

# Typehouse

Issue 10, January 2017

LITERARY MAGAZINE





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# *Typehouse*

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# Typehouse Literary Magazine

Editor in Chief: Val Gryphin  
Fiction Editor: Lindsay Fowler  
Non-fiction Editor: Lily Blackburn  
Poetry Editor: David Midkiff  
Visual Art Editor: John Koch

Typehouse is a writer-run literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and art that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. If you are interested in submitting, visit our website at [www.typehousemagazine.com](http://www.typehousemagazine.com).

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## Cover Photo

*Secrets in the waters by Dr. Ho Cheung LEE (See page 24)  
Summer 2015. My young companion pondered as he waded into the wrinkled waters of a southern beach of the Hong Kong island. His family matters were unreadable on his face. Yet, this moment, his lowered head and stillness against the calm ocean seemed to be telling that there was more being hidden in his mind than the undiscovered in the buried castle under the seabed.*

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*Rhonda Lott's work has appeared in a variety of national and international publications such as Hayden's Ferry Review, Southern Humanities Review, and Whiskey Island Magazine, among others. She has also served as an editor for Iron Horse Literary Review and Sundress Publications. Rhonda received her M.A. from the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Writers and her Ph.D. in English with an emphasis in creative writing from Texas Tech University. After graduation, she worked as a writer-in-residence at Sundress Academy for the Arts in Knoxville, Tennessee where she facilitated poetry workshops, designed book covers, and fed a donkey named Jayne. Now, she teaches as a lecturer at the University of Tennessee.*

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# The Donkey in My Apartment

Rhonda Lott

The night we came home from the Gertrude Stein convention and found the donkey standing in the bedroom of my fifth-floor walk up, and he would not take the stairs down, I knew.

I dialed and redialed the landlord, touring somewhere much warmer than here, while you led the donkey to the kitchen, chopped my last Honeycrisp apple into neat wedges

he could not choke on. I tried to open windows, looked for a rope, estimated his height and weight. You told me I should pet the ears because they were the softest things

in the world. *What the hell is wrong with you?*  
I snapped. You brushed flies from his eyelashes.  
*This isn't the worst thing I've ever found*  
*in a kitchen*, you shrugged. When I touched one

ear, my forearm's length, with a pinky tip,  
it felt as soft as the cheek of a first  
crush before he grew up Mennonite, soft  
as chiffon pie left in Mississippi

July, soft as the violet velvet  
of a whiskey pouch locked in a mother's  
nightstand, and all I could think of to say  
was that you owed me another apple.



# The Donkey in My Apartment Watches Zebras on TV

Last Sunday night, my downstairs neighbor knocked.  
*Are you working out now or what the hell?*  
she half whispered, half yelled. *I don't know how*  
*someone so little sounds so big.* Just then,

the donkey brayed from the bedroom. *What's that?*  
Her hair, blonde gray, stood stiff as hay. I looked  
past her lavender terrycloth toe socks,  
puffed pink like her eyelids, stitched with sparkling

skulls less human, more equine. *Discovery*  
*Channel*, I said. She came back Monday night,  
same slippers, same robe. *You must have big dogs,*  
she apologized. *My husband just died.*

*It's good to hear big feet. I don't know what*  
*I'd do with quiet anyway.* I called  
animal control. When vans came Friday,  
I sighed, shut the blinds, let them drive away.

# The Donkey in My Apartment Runs for President

You might assume he marches to the left  
because his ancestors posed as Andrew  
Jackson for Thomas Nast cartoons or since  
they invented the first green energy,

but he's running independent. He hates  
the car companies for taking his jobs,  
and ever since that time he ate the wrong  
wild mushroom, he pulls the cart for the war

on drugs, so to speak. He's lived here three weeks  
now in my apartment, and even though  
his fans circulate a certificate  
that declares he was born in Ohio,

his opponents cite the mark on his back  
as proof he's a Jerusalem donkey.  
Never mind that Akron is spelled *Akorn*,  
all standard donkeys carry the shadow

of the cross. Even the atheist ones  
as dark as the gray of the lowercase  
"T" itself carry it for their children,  
yet he brays in a foreign accent,

and no one knows why or how he moved in  
with a woman twenty-eight years older  
in a fifth-floor walk-up in Tennessee.  
When reporters ride cherry pickers up

to my window and knock, I shut the blinds  
to save him from a scandal. He's in deep  
enough already since he's never prayed  
on TV, so who knows if he believes

in the deity of the dollar bill  
or worships a donkey god that transmutes  
the hair of petting zoo children to grass,  
their eyes to bloodshot peppermint candies.

All I can tell you is he won't back down  
in a debate, won't even trot downstairs  
if I harness him, so I let him stay  
like the raccoon that slept in my ceiling

all winter. I feed the donkey carrot  
ends, clean up his messes, and hope he'll find  
his way out to the pearly pasture where  
he'll reincarnate as a unicorn—

bucktoothed, somewhat short—and lead a parade  
of seventy-three silver-winged fillies  
in a chariot bedecked with apples,  
drawn by the richest, most selfless of men.

# The Donkey Becomes T.S. Eliot

*“Gin and drugs, dear lady, gin and drugs.”* —T.S. Eliot, on his inspiration

There was something wrong with the donkey’s bray today—a whisper through the *haw*, tongue tight on the teeth of *hee*—half mantra, half plea. *Pretty boy!* I called. *Did you just shanti?*

He said, *Shanti, shanti. Should I gloss it in a footnote for you?* I took a swig of coffee. *Am I asleep?* I wondered. *Am I alive? Am I in hell?* he asked.

I answered Tennessee. *What of these hooves? I asked to be a pair of ragged claws.* His back hoof kicked at the ram behind him. *Maybe you should have eaten more peaches,*

I offered. *Have you got any?* He snapped. *Just peppermints.* Donkeys like peppermints. *I would like a martini, stiff and dry.* I had no vermouth. *A gin and tonic.*

*How about a fresh trough of cold water?* I suggested. *Gin and drugs, dear lady, gin and drugs.* I had no gin, so I filled a pail with ice and bourbon. *Good enough*

*for Faulkner,* I thought, but he just snorted and tossed his head. *April may be cruel in London,* I said and shooed flies from his ears, *but she should meet July in Tennessee.*

# The Donkey in My Apartment Is a Hero in Guatemala

He's been here eight months now. Grass sprouts from cracks  
in the tile. Flies adorn his eyelashes.

Tuesday, a guinea flew in through bathroom  
window while I bathed and spilled my red wine

before I could shoo her out. As I lie  
down for the night, someone knocks. I pull on  
a cardigan over my nightgown, inch  
open the door. A woman in yellow

cotton embroidered with scarlet orchids  
holding a saddle and satchel and leans on  
a wooden leg. *Have you seen this donkey?*  
She slips me a snapshot: a sunny rain

forest where she rides a gray donkey weighed  
down with books in burlap pockets. A sign,  
hand-painted, reads *Biblioburro Dos*.  
I tell her to come in, and the donkey

ambles into the room. *Don Quixote!*  
the woman coaxes. *Why didn't you name*  
*him Rocinante like the horse?* I ask.  
She plucks a pouch of wintergreen candies

from her satchel and offers one to him.  
*Steinbeck called his camper Rocinante,*  
*The name's no good now.* She hands me the mints.  
*I just call him the donkey,* I confess.

She nods. *Don Qui for short.* I palm candies  
curled like baby geckos eating their own  
tails and ask why the donkey came to me.  
*Because of the books? Looks like home to him,*

she guesses. The donkey nibbles a green  
ouroboros from my hand. *I wondered  
if he knew I come from generations  
of farmers and don't belong here somehow.*

The woman laughs. *That's crazy.*  
*You don't speak with an accent.* I argue  
that I do. *The way you can't see pepper sauce in stew,  
but it spoils the whole pot if it's too hot.*

She laughs again. *What do you mean "too hot"?*  
The words roll from her mouth, soft and easy  
as a ball of yarn. *You'll take him with you,  
I suppose.* She bridles him, saddles him,

and caresses his nose. *He must go back  
to Guatemala. The children miss him  
in the back country.* One leg bends and steps  
in the stirrup. The other sweeps over

the donkey's back in an elegant arc,  
and uncovers another orchid field  
carved into her cedar ankle. I ask  
*Can I go?* But he's already trotting

towards the front door. *¿Hablas español?*  
She ducks below the door frame. *No mucho.*  
My tongue tangles. *¿Te gustan los niños?*  
she calls out as they saunter down the stairs.

I say no. *Absolutamente no.*  
She turns as they round the corner and smiles.  
*Don Quixote is my life. Maybe now*  
*you can get your own.* I blink twice. They're gone.

*Nancy Au's stories appear or are forthcoming in Forge Literary Magazine, Flapperhouse, Midnight Breakfast, Foglifter, Liminal Stories, SmokeLong Quarterly, Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, Necessary Fiction, Fiction Southeast, Word Riot, Identity Theory, among others. She was awarded the Spring Creek Project collaborative residency, which is dedicated to writers inspired by nature and science. She is an MFA candidate at San Francisco State University where she taught creative writing. She teaches creative writing at California State University Stanislaus.*

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# Anatomy of a Cloud

Nancy Au

The low sunrise, gray clouds and mist, glows from the mountain cave opening. Fei slowly waves her paw, cuts the air above YingLong's face, a shadow to wake her. She circles the hard ground; YingLong's breath is staggered, no longer able to form clouds to soak the mountain region, nor breath of fog, thick around the mountain's neck. Imagine: Air in, snow out. Fei fervently checks for the tiny hearts that should beat in her paws, throat, and chest. YingLong, the last dragon god of rain, does not stir.

Fei bows her head, her long leathery wings folded and resting neatly on her ridged back so that they do not drag on the dusty ground. She listens to YingLong's breath, the rattling *ch ch ch ch*, sound of thirsty clouds. Biological burble. She walks like YingLong once flew, swerving left and right. She studies YingLong's brilliant blue scars, wounds from dry lightning strikes--like shafts of sun and *yún*, like virga falling, like crystal storm sublime--where the azure teardrop scales would never regenerate on the back of her long, slender neck.

When YingLong's father died, Fei had been diligently working on her clay sculpture by the nearly dry riverbed. When she sculpts, she cannot hear the carrion crows cawing or the cockroaches'



gregarious chirping, her thoughts are so loud. The only other sound is of her claw scraping designs and sculpting the deep red clay. When she had returned on that day to their mountain top dwelling and found YingLong, she had thought that her paleness and hunch were for her. She observed the artifacts scattered around YingLong's feet: a chicken claw back scratcher, a sand dollar that YingLong had carried home tucked inside her cheek from her final journey to her father's lonely mountain, an enchanted urn filled with the precious water collected from clouds long ago. She understood then, that they were now alone. When YingLong dies, Fei will be the last dragon. A coin without country, a book without pages. A name without meaning. A land without home.

Fei uses the chicken claw to comb YingLong's coarse beard, and recites stories of the afterworld, a place not deadened by drought, with oil slicks for oceans, black and mystery deep. Fei shakes the sand dollar to hear the sand inside. She puts it to her ear the way you'd put a seashell to your ear to hear the ocean. But she hears the way the sand slides over itself, washes over rocks and sea ledges the way water once did before returning to the long dead sharks and penguins, seaweed and jellyfish. The sand dollar lets her see underneath the beach. And there she finds millennia before the anthropocene dried up the planet. She finds buried treasure, gold booty and purple gemstones, lost eyepatches of pirates. She finds the footsteps of every creature that has ever walked the beach, every bird, every warrior. She finds every seal and whale and dragon skeleton. She finds broken kite strings, lost tennis balls. She finds the ocean that was once ice and once glacier and once in Africa and on the cap of the Earth.

As Fei braids YingLong's coarse mane, she thinks back to her first attempt at flying as a juvenile. No mother to teach her to fly. So, imagine the flailing wings, around and around. Never lifting off the ground. Dirt flinging everywhere, spoons and shovels. And because her wings were not strong enough to fly, she'd decided then to dig. With her lantern eyes at night. Yellow, brilliant blasts. She dug until her claws cracked and bled, to the same depths as the deepest ocean trench. And there curled into a circle, she slept, dreamt of steam vents, fire and lava, krill and glowing fishes, of cures for every

disease but the drought that had ravaged the planet. She dreamt of lost civilizations, crashed airplanes and sunken boats. There, at the bottom of her sleeping ocean, in the darkest crevice of the Earth, there were no shadows.

Fei had shared a balloon-soft belief with YingLong, that the clay beast she sculpted could fly for both of them, bring water to the land. That the beast would have YingLong's gift of flight that Fei did not share, its arms spread wide, holding up the sky like a caryatid to raise the planet's waters. But the night of YingLong's father's death: Doubt, hard as wood. Loud as trumpet. Living lunacy. Fei remembers the sounds of sorrow out of YingLong's horn mouth, mournful music that bled and drowned and boomed, trumpet call for other dragons to join. But theirs were the only sound. Their tears thick with clay and dirt. By morning, they'd used their claws to dig out the dried tea leaf dreams from the corners of their eyes.

Fei remembers the summer day she started the sculpture. After a long frigid winter, she'd been craving jasmine blossoms, which is the scent of dragons in love. The only scent that makes her scales glitter with excitement, lifting from her body like fish gills, open and close and open and close. For many months, the mountain villagers had burned huge bonfire shrines in desperation, filling the sky with ash and prayers, calling out to the dragons for the rain they had not seen in ten years. So, as YingLong tried to garner the strength to fly again, Fei descended the mountain, out of the choking smoke, and headed towards the river valley.

Fei started by building the beast's armature with elephant bones melded with fire, and affixed with wax and tallow. She stuffed the frame with ostrich nests and juniper treetops. She built the beast wings larger than even YingLong's, and extended them beyond the reaches of the valley. She moulded armfuls of clay around this frame, slowly adding dimension when she could find enough water. Fei's clay sculpture, a beast she and YingLong had dreamed about, is barn big with matted fur and a metal jaw. Its tongue, a pink belt beneath hinged teeth that grind and crunch. Exposed brain grooves like walnuts. A jagged bony spine. The villagers collected hundreds of elephant hides, stitched them together, and massaged them every day with the last of their precious almond oil, so that the skin could

stretch and double in size. Thorns screwed into its sides. Legs that egg and dart, like four oval pillars. Sturdy shooting arrows. Solid, swiveling. Certified beast.

Unlike YingLong, who is deaf, Fei hears everything. She knows that the clay beast's talk will be garbled, gentle. Large and soft. Unlike the harsh words screamed at the sky, brought on by the villagers' growing desperation and grief during the drought, beast speech is all vowels, no hard angles, heard low beneath the warble symphony, morning chorus. Fei carved a pink slit, crooked and ragged, where sounds come out of. Sounds like sand sliding over round river stones. Sounds like the final breath of an oak, decayed wood pieces, a shadow tree on the ground. Sounds like a vulture flapping its wings, or ants scurrying and scurrying. Like eggs laying, or growing limbs inside a womb. Like fungus breaking earth, or snakes dragging trails in the sand. Sounds of sun rising, the moon setting.

So different were these from the sounds and smells of dragons in *love*. Imagine: The villagers chanting loudly in the background, their necks crooked and cranked towards the sky. YingLong carrying Fei into the air, tangled together, coiled, tail to nose tip, rippling the clouds. The adults cheering with glee and understanding. And the children shouting at what they believed to be two deities battling one another: *Go, Big Vicious! Go, Big Vicious! Yes yes yes!* Pungent summer days, fish oil in heat, like steam rising off of damp dirt, like turtles swimming, their bubbles rising.

Fei ventures out of her mountain cave when she can no longer stand listening to the movements of YingLong's shallow bird breaths. Climbing down, her bones feel heavy like waterlogged wood, her blood, dense like pressed mud. She returns to the crumbling, dried beast by the parched river. She smooths the dirt around the base of the sculpture, stomps with the flat of her paw. With wild pig blood and grey matter and the whites of their eyes, she paints designs of the sun on calm water, and the movements of fish she can no longer catch. Paints a murder of withered crows, in flight. Unhappy with this, she drags her long tail across the dirt and starts over. Paints her father as she remembers him, as the grieving drunken widowed royalty of a mountain forest. She speaks to her dragon father: "You remember

me?” she asks. “Because I remember *you*.” She tries to explain why she chose art over water, says, “See, I told you. Timid dragons live forever.”

She sketches what his response would be: “You can always tell who has no mother.” Fei swipes the dirt with her tail once more, and paints her *mother* in muscular flight.

Each day, Fei leaves the cave for longer and longer. Scrabbles down the mountain. Paints more of her mother, father, the villagers and their angular words, and everyone’s happiness engorged on fatted deer and rabbit. She paints her collection of snake skins. Tries to paint the anatomy of a cloud, of a home with rolls and ripples, an endless heaping *étage* of white water and gray shadow and blue sky.

And, each evening, Fei returns to the mountain, hurriedly takes in YingLong’s hulking form silhouetted against the moon, and measures her uneven breath. She reminds herself that ghosts do not have shadows. She licks her cheek, tastes of nighttime, of warm wavy lines pressed into a heavy belly from cracks in the hard ground. She places her snout close to her, and inhales deeply her outgoing breath, the smell of swollen river, turbid with silt and sand in winter, the apple dew in summer, the center of YingLong’s heated palm in springtime, the reflecting moon on still water in autumn.

Fei wonders when the end will come, when YingLong’s pointy ears perk up for the last time, what she will make of her slow gesture, not of a final sleep, but of other dragons and beasts in her dreams. Will the tears Fei shed be for YingLong’s demise, or for the villagers who will die without rain? All Fei knows is that she will take YingLong’s blood and brain and sclera, and in the darkness paint the sun rising, sun setting. And, when the light of the new dawn comes, she will find that she cannot tell the paintings apart.

*Camille Mireles is the business owner of a dog walking company, and is also a novelist, poet, and short story author. She enjoys distracting herself from her writing by quilting, baking, spending time with family, or by walking her dog, Colby. Camille is currently a full-time undergrad student who graduated in December 2016 as an English Literature major.*

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# Mirrors Within Books

Camille Mireles

Chicken Soup for the Preteen Soul: Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen and More

I remember little about my senior picture day. It was August, a week or two after my birthday. My senior year of high school was two weeks away. I had an appointment to get my photo taken at a location across from my high school. I did my hair, my makeup, and went to take my photos. I was placed in a semi-dark room and held different smiling poses. I smiled— but it was fake.

What my mother doesn't know: Sonya Sones

Looking back, to that day before picture day, to the day when it all happened, I remember so much more. The manipulation, the grooming that came before it happened. I can see so clearly now that I look back. Back then, I thought I knew it all, I thought I had been prepared. I remember that Evan\*, one of the two guys in my life and my boyfriend at the time, had band camp that day and my mom would be teaching summer school, so I had the house to myself.

Did Patrick hear me say no? Did I even say it? But he was my boyfriend's best friend, I shouldn't have had to have said it. But I did. I remember now. I told him no. But that was after I had let him into

the safety of my home. After I had been texting him for a month. After I had let him kiss me the past week. It was after. It's always after.

### Annie's Baby: Dr. Beatrice Sparks

I was a bibliophile growing up. No book was censored, only TV and music. I read the accounts of love, sex, arousal, hate, teen angst, rape, abuse, and of course, at the back of such books, a page at the end. The one that tells you what to do if you or a friend has experienced any type of abuse and which hotlines to call. They state the following: DO NOT: wash hair, wash hands, touch anything, change clothes, shower, clean, etc. DO: call the police, go to a hospital, get a rape test, speak up. They list the hotline numbers, there in case you need them. Books prepared me for the worst. They informed me. Books, they educated me and taught me all about what to do and not to do. But the books just watched as it happened, waiting for hands to touch them. They sat there amongst themselves, perfectly still on their place on the shelf, waiting for the ordeal to be over. It was the same for me when I looked in my dresser mirror. I was filled with wisdom, yet could nothing but watch it happen. I, like books, knew nothing of the reality within the tales.

### Forever...: Judy Blume

Looking in the mirror atop of my dresser, the mirror that saw everything, and the mirror that did nothing, I see what happened that day. I remember my fingers clenched around the door frame as he pulled me by the waist into my room, I was trying to propel myself into the living room, because it was safer than being in my room. There was no bed in the living room. That was my thought process. If there was no bed, nothing bad would happen. It was the thought process of a young and naïve 17-year-old girl who was planning to not have intercourse until marriage. But that plan didn't work—the one to stay in the living room, that plan came crashing down, he was

so much stronger than I was.

The Giver: Lois Lowry

*I stared out of the frame at the girl on the bed as she faced me. That sunny August day, I stared at the girl and willed her reality to be wrong. Why was there a man in her room, on her bed? I saw as the girl, the one on the bed, told him no, pleaded no. I saw Patrick as he pushed her onto the bed and started taking off her clothes as he smiled. I saw him, I saw her, I saw her world end in that moment as she realized he wanted sex. Then, incredibly, I saw her think. Maybe, just maybe, if she satisfied him in another way, he would leave. It would all be over. So she pleaded differently, she pleaded with her busy hands, the ones that touched him in ways that made him forget about touching her. She believed that if he didn't get to touch her back, then it wouldn't be as bad. So the hands were the ones that seemed willing. I stared out of the frame at the young girl in front of me, the one of the girl going down on Patrick as his hand held the back of her head while tears refused to fall from her face. I saw the words form, I couldn't hear them, but she did. That young girl, who hadn't even made it to senior year of high school yet, she heard as he told her, "I'm not letting you stop, and I'm not leaving until you make me cum." Those words, the girl never forgot them. The tears fell then, the tears inside her heart. She watched herself in the mirror, because there was nowhere else to look, because if she closed her eyes then the image would forever form, and that was worse. She looked at me from her bed, and I could do nothing to help her. I only stared at her from my place above the dresser, precariously perched in a spot where the only help I could give was the out of body experience. Instead of looking at him face to face, she looked at him through me, and with that small contribution, I helped her. If you call that helping.*

The Velveteen Rabbit: Margery Williams

*The books told her what not to do after suffering from abuse, and she did them all. I watched her as her body refused to accept*

*what had happened. I watched as she didn't cry after he left, but instead, immediately tried to fix the situation. Immediately tried to forget. I screamed at her for attention, so that she wouldn't erase the evidence, but she wasn't listening, she was in shock. She didn't see how much worse she made the situation. She only saw herself trying to fix it. She stood at the foot of her bed and stared for a quick moment before pulling everything off. First, she grabbed all the stuffed animals that had been on her bed that his cum had been left on. Her beloved stuffed animals, the ones she always believed would come to life if she ever needed saving. The bear, lion, puppy, and so many others that hadn't come to life. She took them and placed them in the washer. Next came the blankets and the sheets that held evidence of his having been there. She pulled them off the bed and placed them in the washer with the stuffed animals, put in some soap, and turned the dial to hot water cycle. Next, she wiped down the walls where her own fingers had touched, and where his might have been, trying to erase the struggle of her failed attempt to stay in the living room. Then she vacuumed the house, trying to destroy any cells that she may have missed. Of all that she did to try and erase what happened, it was nothing compared to the worst one of all-- she took a shower; a long hot shower with heat that scalded her skin. There wasn't enough soap in the world to wash away what happened, but that didn't stop her from trying. Then, when she was done, and had dressed herself, she looked at me for a very long time. She saw me look back at her from the glass that stood between us and took in the scene that had happened. It was too much. She covered me with an old quilt, took me off her dresser, carried me to the other side of the house, and leaned me against a wall in a different room, behind a door, where I wouldn't be seen by anyone. Who could blame her? I couldn't, I had just watched, and had done nothing to help her. I didn't know what to do, that poor girl who had to experience the reality while I stayed safe in the mirror. I'm so sorry. I deserve to be hidden in this other room so that you can try and heal yourself. You can't heal with me there, I understand, leave me here. I'm so sorry.*



## The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle: AVI

My mom had driven me to take my senior photos and then taken me home and left to go...somewhere. I hopped on my bike to be there for Evan's lunch break from band camp so I could tell him what happened. I needed to tell him everything. I needed to tell him what his best friend had done. He would know what to do and he would help me.

I came home from having told him—only, I hadn't told him anything. "I kissed Patrick," was the only sentence I could manage. I had no strength that day to face my own reality of what had just happened. I biked home and faced myself in my mom's bathroom mirror. I saw the mascara running down my face, like they show in the movies. Only it wasn't dramatic and cheesy, it was real and ugly.

## The Scarlet Letter: Nathaniel Hawthorne

A few weeks later, senior year started, and that's when I heard the rumors. I heard the whispers as I realized that my classmates were whispering that I had cheated on Evan. *"That bitch, she cheated on him over summer break, can you believe it?" "I heard that she kissed another guy while she was still with him, what a slut."* Evan told his friends that I had cheated on him, because I wasn't strong enough to tell him the full story. Partly because I didn't want to hurt him, and partly because I felt it was my fault. I felt that if I had tried harder, I could have stopped it. Had I not started anything, I could have stopped it. It should have never happened and so I continued to feel guilty, that it was my fault. I stayed silent on the full matter, and only told Evan what I knew would make him break up with me. What I knew I should say so that he would hate me, so that it wouldn't hurt as bad as the reality I had already faced. It was my burden to bear, not his. So that's what he told his friends, because that's what I told him. Many months later, when his friend, Patrick, who had been set to leave on his Mormon mission and spread the word of God around, was told by the police to not leave town, my ex-boyfriend Instant Messaged me and asked what really happened. I emailed him my

police statement. We didn't get back together, but at least he knew the truth. At least we could continue being friends again.

### American History X

For as many books as I had read, the books don't speak of what happens afterwards. How when you hear your mom make an appointment to see the doctor for a physical, you ask if you can tag along to her appointment, wondering if you'll get the courage to ask to speak to her doctor alone. Books don't speak of how when you ask the doctor a "if this happened to my friend..." scenario, she tells you that if you don't tell your mom, she will. Books don't ever say how badly your mom will cry when you face her in front of the doctor and tell her what happened. Books never tell you how badly your mom cries, never. Books never bring up how difficult the road is to recovery, and how you will no longer be able to watch movies with rape scenes, especially the violent ones. Books don't tell you how you will no longer be able to hear the name Patrick without your blood going cold. How it sucked to work at a popular fast food joint and see Patrick's brother leer at you from the backseat of his friend's car. Having to serve them food as they stared and watched you.

More importantly, books usually tell you the successful ending, how everything went to court and the bad guy went to jail. You can have that ending if you'd like. Here it is: I told on him and he went to jail. The end.

Not.

### Stone Fox: John Reynolds Gardiner

Here's what the books also don't tell you: how the District Attorney sits to have a chat with me about how even though I was seventeen and he was nineteen, they weren't going to be taking my case to court. Why not?

