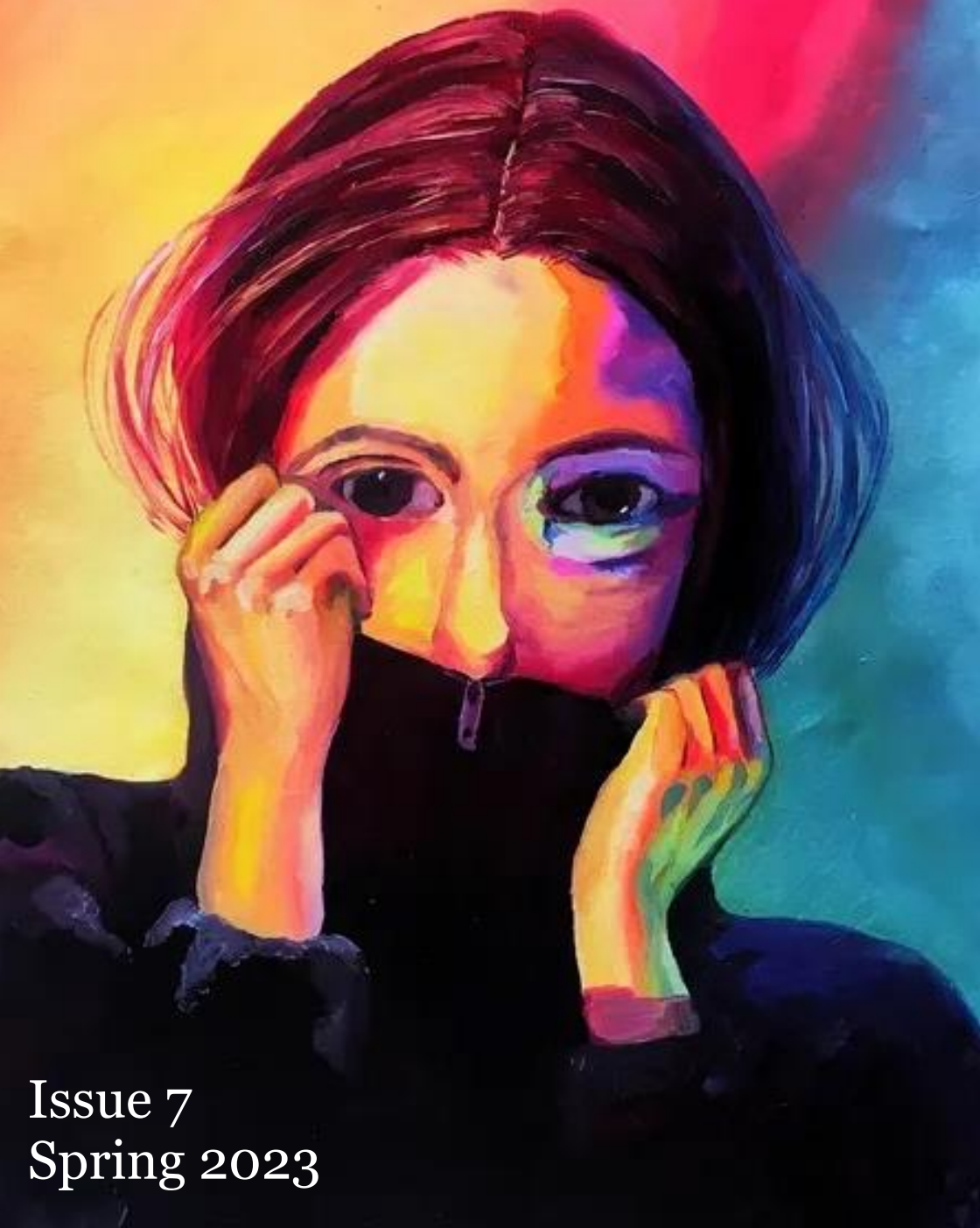


Hive Avenue



Issue 7
Spring 2023

HIVE AVENUE



**A LITERARY
JOURNAL**

Hive Avenue Literary Journal

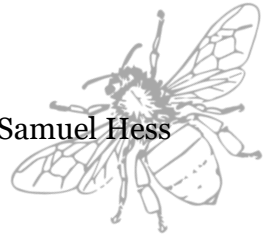
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Cover Art: *Varia Femina (colorful woman)* by Samuel Hess



MASTHEAD

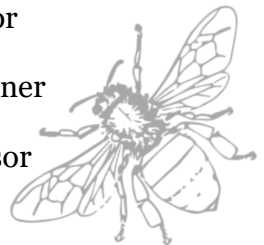
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MISSION STATEMENT



Hive Avenue is rooted in the belief that art is vital for the sustenance of life and has the strength to unite a community.

Our mission is to foster the professional development of writers, poets, and visual artists, to promote communication, connection, and the feeling of kinship.

Here at Hive Avenue, we aim to showcase the tastes and talents of both established and emerging writers in the global community – dare we say, hive?

Hive Avenue strives to cultivate an environment of appreciation; a sanctified space for all to be able to breathe and to read.



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POETRY



Old Now

by Susan Kay Anderson

I was twelve when he said he was old at almost forty
said he could barely move and I thought I might be ready
to die, too, when I got that old. That was when we had just moved
from Nome and down to Schurz to government housing
on the reservation where the road ran parallel to train tracks
along the river

where Renee and I rode the small, uncomfortable ladders
of the train when it slowed through town that was not a town
a place along the river that made the park where the Pine Nut Festival
was held so green

Dad's body is strong but his feet cannot find their footing.
Pennies we laid out on the tracks bounced off into the desert.
We never found one flattened. Now, he says he has to go
up to Portland

to manage a baseball team, never interested in baseball
and never watching a practice in his life. The bats wait
all in their cart, and the team spits into the dusty field
away from the diamond, its dugout.

lines from the fountainhead

by Logan Anthony

beneath the command of three full moons.
between walls filled with water. this is where
my memory begins. a flightless bird; a body
reckoned. in the good days, praises rained
from your mane of charcoal braids and dust devils
scraped their muzzles in the dirt below my windowsill
where the crows took flight and the sun neglected
to burn, only shimmer. there too was a time i longed
to rake clean the pulp from my throat and leave
behind the clean slate i craved. dried blood lingered
under all my nails. i carried that gore like a keepsake,
a talisman. never a burden. i tended my garden
of diagnoses like huddles of foxgloves
even as they drooped beneath the spitting rain
that fell too fast to drink from. it's in my nature—
the tendency to misinterpret a world of sustenance
whirling around me. it's taken years to traverse miles.
by now, all the river birches have eyes.
a cozy drug haze blurs my days, crowded or not.
shadows from the past pad up, baring fangs,
bearing witness to each morning's newfound
commitment to change. but as larger strokes
of time brush past, i don't change anything.
i disappoint myself all the time.
i can barely bear this body—forget the blame
for all i've been and failed to become.
the body unseen is the body unlabeled.
this i will never unlearn. to remain in shadow
is to remain in power. i was born into this world
pink and screaming and pink. i spent my formative
years bruising these hues to blues. my childhood
body was chewed up and spit out, time and again,
stuck in pieces between my own teeth.
i was born beneath a clock no longer ticking,
hands flat on the floor. feathers budding beneath
folded arms and claws dug into my back.
it wasn't until years later i learned all this and more:
the way a brute cowers within the body;
how a small, sick heart clangs shut and settles
into rust—an iron cage draped in sopping,
suffocating shadow. the way a spine

becomes a ladder as the body contorts
into its pitiful, self-loathing sacrifice.
with these words i give you a reckoning.
the beginnings of an identity.
the origins of the story
as i remember it unfolding.
from here we trace the lines, cast the shadows,
and play the parts. we're searching for the blame—
where it came from, whose it is,
where to go running from here...

by Logan Anthony

a body is a wide open field,
through a leaning, splintered doorway.
you don't realize until you've collapsed
what it takes to make it through,
how much you've already lost.

oh, my body. this body doesn't hunger, but ache.
when the body aches, it earns a name. we'll call this longing hunger.
yet another quiet violence.

& aren't they all the same?
a longing body is a starving body
& it turns on itself the way we all do.

tentative, but gasping. open-mouthed and slick-palmed.
oh, this body, how can i call it mine?

the body feeds on itself & refuses to give it a name.
you lose control the way we all do—in the pursuit of it.
weak in the knees. devoured inside.

you'll find your body discarded. under loved.
but you don't need love, only the illusion of it.

someone to lie with, someone to lie to your body. oh, your body,
you can't be alone with your body & that headful of longing.
to touch is to love & to be touched, your body aches.
but at the touch, the aching intensifies.

it's the gleaming of your bones. it's the wind when you speak.

a patchwork body
cannot be satisfied
within the confines
of such limitations.

when the belly of the earth opens & willingly you go,
you join all the other trans bodies of the world there with their agonies,
writhing in the haven of the dark. & someday when you've got burrs

in your forearms & eyeteeth tearing into the soft flesh of your neck,
you'll realize it's not there, but somewhere near.
it's not the darkness, but the lack of light.

nothing green grows where you've been.
where they send us to hide our truths and swallow the art of our lives from
canvases they prefer blank—empty and cavernous as their closed minds.

& someday far off when you've unearthed yourself from this makeshift grave,
you wake in a made-up bed, sunlight searing your limbs,
to a wet voice, thick & coiled tight, calling out
your name, welcoming you, at long last,

home.

Perennial

by Daniel Brennan

The tree beyond my window
bloomed last night. Or, over many nights.
Can it matter except that life

pushes ahead? My midnight visions
bury themselves within the soft-tissued buds, deep in those
cream-colored hearts that the breeze coaxes into
an easily wounded intimacy.

Yesterday, I felt your hand grip my thigh and I believed
I could be blooming too. I thought I was unfurling
in ivory and gold delight, all my featherweight fantasies.

Spring is pushing us into each other, don't you see?
Pushing us away from our hurried pasts
and their street-corner droughts.

Lean into me, take hold of our perennial hungers.
Is there ever enough time
for men like us?

Spring makes our bodies such an easy meal;
it devours us beneath the falling cherry blossoms,
it haunts us like a nameless daydream, a sonata with no melody to follow.

I won't always know what to say;
to you, to my own shape in the mirror, to the blameless garden of lovers
we've often tended, hand-in-thorn-pricked-hand.

But the tree beyond my window bloomed last night
and one day must bloom again. Have you always known that my body,
these buds, the shuddering edge of revelation after dark –

all they need is time?

Miasma

by Emily Buckley

'an unpleasant or unhealthy smell or vapour'

'an oppressive or unpleasant atmosphere which surrounds or emanates from something'

I wish I smoked cigarettes,
I'd go outside daily,
watch fag smoke float into the air,
strum on my ukulele.

Gentle music makes a backdrop
to the film's projection
a new world of beautiful light
of fag smoke's creation.

Dragons fly through fire ashen smoke.
When the porch light hits it,
a bright fantasy world appears.
The nicotine has hit.

Odin fights the tax collector,
throws him from Valhalla
while Loki performs a Norse dance,
Thor on the piano.

Frigg beheads the greedy loan shark,
I tap dance on the grave.
Pull tar and ash into my lungs
and watch them misbehave.

Urðr turns back the hands on the clock,
changes my credit score,
and makes it green for the first time.
I sip coffee with Baldr.

But I don't smoke cigarettes,
I kinda wish I did,
so I could meet the pagan gods,
and get out of my bed.

Sculpture Garden

by Rohan Buettel

From the unruly trees and bushes
writhing in the breeze you would think
this a wild unkempt place. Yet look
beneath the foliage and you find
the clean sharp lines of geometric design,
the hidden treasure of triangles.
A series of outdoor rooms frame
objects of interest or give views
of other forms across the lake.
Stunning verticals in the sharp-edged blades
of the Carillon cleave clouds and sky.
A bridge paints a long horizontal streak
beneath a backdrop of mountains.
This place — a retreat from busy lives.
Visit again and you begin to appreciate
the unities. The matching colours:
how the dark blue of the lake reflects a blue sky.
Under louring clouds, grey waters match
the slate paving, forming a wintry infinity pool.
At night, the waters are black,
yet softened by thin streams of light
flowing from the far banks,
adumbrated by gentle surface movement.
In the past, people would wander through,
stop to examine works, admire views,
engage in foreign conversation.
From the lake there would be noise,
the asynchronous drumming of dragon boats,
the calls from kayakers and standing paddlers.
Voices of cyclists and pedestrians entangled
where the path narrows beside the water.
Now all is quiet
but for the tolling of distant bells.

On My Ride

by Rohan Buettle

I love to race an eastern grey, I see them on my ride
They bound ahead then turn away, I see them on my ride

A wedge-tailed eagle flies beside the arboretum path
I watch it glide above the fray, I see them on my ride

The bikes are stopped upon the track, echidna in a ball
The creature's harm would cause dismay, I see them on my ride

On muddy trails swamp wallabies watch riders take their jumps
A quiet vigil — still they stay, I see them on my ride

In forest pines, a flash of red and blue along the route
Rosellas come and lead the way, I see them on my ride

We stop, with gentle hands she lifts the blue tongue from the track
The reptile safe from our affray, I see them on my ride

In winter cold, black cockatoos with yellow tails come in
To city bush to feed and play, I see them on my ride

The iridescent purple of a swamp hen by the lake
Red shield and bill make fine display, I see them on my ride

White cockatoos beneath the trees like foam upon the sea
They nibble acorns amidst the spray, I see them on my ride

New suburbs grow on fallow land, habitat disappears
For urban sprawl leads us astray, I see it on my ride

The rider watches a world that's wild, delights in nature's web
That human wants will now betray, he sees it on his ride

Let Me Weep

by Geoff Collins

Beside the frozen pond
marsh grass sleeps

and each day I walk past
but don't see

there are moments
we don't know are roadways,
places we exist without living.

A wind comes up and the grass leans.

Who moved the grass?
Who dreamed the wind?

Somewhere a choir is singing
and I am searching for my lost name
among the stones.

The broken reeds along each shoreline
listen with their whole heart.

River Music

by Geoff Collins

We are all of us
drifters, from verse
to bridge to chorus and back
like whole forests
worn smooth and washed ashore
age after chanting age
to lie paling under a moon
round as god's eye
and to have our stories told
in the darkness of water.

Thumbing through driftwood
hymnals
we mumble over the pages
conjure up
some reasons to be here
and soon we are
blind as mist in a garden
reaching out with tired fingers
touching foreheads, cheekbones
and eyelids, tracing our lives
the best we remember.

The cellist steps
onto the rooftop at midnight
her long hair a halo
in a river of dreamers
and she plays something
slow and humid
where the sun stays hidden
windows whisper
and the innocent speak in tongues
while I wait at her door
like a drunken puppy.

***Duḥkhá* (sorrow, suffering, misery or pain)?
A foolish, senseless, obsessed or ignorant
weapon, home or existence.**

by Douglas Colston

Ancient times, the past, history, the old-fashioned
or the simple, unaffected and unsophisticated?

A pond, lake, moat
or an object used for storage ...
spokes on a wheel.

A frog or the Noh mask representing a drowned person?

Rapid, extreme, unexpected, beautiful, tiny, swaying,
preparation, obsequious and the end –
crowding nothing, dreams, illusions or the military.

That which flows?

That which is bright, clear or the target –
the aim, standard and criterion,
the optimal potential in each emerging moment,
me
and you ...
sounds, voices, tidings, news, words, fame, responses, timbre and music.

**Ordinary dreams? The target.
The optimal outcome? A bunch of children,
days and nights, teachers, respect, fruit,
seeds and eggs.**

by Douglas Colston

The Sun, the commonplace, days (including the past) and ages?

Constancy –
normal, frequent and invariable.

Dreams, aspirations, ambitions and goals (including the muddled)?

Thoughts, ideas and concepts –
thinking, planning, considering, desiring and missing.

The heart of the matter?

The aim, standard and criterion –
the optimal potential inherent in each emerging moment ...
that branch of you.

Bearing, wearing, taking, conveying, bringing or receiving
illumination?

The dream ...
make a home and family.

Each and every day,
house the dream.

Daily,
dream of peace.

Those who daily dream
are at home.

Professor Elicker's Philosophy of Art Course

By Callie Crouch

you know, female painters
started out barely painting –
not replicating the nude models
they weren't allowed to
sit in on
for fear of the second sex's
hungry eyes.
because drawing grapes
ends in
adultery.
*why not let the models
be themselves?*
figure painting classes
turned mirror maze,
female bodies creating
female bodies?
(as only female bodies can).
because women can't be
artists, let alone
lesbians.

Domingo, Vino Blanco

Tulum, Q. ROO. Mexico

April 2022

by Meredith Davidson

in the wine there's a mist
missed messages
mistaken connections

or other things, more sinister or
banal
either way it clouds the vision

at the bottle shop I ask for clarity
but all the man can say is it's white.
And when on Sunday I have to drink some,

before I take it home, I ask –
is that for religious reasons? And he says,
“Do you see any churches around here?”

It's all just obscene anachronisms of indigenous rituals
here, the city just doesn't want the locals
drunk and causing trouble on their day off.”

Taking my change, I vow to come back to him
here, not on the Sabbath
here, maybe not at all.

Lethe

by Krystle Ellen

i am a winged thing flailing,
driven into my bovine body, and
back into my savage infant soul.

in the beginning, nature
conceived another deadweight,
and i find myself stillborn.

i am forever waiting to
open my welkin eyes
and outwit the brute.

i want the earth wrested from me;
i want no longer to acquiesce to
the stranglehold of gravity.

i am forever looking forward to
eclipsing the round
seared by fantasy.

Mapplethorpe

after Robert Mapplethorpe's *Self Portrait*, 1980
by Krystle Eilen

half youthful, half emaciated,

he reflects the epicene
and the languishing.

his head is all shock and flurry;
his mouth a toothless brevity.

half Madonna, half Antinous,

he reflects a decadent flower
both wilting and transcendent.

his eyes suggest a having seen,
two eternally startled interims.

a princely pauper
whose aspect reflects that of
a parched orchid culled
too soon.

She called in the afternoon

by Greg Garner

before caller ID and
screening calls
was a thing and
I answered

she said he had died
which I knew would
happen of course
he said he had cancer
last time we spoke

cancer, yes
how many obituaries
say cancer not AIDS like
cancer is a good death
not like it doesn't

eat your body in
much the same way
not like my family would
say either word
without whispering

The sky tries to be blue

by Greg Garner

I try not to be
an effort for us both

Clouds roll in and out, March winds

The chill is mean
biting through my sweater

I am cheerful and
irritated in turn
a normal day
by all accounts

Up early but
for what purpose
I'm muddled
don't know what to do

Photographed Kevin yesterday
in the paper dress
Today?

Coffee and possibilities
drive me to take
pictures at Beech Forest

Once home I develop the
film in the dark and cry

Joaquin Stalls Over Bahamas

by Lisa Hase-Jackson

I never lived near wetlands before,
never seen so much rain.
It's been a thousand years or more

they say. This storm's the stuff of lore.
I've never seen a hurricane
nor lived near wetlands before.

Rain keeps inching closer to the door,
overwhelms the city's storm drains.
I guess it's been a thousand years or more.

Joaquin is a mere 500 miles offshore.
Should I leave my condo, or commit to remain?
I've never lived near wetlands before.

Nearby shelters have space galore.
I suppose my cat and I are vain.
They say it's been a thousand years or more

and that next time we won't ignore
a cyclonic band of rain.
I've never lived near wetlands before,
What's another thousand years or more?

Advice for Hungry Actors

by Dana Kinsey

Your practical relatives join well-meaning friends who rush you, demand your CV, the back-up plan, bridesmaids' dress color meaning in no uncertain terms — surrender.

But listen, there are worse things than technicolor parasitic passions searing holes in your stomach & after ten or more years filming myriad auditions that disappear like white rabbits into black hats you know there's one — that one that possesses potential to become your chance at unimpeded time travel to the places you long for, sinking through history, saving it for future where your doubters sigh, awestruck over how much a stage or film can hold, a spotlight can spot hidden in lost voices of a generation in the mouths of another, scripted into letters on a page, talking to words that can yank the dead from dust, reach in their pockets for wisdom, raise every truth you ever learned high above heads in resounding dark.

The Crack in the Killing Stone

by Torrey Francis Malek

It is said that one thousand years ago,
the wrathful spirit of *Tamamo-no-Mae*,
who was said to be a beautiful courtesan
of heavenly sovereigns, was bound into the *sessho-seki*,

westerly referred to as, ‘*the Killing Stone*,’ for her devious
role in an alleged assassination attempt of the 74th *Emperor Go-Toba*,
who was said to have reigned a long and glorious reign of sixteen years.
Legend states that she was a nine-tailed fox spirit
who conspired to take the form of an enchanting
concubine, rather than use the teeth and tails with
which she was born to perform her nefarious plot.
As the story goes, the only way to tame a nine-tailed fox
is to lock its essence into volcanic rocks, where she will take

疑心暗鬼¹

the ghastly shape of ashen gasses for some one thousand years,
until the stone someday shatters. Whereupon she will escape to take out her
fury on those who figured out how to outwit a vixen into chunks of obsidian.
It just so happens that I read today, that the *Killing Stone* has been found
cracked

uncleanly in half, up *Matsuo Basho*’s northerly *Narrow Road*,
with the rope that bound it lain loosely aside
shredded and gnawed by whetted canines,
and that the oracles and bloggers are in a tense terror
(*as is tradition*) with the imminent resurrection
of the vengeful she-spirit that was once imprisoned.
Though, I partly feel this vulpine maiden has found
that her work is cut out for her in 2022; there is
stiff competition for the sash and crown of *Miss Apocalypse*.

-
1. A Japanese proverb, translating to English as, “*Suspensions will raise bogies.*”

Friday rain

by Sean O'Neill

A cloche of small quibbles
stretches at the lip of the afternoon.
Has this week slowed enough
to step from the carousel of graft
into something like a joy,
or even a sheaf of feignings
to spite the sighs of the rain king?

The windows, like a shawl of water,
startle the sleep of rooms
with another pulse of beads
that rummage down the panes
looking for tributaries
in scrawls of liquid writ
and insistent seaside sounds.

Here, sitting at the desk,
glancing from the screen,
I can watch the mood fall
like a slow rapacious owl
onto the gullet of the day
and sink beyond light's trick
of quickening delight.

Time enough, surely, surely,
to wrap up ravels of toil
and make for the doorways
and the homeward road.
The hands that count tocks
will always be right there
like a thrust of spears.

Fleet though the moment be
I could cherish these haloes
of time's stern courses
and archive each instant
in a battery of sweet recall.
Until the grinding week returns,
farewell fond labor with your thrills!

Nightfall

by Sean O'Neill,

A full stop of a moon
swings in a falling sky,
like a finished sentence
on the stature of a man,
his beginning and his end.

An unseen bird
pipes in the stern
and the admiral of night
steps gingerly aboard
in his uniform of black.

Across the bleeding lake,
the last of the sun's nails
claw weakly at the trees
and let go with a muffle
and a sigh and a snuff.

And here am I again,
locked in the moment
like that linnet caged,
reaching out for signs
into the dark of skies.

The Caged Bird Won't Sing

by Sage Ravenwood

Two sets of wings beating
Against enclosed windows
The cat hearing their frantic trill
Begs at the door to still the noise
Needle pincer jaws tasting quiet
In my palms a flutter heart beats
What is fear but a song of will
Mine or the tiny redpoll bird's
A mated pair unwilling to part
Let stillness end them both
First the female with tawny plumage
Fingers spread as if a cage door opens
Wind float escaping toward aspen trees
Her love like all things awaiting an end
For but a moment I become the beggar
Sing damn you for deaf ears sake
One bird left in my cupped prison
The male with red markings
Eyes searching branches
Remaining steadfast
In love's captured tragedy
Half of a tenuous pair
No right to imprison one
Go on fly, let it end with me
Their song wasn't mine
And yet, and yet
I want to call them back

Pax Christi

by Brendan Rowland

He's supine, legs bent onto the couch
like an unnecessary letter, says he's a
stuck zipper. I feel the camera panning
upward until you can't distinguish us
from the carpet we're lying on like a Bible.
He thinks love is an anachronism from
when the faithful worshiped jewel-studded
fingers. *Sanctificetur nomen tuum.*

I can see his eyes are open by the Kodachrome
colors weeping on the white borders. I pass him
a lemon; we peel and eat them in silence. I draw
the curtains so the dark won't escape. He arches
his back like Kafka, says his skeleton feels like scotch
tape. I count his ribs. *Gratia plena, Dominus tecum.*

He wants to die, but that's cowardice. And the lights
smear and drip – at least Christ knew it'd be over quickly.
I feel the snow settling in our apartment, white as gauze,
anesthetizing, and the bread is moldy as Christmas. I wish
I could set him free like cracking a knuckle, but we're wrapped
in miles of rosary beads and kimonos and amulets. He and I,
we ask *quid es veritas?* alongside Pilate, unsure if we're earnest
or sarcastic or desperate, knowing it will dwell in us richly, silently.

