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WRITER SPOTLIGHT

Claire Foxx

Writer Claire Foxx brings to her craft a dry wit, an expansive vocabulary, and a way of capturing the magic of a thing, whether it is as simple as a puppy or as vast as a superstorm. Read about Claire on page 72.

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ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

Taylor Morris

Senior Graphic Design concentration Taylor Morris is an illustrator who uses her vivid, quirky style primarily in editorial work and in her treatment of the human form. View a selection of her work and read about her process on page 48.

FOREWORD

As writers and artists our medium is that which resonates. When we first put pen to paper or brush to canvas, all we have are those things which are held up to the surface of our minds, refusing to be ignored. It is impossible to know what forms these obsessions: a pull or a push, a weight or a tension, a wishing or a kind of magic. All we know is that they demand to be expressed. These things make up the skeletons of our minds and as we grow they, like bones, fracture and reform. We start to see things differently, and what was once oil on asphalt becomes a string of pearls around a neck.

We engage in the act of creation because we know that once found, this vision, like a fragile child's pulse, is capable of stopping. And sometimes it does seem to stop. Something slips in, like wind around old windows, and what was once the echoing music of conversation becomes just noise. Sometimes newspaper headlines distract us from even the most beautiful of melodies. Too many things demand our undivided attention until they all bleed together, like sticky black ink, seeping down the walls of our minds. But even in the midst of this, we hear a steady whirring monitor whispering just loudly enough to remind us that our hearts are still rhythmically resonating within us. We create because we are convicted that, although that pulse is difficult to capture and define, it is worth fighting for. We bear down on our ideas, quietly subversive like children pressing gum into a schoolyard tree, forming a psychedelic abstraction of pigment that serves as a reminder that we are so much more than faceless stone statues.

This 93rd edition of *Ivy Leaves* is a collection of these reminders, captured like fireflies circling in a clear glass. We give it to you, not pretending to be able to solve the equations you will face. But we hope, through this journal, to show you that we understand, and remind you that you are whole.

STRINGS

Claire Foxx

My mother had these veins
in her hands. Soft little snakelets
you could roll back and forth
with a pencil lead and wavy slashes
of watercolor that only showed up
in the sun, like disappearing ink.

They aged her, but they didn't.
Varicose was the wrong word;
something else held them up
to the light, a pull or a push,
a weight or a tension,
a wishing or a kind of magic.

Not the blood but the woman
herself, her heart and all its strings.

LUCKY

Claire Foxx

"Doc-tor, doc-tor, call the doc-tor, Ella's gonna have a brand new ba-by, wrap it up in tissue pap-er, drop it down the el-e-vator, BOOM."

It was like we summoned it. The three of us, two turning the ropes and one jumping, all chanting "Doctor, Doctor" instead of "Father Abraham" like we were taught. We used Ella's name in the rhyme because no one could double-dutch to Ma-ry E-liz-a-beth, it had too many syllables. But it was her idea.

Mary Elizabeth saw it first and said *mercy* in the fondest, most secret whisper, in a mother's voice, as though she might suddenly cry from happiness, and stopped everything and knelt down in the grass. The jump ropes wrapped around her ankles like dead snakes.

"Hey," I said. The church ropes were stiff, old cordage with no plastic handles on the ends, and they skinned the palms of my hands when I lost my grip. It was so fast I couldn't even tell what happened, just that it hurt, and that it was Mary Elizabeth's fault for not explaining herself, and Pastor John's wife's fault for not buying the waxed nylon jump ropes that were supposed to be used for double-dutch, and after that I didn't know. I never followed that sort of logic further than two or three degrees.

"Wait, Grace—look it," said Ella.

She pointed to a fat, shorthaired little dog the color of bread dough that none of us had ever seen before, on the First Covenant Fellowship playground or anywhere else. It sort of did look like a baby, with dark, pupillary eyes and a pale dumpling body. It was incontinent. Its pee sprinkled on the dirt when Mary Elizabeth reached her hand towards it, so tenderly, and then it lay down in the pee on its stomach.

"Aw," I said. "Aw, don't do that. It's okay."

It looked like it wanted to be touched more than anything in the world and like it would die right away if anyone touched it. It looked like it was asleep and awake at the same time, dreaming and not dreaming. The eyes blinked oppositely at Mary Elizabeth and me.

"He's lost," said Ella, who was right about everything but always sounded wrong because of how she spoke from her sinuses, without authority.

"He is not," said Mary Elizabeth. "He's our dog. He's with us, he found us." Her voice made the pronouns sound righteous and definitive, as though we'd been waiting for years, since before anyone could even remember, for this exact miracle to happen. *He's* with *us*, *he* found *us*.

I said, "Yeah, finders keepers," but it wasn't the same.

"We just have to make sure Mrs. Lyall doesn't look over this way. Or anyone. Make sure nobody sees. He's our secret dog." Mary Elizabeth held her finger to her lips, *hush-hush*.

Our secret dog wallowed in the coolness of our shadows on the ground, the long gray pinstripe of skinny Ella and the two-headed likeness of Mary Elizabeth and me, the shape of my torso growing out of her shoulder like a Siamese twin.

"He's perfect," she said.

After that we called him Lucky, although I made a case for Temperance because it

was my mother's name and a fruit of the Spirit. I conceded after Mary Elizabeth said it would be heresy to name a dog from the Bible because dogs didn't know how to pray, or sing hymns, or do anything Christian. Ella didn't want to name him at all. Ella was sometimes not very fun, but we forgave her.

We worked out that Lucky must have got into the playground through a weakness in the fence, which was already more weak than strong, its joints black with rust like dried blood in the corner of a mouth, so we decided to let him come and go as he pleased. Not that we could have done much else. Sunday school only happened once a week, and we only ever spent the last fifteen or twenty minutes outside. Plus there was Mary Elizabeth's *secret*, which limited us to quiet, self-conscious play in the shadow of a tree grown over the fence.

It is still hard to believe that no one asked us what we were doing. We were careful, but we were children. Mary Elizabeth's voice carried like a radio signal. She was always the caller in Red Light, Green Light and Mother May I and Simon Says. *Simon says stand on your head. Simon says everyone lie flat on the ground, and you can't get up unless I tell you.* The game would go on forever because nobody could bring themselves to disobey her. Nobody wanted to. We lay in the grass for so long that our cheeks turned rare pink in the sun, and we had to wait for the color to peel off in dry, itching petals like the skin of an onion.

But if anyone figured out about Lucky, they must not have cared. Mrs. Lyall didn't. She sat in her camp chair by the door and supervised the playground with documentarian objectivity, the way nature photographers look at the wild savanna with awe or disgust, depending on what they see, but with no intention to intervene, either way. The other kids were satisfied to take our jump ropes and appoint a new Simon and leave the three of us to ourselves.

So we did what we wanted. We talked to Lucky the way our parents talked to us, in a whispery falsetto that was meant to sound friendlier and more playful than our regular voices but more often sounded like someone was pinching us under the chin. *Good boy good boy good boy Lucky*, the faster the more he wagged his tail. We rubbed the silk of his ears between our fingers and petted his warm, floury belly until his eyes crossed and his tongue lolled gratefully out of his mouth. It reminded me of cherry taffy, the kind you buy at the beach, so smooth and grainless I wondered how he tasted anything. I poked it with the end of my finger just to see what would happen.

"Watch, Ella." I poked and poked, and his tongue just hung there funnily like he couldn't even feel it. Ella giggled and tickled his nose with a blade of grass to make him blink. He sneezed with a little whistle.

"Cut it out," said Mary Elizabeth.

We heard her, but not really because we were still caught up in the alienness of Lucky's tongue and the humanness of his sneeze and the curious noises of our own laughter, Ella's high in her nose and mine half-swallowed, sort of coughing. Ella trailed the grass blade across Lucky's forehead, where his eyebrows would have been, if he had any, and he squinted his face in such naive perplexity you almost thought he had to be doing it on purpose. We laughed harder.

"Cut it out," said Mary Elizabeth.

In her hand was Lucky's tongue, pinched like a scrap of red ribbon between the scissors of her two fingers. She held it loosely because she chose to, but not because she had to, not because we were stopping her from anything.

"You're being loud," she said. *Hush-hush.*

Every dog in the world would have struggled, whined, wrenched its head sideways, but Lucky did not move. He peed in a weak orange stream that dripped off his back legs, and that was all.

"We talked to Lucky the way our parents talked to us, in a whispery falsetto that was meant to sound friendlier than our regular voices, but often sounded like someone was punching us under the chin."

"It's not his fault," I said. It was my fault for laughing, and Ella's fault for making me laugh, and Pastor John's fault for not replacing the fence around the playground even though the chain link looked like something from an old prison, and after that I stopped because Mary Elizabeth blinked.

"I know. I'm just *kidding*, Grace. Just kidding, see?" She let go of the tongue, and Lucky used it to lick her ears and her neck and the palms of her hands, which were the same size as mine but a prettier color, shell pink.

Simon says everyone lie flat on the ground, and you can't get up unless I tell you.

"Well," I said to our secret dog. "There's a good boy. Good boy good boy good boy Lucky."

Lucky never really learned his name, just the sound of Mary Elizabeth saying the two syllables, or any two syllables with the right inflection. Sometimes when she said Ella, *El-la*, crisp and phonetic, Lucky's tail would twitch optimistically, and we'd smile at him, anyways, for trying so hard. *Grace* didn't faze him at all. It made the same dull thudding sound as *sit* and *stay* and *shake*, none of which meant anything to him. We thought this was strange. We thought these were things dogs knew.

"Sit, Lucky." He stood panting, with that dense, wet look in his eyes like if you stare into a mud puddle after the rain.

"Sit." Mary Elizabeth put her hand on his butt and gentled it to the ground.

"Stay." She crawled backwards on the balls of her feet, to keep her skirt from dragging in the grass, and he stood up and walked towards her, which was sometimes considered obedience and sometimes not. He didn't know the difference.

"Lucky, no," I corrected him. "Stay means stay."

Mary Elizabeth said, without looking at me, "Don't be mean, Grace."

Then she brought her face very close to Lucky's, so that you could see the whiskers on his nose flinch at her breath, so that he couldn't focus his far-apart eyes on her face, and whispered something that sounded a lot like a prayer, but wasn't. It was almost ventriloquism, her lips barely moving. Sometimes I think he understood her. But then it didn't really matter if he understood, as long as he listened.

I told Ella not to say that she saw a Lost Dog flyer with Lucky's picture on it. It was stapled to a telephone pole at the stoplight behind First Covenant, and the picture was printed in black and white, she said anyways. Lucky was sitting on a scrubby suede basement couch with his mouth open and his ears drooping off the sides of his head like folded wings. The flyer called him Rover. *Answers to Rover. If found, please call.*

"I like 'Lucky' better," I said, which was the wrong thing to say, but at least it was quiet.

Mary Elizabeth moved her ears. I don't know if she meant to, but they shrank back and tightened her whole scalp, and her headband just barely slacked in that annoying way elastic headbands do, at the slightest change in tension.

"You're not funny, Ella."

There was still time for her to say *I know, I'm just kidding, see?*

But she said, "No joke, I saw it."

Lucky was on Mary Elizabeth's lap. She was sitting cross-legged, and he was

lying with his chin on her knee like she posed him there for a photo, to challenge the counterfeit image of the flyer. *Does this look like a Lost Dog to you? Does this look like someone who is hiding a Lost Dog to you?* It didn't. It looked like a portrait from an illustrated Bible.

"It was just a dog that reminded you of Lucky," she assured Ella. "You just thought of Lucky when you saw it."

"How do you know?"

"Because it *wasn't* Lucky," said Mary Elizabeth. "It wasn't *Lucky*."

"His name is Rover."

It was so quiet I could hear Ella not breathing.

Somewhere outside the shade of the tree, there were pairs of girls clapping to Three Sailors and Miss Mary Mack, and boys playing tug-of-war with one of the prickly church jump ropes. They would pull the skin off their hands, but they knew that, they wanted the scabs to show off to their fathers. *Three sailors went to sea sea sea to see what they could see see see*, which turned out to be nothing much.

Outside of that, our parents were sitting side-by-side-by-side in the front pews of the chapel so that they could kneel at the altar without having to walk the long aisle from the back of the room. They could just reach forward and down, and it would already be at their fingertips, the familiar dark stubble of the carpet, the holiness.

But in the shade we were strangers.

The next Sunday it rained. The smallness and sameness of the playground looked very briefly exotic, like the jungle Mrs. Lyall must have seen when she looked at it. The grass was mowed to a short nap like moss, and the whole yard was soggy with mist and heat and the deadwood smell of the end of summer.

We stayed inside and watched out the window to see if Lucky would come look for us because that was the test of his true loyalties, and then when he didn't, we decided his loyalties probably just wanted to stay dry. We didn't blame him.

After the lesson, Mary Elizabeth drew a picture of a dog and colored it with a reddish-brown crayon called *bittersweet* and gave it to Ella. It said LUCKY at the top of the paper, which I showed her how to write in cursive, and I gave her the idea to make each letter a different color.

Overall, it was a bad drawing. The dog's body was ragged and disproportionate compared to his legs, and his mouth was open, but it was just an unfriendly wedge of blank space in the profile of his head, without any teeth or a tongue. His eyes were supposed to be squinting with happiness, but she drew them as thin, black subtraction signs that made him look blinded, instead. She drew herself in the corner where you would normally put the sun. An oval face with pink hearts for cheeks and long, maraschino red hair that fell all the way down the page, over the middle of the dog's body like a saddle blanket and then clear off the bottom of the paper, as though you were meant to imagine it went on forever.

"How lovely, Mary Elizabeth," said Mrs. Lyall. She could have said anything in the world, and she said, *How lovely*.

RADIANT ASPHALT

Ana Kate Barker

The sky is almost overrated when the pavement is a galaxy of glimmering stars. Those who work for the National Asphalt Pavement Association (NAPA) probably understand. I would love to meet them because I'm sure they are interesting like asphalt. Though, I guarantee they don't often hear that. Instead, we hear—they hear—the sky is big and beautiful. And why not? It's hard to miss.

Rather than stargazing, why not lose yourself in the psychedelic vortex of aggregate? The paved road has many unexplored secrets. I can tell by its twinkly winks in the sunlight. Like a string of pearls to the neck, so is oil to asphalt—the inheritance from leaky cars and bike tires imprinted in droplets of rainbow ink. When rain falls, the oil drips float on water drops. When the sun shines and the layers of oil and water are just thin enough, they catch wavelengths of visible light. I'd like to float in this prism pool.

Those at NAPA wouldn't say they "walk on the road," but "stroll over asphalt," and if asked to describe it, they wouldn't say, "grey." I'm sure if you asked what they see in the ground we tread, you would leave thinking, *How, day after day, have I never considered asphalt?*

THE SOUND IN QUESTION

Logan Carroll

It was not a seashell
whispering coastal drones,
pining for maternal tides to rock it back to sleep.
The child's music box—
however pleasant a tune,
sat unwound atop the dresser.
Fireflies had been looked over
a time or two. A worm's wiggle—
felt then forsaken by red-clay hands.
But the dreaded buzz of honey bees
was heard only within the garden.
Perhaps the primal scream
began to make itself audible—
parents argued over such-and-such,
a scolding from a teacher,
the pulse, found and consequently
capable of stopping.
But the child simply counted
as friends ran to hide,
guilty for not shutting his eyes,
hearing one voice only:
twenty-one Mississippi, twenty-two Mississippi,
twenty-three Mississippi, twenty-four…

TWO HUNDRED SIX

Claire Foxx

Metacarpals are the bones in your hands that connect your fingers to your wrists. You can break one by bicycle riding with your brother and your cousin, who knows how to ride a bike with his feet on the handlebars. Children's bones are harder to break than adults' because they're so plastic, they bend like old celery before they fracture. But you can do it—if you stand on the pedals to show you're not afraid, although you are, although you have always been, and the bike wrenches its head like a horse and throws you on the asphalt, chewing the skin off whichever leg hits the street first. You will catch your weight with the palm of your hand, and your thumb will splinter quietly, shyly into two pieces. Your father will say it's not broken. But your mother will show you on the X-ray: a humble black hairline like a flaw in the film.

Metatarsals are the bones in your feet that connect your toes to your ankles. You can break one by trying to turn two pirouettes when you know you can only do singles. You will hear it snap woodenly like a pencil, and then you will hear yourself land on the studio floor with the ugliness of a flat basketball. This is called a *dancer's fracture*. It means you will have to use crutches. You will stand on one leg for eight weeks as punishment for your poor balance.

You will not ride a bike again for five years. You will quit ballet in the spring, and your foot will always have a calcified knot on its side, which feels like a rock in your shoe no matter which ones you wear. You remember it on first dates, and job interviews, and sometimes for no reason at all. It means when you play *Truth or Dare*, you will choose on behalf of your skeleton.

Truth.

ALABAMA HEAT

Rachael Barefield

There isn't much my father hasn't done. He could be the starring role in an action movie. He has a tragic backstory, eventful work résumé, outlandish party stories, and has survived long enough to settle down and have a family.

His father, Bobby Barefield Sr., died when he was just a boy. He has never told me what he passed away from, but I've heard enough conversations and caught enough implications to put together that they hadn't been close. His mother raised him and his sisters on her own while maintaining a job for the Air Force. She died when I was five and I only remember bits and pieces of the funeral. But the main thing I remember was my aunts and father reminiscing about her and calling her a firecracker that ran the base. It only stuck because my young brain couldn't grasp the comparison of a mother and an exploding firework.

My dad did get to go to college. My aunts joke that it was because of his baseball skills and his great hair, describing him as the "heartthrob jock with the flowing locks." In my opinion, after seeing his old school pictures, only the baseball comment was true. He played at a junior college in Dothan, Alabama. Whenever I ask about his college career, he gets this twinkle in his eye. He really loves baseball. But then he'll start to think about his coach, and the glint disappears.

"That man was something else," he says when I ask about Coach Triplett. "I remember he made me run until I puked after a game one time. I missed a batter he told me to hit intentionally. The guy had already hit two solo shots. I tried to hit him, I just missed. He pulled me after that one pitch and had me running for an hour after the game."

