

The Mockingbird

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of East Tennessee State University



2018

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The Mockingbird 2018

The cover image is a detail from *To Love and to Cherish* by Katie Murphy.

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of East Tennessee State University

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Department of Literature and Language
and the Department of Art and Design



2018

Volume 45 edited by Kara M. Russell

A project like *The Mockingbird* requires the support and cooperation of so many people that one hopes the production of the magazine itself serves as an expression of gratitude, but we would like to offer our thanks to Dr. Bert C. Bach, ETSU's Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, who has authorized the magazine's production fund as part of the regular budget of the Department of Literature and Language. We also thank Dr. Gordon Anderson, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, Dr. Katherine Weiss, Chair of the Department of Literature and Language, and Professor Mira Gerard, Chair of the Department of Art and Design, for their continued support and commitment to this project. We cannot overemphasize the creativity and patience of the ETSU Office of University Relations and, particularly, Ms. Jeanette Henry, our designer. Thank you all for sustaining this project.

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Editor's Note

Kara M. Russell

This edition of *The Mockingbird* has come to encapsulate an energy that both urges transformation and allows reflection in moments of stasis. With this energy, we transcend times of peace and conflict, heartbreak and joy, confusion and confidence. These considerations are of course common fodder for creative exploration of the human condition, but the works gathered here offer a fresh and welcome specificity that encourages all of us to search for the eternal in our lived experiences and give word and image to honor those experiences.

The cover artwork, *To Love and to Cherish* by Katie Murphy, embodies the searching energy invoked by the pieces collected here. Like the writing of this edition, Murphy's painting invites the audience along on that next step in exploration, that moment of action that stands frozen in time for consideration. The composition of *To Love and to Cherish* speaks to the tension of knowing and unknowing so characteristic of creative writing of this region that is also well-represented by *The Mockingbird*.

I hope that this year's selection of student work carries you through seasons just as it has done for me: from a pensive drive along the Blue Ridge Parkway to a pregnant autumnal rain, from a quieted love to the warmth and war of life in spring. These works have stayed with me after reading, and I am thrilled to share them with you all. The writings demand attention and invite investigation of experience. Like R. B. Morris's songbird, this *Mockingbird* has "no recourse but to sing."

As a newcomer to both East Tennessee and creative writing, I have been especially honored to serve as editor and read the stories our students have to offer. The welcome I have received from the creative writing community here at East Tennessee State University, with the connections it has allowed to flourish elsewhere, has been perhaps the greatest gift of my time here; *The Mockingbird* will forever serve as symbol of this great charity.

The fruition of this forty-fifth edition of *The Mockingbird* is borne from the efforts and support of this creative community, at the core of which is found the Department of Literature and Language, chaired by Dr. Katherine Weiss and supported by Diana Qualls. For their diligent considerations of each submission, I send many thanks to my team of student readers: Sakota Blevins, Elizabeth Chapman, Sari Causey, Charissa Doughty, Matthew Gilbert, Seth Grindstaff, Lia Hall, Brooke Johnson, Elena Puckett, Amanda Sawyers, and Adam Timbs. The work of a number of these readers is also represented here (no students read for any category to which they submitted), speaking to the collective effort and interest that has long been a hallmark of this journal. Thanks are extended to members of the Department of Art and Design, in particular Katie Sheffield, Visual Resource Curator, and Karlota Contreras-Koterbay, Director of Slocumb Galleries.

I am honored to have the participation of such remarkably talented and truly inspirational genre judges for this edition: Amy Wright, nonfiction; Mark Powell, fiction; Maurice Manning, poetry; Katy Baker, drama. Thank you each for your time reading and evaluating student work; your continued commitment to the next generation of writers is not a gift unnoticed.

Special gratitude is due former Editors Danielle Byington (2017) and Catherine Pritchard Childress (2013), who invariably met even the most asinine of questions with patience and guidance every step along the way. Thank you to faculty advisors Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes and Dr. Jesse Graves for your help during times of confusion, as well as for the trusting autonomy granted me to send this bird to flight.

I extend particular thanks to my friends who sent messages (and memes) of encouragement and kept me fed with perfectly baked chocolate chip cookies and home-cooked meals. Lastly, I send love and light to my family who have supported me in gestures large and small to bring me where I am today.

Off the Blue Ridge Parkway towards Alleghany

Amber Rookstool

The night sky shines as if the world
bumps and bruises, bounced and beaten
like a ball inside a bare can,
crushed and kicked down the street:
a bespeckled tin.
Lovers cuddle, contemplating,
attempting to catch a glimpse
outside this dark sealed ribbed vessel—
A cold metallic barrier
blocks the soft spring Sun, shining on
Sunday's sidewalk trash and litter,
tumbled and tucked, gnawed in-between jaws.
The Neighborhood's mangy yellow
dog tosses the can side to side:
Find the thing that rattles within—

Us.



Home before Dark (Autumn Reflections along I-26)

Nancy Jane Earnest

WEAVERVILLE—

I-26 wears splayed light like beach sand wears waves.
It shimmers across the median, up spindly shrubs
in the graveled shoulder. Road signs whirl past me,
jerky frames in a hand-cranked movie.

FORKS OF IVY—

Images flatten against deep sky,
ridges jump forward,
become a child's paper collage of
determined shapes torn by small hands.
Oversized circle of yellow mimes the sun.

MARS HILL—

Gold-tinged leaves flutter and cling,
waiting for first frost. In low sun,
trunks and branches become fine-line etchings
matted in dark shadows that cup hollows where
gray barns guard steep pastures.

WOLF LAUREL—

Mountain vistas open and close. I sing decibels above
road noise. Radio defines me, my generation.
We carried transistors on wrist straps, punched
metal buttons on the dashboard of our first cars.
Now it's oldies on XM that bridge the gap,
bring faces, fragrances, emotions to mind as if I'd
opened dog-eared pages of a musty yearbook.

ERWIN, UNICOI, JOHNSON CITY—

Touch of a button opens the moon roof.
Wind sends a chill through my denim vest;
whistles in my ears.
Nearly home to roost, I'm besting sunset by minutes;
watch gray clouds finger out into an ever-evolving
fiery sky. *Sailor's delight.*



Fear of Getting Wet

Lacy Snapp

Sunset swim at Grandmother's
condominium with Blue
Ridges in the background,
bright orange sky in the forefront.
You swan-dive into a still pool
after testing the temperature
with your big toe. Dead bugs sleep
on its surface. My childhood refuge,
reflected in fragmented ripples,
is now falling apart—tiles missing
in the shallow end. I get in past
my shins, then waist. I backtrack
then wait, watch as you
submerge yourself until only
your eyes are peeking out.
Our time is slipping out
into the deep, darkness silently
wraps around us. If I don't go under now,
I never will. I'll never know
how it'd feel to float with you
in lukewarm water—cicadas calling
from the trees, full moon rising
overhead. I welcome the smell
of stale chlorine as it sticks itself
to this memory. Wading,
I let my apprehensions wash off me,
I push them away with the motions
of a breaststroke. Your eyes follow mine
as my remaining limbs slip beneath the surface.



Watauga Lake in Autumn

Alexandria Craft

Trees mimic chameleons, transforming into a mix of golden and fiery foliage. As morning rouses, the sun peeks out over the ridges of dense Appalachian Mountains and the lustrous reservoir becomes translucent, revealing the town submerged at its bottom. I'm tempted to dip my toes in—surely something so stunning couldn't be so cold—but when the wind stings my cheeks and goose flesh rises from my pale skin, I am reminded of a season when the sun's rays whisper of counterfeit warmth. The Floridians have all returned home at the prophecy of a woolly worm, leaving the locals to embrace fall with their flannels and spiced cider. Beneath chilly waters, Bluegill and Brown Trout glide along sleepily. An engine sputters to life, resounding through the marina, warming for a journey. Another leaf sashays in silence to the lake below. The small ripple it generates is soon eclipsed by grandiose waves.



August Chapel

Bradley Hartsell

When the all-giving, incandescent orb,
burning a billion and some change, keeps beaming in my eyes,
I can just scoot a foot more beside the crooked ped xing sign,

as I enter into the marble chapel—all august ceilings and
jasper adornments.

The stained glass and altar impart our dawn, our fall,
the blood that forgave and our rewards awaiting.

What's more: the etchings, the symmetry—dictated by
the pious men, solemn and cloaked, who visited some nearby village
for bread and wine that morning, just to carve and erect all night—

They've long since enriched the bread we eat. As Job endures,
secured in
the friars' magnificent antiquity, I take my place in the varnished
oak welcoming
acolytes and nonbelievers.

In respect now, I bow my head as my eyes affix to the
Bose speakers affixed every twelve inches, projecting the
resounding voice

of Brother Sean, I believe they call him,

enrapturing the congregation with the Good News.



October, 1938

Hannah Purdy

The moon cuts a hole in the sky: a perfect circle in the night like someone had taken a paper punch to it. Nora supposes God was the one to do it. That's what her mama would've said, if she'd ever bothered to ask. It doesn't look so hard, Nora thinks. She learned how to draw a passable circle at the kitchen table when she was three. Blue crayon on white paper.

She could cut that circle, if someone only gave her a decent pair of scissors and a tall enough ladder. She could climb right to the top, hack at the sky's inky fabric like she was making a felt animal. Then that circle would fall, and the light would shine down on the fire escape like it is right now. Only it'd be better, because she'd have done it herself.

Her foot taps out a rhythm against the grate. Some tune drifts out the window, sultry and low. Gwen's got a record playing on the Victrola while she fixes her face. She likes to set the mood. Soon as she'd put the needle to the vinyl, Nora had thrown open the window and plunged outside.

"Need a smoke," she'd called on her way out.

"Save some for the rest of us, sweetheart!" Gwen had said.

The smoke curls up into the air. Her breath follows it, fogging in the cold. It's too cold to be outside, really. She'll have to warm her hands over the stove when she climbs back into their matchbox one-bedroom. Despite the chill, the city still hums, tuneless as Gwen singing along to her record.

"Hey," Gwen says, poking her head out the window. "How 'bout a drag of that?"

Nora passes over the cigarette without looking at her. "You ready to go?"

“I look like I’m ready?”

Turning her head, Nora finds Gwen hanging half out the window in nothing but her slip. Her hair’s done in neat curls, face powdered, but her lips are still bare. She doesn’t need that signature red, Nora thinks; her natural pink suits her just fine.

“You trying to scandalize Mrs. Taylor across the way?” Nora waves to the building across the street.

“Maybe I am,” Gwen says, a smile blooming wickedly. “Should I call out to her? Throw rocks at her window?”

“I think you ought to put the rest of your clothes on before you catch cold.” Nora swipes the cigarette from between her fingers and stubs it out against the fire escape. “Aren’t you gonna be late?”

“Oh, Danny can wait an extra twenty minutes,” Gwen says. “It won’t hurt him none.”

“Maybe his pride.”

“Well, that’s not my problem, now is it?” She titters a laugh, swatting at Nora’s shoulder. “Come back in, I need you to zip me up.”

“Hey,” Nora says before Gwen ducks back through the window. She lifts a hand to point at the sky. “You think I could hang the moon?”

Nora looks sideways; Gwen’s watching her, teeth dug into her lip like she’s really considering it. “I think you could do just about anything you set your mind to, Nora.”

Nora smiles, bemused but warm. Gwen returns it, then grabs her by the elbow to draw her back inside.

“*Including* come out with me tonight,” Gwen says as she shuts the window.

“Oh, cut that out,” Nora groans.

“Won’t you come just once?”

The record’s still playing. Nora pauses by the Victrola, hand hovering over the dial. “You know I can’t afford it.”

“But that’s the whole *point*, sweetheart—you don’t have to.” Gwen comes up behind her, lays a hand on her hip to spin her around. Nora bats her away, mouth twisting. “You think I buy my own drinks? Huh uh, that’s what dates are for.”

“I don’t wanna go with some guy just so he’ll buy me a drink or two,” Nora says.

“He’ll expect something out of it. I ain’t a girl like that.”

Gwen’s face darkens, lip curling into a sneer. “A girl like that, huh? A girl like me?”

“Gwen, no, you know I didn’t mean it like that—”

“Mm, I know what you meant, sweetheart.” Gwen turns and trails into their shared bedroom, pausing at the threshold to look over her shoulder. “Not all of us can be smart college girls like you. Some of us gotta make our own way as best we can.”

“*Gwen.*”

“Come zip me up.”

Chin tucked to her chest, Nora follows her into the room. Gwen’s got the green dress laid out on her twin-size bed, the one with the skirt that moves like a dream. Fits her like a glove. Perfect for dancing. She slides it onto herself, then lifts her hair to present the open back to Nora. She stares for a beat, then remembers she’s supposed to do something about that. Tottering forward on unsteady legs, she grasps the zipper in one hand, the fabric below it in another. The sound as she eases the dress closed feels loud enough to echo.

“I’m sorry,” Nora mumbles.

“You should be.” Gwen turns to the vanity—theirs, technically, though Nora rarely uses it. “You’re dumber than I give you credit for sometimes.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“And you are, I know. All I’m saying is, you don’t always know best, Nora Healy.” Gwen smirks at her in the mirror; Nora feels her cheeks flushing. “Most of the time, sure, but not always.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” Nora says with a nod. She starts to head toward her bed, where she’d left her book on the quilts. She’d stopped at a cliffhanger, she really ought to—

Gwen stops her by circling fingers around her wrist. “You really don’t wanna come out with me? Just the once? I’ll doll you up real nice.”

The way she wags her tube of lipstick is hypnotizing, almost. For a flash, Nora pictures sitting down at the stool, letting Gwen comb her hair, paint her face, lean in close to swipe the lipstick across her mouth—

She shakes her head, breath hitching. “I’d only sour your fun. I got two left feet.”

“I could teach you the Lindy real quick,” Gwen says, and then she’s grinning that wicked smile, dragging Nora by the wrist back out into the living room. Once there, she spins around to face Nora, taking both her hands. Her skin is soft, and Nora’s too bewildered to remember to pull away. That happens, with Gwen.

“Okay, see? I’ll lead, you just step when I step, only the opposite.”

She tries, honest to God tries, to put in the effort, if only because Gwen’s smile is so infectious and the song’s catchy. But she keeps treading on Gwen’s stockinged feet with her loafers, and you can’t find the rhythm if you never had it to lose. With a frustrated sigh, Nora tears her hands loose, turning away.

“I’m no good.”

“Hey,” Gwen says behind her. She takes Nora gently by the shoulders to turn her around. “So lindy hop’s not your thing. We can try something else—c’mere.”

And she takes Nora’s hand and sets it at her shoulder, lays her own hand at Nora’s waist, hauls her in till they’re standing flush.

“We’ll try something a little slower,” Gwen says. “Shoulda started off that way. That’s my fault.”

They dance, just shuffling really, and the record’s playing something slow and sweet. She’ll regret it in the morning—she’ll regret it as soon as the door shuts behind Gwen as she leaves—but for now she gives in. She lets Gwen take them in slow circles around the room, their hands clasped tight, her fingers gripping firm at Nora’s waist.

“See?” Gwen says. “What’d I tell you? You can do anything.”

“Guess you are the smart one.”

“Alert the presses,” Gwen laughs, then she slides in closer, hooking her chin over Nora’s shoulder. Her hair brushes against Nora’s cheek; she smells like apples.

“This ain’t so bad,” Nora murmurs.

“Yeah?” Gwen asks, hopeful. “Y’know, they don’t even mind so much if the girls dance together. You can come out, just dance with me. I’ll buy you a drink, too. Whisky and coke. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“It could be.”

“You won’t do it, though.”

“No.”

Gwen sighs, a shallow breath, and pulls away. She says something about still needing her lipstick and shoes, how she's already ages late. Nora lets her go, tells her she looks nice when she asks, shuts the door behind her when she leaves. It's hard to concentrate on her book, after that. She flicks the light off and tries sleep instead.

Later, Gwen will come home. She'll clatter around the kitchen for a glass of water, kick her shoes off in the living room. She'll forget the bedroom door creaks. She'll smell like whisky and cologne and sweat. If it's cold enough, she might even climb into Nora's bed instead, stick her cold feet against Nora's calves.

It's not cold enough. In the morning, Gwen's asleep in her own bed, turned toward the wall.

But there's a room-temperature bottle of coke sitting on the nightstand. The label's turned to face Nora. She sits up and reaches for it, a strange smile pulling at her mouth. They'll share it over breakfast, when Gwen wakes up.



October Shower

Janice Hornburg

A mistfall of soft-soaking rain—
he opened the green door
of cedar's dense foliage,
drew me into the secluded room
at its shadowed heart—
brown branches and bare
earth crisped with fragrant needles.

We kissed as afternoon filtered
down in faintly diffuse light,
silvering his damp hair
tangled in my fingers,
suspending time in twilight.

Too quickly, the shower passed.
He emerged laughing, hitched
up his Levi's, brushed away
twigs still clinging to my sweater.
We continued our walk
down trails that split and split again,
until only the memory remains.



Orogeny

Janice Hornburg

At stream's source, water tumbles over stones,
moss-draped roots
 tangle under rivulets,
phlox paints sun-splashed creek banks
magma red—
upwelled ores of garnet and gold.



When continents collided,
Appalachian spires thrust high as Himalayas.

Three hundred million years of wind and water
crumbled the mountains to tree-furred spine and ribs—
rusted as relic blood, iron-rich clay pooled and clotted,
eroded from softer rocks,
 gemstones washed downstream.



