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IVY LEAVES

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THE RUBBER BAND BALL IS
THE PERFECT METAPHOR
Claire Foxx

The background of the page is a dark, out-of-focus photograph of green leaves and branches, creating a bokeh effect. The colors are primarily dark greens and browns, with some lighter green highlights where the leaves are more in focus.

FOREWORD



It seems that writers and artists live in perpetual childhood. The globe orbits yet again, stealing our youth, swindling our naiveté. But the world retains its wonder; life is still whimsical. And thus, we find poetry in magnolia limbs and portraits in friends' faces. Since we were kids, we have been stuck in our heads, in awe of how planet Earth moves—imperceptible to the human eye but nonetheless constant, unstoppable, assured. Inspiration is everywhere: the mundane, the grandiose, the tragic. This life is one of small wonders, and art is born from noticing. We create to remember it all.

We never outgrew the days when toys came to life, when tree branches were castles, and when our backyards were Transylvania. We were imaginative kids, the quirky ones who were mesmerized by the taste of grass, the glisten of fish scales, and the curtsies of falling leaves. We stood our ground, barefooted, and refused to acknowledge the cold of the night. Flannery O'Connor said that anybody who has survived childhood has enough information to last a lifetime. The moments penned and painted on these pages prove her words true.

Though our imaginations never faltered, we still grew up. The bliss was evanescent. The world, like kudzu, consumed our innocence. Dandelion rings withered, our shadows wandered like ghosts in our old hometowns, we fought our own wars, and we stared death in the face. We prayed on creaky pews and sought meaning in the stars. We are torn at the seams. Our souls are exhausted.

But the sense of childhood that remains in us allows us to see a world beyond what is in front of us and compels us to create. Art dulls the harsh edges of the world. Our words and brushstrokes are the layered entanglements of many strands of our lives. This 95th edition of *Ivy Leaves* is nostalgia, grief, love, and questions. These are our ponderings, our humble attempts to make sense of the narrative arc of our existence. These stories are worth remembering. And at the end of the day, we would do it all over again for art.

FIELD FOR PLASTIC HORSES

Hayden Dutschke

A collection of horses in cardboard, caged
and placed in the back of the coat closet,
and tiny hands of the child cutting through
the thick grass of fabric, hoping
to set them all free. Mom picked

me up by my striped overall straps, choo-choo,
and dragged me out of the closet,
banishing me to my room (boo...)
for interrupting a private space.
I didn't get it then.

I don't get it now, so I kick the door
in, chucking the coats of my father,
wondering where those plastic
toys had gone, just to turn around
and find them all running free

in a pasture across the road, pushing
legs like they were filled with blood
and neighing like real horses. I stood
staring, wondering how I had missed
them in the first place.



DANDELION RINGS

Genevieve Rice

We once crafted rings from dandelions,
twisting stems round our fingers
to mark each other
as allies against preschool.
Suns tethered to our fingers,
dandelion bands bound our fates.

But our crushed petals and crumbling knots
testify that time or heat
unravels promises
woven between flowers.
Let us untie our faded rings
and trade them for silver bands
that cuff our sunshine covenant—
cool metal to clutch warm fingers.



ON THE LAST DAY OF THE MAGNOLIA

Lucy Kirkpatrick

Returning again, you know the bough.
Glide your palm across the limb
that you wore smooth and realize
that it's smaller than you remember
and that your castle's drawbridge
no longer holds muddy footprints.

Ten years ago, it enveloped you.
You raced there against the sun,
bike neatly stashed and sneakers gone.
You hid from pirates and Indians,
gripped perfectly-placed branches
as you climbed toward the dragon
who will be finding a new nest tomorrow.



REVENGE

Samantha Brooks

My sister's Dora the Explorer night light swept shadows across the floor, making every object deadly. In the corner, the toy chest became a killer clam with blood-stained teeth. I stepped over landmines—Barbie's pink convertible, a tennis shoe with worn Velcro, her stupid pink guitar. I had one, too. Until she stomped it. But now, surrounding me, her toys waited for me to make one wrong step.

I set my foot directly on top of a Littlest PetShop animal—a giraffe—and my life flashed before my eyes. I danced about the room flailing one arm and covering my mouth with the other to hold in a wail. If it had been my first mission of revenge, I might have cried out, but this was war, and I am a professional.

I steadied myself then, standing just beside her bed. I lifted my hand to the top of her dresser so that I could run my hand down its body; only then was I able to distinguish the drawers from one another. I counted the drawers—*one, two, three*—until I hit the one I needed.

I looked over my shoulder. The lump of blankets and Beanie Babies had not moved. Still asleep. *Chump*, I thought, smiling to myself. Slowly, so that the old drawer would not scream, I pulled it open. Blindly, I reached my arm in and felt around.

Fabric and hair. Plastic.

Bingo!

I pulled her cold body from the drawer and closed it softly. Gripping her waist tightly, I navigated my exit path. Once in the hall, I lifted the Barbie doll, a doctor this time, to my chest and wrapped my fingers around her head. With one pull, her head popped off. I smiled.

That will teach her.



LILACS AND SMOKE

Emily Britton

You know the scene.
Young girl on rusty park swings,
a halo of golden ringlets framing her face
while the diligent mom,
smelling of lilacs and smoke,
watches from the sun-warmed bench.

But the bliss will not last.
The angel will fall,
and the swing will creak in loneliness.
The mom will rush to the side
of the one she swore to protect,
as hands and knees slowly turn red.



PURPLE

Alli Kennedy

Mrs. Davidson seemed exhilarated by sin. She was the church gossip and somehow knew everything about everyone. She always gladly chaperoned our youth retreats, making sure teenagers didn't sacrifice themselves in the woods somewhere. Purple—that's what she called it. Boys were blue and girls were red. No purple.

I was one of her victims once. A boy in middle school asked me to be his girlfriend, and, of course, I said yes—who else could jump over five chairs at the same time? But no purpling was allowed on the bus. So he sat in the seat ahead of me. I leaned forward, he pressed back. I put my hand on the shoulder of his seat, he reached back to thread his dangly sweaty fingers between mine. My whole body erupted in goosebumps. We rode fifteen minutes with his arm bent behind him, staring at each other's reflections in the windows next to us.

"No purple!" Mrs. Davidson yelled and broke the spell. All of the kids around us chanted, *they were holding hands! They were holding hands!*

I pulled my hand away. She marched the youth pastor to the back of the bus. We were to walk the narrow path of purity, she said, not the wide path of self-indulgence. She sat down beside me to monitor my hormones. I watched the back of my boyfriend's head the whole ride home, trying to find his reflection in the window beside him through beams of sunlight from the western side of the highway. Our youth pastor told our parents. I was grounded. Goodness knows what might have happened if he had turned back to look at me. Goodness knows. Yet, in the stillness of my grounded boredom, I wanted to hold his hand again.



SIXTH GRADE

Larisa Crowder

Sprawled face down on my mom's bed, I plucked at embroidered flowers as she spun around and around in front of her full-length mirror, craning her neck to catch every angle. Gymnastics practice started at 5:00 p.m., was a ten-minute drive away, and it was 4:50 p.m. I exhaled as loudly and violently as I could, squeezing the air out of my lungs and holding my breath until I couldn't, then gasping the air back in, launching myself into a coughing fit.

She turned to me. "Sena, can you see my love handles through this shirt?"

I looked up, still coughing. "Mom, no, you're fine." It didn't matter how I answered. She never believed me.

"I'm not sure. I don't think it's long enough."

"Then wear a longer one. You'll just be watching me practice, no one cares what you wear."

Sighing, my mom reached into her closet for the third time in the last nine minutes. Thanksgiving was two days away, and she'd been trying to lose weight before the influx of relatives. For the last three months I'd watched her prep her tiny meals—four ounces of grilled chicken paired with a single tomato—and listened to her complain about her love handles, or her fat ankles, or her double chin. The reality was that she had none of these things, and when I watched her twist in front of the mirror like this, I was convinced we weren't seeing the same person. I'd be lying if I said I blamed her, though. My dad's family was ruthless, with their congenitally critical eyes that somehow only my father had escaped inheriting. They'd go down the line, hugging us too tightly and telling us how we looked. My uncle was the worst. My younger siblings and I would recall his annual commentary in preparation for his arrival, bracing for insult. My brother had always "grown like a weed but could use some muscle," advice that was followed by a slap on the back that literally echoed, and my sister, tall and a natural athlete, was complimented on her legs one too many times. His past comments to me had included, "You look heavier," "Maybe skip the bread this time" (accompanied by a wink that very much made me want to skip the bread, along with everything else), and "That skirt isn't very flattering, is it?"

Luckily, my mom's third shirt was deemed adequate and we left for the gym, my second home since I was four years old. The gym was a massive, un-air-conditioned warehouse full of equipment, where my teammates and I were taught sportsmanship, discipline, and strategic self-hatred. My mom dropped me off by the door and I flung it open, inhaling deeply. Every gym has its own smell, and mine was one I'd recognize anywhere, any day,

until I died. It was like a Sharpie in that it went straight to your head, but layered with notes of sweaty carpet, and rubber, and chalky leather, and wafts of evening breeze filtered through the giant fans near the ceiling. Our coach, Bohdanka, was a petite woman with cropped blonde hair, originally from Czechoslovakia. She wore scarves year-round and was the secret owner of a World Championship bronze medal. “My dog could do better,” she’d snap, her iron jaw never twitching. Shame was the name of the game. She seemed to think that the less we liked ourselves, the harder we would work. I Googled her once and found a couple of videos. Gymnastics was different back then; girls floated with the grace of butterflies rather than the powerful athleticism of gymnasts now. I adored it.

“Some girls did cry. Some never came back. I never cried.”

During that evening’s practice, she perched atop a balance beam, ankles crossed and back ramrod straight, somehow watching everyone’s everything all at once. “If you want to cry, you can do it at home,” she yelled, as, one at a time, we scaled two stories’ worth of climbing rope using just our chalk-gritty hands. If we failed, we’d be stuck climbing for the next hour, each attempt punctuated by verbal abuse. I thrived on the expectation of perfection and on the satisfaction I found in my own resilience. Some girls did cry. Some never came back. I never cried.

I came close once, when I’d bent my arm while doing a back handspring and had to do a hundred pushups. Instead, I’d counted each one out loud, arms and voice shivering, stood up, and looked Bohdanka in the eye. She’d nodded solemnly, then turned her back again. My back handsprings were perfect after that.

As practice ended, without tears or anyone being insulted more harshly than usual, our new competition leotards arrived. We tore into the packages like it was Christmas morning and we were five. I held mine up, all glittering plum-colored spandex and mauve mesh sleeve dotted with diamonds. The state meet was in six months, and this was the leo I’d win it all in. Envisioning myself, radiant under stadium lights, and the crowd’s roar as I stuck landing after landing, I felt a surge of adrenaline. This was what I’d be wearing when I qualified for Regionals as one of the top six all-around scorers in the state. I could feel it.

“Let’s try them on!” someone yelled. We all crowded into the bathroom and began stripping off our practice leos. A gym is the only place on earth where preteen girls with eight-packs are average. Though we were all within a year of one another, none of my teammates seemed to be experiencing the same awkward onset of puberty weight I was. I stole glances as they changed, flat-chested, muscle layered on bone, and avoided eye contact with the mirror,

knowing I wouldn't see the same thing. I was layering sports bras and was definitely the only one whose thighs rubbed each other raw when we ran laps. It didn't help that I was the tallest one in my level. I thought of my mom, measuring her food and pinching her waist, and shivered.

New leos on, we filed out of the bathroom, a parade of amethysts dancing and sparkling under the flickering yellow lights. I tugged on mine—the legs were cut too high, and the neckline bit deep grooves into the tops of my shoulders. I hopped on a beam and began practicing leaps. I landed one rather heavily, and Bohdanka immediately began snapping her fingers in my direction.

“Sena!”

I whirled around, too fast. I hit the mat, little clouds of chalk rising around me as her words echoed across the gym.

“You're an elephant. Do you want to break the beam?”

Someone laughed. I laughed, too. No one would ever say that to me again.

As soon as I got in the car, my mom began complaining.

“I've been so good, but I haven't lost a pound in over a week. I haven't lost inches, either. I measured. I mean, I did eat an extra serving of strawberries the other day . . . it must've been the carbs.” She smacked the steering wheel with her palm. “It was definitely the carbs.” She sighed and looked over at me, but I turned away. I couldn't remember the last time she'd asked me how practice was. After a few minutes, I rolled my eyes, took a deep breath, and asked her the question I was sick of hearing from her. After Bohdanka's comment and watching my teammates change, I felt the need for an honest answer, urgently.

“Mom?”

“Hm?”

“Am I fat?”

She laughed as if I'd asked if I were adopted. “No, dear.”

“Would you tell me if I were?”

“You're not fat, Sena.”

I watched her arms as she drove. They looked like mine—pale, freckled, ending in small, bony wrists and hands lined with blue veins. Our arms were nearly the same size, and she'd always complained her hands made her look old. If she was so hideous, what did that make me? “Well, I don't think you're fat either,” I said, in a half-hearted attempt to console myself. She ignored me.

Thanksgiving morning, my dreaded uncle arrived, along with his wife and mother. His sister and her husband came that year too. I didn't have any cousins on my dad's side of the family. He was the only one of his siblings with kids, probably because God spared the unborn children who could've ended up with them as parents. I endured their hugs and presumptuous comments for my dad's sake, but was cornered by my uncle and grandmother before I could slip off to my room.

“Sena!” my uncle shouted. He was always so loud. “It's good to see you!” He lifted a year-old family photo off the mantle and held it up near my head, glancing between the two. “I think you've lost weight since this was taken,” he finally declared. “You look very nice.”

My grandmother squinted over his shoulder and smiled at me. I wondered why, after all the times I'd seen her bleach her mustache and pluck her chin hairs, she'd never bothered to get braces. "Yes, I believe she has. It must be all that gymnastics."

I smiled back, confused. "Oh. Thank you." I'd never gotten "very nice" before.

Instead of locking myself in my room when I finally escaped, I found myself in my mom's bathroom, eyeing the scale. It had been there ever since I could remember, a permanent fixture between the bathtub and the toilet. Wondering how much "very nice" weighed, I stepped on. Barefoot, I shivered as I planted my feet on the cold glass. The glowing blue box of digital numbers fluctuated for a few seconds before settling on **93.5**. I stepped off. That seemed like a lot. There was a girl at the gym named Avery—she was two levels above me and had made it to Regionals every year she'd competed. She'd never been called an elephant. I wondered how much she weighed.

That afternoon, after we'd eaten ourselves into oblivion and dispersed for naps, I snuck back to the bathroom. How much did "very nice" weigh after a full Thanksgiving meal? The scale blinked **95.0**.

The next morning, Black Friday, I went shopping with my mom, sister, and one of my aunts, the one married to the uncle. Before we left, I made sure to weigh myself. **94.0**. I skipped our traditional leftover-pie-for-breakfast.

In the first store we entered, I grabbed a shirt and ran to the dressing room, determined to take advantage of the rare opportunity of being surrounded by full-length mirrors. I slipped in and locked the door quietly, feeling guilty for some unnamed emotion and waiting to be disappointed. I stood there, shirtless and cold, and evaluated my body. My shoulder blades, widespread and sharp, reminded me of butterfly wings. My wrists were delightfully tiny—my thumb and pinkie could touch, even wrapped around the thickest part. I sucked in my stomach and tried to count my ribs, but could see only the two most prominent ones. I knew it. Most girls at the gym had at least four showing, and Avery probably had five. I began formulating my plan.

First, I figured I might as well quit the dreaded carbs. I swore off bread and jelly, and reduced my beloved pre-practice PB&J to a spoonful of peanut butter. After reading labels and discovering my mother's complaints weren't exaggerations, I decided on a fixed diet of peanut butter, eggs, cheese, and the few vegetables I didn't hate. I started weighing myself every morning and every night. Then before and after I ate. And before and after I peed. Before and after pooping was the most satisfying; I found I could temporarily lose up to three pounds that way, so I started using laxatives. All I told my mom was that I wasn't pooping, not that I wasn't eating, so she let me have them. It's not like we didn't have at least a year's supply. I took them almost every day, and was eventually left with nothing but the worst cramps of my life. It was like dry heaving, but in the other direction. One night, as I crouched over the toilet, tired and cold, I was in so much pain I started praying. My prayer was directed toward several deities simultaneously. There was God, of course, who was to blame for my body in the first place; the scale, my sacrificial altar and a testament to my edible sins; and my own hateful little skeleton that I'd sworn to carve out. After an hour of this agony, though, came the feeling of empty lightness, of floating. Not like an elephant.

I wasn't losing weight very fast, but I felt all right as long as I didn't break any of my rules. My discipline showed up in the gym, too. Then in competitions. I started winning. Every time I refused food, I landed, solid, sure, both feet exactly where I wanted them. I conditioned extra after practices. I was a winner. I was hungry. After a meet in January, where I'd scored first in my age group in every event but vault, my dad suggested we go out for ice cream. It was just the two of us. I'd always felt less tense around my dad, and was elated by my success, so I agreed.

My stomach began twisting as soon as I stepped inside, enveloped in air that tasted like waffle cones. I wanted it all. Every flavor, every topping, all of it in a bowl that would last me all day. My hands shook. There were too many options, and this was my only chance. I stuffed my fists into the pocket of my hoodie and ordered two scoops of dark chocolate in a cone, then ate it so fast it didn't leak a single drop. It was the best thing I'd tasted in months. The next morning I'd gained a pound and was bloated for three more days after, so I cut out dairy. Eggs and peanut butter remained.

*"I started noticing in other people what I wanted in myself.
Then I stopped noticing anything but."*

I started noticing in other people what I wanted in myself. Then I stopped noticing anything but. What had started as admiration for Avery became an inescapable mindset. People became their collarbones, their flat stomachs, how far apart their thighs were. Going out in public was like watching censored news footage. Faces were blurred, voices crackled, but bodies were crystal clear. I watched thin people in the grocery store, stopping to look in their carts when their backs were turned. I looked in fat people's carts too, but I didn't care if they saw.

92.0

The more foods I cut out, the more I thought of them, dreamed of them, woke up in cold sweats after nightmares about eating them. I drew food on my church bulletin and read cookbooks like novels. I scrolled through Pinterest boards of food when I couldn't sleep. It felt like every day, I took up more space. I couldn't wear hoodies big enough, and I dreaded putting on my leo every night. Were people staring? They had to be. Why wouldn't they be? I took up so much space.

91.0

My family and I spent a weekend in the mountains after another successful meet. In my leo, which still sliced curved pink lines across my shoulders, I threw myself across one of the beds and turned on the TV. We didn't have cable at home, and I was compelled by something greater than myself to spend as much time salivating over *Cake Wars* as humanly possible. Our room had a huge window, with a breathtaking view of the Rockies. I tried to appreciate it, glancing out during commercial breaks and wondering why I couldn't care.

I did care about *Cake Wars*. What happened to all the leftover cake? Why didn't they ever show people eating it? I wanted to see them eat it. I would've eaten it. My whole body ached. I drank a glass of water. My family asked if I wanted to go for a walk, but I told them I was too tired. The season finale had just started.

At **90.0**, people began to notice.

"Bailey's mom was asking if you'd lost weight," my mom mentioned to me, in the car after another practice. "I told her you just had a growth spurt and haven't caught up with your height yet."

I liked that one. Once I got as thin as Avery, that's what I'd tell people. "I guess," I said.

"Then again, you haven't been eating as much lately."

All I heard was "as much." How much had I been eating before? Was I eating so much now? Besides, neither was she. She wasn't allowed to talk about this, not to me.

"I'm afraid you'll wither away. You don't think you need to diet just because I do, do you?"

I shrugged, though my cheeks burned and my heart was skipping beats. "No. I mean . . . I just eat until I'm full. Why eat more than that, you know?" I had told many lies in my life before, none so outrageous as this one. I couldn't decide if I wanted to laugh or cry, the lie was so ridiculous, so I did neither. "I'm not actually dieting or anything." She was just jealous that I was beating her at her own game.

"Well, your arms sure are tiny." We both laughed then, and I made some joke about having the weakest arms out of everyone on the team. In bed that night, I wrapped my thumb and pinkie around my wrist again. I slid them a couple inches up my arm. I hadn't been able to do that before.

That February, I was blessed with the worst case of the flu I'd ever had in my life. I threw up everything I ate, and then everything I thought about eating, for an entire week. I spent my days in feverish sleep, sweating through the sheets and waking up shivering until my teeth chattered, and my nights kneeling by the toilet. Gagging and heaving like my dog had that one time she'd eaten three loaves of stolen banana bread, I prayed the way I had with the laxative-induced stomach cramps. It seemed the majority of my prayers had been prayed in the middle of the night, lifted up from a bathroom floor. I don't remember what I said, just how it felt. My t-shirt dripping in sweat, I stretched myself out across the cool tile and stared at the popcorn ceiling, connecting specks of paint like stars in constellations. My favorite constellations looked like food: slices of pizza, ice cream cones, that one mint-chocolate-filled ganache-covered cake from the show, my brother's leftover French fries in a Styrofoam box in the fridge downstairs that I'd been thinking about since he brought them home two days ago. Two days. How do you forget leftover French fries for two whole days? I wouldn't have forgotten them. I wouldn't have even brought them home. I would've eaten them all in the restaurant. They get gross when you bring them home and reheat them. What a waste of French fries. The bathroom reeked of diarrhea and vomit. My brother was a monster. I ran a clammy palm over my ribs and counted four.

I lost five pounds that week. At least, that's what the scale kept telling me. I stepped on, laser-focused on the luminous blue box of numbers. **85.0** it flashed. I stepped off. I looked in the mirror. I stepped back on. **85.0**. I looked in the mirror again. Why couldn't I see it? I certainly felt it, since I hadn't consumed solid food in seven days. I saw I was pale. **85.0**. I'd lost eight pounds since that Thanksgiving morning three months ago, and I couldn't see it. My circled fingers slid up and down my arm. I counted my ribs. Wasn't eight pounds supposed to be a lot? I'd read an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about "too-thin" models potentially being banned from the runway and had been confused because the photos of the models being banned didn't look that thin to me. I watched **85.0** flash in the blue box and wondered how much those models weighed. Eight pounds definitely wasn't a lot.

I maintained **85.0** for the rest of the competition season. A week before the state meet that April, I told my mom something completely true for the first time in months.

"Mom?"

"Hm?"

"I'm nervous. About State. I know I can do well—that I have been doing well—but this is State. I don't know if I'll make it to Regionals. There are so many people there I've never competed against. It could turn out that I'm not good enough."

She smiled. "I wasn't supposed to tell you this, but back in November, Bohdanka told me she knew you'd make it."

This was the last thing I'd expected to hear. "How would she know? She doesn't even like me."

"She said you'd finally decided to get what you wanted."

State came, and it was exactly how I'd imagined. Every color was brighter than I'd ever seen it, all my senses were heightened. Hair glue, sweaty carpet, glittering purple and diamonds, flashing blue boxes—scoreboards this time—instead of overwhelming me, everything amplified my strength, excitement, and precision. I knew exactly what I was doing. I was meant for this.

The lights seemed to glow more brightly, illuminating the billions of chalk-dust snowflakes that billowed up around me with every stuck landing. **9.600**. Straight legs, pointed toes, everything perfectly timed. **9.650**. I couldn't tell if the crowd was really cheering, but the roaring in my ears was enough. I was doing it. My beam routine was the best I'd ever performed it, and Bohdanka nodded as another **9.650** lit the scoreboard.

I was first in every event. I won my spot on the Regional Team. I got the highest beam score in the state on nothing but a protein bar. I was a gymnast. I was not an elephant. I did not cry.

As I stepped off the podium, Bohdanka looked like the idea of hugging me had briefly crossed her mind.

"Very nice," she said. "You must be proud."

I nodded, exhausted. I slipped my hand under the shoulder of my leo—no line. I couldn't stop smiling. The five gold medals draped heavily across my collarbones, thumping against my sternum with each step. They clanged against one another, ringing in my victory.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF GROUCHO MARX

Cameron Mason

You know the comic face
with greased-on fuzzies
framed by wire-rimmed glasses
and rolled tobacco leaves
clenched between teeth.

But my eyebrows never wipe off
with a wave of the toweled hand.
And yet, when I am old,
they will become fuzzy caterpillars
to keep me company while I write.



RIVALRY

Kayleigh Schneider

My older brother and I may have had the greatest rivalry in history. Coke vs. Pepsi didn't even compare. I always claimed that he started it, and that may be true, but I will admit that I may have been an instigator at times. At about the age of four, I will also admit that I did jump off of my bunk bed and kick him in the face, which sent him to the doctor with a black eye. At the age of eight, he returned the favor by dragging me by the foot across the floor into the wall, where my knee proceeded to bust through the drywall. The mark can still be seen if you know where to look. At the age of eleven, we both got in trouble for yelling about how much we hated each other. I guess that's not an acceptable thing to do. At thirteen, I watched my brother flip his race car six times at about one hundred miles per hour. I immediately thought he died and was surprised to find out that his death made me incredibly sad. He was fine, thankfully, and told me I was a baby for crying. At fifteen, he let me play *Grand Theft Auto* with him in his room, a territory that I was never allowed access to before. We bonded over running from cops and hitting old people with baseball bats. At seventeen, he left for college. Eventually, I noticed. At eighteen, I went to college thirty minutes away from him. We got lunch sometimes. He invited me to hangout occasionally. I said I loved him. He hit me, or said "love." He graduated college at twenty-one. He has an adult job now so I don't see him much anymore. Funny the things you miss.



TORN AT THE SEAMS

Sarah Grace Hoover

Growing up, I never saw many emotions from my brother. All my life, I had one basic image of him. Easily angered. Generally apathetic. Occasionally passionate, but only about the Marines, planes, and other military-related things. This is the box I stuck him in, and for the most part, it fit. But then a day came that the box not only didn't fit, but it didn't come close. It tore at the seams. He came home after two weeks with the Civil Air Patrol in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where he had helped put on one of the world's biggest airshows and earned the prestigious Blue Beret. Before he left, my brother signed his name on the barrack wall, alongside names of cadets who had come before him.

It was an honor, a privilege.

A tradition.

A mistake.

Within hours of coming home, his phone rang.

I had never seen my brother cry before. Never really considered him capable. But when they told him they were taking away his Blue Beret because of "vandalism," he was crushed. It would seem like a little thing, looking back, if it weren't for the sobs I heard from across the hall. For the anguish I saw on his face, seeing how fragile he was as something he cared so much about was ripped away. Had my box fit, he would have been angry, indignant. Instead, he was broken. Because what he really cares about is so much more than his own pride. He cares about honor and integrity. Justice and truth. Things that were taken from him that night. Things he was accused of lacking.

Days later, the situation was fixed, but it wasn't ok. Then again, maybe a humbled man is a better man.





PHOTOGRAPHY CLASS IN KASANGATI
digital photography by Alli Kennedy



UGANDAN MOTHER COLLECTS BOTTLES TO FEED HER FAMILY
digital photography by Alli Kennedy

CIGARETTE THROTTLE

Hayden Dutschke

“We were strangers,” croons
out from a warped record
as I step into the aged clubhouse.
I nod along to the tune and think
about a time when he might have
played the record new, and carefully.

Dad lies on a torn couch.
An empty whiskey bottle turned
on its side rests on a stained
spool. A cigarette burns
in his hand. Smoke uncoils
and spreads its hood.

I step past him and seat myself
on an abandoned ‘67 Super Hawk.
A slow, calm snore lets out as I
gently touch rusted handlebars
and watch the cigarette
drop from his callused hands.



MY WAR

Hayden Dutschke

Black Flag's "My War" blasts
from a beaten boom box,
and our backyard fight club
becomes a serious affair.
Roundhouse kicks delivered
in black combat boots, shirts
ripped in prolonged grapples.
Mom rushes out yelling,
and I'm ignoring her,
distracted by my girlfriend
face-hugging the new kid
with the Barry Manilow hair.
I turn to my best friend,
my hands up, and he headbutts
green spikes into my gut.
I puke Mom's leftover Hamburger Helper.



MONKEYS, GUNS, AND GROUNDHOGS

Cameron Mason

Every summer my family would go to Pennsylvania, and I would help Grandpa with his farming. Grandpa usually worked in silence. When he did speak, he had a funny way of wording things. That summer, he showed me his .22 revolver, accompanied by many a warning of “Don’t monkey with it.” Images of pistol-wielding monkeys flashed in my mind. That was the first time I saw a gun.

We met at the garage one morning in early August, the farmer and his sidekick. Grandpa said we were going to check the groundhog traps up at the barn. The old egg room housed a golf cart, a lawnmower, and a sign from the poultry days, “Craig’s Eggs.” I was greeted by the smell of dust, the homemade bed on the back of the cart full of tools and equipment, the revolver in the glove compartment. My second time seeing a gun.

