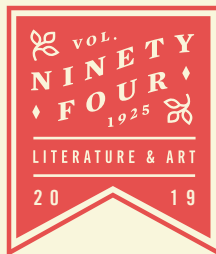


◆
2019



an
ANNUAL PUBLICATION
from
ANDERSON UNIVERSITY






IVY LEAVES

JOURNAL *of* LITERATURE & ART

VOL. 94







**TABLE OF
CONTENTS**



POETRY

- 16
28 JANE STREET
Emma Morris
- 25
CLIMATE CHANGE
Claire Foxx
- 40
THE LIFE EXPECTANCY
OF DOWNTOWN
Hayden Dutschke
- 42
IN EARLY DECEMBER
Logan Riley Carroll
- 48
KATANGA
Alli Kennedy
- 81
BOY FROM KENTUCKY
Anna Grace Clark
- 88
DEAD, DEER
Claire Foxx
- 92
INFINITE
Aleisse Buck
- 100
SOMEDAY
Aleisse Buck



POETRY

- 101
SACRIFICE
Emma Morris
- 108
PUDDLE PIRATES
Hayden Dutschke
- 116
GRAPHITE IMAGE
Matthew Jarrett
- 117
STORIES
Ashley Derrington



NONFICTION

- 10
C.O.A.S.T.
Claire Foxx
- 44
NAME CALLING
Rachel Tabor
- 50
DOUGHNUT MENTALITY
Hannah Alkema
- 119
BE STILL AND KNOW
Claire Foxx



FICTION

- 17
THE ENDS AND ALL
Logan Riley Carroll
- 26
HE DID, HE DOES
Claire Foxx
- 34
MILITANT VEGANISM
Jacob Cavett
- 82
AND NOT A SIREN
WAS HEARD
Logan Riley Carroll
- 94
ARE YOU WASHED
Claire Foxx

- 102
MOTH AND RUST
Emma Morris
- 109
LITTLE THINGS
Claire Foxx





ART

64
DISAFFECTION 1
Caleb Flachman

66
IRENE
Grace Poulton

67
MY CUP RUNNETH OVER
Cari Golden

68
WOMAN OF THE SLUM
Allison Kennedy

69
RAMADAN IN KATANGA
Allison Kennedy

70
EXTRAORDINARY
Taylor Harrison

71
PORTRAIT STUDY
Hannah Sherrard

72
SPEAK LOUDER
Matthew Everett

72
REACHING FURTHER
Matthew Everett



PUNCH PROSE

24
UNCRUSTABLES
Alli Kennedy

41
THE FIG TREE
Rachel Tabor

90
COBWEB HANDS
Genevieve Rice

91
NOVEMBER 14, 2018
Aleisse Buck

93
BITTERSWEET
Emma Morris

118
COUSINS IN THE TREE
Jacob Cavett



ART

73
THE ART OF SACRIFICE
Will Dunlap

74
GRIFFIN
Grace Poulton

80
**TAYLOR PORTRAIT
STUDY**
Hannah Sherrard



SPOTLIGHTS

54
ARTIST SPOTLIGHT
Rachel Tabor

76
WRITER SPOTLIGHT
Logan Riley Carroll





IN THIS EDITION

PAGE 54

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

Rachel Tabor

“Someone once told me that I’m fun in a serious way,” she says. And that’s true, but she’s also serious in a fun way, in life and in the way she approaches her art.

Read more about Rachel and explore her art on page 54.



PAGE 76

WRITER SPOTLIGHT

Logan Riley Carroll

“And then the day is over and I realize that I’ve blackened fifteen pages.” Logan wants to live and work as a writer, creating stories which move beyond himself.

Find out more about Logan and his writing on page 76.



A black and white photograph of a pine tree, showing the texture of the needles and branches. A white rectangular box is centered on the page, containing the word "FOREWORD" in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

FOREWORD

We create because we have something to say or prove, tidbits of truth we're compelled to share, because we know others crave answers as desperately as we do. Our search begins with curiosity as we innocently consider everything from the dangers of driving to the implications of time travel. Every observation reveals how the Creation we inhabit is infinitely more complicated than the work of our own hands. Still we try to imitate, prove our capabilities, and hone our craft to what we hope is perfection, draining words and images from our veins like blood that sustains others. Then we are downcast, wounded, when we realize making our own worlds doesn't mean we control this one. We cannot know why those we love sometimes never come home and we cannot end prejudice. We cannot even fix a broken dryer. And our hands are weary.

Somehow, as artists and writers we have to find purpose in all of this. It doesn't come at first, and sometimes not at all, but we strive to find meaning under the moth and rust. Sometimes morsels of truth are as humble as affirming those gentler than graphite or deciding that fig trees *do* deserve to be smitten. Before we know it, we're consumed by our craft, lost in the depths, then finally spat into the sand. We have just enough answers to know we've only scratched the surface and just enough hope to know there is more. This 94th edition of *Ivy Leaves* could never offer all that we need, but one breath is enough for hope to soar.



C.O.A.S.T.

Claire Foxx

The first time I almost died in a car I was still in the womb, a taut, smallish rubber-ball shape under the hem of my mother's shirt. I don't remember it, obviously. I've only heard the story. My grandmother was driving, and my mother was changing the radio station, hoping to land on a blues ballad that would coax me out from under her ribcage, where apparently I spent a great deal of my prenatal leisure time huddling like a startled hamster. I don't remember that, either. But it doesn't surprise me. I am a person who, on even the best of days, often requires coaxing.

The traffic light turned red, and my grandmother stopped the car. Then she looked in the rearview mirror and had just enough time to say, "They're going to hit us," before a speeding four-by-four tackled our van into the intersection. And we weren't even moving. We were stopped at a red light.

What I'm saying is that it's not an irrational fear. It's not paranoia if there's proof—and the calculated lifetime probability of dying in a traffic accident is one in eighty-eight. You probably didn't know that. You've probably never stayed awake at night Googling automotive fatality rates by state, by gender, by age demographic, by vehicle make and model and number of occupants. I mean, neither have I, of course. That would be really excessive. But if I were an unrestrained male driver between the ages of fifteen and nineteen in the state of Texas, I would probably consider buying an SUV since their heavier curb weight decreases the potential lethality of collisions and rollovers. That's all.

This is the kind of thing they teach you in high school Driver's Ed. Plus a lot of devastating statistics about teen alcoholism and drug addiction that are only loosely related to driving, but the curriculum designers at the Department of Transportation are nothing if not thorough. They cover all their bases. They know better than to expect any kind of active listening from an audience of high school sophomores, but after twenty hours of cautionary documentary footage and emergency hypotheticals, you become an educated driver almost against your own will, even if you thought you just stared at the wall the whole time.

I sat at a desk in the back of the classroom and tried to act casual. Like I was dying to be there but also dying of boredom, like everybody else. I didn't know anyone's name because they were all a grade younger than me. Everyone in my year had already taken Driver's Ed—by now they were driving themselves to school in used Hondas, trading paint in the parking lots and exploding their insurance premiums. Good for them, that's what I said. *Mazel tov*. My mother dropped me off at school in the mornings, and I rode the bus home, and as long as someone else was behind the wheel, the threat on my life and/or limbs seemed mostly theoretical, like something I could choose to think about, or not. I could choose to think about it abstractly, if I thought about it at all, or I could choose to fall asleep with my head against the window because I was in control of my thoughts and not the vehicle. That's the great thing about being a passenger: whatever happens, it's not your fault.

But Driver's Ed was a graduation requirement. Ergo I sat. Casually. Here is how every class session went: the instructor called roll, and when he said my name he

mispronounced the silent “e” as a “y,” and I never bothered to correct him. Then he read aloud ten or twenty pages from the *North Carolina Driver's Handbook*. Then he told someone to shut up and pay attention or they could wait until next year to get their learner's permit, and how would they like that? Then he lowered the lights and put on a film where many mothers mourned many dead teenage children whose bodies were burned in flaming sedans, or flung through windshields, or flattened or dismembered or otherwise brutalized by forty-ton tanker trucks, all because they neglected to follow one simple tenet of defensive driving.

Alert today, alive tomorrow.

Look twice and save a life.

After that we had ten minutes to eat. You could bring your own snacks from home, or you could buy fifty-cent cinnamon buns and cans of Mountain Dew the instructor sold from a cooler under his desk, which people actually did.

Here is how my first in-car driving lesson went: five miles per hour.

The road testing segment of the class was taught by a different instructor, who was older and blue-eyed and had a brake pedal installed on his side of the floorboard in case he needed to stop the car from the passenger seat in the event of an emergency. He thought everything was funny.

“Have you ever driven a car before?”

“It's illegal to operate a motor vehicle before you're legally licensed,” I said.

“Right.” This made him laugh. He mimed checking something off on his clipboard and winked. “What about a golf cart?”

“No.”

“A bicycle?”

“Yes.”

“Well.”

He showed me the car's turn signals and the gearshift and the horn and all three mirrors on their gooseneck swivels, and the speedometer and the tachometer and the odometer, and how to set the cruise control with a button on the steering wheel.

“But first I guess we'll need to get out of this parking lot, huh?” He smiled, although one in five car accidents occurs in a parking lot, and four in five occur everywhere else, which is pretty much the opposite of something to smile about.

“You have to start the engine,” he said.

So I did. I turned the key in the ignition and crawled backwards out of the parking space without actually accelerating, letting gravity roll the weight of the car along the infinitesimal grade of the pavement. He took his foot off the auxiliary brake.

All things considered, my style of driving is probably better diagnosed than described—with words like “geriatric” and “hypertensive” and probably also “neurotic,” although I prefer “preventative.” I would like to call it “safe” driving except there's not any such thing. That's the point. They said the *Titanic* was the safest ship ever built. In the fifties, they said cigarettes were good for your health—they put doctors on colorized billboards, and vacuuming housewives who said nicotine cleared

“... my style of driving is probably... ‘geriatric’ and ‘hypertensive’
and probably also ‘neurotic,’ although I prefer ‘preventative.”

their skin. God said, “it was good,” and the serpent said, “you will surely not die.” But then Eve took and ate, and the housewives grew tumors, and the S.S. *Mesaba* sent the *Titanic* a warning missive to alert the ship’s captain of “much heavy pack ice and great number large icebergs,” but nobody knows if he even read it. Not that it really matters. The boat sank, either way. 1,503 people died.

No matter how many dozens of times my mother told me I couldn’t go fifty on the interstate, I ignored her. *Alert today, alive tomorrow*. Better late than dead.

I imagined a small-eyed videographer asking her questions at our dining room table, touching his chin in that particular way people do when they know they’re on camera.

“Were you close to your daughter, Mrs. Foxx?”

My mother would already be crying. She would cry before the videographer came and after he left. “We were best friends,” she would say.

In post-production, they would dub the audio over a closeup of her eyes, which would look like scoured glass marbles with all the varnish worn off from being flicked over the sidewalk a hundred thousand times. “Actually, can we not film this part? I’m sorry. I thought I could. I just—”

Cut to a photo of me, probably my senior yearbook photo with the blue crushed-velvet background, which would take up the whole screen to remind you how much life I still had not lived, how many remarkable things I probably would not have done but might have liked to talk about doing until I got old and realized they were always impossible. If only I hadn’t sneezed at that intersection.

No. My position on driving was strongly and in every respect Anti. Anti-driving as a rite of passage, as a hallmark of human progress, as a leading cause of preventable death, injury, and disability among young Americans. I considered myself a conscientious objector. Under acute parental duress, I took the permit certification test on one of those microwave-looking desktop computers you don’t think about people still using until you see one at a DMV. But I did not like it. I answered the questions with hateful rapidity, in a blur of True/False diametrics that made everything seem much easier and more obvious than it actually was, as though it were ever as simple as *A green light means you must yield to right-of-way traffic*. The man at the desk congratulated me on passing the test faster than anyone he’d ever seen.

“You must really know your stuff,” he said. “Good for you. A quick thinker.” He had the look of a postman, with that infuriatingly nice, unironic postman face. Only because he was taking the picture for my ID, I smiled. He angled the monitor towards me so that I could see the mockup and decide if I wanted a retake, but I didn’t want him to have to press the button again, so I said no.

I am not a quick thinker. I’m good at memorization, which makes me good at spelling and *Jeopardy* trivia, but not at anything that requires the mysterious agility of instinct. I’m bad at every sport. I’m bad at watching sports. I lose track of the ball, and unless you know where the ball is, nothing anyone does in the game makes any sense. Everything looks arbitrary—an arm, a leg—and then someone you didn’t even see makes some gesture that is either good or bad, either accidentally or on purpose,

and it is either the meniscus tear that will end his career or three weeks of rehab and another championship run. That can happen in one minute. The DMV test took me seven. The fact that I knew all the answers was immaterial, really, because driving is not a question. It's a roulette wheel. Red or black. Win or lose. Sink or float.

Then the postman asked me what I wanted to do about my organs.

"My what?"

"You choose whether to register as an organ donor. You know, if you die but some of your organs are still viable and they can transplant them into somebody else," he said. "Or not transplant them. This is the paperwork."

"Do you know which organs?" I asked. It seemed like that would make a difference.

"I guess any of them? I'm not sure, I don't think it works that way," he said.

"Oh, okay. Never mind."

I didn't have a car, anyways. More directly, I didn't have money to buy or fuel or insure a car, but I also didn't want one, which struck me as a highly convenient arrangement.

"It's a sign," I said. "I was not born to be a Person Who Drives."

"No, it's a logical fallacy," said my father. "False cause."

He's an engineer, and a good one. He would still cry in his interview with the chin-touching videographer, as he is known to cry when he watches certain movies or when he tells me about certain books I should read, but of course he wasn't thinking that.

"Isn't your grandmother selling her car?" he asked.

He and my mother would have to be interviewed separately because they live in different cities, which would mean several extra hours of travel for the videographer's film crew. Maybe they would decide, in the end, that documenting the aftermath of my untimely death-by-traffic-law-violation was more trouble than it was worth. I didn't know exactly how to feel about that. But I couldn't help thinking the world would be a better place if my headshot was never enlarged on a projector screen for roomfuls of high school motorists-in-training to whisper about behind their hands. So I wasn't complaining.

"The Acura?" I shrugged. "I mean, I guess so. I don't know. Maybe."

The Acura is a 1998 luxury sedan the color of gray hair dyed black, with that kind of oily, bluish-metallic patina. It has a tape deck because it is twenty years old, and twenty years ago cars came with tape decks, and ashtrays, and icecap-melting fuel efficiency ratings. Five years from now, the Acura will be an *antique*. Currently, it's a *classic*, with an automatic sunroof and leather interior.

The first time I drove it, the driver's seat warmer was set to HI, but I didn't know how to turn it off. So I just sat there for two hours in a feverish pulp of leg sweat. It was July.

I could have tried to look for the setting on the dashboard, but to do that I would've had to take my eyes off the road, which would constitute distracted driving, which kills almost four thousand people every year in the U.S. alone. Or I could have tried to feel around blindly for the toggle, but to do that I would've had to let go of the steering wheel with one hand, which would compromise my ability to swerve properly, in the event that swerving was necessary. I could have done a lot of things—if I wanted to die. Ergo I sat. Warmly.

I checked my speedometer and then my lane positioning and then my rearview mirror. I counted how long it took my car to pass a speed limit sign after the car in front of me passed it, which I always do because of an acronym that no one else probably remembers from "Chapter 4: Your Driving" of the *North Carolina Driver's Handbook*. The acronym is C.O.A.S.T. Concentrate, Observe, Anticipate, Space, and Time. But the way you use it is C.O.A.S.T.C.O.A.S.T.C.O.A.S.T. because you have to keep cycling through the operations on loop in your head—Concentrating, Observing, Anticipating, Spacing, and Timing—or it doesn't work. Sometimes it doesn't work, anyways.

“You just about made it,’ he said, which was funny because I was thinking I just about didn’t.”

The second time I almost died in a car, I was C.O.A.S.T.ing on the street in front of my neighborhood, and a pickup truck sideswiped the Acura like a matchbox toy, with exactly the same sound effects as kids make when you give them Hot Wheels. And they take one in each fist and smash them together, plastic-on-plastic, until little pieces go flying across the room like shrapnel, the kid saying *CRASH CRASH* and getting carried away making noises in the back of his throat that are supposed to sound like someone screaming in the distance but start to sound like someone screaming very loud and very close—so the kid’s mother gives him a *cool it Bobby* look from across the room, and that’s the end of the sound effects.

Then it gets very quiet. There is only the voice on the car radio singing a song you shouldn’t have been listening to, even if the volume was low, because clearly it impeded your ability to Concentrate on Observing and Anticipating, and now look what happened.

What happened? At first I had no idea. I got out of my car and stood in the middle of the street because I was pretty sure I was dead, and a dead person’s ghost can stand wherever they want. I could see my house down the road, very small, with an empty driveway. My mother was at work. So was I, until ten minutes ago. I was still wearing my name tag. And I was hungry—I died before eating lunch, so now I would always be hungry for the rest of eternity. Of course.

What happened is that I tried to turn left at the same time as a pickup truck tried to pass me on a double yellow line. It was going fast and I was going slow, it was going straight and I was going horizontal, which is why passing on double yellow lines is illegal. Our cars hit faces like a botched kiss, and the Acura sustained a \$3,000 black eye. The truck broke its nose and most of its teeth, which were spit out on the pavement in hundreds of mirrored glass shards. Zero people died. Two people pulled off the road to ask if we needed help, and many other people did not.

The driver of the truck turned out to be an undercover cop, which made things interesting. A whole fraternity of sheriff’s deputies responded to the scene of the accident, but they couldn’t handle any of the reporting, so we all had to stand around together and wait for a state trooper. We moved my car into a driveway so that it wasn’t obstructing traffic, and I asked one of the officers who was going to sweep the glass out of the street. He said nobody. I always thought that was somebody’s job.

“They just leave it there?” I asked. What if it popped someone’s tire? What if someone was driving her kid to a basketball game in a number-one-crash-test-safety-rated Chrysler Pacifica at a moderate, law-abiding speed, Observing and Anticipating all clear and present roadway dangers, accounting for the 1.1363636% probability that either she or the kid would become a traffic fatality but hoping the kid would survive even if she didn’t, hoping he would finally score a point in the game, if somebody else’s kid would just pass him the ball—and the tire popped? And the Pacifica swerved. And there was nothing she could do, or could have done, or can ever do, if no one was going to sweep the glass out of the street.

The cop shrugged. “You okay, though?”

“Yeah, I’m good. I mean, I’ve been better,” I said. “But I’m all right.”

I called my mom and told her the same thing. “Yeah, I’m literally fifty yards from our front door. I’m fine, it’s just the car. Well, I’m *with* the police. Okay. I’ll tell them. See you soon.” I had to borrow an officer’s phone because my battery was dead, and I handed it back to him when I was finished.

“Thanks.”

“You’re really that close to home?” he asked me.

“Yeah, right over there.” I pointed. He shook his head.

“You just about made it,” he said, which was funny because I was thinking I just about didn’t. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I think so,” I said. Behind him, two more cars drove past each other on the street. They slowed down when they saw the police lights, and their tires crunched warily on the shattered glass, and then they kept going wherever they were going. Red and black.

It’s what people do. They go places, they get there and they don’t get there, stopping and not stopping, faster and slower and exactly at federally regulated speeds. In pickup trucks and used Hondas and squad cars and classic black Acuras, with and without automatic sunroofs, with and without driver’s licenses, with and without the little heart-shaped insignia that means maybe your organs will end up in the body of someone luckier than you. Unless they’re too mangled to salvage, in which case everyone loses. Nobody wins. With and without insurance coverage against *acts of God*.

It used to be horse-drawn carriages. Before that, it was just horses. Before that, or if you didn’t have a horse, you walked. You walked everywhere on foot. You got there or you didn’t get there, stopping and not stopping, faster and slower and hoping you didn’t get leprosy, or a chest cold, or whatever used to kill people by the hundreds of millions before they could make documentaries about it.

“You sure you’re okay?” said the cop.

“I mean, I’ve been better.”



28 JANE STREET

Emma Morris

Come inside, says a pile of porcelain mugs,
their chipped white paint browned with coffee.
On shelves, verdant plants rest in disarray.
Aged cream pages adorn the corner table.

The wearied hum of yellow cabs dissipates
with the squeals of a tired espresso machine
and a melody of hushed voices and soft notes.
A reluctant orange sunset fills the lamp-lit room.

Behind the counter, a barista smiles.
Beyond the window, New Yorkers clutch bags and hurry.
An aroma of grinding beans seeps out,
beckoning the passing slaves of cracked sidewalks.

The bronze bell on the glass door sings its anthem.
Scuffed black heels shuffle in, tapping anxiously
until blue fingernails wrap a warm drink tightly—
the latte heart fades beneath a red lipstick stain.



THE ENDS AND ALL

Logan Riley Carroll

Dr. Herbert rarely does anything but travel these days. Lately he has been in feudal Japan. His invention of the time machine has made this a possibility. Last week he was studying a variety of lily thought to have been lost in *pre-Vesuvius Pompeii*. Time travel has given us a unique perspective on cataclysm.

“Nature’s bookmarks. Or dog-ear, if you will,” Dr. Herbert once said. “Only way to remember what page we’re on.”

Dr. Herbert is adept at hatching these little metaphors. Each one feels like his daily contribution to history. Often, he says them before even turning from his monitors. By the time he looks toward me and my desk, to his left, I have digested his aphorism and his glasses are off, being polished by a loose microfiber.

My time with Dr. Herbert is spent recording findings when we find them and consoling when we do not. Our job, as a collective, is to scour the past and future for minor details in abstract significance to major details. At this point, everything to be known about Adolf Hitler, the man, is known, yet there are still realms to explore regarding his grandfather on his mother’s side or his tailor in Munich, for example. Dr. Herbert and I once observed Ernest Hemingway’s polydactyl cats for multiple months—an attempt to detect some source of aggravation during the famed *Papa’s* final years. Despite an obstinate calico with a penchant for knocking over cognac and conveniently missing the litter box, Dr. Herbert and I deemed the matter *historically insignificant* and moved on. There is a complex art to writing history. I said this aloud once. Dr. Herbert was immensely pleased with my observation.

Dr. Herbert and I do not speak conversationally much. Our dialogue is a smattering of checklists, instructions, preconceived responses. This consistency informs our research. We are able to view history in mute colors. We are keen to vibrancy. I’ll never forget when Dr. Herbert followed a rabbit trail (*rabbit trail* being a generous term) to uncover the impact of Grigori Rasputin’s occult activity on the Indonesian Coup of 2247. And all on the whim of tracking a loose scrap of parchment the mystic left in a bed stand. Seventy-three consecutive hours of fervent research, aided by the thirteen cans of energy broth, a carton of cigarettes, and a visit from an in-home acupuncturist, yielded many a valley. I watched Dr. Herbert, dizzy from all the traveling, study his monitors, lidless behind his spectacles, flashes of soul fire on his face, lives of past and future *somebodies*, *nobodies*, perfect strangers, a theatre of impossibilities actualized in real time, *Old Time*, *New Time* in the very fractions of the second we’ve commodified. I do not remember when exactly I fell asleep during our marathon, but I awoke, certain that Dr. Herbert was looking my way, noiseless. It was morning. The rims of his eyes were reddened by the monitor glow, the forced insomnia, the dry tears. What is so often kempt of him was disheveled—his black hair coming unglued in the dawn. He was waiting for me, I assumed, to come to, and once I arrived, his smile brightened.

“You won’t believe it, Stephen,” he said. “The key was in Peru.”

Dr. Herbert is likely older than me. I am his assistant so, at the very least, it feels right. Outside of grade school, one seldom mentions their own age. I am twenty-three,

though I haven't said so in some time. I assume Dr. Herbert is fifty, though I can't imagine he realizes it.

Our task is a delicate one, commissioned by none but ourselves. We can't simply view the future and warn farmers of the droughts, the early frosts. While the past remains reliable, *New Time*, what we call data regarding the future, is largely simulation. At any given moment, there are percentages of likelihood, causation and effect, cryptic symbols only Dr. Herbert is qualified to interpret. *Traveling* has nothing to do with transporting oneself through a wormhole or hyperspace. Space-time remains like an ironed pant leg. Dr. Herbert sits in a synthetic leather office chair with a therapeutic heat-pad built in to the back. He travels with the touch of a screen, a flick of the eyes, often lifting a mug to his lips to blow-blow-sip, a cigarette rests in the crevice between ear cartilage and skull, replaced twice an hour. Once traveling, he is no more than the pilot of a thought bubble, the eyes of the wind, a ghost—nameless and unhaunting.

"Stephen, what was the name of that Italian with the boats?"

"Christopher Columbus, Dr. Herbert?"

"I guess so."

Dr. Herbert has seen how humanity ends. He claims it's inevitable, yet unexpected. The only possible outcome, and still shocking. His goal is to craft a most-unified version of our history before it's too late. I've fought the urge to ask about the end. He has spoiled *some* details to me—once while we were watching an aged Pablo Picasso at a dinner party, what would be the artist's last moments of genius, when the cinematograph did its sublime life-flash in color before him, speeding up, then slowing down, then speeding up, then slowing down. He was white-haired and happy and then the next second, cooling, dead as stone. His wife Jacqueline held his head in her lap, looking upon him, tender, as if he had never painted a thing. Dr. Herbert pulled off his glasses, as he is prone to do, and rubbed his eyes wet.

"We never cure aging, Stephen," he said. "We try desperately, but we never do."

I have only seen Dr. Herbert outside of our workspace, his house, on one occasion. He once mentioned, during a lull in our studies, that he enjoyed walking around the Metropolitan Museum of Art on foggy weekends.

"That's unexpected," I said.

"And why is that?"

"Well, can't you go and watch every piece of art in the Met be crafted in *Old Time*?"

Dr. Herbert sighed a father's sigh, as if he'd just watched his son strike out in little league.

"Stephen," he said, "I can watch every piece of produce lining supermarket shelves grow. I can see soil be tilled, seeds scattered or spuds punched into the earth. I can be there for the exact moment stems pierce the crust, and I can view flowers stretch their petals, tune their trumpets in the dawn. But does that stop me from wandering fluorescently lit aisles in search of the components for a perfect caprese?"

"That's different though," I explained. "That's food. Sustenance."

"I don't see any difference."

Next on our agenda was to check in on the polar ice caps, or what is left, in 2097, after the terrible heat wave that hit both hemispheres, melting the tires of airplanes left on the tarmac, simmering man-made ponds. This exercise of measuring glacial surface area and water levels was important, but unamusing. I was happy to delay it.

"Stephen, do you know those cooking channels?"

"I don't own a television," I said proudly.

"Wow, Stephen. Some martyr you are."

I blushed.

