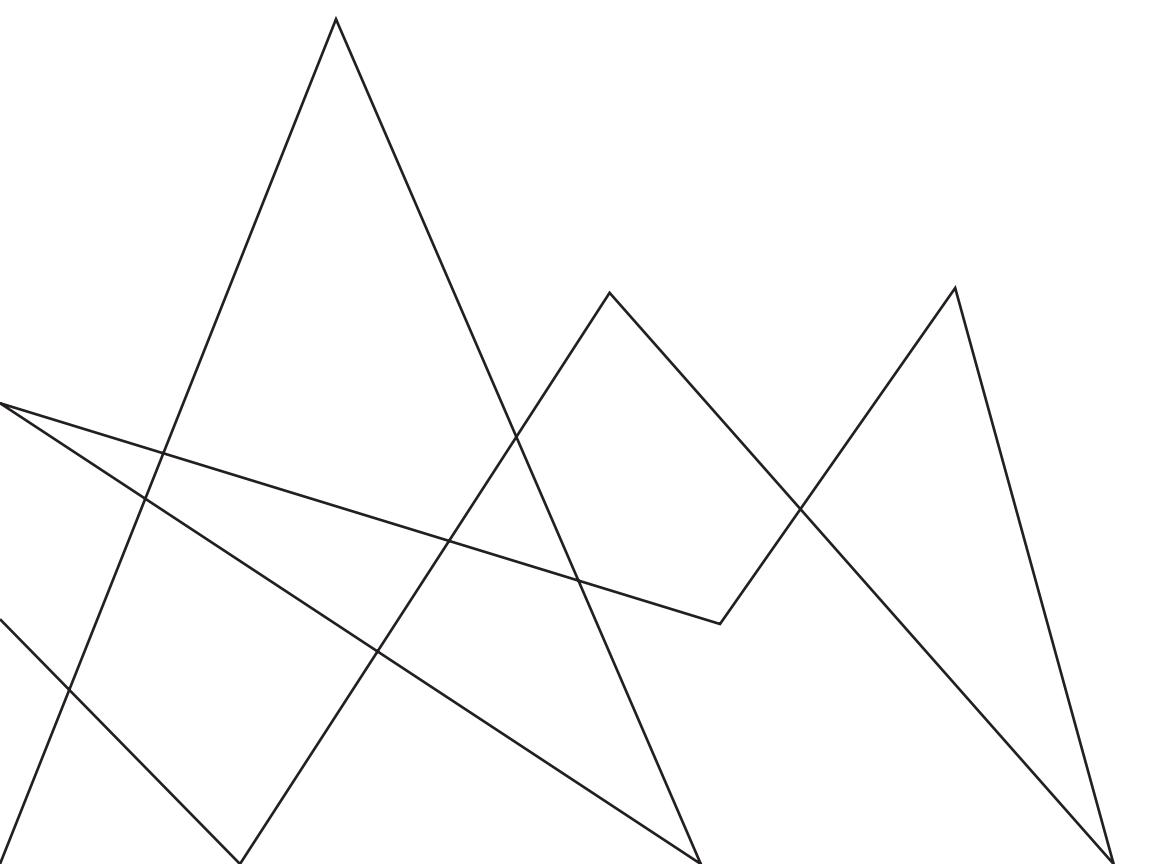




# Garfield Lake Review



READERS,

WELCOME TO THE 2019  
GARFIELD LAKE REVIEW.

THIS EDITION CONTAINS  
ELEMENTS THAT ARE UNIQUE  
AND NEW. IN A TIME OF  
CULTURAL AND POLITICAL  
DIVIDE, ART CAN SHOW US  
HUMANITY AND COMPASSION  
BY EXPLORING OUR DIFFERENCES.  
NOW, MORE THAN EVER.

CREATIVITY NEEDS TO TRIUMPH.  
IT'S MY HOPE THAT THIS  
PUBLICATION CREATES A CATHARSIS  
— LEAVING YOU PROUD OF YOUR  
DIFFERENCES AND MAKING YOU  
FEEL INSPIRED.

ENJOY,  
editor  
Rae Claramunt

## Editorial Board

Ta'Neeka DeMyers is a music vocal performance major and a writing minor. She loves to sing, dance, play and listen to music, go to church, and hang out with family and friends. She aspires to be on Broadway, be an author, and a Worship Leader someday.

**Ta'Neeka**



**Maggie** Maggie Dunn is a senior psychology major and English minor who plans on getting her degree in American Sign Language.



Leah Miller is a sophomore at Olivet College and a writing and history major with a music minor. Though originally pursuing creative writing, she is now planning a career in historical journalism and cultural preservation.

**Leah**



**Savana** Savana Bioty is a sophomore majoring in English, with a minor in writing. Savana enjoys writing novels and reading books which help her to relax. She is a mother of five and enjoys teaching her children reading and writing. Savana plans to become an Editor at a Book Publishing house in New York City—the city she loves.

Marah Heikkila is an Olivet College undergraduate student pursuing a double major in English and Cultural Studies. She enjoys writing and reading with a passion, particularly as it relates to culture. She has been published in The Garfield Lake Review and Toe Good. She was the recipient for the Leo T. Hendrick Writing Prize in 2018.

**Marah**



**Josh** Josh Scheidler is an aspiring professional. He enjoys reading novels, playing games (especially strategy games), eating steak and drinking strawberry flavored carbonated mineral water.



Zach Oshinsky is a student from West Bloomfield, MI. He is majoring in sports psychology.



**Abby** Abby Radcliffe is a junior pursuing a graphic design at Olivet College.



Rae Claramunt is a soon-to-be Olivet graduate. She is attending a postgraduate program in England to pursue a degree in English Literature and Culture. She had the pleasure of being the editor of this year's Garfield Lake Review, and thanks Olivet College for yet another experience.



**Meredith** Meredith Dodson is an Assistant Professor of Writing at Olivet College and directs the Writing Program. She has an MFA from Georgia College and State University and is working on a PhD from Western Michigan University. Most of her non-working time is spent either chasing her two young daughters or tiptoeing through the house once they are asleep. Sometimes she dreams of making fancy cupcakes or writing longer pieces again.

Kirk Hendershott-Kraetzer is Professor of Humanities and Director of the Global Citizen Honors Program at Olivet College. He teaches film, creative writing, literature, Shakespeare, and rhetoric and composition. His recent publications include "It's Joss Whedon's World and We're All Just Livin' In It: The Closed Frame of the Whedon verse" and "Romeo Unbound." More of his articles, on Romeo and Juliet in popular culture, can be found at <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc/vol5/iss2012/3/> and <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/783190/show>.



# **Garfield Lake Review**

**/gär'fēld'/ /lāk/ /rə'veyōō/**

***noun***

**A curated collection of artistic  
expression from creative minds  
for creative minds.**

A Damp Road Leads to the South

A Gathering of Blisters

An Apology For Hate

Antonym

Ball and Chain Thing

Going Around in My Head

Deflower

Green Card

How To Meaure Time

Hush

Indehiscent

La Tristesse

Long John'd

Macular Degeneration

Ode To Brenda

Selah

Stevensville

Thanksgiving

The Black Sheep

The Shade of Color

This is The Sky in Oakland

Waiting for Gauguin

Winter A While Back

Your Dick Points to the Fifties

A Fallacy of Beauty

After my Death

An Old Woman

At the Self-Serve

Daemonophobia

Eyes Open

Growing up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan

Hummingbird

I Died at 45

Katie's Sunflowers

Lift Up the Toilet Seat

Love Letter

Nice Guys Come Last

Poor Little Latin Man

Something About Coffee

Talking My Generation Blues

The Flailer

The Kid With the Faces

The Story of the Gymnasium's Suicide

This Nurtured Honey Tastes Like Gruel

We Must All Be Artists

Woman

## A Damp Road Leads to the South

Parihar

A damp road leads to the south,  
across the lake and mahogany,  
ashy on the sides.  
It smells of graves and death,  
like all the hope  
all the hope of the world  
came here to die.  
I prance on the damp soil,  
and am suspended in the air  
Only for a mere moment but,  
my body refuses to come down.  
A mystical buoyant force here,  
the gravity stops to work  
I avoid to see,  
to see perhaps  
Perhaps I'm flying,  
and now that I am aware, thud!  
Thud and I'm back  
Except the thud is not coarse,  
It sounds damp like the road  
and the damp soil prevails on my skin.  
I get up and start walking again  
careful not to tread,  
Tread on the prints drawn of bones.  
It's the dampest road I know  
swallows like quicksand  
but oddly marshy  
And the wind here is stale.  
Somehow, I go there  
who knows why,  
and always manage to come back.

## A Fallacy of Beauty

Heikkila

Beauty is a fallacy.  
It makes sense to us,  
but who has the right to  
determine it?

The majority of the  
Population perceives that  
they are given that right,  
for beauty has been twisted,  
manipulated and barbed into  
a wire that is toxic and  
vehemently grotesque.

Beauty is subjective,  
Its core isn't objective.  
We like to think it is,  
but in reality, in notions,  
in principles, and in practices  
it is not

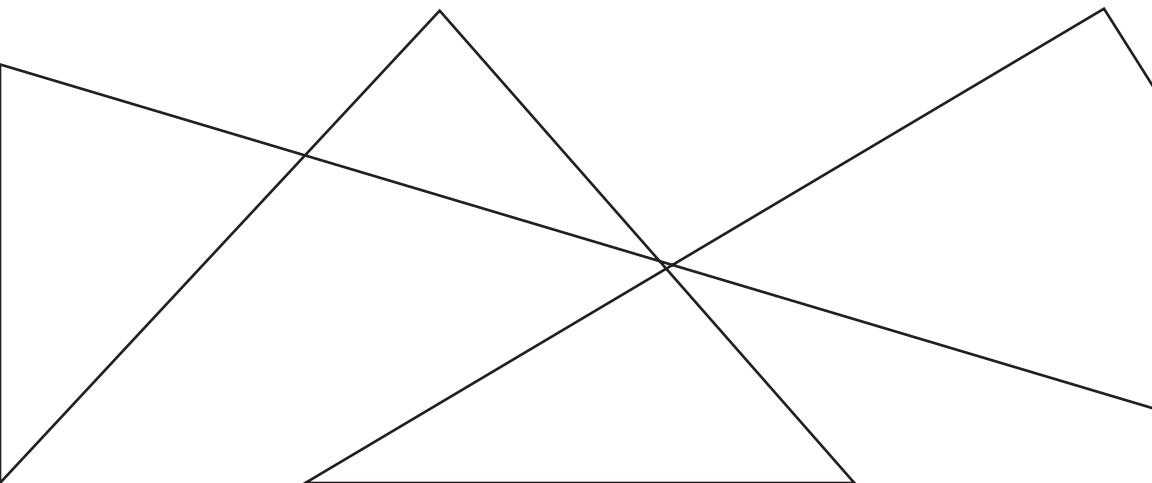
For beauty is determined by grace,  
by elegance, and most importantly looks.

Beauty of thought and process  
is highly disregarded.  
It has become but a mere  
illusion, barren in both  
the intricacy of reality and truth.

Beauty is subjective, yet  
it is determined by predispositions  
and implicit standards that  
originated many years ago,  
yet these originated ideals  
still reign supreme today.

Beauty is far more than  
an outward façade,

For beauty is truth,  
beauty is compassion,  
beauty is humility,  
beauty is knowledge.



## A Gathering of Blisters

Collins

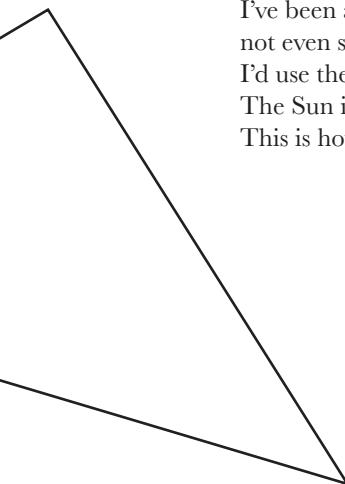
The sky is having surgery;  
A scalpel slicing open its skin.  
It bleeds the color of flames and oozes a soft yellow.  
For a few days, the horizon heals,  
Yawning lazily amongst the clouds.

My hands feel the touch of crumbled paint from a few nights before,  
And I find myself performing a quiet nightly ritual between myself  
And a tired home.  
There's a comforting cloak hovering over me that smells Of sweet vanilla.  
The steam rest upon windows that beg for the touch Of light.

Today the sunset is pouring bruises.  
Lavender, corpse grey, and a tender blue drain from above and into  
A river that lives in my back yard.  
The colors hold each other's hands,  
Melting into the shade my canvas craves.

I'm an artist, a surgeon of nature,  
With a pallet heart that collects dying skies.  
When I was a little girl, I had conversations with the Sun.  
He told me he died every night but would always bring footsteps into tomorrow.  
I cried that day; I didn't believe he'd come back.

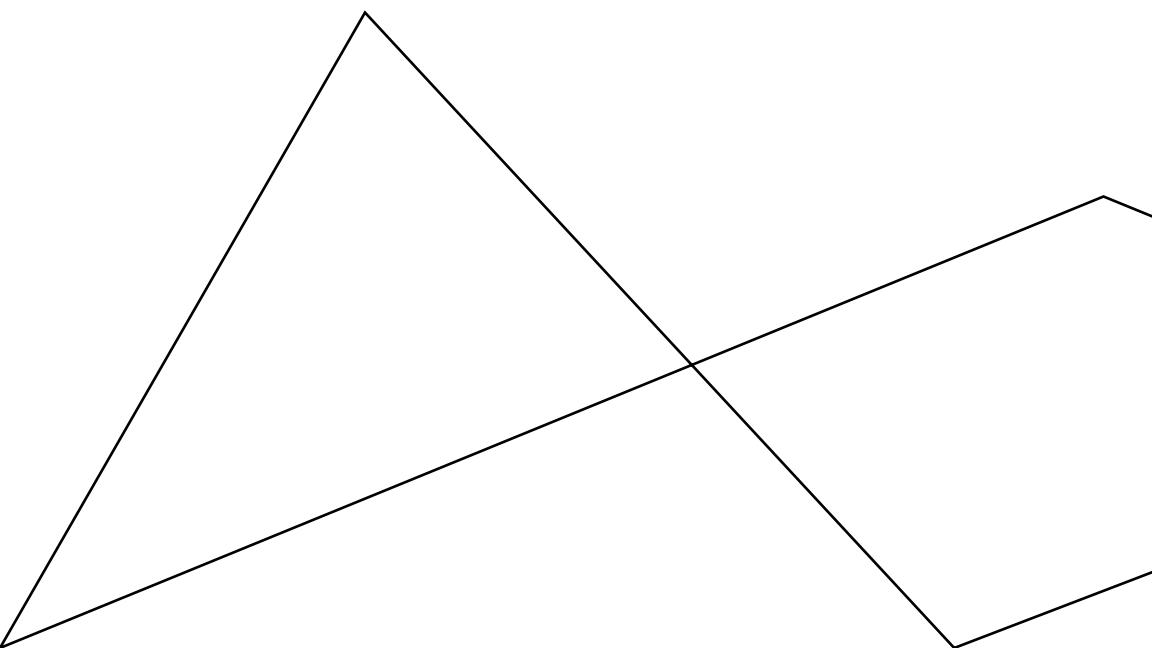
I've been a painter since, saving leaks from the horizon that not even stitches could hold.  
I'd use them to portray the many lives of a new day.  
The Sun is sunken into the tip of my paintbrush,  
This is how I keep him alive.



## After my Death

Hattam

After my death I kept every letter I sent.  
After my death I didn't destroy a single journal.  
After my death I wasn't embarrassed of this life I knew  
No one would read



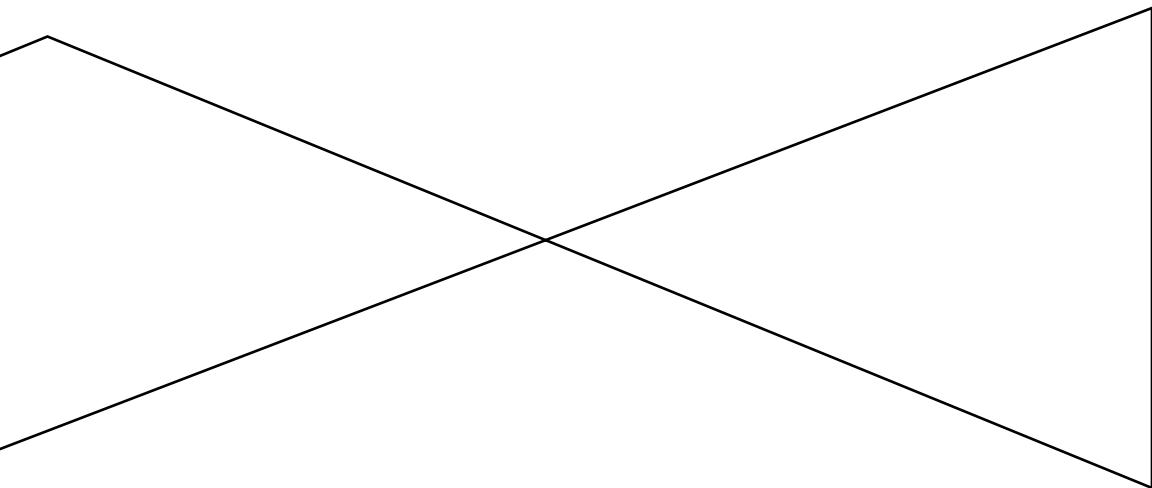
## An Apology For Hate

Ahern

Unloved things- weeds and warts,  
Dry rot and wet rot and wall mold,  
Rats and lice and cockroaches  
Halitosis and cancer and herpes  
Are with us despite every effort.

But our most pernicious consort,  
born of fear, reared in animosity  
is hatred- of others, of change,  
hate that proverbs and strictures  
fumble helplessly against.

Many-splendored hate is of all sides:  
radical/ reactionary, Godless/ Godfearing,  
free loving/ abstinent, sharing/ selfish.  
It flourishes despite agonized exterminators,  
an eye we refuse to pluck out.



## An Old Woman

Rivera

My memory escapes  
through the trees of fall  
like the bright crimson and amber leaves  
falling from the branches.

Down below against the edges of Dante's park,  
a human rainbow:  
construction workers,  
sitting on benches  
of blistered wood and rusted iron.

Unmasked immigrants,  
of brown, black, white, yellow, and burning red faces  
smiling  
talking,  
eating and  
looking into the street  
engulfed by the September dust:  
automobiles and transit buses stand still  
as the flock of American children walk in the crosswalk.

A break in time  
while building in the city.

Antonym

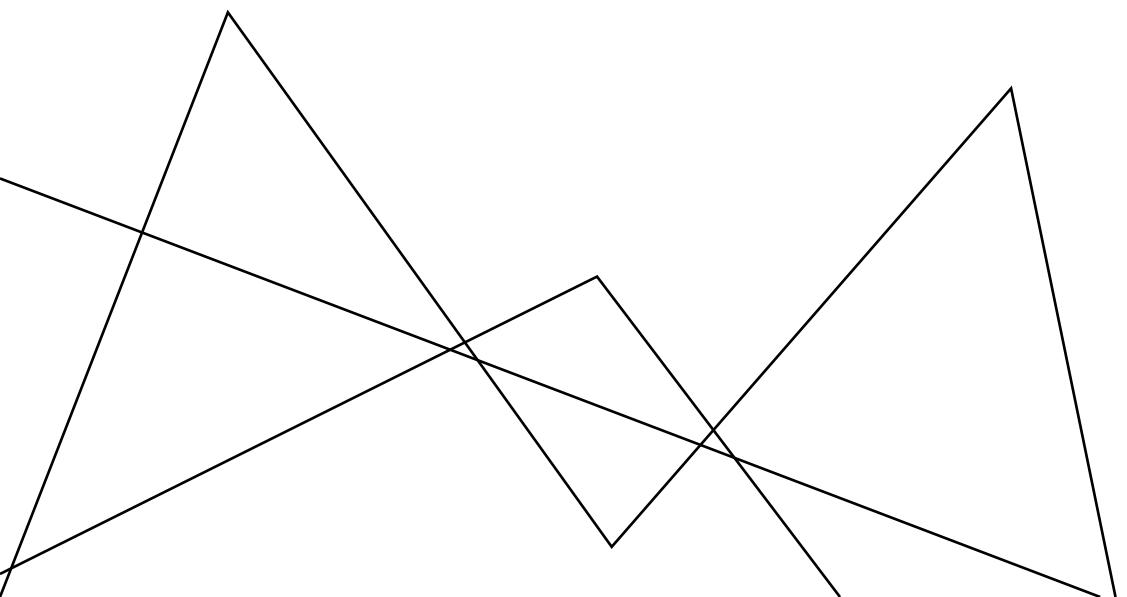
Reach out to me,  
embrace me as you would a cactus,  
laugh with me as you would a foe;  
I am open like a restricted section  
and docile like a rabid dog.  
How is it you find me confusing  
when there is no complexity  
to my name, and my lips  
leak seductive words while  
my tongue lashes you instinctively.  
Consider me not a paradigm,  
that is where you've lost your way,  
consider me the antonym  
to your fated definition.  
Passion is my syntax,  
intensity my punctuation,  
yet you border me with  
misplaced logic and hear  
only affirmations.  
I cannot be delimited  
or whittled statuesque  
when I am molten narrative  
of ink that never dries.

Coggeshall

## At the Self-Serve

Keeler

Tonight, across the next island, I noticed a middle-age man  
crying as he pumped gas into a shiny white, spattered car.  
A dull-alloy nozzle weighed down his ringed left hand;  
a dull-black hose snaked above his invisible knees.  
As he stared sideways at the double-timing counter,  
soft ununnilium light twinkled up his right cheek.  
Inside the gasoline dispenser, some imbalance went umpa-  
pump,  
umpa-pump. Then, on every second beat, some bent gear  
went skreeek.  
I wondered, after he had driven away,  
had he been pumping regular?



## Ball and Chain Thing Going Around in my Head

Cardoza

Some say Charley and I live on the wrong side of the tracks, in Detroit. To put food in our bellies, I hang sheetrock. I'm strong and fast, liked by the contractors. Hanging ceiling panels is the worse, especially when I work alone. I wear a hard hat while on the scaffold, so I can balance the 70 pound piece of gypsum using my neck muscles. Sometimes I come home walking like Herman Munster. Charley laughs.

I like to see Charley laugh. Ever since his mother took up skydiving, it has been a challenge around here. Glad I only have one kid. The short and long of it is, Charley's mom, Amy, Jumped off a four story parking structure last April. Why? How would I know, I am Herman Munster remember, incomplete human feeling circuitry. Her so-long note: "Sorry, I have more darkness in me than unanswered prayers. Goodbye." The medication Dr. Frederick gave her didn't work. That free therapy Wayne County gave her didn't work either. All the love I gave her didn't work. All my unanswered prayers didn't help. Charley thinks his mom slipped in the rain. I am leaving it like that until he calls me a liar, then we'll have that father and son talk.

I try to keep things the same for Charley. Gave him a big pizza party at Buddy's, on Conant Street, for his birthday in September.

And we were a hit at Halloween; I'm a Jack Daniels bottle, Charley a pack of Camels. Neighbor John laughed his ass off. The renters across the street said make sure you get the filtered brand. I got high fived from a stranger around the block, he chuckled, *watch that shit; you know it killed Janis Joplin.*

On the way back home, a woman in a 2011 Jetta, with a ghost up her ass threw a handful of Bit-O-Honey at me, in a Halloween Drive-By.

"Leave those on the ground, no one likes 'em. He's only eight I know; not too discerning. And by the way, ignore the dirty words that bitch used."

Charley barks, *whatever*, just like kids do now-a-days, whether something is bad or good.

I've been a stickler about raising my boy the right way. So I teach Camels a thing or two practicing what those Shrink's call modeling behavior. After all, I was not raised in a bread box.

Up the steps at home, I trip and break my bottle. I'm thinking all in all, we had a great evening. Next year, I might replace myself, with Southern Comfort. Got that *Ball and Chain* thing going around in my head. After all, wasn't it Jim Morrison who said no one here gets out alive?

Later that night: "*Goodnight Jack!*"  
"Goodnight Camels, I love you all the way to the Raleigh North Carolina Cigarette Factory and back to Detroit."  
Giggles in two bedrooms.

## Daemonophobia

Kuntz

The sink demon required regular feeding and had grown a liking for the taste of me. Every couple of weeks or so, I'd floss my gums ragged until bright lines of crimson appeared between the crevices of my teeth. Then I'd spit up dollops of blood down the drain and watch as the hungry mouth lapped them up, the red fading to pink in its jaws. The porcelain would gleam for a brief moment, a set of eyes reflected in the brass handles, and then all return to dullness as I shut the water off. It was the least dangerous thing I could do to keep him quiet.

Sometimes I would flash my incisors, to bare my own fangs, to show him I wasn't afraid. It was never convincing enough, not for him, or for any of the others. His thirst for blood was unquenched and flashed with all the ferocity of a straight razor.

\*\*\*

My monsters had a habit of making themselves at home with me. First it had been the fridge beast. The roar would shake the entire kitchenette when I opened the fridge and frighten me back. It was hoarding all of my groceries for itself, and they would swiftly succumb to rot in its grasp.

It settled in when I moved to the apartment in El Barrio, when the fridge was newly installed, when it knew my belly would ache with hunger but I'd be too busy unpacking to notice. It knew, the clever thing. It spread its roots deep into the grimy tile floor and beyond, made friends with the roaches, latched itself in for the long haul. After two days of no food, I finally grew dizzy enough to stumble to the door and look inside, where it lay in wait. The thunderous cry it elicited was as loud and powerful as the rumble of the train cars as they rocketed past on their way downtown, and it sent me tumbling backwards to cower against the countertop. Beads of sweat had gathered in my hairline; I realized I could not fight well enough to best it. I ate stale crackers for another two days, and though I grew weaker, thinner, paler, I knew this had to be for the best.

On the third day, it finally let me snatch a handful of grapes. Wild-eyed at my thievery, I shoved them in all at once and let their sour juices burst on my tongue with all the bliss of an addict finally scoring. The minuscule mold spots dotting them didn't bother me in the least, and they certainly didn't

bother the beast. In fact, it was so satisfied with the mini meal that it grew quite pleasant, and only acted up when I was in the foulest of moods, when it could smell my dissatisfaction.

\*\*\*

The stink of the fridge beast had attracted friends, beginning with the siren in the bathtub. She had a voice as slippery as butter and the claws of a feral cat. Both would sink into my skin the first time I bathed in the El Barrio apartment.

When I turned on the tap and watched the water fill the claw foot, I was none-the-wiser. It was only once I'd slid into the steam that she made herself known. Bared to her raw powers, I put up even less of a fight than I had with the fridge beast. She whispered in my ear, with her hand clutching my jaw, that I should stay awhile. I spent the night in the water with her teeth at my throat, afraid to close my eyes lest I slip under the surface and get stuck with her permanently. Only once she drifted off did I scamper out, skin pruned and wrinkled. I dripped water all over the bathroom in my hurry to run to safety, left behind a lake on the floor and my towel on the rack. I lay naked on the couch, utterly soaking wet, and air-dried as I listened to her muffled screams of frustration. For the next week, I cleaned myself in the sink with dish soap, running a wet washcloth over my grimy skin.

I was growing slow and soft and the El Barrio apartment was growing smaller and smaller as it crowded with devils. The siren's screams drew more monsters, all of who took up residence with villainous delight. The fiend in the sink is only the most recent. He followed the toaster mites, who often told me, in their little singsong voices, to stick my head in along with the pizza bagels. I'd called an exterminator to rid myself of them, but when he came for his overpriced inspection, the fat exterminator man had only told me I had cockroaches the size of rats and rats the size of dogs. Unhelpful, as this was information I was well aware of. He trundled off in his exterminator suit, leaving me to my host of pests.

\*\*\*

One day in July, when the air was hot and sticky with the breath of the heaving city, as I was letting my bi-weekly dose of bloodied spit to the demon, I heard a rap-tap knock at the door. In unison, the demon and I raised our heads. Who would come to see us at this time of day?

There was a man at the door, a man with a book.

The book.

“Pardon me, do you have a moment of time to talk about our—”

I insisted he come in at once. He looked surprised by this, as if he often had doors slammed in his face. Unfortunately for him, I wasn’t the religious type; but I’d be anything he wanted if he exorcised the monsters.

The confusion spread on his face when I led him to the bathroom, growing further when I asked him to look down the eerie depths of the drain. Where he expected a cup of tea, he received a bottle of Drain-o. I didn’t have the heart to tell him the teapot was housing a particularly malicious genie.

“I don’t see anything, but you know I’m not really a plumber...”

But couldn’t he see the demon? Couldn’t he hear the voice? Were those not his red eyes peering from the rim?

His face wrinkled with concern. “Perhaps you should pray...?”

He extended the book out to me with trembling hands and flinched away when I moved too fast to take it. I expected to feel heat, to shudder with the weight of power as it entered my grasp. I did not.

How did one go about talking to the Almighty? Was He like anyone else? Did He like compliments? Was he more susceptible to granting wishes if one praised his son?

“His power and love are all-encompassing... He hears and sees all.”

Yes, but could God Roto-Rooter the evil out of my sink? Important questions. I pushed the book back into his hands and politely, though perhaps aggressively, asked him to read a bit if he wouldn’t mind.

The man was sweating profusely, with thick beads of perspiration trickling down the sides of his face. His hairline was soaked, as was the collar of his shirt. When he palmed at the wispy thin pages, he left little finger-shaped grease stains behind. With great interest, I watched as a single bead rolled off his chin and down into the sink.

The pipes hissed and squealed with the fierceness of the demon’s displeasure. His vampiric palette had no patience for anything but blood.

“You can—uh, keep it!”

The man was sprinting out the door before I could

catch him. The book flopped to the floor, pages waving goodbye as their cowardly master turned tail and ran. He was lucky; the demon didn't want him.

A passage was highlighted in the book in sloppy yellow strips. I traced my finger along the sentences, felt the graininess of the paper. The Book of Job.

...so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. When I lie down I say, 'When shall I arise?' But the night is long, and I am full of tossing till the dawn. My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out afresh...

Get a load of this, I told the demon. The pages were easy to tear out, even easier to shove down the drain. He swallowed them up with gnashing teeth, angry, hungry. I stuffed and stuffed until his gaping jaw could unhinge no further, and he sat with a mouthful of the good book. Swallow that.

Deflower

Brunetti

She's selling her virginity for a million dollars—or trying to. That's what she says anyway. She's gotten herself hired at an infamous Reno whorehouse, the Wild Cat Cathouse, so it's all legal, thank God, I guess. Her name is Flower and she's looking to get deflowered. But before she gets deflowered she needs to meet the right man. He needs to be the type of man that has a nice thick wad permanently in his wallet and a money clip to boot. He needs to carry diamonds and rubies and other precious gems that he's ready to pop in his mouth—or her mouth—like a tic-tac. And he needs to have someone on staff that'll wait outside the bathroom door and rush in when the shitting's done and pick through the brown lumps with a thin metal rod to recover the expelled gems. Then scrub them in a proper cleansing solution and put them back in the velvet pouch for the next proposition.

But Flower. Flower is there, at the Cathouse, on staff, but how long will she be on staff if she doesn't give it up, i.e., her virginity? Well of course she wants a million bucks, and the gems, but she may be forced to take the highest bidder instead if weeks and weeks go by. Hopefully, and thankfully, there are enough vulgar, crass and venturesome millionaires (and billionaires) in the good old U S of A, not to mention the wicked world at large, to meet such astronomical bidding.

\*

“Flower,” I say. I enter her humble alcove. It's set up with a daybed, a small round table and two cushioned chairs, all cooed behind mosquito netting. It's here she meets her men, interviews them, finds out their bid, and then dismisses them back into the sludge of the world.

“I never wanted to fall in love with you Flower,” I say.

“STOP,” she says, holding up her hand, flat palm facing me. “No L-word here,” she affirms. “Ever. Let's talk mullah.”

Ah, mullah.

I talk mullah. I show her my bank statement. I've got 18-thousand dollars in my savings account, six in my checking. I've got four credit cards with 12 or 15K limits and my credit score is in the high 700s. I could probably get close to 100 thousand—as a bid—but I don't have a fat wad in my wallet, at present, and I don't have gems.

“There was a gem once,” I say. “It belonged to my

Eastern European grandmother. I never got the country name straight. A place that was—and then wasn't. Yugoslavia maybe..."

"STOP," Flower says. Once again she gives me the stop-sign hand signal. Turns out I talk too much even though most people agree I never say a word. Then Flower displays that she has a heart—or she's not really ruthless. Just greedy.

"You've misunderstood this process," she says. "I'm not interested in men that must cause personal financial ruin to themselves to sleep with me. That's no fun. Then they won't have anything left if I decide on a second fuck. Or, God forbid, a third one, *hehe*. You're just an average man with an average bank account. I'm after millions—billions even."

"I see," I say.

And I do see. And I do understand. But that's not the point. The point is that Flower and I are after different things. I'm not really interested in her virginity *per se*. I'm interested in my own self-destruction and financial ruin. I thought it'd be fun to go out this way, a firefly burning brightly—then abruptly snuffed out. And then...darkness. A Still-life darkness...

\*

Overall Flower doesn't despise me but she doesn't respect me either. It's because she realizes I don't respect myself. That for all my high and mighty, I'm low and weakly. And I've decided to satirize her virginity giving (and/or taking) but it can't be satirized properly. Or at least I'm not the man to satirize it.

"It's okay Jones," Flower says. She calls me Jones but my name's Stellino or Lino for short. Anyway I let her call me Jones. And I can call her Deflower. I know I shouldn't—I know it's a rotten joke. But I can't help myself!

