "falling into nonfiction" and points to the opportunity to work independently with Dr. Jones as highly influential. Most of her work is inspired by people that she's come across by accident—through travel or otherwise. She also prefers writing about family, as opposed to friends because with family, "you get what you get," whereas with friends, "there's a measure of choice."


ROCKS WERE
SPLIT
OPENING UP OBSIDIAN MOUTHS JUST WIDE
ENOUGH TO SHOUT HIS PRAISES
IF THAT MUCH HAPPENS WHEN HE FALLS
HOW MUCH MORE WILL THEY SHOUT WHEN HE
RAISES
What WAS I bORN
FOR?

"...Literature and writing offer endless possibilities...If you read something and it's influential, it can alter the path you take."

Much of Jenni's body of work is inspired by the two months she spent on a mission trip to Perú during the summer between her sophomore and junior years at Anderson—the people she was seemingly thrown together with, the experience of surviving in the middle of the Amazon jungle, and "learning to see God in new ways." "Princessa" is the first part of a series of eight nonfiction essays that Jenni is completing for an independent project with Dr. Jones. These longer essays will be separated by punch prose vignettes. "I'm working to chronologically walk through those two months from the feelings of abandonment and frustrated expectation to feeling my own religious shifts occurring. I saw God seemingly transform in front of me as we did ministry, grew closer as a team, and shared those surreal experiences." Whether it be the coincidental creative writing major mix up, the chance encounters with people that would inspire some of her best works, or the mission trip that placed her in the middle of a dangerous jungle and sent her home with a story to tell—as readers, we're all the luckier for these moments of fate.

As for future endeavors, Jenni is pursuing graduate school in English literature and her ultimate goal is to teach at the collegiate level. She admits to becoming increasingly fascinated with the "idea of narrative—the power that it has to bring people together and the way that people interact with texts and, in a sense, have their own stories that come out of those interactions." On the power of literature, Jenni says, "I just think literature and writing offer endless possibilities for how other people will receive it and what that can do to a person's life. If you read something and it's influential, it can alter the path you take. I just think it's so cool that the written word can do that—that we connect with people through stories. I just want to study that forever."


Wed
Jessica
Laurel
Marylee


b. Juxtaposit
c. Proportio
d. Color/V
Crit

LAKE WYLIE

Shelby Swing

Disturbed by splashing,
gritty brown lake water swirls,
hiding what's below.

Broken glass bottles
slice into smooth, soft arches
while snakes flee, unseen.

GEMINI

Maris Mabry

They mutated silently, the moment
the cell split into two cells and fastened
to the womb lost in embryonic record.
There they grew, clustered like two
dark cherries, fed by the same stalk,
moored to the same berth.
By the time they were pressed together,
the heads bulging against the womb,
their flesh had all but sealed skin to skin
within the preserving brine.
Sentience of the other would not come
till the womb was sliced and the first
cherry pulled from its stem, leaving
the second one—the second half—alone
with the realization
that they were two all along.

LOOKING THROUGH AMBER

Samuel Funk

For the past three months, I have participated in a calculated ritual. Starting at the mouth of my room, I turn my bare lamp on. The cold, unforgiving light shouts my room into alert. The heaping spread of clothing leaves countless visitors backing away from my room, as if I'm hiding a body beneath the pile of jeans. Here, after work every Sunday, I prepare for the journey that lies ahead of me. I know I must travel light, so I pack only a few pairs of pants, shirts, and a few prized gems from my delicate collection of Scottish plaid boxers. Typically around ten-thirty p.m. I set off into the night. They say there's no rest for the wicked; the same is true for those without a washer and dryer.

Most times, I have a set destination that doesn't extend past a thirty-minute drive. And most times it's the house of a friend, one who doesn't mind me keeping them up while I insist on folding my clothes on their living room floor. So, naturally, the list is short, really short. Connor is lanky, soft-spoken, and the only member on the list. Not much is said when I sit on his dingy leather couch each Sunday, waiting for the end of the last drying cycle. He sits on the opposite side of the couch filling a familiar silence with his presence. We don't talk. The metallic echo of coins muffled by shirts and socks can be heard in his living room. These silences are the result of a mutual understanding; we're both preparing for the next phases of our night. For Connor, the next phase is sleep, since he is only awake to keep me company.

My next phase requires silence so that I may ready myself to enact an age-old sacrament of the Funk family, preparing finished laundry for the week. While in high school, Sunday nights ended with my father and I sitting in the living room while he ironed clothing. I'd watch the smooth motions of his hands gently fold creases into his khakis. The faint sound of water spraying on his button-down shirts trickled through the room, immediately followed by the sizzle of freshly-pressed professional attire. During this time, a silence would fill the room, until my father would look up and ask, "How does your week look?" We would outline the duties of the coming week, openly admitting our concerns, guessing how it would unfold. It served as a prepared time to openly harmonize over the ways we longed for God to move in our lives. Sometimes, after he put the ironing board away, the room felt ten degrees hotter. I chose to believe this was God, ironing over the creases for our week.

Once the final pang of Connor's dryer screeches from the kitchen, he smiles and shuffles to bed. I am left to my folding ritual. The family sacrament of communal preparation has morphed into an act of solitude, as I gently mumble my wishes for the week to the wall. Each shirt is held with deep reverence as I breathe in the warm lavender detergent now emanating from collar to the trim at the bottom. After I finish my folding sacrament, I stop. Breathing in lavender and silence, I catalogue the week and faintly hope, to no one in particular, that it unfolds in my favor. Connor's back door groans as I creep out.

When my friend RJ moved in with me at the beginning of senior year, he arrived with a solution for the lack of a washer and dryer. Some of his relatives were willing

to provide us with an older set. We immediately celebrated this as a beacon of hope shimmering from the West; some might even call it a miracle. However, it turns out God seems to struggle with longitude and latitude. The washer and dryer rested in a basement roughly two hundred miles away from our house. This left us with a new problem; meanwhile, the mounting piles of clothing threatened to devour our rooms. We'd solved previous moving problems by sticking furniture on the roof of my Honda Accord, RJ sitting on the edge of the passenger window. One hand on the couch, table, or TV set, the other on the corner of the window, begging me to take turns as slowly as possible. With this in mind, the interstate didn't seem conducive for this mode of traveling; so we were left with a simple solution: find a truck.

I assumed that attending a religious college resting near the buckle of the Bible belt provided us with a fleet of truck drivers to choose from. This part soundly held up. For the past four years, I've found myself to be the odd car out in parking lots. The lone mom car for rows on sight. After three months of failed promises and dodged calls, I realized a key component was missing from our "truck solution." The driver must be willing to help.

A few weeks ago, I could feel my phone vibrating against my leg as I walked up the steps of my porch. RJ was calling. When I answered the phone, I could feel him rubbing his brow while he sighed, "Brian is backing out." I paused, and counted with my fingers. "RJ, you realize that means six different people have done this, right?" Of course he knew this. He sighed again, "I'll be back at the house soon."

When he arrived, we sat on opposite sides of the couch, shaking our heads, exhausted by the repetitive cycle of failed promises. We didn't say anything. I stared at the wall while this seemingly simple solution disintegrated in my lap; my thoughts kicked up these remains, sending dust into the air. I didn't think that it would be so difficult to find a willing driver here—at a place where generosity is supposed to pulse through the hallways. But it's been months. These thoughts fluttered in the air around me for hours, until the dust from my frustration settled. Dazed and with no clear next step, I felt like praying for a washer and dryer to appear in our driveway. Instead, I opened my bedroom door and muttered my wishes to a solitary square of beige carpeting, surrounded by dirty shirts.

I haven't prayed in over a year. I also stopped attending church and reading the Bible around the same time. My faith crumpled in on itself at the end of my sophomore year, after years of unanswered questions finally ate through the scaffolding of my belief. After the remains from my fall from grace settled, I realized that I'd been running for years. Covertly building friendships, hoping to find the key to silencing my doubt. After my faith went away, they did too.