"But you know what I'm talking about." Dr. Herbert continued, "*The Food Network*, they call it."

“Dr. Herbert has seen how humanity ends. He claims it’s inevitable, yet unexpected. The only possible outcome, and still shocking.”

“Sure.”

“Do you think people satisfy their hunger, gather their nutrition, from watching that station?”

I was familiar with the programs they aired. Every year, when I visited my family for the holidays, my sister and mother would have it on. They were particularly fascinated with a quippy female host that consumed the world’s most bizarre culinary delicacies. I found the episode involving milt to be particularly appalling.

“I wouldn’t think so.”

“Of course not, Stephen.” He said this, mighty, “Art is no different. You can go look at a Pollock online. You can probably even imagine what *David* looks like right now. But the only thing that’s going to satisfy your thirst is being right there, naked eye fixed on naked king of Judah, and nothing else.”

The next Sunday that the fog rolled in from the bay like sheeting, I went to the Met myself. I wandered through the halls for hours, stopping for minutes at a time to admire paintings and the lights that illuminated them. It wasn’t until I emerged from the museum, late in the afternoon, that I realized the fog had retreated, that I had not eaten lunch. I stopped at the grocery to grab a fresh sandwich from the deli, but before I could do so, I saw Dr. Herbert from a distance, near the bakery section. I wondered if it was appropriate to approach him as anything but a boss and decided it was not. I watched him, cloth bag filled with a variety of leafy greens, look once over each shoulder, turn 180 degrees clockwise, back the same way, then step to the counter and ask for a chocolate eclair. He took a great bite out of it before he even reached the check-out line.

I travel to our workspace via the public bus. This simple, civic activity feels ahistorical, plotless. A woman can sit next to me, can breathe in my heat and I can breathe in hers, she can smile at me and bruise her shin on a seat back when she stands before the bus is fully stopped. She can do all these things and mean nothing to me—nothing to the world. Every morning I arrive to find that Dr. Herbert has already busied himself. He greets me with a question and then a greeting.

“Stephen, what do you think happens to all those airliners once stratospheric travel is outlawed? What’s *their* fate?”

“I suppose I haven’t thought about it.”

“Good morning, Stephen.”

Our workspace is in the basement of Dr. Herbert’s house, the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The upstairs is furnished with sofas and loveseats that no one sits on, useless ottomans and end tables, coasters neatly stacked, a record player covered in dust. Dr. Herbert owns more plants than books or magazines. There is one flaccid-looking fern on the mantle. Dr. Herbert lives alone and doesn’t take visitors.

We operate out of the windowless basement. Our desks are aligned like thoroughbreds—*his* with the superior horsepower. Dr. Herbert stares

into three different monitors simultaneously. *Old Time, Real Time, New Time*. The man is omniscient, or as close as we can become. Brilliant, and yet lacking. Has everything, Solomonesque, but completely void of my envy.

On a squally Tuesday, we watched the infamous public execution of New Britain's prime minister 263 times, *New Time*. Dr. Herbert had an inkling that every degree to behold offered a newer, more profound truth of the event. It was an awful execution. No precision, no mercy. There were shrieks, blood-freezing screams between each slash. The man was tied to a post in the middle of London and watched, rueful, in agony as each member of his thirty-six man cabinet cut him up like cloth, spitting on the wounds. Near the 200th replay I became indisposed.

"For the love of God, can't we move on?"

"Is Stephen's stomach upset?"

"We're not getting anywhere."

"You're right. *That's* why we must proceed."

Dr. Herbert began to play the event 1.5x faster. The screams became more screech than anything. Viola to violin.

"You're a sadistic *jerk*, Herbert. You know that?"

"Would Stephen like to omit this portion of history? *Hmm?*"

"Why don't you tell me the likelihood of this happening?"

Dr. Herbert zoomed in making the screeches louder, the blood closer. The prime minister looked to have tasted something copper.

"Likelihood doesn't matter, Stephen—"

"Give me the percentage."

"—it's about *opportunity*."

"Tell me the number."

The blade hit a rib. Fire crackled inside. The crowd let out a gasp. The executed was *not yet*.

"Shouldn't we care about the possibilities, Stephen? Shouldn't we care that this *can* happen?"

"You don't care about anything. You have no conscience. No morals."

"Where do morals get us, Stephen? Do *these* people have morals?"

Dr. Herbert scanned over the faces of those doing the harm. The one currently hacking seemed to be the Surgeon General. They were, for all the familiar, anthropological features of the face—furrowed eyebrows, clenched teeth, sweaty foreheads, bloodshot eyes, pockmarks and the like—*animal*.

"Why do we have to watch this so many times?"

"Why does anything happen at all, Stephen?"

"Oh, don't get all Socratic with me. Not now."

"I'm serious, Stephen. Why do we separate North and South Dakota, but leave California to its devices? Why did Julius Caesar cross the Rubicon?"

"I don't consent to this lecture."

"Why do we smoke cigarettes when we *know* they cause cancer? Why do we burn so many fossil fuels when we *know* the emissions mutilate our atmosphere?"

"Shut up. Okay?"

Though I glared, Dr. Herbert never moved his gaze from the screen. At some point, he began to play the execution in slow motion, adding a theatrical romance to the affair, a certain *je ne sais quoi* to each stroke of the blade. The prime minister's face seemed less anguished this way.

"History goes on whether we like it or not. It's not going to stop for *your* queasy tummy."

Seeing that Dr. Herbert was steadfast, I unfixated my glare.

"All right. I get it."

"No, you don't. There's an endless succession of cars on an endless strip of highway. We stop now, they all crash. Everything, all at once: kaput. *Our job, historians' job*,

dating all the way to Cicero and then some, is to make sure everything keeps moving. We answer the questions: Where are we going? And where from?"

"This isn't even history yet."

"History isn't even history yet."

"Then what's the point?"

Dr. Herbert finally stopped the execution. As it was, maybe the man wouldn't bleed out, maybe he would. There appeared to be a few birds floating on a wire, suspended by magic alone, at some exclusively avian height, behind the prime minister. What the line was connected to was out of frame. This was commonplace in *New Time*: subterranean bullet trains, powerful satellites, oceanic colonies left many once-indispensable temporal structures as relics of a bygone era—architecture made from the dust to be reclaimed by the natural world. The birds somehow found it in them to chirrup and sing.

"Stephen, I have reason to believe that someone in this crowd brings the first world peace."

I had not studied the faces of those watching. There they were, all bundled up and intact. Some of their cheeks scarlet with hate, others tear-stained. They had only watched the execution once.

"How do you know?"

"Time might tell."

Dr. Herbert called it early that day. I still traveled home on the bus in the evening, but before I left, Dr. Herbert and I went up to his living room and drank some port he'd kept away. We sat on his furniture and propped our feet up on the ottomans. He produced an old Ella Fitzgerald vinyl, but we couldn't get the record player to work.

Dr. Herbert does not celebrate holidays, but he allows me to.

"In the long run, Stephen, none of those days we commemorate mean anything."

"What do you mean?"

"The last possible year of the United States' existence is 2202. Who's going to celebrate the Fourth of July after that? The first world peace lasts for 300 years, during which all the war veterans die off. No person remembers a person who remembers a person who fought. People begin to wonder why we ever celebrated Veterans' Day in the first place when peace was an option. It's a whole ordeal."

"Well, what about New Years?"

"Goodness, Stephen. Why don't we just throw a party every time the second hand on your watch moves?"

I was visiting my parents in Indiana for Thanksgiving. My sister Holly and her family visited too. I took the train to get there. Something about air travel, not just what Dr. Herbert says it does to the ozone, but the actual nature of it unnerves me. Personally, I like to see my life pass by. In the sky, the world doesn't look like its aging, but you land and find out a forest fire burned a town to the ground, a movie star overdosed on pills, a friend's baby was born and named *Liam*. Nothing literary happened while I was aboard the train from Penn Station, but I did watch snow fall upon the pine trees and rooftops, below the clouds.

After Thanksgiving dinner, I settled in with Holly and her husband Deshaun. Deshaun had already put the kids, twin girls, to bed and mine and Holly's parents were on their way. People had always told me that Holly and I looked nothing alike, but *sounded* like siblings. I understood the lack of resemblance, as Holly was blonde and fair-skinned while freckles and red hair made a torch out of me, but the voice thing, I never got.

"So, Stephen," Holly asked, "Is the job still as strange as it was a year ago?"

We were sitting at a round table. An overhead light sparked the lacquer. Unshelled peanuts piled in a glass bowl sat halfway between any two of us.

I was sipping my tepid coffee and swallowed before answering:

“Honestly, it’s just like any other job.” I wiped my mouth on my sleeve, “Most of the time you don’t really know what you’re working toward, but you work hard anyway, trusting that you’re moving the needle forward.”

“I feel the exact same way about my job.” Deshaun reached for the peanuts. “Some days I’m convinced my contribution to the world is a miniature thing, other times I wonder how humanity would ever function without me.”

Deshaun owns a company that installs footrests for toilets. Just footrests—if you needed a toilet, they would refer you elsewhere. They were sturdy, elegant, porcelain and angled for prime bowel momentum. Mom and Dad had one in every bathroom.

The results were heavenly.

“What do you think of your boss?” Holly asked, “Herbert,” she clarified.

“I can’t stand him some days. I mean, he can really make you feel small. The other day he told me that nothing I did before taking this job will be remembered in fifty years. And he thought he was comforting me!”

Holly watched closely as I took another sip. She always knew when a thought of mine was incomplete. Sister faculties.

“But,” I continued, “there are days where I’m certain he cares about me. Like every time he talks about the good of *humanity and civilization as we know it* I can swear he’s speaking directly to me. Stephen. It’s like a language he invented that only I understand.”

Deshaun crunched peanuts, loud. One of the twins started to make a fuss upstairs and Holly went toward her, whichever one.

“Well, Stephen,” Deshaun said, “sounds like a complicated work environment.”

A minor narrative surrounding Dr. Herbert and his time machine. One does not stumble upon time travel. Dr. Herbert, as far as I can tell, has only ever wanted to accomplish one thing in his lifetime: author the histories of the human race in totality. He is a Doctor, I am certain, and if he is not, he deserves to be. The original prototype of his machine was developed from an old satellite television receiver, initially allowing him only to see what has been publicly broadcasted. He has never explained exactly how his final model functions and if he were to I don’t think I would fully comprehend, but he has said that *light* is the key.

“Light never really disappears. It’s always being reflected by something. The light from Achilles’ funeral pyre is reflected in a red giant on the opposite side of our galaxy. The supernova responsible for the Crab Nebula is reflected in some infant’s eyeball. If you study light closely enough, you’re no longer studying light.”

I sat in silence, measuring what Dr. Herbert had to say.

“Everything you do today is reflected by something tomorrow and was reflected by something yesterday. One day you will sit in my chair and rise above the beams.”

“Does that mean you never get to see your completed work?” I asked.

“I’ve already seen it. It was the first reflection I saw.”

Again, in silence, I imagined this.

“Stephen, do you know what I would’ve been if not a historian?”

“A rocket scientist? Maybe, some kind of brain surgeon? Human brains, naturally.”

Dr. Herbert took off his glasses and began to polish them, looking toward a wall as if out an open window.

“A landscape photographer.”

I laughed. The idea seemed so nostalgic, so quaint. Dr. Herbert was surprised by my outburst (we so rarely laugh while at work) and proceeded to laugh with me.

“What were the odds you didn’t discover how to travel?”

“The percentage chance was closer to zero than one.”

Dr. Herbert has been in a peculiar phase. He spends most of his hours in *New Time*, exploring the *highly unlikely*. We haven't analyzed a thing over a five percent probability in weeks. Aborted fetuses have been Dr. Herbert's main interest. Not the lifeless little mass—the usual happenstance—but the ones that “survive.” It fascinates him. The ends and all.

Over the course of our studies we've watched a number grow, become something. We watched librarians shelve the classics, tiptoed on mahogany stepladders. Singers of complex aria, altos and sopranos alike. Painters of watercolor, of acrylic, of rich, linseed-scented oils on canvas. Some grew to have families of their own. A soccer mom, a cancer survivor, atop a cooler full of artificial fruit-flavored juice boxes yells *hustle, hustle*. A man on a stage in cap and floor-length gown publicly thanks his seven-year-old daughter for listening as he practiced his commencement speech at home. A son held his mother's hand as she died awake in her hospital bed, and before she closed her eyes, before she became vapor between space, a timeless object, she couldn't fathom ever going through with the procedure years and years ago.

For every heart-warming future we witnessed, there was an equally miserable one, mirrored intensely. Disease, heartbreak, poverty, depression, double binds of heart and head, soul-corrosive addiction. Some were born into regimes that forced labor upon them; others wound up in communities without clean water. But the worst ones didn't draw out any sympathy. We watched rapists, murderers, belligerent, abusive spouses, corrupt politicians, kidnappers, and drug-pushers. With as little detail as possible, a man so horribly drunk on existence and vodka from a plastic bottle, realized he could not take back his birth, could not undo what seeds had been sown, grown, and harvested, and chose to do an awful thing with a curling iron to his own daughter, to further prevent any more mistakes from happening.

I watched these outcomes, unsure of so much, certain of so little. How does the mammal evolve to reach such a position? Of the futures we readily create and the ones we corrupt, of the myths we realize and the ones still robed in mystery, whatever of possibility and event horizon, of holy texts and fortune cookie proverbs, of the sermon Martin Luther King Jr. had written for Easter Sunday, of the words Abraham Lincoln whispered to his son as he held the boy's corpse, of *not now* and *maybe never*, and every *you just missed him*—I tasted all these things, like ash and strawberry.

At no moment in particular, Dr. Herbert seemed to snap out of this peculiar phase he'd been in, as if awakened from a dream that wasn't entirely his. He arose from his chair, brushed off whatever was on his lap, and gave his back a stretch.

“I just remembered,” he said, “today's my birthday.”

I was delirious from so much *New Time*, but this pulled on my attention.

“I'm going to go to the beach. Let's pick up again next week.”

On the bus ride home I realized Dr. Herbert and I shared a birthday. The bus wasn't stopping or starting when it occurred to me. From my vantage, there was nobody younger than eleven aboard. No woman looked pregnant, no person seemed nearer to death than the one seated next to them. When it came to me, I was not looking at the mirror above the driver, glimpsing a portal into reality. Nor was I watching my pocket calendar, glimpsing what hasn't been done. It was simple. I was upright, near the waist of the vehicle, hand on briefcase, hand on metal pole, when I remembered what day I was born and what day it was, sudden and strange. But what did it matter? So many before me had been born on this date. So many now. So many after. All at once.

UNCRUSTABLES

Alli Kennedy

I can usually tell when someone is watching me. This time it's Natalie. Natalie stares at me wide-eyed across our third-grade cafeteria table. "You know you don't eat it like that!" she scolds. I look down at the crimped canyon edges of rounded bread in my hands. There's one prominent half-moon opening on the perimeter with a spoon protruding from the mud of peanut butter and grape jelly. I want to tell her I like the bread too, I just enjoy each flavor on its own. "I can eat it however I want," I say and I shovel another spoonful in my mouth.

Maybe I am eating it wrong. I look at my crush, Zack. He doesn't use a spoon either. I hide my spoon under a napkin and eat the rounded bread, peanut butter, and jelly all at once. As we gather our trash on our trays, I fixate on the purple picnic table printed wrapper and hope my parents won't find out I'm eating "off limits" food from the lunch line again. Those foods are only for the kids with the cool lunch boxes and animal shaped plates.

I get home. I'm reprimanded. I lie and say I didn't eat it. Mom and Dad shake the lunch bill in my face. "We're not made of money!" I'm grounded again. The solution is a sandwich cutter that cuts the crust of bread and crimps the edges. It's a nice gesture, but I know it's an imposter. This isn't in my third-grade skillset. It can't have the hint of brown crust imperfection. I slip it into a Ziploc bag and hide it in my battered lunch box. *They'll know it's not real.*

I enter the lunch room and quickly find my seat next to Zack. He opens his Uncrustables. No brown edges. "Why aren't ya gonna eat?" My heart pounds. Lunchables crumbs and Gushers wrappers litter the table from the kids around us who are finished with their meals. I unzip my lunchbox. Natalie watches me.



CLIMATE CHANGE

Claire Foxx

She wishes for snow.
Not a dusting, but enough snow
to bury her car to the windows,
to congeal in the streets
like so many tons of white
rice the way Americans eat it,
boiled plain with butter
and sometimes salt.

Snow to fill up her chimney
like ash, appear solid
and then disappear at the touch
of her hand, something else
that cannot be saved, sealed
in an envelope for her mother
to open next week in Morelos,
where it rains or does not rain,
and *nieve* is a word used abstractly
to mean *cold* and *white*.

People will die if it snows here.
Old people who can't heat
their houses, or who lose
their balance on the ice, unsure
now of what they have known
since they were children
about where to plant their feet.
People will die if it doesn't snow.

She wishes for spring.



HE DID, HE DOES

Claire Foxx

I used to have this friend who went to church. Actually, I had two friends who went to church, but the other one called herself “lapsed,” and on the phone with her boyfriend she still dropped f-bombs—she said the word, I mean, but my real church friend would have called them “f-bombs,” which she thought was a euphemism but is technically, I think, considered hyperbole, as in, *Hundreds dead and thousands injured in f-bomb explosion, limbs severed, families devastated, lives irreversibly changed*—and the occasional s-word when she was late for something, which was often. She was occasionally on time.

We used to get lunch on Tuesdays, and I would tell her 12:30, and she would tell me 12:30 was *perfect*, and I would get to the restaurant at 12:25, and she’d get there at 12:48. *Sorry*, she’d say as she pulled out her chair. *Brandon keeps calling me even though I told him I’m done*. Brandon was her boyfriend. When she wasn’t telling him she was done, she was telling him she wanted a wedding in the spring, and a house with a yard, and three kids to run circles in it, two boys and a girl, whose names she had yet to decide but would all have the same first letter.

He thinks I’m not serious, she would say to me. I wasn’t allowed to say anything back because if I did it would be, *Are you serious?* And she’d get all offended, pluck at the end of her straw wrapper with the birdlike nervous aggression of someone who expected you to agree with them instead of telling the truth. *I deleted him from my phone this time. I did. When he calls now, it just shows up as a bunch of random numbers on the screen. It’s kind of really sad, actually, in like a stupid way. Look, see, he’s calling right now. Should I answer? I’m not going to. Where’s Lance, anyways?* Lance was my boyfriend. He used to come to lunch. Then he stopped.

I waited for her to finish unwrapping the straw and drink a mouthful of water and then said, *Oh, yeah, I got you a water while I was waiting. The ice melted some. I hope it’s still cold.*

I know that makes it sound like we weren’t really friends, but we were. She was most of the time very nice. Just not punctual. She told me that “lapsed” meant she could go back to church any time she wanted and start practicing again—*Like riding a bike*, I said, and she said, *I guess so, but I think that’s probably offensive*, and I said, *You’re the one who said “practicing.”* and she said, *That’s what it’s called*—but in the meantime she was still Catholic. Just not as Catholic, I suppose, as she could have been if she had practiced.

I imagined the names of martyred saints spelled neatly on flashcards. Warm-ups and workbook pages, exercises with strange names—Eucharist, transubstantiation, eschaton—and online tutorials in the style of aerobics instruction. *If you’re just starting out, this might get a little uncomfortable. But you know what? Rome wasn’t built in a day. Success is progress. Feel the burn.* I tried not to find this particularly clever—the *burn*—although admittedly not very hard. If I told her 12:45, she would come to the restaurant at 1:00. By then it was too late. I got tired of waiting.

Allison, though—she was fully evangelical. We met at the frozen yogurt place in the mall the first time I ever went. This was after twenty-five years of my successfully

boycotting frozen yogurt on the basis of several, in my opinion, very good reasons: one because the concept of frozen yogurt, as an alternative to ice cream, always struck me as being fundamentally suspicious and predicated on disappointment, and two because people called it “fro-yo,” which kind of language I had no interest in taking seriously. Three because boycotting is good for the soul. Righteous anger. It means you have principles. I would die on this hill: ice cream cannot be improved. Some things can’t.

But I had a voucher for eight ounces free from one of those coupon books someone’s niece was selling at work, which I bought for ten dollars in the breakroom and had been systematically redeeming for almost a year, saving the frozen yogurt coupons for last. Lance was helping me at the beginning, getting rid of the hardware store ones buying hammers at half-price—*You know you can buy other things besides hammers*, I told him, *the discount is for the whole store*, and he said, *But don’t you just love hammers, the way it feels to hold a hammer in your hand*, and I said, *We don’t have any nails*—but now I was finishing it myself. Actually, I had ten frozen yogurt coupons. And not that anyone cared, half a dozen stainless-steel hammers in the kitchen drawer next to the oven where lost and forgotten things tended to accumulate—birthday cards, safety pins, loose change, dead lighters, handfuls of ibuprofen in plastic bags because the cap broke on the bottle and we couldn’t screw it back shut—and multiply in their disuse like dust. The coupons expired in less than a week.

“So, have you been here before?” I asked the girl ahead of me in line at the frozen yogurt place. There was a line at the frozen yogurt place when I went, which for obvious reasons I was forced to take personally, even if it had nothing to do with me. I don’t know what it did have to do with, truly. I had my excuse. But thirty other people at least were there of their own volition, paying fifty cents by the ounce for sugar-free, reduced-fat soft-serve in eight flavors of disappointment. Just because it won’t give you diabetes doesn’t mean you won’t regret it. That was my thinking. There’s no such thing as *guilt-free*.

The girl turned around and said, “Sure, lots of times.” She was at least six or eight years older than I would have guessed looking at her from behind—not a girl but a woman the size of a girl—but still I wasn’t surprised. I am a person who is very difficult to shock. In the way fish are difficult to drown. Everything in the world shocks me. Nothing does.

“This is my first time,” I said. “I’m a little nervous.” She didn’t laugh. She took a paper cup from a dispenser attached to the wall, and across the room at the toppings bar a little boy burst into tears because his mother put the cherry on top of his sundae without letting him pick which one. *You don’t always get to choose*, she said, and he collapsed on the floor in despair, and wept into the neck of his shirt while she paid the cashier—*Poor little guy*, and his mother said, *Don’t let him fool you, he only does this for attention*—until his whole face was so raw it looked like it would bleed. Then she picked him up by the arm, and he let himself be lifted off the ground like the prize in one of those machines, the arcade game where nobody wins, and she carried him off like that and was gone.

I took the next cup and asked the girl, “What’s the best flavor?”

“Well, my favorite’s the mango,” she said. “But if you’re a big chocolate person, I’ve heard the fudge ripple’s good, too.”

“Yeah? Who from?” I asked.

“What?”

“What big chocolate people do you know that told you about the fudge ripple? Big chocolate women, or big chocolate men?”

She didn’t laugh again, and for reasons I find difficult to explain this encouraged me. “I know,” I said. “I hear myself, and I know I’m not funny. At least I’m not the

kind of person who doesn't even know, you know? Anyways, I was just going to see if you wanted these coupons. I'm trying to—I don't want them. They're free to you, if you think you can use them." I followed her to the mango machine and fanned out the vouchers under her nose like a magic trick. *Pick a card, any card.* They were all the same.

"What kind of person are you, then?" she asked.

"Sorry?"

She pulled a lever on the machine and extruded a long rope of frozen yogurt the color of pollen into her cup, where it curled up on its side and immediately started to melt. "What kind of person are you?"

This is what I loved about Allison. She said it had to do with her going to church—*Well, but I think it's also your personality*, I said, *You know, the way you are*, and she said, *I wouldn't be the way I am unless I went to church, I'd be totally different*, and I said, *Touché*—but she would ask anybody anything. She didn't care. You offered her seventy-two ounces of free frozen yogurt, and she went straight to *who do you think you are?* without even knowing your name. You might say we had this in common: a mutual lack of inhibition, the special insouciance of women having lost interest, for one reason or another, in being understood by most people not of our kind.

Allison told me that Jesus Christ saved her life when she was fifteen years old and weighed eighty-nine pounds and four ounces—she said it exactly this way, like she was a baby, just born—at a church with wood pews and a red carpet like a tongue of fire down the aisle, from the door all the way to the altar. She said she remembered the wood pews because when she weighed eighty-nine pounds and four ounces it hurt her to sit in a chair with no cushion on it. She'd get bruises on her back where her hipbones pressed into the seat.

"I used to love that," she said. This was after we sat down with our yogurt, which she agreed to let me pay for in exchange for the chance to evangelize me. I said, *Deal*. I'm a lot of things, but not unreasonable. That seemed as fair as anything. She said, "They told me I would die if I got any smaller, but it didn't matter to me. I didn't want to die, but I would if I had to. You know? It sounds so strange when I hear myself say that now. But it just goes to show you. Have you ever been in love with somebody? I mean, really in love, where they could run over your dog, or lose your house in a bet or something, and you know you would still love them anyways?"

"No," I said. I never lived in a house with Lance. We rented an apartment in the city, which although it was only one bedroom, I could no longer afford on my receptionist salary and was presently waiting to be evicted from, mostly out of curiosity at how long it would take and whether I'd be served the papers in person or, like in the movies, a notice would appear on my door, signed with somebody's name but for all intents and purposes anonymous. There were no dogs allowed.

"Me either." She shrugged. "But it was like that."

I watched her lick frozen yogurt off the back of her spoon.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Why?" She chased half a strawberry around the bottom of her cup and then after five or six laps picked it up with her fingers. "I'm not. That's my witness now. I was in bondage. Today I weigh one hundred and seven pounds." She swallowed the strawberry without appearing to chew it, almost without opening her mouth. And shivered. "Nine ounces."

I said, "Wow, that's so great. That's really great, for you. This is good fudge ripple." I thought it would be cruel of me to tell her that anyone who had ever actually tasted fudge ripple—as in full-fat, as in 200 empty calories per half-cup—would consider this fudge ripple to be a disgrace, and that I, in fact, was such a person, and that the big chocolate people she thought were her friends probably just didn't know what to say when she talked about food, and maybe didn't even like chocolate at all. I tried

to smother it in whipped cream and caramel—I tried—but I could still tell the difference. It couldn't be smothered. "So you go to church," I said, "to sing worship about God, and pray about God, and talk about God."

"To God," she said.

"To God, then. All right. And people get saved? Is that it?"

"A lot of times they do. Not always."

"Why not?" The frozen yogurt machines hummed behind us in their various baritones, a song that's only one note. We were sitting at a table in the corner of the room that was obviously meant for a much larger group of people, with seven or eight chairs around it, but all the two-person tables were taken, so we sat in the circle of empty seats and talked across the dead space at a volume that was probably disturbing to other people, although no one could ask us to move. We had nowhere else to go.