He has so many stories about Coach Triplett. The man was an insane jerk. When they travelled, he would pay for one bag of ice and tell five different guys to go pick it up and end up stealing four extra bags. If they lost an away game, Triplett would curse them until he was blue in the face. He'd tell the driver to pull into a restaurant and open the door and dare any player to go eat if they felt they deserved it.

"The first time he did it, I was intimidated. I didn't get off and neither did anybody else. The second time, I was annoyed and thought about getting off anyway, but no one wanted to join me. The third time, I said *screw it* and went and ate. It shocked him, but I didn't care because I was hungry."

After the two years in college, my dad found work on an oil rig. He always brags about the schedule, a few days on and a whole week off, and how good the pay had been, especially to a young guy out of college. I'm pretty sure he hated it though, hated it more than he would ever admit. Mom tells me how the rig was the origin of his knee problems that plague him today. She says the work was too much and he took too many shifts, but always ends with, "At least he got out when he did."

My dad joined the sheriff's department in his next chapter in life. His family was from Ozark, a small town, so it wasn't too hard for him to be accepted into the program. My aunts tell me he completed the training with flying colors, but my dad always blows

"Sometimes I wish I could see this wild card I hear so much about."

it off or says they are exaggerating. That's one thing that doesn't match up with the man I know: in every story I hear, he is the epitome of a man. He is the best athlete and never takes anything from anyone. He isn't afraid to speak his piece if he has to. The man I know and have grown up with takes the high road as much as he can. He'll stand his ground if he must, but he avoids conflict at all costs. Sometimes I wish I could see this wild card I hear so much about, though.

His deputy sheriff stories are my favorite. One of the funniest, I think, is the story behind the picture of him standing next to a truck bed full of marijuana with a piece in between his teeth like a strand of wheat.

"I remember Lawler asking if it was my first bust," he says. "If you ever thought I chewed a lot, you would have thought he *ate* tobacco. Always had a clump in his cheek. Lawler was a card. I remember he had two kids from two different women. One was a redhead and the other was Latina. Meanwhile, he had a jet-black mustache and buzz cut he always kept in a close shave.

"He insisted on explaining the whole scenario. 'They might come out running or swinging. You never know with growers.' I told him about four times that I had witnessed a couple of busts before. I guess he just felt the need to mentor or explain since he was older.

"I remember it being so hot that day. Remember a couple of years ago when we were at the lake and it was so hot and we tried to cook that egg on the asphalt? It was about like that. I was soaked to the bone in sweat. A couple of the other deputies there— I can't remember their names now—had to take a few breaks. One almost passed out in the dirt."

I can imagine the scene. It doesn't matter how long you've lived in the Alabama heat. It isn't really something you truly get used to. When the heat flares and the humidity rises in the summer, air conditioning is your only friend. I can only guess how hot it must have been for my dad and the other officers to be out in the fields plucking up marijuana for an hour.

"We filled two trucks. We had to press them and break the stems to get the last bit to stay down when they drove."

"How'd you guys know the marijuana was there?" I ask every time. I love to hear the whole story because it's so crazy.

"Someone called in a tip that there was a marijuana farm in the area. They took a chopper out on a patrol and spotted a dark circle in the middle of acres of corn. That's how you can tell. Marijuana leaves are a dark green, not really like any other plant. They stick out like a sore thumb. I heard stories about people being busted because of one lone marijuana plant in the center of the field.

"Lawler was cracking jokes the whole time. He kept saying how rich he'd be if he took a quarter of the load and sold it. It was premium stuff. We got done and one of the other deputies had brought his wife's camera because she had demanded a picture when he got back. We took turns posing with the stack. That was mine and Lawler's."

I have the picture on the desk in my room. The tones have faded a bit over time, giving the picture a yellow tint. A Ford truck is in the center. I'm pretty sure it was blue

but I'm not certain with the fade. My dad had one leg perched on the trailer hitch and was leaning on his knee. A piece of marijuana was sticking out of his crooked smile. Officer Lawler was sitting in the center of the weeds, a sweat-stained hat gripped in one hand and a toothy smile plastered on his face.

The picture never fails to make me smile. I've shared the image and story countless times to my friends, and each time they stare at me in shock. It makes me glad my dad decided to keep a copy, but makes me wonder what it would be like to meet the young deputy with the weed in his teeth.

Dad has always been a night person. He's a private investigator now and constantly works strange hours. I remember one case where he was following a night club bouncer. He worked from midnight to six in the morning, so those were my dad's hours too.

When I ask why he is so good at adjusting to the night shift, I get the same answer every time: the graveyard shift.

"I remember when I first transferred to Lee County, me and my partner at the time, Dennis Patterson, used to get assigned the graveyard shift two or three times a week. When Hodges took over as chief, we would get it up to six times. But that's a whole other story.

"One night, we had been out for about six hours. Nothing was happening and we were bored out of our minds. It was around three in the morning, and when you've got nothing going on, it gets a little hard not to think of sleep.

"We finally got a call on the radio saying there had been a break-in a few miles away and one of the suspects was fleeing on foot towards us. We followed the operator's direction and pulled up to this old plantation house, kind of like the Samfords'. Big, white, giant front porch. It was just past Beauregard High School. I think it's still there. Anyway, we pulled up and saw this big guy hurrying inside.

"Me and Patterson jumped out and took off after him. I heard Patterson radioing our position and calling for backup as I beat him inside. I chased him in and saw him crawling into the attic. I just grabbed his ankle and yanked and he came flying out backwards. He hit that ground so hard I thought he was going to dent it. He had probably eighty pounds on me, but Patterson showed up just as he was trying to run again. Got him booked without much problem after that."

Officer Patterson is still a dear family friend. I have asked him about the incident after my dad first told me, to see if there are any differences or embellishments. He tells me most of the same things, except he has a much more interesting climax.

According to him, my dad sprinted inside "like a puma" and basically jumped the flight of stairs to the attic door. He says he looked like Superman as he lunged forward and yanked the man back down. When my dad talks, he makes it sound like an average event that any capable officer would do. But when Patterson tells me, he makes my dad sound like Clark Kent in his true form. He said people around the department called him "Superman" after he filed the report. I often wish my dad would brag more when he shares his stories. It makes me wonder what all he's actually leaving out.

A few months ago, I had a conflict with a teacher. She hated me for reasons unknown and would grade my assignments unfairly. I remember comparing tests with a fellow student after one class and the grades were different but the answers were the same. I vented to my parents, and that was the first time my dad told me the final interaction story with Hodges at the department.

"Your mom had just gotten pregnant. That had always been her ultimatum that when she got pregnant I had to quit. Chief Hodges always had it out for me, a lot like your teacher. I would come home frustrated which would frustrate your mother. And because he didn't

like me, he'd give me the worst shifts he could as often as he could. It didn't help things that we had been trying to start a family for a few years. Your mom finally had enough and made me promise that if we got pregnant, I had to quit.

"Obviously, I had to carry through with my side of the deal. I went in one day and was finishing up some paperwork, making sure everything was cleaned out. Hodges had the nerve to come and see me off, trying to be all chief-like.

"As soon as he opened his mouth, I just wanted to deck him. I could have taken him, could have embarrassed him. He was a little bigger than me, a little heavier, but I have no doubt I could have taken him down. Plus, he was all about how he looked, so the idea of a black eye would've probably made him faint. But I didn't. I tried to be the bigger person."

I try and imagine my dad in a fist fight. It's the hardest story of his to picture. He is all about being the bigger person, taking the high road, leaving the "ball in their court," and making sure you do as much as you can to end things on a good note. Of course, my dad is a big man. I don't doubt he could handle himself if he had to. But, the personality of the man I know makes it hard to imagine.

"He was saying some crap about how much he was going to miss my service, how great of an officer I'd been for him. I can't remember exactly what he was going on about. I just remember it was all a lie. I knew he hated me and he knew I knew it. But, again, he was all about image and what better image than to wish a resigning officer off?

"I just told him how I felt. I told him that I didn't know why he hated me, but I didn't really care. I let him know how I tried to avoid a run-in as often as possible but that his façade about wishing me well needed to stop."

"What'd he say?" I ask.

My dad gives a small smile. "He said good riddance and shook my hand. I just agreed and left. He made a comment under his breath as I walked past him, and no I won't repeat what it was. I got a little fired up and made a certain gesture as I walked out the door."

I can't help but laugh at the climactic ending. The move is so unlike my father.

"So, I can be cordial to my teacher but if she's still rude when I leave, I can give her a certain gesture too, right?"

"Sure, hon. If you want to be grounded for a month. Sure you can."

"Why'd you stop being a cop, Dad?" The question has been burning in my mind for a while. He already told me about the ultimatum Mom gave him about quitting, but I refuse to believe that was the only reason. It's clear he loves law. Otherwise, he wouldn't have moved on to private investigating.

He looks at me for a long moment before deciding on the most cliché answer he can come up with. "It was just time to move on to different things, I guess."

I nod and look back at my math book but don't start writing just yet. My dad goes back to focusing on his handheld camera and the footage he's sorting through.

"You ever wish you would've done something different?" I ask. I think if he won't tell me why he stopped, maybe he'll tell me if he ever had second thoughts.

"Like other than private investigating?"

"Other than any law enforcement."

He doesn't hesitate before answering. "I tried a lot of things before finding my niche."

"You ever wish you would have stayed on the force? You'd probably be pretty high up if you did."

"No, I don't think so. There are too many internal issues and too much drama there. Besides, I like the following and secrecy of this better than traffic stops." He winks at me as he speaks.

It isn't the answer I'm searching for, but it seems to be the only answer I'm getting.

"I often wish my dad would brag more...It makes me wonder what all he's actually leaving out."

I return my focus to the textbook in front of me, my mind far away from the assignment. I think back over the many stories he's shared and the man depicted in them and am amazed at how much my father has changed.

I will never know what he was truly like in all these adventures. But I can still get a glimpse of what he went through. Maybe when I'm older, he will be more honest about certain motivations and events. But for now, I have to rely on my imagination and deductions.

"Hey Dad? Can you tell me another story?"

"Sure. What do you want to hear?" He's happy I ask for more entertainment. He likes to relive the past, I think. Whether it is nostalgia or sharing his life with me, I don't know. But either way, it makes us both happy.

"Surprise me."

A GOOD SOUL

Ana Kate Barker

BARBIE SHOES

I'd rather have a splinter in my finger than a scuff on my shoe. Walking, standing, or sitting, I frequently glance down to ensure both shoes are as good as new. In my younger days, Barbie shoes were the only footwear I cared about; but, my dolls always went barefoot thanks to my younger sister, Kara. She would chew on their plastic slippers, leaving nothing but a slobbery blob. Shoes were not her only victims. Ken had tattoos, Jane was bald, and Sally had no nose.

Once, I let her play with my hula-hoop. She returned it held together with silver Duct Tape. The hoop would no longer hula. For years I reminded her that she owed me a new one. I sounded like a broken Alvin and the Chipmunks' Christmas record playing "I still want a hula-hoop" over and over and over again.

"It's just a hula-hoop, for goodness sake," Kara would whine.

Old habits die hard. By the time we entered our teenage years, Kara was not allowed to touch my bobby pins because she liked to bend them into makeshift braces; or my headbands because her big head stretched them out; definitely not my books because I prefer the bindings barely cracked; and certainly not my shoes. But nearly every morning she would ask to wear them. I would say no, and she would say:

"Mom! Ana Kate is being stingy again."

Me? Stingy? Frugal is a better word.

"You're so attached to your stupid shoes. Name the last time I ruined a pair," she said more than once.

I always had a hard time thinking of a specific incident on the spot because they all blurred together. She knew the struggle. That's how she got to wear my leopard-fur shoes that came back with the hairs standing straight on end. And my black sneakers, caked in waffle cone batter because she wore them to work at an ice cream shop. And, my navy Converses that looked like they'd survived an acid thunderstorm—there was no telling how that happened.

"Okay well, I'm just going to a wedding, so I promise these will not get messed up."

I gave in. My mistake. I should have known that every trendy bride has a rustic barn wedding nowadays. My sister returned the shoes, but it appeared as though she didn't watch out for a single cow patty, and then tried to wash them in a trough and dry them in a wood chipper. I rest my case.

A GLASS SLIPPER

When my sister and I played together as children, I always played the part of the princess, mom, or oldest sister. Kara played the dad, brother, aunt, uncle, cousin, grandma, grandpa, neighbor, store clerk, and pet dog. If we reenacted a fairytale, *Cinderella* for example, I would be Cinderella because my sister would make a careless princess. In my fairytale, I never would have left a priceless glass slipper behind. I would go back for my shoe then head for the coach which would be a pumpkin by the time I arrived. I would then have to walk back home, which would have been much worse with only one shoe. The prince

would never find me and I would return to my miserable life of chores. My sister, on the other hand, would have left the shoe behind and found her Prince Charming. Good thing Cinderella didn't value the glass slipper.

Dorothy wasn't attached to her shoes either. She had ruby slippers, but didn't think twice before skipping through a forest and traipsing through a field of poppies. Those slippers surely lost their twinkle before she even reached the Emerald City.

There's also the old woman who lived in the shoe. I'm not sure what to make of her shoe, but she lived in it. It was a practical place to raise her slew of children.

Then, there's Miss Havisham. She only wore one shoe; the other sat on her table collecting dust. No one ever messed with her belongings, but then, she never left her decaying house.

ANOTHER MAN'S SHOES

My grandpa, often labeled a generous man, recently passed away. After he died, *generous* seemed too small a word to describe him. I stood in line at his viewing, alongside the rest of my family, receiving all of the praise and thanks that should have been given to him had he been there. The row of people stretched around the funeral home. My grandpa was CEO of a private airline, as well as an electrical company, but that's not why families stood in line for over two hours and children waited patiently without food well past dinner time. Two young boys told me why:

"One time, we were selling chocolate bars for a fundraiser at school. We told Mr. Jimmy and he bought a whole case of them right then! And then, this other time…"

I don't recall exactly what the boys said after that; my thoughts wandered to the rusted pick-up truck my grandpa drove most of his life. When it broke down, he finally purchased a Jaguar. Before long, the car began to resemble the old truck since he used it for the same purposes. One blustery winter evening, my grandma cooked dinner for her family, as she did every Tuesday night. At the time, my grandparents had not yet upgraded to gas logs, and the last of the firewood burned in the living room where my family waited for Grandpa to return from work. A little while later, he arrived in his Jaguar. The once ritzy car was filled from top to bottom, packed like a pint of ice cream, with freshly chopped firewood.

Every year at my grandpa's birthday party, he gave presents to every member of the family. We were spoiled. Family and friends were most important to him. When he finally decided it was time to remodel his house, he designed the dining room as the largest room. He had four banquet tables fastened into one so he could enjoy the company of all twenty-five members of his family at dinnertime. My grandpa is remembered for many things: his puppets, his electric model train that passed the food around his enormous table, his plaid suits, and his gumball machine. But I remember his threadbare penny loafers. They had holes in the bottom, but he didn't seem to mind.

My sister's shoes look very much like my grandpa's. When I visited her at college, I needed to borrow a pair. She let me. The brand was nice, but the shoes were beat up. She claimed they looked cool that way. One of Kara's friends wore her new pullover that she gave him because he said he liked it. Another friend wore a shirt that my sister had bought her on a shopping trip. That night, we all went to a coffee shop; my sister paid. And before I left, she filled my car with gas simply because she was glad that I came to see her.

Harper Lee's character, Atticus, in *To Kill a Mockingbird* advises that, "You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them." I thought I would enjoy wearing someone else's shoes—it wouldn't require me soiling my own. When I slipped into my sister's tattered sneakers, my feet didn't quite fill them. Kara doesn't understand why I'm petty about shoes, but only because she doesn't see the value in everything I do.

WHAT'S IN A SHOE?

Paved roads and short skirts popularized fashionable footwear. Through the aid of flappers, shoes now represent good taste more than social class. In a modern, consumer society, little things matter a lot. Shoes are a status symbol for people concerned with such petty things. But anyone can afford to look fashionable—that's why vendors sell Gucci knock-offs at flea markets. Truly picky people aren't fooled; we have a sixth sense for spotting counterfeits. But what does it matter how nice someone's shoes are? Fashion trends come and go. Ten years ago, I strutted in Crocs, the plastic shoes with little round cutouts, not the fake ones with diamonds, and a gator on the side. The colorful waterproof shoes with holes were considered tasteful. Today, I wouldn't be caught dead in a pair. Mainly because shoes can influence one person's idea of another.

People with worn shoes are often viewed as approachable and agreeable. Those with immaculate shoes, like me, are considered conscientious or over-anxious. Before I left a friend's Halloween bonfire last fall, I decided to play one final game. I had gone the whole evening without stepping in mud or toasted marshmallow. I had just placed my Coke on the table in front of me when the pet dog sat by my feet, whining to be petted. The more I scratched his mangy coat, the more excited the dog became. I had just told him he was "such a good boy" when he gave his fluffy tail a giant wag that sent the Coke toppling down right onto my shoes. The next time my sister asked to borrow my shoes, I lent her those.

Shoes may say something about someone's character, but not necessarily his footing in society. My grandpa, whether he would claim to be or not, was a socialite. However, if a persnickety person studied his worn loafers, his status would have been completely misjudged. Even Michael Jordan, famous for his athletic footwear, said, "It's not about the shoes, but what you do in them."

A GOOD SOUL

Kara wears overused shoes, but she is not frumpy. In fact, she is my most trusted fashion consultant. She, more than anyone, deserves to borrow my shoes and would probably wear them better than I. She's an artist. She is gifted and knows that her talents and resources are not meant to be wasted. Her work could have gained acceptance in the most prestigious art schools, but she has chosen to study education and work with underprivileged children. My sister sees shoes for what they are meant to be—worn. Kara doesn't look down because she's too busy looking out.

IOWA

Caleb Flachman

Autumn days whirl by
like fields of corn and wheat through
fingerprint windows.

LINGER

Sheridan Vance

Piano notes echo throughout the house. Dogs slide on wooden floors to greet you in the living room. Bright light seeps through open windows, encouraging peace lilies underneath to grow. Spices from the kitchen linger in each room, drawing you closer. The dining room chandelier refracts light across the wooden table your uncle made, and green velvet chairs surround the table at attention, ready, and hoping for the next family gathering. The backyard blooms with hydrangeas and canna lilies from our granny's house. Leyland cypresses line the inner haven, and white wisteria scales the black iron fence.