Thump and rattle, Grandpa’s left hand found the key on top of the roof. We beeped our way backward as Mom waved to us from the window over the kitchen sink. Our high-speed journey down the driveway ended in Grandpa flicking on his self-installed hazard lights.

I had only seen the cages empty before, strategically scattered around the farm. I stopped at the first cage in front of the barn and turned to see Grandpa walking toward me from the cart, revolver in hand. *Bang, rattle and thud*. We climbed back into the cart and Grandpa wrapped the revolver in an old rag, replacing it in the compartment in front of where I sat.

I half expected to see the groundhog’s head explode, but all I saw was a single small hole and a thin stream of bright red blood.



ALL THAT GLISTENS MAY BE

Lucy Kirkpatrick

Tiptoe your way down to the dock
and follow the fumes of Granddaddy's
puttering johnboat—a slice of jellied
Wonder Bread toast in hand—
squealing like a piglet when you land
on gumball spikes and sun-scorched gravel.
Between Jack and Jill's quacked argument
and the squeaking and hawing of the neighbor's vinyl dock,
cast and reel and gather the morning's catfish.
Later, in the reverential calm of the hidden cove,
the fish scales of yesterday's spotted bass
glisten on Granddaddy's well-practiced hands.



THE HOUSE YOU LEFT

Alli Kennedy

Down the gray hall,
picture frames grasp
the family of four:
glassy smiles and vacations
on New Smyrna Beach.

In the room ahead,
a blue tarp swells with dust,
blaring red paint stretches up
white walls in spongy Ws
from stiff rollers.

Out the window,
the skeleton of a small house sits
in the tree with branches good for climbing;
near the root, razed bones of lumber
feed hungry termites.

Past the fence,
wind whistles through
the strings of the basketball hoop
like the deep sea in a
fisherman's net.

In frigid winter,
browning leaves pop, crunch
under the pressure of tires,
like microwave popcorn
bursting en masse.

By the door,
blue and pink backpacks,
zippered mouths gaping open on the floor,
filled with times tables and algebra
left for tutors.

On the kitchen counter,
letters and sleeping pills
next to dishes glued together by
week-old remnants of bread
and ramen noodles.

At the round table,
where four passed dishes
and remarks on grades and God
for seventeen years,
three linger, betrayed.



WORDS

Salvatore Fontana

Zack

He found it in a pile of clothes at the garage sale. An old woman waddled toward him between white folding tables covered in junk. She snatched it from his hands and eyed it like a fresh-cut gem. *A bargain*, she grunted. *Fifty cents*. Zack dropped the change on the table and took it back. It was his, soft green cover, yellowing pages, and one word stamped on the first page: Poetry.

He stashed it beneath his bed, sandwiching it between his lockbox and suitcase of dirty socks. It was a small thing, easy to hide from drunken, rage-filled eyes. Zack wanted to tell his friends in Produce about it, but he had said goodbye to them yesterday. He was leaving soon. Tomorrow. The door handle jumped to life, incoherent shouting rattling the wood. He shrank back. Pain claimed his last night at home.

Plane

Zack had heard about planes. They were everywhere in the big city, so he was told. Jamie from Produce was the one who told him all about planes while stacking the cabbages. They used certain scientific principles to lift off the ground. The only principle Zack had in mind as the metal tube shuddered into the air was keeping his breakfast from coming back up. But then, he was flying. A tiny window showed him the world. For all of five minutes he was enraptured with the clouds and hills, so small.

He reached into his pocket and pulled it out. Poetry, it said. He remembered learning about this in high school. Words came together to form meaning about life, the universe, and everything else. Only, Zack never liked words. They got him in trouble. Trouble—the word shook and glowed. He squinted out the window and the word settled down, uninteresting as the rubber seal around the airplane window. It was better if he didn't think about words.

He tried to remember what he was told about the city. It was a grand place, his father had told him, full of large buildings and pretty women. The gruff voice would pause for a swig of beer. After the first pause nothing good came out of the man's mouth. Jamie from Produce knew a lot about the city. He had personally shaken the mayor's hand once. The buildings gleamed in the afternoon sunlight, the parade band blew a chorus of trumpets, and the citizens threw confetti into the breeze. Jamie wished he could go with Zack, but his position in Produce paid well and the city had few jobs to offer. Zack patted the lockbox in his lap, worn corners tinged with mold, filled with his earnings.

Curious, he flipped through the book, looking for any writing. The only word was the one on the first page. He'd have to write his own words. The book couldn't make any up for him. He wondered if he remembered to pack a pencil.

The plane shuddered as the seatbelt light dinged on. Zack looked out the window and saw dark clouds, smoky, thin, like cigarette breath. Fake. Where is the plane going? The smog parted and he saw large towers, not shiny like he thought, but black, smoke trailing lazily from their tops like giant metal cigarettes.

Cigarette. The word shuddered and glowed. It exploded into colors, sounds, smells.

He stands in a dark, dingy bar, surrounded by faceless men and women, each puffing a cigarette. The white smoke envelops his body and tugs him into the air. He soars between the stars on smog-clouds until they plop him into a familiar bedroom. No smoke here, but there, under the door, wisps of blackness like demonic fingers prod through the crack. They push the door open and the smoke rushes into the room.

Zack blinked the thoughts away. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pencil—so he DID remember—and wrote “words are scary.” He slipped the book back into his bag. The flight attendant advised passengers to secure their bags and take their seats. He patted his bag and lockbox. The plane shuddered, and Zack focused on keeping his breakfast down.

Professor

Freshman, seventeen years old, male. Major: undeclared. Interested in Psychology and English, to be placed in the introductory classes. No scholarships, payment for first semester received late—by mail. Application showed creative promise.

Assessment

What's your name, where are you from, what's your major, the woman asked. Zack blinked in frustration. This was the fifth time he'd asked someone to show him to his dorm and the fifth time he was assaulted with a barrage of questions. He told her his name and asked again if she could show him the right building. The woman smiled and nodded. He followed her down the cobbled sidewalk, past the red brick administration building and into the hallway of a smaller, rounder building. It was gray, dull. Loud noises came from inside. He thanked her and pushed the door open.

Room

The gray dorm was furnished with two dressers, two beds, and two desks. The young man assigned to be his roommate would be arriving later that week, so he had been told. He placed his bag on one of the beds and stashed his lockbox underneath it.

Paper-thin walls separated him from the rowdy chaos taking place in the other rooms. He heard muffled shouts and bangs. He grabbed the book and opened it to the first page. “Poetry,” then, “words are scary.” He squinted at the page, as if daring the yellowed lines to tell him he was wrong. The book felt heavy in his hands.

The door slammed open. A man walked in with an armload of boxes. He mumbled a greeting, plopped the boxes on the other bed, and walked out.

Curious, Zack walked over to the boxes. A dirty Marlins baseball cap lay on top. Do you like it, a voice asked. Zack spun around and saw the man again. He looked older than the average college student because of a thick beard. You can have it, the bearded man said. Zack nodded his thanks and put the cap on his head.

My name's Carl by the way, and I used to like baseball, the man—Carl—said. Zack nodded, exchanged his name. That was something people did at college. Trade names like a foreign currency, see how much you can get for yours.

Dorms

Zack avoided a lot of words the first week, but he couldn't avoid names. Carl, Daniel, Geoffrey, Hassim, Jonah, all lived in the same dorm as he did. Kelly, Hannah, Jamie, Pauline, and Laura were in the dorm next door. He met and shook hands with all these people. The second week came, and he was exhausted.

It's your turn, Kelly said. Zack nodded and looked at his hand of cards. He had no idea how the game worked, so he played a random card. Kelly played her card next with no complaint, so he must have done something right. Classes had started and he liked playing cards with new acquaintances, but he thought he should be studying. Studying, the word shuddered, threatened to come undone. Zack closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His turn was coming up, he could stay focused on the game. He played another card, nobody protested. He was getting the hang of this.

The book was always with him. It was small enough to fit in his pocket, or rest atop the textbooks he carried to classes. He hadn't written anything more, yet. There was nobody telling him he couldn't. He wanted to wait for the right moment, for brave curiosity to overpower his fear. *Uno*, Carl said. I win, Kelly said, laying down her last card. They agreed it was late and they should go their separate ways. I have to study for a test tomorrow, Carl said, want to join me, he asked.

Zack ignored him. The word Study lurched and quaked, glowing brighter than the fluorescent dorm lights.

He stands in the library, surrounded by crowded shelves, familiar, from back home. A tall, faceless man with dark alcohol stains on his shirt reaches for a book, *How to Study: for Dummies*. The man screams at the book. He throws it at Zack. It catches him square in the face, throwing him through the shelves and walls and sky, into the sun. He struggles to stand up. He watches the faceless man throw book after book into the flames of the sun. Tears of blood run freely down Zack's face.

Are you okay, Carl asked. Zack blinked against the tears welling up in his eyes. Nodded, yes, he was just fine. He needed some rest.

Tests

Zack sat at the front of the classroom. It helped him focus. The teacher pointed to the whiteboard diagram and outlined a key principle of the English language. A quick review for the test today, she said. The class groaned. Zack smiled. In this class he didn't need to write, didn't need to dwell on the words and summon a story from his mind. He only needed to remember the principles and read other peoples' words.

The test flew by in minutes. Zack turned the sheet in to the professor and flew down the hallway. He was early to every class. His advisor had said, do your best and you will be rewarded. He did as much as he could and thought as little as possible. The words were getting better.

Another test in Psychology class. No review this time. The words here meant something concrete. They didn't change. They named this behavior or marked that concept. Self-contained, directed, grounded. Safe.

Confrontation

The hardwood chair creaked as Zack fidgeted with his lockbox. The secretary leafed through the financial paperwork. She paused, asked him to sign here and here. He needed a parent or guardian to sign off as well. He should be here soon, Zack said. The door creaked open. The stench of old smoke and alcohol filled the room. The man took a seat. Sign here, the woman said. He grunted and signed, smearing grease on the paper.

How's school, he asked Zack. Zack tried not to look at his face. He told him it was good, and the teachers helped him learn a lot. His father grunted again. Half his vocabulary was non-verbal. The woman filed the papers away and wished the men a good day.

Zack said goodbye and walked out into the hall. Wait, the man called. He followed. I need to know when you'll be back for the summer, his father said. Zack gulped. He wasn't going back. He wanted to work here, at the school, to help pay for the next semester. His father shut his eyes. His breath was shallow, ragged. It carried the stench of beer.

I need you home, boy, can't manage the house on my own, he said. Zack shook his head. He turned and walked away. A hand grabbed his shoulder. I need you home, boy, the man said. Zack shook the hand off and ran for the exit. A fist clipped him in the side of his head. He stumbled into the wall and fell to the ground. A woman was screaming, people were running. A fist was slamming into his head, over and over. The word fist quaked and shuddered, enveloping him in a bright, soft light.

He sits on a fluffy couch, watches Saturday cartoons. His mom makes pancakes with syrup, calls him into the kitchen. Everything around him is larger, grander, glowing softly in the morning daze. He smiles and bites into a pancake. The windows rattle, and the sunlight is eclipsed by darkness. A loud bang shakes the ground. Bang, bang, bang. The windows break, smoke clouds filling the room like greedy bandits. His mom is lost in the smoke. It chokes him. He falls to the ground, clutching his face, protecting his head, plugging his ears, switching back and forth but none of it helps. Bang, bang.

Rest

Beep, beep. Zack opened his eyes. His head throbbed. He lay on a bed; a white sheet covered his body. A tube was hooked into his arm. Hello, the nurse said. Zack saw his books and lockbox on the stand next to him. A note rested on top. *Get well soon, I look forward to having you return to class - Dr. J.*

Zack groaned and touched his forehead. He felt the bruises. Only three this time. The nurse was asking him questions. He nodded, then shook his head, then nodded, only half-understanding her. She told him to

get some rest, then shut the door. The lights dimmed and he drifted between waking and sleeping.

Zack woke up, alone. The quiet was comforting, inspiring. He grabbed the book and pencil. Nobody had to know, nobody had to read it. The words would never leave him. He could always run and avoid them, but they would never stop. Stop, the word burned, glowed red like embers. It melted onto the floor, a pool of lava. He opened the book to the second page. Blank, white, yellowing around the edges. He closed his eyes and remembered all the words he had tried so hard to ignore. And he wrote them down. Hundreds of words sparked and danced around his bed, fading in and out of view. Cigarette, beer, stop, study, home, fist, mom, each one shaking, then bursting into the senses.

He swims in a river, going upstream. The water cools his arms. It turns to beer, then lava, then smoke. The smoke lifts him into the air. He soars into the library, picks up a book, sinks toward the ground, falls onto the fluffy couch. The floor shakes from shouts and laughter. His mother smiles at him from the kitchen. His father laughs, then frowns, then laughs, then frowns. Zack dashes outside, falls on the grass, looks at the sky, blue. Birds fly south in a V-shape and he reaches out to grab them.

College Life

Zack held a paper up for Carl to read. The light illuminated black print on the white letter: acceptance to a full-time job at the college. Carl clapped him on the back and smiled. They finished packing up and carried their bags to the car. Zack held onto the book. He wanted to write during the drive.

They passed trees and streams and mountains. Carl and Kelly talked and laughed in the front. Zack sat in the back and looked out the window, eyes searching for words. The book was light in his hands. He had filled it up to the third to last page. The first thing Carl did after reading it was ask how it ended. Zack didn't know. The words had slowed down since he started writing.

They passed a sign for the campground. Carl joked about getting lost in the woods just in time for finals week. The car was slowing down, trees surrounding the dirt road. Lost. The word shook, feebly, like an old man with chronic arthritis. It wrinkled and warped into a thousand different people, until it shifted into Zack. He stared at himself, a pale reflection in the window, trees half visible in his cheekbones, and smiled.

He stands at the edge of a roaring campfire. His friends tell stories of their lives. He turns around and walks into the woods. He sees Carl there, waiting for him. They embrace. Kelly hugs them. Then Daniel, Hassim and the rest. They float between the trees and beneath the twinkling stars.

The Doctor Reflects

Zack has shown incredible progress in my class. No, he is the one that sits in the front. Yes, that's him. He is a gifted student. I think he works hard, yes. No, no that project was assigned last year. I'm sure he would enjoy it. He takes notes for the duration of the period. Yes, in that little green book he carries around. He showed me something from it after class, exceptional prose, if a bit aimless. He is willing to learn. Yes, I want him in my class next semester.



FENG SHUI

Claire Foxx

My mother moves the furniture
on the weekends, says
who needs a man
to get things where they should be,
here to there, the loveseat,
that old thing,
backed shyly into a corner
by the window letting
the good light
in, the curtains spread like wings
against the wallpaper we chose
because
we liked it, smoothing the dark
wrinkles with our fingernails,
much better
already, and just think of a new
bookcase, armchair, hardwood laminate,
just as good
as the real thing and easy to clean,
impermeable—
that means strong.



CALL IT DANCING

Salvatore Fontana

Their steps snap on the hardwood floor,
her heels like the hooves of a newborn colt.
Wild brown hair whips from her face to his,
swatting sweat from brows to broken shoes.

Her spin is like a drunken trip.
Mirth sloshes with every step.
Joy spills when they slip, and smiles
splatter laughter on the wall.



DARK PLACES (LEFT)
SELF PERCEPTION (RIGHT)
acrylic painting by Caleb Newton
at right



SWEET PETE LOVES YOU

Jessica Jeter

I pulled into the parking lot of Ponthieux's Jewelry Design Studio off of Augusta Road at 11:24 a.m. I looked through the window to see the usual worker, Molly, lying on her oversized pillow, as if she were a window display. I went inside to find my mother already talking with Mrs. Alice, one of the owners of the studio. Mrs. Alice opened this shop with her husband, Tom, back in 1987. They were Greenville's finest jewelers and our family had worked with them since the beginning for all of our most prized gifts. Mrs. Alice and my mother were leaned over a counter, admiring the newest set of amethyst necklaces Mr. Tom had just designed. They were jagged, tie-dye rectangles of purples and blues and whites, attached to golden bars, hanging from golden chains. He had made only a few, asking \$310 for each, but I had made up my mind that Laurel would be an owner of one. It went perfectly with the ring.

My mother had moved onto a different display case of earrings and bracelets that Mrs. Alice designed a few months ago.

My mother squealed. "Your hands are magic, Alice!"

"Oh goodness, Leslie. I don't know if I can say all of—Oh! Look who's made it right on time."

I went in for a hug. "Good to see you, Mrs. Alice."

My mother turned around, with the tears already forming in her eyes.

"Hi mom," I opened my arms ready to comfort. "Please don't start. You've already gone through this once with Joey, and you still have Kyle."

"I know, Pete, but it's another one of my boys growin' up, movin' on."

I put an arm around her. "Let's just do this at lunch after we get the ring, okay?"

"Fine, fine. You're right. Mrs. Alice and Mr. Tom have wonderful things to show us!"

My mother dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, while Mrs. Alice went behind the counter to grab Mr. Tom and the ring.

I quickly turned toward her. "Are you certain this ring will be what I asked for?"

My mother frowned. "What are you talking about? We've been coming here for years."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Pete, we know their work. I know it will be exactly what you asked for."

She began to rub my back and I squeezed the bridge of my nose to calm myself. I had been in at least four times to work out the design of this ring. If it was not perfection, I was not going to give this man a dime of my money.

Mr. Tom appeared with Mrs. Alice and he greeted us with his usual over-the-top friendliness that made you feel like the studio was actually his home. Arms open wide, he grinned.

“Leslie, Pete, how are we today?”

My mother gave him a hug, then I shook his hand.

“Feelin’ good, Mr. Tom. Feelin’ good.”

I rubbed my hands together, waiting for him to place the ring on the jewelry pillow. He passed it to Mrs. Alice, and she gave it one more swipe with the cloth that hung out of her back pocket. She then laid it down for all of us to see: an oval cut, white opal diamond of my grandmother’s, surrounded by a set of eighteen smaller white gold diamonds, with a yellow gold band. It was engraved with the words, “Made for me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Tom and Mrs. Alice,” my smile widened even further. “This is more than perfect!”

My mother radiated the same excitement. “Yes, it is dazzling! I can’t wait to see it on Laurel’s hand.”

Mr. Tom chuckled and spoke for him and his wife. “We are glad y’all are pleased. I think it turned out really nicely.”

I took out the money I had been saving since I told Laurel I loved her, almost a year ago, and paid for the ring. As we left, Mr. Tom shook my hand and grinned.

“You’ve got one lucky girl to keep happy for a lifetime. Enjoy it.”

*

I couldn’t have imagined doing anything else since day one. The first time I ever saw Laurel, I watched her shop at Publix near campus. I was just running in to grab a few items, but then I saw her in the breakfast aisle contemplating between Fruit Loops and Special K. I wanted to talk to her then, but I would have been completely under-prepared, and I don’t do anything without a plan, executed to perfection. So, I followed her around at a distance and she never even noticed. She is rather oblivious at times, but that has only made things easier for us. I wanted to know her late-night snacks, her favorite fruit, what kind of creamer she used, if she was a conscious shopper, a practicing vegetarian, a Coke or Pepsi kind of girl. I wanted to follow her around until she was done, make sure she made it to her car safely, but she took a while to make decisions. I had to leave, but I was determined to find her on campus.

I was an Architectural Design major, which was also Laurel's minor, so during our junior year, we shared a few of the same classes. Our first class together, I led my friends to sit behind her and her friends. I listened to their conversations for weeks. She liked to listen to Johnnyswim when she studied, she missed her two Cockerel Spaniels at home, Mexican is her go-to food choice, she needs hot tea to sleep at night, horror movies make her cry but she can't stop watching them, and if she couldn't find a job after school, she would audition for reality TV. Laurel was a silly girl, but she made me smile. Our friends began to mesh, and we all became friends, always hanging out in groups. But never alone. It was time to change that.

I was working the Starbucks drive-thru one night, when she pulled in for her usual venti non-fat latte, no foam and an extra shot of espresso. It was a slow Tuesday night, so I talked to her for a moment. She handed me her cash through the small window.

"Pushing through another all-nighter?" I asked.

She laughed, throwing a hand over her blushing face. "Oh, Pete, you know me so well."

"Hey, we've all been there."

I passed her drink to her, as she responded. "I don't think I've ever seen you stress over anything at the last minute. You're always so put together."

I shrugged. "Well, we can't all be procrastinators. Professors have to have hope in at least one student."

She shook her head and smiled, then took a sip of the latte. I smiled in return, unsure of what to say next, so I said anything.

"Could I take you on a date this weekend?"

She looked surprised, then a playful smirk appeared. She tapped her finger on her cup, looking me over.

"All right, I'd like that." She took another sip, "I'll see you in class tomorrow."

She drove off and I stood there in disbelief. This girl was going to be my girlfriend. My wife. The mother of my children. I probably could have asked her out on the way to class the next day or after a study group night, but I didn't want to wait any longer. I couldn't risk someone else having her.

*

We left Ponthieux's and went to my mother's favorite restaurant, Mary's Cottage, as promised. We sat outside among the rose bushes and soft music playing from the artificial rocks. It was one of those perfect June afternoons, where the clouds traveled at a slow pace across the sky and you could feel the sun burning through your clothes. I couldn't decide if I wanted to ask Laurel to marry me on a day like this or wait until nightfall. Either way, it had to be special. She deserved nothing less. My mother took a sip of her sweet tea and began to talk engagement details.

"Do you have a big plan, or is your plan to wing it like Joey?"

I tilted my head side to side. "I mean, it worked for him."

She rolled her eyes. "Come on, Pete. You need to have a plan for Laurel."

"Don't worry mom, I have a plan. Two plans actually. Would you say day or night?"

“Night!”

“Then it’s set. I officially have a plan.”

She smiled and looked towards the open green fields of Falls Park. Kids were rolling down the hills, ruining their clothes and irritating their skin. Dogs were sprawled about taking in the sunshine. And couples were attached at the hip, enjoying both their ice cream and each other. My mother turned back towards me with a different look. Her eyes were stern and her body less relaxed.

She smiled softly. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Her words caught me off guard by a long shot. We’d been discussing this for months.

“Excuse me?” I said, quite agitated.

“I just mean right now. It’s a huge commitment and you two only graduated a month ago and—”

“How can you sit here and ask me something like this?”

“Pete, lower your voice!” She spoke in a sharp whisper.

“You know I’ve been dying to ask her since we went on our first date!”

“I understand that Pete, and I was not trying to upset you . . . I just wanted to know that you have reflected on this decision and you’re not rushing into anything before you’re ready.”

I took a deep breath and squeezed my hands into fists under the table until my nails pierced my skin. I hated when people would oppose me or test me. I breathed once more, reminding myself that this was my mother, not just people, looking out for me.

“You’re right, and I’m sorry,” I sighed. “I’ve thought about this ring and proposing to Laurel for as long as I can remember. I’m ready for this. We are ready for this next step in our relationship.”

With a soft look, she reached out to squeeze my hand. “I couldn’t be happier for you, Sweet Pete. She’s getting one of the best.” It is not that I have a temper, so much as a strict standard.

I felt myself release the tension that had grown so strongly throughout my body. She only called me “Sweet Pete” when she knew she couldn’t push things any further with me.

It is not that I have a temper, so much as a strict standard. While other people can’t understand it at times, my mother always has. I was thirteen when my soccer team was snubbed from the championship game. The opposing team was clearly out of line and had no sportsmanship. I tried to keep calm and let the referee handle it, but he only blew his whistle to start the next round. If he did not want to do his job, I would do it for him. I kicked the ball as hard as I could toward one of the opposing players, and it grazed the side of his head. The referee blew his whistle again, while the player locked eyes with me, bounding up the field. The referee tried to foul me, and I began to feel a rage that made my head pound and my heart race. The first moment of many pierced palms. How dare someone attack me for defending myself, for doing the right thing. I was taken out of the game and our team lost. When I got home, I tried explaining what had happened to my mother, though she clearly saw everything from the stands. But she was too disappointed to see the truth. I began to shout, and the rage returned. My mother shrank back, waiting for

me to finish. I said my final word and she looked me in the eye, begging to end the evening.

“You are my Sweet Pete and I know you would never go after anyone, unless you had good reason.” She rose from the table and kissed me on the cheek. Her response satisfied me, and it continues to satisfy with every misunderstanding she has tried to challenge me with. I am Sweet Pete and I am always right.

I let a week pass before I felt absolutely ready to ask Laurel to marry me. I had to make sure every word of my speech and every detail of the night would be flawless. I recorded my speech and played it through the Bluetooth connection in my car to help me remember. It was a bit of a commute to work, so I could play it at least twice and spit it back out twice. I also outlined the layout of the night. The placement of every flower and candle needed to be perfect for Laurel. This was a girl who deserved the world and I was going to be the one man who would give it to her, for the rest of her life. I didn’t request any help for this night, other than for Kyle to set up the food and watch the area until we arrived. I didn’t want other people’s suggestions, either. Too many different voices and opinions would ruin everything, and the night would no longer be about Laurel. Besides, Laurel was mine and I knew what she liked and how to do everything right for her.

“I couldn’t risk someone else having her.”

I planned the day of the proposal like any other Saturday night date. I told Laurel I would pick her up at 6:30 p.m. But I arrived a little early, with a new dress, shoes, and a bottle of perfume from one of her favorite boutiques. I let myself in with the key I had made for emergencies and laid the gifts on her bed. I also left a note asking her to wear the outfit and that I would be waiting in the living room for her, while she was in the shower. I sat on the couch, sweating through my nice button up. I heard her step out of the shower and gasp. My palms were now sweating, but I was more excited than nervous.

She shouted from the room. “And where could Pete possibly be taking me tonight?”

With the biggest grin, I shouted back. “You’re going to love it.”

She finally stepped out of her room, and looking amazing in the outfit I picked out, just like I knew she would. I always thought she looked best in a black dress that made your eyes go straight to her curves. She usually wears her sandy brown hair straight, but she took the time to curl it and I really appreciated that. She walked towards me, kissed me on the cheek, and thanked me for the outfit. But I pulled her back in, gently kissed her on the lips, then took her by the hand to the door.

Once we were in the car, I pulled out a blindfold for her. One turn and she would know exactly where we were going. So, for the next 20 minutes,

she guessed all the possible destinations and wondered if we would ever arrive. As soon as I turned off the car, she reached for the blindfold, but I told her to leave it on until I texted. I ran out to the field where we used to sneak away in the summer when we craved alone time. I reached our designated spot, turned on the music, lit the candles, and sent the text. She stepped out of the car, both hands crossed over her heart. I created a pathway with the candles in mason jars, while Johnnyswim played throughout the field. I could tell she was growing nervous, as she stepped closer and closer. The pathway led to an old patchwork quilt, set with a spread of dinner from a Chinese bistro where we shared our first kiss. We didn't eat there often, but it felt appropriate for the night. More candles lined the quilt with a vase of a dozen red roses, decorating the top left corner.

Laurel's hands moved to her mouth, but I could still hear her clearly. "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh!"

I beamed, reaching out my hand. "I told you that you would love it."

I invited her to sit down and I poured us two glasses of sparkling water.

"What is all of this?" she asked.

I don't think she had any idea what this night was really about, so I kept it as casual as possible.

I gave a smirk. "I just wanted to say how much I love you."

"Well, you mean more to me than just a new outfit." I made a toast to the perfect evening and I prepared our plates for us to enjoy dinner.

As soon as we finished, I looked into Laurel's deep gray eyes and asked her to dance. John Mayer's "You're Gonna Live Forever in Me" had begun to play in the background. I wrote my speech as if it were a conversation and it went as planned. She responded at all the right times until I let her go and dropped to one knee.

"Laurel Elise Davidson, will you marry me?"

Her face went blank and I went numb.

Silence.

I tried to keep a calmness in my voice. "Laurel, now would be a fantastic time to say yes."

She stuttered back. "Pete . . . I don't think I can say yes."

"What do you mean you don't think you can say yes?" I shoved the ring in my pocket and rose up from a moment that was supposed to leave us drooling over each other for the rest of the night.

She began to speak. "You know I love you and this past year together, but I just think I need more time."

"More time for what?" I asked, a little too bothered.

She looked away and shrugged. "I don't know, maybe to gather myself a little bit more. We just got settled into the routine of these new jobs and being adults."

This was ridiculous. We had talked about marriage plenty of times or how much we love each other and were made for each other. This whole "time" thing sounded like something my mother planted in her head. I stared at her before I could answer evenly, but I could feel myself getting angry.

I squeezed the bridge of my nose. "You don't get to ask for more time. It's a yes or no question."

“That’s not fair—”

“Actually, it’s a no-brainer!”

She looked guilty, as she took a couple of steps backward. But I wasn’t finished.

I waved my arms around. “I took the time to do all of this for you, I bought you a ring from Ponthieux’s, and I made sure to do everything perfectly for the past year!”