"He has mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will He hardens," she said.

"And you believe that?"

"Yes."

"He had mercy on you."

"He has mercy on me every day."

"What if he didn't?" I asked. It wasn't that loud. But halfway through the question the machines betrayed me with silence, and the manager gave me a look from the front of the store. I looked at her back—at her hat and her ponytail and her job selling frozen yogurt in the mall to people who convinced themselves that it was edible, which was so blatantly absurd it was also almost impressive—and neither of us ever thought it would come to this, but here we were. She looked away.

Allison smiled. "He did. He does."

Lance's mother used to call him in the middle of the night when he died in one of her dreams. The ringtone he set for her in his phone was "sonar," a loud, clear ping followed by lesser echoes of the ping that seemed to grow more and more distant until they were barely audible, and then another ping at full volume, trailing off like the last note of a song, and so on, et cetera, ad nauseum, until finally he picked up the line and whispered, *Not now. I'm okay. Go back to sleep.* This was usually at two or three. I usually woke up, although without opening my eyes. We had an agreement—we had several agreements, and this was one of them—that between the hours of eleven and seven we pretended to sleep.

Between the hours of eight and ten we pretended to have slept, and he told me his mother called again last night, and I said, *Really?* Because I'd been unconscious and had not the slightest idea. He said he loved his mother, but he wished she wasn't like this. Every time she had a dream where he died, it reminded her that if he actually died he would burn in the fires of hell for eternity, and she called to beg him to think about what he was doing, living with that girl, to think about what he was giving up. She often cried. Over the phone she sounded like someone crying in a movie being watched down the hall—but down the hall was the bathroom, and we didn't have a TV, so I couldn't even pretend. Not that I would have. I don't do pretend, that's the point.

Would she feel better if we were married? I asked. He said, *No. That's not it. For her it's much bigger than that.* I said, *Oh.* I didn't think marriage was small. But people mean different things when they say "it." I said, *It's okay. It will be.* I meant "it," as in, this: here, the floor of our bedroom, the wall, the window, the sun coming through it, the bed, the two of us, our many hammers. That was the biggest thing I knew.

Except for space. The biggest thing I believe or have ever believed in is space, and only because it is there. I would prefer that it wasn't—or at least, that nobody ever told me it was—but alas. You can always know more, but you can never know less.

“So what created space?” Allison asked me. She said “created” the way she said “are.” *What kind of person are you?*

“Nothing,” I told her. “Particles. I don't know. Space created space. Accident. Does it matter?” This was our second date, which if she had known I was calling a “date,” she would have not-laughed at, and if she had known how much of a date it was—we used two more coupons and took our yogurts for a walk through the mall, two women licking spoons, with chills on our arms from the cold—she would have called something like “quality time,” and I wouldn't have come.

“Accident is another word for God,” she said.

“No, it's not.” We walked past the food court towards a candle store that smelled like every good smell in the world combined into one greatest smell, so good it almost wasn't. We walked slowly. Someone was sitting on a bench across from the entrance, pretending to do something on their phone but actually just breathing the air. It was Lavender and French Vanilla and Buttercream and Fresh Linen and Bittersweet Memory of Drinking Tea during a Rainstorm on a Sunny April Afternoon. *The Devil's beating his wife*, Lance would say. This was meteorology, the way he learned it from his mother growing up. We grew up very differently. *When the sun shines while it's raining*, he said. *You've really never heard that?* And I said, *What wife?* I had always imagined Satan as a bachelor. And he said, *I don't know. It's not like that. It doesn't have to mean anything, it's just what you say.*

“God is another word for accident.”

“You think this is by accident?” Allison gestured with her spoon in the direction of everything in general—herself, me, the candles, the mall, the city, my apartment that used to be our apartment that used to be somebody else's, her church with the wooden pews, all churches, all pews, all malls, the universe.

“This, right now?” I said. I was holding a spoonful of fudge ripple halfway between the cup and my mouth in an impression of someone who was going to eat it.

“Yes, this right now. You and me,” she said. “Things like this. Doesn't this matter?”

I took the bite because she was staring at me, and then immediately regretted it, and then immediately asked myself why, if I knew I was going to regret it—which I did—I had taken it in the first place, and didn't have an answer. She had that effect. “It can be an accident and still matter,” I said. “It matters right now, in a way. But in a year, it might not. In fifty years, it won't. In a hundred years, it will be like this right now never even happened at all.”

“But it did,” she said.

“So?” The smell had gone out of the air and we went back to breathing oxygen, unscented.

She licked her lips. “So, it did.”

We kept walking down a row of more stores that had names, which I read on the signs but chose not to understand, the way you can listen to music without hearing the words, or look at someone without seeing them—for days or weeks or even years at a time—if you tell yourself not to. This was a hobby of mine. I could write my name down on a piece of paper and stare at it until it became the absolute most ridiculous and meaningless thing I had ever seen in my life. This would have been my talent, if I was the pageant type. Or stand-up comedy. Or I'd have put my name down to do stand-up comedy and done this instead. I know I'm not funny.

“I used to count calories for toothpaste in case I swallowed some by accident,” said Allison. We were standing in front of a lingerie store with mannequins in the window, the kind with their heads taken off, posable limbs painted chalk white like

ghosts. As lingerie mannequins go, they were modestly clad. They wore matching black lace camisoles like four sisters at a funeral. A highly unconventional funeral, granted. But I didn't judge. Grief is strange.

"I'm not telling you that to make you feel sorry for me," said Allison.

"I don't." This was true, I realized. I searched myself for pity and found none.

"Good. I'm telling you because—" she looked to the mannequins for inspiration. They refused. Their missing heads embarrassed us both for having looked at them at all, in their nakedness, the absurdity of their private mourning.

I said, "My boyfriend hanged himself from the ceiling of our kitchen three months ago."

"Because now I don't anymore," said Allison. "And that means something. It does, whether you believe it or not. Someday you will. But you don't have to wait." She swallowed, although her mouth was already empty. "Wait, what?"

"Sorry," I said. "What I meant to say was, this is good fudge ripple."

"What about after you die?" Lance asked me once. We were in bed. I thought nothing of it. I thought this was the kind of topic people in our situation considered to be conversational, being that everything else—favorite color, favorite food, favorite music, first concert, first love, best day of your life, worst day of your life, life on other planets? life sentence or capital punishment? justice or vengeance? for who? at what cost?—had already been talked about, asked and answered. We had a lot of conversations. This was what was left.

"Is that what you call pillow talk?" I said. Now it sounds sadistic. So does everything. When your boyfriend hangs himself from the ceiling of your kitchen, they ask you if in the time leading up to the incident—they call it *the incident* so as not to upset you, as though the upsetting part about it was the vocabulary—you might have noticed any signs. When you ask what they mean by "signs," they answer by asking you if your boyfriend ever confided in you, for example, that he wanted to end his life. *Get out of our house*, you tell them. *Get out*. Maybe you drop an f-bomb. But it's only a word. It doesn't even seem bad anymore. Not enough.

"Seriously," he said.

"Okay," I said. "Seriously. What about it?"

"Do you think there's something else?" We were on our backs, staring up at the ceiling in the dark like there was a night sky to contemplate the beauty of instead of lath and plaster the color of gutter snow, being held up by the walls of our room and then holding up someone else's, and someone's, and someone's. We lived on the first floor of our building, at the bottom of a stack of people five stories high. Our ceiling was the object of incredible human weight. A marvel of modern engineering. That's what I thought of it. Maybe he thought something else.

"After this?"

"Yeah, after this."

I said, "No."

"If we died right now, I mean, then what would happen?" *We*, he said. It was hypothetical. But once you start looking for signs they are terribly easy to find. That's what a sign is. There are signs for everything, wherever you put them.

"Then we'd be dead," I said.

"And then what? Where would we be?"

"We wouldn't. That would be the end of it." I pulled the sheet over my face like they do bodies at the morgue. My eyes were still open underneath, blinking against the weak resistance of the cotton. I could still see the ceiling through the pale scrim of fabric. The thread count of our sheets was very low.

He pulled it down. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?" I said. "I'm not doing anything."

“It’s so easy for you.”

I tried to come up with even one thing I considered to be easy. But nothing came to mind. Everything I could think of was hard. *It’s your flippancy*, a man told me once, before Lance. He was much older than me, ten years he said—fifteen I suspected—with a dark, tapered beard that reminded me of every picture I had ever seen of a buffalo. He liked to give me advice. *That’s your problem. You’re glib. Everything’s a joke with you. Ha ha.* I laughed at this, obviously. This was the most ox-like he had yet to look, *ha ha*, with his dull teeth, his beard wagging stiffly under his chin. *There you go*, he said. *Proving my point.* I never had much luck with men.

“Lance,” I said. It was like when you talk on the phone with someone and then after an hour or two you both run out of things to say, but nobody hangs up, so you sit for a while in silence until one of you—the lesser one, usually, the one who needs more than they’re needed by the other person—calls out to check that the other’s still there, that the silence is shared. I suppose in a manner of speaking this is not unlike prayer.

He said, “What?”

“I don’t know.” What was I supposed to say? Knowing only what I knew, and not knowing what I didn’t. “Maybe we need new sheets.”

As joint custodians of the remaining frozen yogurt coupons—there were six—Allison and I agreed by unanimous vote that the right thing to do was redeem them all at once on the Tuesday before they expired at 3:30 p.m., which was the low point in the frozen yogurt place’s business week according to some statistics I found on the internet and would offer us relative privacy in which to consume our respective one-and-a-half pound servings of ice cream alternative.

Technically speaking, the coupons were not to be used in combination. *Limit one coupon per transaction. Not valid with any other offer, discount, special or promotion.* Allison found in microscopic fine print on the back of the card. I said, *Seriously. How can you even read that?*

And she laughed. *Have you ever seen a Bible?* I said, *No.* She reached into her purse, and for a moment I expected or feared that she would produce a King James, or at least one of those pocket New Testaments Lance said they used to hand out in his neighborhood as a kid—there was one in the kitchen drawer, with everything else—in which case forty-eight ounces of perfectly good frozen yogurt would have gone entirely to waste. “Good” being a relative term.

But all she did was pull out a tube of Chapstick and say, *I can show you someday.*

We went through the line six times and used one and only one coupon per transaction, as stipulated by the fine print. Actually, Allison went through the line six times because she was more efficient and, with her experience, had mastered the art of dispensing exactly eight ounces of frozen yogurt into each cup without going over—all six times, within a quarter of an ounce—and because she was the one who wanted to go through the line in the first place when there really was none. It was us and the manager. Ponytail. She stood at the register and took the coupons with borderline robotic equanimity, as though in her line of work she had seen so much stranger and more pathetic things than the likes of us, and maybe she had. Although I don’t think she knew what she was looking at.

When Allison sat down with the last cup of yogurt, we lined them up across the table like shots, or like something more wholesome than shots—non-alcoholic shots, of milk—that wouldn’t have offended her, and I thought about asking if she believed in purgatory, but I knew the answer. Besides, it didn’t matter what she believed. It mattered what was. I said, “I have an idea. We could put some of them together, you know, so it doesn’t look like so much.”

We both knew it didn't matter how much it looked like. She shrugged. "If you want to."
 "It wouldn't help."

"No."

"We're doing it though."

"Yes." Her foot was jiggling under the table. I couldn't tell if she was jiggling it, or it was just jiggling of its own accord, but it gave the whole table anxiety, and the cups shivered together and nudged each other barely out of and back into line like restless children.

"Do we count down or something?" It seemed necessary to approach the consumption of such a quantity of frozen yogurt with a certain sense of occasion. On This Day in History: recovering anorexic—or was it "recovered?" it was both *now and not yet*, she said of her deliverance, *present and future*, but that was soul and this was body, which seemed like they needed separate conjugations—and newly bereaved atheist set simultaneous personal records in emotional eating. Was that what this was?

She shook her head. "No counting."

"Okay, then," I said. "We just go?"

"Yes." She tied her hair into a knot on the top of her head and rolled back the sleeves of her shirt to the elbows. Her forearms were badly scarred. I didn't pretend not to notice, but I didn't say anything either. There was nothing to say. He has mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will He hardens.

"Allison, I should tell you. And I mean this in the least flippant way possible, but I just think you should know. I really hate frozen yogurt."

She looked at the six cups. We had one of almost every flavor, a swath of anemic pastels like a rainbow seen through a dirty window. Whether this was something to be proud or ashamed of I was still undecided. "It's not for everyone," she said.

"No. But you have to say, I did try."

"You did try."

I did try.

I cheered her with a watery spoonful of mango, which resembled a pat of unrefrigerated butter like the kind Lance spread on toast for breakfast. I don't mean there was anything special about the kind of butter it was. It was just regular butter, store brand. It was still sitting on the table in the covered dish his mother sent in the mail as a housewarming gift—*To civilize us*, I said, and he said, *Me Tarzan, you Jane*, and I said, *That sounds about right*, mostly joking although ten percent not—with little doves painted on the ceramic, holding roses and bits of pink ribbon in their mouths. I have never wept so bitterly over anything so hideous.

"To trying," I said. "L'chaim."



MILITANT VEGANISM

Jacob Cavett

Yo-Yo parked her Kia in the shoulder and approached the rusted pickup. She had stopped to help victims of roadside breakdowns ever since she began to believe in karma. Because half of her childhood was spent in her father's body shop, automotive repair came as naturally as volleyball, even if she was missing a thumb. Really, it was the easiest way for her to help people—and earn good karma.

“Having car trouble?” she asked.

The truck's driver, standing in the bed, peeked his head over the cab. “Huh? Oh—nuh uh, just gettin' my cooler.” He was the worst kind of bald; tufts of hair sprouted on the sides of his head like a reverse bowl-cut, with a few lonely weeds on top. It reminded her of her bare backyard, where her Dachshund, Dumpling used to roll in the brown grass. That was before she had let him run away last week.

Through the truck's streaked windshield, Yo-Yo could see the dashboard smothered by crumpled paper, burger wrappers, and dirty clothes. She was sure that if the windows were open, the whole shoulder would smell like a gas station bathroom.

“A cooler?” She stopped at the side of the truck bed while the man lifted out a Styrofoam box splotted with mildew. “If your truck won't start, I can fix it.”

The man slipped to the ground with difficulty, his beltless jeans flashing his behind. “I 'ppreciate your help, but ain't nothing wrong with this here truck.”

“What are you doing on the side of the road then?” Yo-Yo didn't intend to be nosy, but she needed some extra karma points after shooting a friendly hand gesture at the tool who offered her a corn dog at the Mercy for Animals Rally that morning.

He pointed to a furry mass fifteen yards behind his truck. “I hit that there possum a minute ago. I thought I might as well fix it up.”

Yo-Yo flinched at his pronunciation of opossum, but nonetheless appreciated his cause. “That's very kind of you to help an animal in need, but do you have any veterinary experience?” Her friend, Stacy, who happened to be a fellow member of the International Society for Animal Rights, had a vet clinic a few miles away. Stacy usually dealt with dogs and cats but was also known to mend any animal brought to her, whether it was an injured goose, raccoon, or opossum.

The man gave a jolly laugh that sounded like Santa if he had beers in both hands and tobacco spit in his beard. “Darlin', that's not what I meant by fixin'.” He bent over to grab the opossum by its tail and tossed the roadkill into the box. The man placed the lid on top and carried it back to the truck. He slid it in the bed and shut the gate as if he were loading firewood instead of a precious product of nature—one that he almost flattened with a pair of thirty-inch tires.

“You can't eat that! You don't even know it's dead.” Yo-Yo reached for the gate without thinking, but her four-fingered hand stopped on the handle. She had only seen a flash of the animal before it was tossed into the disposable cooler, but she

hadn't noticed any red in its fur. Surely, there would have been spatters of crimson if this hillbilly ran over it.

He eyed her hand with bulging eyes dumb as a cow's. "It would'a quit pretending when I picked it up if I hadn' killed it, darling."

"That's not how that works," she said. "Opossums don't play dead. They literally pass out. It could wake up in the next hour." She had read that on an animal rights blog last week.

The man leaned against the truck as if he were a greaser, his saggy arm swallowed by his gut. "I'll tell you what. If yer so worried it ain't dead, why don't you come back to my place to find out?"

Yo-Yo's veggie burger from lunch ascended her throat, tasting far more acidic than it did the first time. Still, if she took this man up on his offer, maybe she could help the animal escape once it woke up. Otherwise, it could end up boiled alive and served with cornbread and pinto beans. She needed a lump sum of good karma, especially after she let Dumpling run away. A life saved for a life lost.

She would play along for the sake of the animal and, consequently, herself. "Sure, I would love some dinner."

The man smiled, his few teeth spotted and yellow. "Great, you can follow me back to the house . . . uh, what was your name?"

"Yo-Yo." She prepared herself for his imbecilic response.

The man traced his furry chin with a yellow fingernail, zombie teeth still displayed. "Looks like we have somethin' in common—we both got funny names. Mine's Hick."

Of course it was.

Hick paused, presumably for Yo-Yo to ask for the backstory, but she declined to press further. They hopped into their vehicles and she followed Hick down the road for miles. She kept an eye on his truck bed in case the opossum managed to somehow awaken, escape from his delivery box, hang over the bed gate, and desperately wave for help.

Yo-Yo imagined the opossum was Dumpling instead. She wanted more than anything for her Dachshund to return home. She missed how he looked like a floating hot dog when she walked him through the neighborhood, and rolling her palm over his doughy body while they watched movies, and waking up to his spongy tongue polishing her knuckles, and even how he peed all over the doormat when she got home from working at the shelter. Ever since Stacy got married, Dumpling was Yo-Yo's only company.

It had already been a month since Dumpling's escape. Yo-Yo had been careless enough to leave the backdoor cracked before she left for work. By the time she got back, the pooch was long gone. The door was cracked just enough for him to wiggle his ten-pound frame of chub into the backyard. If she had put up a picket fence, or even one of those hideous chain-links, Dumpling might still be curled up on the pillow next to hers at night. Yo-Yo, an avid animal lover, had failed the one creature she claimed to be her own. Because of her, Dumpling likely starved, or got eaten by coyotes, or was hit by a car, or—God forbid—came across a savage like Hick. There was no telling what horrendous punishment the universe would send her way unless she accounted for it soon. If Yo-Yo ever had the opportunity to make up for her utter failure, saving this opossum was it.

Finally, Hick pulled into Mountain Springs, a fifty-year old mobile home park known as the methamphetamine capital of the Upstate. His trailer was the last one

in the lot, shaded by a thicket of sickly trees. They must have carried some of the penance for the drug's production. The home looked much like Hick's cooler except longer and moldier. Weeds tickled Yo-Yo's thighs as she followed him to the front door. The porch creaked under their steps, threatening to cave under the weight of their debts.

Yo-Yo was in such a hurry to get off the porch before it collapsed that she squashed into the back of Hick's sweaty back. He stood in the threshold, still as the opossum, transfixed towards the only light in the dank space.

A middle-aged woman with terrible acne was illuminated by a camping lantern on a folding table, a few bags of crystal powder littering its surface. She gripped a clear pipe and haze passed between her lips.

"I know you didn't bring home another one," she said.

Yo-Yo didn't know whether to gasp or grin. Sure, this was a nightmare, but that meant she would earn more than enough karma for carrying out the rescue. She raised her hands in surrender, or to prove her innocence, or whatever it was that people raised their hands in these situations. Clearly, Hick had some alternative intentions behind his dinner invitation, and it wasn't the first time, either.

The woman sputtered in laughter, coughing out smoke like a train climbing a hill. "You're pathetic, Hick. She ain't even got two thumbs!"

Yo-Yo curled her nine fingers into two fists. She wanted to punch this meth-head. Before Yo-Yo was a vegan, she worked at a slaughterhouse in high school. The job was gross, but it was the only under-the-table work she could find. Even though she was always with the live pigs, she had grown weary of meat thanks to the squeals of swine being sawed in two. She did her best to treat the animals well, but it wasn't enough. The biggest hog in the house, Sir Crispy Buns, chomped off her right thumb when she reached into his pen to trade his old slop bucket for a new one. Her thumb hung from her hand like a raw hunk of bacon, and he squealed his protest at her. *That's for eating my kind. And the cows. And the chickens. You deserve it!*

Yo-Yo hadn't an ounce of meat since. She had since paid retribution for her days of carnivorousness by delivering injured animals to Stacy's vet clinic and helping stranded drivers revive their hopelessly deteriorating cars. Now she had to recompense for failing Dumpling and she couldn't let herself ruin it by starting a fight. She released her fists and slumped her shoulders in surrender.

Hick stuttered worse than his pickup's motor. "She off-ferred to help me fix the tr-ruck, even though it wadn't broke. So I said 'come on over 'n eat with us—with me and my wife!'"

Hick's wife lay down her pipe and crossed her arms, providing more coverage than her tank top. "And why would you say that if you knew I was s'pposed to be working tonight? You know good and well that you was trying to sneak another woman home."

Yo-Yo opened her mouth to speak, but choked on the overpowering smell of vinegar and ammonia—was that what meth was made of? She cleared her throat. "Hick said we would wait till you got back from work to eat because . . ." Here came the veggie burger again, ". . . because he brought a surprise home for you."

The woman squinted her eyes that nonetheless failed to focus. She flipped a light switch behind her, bathing the room in light. More crumpled paper, burger wrappers, and dirty clothes filled the space. The furniture had practically been skinned and now boasted the foam underneath. Most jarring of all was the hideous

cow-print wallpaper; a yellowed white background with giant splotches of faded black, cracks all throughout.

There were also paintings of longhorns. And heifer figurines. And cattle-print window curtains. Dang, this place was one big cow.

Yo-Yo channeled her prayers into the cooler in Hick's arms. *Please wake up, lil' opossum. Let's get out of here.*

Hick's wife ripped off the cooler's lid. To Yo-Yo's disappointment, the animal was motionless as ever.

The wife clapped her hands together with a puff of white powder. "No, it ain't a possum!" She smiled all four of her teeth and planted a smoky kiss on Hick's sausage lips, lingering on them for a good ten seconds.

"I knew you been wanting to make a possum pot pie," Hick said. "I had just ran over it, and I couldn't help but get it for you."

The wife's gaze bounced back to Yo-Yo, then to Yo-Yo's Caesar haircut, then to her chest. "All right, then. The auto-mechanic can join us. I'm Goldie."

Mechanic, huh? "I'm Yo-Yo." She wondered if she should tell Goldie how she got her nick-name. Ten years ago, when Yo-Yo was in high school, she got a lot of grief for her mannish build. She worked out more than the boys, hence her all-star serve that sent more than one volleyball player to the hospital with a misshapen nose. By her senior year, she never failed to respond to insults with her fist against someone's jaw. What went around, came around. Or better yet, what spun around always came spinning back—like a yo-yo, Stacy always said. Goldie's jaw would have been next, but Yo-Yo restrained herself.

Goldie wrinkled her nose, zits piling together. "Yo-Yo, huh? I never did like those dern things. Always thought they was sneaky 'cause hardly anyone knows how to use 'em right."

Hick kicked through trash on the floor until he was in the kitchen and set the cooler down on the counter. He retrieved a boiling pot adorned with cartoon udders and filled it with yellowish water from the tap before placing it in the microwave and setting the timer for five minutes.

This was Yo-Yo's chance. Goldie was swiping her bags of powder from the table and hiding them in the recliner. Hick faced away from the cooler, rummaging through drawers and pulling out his roadkill-cooking utensils.

Yo-Yo reached the cooler in three strides. She had just wrapped her fingers around it and lifted it from the counter when she heard a *shing*.

She looked over her shoulder, hands pressed to the slimy sides of the Styrofoam, to see Hick brandishing a straight-edge butcher knife.

He tapped the crusty point with his piggy index finger. "Haven't got to use this'n here in a while."

Yo-Yo dropped the box back on the counter with a gulp.

"You takin' another look at it before it's gone?" Hick asked. "Good idear. It's purty, but I bet it tastes e'en better."

Yo-Yo gripped the sticky counter behind her. Was he talking about her or the opossum? She took another gulp. "That's a big knife."

Goldie stepped into the kitchen, brushing her hands on her pants with another cloud of dust. "Why don't ye let the *mechanic* here do the honors, Hick?"

Yo-Yo flailed her hands, then reminded herself to chill. These hillbillies thought she was excited to eat opossum, so she would act excited if that's what it took to save it.

She brushed her hand coolly through her short hair. “You two seem more experienced. I’ll leave it to you.”

Hick shrugged and slouched forward. He lifted the opossum onto the counter and lowered his knife to its neck.

“Wait!” Yo-Yo racked her brain for a distraction until she saw the calf engraved in the knife’s blade. “What’s up with the cows?” Before Hick tried to cut and talk at the same time, she touched and steadied the blade with her hands as if she cared to take a closer look at a poorly etched calf covered in stains.

Goldie gave a cackle that sounded more like a sneeze. “We like ‘em. Both grew up on farms with cows.”

Hick moved closer to Yo-Yo, both their hands on the knife. “You know, *some* people think cows is holy animals.” His breath smelt like roadkill, too, except two weeks aged and picked apart by buzzards. “You heard of ‘em?”

“Hindus?” Yo-Yo spoke the words just as Hick exhaled, sending a cloud of hot fumes into her mouth.

“Whatever they’re called,” Hick said.

Goldie petted a brown-spotted ceramic cow on the counter beside her, a bell jingling from its neck. “We ain’t no Hindu-ists, but we do like cows a whole lot.”

Yo-Yo craned her neck away from Hick, lest he breathe into her mouth again. “So you two don’t eat beef?” Finally, some redemption for these druggie-yokels.

Goldie cackled again, Hick joining her this time, his gut sloshing up and down like a waterbed in transit.

“Darling,” Hick said, “we got a whole dern ‘frigerator of steaks out back.”

Yo-Yo felt the bad karma emanate from Hick, from his carnivorous innards to the point of his butcher knife. What was that shuffle she heard? She whipped her gaze to the opossum, watching for any movement.

Hick brought the knife down to the creature again.

“Wait!” Yo-Yo grabbed his wrist. Her stomach churned upon contact with his oily skin. “You know they’re better cooked in their skin, right?”

Goldie’s bloodshot eyes seemed to redden more the moment Yo-Yo touched Hick. “I ain’t never heard o’ that.”

“It’s true.” Yo-Yo wasn’t sure this was a good idea, but she would stall Hick from dicing the creature as long as she could. After all, the opossum could use even one extra minute to wake up and escape. “You lose all the . . .” she voluntarily restrained a gag, “all the juices if you take off the skin.” Hick licked his lips at the thought, his debris-covered tongue parting the bristles of his moustache.

Goldie gritted her teeth. “You’d better get yer hands off my husband ‘fore I take off your skin.”