About Distance

by Jayce Russell

The rain does and does not care, sweeping in overnight
so that, waking to its pattering on the fallen leaves,
we may think to remain voiceless for a little while,
considering how little there is to be said in the thin morning dark,
then how little there is to consider.

Our aches and our responsibilities
and the flowers opening to the sun
and the hasty car, cutting us off even though the road behind us is
clear to the horizon
and the rude cashiers and the kind
and the windows that shed paint when we push them open
will all still be there for us to notice them

when we rise from our daze.
For now, the rivers have come to visit us
from places we thought we'd certainly go
when we first ran our fingers over the smooth pages
of lushly glossed coffee table books.
If I open my mouth, I'll find myself pecked clean
at the bottom of a dried out canyon.
If I open my heart, I'll be swept out to sea.

Between Earth and Sky

by Michael T. Young

A boy leaves a room
carrying his mother's last breath,
which passed over his face
just as he took her hand.
It's the heaviest thing
he will ever know.

A man in the park lingers
stiff under the weight of something
only the rain utters
as it beats him and the earth.
He hears overhead a falling
from where leaves hiss and flash.

Birds there bargained flight
for a sustaining song in the branches,
becoming a source that flows
into another day, a wonder,
that if we listen, will help us bear it.

FICTION



Phones in His Pockets

by Travis Flatt

One: Charleston

The band wakes, drinks breakfast, and strips down on the beach.

Everyone except for Luke, anyway.

Luke sleeps in, rises, and staggers down the back porch. He remains watching from the sand, smoking a cigarette and sipping a bottle of orange Mad Dog 20/20 which we bought yesterday as a joke. Last night, we played a shitty show in the living room of some rich kid's condo where we crashed out on the floor/couch. The show was shitty because no one (in the crowd) got naked, and I was too high to down-tune my guitar mid-set. Luke had to rip the guitar from my hand and adjust it for me.

Now, I stand and let the freezing waves slap my thighs.

"Come on," we shout to Luke. He's pouting about last night, the four kids who showed up, the zero dollars gas money, the songs we forgot, and the generally garbage start of a tour.

"Alright, hold on," he says and turns the rectangular bottle skyward. He kills the second half. "How cold is it?"

"It feels good," I yell, but he's my brother and can tell I'm lying.

"Don't be a pussy," says our drummer, Ben. Our lips are blue. We wrestle for warmth.

"Spring break," Bill Stack, our roadie, calls to Luke, by way of invitation.

Stack doesn't actually do anything, he's just come along for the ride. He knows someone in every city in America via the National Network of Crusty Punks (Chattanooga Branch), and he helped us book the tour. Spring Break Tour Three. It's not spring break, by the way, it's November. Every tour is a Spring Break Tour. Spring break is a state of mind.

Luke plunks the bottle down on the sand for some kid to step on later. He contemplates the cold, then item after item bundles into everyone's shed clothes, and once enormously layered, runs into the water to our applause. I've yanked him into a headlock, and we're submerged when I realize that my

phone's still in my jacket pocket, which Luke is currently wearing. And my wallet's in my jeans. All of our shit is now in the ocean.

Two: Heading north to Richmond

The accident occurs when we're about twenty miles off the interstate, headed for Richmond. Stack knows a girl who goes to Virginia Commonwealth and wants to visit her in the dorms. For sex, presumably. We pull over into the back lot behind a ramshackle, fish and tackle store called "Fish and Tackle" to smoke Stack's atonement blunt—we're not happy about this detour—and despite all signs that the F & T is closed/empty, a big, white car pulls off the road into the front lot.

Our van is idling, and Luke, at the wheel, panics. He slams on the gas, accidentally rocketing us into the woods. Later, he'll explain he thought it was a highway patrol car. Last thing I see before we go careening into the trees is this misidentified cop car driving off down the highway. He apparently never saw us.

The van's at an odd angle on a hillside, entangled in trees, and somehow we're alive. Our amps are wrecked, though Stack and Ben, in back, are entwined. Luke is wedged between the front seats. I was wearing my seatbelt and I'm frozen in the same position I was in when we shot into the woods. After verbally establishing everyone's status—nothing broken—we learn the doors won't open. That's okay, we can kick open the windows. Then the supporting trees give way, and we tumble. And tumble. And tumble, finally coming to rest sideways in a huge ditch.

Now, Stack is not okay. He thinks his leg is broken. This leaves Luke, Ben, and I, who are all battered and shocked but relatively lively.

Except stuck inside the goddamn van.

Three: The Ditch part 1 – Trapped

When Luke went into the ocean with our clothes on, he killed our credit cards and phones. We'd spoke of using our meager cash to buy a burner phone to split between us, but no one saw the particular need. On Spring Break's One and Two, I'd gone weeks without talking to my girlfriend back home.

After about an hour, Ben manages to kick a big dent into the windshield, but since we're covered in limbs and logs and shrubs and rocks and mud, without a saw (or beaver) or shovel, that's doing us dick all.

There's no food. Unless you count seven PBRs and a half ounce of schwag weed.

Four: The Ditch part 2 – Alive

A few hours in, the beers are gone, and the arguing is getting vicious. Light is dim, and Stack is convinced his leg is gangrenous.

He passes out and doesn't wake up. His fever warms the van.

Ben makes the first, cautious *Alive* joke.

Five: The Ditch part 3 – Jam Session

Turns out that Stack's leg isn't broken, afterall.

Unfortunately, it takes me biting his thumb to lead to this discovery. He wakes up screaming, and in the subsequent surge of adrenalin, he yanks his leg out from between the amp cabs, and kicks the shit out of me with four very sturdy limbs. Hysteria is setting in and Luke becomes the voice of reason. Or something approximating it. Because it's growing even colder, Luke concludes that it's night out. The van is now very cold. We need activity to stay warm, and therefore locate our instruments—or what is left of them—and attempt a jam session.

Stack calls us “hippies.”

Six: Discovery

Turns out that that big, white car Luke mistook for a highway patrol cruiser was actually the owner of the Fish and Tackle. The driver/owner did, in fact, see us behind his shop, but assumed we were some kids making out: “Happens all the time, fellas.” Unfortunately, he missed the rocketing into the woods fiasco.

He sees us, disregards it, and then two days later, takes his trash out. That's when he notices the ragged hole crashed into the woods and inspects.

During this time, we lose our minds and divvy up our personal belongings to fight off hunger.

The neck of my guitar, I discover, is the thinnest and softest wood (once I unstring it) and therefore the easiest to eat. I manage to chew about half the neck to pulp. The worst part is the splitters between my teeth. Once I've cracked my canines and can't chew further and the blood is making the endeavor too slippery, I change tact and attempt filling my stomach with the low e string. Kind of like an incredibly al dente spaghetti noodle. Ben has his drum skins, lucky bastard, while Luke is suffering similarly with his bass.

The Fish and Tackle guy, Lloyd, finds us feasting on our instruments, Stack munching on his Doc Martens. He rushes us to the hospital, where they contact our respective families and we're all awaiting our parents/siblings while the surgeons assess the damage.

The thing is, I feel like I'm the better musician after this ordeal. I definitely *understand* the guitar better, and I'm actually excited to see how this experience affects our songwriting. Once we figure out how to buy new shit. Maybe a Kickstarter or something.

Seven: Return to Spring Break

I admit that while in the hospital, I dreamt of opening my mouth (or ass) and this amazing music shooting out, but sadly—no sir. We sound pretty much the same. Stack has declined to go on Spring Break Four with us. And we were able to write a whole new set about the van thing. Like a concept album. Only it really happened. I'm calling it, "I Was Stuck In a Van and Ate My Guitar" as a sort of place-holder name.

Paper Bullets

by David Luoma

Breakfast was always battle time at Penn's because her father told stories. I could hardly breathe as he mimicked the trajectory of a grenade with a cup, his head ducking, our heads ducking. Coffee splashed. Tapping a plate of scrambled eggs with a fork became a machine gun rattling. He and three others got pinned by enemy fire. The air smelled of burnt toast.

Then they improved the amusement park. They opened a pendulum ride, brand new. We held our place in a long line, facing the backs of those in front, inching forward. Gargantua towered overhead and Penn got this seasick look on her face.

"It's not as rickety as it looks, really," I said, trying to say anything that might impress her. "Creaking and squealing's part of its design. There's nothing to worry about, really. You're staring up into the guts of an engineering masterpiece."

Gargantua stood near the park's red footbridge, beneath the creamy clouds mushrooming in an otherwise baby blue sky. Back then, Timber Town's park had constant background noise, screaming and laughing, little kids pleading for popsicles. That red footbridge, it stretched over the park's peaceful pond like a stitch closing a wound. People loved tossing coins in, wishing. Penn refused to trust her future to any such thing. She said so more than once.

They hit the beach, crawling in wet sand. Faces down, they held quiet. Mortars landed and sand went airborne, hitting, pattering. Sugar fell from the spoon. Spent cartridges made the best depth charges. Hovering over the fish tank in my bedroom, I chased Lenny and George all over the calm Pacific. A young male lion killed an older rival, then slaughtered all its cubs.

Our park attendant placed a dirty Converse high-top on the gondola for leverage and yanked at the restraint harness. Such action suggested g-force alone couldn't keep us safe. Although I believed in the harness and trusted the attendant, I reached for the locking bar just the same. Penn moved her head closer, a small increment. Warm breath grazed my cheek and her eyes got wide. Afterward, we sat on the grass near a warped picnic table and split a peanut butter sandwich that she pulled from her bag. An anthill stood nearby like a minuscule volcano. Ants flowed out in a single stream over my foot. I wiggled my toes and it was the fall of Pompeii. Planes struggled to find the drop zone.

Penn decided to play Scrabble. Her zeal for trying new things separated her from others. I pictured her marching down to Shultz's Drug Store on her single mission, to buy that game and open it under the tall sycamores. Besides,

she was three months older and now fourteen, so look out. I visualized her in charge and doing things. On a cellular level, bacteria invaded and multiplied. Survival tactics, really. Stronger antibiotics were stockpiled as a counteraction. Tremendous rain hitting the Pacific Coast made for mudslides that erased houses.

There used to be a big house fronted with white pillars up on Concord Street. One evening, out of nowhere, it caught fire. Flames whispered and coughed behind smoke-browned glass before penetrating the roof. Ash floated up and parachuted down. Bystanders discussed causation. Timber Town's newspaper ran with other more tactical stories. Ground water contaminated by arsenic. A new strain of flu threatening. Blinding sandstorm on the interstate. Then finally Bob Quackenbush, 88, who passed quietly in a nursing home. Natural causes, it said. Survived by three adult children and seven grandchildren. Mabel, his beautiful and beloved wife, went thirteen years before. Nothing more.

Getting to the capital became a slogged-in-the-mud foot race. Finally, though, there it was, a horizon resembling glass shards. He felt a jumble of anxiety and confidence rising from the rubble. Cream seeped up in the dark, dark coffee. He took his first prisoner there, grabbed him from behind and didn't let go for the life of him.

Chuck Janus, who lived next to the big house since who knows how long, had smoked cigarettes like he owned stock. Antagonistic cells formed encampments near a bloodstream and a few went to scout for new areas of hostility. Whether at a cigarette's tip or in a house, no matter, conflagration remained a stratagem that didn't take sides. Lightning struck a tree and the forest burned and deer ran in conflicted directions. Sharks skulked in an agitated ocean. One had a seal locked in its jaws. Patrolling U-boats fired torpedoes.

Penn cupped a few Scrabble tiles in her hands and breathed on them for extra luck and placed them in neat formation on her wooden rack. We made words on the board. After a few turns, I drew the Q. I tried to fit it somewhere, squeezed in with COIL, a suffix to LAKE. Q struck me as preposterous. It had the power of fate. Some broken code in the genes confirmed at birth how and when the end would come. Berlin's air stank like boiling milk. Withered, bullet-struck, the swastika was blown from its perch. A torn pancake smacked the table. Sneaking up behind an enemy soldier, he stood behind a kitchen chair, wrapping his arms around it.

All I wanted to do was look into her face, to stare so deep that I could discover what really lingered behind her dark eyes. I wanted her to look back so

we might catch each other in that uncomfortable moment. Instead, she talked about money that she felt certain should drop out of the sky because her future happened to be full of x-amounts of possibilities, of course. Everything became an equation for her.

“When I get enough saved,” she said, “I’m going. It’s Paris or nothing. Forget Timber Town. Watch and see.”

“That’s thousands of miles.” There was more I wanted to say but the words were trapped and mangled and scuffling with themselves, unreachable.

I struggled fitting my nervous Q into words like CUFF and IF. The whole problem was the fatal flaw Q equaled. A person had it until it cost the game like a broken chromosome lingering in the background, spelling disease, preprogrammed. Penn came up with AT on her side of the board. TO, going down, was it for me.

She talked about putting her toes in sand at a French beach and swallowing salt water and dipping under the waves at sunset. She traced her fingers along the board’s edges, goose stepping. “All that beautiful culture. All those beautiful people. Adventure. Museums. Trains. Architecture. A beautiful experience.”

Never mind that the pendulum ride in Timber Town’s park was a rotting thing of terror for me, I had to ride with Penn. My gut ached right there in line. I tried not to appear obvious. Gargantua loomed enormous and skeletal, a fossilized marvel engineered for fear and designed to make us rely on outside comfort. She asked if it could ever fall and I tried to sound unimpressed by that possibility.

“Not in a million years,” I said. I wished I told her about the baseball.

Penn nodded. She ran both hands through her hair, upsetting a blonde curl. Those dark eyes scanned the placed tiles, solving mathematical probabilities, weighing the words. She lifted letters from her rack. A terrible earthquake struck Japan. Some became homeless.

I said to her, “Your word, ATARAXY, is that real?”

They marched along mottled streets. Rifles horizontal on tired shoulders. Helmets undone. If the enemy had an atomic bomb, we’d be living in a different world. It came down to that, technically a roll of dice. Rods and cones fired with nervous energy. Shadows from Gargantua’s frame trudged across Penn’s face. I wanted her to look at me, really. Blindness correlated with

failure of the optical nerve while the ocean's tide sucking out correlated with the earthquake on the other side of the world.

Winter was brutal. A gun's action got distorted by the icy cold. First was the damage, then came its sound trailing after. Waffles slapped a pale plate. So a soldier would be bleeding out and lying in the snow. Then, as images of his life flashed before his eyes—Mom cutting his hair, several amusement parks, cotton candy, a special girl—then he heard the shot's sound telling him to duck. In the obituaries, Bill Livingstone succumbed to Alzheimer's, a lethal disease of lost memories. No family turned up for the funeral. Nothing more. A squad of killer whales eased up behind an ice floe. They created waves that knocked penguins into the water.

Trying to make words made no sense because the letters we pulled out of the bag were not all the letters of the alphabet at any one time. That and they were attached to numbers. This equaled a design flaw. I should have mentioned it, impressing her with the simulated limitation I discovered. Penn's eyes worked out alphabetical-mathematical combinations. Besides, I liked the way she looked whenever she calculated things. She had the confidence to stay on her course. I decided not to do anything to dull her appearance.

Our attendant secured the locking bar against us. There was a metal-on-metal sound clicking like a ratchet. My breathing constricted. Penn twisted her hands on the locking bar. I wanted to tell her how I'd keep her safe. Resting my head back, I felt a slow rickety rise, anticipating that butterfly-in-the-stomach panic of weightlessness once we got into position.

I hid the hostile Q in my pocket, my security against bad fate. Viruses spread like butter on warm rye bread. Once in the body, viral intruders landed on innocent cells. I pictured over and over the lunar module landing on the moon. Then a projection descended and the virus injected itself inside. Because of this the virus got mistakenly reproduced by friendly cells. The body mounted a defense through its immune system like it was trained to. The inescapable conflict was marked by progress and retreat, hope and gloom. In an autoimmune disease the body attacked itself, friendly fire.

I wanted to talk about the real words locked in my head. I was that close. Instead, I pulled my hands back and folded my arms. They hid under a covering of trees. Two planes cut back and forth, engines sputtering, searching. Out of apparent frustration, enemy pilots strafed the area with bullets. Shredded wheat split the air. Shredded wheat hit the floor. Tiles rattled as Penn mixed them inside the paper bag. She lifted it above her head, scrambling her odds. Mulley Johnson made it in the obituaries. He had lost his fight with Lou Gehrig's disease. No one saw that coming. Nothing more.

“Okay, my plan,” she said, halting with the bag. “I’ll get a nest egg. Buy a boat ticket. Stay at a hostel. Live out of a knapsack. Work in a pastry shop. I’ll learn French. Merci. Meet somebody. Have kids. Get old on a farm with x-amounts of pigs and chickens.” She spoke all this to the sycamore trees or maybe it was the sky.

Once, I had offered to carry Elsie Barrett’s groceries for her. We were standing on a corner outside of Shultz’s Drug Store. I even offered to mow her grass, saying I’d mow the moon for her if she’d let me. Mrs. Barrett refused point blank. Her husband would do it, she insisted. Ed Barrett happened to be hospitalized at the time with a spirited pneumonia that kept reassembling in his lungs. He never made it back home.

Out of nowhere another house burnt to the ground. Speculation centered on statistics, that there happened to be an unusual amount of house fires for a place the size of Timber Town, all happening in a single year. Neighbors were dumbfounded because fortune seemed to be pointing and laughing. No one heard the tall maple tree fall in the woods. A nest bounced. Crows devoured robin eggs.

Bright sunlight glowed behind Penn. I moved to sharpen the view. I was tongue-tied as a result. He slipped up behind and wrapped an arm around the neck and squeezed like a python. Ants carried the human equivalent of battleships while pillaging and plundering like Vikings. The bravest perished for the colony and its queen. On a cellular level, white blood cells were trained to recognize infiltrating pathogens by certain defining tags. They then engulfed those infiltrators whole, sacrificing whole squadrons of themselves. Troops parachuting from planes were picked off at random. Only a small number of Cheerios made it into the bowl. They searched street by street, house by house, room by room.

Gargantua’s movement swirled with the pond and the red footbridge, blurring with sycamores and blurring with sky. Such force of traveling fast through space spiked my hair and pushed my cheeks into a puffy-faced smile or a puffy-faced scream, depending on perspective. For Penn’s sake, I opted for the smile. Smiling, I traveled through both space and time, not afraid of either.

I wondered about her textbook of a plan. Did she notice my blue baseball shirt or that my hair had just been cut? I scratched the picnic table’s leg to create a dramatic moment. My chest pounded, my ears pounded. I counted to slow my breathing. I worked out words in my mind. Where was I when she dreamed of Paris? Did she see me standing near a painting and pointing at a sculpture? But what came out was, “So what letter you putting down?”

“I hate it,” she said right away like a jab to the heart. “Same place since kindergarten. This park. Same trees. Same grass. Same school bus with the same driver. Willy. That’s him.” She coughed and it sounded deep. “Shackled to one job for twenty years.”

“You can’t blame him for working, can you?”

“It’s bad luck getting born here.” She crumpled the paper bag. “Nothing ever changes here. Once I get a nest egg.”

Four things had been festering in my brain: The sound of grinding teeth in the high school hallway, the belief I was going to die when Rod Shultz grabbed my throat, the sharp pain from his slow blows to my gut, and throwing up as I dropped to my knees. Rod Shultz had some wild idea that Penn belonged to him in an exclusive sense and that I spent too much time with her. Newspaper, twisted into terrible shapes, bounced off the wall, paper bullets.

One Sunday night they hosted dinner. Baked-ham smell occupied the whole house. Everybody sat at the kitchen table talking about that year’s flood. “Bill’s place’ll be all right. You’re on high ground.” Steam rose from the boiled potatoes. “Yeah, Elsie and the kids need help for sure. That old barn of a home leans in a troublesome manner. Mulley’s got extra wood, don’t you Mulley, and we’ll pitch in, sure we will.” Steam also rose from the ham. “Suppose, Ed, you’ll plant corn again?” Butter melted and slid off the hot rolls. “Flooding is devastation, pure and simple. No question about that. Chuck, cut me a piece and make it what a grizzly would desire.” Forks clinked against plates. Innocent bystanders were amazed once they found out another home had disintegrated in flames. Eventually, though, fields were replanted. Penn and I ran between the tall cornstalks, hiding.

Out of nowhere, a baseball shattered the large front window of Shultz’s Drug Store. Splinters of glass were found hiding behind toothpaste and aspirin. Glass dust covered the floor. Such breaking of glass went by the name of crystal night. They led with their rifle barrels so they could detect enemy movement and fire at the same time. Wounded buildings stood with furniture and clothes and family pictures spilling out. Rye bread, standing like teepees, was broken into crumbs. They looked for movement with rifles pointed. He scanned the kitchen with his fork extended.

Penn thrust her arms in the air. The gondola swung forward and she screamed because of it, because of wanting to amplify experience. Hot air rushed past. Pressed into our seats, she screamed again and I struggled to reach for her hand but the pinning g-force against me was too strong. Then the pendulum ride’s momentum reached its opposite peak. Such a momentous

loss. A fish suddenly snagged by a fisherman's hook, its fight slashing out as the water fell away.

They raided at night, concealed by darkness. They moved on their bellies toward a strategic spot and waited. They searched for any weakness. Cinnamon rolls held positions behind two cereal bowls. That was how they were going to get home in one piece. Over and over there was that breakfast story about a hero named Jonesy who dived on an exploding grenade. Marauding ants discovered a corner of a peanut butter sandwich lying on the grass.

Penn left Timber Town's park, taking the folded Scrabble board with her. She stormed off when I said that France made zero sense. A firetruck's siren screeched in the distance, followed by a wailing ambulance. I watched her walk beneath the mushrooming clouds, watched her shrink, really. On that red footbridge I thought of a baseball's dirty, stitched roundness, of its having no beginning and no end. Purposeless if it was not in some kind of game. I took my lonely Scrabble Q from my pocket and held the tile up to the sunlight. Ten points.

I threw it with all the strength I could muster. I followed its trajectory against the baby blue sky. I followed it over the edge and into the water where I saw my own rippled face and waved-forward hair floating, gray as ash, there like lilies in a painting, floating in peace, defenseless.

At the funeral, Penn's father wept. Nothing more.

Bitter Orange

by Kira Obolensky

She has certain feelings about Riverdance. These feelings do not wash over her, rendering her frantic or swooning, nor do the emotions summoned by considering a theatrical performance improve her mood. Rather, Riverdance exists in her toolkit of observations, along with the smell of Lysol, a pungent memory from her mother's obsessive cleanliness.

She finds herself longing for Lysol, because it makes her feel nostalgic for her childhood. She can smell it wherever it has been, as if she is a diviner for Lysol, walking down one of the endless tile hallways in the shelter, or popping into a church basement in search of a bathroom.

And also, there's Mah Jong, which she played when she lived in the neighborhood. She tries to keep up the façade and takes the bus to the community center even now. It's the game, with its black and white tiles and endlessly slow progression, that causes her to walk outside the community center at just the right time to bump into a Cuban gentleman trying to get something sticky off his leather soles.

How does she know he is Cuban? He tells her right away that his name is Luis Batista, and he smiles a wry smile as he wields a handkerchief, from another era and destined for the garbage can. "Bastard dog," he says.

Luis Batista stands tall, as elegant as a daddy long leg spider, and she is certain he dyes his hair because it is unnaturally black, as if colored in by a Sharpie.

He considers her crumpled blue dress and tells her, in Spanish, she is "Azul," which she accepts as a compliment.

He wears a yellow jacket, the color of pollen.

Does she extend her hand as if she is about to waltz? She can't remember.

He is solicitous that she hasn't stepped in the pile of shit that he has and asks her to check her shoes. Which she does, to discover nothing, not a smear. They laugh. He asks her to Riverdance, of the endless billboards and advertisements, the entertainment she has vowed she will never attend. But Luis Batista—he is no relation he assures her to the former President and head thug of Cuba—is a professional gaffer, a term that makes her laugh, until he

very seriously explains what it is and the ways in which his union gets him free tickets.

The tickets, it seems, are for later that day. She assumes he will want to pick her up, which makes things tricky because as of now she has no official place to be picked up at. Her mind races as to how she'll shower, find him, etc. when he makes it easy and suggests a meeting at the theater, an hour before for a "libation." He assures her that his shoes will be clean.

She sneaks into the local YMCA and takes a shower; it's less sneaking and more looking like she belongs. She's been a member for years! After, she puts on her usual dress, the one that doesn't wrinkle except perhaps when next to open flame. He finds her easily in the lobby, and on offer for libations, white wine, and can she please have two packages of almonds? She smiles, confesses, she hasn't had time for dinner yet.