Morning hatch rises like vapor from the river.
Fisherman wades hip-deep in silver, casts a fly,
 reels in rainbow trout—
sapphire and garnet—
sets it free,
 goes home with empty creel.



Before the Bird Went Weightless

William Rieppe Moore

Before the bird went weightless
the scalding pot sent its chimney
smoke up with impatience.

The span between last night and here
was just the rain planning its last
ambuscade against potash.

Dividing greys smear scorned images
across the sky. Sun's blue ignorance
of light mingles on the wind

That drops color-burden off so it
can race around outstretched beech,
oak and walnut branches

Encircling green pasture that fades like
a wind-up-doll on the kitchen table.
While stained-glass leaves

Invert hand-cupped trying to hold
their crisp story long enough to tell
someone but not enough to

Remember. Hen feathers tan-fleecing
clutters fallen poplar leaves Melasma.
The pickaxe leans against

A twin-oak further in the woods. It's
heft told clay's cow-patty postern,
I'm gonna beat this door

Down. The feathers and gizzards
need a place that's all their own. A place
for blood, a word like home.



MOASS

Zoë Hester

Uncle Mike was always telling
tales: pirogues, gators, wardens.
Grandpa says he's the reason that
Murphy's Law was invented.
Grandpa calls this one the MOASS:
the mother of all snake stories.
After that water moccasin
bit Mike, Grandpa called him at the
Jennings Hospital. "What happened?"
"You really do not wanna know."
But of course he did. Mike and his
old buddy was fishin' on the
Mermentau, saw the cottonmouth
across the river, black and gold.
Being a good Cajun, Mike knew
he had to end the critter's life.
They got the boat real close, the snake
got agitated. Grandpa says
he'd been agitated too if
some screwy wild-eyed Cajun man
drove his pirogue alongside
with strange murder showin' in his eyes.
But Mike grabbed him and got bit bad.
Game warden had to fly him out.

Later, when Mike got to go home
he got out of his pickup truck,
checkin' his mail and then realized
his foot was squarely on a huge
cottonmouth. He managed to reach
into the bed of that pickup,
grabbed his .22 rifle
and shot the damn thing dead real fast.
Way down in Louisiana,
one typically sees snakes and such
but Mike was always more bothered
with them seeing him.

Swimming in Grandma's gumbo was
the closest I ever got to
the bayou, which made Mike's stories
seem like he was catching dragons
instead of gators, that Grandpa
was a Cajun memory, sent
to remind us of our history.



On Funerals and Family Reunions

Amanda Sawyers

My Uncle Teddy fell over dead one July morning. He greeted the balmy heat like he did most every day, cup of coffee in hand. Except for this day his heart just gave out without warning.

I was awakened that morning to the sounds of my mother's rustling skirt and loud exclamations to God. As if it would take her words and her words only to stop his supposed will. Mom prayed for everything. She once prayed when our fridge gave out, and much to the shock of my then best friend Rena, it came back to life. I'm not sure if she thought the same would work for my uncle, but I suppose at that point muscle memory kicked in.

"Amanda!" Her prayers changed suddenly to calling my name. I'm sure she didn't realize that I was already awake. I often preferred to assess situations such as these from the comfort of my bed before getting involved.

"We have to go! Oh, Jesus," her frantic pacing now involved stopping at the end of the hallway long enough to open my door and then resume her attempts to raise Teddy like he was Lazarus.

This impromptu ritual continued as I showered and dressed. From the bathroom, I could peek outside to see my uncle's house. He lived just across the road and up the hill from ours. There was a mass of people gathered around the porch. Several trucks and cars were lined up on the side of the road at the bottom of the hill. As I finished, I noticed the ambulance arrive. There was no urgency to it. I even wondered if it had its lights on merely out of courtesy.

"I've got to go," Mom was muttering as I was finishing up, "I have to help."

"Mom, there really isn't anything you can do," I said.

She hadn't heard me. She was still praying and talking to herself as she went out the door. I decided to return to the task of getting ready

because I was sure we'd be heading out or, at the very least, over to my uncle's once the crowd died down.

No sooner had I finished drying my hair, I heard the front door close. Instead of the usual noise that came with her praise and praying, I heard soft crying.

"Mom?"

She was sitting on the love seat, cradling her head with her hands. When she looked up at me, I could see her eyes were bloodshot and wide, and her face was pale.

"You saw him, didn't you?" I already knew the answer to my question before it even left my lips.

"We need to head to the hospital." Her response was barely a whisper.

"I'll drive." I was already heading out the door and could feel Mom's presence close behind.

As we made our way down the steps, the ambulance was already pulling out into the road. Its lights were no longer on, and the massive number of vehicles had begun to disperse and follow in what I could only describe as a pre-funeral procession.

Mom was still silent as I found a place for my little Chevy in the line. She had since stopped crying and only stared blankly ahead.

"They don't know what happened," she mumbled. "They don't know."

"Had he been sick?"

From my peripheral, I could see her shake her head slowly.

"They were draining his blood in the ambulance," she whispered.

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. I knew from being a bit of a nerd for random pieces of knowledge that draining fluids was part of the embalming process. I knew better than to believe that would actually happen during the ambulance ride to the hospital or funeral home or wherever. There's no denying something happened, and I most certainly wasn't going to press the matter with Mom.

With the convoy of cars and the ridiculous, curvy rural roads, the trip to the hospital took much longer than normal. Mom offered very little in regard to conversation, until she saw that I had pulled in next to my Aunt Betty and Uncle Joe.

"It's so awful!" Mom fell into their arms as she began to sob again. They proceeded to lead her to the hospital, barely acknowledging my existence.

The only hospital in our rural area, Buchanan General Hospital, had once made the list of the top ten worst hospitals in the state of Virginia. I often figured that was the reason Daddy opted for out-of-town treatment as he battled the cancer that would claim his life. Still, no one placed any blame on the institution or its lack of state-of-the-art machines or doctors who had first languages other than English. Even when first responders failed to navigate the horrible back roads in a timely manner to save my Uncle Eurmil and little cousin Patrick, when they drowned during a fishing trip two years prior, it was just “God’s Will.” It was as if he sits up high and decides who lives and who dies with a wag of a disapproving finger. These were the thoughts circling my mind as we sat in the ICU waiting room.

What started as my mother and me and Betty and Joe soon turned into a full-on Sunday congregation as Mom’s preacher and several church members joined us. I was reminded of how they were at the hospital not even thirty minutes after Daddy died, and that was forty-five minutes out of the way. It’s almost like they wear beepers or something. Anything that keeps them in contact with one another in times of sorrow, so they can be at the ready with apple pies and Kleenex.

It was during the peak of the commotion that I noticed a nurse had joined us. It was one of my sister Becky’s many in-laws, Tina. While she’s well-respected as a head nurse, I often feel she’s a caricature of the role. Other nurses are almost always in comfortable scrubs. Tina looks like something from a ’50s-time capsule, complete with the folded paper hat. My own dealings with her had been minimal, but right now she was awkwardly trying to position herself as a matronly figure in our collective.

“As anyone been able to contact the immediate next-of-kin?” She asked as she placed herself in the center of the room.

Mom, with her head buried in her purse searching for more tissue, was only able to shake her head. Joe, who often appoints himself as a spokesperson whenever her can, cleared his throat.

“All three sons work. I was able to get a ’hold of Doug’s foreman. He said he’d get word to him.”

Tina offered her best, premanufactured, comforting smile to this answer as she sat herself next to him and Mom.

“As you know, we can’t release him until one of them are able to sign the death certificate. If I could I would let one of you,” her soft voice trailed off.

“No, no, we understand.” Joe felt the need to grasp her hand, and before I knew it, they were all lost in prayer again.

I decided to take the opportunity to escape the room for some air. Since Daddy's death, I have become an old hand at the grief process. Aside from him and my other uncle and cousin, I had also recently lost another aunt, a great-aunt, and a baby cousin. The baby cousin was perhaps the most difficult. Little Amber was barely two years old when it happened. Her mom sat next to her casket during the entire service. No one knew what to say to her. Thinking on this just now made me go back to the whole will of God thing. Would he really want a baby to die? I think instead of speaking about such things at the services, we all should have just sat with her and grieved for the life cut short.

As I roamed the halls looking for a soda machine, my thoughts turned to what funerals usually mean in our family. When Daddy died, I saw cousins I hadn't seen in years. When Aunt Janet died later that same year, I met some cousins for the first time. Funerals had become our family reunions. I despised the grief involved with it, but it was nice to see some of my relatives who managed to escape the rural hell I call home.

Daddy's youngest brother, Ricky, is by far one of the most successful out of his siblings. He left home right after graduation for Illinois: the same trek made by many in search of a brighter future. Daddy chose home and a job working long hours in the coal mines. He more than provided for us, but it was back-breaking work. He'd come home and nap, and he often consumed copious amounts of beer with his other coal miner brothers. The relaxation poison more than likely contributed to the cancer that killed him. Uncle Teddy drank just as much as he did and lived another four years after Daddy passed. I suppose the two weren't related, but my train of thought was skipping its tracks. Considering when Daddy died I shut down, this wasn't as bad of a reaction.

It was a weird feeling, looking forward to seeing people during times of grief. Which I guess really some see it as part of the healing process. When I made it back to Mom and the rest of my family, Derrek and Billy, Teddy's sons, had arrived and looked just about as grief-stricken as you could imagine. Doug was still nowhere to be found. He worked for one of the many logging companies in the area, and it could be a while before anyone located him. I noticed the clock in the waiting room read a quarter after noon. It had felt like we'd been at the hospital a lot longer than two hours.

I leaned against the wall, surveying the whole scene as I sipped on my Dr. Pepper. Mom was still praying with Joe and Betty. Derrek and Billy were looking over the paperwork with Tina. I almost jumped when a hand touched my shoulder.

"Hey, ugly." The voice of my Uncle Darrell said in my ear.

Daddy's second youngest brother stood next to me as his what he believed to be common-law wife joined the others.

"You know, that stopped being entertaining when I was seven," I said.

He chuckled, as he always took my replies never to be serious, and patted me on the back as he made his way to Derrek and Billy. Things seemed to be wrapping up, so I made my way to Mom, who was still clinging to Joe.

"Amanda," Joe said, pulling me in for an awkward hug, "didn't know you were here."

"Been here the whole time," I said, laughing and blowing off not being noticed.

"We really need to get you to church this Sunday."

Conversations with him always turn to saving my soul. I figured out early in my teens my soul was headed for damnation simply just for being a teen with an opinion of my own. As I approach my twenties, my soul was doomed because I chose to question the will of a deity I didn't believe in. Lately I've wondered if once you sign onto the organized religion bandwagon you receive a soul quota.

I smiled politely. It had been a trying morning, and I was not in the mood. He would have kept staring at me, expectantly, if Mom hadn't chosen that moment to put her arm around my waist.

"Think it's 'bout time we head home and check on Debbie." Mom attempted a smile, but it fell flat as soon as she tried.

"Oh goodness, I figured she'd be here."

Debbie was Teddy's girlfriend. Since I could remember, he always had someone living with him, but had never married. Many of my relatives, like Darrell, believed common-law marriage to be valid in the state of Virginia. It used to be fun to argue with them. Daddy used to encourage my arguing. I could never tell if he was just an instigator, or thought I had potential to be a lawyer. Time spent with Mom and her desire for me to be nice quenched the argumentative part of my personality.

"I called the trailer before we came over," Darrell stated. "Her daughter answered and said something about how she had passed out."

"Oh Jesus!" Mom exclaimed. "We better get on home."

"Will you guys start calling the rest of the family?" Darrell directed his request to me.

"Of course," I said as Mom led me to the doorway.

Mom opted to check on Debbie, so I got left with her address book. As I flipped through the names, I decided to start with Ricky first. The fact he had not only a home and office number, but also a cell number, fascinated me. He always said it was the easiest way to reach him, so I decided to start with it first.

“Hello, you’ve reached Richard Justus of Aimm Corp. Please state your name, number, and nature of the call after the beep, and I’ll get back to you at my earliest convenience. Thank you.”

For whatever reason, I found myself nervous, as if a piece of technology could really put a person on the spot.

“Oh, um, hi, Uncle Ricky. It’s Amanda.” I was stuttering. Why in the hell was I stuttering? I cleared my throat and charged on.

“Uncle Teddy passed away this morning. There’s no word on arrangements at the moment. I guess give us a call when you can. Bye.”

“I can’t believe I let that freak me out,” I muttered to myself as I got back to dialing.

I made it through Mom’s address book just in time for her return. She still appeared just as distraught as she had at the height of this morning’s ordeal.

“Everyone’s been called.” I said, handing her back the book.

“Debbie got several calls while I was there.”

“How is she?” I asked, sitting at the kitchen table as she made a pot of coffee.

Mom stopped what she was doing and closed her eyes. She began to sway as she lost herself in what she called “the spirit.” The last time I ever stepped foot into her church, I had a similar incident fall upon me. I was surrounded by people, shouting and crying, as they stumbled about. I couldn’t lose myself in the hysteria. I tried, and it scared me. Whenever she had these moments, I found it best to just let her be.

“He hadn’t even been sick,” Mom finally replied.

“Oh, wow,” I wasn’t sure what to say. What does anyone say when a perfectly healthy person just falls over dead?

“There had been some issues, with Margie,” Mom’s voice trailed off.

Margie was another in the long line of live-in pseudo-wives. Daddy had known one of the three men she had called husband at one point in her life. There was

some humor to be found in the fact he was named Homer Barron, but unlike in Faulkner, Margie never slept next to his corpse, although it was rumored she did kill him. Daddy often mentioned their fights when we could hear Margie go at it with Teddy. He worried his brother would meet a similar fate. Thankfully, they just split, although she never left him alone.

“I don’t understand why she still bothers him.”

All Mom could do was shake her head.

“Bad nerves do run in your dad’s side of the family.” She finally said. “I wonder if the stress just got to him.”

It was interesting for Mom to say that. I was in the room when Daddy died four years earlier. Shortly after I developed sleep issues and vivid nightmares. At the time, she refused to admit I had any sort of problems. Even after teachers at school talked to her about it. She chose to pray over me than seek professional help. Thankfully, the insomnia passed some time ago. The nightmares still happen, but I’ve just learned to deal and wait patiently for the time when I have my own health insurance.

Conveniently, the phone chose to ring at that moment. Betty typically called between 7 and 8 p.m. every night to gossip about the goings on in our area, as is the typical hobby for the Appalachian housewife. I pretended to read some Sylvia Plath as I listened in on their conversation.

“You mean to tell me he just up and left her?” Mom sounded like a mix between angry and sad. She rarely got mad about anything, so whatever happened had to have been bad.

“Well, he’s probably under a lot of stress, what with his job and now this.” I knew her annoyance wouldn’t last long. She always tries to look for any sort of justification for the actions of others.

This back and forth action went on for a while before I gathered that it had to do with my Uncle Ricky and my Aunt Nina. There was either a miscommunication on riding arrangements or he flat out left her standing. I hadn’t seen Nina since Daddy’s funeral. I had heard she had become pregnant a year or so after that. She had been married a long time ago and had two children from that relationship, but I knew nothing of her current situation.

Between skimming over *The Bell Jar* and trying to follow a one-sided conversation, I suddenly found myself at the beginning of a headache. I decided to retreat to my room and attempt sleep. I had nothing to look forward to except the madness that usually accompanied any family gathering.

My family used to visit more often. I wouldn't say we had reunions, but there were extended get-togethers. Ricky would often stay for weeks at a time. He has a daughter, Vanessa, close to my age. However, when I last saw her she had lost her virginity at fourteen and was the epitome of everything that made me feel awkward around others. A lot of the guys from school would refer to me as mousy and spoke to me only if they felt it would garner the opportunity to cheat from me. The girls with the big hair and heavily made-up faces always made me feel like I was a kid, even though thanks to an early-in-the-year birthday, I was older than most of them.

The rest of my family usually treats me like some sort of intellectual sideshow. At age eight they used to drill me on state capitals. They always said I'd be a doctor or lawyer, as if remembering the capital of Kentucky was a deciding factor of entrance at Harvard. It's interesting, though, considering I haven't aged past early childhood in their eyes.

When Daddy died, the family converged on us with suffocating sympathy and food. So far, it's been similar with Teddy's death. With his house, my mom's, my Aunt Sylvia's and my Aunt Phyllis's all in close proximity, food and grieverers wandered through all of our private spaces. While sharing memories, they also used our bathrooms and took advantage of the ample parking available in our yards. With the tears and personal space invasion, they continued the steady flow of food. Fried chicken, pizza, pies, cakes, cookies, anything you could possibly think of.

For the most part I avoided the masses. Maybe since I'm two years shy of leaving my teens, I no longer hold any interest. This allowed me to be an observer, and that's the sort of position I enjoy. I would often watch people cry and share memories all the while enjoying some drumsticks and chocolate cake. Might as well make the most of the situation, right?



He was always well dressed. Even when he wasn't working. Ricky arrived with his second wife, Martha, dressed in a dark blue Izod polo and Hagar slacks. His sunglasses, while I couldn't place a brand name, I could safely assume cost somewhere in the \$200 range. Martha was slender, and her dress matched the blue of Ricky's shirt, an act I'm sure was coordinated on purpose. She was quite tan, which reminded me of her birthday present two years ago: a tanning bed. She didn't work, so of course there was ample time to devote to the perfect tan.

After greeting everyone, Ricky approached me.

"Amanda!" He was smiling warmly.

“Hey,” I hugged him and Martha in turn.

“You look good!” He held my hands, almost like he was taking me in full view. An act, normally creepy, but seemingly acceptable by family. “I assume graduation went well?”