Hick’s face seemed to fall when Yo-Yo jerked her hand from his wrist. “Now calm down sweetie,” he said to Goldie. “She’s right. Drying out a possum will ruin it quicker’n anything.” He set down the knife.

Goldie crossed her arms, twisting them together like a python around its prey. The three stood there while the pot of water rotated for another minute in the microwave. Once it beeped, Hick grabbed a homemade oven mitt (a dirty tank top wadded around his hand) and set the pot on the counter. Steam hovered like fog over a pet cemetery. Yo-Yo could act now or forever feel the guilt of Dumpling’s loss.

She would have grabbed the cooler and ran now if Goldie hadn't nonchalantly backed towards the door, taking the knife and flicking her wild gaze to Yo-Yo. Would Yo-Yo have to jump out a window to escape this forsaken place?

Hick's steps came in slow motion, the bottoms of his shoes sounding like Velcro on the sticky floor. He grabbed the limp opossum by its tail. Yo-Yo wanted to snatch it and run, but at what risk? Getting them both slashed by Goldie at the door? She always heard meth-heads could be violent, unpredictable, especially if they thought their husband brought home a mistress.

Hick returned to the pot, entering the opossum into the column of steam.

Yo-Yo trembled. If she didn't take this opportunity to save the opossum, she might never get another chance to earn her good karma. "Are you sure the water is hot enough?"

"Oh, it's just fine. Steamier than Goldie in her mud-wrestling days." Hick looked to Goldie, raising his sweaty eyebrows in desperate assurance. She gave him a soft grunt and nodded for him to proceed. He lowered the opossum, head-first to the vat.

As soon as its pink nose reached the water, the creature hissed to life. It thrashed from its tail, swinging to Hick's arm with sabering fangs. Hick flung the animal with a yelp, scarlet leaking from his palm. His other arm flailed against the boiling pot and splashed water across his torso.

The opossum scurried across the floor. Goldie charged at it with her knife. Yo-Yo kicked out her stout leg and tripped her. Goldie soared with outstretched arms, sending the knife clattering across the kitchen. Her falling body clamped onto the opossum's wormy tail and the animal clawed at the floor, immobilized.

Goldie grasped the animal's torso. "You ain't goin' nowhere, sonny!"

Yo-Yo grasped the animal behind its hind legs, wrestling for control of the animal before wiggling it free of Goldie's grip and launching it across the floor. The sliding opossum plowed through litter before smacking into the wall with a squeal.

Yo-Yo dashed to the door and flung it open. The opossum darted out and she followed, the porch groaning under their weight. She hopped down the stairs and scrambled into her car while the opossum scampered into the trees.

A moment later, she heard Goldie shout again, "Come back here, you one-thumbed—" Her voice drowned in a crash.

In Yo-Yo's rearview, she saw a cloud of dust where the porch should have been, Hick's meaty feet kicking out from the rubble. Served him right for trying to cook an innocent creature.

The wheels of the Kia spun in place before rocketing forward. Even in Yo-Yo's righteous victory, she felt the weight of her failure. She knew it was stupid to think that saving a marsupial could atone for losing Dumpling. No matter how much she wished for him to sniff his way back home, she knew not to get her hopes up. She imagined his doughy body in the middle of the road, wagging his hot dog tail and yapping at the familiar Kia. He wore the same rainbow collar she'd bought him for his birthday and licked his imaginary lips, knowing he'd get his first dinner in a week. Yo-Yo ignored the hopeful hallucination. Instead she drove full speed ahead so that maybe, if she'd just forget, she wouldn't feel so guilty anymore.

Then came a thump under her tires. She decided it was only a pothole.

THE LIFE EXPECTANCY OF DOWNTOWN

Hayden Dutschke

Bergman plays on an old TV
as we all cram onto a couch,
wearing paper bag crowns
and trash bag shirts. Pregnant
pauses on cue cards ignored
as we verbally spar about
whose heart is really broken.
A laugh track can be heard
from an open window
of a crumbling motel.
Cut to a negative creep,
taking aim with a 16mm,
commanding us to stomp
around on cracked roads.
Broken instruments in hand,
we bob our heads in tune
to killer bass thumps
provided from the MMA match
happening behind the dumpster.
Finally, the mise-en-scene shudders:
the cable is pulled and Bergman dies.
We retreat to the collapsed city
under an elevated parking lot
and sleep with our backs turned.
An old man rolls by with
a golden shopping cart.
No one says a word.
We draw finger guns
and pull back the thumb.



THE FIG TREE

Rachel Tabor

Every day, on my way to class, I pass this sprawling monstrosity of a tree. It took me a while to realize that the hundreds of purple bulbs on it were figs because I'm not a connoisseur of weird fruits. Also, because this tree is ugly. The ancient ideal in my mind was a delicate tree, graceful and poised. Instead, this fig tree devoured the chain-link fence around it and reached out toward me. One day in early September, I stopped in front of the fig tree and resolved to try one. I did wonder briefly about the advisability of eating strange fruit, but in the end, I took some and ate it. It was sickly sweet: saccharine and slimy, opening to a grotesque cavity full of menacing pink and white tentacles. I immediately spat out the wad of chewed, purple flesh. So that's a fig. I remembered how Jesus had cursed a tree for not bearing figs. I never understood that story. But now that I've eaten the fruit my eyes have been opened, and I would tell Jesus to calm down because that tree did him a favor.



IN EARLY DECEMBER

Logan Riley Carroll

the damn dryer broke and the air outside was too cold to be useful, and you didn't know your neighbor well enough to ask to string a line between your porches anyway, and like I said, the air was *freezing*.

You were bent over the dryer like a slug, trying to see what was wrong on the other side, wearing a pair of jeans that had been severed at the pocket, and a t-shirt knotted above your navel.

You weren't wearing underwear and I knew this because you only do laundry when fresh out.

You muscled the dryer from the wall like a demigod while the vein in your neck went topographic.

Next to you, the washer reached its penultimate cycle. It was spinning at a calculable rate of 75 miles per hour, though nobody bothered to count its revolutions.

Meanwhile, you unplugged and replugged the dryer's power cable from and into the wall, as if all the dryer needed was a moment to itself, as if all the electricity that ran the thing was caught like a kink in a garden hose, as if all of life's most complex problems have the simplest solutions.

And you stood there for a minute, watching.
And I just stood there, watching too.

You pressed the button and nothing in the machine even *coughed*.

So you planted your hands on your hips to pout partly because you had a mess of wet garments to deal with, partly because you *really* believed your solution was going to work.

Your shoulders relaxed the way necks do when strung to the gallows for awhile, and your arms just hung there like vines,

and I wanted nothing more than to be the spark that animated the thing, but all I could do was hold you.

And while holding you I contrived a plot to *keep* holding you.

I thought to myself: as long as I hold you nothing is broken,

and your laundry will dry on its own,

and the dryer will fix itself,

and the washer will break itself,

and before we know it, your clothes will be out of style

and we will donate them to the cousins. The ones with abysmal cholesterol.

Anyway,

I held you until in a deathgrip,
and your lungs began to coalesce
and I tightened enough to warp you
but I was problem-solving, just like you.
Electricity was in us both, teasing our nerve endings, and you shivered
because you were wearing too little for early December. Too many days before spring.



NAME CALLING

Rachel Tabor

Whitner Street Discount Grocery is a small, brick building that stands alone on the stretch of road that leads to downtown Anderson. I noticed it for the first time a couple months ago in passing. Its fresh banner and newly painted parking spots stood out on this particular road where everything else is in decay. I went back for the third time, drawn to the brick building packed out with cheap groceries and people who are different than me. The same cashier rang me up each time I went to Whitner. I hadn't thought to ask her name before. I hope that doesn't say something about me, but it probably does. This time, she smiled and told me her name is Tina. I think she was also glad to put a name to the clumsy college girl who bought six canisters of Brazilian coffee and left half her grocery bags there last week.

The mid-October sun was beginning to set between the spire of the white church and the crumbling brick wall across the street. There is an old, dilapidated mill there whose sunken walls and smashed windows seem to mirror the fate of this part of Anderson. This is the part of town that the students at Anderson University warn each other about: *Don't go to the alphabet streets*. The alphabet streets run perpendicular to Whitner Street in rows. A St., B St., C St., and so on. Seventeen roads that nice people should avoid. Seventeen roads so bad that they're hardly worth the trouble of naming.

"One moment," Tina said.

She turned away from me to grab a bright orange pack of cigarettes for the tall man behind me, whose sinewy arms continued for miles out of his faded, black tee-shirt-turned-tank-top.

"Have a good day!" Tina called out to him.

She turned back to me. Her black hair was pulled back in a low ponytail with little silver strands escaping around her face. The dark rings under her eyes are pronounced but somehow don't make her look tired or old. Instead they frame her large, deep brown eyes. She told me through a smile how much she loves working here. She told me she worked at McDonald's for five years, but she likes Whitner Street Grocery because it is not so fast-paced and demanding. I don't think she knew that she painted her character for me with that single line. To smile through a story of five years in food service is no easy feat.

"You like coffee?" She asked.

I laughed. Six forgotten canisters of coffee were probably the basis of this observation. "Oh yes. Do you?"

"Oh no. I like tea. Indian tea."

Tina told me how she makes her tea every morning. It sounded complicated and kind of exciting. She described the process of mixing and straining spices. I think she said she uses cardamom; I know she said she adds a lot of ginger because we looked at each other and shared a moment of unspoken appreciation for ginger. Next she strains and heats it and adds 2% milk. Just as I started to tell her about my love for coffee, we were interrupted by a voice behind me.

"He come at me with a knife, said he was gonna slit my throat."

I turned around to find the owner of this voice: a middle-aged woman with a thick southern dialect crusted over by years of cigarette smoke. Both eyes were blackened. Black isn't right though. They were deep indigo, flashing out in streaks of grotesque purples and sickly yellow hues.

"That's messed up," a round, middle-aged man responded.

I didn't catch his name, but he was unmistakably southern too, with red cheeks that matched his baseball cap and a scraggly brown beard flecked with grey. He was standing about ten feet away, almost yelling to cover the distance, and he never once stopped shaking his head back and forth.

"Did he want money?" I asked.

A stupid question. It hung in the air for an instant as I took in her faded, blue shirt with the fabric rolling off it in fuzzy little balls and her jeans that were two sizes too big and ten years too old. She raised her eyebrows and whispered loudly, "sex."

Her hair was blonde and matted, her belly bloated.

I looked back into her bruised eyes. "I'm sorry." I think I should have been taken aback, but there wasn't time.

"He unzipped his pants." She looked at me meaningfully and continued. "I told him I don't think so. I insulted his manliness and he whooped out a knife."

She was laughing. I was not sure we should have made light of this situation. In my circles, sexual harassment is recounted in hushed, solemn tones. This woman, on the other hand was practically yelling about it and making jokes. I wanted to cry with her or pray for her but in my discomfort, I found myself laughing with her.

"Well, that hurt his feelings. He whooped me on the back of the head and beat me."

Grey tee shirt/red hat was still shaking his head as he moved towards the door. "I wish I'd been there. I woulda messed him up." He was at the door now but turned and looked solemnly into her bruised eyes. "I'm praying for you, Rhonda. You praying for me?"

Rhonda closed her eyes and nodded once emphatically. If the conversation had been flippant before, this moment was weighty. She seemed to sink into the comfort he offered. His words were not eloquent, but they were somehow sacred; a beautiful liturgy where he called her by name, offered a prayer, and met her where she was.

Whitner Street Discount Grocery is a collection of things that don't match. There's a bin of pineapple juice next to an impressive collection of gluten-free and paleo waffle mixes. There's a box of expired protein bars and a crate of pencils. There's no pretense or organization. There are no curated collections or brand standards. Shopping here requires a high level of personal responsibility. I know this because I saw the expiration date on a dented lid of mayonnaise. I was checking the dates on bottles of colorful sodas when a man started unloading bottles next to me. I recognized him as Tina's husband and said hello. He smiled politely and kept stacking sodas.

"My name is Rachel . . . What made you want to start this place?" It was an awkward attempt to reach out.

"I was driving by and saw the space. There's a lot of EBT people here so I just started it. This end of town," he nodded down the road, "has nothing."

I nodded. Even though I didn't know what he meant by EBT. "I like it here. I like the atmosphere."

He nodded in assent. "People say that . . ." Jim stopped stacking sodas and wrinkled his brown forehead in thought. "I think it's because we respect people."

He turned away and I saw a woman in the corner with short, dark hair and square glasses. She was frantically filling her arms with Entenmann's cherry pies.

I watched her pile up boxes, one by one until she tucked the last one under her chin. She carefully stepped to the front of the store leaning backward and clutching the boxes tightly to maintain her precarious tower. She paused as she passed me and stared at me blankly. She only moved when Tina called her to the front, smiling, "More cherry pie?"

I don't think there was an answer, but I could hear Tina smiling.

The diversity here is not limited to groceries. Whitner Street Grocery is a gathering place for people who don't match. In a few hours I saw more racial and cultural diversity than I see all day on my university campus. Tina is from India. Jim is from England. The woman who walked in as I was leaving, spoke Spanish. Jim greeted her and her young son with a hearty *Hola!* Some of the languages and accents I heard I couldn't even identify. The apparent socioeconomic range at any given moment was pronounced, from the homeless, wearing everything they owned on their backs, to people who looked pretty middle class. When Jim said "EBT people" I hid in the cereal aisle and Googled it on my phone. EBT stands for Electronic Benefit Transfer. It's the card your SNAP benefits are loaded on to. SNAP refers to The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program which used to be known as food stamps. I knew about food stamps from history class. I thought they were a relic of the Great Depression. I had never even considered what it looked like today. From the other side of a wall of expired cereal, I heard a voice call my name.

"Rachel."

I stepped forward and Jim was standing there. I was surprised to hear my name. I was surprised that he *remembered* my name.

"Did you know the Indian girl who died a couple weeks ago?" He asked.

"No. What happened?"

"She came here to go to Clemson and quickly came down with Meningitis. I knew you went to college around here. I didn't know if it affected you. Her family came for the funeral and stayed with us."

I hadn't heard anything about it. "Did you know them before?"

"No."

"Then how . . ."

"They don't have a penny. They didn't know if they'd be able to make it over but all the Indian doctors and us got together and took care of everything."

"That's amazing," I responded.

Jim shrugged and said, "It's just how we are."

I was still surprised that he had remembered my name. I offered it insignificantly over the buzz of the refrigerator. It was a convention. I didn't expect him to use it. I don't know why it stopped me in my tracks when he did. I wonder if that's how the family of the Indian girl felt when they were offered tickets and a place to stay with complete strangers across the world. Like maybe, in the midst of their grief and helplessness, someone knew their name. Jim said it was respect. He said they respect everyone. Respect to me, though, sounds cold and distant. I think I felt known.

I wonder if I call people by their names or if I use people's name. Lots of people use names. Car salesmen and telemarketers use your name a hundred times in a sentence trying to get you to respond positively to them. Because they know that names matter. This usage is slick and smarmy. It's fake familiarity that presumes a relationship and plays on your desire to be known. Bosses and professors use names to establish dominance. They don't need to ask to use it or be offered it. It is often an exertion of power or status. A demeaning familiarity. But then, there's being called by name. When someone calls you by your name it feels like freedom and belonging. Like you have space, even if it's just the span of your name, to be exactly as you are. It feels like being recognized and valued, being known.

Our names are a combination of letters and syllables that somehow hold our identities and they're a key to our membership in cultural groups. My name is Rachel. I was born in 1996, at the height of the show *FRIENDS*, when everyone knew Rachel. Add to this the fact that my parents are Christians who gave all of my sisters biblical names, and you see that my name is reflective of my culture and my era. Have you noticed how often Christians tell you they're bad at remembering names? I used to believe them until I noticed how many people say it. Maybe it's true for some people, but more often than not, I think people are telling you preemptively that you're not worth remembering.

I stepped outside and the sun was now low in the sky. There was a rusted, blue pickup truck still running outside with four kids crammed in the front seat. Their eyes followed me as I sat down on the concrete steps. I ran my hand back and forth over the metal pipe joint where the stair rail curved and found myself staring at the clean, white church on the hill with the sun glowing ironically behind it. I didn't know if the people behind me were Christians. I want to believe that they are. I want to believe that the reason I feel comfortable and a little bit at home is because of people trying to emulate Jesus, but I do not know that. I want to believe that the white church on the hill could make me, and everyone here, feel the same way. But I do not know that.

My roommate, Mad, pulled in to pick me up at our agreed-upon-time. She was wearing yellow scrubs and a tired expression from a day of student nursing. She was the only person who would drop me off here and drive away without worrying about me. I got in the car and we drove in silence for a while. I was still processing what I'd seen and there was one detail that didn't add up in my head.

"Mad? Why does it seem like poor people's stomachs are swollen?" I asked.

"You mean when they're distended? It's from malnutrition. When your body doesn't have enough nutrients it tries to pull from the cells and basically bloats itself. Basically, it's water."

Back to silence and shame as I came to terms with the idea that malnutrition exists this close to me. Abdominal distention is a common image for anonymous African children or distant third world hunger campaigns, but it doesn't fit into my concept of small town America. It turns out that over thirty million Americans experience hunger regularly or are at risk of going hungry. The number is 807,960 in Anderson County. 30 million is a big number, but it doesn't strike me as much as one name does: Rhonda. Rhonda had a distended stomach. I began to understand the fear of the alphabet streets. It's not the fear of being harmed, it's discomfort in the face of need I cannot meet and problems that I would rather pretend don't exist. I am afraid that if I get too close, if I learn people's names, I will become responsible for them—responsible like the round, bearded man made himself for Rhonda when he offered to defend her and pray for her. Or responsible like Jim and Tina who opened their home to take in a grieving family from India. I don't know the names of the people in my town on food stamps. So I keep driving back towards the familiarity of college students complaining about burnt lattes. But this time, I don't want to join the congregation in reciting our Sunday morning truth: the one that says we are bad at remembering names.



KATANGA

Alli Kennedy

She pulls me along paths
of orange dust, looking back at me
with rosiness in her 7-year-old eyes
and a smile missing
two teeth.

She dances to the beat
of music I cannot hear,
skipping under clotheslines of
dripping dresses, floating in the breeze
like flags of abjection.

She tiptoes over a river
of rainwater filled with feces and glass,
snaking its way between homes of
tarp, metal scraps, and
crumbling brown bricks.

She smells like the rubber
of tires that have spun
in one place too long,
charring the air, and branding
the blackened road.

She is the daughter
of a man who satisfied
his hungers in dark corners,
of a woman who cuts her arms
and screams at walls.

She has brothers and sisters
from more hungry men,
an aunt too poor to make provisions,
and a grandmother
waiting to die.

In her mind,
brimming with
daydreams of elephants
and abundant soda,
I save her . . .

I don't save her.

I say, "I love you, sweet girl."
She returns a stare full of ashes,
she evades my embrace,
and her quiet hand
lets go of mine.

She retreats on heavy feet
from waved goodbyes and
buses churning through the sea
of children chanting
Muzungus.

The dust will rise
in a cloudy amber haze.
She will stop one hundred feet away,
looking back as she turns to salt,
standing alone before Katanga.



DOUGHNUT MENTALITY

Hannah Alkema

It happened again this Sunday afternoon. When the man in front of me in line at the Spinx gas station in Anderson, South Carolina, noticed that I was alone, he smiled accommodatingly. He gestured for me to take his place ahead of him in line, but I declined. Realizing that he did not appear to speak English, I nodded and thanked him. I could feel his eyes on me as I paid and skirted back to my car in the abandoned lot. Here I could detail how the afternoon sun hit my eyes and warmed my back or how the grimy pump stuck to my fingers, but in this moment I didn't care about that. All I cared about was manipulating my shaking hands into pumping the gas so that I could drive away. The man, still smiling, and his friend exited the gas station and spoke quickly while gesturing towards me. "Lord, please help them to just get in their car and drive away," I said under my breath. "Please leave me alone." I had never met these men before, but the smile was familiar. The smile is a half-truth, the kind where the light never reaches the eyes. "This is a game," the smile seems to say. But I never signed up to play.

Should I have felt ashamed? No. But I did. Growing up in a small town in Southern Florida, I was raised in nondenominational Christian circles to be polite and submissive. I was taught these attributes in Friday chapels at my Christian middle school when the teachers would separate the girls to learn about modesty and the boys to learn about integrity. One particular chapel, a guest speaker placed an open box of Krispy Kreme doughnuts in front of us while she explained the importance of covering our bodies. We could not concentrate on her words because the sweet smell of sugary halos wafted up our noses. At the end of this lesson, the speaker revealed another set of doughnuts, which were hidden, and drove home her point: we were the doughnuts. When we did not cover up our bodies, we made it harder for boys to concentrate (and easier for them to salivate). My friends and I nodded our heads up and down fervently, drinking in her words. For years we joked and reminded each other to "not be an uncovered doughnut." I used to wonder what the middle school boys learned about in their study. Integrity. It sounded so powerful. The boys looked smug when they came back, like they were learning secrets that we could not understand. Eventually I got it out of a male classmate that "integrity is what you do when no one is watching." I wanted to be a part of *that* conversation, not just the conversation about how to cover the body that housed my character. But that was the way it was. Doughnuts had other things to worry about.

As I got into my car and locked the doors in the gas station parking lot, the two men took their car around the long way so that they could drive by me, ever so slowly, and speak to me with their heads out of the windows. I couldn't hear the words, but I didn't stick around long enough to find out if they were speaking English or Spanish. I fought back tears of anger as I merged onto the highway en route to Greenville. Perhaps I shouldn't have been at the gas station alone, in a floral dress. Perhaps I should have planned better and filled up my tank at my favorite gas station the day before, the one that has the elderly gentleman working who likes to

talk to me about sports. When he looks at me, he sees the face of a granddaughter and for some reason, I see the face of a grandpa in him. I think it's in the way he smiles. I've been trained to interpret these smiles since birth because it is a necessary skill for a woman.

At twenty-one years old, I am thankful that the worst thing men have done to me is approach me. It could be much worse. I thanked God that I was in the security of my car, my little haven from the madness. I turned the radio on to country, but because its upbeat rhythm was an insult to my nerves, I turned it off. Turning a corner, I saw the mountains set up against the background of the sky, looking like jagged teeth. *Why couldn't they just leave me alone? Do I look like I want their attention?* No. The smile had stung like an insult and a threat, reminding me of the man who had chased me the week before. That man wore the same smile. I had taken a solo trip to downtown Anderson to check out a beloved antique store. It wasn't until I was five steps away from my car that this man yelled across the street,

"Hey baby, do you need help?" Then he was running towards me.

"No, thank you," I said as I reversed directions, got into my car, and locked the doors. Car in reverse, he was at my window just in time for me to pull out of the parking space and speed back to my college campus. I adjusted the spaghetti straps on my red tank top. Part of me wondered if he would have followed me if I had been wearing a T-shirt instead. I know the arguments on social media about the freedom to wear what you want. A troll's comments regarding how a woman wearing a short skirt deserves whatever happens to her are now met with hundreds of comments regarding how that is false and that a woman should be able to wear what she wants. We know this. But I still feel the shame of a jean skirt. And wonder if I will be taken seriously, even as the rough material reaches my extended fingertips, the sign of an appropriate length, according to middle school teachers. It's safer to wear a T-shirt and jeans, even though I know I shouldn't have to feel this way. I told my friend (let's call her Kaitlin) what happened downtown and she was incredulous.

"You mean that you went downtown alone?" Kaitlin asked in exasperation.

"I like going places alone sometimes." My tone was indignant, knowing what was about to come. Kaitlin was not often shy in making her opinions known and safety was a topic that she was passionate about.

"Oh Hannah, Hannah, Hannah," she said knowingly. "You shouldn't go places alone."

Did I do something wrong? Heat started in my throat and I scrambled for words. "I like going alone. I shouldn't have to feel ashamed; they should feel ashamed." The words sounded right but I didn't feel the power they projected. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Just be safe, friend." This conversation irritated me and made me feel helpless, though I couldn't identify why at first. It was as if the blame for what happened rested solely on my shoulders because I went alone. The injustice of it all reminded me of a brief conversation I had had with my brother-in-law and grandma three years prior. It was late August, and because I was about to move to South Carolina for college in the next week, one last family gathering was in order. A dozen or so of my family members were broken up into groups of conversation around two pushed-together dining room tables. The room was loud with inquiries and politics and requests for passing mashed potatoes. My brother-in-law asked me what I was most nervous about starting my freshman year of college. Having read an article about the physical dangers of a college campus, I said, "staying safe from creepy guys." He laughed, I remember he laughed, and said, "just stay out of dark alleys and you'll be fine." I opened my mouth to respond that people get hurt more often by people they know than by strangers, but then I stopped. If he could dismiss my fear so flippantly, I did not think I could make him understand.

Later that night my grandma sat down by me and had me agree not to be alone in a room with a boy. “Okay, Grandma,” I said to appease her. Often her thoughts kept her awake during the night and I didn’t want this to be something she had to worry about. I looked into her sweet ninety-five-year-old face, graced with wrinkles.

“I’m serious,” she said. “You can be naive sometimes, Hannah. That’s how young girls get hurt, by trusting people they don’t really know.” I nodded.

Looking back, I see the lesson now. Girls get hurt because they walk where they shouldn’t. They’re naive. They trust too much. But to me today, that seems like good intentions with sneaked-in misconceptions. Yes, girls need to be smart. They need to be cautioned because there is a reason to be afraid. Not of all men, but of the ones that think they can treat women like objects: men who harass on the street and men who cause woman to be uncomfortable by staring. The smile isn’t a facial expression, it is a mindset.

The first time I identified the smile for what it was, I was seventeen. When I was growing up, natural and learned resistance against predatory men was ingrained within me, as it is with many women, but seventeen was the year I began to experience objectification for myself. I was bagging groceries at the Publix where I worked when a sandy haired sixty-esque customer began joking with me in line, exuding superficial confidence and charm that tasted like zinc water. What should’ve been pure was metallic. Walking him to his car, as per his request, I felt uncomfortable because his flattery was insistent. What beautiful blue eyes I had. I really should protect them from the sun. He was a pilot, you know. Did I want to go flying with him? The smile introduced itself: “This is a fun game, don’t you think?” To him, I wasn’t a person, someone interested in politics or literature; I was a thing.

Again this summer, I saw the smile in a hairdresser as he introduced himself. I pushed the thought away because I didn’t trust my instincts. What if it was just in my head? The man had long, greasy hair and a well-kept mustache. When he spoke, his words were full of energy, and something else. I focused my attention on the mirror as his fingers lingered on my exposed shoulders. He was just doing his job, relax. Snip. Snip. Conversation upbeat. “Yes, I’m going to Holland tomorrow for a trip. Kind of waited until last minute to get a haircut,” I said.

