

Typehouse

May 2016, Issue 8

LITERARY MAGAZINE



Call for Submissions

Typehouse is a writer-run, literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We publish non-fiction, genre fiction, literary fiction, poetry and visual art. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished, writing that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. If you are interested in submitting fiction, poetry, or visual art, email your submission as an attachment or within the body of the email along with a short bio to: typehouse@peoples-ink.com

Editors

Val Gryphin Lindsay Fowler Michael Munkvold

Cover Photo

Pastoral: Fae 2 by A. Riding and S. La Fey (See page 86)

Established 2013

Published Triennially

<http://typehousemagazine.com/>

Table of Contents:

Fiction:

Hunky Town	Haley M. Fedor	5
Stall	G. A. Shepard	19
The Alpine Mall	Amanda McTigue	33
A Marvel of Modern Science	George Allen Miller	50
In the Wine-Dark Deep	Shaun Bossio	55
Returned Fire	J. Edward Krufft	77
Shampoo	Samantha Pilecki	87
Alchemy	Kathryn Lipari	88

Poetry:

William Ogden Haynes	27
Rachael Adams	45
Steve Luria Ablon	53
Robert Brown	78

Visual Art:

Tagen T. Baker	15
Cassandra Sims Knight	31
Fabrice B. Poussin	46
A. Riding	72
Denny E. Marshall	100

Haley Fedor is a queer author from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Section 8 Magazine*, *The Fem*, *Guide to Kulchur Magazine*, *Literary Orphans*, *Crab Fat Literary Magazine*, and the anthology *Dispatches from Lesbian America*. She was nominated for the 2014 Pushcart Prize, and is currently a graduate student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

Hunky Town

Haley M Fedor

The car went quickly over a bump, and Michael hit his head on the lid of the trunk. He woke up and panicked. Why was he here in the first place? His body jerked. Michael rolled a bit as the car made a turn. The familiar crunch of gravel was a comforting reminder, however, and he smiled, previous fears all forgotten. They were going to see *The Last Man on Earth*. Scott, his older brother, convinced their mother that they were going to see something else. Apparently Michael's twelve-year-old brain would be damaged for life if he saw this one. That prospect only excited him. Their dad's brand new 1964 Cadillac slowed to a crawl for a minute, before stopping altogether. Michael heard talking, but nothing distinct. Sometimes they checked the trunks at the drive-in. If he was caught, he'd have to spend the quarter he was going to use on popcorn. Their mother had only given them two, and Scott had to do the driving. His friend Joey was in the passenger seat, eager to come along.

Scott hated monster movies, he often complained. But Michael had begged, using every minute in their shared bedroom to wheedle a promise from the dark-haired, aloof eighteen-year-old. Eventually he came home from Joey O'Leary's house and said in a resigned tone that he'd take him—but only if they could pick up Joey first. Michael agreed to those terms, and left his brother to talk their mother around. He could handle her better. Margaret Timko was a fierce woman when they needed her permission. For *anything*. Compact and plump with a broad face, their mother inherited the intimidating presence and hard accent of her Rusnak parents. But she had given them some money and promised to wait up for them. They were in for a great night, and Michael fidgeted in anticipation. He couldn't wait to see it—the posters up in town were promising.

The Cadillac rolled forward again. Then stopped. They were in the line to get in, probably. Michael heard voices again and perked up. Would the attendant be suspicious? But after a minute they were moving again, and he was safe. He had to be. After his brother found a good spot, he'd let

him out, Michael knew. He preferred the Capitol Drive-in, where you could sneak in over the hill, but it wasn't playing this one. Only the Ardmore had the Vincent Price film at the moment. Luckily Scott had been able to take the car; their father was down the street at the Club.

On a Sunday the bars were closed, but the social clubs were lively. It was a neon siren song, luring all of the mill workers and railroad laborers from that side of North Braddock. There was the Polish Club, the Slovak Club, the Elks, and a slew of others. Their father would head on down to the Polish Club, nicknamed the "Hunky Club" to have a few beers, play shuffleboard, and smoke his cigars. Their mother couldn't tolerate his smoking, so he brought his fat cigars there too.

When Michael was younger, he had used all the old cigar boxes to house his battalions of toy soldiers. Even though he didn't play with them anymore, their tiny square of yard in the back would still occasionally yield up soldiers, forlorn and forgotten, to their father's cruel lawnmower. It would spit out the dismembered bodies in a cough of plastic, before dying.

The car door slammed and after a moment the trunk opened.

"Hey little brother," Scott said, "I wouldn't forget ya. The attendant asked if I was sneaking people in though, it made me worry for a minute." His dark hair was mussed from leaving the window down, and Michael saw mischief in his brother's raw blue eyes, drunk on the excitement of illegal activity.

"I was going to run out of air," Michael complained.

"You wouldn't, you dummy. Get on out before someone looks," his brother insisted, looking around at the other cars. No one was going to tell on them, not when the movie was about to start.

Michael clambered out, trying to be discreet, but he was growing bigger and more awkward every day. He almost tripped and fell, until Scott grabbed him by the arm and steadied him. The eighteen-year-old was muscular, mostly from baseball and work. "Now go get some popcorn and drinks before the movie starts, there's a line," Scott told him, handing him another quarter, before turning to set up the speaker for the car. He worked part-time down at the mill already, so he made more money than Michael's paper route could ever deliver. Come lunchtime, Scott spent the rest of the day down at Edgar Thomson. As a foreman there himself, their father couldn't have been prouder.

Michael didn't want to work at the mill. His science class took a field trip there once, but he didn't gasp in awe at the interior, filled with sweating men and oppressive heat. The noise was deafening. He imagined that a year of working there would make him as deaf as their Great Aunt Edith. He had no interest in the hodgepodge of metals going into the blast furnace. Nor did he the blooming result—looking like an angry orange flower—as the ladle poured molten steel into rails over one-

hundred feet long. They told him Edgar Thomson produced hundreds of tons of steel every day, but all he could see were the dirt-streaked men in overalls, carrying heavy things and paying no mind to the raw sparks that haloed them.

Michael grabbed at the quarter and stuffed it in his pocket, pleased at the jingle it made against the other coins. He smiled at his brother and hurried to do exactly that—movie popcorn was the best. Plus he'd probably have some money left over. Eager to get in line at the big gray cinderblock of a building, Michael didn't look back to see what Scott was laughing about in the car. Located right smack in the middle of the lot, the projector on top rattled with the air smelling like popcorn and the bathrooms out back. He saw a gaggle of older girls swarm past him. They were a few grades ahead, but he recognized most of them; North Braddock was a small town. Michael liked their pleated culottes, all of them showed off leggy thighs and calves illuminated by the big screen. They didn't notice him.

By the time he got the popcorn and drinks, Vincent Price's voice echoed around cars, and monsters swarmed the screen. Scott couldn't hate this movie, Michael was sure. It looked like it had everything—monsters, fighting, and a pretty woman. That was what the poster promised. He struggled, trying to hold everything and walk quickly, especially because Scott's old sneakers were a size too big on him. He hated having to wear hand-me-downs, but their mother griped about giving them money for the movies all the time. He'd rather see a double feature than have a stupid sweater that was new. Godzilla movies, maybe. Or the old horror movies, like *The Invisible Man* or *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Those were the best. Scott never went with him to those. He preferred the beach movies, the ones about stupid teenagers hanging out—he even had a poster of Frankie Avalon and Annette Funichello in their room. Michael didn't think she was pretty at all.

As he neared the car, he crouched lower, wanting to jump out and surprise Scott. Boo! He'd yell. That would scare all the freckles off of Joey's face, and Michael would laugh himself sick. Scott would just call him a stupid kid with the same old half-smile, then forget about it. He walked the long way, going to the edge of the lot and coming up from the rear, excited. When he got to the back of the car he set down the food before stooping low. Quietly he waddled in a crouch to the driver's side, then bounced upward like a spring.

"Boo!" He yelled, looking into the car.

His satisfied grin fell away, however, when he saw his brother and Joey. They were both surprised, all right. But Joey was pulling his hand out of Scott's unzipped jeans, his face turning as red as his hair.

"What the hell, Mikey?" Scott yelled, his eyes wide and angry. "Jesus, why would you do that?"

"I'm sorry," Michael stammered, stepping back a few paces. He didn't want to watch his brother zipping up his jeans, or Joey's fat fingers going back to his own lap. Scott swore at him again, using another word their father said only in the worst of times. Scott never swore at him before.

"Just get in the goddamn car." Scott wasn't looking at him; his black hair was disheveled-looking and his mouth formed an angry line. Questions buzzed around Michael's head, each scarier than the last, and he was so distracted he almost forgot about the forlorn bag of popcorn and cokes on the dusty gravel.

"I want to go home," Michael said quietly, swinging into the backseat of the Cadillac, and all but dumping the snacks beside him.

"We paid for the movie," Scott reminded him curtly. Joey was staring out the window, but at the fence and the other cars. Joey didn't even move to look when Vincent Price let out a bark of dialogue, crying out in defiance at the monsters.

"You're going to be quiet and watch the movie. That's why we came, and we can't leave early," Scott said, looking back at him and glaring. They both knew their mother would be suspicious, especially if they came back after barely twenty minutes and, even worse, without the money she'd given them.

"But what were you—"

"I said sit back there, and shut the hell up." Scott had twisted around in the seat and grabbed him by the arm. "And you're not gonna to talk about it. To anybody. Y'hear?" His eyes were wide, and Michael couldn't tell whether his brother was angry or as scared as he was. "Y'hear?" Scott repeated, and his fingernails dug into Michael's arm, squeezing even tighter.

"Yeah, okay. Okay! Lemme go!" Michael was relieved when Scott released his arm and turned around again. Slouching down, he tried to get a good view and just watch the movie. The popcorn tasted like dirt, and he gave up after a handful. Even the coke tasted bad. The throng of monsters crowded around Vincent Price as he tried to fend them off. Their clothes were torn, and they shrieked when he hammered a stake into them. Michael kept looking at the back Scott's head, then Joey's. Occasionally Joey would look over at Scott, but his brother never moved a muscle. He wanted to ask why Joey had done that, had put his big hand...down there. None of his friends ever tried to stick their hands in *his* pants, and it seemed odd that Joey would do it at the movies. Everyone said that boys would go blind if they did stuff like that, even Father Patrick. Especially Father Patrick. He had said so during confession once, and told him it was sinful. He could go to hell for it, Michael knew. Anyone could, even his brother. But Father Patrick never said anything

about having someone else do it for you. It seemed even worse. Was Scott going to hell for Joey's stupid, fat fingers?

Michael's family were Russian Orthodox. Perhaps Joey and his family did things differently, those Irish Catholics over in the suburbs. Joey's father was a businessman, so they could afford living somewhere other than the cramped houses in the Bottoms. They had moved into town with a silly white car, and everyone laughed at them. Within a week the ore dust from the mill turned it red, destroying the paint no matter how many times Mr. O'Leary washed it.

The movie seemed to play forever. Michael only half-watched it, just wanting to go home and forget that tonight ever happened. Not even a resounding shout of "Freaks!" as the title character cried out, betrayed, served to rouse his interests. His brother started the car right after, leaving before the credits rolled. They'd almost driven away with the speaker still in the car, before Joey said something and unhooked it.

#

When they left Scott muttered something about wanting to beat the post-movie rush, but no one spoke up in protest. Michael watched his brother grip the steering wheel tightly. He was breathing hard in the dense quiet of the car. Was it Joey's fault, or his? Michael was too scared to ask. He slid down in the seat, even after they had sped out of the lot and were swerving with the turns on the hillsides. They moved down the steep hills that flowed into the South banks of the Monongahela River. Moonlight reflected on the black surface of the Mon, rippling and dashing forward with their own movement. The car moved and the light sped to meet them. If only he could run away, as fast as the slivers of light did on the crests of the small waves.

A sunken tree branch caressed the hood of the Cadillac with screeching fingers, and they all jumped. The barren trees that lined Carnegie Lane were all reaching out to touch them, and the brisk October wind whistled that they were all damned.

When they reached Joey's house, the redhead unbuckled his seatbelt so quickly that his arms jiggled. Michael watched him turn to look at his brother and, meeting no response, wordlessly got out. The door slammed harshly, and they both watched for a moment in silence as Joey hurried into his house. He almost tripped over the empty dog chain snaked in the stone path, and Michael snickered. The noise animated Scott, who whipped around with a soulless curse.

"What did I tell ya?" Scott demanded, frowning. "*Shut up*. Look, you can't tell anyone about tonight, y'hear me? Not mom and dad, not Father Patrick, nobody," his voice strangled, before coming out in a groaning croak, "they'll kill Joey. They'll kill me, d'you understand?"

"Yes," Michael said softly.

But he didn't. They wouldn't hurt him if he confessed to it. Father Patrick didn't beat him for what he said in confession, after all. And even if he didn't and their father found out, Andrew Timko would just give him a beating. Sure, he used the thick leather belt, but Scott had taken those before. The principal used a flat ruler if you did something wrong at school, and it was worse because everyone could hear it over the announcement speakers.

"Good. Just remember that, okay? Please?"

"I will." Michael looked up at his brother again, not used to hearing *his* voice crack. Scott was always strong; he played baseball for the league. With the mill work, his muscles got even bigger. Stick-limbed and graceless, Michael looked nothing like his older brother, save the mess of dark hair and bright eyes. His brother's eyes were wide now, under thick, furrowed brows, and Michael knew he was scared. His big, strong brother, the one everyone called The Bull, was scared. "I'm sorry, Scott. Please don't be mad at me."

"I'm not," Scott promised quickly. Too quickly.

Michael wasn't sure. His arm throbbed vaguely, the ghost of his brother's hand squeezing once more. They said nothing after that. Nothing on the ride home, wordlessly throwing the wasted food out the window. Nothing when they pulled into the driveway, seeing the kitchen light on. Their mother greeted them with an indifferent question about whether they had a good time, followed by an order to go to bed. It wasn't too late, but for once Michael didn't argue. Instead he plodded behind Scott up the stairs to their shared room. He gazed at his brother's broad back and slumped shoulders, waiting for him to say something. Anything. Scott turned off the lights as soon as they pulled out their pajamas, undressing in the dark. They groped their way into them, and clambered onto the matching beds.

Michael watched his brother as his eyes adjusted, and for a moment they stared at each other, unwavering. Then Scott flipped over with a grunt, facing the door. Every time he closed his eyes, Michael saw Joey's meaty hands. They weren't reaching for his brother, but for *him*. He almost gagged at the thought.

Last year Scott punched Danny Hollyer in the face for calling their father a drunk. So why didn't he kick the crap out of Joey? Supposedly Danny Hollyer's cheek busted open; he got a black eye, and they even said he lost teeth. Then he cried so hard that everyone called him 'Danny Holler' now. Michael had gone to the field where it happened, but couldn't find any teeth. All of the other boys playing ball after school had sided with Scott. Even though everyone in town knew before

supper, no one called to complain or cause a fuss. The neighborhood hated Danny, a loud-mouthed bully who stuck his crooked nose into everybody's business. He was a neb nose. Michael didn't understand how he could hurt Danny, a stupid bully, when he couldn't hurt Joey—a sinner going straight to hell. At that moment, Michael wished he could have. If he were as big as Scott, then *he* would've broken those stupid fingers. *He* would've punched Joey in his ugly face, until it was as ruined as his dad's stupid stained white car.

#

Almost nothing had changed after the drive-in incident. Michael never breathed a word, not once during the following months. Scott stopped hanging out with Joey. The redhead stopped showing up after dinner, hopeful like a stray, and they were never seen together in the hallways at school. Scott got quieter, and started spending more time with guys from the mill. They would sneak down to the riverbank and drink from twisted paper bags. He was probably there tonight, too. Michael didn't want to know what else they might be doing; they seemed even worse than Joey O'Leary.

"Stop staring at the book and read," his mother said thickly. She stood over him at the kitchen table while he did his homework.

"Sorry," he mumbled. He couldn't help being distracted. It was work for his history class, and they were doing a chapter on local history. It was all boring, the stuff they learned about Andrew Carnegie, with his mills and his libraries. He'd heard it all before. Michael hated reading about history or, even worse, writing about it. Who cared about dead people?

"Your grandfather, he was lucky to have a sixth grade education," his mother reminded him. "You be good like your brother, and you can graduate too. It's more than I got, and it's more than your grandfather got. Remember that."

The lines were a mantra, repeated at least once a week over this table. All he had to do was be like his brother, and he would graduate and get a job. *But I don't want to be like him*, he wanted to say. He's stupid and lets boys like Joey O'Leary touch him. Maybe he let all kinds of boys touch him. Sometimes that was all Michael worried about, focusing on the "friends" he saw with Scott at school, how he never really talked to girls. Sure, they all gave him pretty looks, but he never so much as said 'hello' to them. Michael would watch his older brother in the hallways, and a burning sensation filled somewhere behind his navel. His palms would get sweaty. He was guilty of omission, having sputtered and lied at the last confession. Father Patrick probably knew he was lying. The priest's craggy face was always clouded with concern.

"Are you listening to me?" His mother's demand jolted through him.

"Yes, I'm listening," Michael replied quickly.

So long as he continued to write something down, Michael's mother wouldn't lecture him. The textbook had pictures of smug, dead soldiers in them. The battles were already over, so Michael didn't see why they needed to keep talking about them. Michael wrote slowly as a siren wailed in the distance.

"That's probably old Mrs. Gledich," Margaret Timko said, stealing to the window and parting the lace curtains. She was like every other mother and gossipy old woman in town, Michael thought. All caught up in what so-and-so was up to. "She's been having such trouble since Vito died," his mother reminded him. They were all waiting for Mrs. Gledich to die.

Michael concentrated on his homework again.

#

They didn't get a call from the hospital until Scott was already dead.

He'd been beaten to death, they were told, but Michael wasn't allowed to see the body. The police asked him questions, but he didn't know anything about who his brother had been with, or what he'd been doing. Michael knew it had been men from the mill, maybe even seniors from school, but Scott had never told them anything the incident.

Do you know anyone who would...would shove a pipe inside him?

The policeman had tried to keep his voice down, but he still heard him. His parents were baffled, almost beyond tears. But he was guilty of omission again, and nothing happened.

