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from

ANDERSON UNIVERSITY

TO DR. TERESA JONES,

for the past twelve journals, for calling us writers,
and for teaching us how to tell the truth beautifully.

You will always be at the heart of our stories.

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FOREWORD

When we are told that the world is lost to chaos, that these are uncertain times, that all is vanity, and that we must fight, all while people are dying, we stop. We stare. We stare so long and so hard that even in the smallest things—in a teacup, a patch of Velcro, golden yellow sand—we see the entire world. Flannery O'Connor calls this quality of having an artistic stare "a certain grain of stupidity." It is this act of continuous discovery that drives us to try to capture the whole world in limited, particular scenes. As writers and artists, we are storytellers.

This act of storytelling is more often than not a documentation of extraordinary normalcy and its revelations—waking up to the sound of rain, pulling clean laundry from a clothesline, drinking tea. In these moments, we see what is true, what is beautiful. We remember childhood and what it meant to feel tall. We experience loss and grief and deafening doubt. Then we remember that there is a God who created the feeling of the color red. And sometimes, we confront death in the snout and place an apple between its teeth, and we shrink back for fear of being some kind of too close. In all of these experiences, we see a story, and this is where we find hope.

It is our hope that when we tell our stories, you somehow hear yours, and in this connection, we see the harmony, the unity, in humanity. In our search for truth displayed in art, we plunge ourselves deeper into reality rather than escaping from it. As John Gardner has said, we "temper real experience, modify prejudice, humanize." Without giving a moral lesson on stealing, we show what it means to be a person who is a horse thief. In this, we honestly show what it means to be human.

Still, there will be people who are tempted to ask, "Does it matter?" Why tell stories when there is work to be done? In this 96th edition of *Ivy Leaves*, we see work being done. Our writers and artists have stared intently, sometimes stupidly, and they have stories that deserve to be heard. From the first story to the last, this edition reveals what it means to survive. As Joan Didion has said, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." And that is enough.

THE FIRST STORY

Samantha Brooks

I pulled the retainer out of my mouth and placed it on the cafeteria table, challenging the strangers eating with me to stare at it, to ask me about the tooth attached to it that looked soooo real when floating in my mouth. I had prepared for this first story of my college career.

I slipped into the deep southern drawl that my mother paid teachers to remove from my mouth. I told them about the dirt road where my grandmother, her seven children, and all twenty-three grandchildren lived.

"We were farmers, millworkers, myself only two generations removed from two sharecroppers. My mama would tie me to her back with a bedsheet when I was small because every hand was needed for harvest, so that we wouldn't starve before spring. And in the creek, just through the woods behind Gran's double-wide, was my cousins' moonshine still built from scratch."

No one picked up a fork the whole time.

"One night," I whispered, "I was fifteen and missing curfew, driving so fast on that dirt road that my back tires drifted at every turn. On a rusted bridge, two hooded men refused to move from the middle of the lane, blocking my way home."

I blew the horn of my hand-me-down Ford by hitting the table with my palm. I mimed rolling down the window with my hand and stuck my head through the narrow crack.

"I never saw it coming," I spit. "I swear, it whistled! Really, I was marred with a rock by a crackhead!"

When their laughter died, I concluded my story with an exaltation, "And I went HOME where my father held me."

Nobody moved until a girl asked, "Is it true?"

I smiled and answered, "Does it matter?"

SELF-PORTRAIT
acrylic on canvas by Charlie Classe

AN ART SPIRIT

Larisa Crowder

Rain—pattering on the roof, sloshing in the drainpipe, tapping on my bedroom windows: I've never liked rain. It makes me gloomy. If I were a plant, I'd be a cactus, and it's easier for me to understand businesses being closed on a rainy day than on a Sunday. When I go to the library on a Sunday and see that it's closed, I'm shocked every time. When I wake up on a rainy day, I look outside and think, "I'll go to the library tomorrow. It must be closed because of the rain," though that has never been the case.

On this particular rainy morning, I lay awake in bed, my room glowing in that pale gray light which blots out any sense of time. The night before, I'd dreamed I attempted suicide over my unrequited love's marriage to his high school sweetheart, a little blonde who never actually appeared in the dream but haunted the plot like a distant organ symphony. Although in reality I had no unrequited love, watching myself jump off a bridge had been sobering. I reached for my journal and pen—I'd made a habit of writing down my dreams, with the general idea that I'd read them all together someday and notice a pattern that would enlighten me to my subconscious. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Joan Didion once said. "We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience." The "idea" that a dream could be meaningless seemed wrong, and I felt the least I could do was write it down. I decided to listen to an organ symphony while I wrote—its ominous tones would complement the pattering rain, and I could wallow in the lingering luxury of self-absorbed tragedy a bit longer.

I reached for my earbuds—I doubted my roommates were interested in hearing Louis Vierne's Organ Symphony No. 5 in A Minor at 9 a.m. on a Saturday—but they weren't there. I figured they must be in the front pocket of my backpack, since that was the only other place I ever put them. I slid out of bed, pulled a flannel over my shorts and t-shirt, and checked my backpack. Nothing. I crossed the room to where my denim jacket was hanging by the front door and turned the pockets inside out. Nothing, again, but the jacket was the one I'd worn to a soccer game the night before, which reminded me that, on my way to the car, I'd pulled my keys from the same backpack pocket, yanking a pen out with them that I caught as it fell. Most likely, my earbuds had also fallen out and I hadn't noticed. *NO, NO, NO.* I pulled my keys from the rack and ran to my car, splashing barefoot through the puddles on my driveway. These earbuds were new. I'd spent twenty dollars on them, praying they'd last longer than the ten-dollar ones I

had to replace every two months. I drove to the soccer field's parking lot and began prowling up and down the lot in my car, my neck craning like a turtle's over the steering wheel. I scoured the whole lot like this, to no avail. Then I remembered I'd parked near a light pole the night before, beelined for the nearest one, and there they were: bubblegum pink and plastic, neon against the wet asphalt. I parked and jumped out, splashed through more puddles, scooped them up in grateful triumph. They seemed in perfect condition—they hadn't been run over or anything. Hopefully, that extra ten bucks had magically made them waterproof, too.

Back home, I patted them dry with a paper towel, but decided to let them air out for a while before finding out if they still worked. A bit of suspense was better than instant disappointment. Meanwhile, my mom called.

"Have you taken your car to be fixed, yet?"

"No...."

"Risa...."

"I'm scared."

"It'll be scarier to end up driving on a flat and crushing your rim. Just go over there!"

My car had been alerting me, constantly, to the decreasing pressure in the back left tire over the past few weeks. I dreaded taking the car to be fixed because I had never taken a car to be fixed before, and I resent doing things for the first time. Why? Let's just say I have a certain unawareness regarding practical matters, and sometimes it seems I exist to give people workplace stories to tell their families over dinner. I imagine they begin with, "You guys will not believe this customer I had today, the poor girl had no idea...." Besides, I'd just witnessed myself attempt suicide *and* it was still raining.

I tested my earbuds, selecting a gentle piano piece instead of the organ one I'd had in mind earlier. The fact that I'd found them at all began to renew my faith in the day. They worked! In a flash of inspiration, I opened my journal and wrote, "Being an adult isn't about not losing things. Being an adult is about finding things you've lost."

Bolstered by this sage reflection, I showered, dressed, and drove to Discount Tire. Check-in went smoothly enough—I told the employee, a man in a red polo, about the tire pressure, to which he responded, "Maybe a nail?"

"Quite possibly," I said.

"Why are you driving over nails?" He tossed back his head and laughed, the bandana around his face slipping down his neck. I laughed too, nervously.

It was a good joke, but I still had no idea what I was doing. He took my name, number, and address, and motioned for me to park until someone came to assist me.

I waited in my car, reading *The Art Spirit*, by Robert Henri. I'd been reading it for the past three weeks, and it was a book I liked to be seen with. The cover art was an enlarged detail of one of his portraits, a child's face, rendered in bold brush strokes, with the title in the bottom right corner in all caps: *THE ART SPIRIT*. I felt it implied I was both artistic and spiritual, with refined tastes. A collection of Henri's reflections, it was mostly painting advice, but I figured my writer's brain could use some cross-training, and most art advice is applicable across all mediums, symbolically if not literally. "Fight with yourself when you paint, not with the model," I read. "A student is one who struggles with himself, struggles for order." Isn't that the truth. I thought of my stacks of essays at home, finished except for what my professor called "the heart of the story." None of my stories seemed to have hearts, just events in a certain order, determined planets orbiting nothing. Experiences I'd hoped to make sense of by writing about them and never quite did, the way I wrote down my dreams, though somehow their being real didn't make them any easier to make sense of.

Someone knocked on my window, which I rolled down to see a guy about my age—red hair, glasses, red polo. "Go ahead and pull into bay one, where that Silverado is leaving." I nodded.

I pulled into the garage, making sure to avoid the dangerous-looking yellow platform in the floor, and parked carefully alongside it. *If they're going to check my tire, they may have to lift my car. I wonder how they'll do that?*

"No. Move over," the ginger said, waving towards the yellow platform to my left. I backed out, pulled in again, and parked, with slightly less confidence than the first time. "Nope. Further over," he yelled. *Oh. The LIFT.* I backed out and pulled in again, but only the left side of my car made it on. There were several guys watching now, arms crossed over their red polos, all smiling. I backed out again and heard a crunch. My audience didn't react, so I ignored it. I pulled in again, so slowly I wasn't sure I was moving at all, until he motioned for me to stop. I climbed out of the car, *THE ART SPIRIT* tucked tightly under my arm.

"Hi, how are you today?" asked one of the grease-stained guys, laughing.

"I'm okay," I answered sheepishly, and retreated to the lobby at a speed not even the rain could excuse. I'd made my contribution, their workplace story for the day.

Inside, I sat down in a narrow red chair and pulled my jacket around me. Surrounded by tire displays, dark, hulking sculptures of rubber and metal, I had another flash of inspiration. In lieu of my journal, I typed in my phone's notes app: "Embarrassment teaches the permanent lessons. Of course I'd rather make my mistakes in private and prove consistently competent in public, but taking three tries to park on the lift at Discount Tire guarantees that's one mistake I'll never make again." At least that planet orbited something conspicuous—the moral of the story, some trivial sun.

I opened my book. "Regard the head as a gesture," Henri instructed me. "Think—how does the head come out of the body?" "Sometimes the features

shape the face, other times they are contained within the face." "Interest generally begins with the eyes, with the mouth or the gesture of the nose." "All faces have a direction of their own, some point in, some point out. Concert the lines to express them."

I read until I noticed an elderly man, dressed in jeans and a checkered button-down, shuffling in my direction. Not wanting to stare, I pretended to read until he was within speaking distance, which took several seconds. Even under his blue mask, his jaw was distinct like that of a skull's. The direction of this particular face pointed in.

"I'd like to congratulate you," he said, as I looked up. "I don't know what you're reading, but I know that I always like to bring a book with me wherever I have to wait. Here, the doctor's office, the dentist." He nodded once, signaling he was finished.

"Thank you," I said, but he was already on his way to the door. "It's nice to be able to just sit and read," I offered, and he nodded again as he left. I realized why the exaggerated curves of his head looked familiar—they reminded me of the figure in Edvard Munch's "The Scream." And he had congratulated me! I turned back to my book but didn't read, just sat there smiling. A few minutes later, I heard, "Crowder? You're good to go, ma'am."

I walked back to my car slowly, head held high, as if to make up for my hasty retreat earlier. As I backed out, yet another guy stood behind my car and directed me out of the bay, motioning when to stop and when to turn to leave. I sensed this wasn't customary—there weren't any objects or other cars I could've hit. The way out was clearly marked, but he continued to direct me all the way down the driveway, and I began laughing. They didn't trust me with my own car thanks to the story I'd given them, and fairly enough. I drove to the library, finally listening to my organ symphony, which really did sound wonderful in the rain, though now I was thinking of being congratulated by a fellow reader rather than unrequited love. On the way, my car began alerting me again, this time because the pressure in the back left tire was higher than the others, and I realized Discount Tire hadn't charged me, nor had they bothered to explain what they'd done to my car. It never occurred to me to ask.

I parked in front of the library, which was, in fact, open, despite the rain, and sat in my car reading *THE ART SPIRIT*. "Take care that your compositions are an expression of your individuality," Henri said. "See things not as they are, but as you see them." All I could see were planets, as usual, dense, gray ones, orbiting some invisible, mighty heart. I wanted to string the events of the day like beads on a string, if only I could find some string. I returned *THE ART SPIRIT* and checked out another book, Charles Bukowski's *You Get So Alone at Times That it Just Makes Sense*. I returned to my car, set the book in the passenger seat. *It had better.*

SLOW DOWN
digital art by Jullianna Eckardt

LITTLE CAESARS

Hayden Dutschke

Little Caesars pizza
hosts a county state fair,
and we ride the paragliders
like they're a buck fifty a slice.
The sun hits your face,
bounces off the mirror maze,
blinds the man at the ticket booth,
sets the plushy stand on fire.
The ride stops, we count our tickets,
and hand them off to a kid.
We walk out on exploding park lights.

CINDERELLA MAN

Canon Allen

Maryville Downtown Drive-In had a Disney classics marathon in the Summer of ’98. On Monday, June 1, Mom took me—eight years old—and my best friend Isabella to see *Cinderella*. I remember it as clearly as the day that I looked in the mirror and understood that I wasn’t man enough to ever become a husband.

We were in the back of Mom’s pick-up, layers of blankets as thick as the earth’s crust, pillows outlining the truck bed like the padded walls of an asylum. Mom left Isabella and me to get a bucket of popcorn and three cokes from the concession stand. Isabella always talked about *Cinderella*, but I’d never watched it. The only things I remembered her saying about it were the main stuff, like a magic grandmother, a clock striking at midnight, Prince Charming, and a glass slipper sliding off. I’d also heard my brothers—four, all older—make fun of it. They wondered why, since the glass slipper was magically fit to Cinderella’s foot, it ever fell off in the first place. Honestly, if it hadn’t been for how much I loved spending time with Mom and Isabella each individually—it became explosive fun when we all did things together—I probably wouldn’t have ever watched the best love story ever told.

The summer sun continued to set, the gradual increase of lightning bugs across the vehicle-rowed field, as Isabella and I sat criss-cross applesauce facing one another, doing “Miss Mary Mack” faster and faster and faster until we were clenching our stomachs and laughing without end. I never forgot how to laugh when we were together.

Mom appeared from around the truck, her dark stringy hair in a tight ponytail, her cheeks a little rosy from push-mowing the lawn earlier that day. In the nook of her left arm she clutched a red-and-white striped bucket overflowing in golden, glistening balls of fluff, and between her two hands, she had formed a triangle of straw-in-lid cups, held together by nothing but her decisive strength. She was so unbeatable, so amazingly beyond amazement; I wish now that I had helped her with the snacks, not just stared at her as she struggled to put everything down and into place. But she didn’t mind. She just smiled at the fun Isabella and I were having, never losing pace with her heavenly hum of “So This Is Love.” *Cinderella* was one of her favorite movies, too.

“Thank you, Ms. Rosie,” Isabella said. “Thanks, Mom,” I followed. She inspired me more than anything I could have ever dreamt of. Still does.

Two more minutes until eight o’clock sharp, Mom tuned our portable radio to the FM station, grabbed the popcorn bucket, and relaxed at the back of the flatbed, her back settled into the wall of pillows built along the truck cabin.

Isabella and I snuggled up on either side of her, and when I popped a piece of popcorn into my mouth—popcorn so buttery that it left yellow residue on my fingers—I smiled.

The huge drive-in screen became illustrious with the projections of a brilliant blue, the tune of "When You Wish Upon A Star" playing as a castle formed above a spelled-out *Walt Disney Pictures*, and then the magic began as the opening credits of *Cinderella*, made in all the beauty of Technicolor—the art of forefathers—whispered into being.

Isabella fixed every inch of her being on the screen for the first ten minutes, and I heard her whisper in random spurts, "I love it. I love it. I love it."

This was the moment where I learned that, if you do something with someone who whole-heartedly loves the thing that you both are doing, the whole experience is amplified by thousands, and it becomes a treasure to your own heart.

I loved that time, in that truck bed, beside Mom and Isabella, watching the first half of *Cinderella*. If life had consisted of nothing else other than that, I would've been more than content. I would've lived a life of apex joy.

"I HEARD HER WHISPER IN RANDOM SPURTS, 'I LOVE IT. I LOVE IT. I LOVE IT.'"

Then something happened. Something changed everything I was feeling.

It was right when Cinderella, in her pink dress made by birds and mice, was all ready to go with her two stepsisters to the royal ball. But then they messed it up. They ripped it. Tore it, so she couldn't be happy. I heard Isabella begin to cry as we watched; I felt a ball form in my own throat: a severe feeling of, this *can't* be right! Why are they doing this to her?

Then, from a truck a row or two behind, I heard a group of older boys whistle at the screen, hollering: "Woo! Yeah! Rip it off! Take some more off!"

Mom, with an offended gasp, stood straight up from where Isabella and I had been nestling comfortably in her arms and stared straight at the boys. It scared me, the suddenness of it. She stood there and glared at them, not saying anything, just staring. I turned around to look at them with Mom, but by the time I got up, they had already started their truck and were

driving off, an employee of the drive-in walking away from where they were originally parked. I still imagine that they left more so out of fear of Mom than because the employee asked them to. I trembled at the feeling of disgust I could sense from my mother. She was appalled, and I could feel it radiating off her skin like heat from a stove. I couldn't even smile when the Fairy Godmother appeared shortly after, sang "Bibbidy-Bobbidy-Boo!"

Of course, in about ten minutes, I was grinning as Cinderella danced with Prince Charming, my mother softly humming—differently than she had earlier—with the music as they waltzed. But I remembered the boys when I went to bed that night after the drive-in. I couldn't stop thinking of how disgusted Mom had been at them.

*

With a few days left of summer vacation, Isabella and I started spending much more time together, as if the mere notion of school starting back warranted our squeezing every ounce of juice from the word *fun* as possible. Her house became my house and mine hers, but I was more fond of hers. Not only was her house free from my four older brothers watching every episode of *SportsCenter* in the living room but she also had a teen-sized dollhouse replicating Cinderella's Castle. I had never seen anything more cool than the grand staircase which led to an entire ballroom, perfect for waltzing and falling in love.

With the dollhouse, she had a whole collection of hand-sized dolls, all the Disney princesses alongside their respective princes, a bag filled with different outfits, from Polly Pocket rubber to soft cloth, and an even bigger bag filled with all the props needed to have a wonderful day of creativity, whether that consisted of playing House, or Kitchen, or Prince and Princess. We played in her room, never exceeding three feet away from the marvelous Cinderella Castle, for hours.

"Want to do somethin' else?" Isabella said finally, her Native American voice having started to become a little dry as we played with Pocahontas and Captain John Smith. I could tell she was getting tired of it, but I could have sat there and played with every princess and her prince for another week.

"Like what?" *What better is there to do?* I wondered.

She smirked, her cheeks peachy with innovation, then moved to her Barbie-plastered bed, pulling out from underneath it a flat storage tub. It was transparent, so I could see an entire rainbow of fabrics sparkling along the sides. She opened the lid and showed me costume after costume. "This was from last Halloween," she said, holding up Cinderella's sky-blue gown; then handing me a golden dress, she added, "this was from Maggie's birthday last month. She wanted to be Cinderella, so I had to go as Belle. You can wear this one and *I* will be Cinderella."

When she spoke, two emotions rose up in me. First, I was jealous that she was to be Cinderella. Second, I was embarrassed.

"Do you not have any boy costumes?" I asked, my fingers twiddling with the swirling plastic beads that outlined the gown's hem.

"Why would I have boy costumes? Come on, Taylor, we're the same size, too, so it should fit."

I was a little frustrated by her comment on my small body, but only for a moment. What made me more frustrated was that she didn't have any boy costumes. I had memorized Prince Charming's outfit after playing with his doll for two hours straight, had thought I'd look pretty good—pretty *charming*—with those gold epaulets on.

"Mom wouldn't want me to," I said, handing her the dress. "Only girls wear dresses."

Isabella scoffed, not rudely. She gave me back the dress, said, "it's just pretend! It ain't like you're going to school in a dress or anything. She won't even be here 'til later to pick you up, so we have hours still to play." She then puckered her lips, produced a whining *please*, and I nodded.

"Okay, but I'm keeping my blue jeans on."

At first, we played in her room, Cinderella and Belle at Cinderella's Castle. The amount of discomfort I felt was unbearable at first; I was so shocked by what it was like to wear a dress, particularly a gown, but, after a few minutes of Isabella teasing me into laughter, we were playing completely fluidly, spinning, and waltzing, and singing, and minding not a single care in the whole kingdom. Well, there was a *lot* of care and drama when Isabella's "glass" slipper fell off, but when I relented to putting it back on her, she celebrated and shouted,

"Oh, my hero! Well, my princess! Or... what do you consider yourself?" And the absurdity of it sent us cackling.

When we recollected ourselves, Isabella sashayed to the open window and peered out, her arm waving to the squirrels of the yard as she beckoned to them in song. "Hello, my nut-gathering friends! Shall we dance together?" She turned to me, pretending to be naturally prudent, "What do you say, Belle? Shall we join our friendly rodents in the great nature!"

Distracted by my laughter, I agreed, and we skipped out of her bedroom, sneaked past the kitchen where Isabella's mom was starting dinner, and ran out the back door toward the trees and bushes and the limitless playground of our imagination. What started as a dance party with the squirrels quickly morphed into anything and everything else. Oh, how I spun and spun, loving the thrill of trying to keep my dress from overlapping upon itself in this golden tornado of excitement. I didn't see it as a dress anymore: it was more like a full-body cape encircling me. There wasn't anything strange about it. The tiara on my head was also just an accessory. I didn't see anything weird about that, either.

"Belle!" Cinderella called me over to where she was, a scattering of thin, low-branched trees around her. "Oh, Belle, look what I've found! It is but a cherry orchard! How marvelous, is it not? Oh, if only our princes could see us now!"

"If it is a cherry orchard," I played along, trying to emulate what a refined princess might sound like, "where do be the cherries?"

"*Use your imagination, Taylor!*" Isabella scorned in a biting whisper. Then, resuming her character, she reached down, grabbed an acorn, and handed it to me, dropping it into my palm with all graceful elegance. "Here, Belle, have a chosen fig!"

"A fig!" I laughed, my voice slipping back to my own. "This isn't a—"

"*Your imagination, Taylor!*"

We played for an hour like this, Cinderella and Belle, befriending all the wild winds of nature. Then, I began using my tiara as a weapon, a boomerang like how Wonder Woman uses hers, and pretended that my dress was a full-body shield, impenetrable to all the armies of the living dead that were chasing after us. Isabella loved the idea I kept adding onto: Cinderella and Belle were princesses that were the only two humans left on the Earth, and everyone else had become zombies, and we alone could defeat them all. Which, being the most powerful princesses of all—Cinderella with her diamond-sharp glass slippers and Belle with her invisible Beast that followed closely behind her, obeying each of her strategic battle orders—defeating the undead legions was an easy feat.

"THEN, I BEGAN USING MY TIARA AS A WEAPON, A BOOMERANG THE WAY WONDER WOMAN USES HERS, AND PRETENDED THAT MY DRESS WAS A FULL BODY SHIELD"

"Isabella!" We both stopped, slippers and tiara in hand, to look in the direction of Isabella's house, and found her mom standing at the back door. *Dinner's ready,* I thought. I completely forgot about my dress. Until I saw Mom's car parked in the driveway, Mom standing beside it, staring at me. Not waving. Not moving.

My heart shrank. I wanted to rip the dress off of me. Shred it until not a single fabric remained of it. I wanted to throw the tiara to the earth and stomp on it until it was grounded to nothing but ash. But I couldn't. She already saw me. She was staring, not saying anything. Just standing and staring. Arms crossed, one hand picking at her lip.

Isabella frolicked to her mom, not caring a single bit about anything else. She probably didn't even see Mom, but even if she had, she wouldn't have understood the shame I felt.

"What are you wearing, Taylor?" Mom said when I finally approached her. My head felt like it was weighing down to the earth, the sides of my lips even more so.

I cried before I spoke my first excuse. Though she retained all gentleness, all intrinsic love of a mother that I knew and understood, I cowered beneath her disappointment. The way her eyes were so blank—as if the scorn had cancelled out their love and neutralized them into an empty stare. I thought about the boys that were at the drive-in that night. I remembered how uncomfortable it was to feel such disappointment—disgust—come from Mom.

"Me and Isabella were just playing," I cried, choking and sobbing through my words. She put her hand around my head; she was sweaty and hot, as if she had stopped mowing our yard just five minutes ago to come pick me up. I learned much later that Isabella's mom had called my mom, warning her that she saw me outside through the kitchen window, dancing in a dress with her daughter like two princesses. So Mom came to pick me up early.

I took off the dress, returned it without saying goodbye. I never spoke to Isabella again.

On the ride home that evening, Mom told me that I wasn't to wear dresses. That she wasn't upset with me, but she wanted me to understand that I wasn't supposed to do things like that. She spoke tenderly, yet I heard nothing apart from anger and distrust. I thought it was an inexcusable truth that I had disappointed her so terribly that she'd never forgive me, that now she was to love me only out of motherly duty and not out of true appreciation. I cried the whole way home, stifling my sniffling and hiding my tears.

Days later, things around the house went partially back to normal. Mom and I were close again, but I was careful not to do anything in a feminine manner. When my laugh became too high-pitched, I coughed and began speaking in a lower octave. When my brothers made fun of me about wearing a dress, I laughed and turned it into a joke.

"You only wish you'd look as good as me in a dress!" I'd reply, which they responded to as a fairly cool jest, but every time they'd bring it up, the agony of seeing my mother disappointed in me would set ablaze all anew.

I was missing Isabella really terribly one day—missing the time we spent playing with her dolls, easily the most fun I ever had. *Dolls*, I grimaced, as if mentally pinching myself into quitting a horrid habit. But that mode of suppression never worked. Instead, I went into my older brothers' room, found their shelf containing hundreds of horror movies, and picked out the scariest. It was about an abandoned amusement park filled with animatronic dolls that would become sentient and murder children, titled *Doll Hell: Amused Yet*? I grabbed that movie, put it into the DVD player in my bedroom, closed the door and curtains, turned off the lights, then watched it. It was rated R for frightening and intense images, suspenseful sequences, and graphic/gory violence. I sat there on my bed, curled in my blanket, staring at the TV as I cried and wanted so badly to close my eyes. But I didn't. Not until I hated dolls. Not until I was man enough to watch even the scariest movie. Not until I forgot about how much fun it was to wear that dress and laugh and spin and spin.

REPTILICUS

Hayden Dutschke

Rudy Giuliani struts
down to the Apple store
in a long, fancy, and expensive
coat. Iggy Pop would never.
I'll go on a mining expedition in
Lapland,
unearth an ancient reptilian being.
Green and long, ready to launch
snot. Giuliani will call in the army:
green tanks, green guns, green men.
They'll all be covered in snot.

THE ART OF TOWEL COMBAT

Salvatore Fontana

Laughter. Yelling. A body slammed against the bathroom door, shocking me out of my shower reverie. What are those guys DOING?

I dressed, quickly, a volatile mixture of curiosity and confrontational bravado building in my chest. I opened the door and there, crowding our dorm's tiny hallway, they demonstrated the proper way to whip a hand towel. They wanted me to have a go. My roommate lifted his shirt and turned around. I snapped him across the back with an underhand flick. Everyone winced. His skin flushed where the towel bit. I turned around so he could get me back. Roommates have certain unalienable rights.

The others wanted to try whipping me, too. No way. My roommate repaid me in kind and that was that. The towels ached in our hands, soft fabric twisted in snarling folds. The thought of them biting into our skin engendered communal bloodlust. Our restless desire had to be quenched. A pact formed, lest we devolve into brute savages: one on one, five attempts each, taking turns like civilized men.

The first two competitors faced each other, barebacked and barefoot on the cold linoleum. The others gathered around, commentating like sportscasters. When the current two combatants finished, we others conferred, judging the victor.

Then came my turn. I gave my opponents a thrashing, all the way through the bracket to finals. My final opponent and I shook hands. Adrenaline pulsed through our veins. And neither of us held back. He opened with a bullet snap to a previous welt. My back stung. I gave him a brand new welt in return. Respect grew with each hit. The judges examined our backs; a verdict was given. I went to bed sore and content. A champion among brothers.

HE NOTICED ME!

Kaleigh Jamison

I loathe high school. Everything about it screams horrible. I have to ride a stinky bus to an overpriced school where I meet tons of fake people. I am forced to listen to unbearable lectures and pretend like it will help me in the future. Don't even get me started about gym class. Ms. Turner makes us run laps until our legs are like Jell-O. I once tried to sneak out, which only led to the whole class doing push-ups because of me. It isn't all bad, though. I'm able to escape the vile clutches of my father. I also have Emily. She and I have been friends since preschool.

But it's late October, so I'm wearing my favorite sweater with my best pair of boots. There is already talk about an awesome Halloween party, and I want to be invited. Emily thinks it's a waste of time.

"Why do you even want to go to that stupid party, Sara? You don't like anyone."

"That's true," I reply while flipping my hair, "but it's also true that the party don't start 'til I walk in."

Emily rolls her eyes. We sit at the front of the bus, away from the chaotic lunatics. I always sit next to the window so I can open it and feel like I'm flying. It also helps with the smell. In the row next to us, a quiet kid named Ryan plugs in his headphones and stares up at the ceiling. His thick muscular neck and square jaw captures my attention. I can tell he hates the bus as much I do. When the bus tires screech to a halt as the colossal school building comes into view, people begin to exit, but Ryan listens to his music. I tap him on his shoulder to get his attention, but he doesn't budge. The bus driver snorts, "That boy won't leave his seat 'til the last second. Don't bother getting his attention. He'll leave when he's ready." I look closer at his handsome features and sigh. I should probably take the driver's advice. It's a shame though, we would look super cute together.

Emily and I take our seats for homeroom and see Mr. Johnson barge into the classroom and slam his supplies across his desk. Mr. Johnson is sooo dramatic. He's one of those teachers who gets out a clipboard and writes students' names down for "being disruptive." Today, he seems more agitated than usual. He announces to the class that there's urgent news. "Attention, everyone! Apparently, some hooligan thinks it's funny to vandalize our peaceful town. Police have asked us all to be indoors by 9:00 p.m. and to be on the lookout for any suspicious characters." A resounding groan erupts from the class.

Brian hunches up in his seat. "No way," he says. "That's, like, criminal or something." Brian never knows what's going on.

Then Salena, Brian's idiot girlfriend, chimes in. "To think, I just had a dream about a vandal coming to save me."

Chris sighs. "*Vassal*, not vandal." He throws his hands up. "Jeez."

The entire class erupts, and Mr. Johnson gets out his clipboard, thinking it will scare us into submission. Right. Eventually, Mr. Johnson gets tired of yelling at us and lets us go. But the bell has to ring first.

The rest of the classes proceed normally, despite the gossip about a criminal on the loose. Math class makes no sense. Science is disgusting. And there are far too many words in English. Finally, it's the last class of the day: Gym. I ask Emily to break my leg, so I don't have to run, but she refuses. We begin running our laps when I notice the same boy, Ryan, sprinting faster than anybody I'd ever seen. Normally, I wouldn't care, but Ryan intrigues me. He has sandy blond hair and a muscular body for his age. He reminds me of a superhero... an attractive superhero. I whisper to Emily,

"You see that boy over there?"

"Who, Ryan?"

"I think I'm crushing on him."

"In that case, we need a code name so we can gossip about him without anyone knowing who he is."

Emily is right. I can't risk the whole school finding out that I love Ryan. I might become a laughingstock. Then I look at his glistening biceps and alluring calves as he runs around the gym. I think of his heroic qualities and realize there can only be one name fitting enough for such a hunk.

"His code name is Thor."

We both giggle in agreement as we finish our final lap. Now it's time to see what our beloved drill sergeant—I mean gym teacher—has in store for us. Ms. Turner marches to the center of the gym. She likes to carry around a megaphone so we can hear her, but I think she's just obsessed with her own voice. She pulls out her megaphone and screams, "Dodgeball!" Great. I look at Emily: So *this* is what we need for life?

Ms. Turner lines us up like toddlers and yells, "We need team captains. Any volunteers?"

I roll my eyes until I see Ryan. This could be my chance. I raise my hand as quickly as possible, while giving Ryan my best pouty face. We're gonna be the best team ever. Chris volunteers to be the other captain. He loves to show off in front of the girls. Not like Ryan though, he's just naturally talented. Once the teams are picked, the game starts. Emily runs to the corner and pretends to be out, while Ryan grabs two dodgeballs and expertly throws them at the opposing team. I flip my hair and try to look as seductive as possible. Unfortunately, Ryan is too focused on the game to notice. It's a hard-fought battle—mostly by Ryan—but my team wins! We high five each other as the last school bell rings out through the halls. I put on my team captain face.

"Ryan! Great job! I'm glad you were on my team."

"Thanks. I'm usually picked last. You know, who's most popular instead of most athletic."

"Yeah, popular people are so self-absorbed. I'm Sara, by the way."

"I'm Ryan. I know who you are."

He noticed me! I know from that moment that we are meant to be soulmates. He shows me how many folding chairs he can carry at once. I show him how my name glitters on my knapsack. Then from nowhere comes the megaphone.

"Go home!" Teachers, so blind. Ms. Turner doesn't realize that a beautiful love story is blossoming. Ryan grabs my hand and asks if I want to get coffee. Obviously, I say yes. I send my dad a quick text and tell him I'm hanging out with Emily; then we walk to the nearest cafe. We talk for hours, and it feels like my entire world stops. Ryan explains how his parents are never around, because they are constantly on business trips. He also mentions how hard it is to be alone all the time. My poor baby. He needs someone to be his comforter and I'm happy to oblige. We finish our coffee, walk up to the cashier, and Ryan asks me to pay because he's trying to save up his cash. My heart breaks for him, and I pay without hesitation. He walks me home and hugs me sweetly.

"I had fun. We should hang out again sometime." He moves a strand of my hair behind my ear and smiles. Braces have never looked so good.

I can't speak. My stomach feels like it's in the sky, and my heart beats so loudly that I can't think. I always dreamed of finding my true love, but I didn't think it would happen this way. My heart skips a beat, and I nod with enthusiasm. He laughs, then walks away like one of those slow-motion movie scenes. If he was shirtless, it would be exactly like the movie *Baywatch*. I sigh with longing; then, I turn to trudge home. As I enter the house, I'm bombarded by a hideous display. My dad is dancing to 80's music again. He runs over to me with outstretched arms and begins to suffocate me with one of his "bear hugs."

"How's my baby girl doing today? Did you have fun with Emily?"

"It was great, Dad. Please try to keep the shutters closed when you dance. I'd like to keep my dignity intact."

"Sorry about that, sweetheart. Music always helps me clean the house. Dinner is in the fridge."

I grab my food out of the fridge then sprint to my room to avoid further embarrassment. I lock my door and plaster a big "DO NOT DISTURB" sign on the other side. Dad never understands me. Mom died when I was young, so it's just been the two of us my entire life. He always treats me like a kid, but I'm fifteen! I'm practically an adult. He has a list of rules that I'm supposed to follow, such as "don't go to wild parties" or "don't invite boys over." He tortures me with countless chores like some housemaid. I can't wait to graduate and leave this nightmare.

The next morning, I get ready for school, for Ryan. I brush my silky brown hair and apply my lucky mascara to my luscious lashes. My outfit needs to be bold. I decide to go with a skintight V-neck with a pair of super cute skinny jeans. I enter the kitchen to see my dad in his embarrassing apron with the words, "I love my daughter," plastered across the center.

"There's my favorite girl! I made you some bacon and eggs for breakfast." My dad pauses as he notices my outfit. "Don't you think that shirt is a little low?"

"Uh, no. What do you want, *Dad*, a turtleneck? Please."

I grab my breakfast before my dad can protest, then rush out the door. I sit next to Emily in our usual bus seat. We overhear some boys talking about the town troublemaker.

"I heard that someone's house got egged and robbed."

"Yeah, people are starting to call the culprit 'The Copperhead Criminal,' because he leaves a penny at the crime scene."

"What the heck? That's so weird and cool at the same time!"

I shake my head. Boys are so stupid sometimes. Except for Ryan. He's silently listening to music with his headphones on. I signal to Emily that it's time to get my flirt on. She nods in understanding, then moves her legs so I can walk over to Ryan's seat. I dive next to him and remove one of his headphones so he can hear me. At first, Ryan's face flames with anger, but when he sees me, his features quickly transform into that shiny smile.