“How fun,” he said. We spoke of Holland and his family (and wife) until the last cut. Then he spoke by my ear, “Maybe we should hang out sometime before you leave.” I had already told him several times before that comment that I was leaving the next day. He meant hang out tonight? I couldn’t tell you my response to him if I wanted to. But it most likely was a stuttering mumble. His face was neutral as he let me up from the chair. I gave him a larger than normal tip (“keep the change”) because I just wanted to get out. But why? Because I didn’t have the courage, the audacity, to say, “No, that’s never going to happen.”

To him, I was something to be used. And yet I was the one who felt ashamed. Perhaps partly because of what I’ve grown up hearing. That what a person wears, walks, trusts is a direct link to how they deserve to be treated. The instruction was not explicit and therefore this statement may be too strong, but that is how the underbrush of the lessons was received. So while, yes, there is a reason to put precautions into place with men like these and to not make reckless decisions, ultimately the blame shouldn’t go to the ones being followed. I knew this already. We knew this already. But dissecting my experiences and the disconnect between what I knew and how I thought has been wild. And it’s made me see that this is not just my story.

When I share these stories with friends, it is all too common to hear similar accounts in return that make me think, “you too?” A dear friend of mine recounts the endless chilling evenings during her summer internship in which she was verbally harassed while walking home. Sometimes men sitting on smoky

outside patios would make comments such as, “You look nice” but if she smiled, their comments would dissolve into noises and pet name calling. Another friend, while reading outside on her college campus front lawn, was catcalled last week. She mentioned this casually during lunch, saying, “I was just so surprised because I wasn’t wearing anything provocative. I was wearing a sweater. It just goes to show you . . .” she shook her head, “that it doesn’t matter what you’re wearing or doing.” The college student sitting next to her shared her most recent uncomfortable experience and then we all continued on with our lunch. Just another day. Could it be that we have become desensitized, like a fish in a bowl of water, to the point that these experiences are no longer upsetting but on par with conversations about the raising price of gas?

All I can do is I ask myself “why?” Why, after all the progress and social reconstruction, do certain men still feel like they can treat women like playthings? It is tempting to answer this question with name calling. “This kind of man is weak. He is insecure.” It feels good to call them names because it makes me feel like I’m taking power back. But it’s empty power and it’s too easy. It doesn’t touch the root of the problem. Why why why why why do they think this is okay? I could pull my hair out and still not have a satisfactory answer. Could it be possible that if my upbringing reveals a root of self-blame, then maybe the upbringing of a boy who treats women like this could reveal a root of toxic masculinity? That this mindset could be unintentionally fostered by our culture? It hides in plain sight, disguised in the fostering of superior attitudes of middle school boys in a program originally designed to inspire ethics, but instead resulted in patronization. This root also hides in humor. For example, it is a widely accepted joke that when a woman says, “I’m fine,” it translates to “I am the complete opposite of fine.” I laugh with friends at this joke and play along, but what is the lesson in this joke? The lesson is that a woman doesn’t mean what she says and she doesn’t know what she wants. Therefore, her word should not be taken seriously. My culture has imprinted itself on me in ways I never realized and perhaps it has done the same for some men in our culture, by twisting the truth—of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman.

“You are not responsible for anyone else’s bad behavior.”

When I first heard these words in a college lecture, I sat back in amazement. It’s so simple. In fact, it’s almost too simple. Of course I knew this but I do not think I ever really *knew* this until it was paired alongside my struggle with self-blame. When men leer or yell obscenities, I do not have to carry the weight of their actions; that is on them. This distinction alone has done more work than any amount of self-defense classes could do (though I am currently on my way to becoming a yellow belt now and that doesn’t hurt).

But I also need to speak up. I didn’t speak up to my brother-in-law or the men on the street because I was afraid. Afraid of being misunderstood or misconstrued as rude. I crave peace, instead of conflict. But in buying peace with silence, I forget my value. I am not a doughnut. I am not theirs for the taking.



RACHEL TABOR

*Written by Alli Kennedy
Photographed by Blair Bellaire*

Rachel Tabor's striking blue eyes stare into the distance as her words chase stories of her friends, family, and her artistic endeavors. She's wearing an outfit she proudly picked out from clothes scattered on the floor of her room and gold earrings, shaped like hands with a peculiar engraved swirl in the middle, that she got from a thrift shop in Colorado. "I don't know if the swirl means anything. Hopefully, it's not symbol from a cult that will try and claim me as their own," she says laughing.

Rachel is motivated by curiosity, picking figs from trees on the way to class just to know what they taste like, and listening in on conversations at grocery stores to understand better how folks different from her live and care for each other in Anderson. "Someone once told me I'm fun in a serious way," she says. And that's true, but she's also serious in a fun way, in life and in the way she approaches her art. Completely dedicated to her craft, she enjoys every one of the hundreds of hours she pours into projects like her self-portrait made entirely from straws.

Though Rachel did not seriously pursue art until she started college, she has valued creativity in different forms since she was a child. Growing up with four sisters, she often put on plays and musicals, wrote scripts, and designed costumes and sets to showcase her wild imagination and creativity. Ergo, she attributes her love of art to her sisters. Subconsciously, consciously, and with remarkable consistency, Rachel has given women a central role in her art; nearly all her portraits feature women, something she also attributes to her sisters: "My entire world is filled with women; they are collectively my best friends and biggest supporters." Rachel's work presents a strong message of female dignity and vitality. "I think my family and friends are proof that girls do get along, and that shows through my work."

While many of her ideas come from the women around her, she also draws inspiration from literature. Because there is little time for her to read as she pursues a double major in Painting and Drawing and Digital Media Communications,





“Beyond caring about relationships, beyond accomplishing things, it’s people who are valuable. People are never a wasted investment.”

she listens to audiobooks. “Listening while I’m working in the studio has enriched my process. It gives me more time to think about the book and grapple with new ideas to incorporate into my work,” says Rachel. Her latest body of work was inspired by a quote from G.K. Chesterton’s Christian apologetics classic *Orthodoxy*: “Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free . . . they want things repeated and unchanged.” Through a series of figure paintings focusing on the repetition of similar forms rendered in various, dissimilar ways, Rachel explores what it looks like to do the same things over and over to discover the value in repetition, rest, and routine.

Friendships have taught her about God, too, she says. “Beyond caring about relationships, beyond accomplishing things, it’s people who are valuable. People are never a wasted investment.” Rachel is preparing to backpack across Europe with one of her friends after graduation, hitting every art museum she can along the way. But Rachel doesn’t need a plane ticket for an adventure. She laughs as she recalls taking an air mattress to a lake with her friend and paddling around with sticks, waving to boats that passed by. As Rachel moves towards graduation and pursuing her dream of being a “creative director of anything,” she wants God to be the focal point of her relationships and pursuits. She wants to follow where curiosity leads and discover the fun in serious things, in serving God and creating art.



RACHEL TABOR

*Five paintings
in the order they appear:*

PAGES 59-63

TURN

6 x 8 in.

Canvas assemblage on wood panel

ANNA

22 x 30 in.

Canvas assemblage on wood panel

MINUTE

4 x 4 in.

Canvas assemblage on wood panel

LYDIA

12 x 16 in.

Canvas assemblage on wood panel

MUSE

4 x 6 in.

Canvas assemblage on wood panel





















DISAFFECTION 1
(previous) photography by Caleb Flachman

IRENE
oil by Grace Poulton

MY CUP RUNNETH OVER
acrylic by Cari Golden



WOMAN OF THE SLUM

digital photography by Alli Kennedy



RAMADAN IN KATANGA
digital photography by Alli Kennedy



EXTRAORDINARY
acrylic on panel by Taylor Harrison



PORTRAIT STUDY
charcoal by Hannah Sherrard





SPEAK LOUDER

ceramic by Matthew Everett

REACHING FURTHER

ceramic by Matthew Everett

THE ART OF SACRIFICE

digital photography by Will Dunlap

GRIFFIN

(following page) ink by Grace Poulton





LOGAN RILEY CARROLL

*Written by Caleb Flachman
Photographed by Blair Bellaire*

As a person, an author, and the frontman of the alternative rock band POLYMATH, Logan Riley Carroll eschews being easily pinned down. His vocabulary is peppered with abstract references to the many obscure authors and philosophers who have impacted him. And yet, as he joins me in the glass-encased study rooms in Thrift Library—ever-present vintage briefcase in hand—Logan is instantly present.

Unbuttoning his corduroy jacket with electric-purple fingernails, he crosses his legs and asks me how my day has been. With a mixture of restraint and passion, he speaks of the faults of “easily consumable art:” pop music, Marvel movies, and the like. Though these art forms come and go with little to no investment from their audiences, reading requires commitment. “It sounds pretentious to say that I want people to commit to consuming my art, but I honestly think it’s better that way.”

A self-described literature nut, whose head is always “stuck in the bookshelf,” Logan still cannot escape the instant thigh-slapping camaraderie of sporting events. He smiles widely under his mustache as he describes his affection for sports’ ability to unify and connect diverse groups of people with disparate experiences. It’s this attention to philosophical complexity and social groundedness which drives Logan’s art.

Logan characterizes his childhood in Redding, California, and the Upstate of South Carolina as largely lacking “artistic conditioning,” until he was introduced to music. After following his older brother Dallas to Anderson University to study music, Logan quickly discovered that the narrative component of writing is what sustains his interest. His continued songwriting for POLYMATH reflects this commitment: “I am attracted to the choruses and lyrics that transcend demographics, that transcend age. And I try to create them in a literary fashion.”

Similarly, with his fiction and poetry, Logan strives to create stories which move beyond himself. He says he recognizes the privileged and unappealing nature of his position as a “regular, white male” and that he





*“ . . . the day is over and I realize that I’ve blackened fifteen pages.
And I have no idea where the time went. That’s what fiction does for me.”*

does his best to escape it. Often, he begins writing with just one line of dialogue in mind, “And then the day is over and I realize that I’ve blackened fifteen pages. And I have no idea where the time went. That’s what fiction does for me.”

With another broad smile, he attributes his fascination with pure and unadulterated creation to the stories his father told him as a child. Most of these yarns featured characters who resembled Logan and his older brother embarking on fanciful adventures. Recently, Logan has been influenced by the groundbreaking work of James Joyce, Don DeLillo, and Kurt Vonnegut. Though Joyce served as something of an early barometer against which Logan measured his prose, he typifies most of his work from that period as “pure emulation.” Inspired by Kurt Vonnegut’s anti-war science fiction novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Logan wrote the time travel piece, “The Ends and All” which appears in this year’s journal.

After he graduates in May, Logan plans to attend graduate school and earn an MFA in Creative Writing. He wants to live and work as a writer. Hands folded on his right knee, gator-skin watch ticking under its clear face, he again smiles. Calmly, assuredly.





TAYLOR PORTRAIT STUDY
charcoal by Hannah Sherrard

BOY FROM KENTUCKY

Anna Grace Clark

You dig graves for those you claim to love,
 always and in all ways trying to set them ablaze to keep you warm,
 with thoughts of ashes, you breathe only to choke others out,
 and your mind is dark.

You turn words into matchsticks,
 using the syllables that started the flames to smother the fire alarms,
 and your words mean only what they can get you from others,
 and your tongue is dark.

You walk into the hearts of the frozen, promising light,
 but instead you start a forest fire around them and call it the sun;
 you take love and dilute it and manipulate it into fatigue,
 and your heart is dark.

You are a cadaver who creates cadavers to keep you company,
 with a soft spine, blackened lungs, and charred teeth,
 every action of yours is one of decay,
 and your hands are dark.

And mine are weary.



AND NOT A SIREN WAS HEARD

Logan Riley Carroll

People disguised as servers bustled corporately. Dressed in black slacks and black button-downs, concealing various forms of body hair, scar tissue, sweat stains, what one might call *humanity*, in a uniform that comforts the clientele of the Holly Bough Cafe in Manhattan, they moved in and out of the kitchen, hive-like. One with a face tattoo gathered used dishes from empty tables. One with a tattoo that no one could see rolled silverware in white linen squares. The one bent obtusely over the table refilled water glasses that were not yet empty. The ice, cubic and working as intended.

Dad had already asked me why I didn't tell him about my trip to Ithaca. I had not answered because I was busy chewing honeydew. The answer was *because we don't talk*. The answer that I wanted to give was *because it doesn't matter*. I swallowed melon.

"Must've slipped my mind. I hope you didn't take any offense."

"I heard the weather there is at its all-time worst."

Dad manages to find pancakes on every menu. He eats them with the fervor of a child wanting to go back outside to play. His plate was already spotless. The syrup residue glistened when possible.

The weather in Ithaca was balmy. I was never bothered by it during my time there. Dad has always liked to measure things in peaks and valleys. Before Ithaca was brought up, he had told me about the best baseball game he had ever seen. The final score was four to three, Mets. There was one extra inning played.

"How's your mother?" Dad asked. Better to get it out of the way now.

"She's well." I studied a grape on the end of my fork. "She's really loving satellite television."

Dad rolled his eyes, left to right.

"That woman was never satisfied with cable." He said this exhausted, even though it was before noon. "It was always, *why can't we have more than fifteen channels, why do we have to wash plastic forks and spoons, blah blah blah.*"

I could tell that he wanted to voice more complaints, but he had worked himself up. His mind could only produce gibberish.

Growing up in Newark with both of my parents, we rarely spent. This was Dad's decision. We ate off of plates that didn't match, using forks that ought to have been disposed of. Pants and shirts were worn well after they had lost their fit. Holes in clothing were patched up by hand. I knew I was an accident. Dad probably didn't want to spend money on condoms. I often thought Mom and Dad never would've seen their twentieth anniversary without me. I thought less often about the misery of the anniversaries in between. I remember asking for a brother once. Sometimes children pose complex questions that require simple answers. Dad saw it differently. He went through my room with a trash bag and proceeded to throw illustrated books, what I owned of crayons and markers, what little toys were dispersed across the hardwood, articles of clothing, going as far as unfooting one of the socks I wore, all into the plastic.

“Parker, if you want a brother so bad, be prepared to give up everything in this bag,” he told me. “Get used to eating half sandwiches and sharing your bed. Lord knows your mother and I aren’t going to pay for another one of *you*.”

Mom did not say anything, but if the Lord knew what she was thinking, I considered it the first time she and Dad ever agreed on a matter. She sat at the table, as if, left unattended, the meatloaf would be stolen away, while I cried and cried down the hall, in a room half empty, or, by Dad’s assessment, half full. We owned a matching set of silver knives that I never questioned. They were Mom’s favorite thing to clean.

“Don’t worry,” I said, “Mom only watches one channel, anyway. The one where celebrities cook their favorite meals.”

I can never understand why I comfort him, like I’m more loyal to one or the other. I decided I no longer wanted grapes and began to rifle through my fruit salad for a kiwi slice. A server with a bad leg and a headache asked Dad if he wanted more pancakes. He did. The cafe was more staff than customer. Seated at the table to my right was a blonde couple, man and woman, wearing matching sunglasses. Something about them felt European and it was probably their sunglasses. They had emptied sparkly mimosas with that commonwealth vehemence since sitting down. They had yet to order food. To my left and behind me were empty tables, either cleared and reset, or in the process of being. Kiwi wasn’t included in my fruit salad and I returned to the grape.

“Unreal,” Dad said. “What is it about those shows that attracts people?”

I anticipated that he already had his answer, silent.

“It’s like we can’t enjoy a roast beef unless Oprah Winfrey cooks it in front of us. Tell me Parker, how does watching Chevy Chase prepare potato casserole enhance a potato casserole?”

The same server with the leg and the ache delivered hot pancakes to Dad. He limped to the table with the European blondes and took their order: two eggs benedict and another round of mimosas. Water condensed and pooled beneath my glass. For all of its life-giving properties, it was not the drink I needed at the time. A server seemed to have dropped something important and glass behind the kitchen door. Dad was not yet finished with his soapbox, his grand soliloquy.

“What has humanity come to, Parker? When I was your age we fought wars for freedom. But freedom to do *what*? Now we freely sit around and watch polished mirrors with antennas sticking out. It’s not us we see reflected. It’s how we want to be seen. Dream of being. We dream of being Madonna making stir-fry.”

As far as I know, Dad had never fought in any wars. Post final remark, he seamlessly transitioned into pancake devourer. I took the time to dent my fruit salad. Most of the fruits were out of season, stiff and insipid. There wasn’t any juice at the bottom of the bowl. There was water in my glass, but I was not thirsty. Mimosas sparkled in my peripherals. Syrup sweetened something in front of me. I was late for nothing, but I checked my watch anyway. Dad didn’t notice. His pancake consumption defies logic. Time seems to slow for each bite, seems to bend elastically as he chews,

chews, swallows. Somewhere, on an atomic level, I am happier than he is. Sure, he got to eat his favorite food and I was left with flavorless fibers, but I saw it, even then. When he would finish with this stack of pancakes he would want more, but be too full to continue. He would ask for the check instead. To my surprise, Dad paused his eating.

“You know what happened, Parker? One day we all stopped worrying when we heard ambulance sirens. That’s what happened to humanity.”

What was left of the pancakes was preyed upon, but I was no longer hungry. Had any ambulances driven past while we ate? I wasn’t sure.

It turns out the blondes sitting next to us were movie stars. We learned this from the server with the limp and the throbbing temple after they had paid and left, leaving behind a handsome tip and a dozen tall champagne flutes. It turns out there was a slice of kiwi in my fruit salad. I learned this after I had lost my appetite.

When I was in Ithaca, I did a lot of driving around. In the city, you only get to own a car—not drive one. Driving feels like a luxury to me now. Like owning horses and riding them through untamed foothills, through crisp, verdant pasture. It was the first weekend I had off from the magazine and chose to spend it upstate. The weather was balmy and I would know: my windows were never rolled up. Insects gutted themselves on the windshield perfunctorily, mums made known by their redolence. The year had worked hard to entomb me, with its breakup and job change, but all at once and slow like thaw, my blood went from tepid to racing, and life was no longer a thing without color. I laughed at jokes that came back to me. I smiled at things that weren’t there.

Mom sat on the couch the entire weekend. Her show was on, her husband away. I offered to buy her groceries, to take out the recycling, to donate bags of old clothes, anything to get me out of her house and on the road. A fifteen-minute errand turned into an hour-long car ride. Every street sign with an intriguing name was turned upon. *Monkey Run Road*. *Beechnut Terrace*. I never found anything special, noteworthy, and yet I did. There were roads that led everywhere. There were roads that led nowhere. *Sodom Road*.

On an eventide trip through the outskirts, when the light that hit my vehicle could only be described as *aureate*, I came upon some young boys standing at the edge of the road, near the bottom of the hill, just where it bent homeward. Their bikes were scattered on the asphalt, some directly in the way of my car and any other cars, for that matter. It wasn’t distress that was written on the faces of the boys, it was only white-hot fear. I parked my car, not bothering to roll up my windows, and got out to investigate. My key was still twisted in the ignition. The engine hummed terribly.

The young boys, who I thought there were only three of, were four in total. I imagined they were anywhere from ten to twelve years old. The fourth boy, the one that I didn’t notice at first, was five yards off of the road. His bike, I assumed, was the one in the ditch with a back tire still spinning, a handlebar planted in the dirt, deeply rooted. He was tangled in a mess of barbed wire fence, crying softly. The barbs were in him good and, though his arms and face were covered in dirt and grass from the crash, lines of blood were visible, running out of him from where the metal dug in, making maroons and violets where they ought to not be. He had done his share of twisting before I arrived, but only made things worse. Now he just laid there, wide-eyed and panting. His shirt was ripped at the cuff, but I only noticed after he’d gotten loose.

It didn’t take a surgeon to remove the boy from the fence. I am just a writer. This was not surgery. When he was freed, he declined my offer to drive him to his house or the hospital, his choice. He said his house was just around the corner and that his bike would

*“Parker, if you want a brother so bad, be prepared to give up everything in this bag
 . . . Get used to eating half sandwiches and sharing your bed.”*

still ride. Once the tears and the sniffing had subsided, I asked him what had happened.
 “I just got going too fast.”

Dad walks swiftly at all times. He breezes up flights of stairs, two at a time, and paces, agitated, in checkout lines. As he walked, several strides in front of me, down the sidewalk, he seemed to flee any and all observation.

“Do you want to get a bag of roasted nuts, Dad?” I asked, smelling sweet aromas pervade from a nearby cart.

“Where from?”

From birth, we are taught that a father is someone you can depend upon. A cornerstone to build, build yourself, around. It’s not just another exotic jewel in the crown of the patriarchy. For a while, it’s a truth. I built around that cornerstone, even looking up to it at times, measuring my height with its height, but eventually the rooms were my own, furnished with objects *I* like to sit upon, tables for *my* belongings to rest atop, and felt safer in lieu of it. At what age can you start to worry about your own father?

In Central Park, Dad sucked in oxygen, noisy, on a bench. I chose to sit, but not right away. Dogs are the new babies and every person is a parent. Families walked around, froliced really, bound together by cord. A dog never asks for a brother. When given one, he shares the house, as I understand. Caterpillars were out there, inching up oaks and down oaks. Great birds seized the skies above, sniffing at the heavens, until they landed and were just pigeons pecking at bread crumb, seeds like sand. A homeless man disguised as a drummer beat his drum. The beat replaced thought. I sat down beside my dad.

“This is the best park there is,” Dad said and meant it.

I would have taken a moment to absorb the park, to ruminate upon his statement and agree, had I not already been soaking the park in prior.

“Dad, why did we even get brunch today?”

The question shocked him. It shocked me. We let the air clear as we sat in our little electric chair disguised as a bench.

“I suppose this is where I apologize for years gone by,” he said, a chuckle rattling around in his throat.

“I suppose it’s never too late.”

“You know,” he turned to me, “No one is ever ready to be a parent. You might think so. You might buy the diapers or paint a room all periwinkle, but you’re never *really* ready.”

I watched anything that was not the man beside me. Shoestrings. Chemtrails. Woman with sloppy sandwich.

“But when I held you the day you were born, your life still being measured in hours, your eyes reflecting so much, your brain filled with so little, I realized something, Parker. You helped me realize it, funny enough. I realized that I had so much of my *own* life left, and how badly I wished to live it.”

*"I wondered if the fence would mend and the boys on bikes would slow down.
The days would be shorter then. Boys often grow."*

"I thought you were trying to apologize?" I caved in, returning eye contact.

"I'm sorry, I thought I was," Dad said, confused.

"Dad, if you really did have this revelation, why not leave? Why stay married to Mom for twenty-one years? Why be so, so painfully involved in my life?"

"I guess." Dad swallowed. "I guess you and she were an integral part of the life I envisioned, that day, holding you, all red and crying. I suppose that's what I'm apologizing for."

"I can forgive you," I said, turning my head elsewhere. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"Parker, sometimes you remind me so much of *Kare-bear*."

The comment wasn't supposed to sting, but I winced. I had almost forgotten Dad's pet name for Mom. Why use it now? What purpose does it serve in speaking with me, his son?

"How is Sheila?" I asked him, ignoring him, in a way.

At once, Dad seemed to awake from amnesia. His body stilled and his voice went flat.

"She left."

Before us, a collie sniffed a boxer. A boxer sniffed a poodle. A poodle kept its nose to itself, pridefully. Dad didn't smoke anymore, neither did I, so we sat there and watched the dogs greet each other, as they do.

"Are you still living with that one person," Dad asked. "Roger, was it?"

"Robert." I corrected. "And no. I am not."

The drummer was packing up, but his beat was still beating. The pigeons took flight. Here, it seemed, traffic was myth. Green lights, yellow lights, red lights, all of it—myth. A concept we made, but don't even believe in. How any amount of cars could wind up motionless on the very streets paved to be driven seemed to be as real as Homer's *Odyssey*. But here, people moved, soul-by-soul, like water down a hill. A pregnant woman in sandals walked upstream, or maybe she was just rotund.

"We need to get you to the station," I said, "if you want to be back on time."

Before leaving Ithaca, I wrote a note to Mom, but left it in my shirt pocket. By the time I found it, it had already run through the wash twice over. It didn't resemble words anymore so I threw it away. Mom found the life she wanted, the husband who bought her plates that matched and silverware that shined and couldn't break. She had infinite channels to watch. She watched one. She never left the couch.

Ithaca was beautiful. The University was just as I recalled. People wore disguises seldomly and Mom fit in. She no longer had to sit at the dinner table, quiet. In December, I planned to return and imagined I'd be driving a lot. I wondered if the fence would mend and the boys on bikes would slow down. The days would be shorter then. Boys often grow.

When I took Dad to Grand Central, other people seemed to arrive simultaneously, synchronized. Sons and daughters like me brought their parents and stuffed them into trains. Other parents arrived, greeted by their children, smiling.

Dad wanted to say something, wanted to impart some lasting wisdom, but he left me with this:

“Today has been all right,” he said, looking toward the terminal. “And you really make me proud.”

Parents and their grown-up children arrived by the taxi-full. The trains spat out others and swallowed more. Dad wasn’t tall like I used to think of him. Had his ball cap been off, his hair, gray and thinning, would be evident. Dad wasn’t tall at all. His girth was directly above the beltline. His mind was already starting to deteriorate. He was really a short man.

“I’m glad you came up for the day. I’m proud of you too,” I said. The words puzzled him at first. He didn’t see how they fit together. The scene made sense apart from them. But, eventually, he smiled up at me. His hand touched my shoulder and hung there for a bit.

When his train would be there any minute, we shook hands and said goodbye.

As sweet as the memory was and is, the next time I saw Dad we were back to being strangers in a cafe, broaching the subject of a past marriage and a current, cold. But for a while there, I walked proud and talked proud.

When I saw pancakes on a menu I, at least, considered them. When the Mets played, I contemplated the relative genius of the game. At times, the weather really did feel like it couldn’t get any worse.

Mom called me one evening to hear about what I’d been working on, but really to talk about herself. I listened.

“You know, some days I still think about Newark.”

She always said Newark, but I knew who she meant. A child of divorced parents becomes quite adroit at translation.

“The other day I was at a picnic,” she said, “and I thought: *Wow, I can’t believe I miss plastic utensils.*”

Mom knew she missed something, but it wasn’t plastic. It wasn’t Dad either. She sensed there was something absent from her new life and reverted to what she knew. Men and women aren’t meant to have satellite television. We shouldn’t be allowed to see into the kitchens of pop stars or watch them dice fresh stalks of rhubarb. If backed into a corner, perhaps, I’d confess that silverware is a privilege we ought to not afford.