\*

I leave the Wild Cat Cathouse. I'm dressed in rags and tatters as the security staff—bouncers, really, beat me to a pulp and rip and tear my clothing. I didn't take kindly to Flower's insults. I'm not exactly sure what the insult was—but I didn't take kindly to it. I started tearing down the mosquito netting draping her alcove. I yanked it at the seams until the fasteners broke, the sheer material shredded. Then I slapped Flower's face hard. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," I said. "Selling *that*."

Just then security arrived and tackled me. They busted my head open. They knocked out four teeth. They

fractured a rib or two and mashed in my nose with heavy fists.

Eventually they escorted me to the door. I had one arm draped over each hulk. My feet barely scraped the ground. They deposited me in the parking lot like a lump of shit. I called to them—as they abandoned me there—and asked if I could work for Flower. If I could work for her man even...the one that'd feed her gems.

“I’ll do it!” I screamed. “I’ll pick through her turds with a fine-tooth comb!”

HAHAHA! The brutes laughed. I lay there aching in the sun for a while. Then I stood up and brushed off my torn shirt and pants. I got into my rented Chevy Spark and headed for the nearest emergency room.

## Eyes Open

Williams

I was ten years old when I had my first kiss. In early December I was at Brianna Reed's house to decorate the 4-H float for the Christmas Lights Parade. 4-H was a huge deal in Harrisburg and almost everyone in my class was part of it. The logo, a massive four-leaf clover inscribed with 4-H in huge white letters, was the beacon of the future for the agricultural industry in our area. Kids put on their cleanest jeans and their grass-green polo shirts with the famous logo and paraded around the fairgrounds on the outskirts of town. During the county-fair on the last week of July, showing livestock in the barns or horticultural prizes in the exhibit hall was an honor and a privilege. The fair was the big event of the year. During my 4-H years I showed rabbits, carrots, sunflowers and zinnias. Most of the kids in my chapter showed cattle, sheep and pigs but I wasn't into showing livestock. Instead, I stuck to the smaller events and enjoyed the camaraderie anyway. There were monthly meetings year round where each chapter met to discuss what we could do, as youth, to make improvements in our community. That December all of the kids were excited to go to the Reeds house for the meeting because it was built into the side of a hill, something we didn't often see. I'm sure there was a time when sod-roofed houses were commonplace, but the few "underground" houses in the Harrisburg area stirred quite a bit of excitement among kids. If you were agile enough you could jump up on the roof from the back side of the house and hang out up top with the goats.

That night we were supposed to be decorating our chapter's float for the holiday lights parade. The adults were inside the red tin barn, huddled around space heaters and unwinding strings of lights. We were running around outside, chasing goats and playing hide and go seek as the sun dipped behind the trees.

I thought Kaleb Ward was cute. That wasn't a secret. I had told most everyone I knew, including my best friend, Caitlin. Every other girl my age had their eye on a certain boy, so I picked Kaleb for myself, just to go along with the trend. He was the real kind of cowboy that wore Wranglers and dirty boots to school. He was a horrible student but charmed the teachers with his slow talking and crystal blue eyes.

We were playing tag in the dark. The other kids had taken off running around the side of the barn underneath the

security lights when I saw Kaleb's form waving at me from the side of the house. When I ran up on him, he grabbed my hand and led me behind the house, to where the roof almost touched the ground. I could barely see the outline of his face in the dark, but I could feel my breath bursting from between my lips in warm, moist puffs that dissipated in the cold night air. We stood close to each other, close enough that the arms of our coats brushed against each other.

"Hey, you should kiss me," he said.

I didn't hesitate. I leaned in, eyes open, and pecked him on the lips. The sensation was soft, but there weren't any flips in my stomach like the ones I'd read about in books.

Kaleb pushed me back on my heels.

"No," he said. "You should kiss me like they do in the movies."

I tried again. I closed my eyes. I pressed my lips to his and didn't pull away. Then, I felt something warm and slimy shove between my lips and lap at my front teeth.

Thoroughly grossed out, I clawed at Kaleb's shoulders and tried to shove him away but he had me locked into the embrace.

After he finally let me go I wiped the back of my hand back and forth across my mouth. I tried to rid myself of the slime that had been deposited all over my skin.

"What!" he exclaimed. "That's how you're supposed to do it!"

---

I was fifteen years old when I had my second kiss.

I was shy and made of two gangly legs, two matching arms and a torso that was too short and teeth that were too big for my mouth. I had bruises on my knees and elbows from summer volleyball practices and I had taken up bleaching highlights into my hair and sporting big hoop earrings. My body hummed with an awkwardness that is so often found in young teenagers. I tried to fit in where I could, but I was the proverbial square peg unable to squeeze into the round hole.

For that kiss, I was parked in a pick-up truck with a boy, but again my eyes were open. His name was Kyle and he was seventeen, a junior in high school while I was a freshman. I'm not entirely sure why my parents let me go out with him.

The date happened by accident. We ran in the same circle of friends at school, but we'd never really talked that much. I tended to hang out with the girls, but all the girls wanted to do was talk about the boys and try to get asked out. When it happened for me, I was in the midst of our gang of friends at a fall football game. I bumped into Kyle when I ducked to avoid a flying Coke can. He grabbed my shoulders to steady me, then leaned in close to my ear and mumbled something that sounded like "Do you wanna, like, go out sometime?"

I agreed, maybe a little too quickly. My parents didn't seem to mind that I had said yes to going on a date with an older boy. They must've been happy that I was expressing interest in romance of any kind outside a book. A week later Kyle and I were side-by-side in the single-cab of a Chevy S10 pickup truck driving aimlessly around the back roads between Harrisburg and neighboring Carrier Mills. We were supposed to be at the movies. Instead, Kyle drove in continuous loops blasting a mixed CD of old country songs over the speakers. The desolate gravel road rolled out in front of the headlights like paint on a black canvas.

Kyle was reclined in the driver's seat, in what I would have called gangster-style, with his left arm supporting his body weight against the door while his right hand loosely held the wheel. Even though it was the end of September, the windows were both open; muggy, warm air poured in. My hair whipped around in the wind and a chill crept up the hem of my long-sleeved black cotton v-neck shirt. We had been driving around for more than two hours, making stops to grab sodas and talk to friends in the parking lot of the strip mall called Parker Plaza. I was more comfortable while the truck was in motion, with the loud music and the sound of the gravel dinging against the fenders because I didn't have to make conversation when there was no space for me to speak.

Perched in the passenger seat I tried to tell myself that I was attracted to Kyle, but he was not cute. He was tall, thin, and his eyes were a little too close together, which made his face look like a sharp triangle. He sported a scraggly beginner's mustache that hung out under his large, pointy nose. The musky cologne he had chosen to wear would've been nice except that he'd layered it on far too many times, and the scent wafted off of him like a fog. To his credit, the plaid shirt that might've been picked out by his mom was a warm shade

of burnt orange, flattering on his skinny body. His boots were muddy and there were fashionable holes in the knees of his jeans. I saw him wear those jeans every weekend even though his buddies had deemed them “fag jeans.” Maybe we had something in common. Kyle wasn’t quite one of the guys just like I didn’t fit in with the boy-crazy girls.

He reached over and pulled my hand from between my knees and onto the console and intertwined our fingers. My palm instantly coated in sweat and my stomach swooped low in my torso. I wondered if it was the butterflies that I had heard everyone talking about. The ones I had read about for years. I had held hands with boys before, just a few times, and it felt that way each time, like I was spooked or like I was swinging upside down on the monkey bars. I tried not to mind the uncomfortable position my hand was in; he had a hold of my fingers and had bent my wrist so it was in an almost-palsy position. I’d seen so many girls from school pull up in trucks with their boyfriends to talk at the Plaza and they had been holding hands the same way.

I looked out the window and counted the shadows of the trees as they passed by.

Thirteen. Sixteen. Twenty-one.

My stomach didn’t settle like I thought it would. I didn’t regain the comfort I had felt in the silence. Instead I was seized by a panic when Kyle slowed the truck at the bottom of a hill. He pulled to a stop beside the railroad tracks, underneath the yellow security light. We hadn’t spoken five words to each other since we’d gotten back in the truck with our Cokes. My arm was falling asleep.

Kyle shut the engine off and turned to look at me.

I pursed my lips into a smile and it probably looked like I was batting my eyelashes, but I was really trying to figure out where to hold my gaze under the yellow light.

“You okay?” he asked.

I nodded my head and smiled bigger, showing my teeth, and laughed. I gripped the hem of my shirt with my right hand.

Kyle was respectful of my hesitancy and when he leaned in close, he hovered around the vicinity of my nose, his baby mustache tickling my top lip.

I couldn’t remember what it was like to kiss — if I had even known.

He leaned forward.

I tried to close my eyes but it was like my eyelashes were glued to the lids of my eyes. I could hear the blood pounding deep along my ear drums.

Kyle pressed his wet lips heavily onto mine, but he must have been used to something different because it got very sloppy very fast. Slimy, slippery spit kept coming out from between his lips and slathering onto mine. There was no magical moment. No tingles down my spine. No desire was shooting anywhere.

Instead of focusing on how he was sticking his entire tongue down my throat, I tried to pay attention to the way his hands fumbled down my sides. I felt like it would've been way better if he had just touched me instead of assaulting my mouth with his spittle and thick tongue. I couldn't even figure out what to do with own my lips. I was exhausted with embarrassment by the time he pulled away, his face a blotchy red and his eyes glazed with lust. His right hand brushed over my left breast, over the smallness of my bra cup. I didn't mind that part.

But when he leaned back in for another kiss, I leaned away and said that I should be getting home for my curfew.

The lie came out of my mouth as smooth as butter. Kyle didn't know that I didn't have a curfew and I didn't want him to. I wanted the safety of my bedroom where I could release my thoughts onto the pages of my diary.

---

I spent many years of my youth in southern Illinois trying to become the poster child for young Christian femininity. Taking cues from teenagers that had come before me, I structured my life in a similar way. I knew all the classic church hymns by heart and helped my grandmother make desserts for the Red Hat ladies' luncheon. I went so far as to make an old fashioned hope chest for which I practiced my needlepoint and cross-stitch on tea towels. I could name all the books of the Bible, in order, and could recount all the main happenings of the Old Testament and most of the new one. One of the instances when I found myself sidestepping — I realized that I really enjoyed the story of Sodom and Gomorrah — I promptly confessed in prayer and tried to memorizing psalms

additional psalms. I enjoyed the adoration I received from the church elders. The attention solidified the path for me.

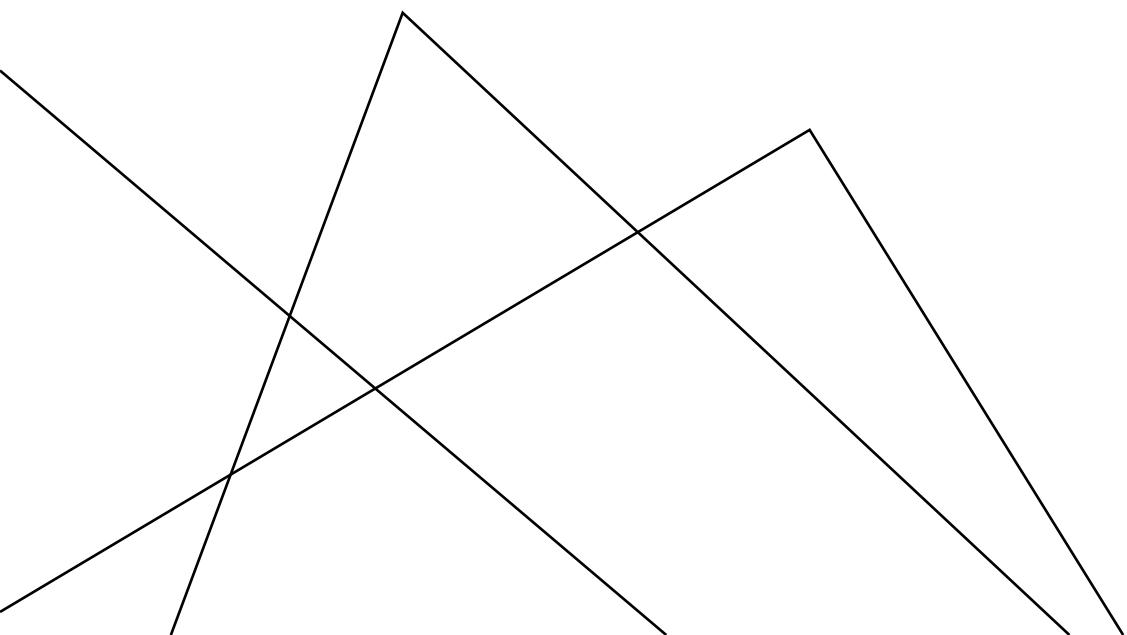
When I was halfway through my sophomore year of high school I fell in love Kathleen Campbell, the catcher of my softball team. It was completely unexpected and absolutely unrealized by me, well after being kissed by Kyle. I had no understanding that I was feeling romantic love — or lust for that matter. I knew I wanted to be around her, all of the time. Kathleen was short, stocky and had the most beautiful brown curly hair and brown eyes I had ever seen. She was a year older than me in school but acted like she was well into her twenties. Kathleen had a cocky, sarcastic attitude that I found altogether unattainable. I desperately wanted to be included in her circle of friends so I forced myself to ask Kathleen for a ride to the softball field for our team's first practice.

Kathleen let me ride with her but I couldn't come up with anything to say to her. During practice I realized that she could throw the ball hard enough to break my hand. I played first base and when I threw the ball back to her at home plate, the ball smacked against her glove just as hard and she pulled her mask off and looked at me, surprised. Then I realized I could hold my own against her. After the next practice I lied about my parents being out of town so I could go home with her for supper. My parents never went out of town.

Two months later she kissed me in the middle of the night during a sleepover. We had just climbed into her bed — and oversized Queen bed that was a hand-me-down from her parents. Kathleen sat up on her knees in the middle of the bed and pulled the string on the ceiling fan and we were instantly immersed in darkness. The hum of the blades continued to play as I felt her body slide under the down-feather comforter. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness she rolled towards me — I caught a flicker of light in her eyes. The tips of her fingers traced over my cheek before her lips fluttered over mine. I pressed in. She smelled like M&Ms and toothpaste and when her tongue touched my bottom lip my stomach had bottomed out — the feeling was similar to swinging upside down on the monkey bars. My eyes instinctively snapped shut at the sensation. She tasted like the coolness of a glass of ice water.

The next morning we went to her church that was just down the street. Her father, Dale, was the music minister and we sat in the front row before God and everyone else like

nothing had happened between us. During the service she turned and looked at me and smiled. Then she winked and touched the side of my hand that was resting on the pew with her pinky finger. I had never been to her church before, but I knew right then that I wanted to go back every Sunday.



## Green Card

Obuchowski

We barely watch anything on live television anymore. But for a show like this, it's the only way. You don't want to have the ending spoiled when you go on Twitter. You don't want it to be ruined when the loudmouth in the cubicle next to yours tells you all about it even though you never asked him in the first place. Plus, it's not just watching – it's the voting. It's fun. You get to be part of the show; you get to have some kind of impact on the outcome, you know?

We make a whole evening of it, we really do. And that's a good thing, because Nicole and I have not been getting along lately. Frankly, I don't think we'll make it more than a couple months from now unless something really changes. But this is the one thing we still enjoy together. We get into our pajamas, make cocktails, and order in. I get soft tacos because I'm rooting for Jorge, and he's from Mexico. Nicole orders chicken korma because she's hoping Safiya wins. I tease her, of course, because chicken korma is Indian food, and Safiya is from Afghanistan.

"Close enough," she tells me.

"Tell Safiya that," I tease, but it's all in good fun.

"Hey," she says, and gives me a look.

I have to be careful. She's really been in a mood these last couple months.

The show starts at 8:00PM. By 7:55, we're on the couch with our trays of food and an ice bucket. On my sidetable, I've got a small pitcher brimming with margaritas. Nicole's glass pitcher looks to be filled with water, but don't be fooled – that's gin and tonic.

By 7:58PM, the news is finally over. "From all of us on the desk, we bid you the best," the anchor says, and then he nods self-importantly as the camera slowly zooms out. The picture gives way to a commercial for an updated line of GMC pickup trucks, which flows seamlessly into a Budweiser commercial, which then cuts to a minute-long preview of a movie about American soldiers in Yemen trying to escape ISIS captors. I almost crack a joke about how Nicole probably thinks Safiya is from Yemen, but then I decide against it. Last thing we need is another fight.

At 8:00, the screen goes black and the theme song begins with an energetic snare drum lick, which cues the guitar and bass and organ. It's a mostly instrumental version of a

Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers song, but I can't remember the name of it. Great song, though. Old, but really catchy. The opening sequence features vividly colorful shots of iconic American landmarks that all start blurry then come into sharp focus: the Empire State Building, the Lincoln Memorial, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Sears Tower, some farm in God-knows-where, maybe Nebraska or Missouri, the Rocky Mountains, a river (the Mississippi? What else would it be?), Bourbon Street, Pike Place Market, and then finally the Statue of Liberty. When Lady Liberty's green face fills the screen, you hear Petty's voice cry out, "Ya don't / have / to live like a refugee!" and then his backing band answers back in a rock-and-roll chorus, "Don't have to live like a refugee," stretching the last syllable out like it's a long-A. *Refujaaaaay*. The title comes up in big, blocky, all-caps letters:

## GREEN CARD

Nicole picks up her gin and tonic, and I raise my margarita glass. We clink them together, though I notice she avoids making eye contact with me. I almost ask her what her problem is, but I've been looking forward to *Green Card* all week, and I really don't want to get into a whole *thing*. We both take big sips of our cocktails. She digs into her korma, and I tuck into a soft taco—carnitas I think, maybe asada. They all taste pretty much the same to me. I just order six and tell them to make some with beef, some with pork, some with chicken. They also have beef tongue, but I can't stand the thought of eating a tongue. They have tripe, but give me a break. Tripe in a taco? Pass. And they have shrimp, too. But, sorry, I'm not trying to get food poisoning by eating seafood from some little Mexican joint that took over the closed-up Sunoco.

"Last week, on *Green Card*," the narrator intones gravely over black-and-white clips from the previous episode, "the RAMs had to work a minimum of one hundred hours in six days, earning at least three hundred dollars for their families. They also had to complete a seven-mile race through the woods while being pursued by our NICE Agents." RAM is an acronym. Stands for Refugees, Aliens, and Migrants. A catchy way of saying illegal aliens, or undocumented people or whatever. NICE is also an acronym. Stands for Not-ICE, because the actual ICE hasn't participated in the show since

the second season, when there was a big uproar on social media and the government caved in to the backlash and stopped supplying ICE agents. It was a whole thing. Everyone loves getting worked up. Activism. It's a trend, you know? Like those ugly shoes, whatever they're called. Nicole must have three or four pairs of them.

“Abshir worked a respectable one hundred seven hours,” the narrator continues to recap, “and he came in fourth place out of six in the race, managing to evade NICE Agents. But viewers voted, and we heard their voices loud and clear. Abshir, once a driver for a popular ridesharing service and a busboy at a popular Minneapolis restaurant, was turned over to the *real* ICE where he, along with his family will be detained, processed, and returned to his country of origin: Somalia.”

“About time. He should have been gone weeks ago,” Nicole says.

“Wow, you *hate* Abshir!” I say. I’m just trying to be playful.

“No I don’t!” she snaps back, sounding wounded. “I just think the other RAMs worked harder. Plus Abshir’s wife and daughters wore those full-on *hob-jeeb* things.”

“Burqas, you mean?”

“Whatever they’re called. They’re weird. And, for the record, I think they’re sexist.”

“Somalis?”

“No, *hob-jebs*! Don’t make it out like I have something against Somalians!”

“Okay, okay,” I tell her, holding my hands up like she’s a cop. I told you, she gets very intense about this show. She’s just sensitive in general. Really defensive. It’s exhausting. “I was just—”

“Can you *not* talk over the show? We wait all week, and all you do is—”

“*You’re* the one who’s talking!” I swear, she always does this. She does something, and then she yells at me for being the one who did it. It drives me fucking nuts.

Nicole just glares at me. I dig into another taco—this one is chicken, I’m almost positive it’s chicken—and wash it down with a big mouthful of margarita. She’s pissing me off, but the margarita is making me pretty happy. I have a great recipe where I use Sprite to sweeten it.

“Five RAMs remain,” the narrator continues, but

now there's all this dramatic music going in the background. "Who will get their," the tense music builds to a crescendo, and then right as it cuts, the narrator says, "GREEN CARD."

I get goosebumps every time. Really. What a great show, I mean it. I just wish Nicole could relax a little and enjoy it instead of getting all worked up about everything I say. If I had to be really honest about it, I've been having this fantasy lately where she tells me she's leaving. I've got half a mind to just break up with her myself, but I really don't want to deal with all the screaming and yelling and fighting and tears. I can't stand that stuff, I really can't.

I open the *Green Card* app on my phone, and Nicole does the same. "Who're you voting for?" I ask. We sniped at each other for the last forty-five minutes. Or, rather, she sniped at me, and that eventually got on my nerves, so I asked her to, *Jesus Christ, give it a rest please*, and that hurt her feelings. But now I'm asking her who she voted for not because I really care (though, I kind of do), but because it's a little joke. We have this rule where we don't tell each other who we're going to vote off the show. So, I always like to ask her in a kind of teasing, playful way. But, tonight, she's not having it. She just looks at me, rolls her eyes, then exhales all loudly and turns her attention back to her phone. Maybe she even says something under her breath, I don't know.

"Jesus Christ, Nic, I'm sorry."

"Mmmmm," she says, not looking up.

"I am," I say, and it comes out more combative than I want it to.

"Didn't say you weren't," she mutters.

"You know what?" I ask, and for an instant, there's some small part of me that tries to get the rest of me to just shut up because I'm only going to make it worse, but it's too late, and I say, "I'm not sorry. You're the one acting like such a—"

She turns to me, and cuts me off with a glare. There's silence for a second, and then she goes, "Say it. Say what you were going to say. Such a *what?* Say it."

"Never mind."

"Such a *bitch*. That's what you were going to say," she says, narrowing her eyes. God, you can really tell how much she despises me just by how she looks at me.

"*You* said you were a *bitch*. I didn't."

“That’s what you were going to say.”

“Let it go,” I tell her. “Just let it go, okay? Please?

Show’s gonna be back on in two minutes, and I’d really rather not be fighting when they say who’s getting deported.”

“Sure,” she says in some awful parody of congeniality.

“Fine, *honey*.”

“Thank you,” I say, not taking the bait. I look down at my phone and put in my vote. The guy from Vietnam. He did fine on all the challenges this week, including the one where everyone had to do each other’s jobs—like Jorge had to program software and Safiya had to change oil and flush transmissions; it was a riot—but I can’t stand how the Vietnamese guy talks about opening up a restaurant. It’s like, come on, man, you can barely speak English, and you want to own your own business? You just think you’re going to get a green card and then open some restaurant, and we’re all going to give you money to cook for us? I don’t think so, pal.

Mercifully, the commercial break ends.

“This only gets harder every week. All of you RAMs have shown how hard you will work to stay in this country,” the host says. He’s some guy who used to play the rich, vaguely evil father on some teen soap opera a million years ago, but who, through the magic of surgery and Botox, now looks like he’s wearing a plastic mask of his own face from when he was 30. He’s standing in front of a screen that displays an American flag billowing and blowing in slow motion. It undulates so profusely, it’s damn-near erotic. That’s a weird thing to say, I know, but Nicole and I haven’t had sex in months, so it’s pretty much all I think about these days.

“But as you know,” the host continues, “one of you must go home. Every one of you RAMs knew you were entering this country illegally. And you were all well aware that you were living and working in this country illegally. You also knew that when you agreed to be on this show, only one of you would be given the coveted green card.”

Same speech every week. They just do it to build suspense.

“Those watching from home have logged on, have cast their votes. And as you know, it is they, our viewers, who get to make the ultimate decision as to who stays, and who goes. So, without further ado, the RAM who will be leaving us today is,” and here the camera cuts to a closeup of all the RAMs’ worried faces, occasionally cutting back to a close up

of the host's artificial, ageless, expressionless face until, finally, it cuts to a wide shot of all the RAMs, and then switches to a dramatic zoom-in on the host, who nods then says, "Jorge, you're going back to Mexico."

"No way!" I say in disbelief. "Jorge? Shit."

I can't believe they're deporting Jorge. He worked all over the Phoenix area doing drywall and spoke really good English. He was my favorite by far.

The camera zooms slowly into Jorge's face. He's making a valiant effort not to cry, but you can see it's not going to be a successful one. Anyway, it makes good television for the RAMs to cry, so the host is only too happy to help by offering insincere condolences to make them even more emotional. "Sorry, Jorge," he says. "You're going back to Mexico. I'm so sorry. This is the greatest nation in the world, and we all understand why you would want to stay, but you can't. I'm sorry. It's a price you pay for entering the country illegally," he almost whispers. "But I'm sorry. And I hope you and your family will be safe back in Mexico. I hope you can find prosperity in your homeland, though I know it won't compare to what would have been so readily available here in these United States."

This is where Jorge's quivering mouth opens and he squeezes his eyes shut against the tears, which have now already started to flow, and he turns his face up to the sky (or, more accurately, the ceiling of the studio) and bawls.

"That sucks," I say. And for a minute, I actually really do feel bad for the guy. He seemed decent enough, and he looks really upset and worried about being deported. "That really, really sucks," I say. I can be kind of a sucker when it comes to shows and movies and things like that.

"Oh well," Nicole says like she's happy about Jorge. "Safiya's still safe." She sounds like she's bragging a little, and not in a playful way.

"Can't believe what's-his-face, the Vietnamese guy, didn't go. That's who I nominated."

Nicole shrugs and takes a sip of her gin and tonic.

"So who did you vote for?"

"Not telling."

"Why? The episode's over."

"Because. That's why."

I look at her half in disbelief that she's being so stubborn, and half like I'm just really irritated with her, which I am. And then it dawns on me. "You voted for Jorge," I say.

“I’m not telling.”

“You *knew* that’s who I was rooting for, and you voted against him.”

“I didn’t say I voted for him,” she smirks. “You did.” She’s mocking me now.

“That’s so petty, Nicole.”

“Whatever, Brian,” she says like she hates me. “It’s just a show.”

I can feel my forehead getting hot, very hot. I’m getting so mad, I am literally starting to sweat. I have a terrible poker face that way.

“Next time, I’m voting for Safiya,” I say. “I don’t even care!”

“Fine!” she almost yells. “I don’t care, either!” Nicole gets up and storms into the bedroom.

I just sit here on the couch, thinking how much of a vindictive brat she is for voting against my guy like that. And I really meant what I said: I *am* going to vote for Safiya next week. I mean, it probably won’t make a difference—I’m just one person out of about ten million voters. Just like it probably didn’t matter that Nicole voted for Jorge. But it’s the *principle* of it. See how she likes it. *Pack your bags, Safiya, ‘cause if I have any say in the matter—aand technically, I do—you’re gonna be on the next plane to Riyadh or wherever.*

I pour another margarita. Might as well. God knows I’m not going into the bedroom anytime soon.

I flip around to other channels. Three people screaming at each other on the news. A commercial with some guy talking about how he injects himself three times a day with a chemical that helps him not want to smoke two packs a day. Some show where two brothers dig through people’s kitchen trash looking for things they can fix up and sell in their shop. I turn off the television.

There’s nothing on.

There never is.

A billion channels and streaming platforms, and not a thing to watch.

Everything these days is just so goddamned *mindless*.

## Growing up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan

Rickki

Family is full of secrets,  
the way the body lies,  
bored, in the cemetery, the pond  
listening to the loons near the track  
that slept across from it.  
I'd stare at distant graves, the snowdrops  
pretending to own gentleness,  
but I know that January  
in the U.P. has phantoms in its drifts,  
my father telling me there are voracious  
ghosts in the blizzards' bone.

I stand in the window, under the eaves  
and listen to the cold shrill  
wind insisting that it will own  
this region for months, my thin  
body taking in the luxury  
of heat, the sound of logs breaking,  
exploding, terrorizing the silence

with a heavy caravan  
of crackling, and our road  
unplowed, the nearby Wagon  
Wheel Bar's counter newly lacquered  
when its front yard caved in, the flowers  
swallowed by earth, the anger of the mines and  
the unemployed so that the earth was calling  
for us to join it early, it wanting something.  
We'd look for the bodies later,  
but there was nothing to find.

## How to Measure Time

Wilson

I.

I measure my existence in cigarettes  
the tangible cylinder between fingers  
that are a constant reminder of  
the fact that I could only ever stretch  
one octave and three keys in my pianist days  
and friends who never played a day  
could stretch two full octaves

What's My Age Again plays on my iPhone  
becomes a portal to New Year's Eve  
when I was sixteen years old and  
couldn't wait to be twenty-three  
There was a boy—  
my sister's friend from high school  
he was nineteen and  
smoking a cigarette on the porch

I had just started that year  
he asked me my age outside  
I grabbed the cigarette, dangling  
from my lips as I spoke  
as if I were an adult in that moment  
still very much sixteen  
however old you want me to be

When he kissed me—like an adult  
My first real kiss  
something involving his tongue  
I was suddenly drowning  
in the tsunami I created  
by longing to be twenty-three

His fingers were white caps  
pinning me to the wall when  
he tried to tear my shirt off  
saying that I had been a tease  
all night and I better give  
him what he deserved

A single song lasted a lifetime

of seconds and missed chances  
to get away—if only  
I had been larger, or stronger  
Then it ended and there was a drought  
in the middle of the storm  
releasing me, lightheaded and salty  
to return to the party  
officially entered into adulthood and how it felt—  
the weight of what it meant to be a woman

## II.

Time is death and those sweet  
few seconds in between, when  
you feel like infinity and forget to  
think of the future because nothing  
more matters than that moment

Like when I was eighteen and  
he had no ring, but proposed anyways  
and it was as if all the air in the world  
had been removed and I became trapped  
inside a vacuum of nothing but dust  
and stale remnants of what  
people never wanted—

He is the part I never wanted  
tells me he has nothing else  
to live for and one day he will  
just drive into oncoming traffic  
terrified, I tell no one

Bullet speed cannot be explained  
until the day the phone call comes  
from an old friend, so hysterical  
I can't tell if she is laughing or crying  
saying that his car swerved into  
a mother and child, unharmed and  
the world is somehow virtual and  
nonexistent like its constructed  
from pixels which have now separated  
creating an oblivion for him to remain in

Now every moment is spent wondering  
about parallel universes where he must  
still exist, some plain between  
life and death that I must be able to access  
even just a single moment to caress  
the crooked frame of his once broken jaw  
allow fingers to be scratched on  
the pins and needles of his ginger stubble  
but no matter how hard I try  
there is always that divide—  
fourth wall keeping me from him

So, I write non-fiction, poetry, broken lines,  
anything to get him off my mind  
title it It's Not Sexy When  
a Man Says He Would Die for You  
and it got published, but the void  
of missed opportunities, unspoken words  
bury themselves under my skin  
keep me away from his grave  
forever unable to say goodbye

### III.

When a homeless man calls us—  
my roommate and I, beautiful  
I smile  
longboard is distorted with the image of  
a woman's face smeared on the bottom  
some sadistic cross between a skull  
and a clown that can stare directly  
into my soul as if it knows my every secret  
even I was unaware I possessed  
some far-off glimpses of seconds from days  
when I was four that were blocked off  
for some reason unbeknownst to me

My roommate threatens to kill him  
I assume it to be nothing more than  
the fact that she is drunk—we are drunk  
So, I throw myself between the two scrappers  
as if I am somehow able to fill the gap

in my mind the face on the longboard knows about  
that I somehow do not  
and slip my tongue into the mouth of a stranger  
breaking the screaming to fractals  
of soundwaves on mute dissolving into the air  
never to be heard again

Two fingers brush—lightly against dry lips  
and I instruct him to go, just go  
a moment just long enough for him to skate away  
and for me to save a life

#### IV.

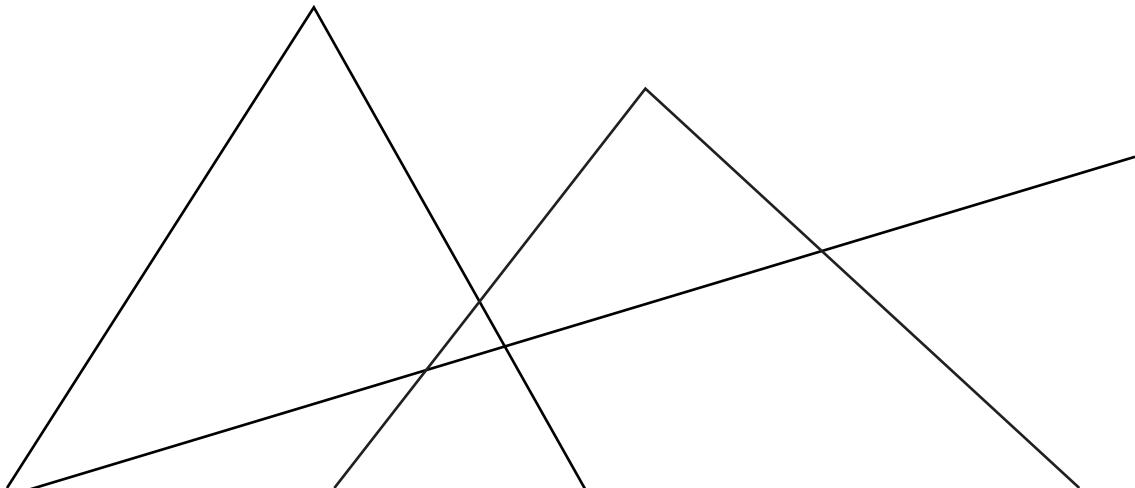
Time is always moving—reminding me just how  
many moments are beyond my control  
places and people I will never get back  
memories become scar tissue on my brain  
so, I can forget the pain this life has caused me

Always forward, never back  
to relive what slipped through  
the strainers  
of my fingers  
each moment a grain of sand  
I have no real claim to  
each moment borrowed from some promise  
of an alternate reality of a better tomorrow  
and somehow, all I can say is—  
I ain't dead yet  
so, I try and enjoy what little I have  
before it dissipates like the rest

## Hummingbird

Damaged cramped  
and crumpled wings  
outstretched and  
reaching towards-  
but I love the pain.  
Maybe if I damage  
myself I'll begin  
to love again.