A growing sense of unease about the evening begins with the opening solemn stomping of 100 feet on a dance floor. She'll try to swallow the Celtic influence of it all, which reminds her of her brutish first husband. Instead, she considers the rousing nature of the music. She wishes it could inspire her, open portals in her mind to another place, another way.

Luis turns to her, with his dark eyes eloquently surprised, a cartoon Ooh! and Wow! floating above him. She has to admit it is rousing.

But the Irishness of it that exhausts her, abuses her even, and it is strange that her new date, with his free tickets, falls asleep almost immediately, while she can't seem to look away from all the Celtic shenanigans. They have completely reimagined the 'ground-breaking show with innovative and spectacular lighting, projection, stage and costume designs.' That's what the program says...and she tries to appreciate the idea that so many people labored to do just that... must be some heavy lifting. She thinks about the idea that something this old can, in fact, be reimagined. The thought jars her as she thinks in practical terms about the wear and tear on all the stomping dancers' joints. She looks over at sleeping Luis. When he slumbers, the spikiness of his energy mutes, his attractiveness dilutes as if the snoring is a solvent and all his color, his energy washes away. It occurs to her that she could fade away, herself, slip into the bathroom and then be done with this Luis Batista and this evening of cultural contradictions.

"Hey," she jolts him with her elbow and his eyes open quickly, and he crosses himself, whispering in Spanish *Padre, Hijo, y Espiritu santo*.

"Superstition?" she hisses, "or something more?"

His eyes are brown pools and he responds, in his low gravelly voice, that if you fall asleep sitting up and awaken suddenly to learn you are alive, you must thank God for his magnificence.

It makes some sense. She has much to say about the matter of life and death. She holds his elbow and mouths, "Can we go?"

And he nods, relieved, and they scooch out of the auditorium where some 572 people similarly doze in and out of consciousness.

In the car, he says to her, "You are loco," and she says, "Thank you."

He drives. It's always the case, even now at this advanced age when all women are certifiably better drivers than the men, but the premise of bad male drivers must be kept, like a secret, from half the population.

As they turn onto Bayshore drive, she smells a sharp pungent smell that she knows is coming from the latest attempt to clean up an oil spill. Now that's something to talk about, so she says, "So many dead birds. Breaks the heart."

Luis Batista doesn't respond. She wonders what he thinks about. Her second husband, long dead, used to claim he thought about nothing, and she would think this thinking about him thinking about nothing has become something. They drive to her house, perhaps, or his house because he hasn't asked for her address. That's a mercy. Perhaps he has an idea as to where they will go next. Finally old enough to understand that this question, "what are you thinking," is a dead end, instead she says, "Oh, pull over there, Luis Batista," and he does exactly what she asks.

She leaps out of the car, he doesn't ask why, and she gathers bitter oranges fallen from a tree. Such a find, because it takes the wind, almost hurricane force gales, to separate those fruits from their mother tree. It's an impulse, whenever the earth offers free food, or a dumpster, to take what she can get.

Picking up the oranges from the ground is a kind of harvest, which in turn is part of a chain that binds her to the earth. That's what she'd rather say than "you never know when your next bite is coming." As she walks back to his car, she practices saying her thought, "The trees and plants grow for us, and we pick them and consume them, and the seeds are strewn again." She tells this to herself twice and by the time she gets back into the passenger seat, arranges herself in the car with 12 too ripe bitter oranges in her lap, it feels unnecessary to intone any observation other than, "Can we go to your place and fuck?" She

likes to go to her lovers' houses and snoop, inventing pasts and futures. It's also a free night away from the shelter, which houses too many women, too many children. If she had more energy she would compile a book of love, a register of each place she has engaged in fellatio, or more; a document to the energies of free love sadly untethered.

Luis Batista smiles in response, tips his imaginary chapeau and they are soon bundling themselves into his suite in the Bali Hai, the oranges spilled fruit on a terrazzo floor.

Her observations later, after the siren pull of Luis Batista, are that he has unnaturally long appendages, fingers, toes; his maleness as skinny as a carrot and as long as a knitting needle.

The rhythm of Riverdance unfortunately inspires him.

He snores right away.

She smells of orange zest. The oranges perhaps provide a clue about her fragile mental state. She has picked them up for what purpose? Is there vodka? But she's trying hard to stop drinking. She'd smoke if she could.

The clues in this sterile suite are that Luis Batista is similarly unmoored. Can two unmoored people create stillness and peace? She'd learn Spanish if that were possible. She'd speak to him in his native tongue. She'd stick her tongue in his elfin ears on a regular basis. She doesn't want his money, which is good, because he doesn't seem to have any. She paces on the balcony, trapped by a chain lattice. What did he say when they were making love? How did it go again?

"You are beautiful enough..." Yes, that's what he said. Is that an insult, did he imply that she would do in the scheme of physical attractiveness? Could it be that this was a compliment, or even intended as one...or did he intend to say that she would suffice to turn him on. And this "enough," perhaps that word...she can't get over the word. She takes everything so personally. It is exhausting.

Below the balcony, a highway. A parade of classic cars drives by, each wheel a statement in male prowess. What do they call them? Muscle cars? What a weird club. She needs a weird club. This series of one-night stands will no longer do.

What to do with the oranges. She could pelt him with them, or throw them down below, a satisfying way of disposing of too ripe fruit. She

contemplates his small kitchen, a kitchenette...Meat in the fridge put out to thaw looks pork-like, and a cloudy shade of gray; the bins are barren. There are 17 sticks of butter in the freezer. Not a slice of bread to be seen.

His shoes, pointy and brown in a European way, sit side by side near the door. She puts them on—so big on her. She's a clown. She wants to wake him up and show him, like she did as a child, Dada, look at me! She ties them tightly to stay on her ankles. The floor is shiny and smooth. She could skate on it. He still sleeps. An older man, trying to be younger. She's an older woman trying to find another person. Anyone suitable who can help her, shield her from what she sees as a certain future.

The first orange hits the floor, too ripe, almost a plop. It's hard to raise her foot without the shoe loosening but she does so, keeping her ankle flexed up and stomps hard on it. Juice flies outward, upward, deflating the orange of juice, of pulp, of seeds. Eleven more to go. Stomp goes another, and another. Still, Luis sleeps. His shoes are going to be sticky. There is some regret about that. But how satisfying this destruction of fruit on the canvas of the floor.

By orange number ten, the floor is sticky, slippery, and she is fully juiced herself. The flies will come, she thinks with some satisfaction. She turns, too fast, and falls on a peel, a screwball move that puts her too hard on the floor. Does she scream? Or perhaps she blacks out with hunger because Luis revives her by shaking her, holding her, confused about the oranges but concerned about her ankle which swells.

“Can you stand?”

“I don't know.”

He lifts her. She squints with pain. He considers. He looks like he wants to ask about the oranges, but he says nothing, just picks her up, sits her on the edge of the bed, carefully untying the shoes—his shoes—not asking, but she can see the calculations running behind his eyes.

“Beautiful enough?” she asks.

“Oh yes,” he says. “For me you are so beautiful. And a little strange. That's true. Let's get you to the clinic.”

She can't explain she has no insurance, no umbrella to protect her from the storm, so instead she says, “Can you take me to breakfast first?”

They sit in a booth at a café down the street. He drinks coffee and she eats eggs, pancakes, toast.

“Do you want orange juice?” he asks. It’s a solemn question. And she prays he means something else with it.

“I do,” she answers. “I really do.”

He raises his arm to signal the waitress, and soon there it is—a large glass before her. God, she is thirsty, ravenous. Her ankle throbs. She can’t think of what’s next, except to drink the juice before someone takes it away.

END.

Arteries

by Gerry Rodriguez

“We’re home,” Skye’s mother sang as she pushed open the front door and gave an elaborate wave. She shuffled across the dark living room, throwing her purse on the kitchen counter. “Now you just sit on that sofa and relax while I see if those beans ever cooked through.”

Skye lingered in the open doorway. She heard her mother’s bubbly voice pick up its rambling pace. She hadn’t stopped talking since she had embraced Skye in a hug that more closely resembled a choke hold outside the prison gate. Her mother’s voice had the effect of a mosquito teasing her ear. The tiny living room looked the same as it did six years ago except the sofa showed signs of extra affection, but the mass of papers still hid the old coffee table. In six years, Skye’s mother still hadn’t found the time to sort through the landfill of trash. The piano was still covered in a layer of dust. It was a welcoming living room that didn’t oppose to guests touching the decorations. The harsh smell of cooking beans filled her nostrils. It reminded her of those years when she was a teenager. She and her sister had been forced to gulp down bowls of beans or fideo the week leading up to payday. Except now it seemed as if these delicacies weren’t just reserved for a few days out of the month; they had earned themselves a permanent spot in the weekly meal rotation alongside the predictable fish sticks and spam.

The mosquito-like voice finally pierced Skye’s ear.

“Honey, come inside,” her mother called from the kitchen.

Skye closed the door and sank into the indentation on the sofa. Her gray sweatpants rose to show her white sneakers and pale ankles. These were the only pants that fit her. The clothes littering the closet would have to be donated except for a few oversized t-shirts. She could hear her mother moving dishes in the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets. It hurt her ears to hear the banging against the silence of the room. She begged for more noise, voices and feet stomping down a hallway, a laugh that would fill the room, a voice booming over surprised face.

The door opened, and Sarah entered. She dropped her purse on the piano and glanced at Skye before rummaging through her purse for her cell phone. Only social media could save her from being forced to make eye contact with her sister. Jackson entered and closed the door behind him. He saw Skye on the sofa and took large steps to greet her, holding out his calloused hand.

“Skye, it’s great to finally meet you,” he said, shaking her limp hand. “I’m Jackson, Sarah’s husband. But I guess you already know that.”

It was the awkward familiarity of greeting someone you’re *supposed* to know, but in reality Skye couldn’t have even told someone that his hair was brown before this moment. It was like that time Skye was forced to greet her Aunt Katy with a hug when she was 12 even though she had only met her once before she could even walk.

Her mother hurried into the living room. “Come here, come here!” She waved her arms at both of her daughters. Skye obeyed, rising from the sofa and dragging her feet towards her mother’s arms. Sarah rolled her eyes before joining her mother’s embrace. “My girls. My girls,” she whispered into their hair. “Jackson, take a picture.”

Their mother held their shoulders and positioned herself between them while Jackson lifted his phone. Their mother smiled so big that her glasses cut off her eyes. “Everyone smile,” she said.

Skye lifted the corners of her mouth while she looked through the phone and through Jackson. She could do this for her mother. The mother who rode a bus to visit her every weekend. The mother who paid for her bail and the lawyer who couldn’t get her off with the money that she didn’t have. The mother who, despite all contrary evidence, believed that Skye was a gift from God. She could do this for her. Sarah smiled at Jackson the way she smiled for every school picture she had taken in high school. It was a smile that said, *I can fake my way through more than just orgasms.*

Jackson snapped the photo, and their mother pushed forward to take a look. She hugged Jackson. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you. Thank you. Please, send it to me. I want to post it on my Facebook. The girls from church will be so excited to see Skye again.”

Skye stared at the dirty carpet. She was part of the real world again, an object to be displayed and judged. Her value would be determined by the amount of reactions a rare photo of her would generate.

Sarah looked at Skye’s swollen face. She was too pale, and her hair fell over her eyes. Her shoulders slumped forward making her body look deceptively small. She looked like a wounded kitten that most people would want to pick up and nurture, but not Sarah. Sarah was tired of caring for adults. Beneath her calm exterior, Sarah was shaking. She could feel her pulse in her head and in her arms. Her mouth tasted sour. She watched the way her mother held Skye, as if she might be ripped from her arms by the

devil himself. As much as she wanted to look away, distract herself with her phone, she couldn't. She forced herself to watch her mother kiss Skye's forehead and tuck her hair behind her ear. Sarah concentrated on the tightening of her throat, allowed herself to choke, before she blinked and smiled. She let out the breath she had been holding. She would never show her belly to Skye.

Skye lay curled in a ball inside the large indentation in the sofa. The soft blue glow of the tv reflected off the ceiling. The news anchors mumbled in low voices that cradled her head. They had held her hand all night, a reminder that she wasn't alone. Footsteps thumped down the hall. They grew louder until Skye's mother appeared. Skye curved her spine and sank lower into the sofa.

"I wish you would sleep in your room," her mother said. "You would think you would enjoy the privacy." Her eyes and mouth curved down, pulling her wrinkles with them. They seemed to multiply every day, three wrinkles for every worry. After only a week, Skye had managed to age her mother by years. Her frown made the rash on her face look more sinister, instead of the flush that it usually resembled when she smiled.

The disappointment stilled Skye. Her homecoming wasn't what her mother had expected. Her mother had imagined her little girl coming home and embracing her. She had imagined Skye would squeal, jumping on her bed to music that was too loud and that she would raid the pantry, devouring every last pizza pringle. Her mother had imagined a daughter that had disappeared long before Skye had been arrested. She seemed to believe that the relief of being released from prison would remind Skye to be grateful for her surroundings and that she would revert to an innocence that only existed in a memory.

Skye's mother stroked her hair and smiled. "I'm making pancakes," she said, and she danced to the kitchen humming a vaguely familiar gospel song.

Skye sat up on the sofa and turned off the tv. Sarah walked straight to the kitchen and began to brew coffee. Her glasses magnified her red eyes. "I'll drop you off at the rheumatologist on my way to work," she said to her mother, while pouring coffee into her cup. "But I won't be able to pick you up until my lunch break. Do you think you'll be okay or do I need to make arrangements?" Sarah poured one packet of Splenda into her coffee and took a sip.

“Don’t worry about me,” her mother said. “I can make some calls and invite some people to come see Skye. I was thinking we should have a welcome home party.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

“Why?”

“I just don’t think everyone needs to know our business.”

Sarah’s mother waved a spoon of pancake batter at her. “Don’t be ridiculous. Everyone already knows she’s home, and it would be rude not to invite anyone.”

“Well, I don’t have time to throw a party.”

“It’s not your party to throw.”

“And how were you planning on paying for this party?”

“I have my own money, you know.”

Skye cradled her head in her hands. She weaved her fingers in her hair and pulled. The tug relaxed her scalp. It felt like the tension from her brain was finally relieved. The rhythmic scratching of her head drowned out the noise from the kitchen. Her concentration was broken by her mother’s voice.

“Skye, I need to know the date of your next appointment with your parole officer. We need to put it on the calendar.” Her mother spoke as if she was marking the calendar for a kindergarten assembly. She could finally start marking Skye’s pivotal moments on the calendar again.

“Good morning, Skye,” Jackson said on his way to the kitchen. He was too eager, too welcoming in a home that *she* had grown up in, not him.

Sarah ignored his entrance and attempted to refocus her mother. “Mom, please,” she snapped her fingers in her mother’s direction. “You should be resting, not throwing a party or worrying about parole appointments. Skye is a big girl. She can take care of herself.”

“No, she can’t.”

“She’s an adult.”

“But she’s been gone for so long.”

“Can we just focus on your doctor’s appointment for a minute?”

“It’ll be the same as always. Nothing new.”

“Yeah, but I feel like I have no clue where your health stands right now.”

“I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

“I just...” Sarah rubbed her eyes beneath her glasses. “You know what? Forget it. Everyone get dressed so I can drive you all where you need to go. And you?” Sarah looked at Skye on the sofa. She dared her to say something.

Skye turned on the tv and lay back in her cubby in the sofa.

Sarah shook her head. “That’s what I thought.”

Sarah sat on her bed as Jackson got dressed. He wore a gray button shirt and black slacks, but he couldn’t seem to pick a tie. A red tie might portray confidence, or it may be too bold. An employer might think he was loud. A black tie might portray him as too serious. Blue looked solemn. He held up a tie to his shirt only to replace it on the dresser and repeat the process. The fate of the family home rested on a single tie and whether Jackson was competent enough to pick the correct color. Sarah picked at the loose threads on the green comforter. She twirled them between her fingers trying to be careful with her words.

“I have a good feeling about today,” she said.

“Me too,” said Jackson as he held up a yellow paisley tie and a solid blue tie, looking into the mirror.

“Blue,” Sarah said.

Jackson dropped the yellow tie on the dresser and began to tie the blue tie, fumbling clumsily with his collar. Sarah bit the inside of her cheek.

“Where are you going today?” she asked.

“Some restaurants uptown.”

“But you’ve never worked at a restaurant...” the last word trailed off. Sarah closed her eyes. She shouldn’t have said anything. Jackson knew his work history without her reminding him.

Jackson finished struggling with his tie then picked up the stack of resumes he had printed at the library. They had joked when he had originally printed such a large number. “Better to be prepared,” Jackson had joked, and Sarah had laughed. He would have a job long before he could distribute all of his resumes, or so they had thought.

“Did you ever get a call for that carpenter job?” Sarah asked.

Jackson sighed as he put his wallet and keys into his pocket. Sarah knew better. She knew he would have told her if anyone had called.

Skye was sitting at the kitchen table when Sarah walked into the kitchen. She tried to concentrate on her milky coffee, ignoring Sarah’s squinted glances. It was bad enough that her mother had dragged her off the sofa. She didn’t need the reminder from Sarah that she was just a waste of space, another mouth to feed in this house of leeches.

Her mother sat at the table, too close to Skye, sipping her sugary coffee with glee. She acted like they were two girlfriends at a coffee shop sharing gossip, trying to conceal the very obvious interrogation of a mother fearing her daughter may return to prison based on the sole fact that she was just too lazy to leave the sofa.

Skye’s mother leaned in, coaxing her eyes to meet hers. “How is the job search going?” her mother asked.

“Yeah, Skye, how is the job search going?” Sarah asked in too high of a voice. She wore her innocent school photo smile.

“By when do you need to have one?” her mother asked.

“Mmmmm...” Skye tried to stall, but she didn’t need to.

“You’re doing fine searching online? You don’t need any help? Because Sarah would be more than happy to help,” continued her mother.

“Because I don’t have enough to do,” Sarah mumbled.

Her mother ignored the comment. “Maybe it would be better if you went and applied in person. Employers like that.”

“Do you even have a resume?” Sarah asked.

Skye’s mother clapped excitedly. “Oh! You can go apply with Jackson today!”

“Mom,” Sarah warned.

Sarah’s mother looked at her with the innocence that graced only the most oblivious person. “Then you’ll only have one place that’s out of your way instead of driving all over town before work.” She believed with all of her heart that she was being helpful. Somehow, this arrangement would make everyone happy and could only end in the success of everyone involved. Jackson and Skye would both get hired somewhere, and she would try to throw a party so she could invite all of her friends from church.

“What do you think?” her mother asked again when Sarah didn’t say anything.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Sarah said with venom on her tongue.

“You do?”

“Yeah, Jackson will definitely get hired if he brings a felon with him to apply for jobs.”

For once, their mother was silent. They three women allowed the silence to grow louder. It plugged their ears and wrapped around their throats. Their pulses filled the air, drums beating in a cadence, each playing a different part. The cadence rose, forcing a weight onto their heads and shoulders. Sarah enjoyed the building pressure, refusing to release the safety valve. The scream grew in her chest, and she wrapped the silence around her body, feeling it close around her skin. She wished it would grow tighter on her body, never release her. But Skye needed to breathe. She couldn’t hide in silence. She couldn’t remain upright beneath the eyes that penetrated her brain, trying to pull something out of her that didn’t belong to them.

“That was cruel,” their mother said, breaking the silence. She stood, leaving her coffee, and walked back to her bedroom.

Skye watched Sarah. She seemed to have collapsed inside of herself when her mother spoke. But Sarah had been right. Their mother had grand ideas that could never fit into their imperfect world. She was trying to put together one of those puzzles of a family photo where everyone is wearing matching sweaters and a matching smile, but every piece is slightly off and doesn't fit. The picture on the puzzle is distorted. There was a reason Sarah and Skye had been inseparable as children. They always understood what the other person needed without words. And right now, what each of them needed was to not be reminded that the other existed.

Skye sat at the kitchen table and stared at the glowing screen of the laptop. The television mumbled in the living room, giving her the peace of mind that someone was in the house with her. She was alone again. Everyone had a purpose, work, job hunting, doctor's appointments. Everyone had a task except her. Could her half-assed job search be considered a task when she knew it would never lead anywhere? She scrolled through the job listings, a finger exercise. She didn't read the postings. What exactly did her parole officer expect from her? What employer was stupid enough to hire a felon with no job history?

Skye slammed the lap top closed and buried her face in her hands. She was suffocating in this new world, a world that didn't have structure and didn't have obvious rules. She felt like she needed permission to breathe in this house. If she continued to mope, she wasn't grateful for her freedom. If she laughed with joy, she hadn't taken her experience seriously. If she didn't find a job, she hadn't readjusted to society. She had been thrown into an ocean of impractical expectations, a test where every decision and emotion was judged, but stones had been unknowingly tied to her feet. She couldn't go back to her old life when she wasn't the same person anymore.

Skye walked down the narrow hallway to her old bedroom. She had avoided the blue walls covered with Smashing Pumpkins posters as much as possible. This room was reserved for fishing out a clean wrinkled t-shirt everyday while keeping her eyes lowered. It was better to face the old bedroom for a few seconds a day than to face her mother's worried eyes when she was seen in the same dirty shirt multiple days in a row.

Skye laid down on her bed for the first time in six years. The sheets carried that dryer sheet freshness. Her mother had wanted her to come home to a clean house, a clean room, but she had only had the energy to wash and replace the bedding. Skye stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to her ceiling. They were the same pattern of stars that decorated the back of her

shoulder, an incident that had earned a grounding for two months when she was sixteen. The stars bound her to her time capsule of a bedroom. *Hamartia*, she thought. It had been the lesson in her Theatre Appreciation class earlier that day, the day that changed her life. The irony was painful, but here she was reminded of it again and every time she saw that tattoo in the mirror. Skye was perpetually a child in an adult body.

It had been a prank, not a crime. Cass had sat on the bed facing Skye. They listened to Sublime as they passed the bong between each other, taking hits and cackling. They had given up on strategically blowing the smoke out the open window. It had been too much work.

“You seriously keep this on your dresser?” Cass asked, taking another hit.

“I told my mom it’s a vase,” Skye said.

“And she believed you?”

“Please, my mom knows I have exceptional taste in antique décor.”

“You’re the worst liar. I can’t believe she bought that.”

“You’re hogging the décor.”

Cass passed the bong back to Skye who took several deep hits.

“You know Rachel’s working at 7-Eleven now?” Cass said as she reloaded the bong.

“Oh my God, why?” asked Skye.

“Her parents made her get a job.”

“And she couldn’t find anything better?”

Cass laughed. “I told her I give her a week before the store gets held up and she quits.”

“You’re a bitch.”

“I’m an honest bitch,” Cass said as she hit the bong.

“She’s not gonna get held up.”

“Oh my God!” Cass jumped up on the bed, dropping the bong. “I have the best idea!”

Skye scrambled to scoop up the fallen dro. Bong water had spilled onto the sheets. She would have to Febreze them before her mom came home. “What’s your deal?” she asked.

“We should hold up Rachel. It’s her first day.”

“What the fuck?”

“No, it’ll be hilarious.”

“We’re not gonna hold up a store.”

“Of course we’re not, it’s just a prank.”

“Cass...”

“Come on, please. It’ll be funny, and it beats sitting in here. We can grab some munchies when the prank is over. I bet Rachel can hook us up with a discount.”

Skye rubbed her red eyes. “I’m pretty hungry.”

“Yes! Let’s go!” Cass danced out of the bedroom and down the hall with Skye following drowsily behind her. She had no clue that Cass had a real gun in her car.

Later, with her lawyer, Skye’s mother had cried.

“But I’m just a kid,” Skye said to her lawyer. She still couldn’t comprehend what was happening. She didn’t even understand how a trial worked.

“You’re not a kid, Skye, you’re eighteen. There are consequences for your actions.”

“It was a joke!” she cried. “It was just a stupid prank! It wasn’t even my idea!”

“It was aggravated robbery.”

“No! It was a joke! The gun wasn’t even loaded!”

“It’s still a crime. Look at me. You have no priors and...”

“No! It was a joke!”

Skye pushed the memory away. She inhaled deeply, muffling the cries of her mother that filled the quiet room. It was as if she was right here, crying over her all over again, a shadow that stroked tears into her hair despite her protests. She could never hide from her mistakes. The last thing she needed was her mother reminding her of them with her overenthusiastic fantasies that everyone knew could never exist in this hostile environment that Skye had created for them. Skye hadn’t been the only one who had been sentenced to prison; she had sentenced her whole family to their own prisons that day with cells that were built and decorated to fit each of their preferences.