During my first two years of college, I joined a group of mystic Christians. They attempted to pursue the same warm presence of God I felt while sitting with my father. Our weekly meetings centered on patiently waiting, expecting His warmth to fill the space. Jeremiah, solemn and gentle, greeted everyone with a hug and whispered, "I'm glad you're here," while the slow motions of preparation spun around the converted mechanical garage. Soft crackles of conversation and laughter spread throughout the room as candles were lit in preparation for the setting of the sun. We would all listen while people talked about their week and how they hoped it would unfold. Then, someone would pray to the Father, asking for His divine preparation to stretch out the wrinkles in our lives. While John played obscure worship songs, I would sit. With my eyes closed, I could feel the room getting hotter, and just for a second the faint sound of my father's iron sizzled in the background.

John, the unofficial leader of the small tribe of mystics, frequently told stories of gold dust raining from ceilings, people with crutches walking upright after prayer. His piercing blue eyes would gloss over with a conflicted mixture of sympathy and pity when someone doubted the existence of such acts of splendor. Once, after a new member doubted his recounting of when he heard God speak through a dream, he slightly shrugged and walked away. Later that night as everyone shuffled out of the garage, I asked him why he hadn't debated his point more. John paused while placing his amp in the bed of his truck and turned, meeting me with a confused expression on his face: "I can't change someone's doubt. That's between them and God; I'm just here to love them." As we became closer, I heard this response routinely, and mostly angled towards my own questions.

How could a loving and foreseeing God actively create a world that would result in the necessity of a hell? Were we told to have faith because God doesn't have the answers to our questions?—"I can't change your doubt. That's between you and God."

So I began praying while doubts like the inerrancy of Scripture shot holes through the walls of my room each night.

"Father—

Why do you really believe in a collection of letters written thousands of years ago?

"please, take my doubts—

What really happened behind closed doors when the church elders canonized the Bible?

"I want to believe you—

Why are swaths of Mark's gospel only found in certain manuscripts? Why would you allow humans to warp your message through simple transcription errors?

I want to believe all of it."

The loop of questions coiled onto my skin, branding every layer of my life with uncertainty. I admitted the severity of my spiritual weakness to John one evening, expecting to receive insight, answers, or at least momentary relief from the infinite regress circling behind my eyes. When I spilled the loop out to John, shock and dismay rippled across his face. He looked at his feet and told me, "Just, stop thinking so much. That's what helps me." As I reached out to other friends and members of our small tribe, this trend continued.

Doubts of hell's existence were met with more disappointed stares. Reservations over the literal nature of Genesis met with silences that have yet to break. By the end of my sophomore year, these experiences mounted into a pile of estranged friendships—a chorus of eyes averting direct contact with mine as I walked to class. The borders of my old tribe appeared to sink inward. My Wednesday worship meetings were replaced with lone nights in the library with books by Sartre while I looked for answers. Sunday night Bible studies were replaced with laundry and silence.

On a recent Sunday night rumination, as I breathed in the lavender, others breathed in the Holy Spirit I failed to catch up with. I couldn't help but wonder who was to blame for this separation and its relation to my lack of a washer and dryer. For over a year I'd been blaming my old sources of community, forgetting to look down at my own feet. I'd traveled away from them at an equal pace. My doubts had driven me to demand explanations, a highway robber only seeking out to mug his friends for the answers. With nothing left to gain, I began a pilgrimage out of faith.

Joseph Campbell observed a similar trend throughout the development of human history. When someone searches for new sources of truth, they must leave home. Stories of the Buddha, the Apostle Paul, and of Christ himself are all manifestations of this progression. Each central character receives a new revelation and is faced with the obligation to respond. Saul left the high ranks of the Pharisees. Sakyamuni left his palace.

Jesus entered the desert. My story doesn't involve a beam of light shimmering from the heavens, but it does mean finding new sources of community.

After this revelation struck me, I left Connor's house with the bitterness and old weight from doubt next to his washer and dryer. The following week, I began noticing my divide with the Christian experience through a more objective lens. I went to a worship service for the first time in months. That Wednesday morning, I watched as the students entered the auditorium, straining their necks in search of their friends. Pops of laughter scattered through groups while they waited for the sermon. Other students sat on the edge of the aisles dislocated from the clumps, seemingly invisible to the chattering members of the community. The sea of cell phone screens slowly dissipated as the thirty-something-year-old pastor walked towards the center of the stage.

Outstretched hands extended past the soft glow of the pulpit. He promised healing for those in need. Heads nodded as he spoke, breathing in his reaffirmation. Students slid slightly forward as if grasped by the hand of the pulpit. Then after he was done, the crowd echoed his pattern of open hands as they lifted theirs in worship. Breathing something in that I couldn't smell. My head slowly moved from side to side as I watched them, remembering how this openness to the transmission of hope felt. As I walked out, I realized I no longer envied these people. I didn't pity them. I wasn't angry with them. On my drive back home, I remembered my fretful nights of battling the demon of doubt with a slight film over it, like it was captured in a sheet of amber stone. It laminated over my mind's eye, the emotions of the memories no longer permeating the surface, John's sympathetic eyes dulled by the absorbent crystalline tomb. The glare of this amber screen struck me as I walked up the steps of my porch. It was the marker of separation. I no longer needed my old mystic tribe, leaving me free to enter the desert.

My assumption that Christians with trucks would leap at an opportunity to help a nonbeliever did not take into consideration the warning embedded in Campbell's observation. When Paul responded to his revelation he was consequently stoned. Buddha swarmed by the forces of nature. Jesus, crucified. The desire for a new pattern of knowledge isn't new, in fact it's one of the oldest desires in the history of man, but it's new for me. And my payment is placed every Sunday night as I drive to Connor's house.

I understand those drivers who stepped away from helping. The consequence for not helping two people you barely know anymore is rather low. More than that, losing a few hours, and possibly having to move a washer and dryer doesn't exactly sound enjoyable. We asked people to find the motivation to walk through amber, and then spend time and energy on us. It turns out, this request may have been simply too heavy a burden, partnered with ideals too lofty. Sending a hand through human divides is nothing short of a miracle. People remain within the tribes that reaffirm what they want to believe. I now see that the cacophony of laughter and worship songs often drowns out the voices from the outside, even the ones calling out for help. I chose to step into the desert where my voice couldn't be heard and found no trucks or answers in sight.

And, that's okay.

Now, each Sunday night, as I pack my clothes, I scroll through the list of names. Connor's house rests outside of the amber. His washer and dryer serve as an open hand extended my way, welcoming my clothing ritual. While others spend this time soaking in worship and heat of the Holy Spirit, I spread my folded clothes around in a circle. I close my eyes and breathe in the scent of lavender. My hands outstretched, receiving the generosity that is available where I am. With every laundry service I attend, the haze from the amber grows brighter. Every act of generosity fills my communion chalice, reminding me that every desert ends. The ground seems firmer each Sunday night as I gently shut Connor's back door.

Last Sunday, RJ was sitting on the couch when I walked in from Connor's house. He looked at my precarious pyramid of folded clothes, with my head just clearing the top. After I hobbled to my room and placed my basket on the floor, I returned to where RJ sat, choosing the opposite side of the couch. For the first Sunday in months, we didn't speak about the washer and dryer. We forgot to ruminate over who wasn't lending their truck to our two-person cause. But we did talk about how nice that lavender smell is at the beginning of another week.

VISITING CHINATOWN

Angel Hisnanick

Strands of lanterns hang
like jewels over crowded streets:
a borrowed necklace.

NATIVE TONGUE

Jenni Harris

I wish I could say I did not see the woman trying to get out—the lavatory door bowing, shaking, stuck on its hinges. I wish I could say I did not know she had gone to the restroom and accidentally locked herself in that ever-shrinking space, pressed against a metal bowl that still smelled of her urine. But it was a red-eye flight, and I was the only one in the cabin who seemed to be awake. Still my hands rested on my seatbelt.