Walter



Hush

Jimenez

Bruce was very interested in the television shows like *Ghost Hunters* and, later on, *Paranormal State*. When he was around eight or nine years old, these were his favorites. I watched them because they were on, not because they were interesting. An episode could be entertaining, but after half of a season, I figured out that the D-list reality TV stars were simply visiting “haunted” locations and using the night vision function on their camcorders. Ghosts were almost never caught on tape. If they were--if there was real, hard evidence--would it have been kept under wraps long enough for an entire season of a television show to be edited and aired? I think, and I thought then, that these programs were more grounded in fantasy than having a true, scientific approach. I was aware of experimental controls even when I was 12. Dana made sure of it.

As a family, we knew about these shows and their general mission: to find the proof of life on the *other side*. Bruce was the only one who gave them his full attention--borderlining on an obsession. Since he had been playing guitar for a few years by this point, he had a small audio recorder of his very own. It didn't need a cassette tape or a mini tape, the same kind that the answering machines used whenever a dinosaur called. This recorder was rather fancy for the time, it could be plugged into the computer to create an .mp3 file.

Outside of the door to the bathroom on the first floor, our family watches Bruce begin his experiment.

“If you hear a baby, that's just Devin. I'm gonna close the door,” Bruce says for the sake of the recording's integrity. He places his recorder on the bathroom counter.

With the door closed, we all just stood there, waiting. We didn't know what to do. I'm sure we said something to each other over the course of the two minutes of recording, but I truthfully have no memory of it. Dad probably made a comment about how we were nuts and Dana didn't need to let us, the kids, scare ourselves. Maybe she was skeptical, fearing the worst. Whatever we said to each other was forgotten after it was said. We were waiting to check the audio recorder. After about two minutes, Bruce opened the door.

“Alright, I'm back, I'm going to go check now,” Bruce

says after going into the bathroom to turn off the recorder. We go into the library to play the recording on our family desktop.

I remember thinking that this whole experiment was stupid, that Bruce was stupid, and that Dana was even more stupid for encouraging it. But I couldn't ignore my curiosity. What if something was on the recording?

Bruce clicks *play*. Entirely, across each of our faces, is utter disbelief. Devin had been right: there is a man in our bathroom. A man none of us could see. "Mom," Devin mumbles in the background before the door clicks shut. His baby-talk is heard over the first 40 seconds of the recording. It's clear that he is on the other side of the door, it's muffled enough. Whatever he is mumbling, *no, no, ma, mom*, doesn't even sound like it's near the recorder's microphone. At the 40-second mark, a new voice plays from the recording.

"Hush up," is whispered in a gravelly voice, the voice of someone who might have smoked three packs a day. He says this directly into the microphone, as if done so intentionally. As if he knows we are recording him.

It sounds more like a man than anything else. Though the syllables are drawn out, more like *hhhussssshhhhhhhhhh* *uuuuuuupppp*, this transcript wasn't written with a healthy dose of interpretation. As I listened to the audio a moment ago, it still gave me chills. There is enough background noise from Devin, and enough white noise in the recording to rule out anything but an unexplainable energy producing the audio.

I have read about countless examples of paranormal occurrences in the media attention: a woman burns a piece of toast, but the burns look like the Virgin Mary; a Cheeto resembles Jesus Christ on the cross, which must be a sign of sorts; or an orange resembles Christ's open embrace after it's been sliced open, randomly, of course. Of the many examples, some are more compelling than others. At best, the audience sees these coincidences of religious imagery by the power of suggestion. If I wasn't told that the toast resembled Mary--the Virgin--I would probably say that it looks like anyone named Mary, she could be anyone. The char on this particular piece of Wonder bread might look vaguely humanoid, but no one knows what she looked like, so we are collectively basing the acceptance of these "signs" on the imagery that society

has perpetuated of her appearance. If the toast, during its toasting, neglected to showcase Mary's veil, does it mean that the toast and toaster don't know what the Virgin looked like? Some of the slices of toast are rather pretty, is Sharon Tate trying to say hello? How much of these religious coincidences leave room for artistic interpretation? Our recording, on first listen, leaves no room for interpretation.

An audio recorder was placed into an empty room, the door was closed, then the recording plays a voice telling its audience to *hush up*. This remains one of the most important experiences our family has had.

To us, the words "hush up" carry a lot of weight. We don't use the words without also thinking of the recording. We don't say this phrase, generally, unless Bruce and I are trying to freak each other out. It was very freaky, so it still works.

\*\*\*

After the recording, in my father's way of using comedy to make sense of the world around him, he used it as a tool to toughen his children. When Bruce was brushing his teeth in that bathroom, focusing on his oral hygiene, not focusing on the ghost we knew lived in that room, Dad would burst this bubble.

"Hey, make sure you *hush up* in that bathroom!" Dad shouted at him. I always laugh when he does stunts like these; it is funny. Bruce is always less brave than I am, though not by much, and he shows it very easily. Because of this, we scare him often. He runs out of the bathroom, adequately frightened, toothpaste dripping from his mouth.

"Come on guys, *stop*," he begs, our father eventually relents. But I kept teasing him. Not only can I riff on the fact that he has to go back into the haunted bathroom to finish brushing his teeth, but I also pointed out his squeaky voice while trying to get us to stop.

I receive my share of our father's torments, as well. Though I have the tendency to act tough, I'm actually the same consistency as a melted marshmallow. Deep down, I'm a wimp when it comes to the occult.

As an adult, I'm graceful in a crisis. An insane person at the end of an alley at night? I'll walk the other way, with my knife out, and my phone dialing 911. A pervert at the bar continuously tries to get me to leave with him despite my repeated

declination? I can call my partner to come by and pick me up. Hell, I'll even step in if I'm out by myself and see another woman who needs a friendly ally to step in whilst a creep tries too hard to get her attention. These are easy problems with tangible solutions. In these situations, I'm as brave as anyone.

When I lived in that house, I wanted to know:

- How do I tell a ghost to leave my family alone?
- Can he hear me?
- Does he care about my request?

These are the questions I don't know how to answer as an adult or a child.

I am showering in this bathroom, a few days have passed since the recording. I'm not concerned with the ghost. Something else occupies my mind because I don't think about the energy in the room. About halfway through, the lights go out. Suddenly, I am only aware of the energy in the room.

“Fuck, Bruce turn the light on!” I screech, assuming it's him because we are always getting each other back for the last trick one played on the other. I don't know what I've done to him, but I reckon I had it coming. In an instant, I am aware of two things. One, the lights are out in a very dark bathroom. And two, the ghost was in this room. By my logic, and the assurance in my gut, he still is. I can reach the lightswitch from the shower, but I feel like extending my limbs outside of the curtain could get me possessed. For fear of a demon entering my soul, I keep my limbs firmly near my body, my back against the wall. I stay put for what feels like minutes, but is only a few seconds. When Bruce doesn't answer, I know it wasn't his fault. It is certainly the ghost. Or my father.

“Dad, turn on the fricking light,” I howl.

“Oh, hush up in there,” he says in a tone that suggests that he's forgotten all about the ghost we recorded in this bathroom just a few days before. These stunts are meant to be playful, he is just having fun by giving me a scare.

I hate it and it makes me feel like I am constantly on edge.

We don't talk about the recording on a daily basis, not even on a regular basis. But it changes our family, slowly. We know there is something we can't explain in the house, so we start to keep an eye out for it.

\*\*\*

In her training, Dana is a researcher. A legitimate scientist, she looks at unusual situations as a question to answer instead of reading too much into *signs*. She has a book on relationships that is rooted in astrology. It's a surprising spine on the shelf next to her historical biographies and novels about perfumers. I use it to look up the birthdays of any boy I have a crush on all through middle school. If our birthdays match and we are destined for happiness, it makes my week. Her ownership of this book supports the idea that she is a scientist who relies on facts, but also feelings. The audio recording from our bathroom was a perfect combination of both. Without the recording, she has no facts to go on. Without her feelings, she wouldn't have listened to the recording in the first place. This raises more questions than it answers about the other family living in our house, but it gives a good summary of Dana as a person.

A niece of the Hofstetters, I'll call her Nancy, moves in a few houses down from us not long after we make the recording. She is old, perhaps around 65 or so. She moves into the house to get it ready to sell – it still belongs to her family. Dana quickly makes friends with her. We stop by to say *hello* one Saturday morning while she gardens. I am between 14 and 15 years old. Dana wastes no time.

“Could you tell me anything about your family? What were they like?” Dana keeps the question open-ended, I understand, to avoid swaying her response.

“Sure, my aunt was very grumpy, she was always mad at the kids who ran through her yard in the summer. But my uncle would always yell at her to just ‘hush up.’” Nancy says this the same way one might explain the flavor of vanilla ice cream. Or they way one might list the ingredients in a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. These are boring, ordinary facts to her. One *might* even say that she describes her uncle's catch-phrase in much the same way that I will grow up to describe the ghosts in our house. She just explained our recording. Dana and I look at each other in silence as she continues. “My aunt was also very crafty, she was always making something.”

“That's cool, Corrine is very crafty as well. She's just recently gotten into making beaded jewelry, she's pretty good!” Dana says this without missing a beat, she is trying to keep a calm face as she keeps the conversation going. Nancy

is delighted that I have something in common with a woman who lived so long before I did. Especially something as niche as jewelry making.

“Oh, you must let me give you some of her necklaces! She would be glad that they went to someone else who likes beadwork,” Nancy heads into her house to get them. When she comes back outside, she gives me a cardboard necklace box that has two faux-pearl strands in it. They aren’t fancy, but they seem immediately special to me. They belong to someone I lived with everyday but had never met.

“Thanks so much! I’ll put them to good use,” I am elated because found supplies are the most fun. They provide a constraint, forcing me to be more creative. It was like a puzzle created by whoever I ran into. I didn’t think Caroline would mind if I chopped these necklaces and used them for parts.

When I get around to using the beads, I am working on the floor of my bedroom to maintain my poor posture and do the best I can to build a hunchback before 70. I’ve been working for a little while and I take a break to go downstairs. In the few minutes I am away, Caroline passes through my room. She passes through our room.

My jewelry supplies are on the floor near the foot of my bed. Though I’ve channeled my creativity into writing and knitting today, I am still a Jill of all trades throughout my adolescence. I am always given beads and wires from folks who cleaned out their attics or spent too much at the craft store and don’t know what to do with the extra beads. This orphaned set belongs to the woman who used to be the mother of the house. Blinded by the prospect of free supplies, I don’t care that they’re her beads. Caroline flips over one of the boxes of faux-pearls that I have been working with. They are gray and I have chopped up the necklaces to use the beads for new projects. She doesn’t like that I essentially butchered a 1970 ‘Cuda with matching numbers just for parts. I understood her frustration as an adult, but I am petrified when I return to my room.

I get to the top of the stairs and look at my room before entering. Her beads are everywhere. My mind races immediately.

Our hideous carpet is rather lumpy and doesn’t allow for beads to roll very much, yet the beads are spread out all over the floor. It feels deliberate. My parents are not home and

my room has been changed. The ghost has already cleaned up a scarf I was crocheting and now she's dumped her beads all over the floor. Caroline is frustrated that I would destroy her necklaces. Why did I think this was ok? I don't think they were rich, so she probably loved these necklaces. And I ruined them.

\*\*\*

Without knowing how my family found out about the other family in our house, we adopted their names the same way we adopted a pet. Dana must have found the names in an obituary or in an old newspaper or an online database. I don't know how, but she provided the details of the baby's death with enough conviction that I don't remember any of us questioning her.

"She pulled a coffee pot on herself, right there, in the kitchen," Dana paused for her three children to mentally catch up to the reality of what she was saying. Our house had a baby die in it. "Then, her wake was in the library," she was practically giddy with intel. This is a fractured memory. I know she explained this to me and my brothers, but I can't remember exactly when. It must have been after Devin was born, and before I was 15 years old. Later, she would tell this story as often as the situation required.

When I was 19 years old, I enjoyed watching her tell the man I went on to marry about these findings.

"So, you mean to tell me that the baby died right over there," he motioned to the kitchen after Dana explained the spookiest fact about our home. "And they had a funeral in the other room? Seriously? Man, I knew this place felt strange the second I got in here," he was no stranger to the paranormal, but this was a lot to wrap one's head around. Especially when he was still a relatively new boyfriend.

"Yeah, it's pretty crazy, right?" she asked. I was delighted that he was intrigued, not scared. I think she was, too.

Dana was always the record-keeper for our family, I never researched anything about the Hofstetters while I lived there. I didn't need to until I no-longer lived with a human library. She is so smart, but I've grown up to be the know-*almost-it-all* in my own family, so I started researching the Hofstetters myself.

## Katie's Sunflowers

Dodson

Katie says that every morning she puts on her make-up and pantyhose and goes into an office. An office, she says again. And they all look right through her, just another middle-aged woman sitting behind a desk. Can't you understand? she asks me. People used to watch her. They'd pay money to see and hear her.

Her voice falls around me, filling up the truck's cab. It gently brushes against my skin, and I want to relax into the softness of it, wrap her up, and keep her with me. I want to tell her that all I do is watch her, that I see her pulling further and further away from me, turning her back to me in bed, ignoring my eyes when I come home. I want to say that while I may not have always done right, I love her like no one else can. But her soft voice churns out unwieldy words and they fall onto the seat between us, building a choking barrier that I can't even see across.

She says she is sorry, and I think it might be for filling the cab with those chunky words that are pressing against my chest, but really she means she is sorry because she is leaving.

My fingers tap out a forceful drumbeat on the steering wheel where the tread is rubbed smooth. There are huge fields of golden sunflowers off to the right and meadows in front of the hazy mountains on my side. I keep my eyes focused on the pavement, on anything outside the truck.

Katie reaches through the thickness of her words as if they were air and tries to tune in a radio station, twisting the knob left and right while the voices and static warble throughout the truck's cab. She doesn't find anything, so I don't get to hear her sing again. I used to tell Katie that her voice was like the sunrise. It would come up slow, bursting into full daylight that blocked out everything else but the tremble of my heart-beat reverberating.

The sun glides its streamers over the mountains, but the faces of the sunflowers are still down. Katie's face turns down and tears slide onto her jeans.

I thought this life could have been what I needed, she says.

Some mornings I see her standing in front of the mirror in our bathroom tracing the lines on her face. Those creases will follow her to whatever city, whatever life she thinks she wants. They're here, with the new morning sun drawing them out and her tears traveling them. And she knows it; her

fingers start following those lines, trying to wipe them out.

I want to tell her what I have learned from watching the world, how we are growing old, that our time is shifting past us like the fields beside the road. That there are no more crowds to cheer for us and the most we can hope for is one person to wake up to in the morning.

We follow a curve in the road and the sun comes in at my eyes through the gap above the rearview window. Katie turns her head to the other side, leaning against the seat and watching the fields pass by. The mountains in the distance become clearer and a cloudless day is opening. The sunflowers start to lift their heavy heads to greet the sun.

The sunflowers, I say, Katie, the sunflowers.

She stares out the window, keeping her face away from me, the one man who always sees her glittering on stage, a star. She sobs against the glass as hundreds of sunflowers turn their blank faces to watch.

## I Died at 45

Gill

A normal day at the V.A. hospital,  
its Barron cavernous halls scrubbed  
so white they could bleed,  
wide like your son's innocent eyes  
and I sit there surrounded by  
unfamiliar family in wheelchairs missing  
smiles, limbs and memories when I see your diabolical gaze  
heavy like a boulder on the back of my neck,  
your portrait surrounded by bright screens bouncing sunlight  
and I awaken into a nightmare where  
my tears pour into a glass like the wine I need to cope with you  
and  
sitting there I eat my cheap cake with this tiny sterile fork  
a reward for my mother's service but you...

You can go service yourself cuz...

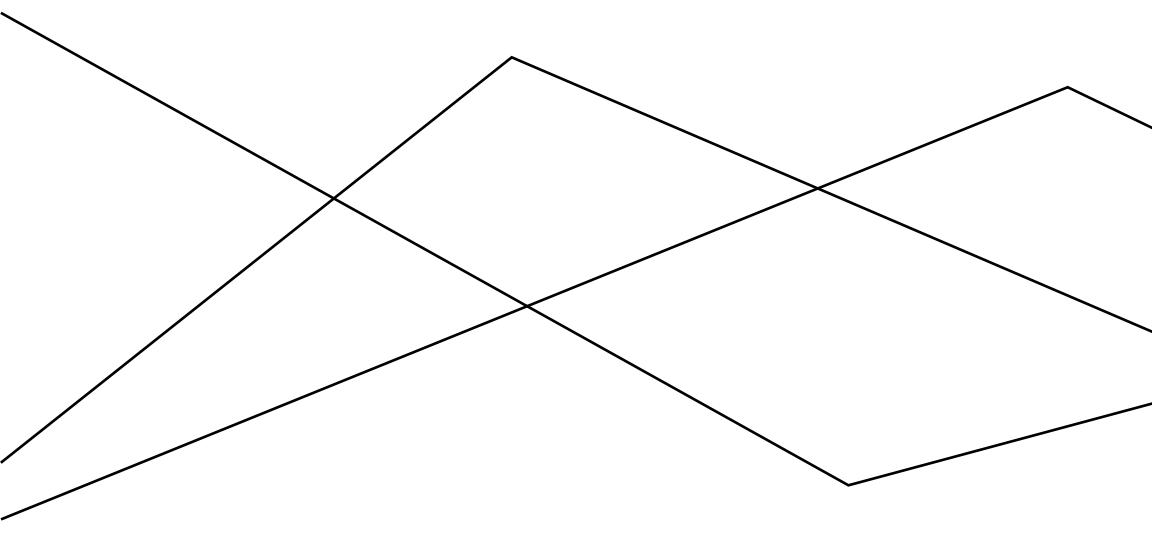
You should symbolize a new Melania but  
put your wife in your tall tower like Barbie's gold-plated dream  
house  
wanting her to saw through your dried out steaks but  
instead she cracks her teeth crunching diamonds,  
twirling sterling chains on forks like pasta  
her appetite insatiable and nose in the air as she  
tears the emerald fabric from Liberty's metal frame  
leaving exposed curves shivering and fending you off,  
deciding between securing a radiant crown or  
covering her lap with tablets, a flaming torch her only defense

I...

vanka try on your daughter's office dress,  
dirty it with my crotch toss it in the 80 percent off bin  
in your former corner next to your  
powerless ties no one bought and slip on my  
fine Calvin Klein's Armani button ups  
Diesel jockstraps and True Religion jeans cuz

It's Raining Men baby  
and when we finally piss on your crusty face, that foundation  
will

run like your fingers to twitter, trying to be The 45th but  
you will never be The 45th, no  
you looked to the wrong Betsy,  
you will always be 44 point 1 so  
quit your texting and grab a textbook  
cuz in this country, we round down bitch.

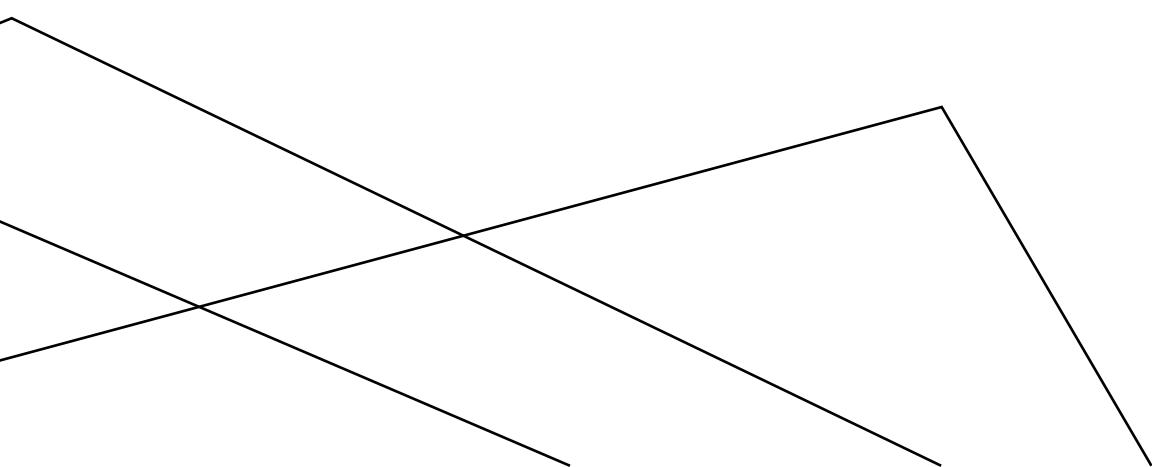


Indehiscent

Conklin

You tongue the curve  
of my calf, tracing  
to where skin meets fruit,  
and tear, as you would  
a dried apricot  
cured with sulfur, the better  
to keep its color.

Keep me. Come  
looking. Slip knife,  
slit rich, cream flesh, ride  
the bitter pit ridge lain  
in wait. The cured scent  
of a buried summer  
will rise between us,  
missing its sun.



La Tristesse

Lynn

I've never been good at goodbye.  
My mother says I don't have the constitution  
for it. But it wasn't supposed to be the last time;  
it never is. Salt-slicked lips and dew-drop eyes,  
I couldn't wait to watch you walk away. I left.  
I'm always leaving. Every day, people find ways  
to settle in. The wind screams my name. Sometimes,  
the gurgling of the river urges me to follow it,  
down into the depths, total submersion. The ocean  
begs me to traverse it. The flowers bloom and die  
for me. Van Gogh cut off his own ear for his art –  
artistic integrity. Believing in something;  
you screamed at me one night that I lacked ambition.  
Now, I hear your name in the flapping of the wings  
of birds and butterflies; I hear you call for me  
in your sleep. The rain whispers our last words.  
His own ear, can you believe it? With a razor.  
As if I'd give up a part of me that easily.  
As if I'd let you take me, when I can't even look  
at myself in the mirror for fear of the ghosts looking back.  
A razor, sharp enough to shear away our defenses.  
I'm a liar who tells her tale so well that I don't know  
what the truth is anymore, or if there's even such a thing.  
When you hear the whole world pushing you back  
to me, shut the window. Close the blinds.

## Lift up the Toilet Seat

Collis

A line that makes all men shy,  
Which produces us to say this instinctive lie.  
“It wasn’t me” or “I haven’t been”.  
A lie that’s detected,  
And inspected by the lens of a woman,  
Still to this day it remains a crime,  
That women simply cannot justify.  
Why don’t we lift it up?  
It’s our competitive edge  
To strike the bullseye.  
Or the inspection of our weapon.  
A fire arm that can make organisms live and die.  
With my eyes closed and  
Head suspended back.  
A sigh of relief.  
The perfect shot.  
Results in no grief.

Until the shake at the end.

## Long John'd

Scheidler

Largely sinful, wicked, dishon'rable  
Be satiation, joy, consumption see;  
Unsatisfiable, incomp'rable.  
May you give more than sweet delicacy.  
First risen treat; luscious, sweet, best in heat;  
A delight teeming with warmth, slightly floured;  
Ly'n on sheet, finished, be once moist, dried eat;  
Ne'er more thoughtless moments 'fore whole devour'd.  
Such worth convinc'd with exercise before,  
Consider workout, in course, we partake.  
Whate'er herein we did, t'was quite a score.  
Nothing so sugary sweet as your cake.  
Many sessions adversely shape masses,  
Honeyed sticky Long Johns dilate asses.

## Love Letter

Hricovsky

*z = 80*

1 *mf*

2 *mp*

12 *p* *mp* *mf* *f*

18

25

## Macular Degeneration

Vigfusson

When I told Daniel the lime margarita tasted like a menthol cigarette, he asked me what that even meant.

“Astringent. Sharp. Antiseptic.”

“Are you a teacher?” he wanted to know.

“Why do you ask that?”

“Because you sure know a lot of words.”

I didn’t know these people and I was only there because their mail had been delivered to my grandmother’s place. When Daniel had opened the door, he was holding an empty wine glass and sweating profusely as if getting drunk was exercise.

“I brought over your mail,” I said, handing it to him. “It was sent to us by mistake.”

“Would you like a margarita?” he’d asked.

Drinking with him should have been out of the question since he looked about fifteen, but being naturally depressive, I never turn down a drink, a toke or any chance to improve my mood. He had dark hair, blue eyes, and a definite Timothee Chalamet vibe.

The house was a run-down bi-level, the living room so messy, it might have been ransacked plus you had to wade through toys strewn all over the floor. It was 103 out and the air in there felt as dank as ether. A cat and dog slept together near the blower fan, stretched out as if they were dead.

Aside from drinking margaritas, we sat on the couch watching the Home Shopping network which he said his Nana had left on. They were selling designer teddy bears and the toddlers in the room were mesmerized.

When I told Daniel my grandmother lived in the mobile home park, he wanted an invitation to the pool.

“You really don’t want to go,” I said. I found it kind of disgusting

myself seeing the seniors half-naked with all that withered flesh dripping out of their bathing suits. “They just sit in the pool like hippos. Trophy hunters should really shoot them instead of endangered species, but they’re too ugly to put on a wall.”

“My mother’s fat,” Daniel said and I blushed, not sure if he meant to embarrass me or not.

He showed me her picture on his cell phone as if he was proud of her. She was a very plump, baby-faced blonde with heavy makeup and skin like white marshmallow.

“She’s pretty,” I said, “She looks really young.” She could have been his sister.

“She’s thirty-seven.”

“Does she live here, too?”

“She’s living with her boyfriend in Bakersfield. She’s not that fat, anymore. She had liposuction.”

“On her stomach?”

“All over. She did a *Gofundme* for ‘life-changing surgery’, but no one donated so her boyfriend paid for it. Nana chipped in, too.”

On HSN, an English lady with a pert accent and bowl haircut was still showing her teddy bears. They were actually kind of gruesome with long, sloth-like fur and mute, stunned eyes as if she was holding them prisoner, but she and the hostess were hawking the hell out of them, insisting they were ‘absolutely precious.’

A customer called in and raved about how soft they felt.

“I own so many I’ve even had nightmares about them and my husband would say, ‘why do you collect them if they scare you so much?’”

The hostess and the English lady tittered a little uncomfortably.

“Well, I’m a widow, now,” the woman went on. “I’m going to

order mine and wrap it up, then give it to myself for Christmas.”

Daniel burst out laughing, but I thought that was sad. My grandmother had come to California after she was widowed because of a deluded stubbornness. She was suddenly determined to live in California before she died and she didn’t care where. She just wanted a California address and Pottersville was the only city she could afford. The median income here is like poverty level and meager as her retirement is, she’s still in better shape than most. Her mobile home is modern and she has central air conditioning.

One of the two toddlers crawled over to Daniel, pointing to her ass because her pamper was full.

“Forget it,” he said. “I ain’t changing you. Wait for Nana.”

I didn’t volunteer, either and the little girl stood up, whining, and I stroked her arm, sympathetically. She was adorable, a towhead with huge blue eyes. Her sister, maybe a year older, still sat on the floor in front of the large screen tv, enrapt in the teddy bears, with a binky in her mouth. She was also blonde, but her hair was curly and her complexion, the color of maple syrup.

“Are they your sisters?” I asked.

“Cousins,” he said.

I was about to ask him what their names were when his Nana opened the door. She was a stocky woman in her sixties, wearing shorts and sneakers. Her lank grey hair was in a pony tail and she carried a tote bag.

“The bus never came,” she announced and Daniel said something to the effect that they changed the schedule every day because the drivers only worked when they felt like it.

She looked at me and smiled broadly. “Well, aren’t you pretty.”

“She don’t see very well,” Daniel whispered and smirked.

She had a few side teeth missing, but didn’t seem self-conscious, maybe just glad she had enough left to eat with.

The little girl with the poop in her pampers hugged the woman's hefty legs and Nana felt the child's rear end.

"Somebody needs a change." She fetched a fresh diaper from one of the bedrooms and changed the little girl on the floor.

"What's your name, honey?" she asked me.

"Millie. Short for Emily," I said.

"I knew an Emily as a child, but I never heard her say one word. Now, I think she might have been mute."

"She's a teacher," Daniel said.

"I'm not a teacher," I said, annoyed. I was only a few years older than he was, though too old to let him paw me which he'd been trying to do ever since I sat down. "I'm in college."

"Where?" Nana asked and seemed truly interested.

"Rutgers."

Nana's faded blue eyes visibly glowed. "Are you from New Jersey? Me, too. Where do you live, honey?"

"Montclair."

"What a beautiful town! I lived right near there in Little Creek as a child. I don't know what it's like now, but everything was green and the temperature never went above eighty. In those days, we played outside from dawn till dusk."

People think California is the plushest state in the union, but it just shows how hopelessly shitty this town was that she talked about New Jersey as if it was Eden. The closest beach here is over a hundred miles away and the sun is different than in the North. There, you welcome it, but here it stalks you like a predator.

I couldn't wait to go home. I was good and pissed at my parents for making me visit my grandmother while they vacationed in Tokyo. My mother never said much about Pottersville. She always

said grandma had “retired to Northern California” whenever anyone asked. She almost made it sound swank.

Daniel’s Nana had changed the channel to the local news and they were talking about a young man who’d broken into a house just to take a shower since there was a water shortage in his neighborhood because of the drought.

“You know, I wouldn’t have even pressed charges,” Nana said. “I would have just told him to put his clothes on and please leave.”

“You’re all heart,” Daniel said and she didn’t reply as if she hadn’t heard him and maybe she hadn’t.

“At least, we’re not near those horrible fires.”

It was just like a book I’d read for a Lit course. The book was called **The Day of the Locust** and the main character was an artist who was working on a painting called *‘The Burning of Los Angeles.’* It had been written in the nineteen-thirties though it wasn’t sci fi.

Nana turned back to the shopping network and David Bowie’s widow, Iman, was hawking an ivory dress from her fashion line. She was very persuasive, demonstrating how the dress had been made so that it hit the model’s legs and cinched her waist at the most flattering angles. She even called it ‘the Goddess dress.’

“Marilyn Monroe wore that dress. It’s the exact same pattern,” Nana said. “Do you even know who Marilyn Monroe is, honey?”

“Sure, I do.”

“I really try not to buy anything,” Nana said, almost apologetically. “The women are just so pleasant to listen to and I don’t hear much adult conversation. I have gotten rooked, though. I ordered a topaz ring once that was surrounded by starfish. It looked so pretty and the way they talked about it, I just had to have it. I was scared it would sell out. It was blue like the ocean and reminded me of Cape May. We used to go there every summer when I was a child. Well, in real time, that ring was so gaudy I never wore it. Now, that my eyesight’s bad, it might look better.”

I smiled.

“What are you drinking, anyway?” she asked.

“I made lime margaritas,” Daniel told her. “You want one?”

“Not now, dear. I’m going to try to catch the bus again, in a little while. Millie, have you ever had a dreamsicle margarita?”

“No.”

Daniel made a gagging noise.

“Well, I think they’re delicious,” she said. “Tequila, orange juice and vanilla ice cream.”

“Her tastebuds are shot, too. You should try her cooking.”

I scowled at him, but he waved his hand. “She can’t hear. She listens to your tone of voice like a dog. If you told her you won the lottery and said it in sad tones, she’d feel sorry for you.”

“Daniel, are you talking about me?” Nana asked. She’d taken off her rubber band and was letting the little girls brush her loose hair to amuse them.

“I gotta take a whiz,” Daniel said and got up to use the bathroom.

“I guess you think I’m terrible letting him drink around the little girls, but I’d rather have him here than somewhere I don’t know about.”

I nodded.

“This is my other grandson, Luis,” she showed me a picture on her cellphone. “Right now, he’s the pick of the litter. He’s at cadet camp.”

I wondered if ‘cadet camp’ was a euphemism for a white supremacy compound, but the boy’s name was Luis and he looked Mexican. He was slim with fine, dark features, even better looking than Daniel. In the picture, he wore some kind of khaki get-up

with a military beret.

“He’s really handsome,” I told her.

“I think he’s going to join the marines when he graduates school. Daniel - well, Daniel’s a puzzle. He never leaves the house, but maybe that’s a good thing with all the drugs out there. Still, he’ll have to leave the house to get a job, someday.”

“Isn’t he too young to work?”

“He’s twenty-one.”

Here, I thought he was in high school when he was two years older than I was.

Daniel returned and asked if we were talking about him.

“I just mentioned how we’re out of everything, but it’s really too hot for you to walk all the way to the Save-Mart,” Nana said.

“Damn right,” he agreed.

“Honey, do you drive?” Nana asked me.

“Sure,” I told her.

“You think you could drive me, there?”

“I don’t have a car.” I wasn’t about to ask my grandmother for hers.

“Oh, we have one. It belongs to my daughter, Samantha.”

“She’s in jail,” Daniel said, “for not paying parking tickets.”

“You can go to jail for that?” I asked.

“She’s using and they know it, so they got her for parking tickets.”

“That’s enough of that, Daniel,” Nana said.

“I’ll drive you to the Save-Mart,” I said to change the subject. I

could only assume that neither of them had a license.

“Well, aren’t you an angel?”

The car was parked in the driveway, a blue, banged-up Saturn with duct tape on one of the fenders. Nana got in on the passenger side and gave me the keys.

“You sure this is no trouble?” she asked. “I can call Luis’ father, later, but he’s at work right now. He works at the casino.”

The casino was the main source of employment there aside from the Walmart.

“It’s fine,” I assured her. “Your grandkids are beautiful.”

“My parents would turn over in their graves. Good people, but very prejudiced. Everyone was at that time.”

I was mixed, myself, Scotch-Irish and Jewish, though Jewish counts pretty much as white now except to hate groups.