Here's what she said, "Imagine twelve women sitting around wondering what they should have for lunch. Do you think they all

agree on where they want to go?”

No.

“Exactly. Think how indecisive they would be. Maybe they all finally agree on a spot, but it would take so long and maybe all of them wouldn’t agree. That’s how your trial would be if we took it to court, and you’ve been through enough.”

What?

She said some kind words here I’m sure, but the only sentence I heard was: “It’s not strong enough to prosecute.”

### Green Angel: Alice Hoffman

After my senior photo was printed, I couldn’t see the smile, I only saw the mascara running down my face when I looked in the mirror later that day. The books didn’t prepare me for the day when I told someone I was raped, and they scoffed, saying it was just molestation. Maybe if that person looked up each term, sure, they’d have been right, there was no intercourse; but that’s not the end of the story, it never is.

### The Catholic Youth Bible: Third Edition

The books don’t tell you how you continue to go to church, and every day you continue to pray, no matter how hard and how much you don’t want to, but you do. The books don’t tell you how one day you stare at the crucifix and pray for Patrick to be forgiven. Feeling only how your blood spits back at you and tells you to forget that shit, you want justice. The books don’t tell you how you’ll then ask to forgive yourself, and how your heart curls in tightly around itself and says no. Yet finally, impossibly, you learn to forgive yourself, and realize you’ve forgiven him.

I’ve been asked why I decided to forgive him. I reply that I didn’t decide, I don’t know that anyone ever makes a conscious decision for forgiveness to happen, it just does. There’s plenty of reasons to be bitter, to be mad, to be angry, to hate. I choose not to. I

choose to move on with my life and just do what I can to help others, and do what I need to so that I can feel good about myself and learn to be happy. I'm not over what happened, it still hurts, but I'm stronger than one incident. He didn't break me, he just tried to.

Altered (unpublished): Camille Mireles

Eight years later, I finally went to that other room and took the quilt off my mirror. I stared at my reflection gently, picked up that beautiful girl who looked back, and placed the mirror in my room once more. The mirror sits on the floor behind my door, not facing my bed, at an angle that doesn't allow me to see my whole image.

Maybe one day I'll allow my reflection to see her whole image, the one that hugs her tightly when she look at herself as I say, "you're not broken." Maybe one day I'll step into complete view, and stare into my eyes, and tell myself it's all over, that it's all ok. Maybe one day.

*My Senior Year Photo... a few days after the rape...an hour before telling Evan.*



*\*Names have been changed.*

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# Touch

## Ho Cheung LEE

Pictures taken down  
from that aged  
stone wall breathing only  
through the barred window  
The sweat from your back  
has soaked through  
the blanket so deeply  
that even the  
wave is unable to  
take away my senses  
My senses that are  
only getting sharper every  
second with the  
square hollow sponged  
on the aged stone wall  
so old and fractured and  
irrationally hungry  
for a touch

# Blackbirds

Ho Cheung LEE

Pictures taken down  
by force from my  
phone in remorse  
now for the loss of  
the chill morning air  
at the memorial park  
twenty minutes from  
your home  
Twenty-eight pictures  
and a minute-long  
video of you  
humiliating the bar  
as you muscled up  
in fifteen raps  
Your shirt cuddled  
my shoulder  
Light vapour  
smoked out of you  
as morning dew fell  
off the icy metal  
You landed on the  
crispy leaves  
Palm to palm  
Your bare chest sheet white  
against the blackbirds

# Pyjamas

Ho Cheung LEE

Pictures taken down  
piece by piece from  
your angled face  
that afternoon we  
whispered  
in violet verses  
We were in complete  
disguise knowing  
only cultures from  
an extinct civilization  
The heat we shared  
did more harm than  
the unforgiving  
slash at the throat  
by the autumn storm  
I try to remember  
when I last folded  
your warm pyjamas



*Justin Hunter is currently working on his MFA at Arcadia University. He lives in Dallas with his wife and kids, and when he's not writing, Justin is probably buried under a doggie pile of children and, well, dogs. His work has been published or is forthcoming in Corvus Review, Down in the Dirt Magazine, and Centum Press, among others.*

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# Leaving Arizona

Justin Hunter

Rather than a note, the missing boy left a scorpion in his sister's bed. To be fair, it was a dead one. Of course, she wouldn't know that as she pulled back her comforter and screamed. And the missing boy wouldn't be there to laugh and poke fun. But it would happen nonetheless. And it would give Arizona something to hate him for. Something other than the real thing she should hate him for.

This was before the missing boy was missing, but once he left, he'd seen the news report. He'd seen his mother crying on the television screen, her mascara running down her face, her eyes blood-shot. No one knew that that's what her eyes looked like all the time, that her makeup was smeared across her face so often he'd wondered if she knew how to apply it.

"Find my baby," she'd said on that first newscast. "I miss him and want him home."

Sure, she did. She wanted the missing boy to come home, to go back to what he once was. He remembered seeing Arizona in the background of the shot, head down. She looked fine, she was fine. She'd be all right without him.

#

She'd gone twelve years living in a state that shared her name. That alone brought the type of torment that would thicken her skin, prepare her for a life without her brother .

Those reporters, they could not believe her name. “Arizona? And you live here, in Arizona?”

They didn’t know Mom thought it was funny. Didn’t know that Dad had wanted to call her Charlene. All those reporters knew was that my sister was a novelty that would play well on the television and in their newspaper article.

The missing boy remembered the one quote Arizona had given to the newspaper—the small one that had its headquarters up on the northwest side of town.

“My brother doesn’t deserve to come home.”

It made the front page in bold typeface. The missing boy had almost walked right past the paper laying on the bus bench when he’d seen it, not realizing it was his sister who’d said such a thing.

But she was right.

He rolled over in his dusty sleeping bag and lifted the rock off the newspaper he’d stolen from Pap the day before. He unfolded the paper and laid it across the warm caliche. He flipped through the pages, but the coverage of his disappearance had faded. He was a vague memory, a shadow fading from a wall.

The missing boy rose, folded the newspaper again, slid it into the back pocket of his last pair of jeans. He rolled his sleeping bag, tied it off, and slung it over his shoulder. The clearing he’d slept in the last couple days was a few hundred yards off the freeway. He’d caught up with Pap, an old man who sold papers, and he found out about the camp. A few homeless people in tents and sleeping bags, hiding from police roundups. It was a damn miracle that the missing boy found Pap. In the month he’d been out there, he’d discovered he did not enjoy sleeping alone. Especially when the coyotes started to yip.

He yawned and looked east. The sun gripped the top of the Catalinas. He shielded his eyes to watch the orange and yellow melt away the purple horizon. A perfect day to make his real escape. Today, he’d hop the Union Pacific west. Today, he’d be gone for good.

“You out?” Pap asked. The missing boy nodded, still staring at the Catalinas, wondering if he’d ever see something as beautiful in all his life. It didn’t matter. Beauty couldn’t wrap arms around him, pull him close, hide him away from the next thing to come.

“Going for the train today.”

“That right?” Pap climbed all the way out of his tent, his Wildcats championship shirt hanging down to his knees.

“Yes, sir.”

“‘Bout time, huh?”

“I been saving.”

“Nah, you been stalling.”

The missing boy had thirty-two dollars in his back pocket. It had taken him the whole month since he left to make that money. Wasn’t much, but he had it, and he’d make it last the whole way through to California. It was only a half-day ride on the train. Better than going north or east where he might have to hop off one train, get on another. No, California was the only place that made sense.

“I’m not stalling anymore. That night train going west is mine.”

Pap shook loose a jar of instant coffee from a bag he kept in his tent. He poured a pinch of the nasty, black granules into a dirty mug then grabbed a jug of water. He filled the cup, swirled it, took a drink. “You caught a train before?”

The missing boy shook his head.

“Not that easy, my friend. Especially for a kid.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“Since when is a middle-schooler not a kid?”

“I’m fourteen, a highschooler. Not a kid.”

“Right,” Pap said. “What I’m saying is be careful.”

The last cigarette the missing boy’s mother put out on his arm bubbled the skin just above the fold of his elbow. He thought about that before responding. He thought about the last bottle of Jack she’d thrown at his head. He thought about the day his father showed up on the steps of their trailer three years ago, promising he’d take the boy and Arizona away. And he thought about the sound of his father’s shitty Harley Davidson riding away in the middle of the night.

“A train isn’t shit.”

“Still.” Pap took another sip of coffee then offered the missing boy a straight blade sheathed in cloth.

The missing boy shook his head. “I can’t take that.”

“You can, and you will, ‘less you want to see that money you saved taken right out your pocket.”

He took the knife and thanked Pap. Then, the missing boy set out toward the Union Pacific rail station south of downtown Tucson. It would be a couple hours walking, but he had plenty of time. He’d get there early to scout the right car. He’d heard about Border Patrol and sheriff deputies crawling the yard, looking for train hoppers. Give yourself time to watch for them, he thought.

As he walked, he thought about the trailer, about his sister. Worst case, he figured, Arizona was being ignored. Their mother put in five or six hours a day at a place she called The Clubhouse. Really, it was a cowboy bar two miles from their trailer.

The missing boy wondered why their mom chose him. He didn’t know why Arizona got a pass. He was happy for her, but he didn’t get it. He was old enough to remember the first time their father left, and maybe that was it. He was the “man of the house.” He was the reminder of his mother’s choices. That night when he and Arizona’s father came back then left, his mother beat him worse than he’d ever gotten it before.

Without realizing it, he had stopped walking. The paths cut through the desert led in every direction—a homeless freeway system amongst the cacti and sage. He tried to force himself forward. Just pick a path and head for downtown. But Arizona’s voice knocked around his ear drums.

“She’ll keep getting worse,” Arizona had said a couple months before the missing boy left.

They’d just watched their mother polish off a bottle of something new, something cheap. She couldn’t afford the Jack by then. “She’ll be all right,” he’d told his sister.

Their mother hadn’t always been like that. Without the missing boy around, she’d get better. She’d never raised her voice, never laid a hand on him or Arizona before their father left. But after, she took up that job at the bar and something broke inside her. She was the Thanksgiving wishbone that held together until she couldn’t anymore, until she snapped.

She couldn't get worse. If she did, the missing boy didn't know about his sister, didn't know how she'd hold up. But he was the cause, not Arizona. Without him there, his sister would be fine.

Yet, he was already walking back south, back toward the dirt lots that held groups of trailers parked side by side with nothing but mesquite and the beating sun as a backdrop. He'd just take a look. No one would see him, and he'd be back on his way to the train once he saw that Arizona was all right.

It was funny to think about his disappearance. The desert surrounding the trailer, for about a mile in every direction, was crawling with police and volunteers. Maybe he had run away, but they had to assume he'd been taken. His mother pulled out all the stops to get her punching bag back. Tears, pleas, missing boy posters. But they didn't look far enough out. The guys at the camp figured out who he was, but no one said anything. Not to each other and certainly not to anyone outside the camp.

Pap had tried to convince him to go home that first day when they met, that living out in the desert wasn't a life at all. Pap had said, "Your life back home can't be much worse than this."

The missing boy pulled up his shirt and showed Pap the scars, the bruises that had yet to fade, and the old man shut right up.

He made good time as he neared the dirt road leading toward the lot his mother's trailer sat on. But the closer he got, the slower he walked. He remembered a time two or three years ago when Arizona tried to do something. It was one of those fall days that still felt like summer, and the missing boy had been sweating through his shirt. Everyone had been sweating. His mother cooled off with whiskey on the rocks, and when she was feeling nice and cool, she decided her boy was looking a little too comfortable. A little too relaxed and lazy, a little too much like his father. She dragged him into the one bathroom they all shared in the trailer, told him to clean the bowl.

"What about gloves?" he'd asked. The inside of the bowl was crusted in brown and black God-knows-what.

"Gloves?" his mother asked. "You don't appreciate anything I do for you. I'm sick of you thinking you're hot shit. You are nothing. You can go right the fuck out that front door and go live with him."

"Maybe I will." he'd said.

His mother grabbed him by the hair and shoved his head into the toilet bowl. She pushed until his face was pressed up against the inside of the bowl. “Clean it, now.”

Arizona came into the bathroom crying. “Stop it, please, Mom.”

Their mother didn’t hit her, didn’t yell at her. Instead, she calmly told Arizona she was in charge and she’d need to watch him clean that toilet with his bare hands. Arizona shook as she leaned against the wall watching. He remembered her tears dripping onto the chipped linoleum floor.

The missing boy picked up his pace, ignoring the memories, ignoring the pain that crept through his bones as he thought of his mother.

When he saw the trailer, he stopped again. He had a thought that he’d had many times over the last month. He wondered if he loved his mother. Yes, he had to. No amount of beating and yelling allowed a boy to cast his mother aside. He couldn’t stop loving her, but he could be selfish. He could set out on his own.

But he loved his sister too, and he’d check on Arizona one last time before he went.

Arizona had never felt their mother’s bony knuckles against her cheeks, never felt the cold tines of a fork turn hot as it was jabbed into her triceps. She never felt any of it, and she never would.

Except, he wasn’t sure. As he inched closer to the trailer, he’d grown sure of something else. He’d grown sure that he had not been sure about a damn thing after he left.

The missing boy stayed missing by pretending he knew what he was doing, by pretending to have a plan. But he didn’t know shit. The first week on his own, if he let himself remember it accurately, was terrifying. He’d almost been picked up by police for taking a piss in public, but he ran into the desert and disappeared. He’d been bitten by a lizard while he slept, and he dreamt it was a gila monster, jaw clamped down, injecting its poison into his body for all eternity. He had been kicked and pushed when he begged for money near the I-19/I-10 interchange.

There was a time when things with their mom started spinning out of control that he tried to convince Arizona to run. Not with

him. Alone, just her. He didn't want her to see it, he didn't want her to be a part of it, their mother's destruction. He knew what their mother did to them would stick with Arizona. The endless stream of cigarette smoke choking off the outside world. It would suck away Arizona's potential.

She told him back then, "I'd never leave you."

The words still tore at his chest, a constant reminder of who he was. Now, it was him who had run and left his sister alone. But she was going to be fine. He'd see that now.

The missing boy made it to the rear of the trailer, the cracked clay crunching beneath his feet. He wiped his nose, ran his fingers along his moist cheeks. He saw his mother first. She stood in the kitchen with a cigarette between the skeletal fingers of her left hand, and she had an empty glass in her right. She'd been beautiful once. He remembered the way she looked when she would go to his school functions as a boy. He stood outside the window, transforming his mother back into that woman. The smile, the laugh, the smooth hands that could fix anything.

Then, Arizona stepped out of the shadows in the kitchen. Her face was bruised, her eyes welled with tears. The missing boy almost ducked out of view, but he had to see her. He had to know what he'd done before he could fix it.

He'd convinced himself that, somehow, Arizona would be fine. He was just like his father. A coward who would rather run than stand up. He would change that now.

Arizona opened her mouth to say something to their mother, but their mother lifted the glass in the air and threw it across the room. It hit Arizona in the stomach, and she doubled over, crying and cursing and praying.

"God isn't here to help any of us right now, so you keep his name out your mouth," their mother yelled.

Arizona slid to the floor and hung her head between her knees. Her back rose and fell with the sobs, and their mother just watched. The missing boy slipped down away from the window and sat in the dirt. All the words, all the things his mother had done to him, all of it fell on Arizona now.

“I give you a roof, girl. I give you food. The least you can do for me is get me some fucking cigarettes. You know how hard it is for me to drive. I’m not asking much.”

He couldn’t see them anymore, but he knew what was happening. Their mother would be crossing the kitchen and leaning over Arizona’s shaking body like she had done to him so many times before. She’d force feed the guilt until she was sure you hated yourself. Then, she’d lay down the insults.

“You think you’re better than your mother,” he heard her say. “You’re a whore just waiting to spread your legs. One day, you’ll come crawling back to me, alone with a couple kids to raise. And you’ll know. You’ll wish you had listened to me. Treated me better.”

Then there would be the slap. The missing boy listened through his own sobs. It came a few seconds later. Then Arizona’s scream. He felt it all. He lived it all. He remembered the first time his mother hit him. It had surprised him so much, he didn’t feel the sting of her hand. He didn’t cry. He apologized in that moment. And he apologized for years after that.

He grabbed his knees and begged himself to act. To do something. But his stomach burned and his eyes remained shut. All he could do was listen.

“Get your ass up,” his mother yelled. “Go get me some cigarettes before I give you something to cry about.”

He couldn’t hear Arizona’s response, but he knew she’d said something because his mother raised her voice louder.

“What? They won’t ask for ID at the gas station down the road. Don’t give me your bullshit excuses.”

His sister could be saved. She could be removed from that trailer. The missing boy could take her along on the train to California. But he’d have to go inside.

He listened as his mother slapped Arizona again. He stood as the yelling grew louder. He could go in, but he was already inside that trailer. He’d never get out.

Unless he left.

The pain in his bones surged, stretched, clawed at his muscles. It seized his body and sent him back to the dirt beneath the trail-



er. He sat there begging himself to be strong. To ignore the pain. To do something right for once.

Through his tears, he watched a scorpion sneak out from beneath the creosote shrub to his left. It scattered into the sun and stopped, confused. The missing boy took out the knife Pap had given him, held it flat in his hands. He told himself he was strong enough, but that was just another thing he didn't know shit about. Strength.

Before the scorpion could rush back into the safety of the shade, the missing boy slammed the knife through its body, pinning it to the desert floor. He knew what he should do, what the right thing was.

But he was already crawling away, his knees and forearms shuffling and kicking up dust. When the pain in his bones faded enough, he stood. He walked away from his mother. Walked away from Arizona. And the further he got from the trailer, the less he hurt. All he'd have to do was forget his sister, forget what he'd done.

He walked all the way to the rail station near downtown, and he waited for the train to take him away. He would forever be the missing boy, but he'd never again be the hurt boy.

His sister would have to make her own way.

*Manit Chaotragoongit was born on September 30, 1983 in Bangkok, Thailand. His inspiration started when he was teenager. He found old books about art and photography. He saw black and white photography. It made deeply feeling in his heart and he was learning about Art and photography by himself. He prefers conceptual photography and street life. His artwork is all about life, he presents his experience and vision through his eyes, He recognizes and describes a series of events. He thinks everything in a part of life has meaning. He hopes his work will give value to the audience.*

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My artwork is all about life, movement and memory of life. I choose photography as a way to present my concept and choose conceptual photography style to describe my story that I found and recognized.

The purpose of living may be to find the meaning of life, but in the end we may find there is no one true meaning; it is the small things that happen to us that give our life meaning.

Life is a journey, not a destination. As we continue on the journey of life, we discover life's different meanings and purposes. Each of which contribute to our growth and gives us a new breath. I've discovered that one path that brings meaning to my life is creating an opportunity for people to experience the world through my perspective.

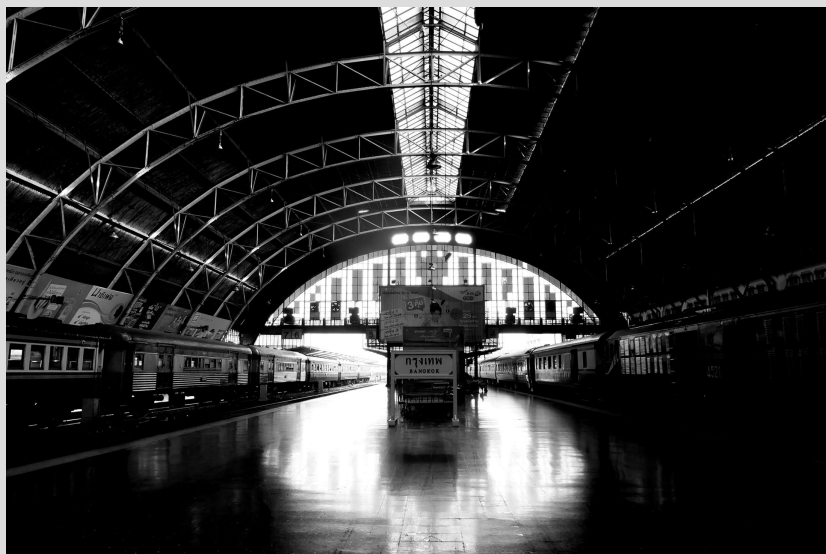
I want to be able to capture and share my emotions from the encounters of my journey.

### **Project description**

#### **The Sound of Silence**

*I felt the silence was some kind of sound. It was smooth and pure. The silence makes me hear my heartbeat. I hear the sound of my thoughts in my head. I feel I can touch the silence, when my heartbeat slow and relax. My muscle working slowly as if it will stop.*

*However, the imagination flows in my dream, my memory and deep in my mind. I perceived that the silence allows me to think and feel. I think the sound of silence is more beautiful than anything.*



## Silent Station

*Long time ago, I was going somewhere and was hoping for someone who could join me as a friend on my journey. I looked around myself but I didn't find anyone, I found silence and loneliness.*

*It's possible the past scene will become true again in tomorrow.*

*Maybe my destination in life is different from others. If I want to reach my destination, I must be strong and continue in the way that I believe.*

*Although I am alone, I still go forward.*



### **Silent time.**

*Sometimes, Silence helps me listen. Another sound from around myself louder than sound of my heart.*

*Sound from society, sound from modernization, sound from value, it chains me from freedom and inspiration.*

*In the silent time, I feel free and hear the sound of my heartbeat and I know what it is my heart wants.*



## Silent Tree

*The tree never talks, never shouts, never requests. When it stands in the storm, I never hear the sob from its leaf. When it stands in the light, I never hear the laugh from its branch. When it stands in the drought, I never hear the lament from its root.*

*No speech from tree but it always stands and survives.*



### **Silent Journey**

*No one can travel with you all the time.*

*I tell myself about the brave and confident for traveling somewhere that I don't know. I don't know what will happen in the future and I can't avoid the factor of uncertainty. But, I am ready for learning, the lesson of life. I travel to learn about that I want to know and touch.*

*One thing that I always recall in my heart, I fear to walk, I don't progress.*

*Hillel Broder holds a PhD in English from the CUNY Graduate Center and teaches English at Fordham University and SAR High School in the Bronx, NY.*

# Twilight: 3900 Greystone Avenue Hillel Broder

*-For Frederick Hampton, 1941-2010*

You slouch after absent  
Bronx sunsets  
patrol shared walls,  
dimmed pocked stone,

a careless arrival:

forehead wisps  
cigarillo scent,  
compassion left  
in cat food cans.

\*

Sometimes, a child

born into this twilight,  
eyes of pre-war greystone,  
locked-less, bricks,  
fields, farms,

remembers well  
the checks of steaks  
textures of diners,  
lights and chairs.

\*

Worn, my knocked door is yours,  
planted long ago,  
echoing through  
marbled baptisms,

calling to speak of

denied pensions,  
twilight mother  
buried wife  
cats and girlfriends.

\*

Past and parents dangle together

in every corner. You are alone  
when they find you  
with your cats. We lent you time  
but not enough breath to cut

your hair and the courtyard  
stones for smothered grass,  
enough time to check  
your Bronx asthma.

\*



Now, basement entrance eyes  
blinded by the street light  
trace your shadow,

which slinks like the possum's  
brood, welcomed from  
Van Cortlandt Park,  
secure again

to mother's sunken back.

*Nicholas MacDonnell is a writer and teacher living in Kansas City, Missouri.*

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# Going Home

## Nicholas MacDonnell

I know this road like I know this song. The rhythm of the asphalt, the bend of the curves. Tune, and trail, play out before me. Both of them are too familiar. Both of them are sad.

One time long ago, I remember you told me something about going home. We were out south of town, somewhere in those moonlit buttes. I was drunk, shouldn't have been driving, but what else could we do.

What music were we listening to that night? Was it Springsteen? Seiger? I can't remember the song, but I will never forget what you said.

"Going home is like watching a movie you've seen too many times before. You know all the scenes, forwards and backwards, but even though it feels pointless rewinding the tape again, you just can't help but hit that button."

I can't remember the song that was playing, but I do remember looking over at you. Your feet hanging out the window. The wind blowing in. The cigarette smoke, rolling out. Gravel crunched beneath the tires of my dad's old truck.

I think it was Springsteen. Thunder Road. *Show a little faith, there's magic in the night. You ain't a beauty, but hey, you're all right.* You always liked those old songs, long before I did. Long before I realized how cool you were.

It was Springsteen. I remember it now. I remember because the closer I get to home, the more it all comes back.

Rewound, and played back, for the ten thousandth time to come.

#

“You think we’ll always be friends?”

You asked me that once out on a different back road, out past the Wagner’s place, the scent of what we’d just done still clear above the smell of fresh cut alfalfa wafting in through the open window.

“Friends,” I say in surprise. “You’re asking if we’ll be friends. After that?”

I lean over and kiss you, run my fingers through your long dark hair, but when I pull back, there is an absence on your face. I am sincere in my promise, as sincere as seventeen can be, but although I’m ready to offer you the world, all you want is a handshake and an agreement that everything will be all right.

“Don’t act like you don’t think about it,” you say as you light a ceremonial cigarette. “We’ve got one more year, but then what? Are you going to come home and see me every weekend? Are you going to stay away from all those college girls?”

I blush at the thought of someone else wanting me, needing me, longing after me like you do. It isn’t the right reaction, but it’s all I’ve got.

“You know that isn’t who I am.” This much is true, but as for the rest, I’m not so sure. “Don’t talk like this babe. You know I wouldn’t leave without you. Let’s just head home and get something to eat.”

It was Dylan then. I was in my Dylan phase. We didn’t talk much on the drive home, but I sure do remember the song.

*You say you’re looking for someone, who will promise never to part. Someone to close his eyes for you. Someone to close his heart.*

Sometimes, I really do wonder. Do we choose the songs we listen to, or do they choose us instead?

#

Ten years later. Ten years after that summer romp out past the Wagner’s place. Ten years since I promised you my world.

I pull back into town and everything is exactly where it should be. Just like I remember. Just like I try to forget. There is a special type of association with home, a gut wrenching déjà vu of the best of times and the worst of times and of the times that simply were.

The old swimming pool, where I graduated from blowing

bubbles, from summer swim practice and weekend sleepovers, to working as lifeguard.

City Park, next door to the pool, where I got high before going into work.

Sixth Street. The main vein. The same people cruising up and down that two-mile loop. The same people who were there before I spent my time in service. The same people long since after I have gone.

No time to stop and wonder why. First things first upon going home. I drive to my house. My Mom's house. Still there, but never the same.

Was our grass out front always so sparse, I think as I turn on my street? Did the paint always chip and flake from our white picket fence? Mom comes out and meets me in the driveway, the smell of electronic cigarettes and baking thick on her faded blouse. My radio still plays, will continue until I take the keys from the ignition.