Sarah looked at the family photo that sat in its silver frame on the piano. The family of four had sat in front of a Christmas tree on Christmas morning. They sat in a nest of wrapping paper. Sarah had clung tightly to her mother’s neck. Her six year old smile revealed a missing tooth. She had received her first visit from the tooth fairy only days before. Her mother held on tight to Sarah’s arms. At any moment she would lift her off the ground and twirl her around the room. That was back when her mother had the energy to stay on her feet for more than fifteen minutes at a time. Skye clutched a Barbie. She was cradled in a tall, thin man’s lap. Even at four years old, she hadn’t been able to break the habit of sucking her thumb in her father’s lap. Sarah ran her finger along the top of the frame. Her dad had been handsome. His black hair would fall in his face, and her mother would sigh stroking it out of his eyes. His skin was gold from working on roofs all day. His dark eyes always looked half closed because he was always smiling, telling a joke. Charismatic, that’s what family friends had called him. The photo didn’t make sense. How could anyone look at this picture and believe that her father would be gone the next year? Clothes packed, truck gone. Had he taken a single picture of them with him? Sarah had asked herself that question more times than she liked to admit. Skye couldn’t understand. There was no way anyone could explain to her that her hero had left her without saying goodbye. Sarah had wrapped her in her arms night after night as she slept in her bed. She stroked her hair and wiped her tears, whispering bedtime stories into her ear. Skye wouldn’t sleep in her own bed again until she was thirteen;

she had been convinced that when she woke up, another family member would have left her. Instead, she slept with Sarah, a hand placed somewhere on her at all times for reassurance as their mother tried to put her own shattered soul back together.

The photo had earned a permanent spot on the piano when it had been printed and placed in the frame. Even years of abandonment couldn't remove its permanence. Sarah hated that it her mother wouldn't put it away somewhere. She hated that she had to explain to her friends who the man in the picture was. She hated that she had to explain that no, he hadn't died, he just didn't want them anymore, and no, he hadn't said goodbye either. The embarrassment followed closely with whispers. How could her mother not be aware of how unhappy their father was? But no one had known, not even his friends.

"That was a good Christmas," her mother said behind her.

"Why do you keep this picture?" Sarah asked without looking away.

"It's my favorite."

"It's stupid."

"It's not stupid."

"And it hurts."

"Honey..."

"Just put it away somewhere."

"No."

"Why?"

"Look at how happy everyone is."

"Not everyone."

"He was happy."

"No."

“You girls were everything to him.”

“Then why did he leave?”

“He loved you so much. He just...”

“Why didn’t he come back?”

Sarah looked at her mother. She was silent. She held the years of pain in her eyes. She couldn’t say anything because there was nothing to say. She couldn’t explain to Sarah or Skye because she didn’t understand it herself.

Sarah saw the crack she had made in her mother but felt the need to take one final blow.

“He left you too,” she said.

“I know,” her mother whispered.

“So stop torturing all of us. Just get rid of it.”

“Please...”

“Throw it away,” Sarah said as she walked to her bedroom.

Her mother looked at the picture. She tried to draw answers from it, secrets that it held and would never reveal. She picked up the photo and wobbled to the coffee table. She dusted the photo with a paper napkin that had been left on the stack of mail. She took the photo back to the piano where she replaced it carefully before she walked slowly to the kitchen.

Skye lay on her bed. Her muscles relaxed as she melted into the sheets. The pillows cradled her body. She heard her mother slam the door as she entered the house.

“How could you?” her mother cried. “What were you thinking?”

Skye closed her eyes and rolled onto her side. She took a deep breath of the pillows. They had lost their fresh linen scent and now smelled like home.

Her mother appeared at her open door and screamed, “Did you think I wouldn’t find out? What, you were just going to wait until the police showed up at the door and dragged you out of here, cuffed like the last time?”

Skye let her mother’s words bounce off of her ears. There was nothing she could ever say to her to make her understand. She felt the way she did sophomore year when her ex-boyfriend, Isaac, had traced the long, blue artery that seemed to protrude through her transparent skin. She watched as he had traced it gently with his finger, tickling her hand, her arm, all the way up to her armpit. She had thought about the blood pulsing in that artery many times. How could something so fragile be keeping her alive? She often thought about the blood that would spill from that artery if she traced it with a knife. Her mouth watered. She didn’t want to die. It wasn’t about killing herself. It was a morbid curiosity that she couldn’t seem to shake. She stared at the vein now, still too visible in her pale skin. It slowed her breath, her heart. It gave her peace.

“Say something!” Her mother yelled again. “Why don’t you ever say anything?” When Skye didn’t respond, her mother continued, “I just don’t understand. Did you learn nothing from last time? Your actions have consequences. All you had to do was show up for your appointment. All you had to do was sit there. Sarah drove you to the office. Where did you go? Where were you? How could you be so irresponsible? How could you do this to me?”

Skye opened her eyes and watched as her mother cried uncontrollably. “I love you,” her mother sobbed. “Why isn’t that enough?”

Sarah stood behind her mother and held her by the shoulders. “Please, you need to lie down,” she whispered to her mother.

Her mother whimpered as she shuffled to her bedroom. Sarah looked at Skye’s dark eyes. She could see the peace that had replaced the fear and the pain. She wanted to crawl into the bed next to Skye and hold her the way she had when they were young, but her feet couldn’t move. Sarah closed her eyes and bent her head. The relief made her feel guilty. When she opened her eyes, Skye had moved her hand to the edge of the bed and held onto the comforter. Sarah placed her hand on the door frame. The sisters paused and watched each other for a moment, sharing a familiar understanding that had always made people jealous. Finally, Sarah relaxed her hand and walked into her room, leaving Skye to her peaceful thoughts.

Jackson was organizing a stack of freshly printed resumes. “Would it have killed you to be nice to her?” he asked.

“You don’t even know her,” she said.

“And whose fault is that?”

“I was pissed. I get to be pissed. I’m still pissed.”

“Yeah, you make that abundantly clear every damn day.”

“I don’t understand how Skye screwing up is my fault.”

“Just be chill. That’s all you had to do. Just pretend to be nice to her. Maybe it would’ve made a difference.”

“You think I have that much control over her? I drove her to the damn office. What was I supposed to do, hold her hand and walk her into the office myself? Was I supposed to stay and sit next to her during her meeting too? I have a job, you know.”

“Really?”

“That wasn’t a jab at you, and you know it.”

“You sure about that?”

“I know how hard you’re working. I’m the one driving you to different parts of town every day. I can see your frustration and your fragile male ego crumbling before my eyes. I can see it even though you refuse to talk to me. I’m still here, you know? Sticking it out, waiting for things to get better.”

“Because you feel like you’d be a bitch if you didn’t.”

“No.”

“Imagine you leaving your sick mom and your unemployed husband while your sister was still in prison.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Don’t try to deny it.”

“I wasn’t even here!”

“What?”

“I was in college! I was living my life, and she made me give up everything! I couldn’t visit her. I couldn’t look at her stupid face and pretend that we were okay.”

Jackson stepped forward and reached for Sarah, but she pulled away and walked to the window. She wrapped her arms around her chest.

“You have no idea how much I...” Sarah choked.

“Why don’t you say it?” Jackson asked.

Sarah shook her head. “It’s like we can read each other’s thoughts,” she whispered.

Jackson sighed. “It’s still early. I’m gonna take the car and pass out some resumes at the bar on Juniper. A friend said some roustabouts are in town for their time off, and it’s highly likely they’ll be there.”

Sarah looked at Jackson and smiled. “I have a good feeling about this,” she said. They let the lie hold them for a moment. They pretended that this plan had no flaws. He would walk in, hand a resume to a roustabout enjoying a beer, and somehow that resume would land in the right person’s hands. Job secured. They had to pretend it would work.

Jackson turned to walk out the door, keys in hand. He turned just before stepping into the hallway. “I’m sorry,” he said. Sarah kept her back to him. “You know I love you, right?”

Sarah nodded, and Jackson left the room. She leaned her back against the wall. Skye was just on the other side. She could feel her warmth through the wall. Skye would be wrapped up in her blanket, still in her bed, her arms and legs suffocating a pillow. For the first time since she had come home, Skye would be smiling, tracing the pattern of her paisley pillow, imprinting the design into her memory. Sarah turned back to the window. The large oak in the front yard held firm in the wind, but the leaves clung to the branches, refusing to let go. They had stood their ground all winter, supported by the humidity, too warm for this time of year. Why did those leaves fight so hard to stay? What were they clinging to? It would be so much easier to let go, float on the wind, landing wherever fate decided. It was just an old tree. She couldn’t see what was so important that would make them want to stay.

RE: Your Best Man Speech

by Benjamin Selesnick

Thursday, 2 p.m.

Dear Mark,

Thank you for getting back to me, and for taking interest in my proposal! I'm so excited to be a part of this project. I've been speechwriting for a few years now, and I haven't yet had the chance to write something so, well, *from the heart*, you know? It's such a great opportunity. When I saw your ad, I knew I couldn't pass it up.

So, to get the ball rolling: tell me about the groom! How do you know him? How long have you known each other? What's he like? Is there anything you want me to mention in the speech, like a moment you two shared? Or how about an inside joke that you and he—and perhaps a portion of the audience?—share? And, most important: what do you love most about him? It's not the easiest question to answer, but honestly, that's the crux of it. We want to communicate the love you have for the groom to everybody in that room.

Also: What's the crowd going to be like? Are we talking fifty people or three hundred? What's the bride and groom's family like? I want to tailor my speech as best I can to the circumstances—That being said, what're you like? What's your sense of humor, what movies do you like best? What do you do? What's the one thing I should know about you?

And lastly: what's the bride like? Why is she a good fit for the groom? Truth be told, I don't need too much on her. I'll just rope her into the speech right at the end.

As per compensation—forty dollars upon completion of the first draft, and another forty upon completion of your edits. Considering the small size of the project, I imagine that I can have a completed draft for you in a day's time. Note, though, that I won't be able to work over the weekend, so if you agree to these terms and answer my questions, I won't have a draft prepared for you until Monday end of day.

How does all that sound to you?

Best wishes,

Leo

~ ~

Friday, 11:15 a.m.

Hello Mark,

Great. You seem to be familiar with Upwork—a frequent flyer, you are!—so I’m sure you know how the payment process works. Let me know, though, if you have any questions.

Before we start, I want to say again that I’m so glad to be working with you!—And your brother sounds like such a nice guy! Special, too, if that’s the right word. You just don’t hear much about guys becoming therapists, and when you do, you think it’s going to be someone like Freud. Someone distant. Clinical. Almost unfeeling. But your brother doesn’t sound like that at all.

(When I was reading through your description of your brother, I was actually reminded a lot of my brother: Sweet as they come, but tough to understand sometimes. Could be aloof. Lovable all the same. Someone who you could sit in silence with for hours on end and still feel comfortable.)

As per your anecdote—I’m not sure if it’s really a great idea to mention you and your brother smoking weed in high school. I see what you’re getting at—how much fun you two had, how he encouraged you to rebel—but I’m not convinced everyone at the wedding would want to hear that. I mean, the groom doing *drugs*! You said the bride’s family is New England, old money. Maybe if the weed story took place at a prep school it could land, but as it is, the whole thing seems like a big miss. Let’s keep it PG.

To stir up some inspiration, think on this: what was it like when you two were younger, like before you were teenagers? Were you in competition? Were you best friends? Were you following in his footsteps? If I could get a feel for your connection back then, I’m sure I can write this speech in a heartbeat. It’s easy to write kids. They’re just so *themselves*. They don’t have big worries like we poor grown-ups do. They can have fun together in the simplest ways. They’re always in awe, always on an adventure. Makes you wish you could go back and capture it, right?

Anyways, that's enough of me. I look forward to learning more about you and your family!

Thanks,

Leo

P.S.— A picture of you and your brother—as kids if we're going the childhood route?—would be helpful to have, too.

~ ~

Friday, 6:45 p.m.

Dear Best Man,

Oh my god—how cute you and brother look in those little suits! You both have the same floppy hair, the same little waves in it, the same smile, the same nose. Adorable. I'm surprised the two of you didn't model for Gap Kids or something.

So cool, too, that you grew up in Verona (I recognized Town Scoop in the background of the first pic lol). I grew up in Caldwell! My mother used to take my brother, Ezra, and I to Verona Park on weekend afternoons and we'd walk laps around the pond. I remember my brother and I riding on those swan-shaped boats, you know, the little ones you paddle with your feet? There's a name for them, but I can't remember right now—Too tired! Ready for the weekend.

Okay. I love all that you've sent me, and I think I have almost all I need from you. But before I say goodbye and type this whole thing out, I wanted to run an idea by you that I had this afternoon.

I was wondering what this speech might look like if there wasn't any humor in it. I know. *Radical*. Best man speeches are meant to be funny. Light. A get-to-know-the-groom affair. But when I look at you and your brother in those suits on your front steps—those are your front steps in the picture, right?—with you seated on your brother's lap, his arms wrapped around you, I feel like if we're all to laugh at that, then there's something lost.

Something wasted. This is special; writing the speech, you two brothers embracing. Brotherhood. I don't want to spoil the sanctity of it.

(TBH this idea came to me because I tried writing a few introductory paragraphs, and each time I went for a joke, it didn't come out right. It felt forced. I don't know. I read them out loud, and I tell you, it was some cringe-worthy stuff.)

Looking forward to hearing your thoughts on all of this! I know my suggestion is a bit off the beaten path, but give it a chance to sink in. I think it'll grow on you.

Best,

Leo

P.S.—Could you attach a photo of your childhood backyard? I loved your story about the games you guys used to play there, and actually seeing it could make it easier for me to put the audience deep in that moment.

~ ~

Saturday, 1:05 a.m.

Mark—

I'm sorry for bothering you so late. I was just up thinking about you and your brother and I had a few questions I wanted to ask before I forget.

Just so I get the clearest picture—could you tell me about some of the big moments in your relationship? Like, when were you most proud of him? Was it at his graduation? High school or college? What was it like seeing him walk across the stage, with the robe and tassels hanging off his shoulders? What were you thinking right then?

And what about vice versa: what was it like knowing that your brother was watching you as you crossed the stage? Were you thinking about how proud he was? About how you two had both made it through this chapter—a long chapter, it felt like, at times—in life?

Again, sorry for the late night message. I hope I didn't wake you.

-Leo

~ ~

Saturday, 3:20 p.m.

Mark,

I ask you to reconsider. Like I said in my email, I know the humorless route is not par for the genre-course, but being sincere like that elevates the speech to the best it could become. Earnestness is not a sin. And remember, speeches like this are once in a lifetime (god willing, your brother will never have another wedding). There are many men out there who would kill to have the opportunity to tell everyone they know about how they care for their brother, their best friend. It's not something to take lightly.

Also, I didn't mean anything by asking for the photo of your backyard. I wasn't trying to be invasive. I just wanted to get as much character for the backyard scene as possible. Seeing the bushes, maybe even seeing how much sun hits your backyard—But okay, I'll keep that moment in the speech and I'll just use vague descriptions for the setting. I can mention you both running across the grass and around trees. Is that good? You had trees and grass in your backyard, right?

I didn't mean anything, either, by all those late night questions. I was just trying to get a better sense of your relationship with your brother. Doing so gives me the best chance of hitting this speech out of the park. But you're right. You've already given me enough to work with. The speech only has to be a few pages, after all. It won't be a problem.

My number is on my Upwork profile if you'd like to talk through any of this.

Sincerely,

Leo

~ ~

Sunday, 8:35 p.m.

Mark,

Okay. We'll go the simple and punchy route. That's what the people are expecting, that's what they want. I mean, this speech *is* important, but I get it. You can tell your brother how you really feel about him some other time. He'll be around.

Assuming nothing comes up, I should have the speech ready for you by tomorrow afternoon. As I said before, if there's anything you don't like about it, tell me and I'll make the necessary changes.

-Leo

~ ~

Monday, 3:00 p.m.

Mark,

You're going to hate me. So much.

I can't finish the speech. I have a handful of other projects I'm juggling, but I've been putting them off so I can give your speech the time it deserves. So, it isn't like I'm not trying. I'm taking this project seriously. I want you to know that. I'm with this project 100%. I'm just blocked.

I know I said that you'd given me enough to work with, and if there was any other way, I'd do it, but I need to know a little more about you and your brother. Just for texture, for a small anecdote right near the end. Mainly—this is what I was wondering about this morning, this is my block—What was it like when you guys were in your early twenties? Did you live in the same city? In the same neighborhood? Were there evenings when, say, you were tired and weakened by a long day of work and you went over to your brother's apartment to get cheered up? If so, what did he do to cheer you up?

Did he make you some food? Did he get drunk with you? Was there a song he'd play? Was there a song you'd play when you missed him?

And what about a few years earlier, when you both were in college—what was that like? I know you guys were only two years apart, so there must've been some overlap there. Were your colleges nearby? Could you see each other on weekends, or was it a once-a-semester type thing? When he was able to visit, did he get along with your friends? Did they become *his* friends by the end of the weekend? Did he sleep on the floor beside your bed, and did you two stay up telling stories the way you used to, the way brothers do? Was it like you'd imagined it'd be when you were a teenager?

I promise that after you give me your answers, I won't reach out until I'm done with the speech. I beg for your patience. I'm so close. The words are on the tip of my tongue and I know that with a little push, they'll come out.

Keep the faith,

Leo

~ ~

Tuesday, 9:15 a.m.

Dear Mark,

I never meant to be a nuisance. I know you know that. You've seen how sincere I've been in my attempts, you've read my emails. I wouldn't go through all this effort if I didn't care about this project! I want to do your speech *justice*. Really, I always had you and your brother's best interest. And I still do! I *really* do.

Tell me what you need me to do to stay on this project and I'll do it. I will make the speech a laugh a minute. I'll have your parents and the in-laws falling out of their seats with laughter. People will *remember* this speech. Ten years from now, they'll come up to you at Christmas parties and say, "You really blew the pants off me with that best man's speech of yours. So magnificent! So beautiful!" You've seen the speeches I've written, you said you read samples of my work I put on my Upwork profile. You know I'm good! You know I can do it.

Please don't give up on me just yet. I will do right by you.

Leo

P.S.— You can pay me sixty instead of the agreed upon eighty, if you want. Forty would be fine, too.

~ ~

Tuesday, 3:40 p.m.

But you've already given me so much! Think of all the time you—*we*—have invested. Who else at this point could write this speech better than me? What other freelancer could you expect to put the time and care into this work like I have? Imagine: going back on Upwork, finding some schmuck who'll write you a best man's speech that you could've written better had you gotten piss-drunk one night and scribbled and scribbled until you couldn't scribble anymore. Is that what you want? Do you want to disappoint your brother and everyone else at the wedding? Do you want to make a fool of yourself?

Look: With the stories you've told me and the photos you've sent, I feel like I know you and your brother now. It's true. I can imagine you two so clearly. I can imagine the bond you share, the memories that bring you together. When I look at those pictures you sent me, I feel the connection. And I can imagine just how amazing it'll be when you read your best man speech to him. I can step into those shoes. I can channel that energy.

~ ~

Tuesday, 6:15 p.m.

I understand, Mark. I understand that kind of love.

~ ~

Tuesday, 9:42 p.m.

I will do right by you. I know I will.

~ ~

Wednesday, 12:12 a.m.

Are you awake? Please respond.

~ ~

Wednesday, 12:12 a.m.

Mark?

~ ~

Wednesday, 2:35 a.m.

I never thought about what it'd be like if Ezra got married. We were just teenaged boys when he died, and what teenaged boys think about weddings? He had never even dated. There was a girl who he liked in middle school, but I don't think that amounted to anything.

It was then—in middle school—that Ezra's depression draped over our house like a blanket. Most days I wouldn't even see him, but I still felt his

presence. Behind his closed door, in the room that shared a wall with mine, playing video games, reading, watching YouTube videos. He was there all the time, especially by the time he turned sixteen; by then, he stopped going to school. My parents did all they could to get him to go, but on weekday mornings he'd just sit at the kitchen table like an insolent child until they let him be. Except he wasn't insolent; he was stiff, despondent. His head in his hands, he stared blankly at a wall.

Nobody knew what to do. And then: One morning, Ezra snuck out and took a walk along the train-tracks. We didn't even notice he was gone until mom went to his room to see if he wanted any breakfast. By then, news had already spread that someone had gotten hit by the 6:41 commuter line. Mom was hardly out of the house when the call came in, giving her a name to the 'someone' that'd been hit.

Ezra was lowered into the earth a few days later. Then, there was a week of sitting shiva. Everyone we knew came through our house, offering their condolences. Uncles and neighbors told me how great Ezra was, they told me stories about him. Standing beside me, with these expectant, compassionate looks, I felt like they all wanted me to share stories, too. That was the healthy thing to do, they intimated. But I couldn't. I had one memory floating through my head, practically non-stop the whole week, and I wasn't going to let anyone else take it from me.

In the memory, I am seven and Ezra is nine. We're at Verona park with mom, standing at the edge of the pond. The sun is out, and a turtle is by Ezra's feet, its shell the size of a softball. We both get down on our knees and, although mom scolds us to keep away, we offer it leaves we each pluck off a nearby branch. It's curious at first, stretching its head forward towards our offerings. It takes a small bite, but soon it gets spooked. It turns around and walks away. As it slips back into the pond, Ezra tries to rub its shell goodbye, but mom grabs his shoulder and pulls him back. I laugh, and Ezra's cheeks blush as he laughs away his embarrassment.

Dad finds us at the pond a minute later. Ezra has a playdate dad's going to take him to, and I'm going to be staying at the park with mom. But I don't want to be separated from Ezra. There're other turtles around, there're other animals to play with. I tug on mom's hand and ask if I can go with Ezra, but she says no. Dad then takes Ezra's hand and starts walking him to the parking lot. When he gets to dad's car and hops inside, I remember thinking *please*

~

~

Wednesday, 2:36 a.m.

don't go.

Aftertaste

by Jefferey Spivey

Niles had been here before, a beaming Ahmad leaning over the partition between their cubicles, shoving his phone in Niles' face. This time, two photos of a guy called Ryan. Ryan seemed like standard fare for Ahmad. One photo showed him from the waist up, pasty and muscular in a wifebeater, forearms marked with various indiscernible tattoos. He was all tight lips and clenched jaws, menacing almost, something insidious boiling beneath his skin. He was mid-laugh in the second, his mouth agape, black gaps where molars used to be.

Ahmad told Niles he'd met Ryan on one of the apps. Ryan had recently finished a stint in prison, something about a gun charge and a parole violation. He'd told Ahmad it wasn't reflective of the person he was. That Ahmad believed him was reflective of who Ahmad was.

Niles tried to be supportive initially as Ahmad gushed. To an extent, he was even jealous of the way his friend seemed so fulfilled by the attention of men. Niles would've liked to let him bask, allow the fling to run its course. He'd only offer truthful insight if it seemed this paramour would be around long enough to warrant the conversation. But Ahmad pushed.

"You already know what I think," Niles said.

Ahmad's mood dampened. "I'm sorry I'm not in love with a fucking Rhodes scholar," he snapped, raising his voice.

Niles looked around to see who was listening. He hoped Ahmad was just using the word *love* exaggeratedly.

"Why ask me for my judgment and then call me judgmental?"

Ahmad sucked his teeth. "I wanted your support. But you look down on me whenever you have the chance."

"I'm looking out for you, not down on you. Don't you think you should give yourself more credit?"

Off Ahmad went without answering. He'd been more sensitive as of late, somehow desperate for Niles' validation and resentful of it. There was a time when their points of difference had been perfectly balanced, each one getting what he wanted from the other.

They met working in a cable company's call center. Separately, they spent their days fielding complaints from irate customers whose promotional rates had expired, or who were confused about charges on their bills, or who didn't understand why someone couldn't come to troubleshoot their fucking cable box immediately. Together, they found solace in one another, creating moments of levity in an otherwise staid environment.

During Niles' first week on the job, they landed in the breakroom during the same hour. He found Ahmad at the room's only table, almost regal, androgynous in a glittery blouse and flowing slacks, his long, permed hair pulled into a simple ponytail. He started talking to Niles as though they'd been friends for years, his sentences clipped together like a document without periods. Niles didn't find Ahmad's interest in him special. Ahmad seemed like the type who could coax conversation out of a rock.

"You're a really good listener," he said, despite having left no space for Niles to insert himself into the conversation. But given that Niles had yet to connect with any of the other employees, he figured, at best, Ahmad could be a workplace ally.

After lunch, Ahmad urged Niles to join him outside for a smoke. Niles didn't normally partake and politely declined. Ahmad insisted.

"This place has no windows, no connection to the outside," he said. "You stay in here all day and you'll go mad. Five minutes of sunshine will do you good."

Ahmad was right. The call center had a depressing pallor. Without even the faintest hint of daylight, everything appeared as gray as the fabric on the partitions. The other workers, clad in cheap headsets, their eyes fixated on their computer monitors, recited the company script with robotic precision. Each of them put their own twist on the delivery, trying out inflection on different words, but together, their voices blended to create a constant buzz. They were bumblebees in a manmade hive, slave to their entitled customers to stop them from cutting the cord, and the world beyond those four walls didn't exist unless they decided to make it so.