“My father’s Jewish,” I told her.

“I knew a lot of Jewish people in New Jersey. I had a friend who was Jewish when I was a child. Her name was Cindy. Once, she was playing with one of my dolls and I asked her if she wanted it and she looked so thrilled I gave it to her. I gave all my dolls away that day just because I wanted to make my friends happy. When my mother found out, she threw a fit. ‘They’re *my* dolls!’ she yelled though of course, they weren’t. I had to ask everyone for them back. They were all real mad at me, but just for that afternoon.”

I could picture her affably parting with her dolls the way she’d cheerfully taken on her grandkids. She was afflicted with good will; I’d never met anyone like her.

“What he said about Samantha; her being in jail. You see, my husband died at a bad time,” she spoke as if certain times to die were more opportune than others. “The girls were in high school and they just ran wild. I had no control over them. He was the boss of the family.”

When we reached the center of town, she asked me if I wanted to come inside with her to the Save-Mart. I really didn't want to, but running air-conditioning in the car would waste money.

It was mostly geezers at this hour. One guy of about eighty, in the produce section, was trussed up in a contraption like a cage around his head. Probably, he'd broken his neck, but went shopping to prove he could still live alone so his kids wouldn't put him in a nursing home.

The store played the slushiest doo-wop possible, *This Must be Magic* and *You Belong to Me* while the shoppers drifted around the aisles on walkers like invalids at a ball. Homecare aides were helping some of them shop and all the aides were Mexican. There were more Mexicans in this town than whites, but Trump had won here because illegals can't vote. Who did these old people think was going to help them if the wall got built? Daniel? He wouldn't change a baby's diaper, let alone theirs.

When Nana was done and we loaded the car, she mentioned how she needed a new phone since hers was dying.

"They're giving out free phones in town, but I don't want to stop, now. Everything will melt."

I wasn't sure if she wanted me to come back tomorrow and drive her again, but I didn't volunteer.

"This was my car until I gave it to my daughter," she said. "I got into an accident and found out I had macular degeneration."

"What's that?"

"My eyes are going."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not really that bad. It's kind of like looking into water on a lake. I can still see colors, but they're soft and blurry, dripping into each other. Things kind of float."

What she described sounded like a mirage.

When we got back to the house, I helped her unload the groceries.

“Hey, you two,” Daniel said, still planted in front of the tv. He made no offer to help, but it wasn’t because he was mean or selfish. He just had a lame personality and you knew he’d be screwing up all his life.

Nana wanted me to stay for dinner, but I told her I really had to go and her face fell. I honestly think she would have let me move in there and we’d just met a couple of hours ago.

She was now wearing that Cape May ring she’d told me about as if our earlier conversation had made her remember it. The blue stone was grotesquely huge on her short fingers, but I didn’t say anything. She looked like a kid playing dress-up.

“I can’t thank you enough, Millie,” she said and hugged me and the little girls wanted hugs, too. “I hope you come back and see us again before you leave.”

For an instant, she looked exhausted, even faint, maybe because of the heat. She was definitely the type who’d drop dead right in the middle of doing a chore and then everyone would be shocked, because she’d seemed so active. I remembered what she’d said about ‘bad times to die’ and I knew that whole brood would go to hell if something happened to her.

I didn’t get to say goodbye to Daniel. He’d retreated to his room while we were putting the groceries away. I could hear video game explosions coming out of there.

I walked the half-mile back to my grandmother’s mobile home park. Her powder blue unit is really quite pretty like a little cottage. Her place is fresh and cool inside and spacious with two bedrooms and two baths. It’s also immaculate since she cleans compulsively as if cleanliness can stave off dementia. She equates messiness with mental illness, and Nana’s house would have left her aghast.

She was sitting in front of the tv with her afternoon glass of Riesling. Aside from playing bridge or going to the pool, she doesn’t spend much time with the other seniors. The ones she introduced

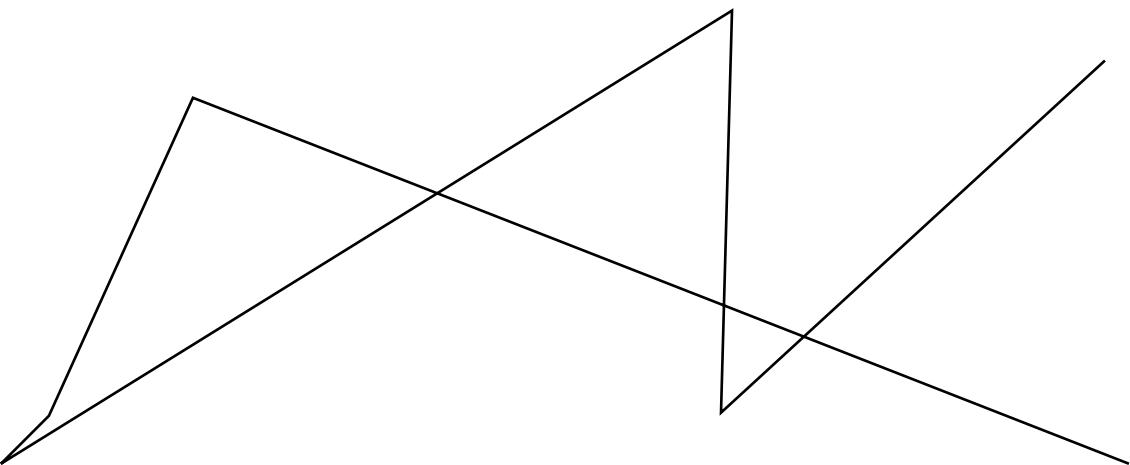
me to had also come from up North and most of them were sorry they'd left. They even seemed dazed as if they'd been moved against their will. Maybe their sense of dislocation was practice for the final trek to the Great Beyond.

"You've been gone for hours," she said. "Those people must have been interesting."

"It was just this lady with all her kids and grandkids living in her house. She was like the old woman who lived in a shoe."

My grandmother was also watching the Home shopping network and it did surprise me since I'd never seen her watch it when she lived in New Jersey.

The hostess was hawking sugar cookies now, raving that the 'delectable goodies' were the exact same ones you remembered from childhood and I realized that was the hook. These old women watched in mortal yearning, idly trying to buy back their lives.



## Nice Guys Come Last

Stone

Years ago, this colleague of mine had a partner that ended up in hospital. Specifically, he ended up in hospital with tubes snaking down his throat and his scalp removed to relieve the pressure his swollen brain was under because apparently, this partner of my colleague's, he was involved in some kind of altercation he didn't really have with this SUV driver.

Since he just wasn't like that according to my former colleague, it was difficult to see how this could've happened. Such a nice guy ending up with his scalp in a bar fridge next to the bed over an incident he couldn't have been responsible for? It just didn't make sense.

There's little chance, for instance, that her partner would've tried to push his way into the merging lane from that fateful on-ramp even if technically he was in the right. What he also wouldn't have done since he's such a top bloke was stand on the horn as he just missed the rear of this SUV, midnight blue, and then still on that horn, round with an element of attitude this really rude guy driving it. Obviously the driver he didn't really have the altercation with was being a total dick not letting him in when he could've just blinkered over into the empty lane, but that's SUV drivers for you my colleague said.

Also what my colleague said was certain is that there's no way, just really none since her partner simply wasn't like this, that upon passing the SUV, he would've held out his fist to the rude guy powering down his window and then from that two fingers like the barrel of a gun. Not having done that, neither could he have aimed his literal handgun at the belligerent jerk in the SUV, midnight blue, shouting at my colleague's partner what for in no uncertain terms, and then according to said belligerent jerk when it got to court, "recoil" his "handgun" as if it had just "fired" quote "a bullet at him" end quote.

But not content with that obvious lie, this really rude driver of the SUV, midnight blue, went on to contradict himself by saying though "unsure" of what he was "seeing" through my colleague's partner's "tinted" windows (she's convinced his alleged gun-shaped fist with extended fingers was actually the hand of compromise being offered), he forewent giving my colleague's partner what for in order to "fear" for "his life" that with a "gun" "aimed" at him he was in fact about to be "shot."

I mean, can you believe that's actually what this guy

said in court despite reality my former colleague wanted to know?

Because just looking at those pictures on my colleague's phone of her partner hooked up to those tubes and the bar fridge by the bed waiting with his scalp, it's pretty clear that this version of events from the SUV guy just couldn't have happened. What's not in doubt, however, is that this SUV driver - in fact a burly thug with star constellation tattoos and a history of domestic violence after several Jimmies against his pack-a-day de facto and their thuggish little sixth grader known for bullying smaller kids - upon "realising" that the questionable quote unquote "recoil" of my colleague's partner's misconstrued "hand as a gun" (really just a friendly wave) was in his words "a crock", proceeded to mercilessly tailgate my colleague's soon-to-be hospitalised partner like right across the city.

This car chase, as my former colleague referred to it, featured on various security camera footage far beyond her partner's place of work as he tried to shake the SUV maniac off. In fact, this quote unquote "Smokey and the Bandit" rubber burning frenzy only ended when he, M.F.C.P, ran out of fuel and his fight or flight instincts lathered into a frenzy by the SUV (midnight blue), scrambled him out of his car where in all likelihood he didn't put up his fists. Alleged not-so-expert witness testimony went on to state that the SUV driver in response "calmly", "methodically", like "the adults are now in charge" unfolded his two metre, fridge-like frame out onto the sidewalk he'd boxed my colleague's partner's car onto as this "inhuman cry" rose into the morning.

Apparently, the ensuing court case spent a lot time hearing who's ultimately at fault when it comes to inhuman cries. If as alleged this particular inhuman cry was my former colleague's partner screaming "F- you, you SUV driving loser!" and "Why don't you drag your f-ing bogan knuckles back to the swamp from whence you crawled!", then the brutish SUV thug's flying kick at my colleague's partner's head that followed could be justified his two hundred dollar an hour lawyer said. But how even a "deliberately provoked" quote unquote "defencive retaliation" demanded by the thug's self-perceived high social-standing under threat by raw civilian fear can ever be justification for such a high velocity head kick,

my colleague didn't know.

Seriously? she kept asking me. Does simply paying a pompous suit large amounts of untaxed cash somehow magically mitigate your ending up in hospital with shoe tread stamped across your face and your scalp in a bar fridge? Because if yes, then such reputation-defending human-missile theory balancing fear as assault is dangerous territory my colleague said.

What next? Domestic violence justified by the discomfort inflicted by a victim's whimpering? Nuclear holocaust because we don't like the way you wear sheets on your head? Really, annoying inhuman cries dopplering higher as some SUV driver's foot caves in your face is no excuse for violence in a civilised society she wanted me to know.

But, and as these things often go, my colleague's partner's face thus footprinted with the boot of this SUV maniac launched out of mindless hate and jealousy wasn't the end of it. Because getting to the actual justified violence part of this case then, it was these same witnesses who more or less testified that my former colleague's partner - obviously feeling he had a moral duty not to let any of the kids watching from the nearby school fence see that bullies have it all their own way in grown-up society - proceeded to climb up his own blood splattered car, ingot silver, gurgling teeth "inhumanly".

You see that? she would say.

First there was an "inhuman cry" according to these would-be secondary sources, then the gurgling of his own teeth by the soon to be hospitalised partner of my colleague was "inhuman". Your honour, my colleague drawled in mockery, my client's victim was inhuman and therefore we rest our case. History is littered with this excuse - just look at the Reichstadt. In reality then, the real victim in all this being the kind of guy always ready to do the right thing without a mean bone in his body, having mounted his own blood-spattered car, endured sudden body spasming (as a consequence of being struck by the attacker's boot) and didn't really leap upon the driver of that SUV, midnight blue, who'd followed him upright to make sure he was in the process of knowing what for.

Now, how a guy like my former colleague's partner couldn't have done such a thing isn't clear, but what is in law she said? The fact he liked puppies and orange chocolate from England was not admissible. Neither that I Huckabee's was,

according to him, a sincere attempt at balancing the human dilemma of achieving financial pats on the back without trashing the planet seemed to matter, while a third grade teacher plucked from a nursing home in Kellyville who seemed to be sure at least one of the kids she used to teach could spell “blankanash” held little sway with the jury either.

What did seem to matter, however, was that the hospital who also took in the SUV driver claimed that they pulled a human tooth which matched my colleague’s partner’s from the rude jerk’s right eyeball. Depending which lawyer held the floor, it appears somehow his alleged “aggressive” and don’t forget “inhuman” gurgling in the SUV guy’s face “accidentally resulted” in one of his kicked-in teeth being launched in the direction of the guy’s face, specifically his eye, where at “one in a million odds” it “deliberately lodged” until surgical removal later that day. The fact that my colleague’s partner was in all likelihood just trying to give the SUV driver a conciliatory hug of manly humanity rather than machine-gun attack his eyes with his own teeth seemed oddly irrelevant to the judgement that followed, but again, that’s law for you, right?

Anyway, an eyeball’s one thing, but just you try convince a jury like in the SUV driver’s case that you’re the victim when it’s you who then tackled, one-eyed, the actual victim to the ground and pummeled his face around your own footprint. Seriously, you get yourself into the shoes of an SUV driving jerk and try it. Because when you think about it my former colleague urged, it’s actually completely understandable that her partner, the real victim, with his face following the way of his teeth, would react reflexively and superhumanly dislodge the brute from his thorax. And in what you’d have to call (according to my colleague at least) a kind of karmically induced inversion of fortune for the SUV driver, her partner, finding himself suddenly on top of this menace for the first time, felt not unreasonably compelled to enact some serious cosmic justice on behalf of victims of bullying everywhere.

Even if under normal circumstances he wouldn’t have been that kind of guy.

Even if - and this is how much he cared about standing up to bullies - it meant a mandatory jail term.

And though feeling understandably sorry for my colleague’s partner in those photos of tubes snaking down his throat and his scalp in that bar fridge by the bed, the other

pictures, the ones of this SUV driver's face (Exhibit F) after her partner had got through with it, well, clearly there'd been either some heavy use of Photoshop or malicious intent hadn't just been a figment of the jury's imagination. Because that rock they pulled out of my former colleague's partner's hand mid-strike, Exhibit R, it had by that time about as much of the SUV driver's face on it as the guy's skull still did.

Sure that looks bad my former colleague would say when the face-on-rock fact came up in the lunch room, but trust her, it wouldn't be the first time some evil aggressor playing the victim had bashed their own face to pulp. Hospital accredited photos and JOP ID post the disfigurement are one thing she'd explain, but isn't jail full of people who would pulp their faces if it meant they could get to you? Think about it. You steal a car on ice aged sixteen and, post mowing a family down, get mandatorily sentenced to repeated rape and criminal gang indoctrination and you'll be ready to bash your own face in too. And of course, once you factor in a partner like my colleague's who was incapable of hurting a fly even, self face-pulping by the SUV driver is the only logical explanation of what happened.

I mean, my former colleague would say, had it been her partner who failed to let him, the driver of the SUV, midnight blue, onto the on-ramp?

No it had not.

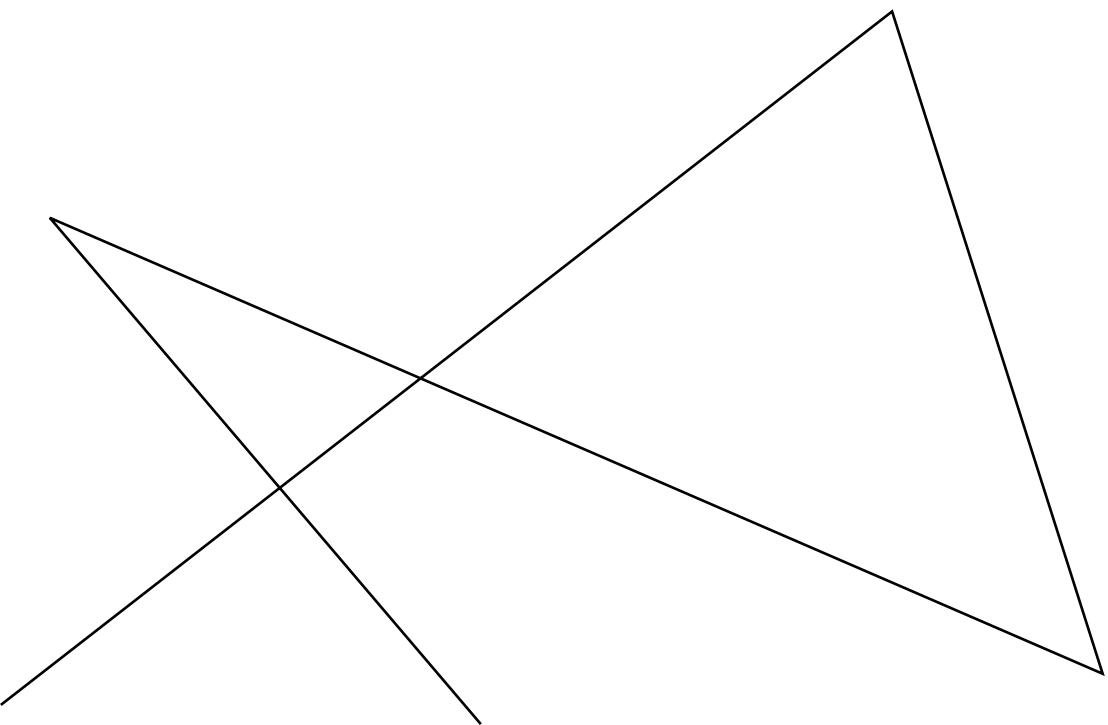
Was it the partner of my former colleague who, regardless of the literal handgun thing, proceeded to chase the SUV driver across town until his SUV, midnight blue, ran out of fuel and then enact a flying kick like a horizontal sound-seeking human missile to his face?

A simple no will suffice here as well.

In fact, this rude jerk of the SUV holding himself up like an angel before the court with his mashed-in face surgically reattached after it had been scraped off Exhibit R blatantly refused to accept responsibility for his crimes according to my former colleague. A shameless bully whose pretense to shame only rears its ugly head when it's clear he's come off second best, this loser, my FC said, played the jury like a skull-cap xylophone to the tune of Money.

And so, in the case of my former colleague's partner versus deceptive evil driving midnight blue, the court was obligated despite reasonable doubt to find the SUV driver

not as much at fault and not as much throw the book at him. That this really happened and the SUV guy avoided jail time is, according to my former colleague at least, a clear sign that society's descent into moral collapse has begun.



Ode to Brenda  
[A Vogon Poem]\*

Duby

See, see the blunt sky  
Marvel at its big yellow depths.  
Tell me, Brenda do you  
Wonder why the squirrel ignores you?  
Why its foobly stare  
makes you feel Cantankerous.  
I can tell you, it is  
Worried by your pshhht facial growth  
That looks like  
A mustard  
What's more, it knows  
Your mottled potting shed  
Smells of Avacado.  
Everything under the big blunt sky  
Asks why, why do I even bother?  
You only charm Marching uniform.

\*Douglas Adams' The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy defines Vogons as "one of the most unpleasant species in the galaxy. Not evil, but bad tempered, bureaucratic officious and callous. On no account should you allow a Vogon to read poetry to you. Vogon poetry of course, is the third worst poetry in the universe."

## Poor Little Latin Man

Gill

All five foot six of you, skin hanging like a brown  
plastic trash bag on your withered frame, demanding,  
like a toddler, to be hear over my stern words.

A bag wrinkled as the look chiseled into your wife's face,  
forever a step behind you, defeated short black curls  
colored a shredded gray, standing hunched and silent.

I am not your wife, my feet are concrete, my speech like  
marbled gloves, throwing knockout blows with words you  
simply mumble over, lips pursed as if you bit into a lemon.

Biting from five feet two, I tower over your grimace,  
chew on that machismo, and spit it up at you  
with sparks that blister your skin wet with rage.

Atrévete a levantarme La Voz otra vez!  
It blades through your defeated ego  
now lifeless, splattered on the floor.

Selah

Lafleche

have you ever held the trigger of a gun  
trained on the chest of another man's heart?

have you ever held a child, your son  
after ceding consent to remove his life support?

have you ever loaded a Winchester, twelve gauge  
and passed out before pressing it under the chin?

have you ever summited a mountain, in rage  
only for the voices to be silenced by the wind?

or thought spring won't arrive this year?  
or the warmth of the sun won't bookend the night?  
have you ever fought to suppress that burning tear?  
or collapsed under the weight of a ceaseless fight?

and still we walk, one foot in front of each other  
inhale the next breath, and smile to still the shudder.

## So it Goes

Lafleche

a splintered boat in an overgrown field  
gord downy on the big screen, he's dead  
an old friend in stage four, haven't seen in years

as if premature twin babies weren't enough  
or four years sobriety didn't count for anything  
colon cancer stage four, premature babies, so it goes

at least the wife gets to blog her pain to the voyeuristic mass  
at least he's returned to Christ and the family is holding fast  
at least there are these latter days, at least there will be heaven

a woman pregnant with a dying child  
bowels afloat outside its stomach,  
she rejects the offered opportunity to abort

takes a hit from the pipe then sips a beer  
it's okay, she says, her friend drank and smoked  
the entire term and the baby was born healthy

and so it goes, the world spins its web of pain

so it always goes

## Something About Coffee

Kepfer

What I want to know is how Nicaraguans are somehow so much better at making coffee than everyone else in the world. They've got to be cheating, there's some trick to it. Either that or all the Columbians and Ethiopians are just really stupid when it comes to growing plants. How are the beans in Nicaragua better than Costa Rica or Honduras just miles away, or one of the thousands of African countries (I looked it up, there are 54)?

That's my favorite thing about Africa, they have so many varying nations and languages and cultures all jammed into one continent. My second favorite thing, tied with Black Panther, is of course, cannibalism. I can't imagine how hard eating people must be for them nowadays. It takes a lot of guts to stick to your convictions in this modern world, with so many people telling you you're wrong. I wish we could have the freedom in America to let someone identify as a cannibal if they want to be one.

We're even the ones that came up with the phrase, "You are what you eat." All Africans are doing is carrying out the phrase to the natural conclusion. The first people in the world to think rationally probably looked at other people and thought, "Hey, they look exactly like me. Eating them would probably give me the exact nutrients I need to survive."

That makes sense. What I want to know is what idiot thought of eating the first vegetable, or the first fish and why they would eat that rather than a perfectly good-looking human.

Of course, when I racistly refer to "Africans," what I really mean is, "Certain tribes of the African Congo." Saying they're cannibals is just a true statement: not racist. Maybe we should call them, "People who identify themselves as people who eat other people," but that still doesn't seem fair to a lot of these people, so we should include a separate category for the people who only sometimes eat people, but usually don't. And I'm sure there are those who have come clean from eating people but still enjoy a grilled ear or bicep on special occasions.

The point is cannibals are people just like you, so stop making them out to be so uncivilized just because they aren't vegan like you. Humans are probably the most nutritious things they have to eat.

Now to clarify, I don't condone all shapes and sizes of cannibalism. In fact, there are some that I outright dislike. For instance, there are people in Africa called the Pigmies who are very much shorter than the surrounding people groups. For some reason, some taller African tribes have decided that since the Pigmies are small, that means they are supposed to be eaten. Some even hunt the Pigmies for sport. Apparently, tribes from Uganda, Ituri, and all over the Congo, plus rebel soldier Mayi-Mayis, all agree that the Pigmies are food. The poor Pigmies are eaten by almost everyone. Of course, they themselves are also cannibals, but they do cannibalism right as far as I'm concerned: only eating members of their own tribes, always cooking their meat well-done, eating almost all parts of the body and not just the scrumptious genitals and outer thighs (like some Mayi-Mayis). So if there are any Ituris or other members of the cannibal community reading this, please stop hunting and eating Pigmies. Pick on someone your own size.

No one really knows why the Pigmies are so short. If you ask one of them, they'd probably tell you they're not short you giant, and then run home to eat their grandma. Evolution must have forgotten about the Pigmies, or they just evolved from lemurs instead of apes. Their genes seem to be rebellious, it's very odd.

Some humans still believe that African genes in general are less advanced than other continents. I personally believe the opposite is true, excepting the Pigmies, sorry Pigmies. There's just no advantage to being short.

In 1904 Germany actually almost succeeded in performing a complete genocide of the Herero and Namaqua peoples, complete with concentration camps and inhumane experiments. Soldiers were colonizing this area of South Africa and found the locals to be less evolved than they were. Most Germans and even most of the western world have agreed with this idea of genetic supremacy. The leading thought at the time was that if the less civilized humans were to be eradicated, what's left of humanity would evolve quicker.

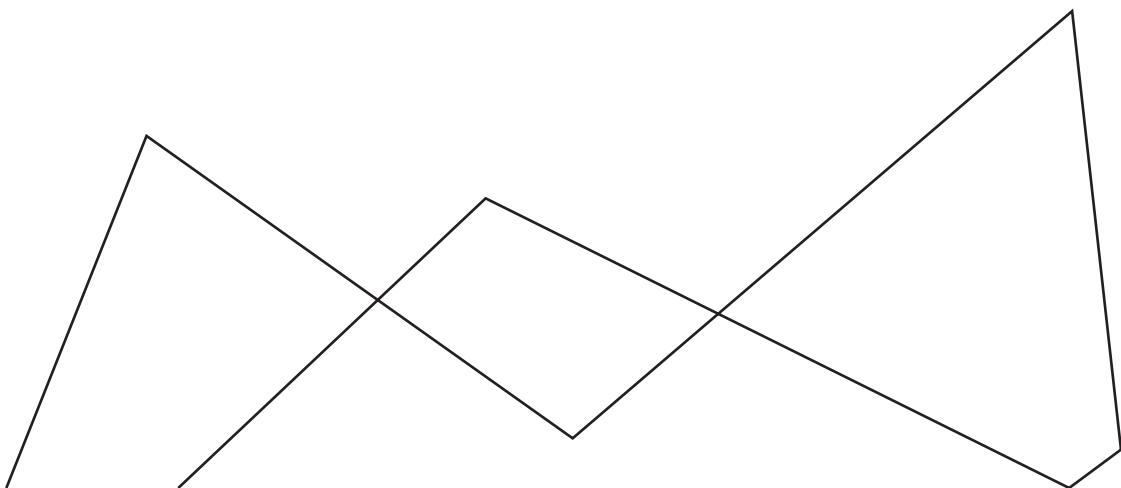
I wish the founder of this horrible idea was also a Nazi, but in reality it was Sir Charles Darwin. He predicted that events like this would happen, if not encouraged them, because of human natural selection. It was part of his theory of evolution.

You mean the theory that we all agree is a fact

without question today? Yes, that theory. But at least Charles doesn't eat Pigmies.

There are cannibals in South America, too, but they have the best coffee. So South America is pretty much just a better Africa.

The real point is, drink Nicaraguan coffee. It's really good.



Cassius Stevens parked on Main Street, got out, and leaned against the side of his coupe. He closed his eyes and smiled up at the sun as if it were shining down just for him. He could picture the old storefronts running up and down either side of the street, at least those that had been there since his pappy was a kid. Pappy had told him, "Them foreigners moving here, thinking there's an easy buck to be made will find themselves wrong in, most, a year. Family buys from family or waits for the "Going out of Business" sign to appear in the window. Blacks ain't got enough money to keep 'em afloat." If they were outside, his pappy would spit some tobacco juice and add for emphasis, "First white likely only going in after that sign goes up."

He laughed just thinking it. Now there was that Jew ice cream store been there for six months already. Things were a bit better now. Kids like his younger brother Lee, but going in mostly to see what a Jew looked like. Lee telling him how Katie asked for a vanilla cone and while he was scooping leaned in and asked, "Hey, Mister, where are your horns," and then ran out laughing without ever paying.

He was thinking pappy taught little Jeb right. He hand-lettered that sign, "Coloreds here ==>" went in, walked to the back of the store, took the gum out of his mouth, and splattered it and his sign in the middle of the glass case. He spread his gums smiling and strutted out cackling in his high voice, "Southern Hospitality."

He opened his eyes and saw Cousin Anders racing on his scooter down the block. When he got to the ice cream store, Cassius whistled. Anders turned and fell. He sat back on the sidewalk, stared at his skinned knee, and started crying.

Cassius placed his hands behind his butt considering maybe to push off and check on him. He looked down the street and recognized the old black woman who used to clean for the family rushing over so fast her cane could barely keep up. She planted it to the side of the boy and struggled to lean over. She and Anders talked some. She went into the store, came out with some wet paper towels, and did her best to clean up the scrape before spotting it dry with a tissue she took from her large purse. Now Cassius remembered her name, Aunt Jemima – that's what we always called her.

A minute later he watched as the Jew-boy came out

with an ice cream cone and a small wooden chair. He put the chair in the shade of the doorway, gave Anders the cone before helping him to stand and walk over to the chair. He retrieved the scooter and leaned it against the storefront.

He said something to Aunt Jemima and then rushed back into the store. He watched as she chatted up Anders, daubed off some ice cream that had dripped on his chin, and then said something that made him smile. The Jew-man came out and gave her a chocolate cone then looked across the street and seeing Cassius, made a sign that everything was okay. The old woman followed his gaze and waved once she recognized him.

Cassius couldn't hear what they were saying but Aunt Jemima smiled and nodded.

The Jew-man was saying that in a small town like this she must have heard about Jeb's note, this boy being another Stevens. "I was so upset I called Mr. Stevens; told him how disappointed I was with little Jeb. And unless Jeb apologized, he wouldn't be welcome here again. Mr. Stevens laughed and advised me not to hold my breath. 'We don't buy from Jew-boys down here.' I thought for a moment and then said, 'Well, if he apologizes he can have two scoops free. That way he won't have to buy anything.'"

Nor did he hear her laugh and thank him for trying. He smiled in return and said, "We can only do our best."

Cassius stared as she started walking back up the street seeing the ice cream glisten in the sun. The same sun beat down on his head. He was thinking. Neither of them two seemed uppity. Jeb didn't do bad here and Anders seemed happy with his free cone. Never even looked back at me. Should at least have waved. If I hadn't whistled he never would have gotten that free cone, just gone sailing by that store. He got back in his car. Three blocks later, he turned off Main. Maybe tomorrow, early like, when no one's about, I'll drive back in and get a cone. See what the Jew really looks like; bet he knows Aunt Jemima's name.

The next day Mr. Klein told Cassius the name of the elderly woman who helped his cousin is Scarlett Higginbotham. He reminded him about his offer of two free scoops for Jeb.

"You come back with Jeb and I'll even give you one free scoop if you buy the other. A man's got to make a living."

## Talking my Generation Blues

Clattenburg

Madison was the girl who got me to quit listening to Led Zeppelin. I'm not sure why I put so much stock in her opinion—I guess I just wanted to get with her. Anyways, relationships are all about compromise, isn't that right? Give and take. I'll curb this annoying habit if you curb that. That kind of thing. I'm still not sure why she was especially offended by Led Zeppelin though. Maybe it was Robert Plant's voice. I can get that. I still remember all my liberal arts professors swooning over Leadbelly like he was at the vanguard of 20th century music—and I'd always thought if I had to listen to him everyday for the rest of my life I'd go insane—not to mention the poor woman who had to wake up every morning next to that face. As if the cheerful subject matter of his songs wasn't enough. Oh well. No accounting for taste. I was saying Led Zeppelin—Maggie said they were too "acid rock." She was speaking about Houses of the Holy since that was the only CD I routinely played back then. I'd listened to Led Zeppelin IV all through high school to the point where I'd scratched and damaged the original CD and in the process—even after I bought a replacement—I'd lost interest, I couldn't listen to it anymore, I'd had enough. So I decided losing Houses of the Holy wasn't that big a deal either as far as concessions went. Maybe Madison was doing me a favor—helping me outgrow some vestige of my boyhood or something. Like maybe adult men are supposed to outgrow Led Zeppelin the same way I'd outgrown Pearl Jam, Ernest Hemingway's novels, Burger King, Big League Chew, Fruit by the Foot, and video games. Sure, not everyone outgrows video games, but by age 18 or 19 I couldn't get into them anymore. I just wasn't interested enough—and so I theorized that everything peaks in your life—all your hobbies and enjoyments—and sometimes the peak is more like a plateau so it becomes a lifelong interest and other times the peak is sharp and jagged and afterwards your interest just dips and bottoms out. I didn't listen to Houses of the Holy and I even erased all my Led Zeppelin albums from my computer—this from back in the day when we burned CDs onto computers and made due with scuffs on the original CD. I didn't miss those albums the first few years we were

together. I never one time had any regrets like Gee, everything's swell, only I wish Madison hadn't outlawed me listening to Led Zeppelin. And "outlaw" is really an exaggeration—all she did was criticize Houses of the Holy at face value when she heard it playing in the background. She'd just said, "What is this... acid rock? Psychedelia?" The thing is, I hadn't really considered Led Zeppelin to be acid rock at all—and I was on the point of explaining how I'd classify the band as more of blues rock but I didn't. I didn't think it was worth the time or effort to explain. Besides, I'd been itching to get with Madison since we'd graduated college and ended up in the big city.