Mom’s voice was tender and aged her impressively. She was young once, although it’s hard to believe. Her hair is graying like Dad’s. Although she wouldn’t know this, she could guess what the years had done to him. In a cosmic way, they were still connected. In a concrete way, I connected them. She would never ask about him. I got the sense that she always understood, whether she wanted to or not.

When we finished our phone conversation, I was on the street, about to make my descent into the subway station. As people filtered in and out, I filtered in. I stood, aimless, simple, poised to board. The subway seemed incredibly fast—too fast for human transportation. So I watched it pass by. Start and end. Start and end.



DEAD, DEER

Claire Foxx

I come home one night, at the end
of one day—it doesn't matter which one,
not because they are all the same
but because there are so many of them, not
mattering differently—only this
is the night of the day I find the body
of a deer in my front yard. Lo.
Behold. The deer is dead.

Someone hit it with their car
and left it lying at my mailbox
like a package,
misdelayed.

The deer is small, a girl, alone.
It is a small girl deer—the body
of a deer, I remind myself
since deer is what it was
and body is what it is—alone
and on my grass, deer girl,
deer neck broken, backward-looking,
with black eyes.

What is one to do with such a thing?
How did I become the asker
of this question? I signed nothing,
swore no vows. I hear myself tell someone

on the phone: *I'm sure you must be busy,
but I have a situation. No sir,
it is not emergent. Everything is quite
under control.* The deer is dead. The deer
is child-sized, with fur like those suede
couch cushions you might have liked
to draw on, tracing pictures

with your finger to erase them
with a back-swipe of your hand.
You'd practice spelling words from school,
your name, the address of this house, the colors

*black and red. I hear myself say to the phone,
I understand. There's nothing you can do.*



COBWEB HANDS

Genevieve Rice

I hold onto my grandmother and guard her sleep. Finally, a peaceful one. Quiet eyes under closed lids. My sleeping mother stirs behind me, shifting in our shared corduroy recliner. It's the only seat in my grandmother's room. Too much furniture is out of place; in-home care reshaping our home. Yellow light from the stained-glass lampshade catches on the hospital-style bed. Hiding from bottles of cologne and her long-discarded watch on the vanity, it stands self-consciously in the center of the room, huddled next to the ventilator. Two outsiders inhabiting her bedroom. My mom's hand follows my arm to collect my fingers. Her eyes are shut, holding onto the light doze of recent days. Night watchman is her constant job, while I am volunteering, making the most of the hours before I go back to college.

There's something peaceful about the ventilator's repetitive click-whoosh in the dark bedroom, so I match my breath to it. The air hangs like a shroud. It's old. The night wind taps on the window. Four blankets lie on the bed. My right hand hides under the soft down, mimicking the reach-lean that countless family members enacted this week. My grandmother's hand is cool and fragile. The heat from my fingers leaches away the cold from hers. One hand of shallow lines and deep-seated veins. Only nineteen years held in those fingers. The other is covered in translucent skin, stretched over cobwebbed veins and ninety-three years of touches. Her hand is small now, the skin fragile as crepe paper.

My mother's hand is warmer and darker than mine. Stronger, too. Three generations strung together by fingertips.



NOVEMBER 14, 2018

“For Jackson Cowdrey”

Aleisse Buck

At midnight, I wake from a nightmare. I glance to your spot, hoping to find your arms for comfort, but find it empty. *Maybe you're still at work. Or you went to your mom's instead.* I check my phone in a hurry: nothing. I start texting a few friends, *have you seen him? Did he text you? Where is he?* I check the news: *there's been an accident.* I shiver as I read the description of the person who died: a twenty-one-year-old Greer man. *That sounds like you.*

I crawl out of bed, my cat dancing at my feet. At the front door, I pull the blinds open. There's no light outside on our porch. But somehow, in the light of the moon, I see a person walking up to the door, only a shoulder illuminated. I'm joyous, of course. *You're finally home!*

I swing the door open, but it's my parents, not you. In one moment, I know.

You're gone.

You can't be, I just talked to you this morning.

You were just here.

The sound that escapes me in devastation is ugly, yet real. I loved you, I loved you, I love you. On the floor, my mom holds me in her arms. She whispers that everything is going to be okay, but it's not. My dad watches. Tears roll down his cheek. I scream your name over and over and over, as if like a genie you'll appear in front me if I call, alive and breathing once more.



INFINITE

Aleisse Buck

Is there a heaven?
If so, how is it?
Does everyone receive
angel wings,
or is that up to God
to pick and choose,
like he chose to take you?

Is there a heaven?
There must be some place
for the two of us, my dear;
we are infinite.



BITTERSWEET

Emma Morris

Strawberries don't grow on the mountain. I've tried it, burying plants with small green leaves and white flowers, adamant that they would defy nature's limitations. But God sends spring frost, and the blooms refuse to become more than dime-sized, bitter pink berries. Thus, in May, family tradition took us down the mountain—several hundred feet lower, thirty miles south, across the North Carolina state line.

Sometimes, we could pick our own berries at Country Road Strawberries. I was an adventurous kid obsessed with Robert McCloskey's *Blueberries for Sal*. Dropping berries into a metal bucket and sneaking a few bites along the way was idyllic. The juice was vibrant red, the flavor earthy and sweet. When our buckets were full, my brothers and I crawled into our minivan with rations to fill our mouths and consequently keep us peaceable on the way home.

Then the work started. We sliced off strawberries' verdant tops and ripped open packets of Sure-Jell. Mama and Grandma boiled strawberries and heaps of sugar, and we funneled the warm gelatin concoction into mason jars of all sizes. We watched the waiting jars, hoping they would set just right. Finally—when the fruit of our labor was ready—we savored the candy-like puree on homemade biscuits.

Last spring, I packed my suitcase for a weekend at home. We bought a box of pre-picked berries. Mama guided me through the delicate jam-making process, letting me take the lead in a legacy I hope to perfect. But I mourned the loss of messy childhood strawberry days. When I left, I took one small jar to enjoy alone. Spread atop whole wheat toast, it tasted like all that used to be.



ARE YOU WASHED

Claire Foxx

The first time she even considered it was at church. Something had happened in the world, Pastor said, which was of the Enemy and not of God, who was good, and whose eye was on the sparrow *amen*, and whose ways were higher than man's ways, His thoughts higher than man's thoughts, and whose everlasting dominion could not be shaken *amen*, not by the principalities nor by the rulers of the darkness of this world, not by an earthquake—not a seven-point-oh, not a *nine*-point-oh—no. The whole earth trembled before the Lord.

But folks would be needing blood, and a lot of it, soon. So the Red Cross would come and set up in the fellowship hall next Saturday and the next, taking donations to send to the island where the earthquake knocked down the most buildings, where they were still finding people—the islanders—crushed underneath tons of brick and wood and palm thatch and other things they used to make buildings there. People calling out, in the language the Lord had given to them to speak, for help. Calling out to be saved. Calling out, church, for *you*. For the *life* of the flesh is in the blood, and it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. The blood of the Covenant, the blood of the Lamb. There is *power* in the blood. Let us pray.

Carmen said *amen*. Not only that, but she meant it—she had never meant anything more sincerely or at such a stirred depth of her soul as when *all God's people said*, and she heard her own voice with the others, each one modest of itself but loud altogether, in one accord, promising that if folks needed blood they would give it. *It is done*. She had never said such an *amen*. Her own hands were holding the hands of two people, who held hands with two people, who held hands with the crushed islanders of the Pacific. It was like they were transfused already. She could feel it.

The person on her left was a tall, sober, indifferent-looking man with a face like a memorial statue, or like he ought to have been a statue and didn't know why he wasn't. This was her husband Travis. He clasped her left hand in his right. He didn't have a left hand of his own because he was a war hero, with an honorable discharge and a Silver Star pin he never wore on his lapel although Carmen didn't see why not. He wouldn't let her wear it, either. She asked. It wasn't done, he said.

If she had sat in the pew on the opposite side of him, someone else could have taken his hand during the prayer, and she could have taken the soft, argil club of his forearm, curved her palm over the head of the bone, and traced the smooth cleft of his scar with her fingers. But he wouldn't let her sit on that side. He didn't like people to touch it, no matter how gentle. He kept it tucked privately in his shirtleeve and stood through the benediction with a stranger's hand draped on his shoulder like a lost glove.

She didn't know how to explain it to him, so she didn't. She waited for Saturday morning and just started doing the things she would have done if she had somewhere to go, taking a shower, brushing her hair, pinning back certain pieces above her ears, and waited for him to ask, *Where's the fire, Carmen? It's the weekend.*

I'm going to church, she would tell him.

That's on Saturdays now? He would think this was funny.

Travis, really, she'd say. *Don't you listen?* She said that a lot. *There's a blood drive for the people we saw on the news the other night. The earthquake. Pastor said. They're taking up blood to send over there.*

They don't have to send yours.

Well, they have to send somebody's, she would say, with her hands on her waist, maybe, or maybe not, depending on how he was looking at her. *There's no reason why it shouldn't be mine. You can stay or go, but don't think you're going to stop me. You won't.*

She was right about that. After she put in her earrings, the turquoise studs with the silver posts, she got him to hold the clasp on her bracelet with his good hand while she hooked it—or while she missed and missed and then finally hooked it on the last try, like threading a needle—but he didn't ask her anything. He let go of the chain and watched it slide down her forearm until it pulled taut against the breadth of her palm like a rubber band, and she thanked him for his help, and he yawned.

"I'll see you later," she said.

Travis waved goodbye with the bald heel of his wrist. Since it was his left hand that was missing, he didn't wear a wedding band anymore. *You could always wear it on your right hand,* she had offered, helpfully, she thought. *You've still got that.* But he didn't want to spend the money on a new ring. *Only the old one,* he told her. The old one was buried God only knows how deep in the sand of some Arabian desert, in a place too dangerous for her even to know by name. That's what he said, anyways. Personally she thought someone would have found it by now, would have sold it for a pretty penny on the black market. She only hoped it was someone who needed the money.

Sometimes when Carmen was driving alone, she steered with one arm and clenched the rest of her fingers into a fist in her lap until she passed seven American flags—which could be a long time, or not at all, depending on where she was going and what roads she took to get there—and then again sometimes seven was too few, so she had to count ten or a dozen, until it was enough. But on her way to the church that first Saturday she used both hands. One for driving and one for drinking from a bottle of water she stopped to buy at the gas station on the way there because that was the thing to do if you were a blood donor, which she was. She was almost. She could feel it.

In the fellowship hall, they gave her a clipboard with pages and pages of forms asking questions about her medical history to determine whether she qualified for donation. Not just anyone could do it. You couldn't if you had been to Africa in so-many months, you couldn't if you were taking antibiotics, you couldn't if you were too thin, or too young. You couldn't if you were pregnant. Of course, for Carmen it was all *No* to everything, a long column of *Noes* justified against the straightedge of the paper. No reason why it shouldn't be her.

Every pint of Carmen's blood could save three lives, said a poster tacked up on the wall. It said *Every pint of blood donated,* but she put in her name when she read it. Three people would live by the *life* of her flesh, or without it three people would die—and she could see them right there, pictured in a bright color portrait like a billboard or a Christmas card. They looked so familiar. Their faces were shiny where the light hit the poster paper. One of them was crippled in a wheelchair, which seemed unfair to Carmen, but each must bear his cross, as Pastor said, so do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices, *amen*, are pleasing to God. The one in the wheelchair was smiling, too, maybe even harder than the others—smiling at Carmen directly as she sat on a plastic stool and held out her hand so the Red Cross could test a drop of her blood.

"It's just a pinprick," said the nurse. "You won't even feel it." That was untrue. It felt like stepping on a thorn with her finger, the sharp sting of broken skin, the dark

bead of blood welling up in a perfect teardrop. Then the test results came up on a computer screen, and the nurse crossed her arms and said, “Oh, look at that. You’re AB, Carmen, did you know that?”

“A-B what?”

“Your blood type. You’re AB negative. It’s an antigen thing. Most people either have A or B, or neither. But you have both.”

“So it’s good?” Carmen asked.

“I mean—sure. It’s good,” said the nurse. She chewed the butt of her pen like a cigar, in that way so many girls nowadays had the unattractive habit of doing. “It’s pretty rare is what I meant.”

“How rare?”

“Well, I forget the statistics. But it’s the least common type. Something like one in a hundred, I want to say? You’ll probably be the only one we get today.” She spat out the pen and used it to sign a slip of paper—probably the only one she would sign all day for a rare AB negative donor, who was Carmen—and replaced the cap with her teeth.

“Anyways, your hematocrit’s fine, so you’re golden. Just take this down the hall, and they’ll give you another nurse for the blood draw. Take care.”

“Yes, you too,” Carmen told her. “God bless.”

She carried the paper down the hall without folding it, careful not to smudge the writ of the ink with her thumbs. *Look at that.* It felt a tad bit thicker than regular paper, like a certificate or something, maybe a newspaper. Carmen had been in the newspaper just last month in her mother’s obituary, on the back page, but the editors misspelled her name. It said, *Mary Grace King is survived by her daughter Carol King Strickland, 41.* Travis said that was fine because nobody still read the paper, anyways, which was probably true, but for ten dollars per line you at least wanted it to be right. That was all she was asking, to get what she paid for.

The second nurse said, “Hello! So the first thing I’m going to need you to do is make-a-fist so I can see all those beau-ti-ful veins.” She had an accent from somewhere but was beautiful and very efficient, with black eyes and long, shrewd, obedient fingers like a pianist. She knotted a tourniquet above Carmen’s elbow and pressed something into her hand that felt like a bread roll but was really a ball of foam with the Red Cross logo on it.

“Squeeze this,” she instructed. “Make-a-fist. Please.” Then she stared at the inside of Carmen’s forearm, at the pale, crooked tracing of capillaries, as though something meaningful would reveal itself if she stared long enough, an answer of some kind, the *power* of the blood.

“What do you see?” Carmen asked. The nurse stared. Carmen wondered if she understood.

“O-kay! So I’ve got it right here you just close your eyes-and-count-to-three-little-pinch-and-we’re-done.”

There was a needle in Carmen’s arm, and her blood was bleeding through the needle into a long, snaking catheter, and through the catheter into a plastic bag on the table, where it pooled in a shallow puddle the color of wine.

It was not very red, compared to most blood she had seen in that quantity. In all the war movies and Easter pageants ever made, the blood was always that bright, poisonous color, weeping like nectar from Jesus’ forehead, or clotted in somebody’s mouth after they were hit in the face, or shot in the stomach, or their throat was slit, but always the same thick mouthful that dripped vividly down their chin, almost pink. Travis never told her how unrealistic that was. He never liked to talk about things like that, but it would have been something to say, at least—they could have laughed about it together instead of just sitting there in front of the TV on the first and third cushions of their three-cushion couch.

“See, that was eas-y, you’re doing so great,” said the nurse.

“Thank you,” said Carmen. She meant it. She pointed at the blood bag, which was already growing full on the table, gorged in a dark, sour clot like a leech. “Are you sure that’s enough for three people?” she asked. She had more blood to give, if it wasn’t. The paperwork warned that she might get lightheaded, but really she felt very good, even better than before—like she could keep going for at least another pint. Travis could figure out how to make his own lunch like he figured out how to do everything else, with *gallantry in action*, and she could stay here filling bags from her beau-ti-ful veins until it was enough.

The nurse said, “It’s a won-der-ful thing that you’ve done today, ma’am. You should be proud.” But she didn’t answer the question. Maybe she had not understood.

The Red Cross had a policy that you could only give blood every fifty-six days, they told Carmen when she went back to church the next Saturday. Even if you felt strong. Even if your blood was the least common type. Even if you had never been and had no thought of going to Africa in your entire life, it was still fifty-six days. That was the rule.

Had she known that from the beginning, she might not have thrown everything away so quickly. Like the crackers they gave her to eat afterwards, or the volunteer sticker that said *I make a difference*, which wilted in the humidity and fell off her blouse—she stuck it on over her heart, pressed it down with the palm of her hand like the Pledge of Allegiance, but it just peeled right back off—before she even got home. Maybe she could have saved it. She knew it was cheap, but it meant something. It was symbolic.

Fifty-six days was eight weeks. Carmen read seven library books: five novels and one thirty-day devotional and a biography of a cardiac surgeon who held the world record for successful heart transplants. The biography took her the longest, but she finished it. It was interesting. Things like that always interested her. At one time she had thought of becoming a doctor or nurse herself—something healing—but instead became Travis’ wife, and Travis became a war veteran, and she used to volunteer in the hospital nursery where they would let you sit and hold some of the sick babies in this old, splintered wood rocking chair, but they only cried for their real mothers and opened their chapped pink mouths to her breast like fishes, and she had to turn them away.

She took fifty-six showers. Carmen was a shower-a-day type of person. She liked to be clean. She made steak nine times for dinner because it was Travis’ favorite—rare steak, fillet, still sort of raw in the center so that when it was pierced with a fork it bled onto the plate in a watery pink dilute that soaked into the broccoli and the corn and the baked beans and anything it touched.

“You know, the Jews don’t eat beef,” she told Travis as a point of interest. “It’s one of their laws.” What Carmen knew about Judaism was that it was nothing but laws, and then more laws until your head spun. They had every kind of law you could think of, food laws and hair laws and sabbath laws—blood laws—and Hanukkah. They missed the point.

Travis nodded, chewing. *Crying shame*, she thought he would say.

Don’t say that, Travis.

Why not?

It’s disrespectful. That’s God’s people.

But he didn’t say anything. He just kept gnawing into his ribeye with the serrated edge of his knife, working the blade back and forth with his wrist, back and forth, digging down through the leanness of the meat, with the plate inching away from him on the table until every few seconds he pulled it back in, not quite patiently but without frustration, knowing it would happen again but having no way to prevent it. It was hard for him to cut with one hand. But he only had the one hand—and he wouldn’t let Carmen do it. She was his wife, he said, not his mother.

She wasn't anyone's mother, which she had to remind the Red Cross when she finally could go to the blood bank, on a Monday. Her name was Carmen. No, she was not pregnant. No, she was not younger than this-much or thinner than that-much. No, this was not her first donation, although she had to answer all the same eligibility questions again. At first she thought of this as a flaw in the system and a waste of everyone's time—hers and the nurses' and especially the folks' needing blood, who had precious little time to waste—but then again, she understood. A lot of things could have changed over fifty-six days. The death toll of the earthquake had gone into the thousands, in that time. There had been a tsunami, on top of everything else. Drownings were added to the crushings of the islanders until it seemed to Carmen that soon there would be none of them left at all, that someday she would listen in her heart for the sound of their calling-out and hear silence.

But things hadn't changed for her.

"I like your earrings," said the nurse when Carmen sat down in the blood-donor chair. They were the same earrings from before. She was still wearing them.

"Oh, they're real turquoise," she said. "On silver posts." She touched each of her ears appreciatively with her left arm while she straightened her right arm in a kind of salute, open-palmed, for the nurse to decipher its entanglement of vessels. Carmen loved this part. She remembered how much she loved it as soon as the nurse leaned down over her arm, pursing her lips like an artist, like a poet searching for a word. The nurse did not have to say *Make a fist* because Carmen was already doing it. Instead, she said, "Yeah? Where'd you get them?"

"They were my mother's. She gave them to me as a little girl, when I first got my ears pierced."

"Is that so?" said the nurse.

"They're Navajo. From a tribe that used to live in Arizona, or somewhere." Carmen tried to remember the name of the tribe, which she used to know, but she was at a loss—and now she was at a true loss because up until three months ago she could have called her mother and asked, but now if she couldn't remember the name herself, the name would not be remembered. That made it hard for her to tell the story. "Well, anyways. The Navajos were great jewelers—if you didn't know—but the particular tribe died out a long time ago now. It's very tragic."

"I see." The nurse narrowed her eyes. "Those must be worth a whole lot, then."

"They must be. I'm sure they are. I don't think I would sell them, though."

This nurse didn't count down before she put in the needle—she just put it in—and at the same time she said, "Well, they're very beautiful."

"Well, thank you." Carmen wished she remembered the name of the tribe. But maybe it was for the better, for ill-gotten treasures have no lasting value, and righteousness alone delivers from death, and it is the *blood* that makes atonement by the life. Her blood. Dark and viscid and rare, freely given. It was too late for the Navajos. Let the dead bury the dead. *And all God's people said—*

"Did you want a sticker?"

"Yes, please."

This one she kept, with all the other ones like it, for a very long time. She collected them in the glove compartment of her car like receipts, and every fifty-six days she counted them up and multiplied the total by three—then she added three more for the first sticker, which she had thrown away before she knew any better, but it still counted—which gave her the number of people whose lives she had saved.

Amen.

She got all the way to forty-five. It took two years and one month, but it seemed like no time at all. It passed in a flash—it was only two years—and anyways, forty-five people was more than half the membership of the church, that many souls, that many

men and women and children, and their children, and their children's children. Flesh of her flesh. She could feel it.

The nurses tried to switch back and forth between which arm they drew from although all the blood came and went to the same places, so it was just as well, either way. Carmen encouraged them not to worry over it much. She had never been vain about scars. These were so small, anyways, just little blistered flecks of scars strewn in faint constellations on the insides of her elbows, seven on the left arm and ten on the right. Even when the Red Cross assigned her to one of the training nurses who had to strike two or three times to find a vein, it never bothered her. They were learning. Everyone had to learn how to do things right.

Travis ordered an artificial hand from a company on the internet. It wasn't a working hand. He couldn't open or close it, or anything like that. The joints of the fingers were fused. It just hung there at his side, fixed in a kind of paralyzed gesture between a fist and a handshake, grasping undecidedly at whatever he pointed it at, which was mostly the ground. It was only for looks. He wore it to church, even though everyone at church already knew he was missing one hand, even though it was already too warm for sleeves and you could see where the prosthesis strapped onto his arm with a thick, rubber band, not fooling anybody in the slightest.

He rested the hand on Carmen's knee during the sermon. This was what disturbed her the most—not that her husband had a false hand but that he treated his false hand like a real one, that he offered it to people to shake, that he touched her with it as though it could feel the warmth of her skin through its senseless fingertips, as though it were part of him really and not just a hollow replacement for what he had lost. She stared at it. If he had not been her husband, she would have stared anyways, with more subtlety, but since he was her husband, and she was his wife, she stared at the stiff splay of the fingers until her eyes burned. They were gray fingers. Like a mannequin, like how her mother's gray fingers had been clasped together in a thick steeple on her chest. Without blood. Carmen stared.

And if your right hand offends you, said Pastor, then you cut the hand off, *amen*, and you throw it away, for it is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body and *soul* to be thrown into hell. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, and no man shall know the hour, and when the hour comes every knee shall bow, and every man shall give an account for the works he has done. Not one will be spared. No, not one.

Carmen counted on the fingers of the hand from one to forty-five. Then she counted them backwards to one. The works she had done. The hand was good for this. You could count on it all day, to a hundred, to a hundred thousand, to infinity both ways. But it didn't have a pulse.

She had never felt sorry for Travis until now. Being one-handed, she knew it wasn't always easy. But there was no shame in it. People were grateful. They stopped him in grocery store aisles—total strangers, the way women stop other women to admire their babies even though they've never met—and thanked him from the bottoms of their hearts for the sacrifices he had made in the service of this great nation. *What do you say, Travis?* Carmen said. He scratched his chin. *He means thank you. Thank you very much.* The new hand didn't change anything. It emphasized the thing lacked, made the real hand seem somehow more amputated than it already was.

And so she began to pray. She didn't know what for. Prayer was often that way, in her experience. The Lord knew. This was a prayer without any words, it was all numbers, like a timetable. *Three threes make nine. Nine threes make twenty-seven. Nine nines make eighty-one. Eighty-one zeroes make zero . . . Three threes make nine.* Until it was enough.

SOMEDAY

Aleisse Buck

Maybe someday
I'll figure out how to live
with more confidence
and spontaneity:
all comfort zones broken,
all walls torn down by
each tick of the minute hand.

Maybe someday
I'll say the words
hidden beneath my tongue
and give myself a voice.
For I am someone, too,
folding into myself again
until someday comes.



SACRIFICE

Emma Morris

The dandelion
trades her beauty for wishes.
With one breath, hope soars.



MOTH AND RUST

Emma Morris

It's New Year's Day. The sun settles below the blue ridge horizon, and the thermometer skirts single digits. Snow has fallen steadily all day, leaving a generous layer on the ground. My younger siblings, Josh and Emily, drag sleds up the hill in the backyard, dressed in so many layers of clothing that they walk with their legs and arms wide, like permanent snow angels—one last ride before evening becomes night. I only enjoy the snow from inside. I watch the white world from Papaw Jack's windows. It's senior year, and I long for the earth to stay this still. A bright red glow illuminates the gray sky and dances across the ice. It's pure and breathtaking.

"Eliza Mae, can you believe it's January?" Papaw's words call me away from the cold glass. When he says "January," the syllables are in all of the wrong places, creating a murmur that sounds more like "Jan-ah-rar-ree."

I make my way to the kitchen table in Papaw's indigo-carpeted dining room. He leans on the laminate countertop, watching a Mr. Coffee pot brew. Heat meets the chill air and makes cloud-like spirals. Papaw reaches for two mugs. He holds the pot's handle with both hands as he pours but still shakes, and a few drops of coffee bubble on the counter. He wipes the stains with a crocheted dishrag before joining me at the table and sliding a cup of plain black Folgers to me. It's my favorite coffee. It tastes real, without pretentiousness; I have a humble preference for cheap caffeine.

We sit in silence for a little while. I study the lines on Papaw's face and think of them as a roadmap. I like observing people and finding stories in them like that.

Papaw's house is less than half a mile from our family's house, but it feels more like home than anywhere to me. When Granny Katherine died six years ago, Papaw sold their brick home of over fifty years to move near us. He thinks our mountain city has too many distractions. More and more people are spending their weekends here and building homes here. Outdoorsy environmentalists are drawn by our mix of hiking trails and farm-to-table restaurants. Our simple rural landscape has become vogue and not so simple anymore. Mama says it's good for Papaw to be around people. But if I had lived like him, I don't think I would like it here either. It's as if his life has been a slow progression away from the quiet culture that he was born into. He is closer to the clamor of strangers and traffic now.

"It's my birthday in three days," he says, watching the remnants of the sunset outside. He leans into his wicker-back kitchen chair.

I've been expecting his reminder. Every year, we spend his birthday together; it's our tradition. Last year, we went to an antique music store. Neither of us play any instrument at all, but we pretended that we did. And Papaw pretended he had money to spend on an old, croaking fiddle. He held it carefully and inspected the fingerboard but never played it. He told the shop owner he'd think about buying it, but we left with no intention of returning. It was Papaw's eighty-three-year-old idea of a prank. He is committed to starting every year with a memory. Without fail, he jokes that it might be his last year. "All are of the dust, and all turn to dust again," he reminds me often. I think it's morbid but laugh anyway because I don't know what else to say.