*Cause Momma, Momma I'm coming home.*

I always was a sucker for the cliché. Right or wrong, some things just bring you home.

#

It's been ten years since that blacktop date out beyond the Wagner place, ten years since I graduated High School. You were right, you know, about us having one more year. I was a senior, you a junior, but in that last year, we spent as much time together as two people could.

We spent so much time together my Dad just knew I'd get you pregnant.

"I don't want to fight with you," (such a great way to start a conversation Dad), "I really don't, but Christ Mikey, you're eighteen now. You knock Katie up and you'll have that kid following you for the next eighteen years. You're just a kid yourself. Do you really think you're ready to have one of your own?"

Dad's house. On the other side of town. Nicer, newer, better furniture, crappier food. On Saturdays and Sundays, on every other Thursday, I pack up and split my time between parents in a town so small I could yell back and forth between their homes.

Only Mom never questions me about Katie, never asks what

time Katie is heading back home. Mom never asks why Katie is still there when morning comes. This is but one of the many reasons I prefer my time over there, but today, Saturday, Dad is not so acquiescent.

“Are you hearing me Mike? Are you even listening?”

Nirvana plays through my mind as I do my best to show my dad how little I care. I wonder if he knows I’m stoned? Would it matter? Would it make things worse?

*Nature is a whore. Bruises on the fruit. Tender age in bloom...*

Only fading out isn’t going to work this time. Dad stands there. Hands on his hips. Waiting. But I have my exit slip in hand.

“Jesus Dad, we use protection when we have sex. Is that what you want to hear? Katie is on the pill. I don’t want a kid, and she doesn’t want one either.

Talking sex with your parents. Always a sign of a good time. Dad throws his hands in the air like I’ve just scored a touchdown, but when he retreats from the room, I mimic his gesture and relish in my win.

#

Ten years later. Dad was wrong about us, even though I lied when I told him about the birth control, but truth is, I don’t know how you didn’t get pregnant that year. After football games. After school. After getting stoned at lunch. We were eighteen, seventeen, invincible, idiotic, hormonal, high. Maybe someday I’ll find out I can’t have kids and get my answer. Maybe that will be for the best.

Mom takes me inside and I see she has let the house go, just a little, but a little bit more each time I come home. There are piles of things, bowls of seashells, notes without purpose taped to random corners of the room.

“Call Janet about the event on Saturday...”

“Wednesday. Remember Wednesday.”

“Eat more cheese.”

I don’t have the energy to confront my Mom, so I just collapse on the couch and wait for her to bring me something to eat.

Ten years since graduating High School. If life is a road map, and we are the drivers, at what point do we close our eyes and let fate

steal the wheel from our hands. So many hopes and dreams, so many plans about where I will go, but somehow, after ten years, I've ended up back here.

Mom brings out a spread of lamb chops and asparagus and three kinds of pie. I know she went out and bought the meal special when I told her I'd decided to come back for the reunion. Until that phone call her fridge probably had nothing in it but coffee creamer and energy bars. She has filled it by now, I'm sure, guaranteeing her baby boy can chow down on all his old favorites.

Dinner is delicious, but as we eat over the background noise of the local news, I see my mom struggling to bring up something she has thought about all week.

She starts slowly at first, easing her way into the bombshell.

"Who else came down for the reunion," Mom asks. "Who do you think you're going to see?"

"Not sure," I say between bites. "Most of the people on the Facebook group still live here, but there were a few maybe's. I know Andrew's coming down, and Ginny and Nancy too. Not sure about Derrick. I'm sure Roman will be there."

My mom tells me how nice this all sounds, how important it is that friends stay in touch as she takes our plates back into the kitchen. I follow her in and insist on doing the dishes, concerned over the pile I see beside the sink. "Most of those are mine honey," my mom assures me, but I tell her I don't mind.

Besides, I have enough remembering left to do to distract me through the stack of plates. Mom does whatever it is she does behind me as I slosh through the foam and the suds, but when she doesn't return to the living room, I know she's found her confidence.

"Honey," she says slowly, like I'm still a child and big news will break my heart. "I don't know if you've heard, but I ran into Pauline Arrona at the grocery store earlier this week and she told me that Katie's back in town. I don't know if she came for the reunion, but I just figured you should know."

I don't turn around after Mom delivers her news, don't respond as the seconds stretch to minutes. Katie never bought into social media, too cool or too stoned or too drunk to waste her time with such nonsense, and it had been at least two or three phones back

since we had each others' numbers. There would have been no way for me to know that she was back in town, but I should have known.

I didn't, but I should have known.

Mom's news isn't the biggest surprise, but when she says my name again, a second and third time, I know I have to say something. I can't let her see what I'm feeling inside.

"Wow, I wasn't sure whether or not she'd be here. I'm sure I'll run into her sometime, but thanks Mom. Thanks for telling me."

Mom leaves me to my dishes. When I'm done, I walk into the living room and kiss her head. "I'm heading out," I say. "I'm going for a drive."

#

Better now, now that I'm away from the dead air exhaust of Vape cigarettes, the living memorial to the child I once was. I roll down the window and crank up the radio as I resume my spot on Sixth.

Going home, like you've never left at all.

Loops pass buy as I observe the minor changes from my childhood. The Wilson's sold their house. So too did the Allens'. Why don't people take care of their lawns anymore? When did the street get so rough?

Wondering over these monuments shows that I've forgotten what I promised myself, what I swore to myself in my bathroom mirror over and over again. "It's never going to be what it was," I said to no one but my reflection. "Don't go searching for something that's long since gone."

After fifteen minutes I drive out towards my Dad's place, his old place, out on the other side of town. When I graduated from High School and left for college, Dad and I started growing close again, when I stopped being an asshole and he stopped pretending to care. Too bad it took so long. Dad made it to see me graduate a second time in four years, but by the time I'd turned twenty-five, cancer had put him in his grave.

"One for you Dad," I say as I switch my iPod and play another track before driving away. One for you Dad. A classic, country, the old stuff you always adored.

*Hear that lonesome whippoorwill. He sounds too blue to fly.*

*The midnight train is whining low. I'm so lonesome I could cry.*

Where to next, I wonder. Where should I go from here? Back on Sixth Street I think about years past, remembering where I've been before deciding where I head next. I remember you most of all, you and the things I strive to forget.

#

We had that last year together, the classic high school sweethearts. Holding hands in passing period. Dances at homecoming and bottles at prom. We had everything a high school romance should have had, but in the moment it felt like so much more. Perhaps first love is like that for everyone. Deeper, unexplainable, wise beyond years and foolish without measure. But like a ticking hourglass, our love came with expiration, the date of departure growing closer every week and day.

"I'll stay if you want me to stay," I said one night as we laid intertwined on the sheets of your bed, naked, the sound from your mom's tele-novelas loud over the window air-conditioning unit. "I don't care what my parents say. I love you, Katie."

You don't cry, but I almost do, holding you close and kissing the nape of your neck. Your scent is grape cigarillos and sunlight, the purest thing I've ever smelled. It is July, one month until I leave for college, but although the date draws closer, you have acted like time will never move.

Until now. Until I force you to act.

"Don't put that on me, Michael. Put me between you leaving and you staying. You hate it here, hate everything about this place. You've wanted to get out since before I met you."

Katie hates it too, but she and I both know her options for leaving don't extend as far as mine. This doesn't stop me from saying something I'll surely regret.

"Come with me," I offer. "We can get an apartment. You can get a job. When I graduate we can go anywhere after that. You don't have to stay..."

But she does, and the fact that I've ignored this truth hurts Katie almost as much as my leaving.

"You know I can't go. Leave my mom? My brother? You might hate it here, hate all these stupid people who will never leave,



but this is my home. I wouldn't make it without my family, and you know they wouldn't make it without me. Don't say things you can't take back Mike. It just makes this worse."

You push away from me, from our spoon and our sweat. I watch you cross the room, your brown skin and round ass stirring feelings that should be buried at a moment like this. You just look so beautiful, so whole, as you throw on a white tank top but nothing else below.

"I think you should leave," you say with finality. "I think you need to go."

You are serious, even in the half-nude. You are so wounded and tender and broken it kills. I get up, more naked than you, but it is difficult putting up a fight in such a state.

I get dressed and head out into the night, promising to call in the morning, promising we will figure this out. I get into my truck and drive Sixth for half-an-hour, but the memory of you, of your body and your soul, they haunt me as the radio plays another tune.

*I told you to be balanced. I told you to be kind. Now all your love is wasted. Then who the hell am I?*

Who the hell am I is right. Without you, I just don't know. Without you, I guess I'll just have to be me.

Without you, I'm not sure that will be enough.

#

The reunion kicks off the following day, a day filled with school-sponsored activities and extra-curriculars never condoned. We meet at the High School, twenty-seven graduates at one time past, whittled down to the thirteen who have made the trip.

Ten years. Some shout this fact with reckless abandon. TEN YEARS!!! Others mutter it below their breath. Ten years. We eyeball each other before shaking hands, before hugging in half-hearted embrace. We wear airs and tell lies, all to cover up how we feel.

"Roman, how are you?"

"Nancy, I heard you have kids."

"Richie Brown. My god, if it isn't Richie Brown."

The class of 2005, all together again.

After we hug it out and bury the hatchets we lost along the

way, we roam the halls we used to call home. Were we all so small, I wonder? How did we ever fit into such a place? The lockers seem miniaturized. The hallway art looks like kindergarten doodles. Even the basketball hoops appear lower than they were.

How did we ever think this mattered?

God, how did we make it so far?

Soon the High School halls grow claustrophobic, even to those who best loved those glory days, so we depart to the next most logical place. The Wobbly Wagon Saloon was good enough for those who came before us. It will be good enough today.

"I'm buying," screams Roman as we walk through the swinging doors, the dark lit bar and stale air hanging heavy over the town drunks. The bartender isn't disturbed that thirteen new souls have entered his domain. If anything, he seems pissed off. Probably working on a heavy buzz himself. No need to work harder than necessary.

I partake in the revelry and the pomp of it all, eating up what I didn't already know from Facebook, served by those I'd let fall aside. Andrew works in retail at a store in the city...Ginny came out of the closet, finally...Nancy has three kids, not two...Roman is still a dick.

It does feel better than I expect, the reunion, the childhood friends, most of it anyways, but in the back of my mind digs a splinter that will not rest. Not even under all this Budweiser. All these people are but a shade of my time, a shadow of my memories of home. They are acceptable distractions, but they are only the opening act.

I can't help but peek at the doorway between games of pool, waiting for you to enter, going over what I'll say. I can't help but feel butterflies when I picture seeing your face.

But you don't appear.

Not at nine. Not at eleven. Not even at one.

We stay way too long at the bar, reluctant to give it up, to say goodbye again. After shots and karaoke. After draining the jukebox of the songs of our youth.

Garth Brooks. Lil Jon. Chingy. Metallica.

The music we play is such a blend, such a scatterplot of what the rest of the world would call taste and style. But in so many ways,

all of it is home. The Wobbly Wagon, the creepy townies, the “If only we could go back,” barroom sobs.

It is home. The first one I ever had.

But home, my home, is wanting. I stagger back to my mom’s place after last call, blurred and reeking and already dreading the morning to come, but when I collapse on her cat hair couch, I say your name before I fade away.

I say your name and think of home.

#

Awful. Dying. Shit on a stick. Death warmed over.

All the things I feel as I wake to the sound of sizzling bacon. All the pounding messages in my head as I replay scenes from a night before. Lord, if you’re really up there, please don’t let me have made any plans or promises about what I’ll do today.

I check my text messages, but although I’m not sure if it is you, Sweet Jesus, or rather my poor personality, no one has contacted me about restarting our day.

Breakfast with Mom passes in a blur, telling her about the reunion, the school, the Wagon, the party. She is so happy to have me home that I know she tries ignoring the smell of booze on my breath, the fact that I am still wearing the same clothes I had on yesterday. I love her for this. For this, and the questions she doesn’t ask.

After breakfast I pack my backpack. A nap sounds better, but if I fall asleep, I will never go. I have to make it out to the lake, to the Point, if only to say I did. Four aspirin help me find my courage, and with a sandwich from Mom thrown in “just in case,” I leave home to go and find it.

The drive to the Point takes twenty minutes, but in the slow crawl of the hung-over morning, time feels much longer. I leave town, passing the Wobbly Wagon, the Dairy Queen, the single flashing stoplight, but these places slip by me like panels in a comic book.

There is no continuity between my memories. They are self-contained in their single cells.

Maybe this is why the memories of my childhood will never change.

Maybe, it’s because I won’t let them.

Out of town I am greeted by the open road; the wind and the sun. July is baking, hot even this early in the day, but I relish the stifling heat. I shut off the air conditioning and crank the radio, turning onto Lane Nineteen as I make my way out towards the Point. Rick Nelson syncs up next on the playlist, the coincidence too powerful for chance.

*If you gotta play at garden parties, I wish you a lot of luck.  
But if memories were all I sang, I'd rather drive a truck.*

The Point materializes from a horizon of dust and weeds and clear blue sky. Down the dirt road, down Lane Nineteen, and then to those rocky bluffs. The wind is blowing fierce when I get out of the car, like standing in front of a blow dryer. The way the waves break methodically, splashing with the whistle of the wind, is mesmerizing.

I spent all day being seventeen, feeling twenty-seven, seeing thirty-five. So Billy Pilgrim in my timeline, ending and eternal in those sun-baked waves. I swim and nap and even fish a little, catching nothing, but trying all the same.

There were so few beautiful places surrounding the town of our youth that we made due with what we had. This is what made the Point so special. It was here where I took you on our first date, if you could call Dairy Queen and third base a date. It was here where we spent lazy summers doing exactly what I am doing now. I would stand chest deep in the water, buzzed from pilfered beers, fishing with minnows. I would look at you, your blue and maroon bikini, your dark brown hair and hazel eyes. Your skin already bronzed before the sun.

But today I am alone. A pair of locals, fat and trashy in their calf-high socks and cargo shorts, their beer bellies and thinning hair, come and go and leave garbage in the parking lot, but aside from them I am alone.

I stay all day, but when five o'clock comes, I have had my fill.

Driving into town feels better than it did leaving this morning. The hangover has lessened, and although it is against my better judgment, I debate texting Richie and seeing if the party will recommence tonight.

While I make up my mind I cruise the streets of town, not

Sixth, but those other byways. There is no purpose in my drive, but magnetically, like when I was pulled out towards my father's house, I slowly circle back towards your mom's side of town.

When I am two blocks away I decide to turn back. When I am one block closer, I think what the hell. You won't be there. I won't see you. There is no reason it will hurt to look.

Only I am wrong. In the front yard with your family, holding a twenty-four once can of Keystone Ice, I see you, catch your eye, almost stop as I keep driving past.

You disappear in the rear view mirror as I turn and head back towards my Mom's.

#

I don't go out with Richie that night. He texts and swears that it is better, that there are girls, the "freshest crop" sprung up from High School. There is even a band playing at the Wobbly Wagon. Still, I don't go.

My Mom bursts at the idea of having me home all night. "Let's rent a movie!" she suggests. "Let's get one of our old favorites. We can make popcorn and have ice cream and just hang out at home!"

I agree with Mom's plan, if only because I know a movie will help cover up my mood. We drive to the Video Store, open only in a small town like this, and rent *Big Trouble in Little China*, one of our favorites since when I was young. Back at home, Mom cooks another meal that is delicious beyond measure, and as she hits play on the DVD and I relax into her single rocking chair, the moment is almost perfect.

Almost. Except my mind is somewhere else. My mind is still with you.

You didn't look like what I remembered, Katie, like what I'd hoped, what I'd needed to see. There had been pictures of course, updates on other people's timelines of what you'd transformed into over the years, but those snapshots didn't reveal the girl I'd just seen.

Your clothing hadn't changed, not really. Nor had your soft brown eyes or your long dark hair. We've all gained weight since high school, me included, and seeing your swollen stomach, the way it pushed against your tight white t-shirt, that wasn't even what threw

me most.

No, what I saw was a look I should have feared. What I saw was my reason to leave.

#

We said goodbye the week before I left for college. Goodbye for real. Our goodbye with no going back.

Thankfully, you had already forgiven me after that sweaty night at your Mom's house. That night where I professed my love, my desire to take you with me, like bringing a starfish back home after capturing it on vacation in Florida.

It would have been the same with you and me, you know. Me, watching you struggle for air. You, never the same after I'd taken you from your home. Me, watching you die a little bit each day.

On our last night together we visit the Point and make out but don't make love. You offer up a joint, but I decline as we watch the sun set over the water. "I want to feel this," I reason. "I don't want to make this fade away."

I drive you back to your mom's house after you finish smoking, and for a long time we just sit and listen to the radio.

"I am really going to miss you," I say.

"I know," you reply. "I'm going to miss you too."

"I'll be back at Thanksgiving. And Christmas. Maybe we can see each other then?"

"Maybe, but I'm not so sure," you answer. "I think I need to go Michael. I think I need to say goodbye."

You lean over and kiss my cheek, your lips lingering on the stubble of my face. Then you go. I don't turn and watch you leave, watch you get out of my truck and my life and my world. I can't even look back to see if you waved.

I can only hope, and imagine, that you are hurting like me.

This fabricated memory, a memory of you watching me leave from the window of your mom's, this is a memory I will long cherish. It is the moment that I'll picture when I get lonely up at college. When I think about calling you after having one too many beers. When I text you something stupid and wake up the next morning, relieved you haven't replied.

This look is the one I will hold in my heart, my lasting

memory of you. It is selfish, but over ten years, it is a look that has made me think that you will always be there, Katie, that you will always be waiting on the other side of that glass.

Only I've been wrong. Seeing you today showed me that. That look that I've imagined was nothing more than my projection onto a place that didn't exist, a memory that never was. Like the home I left behind, that look just wasn't real.

#

Over the cheesy dialogue of Big Trouble in Little China, over the gunshots and karate kicks and bad special effects, I think of you and how you looked. Not in my mind, but in real life. How you looked today.

I suppose I've always held onto that forged memory because it portrayed a look of longing, a look of wanting love that made me feel needed. What I saw today was so different, but although I can't fault you for it, I hate you just the same.

Standing there with your family, surrounded by those you love, when you caught me creeping by your house, I see that you haven't remembered me as I've remembered you. Sure, there were moments; times where you wondered what life would have been like if you had gone. But unlike me, you never really looked back, not with such desperate regularity. You never dreamed about what might have been.

Your years haven't been easy. I can tell this from our snapshot. The home done tattoos and smoker's lines and string of bad boyfriends. But they haven't been terribly cruel either. There was a child, with dark hair and hazel eyes, close and familiar as her ran around your legs. Was he yours? I'd like to believe he was.

When you see me drive by and catch my stare, your eyes say hello, inviting me to stop and catch up, to have a beer with your family, but they do not burn with love. Your expression is more like one you get from running into an old acquaintance at the grocery store. An unexpected meeting that you tell your family about over dinner and wine.

You didn't hold on to me for all these years. You were able to let me go.

When the movie finishes my Mom is yawning, nodding off to

sleep, but she doesn't want to say goodnight unless I am ready to hang it up. I know I will not sleep. I can't, not after seeing you. Not after losing ten years of memory. But I can't standing seeing my Mom force herself to stay awake either.

"I'm calling it Mom," I say as I stretch and mimic a yawn. "I am going to bed."

Mom asks me if I'm certain, if I want to watch the news or have a cup of coffee, but I promise her I'm tired, kissing her head and thanking her for the wonderful evening.

It takes us both time to wind down for the night, but as my Mom settles and the house closes in, I lay in the soft bedroom light and stare at the popcorn ceiling. There are no shapes in the pattern above my head, but this doesn't stop me from trying to find meaning in the nothingness.

I will leave home tomorrow. Aside from that, there is no other certainty I can find.

#

My second breakfast is more enjoyable than the first. Perhaps this is because it doesn't taste like a cat has shit in my mouth, but maybe, it's because of something else.

I pack and decline my Mom's invitation to stay for lunch, to attend church with her and all her other old lady friends. "Are you sure," she asks again and again, her puppy dog eyes begging for one more moment. "What if we went out and got something to eat. My treat. Any place you want."

"I'm sure Mom," I say, "but I've had a really nice time seeing you. You can come up soon and stay with me. Next time I'll be the host."

Mom accepts that she cannot change my mind, so instead she loads up a cooler with half filled bags of Doritos and cheddar dip and fruit and ground beef. "I can't eat all this before it goes bad," I say, but I don't object when she forces the goods into my hand.

Mom walks out with me to my truck and helps me throw my things into the dirty bed. We hug and tell each other goodbye, professing our love and promising to call. Mom stays out on the sidewalk and waves, not going back inside until I disappear from view.



The highway out of town is only seven blocks from Mom's place, but although it makes me feel like I liar, I don't head for the exit, not right away. Instead I take one more victory lap on Sixth, mildly worried that I might see someone I know heading to church, someone who will tell on me.

I don't run into anyone I know. Instead, I quickly turn off Sixth and get back on the highway. My trip home, missing my father, the reunion, the Point, seeing Katie. All of these feelings occupy so much space inside the cab that there isn't room left for music. In silence, I reach the bridge crossing the Arkansas River.

The bridge that will take me home.

But not yet. Stirred by a feeling of spontaneity I can't explain, I don't drive over that murky brown water. No, instead I stop, putting on my turn signal even though there is no one following within a half-mile. I park on the empty shoulder, not confident in my actions, but stopping all the same.

The wind is blowing when I get out of the car, blowing like it always does in late July. There is a concrete ledge on the side of the road, about two feet in width. It isn't quite a sidewalk, but there is enough surface to stand on as I put my hand on the steel guard rail and walk along the bridge.

If anyone from my class were to drive by and see me, they might think I'd lost my mind. If Katie were to drive by, I wonder if she'd wave.

The bridge over the Arkansas stretches the length of two football fields. It is only forty feet high. The river below doesn't span the length of the bridge, but is instead contained to a single channel, barely wide enough to skip a rock.

When I get to where the river runs below me I stop and wait. The wind whips up grating flecks of dust and hay. I put my hands on the rail and lean over, looking for debris. The Arkansas is murky and swirls at slow pace. It is filthy and brown and lean.

I look back towards town and think over my weekend, a time span just under forty-eight hours. A time span that will linger for weeks to come. Why did I come back, I wonder. What made me do this to myself again?

When I look back at the river, no answer has made itself clear.

Twenty miles further downstream stands the Point, that bottled up reservoir of flooded ground and sun-drenched rocks. I cannot see it from where I stand.

Shutting the door of my pickup, I look back in the rear-view mirror before starting the engine. I can see town, the old homes and browning lawns that welcome visitors to a place they shouldn't stop. I see the Welcome sign and the jail and the golf course and my life.

Only I'm not imagining it anymore. This time, I am seeing it for real.

It hurts, much worse than I could have anticipated, but although it is stupid and dangerous and dumb, I watch town through the rear view mirror of my truck until it has disappeared from sight. Over the bridge. Onto the highway. Away from my home.

It took seeing you Katie to finally look back. After all these years, all those hours of looking back and wondering. I always thought it was you Katie, you who kept the dream alive. Now, I know the truth. Ten years parted from when I first drove off, but now I can finally stop looking back.

I hate you and I love you all the same.

You and that town.

You, and that place I once called home.

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# An Honest Conversation

Chris Sanchez

Light broke through the tinted glass ceiling casting a dark skinned female figure in a dull blue hue that bounced off her metal plating. The soft curves of her face juxtaposed the harsh angles of her inner mechanisms. Consistent ticks from her chest cavity drilled into the air.

A man playing with the frayed edge of the tablecloth sat across from her. "Do you enjoy the blue light? I'm experimenting with light therapy," he said. A tea set laid unused at the center of the table.

"And I both know lights won't fix me you," she said. Her southern drawl draped every other word. She swiped at a strand of hair blocking her right optical sensor, missing entirely.

"No, they won't, but they might preserve." He poured a cup of tea for himself and motioned to pour for her. Her silver and brown hand covered her teacup. Her ticks matched the grandfather clock in the corner.

"We skip today's session can?" She made a second attempt to rid the strand from her view. It wasn't better than the first.

He threw the tea in her face. "That's not your decision to make." Brown liquid seeped into every available crevice in her stainless frame.

She shrugged and her shoulders locked in place at the nape of her neck before dislocating back to their resting positions.

The clock struck noon and a deep chime engulfed the room. He slammed down on the teapot, shattering and flinging porcelain pieces.

"Come with me." He approached her, bloody hand at his side. Her pale blue sensors stayed on the broken teapot. Crimson liquid swirled against brown tea. "Now."

"Never leave I." Her sensors adjusted, then readjusted, focusing on the dueling liquids.

He grabbed her hand and dragged her to the room's only door. "Today's different." Delicate steps were followed by a weighty thump on tiled floor.

The door slid open on their approach and a long ivory hallway stretched before them. Clocks decorated both walls, each positioned four feet from each other. Some gothic, others modern. All of them struck noon.

"Time like you." The drawl no longer present, her speech defaulted to a distorted timbre.

"If only the feeling was mutual." They passed clock after clock, reaching a door at the end of the hallway. He pressed his hand on a side panel, leaving a red handprint. A sensor popped open above the panel and he placed his green eye against it.

"Recognized, Dr. Matthias." The door glided open. He squeezed her metallic hand, bending screws and filaments in the process. She made no movement.

They strode into a wide cylindrical room. No windows, furniture, or exits. Clocks again filled the walls, crowding closer together this time. Machinery was clustered near a monitor in a far corner.

"Computer, start fabricating a frame for Claire." His shaking hand betrayed his measured tone.

"Doctor, there is only enough material left for one more frame. Are you sure you want to proceed?"

"Am I ever sure?"

The machinery in the corner sparked to life. She took her hand back and inched toward the center of the room. Her foot dragged against the floor, leaving a long scrape.

"Time more." She stood leaning on one leg, surrounded.

"If only." He clapped and a panel opened in the wall, revealing a partially dented steel bat. She turned her back to him.

He strolled toward her, bat bouncing against the floor.

Machinery rang with a high pitch whistle. The steel was lined up parallel to her head. Gritting his teeth and fists, he swung wide.

Pale blue met green. "I'm sorry, Ian." A drawl perfectly hung on each syllable.

The bat impacted. Rivets and components slid across the room. He stood above her, shaking. His grip on the bat caused his wound to pour. The second swing hit her legs, crushing them. A third one dislodged her arms.

A wig piled under metal, plastic, and gears. Only her torso and face plate intact. He dropped the bat to open her back panel and pull out her central axle.

"The frame is complete, Doctor."

"Thank you, Computer."