This is the house that your parents are supposed to grow old in, the house you will visit with your own children one day. But something slips in, like wind around old windows, changing everything, like the shade of someone who lost sight of home.

The piano falls silent. Kitchen tiles chill bare feet. Vacant bedrooms fill with relics and photographs. Light is blocked by curtains, stopping at the window. It is winter. A two-story colonial with pillars and wide oak doors becomes a second story apartment, indistinguishable from the others.

Beige. Everything is beige. Walls and carpet. Cardboard boxes absorb all light. Unfamiliar sounds enter. No music, just screaming neighbors. Noise.

THE OUTHOUSE

Amy Johnson

Surrounded by family and urine-stained mattresses, I opened my salt-caked eyes to frigid blackness. At five years old, I laid still as I breathed in the winter air that froze the stench of sweat and lamp oil in my nostrils. Our makeshift beds sprawled across the floor of our 900-square-foot shack of a home in Bishopville, SC, halfway between my hometown and my mom's new job. Leaving the cocoon of my sleeping bag, I stepped over my brother's head to get to my father.

"I have to go," I told him, tugging on his once-white T-shirt, now yellowed with the labors of "a man's work."

My father's sigh reeked of his friends, Bud and Joe, who had long overstayed their welcome. They'd stuck around from my dad's college days, Mom said. He had me help him up; I used every bit of my strength to get him off his cot, a relic of his glory days in the Marines. After untying the door lock from its broken hinge, we trudged barefoot through the stagnant dishwater that had been poured out after dinner. My skinned knees tightened with each step over roots and broken glass. Finally, I made it to the cracked seat over a shallow hole in the ground. When I was done, I asked my father what to do.

"Just cover it," he exhaled, as if it were an answer I should already know.

SMALL TALK

Sarah Tucker

Words never rolled so gracefully
as when uttered by you.
In silence, I listened
to all of your beautiful stanzas,
your philosophical sermons,
your sound concepts greatly above my reach.
In vain, I stretched out my hand,
and you kept talking.
And I fell for it.
Self-loathing never seemed so close
as when your mouth was open
and self-preservation never more entangling
as when you were silent.

SIRENS

Haley Schvaneveldt

The trucks behind the townhouses across from ours had their sirens off, but their rotating red lights signaled chaos. The silence felt false, like the moment in a movie after an explosion when you momentarily wonder if your television sound is broken. I waited for the whining sound of a siren to confirm a nearby danger, but all I heard was the muted scream of frogs, triggered not by fire or explosion, but by recent rainfall.

My roommate Rachael Ann drew my attention to the glossy red trucks visible between the houses across our communal backyard. We were lingering after dinner at the dining room table, I with my face pressed against the sliding glass door. I like feeling the two temperatures at once, the cold of the glass contrasting with the warmth of the room. Through this door we can see into the identical glass back doors of identical houses. Between the houses there are gaps where you can see the houses beyond them and the road where tail lights whip dangerously around the blind curves that snake through the neighborhood. Rachael Ann, always upright and watchful, never misses anything.

"Good golly, Haley," she exclaimed. Standing up slowly, she crammed her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, and gestured with her shoulder for me to look out the window. "There's three firetrucks up there."

I turned my face so that my forehead and nose squashed against the glass. Sure enough, red trucks filled the gaps between the townhouses, and a thin, wispy column of smoke was barely visible against an equally gray sky.

Very often, Rachael Ann says things out loud that I'm only thinking. That's how we became roommates. I hoped we could live together, but she said it into being. Then, she asked, "Want to walk towards it? Get a better view?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed, almost before she finished the question.

When I was five, my next-door neighbor decided to burn some trash on his Washington winter dry lawn and his whole yard caught flame. The fire spread to his house, and while I was told that our home was not in danger, my parents took my sister and me across the street to sit under the overhang of the elementary school as a precaution and as an educational opportunity to watch the firemen work. I don't remember that house or that street except for that view from the school parking lot. I remember the concrete wall against my bony back and the neighbor's yard being solid black as if it had been colored with a crayon. I remember wanting to know about the fire. There was nothing particularly tragic about it. I knew that the firemen caught it in time, that there was minimal property damage, and that no one was hurt. But I wanted to know something my parents couldn't tell me. I wanted to know how it *felt*. I wanted to walk towards it, to get close enough to feel the way its warmth on my skin contrasted with the cold air around me.

I felt that same pull as Rachael Ann put on the boots that she kept by the door as if she had been expecting this to happen. I grabbed the blanket from around the back of my chair and wrapped it around my shoulders, stepping outside barefoot. The ground was cold and damp. I walked a step behind Rachael Ann to a tree halfway between our house and the fire where we had both the lumbar support of the curved trunk and a view between the firetrucks into an empty, blackened doorway. I didn't know what was beyond

"A thin, wispy column of smoke was barely visible against an equally gray sky."

that darkness. But I wanted to know. We stayed there until I got restless and Rachael Ann suggested that we try to get closer. We moved forward slowly, wanting to stay out of the firefighters' way, until we were only a one-lane road away from the cavernous entryway.

I think a lot about doing crazy things. Then, I thought about darting ahead of Rachael Ann and running through that doorframe into whatever was beyond it: maybe a burned rug in a burned living room, maybe a charred picture frame or dining room table or backpack. I wanted to press my hand onto the sliding glass door covered with chalky black soot just to know what it felt like and to see, through my handprint, what confusion or alarm looked like on firefighters' faces.

One of our friends lived in the townhouse behind us. She came out of her house asking how to get her car out of the parking lot so she could go to a meeting. I shrugged, but Rachael Ann told her how to navigate around the trucks. By then the smoke had died down. We trudged back towards our kitchen.

I drive past that black hole of a doorway every day on my way to class. Sometimes I swerve on the road, craning my neck to stare into it. Then I grip the wheel with both hands and imagine what it would be like to crash my car into a roadside tree while I wasn't paying attention. I stare out of my icy windshield and imagine what it might feel like to be projected through it from the heated interior of my car into the chilly winter air and have it shatter into little hail-sized pieces of glass from the impact of my body. I wonder if the siren of an ambulance would sound different with the knowledge that it was coming for me, and I wonder if I would be able to hear that siren at all.

But I don't crash. So I don't know.

MOONLIGHT IN THE ROOM

Logan Carroll

An Ekphrasis of Edward Hopper's Room in New York

"Clair de Lune" was Anna's favorite song. She often found her only felicities within its melody.

In primary school, Mrs. Brown asked the class what each of their favorite songs were. To every "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and "Mary Had a Little Lamb," Anna whispered, "It should be 'Clair de Lune.'"

When it was finally her turn to answer, the entire class laughed at the "made-up words" in the title.

"They are not made-up," Anna pleaded. "They are French!"

The class laughed with greater enthusiasm when told Claude Debussy wrote it. Anna looked to Mrs. Brown, tears piling up on the edge of her eyelids.

Mrs. Brown shrugged. "I'm not familiar with that one either."

After that day, and for a time, Anna ignored "Clair de Lune" entirely. She graduated high school in the summer of '26 and even completed a year of university. During what would be her final semester, she met and fell in love with a homely man named Jon. Jon told her they were getting married during a walk through the Central Park Zoo. The two were near the peacocks when he popped the statement. It was never discussed. Anna stopped attending university shortly after.

Jon wasn't disgusting nor was he particularly charming. He preferred newspapers to poetry and was more entertained at the office than the cinema.

"Would you stop making me sound like one of those soft-hearted Frenchies?"

Anna often teased him by saying "Jean" instead of "Jon."

Every morning he skimmed the paper, and every night he brushed his teeth before doing sit-ups. Anna pictured him marching down Wall Street like a soldier and saluting his boss with his feet together. She didn't like that she imagined him that way, but she chuckled still.

In October of '28 they tied their knot. The first months of marriage were fine. Anna spent most of the day alone in the apartment tidying up while Jon went to sell stock. The winter was exceptionally cold when Anna's father died. He had been coughing in his sleep for years and one night it finally killed him. Jon feared that being alone in the apartment all day wasn't good for Anna. He loved her in the best way he could. "Is there anything I can get you to keep you from staring at these walls while I'm gone? Anything at all?"

Anna blinked four or five times before she answered. "I've always wanted to play the piano."

Neither of them knew anything about pianos, but a lady on their floor played organ at a church. She circled one in the Sears & Roebuck catalog with a blue pen.

The day the piano arrived was one of Anna's finest. The piano was tall and black, and ruled over all the other furniture in the small apartment. The wood was polished like

"To every 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' and 'Mary Had a Little Lamb,' Anna whispered, 'It should be 'Clair de Lune.'"

an automobile, and as she ran her hand over its curves she thought of ebony. An hour passed before she even sat on the bench, but by the time Jon got home she was able to play "Ode to Joy" with one hand.

"That was very beautiful," he said. "I didn't know you were so talented."

Anna smiled with her eyes closed and then played it for him again.

Jon opened a bottle of wine at dinner to celebrate Anna's performance. They loved each other more that night, it seemed, than they ever had before. When it was time for bed, Anna stole a few more glimpses of the piano on a trip to the kitchen for a glass of water. In the darkened room, the piano's outline stood like a Greek statue she'd seen before. Perhaps in a book from the university library.

That night Anna dreamt of Carnegie Hall. In the audience were faces she knew—some neighbors and Jon, but also her father and Mrs. Brown and people she'd crossed on sidewalks—though not an exact resemblance. All of them fixated upon her in silence, yet they seemed to mouth apologies. Despite not wanting to, Anna stood on the stage before them and cried as if she was in primary school again. In the morning, once Jon had gone to work, she began to learn her favorite song.

Anna's fingers weren't long. The distance between her pinky and thumb barely reached an octave. She was also slightly farsighted which made it difficult to read music. But she knew the song like an instinct and was poised to do it justice.

On Easter she played Jon a hymn. On the Fourth of July, the "Star-Spangled Banner." All the while concealing her labor. Every day, she would hide the sheet music underneath the rest before Jon got back. She even found herself biting her lip to keep from humming the tune while cooking or reading around him. Anna had decided that she would surprise Jon with the song for their first anniversary.

On an afternoon in August while she was practicing, Anna heard a knock at the door. Behind it was the woman who had circled the piano in the catalog.

"I have listened to you practice every day since you got that piano," she said. "You have improved greatly since then."

Anna did not blush. She thanked the woman and returned to practicing.

The anniversary fell on a Monday. Jon had gone to work early and left the paper and his ceramic mug on the table. Anna wanted everything to be perfect, her own Carnegie Hall. She cleaned all of the dishes, vacuumed each room, discarded the old newspaper, and prepared the dinner.

If he thought it was beautiful the first time I played for him... her thoughts drifted.

Anna changed into a red dress without looking in the mirror. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she imagined the faces from her dream. Mrs. Brown applauded. Her father whistled.

Jon opened the door in a hurry. Anna rose to greet him.

"Happy anniversary, dear."

Jon was on his hands and knees peering under his chair when she entered the room. He did not look up at her. "Where is the newspaper?"

"In the darkened room, the piano's outline stood like a Greek statue she'd seen before."

"I threw it away," she said. "I thought you were finished reading it."

"Good heavens." Jon reached into the trash, producing the wrinkled paper. He sat down and unfolded its pages. His eyes moved frantically across each line.

"Is everything okay?"

Jon leaned back into the chair. He took a long breath and then another. "Everything's falling apart. I might lose my job."

Anna sat on the bench to collect herself. Jon continued:

"We're not going to be able to afford this apartment. You might have to find work. My word. We might even have to sell the piano."

Anna felt feverish. Her hands began to tremble.

"I wanted to play you something for our anniversary," she managed to say. "A song I've worked really hard on."

"Please! Honey, can it wait? I'm not going to be able to read with that noise."

Anna turned away so Jon wouldn't see her cry, but he heard the choked sobs.

"I'm sorry, darling. This is just bad timing," he said while pushing a piece of hair back from his face. "Just play your song while I read, will you?"

For the rest of the evening, Jon hunched forward and read the paper cover-to-cover in silence. Anna did not play a single note.

THE RAT

Claire Foxx

They heard it that first Friday night in the new house, scratching and fretting a wafer of cardboard with its needled teeth. They could tell it was big, great big, by the coarse scraping sounds of its movement, like its body filled out the several-inch width of the wall, and wherever it crawled its fat haunches chafed at the plaster.

"What is that?" said the wife. It was pitch black in the bedroom, and she lay very still on her back, afraid to move. Her voice barely trembled with breath.

"What is what?" said the husband, louder and surlier because he had just woken up from a dream, and because in the dream he had been a famous strongman in the circus. But he'd heard the noise, too, and he knew what he heard even if he wished he did not.

They listened. The room was so still it almost felt empty. Somewhere there stood a floor lamp and an armoire and a chest of drawers, all of which theoretically took up space—but the lamp was unplugged, and the furniture lost all its bulk in the dark so that their bed seemed to float in a vacuum of flat, shapeless shadows. It crossed the man's mind that maybe he was still asleep.

But then there it was—stirring and chattering insanely to itself in the baseboards, champing its teeth with a dull cartilaginous snap that raked goosebumps over the woman's bare arms. Here she inserted her elbow between two of her husband's ribs.

She said: "That. Don't you hear that?"

"Okay—yes—Violet, I heard it. I've got it. Okay," he winced.

"Do something. Go turn the light on," she told him.

He did not move. He did not reach for his glasses on the bedside table. He flexed the knuckles of his toes on one foot, clenched them, released them, clenched them again, with weak prehensility. Now he was awake.

"It won't make a difference," he said. "It's inside the wall."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Don't worry about it. I'll handle it." He meant this in earnest. He would not cohabitate with a rat, it went against his morals. But he would wait until morning. "Now go back to sleep."

Violet nodded, although the gesture was lost on him in the dark. She blinked her eyes. She had not been asleep the whole night—she'd been listening to the settling whimpers of the house, the ambient rocking-chair creak of the rafters and the brittle complaint of the windows that sighed in their frames. It would be several nights before she could sleep there in any real sense. First she would need to learn the language, to know the difference between noises that meant *you are safe here* and noises that meant *a rodent lives in your wall, hoarding your cereal, twitching and blinking its eyes like great black drops of blood, handling your things with its chapped, naked paws.* Then she remembered something.

"We can't kill it, Jack."

She was a vegetarian.

"Do you mean that we can't kill the vulgar, disease-ridden rodent that lives in our house with us, in the room where we sleep? And wants to give us rabies? And raise generations of rabid rat children until our walls writhe with vermin?"

The rat confirmed its intentions by making a dry gnashing noise in its throat like the rind of a scab being peeled from a knee, or of several scabs being peeled from several knees because it was not quiet. It was inhuman and nauseating and nearer to the bed than any noise had been so far.

"You can catch it in something," Violet offered. "It doesn't have to die, does it?"

There was silence for another minute, during which the husband lay deadly stiff on the mattress and cast his mind back to the circus, where he could bench-press a station wagon, or pull its dead weight with his teeth like a plow horse. He did not mean to stay there—but his audience called for an encore, so he felt obliged to take hold of the phonebook someone handed him and tear it in half with his bare hands. Then the halves into quarters, and the quarters into eighths, and so on until finally the pages were nothing but pale, wrinkled tickertape strewn on the ground. It was an incredible display of strength. The applause was deafening.

Eventually it became Sunday morning, and on Sunday mornings Violet had cornflakes for breakfast. But first she inspected the box very thoroughly, checked all the corners for holes or the suggestion of holes or for any suspicious defect whatsoever, a smell or a stain, a lingering impression of nastiness. She was not sure she knew how to recognize something the rat had touched, which disturbed her. But she felt she had good instincts. She would know if she saw it, surely, the way you know love when you feel it, or when you don't.

She took out the bag and held it up to the window above the kitchen sink, defying the sun to find some hidden flaw in the plastic. It didn't. All was as it should be.

You are safe here, she thought, and pulled up a stool at the counter. There she sat watching the thin yellow crisps of her cereal soften like pruned fingertips in the bath, lathering into the milk so it looked like she'd finished the bowl when, really, she'd not even picked up a spoon from the silverware drawer.

The thing about the rat, she decided, was you never knew where it had been. Sure, there were droppings some places, and incriminating crumbs and leavings of half-eaten paper and foil. There were the tufts of gray-pink asbestos Jack found in the basement, where he figured the rat had dug its way in. But how could she know *everywhere* it had gone in the house? Every surface across which it dragged the gorged worm of its tail? Unless it soiled something or ate something, what real proof did she have to say it had not slept the night in the china cabinet, nestled like some mutant embryo in her cereal bowl?

She pictured it too long and started to gag at the table. Still, it was worse to envision a corpse.

Not so for the husband. Jack took up rodenticides like an enthusiast, like other men took up fly-fishing or auto mechanics. He stood in the aisles of stores, weighing the respective mortality rates of warfarin and cholecalciferol, with a look on his face of intense mathematical solemnity. The rodent itself he weighed on the scale of his own intuition, which is to say he resolved to buy three doses of poison for every one rat the box said it would kill. Surely this was a rat of Bubonic proportions—an ogre, a vermin Goliath, from the sound of it. All things considered, he thought a three-to-one ratio might even be too conservative.

He surveyed his options: single-bait and multi-bait, death-by-this and death-by-that, let-them-live and make-them-suffer. Some kind of rodent-taser that cost thirty dollars and took batteries. In the end, he came away with enough neurotoxins to stagger a horse, plus two or three of the regular spring-loaded traps, for good measure. Mostly to scare it. He imagined its neck would at least be as thick as his thumb—then again, when he looked at his wrist, he sometimes thought that seemed more like it. Either way.

As a courtesy, he advised her to watch where she stepped in the hall. And in the basement and the closet and the pantry.

"Why?" she asked, knowing why. "What's in the pantry?" Two baited mousetraps like a pair of twin guillotines lined up against the wall—too perfectly miniature, too identical, down to the bright scalene wedges of cheese sliced from the block that Jack kept in the fridge for exactly that purpose, now he'd become an exterminator.