"Sara! I haven't stopped thinking about you since—"

"Really?"

"Absolutely. I mean, I was, like, nervous, you know? *Totally.*"

I smile to encourage him.

"I mean, Sara, you're *real*, you know? It was like, you know, I could be, too."

I beam with excitement. "Oh, Ryan." I can't take my eyes off him. "Want to do it again, today, after school?"

Ryan's eyes flicker with mischief. "I have a better idea. How about we skip class after lunch?"

I'm taken aback at first, but soon feel a rush of adrenaline. "Let's do it."

"Cool. Enter your number in my phone, and I'll text you where to meet."

It feels like each second is an agonizing hour. Every class, I stare up at the clock and beg for it to move faster. At lunch, I don't see Ryan anywhere, but I have my phone close to me. I tell Emily about our exciting plan, but she doesn't look nearly as enthusiastic. She lectures me like my dad and spouts nonsense. I don't know what her deal is. It's like Ryan and I are the only sane ones. Finally, my phone screen lights up with a text from Ryan. I run out of the cafeteria and meet my true love at the bleachers. He has a big black bag and an even bigger grin on his face.

"What's in the bag?"

"You'll see. I just hope you're ready for an adventure."

We sneak off campus and Ryan leads me to an abandoned building. The windows are shattered, the brick is moldy, and the floorboards creak with every step. It's so cool! Most houses in our neighborhood look identical, so I'm excited to see something different. Ryan unzips the bag and pulls out a few cans of paint. He hands one to me.

"Your canvas awaits."

I squirm, "Is this legal?"

"Does it matter? The important thing is not to get caught."

I look at the can of paint, then back at him. He's right. There aren't any security cameras, and it's not like people are using the house. I spray the walls red and blue, with a touch of yellow. Then I paint a portrait of Ryan with glistening abs. He grins. "How'd you know I have a six-pack? I better step up my game." Then he paints a gorgeous rose. When we finish our artwork, he pulls a real rose out of the black bag and romantically gets on one knee with the flower outstretched.

"For you, my flower."

I giggle at the cheesiness, but accept the flower nonetheless. As we begin gathering our stuff, I notice that my fingertips have paint caked all over them.

It's such a beautiful symbol of our love. I swear to never wash my hands again so I can always have a part of Ryan with me. As we saunter to Emily's house, where I'm supposed to be her study buddy, he tells me things like how I'm amazing. And I act like, *no way*; really? And he squeezes my hand. And I know, you know, this is it. For real. The boring white paint of Emily's house looks pitiful compared to the grand artwork we just created. Ryan shyly kisses me on the cheek then waves goodbye. That same lightness returns to me, and I feel like I'm floating. I blissfully knock on the door, and Emily answers with a judgmental look. We climb the stairs to her room, and then Emily turns on me.

"You know that boy is bad news, Sara."

I scoff at her accusation. "You know nothing about Ryan. He's one of the most amazing guys I've ever met."

Emily's face scrunches in aggravation. "You've barely met any guys."

"Ryan's different!"

Emily sighs and opens her textbook. I pretend to begin my own homework. After an hour, I get a text from Ryan inviting me to a Halloween party! Chris–the only one who knows what a *vassal* is, *and* the show-off from gym class—has the house to himself and is throwing a huge celebration. No curfew. I jump up like a spring and dance around Emily's room. I show Emily the text, and she raises her eyebrow like I'm some psycho.

Emily grumbles, "Please tell me you're not considering going to the party."

"I am, and I will. You should come too. I promise it'll be fun!"

"But what about curfew?"

"Oh come on! We'll be back at the house before anyone even knows we're gone."

"How will we get past my parents?"

"We'll sneak out. It's High School 101."

Emily begins to object, but decides to surrender to my brilliant plan. We put on our costumes and sneak out the window, giddy with excitement. I choose to dress up as a cheerleader, and Emily dresses up as a cow. I try to persuade her to put on something sexier, but she is adamant about being a cow. The party is everything I was hoping for and more. There are colorful lights, pulsating music, and plenty of snacks. Emily, obviously uncomfortable, goes straight for the snacks. I begin to follow her until I see Ryan. He's standing on the dance floor wearing a bright red cape and a mask like a superhero. It fits him *well*. I sashay over and, just with my eyes, invite him to dance. His moves are awkward at first, but we both soon get into the rhythm of the music. I'm especially proud of my twerking. Eventually, a slow song begins playing, and Ryan places his hands on my hips. We sway to the music, and I feel like the happiest girl in the world. I see Emily out of the corner of my eye with a mouth full of pretzels, and a disapproving look. I ignore her and look at Ryan. His handsome face is inches from mine, and I lean in for a kiss. Ryan is hesitant, but soon embraces the moment. His braces cut my lip, but he doesn't seem to notice. I don't mind the pain, it's simply another memento of his love for me. As we sway back and forth, I stare into Ryan's deep blue eyes.

"I have a confession to make," I whisper. "I've wanted to do that since I first met you."

Ryan laughs. "I guess it's true what they say about love at first sight."

I press my blushing cheek against his shoulder. "I wish we could just leave this boring town and go on adventures together all the time."

He gently smooths my hair. "Well, why not?"

I snicker, "Ryan, we have no money, and my dad watches me like a hawk. I'm trapped here."

Ryan pauses and seems to have an idea. He promises to have another dance with me, but has to go to the bathroom first. Curse that man's bladder, things were just getting interesting. I approach Emily and apologize for ditching her at the snack table. Emily shrugs. "You were pursuing your love, and I was pursuing mine. Just be careful." I keep waiting for Ryan to come back, but he never does. I start to panic. What if he's having some sort of bathroom emergency? I told him not to eat the spicy salsa. Thankfully, I soon get a text from Ryan saying that there was a family emergency. I decide not to pry. I want Ryan to know that he can trust me.

Saturday morning, I have breakfast with Emily and her parents, then head back home to face my father. I start to dread the interrogation about where I was last night. As I walk closer home, I see red paint splattered all over the house. I run inside and find my father talking to a police officer. I notice that the officer is holding a bag full of pennies. It must have been the Copperhead Criminal. After talking with the officer, my dad wraps his arms around me and squeezes so tight, I think my ribs break.

"I was so worried. I'm so glad you're safe. Where were you?"

"Dad, I'm fine. I just slept over at Emily's. Sorry for not informing you. What happened to the house? Was it the Copperhead Criminal?"

My dad nods, "He must have vandalized and robbed the house while I was sleeping. You know I'm a heavy sleeper."

He totally is. His snores could wake up a bear in hibernation. My dad gives me a reassuring smile, but I can tell he's upset. Most of our valuables are gone, and I notice that a few of our family photos are destroyed. I never looked good in those photos anyway. The red paint is all around the house, but I personally think it makes a nice contrast against the brick. It makes our house finally appear different from the others. I decide to give my dad his space and go into my room to watch TV. I watch Netflix until I hear a faint tapping noise. I immediately think it's my dad trying to get into my room, but I don't see his shadow outside the door. I look around, perplexed, until I see small pennies being thrown against my window like pebbles. I walk over to the window, and there I see him. Ryan, looking up at me like something in a fairytale. I sneak past my dad in the living room and exit the house as quietly as possible. I go into the backyard, and Ryan quickly embraces me. It feels warm and romantic–like all the bad in the world is melting away.

"Ryan." I'm hugging his bicep. "Did you leave the party last night to do *this*?"

"Yeah," he says, kind of proud sounding. "I knew you wouldn't mind. Your dad's a pain, and you hate living here as much as I do."

"So, does that mean you're the Copperhead Criminal?"

Ryan reveals his sweet, flashing smile. "Yep. At first, I was just collecting pennies, but I wanted to *do* something, make a difference."

"What if you get caught by the police?"

"Never happen. I'm leaving town tonight, and I want you to come with me."

"How are we supposed to leave?"

"I've been stealing from the rich and giving to the poor—in this case, me. I have enough money to get us bus tickets and go wherever we want to. When we run out of money, I'll just steal more!"

I don't know what to say. My whole life, I had dreamt of this moment. I think about Emily. She will be distraught if I leave, but she'd also want me to be happy. Besides, she'll be my maid of honor when Ryan and I get married.

I squeal with excitement. "Yes, yes, yes! A million times, yes!"

He hugs me tight and turns serious, manly.

"Okay," he says. "Pack a suitcase and destroy your phone. I'll meet you here at 11:00 p.m. Don't be late."

Destroy my phone? I have almost eight hundred followers on Instagram, and he wants me to destroy my phone? Love makes us do crazy things, I guess. I give Ryan a goodbye kiss and walk back to the house in a daze. I foolishly close the door loudly enough to alert my father. I tell him I was only out for a walk, but he doesn't seem to buy it. He has just made a pot of tea and hands me a cup. He always says tea "calms your anxiety," but I think it's just overpriced water.

"Sara, you know I love you."

I nod. He tells me every day, like it's something I might forget.

"This Copperhead Criminal nonsense has got me worried. I want you to stay safe, Sara. Please be careful, sweetie."

"Dad, I'm not stupid."

He sighs. "The world may seem to gleam with opportunity, but there are masked horrors out there. Don't forget your worth."

I roll my eyes. He probably got that from the mini fortunes on the tea bags. I assure my father I understand what he is telling me, then run to my room. I pack up my suitcase and text Emily for the last time. I don't give her a lot of details, only that I am about to go on the adventure of a lifetime. I throw my phone on the floor and crush it beneath my foot. I have the perfect guy and the perfect plan. Ryan sees me as a queen, a priceless jewel that is worth fighting for. In a little while, I tiptoe past my dad who is sleeping soundly on the couch, then approach my superhero waiting patiently, with a suitcase and a jar full of pennies. I look at Ryan's charming face and his jar of pennies.

"Ryan," I say. I can hardly breathe. "Would you mind if I held the pennies? I love how shiny they are."

LOVESICK
photography by Sara Pepper

THE BITTER TASTE OF ALMONDS

Emma McKay

The pendulum clock on the wall swings back and forth, ticking away the minutes. You sit in the drawing-room with Lady Christine Chambers. Her maid, a young girl no more than twelve brings in a tray of tea. The two of you watch as she sets the rattling tray on the table between you and hurriedly curtsies.

Lady Chambers waves her delicate porcelain hand in dismissal. Your eyes follow the girl as she scurries off to attend to her other numerous duties. You remember a time some twenty years ago when you were in her position. The phantom of your once perpetually-fatigued body resurfaces, reminding you of restless nights in your uncomfortable, tiny bed and a neck cramp that once felt like a permanent fixture. Your heart aches for her, wishing that there was something you could do to help her.

Your host adds a sugar cube to her tea and stirs it until it dissolves. Once satisfied, she takes a sip and says, "Your needlework is widely regarded as the best in all of Cambridge."

You swell with pride. "Thank you, madam."

"Yes, well, as you know, my Lizzie is making her debut this winter, and she simply must have a new gown. Lord Chambers has denied me my request to import a French dress, and with that horrid Ripper fellow running amok, I must say I am hesitant to conduct any business in London until he is behind bars." She takes another sip of tea. "Nevertheless, she deserves a dress that, while still in line with the current fashion, stands out from amongst the rest. An elegant piece, that will make all of the other young ladies and their mothers jealous. My daughter deserves the best, don't you think?"

You have never met Miss Chambers, but you agree anyway.

"I am willing to pay handsomely for the construction of such a dress."

"Thank you, madam." You have faith in your ability to create that dress.

"Right, well, Mary," she rings a bell, and the girl from earlier reenters the room. "Mary, summon Miss Chambers."

The maid ducks her head, then disappears.

The two of you sit in silence, waiting for Miss Chambers to arrive. At first, you wonder if Lady Chambers will strike up a conversation. To your relief, she does not, so you busy yourself with your tea, adding cream and sugar to your liking. You have never been good at conversation with people in the higher classes. Things always got unbearably awkward whenever they eventually asked about your past, then fumbled for how to respond to your upbringing. You bring your cup of tea up to your lips, and, blowing softly, you take a sip.

The door creaks open, and the young lady enters. You are surprised at the contrast Lizzie is to her mother. Where Lady Chambers is plump and beautiful, Miss Chambers is sickly and plain as Jane Eyre. It will take a magnificent dress to turn her into a jewel. You can do that.

*

You burst into your parlor the minute you get home. "Darling, I have the most wonderful news!"

Your husband sits in his favorite high-back chair, angled towards the fireplace and the wall of books that surround it. The bookshelves are his current favorite part of the house. They are filled with leather-bound books both old and new, from all over Europe. He insists that Helen, your maid, dust them every day. He also enjoys reading the newspaper. This is how you find him today.

"*Lady Chambers* commissioned *me* to make the dress for her daughter's debut," you clasp your hands together. "My dress will be the talk of Cambridge!"

Your husband turns the page. "That's nice, dear."

You wonder why you bothered telling him in the first place. He never expresses interest in your affairs. Not for the first time, you think you should just stop telling him anything. However, you know that you will not be able to do that. Like a kettle boiling over, sometimes you need to spew the contents rising inside of you. You cannot help it.

"Alice," your husband says just as you turn to leave. You look at him, surprised to see him looking back at you. Betraying your sensibility, your heart flutters, hoping that he might express his pride in your sewing abilities.

"The Jeffersons are coming to dinner tomorrow night. Be sure to wear something pretty."

"Of course, dear," you sigh.

You ascend the staircase and head to your bedroom. Walking through your house is like walking through a museum of things that have struck your husband's fancy over the years. Oil paintings of relatives and the nobility hang in gilded frames. A table with ornate vases, a bust of Queen Victoria, and a Fabergé egg given by a distant Russian cousin, stand proudly on display at the top of the staircase.

These possessions make your house feel cold to you. It does not feel like the place to raise a family, not that your husband wishes to have children. He fears children running around the house might bump into tables and walls, toppling over his precious things.

Your room is sparsely decorated. Other than a few books, the only decor on the dresser is a small standing clock. There is a singular painting hung on the wall, a gift from your sister-in-law that your husband claims does not fit in with the rest of the house. You begged him to not throw it out, claiming that your sister-in-law would be deeply offended if she were to inquire to see the painting upon her next visit. Really, you just liked the painting and knew that your mere fancy of it would not be enough to convince him. The scene depicted is an unknown jagged coast in the midst of a dark and terrible storm. There is something wild and free about the waves crashing against the rocks. Sometimes you stare at it, transfixed, longing for wet sand between your toes and sea mist tangling your hair.

This room has not always been your room. At the very beginning of your marriage, it had been a second guest room. You wished to one day turn it into a nursery. When you told this to your husband, he forced you to move out of your shared room and into it, stating his aversion to children. A darker part of you wonders if he grew bored with you. You do not like to think about that much.

You tuck Lady Chambers' downpayment away into an old pocketbook which you keep in your side table drawer. You are saving up for a sewing machine to help you make dresses faster, so you can take on more orders. You would ask your husband for one, but you know him and his distaste for practical, unremarkable-looking things. Sparing yourself the disappointment of a "no," you decided to earn the money for one yourself. Besides, buying a machine with your money will be much more satisfying than buying it with the allowance your husband gives you.

You rummage through the oak chest at the end of your bed. Instead of housing extra clothes and linens, it contains your collection of fabrics, threads, and patterns from women's magazines you have accumulated over the years. After a bit of searching, you find what you are looking for: a bolt of emerald silk fabric you had been saving for a special occasion. You set this aside so you can find it easier later. You choose a few dress patterns to look at for inspiration, and, with charcoal and notebook in hand, you start joyfully sketching ideas for Miss Chambers' dress.

*

"Oh, this is magnificent! My Lizzie is sure to be the talk of the town."

You flush under Lady Chambers' praise.

"Mother," Miss Chambers whined. "Please stop calling me that."

"But it's your name."

"No, Elizabeth is my name. Lizzie is a name for a little girl."

"Nonsense. You are my little girl, no matter how old you are; therefore, you are my Lizzie."

Miss Chambers groans and stomps in exaggerated frustration, causing the skirt you are pinning to swish. You suppress a laugh.

"Lizzie, be still! You are disrupting Mrs. Moore's work. I will not tolerate an uneven hem because you refused to stand still," she scolds. "Oh, Mrs. Moore, that reminds me, I was wondering if you could also make my Lizzie a fur wrap.

I think a nice sealskin wrap would make a lovely addition to her dress. Don't you agree? Of course, I will increase your payment, but what do you think? Can you do it?"

With a mouth full of pins, all you can do is nod. You do a quick calculation in your head and figure that with the extra money, you will be able to buy a sewing machine as soon as you receive full payment for Miss Chambers' dress. You nearly combust from excitement.

"Oh, wonderful! I will have Mary deliver the furs to your house tomorrow."

The sound of the front door opening carries through the house.

"Blanche, Lizzie, I'm home!" a man calls out.

"We are in the drawing-room, darling," Lady Chambers replies.

A few moments later, a man appears at the entrance to the room. He has a warm glow about him. His eyes are soft and kind.

"Father! Father!" Miss Chambers rushes to the door, accidentally yanking her skirt out of your grasp.

Lord Chambers envelops his daughter in a hug. "How are you, my dear?"

"Wonderful! I am getting fitted for my dress." The girl steps out of her father's arms and gives him a twirl.

"That's marvelous!" Lord Chambers turns to his wife. He appears to relax in her presence. You notice his wife does the same. In fact, her boisterousness has quieted down to a soft whisper. Her eyes, as they gaze upon her husband, are filled with love. The same way your husband once looked at you. Gathering your supplies, you head home.

It was a boiling hot Sunday afternoon in the spring of your sixteenth year. You were hanging the clothes out to dry when you saw his family return home from church. His parents and his sister walked ahead of him, loudly laughing in merriment. You could not help but stare as they approached their home.

Suddenly, the younger Mr. Moore glanced your way. You shuddered. The two of you locked eyes and stood, in awe of what all could be.

His mother called out to him and, with a nod, he turned to leave.

After watching him disappear into his house, you returned to your chores, a little bit lighter than before.

The next day, when you went to retrieve the dry laundry, he was waiting for you by the hedge that separated the two properties. He had brought you a flower he had plucked from his mother's garden. He told you he was enchanted by your beauty. He helped you fold the laundry, while the two of you talked. You have since forgotten what you discussed. What you remember is the feeling of having been seen by someone for the very first time.

Over the next few weeks, he kept returning to the hedge. Whenever you were out working, he would hop over and help you. If you happened to spot him waiting there when walking past a window, you would find a reason to join him in the backyard. At first, it was just talking. Sometimes, he brought you little trinkets. Nothing special. A pretty button. A smooth rock. A shiny crystal. He said the things he brought you reminded him of you. You treasured them. You still have them. You keep them in the jewelry box he gave you as a wedding present.

So much has changed since then. You know you will never get back to that time, when he looked at you with love in his eyes. You want to be seen again.

If he will not see you, maybe another man will. Another man who will give you the same fulfillment you find in sewing. A man who will listen to you, who will want to start a family with you. There has to be some way you can get out of this marriage, so you can have that man.

Your mind begins to race. There must be a way to leave your husband, so you can find this future. If you simply walk out on him, though, you would be ruined. No one would want you after that. And what if he decided to come after you? To put his pretty little wife back in his lifeless museum? Or worse. He could claim you suffer from hysteria and send you to an asylum, then you would never be free.

As your mind swirls with thoughts, you slow down. Home is still a few blocks away, but it feels too close. You feel surrounded and exposed, like someone is going to grab you at any moment. You try to shake off this feeling, but you cannot. You stop in front of the pharmacy, unable to will yourself forward. You wonder if this cloud of torment is going to loom over you forever.

Tears sting the corner of your eyes. Fatigue rains down on you. You grab hold of a nearby lamppost for support. Keeping your head trained to the ground, you try to focus on your breathing, hoping that it will keep your mind off of your husband and the meaningless life you are about to return to.

You try to think about your sewing. You try to remember the joy that each completed, beautiful dress causes in you. Under this heavy cloud of emotions, you cannot remember that gratification. You are numb.

You open your eyes. You do not recall ever closing them, but now they are open. You find yourself standing on a damp page of *The Morning Post*. The ink is too smudged to make out the complete article, but the headline appears to announce a fifth victim of the self-proclaimed "Jack the Ripper."

How can someone kill so many people and get away with it?

Like the hour hand on a clock, an idea strikes. As you step into the pharmacy, the panic subsides.

*

You return home just in time for tea. As you walk to the kitchen, you see your husband sitting in the parlor, staring at his prized books. Out of curiosity, you try to make as much noise as possible as you pass. You stomp across the hardwood floor, bumping into the coat rack. He does not look your way. You let out an aggravated sigh at his lack of interest in you, then you continue on into the kitchen. He deserves what is coming for him.

In the kitchen, you set about making tea, something you have done a hundred times before: boil the water, set the cups on the tray, grab the sugar and cream. You move about the kitchen with a practiced ease, never once stopping to wonder if you should not go through with this. After you pour the water into the teapot, you remove a bottle of prussic acid from your purse.

It took a little coaxing for the pharmacist to agree to sell you it. You lied to him about your lovely sealskin wrap you accidentally spilt some lemon syllabub on. You just needed a little bit of prussic acid to get the stain out. You had promised that you would be careful not to touch the deadly toxin with bare skin (it is quite poisonous, after all). You may have even batted your

eyelashes a bit, and given him a dazzling smile when he agreed. You are still surprised at how easy it ended up being. Men can be such fools.

You uncork the bottle, and pour its contents into the teapot. As you carry the tea tray to the parlor, you glide through the house with purpose. Soon, nothing will stand in between you and your future.

In the parlor, your husband is now reading the newspaper. He does not look up when you enter the room. You set the tray down on a side table and prepare the tea—cream and sugar for him, nothing for you. You are already ruining some perfectly good tea, why waste anything else?

"HOW CAN SOMEONE KILL SO MANY PEOPLE AND GET AWAY WITH IT?"

Your husband barely acknowledges you when you set his tea next to him. Your anger, which had cooled some while you made the tea, returns to a boil. You have to restrain yourself from throwing your tea at him.

Tempering your rage, you take the seat next to your husband, and gently blow on your tea. To your surprise, he folds his newspaper in half and sets it aside.

"Gregory Jefferson and his wife are going to Brighton for Christmas, something to do with Mrs. Jefferson's nerves." He takes his cup of tea and blows on it. "It reminded me that we haven't been on holiday in quite some time. Perhaps Kent. I hear the coast is lovely this time of year."

You are confused by this sudden suggestion. A small part of you wonders if maybe he has had a change of character. Maybe he wants to salvage your relationship.

No. You have gone on holidays before. Nothing has changed. *He* has not changed.

He takes a sip of his tea, and then another. You note how he had never once looked at you since the moment you walked into the room. Within seconds, he falls to the floor, writhing in pain. You can feel his eyes on you now, but you refuse to look back at him.

You should feel guilty. You do not. You should be horrified. You are not. For the first time in your life, you feel free.

You stand to collect the tea. You step over his body.

"A holiday sounds lovely, dear."

AMERICAN DREAM

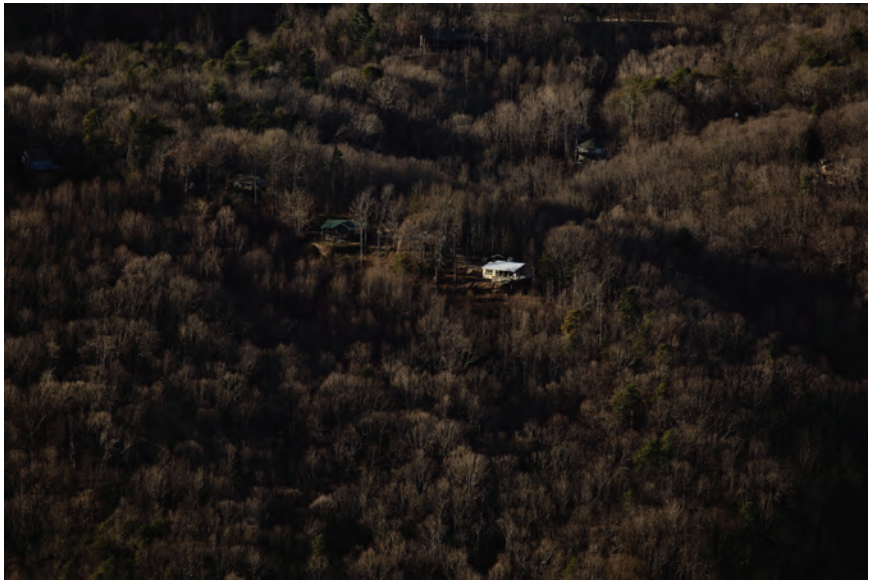
Samantha Brooks

In her youth, she attracted the doctor
who lived in the old brick house
on Main Street that leaked raindrops
through high ceilings in early spring.
He dressed her in greens
and dyed her hair vibrant red,
calling her his personal wildfire.
After a love affair and divorce,
they settled in a mahogany-framed bed
with no sheets to keep them warm.
Every morning since, they shared
white pills and mimosas for breakfast.
Water filled buckets on the floor.

Scattered in their den, empty
bowls, chandelier glass,
whispered secrets to
golden lamps, casting rainbow
beams on antique hardwoods.
By the boarded-up fireplace
sat a small table, her emerald
chaise lounge, a wine glass
rimmed with flies.

Beyond stained glass windows
grew figs plump to bursting, crystalized
sugar hiding wasps that bruised manicured
fingers. There too, the brilliant
green lawn, the white fence, locked gate.
All perfect: a picture, a sham.

MASK OFF
photography by Taylor Smith



CABIN, A PLACE I DREAM OF
photography by Taylor Smith

AND IF IT'S A GIRL

Abby McNeely

At about three in the afternoon, Cathy sauntered out to the rotary clothesline in the backyard. It was her second load of the day; first bed linens, then the clothes. When she lifted her arms, her pinstriped button-down came slightly up, and the bottom of her small, round belly was exposed. At five months, she already had to squat to pick up the hamper, into which she tossed article after article of just her own clothing. There was only the exception of a pair of her husband's sweatpants, which she'd found far underneath their bed when she deep-cleaned earlier that day. She assumed they were never washed after John's last run before he shipped out. He had run a six-minute mile that day, coming through the door huffing but energized, analyzing his watch with a satisfied smile. He ran faster every day in the months leading up to his deployment. That was four months ago but felt like yesterday.

As Cathy unpinned shirts from the line, the sound of an aged engine and blasting radio came rolling closer until a car was in her driveway. She could see the old station wagon whip in from over the picket fence, which she had painted herself two weeks ago. John had built it right before he left but didn't have time to paint it. *I want this thing nice and sturdy before I leave,* he'd said. *Our boy will be playing out in this yard soon as he can crawl, and I don't need him getting away from you.* Cathy had been terrified when she found out they were expecting, but John was jubilant. He had a crib built from scratch a month after they found out and started a college fund a week after that. He seemed so ready, and Cathy was relieved, because she was not. She had only just reached a genuine excitement around the time John came home with the news that he was assigned to a year-long tour of duty in Vietnam. He would not be there, he said, when the baby came. She hadn't slept a sound night since.

The car continued to run after it parked, and Cathy's sister climbed out of the passenger seat after giving whoever was driving a long kiss. When she stood up, her long hair wisped through the air with the smoke of her cigarette. Cathy watched her give the driver a sloppy smile and a wave as he backed out of the driveway and drove away. She made her way to the backyard, hopping the small fence instead of opening it with the latch. Violet. Mom and Dad's moon child who never could get her feet on the ground.

"That the new boyfriend?" Cathy asked as Violet walked towards the clothesline. Her sling bag didn't seem to hold much, but her steps were off kilter as if it weighed fifty pounds.

"Just a friend. How did I know you'd be doing laundry?" Violet dramatically sighed out smoke.

"Are you high?"

"On life." Violet smirked and winked. "Jay is really something."

"So it's Jay. I'll remember that so I don't accidentally call him one of the fifty other ones."

Violet gave her an accusing look but laughed through it, like she couldn't decide if she was hurt or amused. "We both know you did that on purpose. So mean." She tapped ashes from the cigarette. "He's a nice guy. Considerate. You'd like him."

"Considerate enough to supply you with excuses," Cathy said. "You didn't come around the last few times you said you would. Wonder what you were doing." There was no sign of question in her voice.

"For Heaven's sake, aren't you all grown and righteous." Violet gave Cathy a look of mischief. "What? Little miss Cathy didn't touch any oats in her college days?" she asked with an artificial sweetness.

"The only oats worth having are the hearty, organic kind you can eat," Cathy snapped. She unclipped another shirt from the line, thinking back. "John taught me that."

Violet looked ashamed for a split second, then turned defensive. "I said he's just a friend right now. I don't—" she stopped and waved away the comment, puffing the cigarette, deciding it wasn't worth it. There was silence for a moment, but the two were used to it. These quiet moments had become their custom greeting, where the bickering settled, and they remembered they had more reasons to be allies than enemies. The death of their parents had ensured that for nine years now. Cathy was twenty-two and rebellious as ever when they died. Violet was seventeen and still watched everything her sister did. Since no one really adopts two young adults, the only backs they had to lean on were each other's, and their backs were weak. But they had done the job so far, and when John came along the burden lightened for both of them. Cathy cleaned up her act and saw how much easier it was to live well with someone to take care of you.

"How are you feeling?" Violet asked.

"I'd feel better if you put out that cigarette," said Cathy.

Violet took one last puff, nodded, and bent to snuff the cigarette on the ground. When she moved to stand up, she hugged Cathy's belly and kissed it.

"Aunt Vi can't wait to meet you, kiddo." She stayed there for a moment, hugging. Cathy smiled and stroked the top of her head, running her thumb along the defined middle part in her hair. Beneath Violet's contrariness and her knack for making bad decisions, she had a kind heart, and Cathy loved the moments when it that was easier to remember.

"Come on," Cathy said. "I'll make something for dinner. Take a quick nap to freshen up. There are clean sheets on your bed since last time you stayed." She remembered the days after the all-nighters when she needed a good nap. For her, sleep had worked better than anything to get her back to normal, and it had proven to work for Violet, too. They walked to the house with Cathy's arm around Violet to steady her, though she probably didn't need it.

But Violet, likewise, put her arm around Cathy's shoulder. Cathy turned to sniff Violet's hair.

"And maybe take a shower, please."

Violet sighed again through a big, lazy smile. "Yes, ma'am."

At dinner they talked about the usual things, which started out with Cathy's usual series of questions to bring herself up to speed on Violet's living situation, or wherever she had been between her stays with her every couple of weeks.

"So are you staying at Jay's place now?"

"Yep. It's a group of us staying there," Violet said as she twirled spaghetti on her fork. "It was getting too crowded though. That's why I came to stay for a little while."

"What about that job? Did you get it? Have you been going?"

"Oh, you guessed it. I never got back in touch with them, so I never went."

"Why, Violet?"

"There was a rally! Phone call completely escaped my mind. I wasn't all for the idea of working at Walmart anyway." Violet spoke as she chewed.

"THE ONLY BACKS THEY HAD TO LEAN ON WERE EACH OTHER'S, AND THEIR BACKS WERE WEAK."

Cathy anticipated the answer of just about every question she asked. This was how she tried correcting Violet's behavior, though it never seemed to go well. All she wanted to do was yell what she was thinking, which was *You're twenty-three years old. You need to grow up and clean up your act. I can't mother you forever.* But she never said it. She didn't deserve to say it. All she did was ask the questions and hope that one day Violet would realize how ridiculous her answers were, how ridiculous her life was.

Violet got up for another helping. She came back to the table with only noodles coated in butter, no sauce.

"What about soldier-man?" she asked to change the subject. "Heard from him recently?"

"Nope," said Cathy. She wrung her hands a bit. "That one letter from about a month ago is the last I've heard." She took a deep breath and put her hands down. "So there should be one coming any day now."

It had been her most anxious month yet. She lived in a nervous state of waiting that always seemed to reach an unbearable point right when she finally got a letter, which calmed her like a suppressant. The letters came once every few weeks. John wrote a little about the war and mostly about how much he missed Cathy and home. He always asked how the baby was, how the doctor's appointments were going, how the neighbors were, and he always asked about Violet. In one letter, he explained that he didn't always know when he would be able to write again. But she was to keep on writing him, he'd said, so that when he finally got her letters there would be

a bounty of her words to keep him at home, in a way. Cathy clung to that. She had written him five times since that last letter she received.

"I still just can't believe he's over there, now of all times," said Violet. The disagreeable tone had returned to her voice. "The fact that he isn't even..."

"Don't, Violet," said Cathy. She put her forehead in her hand and closed her eyes. "Just don't." Since John had left, Cathy had felt the same shrinking feeling she had when her parents died, the feeling of knowing she was it for Violet now. In some dark moments she let her brain slip into the idea that it could all happen again, but each time she snapped herself back. She could not afford to think like that.

"I know. Sorry," said Violet. "Hey."

She came around the table and knelt by Cathy and looked at her earnestly, only this time it wasn't a Jay-high or sleep deprivation. It was just Violet, who felt everything so intensely Cathy didn't know how she didn't explode.

"You'll get a letter soon. I just know." She paused. "If the universe would make it work for anyone, it would be him."

Cathy just sat there and smiled weakly in thanks but couldn't be comforted. It was like taking reassurance from a wide-eyed child saying *yes, yes, yes, Santa is real and if you want something really bad all you have to do is ask!* Life did not work like that, Cathy knew, but in her twenty-three years of life Violet had never abandoned this notion that things just worked out, that life could be lived on a whim and fortunes and consequences floated around and were dropped on ordinary people however the "universe" pleased.

"I'm going to read for a while and then go to bed," Cathy finally said.

"This early?"

"Yep."

"My gosh, you're old."

"Nope. Just pregnant."

"You don't say." Violet chuckled to herself. "I'm stepping out for a smoke."

"Okay. Goodnight."

Cathy went to put on her robe and walked back out into the living room to turn off the lights. She looked through the screen door and watched her sister, lying flat on her back in the grass, which needed mowing, puffing clouds of smoke up into a night sky. Violet had been a stargazer even before Mom and Dad died, but from that point on it was a respite, a sanctuary. While Cathy had turned to parties, she had spent hours looking upward. She was rougher around the edges now than when she was younger, but the strange impulses to lie freezing under a night sky or stand out in the rain never left her. The only sanctuary Cathy ever found was John, who was a bit of a stargazer himself. He and Violet argued about all things political, but he would always go out and join her if the night was clear. Cathy never knew what they talked about or what staring at stars for so long did for anybody, but she knew that time was theirs, and that Violet was safe under the same kind heart that she was. What had either of them done to make such a blessing come their way? Perhaps Violet was right, and a random star of redemption had been blindly shot and had landed in the sisters' unlit sky. She left a lamp on in the living room for Violet to see when she came back inside, wishing she was leaving it on for John too.

Cathy woke up to the sound of a smoke alarm. She threw on her robe and rushed to the kitchen, where she found Violet moving a pan of burning eggs over to the sink. For a second she wanted to scold her, to point out how talented someone must be to burn something as simple as scrambled eggs, but instead she began to chuckle, and then laugh, and then laugh so hard she had to sit down.

"It's not funny!" said Violet, though she herself had to work to conceal a smile at her mess.

"Yes, it is," Cathy said through her laughter. "How do you mess up eggs?"

"I thought I'd make them for us so you wouldn't have to when you woke up," Violet said. "And here you are just laughing. Last time I try to do something nice for you."

"A RANDOM STAR OF REDEMPTION HAD BEEN BLINDLY SHOT AND HAD LANDED IN THE SISTERS' UNLIT SKY."

Cathy got up and waved a hand towel in front of the smoke detector to get it to stop. Then she got out a new pan, and they tried again.

Over breakfast, Cathy tried to read the paper while Violet chattered on. Cathy was half listening, waiting for a decent spot to interject.

"Hey, why don't you go check out that Miller's Deli down the road. They have a "Now Hiring" sign out front. How bad could making sandwiches be?"

"Can you seriously picture me working in a deli?"

"It's not about what you picture yourself doing, Violet. Sometimes you don't have that luxury. Sometimes you've just got to do things you don't want to do for a while so you can get on your feet, so you can take care of yourself."

"I take care of myself," Violet snapped.

"I mean provide for yourself. Work enough to eventually get your own place." Cathy paused and sighed. "I keep wanting to move the crib into the guest room and make it a nursery, but at this point I know you're always going to show up every few weeks to stay for a while, so I keep it the way it is. For you. But I'm about to not be able to do that anymore."

"John was always fine when I came around to stay and said I was always welcome. You've always said that too." Cathy could hear in her voice that she didn't know where this was coming from, and she didn't like it.