“Oh yeah. Was insane hot in the gym.” The temperature that day broke 100 degrees. With over 150 graduates and all their nearest and dearest packed in like sardines, it became miserable quite quickly.

“I’m so glad it all went well,” he was still smiling widely at me. “I’m sure you got our card?”

“Oh yes, thank you so much. I’m still working on thank you cards.” Ricky had mailed me the most out of anyone. A check for \$250. It must be nice to not to have to stress every penny to let a cleared \$250 check go unnoticed. He was more than likely being polite, but he was also the type that enjoyed bringing attention to his wealth.

“Have you thought about college, Amanda?” Martha asked.

“Virginia Tech.” I replied without a moment’s hesitation.

“Good school, good school,” her voice trailed off. I didn’t expect much attention to be paid towards me. That I even got that much attention was nothing more than mere courtesy. As people gathered around to share in the community of loss, I retreated to my bedroom. There’s only so much of people I can deal with before I’m spent.



If you’ve never been to an Old Regular Baptist funeral, it’s something you need to experience at least once in your life. The Old Regular Baptists are rather clan-ish, like most of the people of Southwest Virginia. The religion itself originated in Appalachia. The church where my family chose to host Teddy’s funeral, the Wolford Old Regular Baptist Church, could very well pass as a time capsule. The original building dates back to the late 1800s. The walls were more contemporary, because they are now covered in a dark brown wood paneling, like they belong in some ’70s sitcom. Hanging on these walls are photos in aging frames of church members, long since passed on from this world. Current church members still discuss those gone like they are still sitting among the rest of us.

This was my Mawmaw Kelsa and Pawpaw Russell’s church. The very same people that brought my Daddy and Teddy into this world. Sure enough, every one of the nine preachers that spoke about Teddy, while they didn’t know him, knew

Mawmaw and Pawpaw. And they talked about them, at great length. Several members have told me that I resemble Mawmaw. I was barely two when she died. Something about this candid conversation while at the funeral of another relative was rather unsettling.

The music was also unnerving. Every song was performed in an eerie take on call and response, where the one person leads with the first line of the song and the rest of the church follows with the next line, drawing it out. I remember Daddy joking about how they could make “Amazing Grace” last twenty minutes. I never understood that joke until Teddy’s funeral.

The thing that bothered me the most was that the service itself was rather disjointed. As I mentioned earlier, nine separate preachers shared officiating duties. However, there was no rhyme or reason to this, and at moments upwards of three men were screaming and preaching at the same time. It was during these moments that the rest of the congregation joined in and added to the insanity. I had honestly seen more order in the televangelist shows mom enjoys.

Suffice to say I found myself outside a lot. Most of my male cousins, including Teddy’s sons, could be found shuffling about the parking lot. I wasn’t sure who’s idea it was to have Teddy’s funeral here, because the majority of the family seemed rather uncomfortable being here. Or, perhaps, it was their way of just dealing. I’m sure the eeriness of the music and the presence of their dead patriarch was a bit too much of a strange combination to handle.

I often float through groups of people. Happened in high school and it seems the same could be said about these “funeral reunions.” I was lost in my own thoughts, and before I was fully aware of the sound of crunching gravel, I had a pair of arms locked around me in a bear hug.

“Amanda!” It was my Aunt Nina. With her was a lanky gentleman who seemed somewhat out of place in this environment. Perhaps it was due to the lack of oxygen to my brain, but, at first, I couldn’t quite figure out why.

“Oh, my goodness! You look so good, sweets!” She still had me locked in a tight hug. I was starting to feel slightly light-headed.

“It’s good to see you, too,” I managed to get out a response. “I can’t breathe.”

Nina stepped back, laughing. As she did, she took the hand of the man with her.

“I’m guessing everyone is inside?” She inquired. “Oh, this is Waylon. Waylon, this is my brother Roger’s girl, Amanda.”

I smiled and shook his sweaty hand. His gaze seemed happy that I was accepting of his presence. I failed to register anything at Nina’s lack of mentioning Ricky

from the immediate anxiety radiating from Waylon. The looks he was getting from my cousins explained his nerves. Suddenly, his anxiety made sense.

He was black.



Growing up in the deep South, I have encountered racism. Throughout my twelve years of secondary school, I could count only two African American students. They received the expected animosity from the ignorant types. The adults, if they harbored any negative feelings, never expressed them. Which is probably why I was so surprised at the tension caused by Waylon's presence.

It was infuriating. Here, we are gathered as a family, cherishing the memory of a lost loved one, and more focus was on the proverbial "elephant in the room." As the service went on, I was lost in memory of my own father. However, it was more for what he told me growing up. Daddy had his moments of using the language of a racist. I had heard him use the reprehensible "N" word. It wasn't what you'd think, though. People around these parts have a name for Brazil nuts, and it doesn't take much to discern what that is. Daddy never once uttered it in hate speech and often told me to be accepting of everyone.

No one directly approached Waylon. That goes to say no one approached him in friendship either, except for mom and myself. It was one thing I could applaud her for. While she was often overbearing with her need to save everyone, Mom was overly accepting of everyone. I wasn't sure of his spiritual affiliation, but Waylon seemed appreciative just to have people to talk to.

Most funeral services in these parts of Appalachia last around three days. The term "wake" often refers to the evening services. I was told something once about how families stayed up all night with the mourning. Most of these old funerals took place in homes, so there was this eerie slumber party feel. Daddy's services were like this. Daddy and Darrell helped build my Aunt Phyllis's house. Mom tried to justify that he would want the funeral held there due to this significance. I honestly thought it was just damned creepy.

Something about this though had caused her house to become a sort of gathering ground for all of us. Throughout the series of deaths since Daddy's, the family would gather here to eat, cry, and remember. It was from each of these deaths and subsequent funerals that a family reunion would rise from the sorrow. It had been years since anyone had gathered outside of the death of another relative. It was all we had in respect of togetherness.



Throughout the three days leading up to Teddy's burial, I spent what time I could with Ricky. He was always a favorite of mine, and it was due to the fact he had escaped from this rural prison. This made my own exodus seem attainable. He listened to me like he considered me to be an adult already. While there was no denying my lineage to my own parents, when I was younger I fantasized about being one of his children.

Teddy's grave was within close proximity to Daddy's and other members of our extended family. Daddy had told me the stories of many of the souls laid to rest in the family cemetery. The saddest for me was seeing the line of crib and young child deaths. Many were just marked with a stone and the scratched-on dates had long since faded. Not only did these families suffer the trauma of losing a young child, but they were further scarred by the poverty that wouldn't allow a proper burial marker.

It was shortly after Teddy's bones had been reunited with the Earth that everyone started to leave for their respective homes. Mom had wandered back to our home. I decided that I wanted to see Ricky and the others off. I didn't want to focus on processing the shock of Teddy's sudden death. Nor did I want to focus on what would bring us all together again. I wanted more time with what I hoped to be my future: seeing what life could be like away from Appalachia.

When I made it to Phyllis's door after my trek from the graveyard, I was greeted with yelling.

"Oh, oh, so all you can do is give me bus money," I could hear my Aunt Nina's heated voice from the other side of the front door. I stood frozen in the moment.

"You left me. You up and left me!" Nina was screaming at this point. This is it. I knew I should feel guilty for eavesdropping, but I had to know what happened between her and Ricky.

"I told you we were leaving at five in the morning," Ricky responded calmly, "there's really no need to yell."

"And we were waiting! You just drove right on by with your nose stuck up in the air," Nina retorted.

"You never said a word about *him* coming with you." The way Ricky emphasized the word, *him*, left me with an uneasy feeling.

"What should that matter? You have room. You knew we've been seeing each other. He's the father of one of your nephews. You know, the one you're suddenly too busy to visit?"

“Damnit, it’s my vehicle,” I could feel that Ricky was losing his cool, even with the wood of the door between us. I wasn’t at all prepared for the next words that left his mouth.

“You ever think that maybe I didn’t want that nigger in my car?”

The words hit with such venom. I had expected to hear the word from my Appalachian kin. As much as I hated it, I ever grew to accept it as the curse of their generation. But, Ricky got away. That’s supposed to change things. Right?

I chose that point to leave before I was noticed. People were milling about outside of the house, but none of them paid me attention, or for that matter, the knock-down drag-out fight some fifteen-odd feet away.



Mom barely acknowledged me when I came home. She was absorbed in the latest televangelist asking for money crusade. It was for the best. I really didn’t want to talk to her. Or anyone for that matter.

No matter how hard I tried, I could not get Ricky’s words out of my head. I always viewed him as the epitome of everything I wanted to grow up to be: rich, sophisticated, and not tied to a dying, rural Virginia town. He had always made me feel like those were achievable goals. I even considered business as my major in college because he had done the same when he left Appalachia.

People always tell you that you’ll grow up to be like your parents. While I didn’t view the lack of education in my parent’s lives in a favorable view, they were honest, caring people. Daddy may have used that horrible word himself, but it was never in an ignorant way towards another human being. Mom didn’t care about the color of anyone’s skin. She just saw another soul to save.

Perhaps it’s naïve to say it, but maybe that’s the goal of this time we spend on Earth? Being kind to one another, regardless of skin, and hope for a peaceful future in Heaven? Or, maybe life’s grand narrative is money and abundance don’t make you a better person. After all, no one thinks about what a person wore or what car they drove to that last-ever family reunion. You remember the good times and interactions shared amongst the group. At least, you’re supposed to. I guess that’s the fault of thinking of funerals like family reunions.



Keeper of the Plains

Calvin Ross

He rises above the urban tree line
Where two rivers meet,
Native Chief cut in iron silhouette,
Head tilted, palms lifted skyward for

His ancestral kin, nascent tribes,
Grain gatherers, game hunters,
Ascending smoke columns swirling,
Vast flat of evaporated sea
That become Kansas, Wichita, me;

Thunderous, undulating herds
Of stampeding buffalo,
Now motionless Holsteins
Huddled for warmth against
A constant winter wind;

Wheat farmers in denims
Scanning prairie panorama,
Watching an entire distant storm,
Searching the sky for what
To do on the land;

A five-ton emblem keeps secrets
At the turbulent confluence of
Taboos and passions, where
A son of the city came of age.



Forest Soliloquy

Calvin Ross

Seed casings crunch underfoot,
Umber trunks in somber postures,
Each column its own signature,
High limbs for a translucent canopy
Of sunlit and shadowed shades.

Avians tweet conversations,
Winged blurs among trees,
Hummingbirds darting?
Woodland nymphs dancing?
Aimless clouds drift the sky
Cooling my skin.

How many millennia has this mossy
Ledge squinted through lined strata
At natives or gnomes passing by?
At me watching a busy brown ant
Search fresh fiber on a split log?

Solitary twirls of early colors,
One rests on its delicate back,
Pointed edges curled up casting a
Precise shadow on its crimson torso.
Sylvan balance of sun and soil.
Cathedral tranquility calms my bones.



A Field and a Fire

Andrew Miller

The wind stopped for the first time since the fall. The leaves of October sat brown and lifeless under the thin blanket of December snow that had fallen on the edge of the once-green forest. I sat beside her on the side of our pond opposite the cabin. We'd built it together, and it was ours. Her eyes focused gently on the fire that was between the pond and us. She raised them towards the cabin. I knew she was thinking, and I knew what she was thinking about. I heard it in the silence, and she didn't need to speak.

She looked down at the pond and then behind us to the darkness of the forest. She was restless on the bank by the pond, and I felt her look at me. I didn't move my eyes from the fire.

"Talk to me."

"Okay." I breathed out, and my breath clouded my face.

"It ain't that bad, Jim." She had her arms wrapped around her legs. Her black coat and the fire would keep her plenty warm.

I glanced quickly to the pond. The water had frozen over, but the ice wasn't thick enough to walk on. I worried about the fish and if they'd make it to spring, and then I didn't care too much if they made it to tomorrow. I thought of May and the green that was fresh for summer. The cabin faced south, and we'd spent enough nights watching the sunset from this side of the pond. But in the winter here, the sky was gray and only turned to blue when it was cold and didn't want to snow.

"C'mon, Jim, it wasn't your fault or mine. You heard what they said, there wasn't nothin' either of us coulda done." She moved closer, and the snow and frozen grass crunched under her feet. She gently put her hand on my arm.

"Nira."

“Yeah?”

I shrugged my shoulder and brushed her hand off. Her face sank back down to the fire. She sniffed quietly, and I looked at her small nose. It fit her round face well, and for a while, it was the only face I cared for. Her brown hair fell softly on her shoulders.

“We don’t have to stay here, Jim.” I knew she didn’t want to.

“I-on’t see why we can’t.”

“Daddy says Asheville’s growin’.”

“Asheville ain’t for people like us.”

“It ain’t really a city, Jim. Martha told me it was a big small town. She says I could get a job bein’ a teacher in the city or in the country. She says Asheville’s got both.”

“Martha tells you plenty.”

“I wished you’d tell me plenty.”

We locked eyes for a moment. Her green eyes made me think spring was closer than it was, and I needed winter to be over. I smiled at her and didn’t know it. I didn’t want to do anything, and I didn’t want to love her right now.

“You know this land is worth plenty.”

“Don’t talk about gettin’ rid of the cabin, Nira.”

“We’ll build one in North Carolina.”

“We don’t got money for that.”

“Will if we sell this land.”

It got quiet and kept getting quieter. The fire was dying down, and the crackling of the wood had slowed. She knew I didn’t want to hear anything about getting rid of this place. It was my Paw’s and his Paw’s and his Paw’s, too. We’d grown up with this land, and I wasn’t about to go anywhere.

“Jim.”

“Nira.”

She took a deep breath and looked at me.

“Okay.” I knew she couldn’t stay here. But I didn’t think I could go where she wanted to.

“You gotta talk to me, Jim.”

I wish I wasn’t stubborn.

“I ain’t goin’ to tell you that I’ll be gone tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that. I don’t want to go nowhere without you, Jim. But you got to start talkin’ to me.”

I looked at her and looked back at the cabin. The dark brown stain on the logs stood out against the gray of the trees of winter. I stood up from the little chairs I’d dug out on the hillside. I put stones in the dirt seats so we could sit by the pond and watch time walk away. The stone stayed cold when it was out of the sun. It was colder today, and the snow didn’t help.

I got up and started walking towards the gravel driveway. The snow crunched with the dirt and rocks under my boots. The birch trees lining the little road to the house almost made a tunnel. I walked quietly and felt her look away. I didn’t look back. I wondered what she thought. She must think I don’t want to be here either. I want to leave my life here. I don’t want to spend it in North Carolina. But I ain’t sure I can spend it here, either.

I stopped in the driveway. I looked at the shed on the other side of the road from the house. The tools we didn’t keep in the basement we kept in there with the hunting gear. The windows were old and stained with dust. The wood had gone gray with age and the heat of the southern summer had started to warp some of the planks on the side of the shed. Paw died in there when I was little. Momma didn’t ever say a word about it. I wanted to know, and I think I did. She told me he walked in one day and didn’t walk back out. She said she never heard nothin’ while he was in there, and I don’t much believe that.

“Don’t you go lookin’ in that shed, Jim.” Nira stood up and kicked some snow on what was left of the fire. She knew I couldn’t stay in there long. She started walking towards the driveway, and I kept going towards the house. I got up on the porch and sat down on our little porch swing and slowly rocked. I looked out into the forest across the pond. A small trail of smoke came out of the snow where the fire had been and disappeared before it reached the treetops as the fire took its last breaths. Nira walked a little quicker up the driveway than I did. She sat down beside me. I put my arm around her shoulders, and we rocked together in the quiet for a while.

“They say the logging business ain’t too bad in Asheville. Martha says there’s little towns all around. We don’t have to live in the city.” Her voice broke the cold quiet.

“What little towns?”

“Martha didn’t say their names, but I know they’re there.”

“Roads is too bad this time of year to get down there.”

“We’ll go in the spring.”

“Maybe we will.” She grinned at me, and I looked at her white teeth. She was smarter than she talked. Her Southern drawl kept her out of some social circles but surely kept her in mine.

“I’m sorry everything went this way, Jim.”

“I know you couldn’t help it. I wish that doctor told us what could, but I know it wasn’t your fault.”

“You know it wasn’t yours neither, right?”

“I know.” I didn’t know and didn’t want to tell her. I looked over the fence that ran beside the shed. The small church down the road ran their graveyard right up against our property. The church goin’ folk were good to us when Paw died, but we didn’t see much of them when Momma passed. Nira and I didn’t have much business with them now.

A light breeze came through. Nira leaned over and kissed my cheek. She always did when I looked away too long. Her lips were cold but soft. Not much of her changed except her clothes. Her black winter coat turned to bright-colored dress in May. April if it got warm early.

“I’m goin’ in to warm up. You come in soon, we’ll get dinner goin’.” She stood up, and the swing rocked slowly without her. I looked out at the pond and worried about the fish. I figured they were dying, but I could get some more in the spring. There was a place in Knoxville I could get them from. Paw said it wasn’t honest work if someone else grew them for me, but I didn’t think it would bother me too much.

I stood up, and the swing rocked slowly until it stopped. I breathed deep, and the cold air woke up my lungs.

“Can you grab some wood from the shed?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Jim?”

“Nira?”

“Be careful down there.”

I didn't turn back, and I wasn't going far. I walked off the steps and across the driveway. I crossed over the snowy gravel to the shed and softly kicked the bottom of the wood stack, making my way to the door. I didn't come down here much. The shed was dark and didn't get much light in the late day. I stepped slowly towards the old workbench. I looked around, and the room felt smaller than it used to. A cold wind blew through the old wooden boards. I turned around and closed the door. Asheville ain't for us, I thought. These hills were supposed to be for us. I don't know if we can stay much longer.