"Just pay attention to where you set foot, please. Don't be difficult." He turned down his side of the bed and left the wife side for the wife to do with as she saw fit. She was washing her face at the bathroom sink, which involved splashing and hollow plastic bottle noises of various timbres choreographed to the slurp of the faucet.

The nature of this choreography had always mystified him. In the old house, the toilet had been set off from the bedroom in a kind of recessed half-occlusion, out of view from the bed, so that he knew exfoliation only as a series of faint and secretly ritual woman-sounds. But from where he lay now he could see straight in at the commode. It looked like a broken molar, with his wife standing whey-faced in front, closing the lid of a tube and running a weak stream of tap water into her palms.

"Is that where you went earlier? Out for more traps?" she asked him.

"Yes." He looked at the ceiling.

"Really? You were gone just about all afternoon," she almost didn't say. But then she did. Better out than in, someone once said, somewhere.

"Well I picked up more toilet paper, too," he came back. "It's under the sink."

She knew where the toilet paper was. She stared in the bathroom mirror at her cheekbones and eyebrows and forehead, none of which were especially worth staring at. A white strand sprang crookedly out of her hairline, but she let it be—if she pulled it out now, two more would grow back tomorrow.

"I said don't be difficult, Violet," Jack said.

"I know."

"We needed toilet paper," he said. Which was true, but when he said *toilet* he really meant *rat*, and when he said *paper* he really meant *traps*. When he said *we*, he meant *I*.

"Well, we have enough now. Don't you think?"

After a week, the cable man finally came to install their cable, so they watched a movie together in the living room. Or the wife watched a movie while the husband sat next to her on the sofa, impersonating someone who wanted to watch a movie. He thrashed the couch cushions with a coat hanger to check for the rat before they sat down, but it was half-hearted. He knew it was hiding from him, he could tell.

Perverse little creature. Where could it be now? What was it doing, he wondered? The house was a minefield of snares and strategically-laid poison baits, chalk lumps of strychnine in corners and cabinets, in drawers and underneath furniture, in places Violet knew and places she could never guess. No matter. All night long, every night, there was the wet mucous smack of its chewing, gnawing, biting, whispering, burrowing, the hoarse violin of its squeak, the choked sibilance of its breathing. It would not stop breathing.

Sometimes he found it useful to believe that the rat did not actually exist. That the whole thing was some kind of unreal delusion, or that the noises were real but were not really rat noises. Of course, this never lasted for Jack because if the rat did not exist then he could never destroy it.

He watched enough of the movie that if Violet asked him what he thought at the end, he could give her a passable answer. From what he could tell, it was a movie about a man who cheated on his wife with another, blonder woman—a movie that hoped to be more than mediocre but turned out to be tragically, squarely mediocre, anyways. He found the wife boring and depthless. So did Violet. What was more, she found the husband ridiculous, and when he appeared in a fourth or fifth rendezvous scene with the blonde, she rolled her eyes far back in her head, away from the screen. It was

a roll with momentum, and her eyes went stumbling across the room, astonished at their own strength. She steadied her gaze on a dark shape.

Jack saw her see it. Beside the bookshelf, on the carpet. Her eyes hesitated, focused on something, and then with deliberate slowness she swiveled them back to the television screen as though nothing had happened at all.

"There it is." He muted the movie almost in reverence. "There it really is." He looked at Violet, at the floor, back at Violet, who looked into space like a china doll with its eyes painted open, unblinking.

"Jack," she said.

It was every bit as prehistorically hideous as either of them had imagined. Like something from a plague. Swollen, adipose body with flat-bristled steel wool for fur. Bald collar of mange around the neck, which was, after all, about half as thick as Jack's forearm—it was nightmarishly large for a rat. Its head was a dark fist, with an ear like a burnt-looking scrap of paper smelted to one side and nothing on the other side but pink scalp.

It hissed and somehow turned uglier. Jack stood from the couch.

"What are you doing?" asked Violet.

"I'm going to get it."

The wife from the movie wept in frustrated silence on the TV. She had tried to dye her hair blonde, and it had gone horribly wrong—she was at the absolute end of her rope.

"What do you mean *get it*?"

He took a step forward. He was staring the rat in the face because he no longer cared if it knew he was coming. There was no thought in its eyes.

Except: *run*. Which was not an especially good thought because this particular rat was not nearly fast enough, not even close. He took hold of its hind leg—like that—and it swung upside-down like a crazed wingless bat in his fist, reeling and shrieking, shrieking and reeling. It must have weighed three pounds.

"Jack," said Violet. She stood by the front door, which she unlocked and opened for him so that he could take it outside, and it would be over.

"I got it," said Jack. He held up the rat proudly and pointed to it with his other hand, the way fishermen point to their bluegill in pictures, and write the word *bluegill* with the date on the back of the photo. And the rat opened its needle-toothed mouth and clamped down on his finger so hard that his whole hand caught fire.

He drew back, flailing—but the rat only tightened the vise of its jaws, forced him to thrash and flap his arm for thirty long seconds before it finally let go and was flung across the room into a wall, where the crushing impact of its skull left a sudden red stain and a shallow indent like a scar. The limp, monstrous form of it slumped on the carpet.

The wife went on holding the door.

"It's over," she said.

The husband's blood clung tearfully to his fingertips, purplish and salivary, like it would rather have been anything else besides blood, anything more remarkable.

He answered her, "Don't be ridiculous, Violet. There's never just one."

ST. MARY'S HOSPITAL: INTENSIVE CARE UNIT

Caleb Flachman

The burn of cleaning alcohol lingers
long beyond its welcome, a sterile threat
to vestiges of hunger.

Lazy drapes of sunlight divide the room
into paths of dark and light,
mirroring the pale-faced answers
offered by heavy-handed healers.

Stiff wheelchairs shudder and rattle
over every wart and boil
in the blistered veneer
of linoleum and imitation hardwood.

Yet the steady whirring monitor
still whispers louder than
the screams of echoing sterility.

WEEPING WILLOW

Ana Kate Barker

She peers into the
watery glass to skim the
pond with tinsel tears.

ARIADNE

Olivia Strickland

Midnight has no place here.
Dawn is her silhouette,
blurring the backward arch of her neck.
She is the music I run after,
the symphony I breathe in
when I think morning is gone.
Her eyes pour into mine,
begging me to rest in her.
My soul falls asleep,
enraptured by her fantasies,
fantasies of my courage.
I fade into silence,
hushed by the perplexity,
the euphoric illusion of her dreams.
She calls my name,
stars dripping gold around her lips.
I long to touch her.
But midnight has no place here.

ZELDA FITZGERALD, 1927

Haley Schvaneveldt

"Nobody has ever measured, not even poets, how much the heart can hold." –Z.F.

At a pointe, soft flesh splits.
Her calves press against the barre.
She is twenty-seven, dancing to catch up.
In a room full of mirrors, she is infinite.

Her calves press against the barre.
Here, indefinitely, she is swept off her feet.
In a room full of mirrors, she is infinite.
She measures how much the heart can hold.

Can she, indefinitely, be swept off her feet?
Can anything survive her life?
She measures how much the heart can hold.
Death may, after all, be the only real elegance.

She is twenty-seven, dancing to catch up.
Nothing can survive her life.
At a point, soft flesh splits.
After all, death is the only real elegance.

ON THE EDGE

Olivia Strickland

There was a little girl screaming,
but I did not want to help her. I wanted her to stop.
Everything was overlapping,
demanding undivided attention,
sounds bleeding together until the words
faded into sticky black ink
seeping down the walls of my mind.
A booming voice rattled along
the bottom of my consciousness
like the spiky back of a crocodile
that may be a log.
It glided along, real or not real.

MAGNETIC RESONANCE IMAGING

Caleb Flachman

In no way does the nurse installed in the doorway of the radiology waiting room resemble the nurse typical of my experience, but she is emblematic. She is by all definitions stout, sporting a short-cropped wiry haircut and a face like a recently animated cantaloupe. She feigns interest as she leads me through a heavy door and into a blue room where she sits me down in a blue chair and rather suddenly produces an IV. I roll up my sleeves faster than I thought possible. *Any issues with contrast dye?* I tell her no. She perfunctorily ties a blue strip of rubber about my right bicep so that my veins bulge fabulously and then mashes the inside of my elbow with an alcohol wipe. *Ready?* She proceeds without waiting for a response and botches the landing twice before striking my vein. It suddenly seems to me that she was consigned to scanning people in the darkest corner of the basement because she is the entitled ogre-child of some obligated executive.

Then comes a passively enumerated list of things that could cause complications during the scan. *Implanted pacemaker?* No. *Shunts?* No. *Catheter?* No. I wonder if that's something she asks everyone or if my anxiety is visible and thus inspiring her, like a carcass to a vulture or a tumor to a troll. *Aneurysm?* No. *Cochlear implants?* No. *Pellets or BBs?* No. I imagine a caricaturish redneck—a real man's man—ignoring a decades-old hunting accident and then having tiny metal shards ripped from his insides by the powerful magnets in the MRI. *Vascular stent?* No. *Neurostimulators?* No. *Insulin pump?* No. The nurse looks me over from behind her clipboard and gives a little half-snort-chuckle-smirk. *Pregnant?* She genuinely thinks this is funny.

SENTIMENTAL MOURNING

Olivia Strickland

Author's Note: Names have been changed to protect the privacy of those most touched by these events.

I don't think I've ever understood what it takes to earn the right to a feeling, or what gives you ownership of a story. Too many artists and writers use sentimentality to elicit undeserved emotion from their audiences, and I have always sworn I would never be one of them. I know that there are too many thoughts and feelings I have no claim to and no right to inspire in others, but, to be honest, maybe I'm too prone to self-deprecation. Sometimes it works in my favor, maybe for a good joke or a snide comment, but sometimes it crosses into the much less amusing self-loathing category. Then again, who doesn't do that? I'm not special for thinking I'm not special. I graduated high school with a few shreds of confidence, but those would be obliterated my first weekend in college. All it took was two randomly assigned roommates and a tragedy a few days after having met them to remind me that I had no idea how to handle anything of importance. Zero real knowledge and very little emotional health left me with only sentimentality and empty gestures when my roommate, almost a perfect stranger, lost her best friend the first Sunday we were at school.

All I could think was that I was the wrong person to be there. It should have been my mom; moms just know how to ease pain. It should have been a pastor, someone who perhaps knew the mind of the God I was not sure I believed in. It should have been someone who had known Cassie longer than a week. Instead it was me, the emotionally unavailable, sheltered aspiring writer. Now all I could do was listen to Cassie scream on the bunk above me. A simple phone call had stirred our dorm room from our slumber, a phone call at six a.m. on a Sunday morning. The soft tinkling of her ringtone had roused us immediately into full awareness. There was no question about the contents of the phone call, though I had not actually heard anything or even known who had called. I opened my mouth to say something, but closed it. There was nothing to say. We had gone to sleep knowing her best friend, Emma, was sick, but she was supposed to be okay. She was supposed to be fine. I felt the bed shake as our third roommate climbed from her bed to Cassie's. Please don't say anything stupid, I thought.

"Cassie," Hannah said. Her voice was low. She probably meant to sound gentle. I could not see the two of them from the lower bunk, but I imagined Hannah awkwardly putting her arms around Cassie, maybe stiffly stroking the sobbing girl's hair.

"I know you don't want to hear this right now," said Hannah, "but everything happens for a reason. God has a plan." I closed my eyes as though that would block out her words. Maybe I could say something to erase them, something to at least distract from the arrogant insensitivity of the statement. I wondered if maybe I was projecting, maybe my anger stemmed from going to dozens of funerals as a pastor's daughter growing up. I imagined Hannah as a well-dressed mourner with perfect eye liner and deep red lipstick whispering about God's plan to a sobbing mother standing over her child's body. Cassie gave no answer, but began climbing down from her bed.

"It felt wrong to speak; the room already felt too full to handle the soundwaves."

Her long blonde curls stuck to the tears on her face, her barely visible blue eyes already bloodshot. The second her feet hit the floor, she collapsed.

She was probably ten feet away from me, but I had kicked all my blankets and pillows off my bed in my sleep, cluttering the space between us. My palms had just started to press into the mattress to jump up, but she was already pushing herself back to her feet and stumbling into the bathroom. I heard her getting sick over the toilet.

I vaguely remembered reading somewhere that shock and grief could do that to you. I suppose losing your best friend to some unknown cause the first weekend of college constituted both. I stood and took a few steps toward the bathroom door, then stopped again, unsure of where I was going.

"What do we do?" Hannah whispered, still perched on the bed. I thought that avoiding religious clichés would be a good start, but I did not answer. It felt wrong to speak; the room already felt too full to handle the soundwaves.

"I was trying to help," Hannah said. I wanted to tell her to stop trying. I wanted to tell her she had no idea what she was doing, that she was only making things worse. But maybe she was doing better than I was. The bathroom door swung open. I was struck again by how small Cassie was. I was taller than most girls, but I felt like a looming troll next to Cassie. Tears still ran down her face, but less violently now. She took no note of them but stared at the floor. I thought that I should get her a tissue, but remained still.

"You need me to drive you to the hospital?" I asked.

Cassie shook her head. "Kristen is on her way up."

I nodded. I did not know who that was, but it really didn't matter. Cassie reached for her glasses on her desk, but her shaky hands knocked them to the ground. The clatter they made disrespected the silence of the room and further cemented me in place as though my stillness would counteract the jarring sound. I stood and watched like a driver pulled over on the side of the road for a funeral procession. Standing didn't really do anything, but it felt wrong to sit or look away. The girl I assumed was Kristen came to the door. She said nothing, but hugged Cassie and walked out with her. I heard a small crack as they left and saw my plastic pen on the ground where Cassie had stepped on it. I picked up the destroyed ballpoint, ink running down my hand like tears for a pain that I had no right to.

WHAT REMAINS

Ana Kate Barker

The scent of fatback lingers
over her well-greased stove below a still bell
that clanged to call him, for cornbread
and collard greens, to the vacant chair
at the head of the table across from hers
facing a re-heated takeout box.

Hard candy softens in a sticky cluster
on his nightstand by their bed—
his covers frozen on the left; hers puddle
on the right, scented with his cologne.
Her nightstand bows under damp photos
and an empty fragrance bottle.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

TAYLOR MORRIS

Written by Caleb Flachman
Photographed by Lindsay Higgins

Taylor has spread her laptop, sketchbooks, and watercolors across a drafting table in Rainey 160, the drawing studio where she spends much of her time. She holds a cup of coffee tightly between two hands, preparing for another late night. But she doesn't complain. "Drawing is fun," she says more than once. "Most artists hate drawing people, but I love it."

She flips through sketchbooks filled with portraits and frame-by-frame studies of twirling figure skaters. She shows me sketches of buildings in Spartanburg and Anderson, places where she has lived. She has also created digital renderings of buildings of architectural and historic significance, such as the Cecil Hotel in Los Angeles. The colorful illustrations recount the disappearance of Elisa Lam, whose body was later found in the water tank on top of the building. Everything Taylor creates is meant to capture and communicate her interest in the personal and the public in a way that others can understand. "I really love sharing weird experiences with others," she says. "Hopefully my art can give those people those experiences."

She talks about her fascination with surreal and dreamlike experiences. "Basically to me it's those moments where you're in eerie spaces that have you holding your breath in anticipation for something that never really comes," she explains. "The spaces when you have some preconceived notion for what those spaces should be, but those notions don't quite match up. It's a very abstract feeling that I'm trying to express visually, which has been my biggest challenge." Recently, this attention to the liminal provided the groundwork for a series of mixed-media portraits. Digitally layered underneath changing shadow formations, the pieces are meant to demonstrate the subjective nature of individual perception.

Taylor grew up in Spartanburg, where she discovered an early interest in painting and drawing. She says neither of her parents is particularly artistic, but they enrolled her in art classes that helped foster her abilities: "My dad is really big on finding out what each of our gifts are, mine and my siblings, and pushing us towards that." Art, however, remained only a hobby until

"Everything Taylor creates is meant to capture and communicate her interest in the personal and the public."

the latter part of her high school career. Taylor recalls having a sudden realization that art could be something more than a simple diversion. "I have this distinct memory of being on a trip with my church where we drove up to New York," she says. "Being stuck on a bus for hours on end spurred me to draw, and I started drawing portrait after portrait. I don't know why, but for some reason that was when it really clicked, and I began to start practicing and improving as much as I could."

Today, she focuses on illustration, a style that she attributes to the inspiring work of Alphonse Mucha, Agnes Cecile, and Thomke Meyer. She says breaking out of her comfort zone and redefining her work is something that she always strives for: "I like to say the one thing constant about myself is change—that's why I won't let myself get a tattoo, because I know I'll hate it in about a week."

Taylor closes her third sketchbook but apologizes for not having more to share. She seems not to recognize that she has shared her vision, given us access to dreams we never could have imagined without her.