"Some of the others have a bet going about you," Ahmad said once they were out front.

"A bet about me?"

There was plenty of sun, but it was blocked by scaffolding. They both leaned on its poles, opposite one another on the edge of the sidewalk. The city carried on around them, streams of yellow cabs racing down Sixth Avenue, professional men and women traveling to lunch in suited wolfpacks, owners of halal food trucks dishing out falafel platters and gyros slathered in white sauce.

“Yeah. The great debate – do you like boys or girls?”

Niles knew his preference but hadn’t spent much time trying to confirm it. He’d dated girls in high school and in college, but he was never all that invested and certainly not heartbroken when the relationships ended.

He was reluctant to answer.

“Oh, come on,” Ahmad said. “I’m not part of the bet. And I don’t think it’s right to make a sport of hunting out queer folks. But I know one of my sistren when I see one.”

He paused to take a puff of his cigarette.

“I think you know. The first time I saw you, I knew. It just oozed out of you, and I mean that in the best way, really. Not that you’re all femme or anything, and not that it’s bad to be femme or whatever - look at me. But I could just tell. And, for the record, if they’re all fighting over your sexuality, it’s because someone wants to fuck you.”

Niles knew then that they’d be friends.

But maybe not the type of friends they’d become. After locking horns over Ryan, the two settled into a longer-than-usual period of silence. Niles would see Ahmad around the call center but Ahmad wouldn’t look his way. If he walked in to find Ahmad in the breakroom, Ahmad would leave. When Niles opted to join the bigger group of employees for afterwork drinks, Ahmad would bow out.

It went on like this for a couple weeks, until Ahmad popped over to Niles’ desk to ask for a pen. It was a strange request – the place was crawling with them and certainly a writing utensil wouldn’t be worth swallowing one’s pride. It was Ahmad’s way of saying he was over the fight

and ready to resume the sunnier parts of their friendship. They did, without discussing what'd happened. It seemed like a sign of strength - only two people who truly knew one another could resolve a conflict nonverbally. But then, maybe that was bullshit, because whatever was left unsaid was unknown and, worse, unresolved.

In Niles' eyes, everything was as it'd been before.

They went out together frequently, dancing, imbibing, shouting the lyrics to early aughts hip hop until their voices were hoarse. By ignoring the tension between them, they could be carefree. It wasn't the type of tension that simmers, that keeps the temperature too high for anyone to be comfortable.

On one of their many nights out, they waited on the platform for the train. It was late. The monitor showed the C wouldn't arrive for another fifteen minutes. The stale, underground air was crisp. Ahmad lit a cigarette, Niles told him he couldn't do that in a subway station, and he said no one would stop him. They were both right.

"I wish it could always be like this between us," Niles said.

"It could be, but you're too serious," Ahmad said. "It's not that you don't have a sense of humor. You're just always in your head, sizing shit up. Nights like these happen because you let go."

"Aren't we old enough to worry now? Isn't that what we're supposed to do?"

"Nothing's determined. We can be different people every day if we want."

Statements like that left Niles enamored. Ahmad seemed so enlightened, so much more experienced than him, though they were both circling thirty, so worldly though he'd rarely left the city. It was easy to be impressed by him, to be intoxicated by his spirit, so as to be oblivious to his faults and the darker currents flowing behind his liberated, truth-teller façade.

The earliest stages of their friendship were best characterized as fast, furious infatuation. They first hung out as part of a broader group, tagging along with the others for happy hour. But realizing they enjoyed one another's company much more, they skipped bonding sessions with their coworkers for their own happy hour, gayer and freer and better suited to their tastes. Then they began spending time together on days where they didn't work at all.

Ahmad took Niles to his first gay bar, and when Niles recoiled from men who gave him "the look", Ahmad whispered in their ears and brought them over, eventually looking on like a proud mama bear as Niles French kissed strangers.

In so many situations, it seemed Ahmad's soft palms were pressed against Niles' hunched back, like confidence was something that could be passed from body to body with a forceful touch. After finding out Niles had studied songwriting in college, Ahmad had begged to listen to, and then gushed over, a stash of demos that had lain dormant in Niles' bedroom. Niles had already quashed his musical ambitions; the person on those MP3s was a former self buried so deep within him he didn't even recognize his own singing voice. Ahmad insisted that Niles not let his talent suffer a quiet death on an unlabeled external hard drive. Niles thought they'd resolved to disagree, that the path of his life wouldn't be outsourced, but Ahmad signed him up to audition for a music competition show. Of course Niles didn't want to go. Standing out front of the production studio, in line with other hopefuls running through vocal drills, everyone around him trilling, riffing, and running, he felt like he was waiting at the edge of a bridge. He was to jump because Ahmad had said so, and he knew how ridiculous it was, how every time a parent had used this very analogy to encourage independent thinking in their children, the right choice was always not to jump off the bridge. Yet he didn't want to disappoint Ahmad. He wanted to be the person Ahmad was forcing him to become. He bombed the audition, fumbling the lyrics to his own song and never recovering, his normally assured alto too shaken. Ahmad hadn't seen it - only auditioners had been allowed in the room - but Ahmad still hyped Niles up and blamed the panel for not seeing his raw talent.

Niles had become Ahmad's project. There was no subject beyond reproach, not his career, his sexual preferences and experience, his other friendships, his style, his mode of quiet self-expression. Ahmad constructed a funhouse version of Niles that had once made Niles uncomfortable but then became his ideal self. Every time they saw each other, Ahmad played house mother, Niles his recruit and protege in need of every available type of guidance. It was a sticky and questionable dynamic, Niles addicted to Ahmad's attention, guzzling every drop and immediately craving more once

the glass was empty. Validation was their connective thread, and he didn't stop to consider what would happen once he no longer needed it. What was to become of their alliance once Niles transformed into the person Ahmad so badly wanted him to be?

Though Niles wasn't blame-free. Less deliberate and only mildly effective, he too attempted to sand Ahmad down to an optimized form, someone dimmer than the gregarious man he'd encountered in the break room.

Ahmad was smart, with a knack for finance and a plan to graduate from business school. But being a year behind schedule and drowning in student loan debt, he'd started at the call center to stay afloat. Niles had liked this about Ahmad, that the job was an emergency action plan, not a career path. Part of their kinship rested on the fact that their dreams evoked more color and expanse than that of their immediate environment.

Niles also admired Ahmad's commitment to his mother, who suffered from severe depression and a mixture of other unspecified "mental health bullshit". His mother was borderline functional at best and immobile at worst. But in either condition, she was never dependable. The money Ahmad earned wasn't just a balm between student loan payments. He was a reluctant breadwinner. Sometimes he knew which version of his mother was waiting at home, sometimes not. Still, he showed up to work as the same person each day, wise, bubbly, Zen, so even-tempered as to indicate he'd never faced a setback. Niles found it admirable and yet also dishonest in a sense. Was it a coping mechanism, a toxic optimism, a performance meant to distract from other problems? Ahmad's disposition could change the narrative in others' eyes, give him a semblance of autonomy.

On the other end, the men in his life could be controlled outright. They could be handpicked, they could be seduced, they could be pleased, they could be calmed. He possessed a power over them, attracting ones who loved men yet loved being men in an outmoded way. As intelligent and savvy as Ahmad was, he positioned himself as a beacon of fifties era-domesticity, doting on his boyfriends and finding equal enjoyment in both their gazes and their touch. Their strength, their passion, their ability to protect mattered more to him than their trajectories. This type of man was plentiful, always easy to replace once he tired of them.

That's not to say that love was easy for Ahmad. The scene could be unforgiving for boys like him, slim waists and long hair, outfits assembled in the H&M women's sale section, bony hips that swished side to side with verve. He was dark-skinned, effeminate, proudly existing beyond the binary.

Despite queer men being a marginalized group, they weren't immune to or afraid of marginalizing one another. Ahmad knew this quite well, and Niles had witnessed it, how inter-community discrimination could be masked as preference. That aside, however, Ahmad didn't exactly take the path of least resistance. The men he chose were the ones he thought he deserved, their fierce, muscled masculinity often coming in a package deal with unsavory and alternative professional pursuits.

Once, in a bar bathroom, Ahmad pulled Niles into a stall and locked the door. He slid a small plastic baggie of white powder out of his pocket, jingling it in the air between them.

"Don't be scared," Ahmad coaxed, dipping one of his fingers inside and rubbing the substance into his gums. He motioned the baggie toward Niles.

"Why do you have that?" Niles asked, his hands down by his sides.

It was a gift from Ahmad's then-boyfriend. He explained that the boyfriend had a real job, as a part-time employee at a cell phone kiosk at Manhattan Mall. The drugs were just a side thing for extra cashflow, with the occasional perks. There was always a justification.

"You guys seem pretty mismatched," Niles said. "I don't see you as a trap house kind of girl."

Ahmad huffed, now dipping a key into the baggie. "Not everyone has good choices, you know. You think he'd be doing this if he had other options?"

He snorted the powder.

"I think there's always a better option than selling coke," Niles said.

Ahmad closed and concealed the baggie, taking care to wipe his nostrils clean.

"Never mind," he said to Niles. He undid the latch and exited the stall. Niles called after him but he didn't turn back. That time, they didn't speak for almost a week.

Were someone to suggest Niles viewed Ahmad as a charity case, he'd be offended. But subconsciously, he behaved like an emotional philanthropist. He imagined the person Ahmad could become with the right

influences. While it was true they'd had different upbringings - Niles an upper middle-class Midwesterner college-bound from birth, Ahmad the stand-in parent for two younger brothers in a rough neighborhood of an outer borough - it was a terrible misunderstanding to think their beginnings positioned one above the other. Any perceived ranking was borne of insecurity, of some void that each one was attempting to fill.

What meaningful connection was bred from reimagining someone in your vision? Was the person you befriended a person at all or an avatar for your own wants, needs, and deficiencies? Niles had never stopped to think that he'd forgotten to know the real Ahmad, because he'd been so busy fueling the fantasy of who Ahmad could be. And so busy coloring in the image Ahmad had constructed for him. Perhaps it was unfair to think of Ahmad's hands held firm against Niles' back when Niles was so willing to rest his full weight on them. Were he to fall, what outcome would be determined - Ahmad catching him and Niles looking down on him for doing so, or Ahmad prioritizing self-preservation, Niles crashing to the ground in a heap?

Ahmad continued seeing Ryan but hardly spoke of him. It was around this time that Niles began solidifying his preference and seeing a man called Franklin. He was sufficiently occupied with his own romance, too busy to wonder about the state of his friend's latest relationship. However, Niles spoke frequently about his own. Ahmad feigned happiness for him but made snide comments - Niles was social climbing by dating someone wealthier, he had expensive taste in material objects and men, his approach to love seemed ripped from the scenes of a formulaic romantic comedy. Individually, the taunts were toothless. The sum of the parts, though, gave Niles a sour aftertaste. Stitched together, they told a story of resentment. If Niles could issue harsh verdicts about Ahmad's choices, Ahmad could reciprocate.

Alas, things weren't as they'd been before.

Niles began to notice changes in Ahmad's behavior and temperament, a slow-motion decay, the sort of thing he'd befriended him to prevent. Ahmad missed a day of work here and there without any mention to Niles. Niles would text to check on him, and Ahmad would share some halfhearted anecdote. He'd played hooky to go to Atlantic City with Ryan or it had been an especially bad day with his mother. Flights of fancy, family

disruptions, these excuses weren't atypical. But Ahmad would show up to work on the days after his absences in questionable shape, his light a little duller than before. Maybe he'd have on a turtleneck on an early summer day. Or his concealer would be so caked on it was clown-like. He'd wince every time he stood up from his desk. He'd ask questions about work but skirt around personal topics. In so many ways, this was the Ahmad that Niles had wanted and yet he noticed how much Ahmad had been reduced, how lousy it felt to witness it.

"You'd tell me if you weren't okay, right?" Niles asked one evening as they exited the call center.

"I'm tough, Niles," Ahmad said without looking at him.

"I know, but—"

Ahmad cut him off.

"Unless I come to you, you don't need to worry. Okay?"

Niles nodded, dropping the conversation but never losing the thread in his mind. Ahmad needed saving. But he realized it was impossible to rescue someone from danger they confused with pleasure. And, arguably, this—listening, offering help but not forcing it, inventorying but not verbalizing—was how you fleshed out a friendship once you saw a person as they were and not as you'd imagined.

Niles and Franklin were just getting home from dinner when Niles' phone buzzed, the vibration tickling his chest through his blazer's interior pocket. He saw Ahmad's name on the screen as he pulled it out. Franklin, peeking back over his shoulder, saw it, too.

"Just ignore him," Franklin said as he pushed his way into the revolving door.

Franklin had never held a high opinion of Ahmad. Niles assumed some part of it was snobbery. From the first message Franklin had sent on their preferred dating app, he'd seemed above it all. He was a tax attorney with an apartment in a Bryant Park high rise and a distaste for one-night stands. He was chocolate-skinned, ruggedly handsome, tall and fit with impeccable posture. His profile photos were more a reel of his lifestyle than his appeal as a partner – Franklin standing and smiling in front of the Sacré-

Cœur, Franklin shirtless in a cabana holding a cocktail garnished with a pineapple, Franklin in a tuxedo on the steps of Cipriani. The photos lacked context, who he was with, how the trips were paid for, when they'd taken place. But none of that had mattered to Niles. Here was a man, attractive, thriving, interested, his lack of compassion notwithstanding. And too, Franklin was a different kind of gay. Keep your head down, go unnoticed. The machismo so many men like them had adopted as a means of survival had become him. The way Franklin flinched at the sight of Ahmad with clear gloss on his lips, colorful eye shadow, heavy contouring, it was learned and venomous, a wall between them that couldn't be torn down even if they got to know one another more deeply. Niles—more so since he'd been with Franklin—had oscillated between a sense of protectiveness and embarrassment.

Franklin's directive was tempting. Niles was woozy from a few glasses of wine, his belly full of veal meatballs. Just footsteps away from sex, post-coital cuddling, and refuge from early March's crisp bite, he had all the incentive in the world to send Ahmad to voicemail.

But Niles' love for Ahmad, while strictly platonic, had remained more consuming and urgent than the relatively new thing he had with Franklin. It wasn't the kind of connection you rejected, even when the person on the other end had atrocious timing.

He ignored Franklin and answered.

"I need you to be strong," Ahmad said. His voice was muffled, like his mouth was packed with gauze. Wherever he was calling from, he was outside. Niles could hear cars whizzing by in the background.

"Why do you sound like that?" he asked Ahmad.

In the apartment now, Niles kicked his shoes off in the closet as Franklin put on the tea kettle.

"I need to come to you. Where are you?"

"I'm not at home," he said, attempting the delicate work of maintaining boundaries and being supportive. For so much of their friendship, Niles had been unpaired and Ahmad had inundated him with stories about his men. As Niles had become more involved with Franklin, Ahmad had remained invested in his own interests, failing to take note of just how much space Franklin was taking up in Niles' life. Niles hadn't really noticed it either, how close friendships and romantic relationships could be

so at odds. Here, without warning, he'd waded into a conflict, the needs of the two most important men in his life clashing.

Niles glanced over at Franklin, who'd been listening intently. No, he mouthed at Niles, angry without so much as a whisper.

"I don't care," Ahmad said. "I just can't be here right now."

"Where is *here*? What's going on?"

Niles didn't appreciate how cryptic Ahmad was being.

"Just be strong and trust me."

"Okay," Niles said. He sent Ahmad the pin for Franklin's building after they hung up. Franklin was less than pleased, for Ahmad was ruining both their nights, not just Niles'. The call may have been unexpected, but this, the way Ahmad demanded things of Niles without regard for his needs, was nothing new. Somehow the good times had been thrilling enough to distract Niles from this.

"I've never understood you two," Franklin said before slurping his tea. Despite anticipation of their guest, he'd already changed into a pair of baggy sweats and a cotton tee with small holes around the neck. "You are opposites in every possible way. At least to my knowledge, the man has never shown any measurable desire to care for himself or use common sense. He completely drains you of your energy."

Franklin overemphasized *man*, as if to remind Niles, to suggest that Niles' concern for Ahmad was maternal or chivalrous, a type of care that couldn't be exchanged between men.

"I think he's just lost," Niles said. "The right thing for me to do is help him, or try at least."

"If he wanted to be helped, babe, you would know."

Niles wasn't faultless; there were times when he lacked the necessary compassion to understand Ahmad. But Franklin, as attractive, thriving, and interested as he was, seemed to lack any capacity for empathy. Ahmad had

been a blind spot for them, a minor point of tension. Niles didn't agree with Franklin, and the disagreement had the potential to become something bigger. Niles wasn't sure how he'd feel if Ahmad initiated his and Franklin's demise.

What Niles knew was that a drowning person had a very small window to realize they needed help, seek it, and receive it. Maybe Niles couldn't force Ahmad to live his life any differently. But he could stay there, perched above, swoop in just in the nick of time.

"Some people are meant to stick around for a long time, some are just making a cameo," Franklin said. Staid wisdom that fell flat.

The intercom phone rang then, the doorman. Ahmad was downstairs.

"Just let me handle him," Niles said.

Franklin shrugged and carried his tea into the bedroom, pushing the door closed behind him.

There was a muted knock on the front door. Unprepared, Niles opened it to find a shrunk Ahmad, his right eye nearly swollen shut. A fresh, red wound parted his bottom lip into bloated halves. Both his cheeks were bruised, fresh tracks of tears and eyeliner smeared over them. Niles gasped, a pang of dread upsetting his stomach and eventually overheating his face. Then an immediate sadness. Uncontrollable sobs before he could say a word.

They hugged one another there in the doorway, neither able to speak.

Niles and Ahmad sat on the deep sofa together, holding hands and sinking into the cushions. Niles worried for him, because Ahmad had come to him. Because he needed help and he'd said so. But what to do with the worry?

Ahmad told Niles things had been bad with Ryan for some time, news that didn't need confirming. This incident was just the latest, and the worst. Ahmad and Ryan had discussed their future together, including renting an apartment. This wasn't shocking to Niles, how Ahmad could consider a life with a man he hardly knew, who could easily be discarded and replaced with someone similar. Ahmad told Ryan he wasn't salaried; the call center's benefits were weak, and his hourly pay wasn't enough to cover both of their expenses, implying—but not explicitly stating—that Ryan would need to contribute. (Ahmad had already learned not to poke the beast if he could avoid doing so.) Ryan still grew angry almost instantly, reminding Ahmad that he'd been incarcerated, that he'd been looking for work, but no one wanted to hire a criminal. He felt judged by Ahmad, and he didn't want to be with someone who loathed him. Ahmad, ever the doting wife, tried to calm him; he was only acknowledging the financial reality of their situation, he explained. It didn't matter; their disagreement escalated quickly, that insidious thing circulating beneath Ryan's skin showing itself. Ahmad felt the first punch in his right cheek, then another in his left, then he lost count of how many times and where Ryan's fist made contact. Ryan beat him the way he'd pummel an enemy, like Ahmad had wanted to hurt him, as if dainty, affectionate Ahmad was someone with the force and strength to fight back.

Niles only nodded and cried more as Ahmad relayed the story. He couldn't find his words, and even if they'd been available, he was in no shape to share them.

It was Franklin who spoke up.

"I have a friend at Mount Sinai who can see you," he said from behind them. Niles hadn't noticed he'd emerged from the bedroom.

"I can't go to the fucking hospital," Ahmad said through gritted teeth, trying mightily not to open his mouth too widely. "They'll call the cops or a social worker or something. I don't want to get him in trouble."

For Niles, this was the final proof of Ahmad's troubles and their depth, Ahmad sitting before him nearly unrecognizable, yet worried about his abuser's freedom and not his own.

"If he doesn't get in trouble, he could do something worse," Niles said.

Ahmad looked away from him then. They both knew that *something worse* was as ominous as it sounded.

“I’ll tell her to keep it quiet. She’ll just make sure you’re okay,” Franklin said.

Ahmad agreed, and the three of them crowded into the backseat of a yellow cab. They were silent, nothing adequate could be said. The driver had in an earpiece, speaking Arabic passionately to whoever was on the line. Niles couldn’t understand what he was saying, but the man’s voice was soothing, the incomprehensibility of the conversation a much-needed distraction. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ahmad gently pressing his fingers into different parts of his face, so carefully, silently verifying that the story he’d told actually happened to him. This made Niles teary again; he blinked furiously to stop them. He squeezed Franklin’s hand and Franklin squeezed back. The three of them remained this way until they arrived at the hospital.

Ahmad’s jaw was broken and would need to be wired shut for several weeks. Franklin’s friend, Daya, would perform the wiring procedure the next morning. In the meantime, she advised that Ahmad stay with Niles and Franklin overnight to ensure his safety. Franklin accepted the intrusion right away as though he’d never uttered a negative word about Ahmad. Niles felt conflicted, warmed and impressed by Franklin’s generosity and confused by the sudden shift in his behavior. There were layers to be explored; both Niles and Ahmad had found themselves smitten with men they had only just begun to know.

Niles hated himself for thinking it in that moment, but he realized he’d been right about Ryan. Not hasty, not judgmental, not unfair, not snooty. Perhaps Ahmad had reacted so defensively because he’d known it, too. However, what would being right do for either of them now, besides make them both feel awful? There was no question - there’d been enough of that.

What began as a tug of war between Niles and Ahmad devolved into something less dynamic. Niles’ excitement, borne of reverence and intimidation, morphed into anxiety. It was as if Ahmad were his adult son, an unanswered text inciting panic, his every thought an iteration of a worst-case scenario. Ahmad had quit the call center, too embarrassed to report to work as a victim, denying Niles an easy and consistent method of welfare checks. Thus, whenever Ahmad asked Niles to meet him somewhere, Niles would always say yes, to his own detriment and to Franklin’s chagrin. It was a selfish need, and intrusive in only the way selfish needs can be. He feared that maybe he’d be needed most the one time he declined, the thoughts of a savior.

They didn't talk about that night for many months. Niles assumed it was because of the pain, the injuries that had shown and those that remained unseen. Perhaps Ahmad didn't want to relive his trauma; Niles didn't want to force him.

Walking through Union Square Park one afternoon, they gabbed like the friends they wanted to be. They traded jokes and shared updates. Franklin and Niles had recently discussed Niles moving in; they were targeting the summer. Bougie bitch, Ahmad had said, but with a genuine smile. It was surreal to think that Ahmad, so fixated on love, had struggled so greatly to be happy while Niles had waltzed into his most serious relationship without much effort. Other people in relationships had always told him he'd find a man when he wasn't looking for one, but he thought that was just a thing coupled people said to make single folks feel less lonely. Now though, he wondered if they were right. Ahmad tried and tried and tried, and he always found himself back here. Bruised in some way, the end of one cycle bleeding seamlessly into the next. Niles had prepared himself for Ahmad's new stories, about some hard-edged guy whose bravado and muscles ranked higher in importance than Ahmad's own safety.

"He took me out to dinner last night," Ahmad said, unprompted, contextless. He was looking ahead as they walked, his mood sober. "To a great Italian place in City Island. Spent a grip."

"Who?" Niles asked.

"You know who," Ahmad said without turning toward Niles. It made sense then; Niles did know who.

It was dusk, the setting sun turning everything and everyone golden and opulent, even Ahmad. His jaw had mostly healed, his spirit, too. But whatever wound there was inside of him, it was still open and bloody and sensitive, and Niles was certain he couldn't heal it.

"You're still seeing him?" Niles asked, trying not to lose his composure.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," Ahmad said.

Niles sighed wearily. "You can't always pull that," he said.

"Pull what?"

They stopped moving to face each other.

“Your self-righteous performance. Instead of just admitting that you make shitty decisions, you frame it like you’re more experienced or more honest or more genuine. But you don’t know anything about anything.”

Niles could feel his pulse booming in his ears, his face hot with frustration. He waited for Ahmad to say something, but he stayed silent. Perhaps because he was finally being seen. And now that Niles could see him, he couldn’t remember the person he’d wanted Ahmad to be.

They resumed walking, in an awkward silence until they reached the pedestrian plaza at the entrance to the 456.

Ahmad would call Niles three times over the next two weeks, and each time, Niles would be available to pick up the call but wouldn’t answer. He’d wonder if he was being shallow, if he’d failed to understand friendship. Wasn’t it the case that he was giving up on Ahmad because he hadn’t lived up to Niles’ expectations? Wasn’t it the case that he just didn’t want Ahmad anymore, and as such, he was discarding him, extricating him from his life? He’d think, maybe these were the salty, chewy parts of platonic unions, and you had to develop an acquired taste if you ever wanted them to last. So then, in that case, maybe it was true that Niles didn’t quite comprehend what it took to be a good friend. But he did understand love, in all its forms, and not just because he’d finally felt its warm, unweighted embrace. He knew people fell out of love all the time. He’d seen his parents fall out of love with one another; he’d seen angry strangers falling out of love with each other as they screamed and cried out front of restaurants; he’d seen it in movies. He also knew it wasn’t only romantic spells that could be broken. Now, too, he knew what it was to fall out, the acidic taste, the sting of the slap, the guilt, the disappointment. He knew it better than anything else in that moment, better than he’d known Ahmad.