"And besides," Violet continued. "I could help with the baby. In case you forgot, you're going to be doing this mom thing by yourself for a little while."

Cathy bit her tongue. Violet's offer for help may have been genuine, but all Cathy could picture was Violet playing and laughing with the baby until he cried or needed changing. She didn't have what it took to help Cathy in the way she needed. Worse still, hearing out loud that she would face the first months of motherhood alone made her cheeks redden. And it could be more than months, more than "a little while." It could be however long this infernal war lasted.

"You don't think I would help you, do you?" Violet asked accusingly.

Cathy grasped at an answer. She was interrupted by the doorbell.

"That's probably Jay," Violet said. "I called him earlier and asked him to drop off some more of my clothes." She walked toward the door, turning and stepping backwards and holding up her hands in fake surrender. "Unless, of course, you need me out of your hair because there isn't enough space for just you, your unborn child, and me."

Cathy was ready to retaliate, but Violet had already disappeared down the hall out of sight. Cathy heard her open the door and was confused when she heard her say uncertainly, "Oh. Hello."

Then she heard a man's voice. "Good morning. Mrs. Borden?"

At the sound of her name, Cathy got up, retied her robe around her, and walked down the hall. As soon as she saw the man she halted. He stood resolutely tall and wore an Army uniform. Another dressed the same stood at the bottom of the porch steps. Two men. Another she could see in the vehicle parked on the road.

"Mrs. Borden?" the man asked at the sight of her.

No, she thought. *Don't say another word. Just get back in your car and drive away.*

"Yes," she said faintly.

"Mrs. Borden, I'm Lieutenant Sullivan." He paused and shifted his weight slightly as he removed his hat. Cathy could tell that he could better see her expectant body with the light coming through the door, which Violet had opened wider for him.

"I have been asked to inform you..."

No.

"...that your husband was killed in action in Khe Sanh, Vietnam on March third. He was stationed at the Khe Sanh Combat Base, which came under a conflict that resulted in a number of losses."

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Violet turn her way with eyes wider than ever.

"Cathy..."

"On behalf of the Secretary of Defense," the man continued, "I extend to you and your family my deepest sympathy for your great loss."

He waited for a response. When both sisters were silent and still, he slowly put his hat back on and stepped backwards to leave.

"Let us know if there is anything we can do for you, Mrs. Borden," he said. "We'll be in touch." He took one more glance at the bulge under her robe before he turned with his partner and walked to the car.

For what seemed like hours, Cathy stood in the spot where the words fell on her ears. *Been asked to inform you. Khe Sahn. Sympathy for your great loss. Your great loss. Killed in action. Killed in action.* The words took a long time to land, and when they did, they seemed to bypass her brain and land directly on her chest, which felt tight and heavy. Violet tried to guide her to the living room, to a seat, but when Cathy wouldn't move she pulled up a kitchen chair behind where she stood and then ran to the backyard. Cathy ignored the chair at first, but was grateful for it when her back and feet ached too much to stand anymore. She eased herself slowly into it like hot bath water.

She stared at the door, now closed. It came over her slowly that he wouldn't open that door again. Not when his term was over, not when the baby came home, not after a run, not after mowing the lawn on a Saturday morning.

Cathy stayed in the chair all night, finally crying, mostly when the baby moved. Her precious piece of John who would never know him. He wouldn't wait till she was ready. Father or not, he was still coming. She thought of how excited John was when she told him as he made her coffee that morning. Her mind's eye could see his smile open wide and his arms too, and an ache came over her. At some early morning hour, she finally slumped over in the chair and slept, crooked and deeply.

In the days after the funeral, Cathy spent most of her time sitting and sleeping, occasionally walking around the house to reduce the new swelling in her ankles. She hardly spoke, as the only person to speak to was Violet, who wasn't John.

On one of the first mornings, Cathy woke up to the smell of coffee. She found Violet in the kitchen French pressing the dark stuff the way John had always done.

"Morning," Violet said with a slight smile as she brought a cup to Cathy.

Cathy could see and smell that it was far too strong and that it still had grounds in it.

"Is it decaf?"

"What?"

"Is it decaf? I can't have caffeine."

Violet looked at the press and sighed. "I didn't realize that. I just made a regular pot."

Without a thought, Cathy put the mug down.

"You have it." She returned to her room.

A few days later, she woke up to the sound of the lawn mower. She glanced out her window to see Violet in the backyard, pushing the mower in aimless lines all over the yard. When she was done, there were slivers of missed grass between the lines of the mower's path. John had done the job uniformly every time. Cathy made a half-hearted mental note to thank Violet later, but never did.

Violet carried on in what Cathy thought as an attempt to fill every John-sized hole. In between the half-completed chores and sloppy cooking and taking chances at conversation with Cathy, she was in the bathroom or outside, shaking and sick. The first days were the worst. Cathy could hear quivering whimpers from her room and knew exactly what they were. Withdrawals were horrible. She asked no questions and never got up to check on Violet. Every day Cathy expected to see her pupils enlarged again, but they remained normal in her icy blue irises. She was busy and miserable, but unargumentative. It was the mildest Cathy had ever seen her, and Cathy did little more than acknowledge it.

Three weeks after they received the news, Violet left for several hours and came home in the evening with a bag of sandwiches. Cathy was reading at the kitchen table, where Violet placed the bag right in front of her.

"Miller's Deli," she said. "I just spoke with the owner for a while. I start on Monday."

Cathy wanted to want to push the bag away. She wanted to think of how John would have done this so much sooner. But she couldn't. This was just Violet being the Violet Cathy remembered in the days after Mom and Dad died—kind and willing. She opened the bag and unwrapped the sandwich. She ate it rhythmically, bite after bite, without taking a breath. They both knew she had not eaten nearly enough since the day the Army came to the door. Violet watched her and filled a glass of water. She placed it on the table on her way to the backyard. The stars were coming out.

Cathy finished the first sandwich and realized how hungry she still was. She opened the second one and ate it just as quickly. The baby had been mostly still for the past few days, but now she felt kicks, and she realized she'd forgotten how good it was to feel him move.

It wasn't until after she finished the second sandwich, the deli paper open and messy in front of her, that she realized one was for Violet. She began to chuckle at her own absent-mindedness and how hungry she'd been. Her laughing continued weakly and then without warning, turned to tears. They fell on the wrappings as she got up and carried them to the trash can. She looked out of the sliding glass door at Violet, lying in the grass with a cigarette. After standing for a while and staring, she took stiff steps across her living room and went into the yard.

She maneuvered herself down and lay on her back next to her sister, who put out her cigarette and looked at her. Before Cathy could blink the tears out of her eyes, the water pooled like a magnifying glass and made the starry sky strikingly clear and close. She felt Violet's arm come around her just above her belly, her cold nose grazing her shoulder.

"When John came out here with me, we talked about two things," Violet whispered. "He talked about you, and I listened. He mostly said a bunch of things I already knew, like how you were always meant to be this great homemaker and neither of us ever saw that coming." They both laughed.

"And then I would talk about Mom and Dad, and he would listen. He had to ask me a lot of questions at first, but after a while I felt like I could talk about it and it made me feel better. But I could never do it unless we were out here, at night."

Cathy remembered when she and Violet had tried to talk about their parents after the accident. They usually never got far, and Cathy had always regretted it. To John, though, she had poured out everything easily.

"I'm going to name him John," Cathy said. She turned on her side and put her head on Violet's shoulder, still turning it up enough to see the stars that were just popping out where the sun's last remnants were dimming on the horizon.

"As you should," Violet said.

And if it's a girl, Cathy thought, *Violet Jeanne Borden.*

WELCOME HOME, SOLDIER

Samantha Brooks

After a year in the desert,
my father returned to find
that my mother had taught
my sister and me to tie
bunny ears in white shoelaces.

Velcro, on bedazzled pink
or sand-colored uniforms,
had no place in our home.

"I'm big now," I said,
pushing away his Velcro patch,
his American flag. Placing it
on his sleeve, he asked,
"When did you get so tall?"

PARODIA
photography by Anastasia Shcherbina

EPHEMERAL
photography by Anastasia Shcherbina

GOLDEN YELLOW SAND

Salvatore Fontana

I saw my dad cry for the first time when I was four, in our hardwood-floor living room, our TV cabinet taking up too much space. He got the news and wept, silently at first, slowly getting louder. My mom comforted him as he retreated upstairs. Men don't cry in public. My sister cried when my dad cried. My unborn brother didn't know that his namesake, my father's mentor, just died. He didn't know.

My dad drove by himself to the funeral. My brother slept in the womb, content to be overdue by a week. And my dad drove to the funeral. He made it back in time to see my brother born a day later, a small miracle.

For a while it was just me, my sister, and my brother, the three amigos. Our childhoods were spent doing school at home, rushing outside to play in the backyard when we were done. We played pretend on the trampoline, in the forest, and on the large, sandy hill. I can still see that hill in my mind's eye.

The sandy hill in our backyard shone in the sun: our personal sun-scorched desert dune. I hefted the stick on my shoulder, scanning the rippling sand for enemies. Sunlight tickled my skin. My brother shouted. He got one. I rushed over to see. A wasp writhed in the sand, its stinger seeking a surface to stab. Vengeance. Our sister pointed, and we looked up. More wasps darted across the sand. I led the charge up the hill, around the wooden playhouse, between the swings, chasing the elusive yellow devils endlessly. Vigilance defined our hunt, for we three hunted deadly prey. Trespassers, unworthy of our hill.

Night-time brought sleepy stars, the sand golden yellow in the moonlight. It matched the color of our house. Ugly, my mom always said. But it was our hill, our house. We protected it in the hours after school and before bedtime.

I laid awake in the queen-sized bed, staring at the ceiling. The white popcorn ceiling, grey in the darkness. I shared this bed with my now toddler brother. I recalled his namesake. A kind, God-fearing old man who looked like the best version of Santa Claus, who mentored my dad from a druggie college dropout to a father, who carried around a metal lung and gave me a tiny Hess truck when I was a toddler and I loved him for it. My brother didn't know him. But I did.

Wasps eradicated, or otherwise left alone, we set to our next daily task. Sand dunes hide secrets deep below. Ancient, once-living secrets. We would find legendary dinosaurs hitherto undiscovered. We would be the world's youngest archaeologist trio, my sister, brother, and I. First, we needed supplies. Forgotten garden spades lay covered in dust in the garage. Perfect. Then we chose our spot. Bottom of the hill, to the left, just out of sight of the back door.

Starting at a lower vantage point put us closer to the fossils, obviously. And closer to the tree-line. I stabbed the roots around our shallow hole. Tendrils encroaching on our scientific search, bah, they had to go.

Night-time brought parents come to see what we were up to. They could not understand the monumental importance of our task. We dug for fossils; ancient life forms preserved under our hill. Tearing up the yard, they said. We solemnly put the shovels away, our expedition defunded. Why care about the yard if it's so ugly, I thought. We three wanna-be archaeologists loved our yard for the adventure that it was.

We got the news a few weeks later. Our parents planned to put grass on the dirt hill. We thought if we ignored them it wouldn't happen. We grabbed our toy cars and headed out back. Fingers swept sand in soft waves, forming circular paths. We made a racetrack worthy of three master drivers. Our hands clenched the tops of the metal machines. Tiny wheels slammed into the dirt. Engines rumbled, drivers took deep breaths, and the countdown began. A three person race, no sweat. I knew I could win. Three, two, one, go! I took the first turn too soft, losing speed. My sister got ahead. I lurched forward on the straightaway, my longer legs propelling me past the competition. Just like that, I won. The one-lap wonder. My brother complained, no fair, we should keep going. Fine, one more race. One more race. One more—

They told us to stay out of the backyard. The yard care crew helped my parents roll out the bundles of awful green. We three stood in solidarity, together, watching our hill disappear beneath lush lawn. Repulsive green blades to cushion our feet, get caught in car tires, and to hide forever the secrets below. Goodbye to our racetracks, and sand dunes, and fossil hunts. Hello, lawnmower hell.

"Damn dog got out again," my dad said. I saw no problem there. My parents thought he was an ugly dog: a yellow lab mutt that wagged his tail a lot, whom I appropriately named Waggy in my childhood brilliance. We loved Waggy, despite his propensity to dig under the fence and escape our yard. He didn't hurt anyone, just ran around the neighborhood. He did it a lot. I wonder now if he had other pals. Ones that remembered to feed him.

I got the news a few weeks later. Waggy was going to live with another family. I cried, a little. I told myself he would go to a nice, loving family. For whatever reason, I pictured a rich, loving, African American couple with one son, soon bound for college, in need of an energetic mutt to keep their empty nest vibrant. My parents said I was too young for the responsibility

of a dog. I never fed him, washed him, walked him, or any of the things a responsible dog owner should do. Waggy deserved better than I gave him. I still cried after I said goodbye.

After some months I became used to the green grass hill, but I still resented the extra real estate to mow. I remembered Waggy, the same yellow color as our old dirt hill. I used to grab his paws in my hands, feel his hot breath, his scratchy nails. The roughness of unwashed fur. And we danced. Danced over the green hill, down towards the yellow house. Big, lean Waggy and I tramping over forgotten dunes. I never remembered to feed him, but he was my pal. We loved each other without words.

Dad was not home yet. It was bedtime and Dad's not home yet. Mom cried. He could be dead. My sister cried when my mom cried. Did my brother cry? Did I cry? I wanted to know what was going on. Nobody knew what was going on. We paced the hallway, worrying. Mom said to go to bed. Said not to worry. We went to bed. We worried. Dad came back the next day. I pretended nothing happened. To acknowledge my father's absence was to acknowledge something was wrong, and that brought uncomfortable pain.

"I STOOD, WARLORD SUPREME, TOWERING OVER MY BROTHER, DESTROYING HIS PRIZED CREATION."

My brother and I, growing older and away from adventurous sand dunes, played inside more often. Our room held no ancient fossils, but plenty of toys. Beyblades spun in righteous fury. Rescue Heroes saved trapped stuffed animals. LEGO empires rose and fell with the ages. My brother built a LEGO contraption he was particularly proud of. It served no military purpose, but he built it without help, and it held together quite well. Until I held it up to the whirring ceiling fan and watched it get torn to shreds, piece by piece, as he cried under my wrath. I would stop once he conceded what was rightfully mine. I stood, warlord supreme, towering over my brother, destroying his prized creation. Laying down our sibling bond for cruel victory. Vengeance. In that moment, I showed myself to be capable of cruel, heartless villainy. I hated myself for it.

My brother had his seventh birthday, *Fear Factor* themed, on our green grass hill in the backyard with gummy-worm "dirt" brownies and an eyeball cake. My mom brought out live crickets. A curly-haired kid grabbed one by its glossy black hindleg. We chanted and screamed, watching him lower it into his mouth. My brother opted out. I watched him open his present from us. A live kitten. I can't remember if our dad attended.

Birthday party invites always included sleepover potential. My brother and I technically had a sleepover every night. Maybe that's why we were often invited to sleepover at our friends' houses. We were just good at it. Dropped off at a rich house, just me, my brother, and my friend. Other guests

left long ago. We watched my friend play *Minecraft*, cozied up in pajamas, resting on the pristine white carpet.

"What's that?" my brother asked. My friend spat out a terse reply. My brother asked another question. No fault of my brother's, he is a curious creature. My friend yelled, ranting about how annoying, stupid, and ugly my brother is to his face. I pretended nothing happened, said nothing. My brother left the room. I loved him but said nothing. I found my brother asleep in bed. I didn't see the tears drying on his face.

My brother asked me a lot of questions when we got Nintendo DSes for Christmas. I barely contained my excitement long enough to answer, long enough to help my mom pack the car with our things, long enough to put my seatbelt on. We got the new *Pokémon* games and battled together, every long car ride to and from Grandma's an excuse to play. And then we found it. The entrance to the underground fossil expedition. Physical dreams manifested in the digital realm. We hunted fossils for hours, and I always found the best ones. My brother found my fossil hunting base. Our screens jostled as the family van pulled on to the highway. He stole my base's flag and sprinted away. I chased him down the pixel cavern, but he slipped out of my grasp. His score updated. One point. Triumphant.

Dad didn't come home, again. Mom told us to go to bed, he had a good reason to be out late. Went to a marathon or something, don't worry. I worried as I crawled up to my bed; my brother slept better on the bottom bunk. I stayed awake until I heard the front door creak open. My mom did too. I heard mumbled arguments drift up the carpeted stairs. My dad started louder, got softer. My mom the opposite, digging her heels in to keep herself from falling apart. The house's soft carpet kept me from making out the words, but their tone told me enough.

I cried, a little. More than I thought though, because my brother asked if I was OK. I choked out a reply. Then he got up, walked downstairs, and said something to our arguing parents. My mom crawled into bed and held me close. Asked why I was crying. I sobbed out the word divorce. She promised me that would never happen, not if she could help it. She dug her heels in to keep us from falling apart.

I was twelve the next time I saw my dad cry. They told us to go to the kitchen. Our baby sister perched on my dad's leg, the rest of us awkwardly taking up too much space on the checkered tile. Dad was leaving to live with a guy from church, only for a little while, he would come back when he was better. He looked at me with tear-filled eyes and thanked me for being the man of the house, asking if I could do it a little longer. If that's what cutting the grass and caring for my siblings meant, sure. I pretended nothing happened.

Our parents sold our yellow house for a white one. A broken down, moldy, asbestos-filled white one that took a whole summer to fix. I stared at the flat backyard. Hard, thin tree roots covered in white sand. I got my own room in the deal, the dream of every high schooler. My door had no handle, perks of a foreclosure. I slept soundly on my new, feather-soft bed.

My brother asked fewer questions as we grew. But he watched me. He watched me type emails on the family computer. Raging hormones fueled

my angst pouring out on the internet. I despised it, him, and wished he would go away. He refused. I told my friend how annoying my brother was. And he watched me. Vengeance. My parents sat me down at the kitchen table and asked why I said that, especially if I loved my brother. I stared down at the pristine wood, the flowing patterns of golden brown. My brother came in. I looked into his hurt eyes and apologized as if I were forced to. I hated myself for it.

*

I know the ones I can hunt wasps with, driving back the enemies of all that is good and righteous. I recognize the ones who will follow me into the sand dunes to unearth fossils. And the ones who make racetracks just for fun. I feel it in the evenings when we crowd around a tiny TV together.

"SHE DUG HER HEELS IN TO KEEP US FROM FALLING APART."

I smacked my brother's leg. He yelled, partly in pain, partly in triumph. We lounged on the couch, smartphones in hand. We grinded *Brawl Stars* together, as the kids say. Brotherly teamwork and communication squashed our enemies. Vigilance defined our hunt, but not our posture. Our reward another victory screen.

"You're leaving again," my brother said. I nodded. The next semester of college loomed on the horizon.

"Yeah, but I'll be back before too long," I said. And so the cycle went: college, home, and back again. We ready up for the next match. One more game.

I was nineteen the last time I saw my dad cry. My family gathered on the front porch atop a grassy green hill, different than the yellow-gold we left behind. I hugged each of them, twice.

DISTRACTED
acrylic on canvas by Alex Tackney

FALLING UP

Lily McNamara

I'm twelve years old, lying upside-down on the couch. Just a few hours ago, I found out that my mom had a miscarriage, and that I'll never meet my baby brother, never know quite how to miss him. My head hangs over the side, its shock of wild brown hair brushing against the uneven floorboards. My little brain runs itself in circles, struggling to justify what I've done. Tears fall up my face, rolling into my ears and hairline. I'm only a kid, but I've just now decided to clutch every sin close. Moisture that caught on my lip retreats, spilling into my nose. It burns, salty and uncomfortably warm, irritating the inside of my nostrils. A leaden weight pulls me down. I slide to the floor, bony shoulders pressed against hardwood, gangly legs hooked over the back of the couch. I can't recall where I read it. It doesn't matter. *Undue amounts of stress can be the cause of late-stage miscarriages.* Those words are burned into the landscape of my mind. I don't think they'll ever leave, because I've done some math of dubious quality and decided that my childish shenanigans are the stressor. It doesn't matter that he had a heart disease. It doesn't matter.

FOR THE BIRDS

Rebekah McCallum

Like a pudgy acrobat, the squirrel nimbly mounted the dew-soaked porch railing to help himself to the birdfeeder. Dad had tried everything. He had my brother help him. Andy was big enough to ride the Ferris wheel, cut the grass, stay up late, and defeat the squirrels. Not me; too little. Their latest solution involved coating the rod which held the feeder with a mixture of tabasco and peanut butter. Our neighborhood's squirrels must have been cultured; they accepted it as an appetizer. I sneaked through the kitchen door which screeched open like the ones that lead to cobwebby basements in horror movies, but the invader did not seem to mind my company. His whiskers twitched. With unblinking eyes fixed on me, he reached his paws towards the forbidden fruit.

The zinging report from my pink Daisy Rider broke the morning's silence and the squirrel stared in disbelief. He dropped with a pillowy thump onto the ground, my trophy of big kidhood.

I scrounged under the porch, hoping to find him dead. I've never seen anything more alive. Dirt and mulch mixed into his wound as he writhed like a molting snake. My grown-up cousin stooped to lay a hand on my shoulder. He held a rusty shovel. *Go inside.* I turned my back and buried my face in my hands. The creature gave a cry that ended suddenly. I couldn't help but look. Blood pooled beneath his head and stained his grey coat. I felt taller; a metallic smell filled my nose.

THE GAUNTLET

Lily McNamara

"I watched your fight."

The voice rouses me from my daze, and I glance up from the cracked, weed-sewn concrete, brows twisting in annoyance at the interruption of this rare moment of serenity, the statement calling to mind memories of bandage-bound knuckles connecting with bruised skin, blood spraying from my nose and spattering to the floor. It still aches from that last hit. Scratch that. My entire scar-riddled body aches. But few other women dominate a ring the way I do.

"And?" I rasp, squinting at the kid who stands beside me at the crosswalk. His slight stature is illuminated by the red of the stoplight as he shuffles from foot to foot, avoiding eye contact, his face open in an almost painfully earnest expression. *Squirrelly.* That's the first word that I snag onto as I watch him fidget. I huff a short, amused breath at the thought. It takes me a moment to understand the implications of his interruption, and my amusement drains away, replaced by irritation that prickles beneath my skin.

"Now hold on just a sec. The ring is near three blocks away from here. How did you know where I went after the match? You followin' me?" The walk to the tea house is just short enough that most nights I can get over there for a cup or two between matches. The Red Kettle is my sanctum, one of the few places I feel just a little at peace. The idea of my easy solitude being disrupted by this *squirrel* darkens my expression even further. He balks and rushes to make weak explanations.

"No! No, I was just..." He trails off, embarrassment turning his eyes to the street as we cross, to the illuminated walking signal, anywhere but my face. "Ok, I followed you. But only because I needed to speak with you! It was so busy after the fight, and I couldn't get a moment to—" He flounders for something to say. "Listen, I just really need to talk to you about something, please?" He has to do an awkward half-jog to keep up with my long strides, his ludicrously curly blond hair bouncing with each hurried step, and I can hear that he is already out of breath. That unpalatably earnest expression is back on his face, and I wince, realizing what he probably wants to "discuss," though I doubt discussion is what he's picturing right about now. It's happened less frequently as I've grown older, but the odd admirer will still approach me after a match, hoping to draw my affection with borderline vulgar flirtations and flattery that are about as subtle as a brick to the face. I guess the attention makes sense. I may be crossing into middle age, with hair that is flecked with gray and worry lines drawn deep into my face,

but I'm about as physically fit and well-muscled as they come, and some would say I possess an *elegant face*. Those who do usually catch a fist to their own.

A scowl tugs down the corners of my mouth, deepening the lines on my face to what I assume is a frightening degree. I drag out a harsh reply, my voice gruff and detached. "Listen, Squirrel." He blinks, so confused by the moniker that I find myself holding back another breathy laugh.

"SOME WOULD SAY I POSSESS AN ELEGANT FACE. THOSE WHO DO USUALLY CATCH A FIST TO THEIR OWN."

"That's not my—" he starts, but I cut him off.

"I don't care what your name is. While I am flattered by your interest," I ensure that the severe edge to my tone expresses a *very* different sentiment, "I'm not interested in partnership of any kind at the moment. And anyway, you're what, eighteen? Nineteen?" I rub a hand across my forehead to alleviate the headache I can feel clawing its way from the back of my neck, right up behind my eyes. It doesn't help. "I'm a number of dubious things, Squirrel, but a cradle-robber is not one of them." I add this comment without much thought, but it seems my response has sent Squirrel into a near fit of mortification.

"I wasn't—" he splutters, "That's not what I—" Squirrel's round face is splotched a flaming cherry-red I would have thought impossible for the human body to conjure as he stammers in a weak, flustered protest. Maybe I was off base. Watching Squirrel looking near to collapse from embarrassment as he struggles to recompose himself supports his seemingly guileless nature. "I just had to—" he paused, "had to ask you about—" Squirrel cuts himself off again, teeth worrying at his lower lip, pale brows drawn together as he stares intently at a streetlight, fingernails scratching at his sleeve, still studiously avoiding my eyes.

"Fine fine, that's not what you're interested in, I get it." I wave a calloused hand dismissively. "Dang kid, you need to relax. You'll live longer." He mumbles incoherently in response, face flushing an even starker shade. "I'd really love to grab a drink before the next match, I don't have all night,

so get on with whatever you need to say, and then please, *please*, leave me alone." It's an entirely genuine plea. I am desperate for five minutes ago when my life was all peace and solitude and entirely Squirrel-free. I pin my severe gaze onto his freckled, child-like face, and he finally drags his eyes to meet mine. My eyes are arrogant, indifferent, I know this. His are a warm, friendly brown, with smile lines already formed despite his youth, and smudges of shadow underneath that suggest he hasn't found sleep easy as of late. *You and I are in the same boat there.* As he watches me intently, I see something in his expression change, like he's made a call that he regrets, and his shoulders sag.

"No, you—you're right. This was a bad idea." Squirrel drags a hand across his face, the motion pulling his skin down like a melting wax figure, all dejection and burnt out wick. "I shouldn't have come. I'm sorry to bother you." I almost feel bad for him. That expression causes a tickle at the back of my mind, a long-suppressed memory resurfacing. A pair of sad eyes, watching me, full of confusion. No, that wasn't it. They were full of trust. *I shattered that trust, I left, I—No. Stop it.* I clouded those memories with years of alcohol and a number of hits to the head for a reason. But the damage is done. I look at Squirrel and I see *him*. I see an accusation where there is none, false-regret shredding all my good sense into a pathetic little pile. We're standing outside The Red Kettle now, the walk passing quickly in uncomfortable half-conversation. Once again, I interrupt his fretful rambling.

"It's fine. Don't apologize." I open the door to the tea shop and gesture inside. "You coming?" A look of disbelief is all I get from him. "If you don't go in I'm taking back my offer." That spurs him into action. He half trips into the shop in his haste, and I follow, ducking to avoid brushing my head against the doorframe. He skitters over to a two-seater by the window, and I sit heavily in the seat across from him. *This was a bad idea.*

I breathe deeply the scent of dried herbs, ignoring the ache in my bruised chest that the movement triggers. The Red Kettle is always heady with the smell of spicy teas, though I have found myself having trouble smelling lately. My nose is crooked, and I figure you break something enough times, it's gonna stop healing properly. There are bundles of herbs hanging from the ceiling which, though they are entirely decorative, give the shop a serene, rustic atmosphere. The first few times I showed up to the establishment a battered, frequently bloodied mess, I got alarmed looks from both the owner and other patrons. But after a number of trips post-fight I've become enough of a regular fixture that I'm paid little mind, if perhaps given a wide berth, and that suits me just fine. I lean back against the wall with a sigh, my hand tapping against the table as I watch the steam dance and unfurl into the air above my cup.

Squirrel babbles endlessly about absolutely nothing across from me, and I can feel my face soften. I admit it, begrudgingly, the kid's got a soothing presence. The endless chatter washes over me, and I respond with grunts of assent or short, one-word answers, my fingers playing over the scars across my hands and arms. He doesn't seem to mind my clipped responses, appearing to be pleased that I let him hang around at all, though I can tell something is... off. He still hasn't told me why he's here, and I suspect that his ceaseless jabbering

is his way of putting off whatever it was that he needed so desperately to talk about. I'm admittedly curious to know why this kid needed to see me so bad that he followed me all the way from the empty warehouse where the match took place. But he is clearly not ready to ask, so I let him talk about college, about his work, about the fight. I can tell that the last topic makes him vaguely uncomfortable. The fighting that I participate in is... less than legal, with bets changing hands over the often permanently damaged bodies of participants. This manner of underground competition is clearly not up Squirrel's alley.

I take a deep drink from the red clay cup. It tastes of blood. It had run from my broken nose after the fight and dried on my lips, mingling with the tea, the metallic flavor swirling in the herb-infused water. I sigh and set the cup down on the wooden table. The soft clink of clay against the lacquered wooden surface is loud in the sudden silence, and I finally take note that Squirrel has stopped talking. The quiet is odd, and I almost miss the sound of his prattling. The strangest look paints his face, a sad, apprehensive sort of expression, though I can see resolve hardening it at the edges.

"THE WORDS I SPEAK ARE VELVET PULLED TAUT OVER A BLADE, WEIGHED DOWN BY BITTER RESENTMENT."

"Do you think some people are meant to find one another?" Squirrel asks. I bark a sharp, cold laugh that doesn't quite reach my eyes. His eyes narrow, just slightly. "I'm serious! I just thought that—" he says indignantly, and I raise my hands in apologetic response. "I just mean, do you think that we have an influence? Can we choose, or are people thrown into our path and taken away, entirely out of our control?" I drag a calloused hand through my blood-matted hair. *Oh. That's new. Didn't realize the hit I took was that bad.* I feel along my scalp while I think of a response, and Squirrel watches me, concern coloring his features. I find the cut at the back of my head and an answer to his question at the same moment. Stirring my tea with a finger, I watch the dried blood break off and dissolve into the liquid, almost hypnotized by the swirling motion. I clasp the cup in my hands, the rough grain of the clay catching on my weathered palms. Draining the last of the now cooling tea, I let the silence stretch just a little bit longer, the soft murmur of distant conversations and the rustling of dried leaves overhead the only sounds breaking the quiet.

"You want my real answer?" The words I speak are velvet pulled taut over a blade, weighed down by bitter resentment, though against whom I do not know, and just the barest touch of melancholy. "You *can't* choose. This world has a way of forcing you exactly where it wants." I tip over my empty cup, watching it roll across the table. "You can fight, Squirrel. You can scratch and claw to get what you want." *Little brown eyes, his weight in my arms. He was so soft, so light, and it was so strange to hold him.*

I felt too sharp, too brittle, like my muscled arms would break and cut him. I wouldn't let him bleed. I told myself that's why I left. I stop the cup with the tips of my fingers as it teeters at the lip of the table, and set it upright in front of me once again. "In the end, it doesn't matter. You'll always find yourself right back where the world made you to be." I expect Squirrel to look put off by my words, to mumble his polite excuses and leave. When I glance over, I see no discomfort. I see exhaustion, and I see pity. But not for me. Maybe for himself. His eyes rove from hands to Japanese lanterns to customers at the door to the window. Maybe for everyone. Maybe the world.

"And where were you made to be?" he asks, his voice soft. He's too young to be so serious. To look so tired. To have eyes that hold such wisdom and remorse. He looks so much like me. He looks... *No*. I laugh, a hollow, joyless sound, shaken from my reverie.

"Here," I say, gesturing to the run down shop and to my bruised face and deeper still, I think, to those grating shards that I don't think I ever quite fixed, that become more frail each fight, each time I fall down and almost don't get up, each time I remember those sad brown eyes. "The world got its claws into me and dragged me right down where I belonged." Squirrel stares down at the table, fidgeting with his hands, then back up at me. His eyes look wet.

"I SPIT A MOUTHFUL OF BLOOD TO THE FLOOR AT HIS FEET."

"You know why I'm here, don't you?"

I tug on one of the dried bundles suspended above me, watch as a single leaf shakes loose and drifts down to the table in lazy circles. The silence drags on. I stand up. When I try to speak, I hear my voice in my head, sharp and distant, but I detect a break to it that I *despise*. My pulse roars in my ears, and I realize that I have been biting my tongue; I can feel the blood gathering between my lips. Squirrel stands up too, with such force that his chair falls over behind him.

"You do," he whispers. "I saw you," he says, "walking into that warehouse for the fight, and you were so familiar. I saw you and I *knew*. You knew, too."

The sick-sweet taste of blood in my mouth, his voice like an echo down the years, even the rasp of the clay mug against my palm is all too much. I spit a mouthful of blood to the floor at his feet. The same blood that pulses in his veins.

*

Stumbling back with a grin, I drag a thumb under my nose, bleeding. I bring my arms back up in front of my face. I'm lightheaded, bleeding too much. I don't care. It feels good, to take a hit and give it right back. It feels simple. In that moment, in the pain and triumph and the thundering

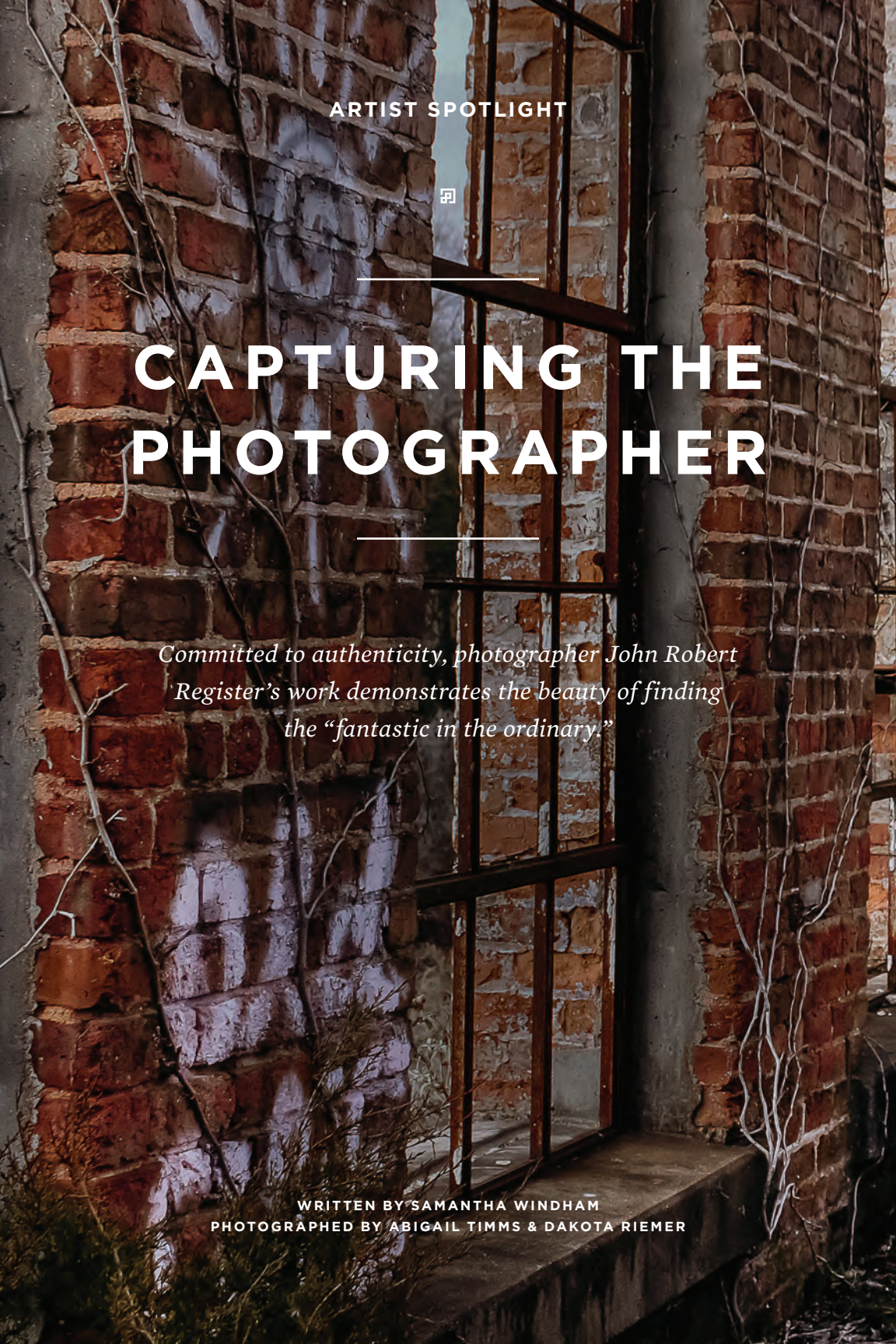
of my pulse, there is no guilt, no regret. My heel slams into the man's jaw as I go in for a spin kick, the jarring sound of skin impacting skin echoing in my ears. He brings a hand to his bruising face with an expression twisting into one of pained annoyance and spits out a tooth knocked loose by my blow. I take a step back, almost to the edge of the mat, rolling my broad, scarred shoulders, staying light on my bare feet, ready to evade should my opponent throw a punch.