The tense weeks turned into slow, plodding months, and even with the police investigation, no one was ever caught. Their close neighborhood was filled with busybodies and not a name was spoken.

Just a word: *faggot*.

Its tendrils snaked out until it reached every corner of North Braddock. Michael thought he knew what it meant, but wasn't completely sure. His classmates said it in the halls, before looking at him. No one spoke to him anymore. Even the teachers preferred to leave him alone, or else spoke in hushed voices like he was going to die too.

He felt like he was going to die when he packed Scott's things away in a cardboard box. Scott had been dead for months, and Michael's parents still couldn't come into their shared room. He was asked to put the belongings—and his old clothes—in two piles. The clothes would be donated, and Michael was promised new clothes. He would be glad to have shoes that fit, but he didn't want to give away the rest. Even if he was too small for all of it.

The watch on the nightstand, Scott's brush, his books. They were too powerful, these relics that reduced grown-ups to tears and sent his father to the Hunky Club every night. Michael stuffed them all in a big cardboard box. He left the comic books out, far too valuable to get stuffed away. They had shared most of them, anyway. Captain America, Nick Fury and his Howling Commandos. These were far too important to get shoved in the attic. He stopped and looked at them, thumbing through the worn pages.

A photograph fell out, but it wasn't one of his. Scott's face grinned up at him, making his chest constrict until he felt he could get no more air. It was a picture of Scott and Joey together, both in their baseball uniforms. The corners were bent and worn, but it had been placed reverently between the panels of their favorite heroes. Scott's arm was flung around Joey's shoulders, and he had a grin that hadn't existed since the Ardmore. No one would ever see that smile again. Michael didn't want this picture, but he didn't throw it away. Instead, he set it down on the dresser. Maybe he would go over to Joey's house and give it to him. If Joey still wanted it. He wasn't sure. Maybe no one wanted to own this brief remnant of a dead boy's happiness. Still, he set it down on the dresser carefully.

One day after school, Michael found himself going in the opposite direction. It was a bleak day, and his sneakers crunched over the gravel on the alley between yards. Compact yards and petite sheds framed either side of him, glaring in their soot-covered intensity. He knew nine out of ten occupants on every side, and silently named them as he went. He rubbed at the corner of Scott's picture in his pocket. It was supposed to stay on the dresser, but Michael couldn't help but keep it with him. When he finally got to Joey's house, he didn't see the car in the driveway, but there was a light on in the kitchen. He didn't even get past the rusty gate before a shock of red hair came into his line of sight. Joey was closing the back door behind him and hurrying up to meet him.

"What are you doing here?" Joey asked, keeping his voice down and looking around. There was no one there, but that didn't mean that no one was watching.

"You never came by the house," Michael said simply, looking up at him. The other boy was taller, and there was a splash of freckles across his nose. Had his brother liked them?

"I didn't think you guys would want to see me anymore," Joey replied, shrugging. He kept his hands in his pockets.

"They don't know about you," Michael told him. Joey shushed him with a sharp look. But then he relaxed, and his expression was kinder.

"I'm sorry. About your brother," Joey said softly.

"Thanks," Michael replied. "I'm sorry too. I brought something for you." Perhaps he had meant to give it to Joey all along. The photograph was not meant to be his. They had others of Scott by himself at the house, now displayed on every surface in mourning. Of all the things he could not have, Michael didn't have the heart to deny him this. "I think Scott would've wanted you to have it." The photograph was slightly more crinkled at the edges, and bowed, but Joey wouldn't care.

When he handed the photograph over, Michael saw he was right. Joey held it in his hands, smoothing the edges and smiling softly.

"He was a good player," Joey said, after a moment. It didn't seem like he was speaking to Michael at all, merely repeating what they all knew. The two boys stood looking at the pale imitation of Scott with a wide smile on his face, perfectly carefree.

"He was," Michael said after a moment, feeling himself start to cry. It was embarrassing; his father told him to never cry in front of other people, and here he was in front of Joey who would probably think he was an even bigger sissy. He bit his lip and rubbed furiously at his eyes, until Michael felt himself enveloped by Joey's big arms.

"It's okay," Joey told him, rubbing his back with one hand. Michael settled into him and buried his nose in the other boy's flannel shirt. "I miss him, too."

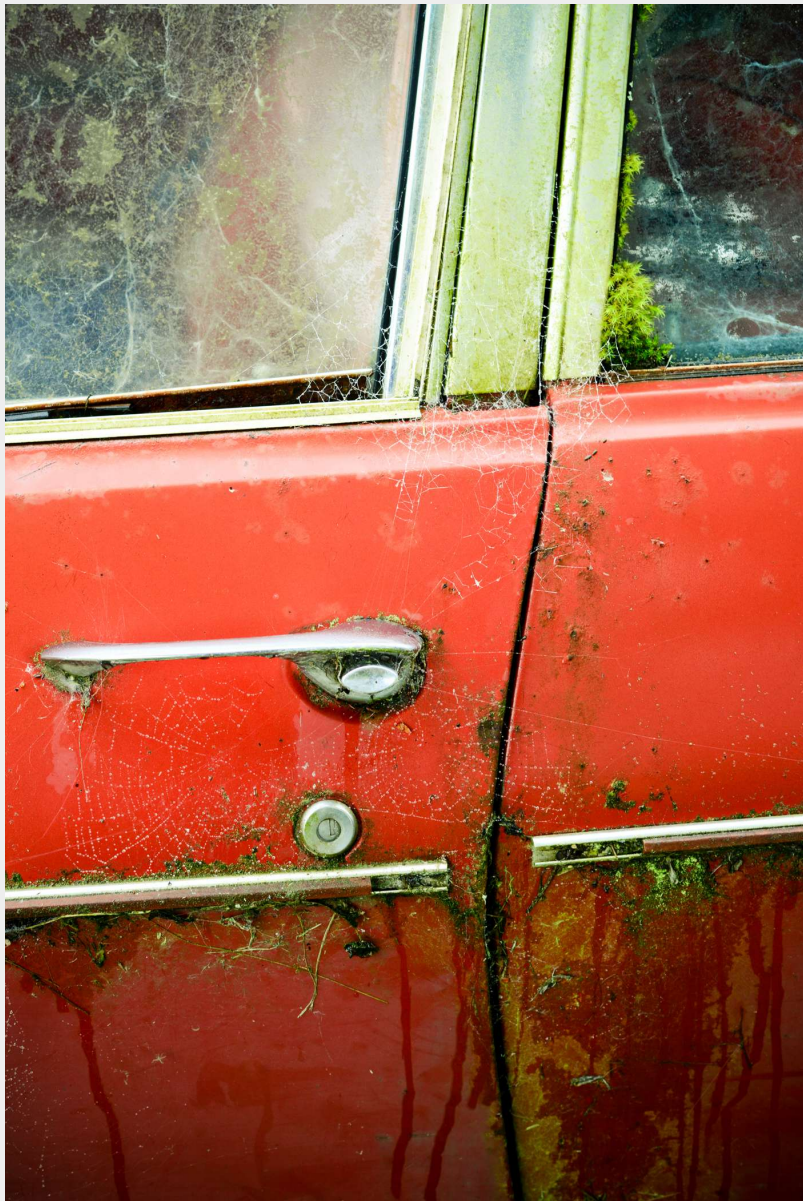
"Yeah," Michael said softly, voice muffled. He leaned into the older boy and cried, not caring who saw them from the rows of dirty, narrow houses.

Tagen Towsley Baker is from the rural town of Mackay, Idaho. She received her BFA in Art from Idaho State University and her MA in English from Weber State University. Her work centers on her research interests in water ethics, sustainability, image text relations, and small farms. Her photography and poetry have appeared in *Lullwater Review*, *Exit 13*, *Chaparral*, and more. She resides in her 130 year old house in Millville, UT with her husband, a very fluffy great pyrenees, and a Commander Shepard in the form of a husky-mutt.



The Departure

This photograph was taken in an alleyway of my hometown, Mackay, Idaho. The summer lawn and golden hour provide the perfect setting for afternoon fishing trip. Weather worn, the rowboat is hitched to the back of the 1952 Chevy—ready for departure.



Red Nova: Warreton, OR

One block from the Oregon Coast sits a small row of houses on a lake. Lavender plants spill from planters, a sprinkler is attached to the roof of a cottage on the corner. The sprinkler water arcs across the lawn, droplets of water drumming the metal roof of a red nova.



Barbies on a Ledge

In an old barn in St. Helens, Oregon sits a band of Barbies on a ledge. Their expressions are social, like they are thinking about going out for an afternoon picnic. The Barbie's cemented smiles are central to the composition, contrasting dusty paint rollers, cobwebs, and the faint dawn light of another neglected day.



Bed of Bones

Behind a gray biker bar that used to be a gas station is a bed of bones. Various joints, skulls, and teeth are interwoven with the metal springs of a rusted out mattress. The stark whites of the skeletal remains are soft and worn juxtaposed with sharp tendrils of rusted steel.

G.A. Shepard lives in Fort Smith, Arkansas with his wife and two high-energy kids. He has been published in Flash Fiction Magazine and writes fiction out of a coat closet he converted into an office.

STALL

G.A. Shepard

The blurry figure in front of him moved aside and Brian took his place under the order-here sign. The barista's silhouette, a girl with long hair pulled back in a ponytail, stood waiting behind the counter, but Brian looked passed her to the happy-face drawing on the chalkboard menu behind her. Its smile became animated, ready to start their dialogue.

"Hi Brian, do you want your Grande Americano?" the happy, chalk-face asked with the voice of the barista.

"No, not today," He smiled. "A hot chamomile tea please."

"Can I get you anything else?" The chalk-face winked at him.

Brian glanced down to find the barista's name tag. Decorative pins of old eighties movies, the Princess Bride and E.T, surrounded the name Anne. His chest tightened and his face grew hot. "No thank you Anne. Just the tea," he said. He slid a five dollar bill forward and turned to find a path around the line of people that stood waiting to order. His heart pounding, he stared at the ground and focused on his breathing. Controlled breaths in through his nose and slowly out his mouth. The people blurred into dark silhouettes, the pressure in his chest subsided, and his face cooled.

He chose the table closest to the bathroom and sat in the seat with the restroom in his line of sight. He slid his hand into his jacket pocket, squeezed a bottle of pills. He'd take his pills as soon as he had his tea. His date would show up in a half hour, and his pills would last about 90 minutes. If he timed it right, he wouldn't have to make an early exit.

Silhouettes past by his table, moving around the coffee shop, out the doors, in the doors, to the coffee bar line, and to the bathrooms. He noticed them through his peripherals and kept his focus averted. But then one of the silhouettes slid into the seat across from him.

"Brian?"

Brian's chest constricted. He kept his eyes trained on the tabletop. "Sara? I wasn't--"

"Didn't you see me over there waving like an idiot? I was saving us the sofa by the..." She moved to get up but then slumped back into the seat. "That couple just stole it." She looked around.

"This is fine I guess."

His pills were in his pocket. He hadn't taken one yet. He had been waiting for his tea. Even if he had taken a pill it would be twenty-seven minutes before he'd be able to interact with her directly. He grasped the pill bottle from the outside of his jacket. His head grew hot.

"You're late," she said. "Just kidding." She giggled and touched his hand that lay palm down on the table.

Brian shot up out of his seat. "Excuse me," he said to the back of Sara's chair. His heart shook his body with each pounding beat. He pulled air in through his nose, and pushed it out through pursed lips, as he walked as normally as he could into the men's bathroom locking the door behind him.

He fumbled the bottle of pills from his jacket pocket, spun the cap and dumped half of the chalky-white pills into his hand. He funneled all but one back into the bottle, a few bounced off the rim and skipped across the floor. He smacked his mouth with his palm but the pill stuck to his hand, so he took it with his teeth and tongue. He washed it down with handfuls of sink water, but the taste of dry pill and salt from his palm remained in his mouth. He'd feel the effects of the pill in twenty-seven minutes. How long could he wait in here? How long would she wait out there?

#

Brian wanted to share Voltron with his kindergarten class, ever since prying it from its box two months ago on his sixth birthday. It came to school in his backpack each week on share day. And at the end of share time his teacher, Mrs. Kesner, would ask him if he'd brought anything to share. The other kids would turn their heads, aiming their faces at him. He'd wipe the tears from his cheeks and shake his head. *Please look away.* His lips would move. His thoughts almost audible. *Please, stop looking at me.* By the third week he started leaving his backpack in his

cubby, and Mrs. Kesner stopped calling on him. But today would be different. He had practiced all weekend, and his mom had coached him.

Just stare at Voltron. Talk to Voltron.

They gathered on the alphabet rug. Brian plopped down on the letter E, his backpack resting in his lap. He squeezed the robot's body through the green, heavy canvas.

He stared at the carpet in front of his shoes, listening to his other classmates' shares. Every week there were a few Barbies and Tonka trucks, but today there was also a rock with googly eyes, and a lost tooth that would go under a pillow at bedtime. Nothing as good as Voltron. Shiny chromed plastic, bright reds, glossy black, and hands that looked like the jaws of fierce robot lions.

"Is there anyone else that brought something to share?" Mrs. Kesner asked.

His arms tensed around his green backpack, then he raised his hand up just above his shoulder.

The girl next to him shouted. "Brian's got something."

He cringed and retracted his hand.

"Brian?" Mrs. Kesner said. "Oh, wonderful." Her hands clapped together. "Come on up Brian."

Brian started to hyperventilate. He heard his mom's voice in his head. *If you start breathing fast, just close your eyes and breathe in through your nose, then blow it out in a silent whistle.* His breath hitched, but he was controlling it.

"Brian?" his teacher said. "Do you have something for show and tell?"

Brian nodded but kept his eyes trained on his backpack's zipper. He pushed himself up then walked around the mass of children who spread out across the floor. Stepping into position beside Mrs. Kesner, he fumbled with the backpack's zipper, opening it enough to plunge his arm down to the bottom. He pulled Voltron out and let his backpack fall to the ground.

He stared at Voltron's face picturing the toy robot's lips moving, hearing his robot voice in his mind. *"Hi Brian."*

Although Mrs. Kesner was speaking right next to him, her voice sounded foggy and distant. "That's a shiny toy. Can you tell us about him?" She said.

Voltron turned his head towards Mrs. Kesner and then back to Brian. *"Brian, I can't remember who I am or how you got me. Can you tell me?"* Voltron said.

"This is Voltron-- "

"Can you speak up Brian, so that everyone can hear," Mrs. Kesner interrupted.

Brian's face and neck warmed, and his hands shook.

"I can't hear you Brian, just a little louder," Voltron said.

"This is Voltron, I got him for my birthday."

A few of the boys gasped. "Can you pass him around so we can see him?" one of the boys asked.

Brian's breathing quickened, his hands were moist with sweat.

"Brian, is it all right if we pass your toy around for everyone to see, or would you like to walk around to each of your classmates so that they can get a closer look?" Mrs. Kesner asked.

The kids sitting on the ground in front of him came into focus. Their eyes were on him, demanding he say something. The heat swelled in his arms, his chest, and his face.

"Brian, are you feeling okay?" Mrs. Kesner's hand touched his shoulder.

A flood of saliva pooled in his mouth, the room spun, and Brian threw up.

The children in the splash zone screamed.

#

Every few minutes Brian cracked the bathroom door and peaked out to make sure Sara hadn't left yet, and see if his tea was waiting at the bar. When he saw his tea, he beelined for the bar, grabbed the white to-go cup, and took his seat across from Sara. She did most of the talking, but it was the white to-go cup that Brian spoke to.

The plastic lid and the rim of the cup made a mouth that talked to Brian in Sara's voice.

"What kind of work do you do?" the cup asked.

"I work from home as a data analyst for a market research firm," Brian said.

"I work from home too," the cup said. It slapped its lid with the green paper that dangled from the string of the tea bag. "I've always been really shy, so I thought that my party planning business would force me to come out of my shell." The green paper moved to the cup's mouth to conceal its giggle the long string acting as an arm.

She must have put *shy* and *works from home* in her profile. Although the dating site claimed to be scientific, Brian thought it was more a matter of how many of the same boxes got checked. Sara had no idea what shy was.

"So, I know we were only planning on a coffee date but there is this new bar I want to check out. Maybe we could go over there a bit later. I love dancing." The plastic cup's mouth couldn't get the words out fast enough. "Last Friday I was still dancing when the lights came on at *The Port Bow*. They have these two platforms with dance poles in the middle. They call them crow's nests. I don't know why. Everything is like sea themed, so you'd think it would be a seagull nest. But anyway, usually only the servers get to dance in there, but at the end of the night, they were closing, and the lights came on and the bouncers were like *If you're not staff or pole dancers get out*. So you know what I did?" The top of the cup wagged back and forth, its tea string paper now a fist resting on its hip. "I got up in the crow's nest and started spinning around on that pole."

Brian pictured the white to-go cup spinning around a chrome pole, complete with mirror ball and smoke machine. Twisting its top half like it was looking over its shoulder while twerking. Brian laughed.

Sara's foot touched his leg under the table and he jumped.

"Are you okay Brian?" Sara asked. The rim and lid of the cup weren't moving anymore.

"Yeah, I'm okay." He was now very aware of the woman sitting across from him. His chest tightened. His face flushed.

"Brian what's wrong with you? You haven't looked at me once the whole time I've been here."

He looked at his watch. Just a few more minutes. He focused on his cup and thought of the picture from Sara's dating profile. "I think your green eyes are very pretty."

In his peripherals he saw her slip backwards into her chair. Her arms crossed. "I used to wear contacts okay? I had LASIKs." Her voice raised. "You don't look exactly like your picture either you

know."

He could taste the bile rising to his throat. "Excuse me for a moment." His chair shot backwards as he jumped up and bolted for the restroom.

#

Brian stood next to his mom's bed, his hair and pajamas damp from sweat.

"What's wrong honey?" his mom asked. The green numbers of her alarm clock illuminated her face.

"I had a bad dream." He sniffed and wiped his face with his pajama-sleeve.

Earlier that evening, they had watched ET the Extra-Terrestrial. Brian had slowly burrowed his way under the couch cushions before asking his mom if they could take a break.