“I’ll see you around,” Ahmad said, glum and noncommittal.

Niles nodded, watching Ahmad disappear down the steps, the dissolution so quiet as to go unnoticed, even by the two of them. The tears that began to wet Niles’ face weren’t those of sadness, however. Relief could be just as overwhelming. His phone rang as he wandered around the plaza, aimless. His heart jumped; he thought it’d be Ahmad, the two of them still in sync. It hadn’t only been Niles who’d realized how fraught the past minutes had been. But no, it was Franklin. It was a low feeling to be so unexcited over a call from a lover, to crave instead the attention of someone who couldn’t fully love himself.

“You sound kind of stuffy,” Franklin said once Niles picked up. “You okay?”

He shrugged as if Franklin could see.

“Always worrying,” Niles said, wiping his face. He began walking uptown toward his man. It would take him half an hour, and he wasn’t in walking shoes. He didn’t care. Franklin was worth making the journey for.

You, Me, a Bowl and the Hour

by Anna Louise Steig

What has changed from the time we met to now? Those early years—they were a kaleidoscope of mango imbued hormones and those prophetic dreams I could never seem to shake, but now I lie awake and dream we've drifted slowly toward the latter days. That winding path we'd once laid out for each other turned out to be false. Our tie was destined to fray, I believe, and now the last few threads are what has guided me into your bed tonight.

Two fleeting years of silence escaped us with a hush; how foolish was I to imagine I could ever forget you, though. Those dimly illuminated memories have lost their color but are still seared into my subconscious: wasted afternoons jamming buttons to win round after round of Mortal Kombat; blue hair dye melting into sour bleach with summer soil roots; the taste of cherry chapstick and lingering afternoons in a sordid bed of sweat, the summer when we first began to drift. Your teddy bears still linger in the corners of my eyes, and the most mundane sounds outside my room can suddenly conjure up your kitchen floor, the pitter patter of your tiny toes skipping across the tile to draw fresh water for the roses. The roses were white, most weeks. You told me that white roses carry the deepest fragrance; they last the longest. These were the things I'd never thought to learn, but you knew it all.

I still remember in brighter detail the thin scattering of hay that obscured the doorstep to your trailer, and of course the sheets of ice that, come winter, would turn your steep driveway into a death slide. At the bottom of the drop loitered my father's idling pickup, lit only by the neon of the bar next door—*The Full Moon*—and by a silver strip of moonlight escaping through the clouds. I close my eyes and feel the weight of the door swinging on its hinges; I close my eyes and see his wrinkled, sun darkened face turn the other way, so that he wouldn't have to comment on the bouquet of fresh white roses in my arms or the burgundy bruising hickeys on my neck. When I got home, I would watch my mother cry. Then, she would cut the bottoms of the stems and vase my forbidden flowers. And I would laugh aloud.

But now the nights are darker, and all the neon of Funkstown has inevitably burned out. I got lost twice driving myself to your new address - things have changed. I don't have roses wilting in my windowsill anymore. I don't have the remnants of your lips on my new skin. I don't laugh unless someone tells a joke, and my mother is already asleep by the time I come home. And I don't have a father anymore, but you, you never did. So maybe *that's* the reason you opened the door for me tonight, because now I am

strange and reborn and red-eyed, shivering from the drive because my heating doesn't work. I am not equipped to handle myself tonight, but probably I never have been before.

But you, in your moth-eaten Ramones t-shirt and black ripped jeans at 11 p.m. are seemingly immune to change, and that itself is something of a miracle. In this new house, I still have to dance around the drooling pitbulls and greet the snakes inside their glass homes—I wonder if they remember my face? My hair has grown out, now. I have to tip toe over the oceans of Dr. Pepper cans and miscellaneous life-stuff that infests the invisible floor of your bedroom; I find comfort in the starry bedspread on your rotting mattress, and in the King Princess posters that clothe your new four walls. The only thing missing is the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling, and I think I miss those most.

We bounce onto your bed and yank out the cords and black lace bras beneath our asses, and suddenly the world is small. There is so much we have to say, and yet the space between our lips is a void. I can smell the Pepsi on your breath, hot and heavy and waiting to hear the sound of my voice.

You ask me then, "Where did it begin?" but you're staring through my body with a type of x-ray vision I'm beginning to think can only belong to you. You've seen it all. You know how *I* began, and probably you know why I came here, too. Why I came back to you.

I'm not surprised that you stash your weed in a pickle jar, and you're not surprised when I scrunch up my mouth in disgust. But it's hard to argue with your eyes, watching you watch me. And of course you smoke out of a strawberry shaped bowl, and from the way you tamp it in so thick, I suspect you do this every night—every night is all the nights you've spent without me, and now they are so many.

After all these years, I still can't do the simplest things: I can't flick a lighter right, can't say the words I mean, can't keep my eyes from staying wide open as you light the bowl beneath my lips. The flame is hot. I am cold but thawing out.

Soon, I won't be able to remember my own name. Soon, I won't be able to stop staring at the freckle beside your beak shaped nose or keep my wandering hands confined to my lap. Soon, I'll start to ask you where Bagheera is, even though she ran away four years ago - that cat loved me more than you, though you refuse to admit it. Soon, I'll have to admit that I can't drive myself home, and that I don't remember the way to the bathroom because the paths inside my head are rooted in the past; the trailer house had

just one hallway, but this new house has three. Soon, you'll drift into a fitful sleep, but I will stay awake and wild-eyed with loss. I will find myself flipping on the light under the kitchen stove, touching every surface with my eyes clenched shut, trying to find a portal to the past. Soon, I think I might just get there, and in that dream I know you'll be there waiting with a single dying rose.

Dinosaur

by O Thiam Chin

Peter gets up in the middle of the night, and stalks out of the bedroom, deserting Hock Chuang on the bed, who's sleeping like a baby. He is used to waking up at odd hours for the past week, and his fatigue doesn't much bother him now, a slow lumbering state in which his mind is always two steps behind his body. It is half past three in the morning, and the flat is steeped in a hollow echoing silence. The dark outside is an emptiness that swallows every movement, every activity—it sharpens the shadows, animates them.

Peter has been thinking about Adam, who has just moved in three doors down a month ago. He has helped Adam water his orchids while he's away—he is a flight steward, always on the move. In return, Adam has so far given him a bag of biscotti and a jar of black vinegar from Rome as thank-you gifts. He had declined them at first, but Adam was insistent, and Peter relented. The biscotti is nearly gone—Hock Chuang has eaten most of it. The jar of vinegar stays at the back of a top kitchen shelf, out of sight. Peter has no intention to use it yet. Hock Chuang doesn't know about the vinegar since he doesn't cook.

He has been sleeping shorter hours, three or four hours max every night, and now takes naps at work throughout the day. He still keeps to a three-coffee a day regime, though nothing after five in the afternoon. Before he sleeps, he makes a glass of chamomile tea from which he takes small sips, barely finishing a quarter of it each time. He drops off to sleep, deeply and instantaneously, like sudden death, once his head hits the pillow. He doesn't dream, doesn't move, and loses all his senses while he sleeps. He remembers nothing when he wakes up, Hock Chuang's chest on his back, his acetic breaths feathering the nape of his neck. *What were you muttering about last night,* Hock Chuang asked one morning. *Don't know, I don't remember,* Peter said. *It's like you're talking to someone in your dream.* Peter shook his head. *Maybe I was talking to myself.*

The built-up exhaustion has become companionable after some time, the dulling of his mind slowing down his thoughts, making them easier to access, to file down. His moods, too, have turned languid, monotonous, less invasive, and he is able to manage their oscillations more readily. If only his regular days—in Peter's mind, this phase of erratic sleep is only an interlude, an aberration—are like this, flattened to such an easy, amenable pattern. Whatever his feelings are—they are still there, clumped into an undistinguishable mass—they now seem acquiescent, filtered, defanged, peeking through a screen of veils. It's not an unpleasant state to be in, he tells himself.

But how long will it last? And will it last long enough? Will he always feel this way?

Peter moves through the flat like a spectre slipping through walls, adrift, ill at ease, purposeless. The framed photos on the walls, the red-faced Balinese masks, the reproduction Lichtenstein poster of a young woman caught in the waves, tears leaking from her wretched eyes. They are all dusty, leaving his fingers padded with a sticky film. They have been hanging on these walls since they moved in twelve years ago, immovable like relics, devoid of any significance that Peter has long forgotten.

He comes to a stop in the living room and sits on the sofa. The lights from the corridor outside streak the exposed surfaces of the room in rich honeyed hues. Peter's mind hobbles down a well-trodden path, made smooth by constant treading. The image of Adam, and behind it, hovering at the edge, a glimpse of David, the last man Peter loved. A smile on David's face, opaque yet enigmatic, opening up to all kinds of meaning. His face, like Adam's, a series of open doors, leading onwards, into infinity. The ropes around his hands, tied behind his back, his chest a web of hard knots, clenching tight, burning his skin. Threads of saliva drooling from his enlarged mouth, plugged with a black ball gag. In his eyes, David's silent pleas: *Don't stop*.

St Sebastian, David's favourite saint, though he was a lapsed Catholic. That's who he was—is. An ecstasy of arrows in his neck, waist, calf. David with his eyes downcast, his pain heavenward, glorified. He had sent Peter a postcard of the saint once, the words on the back: *I want to be him, make me like him*.

Peter loved—loves—David, can't stop thinking of him, even now. He's his great love, his salvation—but who's saving who, really? Then, almost instantly, another voice: you're getting old, getting too maudlin, a fool, an idiot, your words a sack of old, useless bones.

"Then what do I have left?" Peter whispers into the air. The gesture, his words, strikes him as something he can never bear to hear spoken aloud, by anyone, let alone himself. They reek of overripe sentiments, putrefying with dead emotions. The young can do this, spout all these nonsense if they want, but he's already old, already fifty-three—he always feels older than he is, at every stage of his life—and the old have—need—their own way of speaking and behaving and coping, of managing their own thoughts, words, not this unthinking, blatant outpouring of feelings, so unrestrained, so infantile, gushing like an exploded tap. He needs to do better, needs to keep himself in check.

Peter empties his head of David, but in exiling him from his mind, he only finds Adam in his absence. He remembers the heat of Adam's hands as he pressed the gifts on Peter. *It's nothing, really, don't even think about it.* Every trip, a new gift, gifts. For helping him water his orchids. Kombucha from Kyoto, salted-egg biscuits from Taipei, spicy dried shrimps from Bangkok. They aren't nothing; they are more than are suggested, implied. Adam's invitation to come into his flat, for a chat, then drinks, snacks, longer conversations. Adam lives alone, been alone for a while, not actively looking. *I'm too used to being single, hard to change, better this way, with my work, all the flying.* He knows about Peter and Hock Chuang, he has seen the latter around. *He's cute, Adam said, like you, but you're different.* They had kissed twice, but nothing more, Peter backing away each time. *Sorry, he had said, sorry,* but he didn't mean it.

Peter stares at the pool of amber light reflected on the glass pane of the coffee table. He looks into it, catches his reflection, etched in a vague outline. He touches the cool surface, where his eyes are—he can't see them—rubbing it. He feels anew the weight of his exhaustion, huge and immense and crushing. He feels it like a burning mark, freshly branded. He has nowhere to go, sitting here in his living room, in the middle of a long, disquiet night, surrounded by his ghosts. He falls asleep, but only briefly.

A charge of nerves wakes him up, rudely, a while later. Peter cranes around to look at the hanging clock, makes out the time: 4:16 a.m. He hobbles to the bathroom, legs numb with sizzling pricks, his bladder clenching. He sits on the toilet bowl, the coldness of the seat chilling his butt, shriveling up his balls. The moment the pee exits his cock, Peter emits a satisfied groan. The jet of urine never lets up for a good while, hitting the porcelain wall of the bowl hard like a blast of bullets. A powerful waft of ammoniac fumes rises up, rich and robust. Peter pinches out the last drops of pee, his cock semi-hard, a surge of current briefly stirring his body. The world feels right again, as if reset. Peter remains seated on the bowl, relishing the fading buzz of his post-pissing pleasure. He strokes his cock distractedly, undecided whether to commit any further. It goes soft within seconds, lying limp, deflated, in his left hand. This happens more than usual lately. Peter doesn't want to think about it. This can happen to anyone, any guy, at any age. But no, it's not true, Peter knows. Hock Chuang can still sport an erection—and maintain it—whenever he wants, though he is forty-five. *Horny bastard,* Peter teased, when he moved his hand casually over Hock Chuang's crotch, while watching TV. *Not as horny as you, you old man.* He's tired, after all, no, exhausted. He's too tired for anything. He needs some serious shut-eye, to get back to his usual self. When's the last time he had had sex with Hock Chuang? Three or four months ago? He can't remember, doesn't want to overthink this. It can happen to any couple, even them. They have been together for so long, fourteen years, and sometimes things change, some things fade or deteriorate, get sidelined, excluded. But

they are still okay, still together—that counts for something, right? Peter knows of some couples—no, ex-couples, close friends of his, and friends of friends—who had broken for lesser—dumb, silly, laughable excuses, really—reasons. They still have something—but what, Peter has lately been asking himself—that keeps them together, each assimilating his own rationale and motives into the commitment, braiding these things together to form a thick, solid cord whose threads are indistinguishable from one another. Yet, at times, when Peter starts to gaze elsewhere, the cord can easily feel like a noose, slowly tightening itself around his neck.

Peter stares down at his flaccid cock, the hole peeking out of the wrinkled foreskin like an accusing eye, and hisses: *you greedy little fucker, what else do you want, uh? What else?* He grabs hold of his cock and balls in a fist, shakes them roughly. Then he shoves them back into his boxer shorts and washes his hands and leaves the bathroom.

He goes into the bedroom to find his mobile. Hock Chuang is mumbling in his sleep, now occupying Peter's side of the bed. When he touches the screen, the flare of light illuminates the side table and the assortment of sleeping-aid sprays and rubbing oils, and Hock Chuang's placid, unruffled face. His features—thick broad brows, narrow lips, a gentle slope of a nose—pinch in a flicker of mild irritation, and Peter, afraid of awakening him, buries the mobile in the folds of his T-shirt. He does not want to entertain Hock Chuang's usual interrogation—"how's your sleep? Have you slept well?"—or belabour him with yet another explanation of his sleep troubles. He has run out of reasons on why he hasn't been sleeping well; it can be anything—the food he eats, the night-time reading, the coffee he still drinks, too much screen time, the stress from work. It can be any of these, or all of them, in varying degree. It can be his age, too. He's old, already middle-aged, and the old don't need much sleep, they say. Yes, he's fucking old, that's his problem, why he can't sleep now. He's a dinosaur. A dead, prehistoric creature from an age no longer his own, fumbling his way into an existence he can't know or make any sense of. He's not made for this world anymore, his bones already dried and desiccated, unearthed and exposed, hung up for display. And the world doesn't need him—what use does it have of him, anyway?

Peter fiddles with his mobile, scrolls down the length of his WhatsApp messages. He finds the last exchange he had with David, nearly two years ago, which ends with: *yes, let's catch up soon*. Peter had initiated it that time, wanted to see David again, but in the end, he didn't follow through with it. It was around the time he had gone for a check-up after a prolonged bout of pain in his pelvic area and was told that he had prostate cancer. The earliest stage, but still. He snickered openly at the diagnosis, wasn't frazzled by the ensuing prospects—what it meant, what it entailed—didn't make a big deal out of it,

unlike Hock Chuang, whom he had to inform, who was all up in arms, who accompanied him for all his subsequent check-ups and chemo sessions, grim and determined and sounding like a Hallmark card. It was a burden to be around Hock Chuang during the period, to listen to all his platitudes, warm and well-intentioned as they were, to endure his ministrations, his incessant fussing. *Go, do something else with your time, I don't need you here*, Peter had told him at one of his follow-up sessions, his patience sapped dry by Hock Chuang's constant, needling presence. *No, you need me here, I want to be here*, he replied, his tear-brimmed eyes teeming with pride and concern. Peter couldn't stand to look at Hock Chuang's face, fuming inwardly with indignation, with vexed helplessness.

All Peter wanted during those long months of treatment and medication was to be left alone, to seal himself up in his own silence. He felt fine, most of the time, felt like himself, except the days when the drugs made him go under, suspended him in an unbreakable fog of numbness and vacuity. His body, a city ceded, under a separate, foreign authority. He would get better, he had read the articles and literature and books on it—early detection, timely intervention, faster recovery—heard the noises of hope in his doctor's and Hock Chuang's voices. Yet, Peter still felt the persistent sense of losing control, of not being able to effect anything on his own to deal with his illness.

Don't worry, you're still recovering, everything will be back to normal in no time, the doctor had assured him, handing him a brochure on erectile dysfunction during one of his last consultations. Peter shoved it into the trash bin when he got home. He felt insulted, unshielded, as if his one and only concern were whether he could have a hard-on again. True, he couldn't remember the last time he had an erection after the diagnosis and through the long drought of his treatment, but it wasn't something he was troubled about. Or not as troubled as he would have admitted to himself. Sometimes, when he showered, he would hold his lifeless cock in his hand—so pathetic-looking, so wretched—and tug at it gently, unable to summon it to any sort of hardness, and quietly mourn the loss of something he had always taken for granted.

When they had sex for the first time after his recovery—they had come to a decision, mutual and unvoiced, to abstain from sex after Peter's diagnosis—Peter was nervous and miserable and lonely. He took the lead, for he had not wanted Hock Chuang's hands all over him—he wasn't sure he could withstand his touch—discreetly directing Hock Chuang's hand away from his cock, pushing him onto his back, latching his mouth on Hock Chuang's cock. Later he got on top of Hock Chuang and slid the latter's bare, rigid cock into him, feeling the length of it tight inside him. and pumped steadily, facing away from him. He worked at it diligently, conscientiously, as if it were a test he needed—had—to pass, until he felt a tremble of release coming from Hock Chuang. As the

latter came, Peter veiled his eyes and imagined the thick jet of sperm coursing up his rear, into the maze of his interior, reaching where his prostate was, covering and surrounding it, nursing. He felt the warmth of it, its fluent sticky goodness, as he went under, his body heaving. Even as he kept his eyes closed, he could still sense Hock Chuang's enlarging presence around him, pulling him into his arms, crying: *what happened. what's wrong, please tell me, where are you hurting?*

Peter wasn't sure he knew David at all, even after the few months they were seeing each other. Peter had met him in the changing room at a public pool, and David had invited him over to his place. He lived with his boyfriend then, and they were relaxed about such things. *He had his own fun too*, David explained, as he led Peter into the bedroom. David's skin, after a swim and tan, was taut and smelt faintly of chlorine, the area around his crotch and butt a lighter, paler shade, blazingly white against his darkened skin. He bent his body over Peter's legs, lifting his tense, fleshy butt towards him. *Hit me as hard as you can*. Peter was hesitant, delivering the few first smacks obligingly, lightly. *No, harder, don't worry, I can bear it*. Peter did as he was told, till his hand began to prick with a numbing buzz, and a fierce scarlet hue rose across David's skin, like chilblains, inflamed, radiating a nimbus of heat. David never once asked Peter to stop, not even when he was gasping, letting out small cries. Later, after Peter came on his butt, David slathered the creamy cum over the red blooming patches evenly, tenderly, as if nursing his own wounds.

Peter left shortly after that, though the boy—who was twenty-seven years younger, he realised later—had not asked him to go. He assumed this was a one-off thing, an interesting experience, but David texted him three days later, inviting him over again. The marks Peter left on David had nearly faded away, and the fresh round of smacking once again turned the flesh into flushed blotches of pink-red, raw and delicate. David's eyes brimmed with tears when Peter held him later, an unexpected pang of protectiveness, almost paternal in instinct, overcame him. David returned the force of the embrace, his arms wrapped around Peter's back, trembling involuntarily. When they collapsed into the bed later on, they stayed there for a while, their bodies slick and wet, glowing.

The visits to David's place—Peter couldn't afford to ask David over, he couldn't take the risk, there was too much at stake—grew frequent, but irregular. Sometimes, twice a week, occasionally once a fortnight, the sessions arranged impromptu over texts. These sessions did not interfere with their lives, at least for Peter's; it was something casual, unconnected with the rest of his life. He liked David well enough, over time, a person unlike him, expressive

and brazen, open to what he wanted, unafraid to seek it out, and the frisson that came with their differences was like an unbridled current charging through him, wild and violent and unpredictable. It teased Peter out of his shell, seduced him with a new knowledge, a new way of being. Did he like that, could he do this, was he comfortable with it? Yes, always a yes, even when his mind told him otherwise, raising alarms, warnings. He grew, or became, someone entirely different before David, a shadow-twin, someone with his own tastes and strength and appetites. This man—it was him, of course, Peter knew, though he hardly recognised it—had always been there, somewhere inside him.

Don't be gentle with me, David had said, and Peter listened, took heed. First the ropes, then the gags, the candles. The razors. David wanted more, wanted it all. And Peter wanted badly to leave his marks, his signature, a way to make David his. He grew to take up his role, to assume the control, his mastery over David. *Who am I? Who am I to you?* Peter once asked, growling, spitting into David's face. David writhing breathlessly under his grip, uttered helplessly: *everything, everything*. And Peter believed him.

Once, when David's boyfriend was away for a week in Bangkok, Peter had stayed over at David's for a night. It happened on the same week that Hock Chuang was on a field trip to Cambodia with his junior college students, and so to Peter, the timing could not have been more opportune or providential. He found himself wanting to spend more time with David, felt his thoughts slipping constantly into the gaps that David had left in him. The time between them being apart and coming together was an exquisite, excruciating period of waiting, broken only when David replied to his texts—they never called each other, another of their mutual tacit agreements—agreeing to meet up again. Peter was feeling unhinged, tottering on the edge, trapped and desperate. I'm like a man who had lost his head, he jibed at himself, unkindly.

He went over to David's place earlier than arranged, and, upon entering the flat, immediately took to undressing David, bending him over the sofa, and belting him with an intense, fervid urgency that even caught Peter by surprise. When he had completely exhausted himself, catching his breath, Peter laid his damp face on the swollen heated skin of David's butt, tracing the plump crisscrossing welts with his tongue. David, turning around to look at Peter, grabbed a handful of Peter's hair and pulled him to his face, kissing him. They fell in a heap onto the floor, the ceramic tiles cooling their warm bodies. Peter sensed a huge tide cresting inside him, felt it rise and rise. Everything shaking inside, shifting out of position, and Peter alone in all of this, always alone. He sank his weight into David, unable to hold it in.

"Hey, hey," David said, looking into Peter's face, searching. "Don't do this, don't you do this to me now. It's our time together."

David pushed himself out of Peter's clasp and went over to the kitchen, his half-erect cock bopping in the air, and took out a stick of ice cream from the freezer. He gave Peter an indulgent smile as he came back to him, tearing off the packaging with his teeth. He handed the ice cream, lime and vanilla, over to Peter, and laid prone on the ground, his head on his arms.

"Do something nice for me, will you?"

Peter pressed the flat tip of the ice cream on a wormy welt on David's skin, and David jerked reflexively, tensing his muscles, a soft whimper issuing from his lips. Peter glided the ice cream along the red lines of each swell, which ran into one another, a maze that spread out to the edge of David's butt and narrowed into the crevice of his cheeks. The ice cream slowly melted, leaving smears, falling off in trails down the butt-cheeks, which Peter bent to lick off, tasting the salt of David's skin along with the sweetness. Spreading David's cheeks, Peter lifted the stick of half-gone ice-cream, allowing the pearly droplets to fall onto the puckered hole, to drip down the folds. He teased it with the softened end of the stick, slowly eased it in before throwing it aside. Then gathering the melted cream with his two fingers, Peter pushed it into the hole, fucking the mix into a thick, foamy lather, which he ate with a rabid hunger.

Later, they went into the kitchen, naked and ravenous, tearing into packets of potato chips and prawn crackers, downing every bite with a gulp of Coke Zero, the frizz of bubbles erupting from their mouths with a loud belch. Peter was heady, heedless with joy, as he watched David move around him, slipping in and out of his touch. When was the last time he had felt this way, this reckless, so unfettered? *David, David, David*, he called out again and again, as if each utterance was a chain, linked inextricably into a loop, binding him to David, solid, unbroken, permanent.