His fist flies, and I duck to the side, bringing my own up into the gut of the man, with such force that my own knuckles ache. The blow forces the breath from his body with a wheeze, and he doubles over. Caught up in my minor victory, I'm too late to duck away as he lunges forward, driving his elbow into my side with a triumphant shout. I wince and bite back a pained yell, evading his second attack with ease, his fist rushed only through empty air, though I can already tell the bruise beginning to form will be there for weeks.

He telegraphs his next hit, aiming directly for my head. I should dodge. I always dodge. It's easy, simple. But over his shoulder, I see Squirrel back again, in the corner of the room, watching, tying on gloves.

The fist connects with my face with a nasty crunch and my head snaps back. I trip over the edge of the mat, the room violently tilts, and I hear the crack of my head against the unforgiving concrete. I feel nothing. I don't get up. My hands shake. Everything in my blurred vision is strange, like looking through cracked glass. I hear muffled shouts of the audience. I blink sluggishly. The side of my face is pressed against the cold ground, and I can feel blood pooling in my cheek, in the back of my throat.

Then the pain, the panic, is interrupted by gloved hands grasping my face. Squirrel is kneeling above me. Speaking, but I can't hear it. I push his hands away as if I'm blocking a punch. My wild strike lands on his jaw. His fist slams into my face, struggling to keep me down. Sparks fly across my vision. It feels right. To hold him again. To meet him eye-to-eye. I can't feel my lips, my tongue lies heavy in my mouth, and I choke. I want to say I'm sorry that my jagged edges hurt him. I'm sorry that I left him. But it isn't true. And I can see in his eyes that he knows it. I feel my face swelling from his blows; I see his face bloody from mine. I can see it in his eyes, those soft sweet brown eyes: *two of a kind, aren't we?* The kid is smiling. Two of a kind. And where we're meant to be.



ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

CAPTURING THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Committed to authenticity, photographer John Robert Register's work demonstrates the beauty of finding the "fantastic in the ordinary."

WRITTEN BY SAMANTHA WINDHAM
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ABIGAIL TIMMS & DAKOTA RIEMER

JOHN ROBERT REGISTER'S LIVING AREA IS FILLED WITH artifacts from his photography expeditions—dominoes, rubber balls, even the orange chair in the corner—evidence of his attention to detail. A senior graphic design major, he has been doing photography for four years, inspired by William Eggleston and Stephen Shore. While the colorful street style of these artists can be seen in John Robert's work, his style has taken on a life of its own through his passion for capturing the beauty—the meaning, the experience—he finds in the ordinary places and objects around him.

"I can't capture the smell of the grass," he says, "or the chill of the wind, but I can choose which moment I'm convinced must be shared. When I do that, I can create the feeling of what I was in and allow others to feel it with me. It's about the emotions."

A self-proclaimed wanderer, John Robert stops at nothing to capture these emotions. The lens of his film camera is cracked from the time he hopped a fence to explore a place he "probably shouldn't have been,"

"I CAN'T CAPTURE THE SMELL OF THE GRASS, OR THE CHILL OF THE WIND, BUT I CAN CHOOSE WHICH MOMENT I'M CONVINCED MUST BE SHARED."

though that instance of potential trespassing isn't his wildest. While shooting in Walhalla in intense heat, he found an abandoned tour bus left out to rot. He climbed in anyway, risked locking himself in to bake, just to capture the history that bus had seen. He has frequently been known to follow the railroad tracks of unfamiliar towns, in search of the beauty and history of the old South alongside places reclaimed by time.

He doesn't want his life to be overly curated, or for his art to become purely about the presentation; unlike many, this photographer chooses to not keep an extensive social media feed, preferring for those who see his work to see it once and experience the moment as he did when he captured it—as one that is unique, never to be repeated exactly. Committed to authenticity, he keeps his photos unedited, "raw." "You shouldn't try and make it perfect," he says, "it's about character,"

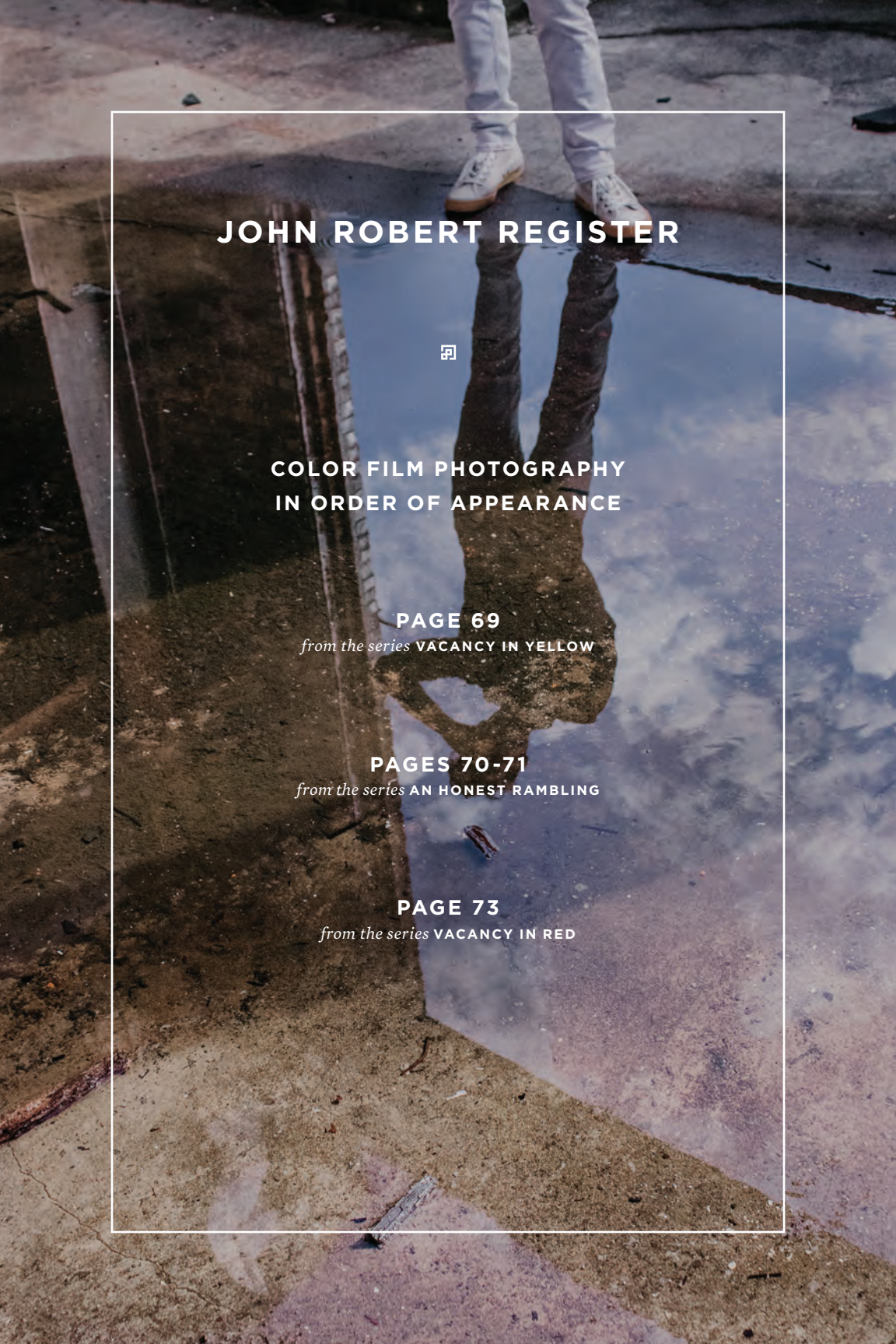
unfiltered moments that speak for themselves. The imperfections take the viewers on a journey with him, searching for "the fantastic in the ordinary." Capturing the essence of an instance functions as an act of faith. Inspired by *The Color Purple*, he says, from memory, "I think it [annoys the life out of] God if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." John Robert's art, as well as his faith, demands that he notice everything.

As he scrolls through his laptop, showing me his work, it's clear that his craft is an extension of his love for exploration, and that capturing it is a necessity. He leans in as he clicks through albums. As he tells the stories behind each photograph, he looks far away, or perhaps more deeply inside. He tends to tug on his hair and rock back and forth as he reflects on each shot, lost in the memories of both captured and uncaptured moments. Recalling one of his favorites, he can't stop smiling—an instance of a perfect sunset peeking through an alley. As he shot, the fireflies came out, flickering in time with the setting sun.

"CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF AN INSTANCE FUNCTIONS AS AN ACT OF FAITH."

"But when I got back, I realized the film roll had jammed," he says. "All the pictures were ruined, but I still got to experience the beauty." Then he adds, "I still got to experience that beauty."

And that is what it is all about—for him, and for the viewer for whom he captures, or sometimes only almost captures, those incredible moments. As we conclude our interview, he asks if I want to meet his dog. "He's a Pyrenees," he says, smiling. "They're known to be wanderers."



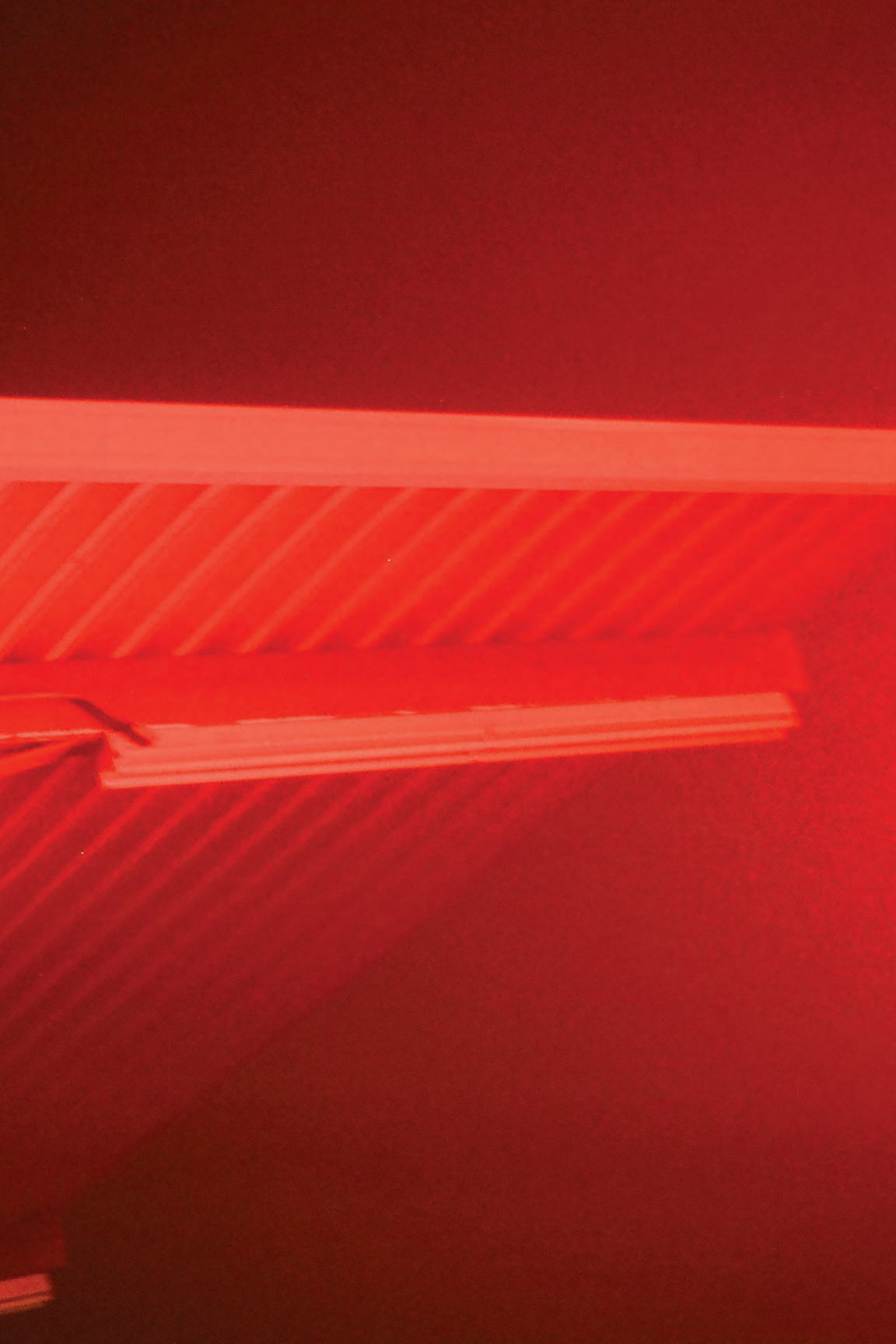
JOHN ROBERT REGISTER

COLOR FILM PHOTOGRAPHY
IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE


RADIATOR
SERVICE


SUMMIT CHU
OLONY


COIN



MEALS ON WHEELS

Andrew Robertson

She watched as I pulled the van into the driveway, her eyes focused, searching. Ms. Glenda Reeves, 106 Sycamore Drive, number 14 on my list of meal deliveries. I sat behind the wheel and watched her watch me. The strain on her face told me I could see her far better than she could see me. *Time for another introduction,* I thought. I got out, packed the food in the plastic bag, closed the door, and took one more glance at my information sheet to make sure I had the correct name. The last client I greeted with the wrong name had not received me very graciously. "Reeves," I reminded myself. "Glenda Reeves."

A 20-foot wooden ramp connected the land to the porch. As I approached it, I felt her watchful eye searching from behind the screen. "Good afternoon, Ms. Reeves," I called out, smiling as I scaled the ramp.

She sat on an outdoor sofa, her walker in front of her. Her silver hair ran shoulder-length meeting her small, round body. From the look of her, I would have placed her in the early nineties. "And to you too," she replied, a small smile breaking her serious stare.

"My name is Joe," I yelled, smiling. I came to the screen door. "I am with Meals on Wheels," I hollered, making sure to annunciate well. "May I come in?"

She looked me up and down. "You may, but you don't have to be so loud. I can hear you," she snickered.

"Yes, ma'am." I let out an embarrassed laugh, my cheeks reddening. "I've brought you your lunch for today. Where would you like it?"

"Inside on the counter, if you don't mind." She pointed toward the front door.

I nodded, turned to the door, and stepped inside. The smell hit me first. The air was stale and dusty. It smelled like the place hadn't been well cleaned in years. I glanced around the room. Stacks of dirty dishes filled the kitchen sink, each dirtier than the last. Mouse traps littered the floor. The counter was home to an assembly of pill bottles. The only light in the room came from the orange glow of a corner lamp and from the sunlight piercing the kitchen window, the shadow of the cross on the windowsill casting itself across the floor. Maybe it protected the mice from the traps. Beside the kitchen, the living room sat shrouded in darkness. The wallpaper was chipped and peeling, the carpet stained and rough.

"Is this good?" I called.

Ms. Reeves leaned to see through the door. "Yes, that'll be fine," she said, motioning for me to join her on the porch.

I placed the bag on the counter and tiptoed across the mousetraps, almost walking into the refrigerator. It was covered with magnets, cards, and family photos collected over the years. One of the pictures, creased and faded, was of a guy my age. He had my brown hair color and style, the same green eyes, and what seemed to be a similar height and build. *Funny,* I thought.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Ms. Reeves?" I asked, closing the door.

She patted the couch cushion beside her. "Won't you sit awhile?" she asked, staring up at me. "I can make you some lemonade."

"Oh, that's very kind of you. I wish I could, but I have some more people to deliver to," I lied. I did have one more person on my list, but I wasn't up for social hour.

"Oh," she said, disappointed. "What did you say your name was?"

"Joe."

"Joe," she repeated. "Joe what?"

"Joe McAlister. I'm delivering meals for Meals on Wheels this summer."

"Oh, that's nice," she said. She looked me up and down again then met my eyes.

"Yes, ma'am. It sure beats standing behind a cash register at McDonald's all day."

She chuckled.

"Well, I better get going." I opened the screen door, closing it softly so it didn't slam behind me. "It was nice meeting you, Ms. Reeves. I'll see you later this week."

"Nice meeting you too," she said softly. "Goodbye."

I waved, descended the ramp, and entered the van. Cranking the ignition, I glanced back at the porch. She was watching me just as she had when I arrived. Searching, scanning for my body behind the windshield. I put the car in reverse and entered the next address into my GPS.

*

Two days later, I pulled into Ms. Reeves' driveway for the second time. It was Friday. Delivery days were Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Every delivery came with a hot meal for that day and a frozen meal to heat on the days between deliveries. I parked, loaded the plastic bag, and approached the ramp.

"Hello again, Ms. Reeves," I hollered on my way up. "I've got your lunch." When my greeting wasn't met, I looked up to see an empty porch.

Inside, I thought. I passed through the screen door, knocked on the front door and called, "Meals on Wheels!" *Give the clients a couple of minutes to come to the door,* I remembered my boss telling me. *Most of them are very slow.* A few minutes passed and Ms. Reeves did not answer. I knocked again and placed my ear to the door. *Knock a second and third time if they don't come to the door the at first. Sometimes they can't hear very well,* my boss had said. *If they don't answer the third knock, call them. If they don't answer the phone, call us immediately.* Distressed, I knocked again, announced myself, and heard the latch moving on the other side.

"SHE WAS WATCHING ME JUST AS SHE HAD WHEN I ARRIVED. SEARCHING, SCANNING FOR MY BODY BEHIND THE WINDSHIELD.

"Hello?" I heard from behind the door.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Reeves. It's Joe from Meals on Wheels. I've got lunch for you."

The door opened and Ms. Reeves stood behind her walker, smiling. "Oh, hi," she said. "Will you help me outside?" she asked, pointing to the porch sofa.

I grabbed her arm, feeling her feeble body lean into me as I led her to her seat. Holding up the bag, I asked, "Would you like this on the counter again?"

She nodded. "What have you brought me?"

"It looks like roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, steamed broccoli, and some fruit," I said, walking toward the kitchen. I set the bag by the pills.

"How are you today, Ms. Reeves?" I asked, returning to the porch.

"Fine," she said, her eyes studying my face. "You've been here before." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, ma'am. I was here the other day."

"Oh," she said, trying to focus her memory. "You sure are a handsome young man," she said, exchanging her confusion for a smile.

I blushed. "Well, thank you. You look lovely yourself."

"Thank you, dear," she replied, shifting her body as she let the compliment boost her posture. "Won't you sit awhile?"

"I can't sit, but I can stay a few more minutes. There are still people I have to go see."

"Oh." Her eyes met the ground. "What did you say your name was?"

"Joe McAlister."

She raised her eyes, repeating my name to me like she had before. "Joe McAlister."

"Do you have any family nearby?" I asked. My boss told me to ask about family when making small talk with the elderly. *It brightens their days,* I remember her saying.

Ms. Reeves' eyes shifted to the yard. Her gaze was blank, expressionless. I looked to where her eyes went but there was nothing there. "Ms. Reeves?" I asked.

"Hm?" she said, breaking her gaze to look at me.

"Are you okay?"

"How old are you?" she asked, her eyes circling while she examined my face.

"Twenty-one."

"You look like my son," she responded, the spheres of her pupils focusing harder as she stared into my eyes.

"Does he live nearby?"

"Brian died when he was twenty-one. Your age," she said, shifting her gaze back to the spot in the yard. I remembered the old picture on the fridge. A guy my height with similar features. Brian.

"I'm sorry to hear that." I fished for something else to say but nothing came.

"He was driving home from a friend's house one night and was hit head-on. Dead on impact, the coroner said." She grew silent for a few moments, nothing to break the air but the sound of a few birds chirping.

"He parked his car there." She pointed to the place where she had been staring. "He never came home. My husband died a few years later. Complications from colon surgery. Brian was our only child." She released a sigh. "I never remarried. I've lived alone in this house for 45 years."

"Do you have any other family nearby? Someone to check on you?"

"My niece lives next door." She pointed to the house beside hers. "And my brother Harold lives nearby. They're close," she said, then silently turned back to the yard. "You look just like him," she said again.

We sat in silence for an awkward minute, her mind absent and mine tongue-tied. "Well, it's good you have family close by, but I better head on. I've still got people to see."

"Goodbye," she said, her eyes not straying from the vacant spot in the yard.

*

The next week, I climbed the ramp to an empty porch and opened the front door. "Ms. Reeves," I called. "Ms. Reeves, it's Joe!" She was in the middle of the kitchen, her body slumped over her walker. The pills on the counter were knocked over and a mousetrap had snapped itself onto the hem of her gown. "Ms. Reeves, are you okay?"

She turned her head to face me, a nebulous look contracting her pale face. "Oh, hello," she said, trying for a smile. "Won't you come in?"

"Let me help you sit down," I said, crossing the room.

"I was just making myself lunch," she said, her breath heaving as we traversed the kitchen floor. "Would you like something?"

"No, ma'am, I'm fine. Besides, I bring you lunch remember? You don't have to make yourself a meal."

SNAP!

"Damn!" I muttered, staring down at the mousetrap that had clamped onto my right foot.

"What's that, dear?" she asked, raising her tired face to mine.

"Nothing," I said, trying to shake off the trap. I flung it off my shoe, sending it out the kitchen door and onto the porch. Together, we made it

to a chair by the counter. Ms. Reeves sat down, resting her drained body on the countertop.

"Could you pour me some juice?"

"Of course." I turned and faced the mounds of dishes in the sink. Grime from meals past collected on the sides of bowls; mold wafted from the bottom of glasses. "Ms. Reeves, do you have any cups?" *Clean* cups, I tried to imply.

She pointed at a cabinet above the sink. I opened it and found a few plates, some bowls, but no cups. I searched a couple more cabinets and drawers, seeing none but the dirty ones in the sink. Finally, I found a stack of red solo cups in a cupboard. I grabbed one, dashed to the fridge, yanked open the door, and felt the air inside me escape all at once. Inside the fridge was a carton of orange juice, and beside it, every meal I had delivered to 106 Sycamore Drive. Based on the dates, some of the meals were from the previous delivery driver. There must have been twenty or thirty meals stacked side by side in the fridge, flies swarming the plastic-covered trays.

"Ms. Reeves," I gasped. "Why haven't you eaten these?"

She offered no reply, only a head shake. I poured her a glass of orange juice and began heating the meal I brought for the day. While she ate, I stepped outside to call the office. I reported my situation and asked if they had an emergency contact in their system. They called her brother, telling me to wait until he arrived. A half hour later, Harold's grey truck pulled into the drive and I went outside to meet him. He walked to the porch, slow and steady, thanking me for waiting with a calm, tender voice.

"Sir, it may not be my place to say, but she doesn't need to be living alone."

"You're right, son," he said with a smile. "It's not. We take care of our own." He patted me on the shoulder and opened the door. "Glenda," I heard him say. "Are you okay?" As he closed the door, I could see her staring at me from the counter, her head following the door as it took her line of sight with it as it closed.

I walked to the van, slumping my body in the seat and resting my arms on the steering wheel. Looking back at the house I muttered, "What are you holding onto?"

*

I was back two days later. "Good afternoon," she said from behind the screen. The color had returned to her face and she could weather a smile.

"Ms. Reeves," I sighed, reassured, "how are you today?"

"Just fine," she chimed. "And you?"

"I'm just fine too. May I heat up your food for you?" I wasn't leaving room for user error anymore.

"Why, sure. There's a tray in there somewhere."

In the kitchen, the dishes still occupied the sink, the pills remained scattered on the counter, and when I opened the refrigerator door, the expired meals were packed just as they were before. "We take care of our own," I mocked. "Bull." I unwrapped the hot meal, opened the carton of milk, peeled a quarter of the banana, then placed them all on a tray I found on top of the fridge.

"Lunch is served," I said, imitating the fanciest waiter I could imagine. Ms. Reeves giggled and began eating.

"Are you hungry? Why don't you stay awhile?"

"Not right now," I said. "Would you excuse me?" I returned to the kitchen, found a trash bag, and stuffed the rotten meals from the fridge inside. Next, I turned to the sink. When all the dishes were hand scrubbed and the dishwasher running, I hoisted the trash bag over my shoulder and stepped onto the porch.

"WHAT ARE YOU HOLDING ONTO?"

"Spring cleaning?" Ms. Reeves chuckled.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, smiling as she ate her meal. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No, thank you."

"In that case, I'll leave you to your meal. Have a great day, Ms. Reeves."

She waved goodbye as she chewed on a bite of banana.

*

She wasn't on the porch when I climbed the ramp the next day. I lifted my fist to the door. *If,* I thought. *Only if.* I banged my fist against the door.

"Brian?" she asked, the shock jolting her upright.

Eyes closed, I inhaled and exhaled. "Hi," I said. I leaned down, smiling, allowing her to take me into her arms. I felt her weight shift as her legs began to buckle beneath her. "Here, come sit down," I said, leading her to the porch sofa. We sat and she took my hand.

"Oh, Brian," she said, staring into my eyes. "I was worried sick."

"I know you were," I said. "I'm sorry." She nodded, then she turned her head once more to the yard where Brian's car used to stay. I got the tray from the kitchen and brought her meal out. I placed it in front of her and again sat beside her. She forgot I was there, forgot about eating, forgot about the time ticking as the two of us sat there and watched the yard, waiting for ghosts.

RE: IN THIS AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

Samantha Brooks

If my family would act more like suitemates,
then maybe I could concentrate
on my classes that have turned to online
learning. But right now, I am borderline

crazy, hiding from my sister and mother
who want to "girl talk," and at the door, my brother
knocks repeatedly, and I hope my class won't hear
the yelling in the den. We students are pioneers

in this new age of Zoom and uncertainty.
Together, on screens, we mourn the memories
of campus activities and the ability to create
a home with strangers we called suitemates.

COULD BE

Rebecca Lesley

i hope your feet
touch the water
of the california coast.

like you used to talk about doing
with your face lighting up
on the couch in your pajamas
when i forced you to watch addison
move to santa monica for a fresh start.

you changed your major,
despite what everybody told you.
you always were an actress,
a quick-change artist.

i hope you make your
big break in hollywood
and prove everyone wrong.

i hope you raise a beautiful family.
like you explained to me
that night in the living room
when you came home
and said you knew he was the one.

i didn't tell you
before i packed my things
and left
with no explanation.

it's been two years now.
and i know i haven't said it yet
so here it is:
i hope you marry your best friend.

MULTI-LAYERED PHOTO
photography by Taylor Smith

MY CUP RUNNETH OVER
acrylic on plexiglass by Anastasia Shcherbina

ENOUGH

Caleb Flachman

When he last appeared, I was hanging up new Valentine's Day signs in his Dillard's. His fat, varicose body burst through the front doors—executives in tow—wheeled about by a secretary frantically trying to please him. Every employee in the store, myself included, instantly wiped on their most saccharine smiles. I checked my hair and makeup in a mirror and ran through who I would sacrifice: janitor, Steve, bad breath. I checked my own breath.

I could hear someone over in the kids department:

"Good morning, Mr. Richardson. How are the beloved hydrangeas? Oh, yes the early frost, isn't it tragic? But they are bouncing back? Hefty little suckers aren't they? Sorry, sir. No, sir. I will never use that language in your store again."

Mr. Terry Richardson, Jr., was making his rounds, interviewing everyone about employee conduct. Dirt was expected. Had anyone cussed recently? Anyone taking advantage of their employee discount? Who had shown up looking frumpy and threadbare?

Everyone wrung their hands and pointed fingers in a penitential routine as if Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed had appeared together in a cloud of onionskin scriptures. Which is actually what Mr. Terry Richardson, Jr., looks like: a mishmash of assorted parts fused together in an experiment gone wrong. The giant heart-shaped poster board I was wrestling with slipped from my fingers and almost fell to the ground.

I could hear someone in the shoe department going on about misplaced coat hangers. "And they just go missing. We can never find them when we need them. Sometimes we have to keep stock in the back because we don't have enough. One poor customer couldn't find his size. I had to go to the back to get it for him."

It was a solid strategy: filing a complaint with no culprit. Give evidence, but put the responsibility of incrimination on someone else. Wash your hands of the thing, as it were. Their conversation fell silent and I moved to the next poster.

Suddenly he was before me, shapeless hands gripped together, eyes looking up at me from far inside his skull. I shrugged off my surprise as best I could and greeted him. I asked about his dogs. He waved a hand and asked me about Ivan in shoes.

Someone must have made up something about Ivan already. Steve was saved.

"I mean, he's a good guy. But, between you and me, sometimes Ivan has bad breath," I said.

"Bad breath," said he, murmuring. "Thank you. I'll have a chat with him. Carry on."

I forced a smile and a thank you and returned to hanging up posters. I knew where he was going next. Armed with my testimony, he would end his last appearance in the same way he ends all his appearances: by finding a scapegoat. This time, I knew it would be Ivan.

"EVERYONE WRUNG THEIR HANDS AND POINTED FINGERS IN A PENITENTIAL ROUTINE AS IF JESUS, BUDDHA, AND MOHAMMED HAD APPEARED TOGETHER IN A CLOUD OF ONIONSKIN SCRIPTURES."

In view of every customer and employee in the store, Mr. Terry Richardson, Jr., called Ivan away from the shoe department. While I could not make out what he was saying, I knew the gist. He was detailing the infractions and intoning the sentence.

Mr. Terry Richardson, Jr., fell silent and pointed. Ivan slowly put down the box of Sperry's he was holding and slipped out through the mall entrance like a disinvited, nearly disembodied party guest. Nobody moved.

Then, with a sudden look of righteousness, Mr. Terry Richardson, Jr.'s waved his hand. He was then turned about in his enormous wheelchair to lead forth his procession and be enveloped by the glaring light of the parking lot.

And we, the people of Dillard's, returned to our business as though nothing had happened; gabbing about fireable offenses was a known fireable offense. Samantha was canned last quarter for it. I went back to setting up garish perfume posters for Valentine's Day.

Prove your love with Rancid Odors by Highly-Photoshopped-Half-Naked-Actress. 10% off when you sign up for a Dillard's card.

I could feel Rebecca, former homecoming queen-turned-perfumer, staring at me from her glittery shrine of colognes. The color of her pencil skirt (bright pink today) was as usual reflected in her choice of eyeshadow. She's never subtle.

"You look just miserable," she said. "You need a boyfriend."

"Right, because a man will complete me," I said, forcing a poster into a frame.

"Uh-huh," she said unironically, my sarcasm glancing woodenly off her hairspray.

The poster pinched my finger against the sharp metal frame. "Damn," I said under my breath and put my finger in my mouth. Rebecca looked up suddenly. *Darn. Strike one.* I just hoped that she would forget before Mr. Terry Richardson, Jr.'s, next appearance.

Everyone says Rebecca is thirty, but I figure her to be about thirty-four, meaning her days of himbos hanging off her arm are reaching their inevitable end. The way I figure it, she will settle down by the end of the year with a man she can only just tolerate. "He's just wonderful," she'll say, tight lipped, by which she will actually mean, "His paycheck is wonderful."

She will immediately stop working, start driving a minivan, and have two kids named Sarah Grace and Robert David so that she can either brag or complain about them at chintzy wine parties, depending on her mood and how much wine she has consumed. Then, when I run into her at the grocery store, she will have the audacity to invite me to her women's Bible study on Wednesday nights, which likely consists of an hour of gossip thinly veiled as a reading of the latest Beth Moore book.

"You want to know what's really bothering me?" I asked. Rebecca looked up from admiring her nails and leaned forward on the glass counter.

"Look at the legs on this woman," I said, gesturing to the poster I was holding. "No woman alive looks like that." Rebecca blinked for a second and then laughed.

"You need a boyfriend."

*

Off at 7:00 that night, I drove down the commercial main drag towards home. Everything was business as usual. The normal line of cars wrapping around the Chick-Fil-A waiting for their perfunctory "my pleasure." A thriving vape shop. A defunct Long John Silvers. But I was doing something strange—I was praying. Well, "praying" is generous. More like leaving ugly voice messages on the telephone of whatever cosmic power exists.

"Four years of art school. And I work at Dillard's. You're really something, you know that?"

I played pretend that a voice kinder than the one I grew up with came back muffled through the receiver, saying, "Yes. I know. None of this is fair." Because that would have been enough. Because a God like that would have the decency to admit His faults instead of coercing undeserved praise from His children.

I upped the steps to the apartment I share with Mom and ran headlong into the stench of a Hungry Man dinner—something Mom has this weird thing for. I think she's compensating for the lack of a man around the house by recreating what she thinks a man would enjoy—a thousand milligrams of sodium disguised as watery mashed potatoes and gravy that tastes like motor oil.

"How was your day?" she shouted, aglow before the radioactive whirring of the microwave. I didn't answer, preferring the solace of my bedroom.

A few minutes later, I heard the whirring stop. She showed up at my bedroom door, breathing over a forkful of nuclear-orange corn, contaminating my room with Hungry-Man toxins.

Mom was pretending she wanted to hear about my day so I did the sane thing and pretended not to notice. I sat on my bed. I crossed my legs. I pulled out my sketch book and tried to draw. I picked at the lint on my shirt. I put my hair into a ponytail. Twice. I fiddled with my phone. I drew a lotus flower while mustering the strength to say something to make her go away. "Today, on my lunch break, I ate two Cinnabon's for lunch," I said.

"Wow," she said and slung potatoes in her mouth. "I mean, it's your wardrobe. I'm not buying you new clothes."

I pulled my sketchbook up on my knees. "At least I won't have microwave-dinner sodium-sausage toes," I said.

She was glaring at me, but now I was busy drawing the future of her feet. Her toes were going to be truly appalling in about twenty minutes.

"Just drink some water," I said. "That'll flush your toes right out."

"They let someone else go, didn't they?"

"Did you know that pure sodium explodes when it's dropped in water? What if your toes just vaporize the next time you shower?"

"Who was it this time?"

"Good grief. It would be like a slasher film. Fragments of toes all over the bathroom. And I'd have to clean it up. Thankfully, I think your toes are real pretty."

"Who was it?"

"Ivan. Shoes."

"Just 'Ivan'?"

"What?"

"I don't know anyone named Ivan. I don't think I even know anyone who knows anyone named Ivan. Is he an immigrant?"

"Yeah, he came from Mars to be burned in the fires of Mr. Terry Richardson, Jr.'s, hell."

I turned my sketchbook around to show her the horrific destiny of her extremities. "Sausage toes," I said.

"Have you ever considered," she began without looking at my grotesque masterpiece, "that Mr. Terry Richardson, Jr., has to maintain his reputation? If he puts up with bad employees, why would people shop at his Dillard's?"

I stared at her. What was that supposed to mean? I tried to keep drawing but all that came off my pencil was graphite.

"I'm hungry," I said, rolling out of bed.

"Fine, but we don't have any cinnamon rolls in the freezer."

"I was thinking tofu. Slimy and straight out of the package."

Of all things, that finally got to her.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked.

What is wrong with me indeed? I pressed past her and stuck my head in the fridge. We didn't have tofu. I closed the fridge and settled on some dry cereal. Her TV burst to life. Someone was repeatedly saying, "I'd like to wake up now" and a laugh track crescendoed. But there's nothing funny about waking up when you're living a nightmare.

*

I found hordes of rude old southern women shuffling through Dillard's the next afternoon. Like living Crusaders, they came, dragging their husbands behind them. Their sharp, staccato questions echoed off the walls. They ran us in circles. They left stacks of capris toppled and bickered over blouses that they put back in the wrong places.

One of these Crusaders—a spry, classy-looking woman—approached me while I was folding polos. She stared up at me as she came, blinking and studying.

"I need help finding something," she said, chortling.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, putting a shirt down. "How can I help you?"

"That's the thing. I don't know. But I want something." She was gripping a turquoise purse with a studded cross on it.

"Well, what did you have in mind?"

"I'd like to buy everything in this store, honey. Everything. I have money. But I just need someone to help me know what to buy. Do you see my dilemma? I think you do. You're a smart girl."

"Well, I mean we have clothes and jewelry and perfume and shoes, ma'am."

"Are you even listening?" She asked, her voice impossibly going up another octave. "I'm asking you to help an old lady pick something. I'm in the most pitiful position I can think of."

"And I'm trying to help you, but, you know. What about lingerie?"