He ambled toward the machinery. A dark oak oval clock with ebony hands sat on a pedestal. The axle aligned perfectly with the internal workings.

A spot was predetermined near Bethany which in turn was near Alex. He placed the clock in its spot, then the monitor displayed a female form.

"It was a pleasure, Doctor."

He stared at the dark oak clock, his reflection in the glass.

"That it was."

Panels shot up from the wall exposing a wide robot with bristles protruding from the front chassis. It sped off towards the pile, pushing all the debris into a side of the wall where another panel opened into a sharp drop.

The pieces fell for fifty feet, impacting on a mountain of metal. Her face plate rolled to the side, resting near hundreds of identical faces.

*Ben Kingsley is best known for his Academy Award winning role as Mahatma Ghandi. This Ben is a touch less famous. He hasn't acted since a third grade debut as the undertaker in Music Man. Currently, he is a Michener Fellow, VONA: Voices of our Nation Scholar, and belongs to the Onondaga Nation of Indigenous Americans in New York. He holds an M.A. from the University of Pennsylvania. Most recently his work has been published in [PANK], Prairie Schooner, & nominated for the Academy of American Poet's Prize.*

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# When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone

Benjamín Naka-Hasebe Kingsley

they are laser-bathed and crystal-eyed all of them  
candied bracelets circle upturned wrists  
in knee-high neon socks they pitch themselves  
forward as a wave oceans of blood sloshing  
against the stage's shore  
    everything is electric  
    yellow,  
& there is only the bass now bumping and slapping  
inside their tearing ear drums  
    fragile tongues spill  
against one another and molly roosts on their lips  
    a thin red butterfly against a current of light and  
  
vibrating  
    limbs stretching tight  
        as thrumming piano wire shattering  
            to the vaulted ceilings top

& they call to bring out  
the beast

I bet it will look like an empty room  
the absence  
of objects for light to land on.

# Along a Field by my Then- House

Benjamín Naka-Hasebe Kingsley

Eroded rocks spread like my then-  
golden lab Sasha when she shattered  
a hip curled under hyssop and sun-eroded  
to the size of a pup buried  
beneath spades of porch light

grass in steam-printed thatch on my then-  
lover's thighs and her small breasts smelling  
like handled change then-  
certain we were more than the sum  
of two or more  
urges sequestered then-  
beneath skyplanes shelling out  
stars that stained children's fingertips straining  
to reach a telephone wire sagging against the weight  
of one-hundred lost boy's then-shoes

back-then's field a piebald mudslide  
shorn by wind gonging through skeletal rakes, red  
backhoe loaders drumming past crawler excavators  
tearing down and tearing down then-  
boys on neon-green bikes then-riding high on  
doubled dirt hills being built up  
and being built up popping wheelies then-  
without their mothers to bring them back  
from a field by my then-house and my then-mother  
to call me home and into the kitchen



where my then-father gulped milk and Raisin  
Bran from a glass Pyrex measuring cup  
and he said to dress for the job I want  
so then I delivered pizzas dressed like James  
Franco gripping the handles of a battered  
dirt bike

Now I look at those hills along a field  
by the house I inherited and I speak  
to the window as if it's one  
of those boys now riding  
high and say: "thank the one  
that washed your small body  
that dressed and fed you  
that saw to it you got enough  
sleep."

*Robert P. Kaye's stories have appeared in Hobart, Juked, Dr. T. J. Eckleburg Review, Beecher's, Per Contra, The Los Angeles Review and elsewhere, with details available at [www.RobertPKaye.com](http://www.RobertPKaye.com). His chapbook "Typewriter for a Superior Alphabet" is published by Alice Blue Press. He facilitates the Works in Progress open mic at Hugo House and is the co-founder of the Seattle Fiction Federation reading series.*

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# We All Think We Can See the Trajectories of Each Other's Lives, But Tend to Lose Interest

Robert P. Kaye

My wife trained as a neurosurgeon. I might have been her first patient, but this isn't about me. I just want us to be happy.

The downward spiral started after her parents invited us for Thanksgiving dinner. They'd put her through school— for the good of humanity, they said— and moved into a tent after the bankruptcy. We found them dead of exposure, not a stick of firewood left within miles. The turkey was still warm in the fire pit and quite delicious. We were newlyweds then and her father insisted on paying for the wedding with two hundred people and a five-course dinner. Which, come to think of it, featured smoked turkey. I regret not getting to know them better.

Shortly thereafter, we acquired a cat and my wife stopped working. Good practice for when we had children she said. Fifteen years later we had twelve cats and no children, her medical degree a framed memory on the wall. I drove for a ride-share company and picked products in a warehouse evenings and weekends. We didn't

have medical coverage and my cancer diagnosis put a heavy weight on our finances. Not to worry, my wife said. I'm ready to rejoin the workforce.

She got a job as a barista, the delicate touch of a steamer, she said, felt a lot like a laser knife and in my line of work, precision is life and death. It's not brain surgery, the manager said when he fired her.

Not a problem, she said. I've got this covered.

She went back to school in journalism, but reportedly there are no jobs for reporters. Then she trained as a travel agent, but that didn't go anywhere. Then a vocational course in assembling automobiles, but it turns out all the good jobs go to robots. She learned weaving, but her textiles didn't sell at prices a hundred times the cost of foreign goods. People don't appreciate quality these days.

I had to give up the warehouse job altogether while in chemo and do telemarketing while I drove, whispering into the receiver while my fares asked who I was talking to. Our run of bad luck continued.

If you can't join em, lick em, she said working in phone sex. She couldn't stop correcting the customers' pronunciation and emotional framework. It's anal with a long "a" she said. Let me tell you about Freud.

We almost lost our house constructed from cat food cans, unrentable on the guest share services because it's impossible to wash that smell out. We could hardly afford to feed twenty-four felines, let alone however many we had. By this time, I drove for all the ride-sharing services and, of course, sold plasma.

My wife won the election because nobody else would run. Now she decides on how much light rail to build; whether to invest in coal, wind or solar; refugee quotas and services for the homeless. People line up to be Secretary of Whatever, Judge of this or that. It's very lucrative but she doesn't have time for the cats or me anymore. I worry about her work/life balance. I suspect she's sleeping with her chief of staff.

I still pick up the occasional fare in the executive limo or make a call about replacement windows just to keep in practice. Her father's tent is in the basement of the executive mansion, smelling of

mold and turkey. It's good to have a plan B in case bad luck comes out of remission.

# Rosemaling

Robert P. Kaye

I touch the petal-shaped chip in the mauve coat of paint on the wall of the freight elevator, the one that reveals the color underneath as yellow. I think *I'll never do this again*. Or maybe I say it.

A tired nurse, also going up the back way, looks over and says “Doctor, are you all right?” She’s not intimidated by the crusty old surgeon. *No, he’s not all right*, the walls answer. *He’s too old to be cutting people open*.

Rose always said I was a few degrees off true north, plus or minus a right angle. She liked to decorate everything. I don’t like people, which helps maintain detachment when cutting them open.

Mental disorders blossom like wildflowers when fertilized by loneliness. I say things, maybe out loud, how would I know? I’m not Nixon. There are no tapes.

I took time off after Rose died—none of that “Rose passed” bullshit. Painted the house in the summer heat thinking I’ll be dead myself before the place needs it again. *I’ll never do this again* became my mantra scraping the blisters, filling the cracks, cleaning the brushes. The trim lines are razor straight. I’ve still got the hands. Thought about falling off the ladder but the house isn’t high enough to guarantee a clean death. Boy do I know that after working on so many botched attempts, wondering why we bother. People can’t even do the simplest things right.

What did I learn from my time at home alone? That if I did retire I’d have to have to get a giant FUCK OFF doormat custom made because the three-inch high letters on the NO SOLICITORS sign are apparently too small for political and environmental hucksters to read.

I painted the flower boxes last. Impenetrable sealer, three coats of paint over the rosemaling, a hobby she adopted without any connection to Norway other than thinking such a thing suited a

woman named Rose. She didn't even like herring.

The bright colored C and S figures were hard to cover. It was a relief to paint over the atrocious asymmetry of folk art. I should have sanded them down first because the shapes still lurk beneath the many new coats of white paint, a color she would never have chosen. You can't paint a house black, can you?

I can't help but remember the last time we had old people sex—don't worry, I'll spare you the details. Afterward, thinking "We'll probably never do that again" and not knowing I said it out loud. "How come, you silly old goat?" she said. "We've been doing it on Wednesday nights for forty something years, in sickness and in health." Turns out I was right.

Gaudy Scandihoovian flowers still bedeck the damn bed frame, requiring me to sleep in the guest bedroom on the pullout sofa, which hurts my back.

I scrub up, but the mantra won't get out of my head, *I'll never do this again*.

Metastasis rhymes with insidious. We did everything we could, doctor, you know that. I've said it myself on an infinite loop. Between sickness and health, death always wins.

Seventy is the new thirty, they tell me. deBakey cut on hearts until he was almost a hundred. Retirement is the most effective method of suicide. Yeah, sure. Maybe I could paint the house a different color.

The incision opens flesh, the stroke of a paintbrush describing the stem of the flower. One more cut, trivial as rosemaling. I put the scalpel down.

I tell them to page Dr. G. to take over. Go back to the freight elevator, still gowned. Touch the flower petal chip in the paint with a gloved finger. Say out loud. *I'll never do this again*.

# Appropriation Starts Here

Robert P. Kaye

Hernán Cortés de Monroy y Pizarro, Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca, conqueror of the Aztec empire, rolls up on the strip mall in a beat up Winnebago. La Malinche, once a Nahuatl slave, translator, favorite concubine and mother of his firstborn son, is asleep in the back. She is 520 years old, give or take the uncertainties of the Aztec calendar, but still a great beauty, and of a mind to travel. He is just glad to be someplace they can park the rig, pump the tanks, maybe find a real flush toilet.

The parking lots are spacious but empty, the buildings squat and massive. He is reminded of the approach across desert scrub toward Tenochtitlan, the future Mexico City. He led five hundred men all of one mind to kill him before they become human sacrifices at the point of an obsidian spear, all abiding against the remote possibility he could deliver them to glory. They did not suspect he was more afraid of them than what lay ahead.

And deliver them he did. But at what cost? He still smarts at the portrait by Diego Rivera portraying him in syphilitic corruption. You can't project modern morality on a previous age, he thinks. Values change and so do people. He pulls up outside a T. J. Maxx with plywood over the windows.

A man wearing a straw hat and carrying a push broom steps out from the shadows between buildings. He appears to have Nahuatl blood in him, like La Malinche. Also some Spanish, like his own son.

"You can't park that thing here," the man says. "The mall's dead, but the lot's still off limits to you RV gypsies. Try down by the waterfront. There's an encampment."

"I would claim this land in the name of the Spanish King," Cortez says, "But that only leads to disappointment. Is there a real bathroom I can use?" Computers, automobiles, airplanes that slice the sky like fine Castilian blades—there are advocates for all of these as the greatest of inventions. Cortez knows everything else pales in

comparison to the flush toilet. Public sanitation is redemption from the constant stink of life that leads to public death. A salvation he is denied.

Straw Hat looks at him with pity. “You belong in a museum, old man, not out on the road. Lock that thing up and follow me. Then you gotta leave.”

Cortez, who slaughtered thousands and transformed the history of the world, lowers himself on aching joints down from the cab, but does not lock up. Anyone who stumbles into the RV and wakes La Malinche will find out how deep obsidian can slice. Five hundred years and he’s still afraid of that. He follows Straw Hat into the bowels of the mall. T. J. Maxx is empty, as is J. C. Penny. Cinnabon is shuttered. Vacant halls are bathed in ghost lighting.

Straw Hat points to a door with a stick figure man. “Make it quick and don’t trash the place,” Straw hat says. “I gotta keep this place clean. Don’t ask me why.”

“What plague has laid waste to this civilization?” Cortez says. “Black death? A pox? The fever that turns eyes to pits of pus?”

“Old dude, you are a crack up.” Straw Hat says. “Amazon did this.”

“Francisco de Orellana?” He is Conquistador of the Amazon and his cousin, but kinship does nothing to lessen danger when new worlds are at stake. Cortez reaches for his sword and realizes he isn’t wearing one. So hard to remain a gentleman and drive an RV.

“Right. Look, I need this job. Do your business and get on your way, OK? Don’t make a mess.”

“I have a better plan,” Cortez says. “Together we will raze all this and build anew, as once the temples of the Aztecs were made over into cathedrals. Together we will construct a new empire greater than all the others. You will be my general, with more concubines than you can mount in a year.”

“You really don’t have to use the can, do you?”

Cortez thinks of the cool porcelain throne behind the door. The satisfying expulsion. The celestial music of flushing water. “Yes. Yes I do.” He pushes open the door.

The toilet is blessedly clean, his estimation of Straw Hat vindicated. When he comes out they will found an empire on the



bones of this one. He will begin with the burning of the RV, as he did the ships at Veracruz. There will be no turning back.

# People's Ink January Focus

## Member:

### An interview with Taylor Zajonc



*As a maritime historian, Explorers Club member, shipwreck expert and avid world traveler, **Taylor Zajonc's** real-life adventures nearly exceed those of his fictional counterparts. His fascination with exploration began when he joined a Russian expedition to the deepest archaeological site on the planet, descending nearly three miles into the abyss of the Bermuda Triangle aboard a Soviet-era submersible. Now a recognized shipwreck and treasure expert, Taylor has contributed research and methodology for some of the most important shipwreck finds of the past decade, including World War Two treasure ships SS Gairsoppa and SS Mantola and the British naval ship HMS Victory. RED SUN ROGUE is his second novel.*

**Typehouse:** *How long have you been a People's Ink member?*

**Taylor Zajonc:** I've been a member for about two years now.

**TH:** *How long have you been writing?*

**TZ:** I've always been a writer to some extent, I spent a lot of time in high school writing funny stories for my friends. I got more serious about it in 2005 and wrote a couple of screenplays. I built up my skills one project at a time until I eventually landed a literary agent (my second, the first one didn't work out) and a two-book publishing deal.

**TH:** *What genres do you write?*

**TZ:** I write adventure novels with strong scientific, technical, historical and environmental themes. Many of them take place at sea. I also do quite a bit of nonfiction writing as a historical researcher.

**TH:** *Where do you get your inspiration?*

**TZ:** I tend to draw a lot of inspiration from my real-life adventures. I've accompanied a Russian expedition to the Titanic and the Bermuda Triangle, helped recover sunken Civil War gold off the eastern seaboard, discovered lost shipwrecks in the Atlantic, became a wilderness search and rescue volunteer and traveled through parts of South America, Europe and Africa. I've also met legendary explorers and adventurers, archaeologists, submarine captains, financiers, diplomats, high-tech engineers, all kinds of amazing people who have become source material for my characters.

**TH:** *How do you deal with writer's block?*

**TZ:** If I'm stuck, it's usually because whatever idea I'm working on isn't good enough yet. I'm either trying to bridge two sections I'd rather be working on instead (in which case I try to cut the bad section between them) or I'm just not inspired to work on the scene

(which means I'm writing something boring and need a new idea to make it worthwhile.)

**TH:** *What do you like to read?*

**TZ:** As much nonfiction as I can get my hands on! I have a library full of books on maritime history and exploration.

**TH:** *What is your favorite writing moment?*

**TZ:** I got myself a decent bottle of scotch and set it on my shelves a while back. The next two years were spent staring at the unopened bottle, promising myself that I wouldn't touch it until I landed a book deal. But the moment I landed a book deal (actually, a two-book deal) the bottle went right into the closet where it remains unopened to this day. I suppose this is a roundabout way of saying that I don't spend much time focusing on great moments or victories... I'm always chasing the next challenge.

**TH:** *Where have you been published?*

**TZ:** My novel THE WRECKING CREW was published by Blank Slate Press last year, the sequel RED SUN ROGUE is coming out late February of this year from the same publisher.

**TH:** *Why did you join the People's Ink?*

**TZ:** There is no single greater tool for an aspiring author connecting with people and getting critiques. I love it when someone points out exactly what I've done wrong... it's an amazing opportunity to learn and improve.

**TH:** *What is your favorite People's Ink moment?*

**TZ:** I did a one-on-one critique session with another author recently and had one of the greatest "ah-ha!" moments I've ever had. I'd been

struggling with a novel project for a few years and couldn't figure out what was wrong with it despite showing it to dozens of people. She immediately figured out the central problem with the narrative, enabling me to tackle it again from the beginning. I've never been so excited to completely gut and rebuild a novel.

**TH:** *Where do you see your writing in ten years?*

**TZ:** I'd love to have published at least ten books by then. I tend to write one a year and hope to pick up the pace as time goes on. It's hard to overstate how much I enjoy doing this. Beyond that, who knows? Ideally, one or more of them will catch on. I'll do my best to make that happen, but it's a fickle industry.

**TH:** *What is something quirky about you?*

**TZ:** Geez... what *isn't* quirky about me? If I were to narrow it down in terms of writing, I have a bit of an obsession with stuffing my novels as full of real-world concepts as possible. For instance, in a scene where a character suffers "the bends" (also known as decompression sickness), I not only meticulously researched the subject but also had a diving medicine expert who had personally experienced a near-fatal bout look it over and review for accuracy. When readers ask about my inspiration for a certain scene, they're likely to get an answer a great deal longer and weirder than they anticipated, so fair warning!

**TH:** *Tell us something about the piece we are publishing.*

**TZ:** This is a chapter from my forthcoming novel RED SUN ROGUE, which will be available in late February from Blank Slate Press. The novel picks up just a few weeks after THE WRECKING CREW, my previous book. Protagonist Jonah Blackwell and the crew of the submarine *Scorpion* have left dry dock and have sailed across the Pacific for their first real mission. This chapter introduces the two main villains, who are meeting for the first time. Jonah will soon be forced into a confrontation with both as he stumbles into a conspiracy dating back to the Japanese secret weapons programs of World War II.

***From the back of the book:***

***May 6, 1945:*** A German submarine U-3531 disappears en route to mainland Japan, taking with her a weapon that could have changed the course of the war.

***Present day:*** Salvage diver turned submarine captain Jonah Blackwell and his unproven crew resurface on a mission of mercy, secreting starving refugees from the brutal North Korean regime as a hundred-year winter ravages the northern Pacific. Hunted by the Japanese fleet and forced to surrender, the crew of the Scorpion are blackmailed into investigating a mysteriously quarantined DPRK submarine base. As chaos erupts across the East China Sea, the crew of the Scorpion find themselves embroiled in a conspiracy that threatens to reshape the entire region. Now his crew must race against time in an adventure spanning the irradiated waters of Fukushima, flood-beset Tokyo metropolis and the crumbling tropical remains of a secret Japanese research facility. At the center of it all is an enigmatic technology cult with roots in the clandestine weapons program of the Second World War—a cult that has waited seventy years to strike its final blow.

# An Excerpt from Red Sun Rogue

Taylor Zajonc

## Chapter 4

*South China Sea*

*8 Miles North-Northwest Naha City, Okinawa Prefecture, Japan*

The Augusta-Westland AW139 soared over the South China Sea, bleeding velocity as it slowed from a 191-knot cruising speed in preparation for landing. Losing altitude, the helicopter tilted, panoramic passenger windows dropping to show the moonlit coastline of Okinawa to starboard. The lights of subtropical Naha City and the sprawling American airbase twinkled below as they began the final turn towards the harbor and the faint silhouette of a waiting superyacht.

Freya Weyland unzipped her orange, neoprene survival suit, securing the loose arms in a knot around her waist. Near as they were to their destination, she had not finished her nightly pushup regimen—the exercise driven more by boredom and compulsion than necessity. At five feet ten inches, and with a MMA fighter's build, Freya's muscles were impossible to hide, even under the bulky neoprene. She grimaced as she flexed, one arm straining against gravity, white knuckles ground into the soft carpet of the helicopter's deck. The other hand was held behind her back, the toes of both feet digging into the seat of her plush leather chair.

Although the luxurious helicopter was designed for a dozen passengers, it held only two, with access to the cockpit blocked by a thick bulkhead covered with elegant brass and wood-burl inlays. Her mute minder sat across from her, nearly immobile as he watched one repetition after another, barely blinking as she switched arms and started the count again.

The minder amused her, as did the confluence of cultures surrounding her. He was a slight Japanese man in an expensive Italian suit watching an American woman from his seat on a Russian-manufactured, French-appointed, British-designed helicopter. The sumptuous interior couldn't help but confirm her belief that luxury and technology had become tediously generic and indistinct. The economic flattening of the earth turned the rich into an army of clones—driving the same cars, carrying the same handbags, vacationing at the same ritzy hotspots, wearing the same designer clothes—and destroying the same planet.

Her minder wasn't much for conversation. She'd tried English, Dutch, even German, all to no effect. Freya sighed, drawing herself up from the exhausting one-armed pushups and slumping into

the soft seat, not bothering to secure the belt as she rolled and stretched her powerful shoulders.

The helicopter couldn't land soon enough—comfortable as it was, she was ready to get out and walk, hell, she would have swum if the pilots had let her. She'd spent twenty hours onboard, the flight beginning as she was plucked from a patch of open ocean south of the Solomon Islands—where exactly, she didn't know. And then it was on to Papua New Guinea, across the equator to the Philippines and finally towards the southernmost island of Japan. The stops along the way were a quick affair, the engines barely slowing to accommodate a well-coordinated refueling by waiting teams at each remote airstrip.

Her Japanese minder was brave—she'd give him that, at least. Most men were intimidated by her physicality, to say nothing of her commanding height, gauged earlobes, tribal tattooing, and long, platinum-blond dreadlocks. She was used to the stares, the whispered *hey-bro-check-that-out*, her mere presence somehow a threat to masculinity everywhere. Surprisingly, the minder had only averted his eyes when she'd changed out of her oily, salt-encrusted sports bra and into a clean white t-shirt, his eyes meeting hers again the moment she was once again dressed.

But brave or not, she could still easily break him in half if she wanted.

#

The helicopter slowed to a shuddering crawl as it hovered over the bow of a superyacht, wheels emerging from the undercarriage as they prepared to land on the well-lit pad. Little more than an angular shape on the green moonlit waters, the metallic-grey ship was longer than a football field, constructed of seamless aluminum and hardened steel, interrupted only by black privacy glass. But unlike any other ship she'd ever seen, the entire aft third of the yacht was encased in clear glass, the greenhouse within an immaculately terraced artificial landscape of thick vines, flowering plants, and tropical canopy.

The engine and blades barely changed their pitch as the helicopter touched down on the gently rocking pad. Her minder moved, perhaps for the first time since dangling an articulated winch and high-tensile synthetic rope out of the craft as he plucked her,



shipwrecked, from the waters off eastern Australia. A hidden motor whirred, opening the sliding door—the minder, with a single outstretched finger, pointed for her to get out.

Thankful to be moving again, Freya stepped down from the helicopter, bulky orange survival suit still bunched around her waist. Hidden lights flickered to life beneath her feet, guiding her along the length of the bow and towards an open exterior door. She turned to look back at the aircraft, but the engine had already begun to increase in pitch as it rose once more into the dark winter air.

Pausing to take in the cool breeze, the last thing Freya saw before ducking into the well-lit interior were six American fighter jets on maneuvers over the harbor, the screams of their glowing engines splitting the sky.

Now inside, she could see that the heart of the megayacht was an immense, open chamber that ran nearly the entire length of the craft, with steep bulkheads that met at the ceiling to form a perfect triangle apex sixty feet above, their surface made of glinting, machined aluminum. And yet, it all felt so timeless, the space-age design a modern reinterpretation of ancient Japanese architecture. Freya could scarcely believe the scale of the windowless chamber. The length of it ran from the raked bow all the way to the distant stern, almost as if the entire vessel was a shell for this single room.

The interior was like nothing she'd seen before, hundreds of glass-encased artifacts and museum pieces displayed under soft LED lighting. A small part of her brain tickled as she remembered the two art history classes she'd taken in college before her expulsion, but she couldn't identify any of them. She gazed intently at each in turn, passing Dutch-marked artillery, late nineteenth century bayonet-affixed infantry rifles, ships' bells, brass-encased marine telescopes, the uniforms of Japanese generals and sailors alike. The carefully curated collection surprised her as it eschewed any of the samurai martial instruments antiquarians had come to prize. Even so, there were no photographs or paintings of any variety. All of the artifacts were constructed of indelicate metals and woods, with a sort of blocky tactile sensibility that defied the typical holdings of a museum.

A soft, commanding voice echoed from the far end of the chamber, its speaker lost to the darkness.

*“Remove your shoes, please.”*

Freya stopped dead, weighing her options. The survival suit didn't have leg cuffs; the neoprene was designed to wrap all the way around her boots to prevent the outflow of body heat. There was no easy way to remove them without removing the whole suit. But what option did she have? She nodded in reluctant agreement, peeling off the lower half of the neoprene to her ankles, then awkwardly pulling the thick rubber free of one foot, then the other, leaving her dressed in the clean t-shirt, she'd donned in the helicopter, and ratty, rolled-up khaki cargo shorts—all she owned in the world. She dumped her heavy black combat boots next, untying the fraying red laces and abandoning them to a salty puddle on the immaculate bamboo flooring. Barefoot, Freya rose to stand.

A young, robe-clad Japanese woman emerged from the darkness, bending down to feel for the survival suit and boots, fingers sweeping the floor until the edges brushed against the still-damp synthetic fabrics. The attendant stood up, her face briefly towards Freya as she retreated to the shadows once again. But when Freya tried to meet her gaze, she saw nothing in the young woman's eyes but a white film—the attendant was blind.

“Please come closer,” said the voice, beckoning her to proceed.

Freya recognized the voice now—how could she not? She'd spoken to him for months, the soft, reassuring voice on the other end of her carefully-hidden satellite phone, gently pushing her forward at every moment of doubt. But she'd never before met her mysterious benefactor.

Recess lighting slowly glowed to life as she approached the end of the immense chamber, illuminating a single, sitting figure behind a mahogany art-nouveau writing desk. The man was wheelchair-bound and massively overweight, with long, dark hair dropping straight from a thinning part and cascading over his shoulders. His aging skin was puffy and pockmarked; his sickly aspect almost more a doughy mask than a natural face. And like his attendant, he was blind. Thick, pinched eyelids covered sunken, useless sockets.

Startled, Freya realized she recognized him—the soft voice

belonged to Yasua Himura, chemical engineering magnate turned electronics billionaire and infamous recluse. His wildly profitable corporations had long since dominated Japan's military contracting system, and every drone, military avionic, and guided missile in the nation were stamped with his logo—SABC Electronics and Industry. Ten years ago—at the apex of his power, no less—he'd all but disappeared, withdrawing from friends, family, and business partners alike to live at sea aboard an expanding fleet of ever, more-impressive oceangoing yachts.