I thought I heard a noise from the porch. It was quiet in here. I don't think much noise got in, and I don't think any got out. I don't think that much mattered. I ran my hands over the workbench and knew I wasn't going to leave. What was left of the daylight slowly drifted away from the windows.



The Imposter

Kayla Hackney

When I was a young girl of only five or six, I was my grandmother's shadow. I wanted to be everywhere she went, and I wanted to do everything she did, including working in the garden. The years she spent on her hands and knees digging in the soil to help care for her seven siblings, of which she was the oldest, and later her five children, had given her a lifetime of experience to supplement an already extraordinary gift for tending to the land. The garden was beautiful and lush, with countless, diverse colors and types of plants blooming wildly out of their neat, organized rows. Gorgeous red tomato-producing vines grew tall and unkempt along their wooden stakes, with little, green cabbage heads lined thoughtfully beside them. Rows of potatoes grew steadily beneath the dirt, while pole beans grew swiftly upwards to the heavens. The garden was filled with healthy, hearty-looking vegetables, and my grandmother was proud of her work. My grandmother's skill and dedication were impressive, and not just to other humans. The garden frequently had unwanted visitors looking for a quick and easy dinner. My grandmother and I often found an animal lurking around on our daily walk, and she would irritably shoo them away; however, I loved crossing paths with the wild creatures that would invade the garden. An innocent girl of only five, in my mind the animals were not foragers looking to destroy my grandmother's hard work; the animals were my friends, and my favorite friend was the rabbit.

The rabbit was a repeat trespasser in the garden, and we found her or one of her relatives prowling around at least twice a week. I was fascinated by the rabbit and had often tried to catch her. Of course, each time I attempted to apprehend and make a pet out of my grandmother's existential bane, I failed miserably. The rabbit outran me with great ease, time and time again. I cannot recall exactly when the thought of trapping the rabbit occurred to me, but I do know that my harebrained scheme to catch her formed almost immediately after. I had decided I was going to catch the rabbit, and if I couldn't do it with speed, I would do it with wit.

I excitedly found my father and my grandmother sitting at the kitchen table chatting over tomato and cheese sandwiches and explained to them my elaborate strategy to catch the rabbit. They pretended to take me extremely seriously as I explained each step to them. “First, we grow some carrots in the garden. That’s a bunny’s favorite food. Then, we need to dig a giant hole in the ground and cover it up with leaves so the bunny can’t see. After that, we can put some carrots on top, and then when the bunny goes to eat the carrots, she’ll fall into the hole and I can keep her in my bedroom.” Every breath was dripping with the kind of ridiculous, excitable sincerity that only a young child can produce. My father, mainly since my plan was amusing to him, agreed to help me dig the hole, and my grandmother said she would assist me in planting the carrots.

That same evening, my grandmother and I strolled into the garden with a small package of seeds, my plastic shovel and pail, and a small sandwich bag of fertilizer. I dug one small hole in the soft, dark soil, and tossed all the seeds into it. My grandmother smiled and laughed as I covered the seeds with the dirt, and she took a bit of the fertilizer from the bag and sprinkled it over the top of the poorly planted seeds. “Now, this fertilizer is magic. You’ll have fresh, good-looking carrots by morning.” It was incredibly satisfying that the first part of my plot had gone so smoothly, and by noon the next day I was holding a sandwich bag of seven suspiciously perfect looking baby carrots, watching my father as he dug yet another hole in the ground next to the garden. When he was finished, I put some carrots in the hole in case the rabbit became hungry while she was waiting for us to come and retrieve her, and I carefully covered it over with leaves, placing more carrots nearby as bait.

The next day, I was glowing with excitement when my grandmother finally agreed that it was time for our walk in the garden. My sparkly pink shoes carried me quickly down the hill to our little plot of flat land, stopping only for moments at a time to allow my grandmother to catch up to me. When I finally made it to the garden, I was surprised to find my father there, as he seldom visited the garden with us, let alone by himself; however, I lost interest in my father when I noticed the uncovered hole next to him, and his large grin. “Looks like you caught something.” Squealing with childish delight, I ran quickly over to where he was standing, but as he began to laugh, my smile faded. “That’s not my rabbit.” It was not a rabbit, but I had in fact trapped something. Inside the hole was a tiny, ugly turtle, partially inside of his shell. Once my grandmother caught up and looked inside the hole, she began to laugh with my father. I did not think it was funny. “That’s not my rabbit,” I repeated, and my father stopped laughing and explained to me that perhaps the rabbit had just been too smart, and that a turtle would not be a proper pet, so we would be forced to release him back into nature. It was disappointing to me that not only had I been unsuccessful in capturing my rabbit, but that I could not keep

what I had managed to catch. Disappointed and heartbroken, I remained in my melancholy state for a total of around fifteen minutes.

The older I grow, the more inside details I learn about this story from my grandmother and father, like how the carrots were in fact purchased from the local supermarket, and that my grandmother had made a stew from the rest of the package later that same week. The carrot seeds were not seeds at all, but instead miniscule Styrofoam beads, and that the magic fertilizer was simply Miracle-Gro. Shockingly, I also discovered that the turtle had not fallen into my ingenious trap after all, but that my father, who had gone to the garden to make it seem like my trap had at least been disturbed by the rabbit, had found the turtle in the garden and placed him in the hole so that I would be satisfied that I had at least caught something. These grown-up truths do nothing to tarnish the nostalgic, unadulterated happiness I feel when I reflect upon the rabbit, the now-barren garden, and my beautiful grandmother.



Delicacy

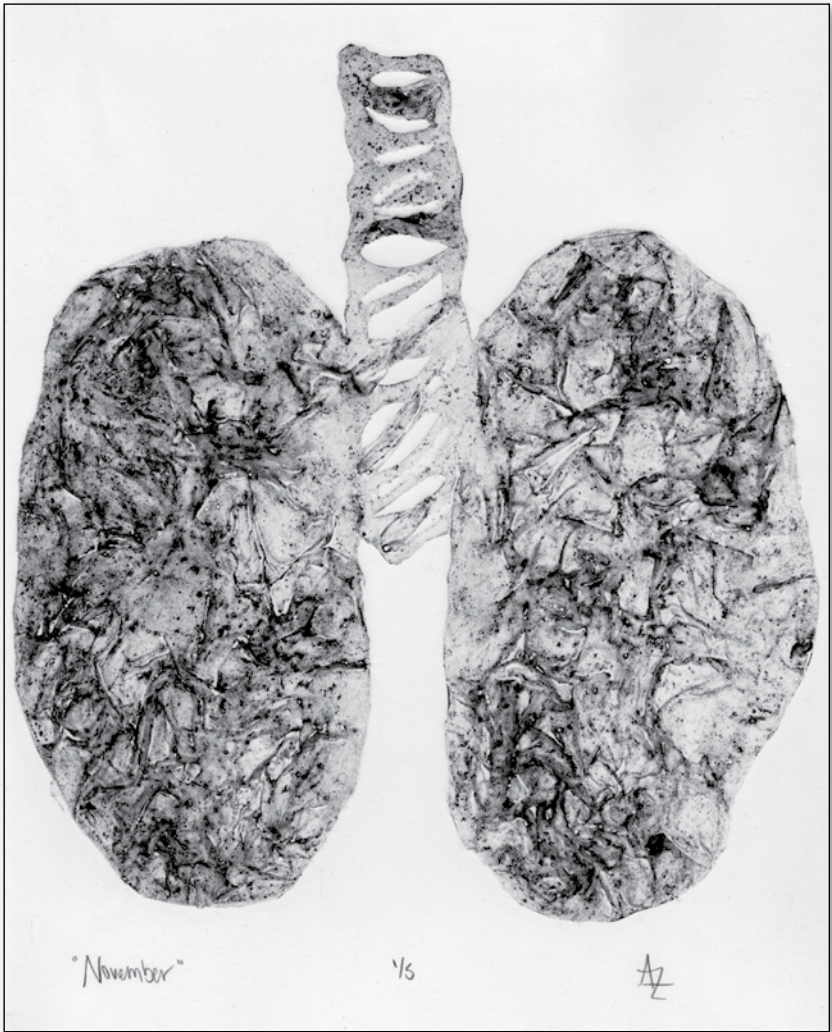
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Emily Johnson

November

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Arizona Clawson

Move to Jupiter

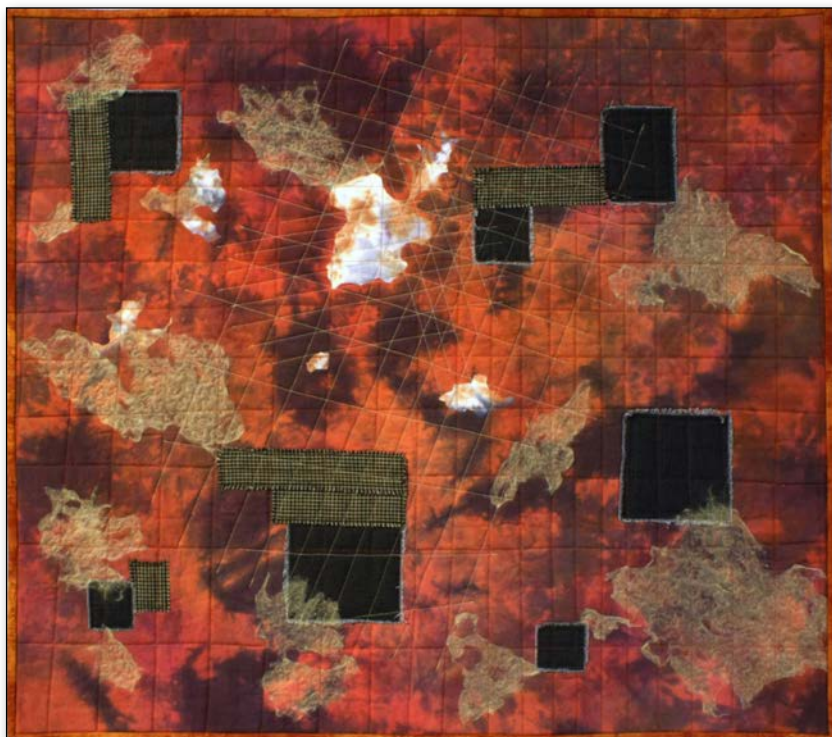
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Taylor Campbell

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Alexis Whitaker

To Love and to Cherish

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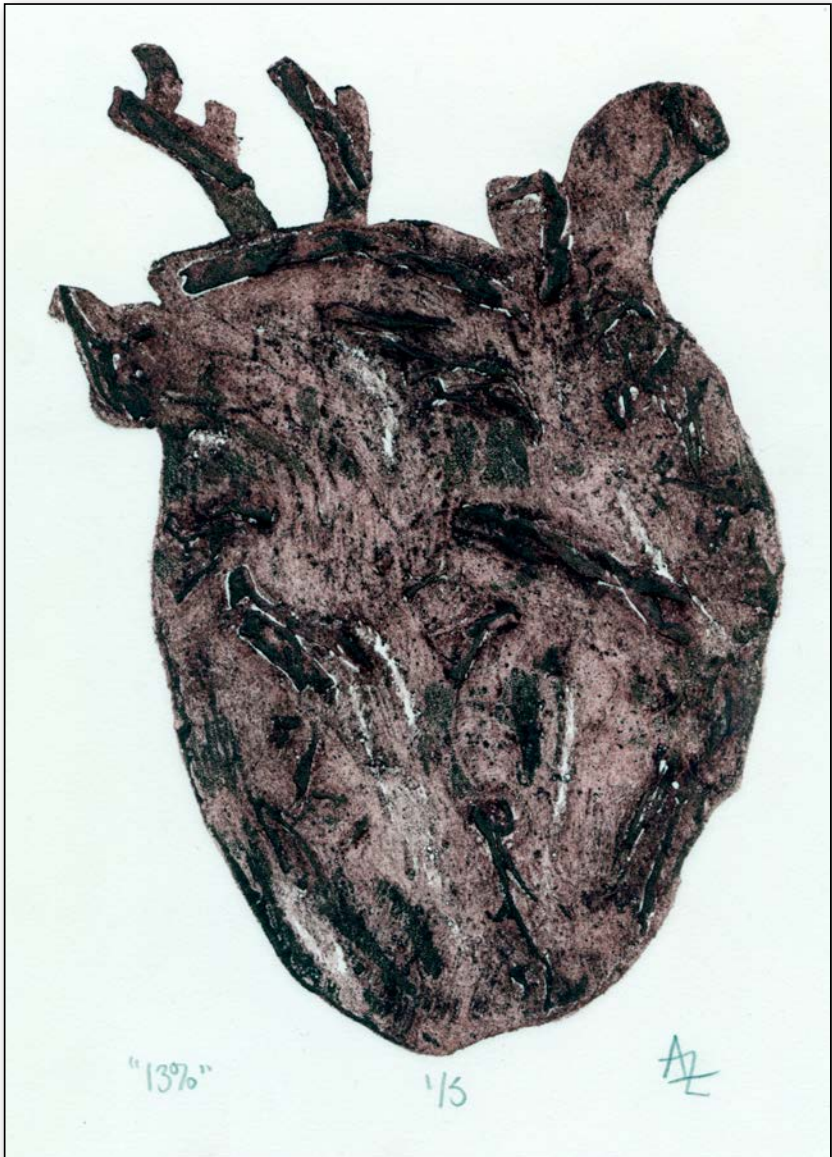
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Raina Nief

Masculine vs Feminine

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Kalliope Strapp

Spring's First Rain

Adam Timbs

Maple buds smolder to blemishes,
the rattlesnake plaintain bursts
webbed and green beneath
stalks of last season's graves.
Today, I cannot turn my eyes
from town fast enough. I cannot find
a mountain deep enough to die in,
so I must walk the ridge road
until I am tired.

I want to be a thing worn out
like the face of the rainy ash
or an old grapevine
skinned up by ground squirrels.

How is it to be unlooked for?
How can I hold still
out here, above the thawing humus,
when my rain-sopped bones rattle
an intruder's racket
amongst this waking place?

A red-bellied woodpecker
cuts the gray air and
lifts my heavy eyes
with his blood-jeweled head.
He flits from branch
to trunk, patiently gleaning
his share from furrowed bark.
He sings to nothing I can see,
no refrain is returned to him
From the low, misty slopes.

For the sake of his singing,
I wonder on the impossible music
of the soil, rocks, and roots
coming undone in the marrow
of the ridge, of my own body
flowering darkly beneath
the shaded sun.
I'll stand awhile
and move on when I'm called.



Blackberry Picking

Adam Timbs

The road is given up
to the wild rose, yellow poplar,
vine-ridden birches.
Cattle have ruptured the spring,
churned its swollen clay with manure and piss.
We step through the seeping ruts
as deer have done, and the coyote,
a brace of rabbits.
Tracks of beasts and men
steeped in the hunting
of paths, prey, days
and evenings with kin;
life that falls and ripens
around the twining flesh of briars.

The thickets here are flushed
with troves of blackberries
that hang like sun-stained jewels
in our thirsting, evening eyes.
We browse sagging bunches,
navigate thorned cages
of the interior
for the solitary one
that must surely be big
around as Papaw's thumb.

You eat of them stubbornly,
as if the dark juice
that washes your lips
and twists a coil of sweetness
around the door of your throat
is worth the spurred heart hung
at the bulging center of blackberries.
And the clench of fruited clay
Gritting in your sour jaw
binds the tongue in turn
to rain running old
with blood and
bone of this dirt,
and to the hidden draught
that greens winter-bled husks
with a ripe liquor of seed
at summer's end forever.

The memory is voiceless,
naught but shape transcribed
amongst bloody-handed work
of gathering. Take up what pails
you've filled. Leave a share
for creeping things
that gather in their own silence.
Let's be quiet.
Listen now.
Cardinals are singing us
down the road.



Old South

Mark Hutton

I sat on the porch in a rainstorm,
my arms stretched and palms
turned to cup the gutter's overflow.
Mama said I would catch my death
from the cold water if not the lightning.
She was fearful of storms, certain that
death lurked within electric-charged clouds.

But momma died on a sunny, cloudless day in
Birmingham, not long after Katrina took her
house and left New Orleans.

I sat down then to write my sister a letter, but
called her out in California, instead. I did not
think she understood our ways anymore. The
changes in time and land had grown. She had become,
as my mother feared, all granola
and godless.

But she came back. We walked the white
sepulchered aisles of St. Louis together and
laid momma among the bones. Neither she nor
I said a word, though I think she had a tear on her cheek.

But it might have been rain.



Sacrament

Emily Williams McElroy

The mother planned on spending most of Sunday hiding her abortion. It was done on Saturday. She had an eight-year-old, Tasha, who could not know, because the mother did not want her daughter to grow up to be a slut. She did not, personally, consider herself a slut, but, just in case, she did not want her daughter to think that erasers existed for adult mistakes. The mother also had a blonde husband with a combover who worked in IT. He would have to stutter through the word “abortion” if he ever said it—the mother doubted he had more than maybe once or twice out of conversational necessity.

She supposed that if she were to ask him what he thought of abortion—any abortion, into the roots of any old person—he would have to sit down and think about it. Usually, when the husband took up residence in his slattern grey recliner, it was the middle-class equivalent of launching into space. He would orbit ideas he was trying to avoid—run-ins at the watercooler, paying advances on the mortgage—from a cold, deep space all his own. He emerged only when he had made that which was initially foreign to him completely alien. Also, the mother did not know who the father was. It could either be the husband or the deacon.