TAYLOR MORRIS

Five illustrations in the order they appear:

PAGES 53-57

UNTITLED
16 x 20 in.
Pen on canvas

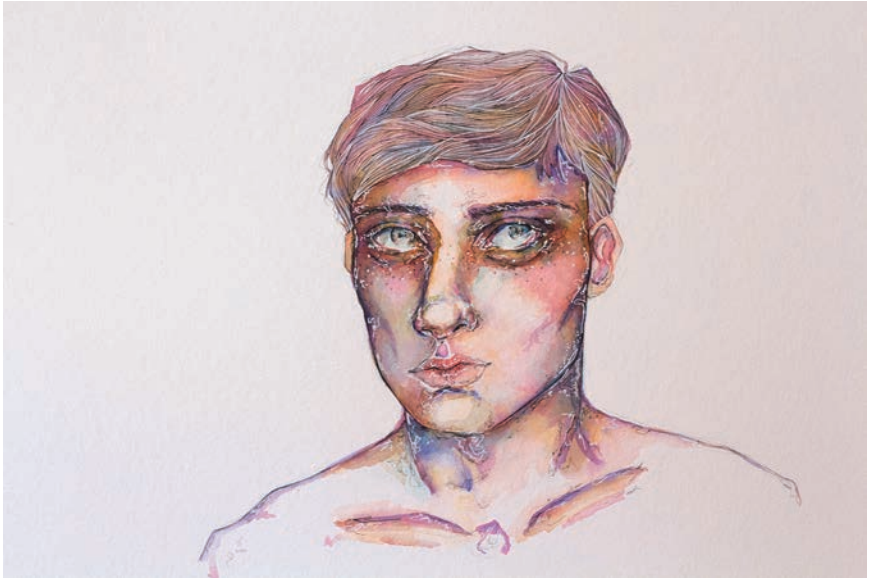
STILL (SHADOW 4)
14 x 20 in.
Watercolor, photography, and digital manipulation

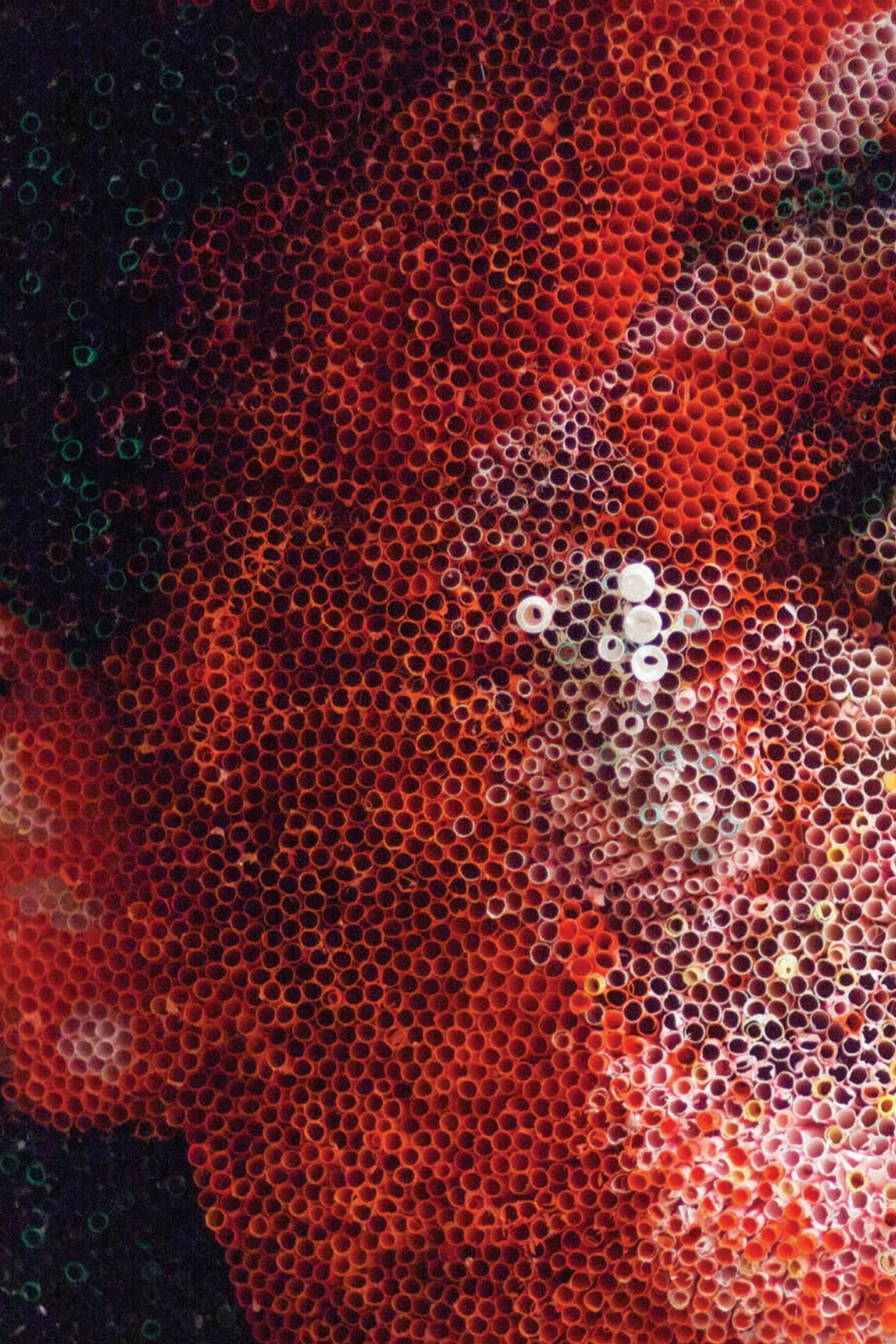
CECIL HOTEL, FEBRUARY 19, 2013
7.7 x 11 in.
Digital illustration

STABLE
22 x 30 in.
Watercolor on 220 lb. Arches watercolor paper

STABLE (SHADOW 4)
14 x 02 in.
Watercolor, photography, and digital manipulation

HOTEL CECIL



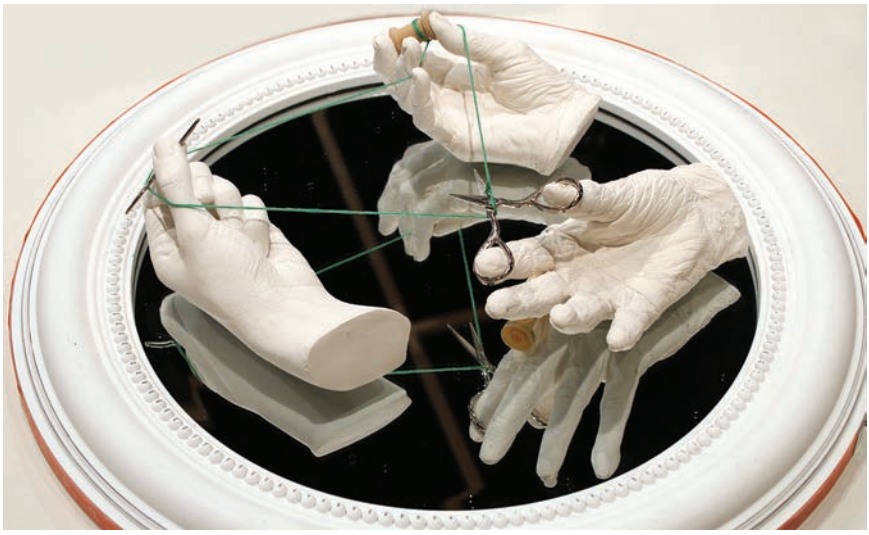


UNTITLED
(previous) plastic straws on wood panel by Rachel Tabor

EVANESCENT
digital photography by Melanie Pretorius

VICTORIAN MUSE IN RED AND BLUE
slip cast porcelain cone with rice paper oxide decals by Morgan McCarver

WARM HEART
collage by Olivia Ficklin



CLOTHO, LACHESIS, AND ATROPOS: MORGAN, MERLE, AND MELBA
plaster, mirror, and found objects by Morgan McCarver

LIDDED JAR TRIO
thrown stoneware, cone 10 gas reduction by Haylee Horn

MATTHEW
oil on wood panel by Anna Grace Cunningham

GIO
oil on panel by Caroline Wright

TRANSIENT

digital photography by Melanie Pretorius

EXPRESSION IN PORTRAIT

digital photography, double exposure by Kayla White

THE CYCLOPSES NO. 1
digital photography by Will Dunlap

LEAVES AFTER RAIN
film photography by Haylee Horn

SELF-PORTRAIT
oil on canvas by Grace Poulton

THE CYCLOPSES NO. 2
(following page) digital photography by Will Dunlap

CLAIRE FOXX

Written by Caleb Flachman
Photographed by Lindsay Higgins

Claire sits outside Books and Beans, arms folded, legs crossed, absently noting that frogs are croaking somewhere behind her. When asked a question, she pauses carefully, adjusting her glasses and bouncing her Keds until she finds the best possible phrasing. She seems to be rifling through some enormous dictionary that exists just outside tangible space.

Claire is studying Creative Writing and minoring in Spanish, but language isn't the only thing she cares about. As we talk, she often mentions an enduring fascination with science that she inherited from her mother, who is an X-ray technician. "I would sit on her bed and she would quiz me on all the bones in the body," she says. "I have this really random knowledge of orthopedic structure," knowledge that, like the facts she draws from many disciplines and experiences, works its way into her writing.

She lists the North Carolina towns that she was raised in: Denver, Sparta, and King. I haven't even heard of them, but she tells me this isn't uncommon. Apparently, most people mistake Denver for the one in Colorado, and Sparta is just a large Christmas tree farm. She says growing up in these small towns played a crucial role in her development as a writer: "I remember going to antique stores with my mom when I was little, and finding old paintings to make up stories about. I liked to think about who lived in the houses and landscapes and things, who their families were, what they named their dogs. I still do this—I just write it down, now."

But if her mother took her into the world, her father led her into literature. The love of story is something Claire attributes primarily to her father: "On the weekends, he'd always take me to the bookstore and let me choose whatever I wanted. Even now, he considers books a 'living expense.'" Claire does, too.

The first stories Claire wrote were mostly fantasies about fairies and elves who got together and had "felf" children. "I really thought that was going to be the next thing," she laughs. "I was going to popularize it. But sadly that never happened." In high school, Claire began taking creative

"...that's the real magic—tapping into the raw thing of an idea and seeing where it takes you."

writing classes and focusing more intently on her craft. After garnering more experience with poetry and full length short stories, she began encountering challenges: "A lot of what I wrote in middle and high school was very esoteric and convoluted—like, to the point of not being understandable. I had to figure out that simplicity is the power of a story. I try to keep that in mind when I write now. Because I think that's the real magic—tapping into the raw thing of an idea and seeing where it takes you."

In her current work, Claire emphasizes realism and psychologically authentic characters. She prefers exploration to exposition: "zeroing in on one person or situation or set of circumstances and trying to figure out as much as I can about that particular place or person." Among her favorite authors she lists Raymond Carver and Flannery O'Connor—O'Connor for her ability to infuse stories with nuanced religious themes and Carver because his stories, "ring with a strange kind of poignancy you can't quite put your finger on."

Claire plans to go to graduate school and pursue a degree in literature or linguistics, "or really anything having to do with writing." But here, in this moment, she stops to laugh. A chorus of frogs has just interrupted her midsentence. I doubt anyone else would have noticed.

WE FLY AWAY

Claire Foxx

He brought too much bologna to eat by himself. By the third morning it floated face-down in a puddle of tepid icemelt several inches deep, bumping anesthetically against the walls of the cooler when he opened the lid as though to say: *you've done it again, Thomas, you waited too long.* Which was true. The air hardly smelled like rain any more, and the sky was clear and pale. But he felt the omen of the storm in his knees and could tell he was not far behind it, even now, by the way the pain densified low in his joints, in his bones and the sockets of his bones.

He hefted the cooler out of the passenger's seat, sloshing thickly like a full stomach, and set it down under a tree whose limbs had been variously amputated to keep them from growing over the power lines that ran like taut black high wires parallel to the road. He was glad it was only styrofoam and not a nice cooler with real insulation, but he would have left it there, either way.

He must have slept a long time because the car was hot now. The leather had grown slack and febrile on the steering wheel, fatty against the palms of his hands. To his left was a close-shorn field steaming damply in the sun. To his right he was sure there were more, acres and acres, he could sense the impression of the gray-green expanse through the trees. Everything in Oklahoma was gray-green: the dirt, the houses, the streets, the dull, abstract shadows of the livestock—the color of stale water. But according to the map, he was in Pawhuska.

He turned over the engine of the car and waited for a black pickup truck to go past on the street, but instead it veered onto the shoulder, and a sunburned man with his hands in his pockets came to the window of Thomas' Grand Marquis.

"Sir?" he knocked. His nose was so red it looked blue, overripe. "Do you need any help, sir?"

"No, thank you," said Thomas. He cracked the window, but only an inch so that nobody had to yell. "I just pulled off to rest, I was just going."

"Hmm. Well—okay then. If you're really sure. No car trouble or anything like that. Because I'd be happy to help." The man stared diagnostically at the car, at the tires, at Thomas three days unwashed in the driver's seat, wax-eyed the way old men are whose eyes used to be blue.

"Anything at all, don't hesitate," he said, meaning: anything in the next thirty seconds, you seem harmless for a stranger, but you sleep in your car on the sides of highways. And you badly need to shave.

"No, thank you," said Thomas. "Except—have you heard anything lately about the storm?"

Supposedly no one had ever seen anything like it. But it seemed somehow profoundly familiar to him, the rash of bright, floral cells on the radar like something he dreamed, plagiarized from his own memory. He found that he knew its gestures, almost foreknew them: the change in its posture over the water, the slow armless crawl of the clouds. On TV the broadcasters called it a "superstorm," which they thought was clever and he thought was dull, coarsely prosaic. Even the thunder in Oklahoma pealed gray-green over the miles of featureless land like the voice of the Lord God Himself. "Super" lacked the necessary gravity.

"...he grew shrunken and ancient-looking, crying the same gray-green tears men have cried from the very beginning of time."

The sunburned man crossed his arms, and his raw purple forehead brooded over his eyes.

"Heard it'll get worse here soon," he said. "Lightning and bad wind out east. Trees down, probably tornadoes by the end of it. I hope not."

"Oh no, of course not. Of course. Thank you." Thomas shifted his car into gear and dragged it back onto the road, too fast, reeling almost deliberately into the oncoming lane, which was empty, and then back in the right lane, which was empty, and into the empty flatland panorama. Behind him, the cooler sat at the foot of the tree, dumb and forgotten-looking, but by the time the man thought to wave his arms at the faint, dark scab of the car in the distance, Thomas was already gone.

So far, not much had happened. Twice he had stopped for gas and once for cigarettes. Now and again for the bathroom, or he went in the woods and peered up at the sun until the margins of his vision blackened like a burning photograph. For the first two days he stayed awake, driving out far ahead of the storm and waiting for it to catch up behind him. There was evening and there was morning. The radio played sermons and forecasts, alternately and then, as the stations changed, in lapsing simultaneity: *seek shelter—the days of our years are threescore and ten—expect strong winds and quarter-sized hail—labor and sorrow, for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.*

The ninetieth Psalm. Not the famous one, but Thomas's father had known it. He had known them all, pored over the language until the black print came away on his thumbs, and whatever he touched he transferred the pigment: his bold little church, his house on the corner, his son, who believed that his father and The Father seemed so much alike that sometimes he secretly worshipped them both.

In the end, Thomas's father remembered *the beginning,* when *the Word was with God and the Word was God...in Him was life, and the life was the light of men.* He forgot everything else. His wallet, his car keys, his wife's birthday—his own birthday, his own name, his home address, the word "home"—the days of the week, weeks of his life—months—years—his son's face.

Thomas read to him from the Old Testament, from the Genesis patriarchs who lived centuries each. Noah was six hundred when the Great Flood obliterated the world as he knew it. Thomas had been forty-seven.

But now he was seventy-one and had not known the world for a long time.

Driving across the Midwest, he understood how people had used to believe that the earth was flat—that somewhere the land just dropped off like a shelf, and that was the end of it. He came to wish they were right. There was nothing for him to do besides smoke and watch the cattle and the half-grown sorghum and corn stalks flash by again and again like identical slides in a zoetrope. Only the light changed, each frame bleaker gray than the last until eventually everything sulked in the iodine dusk of the storm, and the start of the rain forced him to put up the windows. Then there was nothing to

do but drive. He sat thinking of ways to smoke his last two cigarettes in the closed cab, but nothing occurred to him.

He sat thinking of other things. The headlights picked up a farmhouse, the wood darkly oiled with rain, and he imagined himself on the front porch watching the water fall like dull silver coins in the fields, tons of gallons of dimes shaken down from the cast iron sky. In the kitchen, he stood at the sink with a thermos of coffee, burnt black so it tasted like char, or like medicine. In the hall, between rooms: one where his wife, if he had married, would sleep past noon on Saturdays and one where his son, if he had a son, would keep all his books. He imagined himself in the silo, the yeast stench of raw grain in his nose, dry dust and chaff in his lungs, stinging his eyes. *You've done it again, Thomas, you waited too long.*

Which was true. He'd forgotten that the windshield wipers on the Grand Marquis needed replacing, and now they drawled lamely across the glass, too slow and too feeble to cope with the downpour. All he could see was a wet charcoal portrait of the street. The clouds were heavily drawn, masses of dark carbon black bleeding into the few trees that stood like spent matchsticks on the horizon. Most everything else looked like a half-dissolved ghost of itself except when the lightning flashed, and the view was electrically clear for an instant. Suddenly there was the corn, nodding wildly so as to break its thin neck in the wind, and a speed limit sign, and a pale, distant barn the size of a dollhouse—then again, just as suddenly, there were only the watery shadows clinging to the window.

He pulled off in the grass and parked at what he thought was a good distance. Good being relative. On the hood of the car the rain leapt convulsively, shocked at its luck: it could have dropped down on some mountain somewhere at dawn, vanished soundlessly into a stream, but instead it was here, where the air hummed with pure manic energy like a hysterical charge. He turned off the engine to listen. The wind raved in the fields, plucking dead grass, flinging hay and gravel and fistfuls of clotted red dirt that thunked warningly on the car doors, an inch from his head, from his heart with its slow, measured pulse. The man with the sunburn was right about the trees—they bowed like whips, branches flailing and tangling in the wind.

Thomas was not afraid.

As the reverend's son he had seen funerals. Without trying, he could number a dozen: private and public, closed casket and open, prayers like somnolent epics and stale weekday eulogies as spartan as "so long"—shoe polish and stained glass and flowers so bright his eyes throbbed. His father would stand at the altar in his darkest suit, tacit and holy. The Reverend. He shook hands, he held his Bible and opened it when people asked questions about What Comes Next. But at home he grew shrunken and ancient-looking, crying the same gray-green tears men have cried from the very beginning of time.

This was not that. That was not what Thomas wanted, and not what he came here for. He came for the storm—and he was not afraid.

In the end, he guessed he had always imagined mules to be brutish things—broad-necked and innately perverse, with a kind of Marxist grudge against their place in the world: at the plow, under the yoke. It had never occurred to him that he imagined mules at all, but he must have because when he saw one standing several yards from the car he thought *is that a mule?* and, at once, *that cannot be a mule.* It was a cruel joke of a horse, dysmorphic, with short, kneeless legs and a fur coat the color of dust—not brown or gray but filth-colored, even with the rain pouring over its back so torrentially it could batted it back and forth like a crude, boneless puppet until finally it was forced to kneel and breathe wretchedly through its teeth to keep from drowning in the water.