"Dear Lord in Heaven, you people are..." and here she hesitated, struggling to find an adjective that wouldn't land her in Hell, "...unbelievably... useless." She threw up her hands and pounded off behind some athletics.

Slack-jawed, I picked up another shirt. *Left sleeve, right sleeve, left quarter, right quarter, in half.* What was that? I mean I know this is retail but who does that? Maybe it was an act because she was hiding some secret rendezvous from her crusty husband. Maybe, once she was hidden behind that rack of nylon shorts, she took a sharp left and circled back round the store to the lingerie. Or maybe she had some horrible form of dementia.

That, however, would be what they call conjecture. It would assume that there is a rational explanation for everything. And that is something that the people of Dillard's don't have the luxury of believing. Left sleeve, right sleeve, left quarter, right quarter, in half.

I was still trying for an explanation when closing time came and we herded the final stragglers to the checkout counters. While they paid for their armfuls of clothing, the mall security guards came by to lock the big sliding cage at the front of the store. We said goodnight to the customers and tried to smile and turned off all but a few lights.

I slipped out the back door and it clanged shut behind me. I paused beside my car for a long moment. My condensed breath floated up and curled about the stars. I fumbled with my keys.

You people are... useless.

My car was cold. I dropped my keys on the floor. When I flipped on my headlights, I exposed a group of vagrant youths on the other side of the small back lot. They scattered instantly and noisily, like nervous poultry, kicking out their cigarettes and dragging their bicycles into the bushes and reeds, hiding their beer bottles under their shirts.

But one boy—maybe fourteen or fifteen years old—who had clambered his way into a sitting position on top of a giant HVAC box, brazenly pumped his legs and stared right back at me. He deliberately moved his hand to his face and took a long, stoic drag from a cigarette. The smoke emerged from his lips in a single, unbroken stream that seemed to ask, "Woman, what has any of this to do with me? Mine hour is not yet come."

I didn't know.

I couldn't think.

I looked at the metal door.

This wasn't Mr. Terry Richardson, Jr.'s, Dillard's. It had his name on it. It had his portrait in the entrance. He called the shots. But it was we, the people of Dillard's, who told him what to shoot. We poisoned him with fear and we gave him the antidote. We had formed him in our own image.

"THE SMOKE EMERGED FROM HIS LIPS IN A SINGLE, UNBROKEN STREAM THAT SEEMED TO ASK, 'WOMAN, WHAT HAS ANY OF THIS TO DO WITH ME?'"

I could hear the youths shouting obscenities from the bushes, the glass shattering, the metal ringing every time the boy beat it with his legs.

The boy lifted a small, square bottle to his lips and drank deeply of its contents. He smiled at me. Out of reverence or fear—I don't know which—I cut off my headlights. As the boy vanished, I breathed out a genuine prayer. It wafted misty and smoky from my lips, "God, I don't understand what you're doing."

And I truly heard Him whisper, "I know."

CHASMIC CONNECTIONS
colored pencil on paper by Charlie Classe

SYNESTHESIA

Carson Cawthon

It was just a few days ago that I sat in a chair, in a corner, and I cried. I cried for lives lost and lives not yet found. I considered the lilies dying, the birds cold in their nests, the man on the corner and the man in the corner office, both toiling much and gathering little. I gazed down at my chipped, painted fingernails. I wondered what kind of God would create this world, and yet, like a current running under the surface, I wondered what kind of God would create the *feeling* of the color red. I marveled at the joy I felt looking down on my fingertips, prancing across keyboards and turning pages like little sparks, like fireworks, like red hot coals. I silently conceded to the ecclesiastical power of pink ballet slippers and the brassy golden aura of a trumpet solo. I flirted with thoughts of emerald green corduroy, glistening silver heirloom rings, and smooth black leather. I remembered color.

I AM GOING TO BECOME A WRITER

Adam Jobson

I only sort of took AP Calculus because, officially, it was a two-semester course. I only took one. With some amount of difficulty, I dropped the class at the midpoint, though I was fully aware that those around me thought I was making a mistake. At the public high school where I spent eleventh and twelfth grade, AP Calculus was practically a rite of passage for high-performing students. Considering the difficulty of the subject, the school returned impressive results on the AP Calc exam year after year, a feat students and faculty most commonly attributed to the competence of their teacher—a somewhat small man with a bald head and a distinct Indian accent.

Every high school has teachers who are widely beloved by their students, but this particular man had a seemingly unmatchable reputation—everyone knew his class was difficult, but he was vastly popular among his students all the same.

He was a stern man. The first time I met him was at the end of my junior year, when I was presenting the results of a different AP course. He stopped by my display, a large piece of loose, plain-looking poster paper. Required elements of the presentation were stuck on wherever I could fit them, in perhaps the least impressive manner possible. An hour or two before, it had been assembled, hastily, haphazardly, and with a sense of impending doom. Fortunately, I only arrived a few minutes late, so by the time this particular visitor started asking me questions, the shakiness of my voice had died down.

Still, it was a harrowing experience. Perhaps not the greatest first impression. Clumsily, I delivered the rehearsed summary of my research—something about virtual reality, if I remember correctly—and was subsequently caught off guard by the questions he asked. They weren't unrelated, or even unreasonable, but they were questions that fell just outside the bounds of the research I had done. He approached me with high expectations, higher than I was used to. When I couldn't provide a concrete answer, his face showed no displeasure. But it did show sternness. My current feelings aside, at the time I was tired, disoriented, and a little frightened. I didn't know what a math teacher like him wanted from me anyway; I was planning to become a writer.

By the time the next semester rolled around, I don't know if he remembered me. I'm inclined to believe he did not, since I didn't receive the packet of prep work for AP Calc, which I was supposed to do over the summer, until the school-wide open house about a week before classes started. The expectation was never to get all the answers right, but to give every

question an honest effort, even if one's actual solutions were entirely wrong—in other words, it was a nightmare. There must have been at least fifty questions in this packet, all advanced mathematical problems I had no clue how to approach, and I was supposed to commit myself to every single one without the end goal of a job well done? Simply put, it was impossible for me to manage in the time I had left—so, he allowed me to take some extra time and work on it during the school year. Lucky for me.

He was a hardworking man, and he expected no less of his students. From day one, our AP Calc workload was heavy, especially for those of us who had a particular packet of summer work still hanging over our heads. He didn't particularly care if we were naturally attuned to whatever advanced concept of the day, only that we tried. Trying, however, still did not excuse anyone from being affectionately labelled as a "ding-dong" when they made a careless mistake.

For someone like me, this was an entirely jarring teaching environment. In years prior, teachers and fellow students had accused me of being smart—they insisted on it, while I disagreed fundamentally. At the time, I was probably a little hard on myself, but honestly, even now, I have a distaste for the label. It was like being told that I had inherited a musical gift from my mother, as if every violin performance I'd ever given wasn't the direct result of hours of rigorous practice. It discredited me, as well as my mother, who was herself far more in my musical development than some unwitting benefactor. When people told me I was smart, as if it explained my relative academic success thus far, they failed to account for the hours spent struggling with what the Internet called symptoms of mental illness, and my parents called symptoms of laziness.

I certainly wouldn't say that the label of "ding-dong" was a better fit, nor would I recommend it as a teaching strategy to anyone else. But sometimes I can't help but wonder if, had I swallowed my fear of criticism enough to actually hear it in my direction more often, it might have been oddly refreshing. Unfortunately, I did not quite manage to swallow my fear of criticism; thus I was far too nervous to fully experience the difference.

Everyone else experienced a bit of that fear too, of course, except for the quiet girl who sat at the back and probably could have taught the class herself. In fact, the solidarity was strong enough to take a bit of refuge under. All of us (again, with one possible exception) were perpetually confused, frustrated, and exhausted, and somehow that manifested into surprisingly good humor. The teacher fully endorsed this camaraderie.

He was a funny man. He liked to entertain, and knew students got a kick out of most of his antics. So he made a scene. Seemingly incapable of embarrassment, he danced merrily along as a toy elephant he'd found in the library sang nursery rhymes. There is little more to that story. That is what happened.

More often, the jokes were at someone else's expense. Whatever the opposite of sugarcoating is, that was his sense of humor. It became an expected element of any conversation with him, and nothing—not students, not teachers, and certainly not *High School Musical 3*—was safe from his scrutiny. But to describe him as mean-spirited would be dishonest.

He was a caring man. A father. His daughters were very accomplished, intelligent, hardworking women. He was extremely proud of them, and they knew it, and we knew it. Sometimes he would tell us stories about them. One time, one of his daughters came home, distraught over the grade she'd received on a test. I don't remember the specifics, but for the sake of illustration will pretend it was a 76. Her father, upon learning the situation, went out and bought her a cake—one with a big number 76 in icing on the top—to celebrate her hard work. They celebrated every single percentage point of that grade for everything it was worth. He told us this story because he knew many of these high-strung, perpetually anxious AP students in his class were finally seeing the tide sweep away our straight-A sandcastles for the first time, and didn't know how to move forward with their soggy remains. He wanted to lift as many spirits as he could.

Despite his flair for poking fun, students who really got close to him trusted him immensely. Those who came to him with their questions usually returned to their seats feeling encouraged. Purely out of habit, I engaged as little as possible, so I didn't get to see much of this up front. But even from a distance, I could tell why his former students loved him. It was a shame things were so complicated for me; perhaps if I hadn't been planning on becoming a writer, everything might've worked out.

He was a passionate man. He thought math was one of the most important things a person could study. To my mounting irritation, he constantly illustrated this with word problems which never came close to proving his point. I've never been a big fan of word problems. Speaking from personal experience, I have never found myself standing next to a flagpole, desperately needing to solve its height by comparing the length of our shadows, but my perspective is limited. It's true that math is capable of a lot of things, but advanced calculus felt distantly removed from necessity, especially as a high school senior making plans to go to college for English. Ever since we first met at the end of my junior year, this teacher seemed to want me to invest in more math classes. He was very passionate about math; as I was about writing.

But he was also passionate about students. I think I have already made that clear enough. Just in case, here it is in writing. He loved watching students struggle towards a goal and finally, victoriously, cross the finish line. He loved seeing the brightened faces of students who had just grasped a new concept for the first time. He loved his students, even if he made them work tirelessly week after week. And I was one of them.

It is difficult, when reflecting on a weighty decision, to pick apart the tangled threads of reasoning that ultimately lead to the present. Especially sitting so far in the future, my near-sightedness is exacerbated by the unavoidable reality of the present. But I think, although I cannot confirm it, that I knew all of these things about my AP Calc teacher. I want to believe that, even then, I knew him as stern, hardworking, funny, caring, and passionate. Hopefully, I saw clearly all the good attributes which I could have mentioned here but did not.

I do know that I was tired. I would have told those who asked that I was tired of constantly feeling behind, or of being afraid to ask questions in class,

or of becoming increasingly convinced that the subject was entirely irrelevant to my future. More likely, I was just tired in general, and assigned causation to the easiest target—the notoriously difficult AP class which was not required for graduation. Perhaps it wasn't the most dignified solution, but at the time, I just wanted to make my life a tad easier.

In order to do so, I had to make it a tad more complicated, temporarily. To accomplish my goal, I'd need to convince my parents, my teacher, my counselor, and myself, all while keeping as tight a lid as possible on the matter until it was settled, to avoid being drowned out by others' protests. It would not be a popular decision, but I would handle that once the matter was really and truly settled.

Surprisingly, my parents were the easiest to bring around on the idea. It was true, they had to admit, that this class was causing me immense amounts of stress, and affecting my other work, and yet on a technical level was less important than the others—its only real function in my academic future was that a high enough grade on the exam might excuse me from taking math classes in college. AP Calculus was an extraneous class on my schedule, and it had been giving me more issues than all my other classes combined. I'm no master of cost-benefit analysis, but I'm forced to admit that this reasoning was sturdy.

The real challenge was convincing the teacher. As long as there was consensus, my counselor had no real problem with removing me from the course. But she insisted that all of us meet together to talk it over—me, my parents, my teacher, and my counselor. I presented my case to the best of my ability, but the teacher was not exactly receptive. He heard my complaints, and defended his course, as one might expect. There was no way to force me to stay, ultimately, but if there was any way to get me to stay on board, he wanted to try it. My parents said their piece, my counselor said hers. Everyone's take on the matter was presented, but the matter at hand hung in the air, unresolved, from start to finish. I imagine everyone left that meeting dissatisfied.

I have already told you how things ended. Ultimately, I suspect it was my argument from practicality that won. AP Calc may have been building character, but it wasn't the kind of character that looked impressive on college applications. "I am going to become a writer," I told my teacher, "and I need to make decisions that push me in the right direction."

Was this the decision that pushed me in the right direction? It's hard to say. I knew back then just as I do now that my writing career, successful or not, would rely on so much more than just the classes I took when I was eighteen. I had doubts then, and probably would have continued to doubt indefinitely, if not for the last day of classes.

It would not be goodbye for my teacher. I had him for a different class altogether, and would continue to see him every week in class until I graduated. I could only say the same for a fraction of my classmates, to whom I had finally broken the news. I would not be returning for AP Calculus BC the following semester. The decision was not set in stone, but I presented it as if it was. When class ended, it was clear that it would be my last class period with the group. Even so, an alumnus, only visiting

for the day to watch our end-of-semester projects, stopped me as we prepared to leave.

"I hear you're not planning on taking this class next semester," she told me, "and I just wanted to encourage you to reconsider. It's a tough class, but I truly believe it's worth it."

At least, what she said was something along those lines. Something about it, whatever it was, made me angry. I couldn't quite articulate why, but I was irked. After pretending to consider her pleas, I walked out and made myself a promise that I would not regret this decision, ever.

Such a promise was a little hasty, I won't deny that. But still, I believe it would be unfair to break it. So, since then, I haven't regretted it. I have thought about AP Calculus BC a number of times, but never wished for a different scenario, never fantasized what might have gone differently, never felt shame for taking the easy way out. If I can, I'd like to keep it up.

Maybe someday once a little more time has passed I'll decide the whole thing was immature and foolish. I doubt it, though. I think, two years ago, in the midst of one of the most stressful times in a student's life, I needed permission to make one selfish decision. A decision I wanted to make, whether or not it was "for my own good."

When I was much younger, I was dragged to Boy Scout meetings every week, quite against my wishes. Nothing about the environment excited me, or brought me joy. But, in theory, it was "for my own good."

At the end of ninth grade, I was pulled out of the homeschool program I'd grown up in, and separated from my friends, largely due to my parents' dissatisfaction with the curriculum. Given the choice between public school and military school, I would have easily chosen the former, until I was convinced that the military school where my father taught would be "for my own good." That turned out to be wrong, but at least it only lasted a year.

In eleventh grade, I was sent out to find a part-time job, and landed at a fast food place, which also lasted about a year. The training I was given was lackluster, the managers often failed to match my schedule requests, and the social interaction required was barely manageable. I can admit this was "for my own good." But that didn't make me enjoy it any more.

So I suppose the real reason why I never changed my mind is because I simply didn't want to. I suppose I needed, for once, to truly be lazy.

Regardless, the next semester I walked into AP Research, where I knew I would see my Calc teacher again for the first time. I didn't know what to expect, other than disappointment. Steeled for an awkward interaction, I was caught off guard by what he said to me: "When you publish your first book, will you send a copy to me?"

That is the thing I remember him by.

MASK OFF
oil on canvas by Sarah Delano

Blue Line Down is the debut novel of Maris Mabry Lawyer. An Anderson University alum who graduated in the spring of 2017, her idea for the novel originated in Dr. Wilhelm's Appalachian Literature course, and she began the novel in ENG 490 with Dr. Jones. It has since been selected by the South Carolina Arts Commission, Hub City Press, the College of Charleston, the S.C. State Library, and S.C. Humanities as the winner of the 2020 S.C. Novel Prize, and will be released this June. We hope you will join us in congratulating her on her success!

CHAPTER ONE: THE BLUE LINE DOWN

Maris Mabry Lawyer

Quarry Hill, Virginia
1922

*

At least there was no uniform. On occasion Jude would notice Bradshaw don portions of his old army garb, but even he had no formal uniform as a Baldwin-Felts agent. Always, though, Bradshaw kept his shirt tucked tight into his trousers, his old military boots buffed till they gleamed. From his thickly-muscled neck to his clean-shaven face, Bradshaw never shed his identity as an army lieutenant even in his role as a Baldwin-Felts brute: a stark contrast to Jude, who at twenty-four was leanly built and had three days' worth of stubble on his face.

Jude had not particularly wanted the promotion to Bradshaw's second in command. Regardless, the other agents followed him up the mountain with no objections, though several, like Bradshaw, were former military men: older, bigger, and more experienced than Jude. More so than the ex-military, Jude was watchful of the ex-convicts. The Baldwin-Felts were not picky about their recruits. Two or three of the men with Jude had appeared in the papers mere months before, typically with the words "Robbery" or "Attempted Murder" printed over their photograph. With the rise of unionizing miners, however, the Baldwin-Felts were not above negotiating with the jailhouses for convicts who were eager for freedom, and more than a little comfortable with physical confrontation.

There were few, if any, reasons for the other agents to follow Jude as a leader, at least in Jude's eyes. The only factor working in his favor were the

rumors surrounding him, and Jude saw no reason to lay them to rest. On a couple occasions, he heard the other agents retelling Jude's story to the new recruits, embellishing on how Jude ("just a kid—not a whisker on his face") had turned over his entire mine camp ("after slitting his daddy's throat first") to the Baldwin-Felts, standing on the mountainside ("watching the whole place burn, like the devil himself"). The recruits would scoff, exchanging glances with incredulous grins and sneaking glances across the room at Jude, who was perpetually leaning against something—walls, furniture, whatever was nearby—resembling a lazy tomcat more than a clawing tiger.

Jude let them tell their version. He wasn't about to share his own. When he had first joined the Baldwin-Felts, just a kid in his teens, the rumors had felt like a knife in the gut. He relived that day when Willis was killed in the mines, and then, a few days later, when Mr. Wagner had summoned the Baldwin-Felts. It was an outbreak of brutality: the unionizers were routed out and beaten in their homes, in front of their own families. The men that fought back were clubbed to death, or shot. The men who didn't resist were abused almost as badly before being told to leave the county, with the understanding that reentry would have them shot on the spot. Jude had watched all this from the Wagners' front porch. He remembered Mr. Wagner sidling up beside him, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

"You did right, son," he had said.

Whether Pa had been killed, banished, or left for dead, Jude never found out, and it wasn't a matter that kept him up at night. The only conviction that, even eleven years later, tormented Jude was wondering if Mam Myers and her family escaped. He had hinted to her that the Baldwin-Felts were coming, though whether or not they had fled in time he never discovered.

After the Baldwin-Felts raid, the Wagners took Jude back to their home in Bluefield. The Wagners' daughter, Dorothy, had taken a shine to him and begged her daddy to keep Jude with them, which was how Jude came to work for the family, mostly as an errand boy and yard keeper. Dorothy was a year or two younger than him and followed him around incessantly; Jude tried to shake her, unconcerned with staying on her good side. He only wanted to be left alone.

Jude came to crave rigorous labor that pulled his mind away from Willis's death and the Myers family, preferring to focus on his own screaming muscles or the blisters pebbled over his palms. After turning seventeen, Jude was called into Mr. Wagner's office and met Bradshaw for the first time. There, he had been offered a job with the Baldwin-Felts.

"Mr. Wagner here's told me your story," Bradshaw had said, the corner of his lip lifting ever so slightly. "We take on men like you."

*

Jude set the other men to pitching camp in a clearing they came across, rubbing his palms together to warm his stiff hands. Here in the Virginian mountains, though a few wildflowers broke through the soil and the trees were beginning to bud, it was still bitingly cold in the middle of March. Jude felt his stomach growl and made orders to have a fire set up. He watched the men as they worked: the ex-military men, as expected, were quick to clear the camp ground of underbrush and had soon collected firewood to set into the center. The other men pulled their bedrolls out of their packs and were already claiming spots around the fire pit.

"WHETHER PA HAD BEEN KILLED, BANISHED, OR LEFT FOR DEAD, JUDE NEVER FOUND OUT, AND IT WASN'T A MATTER THAT KEPT HIM UP AT NIGHT."

With a frown Jude noticed Johnny Prince, one of the ex-convicts, already sprawled atop his bedroll with his hands under his head. Jude said nothing, knowing he would not last long there; sure enough, one of the ex-military agents kicked Prince's legs and told him to get up. Prince grinned and lazily raised himself.

Jude tried to recall what had gotten Prince into prison in the first place; he thought he remembered Bradshaw mention his crime in passing: assault, alleged rape, some act of violence. Jude's immediate impression of Prince had been of a mad dog, and he had never shaken that image. His clothes—not unlike Jude's—were always rumpled, often stained, and he didn't bother much with hygiene. Prince's hair was dark and fell in long, tight ringlets, which he kept combed through with oily brilliantine. His teeth all came to a canine point and were horrendously crooked, giving his smile a feral look.

Jude's thoughts turned when a fire began to lick up the pile of logs in the center of camp. He approached the fire, spreading his hands out to warm. The other men did the same, crowded around tightly. For a few minutes, they said nothing. Jude's eyes fell on the newest recruit, a kid named Harvey Morgan, who he was supposed to be training. Harvey couldn't be older than eighteen or nineteen, but he was solid and strong—came from a farm, Bradshaw had said, and Jude believed it. He was exactly the kind of kid you'd expect to find pitching hay or cleaning horseshoes.

"So when do we meet up with old Bradshaw?" Prince asked, breaking the silence.

Jude wanted nothing more than to unfold his bed roll and stretch out for the rest of the afternoon, but he knew that Bradshaw was waiting to hear that they had arrived.

"I'll be going up to the camp," Jude said, rubbing his hands in an effort to seal in the warmth. His eyes fell again on Harvey, and with a flicker of annoyance he gestured at the boy. "You—come on."

Saying nothing, Harvey stepped away from the fire and picked a couple of items from his pack to stuff into his pockets. Jude strode off into the woods,

not looking to see if his trainee followed.

"Don't wander off," Jude called over his shoulder to the men.

The Baldwin-Felts were supposed to camp out before raiding the Plummer Mine in the morning. Bradshaw was already up at the mine and had been there for several weeks along with a handful of other agents. The mine manager had called them a month ago after catching word about his men trying to unionize.

The Baldwin-Felts prowled the camp throughout the day and night to try and catch the miners meeting. Bradshaw had ordered reinforcement from the Baldwin-Felts headquarters in Bluefield last week when he and his men sniffed out that the unionizing party was larger than they had initially believed. Now Jude and his group of agents were supposed to join Bradshaw and his men, with the orders to set up camp on the mountain away from the mine camp to keep their movements inconspicuous.

Jude hiked up the hillside, eventually hearing Harvey's heavy march following behind. Jude had no map and didn't even carry a compass; the sun was halfway across the sky, and that guided him well enough. He had a decent sense of direction, and was somewhat familiar with this mine camp anyway, as it was not far from the mine camp where he had been raised. It seemed that all the mine camps were dotted along the ragged blue line of the Appalachian mountains, and you could almost count them like a string of pearls. On clear days, Jude would be able to see smoke rising on the other side of the mountain range, presumably where these miners worked and lived.

"How far away is this camp?" Harvey asked from behind.

"No more than a mile," Jude answered. He turned to look at Harvey, who was keeping good pace with him. Like the other agents, he had a revolver belted to his side, and it slapped him on the side of his leg as he walked.

"Ever shot one of those?" Jude asked, breaking off a protruding twig as he continued to climb up the mountain.

"Sure I have."

"At a man?" Jude turned again to see Harvey's face at this question. The boy's stride stalled for half a second, but only just. His young face was solemn when he replied, "No, can't say I have."

"That'll have to change soon enough."

"Are all raids—" Harvey began to ask.

"No," Jude interrupted. "It's not always a bloodbath. But if you're working under Bradshaw, you better be ready to use your gun."

"He's violent," Harvey said, his words posed halfway between a statement and a question.

The ground grew more steep, and Jude's breath grew labored—a reminder that he hadn't kept up much physical training as he lazed around the office in Bluefield for the past few weeks. "You could say he has a reputation," Jude answered, panting. "Ever hear about that trouble in Colorado?"

"Something about it," Harvey responded.

"They sent us out West for a while," Jude said. "Hired by Northern Coal and Coke. Lots of unionizing going on. Bradshaw was one of the elite they sent out. They killed thousands out there—come to think of it, I think that's how Bradshaw got promoted."

He recalled again his first meeting with Bradshaw, nearly seven years ago now.

Bradshaw had been younger, sleeker, and loaded with the aggressive swagger of a man who had slaughtered dozens and been rewarded for it.

"Yeah," Harvey said. "I remember my pop spitting nails about it. But I was just a kid when it happened."

"Your old man can't be too happy about you being here, then."

Harvey said nothing for a few seconds. "He'll be grateful when I start sending money back," he said at last.

"Didn't want to try the army?"

"Ma wouldn't let me."

"You always do what your ma says?"

"No," Harvey answered. "My brother was killed in the War. Didn't want to do that to Ma again. So I came here. Seemed like the closest thing."

Jude licked his lips, parched from the cold. "I didn't mean to—"

Harvey shrugged. "It don't stick with me like it used to."

Jude thrust aside a fir branch that barred his way. "Yeah," he said. "Good for you."

As they crested the hill, the mine suddenly opened out before them. Jude paused, surveying the landscape below, and the sudden treeless expanse stunned him at first, as if he had stumbled upon nakedness. The mine camp he had grown up in had at least maintained the semblance of a community, with a few hardwoods kept around the housing areas and the grass springing green, if a little unkempt, between the cabins. Here, without the furry spruce and cypress or even the bare trunks of the deciduous trees, the land seemed bald and ravaged. About a mile away Jude could see the mines dotted against a colorless face of rock, the outcrop of which looked like gray backs bent over.

"What a place to live," Harvey said.

"You get used to it," Jude said, moving on down the hill.

With the trees stripped from the surrounding land, it did not take long for Jude and Harvey to descend the hill and enter the camp. The acrid smell of coal and smoke permeated the camp, and coal dust darkened the sheet metal and split logs that made up the ramshackle huts. The men were all up in the mine still, and would not come out till after dark. Their wives and children milled about the camp. Women stood in the doorways of the cabins, and Jude recognized the reediness of their bodies—the sinewy arms, the angular faces, the network of their ribcages visible through the backs of their thin cotton shirts. Most of them were surely in their twenties and thirties, but they already wore the grim, weathered look of old women. Grubby children grasped at skirt hems or whined to be picked up.

Jude dropped his eyes. He thought of Mam Myers' two little girls, realizing that they must be young women by now. They had been Willis's playmates more than his, but in the old days they would bring him trinkets: feathers they found on the ground, or the odd violet that would manage to sprout in early spring.

Ahead, Jude could spot the company store, the only decent-looking building in the camp. It looked freshly painted, and in the window display were various luxuries: china egg cups, soft dolls with porcelain heads, brass pocket watches, and a few bolts of cloth and lace. These items would likely never leave the window, as the miners could rarely afford such things

on their wages. Jude knew from experience that a little sack of corn meal and a corner of fatback were the things most likely to ever leave that store.

Baldwin-Felts agents lazed around the porch of the company store, some sunning themselves on the steps, trying to absorb warmth from the weak March sunshine. One or two were standing, their eyes trained on the nearby camp. Bradshaw was among them.

"ABOUT A MILE AWAY JUDE COULD SEE THE MINES DOTTED AGAINST A COLORLESS FACE OF ROCK, THE OUTCROP OF WHICH LOOKED LIKE GRAY BACKS BENT OVER."

"Decided to arrive after all," Bradshaw said as Jude and Harvey approached. He had a darkly tanned face with long crow's feet around his eyes, which looked like bright blue crystals imbedded in clay. Bradshaw was a massive man, barrel-chested, with thick, powerful legs. He stood alert, focusing on the mine camp. "We've got to move fast on this one, Washer," he said to Jude. "They know something's coming."

Bradshaw turned away from the camp, acknowledging Harvey with a brief, stony glance. He snapped his fingers and one of the agents stepped forward. "Where's that list?" Bradshaw asked.

Wordlessly, the agent turned and dug into a bag that sat slumping against the side of the store. He withdrew a folded piece of paper and handed it to Bradshaw, whose eyes darted over it quickly, grunting to himself.

"Here," he said, thrusting the paper at Jude. "That's who we take care of. Tomorrow."

Jude unfolded the list. Names covered the entirety of the paper, scrawled crudely in pencil. Jude looked up.

"Who do we exclude?" he asked.

Bradshaw scratched under his chin. "Seems to be only about two or three families not interested in unionizing, but we can't know for sure. So no exclusions."

"What if they're innocent?"

Jude and Bradshaw turned to look at Harvey, who had spoken up from the base of the steps. Bradshaw took the paper back from Jude and folded it deliberately. He came down the steps and stood before Harvey till only a few inches separated the two. Bradshaw pushed the piece of paper into Harvey's hand.

"They'll learn a lesson early, then, won't they?" Bradshaw said.

MOUNTAIN LAKES

Nicholas Phillips

The fall banquet had been heavily anticipated, the kind of thing you look forward to for months. Julie and I had a countdown on our fridge starting half a year early. When the month came, she wrote a big pink X over the designated day. She was so excited. She tried on ten or twelve dresses in the interim.

I remember her standing in front of the vanity, flicking strands of hair off her chest. "It's got to be just right," she said, pulling on the shoulder straps. "I can't have *Carol* out dressing me again." She smiled.

"But who cares?" I smiled back at her in the mirror. "Nobody pays attention to Carol."

She turned around as if to upbraid me. "Everyone cares!" she cried. And then she laughed.

Regardless of whether that was true, she definitely found the right dress. It hugged her waist and flowed down her legs with perfect elegance and beauty. I can't describe it. The color flawlessly reflected the misty ocean churning deep in her eyes. It made me want her in ways I can't describe. In our fifteen years of marriage, I hadn't seen her in anything quite like it. Carol did not stand a chance. She couldn't hold a candle to my Jules. That night, she was absolutely stunning.

Midway through the banquet, we sat with Paul and Carol around a table. I hated that part more than anything else. Between her high-pitched laugh, and his rich misogyny, they were both insufferable. Schmoozing has never been my strong suit. When I had to fundraise for my semester abroad in college, people never gave much. I don't know if it was my overall awkward demeanor or the fact that I can't remember people's recent updates to save my life. I would ask people how work had been only to be reminded of their layoff. I'd ask their kids about high school only to be told they were in college. "How's Tori?" I'd say. "Phil, we broke up," they'd respond, "remember?"

After these conversation starters, where I clearly showed that I had little invested in the person's life, they seldom responded favorably to my asking for their money. Funnily enough, I never went abroad. Two months into three months of fundraising, I had met ten percent of my goal and gone through one hundred percent of my contacts. So, I threw in the towel. At the banquet, then, I was appreciative that Jules didn't mind schmoozing. If it was in my hands, our nonprofit would have gone under long ago.

I first met Jules a couple years after graduation. She was working part time at the Holiday Inn while she and two friends tried to start an organization. They wanted to help clean lakes in the Northwest mountains.

I never understood it, but she was passionate about that kind of stuff, and I loved her passion. According to her, people pouring trash in the mountain lakes had become "the modern tragedy of environmentalism, Phil!" I held a degree in business while she had a BS in Environmental Science. We met through our mutual friend, Gregory. He was a tall, slender, and smart guy. He wore cardigans, leather shoes, and epoxy glasses with circular frames. A month into their startup, the three realized that a Bachelor of Science doesn't equip you to start a company. Gregory asked me for help with the business side of things.

"THEY WANTED TO HELP CLEAN LAKES IN NORTHWEST MOUNTAINS. I NEVER UNDERSTOOD IT, BUT SHE WAS PASSIONATE ABOUT THAT KIND OF STUFF, AND I LOVED HER PASSION."

I met her at our first board meeting. She wore a dark green shirt made of recycled material. In a trendy white graphic, it read "Save Our Lakes" with some colorful mountains as the backdrop. Her soft hair rested in a perfect ponytail, light reflecting off the taut brown strands; skintight jeans hugging her hips. Her gray-blue eyes looked over at me and she excitedly asked, "So this is the guy?"

By the end of that meeting we knew we had chemistry. We flirted so much the whole time. I don't recall a thing about that meeting other than her outfit. Gregory would later tell us through laughs that the chemistry was understood by more than just Jules and me. "Absolutely nauseating!" he'd chide. "I feared I'd have to just grab Chelsey and leave before y'all started taking it up a notch!" We'd all laugh. Gregory always made us laugh.

Julie missed him, and so did I.

Like all of us, Greg had his own demons. Funny as he was, he took a bit too much joy from the bottom of the bottle. A day rarely passed where our meetings weren't tinged with at least a whiff of liquor. Liquor, but never beer. "That's for the hicks," he'd say. "Cocktails are the sophisticated man's drink."

I missed him, but I held no regrets about our final interaction. We played spades the last time I saw him. Jules, and Greg and Chelsey and I all sat around our coffee table crisscrossed like a bunch of kindergarteners drinking the sophisticated man's drink. We talked about the mountain lakes and the business some. But we cared more about each other's lives. Chelsey shared about her new guy—a skateboarder who replied rarely but got texted often.

"Chelsey, my goodness, just quit! Where do you keep finding these scumbags?" Gregory chuckled as he spoke, sipping his Negroni. "I swear, if you would go literally anywhere other than the club or the bar, you might find a decent gentleman!"

Chelsey rolled her eyes like we all did during Gregory's soapboxes.

Turning our way, he asked, "Y'all met at the business meeting right?"

We nodded.

"And they've been married two years now!" Peering through his circular lenses, he continued, "Nobody meets their lifelong partner at a bar, let alone a night club!" He dramatically flung his hands as if tossing annoyance into the air.

Chelsey leaned forward over the nine of hearts. "I'm surprised such a relationship expert," she paused and grinned, "will be returning to an empty apartment tonight!"

Gregory took another sip. Chelsey laughed at her own comment. Jules and I laughed too.

After hours of card play, Chelsey finally won. She collected her fifty-dollar winnings and walked our glasses to the sink. Jules loaded the dishwasher and I hugged Chelsey goodbye. We agreed we'd do it again soon. Lingering, Greg asked if we needed any help cleaning up.

"Nah Greg, I know you're anxious to get back to that empty apartment of yours."

He laughed, "Yeah, yeah." Then he spoke with a twinge of seriousness. "Hey, I really appreciate you and Jules having me over tonight, Phil. I'm not going to say I needed it, but I might have needed it." He paused and thought for a second. "I definitely needed one of your Negronis, at least," he said, chuckling, his breath tinged with the scent of gin.

"Anytime, friend," I said. "Anytime. Need me to drive you home?"

"I have the tolerance of one hundred men, Phil. I can handle it." He smiled.

With a manly "Love ya, dude," we embraced like two men closer than brothers. I patted the back of his oxford and closed the door behind him.

Three days later, he died. DUI.

*

Though Jules was passionate about it, the nonprofit was Gregory's child. He had big dreams for it. After his funeral, the three of us stood in the vacant parking lot, clad in black behind the funeral home. We took out a flask filled with gin, "the sophisticated liquor." Then we toasted in tears and vowed to make those dreams a reality. That toast was over a decade ago.

But I can still see Jules at the banquet, talking to Paul and Carol. She smiles big and laughs loud at all the old man's jokes. She plays ditsy with his disproportionately younger wife. She looks gorgeous in that navy dress. For two long hours she schmoozes. I get up at multiple points with multiple excuses: more champagne, more cocktail sauce, more beignets, a bathroom break. At the end of the night the old man writes a check.

Leaning over, he pats her arm in his black tux and red bowtie, and says through his thick southern accent, "Now listen, pretty thing." His wife and I are visibly uncomfortable. Jules is calm. "I want you to go clean up them lakes," he says, rolling the tobacco over in his mouth. Handing her the check he continues, "This should take care of it. All right, sweet thing?"

It was $100,000. Jules later told me that it was worth any creepy comment she's ever heard. It would cover the costs for the next two years.

After that, the night dragged on. I stood mindlessly eating beignets and sipping champagne.

Suddenly, Jules danced up to me on that polished floor.

"Hey, sexy," she said, pulling me close.

"Hello, you beautiful schmoozer," I replied, wrapping my arm around her.

With a caress she said, "This place blows." Then she leaned close with that look in her blue eyes and whispered, "Take me home, love, won't ya?"

We bid some of the guests goodbye and headed for the Audi parked out front.