I turned away and watched a screen on the back of the seat in front of me, showing a cartoon plane trace the path back to my home. We hovered above the Panama Canal—another stripe in the American flag—and I glanced at the woman's previously occupied seat right next to me. She was dark-skinned and probably in her forties. We had exchanged pleasantries several hours past, and it soon became evident we didn't speak enough of the same language to continue conversation—but her cries for help coming from beyond the locked door required no native tongue.

It took nearly ten minutes before her pounding rose above the roar of the engine, before her pushing and pulling with the weight of her entire body was nearly impossible to ignore and before her wails and her thumps finally awoke an older gentleman. He rose from his seat wearing white and pried the bathroom door open. A beam of fluorescent light shone on her trembling hands and she sniffed, embarrassed, while black streaks of mascara smeared her cheeks. I shut my eyes and turned away as she approached, pretending not to have heard and not to have seen, pretending to have been asleep as we sped closer to the border.

BRATTON PLANTATION

Randi Adams

The large white homestead,
flanked by several small red brick structures,
proudly displays a legacy of cotton-grown wealth.
Only steps into the main house,
the voices of two hundred years
of inhabitants and visitors
echo off the walls—
fits of laughter, raised voices,
declarations of love and hate—
they all soaked into the wood
and became eternal.

Outside in the Carolina heat,
the sweet smell of grass freshly cut
and an impulse to wander into a one-room
brick home—slave quarters, the plaque says.
Hear a similar tangle of voices,
only this time, feel the energy of
too many tired bodies crammed
into a single dwelling
all at once. The only light
filters in through the doorway,
but it's noon and the room is dark.

Inside, the brick walls whisper stories
about hard work, calloused hands,
cotton, and servitude—
shedding light onto a forgotten legacy.

SNOWFALL IN THE VILLAGE OF BUEN PASTOR, LORETO, PERÚ

Jenni Harris

Twelve heads white as chicken feathers
stretch their necks into my open doorway
asking if I have time for a visit.
I nod, and they come into my home
kicking up dust, walking on clouds.
It settles speckled on their skin, not mine—
my feet the same deep red as the earth below.

Twelve mouths with teeth white as serpent fangs
open wide and let beads of sweat fall
from anointed upper lips to salt their tongues.
Their eyes find the gaps in my thatched ceiling—
spotted sunlight shines on their faces. They say
Jee-sus is coming soon. He'll make my sins
white as, white as, white as,

I do not understand.

Twelve faces white as old fish bones
try to explain how the sky opens up
for them like a rainstorm. How instead
of flooding fields and bleeding out their crops,
this water is white. It falls in cold flakes,
and it covers the whole ground
like a sheet blown away from the clothesline.

Twenty-four hands white as a netted hammock
float down and grab me all over. Their touch
is damp and their sweat is dripping. They say,
Jee-sus, Jee-sus, make this woman white as—
their fingers spread across my skin like wings
hoping that when they pull them back, *amen,*
I might look the same as them.

CONDITIONAL

Shelby Swing

He sat in an empty coffee shop on 3rd,
hands restlessly playing the wooden table,
looking like a disheveled concert pianist.
I watched him from the sidewalk,
my friend of a past self,
neither of us in a bar for once.
We lost half a decade drunk together.
The smell of coffee beans—a new addiction—
led me inside to his table,
but the familiar whiskey on his breath
spoke of blurry nights spent in pubs,
midnight drives to darkened beaches,
terrible inside jokes told again and again,
made-up games played at my place.
I cradled my espresso, rose to go—
another meeting, I said. You could come.
He shook his head, followed me out,
parting ways at the door. Not again,
he said, and I knew what that meant:
a companionship drained dry.

ANOTHER DRIVE

Ashley Bultman

Get in the car,
my weary one.
The winding roads you now take
do not mind prolonged silence.
The leafless trees that cave in on you
are not startled by your worn-out questions.
The half-dozen churches you pass bitterly
cannot hear your flippant curses.
And I—
the friend you fear may be asleep—
I will always buckle in beside you
no matter the miles you choose to go.

RENEWAL

Ruthie Snow

The red brick still stands like it did in 1989 when it was first constructed, with willowy white columns decorating the front and a gray parking lot that stretches for a hundred yards with no cars to fill it. Dark hues of green found in the hedged bushes surround the front entrance, redeeming any initial impression from a complete deficiency of aesthetic appeal. Rain from last night's storm drained through the gutters and congregates in gritty potholes, dotting the pavement. It was once an old state auditing building that sat on the far left of a largely empty strip mall, but now it serves a different purpose. The roof comes to a small triangular point.

Inside, the air is stale and cold. The front doors are closed except on Sunday mornings. There is a pensive atmosphere—like the building is listening for something to happen, something to awaken it from the slumber of regrettable scuffed tile and stained walls. Dried circles of old coffee are on the counter with the granola and breakfast bars that barely satisfy mid-morning hunger pains. The children's rooms on either side of the foyer reek of old milk and sour diapers. Eerie quiet is more pronounced in the rooms with yellow walls, colorful posters, and crates of toys. Life is expected but missing. The main room is large with black folding chairs that make up pews. Carpet swallows the floor in an endless field of coarse gray. Decorative lights that line the stage are off and instruments are packed away. All is silent.

The parking lot begins to fill with cars. Two or three arrive in early morning light, but the lot swarms with white minivans and blue sedans when the sun rises higher. Doors open and fresh air floods the old state auditing building with those warm, mossy earth smells that follow billowing storms and saturate the world with cleanliness. Coffee is brewed and the aroma joins the fresh air in an intoxicating fusion of energy. Noises from keys jingling, shoes squeaking, and voices laughing are heard from every corner of the building. Pipes disrupt the organic sounds with their metallic echo issuing from the toilets and sinks. The floors and walls swell with moisture, with resuscitation. Within the yellow-walled rooms, babies cry as parents leave them with caretakers. They receive the children with open arms and vacant hips, prepared to distract from maternal memories with goldfish and juice. Volunteers with shiny name tags weave through the mass of florals and plaids, dodging ballet flats and loafers that periodically split from one group to another. There's catching up to do in the foyer: new stories to tell, pictures to share, and funny haircuts to exclaim over.

The mirth flows over into the main room and chairs are filled with families, students, and elderly couples. Lights twinkle on stage and musicians lightly strum their instruments, refining their sound. The mood shifts to a quiet reverence as soon as a microphone is handed to a man and everyone sits content, expectant. As the guitar leads the body in song, the members' collective intake of air before the first lyric—that sweet, mossy air—leaves the room empty, palpitating in shock, trembling for want as the people breathe in what the earth has breathed out and hold it for themselves.

IDEALLY, SHOES SHOULDN'T HAVE THIS MANY STRAPS

Caitlyn Lamb

The summer I gave in to the Chaco trend was the summer after my sophomore year of college and also the summer I worked a two-month-long summer camp with FUGE camps, a product of the Christian organization Lifeway. On the weekends, or most of them at least, we didn't have campers and would head out to places around Panama City Beach and wander, looking for something to do. One of those weekends, a few of my fellow staffers and I found ourselves in a store with Chacos and I caved. Pink with a hint of blue zigzag-patterned triple straps held my feet to the brown rubber shoe and so began my struggle.

The Chacos were good to me for a time. They kept my feet cool as I shuffled kids back and forth from the sometimes air conditioned Bible study room to the blistering hot rec field to the main campus when lunch called our names each day. They were perfect for the rainy weather's regular afternoon visits that threw everything and everyone off schedule. They were easy to slip off as we hid from the campers in the blissfully freezing auditorium during the last fifteen minutes of lunch and easy to slide back on when it was time to go.

When the camp eventually came to an end after one month without Chacos and one with, there were a few more tasks before we could return to our respective states. Not only did we have to clean the three bedroom beach house that fourteen of our twenty-eight person staff had lived in for two months, but we also had to inventory the entire contents of the camp. An all-day event, inventory consisted of counting everything we used, everything we didn't use, everything that broke, packing sound equipment and stage setup, crying from stress and hunger, and lots and lots of packing totes. To my naïve, order and structure loving, perfectionist mind, inventory sounded pretty decent. Not the most exciting, but certainly the most organized and sensible part of camp there could be. While my fellow staffers lamented the coming hours, I remained slightly optimistic, looking forward to the challenge that was presented. However, I had not considered the Chacos.