The mother was in her bathroom sprucing for Mass. She had sent the husband downstairs twenty minutes ago to ensure Tasha was doing the same. She bet he was actually sitting in his recliner, so she was trying to get ready fast. It was hard to open the makeup drawer, because she hurt so much. Her whole body felt like a fresh wound. She just knew her insides were all overcooked meatloaf, because she could feel the fleshy squelch every time she bent over, and she could smell the bloody carrots and onions when she coughed. Fuck coughing. Worse still, the bleeding had not stopped since she had it done. It took a double layer of maxi pads to stop her underwear from turning red. She did not dare try a tampon.

She comforted herself by thinking of the deacon and adhering to tradition. She always wore peach lipstick, rouge, and two spritzes of perfume behind the ears to formal occasions. The lipstick shade had been her own mother's tradition. Peach so you look warm, but not overwhelming. Red is for mistresses and homecoming queens. Mauve is for women who don't keep themselves up. The perfume behind the ears was also strategic. People could catch only a bare whiff of it as you spoke to them, but it would catch in your wind as you walked away. It was always best to leave people with pleasant wind.

The doorbell rang, and in her hurry to leave the bathroom, the mother got one of her sweater buttons caught on a sleeve, and it ripped off. The plastic clack it made as it bounced off the linoleum made her sick. For some reason, it made her hips hurt—both her hips and her head. Then, she was angry at it. Why did all the buttons in the world attach with weak thread? Her mind sped over Christmas dresses with torn sashes, boots with cheap buckles that rusted, and Tasha's favorite tennis shoes from which all the glitter had worn off within a week.

Tasha had fought hard for those shoes—argued with her mother in front of the store clerk at the JC Penny. Plain white ones had been on sale. But Tasha wanted the pair that was eight dollars more because they were coated with craft store glitter. You cannot argue with an eight-year-old. And what did the husband work for if not to give his wife and daughter shoes that the girls at school would notice? Tasha had no social skills of her own. A caring mother would buy her some. But smart mothers knew cheap shoes. Tasha would learn better next time.

The doorbell rang again, calling the mother away from the trilogy of the button. She slammed the door on her way to the stairs and immediately felt guilty about it. The husband had already answered the door and was talking to the next-door neighbor on the porch. The mother abhorred the neighbor. He was middle-aged, mustached, and always voted Republican. He had an unflattering tendency toward striped shirts. Today, he wore a white, yellow, and green one. The mother thought he looked like a perturbed melon.

"It was a hundred-and-fifty-dollar bush," said the neighbor.

"Sure," said the husband with the oiled comb over.

"A hundred and fifty dollars?" said the mother.

"Now I don't want to make a fuss," said the neighbor, "This is a quiet neighborhood, and everyone gets along well."

"Of course," said the mother.

“Where did you buy the bush?” the husband said.

“And I want you to know I am not saying anything bad about your little girl. You two are fine people,” said the neighbor.

“Tasha hurt your tree?” said the mother.

“She was skating, Lily,” said the husband.

“You were supposed to be helping her find the pink church dress with the sash,” the mother said.

“She skated yesterday with the Holland boys,” said the husband.

“Their grandmother never watches them,” said the neighbor.

“We will pay you back for the plant,” the mother said. “I will send Tasha down after church with the money and her apology. You say the Holland boys did it too?”

“I did not see them in my yard, but they were with her,” said the neighbor.

The mother shut the door with the intention of returning Grandma Holland’s collection of Sinatra tapes that afternoon. She would mention the boys. It was a quiet neighborhood.

The husband said, “No bush on this block costs a hundred and fifty dollars.”

The mother told him they were leaving in ten minutes.

The whole way to church, the mother silently agonized over the club soda in the cup holder. The women’s health clinic was downtown next to the fast food joint with forty varieties of hot dogs. Hot dogs made the mother feel like a child getting a treat after a dentist visit. She washed her abortion down with two Philadelphia Chili Supremes and an upsized club soda. Of course, her body tried to reject them instantly. Her meatloaf insides waged sea battles against the intruders. But, the mother held her own, just as she did while her husband drove, and the last remaining evidence of her secret sat between them. She always prided herself on her strong stomach.

The deacon stood at the entrance to Saint Barbara’s, welcoming the parishioners in. He wore a deep violet tunic that sat just a little high and tight around his thick neck. The mother had never seen a neck like his. She could see the corded edge of his jugular every time he looked sideways, and she knew he was pounding. The deacon was a steady beat of a man. She knew he was full of thick, hot blood like motor oil. If she bit him one day in the mausoleum after Bible study, he would bleed black, and she would be able to ladle him into her purse and

then into her car. He was the kind of man you drive to California on without stopping for gas.

The deacon gave the mother the same toothy, insignificant smile he gave the families both in front of and behind her. He shook the husband's hand.

"Everyone needs God's word this Sunday," he told the husband, nodding at the long line.

"Bless us," said Tasha from behind.

The mother tried to cast a grin her daughter's way that the deacon could see, but the twist was too much for her. She doubled over, causing the old woman to her rear—who was not paying attention—to bounce off her backside. A man in an expensive jacket caught the old woman. His high heel-wearing wife asked the mother if she needed any help, without smiling. The deacon started waving to the next family. The mother remembered that her sweater was missing a button and noticed that Tasha was not wearing the pink dress with the sash that had been dry-cleaned. Instead, she had on a wrinkled blue dress that did not go as well with her complexion. When they got to the pews, the mother popped Tasha—not too hard—on the thigh.

"The pink was for today," said the mother.

"You said I could buy this with my own money," Tasha said.

"We don't wear dirty clothes to Mass," said the mother.

"It's so tight it leaves a line afterwards. Honest, I'll show you," said Tasha.

"Lines, my foot. After I rushed all day yesterday to get that downtown to the cleaners' before they closed?" the mother said.

The husband grumbled and stood up to let the man in the expensive coat and his wife into the pew. There were not many seats left. The mother knew this is what happened when you spent ten minutes wrangling with the neighbor when you were supposed to be leaving. She reluctantly stood up too. The rich man's wife had trouble navigating her high heels around the padded kneelers, and she accidentally kicked the combover husband's shoes. He apologized and tried to steady her. The mother leaned back to reduce the chance that the woman would latch onto her if she stumbled. Once the wealthy couple set down, the whole row was permeated with a spicy eau de toilette. The mother thought of her two-spritz rule and smiled to herself.

All throughout the opening prayer, Tasha fiddled with the hem of her shirt. She twirled it around her thumb. Then, she flattened it, stretched it, and started

over again. The mother wondered if the stitches would stretch. During the Liturgy of the Word, Tasha moved on to tip-tap-tapping her pinkie finger on the hymnal in her lap. It had a plasticized red cover that seemed to echo within the pine cave of the pew. When the priest instructed wives from Ephesians, tap tap tap. He then connected his point to Exodus twenty-one twenty, but the mother could not hear his conclusion because tap-tapitty-tap. Lastly came Deuteronomy twenty-two, maybe seven? All the mother's mind wanted to do was investigate the movements down the pew. The wealthy couple sat very still as the mother scolded her daughter under her breath.

Tasha pretended not to hear her. The taps seemed to exacerbate a hollowness inside the mother. She could feel each finger slam echo inside of her, not unlike the deacon's fevered strokes behind the mausoleum. Also, not unlike forceps. The mother wondered if Tasha's finger nails would leave scratch marks on the hymnal's scalloped cover. The scars would be faint. No one would know until months—maybe even years from now—someone very observant or, more likely, very bored, looked too closely. Her family would have moved far away from this pew by then. Probably to the front of the church.

The only person who might notice the marks would be a child. Children always noticed everything they shouldn't. They did not care that the adult lives hovering almost imperceptibly above them were plagued with difficult decisions. They heard only the leftover buzz that was busy driving their parents insane. Then they picked out their own blue dresses. They tore out bushes without knowing the pain of having roots. Really, children were made for tearing with all of those delicate, leafy limbs.

Tasha was now mumbling to herself under her breath. The mother was sure she heard the rich man straighten his jacket. The rich man's wife coughed politely. Her breath probably smelled like the eau de toilette the mother imagined she had swallowed to cover the scent of white collar secrets. If she had an abortion, her insides were probably all clean and ironed the next day. They probably did not even kill the baby. Rather, it was shipped off in high heels to someone in a quiet neighborhood with a good sewing kit. It never grew up to make noises in church because people always taught it not to wrinkle.

The mother was beginning to sweat. Maybe she had been sweating all Mass. She was too tired to tell. Tasha's pinkie had quieted, but the tapping continued in soft, pink undulations at the fringes of the mother's vision. She noticed that Tasha was not mumbling but humming. Swing low sweet Clementine. Clementine was probably a slut for so many men to sing about missing her so much. So much was lost and gone forever. Forever—because Tasha kept repeating only

the final refrain of whatever she was humming. The girl herself probably did not even know.

Over and over, the day after the abortion hurt. The mother was sure that if she looked down, everyone would know. The deacon, who was standing by the altar with his visceral neck, smiling knowingly, would make eye contact. He would wave at the wealthy couple, and the mother's peach lipstick would do her no good. Everyone would see the red. Why had she not gutted it out and tried a tampon? With her strong stomach. She was strong, she knew it. But, Tasha would not stop when she whispered at her again. Nor did she respond to a nudge. A slap on the knee got a look, but no silence.

The mother wondered if all the pews around them could hear the humming, but were polite enough not to stare. God, she hated polite people. They ignored so much to profit so very little. Why did she not run away with the deacon? It was not because of her husband, who had noticed her anxiety, but cowered before it. He shifted in his seat. He listened more intently to the priest. There was a delay on the Eucharist. They would not receive the Body until later. This never happened.

The husband did not seem to care that this never happened. The wife watched his face closely as the priest announced that the Body was not coming. Only the Blood, for now. He seemed all right with that. Body, blood, what did he care? He was not much of a body man, she knew that. But, right now, she wanted his. She needed an anchor or his perpetual boredom to still her fever pitch. She grabbed his hand. Tasha made it through another chorus, and the mother grabbed her daughter's hand too. Body and Blood. All Blood, but no Body. Tap tap tap.

Tap tap tap.

Red-nailed fingers were pulling at the mother's shoulder. A little down the pew, the rich woman stood up, looking appalled. The rich husband had his hand on his wife's arm. Tasha was crying, and there was blood seeping across the front of her dress. Her blue dress was now all creased and violet like bruised fruit. The mother tried to shift the fabric, to find the source of the blood, but Tasha moaned and wriggled away. The rich woman helped her scoot. Noticing the disturbance, the priest paused in his sermon. The deacon looked up too, and to the mother's great relief, marched down the aisle toward her.

The mother tried to tell him that Tasha was hurt, in church of all places, but the husband cut her off. He reached across her, and she saw that his palm, too, was covered in red. It had several thin, but deep gashes across the center. Impassively, the husband pulled his wife from the pew. She resisted, but he was much

larger and in much less shock. The mother imagined that the whole congregation was staring at her. She thought about the sort of questions the deacon would ask Tasha, about how he would console her in his own melting way. But, she saw none of these things. She could not bring herself to look up.

Her eyes were stuck to her own hands. She wondered how they had dug so deep that they reached the center of things. She could almost feel what they had found. The husband was talking but she could not hear him. Her abdomen throbbed so intensely that she felt herself move with the beat. It was the rhythm under the deacon's robe, the beat that had made their baby. The beat of her heel kicking the cold metal table during the worst parts. It was the heartbeat she would never know and never forget, the same unknowable pulsing that had governed her every breath and counted her growing frailty. It was beating away.

On the hall wall hung a weathered picture of Jesus at the Crucifixion. He looked almost green he was so sullen. He would have been an alien to the mother, as unfamiliar and vague as the blonde man standing next to her, trying to get her attention with words she could not understand. But she could understand the hands of the man on the Cross. They, like her own, were red. They, like her own, were trying to ward off sin. The mother knelt and absolved into prayer for her Son. Eyes closed, she could feel the world breaking open.



Survivor of Lucky's War: Before and After

Emily Williams McElroy

She was crinkled blonde hair in a velvet-cushioned church pew
Holding hands, tight, fingers crossed like
Shoelaces anchoring sneakers on during a full
Sprint down a slick, midnight alley.
He would fall off in twenty-eight years, in November.
For now, he was her kid brother. Before:

Head blown off by a shotgun clenched between shaking knees,
Fear or hate falling in final
Tears. Before: Kabloom, red dust of faraway brain stars,
Ever-expanding sodden nebula
Staining: back porch, two thousand twelve, every moment back

Decades through two children in a
Church pew trying to school like fish, slipping into one
Scaly, silver mass through
Broken lines on strained knuckles held taut to deter the lurking
Shark: She who heard blood in their whis-
Spurring on sacred, fast years: carousel vitality.

Blonde manes spinning drive sharks crazy:
Oscillating, perpetual giggle that does not know teeth.
Mother craved to introduce them.
Shade 401 parental nails dug lovingly deep,
Splicing carefully wrapped layers:

Children's spongy epidermis, tactical lucid dermis
Bursting with red-hot, free-flowing
Ninety-eight point six-degree wet dreams of digging in
Unborn baby sister's so fresh
Dirt. Nails diving past silent bears under soft, plaid sheets
Scarring red welts in fleshy palms.

Life lines broken in church bear witness to sacrament.
Twenty-eight years: he bowed his head.
She flattened palms against one another with force to
Heave decades back to the pause
Between pine wood and reverence
Untold spaces where nails dove down and burst the world.



Sepsis

Elizabeth Chapman

I tried to refasten us like a seat belt.
Secure, until sliced by paramedics,
retrieving victims turned patient,
waiting in the back of ambulances.
Holster left
 permanently
 attached
 to
 buckle.

I tried to recite you like an incantation.
Drive the same twist of road, place
lilacs by a cross etched with your name,
click my heels twice
 invoking you
 to re-
 appear.

Promises:
*We got here in time
to repair the damage.*
Waking from comatose
to beeps,
 buzzes, and
 hovering night-shift nurses
Years pass.
 The IV in my vein
 remains
 still dripp-
 ing.



Electric Love

Alexandria Craft

Isaac Banks fell in love the moment he walked into the Alpha Chi Omega house and found himself face to face with a statuesque replication of Eastern Carolina College's most idolized woman. The goddess of the Greeks, Tesla Veton had kindly dropped out of recruitment her freshman year to thwart an imminent World War III among the sororities over her bid. She was a real hero, the kind officials awarded medals to for their dedication and extreme sacrifice. In her honor, the frats had constructed a statue of her, a masterpiece comparable to Michelangelo's *David*, and they had an elaborate round robin beer pong tournament in late August of each year to see which house she'd occupy. Her golden hair flowed down from her heart-shaped face and ended by her elbows. The hips the frats had chiseled for her curved downward to reveal a set of long, athletic legs, and her eyes—two blue jewels hot glued to plaster—looked down at Isaac.

"Those real?" he asked. The frat boy beside him, the Alpha Ross, stood admiring the pair of melon-sized breasts, molded to perfection by only the fraternity's most elite.

"Everything about Tesla Veton is real, especially those," he said. Isaac's mouth went dry, and he rocked back and forth on his toes. Tesla was an unobtainable legacy around campus. Now a senior, she attended all the Greek parties and applauded the frats' flirtatious efforts, but she never bit the lines they threw out. Isaac had been in a couple of classes with her over the past three years, and as far as he knew, nobody ever slept with Tesla or even kissed her, let alone got their hands up her shirt long enough to take an accurate measurement.

"How do you know?" Isaac asked. Ross gingerly ran his hand up Tesla's metal arm, over one softball breast and then the other before planting a single, chaste kiss on her forehead. He raised one eyebrow and winked.

"Why, physics, Professor." Before Isaac could question the guy's rationale, Ross grabbed the suitcase out of his hand and trekked up the

stairs. Isaac gave one last look to the authentic statue, the little brown hairs on his arms sticking straight up even as he gradually turned away and followed the Alpha. Ross led him to a room tucked in an alcove at the end of the second-floor hallway. Had he been an actual Omega brother, he would have been offended with the secluded conditions.

“And this here’s your room.” Ross opened the wooden door and rolled the suitcase inside. Isaac took a quick survey of the room. The Omegas had gifted him with a fully-stocked mini-fridge, two feather pillows, an old buck head, and a *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* movie poster. They had moved all his computer equipment from his dorm and even managed to set it up on the desk in the exact way he’d requested. Isaac booted up his computer and began rolling up his shirt sleeves.

“So, what’d you hire me for?” he asked. A couple of the Omegas had cornered him after a computer science course, requesting his services. They’d nicknamed him Professor even though he was only a senior. It had something to do with his grade point average’s being higher than ten frat boys combined. The Omegas would reveal only so much until he’d signed a confidentiality clause. Even then the contract had listed him only as Alpha Chi Omega management. Since when did fraternities need managers? Party planners or French maids maybe, but managers? Ross leaned against the bed rail, smiling lazily.

“We needed a bookmaker.”

“Bookmaker?” Isaac asked. “As in a bet manager?”

“Precisely.” Ross pointed to the black book lying by the computer’s key pad. Alongside it was a manila folder with the word “confidential” scribbled in block letters on the front. Isaac ripped the envelope open from the bottom. Papers slid out, along with a photocopy of the Omegas’ signatures. Bundles of cash were either paper-clipped together or zipped up in baggies to prevent confusion. Isaac separated one paper from the rest, the official job description.