*

I awoke to a bloody dashboard and piercing pain. Hood bashed in, windows obliterated, defeated airbags sagging with crimson stains. My passenger seat belt hugged me tight, like an old friend apologizing, as if to say, "I'm sorry I couldn't help, couldn't stop this." My face was wet, eyes stinging and hazy from the rushing blood. Broken vertebrae suspended my head like a house of cards. Shards of glass peppered the interior, myriads of which pierced my skin, clung to my face.

Gregory: I wondered if his wreck was anything like this.

Jules: on the ride home. She was driving fast. One hand was on the wheel, the other on my thigh. She was teasing me.

"Jules!" I was laughing. "Focus on the road, you daredevil!"

She giggled.

She had a seductive look in her eye. I expected a flirtatious comment. But suddenly she's screaming.

In the wreckage, I craned my neck towards the trees. I saw a silhouette in the brush near the car. My chest tightened like a loaded spring. Then I saw her. I see her.

Her blue ocean eyes stare up at the silent stars. Blood dries on her open skull. I feel an insatiable longing for peace. Her navy dress is now a murky purple. Her arm is twisted in a foreign way. Her small body contorts around the large branches which caught her. But like my seat belt, they could not help. They hold her silently now, like those who don't know what to do in the face of loss.

"Jules," I whisper. "Jules..."

The weight of the cosmos bears down on that vacant road.

Then the sirens wail. And up come men with yellow vests, stretchers, and gauze. For me.

*

Even now, I see her face in mountain lakes, smell her perfume in swaying pines. I hear her ghost in silent grass. Jules.

PATH TO NOWHERE
photography by Morgan Broom
following pages

SOME KIND OF TOO CLOSE

Marguerite Dozier

We crept through the sharp darkness of that winter night
and slipped through the unlocked door into synthetic light.
The two of us climbed the stairs to the still-lighted theater,
thrilled and flushed with quiet rebellion.
You swept me off my feet across the black stage floor,
lined with mirrors that we watched silently,
locked in time in our private music box performance.
My cheek found its resting place against your shoulder,
your head lay against my hair.
You smelled like cedar.
I didn't mean to end up there.

You must have known the intimacy in this,
but you didn't seek my lips.
I wonder if you did not want my kiss.
I rested beside you, standing, swaying.
I didn't expect to fit into your chest.
I sought answers to my questions but you turned me red—
red with what I found in my head at the thought of you.
And as I pressed into you, I felt a rush
as we waltzed across the floor
in front of wide-eyed windows on the balcony.

And when we left, I said the cold night made me shiver.
Careful not to touch me, you didn't say a word.
I climbed three floors, alone, and slipped into bed,
and all the while, you waltzed through my head.

THIN RAILS
photography by Sara Pepper

NATURE'S CUP

Hannah Wallace

Green and warm,
matcha be warned,
the trees satisfy.
The sweet smelling grass is my chai.

The dirt is so deep,
richer than coffee.
No need for a caffeine buzz,
I'm energized by the earth between my toes.

BRIGHTER SKIES

Emma McKay

Soft is the hum of recycled air
as it filters through satellite vents.
The buzz of my electronic affairs
grates as it spews its trivial contents.

I watch my old home from among the stars
spinning lazily, pulling me in tow.
When I agreed to this, it never seemed far
away from the world I knew.

The cold, metal floor creaks beneath my feet.
With longing, I consume the Earthan feeds.
Day after artificial day,
dials and screens offer no company.

On Earth, I yearned for the bright thermosphere.
Now I know all is dark up here.

WRITER SPOTLIGHT

SEIZING THE HUM

Guided by her storyteller's spirit and the impulse to interpret, Larisa Crowder finds hope in the order that only writing can provide.

WRITTEN BY SALVATORE FONTANA & SAMANTHA BROOKS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ABIGAIL TIMMS & DAKOTA RIEMER

LARISA CROWDER LEANS AGAINST THE BENCH, JEAN JACKET and cropped curls waving in the wind. Sunlight reflects off her glasses—windows through which she observes the world. She speaks softly at first, looking at the clouds, letting the full light of the sun warm her cheeks as she ponders, remembers, as she searches for just the right way to say what she means. For as long as she can remember, she has been "obsessed with words," and in her careful, methodical consideration, it shows.

Larisa hails from Aiken, South Carolina, where she grew up alongside her three younger siblings. She is a senior Communications major, Creative Writing minor, though she looks back now and says that maybe, probably, she should have been a writing major. She made this realization her junior year at Anderson University while taking Dr. Jones's Creative Nonfiction class. This is where she was introduced to "the possibilities of nonfiction." In her senior seminar class this past fall, she had the opportunity to compile interviews and essays about visual artists and their art; somehow though, she says, "It always ended up being about writing." It is this passion for writing that ultimately led her to her position as the editor and chief of this year's *Ivy Leaves* team.

For as long as she can remember, Larisa has been reading and writing. She laughs and says, "As soon as I had a developed-enough brain to understand what a book was, I wanted to write one." As a child, she had an active imagination and a compulsive need to tell stories. She recalls afternoons sitting on her kitchen floor while her mom cooked dinner, making up stories about her dog; in these fits of inspiration, she would insist that, contrary to probability, the dog did deep dives in the ocean, meeting a hammerhead shark who must have appeared in that week's homeschool curriculum and settled on her psyche.

Her mother encouraged this storyteller spirit in Larisa, even helping her as a young child staple together pieces of printer paper, spelling out all the words that revealed the meaning of her crayon illustrations.

Pushing her glasses back into place, Larisa explains that she writes out of necessity. "I can't not write," she says, hands before her as if this statement is the key to her soul. Larisa explains that she writes compulsively, so that her thinking and writing melded into the same thing. She says that originally, she wrote checklists and reminders for herself, a testament to her "selective memory" that she has "no control over." By middle school and high school, she wrote in passionate fits of rage which she reflects back upon as simply "whining." But in her

checklists and journals, Larisa found that writing allowed her to have control over the uncontrollable, to express feelings too volcanic to remain within her; she wrote so that she could understand. In her nonfiction piece "An Art Spirit," she acknowledges the struggle of the process. "Hopefully, by the time that I'm done writing," she says, "I will understand why I had to write it."

"LARISA FOUND THAT WRITING ALLOWED HER TO HAVE CONTROL OVER THE UNCONTROLLABLE."

As a voracious reader, Larisa lists off on her fingers her favorite writers who have inspired her own writing. In her essay "It's Mine," she points to Charles Bukowski as both inspriation and example: he finds hope and meaning in sifting through the minutiae of daily life. Larisa does, too. She recalls Joan Didion who, she says, has this incredible ability to end a piece on an image or insight that fills her with wonder. "Every word choice, and the order in which the sentences are placed—it's all justified in the end. Her intentionality is such that, if you changed a single word, the meaning would be different." As for Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*? Larisa recalls as a high schooler being amazed at his ability to develop a character's psychology; throwing her hands in the air for emphasis, she whisper-yells, "Stories can do *that*?! This is the most epic thing ever created!"

It is in these moments when Larisa allows herself to show her excitement—her true sentiment that she normally only allows in her writing or among trusted friends and family—that her personality shines through, and she laughs. Not *at* herself, but *with* herself. As the light becomes golden and time passes, she tells me about her love of the sun, '80s pop, and her chicken, Spot, because they all make her happy. As it grows quiet between us, Larisa seems to sit, to listen, as if she is waiting for a moment to sneak up on her. In the quiet, she is always listening, ready to, as Cynthia Ozick says of the essayist's genius —"seize the hum and set it down for others to hear."

LOONS

Larisa Crowder

MY SISTER

It was unfortunate, but my hands were tied. "Honey," I called to my wife, who was in the kitchen washing dishes, "either we sell the last lake plot, or we tell our daughter she won't be graduating in the spring."

"I couldn't tell her that," she yelled over the blasting water. "Call Dawn."

My older sister, Dawn, newly married to her second husband, Joe. They were saving up to buy the last piece of lakefront property I owned by Pearl Lake, down the street from my house. The property came with the house and its surrounding land—the farm, we all called it— where Gail and I lived. And the kids, when they were kids. I'd bought it from my dad just before he died, right after Gail and I married. No one had actually farmed it since my grandfather, but we'd always had a few horses, and the land. It seemed right.

It was midnight, but I knew Dawn would be up. I was up, she was up, our other three sisters were probably up, in Florida, Texas, and South Carolina, respectively; we were all biological night owls or something. Dawn and I were the only two who never considered moving south. Why the others left Minnesota for year-round humidity was past both of us. Six months of winter? So what. Makes you appreciate summer more. This was also why Dawn was the only one who'd ever wanted a lake plot—she enjoyed skating and ice fishing as much as she did water skiing and regular fishing. I called, she answered on the second ring.

"What do you want, brother. I'm watching *X Games* with Joe."

"Might be selling the last lake plot. You two want to make me an offer?"

"The very last? Is that the one with the grave?"

"The one and only. Just for you."

She laughed. "Joe, Dean wants to know if we'd like to make him an offer on the last lake plot."

"Your brother knows we would like to, but that we likely cannot at this time."

She must've put the phone on speaker—I could hear him crunching chips. Probably homemade, in their air fryer. Joe was a man of few words, a little weird, but a good cook. I didn't mind him.

"Did you hear that? We likely cannot at this time."

I told her what I'd told Gail earlier.

"Listen, I spend my lunch breaks drawing plans for our lake house, and if you sell that land, I will wring your neck." She paused, ate some chips. I could hear her scowling. "You wouldn't though, would you? Not that plot, anyway. Tell your children to get jobs, any jobs."

"They all have jobs. Leah has that marketing gig. Noah works at Walmart. Erin—"

"Yeah, yeah, we'll look into it. How about you and Gail come over for dinner sometime this week and we can talk about it?"

"How about you and Joe come out *here* for dinner sometime this week and we can talk about it? I could grill venison burgers and we could eat on the patio." That was the one home improvement project I'd completed in the last decade—a big, circular patio right in front of the house. The weather was too nice to not eat outside, and plenty big, way bigger than the dining room.

"I feel like you're avoiding my house," Dawn said. "Are you avoiding my house, Dean? Joe, Dean doesn't want to see our new house."

"I'm not avoiding your house. The venison's here and—"

"You know you're a hermit, right? Whatever. Let's take the pontoon out afterwards and go look at that land."

"Okay. Friday?"

"Friday it is."

Gail finished with the dishes as I hung up, and joined me at the dining room table, pulling up one of the three chairs that still had all four legs and a back. I'd been meaning to fix the others.

"Well?"

"They're coming out Friday to look at it. I'll grill some burgers."

"Oh, wonderful! I'll go get some salad stuff tomorrow." She paused and rested her chin in her hand, gray hair floating from her temples. "I wonder how their new house is coming along. I remember Dawn saying they were going to completely renovate the basement. Maybe they'll invite us over once that's done."

Dawn and Joe lived in a housing development in Fargo, about an hour and a half away. Despite several invitations, we still hadn't gone. North Dakota's a sort of wasteland, all wind and no trees, and the photos she'd sent me of their new house made me claustrophobic. The yard was the size of a shed, and even in the photos I could see the neighbors' decks, with their Adirondack chairs and mini grills and potted plants. You could probably see right into their houses at night, and them into yours, and what kind of a home was that? Windows are supposed to be looked out of, not into, and balconies should help you enjoy the view, not turn you into it. There's no freedom in a place like that.

Dawn knew it, too, which is probably why she and Joe went for so many bike rides. Some lasted days, in which case she dropped off their two labs and a fifty-pound bag of "healthy" dog food in my yard before they left. On their way out, she yelled from the pickup with their Harleys strapped in the bed: "Remember to feed your dogs separately! Their food makes mine sick!" Which I did, sort of, pouring the organic food into a dish for her dogs and the cheap brand into two more for my four dogs, but they all ate out of each other's bowls anyway, and every time she picked hers up I'd get a call about their gas and vomiting as if she didn't know better. Dogs on a farm were going to live like it.

THE FARM

Well, retired farm, which was all the land immediately surrounding the house. I'm no farmer, but I do all my metal working in the barn across from

the house, and you could tell what it had been. Weeds tackling chicken wire marking off squares, an empty, rotting chicken coop. There was a bit of a junkyard building up near the barn—six rusted cars and a tractor, and a trailer home jacked up on cinder blocks. The trailer had a green tin roof and green wooden shutters with the outline of a pine tree jigsawed out of them. Visiting family used to stay there, but now the windows were all smashed. Not sure how that happened. Now, the stray cats slipped in and had their kittens in there.

And there was so much green. My dad hadn't been a farmer either, but every spring he'd burned the whole yard—from the tree line right up to the house, and to this day it always grows back blindingly green. Green so lush and bright it's like a hallucination—the only thing that matches it is the sun reflecting off fresh snow. The whole country is white in the winter, green in the summer. Like flannel sheets, both colors, rolling over acres stuck with pines, firs, cedars. Our whole yard is ringed with elms, and deeper into the property you can find clusters of birch trees.

The last time it was a farm, my grandfather owned it all, the house and the land, which included 162 acres down by Pearl Lake. A Norwegian immigrant working for the railway, he'd built a house near the lake that later burned down. When he rebuilt, he moved up the street and constructed a square farmhouse on a concrete foundation that stuck four feet out of the ground, out of caution, or spite, or probably both. He and his family sold the house and moved again. As adults, my dad and uncle bought it back, the house they'd been raised in, from the new owners, who'd gone into foreclosure for not paying their taxes. My dad moved in, began paying his brother back, and the rest is history, I suppose. I've never lived anywhere else.

My dad always told me, "Invest in land, they're not making any more," but I think he was just proud to have inherited so much of it. The value of lakefront property had skyrocketed as he aged. Detroit Lakes was becoming the tourist town it is now, the population of which practically doubles in summer. And, since he had no money, his retirement plan was to plot out the land and sell it, which he did quite a bit of, and I continued to do. I never relished selling—I'd never imagined selling it all. Truthfully, I'd assumed each sale would be the last, but contract metalworking didn't provide enough to put six kids through college, and now here I was, ready to sell the last of the original 162. It's kind of funny. I never went to college, but I wasn't one of those parents who pushed their "mistakes" on their kids. I told them, "Do what you want to do, you know?" Turns out that what they all wanted was to go to college, and that was fine with me too.

ME

I say "mistake," but I don't consider it one. Would I be making more money if I had a degree? I suppose, but more money doing what? I liked metalworking, especially plasma cutting. I just recently started wearing an apron, because I was going through so many shirts, the way the sparks flew and burned holes in them. Once, when I'd come back inside wearing one of my burnt work shirts, my daughter Erin had asked if it hurt. "Yes," I explained, "but it feels so good when it stops." The absence of the pain when I finished a workday was like all that green after the snow, like shutting off the cutter's showering

sparks to find a perfect line; a respite to savor all the more for its being routine. It's clarity.

If I had the extra money, and the time, maybe I would buy another horse. That had been my thing growing up. I'd had my horse, and Dawn had her Harley, and we both found it hilarious that I was the first one to sustain a serious injury, considering the odds of crashing a motorcycle. When I was sixteen, I had this beautiful white Mustang, sixteen hands high. Strider. I bought him for two hundred dollars at a kill auction with the money I'd earned working at this petting zoo, where I took care of their horses and led them around in little circles for the kids' rides.

I didn't often ride with a bridle, which maybe explains my carelessness, though it doesn't excuse it. I was leading Strider back to the barn after a ride, and I looped the reins around my left hand, my dominant hand, of course, instead of holding them in my palm. One of the cats pounced out of nowhere and spooked him. He reared and took off, taking me with him, for a second, and then just my first two fingers. Ripped them clean off. Dawn was the only one around with a driver's license. I had squeezed the stumps in my T-shirt, just above my heart, and sat like a corpse in the passenger seat of our farm truck as she floored the gas the whole fifty-odd miles to the hospital, the truck rattling on the dirt road like a handful of marbles with us inside. She sang my favorite John Denver songs all the way there, even though she didn't like them much, because the silence was too unbelievable.

At home I'd sat in shock, sagging into the plaid couch as my three younger sisters surrounded me on the floor, staring at my bandaged hand, while Dawn went out to look for my fingers. She found them in the grass like dropped Halloween props, shreds of tendon dangling like peeled string cheese, and brought them to me wrapped in a napkin. I'd stared and stared. "We could bury them," she finally suggested.

We did, the next afternoon. We rowed out in the canoe, sitting in silence this time, to a steep place on the shore, and climbed to the top of a hill. I sat on a rock as Dawn punched the dirt with a spade until it resembled a small grave, then placed my fingers, still in the napkin, inside. She shoved the dirt back on top with her hands. Down on the water, a loon, dark, more silhouette than actual bird, stretched its throat toward heaven, and I instinctively cupped my hands to call to it. Of course, I couldn't, and Dawn almost started to cry, but instead she placed a stone over the soft dirt and stepped on it. "Here lies the hand of a Haugen. Well, part of one." She smiled. "It's kinda fitting, don't you think?" I did.

THE LAKE

On Friday, Dawn and Joe showed up with burger toppings and drinks. Joe said hello and went straight to the grill; Dawn made fun of my outfit.

"Barefoot and wearing cutoff jeans like you're twelve. Don't you own any pants that aren't chopped up? What would your children say about this?"

"They'd say, 'Dad, where's my money.'"

"And you'd give it to them, I suppose."

After dinner, Joe backed his pickup down to the dock, just into the water, and let the pontoon slide off the trailer. Dawn and I pulled it closer to the dock and held it there while he left to park the truck. The pontoon's bumpers

scraped against the rickety dock. “You could throw some tires over the side,” I said. “Keep it from scratching up your boat.”

She glared at me. “That’s not a look I’m going for.”

“I’d do it!”

She snorted. “You would.”

We held the pontoon until Joe parked the truck and joined us, then climbed on one at a time and pushed off. The sun was just setting, and the pinks and purples and blues of the sky reflected off the still lake, which had nearly doubled in size since we were kids. As almost always, a single loon floated a ways off, and wailed gently, like the echo of a wolf’s howl. I brought my hands together and called to it—the trick is to keep your cupped hands airtight and then blow on your thumb knuckles—easy to explain, hard to do, and harder with eight fingers, but I’d eventually figured it out.

“I miss the loons,” Dawn said. “When I’m in Fargo.”

We glided past miles of green shoreline, most of which was stacked with large stones. Every couple hundred feet, a small dock pointed toward someone’s lake home, most of which were new, probably. I wondered how many of them were lived in year-round.

Joe turned from the wheel. “Dawn was telling me your grandfather used to own all of this land?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “Did you know that by the time he was sixteen, all he had in the way of hands were his eight knuckles and two thumbs?”

Dawn laughed. Joe raised his eyebrows under his Golden Gophers baseball cap.

“Yep. One day he was out ice skating, alone—not on this lake, somewhere in Norway—when the ice cracked and he fell through. After treading water and yelling for as long as he could, he knew he’d drown if he didn’t do what he knew he had to do—so, he dunked his mittens in the water and stuck them to the ice, same as a tongue on a flagpole. When they finally found him, they were able to peel his mittens away, but his fingers were long gone. That’s why he came to the States—apparently no one would hire him in Norway like that.”

“That’ll do it,” Joe nodded solemnly. “What’d he do over here?”

“Railways. Then farming.”

Dawn turned from where she’d been watching the shore. “Dean? What do you think will happen to the farm when you and Gail are gone? Do any of your kids want it?”

“I don’t know,” I told her.

The pontoon clipped along in the breeze, the lake now gold and shimmering. An eagle lifted from somewhere in the trees. It pumped its wings a few times, then soared. I leaned back to watch.

CRACKS AND CHIPS
photography by Taylor Smith

RIME
photography by Anastasia Shcherbina

OF ART AND DEAD PIGS

Emma Morris Beaver

My favorite part of my birthdays growing up was smoked meat. Specifically, my Papa's ribs and barbecue. Forget the birthday cake, I wanted a slow-cooked pig. I'm technically from Virginia, but my family's house rested less than ten miles from the state line, so I claim North Carolina as much as I do Virginia. And barbecue might as well be written into the North Carolina state constitution. And when we say barbecue, we don't mean hot dogs and hamburgers—that's a cookout; we mean pork. Old-timer of the hills that he is, my Papa is renowned for his smoked meat. I nibbled at my food and couldn't put on weight as a kid, and my Papa insisted on stuffing me anytime I came over, and usually, that involved barbecue. And it worked. I wouldn't eat lasagna or meatloaf or mayonnaise or bananas or celery or carrots or really anything, but I could devour his meat. So when my birthday rolled around every fall, my family picnicked on barbecue and ribs in my grandparents' backyard, just as the oak leaves turned golden and air began to chill. By the end of the meal, I was smothered in sauce. Year after year in September, my Papa asked, "Emmie Beth, are you ready for some ribs and barbecue?" And boy, was I ready. He still asks, and I'm still ready.

I can barely remember when my affinity for pork began, but it originated in the parking lot of Snow Hill Baptist Church where my parents and grandparents and their parents were members. It was a simple white church with dark-stained pews and red carpet, a country church resting in the middle of farmland. In addition to Easter egg hunts and Christmas Eve services, the church hosted an annual fall pig-pickin'. After a hayride through twisting roads, everyone piled into the fellowship hall for a pork feast. There's no religious meaning to it, just good old Southern Baptist fellowship. The affair was just as barbaric as it sounds. The men in the church acquired a hundred-pound hog and roasted it whole over a grill for hours. And when it was tender, the church congregated and literally shoved a fork into the hog, scavenging the meat straight from the animal's ribs.

While the pig roasted, the church men chose a couple of kids to stick an apple in the pig's mouth. The apple has no real purpose in terms of flavor. But at the pig-pickin' that I remember most clearly—I was no older than seven or so—my Papa was in charge of cooking, and my brother and I were nominated to place the apple. The pig lay on the grill with its stomach split straight through the middle. If my Papa asked me to do something, I didn't question it—for better or for worse. He hoisted us up, and we fed the pig the ruby apple while the other men in the parking lot clapped. Papa laughed when I shrank back from the pig's teeth,

yellowed and ragged and charred. I think that day, as my small fingers rubbed against the glossy skin of the apple, staring down a pig's innards, was the first time I realized that an animal had to die for the meal in front of me. All I knew of reverence was singing hymns inside the sanctuary, with the black and white portrait of Jesus watching us while we sang, but I felt a similar reverence above that pig as my Papa's calloused hands held me above its bleeding, roasting body.

Then we sat outside on white folding chairs with my Papa and the church men for a while, listening to their talk of church politics and football with a smoking hog in front of us. A few hours later, I had a plate full of barbecue and coleslaw and potato salad and preacher cookies. In retrospect, it's traumatic to ask a kid to face death straight in the snout like that. Who knows where my mother and Nini were, or if they even knew it happened. But to me, it meant uninterrupted time outside with Papa and a good supper.

My Papa was unfazed by pig blood. And if he was unfazed, I would be too. He never missed a family holiday or little league game or church service. He's also a forklift mechanic who still goes into work every week and climbs under machinery at seventy years old. He and my Nini married when he was twenty, and he has calloused his hands and smashed his knuckles all day ever since to put food on the table, and good food too—always meat. As my mom likes to tell, he bought a pig named Lucy Bug when she was growing up. Although he intended for it to be a farm animal, my mom somehow became attached. When it came time to slaughter the pig, my Papa didn't have the heart to tell her that they had killed Lucy Bug. Instead, he told her that they sold the pig for money to buy bacon and sausage. My mom, barely older than a toddler, believed the explanation for years until it dawned on her why their freezer was full of pork for weeks and Lucy Bug was gone. It's a story I've heard again and again while indulging in his prime rib at Christmas dinner. Whether it is a good year or bad year, meat will be on the menu at all family gatherings, three people or twenty, holiday or not. If Papa is there, good meat will be too. It's the rhythm of my years, as sure as the Fourth of July.

Papa built his smoker himself from a mass of metal scraps—a barrel loaded with wood chippings that cooks the meat over wood at a steady heat, spouting smoke into the sky. One summer morning years ago when my Papa called a barbecue into order, I sat on my Nini and Papa's deck in a rusty lawn chair drinking Ginger Ale while Papa smoked pork. I was eight or nine, and my younger brothers and cousins were somewhere inside. I was the oldest, and I was convinced I was the favorite too, which meant stealing all the time I could with Papa. I don't remember much else, only my bare feet on the wooden deck, pierced with splinters and coated in red clay. The smoking started before dawn if we wanted a meal by sunset. He cooked the meat low and slow, until the juices and spices married and the meat slid clean off the bone. He's a talker, but when he cooked that day, he was quiet. He checked on the meat, basting the juices and prodding the fire, and sometimes just sitting and watching it cook. The moments didn't last long before he went back inside to mess with something else only to return to the smoker an hour later. Their yard smelled like dogwood blossoms and

cherry wood, and grease trickled into the metal pan beneath the smoker. I listened to golden finches chirp and watched Papa chew on blades of grass. "Well Emmie," he said when the silence went on too long, and he would leave it at that. I was usually a fidgety kid, rarely still, running through the yard or organizing a game with my brothers, but when it came to barbecuing, I was content to just be. While my brothers and cousins climbed trees or watched cartoons, I watched the smoke grasp the blue sky.

"I FELT A SIMILAR REVERENCE ABOVE THAT PIG AS MY PAPA'S CALLOUSED HANDS HELD ME ABOVE ITS BLEEDING, ROASTING BODY."

I should have known then I was a writer, watching him cook and wield metal scraps and chop wood chips and butcher slabs of meat. I found a kind of poetry in it. It was around the time that I started penning stories on construction paper, when I spent hours on my parents' green-stained floor in the basement with my stomach pressed against the cold concrete, creating. Sometimes, I just stared at the ceiling tiles, thinking, waiting for the words to come, waiting like my Papa waited for his meat to smoke. Even then, I knew I could not just wake up as a writer at eight-years-old; I had to live, I had to sketch stories under my covers while the world slept. Papa's cooking was a skill perfected over more years than I had been alive. There was rest in it, a type of slowness and waiting I had never seen before. He stuck his finger in the juices while it smoked and wiped the grease on his ragged L.L. Bean T-shirt. He moved in a way that I wanted to learn, handling the meat and keeping the fire ablaze. It was a task that could not be rushed—one that took hours of patience and decades of learning. There was a deep appreciation for life in his movement, the weight of savoring every moment rose with the smoke. He taught me the ways of an artist, to see the fullness of life and death splayed in front of you and relish it. When I think of his smoking, I think of King Solomon feasting: "A man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun." Maybe it's from all those years of reading his Bible with his black coffee at the breakfast table, but my Papa knows how to eat, drink, and be merry. Smoking meat is his mirth, an act of contentment with the gore and guts of life—a serenity that persists.

I imagine my Papa learned to smoke by watching his father or grandfather or church men just as I watched him. It's a cultural art, passed down from generation to generation. When *Southern Living Magazine* did a roundup of the world's best barbecue, seven of the eight barbecue "pitmasters" inherited both their craft and their barbecue joint from their family. It's a craft that cannot be perfected in a lifetime. Barbecuing goes all the way back to the Caribbean in the 1500s, but sometime in the twentieth century, Spaniards introduced pork, the first real "barbecue" as we know it today,

to the United States. While barbecue popped up across the South, North Carolina harbored a sense of superiority in their barbecue. Texas or Tennessee or even *South* Carolina barbecue doesn't compare. I've had it from all said states, and I still hold true to North Carolina barbecue. Texas barbecue is too sweet, Tennessee is too dry, and *South* Carolina is coated in glorified honey mustard sauce. But North Carolina is tender and juicy, with just the right amount of vinegar-tang. But even within the state is a sharp divide: Eastern vs. Western. It's fighting words. In Eastern North Carolina, barbecue is made with cuts from the whole hog and the sauce is just tart vinegar and red peppers. But in Western North Carolina, barbecue made with only meat from the pork shoulder and ketchup or tomato paste is added to the sauce. Honestly, I'll eat either one, maybe because I don't actually have a North Carolina zip code. But none will ever beat my Papa's pork shoulder with ketchup-added sauce, which places me in the Western camp. Easterners might cry heresy, but to me, it tastes like summer mornings spent in a shroud of cherry wood smoke.

After spending that summer day beside the smoker, basking in nature and smoke, I begged for more meat. But really, I begged for more meat-smoking. I wanted blood—pig blood. When my parents bought me a goldfish sometime in elementary school, I named it Porky in honor of my favorite barbecue restaurant. My parents worried they were raising a murderer; really, they were raising a writer. Raw meat, especially meat that still resembled the animal it once was, actually made me squeamish. It was never about the pig; it was about the cook standing over it, plunging his hand into death's open mouth, unafraid. My Papa took the ugliest raw material anyone could be given and made a meal of it. He faced the brutality of slaughter and made art of it. I was intrigued by his unflinching spirit, his willingness to stare down a pig when most would turn a blind eye. Though I didn't know it then, that is the artist's spirit: to look when no one else will.

When the annual Smoke in the Mountain Festival came around in July, our town's ode to barbecue, I had to be there. As a third-grader who was well-versed in my Papa's barbecue practices, I persuaded my parents to take me, despite their concern for my murderous tendencies. For a weekend, the town barricaded Main Street and brought in the region's best pitmasters. They're featured on *Food Network* and travel the country competing for barbecue awards. And when they're not competing, most cook at family-owned barbecue restaurants that serve dozens of hogs a day. Pop-up tents lined the streets, and the pitmasters started with a hog, or at least part of one, before the sun came up. Then they cooked on spanning grills over wood all morning. They brushed rubs and sauces on hogs with paintbrushes or string mops. Some competed in the whole hog category, others in the shoulder category, and others in the ribs category.

By noon, the smell of funnel cakes and blooming onions mixed with barbecue in the July heat. One brother rode in a stroller, and the other was just excited about the root beer. But besides the typical street festival fare, it was no lighthearted event. It was war. There were strict guidelines involved: the pitmasters must cook with wood or charcoal, the grilling area must be

fifteen square feet or less, and ribs must be only spare or loin ribs (country-style ribs didn't count because they were too close to the shoulder). All barbecue styles were welcome, meaning it was a sure fight to the death. You could smell the pork smoking, but you couldn't eat it. It was reserved for the judges, the lucky ones who actually indulged in the meat. For everyone else, the mediocre local barbecue joint on Main Street capitalized on the grease enveloping the air and upcharged their barbecue, for sale not for competition. But people came anyway, just to be near the aroma and hear an old beach music band play in the mountains.

At three feet tall wearing denim shorts and braids, I stopped at every tent and stared at the towering metal smokers, watching burly men hover above pork. They were artists, and the butterflied hog was their canvas. Some talked, explaining the temperature the pig was roasting at or the kinds of spices they were sprinkling (always omitting the secret ingredient). Others talked about home and their mamas and their barbecue joint back home in Texas or Missouri or the Carolinas or Tennessee, their eyes steadied on the grill marks. Others cooked without a word, ignoring the spectacle as if themselves and the dead pig was all that existed. My parents hurried me from one tent to another, but I tried to plant my kid sneakers in the asphalt. It was a museum, one after another popup exhibits, and the smoke and heat were a velvet thread. The pigs bled, the cooks were coated in sweat and ash, and harsh smog settled over the streets (hence, smoke on the mountain).

Looking back, it was cruel to invite the town to storm the streets only to tease their senses with the pitmaster's creations then sell them a cheap beer and average barbecue on a cold Sara Lee bun. I sipped on soda and nibbled on funnel cake and the grease-ridden pork, but I was fixated on the roasting pigs. Munching on subpar pork while watching the region's finest in front of me was like buying a cheap print at the museum gift shop when the bona fide masterpiece was in the same room. There was no art and no mastery in the street fare. I had developed a refined palate for barbecue; I would only be satisfied if I could watch the pig twirl above the grill. The real pitmaster's barbecue was not something just slid across the countertop. It was dirty, earthy work. They watched blood drain from the hog's body and its skin shrivel in the heat. It was an hours-long endeavor. And I think that's why I enjoyed eating it. It was like swallowing Hemingway or Fitzgerald.

If Hemingway were a cook, he would be a pitmaster. For one who doesn't look closer, a barbecue sandwich is just a grease-ridden meal. I watched scores of people breeze by the lines of pitmasters to the beach music, ignoring the art of the event. Kind of like a Hemingway book, the craft may not look like art at first glance—only short sentences and small words. But the pitmasters grappled with the pain of life and death and shaped it all into art with every rugged slice of pork. A whole festival had formed around the show and pomp of barbecue. I studied the way pitmasters chatted between tent poles, the way barbecue filled a downtown street and wrapped it in haze. The smells and flavors, hickory and oak wood smoke and pork circling in the air, were alive. I reveled in it like it was a scene from Gatsby. It was the champagne and glitz of barbecue. Like Fitzgerald sliced open the dazzling Roaring Twenties, the pitmasters splayed bleeding pigs before a

barbecue obsessed Southern culture. The blood and gore, the slaughtering and hours long drip of blood and grease was hanging in the air, begging the crowds to observe the squealing death and long slow roast of their sustenance. While crowds gathered round, feasting on meat and beer, a dead pig spun in front of a pitmaster. I think that is what makes a writer too: not running from underbellies but making art.

I had never looked at the food on my plate like that, from the ground up. The pitmasters were so close to the earth. I had grown up in a world where meat came wrapped up, the butchering done behind closed doors and stocked on a grocery store shelf beside Purell wipes. My Papa remembers his aunt taking an axe to a chicken. He said when she cut the head off, it jumped nearly ten feet in the air, it's head on the ground beside it. And when she dunked the chicken in a scalding pot of water to de-feather it, he said he has never smelled anything worse. I had never seen food born of necessity, never had to work for it like that. In that, we lost something. We lost our respect for the ground and its life, for the sacrifice and blood it takes to put a barbecue sandwich on our plate. And we lost the process, one that takes stillness and dedicated work and scooping innards to make dinner out of a dead animal. We saved our queasy stomachs, but our humanity got a little bit farther away from us, farther from our most basic need for food, farther from letting the meat cook long and slow. Our food became convenience more than art, a way to fill our stomachs as quickly as we could and eat on-the-go. But the pitmasters and my Papa cooked slowly for the sake of cooking, remembering where it came from, turning a hog into a Southern delicacy.

Art is what I learned from my Papa's barbecue, from sticking my small hand in a dead pig's mouth, from smoke seeping into my hair. When I should have been watching Pooh and Piglet, I watched Papa dust pig shoulders in a rub. I remember holding the red apple he gave me in the church parking lot, hovering above the smoker and running my thumb across the glossy skin of the Red Delicious while I watched smoke rise from the hog. I could feel the heat. I don't remember if the hog's eyes were open or closed. I wanted to draw back, to throw the apple on the ground, but my Papa was watching me. I plunged my hand inside. I shivered when my feet hit the asphalt. I saw the literal underbelly of art, slashed open. It was bloody and unrefined. I baked in the smoke of the spilled blood, mesmerized by the craft, the flavor, that could come from such a grotesque sight. Barbecuing was a day's work and decades of craft. Writing, like smoking barbecue, is slow, a process of butchering and poking and prodding and waiting. It's cutting myself open, splaying myself on the grill and lying in the smoke. Hemingway—the pitmaster of writers—said "There's nothing to writing, you just open a vein and bleed." And you smoke, I would add. I run my hand across the pen the same way as I did the apple, hovering above a blank page.

LAST GOOD DAY
photography by Morgan Broom

WHISTLER

Lily McNamara

I grew up on a rabbit farm, butchering the livestock every three months. When they're that small we call them fryers, though the more sensitive folk say babies. It never bugged me much, the butchering. I was taught to be humane, a swift blow to the back of the head, then slice the throat to sever the arteries. The rabbit never knows a thing, it's more civilized that way. I guess if you're raised in blood, it's not so distasteful as most folks think.

The city guard was often on my mind as I grew older. They were always looking for new recruits; it was a job that frequently generated vacancies. I figured I'd be good at it. Flesh is flesh. I had spent enough time carving it, seemed to me that my skills with a cleaver would carry over to swordsmanship. I was wrong, but they put me in the field anyway. I patrolled the streets, clad in an attitude and shoddy leather armor that were both too big. I followed the first malefactor I saw into a narrow, shaded pass between two buildings, too much confidence crammed into my little body. The bastard cut my throat, and I cried for the familiarity of rabbit's fur beneath my fingers.

The other recruits called me Whistler. A patrol stumbled upon me, lying in the red-soiled dust, weeping like a child in silent, gasping sobs. As I healed, each rasping breath I drew whistled harshly, each word undercut by the reedy sound. When I returned home, relieved of duty, I went back to work without any fuss, as if I'd never left. And yet, with a soft white rabbit's throat exposed, my practiced hands quiver. I take a sharp breath. A shrill whistle tears from my lips.