They were uneven.

Not as in one was a size seven and one a size nine, but as in the straps were not the same on both feet, and so one shoe was tighter on one foot than the other. Now, this could be attributed to when I was unable to figure out how to shorten the buckle strap. The strap had dragged in the puddles the storm left behind and splashed muddy water all over my calves, which caused me to take the shoes off and walk barefoot. Whatever the reason, the unevenness was a source of distraction during inventory. I was constantly tugging at the shoes, one way or another, hoping they'd magically even up. The group I was with had been assigned with checking in all the team flags, old and new, and the paraphernalia that came with them. We would finish one box and I would turn to the Chacos, desperately trying to alleviate the building annoyance of the different degrees of tightness in the straps.

"You're going to have to do something with those shoes," Kelsey had grumbled. It was seven in the evening and hunger was setting in. Lunch had been at eleven that morning.

The only food any of us had had was from the candy bowl that sat in the middle of the auditorium that our room branched off of. Unlike the commercials imply, Snickers could only hold irritable hunger at bay for so long.

"Either take them off and leave them alone or wear them and forget about it," Kelsey said. My face burned with the embarrassment, but I was unable to ignore the distress of uneven shoes and focus on the work.

Keeping things even or perfectly aligned was normal for me. It only made sense that everything had its rightful place. Ever since I could remember, things had to be done just right or everything would feel off kilter. I would often work myself into a frenzy when things didn't work out perfectly, or what I saw as perfection. This manifested itself most often in my homework in high school. My chemistry class had online homework due almost every class period. The frustrating thing about the homework program was that if the answer was not typed in exactly as the teacher had typed it into the online key, the program would count it a wrong answer. We were limited to three measly tries and my future English major brain couldn't handle chemistry in three attempts. The night grew later and my mother came down the stairs to find me on the verge of a chemistry induced breakdown.

"Just go to bed and finish it in the morning," she said.

"But I'm not finished!" I exclaimed and dramatically fell over the back of the chair, feeling in that moment that my entire future depended upon identifying the construction of a glucose molecule.

"And you're not going to finish, at least not in the state you're in," she said, marched the last few steps to me, logged out of my homework account, and started shutting the computer down. I started panicking.

"Mom. I have to finish. I can't just quit right now," I said. "I'm not done!" I was frantically trying to get her to understand the heavy weight of leaving something incomplete that was settling on my chest.

"Your sanity is more important than this needlessly difficult work. These assignments leave no margin for error or even for differently typed versions of the right answer. No, you need to go to bed. You'll be fine in the morning."

I was fine the next morning, after I finished what was left of the homework. I would often be told I was obsessing over nothing and though sometimes that turned out true, I couldn't change the amount of worry that would overtake me. I was told I was worrying about what didn't matter, trying to make things work when it obviously wasn't going to happen. Who cares that the picture was slightly tilted? What did it matter that placemats on the table weren't centered directly in front of their corresponding chair or that the design on the plate wasn't oriented correctly? So what if the television volume wasn't on a multiple of five? It's not so bad if the blanket isn't folded just right over the couch, you're going to take it down and use it anyway. Just ignore it, you'll forget about it.

I attempted the leave-the-Chacos-to-the-side method during inventory, tried to ignore them in my peripheral vision where they sat in the corner of the room we were boxing. Still they called to me. It was like an itch I couldn't scratch. They may not have been on my feet but I couldn't handle the knowledge that they were not the way they needed to be, the way they should be. It was a feeling of imbalance, like I was wearing phantom Chacos doing their best to remind me of the imperfection. The attraction of the Chaco trend was comfort, that the shoes were easy to wear and supposedly simple to adjust, and something to protect the bottom of a person's feet from potential harm. They were not supposed to cut off the blood supply to my big toe.

Well I didn't forget about the Chacos. They stared me down from their lonely place over by the wall, taunting me. Luckily, just as I could stand it no more, the director popped his head through the door.

"Spencer brought Chick-fil-a. Go eat, y'all!" I immediately picked up the Chacos, fixed them enough to where I could stand it, and ate my chicken sandwich and sweet tea in relative peace—relative being the key word here. It would only hold for so long before the itching feeling began again, letting me know something was still off.

The off balance feeling summed up most of my freshman year of college when my parents got divorced. That was the first thing that wasn't following the format for how life should happen. According to the ideal, two people get married, they have children, and then they stay married. My dad came to visit and took me to supper one evening not long after all the documents had been signed and the divorce made official. As he was dropping me back off at my dorm, he looked at me and said the second thing that wasn't supposed to happen.

"I'm going to marry her."

"Her" was not my mom. And this was not how life was supposed to go. As soon as I stepped into my dorm room, I threw myself on the twin bed, Disney princess style, and let the tears go. That, at least, was predictable.

Growing up, the only movies that I watched were Disney movies. *Cinderella*, *The Lion King*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Little Mermaid* were in a constant rotation in the VCR. They were predictable and had perfect endings and I loved them for it. There was a method to how things went and the storyline did not stray from the method. Movie begins, problem or problems are introduced, adventure ensues, brief risk of everything possibly going wrong, and finally an ending that, sometimes magically, solves all possible problems. The perfect ending was never more than an hour and a half away and could be counted on.

Take Cinderella for instance. She's in an undesirable situation but somehow maintains a positive attitude. There's some magic here and there, bippidi-boppidi-boo, and she's a princess for an evening. Cue some complications but there is hope glinting off the broken glass slipper. In the end, she gets the prince and the evil step-family gets nothing. In this predictableness, there is little worry for the child watching the movie because things are, of course, going to work out in the end, otherwise it wouldn't be Disney. Things turn out the way they should. Chaco straps stay even.

There isn't a perfect pattern in The Game of Life, either. One of my and my brother's favorite board games to play as kids was the old 1960's edition of The Game of Life our mom had since she was young. We would pull out the flimsy cardboard box that had somehow managed to not lose any pieces after its many years. We dreamed of landing on the Doctor or Lawyer space because that meant with every Pay Day space, we would get $20,000 from the Bank. It didn't matter that neither one of us wanted either of those professions in reality. The goal was to have the most money and make it to Millionaire Acres and being a doctor or lawyer was the way to do it. The path was easy to follow but the results were not always what we expected. There weren't only good things that happened on the board. Each player was still at the mercy of the dial and had to move the particular number of spaces, regardless of the resulting placement.

On one occasion in particular, my brother landed on the Teacher space at the beginning of the game, and the Bank could give him only $8,000 on every Pay Day space. He then proceeded to land on almost every space that required you to pay for something. He bought insurance, lost insurance due to board game carelessness, landed in a space that required insurance he didn't have, and paid taxes on land he inherited. He had to get a dreaded Promissory Note and continued to let me know how unfair it was for the

rest of the game that I had landed on the Doctor space. I was enjoying having a couple $1,000,000 bills in my hand and had won the lottery twice. The game was going exactly how it was supposed to, for me at least.

"I would not have to do this in real life!" He huffed. "Who in their right mind would buy a skunk farm anyway?"

"It's how the game goes, Caleb," our mom said wisely from her chair, flipping through a magazine but still managing the part of peacekeeper.

"Well it's not fair," he said as he spun the dial and moved his car piece forward three spaces, reluctantly setting the piece down on a space that said, 'Buy a yacht, pay $15,000.' He groaned right on cue.

"I don't even want a yacht in real life!"

Unfortunately no matter how many times you spontaneously burst into song or protest about unfairness, real life isn't a Disney movie or board game. There is no perfect pattern to follow that will ensure future happiness. Life is frustratingly unpredictable. It happens like having a dead car battery when you need to get to work or like having a doctor's appointment at ten but it's eleven and the nurse still hasn't come to get you. It happens like forgetting to go to the DMV to get your license renewed until the blue lights are flashing behind you. Like muddy water being splashed up on your legs because the Chaco straps are too long.