Isaac cleared his throat and read aloud, “The bookmaker of Alpha Chi Omega is responsible for monitoring all Holy Grail entries made by the brothers. He will be held accountable for managing all monetary bets made by the Alpha Chi Omega brothers as they pertain to the physical conquests on one Tesla Veton.”

Isaac slowly raised his head and thought of the statue below him with those sculpted breasts and piercing jade eyes. Ross patted him on the shoulder and then shook his hand.

“Welcome to the brotherhood, Professor.”

Tesla Veton emitted an ethereal energy everywhere she went. In her analytics class, she was the only girl among the men, and even the professor would trip up on his words when she raised her hand or answered a question in class. Isaac sat diagonally behind her. It had been four weeks since he'd started taking bets and monitoring entries into the Holy Grail. Four weeks since he'd learned every Omega brother's fantasy involving the lovely Tesla and how much they each valued her. They were throwing so much cash his way, even his own fantasy involving the Greek goddess was reaching an overwhelming cost. He priced a single touch at millions, a kiss incalculable.

It didn't help that he'd had a thing for her since freshman year. Ever since she'd walked by his desk in a basic computing class, wearing a sunny dress and white debutante gloves, she'd been running sweet like candy through his veins. They'd sat together by the campus fountain at lunch a couple times, always an arms-width apart, but Isaac still couldn't help but be charmed. The hair on his head would rise up during their conversations; she'd laugh, and though she'd always bring her hand up to smooth his hair back into place, she'd never actually do it. She'd just apologize and leave. Eventually the hair on his head would go back down, so he simply chalked it up to his nerves. Tesla just had a positive energy that rushed through everyone around her, that's part of what made her so attractive.

All throughout class Isaac studied the back of her. Her long blonde hair was twisted in a loose braid down her back. She was wearing a jean skirt, pink blouse, and those predictable satin gloves. When the professor would say something about the text, she'd type up a note in her computer, her wrists sliding up and down the keys, her finger pads gliding over the surface like sudden flashes of lightning. He'd been eyeing her like that for three years from all different angles: the side, the back, the front from afar. She'd just gotten more beautiful each year, almost like each time he looked at her, she glowed a little bit brighter than before. The statue of her in the Omega's lobby may have been impeccably accurate, but it still couldn't capture Tesla Veton's effervescent spirit.

He wondered which Omega boy she'd go for. They were all trying to impress her. Travis had bought her two dozen white roses. Carter and Spencer had sung a duet and took her out to poetry night—they had 800 dollars down that they could get her to agree to a threesome. That thought made Isaac nauseous. Even Ross the Alpha had been going above and beyond. He'd cooked enough heart-shaped pancakes one morning to send three to each sorority house. Ross had been obligated to cook so many since Tesla had a room at each house, and she came and went as she pleased; Ross had to overcompensate. A small price to pay when he had 400 dollars riding on getting a thank-you kiss for his Bis-

quick buttermilk pancakes. Thankfully to Isaac's knowledge, Tesla had yet to recognize Ross or any of the other brothers for their sappy, romantic notions. When class ended, he watched her pack up, remove her gloves, and slide out of the aisleway. He followed behind her, just close enough to catch a whiff of her sugary scent. She slowed her steps, and he felt the hair on his head begin to lift.

"I hear you're an Omega now," she said. He held the door open for her, and as she brushed by him, his fingertips began to prickle. His heartbeat spiked.

"No, just working for them. Brotherhoods aren't really my thing." He felt guilty for deceiving her. As much as Tesla Veton was capable of protecting herself, Isaac still wanted to tell her the truth. At least then she could properly defend herself against all of the Omegas' sentimental antics.

"Mine either." Tesla smiled like she held a secret, and so did Isaac. As they passed the fountain, Tesla came to a stop. Isaac wondered if she was thinking about the conversations they'd had sitting there. She had told him short stories about her home in Tennessee. In return, he'd told her about his uneventful, pre-college life in Winston-Salem. She'd revealed some of her favorite things to him: root beer jelly beans, Judy Garland, and boys in pinstriped ball pants. All those little details had made him fall for her. The positive shocks Tesla always sent his way were extra.

"Have the boys tried to woo you with pancakes yet?" she asked.

Isaac nodded and felt his hair rising up. "Not yet, but they did furnish my temporary room with a very large buck head. Damn thing gives me nightmares, and I swear it winks at me with those glazed-over eyes every time I enter the room."

Tesla laughed and raised her hand in slow-motion. He expected her to lower it, apologize, and run off like all the other times, but she didn't. "Maybe you could show me some time," she said. Hesitant, Tesla eased her hand forward and gently combed her fingers over the top of his head, rearranging his dark brown mop. Two inches taller than he, she didn't have to stand on tiptoe, and Isaac didn't have to bow down. He felt his heart speed along, and so did she. Isaac treasured the moment, his fantasy now reality. He couldn't have even put a price in the Holy Grail for what she'd just made him feel: rich. As she lowered her hand, Tesla could just make out the irregular beat of his heart, pulsing up and down in the curve of his throat.

"I'll bring you up and let you meet Mr. Bambi, so long as you don't go falling for all those Omegas." Isaac blinked several times, trying to clear the fog that was forming over his glasses.

Tesla Veton's half-grin expanded into a wide, wicked, and mischievous smile. She backed away slowly and blew him a kiss. It shocked his cheek. "I wouldn't bet on it, Professor."

It was the Alpha Chi Omega's turn to host a party, and from his vantage point upstairs, Isaac could safely say the frats had spared no expense on their Oktoberfest. While he wasn't keen on the *Magic Mike* camouflage combo, it looked like all the Greeks were into it, especially the freshman sorority girls. From the window in his room, Isaac could see the Omegas walking around in their wife beaters with duck calls dangling by their necks. Ross and a couple of the other brothers had invited him down, but he'd made the excuse that he had bets to tally and odds to calculate. Technically he hadn't lied, since all forty-eight of the guys had placed some sort of bet on winning over Tesla tonight. They were all quite certain she wouldn't be able to keep her hands off all the strip-teasing duck commanders waddling around.

Above him, the power flickered. There was a millisecond of uncertainty before the lights kicked back on, and while the noise outside had cut, Isaac instantly realized it wasn't because of the campus power surge. Tesla Veton had arrived. He watched as open-mouthed frats undressed her with their eyes. Even the sorority girls gawked at her grace and bombshell figure. As she made her way to the center of the party, Isaac stood hypnotized by his window, the heat fogging up his glasses like always. The purple crop-top she wore did little to hide her assets. The fiery orange pencil skirt hugged her backside, accentuated her hips, and the nude heels she wore made her stand at well over six feet. Her blonde hair curled in luxurious waves around her sun-kissed face, and her skin glowed under the flickering frat lights.

For the next hour, he watched her getting hit on by every frat boy in the Omega house. Some had presented her with flowers or beer in Mason jars. A goddess deserved to drink her alcohol out of Carolina fine china, not some run-of-the-mill red Solo cups. A group of Omegas circled around her, like electrons around a nucleus. Two frats had even taken off their duck calls and presented them to her; another had taken her hand on the dance floor and promptly passed out from the close contact. Once or twice Isaac had thought he caught her looking up to his window, but he couldn't be certain. At one point he'd turned to tally up all the missed bets for the night, and when he glanced back out the window, Tesla Veton was gone.

He looked as far as his window would allow him, pressing his cheek against cool glass first to the left, then right. As he was unlatching his window to get a better view, the lights flickered once, then twice before going down completely. Isaac

cursed as he hit his head against the window frame. The Omega house was in darkness, totally quiet. The music had stopped outside, and the Greeks' voices below on the patio seemed to evaporate in the air long before reaching the second floor of the house. Isaac stepped around shadows, feeling his way to his computer desk. The hair on his head began to stick up as he wiggled the mouse and touched some keys on the computer pad. When that didn't work, Isaac held down the power button and began counting down from ten.

"You can sweet talk it as much as you want, but I don't think it's going to turn on."

Isaac dropped his hold from the power switch and twisted around to find Tesla Veton leaning against his door, holding a burning candle in the palms of her hands. She looked even better up close. The glow from the candle revealed a seductive half smile and cast a set of divine shadows across her face. Each time she blinked, her eyelashes would come in long black waves down her sapphire eyes. He followed her gaze to the buck nailed to the wall. In the past weeks, he'd started using the buck's antlers to hang his laundry, and it had only just now occurred to him what a bad idea that was.

"Knock, knock," she said before waltzing on inside. Isaac had never felt more on edge in his life. His heart pounded through his chest, and he was positive Tesla could hear it from across the room. She closed the distance between them, sauntering on those long legs, hair flowing behind her like dazzling, sunlit rays. "Not down there enjoying the party?"

Isaac shrugged. "Not my scene." He watched her take a tour of the room, savoring the moment. She plucked a pair of boxers off one of the buck's antlers and threw it over to him, laughing.

"Animal abuse," she said. He tossed the boxers behind his head and continued to observe her studying his room. She ran her hand along his bed spread, her pink Starburst scent lingering. Thank God he wasn't diabetic. "Nice set up." She pointed to the computer equipment. Her nude heels clicked along the hard wood and stopped in front of his desk. He saw her eye the money, make note of the signatures and black book lying open. When she started leafing through the pages, he couldn't stop her. Every little detail, scrawled by his hand into that damned Holy Grail, and here she was in front of him, flipping through it like it was Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

Isaac couldn't breathe for a moment. All he could hear was his heart beating like the rain and the jingling of Tesla's bracelet as she finished reading through all the pages. When the sound of her busy hand stopped, he closed his eyes. Too late to go back now, so he just prepared for a hearty slap across the face. The wood floor creaked beneath him, and the hair on his arms bristled against his

pale skin. “Isaac,” she said. He felt her stroke his face. Not a slap, but it almost stung like one. He opened his eyes as she pulled off his glasses and laid them behind her on the desk. It was completely dark. She’d blown out the candle, leaving them shrouded in only her glow. He could just make out the curvy shape of her body, her bright eyes, long lashes, and pursing lips.

“Tesla, I didn’t know when I said yes to the job that it was you they’d be betting on. I should have told you, should have quit. I just got dragged into this Omega house and—” she placed a finger on his lips, shocking him. Tesla Veton was like lightning in a bottle.

“You never bet on me,” she said.

He hadn’t. His conscience wouldn’t allow him. He’d been struck by her electric love since freshman year, when she’d strolled by him wearing those pasty debutante gloves. She sifted her dainty fingers through his hair, smoothing it down, heating him up.

“So, tell me, Professor,” she kissed one of his cheeks, then the other. His heart surged under his ribcage “How much are you willing to bet?” His mouth ran dry. He wanted to say he’d bet his life she was about to kiss him, but before Isaac could come up with a proper answer, Tesla pressed her cherry lips against his. It was all fireworks, sizzling orange explosions, and he could sense behind his closed lids that the lights had come on. Cheers and shouts rolled in the window from outside, but Tesla’s breathing and his erratic heartbeat ricocheted against the walls over the background noise.

She tried to pull away, but he ran one hand around her waist, feeling her energy rushing through him. The lights went out again, and Isaac could see Tesla radiating, her lips wet from their kiss, her blonde hair surrounding them like a curtain. He tried to memorize the moment as it was, better than any fantasy he or any of the Omegas could think up. He ran his thumb pad along her bottom lip, dying for another taste. This time when Tesla kissed him, the tingling sensations throughout his body amplified, threw him against the desk, and he felt his heart drop out of his chest. As she glided her lips over his a third time, she revived him. His heart started back, making those faint little lub-dubs like a newborn baby.

And when she continued to kiss him, his heart stopped again, and then it started, and then it stopped, and then it...



Faded

Jillian Bailey

In brown grass and Queen Anne's Lace
lies the empty, white box.
Slow-moving, brown creek
where I caught Crawdads as a kid.

Poison ivy climbs the lone post of the barn.
The tractor rusts in the field,
almost hidden by a thorn bush.
Morning Glory closed for the day.

The field where I hunted arrow heads
overgrown with Bull Thistle and
Creeping Charlie. The biggest pumpkin
won't be grown here.

There's no peep or cackle
from the chicken coop.
The door hangs open,
there will be no eggs.

Holes in white vinyl siding,
a shingle hangs from the green roof.
Crumbling brick that was once four chimneys
litters the Tiger Lily bed.

The Blackberry vine around the column
of the porch won't make jelly.
An abandoned House Wren nest in the hanging pot.
A forgotten curler beside the broken porch swing.

Faded flower wreath on the door.
The screen door is busted and covers the porch.
Hand-made curtains stained yellow from smoke and sun.
The Easter Lilies are in bloom, but
the Knock-out roses are gone.



Alcohol, Love, and Other Things that Kill You

Thomas Chase Clayton

Dickinson's Pub sat on the edge of downtown, staring across the short street and the road verge, out over the river. Crammed in between its recently renovated neighbors, the pub looked ancient. Faded red brick walls surrounded green, wooden frames outlining the windows and doorway. The "Dickinson's" logo was a giant yellow sticker stuck to the window with the bar name illustrated in large green letters and two pint glasses below them. Cars lined the sidewalk in front of Dickinson's from street corner to street corner. To the pub's left was a Brown Bean's Coffee Co., a local coffee shop that stayed open twenty-four hours a day with a polished wooden exterior. To Dickinson's right was Ruby, a popular bar with a metal exterior; neon red lights hung under the patio cover, the words "Ruby: come experience modernity" printed on its windows.

With a screech, a large, yellow taxi came to a halt as the driver slammed on the brakes, leaving two black streaks of rubber down the cracked concrete. The passenger side door crept open, and Michael slowly stepped out onto the sidewalk, putting on his gray down jacket over his white button-up shirt. After a brief moment, as Michael began lightly tugging on his sleeves, the taxi's side door slid open, and Adam jumped out into the street, his black dress shoes clicking against the pavement. Michael watched as Adam, in one fluid motion, buttoned his black suit, pulled on the cuffs of his sleeves until they were the perfect length, reached into his overcoat, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"I swear, I thought we were going to be stuck in that cab all night," Adam said as he pulled a cigarette from his pack and walked towards Michael. Adam's clean-shaven face, expensive haircut, and air of confidence led Michael to develop the theory that Adam was a human peacock, standing out in whatever way he could. His jet-black hair, emerald eyes, and firm jawline were enough to distract from his large nose, though Adam swore it was normal sized. Michael saw that James

was finally making his way out of the cab, with Cameron right behind him.

“It’s nice to know stupidity runs in your family, Adam,” James said, stepping into the street and attempting to pull his fleece jacket over his large arms. “Cam apparently doesn’t know how to work a car door.” Cameron ignored the snide comment as he adjusted his slightly oversized brown sports coat.

“Hey,” Adam said, placing his arm around Cameron’s shoulders, “no cousin of mine is stupid. We come from a very select breed, Cam and I.” Cameron grinned, pushing Adam’s arm off his shoulder. Michael had always been baffled by how similar Adam and Cameron looked, both having the same black hair and green eyes, only Cameron’s nose wasn’t as prominent, and something about him looked younger. According to Adam, most bouncers still carded Cameron at the door, while some would simply laugh and tell him to get lost.

Michael walked a few steps down the sidewalk to Ruby and stared inside. The bar was crowded and dimly lit with a few neon lights, making it hard to get a clear picture of those inside. Though it was smaller, and the drinks were more expensive, Ruby always seemed to be more crowded than Dickinson’s. For a moment, Michael thought it might be nice to get lost in the crowd. “Hey guys,” he called out, “maybe we should give Ruby a try tonight.” Michael should have predicted the response.

“Like hell,” James nearly yelled, as the cab took off down the street. “That place is just a bunch of faggots drinking cocktails.” A couple walking into Ruby gave a quick, disgusted glance at the group before stepping inside.

“Jesus, James,” Adam said, searching his pockets for a lighter.

“I’m sorry. I thought we were here to get real drinks, not sip on fucking spritzers,” James replied, finally managing to put on his jacket.

“James, shut up,” Adam said, retrieving his lighter from his inner coat pocket. “Cam, go inside and get us a table.”

After Adam and James shared a brief back-and-forth of insults and name calling, James and Cameron opened the door to Dickinson’s, and immediately—music and the smell of beer filled the air. Michael could feel every muscle in his body tensing up as if to prevent him from going inside. He felt miserable at that moment, regretting that he let Adam convince him to tag along. Michael wanted only to go home, have a few drinks, then fall asleep. *I could’ve popped open the nice bottle of whiskey tonight*, he thought to himself. *That’s what I’ll do when I get home.*

“Mike,” Adam said, lighting his cigarette, “you want a smoke?”

“Might as well,” Michael said, glad to have an excuse to stay out of Dickinson’s for a moment longer. The door had closed, and the street was now much quieter. Michael could hear only the sound of cars honking from deeper in the city and the faint sound of country music bleeding through Dickinson’s old windows. Michael pulled the lighter from his back pocket and took the cigarette Adam offered him.

“So, how are the girls?” Adam asked, exhaling a puff of smoke.

“They’re good. It was their birthday yesterday.”

“No shit? Their mom throw them a party or something?”

“A big one at her new boyfriend’s place,” Michael lit his cigarette.

“Oh yeah, I forgot Angie is dating somebody now. What’s the guy’s name?”

Michael shrugged and inhaled a cloud of smoke. “Gary. He’s some high-end banker. Maybe an accountant. I don’t know. I just know he’s loaded.” At that moment, Michael felt a vibration in his pocket. He reached into his khaki pants and pulled out his phone, the name ‘Kaylie’ illuminated on the screen.