But rather than fading into lavish obscurity, Yasauo Himura began to write the largest checks of his life. Vast swaths of his impressive profits were diverted wholesale into bleeding-edge alternative energy research, investing heavily in algae fuels, biological hydrogen production, hydrokinetic energy, and fissionable thorium. Freya had once admired his commitment to the future, back when she went by the label *activist*—and not *terrorist*.

"You admire my collection," said Himura. It was a statement, not a question.

"I do," said Freya. "You have so many beautiful pieces."

"Do you understand their significance?"

"No," said Freya, shaking her head even though she knew he couldn't see it. "All I know is that they look old and really expensive."

"They're artifacts and weaponry from the Meiji Restoration," said Himura. "It's the most important period in Japan's three-thousand year history. Within four short decades, we emerged from an isolationist kingdom to the most powerful imperial force in the Asian sphere, conquering Korea, and routing the Chinese and Russians alike. Most importantly, our ancestors accomplished this despite treachery from within the restive, backwards elements of our own ranks."

"Cool," said Freya. "I didn't know that—I can't say I know much about Japan's history."

"It was an awakening, unlike the world had ever seen before or since." Grunting, Himura rolled his wheelchair back from the writing desk, pushing himself around it to approach her. She stood before him, uncomfortable, as though she were being stared down and

evaluated—impossible, given his blindness.

“Tell me of your mission.”

“What do you want to know?” Freya shifted her weight from heel to heel in the too-long silence before answering his question. “Haven’t you spoken with your people? Didn’t they fill you in on how it went down?”

“I would much prefer to hear it from you.”

“No prob,” she said with a shrug, clasping her hands behind her back and leaning against the edge of the antique desk as her benefactor listened intently. “I did everything you asked. I caught up with the environmental activists when their ship docked in Brisbane. Half the crew was out with serious food poisoning—just like you said. The captain and first mate were so desperate they were signing up anybody with a pulse. Getting a job in the kitchen was easy. The resume your people gave me checked out, and the fake passport went through their online background check with no problems. I got a few questions, but nothing I couldn’t answer. We were back out to sea a couple of days later, catching up with the Japanese whaling fleet as it transited south through the Bismarck Sea off the island of New Britain.”

Freya paused, collecting her thoughts, reflecting on how she’d ended up on this space-age yacht chatting with Yasua-fucking-Himura himself. After all, she knew she owed him a lot more than a fudged resume and a fake passport. And she knew she’d designed that fucking bomb *perfectly*, goddamn it. But that was the thing about bombs, they tended towards a mind of their own. The blast didn’t just take out the computer servers holding the design for a next-generation Arctic oil drilling platform, it also killed a night janitor and an overachieving intern who’d taken it upon herself to be the last drone out of the Seattle-based nautical architecture firm that night.

And then somebody in her cell talked. It wasn’t long before Seattle SWAT smashed in the front door of her Delridge Way commune, throwing flash-bang grenades and tear gas as they tore apart the flophouse room by room, arresting everyone inside.

Probably didn’t even matter that she and her friends had been manufacturing highly toxic semtex explosives within. As soon as the yellow police tape came down, some institutional investor would snap

up the graffiti-ridden, slummy property and flip it into marble-countertop, aluminum-appliance yuppie bait for the tech set. *Fuck 'em all*—the whole city of Seattle could burn as far as she cared, her now-incarcerated friends included.

But Freya wasn't inside when the raid went down. She'd watched from the comfortable rear seats of a black-on-black Chevy SUV parked across the street. The driver—another expressionless Japanese minder—then handed her a new passport issued under an unfamiliar name, a stack of walking-around money and plane tickets to Melbourne. She didn't know how they knew about the imminent SWAT raid, but somehow they'd known, three burly men expertly snatching her from a bus stop no more than five minutes before the armored police vehicles came roaring up to the curb. She took her chances with the gifted plane tickets. Between SWAT, local SPD foot patrols, ATF, FBI, and the US Marshals, she wouldn't have lasted a day on the street.

Freya wasn't sorry to see her friends in jail. After all, they were the ones who fucked up her flawless plans. Hell, they could have easily set off a dozen or more bombs before the cell was rolled up, explosions and assassinations rocking the core of the cadre of imperialist corporate executives and oil-barons, inspiring new recruits, copycat bombers, maybe even shaking the sleepy masses out of their complacency.

It was not to be. Not with the weaklings who made up her group, hippie know-it-alls more comfortable with pedantic discussions of Marx, Foreman, and Abby than true direct activism. They sat around and drank microbrews and smoked pot and argued with strangers on Twitter while she honed her mind and her body. So why not leave them in prison and take the plane ticket to Australia, save some whales under the guidance of a mysterious voice?

Or at least that's what she first thought. Over the weeks, Himura's anonymous tele-presence had become so much more to her—an inspiration, guardian angel, even an odd father figure of sorts. In whispered conversations over the satellite telephone, she'd told him secrets about herself she'd never told anyone.

“You found the fleet,” Himura prodded. “Please continue.”

“Yeah, we found 'em. Shadowed 'em for a while, but our

secondhand rust-bucket couldn't keep up. They'd rabbit every time we got within five miles."

"How did you infiltrate the Japanese fleet?"

"Our captain called for volunteers. Wanted us to sneak a couple of activists onboard with jet skis, have us handcuff ourselves to the harpoon ship, force them to turn around to Japan rather than bring a prisoner all the way to the Antarctic Ocean for the entire hunting season. That was the idea, anyway. My hand was the first one up, and I was the only one who managed to get on a harpoon ship and handcuff myself to the railing before the whalers could throw me overboard."

"What of the other volunteers?"

"Didn't even make it over the bulwarks. It was midnight, no moon, but they still saw us coming on the radar. The crew was waiting for us with hammers and machetes."

"But you got through."

"Broke the second mate's jaw and sliced two fingers off another guy's hand with a box cutter before they backed off long enough to let me chain myself to the railing. By the time they sawed through the lock, my ride was long gone. Throwing me overboard again would have been murder, not that they didn't seriously consider it."

"Was it difficult to access their computer systems?"

"No," said Freya, remembering the small USB drive that had arrived in an unmarked manila envelope shortly before she'd sailed from Brisbane with the environmentalists. Not difficult at all, she thought.

"Explain."

"I slept with the sailor assigned to watch my cabin. When we were finished, I told him I wanted to send an email to my family, tell ol' mom and dad I was okay and not to worry."

Despite her budding devotion to her protector, she'd only told him part of the story. She'd slept with the sailor, that much was true. But the young man had refused her request to access the shipboard computer network outright.

So she did it the hard way instead—snapping his neck, taking the keys for herself, and marching to the nearest terminal. From there,

it was only a matter of plugging Himura's flash drive into the network before returning to the cabin to wait.

"Do you disapprove?" asked Freya, cocking her head to match her benefactor's blind, considering stare.

"No," answered Yasuo Himura, a ghost of a smile upon his lips. "I only pause to admire—you are the embodiment of the perfect instrument. Cunning ... ruthless ... and quite beautiful, from what my men tell me."

"It all went down just as you said it would," said Freya, smirking at the compliment. "After a few hours, the harpoon ship where I was held prisoner suddenly heeled to starboard and steered into the factory ship like a spear. One of the mates burst into my cabin and threw a survival suit at me, and ran off. He knew neither ship could be saved."

And they were in such a hurry they didn't even see the body hidden under her bunk. Not that it mattered; both vessels went beneath the waves with minutes, the smashed harpooner sinking not long after the massive factory mothership.

"And your rescue?"

"I figured you were full of shit." Freya grinned openly. "Thought you'd leave me out there to die after I did your dirty work—no loose ends."

"And yet you completed your mission."

"You gave me an opportunity I always dreamed of," said Freya. "The chance to truly strike a blow. Dying was always a possibility—but failure wasn't. Not with extinction at stake. Your helicopter came, just as you said." In her mind, she still heard the frustrated screams of the stricken men thrashing in the sea as her minder hoisted her to safety before abandoning them to their fate.

"I hope you will now take me at my word. My operatives have ensured the American authorities will discover your real identity and presence on the activist crew. As a prisoner of the now-sunken ship, you will be reported missing and presumed dead along with your former captors."

"Do you suppose rescue crews will find any of the whalers?"

"Yes, but by then it will be too late," said Himura. "The virus in the flash drive altered the course of the entire fleet. When they sent

their distress signal, they reported their position eighty miles to the west of their actual location. It will take days for the searchers to happen across their bodies. If exposure doesn't claim them, the sharks will. I believe it is fitting given their crimes against the ocean."

A silence fell between the two, Freya considering the death of nearly two hundred men, the warmth of sick gladness filling her up from the inside.

"This vessel, do you think it's beautiful?" asked Himura.

"It's stunning. A little fancy for me, though."

"Would you like to meet the captain?"

"Sure," Freya said, looking around confused, wondering where the bridge would be on a ship like this. "Why the hell not?"

Himura smiled again, a knowing smile as though he could see her confused expression. He made a sweeping gesture with one hand, hidden infrared cameras catching the motion. With an outpouring of harsh light, the bamboo floor began to open along the entire length of the chamber. Shocked, Freya stood behind the writing desk, watching as the main deck split before her. Beneath it was a grotesque, pulsating collection of organic matter like disemboweled organs, all captured within glass vessels and electronic wiring. On the walls, several cleverly concealed screens flickered to life, displaying dreamlike, fractalized images of Freya, Himura, the superyacht and the American fighter planes above.

"This is *Meisekimu*." Himura gestured to the strange, vivisected biology below them. "She's an organic computer, controlling all onboard functions of my ship. She doesn't simply steer us, she has the ability to intuitively monitor, maintain, and repair nearly every onboard system, replacing all but the most menial service positions."

Eyes aided by the newfound light, Freya noticed a row of black-suited men at the other end of the long chamber, men not unlike those who'd snatched her from the bus stop in Seattle. She wondered if bodyguards and hired guns were considered 'menial' in Himura's labor calculus.

As Freya watched, the screens slowly turned to the fighter aircraft above, focused first upon and then within them, displaying a point-of-view cockpit perspective as they dipped and banked over the



lights of Naha City.

“What are the screens doing?” said Freya. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“We’re observing a narrow visual window into her calculations, or, more appropriately, her thoughts,” answered Himura. “She’s capable of incredible insight and intelligence. You see, *Meisekimu* is not self-aware—that would be too dangerous—but rather she exists in a sort of digital dreamscape, experiencing flutters of consciousness but never truly awaking.”

The blue light from the *Meisekimu*’s sunken chamber shifted, erupting into iridescent yellows and greens.

“What’s happening?” Freya turned to Himura. “The lights and screens—they’re all changing.”

“She’s very happy,” said Himura. “She’s experiencing flight for the first time. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Wait—*experiencing*?”

Himura didn’t answer, instead rolled his wheelchair back behind his writing desk. He reached out, holding a hand outstretched until Freya took it. The blind electronics magnate grasped hers with a surprisingly strong grip, gently pulling her behind the desk as well. Hidden motors silently whirled, slowly raising the desk and surrounding platform ten feet, twenty feet out of the floor as the triangular ceiling above them opened. Within moments, the rising platform emerged flush into the floor of the greenhouse above. Fresh organic humidity swirling around them, Freya found herself within a jungle of vines, flowers, plants, and trees, seeing again the starry sky above.

“Japan is the first,” whispered Himura, “the first among the world, the ... how might you say it? Yes, the canary in the coal mine, the harbinger of things to come. We were the first to run out of resources, out of energy, out of living space, out of youth, and first among nations to fall into irreversible decline.”

Freya looked up through the clear greenhouse ceiling and to the starlight. The fighter planes still circled above, their engines rendered silent by the thick glass.

“In the past decade, I came to realize my investments in alternative fuels were a waste,” Himura continued. “Japan can no

longer be saved by a new energy source; the search is all but fruitless. The world has reached a tipping point, one that will inevitably consume us all. The methane of the Russian permafrost has already begun to erupt, and soon their great northern forests will burn. The drought in the American southwest will only worsen, draining the last of their ancient aquifers and turning their bountiful farmlands fallow. Islands in the South Pacific will drown; Africa and Asia will starve. And the Home Islands of Japan will weather typhoon after typhoon as the world around them crumbles into resource-sparked conflict and chaos.”

“We exist at the mercy of our planet,” said Freya, a faraway look in her eyes. “I’ve always known humanity must live in harmony with nature, or not at all.”

Himura nodded. “The fickle mercy of Gaia indeed. We must all embrace a new ideology, an ideology that already burns within you. *Destruction*. And with it, reinvention and harmony. But blows must first be struck, devastating blows against every false god of profit and power.”

Raising his hands, Yasua Himura guided her gaze skyward toward the fighter planes, the unassailable symbols of domination and imperialism.

“We cannot allow anyone to feel safe, not anymore. No industry or military will be immune. We will strike without explanation, with no manifesto or creed. We’ll leave them to deduce the common thread, discover for themselves what they must do to survive—or they will perish in *our* new world.”

Freya stared at the fighters as they circled above.

“Cast them from the heavens, *Meisekimu*,” whispered the old man. One after another, the indicator lights of the planes flickered and died off as the frozen aircraft spun and dropped from the starlit sky. A geyser of water erupted as the first slammed into the deep harbor, a second and third transforming into blossoming fireballs on the beach, the final planes disappearing behind the low forested hills of Okinawa as they fell.

Distant flames glinting in her dark irises, tears sprang into Freya’s awestruck eyes as she watched with unimaginable joy.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said. “It’s all so beautiful.”

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*Each issue we will have a feature on a member of the People's Ink, the local writer's workshop collective that Typehouse is affiliated with. The People's Ink is a community and writers' workshop based in Portland Oregon, appropriate for writers of all intentions, experience, and abilities. Our primary offering is a twice-weekly workshop, together composed of around a dozen critique groups, discussion groups, writing groups, and book clubs. The People's Ink is part of The People's Colloquium, an upcoming nonprofit dedicated to fostering the practice of the creative arts and the study of the humanities. Our home on the web is <http://peoples-ink.com/>*

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*Melanie Stormm is a poet and writer living in New Hampshire. The trees are encroaching her house. There is some sort of siege underway. She has written since she was ten and has had the privilege of Anthony Hecht praising her work. He sent her a letter. She misplaced the letter and currently blames the trees.*

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# Wake

## Melanie Stormm

Did you check under the bed?

*-yes, mother, I have checked beneath the bed*

And in the closet?

*-yes, mother, I have searched the closet.*

Did you change your panties?

*-yes, mother, I am always clean*

Because if you were in an accident, would the doctors remember me by your dirty underwear?

*-no, mother, if I were in an accident, I would be clean, clean, clean*

What about behind your ears, did you check there?

*-I have bleached my ears, dear mother*

And underneath your eyelids?

*-yes, in case some ideas have stowed away*

Have you forgiven my sins?  
*-can you forgive mine?*

Have you braided your hair?  
*-yes, and made sense of every thought*

Have you kissed a boy?  
*-no, and only in the park.*

What have I told you about kissing boys?  
*-not to do it*

And the silverware?  
*-like me, it is clean and ready*

And the oven?  
*-it is hot, and shortly I will help you  
from it.*

# A System

Melanie Stormm

I dreamt of my mother's house,  
a cottage made of porous hills.  
Pale grey pines. There were cups

hooked on the thumbs of trees.

I dreamt my brother was going to war again,  
that this time he would not return,  
he did not return last time

only a replacement, working on the house.

I am a replacement, like the others. I grasp  
for the moment behind me, tag my shadow  
with my heel,

to slow it down.

I put my children in their beds,  
I turn on the television, the candid colors  
and gargle of music, once more

a replacement

and I replace the moment with another  
like it, I do not mean to ignore them  
but with this ritual I scare off a dream

in which I lost them.

In my dream I do all the usual things,

I allow the children to wander a yard  
that is really an endless wood.

# The Editor's House

Melanie Stormm

There are three sisters, here.  
The prude  
has discovered she loves love.  
Despite the constraints of her mouth,  
she howls after a few strangers,  
she flings herself at their heels.  
Give me love, she cries, and I will  
give you my naïveté.  
The other loves books, she  
threw herself, too,  
but into the state university until  
the books climbed high,  
towered around her neck.  
Only a little room remains  
for her eyes. When she cries  
for love, she is answered aplenty  
by echoes in the halls. The third sister  
does not think of love, her hair unruly,  
her gait mannish. Paint  
creeps around her ears.  
She interprets the world through  
vacancy. Someone found her in a bed  
with a woman at her breasts,  
unashamed to seek a mother  
directly. None of these women  
are poetry's game. If you  
collect them all together, they may,  
as a heap of bodies emerge  
as poetry, but this is  
easily undone.  
No. For you, o poetry,



we reserve the little frog  
in the disparate garden, found  
by surprise one morning.  
I stamped his foot while walking,  
I caught him up regretfully and  
ran into my house.

*Delynn S. Willis is a normal woman in a strange land. She's from Texas but currently writes children's stories for a large school in South Korea. When she's away from the keyboard, she enjoys cycling and lazing about in exotic locales.*

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# VOLARY

## Delynn S. Willis

West Texas winters are shallow, fragile; tide pool seasons. Here, it's the summers that are deep, a time when the heat rushes in like swells to shore and the sunlight drowns out all color except for reds and browns and yellows. Our summers are so heavy and ceaseless that the weight could drag you under, fill you up with dust and scorch.

It was during one of these long deep stretches that my son's daughter came to stay with us. It was the year she turned seven, about the time that her mother, Jaime, stopped wearing her wedding ring and calling me "Ma." But who could blame her? Divorce is an infection. It festers and spreads.

Jamie needed some time off from mothering, and I needed a distraction from the box of ash and bone that had once been my husband. By the time Jamie dropped Savannah off at my place, my granddaughter was already pine-bark dark, the skin on her nose peeling from sunburn and showing pink and vulnerable and new underneath. Her hair was freshly shorn, a white-blonde halo. It had been cut up above her ears, a boy's cut, but it had once been a thing of wonder, running long and pale down her back and over the curve of her rump. But Jamie, tired of the tangles and snares that came with a child in love with the grit of the world, had cut it earlier in the year. Savannah didn't care one way or the other, but I missed the length of it, the way it unfolded after it had been brushed, like a gossamer string unspooling.

There was a wildness at home in Savannah, a bright-eyed

fierceness that prowled the hinterlands of her youth and stalked her, circling, into adulthood. As a child, she would run across my lot barefoot and naked, clothed in nothing but dirt and sunburn, a creature of ravenous, fierce joy.

She often tore through my heat-wilted garden carrying a small box, the last gift my husband had given her, a thing of mesh with wood at each end that would swing open or closed on a hinge. She caught bugs with it, every kind imaginable, whether they flew or bit, hopped or stung. She gathered spiders and moths, grubs and ladybugs, and, on one notable occasion, a scorpion half the length of my open hand.

“What are you doing with all those creepy-crawlies, Savannah?” I would ask her.

But Savannah was as wordless as the things she captured, her thoughts like the glow of heat lightening on some remote horizon, their thunder silenced by the distance. Instead, she’d shrug off my questions and return to her collection, and at the end of the day, she would swing the wooden door of the mesh cage open, letting whatever creatures she had caught free. She never crushed them or tormented them, not like my own boys had done when they were children. No, she tended to them softly, tenderly, a shepherd with her flock. Alongside all that wildness, there was something in her that reached out to other wild, unlovable things.

I think that’s why the summer ended the way it did; I think that’s why Hootie took to her so.

#

I was fifteen years old when I met the man who would become my husband. A boy had drowned in the playa lake a quarter of a mile out behind my house earlier that year. Dean had been hired to build a fence to keep out other stray children, those starry-eyed adolescents that wandered the countryside like sleepwalkers, stumbling their way into all sorts of trouble. The fields that bordered the lake were heavy with cotton. I was winding through the cloud-topped rows like a bird wheeling in a storm. Dean left his tools and waded out to me, an oak of a man, strong lines and deep roots.

He spoke to me slowly, gentling, but my thoughts were floating somewhere far above my head. The sky was the blue of a still

pool, terribly deep. The spaces between my toes were orange with earth, the linen of my skirt was red with blood. Dean coaxed it out of me: my stepfather; this wasn't the first time.

Dean took me with him, fed me, and married me five days later. That was his way; taking on strays.

I gave birth to Savannah's father a year after, and two more boys followed. Two of them grew into brutal, mercurial men. The other never left home.

The world is a cage, and its bars are made of men.

#

I made a habit of taking Savannah to church regularly that summer, every Wednesday night and Sunday morning, as if drenching her in godliness could tame her feral-self. But if there's anything worse than stretching sermons, Sunday dresses, and the hard angles of wooden pews to a young, hyperactive, beast of a child, I haven't found it yet.

I had to fit Savannah between myself and my youngest son, Danny. She was prone to throwing fits in the middle of sermons, screaming with high, birdlike cries. I lost count of the times I had to drag her, kicking and mewling, out into the harsh sunshine and gravel of the parking lot, where I would bend her over and spank her until she was too tired to fight anymore.

But after, Danny would let her loose in the wide-open fields of high yellow grass that surrounded the church. He was in his forties that summer, balding and favoring the shoulder that would pain him for the rest of his life, and Savannah was half in love with him, in the way children love, jealously and with a touch of violence.

"Savannah," he would say, crouching down after she had spiraled her way back to him. "What have you brought for me today?"

And, like a cat gifting its kills, she brought him all manners of things: an abandoned, hollowed out robin's nest; the translucent curl of snakeskin; and, once, a tiny horny toad that sat still and placid in the palm of her hand as Danny ran his finger down its scaled belly.

He made small comments on whatever he took from her, stood, and rested his hand on the crown of her head.

And that, for Savannah, seemed to be enough.

#

Technically, Hootie was Danny's dog. He was a lumbering yellow mutt, a third the size of a horse, all wiry muscle and cracked tooth. His fur was thick with dirt and grit, and Savannah became filthy by extension.

But for that summer, Hootie was hers. He trailed her like the tail of a comet. And she, in turn, crawled into the dark cave of his dog house, pulled the ticks from the pads of his paws, came to him with sticky hands and stolen treats.

I walked out onto the back porch and found them many times, sprawled out under the shade of pecan and walnut trees, Savannah's head against Hootie's barrel chest, both of them full of sunlight and dreaming.

Danny himself rarely spent time with the beast, showed his love by bringing home hambones and raw beef irregularly and flinging them out into the yard before letting the screen door slam closed behind him. He spent that summer irritable as a wounded animal, returning to the house from mending fences or repairing roofs, hunched over himself and pressing on his right shoulder. He had made a lifetime of manual labor, just as his father had, and I could see the very foundations of his body buckling under the strain.

Once, he stood in my kitchen with the last of the previous year's frozen peaches held between the curve of his neck and shoulder. "You shouldn't let her out there by herself," he said as he readjusted the bag of fruit. "Not with Hoot."

I followed his gaze. The yard was scant with shade, tree branches hanging high and ancient overhead. Savannah was on Hootie's back, riding him the way you'd ride a trail pony, all meek and mild. Hootie slathered and lumbered across the yard, dipping his head from time to time to pick out the pecans still in their green sheaths and swallow them whole.

"That mutt wouldn't hurt a hair on her head," I said.

Danny looked away. "I don't know, Ma. He got a mean streak in him, that's all I'm saying."

But I'd seen Hootie go after snakes in the yard, some as long as I was tall. I'd seen him dance around them, crush them between both paw and jaw. He'd also been there when Savannah had tried to

crawl up over the chain-link fence between my lot and the empty lot next to mine, and gotten stuck at the top. I'd had my hearing aids out, hadn't heard her hollering and yelling. But I had heard Hootie howling up a storm, a long, accusing, mournful sound that went on and on until I had run out and found her, clothing all tangled up in the fence, wire cutting into her pale belly. Even full grown, she still carries those scars.

Savannah was more canine than human when she was with the big yellow mutt, more wild and wordless than ever. She'd roll with him in the dirt, help him dig holes along the border of our fence, grip him by the tail as they wandered the tall grass out behind our lot. No matter what Danny said, I could see that the beast was in love.

#

There was a long stretch of nothing but dark clouds and lightning midway through the summer. The air became charged, a spark waiting to catch, and I began to feel the weight of the days press in around me. It was a tightness between my shoulder blades, deep and hard to reach. I suddenly became hyperaware of the five decades I had shared with my husband, whittled down into nothing but mementoes and trinkets while the wide spread of his hands, the momentous span of his shoulders, the open spaces between every angle and line now fit into the ceramic urn resting in my china cabinet. If it weren't for Danny and Savannah and that orange mutt out back, I might have bolted, run for the horizon until I could thread myself into the seam between earth and sky.

Instead, I decided to have a garage sale. Danny took the announcement like prophecy, a harbinger of better times, as if we could sever ourselves from our belongings the way an ox might break away from a yoke, and be lighter, freer, closer to happiness.

I caught him once in his room, surrounded by piles of books and a heap of old cassettes, headphones on and cassette player winding its slow way through a tape.

"I'm going to get rid of them," he said when he noticed me standing in the doorway. "I just want to go through all of them one more time. Before I sell them."

I peered over his shoulder, read the titles of the books, the masking tape stretching across the black sides of the cassettes. They

were all in the same vein: self-help, self-hypnosis, a hundred ways to make your life better, to escape the past, to become more than the you you've been your whole life. I saw the whites of Danny's eyes and the tremor in his hands, saw him wordlessly parrot back whatever he was listening to as fervently as if he were deep in prayer. I thought of that playa lake out behind my childhood home, the boy who had gone swimming in it and never come out again. The things we can't escape, those places we keep returning to.

Heartbreak has many faces, and they still surprise me from time to time, like a snake coiled in high grass. I placed my hand on the top of Danny's head and left him bent over the collection. In the end, no one wanted the tapes or the books, those hollowed out castaways of someone else's dreams. They went back into Danny's room, and I never caught him listening to them again.

#

My husband had died on a Monday night. Danny had been gone, living out of his truck while he worked a construction job just north of Amarillo. Dean and I ate brisket and grape cobbler for dinner, watched an old episode of *Macguyver*, kissed each other goodnight. I slept in our bed and he stayed out in the recliner, his back and shoulder aching too much to rest comfortably anywhere else. I woke in the middle of the night to him calling my name, *Suzy, Suzy, Susan*. He was on the floor on his side. He had fallen and broken his hip.

The paramedics came, and I held his hand all the way out to the ambulance. We laughed at some joke he made, something about growing old, and the medics closed the door to the truck between us.

He had a heart attack and died on the way to the hospital while I was following behind in our truck. He died, and I didn't find out until two hours later, when I asked a nurse to see Dean and a doctor came out to speak to me instead.