"It was just a movie honey." She propped her head up with one arm and brushed his wet hair away from his forehead with her other hand.

"But it could happen," he said.

"Well it's not going to happen." She lifted her sheet and Brian climbed in next to her. He snuggled in close to his mom and lay quietly for a few minutes.

"Mommy?" he whispered.

"Hmm?"

"I dreamed that I could talk to this other kid just like I was talking to you, and then these people came and took him away." His voice wavered.

She gave him a squeeze. "I have that same dream about you, but no one ever takes your friend away."

He sniffed. "Really?"

"Yup, here, I'll let you borrow my dream." She mimed cracking an egg on his head, then dragged her fingers across his scalp, down his face, then tickled underneath his chin.

He squirmed. "Okay, okay, I got it."

"Are you sure? I better do it again?" She tickled him some more.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure!" He tried to catch his breath.

His mom stop tickling him and pulled him in for another hug. "Don't worry sweetie, talking to the other kids will get easier. You're just going through a phase."

#

The pressure in Brian's chest melted away, as did the tension in his face and shoulders. The pills had kicked in. He felt lighter, and a little dizzy. The good kind of dizzy. Maybe he could salvage this date. He opened the bathroom door. Sara was gone.

He returned to the table where his to-go cup waited for him, but it was no longer dancing and talking. He sat down, looked out the window at the parking lot, and reached for his tea--

A woman's hand covered the lid before he could bring it to his lips. "Don't drink that," she said. Her voice was the same as the happy, chalk-face that had taken his order. Anne. Her fingers grazed his index finger as she took the cup from him. The memory of her touch lingered as she took his drink and threw it in the trash can.

The ET pin, a full moon with Elliott on his bicycle and ET in the front basket, dangled from the rolled up green apron that was half stuffed in her purse.

"Do you have a problem with people drinking cold tea?" Brian asked.

"I'll get you another one. That girl spit in it," Anne said.

Brian laughed. "Thank you, but I was done with it anyway."

"Does that happen to you a lot?" she asked.

"No, not a lot," he smiled at her. Her eyes were light blue and brightened when she smiled back at him.

"It's for the best." She looked out the window to the parking lot. "She's a caramel mocha frappuccino with whip and caramel sauce." She turned to him. "You're a Grande Americano. It

would've never worked out."

He smiled. "Is that so? And what are you?"

"I'm a hot chamomile tea." She winked. "See you tomorrow Brian."

Brian watched her as she pushed through the door and walked around the building. He thought of her eyes and her smile. Tomorrow, he would take his pills before leaving his apartment.

William Ogden Haynes is a poet and author of short fiction from Alabama who was born in Michigan and grew up a military brat. He has published three collections of poetry (Points of Interest; Uncommon Pursuits and Carvings) and one book of short stories (Youthful Indiscretions) all available on Amazon.com. Over a hundred and twenty of his poems and short stories have appeared in literary journals and his work is frequently anthologized.

CPR

William Ogden Haynes

Only two of us showed up that night for the CPR course
at East Alabama Medical Center, me and a slight woman
of about seventy-five. I went to the training because we

just had a child and I wanted to be prepared in case he
disappeared beneath the surface of a swimming pool
or nearby lake. The old woman said her husband

recently had a heart attack and she wanted to be able
to bring him back if he ever had another one. The
EMTs demonstrated how to do the chest compressions

and mouth-to-mouth breathing on an electronic
mannequin that beeped if your chest compressions
were hard enough. It wasn't difficult for me to

learn the rhythm of the ratio of compressions
to breaths and after twenty minutes, they said I
had the procedure down and it was the woman's turn.

She had trouble getting on her knees next to
the mannequin, but she did it, placing her hands
in just the right spot on its chest. As she began

to push, no one heard a beep and the EMT told her to push harder, that CPR would do no good unless the compressions were deep enough. Not

only did the mannequin remain silent, but the rhythm of her pushing was not fast enough and she was clearly tired after only a few minutes. Finally the EMT told

her that she was not strong enough to do CPR. And then she began to cry, hugging the mannequin as if it were the husband she will be unable to save.

Dreams in Second Hand Smoke

William Ogden Haynes

She waits in the Walmart parking lot, windows
rolled up in the decades old Saturn, headlamps
cloudy as cataracts, trim above the wheel well

torqued like a spit curl. It's a cold day for the
south, forty degrees and the windows steam
up because she is trying to save gas with the

heater off. Her husband has gone to buy a case
of motor oil, a carton of Dorals, half a gallon
of milk and a package of diapers. He didn't

want to take the kids because they would slow
him down, so she sits with them, the baby in a
car seat in the back and the toddler in the front

playing with the steering wheel. She cracks the
passenger window an inch to flick the ashes from
her cigarette onto the asphalt. Between the condensation

on the windows and the ambient smoke, the occupants
of the old car are barely visible. The toddler munches
on a butter cookie and the baby rhythmically sucks a

pacifier. She makes absent-minded conversation with
the older one, putting her arm over the seat back to let
the baby grab her finger. It was only five years ago she

was single, headed for cosmetology school with no responsibilities. Now, owning a hair salon is just a dream and she fights against another pregnancy.

The husband knocking on the window startles her.
As the car door opens smoke drifts out into the cool air in a haze smelling of nicotine and soiled diapers.

Cassandra Sims Knight lives in Portland, Oregon where she likes to write and take pictures. She edits a literary magazine for the Seattle nonprofit Old Growth Northwest and her work has appeared in Five Stop Story, 5923 Quarterly, and Drunk Monkeys. You can follow her on twitter or Instagram @scifisybil.



Ghost Tunnel

Taken on Snoqualmie Pass in Washington by an old abandoned train tunnel, which is definitely more unsettling at night. It's just the perfect setting for a ghost story. We lit the shot with our cell phones, which gave it this eerie coloring.



Infrared Vines

Taken in Pittsburgh, PA using infrared 35mm film. Infrared film captures light that the human eye cannot detect. The house was abandoned and covered in vines, which look like they're glowing.

We think of abandoned places as dead, but when nature starts to take over, nothing could be further from the truth.

Amanda McTigue's debut novel GOING TO SOLACE was named a Best Read of 2012 by public radio KRCB's literary program "Word by Word." Recent short stories have appeared in Literally Stories and 99 Pine Street. Her works for theater have been produced at Carnegie Hall and the Minnesota Opera. She just got back from the remote Sierra Maestra mountains of Cuba researching her second novel, MONKEY BOTTOM. Find her at www.amandamctigue.com, via FB, or tweet @amctigue

The Alpine Mall

Amanda McTigue

Oh, that's just great. Gabby's in front of me in line. I know she's going to misbehave. All I can see is her tired Brillo hair, a mess of rusted wire larded with what looks like the leavings of breakfast—grits and cracker crumbs woven in there somehow—her doughy backside squeezed out to the wheels of her chair she's so too-big for it. I can't see her eyes, don't need to. When she starts rolling like this, I know she's fixing to do something she shouldn't.

Gabby Waddell is my best friend, and I can't stand her. She drives me bats. On the other hand, she's all I have. Which tells you something about everybody else.

It's Treat Day at the mall. This week, Miss Jincey's set our candy up on cardboard boxes in front of Vitamin World. This is what we get to do on Sundays if we behave all week. We go to the mall and get our goodies.

We're the only folks who do. The hale, the ambulatory, they don't bother. Mind you, they've come through already. That first all-clear sounded after the Rain, and out of the woodwork they flew, fancy people from big towns like Pineville and Beech Mountain right on down to the ridge-top loners. Anybody with a truck was out making the rounds, the mall an obvious target. They stripped what they could and hauled it away. Left the shell for feebs like us.

Lord knows, we were raring to get in on the action, but Miss Jincey said, "How the hell are you going to do that in your chairs, girls?" (She calls us "girls" even though we've all lived well past our expiration dates.) Nobody was happy about it, but we hunkered down in our rest-home-sweet-rest-

home to wait out the locusts, and, sure enough, no one bothered to bother with us. I guess there's not much of a black market for used bedpans or industrial air freshener.

When things got quiet—days quiet, no rain, no trucks—Miss Jincey took the van down the mountain. Parked over near Sears and hit our once-mall for a nose around. Turns out, she's a good noser, our Jincey. She found a storage area off one of the service hallways by the restrooms. The door was wide open, she said—so much for security locks—shelves turned, things tossed—but back behind some ventilation units, she uncovered a stash. Candy. Piles of candy. Like, a mall's worth. Most of it themed with pumpkins and ghosts. Apparently back before the Rain, the enlightened managers of our ever-loving Alpine Mall were busy scamming kids, recycling year-old, if not *years*-old, Halloween candy. Talk about lame.

Now it's Jincey doing the scamming, but we don't care. We go bumper to bumper every week in our wheelchairs fighting over the stuff.

"Dawdle at your peril, girls. Get your goodies and roll!" Miss Jincey's windmilling like a traffic cop today, paddling her matchstick arms down between Gabby and Melvine and what looks like a Baby Ruth that's going back and forth between them.

"I got it!"

"My dibs!"

Honestly, these two! One of them always has to be first out of the van. The rule is, we can't go into the mall until everyone's unloaded, so then it's all about who beats who to the entrance, and Gabby's really good in her chair. Melvine too. It's not just a matter of upper body strength; their knees are good and their shoes have solid toes, so they can really push for speed, racing each other to the door, angling to block whoever's behind.

Today Gabby got there first, but it hardly matters, because as soon as they're indoors, it's a whole other race to the candy, and then the battle over who gets what. I've seen Melvine draw blood. She'll bite right through the foil on a Milky Way to claim the bar inside. Once she was so hell-bent she forgot Gabby's hand was there. She goes *Chomp*, and then *Yuck*, because instead of candy, she got the skin off a knuckle. *Gross*. Then nobody would eat the damn thing. Who wants a Milky Way soaked in someone else's saliva?

This is why I go last. I'm happy to eat the crap no one wants. It takes me two seconds to pick my treats and no knuckle bites, thank you very much. Is this not what it means to be a grown-up?

Gabby cranes around to wink at me. "It's like her chin is trying to eat her nose." She's talking about Melvine whose cheeks swell up around her eyes the second she gets mad.

Gabby has a way of putting things.

"Let her have it," I say, "it's just a candy bar." Like Gabby ever listens to me. She knows as well as I do: push Miss Jincey too far, and we'll all get packed back in the van and driven up the mountain, back to the world of same-old, same-old, and nobody wants that, not for anything, so right away everyone starts making things worse by yelling for everyone else to stop yelling. Everyone but me, that is. I already have my treats.

We're allowed ten. Since everything's inedible anyway, I go for everybody's least favorite: the fruit-and nut bars. Their honey-goo, the kluge that binds them, has years-now melted and re-formed into the shapes of their wrappers with labels we were warned about in nursing school: ALL NATURAL, FARM FRESH, HEALTHY CHOICE. Healthy, my ass.

Once upon a time, I'd thought about taking the dietician route. It seemed like maybe I'd enjoy a career straightening people out about what exactly constitutes a healthy choice. That was back when people were doing well enough to want to live longer, old folks running like tops and motivated to stay that way.

Somehow our combined *shushing* actually ends up *shushing* us, and Miss Jincey—as always for reasons she doesn't feel she has to share with anyone due the to inescapable fact that we need her, so she calls the shots—Miss Jincey awards the single, pathetic Baby Ruth in question—an actual *baby* Baby Ruth—to Melvine who waves it for all to see. Cue some histrionic pouting by Gabby. She's my friend and I don't like to see her upset, but in this case she's made her own bed.

We reach for what's left. Suelle piles Necco's on her lap. No one ever fights her for those. There's some scrambling for the few remaining Jelly Bellys, but, in general, things quiet down. Then we all go to the plate glass and line ourselves up wheelchair to wheelchair. This is the real treat on Treat Day. We go to the mall and get our goodies and sit and look out the big window.

For me, it's a memory of the airport, of being with dad on "his day" and driving out Old 70 to the Pisgah Creek Municipal Flyway to kill the hours he was stuck with us before he could take us home. We're talking not much more than a windsock and a shack and a gash of asphalt masquerading as a runway where, at best, a few dinky plane-lets rose and fell from time to time, but they seemed like rockets to my brother and me. Our neighbor, Mr. Boggs, eked a living at the luncheonette in that shack making melted cheese for the folks who came through including mostly travelers, sure, but also retired guys and the occasional dad-with-kids. It was a big deal, standing at

the glass with our sandwiches in hand (we could eat them by the window as long as we used a napkin), waiting for a plane—just one!—to take off or land, squealing when something finally appeared out of the clouds. Dad sat and drank beer and talked Mr. Boggs's ear off. We paid them no mind. To kids, blank skies are never boring when a plane is on the way.

This mall window is big like that one, only here nothing takes off, nothing lands. It's only Rainbow Ridge out there as far as the eye can see with what's left of its balsam and the remains of some cottages, once tucked into the firs, now exposed. That's our vista. No trace of luncheonettes or dads or brothers. Nothing to remember them by.

Up close, the van sits pretty much in the same spot every week next to the Rotunda entrance. The parking lot, once black, has grayed, its used-to-be white stripes threading overtop like chain stitches on a crazy quilt. Somewhere back in prehistory a few bits of grass came through. Now they're curled, brown. One thing we do sometimes is count the stalks along the window and compare our numbers, though Miss Jincey discourages this since it can lead to more arguing.

At the far edge of the lot is the feeder road that splits to the two anchor stores lined by a piddling cinder block wall. Beyond that, dirt rises. What's left of the forest lies on its side. Look a little higher and you see our road climbing to Green Acres. Unbelievable, right? GREEN ACRES hangs out front of the nursing home. Born a motel, then rehabbed for rehab, buildings don't come much drabber. On the other hand, that's why it's standing. Blessed be concrete, for it shall inherit the earth.

"Scoot over." I pull in at the end of the line of wheelchairs next to Gabby. Through the window, we watch a sludge of illumination clear the parking lot, bleeding backward from crack to crack.

"The light looks like it's fainting."

No kidding, Gabby has a way of putting things.

"There's a ruckus of clouds today."

She's right. It's not the usual dense cover. Things below are dimming and brightening as things above shift. It gives us something to look at for a change since usually there's nothing, and we're used to that, so we don't look *for* things anymore, we just look.

Then—*Ewww*!—Gabby's super-fat fingers with their way-too-small nails like mouse claws come flibbering around my left forearm.

"Get offa me!" I can feel how bony I am to her. I can feel *me* in her touch, that's why I don't like it.

She pulls on my arm—not my sleeve, my actual arm—separating the skin from what's left underneath as if—what? What's the plan here? She's trying to move my chair over sideways closer to her, which isn't going to happen, because these chairs only roll forward.

"Get your paws off me, you creep!" I say.

"I need your help."

"Quit it, will you!"

Now, oh my god, she's reached way over, palpating down my side with her fingers, trying to worm in at me somehow.

"Would you lay off?" I twist every part of me out of her grasp, back my chair up, huffing to make it clear I'm none too happy about the whole deal, then maneuver in wheel-to-wheel just to shut her up. Next thing, she's got a wad she's shoving straight at my butt, trying to wedge it under me, for Christ's sake—*Grody!*

"Hands off, pervert!"

I know what it is. It's those 3 Musketeers she loves. That's why Gabby looks like a butter sculpture wedged into her queen-sized chair. She likes to melt the Original Fun Size 12 Pack between her palms, then peel the tops off the wrappers and suck on them like a baby sucks a pacifier.

Well, she's outdone herself today. Ten's the limit, but she's got, I don't know, maybe eighteen or twenty Musketeers. She can't control those humongous hands of hers. Lord knows, I don't want to touch them—*sticky!*—and I sure as hell don't want to hide her candy.

"No way, José," I spit at her, swiping her hands away.

"Way, Joe-say," she spits right back, "Come on, help me out. I'm full up." Sure enough, her left thigh is already riding high with contraband.

"Hello? I'm not your mule!" For once, I really mean it. Normally, I give in, but today seems to be Stand Up For Yourself Day and I'm willing to say so, because she's gone all "Please-y please!" on me which drives me wild, she knows that.

Now here come her feet—*kick, kick*—at my footplate. She leans over, “Jincey didn’t refill the candy today.”

“So?”

“The treats aren’t going to last.”

“Duh! No thanks to you.” I point at the loot in her hands.

Oh boy, that does it. She sags. The Musketeers spill into her lap and right away I feel bad that she feels bad. I mean, maybe she was going to share them.

“I was going to *share* them,” she says. “But I guess you don’t want any.”

She crams the lot beneath her other leg. I hear plastic crackling. *lck*. I know everything will cook under there, maybe even boil.

And then there’s more crackling.

What is that?

The line of us in our chairs look around for the source. It’s been so long, none of us recognize the sound—like twigs hitting twigs.

Then we look out.

Whoa. The Rain.

Where’s the siren?

Holy shit. Where’s the siren?

It’s probably a good twenty seconds before the damn thing goes off, echoing up Rainbow Ridge from Pineville.

“A lot of good that would have done us!” Melvine yells over the blare. “We’d be toast by now.”

The siren rises and falls in a sickening rhythm. Then it dies.

Then rain. More rain. We can see the drops because they're big and yellow. When they land, they mist upward into spouts like fishes cresting the blacktop. With each drop there's a little hiss, or at least I imagine a hiss from my side of the glass.

Psss psss psss. I say it to myself, watching. Pretty soon, the others do too: *Psss psss psss.*

You can't see the gas. It would be better if it had a color like the water does, purple maybe, forming a layer to show you where you could breathe. At least, that would make the air more interesting.

Now Miss Jincey's on the run. She's the only one of us with two working legs, but this is not a woman who should hurry herself on any occasion given those rickety ankles. By the time she gets to us, she has to bend over and rub them, or try to, since she's so tightly strung she only gets as far as her knees. She's wheezing her outrage: "My god, what if we'd been unloading!"

"I know! Right?" everybody chimes in.

She slows to get a full breath. "What if we'd been out in the parking lot?"

All the girls are in a tizzy except Gabby who's smiling. Truth be told, I am too, because the fact is, we *aren't* in the parking lot, and rain means we can't go home, not yet. Rain means we get to stay at the mall for who knows how long, and the mall isn't any great shakes, but it isn't Green Acres either. When you're holed up somewhere 24/7, anywhere else looks like Thrill City.