When my father told Caleb and me that we would be meeting his wife for the first time at Christmas festivities with our dad's side of the family, we both had the mental picture of Lady Tremaine from *Cinderella*. She would be rude, condescending, have bad hair, and would think that she could waltz into our lives without any repercussions. It had only been a month since he had married her and certainly not long enough for us to recover from the surprise announcement of their marriage. We walked in to our grandmother's house with a sense of apprehension. We only knew about Gisselle from creeping on her Facebook profile. She was from the Dominican Republic, in her late thirties, and wore sunglasses often, if her profile pictures were any indication.

Our father greeted us at the door, his silver wedding band catching the light. It was gold when he was married to our mom.

"Hey, you two! I've missed you," he said, wrapping us in a hug. He then turned and pointed us to Gisselle. "This is Gisselle." A tan woman slightly taller than me with long, dark hair wearing a red sweater stood in front of us. We mumbled hello, shook her hand, and scurried to the living room with our cousins whose faces reflected the levels of awkward we felt. Unfortunately, as the Christmas celebrations went on, Gisselle proved to be unlike my expectations. She had cooked a tasty dish that was popular in her home country, proved herself to be funny and sassy, and even...likeable.

This was the third thing that wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to hate this woman for the rest of my life but she was showing herself to not be a Lady Tremaine. I hadn't ever wanted to be a part of the divorced family statistic. That wasn't how things were supposed to work. That wasn't a part of the life plan and the heavy feeling of imperfection still sat on my chest. But maybe finding the ideal is in claiming the broken pieces, the uneven straps, and finding a way to make them work. Maybe it's finding a way to sit in the same room with a new step-mother and wear uneven Chacos.

PLACE OF THE LOST ONE

Randi Adams

Legend said
Jocassee walked on water
someplace close to where
I skimmed across the surface
in a sun-faded purple kayak.

They called her the lost one.

Like the Oconee Bell—
white fringed blossoms littering
the slopes of the gorge
before the water crashed over all
and erased it from consciousness—
she became myth.

But in the heavy midday heat,
mountains on the nearly
immediate horizon,
I paddled on and found her,
a small bloom hidden in the undergrowth,
never truly lost, she revealed herself—
resisting extinction.

THE HOMESTEAD

Maris Mabry

The paint was badly chipped on the house, and the small windows stared black and unblinking, like the many eyes of a spider. A couple of brick chimneys poked through the top of the tin roof, and the yard was utterly overgrown.

While our extended family lounged, half-comatose, after Thanksgiving dinner, here we were at my grandfather's childhood home, uninhabited for decades. We had lost both of my grandparents earlier that year, and the effect was obvious on our holiday. Instead of all the aunts, uncles, and cousins clustered around Papa's handmade dining room table, we had a small gathering of five relatives plus my own family. We piled our plates high with food while trying to politely ignore the gaping loss of patriarch and matriarch, but I could see how their absence laid heavily on my dad. Perhaps to escape the stagnant conversation in the house, or perhaps to draw closer to the recently deceased, my family of four soon found ourselves walking down the road to the old homestead, which my sister, Savannah, and I had never seen before.

Planted just down the road from my uncle's house, it had grown dilapidated over the years as various family members failed to keep it up. Not that it was any great wonder to keep up—it was certainly a small home, one which had housed my grandfather as a child while he and the rest of this family struggled through the 1930s. The only stories I knew about Papa were relayed to me by my own dad, because even though I had been around Papa my entire life, his deafness had always been a bar to our communication. My entire relationship with Papa over eighteen years could be summarized in a few interactions: a squeeze on the hand upon greeting, a shouted "Hi, Papa" that he could never hear, and offering shy smiles that I hoped conveyed that I loved him, even though I barely knew him.

Dad led the way up to the homestead, wading through the tall grass that swamped the yard. Savannah, clutching her new Canon camera with a finger already poised for a snapshot, plunged after him, my mother and I bringing up the rear. Dad had a key out for the door, but we found it already unlocked. We stepped inside and allowed our eyes to adjust.

Scattered across the floor, orange as traffic cones, were dozens of prescription bottles. They were clustered particularly around a nest of mismatched quilts and flattened pillows in one corner where we also found empty beer bottles and a peppering of rodent droppings.

"Huh," my dad said, nudging the blankets. "Guess nobody knew about a squatter."

My sister was having a field day with her camera. I could hear the *schlick, schlick* of her photographing the dingy window blinds, half the panels warped as if someone had repeatedly pried them apart to peer outside. Then, the peachy colored armchair turned toward the window, its cushions sculpted to show the outline of someone who repeatedly sat and stared out into the yard. Next, a naked lamp with a spider web where a bulb should be. In the kitchen, cracked ceramic tiles strewn around a rusted sink. Cigarettes littered various different surfaces, short and chewed-up like church pew pencils.

I hadn't expected this level of disarray, and my surprise made me ask myself what I had been expecting. Perhaps a perfectly preserved representation of poverty in the 1930s, when Papa rushed in on Christmas day to find nothing under the tree and only an orange in his stocking. Maybe we would find his high school notebook, the notes interrupted in the middle of his senior year as he was drafted during World War II. Or perhaps, stuffed in a closet, we might find the tattered brown package that at one time contained the white silk Papa had brought from Japan to his mother, who told him to save it for his bride.

But none of these items, which I might have used as clues to find the grandfather I knew so little of, remained in the house. They had been washed away by dust and cigarette smoke and little orange prescription bottles.

Dad must not have been too concerned about the squatter, because he had no hesitations in leading us to explore the other rooms. This quest only served to introduce us to the reeking toilet in the house's one bathroom; the two bedrooms, oddly, were locked. There was nothing more to the house, so my family moved on to the back porch. What I saw behind the house could not have caught me more by surprise: acres and acres of smoothly sloping hills, furred over with the dry auburn stubble of what used to be a cotton crop. At a dip in the land gleamed a long ribbon of water, open to the sky and slate-blue against the reddish fields. It was unadulterated—no machines or buildings in sight.

Here, without a single man-made object in view, I felt different. I convinced myself that, though the inside of the house had been invaded by strangers and grown dilapidated, this expanse of land off the back porch had not changed. What I looked at now were the same hills, the same trees, the same sparkle of water that had remained over decades—over generations. It was a connection: small, and feeble, but enough.

MARAÑON RIVER, JULY 17, 5:26 A.M.

Jenni Harris

Sunlight breaks golden,
rising above the water,
illuminating

two halves of the world

stitched together with
slender paddles at the bow
of an old canoe.

STITCHES

Shelby Swing

It would happen at church, in restaurants, or whenever someone saw a picture of my grandmother, mother, and I. The comment is still made though we've all grown older: "You all look so much alike!" If we were to stand together in any public place, that statement would surely be said eventually. Our similarities are in our long, oval-shaped faces, our flat chins, the set of our mouths, and sharp, jutting cheekbones, the last of which I somehow disinherited. Yellowed photographs of my great-grandmother Audrey show that she held the same distinctive features. The very few photographs of great-great-grandma Brown show an elderly woman with sunken eyes and wispy white hair always pulled back into a knot, but the same long face and mouth that have been passed down to the women in my family line.

Grandma Maude Brown, born in 1879 in North Carolina, was known as a quiet woman who didn't speak much. The most prominent memory her relatives have of her consists of her sitting on her porch in Oxford, North Carolina sewing and dipping snuff. She is usually described in curious and baffled tones because on the surface level, she was seen as indifferent. Yet by the time she reached old age, Grandma Brown had been through more than enough tribulation. Her maiden name, Purgason (or Pergerson), is rumored to have originally been Ferguson, an Irish surname. It was most likely changed to Purgason after immigration. Maude Purgason married Wesley Brown and settled down in Franklinton, North Carolina, around the turn of the twentieth century. She bore twelve children before her husband abandoned and divorced her. Some relatives say the marriage dissolved after Maude refused her husband a thirteenth child, but no one knows the exact reasons for Wesley's abandonment. However, he later married a young woman who gave him a son—his thirteenth child.