Yeah, she'd known I was crazy about her and had been for years—waiting out her doomed relationship with this arrogant soccer-playing upperclassman—biding my time but always on friendly terms with her without any weird romantic overtures or bashful come-ons. I was pretty much upfront about how I felt and I left it at that. Otherwise, I was just someone to lend an ear and I don't know, I'm assuming she appreciated it since we remained friends all during college. Then when we graduated and moved that's when our relationship started—we were always hanging out, to the extent that I'd often have to cancel plans with people from work and with my roommates so I could see her. But I didn't mind, seeing her was much better. And we had all of New York for the beginning of our relationship—it was like the city existed in all its complex, impersonal busyness just as a backdrop for our free-spirited life. The dad of one of my exes used to tell me, "Live in New York when you're young. It's the best place for a young person to be." That dad—bless his heart—I'd pray every night to have him as a father-in-law but it didn't work out—not that it should have, I was sixteen at the time, barely with a driver's license and his daughter was the first girl who ever let me take off her bra. I learned a lot about bras from her in fact; for that, I will be forever grateful—though clumsiness at taking off bras is another mark of youth—when you get to your late 20s, in my experience, women just take off their own bras. I think men and women reach that point mutually where naked bodies just aren't that interesting anymore. Anyways, Madison never waited for me to take off her bra, except one time after a

romantic dinner but then on Valentine's Day or anniversaries you pull out all the stops. Anyhow, the point of all that was that Madison and I were together and we were happy—we were a good team—and I put up with her Bjork and Radiohead even though it struck me that Houses of the Holy wasn't much more psychedelic than some of what she listened to. Then after further conversation I learned that a major part of why she'd criticized Houses of the Holy on a general level was she believed that people of a given generation should listen to and appreciate the artists, writers, painters etc. of their own generation like somehow that was the appropriate thing to do—and if I needed more convincing just consider all the artists, writers, painters etc. who hadn't received any appreciation at all from their contemporaries only to be applauded later on as the geniuses they were. I was going to deconstruct her argument by the very fact that it was later generations who appreciated the ones who came earlier but she must have anticipated my critique because she said that her standards of appreciation didn't apply to bands like Led Zeppelin or The Rolling Stones since they were appreciated right away by their own generation—and in the end what I took from her argument was that artists deserved a certain quota of appreciation and once that quota was reached (in the early 1970s in the case of Led Zeppelin) it was incumbent upon the next generation to find their own artists on whom to exhaust their appreciation until their own quota was met and so and so forth. I couldn't quite get behind her logic 100% especially when it came to writers and painters and sculptors but I supposed it was an easier argument to make with regard to musicians. I would have brought up Destiny's Child or some group like that and asked her if you'd really want to listen to that crap all day instead of The Marvelettes or Carole King but I didn't want to belittle her argument with the most outrageous comparisons I could think of. Besides, I knew what she meant had nothing to do with Destiny's Child—for her there would be much better examples of musicians who actually wrote their own songs in the 1990s and early 2000s—bands I'd never heard of or cared to know like Veruca Salt and The Pixies and The Meat Puppets who are obvious examples of groups no one will

appreciate in 10, 20 or 100 years except for the hardcore punk fanbase of Kurt Cobain. And the sad truth is even Nirvana hasn't aged too well over the years probably because they weren't around long enough to develop and give themselves more variety other than their one angry jangle that was so much better than anyone else for 2-3 years circa 1992. I could say the same for Soundgarden only "Fell on Black Days" sounds better now than it ever did. But I can't listen to anything else they ever played. And Madison's moved on from the 1990s too. When we were first together she liked to go to small clubs and venues and make discoveries—and I went with her—but I always thought it was silly to try so hard to be on the cutting edge. Of course, in the types of clubs and places where we hung out, Madison's friends would drop band names like they were the true banner bearers of music, the more obscure and uncommercial the better—though to me most of these punk, alt-rock, anti-folk, grunge acts sounded the same like they hadn't even mastered the whole breadth of Rancid's sound or Nirvana's chord progressions which made them even more limited in scope and consequently even more forgettable. Afterwards, Madison would ask me if I liked the Cocteau Twins or Kiera Lynn Cain or Trespasser William or Seamonkey and I'd lie and go with one of the four and pray I could tell the difference and she'd take me so seriously I felt compelled to expand on my lie and develop it and I'd get myself caught in a myriad of nonsense observations and comparisons. From Madison's serious, sleepy face I couldn't tell if I was impressing her or embarrassing myself. That's pretty much how things went for a while. Finally, one afternoon, I told her I'd been meditating on this whole music issue for a while and I'd had a heartfelt debate within myself and other than Santigold and The Brazilian Girls I hadn't enjoyed a single concert I'd been to in the last year. I especially hated Seamonkey. I detested Brothers Past. Bilge Vomit made me want to punch the lead singer. I'd never liked Billy Corgan and his Nordic doppelganger in Bilge Vomit was equally repulsive. I'd rather listen to Belinda Carlisle than inflectionless female vocalists who sounded like monks. And I wouldn't trade Houses of the Holy for any of them. Madison nodded. Her

face was super serious. I think she must have expected my rebellion one of these days. I told her I didn't mind her listening to all that crap but I'd be trying out Led Zeppelin one last time and I'd prefer if she kept her opinions to herself as I would from that time on. Houses of the Holy sounded better than ever. "The Song Remains the Same" was almost brand-new. I tried Led Zeppelin III and liked all the acoustic songs too. I even unearthed the overplayed IV. Just as good—especially "Going to California." I didn't feel like I'd wasted anything holding onto these albums and I liked the opportunity to rediscover them. I was happy—maybe I'd been right all along. If you're thinking Madison and I broke up after that, think again—well, you can see for yourself we're still together. She did take offense to my comparing the bass player of Bilge Vomit to Billy Corgan. She admitted later that she'd had an intense crush on the guy but I shouldn't worry—it would've never worked out.

## Thanksgiving

Oré-Girón

The walls in my childhood home are thin, a casual conversation in the kitchen can be heard word for word in my room. Except this morning they're yelling. They're yelling and I'm sleeping and it's five in the fucking morning. I groan and pull the covers over my head.

Twenty minutes later and they're still yelling. Mediation is an assigned job in my household so I get up, shuffle over to the door, and open it.

The first thing I hear is my sister's voice. "Fine then! Send me to rehab! I don't care!"

Nope. Nope, nope, nope. I shut the door and slip back under the covers.

Thirty minutes later, my sister comes into my room. She slams the door behind her. "Mom and dad are fucking crazy. Who the hell do they think I am?"

"A coke addict," I say.

She groans and leaves.

Ten minutes after that, my mom comes into my room. She closes the door with two hands, guiding the latch to a soft click. "Your sister is so irresponsible."

"I know."

"And a coke addict."

"Maybe," I say.

She snorts and leaves.

Four hours and a shower later.

"Hey Jenny, how 'bout this?" I walk into the living room, spreading my arms so my sister can take a look at my outfit.

Jenny's spread on the only chair in the room that doesn't have rips running down the cushions. Her feet dangle over the armrest. "Great look," she says. "I'd change though."

"Not fancy enough?"

"I mean..." Her phone buzzes and she looks down to read a text before saying, "You can leave it on if you plan on coming out to them today."

I take a step to the left and look into the cracked hallway mirror. "I don't look that gay."

"No, you look pretty gay." I fidget with the bottom of my shirt, prompting my sister to add, "Your choice though."

"Fine. I'll just change."

“Oh, hey, don’t go yet. You wanna smoke before we leave?”

“Probably would make things worse for you, you know. Hard to deny you’re dependent on drugs if you, like, keep using them.”

She unlocks her phone and starts to type. “Yeah, whatever. Go change then.”

“Hey guys,” my dad turns around in the passenger seat to face me and my sister. He glances at my mom, who’s just outside the window putting gas in the car. “I know grandma’s the worst, but can you guys lay off for a second? Let’s just get there and do the dinner and then we can leave. We don’t need to keep talking about it the whole car ride there.”

I cut my eyes at Jenny before asking, “Why?”

“Not for grandma’s sake. For mom’s. She already feels guilty enough that we have to go in the first place. I think it makes her really sad that this is the way it is. So can we not talk about it until later? When mom’s not around?”

Jenny shrugs, propping her feet up on the seat in front of her and opening her phone. “Yeah, sure. Fine with me.”

I don’t say anything because when either Jenny or I speak with family, we speak for both of us.

My dad nods. “Good good.” He gets out of the car to talk to my mom.

As soon as the door shuts behind him, Jenny snorts. “White people these days. So sensitive.”

I want to agree, because I do. But the guilt of knowing it would hurt my mom if she heard keeps me quiet.

I push a spoon onto the top of the mashed potatoes, mashing them down and making less look like more. A thin cut of sandy turkey, a few pieces of steamed asparagus, a half spoon of dry stuffing, exactly three cranberries. It all looks very... *touched*. Like someone took the asparagus between their clammy hands, rolling its strands like Play-Doh.

The thought of putting even one bite in my mouth—the mastication of its wet, touched, blandness—makes me slightly nauseated. (Not nauseous. Thirty years ago, my mom sat at this same table and told her dad she felt nauseous. “Nauseated,” he had corrected. She responded by throwing up on the table.)

In the chair across from me, Jenny looks at her food with similar disgust, except she does a worse job at hiding it. I scratch at a brown dot on the side of the plate. It has already made its way underneath my nail when I realize what I'm doing and that the dot is not from any food on my plate. Maybe leftover from the last time someone bothered to clean anything in this house.

"Honey that's barely anything." My grandma leans over to grip my arm. She's squeezing hard, too hard. This is the first real physical contact we've had in years. "Go put more on that plate."

I mush the potatoes down further. "No, look. It's so much, I'll barely be able to finish." The intonation of my words is more stilted, overly pronounced. I can't remember why I started talking this way around them, but I also can't remember a time that I didn't.

She squeezes one last time and it almost hurts. "So," she turns to my parents. "You're going to Daniel's sister's after this?"

My dad, aka Daniel, says his next words slowly. I can tell he's taking care to soften his Rs. His own way of sounding more digestible to our given audience. "Yes, we're heading over after."

My aunt smiles because manners. Except not manners that actually mean anything, these are exercised in ritual only. "Oh, how nice."

"Yes," my grandma says. "How nice."

"Mom," my mom warns.

"What?" My grandma looks from side to side, as if in search of the wrongdoing.

No one wants to say *what*, so we start to eat. The only sound for a few minutes is forks scraping against ceramic. The occasional knife.

Then my grandma turns to Jenny. "Where's Kevin? I miss him."

Jenny doesn't even look up from her food. My mom responds for her. "Mom, we already told you, they broke up."

"What?" My grandma leans forward. "No, no one told me that. Really? Broke up? He was such a nice boy though. Are you sure?"

"Yep," Jenny says. "We broke up. A few months ago."

My grandma smacks her lips, exposing a smudge of

pink lipstick on her teeth. I don't know why she bothers with it in the first place, it always bleeds everywhere. Trailing down the side of her mouth. Staining the napkins. Catching the collar of a new white shirt she couldn't afford to buy but did anyway.

"Well that's a shame," she says and I wonder if she liked him so much because he was white.

"Not really," Jenny says.

"No, it really is."

"Nope, not for me."

"Well," my grandma purses her lips and looks down, raising her eyebrows, "if you say so."

More forks against ceramic.

My grandma inhales loudly, announcing her words before she says them. "I mean, I just miss him. Don't you miss him?"

Jenny looks only at me when she says, "No." She holds eye contact for a few seconds and I can see the sheen of water starting to build up. "I have to go to the bathroom." She gets up and doesn't come back for twenty minutes. As she's walking down the hallway, away from the table, I realize for the first time how tiny she's gotten. Her bones poke out in a weird way. Almost like she's...deteriorating. It takes a second for my brain to even think the word. Does the fact that it took me this long to see it make me a bad sister?

None of us eat while we wait. My aunt exchanges pleasantries with my mom about their work. She asks my dad about some vague historical event.

He talks slowly, I can see in his eyes he's somewhere else. Everything about him shrinks at this table. It's rare for me to get so much as a glance from him when my aunt baits him into conversation.

*He has a fucking PhD, I want to say. He's smarter than you. He's more successful than you and he came from nothing. What does that say about you? That you were handed every opportunity available and you still failed?*

When Jenny finally returns, the scraping resumes. I stare at her until she makes eye contact. I raise my eyebrows, *Are you okay?* She rolls her eyes and starts to push the food around on her plate without actually putting any of it into her mouth.

My dad is still talking about the history thing my aunt

had asked him about. My grandma shouts over him to say, “I love Thanksgiving. All of us here together. Seeing all of your faces. It’s a real treat.” My dad lets his sentence fade out.

Desperate, I think, to keep some form of conversation going, my aunt adds, “It really is a nice holiday.”

“Yeah.” Jenny puts a forkful of turkey in her mouth and continues to talk around the pale clumps of meat. “Classic white American holiday. Celebrating the colonization of a country that wasn’t theirs in the first place. Can’t forget the genocide of native people either, that was a big one.”

My aunt is coughing, probably choking on her asparagus. Before she can dislodge the food to respond my mom interrupts to ask her a question, “Stacy, have you been golfing lately? I know you were really enjoying it.”

My aunt places her hand on her chest, clearing her throat. “Yes, sorry about that. Yes, I’ve been golfing. The weather has been so nice, I’ve been really enjoying myself.”

My sister waves her fork around in the air and I can almost see her mouth quirk up. “Hey, wanna hear something about golf?”

She doesn’t wait for a response. “In my seminar course, we were talking about a Native American who was murdered by white, American soldiers. For no reason, really. Him and six other innocent Native Americans who were just kind of taken from their homes. Oh, and his wife. But, anyway, later on I guess the white people decided they felt bad enough about the whole murdering in cold blood thing that they decided to do something about it. And you’ll never believe what these crazy white people did. No, really, you’ll never believe it. They named a golf course after him. A golf course. Can you believe that? The dumbest white sport. Golfing. Like, these crazy white people decided that the best way to honor a man they *murdered* was to *name a fucking golf course after him*. Crazy white people doing crazy white people things.”

I think my aunt might combust. My grandma might combust too if she had any notion about colonization, which she should. Especially considering that her genes make me half Mayflower white.

My mom changes the topic to something about my cousins. My grandma insists we FaceTime them. Well, actually, first she asks me to do it and I say, “I don’t know them well enough.”

“Don’t be silly,” she responds.

“Why don’t you call them instead,” I say. “They would probably really like to see you.”

“You’re right.” She pulls out her phone. It rings for an uncomfortable amount of time. “They might be really busy. They’re at their Martha’s Vineyard house right now.” She turns to me. “Did you know that?”

“Yes.” Because, yes, I am overly aware of the fact that my cousins vacation in the same place the Obamas do while I couldn’t even go into my front yard as a kid because we lived across the street from a meth house. I guess we still do, except now the drug dealers are gone and college students have moved in.

“Heather got into Scripp’s,” my grandma says as she fiddles with her phone. “Did you know that?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know it’s basically an Ivy League education?”

I glance over at my Brown University hoodie I left on the couch when I came in and then say, “Yes.”

My sister laughs except it’s more of an aggressive breath out of her nostrils than anything. At that moment, my cousins answer. “Meema,” they say and I know they’re smiling because I can hear it. It was never even an option for me or Jenny to call her Meema. I don’t know if she would have gotten mad at us for doing it, but I know she wouldn’t have liked it.

A few years ago my uncle visited and brought them, the cousins, along. Every conversation we’d had was off-beat. We were the same age, half the same genes, but nothing they said really made much sense. Even the way they carried themselves felt inhuman to me.

I remember they weren’t allowed to go to the mall with my sister and me. My mom wouldn’t tell me why, but my uncle was really firm about the whole thing. Later that night we’d brought them for Mexican food. We’d just entered the part of town I was familiar with when one of them pointed to a store front sign in Spanish and told a joke about forgetting her passport and not knowing we were going to “literal Mexico.” My grandma still brought up that joke sometimes. She thought it was hilarious, clever even.

My grandma fawns over them now as she did then, bringing the phone right up to her face. “Aw, look at all of you.”

“How are you, Meema?” one of them asks. The worst part about it being that they sound like they actually care about her answer.

They talk for five minutes about stuff I can’t make myself care about enough to listen to. The only voices at the table are my grandma’s, my aunt’s, and occasionally my mom’s.

“Okay, bye now. Goodbye now.” My grandma has to squint at her phone and hold it at an arm’s length away to find the button to end the call. But she eventually does. In the moment of quiet that follows, she cuts a glance at me and Jenny and sighs.

But I guess I should have been listening to their conversation because whatever they talked about seems to have prompted my aunt to say, “So, no boyfriend?” I immediately look at Jenny, wondering why they would bring up her love life again. Except she’s looking down at her plate with a weird smile on her face.

“Like, you’re still not doing the boyfriend thing?” My aunt asks again. As she looks at me. Goddamn it.

“Oh. Um, yeah, no. No boyfriend,” I say.

“Just really busy?”

“Yeah. Lots of homework.”

“Well, you’ll get there eventually.”

Jenny gets a weird glint in her eyes. “Actually—“

I kick her under the table. Hard. And say, “Actually I was seeing this guy Jared for a while, but it didn’t work out.”

Various sounds of sympathy emerge from around the table.

“Yeah, you know how it goes,” I add, thinking it would sound natural. Which it doesn’t. My grandma pats my hand that’s holding a fork.

The topic shifts to my aunt’s work. She’s a therapist, which I think is just more proof that I’ve never met a therapist who’s actually qualified or good at their job. And then it’s like she’s just asking for it, because she says, “It’s so weird though, this field. Living in Tucson, you’d think there’d be more Mexican therapists. But instead they’re mostly white. I wonder why that is.”

My dad, my sister, and I look at each other first like, *this white lady is crazy*. And then like, *is she really asking us this?* And then

after a few moments of my aunt looking at us expectantly, like, *oh okay she really is asking us. Who's gonna take this one?*

I lose the staring contest so I take the next five minutes to try to explain how the formal and informal structures within this country are inherently racist and the barriers, economic and otherwise, this creates. This kind of conversation isn't conducive to five minutes, but it's the only amount of time I'm willing to waste on educating a full-grown adult on something she could find out with a simple google search.

When I'm done my aunt asks, "Okay, but is there some way this field seems unwelcoming?" Because she thinks everything is about her.

"Um, I don't know. I'm just twenty. And, also, still not technically Mexican," I say.

I can basically see the mental math going on in her head. Adding the amount of time she knows I've spent in Mexico, subtracting my mom's genes, multiplying by the family members I have who do live in Mexico, dividing by the fact that she knows my dad was born in Peru, and coming out to zero because at the core of it she thinks all Latinos are the same.

Jenny points to herself, my dad, and me. "So these are the only three brown people you're exposed to." She pauses, for dramatic effect I'm sure. "Guess there is a point to this dinner."

My aunt starts blustering saying that, no she does see... people who aren't white. Because I don't think she feels comfortable saying the words "brown people".

While she goes on, trying to assuage her white guilt, I look at Jenny and point to myself like, *Me? Brown? You sure?*

She shrugs like, *For the sake of making our aunt severely uncomfortable, sure.*

My aunt is still fumbling and at this point I think my dad is sick of entertaining her white guilt, which is utterly useless to everyone except her, so he jumps in to tell her she's fine.

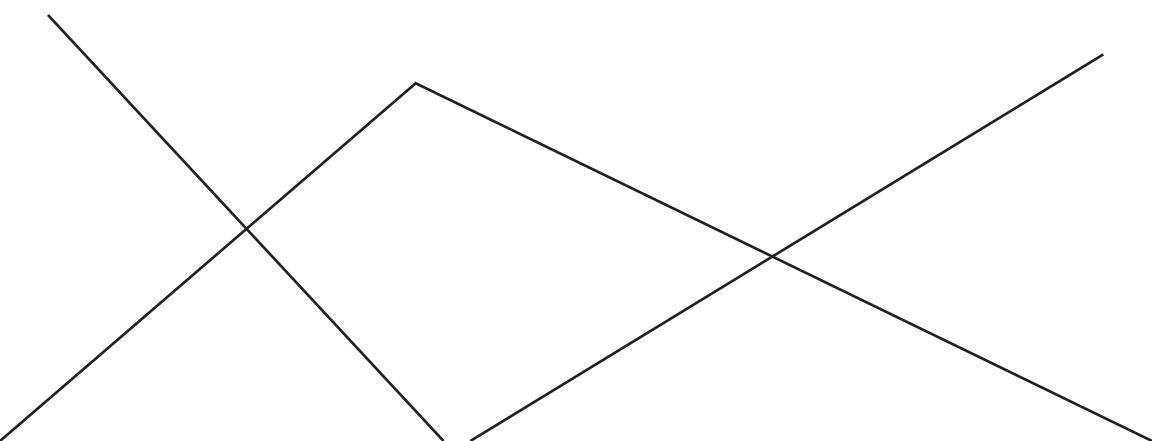
After that, everyone just kind of gives up and we finish eating in silence.

My assigned chore at the end of the thanksgiving meal used to be helping my mom do the dishes, but that was before my OCD got worse and touching plates covered in unidentifiable food substances caused me to spiral.

After my mom walked into the bathroom a few years

ago to see me sobbing as I repeatedly washed my hands, I was given a new chore: Throw out the trash, find an impossible amount of empty wine bottles considering the fact that no one drank any wine tonight and that my grandma is the only one who lives in this house, debate telling my mom that *her* mom's still drinking, and then ultimately decide to keep quiet about the whole thing.

Except that was last Thanksgiving. This time it's bottles of whiskey. I still tell no one.



## The Black Sheep Part I

Claramunt

When I was sixteen,  
My aunt left the family  
Didn't really know why,  
I often saw her cry.  
At my other aunt's wedding,  
The one with the big brown curly hair,  
Getting married to a man she met  
Only a few years ago,  
My aunt (the one with the pretty blonde curly hair)  
Was no longer allowed to be a bridesmaid  
The big blonde curly haired aunt left the family,  
She left her husband, too  
Well, he left her.  
He had a kid no one knew about  
But since she divorced him,  
She was the wrong one  
Her mother paid to load his U-Haul,  
They gathered his belongings together,  
Outside their perfect culdesac home  
When I was seventeen,  
My mother left the family  
Nobody knew why,  
My dad had another woman no one knew about  
Nobody paid for my mom's U-Haul  
No one spoke to me again  
At Thanksgiving when I was eighteen,  
I got the guts to show up, with my father by my side  
My aunt (with the big brown curly hair) at her home  
With the guy she just met,  
Refused to talk to me  
I didn't know why  
And I often cried  
They all knew why  
Turns out, I looked too much like my mom

## The Black Sheep Part II

Claramunt

Scattered with gold rings,  
Some with a really expensive Ruby  
I think that was her favorite gemstone.  
Grandma Nancy once told me her favorite word:  
“Shit.”  
Grandma Nancy once told me I was a  
“Demon baby”  
Because I misbehaved when I was young  
She didn’t like that I didn’t dance,  
Or sing, or play an instrument.  
Grandma Nancy bribed me with checks  
To attend dance classes.  
Grandma Nancy doesn’t speak to me anymore,  
Because I got tired of taking those checks,  
And because I see through her.  
Grandma Nancy carries really expensive purses,  
She hires people to do her chores.  
Grandma Nancy has a bad knee,  
She limped around her house.  
Grandma Nancy prides herself on her homes,  
Fancy granite countertops, perfectly fluffy bedding,  
And shiny gold china.  
Grandma Nancy once told me I was too much like  
My mother, her daughter-in-law,  
Because I aspired to be a professional,  
And I didn’t want to dance, or sing, or cook, or sew.  
My Grandma Nancy isn’t my grandma anymore,  
Just a lady I knew when I was a kid, that  
Cooks, and dances, and plays 15 instruments,  
That wrote me a letter  
Describing how she would now disown me,  
Because I got tired of taking those checks,  
And taking her “Shit.”

## The Flailer

Scheidler

She writhes, contorts her body,  
Distorts her face, eyes closed,  
Sobbing, she swings her arms to her  
Side. She releases the close  
Scrunched face and her nose, it  
Relaxes. Her eyes open slow  
Watching, waiting for something.  
A reaction?

Turning, he sighs, the exhale  
Piercing her heart, she exclaims.  
His head rotated back to  
Double check. Looking as he  
Walks away. Her face is dry.

## The Kid with the Faces

Westermoreland

I knew this kid who said he saw faces and figures in the smoke rings he blew. I didn't laugh at him or tell him he was crazy. I'd just nod and tell him I knew. He would make these walking sticks and staffs and canes from driftwood out there in the backyard, or he'd just avail himself to cut a branch off a living tree, or sometimes the whole tree if it was small enough to fashion a reasonably sized staff. Or walking stick. Or cane. He wasn't real green.

He would make all different kinds. Hickory and oak and cedar and maple. Elms. Dogwoods and wild black cherries, pines and privet, whatever called him at the time. He would strip the bark off nice and fast, 'cause he wasn't real concerned with making it smooth just yet. Then he'd sand it on down, always using an ascending gradient, until his hands, or your own, could just glide up and down the shaft without resistance or spa I knew this kid who said he saw faces and figures in the smoke rings he blew. I didn't laugh at him or tell him he was crazy. I'd just nod and tell him I knew. He would make these walking sticks and staffs and canes from driftwood out there in the backyard, or he'd just avail himself to cut a branch off a living tree, or sometimes the whole tree if it was small enough to fashion a reasonably sized staff. Or walking stick. Or cane. He wasn't real green.

He would make all different kinds. Hickory and oak and cedar and maple. Elms. Dogwoods and wild black cherries, pines and privet, whatever called him at the time. He would strip the bark off nice and fast, 'cause he wasn't real concerned with making it smooth just yet. Then he'd sand it on down, always using an ascending gradient, until his hands, or your own, could just glide up and down the shaft without resistance or splinters, the old splinter test. I told him once that the combination of that particular up-and-down stroking motion and the shaft brought to mind a self-stimulating practice not at all uncommon to the average American male. He laughed. Then, with steel wool, he'd polish that wood 'til it shined like a speck of gold catching the afternoon sun. He'd grab a towel and gently wipe away the sawdust and then a little later on he'd finally stain it real nice with some Minwax.

I liked the sticks he would make. It put me at ease watching him and his process. There was something transcendental about it, us out back on the right end of a cool breeze,

tucked gently and reverently amongst verdant flora. We'd sit out there on my back porch and talk and listen and just be, me sitting with my cigs and coffee, him steadily crafting and sanding and polishing and staining. I think, but I don't know for sure, that his thing with the sticks made his thing with the faces easier to deal with. That's the way I looked at it.

Sometimes the faces would talk to him, tell him things that he didn't always want to hear. He had a bunch of nervous tics, too. I think the faces were the reason. For example, sometimes he'd get to just pickin' and pullin' at his hair. He had this long, thick but straight black hair, a head full of it, and he'd just go to town twirling it in his fingers and ripping it out, then he'd twirl it in his fingers some more, maybe run his hands through it to get it out of his eyes. 'Cause he had long hair. We would be out back in the old pine rockers, finished long ago with a nice, aged white, now chipped and frayed and weathered from time and tumult. Fruit flies and mosquitos and gnats would be hovering, providing a cacophony of high frequency buzzing. It would surround our conversations, sometimes momentarily threatening to drown us out.

The kid with the faces, he'd just get to staring off into the woods. Maybe he was admiring the wise oaks and maples and pines lining the backyard, their tired, distinguished branches rocking back and forth, sort of undulating like I remember the ocean doing when I was a kid, waving sadly, but also gently swaying us into twilight. The placid motion of the branches also brought to mind the countless times I'd ridden past all those perfectly manicured rows of cotton or soybeans or corn plots on Highway 6 in the late summer, how they, too, seemed to surge and well and billow like the ocean.

The kid with the faces, he'd just continue to tear at his hair, neck craned at an odd angle, fingers tilling his scalp, hair floating down, down, down. It was real odd. I never could understand why he did it, what compelled him to pull out his own hair. And I'd say to myself, "that's the strangest thing I believe I've ever seen." And it really was. I thought I remembered hearing something one time from someone, or maybe it was on television, about folks with some condition that caused them to do what the kid did, just pick at their own hair over and over and eventually end up pulling it out. It had a name, I thought. Some big long word. For some reason I thought it started with like a "d" or maybe a "t". I don't retain the way I used to.

Sometimes he would get to be real worried about the faces. He'd tell me they were whispering to him to do stuff that he didn't want to do. Things he would never do in his right mind. And when the faces got to talking to him, he couldn't help but listen. He said he never knew when they were coming. It didn't happen every time he lit up. It didn't happen every day, even. Just at random times. And they would only appear within the smoke rings he blew, framed and confined to that fleeting realm, receding rapidly and dematerializing, leaving him confused and sometimes scared.

This one time, not long ago, just a couple weeks back, matter o' fact, I asked him what the faces told him. All he said was that he wasn't allowed to tell anybody else. I found this odd, and increasingly worrisome. At the time I dismissed it as a kid just saying something strange, but the more I thought about it the more it bothered me. I can't tell you why. It just did.

I know this other kid, too, a little bit older than the kid with the smoke rings and the faces. This kid is about twenty-seven, and he's got his own thing going on. This guy refuses to look at his reflection. He will not do it. He'll get around a mirror and just tense up, look every which way but forward. It's kind of unnatural. I don't know why he has this thing. I figured that maybe he just didn't like the way he looked at first, but he's not a particularly offensive-looking fellow. I mean, he ain't a movie star or anything special or fancy, but he doesn't look altogether ugly, either. Kind of in-between. Now I'm not gay, myself, and I feel comfortable enough with my own sexuality to safely, and without an unreasonable amount of humiliation, say that this guy was normal-looking. Nothing really worrisome about his appearance. But he still refused to look at himself. It's not just that he wouldn't. It actually seemed like a thing he *couldn't* do, like there was some occult, unseen force preventing him from even catching a glimpse of himself.

One time I caught him washing his hands in a bathroom at my place. He was scrubbing his palms, in between his fingers, his nails, all the while taking great care not to look at himself. I found this, as well, to be extraordinarily odd. I don't know why he does what he does. One day I'm just gonna ask him.

I know this third kid who's always talking about the government. I don't think he trusts them. He says I shouldn't trust them, either. He told me that the government doesn't care about me. He also told me that their master plan is to

eventually herd us all into these prison camps that he says they already got set up all around the country. He says we're turning into an authoritarian regime. He's always talking about this girl named Jade Helm, too. Something bout her being thirteen. At one point I got to thinking he might be a child molester. An anti-government child molester. That's what I thought for the longest time. Then one day I googled 'Jade Helm, thirteen-year-old-girl, Oxford, MS', to see if I could find some sort of proof that he was indeed a child molester. Cause I don't want to be around a child molester. But something else altogether came up in the search results. I read about Jade Helm 13, the government training exercise that took place in the summer of 2015, and that also had all types of folks with an inclination for conspiracy theories worried to death that martial law was a-comin'. Now I'm not any type of conspiracy theorist, so it really doesn't worry me too badly.

One day, the kid whose worried bout the government and I are sitting out back at his place, just a few houses down from mine. There's a small, wooden gazebo in the middle of the backyard. It was forged of cheap corkboard, apparently a long time ago, cause it sags bad to one side and has all sorts of mold stuck to the exterior. It's real overgrown with lots of vines and leaves and other organic materials, too, which lends it a sort of earthy, kind of bohemian feel. It's bordered by tea rose bushes and a wall of sage grass four and a half feet high, with a few cleomes scattered about, which smell conspicuously of marijuana in the summer. The yard slopes down just past the gazebo and the crabgrass becomes more sporadic the closer it gets to the edge of the woods. Two perfectly symmetrical maples, one pine, and three cedars, all bordered by two wise and royal oaks, each at least 80 feet and commanding your respect, provide welcome shade from the relentless Mississippi sun.

We always manage to find both literal and figurative refuge under the canopy of these sympathetic giants. A place to talk about our fears and hopes and loves and hate. A place separate from the outside world. So we do. We talk. We talk about a lot of different stuff. And on this day we talk some more about the government. He tells me something crazy. He says that homeless people around the Southeastern United States are disappearing. Just vanishing without a trace. Some have escaped the mysterious captivity, emerging with newly implanted RFID chips underneath their skin. He said the gov-

ernment controls their minds and thoughts and therefore them with these chips. I was shocked to hear this and I tried to find what I could about it online. But I can't find anything. I don't really believe him.

I know this fourth kid. He's about thirty and he lives right next door to me in a house that looks eerily similar to my own. I never did understand why whoever it was who built my house then decided to build an almost identical house right next door, or vice versa, but for whatever reason they had. In fact, they looked so similar that sometimes it gave me the feeling that our houses were the two mouths of a wormhole, like they were punching a hole through spacetime, with his house being a relic of my own from the past. Or the future. I watched a Carl Sagan documentary last week.

Anyway, the kid has this wavy blonde hair and a long skinny face. His cheeks seem sort of brittle, almost concave. I don't think he gets enough nutrients. He always wears these real bright, rainbow-colored, short sleeve cotton shirts with the buttons, like a lot of the frat boys here in Oxford have in their closets and on their backs. He's got these big blue eyes, but his eyelids kind of hang about halfway down his eyeballs most of the time, and that makes him seem kind of chronically sedated. And he reminds me distinctly of a kid. In fact I've always thought he reminded me of a sad kid.

It's one of those subtle things you sometimes recognize about a person or a place or a thing that you must have always known or assumed, maybe subconsciously, but never actually acknowledged, until finally you do and it seems like some profound revelation or the answer to some impossible question you've been thinking about for a long time, and you get to wondering if you've always known and understood that particular thing about that particular person or place or thing, and it's kind of like one of those vicious circles you sometimes hear folks talking about on television, like maybe on the news or one of those educational documentaries on PBS or BBC, like about psychology or brain science or something like that, and you just keep thinking and thinking in circles and you almost drive yourself goddamn insane, and sometimes you think you actually HAVE driven yourself insane and so you begin to look at everything a little differently, like through a lens or something else that obscures the way things really are, or the way you always assumed things were, and then you start to

question your perceptions of the phenomenal world and wonder if the way you see or assume things to be is actually how they are, or how everyone else sees them, like if the particular wavelength of light that you perceive to be the color red is the same as what everyone else perceives the color red to be, like if your red was other people's green, or vice versa, or if a chord progression in A minor sounded and felt the same to me as to you, etc., and that opens up an whole new can of worms that you'd rather not open at all and then you really start to freak out and you curse any god who would sentence you to this life of constant and relentless insanity, and then you start thinking about how you'd rather be anyone else in the universe, because surely nobody else felt and thought and was as crazy as you are and you realize that your mind again has become tired and weary and you wish now more than ever that it would just stop, but then you remember when you tried to make it stop one time years back and everyone got mad at you and the State gave you two options and you chose the latter and they carted you off in a chuck wagon to Lakeside and you stayed there for nine days and you couldn't leave and you saw a doctor who told you that you hadn't progressed or improved at all and it was his professional opinion that you should stay even longer against your will and you started to panic and thought of your family and your house and your room and your pets and you tried to call but nobody was home and you just didn't know what to do so you called your neighbor and she got in touch with your family and they finally came and got you out since they felt you had stayed in that place long enough. One of those type things. I always just assumed this fourth kid was born a sad baby, grew into a sad toddler, then a sad child, finally coming of age as a sad teenager, and just kind of stayed stuck in that phase or space in time in an emotional sense.