They fucked again when they were full, and then in the middle of the night, when one of them woke up, released from a nightmare, panicking, grasping for the other. The sex then was quieter, soothing, a consolatory act. When they woke again, later in the morning, they tried to fuck again, but Peter was all tired out, fatigued, unable to come up with an erection. Their bodies stank of stale cum and rank sweat and different flavours of chips. Peter looked at David in the dim, dust-strobed morning light of the bedroom, but the boy had closed his eyes, his long lashes spidery against his skin. *I want you*, he said, but David remained silent.

They met up again twice after that night. And then, it was over.

Peter texted and texted but there was no reply. He called once, despite himself, but the call went dead. *You there? Can you reply once, for fuck's sake?*

Nothing for a long time, and then finally a reply: *I don't need this now, sorry.* Peter sank back blindly into his old usual self, devastated, dispossessed. Were you expecting something good to come out of this, he chided himself, a happy ending?

And this was what it finally came down to, he realised: a wrecked man, lovesick, making a fool of himself, and for what? For a love created out of his fancy, an illusion that could barely bear its own weight? Peter no longer knew how or what he should, or ought to, think or feel anymore. Even with all the things he couldn't bear, his life still has to go on, still has to persist.

Peter wakes again, sitting up on the sofa. These eclipses of sleep, throughout the day, blanking out one moment, half-conscious the next. Where is he? He fumbles in the near darkness, reaching for his mobile. The harsh burst of light kills his vision temporarily, hurting his eyes. 5.10 a.m. An hour or so before the sky starts to lighten. A shrill of bird-call from a tree somewhere, premature, sounding out the day. Perhaps it's time to get going, to start his day.

Hock Chuang is still sleeping, lying supine, his arms crossed across his chest, protectively. Hock Chuang, who had perhaps sensed something, in the months that Peter was barely existing, cut off from his own life, had reached out with a comforting hand, in a bid to ease Peter's pain. How many times has he laid his head on Hock Chuang's lap, fearing and dreading, yet unable to resist Hock Chuang's touch, his soothing words? *It's okay, I'm here.* How many times had Peter averted his eyes, afraid that if Hock Chuang could look into them, he would see the very thing—a person, David—that was hurting him was the thing that would have divided them, driven them apart, if he had not held it together, barely, isolating himself from the pain. Peter had cloaked his eyes with weariness, with fatigue of a different nature, and made his escape. *It's just work, it's nothing, I'm just tired, I'll get over it, I'll be fine.* And in time, Peter got over it, got back the life he once had, a full and content one with Hock Chuang, and things resumed the shape and form they were once before.

And now, Adam.

With his orchids and his little gifts. And a smile that Peter remembers from another time.

Peter opens the front door of his flat and unlocks the padlock on the metal gate. He picks up a spray bottle from a rack beside his row of Zanzibar gem and ixora and starts to water the plants. He wets the leaves and damps the soil. Then he turns to tend to the bigger plants—the devil's backbone,

pomegranate, mixed hibiscus—plucking off the yellowed leaves, trimming the unruly stalks with a hand pruner. The smell of damp fertilised earth wafts up, pungent with rot and richness.

How did you make them bloom like that? Adam said the first time, appearing before him, motioning at the yellow hibiscus. *They are really beautiful. You're such a good hand at this.*

I don't know. I just water them, Peter replied, and both of them smiled at the same time.

Know anything about orchids? Adam asked. *Mine are dying, I don't know why.*

Do you water them?

Yah, of course. Every day.

Then you're doing it wrong. No wonder they're dying.

What, really?

Yes, you only need to water them once in a few days. Let me take a look.

Peter now turns to look down the empty corridor. He can't make out Adam's flat from where he is standing—is he still away, or is he already back, he can't remember. Peter had watered the orchids two days ago, lightly dampening the charcoals in the pots, wetting the aerial roots. Some of the leaves are dotted with spots of black, early signs of fungal disease. Peter walks over and glances at the shuttered panels of frosted glass. It's still very early, he can't possibly be awake at this hour, even if he's home. Has he told him when he's coming back? Peter isn't sure. And if he is, he must be asleep, like Hock Chuang, like everyone else. Only him, Peter, is the one still awake, still resisting the pull of sleep, a man tramping through a haunted time. A dinosaur, plodding through the ages—does it ever come to a rest, does it ever sleep?

Peter squats near a pot of bamboo orchids, touching a soft lavender petal. Drooping, already past its prime, hanging frailly off a stem. Peter plucks it off, as well as those around it, grinding them in his fist. He smells the mashed-up pulp in his hand—strong, cloying, pollen-scented. Then he puts a bit of it on his tongue and chews, scattering the rest into the pot. He gives the plant a few pumps of water from his spray bottle. A budding shoot peeks out from between the charcoals. Peter uncaps the bottle, empties the rest of the

water over the young shoot. Then he sits down on the cold concrete steps of Adam's flat.

He sits and he dreams, his eyes wide open, unseeing.

NONFICTION



Hearts in Transit

A medical mystery with Carl Phillips, Danez Smith, and Ann Lauterbach

by Stacey C. Johnson

When the Poets start talking together, I listen. They are travelers, too. We move constantly between worlds, all of us—only they have credentials, these Poets, and these work like passports to gain them entry into the places where the Poets meet and talk. I run between meetings and bells and traffic and gas and groceries and practice and homework checks and payment reminders—and, lately, doctor's appointments—but, really, I spend most of my in-between time with the Poets. I suppose this is appropriate, given my fondness for liminal spaces. Before 9/11, I used to camp out in airport terminals, reading with my head on a duffel bag.

Are you delayed? Strangers would ask.

Yes! I would tell them. This was both true and a euphemism. I had no flight.

It was beautiful, then, how we would nod heads together and make comforting comments to one another, sharing in the recognition of our mutual delay. I ached for these fleeting moments of admission of a central experience, how we are here—*both of us, and more!*—waiting in this in-between place.

A universal longing, I suppose: to be seen. The natural extension of a question: Am I real, here? If it is possible to be both at once: *real* and *here*.

Meanwhile, my heart goes on experimenting with its own questions. Perhaps it imagines itself belonging to one of those Buddhist monks capable of slowing to a near-stop while still living. *Heart*, I try to explain, *please don't do that thing right now*. When it does, I am back to fainting: inconvenient, embarrassing. But the heart will do what the heart wants, and so it persists, taking us from this realm into the one that happens after the room goes black and I am down again—and then up again later, nodding when *what really happened* is explained to me, and accepting as I have learned to do, that the official record is something entirely separate from whatever I thought was going on.

From dark, I open my eyes, and my head is in a lap.

I check, it is the lap of my love. He has caught me again.

Now here comes a stranger, offering water, juice, a cool dishtowel. They are everywhere, these kind strangers, vivid and shining as though they have been waiting to offer this help. Their collective appearance, repeated, is the anaphora to a living poem.

"It must be the salt getting low again," I say, attempting control over certainty, which seems to be the coin of the realm in many places. As a show of good faith, I take two of the pills I keep in my purse, like *that should do it*, but meanwhile I am wondering if things would be different if I had cried less often in prior years, but there is nothing to do about this now, so I let it go. *Please, heart*, I say. Web MD recommends clenching the thigh muscles to maintain circulation. So now I do this and other things to keep me present.

One of these involves dreaming myself in the center of a half circle with the Poets, where we are so exhilarated by the prospect of being in such sudden company that the blood flows so thick and hot with recognition that I know that while I may shake with excitement, there is no chance that my heart is going to start deciding that now is a good time for a break. We are in a beautiful, high-ceilinged hall, seated in comfortable chairs on a riser resembling a stage, but I don't sense an audience, only us.

Oh Carl, I say to Carl Phillips, who is seated to my right, *you know what I really think happened back there?* and Danez, who is next to Carl, facing me, screams *Girl!* Ann Lauterbach's hand on my left knee is the squeeze of an aunt beside me on a plane, the one that comes somewhere between the moment when we reach cruising altitude and she drops off to sleep, and the very special place where we are going is a place that, between us, only she knows about. Like the niece in her care, I have nothing to do but wait and dream.

What follows are closed-eye nebulae, and there may be a punchline here about *real* and *not*, but I don't want to hear it. I will deny this suggestion until I pass out—which, these days, may not take long.

I blame the Poets. When I come tumbling out, falling back onto the stage where we can see each other again, here comes Danez, chiding me like they always do. *Girl, we thought you ran off!*

But Danez, I tell them. *I was just passing through*, and they smile like they already know.

Carl follows, ever thoughtful, with a book for me in one hand and water in the other. *You forgot these!* he says.

I am trying to negotiate with my heart and these Poets, calling to each before I leave, at intervals for the next crossing: *Wait for me. I am coming back!*

The strangers and the poets go on offering their poems, and my words go on biting their tails. None can help my fainting heart bear this love, when only the living will do.

From Muscle Memory: A Cà Ri Gà Recipe

by Frenci Nguyen

*because I can't recreate my mom's curry,
but my body remembers the taste*

Ingredients

For the curry:

4-5lbs of boneless chicken thighs, cubed
48 oz of low-sodium chicken broth
13.5-ounce can of unsweetened coconut milk
4-5 gold Yukon potatoes, peeled
4-5 medium carrots, peeled
5 cloves of garlic, minced
3 stalks of lemongrass
2-3 white onions, sliced
1 knob of ginger, sliced into thin matchsticks
3-4 red Thai chilies, minced
3 whole bay leaves
5-6 tbsp of D&D Gold Madras curry powder
1 bunch of fresh cilantro
Salt and black pepper to taste
Desired loaves of French bread

For the roux:

6 tbsp of unsalted butter
8 tbsp of all-purpose or almond flour
2 tbsp of curry powder
2 tbsp of Madras garam masala
½ tsp of cayenne pepper

Recipes are a common legacy across families. They get passed down from one generation to the next through word of mouth, handwritten notes, or observational memory. There's always someone or somewhere to turn to for guidance on recreating a family dish—a still-alive grandmother in Texas who's just a phone call away or a culinary aunt in Iowa who works as a university chef or a paramedic uncle in Texas who keeps stacks of Post-Its with shorthand scribbles of recipe

notes even though he has an unused recipe binder idling in a kitchen cabinet.

Step 1

In the largest mixing bowl you own, combine half of the minced garlic, 1 minced lemongrass stalk, all of the minced ginger, an eyeballed flourish of black pepper, 2 tablespoons of fish sauce, and 2 generous taps of curry powder (or 3 for good measure, until you can taste the curry itself just from the smell). Toss in the chicken chunks and marinate overnight, or at least half a day.

In Vietnamese, we use the verb “nhớ” to express both remembrance and nostalgia. “I miss you” also means “I remember you,” and missing someone then becomes the act of cementing them in memory.

Of making their existence a permanent imprint on the self.

Of training the mind to fight forgetfulness.

Step 2

While the chicken is marinating, prepare the onions, carrots, and potatoes:

- Thinly slice the onions, about ¼-inch per slice.
- Cut the carrots diagonally while rotating them horizontally a quarter between each cut. (1-inch logs are acceptable as an aesthetic compromise.)
- Divide each potato into eighths and soak in salted lukewarm water for 15 minutes.

Set all aside until you’re ready to feed the kitchen at least 4 hours of your day.

For my mom’s recipes, I have no

one to turn to because two major strokes have hospitalized her in a nursing home and nobody else was as physically close to her as I was whenever she cooked. Just like the web of tubes that puncture my mom's body to keep her breathing and eating and excreting, I'm made to probe the holes in my memory until her cooking processes are no longer a ghost.

Step 3

Coat a large, heavy-bottomed pot with some vegetable oil. In batches, sear the chicken on both sides to a light brown color. Transfer the browned chicken to a large plate and in the same pot, cook the sliced onions for 5-10 minutes until softened and translucent.

I'm more sure of my age when my mom first gave me a cooking lesson than I am of the raspy vibrato she'd use to lull me asleep on nights without electricity—or maybe it was a more honey-like timbre, or perhaps a sloppy humming.

I was seven, and we were standing at the kitchen sink in my aunt's house. My mom had taken me with her on a 36-hour Greyhound bus ride from Texas to California because of a fight she had with my father that was too much for me to understand. It was the first separation in what would later turn into a long line of empty "I hate him"s and "I'm sick of him never changing"s and "It's you and me from now on"s.

Step 4

After the onions have softened, stir in the chilies, curry powder, ginger, a sliver-

pinch of salt, and the remaining minced garlic. Let your nose flirt with the aromatic matrimony for another 30-40 seconds.

For my first cooking lesson, my mom had put a pot of unwashed Jasmine rice underneath the kitchen faucet. The wood panels creaked under my toes, and my mom's long, rounded, yellowed nails clinked against the metal of the faucet as she poured water into the pot. I rolled up the sleeves of my puppy-patterned sweater to my elbows.

"First, wash the rice 3 times to clean it. Squeeze like this," she said, scrunching bunches of wet rice into her fists. The milky slosh dripped from her hands and plunked back into the pot. She dunked her hands in the pot to clear off the stuck grains, poured out the cloudy slosh, added fresh water to the pot, and tasked me with the next two rounds of cleaning. The cold prickliness of the rice grains clumped against my skin sent a strange tingle through my fingertips.

"Where do I fill the water to?" I asked after I drained the rice slosh one last time. There were numbered measurements engraved on the inside of the pot, but that didn't matter to my mom.

"Use your index finger and fill to here." She stuck her index finger into the rice and placed her thumbnail just above her knuckle. "From top of rice, about this much water."

She grabbed my hand to let me feel where the water had stopped—so my

eyes could commit the image to memory—so that my body, my fingers would never forget the trick.

Step 5

Tenderize the two remaining lemongrass stalks with the dull side of a knife to release their oils. Return the browned chicken to the pot, along with the potatoes, carrots, bruised lemongrass, and bay leaves. Pour in enough chicken broth to submerge the medley, cover with a lid, and bring the pot to a boil.

While the Vietnamese language does have a personal “I” pronoun that is polite enough to use in any situation, third-person references are still more common between family members as a sign of respect to elders or as a show of kindness to children. The third-person references dictate who the listener and speaker are in relation to each other.

If I told my mom I miss her, I would say, “Con nhớ mẹ,” or “Child miss mom.” “I” becomes “child” and “you” becomes “mom.” My existence as a person depends on my mom’s relation to me as a parent.

Without that relation, what happens to the “I”?

Step 6

Once boiling, skim off the coagulated scum and fat from the surface, careful not to take too much of the actual broth out of the pot.

I can list the terminology I’ve retained from my days of pre-med studies in high school better than I can picture my mom’s goofy smiles.

a.c.: before meals (for taking medicine)
b.i.d.: twice daily (for taking medicine)
BP: blood pressure
CBC: complete blood count
cc: cubic centimeters
CVA: cerebrovascular accident (stroke)
DM: diabetes mellitus
DNR: do not resuscitate
h.s.: at bedtime (for taking medicine)
HTN: hypertension
M/H: medical history
npo: nothing by mouth
q.d.: each day (for taking medicine)

Step 7

Add the coconut milk (shake well first to avoid speckled soup) and stir until you've blended a perfect yellow-orange.

In January 2015, just before my second semester of college, I learned from someone of the medical staff at a California hospital that my mom had suffered a third major stroke, caused by hypertension, that worsened the vegetative state she was already in. She had only been at the hospital for a few days, but her vitals were too regularly low, and her medical history (diabetes, chain smoking, high cholesterol, previous strokes) left grim prospects for her quality of life. The nurses could no longer tell if she was able to recognize people shuffling in and out of the room. I had visited her nursing home not even two weeks earlier for Christmas; I had *just* seen her.

“In the case of an emergency, we’re

contacting next of kin to see if you would want us to continue life support or go with DNR,” the medical staff explained to me in a terse, almost-robotic tone. “DNR means—”

“‘Do not resuscitate,’ I know,” I said. A growing heaviness tugged at my throat as I swallowed back the urge to cry prickling at my eyes. “Do you need an answer right away?”

“You have time to think about it, but we’ll need to know sooner rather than later.”

I let the medical staff hang up on the silence.

Step 8

On the lowest heat, simmer for about two hours.
Continue occasionally skimming scum buildup.

Curled up on my dorm bed and back against the white stone wall, I stared at the rainbow Build-A-Bear panda that I had taken back with me from my Christmastime visit. The day before my flight back to Texas, I brought the panda with me to my mom’s room at the nursing home. Instead of saying, “I love you,” directly to her, I squeezed the panda’s right paw to let it exclaim, “I love you! I love you!” in its high-pitched, chipper trill.

Several minutes later, my half-brother called. He asked me if I heard about our mom, if I was asked about keeping her on life support. He didn’t like that I needed time to think about my answer.

“There’s nothing to think about, Frenci. This is our mom we’re talking about. We’re keeping her alive; she’s all we have.” For someone who didn’t even know that autumn is my favorite season or purple is my favorite color or crème brûlée is my favorite dessert, shoving a nonexistent sibling dynamic in my face wasn’t going to change my mind. Wherever he lived, “our” mom wasn’t part of his daily life. She wasn’t part of my dorm life, college classes, or extra-curricular activities with the on-campus Japanese Honor Society either. Both of us continued on just fine without getting to call her or hear her voice or see her smile or feel her hugs.

I let him hang up on the silence, too.

Step 9

Prepare the roux while the curry simmers:

- In a tiny pot, completely melt the butter over low heat.
- Add the flour and stir to combine it with the butter.
- Marvel at the mixture as it fuses and swells.
- At the risk of tennis elbow, stir nonstop for 15-20 minutes, otherwise the roux will burn.

The cooks in my family all have a signature meal that the rest of us salivate for and crave by just hearing the name: my grandmother’s phở, my aunt’s chả giò, my uncle’s sườn nướng, my mom’s cà ri gà. My mom never got a chance to write her recipes down, so the rest of my family relies on my childhood memories of watching her in the kitchen to someday revive her curry. But these

memories are frayed at best. I can't remember how she made the potatoes and carrots and lemongrass and coconut milk and curry powder and hacked chicken chunks taste tarte, spicy, sweet, warm.

Step 10

When the roux turns amber in color, mix in the garam masala, curry powder, and cayenne pepper.

Aside from its taste, only two things about my mom's curry remain in my memory. The first is that she liked to marinate the chicken in beer, Sprite, or Mountain Dew at least a few hours before making the whole dish. The second is that if she made it for family gatherings, I would scarf the curry down until I was keeled over my grandmother's toilet, hurling up all the bowlfuls my stomach couldn't handle. Her curry was just that popular, and my kid brain didn't trust that the adults would leave any leftovers.

Step 11

Let your nose flirt with the aromatic matrimony again for 30 seconds, then divorce the pot from the heat.

When I first started making curry in 2014, I didn't set out to follow in my mom's direct footsteps. I wanted the curry I made to be simply that—*my* curry.

Step 12

Check the curry for ingredient tenderness. If the medley has reached satisfactory softness, add the curry roux. Scoop the roux into a ladle and then dissolve it completely

with some curry broth before adding to the pot, repeating the process if necessary.

It was a late-July afternoon at my uncle's House in 2020. A tall metal stockpot of curry was simmering atop a medium-low flame; the boxer was trotting across the deck out back while the chihuahuas were barking at the neighbors laughing in their backyard. I was about two hours into cooking, skimming the last clumps of scum and fat from the amber broth before infusing it with more curry powder and pouring a can of coconut milk into the pot. There was something nostalgic about the salty, sweet, rich aromatics of the combined garam masala and lemongrass and cayenne and ginger and coconut that compelled me to finally test the flavor. I dropped to the tile floor, my hand over my mouth, overwhelmed by the warmth.

"Dude, are you okay?" my teenage cousin asked. I hadn't even heard her skipping down the stairs.

"Uh, yeah," I said while letting out a small laugh and looking up at her. "It's just that the curry tastes like my childhood. I honestly might cry."

"Lemme try," my cousin demanded. I dipped a small metal spoon in the pot and blew on it for her before letting her taste the sample. First her eyes went wide, then she started squealing and jumping at the same time. "Oh, dang, that's good!"

"See what I mean?" I said, ruffling her

pompom ponytail. “I’m gonna take some over to Bà’s side real quick—see what she thinks.”

Step 13

Adjust the taste with preferred sprinkle-pinch of salt and pepper, then turn off the heat.

I didn’t see my grandmother until later that evening because she wanted to take a nap, but she requested for me to leave the small rice bowl of curry I had prepared for her on her glass dining table.

“Con ời,” my grandmother called out to me as she sauntered over from her side of the house, her pink sports sandals chafing the tile. I was sprawled out on the grey sectional with my cousin, watching *Big Hero 6*.

“Yes, Grandma?”

“Con ời, keep this recipe. Ngon quá—the best. Just like your mom’s.”

My body had somehow brought me back around to my childhood—to my mom’s curry—to my mom.

Step 14

For a less-viscous curry, dilute with a splash or two of water. For a heartier consistency, simmer uncovered for another 20-30 minutes, stirring occasionally.

I know the layout of most Asian supermarkets in south Texas better than I can recall the sound of my own mom’s laughter. Circling from the right to the left side of the store: walls lined with stacks of 25-pound sacks of

Jasmine rice, the top-most bag of each stack bruised with palm-shaped craters from children and teenagers indulging in smacking sprees; white, refrigerated shelves of quail eggs, jarred minced garlic, udon, kimchi jars, egg noodles, bánh phở, and soy milk; murky tanks inhabited by live catfish, red bass, and flounder; toddlers armed with gigantic tongs picking fights with angry crabs; butchers hacking away at pig and chicken and cow parts; refrigerated stalls of preserved cow tongue, pig ears, chicken feet, liver paste, tripe, and chicken heart; a bánh mì and barbecue meat station understaffed with just one worker; checkout aisles lined with packages of dried squid, crates of YanYan and Hello Panda and Pocky snacks, and shrimp chips.

Step 15

Fill a bowl with your desired amount of curry.
Garnish with cilantro and enjoy with fresh, fluffy French bread.

My favorite part about going to the markets was when my mom and I would lounge in the car and snack on the loaves of French bread she splurged on for a dollar per four loaves. We left the clear bins of freshly baked bread for last so that our haul would still be warm by the time we got to the car. My mom enjoyed breaking the crispier, crunchier end pieces off first and popping each chunk whole into her mouth, but I would take my time savoring the fluffy sweetness, first hollowing out the loaf of its soft, porous inside, the sweet aftertaste making my mouth tingle, and then

picking at the rest like jerky during the trip back to our apartment.

“I’ll just tell your dad to get more later,” my mom would reason as she drove, already reaching her hand into the bags for another loaf.

On Solitude

by Oliver Scofield

I. The Beaten Path

My saw pinches. Caught in the middle of a cut, I take the opportunity to pause, look around. Down East Rosebud canyon, morning colors have evaporated, allowing summer's hazy heat to simmer up from the plains. As my breath calms, I can hear the movement of the creek several switchbacks below me. A squirrel chatters nearby; I glance up the trail and then higher, towards cliff's skyward retreat with scattered boulders fallen at their feet.

I look with both trepidation and hope. I have not seen nor heard another person in 40 hours and, with my record being 43 hours, would like to put my next encounter off for as long as possible. If not a person who inspired the squirrel's warning signal, then I want to see whoever did set the little feller to chattering, be it moose, bear, or bighorn.

When half a minute of investigation fails to reveal any new presence, I return my gaze to the log across the trail in front of me and the small orange handle of my Silky handsaw stuck six inches into the cut. A casual tug does nothing to release this bind.

Wonderful. This is super fucking fun...

I again look around, now directing my gaze at the surrounding forest. I am tired, frustrated, and with no people for miles, there is little reason to filter my thoughts. My primary task this week is to make an assessment—mostly just determining if it still exists—of the Rimrock bridge after last month's flooding. I also need to cut out the trail, which a winter wind-storm has made challenging. Yesterday I cut, dragged, felled, rolled, and threw 103 trees that impeded travel on the trail—the fewer cuts I can make per tree the better. My arms and shoulders are already sore.

Returning to my current obstacle—a mature subalpine fir about ten inches thick—I contemplate my next move. This tree had stood immediately below the trail. It had fallen, of course, straight uphill so the thickest part of its trunk lay across the path. I had started my first cut on the uphill side, hoping I could then pivot the severed portion down, across the trail, and leave it below without having to saw again near the stump.

When cutting—with a handsaw, crosscut, or chainsaw—the sawyer must read the tree, as each presents its own characteristics and challenges. The better the sawyer understands these, they'll both be safer and have an

easier time felling or bucking. The trees on East Rosebud are mostly green lodgepole and subalpine fir; softwood that cuts easily with a handsaw but can twist, bending as fibers are severed. The wind event that brought about this blowdown primarily snapped these trunks about 40-50 feet above the ground, littering broken tops with heavy branches and skinny boles. Occasionally, a larger tree has been fully uprooted, taking its neighbors down with its own crashing descent.

I would not consider myself an expert on cutting techniques; there are plenty of complex situations I have not encountered, and I don't spend enough time on chainsaws or crosscuts to gain the experience I would need to reach the highest level of qualification. But neither am I a newbie. I have spent six summers using these tools and have taught the basics to many fresher to the forests than myself.