It was after the divorce that Maude moved her children to the neighboring town of Oxford, where many of my maternal relatives still reside. In order for the family to survive, the children had to work in the tobacco and cotton fields. Some also worked in the Oxford Cotton Mill. Maude stayed home with the younger children and took in mending to earn money. As the years went by, she watched her twelve children grow up, marry, and start families of their own. Maude Brown lived until she was eighty-two years old. She was a simple woman, much unlike her daughter Audrey, but the work of her hands still remains in the family in the form of several patchwork quilts.

The quilts used to belong to my grandmother before she passed two or three along to my mother. A few of the quilts are kept in the linen closet away from grape juice and bleach, while others are used on beds in the winter months. One of the ones my grandmother has, a green floral quilt that she keeps on her bed, was a wedding gift from Grandma Brown. For my grandmother, it brings back memories of cold nights in Germany where my grandfather was stationed many decades ago. Once heavy and thick, the quilt is now rather flattened from years of use, but it still captures warmth as its counterparts do. The quilts my mother owns show less signs of wear and are still brilliantly colorful. I remember my mother spreading a deep coral-red quilt with a reverse side of sky-blue on our living room carpet when my siblings and I were young.

We would have indoor picnics at least twice a week, nibbling on Mickey Mouse-shaped sandwiches and carrot sticks while watching PBS or listening to our mother read Marguerite Henry's *Misty of Chincoteague*. We grew up on the quilts. If you pull one out of the closet and look close enough, you might see baby drool, mustard stains, or who knows what else. It is painful to know that the quilts have been desecrated in our seemingly careless use of them, but the use of them is what has made them special. We built memories off of a piece of the past.

One particular quilt is my favorite—one side is cream colored and spotted with pink and green flowers, while the reverse side is a patchwork of circles with no circle having the same fabric. Each individual circle is made up of fabric scraps no bigger than five square inches, resembling a pie cut into slices. According to my grandmother, the neighborhood women in Oxford would gather at each other's houses a couple times a week to quilt together. Though the gatherings were much too casual to be labeled back then, they are what we now call "quilting bees." The quilts were primarily made of fabric scraps collected by these women—scraps from handmade aprons, dresses, or handkerchiefs. Like Grandma Brown, the unnamed women who helped make these quilts have been dead for several decades, and yet they've each passed something on to me. These quilts are a tangible link I have to my great-grandmother, my great-great-grandmother, and a whole community of hardworking women. This form of a family "record" trumps the lack of advanced technology available to my predecessors. The quilts exist as evidence for who the women were that made them, and even better is the fact that they still perform the duty for which they were made. There's something about the use and appreciation of a timeworn item, especially one made by the hands of an ancestor, which will never grow old.

I often wrap the cream colored blanket around my shoulders as I work at my own craft and consider the day the quilts will quietly and unofficially be passed down to my sister and me as they were passed down to our mother. The cream quilt will be mine, as my sister will certainly prefer the vibrant red one. The passing down of a product of craft is something I ponder, prompted by the heavy warmth of the quilt. I've been given a piece of the past and have the responsibility of not only passing it along but also giving my children and grandchildren a piece of my craft as well. At the expense of sounding cliché, we all leave something behind for the coming generations, whether it be a memory, an item, or something else. In a way, this is fatalism, and we have little control over it. One hopes that what is left behind is truthful in capturing one's individual personality, beliefs, faith, or values, because where records and memories fail, items speak.

My God-given craft of words is abstract, unlike the physical craft of quilting. Like my great-great-grandmother, I use my hands, but in a different way. As I sit typing words onto a colorless page, I think of a small, plain woman slightly bent over yards and yards of colorful fabric, making stitch after stitch, slow and easygoing like tiny, gentle waves on a multicolored sea.

SUBURBAN MALAISE

Becca Naylor

By your side in the chilled darkness I lie,
my left leg thrown over yours like an X marking gold
or a signed contract. Your feet,
like narrow tombstones, are pale
under the remnants of the window pane.
My right arm is a hook curving
under your head, cradling it,
and my left weighs on your chest holding you
in our fragile home made of sticks
like the woods that guard us, keeping us
in until we bind or burn.
Outside our window the moon,
silent in its certainty,
illuminates the cracks and slats
threatening to splinter us.

LIGHTNING OVER A FIELD OF RYE

Allyson Vaughan

It's a tepid touch,
the air on my bare shoulders
as I run through the rye with its gold
wisps that lick like fire at my heels,
breaking their backs bending in the wind
as I reach the center where covered I can kneel
in the dirt praying with eyes open, tilting
back my head to feel the first hard drop
pop against my eye socket, heavier than any other—
the burden of the clouds collapsing—I am alone,
safe to disappear in this halcyon flaxen sea,
where if I am quiet the thundering in the house
will not find me, it will only be me and the sighs
of the earth, overhead the beating of wings fleeing
where I cannot as the sky swirls in black and purples,
a bruise over the blue eye there yesterday—a crack:
the sound like hitting home and I dig my nails
into the earth as the horizon alights into an angry vein
across the sky's forehead, and I am quelled
only by the shushing mothering of the rye
rustling as it covers its head over mine,
shelter from the reckoning of summer's
fury promising it'll all be fine, fine, fine.

DECLARATION

Haley Schvaneveldt

Feet, free of sandals, kick up waves of sand. I sit too close to a pair of lovebirds. Their whispers vandalize the silence. Did I drag myself out of bed for this? Then I lean back, my head hits the sand, and all at once I remember that the moon is a vast sphere of water-raking power, and I remember that I'm spinning. I reach my arm towards the stars—for contrast—and it confirms. I am a fleck of paint on a revolving marble. The only things smaller than me are the grains of sand under my feet and I dig my toes in them, grounding myself. I dragged myself out of bed for *this*.

Then one lovebird makes a declaration over the waves' loud hush. "He's a twerp," she says, about a lover of the past. And twerp seems like a word so small it's impossible it exists, just like myself and the sand. And she says, "I just want to make sure we focus on God while we're here, not each other." And I think, just lean back, let your head hit the sand. Hear the declaration.

MAFIA

Jenni Harris

For two months, Pedro has taken our mission team to do ministry. Sometimes we'll be riding down the river to one village or another with the boat engine roaring, a steady howl riding the gentle waves, and he'll turn off the motor. Suspended and drifting in the current, phantom buzzing still in our ears, he gazes out over the river and whistles.

The boat rocks and then pink dolphin snouts begin to push through the water. Flashes of smooth skin, a flick of a tail, a diving dorsal fin ripple up and out. We're still, watching their bodies writhe beneath murky glass, bumping up against it until one shatters the screen—watery shards cut into the current. The dolphin stretches in the afternoon sunlight, flexing its rosy back muscles and disappears again. They all swim away.

Our last night in the jungle, Pedro tells stories about his past. We all lie on the floor by the lantern light and watch his trembling, bare-footed silhouette. His nineteen-year-old wife is nearby, holding the same son that Pedro smuggled across the Peruvian border. "Samuel on one shoulder and twenty kilograms of cocaine on the other," he says, looking down. He fled through the jungles—the subject of a death warrant after leaving the Colombian mafia. He met some missionaries, found Jesus, and now he lives here—hidden in the rainforest with only his wife and son.

He is hunched over weeping in the darkness. He shakes and we stare; this redeemed man who whistles for the dolphins cries big tears that hold the world—tears with bottlenoses swimming around inside of them. His bronzed arms flex as he puts his face in his palms. And he floats there for just one moment, for just that night, before he disappears again into the trees.