“And I love all of that, Pete. But we just moved into this new chapter, we’re still getting to know each other, and . . . and I think we might need to get on the same page about a few things.”

I grabbed her wrists and began to plead. “We can be engaged for another year, I don’t care—”

“Pete, you’re hurting me!”

I ignored her. “I just know I want to be with you forever! You want the same thing, Laurel. Just say it!”

She was struggling to break free from my grip, but I released her. She looked at me as if she no longer knew me at all. So, I took a deep breath and ran my hands through my hair.

I spoke steadier and softer this time. “Why don’t I just take you home tonight and we meet up in the morning?”

She hugged her body and nodded her head. I told her to wait in the car, while I cleaned everything up, but she stayed to help me. I loved how good we were together, even when she tried to be difficult.

“It is not that I have a temper, so much as a strict standard.”

We rode back to her apartment like two strangers on a first date gone all wrong. She stared out the window the entire time and I left my hands on the steering wheel. I didn’t know how tonight ended the way it did, but I knew she would wake up perfectly fine tomorrow, ready to wear my ring with pride. I pulled into her apartment complex, walked her to the door, and kissed her goodnight. She placed her hand on my cheek and told me she loved me and that she was sorry for how the night ended. I nodded and kissed the palm of her hand. I walked back to my car and pretended like the night did not even happen as such, already preparing for the morning.

Laurel and I agreed upon 10:30 a.m. for brunch and she arrived right on time. She opened the door and we hugged for a long moment. She pulled away and smiled.

“Thanks for having me over this morning. It smells great!” She looked over at the table set for four people and tilted her head. “Are we having company?”

I calmly smiled and led her into the kitchen. “We sure are. I invited my parents over to celebrate our big news. And I figured we’d FaceTime yours.”

“Pete, we don’t have any news.”

I slipped my arms around her waist. “Laurel, I told you last night, it was a yes or no question. And telling me no isn’t an option.”

She tried to pull my arms off of her, but there was a knock. I looked towards the door and shouted. “Just a sec!”

I looked back at her and grabbed her by the arm. I pulled the ring out of my pocket and spoke to her with a hardness I wished she didn’t have to experience. “Laurel, you will put this ring on your finger and tell them how excited you are to marry me and start our life together. You can tell them we haven’t picked a date yet, but a wedding *will* take place.”

She tried to break free from my grip, but I held on even tighter and came in closer. “Do I make myself clear?”

Her mouth was sealed tight, but her eyes were open wide. She nodded her head and reached for the ring with her free arm. I watched her read the engraving and she gave a half smile, then put the ring on her finger. I kissed her on the forehead and backed away with a smile. I left her in the kitchen to look after the food, while I went to open the door. My parents stood with champagne and bright smiles. I welcomed them in, and we shared a nice brunch. Laurel did as she was told, and my mother proposed a toast at the end.

“Here’s to Laurel joining the Morton family and learning all there is to know about my Sweet Pete.” My mother raised her eyebrows. “You’re in for a treat!”

Laurel froze mid-toast and I clutched her knee under the table. She snapped her head toward me, then slid her arm around mine and gave an embarrassed giggle. We all clinked our glasses together those eight years ago, as I marveled at my soon-to-be bride, made for me.



ARTIST SPOTLIGHT



The Essence of Experience

*“Reflective, spontaneous, and consistently evolving,
artist **Grace Gilbert** documents life and all its layers
in fearless, dazzling color.”*

WRITTEN BY LARISA CROWDER | PHOTOGRAPHED BY ASHLEY STONE





GRACE GILBERT STANDS IN THE MIDDLE OF HER STUDIO. Beams of brilliant sunlight filter through the blinds, striping the paint-spattered floor and her purple Dr. Martens. This is her place—for creating new things, singing while she paints, and articulating her experiences through color. For Grace, creation has never been optional. Though she'd always been fine-motor oriented and artistic in different mediums, it was during her sophomore year of high school that she began painting. Stumbling upon some tiny canvases in Walmart, her first thought was, “these are so cute,” and then, “I can totally nail this.” Done with a tiny set of paints, her first piece was a tree’s silhouette. Shocked at how much detail she was able to capture, Grace began painting more of those miniature compositions and taking art classes and decided to see where painting would take her. She found that “visual art was the best place I could settle, where I could work things out in private and then show it to people rather than expose myself in the beginning.”

“I want my bright colors to be almost like a dream, or an altered perspective. I want people to look, then look again.”

Radiating a palpable energy, Grace moves from painting to painting, speaking excitedly as she describes each one. Comprised of layer upon layer of color, their loose forms and the movement surrounding them make them feel almost like they’re still in motion. “It’s important that they’re abstract enough so they have an integrity of their own,” she says. “I want these to be universally accessible.” Her paintings are documentary, personal, tied together by spirituality along with vivid colors and patterns. Pointing to “Balance” and “Communion,” she adds, “these two are very relational for me.” Relationships with other people, as well as relationships with people in nature, are both preeminent motifs within her life, places where she finds the most growth and fulfillment. Whether it’s searching for four-leaf clovers, climbing a mountain, or feeling the pure joy in a moment of intimacy with another person, she categorizes her work as “moments” and “experiences”—moments where she’s stopped and reflected.





She encourages others to do the same, to be present, inviting people to look deeper when they have those encounters. “I want my bright colors to be almost like a dream, or an altered perspective,” she explains. “I want people to look, then look again.”

Her “stop and smell the roses” attitude—though in her case it’s also “stop and watch the sunrise,” which she does every chance she can—works in harmony with the mantra “inspiration finds you working.” With 11,000 photos on her phone, Grace is always present, alert for moments to pluck out and reference in her next piece. With her friends, “there’s an understood agreement that I’ll be drawing, and they graciously let me,” and, as she draws, “the energy of the moment is made permanent in color. Whatever I’m going through, whatever vibes are in the air, I put them out as simply and expressively as I can.”

“ . . . the energy of the moment is made permanent in color.”

Meditation and learning to sit still has also informed the way she creates. “Retracing my steps over the leaves, taking my time, building up layer after layer and affirming the experience, that’s where the meditative aspect comes in,” she says. And no matter what she’s doing, she’s learning and creating, whether it’s giving stick and poke tattoos, reading about Picasso or Tibetan Buddhist sand mandalas, listening to podcasts, or playing bass. “If I’m having a really good day, I’ll make art about it. If I’m having a really bad day, I’ll make art about it. If I’m bored, I’ll make art about it. I may not have done much today, but at least I made something beautiful, even if everything in my life looks like a dumpster fire,” she says, laughing.

Living in an intentional state of constant evolution, Grace’s post-graduation plans include moving to Nashville with her husband, Trent, where she hopes to find “some sort of artistic job” doing shows and meeting people. Immersed in art and music, surrounded by the mountains and people she loves, she says, “It’ll be an adventure, for sure.”





GRACE GILBERT

**PAINTINGS IN THE
ORDER THEY APPEAR**

PAGES 53–57

BALANCE
36 X 36

acrylic painting on canvas

COMMUNION
48 X 60

acrylic painting on canvas

SOPHIA
9 X 12

*acrylic paint, chalk pastel,
and colored pencil on paper*

REFLECTION
36 X 36

acrylic painting on canvas

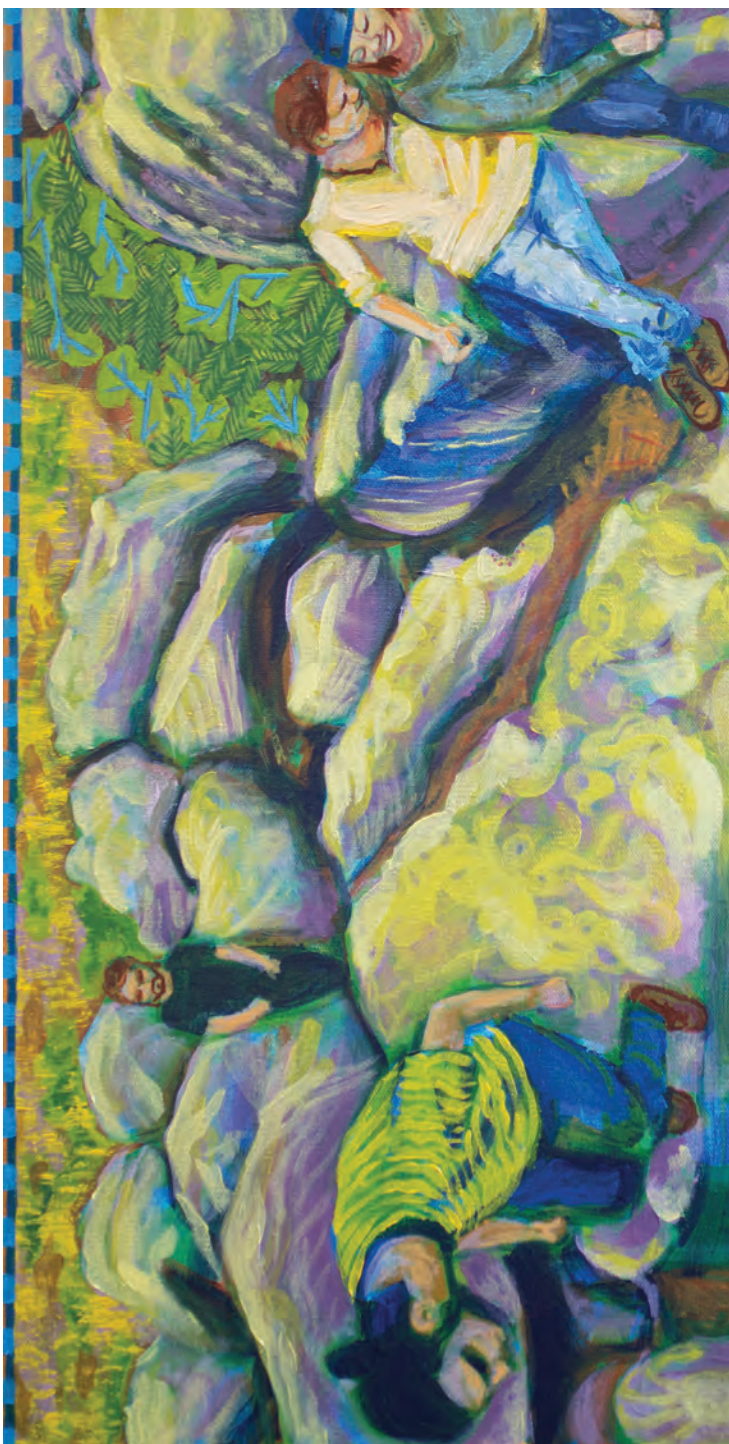
PERSPECTIVE
24 X 24

acrylic painting on canvas











FIRST CAR

Savannah Smith

The old car with its worn-out blue paint,
your dusty footprints pressed on the dash,
the glovebox jammed shut with duct tape,
the cheetah-print tray overflowing with ash.

The air conditioner that would not work,
a stained blanket, shattered CD, fallen fries,
my white sneakers left forgotten in the trunk,
the sticky leather that scorched our bare thighs.

Floorboards stained with perfume, sweat—
a home to ripped shirts and undergarments, too,
abandoned ChapStick and American Spirits,
loose change, foggy windows, and flat Mountain Dew.



PICTURE JACK KEROUAC AND RUPI KAUR

Hayden Dutschke

Picture Jack Kerouac and Rupi Kaur
on a cheap date. They're shouting
and getting really mad cause' Kaur
dissed Kerouac's hat, so he called
Kaur a bad name, and Kaur kicks
Kerouac, so he proceeds to SUPLEX
SLAM her, breaking the table!

Picture Allen Ginsberg and Sarah Kay
in a supermarket. They're arguing
over price points, and Ginsberg is sweating,
and Kay's shoving a baguette in his face,
so he KARATE CHOPS her throat! Kay
tackles Ginsberg, and they're wrestling,
knocking over Campbell's soup cans.

Gonna dress real cool and make fat stacks
and do the bad thangs just like them.



THE LONELY BOY AND THE INVISIBLE GIRL

Bree Green

SCENE

(RILEY, a man at the counter of the diner is looking over at SARAH, visibly trying to hype himself up to talk to her. Just as he's about to, TODD slides in next to SARAH to try to flirt with KATIE while she is working)

TODD
Hey cutie.

(KATIE ignores him)

TODD
Hey, waitress.

(KATIE sighs and turns around)

KATIE
Yes, what can I get for you?

TODD
I can't decide. What's good here?

KATIE
Our tap water is pretty good.

TODD
Oh come on, you know what I mean.

KATIE
Well, what do you like? Milkshakes, malts, hot coff—

TODD
Actually now that you mention it, I like you.

KATIE
(Says deadpan, not even looking at him) Too bad I'm not for sale.

TODD
(Leans over on the counter to get closer to her) Oh come on babe I—

(TODD leans in too far and almost tips over SARAH in her chair, but RILEY stands and catches her. The SERVER notices and crosses over, concerned)

TODD
Oh sorry, I didn't see you there.

SERVER
Is there a problem here?

TODD
No, no problem.

RILEY
I don't think you get to decide that. *(To SARAH)* Are you okay?

SARAH
I'm fine.

TODD
I just didn't see her.

RILEY
She was literally sitting right there. If you weren't hanging all over the counter trying to hit on her, you would have noticed that.

SARAH
You're fine.

TODD
She said she's fine.

RILEY
Would you let her speak?

SARAH
It really isn't a big deal. It was an accident.

TODD
Exactly!

RILEY
I think you've said enough.

(TODD gets the picture and finally backs off to his original seat.)

KATIE
(To SARAH) I don't know what it is with guys like that.

SARAH
What?

KATIE
They're just gross, flirting with anything that has a pulse, you know?

SARAH
I guess.

KATIE
What do you mean?

SARAH
That just doesn't happen to me very often. Guys hitting on me, I mean.

KATIE
I don't buy that.

SARAH
What?

KATIE
Come on! You're pretty, seem sweet. What's the problem?

SARAH
Good question.

KATIE
Well, either way consider yourself lucky. The weird ones are relentless.

SARAH
I can imagine.

(KATIE leaves to return to work, RILEY is just about to say something to her but the stage freezes, including the SERVER)

SARAH
(To the audience) If you're wondering, that's the second time something like that has happened tonight. The first time was with that big guy over there who tried to get a girl's Snapchat. I don't know, I'm just not really the one that people notice. Sure I have friends, I'm just not really the first person people talk to. Like, it's never just "Sarah," it's always "Sarah and blank." There's just always someone who shines a little brighter than me. So, because of that, I make myself happy. When I came to this town I reinvented myself to be this bright, fun, bubbly person that people would want to be around. And they do want to be around me, but let's just say that if I make plans with someone and my other friends don't come as well, they tend to cancel. I'm kind of a sounding board. Someone they talk more at and not really to. Having loving people around you but still feeling alone, you feel like you're insane. It's like I'm sitting in a white room and there's a door and it's unlocked, but I just can't turn the knob, so I'm trapping myself. I've trapped myself in this cycle of being sad all the time, I'm mad at myself for it, so I act happy, which doesn't work, which makes me sad again. Being someone who is just there for others, but not really having anyone want to listen to you, you feel helpless. Like, you have to become your own best friend, until you feel like you're the only person who can help you, which just encourages you to push people away. Some people say knowledge is power, but it's the opposite. Not taking my own words and watching my own self-destruction is almost worse than not knowing better at all. I'm not trying

to be dramatic, but you feel so isolated and you become what you've made your feelings to others. Invisible.

(The stage unfreezes, SARAH looks around, looks at her phone, and sighs. She turns back around, tries a few times to get the attention of the SERVER but fails. RILEY notices SARAH trying to get the attention of the SERVER)

RILEY
Hey!

(The SERVER hears him and turns around)

SERVER
Yeah, Riley, what can I get you?

RILEY
I'm good, but I think she needed something.

SERVER
(To SARAH) Oh I'm sorry ma'am, what can I get for you?

SARAH
(A little frazzled) Oh um, *(To RILEY)* thank you, *(To SERVER)* can I get a milkshake?

SERVER
Strawberry, chocolate, or vanilla?

SARAH
Strawberry.

SERVER
Whipped cream and cherry?

SARAH
No, thank you.

SERVER
Coming right up. *(Walks away)*

SARAH
Thank you!

(The SERVER doesn't hear; this clearly affects her. RILEY nervously looks around, trying to find a reason to continue the conversation.)

RILEY
I'm Riley.

(SARAH doesn't realize he's talking to her and accidentally ignores him, RILEY clears his throat.)

RILEY
(Speaks a little louder) I'm—I'm Riley

(SARAH finally notices RILEY is talking to her)

SARAH
What?

RILEY
I'm Riley, I'm Riley.

SARAH
Oh, hi.

(Awkward beat)

RILEY
Who are you?

SARAH
Sarah.

RILEY
Cool.

(Awkward beat)

RILEY
Well . . . I'm Riley.

SARAH
You said that.

RILEY
I know.

(SERVER brings SARAH her shake)

SARAH
Thank you. *(Turns away and sips)*

SERVER
I saw you in here last week.

SARAH
Wh—what?

SERVER
Weren't you on a date?

SARAH
(Turns back around) Oh, I wasn't on a da—

RILEY

Kind of? We didn't hit it off, but hey, not now ok? (*Awkwardly gesturing to SARAH next to him*)

SERVER

(*Nods knowingly*) Gotcha.

(*The SERVER leaves, not seeing that SARAH was trying to get his attention again. She is dejected by this*)

RILEY

What's wrong?

SARAH

I just wanted to get the check.

RILEY

Oh you don't have to worry about that. I mean, if you don't want to.

SARAH

What?

RILEY

What?

SARAH

What do you mean?

RILEY

You don't have to worry about paying. I could just . . . pay for you?

SARAH

Why?

RILEY

Because? I don't know. Isn't that a thing people do?

SARAH

I guess? If you haven't noticed it's been kind of hard for me to get anyone's attention here.

RILEY

Well, you got mine.

(*SARAH smiles*)

RILEY

You smiled.

SARAH

(*Bashful*) Um, yeah.

RILEY
It was nice.

SARAH
Thanks.

RILEY
I'm um, I'm Riley.

SARAH
(Laughs) I'm Sarah.

(SARAH reaches out for a handshake, they shake hands, then stay holding hands. This makes SARAH blush but RILEY visibly nervous. RILEY ends up breaking their hands apart.)

RILEY
So, have you been here before?

SARAH
A few times, usually with some friends. You come here a lot though?

RILEY
What?

SARAH
You and the waiter guy seem to know each other.

(RILEY looks at the SERVER, he gives RILEY a thumbs up)

RILEY
Oh, yeah. He's a nice guy. I wish I would have seen you around here before this though.

SARAH
Why?

RILEY
Just so I could meet you sooner. Seems like a waste to have gone this long and met you just now.

SARAH
You're sweet.

RILEY
Thanks. What's on your mind tonight?

SARAH
What do you mean?

RILEY
You just look like a person that has a lot to say, but not that many people are listening.

SARAH

(Blushes again and smiles) Stop.

RILEY

Stop what?

SARAH

Making me feel . . . I don't know . . . special?

RILEY

I think you are. If—if that's ok.

SARAH

(Smiles bigger and looks down, tucks hair behind her ear) It is.

(RILEY looks out to the audience. The stage freezes other than RILEY and the SERVER, who listens)

RILEY

(To the audience) Is this a joke? Because this never happens to me. I don't normally just, hit it off like this. People say I do, but I can't really believe it because it's my mom saying it most of the time. Do you see her? And she laughed at me! Well not, not *at* me but with me because, because I made her laugh. That's cool. I don't normally do this, talk to people I meet in crappy diners. But with her, I don't know, I just. I saw her and I immediately could tell she was . . . different. Everyone else around us right now is fighting for attention, talking louder than their friends to be heard, she was just content sitting here, not needing anything just. Here. I'm just glad she's talking to me. I could listen to her talk forever. There's nothing about me that stands out that much, you know? I'm just an average guy, kinda average style, other than my hair I don't really catch girls' attention. But she laughed at my joke and she's—*(Looks over at her, stops, and slowly smiles)* still smiling at me and . . . you know, at this point in my life I didn't think it was really possible for me anymore, like I missed my chance. But something about tonight, something about her. I don't know, I'm starting to believe all sorts of things are possible.

(Stage unfreezes. RILEY and SARAH begin trying to talk, overlapping each other)

RILEY

Do you want to—

SARAH

I was just going to—

RILEY

Oh wait—

SARAH

Oh, um—

RILEY
Sorry—

SARAH
No I'm sorry you—

RILEY
You go ahead—

SARAH
No you, um, you first.

RILEY
Ok. I just wanted to know if you wanted to keep hanging out.

SARAH
(Laughs a little) What?

RILEY
I don't—um—I don't know. Do you just want to keep sitting here for a while
and talk?

SARAH
Like we are right now?

RILEY
Yeah.

SARAH
You're asking if I want to keep doing what we're doing right now?

RILEY
Um . . . yes.

SARAH
Yes, I would like to keep sitting here and talking with you.

RILEY
Wow, great!

SARAH
You're funny.

RILEY
Thank you, I try too hard.

SARAH
(Laughs) Well, so does everyone.

RILEY
Exactly! That's uh—that's kinda why I noticed you.

SARAH
What?

RILEY
It feels like everyone here is just fighting for people to notice them.
You kinda just sat here, content in just sitting.

SARAH
Wow.

RILEY
What?

SARAH
Everyone just assumes I have nothing to say, well, at least nothing important.

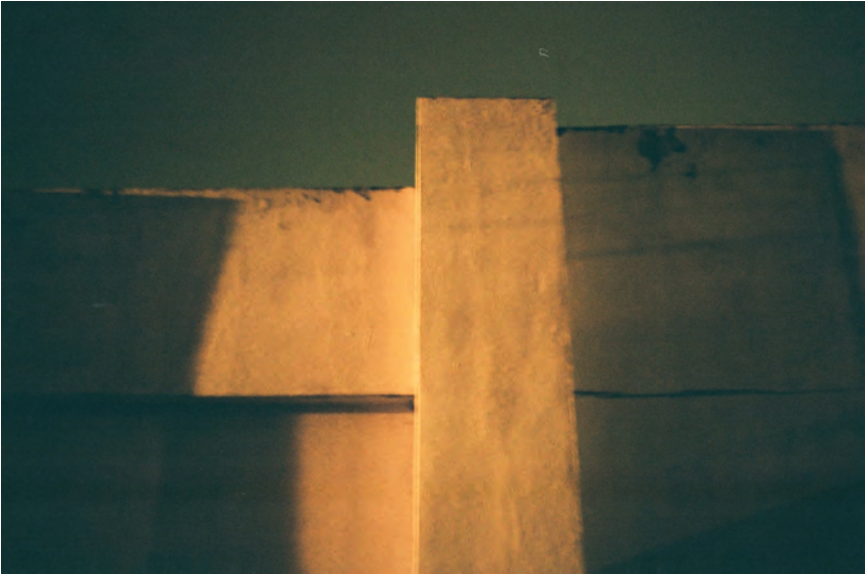
RILEY
I'm the same way.

SARAH
(Beat) Do you believe in fate?

RILEY
I'm starting to.

SARAH
(Smiles and blushes) Well um, I don't. I don't see the point in thinking that everything that happens is all planned by some mysterious force that just decides what's best for everyone. But I'm glad that guy fell on me.
(Beat) I guess what I'm trying to say is that if fate were real, it did a good job tonight, *(takes his hand)* Riley.





A WONDERFUL NIGHT IN

color film photography by John Robert Register



SOME LIKE IT HOT

color film photography by John Robert Register

KUDZU

Bates Whitaker

The sun created the meaning of our own insanity
by ducking behind beckoning drapes of kudzu
only to up and shine across the railroad tracks again
doing the same thing and expecting different results.

Ducking behind the beckoning drapes of kudzu
we balanced along the metal beams like acrobats
doing the same thing and expecting different results
high on the tension between the safety and the fall.

We balanced along the metal beams like acrobats
until we reached that bed of grass a few miles down
high on the tension between the safety and the fall
where we concealed our nakedness among the vines.

The sun created the meaning of our insanity
only to up and shine across the railroad tracks again
where we reached that bed of grass a few miles down
where we concealed our nakedness among the vines.



PISGAH

Alli Kennedy

Greedy winter hands
strip the soft emerald dress
from summer mountains.



A GOOD FOG

Genevieve Rice

Dulls the harsh edges of the world,
locks the door of the sky,
and turns off the lights.
It curls around anxious thoughts,
dimming sight into a faded photograph
revealed in candlelit slowness.



SOPHIE

Larisa Crowder

The most loved I've ever felt was at my dad's funeral. And it wasn't because of the hundreds of relatives giving me hugs, dozens of my dad's coworkers telling me his laugh made them better people, or even the piles of cards that made the church look like the courtroom in *Miracle on 34th Street* when they dump out the mail sacks of letters to Santa. It was because of my friend Sophie, and one thing she did.

I met Sophie in eighth grade. I hadn't had a best friend, or any friends, really, for the past three years, something I blamed myself for—I was too shy, too uninteresting and uninterested—but did nothing about. Instead, I would practice my suicide note some nights before bed, and scorn anyone who tried to improve my life during the day. My younger sister and brother, Lienna and Logan, told me much later that they were afraid of me then. When I asked Lienna to expound on this, she simply said, "You wanted nothing to do with us, ever. I don't think you wanted anything to do with yourself, either." She was right on both accounts.

Not only had I not had friends since fifth grade, but it was the year my first best friend, the girl I'd spent my childhood with, dropped me like a hot brick. I'd had other friends before her, the ones I carpoled to kindergarten with, but they always cried when their moms dropped them off and wouldn't swing with me on the playground. They were the weaklings who'd rather starve than eat the crust on a PB&J. Hardly best friend material. Besides, being paralyzingly shy myself, I wouldn't have tried to make friends with them even if they had eaten the crust.

I don't remember the circumstances under which I met Sarah, only that she was tall for a six-year-old. And loud. Not only did she eat the crust on her sandwiches, she ate raw vegetables voluntarily. She was practically an adult. I was in awe.

Our families started going to the same church, and right away she selected me as her accomplice. Almost every Sunday she got me in trouble.

"Jump off that bridge. I dare you," she'd say, pointing at the bridge that ran from the sidewalk to one of the church's entrances, over a ditch maybe five feet deep.

"My parents wouldn't want me to."

"That's dumb. It's not even as deep as your mom is tall. Or my mom. And we have short moms. Just do it."

She was right, our moms were short. That somehow made jumping off a bridge sound perfectly reasonable, so I jumped, right as my short mom stepped around the corner. I spent the rest of the day in my room.

I considered it a small price to pay for the adrenaline rush.

It was always like that with Sarah—strange demands I complied with just because they were different. She taught me to play truth or dare. I always chose truth because my only secret was my fear of her dares. Her idea of a good time was to ignore Lienna until she cried or start an argument with my parents. I never liked myself much when we were together, but she was so confident about it all, I assumed I was the one without a sense of humor. Then one Sunday, she was gone. Her family switched churches, and after a few of my one-sided attempts to rekindle the flame over email, I never heard from her again. I moved on quietly and didn't think of her often, but meaning so little to someone I'd spent so much time with took quite the toll on my ten-year-old self-esteem.

Three years later, the time of the suicide notes, I met Sophie. We were on the same track team. She was also tall and loud, and beautiful. She had waist-length blonde hair and what I considered to be a repulsive lust for life. One evening, her dad brought along their new puppy when he picked Sophie up from practice, letting it bounce around in the grass for a while. When my dad arrived, it turned out that, of course, he knew Sophie's. He knew everyone. When my parents moved into their first house, he went door-to-door and introduced himself to every neighbor within walking distance. This was something he continued to do as my siblings and I grew. We'd take walks around the block, and never made it home before he'd knocked on at least one door, just to ask how someone was. He never completed a grocery trip without a conversation, much less a Sunday morning. As a child who was too shy to even hold up a few fingers when asked my age, I found his behavior absolutely mortifying. "Dad," I would cry, clinging to his arm as he approached yet another stranger at church. "Do you *have* to talk to them?" I asked this every time, and his confusion was as predictable as my question. "But Risa, he'd explain, "they're new!" So, as usual, he introduced me to Sophie against my will.

"You should go ask Sophie if you can pet her dog."

"No."

"I'm sure she'll say yes. She's nice, I promise."

Rolling my eyes, I walked towards her. I figured that, worst-case scenario, I'd endure a couple minutes of small talk while I petted the dog, and then I could go home and never speak to her again.

"Can I pet your dog?" It wasn't a question. I didn't care.

"Of course!"