I cried as the doctor explained, but my grief was a winged thing. It kept flitting away from me, leaving me feeling weightless, dazed by tears and something new; a light tumbling in through a cracked door, a dark room finally lit.

#

I was cutting watermelon in the kitchen on one of the last lingering days of summer when I heard the screaming. There's

something about terror that de-ages a person, softens the area around their mouths, cuts into their voices like an old recording. I could hear the sixth grader in those screams, the one who had wrecked his bike and had had to get stitches, the toddler who had wailed after his brothers jumped out from behind corners at him, that tiny infant that had fought his way out of my body and cried out in disbelieving, anguished awe. I heard the screaming, and I knew it was my son.

I don't recall running through the living room, but I do remember standing on the back porch, looking down on the scene: Savannah wailing and pressed against the side of the house, Danny on the ground, Hootie standing over him, hackles raised and muzzle wet with blood.

I learned later the truth of what had happened. Danny had surprised Savannah and Hootie in the backyard. He had lifted Savannah and spun her through the air. She had shrieked, and Hootie had pounced, and I had found them moments later.

"Hoot, no!" I shouted, and like a sleeper snapping awake from a nightmare, the dog recoiled from my son and retreated across the yard, tail tucked between his legs.

Just like that, it was over. Like a tectonic event, in less than sixty seconds the world had heaved and twisted itself out of its foundations, beyond comprehension, but now it was realigning, setting back into itself, and I was leaning over Danny while Savannah pressed her wet face against my back and sobbed.

Danny went eerily quiet. His arm was mangled, flesh torn away from the bone. He was white with shock. With his pale hair and pale eyes, his face looked like a mountaintop in the spring; color peeking through a blanket of snow. It took two surgeries and twenty-eight stitches to make his arm right, and even now it pains him, a sleeve of scars that reaches from wrist to elbow.

Savannah slept with me that night, the first time she had all summer, and Danny stayed in the hospital. I spent a long time staring up into the darkness gathered above my bed, Savannah's damp palms and rough knees pressed against my side. I waited until it was late, until there was nothing but moonlight and nightbreeze, before I rolled out of bed and stepped outside.

Hootie wouldn't come to me at first, no matter what treats I



brought him or how gently I called him. But eventually he slunk his way over to my side and pressed his face heavy and miserable into my lap.

I ran my fingers along the back of his neck and head, fingers shying away from the stiff peaks made by the blood in his fur.

“I know,” I said as he pressed his nose into my thigh. “You did wrong, but you meant to do right. I know.”

We sat together for a long time, peering out into the dark, Hootie’s head growing heavier and heavier until he fell into dreams against my side.

#

Danny came home from the hospital, arm wrapped in bandages, and we pretended that nothing had changed. But the atmosphere in the house had gone thick and murky and full of hidden thoughts, and we waded through it the way we would a stagnant pool, gingerly, attempting not to stir up what lurked below the surface of our silences.

Savannah abandoned her outdoor romps. She wandered the house restlessly, a beast pacing its cage. She avoided the windows that pointed out into the backyard. She took to hiding in enclosed spaces, within cupboards amongst my jarring supplies, under a tower of quilts in the hallway closet, beneath low beds and alongside the legs of tables.

Whatever magic that had wound her and Danny together became poisoned and grim. She stopped bringing him prizes, wouldn’t meet his eye, shied away from him like a calf from a brand. She had loved Danny and Hootie equally, I think, and the violence between them had altered something inside her, left her harder and more frightened and toeing at ideas she hadn’t yet grown into.

When Savannah’s mother finally came to pick her up, it was like the end of a prolonged struggle; that first breath after a deep dive. I didn’t tell Jaime about what had happened, and Savannah kept her mouth shut, even into adolescence and adulthood. It wasn’t anything we ever spoke about again. I still remember the press of her cheek against the rear window of the car as Jaime drove away, the wide, wet shine of her eyes and the unblinking secrets lurking there.

Danny took his gun out the night Savannah left. He cleaned it

on the kitchen counter, loaded it and hefted it up with his good arm, checking his aim. I didn't speak, and I didn't bother making supper. We sat in the dim shadows of the kitchen, breathing, before Danny stood and went out back.

But in the end, Danny couldn't do it. He came back in, pale and sweating, and held out the gun with his head bowed, like a penitent with an offering.

"I can't," he kept saying. "I can't. I can't."

I couldn't stand the sound of his voice. I left him there, gun still held out, and went into the back of the house.

#

Years later, I came out onto the back porch under the blanket of a summer night and found Savannah standing on the edge of the dog pen Danny had built. She was pale from lack of sun, and her hair had grown darker. The tips of her fingers danced on the chicken wire of the pen. The summer breathed through her hair and clothing until she was a riot of motion, even standing still.

I stepped up next to her and watched her fingers tighten on the fence. The sharp beginnings of adolescence had crept into her face. She looked into the pen without meeting my eyes.

The enclosure was damp and cool with gloom. There were tracks of packed red dirt and the remains of an old blue couch in one corner. A large barrel of water, green and filled with the writhing shapes of mosquito larvae, stood to one side. The enclosure was as still and dark as the mouth of a cave, and I had to strain my eyes to separate shapes from the shadows.

Hootie was curled in the center of the pen. His fur was matted with mud and neglect. The hair on his muzzle had gone white, and the cage of his ribs stood out stark even in the darkness. He didn't move, but the gleam of his eyes reflected back at us. We watched each other, wary as strangers, and I listened to Savannah breathe next to me.

"Can I go inside?" she asked eventually.

I shook my head. The gate to the pen had rusted shut from years of disuse. I hadn't entered the enclosure in well over three years, not since Hootie's hackles had risen, his chest vibrating with a low growl, entire body trembling away from me. Hootie had become unaccustomed to touch or affection; a prisoner sentenced to a lifetime

in solitary confinement. Danny's mercy was the cruelest thing Danny had ever done.

Savannah reached into the gloom, called Hootie's name low and gentle. She kept her fingers spread and her arms extended, thrown open to the world, waiting for that wild, unlovable beast. But Hootie stayed motionless and close to the ground.

I wanted to warn Savannah about cages, about the consequences of good intentions. Instead, I placed my hand on the back of her neck. She leaned into my touch, but she kept her eyes fixed on the darkness of the pen.

**Jon Beight** lives in Western New York. He likes to photograph the things we pass right by without noticing in our busy lives. His fiction and photographs have been published in *Foliate Oak*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Fabula Argentea*, *Boston Accent Lit*, and other fine publications.

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**Fog and Farmland**

*On a chilly, early fall morning, I set out to capture the fog at a particular location, and came across this scene. Fog is forever changing. It has a mystery about it that makes it a wonderful subject.*



### **Rising Spirits**

*I have been to this pond many times to photograph it, but I had never seen the fog quite like this. The air was cold and rather still and the pond had an eerie quality to it.*



### **Sun Through Fog**

*A location I have gone to several times because of this tree which sits alone in a field. I like the isolation of it. Most of my photographs here have been at night, but I happened by and stopped to take this photograph.*

*Dawn Trowell Jones lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband and Border Collie mix. After wearing a variety of professional hats, including computer programmer and lawyer, she has succumbed at last to the diabolical lushness of words: On her website, [dawntrowelljones.com](http://dawntrowelljones.com), one will find more poems, fiction, and a few whimsical pieces as well as links to two published works: "The Secha," a haunting sci-fi novelette, and the dark literary thriller, "The Acquisition." She is currently editing her first novel, the first in a paranormal/science-fiction series.*

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# Regret on the Morning After

Dawn Trowell Jones

Her eyes are lidless,  
And the joy of life has left me:

Those hesitant beats dinning in my ears come too late.  
Strands of her hair sway in the morning zephyrs  
And salted sunshine

I, a failed pneumatic, would have drawn my fingers  
Down that luminous line from her fuzzy crown  
Along her spine, where she sits--  
What a Picasso might have limned  
At the dipping of his hand.

Those crumpled sheets she's pulled up front,  
And lidless eyes--having seen me,  
They do not see me anymore, only  
An open window, a vine wedged  
In the pane.  
The air: a hot bath.  
The trap: a summer that trundled too long.

She'd said No a hundred times,  
But at last, with the night, in the rush of fiendish impulse,  
Came drunken, fleshy swells.

Her eyes, deep pools,  
My mistake, a stone  
Plopped at the surface;  
    'Went down, down

*Why* did I do it?

The ant on the sill,  
The screeching gull—  
An ant at the rim of the bedroom bowl  
    That sped us  
    Around and down in a Coriolis swirl.

But the passion has died aborning;  
The whirlwind dropped its load.

My fingers twitch in the dawning light;  
My lady shudders.  
She is cold.



*Heather Luby is from the Ozark Mountains and grew up bass fishing and writing stories. Her work has appeared in Shotgun Honey, Word Riot, JMWW, Bartleby Snopes, and a few other places along the way. She has an MFA from Antioch University LA. Her novel Laws of Motion is represented by Brandt and Hochman Literary Agents in New York. Read more at <http://heatherluby.com/>*

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# Careful What You Look For

## Heather Luby

The old man and his granddaughter are sitting across from each other in a booth when cold wind rings the bell on the diner's door like an alarm. Two men stand in the doorway, sizing up the room. The old man keeps his head down, watching the slow steps of their dusty boots to a booth in the back. The girl, entering the age of calculating her worth by the gaze of the men in the room, looks up. The first man, his left sleeve pushed up to show a dancing girl tattoo, glances over his shoulder at her. Gives a greedy wink. The second man, his right eye busted purple, never stops watching the cook behind the counter.

Outside the sky is just beginning to uncurl fingers of light at the horizon. It's a Sunday morning, a time when it is easy to see which customers are up too early and which have been out too late.

The old man holds up his finger to signal the waitress to top off his coffee. The granddaughter stops pushing around her syrup-soaked pancakes and combs her fingers through her long blond hair. She rolls her shoulders back to push her chest forward. She can see the men from the corner of her eye, and she thinks she can feel them watching. The waitress pours the coffee. Her young shoulders already hunched; her body pulled down by the weight of reckless men and needful children.

One of the men in the back booth snap fingers at the waitress. When she pours them coffee, the other smacks her ass. Because he

can. The girl tells the old man she has to pee. She makes sure to walk by the men in the booth, looking but not looking, willing them to watch. The cook in the kitchen keeps a watchful eye on the room, looking but not looking at the men in the booth. The regular Joe at the counter, just off from the mill, uses his toast to mop up his eggs and takes it all in one bite. He slaps a ten on the counter while sneaking a fast glance to the back booth. The bell sounds again as he leaves.

The old man still doesn't look up. He stirs the butter into his grits, the cream into his coffee. Waits. The tattooed man in the back booth nods to the other. His smile shows a row of strong white teeth. He stands. Walks toward the lone bathroom in the back. Disappears around the corner by the kitchen, and from the eyes of anyone watching.

The man left behind squints his good eye at the grandfather and cracks his scabbed knuckles. They are the only customers in the diner. The cook has left his grill and he and the waitress whisper at the window at the end of the counter. The man in the back booth drums his fingers on the tabletop. He puts an unlit cigarette to his lips and drinks his coffee around it. The old man gums the last of his grits and checks his watch. Puts his spoon on a napkin and takes a quick swig of coffee. The old man has gray hair and skin sagging from hard years, but his body glides to the edge of his seat.

The girl screams.

The cook runs for the bathroom, the greasy towel slung over his shoulder falling to the floor. The man in the back booth leaps up, silverware clattering to the floor. The waitress hesitates, looking to the old man, then half-runs after the cook, only careful to let him get there first.

The cook and the waitress and the two men from the back booth pound on the bathroom door. Under the weight of suspicious eyes, the tattooed man swears the door was locked. He was only waiting. The girl on the other side of the door sounds breathless with panic. They think she says *help me*. They shout at the door, all at once—questions, demands, their words made angry by their fear. No one is thinking about the old man.

The cook fumbles for keys in his pocket that might unlock the bolt. The man with the purple eye asks if he should bust the door

down. The waitress asks if she should phone the police.

The girl sounds like she might be crying. *Hurry!* the girl says. Fear makes her voice crack, or that is what they imagine.

The waitress rushes back to the front to use the phone, thinking now of the poor old man and feeling frightened for him.

The cook fumbles and drops a ring of keys on the floor. The men from the booth stand side-by-side and count *one, two, three* then heave their bodies, shoulders first, into the door. The hinges ache in the frame, but the aluminum door remains shut. The cook locates the key. The girl is quiet now, making the men from the booth lean up on their toes in suspense as the cook fumbles at the lock. The bathroom door swings open.

It's empty. A small walkie-talkie, Barbie pink and plastic, sits on the sink. Realization is a click behind, but too late.

They find the waitress on the floor behind the counter. She sits folded over like a piece of paper. They rush forward, then step back. Her head looks wrong in a way no one wants to inspect.

The cook says he will call the police from the phone by the cash register. When he turns, his eyes travel the distance first. There, sitting on the open money tray of the register, is the bell from the front door. The only thing of value left behind.

Outside the sun is coming up, but the sky is not so bright yet. The men can see the glowing eyes of taillights in the distance. Eyes that seem to be looking, but not looking.

*Will Radke is from Oak Park, Illinois. His fiction has appeared in Hypertext Magazine, Chicago Literati, Spelk, and Knee-Jerk Magazine.*

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# What Comes With Will Radke

I tell Jones I'm tired of Chicago and thinking of moving. What happened to that girl? he asks and I say, I'm pretty sure I screwed that up.

Moron, Jones says all pissed off. My older brother has called me a moron 6,438 times, approximately, but this is one of the few times he sounds like he means it.

Which I don't get. Jones doesn't believe in relationships, and he's only been around Rebecca two or three times.

It won't work anyway, Jones says. I tried that, remember? And I answer, yeah, I remember, even though I don't. I remember he moved to San Diego when he was nineteen, but I never knew he was trying anything.

Nothing changes, Jones explains. You take every fucking thing with you. All it is is a change of scenery. When you look out the window you see different shit but everything else stays the same.

That's what I want, I say, a change of scenery, and he says, Carter, you're a bigger fucking moron than I thought.

#

Dave knocks on the backdoor. Two slow taps followed by three quick ones is his knock.

I'm not doing anything. I've been walking around my apartment thinking about rearranging furniture. Dragging my desk into the kitchen, for example. I've been drinking. I let Dave in.

What's up, brother? Dave asks, and I say, was just about to see if you were around.

Dave dates Diane and basically lives in the upstairs apartment

with her and Rebecca. I'm not sure where he really lives, if he has his own place, or a dorm room. He's usually around. Sometimes we get drunk together.

Yeah right, he says laughing. This is a one way relationship, Carter. I make all the effort. Shit man, I don't even know if you like me.

Want something to drink?

Alright I'm convinced, he says. Actually, for you, asking someone if they wanna drink is practically saying I love you. So yeah, I love you too, brother.

That's pretty good, I say. The liquor's where it always is.

Dave goes into the pantry and grabs a bottle of tequila and we head out to the front porch. It's a warm September night. There's a breeze, big and warm. The bottle gets passed pretty fast. I hand it off and right away I'm drinking from it again. We talk some baseball for a while. About another wasted Cubs season. Dave has a lot to say about the Cubs and baseball in general. I don't. I lost that somewhere. I still follow it daily but not anything like I used to. The breeze blows. It smells like summer. Rebecca and Diane moved in in the beginning of the summer. Rebecca wore dresses almost every day. She has legs. Her hips are so good and she's the right height. Drunk I said something like your body was made to be in a dress. She was drunk too and neither of us was thinking about being neighbors.

You been doing anything? Dave asks.

Not really, I say.

It wasn't me who told her, he tells me.

I know, I say, because I do. Dave's not like that. And Diane was with him when they saw. I say, it doesn't matter anyway.

I thought you were pissed at me.

We're cool, I tell him.

I thought you were avoiding me or something.

We're cool, I tell him again, and hope that I don't have to say it a third time. I don't.

Drunken noise comes from the nearby bars on Lincoln and Halsted. College kids walk by every so often. Some yell stupid shit and Dave waves or yells back. Most don't notice us as they pass. It's dark. The porchlight's broken. Everybody's been drinking.

Everybody's distracted. The breeze picks up. There's no summer in it anymore and the bottle's empty. I look at it again to make sure. It is. I check my watch. Two hours is a long time for me to spend with anyone. I'm ready to go back to rearranging my apartment. I think I may have a future in interior design.

#

September ends and suddenly it's really autumn and in Chicago that means winter's close. Any day now it could snow. I wonder what life would be like living someplace where this isn't true. I'm thirty and don't know how many more Chicago winters I can take. Ten years ago I didn't even own a winter coat. I'd wear two sweatshirts, a hat, gloves, like I'd outgrown the cold. I miss being able to think things like that and I miss not feeling closed in, when I believed I'd never outgrow Chicago.

#

I take a break for lunch. I work for my grandpa, from home. I don't have to work at all if I don't want to and my grandpa would pay me the same but I work. I grab an Old Style and make a sandwich. Sitting at the kitchen table, I look at the clock on the stove: 9:54 AM. I eat part of the sandwich and drink all of the beer. I get another one and drink it and go through the newspaper. I'm reading my horoscope—today's a 9—when there's a knock at the front door. I hope it's Rebecca. I look down and now I hope it's not. I'm wearing sweatpants and a marinara-stained gray t-shirt. Two days ago Jones dragged me to Saporì Trattoria. He said he had something important to tell me, but he just wanted to get drunk in a restaurant. Restaurants are one of the few places where he won't get drunk by himself. He has a list of reasons for this but I can't remember any of them and I've never asked him for a copy of the list. We ordered appetizers, didn't touch them, and glasses of Jim Beam, drank those down. Later I got some kind of pasta and a bottle of red wine with a name I can't pronounce. I had to hold up the menu and point like a moron. A while later, when Jones was in the bathroom, the owner came over and asked if I wouldn't mind paying the bill and getting my friend out of there. We can't have people talking like that in here, he said. I paid with cash but also told my brother what the owner said and things degenerated fast from there. Jones had some fun. Glasses were

smashed. Plants were turned over. Chairs got broken. 911 was dialed. We ran out.

Whoever's knocking knocks again. A hard pounding knock. I doubt it's Rebecca, but I don't know who else it could be. Jones has a key. Dave comes to the backdoor and it's not his knock. Nobody else comes by. Rebecca used to, all the time. She'd knock and usually I wouldn't answer because I'd be working but also because I knew she'd slide a note under the door, and I liked her notes. She'd tell me about her day and what she was doing later and how much she wanted to see me. I miss those notes. I sure could use one right now.

I wait for another knock. I think about eating the rest of the sandwich and taking a shower. I think about Hawaii. I think about getting a dog. I've always wanted one, but they can take up a lot of time. And some dogs don't ever stop barking, some piss all over your stuff. You can never know for sure until it's too late. Probably it'd be better if I got some fish instead, or a picture of some fish.

There's no more knocking. I grab another beer. Wonder if it's too early to take a nap.

#

Jones comes by with a grocery bag and a bottle of Jim Beam.

I tell him I'm not finished with his stories. Editing his fiction is basically my second job. Jones thinks I should edit his work first and find time to breathe later.

That's cool, Jones says. You at least got one done, right? I shake my head no and he asks, what the fuck you been doing, kid? Working for Gramps, I say. He glares his deadly glare and asks, and what else? Sleeping, eating, getting drunk. Watching TV, being bored. That takes up a lot of my time actually. I've been busy as hell with being bored, I say. What the fuck's your problem? he asks and I say, that too. I've been trying to figure that out. I dedicate two hours a day to it. Usually only spend ten minutes because I can't follow through with anything, but I set aside two hours a day to think about it.

My brother leaves the grocery bag and starts to walk out.

Jones, I say. He stops and turns around and I ask if he wants to join a Tuesday night bowling league. He tells me to go do something sexual to myself and then, dramatically, like this is a movie, he slams the front door. I've never yelled at anyone in my life,

yet I'm on the way to setting a world record for number of doors slammed in my face.

I look in the bag, steaks and potatoes. I put the food in the fridge and head for the pantry.

#

I'm sitting on the front porch. It's unseasonably cool. I can even see my breath a little. It's raining lightly and the wind's picking up. A storm's coming. I'm wearing a hooded sweatshirt over a sweater and a stocking hat and thick wool gloves that make it hard to hold the end of a cigarette.

It starts pouring and soon after Charles, Diane and Rebecca's cat, comes running through the front gate. He's a yellow cat with big yellow eyes and slender black pupils. A normal size cat, he has big ears that look like they belong on a fox. He runs all the way up the front steps and jumps in the chair next to mine and sits upright, facing the street, and lets out an angry-sounding meow at the rain.

A few minutes later the front door opens.

There you are, Diane says.

Here I am, I answer.

Not you, she laughs and picks up Charles and sits down with him in her lap.

He's a little wet, she notices.

He didn't quite make it.

You're usually smarter than that, she says to Charles as she holds him up in front of her, speaking in a baby-voice like he's a small child, not a full-grown cat. She's always the smartest person in the room, yet is one of those people that talks to their pet like this.

What are you doing? she asks me in her normal voice.

Watching the rain.

Some life you live.

She lights a cigarette and so do I. I want to ask how's Rebecca, but don't want to hear Diane lie about how Rebecca's fine and don't want to lie back and say that I'm fine too. That'll only make me feel worse. I feel really shitty tonight. I wonder if it's raining in San Diego and how warm the autumn rain is there. I wonder had I moved there with Jones, like he begged me to do, if we'd still be out there. I've been thinking about that a lot lately. Every year Chicago



seems smaller and the winters feel colder and I'm running out of reasons to be here. I wonder if I've ever had any reason. I wonder what Jones was trying and if it was feeling this way that made him want to look at different shit and experience warmer, more stable weather.

Are you going to talk to Rebecca?

Does she want me to talk to her?

What is this, high school? Diane asks—I assume rhetorically. I'm getting really sick of both of you moping around when you live in the same house, Diane lets me know. All you have to do is walk upstairs. You don't even need to put shoes on.

I look down at my feet and then finish off my drink

#

Much later that night, I call Beth and she comes over. Beth doesn't sleep at night. She might not at all. Last year, during those months that we dated—or did something like date—she didn't fall asleep once. She'd leave at five or six in the morning so awake it was like she'd just drunk a pot of coffee.

I can't believe it, Beth says. I didn't think you were serious.

You used to say my biggest problem is that I'm always serious.

I did, and you're the least spontaneous person I've ever met, but here you are, painting your room at night. I'm shocked. Pleasantly shocked.

Beth drinks beer and pours shots of tequila for me and together we paint my room with the green paint I found in the basement earlier. There's only enough for two and a half walls. I'm not happy about this. She can tell, and knows what's going to happen, so she kisses me and brings me into the dining room, where I'd moved the mattress. I tell her I want to pour an entire bottle of gin on her and lick it all up, but she doesn't let me get a bottle. She doesn't let me get a single beer, either. She says please stop talking Carter.

Afterward, I feel like everything's in focus again. Lying next to her, I realize that I'm alone so much I barely have any time to notice how lonely it is. I run my fingers through her thin dark hair and think that maybe there's potential here, that Beth and I can put something together.

Stop, she says, pushing my hand away. You creep me out.  
What?

I don't understand you. All you want is someone to make you dinner and fuck you, then leave so you can be miserable by yourself. I was fine with that, and I'd be fine with it now. But you don't fuck, Carter, you make love, and it's not me you're making love to. It's creepy. I feel gross, violated.

I head to the living room to sleep on the couch, but this doesn't stop her. She follows and keeps talking. I close my eyes, pretend to be asleep. It doesn't work. For the next hour she gives her analysis of my condition. A psychiatrist would charge about \$200 for this, but from Beth I get it for free. Not a bad night, overall.

#

The next day I don't wake up until eleven. I can't remember the last time I slept in this late. I feel dizzy and weak, pretty shaky, but despite this I'm motivated as hell. I shower and shave, brush my teeth and put on clean clothes, and then go out to buy paint. I walk all the way to Home Depot, but then turn around and head back home. I'm going to leave my room the way it is. I want to prove Beth wrong. It doesn't matter that she's never coming back. I can't let her be right about everything. But maybe my room's not enough. I go to Home Depot and buy two one-gallon cans of a yellow paint called Sunny Summer. The woman at the register says, I really, really like this color, and I say, that's good to hear. I've been told I have terrible taste. Who told you that? she asks, and I answer, everybody. She smiles and says, well, I think you've made a good choice here. Which room in your house are you painting today? and I tell her, I'm going to paint one wall in every room this color. And I'll be back later. I'm painting the ceilings aquamarine. Back home, I move the furniture back into my room, set it up a different way. The bed over there and the dresser over here, the chair by the window. I grab two cans of Old Style and start painting in the living room. The yellow's really bright, sunny and summery as promised. I like it but it won't last. It'll be hard to look at all the time. I don't care. I call Dave and ask what he's doing. Smoking up, watching the weather channel, he says. I tell him to come down and drink beer and help me paint the rest of the apartment, and he does, and later the beer is gone and we have bottles

out and music blasting as we paint purple stripes on every wall, and I'm good with it.

#

Saturday night Jones comes over with a duffel bag and a handle of Jim Beam.

The duffel bag's loaded: our Nintendo and lots of games, Adam Sandler and Jim Carrey movies on VHS, four Tombstones, six cans of Spaghettios, Cheetos, Cooler Ranch Doritos, M&Ms, Skittles, Oreos.

We drink for a while and play Super Mario Brothers 3, and then Jones makes two pizzas, pours a can of cold Spaghettios over each, and we eat and watch Dumb and Dumber

Let's go buy some beers and watch another one, Jones says. We head out and I ask, you ever remember it being this cold in October, J? and he says, yeah, that one year they canceled trick or treating and I ask, when was that? I was eight, I think. It fucking snowed. Halloween was on a weekday and they pushed trick or treating back to Saturday. It was kinda cool. We celebrated Halloween in school one day and went trick or treating that Saturday, so we got two Halloweens, he recalls. I don't remember this. I would have been six, in first grade. I say, but you never liked Halloween, and he says, that's not right. You ruined it for me. You ruined everything for me. I was perfectly fucking fine until you were born and started depressing the hell out of everyone.

Later we're watching Ace Ventura, the first one. On the coffee table, the Jim Beam is surrounded by all the candy. Another pizza's in the oven. I'm drunk and want to tell Jones what happened. That Eva, Jones's Eva, who's been bothering him and harassing me for years, came by looking for Jones, was ringing my doorbell nonstop at like 3:00 AM, and so I came out to make her stop, smoked a cigarette with her, tried to get her to calm down like I've had to do so many times before, and that's when Dave and Diane came home from a party, and right after they went upstairs, Rebecca came down and saw me with Eva and walked right back in.