BACKBONE

Maris Mabry

My father would come home early from work on days when Mama called and said I was feeling sick. If "fever" or "ear infection" were mentioned, he often took the entire day off, bringing home bottles of fruit juice or my favorite soda to entice me to drink fluids. He emptied all the puke-buckets and changed all the fever-soaked pajamas and stayed up late with ears perked for sudden coughs or retching. Always, he finished these tasks with his hand stroking the top of my head, saying "If I could take it away, I would," with all the tenderness and agony of a father whose child has the pukes.

At the time I did not know, for I could not see, the way his spine ate itself gradually year by year. What I could see, on days when he struggled to conceal it, was the pain, and on those occasions I would rub his back, my six-year-old palm roughly the width of the vertebrae that would come to grind into each other, bone against bone. The doctor told Dad that, at forty years old, he had the spine of an eighty-year-old man, all thanks to Degenerative Disc Disease.

The fact that Dad wasn't supposed to ride jet skis or shouldn't lift heavy furniture or couldn't play football was something I accepted without questions. I was almost in college before I realized that, unlike my sister and me, none of my girl friends had mown a lawn before.

Never, ever?

No. Dad always did it.

Whenever a pain cycle got bad, we knew what to expect. Sleepless nights, half-days at work, new painkiller prescription, put on the prayer list at church. Every few years, a surgery: first the screws in his lumbar, then his neck, then installing the morphine pump to control the pain. Then surgery again to remove the morphine pump, followed by a second neck surgery, and a new round of painkillers and sleep-aids.

This was my comfort zone. Help with yard work, pray a little harder, maybe get a few days with the grandparents while Mom and Dad were at the hospital. This lifestyle did not invade on me enough to catch my attention. I would feel sad to see Dad hurt and do what I could to cheer him up or campaign for prayers, but always I enjoyed the illusion that my childlike gestures somehow helped.

This was shattered in the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college, specifically on the day before my twin, Savannah, and I turned twenty, June fifteenth. The summer, barely a month in, passed with unbearable slowness. While the rest of my friends staffed at wild-looking summer camps or, like my boyfriend, spent the summer with a mission program that traveled to Arizona, the Ivory Coast, and Paris, I made salads and coleslaw at the local Chick-fil-a. After finishing a shift at this job, I made my way home anticipating nothing but a long shower and an afternoon watching M*A*S*H reruns. When I got home at three o'clock, I found Dad thrown over his therapy ball and my mother's face stretched tight. Mama conveyed a simple message: Dad had thrown out his back and now could not get off the therapy ball, which he had initially used to stretch out the muscles. He had been stuck on the ball for hours as any movement now sent agonizing spasms throughout his whole body. As we were

later to find out, the task of getting him off the ball would leave him thrashing on the floor as his nerves seized with pain that elicited animal-like noises from his throat.

The fact that Dad writhed as if electrocuted did not compute with my idea of a cartoonish thrown back. I could see my mother turning frantic, and I felt something grip my own brain as I witnessed what looked like a Hollywood torture scene. Savannah was absent on a trip with her boyfriend's family, leaving Mama and I scrambling for solutions. We had already loaded Dad with every muscle relaxer in our medicine cabinet and rubbed him with a multitude of pain creams. Twice we called my aunt, a physical therapist, but we had difficulty executing the complex massages she described. In our heads Mama and I whittled together prayers, carving them quickly and bluntly like wooden stakes.

At the sight of Dad lurching on the floor, biting back screams that came out as strangled growls, Mama began to unravel. She, too, began lurching, first heading toward the door, then the phone, then stopping, uttering different solutions under her breath. Dad was turning dark red and the veins were protruding on his neck, his forehead, his arms, everywhere I could see. Bending over him, squeezing his hand till I thought my fingers would pinch off, I barked for her to call an ambulance. Mama snatched up the phone and while she spoke with a queer, calm voice to the operator, I placed my one free hand on Dad's chest and prayed in a dumb, repetitive flow, sending upward whatever words came into my frozen brain. I opened my eyes when I no longer felt Dad jerking beneath my hand, exhaling in shuddering gusts. The color now drained from his face till his skin became a waxy gray, nearly blending into his white hair. The flesh around his eyes had swollen to twice its normal size, closing up red-ribboned eyes that bulged when opened. He barely dared to breathe, afraid to set off more spasms.

As soon as the ambulance sped out of our driveway, a sight in itself that disarmed me, I broke into shivering hysterics and dialed my boyfriend's phone number, stammering incoherently. Benjamin was across the country in Arizona, teaching Bible school, and could do nothing but talk me down from my panic and tell me to take a cold shower. Savannah returned from her trip later that evening, looking dazed after receiving a choppy explanation of the incident. I gave her boyfriend a sour look before he and his family drove away; I had been disliking him for the past year, and now he became the perfect scapegoat for stealing Savannah away from home when we needed her most. It did not occur to me that he had spared her a great pain by keeping her away that afternoon.

The following day, Savannah and I turned twenty, and it ended up being a great day where we forgot about family troubles in light of being together again. Savannah and I have always been unused to separation, and so our birthday reunion was spent as giddily as if we had not seen each other for months. In our excitement, we hardly noticed the mammoth threshold we had crossed between adolescence and adulthood. I chose to brush off the memory of Dad shuffling down the hall that morning, each movement made gingerly, fearfully. He was bound to be sore, I said to myself, but in a few days' time he will have recovered. It's just another cycle.

Weeks passed and Dad's pain did not ease. The muscles around his lower back bunched together and became so tight that they shifted his pelvic bone. Dad began to walk like an old man, shoulders and pelvis tilted forward so that his whole body formed a parenthesis when standing. He did not work for months, and though the company went above and beyond to assure him that he ought to take whatever time he needed to recover and could still expect a paycheck, we could all see that the inability to work hurt Dad's pride. My mom, more than any of us, withdrew almost completely as her ability to watch Dad shift from TV to computer day after day, unable to do anything else, became strained.

Something changed about the house. I could be fine coming up the walkway after a shift at work, but as soon as I opened the door I tangibly felt a yoke settle across my shoulders. Though mid-summer heat baked our front porch to an unbearable temperature in the afternoons, I came to prefer it to the indoors. It felt different just to close the door of the house behind me; entering back in had the same noticeable effect. After a few minutes, no longer able to stand the blistering heat, I would go back in and an unidentifiable presence would settle itself on me once more. It bent its head close to mine, chewing the back of my brain with saliva that numbed.

I took my time driving home after shifts at Chick-fil-a. Some days I got off right at sunset, and I'd drive half-blinded by the hibiscus-bloom of the sun sinking right below my dashboard. I experimented with climbing the hill to our neighborhood as slowly as possible without having my car slide backward. But home could not be avoided forever. After parking in the driveway, I ambled up the walkway, clapped my shoes together to clean out the stuck food, and stared at the door. Eventually the porch light would flick on, and Dad opened the door.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

I would try to look past his parenthesis body and the face that had aged five years in the past two months when answering, "Yes." We communicated rarely now. The medication was so strong that it often scattered Dad's thoughts, something he became self-conscious about. I tried talking to Mama, but she had reached some sort of emotional limit and closed herself off, talking in clipped answers. I often found myself drifting to Savannah's room, and we'd huddle on her bed and talk or, if things were particularly dark, look up funny videos to watch. Most of the times the videos weren't all that funny, but they somehow stroked the painful tension in us both, and we always laughed till we cried. A few weeks into the summer, though, and Savannah stopped answering my knocks on her door. I would hear her talking on the phone to her boyfriend or crying softly on the other side of the door.

I counted down the hours till Benjamin would have a few days of vacation from the mission program and would come to spend the weekend with us. I clung to the idea of his arrival like one waiting for an antidote. His presence, I was sure, would shake everyone out of this frozen state of despair. But on the day when his car rolled down the driveway, I stepped out to greet him with a vacant feeling. Instead of jumping into an embrace as I had envisioned, I leaned against him limply and tried to siphon comfort from his presence.