As I did, she started talking. And talking. And talking. Not exactly the school-weather-practice schedule gamut I'd anticipated—she told me about getting this puppy (Maxine II, Max for short) because her first dog (also a black lab, Maxine I, also Max for short) had been hit by a car. She hadn't wanted a new dog, but she'd been having nightmares about Max I and would sleepwalk all the way down the stairs and out the front door into the street, searching for Max I, so her parents bought her Max II in hopes of appeasing the nightmares and sleep-searching, which had worked, and she just loved black labs so much that she was happy about Max II and could now fondly reminisce on Max I instead of crying for her in the streets in the

middle of the night. This information was so unexpected, so unlike anything I'd ever heard, that I laughed out loud.

"That'd be pretty ironic if you got hit by a car."

"I guess. Besides, since my parents felt so bad about me crying every night, they're letting Max II sleep in bed with me." Then she winked.

And that was it.

*"She could have talked a tree to the ground or a murderer
into the electric chair."*

She invited me everywhere. I went. It was perfect because she did all the talking and asked nothing of me. If she had it wouldn't have worked. Instead, she required nothing during a time when I had nothing to give. She just talked. She was truly exceptional at it. She did it in such a way that you absolutely could not leave, or interrupt, or make some excuse to move on, but I never wanted to anyway. She could have talked a tree to the ground or a murderer into the electric chair. If she'd been alive during the book of Joshua, the Israelites wouldn't have needed trumpets to bring down the wall of Jericho. God would've just said, "March around the city while Sophie talks to the wall." I fell in love with her, and we spent every possible moment together. And when I was ready to talk, she listened. One Saturday morning, she recruited me to help her and her family plant a field of trees on one of their several acres of land in the country. After laughing our way through hours of digging and planting and watering, we stopped for lunch. We took our sandwiches, water bottles, and Oreos wrapped in napkins, and hiked to Sophie's favorite picnicking spot, a sheet of rock jutting out over a steep hill, overlooking the field we'd just planted.

"You're my favorite," she said decisively.

I knew what she meant, but I fished for compliments. "Favorite . . . ?"

"Person. Friend. I trust you the most."

I trusted her the most too. For the first time, I told her about Sarah, ending with, "she literally made me jump off a bridge and then dumped me."

Sophie scrunched up her face, scowling. "Yeah, I met her once. She told me that I was loud and take up too much space when I talk." I laughed and ducked as she flung her arms out for emphasis, lost on the irony. I thought about how little space I took up in the grand scheme of things, hardly talking, sharing nothing until someone poured into me so much I was finally willing to grow, to take the risk of being known and move past my bitterness. I realized, too, that what Sophie had done for me was what my dad did every day. All those times I'd clung to his arm and begged him to stop talking, he was taking that risk and changing lives. Suddenly, I loved him much, much more.

As I began my junior year in high school, my dad was diagnosed with brain cancer, a stage four glioblastoma on the left frontal lobe of his brain. Less than a year later, after chemo, radiation, two surgeries, and several seizures ending

in ambulance rides, he'd lost almost his entire vocabulary. This included his kids' names. He knew he didn't know them, and he knew he'd forget every time we told him, but he never stopped asking. "You're my daughter," he'd tell me at least once a day. "You're the oldest. What is your name?"

"I'm Larisa."

"Larisa." He'd close his eyes, squinting hard as if that'd make the word stick. Then he'd open them and smile. "I love you."

Eventually, he became embarrassed about the forgetting, so he asked our mom to write everyone's name on a sheet of paper. Typing was easier for him than speaking or writing by then, so he'd text each of us every morning.

"Larisa! I love you!"

My name had never sounded so triumphant.

He couldn't hold a conversation. He didn't grasp what I said. He didn't give up, either. My father, a reader, a thinker, who held a PhD in Chemical Engineering and wrote the funniest poems I've ever read, spent his last conversations struggling to ask me about my day. "Your life. Tell me," he'd say from where he was curled up in bed, the lights always off because his head hurt so bad. "I want to know."

Sometimes he would cry when he couldn't understand, and then our mom would get angry. Not with him, not even with God, just angry. My mom had to do everything for him, and for the doctors who refused to try anything new that hadn't been proven a failure, on top of everything she did for my severely disabled sister. With a non-verbal daughter who required constant care, and now a husband who needed the same, she was overwhelmed and lonely, emotions that manifested themselves viciously. I left nearly every room she entered, avoiding her exhausted tears and righteous anger in a half-hearted attempt at denial.

Lienna and Logan and I were each other's escape from it all. One Saturday afternoon in July, we were spread lazily across Lienna's and my bedroom floor, exhausted and sunburnt from camp. We were laughing—that stupid, sleepy laughter that's inevitable after six days of hiking, canoeing, and midnight bonfires with your favorite people . . . or, for us, the bliss of six days without tears, without anger. We hadn't seen either of our parents for a week, and we didn't particularly want to.

We tensed as our mom pushed open the door. She stood there for a second, lost. We waited.

"You all need to come talk to your dad. He thinks he's dying and wants to say goodbye."

We believed he thought he was dying; we didn't believe he was. We dragged ourselves single-file into our parents' bedroom. My mom and Logan sat on the bed, while I leaned over the footboard and Lienna sat in a chair. The room was dark and hot and stank, saturated with the fumes of vomit and rot; a body decomposing alive. Death's body odor. I hated being in that room, and I hated looking at the shell my dad had become. Though he'd always been thin, a year of brutal treatment and a stomach crammed with pills had left his body skeletal and his face bloated. His bald scalp was stitched and scarred from being sliced open so many times. He looked like a baby. An alien. Not my dad.

“Mark,” my mom whispered. “The kids are here.”

He just cried. I’d seen him cry many times before—my dad was an openly emotional man—but not like this. This wasn’t a choice.

“Tell them . . . tell them . . .”

“Tell them?” my mom asked.

“I love them so much. God loves them. Tell them . . .”

“They’re here. They love you too. They know that.”

Lienna and Logan were crying too. I was swallowing mouthfuls of vomit. It tasted how the room smelled and burned my throat like vinegar.

“Dad, we know you love us.”

He didn’t even know we were there.

“I love them . . . when I sleep, and I don’t wake up, I just want them to know . . . I love them all the time. And God. Tell them.”

I sat down behind the bed where I couldn’t see, squeezing my head between my knees so I couldn’t hear either. When people cried in movies, I just muted the TV. Real life was trickier.

It took a long time for him to fall asleep. He did not die that day.

“The only thing worse than what just happened,” Lienna said as we returned to our room, “is that it will probably happen again.”

She was right. Oh, God.

*“When people cried in movies, I just muted the TV.
Real life was trickier.”*

I crawled into bed, where I’d left my phone. Three missed calls from Sophie, and she called again while it was still in my hand.

“Hey.”

“Larisa, are you okay? I started thinking about you and I got sick. How’s your dad?”

“You actually got sick?”

“Yeah. I still am. What happened?”

“My dad thought he was going to die and was afraid we didn’t know he loved us.”

“Tell me.”

So I told her.

When my dad did die, it was two months later, during my second week of college. We’d known it was close, so when my mom called me at midnight to tell me he’d passed, I just said okay and fell asleep, more at peace than I’d been in a year. To say it was a relief sounds callous, but he’d been so sick, for so long, that that’s exactly what it was. For the first time in his life, and now for eternity, he was whole. He was perfect. My life was missing a piece, but his was just beginning. How could I regret that?

My mom texted Sophie and asked if she and her brother would play their violins at the funeral. Sophie answered immediately. “We would be happy to

provide the music for your husband's homecoming celebration," she said. Yes. That's exactly what it was.

I was very self-conscious at the funeral. I didn't know how to be. Did I sound too friendly as I greeted the guests? Was my "my-dad-just-died-but-I'm-glad-you're-here" smile wistful enough? I hadn't thought to Google "how to act at your dad's funeral."

Sophie and her family were the first people there. She stood beside me as I mechanically hugged over three hundred people, her presence somehow deflecting a bit of the sadness, her impenetrable aura like a shield. My self-appointed emotional bodyguard.

Then, across the room, I spotted her. Sarah had shown up with her parents. A violent, childish rage consumed me, roaring in my ears and burning my watering eyes. Seriously? My dad's funeral? The church was packed, and I'd never pointed her out or even mentioned she'd arrived, but Sophie spotted her pushing towards me. Sarah never made it. Sophie moved from my side, blocked her path, and began talking. And talking. And talking. That was what she did best, after all. She talked to Sarah for a good half hour, eventually ushering her to her seat inside the sanctuary.

The ceremony was the closest to a celebration that a funeral can be. The eulogies given by my dad's brother and best friends were about hope, not loss. I cried in public for the first time since I was five years old, and people talked about loving and about knowing.

Since I'd spent the morning greeting guests and the ceremony itself crying, afterward I was exhausted. My soul was exhausted. I sought refuge in a stairwell in a shadowed corner of the church, assuming no one would find me. Sophie did, bearing samplings of every single dessert available at the reception. Three plates worth. She sat down with me and started telling jokes. I know that sounds morbid, and maybe even disrespectful—joking at my dad's funeral. But Sophie and I had always told jokes. And the joy and the love in the church that morning overwhelmed my hatred, my loss, my self-conscious smile. It wasn't heaven, but I felt whole. Known. So we laughed at her stupid jokes and ate all the dessert and, finally, just sat. My emotional bodyguard knew when to be quiet, too.

"I saw what you did with Sarah," I said.

Dramatic no matter the circumstance, she threw her arms across my shoulders and lifted her face towards the sky. "It was horrible," she said. "But I know you."

And there in her arms, my eyes bloodshot and puffy and my stomach full of chocolate, I felt braver than I ever had before. Yes, she did.



HOSPITAL BED

Savannah Smith

Near corpses smell of cancer.
Wrinkled people lie in bed,
remote in hand, “bring out your dead.”

Trapped.
Needles, veins, gloves, gauze,
poison—chemotherapy and crappy cable—

Sugar-free Jell-O feeds empty stomachs
while Jeopardy feeds minds,
or numbs them. In this room,

there’s a robot attached to the bed—plotting,
beeping, breathing, with a pulse. It has tubes
attached to my mother. One beep, two beep

pause.
Summon the white coats and their army of minions.





THE YELLOW BUILDING

digital photography by Megan Adams



LETTERS TO STARR

digital photography by Megan Adams

WRITER SPOTLIGHT



To Remember the Beauty

*“Southern writer **Lucy Kirkpatrick** channels light and legacy to keep family stories alive—for herself, and for us.”*



WRITTEN BY LARISA CROWDER | PHOTOGRAPHED BY ASHLEY STONE





“BRIGHT” IS THE FIRST WORD THAT COMES TO MIND WHEN
I meet Lucy Kirkpatrick. Her red curls are striking against her yellow raincoat, which she removes to reveal a yellow sweater underneath. “You always have to wear yellow on a rainy day,” she tells me. “Somebody has to bring the sunshine out.”

Though she remembers fourth grade being the first time she was told she was a talented writer, it was in seventh grade, when she discovered her English teacher had a degree in Creative Writing, that she decided to pursue it. Now, as a double major in Creative Writing and English Literature, she recalls Dr. Wilhelm’s Southern Literature class as the time when she came into her own as a writer—that the genre’s emphasis on home completely changed how she viewed writing. After years of planning to write fiction, she realized her own stories “are worth telling, because they’re about home and home matters to people.”

*“I don’t consider myself as much of a writer as
an astute observer of life . . .”*

Immediately, she names her family heritage and the memories of summers spent with her grandparents on the Kirkpatrick side as the inspiration for so much of her writing. She grew up listening to her Granddaddy’s stories, told around the table of their lake house, and inherited his gift of storytelling. She says she doesn’t consider herself as much of a writer as “an astute observer of life,” and her autobiographical poems, which she describes as “images,” provide vivid glimpses into the past. “All That Glistens May Be” is one of these, a detailed snapshot from one of those summer mornings.

Originally from Rock Hill, South Carolina, Lucy lists many of her favorite things. Each of these transcends time and place and bespeaks her heritage: bagpipes, hymns sung from a psalter, her Gammy’s 1934 Remington typewriter, and her poem “Kirkpatrick,” a triumphant tribute to the inherent identity wrapped up in her name.





“Kirk,” she explains, is the Scottish Gaelic word for “church,” and “Patrick” identifies the church parish. “Lucy” means “bringer of light.” I can’t help but notice how fitting that is, as she uses words to illuminate truth through both writing and teaching. She loves teaching children especially, and finds “revitalizing energy” digging into Scripture and writing lesson plans. She’s not sure what she wants to do after graduation and can see herself in a variety of positions because “that’s the beauty of an English major.” But, ideally, she says, she’ll pursue Bible curriculum development.

*“When you read my pieces, I want—no, I need you
to remember the beauty of ordinary life.”*

Lucy also sheds light on reality, emphasizing the sacred everyday while acknowledging the necessity of change. Though she hates change, and the deterioration of things she always hoped would be permanent, she says that if it weren’t for it and the pain that it brings, “we wouldn’t be able to recognize the beauty of the past, or the horror of it. If it weren’t for change, we wouldn’t be able to recognize reality for what it is,” which is what she loves about nonfiction, and why she often writes in second person. As she explains this, she speaks purposefully, selecting one word at a time. “When you read my pieces, I want—no, I need you to remember the beauty of ordinary life. The honesty of personal testimony, and the raw reality tied up in telling a true story, illuminates the beauty of the life we’ve been given. If we forget that beauty, we’re taking it for granted. And life shouldn’t be taken for granted, because we only get one on this earth.”

As she stands to leave, yellow raincoat in hand, it is evident that she lives the way she writes: thoughtfully, through light and through legacy, embracing history and change, and with a contagious reverence for life.



STATIC

Allie Zitvogel

“The year had lost its meaning,
and in intellectual chains I lost both love and loathing.”
—Richard Eberhart, “The Groundhog”

It is a Sunday afternoon of academic reluctance. I am mentally contriving a list of things I would rather be doing than analyzing Richard Eberhart’s poetic masterpiece, “The Groundhog.” Standing knee-deep in a pit of high school senioritis, my procrastination is at its finest. Nevertheless, I prevail because AP Literature does not have time for hesitancy. Two more paragraphs and I am home free. Surprisingly, I do find beauty in the gradual decay of a groundhog mirroring the earthly seasons. Poetry has a way of making death seem like an adventurous journey. Yet, it is a journey that will have to wait until I return from youth group. There lies another event of reluctant obligation. Like a lamb to the slaughter (or a groundhog to its fatal death), I prepare for a talk on love and dating. The annual talk that adults dread and teenagers squirm at: sexual purity. Long live the joyous Valentine’s Day season. Can’t wait.

Upon hearing the whoosh of my bedroom door closing, my mother rushes to me in the hallway. She is crying so hard I wonder if she is ever going to catch her breath. Knowing my mother and her tender dramatics, I am only slightly curious as to what is happening. I recall our teasing at her tear-streaked face and wadded tissues while watching the latest Hallmark movie. Spoiler alert: they always find their way back to each other and end with a joyous wedding right as the credits begin to roll, Mom. Nevertheless, tears are shed at every sad moment. That woman can cry at *anything*. I have always wondered how we possess similar physical traits but are exactly the opposite in personality. Bad vision, blue eyes, semi-straight teeth, short stature, they all come from my mother. Lack of emotion, that one is from Dad.

Jokingly, but also legitimately curious, the strange decaying processes of groundhogs still on my mind, I ask, “Is it the dog?”

You see, we Zitvogels have never had much luck at keeping animals alive. Surrounded by acres of luscious grass and open land, I always wondered why animals never truly felt welcome enough to stay at our homestead. Maybe they could sense our ever-pesky pet allergies. I do not suppose it feels good to know that you give your owners hives while simply trying to convey your affection. Unrequited love at its peak. We had just acquired a new dog a couple months previously, a beautiful Redbone Coonhound, straight out of the *Red Fern* classics. We named him Copper due to the color of his coat. I just hoped his namesake would keep him slightly more durable than the deceased

dogs before him. Our chickens were eaten by foxes, our dogs got snatched up when we were not looking, our hermit crabs simply hated us and died slowly, on an angry note, and my dear old Sally was the only turtle I had ever known to run away from home. At this point, I was prepared for Copper to leave us one way or another.

As I am waiting patiently for my compassionate mother to spit out the news, I hear a sound that I have never encountered before. I look past her to the sinking figure gripping the kitchen counter for support. My father. He has this look on his face that makes me cringe involuntarily, even though I am an oblivious guest in this house of knowing what has happened. Fat tears are streaming down his face.

My father is crying. I have never seen my father cry. He usually resorts to stone-cold stoicism when a painful situation arises. Whenever he is met with a fight-or-flight circumstance, he always chooses to fight. Crying in the Zitvogel household is always met with an eye roll from him, even when we had legitimate reasons to shed a tear. If I fell off the balance beam in gymnastics attempting a handstand, he would say, "Get back on the beam and practice ten more." If either of my brothers got hit with a fastball at the plate, my dad would scream from the third-base line, "Don't rub it until you get to first base, son!" He never cried, so how could we? Through the various injuries of our home remodel, my father never shed a tear. When he electrocuted himself trying to fix our bathroom outlet, he simply laughed. The literal shock had him in shock. I remember laughing along with him in a nervous fashion, wondering what could possibly be funny about the smoke emitting from the source of electricity I used to curl my hair every morning. Another time, he mindlessly drilled through his thumb. This resulted in hushed epithets, followed by a hollow silence. He set down his drill, slapped a Band-Aid on his finger, and fell asleep on the couch with his hoodie wrapped tightly around his head. He has never been the most effective handyman. Fixing things has always caused him injurious pains. I wonder how he is going to fix this one. My throat is closing as if I have been cast into a springtime field full of lilies, the pollen overtaking my senses. Gasping for fresh air. Swollen eyes. Slight wheezing. It sets in slowly: *My father is crying.*

My eyes flick back to my mother, ashamed of what I just witnessed. Then, I hear it. It glides into my eardrums like lapping waves, but when it hits my stomach, it is a monsoon that wrecks everything in its course. Somehow, it feels both frightening and expected.

"Your brother . . . he . . . he is gone."

Numb. Like the sufferer of congenital analgesia who is unable to feel pain when an injury ensues, I feel nothing. I could punch my hand through the drywall of my hallway and not an inch of pain would befall my senses. I could stand amidst the hottest flames and the cold numbness would still prevail.

Gradually, my hands, my legs, my whole body begins to feel like what I always thought the sight and sound of television static would feel like. My mind coasts to a Saturday morning with my brother, watching the newest Scooby-Doo videocassette tapes. The sleuthing profusely piqued our interest. We cheered in wild adoration at the routine unmasking of the latest monster. I always noticed how human the unmasked culprit looks in the final,

unveiling moment. Vulnerable. Scared. Ashamed. We clapped for Shaggy and Daphne and Velma, our heroes who fought the evil masterminds. They uncovered the monster, and all was right with the world until the next one came along. We smiled and resumed our tasks of building forts in the living room and creating our own little worlds of sleuthing. The television static was simply a soundtrack to our joyful playing. The static would endure at heightened volume until my mother intervened. She would huff and puff at how we could possibly stand the sound of static in our ears. We would laugh at how we never noticed any sounds, too intent on catching our monsters.

Now, it is deafening, filling every open space and feeling as if my whole body has fallen asleep from a lack of movement. My mind is shouting NO SIGNAL while my frame feels as if a whisper could cause it to fall like a leaning tower of Jenga blocks.

*“We would laugh at how we never noticed any sounds,
too intent on catching our monsters.”*

I drag my eyes away from my mother’s moving, chapped lips and look down at my static hands. My left hand has decided to methodically snap my right hand’s wristband in an attempt to spark life, but to no avail. I am stuck in the abyss of numbness, static bouncing off my limbs, searching for a steady signal. Everything is cloudy. These are not the cotton-candy clouds you wish to sleep on in imaginative states. The cloud of grief is one that does not listen to the sun’s commands of parting to let its rays shine through. These clouds linger. The rains have no choice but to pour. No dancing in the puddles of these falling waters. No joy found in this rainy day.

Without warning, I am overwhelmed by this urge to move. Like the deadly drug that coursed through my brother’s veins when he took his last breath, this empty adrenaline fills my body. I run to the front door, sputtering useless excuses of elsewheres that are calling my name. With the reflexes of a disciplined baseball player, my dad grabs my arm. It is not the firmness that I expect. It is a gentle hand. Vulnerable. Unfamiliar. I push past him, knowing I need to escape this suffocation of mourning. The February air hits my face, a cold reality. The wind is biting; it tries to dim the static, but my emptiness is a fighter that resists all feeling. I look down at the steps of my front door. I used to sit on those steps and watch my brother skateboard down our windy, asphalt driveway. On hot July days, my mother would find me on those porch steps with a strawberry popsicle, cheering Casey on until he perfected his ollies and kickflips. I was vocal about my sisterly affection; he was perched high on the pedestal in my eyes. Every kickflip would elicit another round of cheers and giggles from his kid sister, and it fueled him to continue sporting his tricks on those four wheels.

As I get in my car, I see my mother's concern in her eyebrows and the aura of overprotectiveness lingering over her head. She has lost a child. She will stop at nothing to prevent the loss of another. Knowing my tendency to dodge the speed limit, I almost expect her to stop me. Break the door down and fling herself in front of my car. Slash my tires and lock me in my bedroom. I detect the fear in her bright eyes. Yet, she stays at the window watching me like a dog watches his owner leave for work. I wonder if she will still be there when I return, with those watchful eyes.

Out of habit and the routine caution of a rule follower, I glance in the rearview mirror, my hands on the ten and two. My mind on the "too late." I am taken back to the image of the last time I saw my big brother through this same rearview mirror.

It is the day after Christmas, and we are packed into my mother's car. The drive is short and sweet to my grandmother's house, just across the road to her long, dirt lane. Casey has just arrived, having made the two-hour trek from his own home. I catch myself being surprised at the follow-through of his arrival. I am used to the art of the no-show. Broken promises lie in the back of my mind. Nevertheless, I push them away. I do my usual surveying of his appearance. His homecoming hug feels welcoming and strong. He seems to have gained some weight and his face is fuller. His arms are thin but unmarked. The day looks promising.

Elbows touching, I sit between him and my younger brother. It feels both strange and normal all at the same time. My little brother, Jacob, is talking to Casey about his latest baseball tournament. I sit silently, breathing it in. Casey turns to me with a playful smile. "Perdy, how is your senior year going?" The urge to tell him he should already know the answer to that question and be here to witness it himself is stifled by the sound of my nickname. I have always had a soft spot for him, and he knows it. He has always been the only one to melt my hot temper with a simple smile. No matter how angry I got at his broken promises of coming to see my volleyball tournaments or his lies about being sober, the sound of my nickname emitted from his lips would always elicit my forgiveness.

Cigarette smoke wafts off his clothes and tickles my nose, but I don't mind. Any alternative is better than a needle in the arm. Lung cancer is easier to explain than drug-induced brain damage. Cigarettes do not create monsters out of protective older brothers. I miss this closeness. Nothing can touch him when he is surrounded in all directions by our family.

We arrive at the home of my grandparents. Christmas decorations are lit and ready for the prodigal son to return. My grandmother, already teary-eyed at the front door, envelops Casey in a suffocating hug. She specializes in those, and we all know it. He looks uncomfortable, a misfit toy in a sea of holiday perfection. My grandmother has this effect on people, and I let out a small smile that I am not the target tonight. I look up and Casey is staring directly at me. He widens his eyes, arches his eyebrows. I throw him a mischievous look. *Sucks to suck*. He smiles and nods, reading my thoughts. I thought the distance might hinder his ability to know what I am thinking, but no span of miles could do that. I have not changed my ways. He knows me through and through. I just wish I still knew him.

I fumble with the camera bag that is around my shoulder, waiting for the awkward greetings to finish. I was surprised to receive the camera last night, never previously expressing an interest in the world of photography. Nevertheless, I impulsively grabbed it before leaving my house. Leaving is my outlet when tension ensues. I plan on catching the last rays of daylight through my viewfinder, far away from this feigned family engagement.

Apart from airtight hugs, my grandmother specializes in Christmas dinners. The cherished china is placed meticulously on the dining table. Forks on the left. Spoons and knives on the right. I notice they look newer than the ones set out last night. Tonight's company is far more special than the plates with Christmas wreaths in the center. White and golden china is set out. Elegant. Sophisticated. Like a detective in an interrogation room, my grandmother is probing with questions.

"Where are you living now?"

"Are you still dating that blonde girl?"

"How is the plumbing business?"

"Can you pass the mashed potatoes?"

He takes the questions in stride. With an affectionate smile, he answers each one with far more than the minimum word count. He stands in stark contrast to my terse replies. Only respectful but predictable answers are delivered, never revealing any of the personal details I know my grandmother is fishing for. No gateways into the elephant in the room.

*"He nods and I receive the very last 'I love you'
I will ever get from him."*

Casey opens his presents ever so slowly, gushing his gratitude at even the cheapest stocking stuffers. I mean, who really needs another notepad? He has always expressed his thanks better than I ever could. He did not receive the gene of emotional absence from my father like I did. There are no awkward lulls of silence at unwanted and unexpected presents; he understands that he doesn't come around enough for them to know of his love for Supreme sweatshirts and Vans shoes. Yet, my camera does not lie. I capture the faint facial expressions of disappointment. Regret at being absent. Sadness at managing to feel like an awkward guest in the same room where he took his first steps. The outdated living room with the fireplace that we would take turns sitting in front of until our backs got too hot used to be a safe haven for him. Now, the only security he seems to find these days is in the form of a needle injection.

We fill my newest memory card with photos, oblivious that only two short months will pass until they are presented on the big screen of our church at Casey's Celebration of Life. My favorite one, his smiling face filling the frame, will be placed front and center of the programs, followed by the words, "In Loving Memory." These are the last photos I will take of my older brother.

Healthy. Smiling. Breathing. Alive.

As I snap the last photo of Casey, thin arms enveloping my grandparents, I know I will have to rush to make the sunset. I begin my frantic declarations of wanting to go back home. I start in on my mother. She is always the easiest to bend to my will because she knows my panicked beckoning will only stress her out further. As I am vocalizing my desires, Casey's ears perk up in an eavesdropping manner.

"Allie, don't rush things. Everybody is having a good time right now."

I stare at him, knowing he is right but not wanting to be accused of any wrongdoing, especially by him. I resign to a passive aggressive glare and wait for someone else to approach the nearest exit. My father, always the homebody of the family, soon announces that we should get going. I eagerly agree and we grab our coats.

The sun is approaching its last breaths, and I know I can make it to my favorite spot if I hurry. We pile out of the car once we reach home, and I immediately start in on my farewells. Sensing my urgency, Casey envelops me in a firm hug. Taken aback at how much I missed him, I almost cancel my sunset engagement. Tears crowd my eyes. I have never been too fond of goodbyes. I notice that I can wrap my arms completely around my brother's torso. Once a solid baseball player who terrified every boy that glanced my way, his lanky body feels strange in my arms. I feel as if I should be the one chasing off the evils of his world. All at once, I am hit with the reality that I am unable to protect him from his biggest demons. The monster has already come and destroyed. It has taken so much from him. Baseball scholarships. Genuine relationships. Joy. All I can do is watch in silence. This isn't a Saturday morning cartoon and I am unable to unmask his monster and make it all go away.

I finally pull away, feigning a smile and say, "Come back soon, big brother."

He nods and I receive the very last "I love you" I will ever get from him. I open my car door with ease, no sense of the static hands I will become ever so familiar with. As I speed down the winding driveway, I take one last glance in my rearview mirror. There he is, the brother I used to know so well. Smiling back at me, he waves me off with his left hand. I smile, hands still stuck at the ten and two. White knuckles on my steering wheel.



FOLDED, FADED ORANGE

Sarah Grace Hoover

A shirt always sat on the back of my grandfather's chair at the kitchen table. It was orange and boasted the name "Metro North Church" on the front left corner in faded letters that might have once been navy. The shirt was well-worn and well-loved, much like the man it belonged to. It wasn't until this Christmas that I found out why it was really there. He tended to spill food on his shirts when we were eating, and then get frustrated when he noticed it, even though it happened all the time, so I guess I always thought it was some kind of backup. In truth, though, it was meant to cover the black ironwork design on the chair back, which would always catch his belt otherwise. I heard about how he'd stand up and unknowingly drag the chair around the kitchen for a few steps before coming close to cursing and detaching it in frustration. But I don't remember this. All I remember is the shirt, the one I never gave much more than a passing thought to until we took it off, knowing it wasn't needed anymore.

I don't know what happened to that shirt. A few days before Christmas, once the rest of our extended family had left the house after lunch, my mom and my aunt were helping my grandmother clean. I watched my mom slide the shirt off the chair and walk to the laundry room. She probably folded it up and set it on top of the washing machine, waiting to be donated. I stood on the kitchen tile, cold seeping through my socks.

Months later, I still catch myself looking for that shirt.



YELLOW

Lucy Kirkpatrick

A yellow raincoat
nods to its twin: another
link between ages.