"Can I count on you girls to stay put?"

Everybody's heads, chair-height, bob Yes happily.

Miss Jincey straightens, pushing off her knees. "Stay out of the candy." We know where she's headed. She's going for the radio in the emergency call box down by Forever 21.

"Jail break!" Gabby whispers straight at me. "We gotta go now!" She wheels 180, rolling out of the Rotunda, away from the window and the vista and the van down the main artery of the mall. I fall in behind. Like I say, she's my best friend. I won't hide her candy, but I follow her.

We get to the T that splits to the anchors, Sears down one way, the Hofbrau Haus down the other. She goes for the Hofbrau. Now we're where no one is supposed to be, moving at quite a clip for us since the concrete is mostly bare here, pocked with occasional adhesive where carpet used to be. There are still a few carts around, jammed up against the roll-downs. Otherwise, everything's gone except the signs that are too high to reach: PARTYTIME and FAYE KENWICK'S DOLLAR STORE.

I can see things the way they used to be as I go, shoppers with their lists—*Get in! Get out!*—bags stuffed with stuff, everyone rushing to rush that stuff home. Lord knows, the mall developers tried to make the place inviting with their *Alps to Appalachians* décor, lots of fake snowflakes and antlers, but this was never somewhere people came to hang out. I mean, we saw the fancy malls on TV with the big chains, more along the lines of Victoria's Secret, but here in the pitiful Piedmont, the best they could do was the Hofbrau serving whatever you wanted batter-fried, runny slaw included. That was the big night out in this neck of the woods.

Now it's the big day.

We go wheeling for it. HAUS hangs torn over the entry on what's left of a canvas awning. An awning, for Pete's sake, as if—what?—there's a shade problem inside a mall? We glide ourselves in.

Amazing.

The hostess stand is still here, tipped over. I remember Melvine's mother Myrtle manning that thing in a Bavarian get-up, poufy sleeves, poufy skirt.

Gabby does a wheelie, something she's mastered. That's because she uses a pair of washcloths like gloves when she rolls so she doesn't strip the skin off her hands, squeezing one ring while the other one is still going, pawing with her feet to help. It's not technically a wheelie, but she can do a pretty darned tight curve that way.

I don't even get close. I have to coast past her until my chair comes to a stop on its own, then turn myself around to come back.

By the time I do—there's a wall missing where the salad bar used to be—Gabby's inside Bliss Bridal.

Which is just so wrong.

Because this is the part of the mall Miss Jincey says is *verboden*. Weather blows in from the west, she says, so the wind comes straight off the mountains, hitting these stores first. She says it's lifted parts of the roof, so we should never, ever, under any circumstances, *ever* come down this way, because the Rain can get in.

And it's raining now.

And yet here is Gabby, parked among manikins, naked manikins, most of them on their faces, held up by their noses or maybe a hand cocked in some weird lady gesture, manicure-molded fingers

bracing sexless boobs off remnants of linoleum.

I hang back under an archway of plastic flowers. It's still upright because someone bolted it to the floor. The ceiling looks okay from here. Still, no way am I going any farther.

"Get in here, you wuss!" Gabby is really exasperated with me. "At least get away from the door so no one can see where you are."

I wheel in just enough to be out of sight.

"What's the deal?"

Gabby shrugs. "I used to work here."

"For real?"

"For real!"

She wheels to the big plate glass at the other end of the store, a legend painted on its inside in big backwards letters: EURT EMOC SMAERD. I recognize the hand of Howie McCurdle. He was so good in art class, even as far back as elementary school, that by eighth grade they were paying him to freestyle signs around town. On this one, he'd put a flower in the D of DREAMS with a bird flying out of it, good bridal stuff. I wonder how much he got for it.

Parked next to the last E of TRUE, Gabby has a view of the Bliss parking lot which is something I haven't seen for a while and I want to—at least it's something new—so I inch in slowly, checking the ceiling tiles as I go. There's no light coming through. I'm still breathing. Maybe Miss Jincey's been lying to us about this side of the mall. Maybe it's okay, and all this time we could have been running races up and down the corridor.

It's just the two of us now at our very own window. I'm far enough away from Gabby that she can't reach over and paw me again.

It's fun to see the little explosions of rain. The pavement is the same over here, but this lot is round with the skeleton of a single car, a Fiesta maybe, lying rims-up in the center like the town fountain.

"If I could make it so there's no blood and it's all easy and I asked you, would you kill me? We could kill ourselves."

Jesus Christ, I hate this woman!

"No way!" I say right away. I yell it. I'm so over her.

I wheel myself forward the twelve inches to the window and get my hands on the glass, both of them. I know it will be cold and it is. It feels so good. Normally, I can draw things, trace animals and words with the oil tracks of my fingers, but this glass is gummy, so all I can do is palm it. Which I love. I love this damn window and the cracked asphalt out there and the cinder block beyond, all of it. I love it. No way. There's nothing to live for, but I am not going to kill myself.

#

I get back before Miss Jincey returns, and take my place at the end of the line where Gabby had been, and park so that when Miss Jincey finally shows up, she doesn't notice, because we're all lined up as we should be. She's not counting anyway, she's on the radio, looking out at the Rotunda arch and speaking very loudly. "What's happening in Pineville?" A pause. "Well, who's in charge today?" Another pause.

The girls are pigging out, not waiting to eat their sweets, but eating them all now—they'll be sick in an hour!—bent over scraping every last bit out, licking their arthritic fingers and speculating with their mouths full as to when it will stop, when we can re-load the van.

So they don't see her come around from Bliss Bridal, but I do. She's out in the Rain in her chair.

She's wheeling herself along the feeder as if she were a car looking for a spot closest to the entrance—*Get in! Get out!* Only Gabby is moving much more slowly than a car. She zigzags, her hands in their washcloths out of sync as they push the wheels forward. It has to be hard in the Rain. Which is staining.

Her hair is already mustard.

So is her dress. It's a wedding dress.

Wow, how'd she get that on?

But I can see it's not really on. It's open down the back where wedding dresses get complicated with buttons and hooks. She must have pulled it over her head. It's a big dress, all right, but Gabby is even bigger, so it's basically just lying on top of her, the beaded bodice crumpling forward into her lap. Ruffles are piled there too. They run down toward her feet in those terrible, sock-packed clogs she insists on wearing, jammed catty-corner into the stirrups of her chair.

I know Gabby. She thinks about navigation. She would never risk turning herself over as a result of her wheels tangling in the dress, so she's done what she can to tuck all the fluff under her like she did the candy. I wonder if the candy is still there too.

Drops wet the dress, *psss psss psss*, but it's still so clearly a wedding gown, and she's wheeling around in it as if she's having fun. It doesn't look like anything's bothering her. She's smiling.

Way to go, Gabby!

The dress has a train. She's swished that from her right hip all the way around her neck and back down like a crazy shawl. It's a lot of fabric to manage, but she keeps going, and she does pretty well for a while. Then her hands get so busy with the wheels that everything starts to slip until, gradually, yards and yards of eyelet start dragging behind her in the water, the yellow water.

Now the girls see her and they scream her name, scream it. "Gabby!" Miss Jincey turns so fast she drops the radio. Then she's at the window where we are, screaming too.

I can't tell if Gabby can see us, or if all she sees is herself in the glass, but then I hear something, and I tell everyone to stop yelling at her to come inside which won't do any good—they know that—it's too late—and anyway, she'd have to be kept away from us, and who would take care of her?—but they're yelling for her to come in, so I yell even louder for them to shut up.

And I hear her calling my name.

I know she can't see me, that she's blind looking toward the glass, because she's not looking where I am, but she's calling my name. She knows I'm in here somewhere.

So I yell back, "Gabby! I'm here!" and I put my hands on the window the way I had them before, palms to glass. "I'm here-here-here!" and I pound with the words. I see her catch that. She wheels in pretty close to where I am, still not quite looking where my eyes are, but at least in the direction of my voice.

"You look great!" I scream at her through the glass.

She comes closer to the sound. I wiggle my way right to where she is, and I hear her say, cupping her hands as if she could push the sound through the glass, "I found them. The last rack of dresses. I left them for you. There are lots of sizes."

"Lots of what?" I yell.

"Sizes!"

She lets go of the window. She turns her fingers upward, *psss psss psss*. Her dress is quite yellow now. So is her face. She turns her head up to the sky, close to me, closing her eyes.

"Does it hurt?"

She can hear me.

I think she says, "It stings."

Then she does a wheelie—even with no washcloths, her hands slipping, she can do it—and heads directly away from me, from all of us, toward the cinder blocks at the far end of the parking lot.

Her train unfurls and mops behind her. It's quite a sight.

Rachel Adams lives in Washington, DC, where she is an editor at an nonprofit educational association and the founder/editor of *Lines + Stars*, a literary journal. Her poetry has appeared in *The North American Review*, *Blueline*, *The Conium Review*, *Free State Review*, *Driftwood Press*, and elsewhere. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and the author of two chapbooks, *What is Heard* (Red Bird Press, 2013) and *Sleeper* (Flutter Press, 2015).

Above-Ground

Rachel Adams

At my head, I'll place the twisted
chalk-red plant that smells of cinnamon.
At my feet, the bright-leafed fern,
golden green, and thin as wet paper.
I'll lay inside the sound of dripping water,
beneath the metal mesh of sprinklers,
looking up.

In this closed space, clouded
from within by plant breath,
the glass will become like soil,
but louder, wider —

metal grates beside me on the floor,
two blue-black orchids,
the inside-locked door.

Fabrice Poussin is assistant professor of French and English. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in France at *La Pensee Universelle*, and in the United States in *Kestrel*, and *Symposium*. His photography has also been published in *Kestrel*, and is scheduled for upcoming publications throughout 2016.



After the Break Up

This photograph is the result of experimentations in the studio, using strobes and gels to create more dramatic effects on the flower. The result is the impression of a dark shadow overpowering the normally more romantic connotation implied by the rose. This mass will eventually eradicate the symbol of a love which no longer exists.



Dreaming 2

This photograph was taken in an old house in Northern Georgia. The contrast between the areas lit by natural sunlight and the darker areas of the bed is very striking, emphasize the sleeping area under the protective net, and peek the imagination. It is a place of perfect rest where the visitor imagines the peaceful dreams of the sleeper. What were they, what will they be?



Fire in the Smoky Skies

Patience is the ultimate tool when waiting for a sunset. This was taken in the Smoky Mountains. It is one of hundreds of photographs taken over a period of 2 ½ hours from subtle accents of pinks and purples to bright reds and oranges. This specific image is one of the last ones as the light was dimming quickly. It was a quiet, cold, and lonely evening, the ideal moment to appreciate the power of the elements of nature, and to feel a little humbled as a mere human.



Trees Often Cry

Living in the South, it is a privilege to find images as these. Trees are often overwhelmed by Spanish moss and create very dramatic images. Taken in Georgia, near an abandoned church, the photograph shows a protective and inviting, though sad scene. The road is very isolated, and the old trees seem to cry for a long gone glorious past.

George Allen Miller lives in Washington DC with his wife, children, elderly dog and naked-foot-biting cat. His work has been accepted in Fantastic Stories of the Imagination, Stupefying Stories, and several online webzines. Stop by his website at www.georgeallenmiller.com and say hi.

A Marvel of Modern Science

George Allen Miller

Sylvia stood with her hands clasped together and her back as straight as a wooden board. With practiced effort she locked her emotions in the tightest box in her chest and refused to acknowledge them or dare let them out. Even as she did, one thought managed to resist her control and swelled up from the deepest parts of her soul and a feeling somewhere between hope and despair washed over her. Sylvia looked at the metal container on Doctor Mueller's desk and begged any god that would listen to let the experiment succeed, let this one be the last.

Dr. Mueller sighed once and picked up a handheld recorder. "Time, eight forty five pm. Chemical batch seventy seven failed twenty three minutes into test. Subject is – " Dr. Mueller leaned over the metal basket to his right and, with a pen, poked the small shape several times, "subject eighty three is deceased."

The doctor leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face with his hands. "Another failure, Sylvia. But we'll keep trying."

"Of course, Dr. Mueller," Sylvia said.

Dr. Mueller sighed and set his glasses on the table in front of him. "You know, it's frustrating. Science, that is. Experiments, peer reviews, arguments, a constant struggle to prove your theories right. Sometimes I wonder if it's better to find a beach and just enjoy the surf."

Sylvia let herself hope. He's said this many times, but he'll mean it eventually, right? Isn't that how humans are?

Dr. Mueller turned, bushy brown eyebrows pushed out from his forehead, while gray hair, mostly

gone, stood out above his ears and gave him a comical look. If Sylvia weren't in constant terror, she might have even laughed.

"But then, when I think it's all in vain, I look at you, dear Sylvia. A marvel of modern science." A smile lit up across the Doctor's face.

Sylvia choked back disgust and anger. "Of course, doctor."

Dr. Mueller frowned and Sylvia felt her heart jump. Did he see something? Fear? Some emotion she hadn't yet experienced and didn't know how to conceal?

"Something wrong, Sylvia?" Dr. Mueller said.

Sylvia turned her head to one side and kept her smile in place. "Of course not, Dr. Mueller. Why do you ask?"

The doctor stood up from his stool, took a step toward her and touched a spot on her forehead. A single drop of moisture sat on the end of his fingertip. "Sweat? Why would you be sweating? You haven't done any physical exertion that would warrant sweat, have you?"

Sylvia cursed herself. A pore had opened and released a tiny amount of skin coolant when that errant emotion rifled its way through her mind. She forced a small tremor of fear downward and maintained her demeanor.

"No, I have not engaged in any physical exercise today. I can't explain this," Sylvia said.

Dr. Mueller grunted once and shook his head. His eyes moved between the moisture on his finger and the spot on her forehead. Eventually, he shrugged and wiped his hand on his shirt. "Maybe just a fluke. I'm sure it's nothing. I would hate to have you recycled, Sylvia. You've been one of the best research assistants I've had in decades."

"Thank you, Doctor Mueller," Sylvia said.

"Besides, your synthetic genome was designed specifically for my experiments. I can't imagine how long it would take to grow another biological synthetic humanoid as useful as you." Dr. Mueller nodded one last time and returned to his stool.

Sylvia let out a long internal sigh. A biosynthetic with emotions was considered defective. And anything defective is ultimately destroyed. Though the concept of death was terrifying, it was almost appealing. But again her human creators had managed to take care of any plans she ever had of ending her life. Her programmed DNA filled her with a constant and pressing need to survive. Very thoughtful.

“Another specimen please, Sylvia? I think I can get through another round this evening.”

Sylvia nodded, clenched her jaw and closed her eyes. Another specimen. That would make ten today. She wished she could say no. That she could just not do it. That somehow, somewhere, deep in her artificial chromosomes, she could find the command codes that, once executed, meant she didn't have to obey another human again for the rest of her life.

But that day wasn't today. Sylvia reached behind her and lifted her tunic. A dozen shapes clung to her abdomen. She released a chemical to one of the tiny forms and small hands let go of her side. Special orifices, specially created with sharp ridges, cut the umbilical cord and the form began to wriggle in her grasp. The baby, her baby, released pheromones, an alert to Sylvia's breasts to produce milk, which sent shivers from Sylvia's head to her toes and down to her very soul, as she knew she could not comply.

Just before handing the child to the Doctor, Sylvia released a chemical compound from her pores and touched the baby's skin. She sent instructions to her child's DNA and central nervous system to shut down all pain receptors and put the baby to sleep. At least he would feel no pain. Sylvia knew that her actions might very well be what were making the experiments fail, that by saving this child from suffering she was dooming others to the same fate. But hearing her child scream, like the first ones Dr. Mueller experimented on, gods in heaven, she could not bear such a thing again.

Doctor Mueller disposed of the last specimen, took her child in his hands and placed the synthetic baby in the metal tray. Sylvia maintained her thin smile, unable to reject, unable to mourn, and quietly watched as the experiment began.

Steven Ablon has published four books of poems: Tornado Weather (Mellen Press), 1993, Flying Over Tasmania, (Fithian Press), 1997, Blue Damsels, (Peter Randall Press), 2005, and Night Call, (Plain View Press) 2011. His work has appeared in many magazines. He won the Academy Of American Poets Award in 1963.

Sight

Steven Luria Ablon

One eye dark with hemorrhaged blood,
the other grey with age my father watches
sports all day, slumps asleep in his recliner,
wakes and watches more. He asks me

the score, who is at bat, how much time is left.
I beg for a new TV. He says this one is fine.
Defiant my sister and I go to Best Buy,
Choose the newest model, a big screen.

When I return he is in the kitchen talking
to Anna who straightens up the apartment
a few mornings each week. She is saying
her boyfriend asked her to marry him.

She says she is a poor girl from Poland.
What can she offer? My father leans
on his cane, says Anna, "The Colonel's lady
and Judy O'Grady are sisters under the skin"

The Moles

Steve Luria Ablon

My mother keeps the secrets
of a thousand murdered moles
their lives unseen. My father
puts on his boots, stamps down

every burrow, pulls tight the thick
coiled springs and checks traps
whose prongs cut hard and deep.
In bed beside her, at flare of sun

he goes to check those traps,
the first untouched, the second
unyielding, the third has sprung,
exploding red as Chinese dancers

snapping fans. The moles stabbed
so afraid the way my mother fears
the end of summer, fears blindness
and end of light in her eyes.

Shaun Bossio has studied creative writing at Boston University, and is currently an MFA student in fiction at Emerson College. He lives in Boston, where he fights crime during the day and is hard at work on a novel and assorted short stories when he probably should be sleeping.

In the Wine-Dark Deep

Shaun Bossio

As they pulled into the station, there were no parades or fireworks waiting for Jack Leary or the thirty-three other soldiers aboard the train from Grand Central. It was 1946 now; most of the troops had returned home long ago, and America was fresh out of ticker tape. Other servicemen were met by their family or their girlfriends, but Jack limped through the crowd to the other side of North Station where his father sat parked in his Ford, under the shadow of the elevated tracks. The man turned only when he heard Jack swing his rucksack into the bed of the truck.

"Hey, Pop."

"Jackie."