“If you let me drive your truck, I’ll go wherever you want to go.” I cross my hands on the table and widen my eyes. Our eyes are mirrors—the same emerald green.

“Deal.” Papaw reaches across the table to shake my hand.

“I’d like you to take me back to Reid Holler.” His gaze is fixed on the steam hovering above his mug. I can tell his concentration is far away, even though he’s sitting right in front of me.

Reid Holler was Papaw’s old home place. He lived there his whole childhood, and when he married my Granny, he built them a small house beside his family home. They didn’t live there long though, only five years. In 1956, the railroad closed, and Papaw lost his job as a railroad engineer. They moved closer to the shops in the county and bought a two-bedroom brick house. Papaw was hired as a Sheriff’s deputy, and Granny began teaching at the local elementary school. They had four kids and stayed in the county until Granny died, leaving Reid Holler to moth and rust. I want to ask him what it was like to leave his home behind, but I don’t.

“I’m off work Saturday. And I shouldn’t have too much homework.” I speak softly, afraid to interrupt his thoughts.

He looks me in the eye, feigning seriousness before softening his expression into a grin.

“All right. I guess I could clear my schedule.”

“It’s a plan,” I say.

Papaw rises slowly, stacking our empty mugs. I lean under the table to grab a book from my backpack and run my thumb across the worn binding. Papaw returns and places his calloused hands on my chair behind me.

“Whatcha reading?” He stares at the words on the pages.

“O’Connor.” I know he doesn’t read very much.

“Wouldn’t know him.”

“Her, actually. I think you might like this story.”

“I like to think I’ve lived my own stories, ‘Liza.’” He squeezes my shoulder before turning away.

“I like your stories,” I say, but I don’t think he hears me.

He likes to tell me about how things used to be—about living isolated from the rest of the world as a kid, in the purest form of nature. He walked to school, without the roar of buses. In summer, he was often buried in hay, sometimes playing and sometimes baling. He caught snakes in the river in July, without sunscreen. Many of his stories used to be about Granny too, but he doesn’t talk about her very much now.

Papaw walks across the trailer and sits on the couch. He says he avoids the recliner for fear of it being his resting place. Mumbling something about dry bones, he places a pillow behind his head and sighs. He holds the TV remote but just stares at the carpet.

My book is open, but I don’t read. The old wall clock’s movement grows louder. The heat from the wood stove feels suffocating. Days like this will end, and I will miss them. I don’t know how to tell Papaw that I’m leaving in August, going to college. My acceptance letter is tucked in the pages of my book. It feels heavy.

Though Chicago is a short flight away, it feels like I'm moving to Bangkok. My parents and grandparents and great grandparents never went to college, so no one sees the need for change now. They just resent anything that might take me away. They never thought I would want to leave. They never asked.

The sky is a fusion of gray and navy. Snow still falls, and I wonder if it will ever stop. Josh and Emily trudge through the yard, and I can see their cherry-colored faces coming into view. As the door opens, bitter cold mixes with warmth, and I shiver.

It's Saturday, January fourth. It looks like it might snow again, and the ground remains frozen. It's cold and silent—typical for these mountains. I wear a big flannel, black Converse, and distressed black jeans. Papaw will probably ask if someone ran a cheese grater across my pants like he usually does when I wear these jeans. I walk to his house, my eyes drifting from the frosted grass to the foggy expanse. I want this dawn to last forever. I want to stay in this quiet moment, watching the sun ascend over a tranquil earth. For a moment, I imagine that I never have to leave. But Papaw is waiting, so I take one more breath of cool air and approach his home.

"Hey, Papaw." The wind catches the front door, and it slams behind me.

Just as I expect, Papaw is sitting at the table with his Bible open, eating his signature breakfast. Every morning, he reads three chapters of the King James Bible—always in order—while he drinks black coffee and eats a piece of buttered Wonder Bread toast. His shoulders have hunched more over the past few years, and he squints harder when he reads now. He's eighty-four today. The scar above his right eyebrow is almost indistinguishable from his wrinkles. His thin remnant of hair is dark black, without a hint of gray. He told me last week that the Bible says gray hair is a crown of glory. He says he lost his crown in the early fifties, when he strayed from the straight and narrow. I couldn't help but smile. He hasn't always been so wise.

"I'm surprised you're up this early on a Saturday." He takes his last bite of toast.

"I like mornings. Besides, it's your birthday."

Papaw closes his Bible and rises to carefully place it back on the coffee table.

"Let's get going." He throws me his keys, and I catch the edge of his keyring before dropping them on the floor.

"You know I can't catch!"

"I just hope you can drive!" He opens the door for me and we step into the winter morning.

His truck is a 1972 red Ford straight gear. It smells of fresh-cut hickory that's ready to kindle his wood stove. The upholstered seats are pungent with motor oil, absorbed from years of his repairs and "improvements." The low groan of the timeworn engine is soothing. Reid Holler is only about twenty-five minutes away, but the road is curvy. I drive slowly, heeding Papaw's reminder that there may be slick spots in shaded valleys. We stay quiet, watching the pine trees and the smoke dancing from chimneys. We haven't visited Reid Holler since Granny died, but I still know the way.

Gospel radio plays quietly. Our lack of words is not unusual, but today it's terrifying because I have to break the silence. I have to tell him. I pop my fingers while I drive, an anxious habit.

"I'm going to college. I'm leaving. In August." I don't let my eyes waver from the road.

Papaw turns the radio off, leaving us in complete silence. My words linger in the small truck.

"Where are you going?"

“Chicago. The University of Chicago.” Papaw is usually biased towards the South, but at least I know he likes the Bears.

“I’ve never been there.” He turns the air condition on, even though it’s freezing outside, then turns it off again.

“I guess you’ll be reading a lot.” He taps his fingers on his leg. “Your parents?”

“They don’t know.” I shift in my seat, inching closer to the window. I want him to tell me he’s proud, to affirm me. My palms sweat, and I run them across the armrests, one at a time.

He sighs.

The truck is silent again. We pass more houses that used to be homes and a closed gas station. I recognize a white house with a few red shingles clinging to the remains.

“Isn’t that the meth house that was in the newspaper a couple weeks ago? I think it caught on fire,” I say.

*“We walk onto the small porch . . . Papaw opens the white-painted door for me.
I feel like I’m walking into a church mid-service.”*

“Maybe. It used to be Tim Redden’s house.” Papaw pauses before laughing under his breath, like he usually does before reminiscing on his lively teenage years.

“What is it?” I glance at him, relieved to see him smile again.

“There are some stories I can’t tell you, Eliza Mae.”

“I’m seventeen! I’m not a kid anymore!”

He laughs like he’s not quite sure about that, but gives in to me anyway. “Have you ever heard of bootleggers? Redden was one. I’ll leave it at that. I haven’t always been the man I am now.”

I try to imagine Papaw, the teetotaler Baptist he is, drinking moonshine.

“It’s a wonder your Granny married me.” He winks at me before turning towards the window again.

Papaw sometimes tells me that I remind him of Granny. I always saw the resemblance myself. My freckles and unruly blonde curls are from her. When I was young, she spent countless nights reading *Narnia* to me with gentle, slow words. I want to tell her I’m going to college, going to be reading all the time, going to be studying literature. I can tell from Papaw’s furrowed expression that he would like to tell her too.

“Is this it?” I ask.

“Not this curve, but the next.”

“This one?”

“Yep, this is it. Just pull on the grass up there.”

I park the car, and we just stare at the old house, as if it’s about to turn a cartwheel. Finally, Papaw opens the truck door.

The place hasn’t changed much since I was here six years ago. Two houses rest on the property—one Papaw’s childhood family home and one his own. An old barn rests in the sprawling yard too.

“Why don’t we come here anymore?” I ask. “We don’t live very far away.”

“There’s not much to see. And I don’t own it anymore,” Papaw says, kicking his

boots in the clay. "I haven't been here since Katherine . . ." He doesn't finish his sentence, and I see his eyes glisten.

"I think it's beautiful." I kneel down and sift the snow and dirt through my fingers. I don't think I appreciated the history of this place enough when I visited as a kid. "Tell me about it."

"What do you want to know?"

"About the railroad, about where you played as a kid, about how you built the house." I stand up, wiping the dirt on my hands onto my jeans. "About Granny. About leaving."

Papaw turns to face the house again. "The house on the end there is the one I built. It took me all summer. But I finished it by the wedding."

"What year was that?"

"Fifty-one. She had just turned eighteen."

*"I think you might like this story."
'I like to think I've lived my own stories,' Liza."*

He nods, twisting his silver wedding band. He still wears it every day. "Want to see the house . . . or what's left of it anyway?"

Before I can reply, a deep voice from behind startles us.

"Jack!" We turn to see a small dark-skinned old man in a large tattered t-shirt approaching us. I've never seen the man before.

Papaw jumps, surprised by the voice, then smiles widely when he sees the man. "Well, if it isn't Ol' Silas! How've you been?"

"All right, all right. Can't complain." Silas motions to the small blue home with red shutters across the street. "I'm still here."

"That's something." Papaw introduces me, placing his hand on my shoulders.

"She might be leaving for college this fall. In Chicago." He nods at the man, and the man nods back, exchanging some kind of odd understanding that I perceive as mutual disapproval.

The men speak like brothers. I piece together that they were old neighbors, childhood friends. They haven't seen each other in years, haven't even spoken. But I see a shadow of who Papaw once was, a carefree kid who couldn't see the way things would change. Though Papaw's home is dilapidated, it is still a part of him.

Silas shakes my hand and hugs Papaw.

"Good to see you, Jack." He heads back across the road and closes his door behind him.

"I hadn't seen him in years," Papaw says. "I guess the Good Lord took us different ways. He's a factory man, it's a modest job but a steady one. He never left home. Things change, but not really." He faces his old home as if he's talking to no one in particular. "You ready to see the house?"

I have never been inside before. Granny never felt right walking in considering it wasn't their property anymore, but Papaw doesn't seem to mind.

We walk up the hill. It's colder here. I should have brought a coat. I hug my flannel tight around me.

We walk onto the small porch, and the wood whines beneath our steps. Papaw opens the white-painted door for me. I feel like I'm walking into a church mid-service.

"You *built* this?" I ask, inspecting the house.

"A long time ago. What do you think?" he asks.

"I'm impressed."

All the stories Papaw has told me about him and Granny as newlyweds in this house come alive in my imagination. I imagine him carrying Granny through this doorway the night they married. He didn't let her see the inside of the house until then; he wanted to surprise her. He placed a baby grand piano in the corner of the living room. That's one of Papaw's stories. I can almost see water burrowing in the corner of Granny's eyes as she ran her hand across the cold ivory that night. I can hear her playing "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." It was her favorite hymn.

The empty house smells of oak and mildew and smoke. Cobwebs crawl up the walls like ivy.

"The Word made manifest. Moth and rust corrupt earthly treasure," Papaw says, examining the failing doorframe.

I run my hand up and down the cold, crimson-painted plaster wall. I reach in front of the fireplace, as if there are flames blazing inside to warm my hands. In the kitchen, the linoleum floor is bubbled, but I admire the hand-crafted oak cabinets. The dirty cream walls and warped floors in the bedroom bear the house's age. Papaw waits for me in the living room, with his hands in his jeans' pockets.

"It must have been hard to leave here."

"We found where we were supposed to be. And it wasn't here." He places his arm around me.

Papaw and I aren't all that different. I think I know how hard it must have been.

"It was time," Papaw says. "And when it's time to leave, you leave—even when not everyone understands. For everything, there is a season."

We step back onto the porch, and I see his breath in the cold air. He closes the rotting door behind us.

I back out of the driveway, onto the country road. The Gospel station hums again. A sermon plays softly now, and the preacher's words are slow:

*Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity . . .
What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?
One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh:
but the earth abideth for ever.*

The sun is in the middle of the sky now, but the day is still gray. The wind snaps ice-covered branches. Papaw watches the rearview mirror until his home vanishes, and I plead with myself to remember these mountains.



PUDDLE PIRATES

Hayden Dutschke

I dreamed of puddle pirates,
waking up in a constrained ocean,
knee deep in Kool-Aid,
surrounded by children garbed
in striped shirts and eyepatches.
Nerf gun cannons were aimed
from their inflatable ship,
while marauders, wielding
foam swords, approached.
They wrapped me in toilet paper,
yo-yo strings, and soft blankies.
Placed on a mast constructed
of Legos, the powder monkeys
did a mocking dance,
flaunting ice cream delicacies,
willing the ship to part
through red waters.
The captain strutted up to me,
a stuffed albatross in hand,
and wrapped it around my neck.



LITTLE THINGS

Claire Foxx

At the time he was sure he imagined it, that he had seen her pulling a stray piece of hair from the flypaper gloss of her lip, that was all, as she could have been expected to do. She was heavily lipsticked—in red, which came off on his mouth when they had their kiss and made him look ten years old in the photos, no older than a boy, skinny-armed in his tuxedo, with popsicle melted and dried in the corners of his smile. Probably this should have embarrassed him. Probably it did. But now they were married, and the key to marriage was patience and understanding and forgiving the other person for the careless everyday sleights and annoyances and humiliations otherwise known as “the little things.”

Also, love. Deep, abiding marital love, so long as they both should live. This was the meaning of love putting things in perspective: thirty years from now, it would no longer matter what he did or did not see, or thought he saw, his wife put in her mouth in the limousine on the way to the Marriott where they would spend their first night together as man and wife, in one room reserved under one name, which now and forevermore belonged to them both.

What he thought he saw was a piece of white lace from the sleeve of her wedding dress. If he hadn't known better, he would have said she broke a seam with her pinky, tore off a length of fabric the size of an index card, folded it twice—in half and then in half again, as though she had done this before many times and developed a kind of technique—and swallowed it whole.

But the lighting in the limo was very dim. It was hard to see anything clearly. She could just as easily have been flossing her teeth. She could have been chewing a sharp edge on one of her fingernails, which were manicured for the occasion with delicate white tips like waning moons, or waxing moons, whichever one kept getting smaller and smaller until it was gone from the sky. She could have been trying to dab off some of the lipstick with a tissue someone gave her at the altar in case she started to cry, which she hadn't. Neither had he. He never understood why anyone cried at weddings. What he felt when he looked at Gwen was not a crying feeling.

It was love, of course. It was love so profoundly familiar it almost didn't have to be felt. It would be like crying because you had legs, or a nose. You would cry if you lost them, sure—you'd never stop crying, then—but otherwise you just walked, and breathed. That was the whole beauty of it.

When they got to the hotel, he let himself into the room and told her to wait in the hall while he propped the door with a chair. Then he carried her over the threshold in his arms, wondering absently how this was possible for couples less balanced than they, in which the woman was taller than the man, or too heavy for him to pick up—or in which they were both the same size, two perfect halves of a whole, neither one strong enough to carry them together. Perhaps for them it was not possible. He found the idea of two people having come all this far only to find themselves wrongly proportioned, unequally yoked, to be momentarily very sad. But then he returned to himself. It was the happiest day of his life. Gwen was exactly the right size to be carried by him.

He put her down gently on the bed, which the Marriott had strewn with rose petals the color of her lips, more red than pink, with dark, rippled edges like ribbon sealed over a flame. The bedspread and her wedding gown were also the same color—white—and although she could not have known this beforehand in order to arrange it, and neither could he, the perfection of everything suggested it was all by design, put together like a scene from a movie. On the nightstand was a bottle of champagne and two glass flutes that looked like crystal. Across the room was a window through which could be seen a postcard of the city at dusk.

“Gwen,” he said.

“Hmm?”

He had in mind to ask her about the limo, but now that ten minutes had passed it seemed unimportant, so instead he turned back to close the door. To someone other than Gwen, this might have seemed either ominous or suggestive, the sound of the bolt latching, locking them into the room alone together for the rest of the night, and then for the rest of their lives, but he knew she would take it for what it was. Security. They couldn’t very well sleep with the door open.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Sure.”

She was sitting on the bed with her legs folded under her skirt, like a swan, or he supposed, certain similar kinds of geese, with the sleek, long-necked profile of that type of bird. She was beautiful, his wife. She was plucking rose petals off the coverlet and placing them individually on her tongue, one after the other, like there was a contest and she was afraid to lose.

“Gwen?”

She looked at him and licked her teeth.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh,” she said. She shrugged, and he recognized the shrug, the way only a person who was very familiar with her shoulders could have recognized it, as an expression of total indifference. The untrained eye could not have distinguished between this shrug and a mere drawing-in of breath—it was a gesture so subtle and ordinary it seemed almost not to happen, like blinking. It moved the fabric of her dress only slightly, and there was a sound of soft friction like the sticking-together of pages in a book.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s something I do.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It is.” She glanced sideways at her reflection in the window, and for the first time since he could remember he wondered what she was thinking.

“It’s not,” he said. “Since when?”

“A long time ago.”

“A long time ago, when?” In the history of their lives, a long time ago could have meant decades—or a decade, at least, when they were still strangers in separate tenth grades, stars uncrossed, as yet insignificant others. In the history of their life together, a long time was two years, which was how long it had been since one of them—he, or she?—had first used the word “love,” and the other—she? he?—repeated it back in the way of a good waitress, the kind who remembers to hold what you tell her to hold and doesn’t wait for your glass to be empty before she refills it. A long time ago in their marriage was ninety-four minutes. Ninety-five. When his wife breathed, he smelled potpourri.

“In the limo,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean, yes?”

She looked at him with concern, as though uncertain whether or how to proceed if these were the limits of their shared vocabulary, how to communicate in a language more basic and unambiguous than yes and no. “I mean yes. It’s just one of those things. You know.”

He did not. “Are you hungry?”

On the point of her finger she balanced one of the petals, flimsy and barely concave like the contact lenses she would have to remove before they went to bed—he knew this about her, see, sometimes they folded on the surface of her eye and she began to cry involuntarily, without feeling, down only one side of her face—and pressed it onto the roof of her mouth. She spoke with a lisp. “No, it’s not like that.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No,” she said.

“No?”

She folded her hands in her lap in a way that seemed unnecessarily complicated unless it was meant to be some kind of cue, a hand signal to an unseen card player, sign language for *love is patient*. She had slim, flexible fingers. Her wedding band was a size three. “I don’t have to do it this way,” she said, “if it bothers you too much. Does it? Bother you, I mean. You can say yes.”

He said, “I don’t know. I don’t know. Does it make you happy?”

“I think so.”

The answer to the question was yes or no. He thought this was clear. She was happier when she ate things—she ate *things*, his wife, bits and pieces of things in furtive mouthfuls like a hamster—or not. She didn’t look happier, really. Her tongue was the color of cough syrup. Other than that, she looked exactly the same.

He said, “Okay then.”

She said, “Good.”

He said, “Great.”

She said, “Now, get me out of this dress.”

He had one concern. On the subject of his wife’s compulsion to feed herself scraps of cloth, blades of grass, the occasional postage stamp, lost coins and pinches of gravel from the driveway in which they now parked both of their cars end to end, *his* and *hers*, his concern was for her health. He thought only of her esophagus. Was it in danger? If so, what kind? Could he expect, thirty years from now, to be married to a woman whose neck had stretched long in the usual way, aged gracefully into a softer shape of the neck he already knew—and loved, but most of all knew—or would there be ultimate consequences for her throat? A slow loss of integrity over time, perhaps so slow that it would be imperceptible to him until the day of the collapse, when the compromised walls of her throat would fall in on themselves without warning like a mineshaft, the kind in which men could be trapped underground for ten and twelve days at a time while rescue teams tried to pass packets of crushed oyster crackers to the survivors through tiny cracks in the rubble. He imagined. He dared not imagine. He said, when people asked him, *How’s married life?* that he certainly couldn’t complain.

It was true. Being married to Gwen was exactly like what he thought it would be, which was exactly like not being married to Gwen, but with a mortgage and a shared closet and a certificate mounted in the hallway between the kitchen and the bathroom—their kitchen, now, and *their* bathroom, that was the difference—in a modest black frame that was meant to be used for diplomas but worked just as well for their purposes. Better than well, he thought. It was simple. That was its charm. Four corners, two panes of glass. It suggested to him a kind of square durability that the decorative frames, with their delicate inlaid wood, made more beautiful by the taking away of it, did not. Every day when he walked past the frame, he felt sure. He made the right choice.

His wife was an excellent wife. He knew she would be, of course, but now she was. In the mornings she ran. She woke early and ran to the high school, around the track in the near-darkness until the sun came up over the football field like a searchlight, and then she ran home. By that time he was awake. But never before. She was capable, his wife, of remarkable stealth. Every day she left their bed, and their bedroom, and their house, without making so much as a sound—even the sounds she should have made involuntarily, between the mattress springs and the door hinges, the toilet, the sink, the dull windchime noise that keys make when you pick them up off a table. She evanesced. In a different person he might have found this unsettling. How she changed her clothes so entirely in silence, and while he lay unconscious not ten feet away, not even knowing that he was alone until she had already returned, with blood in her cheeks and the soles of her shoes that much thinner, miles he hadn't gone.

But in Gwen he found it romantic. She let him sleep. This was the way he expected to be loved by her, with a love that was very like courtesy. A lifetime of small, repeatable acts of decency performed with the regularity and unthinkingness of habit. What more than this could he ask?

He would have preferred for her to eat only things that occurred in nature. Tablespoons of potting soil and dead fronds cast off by the house fern they kept in their living room instead of getting a dog. *Start with a plant*, they were told by people who would know. *If you keep the plant alive, get a dog. If you keep the dog alive, get another dog, just to be sure. Take your time. A baby is a human being. There's no going back after that. Everything changes.*

"It was love so profoundly familiar it almost didn't have to be felt. It would be like crying because you had legs . . . You would cry if you lost them . . ."

The fern sat under the window at one end of their couch where it could receive direct sunlight and photosynthesize to its fullest potential. They watered it weekly, on Tuesdays, alternating the responsibility between the two of them so that it was equally their fern and didn't belong more to one than the other. The fern was tall for its age. It was dark green and carefully pruned. Whenever they watched a movie on the couch, Gwen would reach her hand into the pot and draw out a leaf, or two or three leaves that had withered or were starting to wither and fall, and fold them carefully into her mouth with a dry, papery rustling that reminded him of money, the sound a crisp bill makes if you crumple it in your fist.

"That guy, the boyfriend, is never going to make it," she'd say then, shaking her head. Or something to that effect, depending on what movie they were watching and whether the boyfriend was going to make it or not. A skill they both had, he and Gwen, was to predict the plot of any film with almost clairvoyant accuracy within the first thirty minutes of watching it. Other people considered this "spoiling" the movie. They considered it an advantage to know the end from the beginning.

"True," he agreed. He looked at the fern. There was less of it now. But there was a lot of it left, so he couldn't see the difference, really. He supposed that was good. "Give it an hour. The boyfriend will be long gone."

At least the fern was a plant. People ate plants. People did not—this was what concerned him—eat dish sponges. People did not walk into kitchens, with all the

new flatware and bakeware and tupperware and wares of every description in the cabinets, monogrammed with their now shared initial; did not open the fridge and pick up a yogurt, and then put it back on the shelf; did not go to the sink and bite off half the sponge with the cereal crunch of stale bread. But Gwen did. The sponge was two-faced: soft on the front and abrasive steel wool on the back side for scouring. This had no effect on her. She ate both layers at once, in a thick square the size of his wallet, and poured herself a glass of milk to drink after. Then she washed the glass with the uneaten half of the sponge, dried it with a towel, and put it back inside the cabinet rim-down, which they both preferred to rim-up so that any last beads of water could drip-dry instead of pooling in the bottom of the glass.

“Gnats,” he told her on move-in day, while they were setting house rules. He was setting them, and she was nodding her head. “Any kind of stagnant water, you get gnats.”

“Right,” she agreed. “Good point.” And they never had a problem with gnats.

They had dinner reservations once a month at the Italian restaurant where he proposed to her, although not because he proposed to her there. Because they made good fettuccini. And because the owners, who were married—or should he now say also married, fellow spouses—knew them by name and referred to them as “regulars,” which would have offended the sensibilities of a different kind of couple but in their case was probably the right word for it. They were regulars. It was a compliment.

“Have you eaten yet?” he asked Gwen in the living room. She blinked too many times when she looked up at him from the couch, which told him she had been asleep and would need the question repeated if he expected an answer. She slept heavily, the way other people went their whole lives without sleeping except by sedation. A strand of hair lay damply curled on her cheek like loose cursive, a signature written out of or into the corner of her mouth, and he thought to brush it away with his thumb as a kindness—to love and to cherish her—but didn’t. He wasn’t sure if she wanted it there or not.

“Have you eaten yet?” he asked again.

“Eaten what?”

When he remembered this conversation in later years, as often as he remembered it, in the moments before sleep when some people pray, he wondered at all the possible meanings of this question. She could have still been half-asleep, his wife. Meaning there was no meaning—these were the first two words to come clear in her mind as language returned to her, and could have been any two words at all, raffled into her consciousness by a chance firing of neurons. She could have been using a comma—*Eaten, what?*—and forgotten to pause for emphasis. Or she could have meant what she said. She had eaten: a three-panel comic torn out of the newspaper, the plastic tip of the shoelace on his left shoe, the toothpick prong of his belt—not the buckle itself, just the prong—so that he could still wear it, but only for appearances’ sake. It had the look of a belt, but without the prong what was the use? He tightened it, and it went slack. He stringed it through his belt loops, but all it did was add weight to his pants, which fell well enough on their own.

He said, “Food.”

“Oh, dinner, you mean.” She sat up. “No, I’m starving. Let’s go.”

For their six-month anniversary he bought himself a new belt to keep in his car. He told Gwen she could have the other one if she wanted it.

She said, “Have it?” Her forehead wrinkled the way it did when she thought she was being insulted. Or else the way it did when she thought something was funny but couldn’t laugh at it because it would be impolite, as though she would laugh later, in private, but for the time being had made it impossible to accuse her of amusement, or of anything but a slight raising of her eyebrows, which then again, could have been purely incidental. He wasn’t sure. She had a very subtle face,

like women in paintings—the kind no one can decide the meaning of, whether they're happy or sad or merely beautiful, unfeeling—that was capable of seeming to show several expressions at once.

“What do you mean I can have it?” she asked. She mated two socks from a pile of socks she was mating on the bed and then put the pair in a drawer.

“You know,” he said. “You can have it. I'm giving it to you.”

“What would I do with your old belt?” Next to the main pile of socks, she started a colony of lone socks whose mates had been lost somewhere between the washer and the dryer. Or perhaps they were otherwise lost. Perhaps she knew exactly where they had gone, and they were lost only to him.