SAND ON FIRE

*digital photography by Taylor Smith
following pages*





THE PROBLEM OF THE INEXPLICABLE

Sarah Grace Hoover

I've never understood why people like to be scared. I've never understood the endless lines for haunted houses, horror movies, or other experiences designed to plunge the spectator into a world of fear. Isn't fear a bad thing? I mean, on one level, I get it. Scientifically, fear induces adrenaline, and adrenaline creates a sort of high. But I think the people who enjoy those things enjoy them because they don't actually get scared. At least, not in the scarred-for-life kind of way. And another thing: for whatever reason, this kind of infatuation with being scared seems to be something that people share with one another. Most people don't walk into a haunted house alone, but with a group or a partner. A friend. They turn their fear into a communal experience, something they can share together, either to laugh or to cry in each other's company once it's all over. The memory they take away isn't so much one of fear, but of community.

The difficult part comes when fear isn't shared. When it's intensely personal, and no amount of words can communicate the depth of the individual's experience. The experience is solely one's own, a source of isolation. Because you are the only one who experiences it, no one can help you cope with. No one can help you understand, and sometimes you can't, either.

My fear is that of needles. It's not so much the pain that I'm afraid of, though they definitely hurt, but the thing itself. If it were only the pain I couldn't stand, there might be a way around that. Instead, though, there's a deep-seated panic in my chest every time I see or feel or even talk about needles. There's an irrationality about it that I can't begin to comprehend, a ridiculousness that I can't explain but still feel the need to justify.

When I was young, I was afraid of shots. I'd assume most kids are. Walk into any pediatrician's office (especially during flu season) and you'll be sure to hear the cries and screams of countless children subjected to this kind of torture. Although I've always been afraid of needles, I stopped screaming from them a long time ago. I suspect it was when a nurse told me that one time, she had had a child so scared of the shot that as the needle was already in place, he jerked his arm to get away from the pain. The needle tore through his skin, ripping a trail of blood and torment down his arm. The irony of it is he probably had to get stitches. More needles—more pain. Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's when my screaming stopped. But, with it, so did my breathing. I became so afraid of moving that I tried to stop breathing. Sounds like a game, right? I bet I can hold my breath longer than you. Ready? One, two, three . . .

It's Friday morning, 8:00 a.m. We didn't make it in time to beat the line of patients waiting for their bloodwork to be done, so we wait. My mother and I. Just like we have so many times before. We walk to the desk and thankfully there are two ladies working at the desk instead of one and we get checked in at the same time instead of one after the other. Name. Sarah Hoover. Date of birth. 11-17-98. Doctor. Sora. Why-are-we-sticking-a-needle-in-you-today. Hypothyroid. Have-you-gone-out-of-the-country-in-the-past-six-months. No. *I wish*. Co-pay. \$25. The nurses are sweet, making jokes with us to get the day started. My mother laughs, and so do I, but only because it's the polite thing to do. It's my twenty-something-th time getting blood work done, but my stomach still recoils from my body with the thought of what's about to happen. My lungs start breathing shallow breaths as if to prepare for the trauma. We sit. We wait, maybe thirty minutes or so. I can't decide if the time is passing slowly or flying by.

Hoover? Tasha and Sarah?

A nurse in her mid-forties stands in the doorway leading to that back hallway, holding a clipboard with who-knows-what on it. My mother and I walk up to the nurse and step through the doorway. The door closes behind us. *Here we go. Again.* My breathing picks up a little, but it's still imperceptible to the nurse or my mother. It's like my lungs know what's coming and want to get as much air in as they can while they can. Sarah? I'll take you in the booth over here. But wait, a second nurse is leading my mother to a different booth. This wasn't planned. *I can't do this alone.* I shoot a pleading, panicked look at my mom as the clock keeps ticking away. I breathe a sigh of relief when she sees it. That's okay, I'll just wait with her real quick and then you can take care of me.

How old are you sweetie?

I blink. *What?* I sometimes forget this isn't normal, a twenty-year-old woman who still needs her mother to hold her hand while getting bloodwork done. It's become such a part of who and what I am, that I forget it doesn't make sense. Twenty, I say, my voice as blank as my stare. I blink again. Oh, you'll be fine. *You wanna bet?* My mom comes to the rescue, assuring her nurse that it's fine, it won't take long, you can take care of someone else while I wait with her if you want. The nurse turns around before she rolls her eyes.

My nurse is nicer. Kinder. More sympathetic. She asks about the giant patch of white goo sitting on my arm, covered by a clear, also giant, bandage. Emla cream, also known as numbing cream. I don't see the nurse raise her eyebrows but I'm sure it still happens. Even sympathetic people have their limits. My mom helps me peel the bandage back and I wipe everything off with a white Kleenex. My heart is beating faster, but my mind is blank. Maybe it's the fear. Not of the unknown, but of the known. Of the anticipated. Of the thing that's so familiar I shouldn't be afraid, but still am. I can see what's happening, but my brain is trying to detach itself. My lungs are still there, though, taking shallow breaths.

The nurse starts wiping the area with an alcohol wipe. Keeping it clean, sterile. No bacteria, no germs, no complications. Finished, she throws away the wipe, turns back to the counter, and I know what comes next. Seeing the needle is almost as bad as the sticking itself, so I grab my mom's hand as she

positions her body so she can block my face from it. I ask the nurse to count for me, so I know when it happens. Then the game starts again, and I see how long I can hold my breath. I don't even have to count this time; the nurse does it for me.

One

Two

Three

One time my mother told me she didn't believe I could feel the needle because of the numbing cream, but I can. I do. Every movement, every time. I couldn't tell you if it hurts though. In the strange world where fear and the mind intermingle, pain isn't even in the equation anymore, and pain isn't the problem anyways. There are plenty of things in the world that hurt, but that doesn't mean I'm scared of them. Needles, though? Not even my 4.0 GPA can explain the logic of that one.

All done.

Is it though? What about in six months, when I have to come back? And the six months after that. And the six months after that. But I can't think about that now. My mom keeps hold of me but lets me know that it's almost over. I opened my eyes and turned too quick one time and accidentally saw the nurse sliding the needle out; it didn't go over too well. So I just keep staring at the ground until I know everything's okay. Despite the numbing cream, I feel the nurse replacing the needle with gauze and I know I'm safe now. She wraps my arm in some sort of bandage which sticks to itself but not to your skin. Ha. Sticks. Funny choice of words.

The nightmare mostly over now, I leave the room without any tears falling. I think my mother tells me something but I can't really tell. I take the car keys she offers and just keep walking. One foot in front of the other. Just keep swimming. This is only the second time I've made it this far without crying yet; my mother thinks I'm making progress.

I'm not.

Sometime during my freshman year of high school, my new doctor asked me for any medical history I thought she should know. When I told her my hands shook a lot, I didn't expect her to say much. Whoops. Didn't realize I was actually opening Pandora's box. What was intended as an innocent question turned into bloodwork to test me for hyperthyroid. My doctor thought it was an obvious explanation, since I seemed a good candidate for this typically non-life-threatening disease that causes hand tremors and an overactive metabolism, and therefore unexpected weight loss. Well, not sure I'm losing much weight, but I'm not exactly gaining it either. But instead of this all-too-easy answer, the bloodwork came back negative; except, more extreme than negative. Rather than hyperthyroid, the lab results said I had *hypo*thyroid, meaning I should have none of the symptoms my doctor thought I did. Hypothyroid, my new friend, slows down my thyroid, which in turn slows down my metabolism, makes me gain unexpected weight (supposedly) and tires me out. Not just I-haven't-had-coffee-today tired, but the kind of tired that caused me to take naps every day one summer because I genuinely needed them.

When these lab results came in, my doctor couldn't believe it—so she didn't. She sent me back two weeks later for another round. With no surprise, my lab results returned, exactly the same as they were the first time. Before I knew it, I added “endocrinology”—the field of science having to do with the thyroid and other glands—to my vocabulary, and an endocrinologist to my list of semi-annual doctor's appointments. Along with that came regular bloodwork.

And so the cycle goes on. Every six months, another appointment. Another round of emla cream, another early morning drive to the office, another book read in a waiting room, another nurse with a clipboard, another needle replaced by another white gauze covered by another sticky-but-not-sticky bandage. Another game of holding my breath. No matter how many times I think I'll win, I just keep losing. But hey, if I've got one thing going for me, at least I'm consistent.

My mother never really mentions the ordeal once everything's over. It's almost as if, once we—I—walk out of the building, we can ignore it for another six months like it never happened. Except for one small phrase that my mom typically says in the thirty seconds after the car door shuts and I'm curled up in the passenger seat, crying silently and using a tissue to wipe away the tears I can't stop.

“I'm sorry.”

I know she is. I know she means it. But I rarely say anything because I don't know what to say. I don't know how to explain how sorry I am, too, for all the nurses who invisibly roll their eyes at me and maybe even at her, for all the raised eyebrows I never see but always feel, for all the moments we've already shared just like this where she so desperately wants to help but we both know she can't.

When my mom says she's sorry, it's because she hates to see me suffer and knows she can't do anything to fix it. What's more, she's a nurse, so she will probably never understand this fear of mine, no matter how much she wants to. Needles and blood work and vaccinations are a part of her career, her profession. What's an ordinary part of her workday is the object of my nightmares, which is a significant distinction that she knows but can never feel, much less stop.

And yet, through everything, she's still my best friend, the one I call when I'm stressed out with school or excited about an opportunity or just feel like saying hi. Although, she'd probably be upset by my calling her my best friend, as she constantly reminds me that she is my mother, not my friend. But this not-friend-but-mother has been with me for everything. This not-friend-but-mother has worked night shift at the hospital for the past twenty years, because it gave her more time to see her children grow up, and later on, more money to help them pay for college. My mom is the one who knows how to make me smile even when I don't want to, normally because her puns are just that bad. She's the one that I sing *The Sound of Music* with to annoy my dad and brother or quote *My Fair Lady* with just because we can. This person I call my mom is funny and witty and cheesy, and she proudly embraces every bit of it, whether it's the middle of the afternoon or three o'clock in the morning during her shift. My mother is the epitome of kindness and compassion and generosity—she has to be to sit through this mess

of mine twice a year. But she can't protect me from this, and I think that's what hurts her most of all. Every time we leave the office together, though, she isn't the only one to apologize; she can't be, because I hurt when she hurts, too. Especially when it's because of me.

For a long time, I wondered if people would let me off the hook a little more easily if I called this fear a phobia. That small word packs so much meaning into itself, offering an explanation of the inexplicable nature of my fear that surely other people feel, too. But, turns out, even the medical field can't think of a better name for this problem than needle phobia. It's also considered a type of aichmophobia, the general fear of sharp or pointed objects, or trypanophobia, the more specific fear of medical procedures involving injections or hypodermic needles—although apparently that term is highly controversial. In the end, though, medical literature just calls it needle phobia or the fear of needles. Helpful. I guess I just wanted some word or title I could give myself to help people understand it better, understand me better. This fear, this trypanophobia or fear of needles or whatever you want to call it is just as irrational as it is involuntary. I can't even look at a needle, whether in real life or just on the cop shows my parents love to watch. A single moment of seeing someone's injection makes me sick to my stomach and triggers an inner revulsion the likes of which cannot be put into words. That's how I know my fear isn't just about the pain, but something much less rational.

This fear may be my own, but I guess one small comfort is knowing I'm not the only coward—I'm not the only one who's afraid, who can't explain their fear. Not necessarily just of needles, but of anything. Everything. There are plenty of people who have acrophobia, the fear of heights, peromerhanophobia, the fear of flying, claustrophobia, the fear of enclosed spaces, entomophobia, the fear of insects, and the list goes on. Ophidiophobia, cynophobia, astraphobia. There's a website for people with these irrational, uncontainable fears, where many of them have shared their stories. When looking at it for the first time, I have to say I was laughing a little bit. One girl detailed her fear of butterflies, another her fear of makeup. Someone else said she was afraid of people staring at or watching her. Turns out, if you can think of it, someone's afraid of it. And underlying each of them is something I know and understand, which is the fact that none of us can fully know or understand why we're so afraid. As ridiculous as some of these fears sound, all of these stories at their core prove that humans are cowards. Chickens. Timid and nervous and afraid. But is there truly anything we can do to help it? And even if there is, do we really want to put ourselves through whatever horrors that might require?

We are afraid.

I am afraid.

And I don't know what to do about it.

It's amazing how closely related our breathing patterns are to our state of mind. When we are calm and happy, we don't think twice about our breathing. When we're in tension, though, there doesn't seem to be enough oxygen in the air. When we're in pain, we shove what air we can get out of our lungs and past our vocal cords in a blood-piercing scream. And when we're afraid, some of us stop breathing all together.

I bet the people who stop breathing when they walk on planes feel the same way as I do when I get my bloodwork done. Or the people who can't breathe when they pass a spider outside. Or the people who get the air knocked out of them when they walk into a room crowded with people. There's a sort of similarity between breath and fear; you can't see them, and in some ways you can't control them. They're involuntary. You might see the symptoms of fear, but you can't put your finger on the thing itself. So, it's really hard to fight. There are so many people in the world who are afraid of simple things, things that steal even our ability to explain what's happening or what we're experiencing. Fear already deprives us of so much carefree happiness; what's worse, though, is the isolation it gives us instead.

Every time my mother and I leave that office, get in the car, and drive back home or go run errands or do whatever else we have to do that day, I can't help but feel caught up in hopelessness, in feeling lost. Alone. Each time I step out the office doors, it isn't an escape. It's furlough, leave of absence. I know I will have to walk back through those doors I just walked out of and do it all again. And again. And again. There is no end in sight. I guess I graduated from the pediatrician's office, so I don't have to hear babies screaming as I wait for my turn, but now I'm faced with apathetic adults and judgmental nurses. The eye rolls and raised eyebrows do nothing to appease my fear; in fact, they make it stronger in a way. I feel guilty and embarrassed, because nothing I say or do can make them understand. Nothing I say or do can keep me from feeling, from being, inexplicably alone. And yet the irony of it is, I'm never alone. My mom comes with me. But that also means that every time I get blood drawn, every time I get a shot, even the time I had to get a TB test, I have to come home. We have to put it in the calendar to mark the day that she gets dragged back to the doctor's office with me to sit through something she can't fix. But it isn't the situation that needs to be fixed, it's me, as if something in me needs fixing, but she can't do it and neither can I. So we both sit in the waiting room, in a small crowd of faceless adults, waiting for the nurse with the clipboard to call our names.

The truth of it all is, this isn't a tragedy. Not to anyone else. No one is dying because of this, no one's life is forever altered. I'm just afraid. But the difficulty is in the silence and the isolation and inexplicability of fear, rather than the mere presence of it. On average, it only happens twice a year; but those two days are nightmares that I can't truly share with anyone else because I can't even explain it to myself. So much of my life has revolved around words and understanding and making myself understood; but there's nothing about this that even I understand. Our world, my world, is one of logic and reason, but this fear defies any of that. It's the fear of the known, the isolation, and the inexplicable.

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NATURE'S INNER MONOLOGUE IN NOVEMBER

Genevieve Rice

Winter clouds pelt rain
at students darting inside.
Finally—clean streets.





FATHER TEACHER FRIEND
oil painting by Ashley Stone



KATE
oil painting by Maggie Hance

OUTRUNNING THE CURRENT

Emma Morris

The man I found *could* have been a dead man. Just weeks ago, a twenty-year-old woman was found dead on the New River Trail, murdered over a drug dispute. She was my age. In the beauty of Virginia mountain trails, where railroads once ran and factories once boomed, meth knocks men out on a quiet spring day and steals young women's lives. This is the underbelly of one of the most beautiful regions on earth.

Work boots were lying in the middle of the trail. All I could see were the boots, soles up. It is a common adage that runners find dead bodies. Trekking through mountain trails alone made me a prime candidate to stumble upon a cold human being, and I had an awful feeling my time had come. I was home for spring break during my freshman year. I had run the same path countless times, but the trail that was supposed to be familiar felt eerie. I imagined the following morning's headline: RUNNER FINDS DEAD BODY. When I ran, my imagination ran as free as my body, dreaming up storylines in the stillness. I pulled my bottle of mace from my waistband and clutched it. I'm not sure how mace would help if I found a lifeless person, but it brought me some comfort.

I kept running, pretending that the work boots were not there. Maybe I was crazy. Maybe I had read too many headlines. I *had* recently decided to read the news more often. But the boots came into view more clearly, then the jeans, then the checkered shirt, then the man's full body. He was a thin man, probably in his thirties or forties, and bald. I can't recall his face, and I think he had tattoos, though I can't remember where. He was lying on his back, straight as a board, on a much too small blue blanket directly in the center of the trail. He looked unconscious, but I hoped to God he wasn't dead. But if he wasn't dead, what *was* he doing on a Linus-esque blue blanket two miles out on the trail?

When I saw the man, I had only one thought. Although my hometown is small and quaint, drugs have hit hard. Situated near the intersection of I-77 and I-81, it's a hotbed. *The Washington Post* recently reported that "Southwest Virginia is among the regions in the United States hardest hit by the opioid epidemic." I've seen needles in parking lots and skin scarred by meth in Walmart. I've watched men pass by one another on a downtown street and shake hands, quite obviously sliding pills between their fingertips. I've read stories of drug busts and overdoses in the local paper. The man in front of me was sure to be another victim. People don't just plop down for a nap on a bike trail in broad daylight without reason.

I responded the only way I could conjure: I coughed and stomped my feet, making any noise I could to wake the man. I walked slowly, breathing quickly and running haphazardly to be as loud as I could. I might have even clapped.

He rolled over to his side on his blue blanket and groaned. He was not, in fact, dead. He did not seem to be in pain, only groggy and confused. He groaned again.

“Hello! Are you okay?” I said, still a couple hundred feet away.

He responded with a sigh. Just a sigh. No amount of thought can prepare you for such a peculiar moment. I was too frazzled to be embarrassed by clapping and yelling “hello” to a possibly dead man in the middle of nowhere. I was afraid that if I approached him, he might not be unconscious at all. Maybe he was a predator and this was all a ploy.

In a moment of panic, I turned and ran away. I still feel a little guilty about it. Perhaps I should have run towards him and shaken him awake and asked how he wound up there or helped him stand. Instead, I did the only logical thing: I called my mom. Cell phone service is spotty on the trail, but I found a gap in the trees and caught a bar of service. I expected her to have an answer, to make sense of the man, but she was just as puzzled as I was. This was a confounding matter that no one else could answer for me—not even my mom.

I hung up and called 9-1-1, but the dispatcher was also confused. She asked me if he was okay, to which my only answer was, “I think so. But I left him in the middle of the trail.” She agreed an officer should probably be sent to the scene and thanked me for calling. I wasn’t sure if I should say you’re welcome. All I did was leave a mostly unconscious man alone.

I stood on the side of the trail, over half a mile away from the mysterious man. I ran the other way, still tracking my mileage and pace. I passed an elderly couple and paused to warn them of the strange scene ahead. Then I passed the police officer, strolling on the trail and looking for the man. I knew the officer from church, so I stopped to explain the situation and direct him to the best point of access. He seemed quite unconcerned, as if this was a common occurrence. Thus, I ran on. I was already sweating, so I might as well finish.

I don’t know what happened to the man. I suppose I never will. I never even saw his face, and I don’t think I’d recognize him if I saw him on the street. I could have tracked down the police officer at church and asked him what happened to the man, if he ever found him, but I doubt he could legally share such information with me anyway. But I never again felt the peace I once had on the New River Trail.

I still can’t say for certain that drugs knocked the man down, but I have to infer that possibility. Beth Macy’s research and investigation for her book about the opioid epidemic, *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company That Addicted America*, originated in Southwest Virginia. Macy says, “Appalachia was among the first places where the malaise of opioid pills hit the nation in the mid-1990s, ensnaring coal miners, loggers, furniture makers, and their kids.” When the factories closed in mountain towns like mine, drugs filled the vacancy.

I grew up beside these factories, among pine trees, on cracked sidewalks, and on top of mountains. My hometown was a hub for U.S. furniture and textile industries, and a railroad once ran through the city. But most of the factories

closed, and my feet trod on the ground where the railroad was picked up piece by piece. This small city's legacy in the U.S. furniture industry landed coverage in *The New Yorker* and Beth Macy's *New York Times* bestseller *Factory Man*. As Macy writes for *The New Yorker*, "Between 2001 and 2012, more than sixty-three thousand U.S. factories closed." She considers my Virginia city a beacon on the hill in the furniture-making world because a local business giant, John D. Bassett III, kept one of its largest furniture factories open and "saved" the city. But one factory's success amid the closing of several still leaves the seven-thousand-person city reeling—especially when most of its seven hundred jobs pay low wages.

One of the closed factories is just a few hundred feet from the New River trailhead. Fifty-seven miles of gravel twist through blue mountains, and evergreens cover the hillsides. The trail, a state park, makes its home where trains once barreled through the mountains. The trail follows Chestnut Creek for miles, eventually merging with the New River. Copper water flows beside the winding path, steadily bubbling across the rocks. Berries and buttercups grow, and roots of old oak and walnut trees sprawl under the trail. It's where I rode across the gravel in a stroller while my parents walked, where I learned to ride a bike, and where I became a runner. I spent hours logging miles on this ground when I was a teenager, pounding my feet in the dirt, watching trees tickle the sky, and listening to woodpeckers drill through oak. I don't think I will ever find a place more beautiful. But as I ran back after finding the man, digging my heels in the earth, the façade of nature's beauty fissured. I stared at the lifeless factory across the street.

It is a sprawling brick building that covers more than a block. People and machinery once buzzed in and out, but it has sat vacant for fifteen years, dilapidating with a faded for sale sign fastened to its exterior. Ever since I can remember, it has been there, doors closed. But after being two states away at college for months, I *noticed* it. It was a building that shaped this city and provided hundreds of jobs, now deteriorated, dead. Just like the man. With every step, the city felt more hollow than before. Most of my friends had moved away for college or work, and more local businesses had closed their doors. I was alone, an outsider in my own hometown. This city tucked in the corner of Virginia was left behind while the rest of the world spun.

Meth and murder are not new problems, but I did not look them in the face until that March day. Perhaps it was growing up or moving away and returning home, but I saw danger and sadness; I saw home crumbling in the epidemic. The drug problems might not be new, but most would agree they are getting worse. Although my corner of Virginia has been hit especially hard, the problem isn't localized. Macy writes, "Drug overdose has already taken the lives of 300,000 Americans over the past fifteen years, and experts now predicted that 300,000 more would die only in the next five." And with thousands of factory and mining jobs disappearing, small factory towns across the South are turning to whatever vice is at their fingertips for an ounce of relief.

It's not me versus drug addicts. These are *my* neighbors. It's systemic. In a way, we are all victims, and we're all responsible for cleaning up the wreckage we've made. When cars and planes and light rails came, we pulled up the train

tracks. We closed the doors of our factories and somehow forgot to replace the jobs we left vacant. We left for college and never came back. We moved to cities. We pretended the epidemic wasn't there. And *this* is what we came home to.

I'm not losing hope for the region. It's more like heartbreak. I believe that the city will roll over and groan, just like the man. Not dead, just asleep.

*

When I ran the New River Trail in high school, training for cross country season and long races, I often stopped at the Falls. Chestnut Creek quickens near the waterfall. The waterfall is about twenty feet—not towering, but thousands of gallons of water gushing into the creek was enough to make me pause. Each time, like the waterfall, my memories spilled. I have climbed barefoot on the rocks above the falls, dipped my toes in the still water, swum in the swimming hole at its base, and pulled leeches from my skin.

Chestnut Creek meanders and widens until it meets the New River. The New River is one of the oldest rivers in North America, and it's also one of the most atypical. While most rivers flow south, the New River flows north. It slices the mountains in half, snaking through the pines of Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, and Kentucky. The New River is a part of the mountains, flowing straight through the heart. As the National Parks Service website says,

Most rivers that have their beginning in mountains, slide off their crest and then follow at the base of the mountains. That is not true with the New. Its two forks converge in North Carolina and then continue to stay within the crest of the Appalachians throughout the river's duration—basically, eroding and cutting through the middle of the mountains as they rose up. Many scientists believe that when the Appalachian Mountains were formed, the New River simply rose up with the mountains, and that is why the New River remains in the crest of the mountains.

As I stretched in the parking lot, still shaking and pondering the fate of the man I left on the trail, I studied the creek, the way it twisted and effervesced and broadened, flooding into the New River. This water once mesmerized Scotch-Irish settlers who made their home in Appalachia. It flowed beside trains carrying steel and coal and wood across the mountains, across the river, and through small Appalachian towns. It saw the first puff of smoke roll from the factories' steam pipes and absorbed their pollution. And it flowed beside me, an incessant rhythm, as I ran thousands of miles beside it. Like this water, history ebbed and flowed, changing course but never ceasing, never dying, simply rising with the mountains.



DELAWARE

Allie Zitvogel

When asked the place of my origin, I respond ever so reluctantly with Delaware. My blood immediately starts to boil at the trace of puzzlement in their faces. *Dela . . . where?* Original. I begin the mantra. Delaware is the first state. Our motto is liberty and independence. It takes a whopping two hours to get from top to bottom and about forty minutes from left to right. Don't blink; you might miss it. Our beaches are lined with colorful umbrellas, ones that like to take off when least expected, hitting the elderly couple in the lawn chairs about two feet away and expensive Jeep Wranglers. Solitude is ideal but impossible. Surrounded in all directions, one can only hope an umbrella is not waiting to victimize and terrorize. If you live near the beach, your five-minute commute to the closest coastal spot in the summer will quickly turn into two hours of ranting about the New Jersey driver in front of you who simply does not know how to work his brakes correctly. Or, you might get stuck behind chicken trucks and John Deere tractors. See, we specialize in diversity. *I notice the brows furrow at what an awful state this must be.*

"Don't blink; you might miss it."

Upon entering my great little state, you notice a sign that represents the intelligence of all Delawareans: *If you lived here, you would be home now.* Thought-provoking, isn't it? Dating life is challenging because either you two are distant cousins or his dad and your dad got into a fistfight over a girl back in high school that is now your Chemistry teacher and somehow, that makes it too awkward. So, you both mutually sever ties and only slightly nod when you see him in Walmart the next day. *I notice the confused look is still there.*

In the particular town where I am from, we have the popular Apple Scapple Festival every October. Because who doesn't love some nice pig innards with their apple pickings? We used to have the well-known Punkin' Chunkin' Competition every November, but after an unfortunate accident involving a flying pumpkin, we had to cancel that one. Delaware is the only state without a National Park, but our beaches with our dark green waters and horseshoe crabs suffice. *The quizzical look turns to slight open-mouthed astonishment.*

In Delaware, we are proud to call Joe Biden and Joe Flacco our own. Other than the Joes, you will not run into a hot celebrity in our grocery stores or airports. Delaware is not the filming location hotspot either. However, *Dead Poet's Society* was filmed in our lovely Middletown area. Yes, we have a town named Middletown in the middle of Delaware.

Delawareans love their beer. The town of Milton, named after John Milton himself, is home to Dogfish Head Brewery. They produce almost 700 million bottles of beer each year, enough for every single Delawarean to have two beers each day. What a relief it is that we will never have to parade soberly through a day. Delaware is also the only state that has never placed in the Miss USA contest. What we lack in looks, we make up for in beer. Better yet, beer with no sales tax. Delaware is the only state that has no sales tax. There will be no surprises when you approach the counter with an item for \$15.99, knowing you only have a mere \$16.00 in your bank account.

As I finish my mantra, their looks are priceless. Caught off guard by the dangerous beach umbrellas and flying pumpkins of my humble beginnings, they quickly change the subject to their latest homework assignments. Small wonder.