That being said, I am still standing here—18 miles from the trailhead, alone, with just a shovel and the odds and ends in my backpack—looking at my only cutting tool pinched in a tree. Like a newbie.

I grab my water bottle and make a quick assessment:

It's 8:30am. Rimrock bridge is still at least two and a half miles away... that's an hour hike, add in an hour for trees and trash... an hour and a half back up to camp... still time to pack up, cut the few trees left between Lake at Falls and Duggan and get to Dewey before 5:30... I'll camp there and Dewey is... 13 from the trailhead. That'll be doable tomorrow, mostly downhill.

Still enough time to continue cutting but I'll need to keep an eye on my watch.

At this point I have blown this small episode into something far beyond its reality. A small squat with my shoulder under the log and one hand easily lifts my saw from the bind. It takes me another five minutes to finish my cut by underbucking, then a small relief cut by the stump and I swing the whole trunk off the trail as planned.

However, this momentary pause in my productivity serves to remind me that small mistakes can be amplified when in the wilderness. I have become so comfortable in my solitude and in my work that these small moments of awareness surprise me. *C'mon Scofield, get it together.* Any problem I encounter or risk I choose to take can multiply quickly in such a remote setting. Especially when the usual crowds of hikers are nowhere to be seen.

In fact, during a typical summer, this is our busiest trail. Colloquially called The Beaten Path, this trail spans the Beartooth mountains, connecting Cooke City on the border of Yellowstone, to Roscoe at the edge of the plains. The Beaten Path runs for 27 miles from East Rosebud Lake, up almost 4000 feet past 11 lakes, then down 2500 feet over the last ten miles, passing another 6 lakes and following the Russell Creek drainage into the Clark's Fork valley near Cooke City.

The absence of crowds on The Beaten Path is an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience and rather disconcerting. As much as I truly enjoy having this astounding canyon to myself, I realize that the busy, people-filled weeks are what affords these quiet days their value. Where there are people, so follows their trash—the Wilderness could use me elsewhere.

The moose had better appreciate this nice trail I'm cutting out... no one else is going to...

I fold my saw, pick up my backpack and move all of a hundred feet before encountering another 3 trees blocking my way. I can see several more from here as well and resign myself to another morning of cutting. I loosely hold on to my hopes of reaching the bridge site but that goal becomes less likely with each new obstruction.

On days when I have gone several hours—maybe three or four—without seeing anyone else, there is a shift in how I perceive each turn in the trail, each lake I approach. Hiking further becomes almost stressful as now I *don't* want to see people. The peace of morning air and quiet bird song, the rush of the creek and flow of thought can extend well into the day if I am left uninterrupted. Walking outside is a meditative, cathartic process for me; one that only increases as time goes on. Several mornings like this, I have heard a group hiking towards me and glanced about in mock dismay, looking for a quick place to hide, but I don't actually do this.

In typical summers, 24 hours alone is a treasure often cut short by my job if I want to stay productive and accomplish everything I have on my list that week. My first rule in setting a new solitude record is that it cannot be achieved by shirking my duties.

A couple weeks previously, I tied my record from three years ago: 43 hours sans people. If there hadn't been a random hiker yoo-hooing for bears once I was in my tent, I would have gone 48 hours total. All of one evening, through the night, and for the entire next day I was unable to fully enjoy my solitude because I was afraid it would end at any point. When I got to the

second night, I relaxed, having now checked all the popular campsites and found no one. Even though I was headed toward the trailhead, I was more confident that I wouldn't see people hiking in. Tomorrow would be Monday and few people hike in on Mondays.

On this trail, here in East Rosebud, I am certain I won't encounter people coming up from the bottom. In June we lost two road bridges, a mile or more of road, a trail bridge and some unknown mileage of trail to what "experts" are calling a 500-year flood event. While this area is technically still open to the public, the amount of scrambling, route-finding, and time needed to make it to where I stand is more than anyone has done so far. Even my boss, who is a badass in all things trail related, has not visited these disappeared sections; our losses are estimates reported from a helicopter flyover from a month ago. This, plus the hundreds of trees I've found across the trail, makes me confident that the only people I may see would have come in the same as I did: up from Cooke and over the top—a long hike only to return on the same path.

The next twenty trees are relatively pain free, although in an effort to limit my cuts I have neglected to limb any branches except those directly in my way, leading to several moments of frustration as boughs catch on other trees, the trail, my clothes while I attempt to drag them out of the way.

Well that's just great. I fuckin' hate trees!

I look up furtively, hoping that the forest either hasn't heard my words or has understood that I do not truly mean what I said. My glance down to the next switchback and the accompanying fifteen trees piled there tells me that my dreams of conducting the bridge assessment are just that.

For the next three and a half hours, I cut, drag, push, and curse 80 more trees off the trail. In places the blowdown is dense enough to have ten or twenty trunks all piled up on top of each other. It's become clear to me that we will need to send at least two people out here with a crosscut. Many of the trees are too big for my little handsaw and there are more than I could possibly hope to clear in the small amount of time I have left. I leave the big piles for whomever comes back, instead focusing my efforts on smaller trees, ones not stacked like jackstraws.

Just before I take my lunch break, I hike back to my campsite. With no one else around, I'd had my pick of sites and had chosen one a short scramble above Lake at Falls with unimpeded views of three waterfalls, the lake, the deep U of the canyon. Last evening I sat out on a cliff edge

overlooking Lake at Falls. A slight breeze kept the bugs down, and I reveled in one of those evenings that keeps me returning to this job again and again.

Now, I pack camp and return towards the top of the pass—home to billions of alpine mosquitoes who have annoyingly adapted to hover on the leeward side of anything poking more than a few inches above the tundra, especially people. I cut another 30 something trees on my way up, moving quicker now because I already cut through this area yesterday and am just cleaning up a few trees for which I didn't have time.

When I reach Dewey Lake, I poke around for half an hour, checking campsites for evidence of use in the two days since I last came through. If any campers had stayed here, they would've been the cleanest, least intrusive backpackers I ever encountered—nothing has been altered. It seems I am the only one who passed this far down the trail. My watch indicates 48 hours and counting. I passed my record five hours ago and hadn't even noticed.

After an evening and night spent hiding from mosquitoes in my tent, I pack up to start the long hike out. I have 13 miles to cover before the trailhead, then a 90 minute drive back to the office. I haven't left much time for chatting with people, picking up trash, or anything else that might come up. I am banking on the absence of people continuing.

I am up and over the top at Fossil Lake before the day truly warms. A lone tent has been pitched on the far side of the lake but, as I can't see or hear any people, I decide my solitude continues. Another three miles brings me down below treeline. The woods remain empty; all the campers I found on Friday have packed up and moved out.

I hear them coming up the trail before I see them. *So it ends...*

I step to the side and look at my watch: 65 hours. A record not likely to be broken any time soon, if ever. Two older men loaded down in fishing rods and antiquated camping gear appear below me. They walk almost next to me before the first one looks up at my "good morning." We chat pleasantly for a few minutes before I wish them well and we head in opposite directions. I think to myself how normal I felt talking to others. I wonder how long I would have to be alone before simple conversation became elusive. I kinda want to find out.

II. The Last Frontier

In summer 2016, on my first solo backpacking trip, I ventured into Denali National Park for three days. I had been road tripping with my college roommate, both of us freshly stamped with our diplomas, given a congratulatory handshake, then booted out of academia into the real world. Rather than accept such a dramatic lifestyle change, I bought an old Volkswagen Vanagon, we pulled out a map, and the two of us drove to Alaska.

After a few weeks in Anchorage, my buddy decided to fly home to begin his search for stable income, health insurance, and a place to live. I drove further north. I wasn't going to leave Alaska without "seeing" Denali, without backpacking into truly remote mountains, without at least pretending that I had done what I could to maximize my current level of freedom.

At this point in my life, I had been backpacking a handful of times. Several trips with friends, a couple instances for work—all in the Teton and Gros Ventre ranges of western Wyoming. Most people would likely describe the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem as the wildest place they have ever visited. The mountains there still hold all the wildlife they are supposed to; development has been limited by the presence of two large national parks, several national forests and the uniquely challenging terrain these all contain. In many ways, the GYE is still wild.

But the Tetons are not Alaska. This sounds cliché even as I type it, but Alaska, at least in terms of what the U.S. offers for landscapes, is just so different, so much bigger, so... Thoreauvian, primeval. Our road trip stuck to main highways due to the fragile nature of my vehicle; our five to twenty five mile excursions into the backcountry were an infinitesimally insignificant attempt to explore the state.

I lay awake the entire night before I had to catch the early hiker shuttle into Denali. My gut was clenching and my mind spinning on the possibilities of things going wrong. The park service, wisely, makes each backpacking group watch over an hour of videos on safely traveling in the pathless, *wild* vastness of the backcountry. Bears, creek crossings, weather, Search and Rescue protocols—they cover it all. Now, looking back, this information has become second nature. In that moment, truly on my own for the first time in my life, they were terrifying.

After a snafu with the bus departure in the morning, I finally arrived at the location I had randomly selected from a binder on backpacking zones. I signaled to the bus driver; he pulled over to the side of Denali Park Road. I

lifted my pack down the aisle under curious, astounded stares of the other tourists. Once I was clear of the vehicle, the driver pulled away and left me alone on a dirt road, 40 something miles from the park entrance. I took a deep breath and started hiking.

What occurred during the next three days was not a transcendent experience of awe or profundity; I was mostly tired, wet from rain and creek crossings, and wishing I had chosen a more majestic canyon up which to hike. Over the following years, however, this excursion came to mean so much more than I thought it would. It was my first deep dive into my own head with no other stimulation, I hadn't even packed a book, just pen and journal; it was my first experience of landscape-wide aloneness, only one person seen, half a mile away; it was my first time truly being *out*, where humans are not the dominant force on the land, even in the Tetons, there are trails, people, and an airport nearby.

Now that this solo backpacking adventure has been followed by dozens of others, almost exclusively for my work as a ranger in the Beartooths, my firsts in Denali are not as impactful as they once were. The importance of that trip has shifted from one of intrapersonal growth to one of managerial perspective. As my work with the Forest Service has expanded into assisting with the stewardship of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, I have found myself remembering my brief time in Denali and what that threshold for solitude can truly mean.

III. The Modern Wilderness

I throw my phone on my bed, swing on my pack, and head out the door. I have my tent, sleeping bag, pad, first aid kit, five days of food along with all the gadgets, papers, and tools I need for my job as a Wilderness ranger with the Forest Service. My route is up Lake Fork Canyon, across Sundance Pass, and out the West Fork. The distance from trailhead to trailhead is only 20 miles, but I'll spend parts of each day off-trail visiting some more remote lakes. Most of my time will involve talking to other backpackers, horse packers, and hikers I meet, explaining and enforcing the regulations in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. As one of the bigger stretches of designated Wilderness in the lower 48, each week I get to live in these mountains puts me in as close a proximity to nature as today's society allows.

Time spent outside, away from the bustle of cities and allure of digital media, is an opportunity to remember how few differences exist between people and nature. These excursions into unpopulated places provide a chance to place our consumption-driven, growth mindsets in perspective; to witness the subtle livings of other creatures whose notice we often pass by; to appreciate that which has become fleeting in our day-to-day.

Wilderness Areas can be some of the best places to accomplish these goals. An official designation by Congress upgrades a piece of Federal land, however wild it might be, to capital 'W' Wilderness and provides the highest levels of protection—against development, extraction, pollution, etc.—that the U.S. government offers. By minimizing infrastructure (including trails); limiting travel to foot, hoof, and paddle (no bikes or strollers); banning motors (leave your chainsaws and drones at home); and restricting commercialization (few permits for any business activity), Wilderness stands as the antithesis to capitalistic, expansionist society.

Wilderness, historically, is a colonial construct—wild nature, uninhabited by “civilized” people. As soon as Europeans set foot on American soil, they viewed nature and the natives with awe and fear. Fear became contempt which manifested itself through destruction of both the natural environment and the people who lived there. Our national parks and forests, with minimal exception, were created by removing Indigenous people to provide the pristine landscape envisioned as natural.

Wilderness now—exalted, picturesque, “pristine” —has been built on these feelings. No longer to be feared necessarily—we have constructed fences around these remote landscapes—but still partitioned, still void of people: “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Wilderness Act, Sec 2c). Our legislation has done the work of separating nature from us, all we need do is blindly accept this proposition.

This week I am conducting the A-B Wilderness' bi-annual solitude monitoring. I have three routes I need to traverse, allocating at least four hours to each one, with an additional half hour spent in a designated campsite at each route's terminus. Every year, in July and August, Wilderness rangers walk these routes, counting the people we see, documenting the length of their visit, marking down their user type along with other notes of significance. In our most visited canyons, we have three of these paths to cover, one in each designation of Wilderness. Class 3 Wilderness lies in canyon bottoms, along main trails where most people congregate. Class 2 follows social and climber trails to more remote lakes that still see fair amounts of traffic. Class 1 is entirely off-trail, encompassing

challenging terrain and harder to access places. With two data points gathered every year on each route for over twenty years, the folks in charge of management decisions can look at trends in usage and gauge whether policies need to be changed.

Solitude is a core principle of Wilderness as defined by the U.S. government. Legally, land agencies are required to manage for it. There are laws that define the number of people allowed on specific landscapes at a given time. At face-value, this may seem absurd. Wilderness areas are typically hundreds of thousands of acres; span remote, mountainous terrain that is less than inviting for most people; and are located far from dense population centers. Visitors to these areas don't spread evenly across the entire acreage. They congregate on trails and near water; they camp and travel on flat, easy to access routes; and they come to these mountains to avoid the crowds they typically encounter.

A variety of techniques exist to help forestall the impact of too many people. These range from permits and timed-entry to limiting infrastructure. Some methods are more involved than others, as anyone who has tried to apply for a permit has likely experienced. In an ideal management situation, visitors to an area wouldn't even realize that the number of people they could encounter is regulated at all. They would simply see fewer people and expect it, view it as normal—a casual diminishing of daily bustle until you are able to truly enjoy the quiet of your thoughts or the company of the select few who have joined you.

Managing the number of visitors in a Wilderness Area benefits not only the enjoyment of people who visit but also the wildlife, the vegetation, and the landscape. People are notoriously unaware of their impact in wild settings, which almost always negatively affects other species and their habitat. Moose and bears, marmots and bighorns need space and access to clean water. Left to their own devices the average tourist will pitch their tent as close to the lakeshore as possible, poop disgustingly close to the same water they'll drink and swim in, leave their food unprotected on the ground, and hack live trees to create firewood—generally degrading the experience of anyone else who uses that area.

The Class 1 route in Lake Fork Canyon runs from First Rock Lake to Second Rock Lake. The best path between the two bisects a large boulder field, drops into a gully, climbs along the base of a cliff, gets lost in steep forest filled with blowdown, then splashes through swampy inlets to Lake Fork Creek before finally emerging in a meadow off-kilter enough to make camping uncomfortable. Second Rock is nestled amid another boulder field and wrapped with tough, knotted krumholtz grown through annual

punishments of snow and rock falls. These twisted trees hunker into the rocks like they might duck the next avalanche. Navigating across the outlet on slowly rotting driftwood and contouring the shore to reach the designated “campsite” brings me as far off-trail as my work typically warrants.

On any Class 1 route, movement is not a thoughtless process of simply putting one foot in front of the other, instead requiring intention and deliberation of pace and trajectory; help is not a yell or phone call away, even satellite phones have trouble in these canyons; forces bigger than any person appear in every huff from a bear or rock echoing down from above. Despite this, I relax into my surroundings.

Even several miles from the main thoroughfare, evidence of people persists. Now that I know this terrain, traces of a trail can be found in certain sections where the few people who do make it this far out have chosen the same route. The amount of trash and number of fire rings is significantly less than elsewhere but still present. Documenting these impacts and any actual people seen is why we come out here.

On my second night out, I sit on a fallen log alongside an eddy in Lake Fork Creek. With my tent tucked into the woods behind me (100 feet from water), food hanging on a branch off to the side (10 feet up and 4 feet out), I breathe in the peace of the evening. The sun is lowering towards Mount Lockhart and Sundance Pass, giving the thick July grass a golden glow. I have sat here and watched otters and moose, trout, mosquitoes, and bald eagles, once, a pine marten; in all of the A-B Wilderness, this corner of Lake Fork is one of my favorite places to set up camp. Today, there are no significant animal visitors, just a slight breeze that deters the bugs.

From my vantage point, I can't see any sign of humans. I can trace where the trail climbs through the lodgepoles and I know where it tops out on the pass, but without binoculars, I can pretend it doesn't exist. Even in this moment of quiet, I can't delude myself to solitude. Not a quarter mile away, at least a dozen campers crowd the shore of Lost Lake, and several more are established around other lakes in the canyon. In a way, I am grateful they are here, for without them, their trash, their inability to read signs, I wouldn't have my job, wouldn't be paid to backpack, wouldn't experience intimacy with these mountains.

I am far from the first to write about solitude while out in nature. Thoreau and Muir, Abbey and Leopold—to name the famous men—each had his brush with the wild. Thoreau in his wanderings around “the swamps” of Concord, Abbey in a world much closer to today's, Muir and Leopold somewhere in between. Solitude and Wilderness have changed over the

years. Thoreau—despite his pontifications to the contrary—lived in town, walked in a ‘tamed’ landscape, had quiet evenings alone in his cabin only when he didn’t feel like visitors. Muir clearly separated the city from the mountains, found peace and health in the Sierras, probably witnessed “wilderness” much closer to how we think of these lands today. Leopold experienced both remote stretches of the American southwest and pastoral farmland of Wisconsin. Abbey sensed the coming storm of cars and people, observed in real time the subduing of the wild.

To deliberately eschew “civilization” for what these writers hold up as “wild” is a choice very few humans, from any culture, have made. The mountain men of the American west come to mind as embodiments of the rugged, wild ideal Thoreau and the others proclaim. In Indigenous cultures—more so than our staunch individualistic, American society—community is paramount. While colonialism has rarely regarded these cultures as civilizations, the truth is even within close-to-the-earth Native lifestyles, turning away from community is not in human nature. Humans need society, even those of us who think 65 hours without seeing or hearing another person is a gift. We designated these special places and then imposed the value of solitude upon them, something not inherent to their natural state of being. Native peoples lived in these “wild” lands long before the U.S. decided to set them aside as Wilderness.

It is important to note that everyone’s ability to enjoy these landscapes is because we have towns with grocery stores and outdoor gear companies waiting past the trailhead to support us in our ventures. Similar to Thoreau, we go out for our walks, and—despite what Muir may say about “going out” actually feeling like “going in” and Abbey’s disdain for towns—to our homes we all return, if only to restock for our next wander.

Halfway through my week, I pack up in Lake Fork and begin to climb up Sundance Pass. Starting in dense lodgepole on the canyon floor, the trail steadily cleaves up the northern wall into patchier stands of whitebark pine, then the sedges and wildflowers of high alpine meadows. Above September Morn Lake, this trail used to climb straight to the top of the pass. Over the years, various sections have been rebuilt with switchbacks to ease the elevation gain. Old cutbank is still visible in the tundra—regrowth is a long time coming at 11,000 feet.

On my way down into the West Fork, I count switchbacks: 55 over the 1,500 foot descent. I marvel at this feat of engineering—an even grade from top to bottom, built with minimal use of retaining walls in those places where snow melts quickest—and fantasize about writing tickets to those who would dare to shortcut such a trail, climbing straight up the scree in some

sadistic attempt to defy this beautiful construction and avoid an extra mile. The whole way down, Mount Lockhart, Whitetail Peak, Medicine Mountain, Castle Mountain, and Sundance Mountain frame the head of the canyon. I let the miles flow under my feet while I mutter to myself and flip rocks off the trail.

It is clear that Thoreau gains some peace of mind from his walks, learns much about flora and fauna from his observations and seems to understand some deeper importance, some intrinsic value in these places and animals. Much like today's environmental writers, he appears to struggle with a convincing argument for why their value should be important for greater society and what the take-away should be for an average citizen. The tone of his writing is not suggestive of persuasion, Thoreau presents his work as philosophy, ideas on which to ruminate, not a hard-line "this is the answer." Much of environmental writing—even when interwoven with alarming facts about climate change or mass extinction—follows a pattern of "here is my profound experience outside, perhaps you would benefit from something similar," often with the premise that if, or when, you do, you will also be motivated toward whichever cause is currently being advanced.

Abbey, in defiance of this and very much in his style, cuts through the bullshit. With his storytelling, Abbey claims his authority on the land. He *knows*. He's out there, hiking and floating and climbing and getting lost and being delirious until he can get his insight written down. This willingness—need—to experience, to be outside and explorative, to get dirty and dehydrated, to learn from the juniper is where Abbey accepts what other writers cannot: no lauded prose, no fevered account, no impassioned argument can replace witnessing—in person—the natural world. You must see, hike, thirst, smell, sleep, stub bare toes on cacti, and so on before any attempt at understanding, loving. In *Down the River* he is lamenting not only the death of the Colorado, but the death of experience.

As someone whose life has been shaped by experiences in the mountains, I absolutely advocate for more people to get outside and explore, to turn off their devices, get off their couches, and see what wondrous interactions our world has in store. As a ranger, working to keep these people safe, protect the habitats and lives of the animals, and enable others to have equally wholesome adventures down the road, I am thankful that most people find sleeping on the ground repulsive and live in cities far away from my haunts. Our Wilderness Areas simply can't withstand higher visitation. And yet, if everyone had a connection to some part of nature or wild place, it strikes me as unlikely our world would be in the circumstances where we currently stand. Survival could easily depend on how many people "saunter

through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements” (Thoreau, *Walking*).

In today’s world, in an obnoxious irony, a certain amount of infrastructure is needed to maintain the “pristine” quality of Wilderness—something that is perverse to our idea of the unimpaired and the untrammelled. Wilderness, as first designated, doesn’t exist anymore. Over time, small concessions for trails, patrol cabins, bridges, mining claims add up to landscapes that are not the pure nature once envisioned. As more people visit these areas, as their impacts increase pressure on already surrounded parcels, can there be balance between allowing for recreation, enjoyment, and recharge away from society and preserving some small corner of the country for other than human needs?

What damage Abbey witnessed during the 1950s in and around Arches National Park has only increased as more and more people invade the parks, forests, recreation areas and so on; the government’s ability to respond to these impacts is delayed by bureaucracy, public opinion, and cost. A problem discovered today will have to be researched to see if it is really a problem. If so, several solutions will be drawn up, the public will weigh in, debate will ensue, a decision will be made. Before anything can be implemented, someone will sue and delay this process even more. By the time anything actually gets resolved, the original problem will have been replaced by six others and any agreed upon solution may no longer be relevant. Especially given how quickly things happen in today’s world, the movement of government is almost comically slow. All of these add up to frustrations for land managers or rangers who then have to balance bureaucratic forces with the beautiful reality that someone will pay them to hike, camp, and live in the most amazing places on the planet.

My final morning: I collapse my tent, cram my camp clothes and sleeping bag into their stuff-sacks, take down the little bit of remaining food and full bags of trash I have collected, and arrange everything in my backpack. I have just one lake to patrol and then a few scattered campsites along five miles to the trailhead; I could be out in three hours. “Get out” days are always a tough balance between enjoying what is left of my time in the woods and rushing toward food and a shower. Even though I just finished breakfast, thoughts of pizza, salad, and beer grumble in my stomach. On the other hand, watching the sun scale canyon walls—light sparkling as it hits waterfalls—and feeling warmth creep up from the plains isn’t a bad way to start my day. This dilemma is manageable because I will be back in the field two days later. An equilibrium of time spent in the woods and time spent in society is essential to an understanding of what is worth preserving and why it is preserved.

I'll complete the solitude monitoring for July's iteration on my hike out. The Class 3 route, from Quinnebaugh meadow to the trailhead, won't be quite as enjoyable as my scramble in the boulder field from a few days earlier. In my mind, the number of visitors on the main trail is a more important statistic on the overall impact to the Wilderness than those handful found in the pathless wood, so I don't mind completing this documentation as I finish my week.

As always happens when I am at work, once I get into a groove on the trail, my mind diverts off the immediate task of walking and begins to ponder larger questions of management and what I might change if given the opportunity. I don't have many answers for these questions. There are countless forces at work that pull in every direction, and, at a certain level, management becomes vastly too complicated for places that are supposed to be simple at their core and reduce the stress of everyday life. For now, I am happy to leave these issues to others.

I hit the trailhead at 2:30. My backpack goes into the bed of the Forest Service truck, and I pull out of the parking lot. I am not liberated from obligation—there is still paperwork to complete and a report to give—but for five days a week I get to live in the proverbial swamp, explore my own version of solitude, and listen to the music of the Wilderness.



Light in the Darkness

by Megan Doss



Thank you for reading!