Anyways, like I said, the sad kid with the sleepy eyes lives right next door to me, and he likes to eat pills. Not all pills. Only certain kinds of pills. The kinds of pills that are bad for you but make you feel good. And one type in particular. He liked to eat a lot of Valium. Apparently it's one of those pills that just totally relaxes a person, puts them completely at ease. The way the sad kid with the sleepy eyes described their effect to me was as follows: "a warm blanket and a cool breeze of absolute wellbeing wrapped in a layer of utmost understanding and unwavering confidence that every single

part of your life past, present, and future will not only be okay, but radiating with exponential hope, drawn from a bottomless well of empathy, understanding, and affirmation.” The sad kid with the sleepy eyes sometimes goes off on tangents, and he is a bit of what we around here call a philosophizer. And the worst part is that he gets to eating those damn Valium like peanut butter M&Ms or something like that and they make him forget shit, so often he’ll go off on one of the same, crazy diatribes four or five times in the same week and I’ll get to my wits end and almost lose my patience with him. But I don’t. He means well. And fortunately for me, he’s out of town this week.

Yesterday the kid with the smoke rings and the faces and the voices came over to my place after I got off work. I clean houses for a living and it’s hard, if not androgynous work. On this particular day, my coworker and I cleaned four houses, and it took eleven hours, and I was tired. So right when I got home I rolled one up real nice and fat and did my thing and just sat there for a little bit, then about an hour later, the kid with the faces showed up. We went out back and smoked some cigs. I closed my eyes for just a second and supper prospects were considered as my stomach began to growl.

Watching him intently as he blew careful circles that rose and expanded only to ultimately fade away, I thought about how it kind of reminded me of life, with evolution and overpopulation, and the inevitable collapse of civilization, of fluoride in my water and chemtrails above my head, prison camps, and computer chips and all the rest. My stomach growled again. And then I realized I had just smoked too much good at one time, and that maybe I’d been hanging around the kid who’s worried about the government too much.

## The Shade of Color

Collins

When people claim to be afraid of the dark,  
I am forced to think they are referring to my  
Skin.

A whip splicing a night sky until its constellations are forced to  
Surrender,

Cracking a horizon until it bleeds a sunrise onto a  
White blank page.

The ash that settles mocks cinnamon dust  
That soaks blisters upon my unforgiving  
Flesh.

My feet fabricate to paper and cruel rivers are the only way  
Home.

I have become an echo who is too reluctant to find itself.

All I know is when I let the rays swallow me,  
I will give the birds permission to pick at my  
Wreckage;  
Only then will I make it  
North.

## The Story of the Gymnasium's Suicide

Aletti

On June 3rd, 2000, Dean's car was found on the bridge ablaze, paper cups and deli wrappers running away like raindrops. No one had driven over that bridge for nearly 100 years. It was steel truss, built at the beginning of the 20th century and then closed to railroad and carriage traffic. At some point it was painted black. For us teenagers, it was the bridge where we gathered late at night after smoothly sliding the basement door shut on its tracks and running to what's-his-name's car, parked in the dark at the stop sign. Breathless, we'd hop into the back seat: *Hey*.

We parked by the train station and got out and walked. We wobbled along the abandoned planks, twisted tales and ran rum-heavy kisses amongst the eyebars and brackets. The black paint curled under our fingernails and peeled off into the night like those boys' cars driving away from our house after they dropped us off. They went away without the headlights on.

The story went like this: the first responders were his friends, sixteen-year-olds who bravely joined the volunteer fire house, who donned red KFD tees to match the Solo cups they clutched at parties.

The story went on like this: the boys immediately recognized Dean's car, but the body was indistinguishable, all char and soot, and the older men had to hold them back, scream at them to stay in the truck, stay where they were, even though it was those boys who knew that was their friend was in there, that his baseball cap should have been on and tomorrow was his 17th birthday and this weekend they were going to do what everyone does in a small town— play beer pong.

This is the story of which we are certain: the next day, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators gathered everyone into the gym and tiered us onto the accordion bleachers, seniors, juniors, sophomores, and finally, freshman on the lowest rung. Chatter bounded from the carpeted corridor of the gymnasium, clanged around the weight room next door and finally crashed through the double-doors into the school's gym. But the whole set-up was askew. Why this, why in the middle of the day, why here?

The escorting teachers wore their usual masks of nurture and nonchalance as they took place along the padded walls under the basketball hoops, while the harder-eyed

administrators stood horizontal in front of us. The immature boys in our grade pushed and shoved and touched one another, and in all that bustle, the absences of Mike and Greg and Stephen and all those senior boys weren't noted, even to us sophomore girls. As we entered, the microphone pole stood there awkwardly, thin and metallic in front of Principal Kor, a maternal figure consistently in a dark suit, square glasses, and a swag hairdo.

The microphone's black cords trailed away like tire marks.

\*

As a teacher myself now, I imagine there must have been multiple cues and directives, urging for voices to dissolve into that haven of sweat and sneakers, *to stop playing*, even though we were in the gym, but as a student, I heard nothing of my own behavior.

\*

I settled down onto the first row of benches next to my friends.

*Last night, at around 11 PM, there was a single-car accident in Katonah involving one of our students, Kor* launched right into it, and her deep voice, best known for moving pedestrian traffic faster than an escalator, boomed through the now-silent gym.

The basketball nets froze. The floor's polyurethane coating seemed to momentarily stop glittering beneath the track lighting, whose own incessant melody just, simply, rested. *Dean G—was pronounced dead at the scene. The investigat—*

Her voice halted in the midst of blood-curdling screams from the highest tiers as girls began to catapult themselves down the bleachers, chapsticks and pencils commingled with flip flops in a haste to make it to the door.

It was primal. It was the need to escape the open space where our most private fears—the ones that weren't yet verbalized, that were pitted between guts and pubescent brains—were made public: one day, maybe soon, we were going to die.

The teachers inhaled and leaned back into the padded wall, as though it could absorb the shock of two thousand teenagers recognizing the end of play time, of capture-the-flag and touch football, of crab-walks and three-pointers-- in the very space made for play. The whole gymnasium collapsed

in upon its very existence.

\*

It's 2011, four months into my first year as a high school teacher, twenty minutes into first period, and the principal, Mr. Clawson, comes to my classroom door. It's a rare occurrence: evaluations are usually done by department heads, and the principal in this school, one with two rival gangs, kids bused in from other counties, and a failing state exam average, was primarily there for discipline.

He's a very tall white man with salt and pepper hair and a pockmarked face that suggested his reasons for falling into his position. I've only met him on a few occasions: lunch duty, which we share, and the first (and only) interview I had at the school.

"Ms. Aletti, can you step outside for a second," he asks, his voice husky. All the eyeballs in the classroom widen in excitement, as though I were in trouble.

I get nervous, as thought I'm in trouble.

I close the classroom door behind me and stand in front of Principal Clawson. The lockers are grey behind him and the hallway empty, narrowing into a pinpoint just behind the fall of his coiffed hair.

"Did you check your email this morning?" he asks.

"No, I launched right into my lesson and didn't get a chance. . . ." I trail off, ashamed by my characteristic lateness, my inability to coordinate starting class and checking emails because I hadn't arrived early.

"Well, last night your student B— was involved in a family homicide. B— is recovering in the hospital with a gunshot wound, but his brother, sister, and mother have been killed," Principal Clawson says firmly.

I think my jaw drops. I think my eyes widen. I think the hallway bulges and swells and zooms and pinpoints but I'm not sure. I don't know what to say. B— should be in my next period class, and while most of the students in that class only showed up for half the week, B— was always there.

"What—" I begin, unintelligently, the only word I can muster.

"We'll be sending up counselors next period to tell your class the news and have them make cards for him in the

hospital,” interjects Principal Clawson.

“Okay, that’s a good idea,” I redeem myself, trying to sound certain, positive, hopeful—all the traits you’d expect from a 24-year-old first-year teacher. Through the glass window of the door, I can see my students nearly falling off their chairs trying to see the interaction between me and the principal.

“Okay, then,” he says, his gaze unable to match mine because I’m looking down and trying to breath. He walks past me without touching my shoulder. I inhale and open the door.

The counselors tell the news both bluntly and delicately to my classroom of 14 students, all African-American, half involved in gangs, half trying to do well, all trying to survive. As expected, the girls cry, loud and big. At the counselor’s’ advice, I encourage T— and K— to channel their thoughts into creating nice cards for B— so he could be cheered up in the hospital.

The girls work with a dedication and fervor like I had never seen in them before, except when they talked about the Drama High series they were reading, or how they were getting their hair done. They cut up different colored construction paper and glue it together. They practice writing their thoughts on scrap paper before committing it to their cards. They sing, cry, laugh, and hug one another. The boys though, are stoic, as though they’ve seen this before. The air is heavy with an adolescent acceptance (that far surpassed any adult in the room) of familial and neighborhood violence.

At lunch block, Principal Clawson calls me down to his office over the loudspeaker. In a strange dream of exhaustion and disbelief, I walk to his office.

“Well, Ms. Aletti,” he begins. “We made a mistake.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well, your student B— unfortunately was killed in the shooting. It was his brother, R—, who survived,” he states firmly. His pepper coife wavers in the air-conditioned room. Pictures of his family adorn the bookshelf behind him and the Florida sunlight reminds us it can still cast a glare even through closed blinds. I shift in my seat.

R— attended Dwyer, the high school up the street, as Florida still bussed kids from certain neighborhoods to other districts in an effort to promote diversity and equality, a practice still in place from desegregation.

“Oh.” I say. I look at my hands in my lap. “But what are we to do with the cards?”

\*

Me and my friends, we barely knew Dean, so we sat there, wide-mouthed and wide-eyed, uncannily stuck between the primordial stress response and sudden cognitive epiphany that intersected at the bottom of the bleachers. It was as though those bleachers were set up as an absurd stairway to heaven or adulthood, depending on who you were.

We knew, of course, the story of Dean: his popularity, his position amongst the hacky-sack tribe and the lacrosse team; his beautiful dark-haired, green-eyed girlfriend with the Abercrombie shorts and Birkenstock clogs, who we secretly prayed would shout some bullying words to us, because being recognized by her for something rumored was better than not being recognized at all. Even at fifteen, we knew that it was unimaginable to walk a hallway namelessly. Academic achievement, athletic failures, sexual milestones — these marked your identity. And maybe, if you collected enough, that desire we all had to disappear would actually disappear itself. If you floated through those hallways unknown, you were the ghost that you simultaneously dreaded and wanted to be.

\*

When Friday finally arrives, I bring my files home from work to grade the collected “Do Nows,” which consist of free writes about the thematic topics our literature would address for the unit. I flip paper after paper, and finally reveal B— last words to his 9th grade self, written in pencil to a rightward slant I will never forget for as long as I live.

*I'm not afraid of much, he wrote, but I am afraid of my step-dad.*

\*

The story seemed to end like this: the herd of close peers were followed out by guidance counselors and support staff, who offered “a place to talk” the next couple of weeks. The rest of us went to back, confused about what happened,

unsure if that support staff was meant for us or only close friends. Would you be judged if you went and didn't know him? Was sadness by mere association a thing?

When I run into classmates from high school, which isn't very often now, we always bring up this story and admit, it wasn't the best idea, to deliver the news how they did, where they did. The scene was always approached with an air of puzzled indifference. Was it suicide? No one could quite remember because back then bullying didn't have a name, even though the name that was screamed down the hall at me was sibilant and scary. No, it couldn't have been suicide—we were the kids who had everything, but everything is relative when your world is a small town outside of New York City and you've never seen the projects, bullet holes, or government cheese.

\*

I get the news in an email: The funeral for the two dead children, one my student, one his baby sister, and their mother will be held in the high school gymnasium, the following Friday.

My stomach twists again. I have plane tickets to go to Vail with my boyfriend, to ski, to laugh, to drink, to eat, to fuck. He bought them and I'm not sure how to proceed.

Every moment for this whole week is a paralysis for my 24 year-old-self. I want throw myself down bleachers, to cry for not grading papers quickly enough and recognizing the signs, for signs and situations beyond my control, but still a very big part of me remaining in control.

I don't go. I make my world be about me because that's all I can bare. I watch Florida peel off the concrete as though it were scaling the smoothest of bleachers, lifting into the invisible, intangible air where the clouds have done absolutely nothing to me or anyone else. I think of the caskets amongst the hoops and backboards, the bleachers and scoreboards, the padded walls and painted lines. I think of the utter difference in the life I lived and the lives of my students, who still found themselves in the gymnasium, wondering how suddenly death could come.

## This is the Sky in Oakland

Simone

7:08am

This is the sky in Oakland: dusty blue with pink bits and flecks of orange. If you squint and maybe smoke a hybrid the Clouds are crawling towards each other in a way that makes you believe there's good stories being told up there too.

My back didn't hurt because I started taking my meds again, and my brain isn't leaking because i started taking my other meds again.

I deleted the Postmates app and poached an egg

I got a therapist and a book about the moon

My therapist says to find out more about myself/what the fuck does that even mean

The author says to let go or be dragged/ i know exactly what that means

12:35pm

This is the sky in Oakland: bright and sharp and feels everlasting. Any premonition of chaos is at a stand still and you will play along because right now you can.

I pay 100 dollars for a nigga named Bilal to teach me how to fight the wind.

I may very well have to bury my mother and my brother at the same time.

I do the first thing because of the likelihood of the second.

But in these wretched times i remember that my mouth, my lungs, and the air that gathers in between is not all i have

I remember that my nails are getting long and my patience is getting longer

Red wine is still my friend but not my best friend

I am telling the truth and nothing but

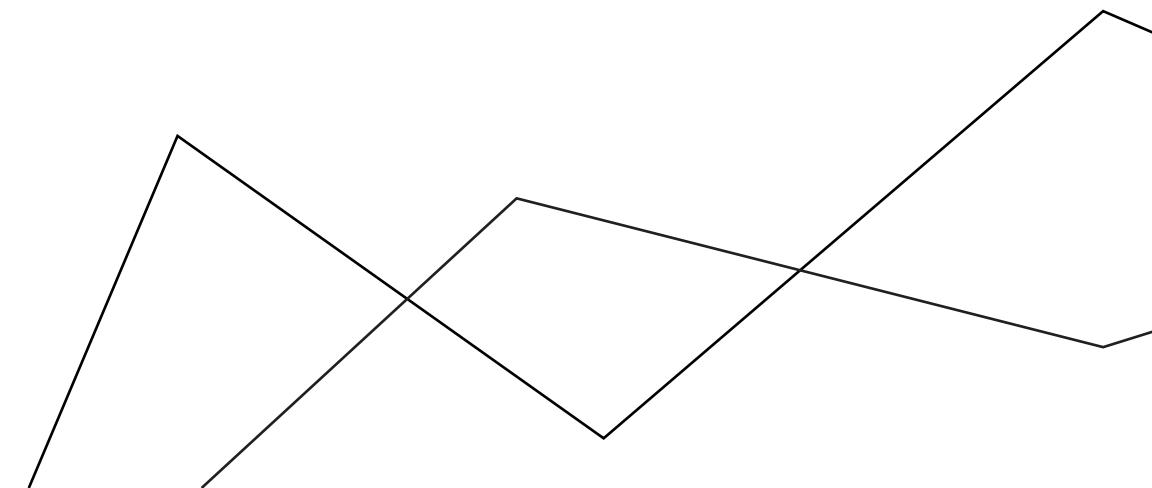
I am eating more fruits with seeds, swallowing one and wishing for at least a leaf

and I am calling my brother back every time/i am hearing him smile every time.

6:46pm

This is the sky in Oakland: Lavender dipped in peach dipped in blood. Just kidding about the last one, this will be a happy poem. My heart is round and ripe and if you wish--- Please Peel back

the skin and be proud  
For I have lost and I have learned  
from the sound of bending that breaks and the stitch of sowing  
that heals.  
Hold it with both hands and feel what it means to re-become  
To have found a way back to yourself  
even if it meant circling back and digging your heels back  
in the spot you ran away from last summer  
you know moments in the sky don't last long but you look up  
anyways  
Snap a pic anyways  
Send it to your pretend sister anyways  
Smile hard and trembling anyways  
I am asking you to be proud/ We did this!



## This Nurtured Honey Tastes like Gruel

Gill

My words are sweet, I sometimes eat them.  
But those monstrous globs of rage you spat at me, are impossible to masticate.  
I cleanse myself in your words, a sticky liquid, but they clump to hair like cheese grits in teeth.

Your argument is cheap and crystallized, mine is organic from a pricey quality brand.

My finger dips into your jar, it tastes bland and gray, as you drip from my fingers.

I'll surrender my plight to polish your life into golden amber, because, your honey is crusty, gooey like glass stirred into gruel, slicing the string linking our hearts

There is no choice but to strain you out, your chemicals taint my body anyhow,

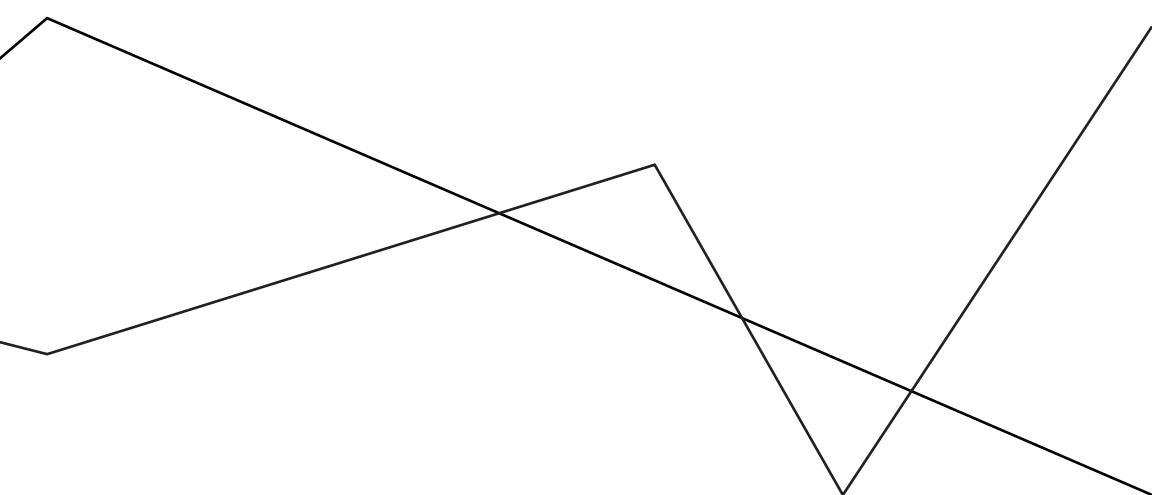
but where will I be without the high from our sugared laughs?  
You choke on brittled honey, eyes bulging, begging for help, but I'm done.

Others will nuke you in the microwave, it's beeps will echo our past.

Quick it's not late! Add more minutes, dilute your vitriolic words into a slick golden haze.

Our Tea is better with honey, and I've never spilled yours!  
For now, I'll take my cookied thoughts home, until you nurture your nest of swarming bees.

My welts are swelling from your stings, so it looks like I've grown allergic to you.



Waiting for Guagin

Darling

### **Part One: Fishhooks and Vodka**

In the summer of 1965, on our first day of fishing in Maine, my father and brother were catching pickerel regularly, while I had no luck at all using smaller lures and the ultra-light rod I had bought for this trip.

My father handed me a big Hula Popper, a short, stout surface plug trailing a skirt of multi-colored rubber streamers. "That's too heavy to cast with this rod," I said.

"Oh, bullshit. I'm forty-five years old and I've been all the way from the East Coast to the China Sea. *[A declaration of authority he used frequently.]* I know how to use a god-damned fishing rod."

*[I had already disagreed with him on other minor things that day, and I could see his rising need to put me in my place.]*

I shrugged, snapped the Hula Popper on the line, and gave it a vigorous cast. The lure had nearly completed a 360-degree circuit of the boat when it was stopped by the back of my brother's head. One of the treble hooks embedded itself past the barbs into his scalp necessitating a visit to a doctor in a nearby town.

The next day, neither Denny nor I were eager for more fishing. Instead, we went on a day trip to Baxter State Park and Mount Katahdin with our mother and Aunt Gert. Our father remained at the cabin to fish in solitude. While our mother and Gert enjoyed a leisurely stroll along the lower end of Roaring Brook, Denny and I scrambled, in breathless exhilaration, up the mountainside, past the tree line.

*[In a zone of dense brush, we blundered to within fifteen feet of a cow moose with a calf. She grunted to announce her presence, ambled placidly on, and disappeared.]*

I had never seen such immense wildness; nor had I ever felt such instant intimacy with the tangible spirit of a place. My brother was equally enthralled, and we vowed to return.

*[Our father caught more than twenty pickerel that day. He released most of them.]*

The following year, we headed for Katahdin on our own, intent on standing on the summit we had seen from far below and couldn't forget.

*[It was the summer before my senior year in high school and after Denny's first year of college.]*

*[On childhood vacations, watching the highway landscape stream past the car windows, while our father lashed his impatient temper to the breaking point and swore at the incompetence of other drivers, we had imagined another way of traveling. We didn't want to merely arrive at Katahdin; we wanted to cross the space between Pennsylvania and Katahdin with open eyes, minds, and hearts, and see where this mountain that had captured our dreams truly stood in the world.]*

On the first day, we traversed the Adirondacks and stopped for the night at Plattsburgh, New York. When I awoke in the morning, I felt pressure and pain in my jaw. We started out early, took the ferry across Lake Champlain to Vermont, ate breakfast in Montpelier, and crossed New Hampshire into Maine. By the time we reached Skowhegan, I was in agony.

I begged a local dentist to pull the abscessed tooth and give me antibiotics, but because I was underage, he was emphatic that he couldn't oblige. My parents were on their own vacation and couldn't be reached by phone. I asked if Maine had a problem with underage people crossing state lines to get teeth pulled just for the hell of it. The dentist did not find this amusing. He was willing, however, to give me a prescription for pain medication.

*[Darvon.]*

We filled the prescription, checked into a motel, and Denny bought a bottle of vodka. The next morning we left at dawn. My brother drove fourteen hours back to Pennsylvania, while I writhed in pain and nausea in the back seat, swilling vodka, and vomiting out the window.

## **Part Two: Better Living Through Chemistry**

After spending the spring and summer of 1970 heavily occupied with both protest and a blossoming identity as a visual artist/photographer, autumn began with a draft notice and a lover in love with someone else.

I had earnestly pursued my education—it was not a draft-dodging scheme. The draft was a threat and an impediment, not a motivator. But the liberation of successfully dodging the draft released several years of pent up tension with a kind of slingshot effect that catapulted me out of school with enough force to bounce off the West Coast.

When I wandered back to North Carolina, where my parents were living then, they could see how psychologically ragged I was and welcomed me to stay while I sorted things out.

They were generous to a degree I hardly recognized at the time.

*[They were also damaged and difficult people whose motives were never pure.]*

I had a solid portfolio of high-minded rationalizations for dropping out of Clarion State College (now Clarion University of Pennsylvania) and then wandering away from San Francisco, but being clinically depressed and stoned most of the time were not insignificant factors. I was largely defined by what I didn't want. Though it should have been painfully obvious that one can't navigate to happiness using a set of negative criteria, depression has its own logic.

*[There weren't many options. School seemed to be the only readily accessible alternative to some kind of grunt labor, probably in a factory.]*

I borrowed my father's yellow Firebird and drove the seven hundred miles north to Clarion in nine hours and forty-five minutes. Denny was working as an employment counselor there, so I crashed at his place, met with people at the university, and re-enrolled for the spring term. Finished with the business at hand before noon, I stopped at the Campus Ministry coffee house in search of Father Zeitler, the open-minded priest who had sheltered and consoled many a hippie through bad trips and failed loves. The only person there was Jan—blonde, beautiful, and bra-less, with a gentle voice and an easy smile. We had traveled in social circles that overlapped at the coffee house and partook of the late sixties/early seventies zeitgeist. I was a radical, one of the wild ones. Though she seemed like a kindred spirit, she also tended to associate with better-behaved people. I had assumed that was a barrier of some sort and had been too absorbed in my personal melodramas to reach beyond a fleeting moment of intense attraction, near the end of the previous year's summer, amidst the agonizing disintegration of my first true love.

With bright autumn woods beckoning on an unseasonably warm, autumn day, I invited Jan to join me for a walk and was surprised when she accepted. We drove out to Bigley Run, a little creek on a State Game Land not far from Clarion. There were no trails, just open woods and glorious sunlight. Jan's company was an unexpected comfort. Just to be with someone who had no agenda, wanted nothing from me, wasn't

worried about me, and seemed to enjoy my company brought a welcome ease I hadn't felt in far too long.

We walked down the steep slope of the gully, crossed a creek reduced to a trickle by an autumn dry spell, and ascended the other side.

*[Soft, tiny voices hidden in the rhythms of rocky trickling.]*

Our eyes met and drew us into a long, savored kiss. I unbuttoned her soft, well-worn flannel shirt and spread my jacket on the ground. We spent the afternoon there, immersed in making love.

Back at the car, we stood by the wooded roadside lightly embracing, procrastinating the drive back to Clarion.

Jan said, "I didn't know you could feel so much, Reg. You know, I'm not going to believe your bitter act from now on."

*[I hadn't thought she could feel so much either; because I had mistaken her gentleness for passivity.]*

Though I hadn't thought of myself as bitter, I had, indeed, allowed bitterness to harden around me like a shell. I hadn't known there was so much to be felt.

*[Making love as an ecstatic throb of creation was a revelation, but there is a farther distance between revelation and the gritty floodwaters of daily life than is obvious to the young and stoned.]*

I was enthralled, but we didn't speak of future plans, or even exchange phone numbers. Though I had fallen in love deep and hard, the events of the previous year had led me to think of myself as toxic in terms of relationships.

I would not be good for Jan—it would all unravel in confusion and sadness.

Predisposed to guilt by both ancestry and upbringing, I actually believed I was being noble in not pursuing a relationship. My nobility was defined more by self-pity and self-indulgence than by love.

*[There's also a fair chance that I really would have been bad for her.]*

The vestigial remnants of a child's egocentric universe mingled with the naïve hippie spirit of the times—just let it happen, and all will be well. I would return to Clarion for the spring semester, and serendipitous circumstance would deliver an opportunity for my nobility to falter.

I drove Jan to the house she shared with several others. After an enjoyable, but obligatory, dinner with my

brother, I wandered off into college-town Clarion and ran into Kirk, an old friend from the dawn of college hippiedom, who gave me a joint and a hit of blotter acid. Reality ran amuck in mostly pleasant ways, except for a few minutes when we were wandering back streets, and I had a rush of anxiety triggered by difficulty telling where we were because everything looked utterly new.

Kirk asked rhetorically, “Where are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“No, *where* are you?”

“Right here.”

He walked a short distance and beckoned me to follow. “Now where are you?”

“Right here.”

“Well, that settles it then.”

*[Be here now.]*

My anxiety evaporated and the street was a glittering mass of jewels rising and falling in rhythmic waves in the moonlight, like the breathing of a benevolently beautiful snake.

I left Clarion early the next morning.

I didn’t fully understand what had happened to me, but I knew it was extraordinary.

*[The confluence of lust and love became exponentially more complex. Jan had reconfigured the terrain of my heart.]*

### **Part Three: She’s Not There**

When I returned to Clarion, Jan was gone. I didn’t know where she had gone or why or how to find out.

*[I wore her absence like a secret tattoo.]*

Early in the semester, as Kirk’s birthday party faded into stoned oblivion, and the last guests wandered away, Bea, whose soft-spoken idiosyncratic beauty exuded a waif-like aura of tragic past, and I found ourselves alone in each other’s arms. We mostly shared our unspoken wounds more than anything else, but sometimes it seemed like love. She didn’t hide her woundedness—she wore it like a seductive gown.

*[She seemed to understand love primarily in terms of conflict and sacrifice.]*

I covered my private agonies with a semi-cool, cynical bravado, but for momentary eruptions triggered by excesses of

anger, intoxication, and longing, when I ranted foolishly and puked cheap wine into alleys.

*[I was probably far more transparent than I realized.]*

Bea and I made love often, but seldom slept together. I slept in my own bed in my own apartment and awoke in solitude.

Our physical attraction alternated between obsessive intensity and leaden absence in cycles that utterly baffled me, but to say I was not astute about such things would be a very great understatement, indeed. Love tethered us to mutual torment in inexplicable, vaguely embarrassing ways.

Rich and Wayne, who lived in the upstairs apartment above Kirk, his girlfriend, Kathy, and Bea, scored two pounds of weed in Edinboro, another Pennsylvania college town eighty miles away. I rode with them to pick it up. As usual, the process of weighing the pot out into one-ounce bags turned into a small party, with fat joints circulating continuously.

Bea and I went downstairs to make love, but just as the last of our clothing fell beside the bed, she began trembling and sobbing with what seemed like a mixture of grief and terror. She clung to me desperately. I kissed her tears away and held her until she found a stillness that no longer seemed to need me.

Bea didn't explain what had happened, and I didn't ask. That Bea had inner torments at least as deep as my own frightened me.

Afterward, Bea's passion waned steadily and in the moments when the raw fact of slowly losing her was most vivid and present, I felt like I was drowning in anguish, but when the near panic subsided, and loneliness settled over me like fog, it was Jan I longed for.

That was merely the first of many cyclical ruptures in our romance, and our life together stumbled onward.

Two years later (1974), after my finances recovered from an unraveled house-sharing attempt with an old friend, my longstanding desire to climb Mount Katahdin became affordable. Kirk joined Bea and me for our biggest adventure in far too long.

Knowing Kirk's personal indulgences quite well (I was a little more moderate and considerably more discreet) and that the temporary plates on my new and conspicuous Volkswagen Thing had expired due to an unresolved bureaucratic glitch, I made it clear there were to be no chemicals on

this journey, and recreational herbs had to be in misdemeanor quantities kept clearly among the owner's personal belongings. The possibility of going to prison, especially for someone else's stash, was not a fear I wanted to pack on this journey. I was emphatic about it, and Kirk agreed.

There were strange tensions from the beginning. Bea and I were six months into living together, and it wasn't going well. Having been raised on Wonder Bread and guilt, the transition to whole wheat and blame should have been fairly easy, but it required more regression than I could muster. All this was complicated by the fact that my heart was not fully available, and I didn't have a clue about how to deal with it.

Kirk still lived in a loose, sloppy world that had seemed vibrant a few years before, but now seemed increasingly prone to danger, dirt, and waste, with little compensation in thrill or insight. Though middle-class society repulsed me, the alternative I had once thought of as a carefree embrace of personal freedom had begun to seem more like a careless embrace of narcissism. Kirk's uninhibited authenticity was devolving into self-caricature. His long, ragged beard and piece of rope for a belt looked more like conspicuous affectation than the simplicity of voluntary poverty. The way Kirk reflected aspects of myself that I was struggling to leave behind was sadly abrasive.

*[Chance and inattention had already cost me more love and life than I was confident of regaining.]*

Even so, there were good times along the way—stunningly beautiful landscapes, campfire food, and the freedom of the road.

We camped in the Adirondacks, crossed Lake Champlain on a ferry, and headed across Vermont en route to Maine and Baxter State Park. Driving through Plainfield, a small town east of Montpelier, I caught a sidelong glimpse of a blond woman who moved in a way that made me think, momentarily, that I had seen Jan.

*[I nearly always drove too fast in those days.]*

I was briefly shaken, but there was no reason to expect to encounter Jan in a little town in Vermont.

*[This is not a movie.]*

It would have been an act of lunacy to *actually* pull the car over, leap out, and run after a blonde woman barely and uncertainly seen from a moving car, with my live-in lover sitting beside me.

*[Right?]*

But metaphorically, emotionally, and spiritually, that's what I did, even as the brief heartthrob dissipated in the visual splendor of the landscape and the utter unlikeliness of that desperate glimpse. I drove on in a far more terrible surrender than I understood. By the time we angled northeast across New Hampshire into Maine, I was feeling edgy and temperamental.

We camped near Millinocket and drove into Baxter State Park in the morning. Registration was required at the park entrance, and climbers had to register again at the Roaring Brook ranger station, at the base of the mountain. We had intended to camp at Chimney Pond, near the tree line, but there were no campsite vacancies. The ranger advised us to make reservations well in advance, in the future. If we were going to climb Katahdin, we would have to do it from base to summit and back in one day.

We decided to load food, water, and extra clothing into a single pack, which Kirk and I would take turns carrying. Kirk volunteered to take the first shift. After a half mile, he handed the pack off to me, stepped up his pace, and quickly disappeared ahead of us on the trail. I assumed he needed a little solitude to walk off the accumulated tensions of the past few days.

I carried the pack all the way to Chimney Pond through savage, dense-as-fog swarms of black flies. We assumed Kirk would be waiting for us there, but he wasn't. Neither the ranger nor other hikers had seen anyone fitting Kirk's description. We had barely enough time to finish the climb and get off the mountain in daylight. Bea and I stashed the pack, filled our canteens, and did it.

The climb was arduous. As a denizen of northeastern forest, I had spent most of my life enfolded in dense, fertile spaces that were always comfortably finite. To emerge, after a long uphill trek, into the tundra-like sparseness of the tree line and then climb naked granite up and up and up to a jagged summit, where unimaginable vastness spread off into hazy infinity in all directions, was beyond exhilarating. But we dared not linger. After a few minutes of rest, awe, and giddy delight, we began the knee-punishing climb back down.