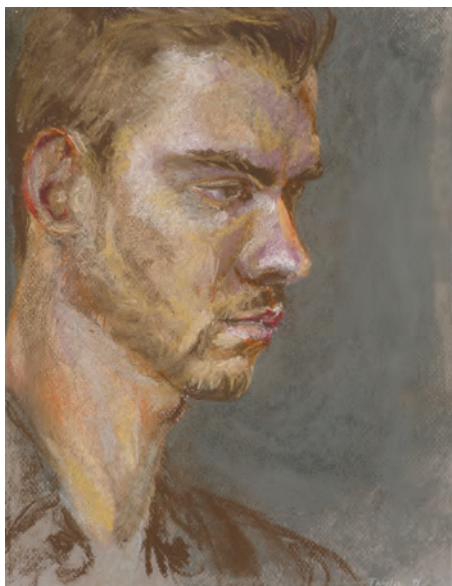


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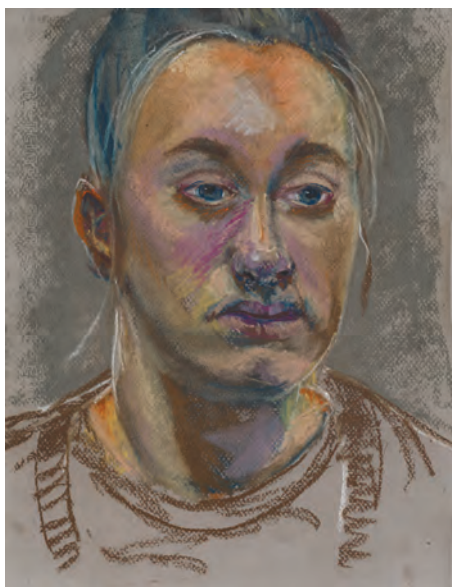
Lucy Kirkpatrick

Listen to the name I have given you.
Hear how it looks as you climb the steps
at the front of the church by the post office
and sit, straight-backed, on the red-cushioned pew.
Hear how it smells as you return, sweaty
from a day in the field, to your cast iron pan
sizzling with catfish and yesterday's grease.
Hear how it tastes as you pass the biscuits
to the man beside you at the wooden table
that settles under the green tartan cloth.
Hear how it feels as you stand your ground,
barefooted, on the edge of the magnolia limb
and refuse to acknowledge the cold of the night.





MON FRÈRE
pastel by Taylor Harrison



MORNING
pastel by Taylor Harrison

A CALLING

Lucy Kirkpatrick

Todd had just loaded the church bus full of middle school kids, and they were so high on adrenaline that any form of instruction-giving was just a waste of air.

“Sit down, Jeremiah,” his wife, Leah, said. “No, not on the girls’ side. I promise, you and Kate will have plenty of time to take selfies once we get to the airport.” Leah was such an authoritative figure—way more than he could ever hope to be. And impending motherhood only made it worse, or better.

“Hun,” she asked Todd, “Do you think they should have their phones at all?”

“Uh, I think it should be fine. It might keep them quiet—”

“I mean, they’re kids. It’s not like they need to do anything with their phones or anything. Yeah. And group unity. That’s something we need to start fostering now.”

“Okay, I guess.”

Leah stood up and grabbed a plastic bag from the front of the bus.

“Mrs. Leah! How come you don’t have to sit down?” called Jeremiah, who was followed by a chorus of “OH! Got ‘em!”

“Because I’ve got this thing called adulthood that says I don’t have to,” she retorted, not skipping a beat. She was always so cool with the kids.

The bus erupted with laughter and cries of excitement. Jeremiah stood up, gaped open his mouth, let his shoulders slack, and sat back down, laughing with his peers.

Todd just drove the bus. He was sure this mission trip to Haiti would go smoothly and that everyone would benefit. The kids would have a chance to go to another country and to bond with each other. His wife would have a chance to have some fun before the baby was born. The head pastor back home would be pleased with him for giving the kids an opportunity for practical ministry.

Then came the punchline: “Todd?” a small voice came from the back of the bus. “Jenna is saying that you need your passport with you to go on this trip. Is that true?”

“Who said that?” Todd looked through the rearview mirror and tried to find the idiot who didn’t think they would have to have a passport to go out of the country.

“Sarah Beth, sweetheart, is something wrong?” His wife was being way more gracious than she should have been. “Do you have your passport?”

A whimper came out of the mouth of the sixth grader, followed by a tear.

“Sarah Beth, do you have your phone?” Todd eyed his wife through the mirror.

“Because you’re going to need to call your mom to come get you. The plane isn’t going to wait and she isn’t going to be able to get to the airport in time to get the passport to you. Sorry kid!”

When they got to the airport, Todd went to find an airport security guard to watch over Sarah Beth while Leah attempted to console the distraught eleven-year-old. He returned with Officer Jeffery.

“Okay, kid, this is Officer Jeffery. He has a granddaughter just your age and he’s going to let you see the gatehouse at the front of the parking garage while you wait for your mom. Got it? Good. The rest of you, follow me!”

With that, Todd marched off triumphantly, leading the remaining thirty-four middle school students through airport security and baggage check, not once looking back. He had done his job.

He did stop and look around several times, though, to shout and pull and point. Joshua thought it would be funny to weigh himself at baggage check so he “wouldn’t have to sit next to his lousy sister on the plane.” Asher wanted to have a race on the moving sidewalk and Lily tried to slide down the handrail Mary Poppins-style. By the time the group actually got to board the plane, Todd had done about as much crowd control as he could handle. Now, it was the flight attendant’s job to keep everyone safe, so he closed his eyes and headed straight into a nap.

The week that followed saw about as much wild energy. The foreign missions organization that the Senior Pastor of Little River Presbyterian Church had found for the church’s bi-annual “Youth On Mission” educational campaign specialized in what was formally known as “community improvement.” In other words, Matt sent a bunch of kids down to the Caribbean to paint school houses that had probably already been painted fourteen times that year. So, naturally, the kids entered into what was perhaps the highlight of their summer—something to truly make them remember what a joyous blessing it is to do ministry—a paint fight. There was plenty of paint to go around and all of the kids had a blast planting handprints on each other’s backs. It was chaos, but it was fun, and Todd, the youth pastor left in charge of these little tornados, was the orchestrator of said fun.

The fun didn’t last, though. Almost as soon as Todd got the group safely back to their parents and he returned to his leather desk chair in the upstairs Youth Ministry office at Little River, the parent emails started flooding in.

He clicked to open the first of about fifteen.

Dear Todd,

We are just so lucky to have you as a youth pastor here at Little River.

Luck? Since when do Presbyterians have anything to do with luck?

You just so graciously give of your time and effort to minister to all of the children here at our church and Zachary and I just cannot thank you enough.

And you say this as if your husband even knows that you're writing an email? I thought we cleared all of this up at the airport.

I do have one little tiny thing that I would like to speak to you about, though. The passport. At all of the parent meetings, I do not recall you ever mentioning that Sarah Beth would need to have her passport with her in order to go on this trip.

We were going out of the country. Did it need to be stated in the parent meeting? The student meeting, sure. But the parent meeting? Come on, Angela. You've got to work with me here.

She has her passport. I promise you she does.

We just renewed it, too, since we had to originally get it when she was four or five when we vacationed in Italy.

I did not know that she needed to have it on her because Zachary always takes care of that kind of stuff.

Of course he does.

Anyways, next time,

Next time?

I would really appreciate it if you were more direct in your communications with the parents of the church. I must be honest, I was very disappointed in you when you had to call me to come pick up Sarah Beth from the airport because she could not join the rest of the group on the trip. Personally, I think this is something that could have been avoided. She was absolutely devastated, and since Leah forgot to give her back her cell phone, she was entirely unable to keep up with the other girls on the trip while she was at home. In the future, I'd really appreciate it if you took the extra effort to communicate a little more with the group.

Tell me how you really think, why don't ya'?

As always, thank you so much for all you do for this group of kids. They really look up to you and we are so blessed to have you at Little River.

Mmmhhmmm.

Sincerely,
Angela Duncan

Todd put his hands on his head and flopped back in his chair. “Ow!” He forgot about his sunburn from bending over the tin of white paint all week long. Now *that* was something he could take ownership of. It’s not like Todd could be blamed for Hannah Rosewell’s unfortunate sunburn when it was she, the perfectly capable seventh grader, who forgot to pack sunscreen. Besides, both of their sunburns would turn into tans in a day or so, so it really didn’t matter all that much anyways.

Spinning his chair slightly back and forth, he reached for a dart from his top drawer and hurled it at the electronic dartboard that had been hanging on the dark green wall beside his bookcase since he began working at the church seven years ago. The dart hit the outermost area worth five points and the electronic scoreboard buzzed like an old man blowing his nose. The number of dart-induced holes on the board and the wall around it were too many to count, each one affirming, “I was called to this.”

Okay. Next round of verbal onslaught, he thought as he clicked open the second parent email.

Todd,

Who is this from? Oh, son of a b—Baptist. ‘Baptist,’ Todd, you’re gonna be a preacher one day. Just as soon as you can get through being a youth pastor.

As soon as McKenzie got into the car on Saturday evening when you all returned from your trip, all she could do was talk about how fun it was. For that, I thank you.

“but...”

But as she began to describe the trip in detail, it became evident that you, once again, neglected your duties and left these impressionable, immature, and inexperienced children defenseless.

Upon boarding the plane, McKenzie said that you almost immediately fell asleep in your chair.

Because I had just spent the last five hours wrangling thirty-five twelve-year-olds who thought that the airport was an amusement park.

This, she said with a laugh because the boys of the group decided it would be funny to try to draw a mustache on your face.

Apparently, the flight attendant did your job for you and instructed the students to remain in their seats.

That, actually, is her job. My job is to ensure that your child gets real-life ministry experience and has a clear understanding of the gospel. Her job is to keep us safe. She gets paid to do that. I get paid half the salary of a senior pastor and I am still going through seminary. And I have student debt—debt that isn’t going to go away until I can get enough respect around here to get a recommendation to work my way up the ministerial ladder and finish my commentary.

As the door to his office opened and the senior pastor of Little River Presbyterian stepped into his office, Todd noticed just how tightly his hands were gripping the sides of his desk chair.

“Matt! How are you?” Todd tried to sound as if he hadn’t just released his favorite mental monologue into the thought-space concerning Lori Davison and her personality-double-of-a-daughter.

“Hello, Todd.” The pastor spoke in the even tones that could belong to the most tranquil of hippies had he not been wearing a sweater-vest. “I’ve actually got something rather serious that I need to talk to you about. It’s about the mission trip. I’ve been blind copied on several of the emails that were sent to you, and I’ve even received a few that were seemingly never going to make it to you in the first place. I’m worried.” He shut the door and sat down on the edge of the desk, just in the way of the dart board.

“What do you mean?” Todd sat forward in his chair and started clicking his pen against the stack of church bulletins on his desk.

“Well, to be clear, the emails all say that the kids on the youth trip all had just a lovely time and that they are full to the brim with stories about how much they enjoyed going on this trip with you.”

Todd lowered the brow he hadn’t realized he had raised in the first place and leaned back in his chair. *Of course. Why wouldn’t the kids love me? I let them play dodgeball in the hotel hallways while all of the old people were out on their nature walks or whatever.*

“But,” Matt continued, using the word that Todd thought should never be in a man’s vocabulary, “a majority of the parents here, including some who are elders of the church, don’t think that you’re quite fit for ministry. They see that you have a passion for the things of the Lord, and that you have a knack for understanding and interpreting the Word, but, I’ve got to ask, do you think that ministry is right for you?”

Todd didn’t say anything.

“Ministry is more than knowing the Word. It’s living with other people. And those emails,” he shook his head. “I don’t know, Todd. What do you think? Do you really feel called?”

Todd looked out of the window, as if looking for the man who would replace him.

He was fully qualified for the job, just a little preoccupied with more important things. His commentary, for example, would reach hundreds of people, and those people would actually listen to him, unlike the complainers on hand-me-down couches in the youth room. “Of course I do.”

Pastor Matt stood up from the desk. “Pray about it. Talk to your wife about it. Why don’t you take this week off and spend it as a sabbatical week?”

“I—”

“It’s okay, Todd. I’m not removing you from the church or anything. Don’t worry. I am just advising that you spend some time with the Lord and consider what He has for you.”

He patted Todd’s desk as he walked out.

Todd looked back to Lori’s email.

I am just very concerned that you are not setting an appropriate example for these students and that your actions may put them in the line of harm. This, Adam and I feel, is inappropriate and unfulfilling of the calling which you have taken up.

Todd shut his laptop. He turned to his Bible and stack of sheets of notebook paper—he always did his best writing on paper—and decided to work on his commentary for the rest of the day. He had been writing it ever since he finished his undergrad and took up a summer internship at Little River. Then, when he was asked to stay on full-time as the Youth Pastor, the commentary had to take a backseat to the kids, his job. Maybe this was just what he needed. Time to finally get back to what he had been dreaming of doing without the distractions of kids or parents or Wednesday Night Service or newsletters or those accursed dodgeballs.

*

When he got home that evening, Leah was watching a movie, eating popcorn and strawberry yogurt at the same time, holding her bowl directly over her pregnant belly.

“I’m taking a mandated sabbatical.” Todd flopped himself down on the couch beside his wife and stole a piece of popcorn that hadn’t yet touched yogurt.

Leah reached for the remote. “What? Isn’t that, like, an oxymoron or something?”

“Maybe? I don’t know.”

“What happened?” Leah looked worried.

“Parents. It’s always the parents.”

“Watch out now, you’re about to be one.”

“Every single time I do something with their kids, they complain. I hold a seminar weekend, they say that it is too intimidating for their kids and that they now think that you have to be a scholar to be a Christian. I hold a pizza party to show that I can do fun things with the students and not just scholarly things, they complain that I wasn’t the one who blessed the food. Now, I take them on a mission trip and give them hands-on experience and they email both me and Matt saying that I’m unfit for ministry.”

“What! They don’t have the right to—” Leah almost spilled her snack. “They can’t say that. The trip went so well.”

“Exactly! See? You saw how I taught those kids and interacted with them and helped them make meaningful memories.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far, Todd.”

“Excuse me?”

“You got them down there and back safely, is all I mean.”

“What?”

“Not that you didn’t help them make meaningful memories, because you did, but you did it in your own way. Maybe the parents just don’t see it that way.”

Todd didn’t say anything, but kept his lips pursed and his mind focused on pulling his laptop from his satchel—the kids told him that all the cool youth pastors had a leather satchel so they got their parents to get him one for a “Five Years of Service” anniversary present. He opened it to begin reading through more emails.

“I’m gonna go get some more yogurt.” Leah looked at Todd and made her way to her feet, after wobbling for a moment.

“Those kids are telling Ricky and Margaret that I let them have a paint fight,” he yelled into the kitchen.

“Well, hun,” Leah shifted her weight and poked her head and belly around the doorframe, “You didn’t stop them. You never stop them. They just kind of do what they want to. You don’t enforce the rules.”

“I *do* enforce the rules. I *make* the rules. I’m the youth pastor.”

“Todd, making the rules and making people follow the rules are two different things.”

“They should know better. I hate kids.”

“Todd!”

“Well, you know what I mean.”

“Do I?” She stood in the doorway, twisting the ring on her finger. She was always doing that these days, probably because her fingers were swelling from the pregnancy.

“They’re unorganized and awkward and lanky and going through puberty and obsessed with self-image and can’t hold a decent conversation with any form of depth to save their lives. What’s not to love, right? I just can’t deal with them.”

Leah used her finger to lick out the last bit of yogurt from the carton before throwing it away. “I see that.”

“What?”

“What do you mean, *what*?” Leah laughed as she set her yogurt and popcorn bowl on top of her belly, still standing in the kitchen doorway. “You said you can’t deal with them.”

“So now you’re questioning my calling, too?” Todd settled further into his seat on the couch and continued to look through the emails. There were now seventeen, not including the few he had already opened. “Honestly, Leah,” Todd said, still scrolling, if I say that I’ve been called to this ministry, then I’ve been called to it. End of story. I wouldn’t have made that big life change in college if it hadn’t been the Holy Spirit leading me in that direction.”

“You mean in my direction.”

“What?”

“Oh, come on. You left your accounting spreadsheets because you couldn’t keep your eyes off of me in college,” she said.

“No. I was called to youth ministry. You over-estimate yourself, my dear.”

“And Preaching 101 just happened to be the one elective I still hadn’t taken by the time you made the switch.”

Todd clicked through to the next email and tossed a piece of popcorn at Leah. He knew he loved his wife and that she loved him. He also knew that she was wrong.

Ministry to him was more than a way of life, it was his life. It was his way to finding the joy that sustains all. And it didn’t hurt that preachers were viewed as some of the most successful and pious people. All he had to do was finish his commentary and his name would be so well-known that he wouldn’t ever have to worry about another trip to paint a schoolhouse because he’d have someone just begging to do it for him.

Leah waddled toward their bedroom, balancing her bowl while trying to tighten the bun on top of her head. “All I’m saying is it was a good point.”

“What was?” Todd asked.

“That you need to think about your calling. That maybe this area of ministry just isn’t—”

Todd interrupted her. “I’m not talking about this anymore. We’re done here. The horse is sufficiently dead.”

She shook her head. “It was a good point, Todd.”

As she left the living room, she flipped off the light, and all Todd could think about was what it meant to be a minister. *And still the light must shine through the darkness.* Todd laughed to himself, rolling his eyes.

*“He knew he loved his wife and that she loved him.
He also knew that she was wrong.”*

A minister is someone whom the church-goers know is well-versed in Bible knowledge, someone who will stand firm in his beliefs. A minister doesn’t need to nurture—that’s the job of the women, according to the Bible—like Pastor Matt does. A minister doesn’t need to lead groups of kids like Leah does. He was cut out to be a minister.

They just don’t get it.

Todd looked down at his satchel at his feet. He hated the thing. It wasn’t him. But the kids got it for him—rather, their parents got it for him—and that was good, since he was already paying student loans. He reached into the bag and pulled out his Bible and a legal pad. He needed to write his commentary and just get this whole “calling” thing off of his mind.

He began his outline for practically the thousandth time. The commentary was supposed to focus on Jesus’ interactions with and ministry to children and adults. He opened his Bible to Matthew 19, where the children wanted to run to Christ, and a picture fell out. He smiled. Somehow, Leah had managed to slip one of the ultrasound images into the pages of the Bible he had recently received. On the back, in her loopy handwriting, she had written, “He commanded ‘Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them.’”

Todd sat back and raised his eyebrow at the long-dead Apostles of Christ. *Seriously, who would stop them?*





I SAW SOMETHING, WHERE DID IT GO
digital photography by Taylor Smith



WHERE ARE WE GOING, WHY ARE WE HERE
digital photography by Taylor Smith

CATHEDRAL ECHOES

Lora Lassiter

Some mornings, you will miss it so fiercely
that your rafters ache, and your window panes
can barely hold the shaking of your bones.
Eyes closed, you will still hear
the keening of the cold sea wind that fills
the sandstone city where a part of you
still sleeps.

You will be surprised to wake up
in your warm and windless home, where
the sunlight leans, unwelcome, against
your bedroom wall. You will try
to hold on to the sounds of rain and
seagulls, but even they are fading
like a fine April mist, interrupted by the dawn.
The tide of memory recedes, and you
are left to pick your way over pebbles and shards
of longing towards the incalescence of the day.

And so, in a pretty town somewhere unreachable,
your shadow wanders like a ghost, restless
and lost between two places
you have tried to call your own.



GOLD

Alli Kennedy

Minghua was confused when she arrived at the campus chapel only to find students throwing frisbees and handing out donuts on the front lawn. She was sure she was in the right place. She had listened intently to every word her tour guide said as he led the group of foreign exchange students to each building during orientation. Coming from a city with millions of people like Shanghai, she was confident that navigating a small college campus in the middle of nowhere Georgia would be simple. Yet, she thought she had ended up in the wrong place. Reaching into her pocket, Minghua carefully unfolded the flyer she had unpinned from the bulletin of her dorm. *Ignite Worship Night Thursday Night at 8:00 p.m. at The Chapel*. It was Thursday night. She was at the chapel. She had ten minutes to spare.

In the days since she had seen the flyer, she had wondered what it might be like to worship. She had heard that Americans had complete freedom, but she couldn't wrap her mind around what that would be like. Prominent steeples and bold signage, not dark rooms in small houses.

When she was a child, her father had dreamt aloud: "We would never have to fear speaking the name of Jesus. Wouldn't that be beautiful?" He then had spun a ten-year-old Minghua around and around their small house in Zhuozhuang to the imaginary music of freedom, whispering hymns and singing the name of Jesus softly to warm the cold air. She pictured him dancing in heaven, spinning and singing the name at the top of his lungs.

"Excuse me," Minghua said as she tapped lightly on the shoulder of a girl holding a donut box and talking to a group of students. The girl turned around, looking somewhere between startled and excited all at once. "Please direct me to where Ignite Worship Night is taking place."

"You're in the right place!" she said. "We usually open the doors right at eight. Right now, we're all just hanging out!" Minghua looked past donut girl at the students surrounding her. The boys wore athletic clothes and passed footballs and frisbees or stood in loud masses. The girls were all huddled together, laughing and staring at their phones. They all wore sneakers, leggings, and long t-shirts. Minghua looked down at her dress. Her mother had sneaked the dress into her suitcase before she left for America. A note was pinned to it written in delicate hanzi: *May your faith blossom wherever you go, my bright flower*. The dress was simple but beautiful, its intricate floral pattern blooming throughout the silk.

Her mother had been saving money from her paychecks to buy Minghua something nice to wear for church in America. When Minghua found it on move-in day, she immediately ironed out all the wrinkles and hung it

outside of her closet. She admired it each morning as she got ready for class, anticipation building for the day she would choose to wear it. The warm memory was suddenly replaced with cold embarrassment. She had completely misinterpreted the dress code.

As she lowered the Bible she had bought earlier that week to somehow hide as much of the dress as she could, donut girl broke through the silence, “you can totally hang out with us if you want until we go in.” Her voice had a bright, candy-store quality to it.

“Yes,” said Minghua, tucking a strand of ebony hair behind her ear and following donut girl around as she greeted people who walked up to the chapel. Minghua loved the way that the chapel stood juxtaposed in its clean whiteness to the dark green forest surrounding it. Forests of steel buildings had replaced any forests like these in Shanghai. She marveled at the white cross prominently displayed at the top of the steeple for all to see.

“Do you often worship here?” Minghua asked.

“Oh yeah, I feel like I’m at events like this all the time,” donut girl said.

“That must be so special . . . to worship together all the time.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty fun!”

Fun. Minghua lingered on the word. She had never heard worship described that way, but maybe it was fun here. Donut girl offered her a donut, which she politely accepted. The glaze annoyingly stuck to her fingers until it covered more of her hand than the donut itself. She took small bites, constantly licking her lips to remove the sticky residue. It was warm and sweet. She found herself enjoying each bite more and more.

“Oh, I’m Shannon by the way,” she said as she walked to a group of three. “These are my friends, Leslie, Justin, and Megan!” Leslie half-smiled and half-waved at her, continuing her conversation with Justin who didn’t seem to notice Shannon’s remark. Megan stuck her hand out to shake. Minghua awkwardly maneuvered her Bible under her arm to give her a free hand. She wasn’t used to this American greeting. Mid-shake, she was surprised by a flash of light and noticed a girl standing to her left with a camera looking down at the image on the screen. She smiled at Minghua and walked away to take pictures of another pair of girls who were running up to greet each other.

“What year are you?” Megan asked.

“I’m a first-year student.”

“Oh my gosh, welcome! We’re so excited you’re here,” she said. Before Minghua knew it, she was being enveloped in a hug that required a bit of stealth on her part to make sure the donut wouldn’t get on her dress or in Megan’s hair. Her arm extended out from the hug with the half-eaten donut in it. When Megan released her, Minghua forced her face into a smile that felt a few sizes too small. Shannon stood and grinned as she watched.

“Where are you from?” Shannon asked.

“I’m from Jinshan District in Shanghai.” They looked at her smiling and nodding mechanically. “The eastern coast of China.” She could almost see all of their brains brighten with understanding at once.

“Wh-oh, okay!” Justin exclaimed. “So, do you get to see the Great Wall of China, like, every day?”

“The Great Wall is not near my city. It’s nearly a full day’s travel. I have not seen it, but my father saw it.” Minghua’s father had always told her he would take her someday. In the days before he was killed, he held her small hand in his through the prison fence, assuring her of their adventures to come.

“Dang, that’s too bad! I hope you can see it someday. I went last year with my dad on one of his business trips. It was freaking awesome.” Minghua pushed her father from her mind as Justin held out his phone for her to see a picture. He was standing on the wall in a bright blue rain jacket and incredibly short shorts, one arm around his father as both of them made a “thumbs up” sign, their mouths gaping open in excitement.

“What a nice time you must have had with your father,” said Minghua.

“Yeah, totally. It was great.” Justin broke away from the group to greet another boy on the lawn who had just arrived. Shannon, Leslie, and Megan stood there with her.

“It was so nice to meet you,” said Leslie quickly and slipped away from the group to join a huddle of girls in leggings like hers. Minghua was left with Shannon and Megan. They looked as if they were searching desperately for the next question to ask her until a crowd of students cheered to signal the doors opening. The beat of the music from inside collided with the cheers from the crowd. Shannon and Megan followed the noise into the darkness of the building.

“You can sit with us!” Shannon exclaimed. Minghua followed her as her heart raced and the bass of a rap song shook her small frame down to the core. She hoped her eyes would adjust to the darkness as she desperately tried to follow Shannon and Megan. It was unlike so many of the chapels she had heard of. Stained glass and reverence were replaced with stage lights and chaos.

They hurriedly tried to find seats in the back of the room, their phone flashlights guiding the way.

It reminded her of Sunday mornings in Zhouzhuang when she was a child. Her father would wake her up around 3 a.m. *It’s time to rise, bright flower.* He would turn on a dim flashlight to help Minghua find her dress. Minghua would retrieve her long gray coat to blend in with the darkness of night as they journeyed to the house church. She watched her father slide a dark coat over her mother’s shoulders as he kissed her neck softly. Her arms glided through the sleeves. They covered themselves gracefully like swans painting each other’s feathers in gray camouflage. Her father would find the family Bible hidden behind several books and place it inside another book that had been hollowed out. He would tuck it into the inner pocket of his jacket, hand lingering over it to assure himself the book was there. He turned off the flashlight and quietly locked the door.

They felt their way in the darkness down the cobblestone path to the water. There they were met by Wang Jing in his gondola. He would smile a big toothy smile which her father and mother would return—as if they were in on a secret they could barely contain. They would climb in the boat as Jing lightly pressed his oar upon the river, not one ripple echoing on the water, moving in complete silence. The houses that lined the shore were dark and still. Her mother wrapped her under her jacket like a wing until every bit of

her was shrouded in gray. She knew she would get in trouble if she peeked out from under the jacket, but she did it anyway. She would always search for her father's face in the dense gray fog. When she finally found him among the clouds, she could see only his eyes—eyes that glimmered like golden fire in the night.

“I think these seats are good,” said Megan proudly.

“Bào qiàn,” Minghua apologized in Mandarin, pushing past the people who were already seated, scolding herself for not speaking English. She smoothed out her dress and pushed down the seat as she used to do at the movie theater down the street from her apartment complex.

As soon as she sat down, she noticed her hands. They were coated in sticky sugar. Hoping to spare the pages of her new Bible, she excused herself to wash her hands and rushed out of the auditorium; the screens on the stage flashed a countdown behind her. When she reached the restroom, she walked straight to the sink and lathered soap on her hands until she had scrubbed them so vigorously, they felt as if they could burst into flame. They were bright red and throbbing in the light of the flickering fluorescents above. Still, she could feel the traces of glaze on her hands. No amount of soap could remove it completely.

*“Stained glass and reverence were replaced
with stage lights and chaos.”*

Walking briskly into the darkness of the auditorium with less than ten seconds to go on the countdown, Minghua found her spot with Shannon and Megan who were standing up and shouting along to the countdown with the crowd around them. Once the countdown stopped, a man ran out on stage and made each section of the auditorium shout if they were excited to be there. Everyone yelled.

Minghua wasn't accustomed to shouting. She hadn't shouted anything her whole life. After her father's passing, she and her mother had moved to Shanghai. The city of millions was busy but in a quiet sort of way. People kept to themselves and there was no loud music, even the night clubs on their street were courteous and had quiet hours. Her family never raised their voices. If Minghua had caused a problem, her father would sit down with her and speak to her gently. Her mother would usually push a problem deep down inside until she couldn't find it again.

Minghua liked to say she was a balance of both, knowing when to speak and when to be silent. But even when she spoke, she never spoke loudly. She felt like a bubble filled with all the noise in the world had burst right there in the auditorium.

She tried her best to keep up with everything that happened after that, but it was impossible. The rest of the worship night was a constant cycle of her not understanding what or why things were happening, asking Shannon,

and Shannon saying she'd explain later. The shouting man gave away a TV to the person who slid a cookie down their face into their mouth the fastest out of a group of students. Everyone in the room seemed electrified by watching them. She found herself caught in the current, giggling at the ridiculousness. More games. More laughter.

The sound of a keyboard rose and fell with the words he said like a dance they had rehearsed for weeks. Minghua closed her eyes and exhaled any tension that had built up inside her once she recognized the tune of a hymn she had sung every Sunday morning in Zhouzhuang. Her uncle, Li Shen, had a small keyboard that he used to smuggle into the house they met in for church on Sundays. He didn't have any formal training in how to play the keys, but Shen tried to pick out the right notes to the old hymn they quietly rehearsed. *Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well, with my soul.*

She missed her father's soft voice that would glide through the words with about ten other voices. He would hold her in his lap when she was a little girl and sway back and forth. She could always feel the hum in his chest from the words.

"She could always feel the hum in his chest from the words."