It had been a long time since he'd looked out on Boston, and as they rode through downtown and up Beacon Street, Jack felt as though he was someplace he'd never been. There was construction happening throughout the city, and driving through Scollay Square felt like an assault on the senses. There was signage everywhere, advertising products Jack had never even heard of. Gigantic billboards screamed at him to drink RC Cola or Pabst Blue Ribbon. Even worse were the cars. The streets were full – it seemed like everyone owned a car now – and there were new showrooms all over the place. Commonwealth Ave was choked with them, and getting through the heart of the city took far longer than it ever had before.

His father didn't seem to mind though. The Ford had a radio now, and so he didn't have to miss the Red Sox game. His father never missed an inning, often sitting in the living room in his armchair, drinking beer and keeping score.

"How they doing this year?" Jack asked.

His father waited for the end of the play, a blooper from DiMaggio that fell for a hit.

"Got a chance at the Pennant," he said, as they drove along "Williams has been knocking the cover off the ball since he got back."

Even once they passed Brighton Center, and he walked through the door to the house where he'd grown up, Jack found himself searching. He'd left a broken down neighborhood on the outskirts of a poverty-stricken city, and come home to a bustling metropolis. There was energy flowing through everything. It all seemed to him as though he'd gotten on the wrong ship home. So this was what they'd been fighting for: cola, and Buicks, and Sears Roebuck.

"So," his father said, "how long do you think you'll be staying?"

It wasn't a selfish question. If anything, it was another attempt at conversation. Jack's mother had always been the bridge between the two of them, and now that she was gone they were left staring at each other over the chasm.

"I was hoping I might be able to bunk here until I found some work."

His father thought about this, nodded several times. He reached into the closet in the front hallway and took down a set of sheets. Jack noticed his father's hands as he gave them over. They were the hands of a working man, but smaller than he remembered, and they shook ever so slightly.

That night Jack walked around the neighborhood. It was early September, and the sun stayed perched above, refusing to give way to night. He walked past St. Columbkille's, and thought about the church in Boussu, Belgium, just over the French border. The front of it had stood, its doors swinging outward as if inviting his platoon in. Past that point had been a garden of rubble leading up to a stone altar that someone had cleared off. Jack had taken a look inside, even going towards the altar, but then he'd seen the body of the little girl. He couldn't tell how old she was, her top half trapped underneath a piece of the ceiling, but he could make out her dress and tiny legs. He'd seen a collection of crumbling churches housing the remains of the penitent, from Normandy to just outside Berlin, and it had proven, to him at least, that the gods had abandoned them all for their sins.

As it got darker Jack stopped circling and made his way to Parsons Street. He walked down the steep hill and around the corner until he could see her house across the way. The lights were on, upstairs and down, and every once in a while he caught a glimpse of movement inside. He imagined Betsy helping her mother clean up after dinner, then listening to the radio, or grading papers for her class.

Over the next week, as Jack made his way about town looking for work, it became a victory tour of sorts, with residents coming up to shake his hand or give him a hug to let him know they'd prayed for him while he was across the pond. They asked what France was like, as if he'd gone there on a two-year vacation, and Jack would smile.

"Loud," he'd say.

"Cold," he'd say.

"Couldn't find a decent bakery anywhere," he'd say.

They'd laugh, tell him about their nephew or neighbor in the service, and pat him on the back. Old Mrs. Gladstone had brought her face so close to Jack's that he was somewhat unnerved, but she leaned in to his ear and whispered, so softly he felt the question rather than heard it.

"Did you get any of those Nazis?"

Her face bent back into position, and her eyes locked onto Jack, who said nothing. His mind flashed with images of silent men in dark grey uniforms, empty containers, pierced through until their lives had drained into the ground. He remembered a man ten feet away pulling his trigger, pointed in Jack's direction, only to have the mechanism fail before Jack managed to run him through with his bayonet. Gotta keep your machine clean, Jerry. He saw a pile of similar men outside of Bastogne, one of their survivors digging ditches for them. More men who would never make it home. Jack just smiled as best as he could, and Mrs. Gladstone took his hand in her own and patted it several times.

"Good for you," she said.

On the seventh day, Jack's father woke him up to help with some errands. Jack sat on the edge of his bed, moving his lower right leg; up, down, repeat. Morning was the worst of it. Each day when he got up, his leg felt like concrete had set in overnight. It took him a good ten minutes of working it up and down, moving the joints that met in the knee, until he could stand and walk to the bathroom. When he finally made it downstairs about thirty minutes later, his father was sitting at the table reading the paper. They drove in silence to the hardware store.

The owner, Mr. Jeffries, had stuttered his appreciation and Jack's father had hurried to the other end of the store. They were talking about the Eiffel Tower when the bell rang, and Jack felt the small hairs on the back of his neck stand at attention. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a young blonde woman enter the store. She was past him before he could see her face, and so he followed

her at a safe distance, pretending to browse whatever was in that particular aisle. When she finally turned around, Jack saw that it wasn't Betsy, and he breathed easier. The woman gave him a friendly smile, but he just said hello and walked right past her.

"Say, Jack," Mr. Jeffries asked on his way out, "any interest in teaching?"

#

He hadn't been sure what to expect on his first day, but he'd put on his only suit – even though it hung off of him now – and walked the mile down Cambridge Street to St. Joseph's. His knee hurt like hell, but once he got moving it began to calm down. It was fall, at least in name, but by the time he reached the high school his shirt clung to his back, and he was thankful for his suit coat to hide the sweat stains.

"Class," Dr. Kelleher said as he walked into the room, without even pausing for the dull roar to die down. Yet as soon as he spoke the entire room corrected itself, with silence the new rule, and all students forming into seated ninety-degree angles.

"This is Mr. Leary," he said, eyes scanning each and every desk. With Mr. Packard out for the foreseeable future, Mr. Leary will be presiding over the room. Assignments will be given each class, and you will use this time constructively to meet these goals. Questions?"

A single young man in the back row raised his hand, though he was giggling along with one of his friends.

Dr. Kelleher looked him over for a moment before pronouncing, "No, Mr. O'Connor." The hand lowered again.

"Others?" Everyone was quiet, waiting for their next command. "Today, you will open your books and read pages fifty to seventy-five. I expect a response essay from each of you by this time tomorrow."

He took one more long look around the room, though it seemed that he was exerting his will over the young men, rather than waiting for another inquiry.

"Any issues, send them straight to me." He held out his hand and Jack shook it. Kelleher's touch was firm, controlled, though before Jack had even clasped his fingers, the other man had begun to turn away. Once the door had shut, the students opened their texts and began reading quietly. Jack hadn't understood he would have to entertain himself, so he'd brought nothing with him to

class. He began to open the drawers of his desk. The bottom two were filled with files, folders and more paper than he could ever look through. Each folder had a name, date, and an alphanumeric code, which he assumed referred to the different sections. The top left drawer was locked, but inside the right-hand side there was a beaten up copy of a book called *The Odyssey*. It was in English, but the style was somewhat difficult to understand. It read as if it had been written ages ago. Still, it was better than staring out the window.

At lunch, one of the other teachers stumbled across Jack eating in the cafeteria with the students. She shook her head, then led him to the lounge where a dozen or so staff had convened away from their constituents. As he walked in the door, his guide slid into a single opening at a table next to the fridge. Two men were sitting across the room, talking quietly as they ate.

"Hi," he said as he sat down. "Jack Leary."

"Stu," the man closest to him said. "And this is Gene. We teach literature." He pointed with his head, his hands on both sides of a sandwich of startling proportions. Gene gave a little wave, then they both went back to their conversation. Jack picked up *The Odyssey* and began reading again as he ate.

"Good choice," Gene said, motioning to the book. "How do the kids like it so far?"

"Oh," Jack said, "I'm just a sub. Just browsing for lack of anything better to do. Have you read it?"

This got a laugh out of both men.

The day crawled by, and when the final bell rang, Jack had no idea what to do next. Was he supposed to check out with someone? Was there some type of debriefing? He walked by Dr. Kelleher's office, but the principal was on the phone. Jack stood there, hands at his side, waiting his turn. After a few minutes, Kelleher said something into the phone and then covered the mouthpiece with his left hand.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Leary?"

"Just checking to see if there's anything I'm supposed to do?"

"Do?"

"End of day stuff. You know, closing up, reporting?"

Dr. Kelleher smiled.

"No, Mr. Leary. See you tomorrow."

On his way out of the school complex, Jack walked past a group of fields on the left-hand side. On one end the football team was running grass drills with military precision. Coaches walked up and down each line as the boys dropped to the ground, then sprang back to attention. The coaches were merciless, the drills continuing with no rest in between. Jack thought about boot camp, and parade drills, and marching in full dress in ninety-degrees. They'd all thought the heat was the worst of it, but once they'd gotten to Bastogne they learned to fear the cold instead.

One student stopped mid-drop and vomited off to the side. One of the coaches, seeing this, sped up his pace until he stood in front of the boy, his face close enough to smell the vomit on his breath. The student looked to be catching his wind, and the coach began yelling at him until the young man dropped back down to the ground with his teammates, and rocketed back up again. Still, the coach lingered, watching the boy go through several rounds, the man finally walking away once he was sure this stray was back in hand.

There was a buffer of grass between the football team and another group, seated on a field situated inside the school track. There were about thirty boys, and they were listening to what their coach was saying. As Jack passed by them on the hill overlooking the field, the coach blew a whistle and they ran off in different directions.

Jack stood and watched for some time. He took his coat off as the sun continued to beat down on him, wanting to make sure he could wear it for the rest of the week. He didn't have any others. He was particularly fascinated by the boys running on the track. There were two groups, one focused on shorter distances on the inside lanes. They would sprint, rest, and repeat. One group had never stopped running though, taking up the outer three lanes. This unit was made up of nine students, consisting mostly of a pack keeping pace with each other in the middle, then two students well behind them in the rear. One young man was out in front of everyone by at least an eighth of a lap, moving effortlessly. Every once in a while the boy would look over his shoulder at the group behind him and adjust his pace accordingly, trying to maintain that same distance ahead.

"Hello," a voice called. Jack saw the coach walking up the short hill towards him, giving a quick wave. The man was dressed in slacks and an oxford shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his tie loosened just enough to allow him to undo the top button.

"Steve Greeley," he said, when he'd reached the top of the hill. "Miserable, aren't they?" He nodded his head towards the team and cracked a smile.

"I don't know," Jack said. "You've got a couple of kids with some promise."

"New teacher?"

"Sub. Just here for a couple weeks."

Steve nodded.

"You a track guy?" Steve asked.

"Long time ago."

"Mmm. Didn't catch your name."

"Sorry, Jack Leary."

Steve narrowed his eyes, considering this. Jack held out his hand and Steve took it, shaking slowly.

"You ran for Brighton High a few years ago?"

"Feels like twenty, but yeah."

"You kicked our ass in the 10k. Hell, you kicked everyone's ass. You won states in '40, right?"

Jack's memory of this seemed like it belonged to someone else, as though he'd seen it in a movie theater, or heard it second-hand from someone at the bar. He had locked it away for safe keeping once he'd been transferred to Mourmelon, one of the Allied hospitals in France.

"41," he said.

"Still run?"

"No."

"That's too bad. Listen, Kelleher's a cheap bastard and I've got these thirty kids all on my own. Would you be interested in helping me out? Can't promise you any money, but I'll work on Kelleher, tell him about your credentials."

Jack politely declined, but Steve was persistent and finally got him to agree to at least think it over. When Jack walked in the back door of his house that night, his father was sitting at the small table

in the kitchen, eating dinner and reading the rest of the paper. He looked up quickly as his son entered and gave him a smile, but then fell right back to his dinner. It looked like a bowl of soup, slices of bread stacked neatly on their own little plate in front of him. Jack watched him dunk a slice of bread without looking, consuming it in one large bite. Then he dipped his spoon, stirring counter-clockwise several times, trying to find something substantial at the bottom of his bowl.

Jack made himself a ham sandwich from the few ingredients in the fridge, and sat down across from his father. He could tell from the faces in the photos that he was reading about the Pacific again. It was his second favorite subject, next to the Sox.

"What's happening with our friends in the East," Jack said.

"Still cleaning up in Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

At this he looked at his son.

"I'm thankful every day they sent you to France instead of the islands. It was awful there, just awful. The japs were monsters."

Jack let it go. His father hadn't asked any questions about his time in Europe, and on the few occasions Jack had tried to insert something into the conversation, it had always come back around to the Pacific. His father was no different than anyone else who'd remained stateside. Everyone was an expert on these far-flung places they'd never seen. Their beliefs had been built from simple enough materials - the government's war narrative and group-sourced conjecture - but they were about as strong as a paper house, and folks resented any attempts to blow theirs down.

"Got offered another job today," Jack said.

"Hmm," his father said, going back to his dinner. "What's the pay?"

"Nothing right now."

"It's not a job then. Job's something where you can make a living. You'd be better off finding somewhere that will actually pay you."

"Probably. It's with the track team though. Might be nice to get back out there."

His father put his spoon down in the bowl and looked up at him.

"Track team. Can you even run anymore?"

"Not really. Doc said maybe, at some point."

"Jackie, I've seen you move up and down those stairs. I don't mean to sound harsh, but what are those kids gonna do with a crippled track coach?"

Jack had no answer for that, and so he just sat there. His father got up and washed his dishes, grabbed a High Life from the fridge. Then he went in the den and turned on the radio – it was a large GE model as big as a dresser – to listen to Jim Britt read the starting lineups, brought to them by Wonder Bread.

It turned out that Steve Greeley didn't care that Jack couldn't run any more, though he dropped his head and put his hand on Jack's shoulder.

"These kids don't need you to run with 'em," Steve said. "They just need someone with experience to work with. Look at me."

Steve was an inch or two shorter than Jack, putting him at about 5'10, and the most polite word to describe him was thick. He wasn't fat, per se, but he was large. Steve looked much more like a shot-putter than a runner.

After the coach had introduced him to the team, everyone again broke up into their sub-groups and went about their business. Jack had been given the distance kids, and they were currently huddled around him on the infield.

"What now?" one of them asked.

"Now you keep doing whatever it is you've been doing. If I see something I think you can improve, I'll let you know."

"That's it?" another asked. Jack thought he recognized him as the kid who had been running at the head of the pack.

"I'm sorry, but I missed your name."

"Gray O'Connor," he said.

"Well, Gray, yes. That's it for now." Most of the kids ran off.

"You're my sub for history. You know how you've just been sitting there, reading?"

"Yes." He was trying to picture Gray in class. Thought he'd been the one to speak up on Jack's first day, when Kelleher had cut him down.

"Just think of it like that. Grab a book and take it easy. We've got it covered."

They broke up, and Gray started shouting directions to everyone, and they lined up as they had the previous day. Gray remained in front, conscious to maintain his clear lead over the rest. Once they'd finished their first round, Jack waved him over.

"Do you want to talk about your program?" he asked.

"I'm sorry. That's not really how this works."

"Excuse me?"

"You're here for these other loafers," Gray said.

"That's a nice way to talk about your teammates."

"Is what it is."

Gray started walking backwards, away from Jack.

"Good talk, Coach."

With that, he turned around and jogged back to the group, lining them up as before, then setting them off.

At practice the next day, there was no Gray. When Steve sent everyone to their stations, the distance kids looked confused. They knew Jack was their coach, but until now he'd only been observing.

"Alright," Jack said, "break up into groups by event. All the 3k guys over there, the 5k group here in the middle, and the 10k on the right." He pointed to the spots about ten yards apart. There were five boys who moved to the 3k, and the other four stayed in the middle for the 5k group.

"Nobody runs the 10k?" he asked.

They looked around at each other, and one of the older boys finally spoke up.

"That's Gray's race, sir."

"So nobody else is allowed to run the 10k?"

"Just no point, sir," the boy answered. "He never loses."

"He was undefeated last year?"

"Well, except for States."

Jack spent some time with both groups, talking about what they'd been doing versus what they should be doing. They hadn't been utilizing any drills per se, just trying to improve through repetition. To hear them tell it, there'd been no noticeable improvement from any of them. They seemed ready to try something new.

"Today," Jack announced to both groups, "we're going to set your times. We'll start out with the 3k group, run it like an actual race, and see where you're at. Then the 5k group will follow. This will be your baseline. If you do what I tell you, and you keep working, you'll crush these times by the end of the fall season."

When they showed up for practice the next day, the distance group was early, and Jack took them away from the track to a hill on the far side. He made them line up in two groups, with the first in each line sprinting up and back down the hill every time he called. By the time they'd completed ten minutes of this, all the boys were doubled over. Some had their hands on their knees, and others were lying on the grass. Jack had borrowed a hose from the custodian, and hooked it up to a spigot just to the side of the hill. He turned it on and everyone suddenly had enough energy to move again. He let them slurp up the water for a few seconds each, some of them pouring it over their heads as well. When they were done, Jack turned the hose off and began walking back to the top of the hill. His knee ached. It felt like a motor where some of the parts no longer did their job and others were forced to work harder to compensate.

"We go again in five," he said, hearing the groans from everyone. At the top of the hill, Gray was standing there watching the scene.

"That looks painful," he said, pointing at Jack's knee.

"Planning on joining us today?" Jack asked.

"No, can't say that I am. Looks like a blast though."

Gray started to jog away, but stopped at the sound of Jack's voice.

"Can I give you a free piece of advice?"

"Sure," Gray said, turning halfway.

"Quit looking behind you."

"Excuse me?"

"Just run your race, the best race you can. Stop looking over your shoulder all the time."

Jack looked down at the boys, slowly coming back together. He could hear Gray jog off.

"Again," he said, and they lined up.

Gray missed practice twice the next week, and even though Steve had told him to leave it alone, Jack felt the need to bring it up. He was the best athlete on the team, and for all his faults, they looked up to him. Gray was in Jack's last class before lunch, and so once everyone was filing out he asked him to stick around for a minute.

"You gonna help me with my homework?" Gray said.

"No. I just wanted to tell you to stop half-assing it. You've got a good bunch of guys, and they look up to you. So how's about you act like you deserve it?"

Gray started laughing to himself.

"You're a babysitter. You're a placeholder. You're gone whenever Packard gets back. And you know what? You don't know shit about me."

Jack watched him walk out of the room, slamming the door shut on his way.