LIES

Kristopher Sutherland

"It's not like I meant to. It just *happened!* We were at a party and I was drunk and—" I leaned my cellphone away from my ear as Luke recited his lame list of excuses. *It was an accident, I was drunk, she came on to me, etc., etc.,* I took another sip of my coffee and laid the phone on the table so that I could still hear Luke but not have to pay as much attention to him.

I had lost count of how many times Luke had cheated on his girlfriend. Three years together and almost every month, Luke would come to me with a sob story and a long list of excuses as to why it had most definitely not been his fault. How could Luke be responsible for falling on top of every consenting woman that happens to pass him by? I even wondered why I bothered to stay in contact with him. We had met in college and stayed friends even after I dropped out to join the Marines. We wrote to each other during my basic training and stayed in touch after I graduated. I used to look forward to hearing from Luke, either by letter or phone call during my training. Even afterwards, when I finally graduated, and even more so after I got discharged. I used to enjoy Luke's company when we'd hang out every weekend we had off.

"Mark? Mark, you there?" *Dang it*. I swallowed another drink of coffee, bringing the phone back to my ear.

"Y-yeah. Yeah, I'm here. Almost spilled my coffee," I lied.

"Dude, what am I going to do?"

That was my least favorite question, the one that Luke asked me the most. "If Lourie finds out, she'll kill me, man." I sighed heavily. *What you should do, Luke, is tell her the truth. Best case scenario, she gets mad at you and leaves you high and dry. Worst, she beats your head in. Either way, you get what you deserve.*

"Luke, the best thing I can tell you is to do what you always do: cut ties with the girl, treat Lourie fair, and keep your pants on." I wish I could have been truthful with Luke, but he wouldn't have known what to do with the truth. Luke's entire life had been a lie, especially to himself. Every time he screwed up, every mistake, it was always someone else's fault. It was the economy's fault he couldn't get a job after college and not because he barely graduated; he lost his last two jobs because his bosses were threatened by him and not because he has a habit of putting his work off till the last second. The list went on.

"You're right...You're always right, Mark..." Luke said through the phone. I had to suppress the urge to say, *No, Luke, because, for whatever reason, I can't just hit you in the face with the truth. There's some mental block that*

stops me from saying it and leaving you a sulking, self-pitying mess of a man. That was the truth. But I couldn't say it. I never could. *"No, Luke, you're not a scum bag." "No, Luke, this isn't that bad."* I told just as many lies as he did just to keep him around. Luke had been a decent friend to me, despite his faults. He was the only friend I had after I was discharged from the Marines. Hell, he was probably the only friend I actually had at the time.

It seemed like lies were everywhere. I said I would get my bachelor's degree, lie. The Military said it would make my life better, lie. My friends from the Marines said they would stay in touch, lie. People respected former soldiers, also a lie. When I thought about it, I wondered if there was truth anywhere.

"Luke, you just got to remember what is important," I said. "Lourie treats you right, she deserves the same from you." Wasn't a lie, but it was not the full truth, either.

"Okay...All right. Thanks, man. I have to go. I'll talk to you later."

"See ya," I said. I sighed again and returned the phone to my pocket. I finished off the coffee and stood up. The coffee shop, Demeter's Study, was practically deserted. Normally, I wouldn't have come anywhere near a place like this. It was a small, artsy place: modern ink art decorating the walls, tall plants and dim lighting that made the place seem like a little, indoor garden. Being six foot, usually decked in leather, and a full tattoo sleeve on my right arm, I matched the place like a bullet in a box of *Legos*, but, as Luke had said when he dragged me in, they brewed a mean cup of coffee.

I threw the cup away and headed for the door, wanting to get back to my apartment and not think about Luke or his love-life. As I walked out the door my knee twitched, an old, hollow ache growling in the muscle. I stopped, leaned down, and placed my thumb to the right of my knee cap. Every time this happened it scared the life out of me. That knee was what put me out of the Marines three years before. I had dislocated it and pinched a nerve, badly. The doctors said that I was lucky I didn't need a cane. Of course, the medical discharge followed shortly after that. I was irritated, but it could have been worse. When the ache finally settled, I stood back up and continued forward.

I came to the crosswalk, my thoughts going back to Luke. I wanted to be his friend, but the man had about as much moral fiber as a brick. He had never done anything to me personally, he knew I would have broken him in a heartbeat. Hell, he had been there for me when no one else had been after my discharge. But having to listen to him complain about his own actions had taken its toll. How hard was it for one man to be honest with his girlfriend? How hard was it for one man to be honest with himself? Luke would have been a decent person if he had just accepted his own faults. I was no saint, but I wasn't delusional. If I had been smart, I would have waited to join the Marines after college. I should have gotten my degree and made a career for myself. But, instead, I decided I wanted to go off and play hero. After the discharge, I drove a forklift in a warehouse. I made those mistakes and I owned them. I learned from them. That was Luke's problem, he didn't learn.

I suddenly became aware that a large, white object was hurtling towards me. A horn was sounding as it collided with me, and I was lifted off my feet.

The world spun around me and I hit the ground hard. Everything became hazy as I came to a stop. I heard a noise from behind me, a loud *hmm* sound. It soon dwindled away as everything blurred together and faded to black.

*

Five minutes. Five, whole minutes. I was dead for five minutes straight. The doctors had no idea how they managed to resuscitate me. For all intents and purposes, I should have stayed dead. Very few people live after being slammed into by a truck at thirty-five miles per hour. The flatbed's brakes had stalled as it came to the red light. He tried to stop and blew his horn just as I stepped into the crosswalk. After that, I was ragdolled about fifteen feet down the road. I can't remember the accident; I saw a video of it on the news. I laughed as I watched the truck send me flying; not sure if that was terrible or not but watching me fly through the air like that was hilarious when I saw it.

Luke came to visit me, with Lourie, when I was still in the hospital. He almost cried when he saw me, full-body cast, a broken arm and leg. My face was covered in scratches, too. They stayed with me for a while. Luke seemed like he didn't know what to do. He used to be a comforting person, back when I had been discharged. After that, he was only good for comforting himself, but I couldn't hold it against him while he sat by my hospital bed. After the doctors let me go, I went back to my life. I went back to forklift driving, dealing with Luke, and drinking coffee at Demeter's Study. I had to start physical therapy, which sucked, but I wasn't going to complain. I had never been afraid of death; I was training to go into combat back before my knee dislocated but coming as close as I did made me appreciate the little things.

It was good, being back in the world. I didn't even mind when Luke called me again about another "accidental" affair. But I started noticing something odd. Throughout the day, I would hear this noise: a soft whisper right at my ear, as if someone were leaning right against me from behind. I could never understand what it was saying; sometimes I wouldn't notice it, I would be talking to someone and just catch the last part of it during a pause in conversation. I wanted to call the doctor; I was afraid that I was going crazy. But, I didn't. It was just a whisper, not even that, and as I said, I didn't even notice it half the time. I left it alone. I was alive, I was safe, I was healthy. And that was the truth.

*

I had been dealing with the voice for three weeks by this time. The whisper I kept hearing soon became louder and understandable. At first, I thought it would be handy. I understood it for the first time at Demeter's Study. I had met this girl, Aleesha, there a few days after being released from the hospital. She was a nursing major at Clemson. Luke set me up with her shortly after I got out of the hospital; he thought it would help my "healing process." We met at Demeter's Study a few times, and it seemed to be going well. I had ignored the whisper up until then when it was still only just an audible hum. One afternoon, we met again at the coffee shop and she had been telling

me a story about how she aced one of her exams even though she had been worried about it.

"I guess all my studying the night before paid off," she said. No sooner had she said, I heard It.

Lie. She did not study for the test. She passed it because she had paid a friend to make her a cheat sheet and sneaked it into the test. I swallowed my coffee hard and spun around, looking for the source of the voice only to find nothing and no one. Aleesha had been surprised, to say the least; especially when I asked her if she had heard It. She thought I had been playing a joke on her, and I laughed it off, at first.

It kept happening after that, every time someone told me a lie, no matter how small, the voice would whisper the truth to me. At first, I thought it was kind of cool. "My own superpower." I had a few days of fantasizing about becoming a detective; what better way for me to use It than to solve crimes that criminals couldn't lie their way out of? But those fantasies quickly died. Soon after the incident with Aleesha, the voice started calling my own lies. No matter how small or insignificant the lie, It would explain the truth to me. It became maddening, hearing It just behind me. Even when I plugged my ears, I could still hear It. The pains started shortly after that.

I had been sitting in the park, wanting to get some fresh air. I had been cooped up in my apartment for two days straight, avoiding people as best I could. After It started telling me the truth to the lies I told, It started telling the truth to all lies that I heard, whether they were said to me or not. I avoided people, but even I couldn't take sitting inside forever. So, there I was, sitting in the park away from the majority of people and their lies. That is, till a pair of kids came into my area.

"You big JERK!" I looked over to see a pair of kids arguing at each other: a girl and a boy around eight or nine years old. The boy was missing an arm and the girl was jerking at her hair.

"I didn't do it, I told you!" cried the boy.

Lie, I hissed as the pain shot up my spine for the first time. I jerked, my hands scratching at my back as the voice continued. *He stuck the gum in her hair. He did it because he was jealous that her friends had invited her to play without him.* When the pain finally stopped, I kept scratching at my back, still trying to figure out where it had come from.

"What are you two doing?" I looked over to see a woman approaching the two kids.

"Mom he stuck gum in my hair!" cried the girl.

"I did not!" the one-armed boy repeated.

Lie, another round of stinging. *He had stuck the gum in her hair. He did it because he was jealous and angry that her friends had invited her to play without him.*

"Did you do it?" the mom asked.

"No, I didn't," the boy denied again.

Lie, more stinging.

"Yes, you did," said the girl.

"NO, I didn't," said the boy.

Lie, I jerked from the pain.

"Yes, you did." "No, I didn't." *Lie.* "Yes, you did." "No, I didn't." *Lie.* "Yes, you did." "No, I didn't." *Lie.* "That's enough, you two!" "Yes, you did!" "No, I didn't!" *Lie.* "Stop it." "Yes, you did!" "I said that's enough!" "Please, stop." "No, I didn't!" *Lie.* "Yes, you DID!" "No, I DIDN'T!" *Lie.* "Please—" "YES, YOU DID!" "NO, I DIDN'T!" *Lie.*

"Shut up!" I hadn't even realized I was on my feet. The pain was so intense my eyes had started to water; my hands clamped against my back. I looked over to the mom and kids and they were staring back, their eyes wide and questioning. The mom grabbed the kids by their coats, dragging them away from me without a word. I sat back down, grasping my head with one hand, the tears still rolling down my cheeks. "I'm losing my mind."

Lie, It hissed again, *you are not losing your mind.*

I didn't go outside much after that. I wore noise-canceling earbuds most of the time from that point on, even at work. My bosses didn't like it, but I stopped caring what they liked. It wasn't worth dealing with the pain. It wasn't worth dealing with the lies. I couldn't even watch TV or listen to the radio on my way to work anymore. I never knew how many lies were told to me throughout my day. I wished I could turn it all off.

As I said, I had also been avoiding Luke. It was much worse around him. I never knew just how much he lied and then, with It, I had to lie even more, too. It seemed that everything that came out of Luke's mouth was a lie. Everything from what he had for breakfast to the fact that he was still cheating on Lourie. Thanks to It, I probably knew more of the truth about their love-life than both of them put together.

*

I'm alive, I'm safe, I'm healthy. And that's the truth. I'm alive, I'm safe, I'm healthy. And that's the truth. And that's the TRUTH. I had been repeating those words to myself for weeks. It had become much louder; the definition of a lie became much broader and the pain became more intense. The earbuds had become useless as it started to tell me the truth to the lies I read and even saw. I saw a billboard while driving home from work one day, advertising about a free consultation from some lawyer I'd never heard of.

Lie. The consultation will be free, but you will still be billed for the actual appointment. I nearly drove into oncoming traffic when the pain hit me. After that I couldn't even read a magazine or book without being assaulted with the truth. It seemed to be determined to tell me the truth no matter how hard I tried to avoid it. After I stopped reading, it started to tell me the truth about people. I had been driving to the grocery story after the billboard incident when I saw a man on the curb holding a cardboard piece reading, "Will work for food."

Lie. He will not work for food. He is a meth addict looking for handouts. He has even been offered jobs by passers and has turned them down because they would not give him money. I had to fight back the urge to run the man down with my car. Not because he was a liar, but because his lie was causing me pain. Eventually it was with everyone. A mom pushing a baby carriage was actually being abused by her husband but denying it. A punk, skater kid was actually a straight-A-student, he just wanted his parent's attention.

Every, single, lie was laid out for me to hear, and I was punished for them all.

I stopped going to work. I stopped going outside. I got voicemails from work; said I'd be fired if I didn't call them back soon. My landlord came to my door daily, knocking and asking if I was okay. I couldn't answer, I didn't want to lie. I never wanted to lie. And then Luke; voicemails upon voicemails! Worried about me he said, had to know I was alright.

Lie.

The pain had spread to my whole body. Every lie felt like acid, my skin burned by an invisible force I couldn't stop. I had thought about calling someone, a psychiatrist, a doctor, anyone. Every time I thought about it, It started. *Liar.*

You are not losing your mind. I held my 9mm to my temple. *Liar. You will never kill yourself. You have no reason to.* That was it. I was stuck with the truth.

My stomach growled, a sinking pain clawing through my abdomen. I squeezed my arms around myself. I pushed myself up from the couch, the movement making me dizzy. I stumbled my way to the fridge and pulled the door open. The only things left in my fridge were a half pack of molded cheese, two bottles of water, and a large jar of pickle juice. I took the jar, opened it, and took a gulp of the foul smelling liquid. It was not pleasant, but it was better than nothing. I jumped suddenly, almost dropping the jar as a loud knock came from my door.

"Mark! Mark, I know you're in there. Open up, man!" It was Luke. My hands started shaking. If Luke was here, he would lie, and It would hurt me. "Mark, I'll kick this door down I swear!" It didn't start, so I knew he was telling the truth. I started to panic.

"Mark," he said, his voice so low I could barely hear it, "just talk to me. Open the door, man. I've been worried about you."

Lie. He's not been worried. He just wants your advice. It was all I could do to not scream, and I didn't. I called him out on his lies.

"Liar!" I yelled. "You do nothing but lie! To Lourie, to yourself, to me. You blame other people for everything but its you, Luke. It's always you, and everyone else. You just can't keep your mouths shut and your lies away from me and I'm sick of it. You, Aleesha, and..." I went on, calling out every single liar that I had come into contact with. The longer I let Luke talk, the more lies he was likely to tell. And the more it would hurt. So, I kept talking, telling the truth till my throat hurt and tears ran down my face.

And it felt so good. The flood gates were finally opened. For the first time in so long, since I was a little kid, I felt so weightless. Finally letting it all loose gave the best kind of adrenaline high. I didn't care about Luke, Aleesha, Lourie, no one; like I was the only one in my world.

Then I heard, "Back up, Mark." My eyes widened.

The door finally flew open, wood splinters going everywhere. I didn't move. Luke stepped into the room. His hair was longer than normal, he had put on weight; he was always heavier and shorter than me, especially now. He looked shocked when he saw me. I knew I looked rough, I hadn't shaved in days, my clothes were dirty, my hair unkept.

"Mark, you need help."

Lie. I screamed as the pain hit me again and I sank to my knees. I felt Luke's hand on my shoulder, and I stumbled toward the kitchen. "Mark, I just want to help you—"

Lie.

Why all the lies?

"Mark, we're leaving. I'm getting you some help."

I looked at Luke over my shoulder. He was looking at me like I had lost my mind. *Lie!* I was not losing my mind. I was sane! I was the sanest I had ever been!

I gritted my teeth so hard my jaw popped. Why couldn't he tell the truth? Did he even know what the truth was? Every word that spilt out of his mouth was a lie! Lies and more lies! How much did I have to suffer before it ended? Not just from Luke but from everyone around me? The mom, the skater boy, the kids, Aleesha...

I grabbed the jar off the counter, turned, and lunged for Luke. I hit him in the temple, and he fell to the floor. I straddled him and brought the jar down on his face multiple times, the pain burning me from head to toe. How many times had he lied since he walked in my door? How many lies had he told since he learned to speak? Was the truth so obscure that it couldn't be said? Or was it so terrible that people could not deal with it? Or was it me? What had I done? I wanted to protect this country! To protect them! And they lied to my face.

Then I heard the droning *hmm* sound I heard when I was hit by the truck. It was a long, low sound. It started to get louder, clearer, like an old timey radio being adjusted so that the signal came in.

A...ah...ha... I could almost make it out. I tilted my head to one side. Ha..aha...haha... Laughing. It was someone laughing, someone familiar. It got louder and much clearer, deep and throaty. I felt a tightness in my chest and stomach, and my throat was going dry. I was coughing, choking, heaving, trying to breathe. I was laughing. *I* was laughing. I looked down at Luke. He was softer now. Blood splattered my floor, covered my arms to my elbows. But a switch had been flipped.

Luke couldn't lie. He couldn't cheat, couldn't slack. He was better this way, and that was the truth. People lie, cheat, and steal, and they always will. Enemies to society. Enemies to me. I was trained to deal with enemies. I would deal with them.

At the sound of a scream, I looked up to see one of my neighbors looking at me, her mouth covered in horror. She took out her cellphone, backed away slowly as she pressed at the screen and put it to her ear. "Yes. Yes, send help! There's a been a—"

I stood up. You could say at attention. "It's okay," I said. "I'm a soldier." And that was the truth.

HIGHWAY 1

Nicholas Phillips

Lord, I wish I had died.
I wish that I
could have been trapped
as the ocean and tides
began to rise
and the car doors sealed
and would not be pried.
They hoped they'd be saved,
but nobody came,
and the water was silent.
All of them cried.
Their air escaped,
and so did their time,
their lives,
their prime.
While I'm left behind.

SPEAKING SADNESS

Emma Miller

What is the dialect
of a breaking heart?
What are the syllables
and vowels of sorrow?

Is there a structure
or outline of heartache?
Is there a special phrase
that defines a heavy chest?

I pin my emotions
to the words I send off.
My grief is gibberish;
my loneliness lost
to words that do not stick.

But you, oh God,
are native to the soul.
You have walked its halls
and inhabited your design.

What is this wordless peace?
The heavenly tongue that interrupts my cry—
meeting me in my silence,
delivering me through deafening doubt.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?
photography by Morgan Broom

COLD SYMPATHY

Kristopher Sutherland

In February of 2019, I started working at Oconee Memorial Hospital as a security officer. I walk around the hospital, talk to people, make sure no one is doing anything stupid, and go back to the security office to watch cameras and rest my feet before I make my next round.

I have learned a lot since I started working there. I've learned the early signs of someone who is having a stroke, how to pin someone to the ground without causing them serious injury or restricting their airways, and how to do my best to talk someone down from a heated situation. I have also learned that, at least to certain people, I am a cold person with a lack of sympathy. I don't fully agree with that, I just think that some people deserve sympathy more than others.

The person who taught me that lesson was my aunt, Di. My aunt is the kindest person in the world and would give anyone the shirt off her back if they asked. She let my mom, my sister and I move in with her in 2014 after the three of us had moved down for our mom's new job. She helped us get settled, find a new place, and register for school. She also let my sister and me move back in with her less than a year later. Our mother had started going through what I considered a mid-life crisis; she started seeing a man much younger than herself and acted closer to his age than her own. She became everything that she taught us to never be.

It was actually Di that pointed out how cold I'd become. One evening, after coming home from a shift, Di was waiting for me in the kitchen. She said hello and asked me how the day had gone, and I told her. During my shift, I got a call over my radio about a patient in the emergency room who was being uncooperative with staff. Of course, my partner and I went to see what was going on and found a patient that we had dealt with before; we call patients like these "frequent fliers." This man, who I will refer to as Joe, had come in and was refusing to leave. So, it was our job to get him up and out. Joe was a younger man, skinny, dirty, and his hair and beard were scraggly and unkempt.

"Sir," I said to him, "I understand that you have been discharged?" He was sitting on the edge of the bed, face in his hands, and he didn't look up at me as he nodded. "Well, I have to ask you to leave." He shook his head, still cupping his face.

"I want to go to the shelter," he said in a groggy tone, referring to one of the homeless shelters that Oconee Memorial works with. Normally, that would have been fine, the doctor could have even arranged for transportation.

But, as the doctor had told us, Joe had tested positive for drugs and the shelters would not accept him.

"They won't accept you, sir," I said.

"I want to kill myself," he said through his hands.

I have come to hate those words, and not for the reason most people do. Most people react with concern, shock, or empathy when they hear them. When I hear these words from frequent fliers like Joe, I roll my eyes and take an aggravated breath, because I have heard many say the exact same words before.

"Sir, you need to leave," I said.

Joe repeated the same phrase three more times and I gave the same reply each time he said it. Normally, the doctor would be forced by South Carolina to admit Joe and would have him transported to a psych hospital. But Joe was a frequent flier, he had come into the ER multiple times using the same excuse, even though he had never shown any actual signs of self-harm or attempts to hurt himself; he had cried wolf one too many times. The doctor, along with all of the other staff there, knew Joe was homeless and just looking for a place to sleep off the drugs in his system, as he had done every other time that he had come in. When Joe realized he was not getting his spot to sleep, he stood up abruptly, looked at me with wide, glassy eyes, mumbled some curse words and walked out.

My aunt shook her head at my story. "How do you all know if he really meant it or not?" she asked me.

"He's been in and out of the hospital and other facilities using that same excuse. He doesn't want to kill himself; he just wants a place to crash before his next fix."

"But how do you know for sure?" she asked again.

"Because he's said it so many times without ever actually trying to hurt himself. He's just a junkie trying to play the system," I said. She just shook her head without looking at me.

"You're a cold person, honey."

Had she said this to me a year and a half ago, I would have been hurt, or at least argued over it. But after everything that happened with my mother, working at the hospital, dealing with any number of individuals like Joe, I had realized that I was, and am, cold. I am not unkind, but I am cold. If people will respect my partners, and the hospital staff, and me, I have no issue helping or sympathizing with them. But I will not help someone who is just trying to make themselves comfortable just so they can continue to feed an addiction and take up hospital resources. It took me back to the issues with my mother.

After my sister and I moved out, she lost her job, her car, the apartment, everything. She was charged with assault after a particularly violent fight with her boyfriend and found herself living with a friend who was gracious enough to give her a room while she jumped from job to job, but she didn't change. She kept similar company as her ex-boyfriend, she would talk me into giving her friends a ride home, borrowing money for one thing and using it for another. I came to help whenever I could, she was my mother, after all.

But, after I gave her four hundred dollars for a car so that she could get a better job, she used it to put a down payment on a rundown trailer with rent she couldn't afford instead. I stopped giving her money after that. I was done letting my mother take advantage of me, and I wasn't letting strangers like Joe do it, either.

If someone were to ask me if I felt bad for Joe, I would say, "I honestly don't care." My aunt always says, "You should be patient with others, because we don't know what they have been through to get where they are." But, to me and the people that I work with, sympathy is quickly spent on patients who either don't respect us or our efforts to help them. The first few times I had to run a patient out, it ate at me; I didn't want to run people out into the cold when they had nowhere else to go. I said this in passing to my partner, who is also my boss, once. His name is Robert, well into his fifties, and he's been working security at Oconee Memorial Hospital for over ten years.

"You can't let it get to you, man," he said to me. "You can't help everyone, especially if they don't really want your help. All these jokers have options, but they don't want to put in the work to get better, so don't lose sleep over them." It took a while for Robert's words to sink in, I wanted to be sympathetic, but eventually I had dealt with too many patients like Joe.

Other frequent fliers have come into the hospital, some even on the brink of losing their lives, cursing, and threatening staff with no regard for their own circumstances. Robert and I have even suffered violence from some of these patients as we tried to restrain them so that the staff could work. How can you be patient with someone who not only disrespects the people trying to save their life, but who also shows no care for their own life at all? How can you sympathize with a person like that? The answer that I have come up with is that you don't. The doctors and nurses do not have to care about a person to save their life; sympathy does not come into the equation. They will give the patient whatever injections and procedure necessary to stabilize them and send them on their way as quickly as possible, and I will be there to make sure the process goes smoothly and that the patient is gone once discharged. I don't know where they go after they are discharged, and I frankly do not care, because neither do they. I did not like seeing Joe walk away from the hospital with nowhere to go that day, the same way that I didn't want to deny my mother when she called me for money or something else, but I was done being sympathetic. It didn't help them, and it didn't help me.

On a separate occasion, another patient was brought into the ER via ambulance, who I will refer to as John. John had been brought to the ER after police were called to his home after he threatened suicide to force another individual off of his property. He had recounted the story to police and paramedics that responded, stating that he was never planning to harm himself and had only made the threat to scare the other individual off of his property. However, as South Carolina law states, they had to bring John to the hospital to be evaluated because of the nature of his threat. After speaking to the doctor and the hospital's social worker, they believed it was best for John to be sent to Greenville for further psychological evaluation.

When the doctor informed John that he could be held for up to seventy-two hours, he became agitated. Of course, the staff then called my partner and me.

Once we arrived, we learned that John was becoming frustrated because he was scared of losing his job for not showing up for work the following Sunday. The doctor continued to explain that they could not legally release him until he had been further evaluated and that they already had a place for him in Greenville, they only had to organize transportation. But, in his state, John was not listening and only became more frustrated. My partner and I stood back and let the doctors and staff continue to try to calm John down, but nothing was working and eventually John stood up and said that he wanted to leave. As John stood up, I started to approach him.

"HOW CAN YOU SYMPATHIZE WITH A PERSON LIKE THAT? THE ANSWER THAT I HAVE COME UP WITH IS YOU DON'T."

"Hey, Doc," I said as I walked down the narrow hall. "Let me have a word." The doctor nodded, stepped back, and I moved to stand in front of John. John was a very intimidating individual. He was tall, built, and outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds. Looking at the two of us, it would have been like looking at a Chihuahua next to a Rottweiler. It was not the first time I had been in this kind of situation, though. What made it worse, however, was that John was also a combat veteran who had served on two different deployments. Given that, plus our size differences, he probably could have killed me before anyone could have done anything to stop him, had he wanted to.

"Hey John, I'm Sully. What seems to be the problem?" I asked, trying to be as friendly as possible. John looked down at me, his eyes red and on the verge of tears, and took a breath.

"I just want to get home. I'm not a danger to anybody and I have to be at work on Sunday or they're going to fire me." I had overheard John saying that his job was very quick to fire anyone who did not meet their standards, even just for missing a day of work. The doctor had already suggested calling his supervisor and explaining the situation, but John was not convinced it would save his job.

"All right," I said. I motioned for John to follow me. I led John to the ambulance bay doors, pressed the button to open them, leaned against the wall and crossed my arms. "Okay, John, here's the deal. The doctors explained why they can't let you leave, right?"

He nodded. "Okay," I continued. "Well, if you want to leave, I'm not going to stop you." The doctor and my partner went wide eyed at me as I said that, but I kept going. "However, if you do, you should know that no one here will be able to help you after that. Did they explain to you what happens if you walk out?" John shook his head. They actually had explained it to him, but I didn't say that. "Okay, so, if you walk out of here and get off the campus,

the doctor is going to call the police. He's going to give them your information, they're going to go looking for you. When they find you, they will take you into custody and bring you right back here. Now, you probably wouldn't make it far, but even if you did, they have your address and they can find out where you work."

John crossed his arms, staring out the open doors of the ambulance bay as I kept talking. "Now," I said. "You said that if you don't show up for work on Sunday, they'll fire you, and I believe that. However, if you go to Greenville, tell the doctors there your side of the story and make them believe that you're not a danger to yourself or anyone else, you could be discharged as early as tomorrow."

"LOOKING AT THE TWO OF US, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN LIKE LOOKING AT A CHIHUAHUA NEXT TO A ROTTWEILER. IT WAS NOT THE FIRST TIME I HAD BEEN IN THIS KIND OF SITUATION."

He looked at me, finally, as I continued my explanation. "I can't guarantee that, but what I can guarantee is that if you walk out those doors, you'll lose your spot in Greenville and you'll have to start this whole process over again when the police bring you back. I've seen people wait days at a time for a spot. And while I doubt it'll take the cops days to find you, I can guarantee you will lose your job if the cops show up and have to walk you out of work. At least if you go to Greenville now, you have a shot to get out and be at work on time."

He stared at me for another moment, then looked out the doors again as they started to swing shut automatically. Without a word, he went back to his bed and sat down, a look of defeat on his face. I followed him back to the bed and stood beside him. "I was told you're a veteran?"

"Yeah," John answered with a sigh. "Infantry."

"Well," I said. "I'm in the National Guard. Not like I know anything from that, but I can tell you that this whole process is just like Basic Training. Quickest way out is to just comply and get to the end. And on the bright side, nurses are much nicer than drill sergeants and there's no early wake ups." I do not think that made him feel any better. He still had the same defeated look on his face, but within ten minutes he was climbing into one of our company vehicles to be taken to Greenville. I do not know if John was released in time to go to work that following Sunday, but I hope he was.

This was not some clever reverse psychology ploy or any other mind game you see on television. As I said, I am cold; had John chosen to walk out the door and take his chances, I would have continued on with my day, got off at the same time, and still been paid that following Friday, only thinking about John again so that I could tell Di the story. I also would not have rushed after him to force him back into the hospital. The staff would have wanted me to, but I wouldn't have, and I would not have lost my job over it, either. I also did not want John to become violent—a man his size could have hurt anyone in the ER severely, including me—but self-preservation

was not why I wouldn't have stopped him. It was because John needed to decide whether he wanted to help himself or make his situation worse. I gave him enough information so that he could make the most informed decision, and he chose wisely.

I think I have managed to learn how to understand people to a certain degree, especially from working at the hospital. But what I have come to realize is that "understanding people," much like sympathy, isn't required to help them. Robert praised me for the way I handled the incident with John, but I did not have any sense of pride from it; I just did my job. I wanted to help both Joe and John from the beginning, whether I understood them or not, but it came down to whether or not they wanted to help themselves.

That is where the difference is when it comes to my sympathy. Joe did not care where he ended up, he did not care about himself enough to ask and accept help or sympathy from the doctor or me. As long as he could get his next fix and be comfortable, he was content. John, however, had priorities; he cared about his own life, and his family, enough to listen to me and accept my advice, my sympathy. While John had been agitated, he had never been disrespectful towards the staff. After I explained the situation, he still wasn't happy, but I believe John realized the best way for him to help himself was to comply.

The same happened to my mother; after some time and realizing that I was not going to be there to help her, she realized just how far she had fallen. After a few years of financial struggle, bad choices, and a lot of work, she has managed to scrape together some semblance of her old life before my sister and I left. Our relationship is strained, but it is more put-together than it has been in a long time. I used to be terrified that I would get called down to the ER to find my mother in one of the beds, refusing to leave because she didn't have anywhere else to go. I have no idea what I would have done in that situation, but I like to think my mom has become more sensible now. It shouldn't take almost losing what's important to you to realize your own mistakes, but it does.

I have dealt with many kinds of patients and I have heard many stories. I have sympathized with some and not at all with others. I am not a saint, or a hero, and I will not sympathize with anyone who does not have any care for themselves or for the hospital's efforts. I am cold, but I am not unkind.

TRUCK DELIVERS SACRIFICE
photography by Taylor Smith
following pages

WHAT'S IN A NAME

Samantha Brooks

I walked up to a building nestled far in the woods behind a mansion. I later learned that the owners of the mansion and building were dog breeders with thick wallets of old money, and the building was their kennel. The kennel-building was well lighted and had two white rocking chairs on its concrete pad front porch. After staring for too long at the little porch with its white chairs, black shutters, and deep planters window boxes that were clearly well attended to, I heard a call from inside telling me to come in. I turned back to the line of cars that I had parked behind and thought about how, even at dusk, the cars shone as if they were washed daily. And I thought about my car in the back, Rhonda, I called her, who still smelled of cigarettes, mold, and neglect left over from her previous owner who abandoned her on the side of the road for my dad to pick up while on call for my granddad's towing company.

My friend must have sensed that I was planning my escape from the mansion, because right as I prepared myself to sneak back into my secondhand Rhonda, she stuck her head out of the kennel/building door.

"Hey, Sam! Are you okay?" Kara said.

I was trying to think of an excuse. Maybe my mom wanted me home. Maybe I had homework that I completely forgot about. Maybe my dad was coming home from the hospital and no one thought to tell me, and I should go check. While I tried to pick an excuse, Kara turned to look at someone inside, said something that I couldn't make out, and walked out to me, closing the door gently behind her.

When she was just a step in front of me, she whispered, "You don't have to come in if you don't want to, but I think you would like these girls if you would give them a chance."

Because I did not want to disappoint Kara by finally showing up to her girls' Bible study and ditching before even coming in after six months of inviting me, I reluctantly said okay and followed her into the building. I am not sure what I was expecting when I walked in, but I definitely did not expect to be surrounded by eight conservatively dressed Mennonite teenagers and two Mennonite ladies. I remember looking down instinctively at my outfit, which I had gotten Kara's approval on, and thinking, "Shoot. I wore pants."

The two ladies said hello to me, and I said it back without looking at either of them because I was strangely conscious of the fact that my hair was down, and I was wearing mascara. I quickly shuffled over to the far side of the room, furnished much like a living room with a couch, loveseat, and recliner. All of the seats were taken, so I sat on the corner of the white rug beside the recliner where Kara sat. I picked my knees up and hugged them tightly,

looking only at the girls and ladies when they were looking at someone else so that I never had to make eye contact. This worked for the first five minutes, maybe, and then one of the ladies, the older of the two who had a silver bun, set her sights on me and asked, "Now, what is your name?"

Everyone stopped their separate conversations and looked at me. I looked at Kara, and she smiled at me in a way that said, *please chill*, but in the warmest way.

"My name is Samantha, but a lot of people call me Sam," I said to the silver bun.

She smiled. "Nice to meet you, Sam." And I believed that she believed that.

I smiled back at her, but when I did, the other lady in the brown bun said to me, "And what is your last name, Sam?"

"Brooks."

The lady with the brown bun furrowed her brow as if she had never heard the name before. Then, she asked me, "And where does your family go to church?"

I assumed at the time that this was a perfectly normal question since I was a visitor at a Bible study for a church that I did not attend, and so I answered her, "We go to South Side Baptist just up the way. The one on the hill. We've gone there since I was about two."

The brown-bun lady chuckled and nodded. "Ah, that makes sense why I don't know the last name." And then she began the Bible study with prayer requests as if our two second conversation gave her all the information that she needed on me to proceed. I asked Kara about this brief conversation with Shannon, the brown bun lady who happened to own the kennel and mansion, when she walked me to the car, and she assured me that it's just a Mennonite thing. She was trying to find where I fit in the Mennonite church, and with just my last name, she and all of the other girls knew that I did not.

I continued to go to this Bible study for reasons that, at the time, I did not know. I know now that I was looking for a new identity, and at times, Lighthouse offered that. Lighthouse Ministries is not a Mennonite church, its members say, but every member is Mennonite by blood and action. When I first started attending the church with Kara's family, I noticed that Kara and her mother were the only women who did not wear a veil on their heads. This was good for me because I was able to blend in when I sat in their family's section. But when the service was over and everyone began to mingle, I found myself overwhelmed by the foreignness of Mennonite culture. Kara was little help since she was a Hershberger, one of the oldest and most prominent Mennonite families in Abbeville, and everyone knew that she belonged because of her name.

For three years I observed and learned what it looked like to be a Mennonite. They loved outsiders as outsiders and were quick to offer their hospitality to me. I became a church project, it seemed, as they passed me around, house to house, family to family. They fed me well and asked about my family. Every time they did, I cursed the Brooks line for being Presbyterians and my father for converting to Baptist when he married my heathen mother.

The Overholts—Galens's, Nate's, and Martin's—liked me the best. Nate's wife, Rose, was the woman who taught me about the miracle of

kombucha and homeopathic healing. Martin's wife, Robin, nursed me through two ruptured ovarian cysts. And Galen's wife, Deb, who had been the silver bun lady from the girls Bible study, became my mom when I no longer wanted mine. My dad has said on multiple occasions that Deb would have married me off to any one of her four sons had I been born a Mennonite. I knew every time he said it that my dad was just trying to joke with me, as I had observed dads do, but I never laughed because I knew that he was right even if he didn't.

After three years, I believed that I had learned what it meant to be a Mennonite woman. As far as I could see, Mennonite women were model Christian women. They dressed modestly, refusing to draw attention to their sexuality while not hiding the fact that they were women. They wore skirts and dresses, often floral, always with a cardigan, and leggings that hid every part of their skin. The teen girls wore Converse, both as a fashion statement and as a mini rebellion against their mothers and grandmothers who urged them to not draw attention to themselves by their individuality. I bought my first pair of Converse during my second year at the church. And the real ones wore veils, coverings some called them, that were placed on the crown of their heads above a bun that never fell out of place.