He watched it through the window. With its stunted forelegs folded under its body, it looked more like a donkey with a mare's head, like Balaam's ass, senselessly caned for its reverence. It was easily eight hundred pounds, twice Thomas's size and four times his weight and yet bowed like a martyr in prayer for a gentler fate, for a few more good years and an owner who would not forsake him to fend for himself in the storm.

Thomas willed it to stand, not to beg. Three times Balaam punished his donkey, and three times it spared his life from the wrath of the Angel of God. Thomas's father used to read him the story. But the mule did not open its mouth to ask *What have I done to you, that you have struck me?* It wailed desperately from its chest and strained with the effort of rooting itself to the ground so that nothing could move it—not the rain that would flood every square inch of Osage County, not the hailstones that struck at its flesh, not the deafening wind that pried houses intact from their foundations.

For a moment, the storm seemed to consider its penitence. But then it was gone, the whole thing wrenched brutely into the air by its thin-ankled leg. And he felt like the last man on earth.

He sensed a sudden relief in the weight of the car, a tentative half-inch of levitation—how unlike what he had imagined, like falling away into space, into infinite inertia where everything only ever falls and could not stop falling, even if he wanted it to.

First they wanted to see the car. He said there was nothing special about it, it was just a sedan, but they asked to see and take footage. He said he supposed they could. It was just that it looked indigent now, wary and bloodshot, with scars on the doors where the wind had scoured the paint down to nothing but bare metal. Its front windshield was webbed with a labyrinth of fissures like ruptured veins, the world reflected in gray-green miniature in each of a thousand shards. One of the wipers was missing, and the other lolled brokenly from the frame of the car like a disjointed arm, dangling by black rubber sinew.

They made sure that was in the shot. And the man with the necktie, and Thomas, round-shouldered, his hands clasped at his waist because that was how he stood in photos, or whenever he wished to look smaller.

"What do you remember?"

The sun burned lucid yellow in the sky, and the man's hair, which was dyed very black and parted senatorially over one eye, shone with a greenish patina that made him look old in spite of himself. He raised the microphone to Thomas' chin.

"I remember the storm," Thomas said.

The man nodded as though this were profound and blinked at the camera, an earnest blink for the good folks at home.

"What do you remember about the storm? Did you see the tornado?"

His voice was the voice from the radio, the clear, narrative tenor. *Seek shelter—expect strong winds and quarter-sized hail.*

"Well, it was dark," Thomas said. "But it was loud, it sounded like every noise you've ever heard all at once. The wind screaming—not like a person screaming because people get hoarse and lose their breath, you know. And the wind just goes on."

"It picked up my car," he added, and the camera trained its cyclopic glass lens on his face, squinting, lest a poignant tear should fall undocumented.

"My God! What did you do then?" asked the man.

"I survived."

"You survived," he echoed.

"Yes."

"And what will you do now?"

Afterward they drove him to Tulsa in the news van because it was their duty to him

as a displaced superstorm victim and an elderly person and a guest of the great state of Oklahoma. Really there was not enough space for them all, and the cameraman was relegated to the back of the van to sit on a piece of equipment that looked like it should probably not be sat on, but he said it was comfortable enough. Thomas rode in the passenger's seat beside the black-haired anchorman, who was accustomed to driving in Oklahoma and paid very little attention to his speed except for the first few miles, where the roads were still choked with branches and fenceposts and glass and anything else the storm had seen fit to obliterate. Whenever they passed someone standing in a front yard foraging for lost shingles or at the edge of a field cradling an armful of mangled crops, he turned to Thomas and said My God. My God. And shook his head.

"Where are you from, anyways?" asked the cameraman when he got bored.

"Virginia."

"The East Coast? What're you doing out here, from Virginia? You got family?"

"No," Thomas said.

It was quiet until they came to a sallow clapboard church shaped like a child's drawing, with a square base and an equilateral roof marked, at its vertex, by a cross. None of the lines were quite straight, the walls vaguely sunken like papier-maché, the cross-beam of the steeple nailed at a barely diagonal bias, but the picture was there. In the cemetery, two men with chainsaws worked at a fallen oak. They severed the limbs at the joint and stacked them up one by one in the bed of a pickup truck to clear the debris away from the graves. It was a tremendous tree, probably older than the church itself, but together they were already halfway through it. My God.

NATURAL LAW

Claire Foxx

By the time I was in seventh grade, the gum tree was either five years or six months old, depending on how you measure. It was planted five years ago in a square plot of dirt landscaped into the sidewalk in front of the Middle School, for the purpose of making the building look less penitentiary. Mostly it succeeded in this. It was a redbud, which is one of the friendlier-looking species of trees, with salutary pink leaves that would remind you of cherry blossoms except they don't smell like anything. If you pinched off the little florets and rolled them between your fingers, the way most of us did while we waited for our parents to queue up in the carpool line, you realized there was nothing interesting about them. The texture was what you'd expect. The color muddied and came off on your thumbs like rouge, and then you were bored again, staring out at the parking lot, pretending you had better places to be.

Eventually, someone chewed a thick cud of bubblegum the color of a pencil eraser and stuck it onto the trunk of the tree, probably without even thinking, on some kind of limbic pre-teenage impulse to do things that are not supposed to be done. It was not so much a gesture as a compulsion. But more importantly, it was the obvious destiny of the tree—and we all felt thoroughly embarrassed for not having realized it sooner, in all those years of plucking at the branches like shy kleptomaniacs.

The gum tree became a sensation. If you have ever stared very closely at a pointillist painting, so that the individual pixels of color separate from the image, and all you can see is a wild, psychedelic abstraction of pigment, then you know more or less what the tree looked like. We stuck all the gum on the side facing the parking lot, and we didn't leave any space between pieces so that the effect was of one solid, conspicuous, unidentifiable figure like one of those clouds that can look like anything to anyone. Certain people of the administrative persuasion considered this to be vandalism. The Middle School student body considered it to be the most and only interesting feature of our education. It was satisfying to look at, in the way ugly things can be satisfying when they are actually almost beautiful.

It was the subject of multiple school assemblies, in which we were forbidden not only from gumming the gum tree but from engaging in any tree-related activities aside from the admiration of natural beauty, as God intended. But twelve-year-olds live for sedition. Besides boredom, risk was our only incentive. And we took the conspiracy seriously—to my knowledge, nobody ever got punished for adding to the tree because nobody ever got caught, and it was impossible to penalize all seven hundred of us corporately.

It was not impossible to uproot the tree, so that when we came back from a long weekend the sidewalk was scalped bald, with the square plot of dirt recessed darkly into the concrete like a shallow grave, or a razed altar, or something far less evocative but equally devoid of vegetation.

And it stayed that way. Eight years later, there is still not so much as a shrub—and there hasn't been, and there won't be because shrubbery could be construed as a form of negotiation, and the spirit of Middle School governance is nothing if not *tough on crime*.

"It was satisfying to look at, in the way ugly things can be satisfying when they are actually almost beautiful."

Only if you stand very close to the building can you make out where someone chewed a thick cud of bubblegum the color of a pencil eraser and stuck it on the wall of the school, smashed it down righteously into the brick with their thumb, like a wax seal. Probably without even thinking. You know how kids are.

IS THERE A WAR ON?

A Ten Minute Space Play (an excerpt)
Chandler Pennington

CHARACTERS

Male pronouns and relations used, but characters can be any gender.

COR – a primitive tribal leader. Ever so slightly smarter than his brother. Any age.

MALO – another primitive, tribal leader. Loud, and pretty dense. Any age.

WARRIE – a highly intellectual alien. Inspired and adventurous. Any age.

SETTING

It is apparent to the audience that two great armies are gathering for a final battle of sorts, on a planet similar to but not Earth. Whether we see the armies or not, we can hear them. The sound awakens in us ancestral memories of Stone Age tribal warfare, complete with incoherent chanting and war cries. Eventually, two ice-cold warrior-leaders, **MALO** and **COR** enter the stage from opposing sides. They are basically human, and their dress is basically that of cavemen. They wield spears, or clubs, or a torch. They are, apparently, meeting between the two armies, as is tradition. They stare at each other for quite some time, each as if daring the other to speak first. Finally, the warrior on the left, **COR**, speaks abruptly.

COR: Malo.

MALO: Cor. (*There is a long, pregnant silence.*)

COR: Wonderful to see you today.

MALO: Always. (*There is another long silence. They both start to speak at the same time.*)

COR: Malo, I—

MALO: The time has come–Oh, I'm sorry—

COR: No please.

MALO: You can—

COR: No, I didn't have anything. Just filling the–you go, seriously.

MALO: Okay. The time has come! This conflict between us is too great. The schism it has formed is too wide. And now the blood it will spill will be far too red.

COR: I am sure it will be well worth it.

MALO: As am I, dear brother. As am I.

COR: I wish it didn't have to end this way.

MALO: I can't say I feel the same.

COR: I was being polite.

MALO: I wasn't.

COR: I've wanted to kill you since you left our mother's womb.

MALO: You tried in fact.

COR: I did.

MALO: But you failed.

COR: The time was not right.

MALO: (*Opening his arms*) Then when will the time be right?

COR: Today, brother!

MALO: Here? Now?

COR: On the battlefield!

MALO: Is this not a battlefield? Am I confused?

COR: This is your grave! (*He stabs a weapon into the ground.*)

MALO: (*Also throwing his weapon down*) Come on then! Bury me!

COR: Only after my army buries yours!

MALO: Oh?

COR: Yes!

MALO: Your army of what? Of children, and weak old men?

COR: Yes!

MALO: You don't stand a single chance against me, dear brother. My men will fight to the last. You will never route us!

COR: I am quite sure of that. Because we will surround you!

MALO: You will surround me?

COR: We already have!

MALO: That's...no you haven't.

COR: But we will!

MALO: We shall see!

COR: We shall see!

MALO: Enough of this. The time is now. The sun shall set soon. And tonight I shall roast your flesh over a fire, burning for the Great Goorag!

COR: Poor Goorag will have to wait, as I spill your blood over an altar for the Goddess Almara!

MALO: Almara is going to have a hard time tonight, as I crunch your bones into the sacred ground of the Mighty Habara!

COR: Habara will be hungry tonight, as I—(*A sudden flash of light. A roll of thunder. Something that, to the tribals, could only be the arrival of a god. They fall to their knees, but a simple, calm man—also basically human, but in a different way than the tribals—appears before them. He is caught between Malo and Cor, and after a moment notices the enormous armies behind each of them. He takes a few seconds to put two and two together, and recognition dawns on his face.*)

WARRIE: Oh dear, is there a war on? (*This simple question takes a moment to process. But Malo manages to form a response.*)

COR: ...Yes. Yes there is a war on.

MALO: Are you the great god Alkaiya?

COR: Or the sorcerer Zankai?

MALO: Surely, by your skin and your temperament, you are the goddess Vamail, manifest as a man! Still, you are beauty itself!

WARRIE: Oh, well thank you! Yes, thank you very much.

COR: So who are you?

WARRIE: Um, no one you've said.

COR: Then surely, the mighty god of rain, Kello!

MALO: Or perhaps the messenger of the gods! The noble Lontar!

WARRIE: No, none of those!

COR: Shall we keep guessing?

WARRIE: How many gods have you got?

MALO: Hundreds.

COR: (*One-upping him*) Thousands!

WARRIE: Ah, yes. Very impressive.

COR: Thank you.

MALO: (*Recovering from the blow*) And we're working on more!

WARRIE: All the time, I'm sure.

MALO: So who are you, actually?

WARRIE: Oh, um. My name's Warrie.

COR: War...ee?

WARRIE: Yes! Just like that. You're very smart.

COR: (*Flattered*) Thank you!

MALO: What are you god of, Wahiyr...ee...

WARRIE: Very close...Um, what am I god of? Let's see...not much, really.

COR: You're not a god.

WARRIE: Not in any traditional sense of the word.

MALO: (*Angrily*) Then who are you?

WARRIE: Hey, hey! Calm down there! I'm doing you a favor here, being very honest. Plenty of interstellar travelers have fallen prey to the temptation of settling on a backwards planet and claiming to be gods, it's very easy. I'm above all that. I consider myself a Universal Citizen. I want what's best for all of us third-dimensional beings. Normally, I wouldn't even interact with creatures of your evolutionary progression. Unfortunately, however, I misread my fuel dial and I certainly wouldn't make it out to the Bi-Cetic quadrant with what I've got, so I'm going to have to stick around and mine here for a bit. So, anyways, really, don't mind me! I'll just watch.

The full text of the play can be found at:
ivyleavesjournal.com/isthereawaron

AMERICAN AMUSEMENT

Haley Schvaneveldt

Frogs with fat legs and fish strung up by tails
hang from metal bars bright in the sun
as hot gusts of air sell sizzling funneled flesh
and corn kernels burst in oil.

"Bust one to win one," shouts a blank-faced operator
with stars and bars needled onto carnival tan.
Slouched in his slack, one-size-fits-none habit,
he grips sharp darts in clenched hand.

With a blue blur, red rubber shrapnel will pop
and a plush, white bear will become yours to take
from where it hugs a stuffed heart
and hangs from a chain.

A CIVIL WAR

Olivia Strickland

Grandma never called it Civil,
only “the war” as she muttered
a curse on the Yankees.
One hundred and fifty years made no difference
as my uncle eyed my date,
a date too dark to warrant a handshake.

In the same woods the blues camped,
musket fire is replaced by glocks.
Boys in blue firing, the others retreating,
and the Confederate flag
still waving on front porches.

In the same streets the greys marched through,
cameras pan over fires and banners,
everyone slinging punches and curses.
Blue men with shields as angry as the others,
everyone wondering whose freedom,
whose lives actually matter.

Grandma never called it civil,
she said war never was.
A century and a half means nothing.
Blood stains on blue,
spattering from the areas
deemed grey.

SCAPEGOAT

Olivia Strickland

Based on Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground) *(1989) by Barbara Kruger*

Remember when that guy grabbed me
when we were on the subway?
Later you screamed at me,
demanding to know why I had smiled,
why I hadn't told you immediately,
why I just laughed and kept going.
You said I was making myself
a part of the problem.
You etch your anger into my skin,
leaving a trail of righteous indignation up my spine.
Your cause is tattooed across my chest,
my thighs mutilated by your war cry.
My safety is the bet you place,
but I'm the only one who will lose.
Every word you pen is truth,
if only my wrists were not your journal.
My body is a battleground,
but not yours.

STATUE CHILDREN

Sarah Teague

We had just passed the fifth Baptist church of the hour when Mom turned to me with a glimmer in her eye. "Honey, I think this is going to be so great for us."

My mouth was full of Cheez-Its, my road trip snack of choice, so I just nodded.

"And this home looked so nice on the website. Better benefits, too." Mom turned back to the road but kept drumming her hands on the steering wheel in anticipation. She was humming along with Dolly Parton singing about working 9 to 5.

Mom was a mortician, so I was unsure why we had to move for her to get a better job. I swallowed my Cheez-Its and counted the sixth church before responding. "Don't people die everywhere? I'm pretty sure that's a universal truth. Weren't there enough dead people back home for you to find a job with better benefits?"

"Hattie, please. We've talked about this. It's *deceased*. Be respectful."

"Oh my gosh, Mom, they're not alive. They don't care what you call them."

Mom picked up her coffee from the cup holder and took her time taking a sip before replying. "Well, I care."

"Are you getting tired? I could drive for a while." I smiled sweetly, nodding at her third cup of coffee. We were on our second day of driving and I knew Mom hadn't slept well in our sketchy motel room the night before. The people in the room next to us kept screaming about which Kardashian sister was best. I figured they were drunk because it's a stupid argument to have, sober or not. Obviously, Khloe's the best. *Duh*.

"Harriet Louise." Mom started and then paused for effect. She liked to use my full name to remind me that since birth, she had been determined to make me seem as weird to my peers as possible. Who looks at their newly born child and thinks, *ah yes, this infant reminds me of an eighty-year-old woman. I'll name her Harriet Louise.* After Mom was satisfied with her dramatic silence, she continued. "This minivan is holding our entire life. If you think I'm going to let a sixteen-year-old drive it down the highway, you must think I'm an idiot."

I slumped back into the ripped seat cushion as Mom kept driving. It's not like I had a lot of friends back in Chicago, so I wasn't leaving that much behind. That wasn't really my fault, though. Being the only child of a mortician didn't bless me in the social skills department. Mom had always talked to me like I was an adult, so I never really knew how to talk to other kids. My claim to fame in the third grade was the day the teacher asked for someone to spell the most difficult word they knew. I confidently announced f-o-r-m-a-l-d-e-h-y-d-e, formaldehyde. She seemed impressed until I explained that it was a chemical used to preserve bodies during the embalming process. Then she sent me to the principal's office. I brought in a fancy urn for kindergarten show-and-tell and that teacher called Mom. But like, I don't really see what the big deal was. It's not like it was used.

I counted my seventh church. The road stretched on.

A few hours later, we pulled into a subdivision called "Sterling Cottages" and I hoped that Sterling, whoever he was, didn't know this cardboard cutout neighborhood was named after him. Mom tried to play off the fact that she drove up to the wrong house

"The statues didn't have faces, which was unnerving. But I guess it would have been unnerving if they did have faces...It was a lose-lose situation. But really, what wasn't these days?"

by saying she got the numbers mixed up, but we both knew the truth. They were all the same. Three bedrooms, two and a half bath, a screened-in porch, and only a five-minute drive from your nearest funeral home. It would seem impressive if it wasn't surrounded by thirty other houses with the exact same features. Once we were finally at the right house, I got out of the van and surveyed it. White vinyl siding with black shutters. The garage would hold our minivan but not much else.

It was an ungodly hot day. Record high temperatures, the radio had said. That didn't stop Mom from making me help unpack the entire U-Haul trailer before the sun went down. She said she had to return the trailer before six so she wouldn't get charged for another day, but then again, she always tried to distract herself when she was nervous.