The hymn faded and the rest of the band came on stage to replace it with a song she didn't know. She tried to watch as the words flashed by on the screen, but her eyes drifted to the students around her. She wondered why the boys didn't know the words to the songs. Some students swayed a little bit, but for the most part, they were stagnant, like lily pads on a marsh. During each song, the people on stage jumped and cried and fell to their knees, but the audience didn't seem to move.

A familiar flash caught her attention and she turned to see the photographer in the aisle closest to her. One of the students was raising her hand towards the ceiling and the photographer was right there capturing every angle of the spectacle. Once the hand-raiser had noticed she was being photographed, it seemed as though she raised her arm higher and sang a little more enthusiastically, glancing every few seconds at the photographer to see if she was still there. Once she placed her hand back to her side, Minghua's eyes followed the photographer up and down the aisles. Up into the sound box over to the side of the stage. She seemed to be everywhere, capturing any movement with a simple click of a button.

The band concluded and everyone sat. Minghua stared down at her Bible. She had chosen the brown leather one that most closely resembled her father's Bible on the outside, but the pages were crisp and white, sticking together in places that had yet to be read. Her father's had pages missing here and there, worn into a yellowish-brown color from years of being smuggled throughout

the country, tucked away on each journey to a house church and hidden in different places.

Her great grandfather, Li Quan, had a friend who, amidst the Chinese Revolution, would smuggle pages of scripture into their city. Quan would sew the pages together and bind them with leather when he had collected all of the text. Her father would copy the text onto blank pages every day after he came home from working in the city and gave them to people who came to their house by nightfall. A government official claiming to be a member of a neighboring church came to ask for a page. That was how they knew her father was distributing illegal propaganda, for which he was immediately arrested and thrown in prison. Executed months later without a trial.

A man came on stage and talked briefly. Minghua was puzzled because he didn't carry a Bible. It didn't seem to matter anyway because most of the students seemed disengaged, scrolling through social media or texting. They seemed to have only come to enjoy the donuts and the games. Still, she was ready to take notes on whatever he said. She was anxious to learn.

"It is so important to be in the Word and praying. There are some staggering statistics about our faith now. Did you know that the average American only prays seven minutes a week?" said the man.

The people in her church prayed for hours, even days at a time. Sometimes they prayed so loud they feared the police would show up and arrest them. They would stop sometimes and listen for footsteps outside of the door, huddled together in a corner as one of the church members stepped out to make sure no one was there.

"We need to start sharing the gospel. More than half of you will never share the gospel according to many studies."

Every night when her father returned home, he wept. He was too afraid to share the gospel, he said. He prayed God would take away his fear. Yet, he had shared with as many people as he could, sometimes more than fifty each day. All of the people who came into his shop were opportunities. Yet, when Minghua looked around her, the mass sat silent and dazed.

Minghua looked at the empty lines in her notebook before her and her Bible, still untouched. She didn't know what to write. The words of the man on stage seemed to slip past the students into oblivion.

"Why do people lack prayer here?" Minghua asked Shannon and Megan as they walked outside.

"Well, personally, I have a hard time focusing if I pray in my mind or out loud. I have to write it out and I don't normally have a lot of time to do that."

"When do you have time?"

"Normally if I wake up early enough," Shannon shrugged.

"Yeah, and she has difficulty doing that," said Megan with laughter.

"Yeah. I fall asleep if I try to do it at night," Shannon agreed as she led them to a campfire behind the chapel.

"Is it true you do not share the gospel here, even though it is free to do so?" Minghua asked intently.

"Well, you see, people here are mostly Christians in the South. If they aren't, then they can be kind of rude if you try to talk to them about Jesus."

“Yeah, they think we’re judgmental and I don’t want to be seen that way,” said Shannon.

“Exactly, we just want to love everyone, so we try not to offend them,” Megan added.

“What do they do if you offend them? Are you imprisoned?” Minghua was startled.

“No, they probably just won’t talk to you anymore,” Megan responded tensely.

Every time she entered the house church, it was made known to her that persecution was a privilege, not a burden, and following Jesus could cost her everything. Social status. Job positions. Her life.

It cost her father everything.

“Have you ever had a s’more?” Shannon asked her, changing the subject.

“No, what is that?”

“Oh gosh, it’s so, so good. It’s like a sandwich made of graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows. We’ll show you how to do it.” They placed marshmallows on the end of wooden sticks and walked over to the flame. People were talking, playing loud music, and blowing out small fires that caught on the marshmallows and left them charred as much or as little as they wanted.

“So . . . oh my gosh, I totally forgot to ask your name!” Shannon touched Minghua’s shoulder apologetically.

“Minghua.”

“That’s so pretty!” she said.

“So, Minghua, do you miss your mom and dad back in China? They must really miss you,” said Shannon.

“Yes. My mother and I call every day. I miss her. My father was killed.”

“Oh, Minghua, I’m so sorry to hear that.” Megan looked at her with pity in her eyes.

“It’s okay, my mother and I are very proud of him. Not everyone has had the honor of dying for Christ’s sake.” Shannon and Megan stood, the orange of the fire dancing on their blank faces. “I want to be brave like him.” Flames crackled and popped in the wake of her remark, filling the heavy silence until Shannon responded, “that’s so cool.”

They made small talk with Minghua the rest of the night, asking her what food was like back home. Minghua missed authentic Chinese food, especially dumplings. All of the “authentic” Chinese food she had found was Americanized. She answered their questions until she nearly forgot about her marshmallow as it was consumed by flames. It drooped down from the stick, charred on all sides, only little bits of white showing through. It was like the time she had burnt a fish when she and her father were turning it over a flame, too consumed with talking about her school and what she hoped to do in the future. Her father always found a way to sneak in a proverb into their conversations. That time, in particular, he reminded her of a proverb he had learned from his family who had also been martyrs.

Minghua, my bright flower, always remember zhēn jīn bùpà huǒ—true gold fears no fire.

The fish was certainly not gold—it was a murky brown if anything—

and Minghua was fairly certain they had never actually had real gold, so her brain strained to process why he would remind her of such a thing over and over again. The sweet marshmallow melted and charred before her, eventually surrendering to the fire.

Minghua took only one bite of her s'more and was so overwhelmed by the sweetness that she just held it as chocolate ran down the sides and into her hands. She decided to leave.

"It was great getting to know you! Let's get coffee sometime!" said Shannon.

"Yeah, definitely!" said Megan. As Minghua walked away, she realized they hadn't asked for her phone number. She wondered how they would contact her.

*"Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well,
it is well, with my soul."*

When Minghua returned to her dorm, her roommate was asleep. She didn't want to disturb her by turning on a light, so she stood there in the doorway and let her eyes adjust until she could faintly make out the distinction between her bed, desk, and closet. She set her Bible down on her desk, running her palm over the smooth surface just like she had across her mother's back to comfort her when she mourned. As she changed, she stood in the dark, staring down at the dress limp in her hands. The empty hanger that had held the dress clattered against the wood of her closet door as she opened it to hang it inside. Minghua winced and whipped her head around to see if the noise had awakened her roommate, she was still asleep. After she closed the door again, she knelt on the floor and pulled her suitcase from under her bed and rummaged through her winter clothes. She replaced the empty hanger with the long gray jacket she had brought to America—just in case it was much more dangerous than she expected.



STAINED GLASS

Emma Morris

Grace lived on the outskirts of the Bronx, another tragedy of the NYC Department of Homeless Services, another number. “One of 63,000 homeless people in the city,” a lady wearing a pencil skirt told her in a government office. Grace shared a sterile room with four women who did not speak to one another, compliments of the NYC Municipal Shelter System. She had a firm cot with bleached white sheets. That’s all.

Every day, she shuffled through New York streets wearing khakis with a green Sharpie stain just above the knee and a red dress shirt with a missing button right above her belly button. She was twenty-four, but she had sapphire circles under her eyes and her skin was sun-speckled and creased. She tied her long black hair in a low ponytail and wore a thick line of black eyeliner and gold hoop earrings.

After the sun illuminated her curtain-less cement room, Grace got up and ate a piece of bread at the shelter. Then, she searched for work in and out of chain restaurants and grocery stores. She sang while she walked, usually old Gospel songs—even though she didn’t believe in the Gospel. Some people looked at her funny, and she looked at the ground and sang more quietly. When she came to the city a year ago, she planned to sing on a stage, not on a street. Her high school choir teacher had told her she was talented, and Grace believed her, but the professionals didn’t buy it. Like dimes on a sidewalk, she was trampled by the city.

Week after week, Grace was met by the same stiff jaws and merciless eyes each time she opened a new door and pleaded for a job. The managers’ demeanors never softened. They were not hiring, they never were. Last week, a tall man at a pizza shop who wore a name tag that said “Sebastian” placed his hands on her shoulders and pushed her out of the door before she could even speak. She fell onto the concrete and did not stand up for a very long time. Eventually, Sebastian opened the door and threatened to kick her if she didn’t move.

On her way back to the shelter, she passed Yesterday’s, an upscale antique furniture store. She passed it the next day, too, and days after. Each time, she paused at the window, staring at plush couches, gold-trimmed mirrors, and towering china cabinets. She had no furniture and no home, not to mention no money, but one chilly afternoon, Grace saw a wooden side table encircled with intricately carved, lace-like trimming. It made her think of her grandmother, and she wanted to touch it. She went inside. As she walked through the door, a bell chimed and a woman said, “Welcome to Yesterday’s” with a voice like that of the type of people who usually did not want her

around—clear and distinguished, unmistakably native New Yorker. She was at the back of the store, stirring sugar into a cup of hot tea. Grace smiled and nodded at the woman.

The woman did not look like she worked at Yesterday's. She was old and her face was shriveled, though she moved swiftly and her teeth were bright white. She wore a neon yellow, ankle-length, cotton, button-up dress and a red hat with Yesterday's printed in white embroidery. Neon pink socks covered the small part of her ankles that were visible under her dress, and she wore white tennis shoes. Her long gray hair was absurdly curly and unkempt.

Grace tiptoed to the little table, stopped in front of it, and touched it with two fingers.

"Walnut." The woman said, appearing behind Grace in a cloud of steam that ascended from her cup of tea.

Grace jumped, turning around. "What? No, thanks. I'm not hungry." She took a step away from the table.

The woman laughed, an uncommon sound on the streets. "No, the wood. It's walnut. It's over 150 years old. Made in France."

The table was even older than her grandmother would be, Grace thought.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I, uh, I can't buy it." Grace put her hands in her pockets.

"That's okay, babe. You just keep looking. A little window shopping never hurt anyone." The woman turned to walk away then turned back around. "I'm Ivy." She extended her hand.

"I'm Grace." Grace gripped her hand loosely and held on for a long time, looking into Ivy's eyes. She smiled.

"Nice to meet you, Grace. Take your time, and come back anytime." Ivy silently spun around again, this time on her tiptoes, and returned to the back of the store, leaving a trail of steam from her tea behind her. Grace nodded, stepped closer to the table, and ran her hand across the wood.

She kept returning to Yesterday's. Each day, Ivy was kind. And each day, Ivy wore the same kind of long cotton dress that she wore when Grace first met her, just in a different color. On the fourth day she visited the store, Ivy wore a hot pink dress. She walked around quickly, tying price tags to furniture while talking to Grace about the unpredictability of New York weather.

Meanwhile, Grace found a glass pitcher. She gently lifted it, with both hands, admiring the glasswork. *Eighty dollars.* "Have mercy!"

Ivy glanced at Grace and laughed, slowly tying a price tag on a dresser drawer knob. "Where are you from, babe? Sounds like the South."

"Yes. South Carolina. I've been here a year."

"Ahhh. I went there once, when I was fifteen." Ivy finished tying the price tag and joined Grace in admiring the glass pitcher. She slipped her arm around Grace's shoulder. "My family went to the coast. The weather must be nice."

Holding the pitcher and uttering the word "Carolina" aloud, Grace could see sun tea brewing on her Grandma's porch in July. Grace shifted away from Ivy, set the pitcher down, and quickly ran out of the store. She was crying.

She untied her ponytail, let her long hair fall over her face, crossed her arms tightly, and ran to the shelter. The next day, she stayed burrowed under the white sheets on her cot. She dreamt of what used to be and

what could be. She rode her hot pink Mongoose bike down bumpy South Carolina backroads. She watched her parents steal a kiss as they cooked blueberry pancakes for breakfast. Her father did not yell. Her mother did not disappear. She graduated from college. She taught her children to play piano in her living room. She believed all of this under the white sheet. As the room turned red with the sunset, she slept.

The next day, Grace woke up thinking about Yesterday's, with a restored resolve to find a job. She wanted to do something that Ivy could be proud of. It was the bizarre month of March, where some days are very cold and others are not. She walked through the Bronx, singing again, and she opened doors to anywhere that might pay a little.

The eighth door she opened was a small convenience store with barred windows. It was over two miles from the shelter. A large man with greasy long hair who smelled like cigarettes greeted her. His name was Big John. He told her to come back within the next few days, that he might have something for her. He smiled. Grace said thank you.

She walked two more miles to Yesterday's. The bell on the door sounded like the windchimes that her grandmother used to keep on her front porch in South Carolina.

"Hi, Grace! I missed you yesterday." Ivy stood behind an antique dresser, arranging a vase of fake flowers. Her dress was orange, like a clementine.

"Sorry, Miss Ivy. I was looking for work." Grace stood in the doorway, fumbling with the hole where a button should be on her red shirt.

"Any luck?"

"A convenience store said if I came back in a few days, they might have something for me." Grace still stood in the doorway. She thought of her grandmother's warnings not to overstay her welcome.

"How exciting. I'm sure you must be the prime candidate." Ivy fluffed polyester daffodil petals. "Come in, babe. Make yourself at home." She spun the flower vase around three times, admiring her work, and resumed arranging.

Grace sank into a clawfoot dining room chair near Ivy. Her feet throbbed, and she didn't realize how tired she was until she sat down. She watched Ivy trim the stems of artificial flowers with wire cutters.

Suddenly, a woman wearing a blush pink coat with a fur hood and big sunglasses walked into the store. She pushed her sunglasses across her forehead to the tip of her head with one finger. Her lipstick was so red that it was distracting. Grace wondered what she could possibly be carrying in such a large purse.

"Welcome to Yesterday's!" Ivy waved a purple daisy.

The fancy woman stopped in front of a red armchair. She looked directly at Grace and Ivy. Grace looked at her own worn red shirt and stained khakis, then at Ivy's frizzy gray hair and orange dress.

The woman made a squeaky sound and looked at her iPhone. "I must be in the wrong place." With that, she hurriedly turned around, her heels clicking on the tile with each step. The bell on the door chimed behind her.

"It's me, Ivy. Look at me. I'll leave." Grace pulled the gaping hole in her shirt together more tightly.

"I won't have any of that, Grace. You belong here as much as she does."

Ivy threw the purple daisy on the floor. She walked to the clawfoot chair and sat on the floor, at Grace's feet, looking up at her, like a toddler sitting criss-cross applesauce.

Grace grabbed both of Ivy's hands. "Why are people so cruel?"

Ivy did not answer. There was no answer. "How about a cup of tea?" She hopped up from the floor, walked to the door, and flipped the "open" sign to "closed."

Grace picked up the purple flower Ivy tossed on the ground and twirled it between her palms, and she closed her eyes.

The daylight was waning. Ivy disappeared into the back of the store to make tea, leaving Grace alone, sitting on a floral upholstered armchair amid the exquisite furniture, her eyes closed—clutching the flower.

When Ivy reappeared with two cups of chamomile tea, she handed one to Grace. "This is my favorite place to watch the sunset." Ivy pointed to the smog-muted orange sky outside. She walked towards the register and hopped onto the counter with one swift motion and patted the marble surface beside her.

Grace followed her across the store and jumped to sit next to her. Their feet dangled, and Grace noticed that one of Ivy's socks was pink and the other was green, both neon. They watched the sun's retreat like it was a movie.

"What brought you to New York?" Ivy squinted her eyes, trying to see Grace clearly in the growing darkness.

"Music," Grace whispered. She stared at Ivy's wrinkled forehead, wondering how old she was. "I wanted to sing."

Ivy turned towards her, still sitting on the counter in the dim room, and she squeezed both of Grace's hands. "Keep singing, babe. You must not quit singing."

Ivy looked into Grace's black eyes deeply, like no one ever had before. Grace cried again, but she did not run away. The room darkened with every inch the sun descended.

"Will you sing for me?" Ivy let go of Grace's hands.

Grace nodded, even though she wasn't sure if Ivy could see her. She sang "I'll Fly Away."

Ivy closed her eyes and swung her feet back and forth, rhythmically. "Stunning," she said when Grace finished singing. She didn't say anything else for a little while, and neither did Grace.

"Do you believe in heaven?" Ivy asked abruptly, still swinging her feet.

"No." Grace shifted.

"I do." Ivy slid off the counter, offered Grace her hand to help her down, and hugged her.

Grace expected Ivy to say more about heaven—or hell, like the street preacher who shouted on the streets of her hometown—but she didn't. Ivy only leaned back and smiled at the ceiling, like she was smiling at God, like heaven might be hovering right above the chandelier.

Grace promised to come back after she received news about a job at the convenience store, and she stepped into the night. She heard sirens often, but she was not scared; their melody was as natural as cicadas were in South Carolina.

On her way back to the shelter, Grace passed an old, stone Episcopal church. The light was on and the door was propped slightly. She walked back and forth on the sidewalk in front of the church several times. It was 11:00 p.m., but she had a deep desire to go inside. She walked up the stairs and stopped. On the top step, she sat and hummed for a while because she was afraid someone would pity her and try to give her something if she went inside. Grace did not want to walk inside as a homeless person but as someone with questions about God, someone who wanted to pray but didn't know how anymore, someone who used to laugh. She went in.

She saw no one inside. It was silent. The velvet pews reminded her of Yesterday's. A long time ago, Grace went to church. Her family was not bad, but they were not good either. Sometimes they went to church; that's where she learned the Gospel songs. Sometimes her parents fought. They used to fight a lot. Grace tried to sing over the yelling. But it eventually became more than yelling. That's when her mother disappeared, and that's when Grace moved in with her grandmother, who often asked her to sing hymns. But a year later Grace found her grandmother, lifeless, in her recliner. Grace was fourteen. That's when she went to foster care.

Grace hummed on the creaky pew, then she got on her knees, and the stone floor felt cold beneath her. She did not close her eyes but stared at the window, watching the moonlight stream through the stained glass. She did not know if it was God's voice or Ivy's, but she knew she should keep singing. Maybe not soon because she needed a job quickly, but one day. The church was silent and empty when she left, and still, she couldn't say she believed in God.

Grace sang the whole time she walked back to the shelter. Men sat on a curb and made crude comments at her as she passed, but she just sang louder. At the shelter, two of her roommates were asleep. The other sat on the floor crying. Grace sat on the bare tile, held her, and sang softly in the dark until her sobs ceased. Then she slept, and she dreamed about Broadway. She was on a stage wearing a sparkly red dress. She sang, and people smiled. She left the stage, and a man wearing a nice suit embraced her tightly. She wished he would not let go. When the sun rose, Grace did too. She remembered that she was not, in fact, being embraced. She was alone. The crying woman was already gone.

Grace walked to the convenience store, singing and smiling at the cracks on the sidewalk, then broke into a jog. Big John did not remember her name, but he recognized her face. He was very unlike the man in her dream, but he was kind. He told her that he could give her twenty hours each week, third shift, at fifteen dollars per hour. It would be a lot of money in South Carolina, Grace thought, but not so much in New York. She signed her name several times on a thick stack of papers, agreeing to many words she did not understand. Big John told her to be back at ten the following night to work. He gave her a new black-collared polyester shirt that said E-Z Stop Shop in yellow letters.

On her way back, Grace rehearsed her line: "Welcome to the E-Z Stop Shop." She walked straight to Yesterday's and swung open the door. The windchimes collided like cymbals. Ivy laughed and embraced her in the doorway.

“Just look at you! It suits you!” Ivy asked Grace to model her new shirt.

Grace strutted through the ritzy store in her E-Z Stop Shop shirt and stained khakis. She placed a fake flower in her hair.

Ivy clapped. “Beautiful, absolutely beautiful.” She reclined on a plush yellow cabriole sofa. She wore a red dress that was not quite the same shade of red as her baseball cap and blue socks.

Grace stopped in the middle of the store and took the flower out of her hair. She stopped smiling. “No, Ivy. I’m not.” She did not speak out of sadness or pity; she said it in the same way that she might say that it’s 48 degrees outside.

Ivy leaped off the couch and trotted straight to Grace. She hugged her tightly, like the man in her dream did.

March turned into April, and April turned into May, and May turned into June. Grace earned three black-collared polyester shirts. She earned a little bit of money and bought a pair of red shorts for summer. At the shelter, a woman with a high ponytail and glasses said, “It takes time to get back on your feet.” There were three new women in her room, and one had a baby who cried often.

Grace worked at the E-Z Stop Shop in the middle of the night, but she did not mind. She worked alone and sang all night in the little store. Big John liked her and let her work more hours. She was often very tired during the day because she did not sleep at night, but most days she still visited Yesterday’s. They laughed and drank chamomile tea. Ivy even let her nap on her favorite velvet sofa. Ivy invited Grace to live in an apartment she owned. But Grace wanted to be Ivy’s friend—just her friend, not her charity. Come July 15, though, she should have enough money for an apartment of her own. And to make it perfect, she would buy something from Ivy.

A few days later, she sat at an old desk in Yesterday’s. She scanned the room, observing every elegant object. Ivy read a book in a Victorian wingback chair. Grace thought Ivy looked like Queen Victoria herself.

Just behind her, Grace saw a small lamp made of stained glass and bronze sitting on a wine table in the corner of the store. It reminded her of the old Episcopal church and Ivy all at once. She rose slowly. Ivy looked up, dogeared the page, and placed the book on her lap. “I’ll take it, Ivy.” Grace spoke quietly, tracing the cold bronze with her fingers.

Ivy thumbed the pages of her book while she stared at the lamp. “It is beautiful.”

Grace reached in her pocket and fumbled through wads of twenties. “How much?”
“Oh, Grace.”

“How much, Ivy?”

“Fine, fine. Let’s settle on sixty dollars, babe.” Ivy did not move from the big chair. Her dress was green and her socks were yellow.

Grace cradled the lamp in her arms, tilting it toward the window like a prism. The sun shone through the glass, and the colors danced.

FALLING LEAVES

Genevieve Rice

Dancers clad in red and yellow,
spin and
whirl on
umber floors,
pirouette once again
and sink into a final curtsy.

Silence fills the velvet chairs—life
spent on
pointed but
broken toes,
entombed in satin shrouds,
finally falls to the ground.





MOMENTS

digital photography by Samuel Gordon



NESTING BOWLS

ceramics by Megan Adams

IN REMEMBRANCE

Abby McNeely

Nothing can fully prepare you for looking at a lifeless body. No amount of description or warning makes it less surreal. I do not mean asleep, sick, passed out, or bored to the point of motionlessness. I mean completely void of life. *Dead. Deceased.* If you're more sensitive, *passed away.* If you're slightly dramatic, *gone.* If you're more technical, you may prefer the Harvard Committee's definition: "An individual who has sustained either . . . irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions, or irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain." The heart has stopped beating, the brain has stopped firing, and only matter remains. The soul, the thoughts, the invisible things which make up a person, have passed on to no one really knows where except through faith in an afterlife or fear of nothingness. But that is a discussion for people far wiser than myself. I didn't encounter any souls, just the bodies they left behind, and nothing could have prepared me for it.

"Have you ever seen a dead person?" asked my friend, Kailee. It was the day before I was scheduled to visit Anderson University's Cadaver Lab. She had visited many times before as a Kinesiology major and was intrigued that I would tour the place for any reason other than an anatomy class, or better yet, no definitive reason at all. I had heard a lot about the lab not only from her but also my roommate, Sydney, a Nursing major. Sydney was a student tech in the lab, and every time she visited, she never failed to report to me her latest findings with utter excitement and reverence. This is something I could appreciate, but not resonate with. Spending hours in a lab cutting open dead people? No thanks. My love for all things medical, if you could have ever called it love, ended in high school. In ninth and tenth grade, I took Health Science classes thinking I wanted to be a nurse myself, until a ten-minute-long video of an infant with the whooping cough sent me to the guidance counselor's office to switch career paths. The switch was good and proves good to this day. I am far more comfortable writing lesson plans than I was taking vitals. I enjoy helping young people develop their intellect and beliefs, not their bodies. I am simply not scientifically-minded enough to retain a career-sized intrigue in biological processes. It's not a passion. This is why, I believe, Kailee asked if I had ever seen a dead person.

The question caught me off-guard and I stumbled over an answer. I knew I had seen at least one, my own grandmother, who had an open casket at her visitation, so I answered as such. I also have vague memories of walking past several other open caskets as a child, but as with my grandmother, they had been all dressed up, hair fixed, faces painted with makeup to falsify life. "It's going to look like she's just sleeping," I remember my mom saying.

Her comforts must have worked, because I was not frightened by MaMa's stillness. (Not pronounced like "momma;" please honor the southern twang of the two short 'a' sounds.) She looked different, of course, but the overcompensating rouge on her cheeks and dark stain on her thin lips were not so different from the slight excess she would wear when she was alive. MaMa was a strong-willed, southern woman, upright in every way except physical, as her rheumatoid arthritis had hunched her forward for as long as I could remember. The doctors say it was the lifetime of smoking that got her, though I have a strong feeling that she was just tired of achy joints and wasted lungs. I also think she missed my grandfather, who had died ten years before and was just beyond the threshold. On Christmas Day of 2014, her poor health sort of collapsed all at once. She was only in the hospital for about a week and a half when I received the phone call that she had died in her med-induced sleep.

"MaMa has *passed away*," said my mom, the sensitive type. To this day, I cannot recall anyone calling my sweet grandmother *dead*. The former is funerals, memories, legacies, and perhaps the hope that he or she has soared heavenward. The latter is permanent. It is a period. When talking with Sydney once, she said, "sometimes they even use the word 'terminated.' How final does that sound?"

It was not until this reflection of my experience, or inexperience, with "the dead," that I started to become apprehensive. Sydney never used the term *passed away* to describe the people she dissected on the table. She almost always used *dead*, *cadaver*, or *body*, and I believe she used the word *corpse* once. I am not sure what my initial reason was for deciding to go to the cadaver lab for an immersive experience, but the question "Have you ever seen a *dead* person?" now made me think. Perhaps I was going because, in the true sense of the word, I had not.

Kailee had asked another question. "Are you going to look at the face?" I had no idea how to answer. Why would I not?

"They keep the faces covered while they work on the body," she said. "You know, to be respectful. But you can see it if you ask. Some people try and just can't because of how real it becomes." *How real it becomes*. I was second-guessing myself now. This experience was starting to feel a lot less like a visit to the familiar dissection labs in eleventh grade Anatomy class and a lot more like riding a new roller coaster that was way higher than you initially thought. At that point, I implored myself to stay more excited than nervous. I ran through every image I could remember of the victims on the

autopsy table in my favorite crime TV shows, and ran through every detail Sydney had already told me about what it is like to be in the lab. This attempt at preparedness, as I would soon discover, was futile.

I arrived at 11:20 a.m. on a Thursday. Sydney greeted me outside the cadaver lab door with a white, oversized lab coat, gloves, and a document of confidentiality to sign. In signing that sheet, I was, and still am, restricted from releasing any information about the cadavers other than general descriptions. This meant no facial descriptions, no names, and no information about their lives beyond what their bodies revealed. Any and all of these could expose the identity of the cadaver. Sydney claims that all of the bodies are those of local South Carolinians and, quoting School of Nursing faculty members, said “we would hate for a student to find out that their relative is on the dissection table.” She added positively, “we don’t even know their names, so you don’t have to worry about spilling that.” I nodded and said okay. The next hour would be filled with a lot of that, nodding and “okays.” “Also, it’s not going to smell good when we go in,” said Sydney. “It’s the solution that we spray the cadavers with.” Feeling the rubber gloves on my hands, with this warning of the potency that occupied the lab, I prepared myself for a sensory overload.

Sydney gave me an excited, quick look after I signed the sheet and said, “You ready?” I responded with a quick and quiet “Yeah” nearly before she’d finished the question. I must have been aware of the subconscious urge I had to turn around and run for it.