I tried my best not to draw attention to myself as I transitioned from a Brooks to a Mennonite woman, dragging the process out as long as possible. I started with my hair, wearing it in buns that started on top of my head and moved lower over months until it sat on the nape of my neck just like Deb's. I bought a green cardigan that I wore with T-shirts, then floral tunics, then full-length, below-the-knee wrap dresses. My mom noticed this most obvious change and asked me one day if I was "trying to be a Mennonite, or something?"

I told her no, of course, that I just liked the way I looked. And this was true. I looked like a Mennonite, and I liked that. With every change to my physical appearance, I felt like I was changing spiritually. Like I was a good Christian, for real. Like God Himself was sitting on the edge of His throne on high, tapping Jesus on his shoulder and saying, "Wow. Look at her. She is getting real holy down there."

This was until my final test as a real Mennonite: convincing the matriarch of the Hershberger family, Kara's grandmother, that I belonged. I was on my fourth year at Lighthouse and my first year at Anderson University when, one Sunday in November, for the first time ever, I was invited to a Hershberger family lunch. Even though Kara was the one who originally brought me to Lighthouse as a project from the Baptist church, I had found my place as a Mennonite with Deb and Galen's Overholts. This Sunday lunch invitation was surprising to me, but I accepted. Having only heard stories about the Hershberger matriarch, I was anxious to see if I would pass the test.

I wore my classic Mennonite outfit and modelled in the mirror I shared with my roommate. I tied and untied my floral wrap dress three times, making sure that each loop was even and laid perfectly on my waist. Underneath the dress, I wore black leggings that were covered at the bottom by thin navy blue crew socks, and on my feet, I wore black Converse, tied in identical bows. Taking the hair pins that Deb had given me my first birthday as a Mennonite, I wrapped my hair in a bun, smoothing out any

bumps in the back of my head, and secured it in place. Because my parents would not let me wear a veil, I completed my look with a thick fabric headband, which many of the girls in Lighthouse's youth group wore as a veil alternative. With my green cardigan pulled low over the tattoo on my wrist—an impulsive decision that I regretted as soon as Deb saw it— I set off to church.

"I KNEW EVERY TIME HE SAID IT THAT MY DAD WAS JUST TRYING TO JOKE WITH ME, AS I HAD OBSERVED DADS DO..."

After the service, I mingled with the ladies of the church. Bev and Bethany laughed with me about going to their coffee shop nearly every day. Rachel tried to teach me the Pennsylvania Dutch word for stocking cap for the fourth time that month, which I kept saying wrong purposely just to hear her speak the language more. Barb, the matriarch of the Stolls, invited me over to play Rook with a couple of the other church grandmas. Kara waved me over when it was time for her family to leave, and I made my exit slowly, saying goodbye to everyone just because I could.

I followed Kara's family back to Donalds, the stronghold of the real Mennonites who went to a church for Mennonites. This church was called Cold Spring, and it was known as the mother church to Lighthouse because Lighthouse had broken away from it about the time my parents started going to South Side. The Cold Spring Mennonites looked down on the Lighthouse Mennonites because the women wore fashionable dresses and skirts, rather than the cape dresses, and small black veils instead of large white coverings. No one could tell the men apart, though. Kara had told me before that her Hershberger grandparents were church elders at Cold Spring, and I knew what she meant. This is why, when I pulled in their long, asphalt driveway, I yanked the diamond stud out of my nose and placed it in the cupholder with a napkin over it. Putting the car in park, I looked in my rearview mirror, licked my thumb, and wiped away the blood bubbling up on my nose, and smoothed my hair.

The Hershberger's house looked like a normal grandparent house, kind of like my grandparents' house even. There were wooden gliders with worn cushions on them that had probably been there since the eighties. Behind the gliders was a fireplace, and on the mantle were pictures of women in cape dresses with children on their hips and hanging onto their arms. I laughed to myself when I remembered Deb telling me that Galen was the youngest of nineteen children. When I thought of this, I instinctively looked around the room for a television set, remembering the joke that my dad had told when he heard about the average number of children Mennonite families had: "Well, when you don't have cable, you gotta do something to pass the time!" And he laughed so much that tears welled in his eyes. When he stopped laughing, I mumbled to him, "You're the youngest of seven, Dad," without looking him in the eyes.

I was just barely in the living room when Kara's grandparents spotted me, and I could see that they were pleased. They smiled big, both showing their teeth, and approached me while wiping their hands on their clothes. Kara's granddad, Ivan—a good Mennonite name, Kara had told me—shook my hand with both of his and said that I had a nice smile. When he released my hand, he moved to the side and let Kara's grandma through as if they had practiced this move before. I noted that she was much smaller than me, but she came to me with such authority that I could not help but shrink when she wrapped me in a tight hug.

"Hello, hello," she said. I liked that she said hello twice. I made a mental note to start doing it myself.

"Hi, Mrs. Hershberger," I said, cringing at my Southern Baptist heritage showing. I always seemed to forget that no real Mennonite said "Mrs. Whoever" or "Mr. So-in-so." They always called one another by their first names, no matter the age difference. I thought that I had blown my cover.

Kara's grandmother must not have thought too much about this mistake because she patted me on the arm and said, "Aren't you too precious. You can just call me Gloria."

"Yes, ma'am, Gloria," I said with an army salute. She looked at me oddly then, and I remembered too late that Mennonites do not send their sons to war. I cursed my father for serving the country for thirty years and the Brookses for producing soldiers in every generation.

Kara's parents, her aunt and uncle, and her grandparents gathered in the kitchen, and all of us children, which I had learned meant anyone who was unmarried, sat in the living room in our separate groups. The youngest children sneaked out the front door and ran off to the pond around the back of the house. The boys took the two gliders and all three seats on the couch and talked about their jobs at their fathers' various construction companies. And Kara, her cousin Kristen, and I sat on the floor by the big window next to the front door and flipped through fifty years' worth of scrapbooks. By the time that Mrs. Gloria told us to call in the little ones from outside, I felt as if I had experienced her entire life with her.

In the dining room, just off the kitchen, the Hershbergers had a table big enough to fit all sixteen of us. At the head of the table, Mr. Ivan sat with Kara's dad on one side and her uncle on the other. Beside them sat their wives, and beside the mothers sat Kara with hers and Kristen with hers as the eldest of their siblings. I sat beside Kara, and the rest of the siblings sat around the rest of the table. Mrs. Gloria sat at the end of the table with the youngest of the two families on either side of her and her husband at the other end of the table facing her so that they were bookends for their family. Kara's dad, as the older son, was the one who led the family in prayer.

For most of the meal, I jumped from conversation to conversation as I had done at Lighthouse just a few hours before. I laughed with Kara and Kristen's mothers who told stories about their first attempts at making cinnamon buns, which I had learned were a Mennonite food staple. Deb taught me how to make them before starting that semester at Anderson. I listened intently as the men at the head of the table discussed work and theology, wanting desperately to jump in, but I didn't because I knew that that would not be right.

I had put away my argumentative nature years ago when deciding to challenge Nate and Galen one morning while church camping in the mountains of North Carolina. Rose and Deb, who had heard about my challenging their authority as church elders, told me that if I wanted to talk about theology, I needed to do so with the girls in the youth group or with them, but it was not glorifying to God to argue with church leadership. "We are supposed to trust and submit," Rose had told me while patting my hand. "The Lord would not have had them in leadership if they were not supposed to be there."

When the meal was nearly over, and Kara, Kristen, and I had cleared away the dinner plates and replaced them with the dessert ones, Mrs. Gloria looked at me in the same way that Shannon had so long ago. I could see her thinking. I knew that she was trying to place me before she even said what I knew was coming.

"Sam," she said, in such a way that all other conversation stopped. Gloria had not spoken to anyone but the young children the entire meal, and this address seemed to catch everyone off guard, except for me.

"Yes, ma'am?" I answered, trying not to let the sadness show in my eyes.

"What is your last name?"

I cursed the Brookses for being heathens: my grandfather for being a Presbyterian pastor, my father for going to the Baptist church, my mother for growing up without religion.

"I'm a Brooks," I said.

Gloria Hershberger nodded her head and looked at her plate as if trying to summon up my family tree in her mind. After a second, the conversations started up again, quietly at first, and then back to normal as if I had not just unloaded my greatest secret to God Himself who was scratching His head because He forgot that I was a Brooks Himself. When Mrs. Gloria finally resumed whatever conversation she was having with the toddler Mennonite at her side, I looked around the table. Kara, Kristen, and their mothers were dressed in clothes that my own mother would wear, and their hair was down and styled. Kara was even wearing mascara, which I hadn't noticed before. And, without thinking about it, I cursed myself again for being a Brooks because, even then, when I had almost fooled the goddess of the Mennonite church, I had been caught. In just a two second conversation, she knew all that she needed to about me and was able to continue what she was doing. By affirming my identity, she affirmed theirs: I was the outsider, the project, the heathen, and they were the model Christians, loving me through hospitality, just like Jesus would.

CHAPPED LIPS

Lily McNamara

She yawns in false-fatigue, half-lidded gaze roving listlessly,
the motion tugging, pulling, stretching, snapping
her dry-as-dust lips.
A needling pain, a pinprick split at the corner of her mouth.

I need to drink water.

She licks the beaded blood, a salt-tang sting,
and closing her mouth again she feels it,
cottonmouth parched.
Her tongue swollen, sandbag-heavy between her teeth.

I need to drink water.

She brings a finger to cracked lips,
their skin rough, chapped and raw.
Chafed and flaking surface rasps against her fingertip,
which comes back painted faint bloody pink.

I need to drink water.

She tries to reason with herself—
it's a mood disorder, a chemical imbalance—
there's nothing *wrong*, not with *her*.
It's only the water that's out of reach,
self-preservation, cruel labor.

I need to drink water.

She needs to drink water, but
numbed thoughts hold her in place.
Tugging her ribs, pulling on her spine,
and weighing down the corners of her mind.

TO EXPLORE
collage by Jordan Flachman

ROLE PLAYING

Logan Riley Carroll

Mary is painting a large lady on a canvas bigger than our refrigerator. The lady's head is double that of my own; her breasts are twice the size of Mary's. The large lady is impossibly postured atop shapeless colors. Or a mound of colors, if you see it that way. The expressionist armchair, Mary calls it.

I am aware of what she is painting because of history and history alone. This is Mary's style—big women leaning on furniture that is not there. Each of them has a narrative, a fictional quilt, if you will, that Mary has seamed. Some of them know one another or are related. They feud, even.

I am facing away, reading news off of my phone. Mary does not allow me to watch while she is painting. She needs me in the rooms while she works, but cannot work while I am watching. Not a hard paradox, but a soft one. So I do a bit of leaning of my own, on our sofa and on history, to fill me in on what's behind my back.

There is a virus working its scythe across Europe. This has kinked the garden hose of information concerning other world events. Mary is the voracious reader—I am merely peckish, but this virus has gripped me by the neck. Already I have signed up for the paid subscription services of three different news outlets. I refresh websites hourly to read how bad is becoming worse, to see the pictures of the bodies. Never trust a photo you didn't take, my dad used to say. What a load of skeptical bull. Mary and I are an ocean away from the very teeth of death. She kneads my shoulders with her hands and I jump as if the mouth has got me.

"Did I scare you?" she asks.

"I thought you were something else."

"It's just your wife. What do you think?"

I turn and admire.

"She's beautiful," I say.

"What would you say to her in public?"

"You're beautiful."

"No you wouldn't."

I see Mary in every female she paints. She hates this, but my brain operates on a circuit. In every face, it is Mary's blood that blushes the cheeks. Every pair of thighs brings me to Mary's knees.

"What would *you* say to her in public?" I ask.

"I'd ask her what she likes to do."

"What does she like to do?"

"Cycling. Although she's amateur."

"Did I ever tell you that I almost bought a bike once?"

"I can't think of a single reason why you would've."

*

Mary is rinsing a bowl of its gazpacho remnants. She sets the dish in the sink and tightens her back before turning toward me. I know this routine. I compare it to a slingshot. When she loosens up there will be a projectile in my eye.

"Ken, I need to let the house get dirty."

"Why would we do that?" I ask. "It's our only setting."

We are eating at home now. The virus has forced an indefinite shack-up ordinance. Jobs are remotely operating, if not closed entirely. There are fourteen cases in Charleston and Charleston is where we are. Ronald Lancaster from my consulting group is married to one of those infected. They were traveling for their forty-fifth anniversary. Some souvenir.

"I know you," she says. "I know how you function. The amount of clean that was acceptable yesterday won't be a week from now. You'll grow restless."

"It's only been three days of this, honey. Let's not tear the wall down before the paint dries."

Is this a saying? It came to me like one. I am packing my pipe with Three Nuns at the table. Mary is grabbing two rocks glasses and some whiskey from the shelf above the microwave. She sets them on the counter and pours past the indentations.

"Besides," I go on. "I like cleaning. Cleanliness makes my job easier. Life simpler."

"In what ways does a clean house make financial advising easier?"

"It's about touchstones, Mary. The baseline of performance is drawn on a clean floor. Any lack of cleanliness, to say *dirtiness*, obstructs me from my standard. I love clean."

I don't expect Mary to understand this. She is messy by nature. Her paint brushes look like Pick-Up sticks around her living room workspace. Her dark hair goes up in a wicked bun and her laundry often misses the hamper.

"You should have been a trash collector," Mary says.

"I agree."

"Or a room attendant."

"Do street sweepers still exist? If so, what a great job."

"Yes, but not as you are picturing them."

The truth is that I enjoy my job. My clients are people that I am glad to help. Their success fulfills me. I like to imagine their households and where they are allocating their earnings. I see myself walking through their rooms, going through their pantries, watering their ferns.

"Look," I say. "I understand how precious your energy is when you work. So while I'm at home, I'll take over the cleaning duties. All of them."

I go out to the porch after I scrub the dishes left in the sink.

*

Mary was right. I had been picturing a single person with a broom trying to swipe the dust off of Kings Street. I am not a dumb person, but I do have these naive lapses in my imagination. Still, as I sit in my Adirondack rocking chair, keeping a little fire lit in the nest near my lips, blowing smoke into a gelatinous night sky that looks like it would jiggle if touched, I think how wonderful it'd be to lean on your broom and see the spotless streets at dawn after a night of hard work.

*

Mary is asleep in our bedroom when I finally come back inside. It appears that the big lady has developed. The colors around her demand less and she receives more. Lips are full as liferafts. The eyes have become distinctly living. What of her skin that is visible seems to conceal miles of veins and ballrooms of twitching muscle fibers. Mary really is incredible. I follow the big lady's legs to the sharpened tips of her kitten heels, but have to backtrack. Something is not right. There, directly on the dome of the ankle is a hideous, rotten blemish, that can only be described as a scab.

It had to have been a mistake. Mary had grabbed a dirty brush and was too tired or annoyed to mend it. This is not her style. It would be an easy fix, really. Maybe even I could manage it. But the mouth of our bedroom is yawning and so am I.

I brush my teeth for an even two hundred seconds. Floss and mouthwash. Wipe my face with a hot wet towel and lay out my razor and shaving cream for the morning. Mary is a heavy sleeper so I flush away and climb into bed next to her.

*

I cannot tell whether Mary is enjoying my presence at home, but I am certain that I am. Every morning I wake up and read two chapters and drink a cup of coffee with each. I take my calls on the porch and send my emails from the dining room table. At the office, there are seconds that last an epoch and if you're not careful, a twenty-minute hour will wizz right by. Time seems to finally get it straight now. I am no longer surprised when the mornings become afternoons and then shift into evenings. Instead, I smile and nod as the sky drains free of its last bit of color, because some things we set our watches to should not be replaced by the watch itself.

Tonight, Mary is going at it with a paint knife. I have become keen to the sounds of each tool. The rigger speaks while the filbert whispers. Her paint knife is like a struggle with a sleeping bag zipper. Even from the kitchen I can make this out.

"They're calling it a Global Pandemic," I say.

"They shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Not a friendly word. Pandemic."

"You can't argue with its descriptiveness."

"Too many people will read right through the d-e-m and think *panic*."

"How do you even formulate an idea like that? Do *you* see panic?"

"No, Ken. I'm just capable of thinking how others think."

I walk into the living room, averting my eyes from the canvas, and hand Mary her Riesling. Since the country has shut down we've been drinking more—starting earlier, ending later. This does not bother our sensibilities. We think ourselves epicureans, even if the alcohol is bought in bulk.

"We should play a game," I say.

"And why would we do that?"

"Think about it. Millions of adults locked in their homes. We can all play games, every night even, and no judgement can be cast. It's like one big slumber party."

"We don't own any games."

"We can make one up. We can play charades."

"Who would be our opponent?"

"We can order a chess board."

"By the time it arrives, we won't be interested."

You won't be interested. Mary is reworking the big woman. She is dissatisfied with the artist's composition. She literally said this, third person and all. I do not understand what it takes to be talented. Mary has had a Liberal Arts degree for as long as I have known her, but she qualified for one long before she was handed a diploma. Her ability is one that can only be described in analogy. Art is to Mary as water is to fish. It is not fanciful to say that art is the medium through which she swims through life, breathes even, receives her nourishment, and to put it clearly, it is her world, has been since birth.

"What if we tried a bit of role playing," I say. "We could pretend to be other people."

Mary sets her knife down and finishes her wine in one motion, using a hand for each action. I am reminded that I want her desperately.

"Splendid," she replies. "Tonight will be practice. I'll pretend to be Mary and you can pretend to be Kenneth."

I agree by clinking my glass to her empty one and head out onto the porch to read, but I am mad that I did this. Later that night, Mary was asleep next to me, but I wondered if in some other room of the house my wife was still awake.

*

Today I woke up with a word on the tip of my tongue, but I could not figure out what it was. I asked Mary to say a couple of words from the top of her head, but none of them led me to it.

I am becoming increasingly aware of our house's security, or lack thereof. This is an irrational worry, as we are home all the time now, but while the news is a conglomeration of death totals, stricter regulations, experts with opinions, the lone breaking and entering, covered by our local news, resonated.

Mary is evolving. She no longer needs me to be around while she paints. In fact, she prefers that I am not. One morning I woke up to find that she had moved all of her equipment and the big canvas to our guest bedroom, where she has continued her work in privacy.

I am using my time to look into improving our home's security. I am diving into the extensive information on the internet about door fortification. There are doors of titanium with tungsten bolts that root it to the frame from top, bottom, and side, all while maintaining a believable paint-on-wood appearance. Literal doors that will survive the apocalypse. Windows have advanced beyond what internet pundits refer to as the "Glass Age." These new windows laugh at bullets and tint themselves on impulse. Living Windows, they call them. Not sure what it means. Our house is 1,700 square feet, leaving us with enough vertical surface area to justify an upgrade to our walls. Poured concrete remains a reliable choice of interior; however, a group of German engineers in Hamburg have been perfecting a rubber metal alloy composed of conductive plastic polymers that can spar with tornados and reduce electricity bills by 15%, though cost effectiveness is hardly an incentive when the discussion is about peace of mind. Radiation-proof insulation is an expense that one can spare.

I spend whole days pouring over the information and feel my worries twist and contort inside my skull. The more I research, the less safe I feel in the current iteration of our home. A little more research and I feel as if I am growing closer to utter security, and this relieves me. It is Mary that I fear for the most. How can I let her walk around inside the danger of our home?

*

Mary is becoming nocturnal. Our individual hours of consciousness have been separating throughout the pandemic, and now they only touch between 5 and 6 a.m. I shouldn't say pandemic. We have been instructed to use the phrase "Contagion Event." Maybe Mary was right. The word was never friendly.

The good news is that the house has never been cleaner. I purchased a Bluetooth headset with a voice-isolating microphone which has allowed me to vacuum while taking phone calls for work. I have made myself a spreadsheet outlining each day's set of tasks for months into the future. There are daily tasks that maintain proper tidiness in terms of dusting and dishes, along with specific, obscure cleansing possibilities. Already I have polished the kitchen cabinet hinges using a mixture of salt, flour, and vinegar. Today I dismantled and reconfigured the toaster to rid it of all bread crumbs and poppy seeds.

Work has slowed down as our clients have become fewer, leaving me with excess time to hover over the house. The only room that remains out of reach is the guest bedroom where Mary has been painting. I know better than to enter while unauthorized, but when she sleeps I have taken to scrubbing under the door with my old toothbrush and Pine-Sol.

*

Today I woke up to find that Mary had made me a cake. I found the dirty tools she used resting in the sink before I found the cake. It was a pink frosted number with big capitalized letters written in white:

"HAPPY RETIREMENT"

At first I thought it was a joke, but Mary came out of the shower to tell me what had happened as I slept.

"They abolished work."

"They did?" I ask.

"Yep. Wiped it clean off of the grid."

"I didn't realize they could do that."

Mary has her hair wrapped in a towel and she is wearing a terrycloth robe her mother bought us—a matching set. I can't remember the last time I saw her naked, Mary that is. I wonder what's going on under there. Renovations? Is the tummy that I used to caress still the texture I recall? I am imagining this, textures, when Mary interrupts my train of thought.

"So what will you do, Bert?"

"Who's Bert?"

"I don't know. Who is Bert?"

"I'm Ken."

"Yes."

"Can you repeat what you said?"

"What will you do first?"

"I'm not sure. What would you do? If you were me."

"What kind of question is that?"

"A funnel question, I believe."

"I'd get a hobby."

"I think I should call someone first. This is all so sudden."

I make myself some coffee and think I'll dial up old Ronald Lancaster. He is the most senior advisor in our group and he always has had an open-armed optimism about the world. The phone rings several times and then I get a woman's voice.

"Is this the florist?" she asks.

"No, I'm looking for Ronald Lancaster. I'm a work friend."

"He's dead."

The words shock me. I put my hand to my mouth, but there's nothing to prevent. My throat dries up.

"Hello?" she asks.

"I thought it was his wife who was sick," I manage to say.

"Both got it. Killed the each of them."

I guess I went pretty silent again because the voice on the other phone didn't wait for me to respond.

"The funeral is tonight. We're streaming it on the internet since none but close family are allowed to attend. I thought maybe someone from work would've sent you all an email."

"They abolished work."

"Hm, they sure did."

"Who am I talking to?"

"Ronald's daughter, Cecilia."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Cecilia. Can I ask you something?"

"You may."

"Did Ronald have any hobbies?"

"He loved food, he loved his kids. My brother Trent is a pitcher for the

Twins' minor league affiliate. He loved to watch him play baseball. But his greatest passion was cycling."

*

Later that night I tuned in to the burial, but I couldn't get the damn audio to work. I watched as the twin caskets sat on the stage, flowers spilling all around them. A minister or a relative or someone mouthed words until the stream ended. I closed my laptop and went out on the porch to have a smoke in honor, I guess, of Ronald. The whole time I wondered why anyone would ever buy a bike.

*

Mary and I have begun to rethink the past when we share our morning hour.

"Do you remember traffic?" she asks.

"Traffic," I say, "I always loved it."

"I loved the way the exhaust floated up like a fog of progress."

"I loved that the most."

"The car horns. There was a deeply personal music to them. Like a daily composition by commuting maestros."

"This," I say, "I also loved."

I adore when Mary becomes all lucid and poetic. She reminds me of what I am not. It is not ridiculous to think that she and I are becoming closer to the soul of the world through all of this. I feel as if the next time I go out to eat, whenever that may be, I'll weep when the check arrives.

"Do you remember what looking for parking feels like?" I ask.

"Like diving through a coral reef."

It is strange to consider what we miss and do not. Yesterday I sat on the porch and cracked the spine of a biography on Lance Armstrong. I was enjoying the introduction, but kept losing my concentration due to the incessant, ear-splitting chitter of songbirds. I closed the book and went inside. Am I becoming someone who gets angry at birds? The thought is troubling.

*

I am eating a box of raisins. Mary is telling me she wants a divorce.

"Were we ever married?" I ask.

"I seem to recall a wedding near the beach."

"I'm having faint recollections of your brother being terribly hung over during the ceremony."

"Do I have a brother?"

"Or was it in the mountains?"

"I doubt we would've invited this brother."

I have a mysterious pain in my back, shooting up from my childhood, through the column of my spine, to my brainstem. Last night I dreamt I was falling from the tree outside of my house in Tuscaloosa, all those decades ago. I suppose it's not a dream if it actually happened and I wasn't asleep. All morning I have been wincing with each breath.

"We shouldn't get divorced," I say.

"You're probably right."

"Not during a time like this. A contagion event. Not while I'm eating raisins."

"It's not that."

"What isn't?"

"The situation. It's changed."

"Into what?"

"They're calling it a State of Health Apocalypse."

"That can't be right."

It was the Summer of '86. My dad had just gotten back from the base in Ambouli. The boomerang was a souvenir. I had thrown it three times and on the fourth time it got stuck in the white oak near the fence in the back of our yard. I remember thinking my first cuss word. *Dammit*, I thought.

I say that what we really ought to do is get married in a time like this.

"I can think of a litany of reasons why we shouldn't."

"That was the word," I say. "Litany. It was on the tip of my tongue."

Mary looks at me like I had a beard, so much beard that it has become a cornerstone of my identity, but then I whimsically shaved, and am unrecognizable, even to my own wife. But there is no beard and there never was—only metaphor.

"What does it mean?" she asks.

*

Mary and I have begun sleeping together again. In the guest bedroom, however. She finished her painting and opened the door. I was downstairs when it happened, cleaning the bottoms of soup cans. She asked me to sex and I accepted. Once in the room, I found the better half of our plates and glasswares strewn about like an antique store. No big woman though. In the corner was a canvas. A scab the size of our refrigerator.

While I pull on my pants I tell her that I haven't known whether she has pretended to be herself or actually is herself, since the game started.

"You mean that night you brought up role playing?" she asks. "Ken, that was over a year ago."

"It feels like yesterday," I say.

"I was a different person then. The world was a different place."

It feels like yesterday.

JUST A GIRL AND HER CAR 1/3
photography by Makayla Fenters

JUST A GIRL AND HER CAR 3/3
photography by Makayla Fenters

IT'S MINE

Larisa Crowder

Binge-reading Bukowski is like gulping black coffee. I'm sure Bukowski himself could suggest a stronger beverage that would more accurately compare, but considering my limited experience, I'm going to stick with coffee. People who've had only poor coffee equate it with bitterness, but black coffee that's been made right? Liquid gold. And as each sip follows the next, your taste buds fall into a rhythm. With the first sip, you're not sure what to expect, since there's only the aroma to go off, but, with the second and third, links begin forming such that, by the time you've finished the cup, what a connoisseur would call the "flavor profile" has been fully realized, and everything sings. It's rare that I let a cup that good go cold. It's equally rare that I read only a handful of Bukowski poems in a sitting. It's more of a "fifty pages in, and I've just realized my foot is asleep" situation. And it's like how, when I finish one of his poems, I've experienced something new. Dark and as deeply sad as his writing can be, no matter how much something sucks, he gets a poem out of it, which always leaves me strangely hopeful. To this particular woman who stole his poems: thanks? Kind of? Because, if any of my Microsoft Word documents ever disappear before I've saved them, I have "to the whore who took my poems" to comfort me:

> twelve poems gone and I don't keep carbons and you have
> my
> paintings too, my best ones; its stifling:
> are you trying to crush me out like the rest of them?
> why didn't you take my money? they usually do
> from the sleeping drunken pants sick in the corner.
> next time take my left arm or a fifty
> but not my poems:
> I'm not Shakespeare
> but sometime simply
> there won't be any more, abstract or otherwise;
> there'll always be money and whores and drunkards
> down to the last bomb,
> but as God said,
> crossing his legs,
> I see where I have made plenty of poets
> but not so very much
> poetry. (5-22)

Not so very much poetry, yet Charles Bukowski wrote over a thousand poems. He was referred to by *L.A. Times* reporters as "poet laureate of L.A. lowlife," "the enfant terrible of the Meat School poets," "the prophet of the underemployed," and "a flamboyant provincial," among other things. To me, though, he was the poet who showed me that the art form is worthwhile—that art is, in fact—despite everything.

I associated poetry with overly sensitive people who cried too much, people I rolled my eyes at, and so I refused to read a single line of poetry all through school. I suppose I had dragged my eyes across a few required-reading poems in high school—a bit of Poe, a bit of Frost, and Dickinson's "I'm Nobody!"— but my mind was sealed. I refused to let these poets' words affect me, out of spite. Much of this spite came from a disdain for my own sensitivity, for the humiliation expressing my feelings caused me, and for the acute second-hand embarrassment I felt at witnessing other peoples'. Not joining them in the seemingly carefree sentimentality I found so embarrassing wasn't enough—I had to despise them, too. How this came to be associated with poetry, I'm not sure. It may have had something to do with the number of times I watched the 1985 *Anne of Green Gables* film, and how my skin crawled during the scene where Anne reads Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" out loud. (This didn't stop me from reading—and enjoying—all eight books in L.M. Montgomery's series, though. Anne wasn't at all relatable, but she was certainly a good time.) This adolescent grudge softened into habit, and by college I'd nearly forgotten poetry existed.

My sophomore year of college, I followed a girl on Instagram named Julia—she had a feathery black mullet, at the time, and wore leather and chains and silk and pearls, often all at once. She was from Seattle but spent a great deal of time in Paris and Shanghai, working as a model and a painter. One day, she posted Bukowski's "an almost made up poem." I admired her and trusted her taste, and so I read it. And read it again. And again.

I loved you
like a man who loves a woman he never touches, only
writes to, keeps little photographs of. I would have
loved you more if I had sat in a small room rolling a
cigarette and listened to you piss in the bathroom,
but that didn't happen. your letters got sadder.
your lovers betrayed you. kid, I wrote back, all
lovers betray. it didn't help. you said
you had a crying bench and it was by a bridge and
the bridge was over a river and you sat on the crying
bench every night and wept for the lovers who had
hurt and forgotten you. I wrote back but never
heard again. a friend wrote me of your suicide
3 or 4 months after it happened. if I had met you
I would probably have been unfair to you or you
to me. it was best like this. (24-39)

It was so sad, it made so much sense. Of course you should never get to know the person you think is magic and have never touched, who you only see through their art, but how could that be shown so frankly, in so few words? Genius. Who wrote that? You see, I'd begun to evolve. My feelings still embarrassed me but other peoples' didn't, not so often. The timing was right, and I wanted to read more. Wait, it wasn't all Tennyson? Up to this point, I'd found the joke, "We get it, poets, things are like other things" absolutely hilarious. But this was different. And it was true. And it was beautiful.

*

"What has been is what will be. What has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun." You know who wrote that? King Solomon, history's wisest, also a poet, with his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines to Bukowski's two wives and probably-fewer-than three hundred lovers.

My belief in this is so fierce, it has become subconscious. I'm getting a tattoo soon—a literary reference, a visual pun: the words "nothing new" under a rising sun. I just can't decide where on my body to assert this truth. "There is nothing new under the sun." I say it as I scroll through revolting news stories, as the friend I gave the same piece of advice to five hundred times disregards it again, as I flip my over-easy egg. I react the same way to crime on the news as I do when the egg yolk breaks before it makes it onto the toast: "dang, again?" I've made countless over-easy eggs, and sometimes I still break them. Humanity's the same. We keep doing the thing, over and over. With hundreds of thousands of years' worth of history to learn from, we sometimes do better, but the one thing that endures is human nature, immutable.

It's being original that's so hard in this world of inevitable repetition. It's telling the truth that's so exhausting. Showing it, rather, not just telling, and believing it's worth it at all. Creating even a fraction of what I consume. Interpretation. Filtration, curation, production, constantly.

After reading two of Bukowski's books in approximately four sittings, I watched a documentary about this gnarled alcoholic, somehow both disgusting and disarmingly tender, called *Bukowski: Born Into This*, which mostly consists of interviews with the writer. During one of them, he said of his abusive father, "When you get the sh— kicked out of you long enough and long enough and long enough, you will have a tendency to say what you really mean. In other words, you have all the pretense beat out of you. My father was a great literary teacher. He taught me the meaning of pain. Pain without reason." This pain that appears in his poems never comes across as reasonless. I don't know what it means, but he does, and that's where the hope comes from. The pain, inflicted without reason, is put to work in creation. There, it does have meaning, when it culminates in truth.

I have had absolutely no pretense beaten out of me, not like that, but sometimes reading his poetry feels like it just might do it. The jolt that is a Bukowski poem makes my subconscious more accessible, shakes the filter, wipes clean the lens through which I see my life, which I believe is the purpose of art. My "nothing new" attitude keeps me from being overly

shocked at horrible things and falling into utter despair. It also keeps me from sustaining much hope. Everything's reiteration, consumption digested and waste recycled. What could I add? What truly new thing could I create, and why would I try? But, you know, maybe no else who ever lived has my exact tattoo, so that's something. It might be the only thing. So, I still write. I'm really, really glad Bukowski did.

"The wine does most of my writing," he told the *L.A. Times* in 1987. "I just open a bottle and turn on the radio, and it just comes pouring out. I only type every third night. I have no plan. My mind is a blank. I sit down. The typewriter gives me things I don't even know I'm working on. It's a free lunch. A free dinner. I don't know how long it is going to continue, but so far there is nothing easier than writing."

I have no idea what he's talking about. Writing is not a free lunch to me, but, as I said, I drink only coffee. Right now, I'm exhausted, and mostly because of writing. School began in August and has barreled straight through November with no breaks, and for me, not even weekends. The only time I take off from studying is the time I spend at work (luckily, I like both of my jobs) or the two-odd hours a week I spend watching *Twin Peaks* with my friend, Morganne. We drink earl grey and talk about what we love, like visiting graveyards and David Bowie. We've talked about how we cried on many of our childhood birthdays, and the unparalleled self-loathing we feel when we're given a gift we don't actually want. It's that time of the semester when I start showing up to class in what I'll wear to bed that night, with a jacket over it; when I crave these moments more than anything:

"it's ours"

there is always that space there
just before they get to us
that space
that fine relaxer
the breather
while say
flopping on a bed
thinking of nothing (1-8)

that
gentle pure
space

it's worth

centuries of
existence

say

just to scratch your neck

while looking out the window at
a bare branch

that space
there
before they get to us
ensures
that
when they do
they won't
get it all

ever. (14-32)

I flop on my bed, my feet dangling off the side, thinking of nothing. I take off my glasses and rub my eyes like an angry toddler, with my fists; I take three deep breaths the way my dad taught me to. I decide what to do next, with a grain of conviction that makes it slightly less impossible because I decided to do it in that moment that belonged to me.

It's that time of semester where I'm showering twice a day to feel awake, warm, clean, alert; washing with peppermint soap and drinking hot, black coffee afterwards. I gulp down my Bukowski for the day, then sit at my desk and write, my glasses reflecting the blue light of my laptop until midnight. I brush my teeth, climb into bed, and stretch out like a cat, legs extended, partly on my stomach, partly on my back. I flex my feet, spread my toes, realize my calves are sore from nothing, as usual. Is this what it is to age? I press my hand against the small of my back and twist, and my spine pops all the way down. I roll over and do it again, take a single deep breath, curl into a ball, exhale, and fall asleep, bone-weary, though it's my head that's spent, not my body, and I think to myself, it could be worse. I could be starving. Someday, I'll get a book out of this. That's hope, right there.

VANITY
discarded cotton rounds by Katharine Landry


THANK YOU

The 96th edition of *Ivy Leaves* was not an easy one to put together, for the best reasons. The volume of submissions, and the variety within, were some of the most considerable and surprising yet, and it was an honor to devote our time and attention to every single poem, essay, and story. To each writer and artist who submitted their work, thank you for trusting us, for sharing your stories. Your work provides a portrait of the University at a strange and difficult time, when the revealing, unifying nature of our art perhaps strikes a different chord than before. It is a necessity.

They say it takes a village, and *Ivy Leaves* is no exception. We thank the College of Arts and Sciences, and the faculty who have encouraged and refined our artistic vision. Our literature team thanks Dr. Teresa Jones, especially—for helping us find the hearts of the stories we want to tell, for guiding us through countless revisions, and for bringing out the best in us by treating us as though we are already the writers we aspire to be.

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We are filled with immense gratitude to the Student Government Association for providing additional funding to enhance the journal's design and include more student submissions. Their generosity has allowed these writers and artists to showcase their work and share their craft with our student body. We are proud of their work and of the students who created it. We see this journal as an artistic embodiment of the campus, and it an honor to share their stories.

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