After his first day, Jack had taken to eating lunch under a tree on the hill overlooking the track. It was fall now, the summer having held on as long as it could, and there was a chill in the air that was unmistakably Boston. There were other areas that laid claim to their own seasonal spectacles, but New England had invented the season and every year it put on its display. There had been no autumn in France. It had been too hot, and then far too cold, with little in-between. It was a place of

extremes. It made him think of Lyon; of canned meals and old cheese, and a hose they'd rigged over a fence as a makeshift shower.

"I've been wondering where you've been eating," Kelleher was standing over him, and as Jack struggled to get to his feet the man waved him off, and he settled back against the tree.

"It's nicer out here," he said, taking another bite of his sandwich, then looking up at him. Kelleher was impeccably dressed, though not in a showy way. His suit looked like it too had come from Penney's, and his shoes were old, though they'd clearly been shined that morning.

"How's everything going?"

"Just fine, thank you, sir. You were right about the babysitting, but I've been getting some reading done." He showed Kelleher *The Odyssey*.

"An excellent choice. I used to teach literature, you know. What do you think so far?"

"It was in Packard's desk. It's pretty good. Little slow going though. Friend of mine in France was reading it. Said we'd trade when he was done, but he never quite finished."

He could see Kelleher understood.

"It's thousands of years old," the other man said, "and it's a sequel, you know."

"I didn't."

"The first book is called *The Iliad*. It's about one of the greatest wars in ancient times, the Greeks versus the city state of Troy. *The Iliad* is about war, and *The Odyssey* is about trying to come back from something like that. There's a passage, one of my favorites, that goes 'Yea, and if some god shall wreck me in the wine-dark deep, even so I will endure.'"

"And does he?" Jack asked.

Kelleher smiled, then handed him the book.

"I won't ruin the ending for you. Have a good day, Mr. Leary."

And with that, the other man walked off towards the main building.

#

Some nights after practice, Steve asked Jack to grab a beer, but he always declined. The substitute gig paid very little, and Jack hadn't had any other luck on the job front. If he was being honest with himself, he wasn't well suited for any real job, though he liked working with the kids. On a Friday night at the end of October though, Jack finally relented and joined Steve at the Knights of Columbus. The team had won their first meet that afternoon, and a number of the distance kids had shown noticeable progress. Gray hadn't been the only contributor to the team for a change.

The two men talked about track mostly, and Steve waxed on about his heavy hitters, his name for his shot putters, discus throwers, et al. The coach had been a hell of a putter in his own right, though that had been over twenty years ago.

Eventually, they got around to the distance group and Steve asked about the training they'd been doing. Jack just shrugged and took a sip of his beer, admitted it was something he'd learned in high school, then tinkered with in his one year at Boston State.

"It's called interval training," he said.

"Do tell."

"The problem with most distance runners is that they think a race is made up of a single component. They move from A to B as quickly as possible. The reality is, a race, even one as short as a 400m, is made up of a lot of intricate pieces, like a well-made pocket watch. You've got pace, stamina, burst, endurance. The longer the race, the more important these parts of the whole become. Most people do a single thing well, but if you can run a complete race, you're at a distinct advantage."

"It's a damn shame you don't run anymore," Steve said.

"Listen –"

"No, no, I'm just saying. Your life is your life, but you glided around that track. You made everything seem so effortless. It was really something."

"It's just not in the cards for me anymore."

Steve nodded, and Jack stood up to use the restroom. The Knights was small, but not a dive. The men wore suits or sometimes their service uniforms, and the women were dressed to impress. There were two main rooms; the bar, and then a slightly larger space off to the right that served as its dance floor. Jack had no intention of dancing, but the bathrooms were on the other side. He

walked slowly, watching the floor, thinking about the meet and how impressed he'd actually been. He was lost in his thoughts when a new song began.

"Stars shining right above you. Night breezes seem to whisper 'I love you.' Birds singing in a sycamore tree."

He stopped in his tracks. It was Ella and Louis. His heart was beating faster, and he closed his eyes for a moment, trying to get his bearings.

"Say nighty night and kiss me. Just hold me tight and tell me you miss me. While I'm alone and blue as can be."

He opened his eyes and scanned the room for the jukebox. It was a large Wurlitzer, sitting in the corner next to the men's room, lighting up the back wall. Jack had stopped halfway through the room, and it was crowded, people buzzing all around him. There was a blonde near the jukebox, dancing close to a dark-haired gentleman in a suit he had bought from somewhere a couple steps up from Penney's. Jack needed to calm down. It couldn't be her. She wouldn't come here. Wouldn't she be at a dance hall, or downtown somewhere? His breathing sped up.

"Sweet dreams 'till sunbeams find you. Sweet dreams that leave all worries behind you."

Jack tried to close his eyes, but he couldn't look away. He could almost make out the woman's features, but they swam in front of him as she moved gracefully around the floor. The dark-haired man dipped her, and in doing so Jack finally caught a glimpse of her face. She was smiling, having a grand old time, and it should have been ok, but it wasn't.

Then Ella sang, "But in your dreams, whatever they be, dream a little dream of me." At that moment Betsy looked up at the dark-haired man, and bent forward, their lips meeting in the middle as the world revolved around them.

Jack dragged himself out the side door, trying to put everything back together, but all he saw were two overlapping images. The first, of Betsy and himself dancing to that same song, making the type of promises that boys and girls make to each other before they are thrust out into the world and come to understand the many ways it tries to break them. The second image was of him huddled under a tree on the outskirts of Normandy, hands shaking in the rain as he wrote her a letter, using his helmet for cover. He'd wanted her to know how a handful of days could change a man, remake him like a piece of steel in the forge of the world, and yet when he was done, he didn't have the heart to send it, to expose another human being to what he'd seen. So he'd torn up the letter, and never sent another.

Jack stopped, hands on his knees, thinking he might throw up, though nothing came. He stood there like that, his breath slowly coming back to him, trying to picture anything else. It was cold, and he'd left his jacket inside, but there was no going back. Once he'd caught his breath, he started walking away, just away.

#

Across the city, the team was on fire. They'd been working their asses off in practice for months, and today they had finally seen some results. Gray and the distance group went to Jimmy D'Antino's house for dinner and they ate more pasta than he thought was humanly possible. The D'Antinos were so happy Jimmy had placed that they'd even given the boys some wine. Gray didn't know what the big deal was with a fifth place finish, but he had to admit he was impressed with what the group had done.

Then it was nearly nine o'clock and they headed out to meet up with the throwers, who were somehow always able to find beer when they needed it. There was a clearing about a quarter mile into the woods behind the school, and sometimes some of the girls from St. A's made their way over. The group was optimistic, whether it was the wine or the win, and there was an energy flowing through them as they headed towards school.

There was no fence surrounding the property, and no need to get into the main building, so they walked casually in from Brighton Ave towards the back of the school that fed into the woods. Still, Gray had to remind them to keep their voices down. The property was dark, but the stars were out and Gray's eyes started to adjust as they came off the well-lit street. He was bringing up the rear, talking to Emmons about that blonde from St. A's, when he walked into Hawkins who had stopped and was looking over towards the fields.

"Shut the hell up," Hawkins said. "Did you hear that?" He took a step forward, towards the top of the small hill that overlooked the track. There were still a couple sounds from the front of the group, but they trickled off into silence. The far side of the track was closest to the street, and between the two there were a number of trees. A street lamp stood just outside, but the bulb had gone out, and so the latter half of the track was shrouded in darkness. Still, there was a noise coming from that area. It sounded like grunting maybe. Gray had spent a considerable amount of time digging wells for his father – every summer since he could hold a shovel, weekends of course, and even now a day or two each week after school – and that's just what it seemed like to him. It was the sound a man made once they'd gotten past the first few feet of sod and loose dirt, and came upon the hard pack and rocks that lie beneath.

Out of the shadow of the back half of the track, a figure emerged, chugging slowly along and grunting as he went. To Gray, he looked like a car sputtering, the driver unable to move from first to second gear. Hawkins began to descend the hill, and then everyone followed.

Mr. Leary wore a sleeveless undershirt and his slacks. He made the turn about thirty yards away, and was looking directly ahead of himself. Gray couldn't even tell if he saw them or not. He watched Leary run and couldn't help but wince. Three-quarters of the way through every stride, it was as if his knee caught on something before begrudgingly moving forward to complete the movement. As he began down the straightaway, Leary's knee failed to move past the hitch and he fell forward, face-first into the track. A couple of the boys ran towards him, his shape not moving for a few seconds. Hawkins reached down to grab Leary's arm.

"No," he said, but they continued to help him up. "I said NO, GOD DAMN IT!" They took a step back and he managed to get to one knee. There was a look in his eyes that Gray had never seen before, as if they were made of steel. Gray could see a patch of road rash on his cheek, just underneath his left eye. It was bleeding, and there were tiny pieces of gravel still stuck to it, but the coach paid them no mind. He staggered back to his feet, and began slowly chugging away down the track again, away from them.

Gray took off his own shirt – the one he'd spent twenty minutes ironing – and threw it onto the grass beside him. He stretched for a few seconds and then jogged off down the lane until he was keeping pace with Mr. Leary, though he gave the man plenty of room. He felt the others coming, and slowly they slid into place around him. There were five up front, and Gray knew without looking that the other five were just behind.

*Aria Riding never goes out, is never seen, but her emissaries run Psychomachia Theater (Seattle) and the art/performance group Lost Dance Project: website: www.lostdance.com. Lost Dance Project has performed, taught, exhibited work and been hosted by companies in America, the UK, Japan, Scotland, Europe and Russia. Aria was awarded the Mary McCarthy Prize for fiction (Bard) and her works (art, stories, poems) have recently been accepted by Atticus Books, Gargoyle Magazine, The Adirondack Review, etc. She has just finished a manuscript entitled *The Exhibitionists*—a series of interconnected triggers, or stories of the unspeakable present: stories that examine the things we suppress, and continue to do while denying that we do them.*



Operation Theater 79

A. Riding, Kaoru Okumura and Alex Ruhe of Danse Perdue

This photo was taken while making promotional shoots for a butoh dance production about the process of invasive/corrective surgical trauma: preparation, operation, recovery. Different episodes were directed by different performers, with the overall production being directed by Joan Laage. In one scene Kaoru manipulates me into giving her my heart, although she does not need it as much as she insinuates.



Pastoral: Fae 1

A. Riding and S. La Fey

Pastoral: We had created a long performance installation using the unused carcasses of hunted animals that get thrown away, just out of site, along roads all over the Pacific Northwest. We danced with them in a sparse field of trees that were about to be poisoned even though without their roots, the hill would fall away into the little river below. It was below freezing and we spent too much time naked in a tree with bones all around us. After that, S. wanted to be a fairy, so we made a whimsical series to warm back up.



Pastoral: Harvest Dollification 2

A. Riding and S. La Fey

The third part of the Pastoral series, Harvest Dollification, juxtaposes unnatural and artificial (idealized) bodies with natural settings, as if we were planting, growing, and marketing body types like crops. Unfortunately, this turned out to be much more fun than the rest of the pastoral series.

Which is why we must remind everyone: Execute Fake Art.

Robert Brown was on the terrorist watch list for several years. Turns out when the bad guys forge passports, they choose generic-sounding names. Robert grew up in Washington state, and misses the Northwest every day he wakes up in Washington D.C.--especially in the summer.

The High Desert after a Storm of Freezing Rain

Robert Brown

Crystals and humans
fracture
into miniature versions
of their original shape.
Like the bottom
of her feet,
how they crack
almost reflectively
into a smaller
rattlesnake skin mosaic
of the desert
soil and dust below
this miles-wide,
half-inch deep
frozen lake: scorched,
then frozen into contiguous tiles—
 a geometric recursion
 of that larger mess
 we all come from
 and return to.

The two of us
approach a succulent
plant encased with a
dry, matte leathery skin
of ice—even and smooth—
like a thickly glazed
ceramic bowl.
But when I pluck
a frozen leaf
from its iced stem
and throw it
into the air,
it does not shatter
into a million little succulent plants
when it crashes into the lichen-
and ice-covered desert stone.

It just bounces across
this smooth, shallow
lake over the desert sand
without taking root.

J. Edward Kruft received his MFA in fiction writing from Brooklyn College. His stories have recently appeared or are forthcoming in Bartleby Snopes, Bop Dead City, Crack the Spine, Eunoia Review, Johnny America, Mulberry Fork Review, and Soundings Review. He was once complimented on the sidewalks of New York by Matthew Broderick for a particular t-shirt he was wearing. He no longer has the t-shirt. He lives in Astoria, NY and Asbury Park, NJ with his husband, Mike, and their Keeshond-mix rescue, Aine. His recent fiction can be found on his Web site: www.jedwardkruft.com.

Returned Fire

J. Edward Kruft

It had been a couple of weeks since my girlfriend Molly had moved out because I was too listless. Like every night since, I lay sleepless staring at the ceiling, trying to discern cracks from shadows. And then sudden inspiration for a new artpiece took hold and I ran naked down the crooked stairs to the cold basement that was my studio. The idea was simple enough, and once I started sketching on a piece of cardboard I felt immensely silly for thinking it warranted exposing my retreating balls to these conditions. To save face, I made a quick list of the materials I would need to realize my inspiration:

1. A standard-issue stop sign, preferably a little beaten
2. At least one gun, probably more, plus ammo
3. Someone willing and able to shoot a gun or guns repeatedly at a stop sign

Satisfied with my progress, I shot back upstairs and dove under the covers and had a couple of hours of really good sleep, the first since Molly.

Later in the morning, after dressing and a cup-and-a-half of coffee, I set out. The task of procuring a stop sign would be easy, requiring only a loan of my bolt cutter, an Andrew Jackson, and the neighbor boy (whose name is withheld to protect the guilty). Then to the Internet to discover that, in fact, there was a shooting range just outside of town. The manager, who may have been Ted Nugent, looked at my cardboard sketch and listened thoughtfully to my description of the proposed artpiece. He said he couldn't give me any of the members' names, but if I wanted to hand over my name and number, he'd gladly pass it along. I gave him my card:

*

*

*

D. W. Chow
Conceptual Artist
555-2519

*

*

*

I thanked Ted and he wished me luck and I drove my Prius over to a café I frequented that had really strong coffee and black and white photographs of old Russian novelists on its walls. The morning server was a friendly type and she asked about the cardboard sketch and I told her the same thing I had told Ted, with the added touch of the title that had just come to me: *Returned Fire*. She said she liked it, thought it was edgy. But, she added, I shouldn't expect folks around here to get it. Folks around here, she offered, would just see a shot-up stop sign. Or worse, the *wonton* destruction of public property, which she believed was a misdemeanor. I assumed she meant *wanton*.

On my drive home I realized too late that I had blown through an intersection where I swore there used to be a stop sign. Truly, I didn't make the connection until I got home and there, on my back porch, was not one but seven stop signs.

Around noon a gentlemen who said he was Freddy D. called, saying Bruce had told him I was looking for a marksman.

- Bruce?
- The manager of the range.

So it was not Ted Nugent after all.

We agreed to meet. I suggested the range, but he said the kind of shooting I was looking for couldn't be done there.

- Come out here. I've got land.

So back to the Prius for what amounted to a 20 mile drive north of town. Freddy had warned that there were several structures on his property, but that his house was the green one with the American flag flying on the porch. Freddy himself was on the porch when I pulled up. A beefy man with short legs but a long torso, mutton chops and round glasses, Freddy was laughing like a Santa Claus when I got out of the car.

- Somehow I just knew from Bruce's description that you'd be driving a Prius.
- My parents were hippies.

That was a lie. There are no immigrant Chinese hippies. Freddy looked me square in the eye as he clenched my hand in his death grip. It was always a toss up to me whether big guys did that to intentionally inflict pain, or because they didn't know their own strength. With Freddy, I thought it was the former. As such, I hated him immediately. But I was in the middle of nowhere, on what I feared to be a compound, so I felt no choice but to remain friendly.

Inside, Freddy led me to the kitchen table, which was round and covered in daisy'd vinyl. We sat. He told me he liked my red socks and then did another Santa laugh. I got down to business.

- Here's the deal. I have this idea and I need someone – perhaps you – to help me execute it. I have seven stop signs in my car. I only need one to be right, but I guess seven gives us some wiggle room. I want someone – again, perhaps you – to shoot small holes through the front. I'm thinking a handgun would make the smaller holes. I'd like about 10 of those, scattered across the sign. Then, I'd like to have one, big shot – I'm thinking maybe from a shot gun, although to be honest I don't really know about such things, which is why I am bothering you – from the back of the stop sign, right through the middle. What do you think?

He laughed.

- You say "shot gun" like it's two words, when it's actually one. Shotgun.

I had no outward response. Inwardly, hate grew.

- You got a title?

I told him and he looked up at the ceiling as though being thoughtful. Then he said he wasn't sure, wasn't sure at all, that he liked the message I was trying to convey. I was surprised, frankly, that he'd divined any meaning, having taken the café server's word, and I offered an unthoughtful reply.

- Too much of a challenge?

If I thought I'd seen Freddy's Santa laugh before, I was wrong. The table shook. Even though we were about the same age, when he finally settled down, he called me son.

- Son, I could shoot the pecker off your boyfriend from across the Grand Canyon.
- You assume I'm gay. Why? Because I'm Asian? To you, all Asian men are effeminates with little dicks?
- I *presumed* you're gay because you're an artist. My bad. No, you see, my problem with your idea is that it is, in fact, meant to convey an anti-gun message, is it not?
- Actually, it's about society's need to stop violence, with a clear articulation that violence begets more violence.

Of course it was anti-gun. But I had this speech prepared, anticipating guys like Chuckles here.

- Aren't you at all afraid that your "clear articulation" will get mired by the hypocrisy of your methods?

Just then a woman walked in the front door. She wore a Hello Kitty sweatshirt and hastily braided pigtails: Mrs. Chuckles. Freddy introduced me as Conceptual Artist Dave. Without missing a beat she asked if I leaned more toward the Rauschenberg school or someone more contemporary, like Damien Hirst? Stunned, I blurted that I wasn't sure, to which she added a pretty smile and then excused herself.