While Mom was gone to take the trailer back, I couldn't bring myself to go back inside the house. Even with the enticement of air conditioning, going inside was an admission of defeat. The trips in and out with boxes were enough to make me notice that the smell of new paint and cleaning supplies still wafted through the rooms. The house had never been lived in, which I guess would seem nice to most people, but I didn't like the fact that I would be the first person to ever use my bedroom. That seemed like a lot of responsibility. Instead of going inside, I sat on the curb at the end of the driveway and stared at the house across the street. It was the mirror image of mine and Mom's, except it had a bunch of those weird garden statues of children sitting on benches in the yard. Mom had mentioned she liked them while we were unloading the trailer and that she wanted to buy one for our yard. I didn't understand the appeal. The statues didn't have faces, which was unnerving. But I guess it would have been unnerving if they *did* have faces and were staring back at me. It was a lose-lose situation. But really, what wasn't these days.

The problem with having no friends in suburbia is there is nowhere to go without a car. There's no hole-in-the-wall coffee shop, or record store, or bar that serves underage kids down the street, like in movies. Not that I had any friends here, but still; at least back in Chicago, I could walk to those places and *pretend* to have friends. Usually, it was just kids from my school. Unfortunately, the boys were too high on pseudomasculinity, and the girls were all too pretty for me to talk to much. But I could at least pretend. They would talk to me a little bit, even if it was only to ask me if my mom came home covered in blood every night or if our apartment above the funeral home was haunted. Sometimes I would tell them it was; they always wanted to talk more if I did.

Once when I was little, I snuck downstairs to the chapel of the funeral home, even though Mom told me not to because there were a bunch of "breakable items" in the lobby. But I went anyway, already knowing at a young age that Mom wouldn't realize I was gone. I had seen the chapel's stained glass windows from the outside, but I wanted to see them up close. I sat in the first row of pews and stared at the windows: five different scenes from the Bible made up with various colors and shapes.

I kept staring at the windows and then realized the only sound in the room was my own breathing. I felt sick to my stomach and missed the noise that would float into our

apartment through the kitchen window Mom always left open. I ran back upstairs to the apartment and Mom, as I predicted, hadn't noticed I was gone. A couple years later, I overhead her telling some clients about the chapel and I found out the silence was by design; the builders had soundproofed it so mourners could have a peaceful ceremony amidst sirens and people yelling and all the other city sounds. The chapel wasn't haunted; it was just quiet, but it scared me all the same.

I could no longer claim my home was haunted and there didn't seem to be anyone my age who would be interested anyway, so pretending to have friends wasn't even an option here. Silence stretched on forever. The only place nearby that served alcohol was a TGI Fridays and everyone knows they don't take fakes.

I could feel the sun burning the back of my neck and already knew I would regret sitting out here. I always got sunburned despite the copious amounts of sunblock I put on. Mom had olive skin that never seemed to burn, so I attributed my fair-skin genes to #4856. The fact I was conceived in a lab seemed so fitting for how I turned out. Mom said she wanted to have a child regardless of her relationship status, so she chose some mediocre guy out of a notebook full of other mediocre guys and had a kid. Mom claims she always wanted to be a mother, but I think she just wanted something alive to come home to every day, and she's allergic to dogs, so here I am.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out, already knowing it would be Mom. When I answered, she asked me what I was doing in the tone that people use when they're only asking you about yourself so they can talk about themselves without feeling guilty.

"Wondering about the purpose of faceless, stone children as yard décor." I plucked a blade of grass from the patch to my right and flung it into the street.

"That's great, hon. So listen, work called and wanted to know if I wanted to get a quick tour of the place. I'll pick up dinner while I'm out and be back in a couple hours. Start unpacking your room!" And then my phone beeped to tell me my own mother had hung up on me.

I knew I would have to go inside. The back of my neck was starting to scream. *Thanks a lot, #4856.*

Mom and I had sold all our furniture from our apartment back in Chicago because Mom wanted to start fresh or something like that. Unfortunately, that meant there wasn't anything to sit on, or eat off of, or sleep on. Fumbling through one of the boxes marked "hall closet," I found the air mattress we only ever used if some extended relative came to visit. I plugged in the pump and the sound of air whirring into the mattress filled the room. I moved it to the middle of the living room and sat, floating adrift in a sea of boxes. Somehow sitting on a naked air mattress in a house filled with boxes was even more depressing than just sitting on the floor of a house filled with boxes.

I remembered seeing a CVS on the main road near the entrance of the neighborhood. Drug stores offer great company, so I heaved myself up off the air mattress and out the front door. I debated on locking the door but figured the chance of our house getting picked to be robbed out of the myriad of identical houses was like an episode of "Deal or No Deal." It was possible, but all the doors look the same from the outside, so not very likely.

As I rounded the corner of the end of our street, something fuzzy dashed out from behind a bush and collided with my leg. The world shifted and my face was suddenly nearing the pavement. I put my arms out and caught myself, but not before my right leg skidded across the sidewalk, creating a zebra pattern of blood and concrete on my knee. I groaned at the inhumanity of it all, cursing under my breath.

I saw a middle-aged man approach in my peripheral vision. "Oh my, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fi—," I stopped when I realized he was kneeling beside an overweight Pomeranian.

The man finally looked at me and his eyes narrowed. "You know, you should really watch where you're going. Little dogs are fragile." He picked up the Pomeranian and

turned on his heels. The dog watched me over the man's shoulder and I ignored my knee's protests as I stood.

"Is he hurting you? Blink twice if you need help!" I yelled at the ball of fur.

The man turned back to me and looked horrified and I just smiled until he turned around again. I watched him as he walked down the opposite side of my street, stopping at the house across from mine. I wondered if he had named those faceless statue children.

I started limping my way to CVS. Going to public places with an actively bleeding kneecap wasn't something I made a habit of, but I couldn't begin to guess which box back home had the first aid supplies. The drugstore greeted me like every single other location in the country, which is the wonderful thing about CVS. It's basically the same everywhere, so no matter what state you're in, it feels like your hometown CVS. Nobody expects you to be anything there either; nobody thinks it's weird if you wander the aisles alone.

I limped to the "first aid kit" aisle and started grabbing the necessities: Band-Aids, Neosporin, the works. I was deciding between the regular Band-Aids or splurging on the waterproof ones when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned and saw a girl, about my age and height, staring back at me. Her eyeliner was blue, which I didn't think people did after they left middle school, but somehow it worked on her. The ends of her dark hair were hot pink and her right arm was covered with tattoos down to the elbow but then the colors abruptly stopped, like a canvas whose artist left it halfway through the portrait. Her left arm didn't have any tattoos, but with it, she was holding a paper towel that was splattered with red.

"Hi there. Just following the trail of blood." I followed her gaze down to my knee, now looking angrier after my pilgrimage. Blood was dripping from my knee, down my leg, and onto the floor. *Oh my gosh*.

"I'm so sorry. A Pomeranian tripped me." I smiled weakly and she blinked at me. My mouth continued as my brain lagged behind. "My name is Hattie Michaels. You can look me up. I don't have a permanent record or anything. I don't have any weird diseases and I'm up to date on all my vaccines. And the Pomeranian didn't bite me so no chance of rabies."

She handed me the paper towel. "Well yeah, it didn't bite you. It tripped you."

I held the paper towel to my leg, but since I had to reach down, I was looking up at her. She was more intimidating from this angle. "So," I glanced at her nametag, "Ruby, you work here? That's..." I trailed off, sixteen years' worth of vocabulary leaving my brain all at once, "cool."

She blinked at me again before rolling her eyes, but a smile twitched on the corner of her mouth. "Why don't you just hobble on to the checkout and I'll ring you up."

At the risk of sounding more nonsensical, I didn't say anything else. Instead, I opted to nod and follow her, half-walking, half-hopping to keep the paper towel on my leg. She rang up my stuff and handed me a bag. "I really am sorry about turning your aisle into a bloodbath. No pun intended."

Ruby shrugged, unaffected, but the hinted smile was still there. "All good."

I dragged my limp leg out of the store but only got to the concrete barrier in the closest parking spot before giving up. The parking lot was deserted. Blood dripped onto the pavement and I knew the cut would leave a scar. I started to clean my leg when I heard the automatic doors *swoosh* open and a flash of hot pink settled next to me. Ruby started talking immediately and her words tumbled out with confident ease. The parking lot filled with the sound of her voice. "Slow night. Figured I'd hear more about this Pomeranian."

I told her about the move and the Pomeranian and his wack owner. I continued talking as I dealt with my knee and I could tell Ruby was nodding occasionally, even though I kept my eyes on my leg. It had been a while since I had talked to someone who wasn't my mom. The rubbing alcohol burned and when I winced, Ruby leaned closer. "You're not

really supposed to use that stuff on a cut. Soap and water are better."

My eyes watered from the burning so Ruby was a blur of color when I looked at her. "Now you decide to tell me that?"

She laughed and put her hands behind the concrete block and leaned back. "Hey, I just had to clean your blood off the floor. I think we're even."

With the bleeding subdued by a bandage, my knee was a lot less gruesome looking. Better enough to shuffle back to the cardboard castle, at least. I stood up and looked down at Ruby. She was relaxed among the concrete below and red hues from the neon sign above. I turned and could see the entrance of the cul-de-sac of copies. All the houses started to blur together into one ominous shape but disappeared when I looked back to Ruby. She was already looking at me, squinting like she was thinking about something.

She opened both eyes fully before speaking. "My shift's up in a few minutes, if you want to stick around."

"Yeah, sure." I knew that if I stayed and Mom got home before me, she wouldn't worry. People who buy faceless statue children don't think about them much unless they're looking at them.

We went back inside and roamed the aisles. It was different roaming them with someone. I followed Ruby as she straightened up shelves and took off labels for sales that had expired. Even though a Top 40 song was playing on the loudspeaker above us, she hummed a different song to herself. She eventually went back to the employees-only room and I stood outside. With Ruby's presence gone, I suddenly got nervous and started shifting my weight back and forth on my heels. The next Top 40 song started up and I decided I liked Ruby's humming better.

Ruby returned shortly, her CVS vest and khakis exchanged for black leggings and a t-shirt for a band I didn't recognize but now I wanted to hear every album. We walked outside and the summer almost-night air hit us immediately and for a moment, I couldn't think about anything else.

When I looked back at Ruby, she was making the same face she made earlier, like she was thinking about something and deciding if she could tell me or not. "You got anywhere to be, Bloody Hattie?"

The nickname made my cheeks redden and I hoped to play it off with an eye roll and a shrug. "Not really."

I could tell Ruby noticed my cheeks but she just smiled. "I usually go on a walk after my shift is over. Want to join me?"

My knee was still hurting but I ignored it. "Sure."

We left the parking lot and turned right down the two-lane street, leaving the neighborhood and CVS behind. A couple of cars passed us, and we continued walking to nowhere, but Ruby seemed to know where she was going. She talked as we walked, and I learned that her dad lived in Sterling Cottages so she was there on the weekends. She was sixteen but going into her senior year because she skipped a grade. She had five older siblings. Her mother hated her pink hair, but not as much as she hated the tattoos. Ruby convinced her oldest sister to pretend to be her guardian and sign for every tattoo and made sure to go to several shops around the state so none of the artists got suspicious. Her mother told her if she got any more, she wouldn't let Ruby go out of state for college.

"That's why I only have half a sleeve." Ruby gestured at her arm regretfully.

We turned off the main road and walked on a little trail in the woods. I knew it was unsafe to follow a stranger into the woods, but I figured my two years of Tae Kwon Do would keep me safe. I hadn't done it in five years, but surely it was like riding a bike.

The woods thinned out a bit, and I realized we were not that far from civilization. I could see the shapes of a neighborhood across a clearing. On the edge of the woods,

though, I saw what I then knew Ruby had been walking towards. It was a little church that couldn't have been more than just one room. It had once been white, but years of being ignored made it gray.

"Isn't it neat?" Ruby didn't take her eyes off of the building. "A couple months ago, when I came home with number six," she paused and pointed to her arm, where the words "wild nights" were written in pretty black cursive, "my mom yelled at me for hours. So I took a walk to blow off steam and there it was. I come here all the time now. Nobody else seems to remember it's here." Ruby was still staring at the building in a way that made me wonder if she looked at any other person like that.

"It's beautiful," I said. The church was backlit by the now-setting sun and looked inviting even though it was so forgotten.

Ruby started walking again. We reached the front doors and I assumed we would stop there, but Ruby reached for one of the handles and stepped inside. I hadn't been inside a church since my secretive trip to the chapel when I was little.

"Are you sure—" I started, still standing in the doorway.

Ruby, now halfway down the center aisle, cut me off. "Check out that stained glass." She pointed to the center of the back wall of the church, just above the pulpit. "I can't believe it's still in such good condition. Leave it to this town to be so boring we don't even have vandalism."

I expected the window to be a scene from a Bible story, but it wasn't. Instead, it was a rose in full bloom surrounded by deep green. I walked down the aisle until I was at the front row. My knee was starting to bemoan all the walking, so I sat in the pew. Ruby sat next to me.

"Cool, huh?" She raised her eyebrows up and down. "It's so quiet in here. No parents yelling or siblings screaming. One of the churches in town used to meet here, but they built a new building. Apparently they were going to use this one for funeral services, but it never happened. I don't know why." Ruby swung her legs out in front of her.

I hadn't noticed how quiet it was until Ruby stopped talking. Even the cicadas outside were muffled by the walls of the church. I remembered the chapel and felt a pull to leave. I looked at Ruby, her face peaceful as she stared at the window. The pull eased a bit.

I could tell she noticed me staring but she didn't seem bothered. "It's getting dark. We should probably head back."

"Yeah, okay." I stood up and followed her out of the church, careful to close the door and shut the silence inside.

When we got back to Sterling Cottages, I stopped in front of my house. "This is me," I said.

Ruby smiled once more. "Thanks for coming with me."

"Yeah, anytime. I had fun." I put my hands in my pockets in an effort to appear relaxed.

Ruby nodded and started walking away. I noticed Mom's car was still gone, which meant a silent living room with an air mattress for a couch was all that was waiting for me. I thought about calling out to Ruby and asking if she wanted to come inside; we at least had Wi-Fi and could watch a movie or something. I started forward, and could feel the words rising in my throat, but then Ruby reached the corner of the street. She stopped and waved. The sight made my words die out, and I could only wave back.

"See you around, Bloody Hattie," Ruby yelled, smiling like she was proud of herself. She laughed at her own joke, the sound filling the air and then my head.

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REACHING THE BARRE

Ana Kate Barker

My fascination with music and dance began as a toddler, next to my nana's stereo system. Nearly every night my teenage aunt babysat me, we would sing and dance to the *Phantom of the Opera* soundtrack. When the overture erupted, I would close my eyes and spin until I was sick with a stomach full of butterflies. By age five I could have acted any part in the musical, but I idolized Christine Daaé, the perfect soprano and ballerina. On my eighth *Phantom of the Opera* birthday party, I dressed as Christine, and my grandparents gave the entire family tickets to see the Broadway performance. I stared in a trance as Christine floated across the stage in shimmering gowns. I so badly wanted to be her and wear a pink and lavender tutu to a masquerade ball. Surely, one day, I would.

First, I needed dance lessons. I knew better than to ask for them, so I never did. I was raised to be lady-like. Dance, with its skimpy outfits and sensual movements, was improper. My parents did give me tap shoes for Christmas one year—a nice gesture, except I never learned how to use them. Since I wouldn't dare ask to take dance classes, I asked for voice lessons. No one in the Barker family sang, but I belted "Ave Maria" when no one was home and went outside to perform "Think of Me." Nevertheless, I was too shy to sing when anyone could hear, so my mom signed me up for soccer. My time as a soccer player was short-lived because I hid from the ball behind other girls. But I soon discovered that writing could inspire the same passion I experienced while singing, so I created stories and poems in my closet and read all day long. Mother wanted me to be more active and enrolled me in a swim class. I hated the water. Once, I hid in the water slide and didn't unclog it until my mother threatened me. After learning to doggy-paddle, I gave up. My parents would never call me a thrill seeker, but perhaps they didn't understand the thrill I was seeking.

When I was six years old, I dressed as a black cat ballerina, a Halloween costume design from my own imagination. I told my mother I would need a black leotard, tights, and a tutu and was shocked when she agreed. Under the dark sky, I beamed, not because of the Tootsie Rolls in my cheap plastic bucket, but because I felt charming, elegant, and most of all, free to dance my heart out, even if it was just for pretend. Fifteen years later, I found myself once again in black tights and a leotard. This time, I was not pretending. I stood in pale pink slippers, facing the only occupied building on the outskirts of downtown Anderson, South Carolina. I was twenty-one and starting my first ballet lesson. My parents were as shocked as they had been when at eighteen, I announced my decision to jump from an airplane, or when I cut my long locks into an edgy pixie. I'm sure they thought I was going through a phase, but years of aspirations seemed more like a lifetime to me.

I had imagined dancing somewhere romantic, like a small-scale Palias Garnier. The Anderson studio, however, did not have the creaky wooden floors and antique walls with peeling paint that I'd envisioned. The building was modern and minimalistic. I rushed into class, hoping I wasn't too late since the GPS had steered me off course. I expected a stern woman with sunken cheekbones and a thick Russian accent to shout,

"My parents would never call me a thrill seeker, but perhaps they didn't understand the thrill I was seeking."

"Alexandra, you're late," looking ready to strike me with her walking stick. But the instructor, Mrs. Yon, was a petite woman in excellent shape with bright eyes and a cheery grin. She introduced me to the two other members of the class: another young woman who had been taking lessons for two years and a retired ballet teacher. So, I was a little behind but not too worried since I was in good shape. I danced, however, as gracefully as a hippo in a leotard, which is exactly what I felt like facing the mirrored wall next to my classmates, the *real* ballerinas. I couldn't even get my legs to remain in first position—feet rotated out from the hip with heels back-to-back. My toes were cramping, and my hips felt rusted in their sockets, but it was time to move on from the warm-up.

The question *what on earth inspired me to take ballet*? popped (right along with my joints) into mind with every strained ronde de jambe and pirouette. My best answer: fascination—the same fascination that led Edgar Degas to paint ballerinas backstage for a lifetime. From the audience's plush velvet seats at a ballet production, the dancers on stage resemble swans, exactly as they are expected to do. Their legs look like blades of grass quivering in the breeze, but the smooth tights conceal blue bruises, swollen ankles, and warped feet. Their pointe shoes utilize muscles of the toes and heels, as well as every muscle from the ankle up the lower back, which explains those perfect ballerina legs. I challenge anyone who thinks ballet looks easy to jump in proper first position twenty times, and see how his gluteus maximus feels the next morning.