“Who’s calling?” Adam asked after a long drag.

“It’s my daughter,” Michael replied, staring at the screen with his thumb hovering over the answer key.

“Which one? Macy?”

“No, Kaylie,” Michael said, silencing the phone and returning it to his pocket.

“Are you not going to answer it?” Adam asked.

“Well, get this. Their mom got them both cellphones for their birthday,” Michael took another long drag. “I mean seriously, what the hell is an eight-year-old going to do with a cellphone? Now they’re going to be glued to a screen all the time. No social interaction, just simulated shit that’s going to give them ADD.” For a few moments, the two smoked their cigarettes in silence.

Michael had agreed to joint custody of his kids. It was better that way. He worked from seven in the morning to six in the afternoon at a low-end law firm, had a two-bedroom apartment in downtown, and had no culinary skills to speak of. Every other weekend his twin daughters would be dropped off by their mother, both toting some new designer backpack or clothes that Gary had bought them. Michael knew he was not full-time parent material, but he knew eight-year-olds didn’t need cellphones.

“Damn. I remember when those two were born,” Adam finally said, looking up at the night sky and laughing as if he could see something funny. Michael saw only gray clouds. “We were so damn young then. Couple of high schoolers thinking we knew everything. We’re getting old, man.”

“Twenty-five is not old,” Michael said.

“Well, I feel old. I look at Cam and think about what it was like to be his age. Just turned twenty-one, drinking every night, sleeping with a different girl every week.”

“It was a bit different for me.”

“True. You had to go be a functioning person. Married, had kids. Me, I just dicked around in college for five years.”

Poor you. “How is Cam?” Michael asked, hoping to change the subject.

“I just don’t know, man,” Adam said, rolling his eyes, sighing, and taking a long drag from his cigarette. “That girl, Hannah, I think her name was. She really did a number on him.” Adam began to frown and look down at the pavement. “You know she tried to pull that ‘I still want to be friends’ crap? I can’t stand it when women say that. It basically means ‘Oh, I still want all the attention, but you don’t get any of the payoff.’ It’s whatever. I keep trying to tell him she sucked anyway, but he still just mopes around all the time. I’m hoping tonight we can cheer him up a bit, you know?” Adam took a last drag and flicked his cigarette into the street. “All right, let’s do it,” Adam opened the door to Dickinson’s while Michael dropped his cigarette butt on the sidewalk and crushed it with the tip of his shoe. The two stepped inside.

Dickinson’s wasn’t particularly crowded. The bar was about half full, the tables were mostly empty, and most of the booths were occupied. Michael and Adam were both relieved to find that Cameron and James had managed to get one of the last booths, even if it was near the end. The faded and torn red leather booth seats were always a necessity since the table chairs were nothing but wobbly wood and there was no way to hold a conversation between four people at the bar. When Michael and Adam sat down, James was in the middle of lecturing Cameron.

“You’ve seriously got to get over this girl,” James said. “She dumped you. Move on.”

“Oh, so it’s that easy, huh?” Cameron replied, obviously annoyed.

“Yeah, it really is, as long as you aren’t moping around like a little bitch.” Michael and Adam had known James since senior year of college, and in those four years

they had known him, James was constantly consuming copious amounts of pre-workout protein shakes and taking trips to the gym at least once a day, which had left him built like a professional wrestler. His comments usually revolved around women, the gym, or emasculating everyone around him.

“James has got a point,” Adam said as he sat down in the booth next to James. “You’re single, for God’s sake. There are a lot of fish in the sea, my friend, and you’re hanging with the best fisherman in town,” Adam gestured to himself, then gave his cousin a wink.

“The only thing you can ‘catch’ is crabs,” James said, attempting to get the attention of a passing waitress, but was unsuccessful.

“Guys, really,” Cameron said in a desperate attempt to end the conversation, “I’m fine. I just need some time is all.” Neither James nor Adam were satisfied. The two began a list of all the things they felt were necessary to get over a break-up, even though neither of them had been in a relationship that lasted longer than five months. Michael remembered the night his divorce became finalized, which Adam thought was cause for celebration. The entire night was spent with Adam’s drinking too much, James’s attempting to hook up with every girl at the bar, and Michael’s feeling worse than he had before. That night started a tradition, however, and since then, Michael, James, and Adam had been to Dickinson’s almost every other Saturday for five months. The conversation came to an end once the waitress finally arrived to take drink orders.

12:24 a.m.

Michael was feeling particularly drunk. His cheeks had begun to turn bright red as he stood in front of the old jukebox, looking for a song he could stomach. The cracked plastic buttons flipped through the albums trapped behind the glass. He immediately skipped through the clichés. If he heard one more Journey or Garth Brooks song he was sure he was going to vomit. Then he’d have to get drunk all over again.

Finally, Michael found what he was looking for. He dropped a quarter in the slot, punched in the numbers, and began to sip his glass of whiskey through a small red straw. Through the speakers, a guitar began to strum, and a voice began to sing, “Let’s get fucked up and die. I’m speaking figuratively of course.” Michael felt at that moment pleased as he closed his eyes, leaning against the jukebox and listening to the song.

“Interesting choice,” a voice said, not unkindly. Michael opened his eyes and saw a dark-haired woman looking into the glass, flipping through the albums. Michael stood up straight and looked over the woman. She was wearing a short

brown leather jacket over a tight white t-shirt. Her ripped, skinny jeans were tucked into short black boots with heels. She turned her head and smiled. At first glance, she looked a little pale, but Michael, through his intoxication, noticed that the woman was wearing make-up a shade lighter than the rest of her skin. Her eyes were slightly large with a greenish brown color, her nose was rounded at the tip, and her teeth were white and almost perfectly straight. The more Michael looked at her, the more attractive she became.

“I mean, I love Motion City Soundtrack, don’t get me wrong,” she continued, turning her attention back to the jukebox, “I just would have picked something a bit more upbeat.”

“Well,” Michael said after a short pause to sip on his whiskey, “I figured most people in here are drinking their sorrows away, so upbeat might not be appropriate.” Dickinson’s was now about twice as crowded as it had been when Michael and the group first arrived.

“Is that why you’re here?” the woman asked with a curious look. “Are you drinking your sorrows away?”

Michael didn’t like the question. He stared into his glass of whiskey and watched as he swirled the brown liquid around. After a short pause, he let out a small laugh and said, “Nah, I don’t have any sorrows to drink away.” The woman returned a smile. “I got dragged out here by two of my buddies from college,” Michael said, gesturing back towards Adam and James, who were sitting with Cameron in a booth across the room. Michael noticed Adam was beginning to slouch in his seat.

“Well,” she said, “do you get dragged here often?”

Michael let out a laugh before taking another sip from his whiskey. “The old ‘Come here often?’ line. Very smooth.”

“Hey,” the woman said, holding up her index finger with a smile, “I asked if you get *dragged* here often. It’s totally different.” Michael looked into his whiskey again and thought for a moment. He decided the woman didn’t need to know all the details.

“I’ve been here a few times,” Michael said without removing his gaze from his glass. “How about you?”

“I got dragged here by some friends, same as you,” the woman said, pointing at a nearby table occupied by three other women. “I’m Megan, by the way,” the woman said, outstretching her hand.

“Mike.” Michael took her hand.

“Well, Mike,” Megan said, reaching into her back pocket and pulling out a piece of gum, quickly unwrapping it, “if you’re looking for another song, I think I’ve got one for you.” Megan had now unwrapped the wrapper and began to chew on the gum. “Got a pen?”

Michael set his drink atop the jukebox and began to pat himself down until he found a pen from work in his back pocket. Megan took the pen, wrote down a few numbers, folded the wrapper, then handed it and the pen back to Michael. Without another word, Megan winked, then turned. Michael couldn’t help but watch her as she walked back to her table, where the other women began to laugh amongst themselves. With the wrapper in hand, Michael walked back to his booth.

“Mike, how did I know you would play some middle school, emo crap?” James said, eyeing the gum wrapper in Michael’s hand. “What do you have there?”

Michael sat down and unfolded the wrapper. There were too many numbers for it to be a song in the jukebox. Under the digits was a dash with the name ‘Megan’ written in cursive, with a heart drawn next to it. “I think it’s a phone number,” Michael said, just before taking another sip of whiskey.

“What?” Adam said, trying not to slur. In his attempt to make Cameron feel better, Adam had told the server to not let anyone go without a drink for long. Adam was now on shot number eight. “Don’t tell me it was from that girl you were talking to by the jukebox.” Michael shrugged. Adam’s expression grew seemingly distressed. “Fuck, man, that’s the kind of stuff you need to be doing, Cam. Go talk to some girls, get some numbers,” Adam was now nearly shouting. Cameron attempted to explain that he was fine, but Adam was either incapable of listening or simply unwilling. “No, dude, you need to find some girl to go home with tonight.”

“That’s it,” James said, motioning for Adam to let him out of the booth, “I’m getting another round. Who wants what?” Adam pulled himself out of his seat and grabbed hold of the table to keep himself steady. Michael raised his half-full glass to indicate that he was okay for the moment, and Cameron asked for another beer. Adam attempted to ask for another shot, but James ignored him. After James got up, Adam slumped back into the booth and sank into the leather seat. The three sat in uncomfortable silence, though Michael didn’t mind. He was still examining the wrapper Megan had given him, then began to remember the way the other women had laughed when Megan had returned to the table. *Probably not even a real phone number*, Michael thought to himself. *Probably not even her real name*. Michael folded the wrapper and placed it on the table next to his drink.

As he examined the condensation dripping down his glass of whiskey, Michael thought about how his kids must be fast asleep by now, each tucked in her own bed at their mother's house across the river in the suburbs. At his apartment, the girls had to share a bed. On more than one occasion, Michael had been forced to separate the two when they would begin to fight about how one was taking all the covers or the other was hogging all the good pillows. Michael would let one sleep in his bed while he slept on the old futon in the living room. He wouldn't be surprised if the squabbles were simply just an act so that they each could get her own bed. The thought made Michael smile, until he remembered the call from his daughter that he had ignored. *I don't want them to think I'm okay with the cellphones*, Michael thought to himself, attempting to shake off a wave of guilt. After unsuccessfully justifying himself, Michael reached into his pocket with the intention of returning the call, but upon seeing that it was well past midnight, decided it was best to wait until tomorrow. Michael noticed that his daughter had left him a voicemail, but before he could open it, a new glass of whiskey was loudly placed on the table in front of him.

"I told you I was good," Michael said, holding up his still half-full glass.

"You didn't say anything, actually," James said, handing Cameron a beer. James told Adam to move over, sat down, and smiled at Michael. Michael returned his phone to his pocket and took a drink of whiskey.

1:27 a.m.

"So, why did you give me your number?" Michael asked Megan as they both sat at the bar, twirling their straws in their drinks. Michael had reached the point of intoxication where he was able to find some hidden spot of courage that only appeared around drink number six. Or was it seven? When Megan had left her flock at their booth to get another drink, Michael intercepted her and struck up a conversation.

"I don't know," Megan replied, shrugging her shoulders. "Maybe I just like your taste in music." Her smile made Michael feel a bit more comfortable, but he still took another sip of his drink for good measure.

"Let's be honest," Michael said, feeling his head get even lighter, "you didn't give me your real number. It's probably just a fake one so you and your friends can have a good laugh." Michael then gestured in the general direction of Megan's table.

"Hey," Megan said with a laugh, snapping her fingers in front of his face, "why don't you get out of your own head." Michael didn't know what to say. After a long pause, Megan's face grew almost sad as she finally said, "Maybe I gave you

my number because you're the only one in this bar that looks as miserable as I do."

"What do you mean I look miserable?" Michael asked, feeling oddly defensive.

"I mean you look like you would rather have your fingernails pulled out than be here."

"I'm not miserable," Michael said, beginning to grow angry.

"Trust me," Megan replied after a sip of her drink, "I know miserable, and you've got it written all over you." Michael stood nearly agape for a moment before he felt two large hands clasp his shoulders.

"We've got a problem," Michael turned around to find James looking far too serious. At that moment, Michael could see Adam stumble out the door and into the street with Cameron following closely behind, trying to tell him to stop.

"I'm sorry," Michael said, turning back to Megan, "but I've got to go handle this."

"I should have figured," Megan said, shaking her head.

"I'll be back, I promise," Michael pleaded as James began slightly tugging on his shoulder. "Will you still be here?"

"I might be," Megan said after a short pause to take a sip of her drink. Michael stood there for a moment, wondering if Adam was worth it, but another of James's tugs pulled Michael towards the door. Michael and James walked out of Dickinson's onto the sidewalk where they could see Adam stumbling down the street, drunkenly arguing with his cousin.

"Jesus, Adam," James called out, "where the hell are you going?" Adam paid no mind and continued walking down the sidewalk, past Brown Beans Coffee Co. and towards the street corner. After a long sigh, Michael and James jogged after him. All the alcohol Michael had consumed that night was now coming back to haunt him. He felt light headed and a few beer-tasting burps began to burn his esophagus. Feeling out of shape and about to vomit, Michael stopped and put his hands on his knees. After a moment of catching his breath, Michael heard James call out, "Motherfucker!" When Michael asked what was wrong, James replied from further down the sidewalk, "Adam's drunk ass just took a swing at me."

Shit. By the time Michael finally caught up to the rest of them, Adam was now being carried, his arms slung over both James and Cameron's shoulders, mumbling some inaudible insult. When Michael asked if Adam needed to be taken home, James explained that he had already called a cab. Most of the cars that

had previously lined the sidewalk had vanished while the group had been in the bar, with only a black Dodge Charger and a beat-up old station wagon left. The four of them waited in silence until a small yellow cab pulled up to the sidewalk, nearly catching the curb. Michael and Cameron loaded Adam into the back seat while James talked to the driver.

"I'm going to ride back with him," James said, circling the cab. "Somebody's got to make sure he can actually make it inside."

"Should I come too?" Cameron asked. James told him there was no need, sat next to Adam, then closed the door as the cab drove off down the street. At that moment, Michael felt completely exhausted. He wanted nothing more than to go back to his apartment, have a few more drinks, then go to bed, but he decided it wouldn't be right to abandon Cameron. After all, Cameron was the only reason Adam had dragged them all out in the first place.

"Come on," Michael said, "let's get some coffee." Cameron shrugged, and the two walked into Brown Beans and approached the counter, the barista giving a long sigh before taking their orders. With black coffees in hand, the two sat at a small wooden table in the middle of the room. The coffee shop was nearly empty, except for two college students who appeared to be studying for an exam. On the wall opposite the entrance, a large shelf full of books hung over a sitting area with two leather couches and a La-Z Boy all surrounding a long, wooden coffee table. Abstract paintings hung along the walls. Michael saw one that he swore looked like female genitalia.

"So," Michael said after they both sat down, "I hear you had a pretty nasty break up." Cameron stared into his coffee for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. Michael felt uncomfortable and began to regret his decision not to go home. "Do—" he said, dreading the words as they escaped his lips. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Cameron looked up from his cup and sighed. "Nah, not really." *Thank you, merciful God.* Cameron began to stare out the large window near the door, then let out a long sigh.

Ah shit. "Come on, let's talk about it," Michael had now given up all hope of escaping some sort of emotional heart-to-heart.

"It's just, I miss her, you know? Things were going great. We were happy. Or, at least, I was happy." Cameron's gaze fell back into his coffee.

"What happened?" Michael asked after taking a sip of his coffee that burnt his tongue.

"I don't know. Hannah and I were having lunch one day and she just says, 'I don't think this is going to work out.'"

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," Cameron said, looking helpless. "She told me that we had been growing apart for a long time, and that she needed something different in her life."

"Something different?"

"Yeah, I don't know what she meant by it. Finally, she said that she wanted to be friends."

"What did you say?"

"I mean I still want to be friends with her." Cameron's answer made Michael sigh.

There was no such thing as exes' being friends in Michael's eyes. He and Angie were civil, meaning they could stand to be in the same room for extended periods of time, but friendship had never been part of their arrangement. An awkward 'How are you?' was enough to get them through any gatherings or social events they both were attending. All things aside, Michael had been surprised not to get an invitation to his daughters' birthday party.

"Do you ever feel like you had your chance at happiness, and now that it's gone, you don't get another shot?" Cameron asked after a brief silence.

Michael looked out the window, hoping to find something to distract him from the situation, but the street was empty. Most of the street lights had burned out, leaving the sidewalk in almost complete darkness. Michael could barely make out the trees out across the river that dotted the suburbs and shopping centers. Michael knew that out across that river his daughters were fast asleep.

"Cam," Michael said, his eyes still fixated out the window, "why are you worrying about that kind of stuff? You're only twenty-one, still in college with no wife, no kids, and no real responsibility. When I was your age, I had two four-year-old daughters, and my marriage was falling apart. Now I see my kids only every other weekend, their mom doesn't tell me when she makes parenting decisions, and her new boyfriend buys them all kinds of fancy crap that they don't need." Michael was now gripping his scalding coffee so hard his hand began to burn against the cardboard cup. Cameron stared back into his coffee in silence. Michael had not meant to sound harsh or unkind. This is why he didn't mix drinking and emotion. "Look, Cam. I'm sorry, man. It's getting late, I worked all week, and honestly, I'm still pretty drunk. Let's just call it a night." Cameron nodded his head in agreement, and the two walked back

outside. Every car on the street was now gone, and only the streetlight in front of Dickinson's seemed to still be functioning. It was so dark now that Michael couldn't see past the river.