We walked through one door. When I recounted the whole experience to my dad afterwards, I told him how I was surprised that there was not a series of doors for security and sanitary reasons. I had expected to walk through one door, hear it close behind me, maybe hear some airlock hissing noise, and then proceed through a second door. “Nope, they’re dead” he stated, chuckling at my imagination and ignorance. He himself is an occupational therapist and had plenty of experience with cadavers in his medical schooling years ago. In hindsight, it makes a lot more sense that the dead bodies would not need maximum security and safety measures. I blame the movies for my pre-conceptions. I also blame the movies for making me think that the lab would be on some basement level of the building and be morbidly sterile. The lab was, in fact, on the second floor of the nursing building and had large windows which flooded the room with natural light. The brightness of midday shone on everything in the room the way a car’s headlights illuminate “Welcome to the State of _____” signs for nighttime travelers. This was a new place with new sights, and all of the lab techs were smiling and happy to see a new inquirer. Though, upon hearing that I had no intention of going into any form of healthcare or scientific field whatsoever, they probably considered me more of a tourist.

The first thing I saw when the door opened was the leg. Knee and toes down, skin, fat, and muscle laterally severed off of half the limb, down to the bone. I stopped walking. “Welcome to the Cadaver Lab,” it said, though that may have been Sydney’s giddy voice coming from a few steps ahead. But nothing spoke louder than the leg’s nakedness. All of the layers were distinguishable. I could not help but think of the diagram from my

elementary science textbooks, depicting the layers of the earth as distinct and separate, each its own size and color. Crust, mantle, outer core, inner core. Skin, fat, muscle, bone. A hearty thirty seconds must have passed before I recognized the open leg as the member of a larger body. It was laid facedown and was mostly covered by a stained cloth. With a larger glance around the room, the full atmosphere of the lab settled into place. The light reflected off of the operating tables—four of them, each supporting a different project, some more thoroughly and neatly dissected than others.

The smell was a degree shy of overwhelming, but I was only conscious of it after the open leg released my stare from its captivity and I could once again use my other senses. The embalming solution was undoubtedly chemical and filled my nose with a sharp sensation. There was another smell that seemed to lie just beneath it, though, mostly masked. After enough deduction, I came to terms with the fact that the more organic smell I sensed beneath the chemical could only be the actual smell of death, of decaying body. The pungent wetting solution is a mercy, then, though it would seem in more ways than just smell. In short, the odorous spray that covers the deceased preserves them as human instead of decaying material, at least in appearance. The solution is an act of respect, both for the once-living and living people in the room. Because of this, I resolved to stomach the chemical smell. I slowly proceeded around the table which held the foremost cadaver, working my way from naked leg to the head, which was open. And empty.

What I thought was a bowl was actually the top half of the skull, which had been skillfully carved off and laid proximally to the rest of the empty head. The lab tech, whose project this first cadaver was, pointed out the brain stem protruding through the skull. She pulled the brain out of someplace that had been hidden to me, but not purposefully. My attention was so captivated by the cavity where I am used to seeing a full head of hair that I did not think to look for the brain that would normally fill the space.

“ . . . until you see a brain or touch one or even hold one, you will never fully know the weight of its importance.”

“Do you want to hold it?” she said. She smiled and extended her hands cradling the gray matter as if it were a duckling at a petting zoo. The mass in front of me was not cute, but my hands received it anyway. It was hard and solid, and bore a remarkably true resemblance to most of the pictures of brains I had seen, even the ones that appeared in cartoons. An adult human brain weighs approximately three pounds, but there was a heaviness about the one in my hands that felt greater than a two-slice toaster or a container of Crisco shortening, things which Google tells me weigh the same as the thing in my head. Perhaps the weight I felt in my hands could better be measured in units of reverence or carefulness. The student pointed at certain spots and called my attention to the cerebellum and medulla, as well as the

physical differences between the right and left hemispheres. While some of the terminology and functions were familiar to me from science classes I had previously taken, it was as if my introduction to the brain was made entirely anew. In that moment, I had to admit to my book-smart self that actions indeed speak far louder than words; holding a brain is a surpassingly more educational experience than reading about one. You could read and commit to memory every word ever written about the precious organ, but I am now convinced that, until you see a brain or touch one or even hold one, you will never fully know the weight of its importance. All the abstract thoughts and hopes and dreams of someone anchored into a tangible object. I wondered which sights this one processed as beautiful or horrifying. I wondered how many times the neurons fired to create a smile, laughter, or tears. I handed back to the lab tech someone's lifetime of memories and knowledge. There was so much more to see.

A few feet away lay another cadaver, this one on its back. Before even noticing the dissection being performed on the body's midsection, I was struck by the arms. They were suspended away from the torso and slightly above the head, wrists tied with string to two metal poles protruding from the head-end of the table. It was a striking posture. What was actually a practical means of keeping the cadaver's arms clear of the open abdomen looked more like a demonstration of an attitude, as if the body intentionally raised its arms to aid my roommate and her partner in their cutting and discovery. A familiar picture emerged of a limp body with arms extended on either side, wrists fastened by steel rather than string, to a tree rather than steel. A posture of offering. Sacrifice. Ah yes, that was it. The likeness of the figure fixed in so many paintings and stained-glass windows was splayed before me. The well-known words rang in my head: "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11.24).

"A posture of offering. Sacrifice. Ah yes, that was it."

Of course, this body here was given for the sake of knowledge and education, not the sins of the world. Perhaps my romantic mind stretched the comparison, but it is still difficult to erase the parallel between the two humans who gave up their vessels willingly, for whomever or whatever reason. The person on the table had suffered "no cost" and "no trouble" in consenting to do so—there was nothing more to lose than the life which was already lost. And whatever good or evil this person did in their lifetime is less significant, to me, than the deep roots of learning and the fallen seed of reverence which now glistened in Sydney's eye. The gift of these people's own bodies to Anderson University's Cadaver Lab was indeed like a long-living tree, whose fruit tasted of opportunity for this room full of future nurses and doctors. We, living people whose health fails us sometimes, are all better off because of this gift.

Sydney and I stood on the left side of the cadaver. Annie Kate, a Biochemistry major, was on the opposite side. Both were trimming fatty tissue from their areas of focus. Sydney's area was the whole abdominal cavity, but today her goal was to expose the large and small intestines, which were becoming more and more visible with each careful swipe of her scalpel. Annie Kate's area was the heart. Apparently, a few days before, she had succeeded in carving off the rib cage, which now laid over the cloth-covered face. She pointed at the different chambers and ventricles, but still had a lot of fat to remove before she could give a full viewing of the organ. The lung on the left side was adjacent to the heart and fairly visible. There were other details in my view which most would prefer not to be documented, including myself. The gallbladder and fatty "muffin-top" area, for example, would require too vivid and (admittedly) repulsive a description. So, I focused on what Sydney and Annie Kate told me about their areas. They told me to walk around and look at the others and ask any questions that came to mind. I was even invited to touch and help expose the muscle on the leg of the first cadaver. The professor in the lab began teaching a group of Anatomy Lab students that walked in at some point. In the lab coat and gloves, I felt like one of them and tuned in to her lecture as I made my way around the room, doing my best to stay out of the way. From anywhere I stood, though, the arms of Sydney's cadaver still enthralled me. I had to remind myself that the body itself was not raising them, that they were tied up for practical purposes. But the sacrifice was still there, Sydney and Annie Kate hovering over it and benefitting. I cornered my resolve and walked over to Sydney's side.

"I'd like to see the face now."

She gave me an enthusiastic but calm "Are you sure?" as she put down her scalpel and crossed behind me. Even if I said had said no, Annie Kate was already lifting the rib-cage from the face and Sydney's hands were already on the cloth to pull. I confirmed. The cloth was slowly peeled back and unveiled the face. Her face.

Eyes, nose, mouth, ears, hair . . . it was all there. There was no rouge on her cheeks or color on her lips. She was indeed dead, but a dead *person*. I admit I had a hard time calling her a cadaver or body after that. It was probably wise that her face was not revealed until the denouement of the visit, because now I wondered about her personality, her family, her achievements, her mistakes, her vocation, her interests, and all the other non-anatomical aspects of life. I would never know these things, let alone her name, but in seeing her face I was reminded that she once had them. I was relieved not to be gazing into the face of a youth who might have lost years of opportunity, or some 40-year-old who might have left behind three young children. No, this woman's years were spent and her face showed the weariness of all the transaction. Her lips were slightly turned down. Maybe her expression had simply fallen when her heart stopped, or maybe she had just released it with the relief of completing all her years. Regardless, she must have done something right to last until this age. I imagined her pale, sunken cheeks young again and flushed with color. Perhaps they pinked, as mine often do, at the sight of someone she loved. Perhaps she puffed them out in a long sigh after a trying day. Perhaps they were kissed by a husband and children and grandchildren.

Perhaps she looked sad because she left a lot behind. Perhaps, Sydney allowed me a long look and did not interrupt my silence. When the face was covered, I glanced at the clock and realized my time in the lab was up.

Sydney and the other lab techs pulled the open bodies back together, muscle over insides, skin over muscle. They doused each layer in more embalming solution. As I shed the gloves and lab coat and signed a time sheet for my visit, I looked back over at the people on the table. I saw the brain beside the open head of the one closest, and the arms of the other which were now being lowered back by her sides. I saw the outline of her face underneath the cloth. These particular dead, passed away, deceased, cadavers',—whatever you choose—sacrifice continues to give. I silently thanked them, because I had seen death now, and I am less in search for that perfect word for it. When asked about my grandmother, I no longer consciously avoid the word *dead*, because my response goes something like this: “She’s dead, but . . . ,” and I smile as I remember her proper southern accent and how she said “Hey, sugar” every time she put her achy hands on my shoulders and pulled me in for a hug and a kiss on the cheek. It’s not about the term I use or what was done with her body. A passed away grandmother and a cadaver . . . each could have very well been the other. One is in the ground and the other on the dissecting table, but both lived lives and left people behind. It’s the “in remembrance” that helps negate the finality of the semantics and the motionlessness of the bodies. I will remember the cadaver’s arms open sacrificially to science, but maybe there is a granddaughter out there who will remember her face as I remember MaMa’s: soft and content to have left a full life behind.

Nothing can fully prepare you for looking at a lifeless body, because, though lifeless, the dead speak eloquently. It is impossible to look and miss what they say. All of the physical details, from the leg muscle to the colorless cheeks, are museums of entire lifetimes. They burst with humanity and make us remember ours. The remainder of their bodies reminds us that they indeed lived and felt and knew and *were*, just as we live and feel and know and *are*. I thank my grandmother in the ground and the woman on the table, for because of their deaths I am more aware of the beautiful thing it is to live, and live on, in remembrance.



THE RUBBER BAND BALL IS THE PERFECT METAPHOR

Claire Foxx

for time;

for your complicated childhood, the layered entanglements of many-colored strands (some broken, doubtless, internally, towards the invisible center where it all must have begun with some original configuration of two elastic loops, entwined for reasons already forgotten and unknowable, buried under thicknesses of wrapping too many now to justify undoing even to yourself);

for things you would not think would be as heavy as they are;

for all the hobbies you have ever taken up but abandoned out of restlessness or lack of talent or for no reason in particular (the sting of stretched rubber snapped against your knuckles like a whip, the rude pink streaks, your mother said *unbecoming*);

for doubt (is anything ever really finished or only stopped?);

for accumulations of all kinds: rain, snow, pocket change, prayers, mutant cells replicating in your prefrontal cortex at extraordinary speeds, karma (good and bad), dust in high and hidden places of your bedroom impossible to reach;

for irony;

for the planet Earth, which your father, who was not a man of science, once described to you (a child) as a ball of wax dipped over and over again into the same warm pool of color, gradually darkening, hardening, growing infinitesimally larger and more perfectly round at a rate of evolution imperceptible to the human eye but nonetheless constant, unstoppable, assured.



EVEN THE STARS BREAK PROMISES

Genevieve Rice

This is not going to be a clichéd essay on stars. It may contain some clichés and it may contain some stars, but it is not a “stars, nature, life is beautiful essay.” My parents were missionaries in Eastern Europe from when the Iron Curtain dropped in 1991 until 2016, making computers and TV to be somewhat of a luxury when I was growing up. Instead of staring at screens, I stared out of car windows as we drove from conferences to Romanian college campuses. The pines changed into broad leafy trees as the mountains shrank into foothills. Playing outside for hours was my daily entertainment. But I didn’t walk uphill both ways to get to school; I took the metro or our dinky Golf station wagon. Always the small child trailing behind on hikes, I was captivated by every leaf and stone and bug. It’s amazing how many colors are woven into pebbles. How leaves crunch after they sit on the ground too long. The ground captivated me, when I was closer to it. In the crowded Bucharest streets, the ground taught me more about my home than the faces above me. The cigarette butts explained the smoky quality of the air, and a person’s shoes told you their life story. Loafers for the semi-successful (very few were really successful so soon after the retreat of the Russian Communist Regime) and sneakers and dirty flip-flops for all the rest.

Despite the seemingly endless concrete that composes a city, my family always made time to revel in everything green and growing. We dissected the ground and the stars, discovering that they have a critical similarity: the joyous right to stay the same. Continuous circles of sameness, like the concentric rings on a tree. Each year holds the same rotations of green, red, and brown. Nature is reliable. The Gradina Botanica, or botanical gardens, and our tiny rectangle of backyard in the sprawling city was a window onto the physical world. Green grass that tastes like butter—to this day, I have never tasted better grass—morphs into a layer of crunchy brown leaves. I never sampled the leaves, but I did taste the snow. It was clean and cold with hints of smoke, probably from the wood fire sobas heating each neighbor’s living room. Put a bowl out the night before a snowstorm, mix the gathered snow with cinnamon sugar, and there’s dessert. One year, it snowed so much that we built an igloo in our backyard. My two sisters, dad, and I played for hours in our snow house before some male cat peed in it one night and my mom declared it off limits. Months later, the snow would be parted by miniscule blades of buttery grass. Repetition. Circles of movement, just as the stars circle above Bucharest’s communist block buildings and older ornate structures reminiscent of a freer time.

Leaving the Ground

Romania was my time of the ground. Until I was six, Transylvania, the land of *iele* (nymphs), *nosferatu* (vampires), and wildwoods, was my backyard. This imaginative feast drew me to all that crept along the earth. The earth was beautiful, and humans were called to name it. Every tree was a palace of fairies, hosting nightly dances among the branches. Every spongy patch of emerald moss was the bed of a long-fingered elf. My mother taught me that. Countless hours reading fairytales taught me to see the fantastic in the world of my imagination. We both could see the possibilities that the world may never reach, but in my mind, I could make the world perfect and myself immutable.

Yet in the mountain skies that humankind had not dimmed, I never saw a shooting star. One summer night, during a getaway to the mountains with a fellow expat family—three more children to make our number six—we decided to have a bonfire. As in a ritual dance of childhood, we frolicked around the fire until our legs tumbled us unto the grass. Ignoring the damp crawling through our clothes and onto our skin, we feasted on the night sky. Lungs heaving, one of us coughed from the tickle of smoke in the cool air. Occasionally, my two sisters would point up at the sky and say, “Did you see that? Wasn’t it beautiful?” I didn’t know. The concept of a shooting star was far above my head. My mind was filled with the stars in the blades of grass, the spots on a ladybug’s carapace, the dust of a butterfly’s wings. I didn’t bother looking up when I was only three feet tall. When my sixth birthday hit, nature still twirling in her dance, my ground vanished.

Bucharest and my Carpathian Mountains were traded for pavement. Cobblestones covered the buttery grass and cement took the rest. First grade began in Budapest, Hungary, my home of stars. This was where I saw my first shooting star, hit my forever height of 5’3”, and poplars and birches became my normal. Six to eighteen was spent in Magyarország, where the lampposts’ reflection in the waters of the Danube mimicked the light of the stars.

Our house in Hungary was beautiful: four stories of grey-blue stucco and hardwood floors, equipped with a cherry tree in the front and a walnut tree in the back to practice my monkey impersonation in. Two balconies jutted from the front of the house; one was large and functioned as our porch—we were still Southerners after all. This was the perfect place to sit with my dad on summer evenings and watch the skies. The nights we spent out there were special in their rarity. Missionaries don’t always pick one place and stay there. For me, Hungary was my new world, but for my dad it was the home base of his travels. Leading conferences all over the world, he would be gone for at least a week

out of each month. But he always brought home gifts from faraway places: a box with a secret compartment from Kenya, a miniature tea set from Hong Kong, perfume from Egypt, and a seashell windchime from the Philippines to remind me how much he thought of us while he was away. But gifts never could replace the evenings we spent watching the stars and singing “Puff the Magic Dragon.” He seemed to know every star and every planet, calling them out while strumming on his guitar. Mars always made an appearance first. If I squinted just right, it had the nice little circle with four small drags of light shooting up and around. Next up on the nightly parade was Orion’s belt. Our dog, Aria, was named after this group. My sister was young and confused when she named the German Shepherd puppy, but Aria fit her. When I was in eighth grade, she had two litters of puppies. Half of the second litter died; nine puppies were born, four were too small, and one’s muscles were only half knit. My parents didn’t let me see it, in an attempt to shield their child from some of life’s horrors. Life kept turning, endless cycle of birth, death, and stars.

“Green is a soothing color, and the sky is endless.”

While Orion’s belt may be my constant now, in Hungary it was the Big Dipper that shone the brightest. In the beginning, I lived in what came to be known as the Fairy Closet. It was a small room on the first floor, right beside my parents. It had a butterfly theme and pastel walls, earning its nickname. Pastel purple, while beautiful in a field of lavender or in the four-point stars of lilac flowers, did not belong on the walls of my hormone-crazed fourteen-year-old self. A girl prone to the angst of being misunderstood and an overactive imagination did not appreciate the beauty of a pale purple. The Fairy Closet was my parent’s effort to keep their baby close, in the bedroom across the hall from theirs, but high school was the beginning of a new time. When my oldest sister moved to the States for college, I inherited her old room. It was the biggest bedroom in the whole house. Windows filled an entire wall, reaching toward the sloped ceiling over my bed. We painted over my sister’s periwinkle, changing it to green and cream the hour she boarded the plane for America. When goodbyes were as common as lightning in a thunderstorm, I tried to believe that grieving change was wasting time that could be spent moving forward. The beginning of a new era, our family unit was splintered into parts and shipped across an ocean. But in my new room, taller than the trees and the houses in our neighborhood, I had direct access to the stars. I traded eleven and a half months a year without a sister for a lavender-less existence. I learned to live without a sister—she missed high school-me and I missed college-her. Green is a soothing color, and the sky is endless.

My queen-sized bed, equipped with two blankets and six pillows to fill the empty space, made the days when standing took too much effort bearable. The inherited mattress was older than I was, evident in the dip in the

middle my mother made during three pregnancies. From my nest between two Romanian feather pillows, the Big Dipper was framed by my white window sill. Ah, back to the stars. The Dipper, or, in scientific terminology, Ursa Major's butt, would give my cheek right back to me. Smiling at my stare, it never left the frame, no matter the time of year. The goodbyes and life in a fishbowl—constantly watched by supporters, other missionaries, and extended family, yet known by none (birthday and Christmas presents still come in purple)—manifested in depression. The fear that everyone I let into my life will someday leave me became too much to carry throughout the countless goodbye parties and farewell prayer sessions. I hope God listened to my words and not my intent, because I was never happy about praying for my friends to make new friends to replace me in their new home. Yet when all I could do was lay in bed, staring at the sky, its twinkling gaze kept me company.

The rest of the world circled the stars, but the Dipper remained upright. Handle pointing upward, it begged to be touched, whispering through the open window. I tried to hold on to so many people that eventually disappeared, despite the wonders of the internet. So the idea of being able to hold something as constant as the stars had its appeal. The Dipper was the same the night I started high school as the night I graduated. It talked me down when I stood on my windowsill estimating the distance between the sky and the ground, wondering if the fall would kill me instantly. I don't have a high pain tolerance. Wondering if four floors were enough to snap a neck, or if the grass would pad my fall and leave me with broken legs and a greater sense of shame than before. It stared me off of my ledge, reminding me that all things come in cycles, even darkness and goodbyes. Rigid in rising at three in the afternoon on the winter night my sisters came home from college during Christmas break as the dark January morning they would leave for another year. The siren call of college cannot go unanswered. Goodbyes are cycles, too.

Stoically twinkling as if the ladle held the waters of life, it watched as my family gathered in my room the January night my grandfather died an ocean away when I was sixteen and finally in self-enforced depression remission, otherwise known as ignoring your emotions in the hope they go away. I glared at the lights, my fingers slowly destroying a tissue my mother handed me. My mind screamed at my family to stand up and walk away so that only the stars would see me cry.

A month later in February, my classmate died—whether intentionally or by accident, we still don't know. That was the February I learned to cry in front of other people. There were only two friends that I had throughout Romania and Hungary, friends since birth. Stephen was one of them. More like a brother than a friend, he had been at more of my Thanksgivings, Christmases, and Easters than my blood relatives in the States. He was not like my grandfather; he was chosen family. He was young. Impermanent goodbyes of moving, ending with a “maybe I'll see you again,” are not the same as death. At fifteen, he had achieved what I could not. He died on a Wednesday, my dad's birthday, with a homemade noose and no suicide note. We had a few days off from school, and when we returned on Monday, most of our classes had new seating arrangements. He was my desk partner in World Literature that year, and I couldn't sit beside an empty chair. The last thing I said to him had been

in that English class. He was paying more attention to his doodle of elaborate sets of weaponry and battle scenes than to the teacher telling us where to turn in our textbooks. I said, “Page 934.” The hours and days that I spent thinking about that encounter seem uncountable. What would I have said if I had known he was going to do something so stupid, so reckless? Maybe I would have told him off for leaving us. Maybe I would have hugged him and told him how much I wished he was here. Even now, I still dream about him.

Ursa Major watched the same year, as I packed my suitcase to fly across the ocean and watch my other grandfather fade away under the influence of dementia and heart failure. When I was little, he and I would spend hours fishing in his metal boat. Looking back, I know I wasn’t much help—I didn’t put my own bait on the hook, cast the line, or eat the fish I caught. But we would go every time I visited. Hours in the sun left me freckled and him tan. We didn’t ever say much, and maybe that’s why I value silence now; just being together was enough after months, if not years, apart. When depression, like a cloud darker than ever before, promised community with my grandfathers and my friend, the Dipper continued to stare me down off of ledges and into my pillowed nest. Changes came and went, but the scoop of starlight held its shape and integrity. Life turns, just as stars and seasons do.

When it was my turn to say goodbye on a cool morning in August, at the windowsill of my naked, furniture-less room, the Dipper’s eyes didn’t blink. I was the one moving this time, and I knew that I wouldn’t be coming back. Our house, with its wonderful balconies and my open windows, was soon to become the home of a new family with three little girls. I assumed I would see the Dipper soon; stars don’t change after all. The sun came up in my airplane window and Budapest, my home for twelve years, wasn’t my home anymore.

Broken Handle

Freshmen year of college is an adjustment for everyone, with new roommates, no parents, and a new lifestyle. I expected this. I also expected the culture shock that comes with re-entry from living abroad for eighteen years. But some things never change. For example, my dislike of okra and Brussel sprouts or my preference for postcards over texts. The extensive shoebox filing system I keep in my closet attests to this postcard obsession. My discovery that exercise will not kill me, despite an increased heart rate, surprised me. Changes sometimes do that. It was this increased enjoyment of movement that led me to take many walks that first year . . . walks late at night or in the rain. The need to get out of my dorm room and away from my roommates definitely encouraged this. Apparently, my culture shock is offensive; who knew? At least, that’s what my roommate told me when I asked her why she hadn’t spoken to me for a week. At dinner I said I missed Hungarian cheese and, to her, that translated into I hated the military. I am unsure how she made that connection, but that is what she told me when I asked what made her think that I hated America. Undoubtedly, there was more going on in our relationship than a sensitivity to dairy products. Throughout the year, whenever I mentioned Hungary or Romania, she became uncomfortable or angry. I didn’t have the freedom to celebrate where I came from or to mourn it, because to recognize that it was meaningful was to insult the country I lived

in. It seemed to me that she had a tendency to take every passing comment personally, which may be why my words affected her so. So on the days I was feeling especially homesick or lost in a culture that I was still trying to understand, I had to escape my room to mourn without losing a roommate.

In the spring, I began such an escape after a meeting of my campus ministry, Cru. The birds that sound like car-alarms and break out in song on sunny Southern days had finally gone to sleep. The chorus of cicadas, newly awakened from their winter nap, mimicked the croon of violins in a symphony. Rustling leaves composed the woodwinds as the new greenery tested out its mobility in the night air. My muscles stretched and lengthened as I widened my stride, my footstep percussion hitting a nice staccato to match the beat of the night's orchestra. As my legs took over, my mind took a break, filling with the sounds around me. My path led behind my dorm and into thin stretch of grass, intercut with cement walkways, like tangled yarn. The grass was protected from the natural weather patterns, with regular sprinkling and fertilizing that left it green year-round. Gardeners, bedecked with weed whackers and pruning shears, had scared the trees off into two straight army lines across from a distant parking lot.

“So lay the Big Dipper, handle twisted and turned toward the ground. I had finally lost everything, even the stars.”

Manicured lawns don't have the same mystery as untouched forests or dirty city streets. What fairy would want to live in a land invaded by humans? What human secrets can uniformly beheaded grass whisper? Even desire paths are paved or hidden under fresh sod. But the sky, it circles and flows, in powder blue or slate gray. Meringue clouds and smoky wisps are full of possibilities. Reliable. Stately. Back my neck tipped, washing my face in the open spaces blocked by trees. I didn't used to feel caged by branches. After years of living on a plateau with wide open skies, the broad-leaf hills felt like fingers reaching around me and tethering me to the earth.

During that walk, the stars betrayed me. I had been unable to locate my Dipper for eight months. Brittle branches had held it beneath the horizon. Now, though, I caught sight of that familiar shape but twisted—like the body of Evelyn McHale, known for the iconic photo “The Most Beautiful Suicide.” She lay perfect, as if asleep, on the roof of a car bent and folded around her after she jumped off the Empire State Building—unlike me, she found a building tall enough. She was not obviously broken, as if space shifted around her, cradling her sleep. Yet, the more you look, you realize that something is desperately wrong. So lay the Big Dipper, handle twisted and turned toward the ground. I had finally lost everything, even the stars.

I had been waiting eight months for my culture shock to wear off and to feel “normal” in South Carolina; waiting for my roommates to ask me about where I came from without glazed eyes or punishing my

responses with the silent treatment; waiting for the pain of losing my home to finally stop pulsing in the back of my mind, for life to feel natural again. I was waiting to understand when to open doors for people or what they mean when they ask you how you are and then walk away. Waiting to build relationships deeper than a splinter on the pad of your finger.

I was reminded of Lord Tennyson's Ulysses, a man who fought for years for his home, a sense of belonging, that is no longer real. He comes home and finds that home no longer fits; I believed that America really should fit me—my passport proves it. But life had changed Ulysses and me, and the culture that should make sense, doesn't. Ulysses kept moving, holding on to the hope that somewhere things will be better. His words are mine: "Yet all experience is an arch wherethro' / Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades / For ever and forever when I move. / How dull it is to pause, to make an end." We both believed that someday, things will make sense again. That the only comfort comes from moving so quickly through life that the pain of change can be ignored and nothing is lost in the forgetting. But loss can't be silenced. The stars came out and the clichés were wrong. Stars do change, turning on their head when you need them most.

The first time I had to say goodbye to one of my best friends, I was two years old. I had said goodbye to two cities and my entire social circle before the age of six. The pain of change is not new. But when memories of pain make me afraid to face what I have lost, I lose the joy of remembering what was so valuable. So I have to think about pain differently. If change is a rose bush, then pain is the thorns, the stem, the leaves. But the root? The root is love of what was left behind. And the roses? Roses are the willingness to do it all over again.





JUPITER BEFORE COFFEE

acrylic painting by Ian Campbell



THANK YOU



Ivy Leaves is nearly as old as Anderson University itself. Its pages are as weathered as the bricks of Merritt Administration Building, as tested as the oak trees on Alumni Lawn. More than a hundred years ago, our predecessors penned their stories and sketched on now-fragile paper. Thanks to our library staff's ongoing efforts to archive the journals, each year our team pores over the aged words and artwork and remembers our origins. We are mere drops of ink in *Ivy Leaves*'s history. We are grateful for those who came before us.

Although the journal is over a century old, it is more vibrant than ever. The journal's design and stories have evolved with time, as has the rest of the University. This year, students entrusted us with nearly six hundred pages of words, each holding its own story, its own memory. Our literature team read and honored every word. To everyone who shared a piece of themselves with us, we thank you for carrying *Ivy Leaves* forward.

Ivy Leaves is a collaborative project that could not happen without the dedication and guidance of our faculty. We extend our thanks to the College of Arts and Sciences and each English faculty member who has immersed us in great literature and guided our words. Our literature staff especially thanks Dr. Teresa Jones for countless hours of instruction and her constant encouragement to "go deeper" into our stories and ourselves. She often reminds us of the great contract of literature: you tell me your story, and I hear mine. Because of Dr. Jones's leadership, this is the lifeblood of *Ivy Leaves*.

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NOTES

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