I had hoped to finally discover my potential as a dancer, but realized the first night that I was too late and, despite my youth, too old. At my stage of life, ballerinas are nearly halfway through their careers. I knew I would never be Christine Daaé, but that didn't stop me from dreaming. I've always felt a kinship to ballerinas. Other people sense a connection too. I've been asked, "Aren't you a dancer?" by strangers, as well as friends. Who knows, maybe I would have been a decent ballerina had I started lessons sooner, but I assure them they do not want to see me dance. People say it must be my physique, the way I carry myself, my temperament, or something they can't quite put a finger on. I couldn't put a finger on it either, until the moment during class when Mrs. Yon claimed to be a perfectionist. Even legendary dancers like Misty Copeland and Natalia Makarova claim to be one. Flawless technique and appearance are demanded of ballerinas. When I read Makarova's autobiography, I knew the ballerina and I were raised with similar expectations. Growing up, my mother was strict and at times, I found her order hard to bear, but I now realize all I have achieved is a result of her discipline.

Before my second ballet lesson, I stood before my bathroom mirror, trying to smooth my hair into the perfect bun. I took it down and re-did it at least a dozen times until I finally achieved a sleek `do that reminded me of my days as "ribbon girl," as people in middle school called me.

"Hold still," my mother said through teeth clenching a comb.

"Ow!" I shouted as her free hand pressed the layer of frizz back away from my forehead, while the other clutched my ponytail.

Suddenly, Mother released her grip, and my hair tumbled onto my shoulders. "You moved. Now I have to re-part it."

"It looks fine. My friends don't even part their hair," I whined as Mother began to drag the comb across my scalp for the trillionth time.

"Well, I'm not their mother."

She brushed back my curls until they were as smooth as satin and reached for a ribbon that coordinated with my outfit. She tied the loops of the bow in perfect proportion, trimmed it, and then escorted me to the kitchen to burn the jagged edges with a lighter to keep them from fraying—this happened nearly every morning. If I wrinkled my shirt during breakfast, I would have to re-iron it. Any clothes I left out in my room vanished before I returned from school. My mother would hide them until I remembered to keep my room immaculate. If I left a drawer unorganized, I would come home to find all of its contents dumped onto the floor for me to re-fold or reorganize. The house had to be shipshape before anyone was allowed to leave. My mother taught manners courses, and I was her model student. Dinner table conversations at my house were lighthearted, but sprinkled with, "Sit up straight" and "Fold your napkin in half; don't wad it in your lap." I thought, "Thou shalt not burp, ever" was the eleventh commandment, so I had a lot to be forgiven for. In my mind, flaws were a nightmare, and failure, a sin.

Even though I had the perfect updo, my second ballet lesson was far from flawless. I was intent on mastering the moves precisely, so I stared at Mrs. Yon's feet.

"Your arms should be extended now," my instructor said. I glanced up from the ground and focused on my port de bras.

"Don't forget to point your toes," I heard while adjusting my arms. When I focused on my feet, I forgot my arms. When I focused on my arms, I forgot my toes. When I focused on my toes, I forgot my legs. And when I focused on my legs, I forgot to keep my back straight—not to mention, I never once lifted my chin. I tried so hard, but couldn't seem to do anything right. I left frustrated at myself for being a letdown and at my toes for cramping so much. My fight for perfection seemed to be stifling me. I dreaded the next lesson as much as swimming or soccer.

My mother enrolled me in piano lessons as a little girl, and I am thankful. After six years of lessons, she told my teacher that she wanted me to learn to sight-read hymns. But as with many young pianists, I never wanted to play what I was supposed to. I would set aside the hymnal and play "La Vie en Rose" or *Phantom of the Opera*, of course. The more I practiced, the more I hated the repetitious stack of chords. I wanted to spread my fingers across the keys and roll the notes, so I asked to quit lessons. A year later, my mother agreed. But I never stopped playing. After mastering every song from the *Phantom*, I learned songs like "Clair de Lune" and "Musetta's Waltz." When I performed the pieces, I didn't have to think about proper technique. I could sense what was right, and I played with feeling. Every emotion I kept hidden flowed across the keys. My sister teased me about how I swayed with the music, though I had no idea I did that. Anyone who heard me play commented on my "nice touch." Nonetheless, my mother urged me to play hymns, my sister told me the music was annoying, and my father kept the television on while I played. Though I didn't yet understand it, I shared all of my deepest longings with every note—in a language my family did not understand. They recognized the talent, but I wanted them to appreciate the beauty.

I was known as the sweet, studious, and obedient child, but also the less observant, less coordinated, and less creative child because I didn't say much, was bad at sports, and was not as talented in art class as my sister. I knew those things weren't true; I just didn't know how to prove it. In my confusion and desire for affirmation, I became the perfect child—one that I thought my parents and I would be quite proud of.

My sporty friend told me at school one day in fifth grade that *my mom* told *her mom* to tell *her* to try to get *me* interested in being athletic, but I don't think she was supposed to say that to my face. It didn't matter anyway; I had overheard the whole phone conversation. So I stopped dreaming of dancing and became the perfect runner. At my middle school jog-a-thon, I came in third place overall and beat all but two of the boys. I was finally noticed at school for being more than a shy girl and no longer had to stress about being picked last for a game in gym class. My proud parents signed me up for races, ran with me on the weekends, and talked about getting me a personal coach. But I did not enjoy running; it only fed my desire for perfection. Running became my ballet—I worked until my feet blistered and my knees buckled.

As a child, I had a little music box that played a piece from *Swan Lake*. I would wind its golden key and stare at the dainty porcelain ballerina as she turned in small circles with the perfect port de bras. Any ballerina would hope to look as precise and delicate as the hand-crafted doll. Her look was created by George Balanchine, the father of neoclassical ballet. He wanted his ballerinas to have the body of a little swan with a long neck and skinny limbs. If I couldn't be a ballerina, at least I could look like one. I distinctly remember first feeling the need to be thinner at six years old after catching a glimpse of my reflection in a window while playing hide-and-seek. As I got older and my desire for perfection worsened, the more distorted my perception of my body became. Through running, I allowed my obsession to drive me to despair and a dangerous eighty pounds. I believed I wasn't perfect enough, but did not yet understand that I didn't have to be.

When Kathryn Yon was rejected from the San Francisco Ballet because of her body type, she came to an obvious, but important realization: she was never going to be tall and lean because she was not built that way. She wasn't and never could be "perfect." After reflecting on Mrs. Yon's story, I entered ballet class with a new mindset. I was never going to be a perfect ballerina, but that was not going to stop me from dancing. Just like playing the piano, or writing, or singing, I could dance with feeling—that feeling has kept me going back to ballet.

Recently, my roommate convinced me to let her read a story I had written. I hesitated. The story was my outward expression of all I felt after a loved one had died, but I gave it to her and turned toward my work as she read. About fifteen minutes later, I heard a sniff and looked up. I couldn't help but laugh. Tears were rolling from my roommate's eyes, streaking her face with mascara, and soaking her muffin. "It's just so beautiful," she said. In that moment, I understood what Natalia Makarova meant when she said, "Just as a good pianist does not look at his fingers, a trained dancer should not think about technical devices of execution. Only then can he control his body so that it expresses what is in the heart, what comes from the soul." And that's perfect.

FALLING SOLDIER

Wayne Cox

"If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough." –Robert Capa

How clean it is, his shirt, how white,
The long sleeves rolled up neatly to
His elbows. The leather suspenders,
Honed smooth by the sweat of his arms,
Hold still the curve of his last breath,
And his khaki trousers still hold
The crease his wife or mother starched,
Maybe, the day before he left.
But in the time between bullet
And shutter his face has gone slack
And he has aged a hundred years.
With his bare arms flung open wide
He looks as if he's just let go
Of the world and is falling down
Into the arms of a stuffed chair,
His drowsy eyes already shut,
His bent legs shot after a life
Of standing on a cold mill floor,
The heels of his shoes resting now
Not on tufts of grass but of rug.

You must have seen this photograph
As well, as you took your coffee
And read the news somewhere in France,
The white drifts of his shirt a map
Of that trail through the Pyrenees
You walked on for days, every step
Behind you filling up with snow.
That night you left, there was no time
For weeping, no time for clothing.
You fought with the Americans,
You made love, you wrote letters home,
Not believing that Fascism
Could be stronger than your patience,
And you held on for thirty years,
The mountain snow drifting, the ink
From headlines whirling in your palms.

But there is no chair to catch you
When someone pulls the rug of your
Country out from under your feet
And the hard shadows and dry grass
Of the past rise up to meet you.
Now, when we look at this image,
His body looming over the hills
As if death still mattered, his hands
Still nailed to the cross of his cause,
No wonder this hope looks foreign,
This scene contrived, to those who live
In an age of blind martyrdom
Where all of us are fair targets
And any cause is dubious
And every photograph's a lie.
To understand this world of black
And white we'd have to start again
With you and learn just who you were,
Why you never could make it home,
Why sometimes it takes thirty years
To fall before you hit the ground.

for Amadeu Olivé Colet

VACANT

Ana Kate Barker

The moon, hanging like
a leaky neon sign, drips
fluorescent fireflies.

TO MY CHILD WITH FRACTION SKIN

Ashley Bultman

The first math I ever learned
was how to divide my personhood:
one-half Filipino,
one-fourth Chinese,
one-fourth "American."

To my child with fraction skin—
do not forget
your grandfather was born
with half-yellow skin
in rural Indiana during the late 60s.
His sister married a kind Brazilian man
and I remember sitting at a holiday meal realizing
there were blood connections at this table
that stepped over four different nations.
We are no strangers
to feeling strange,
and there is always room at our table for you.

To my child with fraction skin—
be brave.
Your growing-up identity crisis
may look a little different.
Some will use you as a reference source
for an Eastern culture you cannot reach,
or strangers will question
where your body was from.
No, where it was *really* from.
We are from here,
you are from me,
and that is enough.

To my child with fraction skin—
it's okay to remember your equation.
For my first few years I remember reciting mine with pride
like I held three pockets of the world in my bones
and a special serum in the locks of my hair.
But there will be months
or years
where you will tire of doing the math.

As your mother,
I will always stand beside you at the chalkboard
because I understand
the collision of identities in this country
lies between your brows
and sometimes pulls your chin down
or presses your shoulders forward.
I cannot solve this math equation for you
but to my child with fraction skin
I assure you this—
you are whole.

EPITAPH FOR A CIVILIAN CASUALTY

Claire Foxx

Let the city mourn me
in burned plaster—
not on the pyre,
in the gilded sulfur
flash of detonation,
but in windowpanes
ground into silver ash
the soldiers wear
for penance on their soles,
in stiff garlands of smoke
like incense whorled
over the stillness of the street.
Leave me to the city
with its grief, its crippled
rites, and let me lie.

THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1348

Ana Kate Barker

Men: here lies the bishop, Blackened by Death,
shoulder-to-shoulder with harlots and beggars,
for whom he gave alms and prayers.
Happy was he to die a martyr,
yet struck with the wrath of God.
Death silenced our faithful confessor,
so I traded my cap for his mitre.

FOR AMANDA BURGESS

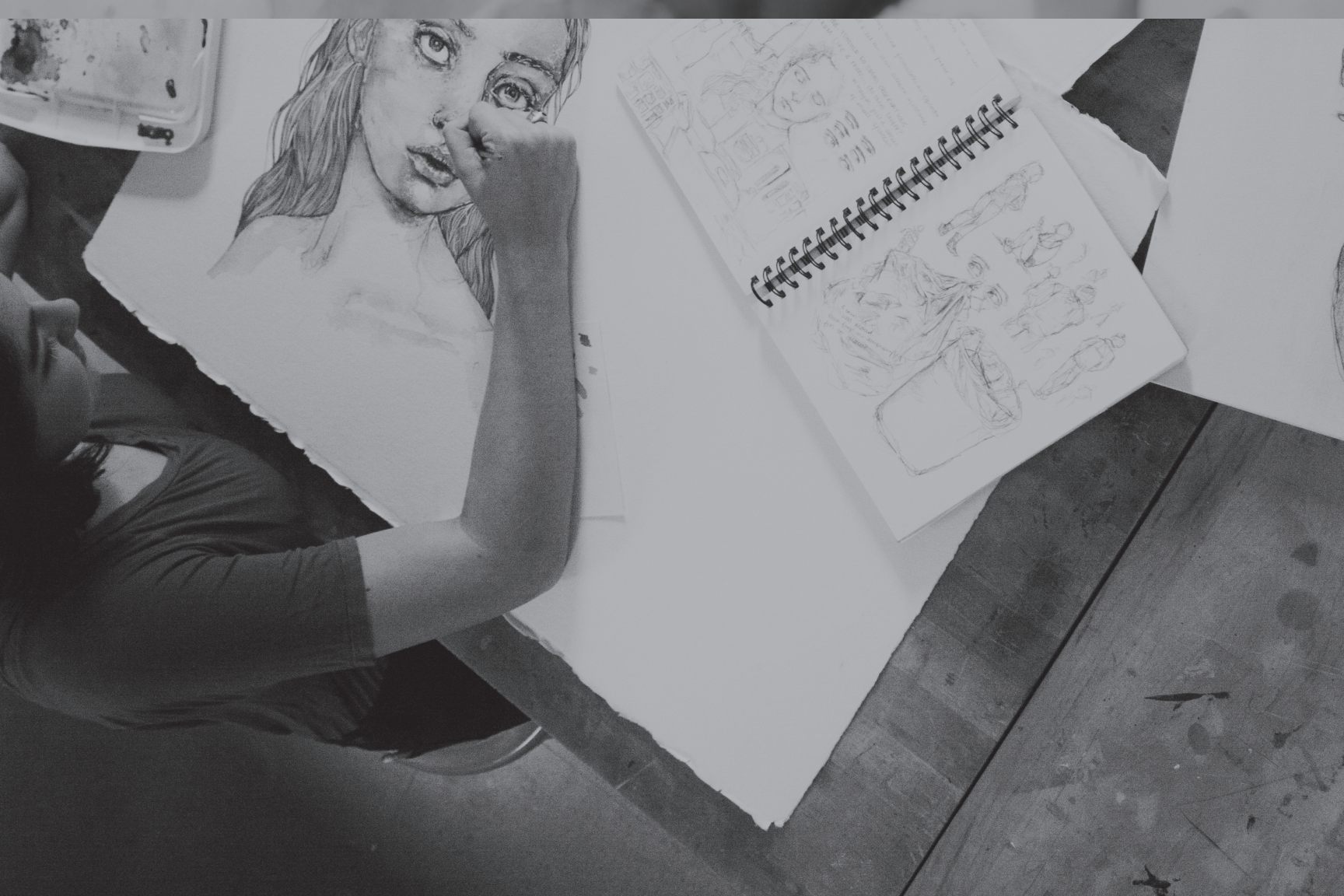
Wayne Cox

In Vermeer's painting, a young woman stands
Holding a silver pitcher in one hand
And an open window in the other.
She is looking not at what she is doing,
But instead at that space in between,
Where the first light of dawn
Streams in and falls into her arms.
Next to her, the table overflows
With a rich red cloth, a blue robe,
And a pearl necklace in a fine wooden box.
But she cares little for this now
Being, as she is, a handmaiden of light.

Amanda, you were a handmaiden of light.
You entered every doorway with a question,
The white toes in your sandals leading the way,
Caring little for your humble clothing
And the low estates of our small offices.
You came instead looking only for what light
We could give to you, small sparks of knowledge
That would circle like fireflies in the clear glass
Of your mind as you turned and walked away.

"Those once dwelling here," you said, "somehow remain."
And so you do, and we shall call you beautiful
And blessed, and hold fast the light of your absence
In our arms, for the rest of our lives.

–from Wayne Cox, and all of your teachers at AU



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with
GRATITUDE

Ninety-three journals. It is one thing to hear this number, but another to be in a room with them. In preparation for this year's publication, the literary team visited the Special Collections room in Thrift Library where Mrs. Kara Hollandsworth graciously allowed us to examine and read a hundred years of *Ivy Leaves* journals. We reflected on how far the publication has come: from only accepting poetry to this years' publication of a ten-minute play. Surrounded by piles of history, we realized just how much we owe to the teachers and artists and writers who have paved the way. Thank you to every single student who courageously sent us their work: precious pieces of themselves. And thank you to each member of the English department for teaching us how to write and read thoughtfully. This journal would not exist without you.

In particular we want to thank Dr. Teresa Jones. Leading writers is not a job for the faint of heart. We are natural rebels, opinionated and fiery. As our teacher and advisor, Dr. Jones has bravely and skillfully taken on the task of channeling and guiding that energy. We know her words resonate with us because we catch them coming out of our mouths as we remind each other that writing is revision, that we should say what we mean, and that we can always dig deeper. Thank you for believing in us and always pushing us beyond what we know we are capable of.

The design team would like to express their appreciation to Prof. Tim Speaker, Dr. David Larson, Associate Provost Susan Wooten, Dr. Jo Carol Mitchell-Rogers, Prof. Peter Kanaris, Prof. Nathan Cox, Prof. Jane Dorn, Prof. Nathan Spainhour, Prof. Ashley Jones, Prof. Michael Marks, Prof. Wellington Payne and Prof. Bryan Hiott. We would not have the capacity to produce this publication without their guidance, leadership, and encouragement.

We extend a heartfelt thank you to all of the students who submitted their superb artwork this year. Your creative spirit fuels us as a design team. We hope that even more of you will contribute next year.

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WEBSITE

Visit *ivyleavesjournal.com* to view the 2018 edition online. The archive portion of the website also features previous volumes that are available for your enjoyment.

CONGRATULATIONS

The 2017 edition of the journal was recently awarded the Student *Judge's Choice* ADDY Award from the American Advertising Federation of Greenville, as well as three Student Gold ADDY Awards: one for *Book Design,* one for *Magazine Design* and the other for *Digital Publication*.

NOTES

The *Ivy Leaves Journal of Literature & Art* is a peer-reviewed publication by students, for students. The Department of Art & Design at the South Carolina School of the Arts is accredited by the National Association of Schools of Art & Design.

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