Benjamin spent his visit getting me out of the house as much as he could and offered relief by distracting us with stories about his travels. My dad laughed at these stories and asked question after question. I felt a blow of guilt when I read the eagerness in his voice, the same hopeful lilt of a lonely child who's included in a game for the first time. It had been weeks since I had made the effort to talk—really talk—to Dad. Instead of addressing this, I allowed Benjamin to pull me out of the house to walk around the local park. We fed leftover hamburger buns to the ducks in the pond and I tried to shake the memory of Dad shuffling back to his computer, or Savannah declining our invitation to join and instead locking the door of her bedroom.

I studied Benjamin while he pinched off bits of bread to throw into the pond. I thought back over our relationship and recognized, not for the first time, the similarities between him and my dad. Benjamin did not have chronic pain but rather chronic bad luck. He regularly jokes about his asthma and how he's allergic to everything in the Northern Hemisphere—which, unfortunately, is only a slight exaggeration. Freshman year, he took so much Benadryl during allergy season that he developed a stomach ulcer; this went undiagnosed for weeks and he lost thirty pounds in a number of days as he threw up everything he ate. The following year, he got sick and ran such a high fever

that a bone shifted in his inner ear, causing severe vertigo for over a month before it was diagnosed and fixed. And let's not forget last Easter with my family, when the pollen aggravated Benjamin's asthma so badly that he could barely walk the length of the hallway without losing his breath. The sound of Benjamin wheezing or, worse, hearing a sick gurgling down in his chest right before his lungs heave up phlegm, always grips me with deep-seated anxiety.

At this point in our relationship, we were discussing marriage. A proposal would not come for at least a year, but I had known a few weeks into dating Benjamin that I didn't want to be with anyone else. That day at the duck pond, though, the peace and gladness I usually felt when thinking on marriage was tainted with a shadow of apprehension. I recalled a few days ago when I had walked in on my mother weeping, holding a picture of her and my Dad on their wedding day.

"Oh, I had no idea," I heard her sob, laying a hand on the photo.

My mom, usually a warm, extroverted woman, took to isolating herself. On the day when I found her with the wedding photo, she had confessed to me that the role of caretaker had overtaken her role as a wife. I saw this: the way she looked at Dad and felt engulfed by his pain. One Sunday afternoon, when I thought she was napping like the rest of the house, I found her hunched on the front doorstep. The curved C of her posture and the numbness on her face so mirrored Dad's that I understood for the first time the bleak manifestation that "one flesh" can take.

I shared none of these things with my friends or coworkers. All they knew was that Dad was in a regular pain cycle, and we offered no insight into the depression that threatened to swallow us up. I thought others might think poorly of me if they knew how dark things were. After all, it wasn't my pain. It wasn't me that couldn't work or had to take mammoth doses of painkillers daily just to make movement bearable.

My whole life I had been a morning person, but that summer I came to crave nighttime. I would climb into bed early and pray, pray, pray for sleep, willing my body and mind to sink into nothingness for as many hours as possible. I didn't want to find Mama crying and tell her God would make it better, I didn't want to see Dad wince with every movement, I didn't want to look my twin sister in the eyes and see the depression eating her like it ate me.

But sleep oftentimes didn't come. It was on one of these nights that I heard a single dark voice reminding me of all the pill bottles in my parents' bathroom. Dozens of big, expensive pills, dizzying in strength, unimaginably potent if consumed all at once. By the time this thought had me trembling, I felt a more powerful force urging me to get up and go to the front room of the house. I obeyed, if only to escape the sibilant voice that had found me in bed.

The house was dark, but I could see the outline of Dad's feet hanging over the end of the living room sofa. He oftentimes slept there if he felt restless or if Mama's snoring bullied him out of the bedroom, but I sensed somehow that he was awake. When I came around and crouched by the sofa, I found him staring at the ceiling, his glasses folded on his chest. He noticed me, and I felt my stomach wring when I saw his eyes were puffy and lined with moisture.

"Hey there, little girl," he said, swiping his thumb across his eyes. He always acknowledged the birth order between Savannah and me, even though I was only three minutes younger. "What are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep," I said. "I felt like I was supposed to come up here."

He nodded, closing his eyes. I could tell he was in pain. His medication had worn off and he could not take another pill till the morning. Somehow, though, he was more himself this way. Perhaps it was the clarity returning in the absence of the medication, or maybe it was something different in me that made it easier to speak. I could see his hands—

his whole arms, actually—shaking, and I reached over and held his hand. His eyes opened and he smiled.

"I'm sorry for all this," I found myself saying. "This is hard enough as it is, but it's worse because the rest of us aren't helping. I haven't been supporting you at all. None of us have."

Dad sat up some. "No, no," he said. "This isn't your fault, Maris. This isn't anyone's fault."

"Just because it isn't our fault doesn't mean we're not wrong."

Dad sighed and squeezed my hand. I looked at our hands since I couldn't look at his face. His hand was huge, each finger twice as wide as my own. My palm could not stretch to hold his whole hand and instead gripped two of his fingers, and I realized it has always been this way. It seemed that the proportions of our two hands had remained the same since I was a small child.

"Don't try to bear so much," Dad said. "I don't understand it any better than you do, but we've got to hand it over to the Lord."

Lately, he had been reading his Bible more than ever. I, on the other hand, found it hard to sit down with Scripture. I used to have a vibrant prayer life, but now when I prayed I felt my own pleas hit the ceiling and crash back down on my head. It wasn't that I doubted God's existence, or even His goodness. Instead, I had the helpless sensation of being suspended in amber. This summer would never end, this depression would never end, Dad's pain would never end. That is the great illusion of despair: that things will continue exactly as they are for the rest of life. But just as times of contentment are never infinite, neither are times of suffering. But I had not yet learned that.

As August came to a close, I counted down the days till we moved back to college with mounting impatience. I did not realize, of course, that I would feel worse after returning to school. The first night back in the dorms, I crawled into our suite's shower and cried till I nearly made myself sick. The guilt that had been whispering at the back of my head while at home now throttled me. The image of Dad thrashing on the floor or my mom slumped on the front steps of the porch followed me throughout the day until nighttime, when I had no more distractions to keep me from facing them fully. Even after my parents both attended counseling, even after Dad underwent a successful surgery that November, I wrestled with a suffocating sense of guilt that I had done nothing to relieve my family's pain when they needed it most. I became so wrapped up in anxiety and depression that I turned tense, irritable, and sensitive to the extreme. I did not notice it at the time, but I became frenzied whenever I found out that Benjamin had a migraine, or didn't sleep well, or had to use his nebulizer: small incidents, unavoidable nuisances, but they triggered indistinct images of shaking hands and ambulances. Savannah texted our parents frequently until, one weekend at home, my mom herded me into my room and closed the door behind her.

"I want you to listen to me," she said, gripping my shoulders. "It's time for you to snap out of this. We're okay now. You have no reason to hold on to these feelings of false guilt. That's from Satan, not God. He's trying to hold you in a place of darkness, and I'm telling you now that it's wrong. It's false. Let it go."

I cried openly, but my mother held firm. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" she said, louder. "And another thing, Benjamin is not your father. He may be like him in many ways, but they are not the same man." Her voice grew gentler and she wrapped me in a tight hug. "Your marriage won't look like our marriage. Y'all will have your own set of struggles, but it won't be the same as ours. Don't be afraid."

One year later, just after my twenty-first birthday, Benjamin proposed at a spot he had picked out with my dad. My father, the man who used to barely manage a thirty-minute car ride, had gone road tripping with Benjamin to help him choose

the perfect place. They spent an entire day driving in the mountains looking for waterfalls, Dad leading Benjamin on hikes that, just a year before, would likely have landed him in the E.R. again. The surgery from November had worked, but it would not last. Barely a year after that operation, Dad was scheduled for another, this time to address critical bone spurs in his neck that were choking off his spinal cord.

But Dad seizes his triumphs and does what he can to help others seize theirs, too. That day when Benjamin proposed, my dad was beaming. At the end of the day, he wrapped me in a hug, praying blessings over me. His big hand laid warmly over my back, and my hand laid over his: that white, broken pillar imbedded in his core, holding everything up.

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NOTES

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