I haven't talked to Rebecca since. Eva's gorgeous. And Rebecca's accused me before, like I'm the type of guy that's going out every night looking for it.

But I don't say anything to my brother. It doesn't make a difference. You always think saying something is going to help, that you're going to feel unburdened, but it never changes what happened, so what's the point? So Jones can say, that sucks, Carter? I already know it sucks. I don't need any confirmation. And I don't need to sit here with Jones for an hour, going over every possible thing I can do or say, and every possible reaction Rebecca could have, because after we do all that, we still won't know anything. I'm not wasting one of these nights on something like that. I wouldn't trade this night for anything.

What if we moved to Hawaii? I ask, starting up an old conversation that we used to have when the world felt so big that I didn't think there were any limits.

They got good pot in Hawaii, kid. Perfect weather. I don't really see us as beach people, though. We at least need a city.

Amsterdam?

You know I'd never live anyplace where they speak some buttfuck language.

They speak English in Amsterdam, I say. Most Europeans do.

Not to each other, he says. Even hearing whatever garbage those beret-wearing, caviar-eating, bicycle-riding Europeans speak to each other would drive me fucking crazy. And besides, Carter, I speaks American.

Yeah, it's an insult to English speakers everywhere to call what comes out of your mouth English.

He grins. I think about starting to edit his stories tomorrow, later going out to get drunk with friends. I think about nights like tonight, that they're old but never get old.

So where were you thinking? I ask.

A little city called San Diego, where there's no cold and the women wear bikinis everywhere, whether they're going to the beach or the public library, he starts off, then keeps going for a while.

I pour another round, listen to it all. Hearing this again, I don't find out what Jones was trying in San Diego, but I don't need to anymore.

*RM Graves is a fiction writer and illustrator. His work has appeared in Interzone, Flash Fiction Online, Escape Pod and Urban Graffiti among other places. He is a winner of both the Writers of the Future and Blue Monday Review Ice Nine contests. He lives in London with his wife and two children.*

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# A Long, Dark Moment

RM Graves

Day 359

As I write this, Jenny is with me at the window. I grip her hand and her fingers fidget for release. I sit tight to her, skin pressed along our sides. We watch a mad wind tease our rusting old motorcycle with memories of speed.

I have screwed all the windows shut and choked every vent with duct-tape, to keep out the chill. Now our breath trickles down the glass. Our reflection looks like one fat person.

A stranger, a woman, passes by. When she glimpses us, she hurries on. It appears she sees a naked old couple as something to avoid.

Strangers!

Every gust of wind sends a prodding finger of draft through some missed gap. It disturbs my writing. I will fix that.

Orderliness is my job, and writing the diary. I started 359 days ago. Day 0. You might think this odd, but it is my system, not yours.

If you are not orderly, then you live in chaos. This is the wild. If your thoughts are not in order, then you are wild. The wild have no soul. And if you have no soul, you truly die.

“Remember the day we met? On the road, on that bike?” I say. “You had your thumb out but your golden hair and your golden dress were visible for miles. You held me so tight we were married before you got off the back.”

“Let me go,” she says.

### Day 360

Jenny has slumped. She pads between front door and back door, repeatedly checking they are still locked. Her concern for our security swells my heart. Then she watches the TV. Or looks toward it. She switches it on, but stares at an old lacquered box next to it.

The wind hurls itself at our windows. I have puttied up every crack. Now I will cheer up my wife.

For us, there is no practical distinction between day and night, but we divide our waking hours neatly. Between canoodling and eating. Tidying and cleaning. TV and looking out the window. Sometimes, when we pass, I brush my wife’s belly with my knuckles. We used to pat each others’ bottoms, but old rumps need less attention.

Today, during a vigorous bout of wall-washing – scrubbing mould from the corners – I sidled past my wife. I did not brush her stomach, however. I tickled her, digging deep to the ribs beneath her skin!

Jenny did not laugh, or even smile. She screamed and then wailed for quite some time. I worry that we are peeling apart.

### Day 361

Usually Jenny and I need conversation about as much as we need clothes. Conversation and clothing are for politeness. Politeness is for strangers. Strangers are wild. Strangers are truly dead. However, today, watching next door’s cat, ‘Schrodinger’, darting about the front yard, I attempted a joke.

“Why Schrodinger’s Cat?” I said. Jenny struggled. I had grappled her onto my lap. I could not stop, now. “I mean, why not Schrodinger’s... budgie?”

Was that a smile or a grimace? I thought a smile. “Or Schrodinger’s wife?” I added.

Jenny twisted off me and left the room.

Most cats love a box. If you fed a cat right there, in its box, and cherished it, and if it had a WC and TV and home delivery, it would happily sit there until it died. And it would die, no two ways

about it.

It is a lovely thought though that, if nobody saw it, its fate would be undecided. A tossed coin both heads and tails, it would be both dead and alive. Caught in a long dark moment. Purring.

#### Day 364

I have nailed all the curtains shut, to keep us safe from bothersome strangers, but there is something wrong with our electrics. All our light-fittings crackle and have permanently dimmed to a flickering half-light

I found Jenny's wedding ring in a box under the bed. I never noticed her not wearing it. She has taken to the spare bed in the box room and will not get up or leave the room, even though it is unlocked. When I slipped the key under the door, to prove her freedom, she locked herself in. I have not slept. I will not rest until I hold her, and feel her hold me too.

I waited in our room, listening at the door for her come to out and use the bathroom, when a sudden noise came from outside, not the hallway. The repeated cough of a kick-started, but quite dead, motor. I left my post, to check if someone was stealing the motorcycle.

Jenny stood astride it, dressed in her old leathers and helmet, stamping on the pedal.

I called, but she could not hear me through the thoroughly sealed window. I banged on the glass and still she did not notice. I was mute to her. I shouted until I saw spots and my knees crumpled.

#### Day 365

I awoke to white noise.

Breathing! I bounced around to greet my love. However, my bed was empty. Even of me. I had collapsed under the window. The noise was traffic.

Outside it was still dark, and my motorcycle lay on its side.

Jenny sat downstairs, waiting. Fully clothed, a full plastic bag on her lap.

"No more of your games," she said. "Dress. We're going out."

You do not live with a woman for thirty years without learning when to shut up and do as you are told. So even though the idea made my head spin, I forced my limbs into stiff, scratchy clothing.

Jenny held my arm as we walked across the heath and all the way up the hill. The wind jostled us and tugged at our clothes and hair. Birds and snack packets, carrier bags and leaves, all whipped about us.

From the top of the hill the dim silhouette of the city looked like a cemetery. Jenny gripped my hand tight and trembled against me. I thought I saw her smile, so I turned, to catch it and to kiss her. I found only the plastic bag in my hand.

I opened it, and pulled out the lacquered box. The one we kept on the TV shelf. I thought I might be sick, but for the sudden clogging of my throat. I had hoped to never see inside that box.

Still, Jenny had helped me this far. Now it was up to me. I swallowed hard, took off the lid and poured. Her ashes curled out into the wind.

Jenny's remains took to the air, light enough to ride an updraft. The rising sun lit her gold and she hovered for a moment, a brilliant ghost against the tarmac sky. Then she was gone.



*John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in New Plains Review, Stillwater Review and Big Muddy Review with work upcoming in Louisiana Review, Columbia College Literary Review and Spoon River Poetry Review.*

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# Last Man?

John Grey

Three refrigerators - but not one dwelling.  
I opened each of them -- two contained bodies.  
The third was chockfull of irradiated meat and milk.

I found a generator that still contained fuel.  
So I watched a video on a small TV  
until the power died.  
Now, I'll never know who killed  
the philandering dentist.

The fields are littered with charred corpses.  
Some grip another.  
Others are fused to table tops  
or tree stumps.

I eat the shriveled lumps on branches.  
Oh by the way, our vines bear charcoal grapes.

The few buildings still erect  
are slowly rediscovering gravity.  
I stay out of their way.  
"Hit by thirty third floor  
of insurance company tower"  
would never fit on my death certificate.

I have my very own Rubens - melted of course.  
It looks like Picasso now.  
And I've finally pissed in a women's restroom.  
So what if it was open on all sides.

I wonder if there's anyone else alive  
or is it just me.  
And is there someone in the remains  
of this city who hasn't quite  
developed the necessary twisted sense of humor  
and is actually sobbing over all this?

My father once said to me  
that there are two things never to lose sleep over.  
One was lack of sleep.  
I forget the other.  
I don't believe it was  
the end of the world as we know it.

*Nasos Karabelas was born in Greece. He's been involved with the cinema and has produced three short films and one feature film, which took part in festivals in Greece and abroad. He started dealing with photography in the last four years. He's self taught and the kind of photography he's been dealing with is experimental photography and in particular the possibilities of deformation of the human body.*

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### **Female Form #1**

*The alienated body and fuzzy features of the engravings of the matter reflects the ambiguous and unstable emotions and thoughts that constitute that subject.*



## **Female Form #2**

*Time has frozen upon his very skin. It goes on without her, dead still, drawn upon his unsteady face. It's the wait that weighs her down, the wait until her mind explodes, until her body withers.*



### **Portrait #1**

*Waiting causes attrition and there are no words for her to express that... Waiting is the only reality while time passes, the only real conventionality that crushes her.*



## **Portrait #2**

*The distorted face of the photograph is a different approach of the photographic impression of the human face. The face pictured here is a new one, different from the initial. Inside this new face maybe we can discover different aspects of the human character.*

*Robyn Schindeldecker is a Minneapolis-born, Internet-bred writer who is pursuing her MFA at Hamline University. When she's not making a mess in the wordsmith's forge, she can be found making a mess eating sandwiches. Follow her one tweet at a time @mouthofplatinum.*

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# Crosswords

## Robyn Schindeldecker

One across. A girl's best friend. D \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ S .

His answer: DIAMONDS.

Her answer: DESSERTS.

Two down. *While You Were Sleeping* genre. \_ O \_ \_ O \_ .

His answer: ROMCOM.

Her answer: HORROR.

Nine across. Personal asset. B \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ .

His answer: BOOBS.

Her answer: BRAIN.

Twelve down. Small talk. \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ H \_ T .

His answer: CHITCHAT.

Her answer: BULLSHIT.

Sixteen across. *Romeo and Juliet*, e.g. \_ O \_ \_ \_ \_ .

His answer: LOVERS.

Her answer: DOOMED.

Sixteen down. True love. \_ \_ \_ \_ C \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ .

His answer: MATCHMADEINHEAVEN.

Her answer: STOCKHOLMSYNDROME.

Twenty-three across. “\_\_\_\_\_ in Love” (Beyoncé song). \_ R \_\_\_\_ .  
His answer: CRAZY.  
Her answer: DRUNK.

Twenty-eight down. Pocket item. \_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_.  
His answer: SPARECHANGE.  
Her answer: PEPPERSPRAY.

Thirty-four across. Drink specification. \_\_ T H \_\_\_\_\_.  
His answer: WITHATWIST.  
Her answer: ONTHEROCKS.

Thirty-nine down. In the wrong place at the wrong time. \_\_\_\_ T U  
\_\_\_\_ Y .  
His answer: OPPORTUNITY.  
Her answer: PERPETUALLY.

Forty-one across. Rejection. \_\_ A \_\_\_\_ E .  
His answer: CHALLENGE.  
Her answer: HEADSHAKE.

Forty-one down. Seduction. \_ O \_ P \_\_\_\_ .  
His answer: FOREPLAY.  
Her answer: ROHYPNOL.

Forty-seven down. The sound of silence. \_\_\_\_\_.  
His answer: CONSENT.  
Her answer:

Fifty-two down. Stage of grief. \_\_\_\_ I A L .  
His answer: DENIAL.  
Her answer: DENIAL.



*Cory Saul is a nymph-out-of-woods living in New York City, where he recently completed an MFA in creative writing with The New School. Prior to that, he was living in rural Oregon, where he had a garden that he misses very much. You can find his other published work at [www.corysaul.com](http://www.corysaul.com).*

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# The Bridge Troll

Cory Saul

“There was once a boy who was tracking a wounded buck through logging country when he came across another boy seated on the stump of an old-growth Douglas Fir.” That’s what I’m saying to myself when I see just first see him, like my life is a fairy tale. It is, but not in the way you’d think.

He’s a slip of a boy about my age, and he sits cross-legged like a gnome on a toadstool, the decapitated tree’s roots thick and gnarled and clinging to the incline of the steep hillside. The pads of the boy’s fingers are playing with tree rings still sticky with sap, jagged with splinters, and he seems to be muttering to himself. I’ve never seen him before, not in the shadow of the coffee stall by the gas station where kids cooler than me hang out and eat frozen yoghurt and smoke cigarettes, and not down by the river, where the athletic kids spend their summers catching fish and swimming, their bodies young like mine but somehow more vibrant, more electric, and more rigid, like the muscular forms of the sturgeon they wrangle on fifty-pound test. No, this boy seems at first glance the oil to the water of these groups that make up the town. And maybe this is why I stop in my tracks, like the desert traveller who rounds a rocky outcrop to find a well.

Everything about this stranger, from the translucent white skin of his neck where it vanishes beneath a t-shirt scarred and torn, to the buzzed hair of his head, the color of a walnut, is soft. As I stand and stare at him in my too-big work boots caked with river mud, with

my bow hanging limp in my left hand and the fingers of my right fondling the fletching of a nocked arrow, I find myself wanting to run my hand through that short hair of his, to feel its soft prickly brush against my skin.

Looking up from the tree rings, an expression of muted surprise comes over the boy's face, as if he weren't expecting anyone to notice him there.

"I didn't know death came in the form of a boy," he says, his voice a singsong, almost sounding like a girl's to me. "You all love to hunt here, no? Because it's easier? The line of sight is clear, the canopy cannot hide the shivering faun if the canopy is erased. I told her she shouldn't have come passing through, but the young nettle that grows here is just too tempting a snack. Tell me, how do you rationalize your crimes? In a similar way to how the tree-fellers do, I'd guess." He returns his attention to the stump beneath him.

"Bow hunting is legal in September, before rifle season starts," I say, kneeling to pluck a foxtail from the hair on my right leg. It was foolish of me to wear shorts and not jeans this morning, despite it already being eighty-five degrees in the shade. The backcountry of Oregon this time of year is angry with creepers; blackberry brambles and poison ivy, stinging nettle and prickly weeds, like the one I flick away now.

The boy exhales through his mouth so hard that he spits a little. "And my guess is correct! It is legal, then." He throws up his hands. "I can't beat that argument." With one swift movement he leaps from his spot on the stump to the dry floor of the clear-cut forest, and lands on his feet in front of me. Small stones and dirt go tumbling down the hillside. As the boy peers deeply into my eyes and I am therefore forced to look past him, I can see the acres of stumps stretching out beneath a dry blue sky. The floor of this land, which was just last week a forest, is carpeted in brush bleached brown by the sun, and speckled with legions of trees missing their bodies. We're the tallest things out here, he and I, and I barely hit five feet. The stumps hunch low to the ground like an army of crouching, frightened men. And beyond them I can see the dark line where the uncut forest stands undisturbed by logging corporations, the thick brown trunks of the pines, the shadows that their dense green needles create. I'm

struck by the darkness in that forest, even during midday. All at once the canopy cuts out the light. How complete a night is created in the untamed and uncut corners of my world, I think. This stranger is right, I wouldn't dream of hunting in there.

"It's legal, then," repeats the boy. His cheeks are flushed red, and I can see the purple veins on the whitest parts of his arms. His nostrils flare while he looks at me. My apathy toward his perspective is either making him angry or uncomfortable, but I can't tell which. "I guess I might as well go home, then." He points to a shock of supple green weeds growing from the base of his stump. On the leaves is something dripping and dark. Blood. "Finish what you started, please."

"You saw it?"

"I saw her, your victim who is sacred to these woods. And she told me about you."

"She? It's a buck."

He doesn't respond to this, but instead places a soft hand on the wrist of my right hand. He does it so quickly that I don't even have time to flinch. I find him cool to the touch, and feel no need to pull away. Everything is so quiet out here, all breathing life having fled save the two of us.

"Finish what you started," he says. "You've already done more damage than you could possibly imagine. Even when you kill her, clean her, cook her, and toss her remains into the stream, this won't be over. Finish what you've started, and then stop. Or you'll never see me again, and you'll have to face the consequences of your actions alone."

"Stop? What did I do?" I ask, a sudden haziness taking over me. It's such a strange threat he's making, to never see him again, but for some reason, hearing his words, they hold all the weight of the world. He can't leave so soon, I find myself thinking. We only just met. Suddenly his lips, pink and plump on his pale face, feel like a memory, something I had once and then lost. I'm frozen in place, my heart thumping in my chest. It's the loudest thing out here. I hold his gaze now, and I can't quite make out the color of his eyes. There is green, but also gray and if I'm not mistaken, red.

"Each killing is unique in its horror," he finally answers. "But

this one is a particular tragedy. I've been watching her for a while now. You cannot be blamed for following the laws of your society, but you can be blamed for not seeing who she is when you can also see me. If you end the beast's suffering now, and then seal it with this pledge I ask you to make, then we'll meet again."

The pledge he's asking me to make suddenly hits me. I pull my hand away from his. "My grandma and I hunt to live. We're poor, do you understand? We can't afford whatever the hell you eat. Tempeh and tofu? Quinoa? Please. I don't have time to sit up here mourning trees with you. I have to feed my family."

"You're at the epicenter," the boy says, "the center of a cataclysm, hunter. You'll regret not heeding my warning."

Okay, that's enough. "Who the fuck *are* you? What's your name?"

"Foster." He says it as if it should explain everything, and somehow it does.

I feel another daze come over me. It's a physical reaction, like what happens in my mouth when I smell cinnamon rolls. Suddenly I'm talking.

"I will kill the buck, Foster," I announce. "And then I will never hunt deer again." I can't believe the words coming out of my mouth. They fall out of me like sweat after a long bike ride. But that doesn't mean I don't mean them. I need to see him again, and the only way to do that is to do as he says. And as of right now I officially cannot live in a world where I don't see him again.

His hand is touching mine again, and it's charged and bracing, like a dip in the river at the very beginning of summer.

"It was nice meeting you, Foster," I manage to say.

"Good to meet you, too, Thomas."

#

The deer's just past the dirt road, blending into a tuft of hemlock next to an eaten log, and he's licking the arrow in his side. Three-pointed antlers stick out of each side of his head and a few strands of velvet still cling to these obtrusions. It was the deer's fresh rutting, the markings he made on a tree trying to get this fuzz off, that led me to him in the first place. Undoubtedly the deer knows I'm close, but he's wounded and worn out from running.

Still above him in the clear cut, I'm partially hidden behind a stump and a few weeds, but I don't feel hidden. Rather I feel naked, like a part of my body so private that not even I have seen it has been exposed and floats above me, untamed and loud. And it's all because of what the boy up the hill said.

"...she told me about you."

The muscles just below my shoulders tense as I pull my bow back and rest my index knuckle in the hollow behind my earlobe. I estimate distance, about thirty yards. While keeping my eyes and my drawing hand steady, I allow my extended left arm to direct the bow until my eye lines up with the patch of chestnut fur that lies over the heart of the deer, with the thirty-yard sight between them.

There is no wind. The deer looks up to where I crouch. We hold one another's gaze, and for a full second neither of us move.

I whisper: "What did you tell him about me?"

Quicker than a skittish deer can flinch, the arrow travels thirty yards.

#

Corpse still warm and draped over my shoulders like a shawl, I make my way through town. My bow I've tied to my belt alongside its quiver. This sort of thing—what I'm doing—is so commonplace in Boulton that the old folks eating in the window of Marlene's don't even raise their eyes from their biscuits and gravy, drivers on the way to pick up their mail from the post office give me knowing looks as they pass, and the cool kids by the gas station ignore me, same as always. Only two tourists walking out of the winery tasting room gawk, realize they're gawking, then hurry around to the side of the building where their Tesla is charging.

Boulton is an intermediary place, a point of passage that one must traverse to get from the Pacific states' main artery, Interstate 5, to the more idyllic coast. Likely this couple hopes to enjoy a weekend of seafood and coastal fog, souvenirs of saltwater taffy and myrtlewood carvings, but before they can get there, they'll have to brave the roars of logging truck engine brakes and the constant possibility of a cow wandering onto the highway. Sure, they'll be struck by the gorgeous rolling hills carved over millennia by the Umpqua River, and the immaculate roads that emulate the river's

meandering course and follow its path to the ocean, but in the end this is the space in-between, inconsequential, nothing but a distance to be covered before reaching a destination. In Boulton—a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it sort of town—they’ll stop at one or even both of the wineries in town to sample the region’s well-reviewed pinot noir, what writers have been calling a great secret of the wine world for as long as I’ve been alive. They might stop for a quick bite at the one classic diner, Marlene’s—but not dare step in the back, where there’s a dive bar and the locals drink—but more likely they’ll enjoy a slightly more expensive brunch at the other restaurant, Tommy’s, which is pointedly more *cute* than Marlene’s and looks a little cleaner and newer. But Tommy’s is just as old as Marlene’s. That’s something about this town: it’s in transition, that’s for sure, from a poor logging town where teenage boys still hunt for deer because their families can’t afford fresh meat to an adorable historic tourist destination with wineries and brunch spots, but that transition has taken my entire life, and will likely continue for just as long or longer. And everyone, tourists and locals alike, is all right with that. They’re happy with Boulton serving its eternal purpose of passage, like a gate in a stone castle.

I sweat beneath the weight of the deer. Two of its legs hang over each of my shoulders, its heavy neck and head wobbling limp at my side. I look at its tongue hanging out, at its glossy dead eyes. This is the last deer I kill. Grandma will have to take the truck out and get one herself when rifle season comes along, and that’s all there is to it. Foster said nothing about smallmouth bass or sturgeon, wild turkey or rabbit. We’ll get by if I follow his rule. I just hope he shows up again sooner rather than later, so I can at least enjoy the benefit of my pledge.

As I make my way past the post office, downhill to the line of houses that sit along Elk Creek, I hear jogging footsteps behind me, but it’s too much effort to turn and look who it is, so I don’t. Something collides with the spot behind my left knee, and my legs buckle. I do not fall, but rather land on my knees on the sidewalk and struggle under the extra weight of the dead deer back onto my feet.

“Nice shooting, Katniss,” says Billie Carter, the fastest—and coolest and best-looking and most fashionable—girl in school. Her

family lives on a ranch on a hill just outside of town, where she keeps a horse she never rides, named Frederick. They're very involved with the bigger of the two churches in town.

I'm already walking again, but she follows me. In my periphery I see two other shadows on the pavement—belonging to her friends, Willy and Bill, no doubt—following us from a distance.

"I see you're going for the young boys while you can," she says. "Look at that thing. Calling it three-point is generous. You like that tender meat? You probably aren't even hungry, are you, Bridge Troll? Just want something warm to—"

She stops talking, and an expression of disgust transfigures her beautiful face. It's so shocking to see her this way that I stop walking.

"What?" I ask.

Then she starts laughing. It's an exaggerated, belting laugh that doesn't force her to double over, but she doubles over anyway.

"Guys!" she says, pointing at me, "Guys, look at the Bridge Troll." There's a shuffling of feet and suddenly Willy and Bill are there. It takes them a second to see whatever Billie sees, but then they start laughing, too.

I feel my face flush.

"What?" I yell. "What's so funny?"

"Serves you right," says Billie. "I had a feeling you were the type to enjoy a good facial, Bridge Troll."

With this the laughter doubles in volume.

I look down at my shirt and see what I thought was just sweat is in fact a white sticky fluid. And suddenly I realize I'm soaked in it. I feel it oozing from the dead deer's underside along the ridge of my neck. It's running down the length of my arms and chest and dripping from my fingers.

I push past the others and rush home.

#

Home is on the eastern edge of town, where Elk Creek runs from the hills in the north to the Umpqua River, which in turn runs along the south edge of Boulton proper. What's unique about my neighborhood is that, while the homes are on a cliff above Elk Creek, they sit below the concrete bridge that spans it, a bridge that belongs

to the highway.

So that's why they call me the Bridge Troll, because my home is the one that sits closest to the foot of the bridge, down below all the other homes in the town, subject to the squealing brakes of freight trucks and motorhomes as their drivers glimpse the first signs demanding a reduction of speed from fifty-five miles per hour to thirty-five. Often I see the town sheriff parked just above my small orchard, as bored as us teenagers on summer break, sitting idly with the engine running, anxiously awaiting some fool who doesn't have the sense to slow his vehicle while passing through the center of town.

If anyone's a Bridge Troll, it's him.

Grandma is drinking a Bloody Mary on the porch. When she sees me and my score, she only stirs her drink with a string bean that she pickled himself. Around her, decorating the walls of the porch and hanging from the frayed awning that shades her, are the bleached or stuffed remains of her favorite victims. A pair of buck antlers, five points each, hangs from the awning on a string like a bundle of sage. Bleached clam shells are strung together to make a wind chime. The mounted head of an elk clings heavy and lopsided from the façade of the house behind her, a façade which, if one looks closely, is a bit lopsided itself. Perhaps the creek is finally getting to this ridge my home sits on. Maybe one day it will just erode all at once, one big fanfare of a mudslide that takes our decaying home and the trash that adorns it down to the river and then to the sea.

"A little small, don't you think?" Grandma says. "What's that on your shirt?"

I pass the porch without looking at her. "Something," I say. "I don't know."

She laughs, sips her drink. "I can take a guess."

The body slips easily from my shoulders as I set it down in the gnarled grass of the garden that I mowed just yesterday. The red of the corpse's two wounds complements the red of the ripening tomatoes on the vines. We're in the shade of a plum tree. It's still before noon, and it's hot, but it will only get hotter. Flies devour the moisture in the eyes of the deer.

"What..." I say aloud, trailing off as I look more closely at



my prize. Part of me is relieved that I'm not covered in deer cum, but the rest is simply confused. Sure enough, a young buck lays before me, his antlers all the evidence I need, but on his belly no genitalia are visible, that is, except for the four large nipples dripping with mother's milk.

This is the tragedy Foster was talking about: my murder was not of a doe or a buck, but of something else entirely. Something that has both antlers and milking teats, an in-between.

I can't let anyone see this. It's probably endangered, or perhaps the only one in existence. Images of me in juvenile hall down in Roseburg jump into my head, Grandma alone and uncared for back at home, a dark solitary cell darker than any forest I've ever hunted in.

Almost instinctively, I look up to the bridge above me and am relieved to find that the sheriff is not sitting in his normal turnout, waiting for speedsters to pass through town. If he were, all he'd have to do is glance in my direction, peer through the rough canopy of the plum tree, and see that I was cleaning a deer that didn't look quite right.