We arrived back at Roaring Brook at dusk, bone weary and famished. We had seen no sign of Kirk all day. I went to the ranger station and told them that we had a member of

our party missing on the mountain. They radioed the ranger at Chimney Pond and decided to give Kirk a few more minutes before initiating a search. Shortly after I returned to the car, and Kirk strolled out of the brush.

“Wow, what a day!”

“Where the hell were you?”

“On the mountain. Hey, I have a gram of hash for each of us to eat tonight.”

*[Three grams of hashish was a felony everywhere.]*

“I think you’d better get your ass over to the ranger station and explain yourself.”

He returned a few minutes later and said, “Man, are those guys ever paranoid!”

“Those paranoids were about to risk their lives searching for you. Get in the fucking car. I need you to get out of this park.”

I was seething with a toxic brew of righteous anger, betrayal, and exhaustion. We drove to the park entrance and signed out. Immediately around the first bend that took us out of sight of the rangers at the gate, I hit the brakes hard, skidded to a stop, got out, and opened Kirk’s door.

“Now get out of the fucking car and take all your shit with you.”

I sped away and checked into the first motel we came to on the way into Millinocket. We drove home to Pennsylvania, by way of Acadia and Boston, where a large Gauguin at the Museum of Fine Arts, *Whence Do We Come? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* pierced my heart so vividly that it quickened my breath and pulse in a strange echo of driving too fast through Plainfield, Vermont. In a sense it made me lonelier, but it also offered a glimpse of a brighter place beyond my loneliness. I realized that reaching into the tender, ecstatic place in my heart Jan, the summit of Mount Katahdin, and Paul Gauguin had caressed and awakened was my only possibility of redemption.

*[Rushing ahead without trusted masters or rites of passage, our generation had often blundered into sloppiness and inattention that led us to miss, in the minute aspects of daily life, the very possibilities of transcendence and ecstasy we had awakened in and through cannabis (with an LSD chaser) and rebellion. We resisted a war in a faraway land, but lost the real war in our spirits, in much the same way that I lost Jan, and Kirk got himself abandoned in the dark, on a dirt road in northern Maine during black fly season. Too often, we chased freedom as an end in itself]*

*rather than as a pathway for consciousness. We failed to hone our cutting edges.]*

#### **Part Four: The Crow Knows**

In 2005, I was writing my second book, which was intended to be my first real book. It was a memoir in which my late friend Hartwell was a primary thread.

He was a very complex human being, and I had lately realized that I couldn't coherently render his complexity on the page, that I could only reach him through my own story because his role was always catalytic. He stirred the inner wildness of others by inscrutable means.

*[All his life, Hartwell was a strange vector for uncanny coincidences.]*

I had just finished the initial draft of the story about the trip to Katahdin with Kirk and Bea and was struggling with the transition onward. Pausing at the computer, I took a break from trying to grasp all the stuff of my story that I was trying to fit somehow into a continuous whole. I Googled "book arts" hoping for the distraction of interesting images. On the very first page of websites I saw Jan's name. Her full name, though it doesn't sound unusual, is uncommon.

*[I thought of Jan with sad, poignant wondering—not with the romantic longing of many years before, but with a nostalgic tenderness that rebelled against the opacity of her disappearance.]*

One of the sites gave a mailing address in the Pacific Northwest for the book artist otherwise known as Jan, so I sent her a postcard. She kindly replied and was not the Jan I had known, but the long dormant mystery was revived. In the age of the Internet, I would have to choose not to know.

Though my inexperience made the search far more circuitous than necessary, it was surprisingly easy to find someone who was almost certainly the Jan I had known.

I thought of that fleeting glimpse from a moving car in Plainfield and wondered if we had passed each other unknowingly on a crowded street or missed each other by seconds exiting a theater, gallery, or restaurant.

*[Would we even recognize each other if we passed on the street?]*

Reliving that love and loss through writing amidst

all the other reliving my writing summoned had an especially sharp edge, because I had never told anyone about it.

*[I once shared with my wife, Terry, that the only other great love of my life had been someone I had spent a single day with.]*

I had never spoken with anyone about the drive through Plainfield. Articulating a transformative experience that had been left unexpressed and unshared for more than three decades was a psychological correction of unexpected significance.

Giving utterance to the too-long unspoken became one of the sustaining forces in my work. I wasn't just telling my story; I was making my life whole in a new way.

*[A powerful nucleus of hidden memory and emotion can gain a kind of gravitational attraction that draws other aspects of mind and experience into its darkness and silence.]*

I knew on some semiconscious level that I harbored many silences, and that opening them might open a floodgate.

Though the ensuing torrent might change far more than I was willing to admit or allow, I couldn't stop. Writing became a deliberate opening of the floodgate. My determined vow to abstain from bullshit carried complex undercurrents of anxiety.

*[Terry and I were halfway through the third decade of a marriage that had weathered a fairly normal variety of storms and confusions and we were still passionately in love.]*

The notion of not contacting Jan seemed absurd, but enough years intervened to make contacting her a minefield of terrible possibilities. What if she was terribly ill or mired in some form of serious dysfunction? What if she had found JAYZUS and become a Republican? What if all I found was tragedy? I needed to give my buried emotions a little time to bubble to the surface.

I had just finished the initial draft of a brief, but difficult passage about Hartwell having an affair when there was a knock at the front door.

The emotional toll of methodically examining difficult parts of my own story had become heavy and visible lately, and Terry had arranged for flowers to be delivered to

me. The woman delivering them was the woman Hartwell had an affair with.

*[I don't objectively believe that such coincidences are some sort of strange message, but Hartwell had taught me to engage that notion without gripping it too tightly. His totem animal was the crow. He felt that kinship keenly, but it was a manner of perception, not of belief.]*

I picked up the phone, called Jan's number, and left a message on her answering machine. She returned my call a few days later.

I didn't want to turn a conversation into an interview, but one direct question was unavoidable: Where did she go when she left Clarion? When she said she had gone to Goddard College, I didn't think of its location any more specifically than New England.

*[Though my emotions were complex, one feeling that stood out was that a clot of inner pressure I had lived with for so long it had become invisible, was suddenly gone. My world made a little more sense.]*

It wasn't until the next day that I remembered driving by Goddard on more recent New England travels. Jan was living in Plainfield when I drove through with Bea and Kirk.

The realization that it was indeed Jan I saw that day transformed my sense of what my writing could be and mean both as product and as process. I wasn't merely telling a story, I was discovering it.

I didn't know what finding Jan meant or what it meant that I had come within a single moment of indecision of an alternative life history. The throb of that poignancy was rendered both bearable and surreal by its juxtaposition with Terry's bright orgasmic warmth, the soft curve of her breasts, the light-filled space of our valley, the keen intelligence of our son. Terry's love was as real and present in my world as the breeze on my face and the pencil in my hand—tangible regret was impossible.

*[Though I'm often guilty of looking a little too hard for meaning, I couldn't stretch anything to fit this story. This was theater of the absurd alive and staggering through my life history as it blossomed into awareness.]*

## **Part Five: Homeward Bound**

As my writing gained momentum, it began to so

dominate my life that it crowded many elemental pleasures into the limbo of procrastination. I needed a road trip to get unstuck.

Driving through the Adirondacks, we could feel the surrounding wildness, the perfect presence of a vast, nonhuman, self-sufficient world.

*[Wildness and wilderness benefit even those who only glimpse them from afar.]*

Sleeping in the woods seemed like a prayer.

Katahdin looming in the distance, as we drove up Route 11 to Millinocket, gave a rush of smiling nostalgia, despite the long ago collision of Kirk's irresponsible behavior and my fatigue-crazed temper.

At Baxter State Park, we couldn't get a pass for Roaring Brook, which I had hoped for partly out of sentimentality and partly to objectively compare memory and reality. So we drove out the Tote Road to a trailhead at OLI Mountain. After an excess of car time, we reveled in the vigor of steep hiking. We carried lunch, water, a bottle of wine, and our love. We drank toasts to wild places, our children, and our cats. We ate cheese, bread, and apples. We made love in the sunny space of a dry, snowmelt streambed and wanted more of each other and everything around us. Gasping and gushing I poured myself into Terry and, as I did, something in my history with this wilderness, a long bottled-up clot of thwartedness, suddenly uncovered the sun like a windborne cloud as it drifted away.

### **Epilogue:**

On the evening of her birthday, Terry and I were sitting on our deck when three mature bald eagles flew in together, alighted in neighboring trees on the far side of the creek, and began to sing. The sounds were unlike anything I'd heard eagles make before. Some were almost like a sea gull's cry, but much deeper in pitch. Others were flute-like and melodic. I felt as though we were witnessing something ancient, magical, and profoundly important. They sang for twenty minutes and flew away together.

## We Must All be Artists

Matthiessen

I saw an advertisement the other night that stuck with me. It opens to a rough looking sky light, a loft-y space, as one might have seen in Soho in the seventies, only no grime on the sky light. Music with a classical bent plays, as the camera lovingly traces scrubby walls down to the paint splattered floor, where a Pilates toned woman in her fifties wields a sculpting tool. In the center of the room, unaccompanied by any detritus of sculpting, a large manatee shape yearns towards the skylight. The music builds, the woman dances gracefully, poking here, smoothing there, in a state of art-making bliss, a diaphanous smile on her face. The music flows along, the voice over intones “FLUMMERY FINANCIAL...thirty-five thousand strong, in seven nations, looking after your interests worldwide...” The woman has never been happier, the music swells, all of her days have led to this moment, the manatee masterpiece flowing from her fingertips. The voice again, “FLUMMERY FINANCIAL—YOUR VISION IS OUR VISION...”

WAIT A MINUTE.

WHAT?

The implication was that money management and the making of art somehow have something to do with each other. A woman, consumed with her creative endeavors, has a good portfolio thanks to Flummery Financial. The only accuracy is that she will likely need it.

In '87 the Beatles “Revolution” was the soundtrack to a Nike ad, and in 1990 the Stones “Brown Sugar,” did the same for Pepsi, so this advertisement wasn’t the first time a collective memory, from which a strand still felt intensely personal, had been stuck onto the side of a product like a wad of gum. But the offense of Flummery Financial, moreover the astounding inaccuracy of this message made me feel as if my house had been robbed. To equate the long, thorny, often thankless struggle of making art with the concerns of a financial brokerage firm was going too far.

I grew up around mid-century writers and artists who were, to venture a broad generalization, mostly running against the grain of what was expected. In these post war years

the future was supposed to roll out along straight lines for everyone—job, or for women, motherhood, a car, spouse, kids, a higher education if you could get it. In Kim Evan's wonderful documentary about Jackson Pollock, my father's first wife Patsy Southgate, a writer and translator, talked about the artists around her in Springs, New York. "...right after WWII men had come home, and they were supposed to all settle down with nice families in suburbs, and I think that the writers and artists were women and men who didn't fit into that role, but didn't know how to get out of it."

This group came to New York City and the East End of Long Island to remake themselves, to seriously undertake an elucidation of their own restlessness, of that which might have been, up till then, unnamable. We know the names of the more successful ones: Pollock, De Kooning, Krasner, Plimpton, Southern, my father Peter Matthiessen, a truncated list which is defined mainly by my own associations. Yet there were many more that did great work, who weren't famous, or lucky, who never will be famous. Unlike a well managed stock portfolio (given the economy doesn't collapse), the long term lookout of an artist can be grim. There are many who spend their lives trying to express something, who stayed true to it, sacrificed for it, who followed it as it evolved for them, which had little or nothing to do with the success they may or may not have had. Who starved, died, or went mad doing their work. Who had success late in life or not at all. The work they produced valued by family and friends, but, essentially, a silent song never heard by the wider world. And certainly, there were great talents whose work was under appreciated even by those close to them, that ended up moldering in storage spaces, or burnt up in fires, or were unloaded on babysitters and cousins, or by second wives trying to cadge some more space by clearing the attic corner of all those dull xeroxed poems no publisher wanted. To a pragmatist, i.e., a banker, to undertake a profession like this, to devote a life to it, would be sheer madness. Better to be a gold bug or a survivalist. Better to ply your fortunes in Vegas getting shit faced at the bar listening to "Luck be a Lady," on your ear buds. Better to try a Thelma and Louise experiment and see if you live. Not for sane folks, but for romantic, moony, impractical, self deluded types, the sort who put their energy into a hail Mary passes (like those who sent letters to hundreds of electors begging them not to elect our

current not-my-president.) And were disappointed.

Some would say, it wasn't always so hard. Some would say that in the forties and fifties the fields of art and literature were wide open. There was so much room, it was easy to be a success. A gullible public with unrefined tastes to cultivate. A post war baby boom who grew up with books and almost no TV, and time to burn. No distractions. No cell-phones. Hungry for content. No sophistication. Innocent. A giant sponge that you could saturate with anything. An audience. Now, (on the coasts), if one says I'm a lawyer, or an accountant or yes, a finance person, it might be perceived as dull. We must all be artists now. We must all be exotic, traipsing around on the interior of our psyches trying to extract something that someone else can use. Forget religion, being an artist, expressing ourselves, being creative is the favored path to salvation. And because of that, some say, there's hardly an audience left.

To which I say, not having an audience is something artists contend with more often than not. It isn't an actual impediment to creativity. Unless you are Shirley Temple.

Just to give a sense of what it was like for those intrepid Americans who crept out to the Hamptons in the forties and fifties, I must remember the way the winters were here. Hard, very cold, and long. Sagaponack, where I grew up, had no other writers to speak of, just my father, working in his studio next to the potato fields, and my mother, writing and researching in her upstairs study. All the kids in my grade school were farmer's kids, every last one. Though they were great neighbors, it's hard to remember the clouds of insecticide boiling across the fields and into our house with nostalgia. It could be very bleak. The summers were a colorful break, on the most beautiful beaches in the world, among a chic crowd that was growing larger every year. Then I was back in school, freezing at the bus stop once again.

Though the East End of Long Island is just one area, it did boast a large concentration of people who broke through in the arts. In the late fifties my father naturally gravitated toward the few other writers who were here or came from the city regularly, and toward Springs where the visual artists were. The places they lived were very rough. Though I was small, I remember them. I can't pass an old fisherman's cottage with a bumpy lawn and overgrown brambles without a sort of yearning. These little places were full of rich impressions for a

child, they were open to the whims of the wind and weather, not in a story book way, but in an adventurous way. They seem terribly romantic now, immortalized in old pictures and films, and, as one by one, they are torn down for someone else's fantasy—usually a big, insulated house. The modern-day truth of the matter—a fisherman's cottage has small rooms, moldy plaster, a leaky roof, cold walls, eccentric additions, and drafty windows. Add to that winters that were mercilessly cold, and a local power plant that often went down for days at a time when there was a serious storm. The public were treated to glamorous, transcendent results—but those of us who were around saw the process, the excess, the self destruction, the misery, the fight, the fortitude. It was a far cry from a wealthy woman in a re-furbished SoHo loft, dancing around a manatee.

In the Pollock documentary, there is a lot of footage of those early parties, and the sweet little drafty places of Springs, and big beach picnics that went on until morning. The beautiful Patsy spoke of what it was like to choose a career in art or literature, in the America of her youth. She talked about the Hemmingway mystique, which was still very much in force. "There were nightly, drunken, large parties," she said, and added, "since artists did have such a limp wristed image in the American view—that their manhood was threatened by doing something as delicate as creating art or writing a poem—they over compensated by being super macho." She talks about train trips with Pollock into the city, each to see their therapists. At that time, Pollock had a great tangle of worries, his affair with Ruth Kligman in progress, his marriage to painter Lee Krasner in trouble. Patsy said his state of mind was "...extremely desperate. He felt that the art within him that he wanted to express was so difficult because he had to bring it up from his subconscious, which was in turmoil." She added that she believed he couldn't possibly maintain that state of intensity. He died not long after this, in a car crash where he was, as usual, very drunk and driving very fast.

These were not pretty lives. They were agonized and messy. It was very, very hard work. There were no guarantees. Their families usually didn't understand. Their immediate families were usually damaged due to neglect and obsession. The general culture was against them, or just indifferent. They were neither fashionable or familiar, not in the way that the concept of a "creative life," is now. The ones that made it,

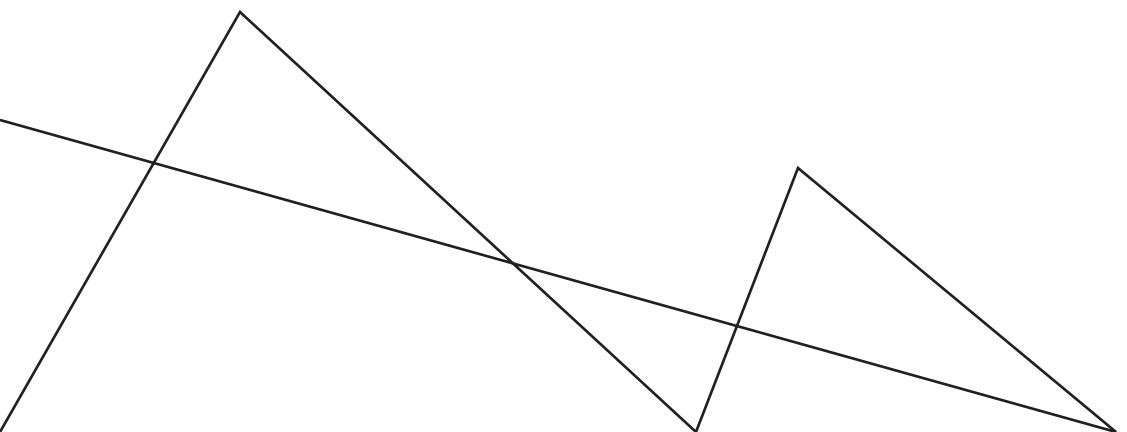
that you've heard of, were very few. There were so many more that didn't make it. On the subject of writing my father often said, "Most writers have to write. There isn't a choice." This was certainly true for him. The other thing he liked to say was, "No one is asking you to do it." In other words, there is no demand. There is no niche, you must create one. It takes some courage to set your cap for something that has no guarantee, especially considering the amount of effort that is usually required. It can be incredibly foolhardy. To equate this kind of life with the calculations a banker must make to produce X return, is pure drivel, but there is something to be learned in the comparison.

It's almost impossible to be a decent artist and follow a tested, known route, the way you'd hope your banker would do. Which leads me to the idea of the conventional in connection with the creative effort. Books that calculated to tick all the boxes in the current lexicon of cares (politically correct) are fundamentally boring. To conform to current norms may work in journalism, but it's death to creative writing. A good book should reach considerably beyond what one is supposed to feel according to ones peers. It should take its finger off of the zeitgeist. Otherwise it's conformist, and when you read it you know you've heard it before. Books that don't have any real point of view, i.e. a distinct self, are disappointing. The path to creative heat cannot be conventional in the same way the layers of a person's thoughts and views and feelings are never in any way conventional. Even a middle-of-the-road writer like myself cannot make something live on the page without completely departing from any idea of what someone else thinks it should be, or even what I think it should be.

Early on, when I'd labor over a paragraph for, sometimes, two days and still not have it right my father would say, "It takes as long as it takes." Looking at that line all these years later makes me laugh. It seems as sure a formula for screwing up your life as any. Think of the things I would miss. A sensible job, a steady income, a community, a long term plan, perhaps any sort of relevance at all. Following that advice, my time would be at the mercy of whether or not a paragraph or indeed, a whole book came out right. In fact, my first book, *Castles & Ruins*, took ten years. I worked part time in real estate to support it, and my husband worked and supported it. We did other things out of necessity, which was also why it

took so long. I attempted something no one had done, which was to write a travelogue of Ireland and a memoir of my mother, Deborah Love, together. I haven't made anything off it yet, though I'm very proud of it, and I think it's good.

A banker would call that a waste of time.



## Winter a While Back

Hunt

By the third night the snow was packed tight against our window panes, we reckoned that we may not be leaving anytime soon; by morning five we knew. We lost our phone service in that first week and found ourselves stacking and unstacking cans of spaghetti sauce from the back of our cellar, replicating pyramids and pantheons, and guessing the rules of blackjack and spit. We rewound all of the old rom-coms we still had on tape and once the power went out, we recited them from heart, our heads swung back, echoing Julia's laugh, Meg Ryan's moans.

We speculated about what it must be like to be something that collects dust: an aged 90's heroine no one wants to hire, a landline in the kitchen corner that we know will never ring. But then somehow in the third week, with our non-perishable relics now in ruins and our cards aces up, it does.

Woman

Leisman

I've been told  
too much  
more times than I can count  
told: emotional  
told: irrational  
told: no

what you're really saying is shhhhh  
telling me my words don't matter because I stand behind  
them, completely  
because I gave birth to them -- yes, from there  
because I grew them  
because they came out raw and messy and so goddamn  
magnificent

my constellation of experience is too vast  
my mind, too multi-dimensional for you and your  
linear world  
your intellectual phallus  
don't you know  
straight lines have sharp edges  
they have only ever caused me pain -- yes, there

let me show you what it means to exist without boundaries  
I hope it scares you senseless

## Your Dick Points to the Fifties

Gill

Oh, so I'm young you say, with that taste of privilege in your mouth I can't afford, like that child and white picket fence, so why  
not drown myself in luscious avocado toast?

Tell me, did you enjoy that tax break for having a traditional family, cuz I paid for it and got nothing but a sharp crack across my firm, taught brown face.

Tell me does the option to be political wear you out, cuz I forced it into my schedule of 72-hour days to pay for three hours of my college education.

Tell me did the fiery new convertible from that glossy dealership wail and woop woop at the police to pull you over, nope you just have a tan.

Tell me one of the bedtime stories from your childhood, but speak up, I can't hear you over the groans coming from my mom's shoulders that drown out my childish cries for help.

Wait, my bad, I'll speak louder for the people in the back.

Tell me is the cha Ching of your credit score deafening, cuz mine comes in tiny red papercuts shredding my future, I'll get more bandages, man Band Aid is raping it in, oops, raking it in.

Tell me, no, wait, you can't finish reading me tomorrow, cuz I'm getting evicted then, by the way can I crash on your couch? Oh, you just had it cleaned, sorry I shouldn't've asked.

Tell me, why can't I go out for some fun if there is no cover, I can't buy the 12-dollar beer anyhow, oh is you wife jonesing for a Virginia Slim, or you for a pack of Marlboros?

Tell me, how can I move out of my parents' house if the job requires experience older than I am, you know, like that wine that is older than you. Can I have a taste? Wait, you spit it out?

Tell me, actually, wait, let me tell *you*. Your dick points to the fifties.

## Author Bios

### **Christine Aletti**

Christine has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared online in journals such as Two Cities Review, r.k.v.r.y., and Thought Catalog and is forthcoming in print at Break the Spine. She lives in Colorado with her little dog.

### **Philip Brunetti**

Phillip Brunetti writes innovative fiction and poetry and much of his work has been published in various online or paper literary magazines including Word Riot, The Bioler, decomP magazine, The Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Identity Theory, and Lungfull! Magazine.

### **RaeNona Claramunt**

Rae Claramunt is a soon-to-be Olivet graduate. She is attending a postgraduate program in England to pursue a degree in English Literature and Culture. She had the pleasure of being the editor of this year's Garfield Lake Review, and thanks Olivet College for yet another experience. She hopes to change the lives of people as her professors did for her.

### **Edward Ahern**

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had two over hundred stories and poems published so far, and three books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of five review editors.

### **Dan Cardoza**

Dan Cardoza has a Master of Science Degree in Counseling from California State University, Sacramento. He is the author of two Chapbooks, Nature's Front Door & Expectation of Stars. Partial credits include: Amethyst, Ardent, Better Than Starbucks, California Quarterly, Curley, UK., Entropy, Esthetic Apostle, Poetry Northwest, The Quail Bell, and Vita Brevis.

### **Will Clattenburg**

Will Clattenburg, originally from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, attended Yale and Long Island University before earning an MFA in Creative Writing from New Mexico State. His writing has appeared in New Mexico Magazine, Digging Through the Fat, Typishly, and Platform Review (forthcoming). He lives and teaches in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

### **Katharine Coggeshall**

Katharine Benelli Coggeshall lives in the mountains of New Mexico. Although her background is in science,

Katharine has always been drawn to writing. She is now a technical writer-editor for a national laboratory. Katherine has been published by

Blue Mountain Arts, Adelaide Literary Magazine, Constant Content, Prolific Press, Inklings Publishing, Focus on the Family, Rue Scribe, Voice of Eve, Projected Letters, and authors a column in the Los Alamos Daily Post Newspaper.

### **Alan Collis**

Alan Collis is a third year English and Creative Writing Student at Keele University.

He is an aspiring poet that loves to write about social and domestic incidents that the majority can relate too and debate about. Alongside his aspirations and studies, he is an English SATS tutor at Park Hall Academy. Teaching

### **Abigail Kirby Conklin**

Abigail Kirby Conklin lives in New York City, where she works in education and curriculum development. Her poetry can be found in The Lampeter Review (2017), Not Very Quiet Journal (2018), and Curlew Quarterly (2018), as well as the forthcoming issue of K'in Literary Journal (2018).

### **Kailey Collins**

Kailey is a poet from Olivet, Michigan. She loves traveling to places that offer a sense of home and taking photographs of where she has been. Kailey hopes to move to Colorado someday and own an abundant amount of animals while pursuing her dream of becoming an author.

### **Collis continued...**

is a career that he wishes to pursue alongside his aspiration of becoming a poet. He believes that his mission is to make poetry and prose accessible to all pupils as early as possible, to give them inspiration and a platform to write their own stories and poems whilst their imagination is still in abundance.

### **Reg Darling**

Reg Darling lives in southwestern Vermont. He paints a small watercolor every day and hasn't missed a day in more than six years. His essays have been published in Azure, The Chaos Journal, Sky Island Journal, The Dr. T.J. Eckleburg Review, River Teeth Journal, Tiferet Journal, Timberline Review, Whitefish Review, and others.

### **Meredith Dodson**

Meredith Dodson is an Assistant Professor of Writing at Olivet College and directs the Writing Program. She has an MFA from Georgia College and State University, and is working on a PhD from Western Michigan University.

Most of her non-working time is spent either chasing her two young daughters around the playground or tiptoeing through the house once they are asleep. Sometimes she dreams of making fancy cupcakes or writing longer pieces again.

### **Duby continued...**

library assistant for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Duby is an active adjudicator, guest conductor and clinician in the state, and has worked with many local groups including the: Royal Oak Symphony Orchestra, Oakland University Concert Band and Wind Symphony, Detroit Symphony Orchestra Civic Wind Symphony, Detroit Metropolitan Chorale, Warren Consolidated School of Performing Arts, as well as many secondary school music programs.

### **Jeremy Duby**

Jeremy Duby is the Director of Bands at Olivet College (MI), where he conducts the college wind ensemble and the Marching Comets. He is also the Music Director for the Warren Concert Band. He began his career teaching music in the Michigan public schools. Duby earned his Master of Music degree in wind conducting at Oakland University and his Bachelor of Music degree in music education from Wayne State University, where he also worked as a librarian and historian for the music department, while concurrently working as the

### **Rolando Gill**

Rolando Gil is a recent graduate from the University of Central Florida, "Go Knights! Charge on!" where he received his BA in Creative Writing, as well as a minor in Women and Gender Studies. He is a thirty-five-year-old gay man and lives in Orlando Florida. He is currently considering Grad school and possibly beyond that, his Doctorate. Rolando is an Army brat who, like many other Army brats, has had a complex life. He is Puerto Rican and was born in Elizabeth New Jersey. He was raised by a single mom who retired a few years back as a Master Sergeant in the United States Army. He has lived an interesting life

### **Gill continued...**

to say the least. Rolando has lived all over the world including Baumholder Germany, Puerto Rico, and spoke three languages by the time he was 8. He is an activist for the LGBT community and is involved with Local LGBT non-profits here in Orlando

Florida. His favorite super hero is Batgirl since she, like himself, is always underestimated and proves everyone wrong time and again. His favorite TV show is Buffy the Vampire Slayer, it is the reason he decided to pursue a career in writing, and why he loves character driven stories.

He also likes chocolate.

### **N. L. H. Hattam**

N. L. H. Hattam has kept poetry as a constant companion, both in writing and reading.

He graduated from SNHU with a degree in English and Creative Writing in 2017 after stops at Hampshire College, Roehampton University, and SCSU, studying subjects ranging across Forensic Entomology, Theater, Anthropology, and Art History, among others. He was born in Austin, Texas and then raised between Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Connecticut before returning

### **Robin Gow**

Robin Gow's poetry has recently been published in Glass Mountain, Furrow, carte blanche, FIVE:2:ONE, and Corbel Stone Press. He is a graduate student at Adelphi University pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing. He runs two poetry blogs and serves as the production editor of the Lantern literary magazine and the poetry intern for Oyster River Pages. He is an out and proud bisexual transgender man passionate about LGBT issues. He loves poetry that lilt in and out of reality and his queerness is also the central axis of his work. He's inspired by trans and gender non-conforming poets like Eileen Myles and Alok Vaid-Menon.

### **Hattam continued...**

to the spawning pool of ATX as current residence. He also so deeply enjoys writing biographical statements in professional language that acts only for the service of conventionality and the all-consuming fear of possible offense. N. L. H. Hattam appreciates the time others take to read/enjoy the poetry of any author and feels honored to be the subject of such gifted attention even if only for a brief time before the torches are lit and pitchforks sharpened.

### **Marah Heikkila**

Marah Heikkila is an Olivet College undergraduate student pursuing a double major in English and Cultural Studies. She enjoys writing and reading with a passion, particularly as it relates to culture. She has been published in The Garfield Lake Review and Toe Good. She was the recipient for the Leo T. Hendrick Writing Prize in 2018.

### **Megan Hunt**

Megan Hunt is a writer, editor and undergrad student currently based in Montreal. Her past endeavors have included interning for sustainability non-profits, script supervising for indie movies, and guiding tour groups through Toronto and Montreal. This is her first time publishing flash fiction.

### **Kenneth Kapp**

Kenneth Kapp was a professor of Mathematics and did research at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. After that Ken was a starving artist, working with clay and iron. He then worked for IBM until being downsized in 2000. He now teaches yoga and writes. He lives with his wife and beagle in Shorewood, Wisconsin. He enjoys the many excellent chamber music concerts available in Milwaukee. He's a home brewer and runs

### **Corey Hricovsky**

5 foot 10 inches tall. As of writing this he recently lost 20+ pounds. So he's got that going on for him. A senior in the journalism and mass communications major at Olivet College. David Bowie fan boy.

### **Corrine Jimenez**

Corrine Jimenez is a recent graduate, having earned an M.S. in Professional Writing from Towson University in May 2018. Her work is influenced by growing up in Baltimore, Maryland. When she is not writing, she uses her creative abilities to operate the Twigs & Wool knitwear company. To learn more, visit [www.twigsandwool.com](http://www.twigsandwool.com) or find the line on Instagram @twigsandwool.

### **Kapp continued...**

whitewater rivers with his son in the summer. Further information can be found on [www.kmkbooks.com](http://www.kmkbooks.com)

### **Robert Keeler**

Born St. Paul, Minnesota. Lived in jungles of Colombia, S.A., up to age twelve. BS Mathematics NCSU, MS Computer Science UNC, MBA UCLA, Certificate in Poetry UW. Honorman, U.S. Naval Submarine School. "SS" (Submarine Service) qualified. Vietnam Service Medal. Honorable Discharge.

### **Joshua Kepfer**

Joshua Kepfer is a 22-year-old living in northern California. He enjoys writing music, prose, and poetry.

### **Kuntz continued...**

and the Greer-Hepburn Prize in Fiction for her work. She spent the previous summer studying, working, and writing in London for online publication DigitalAgenda. Her short fiction can also be found in Happy Captive Magazine. Leah is interested in classical ballet, fiction with strong female leads, and finding the world's best French toast.

### **Keeler continued...**

Whiting Foundation Experimental Grant. P&W's Directory of Poets and Writers. Member IEEE, AAAS, AAP. The Boeing Company. Does not subscribe to the cattle-prod paradigm of poetry. May tend to melancholy. My collection "Detonation" will be published in December.

### **Leah Kuntz**

Leah Kuntz is a senior creative writing student and Creative Writing Department apprentice at Miami University. During her time at Miami, she has received the Montaine Writing Award

### **Andrew Lafleche**

Andrew Lafleche is an award-winning poet and author of six books. His work uses a spoken style of language to blend social criticism, philosophical reflection, explicit language, and black comedy. Andrew enlisted in the Army in 2007 and received an honorable discharge in 2014. He lives in a small lakefront home with his wife and two children. Visit [www.AJLafleche.com](http://www.AJLafleche.com) or follow Andrew on Twitter: @AndrewLafleche.

### **Hannah Leisman**

Hannah Leisman's poetry has appeared in Boulevard Magazine; her poem, "Shark Week" won runner-up in 2017's Emerging Poets Contest.

A native of Grand Rapids, Michigan, she grew up training in classical ballet while raising goats, horses, chickens and too many cats. She now lives in Washington D.C., pursuing a JD/MA in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at The George Washington University Law School and working in women's rights advocacy and policy reform.

### **Rue Matthiessen**

Rue Matthiessen is based in New York City and the East End of Long Island, and has been writing journals, poems and stories since she was six years old. At Bard College she majored in literature, and afterwards was a journalist for The East Hampton Star. She had her own photography studio in Los Angeles for six years. She has a completed full length memoir and travelogue together called Castles and

### **Jessica Lynn**

Jessica Lynn is a 26-year-old poet and writer from Randolph, New Jersey. She has wanted to be an author since she was a child, and is now working on achieving that goal through her work as a freelance writer. Her work aims to explore the beauty in the darkness; writing has been cathartic for her, and she hopes to help others be able to examine some of the experiences within their own lives. Prior publication credits include Pif Magazine, Artifact Nouveau, Wilderness House Literary Review, and Madras Mag, among others. In her spare time, Jessica enjoys going to the beach, drinking wine, and traveling! Want to talk poetry? Tweet her at @JessTheWriter33!