Cameron's phone began to ring as Michael pulled his lighter out of his back pocket. Michael patted himself down to see if he had any cigarettes, but was unsuccessful. "It's my ex calling," Cameron said, staring at his phone. Michael glanced back at him with his eyebrows raised. "I think I should take it. You know, in case it's something important," Cameron went on, not making eye contact. Michael shrugged and nodded at the same time. He wasn't in the mood to lecture, since trying to help earlier hadn't gone so well. Michael was content to let Cameron figure this one out on his own. Cameron's phone reminded Michael of the gum wrapper Megan had given him. Where had he put it? Frantically, Michael searched each of his pockets, turning each one inside out. He found only his wallet, his cellphone, and some lint.

"Fuck," Michael nearly yelled, kicking an old cigarette butt that was lying on the sidewalk. Cameron hung up his phone and asked what was wrong. "Nothing. I think I left something in Dickinson's. I'll be right back."

"Hey, actually," Cameron began before Michael could hurry off, "I think I'm going to go over to Hannah's, which is just a few blocks from here. She said she needed to talk about some things with me." Cameron's expression hinted that he was looking for someone to tell him not to go.

"Yeah that's fine," Michael said, not making eye contact. At that, Cameron said goodnight and began walking slowly down the dark sidewalk. Michael rushed over to Dickinson's and attempted to pull open the door, but it was locked, and the lights had all turned off. Michael let out a loud yell and kicked the door, nearly breaking his big toe.

Now breathing heavily, Michael was craving a cigarette. No, another drink would do better. He stood in front of Dickinson's, scolding himself for being so foolish. His toe throbbing and his self-appreciation crushed, Michael tossed his cup of coffee into the street and thought that it might be nice to walk home. He wasn't sure exactly what time it was, but he was sure it had to be at least two in the morning. He wondered how long it would take him to get home. It couldn't be more than ten blocks. Michael pulled his phone from his front pocket to check the distance exactly, but stopped when he noticed his daughter's voicemail indication. Michael slid his finger across the screen and hit the speaker button. He could hear his ex-wife's voice saying something softly, and then he heard his daughters say, "Hey, daddy, it's us." In the background, Angie's voice gave another soft whisper. "Oh okay," the girls whispered back. "It's Kaylie and Macy."

“I wanna talk to him,” Macy whined. The phone gave a short rustling sound. “Hi, daddy. It’s Macy. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Kaylie called out in the background. Both girls said goodnight in unison, and the message ended.

Michael slowly stepped onto the edge of the street and sat on the curb under the street light. A cold gust of wind made Michael shiver and pull his coat tighter around his chest. He looked up and down the empty street, but couldn’t see anything. As he attempted to look out over the river, he sat his phone down next to him on the sidewalk and wiped the cold tears from his eyes.



Letter to Dreamer

Seth Grindstaff

Dear Dreamer,

Remember the time I broke through?
I knew that mad-man's syringe wouldn't hurt.
Hold still. This is just a dream, I told us, and
you haven't feared a trip to the doctor since.

But what part of "Be careful little eyes what you see"
can't you understand? While you wake in the morning
sweating dementia at the thought of my escape,
I'm stuck here with all your loose ends: raw and

floating among the suppressed teenage imagination,
doing what you shouldn't, repeating what you can't.
You send me with a shovel, in search of your favorite
toy, buried and left at the beach as a kid.

What you put me through in school—embarrassing. I had
the legs to chase every girl you'd met, but when caught,
you should have known how a real kiss should feel;
even the subconscious knows a soggy pillow from a face.

Before exams I'd study your loose-leaf notes, flapping and
disappearing from my hands, never catching a clear view.
And why did you never learn how to fully dress me,
before sending me in front of a cackling audience?

Why have me repeat that missed tackle before each game?
He still jukes left, and I slip—deeper into a frictionless floor—
arms heavy, sunk from sight. There is more fertile ground to
tread than the loose pebbles of memory, worn with thought.

Sometimes I get mad enough to break out of here,
so I jump. You feel it in your feet first—bricks
flung through the shattered sheet of your four-poster bed;
you jerk upright. Of all the possibilities in your head
why don't you just let me fly?

Yours,
Dream



Everystudent

Rachel Nicole Lawson

(There is a cluttered desk stage right with two chairs. The desk is extremely unorganized with stacks of papers on the desk and the ground. All characters may be played by male, female, or otherwise.

EVERYSTUDENT *a bright-eyed, naive freshman. Must appear youthful, but not necessarily child-like.*

ADMISSIONS *dressed in a long, black trench coat and a private detective hat, speaks with a heavy New Yorker accent.*

FINANCIAL AID *a group of 5-6 people, each dressed in casual business attire, spattered in blood. They speak as a group or the lines can be divided out to individuals. It MUST be communicated that they are a unit.*

ADVISING *speaks as if they smoke seventeen packs of cigarettes a day.*

GENERAL STUDIES *dressed in frumpy, baggy clothing in grey-scale.*

FRIENDS *dressed in bright, alluring colors, and has a constant pep in their step.*

EXTRA CREDIT *dressed as a nurse, speaks like a stereotypical super hero.*

MAJOR *dressed in an army uniform*

OLD MAN BOBBERFINS *janitor.)*

EVERYSTUDENT: Oh, golly. Oh, gee. I can't wait for my first semester in college.

ADMISSIONS: Hold up, kid.

EVERYSTUDENT: Yes?

ADMISSIONS: You haven't checked in with me, so you ain't getting in.

EVERYSTUDENT: Oh, golly! Who are you?

ADMISSIONS: I am Admissions. You gotta go through me to get into your precious college.

EVERYSTUDENT: Judgment? What do I need to do, Sir/Ma'am?

ADMISSIONS: Give me 25 bucks, your medical and high school records, social security number, birthday, signed picture of Bill Murray, the original Gettysburg Address, eye of a newt, toe of a frog, some of those chewy little strawberry candies that you only find at your grandmother's house, and we'll call it even. Sound golden?

EVERYSTUDENT: What? You need all that? That sounds a fishy to me. You expect me to just trust you with all that classified info?

ADMISSIONS: Pretty much.

EVERYSTUDENT: But....

ADMISSIONS: Look, kid. Do you want in or not?

(EVERYSTUDENT, with hesitation, hands ADMISSIONS the necessary items.)

EVERYSTUDENT: You better be careful with that. I don't want anyone stealing my identity. Mom said 1.8 million people fall victim to identity theft a year.

ADMISSIONS: Yeah, kid. I'm gonna take real good care of it. It'll be fine.

(ADMISSIONS begins to exit.)

EVERYSTUDENT: Hey wait!

(ADMISSIONS exits crumbling all of EVERYSTUDENT'S information.)

EVERYSTUDENT: What a guy. Why do I feel like I just got suckered?

(FINANCIAL AID Enters holding various weapons. May include: swords, knives, chains, crowbars, etc.)

FINANCIAL AID: Hello there, Student.

EVERYSTUDENT: Um, hello. Who are you?

FINANCIAL AID: We are Financial Aid.

EVERYSTUDENT: Aid? So, you're here to help me?

(FINANCIAL AID laughs hysterically, slowly closing in on EVERYSTUDENT. A gang beating commences. It is long and drawn out with the use of as much fake

blood as feasible. It should not take so long that the audience gets bored. EVERYSTUDENT gets no blows in. None. EVERYSTUDENT emerges hobbling over towards the desk stage right.)

EVERYSTUDENT: What is this place?

ADVISING: Aye, you got an appointment?

EVERYSTUDENT: What?

ADVISING: An appointment? You got one?

EVERYSTUDENT: No, I don't think so.

ADVISING: Of course not. You're in luck. I can squeeze you in, if you hurry. Hop to it.

EVERYSTUDENT: Yes, sir . . . (*EVERYSTUDENT sits.*)

ADVISING: All right, all right. What's your major?

EVERYSTUDENT: I'm currently undeclared.

ADVISING: (*Aside*) Oh, great. (*To EVERYSTUDENT*) Oh, that's sweet.

EVERYSTUDENT: Um, thank you.

ADVISING: Take this note to General Studies. You'll be hanging with him until you meet your Major.

(EVERYSTUDENT takes note.)

EVERYSTUDENT: Okay. Where is that?

ADVISING: You go down the hall take a right, go out the double doors. You'll see a tree in front of you, climb the tree, then jump to the third-story window. From there you will reach the sacred door of truth. You must then solve three riddles from Old Man Bobberfins—the janitor who was here before the school was built. Super easy. If all else fails, there are signs. I've got vacation pay to cash in, so good luck and stuff.

(ADVISING exits.)

EVERYSTUDENT: But! Okay. . . .

(EVERYSTUDENT exits. GENERAL STUDIES enter.)

GENERAL STUDIES: Meh.

(EVERYSTUDENT enters. There is a small tree branch sticking out of his backpack. They are drinking an over-sugared coffee beverage.)

EVERYSTUDENT: Hello, there. I believe you are General Studies. Advising said I was supposed to hang out with you until I find my Major.

GENERAL STUDIES: Meh.

(GENERAL STUDIES and EVERYSTUDENT sit.)

EVERYSTUDENT: So, do you want to . . . I don't know . . . do something?

GENERAL STUDIES: Meh.

EVERYSTUDENT: Okay, yeah. That's cool.

(There is an awkward pause as EVERYSTUDENT sips his coffee.

FRIENDS enter.)

FRIENDS: Heeeeeello, there!

EVERYSTUDENT: Aaaahhhhhh! Please don't hurt me! I'm with General Studies. I'm doing what I'm supposed to do.

GENERAL STUDIES: Meh.

(FRIENDS shakes EVERYSTUDENT'S hand aggressively.)

FRIENDS: Hi, silly. I'm not going to hurt you. My name is Friends. I wanna hang out and do cool stuff.

EVERYSTUDENT: Oh! That sounds like so much fun!

FRIENDS: Yeah come on! There is a whole world out there you are missing.

(FRIENDS takes EVERYSTUDENTS hand. They begin to exit.)

EVERYSTUDENT: Friends, wait! I have to stay here with General Studies. Advising said so.

FRIENDS: Pssshhhh, you'll get to that later. They'll be fine on their own. Right, General Studies?

GENERAL STUDIES: Meh.

EVERYSTUDENT: Okay, then. Let's go!

(EVERYSTUDENT and FRIENDS run around GENERAL STUDIES laughing and making fun jokes. FRIENDS stabs GENERAL STUDIES in the back.)

GENERAL STUDIES: Meeeeeeehhhhh . . .

EVERYSTUDENT: Friends, what did you do?!

FRIENDS: You can't have both of us.

(FRIENDS exit.)

EVERYSTUDENT: General Studies, get up!

GENERAL STUDIES: Meh.

EVERYSTUDENT: Somebody help! My General Studies are dying! Oh, pit-
erous fate!

(EVERYSTUDENT sobs into GENERAL STUDIES. EXTRA CREDIT enters.)

EXTRA CREDIT: Student, what seems to be the problem?

EVERYSTUDENT: Friends killed General Studies!

EXTRA CREDIT: I've seen this before. We can still save him, if you are willing
to put in the work.

EVERYSTUDENT: I'll do anything. I don't want General Studies to die! Who
are you?

EXTRA CREDIT: I'm Extra Credit. Here, take these.

(EXTRA CREDIT hands EVERYSTUDENT a defibrillator.)

EXTRA CREDIT: You must bring him back to life.

EVERYSTUDENT: But, I've never used one of these before.

EXTRA CREDIT: Figure it out, or he's dead!

EVERYSTUDENT: Okay! CLEAR!

*(EVERYSTUDENT shocks GENERAL STUDIES a few times. Each shock in-
creases as EVERYSTUDENT and EXTRA CREDIT scream. GENERAL STUD-
IES will continue to say "Meh." It is a chaotic, scrambled event.
Each shock should increase in screams until a broad climax.
GENERAL STUDIES gets up.)*

EVERYSTUDENT: General Studies! You're alive!

GENERAL STUDIES: Meh.

EXTRA CREDIT: Well done, little one. I must take my leave now.

EVERYSTUDENT: Extra Credit, no! What if I need you again?

EXTRA CREDIT: Don't worry. You'll see me again once you get a girlfriend
slash boyfriend.

EVERYSTUDENT: You really think I could get a girlfriend slash boyfriend?!

(There is an awkward pause. EXTRA CREDIT exits. During this exchange between EVERYSTUDENT and EXTRA credit, GENERAL STUDIES will transform into MAJOR.)

MAJOR: Greetings, lost one. You are found. *(Pause.)*

EVERYSTUDENT: What?

MAJOR: It is I . . . Your Major.

EVERYSTUDENT: Yeah, right, General Studies. Just because you put on different clothes. I can still tell it's you. I'm not that dumb.

(MAJOR smacks EVERYSTUDENT.)

EVERYSTUDENT: Ow!

MAJOR: I am the evolved form of General Studies. They were my forbearer.

EVERYSTUDENT: So? Are we gonna do stuff?

MAJOR: Yes. Move, maggot! I wanna see hustle in those steps! GO! GO! GO!

EVERYSTUDENT: But, where are we going?

MAJOR: Don't think! Work!

(EVERYSTUDENT goes through a series of pushups, sit-ups, and stunts while being dictated by MAJOR. EVERYSTUDENT collapses in exhaustion. Enter OLD MAN BOBBERFINS)

EVERYSTUDENT: I don't know if this college thing is for me.

OLD MAN BOBBERFINS: Hey, kid. It's been a while. How's it going?

EVERYSTUDENT: Hey, Old Man Bobberfins. It's not going so well.

OLD MAN BOBBERFINS: What's wrong, kiddo?

EVERYSTUDENT: What isn't wrong? Admissions stole my identity. Financial Aid beat me up. Advising advised nothing. Friends almost killed General Studies, who then turned into a monster called Major. I feel like I can't keep up, and I really don't care anymore. I just wanna go home.

OLD MAN BOBBERFINS: Yeah, college can do that to ya.

(OLD MAN BOBBERFINS takes out a Thermos, pores some soup, and hands it to EVERYSTUDENT.)

OLD MAN BOBBERFINS: Here. This'll warm ya up. Make ya feel better.

EVERYSTUDENT: Thanks.

(OLD MAN BOBBERFINS and EVERYSTUDENT sip their soup.)

EVERYSTUDENT: What did you want to do? With your life I mean?

OLD MAN BOBBERFINS: Starting with the tough questions, aye? I didn't know for a good while. I went with the days as they took me. I fell in love with a wonderful half-woman, half-robot and had thirty-seven lovely children. I didn't want much more than that. I clean up after these punk kids day after day, but I get to watch them become somthin', and that a glorious thing to watch.

EVERYSTUDENT: It sounds nice when you put it like that.

OLD MAN BOBBERFINS: Look, kiddo, nobody has the answer to life. Not your professors, your mom and pop, or me. We all are scared little humans just trying to be something before we die. It doesn't really matter what you do as long as you're happy doing it. And you're a lot stronger than you think, kid.

EVERYSTUDENT: Thank you, Old Man Bobberfins. I really needed that.

OLD MAN BOBBERFINS: You'll get me back one day, kid. What are you gonna do now?

EVERYSTUDENT: I'm gonna stop whining. Buckle down. And get this degree.

OLD MAN BOBBERFINS: Get 'em, kid.

(OLD MAN BOBBERFINS exits. MAJOR enters.)

MAJOR: Back for more, maggot.

EVERYSTUDENT: Damn straight.

(There is a sound cue of epic fight music. MAJOR and EVERYSTUDENT collide in a battle. EVERYSTUDENT is victorious.)

MAJOR: You have defeated me, child. These are for you.

(MAJOR hands EVERYSTUDENT a graduation cap and gown.)

EVERYSTUDENT: Thank you, sir. *(EVERYSTUDENT puts on cap and gown.)*
I did it!

END



Judges' Biographies

Amy Wright – Nonfiction

Amy Wright is the author of *Everything in the Universe*, *Cracker Sonnets*, and five chapbooks, including the nonfiction collection *Wherever the Land Is*. She also co-authored *Creeks of the Upper South*, a poetry collection on environmental and cultural habitats. Her writing has been awarded two Peter Taylor Fellowships for the Kenyon Review Writers' Workshop and an Individual Artist's Fellowship from the Tennessee Arts Commission. Based in Tennessee, she is a professor and coordinator of the Creative Writing program at Austin Peay State University, where she serves as the nonfiction editor for *Zone 3* journal and *Zone 3* press.

Mark Powell – Fiction

Mark Powell is the author of five novels, most recently *Small Treasons* from Gallery/Simon and Schuster. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Breadloaf and Sewanee Writers' Conferences; in 2014 he was a Fulbright Fellow to Slovakia. He teaches at Appalachian State University.

Maurice Manning – Poetry

Maurice Manning has published six books of poetry, most recently *One Man's Dark*. His fourth book, *The Common Man*, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. A former Guggenheim Fellow, Manning teaches at Transylvania University and for the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. He lives with his family in Kentucky.

Katy Brown – Drama

Katy Brown is an Associate Artistic Director of Barter Theatre and is pleased to be in her nineteenth year at the theatre. She has directed more than 100 professional productions, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Peter and the Starcatcher*, *Mary's Wedding*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Miracle Worker*, *Little Women*, *The 39 Steps*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Doubting Thomas*, *The Road to Appomattox*, *The Fantasticks*, *Holiday Memories*, *The Foreigner*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Thousand Cranes*, *Violet*, as well as Barter's national tour of *Of Mice and Men*. Katy also heads casting for Barter, directs the Young Playwrights Festival, and is the Artistic Director of both The Barter Players and The Barter Players Encore Company.

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