My only option is to follow through and clean the deer, and hopefully that mutilation will disfigure the creature's exceptionality.

#

When I slice open the deer's belly from the neck to the groin, the milk keeps running, but now with blood mixed in. My knees are soaked in warm liquid the color of melted strawberry ice cream. I glance over my shoulder; Grandma is not watching. Tough as she is, she prefers I do this part on my own. From underneath the ribcage I pull the innards, the porous lungs and the slug-like stomach, purple and glossy and almost lifelike; it wriggles on the grass like a Ziploc bag filled with water. I slice it open and see that nothing was unique about this deer's diet. Like Foster said: it had a particular love for the nettle that grew on the hillside where I found it. Inside the stomach the bundle of greens almost look fresh enough to eat.

The intestines I remove from the wound like colorful ribbon from beneath a clown's tongue.

Out of curiosity I feel around the area near the groin and nipples, find sacks heavy with the milk that are slowly draining out

onto the lawn, and I find something else, hard and circular, but not perfectly so, about the size of a soft ball. I slice tendrils that attach it to the body and pull it from the abdomen, suddenly aware that my heart is beating quickly and heavily. It's covered in a cloudy, veiny sack, whatever the thing is. I tell myself it can't possibly be what it looks like. It's September, and the deer has antlers.

With my thumbs I stretch the sack out to more easily see through it, and inside I glimpse the curvature of a nose, the symmetrical depressions that can only hold eyes. I drop the thing and it hits the puddle of blood and milk with a soft plop, and then, as if in quicksand, it slowly slips beneath the surface and vanishes.

#

My first crush was not a celebrity on television, nor was it someone from school. It was Hermes, god of transitions and boundaries, he with little wings on his hat that sort of looked like horns, and little wings over his heels. He could fly and skip and travel the world; he was the god of movement. And I think I've always been envious of that.

In the winery where sometimes I'm allowed to work for spending money and once or twice I've been allowed by the lady who runs it, June, to sip my town's eternally-underrated export, there is a plaster statue of Hermes sharing a corner with a silk palm. It's cheap and tacky, but satisfactory enough in its portrayal of Ancient Greece's young god that it allowed me to fall for his image. His lithe long legs, his curly hair and full lips, his androgynous flat chest and sculpted abdomen that runs in a V down to his exposed genitals, a hairless penis and testicles clinging close to his body, everything so tiny one could argue he doesn't have a cock and balls at all.

#

The smell: venison loin covered in a pulp of fresh blackberries, over smoldering charcoal briquettes. A small plume of smoke spouts from the vent of a red Weber kettle porcheside, Grandma resting her legs from a canvas camping chair not a yard away. This is her role, the cooking. We both shoot when we can, me with my bow and she with her thirty aught-six. But I always eviscerate, skin, clean, and portion, while she seasons, cures, smokes, and grills. We're a team, one that mostly works in silence, but sometimes drifts into idle

conversation.

“We might get a meal off this doe yet,” says Grandma as she flips the loin with a pair of metal tongs. Her dig about the size of the animal—equating it to the size of a female deer—hits me pretty hard, considering the circumstances.

Grandma is overweight, to a point of it being difficult for her to walk. That’s why she hunts from the truck, driving along dirt logging roads until she sees a deer grazing in the clear cut. It’s also why she sits as she cooks, a folding canvas chair her throne, tongs her scepter. She’s a fantastic cook. The blackberries, sizzling on the tenderloin, picked at such a ripe state that a quick breeze could pull them from the vine, grow behind the house, where brambles cling to the top of the hillside above Elk Creek. After she picked the berries, Grandma made sure to wash the soot from the highway above from them. Then, she mashed them in a bowl with the back of a spoon, scooped them seeds-and-all onto a plastic cutting board, and rolled the fresh tenderloin to and fro until it was covered in it. A dusting of salt and coarsely ground pepper was all it needed after that, besides smoke and heat.

Normally this sweet and smoky scent would bring me to salivation, or at least a tummy rumble or two, but tonight the berries smell rotten; the flesh on the grill carries a putrid aroma of heavy decay. This does not smell like a young buck, but an old deer that I had come across dead in a glen, one that had somehow bested the odds of nature and lived a full and happy life, only to die of old age weeks ago. But that isn’t the case. This deer was alive only hours ago, the meat I pulled from its corpse fresh and firm. So why does its scent bring my stomach to the point of convulsions?

I leave Grandma by the grill and step away, toward the creek. Ahead of me creep those tangled brambles, their thorns tough and sharp. Ancient walls, better than any fence. Living barbed wire. I’m thinking about making a wall with that fast-growing flora, to keep Billie Carter and her cronies out, constructing a dome of brambles and berries and flowers and leaves with undersides covered in tiny irritating needles, that folds over my home and hides it from the highway above, so as you drive by it looks like nothing but another overgrown patch of Oregon terrain. Just another forgotten place.

#

Over dinner Grandma brings up Gay Dave for the second time this week.

"He's still over there mixing drinks at the bar. You know Gay Dave? We call him that, you know, because he's gay."

"I know who he is Grandma," I say. "And I don't think he appreciates that name."

"Oh, he thinks it's funny! He loves being Gay Dave. If he didn't like being Gay Dave he would have left a long time ago. You know why he came here, right?"

"You told me," I say. "He came to take care of his dad."

"Yep, Jerry Whitman. Came to take care of Jerry before he died, and guess what?"

"Jerry's dead." I know the answer. We've had this conversation countless times. There's only so much drama that goes on in a small town.

"Jerry's dead," she agrees. "But Gay Dave has stuck around like a lazy tick. And hell, I don't mind. He's the one who came up with the idea to put craisins in the champagne on Sunday mornings."

"Ah, yes. Sunday brunch at Marlene's: one dollar hot dogs and two dollar champagne."

"Best deal in town, and with those craisins jumpin' around in the glass, I daresay the whole affair feels fancy."

Gay Dave is charismatic and loud like all good gay men are expected to be by those who are not gay. He plays into the jokes the drunken hillbillies of my town make, laughs along when the punch line is simply that a man is doing something borderline effeminate.

"Maybe you should just call him Dave next time you see him," I suggest.

"You think he'd answer?" Grandma asks.

#

The darkness feels light and airy, a space of crisp comfort. It's a darkness that I've never felt before. Soft foliage is at my back, growing. I feel the fiddleheads of ferns unwind beneath me and lift me up, rose peddles blossom and lick my back with their delicate tongues. And I'm kissing someone. I don't see much of him but I know it's Foster, the boy I met in the woods earlier today. I feel but

don't see his soft lips against mine. My hand runs through his buzzed hair and it tickles my palm. The moon above is full; I can see it through a gap in the pines, along with endless clusters of stars. And then the canopy begins to close above us. I am not afraid. My hand slides down the back of Foster's head and neck and I find he isn't wearing a shirt. He isn't wearing anything at all.

Our lips part long enough for him to say, "Things are changing here, can you tell?"

"Yes," I answer. I know exactly what he means. His skin is soft on the ridge of his back.

"You need to be ready. When you wake up, it will to," he says.

"When I wake up?" My body is shuddering under his. I'm all tension, all hardened blood.

"I can help you, but only in the dark places."

I slip my hands downward and my fingers reach the hard ridge at the base of his back...and without warning all the energy I've built up is released at once. It comes over me in waves.

I'm covered in mother's milk, and this is the punch line. Everyone laughs. I wake up.

My bedroom is silent and still. The filtered light of the moon is coming through some sheer curtains I've pulled over the window. I lay still, fully awake, every once in a while hearing the soft drone of a car pass overhead. Perhaps I should be charging tolls, challenging tourists with riddles, or simply eating them up. Bridge trolls do that, right? At least one of those things.

My briefs are wet, and when I put a hand down there its fingers come back sticky. I flip the covers off of me. This has happened before, but not with this intensity, not with such a vivid memory of the dream that brought it on. I can remember every part: the way Foster felt laying on top of me, the way he kissed. I remember how the forest looked and how it felt familiar, though I'm certain I've never seen it before, in reality or in a dream. Delicately I step from my briefs and use their drier parts to sop up what's left on my chest and in my pubic hair, then I toss them in the hamper and grab a fresh pair.

The only thing I can't remember is what Foster meant by

what he said: “Things are changing here.” I remember *knowing* what he meant; I remember the feeling of connection that comes from unspoken understanding. I remember that. But exactly what he meant escapes me. Of course things are changing. Things are always changing here.

That’s when I hear someone outside my bedroom door. And I’m standing nearly naked in the middle of my room, darkness surrounding me, the outline of the door hardly visible. But I can hear the soft padding of footsteps on the carpet in the hallway. Is Grandma up this late? My phone is on the other side of my bed, on the nightstand, and it’s my only clock. I have no idea what time it is.

And these footsteps don’t sound like they belong to Grandma, anyway. Her steps are slower, and she doesn’t really pick up her feet. There is no carpet scruff and shuffle here, just a heavy plodding, and the occasional creak of floorboards beneath. Someone is in the house, someone who isn’t supposed to be here. And their steps never stop. Their steady rhythm keeps going up and down the hallway outside my door, as if they’re on patrol. I stand rigid and unmoving for what feels like a whole five minutes, just listening to the footsteps passing by my bedroom door. I hardly breathe.

Silent and useless, my bow and quiver hang on the wall in the living room, right below Grandma’s rifle. The distance from here to there feels impassable, a barrier between dimensions. I’m not your typical boy, so I don’t keep a baseball bat or a tennis racket or a bag of golf clubs within reach. And I’m not so woodsy that I have a pocketknife or hatchet, at least not in my bedroom.

All the while I’m thinking, I’m also listening, and right as I begin to consider myself out of options—aside from the obvious get-back-in-bed-and-hide-under-the-covers option—the footsteps stop.

There is nothing to tell me this, no breathing or creaking or movement or shadow, but all at once I know that what’s out there is standing at my bedroom door, and will be coming in to get me any moment now.

All at once I’m moving. I don’t care about making noise anymore. The curtains over my window fling open, as if on their own accord, but that was my hands that did that. Actions seem to come before thought. The window slides open and crisp air touches my

face. I see the brightness of a full moon filtering through the leaves of an apple tree in the orchard. My bedroom door opens with a shatter, a blast, a storm of splinters, but I don't look back. I'm halfway through the window, my feet knocking trophies and souvenirs from the dresser that I'm climbing—when someone grabs my ankle. It's a hard and leathery hand, a tight grip that yanks at my leg trying to pull me back inside. And I'm kicking wildly with my free foot, my arms spread wide and locked at the elbows so I don't get drawn back inside. Am I screaming? Am I making any noise? How can I tell? At this moment I only have one scent: sight. At this moment I only have one intention: flight. Finally my free foot connects with something and I hear a snap. The hand gripping my foot detaches. I nearly fly through the bedroom window, and then find myself sprawled on grass wet with dew. I scramble to my feet feeling naked and cold, exposed to a moonlight that's as bright as day. It's all a stage, and I'm beneath the spotlight. There's no hiding here. I need to find somewhere dark.

To the left are the creek and the blackberry brambles: not an option. To the right is the road, exposed and uphill. I'd be seen and chased down quickly. The house is behind me, so that leaves the orchard. As I move I realize I'm limping. Looking down I find a bone sticking out of the top of my foot, but it doesn't make sense that the bone is mine. Really it's too long and pointy, and it's sticking straight up from the middle of my foot. That's when I realize I'm tracking blood, and what looks like a bone is actually a snapped portion of an antler. I hardly feel a thing, so I keep on stumbling to the nearest tree. It's a Granny Smith apple tree with a thick canopy. I've climbed it countless times to prune its limbs and pick its fruit. But that was always during the day, when I didn't have an antler through my foot.

At the base of the tree I make a quick glance over my shoulder and see no one climbing from my window. Whoever it is must be coming around front, searching for the broken portion of their creepy dead deer headpiece, or whatever they are wearing. Using everything but my injured foot—I'm starting to feel it now, a little—I clamber up the tree, even using my teeth at one point to grip a limb and hold my body steady. And then I'm in shadow, wide leaves serving as my shelter and a gnarled branch my perch.

Everything is silence around me. No cars pass overhead; the

birds sleep with the wind. It seems even the stream nearby has stopped moving. My heart still beats loudly, and there's a thumping that's in my foot—something like pain but not quite, not yet—that keeps rhythm with that pulse. For as second I close my eyes, and breathe in through my nose, savoring the crisp nighttime air that feels like an ice pack on my tired lungs. Fatigue runs through me before the pain does, but then all at once the latter comes rushing in, seemingly through the still air into my leg and then rushing all the way up its length, sharp and angry. The muscles in my foot contract around the foreign object, and everything is unbearable fire.

My eyes open and below me in the garden, close enough to reach up and touch me, is a person. Or something like a person, at least. It stands on two legs, wears a white tattered nightgown stained with mud where it runs along the ground, out of the bottom of which stick two bare feet, almost devoid of pigment. And it has the head of a deer. A long furry snout and bulbous big eyes outside of emotion tilt up toward me. Now that it's found me it just stands there, staring. Its antlers touch the lowest branches of the apple tree. On one side there are three points to the crown, and on the other there are only two.

Behind this creature I'm just now seeing a deep hole in the ground next to the vegetable garden, where I cleaned the deer earlier. It's wide and tall, big enough to be a grave. And now I'm recognizing the face turned up to me now as the face that looked out at me through a placenta film just this afternoon.

Looking into the deer's eyes I'm consumed by a moment of vertigo, and, as if it has vanished completely, the branch that I'm sitting on is no longer beneath me. I'm falling, and my back hits the grass first. When I get to my feet, I know I'm tracking blood with every footstep. I know the thing is behind me, pursuing me with like I pursued its mother, or father. Parent. It has all the time in the world. I'll tire myself out. Maybe it will stop on the way to me, while I suffer and lick my wounds in the backwoods, to have a chat with a cute boy.

With nowhere else to go I find that I've limped into the shadow of the bridge, its concrete a silent imposition that once I'm beneath it feels like a biome all its own, its own world separate from the one only feet behind me. I'm thinking about Grandma, hoping the nightgown I saw on the thing that's after me doesn't belong to who I



think it belongs to. I'm thinking about Foster. Didn't he say something to me? Not this morning, but right before I woke up?

I glance over my shoulder and see nothing pursuing me. Maybe it doesn't walk. Maybe it just appears. And then all at once, at the base of the concrete foot of the bridge, I find that I can go no farther, and that this spot will have to do. I lean against the cold wall and slide down to a seated position.

"Out streaking, Bridge Troll?" says Billie Carter, whom I've just noticed is sitting against the wall too, not ten feet from me, accompanied by Bill and Willy. They're out late, probably snuck out. They're smoking.

Billie passes the joint to Willy when she sees my foot. "What the fuck are you into?" she asks.

I'm having trouble speaking. I feel like an old tree, watching motionless as a man drives a saw through me. Instead of talking I wave my arms frantically to the Bills, in a motion that I can only hope communicates the complete sentence: Run for your lives.

And then it happens. While I'm looking at them a forceful hand grips my neck from behind, and my face is covered when another reaches over me and takes hold of the bottom of my jaw. All I can see is my grandma's nightgown. I'm shrouded in white. It's my wedding day.

Something hits my right side, hard, and then hits me again. The thing still has hold of me, but as the forces collide with my side repeatedly and I'm pushed in a kneeling position along the ground, I notice that my pursuer is moving with me. It's being pushed too. Eventually I regain my footing but the deer person is clinging to my back. It's removed its hands from my neck and chin but now has hold of my shoulders and won't let go. And I can see. In the dim I can see the Bills rushing me and hitting me with their heads, where round horns have grown, curved things that wrap around themselves like corkscrews. And there are four of them. Willy, Bill, Billie, and Foster, charging us one by one. I'm stumbling backward, feeling the rivets of their horns against my chest and arms, feeling the tight grip of the thing keeping hold of my shoulders. They're all pushing us as a team toward—the thought comes a moment too late, because my footing is leaving me now. As I fall I feel the deer person reaching for my neck

again, in one final attempt to snap it. I hear the stream a moment before I hit it.

When I hit water I feel the weight on my back vanish. The hands gripping me have left, like a character on TV between scenes. All I feel, besides the chilly rush of mountain water, is the suction hold of an empty nightgown. Without thinking I take the garment in my hand, and through the rapids I'm carried to the river.

#

In the center of the river near town, before the rainy season really starts, there is a rocky island where small brush sometimes grows. It's low, like a sand bar or tide pool, so I climb onto it with relative ease despite my injuries.

Foster is there waiting for me, of course, but I can hardly see him since my eyes are cloudy from water and pain. He's sitting cross-legged on a flat rock like he was on the stump this morning. No horns grow from his head.

I crush tiny river snails under my hands and knees as I crawl toward him, and then I lay down there. The night remains as still and bright as ever. I can't see a single star.

"Is it dead?" I ask him.

Foster exhales quickly, like he's annoyed. "That's the wrong question."

As if it were the smallest splinter, Foster pinches the antler in my foot with two fingers, and pulls it from my body. When he does this, there is no pain. Over the next few seconds I watch the gaping wound fill in and heal itself. A rush of relief passes through me sharper than any pain.

I'm sprawled on my back, the smooth rocks below me, weeds coming from the cracks between them tickling my skin. I let it all rush over me, the painless euphoria.

The night is chilly, so I sit up and slip Grandma's—or maybe it was never hers, maybe it always belonged to the thing that chased me—over my head. I stand and let it fall to my ankles. It billows over me and I feel like a kid in a Halloween ghost costume.

Since the first one didn't fly, I ask Foster another question. "If I never hunt again, can I have you?"

"Ownership is a human concept," he answers carefully. "But I

think I understand what you mean.”

The full moon extends its reflection across the supple, glassy flow of the Umpqua. To the north I see the shadows of my darkened town, the trees that loom over the houses. Not a single light is on. And I’m saying to myself: “The two boys watched the moon, and who can go so far as to presume their fate ever after, but they at least lived happily in that moment.”

*Fabio Sassi makes photos and acrylics using tiny objects and what is considered to have no worth by the mainstream. Fabio is also a sometime poet living in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at [www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com](http://www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com)*

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### **Off Key**

*I've shot this pic in a flea market of my town. Choose your key to enter a different world.*

*Lisa Bubert is a Texas-born writer living in Nashville, Tennessee. Her poems can be found in Gnarled Oak, Eunoia Review, Muddy River Poetry Review, and more.*

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# Apologies to an Old Friend

Lisa Bubert

Ghosts haunt this old road  
lined by pine trees  
not unlike sentinel parents;  
grown-up hands on grown-up hips.  
They lean in and watch.  
Once upon a time, you and I  
considered this a solace.  
Now, we turn away  
quiet and quick  
as we can.

Now, I linger with you  
here at the lake,  
toes dipped in ice water,  
considering a reflection of something  
I no longer recognize.

I can still see our shadows  
sitting together, us  
skipping stones and speculating,  
wondering if the world already knew us,  
if it would ever be like the movies,  
if it would ever show up.

Or is it here now,  
breathing between us,  
like the invisible fingers of  
wind rustling blades of grass  
under stars and a moon as  
lonely as us?

I considered a future where  
we demanded the world  
like two small soldiers, angry and insatiable.  
I considered we would grow happily old.  
We would be as familiar as two women,  
languid, silent and stern,  
nodding over two cups of coffee,  
fanning themselves at the kitchen table.

And we may be these women.  
But for now, we sit quietly,  
our hands folded,  
our eyes drawing invisible lines in the air.

# My Red Wheelbarrow

Lisa Bubert

*(With thanks to William C. Williams)*

These sounds,  
on which so much depends:  
that single Friday night  
click –  
your key in the lock,  
your soft footfalls in the  
darkened doorway.

# Morning by the Pool with the Only One Left

Lisa Bubert

We grab our towels, our sunglasses,  
our most recently purchased bathing suits,  
Some of Mexico's finest in a plastic bag, and  
sunscreen cause we will both be sunburned in an hour and  
some vague thoughts concerning  
moles and doctor visits intrude but ultimately,  
we both ignore them because they are  
Trespassers and  
we don't need that fucking shit.  
(Hope we die because of it.)

We float to the water,  
just me and him.

We talk about where we'd rather live  
(me in California, him in New York City).  
We talk about our credit card debt and how we're  
being responsible with it finally but  
(we could totally afford a trip to Hawaii?  
To the California beaches? To the Texas beach?  
Or maybe just tubing on the river nearby, or  
fuck, maybe we'll just call this pool day our vacation  
and get a nice tan to prove we were here.)

We lounge near the water,  
just me and him.

We got the stereo blasting Britney before she collapsed  
and we still know her best dance moves



and we're shuffling through from song to song trying to figure out  
which one best fits this particular moment and decide  
they all do.

His iPod sheltered in a little stereo case that resembles  
a boom box and I wonder how  
he afforded it  
cause didn't we just say... ?

We hide in the water,  
just me and him,

We talk about where the others are and  
what jobs they have now and  
who they're living with and  
who's dating and who's given up and  
all the good times we used to have and  
how they're missing out now and  
what they must be doing right now and  
wish we could be there with them and  
one day we'll move away too.

We immerse in the water,  
just me and him.

We talk about the hickey on his neck from  
a boy whose name he'd already forgot,  
the ring on my finger that blinds me with captured light,  
and we briefly wonder if we should get the makings for Sunday  
mimosas  
because the ones at the clubhouse are  
too damn expensive.  
But we realize we don't have time for that  
brief sense of style cause  
he's got to go to work in an hour and  
I've got shit to do at home in the form of a chores list

and I said I'd only be gone til three and  
it's getting to be three and I should be gone.

*Herbert Cady is a retired pediatrician. After forty-one years of practice and becoming too old to continue riding a motorcycle, he decided to search for new challenging ways to have fun. Writing fiction has proven to be more than adequate.*

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# A Trolley Ride into the Morning

Herbert Cady

In '72, the Germantown Avenue trolley ran from exclusive Chestnut Hill through the badlands of North Philly to the red brick row houses of historic Old City. A first year Resident, I would ride it home from the hospital long after dark; after the young mothers had fallen exhausted into beds, their hungry babies asleep for a moment; after the gang members had gone home to plan their next scores; and after the elders had turned off their flickering televisions, their last armament against the dark. Lehigh Avenue would be bleak and empty as I walked to the trolley. There would be no Hallelujahs ringing from the A.M.E. church, no shrieks of laughter from the playground, and no lights from the boarded up store fronts. All that remained were dark alleys, acrid exhaust fumes, and sweet smells of fried chicken rising from the burger shop's dumpster.

I waited at the corner one night, straining to hear the metallic rumble of the trolley coming up Germantown Avenue, its metal wheels grinding against the tracks like the treads of a Patton tank, the beam from its single headlamp piercing the darkness, a lighthouse for the anxious. When it arrived, I climbed on board, mumbled "Hi," to the driver, paid my fare, and watched the coins disappear with a jangle into the armored coin box. I picked a seat near the driver, avoiding the lone shadow sitting at the back.

The doors slapped shut as the driver rang the bell and the trolley lurched forward. When I sat down, I felt an uncomfortable lump under my thigh. Reaching in my pocket I found my pen knife, a gift from my best friend in Viet Nam. I looked at the knife, its shiny

blade still flecked with blood. I'd been in the Emergency Room a few hours earlier when two parents had burst in screaming that their child couldn't breathe. We could see she was cyanotic, her chest heaving with each croupy gasp. Her small round face was drenched in sweat, her dark hair plastered to her head, and her neck extended trying to get another breath. I took her from her father's arms, while the Attending shouted for the ENT Fellow and the Senior Resident grabbed a laryngoscope. I laid her on an exam table and placed a towel roll under her neck. Leaning over her to restrain her arms, the smell of sweat and sickness filled my nose. Standing at the head of the bed, the Senior Resident passed a laryngoscope blade into the child's mouth. She looked, paused, then abruptly pulled it out and replaced it with an oxygen mask.

"She's got epiglottitis—I can't get in," she said and then shouted, "Where's ENT?"

As I held her, watching her color turn from gray to blue, and heard the PA system repeatedly demand, "ENT to the ER, STAT," I flashed back to a jungle road in Viet Nam. A crumpled Jeep burned in the background. Screaming and sounds of automatic rifle fire filled the air mixed with the smells of gunpowder, blood, and burning gasoline. My best friend lay with his head in my lap gasping for breath, his throat mangled by shrapnel, as blood pulsed out of a severed artery in his neck. I screamed for a medic while trying to stop the bleeding. His blood covered us both and ran in little rivulets across the dirt. He turned ashen as his breathing faltered. His eyes searched mine and then turned away as his body went limp.

Holding the toddler, watching her dusky color turn blue-gray and her struggles weaken, I relived the past. Again I found my pen knife in my pocket and opened its scalpel-sharp blade. The commotion around me seemed to disappear. I held the skin of her neck tightly and made an incision at the bottom of her Adam's apple. Separating the two sides of the cut, I pierced the ligament into her open airway. I grabbed a hemostat, pushed its tips through the hole, and opened them, enlarging the hole.

A young nurse, Marianne, appeared on the other side of the bed - maybe she'd been there the whole time. She cut the oxygen mask off its tubing and handed me the cut end. I held it between the

tips of the forceps and told her, “Five liters.” The oxygen hissed as it flowed into the opening in the child’s neck, forming small bubbles of blood that danced around the wound like beads of quicksilver.

The toddler took a last weak gasp.

We waited. Some part of my mind noticed it had become very quiet—the resident had put down the laryngoscope, the Attending had stopped yelling for ENT, and the parents and nurses were frozen—all watching.

Then a second breath.

Then a third, a little faster. By the fifth, her color was improving.

The ENT Fellow came pushing his way through the crowd, shouting that he’d arrived, only to stop at the bedside when he saw the toddler, her color pink and a hemostat in her neck. Our eyes locked and I snapped, “You’re too late, again.”

“What...?” he replied.

Coming back to the present, I looked around at the nurses and doctors watching me. “She’s okay,” I stammered, “but let’s get her to the O.R. I can’t hold this hemostat all night.”

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As the trolley jerked with stops and starts up Germantown Avenue, its wheels grinding against the metal rails, I retrieved a small picture from my wallet. Two young soldiers standing next to a rice paddy in Viet Nam. I didn’t need any light to see the twinkle in his eyes or the humor of his smile; I knew them as well as my own. And in the trolley’s darkness, no one could see the tears trickle down my cheek for the child who’d survived that evening and for my best friend who hadn’t.

Somewhere between Wayne Junction and Wister Street, I noticed the shadow standing by the exit. As the trolley jolted to a stop, he turned to face me. In the darkness I saw his hand come up to his forehead—a salute—and then he was gone.