### **Matthiessen continued...**

Ruins, a novella, and a collection of essays called Blastocyst. In 2012 she self-published Kaya India. She is at work on a novel, Woman With Eyes Closed. WEBSITE <https://www.ruematthiessen.com>

### **David Obuchowski**

David Obuchowski is a prolific essayist, whose long-form narrative non-fiction appears in publications such as *Jalopnik*, *The Awl*, *SYFY*, *Deadspin*, *Gawker*, and others. He is the creator/writer/host of the acclaimed and popular podcast, *TEMPEST*. A fiction writer, David's most recent short story was published by the Kaaterskill Basin Literary Journal, and for a separate story, he was awarded the John L Rainey Prize (1st place) for fiction by the University of Illinois. David is currently developing a televi

### **Nico Oré-Girón**

Nico Oré-Girón is a junior at Brown University, studying literary arts. Usually, they write comedy. Sometimes, in cases such as this piece, they don't. Nico grew up thirty minutes from the Mexican border in Tucson, AZ. Sometimes it gets so hot there that news warnings caution being outside for more than thirty minutes at a time.

### **Obuchowski continued...**

sion show with Keith Gordon (director *Better Call Saul*, *The Leftovers*, *Fargo*, etc) and Rachel Griffin (producer *Crips & Bloods: Made In America* and *Conan O'Brien Can't Stop*). Also a musician, David's bands include *Publicist UK* (*Relapse Records*), *Goes Cube* (*The End Records*, *Greenway Records*, *Coextinction Recordings*), and *Distant Correspondent* (*Old Flame Records*). David lives in Colorado with his wife and their two children and very large cat.

### **Aishwarya Parihar**

Aishwarya Parihar is a Humanities student at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India. She suffers from chronic observation and cannot help but write. Poetry is more than just a hobby for her and through it, she finds her voice. She writes free verse poetry and articles about the pressing social issues in her country. Or leaves, stones, bread, anything. She wants to travel, write and contribute more to the International Development. Someday she hopes to find the perfect mix of these as a profession.

### **Ron Riekki**

Ron Riekki's books include And Here: 100 Years of Upper Peninsula Writing, 1917-2017 (Michigan State University Press), Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula (2016 Independent Publisher Book Award Gold Medal Great Lakes Best Regional Fiction), The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works (2014 Michigan Notable Book awarded by the Library of Michigan), and U.P.: a novel (Ghost Road Press). He has books upcoming with Hoot 'n' Waddle, Main Street Rag, McFarland, Michigan State University Press, and Wayne State University Press.

### **Rivera continued...**

an M.D. from University of Illinois at Chicago, and has undergone clinical training in Internal Medicine at the University of Southern California and Gastroenterology at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine. He is currently a practicing Gastroenterologist in Los Angeles and working on a collection of short stories.

### **Ben Stone**

Ben Stone studied art with Saburo Muraoka and Marina Abramovic. He has published in Southerly literary journal as Leon Ward, and is the author of novels Sex and Death in Sigaotoka, Natives, Monsters

### **Claudio Alberto Rivera**

C. A. Rivera was born and raised in Los Angeles. He is the author of an award-winning poem which appeared in Body Electric, the UIC College of Medicine Literary journal and a Sonnet published in Ibid, the premier literary journal of UC Berkeley's English Department. He is a previous participant of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference fiction workshop under renown writer Sigrid Nunez. C. A. Rivera holds a B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley, an M.P.H. in History of American Public Health and Medicine, Ethics, & Policy from Columbia University,

### **Joshua Scheidler**

Josh Scheidler is a young fisherman who routinely braves the northwest passage.

### **Maya Simone**

Maya Simone is a poet and cook and full-time sad girl living and loving in Oakland, CA. She is black and queer and femme and a couple other things she doesn't have a name for (yet).

### **Stone continued...**

are Real, and the short fiction collection, The Rise of X. Ben is currently doing a Masters of Philosophy by research with the novelist Rohan Wilson. [www.benstone.xyz](http://www.benstone.xyz)

### **Jessica Wilson**

J.K. Wilson is currently a student attending Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo taking her final year of Studies as a Creative Writing Major and English Minor intending to bring to light issues

commonly overlooked in day to day life to change the stigma around trauma and silence. She is the founder of Nanaimo Spoken Word, a local nonprofit organization to help aid the community to find their voice through performance-based work. In

### **Normal Walter**

Norman G. Walter is a poet from Kentucky, working on his MFA in creative writing, currently teaching elementary music in Colorado.

### **Molly Williams**

Molly is a teacher and freelance writer in the Boston metro area with work that has appeared in publications like Curve Magazine, AutoStraddle and The Boston Globe Magazine. Alum of Columbia College Chicago (BA '13) and Emerson College (MFA '18). This is essay is an excerpt from her memoir-in-progress called 'The Long Way Home.'

<https://mollyewilliams.weebly.com/>

### **Wilson continued...**

addition to this, the organization spreads to Instagram (nanaimospokenword) to aid in poetic creation worldwide. Her personal page (j.k.wilson\_poetry) contains over 600 original poems. She had been published in both The Navigator, Vancouver Island Universities newspaper, and Red Ink: An International Journal of Indigenous Literature, Arts, & Humanities.

### **Robin Vigfusson**

Robin Vigfusson's work has appeared in The Blue Hour, Referential Magazine, Constellations, Lunaris Review, Foliate Oak Literary Journal, Junto Magazine, Jewish Fiction.net, Fine Flu Journal, Old 67, Feminine Collective, The Valley Review, The Tower Journal and other literary magazines.

### **Will Westmoreland**

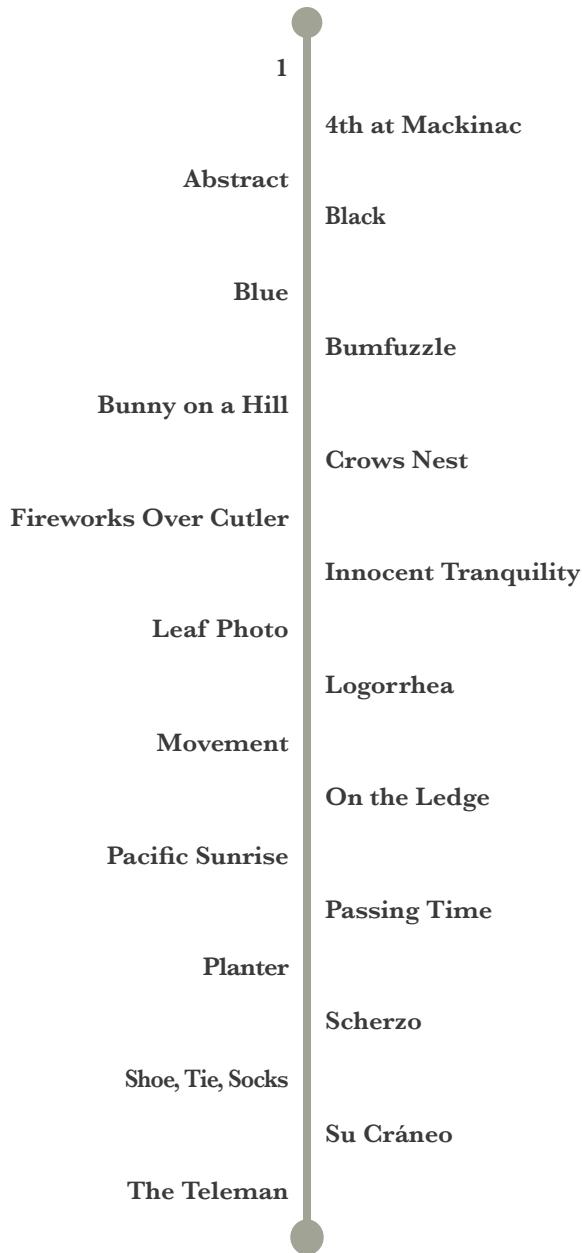
Will Westermoreland is thirty-one years of age, from Oxford, MS, where he graduated from the University of Mississippi back in 2013. He's been writing prolifically for three years now, and this is just one of scores of short stories and two novels in his repertoire.

# **Artwork**

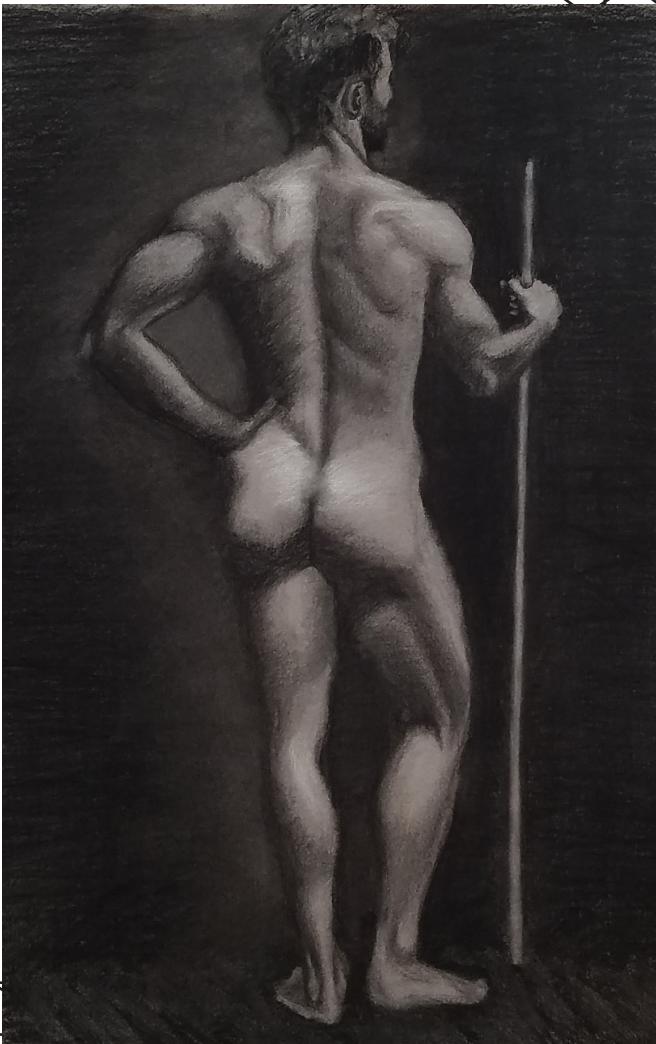
*/'ärt,wərk/*

*noun*

**An outlet for human  
perspective deviating from  
everyday thought that  
provokes emotion.**

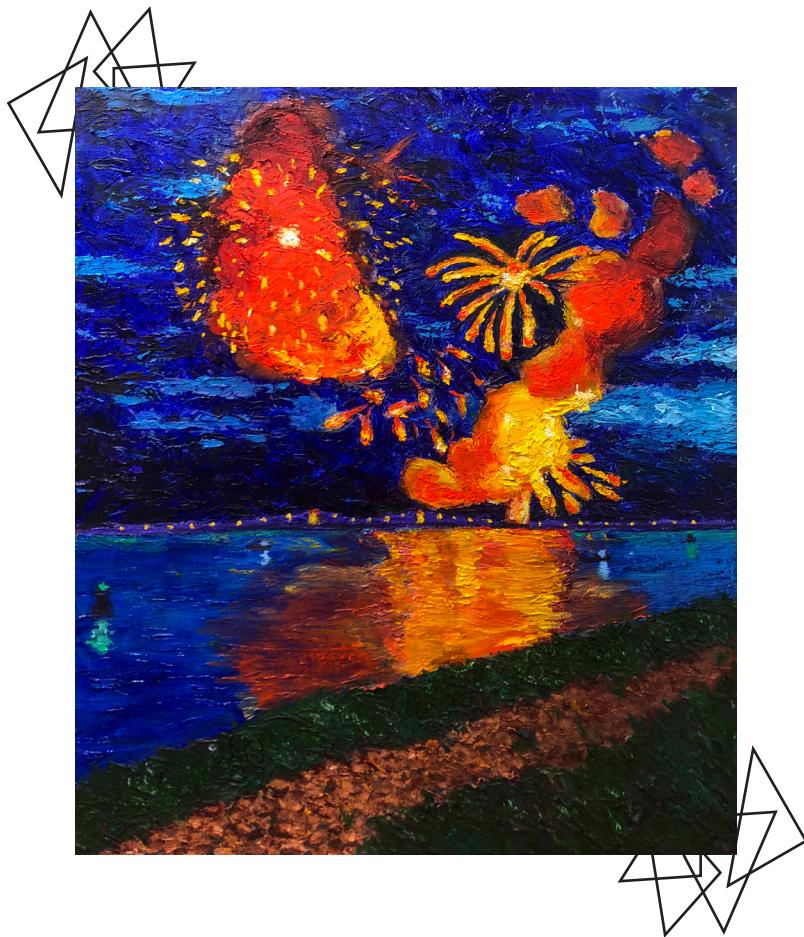


1



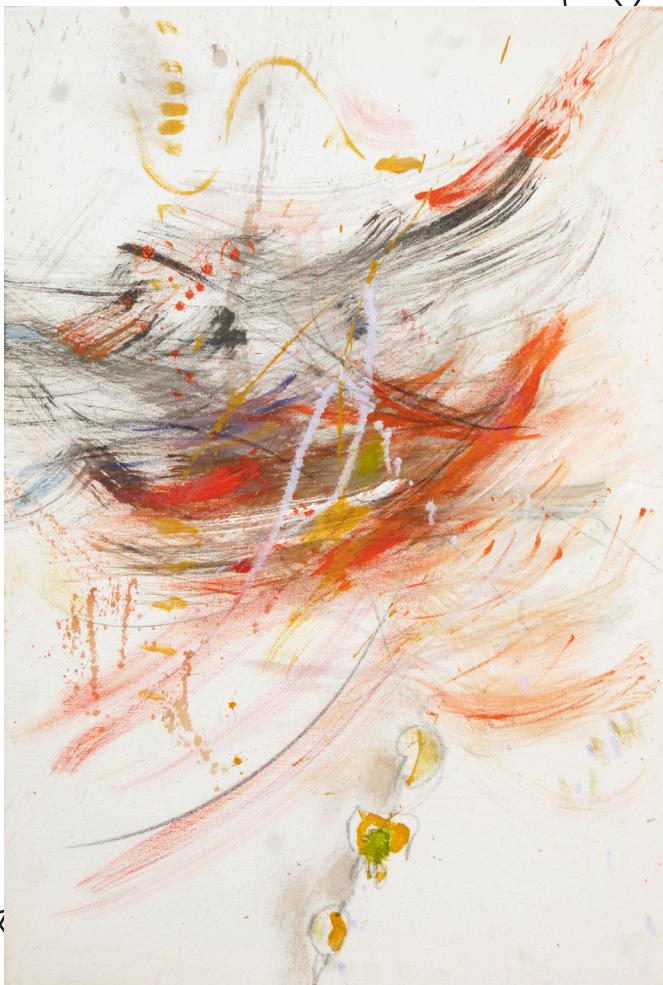
Mellino

4th at Mackinac



Dean

# Abstract



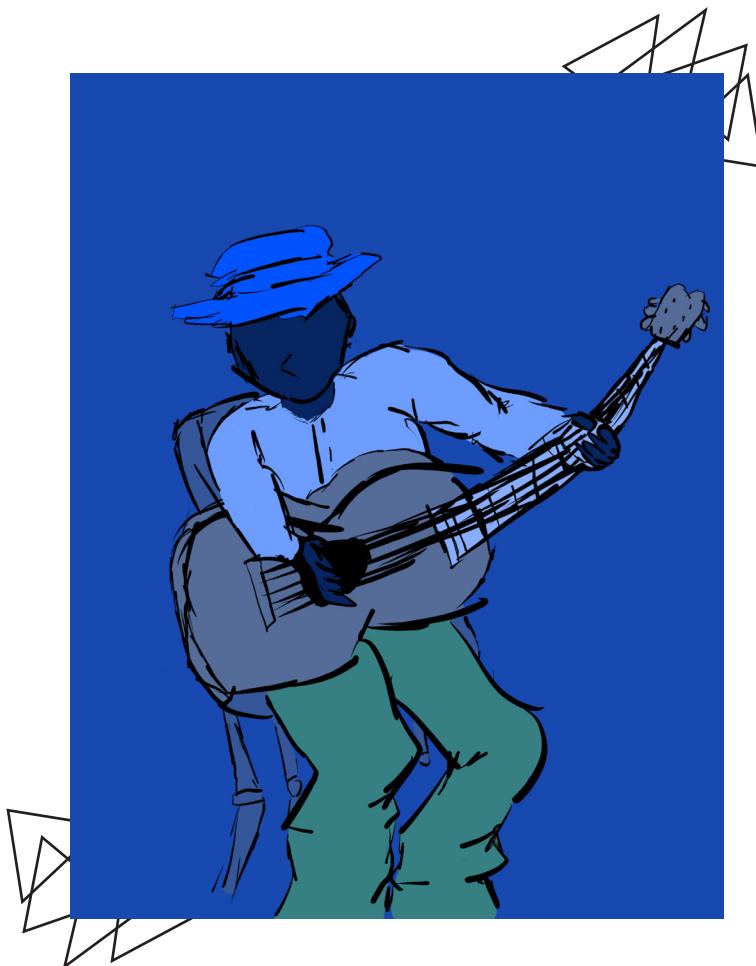
Segalis

Black



Segalis

Blue



Hricovsky

Bumfuzzle



Thomas

## Bunny on a Hill



Radcliffe

# Crows Nest



Dean

## Fireworks Over Cutler



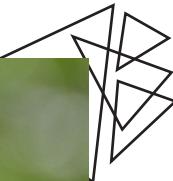
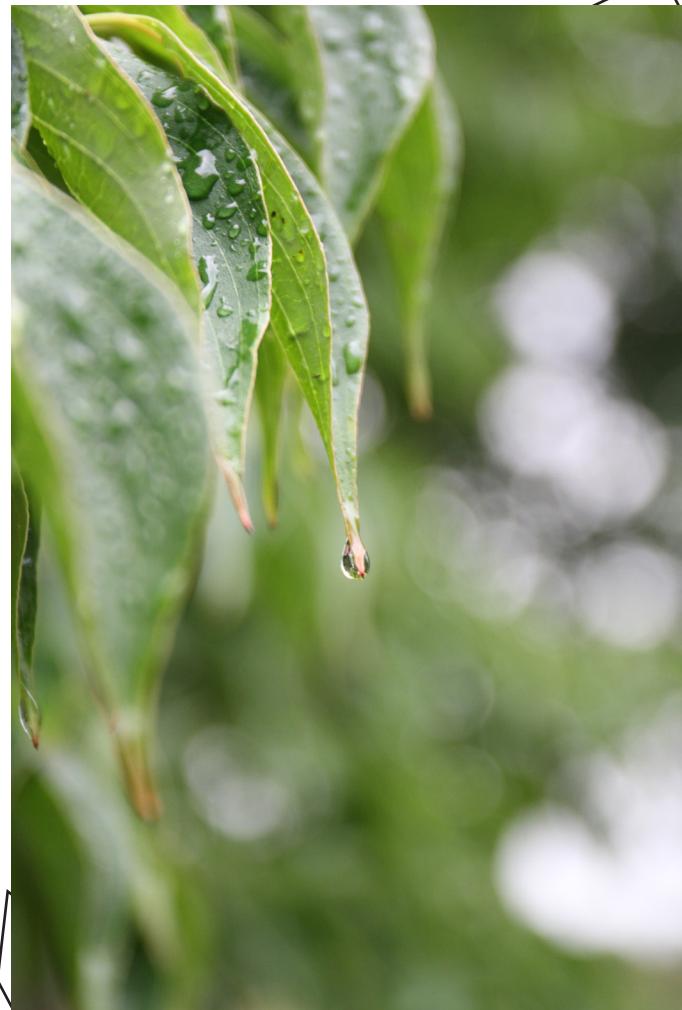
Oshinsky

# Innocent Tranquility



Miller

## Leaf Photo



Cruz

Logorrhea



Thomas

Movement



Oshinsky

# On the Ledge



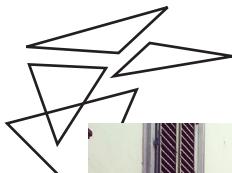
Oshinsky

## Pacific Sunrise



Feldpausch

## Passing Time



Mellino

## Planter



## Kaiser

Scherzo



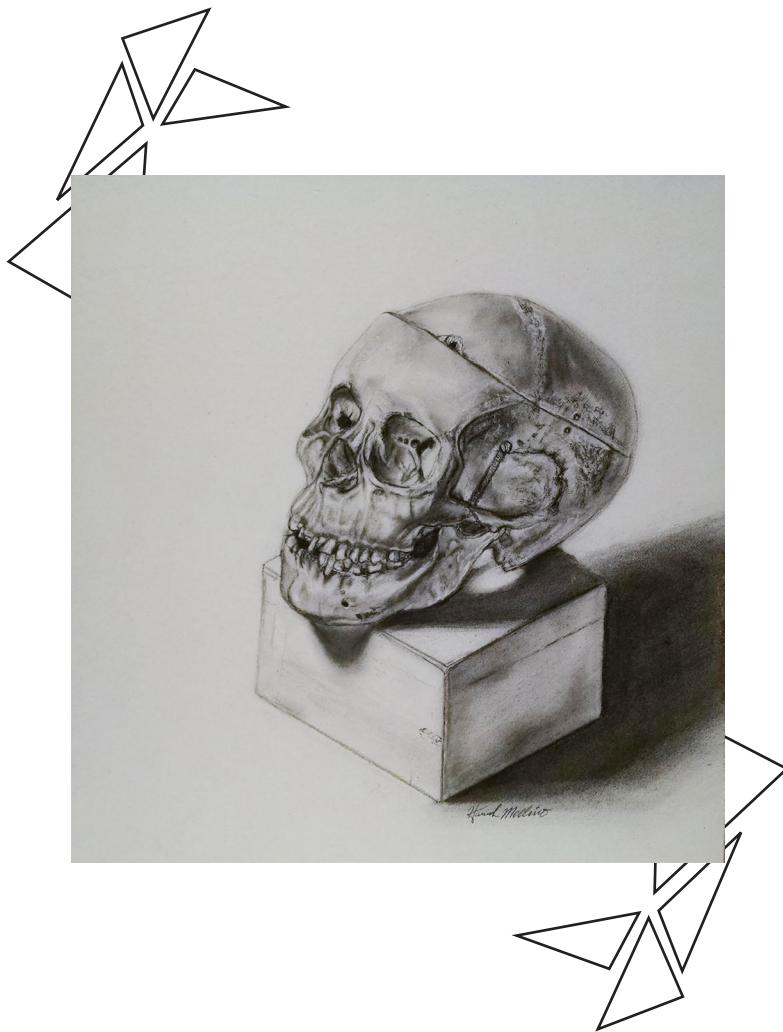
Liao

## Shoe, Tie, Socks



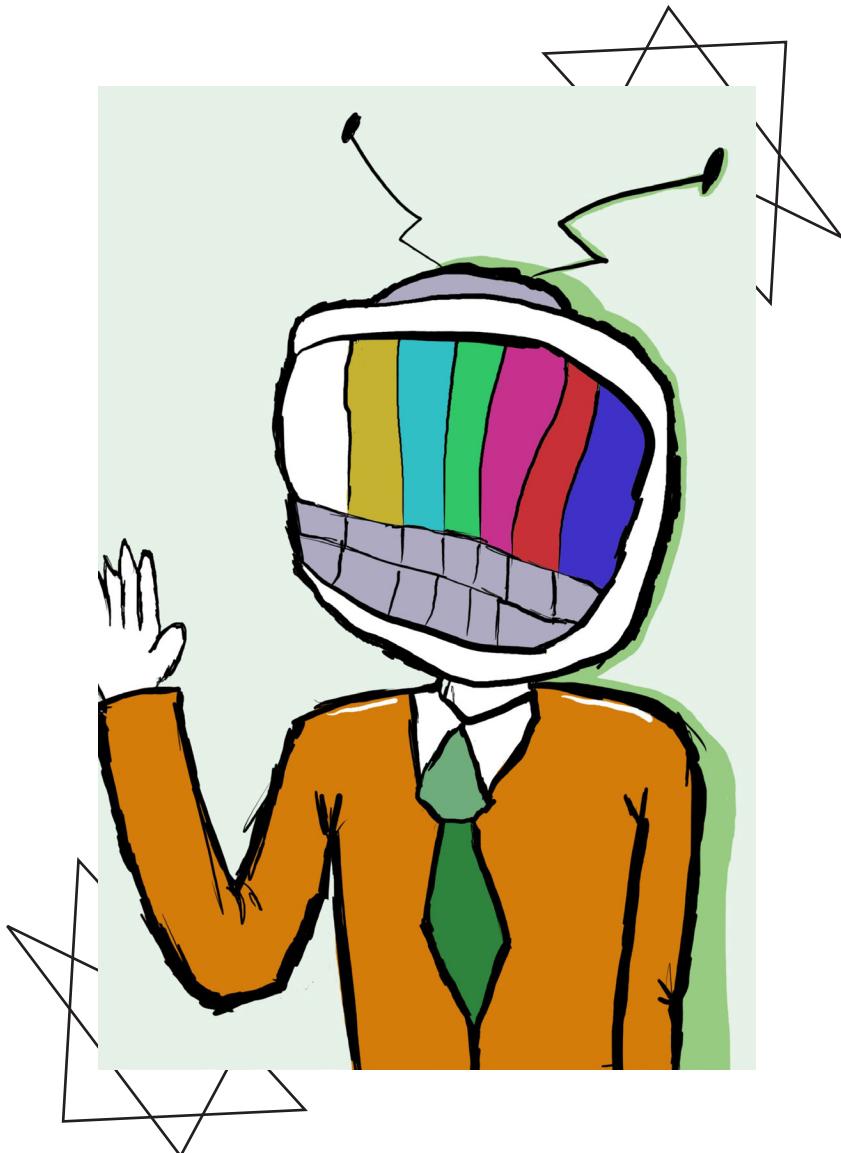
Dean

# Su Cráneo

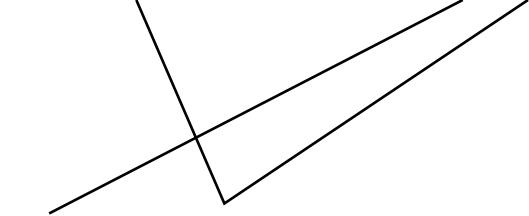


Mellino

The Teleman



Hricovsky



## Artist Bios

### **Keely Cruz**

Keely is currently a sophomore at Olivet College. She loves reading and taking pictures in her free time.

### **Reiker Quigley Dean**

Reiker Dean is a Visual art major with concentration in biological illustration and studio art. The North Carolina Native hopes to continue with his education after graduating Olivet College by pursuing an MFA. Focusing on painting and sculpture, Reiker displays an interest in the figure. When not working on figurative pieces, he focuses on still lives, developing an intimate relationship between the viewer and objects depicted.

### **Sarah Feldpausch**

Sarah is a student at Olivet College. She is majoring in writing and minoring in business administration.

### **Heather Kaiser**

Heather Kaiser is a Master of Arts candidate in sculpture at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). She is an Army veteran and finished serving 11 years of active duty in March of 2018. In addition to being published, she has exhibited work locally and nationally. She recently received scholarships from both the IUP wood center and the Elks Lodge in Blairsville. She received her BS from West Point in 2007. She currently lives in Western Pennsylvania.

### **Dean Liao**

Dean Liao is a visual artist based in Los Angeles. Drawing inspiration from Classical Realism, Abstraction and Expressionism, his work seeks to explore the contemporary human condition through an examination of the relationship between chaos and order.

### **Hannah Mellino**

Hannah Mellino is a senior from Olivet, double majoring in Graphic Design and Visual Arts with a Concentration in Biological Illustration. Her biggest influencer, besides her fellow art majors, Gary Wertheimer, and Cynthia Eller, was her trip to Florence, Italy in 2017. Funded by OC, Florence truly changed her art style and her life for the better. Her career at Olivet has also been significantly impacted by her job at the OC Archive, her

### **Mellino continued...**

main project being the assistance on the 3D interior designs for the Hosford House. Graduating in the spring of 2018, Hannah looks forward to spreading her wings to find new goals, but will dearly miss the people she leaves behind at Olivet. All are welcome to attend her and the other senior art major's show in April to support them as well as view and buy their pieces from the past 4 years at OC.

### **Zach Oshinsky**

Zach Oshinsky is a student from West Bloomfield, MI.

He is majoring in sports psychology.

### **Alyssa Miller**

Alyssa Miller is a passionate photographer from Jenison, MI. She is attending Olivet college and is majoring in exercise science while also playing soccer for the school. She won Jenison high schools first annual art contest in the category of digital painting. Alyssa Continues to progress her passion for photography and digital painting while capturing the beauty and simplicity of life.

### **Abigail Radcliffe**

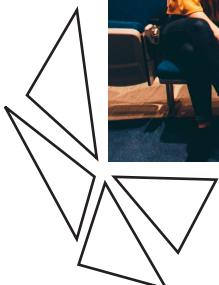
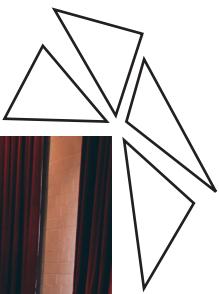
Abigail Radcliffe is a graphic design student at Olivet College. She spends most of her time designing on technology but she appreciates the fine arts. When she graduates she wants to freelance for nonprofit organizations to give back to those who are helping to make the world a better place.

### **Ora Segalis**

She was born in Jerusalem. Attended the School of Art, University of Washington, St. Louis; Parsons, School of Art, New York, New School, New York, and Chicago art institute. Exhibitions of hers were presented in San Francisco, Basel, Miami, Melborune, St. Louis, Chicago, Tel aviv, New York and Ein hod. Ora works in many private collections, including in Australia, Switzerland, Mexico, Miami, Chicago, Great Britain, Belgium and Israel.

### **Bryce Thomas**

Bryce Thomas is just a guy who takes photos, makes videos, and loves his friends. He stays at home all day editing videos and eating Poptarts (Wild Berry). He also likes the möth memes. Follow him on his insta @bryce\_takes\_pics or his personal insta @the\_official\_bryce\_thomas



Prior to the Garfield Lake Review was Olivet College faculty member Jim Coleman, a professor in the 1960s and 1970s. It was through him that the undergraduate literary journal we know today exists. While Mr. Coleman now lives in Connecticut, his Comet connection continues through the Jim Coleman Prize. This has been awarded since 2008 to students who have been published in the Garfield Lake Review. This Prize was established in memory of Tom Boal, Class of 1969, and funded through the Bill Buchanan Fund. The honoree is chosen annually by outside judges.

Past honorees:

- 2018 Adam Walle, Class of 2017
- 2017 Linda Jo Scott, professor emerita of English, Olivet College
- 2016 Meghan Eldred, Class of 2015
- 2015 Camieo Green, Class of 2014
- 2014 Meghan Wilkerson, Class of 2013
- 2013 Jennifer M. ten Haaf Hodges, Class of 2012
- 2012 Jennifer M. ten Haaf Hodges, Class of 2012
- 2011 Jacob "Coby" Heller, Class of 2012
- 2010 Anabel Montalvo Hall, Class of 2009
- 2009 Anya Letson, Class of 2008
- 2008 Katrina Williams Thigpen, Class of 2007

Olivet College, the home of the Garfield Lake Review, has a history that started with the Congregationalists who traveled across the ocean seeking religious freedom. These Congregationalists were founders of the earliest colleges in the United States. These same Congregationalists also funded the defense in the court case of the Amistad, a slave trading ship, in which the slaves won their freedom. These revolutionary efforts would trace their way to Olivet, Michigan.

Naming Olivet College after the biblical Mount of Olives, Rev. John Shipherd founded the school in 1844 in a small area of south-central Michigan. Because of Olivet's unorthodox view – offering anyone, including women and minorities, an education – the state of Michigan refused to grant Olivet a charter, so it opened as a private institute.

Into the early nineteen hundreds Olivet College transformed from a primary school for educators into a true liberal arts college. By the late 1990s, Olivet had experienced many changes, and the faculty created an Olivet Plan to encourage students to combine the founding principles of the Congregationalists and the reforms of President Brewer. The Olivet Plan still exists today, allowing students to focus their education through a global mindset. The Olivet Plan is a nationally recognized educational plan.

One of Olivet College's proudest accomplishments is the Garfield Lake Review. The Garfield Lake Review is a production of Olivet College students interested in creative writing, artwork, and music; it began in 1971 as a project in a creative writing class. The founders of the program were Professor James Coleman, Brent Danielson, James Hudson, Andrew Johnson, Amy Leithauser, George Palmenter, and Norm Wheeler. From its inception, the policy for the Garfield Lake Review has been to accept submissions from students, staff, and alumni with students serving as an editorial board.

Works were chosen through a blind screening process that was introduced in 2006. The blind screening assures that no author will be judged by race, creed, sexual orientation, or political ideology. The selections are reviewed, selected and edited by students on the Garfield Lake Review Editorial Board.

Readers interested in donating financial support for future issues of the Garfield Lake Review should contact the Olivet College Advancement Office at (269) 749-7000, or visit the Olivet College website at [www.olivetcollege.edu](http://www.olivetcollege.edu).

Olivet College is committed to the principles of equal opportunity and non-discrimination. The college, in its employment, student admissions, recruitment, and personnel policies and practices, will not discriminate against any individual on the basis of age, color, sex, gender identity, disability or disability status, height, weight, marital status, national origin, political persuasion, race, religion, military or veteran status, or sexual orientation.

The 2019 Garfield Lake Review was edited by RaeNona Claramunt and designed by Abigail Radcliffe.