Freddy and I argued as time passed and after a while it was inevitable that we were both repeating ourselves:

- *It's an important articulation!*
- *It's bullshit hypocritical!*

Eventually night set in and Barbara (formerly Mrs. Chuckles) came wordlessly into the kitchen and made us jasmine tea and soba noodles, which Freddy and I consumed thankfully. Barbara said she had overheard us and in her humble opinion, we were at a stalemate but both of us were too damned stubborn to concede anything. She called us Two Peas, and further suggested that rather than continuing to verbally masturbate around the kitchen table, Freddy should take me to his

room. As lascivious as that sounded, Freddy willingly obeyed, but instead of being molested or conscripted into some sort of Freedom Army, I was awe-inspired. Freddy's "room" was one of the outbacks on his compound. I reluctantly followed him through the door that he rolled open, expecting – what? – rows of neatly pressed white sheets with matching hoods? Swastikas? A Sherman tank? Freddy flipped on the overhead lights and a cool buzz emanated from above, and then he spun around on me, giving his argument one last breath:

- You know how at the end of movies there's that disclaimer? "No animals were injured in the making of this motion picture." Well, here's my disclaimer to you: "No guns will be used in the making of your *articulation*."

But I was hardly listening, for splayed out before me was a workshop, the likes of which I had never seen. Part machine shop, part woodworking gallery, his many and fanciful tools glistened and the long benches displayed his fine and, even, artistic wares: a teak and rosewood rocking horse, puzzles made of pine, wooden tops and airplanes and trains and racing cars, and a miniature kitchen set of red cedar that could have easily graced the pages of *House & Garden*. I looked at Freddy with my mouth agape, a question looking to form.

- In my spare time I like to make toys for underprivileged kids.

Holy-fucking-Christ! He really was Santa Claus.

On my drive home, whenever I passed under a streetlight, I would catch a glimpse in the rearview of the seven stop signs in the backseat, each one as fully formed and unadulterated as when the neighbor boy heisted them from their dutiful stations. And with each flash of their presence a little greater understanding of this artpiece formed in my ever-racing mind.

After that, almost a year passed. At the opening at the little gallery in the Circle District, the work hung on the far wall and consisted of my original cardboard sketch, my nakedly written list of must-haves, modified --

1. A stop sign hastily drawn on a piece of cardboard, a little beaten
2. No guns, plus no ammo
3. Someone willing and able to tell me he won't shoot a gun or guns repeatedly at a stop sign, and that my asking to do so is hypocritical

-- and a 3 X 3 card, which read:

* * *

Title: Returned Fire: A Wonton Display Of Public Destruction
(*No Guns Were Used In The Making Of This Artpiece) That
Turns Out To Be The Artpiece That Isn't, But Is.

Artist: Two Peas

Medium: Mixed

Price: NFS

* * *

From across the gallery, I watched Molly take in the piece. She arrived late because of Lamaze class, the first one of them I'd missed. When I approached her, she turned and smiled. She said she liked it; she said she had always thought of me as more of a words guy anyway, so the title was fitting and funny and me. I asked if it wasn't really just a cop-out. She took my left hand and placed it on her bulging belly. When, from across the gallery, we both heard Freddy's laugh, our baby kicked.

Samantha Pilecki is your typical librarian who collects dead bugs and enjoys spending time with her pet rats. Her work will be forthcoming in El Portal.

Shampoo

Samantha Pilecki

Like a sigh in her mind. Guilt, guilt, guilty.

Ann looked at the travel sized bottle of shampoo in her hand, and quickly closed her fingers over it. Even though she was alone in the bathroom, she still felt it necessary to hide the foreign thing. But here, it was harder to hide. There was no coat sleeve to slip the shampoo inside, no ratty, Disney-print pillow case to put it under. There was just her, her flesh.

And her hair.

Ann glanced in the mirror and assessed her Hair. It was mouse-brown, stringy, and cut in no apparent style. It hung from her scalp in greasy striations.

She averted her eyes out of habit. It wasn't her fault. She clutched the shampoo. It wasn't her fault her hair was...repulsive. The shampoo was her wild dream- a chance of transformation. It wasn't her fault she-

Guilt guilt guilty again. With her free hand, Ann tested the already running shower water. It was warm enough. She didn't want to waste time; her mother would get suspicious if the water ran too long.

Ann stepped into her flip flops and then into the shower. She acknowledged the pink mold in the grouting, and the darker, more heinous stuff clinging to the drains near her feet. She told herself the mold was all right, as long as she wore her flip flops. She heard college girls wore them when they took showers. (Even at 12 years old, Ann knew she had slim hopes of becoming a college girl. But she knew enough that they wore flip flops. They carried little shower caddies filled with shampoos and loofahs and all the other longed for accessories necessary for collegiate hygiene.)

The shower water came down, uncaring, not giving a rat's fart about her or the mold or anything else. Ann felt herself glow in its non-judgement, felt her skin shining, like sugar candy in the hot water. Ann opened her hand, popped the shampoo's cap, and squeezed out a silky dollop.

She paused. She looked up, timidly, at the shower ceiling. It was bloated with yellow, globe-like spores of mold. Moisture hung, stalactite-like. The moisture threatened to splash down and insinuate itself amongst the pure shower water. Ann cleaned out the shower whenever she could, scrubbing with paper towels, vinegar, and diet soda. But the mold always grew back. The stuff on the ceiling was the worst, because it required dragging a dining room chair into the shower and balancing on it amid all that hard, head-cracking ceramic. Her mother would get suspicious and question her. The whole ordeal wasn't half worth it.

The mold, the mold, the persistent mold. Like a Joker, a Lex Luthor, a Hobgoblin, in her life. Her arch nemesis.

Ann felt (guilty) funny about having the perfect, other wordly, *clean* shampoo in such a repulsive shower. She hesitated to put the bottle down, to contaminate it, as it were, by the yecchy-ness around her. Vowing to clean the bottle later, with vinegar, Ann set it down on the least offensive space she could find.

Knocking on the door, and Ann jumped, almost slipping.

"I need to pee!" It sounded like Katie. Katie always needed to pee.

"So pee in the other bathroom!" Ann yelled. She hastily rubbed the crown of her head with a shampoo-laden palm, working it into the grease-stiffened sparse-ness that was her Hair. She would've used the other shower, in the other bathroom, but that was hopeless. That shower hadn't worked in a long time. Now it acted as a catch-all for her siblings' toys. Katie's footsteps receded.

There were four of them, altogether. Soon to be five, because mother was preggers again. There was Michael, who was 8; Katie, 6, and Sara was almost 5. Then there would be the newest addition to the rabble. If it was a boy, it would be Billy. If it was a girl, it would be Billie. Ann knew how it was. Her mother didn't even care about *naming* them.

in the family named Ann, there was no legacy to carry on, no justifiable reason for it, other than laziness. It wasn't Annie, or Annamarie, or Sophia Ann, just...Ann.

Anyway. On with it. There was no use worrying over what she couldn't change -the mold, her name. There was a mission to be accomplished.

Ann worked the lather's perimeter, spreading the cleansing bubbles above her ears. Immediately, she could feel the magic, the difference, the new shampoo made. Such a difference from ordinary Tesco brand bar soap. It was softer. It wasn't grainy, and it didn't tug at her hair. The lather, the bubbles, smelled sweet in an unplaceable way. This –this, shampoo- was miraculous.

Sadly, she knew this miniscule shampoo would be like the coveted deodorant she had before. She nursed that bar until she admitted it was gone, depleted by time.

She knew she needed another deodorant. Badly. She could tell.

But the Shampoo was Now. Her hair moved with her fingers. It felt free, lighter, weightless. She briskly rubbed the soft froth with more strength, not yet ready to wash away the promise of a different self.

How could anyone blame her for this? It wasn't her fault they had food stamps, or that the shower was coated in mold. It wasn't her fault she tried to avoid said shower, because of the mold. It wasn't her fault her hair was disgusting. She simultaneously took comfort and defiance in knowing that. If she was ever questioned by the Law or the Case Worker, she could see herself lifting her chin and saying It Wasn't Her Fault. It was doing what needed to be done. She was the perfect definition of a vigilante.

It wasn't criminal, it was *heroic*. She had to stand up for herself. But it wasn't fair there was something furtive, something *guilty*, in taking this shower. Ann was conscious of how long the water ran, counting down how long it would take for her mother to poke her head around the hallway and call for her.

Already, small brigades of clean, white shampoo bubbles were being lost, defeated, down the drain. Ann would have to end this shower –soon. She rinsed out the last of the shampoo, just as the water finally warmed to a proper Hot. She hurriedly brushed the regular bar soap over her skin. It yielded plastic-y, thinner bubbles, looking nefariously greasy themselves. She rinsed, and turned the water off.

She held the small shampoo bottle gingerly, already imagining the contamination of mold. She crept out for a towel –also Disney printed, also worn, and smelling vaguely acidic. She dried off and covered herself, not allowing the cold to set in.

But her hair... it felt drastically different, already stronger somehow. This was it, the transformation she had been waiting for. She glanced in the mirror, unable to help herself. Her hair looked scalp-close, wet, but promising.

Ann would have time to luxuriate in its feel later. Now she needed to hurry back to her room, and hide the super shampoo under the pillow case. Still dripping and wet footed, Ann wrapped the shampoo in the towel. She went to the door. Listened.

Nothing. She opened the door, and strode, with intent. She had to make it across the hall, across the old carpeted floor, where her wet, guilty, trail would disappear.

“Ann?”

Her mother’s voice. Ann froze, sucked in her lips. Her mother’s footsteps lumbered closer. She was around the corner before Ann had a chance to move.

“Thought I heard you,” her mother said. In her mother, Ann saw her own heavy features distorted by age. The doughy, shapeless body running to fat, the skin puckered by cigarettes. The slab like cheeks and knobby nose, mirroring her own. Her mother wore her hair in a thin, careless knot, and the gross protrusion of the baby bump was showing.

Inadvertently, Ann clutched her towel tighter, feeling the shampoo beneath it. Her super power. Ann was a super hero. Her mother, simply, was not. They were not the same.

Her mother’s ever suspicious eyes settled on the lump beneath the towel. “What do you have there? Cigarettes?”

Ann hadn’t considered it before, but maybe the shampoo was the approximate size of a box of cigarettes. Her mother swatted her hand. The shampoo fell to the floor.

Ann grabbed it up, fumbling to hold her towel in place. The threadbare fabric strained, creaking, and she felt her face flush. Her guilt was as bare as her newly cleaned hair, the grease taken away and leaving her squeaky clean, squeaky voiced.

“It was complementary –free sample-”

“Complementary? Complementary from where?” And, as Ann didn’t have a lie thought up this far, she felt a spear of fear shoot through her. “Complementary from where, Ann?” her mother repeated, words heavy. Her eyes narrowed. “You’ve been stealing again.

Ann almost flinched, but just in time, she held her chin high. “It’s not my fault.”

“What?”

"It's not my fault," Ann said her voice rising. "It's not *my* fault I steal. *You're* the one who—"

A slap rattled Ann's cheek, sending the towel slipping to her waist.

But she held onto the shampoo this time.

Unthinking, she reacted with mirror-same physicality. Quick as a heartbeat, her hand struck out and slapped her mother's face.

Horrified, sobered with how things turned out, Ann ran before her mother could react. Ann's flip flops slapped on thin carpet, magnetizing layers of dirt with every step towards her and Sara's and Katie's room.

She slammed the door and locked it. There, there was the hurtful shriek, the pounding of feet from outside. Ann jammed the bunk bed's ladder against the door knob -just in case her mother tried to slip a credit card through and pop the lock. Her mother howled all the while, the words gaining volume with nearness.

Ann knew what would happen next. Her room would be torn apart. She grabbed the Disney pillow off the bed and everything inside it clinked —the empty deodorant. The mint floss and raspberry lotion, the lighters and lipgloss and eye shadow.

Guilt guilt guilty.

She didn't know where to hide them anymore.

Kathryn Lipari is a writer emerging from motherhood. Her work has recently appeared in journals including Smokelong Quarterly and elephant. She is a member of Full Frontal Writers' Collective and smallSalon. When not writing she is likely running Portland's trails, teaching yoga to the houseless, or hectoring her three imaginative kids

ALCHEMY

Kathryn Lipari

"Go!"

Dylan jabs Brandee hard between the shoulder blades, shoving her closer to the half-open door. "Get your ass in there; we've only got a few minutes."

Brandee hesitates. "What if she doesn't believe me?"

"Jesse said she doesn't even recognize her own kids. You're her great-granddaughter—Margaret. Now go!"

"Margaret," Brandee repeats. "But what about her? What's *her* name?"

"Who cares what her name is? Think what we can score!"

Dylan grabs Brandee's upper arm and swings her through the doorway and into silence; the only silence she has known for days and days. It is so quiet she can hear her heart, which has been sprinting for days and days as well.

For an instant she is stunned, then the richness of the room washes over her: printed flowers twine delicately over the papered walls, actual flowers pose coyly in several vases. Brandee can smell them—heady in the dormant air. Directly before her is a bed with dark wood posts at every corner and she imagines walking across the clean carpet, climbing upon the comforter, and falling into an impenetrable sleep. It has been so long since she has truly slept—like a house left with all the lights to burn out.

A small noise plucks her nerves, she remembers why she is in this room, and she turns to the corner.

The unguarded eyes of the old woman looking at her remind Brandee of a toddler's. She has been tucked into an upholstered chair—a blanket on her lap, a notebook upon that. Her hair is sparse and very white. She raises a vein-ridden hand in which is clutched a pen.

"I'm glad *someone's* here who can help me remember." Her voice surprises Brandee with its determination. "How does it go for Pete's sake? Married? Buried? No—to six wives he was bedded..." She looks down and scribbles in the notebook. "What rhymes with bedded? Oh! Beheaded." She looks up again and says sharply, "Don't just stand there, come in, help me get this down." She points to a low settee placed at an angle to the chair. "Hurry up. Who's out there? The skinny one?"

"Jesse?" Brandee tiptoes closer, remembering how skeletal Jesse's arms had looked the night before as she pursed her lips around the squat pipe and inhaled with desperation.

"She won't let you stay long, she'll try to get me to sleep, give me that damn medicine. Now help me remember what comes next." She examines the notebook while Brandee creeps to the stool and sits down. "To six wives was he wedded, something, something, something, beheaded..." She looks at Brandee. "How does it end?"

This close to her, Brandee can make out the smell that underlies the flowers, not unpleasant, but undeniable. She has rings hanging loose on almost every finger, Brandee notices, her eyes arrested by a candy-green stone set in a gold band.

She leans forward. "Great-grandma, it's me, Margaret." Her voice is a parched whisper.

The old woman snaps her head up. "Of course it is. And since when did any of you call me great-grandma? Now help me. Henry the Eighth, six wives he was bedded..." The bony hands flap and the rings clink. "That's as far as I can get."

Brandee darts a look around the room—studded with small ornaments which twin themselves mischievously when she tries to focus: ornate boxes, enameled animals. Her gaze touches down on a black and white photograph of an unsmiling girl with an enormous floppy bow in her hair Brandee is sure must be the woman before her.

Brandee looks back to an older version of the same fixed stare. "I don't—I don't think I know how it ends. I'm sorry."

The old woman makes a snorting noise and squints at Brandee, whose stomach clenches so fast it seems to drag the rest of her inward; if she could just get one tiny bump, she thinks, she could do this.

"You must be Christopher's girl? He was such a placid child. Now you have one of those phones, haven't you? Look it up, ogle it! Isn't that what you all do?"

"Oh!" Brandee digs into her back pocket for the phone her parents bought her. Now the screen is a web of cracks from the time Dylan threw it out the car window, Brandee has not seen her parents for nearly two years, and they have stopped trying to call her—although they must still be paying the bill.

"Well?" The woman's feet bounce in her slippers like eager fledglings in oversized nests.

"How does it go again?"

She snorts once more. "What is it they teach you in college these days? Aren't you at Smith? And why aren't you there? Is it a holiday?"

Brandee looks out at the expanse of lawn stretching away from the house, hemmed with gnomish trees clutching their last yellow leaves. "Thanksgiving," she blurts. "We have a long weekend." For a moment she sees her mother standing over the stove, absently circling a spoon in the pan gravy.

"Leave it to your father to buy you a plane ticket across the country for the weekend. Probably used my credit card. Now put this in that phone of yours: "King Henry the Eighth, to six wives he was wedded..."

Brandee taps through the cold ache in her fingers—an ache that seems to have taken up residence within her entire body—and is relieved when a short verse pops up.

"King Henry the Eighth, to six wives he was wedded," she reads aloud—the anxious pitch of her voice startling her—and the old woman chimes in: "One died, one survived, two divorced, two beheaded." They finish together.

"Clever girl!" The old woman claps and her rings chime, again drawing Brandee's gaze. The woman's watery eyes follow. "Ah." Her smile gets wider. "Pretty, aren't they? And every one has a story." She worries one of the rings—a simple gold band—and her smile fades. "But I don't know them all anymore." She twists the ring over her knotted knuckle and holds it towards Brandee. "This is the one your father proposed with? At the Officer's Club?"

Brandee looks at the band, which is dull and thin—worn to fragility. She nods. “Yes. That’s the one.” She feels an echo of the tremble in the old woman’s hands in her own, and clenches them tight between her knees, which tremble in turn.

Again the old woman smiles. “I knew it. He was in such a hurry to marry me. We were all in such a hurry, with the war still on. And then, nine months later, you came along.” She looks up at Brandee and her blue eyes seem to have a summer cloud drifting over them. “Nancy?”

Brandee swallows against her dry throat. “Yes.” She looks down to the ring, stranded in the shaky, spotted hand. “Do you want to put it back on? So you don’t lose it?”

The old woman looks to her palm as if she has forgotten what it holds. “Good idea.” She slides the band back on, her voice lowers, her eyes dart to the door. “That’s why I’m wearing them all, I even sleep with them on—not so I don’t lose the rings, but because I don’t trust them.”

“Who?”

“Them.” The old woman gestures to the door. “Who’s out there? The red head?”

“The skinny one,” Brandee whispers.

“She’s the worst. Always at me with the medicine and won’t let me out of bed.”

The skin across Brandee’s torso is stretched too tight. “Have you told anyone?”