“I don't know,” he said. “I don't know what I was thinking. No reason, I guess. Never mind. I'll give it away.”

In a way, he knew this was cruel. The belt should be thrown out. It was no good to anyone now. But there was a kind of irresistible justice in the idea, something satisfying and, although he hesitated to use the term, poetic in the thought of some other man coming across his belt on a rack of belts in a secondhand store. Running his fingers over the tooled black leather, thinking what a perfectly good belt it was, and not realizing until the first time he wore it that he had made a mistake. He'd been tricked. Worse, he had tricked himself into thinking that he had the great good fortune to discover the one belt of all secondhand belts that was without defect, that had been given away not because it was ugly or something was wrong with it but because it was destined to come into his possession, as proof that the universe rewarded the patience of good men with not much money and nonstandard waist sizes.

It was cruel.

But he was inspired then. He went through the house with a garbage bag and filled it with things to donate: several shirts—someone would find half the buttons were gone—and gap-toothed combs; sunglasses frames that used to have lenses; censored books—whole chapters excised at random, the stories confused, lovers heartbroken no sooner than they had met—and capless pens; a wireless keyboard on which only a certain few words could be typed because half the keys had been prised off with a butter knife and crunched like hard candy. You could spell “Gwen.” You couldn't spell “wife,” or “marriage,” or “what God has joined together, let no man separate.” There was no “i.”

It turned out that very few of his belongings did not go into the bag. It became rather heavy—not too heavy for him but still heavy, his wife, for example, could not have lifted it—and the plastic bulged in places like cellulite flesh, stretched thin to the point of near-bursting, threatening to split open and dump the contents of the bag onto the floor of the hallway like a shrine to the certificate framed on the wall. He stopped to behold it as he walked past. What a frame.

“Where are you going?” Gwen asked him on her way out of the bedroom.

He shifted the bag on his shoulder. It occurred to him that it might look, to his wife, like he was about to leave their house, alone, on a Saturday, with almost everything he owned packed in a bag. Simultaneously, it occurred to him that was what he was doing. “The Salvation Army,” he said. “Are you coming?”

She looked down at herself, as though to consult with the rest of her body before she answered the question on its behalf. She had changed into shorts and tennis shoes. This seemed to give her some clarity. “I think I'm going to run,” she said.

“Didn't you run this morning?”

She shrugged. “I still feel like running. I'm going to run farther.”

He said, “All right then.”

She said, “Good.”

He said, “Great.”

When she kissed him he thought of the man who would buy his old water bottle with the sports cap—the kind with the hard plastic cork that twisted down to seal the bottle and twisted up to break the seal so that you could drink from it—which only days ago she, Gwen, his wife, had decapitated with her teeth to swallow the little piece whole. He turned up the bottle to squeeze water into his mouth, and it poured down his chin like cold rain.

“What are you smiling at?” she asked him now.

“I’m not.” He tightened his grip on the bag. It was an unsustainable grip. He estimated that he could hold the bag for maybe ninety more seconds in this position, but until then he refused to let go. “I’ll be back.”

She said, “Yes.”

When he drove home from the Salvation Army he went the way that would take him past the high school so that he could catch up to Gwen. She’d be on her way back now, too—she’d be running down from the track, through the parking lot, slaloming between the parked buses like he didn’t know why but he always imagined her doing, turning a straight line into five or ten switchbacks, serpentine, left and right. He would offer her a ride. Or at least a wave. Not hello or goodbye, just a wave. Just because. This was a gesture two people in love could make towards their shared future.

He drove up to the entrance of the high school at the very moment she rounded the corner onto the sidewalk and started to run downhill. He considered the odds this would happen—this exact coincidence—and concluded that they must be astronomical, that very few couples had probably ever experienced such perfect, unplanned synchronization. For a moment he watched her hair swing. Then he slowed down the car to match the pace of her running—she really was running, it wasn’t a casual jog, she was pumping her arms, using the momentum of the hill to gain speed. If she misstepped, he thought, this was the kind of running that would slough her skin off on the concrete. This was the kind of running you did if something was chasing you.

He rolled down the window and said, “Gwen!” She didn’t turn.

“Gwen, it’s me—Gwen!” He got closer. He beeped the horn lightly, and then less lightly. He honked.

A woman looked over Gwen’s shoulder. She was a stranger, with someone else’s brown eyes, into which he had never gazed lovingly or for that matter at all, and which had the dark, deer-wild look of prey animals, rabbits and other small game. He considered the odds this would happen.

“I’m sorry,” he called out. He rolled up the window to put the layer of glass between them and yelled through it. Whether she could hear him or not he didn’t know. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. My mistake. I thought you were somebody else.”



GRAPHITE IMAGE

Matthew Jarrett

Lina looks back at me,
her gaze reaching like long fingers,
bidding me to see her,
begging me to see what she sees,
hear what she hears.
I could reach out and erase her with one touch,
she is so fragile.

I see her face,
her eyes an abyss,
her cheeks white—silver graphite.
I see her face so pale,
so black from what she has seen.
She asks me if I see her.

And I do.
I do.



STORIES

Ashley Derrington

Marred by currents tugging
and pulling in every direction,
tearing sentences into phrases,
words into letters,
I have to try
to piece them back together,
losing myself in the depths
until, finally, the sea spits me out,
and tosses me, salt-soaked, dripping,
and tumbling over the sand.



COUSINS IN THE TREE

Jacob Cavett

We call it The Common Room. The thick of the trunk splits above our heads like a roof and the spiral floor is fine when you don't mind the gaps. We can't remember how we lugged the plastic red chair up here but we did and it's there, its cherry legs floating above the earth it will never touch again. A crack in the seat grows a little and then stops. We hope to do the same.

If we fall, the branches will catch us—that's their purpose. There is the recliner made of limbs with a branch to put our feet on, wooden armrests for our bony elbows, and a limb to lean against (even if it does cut into our backs sometimes). Invisible fruit hangs around us that we taste without ever taking a bite. We'd take some to our great grandmother if we could, but the flavor is lost as soon as our feet touch the ground. She doesn't get The Common Room. She points to it with a wrinkly finger and eighty years of wisdom.

"Them Bradford Pears are no good," she says. "They're weak as anything and spread like wildfire. I'm surprised those branches haven't already broken."

We don't want a pecan tree, or the sappy kind that leaves our hands sticky, or the ratty type that peels its bark like sunburns. These limbs hold us up fine. We are the only ones who know what it feels like to sit in this cracked red chair and swing our legs seven feet in the air.



BE STILL AND KNOW

Claire Foxx

I don't know if you have ever stood naked, alone, in the middle of a mostly empty, mostly dark, mostly soundproof bathroom, with mostly wet hair and literally cold feet and an unconfirmed yet undeniable suspicion that you are being watched by some invisible voyeur who must be thinking this is all very funny. But let me tell you, it's not as strange as you would think.

It is much. Much. Stranger.

I can't really say I was surprised. There were pictures of everything on the *Drift Float & Spa* website, so I had already seen my "flotation cabin" in minute photographic detail, with its minimalist white walls, its pristine white shower built into the corner, separated from the rest of the room by nothing—no door, no curtain, just the change from carpet to tile on the floor. I was not unprepared. I was duly familiarized with "The Magic of Epsom Salt," also touted on the spa website. I pored over images of the "flotation tanks" that look for all the world like enormous, mystical toilet bowls from the future, with the lids cracked open and the water glowing phosphorescent blue-green inside. I knew that I wouldn't drown. I knew that the temperature of the water inside the tank would be kept at a balmy 93.5 degrees for the duration of my "float," which would last for an hour, with soft music during the first and last five minutes and "amazing things" in the interval.

Nonetheless, when I got out of the shower, I pulled my dress back on and walked out to the lobby of the spa in my bare feet, with my hair dripping onto the floor.

"Hey, sorry. I know this is probably a weird thing to ask, but it would be much weirder if I didn't. You said I'm supposed to do this with no clothes on—correct?"

There were two women at the reception desk. They both laughed. "Yeah, correct. No clothes. Go for it, girl!"

In the industry, "it" is known as Restricted Environmental Stimulation Therapy, or REST, which sounds a lot less like a torture technique than "sensory deprivation" but means the same thing: "a person is submersed horizontally, in a quiet and light-insulated tank, filled with magnesium sulphate (Epsom salt) and saturated water . . . all incoming stimuli are reduced to a minimum, [and] a profound relaxation and increased well-being are induced." For an hour or so, there is nothing to hear and nothing to see, and your body floats in an enclosed "pod" of saltwater like a weightless inflatable. Thousands of Americans do it every year at hundreds of "float spa" locations across the country—and despite the fact that it sounds like the premise of a not even particularly well premised science fiction film, it's supposed to be very pleasant, and inspiring, and consciousness-broadening.

It is also, obviously, absurd. Below all those photos and descriptions of the flotation facilities I saw on the *Drift Spa* webpage was a list of "Frequently Asked Questions," most of which voiced reservations about the safety and/or legitimacy of float therapy: i.e. *Can it hurt me?* and *Does it work?* And rightfully so, I thought. Anyone can claim that anything is "profoundly relaxing," or fulfilling, or miraculous—and they might even be telling the truth about it—but they might be completely insane.

Or they might be charging you \$70 to lie in a very dark bathtub and experience the absence of experience, in which case *Does it work?* is not only a good question but the only one that really matters.

Not that anyone can answer it. Before I scheduled my float at *Drift*, I signed a liability waiver wherein I “agree[d] to take full responsibility for my thoughts and actions while in the flotation tank” and acknowledged that “each individual may have a unique experience” during his/her REST session. Based on some preliminary Googling, I knew that “unique” was a radically subjective term. For most people, floating reduces psychological stress and relieves physiological pain, which explains why the popularity of float therapy has been on the rise for the last decade in America. But the “real” reason why many people choose REST is altogether unexplainable. It involves a kind of Nirvanic spiritual transcendence, of the sort associated with near-death and out-of-body experiences. People say they have cosmic visions and epiphanies. People say they remember being born. Psychologist John C. Lilly, who invented sensory deprivation tanks in the 1950s in order to study altered states of consciousness, was himself known to take the occasional pre-float hallucinogen (namely, LSD) to intensify the “uniqueness” of his own REST experiences. So there’s that.

“Sometimes the only difference between the thing that will change your life and the thing that sounds like you . . . is that there is no difference.”

The more I read about float therapy, the less I understood it. I wanted someone to tell me that it was absolutely bogus so that I could stop reading and just make that scoffing noise in the back of my throat like you make when you hear a really terrible joke, and move on with my life. I will say that John C. Lilly did his best (aside from the LSD, he was also very interested in extraterrestrial conspiracy theories and “human-dolphin communication”). But in Sweden, the REST capital of the world if you count by float tanks per capita, flotation therapy is prescribed by physicians. With medical degrees. More importantly, people say *they remember being born*—and at least some of them must be sound of mind.

Probably. Or not. I don’t know. But as a rule I tend to err on the side of curiosity—not quite credulity, but not incredulity. *Convincibility*. At Pentecost, after all, people thought Jesus’ disciples were hysterically drunk on wine, and then Peter preached the first evangelical sermon, and three thousand souls were saved from eternal damnation by the power of the Holy Spirit. So there’s that. Sometimes the only difference between the thing that will change your life and the thing that sounds like you would only believe it under the influence of mind-altering substances is that there is no difference.

At least, that’s what I told myself once I was naked again, back in the privacy of my float cabin at *Drift*. I should stop asking questions. I had to embrace the float on its own terms. Which were that there were no terms—for all anyone knew or cared,

I could just stand there for sixty minutes basking in the cryptlike acoustics of the bathroom, staring at the sleek capsule of the tank like an alien spacecraft, and never get in the water at all. I could just take an hour-long shower. Or I could get into the water and float myself out of my mind, into a “unique” dissociative fugue from which I might never recover.

Theoretically, at least, I could open the lid of the tank at any point during my float. I could get out whenever and for whatever reason I wanted to. And in case of emergency, there was always the failsafe button installed inside the pod, which I was told could signal someone at the desk to come to my rescue. All I had to do was press the button twice. Not that I would—if it came to that, I figured I might as well die already because if either of the women from the lobby had to see me naked, there would be nothing left to live for.

Knowing this—and knowing everything else I knew, which amounted to almost nothing compared to what I didn’t know about float therapy—I shoved in the spa-issued earplugs and crawled into the tank, trying very hard not to laugh or cry while I was doing it. One or the other was definitely appropriate to the situation, I could tell. I just wasn’t sure which.

This confusion became a kind of theme. After the first five minutes of being “eased into” my float by ambient Bohemian sitar music, and until the last five minutes of being “eased” out, I irrevocably lost track of time. I knew that however long I *thought* I had been in the tank, I was wrong—but I wasn’t sure *how* wrong, whether I was overestimating or underestimating, and by what margin. I could have been floating for half an hour when I thought it had only been ten minutes, or it could have been only ten minutes when I thought it had been half an hour. I really had no way of knowing. It wasn’t like there was a clock.

And if there had been a clock, I wouldn’t have known that, either. I closed the lid on the tank all the way for maximum sensory deprivation, which meant it was so dark I could see absolutely nothing, whether I opened my eyes or closed them. I tried both. But I was blind, either way, and the blindnesses were interchangeable—my eyes were all but vestigial, not even decorative any more. Not even eyes. I thought about that for a while, trying to decide if it was fascinating or horrifying. Of course, it was both. It was a lot like waking up in the middle of the night at someone else’s house—when you have no idea what time it is, or where you are, or why your arm has gone numb, or whether you are even awake at all or still in a dream. Maybe you’re lost. Maybe something happened. Maybe, it occurs to you, you’re actually dead, and this is the beginning of eternity: exotic, surreal, and sort of beautifully lonely in a way you didn’t expect.

But mostly it was dark.

Since I couldn’t write anything down while I was floating, I tried to remember my best insights during the experience and record them stream-of-consciousness style in the notes app on my phone immediately after I got out of the tank. My first note said:

- *Not like falling asleep. Not like being asleep. Like being awake while asleep.*

Which is what all of them sound like, more or less—highly metaphorical and abstract to the point of incoherence.

- *Like I have mass but not weight, which are supposed to be mutually inclusive?*
- *Not like being in outer space. Emptyier than that—whatever there would be if there was no outer space, if there was nothing, if there was only inner space. Like a black hole? I guess.*

I can’t imagine if I had been on drugs. As it was, I didn’t even know anyone who knew anyone who had ever seen LSD, and those were the most nearly lucid descriptions I could come up with. I don’t know what to say. It turns out that it is actually very difficult to prove to yourself that you even exist without any form of

sensory verification. So forgive me for waxing poetic, but language is a referential system, and in a sensory deprivation chamber there is literally nothing for it to refer to. It's poetry, or nothing.

Certain people with certain PhDs have suggested that there are neuropsychological terminologies to be applied here, like "disturbed time sense" and "primary-process cognition," but I would like to suggest that those people are missing the point. Nobody floats in order to "increase [their] measurable plasma concentration of endorphins." They float to experience the bizarre, the abstract, the unquantifiable—what celebrity float-enthusiast Joe Rogan calls "the center of consciousness where your body and your mind d[o]n't [even] exist." As spas like *Drift* have continued to gain traction in the U.S. and across the world, various studies have been conducted to determine whether flotation-REST is a valid form of therapy. But at the end of the day, in my opinion—which is in all ways biased and in no way scientific, and which is really the only sort of opinion that can answer the question *Does it work?* as it relates to float therapy—"validity" is a moot point. Either you believe in floating because it is mysterious, or you don't believe in it. It's not about science. It's about faith.

This is what I realized while I was levitating in ten inches of warm saline like some kind of deafblind fetus in a simulated womb, trying to convince myself of my own reality by sheer power of metaphor: floating is not the weirdest thing I've ever done.

Because every night before I fall asleep, I talk to God. By which I mean The God, of cosmological fame. God the omnipotent, the infinite, the invisible. And when I say "God," I mean three triune persons, only one of whom is really a person at all, and when I say "talk," I mean pray. As in silently, telepathically, with my soul oriented by and towards what I understand to be God's divine presence, although I can't see or hear that presence (or that soul) in any immediate sense. And it is absolutely ludicrous. Some would say certifiable. I know that. I don't necessarily even disagree—but as church father Tertullian said in his *De Carne Christi* apology, "Creo quia absurdum." I believe because it is absurd.

So like I said, I'm biased. Maybe theism made me receptive or defensive of the "absurdity" of float therapy where the average skeptic would not have been nearly so lenient; maybe it allowed me to accept the morbid ritual of "this weird sort of organic method . . . get[ting] in this big coffin filled with water and . . . clos[ing] the lid." But I don't think so. Christian or otherwise, the reality was never lost on me that I was floating in a recreational sensory deprivation chamber on the outskirts of downtown Greenville, South Carolina, between a Rite-Aid pharmacy and a glass-walled Greek bistro called "Ji-Roz." That never felt normal, to me, even if it was true. It felt like "new-agey mumbo jumbo." And I'm not saying it wasn't—but I am saying that "new-agey mumbo jumbo" is an insult to float therapy only if you assume that float therapy was ever supposed to be anything else, like calling someone "weird" is an insult only if you assume they were trying to be not-weird, or like calling the Gospel "folly" is an insult only if you assume it has to be not-folly in order to be "the wisdom and the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18-19, *ESV*). Otherwise, it's just a description.

I would describe *Drift Float & Spa* as a deliberately, unabashedly weird place. In the bathroom there's this stool shaped like two ceramic hands cupped together: you sit with your butt in the hands, and they hold you up literally, like the baby lion from the beginning of *The Lion King*, only you're twenty inches off the floor, and the floor is teakwood, and you're 8,000 miles away from Africa in the bathroom of a luxury spa. The chalkboard sign on the door of my float cabin at *Drift* was personalized not only with my first name but also the words "Majestic Sea Turtle," which I decided to take as a compliment but could have meant anything, really—good or bad, or both, or neither. Nobody ever explained it. It just was.

But of course it was weird. In retrospect, if it had been any less so, *then* I would have been suspicious—in the same way that I’m suspicious of Christian churches where the Gospel is demystified, impossible miracles chalked up to this or that since-explained scientific phenomenon, and the utterly ridiculous, extraordinary, astronomical grace of God is normalized to a boardroom-like deadpan.

I believe God is the weirdest thing in the universe. I believe if He weren’t, He wouldn’t be God. I believe that it’s weird someone picked a tree in a garden and cursed the entire planet to which that tree was attached, and it’s weird there was even a planet to curse, where once there was nothing and then *there was light*. I believe that the incarnation and crucifixion and resurrection of the Son of God is a weird way to break that curse. I believe love is weird. I believe it’s so weird that sometimes I almost don’t believe it at all. But I pray. And it’s not as strange as you would think.

After maybe ten (?) or thirty (?) or fifty (?) minutes of meditating in the incubated silence of my float tank at *Drift*, I heard the sound of someone calling my name. A still, small voice, if you will. The voice was female, which made me think, *That’s interesting*. I was not particularly alarmed, even if the voice had spoken forth from the ambient beyond or some obscure depth of my psychic unconscious. I was floating. I was not-asking-questions.

“Are you okay?” the voice asked. I didn’t say anything.

“Hello? Claire? Did you press the button?”

Then I unplugged one of my ears and rolled over gracelessly inside the tank like some kind of half-sedated marine animal, splashing myself in the face, trying to be less naked than I was, although it was probably already too late for whatever ill-fated spa employee had been dispatched to collect me from my mid-REST crisis.

“Did you press the button?”

It was at this point that I experienced probably the closest thing to an actual miracle during my float: I remembered that I closed the lid on the tank, meaning the employee knew I was naked, but she couldn’t actually *see* me naked. She didn’t open the lid, either. She didn’t turn on the light. She stood in the doorway and called out as though to address the float tank itself—like some kind of oracle clam that had swallowed me whole—compelled by fear or reverence or some indescribable third instinct not to come any closer.

Crouched in the blackness and brine and utter vulnerability of that tank, I started to have a thought about Jonah in the belly of the whale, but it dissipated before it made any real sense. Plus it distracted me from the question at hand, which I still hadn’t answered. Did I press the button?

“I don’t think so,” I said. But I had no idea.

I continued to have no idea for the remainder of my float, until the return of the sitar music announced that my session was over—and then I had no idea as I took a very, very hot post-float shower, during which I forgot to remove my earplugs or turn on the overhead light. I also forgot a lot of what I wanted to write down while I was RESTing, but I did the best I could—which as previously noted, was not all that great—to express the inexpressible.

The first person I spoke to upon my reintegration into the sensorial world was the *Drift Spa* receptionist, who was still sitting in the lobby right where I left her after she told me to get naked and “go for it.”

I shook her hand. “I just wanted to say sorry, for before. I don’t usually meet people by asking if I should take my clothes off, but at the time it seemed relevant.”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry,” she said, “for interrupting your float.” So the voice had been hers. “Normally that would never happen, but I thought something was wrong.”

“Yeah, my bad. False alarm. And sorry for not answering you immediately. I wasn’t even sure if you were actually there, at first. So.”

She nodded and sat back into the ergonomic contour of her desk chair. We made eye contact over a flatscreen computer monitor, a rack of essential oils in tiny glass vials, a bag of trail mix, and a three-wick votive candle that smelled like an ocean breeze.

She shrugged. “It happens.”

I was pretty sure I already knew the answer based on that shrug, but I asked her, anyways, whether she was a floater herself. She was. In fact, she called float therapy her “passion,” saying: “It helps me reach a higher level of consciousness. I’ve experienced wonderful amazing things, like seeing things or hearing things that have affected me greatly—but I don’t know how to describe it . . .” She trailed off, searching for words, grasping at the space where language ends and experience begins. I knew how she felt. *Like being awake while asleep. Inner space. A black hole?* She shook her head. “I can only say it was amazing.”

She didn’t have to convince me. In the course of our short conversation, she used the words “like” and “thing” some fifteen times to talk about floatation-REST, but I always knew what she meant. And I believed her.

“It’s a really personal experience. But then it’s so personal, and it brings so much . . . enrichment to your life, that you want to share it with other people,” she said. “It’s really a camaraderie to talk with people who’ve floated, who’ve done this crazy thing. But you don’t even have to say anything. It’s like, ‘you remember that pod thing?’ ‘When we were in there in the dark?’”

“Yeah,” I responded. “We were in there.” It’s like we were all there together. Me and the *Drift Spa* receptionist, and John C. Lilly, and Joe Rogan, and who knows how many other “crazy” strangers, none of us with anything in common except for our mutual randomness—and a desire, however impossibly absurd, to experience someone or something more profound than we could hope to explain. Of course, it sounds ridiculous, when you put it that way. But maybe that’s the point.

We believe because it is absurd.







STAFF

LITERATURE

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Jacob Cavett

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Caleb Flachman

SUBMISSIONS EDITOR & SCRIBE EXTRAORDINAIRE

Lucy Kirkpatrick

FICTION EDITORS

Logan Carroll

Aleisse Buck

POETRY EDITORS

Alli Kennedy

Matthew Jarrett

NONFICTION EDITORS

Emma Morris

Jessica Jeter

INTERVIEW EDITORS

Caleb Flachman

Alli Kennedy

ART LIAISON

Emma Morris

LITERARY ADVISOR

Dr. Teresa Jones

PRINT DESIGN

SENIOR DESIGNERS

Jayne Small

Lauren Swathwood

JUNIOR DESIGNERS

Megan Adams

Terra Baughn

PROMOTIONAL DESIGN

Logan Chapman

Allie Thompson

WEB DESIGN

SENIOR DESIGNER

Lizzie Todd

JUNIOR DESIGNER

Austin Rusher

PHOTOGRAPHY & SOCIAL MEDIA

Blair Bellaire

Ashley Stone

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Professor Tim Speaker





with
GRATITUDE

As we prepared for this 94th edition of *Ivy Leaves*, Mr. Kent Millwood provided us two hours in Thrift Library with every previous edition of the journal. Each delicate page thumbed through was a vicarious experience of the past one hundred years. Every entry read quietly or aloud gave access to moments and stories which would have otherwise been out of reach. It's what great art—and *Ivy Leaves*—has always been about: creating experiences from ink and paint and paper. We extend our heartfelt thanks to all who had the courage to make their voices heard and submit their work for consideration this year. Because of you, we had more submissions than ever before. Because of you, we have glimpsed past, present, and future.

We would also like to thank Dr. Teresa Jones for her consistent and tireless leadership. She has been our advocate, our guide, our voice of reason, a constant to temper to our youthful (and often misguided) exuberance. Thank you for never giving up until we go deep enough to find and claim the stories hidden in ourselves. This journal wouldn't exist without you.

The design team would like to express their appreciation to Prof. Tim Speaker, Dr. David Larson, Dr. Jo Carol Mitchell-Rogers, Prof. Peter Kanaris, Prof. Nathan Cox, Prof. Jane Dorn, Prof. Chotsani Dean, Prof. Michael Marks, Prof. Wellington Payne, Prof. Bryan Hiott, and Prof. Nathan Spainhour. We could not produce this publication without their encouragement.

Lastly we are filled with gratitude for the members of the Anderson University Student Government Association who provided us with additional funding this year. Thank you for allowing us to print more journals and put these stories into more hands.





**PRODUCTION
NOTES**

COPYRIGHT

April 2019, *Ivy Leaves Journal of Literature & Art*.
Established in 1916. Volume XCIV.
Printed by PIP Printing in Anderson, SC.

WEBSITE

Visit ivyleavesjournal.com to view the 2019 edition online. The archive portion of the website also features previous volumes that are available for your enjoyment.

CONGRATULATIONS

The 2018 edition of the journal was recently awarded two Gold American Advertising Awards: one for *Best Publication Design* and the other for *Best Magazine Design*.

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.

316 Boulevard
Anderson, SC 29621
art.schoolofthearts.com



MORE TO EXPLORE

THE ALL NEW *IVY LEAVES* ONLINE

Continue your *Ivy Leaves* experience through the following avenues of exclusive content.

BEHIND THE VINE

A closer look at the inspiration and process of our selected writers and artists.

Featuring:

*Jacob Cavett • Hayden Dutschke
Matthew Everett • Caleb Flachman
Alli Kennedy • Grace Poulton*

THE PERISTYLE

An exclusive gallery of student work.

Featuring:

*Blair Bellaire • Matthew Everett
Caleb Flachman • Haylee Horn
Alli Kennedy • Morgan McCarver
Caleb Newton • Grace Poulton
John Robert Register*

VISIT

ivyleavesjournal.com
Instagram: *ivyleavesjournal*
Twitter: *_ivyleaves*



◆
PAINTING

IS SILENT

POETRY

◆
-PLUTARCH



VOL. 94