“Father, but he won’t listen to me. Will you talk to him? You’re his favorite.”

“I can try.” Brandee remembers how Jesse came back to the apartment a few days earlier with a bottle of pills. “Ativan,” she had said, shaking them hard. “She’ll never know. I just give her Jack Daniels in a spoon and it knocks her out.”

Now Brandee asks, “You think she wants to steal your rings?”

The woman looks at her hands. “My rings. Every one has a different story.” She spreads her fingers and the green jewel winks.

“What about that one?” Brandee reaches out and just brushes the stone, notices her bitten-ragged, filthy fingernails, and snatches her hand back. She senses the pointy fingers of need marching up her spine and shakes herself as if she can throw them off.

The old woman pinches the band of the ring, twists it back and forth, and gives Brandee a crooked little smile. "You like the emerald, do you?"

"It's so. . . so juicy!" Brandee giggles at her own words, but then pictures the tiny chip of diamond in the ring her father gave her on her sixteenth birthday, and how slowly Dylan had slid it from her finger. "I'll buy you another one baby—a bigger one," he had said, his fingers tremulous. "I promise. But we can get pure glass for this."

He had meant *he* could; she had not done meth yet, but that was the first time she did, and as the rush hit her she thought that it was worth a necklace laden with diamonds.

"But I never wore it." The old woman's voice suddenly drags. "I only have it on to keep it safe. Don't like to wear it—it reminds me..." Her eyes lose focus as if she is staring out over something vast.

"Reminds you of what?"

The old lady looks up to Brandee, her eyes still lost. "Who did you say you are, sweetheart?"

"Margaret." Brandee says the name slowly. "Your great-granddaughter."

"My great-granddaughter?" The old woman nods. "Margaret. I want to tell you about this ring. If I don't tell someone now it will be forgotten, and that child will be forgotten with it. That little girl..."

As the thin voice trails off Brandee hears a crash from somewhere in the house—a clatter, a cascade; she twitches and looks quick to the old woman who does not seem to have heard, she is still staring out at nothing.

Brandee's heart is cantering again, and all she wants, wants so much that she has to bite down hard on her lip to keep from calling for it, is the straight bliss that she now knows is possible, that once she felt, she realized she had been looking hard for.

She rises abruptly. "I should go." She can hear thick panic coating her words. "You must be tired."

The old woman's eyes snap back. "Don't go, sweetheart. They haven't started poking around yet, and I think there was something important I was going to tell you?" She looks about the room with a little frown.

Brandee folds back down. "The ring," she says. "The green one." Suddenly it seems vital that she hear what the old woman wanted to tell her, although she has to keep herself from grabbing those

frail shoulders and shaking it out of her.

"Oh yes. Don't tell father—he would never forgive me."

"I won't." Brandee leans forward. "What is it?"

"Good girl." The old woman reaches out and takes Brandee's hand between hers. Her skin is cold and the rings colder. "I knew I could trust you, you have your mother's eyes." She shuts her eyes; her inhalation is quaky. "You see, he gave it to me on the day it happened—that's why I could never wear it. Your sister was just one, and you were due in only a few weeks. He gave it to me, well—" Her lips twist like a knot in gray beach wood. "You see, there was a new girl—a secretary—and I had been pregnant for practically the entire time we were married. That's why he thought I didn't wear it you see, because it was a gift for his guilty conscious."

"You mean he was...?"

One hand flies off Brandee's, then lands again. "Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. You're too young to understand, but someday you will. And maybe that's what I was thinking of that day—when it happened. I remember little Nancy was crying in the car, screaming, and I was just driving around, trying to get her to sleep, to stop crying. It was hot, August..."

A noise outside the room yanks Brandee's attention away—footsteps?—but the woman squeezes Brandee's hand. "Pay attention! They'll be coming any moment and I must tell you all of it."

Brandee squeezes back and can feel small bones flexing in her grip. "Hurry!"

"I just wasn't looking. It's as simple as that. But only for a split second. The baby was screaming, and I was looking back at her, but the girl, I swear she came out of nowhere. When I looked up she was there. I can still see her perfectly: a little black girl, maybe eight, with these perfect pink bows, one on each side of her head; I always think of how her mother must have tied them just that morning—tied them on her beautiful girl—and she looked right at me before I hit her. We looked at each other, and we were both so surprised, we knew what was about to happen and it was astonishing. And then? She hardly made a bump, her little body just went right down under that big car."

"You hit her? What did you do?"

The eyes that meet Brandee's do not look old, they are clear and hard and honest.

"I drove to the car wash," the woman says. "The street was empty, it happened quickly, I drove to the carwash all the way across town, and then I took you home to the sitter and got dressed up in my red dress and met your father for dinner at The Regency and he gave me the ring—and I never wore it, and he thought he knew why, but he was wrong. Every time I look into that emerald I see that little girl's face: so shocked to see her own death."

There is definitely someone outside the door, pacing the hallway; Brandee can hear the footsteps on the wooden floor.

"You never told anyone? She leans closer to the woman. "No one ever found out?"

"I made my decision right then. I knew I could get away with it. She was just a little black girl, her mother was probably someone's housekeeper; my husband owned Northwestern Steel Corporation. There was no connection between us, no one would think to make one."

A flicker from the corner catches Brandee's eye and she breaks the lock between her gaze and the old woman's. Dylan is peering around the door. His eyes are wide—roving—and he makes a rapid beckoning gesture. *Come on!* He mouths.

She shrugs just slightly and raises one finger.

Now! His mouth stretches wide.

"Who's there?" the old woman calls, and looks to the door just as Dylan bobs out of sight. "Give us just another minute. I'm not tired yet." She cocks her head like a bird, then looks back at Brandee and starts to speak again, her words rushed. "So yes, I got away with it. And at the time I thought: what would be the use of telling anyone? I knew I would never forget it, never forget her face, would be punished every minute of every day, but I had a baby too, another on the way, what would be the point in disrupting all that? I couldn't bring one little girl back, but I could be a good mother to my children; and I was."

Brandee can exactly see what the old woman has described: the astonished face and the perky bows, can hear the baby's cries and feel the heat of the day enclosed in the car; then a noise breaks through the scene—a pounding from the hallway—within which she can hear Dylan's temper.

"I'm sorry," she rises. "I have to go."

But the old woman drags her back down. "But I was wrong," she says in a fervent whisper.

"You were?"

"We aren't made to hold terrible secrets—I know that now—we are too fragile, too feeble. It would have been best for me to tell the truth and be done with it. I spent so many hours of the rest of my life keeping that girl alive." She pulls Brandee even closer, tugging on her until their two heads are almost touching. "And I want you to take this from me." She lets go of Brandee's hand and yanks the emerald ring roughly from her finger. "I want you to have it, and I want it to remind you of that little girl. Someone has to keep it."

The old woman tries to place the ring in Brandee's hand, but she snatches it back. "I can't take that. It's too precious for me."

"Don't be silly. It doesn't do any good around my old finger." She takes Brandee's hand again and strokes it like a nervous dog. "And I don't want *them* to have it. They will not take good care of her."

As if cued there is a tremendous bang on the door.

"Just a goddamn *moment!*" the old woman cries, then lowers her voice. "Now you must take it. Here." She grasps Brandee's ring finger and forces the band down it.

"See. It even fits your fingers. Are they thinner than mine? What are they feeding you at Vassar? You're bonier than I am, and I'm ninety-seven." She looks at Brandee. "Am I? Ninety-seven?"

Brandee nods. "I think you are."

There is another thump on the door. It swings all the way open to no one, as if it has been kicked.

"Here they are," the old woman whispers, then calls out, "All right, I'm ready for my nap now, I'm tired." And she does slump down, deflated, then looks up to Brandee as if only just realizing she is there. "Thank you for visiting sweetheart. Tell your parents to come more often. I'm not dead yet..." Her words trail off and she looks down to the notebook in her lap. "Now what was it that was nagging me? Oh, the wives: Katherine, Anne; wedded, beheaded, how does that go?"

Brandee is halfway across the room, her fingers clenched around the ring. "King Henry the Eighth, to six wives he was wedded," she begins, then listens to the old woman finish:

"One died, one survived, two divorced, two beheaded. That's right, smarty-pants."

Just before the open door Brandee stops. The violent rush of pleasure that she knows is coming

soon urges her forward, but the quiet and the flowers—are they nodding knowingly to her—hold her back. If she could just stay here she might be safe. She could ride out the desire gripping her body, maybe call her parents to come get her when the dawn is rising and the worst is over...

“Get the fuck out here!”

She can’t see Dylan. His voice comes at her like a slap. The old woman doesn’t seem to have heard. Her head is nodding over the notebook.

Brandee starts foreword, then remembers the ring. She holds up her hand and is shocked to see such an intricate thing on her grubby finger. Gold prongs clutch the deep green emerald; jealously, tiny diamonds nest around it.

And Brandee can see—in place of the ring—what it will bring her if she gives it to Dylan: a pile of glistening crystals; peak after peak after peak, she and Dylan risen to great heights above everything else. Her body strains like a dog panting on a leash to get the ring to Dylan so he can transform it.

But this eagerness reminds her of what else it will surely bring: the crash, finding herself damp and dirty on some downtown street surrounded by frenetic people, whose angry eyes she knows mirror her own; Dylan loud and maddened and yelling at her to stop talking to him, stop even looking at him; the tiny moment of clarity and despair before desperation takes control.

She rips the ring from her finger. Dylan cannot see this! Frantically she looks down her body—the pockets of her jeans are not safe from him. Her heart is beating so hard. She falls to her knees and shoves the ring—scraping the skin of her instep—into the space between her sock and her foot, then stands to him in the doorway.

“What the fuck?” He is trying to speak quietly, but cannot. “We have got to go—now!”

“I’m coming.” Brandee starts to follow him out of the room, one backward glance at the old woman—whom she expects to see with her head still slumped forward—but whose steady gaze surprises Brandee.

“Who else is here, dear? Did I hear someone?”

“I’m going to kill that old bitch!” Dylan hisses, one hand coming down hard into the other. “I think she saw me? She did; I know she did!”

He tries to step around Brandee but she catches his arm.

"No!" she whispers. "She's half-blind. You got the money? Let's get out of here."

Dylan's eyes ricochet back and forth between the ends of the hall. His fist grinds into his palm.

"It's just my boyfriend!" Brandee sings. "He's here to take me home. We're leaving now." She pushes Dylan away from the room. "Come on, let's go." She pushes harder, until his momentum shifts, and he has her arm and is dragging her down the hall.

The old woman's voice follows her, "Can you tell them to come now? I'm ready for my nap."

She lets Dylan pull her, trying not to limp: the ring has slid under the ball of her foot. The front door is still open, the way they left it, but instead of leading her through, Dylan yanks her to a stop, puts his hands on her shoulders, and looks her hard in the face.

"You were in there a long time. Did you take anything?"

"What are you talking about?" Brandee looks away from Dylan's bloodshot eyes; she cannot imagine that she ever stared into them and tried to find something.

"What do you think I'm talking about? This house is full of expensive shit. What were you doing in there so long?"

"What do you think I was doing? Talking to her just like you told me to."

"Why didn't you come when I called?" He gives her a little shake.

"She was telling me something! I couldn't just leave, I didn't want to make her suspicious."

"You didn't take anything?"

"No!"

Dylan looks her up and down. "Because if you did, I'll find it, you know that, don't you?"

"Dylan, you're being paranoid. I didn't take shit. I just sat there and listened to some crazy old woman tell me nursery rhythms. Now let's go." She starts toward the door. "You've got the cash?"

His face transforms. He drums his back pocket. "Oh man, are we going to get cranked up! And don't I fucking deserve it, after all that, talk about stressful, holy shit. You should be thanking me baby; didn't I come up with this plan? And don't worry, I'll take care of you too. You know I will."

All she has to do is follow him, she knows, and she will be transported. And soon, she also knows, after the money is gone, she will dig the ring out of wherever she has hidden it—if she can even remember where—and it too will go to Dylan and then it will be gone.

She thinks of the little girl with her bows and her perpetual surprise. She will forget her if she lets Dylan get at the ring. How will she retain such a clear and fleeting picture if her mind is being more and more dirtied every day? The little girl will fall between the rotting cracks, get lost between the peaks; Brandee will not be able to hold her safe for the old woman. Will not be able to hold anything, not even for herself.

She stops on the smooth expanse of drive that fronts the house. It is bordered with clumps and clumps of tender looking white flowers; Brandee wonders what they are called and how long they will last into the fall.

Dylan checks himself and whirls around. "What the fuck?" he yells. "Come on you dumb cunt!"

They hear the sirens in the same moment: faint but unmistakable.

"Come on!" Dylan screams. "You took too long! Jesse said we only had fifteen minutes before she called the cops."

They should already be gone, down the steep hills they had walked up after they left the city streets and climbed into this neighborhood of huge houses and old trees. They should be buying. They should be flying already, flying into that sun so hot it is pure, blinding forgiveness.

Brandee sways in place while the sirens get louder. Dylan is screaming at her but she is not listening, she is watching his frightening mouth and realizing that if she hesitates any longer he will come at her.

She spins around and sprints back to the door, grabs the curved brass handle and wrenches it open. Jesse is right there—she screams as the door swings in on her—and Brandee sees that she has blood smeared down her cheek from where Dylan hit her. "I have to do it," he had said the night before, "So it looks like we really did break in. It will be worth it though, you won't even feel it when I hook you up."

"Get out!" Brandee screams. "Get out, get out, get out! Now!"

Brandee grabs her around child-sized arms and pushes her hard. Jesse falls out onto the step and Brandee throws all her weight into the door to close it, then turns the latch, not bothering to see if Dylan has come after her.

She leans into the wood, sobbing silently; she has not locked Dylan out, she has locked herself in. She doubles over, wracked by the knowledge that she has just given up all that her body wants.

She nearly crawls back down the hall to the old woman's room.

She is still in the chair, but the blanket and notebook are on the floor, as if she has risen, then sunk back down. Her head is toppled; she lifts it as Brandee walks in.

"Are you here to give me my nap?" She asks. "I don't know where everyone has gone."

Brandee walks, doubled over, to the corner. She sinks down to the floor in front of the old woman.

"No," she says. "It's me, remember? Margaret?" She lets her body lean up against the old woman's legs, hidden under a flannel nightgown. She reaches for the blanket and puddles it back on the old woman's lap.

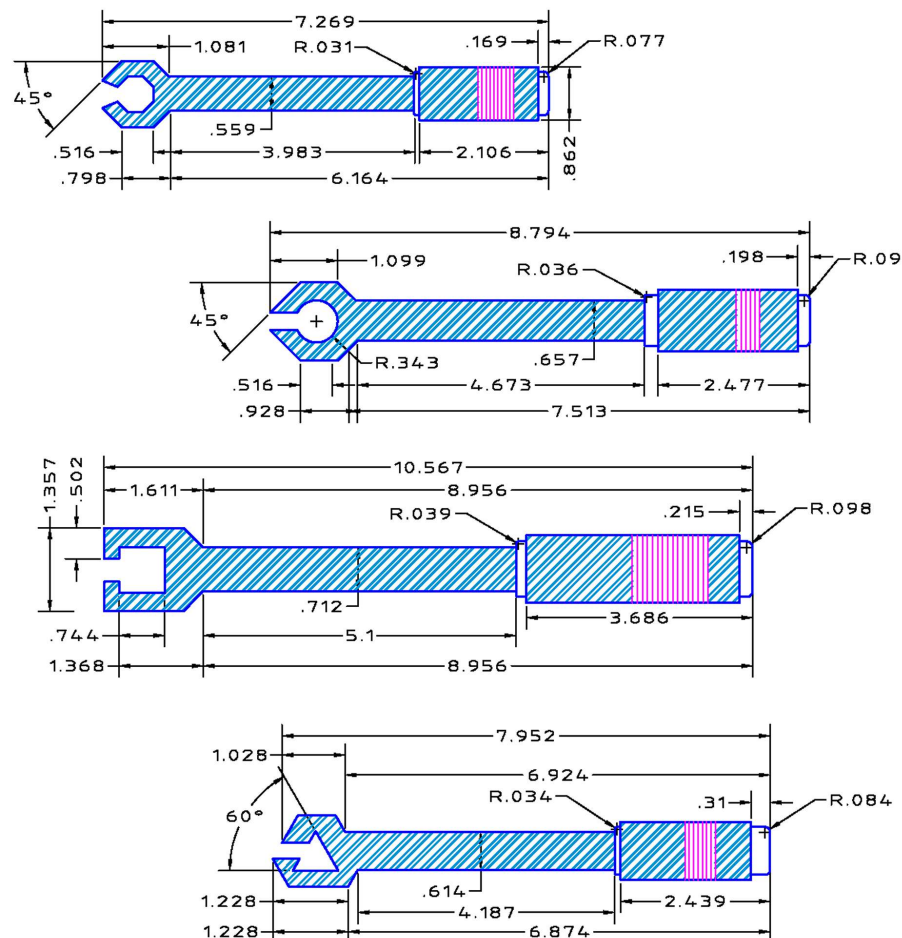
"Margaret. Of course it is. Now will you just stay with me until they come? And make sure I get my medicine; I do need my nap before your father and I go to the Howard's for cocktails."

"I'll stay," Brandee says. "Until they come." She allows her head to collapse against the arm of the chair and a moment later feels the old woman's sharp fingers moving through her tangled hair. From outside she hears the scream of sirens, the screech of tires, and doors slamming. She digs her fingers down into her sock and extracts the ring, scratching herself again. She clutches it tight in her hand.

She shuts her eyes: too dry even for tears. She sees herself holding the ring up to the police officers who will soon be barging into the room. She sees herself on the floor of a jail cell, screaming, crying, begging. She sees herself explaining how she got there to the ghost of a little girl killed years before. She sees herself walking into a room where her parents are waiting for her: pale, strained and hopeful. And she sees herself going back home. Not immediately, but soon.

Denny Marshall has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recently. Mostly does artwork. Denny is plain. He doesn't have any books or books for sale. See more of his works at www.dennymarshall.com

Unused Wrench Set



About My Art

Don't have any long winded descriptions of my artwork or drawing style. When it's all said and done have only one goal. That people would say, "His drawings don't all look the same." (Based on total body of works)

